# Time Immemorial

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**Time Immemorial**

by **FawkesyLady (Tarma)**

**Summary**

Hermione loses it after the Battle of Hogwarts. Unfortunately, she still had that time turner. She becomes a mystery for the good denizens of Hogwarts, circa 1976, including a young Severus Snape - fellow inmate in the Hospital wing.

*** Nominee for 2018 Marauder's Medal for Best Work in Progress ***

**Notes**

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2 May, 1998.

Hermione turned her back on the wreckage of her beloved school and walked away from her friends that day. It wasn’t like her to allow her guts to lead, but her mind was chattering on in circles, failing to understand fully what had happened. She wished she could just turn it off, but she had been running on hyperalert for the better part of the past six months. Now that it was over her control was fracturing. The mist drifting in through the cracks in the wooden walls around her smelled of hot ash mixed with the choking sulphuric tang of Fiendfyre. It made her eyes burn and threatened to stop her throat, already clotted with grief. She emerged into the main room of the Shack, searching, and was shocked to find the place was already deserted. Her legs trembled in warning before buckling underneath her, sending her to the floor in a jarring heap.

What historians would later refer to as “The Battle of Hogwarts” had ended hours before. Harry Potter, her best friend, had emerged alive and victorious against all odds. She should have been happy, but while the others had cheered and wept, clinging to one another, she had drifted away, looking for something, she knew not what. Why did she feel like they had lost? Her entire world had tilted, throwing her off balance with the revelations made hours before. It was all too much. Knees drawn up against her chest, she wrapped her arms around them in an effort to still the tremors that shook her down to her wounded soul.

Dumbledore had planned to send Harry to his death, keeping everyone in the dark up until the last hour. Had he thought Harry’s courage would fail? In the end Harry went willingly, sent as sacrificial lamb to bleed his last on the altar of the greater good. Did Dumbledore know that Harry would survive? Hermione doubted it. And what of Snape? He had dedicated his life to keeping Harry safe from Voldemort, and in spite of all of his hateful behaviour had been harbouring a strange regard for Lily’s son. The staid Potions Master was horrified at what Harry was expected to do, that he would have to be the one to tell Harry, but not until it was “time.” As Dumbledore’s cat’s paw from beyond the veil, the brave man had thrown himself into his role without any support. He had played his part so well that only Lord Voldemort had shown concern for Professor Snape’s fate, although it was not enough to stay his execution. That creepy voice echoed in her mind, “I regret it.” Wracking sobs of despair threatened to claw loose from her chest and she fought for mastery in this moment. She had survived, but for what? She, too, was disposable. Used up. She tucked her chin down and pressed her eyes to her knees to stop the tears. Slowly, she started to rock back and forth, her body offering comfort when her mind and soul seemed determined to tear her apart.

As her heart bled, Hermione’s eyes met the blinding power of sunlight as it poked through the chinks between wallboards, probing the relative darkness. Its sisters had joined the sweeping search and all were stained through with tendrils of smoke that still hung in the air. The pull of gravity seemed to be strengthening, and Hermione was hard pressed to resist.

This was the safest she had felt in what seemed like time immemorial. She was blessedly alone. She found this place comforting, for she had some vague sense that the Shack wasn’t empty - it had a presence. The floor beneath her was her anchor, a solid reminder of what was real. Its splintered boards had been washed in the blood of a man who had made a terrible mistake, and then had chosen to spend the rest of his days doing hard penance under the hard eyes of two disparate masters. She had not forgotten that he danced with the Dark Arts; he wasn’t a saint. Neither were Professor Lupin, Tonks, or Fred Weasley for that matter, but these had acted in the open. Her friends up at the
castle could in contrast mourn them openly, and were probably doing so right now.

They’d be looking for her to fuss and carry on, and she just could NOT handle it. Her friends and their caring were now energy sapping and repugnant, and the idea of going back sent her into new paroxysms of fear. “Alone, just leave me...” Chest heaving, she choked out, “alone.” She was exhausted, so it was only a short while before her breathing slowed once more. Her fingers found the Time Turner in her pocket. She intended never to use it again, but couldn’t make herself give it back after the disaster in the Department of Mysteries. Her fingers tended to spin the inner orbitals as a nervous habit, one that she knew was dangerous. She usually reset the thing every couple of turns to prevent accidents. The soft sound it made as it spun was soothing. Whirrr, click Whirrr…

Unbidden, her eyelids drooped, just for a moment. Her head jerked up, and she realised she was falling asleep where she sat, and that made her heart hammer again. Not good. Another shuddering breath broke the silence, unnaturally loud in her ears. A glance confirmed this was not a dream, and that was her own noise. Muzzy with fatigue, she allowed her thoughts to wander farther afield and she found herself considering the ghost of that wizard in her mind’s eye. Her lips curved up in a bitter smile as her imagination breathed life into that apparition.

He’d scowl at her and rightfully call her an idiot of the highest order if he came upon her here, but that unforgiving glare was what she craved the most. She didn’t want to be praised or pitied. Everything had gone to shit. Yes, they had won, but now that it was all over, what was left? Her friends were consumed with their own wounds, no one would want her troubles. She had served her purpose, as had he, and they were both spent with the cost of it. No one else could understand, she knew it. She would not burden Harry with her miserable, insufferable know-it-all self. Harry didn’t know what she had done, what had happened. No. She’d better stay here and wish herself into oblivion.

She felt her head sag once more, and she couldn’t fight sleep any longer. Her last coherent thoughts contained a new sense of betrayal. The ghost she had conjured spoke at last. “You are still an insufferable swot.” Then he pointedly turned his back on her, laughing cruelly as he walked away. Snape had abandoned this tortured mortal coil, leaving the scales of karma wobbling and unbalanced. He found her discomfiture amusing. Unfeeling bastard.

2 May 1998, later in Great Hall.

Minerva didn’t think she had any strength left in her, but when Ron and Harry came to find her in the midst of the Great Hall, among the long lines of the wounded, she felt a stab of fear. “What do you mean you can’t find Miss Granger? Wasn’t she with you?”

Ron had been sitting with George and his mother when Harry had found him. Harry reported, “We last saw her outside as she was helping the Malfoys get situated. No one has seen her since.” Harry looked out at the grounds, as if he expected her to emerge from the obscuring morning mists. “I sent a Patronus, Professor. It came back.” Harry added, “three times, I did that.”

Professor McGonagall blanched and grasped the edge of the staff table. She, too, had not slept in over a day. “Oh, no.” She swung her eyes around, looking for someone who might be able to find her cub. Hermione couldn’t be gone. She was alright, she had been helping the wounded before they had lost track of her. She let out an exasperated sigh. Hermione would be that foolish, wouldn’t she. “She might be unconscious, or hurt.”

Ron looked guilty. He had noticed that she wasn’t doing well, but who was? He hadn’t been able to get out from under his family, and he really needed to be there, with Fred’s loss so raw. “I’ll ask
Bill. We’ll look for her. I just hoped she had been back up here.” That the teachers had sent her to rest, or on an explainable errand, or something. Without waiting for more, he trotted off, pulling Harry with him. Bill had the best chance of finding her, now that Remus was gone. Pulling Bill away from George and Charlie, he explained with urgency. “Bill, we need your help. No one can find ‘Mione. Not even Harry’s Patronus.” Harry had slipped over to Ginny, putting an arm around her, and judging by the way she clung to him, those two were not going to be particularly useful. Harry cast an apologetic glance over his shoulder to Bill and Ron with a half shrug. He had been looking for hours. It was someone else’s turn.

Shaking his head to clear the fog of weariness and grief, Bill’s eyebrows shot up. “Wait, what?”

Ron nodded. “You heard me. She was last seen tending to the Malfoys. I saw her setting Draco’s nose before I came back up here. The Headmistress doesn’t know where she is either, and she hadn’t sent her off.” Where he had remained for the past six hours until Harry had come looking for him.

Bill groaned, knowing what this could mean. “Are you sure she just isn’t in the hospital wing? Or off with her parents?”

Ron shook his head rigorously. “No. We looked there. And her parents… they are gone.” Ron swallowed the thick lump of guilt in his throat. “They’ve been dead for months, Bill. I thought you knew.”

Bill’s heart had dropped into his stomach with dread. Not another loss. Not another cub, alone. With a deep breath, Bill dragged up some miraculous reserve of energy and took off at a slow lope, calling on his wolf. He wasn’t a full fledged werewolf, but he did have certain advantages, including heightened senses. He had to get away from all of these people. The Malfoys had been sitting by the lake, so he headed that way first. It was hard to smell anything this close to the battleground, but he would give it a go. After circling the lake he found the scent of the Malfoys, Draco’s blood, Narcissa’s fear, and Lucius’ black despair, all unmistakable. Fortunately there was also the scent of Hermione. His nostrils flared and he swung his head side to side and followed the trail.

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Hermione woke with a start. Her mind, still battle-fogged, screamed at her to run. Someone was coming. Oh Merlin. They’re coming for her. She staggered upright, her legs stiff underneath her, and her toe caught on one of the boards below her, sending her sprawling to her knees. She’d had her time turner tucked away, forgotten in her robes, but her fingers found it as she glanced around like a cornered rabbit. Snape’s blood hadn’t fully sunk into the boards, and her left hand came away shaking and sticky as the heavy steps got closer. Run! She had to run! Her fingers spun the mechanism on the turner, not knowing or caring to when so long as she was away. Black spots filled her vision as she disappeared from this timeline.

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Bill heard the movement, the trip, the gasp. He knew she was there and called out, “Who’s there? Hermione? Are you…?” He emerged from the tunnel and looked around into the dim room, illuminated only by cracked daylight shining between the boards of the wall and roof of the shack. The stench of fear and blood was dominant, but Hermione’s distinctive smell, a mixture of magic and vanilla, was there too. She had been here. He prowls the perimeter of the room, finding her scent,
strongest over there by the wall, but... it just... stopped. She hadn’t walked away. She couldn’t have
disapparated. There was no other scent here that overlapped the time frame, although Snape’s
copper-laden blood was overwhelming. She didn’t go with anyone. After another turn around the
room a frustrated Bill took out his wand and focused on his wedding day, and his Patronus, a wolf
leapt out to circle the room. Bill howled out the news, “Go tell Ron, Harry and McGonagall.
Hermione was here, she was alive, but now she’s gone. Maybe a Portkey, but there is no trail. I’ve
done what I can from here. We’ll have to wait for her to come back. See you soon.” The wolf leapt
away, disappearing through the walls and heading back to the castle, its master taking one last
thoughtful look at the stain before turning to follow his Patronus.

The Shrieking Shack, Hogwarts.

Hermione woke up on the floor, disoriented. She had no idea of where she was. Her eyes stung, and she blinked against the brighter beam of light that had pooled around her head and shoulders. She sat up, looking at her hands in astonishment, one brown and flaking with dried blood, the other clutching a small bronze charm with a little hourglass inside. After a few long moments, she achingly pushed herself up to a standing position and stretched her arms. Tucking the charm into a pocket absentmindedly, she touched her cheek where the wood had left an indentation in her skin. She was hungry, thirsty, and needed to take a piss. Not necessarily in that order.

She patted her robes, looking for clues. Well, a stick wasn’t going to help her. She found a purse, which was disparately fancy compared to the rest of her stained things. Patting the side of it, she found there couldn’t be much in there, it was too small to hold, say... a sandwich, so that was tucked away too. After a brief internal struggle over her limited options of stay or go, she staggered out into the tunnel that seemed to be the only entrance or exit with the grace of a newly born fawn, legs shaking and uncertain.

She made it out into the blinding light of the courtyard, and only a moment before she spun at the wisp of warning air movement behind her, she was hit by thick branch of the Whomping Willow square onto her chest. It threw her across the courtyard, and if she had one, her guardian angel would have screamed in utter frustration as Hermione flew bonelessly through the air, and then abruptly knew no more as her head impacted against the stone wall.

***

Severus had spent yet another restless night in the castle Infirmary. He had been beset by Potter and his cronies and wound up here again, under the tender ministrations of Poppy Pomfrey. This time they had immobilised him and used a wandless depilatory spell before capping it off with a Langlack instead of a Langlock. Sirius thought it was hilarious to set Severus bound, hairless, and tongueless, hanging from a rafter out in front of the Great Hall to be found in time for breakfast, charmed with a stuffed dog that sang “Hooked on a Feeling ” whenever anyone approached within 5 feet. It was fortunate that Peeves hadn’t found him first. Filch discovered him, and lacking magic, had to go fetch
Madam Pomfrey from her quarters to help get him down.

The Mediwitch was tired, her own language less guarded than it should have been, given Severus was not unconscious, but the perversity of having that catchy song drone on whilst she helped Filch fish Severus down from the “hook” was just too much. “… that you’re in love with me… Iiiiii am hooked on a feeling…”

Severus had looked Filch directly in the eye with impotent rage, but without a tongue he could not express any responses to the idiotic obvious questions that adults always asked in these situations.

“Who did this to you?” Well, who else?

“How long have you been hanging there?” Also obviously less than 12 hours and more than four, given it was well past curfew, and it was only by chance that Filch had found him while he was getting started for the next day.

“Why didn’t you shout for help?” Will you just get on with it?

Reluctantly, Severus opened his mouth to display the absence of tongue, uttering a gormless “Ah” as though the caretaker might be interested in his tonsils and his “I’ve been hanging here for hours, hexed” morning breath. Judging by the disgusted expression on the caretaker’s face, he at least managed to get to the man on some level. Misery managed. Breaking eye contact, Severus hunched his shoulders defensively as Madam Pomfrey released his bonds. The pain of returning circulation blocked out the details of his transfer to the infirmary, and blessedly the Mediwitch wasted no time putting the young wizard to bed with a pain dulling draft.
Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

Please note that the idea for the Sanctuary Ritual was inspired by BadgerAngel's work, Smoke. It is in chapter eighteen but I highly recommend reading the whole thing. It is wonderful!

Update: 10/14/17. I am sorry to say that it appears that BadgerAngel has disappeared into the Aether. I'm leaving the link up as credit due, but it is a broken one. *sob*

Chapter Notes

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Severus woke to the sound of another to-do in the infirmary, his skin itching madly with the regrowth of hair. Groaning wordlessly, he lifted his head to observe a petite witch being levitated in on a stretcher. It was dim in the infirmary. A wordless Tempus charm showed him it was only 6:13 AM. Madam Pomfrey was much more urgent in her movements, the litany of colourful language that Severus had been exposed to earlier notably absent as she ministered to the newest occupant.

“She smells like brimstone, Albus. Fiendfyre. She has broken ribs, a skull fracture and concussion, burns, bruises, and she’s exhausted. Her magical core is almost empty. She’s malnourished, has nerve damage as though she was under extended Crucio, and look at this. LOOK, at her arm. I’ve never seen anything like this. Where did she come from? Who did this to her!?” Poppy was holding out the girl’s left forearm for the headmaster to inspect as she chattered angrily like a pissed off washerwoman. Bellatrix LeStrange’s masterwork, ugly and festering, highlighted the word “MUDBLOOD” carved deep into the tender flesh of the girl’s forearm.

Severus stopped breathing as he strained to hear the response from Dumbledore. The quiet words floated back over the infirmary. “I do not know for sure, Poppy. It is clear that we must find out.” He straightened, declaring decisively, “For the moment, until she comes around, were there any clues that might help us?” Poppy shook her head, working on the girl, obsessively recasting diagnostic charms. “Albus, now is not the time. You look through her things if you need to. Just get out of my way.” She bustled back and forth, getting vials of potions and a tub of salve to use as the Headmaster waited a discreet distance away. Eventually she passed over the dirtied clothes, a concession to Dumbledore’s looming presence. Poppy was back to working on the girl’s head, having to cut away swathes of matted curly hair, muttering to herself at the state of her latest patient.

A sparkle in the shadows in his peripheral vision turned Severus’ eyes away from the obscured
scene. The headmaster held up a beaded bag. He looked inside the delicate thing and exclaimed in
delight before burying his arm down past his elbow. After fishing around, he dragged out a diary, a
handful of parchment, and the twisted remains of a golden cup. The Headmaster set the cup down
before squinting at the diary through his half moon glasses. He still like a cornered deer.
Something in the little book clearly had disturbed the wizard, deeply. A moment later, he slammed
the diary shut and shoved it back unceremoniously into the bag.

Apparently an important decision had been made and Dumbledore could not contain himself, needs
must when the devil drives. “Poppy, witness this.” Not waiting for the Mediwitch’s answer, he
intoned in the voice a wizard uses when he is backing something up with the magic of will and
intent, “I, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, in my capacity of Headmaster of Hogwarts, do
vouchsafe the protection of this witch, and do claim from this castle on her behalf Sanctuary. So
mote it be.”

Severus, forgetting that he was supposed to be asleep, sat up at this, his eyes as big as saucers. Five
ghosts appeared out of the walls.

The Grey Lady sang out, holding her hands in a triangle over the girl’s brow. “With Wit and Claw,
we will protect her.”

The Bloody Baron silently executed a complicated salute juxtaposed to the Lady, indicating his
protection and respect as though for a comrade in arms, ending with his sword held steady over the
foot of the bed.

Nearly Headless Nick bowed over her one hand pressing his head in place he extended his free hand
splayed open over her heart, “For her bravery and sacrifice we Laud her.”

Solemnly, the Fat Friar made a benediction over the girl’s midsection with his hands cupped in
supplication, “To our hearts we accept her as our own blood, as no other has any claim on her.” That
was a strange pronouncement. No blood claim? No family?

Finally, under the Headmaster’s surprised gaze, Peeves, who was hovering above them all added,
“For the injustice yet done, we will not abide quietly.” There was no mischief or humour here, and
Severus shrunk back towards the wall behind his bed in unconscious self-preservation. With a thrust
of both hands forwards, Peeves completed the ritual. A wave of magic passed over the bed, and the
girl’s hair moved as if by some uncanny breeze. Everyone in the room felt the castle shudder in
response.

Moments later the ghosts were gone, leaving Severus blinking and wondering if that was all in his
imagination. What was in that sleeping draft Pomfrey gave him? He was fairly sure it was made to
grade. In the quiet half-light of daybreak, he stared at the Mediwitch, who was rather busy muttering
her healing incantations, trying to keep the girl alive.

Dumbledore turned around, noticing Severus installed in his usual spot. After his eyebrows met in
consternation for a fleeting moment, the old Headmaster held up a finger to his lips, indicating that
what he had witnessed was to be kept secret. Rolling his eyes in bitter humour, Severus nodded his
understanding, and after a brief hesitation he opened his mouth to show the lack of a tongue with an
ironic quirk of what would have been an eyebrow. That blasted curse left him hairless.

Holding Severus’ gaze for a moment longer, the Headmaster called over his shoulder, “Poppy, do
you need assistance?” After a shouted response of, “Get out and let me work, Albus!” Dumbledore
beat a hasty retreat, taking the bag and the witch's wand with him.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

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Severus chewed over the bad news. His tongue would take the better part of a week to regrow with magical help, and the process was going to be unpleasant. Already his skin was inflamed with the itchiness of stubble all over, which made him restless and surly - not a long throw. What passed for what Madam Pomfrey espoused as restorative peace was interrupted with thoughts of the events of the night before. The new charge was hidden from prying eyes, but Severus was incredibly curious, and watched for any sign of movement. He gathered that she appeared to be his age or maybe a little younger. She didn’t seem to be waking up, and the tension on the Mediwitch’s face as she buzzed back and forth did nothing to reassure Severus that this was all routine. It was a distraction to the tedious succession of runny noses, stomachaches, and magical accidents that passed through the hospital wing.

Severus was usually ahead on his reading and assignments as it was, so he quickly ran out of things to do. Spoiled for choice, he passed much of his time by working on non-verbal spells, a subject covered this year in Defense Against the Dark Arts. This would be a huge advantage eventually and was not as easy as it looked. For the moment, being able to cast an Accio wordlessly without beaning himself with the desired object was requiring practice. After making the mistake of using a marble at first, he switched over to a softer knot that he had fashioned out of some discarded bandage. At least it didn’t leave a bruise.

Once upon a time, he would have had Lily as a visitor, but he had lost her friendship. Breaking the monotony, one of his yearmates had stopped by to drop off more homework. When he asked for help with a potions assignment, Pucey was rebuffed by Madame Pomfrey’s quick intervention. Severus couldn’t speak, and was frankly embarrassed. Truly, he owed Mr Filch for finding him before the other students were up. He’d have to do something nice for the man. These thoughts were interrupted when Madam Pomfrey came over with potions for Severus to take and a tea to help his itching, both of which were vile. “And how are we getting on, dear?” She asked.

Severus waved his wand and words hung in the air as if they were written in molten gold before they faded. “Passable. I regret being able to taste again.” He cast a disparaging eye on the proffered medications, making the Mediwitch snort in response. The very edge of his mouth crooked up, as he had meant it in his usual humour. His smile vanished and a thoughtful look replaced it. He wanted to know. With another wave of his wand, he wrote in the air, “What happened over there? I have never seen Peeves act like that.”

Madam Pomfrey forced the potion vial to his lips and indicated that she would not be answering until he had taken it, which he did with a dramatic amount of gagging and glaring. Eyes streaming from
the volatile medication, he glimpsed a succession of expressions travel across the matron’s countenance as she tried to settle on a response. Uncertainty, concern, and an instant of fear passed therein before a professional mask overtook it all and she was again picking up the empty vial, before pressing the teacup into her patient’s hand. “I am not sure I can answer that for you, Severus. You need to apply to the Headmaster, I’m afraid.”

She was no longer making eye contact and was making to turn and bustle away, so it was out of desperation that Severus reached out and plucked at her sleeve before she could get too far. He had let the teacup clink down to the tray hastily which elicited a frown, but she looked up in time to see him write out again in glittering letters, “Is she going to be okay?”

Madam Pomfrey’s expression softened for a moment before she answered quietly. “I don’t know, dear. I don’t know.” With that, she turned away and busied herself elsewhere.

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Main Office, Ministry of Magic.

Harry and Ron sat waiting for the Minister for Magic to return from a meeting. He was late, but Harry didn’t want to be shoved off one more day as he knew what the wizard had on his plate between piecing back together the fractured wizarding society and cleaning up the loose ends left by the passing of Voldemort’s regime, some of which were very resistant indeed. Ron has always had problems staying still, and not for the first time, he got up to pace. Both he and Harry had been nervously looking over their shoulders at Dumbledore’s portrait, hung in a position of honour between the windows overlooking the open hall below.

Dumbledore was sitting with his chair tipped back, taking a cat nap. The tassel on his velvet hat swayed with every exhaled breath, its sway hypnotic. The fireplace behind the massive desk of the Minister flared to life with a green flame, admitting two Aurors who seemed to be acting as security, before the shorter one stuck his hand back into the fire, indicating that all was clear. The tall figure of Kingsley Shacklebolt stepped through, squinting in the bright afternoon light. Dusting himself off, he walked over to Ron to shake his hand. “Gentlemen.” Porcelain white teeth flashed in a genuine smile for the two young wizards. He turned to Harry, who had stood up to greet his friend in turn. Shaking hands, Harry got straight to the point, “We wanted to talk about Hermione Granger, sir.”

Kingsley’s face flattened out into a more guarded expression, covering a deeper rooted feeling of defeat for he had already spent considerable time and effort searching for the young heroine. The Grangers were dead for months, victims of a vicious attack at their home in South England. None of the neighbors even remembered Hermione or the little family now and the lot where her childhood home had once stood was now empty. He had scoured Hogwarts, enlisted the House Elves, and done everything he could think of, even to the extent of involving the Department of Mysteries. He gestured for the querents to sit, and Percy Weasley appeared, carrying a tea service which was dealt out with the quiet clinking of fine bone china. “I am afraid that she will only come back if and when she wants to be found, boys.”

Debriefings of the Malfoys as well as the rest of the Order had painted a picture of a woman who
had been holding the team together, but suffered greatly over the past year. Worry etched lines into
Harry’s face as Ron interjected. “Isn’t there something we haven’t thought of? A point-me spell, or
something?”

Professor Dumbledore was only feigning sleep, as he now stood with his hands tucked into his
sleeves, as if he was once again poised to direct the meeting. “Mr Weasley, what did the deluminator
show?” It was the way he had found his way back to Harry and Hermione the last time, and it had
found them through Hermione’s layers of wards. Ron took the device out of his pocket and slapped
it down on the desk in response. Glaring at the silver case, he muttered, “Think it’s broken.”

If Hermione were here she would have found a way if it was either of them missing. Both boys
understood this, and Ron just couldn’t let it go. “And you checked with the Portkey office again?”
Percy answered for the Minister, “Yes, there are no records that would help us here. All of the
international Portkeys were locked down immediately after the Battle, and nothing was registered in
Scotland on that day.” Of course, unregistered and illegal Portkeys were another matter entirely, but
he was powerless to do more.

Harry pleaded with them, “This isn’t like her, Kingsley. You know her. She is a true Gryffindor.
She’d never run away from anything.” The Boy Who Lived Twice stood as he couldn’t seem to hold
the nervous energy in lockdown any longer. Facing Dumbledore, he added, “Whatever problems she
had, we’d have seen her through it together, like we always have done. I know Bill didn’t find any
evidence of foul play, but I just can’t believe she’d do this to us.” He turned his head away,
swallowing in an effort to control the tears threatening to break through.

Dumbledore offered his thoughts in response. “I sometimes think we do ourselves a deep disservice,
insisting on facing problems head on. To do less, is considered weakness. We suggest that in
stepping back, we give the problem agency over us.” He raised his right hand to make the next point,
as around the room the wizards took in every word, drops of wisdom for their parched souls. “But
consider this. It is not always wisest to take this approach. There are problems that cannot be solved
without a great deal of pain when one is forced to face them openly and unprepared, lacking
perspective.” The old painting squints a smile at Harry, adding, “Like the muggle expression, you
can’t see the forest for the trees.”

Ron nodded curtly, hand turning over in a “go on” gesture, hoping the Headmaster had something
more material to offer beyond worn out platitudes. Indeed, he was having trouble understanding
what problems Hermione might have had to deal with after the battle was over. She hadn’t lost
anyone. What did she have to worry about? They had won! All she had to do was sit back and wait
for the accolades to file in. Surely she hadn’t left them to go find that ugly cat of hers!

“Perhaps Hermione was faced with what seemed an unsolvable problem? It may have been that the
only way for her to move forward was to, in fact, do the opposite of what Godric Gryffindor taught
us. Deal with a difficulty by running away from it. To achieve a better understanding of the obstacle
by putting distance between it and herself, and perhaps in time, re-approach it from a different
angle.” This was wholly unsatisfying to the gathered group, and Harry noticed the adults exchanging
expressions of skepticism.

Harry did think that he was beginning to understand what the portrait was trying to say, but his
attention was interrupted by Ron who had reached over to swipe the Deluminator up and jammed it
back into his robe pocket. “I’ve heard enough, Harry. They don’t know any more than we do.” Ron
stood and stuck out his hand to Shacklebolt, giving it a perfunctory shake before executing an about-
face, marching out of the office without looking back.

With the air of inner conflict and distraction, Harry reached over to also shake the Minister’s hand
before trailing out after his irritated friend. He paused before leaving, adding over his shoulder.
“Thank you for your time, gentlemen.” Meeting Dumbledore’s eyes, he nodded before disappearing
back into the bustle of the outer office.
Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

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3 November, 1976

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Up in the Headmaster’s office, Dumbledore was examining the wand before him. It was a foreboding thing made out of dark walnut. It had a pronounced taper to a sharp end and a strange curve in its shaft. Dumbledore needed to know more, and since their guest was not waking up, he was reduced to other means of information gathering. He muttered "Priori Incantatem". After what seemed to be a sullen struggle, the wand complied.

Spectres marched across the office as spell after spell presented itself in reverse order. An Aguamenti to fill a bucket. An Episkey applied to the nose of a fair haired teen, none too gently setting it back in alignment. Stupefy and Expelliarmus at a crazed looking, curly haired witch, missing widely. A weak Expecto Patronum with an otter only briefly visible before dissolving to thin air. Reducto to blow away a feral looking man who appeared to be trying to eat his victim. Duro on a tapestry, Glissando on stairs, Stupefy again... nothing Unforgivable. “Curious.” This didn’t tell him much about how the witch came to be found by the caretaker, lying huddled by the wall in the courtyard and in such a state.

He could look back into that diary, but the date and the scribbled warning on the first page gave him pause. Something deep inside was begging him to consider very carefully. The date could be spurious, of course. A fanciful writing by a young witch? Perhaps she was insane? Her wounds spoke of hunted desperation, favoring the diary’s verisimilitude. Putting the ugly wand down, he exited the office and made his way back down to the courtyard nearest the Whomping Willow. The tree itself seemed no more restive than usual. A patch of darkened blood on the stone caught his eye and he directed his steps that way. A search revealed nothing out of place.

With a wave of his hand made from a safe distance, the Headmaster applied magical pressure to the secret knob on the base of the tree, causing it to go limp. There, he discovered a faint glint of brass in the morning sun, hidden in the weeds beyond the pavers. The Time Turner was sun-warmed and heavy in his hand. It sparked ominously whilst he shook the chain loose. Closer inspection revealed a fine crack in the hourglass itself, and with jostling that same crack more of the fine sand of time escaped. This sand turned to a mist that distorted the air around it before dissipating. Using his wand, Dumbledore applied a containment charm before carrying the thing back up to his office. The Headmaster’s unease deepened as he traveled back through the halls of his school.

On returning to the office, the pensive wizard laid the Time Turner down beside the bag and the
Holding his hands steepled below his nose, he considered the ramifications of this morning’s events. What did he know about this witch now? Time turners don’t move in space, only time, so she traveled from Hogwarts, but not from now. The diary was dated 1998, so it was not any earlier than that, if the written words were to be believed.

The girl was in terrible shape and some of her injuries occurred after her arrival. The signs of torture were not fresh. Her arm was cursed and resistant to healing. Wherever and whenever she was from, it wasn’t safe. An icicle of fear crystallized within his chest. He concentrated on the partially formed terror and imagined it to be a dangerous objet d'art, all sharp edges and dripping with poison. Before it could spread, he placed it away in a well-guarded mental vault.

The castle had accepted his claim of Sanctuary for her in a spectacular way. The Headmaster had wanted to ensure that she would be protected, that no one could pull her from his influence before she recovered. At the time, Sanctuary seemed to be the best way of doing that, although now he wasn’t sure why that particular power was recalled to him so clearly; it hadn’t been invoked in decades. The memory of the castle’s acceptance of the ward sent a frisson along the back of his neck and he shivered. Phineas Black called down to him from his portrait, “Did someone walk over your grave, Albus?”

With a wry laugh and nod for Headmaster Black, he answered, “Perhaps.” Whoever the girl might be, he decided that she was much more likely friend than foe, although the corrupted wand was concerning. Well, he would have to wait for her to wake up before he could get any further.

Dumbledore’s thoughts were interrupted by the appearance of a frazzled looking owl at the window. It was a Tawny, and it had clearly laboured hard under the weight of the official-looking scroll, stamped by the seal of the Minister of Magic. Last time he had gotten one of these, it was an Emergency Session, called to deliver a vote of No Confidence which ousted former Minister Eugenia Jenkins, after an incident saw three Aurors dead and many more wounded. In her place, the current minister, Harold Minchum had promised to end the threat of Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters, and he was as subtle as a bull in a china shop. The official seal crumbled under his fingers. It had been keyed to his personal magical signature. He put on his half-moon spectacles and squinted in the candlelight. “Ah, yes. I should have anticipated this.” It was a missive for all members of the Wizengamot to attend another emergency session requesting additional powers to help combat the terrible threat. He had been informed earlier in the week that his friend Alastair Moody had been hit with a curse to the leg during a battle, and there was nothing for it but to amputate his leg. He was planning on visiting, but it had been a very busy week. After feeding the tiny tawny owl some tidbits, he gathered himself and readied to leave.

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The Ogma League met every second Saturday in the basement of 69 St James’s Place, London and had done so since 1726. Wizards from all over Britain gathered here to strengthen their connections, discuss philosophy, and share a spot of dinner and a glass of brandy. Members spanned generations and most were pureblood, joining the League was considered essential for anyone who wanted to get anything accomplished in the political arena. Only the right wizards from the best families joined, and the after dinner conversations held in front of the cavernous fireplace were always stimulating. In 1967 a hot-blooded wizard by the name of Tom Riddle, who later styled himself as “Lord Voldemort”, was invited to join the club as a guest of Ramses Lestrange and his grandfather, Rodolphus.
Tom recalled his impassioned speech with clarity. He was incensed by The International Statute of Secrecy, which he felt did gross injustice to magical people and beings all over the world. Older wizards may have recognised many of the themes on which Grindelwald had built his regime before it was toppled by agents of the International Confederation of Wizards. Riddle had made compelling arguments regarding how life had become worse for the wizarding community at large, and had hoped to gather support to change the world.

He spoke with passion, making eye contact with several wizards he recognised. “Brethren, we have been forced into the shadows for centuries. This has fragmented the magical society at large. We cannot congregate in public without extraordinary measures, lest mundanes see us. Our government spends thousands of Galleons and worse, gallons of magical blood to protect the Muggles from magical threats. If we were in the open, we surely could educate the Muggles, move them out of danger, and openly defend them.” He was very conscious of his audience as he continued.

“Non-magical people have been robbed of their knowledge of our kind, yet they write stories about us, and dress up like us. They tell tales of Merlin’s time with as much passion as we do. I tell you, sirs. They want us back. They too dream of the times, like those of Merlin and Arthur, when powerful wizards and witches provided leadership and succor. We have so much to offer the world, but we keep it hidden!” The last was punctuated with a fist to his chest, and he allowed his tone and demeanor to darken.

“No one should have to die because of an outdated law. Rune magic can be used to cast fire resistance enchantments at little cost, to prevent innocents from burning at the stake. They get tied up, let the fire rise and apparate away, none the wiser.” This was an oversimplification, and everyone knew it, but they also understood the young man’s point.

“No, brothers. The natural order of the world dictates that those who wield the power are the ones who have the responsibility to use it for the betterment of all. The Wizarding World gave up this gods-given charge in 1692, when our fear of the Muggles overtook us. That moment of weakness has caused suffering untold, and we stand by and LET it happen.” He threw his arms wide, “Magical Children need our help. They are abandoned, neglected, beaten, and even killed because of what they are. They die, not even knowing how special their power is, and what it can do.”

Tom Riddle’s eyes glowed with rage, “Ignorant Muggles attack elderly witches, drowning them and worse. As our sisters, mothers, daughters, and grandmothers are accosted by Muggles most vile, will we continue to stand by quietly, pretending that we do not exist?” Some of the seated audience shake their heads no. Others remained inert, although a few of those were probably asleep.

“Respected elders, I challenge you to do the right thing. We need to make new laws, and loosen the white-knuckled grip of the International Confederacy of Wizards.” He held up his hands as if in benediction. “We are up against the strongest captor of all - Fear.” Slowly, he shook his head, “Fear is an illusion. The only power that the Muggles have over us is what we allow them to exert.” Both hands twisted forcefully, as if he tossed that fear under his boots. “We must break our bonds!”

He paced the semicircle and nodded, making eye contact, noting the skeptical and answering the unspoken objections. “You are correct. This will take time, and cannot not happen all at once. We must find the fulcrum, and change our Ministry’s own laws to get the leverage we need to change the world. We can only do this together. Thank you, for hearing me out.”

With that, the session broke into smaller groups of chatter and some drew to Riddle’s side like iron shavings to a powerful magnet. He debated the economic impact of integrating Muggles, of the ways the world could be better if they could harness the untapped resource of their non-magical neighbours.
In time, it became clear to Tom Riddle that the pillars of wizarding society, the oldest wizards who had amassed power and wealth from within the Ministry, were content to continue as they were. Corruption and willful ignorance festered there and obstructed his rational efforts to effect change. He attempted to claim his seat as the last Gaunt descendant, and while privately many of the Ogmas were in favour of bringing him into the Wizengamot, the wary drowned out Tom’s claim. It was in a closed session that they voted, making his rejection a secret matter. It was around this time that Riddle applied for a position at Hogwarts, as the teacher for Defense Against the Dark Arts was retiring. Professor Dumbledore himself, the very man who came to take him away from Wool’s orphanage, also rejected him with empty platitudes. Did the fool think that Riddle hadn’t known that he was in that closed session? He knew his history, he had spoken with Aberforth. The man that the world saw as brave and good was a hypocrite of the highest order.

It was that trip to Hogwarts that brought everything Tom had known all along into painfully sharp focus. Wizarding Society had to burn, so it might be reborn anew. There was no other way. They were all dying, stymied by their own fears. To beat death, they would have to swallow that fear and claim the power that was theirs all along. Many feared the Darker magicks, but Tom was willing to pay the price.

The membership of the Ogma League did not welcome Tom Riddle thereafter as a member, although he was invited back for further debate on many occasions. It was through his friend’s influence that he was able to secure the premises for private meetings, which he held on Thursday evenings. Tom Riddle named himself Lord Voldemort and maintained leadership from the beginning, but it was Ramses Lestrange who was instrumental in setting the tone for their little society. They called themselves The Knights of Walpurgis. It was an exclusive group, and a most serious Oath had to be sworn before admittance. As the Knights grew in size and scope, members were tested before being permitted to take the Oath.

From the outset, it was their mission to work on righting the wrongs that were unchallenged by the Ministry of Magic and governments like it. The work became dangerous, and Lord Voldemort and his followers became paranoid. They had to cover their faces and wear obscuring clothing when they met. This was to protect their identities as many would pay dearly should they become known. Ramses Lestrange suggested that they all agree to a magical tattoo, one that would allow them to know each other, and find each other in times of need. Lord Voldemort had already researched such spells and endorsed the idea. A skull with a snake protruding from its mouth represented their mantra. “To beat the Big Death, we must Swallow our Fear.”

Lord Voldemort continued to inspire his followers, and together they fought the Muggle menace. The message twisted, and Lord Voldemort demanded that his followers harden their hearts. The rescue missions were few and far between now, in favour of espionage and slaughter of the evil Muggles. Fear became their weapon and they were its masters.

The Ministry offered little resistance, and the Death Eaters, as they had been dubbed by the papers, held sway in many places. A new obstacle was making itself clear. There were wizards and witches who were openly opposing him and his followers. Riddle valued magical blood, and in order for his vision to become real, he needed to unite all of wizarding society. His orders were too open ended in regards to the handling of these rebels and it was this that cost Ramses Lestrange his life.

If he had been as ruthless and unwavering as he was with the Muggles, they would never have got close enough to cast that fatal curse, and Lestrange would have still been at his side. Tom Riddle was an excellent student, and he learned this lesson well. He ordered his followers to step down any overt operations as he revamped his command structure to compensate for the huge void left by Lestrange’s death. Lord Voldemort spoke abruptly after a prolonged silence, addressing one of the masked Knights, “Call Rodolphus and Rabastan to the circle, I wish to include them in our council.”
Orion Black bowed deeply to his Lord before turning to deliver the summons personally.

Clearly, things were changing and he needed to plan and arm his followers. Lestrange’s sons had graduated from Hogwarts and were talented duelists and he planned to induct them to the Knighthood. He was certain their father would have wanted that. Together, they would achieve his vision and in so doing, avenge their Hero, Friend, and Father.

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Albus Dumbledore had changed into the plum robes of his office before mounting a broom to the Apparition Point outside the castle grounds. He was a few minutes late, but it appeared that nothing had happened yet. The Chief Warlock sat listening to Minister Minchum and they seemed to be having an intense conversation. Dumbledore was shocked to see Moody sitting in a wheeled chair on the chamber floor. His attempt to make eye contact with his friend was interrupted by the Chief Warlock banging a gong to indicate the session was starting. The youngest member was tasked with opening the session, and Dumbledore was surprised to see Rudolphus Lestrange in the purple robes of the Wizengamot Chambers. In a clear tenor voice, he announced, “Wizards and Witches, please come to order. The Wizengamot is in session, Chief Warlock Gervain Davies is presiding.”

Minchum, wasting little time in observing the forms, said, “I request the floor.”

Davies waved a hand in answer, so Lestrange returned to his seat nearby, ceding the space to their Minister for Magic.

The Minister, one of the few in the room not wearing plum velvet robes, stepped out and began his argument. “When I was elected to the position of Minister, I promised to stop the man known as Lord Voldemort.” Gasps of fear echoed in the chamber and many a face paled at the name. Raising the volume of his voice, magically amplified by charms on the chamber’s walls, he railroaded on, “Our brave witches and wizards of the Magical Law Enforcement Agency struck a major blow to the Death Eaters, we have confirmed that Ramses Lestrange was among those killed whilst resisting arrest.” Muttering broke out in the ranks, crescendoing with excitement.

Mad Eye Moody’s eye had been spinning around, but Dumbledore watched it swivel and stop, intensely regarding Rodolphus Lestrange. The youngest wizard of the Wizengamot had been examined and cleared by the MLE before being sworn in. This mattered, most especially because it was his Father, Ramses Lestrange, who was being discussed. The boy’s father was dead, and he had slipped into the barely cooled seat in his wake. Rodolphus noticed the attention and met Moody’s gaze. After holding the Auror’s attention, his eyes raked down Moody’s form, staring at the stump of the amputated leg, elevated and wrapped with bandages. The Headmaster frowned at Lestrange, but Moody appeared to be unmoved.

“During the debriefing it came to light that our Aurors were at a major disadvantage, as the Death Eaters do not follow written wizarding law, and use the Unforgivables freely. It is this that brings me here today to beg a change in the law, to allow Aurors to have that same freedom in apprehending and subduing these wizards.”

Minchum stalked across the floor, his hands waving expansively as he came to stand behind Mad Eye Moody’s wheelchair, breaking Lestrange’s line of sight. “Our population has been dwindling. We lost much to the conflict with Grindelwald, and what progress we had been making in rebuilding
the pillars of our society is being lost, both by the direct work of the Death Eaters and the loss of our Aurors.” He clapped his hand onto Moody’s shoulder in a gesture of support. “We need to arm them with every advantage that we can give them.”

Albus Dumbledore had been worried about the changes in the ministry. The current Minister had been campaigning with the Wizengamot to increase the number of Dementors in Azkaban, insisting that they would be needed for high level prisoner security. This was being met with resistance from many.

Questions were raised by the council members, obtaining assurances of proper training and judicious use. Dumbledore found the idea of using the Imperius Curse and the Cruciatius Curse on anyone completely abhorrent, and the trouble with Avada Kedavra was that it was so final, and had the potential to hit a friend in the heat of battle. He was also concerned about the corrupting effect that the spell was rumoured to have on a person who used it. Jarred from his thoughts by the gong again, Dumbledore watched Rodolphus Lestrange stand and announce, “The floor is closed for debate at this time. A vote will be called to approve this amendment to the bill forbidding the use of the Unforgivables, to be maintained for a year. All those in favour of amendment, please raise your wands.”

And so it came to pass that the emergency Unforgivable Usage Amendment was approved with much less debate than was typically spent deciding whether or not to bring a bumper if it looks like it might rain. The Wizarding World was at war, and had been for some time. The time for action was here. He had to figure out a way to keep the forces of Light working together. As Lestrange announced the results and then closed the session for the Chief Warlock, Dumbledore considered that carefully schooled expression on the young wizard’s face. It revealed nothing.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

5 November, 1976

On the third day of his internment in the infirmary, Severus’ Head of House finally made an appearance. Professor Sigmund Svartrunir, the man in charge of Ancient Runes was the essence of old. He was thin as a rail, and his hairline had receded enough to emphasize a prominent widow’s peak. He had steel grey hair shot through with streaks of pure white which he kept short and slicked back. His eyebrows were shaggy and expressive, and his deepset eyes were a deep brown. A pencil mustache came and went, depending on his mood. Once when walking in London a muggle asked for his autograph, mistaking him for an actor named Vincent Price. He fancied that he was much more hale than that fellow, although the resemblance was indeed rather uncanny.

A pureblood who trained at Durmstrang, Svartrunir was rumoured to have roomed with Grindelwald himself. He fought alongside Dumbledore and was essential in the clean up some of the uglier aftermath of Grindelwald’s followers prior to settling in for a quiet academic career. Dealing with house disciplinary matters was not the highlight of his day, but it was his job to advocate for his students. He knew as well as Severus did that the attackers responsible for Severus’ current state would get off with nothing worse than a slap on the wrist and that seriously rankled them both.

Walking slowly, Professor Svartrunir made his way across towards his student’s bed. His movements were always precise, and he had affected the use of a walking stick, which doubled nicely as a wand sheath and cudgel. He snorted softly. Severus was here so often that he had claimed the same cot every time and was therefore never difficult to find. As the Professor approached, the sixth year who had been sitting on top of the covers in his pyjamas, reading, came to attention at the sound of the cane on the stone floor. Putting the book to the side, the student stood up and walked over to another section, returning with a sturdy chair to set beside his bed. He smiled at Svartrunir and stood waiting for the man to seat himself creakily, one hand clutching the head of his walking stick for support as he did so. “Well, my boy. What has befallen you this time?” The man’s voice was rough at the edges but the language exact and accent cultured.

Severus waited for the professor to spread his hand graciously to indicate the younger man should sit before making an attempt at answering. Raising his wand to cast, he took the look of one composing his response before the words appeared in the air next to him. His tongue was half grown, but he was still not permitted to use it. “I was attacked from behind as I was returning from the library where I had been researching. The others had left ahead of me, so I was quite alone. First, they cast what must have been a mistaken Langlock, as it left me lacking my tongue entirely. There was more than
one, so at the same time I was trapped with an *Incarcerous*. Finally, they thought it would be funny
to make me hairless like the snake I am before they left me hanging in front of the Great Hall to be
found in time for breakfast, set with a golem who would play music, Muggle music, when anyone
got near enough to cut me down. Mr Filch had to come get Madam Pomfrey as it was too high for
him to reach even with the ladders, and I had been left hanging for hours as it was.” He coloured
with anger at the latest abuse.

The Slytherin Head of House had taken much from Nietzsche and did believe that lessons should not
be taken overly personally. To his credit, it troubled him that Severus had not been able to secure the
allies needed within his House to prevent the recurrent inequity in numbers that the young wizard
faced repeatedly. “Who was it? Need I even ask?”

Finding the floor at Svartrunir’s feet very interesting, Severus hesitated before flicking a his wand to
air-write his response. “James Potter. Sirius Black. Peter Pettigrew.” He had not seen Lupin this time
around, but that one seemed to hang to the back anyway. He was a prefect, and probably absented
himself for the shame of it.

It was James Potter’s will and Sirius Black’s genius that forced the feud to continue well past its
expected shelf life. James Potter imagined himself to be in love with Lily Evans, who still would not
give him the time of day, much less a moment of her time. Potter seemed to blame Severus for this
issue, but Severus had lost much more when Lily turned and walked away from him. In every sense,
Severus had lost twenty times as much as Potter had in their little war, but he had less to begin with.

Sirius tormented Severus in creative ways to further distance himself from his family. It embarrassed
his little brother, who was a perfect child and had been sorted, as expected, into Slytherin. Regulus
was a good student, and did make his parents proud, and that worked on Sirius like sand in his pants,
but he couldn’t attack his brother directly. So why not Snape? Pettigrew was nothing but a simpering
sycophant in these escapades. He seemed to get a charge out of being part of things. He didn’t seem
to care one way or the other, but he did make sure he was never found out alone with Severus, or
any other Slytherin for that matter.

Svartrunir heaved a sigh in exasperation. “No doubt those boys are rotten apples and spoil the rest of
the House by mere association. They have become very wild. McGonagall seems to be slipping.
Why she can’t make those two behave, I cannot begin to understand.” Severus smirked. He had, of
course, spent a significant amount of his recent life pondering ways to get back at the whole lot of
them. So many possibilities. So little time.

Svartrunir knew that look, and he was quick to answer that smirk sternly. “Mr Snape, you recall my
expectations, do you not? Do not let me hear of you engaging in such crass activity. A gentlewizard
would never be caught dead in a prank war. You have such wonderful prospects. Don’t sully them.”
The elderly wizard leaned back and his expression changed to that of a man delivering a treat,
establishing with his walking stick, held as one might a baton, “Just the other day Professor Slughorn
was carrying on about how talented you are and how wonderful it is to have someone like you
working in the lab.”

Severus coloured with pleasure at this praise, a twitch of his wand causing the golden words to
shimmer in response, “Of course sir. Thank you, sir.”

Shaking his head in relative impotence, Svartrunir drew himself upright. A perfunctory pause was
taken to inquire if Severus had everything he needed before the elderly professor took his leave of
the teen, patting Severus lightly on the shoulder in a rare show of physical support. He had a
fondness for this troubled lad, but felt that any more obvious display of affection would probably be
bad for Severus’ character. Severus was quite touched, really, but schooled his features to a more
neutral and polite attention as they took leave of each other.

At the beginning of every year, Svartrunir would gather his whole house for a chat about how the House of Slytherin managed. The rules were: Never get caught breaking rules. Always support your own, no one else will. So they were expected to watch each other’s backs, although not such that you stuck your neck out without known future reward. If you were caught in rule breaking, Professor Svartrunir would put the fear of Morgana into your heart and make sure you served reparations, no excuses. If you were not caught however, well all the better – especially if a Gryffindor was at the receiving end of the prank. The Head of Slytherin was not above acting as the affronted party when no evidence could be found, and rather enjoyed giving frustration to Minerva as much as she did.

Professor Minerva McGonagall allowed her students to get away with everything except the Unforgivables or anything that caused permanent damage. A letter to your parents and some detentions was the worst that was ever dealt out to a Gryffindor and everyone knew it. Well, that letter was an actual incentive for Sirius Black. Why, an offer to anger his mother even further, yes please! Potter seemed to be able to convince anyone who would listen that Severus Snape deserved everything he got.

Severus was improving at not being caught, but everyone seemed to understand that he gave almost as good as he got. The only things that prevented the feud from growing to ridiculous proportions in this rivalry were Snape’s lack of social backup and resources. He had some loose connections among his fellow housemates, but he lacked the political weight that he would have had if he were a pureblood of one the sacred 28. His main value to his fellow classmates was his talent. He was quick on the draw and had a genius for potions, something he inherited from his mother. If he could convince someone to help him, he’d easily put the Gryffindors in their place.

With a rueful glance after the retreating back of Professor Svartrunir, Severus eased back onto the pillows, silently staring at the expanse of ceiling. He knew its cracks better than the back of his own hand. He was unutterably weary of seeing them. Something had to be done.

Chapter End Notes

If you are looking for something to read, go check out my friend’s fic, Tea, Black. It's about Alice. She's lovely.
Chapter Seven

Chapter Notes

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Apologies, just a short chapter this time, but it wanted to be this length. What is a lady to do?

In her office, Poppy Pomfrey was reading over her medical texts, looking for information on cursed wounds and coma. There was precious little known, and her newest and most mysterious charge had yet to show any sign of waking up. The skull fracture had healed, she treated the burns and the ribs, but the child was still not rousing. She had had to resort to dosing her with nutrient solutions as the girl was so painfully thin. It took several castings of a modified medical Scourgify to remove the layers of sweat and dirt. The girl's extensive mane of curls snarled and snapped at her, causing it to tangle defiantly. How she managed without professional help, the Mediwitch had no notion. After the usual cosmetological charms failed, Poppy finally chopped the curls to shoulder length. Such a shame too, it had been down to the middle of her back when she came in, but this was much more sensible.

Realising that she was focused on the surface problems (seductively solvable with simple solutions), she snorted in irritation with herself. She reached for a quill and moved to write a missive to the only other person in the castle who might have an idea of what would need to be done next. A few lines jotted down, a drying charm followed by an origami fold saw the note scuttle off in the form of a crab.

She then leaned back in her comfortable chair, taking a moment to close her eyes and ponder simpler puzzles. Like what to serve for tea with Minerva next Sunday.

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It was fortunate that it was near the end of the day, as the crab-note had to travel several floors away, and it was to an empty classroom that it arrived, unfettered by hateful stamping feet. The crab had to claw at several clumsy students, all of whom would be wondering later tonight how exactly they managed to get paper cuts on their ankles. Cranky, it laboriously climbed up onto the desk of one Professor Whittington Nott, known to his contemporaries as “Whit.” Scuttling closer, the folded eyestalks of the memo contemplated the Professor with a mutinous air.

As the Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts, Whit Nott had put up with a lot from his students so far this year, and he could not help but notice the aloof attitude of his fellow teachers, who didn’t seem to be too interested in getting too attached. Especially the beautiful young Professor of Transfiguration, now there was a cold fish. He had heard of the curse on the Defense position, limiting its attendants to a year at most of tenure. More concerning, some left in the most disturbing ways, and from what he understood, Minerva McGonagall would have only been too happy to
channel the malice of the curse herself. He muttered a desultory, “I was just trying to be friendly.” With a grimace, the Professor tapped the seal on the back of the crab’s shell with his wand and the elaborate construct melted down to a flat single sheet of paper onto which a brief missive was penned:

“Whit:

Please attend on me in the infirmary at your earliest convenience. One of my charges has need of your curse breaking expertise if I am not mistaken.

-Poppy.”

With eyebrows rising up to his hairline in consternation, Whit contemplated the very succinct nature of the missive. So, the matron had found a problem she couldn’t solve. His thin mouth tilted up lopsidedly in appreciation and anticipation. One that she has not seen fit to send on to St Mungo’s, but she thought that he might have something to offer. He glanced at the clock and the stack of essays waiting to be graded. He made the noble sacrifice of putting off his work until later in favour of a visit to the infirmary. After all, who was he to refuse his aid?

Fifteen minutes later the man himself stepped into the sterilised environs of the infirmary. After a quick glance around, which revealed very little in the way of occupancy, the wizard made his way to the small office and rapped quietly on the frame. Poppy had been staring off into the infinite and started when the man announced himself. “Well, this is the first time this has happened, Poppy. To what or whom might I apply a Whit, pray tell?” He stood with arms folded across his chest, backlit against the tall windows behind him. His smirk of humour was almost lost in his own shadow. Nott was a lean wizard with a pointed face, much like that of a fox. His auburn hair was kept short, lying neatly back and never out of place. Sharp moss green eyes measured Poppy’s response down to the milligram, like precious grains of gold. The man was unnerving at times, moving too quickly and quietly to feel safe around.

Poppy stood and straightened her starched apron, allowing herself to compose a response, a faint blush evident as she met the man’s gaze. “Funny. Nott.” After skipping a beat for comedic timing, she pushed past him, twitching her head towards a remote corner of the infirmary, indicating that he should follow her. Whit noticed that Poppy’s retreating form was neat as a pin in the conservative, dark navy dress of a Mediwitch, topped off with a starched apron and white nurses cap. The apron strings alone were enough to make his fingers itch.

Drawing in a fortifying breath, the Mediwitch began to present her case in muffled tones as they tread around the privacy screens to the young woman’s side. “Three nights ago, this young lady was found in the early hours by Filch outside in the courtyard. I wasn’t sure what to think when he brought her up here. She is young, somewhere between 16 and 18 years of age, and frankly we have no idea of who she is or where she came from. She is a witch, but she is not one of our students.”

Poppy’s watery grey eyes had been fixed on their subject, but at this last utterance she met Whit’s gaze, engaging his attention as if to will him to understand the ramifications here. “Albus didn’t feel her break the perimeter wards, she just dropped out of the sky as far as we can tell. Then the poor child ran afoul of that horrible Whomping Willow and was knocked out cold.” She huffed in renewed frustration at her own impotence, “It has been days, the brain injury has been addressed fully and she should be waking up.”

The cursebreaker come Professor glared at the prone figure, and shifted to shove his hands in his pockets as he listened to the matron. This girl had to be considered a risk, then. Unexpectedly he is less interested in seeing the interloper wake as soon as may be. He nodded to indicate his understanding, adding offhandedly, “Perhaps she is just.. tired?”
This, of course, was as stupid as it sounds and earned an appropriate scowl from the Mediwitch.
“Oh, of course, if only it were that simple.” The appended albeit unspoken “you irritating ponce”
was loud and clear and Whit had the good grace to look contrite. “No, in addition to the head
wound, the girl was malnourished, bruised, with cracked ribs, and showed signs of spell damage.”
She glanced across the infirmary to assure that her other charge was not taking too much interest in
what she was saying, before adding in a lower voice, “Whit, the girl had clearly been tortured.
Cruciatus damage at the least, and she smelled like brimstone. I can’t get it out of her hair.” She
looked down fearfully for a moment before twitching the coverlet out of the way to allow her access
to the girl’s left forearm, undoing the girl’s bandages before tilting the pale limb so that her colleague
could clearly read the word carved into her flesh.

Whit sucked in an involuntary breath in shock before swearing loudly, “Merlin’s Dancing Pants,
Poppy! Who did this?!”
Across the infirmary, Severus dropped the Potions journal he was reading. He knew what the man was seeing for the first time. Professor Nott had much to learn if that was the most potent explicative he could pull out of thin air. Severus had crept over to take a look at the arm himself on the second night, after Madam Pomfrey had retreated to her office to claim an hour’s sleep between necessary ministrations to both him and the girl. The recall of what he had seen made his stomach turn, even from this distance in time. The curse was deep, carved down to muscle and bone. The flesh around it was red, puckered, and feverish looking. It seeped blood even after all Madam Pomfrey had already done at the time. Not even Murtlap essence had staunched the flow.

Pomfrey’s whispered reply drifted to Severus’ ears. “I don’t know. I am afraid that the girl will not wake until this has been seen to, and the Headmaster does not want her moved to St Mungo’s. He says she belongs here, but Whit, I’ve never seen her in my life.” She hissed, “The castle granted her Sanctuary. All five ghosts confirmed. We are obliged to do everything that we can for her.”

Whit wasn’t looking with his eyes anymore, so she allowed the girl’s arm to drop gently back to the bed before smoothing the coverlet back into position. An audible clearing of the throat from the Defense Professor brought Pomfrey’s attention back to the wound at hand.

Professor Nott queried, “Have you swept her mouth for charms or retained food? Cleared her stomach? What else did you find on her scans?”

Madam Pomfrey straightened up as she responded, turning away from the bedside. “Yes, no poisoned apple or obvious long acting soporifics are in her system, although it is clear she had been taking ample doses of calming potions and sleep aids before she came here.” She shifted her weight onto her left hip, considering how to convey the next piece of information. “Her magical core is depleted, Whit. I was afraid…”

She paused before completing the thought, one that the cursebreaker anticipated and completed for her, “You were afraid that she had completely tapped herself out.”

The Mediwitch nodded minutely. “I was, but it appears that her magic is slowly rebuilding itself, a trickle. Her channels are raw, Nott. I don’t know what she was like before, but her potential capacity is incredible.”

Whit was pale, considering. A witch or wizard could give so much that their magic would not regrow. It was not a well studied phenomenon, because when it happened, most often the victim died swiftly. Thankfully it was a rare event. What could she have possibly been doing? There had been no reports of major events in the newspaper since the thwarting of a Death Eater attack on a Muggle masquerade on Halloween. Aurors had died, but they had successfully brought down what the Ministry was proclaiming as Lord Voldemort’s second in command. It was Whit’s turn to have his
thoughts yanked back to the moment.

“But as things are, conscious use of magic seems right out for her, it would be pure agony.” She added with a sympathetic wince.

Whit quirked an eyebrow as he watched Poppy’s mood drop into despondency. This girl had the castle, the Headmaster, and the no-nonsense Mediwitch all wrapped around her little finger, and the little chit hadn’t even regained consciousness yet. He reached for the clipboard where the girl’s vitals have been charted and read the name, “Deirdre Ward. Melancholy and guarded.” He shot Poppy a glance heavy with bemusement.

“Well, I couldn’t very well just call her ‘Girl’, could I now? It is only a loaned name. We know almost nothing about her.” Poppy crossed her arms across her chest, looking away from Whit.

Nott had not intended to put the nurse on the defensive and felt a pang of guilt, “Sad tale, the name suits her. No one has been looking for her, I take it?”

Poppy shook her head to the negative. “I have made some inquiries to St Mungo’s, and they haven’t had anyone asking after someone of her description. I hesitate at calling the Ministry directly, as Albus seems adamant that she not be allowed out of his sight or the castle walls.”

Something clicked at this pronouncement. “The Headmaster thinks she’s in danger?” Whit amended this in a moment. “Or is she the danger itself?”

Poppy’s eyes widened at the idea. “I’d hardly believe the Headmaster would allow her to stay if he thought she was a threat!”

Nott ducked his head in disagreement, looking back at the girl. That wasn’t exactly true. The man was a magnet for trouble. He should know. “Did she have anything with her? Any clues to her identity?”

“Albus took her wand to his office, but Whit, she was only carrying one small pocket book and nothing else. No identification.” The Mediwitch’s lip curled up in disgust. “Her robes were torn, blood soaked, and they smelled of unnatural fire. I burned them.”

Grunting understanding, the DADA Professor swung his gaze back to the girl’s features before tilting his head to the girl. “May I, Poppy?”

The Mediwitch gave perfunctory permission, “Of course, why else would I ask you here? Surely not to simply admire the mess?”

Suppressing an uncharitable response, Whit found a stool and positioned it on the girl’s left side before he flung his weight onto it, next to the patient. Getting comfortable, he reached and re-extracted the girl’s arm, holding her hand gently as he moved her arm to the best light. With a whispered prayer, he placed his hand over the wound itself and immediately started to shiver, eyes screwed tightly shut.

Severus had heard everything, and now was out from under the covers, hanging on the metal frame of the end of his cot, craning his neck to get a better view.

Moments stretched out to minutes before Whit’s eyes snapped open, and the sight caused Poppy to stumble backward. Whit’s eyes were completely black, making it impossible to tell what he was fixing on. The professor moved his hovering hand about a foot above the girl’s recumbent form, muttering a countercurse. What appeared to be smoke seeped out of the words in the girl’s arm, seeking out the man for direct contact, which he carefully avoided. The air directly below Whit’s
hand rippled, as it does over hot pavement on a summer day. The wisps of smoke seemed to be changing, dissipating when they reached upwards. If any had looked close enough they would have seen a quartz crystal lodged between Whit’s ring and middle fingers.

The longer the spell lasted, the harder it was on the both of them. The girl was sweating, her hair plastered to her face, beads forming on her flushed face. The professor struggled to maintain the distance, his brow knotted in an expression of pain. The crystal was blackening, becoming more visible.

The man finally straightened and cut off the spell, seating his focus in the palm of his hand. The stone cracked unceremoniously before crumbling down to dust. Whit winced in embarrassment at the clumsiness of it all. Poppy handed him a phial and Whit gratefully deposited the vile dust therein.

Willing his breathing to slow and his heart to stop pounding, the man shook his head. “I didn’t get it all, Poppy. It will have to wait until she’s awake. I can’t finish it off without her help.” Some curses needed to be actively rejected in addition to being ripped out by the roots. He’d got a chunk of it, but the root had snapped and was still embedded in the girl. He commented, “Duced clever, that curse. It seems to be feeding off of her magic, Poppy. There’s your answer of how she got into this state.”

Poppy asked quietly, “But is the curse keeping her from waking?” She moved to minister to the girl’s arm. The ordeal appeared to have reopened the cuts in the word and the edges seeped ominously. The witch frowned as she cleansed the girl’s wounds, thankful that her patient wasn’t awake. She’d have to give her extra nutrient potion and hydration powder after this.

“I don’t think so.” He sighed, his voice modulating to a petulant whinge. “Great. Now I have extra credit homework. Thanks, Madam.”

Poppy looked over her shoulder, her expression bland. “Hand me those clean bandages.” She pointed at a stack a few paces away, and Whit complied readily enough. His mock grumpiness couldn’t cover how heavily he placed his feet, and how his fingers seemed to fumble at picking the squares up. He held them patiently for her and she had the girl’s arm wrapped and covered up in a trice.

He knew he needed to go rest, and so did Madam Pomfrey. “I will return daily to report my progress and to assess hers. Please, do let me know if anything changes.” Poppy indicated her acquiescence with a nod and walked the man to the door before turning to check on Severus, who has now laid down with his face to the wall in an effort to simulate the prescribed nap he was supposed to be taking.

Madam Pomfrey wasn’t fooled. “I know you’re awake, Severus.” She had caught sight of the lad hanging over the bedframe, mouth hanging open in unadulterated awe. She felt much the same at the time, and hadn’t dared to interrupt Professor Nott’s concentration.

The boy hitched his hips, turning back towards the room. He wiggled his wand, and words appeared in the air, “That was dead amazing.”

She had no intention of discussing what happened, and rather hoped the lad would get the point. Poppy put her hand on the lad’s jaw, imperiously commanding, “Open.” He briefly complied, displaying a small, gently glowing tongue. It was only an inch long, but it was properly rooted.

As her grip on his face slackened, Severus impatiently pulled away and twitched his wand again, adding, “Lucky for her Professor Nott is here. I wonder if he’d teach me that countercurse?”

Poppy’s expression rippled quickly from her placid professional face to one of horror. “Severus, I
can’t think of anything worse for you right now. Drawing out a curse like that would expose you to Dark magic. Professor Nott is an adult, and has been trained to do that sort of thing. No, I simply would not want any student here to even think to attempt such a thing.” She sniffed in derision, her eyes cutting off Severus’ protestations with a look that he knew he would only lose ground if he pushed harder.

Thinking to change the subject he picked up a book and shook it, indicating that he wanted more to read. He’d already gone through his homework, current potions journals from the library, and two of Madam Pomfrey’s books on treating common magical maladies - entry level texts for those interested in healing.

“Yes, yes I know. You have eaten through all of these books already.” Turning slightly, she used her wand to Accio a book titled, “Remedies for what Rankles.” It was a book detailing compounding salves and had the potential to hold Severus’ attention for a few hours at least. She had a reading list stashed away somewhere for Severus as he spent so much time here.

Madam Pomfrey looked Severus over with a critical eye, marking the return of the lad’s eyebrows and eyelashes. His head was now covered with a downy fringe of thick, curled, ebony hair. She was going to have to find the boy employment before he got even more nosy, as she still didn’t feel it appropriate to release him back to the tender ministrations of his housemates yet voiceless. He was a sitting duck without his ability to speak.

Professor Svartrunir had sent the boy a missive detailing his rather unsatisfying interaction with Minerva McGonagall on the subject of her prize students and their misdeeds. She had promised to punish the boys by placing them under a geas of silence for the weekend, which was something anyway. Poppy mused that she should suggest that next time that McGonagall also force the perpetrators to only eat gruel and to charm them to make sure that everything they tried to sneak would turn to gruel in their mouths. If the way to a wizard’s heart was through his stomach, it was a fair target for punishment as well.

Clearing her throat to distract Severus from making his new book’s acquaintance too swiftly, Madam Pomfrey offered, “I think you will be able to start to speak tomorrow, although you will still want to use the writing, I daresay, for lengthier interactions.” Severus’ eyebrows knit together as he contemplated how sore his mouth was. The new flesh was tender. “Perhaps you’d care to work on some brewing tonight, after you’ve exhausted your attentions on that book?”

Severus straightened to the alert, his eyes lighting up with the idea of doing anything else. His hand clutched his wand for a moment in excitement before he waved it, putting up his response in gold writing, “Of course, Madam Pomfrey. What can I help with?”

The Mediwitch suppressed a responding grin, replying simply. “I’ll get you a list of what we are running low on. You can write up a list and we’ll send the elves to retrieve the ingredients. You can use my brewing station for now.” She savored the expression on the boy’s face. He had grown so much, but for a moment she saw joy and anticipation, and the transformation they effected was magical. As all things caught in time, it was soon gone.

Severus nodded curtly causing the golden writing to morph now reading in more careful formal writing, “Thank you for this opportunity, Madam Pomfrey.”

The Mediwitch was disappointed as the boy visibly schooled his expression to something more seemly for a Slytherin. That is, inscrutable. It was though a cloud covered the sun on a early spring day, changing the air instantaneously from a promising warmth to cold shadows. Pomfrey pulled a shawl over her shoulders as proof against that chill before consulting her stores. The to-do list was handed back to Severus for his perusal in short order.
Severus ended up making two batches of AcneAid that night. If it bothered him that the purpose of the potion was not vital, he didn’t let it show. He had been reading up on a unguent for arthritis that seemed promising. He had been looking for something he could do for the old caretaker, as anyone could see that Mr Filch never moved quickly or without some stiffness. He speculated that perhaps Professor Svartrunir would appreciate it as well. The kind man had sent him some extra credit Runes puzzles to go over as his idea of entertainment. To Severus, those puzzles were more thoughtful and delightful than any flowers.
Chapter Nine

Chapter Notes

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6 November, 1976

A ghost drifted near as the Professors sat down to breakfast. It was early, and the students were only just starting to file in for the meal.

Professor Whittington Nott sat in front of his plate of slowly cooling, unattended scrambled eggs. He held his fork idly in his right hand, where it was being balanced like a seesaw, whilst the man stared, unseeing, into the distance. His concentration was broken by a jovial laugh, uncomfortably close, since ghosts were rather capable of sneaking up on the unwary and distracted.

“Oh, ho! A lever, poised in the balance of the moment. Quite the dilemma, Professor. A state of indecision, but what to do, what to do?” The monk held his belly, chortling quietly.

Whit glared at the apparition for a moment before recalling his manners. “There are enormous forces in this world waiting to be harnessed, but it is frustrating that one cannot do more with the lesser evils sitting on our own doorstep.” He chuckled at himself, looking away again. “I have studied long, and learned much, but there are still too many problems that even magic cannot fix.” Turning his gaze back to the Fat Friar, the Professor drawled an apology of sorts, “I am rather pathetic today, I am afraid. Not very good company.”

With a gesture of warding, or possibly benefaction, the monk offered this advice. “The most powerful magic of all is in knowing when to apply the lightest of touches. Recall the power of the pin in the axle, or the pebble that starts the avalanche. The one well-placed word.” The Friar chortles, adding, “The kiss in despair, hmm?” He hooked his thumbs in his belt, forging on. “It is these subtleties that can in the blackest darkness render critical understanding, allowing one to create miracles without one wit of magic applied.” The ghost slapped his belly, “A minimum of force, as you were.”

Groaning inwardly at the use of his name, Whit responded, “You’re trying to put wizards and witches everywhere out of business, sir. That seems rather uncharitable for a man of the cloth.” He carefully kept his tone light and playful. It would not do to show his wounded pride overmuch.

The Friar pulled his fat face into a smirk before responding, “Well, get on with it, then. Go ahead. Wake up the ward with your fancy magical forces.” He dipped closer with a jovial grin, causing Whit’s face to grow cold with the proximity. “‘Tried true love’s kiss, yet?’ At Whit’s look of shocked incredulity, he added after a critical once over that seemed to measure more than outer appearances, “No, you are right. That wouldn’t work for you, now would it, Fool?”

With that, the fat ghost turned and sauntered away, taking the chance to respond to his last well-placed word away. Whit was left feeling as though he had been cut off at the knees.
The morning started early in the infirmary. Madam Pomfrey roused Severus out of bed to go shower and accept his tongue growth potion before she had to attend an Apparition training session, Dittany at the ready. Severus didn’t need the itch-tea any more at least, and it was glorious to feel the water sloughing off the dirt of the past few days. Of course the Mediwitch had given him what passes for a wizarding sponge bath - fortunately with an animated sponge and privacy. He hated those - the sponge was always rough and the water cold. This was much better, and he moved his fingers through the fine hair on his head, reveling in the strange new texture. His scalp was still sensitive, and the water felt like ice as it rained down, causing a frisson to pass down his spine. After he had dried off and dressed, this time in black pyjamas and a thin striped dressing gown, he padded back to his bed and sat in the chair next to it.

Madam Pomfrey stuck her head out of the office to observe the boy’s progress. “I think you might be ready for company, Severus. Is there anyone you would like me to contact?” Severus’ expression blackened immediately and the Mediwitch regretted her suggestion. She never understood how a House whose members had to be constantly on their guard, even with each other, could actually produce functional adults. Not waiting for the answer that wasn’t going to come, she went on to say, “We start teaching you to talk again today.” This didn’t get much of a response out of him either. He had been here five days, and he knew full well he was going to be here through the next weekend, and he wasn’t seeing the end of the tunnel just yet. “Do you sing?” Severus reacted to that with a look of pained incredulity worthy of a house elf suddenly given clothes.

“I want you to hum, Severus. It will get your voice warmed up, and will make things easier later.” She put on her most winning smile, “Go on then. I can get you a wireless if you like.”

He seemed to consider this for a moment before writing, “Muggle music alright?” The last thing he wanted to hum to was the warblings of the latest witch crooning “Enchanted Evening.” Wizarding culture seemed dominated by the taste of old fogies, stuck back several decades or even a century behind the Muggle world.

The Mediwitch’s smile faltered for a moment before she assented, “As long as it isn’t too loud.”

Severus had the grace to turn away, ostensibly arranging his correspondence and homework before he rolled his eyes hard enough to be audible. Realising he hadn’t responded, he waved his wand, and an appropriate response appeared. “Of course, Madam Pomfrey. Even better, if you place a silencing spell over this part of the infirmary, you won’t have to suffer with me.”

The Mediwitch felt this was an excellent compromise, and soon enough Severus was humming right along with his favorite rock ballads.

The young wizard was interrupted in the midst of a passionate air guitar solo in “Magic Man” by the sudden return of sound from the rest of the infirmary and Professor Nott’s dry interjection of “Marvelous, Mr Snape. I hate to interrupt what is obviously a wonderful start on a career in pantomime theatre, but if you would, I could use assistance over here?” He watched Severus turn bright red from the neck up. The teen tried to cover his discomfiture with a dignifying straightening of his robe, one hand idly brushing off invisible dust from his sleeve before reaching over to deliberately turn off the wireless. Grateful to have hair again, Severus quirked an eyebrow in askance at Professor Nott.
Having Severus’ undivided attention, Professor Nott cleared his throat. “Quite. Well then. Over here, if you will.” The two walked over towards the sectioned off cubicle containing Miss Ward, and Severus was alert with interest. With a searching look, the Professor explained what he wanted of the student. “I think this young lady’s level of consciousness may be purposefully suppressed.”

Both of Severus’ eyebrows shot up in surprise, so Nott hastened to explain. “She’s been here five days. I have worked with her, and am confident that...” He trailed off, realising he should afford this young lady some privacy and dignity, “The problem that Madam Pomfrey was worried about should not be keeping her asleep.”

Severus decided to help the man out, and flicked his wand to write in the air, “You mean the curse. On her arm.” He jerked his head at the covered arm on the girl’s left.

Choking on his own attempt at nicety, Professor Nott muttered, “Of course. Slytherin.”

Severus gifted the man with a glare, barely tempered by his desire to not end this particular line of conversation.

“Well, yes. I have done what I can, and Poppy assures me that the lass has no physical ailment that would prevent her from waking either. We’ve already tried reviving charms and waking solutions, sniffing salts, pinching, talking, and pressing her hands without much response.”

He lifted a finger to break off Severus’ disappointed grunt. “However, I think perhaps some exposure to pleasant things may help convince her to wake up.” With a grand gesture, he indicated the wall of windows beyond Severus’ cot, currently lit up with the afternoon sun. “I want to move her over to those windows and expose her to some sunlight. It’s too cold to take her outside, but perhaps having more movement around her will stimulate her. After the light has changed, you can move her back to her home.”

Professor Nott cocked his head at Severus with a wicked grin, “Perhaps you might get through to her with your musical talent.” The man turned his back, chortling, and feeling that he had made quite the joke.

Severus made a rude gesture at the arrogant bastard’s retreating back, mouthing an emphatic but silent, “Fuck you, sir.”

Grumbling internally in disappointment, Severus unlocked the wheels on the girl’s bed and drove her over to the biggest patch of sunlight. He thought he was going to learn something today. Intellectual tease. With a glance over towards Pomfrey’s office, he flicked the radio back on and lowered the volume before collapsing onto his bed in a sullen heap.

Sixteen, and the only girl who would let him near her was in a goddamn coma. Twitching some pillows behind him, he sat upright and contemplated the girls’ prone form. Her hair, which had been cut, was braided to prevent it from causing mischief, but curly tendrils escaped all around her face and down the plait which was slung over her right shoulder. Her lips were regular lips, not too generous, not too thin, and her mouth hung slightly open. Her lashes were the same honeyed brown of her hair. In the light it became obvious that the girl’s eyes were moving around rapidly. It hadn’t been like that when she was over in the shaded corner. After another long look, Severus reached out and grabbed the latest book that caught his attention from Madam Pomfrey’s shelf. “Mind Magic - Applications for the Healer.” He slogged through the introduction, a section heavy on ethics, finding the prose dry and tasteless, like Weetabix. Tossing the book to the side, he stood up and moved the cot a few feet to chase the beams of light from the window. As he did so, the girl tossed her head to the side and frowned before the tension in her face bled away once more.
Severus glanced quickly over towards Madam Pomfrey’s office, then back at the girl, before taking off at a jog to find the Mediwitch. His heart fluttered with excitement. After checking the potions bench and the office, he found her in the clean store room, inspecting the racks of potions and other medical accoutrement that Severus hadn’t had time to take in. The motion of him entering the room attracted the woman’s attention, and understanding he wanted her to follow him, she was surprised to see the girl in a beam of sunlight, well across the infirmary from where she had been situated previously. “I am confused, Severus. Did she roll over there on her own?”

The boy had the grace to look embarrassed before he elaborated in gold air writing. “Professor Nott wanted me to put her into the light to see if that helps her wake up.” He shook his head, erasing it and adding further, “Her eyes were moving, and she moved her head.” He stared pleadingly at the matron, willing this to mean something.

Madam Pomfrey snorted softly in annoyance before the faint movement of the girl’s eyes grabbed her attention. “Did she open her eyes, Severus?”

The boy shook his head to the negative with a slight growl of frustration. He would have said that, now, wouldn’t he?

Tapping her index finger on her lower lip, Madam Pomfrey considered the girl, tension bleeding out of her posture. “Dreaming. She’s dreaming! I’ll let the Headmaster know.”

Severus could only guess what this meant as the Mediwitch glided back to her office to pen two missives. He slid his chair over to the girl’s bedside and sat down. What kind of company will she be when she wakes up? She has been rather … tolerable thus far. He chided himself mentally. Pathetic, Severus. Honestly, do you prefer your girls to be unconscious? A bitter guffaw escaped his damaged mouth at the very idea.

From a nearby wall, out of Severus’ line of sight, the Fat Friar peeked in to check on the ward’s progress. He had witnessed the earlier scene with Professor Nott and his somewhat daft tutelage. Chortling in amusement, he withdrew to go tell the others. That Defense teacher wasn’t such a fool after all, was he?
Severus was still standing guard near the sleeping witch when Dumbledore swept into the infirmary. Madam Pomfrey intercepted the Headmaster for a low voiced chat before they both made their way over. The light was fading fast through the westward facing windows, and there was nowhere left to move the bed, so Severus stopped fussing with it. Since his last report, Severus had observed the patient move her head once more, this time with an expression of discomfort before she settled moments later. Her eyes were still moving beneath the lids, and Severus was of the opinion that she might be reading in her sleep. Considering exactly what text might be found written under her eyelids had been his current occupation when the bed started to move away. Startled, Severus whipped his head around, only to find himself the subject of intense scrutiny from the Headmaster himself. “How goes Mr Snape’s recovery, Poppy? Will he be rejoining his Housemates soon?” Before the Mediwitch could answer, Dumbledore chortled onwards, “Cat’s got your tongue, lad?”

Severus’ expression darkened, and the room dimmed along with it as the “lad” raised his wand to compose a response.

A flash of concern crossed Madam Pomfrey’s face before she interjected angrily, “Albus, that was unkind!” It was the Gryffindor Lions who did it, those favoured cubs who were not particularly punished for the act either. The Mediwitch was not so insensitive as to misunderstand the imbalance of karma that’s been played out here.

After a heartbeat’s pause, his expression sincerely conciliatory, the Headmaster apologised with an incremental bow. “I simply could not resist the jest, Mr Snape. Forgive an old man.”

Madame Pomfrey sniffed irritably, and resumed pushing the bed back across the Infirmary.

Letting his fingers relax, Severus closed his eyes, counting to ten before he opened them again to return the slight bow in silent acknowledgement. The pair was turning away already, without the initial question answered - all to the better to his view. Considering how little he wanted to be back in his dormitory just yet, Severus moved to a section of the wall with a clear view of the mysterious patient’s current position, becoming almost as invisible as he felt. Next to him, the Grey Lady stepped into view through the stone, bearing witness, and causing Severus to shiver. The air had chilled markedly in her proximity.

Dumbledore stood still at the girl’s bedside, like a heron at the water’s edge, watching intently. He had already heard the report from Poppy. With a shrug and a sidelong glance at the Mediwitch, he reached over and gently shook the sleeping form’s shoulder. Madam Pomfrey looked somewhat chagrined. No, of course, she hadn’t tried to do that. Augh. In a firm, commanding voice, the wizard said, “Miss. Young lady, it is time to wake up!” Nothing happened.
Severus had been holding his breath without realising. Why hadn’t he thought of that? He exhaled in a quiet puff of bemusement.

The Grey Lady appeared at the head of the girl’s bed and held her hand over her brow in a gesture of maternal protection. “She will wake when it is time, and no sooner, Headmaster. Your cursebreaker has determined that this sleep is not linked to her curse. Leave her be.”

Madam Pomfrey, feeling better about herself, nodded briskly. “It is so, Headmaster. She is still healing. It is described in the healer’s tomes. We will continue with the nutrient potions. It will be well.” She reached over to pat his forearm in reassurance.

Dumbledore appeared to be annoyed with this, but backed off, stepping away from the bedside. He bowed his head, eyes closing for a moment, as if saying a prayer.

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Albus found himself standing in a vast green meadow, it’s grasses rippling in the breeze. Before him, a road approached a bridge that crossed over an idyllic river. Sea birds soared high in the clear blue sky overhead, riding the thermals in wide, gentle circles. On the opposite bank rose a city, built up in a spiral to perch on a hill, towering overhead. Its walls were straight and white and impossibly high, and it seemed familiar, somehow. To the west, a mountain range stood shoulder to shoulder with the city, and if he went off of the path, he could touch the toes of the white-granite mountain to his right in mere moments. Steeling himself, Dumbledore strode forwards, leaving the meadow behind. He was pleased that the landscape allowed him to reach the river quickly without demanding that he run or find a horse.

What awaited him on the bridge, however, made him draw up short. A tall woman in white enamelled armour stood there, her shield set down before her, its emblem shone blinding bright in the sun. It was a White Tree, lined in gold on a green field. Hovering above the stylised branches of the tree, seven stars twinkled with polychromatic light. She looked like she had just returned from battle. Her side bled freely, and a rent in her armour over her right shoulder gave him free view of pale flesh split cleanly, dark muscle laid open to the air. A huge broadsword was sheathed in a scabbard slung across her back, its hilt bloodied. A winged helm sat on her head, shading her face from view, but her eyes glinted therein. Her lips were set in a thin line. At his approach, she shifted her stance so that only her side was presented and her left arm was flung up, gauntlet-clad palm facing out. Clearly, he was being told to halt.

Albus opened his arms wide, an attempt to establish himself as an unarmed traveler. No threat.

An alarming growl rose from the maiden’s throat. Her left hand wheeled up, and at that signal the sky darkened with thousands of arrows, all heading straight at him. The ground jostled beneath him, and Albus was falling…

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Severus stilled, his magical senses on high alert. Surely, the Headmaster wasn’t doing what he thought he was doing? The young wizard pushed away from the wall with a silent snarl on his face,
with no clear plan on how to intercede on the girl’s behalf. Distract the Headmaster, at least.

He needed not have worried, as the matron was already intervening, one hand jostling the wizard’s sleeve insistently. “Albus! Desist immediately!” Her tone was sharp, reminding everyone that the infirmary was her bulwark, and it was her authority that ruled in here.

The Grey Lady’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. She looked at the Headmaster as though he was a boy who had been caught lifting skirts.

Dumbledore jerked under Poppy’s hand, and his eyes flew open. A faint blush spread over the Headmaster’s cheeks and he quickly changed what had been a shocked expression to one of innocent puzzlement out of some dusty corner in his past. In truth, he looked pale and drawn out.

“Perhaps it is best if I retire back to my office. I have other matters to attend to. It seems that our wait is not yet over.” He smoothly transitioned the focus of the conversation back to the Mediwitch. “May I compliment you, Poppy, on the excellent care you are providing to our guest? Surely not even the best of St Mungo’s could do better by her.” The Mediwitch relaxed her grasp on the wizard’s cuff, but her glare was still stony with disapproval.

Severus smirked at Dumbledore’s discomfiture. Caught with your telepathic hand in the biscuit tin, sir? Wait. Why wasn’t the girl transferred to St Mungo’s again? Before he could ponder this further, the Headmaster beat an oh-so-casual retreat. Nosy legilimens. He was fortunate that his mother harboured some talent for the mind magics and had trained Severus as a way of protecting him from his father’s anger from a young age.

Chapter End Notes

Another short chapter, alas. When I hit 100 kudos I'll publish another chapter early in celebration! Thank you all for following along with us on this journey.
Evening, 7 November 1976.

Long shadows darkened the infirmary, and evening came earlier every day as Winter grew nearer. Severus shared a repast of a seafood chowder with Madam Pomfrey, and over dinner she discussed what he could expect from his recovery in the next two days. He might be able to start to speak as soon as sometime tomorrow, but she cautioned him not to overtax his newly regrown tongue.

Before leaving for some staff meeting or other, (Severus hadn’t quite heard her mumbled explanation) the Mediwitch had set him a series of new exercises to hum through. He had a modicum of musical education from Primary school, so understood the therapeutic goal of stretching and strengthening his larynx. At school, he had learned musical notation - enough to get on with anyway. Given that he was forbidden from using magic over the Summers, one of the things he had picked up was the guitar, mostly to piss off his old man. He really lusted after the electric bass, but he was pushing it as it was.

Pomfrey wanted him to extend his vocal range from low to high and back down again. He sat there, working on it in the otherwise unbroken silence of the infirmary. Internally he mused, “Whale. I sound like a damned broken whale.” His speaking voice had finished cracking by the time he was fifteen, but he daren’t sing with the band last Summer as he found he hadn’t yet settled into a firm timbre. “Aooroooooo.” What kind of whale was that? He sniggered at himself. Humpback. He cut off mid-wail as his brain supplied, Sperm. No, no no. He would NOT go that way. Beluga. Sounds nice, doesn’t it? Respectable. “Urrrgoooo.” He paced up and down the floor, East to West, between the two banks of windows of the Hospital Wing. The light of the full moon bathed his path in an ethereal glow. An onlooker might have mistaken his figure to be a new phantasm, perhaps a victim of potions lab gone wrong, or a particularly unlucky casualty from Care of Magical Creatures.

He had missed Madam Pomfrey slipping back into the infirmary a little earlier, so entertained with his own thoughts was he. A golden glow spilled from the Mediwitch’s office door across the floor in contrast to that of the moon, confirming that she had returned and was undergoing her usual evening rituals. Soon, a few of the castle’s inhabitants would present themselves for dosing of various chronic maladies, and Severus preferred not to be seen or heard by those unlucky denizens. By the sound of it, their potions were every bit as vile as his was.

It was a perfect night for brewing, as some of the components would be particularly powerful in the moonlight. He threw himself into the work with gusto, having more than one project going at once. By the time Madam Pomfrey had found him in order to dose him with his tongue growing potion, and, he suspected, a dash of sleeping draught, he had potted up several healing salves. One set was for aching joints, and he had set a few tubs aside to give as personal gifts. It was scented with
camphor and a bit of pepper for heat, but the underpinning components were much more than the short term relief the obvious ingredients would supply. He gifted Madam Pomfrey with a rare, shy smile of pride as he air-wrote what he had been up to. The Mediwitch’s eyes twinkled back at the young man before she observed aloud, “Why, there is absolutely no hurry in returning you back to classes, is there my dear? Do make up more of that bruise paste you did yesterday, would you? I am not sure what you did to it, but it really seems stronger than what I got last time from Professor Slughorn.” Flattered, Severus tentatively ducked his head in acknowledgement.

Professor Horace Slughorn was celebrating his 45th year as Potions Master here at Hogwarts, but everybody knew that he preferred to have the students fulfill most of the brewing required by the infirmary, and was not afraid to assign detentions for just that purpose. Severus suspected that the few he had garnered over the years might have been just that, at least until he had expressed a deeper interest in the subject. His requested time in individual study allowed the Professor to legitimately assign him work instead of foisting it off as detention, and Severus could not experiment without supervision as it was dangerous. Everyone was happy, except perhaps Lily Evans, who had previously frequented the lab in the evenings alongside Severus. Now they were forced to contort themselves through a complicated dance of avoidance; painful for them both in more than one sense. Since their dramatic breakup in friendship last May, Lily wouldn’t speak to Severus, look at him, or even acknowledge his presence. She was working towards a NEWT in Potions too, and Severus missed being able to talk over his ideas with her, but now even his most earnestly potions-only related advances such as, “Watch out, I think your pepper up is getting ready to blow” were met with a well applied stasis charm on the offending brew and a glare that suggested it was always his fault when something of hers went the least bit astray. She had hexed him the last time he interfered, preventing another disaster. Lily just wasn’t all that when it came to potions, honestly, but Professor Slughorn doted on her. Severus supposed that he couldn’t blame the man. She was top in the form on her written work and would likely be Head Girl next year.

Professor Slughorn was an effusively supportive mentor to Severus, but ultimately had grown intellectually lazy and had pointed Severus into correspondence with some of his famous connections. Fortunately, they were able to garner more enthusiasm for Severus and what seemed to be a natural born talent for potions, not only in execution but in pushing beyond the set recipes to create new draughts with innovative applications. While Severus had never been much of a conversationalist face to face, his written correspondence shone. If only Severus had more personal wealth, he would be a shoe in for some of the best apprenticeships on the continent.

As he tucked into bed under Madam Pomfrey’s watchful eye, the melancholy washed over him. Whenever he thought about Lily, the same blackened emotional wound would rip open and bleed anew. He wondered if the Mediwitch had sensed his mood turn for the worse because she seemed to rather hover over his bed, pounding the pillow into shape for him and setting the blankets just so. That night he fell asleep quickly, to dream of whales who looked like Professor Slughorn getting harpooned by a raging redheaded Valkyrie for no particular reason.

The Mediwitch rose early, checking up on her two resident patients before heading down to the Shrieking Shack to collect Remus Lupin. Her heart ached for the lad. It seemed so cruel to leave him out there alone. Recent times found the young wizard doing less damage to himself, but he still was in a right state when he woke in the morning. This particular morning he seemed rather agitated. “Blood, Madam Pomfrey! There was blood in the Shack! Not mine, I smelled it!” He looked truly frightened. “I didn’t hurt anyone, did I? No one came in?” He struggled weakly, as if he was about to run off and check every dormitory in the castle to be sure.

“No, Mr Lupin, calm yourself. There was no blood that I could see, dear. Surely what you found must have been left over from a mouse or other vermin that perished in there. No students have been out of their dormitories. You know Mr Filch is particularly careful on the full moon. He wouldn’t let
anything happen.”

Remus felt somewhat reassured, although he’d not feel certain until he had indeed checked out the student body for himself. Perhaps later tonight at dinner he would do just that. Hobbling on doggedly, he allowed Madam Pomfrey to guide him up to the infirmary. His senses were still quite sharp, and he stopped abruptly at the infirmary doors. “Ah. I should have known Snape was still here.”

Madam Pomfrey noticed the frigid attitude in Lupin’s pronouncement and sighed to herself inwardly. Honestly, these children would never give it a rest. She did understand the werewolf’s desire to remain undetected, of course. “Well, next time, police your friends to avoid hurting the lad, especially at this time of the lunar month. I will not allow him back out into the populace until he can fend for himself. I am not so cruel.” Her voice was clipped in response, dripping with disapproval.

Lupin moved into the infirmary, trying to suppress the limp he had not been worried about showing out in the hall. He did have a pained look on his face. “I am a Prefect, Madam Pomfrey. I shouldn’t be directing James and Sirius’ pranking schedule, and if I had known about it…” He trailed off without completing that thought. What? Would he have stopped them? No, of course not. He would have spoken to them pointedly and then turned the other way, like always. He shifted a glance at the Mediwitch beside him. “Look, I’ll have a word but we both know how little that means when they are caught up in it. Besides, Snape won’t leave it be. He follows us around when he thinks we can’t see. He’s always up to something.”

Madam Pomfrey guided Lupin to a cot in a corner furthest from Severus and her new Ward. She had drawn privacy screens around Deidre, which hadn’t escaped Remus’ notice. He didn’t recognise that scent, and his attention was torn away from those idle thoughts by the pain in his back as he collapsed into the bedding where he laid, limp and unresisting to the matron’s ministrations. He could hear the gentle snore coming from Snape’s cot, proof against the nosy git’s wakefulness. Reassured, he allowed himself to be dosed with medications for the pain in the aftermath of the transformation. He usually spent most of the day after the full moon resting in the infirmary, under the guise of migraines.

Dusting off her apron in a show of nervous energy, Poppy said a little prayer in thanks. She tried not to show how nerve wracking it was to orchestrate what she knew was to happen that morning. It had been six years now that she was in charge of keeping Lupin’s lycanthropy a secret, and she would be damned if she would allow petty rivalries to ruin that now. If she could just get everyone to remain none the wiser through to dinner, all would be very well indeed. In the distance, she could hear the sounds of the castle waking around them. Casting a critical eye at Severus, she calculated how much longer the boy would sleep before she had to start keeping him occupied and ignorant. Turning, she strode back to her office for a spot of breakfast and to write a note to Professor Śvartrunir, a missive suggesting that perhaps this afternoon would be a good time to send some of Severus’ classmates with his homework for a visit. Yes, that would do nicely.

Blinking away the blurriness of a long slumber, Severus propped himself up on one elbow to see Madam Pomfrey barreling towards him. A quick wordless Temporus charm showed that the time was 10:22 AM. Levering himself upright, he straightened barely in time to accept the breakfast tray that was thrust into his hands. Severus jerked back reflexively as he registered the Mediwitch’s cool, dry hands prying at his jaw. “Tut tut, open up!”

Severus did so with a sullen glare. He had just woken up and somehow he had already irritated Madam Pomfrey. It seemed out of character for her, really. She was usually so patient with him. As thin tendrils of guilt wormed their way into his chest, detailing exactly how much he was really imposing on the woman who had time and again pieced him back together, she had stepped back
with a coo of approval. “Right then. I think today is the day, Severus. Won’t it be lovely to speak again? Here’s your medicine. Bottoms up!” She held the vial to his unresisting lips, tipping its contents therein to further befoul his already not terribly good morning breath. After swallowing, he carefully probed around his mouth with his tongue. There was noticeable progress now, no doubt.

Defiantly, Severus made his very first attempt, “Ank you.” His voice was low, and sounded like it was coming from deep in his chest. The diction, however, was no better than that of a drunk Manchester man. He knew all about that, thanks to Dear Old Dad. Severus never bothered to write to his parents when these incidents happened. Communication from him never seemed to particularly move his mother, and his father would have fits regardless of the content of any missive he might have sent. He learned that the hard way, after he had won a medal for showing exemplary promise in potions in his first year. He was so proud he hadn’t waited to get home to tell Mum. When he arrived home the next day, his mother didn’t mention his triumph, and Severus had noticed the new bruises peeking out under the sleeve of her housecoat, ones she had thought were well hidden. Severus had made the same mistake twice more before he stopped writing home entirely. It was hard to give up contact like that. He worried about his Mum, but couldn’t bear to cause her any more pain.

This increasingly maudlin reverie was interrupted by a gentle pat on the arm and Severus focused his attention back on the Mediwitch long enough to register her tender gaze of approval before she started in on his work for the day. “Severus, this morning I want you to work in my potions lab. While you work, I want you to try and read the potions recipes you are working on aloud.”

Ah, well, that couldn’t be too bad. No one would be likely to hear him talking like a cotton mouthed idiot back there. He brightened, nodding as he moved to tuck into the bowl of oats before him. Fortunately it was still warm. As he chewed, Madam Pomfrey hummed. “You are going to have to shave today, Severus. Can’t have you looking like that when you have company this afternoon.”

Severus almost spat out his oatmeal in surprise. Who would visit him? It must be old Professor Svartrunir. Or maybe Professor Slughorn was going to come by with the latest Potions Weekly. It was Monday, after all. The Mediwitch pretended not to notice the consternation on her patient’s face as she barreled on. “I thought maybe tonight you could read to Deirdre?” Now there’s an audience that wouldn’t care if he sounded like a total prat. He twiddled his wand, making words appear in his customary golden script. “That would be acceptable. If I am to be so busy today, who will wheel Deirdre around to catch the sunbeams?”

Madam Pomfrey quickly smothered a smile as she considered Severus. Was that only idle concern for an interesting puzzle to solve, or was the boy building up an attachment where there was absolutely nothing from the other party? The girl was in a coma, for pity’s sake! Deciding that such a thing was unlikely, but also not going to lead to anything, she replied, “I’ll take care of that, Severus. I’m the Mediwitch here, you might recall?”

Severus had since chewed and swallowed that arrested bite of oatmeal, and was free to answer her jibe with a dry guffaw, “Hawr hawr.”

She quirked a lopsided smile Severus’ way before buzzing away to get started with Deirdre.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all of the lovely comments and support, folks. This marks my 1 month Anniversary of posting and I have to say I’m having a blast. I hope you all have enjoyed
this too!
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Antilitigation charm: All of the Harry Potter Multiverse belongs to JK Rowling and not me. No money will be earned for this work. OCs (Professors Sigmund Svartrunir and Whittington Nott) and plot are mine. Thanks to Coromandel for being an awesome beta and to readers like you!

The rest of the morning sped by swiftly, and Severus elected to bypass lunch in anticipation of tea later on. He was bustling around the potions bench and storeroom, working on filling out the school’s supply of unmentionable potions. He was competent at brewing contraceptives, both for men and women (although the latter seemed to go out of stock much faster), and there were a few other potions for witches’ maladies that he had already addressed yesterday, thanks to that lovely full moon. He practised his diction, but was having little luck at coaxing his mouth to cooperate just yet. Merlin’s tears, was his tongue sore!

Madam Pomfrey ducked her head in to check on Severus. It registered with her that he had been working for over three hours. While she was thankful that he hadn’t noticed the third occupant of the infirmary, she didn’t want Severus to neglect himself. Clucking, she forced the boy to pause what he was doing to peek into his mouth. With an empathetic wince, she shook her head. “No, that won’t do, Severus. I don’t think you should speak for the rest of the afternoon.”

Severus appeared to be disappointed, although honestly, while he had been building himself up to read to the ward tonight, he had already forgotten about the visitor.

Patting the side of his face, which was covered in soft fuzz, she exclaimed, “You haven’t even dressed or shaved yet!”

Severus’ eyes widened in realisation before he shrugged this off. He was still in his black pyjamas and hadn’t yet changed from last night. It wasn’t likely that whoever came to visit him would give two sickles about the state of Severus Snape’s facial hair. Feeling Madam Pomfrey’s disapproving glare, he heaved an exaggerated sigh, indicating in clear teen body language, complete with optional eye-rolling, that he would get to it. Fortunately, this was a good point to take a break in the potion’s progression. Severus waved his wand, wordlessly setting all three cauldrons into stasis to await his returned attentions.

Stepping out of the potions lab, he blinked at the change in light level. After a moment, he found Deirdre’s bed, positioned in a sunbeam coming in from the eastern side. Noticing the Mediwitch standing nearby with her arms crossed and an entirely mulish expression, Severus stalked over to his bed to gather his things before marching off to the lavatory.

Thirty minutes later he emerged in a gust of sandalwood scented steam. He was dressed in new pyjamas, black piped with green, which he pulled into position self-consciously. He hasn’t got used to the short hair on his head, and had taken to idly passing his palm over it as it felt tickly. It was now long enough to start to lay down properly at least. He had reflected two days ago that he rather resembled a newborn raven or vulture. All pale and prickles.

It was this moment that none other than one Lily Evans walked into the infirmary. She hadn’t noticed
Severus yet. He did rather look like a shadow, didn’t he? With the grace of a queen, she drew his eye as ever she did. His heart clenched painfully in his chest. Detachedly, a voice commented internally. “Don’t panic. If she’s the visitor, it is likely only to hand off assignments.” His heart fluttered in hope. Could she have unbent an iota, having not seen him for a week in class? Could his absence perhaps have melted that hardened heart? Time seemed to slow down for one excruciating moment of uncertainty.

Then, there was Madam Pomfrey meeting Lily halfway to her office. The low tones carried across the stone infirmary too well. “I need to see Remus, Madam Pomfrey. We have this team project to discuss for charms, and I have brought transfiguration notes that he will want to review before the test tomorrow.” Frowning in Severus’ direction, the Mediwitch answered, “Well, I’ll see what state he’s in, Miss Evans. This is quite irregular, dear. He needs his rest.” With that, she left Lily standing, unoccupied, to wait.

Severus’ chest felt like it had been packed in cold concrete, bitter loss weighing down every breath. He hadn’t been able to tear his eyes away, so he could clearly see the moment his presence registered on Lily’s face. It took a moment for her to even recognise him. He’d lost weight compared to last year, grown a few inches, but it was the hair and state of dress that had her momentarily disarmed. Just like that, her gaze frosted over with calculated indifference. “Oh. It’s you.” Her facial expression suggested that she had smelled something particularly foul.

Severus flinched, before reflexively offering her a courteous nod in greeting. His heart was stuck in his throat, and he dry-swallowed, trying to gain control. With an imperious swing of her bag, Lily marched away without further comment, impatient to see Lupin and not waiting for Madam Pomfrey to confirm his readiness to accept visitors.

The spell over Severus was broken, a subtle and indignant rage bubbled up just enough to give him the strength to turn away. Posture rigid, he walked back to his bed to sit in the chair set by it, feet propped up on the bed oh so casually. Snapping open a copy of the Prophet he had taken to borrowing from Madam Pomfrey in the absence of anything more stimulating, he pulled it up to cut off his view until he was able to get his neutral mask back into place.

A sound drew his attention, Lily was standing over him, hands on her hips and a frown on her lips. He quirked an eyebrow in askance. He was certainly not going to say anything.

“I need that chair, Snape. Give it over.”

Severus answered her with an unimpressed look. She must be joking. Feigning indifference, he continued to sit there, unmoved. He even had the gall to return his attention to the enthralling article about the exchange rates for galleons vs Sterling and how the economy has evolved over the past month.

Lily huffed in annoyance, stamping her foot to get his attention again. “I mean it.”

Blindly fumbling for his wand, Severus appeared to continue to be disinterested before he separated the sports page out from the paper. He shook it before folding it. Lily was about to say something, possibly appeal to Madam Pomfrey, when Severus dropped the paper on the floor, and with his wand he transfigured the paper into a wooden chair, complete with back. No cushion, but it was non-verbal magic – Severus was actually rather impressed with himself. Having completed his work, he crossed his arms as he fixed Lily with that stare that he always reserved for her when she had said or done something particularly Muggle-worthy. He wiggled his wand, as if to say, “Are you a witch or not?”

Lily hissed out in a stage-whisper, “You are such a massive git.” Turning her back to Severus, she
plucked up the chair that he made specifically for her and sauntered back across the infirmary to drop it at Remus’ bedside. The two Gryffindor Prefects bent their heads together, quietly conversing.

Madam Pomfrey didn’t miss a thing, her expression stormy with disapproval as she moved Deirdre again, repositioning her into a pool of sunlight in the west side of the room. Severus felt cowed, not having wished to disturb the peace for Madam Pomfrey, she had always done so much for him. He hunched forwards over the paper, redoubling his efforts to avoid confrontation.

It wasn’t until later when the Mediwitch practically threw Lily out, rather sooner than necessary, that Severus understood that the matron was upset on his behalf, rather than because of his actions. On reflection, he was nothing but a gentleman, after all. He wasn’t sure how to process that, so he tucked it away to consider another day when he wasn’t still vibrating with the aftermath of his confrontation with Lily.

Keyed up by Madam Pomfrey’s promise of visitors, Severus was hyper aware of the door, so he turned to look moments before the door banged open, having heard the heavy footsteps approaching. Two more people burst in, talking loudly and laughing. Severus couldn’t help but stare in abject horror. Surely he didn’t deserve this too?

James Potter and Sirius Black have come to check on their mate, have they? Come to think on it, why was Remus Lupin there at all? Thinking himself stealthy, he continued to hide behind his newspaper, bum firmly in his chair, feet on his bed. His entire attention was focused in that direction now, and he observed that James Potter had seated himself in the chair Severus had made for Lily, while Sirius was perched on the end of Lupin’s bed.

For a migraine sufferer, the Prefect sure seemed to not mind the noise, jostling, or bright light. Madam Pomfrey, who has been inspired to make up a tray with things for formal tea, approached Severus. She stood in his line of sight, pointedly. “Now Severus, you need to eat. You aren’t getting better any faster by sitting there and reading.” Movement from the other side of the room caught his eye, so his response was a distracted nod and a vague, “Yes’m.”

Across the infirmary, Sirius Black was performing a pantomime, silently echoing what Madam Pomfrey was saying in gross parody, complete with fluttering eyelashes. A pause with his arms folded in a mirror to the Mediwitch drew his attention back to the subject herself who cleared her throat, perhaps suggesting that he hadn’t heard her. She added, “I have put together a nice platter for you. Look, sandwiches and cold ham, and every nice thing!”

Severus reached over to pull a teacup towards him, almost spilling it as his gaze was dragged back over to Sirius. Lupin chuckled, his fist stuffed in his mouth to keep the hilarity in while Sirius translocated to James’ lap. James Potter, of course, had taken up a position exactly like the one Severus had been relaxing in when Madam Pomfrey invaded his visual space. Meanwhile, Sirius was fussing over James, tossing his hair to the side and posing like he was a Grecian statue to be admired.

Understanding that the Mediwitch would not leave until he did as was expected, he dropped the paper into his lap and plucked up a crustless triangle-shaped monstrosity and stuffed it partially into his mouth. As Madam Pomfrey turned away, hoping that her distraction has been successful, Severus chewed slowly, watching Sirius continue to pretend amorous interest, his Poppy to James’ Snape. James was sitting unmoving, his feet still up on the side of the bed, arms crossed with a sour expression on his face.

That was it. He’d had enough. He turned away slightly, but his wand was casually pointed in the direction of James and Sirius who have now devolved into obvious audible laughter. He was getting good at these silent spells. Eyes closed for a moment, he visualised how the spell felt, and with a
quick succession of wand work, he performed the perfect *Finite Incantatem*. James was dropped unceremoniously to the ground as his chair returned to its original sports page state, Sirius flailing on top of him in an effort to maintain balance. His expression was unabashedly smug, and Remus Lupin was rolling with laughter, his hands clutching at his sides. “Oh Merlin, stop it! I can’t breathe!”

Madam Pomfrey practically teleported across the infirmary, and before the boys could gather their wits long enough to muster a response, she had each of them by the ear and dragged them out of the infirmary by force. She had seen what they were doing and was highly annoyed. Were they trying to bring attention to their friend? She shoved them out the door with a perfunctory, “He’ll be back in the dorms tonight, so no need to come back!” A kick of her toe slammed the door shut behind them, and she turned back to the room at large, brushing her hands together as if she needed to free them of dust.

Lupin had quieted now and was studiously trying to look like he was ready for a nap. Nothing to see here, nope. Taking pity on her patient, she pulled a privacy screen. Severus distinctly heard her commentary, “Your friends are dunderheads. I don’t know what you see in them! No more visitors today, Mr Lupin. You are cut off!” A muttered conciliatory reply didn’t reach Severus’ ears.

Severus was trying to memorize that moment when James and Sirius were dumped on the floor. He might just get the brightest patronus ever with that memory. With that thought in mind, he turned his attentions in earnest to the tea set before him, valiantly showing his appreciation for Madam Pomfrey’s thoughtfulness.

It wasn’t until almost dinnertime when Severus’ visitors made themselves known. Avery and Mulciber entered, looking cagily about for Madam Pomfrey. She was expecting them, so she was at hand, and pointed them over in Severus’ direction. Severus stood, holding out a hand to shake in an earnest but formal greeting. A repeat of the earlier spell, this time pulling the entertainment page for the task, created a second chair, and Severus sat down on the bed, indicating that Avery and Mulciber should sit. They were staring at him, possibly in shock over his short hair.

Lip curling in annoyance, Severus chose to use the writing for communication with his “guests.” Written out, this time in green, the words hovered, “To what honour do I owe you both this visit today?” Mulciber didn’t seem to get it, reading over several times, but Avery was faster on the uptake. “We’ve got this team project for Charms we need you to deal with. And McGonagall wants a volunteer to present a unique personal transfiguration a week Friday. We reckon you’d best do that too.” Ah, so by virtue of his absence, Severus was now the whipping boy for unwanted class assignments. Oh goody. Severus reached over to pluck the parchment from Mulciber’s fist. Yup, parameters for the team project.

Severus looked it over and wand-wrote, “You do realise that the whole team is going to have to work together? This is a layered charm. Each part will have to be different but interweave with the others seamlessly.”

Avery shrugged. “Sure, whatever you say, Snape. We just need it by next Monday, okay? You tell us what to do and we’ll do our part.”

Severus nodded. Yes, that would work. That’s always the way it goes, isn’t it? Still, it seemed that he could count on their cooperation for success, a reassuring thought.

The two sixth year Slytherins fidgeted and passed on fragments of gossip, detailing little pains that they shared, such as who has gained and lost points for the House, and, of deeper entertainment value, who got caught sneaking laxatives into the pumpkin pasties. Good thing they were caught too, or the infirmary would be overrun with students with the runs. Vulgar humour was ever popular, it seemed. With that, the boys took their leave, pleading hunger. It was dinner time, no doubt they
timed the visit just to have that excuse to leave. Severus nodded to each of his housemates in thanks for the company, as brief as it was. Their return farewells were perfunctory handshakes and with that, his much fussed over visitation was over. Pathetic, really.

Severus decided to not allow it to deflate his ill-gotten good mood as he considered what to do with the rest of his evening. He jotted down a quick note to Madam Pince, charming it into the form of a raven before sending it flapping on its way. Madam Pomfrey discharged Lupin from the infirmary, and Severus observed the signs of pain displayed in his classmate’s posture and guarded gait. He also observed the disapproving expression on Pomfrey’s face, and the furtive glances she had sent his way as she ushered Lupin out. He put that into his memory’s gizzard, to be regurgitated and chewed upon later as he had more pressing things to do at this moment. Severus stood and made his way back to the potions lab to finish off the contraceptives. He was meticulous in his technique. If he wasn’t careful, idiots like the Gryffindors might reproduce. We couldn’t have that now, could we?
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Notes

Antilitigation charm: All of the Harry Potter Multiverse belongs to JK Rowling and not me. No money will be earned for this work. OCs (Professors Sigmund Svartrunir and Whittington Nott) and plot are mine. Thanks to Coromandel for being an awesome beta who spent extra time on her busy Sunday to read this twice for me, and to supportive readers like you!

9 November, 1976

Tuesday greeted Hogwarts with the rare gift of an unseasonably warm morning, its thick cloak of dew laden mists having been discarded mere hours ago. Professor Whittington Nott was at heart a restless sort of fellow, and seeing the opportunity, he grasped it by the short hairs and rode it all of the way to hell. After the clock chimed 10, signaling the start to double Defense with the fifth year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, he stood to address the class. His tone was electric with enthusiasm, “Right, you lot. We’re going to work on practicals today.” He gestured to the door at the back of the classroom, which opened with a bang, “And we’re going to do it outside!” He proceeded down the aisle, hands rubbing together with glee.

One of the students plucked at the edge of his attention. “Professor?” Ah, that whinge would suggest Miss Flamel, Ravenclaw, likely to get at least an E on the OWLs. “Should we bring our texts?”

Eyes bright with amusement, Professor Nott shook his head to the negative. “Leave them here, Miss Flamel. You’ll learn by doing today!” He reached the door, and his progress was checked there at the sight of his students not having fallen out of their chairs in an effort to get out already. A visual inspection showed that the majority of the fifth years were complying readily, and most of the Hufflepuffs were doing so in good humour. A few of the Ravenclaws, however, were showing overt signs of irritation, one aggressively shoving things into his bag, and there; “Miss Flamel, was there something else? You need an umbrella?” She was rather pasty. Skin the colour of cream, a poet might opine, although the same would be sure to leave out reference to the smattering of acne that dusted her forehead, nose, and chin.

Those snow-white cheeks tinged pink in response, and her mouth opened and closed more than once, silently trying out various responses before the girl finally, under his increasingly more impatient eye, choked out, “But Professor Nott, sir. There was to be a quiz.”

Ah yes, that would rankle his best students. All of that revising for no reward. “Chin up, dear. If the skies start to weep, I’ve no doubt we can all come back up here and put pen to parchment to your heart’s delight.” Whit offered in a conciliatory gesture. It could happen, this being Scotland.

A speculative expression crossed the girl’s face. Nott knew better than to let that one percolate undisturbed. Weather magic was highly unpredictable, and it was the last thing he wanted to deal with this morning. A covert glance confirmed that Janet Flamel was the last student straggling. He grated, “Off you go. Think of it as a pretest.” The student had the sense to get on with it.

Whittington Nott possessed a tall frame that would be best described as lanky, and it was short work for him to leg it down to the courtyard in time to arrive with the first wave of his fifth years.
Cordoning off the space in his mind, the Professor situated himself between the students and the Whomping Willow. At five years of age, the thing had already grown to massive proportions, and its reach expanded over ten times since planting. Professor Sprout gushed on about how quickly the monstrous specimen was growing, and proposed that it was due to the effect of Hogwarts’ special magic. Fortunately for everyone, she was speaking during a staff meeting. Professor Dumbledore cut her enraptured diatribe short by steering the topic back to the main point: the expected risk the tree posed to students and ways to pacify it safely.

Bellowing a bit louder than was strictly necessary, Professor Nott grabbed the attention of the children. Leaf Mold and grit were the dominant scents on the gentle breeze in this protected courtyard, tucked under the south-east corner of the castle. “Today we’re going to practise shielding charms.” Groans escaped the throats of more than one student, some of whom had been struggling. In a lower voice, he responded, “None of that now, or Miss Flamel will get her wish and we will all march back upstairs for that quiz I had promised. I could make it extra long, if you like?” The worst offender, a Muggleborn Hufflepuff who struggled academically more than his peers shook his head vigorously. “No sir, thank you sir.” The boy’s long hair fell into his face at the motion, hiding his dismay.

Successfully fighting the urge to embarrass the lad further by mentioning aloud his dire need for a haircut, Nott continued as if he hadn’t been interrupted. “Divide yourselves into pairs and face off at 5 paces.”

“Stay clear of the Willow. I’ll manage it, but it is just as well to maintain a healthy distance.” Luckily, this particular class was evenly numbered.

Seeing everyone take up their positions, the Professor took out a galleon, and with a practiced motion he flipped it high into the air, catching it on the back of his left hand, using his right to prevent it from bouncing. “Heads. Right, that’s the wall side defending first.” They had learned *Protego* weeks before, but practise was a good thing on a fine morning like this. He would have as hard a time as any student keeping his mind on things in this weather. “Grounds students, you lot will use a minor hex of your choice. Be polite, as your partners will have their turns soon enough. Three rounds, then switch roles.” Recapturing the galleon in his right hand, he raised his wand with his left, and let off a blue spark. “Begin!”

The students practised something like this before, so there weren’t any non-participatory pairs. Professor Nott turned and cast a quiet *Immobilus* charm on the Willow. The safety knob had not kept pace with the growth of the rest of the tree for some reason, and was rather difficult to hit with surety. The tree had been rather placid, so the visual effect was subtle. Rude language erupted from one of the Ravenclaw boys, bringing Nott’s attention back to the class. Rosencrantz stood by the wall, rubbing at his side and glaring at his partner, Flamel herself. To add insult to injury, the silly chit went on to show him exactly what he had done wrong. Professor Nott stayed out of it, watching the other six pairs practising, occasionally calling out suggestions or encouragement.

When left idle, Whit’s hands tended to entertain themselves. The coin, which was old and starting to rub smooth under his fingers, begged to be flipped. Another ringing sound accompanied the gold coin as it descended, and then was flipped again in quick succession. Heads. Heads. Again. Heads. Once more. Heads. Holding the coin up for inspection (yes, there was Merlin on one side, a dragon on t’other,) Professor Nott cast a suspicious glare at the nearby students. None of them appeared to be doing any more than they ought. Another toss, heads again.

He pulled his wand back out, and this time, with his right hand, he cast a quick detect magic spell. The coin was, in fact, as mundane as a wizarding coin could be. He peered more closely at the Willow, the only solid thing that seemed to glow under the light of the detection spell. Now he was
just fascinated. Approaching cautiously, he flipped his coin again. Heads. Again. Heads. That’s eight times, a one in 128 probability. After checking on the violent tree to assure it was still quieted, he casually moved to the opposite side of the courtyard.

Recalling what he was supposed to be doing, he looked over the students’ progress, giving out suggestions on defensive stances. Having exercised his duty as a teacher, Professor Nott took out the coin again and flipped it three times in rapid succession. Tails. Tails. Heads. Frowning deeply, he ambled back to the Willow again. The coin was flipped five times in dizzying rapid succession, and now he was calling out the results aloud. “Heads, heads, heads, heads... heads.” He placed his right hand back over the coin on his now smarting left hand, as if concerned that the coin would turn into a sparrow and fly away. “How very odd.”

Sensing movement from the Willow over his shoulder, the Professor pocketed the coin and recast the *Immobilus*. Something about this situation set off his instincts. Probing that feeling deeper, he discovered that it was the scope of strange, not the overt immediate danger to one’s person that was setting him off. Whatever was doing this had to be powerful. Tapping a finger on his lips in thought, his eyes lit up in inspiration. Now what exactly had that Professor Sprout done to get her prize tree so large so quickly? Having a theory seemed to assuage his nerves a great deal. He strolled closer to the Willow, looking for something that could explain it. A dropped luck charm, or perhaps a discarded set of highly illegal trick dice?

He pulled out his pocket watch to check the time. Ah, yes. He muttered under his breath aloud, “Bell’s about to ring.” Professor Nott cleared his throat with the intention of gathering the class, but this action was arrested after something about the timepiece grabbed his attention with the strength of sticky fly paper, and would not let go. Holding the watch close to his face, a repeat inspection revealed that the second hand was moving in fits and starts. Obeying his instincts, he moved away from the Willow, eyes fixed on the watchface. The motion of time smoothed out once he was almost upon the line of students. Surreptitiously, he glanced over his shoulder before tucking the watch back into its pocket at his waist.

“Right, that’s all for today. Anyone who didn’t get hexed shall take that and pride in a job well done as their real-world reward. Don’t forget to complete your reading on hinkypunks, and to write eight inches on what you feel we need to know about them.” He favoured the class swot, Miss Flamel, with a stern look before adding, “Anything over 12 inches will lose credit, as you also will if I have to use an engorgement charm to be able to read tiny print.” He lifted his gaze to include the rest of the class. “You’ve been warned.” He didn’t like grading essays, so this was self-preservation.

Gesturing to the doors leading back inside, he intoned a dismissal, “Finite ordo.” This wasn’t really a spell, just a chuckle for him to break up the day. An inside joke, if you will. Miss Flamel caught the words, and was working through them as she followed her classmates. Whit smirked to himself, very sure that she’d be looking in the library before long.

Having seen the students back to the classroom and subsequently on their way, Professor Nott was free to make his way to the Great Hall for lunch. He needed to have an urgent conversation with the Headmaster.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

10 November, 1976

When Severus awoke that morning he was still unsettled by what must have been a dream. It had been incredibly vivid. Squinting, he could barely make out his fellow inmate’s prone form, still enshrouded in shadows poised on the edge of daybreak. After a moment’s observation he could make out the motion of her chest rising and falling underneath the thin blankets, slow and regular. He let out a long breath, not having registered that he was holding it. He cast back, trying to pin down the wriggling tendrils of memory before they could escape.

***

The light of the waning moon illuminated the late night scene in the Hospital Wing. The Fat Friar was standing by Deirdre’s bedside, his own glow dense and his outline unusually sharp. The ghost was rocking up and down on the balls of his feet, and Severus could clearly make out the measured chanting tone unique to men of the church cutting into the quiet air. Must have been dead useful for putting whole rooms of people to sleep without spending a single sopophorous bean, as Severus felt the weight of slumber pressing on him. It was the little witch who injected a thrill of wakefulness into his consciousness, like a shot of adrenaline. Had she moved? He strained his senses, trying to understand what he was seeing.

Severus was certain that he could see the glimmer of reflected ghost-light from the girl’s eyes. They were a light brown, the colour of a glass bottle when backlit by bright sunlight. The Friar’s lilting cadences must have disrupted her rest, because now she sat upright, causing the covers to fall from her chest. It seemed that the interruption was not unwelcome, as her lips curved up at the edges in a gentle smile. Severus’ heart skipped a beat. Oh, do that again.

Deirdre folded her hands in her lap, as if this was the most natural thing to be doing in the middle of the night - a dreamt tea-break to the monotony of days of coma. Face tilted upwards, she was attentive but silent. Severus noticed her blinking, and it left him wondering. Do witches blink in dreams? He closed his eyes, attempting to commit that smile to memory. It could be useful for comparison later, if she ever really woke up.

Words drifted into his hearing as the Fat Friar continued to intone what Severus had decided must be
prescribed prayers. Perhaps the matins of the little hours - that would make sense? He vaguely remembered reading about these, having found it compelling that the monks had the discipline and dedication to keep a wakeful vigil over the host, such that the Lord Jesus would never find them sleeping should he come again. He forced his eyes open, trying to stay with the words, his mind picking at their shape, sifting the syllables for hints of meaning.

“Esto, Dómine, refúgium nostrum et virtus,

ut ex huius dolóris ténebris et luctu

ad præséntiæ tuæ lucem et pacem elevémur.”

Severus lost the fight, and his eyelids shuttered closed, lulled by the chant. He tried to cling to this particular fantasy, but the undertow of confused dreams was too strong. As he tumbled away, he could have sworn he heard a feminine voice responding, “Amen.”

***

He was certain that he was awake now. His feet hit the stone floor, and it seemed to sap his body heat. After taking a moment to get his bearings, he got up and padded silently over to get a closer look at Miss Deirdre Ward. She looked exactly as she had yesterday morning, and the mornings before that.

With a shake of his head, the young wizard attempted to clear the cobwebs of sleep from his mind before he moved to turn away. His feet froze in place as he noticed a slim volume sitting on the nearby table. His thoughts were interrupted by the unmistakable sounds of Madam Pomfrey getting started with her daily ablutions. The book was forgotten in his haste to retreat. He did not want to explain why he was standing there staring, so he retired to the lavatory to get a start on his day. Something about that dream gnawed at him, and it occupied his thoughts as the day wore on.

Madam Pomfrey moved through the morning’s activities with brisk efficiency. Severus was dosed with his potion, and then set to humming to the wireless. This station focused on popular music, and he found himself singing along to *Eleanor Rigby*. He still struggled with elocution, but the song suited his mood.

“Writing the words of a sermon that no one will hear

No one comes near

Look at him working

Darning his socks in the night when there's nobody there

What does he care?”

Madam Pomfrey had approached under the cover of Severus’ distraction, thus it was a surprise when the verse cut off along with the wireless.

A parcel was thrust into his hands, the Mediwitch smiling tightly as she lingered nearby. “Professor Svartrunir brought this up for you earlier. It seems that your Mum was worried.” Her tone was strained, unnaturally upbeat. He didn’t speak of his home life with anyone, but Pomfrey had every
reason to worry. She had seen the difference in him after the long summers away from school, and
had been called to attend him on his return from the holidays. He was as beleaguered at home as he
ever was at school.

Severus re-examined the handwritten directions, noting that it was only his name written out in a
familiar cramped hand, as if the ink was costing her with every letter she wrote. Determined not to
make any kind of fuss, he used his wand to sever the twine holding the parcel together. A dog-eared
book and a blue cylindrical tin imprinted with, “McVities, Rich Tea Biscuits” tumbled out onto the
bed. Finding an envelope, Severus opened it with some trepidation, his eyes quickly scanning over
his mother’s sparse prose.

Severus,

Professor Svartrunir has informed us that you continue to experience troubles up at school. Please
find the enclosed tokens of my regard.

Eileen Snape.

His mother had never been particularly demonstrative, so all seemed as it should. The “us” told him
that his father had gotten wind of the incident too, and he wondered what state he had been at the
time. Impassively he recalled the last note from home. His mother had written to him at the start of
October to report that, as they had feared, the factory where Tobias Snape worked was being shut
and his father was laid off with no alternatives. Severus fought to maintain his composure as he
turned over the cheap tin of biscuits in his hand. The cost of such a luxury would have been dear
even when his Da was working, as he drank away any spare change that his mother had struggled to
reserve.

He forced his attention away from those morose thoughts, and examined the book more closely. He
didn’t see any new marks from when he had last held it. “The Wicked Witch’s Guide to Jinxes and
Hexes.” The material therein was largely absent from the staid curriculum here at school, and it
wasn’t until after OWL levels that his Defense classes started to really focus on the offensive spells.
He of course had studied this extensively after he got his letter, and had found it fascinating. His
mother had opened up her old school trunk to show him some of the leavings of her happier days.
This was among them.

Severus understood that she had seen through whatever formal language Professor Svartrunir had
used to tell his parents about the incident, and the school’s response and expectations. Eileen Snape
was not a fool, and her son’s fascination with the darker magics had not escaped her notice. He
opened the text, scanning the pages for hidden messages.

While there were no alterations to the book, the message was clear. He had his Mother’s permission
to fight back, and to fight dirty. The book felt heavy in his hands, weighted down with expectations.

Madam Pomfrey meditated on the title, pursing her lips in consideration. Compared to what had been
inflicted on Severus, she considered those spells to be comparatively minor. After a moment she
cleared her throat, and offered, “I had that book myself. It was extra reading for Defense in my fifth
year.”

The sharp look on the Mediwitch’s face as she made eye contact with him led Severus to the
conclusion that she did not in fact approve of jinxing back. After holding his attention for a long
moment, she broke contact. Severus felt tension leave his back and shoulders as she changed the
subject, as though he had been held up by the elbows for inspection and being found worthy, he was
allowed to move under his own power once more. A wave of elated relief passed over him as he
realised that she wasn’t going to take the book away.
Madam Pomfrey, ever the taskmaster, then went on to detail her plans for him today. He was to work on chewing without biting his tongue, and she felt it would be good for him and her other patient if he were to start reading to the girl aloud. That brought the dream back to the forefront of his mind, and he decided to confide it in the matron. His throat and tongue were still on the mend, and the effort of sustained verbal exchanges was tedious for both patient and his audience. He had to pause often to allow a spasm to pass, often choosing the most efficient wording for what he wanted to say.

The Mediwitch exhibited the patience of a saint, and after he had finished, she asked him a few questions before turning back to her desk, where she wrote out a short precis to the Headmaster, inviting him back to visit her domain. The diagnostic charms she had executed earlier indicated that the mystery patient was still in a deep, but not necessarily dreamless sleep. She cast a worried look in the girl’s direction before folding the note into the shape of a cricket and sending it leaping on its way to the Headmaster, begging for his continued attention in the matter. As an afterthought, she sent a similar note around to Professor Nott.

***

Argus Filch liked the early morning best, and as he stepped out into the grey slanted light of the November morning, he filled his lungs with a full measure of damp Scottish air. The day was already unseasonably warm, and the grounds were heavily cloaked over with heavy banks of fog.

Sounds traveled through the thick air strangely, contorting in an effort to get to his ear. He knew he heard something that was very strange. It was a very distant voice, a woman’s voice, calling. “Waaaaaalnut. Here boy!”

Cocking his head, Filch tried to gauge where the voice was coming from. He walked out into the centre of the little courtyard, minding the dark figure of the cursed Willow. The voice was louder here, and it was clearly that of an older woman, not a student. Still, he didn’t recognise it as it called again. “Waaaaaalnut! You naughty boy. Come back here!”

His mouth open, filled with the intention of hailing the woman in turn, he froze, listening. The sound of nails clicking on the cobblestone reached his ears, just at the edge of hearing. Out of the mists, a stout little black dog pranced over. Its tail was waggling in canine joy as it looked up at him expectantly. Flich blinked, trying to refocus his eyes. He must be getting old - that dog had two tails! He bent forwards, offering a hand for the pup to sniff at by way of introduction.

As its wet nose made contact, his brain spat out the breed. Scottish Terrier. “Are you Walnut? Where’s yer mistress, then?” The little dog bounced in place and let out a bark followed by an exaggerated sneeze.

Edged with panic now, the woman’s voice drifted back to the pair, “Fuzzy Walnut, get back here this instant!”

Executing a neat circle, as if inviting Filch to follow him, Walnut disappeared into the mist again. Filch stared in horror as the little beast headed in the direction of the voice, and coincidentally, the direction of that thrice-damned Whomping Willow. He shouted, “WAIT! Come back!”

He dared not edge any closer to the tree in this mist, so when that he heard the voice again he muttered a prayer of thanks to Merlin. The woman was cooing with relief. “Walnut! There you are, little lad. Why, your coat is all wet! No, don’t roll. “ A feminine snort of disgust followed before a
new masculine voice broke into the little scene. “Helga, come away now. We need to discuss your thoughts on how to manage grades next year.” The woman’s voice was partially drowned out by yipping from Walnut, “Yes, yes. I’ll be right along.” The barking ceased abruptly, and all was quiet in the courtyard once more.

Filch stood listening, rooted firmly to that spot until he heard the school above stirring for the morning meal. Before he headed back inside, he lifted his fingers to his nose and inhaled. Dog. The distinct odour was unmistakable. Wiping the fingers on his threadbare tweed jacket, he shook his head as he stepped into the dim corridor, noting the squeak of the hinges for later. “Must have been the potatoes last night. Soured my brain. I’ll be having words with those elves. Feeding us undercooked vegetables. Not good for my constitution...”

Chapter End Notes

AN:

“Eleanor Rigby” is a song by the Beatles, released on the 1966 album Revolver. It was credited to Lennon–McCartney.

The prayer is an excerpt from a funereal mass.

“Comfort your family in their loss and sorrow.
Be our refuge and our strength, O Lord,
and lift us from the depths of grief
into the peace and light of your presence.”
Chapter Fifteen

It came to pass that Professors Nott and Dumbledore had missed one another at noon luncheon, but Poppy Pomfrey’s missive drew them back to the infirmary. Severus was seated on the chair he had dragged over to the girl’s bedside, which was situated in a lovely warm pool of sun. To spare his eyes, he had his back to the window, and his face and book were both in shadow. He had picked out “The Hobbit” to read aloud, a selection approved by the Mediwitch as being sufficiently wordy.

He had marked when Professor Nott entered, raising his hand to Severus in an informal cursebreaker’s salute before finding Madam Pomfrey over by the storage area. The tall wizard took up a position near to where she was working, rotating supplies so that the outdated and soon to expire would be used or disposed of first. She had to make room for the potions that her patient had been producing, a sort of independent study.

Poppy was crouching down on the floor, her skirts pooled about her in a parody of the curtsy one might direct at a partner at the beginning of a formal dance. Whit acknowledged like for like, correctly bowing from the waist with a flourish. His voice was a warm tenor, “I received your missive, fair lady.”

The witch tilted her head up in acknowledgement, and her blue eyes flashed in amusement. She extended her hand up to him imperiously, a silent request for help to return her to her feet. She had an understated sort of beauty, although it was framed by the severe uniform of a mediwitch. Her curls were firmly tucked under the white starched cap, and her cheeks pinked at the intensity of the wizard’s regard.

Curious to see how she would react, Whit bent over the proffered hand and brushed her knuckles with his lips before straightening enough to provide the leverage she needed to rise smoothly to her feet.

Poppy noticed the rough callouses on Whit’s fingertips with curiosity. He had masculine hands, fingers thick and squared off at the ends, a contrast to her longer tapered fingers. Returning her gaze to Whit’s face, Poppy speculated aloud, “You play an instrument, sir?”

Whit’s left eyebrow arched in acknowledgement, his answer cagey. “A gentleman keeps his secrets close,” but he bent closer to breathe in a conspiratorial tone, “but you might find out more if you came out with us on Thursday night to the Three Broomsticks.” She had heard that some of the faculty went out on a regular basis, but had yet to accept an invitation to join.

Madam Pomfrey stepped back from the wizard, her nose pricking with the scent of cedarwood,
citrus, and a heady male musk, evidence of an active day in a tweed suit. She dropped her eyes to their clasped hands and gently broke her grip. A quick nod of her head gave the man some hope that she may show up.

Whit was momentarily ashamed of himself, flirting when she had called for attendance on their case. It was all too easy to forget that she was over a decade his junior. Smoothly transitioning back to their purpose, he asked, “Now, what is this I hear about possible phantasmic nocturnal activity?” His hazel eyes crinkled at Poppy with a reassuring smile.

Headmaster Dumbledore, in the interim, had entered after Professor Nott, and materialised at Madam Pomfrey’s elbow. The bearded man twinkled at the pair as he interjected, “Did you talk to the Friar?” Madam Pomfrey jumped, surprised out of her distracted state. “Well, no I haven’t. I can’t leave the infirmary!” a more steely edge crept into her voice as she volleyed back, “Did either of you?”

Dumbledore had already turned away to study the prone form of the witch and the Slytherin student, Snape, wasn’t it? Oh yes, the victim of a botched tongue tying curse. Potter was usually so spot on with his jinxes. “Not yet.”

Professor Nott raised his eyebrows in amusement and jammed his hands into his trouser pockets, wishing that he could loosen his tie. It was hot in there for a November day. “I’ve not had a moment to spare, Madam Pomfrey. I came as soon as I could.”

Sniffing her disapproval, she glided over to the bedside of the witch in question and placed a gentle hand on Severus’ shoulder. “Now, would you please tell the Professors what you dreamt last night, Severus?”

Placing a finger on the page, the young man folded the volume closed as he reordered his thoughts. Speaking required effort and he had been reading aloud for the better part of an hour already. “I opened my eyes and there was a ghost, over there. The Friar. He was praying over her, chanting in latin.” So far, so good. He didn’t sound crazy yet.

Headmaster Dumbledore followed closely on Pomfrey’s heels and chose to interject, “Yes yes. Chanting, ghosts in the Moonlight. What happened next?”

Professor Nott took up a position on the other side of the crowd, where he could see Severus’ face as well as that of his interrogator. The girl remained decidedly asleep, brow unmarred by worry.

Severus bit back irritation at the Headmaster’s flippancy. He was accustomed to it, so he answered. “Well sir, she sat up.”

Professor Dumbledore leveled a look of disbelief at Snape. “Truly? Then what?”

Madam Pomfrey leaned over to the bed, straightening the sheets and fussing with the girl’s hair, a gambit to hide her disapproval of the Headmaster’s demeanor.

Wincing, Severus supplied in a near monotone, “She listened to the Friar. She must have laid back down. I fell asleep again.” He couldn’t really prove that it wasn’t a dream after all, and it was looking like it would be awfully more convenient if he hadn’t said a word.

Before the Headmaster could do or say anything else, Professor Nott asked in his teacher-voice, “Did she speak? Did anything else happen?” Severus shook his head twice in the negative before setting his copy of The Hobbit on the stool. By way of answer, he stood and walked over to indicate where the slim volume lay. As if an afterthought, he added, “And this book appeared. I had wondered if someone brought it for me to read, part of my Ther-apy.” His voice cracked, making him blush in
concern. He had thought he was past that.

Madam Pomfrey gestured to Severus, “Go on dear. Bring it... “ Severus had been itching to pick it up, so he was already reaching out when Professor Nott barked a commanding, “Wait!” He was, after all, the curse breaker here. As he paced over to the book, he gently pulled on Severus’ shoulder, shifting him out of the way. Severus watched in fascination as his teacher cast a magic-identification spell with his Walnut wand, dragon heartstring core. The book lit up with a faint blue light, and the Professor leant over to cast another spell to be certain it was safe to touch.

Dumbledore cleared his throat, having examined the ward to his satisfaction, and thus took his leave of the little group. “I will be in my office. I have much to consider.” Professor Nott missed the edge of irritation in the Headmaster’s tone. He waved a vague hand in acknowledgement of the man’s departure. Fortunately, he remembered to call after the wizard’s retreating, purple velveteen draped back. “There is a matter I need to discuss with you later, Headmaster. Perhaps after dinner tonight?”

A droll response from Dumbledore drifted back to them before the infirmary door shut, the negative tone again passing well over Whit’s head. “At your leisure, Professor.”
The world was black and formless. Her waking mind screamed, for electric fire blazed through every nerve ending. Her eyelids were heavy, nay - glued shut. She knew that she wasn’t dreaming, but she could not move or even make a sound. New sensations washed over her consciousness, in slow shallow waves at first, building in intensity. Light above glowed red before fading back to black. Snatches of spoken word passed in and out of her hearing, unfamiliar voices running together. Dry professional hands examined her with featherlight touches, searing her wrists at the pulsepoint. These had been and gone before she could even whimper. Time burned on, unmarked, except in the accelerating sharpening of sensation.

Scents were very prominent in her awareness. The dominant scent was of boiled cotton bedclothes, followed by that of sharp lavender. Air currents flowed over her, deliciously cool over her burning skin. They carried the smell of sharp parchment and old leather, and a confusion of sweat and what her waking mind identified as wool mingled with aftershave, or perhaps a cologne, very masculine. The sharp citrus and cedar beat a frisson from her nose straight to her crown, to cascade down her neck and back. The force of her reaction was enough to break open her captive eyes, and she was dazzled by the ambient light.

In time, she could just make out two dark forms to her left, silhouetted by the blinding light behind them. Hot stinging tears gathered before spilling over her cheeks, their scent heavy with brine on her nose. She still had no agency over her own body. Gravity hugged her firmly, holding her to the mattress. She was cold now, but it wasn’t an uncomfortable feeling for the memory of fire was still fresh. If she concentrated, she could catch some of the words as they flew over her. They wriggled away from her too quickly, feeding her rising frustration.

Professor Nott straightened, his brow furrowed in thought as Madam Pomfrey and Severus waited for him to determine if the book he now held in his hands was safe. Severus sidled up next to the man, trying to get a glimpse. Whit had been momentarily thrown back in time by the discovery, but the movement at his side brought him back to the present, “It is not enchanted or cursed. It is suspicious that it should just appear like that.” He tilted the cover so that his audience could better
view the title which was stamped in fading letters: The Winter’s Tale. Flipping through, a smile honeyed with remembrance gentled the Professor’s lips as he settled on a page, reciting, “A sad tale’s best for winter: I have one of sprites and goblins.”

While the adults were absorbed in the examination of the mysterious object, Severus had lost interest and stepped out of the way to allow Madam Pomfrey to get a closer look. He glanced at the bed, intending to retrieve his book and retreat, when his gaze was arrested by the woman herself. Warm brown eyes locked onto Severus’ face, and those lovely eyes wept. He felt compelled to do something, sharp strings tugging in his chest at the sight. Leaning closer, he whispered to her, “This is a better dream.” His voice was tired from the day’s reading, and it sounded rough, as though resurrected from some ancient vault buried under the roots of the castle. He patted in his pocket and pulled out a black handkerchief.

The girl blinked slowly, dislodging more crystalline beads of tears to spill down onto the white pillowcase. A pallid face swam into her vision, hawk-nosed with black eyes. His strong brow knit together as she drew in a shuddering breath, sampling the new odour, a mixture of sandalwood and boy-sweat. She felt this suited him, and tried to reassure the worried face with a faint smile. No, no fine. It’s fine, she wanted to tell him, but her tongue was wood in her mouth and another hitch in her breathing was the best she could do.

Severus had frozen in fascination and was appalled at his own reaction. Deirdre had woken at last and he was just staring at her. He wrung the handkerchief in his fingers, but was saved from making good on his tender gesture by Madam Pomfrey, who snatched the square of linen out of his hand with an exclamation of joy.

“So, our charge has awoken!” She set about mopping up the girl’s face. “Now, don’t try to do anything too quickly. You’re likely to be weak with the terrible state you were in. You’ve been asleep for over a week.”

From what Severus could tell, the girl hadn’t moved a finger. She had closed her eyes against the assault of the handkerchief on her tears, but that could have been reflexive. Once Madam Pomfrey had retreated a step to retrieve the necessary supplies, Severus found that the girl seemed to be looking at him with an intensity that he found unsettling.

Professor Nott, experienced in both military manoeuvres and infirmaries, took up a position on the opposite, fully unimpeded side of the bed. “What’s your name, dear?”

Breaking eye contact with Severus, the girl flicked her gaze up to Professor Nott and her brow wrinkled in consternation. The man was tall, looming and had weight to his presence that seemed to anchor her attention. His auburn hair was overlong, shaped in a gentle natural wave that threatened to topple into his eyes. Clear moss green eyes watched her keenly, and his thin lips turned up at one corner, allowing a dimple to wink into view as he attempted to reassure her. “It is alright, don’t tax yourself.” He moved closer, since the girl appeared to attempt to say something. He was the source of the cedar and lemongrass, and he was dressed in a tweed suit. Movement out of his peripheral vision caught his attention.

He met an icy stare from the girl’s guardian. “There will plenty of time for that, Professor.” Waving her hands as though chasing off a pair of geese, Madam Pomfrey shooed both Severus and Professor Nott away from the patient. The men were reluctant to step away, but faced with threat of indignities they retreated readily enough.

Trying to loosen her cracking throat, the girl swallowed dryly but no answer sprung to her lips. Her mind seemed to be swinging free once more, its sail still filled with dreamt winds, her moorings
threatening to break from wakefulness at any moment. “Who?”

The woman was chattering along and that seemed to pull her back, “My name is Madam Pomfrey and you are in my hospital wing.” Madam Pomfrey tilted her head to indicate the two who just left, “That was Professor Nott and Severus Snape.”

The girl studied the mediwitch’s face as she nattered on, disbelief written on her face. This is all too surreal. “Dreaming?”

Madam Pomfrey shook her head, “Mr Filch found you laying in the courtyard. What a bloody mess you were.” The mediwitch muttered a veritable diagnostic laundry list by way of explanation. “Head broken, concussion, broken ribs, burns, scrapes, bloodied and why... that arm of course.”

The girl’s eyes came into focus as the Mediwitch leant in close to speak more quietly. “I’ll not judge ye or turn you out, dear. You are safe with us. There is nothing to fear. You are at Hogwarts, and the Headmaster has taken an interest in you.” The Mediwitch, who appeared to be no older than 25, reached out to pat her arm in a maternal gesture. She had a sweet face, with watery blue eyes and a straight nose. Her mousey blond hair was tucked up neatly into a nurse’s cap and she sported a pressed formal uniform.

Examining her own feelings, the girl was befuddled. She wasn’t afraid or sad. Her eyes had just really smarted at the bright light. Turning her gaze back to Pomfrey, the girl opened her mouth to rasp out, “I don’t know.” The paucity of knowledge didn’t seem to really bother her, but for the nurse’s sake she clarified further, “Can’t remember.” She was able to lift her head as Madam Pomfrey pressed a cup to her lips, filled with cold water. Suddenly aware of how thirsty she was, the girl guzzled it down.

Supplying an amiable string of chatter, the Mediwitch tended to her hurts and the girl learned that she had been given a name out of convenience, “We’ve called you Deirdre Ward, at least until you remember your own name and people.” Madam Pomfrey have been watching her closely for signs of pain or distress but they might as well have been discussing the fine weather.

The matron could not have found a more cooperative patient, but the girl tired out quickly and so after another cup of water, she left her to rest.

Poppy Pomfrey stepped out from behind the privacy screen to find an audience. She put both of her fists onto her hips and rattled out in a rather clipped tone, “She needs her rest. She can’t tell you anything you don’t know already.” This was addressed primarily to Professor Nott, but Severus felt the weight of the woman’s authority as well. “She doesn’t even know her own name.”

Professor Nott asked the obvious, “Do you think she was hit with a memory charm?”

Pomfrey answered with a note of uncertainty, “Could have done, but I have no way of knowing. Mind magic is not my forte. The blow to her head may have been enough on its own.” The little company fell into a collective contemplative silence.

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Hog’s Head Tavern, later that evening.
Argus Filch had little enough to look forward to. Catching filthy children out at night and sending them up for punishment at the knees of their betters was one of his chief joys, but taking time out Saturday afternoon for a pint of bitter down at the pub took a special place in his heart. So long as you could roll out a few sickles to stand a round, you were part of the company. A ripple of laughter escaped his hoary throat. He had aged before his time, all grey at forty. He had a squint eye and yellowed teeth, and he suffered from aches that should have belonged to man 60 years his senior. He used his ugliness and infirmity as a cloak to hide, a squib surrounded by a world of magic.

To him, magic was like a beautiful maid who had most vilely scorned him. But had she just given him one kiss of her affection, he would have done anything for her. That damned oaf and half-giant had been allowed to attend Hogwarts, although that didn’t last long. The man smirked into the sour foam that Aberforth passed off as lager. He pushed the nearly empty, “One more flagon of goat’s piss, afore I go back to ruin some roaster’s plans.” After a moment he adds, “I’ve some flagstones I’d like ta see my face in, I warrant.”

A wizard slipped onto the stool next to Filch, his cloak pulled up over his head. A handsome, angular face was visible to those nearby, and shadow-dark eyes seemed to measure Filch. Apparently finding favour, the man slapped down the sickles necessary to Filch’s tab, with the exclamation, “Your money’s no good here, sir. Argus Filch?”

Filch’s good eye seemed to pop out as his memory flipped through the yearbooks of past students, complete with crimes. “Aye. You’re one of the Lestrange boys, ain’t ye?” He stuck his hand out towards the young wizard, pushing down the bite of envy he felt at the man’s youth and good looks.

Clasping the hand in greeting, Rabastan nodded encouragement. “Right in one, nothing ever gets past old Filch.” He cleared his throat as Aberforth thrust two pints their way, spilling the foam over the countertop. “Well, I don’t run into you often. Still keeping the school running smoothly for Dumbledore, are you?”

Recognition of the Squib’s contribution to the school was a sore point with the man, and it loosened his lips as easily as any Veritaserum might. “Too right. Don’t know what those eejits up at the school would do without me. Positive pandamonium, ye ken.” Filch gifted Rabastan with a conspiratorial wink, gesturing for the man to lean in for a story.

“Just last week I had to cut down the sorriest bugger, twas left hanging from the rafters like a ham.” He couldn’t help but chortle a bit. “He had been caught out, and the bastards that done him in had charmed out the poor lad’s tongue.” With a push of his mug towards Lestrange, he added, “Which was devilishly cruel but clever. The lad had a sharp tongue and fast wand, and I know he would have met them measure for measure if he weren’t outnumbered so sorely.” Scoffing, he continued, “Gryffindor, house of the brave my ruddy Aunt Adelaide’s arse. Three against one. Never had a chance.”

Rabastan Lestrange listened with bemusement, “Hufflepuff, was he? What happened?”

Filch quieted a moment, considering before answering. “Nay, Slytherin, although not one of the highborn ones. There by his very wit. He didn’t deserve such treatment, but they seem to make it their mission to make ‘is life a living hell, don’t they? Why, the poor lad had hung there in the rafters, bound tight until dawn. Every bit of hair was charmed off. Looked like a bloody cue ball, he shone so bright.” He had started to chuckle again, but stopped himself with a visible effort. “And what does Dumbledore do?” He paused, giving Lestrange room to comment. After the raven-haired man made a sound of encouragement, he went on, perhaps a bit too loudly as it seemed to echo off of the walls, “Fuck-all, that’s what! Two days, charmed to silence!” Filch sliced at the air in a gesture of censure, “If it was up t’me, I’d have strung them up for hours to be seen as they meant for their victim.”
Lestrange encouraged him continue, “That doesn’t seem equitable, does it?”

Filch slammed the mug down on the bar surface, the tin thumping a new dent in the wood. “It was a travesty. Severus Snape don’t deserve it. Still up in the hospital wing to this day. Had to grow back his tongue the hard way, now didn’t he?” Lestrange winced in sympathy with the student’s suffering.

The caretaker had looked in on Severus once, and was gratified when the lad had brightened a bit. It was just before curfew, and he had to bring in another cursed student to the hospital wing. She was vomiting spiders and it was going to cause an infestation of epic proportions. Still unable to speak, Severus had gestured him over and handed him a pot of ointment with a folded note of thanks, and clear instructions written in a cramped hand for the ointment’s use. The student had brewed a salve for his aching joints, what that bothered him more and more with the shortening days and colder nights.

Perhaps it was a twisted sense of kinship that it was that pushed Filch onwards. “That lad is a dab hand with potions. I won’t mind telling you that Professor Slughorn relies on him, that he does. Lessons have been down the midden with Mister Snape still up in the hospital wing. Why, if he had the right connections he’d be a master in no time.”

Lestrange’s heavy eyebrows flew up in disbelief. “Truly? I’d think he would have his housemates, some friends at least.”

Filch shook his head to the negative. “He never fit in, he has a sour disposition. Never cracks a joke, serious that one. To the bone.” Thinking on it, he added, “I would not have you thinking he is completely defenseless, though. He knew more hexes as a second year than most seventh years do, even if they take an interest. He’ll be more careful, I warrant.”

Lestrange seemed to consider this. “I know some people on the Board. I am certain they would be interested to hear how their Headmaster is letting discipline fall completely lax.”

Argus Filch’s eyes softened with the balm of memories of better days. “Nothing like a good old fashioned tanning to get a wizard or witch to learn the rules, and follow them. I have the tethers and rod in my office. I keep them oiled and clean, ready for the moment someone comes to their senses.” The squinty eye focused intensely on Rabastan’s face. “You’d do that? Put in a word for old Filch. About the lack of discipline?”

Rabastan clapped the old caretaker on the shoulder as he dismounted his stool, making to leave. “Count on it, friend. The students are, after all our future.” He paused, asking, “What was that student’s name again? Snake?”


Lips silently repeating the name, Rabastan offered Filch a curt nod, barely taking in the young wizard’s blood status. “I promise, I will see what I can do.” Flashing a row of even, white teeth, the handsome wizard took his leave of the pub.

After settling his tab, Filch rubbed his hands together in lurid anticipation, his mind dancing with thoughts of the Governor’s Board stepping in to restore strict discipline on the whole school. There was a spring in his step and a piggy squeal of delight escaped his throat as he headed back to the castle.
Chapter End Notes

If you are looking for something to read, go check out my friend and beta's fic, *Tea, Black*. It's about Alice. She smokes, keeps a clean house, and is trying to save the wider world from Lord Voldemort in spite of not really liking the Headmaster.
Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Notes

Antilitigation charm: All of the Harry Potter Multiverse belongs to JK Rowling and not me. No money will be earned for this work. OCs (Professors Sigmund Svartrunir and Whittington Nott) and plot are mine.

Thanks to my beta reader Coromandel for saving Whit from drowning in too many cups of tea. Also, thanks also to readers like you! I'm enjoying reading the comments. This fic is pure joy to write, I'm having a blast and you guys just multiply it for me!

Updated 5/25/18: Cognac isn’t served chilled. I must have been hot and bothered when I composed that slip up! :D

Whittington Nott climbed the steps to the Headmaster’s Office two at a time. He had much to discuss with the man, and the conversation was much delayed by the day’s events. It seemed that he was not the only one seeking counsel, as he overheard at least two voices - one the expected low rumble of Dumbledore, the other the lightly accented excited speech of Professor Svartrunir. Whit collaborated in the past with Svartrunir on translations and warding spells for his work - both for the war effort, and in more recent times for his work as a curse breaker, and as such he thought little of joining in after muttering the password. “Super Shrimps.”

Inside, he found a pleasant tableau of camaraderie. Situated around a low fire, Dumbledore and Svartrunir were comfortably ensconced in leather wing chairs. Between them, on a squishy purple velveteen settee, Professor Minerva McGonagall sat with a mangled metal object held before her, and she appeared to be in deep meditation. Minerva was the youngest in the room, and probably the youngest Professor at Hogwarts presently. Her teaching robes had been left behind, and her shapely legs were visible, tucked neatly beneath her. She favored plaids, and today it was a neat pleated skirt that, when she stood, fell to just below the knee. A high collared lace edged shirt and a knitted vest finished out her ensemble. Whit couldn’t help but admire her, from her black hair bound up in a chignon down to the delicate soles of her laced up leather brogues.

Dumbledore’s voice broke through his revery, which was just as well. It wouldn’t do for Minerva to catch him ogling her, as delectable as she was. Rumor was she had sworn off of romance after a secret whirlwind affair went sour. She certainly never seemed to show Whit anything more than polite interest. “Ah, Professor Nott. How good of you to finally tear yourself away from Madam Pomfrey and her newest charge.”

Whit’s right eye ticked in irritation. Surely the old man wasn’t going to make an issue of things every time he was attentive to anyone. “Well, Headmaster. I have brought to you two pieces of news. The first is what I was meaning to bring to you yesterday. There is some sort of distortion down in the courtyard near that ghastly Whomping Willow. I first noticed it when I had the students outside for practicals. I was flipping coins to determine turn order, and all I was getting was heads, over and over. I thought perhaps whatever Pomona was feeding that dreadful tree might have a fortune charm built in, but then I checked my watch. The second hand was all over the map, sir. I didn’t know what to do, but it seemed to me something the Unspeakables would be interested in. As far as I know, no one else has run into trouble in that area.”
Since she had woken up, Whit had taken the time to consider Deirdre’s influence on recent events. He took a deep breath before plunging onwards. In for a knut, in for a galleon. Whit voiced the question that had niggled at him for hours now, “That is where the girl turned up, isn’t it?”

Dumbledore appeared to be thinking over the news, his expression was closed and response was noncommittal. “I will investigate further, Professor Nott, thank you for bringing that to my attention.” A wave of permission was given, indicating that Whit should go on. “And the other?”

Whit smiled as he delivered the second bit of news, “This is one that you have been waiting for. The young lady is awake.”

Svartrunir’s jaw snapped shut in reflexive surprise, creating an audible click as his teeth bit the pipestem that had been resting there peacefully. Supporting the bowl of the pipe with his free hand, he exclaimed, “Norns! I was not certain she was going to come around from what Albus told us. Come now, join the circle.” The elderly wizard stood easily, and turned to a sideboard to top off his glass of cognac. He lifted the snifter in askance with a slight raise of his shaggy eyebrows, to which Whit nodded grateful thanks. The Headmaster didn’t serve more than sweets usually, so this nod to elegant society was all Svartrunir’s doing.

Whit took up a position next to the fireplace, his elbow leaning against the mantelpiece. This angle afforded him a better view of what Minerva was working on. The object was yellow metal, gold or brass, reflecting the dancing level of the flame in the fireplace. It appeared to have two handles and had been split or ripped down its middle.

Dumbledore looked deceptively calm, and was examining Whit’s features as one might a pile of entrails, spilled for divinatory purposes as was done ages ago. It was not a comfortable or welcoming kind of attention and Whit forged on with his description. “She seemed to be confused. She has no idea of who she is, and therefore I don’t think she knows why or where she is either.” His olivine eyes met Albus’ ice blue gaze directly, challenging the Headmaster to complain. He should know you can’t get blood from a stone.

Disappointed by the let down, the Headmaster commented, “Surely you learned something more, Whit.”

Whit shrugged his shoulders, “I might have done, but Madam Pomfrey performed a battery of tests, force fed the girl some of her fortifying stew, and by the time she was done with her ministrations it was late and the girl had fallen back asleep again.” He did his best to look somewhat apologetic, although he was irritated enough to not mean it. Best to attempt to divert the conversation, throw something back at Dumbledore to chew on. Yes, this will do nicely, “I was wondering if she was a victim of a rather forceful Obliviate, but Poppy wasn’t sure as the head injury was enough to scramble her gobstones as it was.”

A sniff of derision escaped McGonagall and her hands relaxed, letting the object dangle by its handle from one finger. Whit barely heard the woman’s wry commentary about the utility of sending the strange girl away, perhaps to St Mungo’s for treatment rather than keep her here. Whit’s eye was drawn again to the metal object in her hands.

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Whit brushed aside the sensible suggestions the Transfiguration Professor made for the girl’s care, instead asking, “What do you have there, Minerva? Students ruin one of the trophies?” That was no trophy, the thing was making his skin crawl. Svartrunir broke his line of sight with the metallic mess, and handed Whit a glass of cognac.

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watching Minerva’s progress too.


Dumbledore’s eyebrows flicked up in understanding, “Ah. Deirdre, when she arrived here in the courtyard had some things with her. Among them was this fascinating little bag.” He lifted up what appeared to be a mauve purse with a brass closure at the top and beaded fringe coming off of it from all directions. The fringe swayed as Dumbledore opened it up to pull out a book. It was an edition of “One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi” by Phyllida Spore. The thick volume, and for that matter, the better part of the Headmaster’s arm should not have fit inside of that tiny bag, but no one seemed to be completely taken aback. Dumbledore placed the volume on the floor by his feet, and as he straightened up, he pointed at the gnarled bit of metal. “That was one of the first things that came out of this bag, and it is very strange indeed.”

Svartrunir had returned to his wingchair and was the picture of ease. He reclined back and had his legs crossed at the ankles, his well-shined oxfords gleamed a reflection of the firelight. “I’ve had a look at it too before we called in Minerva. I thought her experience in Law Enforcement might help us, but it’s a good thing you are here too. Whatever it was, it is very old.”

Whit had a chance to take a sip of the Cognac, reminding himself to share what he had found in the courtyard yesterday morning. After placing the glass on the mantelpiece, he stretched out a hand in a silent request for permission to take the artifact.

Minerva spoke as Whit turned the thing over in his hands. “The Headmaster wondered if it was something that had been transfigured, and I don’t think so. This is the shape the object believes it is meant to be, although it would rather not be so bent. It is rather striking.”

Whit didn’t mind Dumbledore calling in Minerva, as the old man had always been partial to her, having had her as an apprentice. It was no small part due to his intervention that she decided to come back to take his place as Professor of Transfiguration when he took up his post as Headmaster.

The weight of the object spoke to a good percentage of the thing being actual gold. The handles and pedestal foot on it were made out of stronger stuff as they had not bent under the force of whatever had broken it. The outer surface was elaborately wrought to resemble the cap of an acorn at the bottom, and from there flared out. An animal had been depicted there, but its form was directly damaged, as if something had cut and pierced the soft metal with a mighty blow.

Tracing the animal’s broken back with a finger, he detected an oily substance. Investigating more closely, Whit caught a distinctive smell and quickly set the thing down at his feet, pulling out his wand to cast a hasty *Scourgify* over it. “Minerva, your hands.”

At her questioning look, he could only gesture with frustration, “Just hold them out.” A faint tremor became visible after he was finished performing *Tergeo* on her and himself, and she panted as the nearby fire cracked and popped, sending a green smoke up the chimney. “You had better be careful with that bag, Albus. I don’t know what else is in there, but this thing’s been doused with Basilisk venom!”

Minerva looked down at her hands in horror and then the fireplace, where the oil had siphoned off. Whit hastened to reassure her, “It needs broken skin to work. And you had it by the handles. I think you are safe.” He frowned at himself in frustration. He was a bloody cursebreaker, and because he wasn’t in a dusty tomb covered in traps, he had let his guard down. “Headmaster, do you have a pair of gloves hanging about?”

Dumbledore appeared nonplussed, and he opened the beaded bag with a speculatively expression. “I
do not, but let us see if Deirdre was prepared.’” He spoke into the opening, “*Accio gloves!*” After a moment, and the impression of clinking glass and something else metal that rang like a bell, three pair of gloves flew out into the Headmaster’s waiting hands. He sorted through, and picked up the most likely looking pair, made of dragonhide, which he held up to Whit. Whit, of course, was now wiser, so he murmured a quick incantation to determine if the things were cursed before slipping them on. He need not have worried - dragonhide was quite resistant to magic of all kinds.

 Appropriately armoured, he picked both his wand and the cup back up, holding the cup by its handle as Minerva had. As he studied it, Minerva piped up, “I was about to try a *Reparo*. Do you think it would work? And why would a bloody basilisk bite a cup?” He was too close to the fireplace, and he moved off by a step towards Svartrunir. He had started to perspire.

Svartrunir laughed, rather diverted by the idea. “Maybe it thought it was supposed to gobble it.” He smacked his own knee and bent over his cognac, wheezing in amusement at his own very bad pun.

Whit glared over the cup at the distinguished old man. Was he going weak in the head in his dotage? “Quite.”

Dumbledore clapped his hands in delight, “Oh, good one, Sigmund. Very good.” The old men looked at each other and then burst into a more raucous fit of undignified giggling.

Minerva had her back to Dumbledore, so she felt safe in meeting Whit’s withering glare with a strong degree of sympathy. They were probably the only two sane people in this castle full of nutters.

Not wishing to spend all night in this increasingly close room, Whit turned his back to the ridiculous geezers and got on with it. First, he performed the suggested Reparo, and the cup twisted itself back into the right shape. The area that had been bitten by the basilisk did not mend, leaving the most decorative part marred and largely unintelligible. Next, he did a check for enchantment, as the initial passive test he had performed earlier did not warn him of active curses. He should have listened to his first instinct.

Whit, as a cursebreaker, was sometimes reckless, choosing to accept risk in exchange for swifter results. As he opened up his magical senses, the cup reached out and pulled him in. At first the encountered an amiable sort of magic that was built to foster openness and bonds of friendship. It would make sense for such a cup, if it was intended to smooth the formation of political or religious ties. A dark pit lurked behind the magic, sending out questing tendrils, searching for something to bind into place. It was Dark magic, very evil. He could tell by the shape of it that it used to contain something vast, and the use of the basilisk venom started to make more sense to him. This understanding would do little good if he could not extricate himself. He fought, with an eye to contain the binding rather than just ripping himself away.

Nearby, Whit could hear Svartrunir’s laughter stop abruptly. The rush of air against his side told him that someone had approached quickly before stopping at his side. The old man’s voice was flat with tension, “Albus. What have you brought, you great fool?”

Light bent around the cup, creating a void of darkness there. Everyone could see Whit’s eyes flicker with reflected tendrils of living darkness, the sweat breaking in great beads on his forehead as he fought its hold on him.

Minerva too was standing now, wand at the ready. Her cautious voice floated through, “Whittington. How can we help you?”

Dumbledore was searching around in the bag for something as the two Professors rushed to Whit’s aid. Phials came out and were placed on his lap. Cans of spam and beans were tossed to the floor.
Whit, for his part, was heartened by his colleagues’ support. He tried to rally his strength, and bit out, “Almost got it.” He felt a boney hand latch onto his shoulder and a wave of strength flowed from it. This gave him the edge needed and he bound the last of the questing tendrils to itself. It was an excellent binding, and like sticky tape, if allowed to wave around in the absence of something to bind, it would stick to itself.

Panting, Whit came back fully to the world of matter. Minerva correctly interpreted the wild searching look that came over his face. Looking to the Headmaster, she found that he had another bag in his hand, this one larger. He tossed it to the witch, saying, “Here, try this.” The bag seemed to be stitched together with many smaller hides and reeked of a poor tanning job. It was also infused with the uniquely scented murtlap oil, and Minerva immediately understood its utility. “Drop it in here!” She held the bag open under the cup, willing Whit to let go.

Whit was sagging, and only too glad to be rid of the thing. Loosing his fingers, he watched with rapidly evolving detachedness as the witch snapped the bag closed over the evil construct.

A strong arm under his elbow guided him to the purple squishy settee. He dropped to the surface and leaned over, his head between his knees, willing the world to stop darkening before his eyes. Why did he think the room was warm before? He was cold, ice cold. A warm hand traced his brow, “He’s in shock,” Minerva’s voice appeared to his left.

Svartrunir, also weakened by the effort, tottered back to his chair to sit heavily. “He will be alright. Give him a minute. Maybe a cuppa would go over well.” This gave the younger witch something to do, and allowed Whit to have the space he needed to collect himself. The elderly wizard eyed the bag with distaste. “I do hope you have some more benign glassware, Albus. That was a nasty piece of work.” He looked up at Dumbledore. “What could a mere slip of a girl be about, toting that around in her handbag?”

Dumbledore had busied himself collecting what he had pulled out of the bag, stuffing it back into place. He slipped one of the phials into a robe pocket before answering, “I have no idea, and I would very much like to find out.” He looked at the others in the room. “We know that Dark forces are moving again. Reports of strange affairs are filtering in weekly. I believe that we need to keep this among ourselves. I do not wish the Ministry to get hold of some of the things in this bag, and by extension, the girl.”

Minerva opened her mouth to protest but was halted by Dumbledore’s firm hand, held up in a silencing gesture.

“No, Minerva. I know you have many friends at the Ministry, but it is equally certain that there is corruption. The self-styled Lord Voldemort also has his own people firmly ensconced there and we must assume he knows everything that goes on there and influences a great deal already. The Minister is a good man, but he is hard and harsh.” He gestured at the bag. “What do you think he would do with a mysterious witch who turned up with no memories, that cup, and this wand...” He pointed to the twisted wand that lay on his desk, “With clear signs of torture on her?”

Minerva looked aghast. She hadn’t been told the last and her accent was thick as she cried out. “Oh, the poor thing.” Shaking her head, she agreed. “No no… of course not. I won’t say a word of this.” She looked at the other two wizards. Whit’s breathing had slowed down and he was able to lift his head to nod his assent. Lastly, Svartrunir answered. “She has already been granted Sanctuary by the castle. Far be it from us to give her up, Albus. Why would we do such a thing?”

Dumbledore purred out, “Ahhh. But it will be more complicated than that. We will have to integrate her into the school, keep her safe as she tries to recover. I need your help to actively shield her. Can I count on you all?”
Svartrunir was quick enough. “Of course Albus, whatever I can do, just name it.”

Minerva nodded, giving her consent with a pained expression. “I will say nothing of her, not even to Elphinstone.” Elphinstone Urquart, her erstwhile Senior at the MLE, was widely known to be sweet on her, and still wrote her, maintaining their friendship even after she removed herself from the Ministry. Whit rather admired the man, he was as stubborn as a crup with a marrow bone. She had made the tea with a single-mindedness of purpose, and walked back over to Whit and tapped him on the shoulder before passing him a cup and saucer, held with a rock-steady hand. “You alright there, Nott?”

Whit finally sat upright, accepting the cup of strong black ceylon. “Thanks.” Whit slurped appreciatively before answering the two questions put to him. “Right then, well thank you for asking, Professor McGonagall, while I do feel a whit better, truth be told, I’m knackered.” He turned to Dumbledore, taking another sip, wincing in evident pain. “Headmaster, of course you have my word not to speak outside of these walls of what I know, and to help Deirdre in whatever way I can.” He drained the rest of his beverage and set the cup and saucer down before holding up a hand. ”Give us a boost, love.” His words were somewhat slurred.

Minerva had been hovering over him, her expression pinched. She glanced at the glass left on the mantle, and found most of the cognac still there. He really must be weak to ask for help standing. Tentatively she offered her hand to him and asked, “Are you going to be able to make it back to your chambers, Nott?”

Unable to control himself, he quipped, “Why, are yours closer?”

Minerva nearly dropped the wizard on his arse right there. She was the junior faculty member in the room and it was her duty to make sure the wearied man was seen to, but she didn’t have to take any of that cheek! “Whittington Nott! Haud yer wheesht, afore ye earn a skelping!”

Whit flashed a bright grin at his colleague, getting some of his energy back up on the fuel of the beautiful witch’s ire. “Ease up, Minerva.” He flinched back as she raised her hand up in warning. He had been listing to the side, and the angle of his progress threatened to land on her. The fire in her eyes dared him to do it. Two hands held up in a placating gesture, Whit crooned to her soothingly. “Calm down. I know you are not for the likes of me. I was just trying to show my appreciation for saving my life.”

Minerva relaxed her posture, crossing her arms in front of her as Whit took a staggering step away from her and towards the door.

As he headed for the door, his voice drifted back, “Of course, if you change your mind, you know where t’find me. I’ve got catnip...”

Minerva growled, “Wanker!” She took out her wand and placed a well aimed stinging hex on his right ear as he disappeared from view.

A satisfying, “Ow! Damn your eyes, Minerva! No sense of humour…” faded to a mutter as his unsteady steps proceeded down and away from the office.

A glance back at Dumbledore and Svartrunir showed her two adult men, trying very hard not to burst with laughter. She declared, “I don’t care how injured, a gentlewizard should NEVER..”

Svartrunir nodded his agreement with her, eyeing the wand still brandished in her hand. “Quite right, Minerva. Ah, I hate to ask this of you, but I have further business to discuss with the Headmaster. Could you see that Professor Nott does not collapse in the hallway on the way back to his rooms?”
A glance at Dumbledore proved to her that she couldn’t depend on him for an out on this unpleasant errand. “So what if he does. I can’t believe the sheer nerve…”

Dumbledore lifted one hand, effectively cutting off her tirade. “Please, Minerva. You don’t have to talk with him, just follow him and send for Poppy if he seems likely to collapse. That’s all I ask of you tonight.”

Professor Minerva McGonagall lifted her nose in the air as she considered all of the options open to her should the odious man end up on the ground. “As you will, Headmaster. I bid you both a good evening.” As she drifted after Whit, a wicked grin spread over her features as she amused herself with ideas of what she could do to him in retaliation.

Svartrunir turned to Dumbledore after the door closed. “Here I thought the man was over the bridge to Pimpleton.” He had seen how the Headmaster had covertly watched Whit. Dumbledore had never shown any inclination for dalliance, so it seemed rather far-fetched that there was anything there to concern himself with. Svartrunir had known them both rather well and worked with them before Dumbledore ended Grindelwald’s terrible campaign. They had been a very good team, and Svartrunir felt it was in no small part due to Nott’s influence and support that Dumbledore did decide to become involved in that fight.

With narrowed eyes, Dumbledore responded, “Never use that particular phrase again, Sigmund. Honestly, it’s awful. However, if we are using euphemisms, Sir Whittington Nott is a dedicated Horation.” He lifted his glass to his lips to sample the cognac, before looking away, adding as an afterthought. “You know, the man never seemed to stay with any single witch or wizard for long. Perhaps his lovelife has been a casualty of his profession.” The last was meant to be light-hearted but it came out sounding anything but.

Svartrunir measured the change in the Headmaster’s mood, and found he was not reassured. Seeking to navigate away from that particular minefield, he chose something else. “I think young Snape will be able to come out of the infirmary early next week. I have been getting daily progress reports from Madam Pomfrey, and I wanted to ask your permission to work on a few projects with the lad. He needs better support than we have done so far.”

Dumbledore’s irritation transferred itself, and he responded defensively, “I have reviewed the punishments meted out by Professor McGonagall to Potter, Black, and Pettigrew, and I found them to be reasonably fair.”

Svartrunir sat up straight, and his hand had found his walking stick in the meantime. He banged it once on the floor to emphasize his point. “That is NOT what I wanted to discuss with you, Headmaster.” He paused to choose his words carefully, reflecting that it seemed that Dumbledore protested too much. “I feel that given Snape has shown himself to be an excellent student and has never been shown to be instigating these pranks, that he would benefit from additional tutoring to help him evade future traps.” Another bang of the stick emphasized how frustrated the normally retiring man was, “It is a disgrace.” A shake of the stick in Dumbledore’s direction, “Severus Snape has struggled since day one. He deserves as much consideration as any other student to walk these halls.” He leaned in closer, to speak in a quieter, more frank tone as the Headmaster had not seen fit to respond as of yet. “Dark forces are moving. Good people are getting killed out there, Albus. I know you have bigger concerns laid at your door daily. But mark my words, we need to do better by this lad.”

Dumbledore shifted in his seat, and appeared to be uncomfortable under Svartrunir’s glare. The Ancient Runes professor was one of the few who could call Albus out, and remind him of his duty. Svartrunir earned the right to do so years ago and was not going to let the Headmaster forget it.
Letting out a long winded sigh, Dumbledore answered, “Have it your way, Sigmund. I take it you have an idea of how you want this handled already?” Svartrunir’s short nod in response was more than he wanted to hear on the subject as is, so he gave consent. “Well, take care of it, then.”

With a sour look on his face for Dumbledore’s juvenile sulk, Svartrunir stood to take his leave. “Well, it has been a long night, and classes come early tomorrow. I bid you a pleasant evening, what is left of it.”

The Headmaster stood to see his guest out. “You know, Sigmund. We haven’t had an Odd Fellows night recently. I think we should get everyone together soon. Over the holidays, perhaps?”

Svartrunir’s face betrayed a degree of surprise. “Well, it has been a while. I would be interested of course. Glad to stand the Fellows a round in my turn.”

Dumbledore nodded his satisfaction. “I’ll send out the owls by Monday.” He reached over and opened the office door for his friend. “You are correct, of course, Sigmund. Goes without saying. Dark forces are indeed moving, and we need to remind ourselves of why we are here. Lord Voldemort’s recruitment has taken an ugly turn, his search for power is insatiable and his wrath indiscriminate.” He met Svartrunir’s eyes and added, “As a good man once reminded me, ‘The call of the light is hard to hear. We must lend it’s voice our strength, lest the world plunge irrevocably into an endless nightmare fueled by good intentions.’”

Svartrunir’s breath sucked in at the reminder. So, the Headmaster did remember that impassioned speech, delivered about thirty years ago in the Wizengamot chambers. Sir Whittington Nott had been an active Ministry agent at the time and had returned to deliver intelligence he had gathered on Grindelwald’s activities in Europe. Svartrunir was a younger man back then, and had accompanied Nott back from the front lines to beg for aid from Brittania’s people. They had left the chamber, thinking that it had all been for nothing when Albus Dumbledore found them in the hall and volunteered his wand to the cause. The rest, as they say, was history. Having no words to top that mighty speech, he patted Dumbledore on the shoulder and then took his leave.
Chapter 18

11 November, 1976

Severus startled awake, alive with the certainty that something was very wrong. It had been an exciting day and it took hours for him to settle down and fall asleep. Naturally, finding himself awake irritated him greatly. He had tried everything to fall asleep earlier. Times tables. Counting backwards from 100 by 7s, and then 3s. Exercises in meditation. The alphabetical listing of known potions components, backwards. After an extended list of failures, he had succumbed to temptation and requested a sleep aid from Madam Pomfrey, who was only too glad to provide it. Whatever woke him had better be ready to face his wrath.

Pomfrey spent the rest of the afternoon and evening completely taken up with the newly awoken stranger and not on Severus which was more than alright by him. He had observed as the mediwitch’s attentions were split between doing every test she knew on her newly awake subject to see what could be the matter with her brains, and fighting off Professor Dumbledore and anyone else who she thought might disturb her patient. Severus was fairly certain that if the girl was faking, she would have been driven to distraction, but nothing that the woman said seemed to cause a ripple in Deirdre’s placitude.

Downgraded to clinically stable yesterday, Severus was now but an afterthought. “Yes, dear. Do your exercises. No, I don’t think she has time to be read to now. Run along and sing to the wireless, that will be good for you.” Severus rolled his eyes, reflecting that at this point his speech was improved enough to be moving on to learning different tongues. That was a thought, perhaps if he mentioned he wasn’t able to speak gobbledygook as well as before, he might earn a few more days? He’d have to explore that later.

Severus normally lived on the edge of perpetual hyperawareness, and he never slept deeply. A whisper-quiet sound disturbed the otherwise silent infirmary, carrying from where the girl was lodged. Pulled from his internal maunderies, Severus pushed back the covers and ventured out of
bed to investigate. His eyes were already adjusted to the dim moonlight, a crack of light stretched out from the door of the nurse’s office. One hand on the cold stone of the wall, Severus peeked around a corner to see whether Deirdre was disturbed as well. Her bed was empty, the covers rumpled. Stepping over quietly, he placed a hand on the sheets. They were cold to the touch. She hasn’t been in there for some time, then. He’d better check the loo.

As he turned around, Severus felt his heart stop in his chest, clenching tightly before restarting at double speed. There, standing immediately next to him was the ghost of the Bloody Baron, face obscured by an old one-piece helmet with a straight nose guard. The ghost was dressed in mail, crudely fashioned and rusted over with stains that were probably blood. A heavy belt cinched in around his waist, and a sword was sheathed there, a business like bronze metal blade with no guard. Its hilt was made to look like two serpents twining around one another. Gauntleted fingers grasped the hilt and unsheathed the blade, the ghost pointed with it to the boy’s nose. Severus went ice cold, sweat beading up along his spine. Finding a ghost was bad enough, but the Baron himself, well he was unnerving! The only sound he made was the rattling of his chain mail as he gestured.

Frozen in place, Severus could only watch as the once-sharp tip moved in a swift motion toward the door. Severus’ eyes followed it, but didn’t immediately comprehend what the Baron wanted. A brisk repetition of the motion claimed the wizard’s attention more properly, but for good measure the shade gave it a double shake that sent his chains rattling louder this time.

Swallowing a lump in his throat which he was sure must have been his heart, Severus noticed that the door to the infirmary was now open. He took a step towards it, nervously checking to make sure the ghost looked satisfied with the conclusion. This did seem to be the case as the sword was sheathed once more. Severus took out his wand and a whispered Lumos helped him see better as he stepped out into the hallway for the first time in over a week. The Baron floated along, getting ahead with firm, clinking steps. He never spoke, but he appeared to be capable of making noise. Booted ghostly feet turned up into a tight stairwell, going up. Before long, they came out to a long outer gallery that was hidden behind a closed door Severus had never seen before.

They were on the sixth floor, and the walkway here was truly on the outside, a stone wall shielding the traveller incompletely from the elements. At intervals, floor length windows broke the space, allowing one to see outside. Severus had no idea what this was for, but in truth it had been a sort of landing bay for teachers and staff to use for broom travel, to allow them to avoid having to use the courtyard. The hallway was lined with these to Severus’ right, but there was also one at the end of the path. There, silhouetted by the moonlight was the form of a witch, standing and looking out at the night. As Severus neared her, he took care to make some noise. He had no wish to startle her, especially so close to a long drop. She had her hands resting on the panes on either side of the opening, and as Severus neared he saw that she was barefoot with her toes were curled over the edge of the drop, which would end in a little used side courtyard. The Forbidden Forest was visible beyond the grounds, and few clouds were in above it in the sky.

Severus cleared his throat and managed to croak out, “Couldn’t sleep, Deirdre?” Great. A cracking voice, again.

The witch looked over her shoulder at the noise and shook her head. “If Madam Pomfrey is correct, I can imagine I’ve had enough sleep for a month.” She turned back to the view. “This is a strange place, is it not? I feel like I haven’t woken up yet, and this is all a dream.” A gust of wind blew through, and her nightgown and dressing robe billowed about her slight form. “But I can’t remember me, rather than not recalling the dream. How strange.”

The Baron stood guard behind them, watching. “Be that as it may,” Severus crossed the rest of the distance before finishing, “It is three in the morning and it won’t do for us to be caught out past
curfew. Now, come back with me to the infirmary. We can have a nice chat, perhaps a cup of tea.”

What Severus really wanted was to be back in bed and for this to be a dream. He reached out, lightly resting a hand on her shoulder. “Come now.”

The girl doggedly kept along her former line of thought, “Odd. I can remember your name. Severus, wasn’t it?”

Severus nodded confirmation, a flush coming over him. He had forgotten to introduce himself. He squeezed her shoulder. The contact was enough to persuade Deirdre to back away from the precipice.

“I was actually hungry.” She gestured to the hallway. “I am not certain how I came to be here, but I was looking for the kitchen.” She looked up at Severus, adding, “There is one of those here, isn’t there?”

Severus nodded, “Yes, but it is downstairs, in the basement. As in most traditional castles.” His irritation at being dragged out of bed was edging through. He started to walk, dropping his hand so that they could walk side by side.

“A castle, is that where we are? It seemed like it was a bizarrely baroque hospital, from what little I’ve seen.” As she walked, she had a spring in her step, sending other bits and bobs about her bouncing. Her voice was melodic as she sounded out his name, “Severus, since you know all about it, why don’t you show me?” She looked up at him, hope telegraphing from her soft brown eyes.

Severus took longer to reply as his hormonal teenage mind had gotten into gear and was running around gibbering, “IT’S A GIRL. RIGHT THERE! LOOK! NO, DON’T LOOK!” Outwardly, he answered faintly, “No, that isn’t a good idea. If you’re that hungry, I’ve got some biscuits back in the infirmary.” Looking everywhere but directly at Deirdre, he added, “But you must come back there with me now.” Or starve, for all I care.

Shrugging acquiescence, Deirdre walked along with the young man. He wasn’t looking at her, so she took the chance to look him over. He was dressed in thin black pyjamas, buttoned up the front to a high collar. A dressing gown was wrapped around it, and his feet, unlike hers, were stuck into a pair of thin leather buskins. He was not quite as pale as the ghost who was standing nearby, and his hair had something odd about it. It didn’t look quite right. She remarked, “Who cut your hair like that? Its dreadful.”

Missing the ability to hide behind a curtain of hair, Severus answered irritably. “It is most rightfully laid at the feet of three odious individuals - James Potter, Sirius Black, and Peter Pettigrew.” He narrowed his eyes in remembrance of a night not unlike this one, over a week ago. Not anxious to go into detail, he followed this closely with, “They made it out to be a style decision, but I don’t see it. Glad you agree with me.”

She was openly looking at him now, biting her lower lip as she considered what to say. “Well, the waves are nice, it’s the length that isn’t right for you. Makes your face look all long and pointed. You should have the sides trimmed, let the top be your crown. It would make your jaw look less weak. What is it called again, a brush-back?”

Feeling defensive, Severus quipped, “So you are a cosmetiwitch, then? I never have time for such things. I usually let it grow long and have done with it.” His hair was too fine to leave too short, and it never stayed in place, having a life of its own. Keeping it long has always stopped the natural gentle curl from flipping in odd directions, and a little oil weighed it down enough that it didn’t fly around like feather hair on a puppet.
Deirdre considered his suggestion seriously before answering. “No, I’m not that either. Or at least I don’t think I am.” The stairs were laborious to traverse, and she lagged behind enough that when he reached the bottom of the staircase, Severus offered her a hand to help her along. From several steps above him, she looked down into the expectant face of her fellow infirmary prisoner. Truth was, she had no idea of who she was, or what she was. She was just... herself. She hated disappointing everyone. She felt like the knowledge was just out of the corner of her eye, and stayed there, especially if she tried to look directly at it.

It was in this moment that Severus realised that he was being a boor, and had just resulted to reminding her of her amnesia to distract her from further commentary on his person. He could see the lost expression on her face, and he was sorry for it. Searching for something else to distract her with, he suggested the next ridiculous thing that came to mind. “I know who you are. You must be a lost princess, here to hide from your duties.”

This didn’t seem to amuse her. She finally took his steadying hand and stepped down to the hallway, and responded with might have been the outline of a regal nod, “No, I don’t think that’s it either.”

Severus listened to her, really listened. “Midlands. You’re from the Midlands?”

Deirdre shrugged. “Midlands of what?” Her feet stung, her thighs ached, and she was having some trouble following the wizard’s conversation now. She had not realised how weak she was, but the dire warnings of Madam Pomfrey seemed to be playing true. For a short while up in the traveller’s gallery, the bracing winds had taken much of her ache and fatigue away. The brief respite was not without cost, however.

Severus tucked her hand into his elbow and used his wand again to light their way. “Lumos.” They were close enough to the hospital wing that they wouldn’t get caught. He let his own accent slide closer to that of his native area. “What it is, right... England. Midlands of England.”

She looked at him sideways, squinting against the glow and her murmured answer sounded hollow, as though spoken from the bottom of a well, “I have not the faintest idea.” The pressure of her fingers on his elbow increased, and he felt her tremble. She blinked rapidly, as if trying to clear her vision.

“What is it?” He paused to search her face. He hadn’t been walking too fast, he was certain. The Baron was floating some distance away, but now the apparition hastened forwards, rattling his chain armour to get Severus’ attention. It all happened at once.

Deirdre’s eyes rolled backwards and her grip disappeared from Severus’ arm as she fell bonelessly towards the floor. Four more ghosts appeared, but Peeves was the most disturbing as his head came up through the stone floor at great speed. Severus lunged, trying to catch the girl, but only succeeded at gripping her arm with bruising strength. It was fortunate for Deirdre that Peeves was there, as Severus could only slow her fall with the one-armed grip. Peeves manifested his force and pushed upwards from underneath, preventing her from falling more than two feet.

Severus could see the Poltergeist was pained with this show of power, and in spite of the proximity of five ghosts, was quick enough to recover and gather the girl into his arms. “Bloody hell. Daft ‘apeth!” Who knows if he was talking about himself or the girl. After shuffling to get a better grip on her, he patted her on the side of her face. “Wake up, Deirdre. Go on, now. You’re makin’ me see ghosts, love.”

That reminded Severus. Ghosts. He looked up and catalogued their various states. The Grey Lady stood nearby, a pointed distance from the Baron, who was pacing, still agitated. The Fat Friar was closer, and appeared to be attempting to minister to Peeves who was floating in mid-air, curled up
and panting with the herculean effort. Sir Nicolas de Mimsy-Porpinton expectorated, “Gadzooks!” and rushed over to help Peeves. What passed for help was anxious wringing of the hands whilst hovering.

The Grey Lady rolled her eyes at the ridiculous tableau, and added her two knuts. “At least she wasn’t still standing on the stair or worse, the edge.” Shooting a glare at the Baron, she added, “We’re lucky Peeves was watching. No thanks to you, you great tin pillock.” Severus was too distracted with his arm full of nerveless witch to notice the red glow of anger that flared from under the silent ghost’s helm in response.

Deirdre didn’t seem to be waking, and Severus had little choice, being the only other person with a body possessing a pulse who was also awake. He sheathed his wand in his sleeve, and now having two hands free, he gathered the slight girl up in his arms. Hefting her up, he reseated the witch’s limp form so that her head was better cradled on his left shoulder, then made his way down the dark hallway. The door to the infirmary was still ajar and Severus shifted his hips through, nudging the portal wider.

The loud creak of the door fetched Madam Pomfrey from her bed quickly. The woman was wrapped in a full length bedrobe of white wool, and the ruffled cap close around her head incompletely contained her curls. She guided the witch-laden Severus back to Deirdre’s cot and helped him set her down safely before starting the interrogation.

“What is the meaning of this, Severus Snape?” As she barked at the erstwhile hero, she was already checking the unconscious girl’s pulse and the rise of her chest. She wasn’t in distress, it seemed. Severus stood stock-still, gathering his wits and trying to slow down his own galloping pulse. In between breaths, he managed to get out, “Found her standing in a sort of open hall on the sixth floor.”

The ghostly escort had mostly stayed behind in the hall, but the Grey Lady had the wisdom to follow along, and she chose to interject, “The Baron was to watch her tonight, Poppy. As usual he let us down, and allowed the girl to wander up to the traveller’s hall.” Poppy paled at this news. Severus chose to sit down in a nearby chair, folding himself into it with a touch more grace than the falling down he would have done if unobserved. His long legs splayed out before him, and he felt obliged to defend the Baron. “He woke me up, Madam Pomfrey, and led me up to her all the way to the sixth floor. She said she was looking for the kitchens, apparently. I was walking her back down when she just... collapsed.” He gestured at the girls’ unconscious form eloquently.

Clucking in disapproval, Poppy nodded thanks to Severus. “Back to bed with you, young man.” She turned her back to the lad before taking out her wand to cast the diagnostic charms that Severus had fairly well memorised by now, but continued to watch the Mediwitch’s movements with interest. He added anxiously, “Will she be alright? Peeves broke her fall. I don’t think she injured herself.”

Madam Pomfrey looked up at the Grey Lady, who stood across the bed from her, and the two women seemed to communicate silently, something of significance. A shade of a smile tugged up at Poppy’s lips, which she schooled back to outward disapproval before she turned back to Severus. “And you didn’t think to wake me when you found her gone? Foolish boy!”

Severus crossed his arms in front of him, and leaned back in the chair, fending off her attack. “I was half-asleep myself, Madam Pomfrey, and the Baron, well, he’s Bloody terrifying, isn’t he? He wanted me to follow and I didn’t think.”
Madam Pomfrey couldn’t fault that statement. “You got that right, lad. You didn’t think.” She huffed before gentling her tone, seeing the look of tension in the boy’s face.

“She will be alright, I think, but the moment she wakes we need to get more food into her. She was malnourished before she arrived here, and days of sleep have done nothing to remedy that.” A guilty look crossed the Mediwitch’s face. “I should have thought to set out something for her in case she woke hungry.”

Severus felt the last of his adrenaline drain completely away and he felt hallow, his head echoing with the absence of immediate threat. His pulse slowed, and his eyelids became very heavy. His head lolled forward to his chest, and as from a great distance his voice responded, “I have some biscuits. Was going to...“

The Grey Lady had her hand across her mouth, suppressing an unladylike giggle as she watched the teen boy fall asleep. Only children could go from panic to dreamland with that speed. Once she felt sure he was dead to the world (the snoring was a rather good clue), she remarked to Poppy, “Well, that’s not a bad thing for the lad, is it? Both of these lost children could use a comrade.”

Madam Pomfrey looked across at the ghost, considering. “I understand your meaning, but I am not entirely certain of the wisdom in this.” The Grey Lady favored Poppy with a deadpan stare. Before the ghost could say anything further, Poppy quickly clarified, “I know this could be good for Severus - Merlin knows the boy deserves better than what that Evans girl has served him, but we know nothing of this witch. What if she is a criminal?” The scarred word written into Deirdre’s arm made it clear that she couldn’t be a pureblood, and no one seemed to be looking for her. She was alone, but was there reason?

At this, The Grey Lady stepped forward, once again evoking the gesture of warding she made over the girl’s brow. “Poppy, you have to trust us and trust the castle. We would not swear protection to any but the innocent or the worthy. You must know this.”

Poppy’s lips pursed in consideration, looking over her shoulder at the slumbering Slytherin. “Most remarkable, I have never witnessed the like. Too bad it doesn’t extend to more of our deserving lostlings.”

“I know, Poppy. I know, but it must be extended by the Headmaster on the castle’s behalf. It is a most serious matter, and hasn’t been evoked in decades.” The ghost added, “Severus will be looked after and soon will be able to look after himself. Have faith.”

Before she could question The Grey Lady further, Pomfrey was distracted by her charge stirring, and soon was caught up in coaxing the girl to take in quantities of broth and fortifying potions.

The Grey Lady drifted away, unwilling to continue this provocative line of conversation. Before she disappeared, she reached over, and with a cool, ghostly hand, caressed the furrowed brow of Severus Snape. In response he stopped snoring and drifted into a deeper, more restful sleep.
Deirdre woke midmorning, feeling a great deal stronger. As she sat up, pushing the covers aside, her eye caught on the sight of Severus, draped over a straight-backed chair. His legs were stretched out and crossed at the ankles, and his arms were folded over his middle, keeping his dressing gown in place. A dusting of fine black hairs had come up across his jaw overnight, and his head had naturally lolled to the left, exposing whip, sinew, and a prominent Adam’s apple. Deirdre meditated on him as she dangled her feet over the side of the bed, toes stretching in a failed attempt to find purchase on the floor. The wizard’s face was different in this resting state, strange without its animating intelligence. The nose was there, and Deirdre fancied that while it was the dominant feature of his face, it suggested a strength of character. She wondered how many times it had been broken already, and for that matter, how old he was.

Deirdre recalled the events of the night before, and Madam Pomfrey’s fussing. An ewer, cup of water and a potion sat there on a tray, waiting for her. She had promised to faithfully take every drop of what the Mediwitch pressed on her, just to get the fussy woman to leave be. After taking a moment to steel herself, Deirdre plucked the phial up and after breaking the wax seal she held it up in a silent toast to her fellow inmate.

The liquid was oily and tasted reminiscent of fish and bitter herbs. “GAH.” Deirdre lifted her sleeve and wiped the residue from her lips before feeling around for the cup of water. The strength of the stuff had brought tears to her eyes, as though it were full of freshly crushed onions. Her fingers found cold metal and clumsily grasped at what she thought was the cup.

From across the infirmary, Madam Pomfrey heard a strangled yelp, followed by a loud clatter and the ring of a round metal object rolling about on its rim before coming to a complete stop. As she hurried over, she heard the girl’s voice exclaim, “Oh! I am so sorry.”
Severus had been having a lovely dream. It was a perfect spring day and he had been sitting under his favourite tree and his best friend was there, just out of the corner of his eye. Her presence had a gravity which made him believe that they were sitting shoulder to shoulder, although he could not actually feel her or see her. The lake was smooth and the few clouds passing over reflected on its surface. He had been about to remark to her on the shape of one of the clouds when suddenly ice cold water gushed straight into his lap.

Now, his sleep-addled brain was spluttering and he was standing, drenched from the waist down. A quick assessment of the environs showed a teary-eyed Deirdre who was half out of bed, reaching forwards to do… he wasn’t certain what. This was alarming enough, but he also heard the “tap tap” of Madam Pomfrey’s feet coming over. He took a step backwards, and the chair that he had occupied just moments ago startled him, and his arms wheeled for a brief, comedic moment before he tripped over himself and landed in a heap on top of the ice-water puddle, his breath knocked out of him.

Deirdre had her hands over her mouth, a look of horror written across her face. Her shoulders started to heave, and Severus thought for a lurching moment that she was crying. As his panic started to gorge in his throat, the strangest thing happened. Deirdre dropped her hands, revealing a beatific smile. Her eyes crinkled and she started to laugh uncontrollably, flopping back onto the bed, her hands holding her stomach in an effort to quell the roiling hilarity. Severus was still in shock, but when Madam Pomfrey pushed past the privacy barrier, the confused look on her face was enough to break through the dam of his beleaguered dignity, and he slumped back on the floor, laughing as though Deirdre had just said the funniest thing he had ever heard.

Between giggles, Deirdre tried to explain that she couldn’t see well, and was fumbling for the cup of water, but sent the whole tray skidding off the bedside table and onto poor Severus, waking him up. Meanwhile, Severus attempted to master himself, although a quiver about his lips betrayed just how close he was to another jag of laughter. He could see Deirdre desperately trying to lock down on her giggle fit and that only made it more difficult for him to maintain his own solemnity. She pulled the semblance of a sincere look of apology that lasted for a short moment before she lost the battle, and broke down in giggles again.

Severus looked to action to help regain his composure, and he gasped as the cold water hit a new tender bit that had been spared until that moment as he lumbered up to a standing position. Before he had the chance to do so himself, Madam Pomfrey was applying a drying charm and he was feeling rather better.

Madam Pomfrey looked relieved, chagrined, and also vastly amused. “Are we hungry for some breakfast, then?”

Pulled out of her fit at the prospect of food, Deirdre nodded vigorously. “I took the potion, but some actual food would be grand. Are we going to the kitchen?”

Severus leaned down and picked up the chair, setting it aright. He didn’t disagree. He glanced at the witch before shaking his head. “Not likely.”

Madam Pomfrey shoved the privacy barrier flat against the wall, opening the alcove to the slanting morning light. “No, dear. I’ll have the elves whip something up and bring it here for you both.” She jerked her chin at Severus. “Be a dear and set the table, won’t you?”
 Feeling Deirdre’s eyes on him, he looked at Pomfrey blankly for a moment. Then the knut dropped, and he took out his wand and picked up the abandoned tray, hefting it in his hand. After checking Madam Pomfrey’s expression, which only seemed to confirm her intentions, he muttered an incantation that enlarged the tray to twice its size, and caused four delicate legs to sprout. He had held it at the right height and felt the legs touch the ground and begin to support the table’s weight. Next, he pulled out a black handkerchief, which was mildly damp. With a silent *Engorgio*, he shook it out with a satisfying snap over the table before allowing it to flutter down. As an afterthought, he touched the cloth with his wand, and uttered a charm that changed the shade of the fabric to a pale blue.

The sound of applause behind him reoriented Severus to the presence of an audience. A tinge of color rose on his cheeks as he turned to Deirdre. She was not crying or giggling anymore, and the wonder in her eyes made him feel ridiculously proud. He did have a bit of the natural showman to him, so as his eye caught on the chair again, he met her eyes and held them for a moment before he appeared to rip the chair in two. A bead of sweat popped out on his neck, reminding him of his convalescent state. Gripping one half of the chair with his off hand, he trained his wand on it and shook the chair. It looked like the chair had been merely folded like laundry as it opened out to a fully formed, narrow chair. He set it down next to the table before repeating the process on the remaining half. After it was positioned next to the table, he stood behind it with a flourish. “Would you like to be seated, lady?”

A look of disbelief crossed her face before Deirdre stood and scurried over to sit down in the offered chair. “Thank you.”

After helping Deirdre get settled, he muttered ‘*Accio Cup,*’ and caught the metal handle easily. He refilled the cup with a handy Aguamenti before extending it to her. She reached out to take it in two hands, smiling pretty thanks. “I’ll try to hold onto it tighter this time.” A flash of guilt crossed her face and she added, “I am dreadfully sorry, Severus. I couldn’t see, and the potion was ..” She glanced over to see if Madam Pomfrey was attending to their conversation.

Severus, not really caring if the Mediwitch heard him, said, “Dreadful. I know. I had to drink that nasty fortification brew more often than I care to remember. Water won’t do it, but I’m sure you are thirsty.”

“Parched.” Deirdre took a sip and observed as Severus threw himself into the chair opposite hers.

Not knowing what more to say, Severus glanced around to find Madam Pomfrey heading back their way, a newspaper tucked under her arm.

“Breakfast will be here any minute.” Pomfrey plucked a vial out from her apron pocket and offered it to Severus. “Take this now, please.”

The look of revulsion on Severus’ face almost set Deirdre back to giggles, which she aborted by taking another careful sip of water. She watched him over the rim of her cup. He had pinched his nose before tipping the potion back and swallowing it in one go. The paper was presented to Severus as a consolation, and with a disgruntled look, he flipped it open, and after perusing the headlines he opened it to follow one of the articles.

Deirdre read what she could from across the table. The headline blasted, “Wizengamot Votes to Strengthen Thinning Auror Corp.” From there the article went on to discuss the funding for accelerated training of new Auror apprentices as well as greater powers to arrest and detain. Deirdre read aloud. “Aurors are to be permitted use of Unforgivable curses in pursuit of suspected Death Eaters.” Her voice was tinged with the air of horror.
Severus peered over the page at Deirdre, gauging her response. “The Ministry seems to be getting more desperate. Lord Voldemort is gathering power. He promises much, it seems.”

Deirdre had flinched at him saying that name, a fact that Severus tucked away in the back of his mind to chew on later. She asked, “Why do people follow that man?” She leaned over and jabbed a finger at a byline buried further down the page, Death Eaters Attack Muggle Garage. “There is no sense to this. What could be gained by pushing the limits of the International Act of Secrecy? The Muggles have nothing of value to him, and could not fight back if they wanted to!”

Severus dropped the paper to table, answering with vehemence, “Muggles are dangerous, Deirdre. You cannot be ignorant of the Witch Hunts? They are still happening. They target old women, gypsies, and anyone who might be a bit strange. Sure, no one has been burned recently, but Deirdre…” He reached across the table and touched her hand, “What they lack in magic they could more than make up in sheer, overwhelming numbers.” He did appear to be rather passionate.

Deirdre pulled back from him, not so easily distracted. “So it makes attacking them even more idiotic. You have made my point!”

Severus found himself inexplicably infuriated, and had opened his mouth to spill out his own vitriol on the subject of Muggles (thanks to his dear old Dad), but something held him back. He let his breath out in a long, pained sigh and closed his eyes, attempting to compose a more rational response. He leaned back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest as he considered. “It is not that simple, Deirdre. Magical peoples have tried hiding from the world for hundreds of years. We let Muggles hurt us without consequences, and meanwhile, we are expected to protect them in turn, in order to maintain this illusion that there is no magic in the world.” He gestured to the paper. “How is this wise? We lie to protect ourselves, but in doing so, we fetter our own ability to fight back. We have magic, Deirdre. This power, if used openly, could do so much good. If we could show the Muggles, make them respect and value us, we could all be free of this International Statute of Secrecy. That is why Lord Voldemort has commanded so much support. He makes out that the world will be a better place for everyone with magical people back in it.” He watched the witch’s face and he paused here, willing her to respond, to understand.

Deirdre’s eyes were wide as she took in Severus’ words. She whispered, “So. You agree with this madness?”

Shaking his head, he answered ruefully. “If I did, I would be a fool to declare such so openly. No, Deirdre. I do understand the pull of his call but I have not joined up.” He tossed a hand, carelessly indicating the castle. “I don’t know that he’d have much use for a student, and a Half-Blood at that, anyway.” Seeing an elf pop in, Severus took the excuse to stand and help him move the food to the table.

Deirdre, meanwhile, had a thoughtful look on her face as she held up her left arm. She rubbed the sore part, as if to make sure it was still there as she stared down at her lap, attempting to parse out her own visceral response. Half-Blood. Mudblood. These words pulled at the edges of her mind, evoking a sick feeling in her gut, and sorrow threatened to overtake her. She couldn’t make out why she felt this way. She had no memories of interacting with Muggles at all. She knew what the words meant, of course, but how she fit in was not clear. Severus’ words had a wrongness to them, as if she knew that he couldn’t possibly believe what he was saying.

Her attention was redirected by an arm reaching over her right shoulder to place a plate of porridge before her. The table was already spread with a variety of dishes and the smell of a full Scottish breakfast yanked her out of her revelry. The mulish expression on the House-elf’s face did not soften after Deirdre thanked him. He just disappeared with a crisp pop. Severus knew that he’d be irritating
the elf by “helping,” but he needed the movement to shift the conversation. It was uncomfortably intense.

Deirdre noticed that the wizard across from her was bypassing the mash entirely in favour of toast, which he slathered with butter and marmalade. Before tucking in, he poured tea for them both, inquiring, “Sugar?” Deirdre shook her head no, as her mouth was full and after she swallowed that bite down she mumbled, “No thank you,” before getting another bite in. Severus had been correct, she reflected. Porridge was doing a much better job of getting that bitter fish taste out of her mouth.

Madam Pomfrey had been observing the two, and decided that this would be a good moment to inform them of the agenda for the day. “Right, loves. Busy day ahead of us.” A potion bottle was set in front of Severus with firm rap onto the tablecloth. “Oh, don’t give me that, Severus. Last one, I think.” He looked at the Mediwitch, stunned. He hadn’t thought that things were finally coming to an end, but forged ahead. “I need both of you dressed and ready for company. Deirdre..” The Mediwitch paused, as if giving the girl a chance to correct her, and then went on, “You will be meeting with Professor Nott this morning.”

Severus didn’t miss the implication there. “Oh, to finish healing the curse?”

“Yes, I believe so.” Pomfrey didn’t like talking about that with Severus there, but of all the people in the castle, he had spent the most time with Deirdre so far, and he did save her last night.

Deirdre gulped audibly, and her face turned white. In a small voice she asked, “Will it hurt?” Her soft brown eyes were frightened, darting from the Mediwitch’s face, whose pity was not reassuring her, to Severus’ who at least seemed to try to be supportive. His hand reached up to grasp her hand after a hesitation, and Deirdre piped up a little louder. “You mean my arm? It doesn’t bother me that badly, maybe it doesn’t need...” she tapered off as both of her companions’ expressions closed off that particular avenue of inquiry.

Madam Pomfrey stepped over to Deirdre, setting a hand on the girl’s shoulder. “No, dear. It must be done. Professor Nott already drew much of its evil off of you, but it will re-accumulate if it is not taken out by the roots entirely. Don’t worry. I’ll be right there with you.”

Severus felt a tremor run through Deirdre as she turned her hand over to clutch at his. He was surprised when she said, “And you? Will you be there too, Severus?”

The pleading in her eyes invoked a deeply ingrained reflex, and before he could think he said, “Of course.” He looked up at Madam Pomfrey, “That is, if it is agreeable to Madam Pomfrey and Professor Nott.” With an effort he schooled his expression to one of calm concern, although this was made difficult by that small hand, hanging onto his as though her life depended on it.

The Mediwitch inclined her head, considering. “If Professor Nott feels it is appropriate, it may be possible.”

Severus patted Deirdre’s hand with his free one, saying, “See? There. Nothing to fear. You will feel better with that nasty geas out of you. Can’t walk about the castle cursed, no indeed.” He cleared his throat, glancing down at her hand, thankful that her grip had loosened.

Deirdre looked back up at Madam Pomfrey and ventured a brave smile. The Mediwitch noted the shine of tears in the corners of the girl’s eyes and nodded encouragingly. “Quite right. It will be fine, you will see.” Having pity on Severus, she went on to suggest, “Now, Severus needs his hand, dear.” She pointed imperiously at the phial that he had forgotten in the fuss. “He needs to take his potion.”
A faint “Oh!” marked the little witch’s return to self-consciousness and she loosed her fingers at once.

The pressure of Deirdre’s hand removing from his own was not the relief he expected, and his palm itched to chase after and gather it back again as he noticed that Deirdre was not completely at ease. Steeling himself against that protective instinct, particularly under the watchful eye of Madam Pomfrey, he plucked up the hated potion phial and shook it gently before removing the cork. Severus’ expression changed to one of grim anticipation. He glumly uttered “Cheers” before draining the hated draft in one go. Shuddering with poorly suppressed revulsion he handed the empty back to Madam Pomfrey.

Madam Pomfrey gestured at the table. “Breakfast is getting cold, now. Better eat up quickly. You’ll both want to clean up before Professor Nott arrives. He is coming between periods at the Headmaster’s behest.” She glanced down at Deirdre. “I’ve borrowed some clothes from my sister, she was about your size. You’ll find them on your bed.” With that, she spun on her heel and marched off to deal with her next task for the morning.

Deirdre and Severus continued on with their meal in silence for a stretch when Severus noticed that his companion was no longer eating. Rather, she was pushing the beans around her plate. “Full already?” He continued to shovel food into his mouth with a gusto appropriate to a growing teen.

Broken out of her thoughts, she shrugged, and put another bite into her mouth before commenting. “I expect my stomach is still feeling the effects of not eating for days. The pressure is unpleasant.”

Severus sat up and craned his head, looking in the direction that Madam Pomfrey had walked before Deirdre said, “Oh. Don’t worry. I’m sure I’ll be fine.” She didn’t want to bother the Mediwitch more. Then she felt the weight of the wizard’s gaze on her, measuring her up against some unknown standard. It was uncomfortable, prompting her to go on. “Really. I don’t remember when I felt better.”

This got Severus’ attention off of how thin the little witch was, how light she had felt in his arms last night, and back to what seemed to be her bigger problem. The eagerness showed as he set his knife down with a clatter. “Truly? You remember... “

Deirdre looked stricken for a moment before her lips curved up playfully. “No, I didn’t say that. Think about it.” She reached for her tea and sipped from the cup, cradling it in her hands protectively in front of her chest.

Severus stopped chewing and then rolled his eyes, having understood her quip. “You are bloody awful, witch.” He couldn’t hide the laugh in his eyes, a contrast to the disgust in his voice. Deirdre giggled, a light sound in response. Severus picked up his own tea, clamping down on an answering chuckle. The girl’s laughter lit up her face, and he couldn’t help but feel pleased. It was an alien sensation, having an open and spontaneous conversation with someone close to his age. He hadn’t had a good chuckle with anyone since... Ah.

Deirdre could see Severus’ demeanor change, and it was as though a thunderstorm had rolled in suddenly. The light in his eyes died down and the humour drained from his face. She watched dumbly as he stood, using a napkin to wipe his mouth before mumbling, “I’ve got to wash up. Back in two shakes.”

The plate he left behind was not empty, and Deirdre knew that something had happened there. She hadn’t the faintest idea of what she had said or done. She watched the retreating back of the moody wizard, marking where he went as she wasn’t sure where the bath was before she turned back to finish her tea and pick through the rest of the newspaper.
Severus had already scrubbed his skin within an inch of his life, trying to exorcise the demons of his failed friendship with Lily. He thought himself sufficiently over it, but here he was again, drowning out the ridiculousness of it all in blazing hot water. Why must everything he touch turn to ash? After Lily, he had determined to swear off of witches for at least another twenty years, but that was before he met Deirdre. He scrubbed at his eyes with his hands before leaning back against the shower wall in a posture of defeat.

His neck ached from sleeping in that damned chair. What was the Mediwitch thinking, letting him drop off right there? She must have been scattered indeed. His shoulders were sore from last night’s bridal carry, and that brought the memory, unbidden, of holding the little witch close, her breath feather light against his neck as he walked them both down the hallway. A small flame had been lit in his chest and he felt it flicker, warming him with the memory. An intense pressure in his groin made him look down, and to his chagrin, his cock declared that it was rather happy with the arrangement too.

He double checked that the door was locked, feeling a panicky thrill at the thought of someone walking in on him. Cold showers were really not his cup of tea, and he knew from experience that this would not take very long. Still propped against the wall, he took himself firmly in hand and did his best to sate his lust, and gain enough control to set aside thoughts of either witch.

Deirdre was back at her bunk. A quick sort through the clothes revealed what must have been one of Madam Pomfrey’s sister’s school uniforms. She considered the Mediwitch, who didn’t really seem to be all that old for all of her no-nonsense attitude. The smell of cedar and mothballs suggested that these had been unearthed from an attic somewhere, and she felt the pinch of gratitude. So many people already had been looking out for her. It made her feel ashamed as she had this vague idea that she should be more than capable of taking care of herself.

She was concentrating on this thought when a ghost stepped through the privacy barrier, calling to her, “Lovely morning to you, Miss Deirdre. I thought I’d look in on you, after last night.” The ghost bent at the waist, offering her a bow, his hand firmly holding a scruff of his own scalp. “Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington, at your service.” It was then that she noticed the space of separation across his throat. She took a step back, stumbling in her surprise. An ice cold hand grasped her elbow from behind, providing a steadying pressure and preventing her from falling.

Spinning around, she came face to face with the castle’s resident Poltergeist. He had let go of her as soon as she regained her footing, and he shot back to the ceiling as she screeched in mingled surprise and fright. A low cackling filtered down from the rafters, “Careful Nick-y-poo. You nearly made Miss Deirdre lose her head, you did.” Deirdre couldn’t look away from the wide, toothy grin that was being directed at her. The ghost had a head like a squashed tomato set on a doily, his body having been stolen from some poor clown, with poms for buttons, striped trousers, and long curled toes.
Nearly Headless Nick spluttered, “Peeves! I say, that’s rather rude! Get down here at once you… you… bull’s pizzle!” He had let go of his hair, and in gesticulating, his head slipped off to the side.

Lose her head indeed! Deirdre’s hand crept up to cover her mouth as the humour of the situation struck her full-on. She looked back up at the Poltergeist, and unbent as far as to say, “Thank you, Peeves. I should have bruised my… ego if you had not happened along.”

Peeves executed a tight turn, positioning himself just in front of her, to answer her with a stunted bow. “Bruised bum, is more like, yes yes!” The Poltergeist crowed loudly before speeding off. Moments later, a irritated shout from Madam Pomfrey confirmed what direction he had chosen.

Deirdre turned her attention back on Sir Nicholas, and did her best not to laugh at his indignation.

The ghost continued on in his irritation. “That... that... fat-kidneyed rascal!” He shook his fist in the direction of the retreating Poltergeist’s back before straightening his head and his baldric. Attention now redirected, he continued on. “Please forgive my ill-mannered colleague. His churlish nature is irrepressible!”

Deirdre rather liked Peeves, now that she thought on it. She smiled a little, nodding to Sir Nicholas. “What do you here, sir?”

Nearly Headless Nick fumbled with his belt as he considered. “Well, I was just passing through, and thought to look in on you.” It wouldn’t do to tell the lass that they had been taking turns looking in on her, now would it? “Only polite, now that you are fully awake. Morning calls and such.” He twirled his hand, as if willing the explanation to fill itself out. “Ah, yes. If you need anything, Deirdre, just call out. I know how scatter brained the living can be, all absorbed in their own affairs, but us apparitions are always around.” He fluttered his fingers. “If you need anything, that is.”

Deirdre tried not to look vaguely repulsed by the idea of ghosts loitering about, ready to talk, but it was not easy. “Of course. Um, thank you. For your consideration, that is... very kind of you.”

Nick could see that he had already made a hash of it, and he stepped backwards. “I can see you must be busy. Absorbed with breathing and eating and other such affairs. I’ll… I’ll just take myself off, then. Good day, Miss Ward.” He spared her the full view of a parting bow as he already had retreated much of the way through the wall.

Spared the need for further ghostly interaction, Deirdre turned to see Madam Pomfrey bustling in. “Did Peeves bother you, child?”

Deirdre’s brow wrinkled at the use of “child” but she answered readily enough. “Oh no, he and Sir Nicholas were just checking in on me.” A pause. “After last night.” She looked at the Mediwitch and asked quietly, “Will that sort of thing be happening often?”

Madam Pomfrey had taken out her wand and was magically changing the bedsheets as they talked. The fresh white flatsheet was pulled taut, and would easily bounce a galleon. She was quite precise. “Will what be happening, Deirdre?”

“Fainting spells. Weakness. Overwhelming hunger.” The Mediwitch whirled around to look at Deirdre more closely. “Why? Do you feel ill, dear?” She had her wand out still, and the wool blanket had settled into place behind her.

Shaking her head, Deirdre answered. “Not now, but I felt odd earlier. It passed off, but I wanted to know what to expect.” She felt a steadying hand on her upper arm, a warm solid one this time, and she looked up into the Mediwitch’s searching gaze.
Madam Pomfrey tugged at her arm and steered her to the newly made bed. “Sit down, dear.”

Deirdre sat obediently, folding her hands in her lap, waiting.

The chair that had been split earlier had already been restored to its former form, and Pomfrey perched herself on its edge, allowing her to converse with her patient eye to eye. “I suppose you still do not recall much of what happened to you? Of who you are, or how you came to be here?”

Deirdre shook her head, embarrassed at not being able to remember for this woman who had already done so much for her.

With a curt nod, Madam Pomfrey forged onward. “Deirdre, when you came to us, you were sick, starved, and most grievously wounded. And cursed, must not forget that. I have done what I can to mend your body, but that comes at a cost, my dear. You are going to be weak. You will tire easily for some time yet.” She waved a hand, “Magic is wonderful, but it cannot undo in a week what was done to you over the course of what must have been months.” She leaned forwards to capture Deirdre’s hand in both of hers, “Have faith, have patience, dear. You are safe here at Hogwarts. You must give yourself time.”

Deirdre asked, anxiety edging her voice, “Will I ever remember? Who I am? What happened to me? Is there anything that can be done?” Tears welled up, stinging her eyes. She blinked, willing them away. She felt Madam Pomfrey squeeze her hand lightly.

“Don’t be in such a hurry for that, my dear. Your mind has turned itself inside out, a sort of defensive measure. It will return only when it is ready and not a moment before. There is nothing that you or I could do to speed that along. There is no potion and no charm that will help, and Merlin forbid anyone try to forcibly wrest the information from your mind.” Deirdre’s face took on a wild look of surmise, but was cut off. “No, Deirdre, hear me out. I know people will press you to remember, that is going to frustrate you and them to no end. Send them straight to me. I will sort them out.” She patted that captured hand again, adding one last plea, “Be kind to yourself, dear. Take this time, and enjoy it. Rediscover the world.”

With that, Madam Pomfrey stood and was out of the room like a shot, bustling off towards the bathroom. She could hear the Mediwitch’s voice lift, hailing Deirdre’s fellow inmate. “SeveRUS! What, did you fall in and drown?”
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Antilitigation charm: All of the Harry Potter Multiverse belongs to JK Rowling and not me. No money will be earned for this work. OCs (Professors Sigmund Svartrunir and Whittington Nott) and plot are mine.

My excellent beta and brit-picker Coromandel helps me keep my pants on and my knickers decidedly untwisted. Thanks also to readers like you! I’m enjoying reading the comments.

Severus finished his shower, toweled himself off, and was pulling up his trousers when Madam Pomfrey’s voice materialised on the other side of the door. “SeveRUS! What, did you fall in and drown?” He was calm and centered now, so it was not beyond his strength to exhibit some patience for the insensitivity of the healer. In his experience, they had no compunction in invading even the darkest and most private corners of one’s life, especially when you were under their full power.

Groaning, he buttoned up his trousers quickly and then cracked the door, letting steam waft out. “As you see, Madam, I am merely drenched, and not drowned.”

Madam Pomfrey’s eyes flashed with dangerous humour. “Keep on like that, love, and see what I do the next time you are missing one of your favourite appendages.”

Reminded that Madam Pomfrey was in fact not someone he wished to alienate, he bowed his head. “Apologies.”

Clucking, Pomfrey demanded, “Come out here and finish up at the basin. There’s a mirror for you. Time’s ticking on and I’ll not have you holding up Deirdre any further.”

Jaw set in irritation, he allowed Pomfrey to pull him out into the open air of the Infirmary, standing in front of the mirror. Behind him, he heard an exclamation of horror, which caused him to whirl around in alarm. There stood Deirdre, a bundle of clothes tucked under her arm, and both hands firmly clamped over her mouth. Her eyes were huge and trained on... Him.

Ah. How could he have forgotten about the mass of scars roped across his back? He was unused to having an audience. He stood straight, allowing a mask of carefully controlled aloofness to fall into place. The light weight of a crisp white shirt settled around his shoulders, and he gritted his teeth at the apologetic tone of Madam Pomfrey’s voice. “Just over here, Mr Snape. Thank you.”

Madam Pomfrey had neglected to recollect the mess on Severus’ back and she felt responsible. Eyes begging Deirdre to take the hint and not say anything, she motioned for the witch to enter the bathroom. Deirdre met Pomfrey’s eyes for a moment and had the good sense to pass onward without
further comment, her eyes cast downwards.

Waiting to hear the shower water turn on again, Pomfrey contemplated the first time she had seen the boy’s back, years ago. It wasn’t the first or last time she had seen the signs of abuse, but it was one of the more remarkable. He had come a long way from the shrinking boy who had set foot in her infirmary back in 1971. He had been dragged there by a white-faced Narcissa Black, who was a fifth year prefect at the time. She had seen the child wince as he dragged his trunk toward the boy’s dorms and stopped him to assess what was wrong. Her hand had come away from his shoulder, bloodied and Pomfrey had more trouble calming the Prefect than the stoic boy who was only worried that he had done something wrong. Convincing him that it wasn’t really his fault that the pretty girl was crying hysterically took some effort. His robes had hidden it well, but he had cracked open one of the scabs from his latest “lesson in civility” from his Muggle father. The man wished to assure that Severus did not forget the feel of his belt when he went off to the “poncey” school that his mother had attended so long ago. The boy’s back had been flogged with belt and cord so often that she could not completely wipe the old scars clean. For all the miracles medical magic could provide, this was damage that was written into his tender skin over the course of years, and nothing could erase that.

Madam Pomfrey heard Severus pull his arms into his shirtsleeves behind her, and gently banged her forehead against the doorframe in frustration with her own thoughtlessness. A crash behind her made her turn, eyes wide with concern. Severus had taken out his wand and dragged “his” chair back from Deirdre’s bedside. His face could have been carved in stone for all of the expression it wore, and he set about coaxing the chair to grow taller to stool height so he could sit and tend to the remainder of his chores. Pomfrey inhaled, and was about to speak when Severus interrupted her with a clipped, well enunciated response. “Don’t.”

Bowing her head, Madam Pomfrey turned away and sped off to find something else to occupy her time. And perhaps to have a good cry over it all herself.

Severus waited until he heard the stockroom door click shut before he dropped his guard. His head hung and he closed his eyes, willing the sight of the shocked expression on Deirdre’s face to be wiped from the slate of his memory. Failing this, he opted to busy himself, and he slowly buttoned each button up the front of his shirt before tucking it into his waist. Next, the cuffs.

He noticed that Pomfrey had removed his kit to sit on the edge of the basin, and he rummaged inside, drawing out his razor and soap. Most mornings he used a shaving charm to speed him on his way, but today he craved the savagery of the ritual. It would be the first time he shaved since he grew back his hair. Taking the brush and cup with a little water, he stirred up the sandalwood and spice scented soap into a lather which he applied meticulously. He knew that it was old-fashioned but his father had taught him to shave with a straight razor, and this was his preferred method over those “safety razors,” most seemed to favour. Severus had a strong dislike for plastic and disposable conveniences, and had taken to many of the older traditions still held up by wizarding society like a fish to water.

With a scraping sound, he divested his left cheek and jaw of most of its hair and rinsed it, wiping it free of detritus before taking his next swipe. The ritual had the calming effect that he had desired and he started to hum under his breath, a nearly tuneless melody that if he had thought about it, he would have recognised it as one of the tunes his father had sung when he was drunk and happy with the world. He tilted his jaw back and scraped his throat with three practised swipes before rinsing and drying the blade again. It was in this state of half-lather that Deirdre took in as she poked her head
out of the nearby bathroom door. She froze, seeing Severus with a towel draped over his shoulder, blade poised to continue on with his work.

Severus had glanced over at her, and determining that nothing was terribly wrong, he cleared his throat and leaned closer to the mirror, trying to block Deirdre out of his peripheral vision. He wished she would go away. The scrape of the razor against the right side of his face seemed unnaturally loud to his ears, and he became aware of a presence behind him. Looking back into the mirror he saw Deirdre’s brown eyes tracing out the lines of his face. Not willing to be the first to speak, he met her gaze and held it, wondering what was going on behind those lovely eyes.

“I rather liked you with the beard. Now I won’t be able to look at you the same.” He could tell she had made an effort at a smile, and was most definitely not looking at his back. Unable to handle the intensity of the witch’s scrutiny he dropped his gaze.

Severus took a moment to respond. He scraped his face, then tapped the side of the blade on the basin to clear it of suds. “Well, the chaps who put me here felt the school was better off if I had less hair.” He frowned, then spat out: “Greasy git, wasn’t it?” He had lost track of the long list of things that the Marauders tended to call him, but that was a favourite of theirs.

It was fortunate that he had let the blade rest in the basin, for he was startled to feel fingers thread through his hair. This sent a rather pleasant shiver down his spine, and he froze like a cornered cat under Deirdre’s touch. He was about to hiss when she spoke into his ear, stopping his breath. “It isn’t greasy at all, you know. It is actually quite smooth, like silk.” His hair had stopped growing at about six inches all around, and he looked rather shaggy. She reached up and parted his hair away from his face, his expression of disbelief fully visible.

Correctly interpreting his expression, she hastened to assure him of her sincerity. “No, really. It is rather lovely.” She was holding up a hank of it, admiring how it seemed to shimmer blue-black in the morning light. A blush crept up the wizard’s neck and into his cheeks and seeing this, she abruptly dropped the section of hair and took half a step back. An answering blush rose on her own face and she started to burble on, “If you took the time, and had it properly shaped you’d come off rather dapper.” He had picked up the razor before she made this latest pronouncement, but his nerveless fingers dropped the cursed thing back into the basin with a loud clang, and that seemed to break the spell for both of them.

As Deirdre blinked owlishly in alarm at the noise, Severus shifted in his chair, asking, “Was there something you needed?” His tone conveyed annoyance.

Deirdre lifted a hand to her forehead, before answering him. “Towels. I was looking for extra towels.” Ah, something concrete that he could help with and make the witch go away so he could finish in peace.

Severus stood and ushered Deirdre back into the bathroom and opened a cabinet that was inset into the wall. It had an extension charm built in, so it seemed like little more than a pair of doors on the outside, but there was quite a lot of space inside. The shelves that were at the shorter witch’s eye level had been dedicated to soap and washcloths, so as Deirdre commented, “I thought I had looked in there,” and crowded under his arm to look too. He stretched upwards and came away with two large fluffy towels and pressed them into her arms.

Deirdre clasped the towels to her chest and ventured. “Thank you.” As he turned away to get back to finishing his shave, he heard her voice calling after him. “I think I could do something with your hair if you could find me a pair of scissors!” Without answering her, he shut the door firmly behind him.

He heavily sat back in his chair, determined to finish up before anything or anyone else could interrupt.
In the bathroom, Deirdre had disrobed and stepped into the shower. As she shampooed her hair, she contemplated what she knew about Severus Snape, for she had only just learned his surname. She recalled his use of the descriptor, Half-Blood, and the rigour with which he had seemed to argue in favour of disbanding the International Statute of Secrecy. She might not remember her own life or history, but she remembered that conversation with sharp clarity.

"I do understand the pull of his call, but I have not decided to join up." She rather thought there was an unspoken, "yet" in there somewhere and the idea was distressing. As she rinsed her hair, she frowned as the suspicion snuck up on her that it was a Muggle who had inflicted those scars on her friend. No wonder he was interested in more rights for magical people.

She held up her left forearm and glared at it, wondering how she fit into the world at large. If the word carved into her flesh was true, was she on the wrong side of things? Agitated, she sped back into motion, finishing off a fast clean up at speed. After toweling off, she pulled on the unfamiliar garments. White knickers were followed by black wool tights, and over this a thin slip. She had wrapped her hair about in the second towel so it didn’t drip everywhere as she pulled on the button-down shirt. Clever fingers set all of the buttons in their respective holes. She hit a momentary snag, looking down at the conservative grey-wool kilt, the garment appeared complicated and intimidating to her. After she held up its length, she found it possible to wrap the pleated fabric about her waist. As her fingers adjusted the leather fastenings, she admired her figure in the steamed mirror. She felt the garment adjust itself, to better show her slender waist. She would have to do something with her hair as she could not go around in a towel-turban all day, could she? Removing it, she watched her brown hair spring into ringlets about her shoulders. Something didn’t seem quite right about the image, but she couldn’t place what it might be.

She turned about and looked through the bathroom cabinet once more, and her eyes lit on a stopped bottle of hair tonic. Opening it, she took a whiff and swirled it around curiously under the light. It possessed an inoffensive smell, so she dabbed a small amount on her forefinger and found that it contained a light oil, just what she needed. She used this, and combed through her hair with her hands, taking care not to overly separate the coils of curls. Satisfied, she carefully put the oil away before pulling the grey wool vest over her head.

Cracking the door, she peered out into the infirmary. Severus had vacated the basin, so she felt comfortable padding out to use it to brush her teeth. She tried not to be annoyed by the residue of his shaving as she scrubbed at her teeth with the soft toothbrush that had been left out for her. If shaving was Severus’ calming ritual, then toothbrushing was Deirdre’s. Her shoulders, tense before, relaxed visibly, and she tuned out her surroundings as she hummed a little song. She didn’t remember why she needed to do it just so, but it felt right. She leaned down and spit out the paste, and was sluicing tapwater about her mouth when Severus’ face appeared just behind her shoulder in the mirror. The surprise caused her to spit the water out in a coughing fit. Severus reached down and came up holding a hand towel and offered it to Deirdre, who spluttered out, “You did that on purpose!”

She missed the smirk that crooked up the corners of his mouth as she wiped off her face, but still pinned him with a glare scathing enough to burn paint off any surface. He couldn’t hide the amusement in his eyes, so she wheeled on him, her hands resting on her hips. “Well? Want that haircut, or was it something else?” She took a step towards Severus, moving too close for his comfort.

Backpedalling, Severus threw up his hands in defense. The witch was a force to be reckoned with,
and her height didn’t help at all. Before he knew what he was saying he garbled out, “Yes, sure.” Just don’t kill me... He didn’t understand what he had done until the girl’s eyes lit up, and she pushed him towards the nearby chair where he sat. “Sit. Stay there!”

Panic had set in when Deirdre trotted back into view, holding a towel and a pair of sharp looking scissors. He scooted the chair backwards, away from her, and she stopped short, her eyebrows shrinking in with confusion before she addressed him in a mocking sing-song voice, “What, are you afraid of a little witch with scissors?” She didn’t help by opening and closing them in her hand, snippety-snip. She had a comb clutched in her other hand, and a look that brooked no argument. He had agreed unknowingly, and now nothing short of hellhounds was going to stand in her way. She was terrifying and beautiful.

He managed to squeak out in protest, “I thought you weren’t a cosmetiwitch?”

Casting back, she too recalled that conversation. She laughed before reciting in professorial tone: “Cutting hair is a practical skill, useful for all witches to know. A proper haircut improves the health of the hair, and allows the wizard to move in society more easily.” He could only yelp in protest as she bodily shoved him in his chair closer to the basin. She turned him away from the mirror so he could not see what she was doing, only making him worry more. The towel was wrapped about his shoulders, effectively immobilising his arms under its weight. He heard the tap run, and then the comb was running through his hair. Well, what was the worst she could do? Hair could grow back, and she wasn’t going to trim his eyebrows too.

Hunk of damp black hair rained down around his shoulders, and Deirdre’s fingers seemed to know their way around the scissors and comb. She established a confident rhythm, comb-snip, comb-snip. Severus forced himself to relax. Dierdre was humming under her breath. She was evening out the length, not cutting everything to a traditional schoolboy cut as he had feared. As she came around to the front she looked at him, pulling the hair down on both sides to check for evenness about his ears. “You want the fringe left long?”

Hope sprung up in Severus’ eyes. “Yes please?”

She nodded, “Alright then.” It was as though she understood what he liked, and he couldn’t believe his luck as she turned him about, unwrapping the towel. “Right you are, have a look.” She stood at his shoulder, watching his face as he lifted a hand to smooth down an errant wave.

After a long moment he looked down at Deirdre and asked, “Are you looking for clients?” This got a soft chuckle from her, and as he stood, he patted his pockets with an expression of regret, “I’m afraid I left my wallet in my other trousers.”

Deirdre craned her head upwards and an expression of deep satisfaction graced her features as she tip-toed about him. “No matter. You looked out for me last night, it was my turn.”

Before his brain could lurch back into motion, Deirdre bundled everything up and took herself off to look for a pair of shoes, leaving Severus dazzled in her wake.
Deirdre sat on her bed, contemplating her feet, swinging in a pair of saddle shoes that were loaned off of one of the girls who volunteered on Tuesday nights here in the infirmary. The shoes were overlarge, but with the laces tied tight they seemed comfortable enough. It had been quite the quandary, trying to locate a pair that was suitable, and she wondered, not for the first time today, if she had wandered into the school wearing nary a stitch.

She looked across the infirmary, envy passing over her as she observed, not for the first time, Severus reading. He was sprawled back on his bed, and had the book hovering in front of his face. At fairly regular intervals she could hear the crisp sound as the pages were turned. She had learned from Madam Pomfrey that there was a wand with her when she arrived, which again Deirdre remembered not at all.

A bright “Halloo, there, hospital wing!” alerted everyone to Professor Nott’s entrance. He was a fit looking fellow, and didn’t appear to be a day over forty, although Deirdre had the feeling this was a gross underestimate. He came to a stop a few feet inside the door and saw Severus, who had snapped his book closed and was rising to his feet with a wary expression. Professor Nott sauntered over and stuck his hand out to the student amiably. “I hear you had some adventures last night. Good work, that. Will have to put alarms on the doors, now won’t we?” The two wizards shook hands as they talked.

Severus responded irritably, “Or, we could make sure there was enough food, and that Deirdre has a tour of the school before another night passes, so she won’t get lost.” It was a mark of his good upbringing that he didn’t call the man a dunderhead to his face.

Professor Nott chortled. “Oh, now. That would be sensible, wouldn’t it?” He slapped his hip and did a cursory visual search of the infirmary. “Now where did Poppy get off to?” Severus pointed in the direction of the office.

Looking over his shoulder, Severus crossed the infirmary to Deirdre’s “space.” He was taken aback at the sight of the witch hunched over on her bed, knees clasped tightly to her chest, her dark eyes peering out across the infirmary. She worried her lower lip, watching silently. She had heard and seen the Professor enter, and it seemed that she was not reassured.

Severus wasn’t quite sure what to do with this, so he did what came next to his mind. Lacking a chair, he folded himself down to sit on the floor near her feet and looked up at her. He attempted a reassuring smile, but feeling silly, he simply reached up and put a supportive hand on her ankle. “Hey now. It is going to be alright.” Those piercing eyes locked onto his, neither of them dared let go. He had the fleeting image of throwing her a life preserver, when she had suddenly been set adrift in murky waters. A twinge of self-deprecation colored the image, as he imagined that his boat had no oars.

Deirdre’s arm uncurled, and he felt her hand latch onto his. Taking strength from his solid presence, she buried her face in her knees and took a long cleansing breath. Her voice floated out from her hiding place and she asked, “Could you.. Could you maybe keep talking? Anything, really. Say anything.” Her fingers spasmed around his and Severus perceived now that this was no mere girl’s shyness. This was something deeper, more visceral.

After casting the office a worried glance, Severus started to talk about the castle. He started off, describing its sprawling campus, the Forbidden Forest, and the strange Groundskeeper who was seldom seen by the students. He went on to talk about the large lake that sat at the foot of the hill, and the giant squid that lived there. He chuckled, relating a story about one of the times that a student had been chucking sticks into the lake, and the squid decided to chuck a whole rotten log back at him. He described how the student had avoided the log, but had been beaned by a frog who had been a
resident of that log until then. Deirdre was listening, and he could see her unbend a fraction, one of her eyes peeping out at him from under her light brown curls. He relaxed into his story telling role, and he felt the girl’s grip on his hand relax a shade more. He looked up at the ceiling, and taking out his wand, he cast an illusion of the castle at night, with little boats heading across the lake. He described the first time he ever saw the school, and she giggled as he described the terror he felt when faced with the Sorting Hat.

“So there I was, drenched wet from the rain, looking as much like a drowned rat as could be. My best friend had been sorted into Gryffindor, and I was one of the last to be called up.” He looked at Deirdre. “It was ridiculous, but I felt like I was waiting on the playground in primary school, last to be picked for the team.” He had been the smallest in his year and no one wanted him on their team as he was unpleasant on his best day.

Deirdre’s hand squeezed his gently, indicating her understanding. She may have been there too, he reflected. Not that she could remember.

“I marched up the steps, dripping still and sat on the stool. Dumbledore set the hat on my head and the thing shouted out SLYTHERIN before I could say, how do you do?” Severus’ head cast forward, letting his newly shorn hair fall into his eyes. “The students in Slytherin are above average in most ways. We are cunning, and don’t let anything get in our way when we want something.” He was not looking at her when he said this but she felt him shift his shoulders.

Deirdre’s eyes widened and she felt a blush again come over her as she noticed something change in Severus’ demeanour. Want something, what did he...?

Severus tilted his gaze back up to Deirdre, a playful smile twitching up the corners of his lips. “I imagine you will be sorted soon yourself.” His thumb grazed over her knuckles in soothing circles. He considered the witch, as if measuring her himself, “What House will the Hat place you in?”

At her shrug, he filled in the missing gaps, “Hufflepuffs are loyal and kind, always hard workers. Ravenclaws value book learning and cleverness, wisdom is their treasure. Gryffindors are brave and bold.” He smirked at the last, “Do you fancy yourself a hero, Deirdre Ward?”

Discomfited, Deirdre looked away from his intense gaze. Severus was surprised when she spoke up, “What, don’t you?”

Both teens jumped at the booming voice that seemed to materialise almost on top of them both, chortling with mirth. Professor Whittington Nott had been standing there, watching them for some time now. “Careful now, you might get what you wish for!”
Chapter Twenty-One.

Antilitigation charm: All of the Harry Potter Multiverse belongs to JK Rowling and not me. No money will be earned for this work. OCs (Professors Sigmund Svartrunir and Whittington Nott) and plot are mine.

Coromandel is wonderful. She rescues my prose from the Demon Had of Passivity and Tense-Shifts. <3 All bow before her!

We are entering a series of Chapters that are necessarily fantastical and return to a place previously hinted upon. I hope you all enjoy them!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Madam Pomfrey, Professor Nott and Professor Dumbledore all gathered in the infirmary in the corner that had become Deirdre’s home for the past two weeks. This war council was joined by the Grey Lady and the Fat Friar as well. Severus had got out of the way after helping to arrange chairs for the two Professors, but Deirdre had been watching him, her eye swinging back to him like a compass needle finding its pole. She sat on the side of her bed, hands gripping the edge of the mattress and tucked under her legs in a defensive posture as Professor Nott spoke at length on the reasons she needed to go through with the proposed magical procedure.

“... pulling out the curse at its roots, your magic won’t return to its normal state. “ He gestured to the Mediwitch, “Indeed, Poppy here was concerned that your magic may not regain its strength, although thankfully this does not seem to be the case. My initial efforts did push it back enough for you to develop some reserves at least.” The Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher squinted at Deirdre, as if by doing so he could tune out the more obvious evidence of the material world and look straight through to her soul. The regard he had trained on her was intense but clinical, and she was surprised how comfortable she felt under his scrutiny. A contrast to that of the Headmaster, who from the moment he stepped into her waking presence today had set her teeth on edge. Where Professor Nott inquired, Professor Dumbledore probed. The man’s attention was cold and calculated, and made her want to get up and run.

Madam Pomfrey pursed her lips. “Professor Nott, we have not had her try any magic since she awoke. I feel it would be prudent to try some basic magic before we proceed, and I asked the Headmaster to bring back the wand that Deirdre had on her when she arrived.” She looked over at Dumbledore pointedly.

The old Headmaster pulled a wand out of his sleeve, and held it by its middle. This seemed as unnatural as holding a baby at arm’s length, but Deirdre could see why. The wand was dark, very dark. The whole thing was over 12 inches easily, and was curved like a giant thorn, thick at the handle but thin and wickedly sharp at the tip. The wood was naturally dark, perhaps black walnut, and had been polished to a high shine, making it gleam menacingly in the dim light of the infirmary.

Madam Pomfrey urged her onwards. “Go on, dear. Take it. Give us a lovely Lumos, won’t you?”

Stretching out her fingers, Deirdre let them hover near the wand as she looked straight into Professor Dumbledore’s eyes. “You... are sure this was with me, when I came?” Her eyebrows crowded
together in consternation. This felt wrong.

Professor Dumbledore nodded once, and unwilling to hold the malevolent stick any longer, pressed it into the heel of Deirdre’s hand firmly and took his hand away before she could think to give it back.

Deirdre rolled the wand between her hands, her eyes seeking out Severus in his position by the wall. Severus’ face reflected Deirdre’s worry and confusion for a moment before he firmed his lips and gave her a slight shrug.

Sitting up straighter, Deirdre breathed in and out, trying to clear her mind of this fog that seemed to be plaguing her. She hadn’t noticed it until the wand came back into her possession, but she understood a fraction better what Professor Nott had been trying to say. She raised her wand and spoke, “Lumos!”

Deirdre had to concentrate on the word and the wand, and felt a great deal of resistance. After an unnaturally long pause, the tip of the wand brightened to a sullen glow. Sweat soaked Deirdre’s brow and her breathing was coming fast, as though she had been running uphill. The light winked out after a few moments, and Deirdre was ready to fling the wand out of the window.

Professor Nott looked at the Mediwitch, who had been casting a diagnostic spell on Deirdre as she was wrestling with the wand. Madam Pomfrey’s expression was grim. “No more of that, now.”

Deirdre put the wand down on the coverlet, pushing it a few inches further away from her. After Professor Nott cleared his throat, Madam Pomfrey pronounced, “That spell took over ten times the usual amount of magic, Professors. I hope you had not planned for Deirdre to cast any more spells today. No question, that curse MUST be removed fully.” She reached over and grasped Deirdre’s hand in her own, willing the girl strength and courage.

Professor Nott looked over at Professor Dumbledore and went on. “What I saw of the curse was that the whole spell was hooked deep into your magic, Deirdre. It is too deep for me to remove without your help, and indeed I am not sure that it could be done safely any other way. I have discussed this at length with the Headmaster, and as I am not as strong in formal mind magics, I believe it would be best to have us both help you. Dumbledore, please explain.” He gestured at Dumbledore, who seemed to be drawn out of some internal struggle by the utterance of his name.

“Oh, yes... Of course.” He made his first effort of the day to engage the girl, “Deirdre, if you will permit us, we would need to enter your mind, and search out where the evil geas was planted. There, Professor Nott and I will help you pull it out, and Professor Nott will assure that any lingering magics are wiped away.” He looked her over. “Do you think you are up to this? It could take quite some time.”

Deirdre again sought out the faces of those who she had been relying on so deeply over the last few days. Madam Pomfrey’s expression was serious and strained. Deirdre nodded at her, drawing the beginnings of an answering smile from the older witch before she looked over to the Fat Friar and the Grey Lady, both standing off to the side, behind the chairs. The Grey Lady raised her eyebrows, conveying a calm curiosity, and the Friar appeared to be unusually sober to Deirdre. He opened his mouth and spoke this benediction,

“ Heavenly Father, we reach out to you in great need. Hear the cry of your lost child. Your son promised that whenever two or more believers gather in your name, that you would be here with us and through us. Help us cast out this evil, and lend us your grace to heal this wounded soul. Guide us to your light and peace, everlasting. In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti.”

The Grey Lady, and several other voices reflexively responded with the prescribed, “Amen.”
Deirdre felt serenity overtake her with the prayer. There was one more person that she needed to check before they went forwards with this. Her gaze turned to rest on Severus, whose long lean form was hitched up against the wall minutes before, and now stood at Madam Pomfrey’s shoulder. His hands were jammed in his trouser pockets and his expression, so open before, had become distant and angry. Not realising that by acknowledging his presence she was also drawing attention to him, she asked, “Severus? What is it?”

Severus worked his jaw open and closed, as though loosening it after prolonged disuse. Really he was composing his thoughts and he ventured, for Deirdre’s sake, “I have cause to believe that your mind may not accept just any Wizard’s assistance.” He gulped, looking sideways at Professor Dumbledore before turning to Professor Nott. “I have some skill in Legilimency, taught to me by my mother.” This was not something he had spoken of before, and his frame was wound tenser than a rubber band on the Sunday paper.

Madam Pomfrey twisted in her chair to look up at Severus, eyes wide with shock. Before the questions could form in her mouth, he rushed to explain, “I also have a great deal of practice with Occlumency. I follow ethical guidelines and do not use Legilimency except when I feel I am in danger.” He lowered his head under the pressure of unpleasant memory and added, “My mother made quite sure that I would keep tight reins on it, as it was the cause of some serious trouble at home.”

A severely displeased look crept onto the Headmaster’s face as Severus spoke, and the thunder of anger bled into his tone as he spoke. “And have you, Severus Snape, seen fit to communicate this dubious gift to your Head of House? Clearly you haven’t shared it with me.”

Severus took a half step back before straightening under the Headmaster’s glare. “I have. He has monitored me from first year. I assure you that I have not used it for Academic gain,” and after a pause he added with a pained expression, “and it would appear obvious to any with eyes to see that I have never used it for social advantage either.” He gestured vaguely around the infirmary, “Else I would not be here.”

Professor Nott was listening intently as Severus and Professor Dumbledore faced off. He seemed to understand all too well some of what was going on, but it was the frightened expression on Deirdre’s face that spurred him into decisive action. “Gentlemen. If you please. This is a magical procedure meant to root out and dispose of the remnants of a nasty curse. This is not a contest.”

Grabbing Severus’ gaze with his own, he went on, “Mr Snape, your education in the magical arts, particularly ones not currently on the curriculum, was far advanced before you ever set foot in this school.” Nott threw up his hand to stay any rebuttal before the student could speak. “I have been asked to see what we might do with your talents as the current coursework is not challenging enough, and I have looked through your files and I tend to agree. If it is agreeable to you, I’ll take you on for extra tutelage outside of your NEWTs classes with me.” Professor Nott’s tone and posture were reserved, but infinitely more amiable than Dumbledore’s.

Severus had brightened at the golden carrot that was being dangled in front of him, but the waves of disapproval from Dumbledore were assailing his usual barriers, tarnishing what should have been joy. A quiet, “I would like that,” was the most enthusiasm he could muster before he appended, “But what of Deirdre?”

Madam Pomfrey appeared to understand what was bothering Severus, as she too had witnessed it. She addressed the Headmaster, “Albus, are you certain?”

Sitting up, Professor Dumbledore said simply, “Deadly.” He raised his hands in a wide, effusive gesture. “This is not a game, or territory for untried students. I have many more years of experience
with Legilimency, and I am not personally invested. I have agreed to help at Professor Nott’s request, and I do not feel it would be wise to change the plan at this time.” He looked at Madam Pomfrey, Professor Nott, and Deirdre in turn. His eye snagged on Deirdre’s withdrawn expression, “Is that acceptable, Miss Ward?”

There was a delay before it dawned on Deirdre that the Headmaster was asking her opinion. She darted a glance back at Severus, willing her gratitude to be visible in her eyes before she said, “I thank you all for the care that you have taken for me. Of course, I will accept whatever the Professors and Madam Pomfrey think best.” She looked over at Madam Pomfrey, entreating her, “But please, do not send Severus away. I should like to know he is here.”

Before anything more could be said or done to distress the patient, Madam Pomfrey bullied through, saying, “Quite right dear. Don’t you worry.” The Mediwitch jerked her head toward the piece of wall that Severus had previously occupied, indicating that it would be best if he backed off.

Severus took a chance, and sidestepped so that he was able to reach out and gently squeeze the little witch’s shoulder, and gave her a grave nod before he broke away. It was with forced detachment that Severus observed the preparations.

The wand was banished to the bedside table, and Deirdre was encouraged to lay down with a lap blanket. The Grey Lady stood at the head of the bed and was bent down, talking Deirdre through an exercise in relaxing the mind and opening in preparation for the curse breaking.

Professor Nott had taken up position at Deirdre’s left shoulder, seated in a chair. He was rolling his shoulders and neck, as if limbering up for a boxing match. He had looked at the clock earlier, and Severus imagined that there was a good chance the Professor’s advanced classes might be doing reading from the book today, rather than the practicals that the teacher seemed to prefer. On the opposite flank of the bed, Professor Dumbledore moved his chair into position before he sat down, lowering his head in meditation for moments before he looked up and asked. “So, are we ready, then?”

The Defense teacher nodded and took something out of his pocket, handing it to Madam Pomfrey. “Hold this where our patient can see it, let it swing.”

Madam Pomfrey came to stand at the foot of the bed, and Deirdre had a clear view. Bracing herself, the Mediwitch offered her patient a clinical, reassuring smile before raising her hand. A pocket-watch dropped from the hand to dangle at the end of a brass chain, and with a twist of the wrist, the object swung into motion. This part had been explained to Deirdre earlier. She was to go into a trance, allowing better cooperation with what the professors were about to do.

“Deirdre, now I want you to follow the watch with your eyes, and don’t look away. At the end of a countdown from 20 you will go into a deep sleep, a dream where you will have control.”

To... and fro... to and fro. “20, 19, 18, 17... “

Severus watched from the wall, arms crossed, fingers clutching his elbows with bruising strength. Movement to his right caught his eye, and he met the gaze of the Fat Friar. The ghost had his rosary out, and was muttering in Latin, something that was probably a prayer. Curious, Severus turned his head to look at the Grey Lady. She was still standing at the head of Deirdre’s bed, her hands extended in a position of supplication.

He could hear Deirdre doing the countdown, her voice following the rhythm set by the makeshift pendulum. “11, 10... 9... 8...”
Severus shifted his balance from foot to foot in anxiety. He didn’t know why, but something felt wrong. The air in the infirmary seemed thick, and unseasonably warm.

“4… 3… 2… 1.” Deirdre’s eyelids had already fluttered shut and her breathing was shallow, but even.

Professor Nott glanced at the girl and spoke. “Deirdre. Can you hear me?”

After a pause, a voice rose from Deirdre’s lips, but it sounded as though she was speaking from the bottom of a well. “Yes, Professor.”

The man seemed to take this as a very good sign and his shoulders relaxed a fraction. “Very well. We will be using magic to enter your mind in order to help rid you of this curse. Is that acceptable?”

The silence stretched out, and Severus thought that the ticking of the pocket watch in Pomfrey’s hands had become unnaturally loud. Professor Nott’s mouth had opened to ask again but the answer came, again in that distant voice. “You will follow the rules of Hospitality? I should like assurances.”

Severus’ breath caught in his throat. That was clever.

Professor Dumbledore answered this time, “Of course. We shall be but guests, here to help you.” Professor Nott nodded adding, “Yes, we will go in, help you rid yourself of the curse, and then leave back the way we came, hopefully in time for lunch.”

“Then I will allow it. Enter, friends.” Deirdre seemed stronger, her tone suggestive of a Queen granting entry into her domain. Severus wasn’t sure if the next was to script, but he watched in fascination as the little witch reached over and grasped Professor Nott’s hand. He apparently needed no spell, as he slumped forwards almost immediately.

The girl’s other hand turned palm up on the coverlet, the fingers hooking in a gesture of encouragement, presumably for Dumbledore. The Headmaster didn’t seem inclined to do the same as Professor Nott, and he had his wand at the ready. After a slight hesitation he muttered, “Legilimens.”

Albus found himself in a shaded forest glen, rather different than his last foray into Miss Ward’s mind. The shadows here seemed unnaturally deep, and carried with them the sucking hunger of the darkness. He used his wand to cast a Lumos, and while the spell did cause light to form, it seemed to be bled away by the nearest shadow. In front of him stood an open portal, the rotted wood having melted away in the crucible of time. On the step sat a wizened house elf, trembling and dressed in tin-foil armour. Huge watery eyes, clouded over with cataracts, searched out the source of the light. His squeaky voice called out, “Who goes there?”

“Professor Dumbledore, I come to dispel the curse.”

The elf’s ears pricked up, and the light of hope brightened his eyes. “Many souls gather in the path of the dead.” The dim light was scarcely a flicker now, and he added. “You yet live. The way is shut to the living. You must turn back. The way is shut.”
Albus stepped closer to the elf, and marked that the elf had been holding his middle, and a glint of silver reflected the waning light. There was a pressure at his back, that seemed to insist that he not turn away. “I must pass.”

The elf’s voice had faded to a bare whisper, “It was made by those who are Dead, and the Dead keep it, until the time comes. The way is shut.” A blast of foul-smelling cold air flew out from the doorway, and Albus felt it blow in his beard.

Before Dumbledore could respond, the elf toppled head over tea kettle and landed at his feet. From his chest jutted a wicked looking silver knife, and his sightless eyes now stared up at the blackened canopy of trees overhead. Reflexively, Dumbledore touched the dagger, seeking to remove it, and was drawn into a new, entirely different hell.

Chapter End Notes

* The Return of the King, JRR Tolkien.
Madam Pomfrey, having finished her stint as hypnotist’s assistant, was now watching the faces of the two wizards as well as her patient very closely. The Grey Lady was also keeping watch, and so she was the first to notice when the Headmaster broke out into a sweat. Frowning deeply, she muttered to the Mediwitch, “That one, what does he do here?”

Not understanding what she meant, Madam Pomfrey looked closely at Dumbledore and at her patient. “I expect he is wrestling with some difficulty or other. Not to worry. Albus is among the best.” She had also surreptitiously checked on Professor Nott, who seemed to be fairing better. His brow was smooth, and he appeared unharassed as of yet.

By the wall, the Friar had his rosary beads out and was praying in a quiet tone, “O Lord Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of Hell and lead all souls to Heaven, especially those who are in most need of Thy mercy.”

Severus wondered if Deirdre was in control at all. It pleased him to think that perhaps this would help her heal and remember who she was. Did she need mercy? He shifted his weight, fidgeting with his wand.

Whittington Nott found himself surrounded by a company of mounted men who all looked to him for orders. He wore a dark green tabard, and a finely made suit of armour over it, made of silver chain and plate. The breastplate was decorated with the intricate design of a White Tree. A helm was fitted on his brow, and the world seen from under its shelter was dark, and that which was not dark was on fire. A wide river was at their backs, hemming in their options for escape. His men were retreating towards a white-walled city that stood tall against the blackened sky. His instincts told him that the sky was not that of natural night, rather of a necrotic gloom that blocked out light and hope.

A high pitched, evil sounding screech called overhead, drawing his gaze upwards. Some of the men’s horses were being driven mad, and the men themselves were looking upwards too, frozen in fear. Nott sat back in his saddle, and the beast beneath him, a wonderfully responsive dun-haired
horse, slowed enough to allow him to fall to the back of the troupe.

One of the men matched pace with him, and called out, “Make haste, Captain Faramir!” The man was urging Whit on, wildly gesturing towards the white gates. Whit had been a wizard-soldier, and knew how important it was to lead from the rear in a retreat such as this. He unsheathed the huge sword that had been resting at his left side.

“Onward! I will hold them back!” Whit had no idea of how he would do such a thing, but it felt right.

The man saluted in acknowledgement and continued onwards.

Out of the corner of his eye, Faramir-Nott saw one of the five black-winged creatures swoop downwards to harry his left flank. A howl of challenge broke into the false night, and Nott reflexively pointed the sword in that direction. A ray of purest white light shot out from its tip, illuminating the creature as it injured its rider. It was as black and moribund appearing as a thestral, but by no means anywhere near as gentle. The rider screamed in pain, a high pitched shriek that rose above Nott’s range of hearing as the ray scratched his shoulder. The brief enlightenment revealed a face as rotted and alien as that of a Dementor.

His men held together, and shouted as one in defiance as winged death swooped away once more. They were also being chased by swift-running armoured creatures, and men riding gigantic, militant elephants. The infantry of the enemy were falling behind his retreating phalanx, but a few arrows were getting through to prick the backs of his soldiers. Nott-Faramir shouted, “Swiftly! We must make it to the gate.”

His momentary lapse in attention to his rear was sufficient to create a gap in his own personal defense, and his back shuddered with the impact of an arrow. Whit observed its evil black tip poking through the front of his mail with a moment of detachment.

The sound around him suddenly became muted and time moved slowly. The light faded from his eyes, and he shouted again, “Onward men of Gondor, to the gate!” His voice was loud in his own ears, but everything else around him was silent. He struggled, trying to recall something very important. Something was more wrong than this wound and the darkening battlefield before him.

His numb fingers loosened, and his sword tumbled from his grip. As he watched the bright metal disappear from view, the world tilted and became completely dark.

The Grey Lady cried, “Help!” She was looking over at Professor Nott, horror painted plainly across her features.

Madam Pomfrey had been on the other side of the bed, tending to Dumbledore, who was still locked in the spell. Professor Nott had shaken, causing the bed to rock which is what grabbed the ghost’s attention. His face turned grey, and he toppled over just as Severus reached his side. The student was able to ease the man down onto the mattress, still half in the chair set at Deirdre’s bedside.

Other ghosts appeared through the walls. the Bloody Baron stood at Severus’ other side, and Sir Nicholas drifted up through the floor to stand at The Grey Lady’s shoulder.

The Mediwitch stretched across the mattress, fingers finding the man’s jugular. Her face was grim,
and she glanced over at Severus. “He’s alive.” She pulled her hand away, exclaiming, “Frigg’s tears! What could be happening in there?!”

Severus barely heard the woman speak. His hand had come away slick from Professor Nott’s arm, and he was holding it before him in disbelief. Voice cracking, he croaked, “Blood.”

Pomfrey’s head snapped up and she vaulted across the bed, swearing and admonishing the unconscious man for getting himself into something he could not get out of. She looked over at Nick. “Get Svartrunir here at once. I need help!” The ghost nodded once before gliding off at top speed.

Peeves appeared dramatically, forcing the infirmary door open with a loud bang, and walking through as though he were still flesh. He demanded of The Grey Lady, “What passes herein?”

The Grey Lady’s fingers were resting lightly on Deirdre’s forehead, and Severus watched in fascination as she reported, “The Headmaster has been stalled at a test, one he does not appear able to pass. The other one was felled by an arrow in a great battle.” She closed her eyes, her face showing confusion. “The sky is unnaturally dark over a burning field, and a white city sits above. One of his men has him across his saddle, and they are at the gate. The men shout a name in despair - Faramir! Faramir has fallen…”


Madam Pomfrey barely seemed to be aware of the words, but Peeves advanced to Severus’ side. “We’ll be eating a ghostly feast with three more at our table next All Hallow’s Eve, unless you think you can do more, son?” Peeves was very strange, no lilting rhymes or jeering now, and Severus gaped at the ghost. He was standing taller now, taking on the shape of a man, his edges crisper, features no longer twisted. He leaned in close, and Severus expected him to laugh or yell. The ice-cold hand that grabbed Severus’ arm was enough of a shock that the words spoken next hit Severus with bright clarity, “Action is eloquence enough, boy.”

Still mute, Severus stepped over to the left side of the bed near the Headmaster. He knelt at the old wizard’s feet, and steeling himself, he reached over and grasped the man’s knee.

Professor Dumbledore was in a grand room, most likely a ballroom. A chandelier sparkled over his head, its crystals swaying as if moved by light breeze. Deirdre lay on the floor, screaming. Her face was a rictus of pain, and her voice was hoarse with what must have been a prolonged ordeal. A dark-haired witch pressed her knee into the girl’s chest. Her back was to Dumbledore, but he could still hear her chanting words of hate and pain. He observed that she was working on the girl’s arm, and abruptly the terrible revelation hit him. He was watching as the very curse that he sought to remove was cast. The witch raised up her hand, and his eye was drawn to the light flashing off of a silvered blade, smoking as the blood burned to black. The foul witch stopped muttering and raised her voice in a grating shriek, “Where did you get the Sword?! What else did you steal from my vault?”

Deirdre’s head shook as her body continued to tremble, and the witch jabbed her wand at the girl, uttering a renewed “Crucio!” Deirdre’s back arched upwards, and it seemed as though she were in danger of every vertebrae unhinging from its fellows under the strain. No sound escaped the girl, but
there was little doubt that she felt it.

Albus felt sick. He unhinged his jaw and shouted for the villainous witch to halt her progress, but he went unheeded. His feet were cemented in place.

The woman shouted at a wizard who stood off to the side, “Go, take Narcissa and check the vaults. We must find out if this filthy Mudblood found her way in there. If the sword and cup are missing, we will need to break this one’s mind and get the cup back before the Dark Lord hears of it!”

She lifted her wand, a curved, wicked looking thing, and pointed it at two disheveled men. Dumbledore recognised the wand and watched in fascination as the witch cast a neat double *Imperio*, still maintaining the Crucio on Deirdre. “You will go fetch Rookwood and Mulciber. You will not summon the Dark Lord. You will report back here with Rookwood and Mulciber and take no orders from any but me. Understand?” Both men nodded. Satisfied, she barked at them, “GO.”

Dumbledore breathed again as the witch stopped her Cruciatus and stood, looking down at her victim with an expression of mixed arousal and disgust. She walked around Deirdre and came to a stop, facing Dumbledore for the first time. He broke out in a cold sweat, his mind roiling in anguish with recognition. The woman before him was older in this when, transformed from the girl who had sat in the Great Hall at the Slytherin table a mere eight years before. Bellatrix Lestrange, née Black. He watched in growing horror as the witch uttered another spell, “*Legimens.*”

Deirdre cried out, “No, please! No, we didn’t, I swear we didn’t!”

Bellatrix crooned, “Clever Mudblood, you resist me so well. But let’s make things interesting...” She stepped down on Deirdre’s left hand, grinding her heel into the sensitive flesh, “Where are they... where...”

Deirdre’s hair crackled with electricity as she screamed in pain and defiance, “NO!”

A force of magic radiated out from the little witch as though a gale was passing through the room. The chandelier swung dangerously, but Bellatrix leaned into its force. A gasp of delight escaped her and she sang out into the wind, “Australia... you sent them to Australia... you naughty girl! You wiped their memories - what will your precious Potter think of that?!?”

As abruptly as it appeared, the wind died down, and Deirdre was left sobbing with her ruined hand free of the witch’s heel. Bellatrix skipped about the girl in a demented parody of Ring around the Rosie. “Dirt spawned the Mudblood, Information had better Flood, or Ashes, or Ashes, They’ll burn unto t’Ground!”

Bellatrix stopped, all mirth wiped away once more. Leaning down to Deirdre’s face, she ground out, “Tell me now, where did you get the Sword? What did you do with the Cup? TELL ME OR I SWEAR...” The witch giggled, “Your precious Muggle parents will die.”

Chaos erupted as two teens staggered into view, and within the same moment of time a familiar elf appeared, riding the massive crystal chandelier down from its loosened mooring. He was aiming directly for Bellatrix with an expression of mixed terror and determination. Dumbledore found himself cheering the house elf on as Bellatrix reeled away, covering her face. The elf leapt onto Deirdre, and both disappeared from view with the tell-tale crack of elvish teleportation.

Seconds later, the elf popped back into the room between the two lads who had been duelling Bellatrix. The dark-haired wizard with a face like raw meat could see enough to successfully disarm Deirdre’s tormentor, catching her evil wand with a practiced motion. The witch shrieked “I know that’s you, Potter!”, and threw her last weapon straight at the boy. The elf stepped forward, touching
both wizards on the sleeve. All three vanished, taking the evil silver knife with them.

The scene faded, and Dumbledore found himself back in the glade, with the brave elf lying dead before him. The old wizard swayed, and then sat down, his hands clutching at his hair as he tried to process what he had just seen. Unable to hold them at bay, his sides heaved with silent, wracking sobs.

Severus found himself riding a stout, long haired horse. The tack was plain, but well cared for. Looking to his left and right, he found The Fat Friar and Peeves riding beside him - each appeared as solid and living as they must have been the day they died. They too were cloaked in grey. The forest was thick around them, and Severus had the impression that it was watching the company closely. Letting his instinct guide him, Severus raised his fist, halting the company. “Dismount, lead your horses. Keep them quiet.”

One more descent, and they came to an open space. The forest floor yielded underfoot with a carpet of thick moss.

An old man sat cross legged at the bottom of a short flight of stone steps. His back was to the company, his head bent in what appeared to be woe. As Severus approached closer, he recognised the man. “Headmaster! Professor Dumbledore!” Severus skidded to his knees, the moss proving to be slippery so close to the rock face of the hill. Then he saw the malevolent silver knife sticking out of the corpse of a house elf, a sick parody of a blood red rose blooming from its withered flesh.

The sight of the powerful wizard weeping shook Severus to his roots and he reached out to grasp his sleeve. “Professor. We are here now. We must get moving.” Severus reviewed what he remembered of the story. He had read it not too long ago, although he regretted that this was not the volume he was reading aloud to Deirdre before she woke. Time was of the essence. They must win through to Minas Tirith by tomorrow, and they needed to travel through the Paths of the Dead.

He was not certain where the elf fit in, and since the wizard had not answered it occurred to him to check the blade. Were they to take it with them? Neither Sting nor Glamdring would appear here. As he reached out to grasp the hilt, a strong hand whipped up and snatched his wrist. “No!”

Dumbledore’s tear-streaked face came near to Severus’ as he pulled the teen away from the little corpse. The old man grated out hoarsely, “He said the way is shut.”
Severus stood, legs braced and arms crossed in a defensive posture as he regarded the gaping maw of the tunnel in front of him. A foul wind poured out of that darkened portal, and it moaned a parody of the grief that was now etched over his Headmaster’s face. The sight of Dumbledore broken down weeping gave the student cause to rethink this strategy. Was it wise to go on with this metaphor, and what had happened to Albus Dumbledore? If such a powerful wizard was reduced to that, could things get worse from here? Deirdre needed to frame this as a quest, it seemed, and it was put to them to play their parts. He could not change her metaphor, as dark and dangerous as it may be.

Before he evolved that line of reasoning further, the Fat Friar came up beside him. “I would offer thou better support if I knew what we did here? Perhaps we should go back. Or find a way around.” Was it him, or was the Friar shorter? And he had a beard now, and a helm on his head.

A weight pulling on his shoulder grabbed his attention. He reached up, and his fingers found the hilt of a sword that was sheathed in a baldric slung over his riding leathers. Muscles straining, he unshipped the weapon from its sheath and brought it forward for inspection. The blade seemed unnaturally wide, but his hands fit, and the weight felt right.

“There was a prophecy, the words lost to history but translated into common, but a hobbit wrote of it in recent memory.” Severus took a moment, and after collecting his thoughts he recited from memory:

“All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.
From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
The crownless again shall be king.**

Severus held out the evidence in his hands, “This is the blade that was broken. The sword Isildur, used to strike down Sauron the Deceiver, The Black Hand. In this tale, he has awoken again and is reaching out to extend malice across the land once more. We are a company that is destined to help win this war.” He shifted his grip and used the sword to point at the darkened door. “These are the Paths of the Dead. We must pass through.”

Peeves stepped forward, “I will follow you.” He was dressed in a cloak and riding leathers too, a sword at his side and a longbow strung at his back. He was taller still and had an unearthly grace about him.

Dumbledore stood shakily, looking behind them, back up the path. “And these Grey Company?” He indicated a large company of men, each leading a shaggy horse like the one Severus had ridden in on. They all wore thick grey cloaks, and the faces of hardened men watched silently from under their hoods.

Severus sheathed the sword with thoughtless ease before reaching out to grasp Dumbledore’s elbow in a steadying grip. “These are mine and I am theirs. The Dúnedain will follow.” He leveled a steady gaze at Dumbledore, “I was called. Those who went before me have faltered at the threshold. You need not follow, but we have much to do before the day is won.” Letting go of Dumbledore’s sleeve, he turned back to the cold passage. Gathering his reins back in hand, he regarded his Headmaster with a wry smile. “This will be interesting.”

With that, time for discussion was over. Severus Snape, the half-blood Prince, now Aragorn, Chieftain of the Dúnedain, and heir of Isildur who was foretold stepped forwards, giving himself over to the story.

Úowyn lay near her beloved uncle, who had not recognised her in his last moments, crushed under the weight of his great white horse. Wounded and grieving, she lay on the Fields of Pelennor. She should get up and fight again. The battle was not over, but the arm that had struck down the Witch King was seized with agonising pain, and she saw blood leaking out from under her cuff. Leaden despair weighed on her, pressing her down more surely than gravity, pinning her to the blood soaked earth. The Witch King’s steed had not been the first or most significant kill that she had made that day, but it was certainly the largest and most foul. Its black blood soaked the ground on which she had collapsed, and she knew this earth would never turn green again. Her eyes were trained on the skies above, and she thought to herself that she had accomplished this much: the geas of fear and darkness that had been cast over the whole of Middle Earth had receded back to Mordor. If that was her last action, she could be proud. Yes, that was her life. It was sufficient.

A small ruddy-haired man crawled up to her. When she did not respond to his gentle shake, he cried out, “Úowyn, Úowyn! Do not leave me!” She felt strangely unmoved by the tears leaking from the hobbit’s face. She saw that he carried his sword arm awkwardly and did not resent him when he collapsed at her side, perhaps pulled down by the same melancholy.
Closing her eyes, she did not struggle against her own personal night. She was so tired. Why not embrace it?

Peeves whispered into the disquieted darkness, “The dead follow us. They have been summoned.”

Severus struggled with the impulse to break and run. The tunnels were not the clean, cool underground passages of Hogwarts’ dungeons. These were hot and foul, the air laden with the stench of decay. The shadows were unnaturally thick, and he was half convinced that if he reached into one, he would come away with a hand drenched in ink.

The Friar spoke, voice husky with dread, “Why am I afraid to tread where these dead walk freely?”

Grateful for the distraction, Severus explained, “They are cursed. Long ago, they had pledged to aid the Lord of Gondor, however when he called on them in need for the great battle, the did not come because they had worshipped Sauron, the Dark Lord. Isildur won the day, and they were cursed to linger here in the White Mountains until called on to fulfill their oath.”

Shuddering, The Friar looked about him, “These dead are dangerous, Severus. ‘Ware.”

Severus shook his head. “Nay. They will let me pass, though they usually would not suffer the living.” He led from the front, and was unaware of what the ranks of ghosts were doing behind him.

Dumbledore’s face was gaunt. Some of the ghosts had come to walk beside him, and the meeting did not appear to please the Headmaster. Colourless and drained of emotion, they would be hard to recognise, but this particular group taken as a whole could never be mistaken. A lovely woman stood, arm linked with a taller man whose features were blurred. The couple looked not much older than the students he had shared breakfast with earlier today - Lily and James. Behind them, an older version of Sirius Black stood, his outline sharp in Deirdre’s memory, his cheeks sunken and eyes devoid of the laughing energy of the youth Dumbledore had watched so closely. Remus Lupin, even more detailed, crossed the crowd, pulling the hand of a young woman, and both ghosts were weeping. Lupin seemed to be entertaining the Headmaster to do something. Ah, dropping his wife’s hand, Lupin held his arms in the unmistakable sign of a child. A hand over his heart and hollowed eyes prompted Dumbledore to nod in understanding, although surely there was nothing he could do. The woman shook her head vigorously at her husband, pulling at his sleeve before looking pointedly past Dumbledore’s shoulder. Lupin had the grace to look abashed, and stepped backwards.

Dumbledore turned, and caught out of the corner of his eye the figure of an elderly wizard, who stepped pointedly out of view with the aid of a staff. His impression was one of infirmity of body and spirit. A shiver shot down his spine, and his vision blurred, causing him to stumble to full halt.
Peeves appeared on Dumbledore’s left, and the Friar on the right. A very solid hand gently turned Dumbledore to face forwards, and the Friar spoke softly, “I think that particular shade wishes to remain anonymous, Headmaster. Indeed, it would be best not to dwell too heavily on any of these shades. They are of futures not yet lived, as you well know.”

A hunched ghost stood at the edge of the group, looking afraid and making every effort to avoid the rest whilst lingering nearby. He was the same age as Lupin and Sirius, and his face was much altered compared to the very young Pettigrew that Dumbledore knew. It was with this strange company at his shoulders that Dumbledore resolved to fight this future. Somewhere, a child - or indeed children, needed their parents.

At length, the group came out of the dark passage into a twilight lit valley, cloaked in mists which seemed to move around them. The company remounted, and rode up to the ridge, at the crest of which they came upon a huge spherical stone. Mists had given birth to even more shapes, and now they were completely surrounded by ranks of an ethereal army, faintly glowing under the star-forsaken sky.

Peeves was watching the company. His eyes glittered, strangely gathering and reflecting the light back twice over. “Hold, a party approaches. Stand fast. They are gruesome.”

Marching rank and file, ghosts formed up in companies about the hill. Their weapons were drawn at the ready, and many were maintaining the beat of the march by beating their swords against shield and breastplate, or by thumping spear butts into the hard earth below. The living company of rangers were uneasy, too thoroughly surrounded on that hilltop. Peeves stood tall, the only one besides Severus who appeared to be unaffected.

An apparition stepped forth, squaring off in front of Severus. It was a tall, solemn man. Upon his head sat a crown, one of hard edges and sharp points, wrought for a warrior-king. He had long hair that gave the impression that it had been black once, and hollow eyes bore down on the company with a force of foreboding that made many look away.

Severus felt a shiver of recognition as he regarded this terrible figure. Perhaps it was the bend of the hooked nose or the deep lines about the brow, but the apparition put him in mind of his father. The ghost before him started; the recognition ran two ways. After taking a moment to contemplate, the ghost tilted his chin in an odd acknowledgment. Severus saw a rent in the ghost’s neck that opened and closed like a mouth. Abruptly, the King held his hand up in a fist, and the entire host fell into eerie silence. The temperature dropped 20 degrees in that moment.

The King found his voice, grinding out with the dust of years of disuse. “Who dares call the Army of the Dead to the Stone of Erech?”

Severus dismounted to treat with the King of the Dead. “The one who was foretold. Though my friends know me as Strider, I am Aragorn, son of Arathorn, and rightful heir of Isildur.” He unsheathed the sword that had been Narsil and held it aloft for all to see, “Behold, the sword that was broken has been reforged!” After two beats he added, “I have come to claim your aid, Oathbreakers!” The crowd hissed its displeasure at this invocation. “Fulfill your sworn pledge. Defend Gondor for she is surely at her direst need.” He had turned about in a tight circle, his paces allowing him to give the entire host of souls a full view of Narsil.

Severus noted the reactions of his own party. Peeves was implacable, the Friar still unnerved and as wary as a cornered kneazle. It was the Headmaster who looked the worst, eyes cast down and vision trained inward. He must not have liked what he saw there, as he was as whitefaced and grieved as the agitated ghosts that surrounded them. The other rangers watched the thousands of ghosts with the wariness of dangerous men.
The King of the Dead demanded, “What would you have of us? We linger well past the hour of our
deaths, embittered and forsaken. If you are who you say you are, then we would go with you,
though it has been longer than the memory of living men since any of us have left these Mountains.”

Severus mounted his horse after sheathing the sword on his back again. “At your fastest pace, if it
please you. Destiny rides at an unrelenting pace and we have little time left to us if we are to save
Middle Earth.”

The Dead and the Living Armies swept down that night to the valley of the Anduin River, and many
a dire song was kindled in the minds of low men who witnessed the host’s passage. From there, they
travelled along the riverbanks, gathering additional support for Gondor. In the Port of Pelargir, the
company came upon the Corsairs of Umbar, readying their attack on Minas Tirith.

Chapter End Notes

* Tolkien, J. R. R. (1954), The Fellowship of the Ring, The Lord of the Rings, Boston:
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

** Fight! Fight! Fight! ** Fair warning, you folks who do not like fight scenes. My descriptions are not excessively gory, and it is a tightly written (read: not too wordy or long) chapter so hopefully it is enjoyable. I had a lot of fun writing it. It is my first fight scene, so don't be shy if you have ideas of how I can do better next time.

Anti-litigation Charm: All of the characters and the Harry Potter World referenced by my work belong to JK Rowling, who is wonderful. ALSO, there are heavy references from Return of the King and a quote from The Fellowship of the Ring, which belong to JRR Tolkien and his family. The sole exceptions are Professors Svartunir and Nott, who are my original creations as well as the plot. No money will be accepted for my work in any event.

Coromandel, thanks so much for bullying through this with me. I think we both feel battle-tested now. Also thanks to my friends in the Fanfic cauldron tent who listened to my kibitzing and debating when I started writing this a month ago (this was my third chapter for my July Nanowrimo) Thanks go to all of you readers. I appreciate the time you take to leave Kudos and comments.

Severus pulled up and commanded a halt at the last rise at the ankles of the White Mountains. From there, they could smell the briny breeze from the ocean, and hear the lapping of the Anduin against the hulls below. Beyond the horizon, the sun had started her crawl across the sky, and it was an unnatural darkness that obscured the land. He felt rather than saw his companions beside him in the gloom. He spoke into the fertile silence. “We must take those ships.” His voice echoed off of the shoulders of the valley behind them, “I need volunteers.”

Peeves’ voice penetrated the night. “You have one here.” A humph followed, and the Friar’s voice followed. “Me, of course.” There was an edge of challenge in his statement, and a ringing resonance was audible as he plucked the edge of his axe for emphasis. Peeves responded with a low mocking laughter, much more in character than solemnity.

The King of the Dead stepped out of the shadows, and his soul light illuminated the faces of the gathered council. “What is your intention?”

Severus stared down toward the river. “For now, a scouting party only. I wish to travel light, to understand what we are up against.”

Dumbledore spoke, “Surely, you know more of this play than any of us. Can there be any doubt of success?”

With a snort, Severus responded. “Things are not completely to script. For example, you are in the wrong place, Gandalf.” He shrugged. “This is a metaphor, as carried about by Deirdre’s mind. We will need to be alive to the cues as she provides them.”

Dumbledore objected, “If that is the case, what has happened to Professor Nott?”
Severus’ expression darkened. “He was wounded. Madam Pomfrey is tending him, but he is still in here somewhere. We must not tarry. The longer we take, the more tired we become.”

Dumbledore dismounted, and leaning on his staff, he walked over to the King of the Dead who was looking back at the wizard with an expression of bemusement. With an embarrassed chuckle, Albus admitted, “I have been here before.”

Silent stares absorbed this declaration, and Severus invited the Headmaster to continue with a wave of the hand. “I doubt that.”

With a look up at the sky, Dumbledore shook his head. “You know it. She tossed me out, sleeping as though she was.” He held up a hand at the student’s quick intake of breath, “Yes, yes. I need to make amends, I am aware of this. But what I saw then was very different.” A gesture indicated the robes he wore, now bleached a pure white. “I was the same, but the sky was clear and blue, and the only construct I saw was a woman standing on a bridge. It was Deirdre clad in white armour. Behind her, above a green field was a white-walled city.”

Severus’ leather vambrace creaked in protest as the young wizard clenched his fist in outrage. Dumbledore was unapologetic, “I offered her no violence, Mr Snape. There is no need to glare at me like that.”

“Headmaster, you went too far.” Severus fingered the hilt of a dagger at his waist as he spoke. Dumbledore’s expression remained unmoved. “It is not your place to take up that fight, Mr Snape. Do not forget yourself.”

Severus growled low in his throat, his knuckles whitening with tension at his belt.

Peeves dismounted and stood in front of the Headmaster, addressing him. “God gave you one face, but you make another.”

Dumbledore stiffened at the words, but did not respond in kind, gaze searching out Severus’ face. This was getting out of hand.

Severus’ lip curled up in derision. “My place was ordained by our hostess, Storm Crow.” Back straight, Severus addressed the King of the Dead, dismissing the misplaced wizard. “Come with me. Let us measure the obstacles before us that we may win this war for Deirdre.” He added, “What you saw, Mithrandir, was Minas Tirith. As we debate, it is besieged by armies of the enemy of men. The odds are stacked against Gondor, who we ride to support. We must make haste, as this spirit army and these ships will turn the tide of the war, and wipe the blackness from the land.” A sardonic barking laugh escaped the student before he expanded, “The white city is where you are supposed to be, Headmaster, leading the defense of the city. I believe we will find Professor Nott there as well.”

The King of the Dead, although he already waited for eons to gain occupation, lost patience. “Verily.” He had called two of his own strong arms to his side. “It is time for action. My men never flapped their lips when there were foes to destroy.” Peeves grumbled his endorsement, “The living can be so tedious.”

A curtailed conference determined that Professor Dumbledore would stay onshore and watch for the signal. A company of Faithless would go with the King, Severus, Peeves, and the Friar. Decision made, Severus moved out. There wasn’t time for rest.

They crept up to the ship that was farthest downstream. In the darkness, voices drifted down from the deck in heavily accented common. Plans for casting off in three candlemarks were discussed and met.
with grumbling. The crew appeared to be eager to move on, and the closest bragged about how little resistance they expected. Already the outposts were overrun, and nothing but distance stood between them and the white walls of Minas Tirith.

Severus was looking for a way up onto the deck to get a better view. As he presented stealthy plans to throw up a rat-line, he became aware of the Friar staring in horror behind him. Peeves had grown bored, and decided to take a stroll up the aft mooring line, his balance as natural as a tightrope walker’s. As he stepped onto the gunnel, he crouched low, and his progress was only marked by a strangled cry, followed by the thump of the body of one of the ships’ denizens. Peeves’ face peeked over the side, and he stage-whispered, “Well, are you coming, Ranger?” A rope ladder unrolled down the hull, providing Severus the way onboard he had been plotting for minutes before.

The King of the Dead shrugged and followed the path already taken by Peeves, his own knights behind him. All had weapons at the ready and moved quietly.

Severus loosened the thin dagger at his belt. Examining it for the first time, he found that it bore a resemblance to the one his great uncle had kept from his service during World War 2. When Severus was a little lad, the old man had taken an interest in him and had unbent as far as to show him how to hold the stiletto. He died of heart failure two years ago. Severus wondered where that knife was now before wrenching his attention back to the moment at hand.

He leapt over the side, his booted feet contacting the deck with a muffled thump. The ghosts moved into position to take the watchman at the nearby helm, which they did efficiently; one ghost stopping the sailor’s mouth, the other skewering his heart with what any could now see was a very real weapon. The lifeless body was lowered to the deck. Unfortunately, the ghosts failed to gain control of the weapon which had been clutched in the sailor’s hand: a heavy sap which hit the deck with a loud thud.

The sound of feet running towards them masked the wheezing that heralded the Fat Friar, the last to arrive. He landed on his feet, and wasted no time in hacking down one of the pirates at the knee. Peeves was perched on the railing with his bow drawn and arrow knocked, picking off enemies as they presented their heads as targets. He was mouthing a count as each pirate fell.

Severus held his knife point forward, thumb resting on the flat. That strategy session he envisioned was no longer possible. One of the pirates homed in on him, a tall brute armed with nothing but his meaty fists. He was slow and his intentions were obvious as he took a swing at Severus’ head. Severus ducked and dodged to the left, which neatly avoided the blow, but also took him out of striking range. Cursing himself, he remained crouched as he turned with his right shoulder, facing his opponent who had already wound up to throw another punch. Better prepared now, Severus slashed across the man’s body, cutting into his exposed wrist, knocking the fist off course. The big man shouted in pain, making a grab for Severus’ head.

A ghostly hand grabbed the corsair’s arms from behind, and the King’s head appeared over his shoulder. “Stick ’em, son!”

Severus would never forget this moment. A ghost that looked like his Dad, a man who preferred to beat him as look at him, was defending him, giving him the chance to take his cut. A heartbeat’s pause was all that Severus could allow himself, as this was no classroom and there was no safety. Professor Nott had showed him this eloquently already. Swiftly, he buried the double edged blade into the base of the man’s throat. A gorge rose in the back of his throat as the initial resistance of his enemy’s flesh abruptly converted to a rush of hot arterial blood. Severus pulled back, avoiding much of the gush, made easy as the ghost dropped his lock on the body. Pulling a long knife from his own belt, the ghost met Severus’ eyes and then showed him several ghosted moves, the spectral blade
parting flesh as he illustrated more suggested targets. The demonstration took only thirty seconds, but
the ghost had an eye on their surroundings and stood, returning to a predatory posture, shoulder to
shoulder with his protege. Three pirates rushed them, and Severus stomped on his nearest enemies’
outer knee with enough force to buckle it, causing him to crumple forwards onto the tip of Severus’
knife, which he pulled hastily free of the man’s gullet. The next one to gain his attention had a knife
of his own with a long curved blade, and he had wound back, aiming at the King’s head while he
was engaged with two other pirates.

Severus grabbed the man’s wrist with his left hand and guided the blow meant for the King to the
side. Reversing his grip, he slid the thin blade under the man’s armpit and ripped upward. That evil
curved blade clattered to the ground, and one of the pirates who was now defending against the
King’s rebuttal kicked it out of range. Severus’ own knife was caught in the dying man’s flesh, but
he didn’t go down. The young wizard, now warrior, clasped his hands together and then slammed
his elbows into his target’s side, knocking the wind out of him and sending him sprawling. He
retrieved his knife from the now unmoving bastard’s corpse.

A quick survey of the ship revealed the deck had cleared itself. One of the ghosts had climbed the
rigging and was waving a ghostly scarf - a signal which must have been pre-arranged. A drum began
to beat in the hill, it’s dry beat ricocheting back from the hill down to the river and echoing back.
The King knelt and ducked his head through the deck. A dry, sinister cackle escaped the ghost as a
piercing shout of terror came from below. They both could hear feet running underdeck away from
them. After but a moment’s pause, the sound of splashes announced the defection of a good part of
the ship’s crew into the Anduin. Severus felt a solid hand whack him on the shoulder. Shaking his
head in suppressed mirth, the King commented. “You need practice, son. It was your first blooding.
Had these men not been caught unaware, you’d have had a great deal more trouble. Never hesitate,
don’t let them get so close. And for Merlin’s sake, don’t let your knife get caught in the bone. You
lose that, the next fucker will get you in turn.”

Severus bristled at the King’s condescending tone. He reached over his shoulder to make contact
with Andúril, and the ghost added. “Leave that in its sheath, young Lord. At least you had the sense
to not try and swing that monstrous blade in tight quarters. Save that one for harvest time on the
fields of Pelennor.”

Things were progressing rather quickly now, and the first ship was already taken before Severus had
even thought to engage in a full scale battle. This was to have been a scouting mission only. He
watched as the King stomped unceremoniously away from him, commanding his knights to follow.
Peeves had taken up station at the stern of the ship and was picking off pirates at a leisurely pace,
targeting those who seemed important or unusually competent. The Friar took advantage of his
height, felling legs like timber, each tallied aloud.

A gathering light onshore drew Severus’ attention. Ranks of the undead army ate the distance, and
oozed up the mooring lines, scouring over the twelve remaining ships like a plague of locusts. Men
jumped and ran from the uncanny aggressors, and many did not get away as the men of the
Dunharrow had reawakened to their thirst for blood and battle. They took no quarter. There were no
survivors.

The battle of Pelargir was over in less than an hour. It took longer to toss the dead overboard and
dispatch the last few survivors than it had for the skirmish to become a route. After that bit of
housekeeping, Severus took possession of the fleet and divided his living Dunedain amongst the
vessels, with dead hosts to assist. His rangers had bourne his standard all the way from Elvendale,
and Severus bid them install it on the largest ship, leaving it furled. It must stay hidden, awaiting the
right moment.
As a wind rose from the West at their backs, Severus directed the Armada of the Dead to break berth for Minas Tirith under the black sails of Umbar. After rest and consideration, he engaged the rangers on his flagship for sparring practice. With so many experienced fighters on board, he had every reason to take advantage of the time as pre-written destiny drew nearer.
Whit started awake, his consciousness abruptly returned to him. It was disorienting to find his body upright and moving forward. Somehow, he was astride a horse. Immediately the part of his brain that was highly interested in his survival supplied that he was still inside Deirdre’s mind, attempting to help her rid herself of the last of the dire curse that had taken root in her bones. He had been shot. Looking down, he found he was wearing a sky blue tunic embroidered with white silk feathers about the edge instead of the green of before, and his curiosity was piqued. His fingers probed his left shoulder, and came away clean. The flesh there was tender, but decidedly whole.

He chuckled in wonder when he held out his fingers for examination, finding a pair of the shiniest vambraces he had ever seen strapped to his forearms, reflective as mirrors. Other things had changed as well. Black hair peeked out from under a helm that gleamed as bright as the vambraces, and his eyes which were usually mossy green were now clear grey. His face was otherwise unaltered. He was clean shaven, and he was dressed in full plate with a repeated pattern of wings over shoulder and hip. He had been recast again as a leader of men in this strange production.

The fields were quiet, and he was at the head of a company of silent men. All watched with tears standing in their eyes as a procession of men, bearing up the broken body of a crowned king to the white city above. Looking about, he took a chance and murmured to the knight next to him, “Who passes here? My eyes are stung by the foul smoke and I cannot depend upon their report.”

Quietly, his companion replied, “Prince, it is King Théoden of the Rohirrim. He was felled by the great beast that bore the Witch King of Angmar.” Whit was startled to see tears escape the knight’s eyes and to hear his voice clot with anguish as he further reported, “And follows the bier of the Lady Éowyn, the King’s only niece. No one knew that she travelled with us, for he had forbidden it. She would not stand by in the hour of need, and was with her uncle as he was struck down. She slew the black beast and toppled the Lord of the Nazgûl from his mount. As its breath befouled the air above, its blood blighted the earth, and alas, poisoned the fair Éowyn.”

The man sighed in sorrow before he continued, “She met the fell fiend’s challenge bravely in defense of her Lord, sickened as she was. The prophecy once declared that no man might strike down the Dark Hand and he taunted her with this, intending to run her through after wounding her resolve. To
that, she removed her helm and let her long, wild hair run loose. That little halfling, stout fellow that is being carried there, reported it all to us. She said, 'No living man am I! You look upon a woman! Éowyn I am, Éomund's daughter. Begone if you be not deathless! For living or dark undead, I will smite you, if you touch him!' That drove the villain into a rage and as he leaned forward to attack her, though woman she be, that little one stabbed him in the calf from behind, sending the wraith staggering. Éowyn struck a mighty blow, and though no neck held up the foul iron crown, she yet slew him just the same.”

Whit pondered the now passing form of the felled shield maiden. “What does she there? Surely her armour was not pierced, no bruises mar her face?”

His companion answered, “We know not, Imrahil. She lay lifeless next to her uncle, and all weep at her loss. Her brother Éomer ran mad with grief, and is leading those who could still ride off to drive off the rest of the orcs. The battlesong of the Rohirrim has changed to the refrain of Death.”

Whit raised his head, marking the noise from furlongs far before returning his attention to the procession. “We too will bring death down on our enemies, but I would look on this Lady.” He adjusted his grip on his reins and approached the second group, bearing the maiden. His eyes could not mistake the aspect of Deirdre Ward, her wild curls fanned out behind her. Her armour was in place, and her hands had been crossed over her chest.

“Hold a moment, friends!” Whit dropped his reins, and using the height of the horse he braced and leaned close. A touch confirmed to him that her magic was still there, and as he did that, he noticed light reflecting from his wrist guard. Ah, a way to tell the Muggles without seeming uncanny. “Fair Éowyn is not slain, but sorely injured! Take her to the halls of healing. See, her breath, though it be weak, casts a fog on my vambrace! She yet lives.”

A murmur of amazement and relief went up amongst the company, and the men bearing the lady brightened, strength seeming to return to their limbs as they bore her more quickly onward, bypassing her late uncle on the road in their joyous haste.

Nott-Imrahil turned his steed to face the company, and so doing he was among the first to see the black sailed ships moving in from the west. They were thirteen in number, and large. A shout of dismay arose as others saw them too. One of his men called out the proper identification, “Umbar. Pirates from the sea. Has the Dark Hand stretched all of the way to the Western shores? Will no one come to Minas Tirith’s aid?”

Whit saw movement in the topsail of the first and largest ship, and felt his magic swell with recognition. “Stay your grief, men. What is this deception?” For as he spoke, a huge black standard of black with a white tree unfurled, gleaming such that all could see it for leagues.

The company muttered in confusion, as this made little sense to them, but Éomer approached swiftly on horseback. One of the knights had fetched him with news of his sister, but at the sight of the ships he stood in his saddle, eyes round with astonished joy. The new King of the Rohirrim laughed, “Could it be? Is this relief that sails to Gondor’s aid?” and all around looked to him for explanation.

Éomer glanced at Whit and said with excitement, “Cousin, the seven stars and the crown above the White Tree of Gondor. That is the standard of the heir of Isildur, on my honour! It has not been seen in these lands for forty generations.” He cleared his throat, and men looked to him for direction. “Regroup and fall back to the walls. I need two sharp-eyed volunteers to scout the newcomers. If mine eyes do not mislead me, the King has returned at last!”

Men hurried to do as he bid, but Whit motioned his small company to follow back to the spot where Theoden and Eowyn were hewn down and the Witch King met his last. He bid his volunteers to stay
back and to hold his horse. Crossing the remaining twenty yards on foot, he leaned over and willed a torch to appear for him to carry in his hand. The spot wreaked of dark magic, and he recognised it as one of the remaining spots of Deirdre’s curse. Willing a pot of oil into his pouch, he walked the perimeter and doused the ground and the fallen carcasses. He muttered a cleansing incantation, warding the magic in so it could not escape. A pressure of will changed the mundane flame into white-hot soul-fire, which Whit used to burn out the blight. A shadow within the circle of fire wailed its last under its purifying force, winking out of Deirdre’s mental landscape forever. Tossing the remainder of the torch into the circle, he returned to his men and remounted.

“What passes now?” The horses were nervous, and the men doubly so, their faces bloodless and pinched with worry. Whit took a moment to appreciate their bravery. “What has turned your hearts to ice and tongues to lead? Speak!”

His lieutenant turned to him, and in a faltering voice he reported. “Ghosts, sir. An army of ghosts has swarmed from the ships and are eating through the enemy host like unholy locusts.” The man’s horse danced in place, shaking its head in an effort to get his head free to run.

Whit turned his horse about to better observe the eerie host oozing over the fields, a sprawling conglomeration of thousands of condemned ghosts. There seemed to be three main groups, all lead by men of flesh and blood. A party split off from the main body, attracted by the cleansing bonfire. As they approached, Whit saw four mounted men. The easiest to discern was an elderly man in a white wizard’s robe, mounted on a proud white stallion who was outpacing the other horses easily. There was nothing more than a saddle, and Whit was relieved to see a familiar twinkle.

“Mithrandir! Mithrandir! Gandalf has come!” The call was repeated by many voices, taken up as a chant of hope.

Laughing at the amazement on the men’s faces, Dumbledore stood in the saddle, twisting to look behind him. “I am a mere outrider, for behind me rides Aragorn, Elessar, named Elfstone. As rightful heir of Isildur, he has called on the Faithless to fulfill their oaths.” He turned around and murmured to his horse, “Shadowfax, get me closer to yon Prince. I wish to see his face.” With a nicker, the white stallion stepped over to Whit’s side. Whit’s face was written over with astonishment as he found himself knee to knee with Dumbledore. The white rider bent over to whisper, “I have much to relate once all of this is over. But these shades are not all of this world. School your expression, as I do not wish to draw Mr Snape’s attention to any familiar faces, lest all fall apart.” The old wizard looked to the skies, as it occurred to him that Deirdre must be all around them as they were inside her mind.

Whit stood in his stirrups, his vision not yet good enough to see faces. In the centre rode a tall figure, shoulders square, his leathers sweat stained and showing signs of recent battle. To his right, a fair man rode with his bow unslung, an arrow notched at the ready. His horse’s reins were tied loosely out of the way of the steed’s hooves. The third figure was squat, fat, and bearded. This one held to his reins tightly, cradling a large battleaxe in his right arm. These last two did not seem quite solid, their flesh as translucent as the ghosts that marched beside them - although the horses were acting as though they were indeed carrying real men.

Whit’s lieutenant moved forward to greet the party with a challenge. “Halt and identify yourselves for the Prince of Dol Amroth!”

A loud scoffing voice answered from the shortest of the crew, “Know you not, Strider, Aragorn, sixteenth Chieftain of the Dunedain? He who has come to save you all?”

Whit’s response died in his throat as the middle figure finally came into focus. The man looked older in this aspect. Perhaps it was the tarnished mail that was donned over the black leathers, or the confidence with which he sat his horse. Severus Snape looked the part of a King. Belatedly, the
Professor recognised the other two as the ghosts of the castle, although their appearance was much altered. Coming unstuck once more, Whit’s voice rang out, “Hail, Elessar, Gondor welcomes you!” Dumbledore’s low chuckling reached his ears. Smothering his annoyance, Whit urged his horse forwards to meet Severus.

The look of mingled relief and gladness that brightened Severus’ face made Whit wonder exactly what he had already been through. He reached over and they grasped forearms in a warrior’s greeting. Severus murmured, “You had Madam Pomfrey in a right state, sir. Do you not feel your shoulder?”

Whit let go of Severus’ arm and rolled his shoulders experimentally. “The left is sore.” Understanding dawned on Whit’s face as he said faintly, “That arrow. It manifested, then?”

Nodding, Severus added, “And the Headmaster was scary too, all over shaking and sweating.” He looked beseechingly at Whit. “I would have heeded your wishes, but you two needed the help.” He spread his hands out, indicating his two companions, “I have brought reinforcements.”

Whit’s features had darkened at the implications. What manner of mischief had interfered in what should have been a routine curse breaking? “Quite. I’ll delay thanks until after this is over.”

The taller of the ghosts, whom Whit still hadn’t yet identified, called their attention to an approaching host of spectres. The voice pinned him as Peeves, Whit would have never known him otherwise. “Death has not been kind to this host, they rot and fall apart at the soul-seams.” He seemed to be highly disapproving of the group. “They fast approach, desiring release. Best you go out to meet them on foot young Lord, lest those Bird-brained knights lose their collective nerve.”

The stout figure resolved himself to the be the Fat Friar, and interjected at this point. “Is it wise to discharge them so soon? They have been very effective.”

Looking thoughtful, Severus dismounted and handed his reins to Nott-Imrahil. Striding with confidence, he walked out to meet the ghosts. The King of the Dead came forwards, and Whit was struck by the resemblance of the man to Snape himself. Dumbledore had ridden over to join them, and his amusement had been wiped off his face, now held carefully blank. Whit murmured to him, “This mental scape is very strange. I suppose that the ghost there resembles Mr Snape because he’s related in the story?”

Peeve’s voice responded, an evil leer entering it. “Only if Dumbledore’s got a forebear too! Look now into the eyes of your own death, old man, if you dare! You appear much diminished, quite small, really.”

Dumbledore’s expression remained impassive, a quick glance at that shade was the only acknowledgement that he had heard Peeves. The Poltergeist broke into a cackle, leaping out of the saddle to walk behind Severus. The Friar spat, “Recreant and most degenerate traitor! Look not, Headmaster, for surely little good will come of it.”

Whit felt the pit of his stomach drop out from under him and he called out, “Peeves, Don’t!”

The apparition spun around with an open handed gesture, “I shall not enlighten the lad, oh great Prince of Swans. He needs his courage yet still, for the saga is not yet done!” He turned back and stood at Severus’ right shoulder, falling silent as a witness. He was not afraid of the dead, even thousands of agonised, militant dead. They were his brothers, after all.

Whit watched, seeing the older version of Severus bow to the younger, noting a huge rip in the man’s neck, undoubtedly the man’s cause of death. The tableau was eerie, and he was glad that it
had not occurred to the younger wizard that he may be looking at his own death. Now, that was a strange notion, “Why... would Miss Ward have these apparitions in her mind?” His eyes searched the crowd of spirits, noting several others who appeared sharper and better defined than the rest of their fellows. He thought that one at least looked somewhat familiar.

Dumbledore placed a cautionary hand on Whit’s arm. “Have a care with the words you speak. She can hear us even if she is not with us, and I do not care to speculate in either student’s hearing. We will have much to consider and discuss after this is over.” At Whit’s searching look, he added, “Peace. Let it be for now.”

Whit found this disturbing, but was willing to accept his word, for now.

The sonorous voice of the King of the Dead cut across the ambient noise of the living, and all stilled to listen. His tone was one of pride, and disdain seemed to ooze from every cadence.

“We the Oathbreakers, the cursed men of Dunharrow have come at your call and vanquished the enemies of Gondor.” The ghost took its spear and broke it across his knee with a vicious cry, tossing the ghostly weapon to the ground in front of Aragorn née Snape. “We have done all asked of us.”

The ghost lifted his eyes to meet those of Dumbledore-Mithrandir, “We served you in our deaths where service was given but begrudgingly in life. Our debt is paid tenfold.” The ghost’s resonant voice lifted, such that Whit fancied that even the newly dead might be able to hear, to the top of the tower of Minas Tirith. “WE HAVE CLEANSED THE DARK VERMIN FROM THIS LAND. SHE MAY HEAL IN TIME. RELEASE US. LET OUR SHADES GO ONWARD, AND THINK OF US NO MORE.”

The old ghost of the King looked up at the sky as he cried out the last, and Whit felt as though he was saying a final farewell to one held dear. It was a plea for mutual release. Whit turned his gaze to the ghost of Dumbledore, and thought that he might be weeping, his head bowed before him.

“What...?” Albus’ hand on his arm squeezed him to silence, and Whit met the grave and foreboding look on the Headmaster’s face. The words died on his lips, but his heart shuddered in his chest, wrestling with the implications.

Severus stepped forward, heart and mind full of emotion, its intensity bringing the prick of tears to his eyes. The King of the Dead turned to him, and all anger seemed to leech out of the tortured man’s face. He knelt down on one knee before Severus and looked up at him. His voice now was softer, its cadences meant only for Severus to hear. “Make not the same mistakes as I did, young King. Choose your Lord and Master with greater thought and wisdom. All that is gold does not glitter, and not all those who wander are truly lost. Forgive yourself.” The King looked towards the white city of Minas Tirith. “Release me and go. Your future waits. May it be better than mine.”

Severus had a hundred questions and none. How did this ghost know anything of him? A quick mental search told him that this part was not written out in the book. The weight of the dead host’s desperate need for release overwhelmed any urge that he may have had to make further demands. “I thank you all, and release you from your oaths. You have discharged them fully. Go with the blessings of the heir of Isildur and the eternal thanks of a grateful Gondor.”

A breeze felt only by the spirits before him blew, and their souls seemed to brighten and heal before Severus’ eyes, almost solidifying before blowing away in glittering motes to the sky above. The face of the old King lost its lines of care, and seemed to glow with peace. As he dissipated into the winds,
he seemed to silently mouth a name. Severus was distracted from his vigil by Peeves pulling at his arm at that exact moment, and the apparition was gone when he looked back.

Chapter End Notes

* The Return of the King, J.R.R. Tolkien.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Anti-litigation Charm: All of the characters and the Harry Potter World referenced by my work belong to JK Rowling, who is wonderful. ALSO, there are heavy references and quotes from The Return of the King, which belongs to J.R.R. Tolkien and his family. Those who don't like the cross-over aspect of this plot line, please rejoin us in Chapter 27. (Next one!) The sole exceptions are Professors Svartunir and Nott, who are my creations as well as the plot. No money will be accepted for my work in any event.

Coromandel, thanks for being a great cheerleader and beta. Thanks also to readers like you! I hope you continue to enjoy this, and appreciate the time taken for kudos and comments. Cheers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Whit watched with his little armed company of “Bird-brained Knights” as Peeves had hailed them, admiring the effect of souls blowing away like thousands of shimmering dandelion seeds, floating off in the winds to the west. Dumbledore’s voice spoke in his ear. “I tire of this, Nott. We need to finish this. Know you where to find the girl so we can complete this elaborate quest? I have not lifted a sword or cast a single spell, yet I am frighteningly weary and I dare not sleep in this accursed nightmare.”

Whit nodded in understanding. “After we collect young Aragorn, we will return to the city. The Lady Éowyn was struck down by the black breath of a most foul beast even as she vanquished the Witch King of Angmar. I came upon her not too long ago, and the host thought her dead.” He met the white wizard’s ice blue eyes, placing emphasis on the woman’s name, conveying more than said aloud.

Éomer, who also had been watching nearby spoke, “My sister! The news, it is true? She yet lives?” The horse-lord’s face shed its cares uncovering that of a hapless youth, his voice sweet with hope and wonder.

Nott-Imrahil answered the man, “Yes, and glad of it was I to see her. She was being carried off to the Halls of Healing not an hour past.”

Dumbledore interjected, “Her countenance was one of death, but was she injured?”

Whit shook his head, “There was no wound, no rent in her armour. She lay still, her breaths shallow, as though her spirit alone was hurt. I doubt your healers will have much to offer her.” He held up a hand and pointed to the returning form of Aragorn. “If you would hurry there, I beg you report to the city’s Warden. Prepare him for this one’s coming. I would not see his presence met with resentment or confusion.”

At that, Imrahil’s Lieutenant broke in, “If King he is, then he has the hands of the healer, so the prophesy foretells. Send him up to Faramir and Éowyn. I wager even doomed Denethor would have acknowledged him should he heal his remaining son.”

Severus remounted, rejoining the group with an inward, contemplative expression. Tone flat, he
looked at his companions and said, “Let us go forth, for time passes swiftly. The city burns with a fever for which we have the cure.” He patted his belt pouch. “I have done some legwork on the way in that will save us grief.” A self-satisfied smile flashed across his face. “Glad she chose a story that I know so well.”

Dumbledore had been watching his student carefully as he returned and spoke his intention. “I believe it was suggested that we ride ahead of you, Severus. Or should I call you King Elessar?”

A sardonic half bow showed what Severus thought of that. “Yet to be acknowledged or coronated. What title do you prefer, Gandalf the White, Mithrandir, or the Storm Crow? You are the bringer of tidings good and bad in more than one realm, so the last might be most appropriate.” At Dumbledore’s snort, he amended, “I myself would still be the ranger, Strider, a little longer.” He relaxed into the saddle and turned his horse, waiting for Dumbledore to lead.

Nott’s lieutenant commented to Severus as the company arranged itself three horses abreast, “If you are to claim your place, good sir, you will need to prove yourself to the people and gain access to the tower. Denethor bid it locked up before he walked into his own pyre. Faramir, the last Warden of Minas Tirith, lies direly wounded, but for the loyalty of his men he too would have been taken in the flames of his father’s madness.”

It was a short ride to the gate, and Shadowfax once again outstepped the ordinary mounts, allowing Dumbledore to arrive first and announce the identity of the approaching host and its leader. After a brief exchange, the guard stepped aside, allowing passage, the bodies and wreckage from earlier that day already shifted and sorted. The five rode through the streets on horseback, and at length they came to the third tier, home of the Halls of Healing.

There they found Éowyn-Deirdre laid out as though asleep still clad in her mail, an elderly physician tending her. Without invitation, her attendant started to chatter on at length on his findings. To sum up, she had injury to her left arm, it seemed broken under a blow to her shield at some point in the battle. The interesting part was her stubborn delirium from which she would not wake.

Severus handed leaves to the healer, saying, “Steep these in hot water and allow the steam to fall over her face.” He took up the bandages, and was interrupted by the old man saying, “These are but poor weeds, not fit for this purpose! She does not have a mere headache, good sir.”

Annoyance dripping from his every word, Severus turned hard black eyes on the wizened man. “Remember you not your lore? What says it of kingsfoil?”

Reciting from memory,

“* When the Black Breath blows

* and death's shadow grows

* and all lights pass,

* come athelas! Come athelas!

* Life to the dying

* In the king's hand lying!”

The man went on, ”But those are old wives tales and we have never found much of use from this
Severus frowned at his “pupil.” Young in years he might be, in this much he was certain - he had read the script and this player knew not the lines. He gathered a scathing retort, the fire of debate kindling in his chest, acid on his tongue.

Perhaps it was instinct that moved Whit to intercede as that storm threatened to spill over onto the witless, “Good sir, we thank you for your counsel. Since you have yet to find anything better, can you not see your way to help? If these leaves are as weak as you say, then surely little harm will come of their use.”

Grumbling all of the way, the old man conscripted an apprentice to follow Severus’ instructions. The harassed looking girl positioned a brazier with a fitted kettle over it with an eye to the dominant draft of the room. Once it started to steam, Severus removed his gauntlet and plucked open a pouch at his belt. There, he brought out a handful of wilted looking leaves, silver-backed and sharp tipped. Bruising them first, he dropped them into the kettle and then sat by Éowyn's side with an expression of patient resignation. His green stained hand reached out to press the lady’s hand in his own.

Dumbledore and Nott stood waiting, neither willing to break the silence of the Hall. Therefore, when the old Magister turned, huffing in derision, it seemed to echo all of the way up to the tower. Éomer entered, his black head revealed, green eyes clouded with concern. Severus' gaze did not mark the entrance of the Lady’s brother.

Nott’s voice choked out, “Ah, Éomer. There you are.” He exchanged a startled look with Dumbledore. What would James Potter be doing here in Deirdre’s memory of all places? A scar on his forehead must be from the book, surely. This was all getting stranger to him by the moment. Cautiously, Nott extended his senses, and found that this was a shade, not another sojourner into Deirdre’s crowded mind. For his own sanity he needed to move this along.

Severus murmured something in response to Éomer, concentrating fully on Deirdre. He was startled by Nott’s breath on his ear. In a conversational tone his Professor said, “I do not wish to disturb you, but I thought that before you looked up, you should know it appears that James Potter is cast as Deirdre’s brother in this tale. He does not seem to recognise you and he is not actually here as we are.”

Deirdre, having a sense of dramatic timing, chose that moment to wake and Severus’ response was delayed by her swift intake of breath. Her eyelids fluttered open and she locked gazes with Severus at once. He watched in awe as she seemed to bloom under the sun of his attention, a smile playing about her eyes. A weak pressure from her fingers under his hand brought them both back to the present, and pain flooded her eyes. “Ugh, I hurt.”

A low chuckle emanated from Professor Nott. “Well, you have had a rather busy day. I am not certain, but given we are still here, there appears to be more that must be done.”

Coughing weakly, Deirdre broke her gaze from Severus’ and glanced about. Éomer was immediately at her side. “Sister! Oh, sister. You are returned to us!” The man moved into Deirdre’s space and gathered her up into a hug, eliciting a yelp of pain from her as he jarred her broken arm. Deirdre’s look of distress over the man’s shoulder was enough to make Severus stand to his full height. Clearing his throat, he suggested to the man that it would be wise to let the healers work with her, as she only just had thrown off the curse of the Black breath. The man’s back was turned to him, and Severus could make out a symbol on his cloak, a large triangle with a circle inside it, and a vertical line. It was out of place in this story, and the back of his mind itched, trying to remember where he had seen it before.
Gently releasing Éowyn, Éomer turned to thank Aragorn earnestly for saving his sister, clasping him as tightly as he had Deirdre. Stiff postured, Severus stepped back out of the man’s embrace, noticing the differences between this man and James. He seemed older and younger. There were wrinkles around his eyes prematurely, and he was leaner than James, whipcord over bone. As he acknowledged the man’s thanks, he saw the delight in Éomer’s eyes, the openness, and Severus decided that this was what gave the impression of youth over that harder exterior. The man was covered in fine scars over his hands, the left worse than the right. There was a scar over his right temple, a jagged looking thing that disappeared into his hairline.

Dumbledore broke in then, “Indeed, good sir. Denethor passed into the halls of the Dead, and his son remains ill in these same halls. It is time to renew Minas Tirith’s magic and start the next great age, the age of Men. Éowyn, your assistance is required.”

Pale, the shieldmaiden nodded bravely. “Of course, Gandalf.” She moved to swing her booted feet over the side of the bed, and the blood drained from her face. She clutched her arm in obvious pain. Distressed, she whispered, “I don’t think I can go far.”

Casting a wary glance at the Headmaster, Severus knelt once more to her side. “Allow me.” Gingerly, supporting her wrist with her good hand, she extended her left arm for him to examine. His fingers ran lightly over the broken forearm. They did not have Skele-Gro, but since this was a dream, Severus felt that most likely he would be able to do what was needed to move the story on. Calling on the power of the narrative, he pulled and twisted her radius and ulna back into proper alignment. Deirdre bit her lip, face pallid, and he checked in with her before allowing his magic to extend outwards to coax the bones to form the necessary callous of healing, and to reduce swelling in the flesh.

“As a splint and sling, please.” The apprentice was a good one, and had anticipated his need. It was the work of moments with some help from Éomer to get her splinted and in the sling. Severus-Aragorn murmured to Deirdre-Éowyn, “The story grants me the hands of the healer. Hopefully that splint will be off tomorrow, but for now it serves as a reminder not to use it, alright?” The shield-maiden looked markedly better now, coming to her feet.

Éomer, perhaps driven by the power of the narrative as well, spoke loudly. “Gandalf, surely this is Gondor’s rightful King. He has swept from the west, commanding and redeeming the Oathbreakers, and he has demonstrated his power to heal. Long has Minas Tirith waited for you, sire.” Severus was still kneeling and was struck with the surreal nature of the situation.

“So it seems, and if the King of the Rohirrim were to support Aragorn in his claim, we would obtain access to the tower.” Dumbledore stroked his white beard, his wizened face considering Not-James as he spoke.

Éomer turned that blinding smile back onto Severus, and offered him a hand up. Throwing a look of momentary panic Deirdre’s way, Severus grasped his wrist, and the two Kings of Men came to stand, brothers by blood shed on the battlefield. A simple “Thank you,” was all that Severus was able to muster, as he shifted position to place a supportive hand at Éowyn’s good elbow.

Together they gained access to the great hall, the last circled tier of the city surrounding the great tower. There, displayed for all to see were the spoils of battle. Dumbledore lingered behind the little group, considering a table that had caught his eye. Arranged in a group on the table was a crumpled cup, a broken locket, a cracked and blackened ring, a singed diadem, and a journal with a great hole through it. The severed head of an evil looking serpent sat amongst these mangled treasures, its clouded eyes sightless in death. A cough behind him announced the presence of Éomer as he walked
to stand at Dumbledore’s left hand. “Gruesome collection, isn’t it?” A trickle of blood sprung from the scar on his forehead, opaque and red, and the man lifted a hand, wincing. Dumbledore pulled out a square of linen and offered it to Éomer. “You are injured?”

Taking the cloth, Not-James/Éomer pressed it to his forehead. “I was wounded when I was a baby. My Mother and Father died protecting me. My scar hurts off and on, and sometimes it bleeds.” He shrugged before forging onwards with his mission. “You are needed in the courtyard. Imrahil was calling for you just now, and sent me back to find you.”

The bright white stone of the courtyard contrasted well with what was left of the green grass surrounding the central fountain. The fountain was running sluggishly, and the waters were dark with what looked like ash. Moisture dripped from the branches of the dead tree back to the pool below.

Whit was in close conference with the two students, and was shaking his head adamantly at Severus. “No, Deirdre must do this last step. I will lend my strength to you Deirdre, but if I try to weed out the last of this evil, I risk leaving a root that may continue to poison your magic.” He gestured to the tree, stripped of bark by time and wholly leafless. “That is a metaphor if I have ever seen one.” He flashed an even white smile at the pair. “I have every confidence in you, Deirdre.” He lifted his hands to indicate the fantastic construct that her mind had thrown up to help them understand and deal with the problem. “I can’t wait to see what you can do, but until this is done, you will continue to be in pain.” His eyes had bled back from blue to mossy green, as his part in the script was largely done.

Dumbledore had arrived halfway through and looked at the sun setting. “Time is moving on. Let’s get on with this, shall we?”

Éowyn looked small and unsure in that moment, as though something was holding her back. Aragorn reached and captured her hand in his, “You are not alone, Deirdre. We have come this far, we will not let you fail.” As a Lord leads his Lady into the lines of a dance, Severus drew her over to the fountain. Professor Nott followed at her left side, and both men stepped with her into the murky waters of the fountain. Severus felt Deirdre’s fingers slip away from his as they neared the tree, and she alone stepped up to its trunk. Droplets of water fell onto their heads as Severus felt Professor Nott reach out and restrain him from stepping any further forwards.

Deirdre placed a hand on the tree and her eyes closed, sinking into a meditative communion between herself and her magic. Under her hand, the tree withered as though she had cast *Reducio*. Her hand stayed on it as it sunk beneath the waters. Whit stepped up behind he as he saw her knees wobble, and wisely was able to catch her as she fainted dead away with the effort.

Severus came up, eyes anxious. “What now, Professor?”

Whit had gathered up the witch into his arms, heavy armour be damned, but was able to wheeze out, “Her hand, Severus. She has something in her hand.”

Severus was able to pry apart the girl’s fingers as her grasp was loose, and found in her palm a single nut which had germinated in the silt. A single slender shoot was evident, tipped with a colorless folded leaf. It must have been hidden in the tree’s roots as the twig that was left floated on the pond’s surface. Holding the nut gingerly, he stepped forward. The waters of the pool were shallow here, and he could see the rich dark earth gaping where the tree had been. The surface bubbled and glowed, the water around the new spring transmuting from filth to purity. Not willing to risk a slip, Severus knelt in the water, and though it came up to his waist, he was able to mound the earth up and set the nut with its shoot peeking above the water.

Contact with the glowing water was intoxicating, and the nagging ache in Severus’ mouth, forgotten
until now struck him with its absence. As he rolled back onto his feet, he noticed ripples in the water. A detached part of his mind bid him to stand back, do it NOW, and he obeyed, towing Professor Nott with him. As they moved to sit on the edge of the fountain their progress faltered, distracted by tremors under their feet. Together, they watched with amazement as a slender white sapling sprung up with vigour, branches reaching upwards toward the sky, leaves unfurling in the gentle breeze. It was far from the mature tree that had once stood in its place, but it looked healthy once more. The waters of the fountain around it were clearing rapidly, and the crowd that had gathered to watch cheered with joy. “The King has returned at last! Long live the King!”

Éomer approached, his forehead now bandaged, and murmured to the little company. “I think you are not yet ready for this reception, Severus Snape, hero of Gondor and of Middle Earth.” His accent had shifted, and he was no longer wearing the armour of Rohirrim, but a pair of red trainers and jeans with a ill-fitting jumper overtop. Snape had no idea of who Not-James really was, but the warm glow of the fountain had stayed with him, and he found it very difficult to care. He smiled at Not-James/Not-Éomer and nodded. “Lead on, we follow.” Éomer reached out for Éowyn-Deirdre and took her from Professor Nott. “I will watch over her. Go.” The man’s voice was firm and brooked no argument.

Dumbledore inclined his head and grasped Nott’s elbow, towing him towards an exit from the courtyard that appeared to be a portal, opened for their specific use.

Severus lingered, the Fat Friar and Peeves flanking him on either side. He noticed that Deirdre had returned to her ill-fitting school uniform and appeared to be asleep. Again. He dared to ask, “When will she wake?” Even through the euphoria, he had questions. “Will she be well?”

The man responded with an amused smile. “Well now, Severus Snape worried for our welfare. It is truly a day of miracles.” Snape opened his mouth, ready to argue, but the heartbroken expression in Not-James’ oddly familiar green eyes spoke volumes. Who was this man to Deirdre? Who was she, for that matter? It was as though Deirdre had drenched yet another pitcher of freezing water over him and that warm, happy feeling from the waters drained away in an instant.

“She cannot pick up the threads of her old life.” Not-James broke eye contact and continued, “How do you go on, when in your heart you understand that you can never go back? Life will never be the same. There are wounds that even time cannot mend. Some hurts go too deep, that have taken hold.”

A lump had formed in Severus’ throat, and memories of his own homelife encroached on his thoughts, unwelcome as always. He knew something about this, he understood it and felt it down to the ground. “Back is never the way forwards, sir. The homes of our innocence will not hold up to the force of stark and indifferent reality. We must find a way to build a better life for ourselves. Meaning is where we make it. No, the hurt will never completely disappear. It does not follow that life must mean constant pain. But she must want to live, and move forward through the pain.” He felt an odd echo of that earlier conversation with the King of the Dead.

Dragging his attention back to the Guardian of Deirdre’s mind, Severus searched his recent memory, adding, “If nothing else, someone needs to keep my hair from looking too shaggy and to argue with me about politics before I’ve had a full cup of tea.” He chuckled, “She can be quite relentless, you know. Persistent.”

Not-James relaxed, a lopsided smile returning to his face, “Peace. She sleeps but naturally, this is a healing sleep. Be sure to feed her lots of books when she wakes, it will keep her out of trouble. I will try to help where I can from here, look out for her out there?”

Severus Snape had the immediate impression that whoever this was, he must be a Gryffindor to
speak so, and a dunderheaded one at that. Didn’t he know that Deirdre, in her short period of wakefulness, had already turned everything on its ear? He needed protection from her, not the other way around. Still, he had helped them, and Not-James was an extension of Deirdre’s mind, so he unbent as far as to make this promise. “She is in the best of hands, and will have more books than she knows what to do with. She won’t be alone.”

Behind them, the white tree shivered, its leaves rustling with treeish mirth. He had a brief impression of warmth, a caress of magic to magic before he felt the floor pull away.

The scene bleached to white nothingness around him, and he heard Not-James respond from a rapidly receding distance, as though Severus was on a train leaving Deirdre’s mind and her Guardian waited behind at the station, “Careful what you promise, Severus Snape. She will hold you to the letter!”

Chapter End Notes

* The Return of the King, J.R.R. Tolkien.
** Frodo, The Return of the King, J.R.R. Tolkien.
Chapter Twenty-Seven.

Chapter Notes

Anti-litigation Charm: All of the characters and the Harry Potter World referenced by my work belong to JK Rowling, who is wonderful. ALSO, minor references to The Return of the King, which belongs to J.R.R. Tolkien and his family. The sole exceptions are Professors Svartunir and Nott, who are my creations as well as the plot. No money will be accepted for my work in any event.

Coromandel is a fantastic beta folks, no doubt about it! Thanks also to readers like you! I hope you continue to enjoy this, and appreciate the time taken for kudos and comments.

Updated 10/30/17: Trick or Treat special. I commissioned a work by Hoxadrine of Nott in the Hospital wing. They did a great job. If you are interested in seeing more of their stuff, check out: https://hoxadrine-art.tumblr.com/

Poppy Pomfrey was hopping with anxiety. She was alone with three ghosts and four unconscious people, only two of whom were meant to be patients. They had started around eleven, and it being a Friday, a steady stream of students with minor complaints trailed in over the midday break. Earlier, she needed to levitate the Headmaster into a bed and wrapped him in blankets, as he seemed to be in shock. Severus was still kneeling on the ground, situated between Deirdre and Dumbledore. He looked alright, face absent of expression or pain, and his breathing seemed to be the only indicator that anything was happening at all.

The other side of the bed was a different matter. She had to wrestle Professor Nott out of his suit, and presently he was laid out on a cot next to Deirdre’s. He was stripped to the waist now, and Poppy sent his bloodied garments off with the House Elves for cleaning and mending as she hadn’t been gentle. Before she managed to expand the privacy barrier, a pair of fourth year students from Gryffindor were treated to quite an eyeful of their Defense Professor. The girls openly ogled, and Pomfrey heard one exclaim, “Well, Nott’s not so old after all.” Her friend shook her head vigorously. “Built like a brick house, isn’t he?”
Pomfrey performed a Gemino on the original privacy screen, and the new arrangement obscured the view. The students groaned out their disappointment, “Awwww!”

“Girls!” The Mediwitch had had enough of this foolishness. “Did you need something, or are you just pulling for detention?” The smarter of the two girls had developed the predatory expression that warned of a lioness thinking she was about to be clever, so the Mediwitch hastily amended, “Detention with Filch.” That fetched their compliance, and the first of the two explained her problem. All the while, the other craned her neck, trying to get a better idea of what was happening behind the screens.

The Bloody Baron stepped through the screen before her, chain mail jingling menacingly. He folded his arms before him and took up a guard position, feet braced shoulder width apart. Her business finished, the girl collected their friend and passed daringly close to the Baron on their way out of the infirmary. Red light fired to life behind his helm, and this had the desired effect at last, the witches quickening the pace of their tactical retreat.

Rumours flew about the school like Fiendfyre over what was left of the draught-ridden fields around the south country. By the end of the second period, Poppy had started to receive missives from faculty members too taken up with teaching to get away, and Hagrid had actually stopped in to check the veracity of the rumours that Professor Nott was on his deathbed after bravely saving a student from being kidnapped by Death Eaters. Indignant, Madam Pomfrey refused to give out any information, more than to say that the gossip was nothing more than codswallop.

She was glad of the ghost’s help, as she had to fend off increasingly creative and insistent waves of students, all clamouring for a look. One Hufflepuff, having been particularly harshly repelled, burst into tears, declaring. “I just wanted to see his tattoos!”

Poppy had ushered the girl out, but couldn’t blame the feminine furor surrounding the Professor. He was not young, but he had a musculature that spoke of regular training. Two tattoos were evident. The beating heart on his right upper arm was now obscured by bandages. She hadn’t taken the time when he was bleeding to read the stylised script on that shoulder, but the phoenix that was inked over his left breast remained clearly visible. It had been agitated before, but now it had settled, folding its wings in a protective gesture, encompassing the cursebreaker’s heart in a symbolic embrace. His breathing was no longer laboured, and she could catch snatches of dialogue as the shadows in the hospital wing grew long. None of it made the least bit of sense to her.

At long last, Professor Svartrunir ducked in through the door and cast a look of surmise in the direction of the Bloody Baron, who nodded respectfully in response. Madam Pomfrey intercepted him, wringing her hands, eyes alight with worry. Saving her the trouble, he began, “I heard the most extraordinary rumours at the staff table this evening. When Professor Nott didn’t present for his class, it only seemed to fanning the fire of the students’ imagination. It was quick thinking on your part, Poppy, to ask Professor Kettleburn to cover that last class. He covered, what was it again?” He cast a long, considering look in the direction of the screened area before finishing, “Oh yes. He spoke on the subject of Inferi. I imagine that you will need to have some Dreamless Sleep on hand for this weekend.”

Madam Pomfrey relaxed a shade. She also had some Lullaby Oolong she meant to try as well. A muscle in her right eyelid had started to tremble, perhaps she might try some of it herself.

Not to be deterred, Professor Svartrunir pressed on, “Poppy, not to put you out, but I must insist on knowing what has transpired. The whole school also noted the absence of the Headmaster at lunch and dinner as well. The Gargoyles indicated to me that the Headmaster is indisposed at the moment,
and Phineas Black’s portrait directed me here. As the deputy, I must be informed if he is ill.” The perceptive wizard added, “And, Poppy. The Headmaster has told me something of our visitor already. I take it she is involved somehow.” A pair of steel grey eyebrows lifted in an invitation to explain.

Poppy’s mouth hung open in wordless shock, made to feel like a first year who had been caught with a secret that she ought not tell, but without her friends to back her up. She turned around, looking for Nearly Headless Nick. “Why, I had sent for you! Hours ago. I sent Sir Nicholas!”

The elderly wizard’s brow furrowed in irritation, but the stern man inclined his head to indicate that she should go on.

“You knew that Deirdre, our visitor, carried a curse, yes?” Svartrunir nodded patiently. “Well, Professor Nott had already removed much of it, but said he needed the girl to be awake to finish the task. Since she woke up yesterday, today was the earliest opportunity.” She burbled on about how poorly the girl had been recovering her magical reserves and how quickly the youngster tired before Svartrunir interrupted. “Right, and how is the Headmaster involved then? Surely Sir Whit didn’t need his help with the curse itself?”

Poppy stilled, appearing confused. How had they decided to send two wizards in? After a moment it came to her. “Professor Dumbledore is particularly good at Legilimency, so Professor Nott had asked for his inclusion in the rite.” A nervous titter escaped her lips and she mentally shook herself. This was not the time to lose her composure, but the sheer stress of the past week and a half was starting to get to her.

Svartrunir took a step closer to the privacy barriers, his sharp gaze seeming to see right through them. The Baron did not move to stop the wizard either, so when the Slytherin Head of House asked in an off-hand manner, “And I suppose they both cocked things up royally, and now young Master Snape has introduced himself into the volatile situation?”

Poppy gasped, her hands flying to her mouth in surprise. How did he know...?

Svartrunir’s face broke into a grimace of amusement, deep laugh-lines winking into existence around his eyes as he glanced back at Madam Pomfrey. “I had understood that Severus Snape was released. He has not appeared in classes, and a search for him showed he was also absent from his dormitory, and on entering I noticed that he is not in his bunk here, either.”

Poppy’s face relaxed. She recalled that Avery had stopped by earlier and she had to send him off with a cock and bull story about Snape being out to retrieve something from the potions lab. This whole job was more trouble than it was worth at times. A weak, “Hmm. Right.” was her only response.

Svartrunir pivoted to face Madam Pomfrey, the movement crisply executed. “Madam Pomfrey. Poppy.” The Medwitch was looking down at her feet, avoiding the look on his face, but it was obvious that she was listening. “I have been aware since his first day here that Severus is a talented Legilimens. His mother wrote to me after his sorting. We have a gentlemen’s agreement of sorts, and on entering I noticed that he is not in his bunk here, either.”

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Poppy processed this before asking, “But... if he is so good with Legilimency, why does he continue getting ambushed?”

The laugh-lines disappeared, and he answered simply, “Because it is vital for Mr Snape to stay closed off, behind his Occlumentic shields. Whatever violence the so-called Marauders can offer him pales in comparison to what might happen otherwise. The situation pains me, truly. If it were widely
known that Mr Snape was a natural legilimens, it would be infinitely more difficult for him to move about in the wizarding world.”

Poppy opened her mouth, an angry retort hovering at the tip of her tongue, before Svartrunir held up a hand. “Peace, Poppy. I feel the disparity as keenly as you do, but this has been necessary. Would you see young master Snape tossed out? There is no evidence whatsoever that he has ever extended his ability to his advantage. He has kept every oath he swore to me. You know how narrow minded wizards can be, Poppy. Let it lay.” He jerked his head toward the veiled scene, “Let’s have a look, shall we?”

With that, Svartrunir’s long legs crossed the remaining distance and he slid around the screens to observe the tableau of reclining bodies. It looked very uncanny indeed.

Poppy noticed immediately that Professor Nott’s eyes were open and she cursed under her breath. A red stain on his bandage had re-emerged since she was last in, and she hurried over, placing a light pressure onto the man’s chest. “Stay down. You were injured. What happened in there?” She did a quick visual check of Deirdre, Dumbledore and Snape before returning her glare to the fool in front of her.

Whit groaned, lifting his head weakly. On seeing Svartrunir looming over the group he let his head fall back to the pillow with a thump. “Bloody hell. Remind me not to do that again.”

Professor Svartrunir tsked at the younger man. “Honestly, Whitless. After the other night, I am very surprised that you would attempt another cursebreaking so soon.”

Faintly, Whit rasped out, “It was supposed to be straightforward. How was I to know she has a mind like…” He lifted a hand and waved it weakly before dropping it back to the covers in defeated exhaustion. “Like that.”

It was a lame explanation, but at least it told Svartrunir what he needed to know about the trouble. To be certain, the Deputy Headmaster reflected back to him, “So you went in headlong, expecting the curse itself to be reasonably straightforward?” He paused, waiting for Whit to respond, which he did with a nod. “When you entered her mind, what happened?”

From across the room, Dumbledore’s voice croaked out, “We were separated from the start. I was … distracted by the most extraordinary… nightmares, I suppose is the best word for them.” Svartrunir’s head whipped around to regard the Headmaster, but the man lapsed into a unsatisfactory silence. The Slytherin Head of House found his errant student on the floor, and bent down to get a better look. Mr Snape was still in a trance, and was folded into a seated position, leaning against Deirdre’s bed.

Dumbledore was struggling to sit up, until Poppy ground out, “Lay. Back. Down. Albus.” She quickly vanished Nott’s bandages, and was using magic to rewrap new ones after imposing hemostasis again. Whit had lifted his head to look over at the Headmaster, so he missed her warning glare. Irritated, Poppy felt it necessary to lean into Whit’s injured shoulder to get his attention and compliance. It worked with alacrity, and the wounded man swore colourfully in what sounded like Russian.

Professor Svartrunir barked at Nott, “Language, soldier!” Whit’s moss green eyes clouded over with pain, but the rebuke prompted him to subside into panting silence. After Poppy finished securing the knot on the bandage, he offered a contrite, “Apologies, Madam Pomfrey.”

A glance proved to Poppy that Dumbledore, for all that he was a Gryffindor, had followed her directions. Or maybe it was her willingness to use force that cowed him. Either way, she had a moment to wag a finger at Whit with a teasing, “Naughty man. Stay there. Or I will make you heal
Peeves reappeared, coming out of Severus’ ear like he was a genie coming out of a lamp. He was chortling and mocking, “I beat you, Friar! I gots me an Oliphant! That should be worth at least fifteen.”

The Friar wiggled out of Severus’ other ear, getting stuck at the hips. As he grunted in an effort to pop out, Peeves circled back to lend him a hand.

“It was one!”

“Fifteen!”

“One, I still win at forty-two!”

With a growl and a vicious tug, Peeves dislodged the Friar from Severus’ ear and sent the unconscious student toppling over. Professor Svartrunir was looking on with a mixture of fascination and horror. His astonishment made him slow on the uptake, and he was unable to stop Severus from hitting the ground, nose-first.

*WHACK*

Strider woke to a sharp blow to his face, and he rolled from his prone position to a low crouch, holding his arms up in front of his head protectively, fists balled. The iron-tang of blood seeped into his throat, and his upper lip was warm and dripping. He shook his head irritably in an effort to clear his eyes of stinging tears, sending scarlet droplets spattering on the wall. He was looking for the source of the attack. Orcs, was it? Or Pirates? Nevermind, he could take them.

What he did see immediately was that he was surrounded, and his brain was slow to process which was friend or enemy. He was exhausted, and his eyes were unfocused. Now where was the bastard who punched him in the nose? Damn my eyes!

A familiar feminine voice cut through the confusion, waking him up as fully as might a bucket of ice water dumped over his lap. Like the one from this morning.

“Sev’rus. Sev’rus. S’okay. Severus .” Her voice was weak, but the last intonation carried weight enough for him to reorient himself. Severus was his name. That’s right.

Professor Svartrunir approached, taking care to move in slow, predictable ways. He had seen wizards act this way, and was not the least surprised by Mister Snape’s behaviour. He took Severus’ upper arm in hand and steered the student back over to a chair at Deirdre’s bedside. He firmly exerted pressure on Severus’ shoulder, getting him to sit down. Madam Pomfrey thrust a folded bandage into the student’s hand, and she commanded, “Severus, hold pressure on that nose of yours. I don’t think it is broken, but I’ll check it after you stop bleeding. Merlin’s mouldy mustache, child! Can’t you give me a night off?”

Severus had barely heard her, he was so focused on the delicate hand that was reaching off of the bed next to him, reaching for him. Real. She was real. He jockeyed the rag into his left hand and captured those cold, tapering fingers in his right, squeezing in a gesture of mutual reassurance. She
looked completely drained, but before she let her eyelids droop shut, she smiled at him. It was enough. Severus felt all of the adrenaline drain from him. He was spent. It was done. It was done well.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Anti-litigation Charm: All of the characters and the Harry Potter World referenced by my work belong to JK Rowling, who is wonderful. The exceptions are my original characters and plot.

An enchanted thanks to Coromandel. She is my fairy godmother of betas. Thanks to all of my readers like you!

Not much later, Severus was shaken awake and ushered back to his bed by Madam Pomfrey, who gave him a once over. By now, the procedure of fixing his nose, broken or not was instinctive, and the sharp pain of setting things right barely scratched his sleepy awareness. He toed off his shoes and burrowed into the covers at the first opportunity, not caring that he was fully dressed.

“Severus, you need to eat something, and take this medicine.” Pomfrey shook his shoulder gently.

He flipped the blankets up over his head, a firm denial of waking reality. “Nmmph.”

“Severus.” Shake-shake.

Louder grumbling was the only response, reminiscent of a bear growling at a disturbance of its winter rest. Dare she push him harder? She looked down at the meal tray that she had set on a nearby chair, considering. Across the darkened infirmary, Professor Nott was sitting propped up, sipping his soup like a proper patient. He was bandaged, although still shirtless, as Poppy had insisted on checking his bandages before handing over his stew. He wore an expression of muted amusement. They had agreed that he would stay until curfew, and then be permitted to return to his quarters on the understanding that he would present himself for inspection the next morning. He was merely biding his time.

Dumbledore had taken a Pepper-Up and appeared materially improved before he left hours ago.

Deirdre, who had slept a lot recently, had woken easily to the mediwitch’s touch and was eating with verve. It was just Severus who seemed to be worse for the wear.

Peeves poked his head through the ceiling of the infirmary, and stage-whispered, “Is someone having too good of a dream to wake up for his medicine?” The distorted face leered down at the still form of the student below.

Madam Pomfrey stepped back in surprise. “Good heavens!” Half a beat followed before she added, “It seems he is awfully tired.”

Peeves’ body emerged from the ceiling and he walked down the wall, coming to a position parallel just over Severus’ cot, pushing off to levitate mere inches above him.

Whit and Deirdre looked at one another, and Whit hurried to put down his tray. “Wait, old chap.”

Peeves giggled manically and called out. “Oi, Wakey Snapey! Eggs and Bakey!”
A slight shift in the blanket was the only indication that Severus might have heard anything.

Peeves did a weird little somersault in the air, complaining, “I was nice, I was. No respect!”

Madam Pomfrey moaned, taking another step back. What was she going to have to fix this time?

Whit rose from his bed, holding up both of his hands up in a placating gesture. “Surely we can give him another ten minutes, eh Poppy?”

Madam Pomfrey had the expression of a witch who had lost hope, but nodded agreement. “Yes, surely, Peeves. It can wait. No reason to make a fuss.”

What would have been a messy raspberry was the Poltergeist’s response to this. “Fuss, bus, muss. Soup gets cold, not good for little boys. No no, no good. He must gets up!”

Deirdre spoke up, “Peeves. Please…” She had a sweet expression of pleading on her face, but had not put down her tray. If the Professors could not contain the ghost, what was she to do?

Peeves looked at the three supplicants before wiggling his little finger in his mouth and held it up, as though checking for the prevailing wind. “I suppose I should be nice to the little Prince, shall I?”

Deirdre let out a sigh of relief, “Oh yes, Peeves. Nice.”

“NAH!” and with a quick gesture buried his finger through the blankets into what must have been Severus’ warm ear and wiggled it there.

Severus practically levitated out of the bed, arms making a swipe at his assailant. He was tangled up in the blanket enough that when he tried to sit up to get the ice-cold ectoplasm out of his ear, he ended up falling out of the bed entire. Flailing, he landed at Madam Pomfrey’s feet, a mass of angry, swearing teenage wizard.

Peeves was gliding about the infirmary and his laugh was wicked and unrelenting. “Got you, Lordling! Got you, got you!”

Severus ripped the white blanket off and scrambled up to find his wand. He was absolutely furious, and it was almost possible to see the machines of retaliation whir in his dark eyes.

Whit made it over to Severus and had taken out a handkerchief, offering it over to the student with a look of bemusement on his face. “Never a moment’s peace is there, Mr Snape?”

The distraction of the Defense Professor seeming to appear out of nowhere was enough to derail Snape from his planned revenge. Peeves shot out of the infirmary as Poppy had gathered enough wits to shoot a spell off at the Poltergeist herself. She missed, but it was enough to send Peeves packing.

Thwarted, Severus shoved his wand into his sleeve with a savage thrust, and then accepted the handkerchief, using it to clear what he could of the ghost’s ectoplasm from his ear. It was disgusting.

Severus found himself to be the subject of the intense regard of the Professor next to him, and then blushed as he realised that the man was wearing no shirt. And there was a phoenix staring at him with one eye from the man’s chest. His intimidatingly well developed, hairy chest.

A clink of spoon on bowl gave Severus the excuse to break his gaze and turn his attention further outward, and he cottoned on to the notion that Deirdre and Madam Pomfrey were about too.
Making a show of shaking out the handkerchief before handing it back to Professor Nott, Severus cleared his throat and gathered his scattered wits. “Right. Was there something you lot wanted, or was that barmy workeyticket of a ghost just being a proper arse?” Nott noticed that the lad’s accent had modulated to something that would have slunk out of an alley in Manchester.

Pomfrey sailed over and picked up a vial and thrust it into Severus’ face. “Here. Drink this. It is for your nose. Again.”

Severus’ eyebrows went up and he answered cheekily, “Madam Pomfrey. It is big enough, don’t you think?”

Madam Pomfrey had had a long day, and at this point, she cracked. Faster than a snake she reached out and grabbed Snape by the nose and pinched it, her left thumb expertly cracking the seal off of the potion before she tilted Severus’ head back, and unceremoniously poured it down his weakly protesting throat. He had been wheeling his arms in an attempt to stay on his feet, and as he swallowed, the Mediwitch let go and he folded back onto the bed with a heavy thump.

The dangerous glint in Madam Pomfrey’s eye forestalled any further comment from Professor Nott until she stepped away with her shoulders squared, ostensibly to check on Deirdre.

A faint gagging wheeze escaped the student on the bed, and Professor Nott felt that this lad was so pathetic that it made his heart bleed. No wonder Professor Svartrunir wanted him to take an interest. He picked up the tray and handed it over to Severus, making room for himself to sit on the chair. A lame attempt at conversation was proffered, “Well, at least your stew isn’t cold? Small blessings.”

Severus started to eat, his expression one of pure misery. Things had been going so well, and then this. Truth be told, he’d love to go break some bottles or get into a fight, he was so pissed off. Polite conversation at this juncture was well out of his reach. So it was that all he could offer Professor Nott was a sullen shrug.

Nott leaned back in his chair, his wounded arm folded over his belly, which was a bit soft. Using his good arm he shifted his position before commenting. “You know, I was really impressed with how you handled yourself today.” He cast his mind back to Severus’ performance in class in recent weeks. “The regular curriculum seems too easy for you, NEWT level or no.”

Severus paused, mid-spoon, eyes dark with suspicion. Good things didn’t happen to him. What was this toff’s angle? He assayed a cautious nod of acknowledgement before he continued to eat.

Professor Nott went on, “I’d like to see what you can do. You recall what kind of work I did, prior to coming here?”

Severus’ eyes widened a fraction, and the spoon now sat in the bowl, abandoned. “Cursebreaker.” The word was pronounced with reverence.

Professor Nott nodded. “Aye. And before that, I fought in the war on the Continent. So I know a thing or two, tricks not in the books.” He sat forward now, bringing his face closer to Snape’s, “Interested?”

Brow wrinkling, Severus considered. “What would I have to do?”

Professor Nott said, “Well, I’d test you first. I know you’ve the aptitude for much of it, you showed me that much today. Then we’d train, maybe go a bit further afield if you were inclined to help me. I have some side-jobs I do here and there. Faculty pay isn’t much, now is it?”

Severus’ eyes narrowed at the mention of money. “Would I be paid too, if I helped you on a job?”
Nott examined his nails, “Well, the experience is priceless, but...” Nott considered what he knew of the wizard from his clothes and supplies. “I think I could see my way to sharing the profit. Fifteen percent.”

Severus rapidly responded, “Twenty five.”

Nott’s hand stuck out to seal the agreement, “Deal.”

Feeling like he might have asked for too little, Severus shook on it, and looked over at the wizard across from him with growing hope. He had wanted to learn that countercurse, and now he might get paid to do it? Killer. Wait... “Did someone put you up to this?”

Professor Nott stilled, then answered honestly, “Professor Svartrunir brought my attention to your talent and his concern that you were not being challenged properly in class. Specifically, that your energies outside of class might be redirected more profitably for your future.” He held his head up and at an angle, as if measuring Snape in that moment. “I hadn’t a chance to get to know you before this, Mr Snape, but I do believe he is right about your potential. Don’t write my offer off. I genuinely want to work with you.”

He lowered his head, leaning forwards again and whispered, “Let’s even out those odds, shall we?” He winked at Severus, who answered with a cautious duck of his head and a quiet, “Alright. I’ll give it a go.”

Professor Nott barked out a hearty, “Good, glad to hear it, lad. Now, you’ll want to rest up. I’ll give you the weekend, and we’ll start bright and early Monday morning. Six sharp. Meet me outside the great hall. Wear something comfortable.”

Severus was alarmed, “But...”

“Tut tut tut. You’ll see. Until then, Mr Snape.” Severus was confronted with the retreating back of the latest twist that fate had tossed in his path. What was that?

Deirdre ghosted over, hands wrapped about a mug of steaming hot cocoa. The chair was still warm where Professor Nott had just been seated, and she could hear movement behind her and the low murmur of Mediwitch and patient.

Severus looked tired, and what had looked like dark circles before, now resolved into a full double shiner. “Well. Quite the evening.” Her soft brown eyes searched his face, anxious.

The spoon did not pause in its progress, steadily dipping in the bowl, scooping stew chunks and all into the injured wizard’s mouth. He did grunt. It was a reasonably polite nonverbal communication and appeared to invite further verbal discourse, unbalanced as it was.

“I don’t remember a lot of what happened today, but I fought an awful beast, slaying it, and then its rider in turn. I blacked out after that, and came to when you...” She trailed off, her brow furrowing in an effort to make sense. “You were there, when I woke up in the dream?” She lifted a shoulder, and continued on, “I am not sure what it is called technically. Oh dear, this is so silly.” She blushed prettily. “What I meant to say is, thank you. You were amazing. I mean, seeing as you weren’t
allowed to help at first. I gather you rather saved the day.” She giggled, “My hero.”

The spoon had slowed down, and at this last it finally stopped, coming to rest in the mostly empty bowl. Eyes darker than the purest, most magical chocolate fixed on her face for a fleeting moment before sliding away. The cold drawl that answered her was shocking, “Very well. Don’t make me come in after you again.” He cleared his throat, before lowering his voice. “I’d... appreciate it if you didn’t talk about this with anyone.”

Deirdre’s insides had frozen at Severus’ initial cold response, but understanding grew. “Oh... oh! I see.” She deflated, thinking of the implications. “What a shame, to have to hide your talents like that. I’ve done a lot of reading on the mind magics, and it is very rare to be able to do that so young. Natural talent, is it? Very rare. Just think of the interesting things you’ll be able to do. You could work for the Ministry in International Magical Co-operation, to foster better understanding with wizards in foreign cultures. Or with the Department of Magical Beasts in the Beings Division with the same. You could bring people together.” She completely missed the tone of the anxious looks that Severus was throwing around the infirmary, and added, “Just think of the implications for mind healing, all of the good you could do!”

The click of the tray being placed on the floor by the bed staved off the fountain of inspiration from Deirdre. She looked back up, actually looked at Severus this time, and knew she had said something wrong. He shook his head at her and then laid down, rolling over to turn his back to her now, pointedly dismissing her.

Deirdre wrapped her arms about herself, sitting there for a moment more before whispering. “Um. Sorry, Severus. Goodnight, then?” He did not respond, so after a few breaths she took herself off. She stopped to pick a book from Madam Pomfrey’s selection of basic magical health texts before tucking in. It took her longer than usual to drop off to sleep, as she tried to work out where she had blundered and what to do about it.
Chapter Twenty-Nine.

Chapter Notes

Antilitigation Charm: Harry Potter and his Universe are the Inventions of JK Rowling and belong to her. No money will be made from this work. Don't Let the Sun Go Down on Me was written by Elton John and Bernie Taupin in 1974, and the commercial is also a transcript that I took after listening to that bloody commercial twenty times and belongs to Sony and was performed and likely written by John Cleese.

My original characters are mine as is the plot.

Coromandel is a wonderful beta and Brit-picker who continues to work tirelessly, eventually I'll have GOTTEN it, but I'll always need her!

A special thanks to readers like you! Every kudos and comment makes me happy, thanks so much for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Saturday morning in the hospital wing was normally a time for Madam Pomfrey to relax. No one wanted a pass out of class, and nearly every student had something better to do than complain about headaches. This particular Saturday was the second in a row that she had to deal with two patients, and she was at the end of her patience with Severus Snape. Last night, he cast a silencing charm about his bed that showed no sign of wearing off naturally. She was fairly certain that he had worked out a way to bend light away from his bed as well. The rest of the ward was bathed in morning sunshine while his bed was enshrouded in shadow. She sat at her desk, taking a break with some tea, and tapped her toe in irritation. Was the boy going to sleep the whole day away? It was already past ten.

Deirdre was already showered, dressed and fed, and had joined Pomfrey in her cramped office. She was feeling much better, and Madam Pomfrey smiled fondly at the girl, watching her go through the books on the infirmary library’s shelves.

Deirdre held up a copy of Paracelsus’ Paragranum and Paramirum, “I always wondered what would have happened if Paracelsus had had his way. Would all hospitals only treat certain conditions at the Vernal Equinox?” She giggled, “Bad luck if you got spattergoit during an unusually rainy autumn.”

Pomfrey returned the girl’s smile and murmured, “Imagine the waiting room times.” Pomfrey watched the girl replace the admittedly dry text and take out another, dusting it off with a keen look of interest. She dared, “You seem young to have read much about history of Healing. Are your parents Healers then?”

Deirdre froze in her perusal, this time one of Carl Jung’s works, a markedly newer printing than the previous. The stunned, distressed look that spread over her face spoke volumes, and Madam Pomfrey stood, walking over to her, an apology readied. The girl spoke, “No. I... don’t think so. I just love books.”

Madam Pomfrey took the Jung from her patient, tsking softly. “I am sorry, dear. It will come, I am sure.”
Soft brown eyes locked onto Pomfrey’s, clinging to her, desperate for answers. After two beats, the Mediwitch shook her head and answered the unspoken. “No, young lady. I think that when you are ready, you will remember.” She glanced over at Severus’ sleeping form, having noted that he had started to toss under his cloak of magically induced silence and darkness.

“Well, why don’t you go over and turn on the wireless, dear? Might help Severus there to wake up.”

Deirdre considered the request only for a split second before shrugging. “Alright.”

Madam Pomfrey smiled. She had no idea what Muggle songs were like, but she was keen to find employment for Deirdre, and maybe a little bit of quiet for herself.

Click.

“Radio Highland on this sunny Saturday morning. Forecast for today is chilly, with a 34% chance of rain mixed with snow tonight. High of 46 degrees, tonight’s low 35 degrees. Thank you for joining us on Modern Rock Highlands. After a word from our sponsors, we will move on to the popular music hour and return with news at noon. This is Gordie Cruishenks, sitting in for William Dunnagan.

Announcer: Hallo there, why don’t you visit the Sony Stand at this year’s audiofair at Olympia all this week?

Annoyed Listener: Because I don’t want to.

Announcer: What?

Annoyed Listener: Because I don’t want to, that is why I shall not visit it.

Announcer: Uh, you could see the full Sony range, the high fi. Cassette players, speakers...

Annoyed Listener: No no no, not interested.

Announcer: Tuners, amplifiers and tape decks...

Annoyed Listener: No, not interested, now go away.

Announcer: Oh please...

Annoyed Listener: No no. Get away. Get out of my bathroom. Bursting in here like that, shouting about some Sony stand in Olympia! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, now get out!

Announcer: <muffled> We’ll be here all this week...

Annoyed Listener: Shut up! Get out of my house. <splash> Blooming advertising man.

Voice of the Listener, recognisable as John Cleese, returned. “If you go to the Sony Stand in Olympia this week you can see this new thing called hi-ya-figh. It’s like hi-fi, only higher. Nothing to do with hiring, however or anything. It is fi that is actually higher than hi-fi. And costs so much that it makes your eyes water. Thirteen hundred quid for a set of speakers, that’s all the caper! So, if you go to the Sony Stand in Olympia this week, you can not only see all of that ordinary stuff, you could also watch the people looking at the higher figher stuff and make clever satirical abusive remarks to them, like ‘em, could you spare six pounds five for a cup of tea you bloated running dog.’” *

Deirdre screwed up her face, trying to understand the ridiculous commercial’s point, so when she
tuned back in, the next song was already playing.

“I can’t light no more of your darkness
All my pictures seem to fade to black and white
I’m growing tired and time stands still before me
Frozen here on the ladder of my life.”

Deirdre noticed that Severus hadn’t moved at all, so she sat down on the chair that seemed to be his, and began to sing along, her voice modestly loud and pretty enough. Certainly not more trained than an average Primary education would provide. She was too absorbed to notice the shadow lifting from the nearby bed.

“Too late to save myself from falling
I took a chance and changed your way of life
But you misread my meaning when I met you
Closed the door and left me blinded by the light.”

The form in the bed next to her shifted slowly, one eye slowly emerging from the white covers. It fixed blearily on Deirdre, narrowed in annoyance, and then covered itself back up.

“Don't let the sun go down on me
Although I searched myself, it's always someone else I see
I'd just allow a fragment of your life to wander free
But losing everything is like the sun going down on me.”

A cat wandered in during the commercial, Deirdre noticed it as it brushed past her. She stopped singing, and trailed down a hand to try and pet its back, but was too slow. The cat looked up at the bed, bunched its haunches, and with a little preparatory wiggle launched itself onto the bed, landing lightly in the pool of sunlight near Severus’ feet.

Unaccompanied, the radio blared on:
“Don't discard me just because you think I mean you harm
But these cuts I have, they need love to help them heal.” **

The radio cut off abruptly.

Deirdre turned around and saw Madam Pomfrey watching the scene with an amused expression, her hand held firmly across her mouth, her wand dangling from her hand. Deirdre whipped back around, and caught sight of the cat walking up Severus’ leg to perch itself squarely on the least comfortable spot a wizard could imagine - right on top of his full bladder. It seemed to be kneading in an odd, uncat-like backwards fashion with a very determined look on its face.

“Oof! Oi! Geroff, go back to Ryan’s bunk, you...”

The cat chose that moment to leap onto Severus’ chest and growled menacingly.

Severus flipped the coverlet back and peered up into the green eyes of a grey morris-cat, with unusual dark markings around her eyes. Now he understood exactly who was standing on his chest.

Voice cracking with alarm, Severus squeaked, “Ah. Professor McGonagall. If you would be so kind?”

The cat stepped off of his chest and leapt gracefully back to the floor, her tail held high behind her and her nose in the air, clearly making her opinion known.

Deirdre had her fist stuffed in her mouth, and her eyes had started to water with the supreme effort of NOT LAUGHING as the cat made its way over to Madam Pomfrey. Her wide brown eyes locked onto Severus’, and that seemed to help a shade as the look of distilled annoyance grounded the reality of the situation. Finding it likely to be safe now, Deirdre relaxed the hold she had on her mouth and unbent to say, “Good Morning, Professor.” When she turned around, there stood a severe looking witch in green robes and a high lace collar, regarding her carefully.

“Good morning.” The Professor’s strong accent wasn’t that difficult to discern, but Deirdre trained her full attention on the woman. “I am here on an errand for the Headmaster.” Hard green eyes shifted back and forth between the students as she finally settled on the girl.

Severus stood, his clothes from yesterday still on and rather rumpled, and he ran a hand through his hair in an effort to make sure it wasn’t sticking out at odd angles. A yawn escaped before he could fully cover his mouth.

“We are on a tight schedule for today, and I need to take you, Miss Ward, to Diagon Alley before the Quidditch Match.” Deirdre looked agreeably interested, her eyes flickering to Madam Pomfrey for reassurances.

McGonagall looked at the other student, and ventured with an aloof expression. “Mr Snape, I have not had the chance to apologise for the behaviour of my students.” She raised her eyebrows, “While I would like to say it won’t happen again...” She trailed off as it was obvious that she could not, “I have made every effort to dissuade the offenders from continuing in the same line.”

Severus looked very uncomfortable at this, but ducked his head in acknowledgement. “Thank you, Professor. I understand.”
McGonagall turned her attention back to Deirdre and offered the girl a smile. It seemed stilted, polite kindness at best. “Now, can you meet me down by the gates at one o’clock sharp?”

A panicky expression flitted into being on Deirdre’s face, but Severus spoke up. “I can make sure she is there, Professor. Anything she should know?”

Madam Pomfrey’s eyebrows flew up in interest. Professor McGonagall hadn’t looked away from Deirdre with a feline smile. “Nothing special. Just taking you for a spot of shopping, alright?”

Deirdre had shifted to stand closer to Severus, “Can... can Severus come with?” She truly seemed uncomfortable with something.

Madam Pomfrey seized the opportunity to get some peace before the casualties of the Quidditch match started to file in, and piped up, “Severus, you should show Deirdre about the castle a bit, and the grounds in the meantime.” She mooed before amending that, “Perhaps pick up a spot of lunch? In the Great Hall?”

Professor McGonagall looked surprised at this development, but acquiesced. “It would be unusual, but…”

The pleading look in the girl’s eyes could have melted the hardest of hearts, and so Professor McGonagall nodded assent. “I suppose we could make arrangements.” She shot a look at Severus, “If Professor Svartrunir is agreeable.”

Madam Pomfrey clapped her hands together, and spoke with the artificial cheerfulness of a witch getting her way and making sure you smiled as you got on with meeting her desires. “Right, then! Off you go, wash up. I’ll collect some coats for you both.” She made a shooing gesture at the young wizard before taking Professor McGonagall’s arm and pointedly escorting her to the door. Deirdre was overwhelmed already, so she didn’t want the intense Professor to grill her any further just now. Pomfrey paused in the door and called back to Deirdre, “I’ll be back with those coats, hold down the fort!”

The two faculty stepped out of view and into the hallway. Deirdre reached over and switched the radio off, allowing the silence to ring in her ears as she slumped into Severus’ chair. What was happening? Everything was moving so fast now.

Severus stepped out of the lavatory, a towel in his hand, wiping away the last of the soap from his neck. He had changed into cleaner clothes, but had done so in a hurry.

Deirdre hugged herself. “Was that alright?”

Severus blinked at her owlishly. “Was what?”

Deirdre shrugged. “Me commandeering your time this afternoon. For shopping.” She looked fairly miserable at the prospect. “I hate shopping. And I don’t know anyone.” She directed her gaze back to Severus, looking for some sort of reassurance.

“Of course. No contest.” He had turned his back to her, fiddling with his dop kit, packing things up so he had a moment to stamp down on that little betraying shoot of hope that had sprouted from his heart before she pointed out the obvious. She wanted his company because she was scared and alone. Well, that wasn’t going to last, was it? Best not get too excited. Sure, he had carried her back when she had collapsed, and spent the better part of yesterday inside of her head, but that gave him no right to have expectations… of what? He frowned at that line of thought, its shape alien to him. As roughly as he was shoving his books into his bag along with his schoolwork, he shoved that idea
Feeling that he had sufficient control, he turned around part way, mechanically packing still. Deirdre was staring out the window, caught up in her own thoughts, and he felt sorry that he had been neglecting her. In the course of packing, he had come across the tin of biscuits his mother had sent over, and popped the lid off. “Here, then. Have a biscuit.”

So it was, when Madam Pomfrey returned to the infirmary, that the students were sharing tea and biscuits. “Right you two. Off you go.” She pushed coats at her charges, shepherding them both out of the infirmary, leaving half-empty cups behind.

Severus led Deirdre through the halls, their route made haphazard by necessity. She looked around with wonder at all of the details to be seen in the portraits on the walls, the statutes, the tapestries. As he ushered her onto a staircase, he gave her the two-knut summary as it transferred from side to side. “Right, so the Great Hall is on the ground floor, that’s where we eat, down a flight.” He smiled tightly at her, “I imagine soon you’ll be taking meals there with the rest of the school.”

Deirdre had her lower lip sucked in and he could tell that she was chewing on it. Expecting there was nothing he could say to make her relax, he went on, “Hospital tower goes up to the fifth floor, that’s where I found you. Seventh is the top of the castle, only the Astronomy Tower goes higher.”

He leant on the side rail, pointing out highlights as he spoke. “First floor has Defense Against the Dark Arts, History of Magic, Muggle Studies, and Advanced Arithmancy.” He added after a pause, “And there’s a bathroom that no one uses, haunted, and in not a good way.” He waves a dismissive hand at the next one. “Second floor is hardly used, just teacher’s offices and quarters. Professor Nott’s office is there.” They stepped upwards, towards the third floor. “Charms is on this floor, and most of it is the Library, which occupies two levels.”

Deirdre perked up quite a bit, “Really? Sounds massive.” Her voice took on a flirtatious tone, and it was obvious that the place attracted her imagination.

Severus quirked a smile, “Quite.” He turned, tugging on Deirdre’s elbow to get her off of the current staircase and onto the next landing. “Fifth floor is mostly display and Muggle Studies practicums. I think there is a studio and a conservatory if you fancy some painting or harpsichord or whatever.”

They walked up the next flight and he cautioned her, “Skip that third step, it will trap you if you aren’t careful.” He kept his hand on her elbow, applying a steadying pressure.

“Sixth floor is Ancient Runes, Professor Svartrunir’s office as well as Professor Slughorn’s office.” He said, “They’re both Slytherin, one teaches Ancient Runes and is Head of House, and the other teaches Potions.” He hesitated at saying any more, not sure what classes she would be taking.

He frowned, as something occurred to him, “We don’t know what House you’ll be sorted into yet. Well, if you care about the Quidditch match I’d be glad to recommend you as an honorary Slytherin for the day.” His gaze flickered to her left forearm. “Probably won’t stay with our House, I imagine.”

He caught Deirdre looking down at herself and paused to ask, “What is it?”

Deirdre took a deep breath and then said in a rush, “I know I’m a student, but I don’t know what classes I’m taking and you lot already started the year without me and I don’t know how I’ll ever catch up and how do you pick classes and can I learn how to do what Professor McGonagall did?”
Severus tried to parse the complexities of what the little witch had just spilled, and resigned himself to answering at least a few questions. “What year are you?” That earned him a blank look. Exasperated, he said, “Well, how old are you, then?”

Deirdre looked down at her feet, worrying that lip again before shrugging. After a moment she looked back at him with a spark in her eye. “How old are you?”

Severus lifted a shoulder, shoving his hands into his pockets. “Sixteen. I’m a sixth year.” He could just see the girl’s cogs turning.

“Right you are.” She looked up, forgetting the questions she had asked in favour of a new one, “What’s on seventh floor?”

Severus looked up, “Not much. Arithmancy classrooms. Entrances to Gryffindor and Ravenclaw common rooms.” He led them off of the staircases to a short hallway, “Slytherins are in the dungeons and the Hufflepuffs are in the basement, near the kitchens.”

Deirdre asked, “Why do we need to be sorted into Houses? How does it happen? Do I get to pick?” Her eyes strayed to Severus’ green snake badge.

Severus huffed, “Okay, I’ll answer, but after that we need to go down to the Great Hall and nab something to eat before we have to go out to meet McGonagall.”

Deirdre nodded expectantly, “Alright.”

Leading them down the hallway he brought them down another staircase and out into a balcony that gave a view of one of the inner courtyards of the castle. There was a bench and he gestured for her to be seated. This might take a while.

“There were four founders,” Deirdre interrupted him here. “Salazar Slytherin, Rowena Ravenclaw, Godric Gryffindor, and Helga Hufflepuff.” At his searching look she said, “I read it somewhere. I like books, I think I’ve mentioned that.”

Looking annoyed, Severus continued his little lecture, “The Sorting Hat gets put on your head and it decides what House you would be best in, and that usually happens the first night you come to school.” He held up a hand to stay her next question, “No, you don’t get to pick.” He gestured at her, “It won’t be done in front of the whole school for you as a transfer student.”

Deirdre leaned in, interested, and asked, “But… why must we be sorted?”

Severus scratched his head before answering. “Tradition, I suppose.” He indicated the badge, “It puts like-minded people together. My house attracts those who are cunning and have ambition. The Ravenclaws attract students who love knowledge and cleverness. Hufflepuffs are loyal and hardworking.” He frowned, “Gryffindor favours the brave and the bold.”

Deirdre kicked her legs out as she processed this. “And you have to live with these people the whole time?”

Nodding, Severus looked relieved. She seemed to be getting it. “And eat with them, take classes with them… And your Quidditch team will be from your house.”

Wrinkling her nose, she said, “So, you’re saying that if I don’t get sorted into Slytherin, I can’t eat with you or go to classes with you?”

Severus looked down at his steepled hands, “Well, you eat with your House, but classes are more
mixed, especially after the OWLs are over with.” He looked up, considering her. “Any idea of how many OWLs you got?” He amended that, “What school are you from again?”

Shaking her head, she looked down. “I… I can’t remember. I might have been abroad, or home schooled.” She lifted her hands to grip her curls in frustration. “It’s as though my memories are around the corner, just out of reach. They dance, swirling away anytime I get close.”

She looked up to find Severus staring at her, his eyebrows bunched together in concern. “You arrived in the infirmary shortly after I did. You were senseless and beat up pretty badly. Madam Pomfrey worked on you for a long time.” He closed his eyes, examining his own memory of her arrival. “I think you had a few things with you, but Dumbledore took them with him. It is all a trifle blurry.”

Deirdre made a face, “Judging by that awful wand, I imagine my effects must have been confusing.

Severus brightened, “I do remember the ghosts. The Headmaster claimed Right of Sanctuary for you, and all five ghosts confirmed it.”

Troubled, Deirdre asked, “That sounds amazing, but what does it really mean?”

Severus stood and offered his hand to Deirdre, helping her up. “It means that I’ve answered all the questions that I ought to for now. It is early for lunch yet, so how about I show you the kitchens?”

Deirdre pursed her lips, staving off the spate of newly burning questions that leapt to mind. Severus tucked her hand into his arm and lead her away.

Peter Pettigrew sat in the Library, labouring over revisions for Ancient Runes. He was having problems paying attention. His friends were out at Quidditch practice and no doubt would be hauling their sweaty carcasses in soon enough. The game was tonight, and everyone was vibrating with excitement. He was worried when they were caught for that last prank on Snivellus, but Professor McGonagall had allowed them to serve punishment swiftly. It was an eye-opening weekend of not being able to speak, and he heard that practice last weekend was downright dangerous without the ability to communicate verbally. Nobody ended up in the hospital wing, but it was a very close thing.

Peter had come up with an idea using runes painted on the palms of his hands to display words at will, hanging in the air between them. He was able to get short words and phrases to work on Sunday last, but they kept blurring, the spell weakening as the sweat on his palms washed the ink away. He didn’t know enough about the effects the runes would have on ordinary casting, so he was reluctant to try something more permanent.

Giving up, he groaned before slamming his book shut, earning him a glare from Madam Pince. Ducking his head meekly, he started to pack up when his eye caught a movement down in the courtyard. Peter abandoned his bag for a moment and craned his head, looking down on the strangest thing he had seen all year. The figure of Severus Snape, the unmistakable gangly greasy-haired git who had caused such trouble just by breathing was down there, and he was smiling. Nay, laughing! And clinging to his elbow was a pretty witch with shoulder-length chestnut curls, standing on tip-toe to whisper something conspiratorily, which only made his sworn enemy chortle that much more.

“Who is THAT? And who let that wanker out of the hospital wing?” Remus Lupin leaned over Peter’s shoulder, craning to watch as the witch let go of Snape’s arm and then ran along ahead of
him downhill, towards the caretaker’s cottage, leaving him in the dust.

James’ voice broke in, “Ah, well. Sensible girl. She’s running away from him already.”

Sirius drawled, “Well, she’s trying. Look at that bastard. He’s going after her. Worse than a canker.” He nudged James, “I don’t recognise her, do you?”

James shook his head mutely to the negative before coming back to his mission. “Well, we’ll need to sort that out another time. I’ve got to keep my head in the game, and so do you, Sirius. Right you lot, time for an early lunch!” He pounded his belly with a grin. “Need to fuel this finely tuned machine. Lots to accomplish tonight.” He waggled his eyebrows. The whole group knew he had plans to try and impress Lily Evans yet again with his Quidditch prowess. Because it worked so well last time. And the time before that.

Remus let out a poorly suppressed groan. “Come on, Romeo. Before you make me lose my appetite.”

James bristled, “She’s warming up to me! She didn’t even hex me last week!”

Sirius broke in, “That’s because you couldn’t talk to her, idiot.” His eyes were still fixed on the retreating figures down on the green, narrowing in thought.

Remus, impatient to eat, became insistent. “Forget it, let’s get going. They’re doing lamb oggies today and I don’t want mine cold, especially because of you lot faffing over Lily Evans.”

Peter retrieved his bag and led the noisy crew out of the library, casting an apologetic look at Madam Pince, who was perched at the desk with a sour look on her face.

Chapter End Notes

** Elton John, ‘Don’t Let the Sun Go Down on Me.’ 1974
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Antilitigation Charm: Harry Potter and his Universe are the Inventions of JK Rowling and belong to her. No money will be made from this work. My original characters are mine as is the plot.

My beta, Coromandel, is a wonderful person and is cementing her place in heaven if I have anything to say about it.
A special thanks to readers like you! Every kudos and comment makes me happy, thanks so much for reading!

“Slow down!” Severus called out as Deirdre broke out into a run, exiting the viaduct courtyard to run the length of the bridge that led down to the grounds.

Deirdre, of course, was thrilled to be outside and her enthusiasm would not be bridled. Severus groaned as he lurched into motion, his breath turning to a large puff of steam in the cold November morning air. He was supposed to be looking after the girl, but she was outstripping him already. He called out again, “Wait, Deirdre!” before giving in and committing more fully to the chase.

Deirdre was giggling and turning every so often to see if Severus was catching up. “Excuse me!” She ran past a couple of students, out for a little private walk, sheltered in the covered bridge from the gentle drizzle that was covering everything in a light layer of moisture. She felt wonderful. The feel of the cold against her cheeks was bracing, and her body was moving. Her magic seemed to well up within her heart, rising to greet that of the school and its grounds.

Reaching the end of the bridge, she jumped down the steps and half-ran and half-slid down the slope to the edge of the lake. She let out a shout of elation on the way down, which modulated to a yelp of consternation as she slipped on the gravel under her feet. Abruptly, she felt a tug that set her back into a more feasible balance. Severus had almost caught up with her, and was looking down from the shoulder of the slope. He was breathing hard, but held out his wand, a clue as to who just prevented her from toppling into the lake. He closed the distance between them, grousing, “How am I supposed to look after you if you run off like that? Honestly, Deirdre. Did you mean to go for a swim? In this weather? Barking.”

The witch was already turned away from him, looking out across the lake, her chest rising and falling as she too filled her lungs with the rewards of a sprint. Not answering his griping, she pointed out a pair of owls as they headed across the lake, towards the gate. “Where do you suppose they are going?”

Squinting with a hand over his eyes, Severus tried to make out the details of the rapidly retreating birds. He was startled to hear Deirdre report, “They’re on their way to deliver.” He looked over and saw the girl peering through a frame that she made with her thumb and index finger on each hand.

Deirdre smiled sunnily at Severus and shifted her position a little, inviting Severus to crane his neck and have a look too. The light bent between her fingers, and as she moved them closer together, she got a closer view. The first owl had an envelope addressed to Ollivander’s, the address clearly legible for only a few moments more. The second owl, a large eagle-owl, was already out of range.
“How exactly did you do that?” Severus was looking at Deirdre’s hands now, intensely interested. As her thumb to forefinger contacts broke, the magical magnification stopped. Fascinated, he snaked out a hand to capture Deirdre’s, pulling it closer to his eyes to get a better, closer look. There he saw a series of runes shimmering along her knuckles on the left hand, with an answering set fading from the right.

Deirdre had continued to watch the owls progress, but as she felt Severus take her right hand she froze as though she had been sighted by a predator. Her mouth worked soundlessly for a long moment before she was able to kick it into drive once more. “Golden henna ink. Has to be redrawn every few weeks.” She looked more closely at her free hand before adding, “Fading pretty badly. Sorry about that, I’ve no idea when I last worked it.” The runes had lost their light and were settling back to something closer to the tawny colour of the girl’s skin.

Deirdre returned her gaze to her guide, cheeks flushed as she found herself the subject of an intense, searching look. She could clearly feel her heart skip a beat, and whatever words she had mustered died a ignominious death. Suddenly Severus dropped her hand like it was a stink bomb and returned his gaze to the clouds. She heard him clear his throat before saying, “Clever. But there’s something else in that ink, I wager.”

As she opened her mouth to respond, a voice from above them called down, “Snape, they’ve let you out of the hospital wing, then?”

Deirdre looked on in fascination as Severus responded to what looked like the tail end of a rugby crew. Truthfully, the boys and girls that were walking past their teammate who had stopped to talk didn’t look particularly athletic, except the two that had stepped off of the path. They were both dressed in green Quidditch jerseys. She noticed Severus appeared to be tense as he answered, “Obviously. I think I should be back tonight, Avery. We should go over the Charms project tomorrow.”

The boy’s posture shifted a fraction as he let the academic drivel fly right over his head. He nudged the thick, tall boy standing next to him with his left elbow. The two were obviously not related, Avery being pale with blond hair and light eyes was rather well muscled. The taller, heavy set boy was solid as a wall, and had wide-spaced eyes that peered out from under a prominent brow. His closely cropped hair added to the militant appearance, and Deirdre felt flinched as the two simultaneously took note of her. She shifted a step to the side, and was now peering out from behind Severus.

“Who’s this then. Aren’t you going to introduce us?” Avery was obviously craning his neck to get a better look, and added, “No need to be shy. We’re only dangerous on the Quidditch field, right Mulciber?” The taller one held up two huge meaty hands palms up, flexing his thick fingers open and closed with audible creaking, which could have been from the hand-guards that he still wore. “Right.” A travesty of a smile lit on the big one’s face, and Deirdre almost felt sorry for him.

Severus turned slightly, and in a casual way said. “Oh, this? New student. Transferring in. McGonagall set me to giving her a tour.”

Avery made a sound of interest, “Oh, interesting. Been sorted yet?”

Deirdre shook her head to the negative and the boy looked a little disappointed. “Well, you don’t get to pick, but Slytherin’s the best.” He clapped his hands. “You should come watch the match tonight, first of the season. Are you coming, Snape?” Deirdre felt more than saw Severus nod his answer, and was surprised when the big one spoke up, “Will you cheer for us, Miss…?”

Deirdre spoke, “Ward. Deirdre Ward.” She scuffed a foot in the gravel, and glanced at Severus
before answering. “Might do.”

Mulciber’s smile was warmer, and perhaps a shade less predatory as he was rewarded with her name. “Well, we can’t help but win with you in the stands, cheering us on, Miss Ward.”

The blond had been watching Severus as this went on, and he seemed to be amused by something, but he cut in at this point, “Right then. We’re for the pitch. Quick last minute practice. Bloody Gryffindors hogged the pitch the whole morning.”

Snape drawled “They need the practice, don’t they. Couldn’t find a snitch if it wore falsies and sang Tip Toe Through the Tulips.” Both of the boys laughed heartily at that, and Deirdre did too, shocked at the language and ridiculous imagery.

Deirdre covered her mouth in an effort to be the good girl who didn’t know what he just said, but her eyes must have given her away. Severus looked down at her, a shade self-conscious, but his eyes danced, and the answering smirk that cracked his supercilious demeanour before he turned back to wave his housemates off was wicked indeed.

Severus buried his hands in his pockets and commented offhand, “Unless you intend to be late for our shopping trip, we had better get a leg on.”

Deirdre gasped, “Shite!” She looked around wildly before pulling at his sleeve. “Come on then. You’re the one who knows where we’re going.” The young wizard chortled in delight, and she realised what exactly she had just said. Unwilling to discuss it, as a lady does not do such things, she pulled again on his coat sleeve, harder. “Well?!”

Severus set off along the lakeshore, and Deirdre had to hurry, this time being the one left behind. “Come on, then.”

The two walked on in a relative companionable silence, only broken as Severus pointed out minor landmarks, of which this far from the castle there were only a few, including the path to the Quidditch Pitch, the well worn track about the lake, and the Groundskeeper’s cottage. Smoke rose lazily from the chimney and a warm glow lit up the windows, reminding Deirdre just how cold it was outside. She could see her breath in the air before her.

“Looks cozy, doesn’t it?” Deirdre commented as they passed the last.

Severus chuckled. “And how.”

When Deirdre raised her eyebrows in curiosity, he said, “Occupied by Rubeus Hagrid. He’s half-giant. Must have only room enough to turn about in there, but he calls it home all the same.” She had slowed her steps to look on, and asked, “Does he have a dog?”

Shaking his head to the negative, Severus answered. “I don’t think so. He spends his time in the Forbidden Forest. He’s scary enough on his own. Come on, just a bit further.”

An hour later found Severus kipped up against the outside of Madam Malkin’s, arms crossed and expression surly. He had stepped outside as he couldn’t handle another minute of talk about fabrics, styles, and measurements. Just. No. His fingers itched for a cigarette, but instead he had his wand out and was twirling it absent mindedly. A familiar voice broke into his revery, calling from the middle
of the street.

“Severus! Severus Snape? Is that you?” A tall wizard with square jaw, long white-blond hair, and aristocratic carriage strolled over, a beautiful witch tucked into his arm.

Severus came to attention immediately, pushing away from the dingy brick of the shop behind him. He stepped forward to receive a handshake in greeting from Lucius Malfoy himself. “Good afternoon, Mr Malfoy.” He ducked his head to Narcissa, “Miss Black.” All of the wizarding world knew of the romantic courtship of Lucius Malfoy and Narcissa Black, and Severus ventured an amiable, “I hear that congratulations will soon be in order.”

Narcissa was measuring him with her eyes and he felt underdressed. He remembered to breathe when she responded with a smile, “Thank you, Severus. Call me Narcissa. Surely we are old friends, after everything?” Her fiance hastened to add, “Lucius, Severus. Really, old chap.”

Severus tilted his head in acknowledgement, feeling somewhat uncomfortable at the oblique reference to the disasters of his first year at Hogwarts, undoubtedly made easier by her influence. She had taken him under her wing after she discovered his shame that first night. She had coached him on diction, and when she found out who his mother was, she redoubled her efforts to help him to blend in better with the right people. He knew it was mostly out of pity, but he felt the warmth of gratitude. She had told him back then, “We must watch out for one another, for no one else will.” She hadn’t criticised or encouraged his friendship with Lily, but when things fell apart, he had been touched when she had written him to express her distress and disappointment in Lily’s betrayal.

Lucius glanced up at the shop behind him, “Surely school isn’t out yet for Holiday, is it?”

Severus wasn’t fooled, “No, I am here on errands. I believe that I was pressed into service as a baggage mule, although the witches therein have yet to present me with my burdens.”

Narcissa’s laughter rippled out, light and delighted. “Oh Severus. Such a card. It is very good of you, though.” She went up on tiptoe, and asked, “Who are you with, then?”

Lucius beat Severus to the punch, holding his arm steady for his witch to lean upon. “Looks like... Professor McGonagall?” His voice lifted in confusion, “Are they sending detentions that much further afield, now?”

Narcissa’s expression cooled to one of calculation and she let her heels click back to the cobblestones. She glanced back at Severus who shrugged his shoulders. “Who knows? I didn’t do anything wrong, but here I am all the same.” A twinge of guilt clutched in his chest, and he felt obliged to add, “Dumbledore found a stray, and she’s transferring in. She needed school robes.” He added as an afterthought, “Really, the girl was the one who wanted me here.” He muttered sullenly, “Don’t know really why. I’ve never had much of an opinion on these things.” He waved his hand vaguely to indicate the magical fashion world behind him.

Narcissa’s eyes darted up to Lucius’ before she responded to this last, “Oh, but you have excellent taste, Severus. You don’t give yourself enough credit.” Her eyes narrowed, locking onto his face. “What’s different about you?”

Lucius answered before Snape could even register to what the witch was referring. “It’s his hair, dearest. He’s cut it.” He looked at the sixth year student with a penetrating expression, and Severus understood that somehow he had already heard about the most recent incident. “Dumbledore still hasn’t curbed those beastly Gryffindors, Narcissa. I think you might be gratified to know that a formal complaint was presented to the Board on your behalf. Anonymously, of course. Father mentioned it to me at lunch the other day.”
Severus’ eyes cast down as a wave of rage washed over him anew, and the force of it surprised him as he struggled to clamp down on it. He bit out, “They won’t do anything. They never do anything. Potter’s connections are too good.” He had the sense not to mention Sirius Black with his cousin standing there, but Narcissa leapt in with, “Bella told me that Aunt Walburga’s put a second hole in the family tree. She must be absolutely mortified.”

Severus’ eyes snapped back up to confirm what he had just heard, hardly believing it. The Blacks had disowned Sirius? It surely couldn’t just be over him, but the smugness in Lucius Malfoy’s expression said it all. What goes around comes around, and Slytherins greased the wheel on which karma spun.

The door to Malkin’s opened, and a shop assistant poked her head out, saying, “Hallo there. Excuse me, whichever of you is Mister Snape, Professor McGonagall wants you, if you please.”

Severus responded, “I’ll be right in.” He reached out and shook hands with his friends, mustering a sardonic smirk. “Well, I’d better get in there before I’m transfigured into the beast of burden they fancy. Adieu!”

Narcissa and Lucius chuckled at their friend’s predicament and good humour as they turned back to their errands for the day. Severus Snape’s carefully modulated and most theatrical voice floated back out of the shop, “A moment’s patience is rewarded. Your donkey approaches at last. Hee-Haw!” A tinkle of girlish laughter was cut off from their hearing as the door shut behind him.

Lucius muttered, “Such a shame about his parentage. That boy is sharp.”

Narcissa’s face clouded over as they walked away, “If only something could be done about his horrid father. Truly, Lucius, sometimes I don’t think there is any real justice in this world.” Her voice was subdued, and Malfoy was moved.

“The world is what we make of it, darling. I will do what I can for Severus.” His expression was clouded over and he seemed to be drifting far away in his thoughts, plans already being laid out for Snape’s improvement. The appreciative tightening of Narcissa’s dainty hand in the crook of his arm brought him back to the present, and they moved on to lighter, more pleasant entertainments.
Chapter Thirty-One.

Chapter Notes

Antilitigation Charm: Harry Potter and his world are the creations of JK Rowling and are hers alone. I will make no money from this work. My OC's are my own, as is the plot. Coromandel is awesome and the best beta ever. Thanks also to readers like you! Kudos and comments brighten my day, every one is appreciated.

Deirdre was not certain what she was supposed to expect of her shopping trip with Professor McGonagall, but she was fairly certain that the trip so far had been executed in shockingly little time. Plain school uniforms in a variety of iterations as well as the appropriate “underpinnings”, as the teacher dubbed them, were at the surface entirely mundane. Deirdre detected a certain degree of disapproval from the adults when she asked for trousers, athletic gear, and trainers on top of the usual trappings. The shop assistant tittered in response to the peculiar requests, but McGonagall herself didn’t bat an eye.

When time came around for dress robes, the real problems cropped up. Deirdre seemed to naturally gravitate towards modest robes, but the older women were trying to encourage her into more daring ensembles. She was in the full bloom of youth and Professor McGonagall implied that she should look her best when occasion called for it, that it was her duty. Deirdre hated the wisdom of that.

After declining a short beaded dress, a blue form-fitting sleeveless sheath, and a white dress with voluminous skirts, Deirdre was feeling mutinous. The Professor passed her a floor length blue-green silk confection with ruffles over one shoulder with the strictest instructions to try it on, “It is not too tight, nor too short, or too puffy, and it covers one shoulder. Try it. Now.” Deirdre found herself unable to excuse herself from the exercise any longer. Too soon, the curtain was twitched aside and Jocasta entered, ebullient accolades tripping off of her lips to help bolster what she thought to be a young witch with low confidence.

Deirdre stood woodenly, staring at herself in the mirror. She felt as though she might be standing elsewhere, watching a drama unfold. She could predict down to the moment what the witch would do, and sure enough she felt light hands adjusting the ruffles just so. “How pretty you look dear. I say, that suits you.” The hands raised and fluffed her shoulder-length curls, and a forced-cheerful voice admonished her to turn about, prattling on, “That teal color is all of the rage in Rome this year, and the ruffles, well they are wonderful for augmenting your natural beauty. Arms out sweetling, lets see the should…”

There it was. The woman who had been so kind to her had finally really looked at her. Deirdre’s arms snaked about herself, hugging her scar to her chest, and out of sight. She dared to look at her would-be fashion confidant, searching the grieved expression there for a handhold to help them both out of the current predicament.

The woman’s eyes were searching the rest of Deirdre’s skin, finding rather more scars than any young person ought to have. The next worst peeked out from her neckline, a spiderweb of livid pink that crept up her cleavage. Dry swallowing, she ventured, “Would you have anything with a high neck, and long sleeves? I do like the colour.” She offered an apologetic smile to the woman, but could not handle the woman’s pity for some reason, and looked down quickly, her fingers picking at
a crinkled ruffle.

The woman’s mouth worked open and shut as she appeared to be trying out several responses before she settled on, “Gloves would have helped, but I do understand, Miss. I’ll go and look for something else. I... I think I have the perfect thing. Back in two shakes.”

Deirdre had controlled a flinch when the witch had shifted to “Miss,” acknowledging a gaping chasm that now stood between them, echoing with mutual embarrassment. Not for the first time, she felt her mood dip maudlin as she took a peek at her arm. She felt better this morning, but the flesh had only started to really heal. Madam Pomfrey had given her a salve to use on it, but said that what could be done with magic was already done as it had been there for what Pomfrey dubbed “Too long”, and that it was up to her body to take her the rest of the way.

She was distracted by three new offerings being thrust over the curtain. “Try these, Miss. I think we can do some things that will make any of these look respectable.”

Immediately Deirdre felt a bubble of hope float up in her throat. The three pieces were very different from the others. For one thing, they all had higher collars and long sleeves.

First to attract her eye was a floor length maxi-dress in deliciously soft midnight blue velveteen. Deirdre felt her fingers itching to pet the soft material, and when she fingered it, she marveled at how thin and drapey it was as she expected it to be heavy. It had a modest v-neck with a collar, and the sleeves were sheer but of the same colour as the body of the dress.

The second was a shorter dress, all draped mulberry crepe with a fitted upper bodice and puffy upper sleeves that narrowed to fitted cuffs that went from elbow to wrist, accented with pearl buttons. The draped material was gathered in a high empire waist, to fall in a flowing A-line skirt that seemed to be about knee-length. The back was a V, and dipped deeper than the front neckline which was draped, creating the effect of a bateau neckline.

The final dress was a rich mallard teal brocade, inspired by traditional chinese clothing, tailored with a high mandarin neck fastened down the front with decorative knotted frogs. The sleeves, Deirdre noticed, were layered to suggest an overjacket, and the shift sleeve underneath was highly embroidered with bronze and gold thread to look like feathers. The dress was cut to hug the curve of its wearer’s hips, and while the length was down to below the knee, it had a slit up the side that promised ease of movement and a flash of leg. The most striking part of this dress was the motif of two mirrored phoenixes, embroidered in gold, silver, and bronze threads with wings spread down the back, their long tails curving ornately over the hips to emphasise them.

After shucking off the failed ruffle experiment, Deirdre tried each dress on in turn, the ice over her reserve slowly melting as McGonagall and Jocasta cooed over her, allowing her to change and emerge to show off the results. Deirdre was conflicted about which one to choose, as she liked them all, although she felt that the mulberry suited her hair the best. Jocasta hastened to bring out two sets of enchanted combs, one tortoise, and the second golden. She showed her new project how to use them to put her hair up in a loose chignon, and a more formal updo. McGonagall was marking each minute as it ticked by. “Get dressed, Deirdre. We have to get moving. I’ll have Jocasta here pick out some shoes, but we need to get a move on. We still have to stop at Ollivander’s.”

Deirdre perked up quite a bit and hurried to oblige her patroness. A short time later, all things were being loaded into packages and boxes, and Deirdre was amused to hear Professor McGonagall call out to Severus.

A stab of guilt seized her as she realised her friend had been cooling his heels outside of the shop for what must have been over an hour when she heard him proclaim, “Your donkey approaches at last.
Hee-Haw!

The cold winter of social tension that had built up in Deirdre crumbled away, melting in the spring flow of laughter that was surprised out of her. Severus had just admitted he was an ass. The idea just struck her as the funniest thing she had ever heard. The straight face with which he declared his utility only made it more laughable, and she was still giggling and hiccuping as Professor McGonagall led the pair out of the shop. Deirdre was carrying some bags, and Severus was burdened with several large boxes tied with twine.

Deirdre tried to screw down her giggles as male grumbling floated to her ears, “Buy the whole store, did you?”

“Felt that way. I am so glad that’s over.”

There was silence as Severus processed that, and he seemed to be taxed with the effort of walking, balancing boxes and also carrying a conversation. “Well... the next stop isn’t likely to add much more, is it now?”

A light dusting of wet snow was coming down now from the grey November sky. Deirdre hummed agreement and had to twirl and side step to get out of the way of a handsome wizard’s way. He was talking animatedly to another man who strongly resembled him, and Deirdre only got the fast impression of dark brooding eyes and a gruff sort of disdain being sent in her direction until she was out of his view.

The tinkling of the shop bell grabbed Deirdre’s attention as she returned her attention forward. The shopfront read “Ollivander’s Wands.”

It took a moment for Deirdre’s eyes to adjust to the light of the shop, and a voice welcomed them. “Ah, yes. Miss Deirdre Ward. Professor Dumbledore had sent a note ahead, that you were coming.”

She felt a tugging at her arm as McGonagall pulled the bags out of her hands, freeing her. “Go on. Step up to the counter.”

Ollivander already was pulling long boxes off of the shelves. She heard the clunk as Severus set down the boxes on the floor behind her. She stepped forwards, turning around to search for her friend, and found him a step behind her, looking down at her with mild curiosity. She tilted her head to the side and then twisted back around to step up to the counter.

The rough wizard had wild tarnishing brown hair that was too long for him. He had plenty of wrinkles that creased as he looked past her head. “Ah. Blackthorne, dragon heartstring core, 14 and a quarter inches, supple.” Two shaggy eyebrows raised in amusement. “Severus Snape. You’ve grown, son.”

Severus had only been here the one time, so he was taken aback at Ollivander’s mode of address. He nodded respectfully. “Sir.”

As Ollivander turned his attention to Professor McGonagall, Deirdre felt rather than saw the witch’s spine straighten. She spoke, heading off further pleasantries. “Yes, yes. Sir, if you please, Miss Ward is in direst need of a new wand.”

Expression darkening. “Ah, yes. I spoke with him about that wand that you had with you. I was relieved to hear that you were not suited to each other, as it sounds as though it had been corrupted quite badly.” He sighed sadly, “I suggested he bring the wand to my nephew in Hogsmeade for proper disposal. Always sad to see one go that way.” He shook his head gently and slid open the first
Deirdre could see a light coloured wand therein, gleaming. When the box was presented to her she plucked it up and spun it about. While it felt good to have a wand in her hand, the thing was barely responsive.

“No, back it goes. Next!”

Blue velvet couched a red-toned wand with a lovely scrolled handle. Deirdre picked this one up, and she could smell this one over the ambient dust. She fingered it, and felt that she might be having a short conversation with it, just above the level of human perception. A wave of this wand created a force wave that shook the shelves, sending a particularly precariously stacked pile of boxes tumbling down. One of these boxes fell to the counter and opened.

The mastercraftsman scrambled to corral the casualties, muttering to himself. “Tricky. Too sensitive. Was close, let’s see.”

Deirdre had set down the cedar wand with a feeling of disappointment. She didn’t like making a mess, so when she felt rather than saw a wand roll into the side of her hand, she picked it up. She blinked, staring at the length of wood in her hand. The moment she touched it, she felt how different this wand was to others. It wasn’t exactly heavier, but it had a gravity that pulled her whole attention.

Ollivander had recovered the boxes and turned back to say, “No matter. That happens more often than you’d believe. I need to get a new…”

The wizard halted mid sentence, and dismay bled into his otherwise hitherto unflappable manner. He reached out, and then his hand froze before he committed to snatching the stick away. Clearing his throat, he looked at Minerva before supplying, “Well, that is a rather unusual wand. Had it a long time, my father made it as demonstration of concept.” His let his hand fall to the counter, now looking intrigued. Things happened for a reason, after all. “Go ahead, see what you can do with it.”

Deirdre’s fingers were caressing the length of the wand now, fascinated by its buttery smooth surface, the blonde wood unnaturally heating under her touch. Without thought, Deirdre released her will to impulse, and she blew into her left hand, bringing to life a blue flame that burned cold. With the wand, she muttered words, brought forward from a dusty page in the back of her mind. The flame took on the shape of a tiny dragon which she sent flying about the room, moving her wand as though the construct was a puppet.

Unfettered joy lit up Deirdre’s face as she watched it soar about the shop, veering to make a spiral around Severus at the chest level. She crooned at the lizard and it came back to her finger, perching there to rub its face on her cheek before it dissipated back to thin air.

Quietly, Ollivander supplied, “Willow…”

McGonagall’s eyebrows rose as a pregnant pause extended in the otherwise silent shop. She resorted to, “Willow and...?”

The man cleared his throat, finding his voice once more. “Willow and thestral hair. Twelve and a half inches, swishy.” His tone was carefully level as he delivered this news.

Deirdre’s eyes were bright with exhilaration, but the news gave her pause. “Thestral. I’ve... heard of a wand.” She frowned, trying to remember. She muttered, “Damn.”

Mechanically, Ollivander started restacking his wares back onto the wall, turning his back to the little
group. “Right, well. I’ll charge this to the account, as Albus instructed. That wand will no doubt
serve you well, young lady.” He turned back to Deirdre, having recovered some of his composure
and offered her a mechanical smile, but his eyes… they were deeply troubled.

Professor McGonagall seemed unruffled by the news, and put on a polite, ingratiating smile for the
wandmaker. “I was wondering. We need to get back to Hogwarts. First Quidditch match of the
year,” She leaned in to whisper, “Gryffindor versus Slytherin.” She winked at the old man. “I want
to get back in time and it would be so kind of you.”

Ollivander dusted his hands on his apron and finally tore his eyes away from Deirdre who was
feeling more and more uncomfortable by the moment. She wondered if she had done something
wrong. Either way, she was free to return to Severus’ side and searched his face for reaction. He was
looking down at the boxes with a sour expression when he noticed Deirdre’s regard. He leaned over,
giving himself into the role of donkey and gathering up the boxes once more.

Deirdre was watching him from under her lashes and said lightly, “I can manage those once we get
through the Floo, I think. No worries. No one else has to know of your afternoon of being an
incredible... “

Severus’ voice cut in sharply. “You wouldn’t.”

Deirdre rewarded him with a wicked smirk. “Well, I was about to say gentleman, but now I’m not so
sure.” She flipped her hair and having already retrieved her part of the burden, flounced off to catch
up with their chaperone. Severus was caught off balance in every way, but he was getting more
adept at unsticking the paralysis that the clever little witch seemed to easily place on his higher
functions. An answering smirk pulled at the corners of his mouth.

They both knew she was actually going to say “ass”.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Antilitigation Charm: You know the drill. Not mine, JKR is the bomb. OC’s and plot are mine, no money will be accepted for this work.
As you all know, Coromandel is an awesome person and beta who has had a very busy week with her family, but still took time to look over this chapter for me. She's the best!
As are readers like you. Thanks!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The trip back from Diagon Alley was uneventful. They stepped out of the Floo into McGonagall’s office, shaking soot from their shoes on the woolen hearth carpet. Deirdre, somewhat giddy with her new wand, truly looked like a witch in puppy love. Displaying her cleverness, she contrived to shrink the boxes down to reasonably portable sizes. Severus looked nonplussed and insisted on tucking the now jewellery sized boxes into his pockets rather than allowing her to take them over, planning to walk her back to the infirmary for the time being. So she wouldn’t get lost.

As they were getting ready to take their leave, Professor McGonagall pinned the students down with her baleful stare. “Deirdre, tomorrow you will be sorted. I believe that Professor Dumbledore has called a staff meeting so it will be in the staff room downstairs. One of us will come to collect you around one o’clock.”

Severus looked on quietly as Deirdre stilled, coming to attention. He heard a slight tremble in her voice as she replied, “Oh. Oh... of course, Professor. I'll be ready.” Her eyes lit up and she asked eagerly, “Am I to start classes soon, then?”

Professor McGonagall appeared to be taken aback. “Why, yes child. As early as Monday.” A lightning flash of humour cracked the dour woman’s expression, “Last weekend without homework, might as well enjoy it.”

Deirdre pressed on, “What classes will I be taking?” Clouds of uncertainty dimmed the girl’s joy, as she considered exactly what was ahead. Her lower lip was sacrificed as a chew toy for her worries, and her eyes became round with concern. “How will I ever catch up?”

McGonagall arched her eyebrows, as she had been wondering the same things herself. The Headmaster had asked each teacher to come up with short tests of knowledge and skill to allow them to place her more quickly. Tsking, she supplied, “No use worrying yourself about it now, dear. All will be made clear tomorrow.”

Severus felt fascination and dread build in his gut as recognised the wild panic in Deirdre’s expression. “Deirdre. It will be fine.” This clearly had no effect. Louder, “Deirdre.” He reached out a steadying hand, clasping her on the shoulder. She jumped at the contact, her mind having been locked in an ever tightening spiral of what if’s and hastily cobbled solutions. As she turned to look at him, he dropped his hand away and shook his head at her with a lopsided smile.

At that opportune moment, a first year Hufflepuff poked her head in. “If you please, Professor
McGonagall. Headmaster Dumbledore begs that you bring Miss Ward and Mr Snape up to his office on your return.” She cracked a smile that was missing a tooth, and added. “You’ve returned, am I right?”

The Professor glanced cagily at the time and nodded curtly. “Thank you, Amelia. Off you go, now.” The girl shrugged amiably and moved off in a flash of flaxen pigtails.

McGonagall muttered to no one in particular, “What could that be about, I wonder.” She clapped her hands, as if clearing them of dust before pronouncing, “Well, soonest begun is soonest done. Come on, then.”

The Headmaster’s Office was one floor up so in no time they were standing in front of the guardians, and Deirdre heard the teacher say “Super Shrimps.” The tone with which she uttered these words dripped with disdain. She ushered the students up into the office, having to place a leading hand at the witch’s back, encouraging her further into the chamber. Deirdre was slow on the uptake as she was looking all around at the instruments and bookshelves, which were a good sight more approachable than the people in the office.

The Headmaster stood next to his desk and asked Deirdre to sit in one of the chairs in front of his desk. A cheerful looking witch dressed in sensible brown woolens was perched on the other chair, and she reached out a hand to shake in greeting, “Hullo, dear. I’m Professor Sprout.” After a beat she added, “Herbology, you know. And Head of House Hufflepuff. The Friar has mentioned you to me. Deirdre, is it?”

Earnest hazel eyes traced Deirdre’s features, and Deirdre was momentarily diverted by the woman’s wooly brindled hair. It was mostly tucked under a practical witch hat, also in brown, with a modest brim. There were a few fine strands of straw caught in that hair, which did nothing to diminish her resemblance to a kindly sheep.

At a loss for words just now, Deirdre ducked her head in acknowledgement. “Ah, yes. Thank you.”

The clomping of boots heralded more attendants - Professor Nott and Madam Pomfrey. Severus drifted to the side of the proceedings, making room for the others, and was somewhat gratified when the Professor took up a position on Severus’ left, and Madam Pomfrey stood on his right. Nott nodded a greeting to Severus, and Pomfrey was anxiously observing Deirdre. The Mediwitch piped up, “I’ll just get a spot of tea going. Did you get a chance to rest, Deirdre?”

Deirdre shook her head. “Got an early lunch in the kitchens. Um, tea does sound lovely. If it isn’t too much trouble.” She looked around at the little company of magical folk who had so far conspired to help her with no real hope of reward. A feeling of mingled shame and gratitude welled up in the girl, and fortunately she was not allowed to commune with these feelings much longer.

Inclining his head, Dumbledore seemed pleased with the suggestion of tea. “I’ve got some new digestives to share. And jelly babies.” He raised his shaggy eyebrows as he produced a wax paper bag out of the folds of robes and poked it under Sprout’s nose. “Would you like a jelly baby?”

Sprout looked scandalised, “Baby what?” She seemed afraid to look into the bag and shook her head rigorously. “No thank you. I’ll just have the tea.”

Deirdre’s lips pressed thinly together in a line and commented in an off-hand manner, “Those things are dreadful for your teeth.” She looked up at Dumbledore and said, “You’ll have to brush straight away!”

Forgotten, standing with her arms crossed and checking the clock next to her, Minerva McGonagall
cleared her throat. “Headmaster, I am sure you recall what day it is.”

Dumbledore wheeled around to hand McGonagall the bag. “Jelly baby, Minerva?” He didn’t recoil at the glare he received from the formidable witch, but he averted his eyes with a tilt of his head that spoke of disappointment.

Dumbledore’s expression switched to one of delight as the hand of Professor Nott introduced itself into the shunned sack of sweets and drew out a few. He stepped back, and watching the Headmaster, he very slowly bit into one of the soft candies. His eyelids lowered a fraction in enjoyment as he worked at the treat. “Mm. Not bad.” He lifted the second one in his hand in salute to the Headmaster and sauntered back to Severus’ side to casually lean back against the wall. Severus didn’t understand why the Professor seemed to be so tense after that exchange.

One last member of the little cabal arrived, puffing. “Sorry, game day. You know, had to diffuse a few plots for wanton mischief.” Professor Svartrunir joined the group, and fended off the proffered bag of candy with a perfunctory wave of his hand. “Ah, there you are, Mister Snape. You do look better. Will you be returning to us soon?” His eyes were warm as he looked the student over.

Severus was about to say something when Madam Pomfrey’s voice drifted from where she was working with the Headmaster’s Tea service, “Probably tonight.”

A pair of shaggy eyebrows shot up in surprise, “Ah, thank you, Poppy.” He wheeled, searching for something and then with a quiet, “Ah,” he pulled around one the winged chairs near the fireplace and planted himself therein. Everyone with eyes could see the predatory look that Minerva was sending Svartrunir’s way.

The Slytherin Head of House offered Professor McGonagall a wintry smile, “Ah, Minerva. Anxious to get back to your cubs?”

She answered him measure for measure, “Yes, thank you, Sigmund. I have been detained with errands for the school for the past several hours. I trust no one has burned down the tower yet?”

The distinguished wizard answered with a bark of laughter and a decisive shake of the head. There were no major incidents. Yet.

Dumbledore let the sack of sweets in his hand settle in a place of prominence at the front of the desk, an open invitation for the company to help themselves if inclined to do so. “With regret, I must interrupt you all to get started.” Remaining standing, the old wizard paced a few steps to the side and back as he formed his approach. “Most of you are already aware of Miss Deirdre Ward, who has been taken in by the school.” He was looking mainly at Professor Sprout as he spoke, as she was the only one in the room who had not yet run into Deirdre.

“Unfortunately, the true circumstances in which she arrived must remain obscure. I vouch for her to be exactly what she seems. She is a witch who is in need of further education.” Deirdre’s cheeks flushed pink at this, and she looked down at the hands folded in her lap, listening as the pacing wizard went on.

“Now, in today’s society, people are very scared and often foolish. Because Deirdre’s lineage is unknown, we must provide a pedigree for her and explanation for her presence here, joining so late.” Dumbledore cleared his throat and gestured to Pomona Sprout. “Professor Sprout has agreed to claim you as one of the offspring of a lost cousin, as her clan is rather large.”

The matronly witch leaned over and placed a gentle hand on Deirdre’s shoulder. “Quite right. I thought that you might fit in as the only daughter of my cousin, Eleanor. She ran off with an
American years ago, you see. My family would have wanted to meet the fellow but unfortunately it never came to be. They have been travelling for years, and only recently we heard that they disappeared into the wilds of Africa. We received a letter from the Ministry in the Congo that they were part of a research party who went missing. They say they went afoul of those awful Nundu last month.”

Professor Svartrunir spoke up, “Ah yes. I read about that in the paper. They think the last victim of the Nundu breath may have died this past week. They’re calling it Ebola for the non-magical authorities. Gruesome deaths, truly horrific. Too bad they didn’t catch the pair the first time around, hundreds more people died.”

Deirdre’s heart warmed a fraction towards the elderly wizard at his use of the word “people” to describe the non-magical victims. She took in a shaky breath, eyes pricking with the promise of tears. “The scale of the disaster seems appropriate. Enough people that an English orphan might get juggled through essentially unnoticed by the authorities.” Tears dripped, unbidden, and she blinked, trying to will them away. Wasn’t there a spell that might help? Her memory had abandoned her for the moment, it seemed. She closed her eyes, shutting out the others, focusing on her breathing, trying to get control over her emotions again.

She felt strangely grieved, as though she really did lose her parents even though she couldn’t recall anything about having had them in the first place. The absurdity of it all was one thing. What truly astounded her was the number of people who were prepared to work together, to lie to protect her - a mere slip of a girl, one with no connections. That pure generosity and caring was what really put a wedge to one of the many cracks in her heart, widening it enough to let her sorrow through. Too much, too much, too much. She scrubbed at her eyes with her sleeve, and felt a surge of gratitude when Professor Sprout pressed a white handkerchief into her hand. Taking her new role seriously, the dear woman made soothing noises and patted her on the shoulder, which seemed to help quite a bit.

Dumbledore forged onwards after a pause to observe the effect this was having on the subject of their meeting. If he was moved, it was only towards even more aloof heights. “Thank you. I am sorry for your loss, Pomona, but it has helped another in turn, as you see.”

Sprout nodded distractedly, absorbed in ministering to her newly acquired cousin, “Yes, yes. Thank you, very kind I am sure.” Her answer had an edge to it that spoke volumes of her opinion of the proceedings. She was leaning towards Deirdre, one breath away from gathering Deirdre in as one might a small child in desperate need of comfort.

Poppy sailed past Dumbledore and set out tea and biscuits, whispering to Deirdre before serving tea to Professor Sprout as well.

Severus watched from his place against the wall. There was a cold lump of lead in his stomach, which had appeared when he heard Deirdre start to cry. Helpless, he reflected exactly how little the girl had cried so far, and squared that with how long she had been awake. She’d only have had days. Professor Nott seemed to be doing the same kind of emotional math and his expression was remarkably sober. “What of Filch, Headmaster? Surely the man who found Deirdre would need to be included in this conspiracy?”

Madam Pomfrey came over to Professor Nott and Severus, and handed them both cups with saucers and shortbread balanced on the rim. Severus was glad of the distraction. He heard Pomfrey say from nearby, “I’ve talked with him some, Albus. He’s convinced the girl is the victim of one of the Death Eater’s raids, and he’s as eager to keep quiet about her as any. I think we can trust him there. Man seemed invested in making sure Deirdre pulled through.” She threw Severus a glance, “That, and he
is rather grateful for some of the new lineament that Mister Snape prepared while spending time convalescing. I think if we can keep him feeling appreciated, he isn’t likely to find reason to gossip.”

Professor Dumbledore cleared his throat. “Well, tomorrow I will be introducing Deirdre formally at the staff meeting. There she will be sorted, and we will determine what classes she will be matriculating into. At that point, the whole staff will be apprised of Deirdre’s story. I expect that hiding her in plain sight will do better than keeping her in the infirmary until spring, and as for Argus Filch, the critical part of Deirdre’s secret would be the mode of her arrival. All else will be rather an open secret, if you will.”

Deirdre stilled, getting better control of her tears at the new news. Something different to worry about. Dimly, she heard Professor Nott offer to talk with Filch, which Dumbledore declined, having other plans of his own. She dared a brave smile for Professor Sprout, and whispered, “Thank you, Professor.”

Sprout tut-tutted. “Quite welcome dear. You are family, now. Oh, how wonderful.” She brightened a shade, “And you must call me Aunt Pomona when we aren’t in class, alright dear?” Her eyes had taken on that soulful pleading, although Deirdre knew that she was being done the favour and not the other way round, she was not prepared to say no. “Of course, Aunt Pomona.” She was rewarded with a beaming smile of irregular stained teeth, a very genuine smile for all of that.

Nott’s voice broke through then. “Deirdre, I will be providing you with your necessary identification papers and a birth certificate. You were born in Peru, which is why your name did not show up in the Ministry records. I’ve located a copy of a marriage certificate from the Muggle authorities for your parents, Eleanor Ward, née Keswick, and David Ward. Your mother was looking for rare magical plants in the dying tropics, and your father was an artist. Specifically a painter, he would take likenesses of the samples your mother found. They were writing a book before their untimely death. Your education has been rather eclectic I am afraid, so we will have to test you into the NEWT level courses.” He had strolled over to Deirdre as he spoke, standing in a place where she didn’t need to crane her neck to see him. She was no longer crying and was focused on what the man was telling her.

“What sort of testing?” She glanced at Professor McGonagall, who hadn’t anything to add so far.

The Headmaster answered, “Well, we thought that you’d like to talk with Pomona here about that. You may need to answer questions and demonstrate what you can do, now that you have a wand. There will be ample time for that tomorrow.”

Professor Nott continued on, “All of us will need to be consistent with this background.” He looked at Deirdre and Severus in particular. “Are we all comfortable with this?”

Svartrunir spoke up, “How did she manage to arrive here?”

Dumbledore answered, “Portkey. She was sent straight from Zaire. She was triaged here, a victim of the attack.”

Professor McGonagall asked next, “How old is she?”

Professor Nott spun around, “Sixteen! Next question?” He rocked forwards on his toes, looking like a contestant in a spelling bee.

Sprout asked, “Would you like to meet the family next weekend, dear?” She had shifted forwards, as though she was on the edge of her seat.
Deirdre looked poleaxed, and after a pause she answered with a question, “Why not?”

“Nott indeed. Why all of this subterfuge?” Dumbledore stroked his beard, eyes sharp with challenge.

Madam Pomfrey rolled her eyes, “Oh, for Merlin’s sake.” She stepped up beside Nott and looked up at him with an expression of exasperation.

Clearing his throat, Nott raised his voice a fraction in an effort to redirect the group’s attention. “Miss Ward had clearly been attacked shortly prior to her arrival. We must assume that she is in danger. No one has been looking for her, as best we can tell. My contacts have been listening for anyone searching for a witch of her age and description in the hospitals and law enforcement. So far, dry. That does not guarantee her safety.”

McGonagall added, “No one showed any interest when we were in Diagon today, Whittington. This is a lot of fuss for one student.” The Transfiguration Professor didn’t seem impressed. At. All.

Dumbledore looked at Severus and Nott before speaking into the tense silence that followed. “I have reason to believe that Tom Riddle would stop at nothing to get to Deirdre, should he learn of her existence. This must never happen. Deirdre knows things that could change history.”

Minerva’s mouth parted, dawning horror rushing in on her. In a hushed tone, she elaborated on her fears, “And I just walked about Diagon Alley with her, and helped her pick out jumpers!”

Deirdre’s eyes were round, and she shrunk in her chair, feeling small under the collective scrutiny of the little company. A strong, calloused hand gripped her arm, and she refocused on her new Auntie. The expression on the woman’s face was of honest concern.

“I think that’s quite enough, Albus. You’re scaring her.” Spine straightening, Sprout’s thick brows crowded together as her thoughts knitted into a cohesive statement. “It shouldn’t matter that Deirdre might have something valuable in her head. Every student, every wizard and witch in this school has the potential, the same potential, mind you, to change the course of history for better or for worse. In this, she is no different than anyone else. I beg of you, do not treat her differently. She is as said before, exactly who she appears to be.” Deirdre felt the woman gently squeeze her arm as she finished, “A delightful witch in need of a home and an education.” Professor Sprout stood and looked around the room, drawing herself up. “That, friends, is what Hogwarts shall give her. And damn to the nine hells Tom Riddle or anyone else who would seek to interfere with any of MY students.” She favoured everyone, particularly Dumbledore, Nott, and McGonagall with a steely glare.

Severus was quiet, listening. He had to admire Professor Sprout. She had always seemed so innocuous. A competent teacher, for sure. But he had never really heard her talk about anything beyond herbs and their care. She had given Deirdre back her humanity, reminded the gathered company that she was a student. What needed done was no more or less than she would have done for any other pupil. All were her responsibility and nothing could be simpler. Helga Hufflepuff would be proud to have such a paragon for her House.

Madam Pomfrey seconded the notion, “Couldn’t have worded it better, Pomona. Bravo, dear. Every soul in this castle is under my care. It doesn’t matter who they are or whence they came. We are Mother, Father, Teacher, Healer, Coach, and Guardsmen for all of our students.”

Professor Svartrunir stood, lifting his cup in salute. “Well put, dear ladies. You shame us conniving old men and remind us of our larger purpose beyond the classrooms. The future of magical Britain breathes its first in our halls, and it is our mandate to guide it towards brighter days.” He stepped forward to shake Sprout’s hand cordially.
Clearing his throat, Dumbledore recaptured the collected attention of the room. “I am pleased that you both are able to see your way to tucking Miss Ward into the fold, but as staff, there are only so many places we can go.”

Severus had been looking at the back of Deirdre’s head, so he was taken aback when he felt someone move to stand to his right side. A bony hand lighted on his shoulder, and Svartrunir rasped out, “Surely, you have one here who might be counted on. He’s got into more than his share of mischief, but he has a firm character. As we discussed last night, he has unique strengths that will help us. He is a gift of circumstance. You’d be a fool not to invoke it.”

From Severus’ left side, Nott spoke up, “And he already knows the story.”

McGonagall, ever the devil’s advocate, interjected, “That could be dealt with, Nott. Don’t protest, you know how to do the thing as prettily as anyone here.” Nott’s expression darkened noticeably, and he inhaled sharply, mustering a strong response before someone else beat him to it.

Deirdre’s attention was fetched and she had turned in her chair, “Won’t it look suspicious if Severus didn’t know anything about me? You had him give me a tour of the school, and we walked about Diagon Alley already. Surely the openly curious would go straight to me, but others might be more likely to talk to him?” Her dark eyes felt warm on Severus’ face.

The observant would have noticed a flicker of triumph in Pomfrey’s expression as she hastened to add, “Some of the volunteers already know about Deirdre. She’s wearing Serena Badcock’s shoes. And everyone knows where Severus has been for the past two weeks.” Her posture was straight, tense.

Recovering his composure a fraction, Nott lifted his hands placatingly towards McGonagall. “No, Minerva. We can trust Mr Snape. He has already helped us a great deal, and I am indebted to the lad. He will not betray Deirdre or the school. I’ll stand witness in this along with Sigmund.” His gaze shifted to Dumbledore expectantly.

Dumbledore had been noticeably quiet, contemplating Deirdre. “Miss Ward. Is it acceptable to you to have Severus work on your behalf? You have the most to lose here. He is… young.”

Severus held his breath, waiting to know his fate. He hated the idea of anyone altering his memory. How much would they make him forget? McGonagall had no idea of just how much she had suggested. Did Deirdre pick up on the subtle undertone of distrust radiating from McGonagall and Dumbledore?

Looking up at the white-bearded wizard, felt by many to be the First among wizards in the World, Deirdre answered strangely. “You are proud and do not love advice, having indeed a store of your own wisdom.* Cast aside these notions before they destroy what should be a mutual fellowship. You have seen what I think of Mr Snape, mind to mind. I am left to wonder at your reticence. Loyalty must be repaid in kind, lest it rot at its root, Headmaster.” A smile lifted the severity from her face and she turned away to look at the others in the room, finding herself the object of silent astonishment.

Dumbledore’s voice broke the silence, “A simple yes would have sufficed, but I will consider what you have said.” He raised his hands palm up to the company, “Any other thoughts? I think we have come to an understanding. Do speak now.”

As the Headmaster made eye contact with every person in the room, the responses were all to the negative. McGonagall was the last, and Dumbledore had to call her name before she would meet his gaze. She too nodded a silent acceptance of the plan, but she looked tense, ready to run out the door
like a trapped cat the minute it was cracked.

Chapter End Notes

* Saruman to Gandalf, The Two Towers, JRR Tolkien.
Chapter Thirty-Three.

Chapter Notes

Antilitigation Charm: Harry Potter and his world are JK Rowling’s creations. The OCs and plot are mine. 
My beta, Coromandel just might have irritated her husband staying up ten minutes past their bedtime, just to help me get this to you all. (I’m sorry, A!) She’s the best, sweetest, most supportive beta out there.
Thanks to readers like you. Comments and kudos are lovely rewards!

The meeting broke up quickly. Professors Svartrunir and McGonagall both took their leave almost immediately, wishing to get to the game to oversee the proceedings. Madam Pomfrey also scurried away, as she needed to be ready to take care of any casualties of the game and its aftermath.

Aunt Pomona engaged Deirdre’s time for breakfast the following morning as they were being ushered out by Professor Dumbledore. She and Professor Nott went on their way, and Deirdre found herself alone with Severus on the stair.

Deirdre cast a Tempus charm, and the time appeared hovering in the air before their eyes. Severus fidgeted, and asked, “So, would you like to go watch the Quidditch game?”

Blushing, Deirdre looked down at her feet before responding, “Sure.”

Severus was looking at her, and the intense regard was making her squirm. He broke eye contact to squint at the space where the time had hovered moments before, suggesting, “Well, we’ve our coats still. We could go back to drop off your parcels at the infirmary and have to dash to get a seat, or we could stroll over directly.”

Deirdre shrugged with one shoulder before answering, “Let’s just go.” She started down the stairs and as she turned the corner, she looked back at him speculatively and that urge to squirm transformed into something quite different. She grinned at Severus, and then without warning she took off at a run, flying out of sight.

Behind her, she could hear Severus lurch into motion, taking the stairs two at a time. His boots rang out against the stone, reverberating in the enclosed stairwell of Hospital Tower.

Deirdre glanced back, reassuring herself that she had made enough of a lead in the stairwell that they had lost sight of one another. Her instincts had told her where to stop, so he blew past Deirdre on the landing. She had fetched up into an alcove that was built in there, and cast a Disillusionment charm on herself. Biting her lip she waited, trying to be as quiet as possible.

Severus came to a stop several flights down, finally perceiving that his were the only footsteps traversing the stairs. “Deirdre?” At a more ponderous pace, the wizard climbed back up, retracing his steps. He stopped at regular intervals, and Deirdre realised that he was listening. It hadn’t been more than three turns before he had doubled back. As he came to the landing, she her him call out her name, more softly this time. “Deirdre? Where have you gone now, I wonder?”

Deirdre was determined to keep her cool, but her diaphragm was fluttering reflexively in amusement.
He was very close to where she was standing. Calm. Still. Empty air… and then her stomach betrayed her with a loud gurgle.

The boy in black chuckled, leaning against the wall nearby. He drawled, “Hungry again, are you? A veritable biscuit monster…”

That was just too funny, and a giggle escaped, completely giving away her position. Her eyes flew wide at her mistake, and Severus was homing in on the sound. She ducked under his arm, but the passage stirred the air and he whirled to follow. He had his wand out, and cast a silent *Finite Incantatem*. “There you are! Here I thought you had stopped to fetch us some tea.”

She squeaked as she felt the warmth return to her skin from her toes back up to her crown. “No, but I could go for some later.” Deirdre made a show of looking outside at the light level. “What are you doing, dawdling there, Severus? We’ll be late. We want decent seats, right?”

Severus was putting his wand away, so Deirdre, still feeling mischievous grabbed his hand and dragged him after her, tugging him nearly off of his feet.

Nearly at the same speed as before, they barreled down the rest of the stairway, coming out on the second floor. Abruptly, Deirdre stopped and it was all Severus could do to avoid a collision.

Deirdre had dropped Severus’ hand to lift one finger to her lips, a gesture of caution. This hall was not deserted. The wizard was thoroughly befuddled, but seemed to catch on as she started walking again at a more sedate pace. She hissed, “Act normal.” He did his best to look bored with life, and Deirdre almost had to laugh at him again. It was rather difficult to look normal when one had just been running down stairs at top speed. A gaggle of Gryffindor Quidditch enthusiasts were making their way down the hall, each student bundled up, and chatting merrily. Only one of the students looked their way as they passed, and the young wizard’s eyes seemed to pass over them as though they were another statue or painting, background in the hallway.

She had slowed her steps considerably, and this allowed Severus to come up to walk beside her rather than be pulled along behind. On impulse, she tucked her left hand into the crook of his right elbow. She whispered up at him, “Professorial Offices, right?”

Severus glanced about before answering with a short nod, cottoning on, “Um yes. Professor Nott’s office is along there, as is Professor Hare’s.”

“What do they teach?” She was looking forwards, eyes intent on the faces of the people passing them, looking for signs of recognition or interest. Fortunately, most seemed to be heading in the same direction they were, towards the grand staircase that would lead down to the main entry hall and out to the courtyard.

“Defense Against the Dark Arts and Divination.” Severus cleared his throat and looked down at her, expression serious. “Do you have any idea of what classes you will want to take, Deirdre?”

Unable to help herself, Deirdre gasped, “What? I have to choose? How awful!” She had a sinking feeling. She didn’t like the idea of limitations to her studies of any kind.

Severus hemmed, “Well, I suppose you could see what you tested into. It might narrow down the choices for you.” He patted her hand, “You’re a shoe-in for Runes, I’d say. You already seem to have a grasp of that. Handy for wards and enchantments, good for the long haul.”

Deirdre’s steps had slowed a trifle and she looked up at Severus. “I meant, can’t I take them all? There’s so much to learn!” The fire of academic avarice lit up her face, “What are the other subjects,
again?”

Taken aback, Severus answered slowly, “Well, there’s Alchemy, Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, Astronomy, Care of Magical Creatures, Charms, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Divination…”

Deirdre snorted at Divination, feeling a strange level of contempt for that one. The wizard continued to speak, as though he had not had been interrupted at all. “Herbology, History of Magic, Muggle Studies, and Transfiguration.”

Deirdre asked, “And what are you studying, Severus?”

Snape looked at Deirdre sidelong before answering, “Potions is my favourite. I was thinking of going for an Apprenticeship someday. I am also taking Transfiguration, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Herbology, Charms, Arithmancy for Potions, and Ancient Runes for fun.”

Deirdre commented, “Not fond of animals, are you?”

The answer he gave was cagey, “Well, never had any pets growing up. I like animals just fine, honestly. I just don’t care to spend all day mucking out Mooncalf stalls.”

“Cat, rat, toad, or owl?”

“What?” His brow pinched as he hustled to keep up. Deirdre had lost Severus almost as well has she had in the stairs, taking a turn and landing in an entirely different conversation.

Deirdre looked up at Severus as though he was being thick. “Your familiar. Do you have a Cat, Rat, Toad, or Owl?”

Severus’ eyebrows lifted. “Oh. Well, none, honestly. I’ve no use for owls as I can use one of the school owls when needful.” He paused, before adding, “And the others require too much looking after. I’d rather just read a book if I get bored. They at least stay put where I left them.”

Grimacing in agreement, Deirdre answered before he could ask. “I don’t know if I had a familiar. Totally blank. I do rather admire owls, but they are awfully messy.”

They turned down the double staircase and Deirdre had to walk fast to keep up with his long-legged strides. He seemed tense, looking about them with a level of attention that suggested he suspected an ambush. As they came into the entry hall, Severus pulled out his wand with a neat flourish and opened the door, and ushered Deirdre out into the open air of the courtyard.

Remus Lupin was waiting in the courtyard, reading a slim volume for Runes. He had a toothpick clutched between his lips and was worrying at it, causing it to jink about. He was waiting for Peter, who had had to run back for his coat, having left it in the dormitory. As the door burst open, Remus was greeted with a most unwelcome and odd vision.

There was Severus Snape, chatting with a pretty little witch who clung to his arm and seemed to be actually... Interested in what he had to say. Remus’ guilty heart unclenched a fraction on noticing that the wizard’s hair was all back in place, although he looked different. He shut the book and tucked it into an inner pocket of his robe. The toothpick fell out of his mouth completely when he saw the pair stop for a moment. Snape pulled something out of his pocket... long and green.
Peter trotted up beside Remus, and came to a halt as Remus’ outstretched arm arrested his progress. “My god. Is Severus Snape actually lending that girl...” The declaration died unfinished in his throat, and Peter squinted up at his friend before looking over in the direction that Remus was now staring, astounded.

Catching sight of Severus and Deirdre, Peter brightened considerably. He was always pleased when he caught up with his friends. They all seemed so quick witted. “Yes. He’s letting her borrow his scarf. She must have been cold. Come on now, James will have our ears if we miss the start of the game.”

Peter sidestepped Remus’ outflung arm, calling behind, “I think that’s the same girl we saw earlier, you know. Bound to happen.”

Remus followed after his friend, mind working furiously at this latest development. “We have to find out who she is. Hasn’t she been warned?”

Peter jammed his hands in his pockets and shrugged, “Perhaps not. She doesn’t look harassed, Remus. Gives a bloke hope, that.”

Astounded at how blandly Peter was taking this news, Remus barked, “Peter! Severus Snape has a girlfriend. James is single. I’m single! This is terrible!”

Not sure if he should be grateful that Remus hadn’t brought up the subject of Morag MacMillan, the witch that Peter was rather sweet on, Peter’s mind worked through Remus’ broken logic. “That’s right tidy, after spending two weeks in the infirmary after what we did to him.” He chortled, “Maybe not having the ability to speak improved his personality?”

Remus glared at the back of Severus’ head, about fifty yards ahead of them. He slowed his steps deliberately so they would stay behind and observe. “It wasn’t the haircut. Most of his hair is already grown back, although I do think it is shorter.”

Peter was kicking a stone that had caught his attention. Unlike Remus and the other Marauders, Peter didn’t find baiting others nearly so amusing. He was too slow for proper comedic timing. He did have wickedly funny ideas at times for pranks. He was a good sport, and never said no if he was needed. Still, he had been the object of bullying and disliked it when James and Sirius went too far. Only Remus could get them to listen when that happened.

“Wormtail. I think you should do your thing. Follow them.” Remus’ voice was quiet, but serious.

Peter choked on a whine before answering. “Do I have to? Its broad daylight. I’ll be seen. Or chased by someone. Or hexed. No one likes rats.”

Remus’ head swiveled around to gaze down at Peter, his upper lip curled in what Peter recognised as the thrill of the hunt.

“Or… I could just step off the path now, and you can carry me up into the stands so I can run under the seats unseen. That sounds good.”

A gruff snort answered Peter’s reversal, and the flat look he got from his friend sent Peter into action. He looked back and forth before stepping off the path behind a tree, emerging on the other side as Wormtail. He had to run to catch up to Remus who had not stopped walking, and he vaulted himself up Remus’ trouser leg, climbing high enough to be caught up into the crook of Remus’ arm. He permitted himself a rattty sigh and chittered to himself in irritation. He really had wanted to look for Morag, the beautiful flaxen haired Hufflepuff who he sat behind in Potions. Some blaggards called
her heavyset, but he found her lovely like a ripe pear. She said she would be at the game today.

His daydreams about the smells of buttered toast and honey that had come off of his Amortentia were interrupted as they climbed into the stands and Remus set him down at the bifurcation that would take Peter to the opposite side of the stadium. He squeaked his final objection at his friend before scurrying away, over beam and underfoot, using his long tail to maintain balance.

Severus handed Deirdre up into a row of the stands in the Slytherin section, off to the edge of the students. Far from the faculty boxes, students preferred to sit out here if they wanted privacy or had plans to put into action. Deirdre’s brown eyes were alive with intelligence and interest as she looked around the stands.

It had been quite cold for the past three days, and the sky was overcast. It was an average, windy November. The flurry from earlier hadn’t left any sign of its passing, the sun on the wood just warm enough to melt the moisture and send it back into the atmosphere before it proved to be a slipping hazard.

Severus felt Deirdre lean into his side as she craned her neck about. His brain fogged over, and it was through this haze that his poor brain had to shake free enough to hold conversation. The question had penetrated just barely. “What? Oh. This is the first game of the season.”

“Who took the cup last year?” Deirdre seemed to be as distracted as he was, taking in the crowds. He saw her lift her hands and make the spell on her fingers work, helping her see way across the stadium to the Faculty Box. She was panning from face to face, looking very interested.

Ratcheting back into conversational gear, Severus answered, “Oh. Well, Gryffindor. It was quite close. We expect to turn the tables on them this time.” He glanced down at her, wondering if he should put his arm around her. She had taken his scarf and had it wrapped about her neck. Her pink cheeks looked rather fetching against the emerald green.

She answered him with a noncommittal noise. “I saw your Head of House up there. Professor Svartrunir, wasn’t it? I rather like him. What does he teach again?”

That was easy to answer, “Ancient Runes.” He quirked a smile at her, his eyes trailing down to her hands for a moment before returning to meet her gaze once more, “I imagine you will be trying to place into that class, yes? It is quite small. At the NEWT level, that is.” In fact it was one of the classes that wasn’t segregated by House, and this year was being taught Sixth and Seventh years together.

A mischievous grin answered his question, “Of course. I’m going to take as much as I can.”

Severus leaned back a degree, looking concerned. “Is that wise? You’ve only just come around enough to leave the infirmary.”

Deirdre let out a sigh. “I... I can’t explain it, Severus. I feel... Alive. My memories aren’t there, but there is such a sense of change. I am different now. Compared to just two days ago, I have so much energy!” She shivered, and he felt it. Her voice brimmed with joy, “I want to do everything.”

Reflexively, Severus gathered Deirdre in with his right arm, and with his left he took out his wand. He uttered the warming charm, directing his wand at their shoes, figuring that was reasonably safe.
The breeze that it would create could have disturbed her skirts and that was contrary to his purpose. The back of his brain filed away the fact that Deirdre hadn’t moved away or even blinked when he put his arm about her.

Deirdre was feeling warmer between Severus’ arm and his magical efforts. She was taken aback at the kindness, although the back of her brain was pretty sure it understood what might be going on. It had her heart racing, and she needed something to latch onto. The thoughtfulness threatened to overwhelm her higher functions, and she wasn’t sure she was ready for that quite yet. Everything was so much to take in. She didn’t want to do herself, and Severus... who was her first and best friend here at school, a major disservice.

“Oh, that’s nice. Thank you!” She leaned down with unadulterated curiosity at what he was doing with the warming charm. It was then that she noticed the rat. The little thing must have been cold as it was sitting between their feet, and she could see it basking in the warm air that Severus was directing downwards. It was a brown rat with a white belly and a pink nose. It was sitting back on its haunches, and it had its little paws folded together, its eyes shut in what looked like muroid ecstasy.

Severus had stopped the charm, although his wand was kept out in case. She felt his grip around her loosen a shade as she hadn’t sat up at that point. Tentatively, he asked, “Deirdre?”

She answered with a cooing sound. The rat had opened its eyes and had frozen under her stare. “What an adorable creature! Where is your wizard, little one?”

The rat had lowered its body, hunching to conserve some of the absorbed heat he had stolen from Severus’ warming charm. It cocked its head, and lifted one paw in a single eloquent gesture, indicating that he had no idea.

Severus bent over swiftly to eye the rodent beside her. His voice was colder, “I don’t recognise it. Not one of ours, unless someone got a new familiar while I was gone.” The hesitation in his voice suggested that he hadn’t completely decided the rat was a problem, but he was open to the possibility.

The rat shuffled backwards, further under the shelter of Deirdre’s seat, wrapping its tail about it. It was holding the pink tail up in front of its face in apparent fear, blinking slowly.

“Well, it looks cold. And it won’t find its wizard from down there.” She modulated her voice back to that used for small children and adorable animals, “Isn’t that right? Your wizard must be very irresponsible to leave you running about in this cold.” She cautiously lowered her right hand to rest her knuckles on the wood of the floor, palm up. “It’s alright. We’ll take care of you. Come on, then. Up you come.”

Beady black rat eyes bore into Severus’ own stare. Deirdre looked aside at him, bumping him gently. “Go on, then. It seems afraid of you, although I’ve no idea why.”

The rat was looking now between the two faces before him.

With a scowl, Severus unbent as far as to say, “Well, so long as it is here with no ill intent, I hold it no specific ill will. I do wonder how it became separated from his master.”

Deirdre made a face at Severus before turning back to her new friend. “See? He won’t hurt you.
He’s rather prickly at times, but honestly. He’s a good fellow under that dour frown. Come on, then.” She curled her fingers in a ripple of invitation.

Painfully slowly, the rat shuffled forwards to place a ice-cold paw on Deirdre’s finger. After looking back up at the two human faces for reactions, it climbed into Deirdre’s hand. It wasn’t a small animal, definitely not a mouse. Deirdre’s feminine ‘ooof’ of effort puffed its whiskers back, and it stepped off of her hand into her lap. At the first opportunity, it grabbed the long end of the green scarf about the witch’s neck, and pulled it up into her lap like a sailor retrieving an anchor.

Deirdre was delighted as she watched the rat pat her on the middle with one paw and a questioning glance, as if asking permission. “Um, make yourself at home?”

The rat squeaked for the first time, a double squeak that sounded suspiciously like a thank-you. With that, it flopped back against her to look out into the stadium at the game that was now well in progress. It pulled the edge of the scarf about itself like a little blanket, tucking its feet in.

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Severus felt Deirdre relax under his arm, canting more into his side. He was shooting looks of distrust at the tiny creature that had made itself cozy in Deirdre’s lap, and something about the creature made his mind itch. Perhaps it was the flat buck teeth that protruded from its mouth? Maybe the pink tail, completely bald and scaly, that was twitching as it watched the brooms fly overhead with intent interest?

Closing his eyes, Severus did a short exercise in meditation, recentering himself. This was ridiculous. He could not possibly be jealous of a rat. Using the discipline his mother had borne into him from an early age, he tucked that up into a shelf in his mind. It was still within the circle of his conscious perception, just distanced.

A groan from Deirdre made him start, his eyes opening in alarm. The little witch was looking upwards, an expression of disappointment clear on her face. At his inquiring noise, she supplied, “Gryffindor’s beater just managed to knock one of your chasers off course. Poor girl’s spinning like a top!” After a moment, she lifted her hands again, making her magnification window. Her voice, heavy with sympathy, exclaimed, “I think she’s going to vomit!”

At that moment, one of the Slytherin beaters dropped down from a higher altitude to defend the witch from a second impending bludger, and with a steadying hand stopped the girl’s broom from spinning.

A hiss from Severus enlightened Deirdre to a new dimension of the goings on, “Oh, bad form, Black. Bad form.” A sea of hands clapping together heralded the result of the bludgers’ newest victim, this time a Gryffindor chaser who had been clowning about. He didn’t have the Quaffle, so he couldn’t have been a true target, but seeing the wizard who had been standing up on his broom, sailing about like a loon, stumble and fall hard onto the broomstick, he couldn’t help but cheer. “Good shot, Mulciber. Bravo!”

The two Slytherins sped back into action, and due to activity on the other end of the stadium, the score was counting up closer. Both teams were still in the game.

Deirdre watched Severus’ attention stay on the clown and asked in a low, teasing voice, “Friend of yours, then?”
Severus’ expression of glee dropped and he shifted uncomfortably. “You recall the reason I was in the infirmary?”

Deirdre’s levity drained from her face and she used her hands to get a better view of the recovering wizard’s face. As he drifted about, she could see a number on the back of his red jersey, and the name “POTTER” was emblazoned there. “Oh. I see.” She stared at the figure, committing it to memory. Shortly another Gryffindor glided down to check on his friend. This one was leaner, with a aristocratic, chiseled jaw and high cheekbones. What would have been a handsome wizard was marred by an expression of hate written across his features. He barked at Potter and turned, his truncheon raised in readiness to defend his teammate.

The rat had its paws over its eyes and seemed to be worried to Deirdre. She dropped her hands back to her lap, and crooned to the little beastie. It lowered its paws to look back up at her. The intelligence she saw there made her quite like it. “I wish I knew your name. Maybe we should keep it. What do you think, Severus?” The rat was now looking at her fingers intently and the feeling of his little paws on her made her giggle. “Little scamp.”

Severus’ enjoyment of the moment, watching Potter cling for life to his broomstick after having possibly fractured a testicle in his foolishness was interrupted by Deirdre’s return of attention to the rat who had moved in on her affections. He didn’t like the sound of it when she had suggested they keep it. Not a bit, really. “I am sure its wizard or witch will be looking for it soon enough.” He wondered if she would be the kind of witch to hoard animals.

A voice behind them startled them both, and Severus turned slightly to see the welcome form of Regulus Black, one of his Housemates, a year behind him. A glimmer of a genuine smile brightened Regulus’ face as he leaned in to murmur to the pair, “Oh, that was lovely, wasn’t it? The wheel of karma turns for you, brother dear.”

Deirdre’s questioning glance prompted Severus to introduce them. “Regulus Black, meet Deirdre Ward. She’s just joined the school.” The rat in Deirdre’s lap had almost wholly wrapped itself in scarf now, and was quite secure as the witch shifted enough to offer her right hand in greeting. “Hullo.” Her strong brow knitted together, “Um, that’s... your brother up there?” She had missed Sirius buzzing off to pursue his next play, and Potter seemed to be slowly getting his breath and proverbial legs back from underneath him.

Regulus grasped the hand and gave it a polite shake before looking back up at the sky. “To the everlasting shame of my family, yes, he is.” He threw Severus a quirked eyebrow, silently asking permission. At Severus’ head tilt, he slipped in on Deirdre’s other side and rubbed his hands together, warming them.

Severus spoke up, “Regulus here is a rising star of the Black family. A shining hope for their next generation.”

Deirdre’s tinkling laugh rewarded Severus as Regulus threw him a dead-pan glare. “Only hope, you mean. I’m the heir now, Merlin preserve my sanity.”

“Regulus is in my dormitory. I’ve been giving him some pointers for Potions. He’s a dab hand at Ancient Runes.” Severus threw Regulus a leading look. Once his glance was captured, he looked down significantly at Deirdre’s hands and mouthed, “Watch what she does.”
Intrigued, Regulus glanced at the folded hands in Deirdre’s lap, unsure of what Severus meant.

Deirdre’s interest in the game, now knowing there’s more personal stakes at hand, was honed hawk-keen. The announcer overhead drew everyone’s attention to a patch of sky far above them, “Wilkes has spotted the Snitch!” High overhead, a dark shape silhouetted against the sun-blazoned clouds tightened into a line and leaned forwards over his broom. Anxious to see more, Deirdre lifted her fingers to make the frame again and stared into the bright sky, pulling the window wider for better magnification.

Severus tilted his head slightly so that he could see through that same window, and Regulus, intrigued, did the same. Regulus’ eyes widened in amazement, and glanced back at Severus, who mouthed again, “Tell you later.”

Around them, the Slytherin crowd roared with approval as their seeker sped towards what promised to be a game-winning move.

Deirdre’s hands spasmed in fury, and her face whitened as the window was shattered. “Ugh! He could have had it, too!” Her brown eyes flashed and the crowd on the other side of the stadium erupted into cheers and jeers as Wilkes was bodily thrown off course by a well-aimed Bludger, aimed by no other than Sirius Black. “Quidditch is such a brutal game.”

Regulus stretched out his legs before him and crossed his arms above his head, leaning back onto the empty seat behind them. He looked for all the world like a wizard at his ease on the beach. He unwound a hand to shade his eyes and answered, “Yes. Well, it’s allowed, and I like to imagine my brother gets his share of injury. He isn’t shy about dishing them out off field, is he, Sev?”

Severus was not glad for the change in subject and shook his head once, keeping his lips firmly shut. His mind was pulling his thoughts inwards to the succession of wrongs visited on him by the Black Gryffindor, and it was draining him of the positive energies he had gathered back. He felt cold, still. The demon of fury that he had forced deep down into a pit was waking, and if he wasn’t careful, he would do something regretful.

He felt Deirdre’s regard and struggled to let go of that fury, to let it lie dormant. The unmistakable sensation of her arm snaking about his waist in silent support did much more than his personal degree of control could have otherwise done. He huffed out a silent chuckle and favoured her with a blush.

Deirdre spoke up, “Horrible person he may be, but if it were not for your brother, I’d not have met Severus so soon.” Her eyes were bright as she continued, “He’s been a saving grace to my first days here, and I don’t know what I’d have done without him.” She turned her face away from Severus’ and shyly smiled at Regulus. “And any friend of Severus’ is a friend of mine, I am sure.”

At that moment, Regulus sat bolt upright with a groan, and Severus was momentarily confused before he noticed the Gryffindor side of the stadium were all up on their feet and their side were shouting insults and discouragements. “Huxley has sighted the Snitch... Wilkes is broom-lengths behind, don’t know how he’s going to catch up... Bludger’s being sent up! Watch OUT Avery...”

A general outcry from the Slytherin side matched the roar of triumph from the Gryffindor side of the stadium. “And that’s the game! Gryffindor 200 to Slytherin 80. This is Vance, signing off. May the winds of fate blow ever in your favour.”

Regulus covered his face with his hands and let out a groan of despair. “He is going to be even more insufferable. I didn’t think it possible, but there you are.” Dropping his arms back to his side, he commented to Severus, “You know, that whole weekend without having to hear his voice was a godsend, Severus. I am sorry that it came at such a cost to you, but it was really heavenly.” He
cocked his head to the side. “I don’t suppose we could get McGonagall to tell us how she did it?”

A dry, bitter laugh was Severus’ answer. “Don’t count on it.”

Deirdre’s expression had taken on a frightening look. “If I had some time in the library, I bet I could...”

She was interrupted by the flying form of Sirius Black who had swung by and was bent over his broom, showing the whole of Slytherin house his arse. “Ugh!”

Regulus fingered his wand and muttered, “I know. What a... “ he raised his voice magically to a shout, “WORTHLESS ARSEHOLE!” Undoing the Sonorus, he continued to mutter a litany of insults, which were becoming less and less inventive as the fifth year wound down on his fury-fueled tirade. He stood, jamming his hands into his pockets. “I think I’ll head out before that one gets free of his adoring fans. See you back at the commons tonight, Sev?” The younger wizard lifted his eyebrows in interest.

Severus nodded his agreement, “Of course. Take the long way around, stay with the others.”

Bitter acknowledgement pained Regulus’ handsome features as he nodded to Deirdre. “It was nice to meet you, Miss Ward. I hope to see you often.” The genuine smile softened his features and Deirdre lifted her hand in a wave goodbye, releasing Severus’ friend to speed away in haste.

Deirdre looked down into her lap, commenting. “Well, this has been rather exciting. What do you think, Scamp?”

The rat was unwrapping itself busily, disentangling himself from the fringe of the green-striped scarf. It paused to look up at her with a quiver of its whiskers before returning to the task at claw, extricating a hind leg from the fringe.

Deirdre watched with interest, commenting. “Rats are shy, clever creatures. They are reviled, but it just doesn’t seem fair, does it, Severus?”

Severus slipped out of her grip and stood, straightening his robes. He took a long moment to answer as he glowered at the celebrating team in the middle of the stadium. “Hmm? Oh. Yes, indeed.” He extended a hand to her, adding, “We should get going. I’d like to be out of here before the winning team and their admirers decide they have license for mischief.”

Deirdre didn’t immediately take the offered hand. “What about you, Scamp?” She still had a lap full of rat to contend with.

The rodent looked up at Deirdre from her leg, ears perked in ratty consideration. It glanced pointedly at Severus before looking back at her.

“Oh, we won’t mind the company. I’ll walk you back to the school at least.” Deirdre smiled at the brown creature, her tone persuasive.

Severus was frowning, and that frown tightened as he and the rat regarded one another with mutual distrust. He twitched the fingers of his waiting, outstretched hand before looking back at the center of the stadium.

With a last glance up at Severus, the rat bunched up its hind legs and whipped its tail as it leapt from Deirdre’s lap to her shoulder. At her soft squeal of surprise it seemed to chitter, “Well, what did you expect?” In moments, its tail was wrapped about her neck, and its little head poked out from under her curls.
Severus grasped her hand while the rat was settling itself, and hauled her to her feet, and she could see just how worried he was from the firm tilt of his scowl. He offered Deirdre his left elbow, and she realised that he was placing himself on the pitch-side of the stairs, leaving her to skirt the more protected wall. Her heart fluttered, and she became more alert, dipping her hand into her sleeve to touch her wand, reassuring herself that it was at the ready. The walk down was quiet, tense, and a good deal more hurried.

Deirdre was starting to feel quite warm from the exercise, and once they made it out of the stadium onto the green, she called the little party to a halt, pulling them off to the side so she could carefully unwind the scarf that Severus had so thoughtfully loaned to her earlier. The rat’s body generated excess heat and she was starting to perspire.

She folded the emerald green wool and pressed it back on Severus, who looked ready to protest when a voice interrupted, “Miss Ward?” Deirdre felt the rat disappear into her hair, but didn’t have time to wonder as she turned to face Professor McGonagall.
Chapter 34

Minerva McGonagall didn’t like what Albus had in mind for the newest charge of their school. The girl needed to meet some more people, and she had decided exactly what she was going to do about it. She gathered up Lily Evans and Remus Lupin, two of her House Prefects of like age, and herded them out ahead of the burgeoning crowd. As they went, she explained her intentions. “There is a new transfer who just arrived. She’s an orphan, poor thing. Parents died in that Nundu attack in Zaire.” She checked to see that her right and left hands were listening. Finding them reasonably attentive, she forged on. “She doesn’t remember much, but it was clear that she was terribly ill when she arrived, and she has been ensconced in the Infirmary for the better part of two weeks, recovering from the cursed breath.”

Lily listened politely to the tale of woe, her lips pressing together in a thin line. Remus came fully alert, his amber eyes searching McGonagall’s face before he asked, “Curly haired witch, walking about with Severus Snape today?”

That fetched Lily’s interest. Oh, yes. Green eyes homed in on Remus, narrowing as if she were able to measure his veracity before turning her gaze to McGonagall.

McGonagall’s expression firmed, and her frosty tone conveyed exactly what she thought of that. “Yes, that would be Miss Deirdre Ward.”

Lily sniffed in derision. “What does that have to do with us?” She folded her arms across her chest, speeding her steps so that she was walking ahead of her Head of House, her back indicating her lack of enthusiasm for the subject.

Remus goggled at Lily’s indifference as he kept pace with Professor McGonagall. “Well, everything, doesn’t it? She’s been left to the likes of Snape. We know what he is, surely the girl deserves our help, Evans.” His voice was loaded with reproach as he talked to the back of his fellow Prefect’s head. He looked to McGonagall. “Has she been sorted yet?”

McGonagall continued clonking down the steps, a back-passage used by the staff to bypass the throngs of Quidditch-crazed students. “No. She will be sorted privately tomorrow, at the staff meeting.” McGonagall eyed Lily’s squared shoulders, perceiving that she was in fact walking a bit faster, threatening to pull away from the conversation entirely. The redhead was rather defensive. McGonagall expected this to be an easier pitch. She was almost never wrong, so the discordance plucked at her nerves.

Lily remained quiet, but Remus had obviously understood the implications. He went on, “You think she’ll be drawn into whatever Snape’s been up to, don’t you? She is new here.” He pitched his voice
to carry to Lily’s ears, “A friendless, helpless girl, Evans.” He hurried on, elaborating further, “And Snape’s been there almost the whole time as it is.” His expression darkened with dismay, “What wretched luck for her.”

“Just so.” McGonagall’s eyes were boring into the back of Lily’s head, waiting for the girl to respond properly. She didn’t have to wait long as Lily stepped to the side on the next landing, turning to face the rest of their little party.

Her pale brow was wrinkled, and her green eyes seemed to flash unnaturally bright in the dim stairwell. “So. What you are saying is that those Idiots put Severus Snape into the Hospital Wing for almost two weeks, and now the fate of an innocent girl hangs in the balance because of their cruelty? And you want me to try and extricate her from this disaster?” She drummed her fingers on the fabric of her folded arm in irritation. She glared at Remus, “They’re your friends. Make them fix it. I don’t think I want any part of this.”

Remus’ jaw worked open and shut soundlessly, aghast. He looked like a fish out of water. “Erk. But...”

Professor McGonagall nodded affirmation. “That’s an interesting way to view these circumstances, you are quite right. Our House is largely responsible for the situation, we should at least show her that she has alternatives. Miss Evans, I must insist that you extend yourself in this matter. Make friends with her. Show her what school life can be like. She was pleasant enough when I took her shopping earlier. Didn’t fuss a bit.” Her gaze shifted back to Remus, taking up her story of the damsel in imminent distress. “Prize her away from the Slytherins. They’ve nothing to offer her anyway. I don’t think she is a pureblood, and you know what might happen if they find out.” She looked at the ceiling and shot off, “Her father was American, from what I am told.” The tone with which she uttered that nationality would have been equally appropriate if he were a neanderthal.

Minerva knew about the slur carved into the girl’s arm, and was quite sure that at some point others would know too. Really, she was doing the girl a great service by taking an interest. Professor Nott and the Headmaster were very wrong to allow Severus to become her appointed protector. She looked over at Remus, and added, “And she will need strong friends who can watch her back should that happen. Slytherins are so narrow minded.”

Lily looked decidedly uncomfortable with this whole situation and would not immediately agree. “What of Snape? He already has this witch’s ear, won’t he poison her against us?”

Remus flashed a vulpine grin at Lily. “We’ll just have to be all that much more persuasive. Come on, Evans. Don’t tell us you are afraid of Severus Snape after all of those years of defending his sorry hide? A little too late for that, don’t you think?”

The fires of fury rose in Lily’s cheeks, and her voice rose in irritation. “I do NOT want to be reminded of my former sham of a friendship with that odious…” She Fortunately remembered where she was and whom she was with, so she amended the chosen appellative to, “Wizard.” It was spat out, as one might utter a deep slur. “I have no wish to interfere in his affairs, the girl will simply have to learn the hard way, like I did.”

McGonagall thought quickly, “I can’t see how my introducing you all to the girl would make you two the authors of interference, just my agents which you already have pledged to be. I have already voiced my misgivings in Mr Snape’s hearing. There are no lies or subterfuge passed here, only a clear intention for Miss Ward’s betterment. We are exactly as we seem and I must remind you that I am the Head of your House and do still hold rather a lot of authority over all of the students as well as responsibility for their well being, which I remind you both that as Prefects you both share.” She looked back up the passage as the sound of feet descending alerted them to impending company.
“Now, let’s be about it.”

Ushering the two students in front of her, they traversed the rest of the stair quickly, and came out into the diminishing light of early evening.

Just a few yards off stood Severus Snape and the witch they were about to meet for the first time. Her back was to them, but Remus saw a flash of pink tail hanging from her hair. His eyes narrowed in recognition. Good. Wormtail hadn’t forgotten his assigned mission, and found his way to Morag instead. Sturdy chap, that rat.

The cadences of a southern English accent floated to their ears as they approached, but the words petered out as Deirdre turned to see what had Severus’ guard up so.

Deirdre Ward was a pretty girl, and looked to be a like age to Lily. Her light brown eyes reflected the warmth of the setting sun as she looked from face to face, and stepped back a pace, so she stood shoulder to shoulder with Severus. The two seemed discordant together to Remus. The girl was bright with interest, all soft with warm golden tones. She offered an uncertain smile, but Lupin wasn’t completely taken in. She might look like a rabbit, but this was a predator. He breathed in deeply through his nose and he caught an impression of something feline, clever.

Snape was pale, cold, and aloof. His black eyes flickered as he stole a quick glance at Lily Evans before he retrained his gaze on the winning team’s Head of House. He cleared his throat, and uncharacteristically started the conversation. “Congratulations, Professor McGonagall. Your House team acquitted themselves well today.” Any sincerity to be found in his voice was threadbare and begrudging at best.

“Thank you, Mr Snape.” The Transfiguration Professor’s raven hair had been coiffed elegantly and had held through the day. Her hat was pinned in place, tartan earflaps loosely tied beneath her chin. She wasted no time in dismissing the Slytherin, turning her attention to Deirdre. “Miss Ward. I’d like to introduce two of the best students in the Sixth Year here at Hogwarts.”

Deirdre’s eyes widened and she shifted a fraction closer to Snape. Remus looked away, embarrassed that the Professor was being so direct. Surely she saw that the girl was ready to run?

“This is Miss Lily Evans, and this...” He felt fingers plucking at his sleeve, “is Mr Remus Lupin.” She pulled both reluctant socialites forward to make their niceties.

The curly-haired girl bobbed her head in acknowledgement, and responded. “Um, pleasure is all mine, I’m sure.”

Remus glanced at Lily, having fully expected his fellow Prefect to turn on the charm as she was ever able, but the proximity to Snape seemed to have chilled her to the bone. She threw the girl a half hearted smile, uttered, “Likewise,” and then re-crossed her arms before her. Remus had seen her watch potions simmer with more warmth and interest.

Sighing, Remus stepped forward and stuck his hand out. In that instant, he formulated a plan as he spotted Wormtail peeking out at him between curls. “Nice to meet you, Miss Ward.” He shook hands with the witch, taking note of the stiffening of Snape’s posture. Well, too bad old chap. You’ll have to share her sometime. “Imagine my surprise when I heard we had spent a day together, and me in ignorance.”
The girl took her hand back and looked up at the tall Prefect, appearing to measure him against some unknown standard. Her expression was difficult to read as she responded, “Can’t say I recall you, Mr Lupin.”

Quickly, Remus interjected, “Remus. You must call me Remus.” He smiled winningly down at the girl as she released his hand.

Lily Evans turned away at this statement, her nose up in the air as if looking at an interesting cloud in that clear, darkening sky. A gentle breeze was all that remained of the squall from earlier.

Deirdre, under the firm eye of Minerva McGonagall, answered, “Well, that is kind of you to say, Remus. And you must call me Deirdre.” She cast a worried glance Lily’s way before turning her attention back to him.

Remus noticed her glance but was now focused on Wormtail. A quiet squeak shifted the girl’s attention, and she flushed as he exclaimed as though he had only noticed the rat now. “What do we have here?” He shifted his gaze back at her, capturing her in the intensity of his regard. “That rat belongs to one of our first years. Did you know that?”

A chittering came from under Deirdre’s curls. It seemed upset. Deirdre put up a hand, having noticed that the Prefect was edging closer. “No. And I don’t think he likes you very much.”

Barking laughter escaped from Lupin. “Oh, I guess you must be right. I haven’t given him any cheese this week.” Mischief glinted in his golden eyes as he suggested, “I think you should walk back to our common room with me, Deirdre. Give your little friend there a lift, and join our celebration. See the best of Hogwarts.” He trained all of his charm on her in that moment and held his breath, waiting for her response.

Deirdre stepped back a pace. “Well, I…”

Lily had been examining her nails in the fading light and chose to interject, “You really should. And if you don’t want to stay, one of us will gladly walk you back to whatever dank hole you wish.” She looked at Deirdre, one elegant brow arched in challenge. “Or, you could see how the losers party. I don’t care. Just make up your mind. We’re missing it.” She tossed her red hair, setting it fluttering in the wind.

Remus growled under his breath. “Evans, don’t be rude.”

Deirdre had extended a hand to her shoulder. Her little friend clung to her thumb and cowered, his tail whipping in agitation. Her eyes sought out Severus, ever her anchor thus far. He was looking at the ground, his fists balled tight in white-knuckled fury. “Se… Severus?”

“You should go and see what Gryffindor has to offer, Miss Ward. If you wish to find me, I’ll be where we met this morning.” He reached out and grasped her by the hand, raising it to his lips in a gesture of genteel farewell. What should have been a romantic gesture seemed cold and mechanical under the circumstances, and he didn’t even look directly at Deirdre. A glance was spared for Remus. It was stacked with warning, and Lupin inclined his head in acknowledgement of the challenge. He had won this round.

Deirdre watched with an expression of confusion as Severus took his leave, politely wishing McGonagall and Evans a pleasant evening as well. She felt McGonagall’s place pressure on her back, and just like that, she was Miss Ward, a stranger, and Hogwarts once again a foreign land. The little group moved off, leaving Severus behind.
Professor McGonagall cooed, “Oh, well, isn’t this nice.” She continued to stroll with the little group and seemed bent on drawing Lily in.

“Miss Evans, what have you been up to? I heard that the Potter heir is still trying to get your attention.”

Lily rolled her eyes so hard that Remus could hear it, “The day I consent to a date with James Potter will be the day after my own funeral, Professor.” She added in for good measure, “I was thinking about asking Kingsley Shacklebolt to the Yule Ball. That’d get James Potter to leave me alone. He’s so tiresome.” Slyly, she looked back over her shoulder at them before she continued, “Some boys don’t know how to take no for an answer, am I right, Deirdre?”

Deirdre had been falling behind the other witches, but Remus was keeping pace with her at her left. “I am not quite sure what you mean.”

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat. “Yes, well. This has been very nice, but I think I’ll head up to the staff room. I wouldn’t want to keep Professor Svartrunir waiting with that drink he owes me. See you tomorrow morning, Deirdre. I think your Aunt will be bringing you in for the meeting.” With barely that much as a by-your-leave, the Head of House Gryffindor sped off.

Remus asked, “Aunt? You have family here at school?”

Deirdre nodded slightly, looking about her with the posture of a caged animal. “Professor Sprout. She’s more of a cousin on my mother’s side, I’m told. I only just met her, but given the age difference I’m to call her Aunt.”

Remus started to feel a shade of conscience as he observed the lost expression on his quarry’s face. She really was rather alone in all of this. He offered her his arm, schooling his expression to one of friendly interest.

Lily cocked her head, green eyes flashing with wicked intent. “Mark my words. If you hang about with Snape long enough, you will find out how persistently awful he can be.” She sighed airily, as though she didn’t give two shakes. “Some people can’t take advice, I’ll warrant. We’ll see which you are, won’t we?”

Remus murmured into Deirdre’s ear. “I know she sounds off, but Lily had a very bad experience with Snape, Deirdre.” His tone was much gentler, and he seemed to be apologetic. “It might seem hard to believe, but they grew up together. They were inseparable until last year. Very ugly scene.”

That voice cut into their revelation, “Well, Remus. I see you’ve got things under control. I’ll see you back at the commons in a bit. I think I might go find Kingsley now. Intelligent conversation would be a welcome relief.” Without waiting, she too walked off, taking a fork in the road that led down, rather than back up to the Aqueduct.

A small ratty face emerged from Deirdre’s hair, and Remus and Deirdre were treated to a rodent tirade of chitters and squeaks. He clung to her shoulders with tails and hind legs, and his front paws were held up in little fists, a sign of defiance at the witch’s retreating back.

Remus chuckled, “You could say that again. No, I don’t see what James sees in her either. Still, he won’t be swayed.”
Deirdre’s expression changed to one of understanding. “James Potter, the chaser who hurt his...” She giggled, “Erm, *pride,*” She glanced at Remus to be sure he caught her meaning. “That James Potter?”

The Prefect gave her a long appraising look before answering, “Noticed that, did you? Yes. That Potter. And that Evans.” He shook his head, “James swears that someday he’s going to marry Lily. And I have NO idea why. She’s never given him a moment’s encouragement. Even after she came to her senses.”

“Isn’t he a bully? He and that Black fellow. Oh, and Pettigrew, wasn’t it?” Wide innocent eyes looked back up at him, when he didn’t respond, “Friends of yours? Oh, well, don’t answer. But if even a small fraction of what I’ve heard about those fellows is true…” Deirdre’s voice became as saccharine as treacle, “They’re perfect for each other.”
Chapter Thirty-Five

Chapter Notes

Antilitigation charm: Harry Potter’s world belongs to JK Rowling, who is brilliant. The plot and original characters, including Nott, Svartrunir, and Morag Macmillan are mine.

Coromandel and I have been dying to see this chapter in print for AGES. Those of you who voted in the poll a month or more back, here it is. We humbly hope it lives up to your expectation. Thanks to everyone for sharing in this adventure with us, I hope you enjoy my 100K indulgence. Cheers!

Deirdre was ushered up to the Seventh Floor, and her mind picked at the route that Remus had taken. He had told her they were taking a shortcut when she asked about the strange path he had chosen. The Prefect made an effort at conversation, but she was too distracted to respond properly, and after two attempts, they fell into an uneasy silence.

Something was definitely off about this castle. There were fewer staircases between the entry hall and their destination than she expected, and she could have sworn that one hallway had undisturbed dust on the floor. The Prefect didn’t seem bothered or surprised and that made her all the more curious.

As Remus gave the password, allowing them entry to Gryffindor tower, it grabbed her attention. “Space Oddity.” Well put.

The Fat Lady’s portrait swung open, and Deirdre was greeted by a wave of noise. The afterparty was in full swing, and the common room was crowded close with wizards and witches, all chatting animatedly. Drinks were being passed around, and there was a long trestle table set up in the corner, burdened with snacks and sweets. Deirdre’s exclamation of surprise was lost in the din as she felt her rat friend leap from her shoulder to skitter away into the crowd. Next thing she knew, she was being pulled closer to Remus, and in so doing she narrowly missed a colour-changing jinx.

The scene was completely overwhelming, and she had little resistance to offer as the Prefect towed her along to the centre of the room. Remus possessed a presence that made people aware of him, and they moved aside, allowing them easier passage. Deirdre barely noticed as her attention was pulled elsewhere.

Off in the corner, two younger students were huddled together, and the shorter one was looking an off shade of green. His fellow muttered to him, “Don’t be sick, Ollie.”

Ollie obviously swallowed his bile, “I’m alright. I’m alright.” He looked like he was exerting his entire will not to get sick.

“Don’t get sick, Ollie. Not on the carpet.”

“Ulp. I... I’m alright. I’ll... be alright in a minute.” Smoke was wisping out of his nose.

“Don’t be sick, Ollie.”

“I’m alright. I’m not well. Just... get me a drink and that’ll sort me out.”
Deirdre was absolutely certain that another drink was the last thing the boy needed. Remus’ voice purred amusement into her ear. “That’s Ollie Green and York Thistleton. Ollie just played his first game as chaser.”

York stood up, “Now don’t be sick. Remember that I told ye…”

Deirdre shook her head, looking aggrieved. Remus put his arm protectively about her shoulder, and given the strangeness of the situation, she didn’t push him off immediately. He steered her closer to the fire. There, ensconced in a chair was a ruffled black-haired teen in round glasses. He was tanned, well muscled, and in spite of his recent injuries, looked like a King at his ease.

Remus nodded to him, “James.” He steered Deirdre ever closer. A sleek, black-haired wizard stood at James’ right hand and was passing down a smoking golden drink in a tumbler, having one cradled in his hand, reserved for himself. Grey eyes crinkled in amusement as their friend approached. “Ah, Mooney. Wondered where you’d got to.” Finely arched brows raised in speculation as he took in Deirdre’s presence, “Ah. I see you have been profitably engaged.”

A whisper in Deirdre’s ear was meant to be reassuring. “You... had better pretend to be with me. Otherwise Sirius will consider you a challenge.” Hardly. She felt more trapped than before.

“Don’t scare her, Sirius. You should know better manners than that. Or did your mother strip those away too?” Remus smirked at his friend, gold eyes reflecting the firelight as he teased him. Deirdre stilled, waiting for the response to that casual provocation.

Sirius bared his teeth at Remus before tossing back a gulp of the smoking amber liquid in the glass. Firewhiskey. They were sharing around Firewhiskey. No wonder those two in the corner were getting sick.

James spoke up, “So. Are you going to introduce us?” White square teeth flashed a welcoming smile at Deirdre, and she had the impression of dark eyes behind those reflective round lenses.

Remus cleared his throat, making the formal introduction. “James Potter and Sirius Black. Meet Miss Deirdre Ward. She’s joining classes on Monday. Transfer student.” Deirdre resisted the gentle pressure that her ‘date’ had placed on her back. She supposed he intended for her to rush forward to shake hands with the villians, but he couldn’t be more wrong.

James moved to lean forward, but winced and thought better of it. “Augh. Well, welcome to our party. When Gryffindor wins, the whole school celebrates with us.” He spread an arm out expansively.

Sirius silently raised his tumbler in a toast to Deirdre, taking a sip before turning his attention back to Remus. They were staring at one another, as though engaged in some form of silent communication. Remus’ arm was still about her shoulder, and she felt his muscles tense.

A girl was leaning against the mantelpiece, hovering and hanging onto every word that the boys were passing. She giggled at intervals, but she drew Deirdre’s eye to the collection of rubbish and tchotchkes, including a glass bird in a top hat that was dipping up and down at regular intervals. Deirdre heard her say, “This isn’t just any party, you know. Quality, this is.” She had wheat gold hair in loose waves, and still had her uniform on. She had a glass held loosely in her hand as well, although it did not smolder like the others did.

Sirius’ attention didn’t seem to be anywhere near the poor girl. She seemed to be trying too hard. Remus supplied in a low whisper, “That’s Justeen Prewitt. She’s likely to replace Huxley after this year. She’s a chaser.”
Deirdre’s eye was led upwards to the portrait over the fireplace, and it seemed very out of place. It was a portrait of a Wizard, who was striking a dramatic pose in a skin-tight electric blue bodysuit, with an electric guitar held loosely in his hand. Some deep part of Deirdre was obscurely grateful that the guitar covered as much as it did. It didn’t move, thank goodness.

Taking note of Deirdre’s interest, Sirius asked, “Rather good, isn’t it?”

Leveling a stare of disbelief at Sirius, Deirdre asked, “That’s you, then?”

Strutting around the chair, Sirius walked over, oozing confidence. A faint groan in her ear told her what Remus thought of this development. “Fine figure of a man, I am.” He looked down at her, his chest puffing up with pride.

Behind him, James dropped his forehead into his hand and swore, “Oh, for Merlin’s sake.”

Deirdre narrowed her eyes at Sirius Black, considering. “Granted. But can you play guitar, or are you just posing?”

Face brightening with the fervour of an artist asked to share his work, he said, “Oh, aye. I play.” As her response was not as intense has he hoped, he said. “I’ll just have to show ye. Be right back.” He pressed his tumbler into Remus’ hands as he ran off.

A shorter, pale round-faced fellow edged into view. “Shouldn’t have done that, Miss. Now he’ll make us all listen to that awful racket.”

James called from his chair. “Peter. Oh, thank God. Can you put a stop to this madness?”

Peter shook his head at James, his front teeth peeking out, making him seem most approachable of the four. “Fraid not, afraid not. Have you seen Morag? I hoped she’d come.”

Sirius’ voice could be heard filtering down from the landing. “Ah ha!”

James let his head fall down, “Oh noooo.”

Hopping over the banister, Sirius dropped down a few feet away, the same black electric guitar now strapped about his shoulders. Some of the crowd seemed to thin out at the development, but Peter caught sight of the person he had been looking for and strode off towards the trestle table that was laden with food.

Remus groaned again, and steered Deirdre to a sofa nearby that had just been vacated by those fleeing the scene. The girl by the fireplace seemed intrigued. Deirdre felt the cushion next to her dip as Remus sat next to her. “Did you want something to drink?” He still held the tumbler belonging to Sirius, swirling the liquid languidly.

Deirdre shook her head, “No, I really shouldn’t.”

Sirius watched his friend and the new girl, and a dangerous smile illuminated his features. “You’re the one we saw with Snivellus earlier.”

Deirdre stiffened, defensive spells at the ready. Her wand was up her sleeve, accessible.

Sirius bent down, openly leering at her. “Careless of Snivellus to leave his toys laying around.”

Remus snarled at his friend, “Shove off, Black. She’s with me.”

Sirius’ hands came up in a gesture of appeasement. “Hold up. Easy now.” He looked at Deirdre, a
longer, more searching examination. “Enchanting. You have the most peculiar effect on foul-tempered wizards, ma chère. I know just the song.” His right eyelid shivered in a wink before he turned away and started to play.

*Do-do-do-do, do-do-do-dooo..*

*Do-do-do-do, do-do-do-dooo..*

*Do-do-do-do, do-do-do-dooo..*

Remus grumbled and knocked back half of his friend’s whiskey, wincing as the liquid burned down his throat. “Ugh. I will need that shortly.”

In the corner behind them, Deirdre overheard the two again,

“Don’t be sick.”

“I’m alright, alright. Ulp. I’m alright.”

The witch at the mantlepiece stepped closer, like a cat moving in on her prey. Sirius seemed completely unaware. She tossed her mane, an attempt to attract attention. Her hips were starting to twitch with the music.

*Do-do-do-do, do-do-do-dooo..*

*Do-do-do-do, do-do-do-dooo..*

*Do-do-do-do, do-do-do-dooo..*

Deirdre was becoming convinced that Sirius had learned from listening to a broken record when he started to sing, “Got a black magic woman.”

Witches around the room stopped, heads swivelling like sunflowers to the brightest source of light in the room. Deirdre looked appalled and glanced up at Remus, hoping to find an ally in this strange tableau. He waggled his eyebrows at her and stood, extending a hand in invitation.

“Got a black magic woman…”

Being a sucker, Deirdre expected that he wanted to leave the party as much as she did. No. Such. Luck. She was hoisted to her feet and drawn up to him before she knew what had happened. He directed her left arm up to his right shoulder and took her right hand in his left, and off they went.

Feeling rather than hearing Remus rumble with amusement, she froze, looking up at the admittedly handsome Prefect. “It’s okay. I’ll teach you.” His eyes glinted gold in the fire light. Did she have a choice? She was about to squeak that out as a question when he threw her into motion, “One, two, three, four and one…”

Deirdre felt herself move, and some dusty old storeroom in the back of her mind produced the name of the step, “Cha-cha.”

She stepped backwards, belatedly hitching the four, and then chased Remus back forwards. Remus dropped his head to whisper at her again, “Good. Loosen up. It will flow better.”

“I got a black magic woman... Got me so blind I can't see,”

Deirdre attempted to follow the request, but was really too scared to do it well. She gasped as Remus’ heel found contact with someone’s discarded glass. The glass crumbled under his weight
with a satisfying crack. “Oh!” Again, she felt him rumble in amusement. Now the shards were under her feet, and she too was grinding them into dust.

“That she’s a black magic woman… She’s trying to make a devil out of me.”

“Don’t be sick.”

“I’m alright. No, really. Ulp. I’m alright.”

_Doo-doo-doo-dooooo_.

_Doo-doo-doo-dooooo_.

Remus swung her out and then brought her back, re-establishing the pattern. One, two, three, four and one… crunch, crunch, squeak, crunch, and...

Deirdre’s elbow jostled Justeen, who had gone back to leaning on the mantle, and as she stumbled, she sent the drinking bird and all of the little bits of porcelain down onto the floor underneath them. Other couples were dancing as well, and started to trample the ceramics into pieces too, creating an odd percussion underlay to the song.

Across the room, someone had placed the winning game Snitch in a cage, and the golden ball could be seen buzzing about like a frenetic fly, trying to get out. And that’s just what it did as a nervous wizard leapt back out of the path of a dancing couple, knocking into the cage and springing the little door open.

“Don’t be sick.”

“I’m alright... I’m alright...”

“Don’t turn your back on me, baby...”

One, two, three, four and one… crunch, crunch, squeak, crunch and...

The snitch buzzed about their heads, and Remus, having broken a sweat leading Deirdre about the floor, yelped, “James!? A little help...”

“Don’t be sick.”

“I’m alright... I’m alright...”

“Don’t turn your back on me, baby...”

One, two, three, four and one… crunch, crunch, squeak, crunch and...

Zip zip zippzzzz! The snitch made an abrupt turn and headed for the tall figure dancing with Lily.

Remus turned Deirdre about so they were both facing the same direction as they cha-cha’d along, and he had to catch her elbow as she wobbled under the unfamiliar moves. Who was she kidding? Everything was unfamiliar. Only one person seemed right in this whole madhouse, and again she desperately wished that she hadn’t been dragged into this.

“Don’t be sick.”

“I’m alright... I’m alright...”
“Yes, don’t turn your back on me baby...”

One, two, three, four and one... crunch, crunch, twirl, crunch and...

Deirdre caught a glimpse of a flash of long red hair whipping about on the dance floor. She couldn’t help but stare as a striking black wizard led Lily Evans lightly about the common room floor. The Snitch was determinedly buzzing around them now. The tall wizard didn’t seem perturbed one bit, but Lily was clearly having problems focusing. One hand waved vaguely at it and her voice could be heard, “Kingsley, get rid of this thing!”

“Don’t be sick.”

“I’m alright... I’m alright...”

“Stop messing around with your tricks...”

One, two, three, cross-carry, four and crunch...

Nearby, Peter’s voice could be heard. “Calming pie? What a great idea, Morag. How did you do it?” Deirdre caught sight of James diddling his wand from his place at the fire. What was he up to? The Snitch was now buzzing in tight circles around Lily’s partner’s head.

The nervous wizard who had set the snitch free in the first place did a complicated wand movement, and after flash of white light, the snitch dropped to the floor, now inert and under Kingsley’s boot heel. There it was heavily trod upon, flattening the Snitch with a satisfying crunch.

“Don’t be sick.”

“I’m alright... I’m alright...”

“Don’t turn your back on me, baby...”

One, two, three, cross-carry, four and crunch...

James’ eyes glinted malignantly having been deprived of his first line of harassment, and he downed the rest of the contents of his tumbler. After shifting in his chair with a wince, he shot off another spell, turning Lily’s hair to gold and red stripes that undulated with the music.

Remus rolled his eyes. “Oh, we’re in for it now.” He cast about, looking for anyone who might be able to stop James from doing anything else inadvisable. Deirdre watched Lily out of the corner of her eye. She was dancing beautifully, her hips moving just right. Deirdre felt wholly inadequate by comparison.

“Don’t be sick.”

“I’m alright... I’m alright...”

“You just might pick up my magic sticks.”

One, two, push away, twirl, back and crunch...

Remus pulled Deirdre back into him, so close now that they constantly touched, rather than maintaining that space. She could feel his breath on her neck and knew that he was trying to say something, but her brain was a complete fuzz. She was fully overstimulated and flying high on the exhilaration of the moment.
“Don’t be sick.”

“BLEARG!” Ollie lost his battle. Fortunately his buddy, York, had seen it coming and had a bin handy.

“Got your spell on me baby...”

One, two, three, grind, four and gasp...

Feeling dizzy, Deirdre clutched onto Remus as he guided her across the crowd of dancers. She felt him holding her up, reducing her chance at turning her ankle on the multitude of broken glass and china already littering the floor. His chest was heaving under the labour of the dance, and Deirdre felt the Prefect’s regard. He dipped his head down to speak into her ear, now that he had her tucked in close, “Would you like a break?”

“Oh, you’re getting sick...”

“BLEARG...” “Toooooot.” Ollie was going at both ends under the strain.

“Got your spell on me baby...”

One, two, three, twist and lean, two three...

Across the room, James twirled his wand again, this time aiming it at Lily’s partner. Kingsley Shacklebolt sank to the ground mid-turn, his legs going soft like rubber. Lily stumbled and fell, crying out an oath. Hands reached down to help her up, but the one-man band played on.

Deirdre’s relieved agreement to that break was needless as everything came to a grinding halt, the whole room turning to stare at Lily and Kingsley. Remus had brought Deirdre to a standstill right next to the table that was laden with the food. Peter was there, talking with a plump witch with golden hair done up in braids with flowers. Her facial features were delicate, but her hands and arms were solid, her middle thick.

A drink floated under Deirdre’s nose and she took it from Remus with a truncated question, “What?”

Remus shouted to her, “It’s just punch. Nothing added. I swear it.” Deirdre licked her lips, finding that she was surprisingly thirsty. While Remus’ back was turned, she dumped the punch into someone else’s abandoned cup and used her wand to fill it with water. She recalled Severus doing the same for her. It seemed like weeks, but it had only been yesterday.

Lily had finally got herself disentangled from her dance partner and rose from the floor with a murderous look on her face. The crowd parted, forming an open passage between her and James Potter.

“Not on the carpet, Ollie. The bin...”

“HEYARGG...” “Toot toooot.”

“Yes, got your spell on me baby...”

The sight of Lily stomping over didn’t seem to ruffle James at all. He was too busy laughing. Peter squeaked behind Deirdre, “Calming pie. Um. Do you have to eat it, then? I think I’d like a slice.”

A spell hit James Potter full in the chest and he turned into a block of ice. He started to slip out of the chair. Sirius had to stop playing then, and rushed over to get a hold of his friend so he didn’t fall to
the floor and shatter. “What is your problem, Lily?” A goofy smile spread across his face as he took in the moving stripes on Lily’s hair. “I rather like your hair that way, myself.”

Lily’s face registered surprise and she lifted up a hank of hair, finally seeing what everyone else was.

Morag’s alto behind Deirdre said, “Well, they’re just a prototype, but I thought it’d come in handy for one of these wild parties you Gryffindors have.” Deirdre whipped around, asking... “Ingested, or topical calming solution?” The blonde woman blinked at the unfamiliar witch asking her proprietary questions.

Deirdre huffed before repeating herself, clearly enunciating each syllable, “Ingested… or”

Morag supplied the answer now, understanding what Deirdre was asking. “Erm. Both, I think.”

Deirdre nodded to the witch. “Let me have one, then.” When the girl hesitated, Deirdre shook her hand in her face. “Pie. I need to use one of those pies.” As the white fluffy confection was thrust into her open hand, Deirdre swiftly used her other hand to steady the surprisingly heavy dessert. “Thank you.” Part of it got onto her fingers. Instantly she started to feel less worried. Yes. If she just stopped to analyse the situation, the variables largely sorted themselves out. Ah, yes. That is what she will do.

Sirius had stepped backwards, “Lily. You realise I was playing the guitar and had nothing to do with this, don’t you?” A chuckle escaped his lips, “Truly it does bring out your team spirit, just an innocent..”

Lily opened her mouth and shrieked at Sirius, “FUNNY... You think that this is FUNNY?!” She held up two palms riffled over with shards of glass. She pointed at her dance partner, still on the ground. Remus had sidled over to Kingsley and cast the counter curse, allowing the Ravenclaw to finally stop wobbling about and get up. Deirdre prowled around the other side, taking her close to the puking and tooting Ollie. She was trying to avoid Lily’s notice, but also Sirius’ to a certain extent. Remus helped Shacklebolt to his feet, muttering well-rehearsed apologies for the behaviour of his friend and the rest of his House.

“I AM GOING TO RIP OFF YOUR FAVOURITE BITS AND THEN FEED THEM TO THE MERPEOPLE! I WILL TAKE JAMES AND TOSS HIM IN AFTER YOUR BITS AND THEN WHERE WILL YOU TWO BE?!”

Deirdre’s droll voice nearby distracted Lily, causing her to turn away from the cowering wizards. “In Sirius trouble, I imagine. It isn’t called Black Lake for naught, I suppose.”

As Lily drew in a deep breath, preparing to lay into the newest member of the conspiracy to RUIN HER LIFE, Deirdre wound back and tossed the pie straight into Lily’s face. She nearly knocked Lily off of her feet with the force, and the cream topping splashed around the Prefect’s Gryffindor striped pate a good three inches all around. Cream dripped down from her ears and saturated her robes. The disposable tin foil pan fell to the floor with a loud clang, breaking the stunned silence.

Dusting her hands off, Deirdre watched Lily’s expression closely. She was holding her breath along with the rest of the room.

The pink tip of Lily’s tongue poked out, clearing her lips of the confection. A finger crept up and swiped a peak of the cream off of her cheek, and Lily turned to Sirius and thrust it into his face. “You just HAVE to try this, Sirius.” Her delighted green eyes ratcheted down to James, still in ice-cube form, and she giggled as though she had seen him for the first time. “Always thought he was cool.”
Snorting indelicately, Deirdre faintly responded, “Indeed.” She arched a single eyebrow at the little tableau. Done with that crisis, she retraced her steps, ignoring silent stares. Her footsteps clicked and crunched their way across the room, and she arrived back at Peter’s side near the food table. In a more conversational tone, she commented to the room in general, “Well. I’d say that worked.”

A low buzz filled in those silences as students started to register exactly how much trouble they’d be in collectively if McGonagall got wind of this. A pair of smarter, more enterprising girls started to work on the clean up, enlisting a trio of amiable wizards, Hufflepuffs by their colours.

Huxley, also helping to clean up, had found the Snitch on the floor, and he guffawed as he held it up between thumb and forefinger for all to see. “I reckon Wilkes could manage to catch this one now.” It was as large as an eagle owl and flat as a pancake. One of its wings fell off with a tinkle, answered by raucous laughter. Many in the crowd turned their attention that way, grateful for something less awkward to talk about. Plans were being laid out to frame it and post it on the wall.

The triumphant bushy-haired witch turned back to Peter’s friend and gifted her with a beatific smile. “Morag, was it? Jolly brilliant work, that. Bravo.” She stuck out her hand at the blonde, “I’m Deirdre. Deirdre Ward.”

“Yes, quite. Well, um…” The pretty girl glanced at Peter whose eyes were watering with the effort of not laughing out loud. The daft boy had his mouth firmly pressed together although paroxysms of chortling were still escaping his control. He had an overbite, so this made him look rather odd indeed. “And, this is Peter Pettigrew.” He lifted his hand in a weak wave.

Deirdre frowned at Peter, offering him a desultory nod before turning her considerable focus back on the blonde witch. After a beat of taking in Morag’s colours of yellow and black, she exclaimed, “Thank Merlin, you’re not another bloody stupid Gryffindor. I don’t suppose you can direct me back to the infirmary?”

The two girls took their leave of Peter and the party, passing through the portrait hole arm in arm.

A pair of gold eyes followed Deirdre’s retreating figure. Remus had made no move to stop his dance partner from leaving, but she had made no effort to say goodbye and that did rankle. He hoped she had had a good time, although he suspected the whole evening was a gigantic disaster, thanks to James. A supersonic whine issued from his throat before he tore his attention away from the witch and back to the mess underfoot. Duty called.
Severus was finishing up in Pomfrey’s little potions lab, and the hour was growing late indeed. He was running out of excuses to stick around, although he knew that Pomfrey wasn’t going to push him out until the absolute last moment before curfew.

As he scoured the last cauldron down with the sand and oil that the highly reactive iron did best with, he reflected on how his life had changed recently, and yet was likely to remain the same. He had started to fool himself into thinking he had found a kindred spirit in Deirdre. Really, any witch who knew Tolkien so well had to be unusual. And yet, her mind had cast herself as Eowyn. Well, not that she would have been spoiled for choice in that fiction. Arwen didn’t have nearly the same role as Eowyn in the action, and he agreed it made much more sense given the purpose of their quest, but still he wondered. In the original, Eowyn is rebuffed in favour of Faramir, a character played by Professor Nott. He was overthinking this and he knew it.

Scooping out the rest of the scouring mixture and returning it to the sealed container that Pomfrey used for waste, Severus sighed and shook out his hands before taking up the rag, and buffed the cauldron to a high shine. Others would have commented on his habit of doing things without magic, but he preferred the calming effect of repetitive tasks. Potion making was so personal, so soothing.

Noise drifted in through the open door, and he paused mid-buff, listening. Two feminine voices chattered amiably, one heart-stoppingly familiar. He cleared away the detritus and paused, straining to hear more clearly.

Deirdre had been going on about her disappointment in House Gryffindor at length. The pranks, the bullying, and the lack of thought before action had already been touched on. “Are they always that... that... irresponsible? I mean, honestly. First thing I noticed when I walked in were two boys looking sick in the corner. I’d expect a Prefect to take an interest, but he seemed to not even notice.”

Morag hemmed, “Probably is blind to it by now. Six years of that, it becomes normal. Besides, you can’t be best mates with Potter and Black and not know how to be morally flexible.”

A look of disgust crawled across Deirdre’s face. “Peter is one of their friends too, isn’t he?” She
pushed open the door to the infirmary, holding it for Morag.

It was Morag’s turn to vent, “Yes. Although I think friend isn’t quite the word. Lackey suits better. He’s got so much potential. I’ve encouraged him to come out with us, but he always has to check with James and seems to never get back with me.” Her forehead wrinkled, “He says they’d do anything for him, and he repays them a hundredfold. Daft.”

Tutting, Deirdre shook her head. “Wizards. Why are we so interested in them again?” She let the door swing shut behind them, and moved further into the room.

“Oh, but you looked lovely, dancing with Lupin. Quite cozy there at the end, you two. You’ll have half of the girls at school asking you about it come Monday. Or sooner, come to that.” Morag patted Deirdre’s arm reassuringly.

Deirdre’s face blanched. “You don’t… You don’t suppose he thought that meant something? I mean, I didn’t even want to go to that thrice-damned party, but Professor McGonagall insisted and made Remus take me…” She hitched up at that, “I mean, Lupin. He said the rat I had found during the Quidditch match belonged to one of his Housemates, so I simply had to bring him back, but then…” Words failed her at that point.

Morag was giving Deirdre a long, speculative look and then took both of Deirdre’s hands in hers. “I know we just met, Deirdre but I can tell you are a brilliant witch. Any girl who can stop Lily Evans in a full-blown fury is worth her weight in salt.” After a chuckle, “He’d be a fool not to see that, now wouldn’t he?”

Deirdre shook her head in denial, protesting, “It was your pie, Morag. I don’t suppose I could have a peek at the recipe?”

Morag chortled, “Oh no. It’s still in development.” She smirked before continuing on earnestly, “As I was saying… any witch as smart and quick on her feet as you ought to know that a wizard never dances like that with a witch who he considers just a friend. Even if she’s an assignment from his Head of House.”

Deirdre blushed a deep red and began to deny it rigorously. “That simply isn’t possible, I won’t believe it. Absolutely bonkers…”

Morag crooned, “Oh, don’t worry. Remus Lupin is known for nothing more than the briefest of liaisons. Much to the frustration of many. No doubt, if you find his interest so repulsive that it will flag soon enough.” She patted Deirdre’s hand before adding, “He has a rather short attention span. A Gryffindor for sure. They either are more determined than a crup with a marrow bone, or as flighty as a billywig. No middle ground.” She squeezed Deirdre’s fingers.

Deirdre was impressed at how the Hufflepuff decanted such a deep truth so neatly. She kept her eyes fixed on Morag’s larger hands, trying to understand the dread that she was feeling. Her voice was smaller now, “Well, I’ll just have to make myself scarce. I don’t suppose that Lupin is allergic to libraries?” Her eyes lifted back to the blonde witch across from her, and was further dismayed to to find Morag about to burst with mirth at the very idea.

“No, dearie. He’s a good student. You’ll have to face him soon enough.” She turned to the clock on the wall and exclaimed, “Oh! I must get going. I’ve promised to meet my friends back at our commons for a review of the evening.” She chuckled, “Have I the story to tell them, thanks to you! Lily Evans, the first serious subject for Morag’s Calming Pie.”

Deirdre’s hands spasmed on Morag’s in a gesture of affection. She felt like she had known this witch
for years, although they had just met. “I’ll see you around, I hope?”

Morag answered, releasing Deirdre’s hands. “I am just as unavoidable as Remus Lupin. Ta, dear!”

Deirdre’s voice called after her as she waved her friend off, “But infinitely more welcome!” Deirdre sighed and plopped down into what she had come to consider Severus’ chair, considering her second-hand shoes. They were scraped and scuffed. She’d have to find some way to repay the girl who loaned them to her. A complete, bloody mess, like this whole night.

A shadow fell over her, and she looked up to find Severus Snape. His face was expressionless as he said, “Have a good time, then?”

There are some who take dawn’s early light as the sign of promise for better times ahead, but to Deirdre, this colorless twilight was her personal home. The tension in her body bled away as she stood to face Severus with a bitter laugh.

As he listened in on the girls’ conversation, Severus felt a cold lump grow in his belly. The weight of anxiety was familiar, albeit unwelcome. Anything to do with Gryffindor seemed bent on destroying him. She had danced with Remus Lupin, and this witch, Morag, thought it wasn’t merely friendly. He hadn’t missed Deirdre’s use of Lupin’s first name, and in spite of all of her protestations and denials, a part of him whispered that it knew she had been too good to be true, and that it was all over. No witch would want any part of him when she had any other option. He barely heard the rest of the conversation, wallowing in his own turbulent whirlpool of emotion. His mood blackened further with every breath.

When the coast was clear, Severus slipped out of the lab. He placed a dampening charm on his shoes and had half-decided that he was going to just leave. She’d not likely miss him, after all.

There sat the object of his agonies, sitting limply in the chair next to his cot, as though she were waiting for him. He halted, staring at her. Before he could reconsider, he found himself walking over to stand right behind her.

Her head was bowed, shoulders hunched. In short, she looked as miserable as he felt. That bow-tight tension was all wrong on her delicate frame. He would have her at her ease, always.

His throat was dry and tight, and it was surprisingly difficult to say anything. “Have a good time, then?” He attempted to keep his tone carefully neutral but to his ears it sounded churlish and he winced inwardly.

A bitter laugh escaped the witch as she stood up and turned to face him, one hand resting on the chairback. “Oh, good, you’re here..” She shook her head in answer, and her hair fascinated his eye, bouncing, lovely. “No. I can’t remember when I had a more awful time.” Her voice dripped with black humour as she added, “Well, if I had my memory back I am certain that would have been in the top ten bloody annoying, tedious, dangerous, odious wastes of time in the history of forever.”

Severus searched Deirdre’s face and found only openness. No new reserve or walls erected. Just... Deirdre. She did something strange to him, and he didn’t really have words for it. He felt like something vital had risen high in his chest, and was straining to get out. It felt like a mixture of joy and pain, need and fear, all wrapped up in elation. He almost couldn’t think when she was looking at him like that, lips curved up at the edges, eyes crinkling in amusement.
At his silence, Deirdre prompted. “And you? How did you spend your evening?”

Swallowing in an effort to shove that terrible and wonderful feeling down enough to give him room to breathe, Severus attempted to answer. “Em, well. I knocked about a bit in Madam Pomfrey’s potions lab there. Had to finish a few things.” Shining everything to a high polish, counting the minutes until you came back didn’t sound wise to say. He jostled things in his pockets, “Ah. I need to give these to you. I think Professor Sprout brought a trunk for you. And she left a message that she’d be by at eight tomorrow to take you to breakfast.”

Deirdre waved a hand, indicating that he should join her on her way over to her little nook. Sure enough, an ancient looking trunk lay open, partially filled with the bags that Deirdre had left with McGonagall. As he handed her each parcel, she placed it on her bed and reversed the shrinking spells in turn. The last was small enough that their hands brushed, and Deirdre’s eyes widened a fraction before she turned away. Was she blushing? “Voluntary potions work on a Saturday night. Severus Snape, you are a singular wizard. Did you know that?”

Recognising the teasing for what it was, he threw back, “What. I should have been dancing too?”

Deirdre looked up at him speculatively. “Do you?”

Severus was taken aback. “Do I… what?”

“Dance?”

Distinctly uncomfortable, Severus temporised. “Well…”

Deirdre’s face fell a fraction in disappointment. Oh, that wouldn’t do, so he clarified. “No, not really. Slughorn has insisted we learn the wizarding waltz, for the Yule Ball, you see.” Not that he ever really got to use it much. He’d taken a few classmates for a few turns about the floor, but it was because it was expected. “Why, do you like to dance?”

Deirdre shrugged her shoulders, looking away. “I might, given a decent partner of course.”

Severus watched the witch cool off, become more distant, and decided to get things more into the open. “So. Remus Lupin. Is he a good dancer, then?” His chin raised in defiance of the damned uncomfortable subject.

Whipping her eyes back to Severus’ face, Deirdre favoured him with a penetrating look before she answered. “Good enough to get me, the uninitiated, through most of a cha-cha, but honestly... “ He watched her wrap her arms about herself, hugging away her own insecurities. That should have been his job, but he was too busy sulking.

“I’m not that good. It was a relief when Lily Evans made a scene.” The light had returned to her eyes and she was looking up at him, her lower lip caught in her teeth.

Severus didn’t understand what he was seeing there in Deirdre’s expression. The mention of Lily Evans was like carrion in the path of what was an otherwise pleasant stroll. He sidestepped around the rotting carcass of an emotional trap and said, “Oh. I’m sure you dance well. Might do with some practice.” Annnd there he stepped in another. Damn.

Deirdre tilted her head up at Severus, a funny look on her face. “You think I should go back then? Dance again with Remus Lupin some more?”

Severus’ stomach lurched. That is NOT what he meant to suggest. A decisive, “No!” escaped his lips well before his mind could do its usual quality check. He said again, quieter and more firmly.
“No, course not.”

Deirdre was drumming her fingers on her arm and she spoke quietly. “You know, I never got to say thank you for being such a help today.”

If they had been doing a conversational foxtrot moments ago, someone changed the tempo to a mambo without sending Severus a memo. He watched Deirdre let her arms relax down to her sides and take a step closer.

Ever the betrayer, his voice cracked, “You are welcome?” He was frozen, pinned to the spot as he watched her approach. The closer she got, the less air there seemed to be left in the room. It was as though his consciousness was telescoping outward, becoming more and more detached. He didn’t even flinch as she pressed her hand into his and pulled down. What could she possibly...?

Soft lips brushed his cheek, light as a butterfly’s wing. She murmured in his ear. “Thank you, Severus Snape.”

Light and air returned to his world in a rush, and abruptly he was back in his own shoes. He felt wonderful, that little patch of skin was singing an aria to end all arias. As Deirdre stepped back from him, his balance seemed to be pulled towards her gravitational field and he wobbled at the knees in what he hoped was a subtle way, only barely maintaining his upright posture. He had retained possession of her hand, loathe to let it go.

Deirdre seemed to be glowing. Did she know what she did to him?

A clearing of the throat behind them broke the spell. “Ahem. Well, Severus. I do believe that if you intend to get back to your dormitory before curfew, you had better get going.” Madam Pomfrey, always looking out for him.

He was blushing, but the buzz of happiness made him not particularly care who saw. He chuckled, “Ah. Thank you, Madam.” He sensed rather than saw the Mediwitch nip back into the office to give them privacy. Very much the chaperoned type of privacy. How much had she... oh, nevermind.

Severus turned to glare at the clock on the wall. Five minutes to Ten. Damn. He’d really have to get a leg on. He turned back to Deirdre, and was relieved to see that she hadn’t been mortified. Feeling a bit the coward, he retreated back into prescribed social forms and brought Deirdre’s hand to his lips, his expression and manner much more familiar than earlier today, his kiss more tender on her knuckle. “I am afraid I must take leave of you. From what I understand, I won’t be seeing you again until dinner in the Great Hall tomorrow evening.”

Deirdre’s cheeks went a shade pinker and she nodded. “I think that’s accurate.”

He straightened and shot the clock another malignant glare. Time was ever his enemy, it seemed, as much as he wanted it to burn faster earlier. At least his dormitory was only a floor away. There was so much more he wanted to talk about. He didn’t want to go. His grip on her hand loosened and her fingers slipped through his. “Until then, Deirdre.” The name felt sweet on his lips. He nodded a goodnight before taking off at a rather fast walk. At the door he spun around to look at her one last time before reluctantly turning away, disappearing from sight.

Peeves’ face emerged from the ceiling, making sloppy kissing noises. Deirdre looked up, and with a
flick of her wand, pelted the Poltergeist with a splash of white sparks. A loud raspberry told her that she had missed. She turned back to repacking her new clothes into her trunk, hands and mind too unsettled to permit rest just yet. She glanced up at the door, where she last saw Severus.

She replayed that moment in her mind, and felt rewarded for her boldness. The look in those dark eyes sent thrills of joy all of the way down to her toes. The room was suddenly warmer as her mind reviewed the feel of his lips on her hand, bidding her a tender farewell. Her brain shorted out for a moment before the weight of the clothes in her hand brought her back to the present.

After emptying the contents of the last box into the trunk, she flopped onto the bed with a strong exhalation. She basked in her mind’s suggestions of what the future would bring.

Tomorrow night she’d be in her new home, and her school year would finally begin, only two and a half months tardy. How was she ever going to catch up?

Chapter End Notes

**Good news/Bad News Folks.** The good news is that I will still be publishing weekly. The bad news is that I’ve got a hugely important test to study for that I have to take on the 16th of October. Until then, as said above, I’ll be publishing weekly. Chapters for the next 4 weeks are already written, but I’ve killed my buffer in preparing for what comes later (research research research) so... there it is. No worries, I am not going to abandon my babies. Coromandel would come and slay me if I did.
Chapter Thirty-Seven.

The Three Broomsticks, Back Parlour
13 November, 1976

Evening.

A low murmur from the front bar permeated through the walls, and the clink of glassware and snatches of laughter punctuated the evening with a feeling of fellowship and cheer. Dumbledore had been out of the habit of attending these meetings, but now he was starting to believe that they would be more important than ever. The Oddest Fellows was a loosely organised cadre of wizards and witches who banded together to help each other and enjoy a good glass of old Ogden’s. They borrowed their name from the Muggle organisation, and were broader minded than it was safe to admit aloud in mixed company. The last of his expected attendees slipped in through the sound dampening security curtain.

“Ah, Whit. Good. We should be able to get started.” Dumbledore was standing next to the hearth, a glass held loosely in his free hand. The assembled company was a motley crew and had a strong representation from the Hogwarts Teaching corp. Sigmund Svartrunir was already seated at Dumbledore’s left hand in a wingchair, and next to him was Horace Slughorn, current Potions Master and Slytherin, who appeared to place a lot of stock in who you knew and not who your parents were. He had been teaching at Hogwarts longer than most of the current faculty. Dumbledore’s trusty school chum, Elphius Doge was sitting forwards in his chair, listening intently to what seemed to be a friendly debate between the Professors. Further back from the fire sat Augusta Longbottom, Griselda Marchbanks, and Bathilda Bagshot. A trio of witches sat to the other side of the fire, their heads bent together over an album of pictures, and judging by the cooing and exclamations, grandchildren were likely on display.

Whittington Nott sauntered around to the back of the room with a bag tucked under his arm. He brightened and sketched a salute to Conrad Rolle and Bob Ogden, the latter of whom drew up a worn looking leather chair with his wand so he might sit with them. Clearing his throat, Dumbledore called the meeting to order. “Fellow Odder Fellows, welcome back, it is good to be together again. Much is going on in the world. For every mishap mentioned in the news, there are ten others that alas, are not being reported. We have always taken an interest in what we can do for our fellow citizens, particularly those who cannot help themselves.”

A murmur of general agreement went up.
“Anyone willing to host refugees of the violence should speak with Mr Doge. As you may already know, a family of Muggles was displaced, along with their ten year old daughter whose name appears in the Book of Admittance. She will be matriculating at Hogwarts next school year, if her family can be persuaded to go into hiding for their safety.”

A gasp went up, and Imogen Prewett declared, “The poor things! What can we do?” Her eyes sparkled with tears of distress. Nora Nott patted her hand, her face set with determination while Charis Weasley sat nearby, face set stoically.

Dumbledore acknowledged the lady in question, “Any help offered should be passed through us. Unfortunately it appears that Professor Flitwick’s appearance at their house probably tipped off the Purists to the identity of the family in question, although not the specific child. The Death Eaters do not always show such restraint, so it is not yet clear as to whether this was perpetrated by one of their ranks or by someone else. Regardless, we will be changing the protocol for approaching families like this in the future for their protection. I must keep the details of these new protocols secret, but rest assured we are doing everything in our power to guard these children and their families.”

A throat being cleared drew everyone’s attention to Horace Slughorn. “Albus, these reports concern me deeply. The news that magical children are being targeted and their families harassed should not be suppressed! Why, some of my best students are Muggleborn, and I think one might be Head Girl in a year’s time. A thought occurs to me, Headmaster. Do we need to worry about the security of the Book…”

Dumbledore cut off Slughorn sharply. “No, and it will not do to discuss such things here in the open!”

Slughorn’s eyes darted about the room, and his expression grew more grim. “Naturally, apologies.”

Dumbledore looked around, frowning. “Our gatherings may also tempt the Death Eaters to action should we attract their attention. I urge you all to look about yourselves and to use common sense. Do not travel alone. Keep to highly public areas. Keep your wands at the ready.”

Conrad Rolle, Professor of Arithmancy, stood up from his chair against the back wall. His Devonshire accent was difficult to detect under the influence of some of the finest education Muggle money could buy, “Albus. No matter what I do, I am already blacklisted by He Who Must Not Be Named. I have been living under this sword of Damocles since I graduated, and you know what I went through in the Ministry. It is spreading further than I ever thought possible, and the implied threats reached me even in Paris. Of course I want to help, and we can discuss that later. I just want you to know that I stand with you.”

Next to him, Whittington Nott stood and extended his hand out for Rolle to shake. “Connie, I stand with you.”

A whimper escaped a matronly woman who was tucked behind Augusta Longbottom, and Dumbledore turned to regard her. She had her hand firmly over her mouth and her green eyes were wide with obvious distress. The Headmaster rummaged in his pocket and took out a wax paper bag filled with jellied spearmint leaves. Wordlessly, he stepped toward her a held out the bag, an expression of sympathy on his face.

The woman spoke, her voice thick with dread. “No. I don’t want sweets, Headmaster. I want your assurance that this is not some foolish escapade. Surely the Ministry is able to handle these threats?” She sniffed, working to hold it together. “You people already ate my son’s innocent years. I want to see him settled and happy, not out risking his neck again.”
Conrad had let go of Whit’s hand with a whispered, “Thanks, old boy.” He extended a shaky hand behind him to locate the seat behind him before lowering himself into it. Ogden poured a glass of smoking whiskey and passed it over to Rolle.

Whit stood there, dumbfounded. He either had not known his mother was present, or he had forgotten. Either way, he was clearly stricken, and shook his head at his mother, who had turned her pleading eyes to her son. Before he could open his mouth to reassure her, she broke in, “No! You can’t do this. You’ve only been home a few months!” She added in between waves of sniffling, “These have been the best few months I’ve had since you went to work for the Ministry, popkin. I haven’t wanted to burden you, but your bloody career has kept your father and I on tenterhooks for decades.”

She turned to Dumbledore, “And when you offered him this post, I thought to myself, at last my boy will come home. He will be safe. I was so grateful to you, Headmaster.” She held out a hand to the man and when he took it, she squeezed it with a tremulous smile. In spite of her age and wrinkles, her smile was yet still as fresh and beautiful as a warm autumn morning; the droplets of tears on her cheeks reminiscent of dew on summer’s last roses, holding on until frost.

Dumbledore tried to find the words to tell this mother that her son was needed, that Britain needed him, but this preoccupation was broken as Whit crossed the room and knelt at his mother’s side, embracing her as he did when he was a boy. The woman was glaring at him now. “Why can’t someone else do it? Someone in the Ministry. My boy’s retired, Albus.”

Swallowing, Dumbledore fished in his pocket, this time for a square of paper. “Do you recall Nobby Leach?”

Whit released his mother and swiveled, remaining on his bended knee at her side, patting her hand.

Horace Slughorn spoke up, “Yes, shame that he had to retire so young, good man. Loved a good pipe.”

Dumbledore frowned, “I received word that Nobby succumbed at last to Cerebrumous Spattergroit. He passed away last month. For whatever reason, he had not told anyone that he was back at St Mungo’s, and it was his solicitor that carried the news.” He shook out the paper and regarded the flowing handwriting scratched there. “Among his effects was a copy of a letter that Nobby had submitted to the Daily Prophet editors.” He continued, “His solicitor explained that he had been rejected summarily which is a surprise to no one, but I believe that if he were able to join us, he would have said something along these lines. I beg your indulgence, Lady Nott.”

The woman in question was frowning as she could see that he was wriggling as desperately as a flobberworm on a hook. A faint dip of her chin conveyed permission.

Dumbledore cleared his throat and shoved the bag of mints back into his pocket, composing himself before starting to speak.

“To the Editor, Daily Prophet.

I have no desire to return to office. I am done with that phase of my life. What I would like to do is to reach out to everyone, if possible. Muggleborn, Halfblood, Pureblood, British, witch or wizard. My happiness is amplified when my fellows are also happy, and their misery is shared and cannot be borne. This rush to control and condemn on both sides only brings pain and senseless destruction.

In this wide world, there is ample place for every soul. Magic is plentiful and can provide for all. With magic, life should be free and full of wonder, but we have lost our way. Greed and fear poison
the souls of men, perverting virtue to serve hatred. Instead of bringing us together, magic has held us separate. Every coming and going of the Floo network and portkeys are monitored closely. Bitter experience has taught us to be skeptical, and to condemn before hearing the evidence. The Ministry is hard and unkind, too caught up in cleverness and details to notice our world blackening with shadow all around us.

The papers bring us more horrible news, and we grow accustomed to it. Bloodglutted, we face a grim future - all out war among us is taking its toll. The extinction of magical society at our own hands because of wrongheaded thinking is a very real risk. What we need is humanity, to remember who we are, and the responsibilities of stewardship that we hold for all magical peoples and beasts. Muggles too are important, and it says a lot about us as a nation that we have done so poorly at protecting them.

We should use our power to bring us together, a fellowship aimed at the unity and betterment of us all. We share the same air and the same gravity as millions of men, women, and little babies who are victims to the whims of Tom Riddle and his so called Knights of Walpurgis. Under his eye, these innocent, helpless souls are displaced and tortured, often to the point of death. I would reach out to these victims. We must help them, for if we cannot be strong for them, then all is lost. This evil is but the prop of greedy wizards.

These people need protection and encouragement. The hate of wizards for Muggles and Muggleborns is unsustainable. These Purists seek to free only themselves, and to see the rest of the world, magical and otherwise, under their rule. There is a reason that we do not have their ideal society already in place. Purists will find themselves on close examination not so pure, and will breed themselves into extinction if they get their way. But I for one do not fancy waiting for them to die out, and they have taken a more active and sinister tactic that threatens us all.

We must appeal to our brothers not to give in to the lure of promises of power and preferential treatment. These Purists despise all but themselves and will expect you to do what they tell you, and worse, think what they dictate. They treat the lower classes as cattle, disposable after the milk has gone dry. They must not join the Death Eaters, they go against everything Merlin fought to uphold. They invite the darkness, where Merlin with Arthur’s help held it back. As wizards and witches we have magic and love in our hearts, we love our fellow men - magical or otherwise. We don’t hate! This goes against our very natures, and poisons our magic. Only the unlived hate, the unlived and the twisted. Do not walk into slavery under the Purists, and don’t add to Lord Voldemort’s cause as it will be at your cost.

Magical folk have the power within you. This power should be used for good, not to inflict harm on the world and its inhabitants. We can make wondrous contraptions, fantastic potions, and change the nature of matter. We have the power to make this world better, this life lighter and easier. In the name of those who cannot protect themselves, let us use this power! We should band together and fight off this evil that permeates our society. We need to fight for good, and for a Britain where children will have a future and education no matter their background, and all magical folk have a chance to develop their talent to its fullest extent. We fight for a lasting peace in our land, for security and return to order in the bright light of morning.

The Purists speak in shadows and by moonlight, they promise these same things. They lie to us, and have no intention of fulfilling promises except as it suits them best. The Death Eaters can be counted on to take advantage of the gulls who join their ranks as favoured apostles, using them to divide us, to better control us, and secure their power. Make no mistake, they are tools, and can never be equals in this terrible world that Lord Voldemort evangelises. Let us fight back, to free the world of corrupted thinking, to free magical minds of the bewitchment of Lord Voldemort. We fight for a world of reason, a world where old traditions, rooted in hate and fear, will be cast away for good. A
world where new ideas and new magics will someday reunite our world fully, in a way that the Death Eaters can never deliver. I am talking about a world where all people can meet on equal ground and work together.

Wizards! In the name of all that is good, we must unite!

Sincerely Yours in Fellowship,

Nobby Leach.”

Albus was gratified as he finished the speech to find that many of his Odder Fellows had stood up, clapping in the restrained way of well-bred wizards. Conrad Rolle showed a fraction more emotion, calling out his approval. Whit was standing too, his mother clinging to his arm. He made an effort to clap, looking down at his mother. “If I don’t stand up, mother, then how can I expect others to stand up for me in turn?”

Lady Nott screwed up her face and Whit hastened to add, “Children, mother. These monsters are targeting Muggleborn children, seeking to cleave them from their natural birthright. By the love you hold for me, I must work to protect these innocents as their mothers cannot protect them for all the love they bear them.”

Dumbledore watched as the witch was struck by her own son’s words. Gone were the tears now, and resignation took their place. She straightened, squaring her shoulders and boldly stated, “Then so must I. Your father will never forgive us, you know.” The corner of her mouth pulled up, and a twinkle of green eyed mischief shone through. “His mother always said he’d regret me.”

Whit smirked cheekily back at her, “You are in good company, Mother dear. Gran never approved of me either.”

Next to them, a decidedly nervous looking Professor Slughorn was getting to his feet. He was mopping his brow with a folded handkerchief, and his eyes were shifting about as though he expected an attack. “I just remembered that I left a potion on. I need to attend to it. If you will excuse me.” He smiled weakly at the little company, executed a fractional bow, and then hurried out of the room.

Dumbledore looked out at the assembled company. This was a crossroads. “We are living in dangerous times, friends. Very dangerous times. I believe Nobby was right, we must band together and use the gifts we were born with to protect those who cannot protect themselves. Merlin worked with Arthur to fight off many threats to Britain. It is not time to break the Statute, but we should urge the Minister to encourage co-operation with the Muggle authorities. We are relatively few.” He extended a hand to the door. “It is possible that being associated with the Fellows will attract negative attention from the conservative elements within the Ministry. I ask for your support in these difficult times, in any form you feel suits you best. I would be happy to meet with you individually at your leisure to discuss things further.”

Elphius Doge, who had sat back down when Slughorn excused himself, raised his mostly empty glass of sherry, “To friendship, love, and truth!”

The three elderly witches behind him raised their glasses, declaring, “Bravo!” or “Cheers”, but Augusta Longbottom’s, “May t’devil take the Dark Lord!” broke through clearly.

The looks she garnered were a mixture of shock and respect, and Lady Nott answered, “And may he cut off the toes off our foes, so we might know them by their limps!”
Imogen Prewitt lifted her tea primly, “And may he say a prayer for us all when he’s done.”

A general shuffling and raised glasses marked the toasts, and the meeting dissolved into a looser, more casual night among like-minded friends.

Dumbledore motioned over Whit, and they sat down on either side of Elphius Doge. Whit had a bag with him, and he opened it, carefully pulling out a lumpy shape wrapped about in flannel.

Dumbledore nodded to Whit, watching as he pulled on a pair of white gloves. “Elphius, I thought this might interest you.”

Professor Nott’s voice was distorted by distraction as he carefully picked open the mouth of the bag, now situated in his lap. “I came across this artifact in my travels and I was wondering if you might know anything about it, Mr Doge.” He peeled back the soft fabric and the soft glow of gold slid into view.

Doge squinted, pulling out a monocle from his breast pocket and fitted it into his right eye. Whit balanced the heavy piece on the man’s chair arm. It was a large, ornate bowl with handles and a pedestal foot. It had once been heavily etched with decorative knotwork, and the side was mangled and the motif was difficult to discern. His eyebrow rose in interest, necessitating a quick push of the finger to prevent the lens from falling out. “Well now. That is a very old piece.” He indicated that he wanted to look at the handle with a wave of his fingers. “Workmanship suggests 7th or 8th century.” When the damaged section was brought back around for him to examine, he tutted under his breath. “Didn’t respond to a Reparo, eh? Magically damaged.”

Dumbledore inclined his head. “So we believe.”

Doge looked back at Dumbledore now, asking, “Was it... Is it enchanted?”

A shadow fell over the cup as a witch broke into their little cabal. Bathilda Bagshot exclaimed, “Oh my! I thought that piece lost!” She straightened, looking down her nose at Dumbledore. “I suppose there would be no reason for you to recognise it, it has been damaged irreparably. It will have to be remade, I suppose. What a shame.”

Whit stood up out of good breeding after he noticed Bagshot, offering her his chair, still burdened with the cup.

Dumbledore waited, his hands folded in his lap, lips pressed together in mild irritation. “Care to share with the class, Bathilda?”

Doge chortled at the joke. Whit was too busy trying to find a comfortable way to hold the chalice without allowing it to touch his bare skin.

Bagshot’s lips curved up and she had the look of a cat that had drank the cream. Her voice was very quiet, “That...”

All three men leaned in, not wanting to miss what she had to say.

“... is the friendship cup of Helga Hufflepuff. Or I’ll eat that ugly hat you wear, Elphias.” She leaned back, apparently at her ease, having delivered that particularly loaded news.

Doge’s lips parted in disbelief. “Truly, Bathilda?”

She gestured Whit closer, and frowned as he hesitated. “I won’t take it from you, child.”
Whit looked at Dumbledore, unsure as to how much to say.

The Headmaster temporised, “The cup has been cursed, Bathilda. You should not touch it. Surely you are mistaken.”

Irritated, Bagshot tsked, “Whoever violated this national treasure should be thrown into Azkaban for life!” She crooked a bony finger to bring Whit closer, “I won’t touch it, boy. Come here.”

Whit stepped over and held the cup extended toward her. She pantomimed for him to rotate it to reveal the most damaged section. “As you can clearly see, there are the remnants of a paw, and… over there a suggestion of a nose. No, I am very certain.”

The commotion had attracted more notice, and Augusta Longbottom walked over with Madam Marchbanks on her arm. The latter, a petite woman dressed in a set of robin-egg blue robes, exclaimed, “Oh, I haven’t seen that since eighteen sixty-five! What happened to it? Who could have done such a thing?”

Doge answered eyes bright with academic interest, “Whittington here found it in his travels. But is it genuine? I for one hope it was not.”

Augusta Longbottom interjected, “Of course it’s a fake! An expensive, well done fake. No one would dare mangle the real thing. Last I heard it was in a private collection, I wonder what has happened to it. Someone should inquire…”

Dumbledore, thinking fast, stood and overrode the rising clamour. “Of course it is an imitation. This object was cursed and must have been meant as a temptation for some unlucky wizard.”

Augusta and Griselda stepped back a pace, not wanting to get overly close.

Doge’s eyes widened and this time the monocle dropped, falling into his pocket. “By Jove. That is most diabolical.” He dropped his voice, looking around, “You don’t think… that perhaps You Know Who might be involved?”

Dumbledore stroked his beard, looking down at his friend through his half-moon glasses. “I do, Elphias.” He looked around, finding that all conversation had halted, and the room was now absolutely silent. Every head was turned his way. “I cannot say that I understand why Tom would have created a duplicate cup, but I implore all of you, if you happen upon one of the Founder artifacts, contact me immediately. Many of these objects have been lost to time, but there may be other counterfeits surfacing, each imbued with a foul curse.”

From the back, Conrad asked, “Surely these valuable objects are not all lost. I know about Ravenclaw’s diadem, that is a given. The rest largely stayed within the families, I had understood…?”

“I have the Sorting Hat in hand, and the Book of Admittance remains under the strictest safety protocols. The diadem of Rowena Ravenclaw, Godric’s sword, Salazar Slytherin’s Ring and Locket, and the real cup of Helga Hufflepuff all must be located and examined. Our search MUST remain secret. Use caution, and common sense. Do not ask openly.”

Imogen spoke up, “I... have some talent at finding things, Albus.” Still fetched up next to her, Charis Weasley looked shocked that her friend had made such an offer.

Dumbledore turned to her, smiling. “Any help you can offer would be most welcome. Discuss it with your family, and I will attend on you tomorrow evening, alright?”

Mrs Prewett looked as shocked as anyone that she had spoken up, but she gave him a grateful smile.
in response and a mute nod. He was allowing her time to consider ramifications.

Dumbledore made a circular motion to Whit, and the man crouched to pick up the murtlap skin cover that had dropped to the floor in the excitement. Quickly, he rewrapped the object and placed it back in the bag that he had brought it in, commenting as he worked, “The curse on this object remains, although I believe it had been much worse before it was damaged. Whoever did it thought to use basilisk venom, although where one might locate such a thing in this day and age, I have no idea.”

Bathilda Bagshot stood up, face screwed up in irritation. “This is all very irregular, Albus. That object, even if it is a fake, deserves to be examined by experts and historians like myself. You show me such a wondrous thing, and then tell me I can’t talk about it, and then ask me to find the real object? I am quite cross with you!”

Dumbledore tucked his hands into his sleeves, considering. “The Ministry is divided between Purists and the Liberals. It is not wise for me to ask openly about these things, but you, Madam Bagshot, have a unique excuse to be looking.”

The woman narrowed her eyes at Dumbledore, inclining her head slightly. “At a risk. Being here is a risk!” She paused before going on, “I have much to consider, Albus. It is getting late, I think I shall retire.”

Marchbanks was also eyeing Dumbledore with disfavour. “I have not seen any evidence of interference in my Department, Albus. We remain absolutely separate from any political concerns, and I have maintained this stance for decades. I hope you understand...”

“But of course, Madam Marchbanks. Your vigilance is regrettably necessary. I would not dare to ask you to take any sides. However, if you see opportunities for us to do some good...?” He trailed off, hoping she understood.

Madam Marchbanks stood straight, “I might be old, Albus, but I am still an Odder. I remain firm in my oaths.”

Dumbledore hastened to temporise, “I expected nothing less. Thank you, Griselda.”

Augusta Longbottom stepped forwards to shake hands with Dumbledore. “I and my family stand firm with you, Dumbledore. You can count on us.”

One by one, each Odder Fellow bade Dumbledore a good night, leaving via Floo or Apparition in most cases. Whit and Conrad had their heads bent together off to the side, chatting quietly as they waited for Dumbledore. The Professors were obliged to travel back to school by other means, and Conrad stood waiting with three brooms cradled in the crook of his arm.

After retrieving their cloaks, the three Professors exited the Three Broomsticks by the side door. Whit looked over his shoulder, being the last to kick off into the November night sky. There was movement in the shadow of the alleyway. Cursing, he sped away, holding his wand at the ready. Hastily he changed his position on the broom to one better suited for watching their rear, and he wished he had a partner to watch his back. Midflight, Albus dropped back, and after a shouted conversation, he kept pace with Whit, allowing Connie to lead.

He didn’t relax until all three of them landed, safe and sound back at Hogwarts Castle proper.

When Rolle asked, “What was that about?” Whit’s answer was, “Unfriendly eyes. We were being watched.”

Conrad turned the shade of porridge. Dumbledore reached out and placed a steadying hand on his
shoulder before speaking. “We must assume that nothing is secure outside these grounds. Whittington, if you would, please assure that Professor Slughorn made it back unmolested, and I will take Connie in for a stiff drink, I think.”

Whit handed Dumbledore the sack containing the cup and collected their brooms before turning to capture Rolle’s gaze with a playful wink, followed by a long, searching look. “You’re alright, Rolle. I’ll stand you one later, eh?”

Eyes sparkling with tears of anxiety, Connie laughed nervously as Whit shook hands with him, and took his leave. After one last look over their shoulders back at the grounds, the pair entered the castle, one tall and silver-haired, the other slight and golden.
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

Antilitigation charm: Please note that Harry Potter and his world are the intellectual property of JK Rowling. Only the plot and my original characters are my own (Rolle, Svartrunir, Hare, and Whittington Nott.)

Thanks to Coromandel for being an awesome beta, in spite of being sick, poor thing. Folks, I apologize for the late posting but my internet at home is dead for some reason and my son’s birthday this weekend. I'll get it fixed soon.

14 November, 1976

Hogwarts.

As promised, Professor Sprout collected Deirdre at five past nine, and ushered her to a homely set of quarters on the first floor, tucked back beyond the kitchens. It was located behind a portrait of an elderly wizard who was busily weeding a cabbage patch. A hungry-looking rabbit was sitting off just on the other side of the fence. Sprout uttered the password, *Artemisia absinthium*. The wizard stood and opened the garden gate, which the whole portrait mimicked, allowing the witches in just as the rabbit sprinted into the cabbage patch.

The ceilings were low, and the windows round, but there was a nook with a table and a bench next to a window that looked over the main courtyard. There were plenty of windows, so the yellowing paint on the walls had a rather warm feeling rather than worn. The room was generally done up in earth tones with a heavy lean towards gold. The woods were polished to the point of glowing.

“Aunt Pomona”, as she reminded Deirdre, served her herself. Breakfast was a lighter affair than what Deirdre had eaten yesterday, which suited her as her stomach was all butterflies.

Sprout had gone on about her family, the wonderful things they did together over the summer, and their winter holiday plans. “Oh, and you must come home with me for the holiday, dear. I have written to my sisters, and some do seem to remember your mother, as we have assigned her. I do hope this is alright. The family can be quite boisterous, so it is rather easy to tuck lost souls into the chaos without much notice, I assure you.”

Deirdre was quiet, and seemed to be making more progress at dropping crumbs from a scone that hovered, suspended in her hand.

Sprout reached over and gently patted Deirdre on the wrist. “And don’t worry about presents. We do a wonderful White Elephant gifting. Have you heard of such a thing?”

Deirdre’s curls bounced gently as she shook her head to the negatory.

The woman’s face lit up with excitement, “Well, everyone brings one gift. It can’t be something very expensive, and some of the family try and buy something nice. Others,” a chuckle escaped her lips, “Well, others aim to baffle.” A thoughtful expression crossed her face and her eyebrows cinched
together, “What was it again that Walter brought...” Her fingers drummed a staccato on the tabletop, left idle after having finished her scones already. A beam of epiphany switched on and she explained, “Walter studies Muggles, and he had got this catalogue. Last year, this was all the rage. A Pet Rock.”

Deirdre looked blankly at Aunt Pomona. “Rocks are not sentient.”

The older witch brayed with laughter. “I know. Muggles wanted pets that don’t need walking or feeding. So they, Ha hah... They paint rocks and glue googly eyes on them.” The witch laughed more, shaking her head in disbelief.

“And people actually buy rocks? With googly eyes.” Deirdre’s tone made clear that she thought this was the most daft thing she had ever heard. “With money.”

Sprout nodded rigorously, “Yes. Penny defended her prize when she opened it. Made out that it was to be her new familiar. Of course, she’s a dab hand at transfiguration, so she’s animated the thing so now it does want things like food and walks.”

Deirdre stared at Professor Sprout, and then it sunk in. She too started to laugh, “So, a pet that was meant to be maintenance free, and your cousin actually uses magic to give it the features it was created not to have?” She covered her mouth with her hand, but her eyes crinkled. “For amusement?”

Sprout had recovered enough to refresh her tea and held it cradled in her thick-fingered hands. “Indeed. She even talked about making sure it would shed and occasionally vomit in the corner.” She shook her head. “Ah. The imagination on these Muggles. So as I was saying, everyone brings a gift and there’s a hat with numbers. Whoever picks number one goes first. They pick from the pile of presents just one to open, and then it is number two’s turn. Now this doesn’t apply to the first person, but each time you open a gift, you have the option at that moment to trade it for one already opened and in someone else’s possession. And that person isn’t allowed to say no.” She chuckled, “It is best to not be first. Last person has the pick of the entire group.”

Deirdre asked eagerly, mind already picking at the problem which was over a month away, “What are some other examples of things given?”

Professor Sprout sat back, taking a moment to consider her answers. “Well, let’s see. Fruit, pot holders, scarves, candles.” She paused there, “I like to make specially scented candles so that’s something I tend to give to everyone anyway.”

Frowning, Deirdre asked, “Is there some place I could obtain some wool and needles? I have enough time to make some things.”

“Well, I think Minerva McGonagall has a place she likes to go to out in Edinburgh. Maybe you could convince her to take you some time. That would be nice, wouldn’t it?” Professor Sprout missed the cloud that passed over Deirdre’s expression at the mention of that particular person.

Putting down her empty teacup, and observing Deirdre’s plate, she checked the time. “Ah, yes. Well, I think I should tell you about some things that you can expect later today.” Her gaze fixed on Deirdre’s, watching her carefully.

Deirdre had finally finished and folded her hands in her lap. One of her legs jiggled as she tried to focus. “Thank you. I am very interested.” And scared, by the way her leg continued to move.

Professor Sprout, now changed back to the teacher rather than the Auntie, asked, “Do you know
what you want to do when you graduate, dear?”

Eyes widening in panic, Deirdre frantically searched her quiet mind for an answer. “Um. What was it that Professor Nott does?”

Sprout hummed, looking a shade skeptical. “He was a cursebreaker, and before that he worked for the Ministry in International Magical Co-operation.”

Deirdre tilted her head, considering. “I think it would be fun to travel. But I like what Madam Pomfrey does too.”

Pursing her lips, Sprout considered the student. “Well, I suppose that’s a start. It would be a heavy course load, but there is enough cross-over between the requirements for both careers, and I can’t see why it can’t be done. Assuming you place into those classes, of course.” She smiled gently. “Now, there isn’t any reason to be nervous.” Her calloused hand reached out to pat Deirdre’s. “We won’t expect you to be ready to pass the NEWTs, you know. That’s why you are still at school, to learn.”

Deirdre’s mouth was open and her jaw worked, but nothing came to her to ask. Her attention was drawn as Professor Sprout tossed her linen napkin on the table and stood.

“Now then. I think that if it is agreeable, I can step you over to the greenhouses and get started on that process already. It will save you time later, and I can show you around before you end up in class.” To be absolutely clear, she added, “I teach Herbology, dear.”

Deirdre stood and took her first steps to renewing her educational journey.

Professor Sprout hurried Deirdre up to the staff room, and the two were out of breath when they came to stand outside the door. There, Professor Sprout paused, trying to shake off the last of the sand she had been digging in to fetch out a special ginger root she had been cultivating.

Deirdre swallowed, looking around the hallway. There were a few students passing by, but no one she recognised. She too looked herself over, brushing off some stray chips of mulching from when she knelt to examine a plant that was being wintered. Luckily the rain had taken a breather last night, but it did frost.

Looking at Deirdre, Sprout reached forward and pulled open the heavy door and gestured for the witch to step inside.

The room was populated with Professors in various states of dress. Most wore what looked like regular robes, but one younger teacher with black curly hair was dressed in a maroon walking suit. She looked like she might be coming from church.

Professor Sprout murmured in her ear, “They’re a lovely bunch of people. Don’t worry about a thing.” She craned her neck, looking about. The Headmaster was yet absent, as were Professors McGonagall and Svartrunir. A swift intake of breath and a smile preceded her next, “Come, let’s introduce you to the other Heads of Houses.”

Deirdre felt like she was in a haze as she was towed further into the room.

Sprout came to a stop by a peculiar looking man whose left arm was in a sling. His right appeared to
be normal, but his legs were partially missing. That is to say, his left leg was nonexistent and the right was only half there, ending just below the knee. “Professor Kettleburn!”

The man turned... No, his chair turned, situated on four legs that at first appeared to be ornately carved wood, but as it executed a neat pivot, one could see that the legs were charmed to move. A friendly smile easily came to his lips, and he answered, “Yes, Pomona? What might I do for you?”

Deirdre found herself pulled in front of Sprout and she tried to smile at the man. While his lack of limbs was offputting at first look, the man himself, hidden behind a grey-shot beard, twinkled at her with bright interest.

“This is Deirdre Ward. Deirdre is joining classes late, Silvanus. She’s to be sorted today.”

“Ah... I was told to expect you, Miss Ward. This will be interesting. Hufflepuff is a good house, we’d be delighted to have you.”

Deirdre’s mouth had gone dry, as did her fount of social pleasantries. She grimaced in embarrassment, “Um, Hi.”

Kettleburn threw Sprout a meaningful look. “No need to be skittish, lass.”

A short wizard sidled up to Sprout and looked up at Deirdre and her guardian of the moment. “What’s this? Recruiting, are you, Silvanus?”

Professor Kettleburn guffawed, “Well, can’t blame a man for trying, can you?” He raised his bushy eyebrows meaningfully, and the little wizard scoffed before turning to Deirdre with a hand outstretched.

“I’m Professor Filius Flitwick. Enchanted.” He clasped hands with Deirdre who was still in the overwhelmed haze. He shook his head at Kettleburn, “What manner of furry creature are you sneaking about today, Silvanus? Not another niffler, I hope!”

Professor Sprout murmured in Deirdre’s ear, “Professor Flitwick teaches Charms and is the Head of Ravenclaw.” She put her hand on Deirdre’s shoulder. “Professor Kettleburn teaches Care of Magical Creatures.”

Deirdre shivered, and a wave of déjà vu passed over her as she looked down at her would-be teacher, momentarily disorienting her. She recovered enough to press Professor Flitwick’s hand and comment, “I hope I meet your requirements. I think I need a NEWT in Charms.”

Flitwick’s mischievous expression drained away, leaving the calm and collected Professor. “We will have to test you later. The Headmaster had warned us you would need placement testing.”

As if he heard his name, Headmaster Dumbledore presented himself. Everyone in the room turned to watch him enter. In his arms he cradled a ratty looking, wrinkled brown hat. The hat looked at her.

The passage of time when you are a dusty hat who should have fallen apart at the seams ages ago can be tricky. There was something different about today. The light was colder but there was more of it, and as I was carried past the window I saw a grey, clouded over sky.
The purple robe and gnarled hand that carried me was that of Albus Dumbledore, Gryffindor, now grown old and long in the beard. I made an effort at conversation, “That time so soon? Why, I haven’t got past the second stanza of my next song. I’ll have to use an old one. Do you think they’ll notice?”

Dumbledore looked down at me, his squinted blue eyes considering. “No song needed today, I think. We have a refugee.”

My point had been flopping over, but at this surprising news it straightened right up in interest. My my. This was different. “Another Armenian child scooped out of that nastiness in Macedonia?”

A low chuckle rumbled as Dumbledore answered, “That has been over for over 50 years. No.” The Headmaster had paused in the antechamber in his office. “I’ll have to ask your discretion - no, I insist on it.”

Well, that was suspicious. “Do you now? And what, pray tell, must I not speak of aloud?”

The Headmaster seemed flustered, but finally answered, now holding me up between two hands so we could look eye to eye. I don’t like being held up in the air like that, reminds me of how empty I can be without a head under my brim.

“This is a different witch. She arrived very injured, and I think she’s displaced out of her timeline.” Albus averted his gaze before continuing, “I don’t know much more than that for certain, Hat. She has amnesia, and not the magical kind. The kind anyone can get from trauma. The future that she came from was awful.”

The stitches holding my mouth together tightened, my skepticism was not yet allayed. “How are you certain if she doesn’t remember anything? Have you tried Veritaserum on her? She could be an agent of Riddle’s.” I might be made of cloth and leather, but I am not careless. This school is my personal mission. I don’t want anyone to hurt my students. Even if he was a student of ours once too.

Dumbledore’s eyes closed and he shuddered, fingers tightening on my brim before he answered. “She was cursed, and Professor Nott and I had to risk mind-magic to help route it out.” He opened his eyes and looked at me again. “Terrible curse. It was sapping her magic, making her very weak. It would have killed her soon enough.”

“Go on.” I knew that he wasn’t done, but I wanted the story before he dragged us off to meet this new witch.

Shaking his head, he went on. “For whatever reason, I do not seem to be very compatible with this girl’s mind. She seems to want to reject me, so on entering I was confronted by the most piteous sight of a dying house elf. As he fainted away, I saw that he was run through with a ritual knife, a silver one. Not thinking clearly, I reached out to remove it.”

Albus paused, but I could tell he was composing his thoughts. I kept my peace, waiting and watching.

“I was thrown out of what had been fantasy to a very real memory of hers. It was the memory of how she was cursed, of how that knife had been used to carve the word “Mudblood” into her very flesh. She was being tortured for information on the whereabouts of a cup and a sword.” Albus’ expression darkened further. “She was being tortured by Bellatrix Lestrange. And Bellatrix was clearly an agent of Lord Voldemort.”

My hatband mouth sagged open in horror. Well, I wasn’t really surprised. I had seen great potential
in the girl when she was sorted. Brilliance, passion, and power. Oh yes, she was one to move mountains. The capacity for cruelty was only a kernel, a possibility. It had clearly taken root and flourished under the care of Tom Riddle. I searched Dumbledore’s face, looking for any indication that there could be a mistake. “Surely... Surely this too could have been fantasy? Manufactured memories? How do you know it was true?”

Albus’ eyes slid half-shut. “She bears the same exact wounds on her arm, dire and black with necrotic magic that would not heal. I am sure that I was shown a true memory. One that already happened to her in the future.”

The dust was getting knocked out of me today, that is certain. I wanted to know, “How long? How much time do we have?”

The Headmaster contemplated me and answered, “The Diary she brought with her was for 1997-1998. I have not attempted to read it as it appears to be cleverly protected. Any attempt to break its security would destroy it.”

Naturally the next question was, “So, is she going to recover her memories? And what happens then?”

Albus’ face crinkled with pent up laughter, the bitter kind that bubbles up when one is in a situation that cannot be predicted or controlled. “We will have to find out, won’t we. Madam Pomfrey has stated that there is nothing that we can do to make her remember, and that any further mind magic may well damage her irrevocably. I do not want to bring any more people into our little conspiracy, and she has been granted Sanctuary by the castle.”

“What!? Well, why didn’t you say so?” That settled my doubts for the moment. “How many ghosts showed up for the oath?”

“Five.”

Well, that made this thinking cap cogitate. “All five of the long-termers. Very interesting. And Peeves? How has he been?”

“Disturbingly protective. He and the Friar entered Deirdre’s mind with me, along with Severus Snape and Whittington Nott.” The Headmaster’s lips betrayed his displeasure, going tight at the corners with disapproval.

Well. Well now. “Tut tut tut. Severus Snape, there is a strange mind indeed. So much life already lived for one so young.” I haven’t seen a child who had suffered like that since, thank the stars above. “Now, I wonder…”

Albus cut me off before I could finish. “There were other things that were shown us, couched in fantasy and story, one which ultimately did reach the right conclusions. I have yet to fully understand exactly how much of it would be shades of the future we might expect.”

I opened my mouth to interrupt, and the Headmaster seemed determined to stop me, hauling me up close so his face was only inches away from mine. I could almost feel his nose millimetres away, he was so close. “No. This line of conversation is fruitless. If you see anything in that witch’s head that is an immediate danger to the school or its students, say Shrivelfig.”

It was clear he thought I was about to ask more questions, so he shook me to stop me. “Say you understand me, Hat. So help me, I will break tradition if I think you cannot be trusted to keep your stitches in place.”
“I understand, Headmaster Dumbledore. I will not reveal what I see to anyone but you, and I will say ‘Shrivelfig’ if there is anything you need to know immediately. But in all of the centuries I have served this school, have you ever ONCE heard me divulge a secret in public? Whether or not it would impact the school? I have secrets that would make your nose hairs curl and turn to dust.” My eyes were boring into his and I fancy he didn’t like it.

I felt him allow me to move further back as he tilted his head in acknowledgement of my point. “No. No, I don’t believe you have. Very well.”

The next thing I knew, he was twirling me about on his finger with a mischievous grin on his face.

“Aaaaah Aaaaahhhhh!” I felt sick for the first time in memory. Appalling treatment of an irreplaceable artifact.

He stopped and reached for the door, leaving me coughing and spitting out dust as I could not vomit on his pointed shoes. I really wanted to.

“We are going to be late for the meeting, I had better get going!” The blasted man was actually humming as he jostled us both down the narrow stair.

I kept my band shut, not wanting any more rough handling. How much could an elderly hat really take?

Deirdre barely heard Dumbledore introduce her and briefly repeat her cover story. There was a depth, a gravity to that hat that drew her ever inwards. Then the hat blinked, and that broke her entrancement. It struck her that the tale being told was a mixture of as much truth as could be scraped together along with untruths that were necessary to glue together her new past. She had to admire Dumbledore’s construct, it was quite elegant.

She deliberately looked away from the Headmaster as he spoke, and glanced about her. She was near the hall door, and a line of hooks stood behind her, ready to relieve teachers of the formal outer robes that marked their positions as Professors. They were unused this particular Sunday, and Deirdre had a flash of guilt, having been the reason this particular gathering of people had been pulled away from their weekend repose.

The faculty arranged themselves haphazardly about the room in chairs and upon sofas, some at a small round table tucked off to the side. She had been left standing, although Auntie Sprout cast her a tight smile, eyes bright with interest. Looking about, she saw Professor Svartrunir, sitting with his hands resting on a walking stick set between his knees. He was the picture of what she imagined a learned wizard ought to be, turned out neatly, as comfortable at a formal ball as he might be at the pub.

Professor McGonagall sat primly at the table, and her attire suggested she had just returned from morning services at a local parish. She radiated waves of smug disapproval, but not at anyone in particular. It seemed to Deirdre that the Head of the House who won yesterday’s match ought to be more pleased with the world. Opposite to her, Professor Nott was slouched in a chair with long legs jutting out and arms crossed across his chest in an attitude of extreme relaxation. His eyes were hooded, yet a sliver of green gave him away. Deirdre was not fooled. The man’s attention was focused on everything and nothing. As if feeling her regard, he tilted his head her way and lowered
one shivering lid in an exaggerated wink.

Then, everyone’s attention was upon her, and sharpened awareness of the proceedings slammed back into focus. Professor Dumbledore had performed a lovely piece of transfiguration, turning a log meant for the fire into a stool to which he flourished a hand. “If you would just sit here, Miss Ward, we will get you sorted.” Mechanically, she stepped forwards and sat down, bowing her head in anticipation.

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I could sense the tension in the Headmaster’s hands as we watched Miss Ward come forward. Unable to help myself, I spoke up, “And someone’s explained to her what the Houses are, and why she is to be sorted, yes?”

The girl had sat down and she looked every bit as anxious as the last several hundred students I had sorted, but she surprised me by twisting about to look at me and answer, “In ‘Hogwarts: A History’, it clearly outlines the founders’ intentions in creating the Houses to best promote certain strengths of the students.” Miss Ward looked as though she was about to go on speaking so I was just as glad that she was interrupted.

Professor McGonagall, now there was quite a cerebral wrestling match, bridged the gap. “Your House will be like an extension of your family. You will spend most of your time, in classes and out of them, with your Housemates, and your successes will gain your House Points. You failures will lose Points.” A saccharine smile looked out of place on her prim features as she capped this off with words of what she imagined would be flattery, “I am certain whatever House you join will be greater still with your addition, Miss Ward.”

Even I could tell the woman was racking up odds and placing her bets. I wondered what she knew. Albus had kept me hovering where I could see most of the room, and now the back of my newest subject’s head. Nearby, his voice commented in that dry tone he reserved for bothersome faculty, “Quite so. If we are all satisfied?” No one moved to contradict him, so I was dropped into the breach.

The witch’s head was crowded with defining moments. I saw marvelous acts of bravery, self sacrifice, and incredible fortitude. She also had paroxysms of regret, pain, and misplaced guilt. It was rare that I was asked to sort a soul that had lived so much. She gained personal strength and inspiration from the defense of those who could not defend themselves. Yes, whence ever she came, they were dark times. “My my. Oh dear. I am rather sure. The obvious answer is… “

“Not Gryffindor. Please, anywhere but Gryffindor!”

“What’s this? You have strength and courage. When tested, you rise to the defense of others. Gryffindor would be an obvious choice.” I was rather certain at what I had already seen. Albus will be asking me later.

“If what I saw last night was any indication, what you call brave I call brash. I have never seen a group of more self-serving, short-sighted, foolish people. No, I must insist never Gryffindor. I’d run mad. Look again. Try harder, hat.”

I could see that she was driven, cunning, and had a certain high-handed view of rules. But there was her blood status. A pity, really.
“Never in Slytherin.”

I saw that she was capable of loyalty in spades, and she understood hard work. When faced with a problem, she’d pick at it until it unraveled. However she lacked a certain gregarious nature and was prone to retreating into solitude when pressed rather than asking for help. She always seemed to know the answers too. It was a sort of arrogance that kept her held apart. No, not the best match for Hufflepuff.

“Hufflepuff would find you rough.”

As I explored her inner self further I could see that she had a very organised mind, was detail oriented, and goodness me... What a repository of knowledge already stored! Brilliant connections were made, possibilities just shimmering beneath her consciousness. Perfect replicas of reams of parchment and books stretched out inside of Deirdre’s mind. Her passion for learning, joy in reading, and her intensely logical mind all pointed in one direction. Something about this still bothered me, so I tried one more time.

“You are absolutely sure, not Gryffindor?”

“Quite sure. I refuse. Lily Evans, Remus Lupin, and Professor McGonagall can all go soak their heads.”

That made me chuckle aloud, but our deliberation was at an end, “Strength of mind in this one puts me in awe. Wise past her years, Deirdre Ward is RAVENCLAW!”

Deirdre’s gratitude and relief flooded in before the Headmaster plucked me away. A job well done, if I do say myself.

A smattering of applause met the Sorting Hat’s announcement, and Deirdre stood up. She gestured with her wand, and her clothes took on the appropriate colours to her new House. She was relieved and pleased. This felt... right.

Professor Flitwick bounced to his feet and grabbed the dazzled girl’s hands. “Welcome, Miss Ward. I’m sure you’ll fit right in.” He led her off to a seat beside Professor Nott at the table. “Now, just sit here.” He patted the cushion on the straight backed chair and she could see it plump up under his touch.

Professor Svartrunir did not seem surprised and looked on benevolently. Professor Sprout clasped her hands under her chin and beamed at her, seeming genuinely happy for her “niece.” Professor McGonagall was the least agreeable face in the room, but she too unbent as much as to congratulate the student.

Clapping his hands to gather everyone’s attention, Professor Dumbledore looked to Professor Sprout. “Now, have you got an idea of what direction your niece will want to go? We need to set her classes.” Professor Sprout changed roles to the Aunt easily. “Ah, yes. I do believe Deirdre had an interest in healing, or perhaps curse-breaking.” The witch looked over with a fond smile, as though she had known Deirdre for all of her life. “Isn’t that right, dear?”

Uncertain, Deirdre nodded. “There are so many interesting things I could do, I have trouble choosing. But I want to take whatever classes I can. If that’s allowed, I mean.” The flame of
academic ambition kindled in her chest.

Professor Flitwick spoke up then, “So, that would be what? Charms, of course. Transfiguration, Defense...”

“Herbology...” interjected Professor Sprout, “I already tested her down in the greenhouses earlier. She definitely places into my NEWT class.”

Horace Slughorn, quietly seated next to Svartrunir spoke up, “Potions, oh yes. You’d need that.” He watched her closely, interest piqued.

Professor Nott added in, “And let’s not forget Ancient Runes.” He tipped a nod in Professor Svartrunir’s direction.

Deirdre herself spoke then, “And, if it isn’t too much trouble, I’d like to try for Arithmancy too. It can be so useful.”

Professor Flitwick glanced over at Conrad Rolle, the tenured Professor of that same subject to comment. “A student who wants to take Arithmancy, who already finds it useful. Does she need to even take a placement test for that? The enthusiasm I think should count as at least an Exceeds Expectations!”

That garnered a general laugh from those present, but Rolle smoothly replied, “I’ll administer my test, same as the rest of you.” He added to the giggling student, “Miss Ward, the class is sixth and seventh years all stabled into one section. I imagine we will find room for one more, providing you can show an understanding of arthimantic basics.” The new student bobbed her head, wiping the mirth from her face, although not entirely successfully.

A wizard in a wheelchair piped up, “I’d want to see what you could do with my diricrawls, but it sounds like you’ve already got your hands full, young lady. If you find a lonely moment in your schedule, the invitation is open.” Professor Nott, perhaps sensing her unease supplied for her in a low voice, “Kettleburn, teaches Care of Magical Creatures.”

“I might have time, but...” Deirdre’s face took on an expression of anguish as she passed on the History of Magic, Astronomy, and Muggle Studies sections as well.

Aunt Pomona spoke up, “Child, with seven classes is quite enough already. You must not overtax yourself.” Deirdre opened her mouth to protest and was cut off, “No, you can study those subjects in your free time. Don’t forget, you haven’t been accepted into the others as it is.”

A black-ringlet covered head bobbed into her line of vision and Deirdre felt her heart stumble for a moment before she got a better look. “Hello there. I’m Professor Hare and I teach Divination.” Deirdre must have made a face because the woman laughed, “Oh, I see. No matter. Just let me know if you’d like a reading. I have a club, so you could do it extracurricularly if you don’t want to sit the NEWT.”

“How kind...”

Professor Dumbledore cut her off, saying, “Right then. I think we have a plan. Now, Deirdre, each Professor will be collecting you at intervals throughout the day.” He seemed genuinely apologetic as he added, “Each will have their own tests to see if you will be able to manage the coursework. I’ll expect us to have Miss Ward’s classes set by this evening, and will send for your books tonight. They should be here by noon tomorrow, don’t fret.” He must have seen the dawning panic in Deirdre’s eyes.
“I ask you all to keep your assessments to no more than forty minutes.”

Professor Sprout interjected, “She will need a break for lunch. Breakfast wasn’t very robust, I am afraid.”

Deirdre straightened in her chair, feeling alert and not at all hungry. “Who will go first?” She looked about the room, expectant.

McGonagall spoke up, “Well, I think the hands-on practical magic classes like Transfiguration and Charms...” Professor Nott interjected, “And Defense, mustn’t forget.” McGonagall pursed her lips and forged on, “And Defense Against the Dark Arts should be done early in the day, so your performance can be at its best.”

A murmur of agreement met the suggestion, and Professor Svartrunir endorsed this, “Agreed. My class is less practical, although I shouldn’t like to go last.”

Deirdre reflected that she was anxious to get this over with as a loose schedule was framed about her. She hoped she’d pass their inspections.
Minerva claimed Deirdre’s time first, as she had no fewer than thirty students of her own House slated for detention after a house party wrecked the common room the previous night. The Fat Lady, who rarely left her portrait, urgently fetched the Head of Gryffindor up to the tower, pulling her away from her well earned gloat over Professor Svartrunir. Things had been going so well before that, as Sigmund was rather refined in his tastes and was tasked with providing the refreshment and entertainments for the evening. He had been spinning a tale of ages long past, an interpretation of one of his most recent translation projects.

Gryffindor Tower was an awful sight, and if she didn’t know better she would have thought a tornado had gone through. Rubble and ruin were to be seen everywhere she looked, and she was rather ashamed to admit that she had blown up at the few students who had stayed to right the place. She reversed a Freezing Curse on James Potter and had him sent to the hospital wing. She was certain that Remus Lupin knew much more than he was saying. Peter Pettigrew would squeal on everyone later, she was certain of it. She always seemed to intimidate the lad, but there was something shifty about his eyes that made her twitch.

Lily Evans had been on the receiving end of a magical culinary projectile provided by one of the Hufflepuffs. It was a remarkable piece of magical cooking, melding a Cheering Charm into the whipped cream as well as some of the elements of a tranquility tonic, but Minerva strongly suspected that the dose needed adjustment. The pie was not intended for topical applications and the magic was expected to be degraded by digestion. Lily’s behaviour was unusually cheerful, she was going out of her way to be pleasant to everyone. McGonagall decided not to direct her to the hospital wing as everyone seemed to be rather happy with the situation, and it must surely wear off soon enough.

Professor McGonagall pulled her attention back to the task at hand, testing young Miss Ward into or out of her NEWT classes. “Your Transfiguration placement test will be half written and half practical.” She took out a scroll, already penned with questions covering each year of curriculum, and handed it to Deirdre. “See what you can do with this first, to warm you up. You’ll have twenty minutes. It is alright if you cannot answer all of the questions.”

Professor Sprout was watching from the sideline, an afghan crocheting itself out of a violent pink wool, the needle dipping and twisting mid-air. Deirdre took the scroll and looked about the staff room, settling on a spot in at the table. Sprout produced a quill and ink from her carpetbag, “Here you go, dear.” A flick of the Herbology Professor’s wand floated the writing tools over to her ‘niece.’

Deirdre was hungrily skimming through the test questions, but paused to catch the white quill and
small bottle of blue ink, immediately setting to work. The air was disturbed by the rapid movement of
the quill, sending stray strands of her hair flying about her.

Minerva looked at the time, marking it before she sat down primly next to Professor Sprout. The two
chatted in low voices, discussing among other things, the activities of the ladies’ courses, particularly
kitchen witchery. Ten minutes later, she checked on the student and was shocked to find that the girl
was already three-quarters of the way through the test. After doing a double take, she turned back to
find Pomona smirking at her. “Thought you’d set a difficult task, did you?”

McGonagall straightened her cuffs, and answered consideringly. “Well, I must say I am surprised. I
was led to believe she was more impaired than that. I suppose we will have to see about the quality
of her work.”

The sound of a throat being cleared drew the Professor’s attention to the table, where Deirdre had her
hand up.

The Transfiguration Professor smoothed her skirt, mimicking a cat smoothing down its fur after it
was rubbed the wrong way. “Yes, Miss Ward?”

“I was wondering if in answering question number 6 if you want all three theories of instilling
sentience in inanimate objects, or just the most commonly stated in the textbooks?” The girl watched
the Professor, quill poised, ready to answer.

Professor McGonagall’s eyebrows raised in surprise, “Write what you feel is your best answer, Miss
Ward. Do not worry, this will not affect your grades.” She turned away from the student to again
find Pomona amused, hand over her mouth to suppress outright laughter. She narrowed her eyes at
the Herbology Professor. “What do you know?”

Pomona gestured at the needle and wool, pushing it off to the side so she could lean in to
McGonagall. In a quiet voice she replied, “Oh, only that our amnesiac witch seems to remember
enough to quote entire swaths of textbooks, nearly word for word. I quizzed her down in the
greenhouses. She did not recognise one plant, only one missed out of the entire place, and after I told
her what it was, she gave me a minute-long precis on where it was discovered and its uses, including
a few that I was unaware of prior to this.” The stout woman chuckled, “I am looking forwards to the
rest of the staff’s assessments. She’s full of surprises, our girl.”

A shadow fell over them and Pomona sat back up, her lips pressed together and the corners of her
mouth quirking up. Deirdre was standing there, holding out the parchment for Professor
McGonagall. Pomona looked at the clock. Sixteen minutes was all it had taken the girl.

“Well. Let’s see what you can do. We’ll start off small since you only obtained that wand yesterday.”
Minerva wished to be fair, so the consideration was reasonable. She fished in her pocket and
produced a box of matches. She placed it on the table. “Show me what you can do with this.”

Deirdre looked at the Professor, and back to the box for a long moment before she swallowed. “Did
you have anything specific in mind, Professor McGonagall?”

Minerva, curious to see what she would do, suggested, “Start off with simple transformations and
move on from there. You will need to use your imagination, Miss Ward.”

The witch stood, staring at the matchbox for a moment before she moved over and opened it,
dumping its contents out on the table. She took a step back, and then waved her wand, changing
the first match into a perfectly formed needle. She picked it up and passed it over to the Professor
who accepted it, examining it closely before nodding and handing it back. As Deirdre transfigured
each stick, Professor McGonagall perceived the pattern. She was performing each transfiguration as listed in the textbooks. She had worked herself up to third year, before McGonagall stopped her at a miniature dragon, which smelled strongly of sulphur and was a brilliant emerald in colour, most decidedly not wooden at all. It was the flobberworm that had tipped the professor off.

Deirdre stood with the little dragon held on the palm of her hand, gamboling about. Professor McGonagall leaned closer to look at the dragon, but had to straighten up when the vicious thing belched a tiny sulphurous flame, aiming for her nose.

“Well done, Miss Ward.” McGonagall casually vanished all of the match sticks and the matchstick-derived work with a wave of her wand. “Now, try a switching spell.” McGonagall flicked her wand and conjured an evil-looking tom cat and a yellow bird. The cat was very detailed, and appeared to be missing an eye and part of his ear. He stalked about the table, his tail swishing irritably. The bird fluttered about, coming to perch on the mantelpiece above the generous fireplace in the room. It shifted about, eyeing the room with intense interest.

Deirdre watched the cat as it stalked over to sit in the shadow of an armchair next to the hearth, and clearly enunciating the spell, she executed a perfect trans-species switch. The cat had been mid-chatter, but stopped muttering and started chirping, a beak where his mouth and whiskers used to be. He started to shake his head, now tweeting in irritation, trying to get the thing off of his face. The canary opened its mouth, and a confused squeak escaped. The thing would have seen a mouth full of needle sharp teeth if it had turned about and looked in the mirror behind it.

Professor McGonagall waved her wand, and both creatures popped back out of existence. She turned to a side table where a bowl of shiny red apples sat. “This is more difficult. Vanish this apple.”

Deirdre twitched her wand, her lips moving but no sound escaping as she cast the spell. A red flash of light blinded McGonagall briefly, and in the apple’s place a remnant… wiggled? She leaned close, eyes squinting to get a better view. There on the table, a small worm wriggled in the light, surprised at this sudden turn of events.

“Well. It seems that you have a grasp of the principles of Transfiguration, a solid grasp of OWL fundamentals, and talent sufficient for NEWT levels. I don’t know who was your teacher before, Miss Ward, but you do them credit.” McGonagall offered Deirdre a rare smile, transforming the usually severe lines of her face into something much more pleasant and relaxed.

Professor Sprout’s jaw dropped and she watched with fascination as McGonagall continued to talk, extending her hand to shake Deirdre’s as she took her leave, “I do hope you will join us in class this week. Perhaps you can help convince some of my muffinheads that vanishing spells can be done neatly. I get so tired of having to resurface the desks in my classroom.”

As the Professor left, Deirdre turned to Professor Sprout, her wand hand slack, point down. “Was that alright?” The girl’s eyes sparkled, but Pomona could tell that she craved a secondary judgment on her performance.

Pomona stood and pushed her afghan to the side and gingerly hugged her new niece. “Oh, you did very well. Minerva is one of our most exacting teachers. I would say that if you can keep up that level of achievement, you will be able to take any class that appeals to you.”
Deirdre sat down to the next written test, Defense Against the Dark Arts. It wasn’t quite lunch yet, but she could feel herself starting to flag under the stresses of a long morning. Professor Nott’s quiz was short and sweet, only allowing space for a few lines of response for each question. “What spell is used to defeat the common Welsh Boggart?” was a good example. She was finished within ten minutes, and after she turned in the scroll, Professor Nott lead her and Professor Sprout out to a side courtyard, tucked up against the Hospital Tower. Deirdre was still very nervous, but Professor Sprout’s presence was a major calming influence and she was incredibly grateful to the woman. Auntie Sprout was stout, steady, and above all, very kind.

The sound of a throat clearing broke Deirdre’s train of thought, and a thrill of anticipation rose in her chest, setting her heart racing in anticipation. She hadn’t been this nervous all day, and she wasn’t quite certain why. She tried to focus on the words coming out of Professor Nott’s mouth.

“... simple shield spells, before we move on to more difficult wandwork.” He raised his wand in an imitation of a duelist’s salute. “Are you ready?”

Deirdre swallowed hard, raising her wand, and arranged her feet instinctively at shoulder breath, turning to present only her wand side. Sweat started to trickle down her neck, hidden under her curls. “Yes.”

Time seemed to slow as Professor Nott’s wand started the movement for a Stinging Hex. She threw up a shield, hastily constructed, one that would only absorb the hex rather than reflecting it. Her shield shuddered as the crimson energy hit, but the shield remained steady.

“Good start, Dee!” Auntie Sprout was getting into her role, and sometime today had assigned Deirdre the new nickname.

She didn’t break her concentration as Professor Nott nodded to her, and raised his wand, this time to send a rain of ice-needles at her shield, which forced her to adjust to exclude physical attacks. It was more difficult to do, and a few made it through, one brushing her skirt.

“That’s alright, Dee. Stay focused, dear!”

Professor Nott seemed to consider what to do next. “Drop the shield, Miss Ward. Can you reflect curses?”

Deidre heaved her chest, panting. “I am fully acquainted with the theory!”

The Professor frowned at her. “You may take a break at any time, Miss Ward.”

Willing herself calm, Deirdre shook her head. “No, I’m fine. Proceed, sir.”

Nott glanced about them and then raised his wand, casting a wide dome of Protego Maxima, one that would make it safer for bystanders, like Professor Sprout, and the castle itself.

Deirdre shook out her fingers on her wand hand. She had been clutching it too tightly. If she persisted, she would exhaust herself, unfortunately not a difficult thing to do.

Turning back to Deirdre, the Professor raised his wand in salute and Deirdre echoed once more. This time things moved quickly, and after deflecting a Jelly-Legs Jinx and a Melaflors, she stepped to the side to dodge a Disarming Spell instead of sending it back at the Professor, which would have been her best move. Deirdre muttered under her breath.

Professor Nott straightened, intending to withdraw, but quickly was pressed to defend himself as Deirdre went on the offensive.
“Locomotor Wibbly!” Deflected.

“Avis!” Nott wasn’t ready for this use of conjuration magic from her, and flung up his arms to protect himself against the yellow-feathered creatures as they flew at him.

“Expelliarmus!” Nott got up a hastily erected shield that deflected that one, precisely back at Deirdre, who shrieked, collapsing to the floor with her arms over her head, wand landing neatly in the Professor’s hand. He then managed to dispel the birds who were dive-bombing him viciously.

Professor Nott chuckled, swishing Deirdré’s wand experimentally, casually dispelling his Protego. He halted where he was as he took in the sight of Deirdre, whimpering in a ball before him. “Miss Ward. Deirdre. It’s alright. Everything is okay...” He took a hesitant step towards her, and the witch flinched away, scrabbling back on heels and hands like an awkward crab.

Professor Sprout stepped in front of the girl with a hand up. “Just a moment if you please, Whit.” She turned back to face Deirdre. “Dee, sweetheart...?”

The girl looked up at Professor Sprout with wild eyes, not comprehending, caught up in a wild tangle of fear and despair. Shaking her head, she mouthed silently, “No... no... no...”

Professor Sprout went down on her knees in the gravel of the courtyard, hands held out, open and empty for the girl to see. “See? Nothing is going to happen. Everything is fine. Come to Auntie Pomona.”

A measure of sanity seemed to return to the girl, and she let out a wrenching sob. “I don’t know what is wrong with me!” She dropped her head forwards and cried, not the pretty sniveling of a little girl, but the ugly tearing sounds that came from bone deep anguish. Deirdre felt the arms of her Auntie and Professor encircle her and gather her into her lap as one might a very small child.

“There there, dear. It’s alright. You did nothing wrong. We should have anticipated that this would be too much all at once for you.” Deirdre sobbed harder at this, and sensed the woman turn slightly. Moments later, she could hear Professor Nott’s footsteps crunching away in the gravel of the courtyard on some errand.

The soothing way Sprout was stroking her back seemed to help the most, and she didn’t resist. “I wrecked it. Lost my head. Oooh, what he must think of me! A P if I’m lucky.” She affixed her attention on taking in deep breaths, which were punctuated at each extreme with the vibrato of threatened reemergent tears.

“Shhhhh, Dee, dear. Shush now. You are safe, everything will be just fine. I’ll talk to Professor Nott later.” She paused as a thought struck her. “Are you certain that you want to take Defense? You don’t have to, you’ve qualified for plenty of coursework as it is.”

Deirdre pushed back away from Professor Sprout, rolling onto her knees and looking about the gravel for something. “No, I need it. If I want to do Potions or Healing, I need it. Or Cursebreaking.” She stood up, burying her face in her hands. “Oh... I’m sure I failed! What am I going to do?” The last bit crescendoed up into a wail.

Professor Sprout in the meantime dusted off her own skirts. Only the Defense Professor could answer Deirdre’s fears, and it was a good job that the man had returned. Professor Nott had a grave expression on his face, which only deepened when he took in the weeping girl and Pomona’s scowl, Madam Pomfrey stalking past him in obvious irritation.

Madam Pomfrey approached the girl and pushed her hands out of the way, tilting her chin up to look
at her, “Her pupils are fully blown. Whit, I could shake you!”

“Miss Ward, I am very sorry. I knew this could happen, but you were handling yourself so well…”

Madam Pomfrey pulled out a phial, “Nothing for it. Open your mouth, child. Just a few drops should do it.”

Deirdre stared at the Mediwitch, and took a step backwards. She was still trembling and looked ready to bite or fight.

Pomfrey blew out a longwinded sigh, “If you don’t, you know I am perfectly capable of forcing you. Don’t make me do that, Deirdre.”

Professor Sprout interjected, “Emm.. perhaps if you let me?” She held out a hand for the phial, a pleading expression on her face.

Deirdre had taken a step back and was staring at Professor Nott, her eyes locked on his hand, the one holding her wand. This allowed Professor Sprout to get closer to her. “Now, dear. Just a drop or two on your tongue. After this you may have your wand back.” She paused, adding, “Right, Professor?”

“Oh! Of course.” He smiled at her. “After you let Auntie Pomona dose you, you can have it back.”

Graging, Deirdre reluctantly opened her mouth and stuck out her tongue, and Professor Sprout deftly placed two generous drops square centre. “Just so. Thank you, Dee.”

Gagging briefly, Deirdre retracted her tongue. Her breath started to slow visibly, and her shoulders rounded in a posture of wilting relief. Her wand appeared before her, offered to her hilt first over Professor Nott’s arm in an imitation of a Lord returning a sword to a freshly sworn knight. Tremulous fingers stretched out and reclaimed the wand, twitching it out of her Professor’s hands.

Quietly, Professor Nott said, “Now, Deirdre. There’s no need to fret. We’ll discuss this later this week after you’ve had more rest. It has been a rather taxing morning for you.”

An unladylike snort escaped Deirdre, “And I’ve gone and…”

Professor Sprout spoke over her, “Now Professor Nott’s being generous, Deirdre. He hasn’t failed you…” She glared at the man, who jumped to agree, whatever his private feelings might be.

“You did well considering the pressure, Miss Ward. Perhaps some extra tutoring is in order. We will discuss that later.” The Defense teacher’s eyes crinkled with good natured earnestness.

Madam Pomfrey said, “That’s quite enough, all of you. Deirdre, I want you to take a walk about the yard, and when you are done, you might want to freshen up a bit back in the infirmary, eh?”

Deirdre hastened to comply, striding out along the perimeter. Three adults watched her retreating back. When she got out of earshot, Madam Pomfrey wheeled on Professor Nott as Professor Sprout frowned in concern. “You idiot! You are a consummate lack-witted oaf!”

Nott backpedalled a step as Pomfrey raised her hands up, shaking in fury, as if ready to pummel him but having difficulty choosing where to strike first. He held his hands up in a palm-out warding gesture. “Dumbledore insisted I test her, Poppy! I did my best to keep it easy and safe!”

Pomona’s wooly brow crowded together in thought. “Indeed. And the girl herself wished it. It would be needed for all of her possible career choices.”
“Oh, the Headmaster!” This was followed with a suppressed screech of incoherent rage from the Mediwitch that made Nott and Sprout both glance over at Deirdre to see if she marked the outburst. When they turned back, they found Madam Pomfrey was stomping away, back to her post, muttering the whole way.

Nott tilted his head back to Professor-Auntie Sprout, his expression serious. “Pomona, neither of us are fools. The girl is in danger and the Headmaster presses me to work with her through her spell-shock.”

A look of grim determination crossed Sprout’s face. “If half of what Dumbledore suspects is true, we should lock her away in a tower and set guards, and hang the girl’s education.”

“Oh, come now. You cannot want hothouse safety for this wild jasmine? She will become stunted and forget how to bloom without the stars and moon to call her upwards to new heights!” The Professor’s boyish smile invited Sprout to come over to his way of thinking.

Lips pursed, Professor Sprout considered the metaphor. “In or out, this tender vine is far from home, and it is my duty to guard her against all harm, even that kindly meant.”

As Nott hung his head with a wince of acknowledgment, but he froze as he felt a hand grip his arm, “If she is to adjust, best expose her a bit at a time under safe conditions, as we harden seedlings before planting them in the Spring. She has the best chance of natural recovery that way, I’ll warrant.”

Unable to hold it back, Whit responded, “Just don't suggest dragon dung fertiliser, for pity’s sake!”

Pomona gasped in dramatised offense, smacking Whit on the shoulder before pushing him toward the door leading into the castle. “That is quite enough from you! Out of my sight.”

Professor Nott walked away, his laughter echoing from the stone walls before he disappeared through the main hall door. It was only then that Professor Sprout, after assuring herself that she was alone, let out a peal of belly-deep laughter that made the rafters reverberate with mirth at that ridiculous man.
Deirdre stared at her reflection in the mirror at the wash basin, collecting her fractured nerves. She already splashed her face with cold water and brushed her teeth for good measure, and it was the latter that seemed to help the most. She told herself that she hadn’t failed and that it was hardly fair, being only the second day she was back at full strength and only just getting acquainted with her new wand. She wheeled away to lean against the cold stone of the infirmary wall, turning so that her cheek pressed into it, taking comfort from its solidity. A gloom had crept into her heart, fog-like and obscuring. The melancholy that went with it threatened to overwhelm her. Where was this coming from?

A voice broke her from these thoughts. “We’re going to have lunch with Professor Flitwick, Dee.” Aunt Pomona had come to find her, and the woman’s eyes were soft with compassion.

Unwanted tears filled her eyes and she sniffed loudly. “I... I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s come over me. I am fine, really I am.” She blinked rapidly, willing her eyes to stop being so stupid.

Professor Sprout smiled at her. “It is perfectly alright, Deirdre. We could postpone the testing to later this week, you know.”

Deirdre closed her eyes against that wonderful, terrible kindness that threatened to undo all of the careful work she had just done, trying to get away from her feelings. The acknowledgment turned it all too real, the pain reflected back at her was more than she could handle. There was nothing for it but to press on, to run through those burning coals. “No, no. I want to get back to it. If I don’t have this to look forward to, I will truly be undone.” She opened her stinging eyes to see if her words struck the right chord. “Please, I need this.” Her tone was earnest, pleading.

Professor Sprout looked away for a fleeting moment, perhaps to reorder her thoughts and feelings too. Overbright cheer laced her words, “Let’s get a move on then. Filius will take all of the best pastries if we tarry much longer.” She linked arms with Deirdre and started to tow them both out of the infirmary up to the second floor staff room once more.

“Aren’t we eating in the Great Hall?” Deirdre was confused. “Or did he want to do the testing first?”

Quick to respond, Pomona reassured her, “On no, dear. We’re having lunch in the Staff Lounge. It isn’t usual, but it seemed to us that it would be good to eat in peace and let you and Professor Flitwick get to know one another before you proceed on to your testing.”
Blinking, Deirdre took this in. “I see.”

The ladies found Professor Flitwick already waiting for them. He shot up from his seat and came over to shake Deirdre’s hand. “Welcome, Miss Ward. I’m so pleased you will be part of our House.” Before she had time to become shy, she was ushered over to a seat that the diminutive man pulled out for her. After Deirdre was settled, he did the same for Professor Sprout before reclaiming his own seat.

Flitwick’s face was rife with wrinkles, focused particularly about his eyes. Rather than age him, Deirdre thought they brought out his humour. “Minerva tells me that you are very accomplished with Transfiguration. She showed me some of your written responses. Very well thought out, I must say.”

Deirdre felt her face heat up with embarrassment. She didn’t know why she was so flustered. Of course the teachers would discuss their students. She was rescued by Auntie Pomona, who answered for her.

“Yes, and she did very well on oral testing too, Filius. I had her down to the Greenhouses before she was sorted. Her education has been rather piebald, so I was not certain, but thus far she is doing our family proud. What a gift to have her back with us.” Auntie Sprout reached over and patted Deirdre on the shoulder possessively.

Deirdre coughed, unsticking her voice from its tight anxiety. “I... I... don’t recall much.”

Perhaps reacting to the stricken looks on both women’s faces, Professor Flitwick changed the subject. “I imagine that you have worked up an appetite after Transfiguration and Defense back to back, so I ordered up a mutton stew and Aberdeen rolls. You aren’t a vegetarian, by any chance?”

Deirdre shook her head, touched by the little man’s thoughtfulness, belated as it might be. “I do not think so. The idea does appeal to me, but I just wouldn’t want to give up sausage.”

“Righto then. I’ll just have it served in a moment, then.” Taking out his wand, he expertly charmed the crockery to arrange itself in a single file line. A mouth appeared on the side of the tureen, and for a moment Deirdre fancied that it might be about to speak, like the Sorting Hat. The lips pursed, spewing soup with careful accuracy into each bowl as the line paraded past. Deirdre was enchanted with the way the little ceramic legs trundled along, careful not to slop as each came to rest in turn in front of one of the luncheoners.

Professor Sprout frowned, “Filius, you know I prefer a traditional spout...”

The response from Flitwick was vague. “What, oh yes, apologies, Pomona. Not everyone likes the lips, I understand.”

Deirdre had to lift her napkin to cover her mouth, as the tureen had started to smack its lips as if in approval of the soup.

“Now, really. I must insist!”

Flitwick’s eyes sparkled with humour, “Of course, Pomona.” A twitch of his wand set the ceramic trembling, as though it might be resisting the end of the spell. Just as it seemed that it might do the boneware version of snivelling, it stuck out its white tongue before sucking everything back in, returning to its former smooth surface with a clink.

Pomona had fixed Filius with a baleful stare that put Deirdre in mind of the evil eye. Now this was interesting. The little man returned the regard with his eyebrows raised in polite interest. After a long moment, he asked blandly, “Who wants a roll?” He busied himself, twiddling his wand in a tight
complicated pattern to animate the tongs.

“Yes please,” answered Deirdre. She watched with interest, setting her napkin in her lap. The metal moved with liquid grace as it too had sprouted legs. As it deposited the roll on the small plate in front of her, she said, “Thank you.”

Professor Sprout had picked up her spoon and turned her attention on the Scottish broth in front of her. It took her longer to reply, but she nudged her plate towards the platter with a nod as she chewed in silence. “Pass the butter, please.”

As he complied, Professor Flitwick asked, “I saw you at the Quidditch match. Did you enjoy it?”

Deirdre nodded, “I suppose so. The Gryffindor team’s behaviour was appalling. Are all of the teams that crude?”

“Certainly not! That Black boy gets away with far too much if you ask me.” Professor Sprout.

Professor Flitwick considered before he responded, “Sirius Black has a brilliant mind and is a very gifted wizard, but he lacks discipline.” He added after finishing a bite of roll, “He is making more of an effort this year. The Potters have been a good influence on him.”

Deirdre was thinking about the boy’s behaviour the night before and remained quiet on the subject.

After the little trio ate in silence for a while, Professor Flitwick made another attempt at polite conversation. “Do you like music, Miss Ward?”

Deirdre slowed down mid-chew, considering the question. Swallowing, she answered, “Well, I suppose I do. I don’t think I play an instrument.” She didn’t want to disappoint the Professor.

She noticed Professor Flitwick shooting a furtive glance at Professor Sprout as he answered, “Yes, yes. Of course. I only mention it because I am the choirmaster too. We’re getting ready for the holiday performance.”

Sprout seemed to approve more of this change in subject as she chimed in, “Yes, Filius is a gifted musician and he has a way with frogs.”

Flitwick leaned into the table with a conspiratorial expression, “It is the flies. I managed to get the Groundskeeper to help me collect some of the biggest flies you’ve seen from the stabled horses over the summer. They just love them.”

The image of Flitwick tossing stunned green-bodied flies to their proper ends as toad-treats made Deirdre smile. “I’d like to see that. Did you use a stasis charm on them? Freeze them?” She had set her mind to work on the problem of preserving the life of the flies to be useful into the dead of winter, when they were rather hard to come by.

“Mm. I have been freezing them, but the frogs always prefer flies that haven’t been iced. Must change the flavour.” He set his spoon down, and appeared to be done with his meal as he reached to pour out some hot tea into his cup. He used his mundane hands to do it this time. “Biting flies are particularly fancied.”

Deirdre’s brow knotted in consideration. “It should be possible to make a fly trap with a warded stasis field. Have them fly straight into a box. What would make a good lure?”

Sprout shared her knowledge on examples of plants who had evolved lures that enabled them to catch flies, both magical and mundane. It could be a project, should Deirdre wish to pursue it.
As she and Professor Flitwick fell into discussing details of a new type of fly container, Deirdre finished her soup. She was talking animatedly with the man about choice of materials for the trap itself, and it felt good. The mild headache that she had developed earlier was bleeding away as she sipped at a cup of hot tea. The conversation did her as much good as the food did, perhaps more. She felt ready to face the afternoon’s trials, her mind limber and ready to tackle anything.

It was Professor Sprout’s low chuckle that brought that conversation to a halt. “I think you have found your true House, Dee. Only a Ravenclaw would distill pure joy out of a twenty minute brainstorming session on designing a better fly trap.”

Deirdre smirked at Professor Sprout. “We haven’t been boring you, I hope?”

She waved away that concern, chuckling. “No, no. I don’t mind. We have plenty of flies in the Greenhouses as the weather cools down, but they are so fat and slow that Flich could catch them with a net even when his rheumatism is acting up.”

Flitwick sat up straighter, head cocked with interest. “Really. I don’t suppose you’d mind if I set fly catching as a task for detentions sometimes?”

“La, be my guest. I wouldn’t miss the buzzing. In summer they make sense, but in these cold months they are positively unnatural and I forget that they are there until I’m elbow deep in potting soil and they’re all over the dragon dung I want to mix in.”

After a lively discussion about magical instruments, such as the one Sirius Black used last night, the trio finished out their luncheon with scotch teas. Professor Flitwick, showing his strong sense of drama, cleared the table by whipping out the tablecloth. The dirty crockery and cutlery, tea cups, and leftover teas all disappeared in that moment, although Deirdre was certain they were nowhere near the cloth any longer. With expert hands, the tablecloth was folded repeatedly until it was no longer visible, as Flitwick demonstrated by opening his now empty hands for the ladies’ examination. Deirdre ooohed her approval before going silent, considering how it must have been done.

Unbidden, she announced her conclusions as Flitwick was turning away to consider his plans for testing. “Wandless, silent transportation spell, followed by an Extension Charm on your left sleeve?”

Eyebrows lifted, the little wizard locked eyes with Aunt Pomona who was smirking in obvious pride. “I didn’t tell her, Filius. I always thought that last twist of your wrist was a tip-off.”

Having guessed the method didn’t reduce Deirdre’s admiration of her Head of House’s showmanship, and she clapped with delight. “Oh, well done sir!”

This seemed to mollify Professor Flitwick, and he cut the outline of a performer’s bow in acknowledgement. As he straightened, he smiled at his newest pupil, suggesting, “We have but a short while in which to see what you have accomplished in your education thus far. I think this will go best if we nip over to my classroom, if that is alright with you both?”

Deirdre jumped up, making her way to the door. What a difference from the wilted witch of an hour’s past. Professor Sprout’s voice could be heard behind her, softly admonishing her colleague. “Now, don’t tire her overmuch, Filius. She has three more classes’ worth of testing to do today.”
Closer behind her came the response, “We’ll be careful, Mother Lisa. No need to fret.”

Deirdre stood at the door, holding it for the Professors, so when she looked at Professor Flitwick with her eyebrows raised, hoping for an explanation, she was rewarded with the sight of the little man responding with a blush that reached all of the way to his ears. Turning her eyes to Professor Sprout, she was surprised to see no particular response as the witch bustled by with a, “Hurry along, dear. Mustn’t keep him waiting.”

Nerves back in check for the moment, she fell into step next to Auntie Pomona. What was that?

When they reached the classroom, Flitwick called Deirdre up to his desk, where he kept a box of odds and ends meant to be used as props for his teaching.

“You make use any of these to demonstrate the spells as I call them out, Miss Ward. Oh good, you’ve got your wand out.” The diminutive Professor smiled encouragingly at her, folding his hands and resting against the edge of his desk, the picture of relaxed and polite interest. “Why don’t we start with something basic, like the Levitation Charm?”

Deirdre peeked into the box, poking a hand in, fishing about for something likely. She turned and presented the Professor with a small stuffed animal with articulated limbs. It was a ginger morris-cat with green glass eyes and fine mohair fur. “May I use this, Professor?”

Flitwick raised his eyebrows in interest, “Of course. Although you may prefer something lighter…”

Deirdre set the stuffed kitten on the desk, shaking her head in answer. She closed her eyes, collecting herself before lifting her wand, held delicately between thumb and forefinger. Drawing in a long, slow breath she intoned, “Wingardium LevioSā.” The wand tip swished as she spoke, hooking the toy before the flick sent it up where it hovered between herself and Professor Flitwick.

“Excellent, perfect diction…” The words of praise tapered off as the witch reached back into the box and came out with a rubber ball, which she sent into the air, drifting towards Professor Sprout slowly. Deirdre’s forehead was wrinkled with intense concentration, and her hands moved, conducting the forces of nature to conspire to set the kitten in motion, after the ball, its tail whipping about. If she had looked she would have seen Flitwick’s mouth hanging open, clearly impressed.

The red ball made it to Professor Sprout who plucked it out of the air, and getting the idea she tossed it back towards the toy animal, who pounced upon it. The force of the ball sent the thing flipping backwards, its little fuzzy limbs encircling the red ball, not willing to allow it to escape. “Lovely, Dee, dear.”

Professor Flitwick cleared his throat, finding his voice once more. “Severing Charm next?”

The kitten’s tumble brought it back to Deirdre, where she plucked both out of the air with her off hand. She dropped the red ball in the process, and it proved to be extra bouncy. A strand of curly hair wafted up as Deirdre let out a snort of irritation at her own clumsiness. “Oops. Accio ball!”

Having made it more than half the way across the classroom, the red ball was rolling with the determination of an escaping mouse, but it halted and then reversed its motion, flying into Deirdre’s hand which was more ready this time, before she dropped it into the box again. Next, she pulled out a blue silk scarf with a nervous glance at Professor Flitwick, whose expression had changed to one
of polite incredulity.

Deirdre tossed the scarf into the air, cutting it in two with a sharp swipe of her wand. “Diffindo!”

Flitwick twirled his wand, summoning the resultant halves to his waiting hand, where he brought the cut edge up for close inspection. He nodded, “Very good. How about putting it back together?”

Deirdre rolled her shoulders and then tapped the fine fabric in Flitwick’s fingers. “Reparo.” There was a shimmer as the fabric slithered, its edges smoothly reknitting themselves back together. She bounced on her toes, eyes bright.

“You’re movements are quite precise and crisp, Miss Ward. Don’t clutch your wand so tightly, your movements could be smoother. Next is fire.” Deirdre looked back into the box, looking for something appropriate. She came back with a fragment of newspaper which she lifted in silence askance. Flitwick nodded. “That would do.”

Deirdre pulled out a single sheet and wadded it up tightly and looked about the room, ultimately spotting a cold brazier that Flitwick kept for this purpose. She took careful aim before throwing it in an arc to land on the metal, where she wasted no time in jabbing her wand in its direction. “Incendio!” She blinked as the fire from her spell towered above the brazier, well beyond what should have been supported by combustion of that simple piece of paper, which was disappearing in blackened curls which brightened to embers before winking out. “Oops!”

The teachers were calm, and Flitwick’s tone was even as he asked, “Now, how would you put out a magical fire?” Indeed the flames showed no sign of dying out naturally.

Biting her lip, Deirdre said, “Well, dousing with water wouldn’t work, nor would covering it with sand. It must be deprived of both magic and oxygen to halt the process.”

“Very correct, Miss Ward. How about you show us?” The little Professor looked pleased, and was rocking up and down on his toes as he watched, his hands held behind his back, as though he wanted to play too but was holding it in.

Deirdre was anxious to correct her error, and she twirled her wand, intoning, “Exilium caelis.” A subtle shift in the air around the brazier showed the spell was in effect, and the flames died quickly. Back straight, she turned back to Flitwick, her wand ready.

The little wizard rewarded Deirdre with an excited laugh. He rubbed his hands together in thought, before turning to a shadowy corner wherein a large terrarium sat, obscured by a velvet curtain. Pulling aside the fabric, Flitwick twitched his wand, and out of the top soared a very surprised looking toad. The Professor caught the animal deftly about its middle and walked it over to Deirdre, using his off hand to support the creature’s hind legs.

The toad stared at Deirdre, its copper coloured eyes fascinating her, drawing her in as she noticed more and more tiny details, the horizontal slits for pupils relaxing as the toad became more acclimated to its situation. “Right, now Miss Ward, I’ll work with Digim here and I’d like you to show me your sound modification spells. Alright?”

Deirdre nodded agreement, and was surprised when Flitwick cleared his throat and started to sing in a reedy tenor. “The crup is a noble beast, strapping and shaggy.” He patted the toad, giving it a moment before continuing on with a bouncing of his hands to help conduct as he sang, “It has twa ears, and a hantle of teeth.” Following this line, the amphibian had taken up a base line of alternating high and low notes, much as one might expect from a tuba. “Bab, bum, bab bum...” went the frog.
Deirdre murmured, “Sonorus,” pointing her wand at the toad’s throat, and the sound was amplified from a conversational level to that loud enough to fill the classroom and the hallway beyond with the buoyant base line.

Valiantly, Professor Flitwick put more wind into his own singing, the contrast of his voice being the main thing that allowed the auditors to pick out the words, “and a forkie tailie!” The toad was settled enough that he could release its middle, and in doing so he lifted a finger to his lips to indicate that she should lower the volume.

“Finite Incantatem.” A slashing motion cut her spell off, and the animal’s baseline lowered back to a quieter pitch, more suitable for attracting genteel lady toads in a pond environment.

Flitwick’s natural showmanship continued to shine, and his voice, although still clear, lowered to a more conspiratorial pitch as he forged on, “An augurey sat upon a tree, when the year was done and auld.”

The little man’s hand pointed to the toad, and then held up an index finger to indicate that she was to do the next on his cue. Deirdre’s attention was rapt as the toad continued on with its low “Bab bum babbity bum baby bab...” Flitwick supplied the next line, “And aye it cheepit ominisly. My, but it's cald, cald!”
Forefinger and thumb came together in a gesture of ending, and Deirdre, wand at the ready, cast an enthusiastic, “Silencio!”

It must have worked because as she watched, Digim opened his mouth twice more, and after getting no sound he turned his head, looking about in mild alarm.

Dierdre clapped, “That was lovely, Professor Flitwick. I’ve never heard that particular rhyme, is there a book of them?”

When the Professor didn’t respond, she transferred her gaze from the toad up to the wizard, who was looking at her with a comedic expression of exasperation clear on his face. A belly laugh from the seats off to the side punctuated the scene, and Deirdre finally got it. She had not only hit the toad, she had silenced the tenor too!

Flushing with embarrassment, she dismissed the charm with a swish and hurried to apologise, “Oh, Professor, I am truly sorry…”

At that moment, having regained his voice, the toad croaked its censure and hopped out of the Professor’s loose grip onto the floor.

“Nevermind that, slow that hopper down!”

Understanding sharpened the girl’s expression, and she turned. Taking more careful aim this time, she hit the toad with, “Arresto momentum.” The toad’s leaps now were comically slow, the animal seeming to hang in midair for improbably long before dropping back down to the stone floor.

“Good! Now, stop it entirely. Be careful, he’s one of my best croakers.”

Nodding in agreement, she hit the creature with the Impedimenta charm, and it stopped in the act of leaping, one flipper still in contact with the firmament. It now strongly resembled a statue of a very determined toad trying to escape the classroom. Its wide-eyed expression of shock made it hard for Deirdre not to giggle along with Professor Sprout, who was still shortling to herself. Her pink yarn looped and twisted about the enchanted crochet needle suspended in the air nearby, but the movements had slowed in the moment of amusement.
“Next, bring him back here and hand him to me.” Flitwick had cleared the Freezing Charm and Digim dropped back to the ground with a *fwap*.

“*Accio Digim!*” Deirdre held out her hand, belatedly tucking her wand into her waistband. She caught the creature clumsily, and it wriggled in her hands, attempting another escape. She pivoted, slowed toad held out awkwardly in front of her, and eased it back into Flitwick’s waiting hands.

“Right. Now, I’d like you to do some modifications on Digim here. Let’s go to the desk.” Flitwick walked toad and student over, pulling out a few flies from a wax paper envelope in his vest pocket.

Setting the toad down, he flipped a fly into the air with his thumb and said, “Digim, stay.” The toad’s long pink tongue snapped the stunned treat out of the air, both disappearing back into its mouth with lightning quick speed.

“What exactly...?”

“Oh, use your imagination. Surprise me.” Flitwick again had his fingers woven together with an expression of polite interest.

Deirdre stared at the toad, chewing on her lower lip in deep thought. Her wand was lazily being spun about her fingers, twirling from knuckle to knuckle in what appeared to be a subconscious nervous habit. Sparks started to gently drift off of the very tip of the wand as it twirled to a steady speed.

Abruptly, Deirdre turned her hand and the wand was seated comfortably in her palm, still as you could please. She performed a smooth succession of precise movements, and muttered in order, “*Colovarus, Reducio*...” and the last took longest, “*Ilustris minimus*.”

The effect on the toad was readily apparent. In Digim’s place sat a smaller specimen whose leathery skin had deepened to a midnight blue colour. Its spotty markings over its back and legs now twinkled gently with the pure white light. Deirdre wasn’t completely finished, and she twitched her wand at the lights. “*Mobilux.*” The spots rearranged themselves to show one of the more obscure constellations.

It was Flitwick’s turn to applaud. “Oh, fantastic! Pomona, do you see it? She’s done up his warts to look like Bufo’s Constellation!” The little man was bursting with excitement.

Bufo-Digim opened his mouth, and a higher pitched croak added his opinion of the changes. He fluttered his mouth open and shut rapidly in an imitation of lip smacking. Deirdre laughed, “Oh, I think our little star wants another treat. He has been an excellent subject.”

Professor Sprout had come over and stood at Deirdre’s side, her hand resting between her shoulderblades, a gentle connection. “Oh, good show, Dee!”

Professor Flitwick handed Deirdre the wax paper fly-envelope with a distracted, “There you are, you should do it.”

As Deirdre fished out a fly with her fingertips with an expression of suppressed distaste, Professor Sprout turned a frown onto Professor Flitwick. “So, are you quite finished, then?”

Recalled from whatever distant galaxy of imagination that had grabbed his attention, Flitwick hastened to say, “Almost. One last discipline to test.” He waved Deirdre back over to the desk, picking up Bufo-Digim and briskly walking him back to the tank where he was dropped into a puddle with an indignant ribbit.

“Sorry, friend... I’ll tend to you later.” was Flitwick’s comment as he approached Deirdre and took
the wax envelope back from her, disappearing it back into his vest pocket.

On the desk, the stuffed cat sat limply, its fine hairs glowing in the afternoon light from a nearby window. “Right. Animating objects to accomplish a task is last but not least. Perhaps the toy cat again, if you would, Miss Ward?”

Professor Sprout stood behind Deirdre’s back, pointedly looking at a watch on her wrist with a faint frown for the Charms Professor. He acknowledged her with a double nod, returning his attention to what the student was doing.

Deirdre hadn’t needed much time to compose her thoughts, already slowly passing her wand in a tight circle around the toy, chanting softly, “Paegena animus a kitoun...” With each pass, the air around the toy shimmered with an intensifying rose-golden light. On the seventh clockwise pass, the light flickered and oozed into the toy at its centre. She stepped away from the desk, watching tensely.

The first indication of success was the twitching of the kitten’s tail. The creature swiveled its head about, rising from its loose pile to a standing position before it paced a round on the desktop. Its ears swiveled, as though it could hear something of interest. It paused in front of Deirdre, who reached out to scratch it under its chin. She frowned, her expression of triumph muted.

Professor Flitwick was bent, watching the kitten’s movements with interest. “Oh, excellent work, Miss Ward.” He looked over at Deirdre, and misinterpreting her expression, he hastened to reassure her. “You have done very well, Miss Ward. I imagine that you would have achieved an O on your OWLs, and I would be pleased to have you in my NEWT class.”

When their attention was diverted in a closing exchange of pleasantries, the kitten leapt lightly from the table and trotted over to the tank where Bufo-Digim still gleamed from his favourite log. Tail whipping about, the toy lowered its fuzzy belly and crawled closer in an imitation of a kitten stalking something interesting.

By necessity the tank was seated on a low platform, allowing ease of access to shorter students. The kitten arrived at its edge and took up a guarding posture, staring with its green glass eyes at the blue toad who stared right back. The tense exchange continued on unnoticed until after the two witches exited the classroom. Professor Flitwick, after a moment’s consideration, left the toy to stalk about the perimeter of the terrarium, settling himself into his desk chair to grade essays to turn back in tomorrow. When the Professor headed off to dinner, the toy had given up staring at the toad and had curled up in a ball in an imitation of slumber on a padded stool that Flitwick kept under his desk, quite forgotten. Its glass eyes glowed faintly in the shadow of the desk, watching the little Professor leave, closing the door behind him.
Chapter Forty-One.

Chapter Notes

Antilitigation Charm: Harry Potter and his world all belong to JK Rowling. The original characters and plot are my own. No money will be made from this work.

Thanks to Coromandel for keeping my on track, and being the best beta-brit picker a Yankee could wish for.

Please note that this chapter is slightly out of step with the others, switching back to the world outside of Hogwarts and the night before.


The approach to Donn’hywel Castle is steep as the keep proper is situated high on a hill overlooking the River Dee. Grown over with thorny brambles, the ill-kept path was narrow, and as he shuffled along, Jugson felt certain that the cursed plants were out for a taste of his blood. After a quick glance over his shoulder confirmed that he was past the crumbling outside walls of the estate, he twitched out his wand, causing it to erupt in wavering flame. As he suspected, the thorny vines did retract from the path, but the light also brought odd shadows into starker contrast. The feeling of being followed and watched by something hidden was intense. Or several somethings. Well, he likely could handle whatever it might be.

Pulling his cloak tighter about his neck, he wrenched his eyes away from the suspicious shadows and walked up to the postern gate where he had been instructed to present himself. This aspect of the castle would have afforded a view of the extensive grounds that poured out below, transitioning to the wood that was home to many a ghastly creature. Thankful for the magical fortifications as well as the material ones, he knocked on the thick door, calling out, “I bring news, I am expected.”

A cold wind picked up as he stood there under the clear night sky, blowing his flame sideways. Keeping it firmly in his will, he forbade it to burn him.

With a crack an elderly house elf appeared, perched on a stone ledge situated directly overhead. “State yer name, Wizard.”

Jugson sighed, “You know me, Rook. Let me in before I catch a curse. Its bloody dangerous out here.”

The house elf stared down at him, its huge black eyes glinting malevolently. “Master’s brought new guard dogs. Mayhap you’d like to see them, if you’s in such a disagreeable mood.” He hummed, “Oh yes. I see two of them out there now.”

Turning, placing his back to the door, Jugson snarled at the elf. “Jugson. It’s Jugson. Let me in. Now.”

Ears pricking up, Rook watched the darkness for another long moment before muttering, “I told the Masters that those undying wolves were not hungry enough. Should have been on you long before
this, if they were proper guard dogs. Good thing you weren’t injured, Master Jugson.” He winked out of existence.

Jugson could see the form of the creatures waiting behind him in the dark now. They were unnaturally large, and they now stood, heads down as if following a trail. Both heads came up, and now Jugson could make out that one was missing an eye and t’other had a deep rent in its shoulder. His palms started to sweat in response to the revelation. These were inferi. As the door behind him unlocked and swung back, he stumbled backwards with a poorly swallowed shout of fright and his wandlight died.

Rook pushed the door firmly shut, allowing the bar to fall down, locking out the aberrations. The elf cackled lowly, the sound echoing across the bailey back to them. “Come. Masters are expecting you.”

Jugson shakily rose to his feet, dusting off his travelling clothes. Finding that Rook was waiting for him, he growled. “Was that your idea of a jest?”

Making no effort to hide his amusement, the elf flapped his ears. “No, sir. Was Master Rodolphus’ idea. I am but a loyal servant to House Lestrange.” He lowered his voice a fraction, “But if I was you, I’d not suggest it to be funny, sir. He might not see it that way, see?”

Gesturing with force, the wizard pointed toward the door they were approaching. “I’m to enter this way, am I?” He bristled at being brought in through the kitchens.

Rook turned and walked backwards, still leading the bald wizard on. “We are all His servants, sir. It gives my blackened heart joy to do as he bids, and it would do you well to remember your place.” He stopped, staring up at him, “Exert your mind and will to his whims, lest his attention fall on you, Master.”

The door behind them opened, bleeding faint smoky light onto the cobblestones behind Rook. “You will find what you need. When you are ready, knock and I will guide you the rest of the way.” The elf disappeared, leaving nothing for Jugson to do but to slip inside.

There he found the vast empty kitchen of what had once been an important fortress, capable of feeding hundreds with ease. A fire was laid in one of the lesser hearths, its coals burning low but hot. The grate was an ornate work done in black iron, made to resemble salamanders curling about one another. Obscured by a mountain of fine ash, its beauty alluded Jugson who was focused on the robes and mask left out for him. Quickly he pulled off his travelling cloak and pulled the heavy black ceremonial robes over his head. As he put the silver mask to his face, a thought occurred to him. One that chilled him to the bone.

He lifted his hand and knocked once at the nearby door and it swung open for him. A red roll of carpet sat in the passageway in front of him. Rook spoke at his side, causing Jugson to jump. “Kick the carpet and it will lead you to the audience chamber, Master.” The elf bowed low, its ears brushing the ground nearby.

“You won’t be coming along, then?”

The elf violently shook its head. “The Dark Lord finds elves offensive, Master.”

Jugson laughed uneasily at that, “Of course he would. Right. Off I go.” With that, he nudged the roll and it unfurled in front of him, and unfurled, and unfurled… it continued to do so out of easy sight. Taking a deep breath, Jugson stepped onto the plush pile, wishing it didn’t put him in mind of a river of blood. As he stepped forward, he had the sensation of having moved much further than one step
ought to take one. The breeze of his own movement threatened to blow back the hood that he had pulled up to hide his bald pate. Two steps and he was well away from the kitchens and the carpet led him up a steadily widening passage, then a narrow stair, which let out into a wide black marble foyer. He hardly had time to appreciate the place as he felt the rug under him tug him in encouragement onwards.

One more step and he found himself standing in the open doorway of a large receiving room. There at the back were velvet hangings above a dais. On the dais were two chairs. Seated in a pose of supreme ease was the Dark Lord himself. Jugson broke out in a cold sweat, fear stealing his resolve for a fleeting moment before he recalled his mission and stepped into the hall. The carpet did not extend into this room, and the change in speed of movement was disorienting, as though the floor slowed down abruptly.

He could make out the figure of Lord Rodolphus Lestrange seated at the Dark Lord’s right hand, and the figure of Lady Lestrange seated primly down below. A roaring fire was laid into the hearth, and compared to outside and the lower halls, the room was sweltering.

Jugson hurried up to the foot of the dais, not quite even with Lady Lestrange and threw himself down on one knee, his right arm sweeping down before him in a gesture of profound respect, his left behind him in correct courtly form. “My Lord.”

Standing in the shadows, cloaked and masked, Augustus Rookwood, the Spymaster of the Knights of Walpurgis, stood listening as the nervous Jugson reported. The man was intelligent and detail oriented, much more so than the average thug, but he lacked patience and tended to shoot from the hip. As such, he had failed to rise higher in the ranks so far. Still there seemed to be potential yet untapped. He made a mental note to consider further training.

It had been Rabastan’s idea to have him stationed at the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade, as it was an ideal place to observe the comings and goings of many people. They had tried to place a man in the Leaky Cauldron, but Tad Abbott, the man currently running the show there hadn’t been willing to hire the man they had sent. There was talk of finding a suitable wench to do the same spy work, but witches who were interested in their cause felt the work beneath them on review, so that part of the operation was stymied. He’d been looking into helping a cousin of the Dolohovs’ emigrate for this purpose, but again there was no guarantee that once she showed up that Tad would give her the work.

Thus far, Jugson had decanted a list of names of people he had glimpsed entering and exiting the back room of the Three Broomsticks, which had been reserved for a private affair earlier this night. Albus Dumbledore, Whittington Nott, and Conrad Rolle had been clearly identified leaving together, which told them little more than they already knew.

Albus Dumbledore was the biggest potential threat to their whole operation, a hero well respected throughout the wizarding world for putting a stop to the atrocities of three decades past inflicted on the wizarding world by Gellert Grindewald.

Sir Whittington Nott was also a decorated war hero who had spent much more time on the front lines. Augustus had obtained his dossier from his contact on the Board of Governors and had looked into his official public records at the Ministry. His medical records revealed that he was out on leave at least twice in 1939-1945, and he earned an Order of Merlin, Second Class. He was inducted as a
Knight Companion into the Most Honourable Military Order of the Bath from the Queen for the public aspects of his work. According to Nott Senior, his uncle and one of their own, it was rumoured in the family that he was instrumental in persuading Dumbledore to face Grindelwald in the final duel in 1945, but when asked outright over tea, he had replied that he was merely responsible for getting Dumbledore to the necessary place. Nott wasn’t sure what to make of his nephew - the lad was brilliant but very wild, and had never shown any sign of settling down. He had a younger brother who was much more likely to live long enough to inherit the family seat.

In 1953, Sir Whittington retired from his position in the Ministry to pursue cursebreaking. It was a second wave in the golden age of archeological discoveries being made by Muggles, and having posed as a Muggle before, he was able to insinuate himself into the most successful British and American outfits, well positioned to study and divert them away from discoveries of magical importance. He recently resigned, presumably to pursue this position as a teacher. It seemed to be a rather large change.

The last wizard on the short list was Conrad Rolle, a minor Muggleborn wizard whose family were landed gentry. There was a thin file on this man, indicating that he had been an Arithmantic analyst for the British Ministry, however his birth status had seriously hindered his ability to progress beyond a low level position in spite of his aptitude. After a particularly useful presentation describing predictions of Giant movements and likely points of attack, the French Foreign Minister requested that he be exchanged as part of a cooperative effort between the two governments. The British received a supercilious, useless pureblooded witch who had claimed status as a Seeress, and the French a highly capable, albeit Muggleborn, Arithmantist. Rookwood found him detestable, but did not underestimate the meaning of his presence on the staff at Hogwarts. Dumbledore was assembling a team, one meant to oppose Lord Voldemort.

“Did you manage to find out what they were discussing?” Rodolphus’ voice was flat, sneering. Jugson ducked his head down, his nasal tenor a contrast to the senior Lestrange. “No, sir. They had strict instructions and the door was warded from the inside. I did try to listen at the fire, but I was interrupted.”

Fire-listening was a well kept secret within the Ministry of Magic. If there was a fire in a hearth that had been connected to the Floo network, just as it could be used to travel and communicate, it could also be used to listen. It took a good deal of concentration to pull it off without melting your eardrums. Jugson’s lack of hair was an advantage there.

Lady Lestrange wheedled sweetly, “Surely you heard something, Mr Jugson. You are so dedicated, I know…” She looked up at him from under her lashes and smiled winsomely, “Surely you heard a scrap? Names? Anything at all?”

Jugson’s shoulders hunched and he stammered, “Hard pressed to say with absolute certainty, M’Lady.”

Rodolphus leaned forwards, mouth drawn back in a grimace as he hissed out, “Think. Harder.”

The whole host stopped breathing and trained their attention on the figure sitting next to Lord Lestrange, who had been still until this moment. He leaned forward, watching Jugson intensely, “Where are your manners, Lord and Lady Lestrange? Our brother has travelled far and fast this night to bring us this news.” The Dark Lord himself spoke, even the stone listened.

Lady Lestrange took out her wand. “Of course my Lord.” With a twitch she summoned a chair, highbacked and straight with arms upon it. She stood up, gesturing for the cowering Death Eater to rise and take a seat, smiling for all of the world as though he were among friends.
It wasn’t until Bellatrix reached down and pulled at Jugson’s elbow with a falsely jovial, “Up you go, there now. Much better.” She surveyed the man, thinking for a moment before summoning a low metal brazier over and setting it to Jugson’s side.

Rookwood suppressed a groan as she used magic to light the thing. Did she suppose that she would be allowed to practice her twisted hobbies on his agent? Surely not.

The Dark Lord watched the proceedings with a cordial smile fixed in place, his red eyes glittering. Rookwood had seen pictures of the Dark Lord from his school days, having looked into his official files at the Ministry out of curiosity. Once he was a well turned out lad with dark wavy locks and bright eyes. He was a natural leader, and that skill had developed further as his influence expanded. He was persuasive and passionate in his beliefs. He had travelled the world extensively, researching magics considered Dark at best by the narrow minded elders who cared nothing for more than maintaining the status quo.

His physical body had changed in strange ways that Rookwood found fascinating. The Dark Lord had never confided in him the source of power that lent him what he claimed as everlasting life, but anyone with eyes to see had to notice the unnatural pallor to the wizard’s skin. It was ethereal, nearly translucent. His dark waves of hair were now shocks of pure white, his eyebrows the same. His eyes were no longer brown, having transformed to blood red, his pupils vertical slits which suggested that he was no longer wholly human. His hands had remained strong but the fingernails were elongated and translucent, reminiscent of claws. His nose had flattened, as though it were a tire that needed more air. Today he wore finely tailored full length silk robes, black with Slytherin green woven in, only visible with direct light. They were high collared, lending the impression of the clergy. Over it he wore a rich black velvet vestcloak, and upon his index finger sat a heavy gold ring inset with a large onyx, cut into an octahedron and suspended by its points.

For years Lord Voldemort would not show his face to his followers, insisting on always wearing a mask. He had not declared his claim as the Dark Lord, nor his intention to free the magical world from its own fetters until about five years ago. The mask came off, and he moved openly, always surrounded by his faceless but fanatically devoted knights.

It was a particular show of mutual trust and support for the Lestranges to be allowed to attend meetings maskless, but then their father, Ramses, had been the Dark Lord’s most trusted confidante and advisor. Rookwood had never seen the Dark Lord in such a towering rage as the night that Ramses was picked off by a lucky shot leveled by one of the Ministry’s Junior Aurors.

Ramses had been a stabilising influence, counselling patience and encouraging the charismatic leader to conserve magical blood wherever possible. While he agreed that it was The Purists right as the elite to lead and protect the world, he pointed out that it would take every magical body to properly control the Muggle populace and mould the lesser race into obliging servitors with the Magical World as rulers and protectors.

All of that restraint burned away in the mad grief that followed, and now no-one with magical blood was untouchable. If the Dark Lord ordered it, they were to be wiped from existence.

The bright flaring of the fire within the brazier brought Rookwood’s attention back to the present and his poor subordinate. The man’s fists were clenched on his knees, his knuckles as white as the Dark Lord himself. It was not pity but an eye to economy that moved him out of the shadows, bowing to the white marble wizard on the dais. “My Lord, if I may?”

Terrible and fascinating, those ruby eyes shifted down to regard him. He met the Dark Lord’s glance head on, and felt that odd dizzying sensation that told him the wizard had looked into his mind. Moments later Voldemort inclined his head in permission to his Spymaster.
He straightened and turned to gaze at Bellatrix, finding that she had fixated on the Dark Lord and was standing, lips parted in ardent fascination. He spoke loudly, enunciating clearly, “Lady Lestrange, I’d like a quiet word with Jugson here, if you would excuse us.”

It was an uncomfortable silence that extended too long before the witch understood what he was asking. A flash of irritation was clearly visible in her expression as she turned to walk back to her own chair.

Rookwood took this opportunity to step over to his agent, his voice dropped low. “I think it would behoove us to take this out of your hands for a short span. If you will permit me?”

The man’s dark eyes closed for a moment before he gave a curt nod, appending it with, “If you would do it, sir.”

Rookwood reached out and grasped the man’s black wool clad shoulder, murmuring, “You have my assurances of good faith, Jugson.” His hand spasmed in a gesture of support before he went on, “Look at me.”

Scared, barely trusting, Jugson opened his eyes and met the gaze of the Spymaster whose wand was at the ready. “Imperio!”

Rookwood maintained physical contact with Jugson, feeling his shoulder relax under the influence of his magic, murmuring to him, “It would please me if you were to resume your report, starting with at what time and where you attempted to Fire-listen. I want every detail that you can remember.”

“I was in the kitchen, the only other fire in the whole place, see. I added the powder you gave me, and called up the back parlour as it is called.” He cleared his throat. “They was discussing helping Lydia Rolfe’s family. Collecting money and clothes, seeing as we burned down their dirty nest t’other night.”

It was gratifying to hear the man anxious to please. “Very good, Jugson. Go on.”

“It was Albus Dumbledore speaking, he must have been standing near the fire. Anycase, somebody, Slughorn I think, said something about a favoured student of his being Muggleborn, but the Headmaster cut him off rather sharply, saying that they don’t discuss such things in public.” He hastened onwards, “I could tell someone was talking, but it was impossible to make out what they was saying. Then a different voice, a woman’s voice gabbled on at the Headmaster, and she sounded like she was making demands. Very cross with Dumbledore she was, but then the daft man turns about and starts talking about old Nobby Leach dying.”

Rookwood had a sinking feeling... “And?” He could see sincere regret in Jugson’s eyes as he answered.

“That’s when Rosmerta stuck her head back, yelling for me to put in seven pork pies and three orders of chips and I lost the fire connection. Had to get back to work see, didn’t want her to suspect what I was up to, but by the time I got free again, I could hear several disapparate, and I nicked out to the alley and that was when I saw Albus Dumbledore, Whittington Nott, and Conrad Rolle all speeding away on broomsticks.”

He blinked rapidly. “I think that Nott fellow knew I was there but I don’t think he seen me.”

The Spymaster allowed some warmth to leech into his tone, letting his agent know that he was reasonably happy with his performance. “Let us hope not. Now, did you notice who else might have attended that meeting? Did you see anyone arrive?”
The man nodded emphatically, “Yes sir, I did.”

Merlin save him from literal people. “And who might that be, Jugson?”

“I saw Griselda Marchbanks totter in. Didn’t see her leave, though. And there was old Lady Longbottom with her. That’s all, sir.”

Rookwood turned to regard his Lord, “I am satisfied. The three wizards leaving together was indeed the most significant piece of information to be had and he reported that on his own.” He felt Jugson nodding agreement silently at his side.

Lord Voldemort intoned, “We shall discuss further. You have pleased me, Jugson. Rodolphus, Bellatrix, I think that Jugson here is tired?”

Rookwood let go of Jugson’s shoulder, cancelling the Imperius Curse. The change in demeanour was immediate, the man sagged back into the chair. He had the wild-eyed look of an alley cat who just narrowly escaped a demented six year old who wanted him to give him a bath.

Bellatrix rose, sensible to her duty as Lady and hostess. “But of course, my Lord. Brother, I’ll show you to your chambers. This way, please.” She curtsied to her Lord, waiting impassively as Jugson got shakily to his feet, bowed deeply and then scurried away, following her out at a hurried pace.

After both were out of the hall, Rookwood turned back to the Lords. “Odder Fellows. I am certain that was a meeting of the Odder Fellows, a group dedicated to fellowship among wizarding kind and charity work. They’ve been around for centuries.”

Lord Voldemort and Rodolphus met this news with blank looks. Rodolphus challenged this statement, “Charity work? Whatever for?”

Rookwood cleared his throat before answering, “From what I understand, it gives them something to do, occupies their minds with clothing drives and fundraisers. Knitting caps for orphans. That sort of thing. Many of the great Ladies are members. The more liberal leaning ones, mind you. I believe Dumbledore’s been a member for decades.”

The Dark Lord waved his hand at this. “So, what do we know? Dumbledore met with a group of bleeding heart fuddy-duddies, and brought two wizards of interest with him.” His expression sharpened. “Bring Nott in. Let’s find out more about his wayward nephew. Perhaps he could be persuaded to see reason.”

“Of course, my Lord. It will be done directly.” Rookwood bowed deeply before turning on the spot, disappearing with the tell tale crack of disapparation.

Chapter End Notes

Folks, with that I am on a brief hiatus. I have been slammed in real-life work and studying for the test that makes it possible for me to continue to work. This story is not abandoned. I will be applying time and energy into plotting and shaping this monster towards the end of a cohesive book and the beginnings of the next. I’d liked to express a warm thanks to readers like you! I deeply appreciate the support you have shown me over the past four and a half months.
Love!
Fawkesy
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

As before, JK Rowling owns this sandbox, I only play in it. Plot and OC's only are mine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The walk down to the Potions Lab should not have taken very long, but Deirdre felt as though weeks had passed over the course of hours. Auntie Pomona had taken her by the kitchen for tea and biscuits, fuelling her up for the last leg of the day’s gruelling tests. That stop was a stroke of genius, and Deirdre, who had been wound up rather tightly in anxiety, now had a broader sense of calm. Her heart rate slowed, and the cool air of the lower levels of the castle soothed her ruffled nerves.

Auntie Pomona seemed to know exactly what to do. The woman did not chatter on, leaving Deirdre to silent meditation. Before she knew it, the thick door leading to the potions lab was opening before her and the pleasant round face of Professor Horace Slughorn floated into view, his thick-fingered hand thrusting out towards Deirdre. “Oh-ho, here you are, right on time!” The man had a thick, light brown moustache that did nothing to diminish the impression of a walrus who had been stuffed into a moss-green plaid suit.

A tentative smile answered the wizard as she allowed her petite hand to be engulfed in the Professor’s grip. “Yes, sir.” His hands were soft and warm and she noticed that he kept them neat; free of stains and the nails shone in the light. Deirdre’s brow furrowed as he shook hands with her and let her go. He turned to Aunt Pomona, allowing Dee to get a better measure of the man. His woollen robes were expensive and suspiciously free of holes and stains.

“Pomona, my dear. How are things down at the greenhouses? I was just thinking the other day that the new formula I am working on could do with fresh Mugwort sap. The bottled stuff from the apothecary is not nearly as high quality as what you produce.” Slughorn’s eyes searched Auntie Pomona’s face as he asked, “What did you say you do differently?”

The answering smirk on Pomona’s lips before she answered told everyone much. “Now Horace, you know that you could do just as well with common Mugwort as anyone else if you took an interest. I’d be happy to show you later?” She lifted her eyebrows, waiting for the answer.

Slughorn had already turned his attention away from the witches, and Deirdre saw her Aunt’s lips twitch in amusement.
A single loud clap of the hands drew the Deirdre’s attention back to the Potions Professor. “Yes, this will do very nicely. I couldn’t have asked for better timing. Now, Miss Ward. There’s a bit of clean-up to be done before we can continue on to the main event. My assistant has been working diligently on a large shipment of liquorice root. Why don’t you help him and show me your knife skills?”

“Horace. She still has to go to Professors Rolle and Svartrunir after you. Do not forget you have a time limit.” One of her calloused hands slipped behind Deirdre and gently compelled her forwards, as the reminder wasn’t only for Slughorn. “I have some things to attend to, Deirdre. I will return to collect you.”

The man waved Aunt Pomona off. “Yes, yes. Of course.” He twitched his moustache, twirling a bit of it around his finger as he considered the woman’s retreating back.

Dee looked about the windowless room, feeling dwarfed by the high vaulted ceiling. Lanterns contained in bubbled glass cast a warm, steady light from their positions around the walls. A black marble bench was piled with the stick-like roots, and a wickedly sharp knife lay abandoned next to a pile of refuse that looked as it might serve as tinder. Deirdre frowned, wishing that she had an apron and a ribbon to bind her hair. She took her wand out, and after a moment’s consideration, she used it to transfigure a particularly long scrap of bark which she nicked from the refuse and used it to pull her hair back before cleaning her hands.

A quick inspection of the pile revealed that the quality of the roots left much to be desired. Properly dried roots only comprised about half of the collection, the rest were too green. As a result, a disappointing number of them were mouldy. With no further consideration, she started to sort, humming under her breath as she went.

Severus worked for Professor Slughorn as a lab assistant on weekends. Not only was it a way to earn a few extra sickles, but it allowed him to surround himself in the rigours and routines of the world of potions. He loved everything about brewing, and even the most menial work brought him a sense of calm. Until last year, he’d shared the duties with his best friend. In the wake of that disastrous day last year, Lily had stopped coming, telling Slughorn that she wished to focus her efforts on independent study instead.

The young wizard told himself that he enjoyed the solitude. He was efficient. He didn’t need anyone else.

So when he came back out of the storeroom to find a witch at his workstation, his first thoughts leapt to Lily. The intruder’s back was to him, so he took the moment to observe and allow his traitorous heart to slow down from its pathetic tattoo. No, the hair was the wrong colour, the witch was short
and bound back. A band of blue around her wool vest identified her as a Ravenclaw, further distinguishing her from Lily.

Anger came to his rescue and he summoned up his signature armour: a black scowl. Who would be so stupid as to invade his work space? Thus girded, he stalked over and slapped down a cutting board. The heavy glass jar he needed to collect the shavings thunked down, freeing his wand arm before he growled, “What do you think you are doing?” The sharp words echoed about the lab, amplifying them.

Far from being cowed, the witch continued to sort through the roots as she returned his address. “Sorting. Your supplier is sloppy.”

Severus’ eyes widened as he recognised the voice. Deirdre was here? Discomfited, he turned away, taking the knife back up, intending to finish shaving the splintered root that sat on his cutting board. Stealing sidewise looks, he felt the heat of embarrassment rise in his ears as curls of liquorice root rose under his blade to be deposited in the jar. “Well, what might one expect from a class of third years?”

Dusting her hands off, Deirdre pointed to a distressingly large pile. “These can’t be used. They’re already mouldy.”

Pointing with his knife, Severus indicated a bucket tucked just under the table. “Compost. Don’t even bother with those.” Turning back to his work, he chanced a look to find Slughorn watching them with eyebrows raised in interest, his hands folded behind him.

“These are just too green.” Deirdre mused, “Unless you intended to shred them as they are for extract.” Her warm brown eyes smiled at him as her mouth prattled on. “Sufficient for sweets and liquor, but not for potions as uncured, the roots lack potency. What is your plan, sir? Are they destined for shallow pleasures, or shall they be relegated to the drying racks to proof themselves for loftier purposes at a later date?”

Mouth tightening, he reached across her and gathered the neatly stacked pile in his hands. “I’ll take them to cure.” After a moment’s thought, he jerked his chin towards the storeroom, “Come on then, I’ll show you.”

Deirdre glanced over at Slughorn, who had drifted over to his desk and was now perched on its edge, a scroll of parchment in his hands. She said lightly, “Lead on, sir.”
Severus could feel the weight of Deirdre’s regard on his back as he moved away, his long legs eating up the distance to the storage rooms. When they reached the relative privacy, he stopped in front of the drying cabinet. “Open that, please.”

“Professor Slughorn is supposed to be testing me to see if I belong in his NEWT level class.”

Ah, that was the explanation that Severus was searching for. Enlightened, he waited as she shuffled the racks around, correctly pulling a group of fungi that were done. She fished around for an empty rack and set it onto the track, moving out of the way so he could drop the roots onto the tray. He barely registered as she leaned in to help rearrange them so they didn’t touch one another, and he was surprised to hear himself say, “Ravenclaw. And here I thought you were going to be a Gryffindor for certain.”

Deirdre’s huff made him smile. “As if I’d let that happen.” She turned away, pulling one of the cutting boards. “I’ll need a blade. He wants to see my knife skills, I think.”

For all of her confidence, he could see lines of tension between her brows. “I’ll lend you one. I don’t suppose you had time to retrieve your own kit before you came down?”

A rueful look pinched her eyes as she answered, “I am usually better prepared. Thank you, Severus.” She reached out and grasped his shoulder, a casual touch.

He froze, looking down at her hand. Bollocks. He dragged his mind away from the frenzied thrashing that she seemed to induce in him. Her warmth seeped through his sleeve and she squeezed him before letting go. He nodded, not trusting his voice as he led her back out.

When they made it back, Severus took out a leather roll and unfurled it, revealing a collection of instruments. He had a second knife that was particularly sharp, reserved for the really fine work, and a third everyday one that was much like the one he was already using, although it was only six inches, not the full eight he preferred. Seeing Slughorn watching, he turned his hand in a gesture of invitation over the roll. “Since this is a test, it seems fitting for you to select your tool.”

Severus feigned disinterest, turning back to the root he’d abandoned earlier to get the jar. He didn’t miss the surprise on Deirdre’s face, and smiled himself as she passed over the fine knife. She turned to the cutting board, and taking a set of roots she started to shave, producing a rapidly growing pile of long thin curling strips. This wasn’t easy with dried roots, producing ample amounts of splinters and dust as they both worked.
The jar was half-filled with curls of dry liquorice root when Slughorn broke the companionable silence that had grown between Severus and Deirdre. Both students were absorbed in their work, its repetitiveness a sort of soothing meditation.

A gruff clearing of the throat broke that peace. A rack with four stoppered vials was placed in front of Deirdre. “If you would, Miss Ward, please identify each of these and assess their quality.”

Looking at the clock located at the front of the room, Deirdre frowned, placing the knife down and dusting her sleeves off. She picked the first phial up and held it up to the light, tilting it so that the thick azure liquid inside flowed up the side, coating it very well. “Confusing Concoction. Adequate quality, not quite thick enough, but should do for most applications.”

She passed to the next, a mostly empty phial with a single drop of a pink coloured liquid at the bottom. After swirling it, she remarked, “Viscosity of water which is correct, but the colour is not quite right. Too far to the violet end of the spectrum and a bit hazy, isn’t it?” She looked up at Slughorn with a faint smile, “Draught of Living Death. Your Valerian Root stock must have been past dates.”

Severus cleared his throat and looked up at the ceiling. The root wasn’t past dates, but it was poor quality and he wasn’t able to get enough of it peeled and prepared properly for the attempt as the largest section was rotted from the centre. He hadn’t been happy with that brewing session. He watched as she picked up the next, a phial of a greyish potion which had a defined layer of sediment at the bottom. She looked at Slughorn, “May I open this one?”

Eyes alive with interest, Slughorn nodded curtly and Severus held his breath, knowing how bad this one would be. The pungent amine smell of rotten fish was strong indeed, and Deirdre turned away, coughing briefly as she stoppered it back up. Her voice was strained as she stated, “Swelling Solution, or at least an incomplete one. They didn’t let it brew long enough.” She firmly pressed in the cork, shaking it. “And it hasn’t had the bat spleen added; but it wouldn’t be time for it yet.” She watched the sediment circulate. “Quite past saving at this juncture. I’d dispose of it.”

Slughorn gestured for her to hand it to Severus, who vanished it. He was watching her as she approached the last on the rack. It was beautiful, pearly white and luminescent.

Deirdre’s fingers were reverent as she plucked this one out of the rack. “Well, this one is obvious.”

The Potions teacher smiled at her, his moustache twitching. “Of course, but indulge me, Miss Ward. Go ahead and open it.”
Expression tense, Deirdre warmed the glass between her palms, rolling it back and forth with hands open, carressing firmly along the phial’s length.

Severus fought a wave of lightheadedness, and forced himself to tear his eyes away from that inexplicably arousing scene. He shifted, trying to adjust his stance so his involuntary response wouldn’t be quite so painfully obvious. His apron did much to hide his sins, but in that moment he felt certain that Slughorn must know.

When he looked back, Deirdre was inhaling the curling fumes of the volatile potion. “Well, it was perfectly brewed.” She took a second sniff before recapping it with a curious expression. “Old books, tea, and…” her voice faltered, and the last was a whisper, “Fiendfyre.”

The indulgent expression on Slughorn’s face slid off, converting to one of neutral attention. “That last, are you certain it wasn’t just pipe smoke?”

“Yes.” The answer sounded as though it was coming from the bottom of a well, weak and hollow. Deirdre shook her head, “The brimstone is unmistakable.” She turned away, expression troubled as she slipped the potion back into its spot on the rack.

Slughorn stepped over and breathed in the fumes that were still curling up from the unstoppered phial. “Hm. Well, it seems to be in order.” He waved Severus over, “What do you think?”

Severus turned to Deirdre and held out his hand to her. A wry twist of her mouth told him that his mask had slipped and he accepted the cork, thankful that she hadn’t touched him. Highly conscious of the other’s eyes on him, he turned to the rack.

His sense of smell was one of his greatest assets in the potions classroom, so when he took the faintest whiff, it was more than adequate. He recapped the phial, contemplating as the smell was different. Love potions get stronger as they age. “Perhaps it has matured too long?”

He’d not stated aloud what scents he detected in the dangerous fumes but they had shifted. He hadn’t wanted to try it since Lily had told him to piss off last year. Guilt never left him about that moment, and something deep inside of him clutched at the last shreds of his devotion to Lily Evans. Lily had changed, and then again, so had he.

Now he could smell fresh earth after a warm spring rain, a musky mix of myrrh and honey, and a herb that he recognised but could not name. *kingseal. This was in contrast to the spring rain, new
books, and the shampoo that Lily had used that had been present in the mists a year ago.

“I will see to it, Severus.” The big main turned away from him to address Deirdre who seemed to be recovering.

“Miss Ward, I regret that I must put you to the test so you might prove that you are up to standard for the NEWT class. I regret that you will only have about thirty minutes in which to brew, but even a partially completed project will prove an adequate trial. You will be provided with an ingredient that your potion must feature prominently. Impress me.”

A pair of stations was set up across the room, two benches side by side and Dee hurried over. She was rolling up her sleeves and her eyes were set, sparkling with the flame of determination.

Professor Slughorn put a beefy hand on Severus’ shoulder. “Severus, I think you might enjoy this. Care to give the witch a little competition? I know you love a challenge.”

“What ingredient did you have in mind?”

That hand slapped Severus on the back, propelling him forward. “Oh, you’ll see in just a moment. Very good, this will be quite diverting.”

Deirdre’s mind was already furiously working on the problem of trying to produce something… anything in 30 minutes of brew time. Brewing or stewing usually used to incorporate the ingredients would not be good enough. She had to figure out a way to intensify, to distill without heat or time.

Mechanically, she had found and put on a heavy apron and was tying it on when Slughorn approached the bench. Movement out of the corner of her eye drew her attention to Severus. He was already switching out cauldrons and preheating a water bath in a second heavy cast cauldron.

She took a moment to admire the intensity of her… friend? Boyfriend? Galloping Avogadro’s ghost! His new haircut made it more possible to read his expression, providing less to hide behind. In spite of her anxiety, a corner of her mouth pulled up in irrepressible admiration. Lest he become distracted, she turned back to her own work.
Two covered bell jars were set down, one on each table. A gentle sound of something knocking against the side twigged her to the nature of the ingredient, and her heart dropped. Procuring what was needed from magical birds and insects was an important skill, and sometimes the fresher the venom or whatever part was needed, the more potent the result.

A plan started to form in her mind as the Professor began to speak.

“You will have 30 minutes in which to prepare your potions. You may use anything out of the common supply closet, but if there is something else that I might have that you would need, please do apply to me as soon as may be. I will be here to help you, Severus, and I’ve got an assistant for you, Miss Ward.”

Deirdre felt the blood drain from her face as Lily Evans stepped into view, a pleasant smile fixed on her face. Oh, bollocks.

Oblivious to the effect this had on her, Slughorn pulled out an hour glass and flipped it with a dramatic flourish, setting it on the teacher’s desk at the front of the classroom. “Begin!”

Gritting her teeth, Deirdre leaned forward and pulled the drape off of the bell jar to reveal a blue blur, whizzing about, its wings gently batting against the crystal with a dampened chime each time.

Lily was tying on an apron beside her and Deirdre started listing ingredients she would need, taking out her wand. “Snidget bile, common will do. Cat whisker, preferably something that hunts for its food, not one of those pampered familiars. Kneazle would do as well if it is back there. Corryvreckan whirlpool water, as much as they have and runespoor scale, from the left head only if you please. Green tea, dried as it comes. I’ll want that ground to a powder. And ethanol, the purest you can find. I don’t care about its base. And an Abraxan feather, needs to be cleaned but left intact.”

Deirdre noted that Lily was paying close attention, bending to get out a mortar and pestle as she continued to give instructions. Vivid green eyes met hers and they held no derision or spite. It was rather strange. It was even worse when Lily reached over and patted her on the back saying, “Righto, chief!”

Swallowing her confusion, Deirdre pulled her attention away from the strangeness and turned her attention to the billywig. A plan solidified, a variation of a field ready potion she read about in a Russian journal once. She couldn’t be sure when that happened but it was a sharp, crisp memory, the recipe printed out in her mind’s eye.
She rummaged below the table and brought out a metal bowl. Tapping it, she cast a heat sinking charm, transferring as much of the heat as she could to elsewhere. Soon condensation started to form, and Dee craned her neck to see if Lily was coming. Sounds of rummaging and clinking, so she called, “The spirits first, if you please?”

Next, she turned to the billiwig and tilted her head, considering her options. Of the various parts of the billiwig, the venom was most often used, but the saliva was harder to obtain and valued in potions to promote agility. She’d read that it could be used to increase speed as well, but that effect was difficult to use as heat would denature this property rendering it useless and inert. She’d have to scale down the proportions, but that was just a trifle. But she needed a flower.

Dashing away, she shouldered into the supply closet, wildly looking around for what she needed. Lily was in the back, rummaging. “Here’s the spirits if you want them.” She turned and handed the bottle to Deirdre, not waiting for a response.

“Ah! There!” Dee located the drawer labeled ‘Hibiscus’ and pulled it open. Failure glared back up at her from within the shadow contents. Only dried flowers. Why would she think otherwise. “Drat! Now what?” She stood, frozen, considering. It was December in Scotland. Where would she get a flower now?

Lily leaned in beside her. “What’s wrong?”

“They’re dead. Dried. I need a live flower.”

Arms already laden with Dee’s shopping list, Lily flashed a bright smile. “Oh, is that all? Pick the nicest and bring it out. I’ll help you.”

Deirdre stared back. “How?”

Lily’s tinkling laughter carried back to her. “I’m a witch! You’ll see. We’re on a schedule, pip pip!”

Panic dissolved the bonds of Dee’s stymied indecision. She had no solution of her own, she’d have to use a glamour otherwise. Trying to push aside her reservations about Lily, Deirdre decided to take her chances. This was a test, a chance to prove she belonged in his class. And just maybe, a chance to impress Severus.
Setting those thoughts to the side, Deirdre plucked out a likely looking bud, browned and folded in upon itself like a discarded parasol, sized for pixies. Or billiwigs. In spite of the gravity of the situation, she smiled as she emerged back into the main potions room. The thrill of competition focused her and propelled her forwards.

Deirdre’s wand tip glowed white hot and she was carefully puncturing a very small hole through the glass of the bell jar. She didn’t want to shatter the glass, but it was bending inward farther than she expected. With a faint ping, her wand punched through, and the captive billiwig could be heard buzzing angrily within. It investigated the new feature, shying away from the heat rising from the hot glass. Lily was standing at the ready with the dried hibiscus and after a count of seventeen, Deirdre gestured her forward. Twin capillary tubes of finest glass were already threaded through the center of the bloom, one with a small bulb of honeyed water attached, the other with a collection chamber fitted with a gentle suction charm. Setting it in place, Lily smiled at Dee as she prodded the flower with her finger.

“Wow, Lily. Wandless and wordless regrowth?” Deirdre was quite impressed.

Lily offered a modest shrug of one shoulder in response. “I’ve always been able to do that. It was one of the things I discovered before I received my letter.”

Deirdre bent to watch as the billiwig approached the hibiscus with obvious insectoid caution, flitting in and out. Before long a drop of faintly shimmering liquid was visible in the collection tube. “Oh, I can’t believe that worked! Billiwig saliva, Lily! See that?”

Bouncing up and down, Lily quickly hugged Deirdre, “Genius!” She looked over at the freezing basin. Already she’d pulled out two chunks of ice from the solution they made first and looked like another layer was in the offing. “Ah, I’ll get that.”

Stunned by the open sign of affection, Deirdre’s response was delayed, “Right. I’ll check on the matcha, shall I?” Grinding on its own, an enchanted mortar and pestle were working away at the green tea. A haze of dust was hovering just over it, and she had to wave her hand side to side to get a clear view. It wasn’t quite to powderfine yet. She would definitely need to sift it.

A clunk alerted her to Lily having finished offloading the chunk of ice from the freezing basin. “Alright. We’ve got another twelve minutes to go before we have to combine the ingredients.”
“Right.” Deirdre crouched over the hastily penned notes she’d put down earlier. Her mouth was mealy and dry. She tapped it with her finger before reviewing, “Corryvreckan saltwater centrifuge for the whiskers,” she had to go up on tiptoe to admire the squat cauldron’s swirling contents before finishing, “to which we’ll add the tea in short order. Don’t want it to steep too long, even with the purifying properties of the water.”

She glanced over at a glass beaker whose clear liquid had taken on a dull grey cloudy appearance. “Runespoor essence has been steeping for almost twenty minutes. That goes into the ice bath next, Lily.” The liquid at the bottom of the metal bowl was thickened, rich, and fine ice crystals formed on the surface like thorns. “We’re going to have more than enough of the snidget bile concentrate.”

Lily piped up, “If you filtered it, you would not have to worry about the distractants as much. Could use less tea."

Deirdre tilted her head, considering. “Well, it won’t take more time. Let’s try it. Might improve the taste if nothing else.”

“Alright.” Lily summoned a chinois style strainer and set it up, lining it with fine white paper.

The two witches worked side by side. Deirdre had almost forgotten how badly she’d got along with Lily just yesterday, and she was struck by the prefect’s sunny demeanour. Distracted, she jumped when Professor Slughorn leaned in beside her, looking at her notes with an expression of interest. “Well, that’s an interesting approach. The potion will be a bit… raw, don’t you think?”

Deirdre nodded vigorously, “Yes, but given the time constraints and a self-imposed ban on the use of heat, I had to use other methods of extracting the best out of the ingredients. They’ll meld in the alcohol solution well enough.” She turned and cast a Finite on the pestle and scooped a small amount of the green powder out. Lily already had exchanged the snidget bile for the runespoor essence in the freezing bath and was carefully pouring out the greenish-yellow concentrate into the chinois.

Slughorn watched Lily for a moment before commenting, “Aren’t you concerned about losing potency?”

Pressed for time, Deirdre already had turned to the cauldron and was tapping a mesh strainer over the waters, dusting them with the green powder. The waters turned a brilliant emerald shade, and Deirdre smiled before answering, “Well, no. Honestly I am more concerned about longevity of the resulting mixture. It will meld well enough but the potion itself will evaporate over the course of hours to a day at most. Again, quick, but fleeting too.” Unable to help herself, she added, “I think I’ll call it the Faster Speed Potion. Or better yet - Speedy Speed Solution, S-cubed for short.”
Lily came over, using a rag to dry her hands after having washed them clear of the bile which stained her fingers faintly. Deirdre’s naming ideas for the product surprised a genuine laugh out of the redhead, who countered, “Flash Formula?”

A rumbling chuckle rolled off of the walrus-like Professor, “Oh, I do like your idea, Miss Evans.”

Deirdre turned away, suppressing a flash of anger. Busying her fingers, she used a pipette to sample the outermost liquid within the cauldron. A series of test tubes waited and she pulled her first sample out. It was a light green and had tiny bits of whisker sediment. She’d want to send this through the chinois too. She risked a glance back at her erstwhile assistant who was chatting happily with Slughorn over the choices Deirdre already made thus far.

As she pulled a second sample from the cauldron, she looked over at her fellow competitor. They had about five minutes left. Somewhere along the way he’d tied a strip of cloth across his forehead that knotted in the back, and Dee thought Severus looked rather like a warrior. He was well past the knife wielding stage, and was working over three separate cauldrons. Sweat stained his white collar, and his hair looked damp, rather like that morning after his shower, before she’d cut his hair.

Severus looked over at her, possibly feeling the pressure of her attention. His eyes were intense and she felt flinced.

Not really thinking about it first, she mouthed to him, “You alright there?”

His eyebrows were thick and surprisingly expressive, lifting together in acknowledgement without answer. Rapidly he changed to a single brow arched in counter-question. A flicker of a glance Lily’s way suggested the content of his question. Deirdre’s lips tightened in response, but before she could form anything more coherent, he turned back to his cauldron, his lips silently counting down the number of turns.

Sighing ruefully, Deidre turned back to her own work with a whispered, “Sorry.”

A glance at the hourglass wiped all thoughts away and she dove into the last stages of her work. A third sample from the cauldron yielded the thicker forest-green liquid she was looking for as the centre of the whirlpool already had cleared itself back to water in the force of its motion.

She shifted Lily aside with a bump of her hip, holding the test-tube of the needed cat’s whiskers tea and poured it into the chinois, having shifted the bile out of the way. Anxious, she used the wooden
pestle to force it through and turned to the ice bath.

“Lily, the billywig saliva?”

To her credit, Lily stopped mid-conversation and hurried over to the bell-jar. The billiwig continued to come over and take little sips, circling in a calmer, mesmerising figure eight towards the flower and back away again, pirouetting on a tilted axis. It gave the impression of elation, or perhaps honey intoxication. “Oh, this is working rather well. Should be more than enough. Look at that, Professor Slughorn. Have you seen such a thing?”

Deirdre didn’t hear the rest, her ears heating at the suggestion of praise. She was busy clearing ice from the runespoor spirits in the freezing bath. After renewing the freezing charm, another layer of ice formed, and she shucked that off too. She used her wand to agitate the superfrozen ethanol, before ladling out the three ounces she needed into a new flash. To that she added a dram of the tea, followed by the bile, shaking it to combine the liquids that swirled together but did not combine fully, the green and silver streaking with the darkness of the bile. She plucked up the feather she had cleaned and dried earlier and charmed it to stir the liquid together. It moved swiftly, and for all it was only one feather, it sent Deirdre’s curls swaying in the breeze that appeared in the feather’s wake.

Casting a glance over at Lily, she was gratified to see Lily standing nearby. Letting out a slow exhalation to steady herself, Deirdre took the billywig’s spittle and carefully added it, drop by drop. After the fourth drop, the liquid changed from a muddy green to a marbled concoction.

Lily encouraged her, “Just a little more. I think you’ve done it, Deirdre.”

Holding her breath, Deirdre added another drop, biting off an oath as her hand shook. Fortunately the drop made it into the beaker as intended, and the liquid flashed. A hazy mist rose from its surface and Deirdre watched dazedly as the whole beaker changed to a deep peacock blue.

Professor Slughorn gestured at the feather with his wand, stopping it mid-stir. Plucking it out, he leaned over to inspect the liquid. “May I?”

Deirdre glanced over at the hourglass. There was a little time yet left and she nodded distracted permission, “Of course.” Her eyes strayed back over to check on Severus. He was stoppering off one of three phials, all containing a yellow potion that cast a bright glow under his long fingers. He looked satisfied, his hands working with practised assurance. A tension inside of her eased at the sight. Had she been worried for him? Yes. It seemed so. A happy smile played about her lips, and she dragged her attention away, waiting to see what Professor Slughorn thought.
Now that all was over and done, Deirdre wasn’t nervous any longer. She didn’t have to wait long for her assessment.

“Miss Ward, I am very impressed. I can see that you have studied quite a bit, and the use of the cold was rather inspired. What made you use that?”

Deirdre answered, “Chemists use cold to distill, although that’s a misnomer. A more accurate appellation for the process would be fractional freezing. Impurities freeze at a higher temperature than the target essence to be obtained. We had the luxury of doing several fractionations of the snidget bile, allowing us to use the more commonly available variety commensurate with Ministry Protections of their cousin, the Golden Snidget.” She opened her mouth and stopped herself as the man was holding her unstopped phial up to his nose, mustache twitching.

“Sir?”

The rotund Professor pulled out a rubber plug and sealed the vial with an expression of regret. “I’d like to test this out now, but I’m afraid it will have to wait for class on Tuesday.”

Deirdre’s heart swooped, dropping down for a moment until she fully understood what he was saying. “Did I... did I pass?” She glanced over at Severus who was watching, his face expressionless.

Lily shocked Deirdre again by wrapping an arm around her shoulder and squeezing. “Of course you did, Silly. Don’t toy with her, Professor. Be nice. Can’t you see she’s had a long day?”

A voice from the doorway broke in, “Yes, and she isn’t quite done yet I am afraid.” The tall, reedy figure of Professor Svartrunir stepped into the room. “Horace.” He inclined his head a fraction before scanning the faces of the students. A line appeared between his eyes as he took in the pair of witches, Lily Evans with her arm about an tired but elated Deirdre Ward.

Chuckling, Professor Slughorn nodded indulgently. “I would be happy to enroll you in the NEWT level class. Perhaps Severus might have time to bring Miss Ward up to speed on where we are in the syllabus?”

Flushing, Deirdre flashed a triumphant smile at Severus. She only barely registered Lily volunteering to help too.
“Very good. Come with me, Miss Ward. I too must put you to the test.”

Lily piped up in disappointment, “Oh, but I had hoped to see our potion in action.” She let go of Deirdre, the arm had become quite heavy so it was a relief to be released. “Do come talk to me later. I think we got off to a rough start but Professor McGonagall was right to encourage me to befriend you. Even if you didn’t end up in our House. Before I forget, Remus wanted to talk with you. You two made quite the couple on the dancefloor.” She winked at Deirdre.

Distinctly uncomfortable, Deirdre didn’t commit to such a meeting or even friendship. Her tone was stiff as she replied, “Right. Well, off I go. Thank you for the help, Lily. Thank you for the opportunity, sir.” She glanced over at Severus but couldn’t think of what to say, although he wasn’t looking her way. “Um, see you around, Severus.” He resolutely did not look her way, but she thought she detected a faint nod and that would have to be good enough.

Torn away by necessity, she fell into step with Professor Svartunir. She felt a stab of guilt, leaving her best enemy and only friend alone together to clean up after her victory. Why hadn’t Severus looked at her? Or spoken to her? Had she offended him? Was last night imagined?

A well timed query pulled her increasingly irrational thoughts back to firmer ground. “I’m told you already have been working with runic enchantments. What have you accomplished so far?”

Taking a deep breath, Deirdre dove into an explanation of what she knew about the runes used on her fingers. Scraps of a former life hung around the corner of her awareness, stubbornly out of reach.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: See? I told you that Coromandel would beat me if I didn't continue this story. What black eye? Oh... I fell down the steps. *wink* Clumsy me.
Chapter Forty-three

Chapter Notes

JK Rowling owns the sandbox, I only play in it and I'm having a wonderful time!

Thanks to Coromandel, who is a fantastic friend and beta. Also thanks to readers like you!

Readers who are looking for more Chapters on Twelve Days, I have not abandoned that story. I am percolating plot lines. Cross my heart and hope to not die before I finish either of these stories. :)

Severus found himself panting as Professor Slughorn called time’s up. He’d taken a different route to meeting the challenge. He’d chosen a mood elevation serum, one that needed to be balanced against the inflationary tendency of the billywig venom. His superior knowledge of the classroom’s stock helped him a great deal, allowing him to take short cuts by using already prepared ingredients to cut down on time significantly, and its base was an already finished potion. He still chose to brew over traditional fire, but he had to use a higher flame and watch the potion that much closer to avoid scorching. The sunny yellow product was exactly what he had expected, and he told himself that the warmth radiating off of the phials in his hand was the reason he felt so good. No, it wasn’t the witch one bench over or the prospect of impressing her.

He watched covertly as Professor Svartrunir arrived to collect Deirdre. It was a wrench to see her go, but the parting look she cast his way was full of unspoken promises with balancing questions of her own. That look was a balm for his disappointment, disturbingly effective.

Movement nearby alerted him to the attention of Professor Slughorn, who plucked one of the phials out of his hand with an appreciative mutter of approval. “Very nice, Mr Snape. Very nice. I thought that was a difficult challenge, but both of you did very well. And you didn’t even really need help, did you?”

Severus pasted on an ingratiating smile, “Sir, you have helped me for over five years. It is a credit to you that I did so well.” It was a bit thickly laid on, but Professor Slughorn never seemed to take it too seriously and seemed to appreciate the effort if not the sentiment.

“Quite so, although I do think that you are one of the most talented students I’ve ever had the privilege to teach.” The man’s voice was gruff as he turned to address the only witch left in the room, “Miss Evans, you are unusually gifted in this subject as well. The billywigs were your inspiration. How do you think our contestants performed today?”
Lily coloured prettily in response. She worked with Kettleburn and Slughorn in tandem and was responsible for helping to maintain the colonies of creatures kept by the school for potions classes, so Severus was only a little surprised at her role.

“I thought Miss Ward was going to falter there in the beginning but she solved the problem of harvesting the saliva beautifully and without much inconvenience to little Carla. Her arithmetic calculations were effortless, and the idea of using a cold potion instead of waiting on the traditional brew was frankly inspired.”

Severus frowned. It bothered him that she named all of the animals she cared for, as sometimes it was necessary to sacrifice them for the purposes of ingredient collection. Dissection was one of the important skills for NEWT level students. They had an upcoming field trip coming in a week that would take them far afield to collect potions components from locally available sources. He hated doing these trips in the cold wet winter, but there were some things that had to be gathered fresh and there was nothing else for it. He was startled out of his reverie by Lily saying his name.

“Mr Snape showed his usual brilliance, efficiency, and forethought, although I do think he takes that idiom too literally, don’t you, Professor? Can’t really marry the job, for all that he loves it so well.”

Severus always took the precaution of shackling one of his ankles to the heavy lab bench, which was in turn bolted securely to the stone floor. It was a standard precaution when working with the Australian pests and was recommended in the very same potions book that all students at NEWT level were assigned that year. He’d rather not float away, thank you.

Their teacher choked on a laugh before schooling his expression into a more seemly frown. He thought the mustache hid more than it does, Severus wasn’t fooled. He narrowed his eyes at Lily who had sucked in her lips in the effort to not burst out into frank laughter.

“Miss Evans! You can’t fool me. Don’t you use the same practice?” Slughorn’s lip twitched.

Lily had her hair pulled back earlier but had released it when the hourglass was empty. She turned her head, tossing a lock over her shoulder. The light of the dungeon was good for her warm complexion and her green eyes were bright. “I just use a charm on my shoes, sir. Worked on it with Professor Flitwick for sureness of footing.” She demonstrated with her feet, drawing imaginary arcs on the stone floor as Professor Slughorn looked on with bemused admiration.

Covertly, Severus used his wand to undo the embarrassing shackle with a faint clink. He shoved it
back under the table so no one would trip on it.

“When both of my shoes are on the ground, they are quite free to move, but if I lift one off, the other is firmly stuck to the floor. So I can’t float away, you see?” She tilted her head so she was looking back at him coyly. “No chains necessary. Unless you prefer them, of course.” Her tone was light and lilting, implying much.

Severus made a mental note to cast a finite on her shoes in the future. Witch deserved it. His thoughts must have broadcasted in his expression as she shifted immediately to a pouty face. It used to work so well on him, but now it was repulsive.

“Aw, Severus. Don’t be cross. I’m just teasing you.”

He looked to his Professor. “So, what did Miss Ward make? I don’t recognise it.”

The change of subject was grabbed and firmly carried on like an Olympic torch, never to go out, well at least until the games were over. “She made a variation of a speed potion. It isn’t in the standard book of potions, but it is taught as one of the augmentations used by Aurors.” A line formed between the man’s brows, “I wonder… “

Severus cleared his throat, realising that the man was perhaps straying too close to truths they didn’t know and were not supposed to be sharing either way. “Maybe she saw it in a journal.”

Lily laughed lightly, “Oh, it would be fun to have another witch in class with us. Won’t you accept her, Professor?”

“She doesn’t seem the type to be satisfied with beauty aids or seduction serums, I grant you, Miss Evans. Yes, yes. I think she belongs in the NEWT class and not just the extracurricular club. I will make the recommendation.”

 Suppressing a snort of response, Severus found himself looking to the door to the hallway, picturing what it would be like to have her in the class. She was a distraction, but what was that to having a fellow potions enthusiast to talk with, without the complicated social history colouring everything that was said. Someone who seemed to like him, if that kiss last night was any indication. These new thoughts were strange to him, viscerally compelling.
Slughorn’s rumbling laughter interrupted those thoughts. “Watch yourself, young man. You’ll float away if you aren’t careful.”

A quick look down confirmed that he was still firmly on the floor. Confused, he looked back at his teacher, who shook his head, muttering. “Never you mind, never you mind.” A clap of the hands refocused the conversation. “Right. Well, I was going to test these out for academic purposes. Lily, would you take the billywigs back and bring back Tristan and two streelers.”

“Oh, of course, Professor. I’d be happy to. Poor Tristan needs to get out more, a pity no one wants to approach him because of his reputation. His moaning and snappish behaviour helps not at all.” Lily’s tone was theatrically lighthearted.

Severus knew she wasn’t really talking about the Augurey. He felt that silence was probably the only possible answer to her needling. A week ago she’d not been talking to him at all, so this oblique criticism felt much more natural. Besides, she wasn’t talking to him really. He shouldn’t fool himself.

Professor Slughorn shook his head, “Willfully misunderstood creatures, they do best amongst their own kind. Let’s see what your potion does for the bird, Mr Snape?”

“Quite. I’ll clean up here, sir.” Augureys had liquid-resistant feathers that were useless for most purposes. Severus always thought they were underutilised, but the feathers were harder to use than hair or hide. That said they were cheaper and more renewable. These thoughts distracted him somewhat, his mind shying away from painful person who had been his very best friend for so many years. That wound hadn’t really healed, and today it started to ache anew.

Lily resealed both bell jars and flounced away with them, her red hair swinging behind her.

When she left the room, Professor Slughorn drummed his thick fingers on the table. “Remarkable stuff. I seem to have underestimated Miss MacMillan and her pies. I am quite curious to see how long it lasts, and what happens after it wears off.”

Snorting softly, Severus finished scourgifying and wiping down the third cauldron on his own station, heaving it up onto a shoulder to return to the rack at the back of the classroom. “I intend to stay out of her way. Safer.”

A frown made the tips of the Potions Professor’s moustache droop, as though weighed down by disappointment. “I know it is none of my business, Severus but I have seen many shifting alliances
over the years and I cannot help but regret this loss for you both. Lily Evans is a remarkable witch and the only one who could match you in my class, stride for stride. I’ve been gratified to see you both continue to grow, in spite of the break between you, however the level of competition between you two is too sharp for my liking. I realise she is as stubborn as they come, but won’t you make another try at reconciliation? You were so good as a team, you see. She has a good heart.”

Dropping the cauldron much harder than necessary into the rack, Severus spun to face his would-be advisor. “Don’t you think I’ve already tried? Apologised? Tried to do better? She outright refuses to talk to me, even look at me.” It was all he could do not to spit like his Da in disgust. He waved a hand at the tables, “What you heard just now is the most she’s talked to me in months, Professor. Do you really think she’ll be glad to know that I took advantage of her mood-altered state to manipulate her?”

Professor Slughorn grumbled, “I haven’t noticed that much of a difference, except with regards to you, young man. Don’t take that tone with me.”

Severus threw down the rag he’d used to wipe down his bench in frustration. He’d rolled up his sleeves earlier and he was starting to feel the chill of the dungeon air. He stopped, propping both hands down on the table, leaning there under the weight of the inner turmoil. “I am sorry to disappoint you, Professor. What we had is lost. Gone.” The admission twisted painfully and sapped his will to fight off the despair.

A heavy sigh preceded Professor Slughorn’s answer, “Perhaps. Such a lasting enmity would only be possible between two people who cared a great deal for one another. Not unlike another pair of famous wizards I know. One rots in a prison of his own making for his sins, the other has developed an unhealthy obsession with sweets but is, alas, equally alone. How different the world might have been if he’d just apologised one more time?” Shoving a hand into his vest pocket, the man drifted away, returning to his desk. “Good grief, Severus. We should try your potion ourselves and not upon that bloody bird.”

Unable to laugh, Severus turned to Deirdre’s station, thinking to have it tidied away before Lily returned. The Corryvreckan waters were easy enough to retrieve. Left alone, the water was as good as any purifying charm, and the whirlpool motion was ideal for siphoning. The tricky bit was getting it into the right kind of reinforced container that would not react to it. Indeed, the inside of the cauldron Dee used no longer had the aged patina that was customary in a cast iron cauldron. Severus groaned. He’d have to work that over now. Nothing else for it.

After setting it aside, his eye was caught by the notes Deirdre left behind. Drawn to the round loops of her writing, Severus found himself picking apart the equations there. Why the tea?

Slughorn’s chair creaked ominously as he settled into it. The man’s bulk was impressive, but Severus
had seen him move. The walrus could leap like a cat when a disaster was in the offing in class and was a dab hand with containment shields. He radiated the image of a kindly old wizard, but Severus told tell that he had a great deal of power hidden under that inoffensive mask.

Checking to see that the Professor was busy, Severus folded the discarded note and slid it into his pocket. When Lily returned, he was elbow-deep in washing out the chinois. The bile had started to corrode the delicate metal and Severus knew he was going to have to spell it back to a shine. Fortunately, there weren’t any holes in the mesh yet.

Lily was engaged in a whistling sort of conversation with Tristan, who was perched comfortably on her shoulder. He was a muted blue-green in colour, and may have resembled a phoenix if his feathers did not droop as though they were weighed down by heavy rain. For every cheerful trill from Lily, the bird returned a reflection of the same, but ending on a down note and in a decidedly minor key.

This was the Lily that Severus knew, that had once relentlessly jollied him on through his own troubles, pulling him out of the well of despair more times than he could count. For a fleeting moment, those times were close in his mind. The cold, vicious witch who had insulted him yesterday was gone for just a little while. Noticing that she was carrying a pair of heavy cases, Severus stepped over to her and bent, taking them from her.

A flash of irritation changed Lily’s expression, but in a moment it smoothed over into a gentle smile. Whatever hope Slughorn had planted died in the seed right there. He took a step back and looked over to find Slughorn frowning. “Right. Miss Evans, is Tristan suitably gloomy today?”

“Yes, Professor. You’d think he was Severus in bird form, poor thing is feeling rather sorry for itself I think.”

Bristling, Severus bit his tongue. He would not engage. He manhandled the two cages over to one of marble benches against the wall, located near the taps. When he turned back around he caught a faint, “Sorry Professor.”

Slughorn was glaring at Lily. Severus couldn’t believe his eyes. Slughorn glaring. At Lily. He waved Severus over. “Bring your potion, Mr Snape.”

Feeling off balance, Severus cast about the classroom before his eyes alighted on the three phials he had put together. After he retrieved one, he held it up to the light to assure it still looked right as he crossed the distance.

“Alright, Miss Evans. Go ahead and dose your friend there. Let’s see if it works.”
Lily reached out and delicately pulled the phial out of Severus’ grasp. Her face was troubled and she didn’t meet his gaze, keeping her eyes on the phial. Severus wanted to look away but forced himself to continue watching as she tested his potion. She had a way with animals and plants, and it was short work for her to coax the Augurey to open its beak for her. After it was done, she offered it a treat, a particularly fat looking sluggish fly that she kept for such purposes. In reality it was a chunk of fish that was transfigured, but that was Lily. Always shying away from hurting innocent creatures.

It wasn’t the first time he felt a surge of jealousy, and it was fortunate that the bird distracted him from thoughts further along that line. The thing blinked at her and trilled an exact copy of the last phrase Lily had whistled. It was a Disney confection, from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

A smile lit on Lily’s face and she whistled back at the Augurey, and before long they were whistling the disgustingly happy tune in unison.

Whistle while you work indeed. Severus struggled to smother further thoughts of the goons as dwarves. Dopey was Pettigrew… Grumpy could describe Lupin. Too bad there wasn’t an incredibly arrogant one and a vicious one. Insufferable and Entitled?

Slughorn slapped Severus on the back, jarring him back to the present from his diverting thoughts. “Jolly good, Mr Snape!”

Lily snickered. “Quick Jollies. That’s what you should call it, Snape.”

Severus frowned at the use of his last name. “Vulgar, Evans. Vulgar.”

Rubbing his hands together, Professor Slughorn turned to look at the aqua-blue coloured potion that still stood in the rack on Deirdre’s lab bench. “Let’s see what this does, shall we?”

Lily was trying to encourage Tristan to roost somewhere else, but the bird was chirping loudly every time she tried to dislodge him. The last time she tried, the bird nipped at her with his beak. So it fell to Severus to mark the streeler that was to be dosed, achieve the dosing and to open the cages.

Professor Slughorn had sent a house elf for some rotting cabbage to serve as a lure as he worked. The speed potion worked pretty well - Slughorn’s timer showed that the dosed streeler was about 7 times faster than the regular one. It was a pity that it took over ten minutes for the undosed one to make it from one side of the bench to the other, a distance of just over a meter.
Severus was left to wrangle the giant snails back into their cages as Lily looked on blandly. Of course, she made no move to help, and he was disinclined to complain as it would buy him nothing but another opportunity for jibes. Tristan showed no sign of his potion wearing off just yet, and Severus wondered just how long it would last.

Looking about him, Severus found everything tidied away. He looked to Slughorn who waved him off. “You can finish with the roots another time. You and Miss Ward shaved off quite enough for the week’s needs. Miss Evans, I think we’re done for the afternoon after you’ve returned the creatures back to the menagerie.”

“And thank you, sir.” Severus untied the strip of cloth he had used to keep his hair out of his face earlier and tucked it into his robes, sticking his hands in his pockets, and pointedly not looking at Lily, ambled off.

A dainty cough behind him tugged at his attention. He kept going as a smirk pulled up one corner of his mouth. As he reached the door, a louder spate of coughing made him turn to see Lily holding up a hand to fend off the augurey’s flaps of alarm at the explosive sound.

Severus made a “You’ll want to see Madam Pomfrey, Miss Evans. Hanging around these damp dungeons isn’t good for your constitution.” He hadn’t quite come to a stop, and he converted that quarter turn into a gracefully executed formal bow, calculated to mock the Princess.

Lily stood there, soundlessly opening her mouth like a fish.

“Good afternoon, Professor. Miss Evans.” Professor Slughorn’s eyes held a spark of amusement, and perhaps a measure of respect? He waved Severus off, and not waiting for a reply from Lily, Severus spun on his heel and stalked off to the dormitory, his thoughts straying to a certain curly-haired witch and when he might see her again.

He broke into a run, excitement driving him forward like a good strong wind at his back.

A mere twenty minutes later Severus strode through the common room, teeth set against interference. Avery and Wilkes stood upon seeing him and Avery hailed him. “You’re unusually presentable, Snape. Off to find that pretty girl then?”
Wilkes sniffed and then did a fair imitation of a tittering girl, lashes fluttering. It was nauseating on
the ugly mug, but some younger girls laughed at the monkeying.

Severus glared at Avery. “I’ve only moments to spare, state your intentions.”

“Easy, there. We’re on your side, you know.” Avery held up his hands and took a step back as a
sign of placation. “Just looking out for you. Brotherly and all.”

Ah. So they were his assigned keepers for the day. Well, if need be, he could ditch them in the
hallways or distract them. Groaning internally, Severus jerked his head. “Let’s go. We can chit-chat
on the way, if you insist.” He turned and stalked away, senses marking when the two fell into step
beside him.

Avery raised his eyebrows in askance. “Coy, aren’t you? So we’re going off to meet this Miss Ward
of yours, are we? Did she get sorted yet?”

“Ravenclaw.”

Wilkes sniggered. “Another squared off bookish type just like you. She got bad eyesight, then?”

Severus looked upward, as though hoping to find strength in the ceiling. “You wish, Wilkes. Blind is
on your list of kinks, not mine.”

“Well, you showered for her twice today already, more than you do all week to your bunk mate’s
displeasure.” Avery hit a nerve there and Severus growled. Avery sailed on, pretending not to notice.
“I think this is a vast improvement, honestly.”

Severus slowed down, eyes narrowing. All thoughts of rebuttal about his hygienic habits melted
away as the scene before him came to his notice.

Lily was there in the main hallway, still burdened with her cases and Tristan the augurey. Wilkes
already spotted her. “Blimey. Glad we came along, but I reckon if you’re planning on trouble, we’re
outnumbered.”
He was referring to the group of boys that were clustered about her. Potter was tugging at one of the cases as Black talked to her, a sly look on his face. Lupin and Pettigrew stood to the side, chatting with a plump blonde who Severus recognised as Deirdre’s friend from last night. Severus hated the lot of them. Pettigrew noticed their approach first, his eyes widening and looking about them in a panic. What he was looking for was unclear. An exit? A teacher?

Frowning, Severus made a decision. “Come on, then. Keep your tongues in your teeth, lads.”

All jeering and teasing was laid away, and the three Slytherins moved into the main hall, crossing to the staircase, and not pausing even as Potter shouted out, “Oi, Snape! Love what you’ve done with your hair!”

Sniggering grew behind them and Severus could see Wilkes grasping his wand. Severus maintained his cool, shaking his head at him. “No.”

Avery’s face was a mask, one that cracked when Sirius Black called after them in a loud, jeering sing-songy tone, “What... cat got your tongue?” They were a third of the way up the staircase when Avery turned around.

Severus turned too, irritated at the delay. But the sight was worth it as Lily stopped tugging at her case with her arm and walked into Potter, bowling the idiot over and successfully loosening his hold on the handle enough to break away. It did his heart good to see her turn her nose up in the air at Potter, and he watched as Lupin broke away to trot after her.

Black bent to help his friend up, and Severus sneered at them before turning to climb the remainder of the steps, leaving the whole scene behind. Avery and Wilkes, both in reasonably good shape, had to scramble to keep up as they made their way up to the Runes classroom. The door was closed, but he could hear voices inside, and he smiled as he heard Deirdre’s piping voice speaking rapidly and in earnest.

Avery watched Severus’ face with suppressed amusement visible about his eyes. Wilkes had taken up point guard and was standing five meters away where he could see the other end of the hallway and the staircase.

The Grey Lady was the only other soul in sight, and she drifted over in a rare show of interest. “Ah, young warrior. Would you tell our ward to proceed to Arithmancy as soon as she is done here? I think I saw a new species of spider and I wanted to go mark her progress.” She lowered her voice conspiratorially, “I rather think she was eating another spider. Smaller, gangly thing. Arachnids are fascinating.”
She said the last with the most frightening smile he’d ever seen on a woman. At a loss of what else to do, Severus bent at the waist in acknowledgement. “Of course, my lady.”

Drifting off with no further acknowledgement, Severus turned to find Avery staring at him in open curiosity. “Now what was that about?”

Severus answered with a half shrug. “She spent a lot of time in the infirmary this last go around. Some particular interest in Deirdre. That is, Miss Ward.”

“The elusive Miss Ward, newest witch in the crowd. If your reaction is anything to judge, she’ll be quite popular. What is it about her, Snape?”

Avery stepped back as Severus leaned in close, hissing. “She’s just lost her parents and her whole world. I happened to get to know her as she was recovering at the same time and she seems to trust me and I’ve promised to look out for her. She doesn’t need a lot of pressure or attention.”

“Lay off, Snape. I get it. You’re just looking out for her.” A sly look played across Avery’s face as he added, “So if she happened to take a fancy to me, you wouldn’t mind then?”

Severus smirked, “I doubt you have a chance, Avery. She’s little interest in Quidditch.”

Avery side-stepped away into a shadow, which confused Severus for a moment, but then he heard voices approaching the door. He’d been too distracted to even consider how it would look for Professor Svartrunir to see him waiting for Deirdre. Swallowing, and vaguely annoyed by the idea of Avery laughing at him, he stepped back a pace and tucked his hand into the inner pocket of his robe, pulling out a thin volume to be just visible as the brighter light of the classroom before him spilled out into the hall.

The tall, stately Runes Professor and head of Slytherin ushered the curly haired witch out into the hall way, his voice warm with amusement. “I agree, to think that the Nords adapted from Roman writing is unforgivably crass.”

Breathless, Deirdre brightly chirped, “Wimmer was ill-informed and short sighted. Why must we believe that written language was invented by one of the cultures of the Mediterranean cradle? Clearly there are stark differences and influences that strongly support...” She was cut off mid-supposition as the Professor stopped at the door. Following his gaze, she brightened visibly.
Taking his cue, Severus inclined his head respectfully. “Good afternoon, Professor Svartrunir, sir. Miss Ward. I thought to offer escort if that is agreeable?”

Professor Svartrunir’s dark grey eyes searched Severus’ face quickly before he took another step into the hall, making a show of checking the time. He had marked the presence of Avery and Wilkes, of this Severus was certain. “Certainly, Mr Snape. She has about ten minutes before she is expected with Professor Rolle. You know the way, I trust.” He enunciated each syllable with crisp precision.

Severus always admired the man’s speaking voice and found that it drew him in during lectures. If you could get past the chant like cadences that could lull many a third year into a waking trance, there waited a treasure trove of humour and fascinating anecdotes. If.

Looking nervous, Deirdre stepped out into the hallway, “Thank you, Professor Svartrunir. It was a real treat to talk with you. You need to be careful, if all of your tests are so enjoyable your class sizes will triple and then where will you be?”

The elderly man’s impressive brows flew up at the complement. “I imagine there is little danger of that, Miss Ward. But should it happen, I shall find opportunities to shove off the extra dull work to the person who let slip my secret and thereafter limit my class sizes.”

The student answered her Professor’s bristling with a bright smile, as though he’d returned her compliment in kind. “That would be a pity. I will guard my words against discovery.” Deirdre turned that radiant smile to Severus and tucked her hand into the offered crook of his arm.

“Take care that you do. I’ll send the book I mentioned to your dormitory once you are settled.” He harrumphed, adding, “Be off with you. I’m very busy.”

Knowing a dismissal when he heard it Severus moved off, Deirdre coming along with him, calling behind her, “Good evening! Thank you again!” The door to the Runes classroom thudded closed before she was able to get out the last thank you.

Deirdre left the Runes classroom feeling energised. She’d taken tea with the older man, and his testing was deceptively informal. Within the first ten minutes she’d shown her understanding of the
variations of the alphabets, translations, and he had jumped straight into application of runic structure for enchantments and warding.

“Of course there were things I’d never heard of. Professor Svartrunir really is a treasure. I can’t wait to learn from him. What’s the homework burden like?”

Severus, taller than she, looked down at her, a faint smile playing about his lips. “The basic work isn’t too bad, translations and problem solving. That isn’t the hard part. That’s the independent projects that we all choose at the beginning of term.” His arm was warm under her fingers, and it struck her that he was tense.

More alert, Deirdre cocked her head, hearing footsteps behind her. “Severus? Who else would be up here at this time? Are we being followed?” She kept walking but her eyes were searching out shadows. Was that someone going up the stairwell ahead? She felt the colour drain from her face.

Not even looking behind him, Severus answered her, his voice quiet and sharp-edged. “My housemates have taken a vested interest in my well being. Think of it as practical application of Defense. They’re studying.” He growled, “I’ve been taking care of myself this whole time. I don’t like it.”

Deirdre took out her wand, left hand still resting on Severus’ arm and cast a silent Hominem Revelio. The tell tale green glow before them showed a person in the stairwell. She hadn’t been imagining that. Looking behind her, she saw another person walking, disillusioned several paces behind. No one else was there. “The one up there…” She gestured to the stairwell ahead, “...needs the practice.”

“I know. This is your last test, then?”

Tucking her wand away, Deirdre nodded. “Yes, thank the Founders. I don’t think I did very well on my Defense practical. And I know I could have done better in charms. Professor Sprout may have been too easy on me, but that one was out of the way before I was even sorted.”

“Professor Rolle isn’t an unreasonably difficult taskmaster.” Severus paused, pulling a scrap of paper out of his pocket. “I brought this along, thinking that he might like to see your grasp of practical application of the discipline under pressure.” He passed it over to her. It seemed to her that he was very stiff, and was holding things at arm’s length.

His eyes were warm, though and she smiled in spite of her dismay. “You kept this? What happened
“with the testing?”

Severus’ mouth pulled into a thin line, and the blank expression worried her.

“Nimue’s tears. I botched it, didn’t I? I thought for certain that the potion was right. Maybe the bile concentration wasn’t enough. Or the hibiscus, did it contaminate? It shouldn’t have mattered at those temperatures.” She stopped as Severus paused before the stairwell door.

Expression bemused, Severus shook his head at her. “You were brilliant, Deirdre. It made the dosed streeeler move seven times faster than the undosed one.” He chuckled, “I had to sit and time the normal one, you know. Took bloody forever.”

They were facing each other, and she bounced on her toes, her hand going to her chest. “What did Professor Slughorn say? Come on, tell me!” She looked up and down the hallway before turning to be side to side with the wicked wizard. Severus had taken a position with his back to the wall, and she joined him. She leaned there, the stone soothing her with its cool solidity.

“Well, there wasn’t really any question, but Evans spoke in your favour and Professor Slughorn never says no to her. Friends now, are you?” He winced visibly after letting the last slip.

Taking her lower lip between her teeth, she looked up at him. “I think it was Morag’s pie. It should have worn off by now, but she was so strangely helpful and pleasant. Nothing like the witch I met yesterday.”

Severus looked at his watch but answered her before pulling the stairwell door open. “It was almost like old times. That’s the Lily Evans I used to know, before I ruined everything.”

Troubled, Deirdre pushed away from the wall as she answered. “But… surely there must be some way to...”

Holding up a hand, Severus cut her off. “This is not a subject that I care to discuss right now. You have a Professor waiting for you, and there isn’t time. I promised the Grey Lady to convey you.”

“Oh, was she here? That’s nice. Of course, you are right. It was rather marvelous of them to take part of their Sundays just for me, don’t you think? I will have to think up a way to thank them all.” She passed through the door to the stairwell and climbed, her voice echoing its length.
A thin, pimply reed of a wizard stood on the stairwell, head cocked, listening. He nodded shortly to her and then climbed the steps ahead, acting as forward guard. She looked down, the curving steps that way empty. All of these precautions did nothing to calm her nerves. Severus was silent, a solid presence behind her as she climbed the stair. When she reached the landing she paused again, and whispered. “Will it always be like this?”

“You can trust their discretion, Deirdre. It is a condition of the exercise.” His face was tense, worried.

She reached out and reclaimed his arm, leaning into him with a faint sigh. “This is difficult. I don’t like it.”

“I’m sorry, Deirdre. I…” Severus swallowed, looking down at her. “You shouldn’t have to put up with this.”

She squeezed his arm, finding the muscles there tense under her hand. “Peace. I will have to adjust.” She looked downwards, an idea occurring to her. Avery was there, standing guard, the disillusionment dismissed after she called them out with the *Revelio*. “I am not easily put off. Now. A kiss for luck?” He was now on the landing with her, but she was watching Avery. The wizard looked horrified and spun, taking a step down and around the corner.

Severus followed her gaze, looking behind him and noted his fellow’s retreat. He looked uneasy. “Deirdre, I don’t want to make you late.”

“Better kiss me quickly then, hadn’t you?” She watched his Adam’s apple bob up and down once. He didn’t move towards her. Nor did he move away. Feeling bold, she stepped forwards and grabbed his robe. “Get down here.”

She had to go up on tiptoe, but she got her kiss - lighter than a billywig’s wing. A gentle hand brushed her hair away, and she opened her eyes as she pulled away. He was so solemn, so serious. She wanted him to smile, to be happy. Was that too much to ask? Opening her fingers, she smoothed his robes back down, not sorry for the excuse to touch him. “Well?”

“This is another conversation that I wish we had more time for.” He let his hand fall away from her and turned slightly and offered her his arm once more.

She looked up at him, trying to understand what might be going on in that head of his. “You are a
complicated wizard, Severus Snape.”

“Is that meant to be a compliment?” He sounded uncertain, but she rather liked how he put an emphasis on his T’s. It was lovely, his voice warmed her in spite of his words’ stiff formality.

They fell into step, reaching the top of the stair, Severus pushing the door open for her. “Take it as you will.” She smiled up at him. “When shall I see you again? Auntie Pomona was to collect me after this, and was going to help me move into my dormitories.”

“At dinner you’ll be sitting with Ravenclaw and you’ll be tired, I think. Do you have a schedule yet?”

Deirdre shook her head. “After sleeping for over a week you would think I’d be better rested. I do think it is catching up with me.”

Down the hallways, Professor Rolle stood, leaning in the doorway to his classroom. “Are you ready, Miss Ward?”

Severus said, “Tomorrow then.” He looked suitably disappointed. “In class, I suspect.”

Awarding him with a bright smile, Deirdre let go of his arm, taking a fortifying breath. Her mind was already surging forwards to the test awaiting her. “I’ll look for you there.” She blushed faintly, as she noticed the Professor looking between her and Severus. “Quite ready, sir.”

Blue eyes dancing with amusement, the Arithmancy Professor rubbed his hands together. “Capitol. Come in, let us begin.”
Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

I hope that you enjoy this Chapter. No Severus/Deirdre in this one, terribly sorry. It is rather Dee-centric with a bit of Dumbledore/Whittington Nott on the top.

Thanks to Coromandel who is furiously making her way through revising for her German grammar, poor thing. I am very grateful she had the time to work on this with me today.

Thanks also go out to readers like you! Kudos and comments are very much appreciated.
As always, Harry Potter and his Universe are the property of JK Rowling who is Queen of Everything. Not me.

The Headmaster sat in his place at the high table, his faculty arrayed about him except for one chair left empty between himself and Professor Sprout. An everyday feast was laid out for them, a taste of home to nurture the growing minds and bodies of the students. A lull in the chatter drew everyone’s eyes to the Ravenclaw table, where Miss Deirdre Ward was being introduced at last by Professor Flitwick. Dumbledore smiled and felt a sense of gratified pride as he saw several Ravenclaws approach the orphaned witch; for already she was being made welcome.

The quality of the excellent food went unnoticed, as his mind turned back to darker thoughts. He spent the better part of the hour before dinner gnawing on the contents of disturbing request for expertise received from the Ministry, detailing the grisly details of a vile attack on the Meadows family. Dorcas Meadows, a formidable Muggleborn witch who was several years into a decorated career in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement escaped her family’s fate, having been away on Ministry business.

Something about the story was not quite right. Meadow’s mother was missing, and there wasn’t a note left behind. The remains of two others were identified, although there had been some doubt of how many were dead, each body pulled to pieces. The motive was the easy part and he had no illusions as to who was behind it.

Kept from the papers, the details of the attack were what made Dumbledore uneasy. The experts were certain that this was not the result of a known curse. One of the aurors conjectured that it was a werewolf who was responsible, or a pack of them but that was impossible, as the full moon was a week ago. There was not enough structural destruction for it to have been a troll or giant, but everyone could agree that whatever did this had to have possessed an incredible amount of strength. There were no puncture marks to suggest vampires and Skipper, the investigator of the scene, noted
that the massacre most likely occurred in broad daylight, given there was the wreckage of a perfectly good rash of bacon left to burn on the stove. The smoke from that neglected pan was what had attracted a neighbor’s attention in the first place. There were no traces of a magical signature, no evidence of a wizard’s involvement.

The contrast of that horror with the ignorance and safety within these walls turned Albus’ appetite. How to fight an enemy that he could not track? Movement nearby arrested the downward spiral of his own dark thoughts, a welcome interruption.

Dumbledore looked up and nodded welcome to Professor Nott. “Whittington.” He’d reserved the seat to his left for the Defense teacher on Pomona’s insistence that they needed to discuss her niece’s performance. “Tell me, how did Miss Ward do today?”

Whit helped himself to chicken and veg that was nearest, and after a moment he answered, “Well. She clearly has some training in Defense. Unfortunately she also is still rather unwell and I was forced to end the practical early.”

Dumbledore studied the man’s face, reading reluctance therein. “She must be included in the Defense course, Whittington. I realise that this is asking a lot, but…” He trailed off, the request dying on his lips as he marked Whit’s uncharacteristically intense response.

Worry lines formed on Whit’s brow, and his voice was firm, “I can’t have her in classes with the rest. At least, not as she is. She isn’t ready for it.” He punctuated this with a bite of chicken, but the way he avoided Dumbledore’s eyes suggested uncertainty.

Leaning forward, Dumbledore lowered his voice so it would not carry down to Professor Sprout’s curious ears. “Surely she can just push through it? Her little bag was stacked with many volumes on the subject so I’ve no doubt she has the needed enthusiasm.”

Whit’s curly head bent close to Dumbledore’s ear and in a more hushed tone, he answered, “It isn’t her motivation that is wanting, Albus. She has survived horrors bad enough to make her forget her own name, and we saw the extent of the magical and physical injury she bore. We don’t know what happened to her, but we have a good enough idea. Ten hells, Albus! I feel wretched over this.”

“What happened?”

Hanging his head briefly with eyes closed, the Defense teacher composed his whispered response. “I
should have realised that something was not right when she started to attack rather than defending as instructed.”

“Did you not correct her?”

Shaking his head ruefully, Nott admitted, “I wanted to see what she would do, and she was very skilled and only used the classic hexes, but then she summoned a wicked flock of canaries that I had to dispel. I was able to disarm her and I think it a good thing that I did.”

“Why?”

“She fell to pieces, Albus. Blind panic, lost herself in it. If Pomona hadn’t been there, I’d probably have needed to stun her.”

Taken aback, Dumbledore leaned away, turning his gaze to the Ravenclaw table. “Is there anything that can be done? I still believe she needs to be in your classes.”

Nott shook his head no, following Dumbledore’s gaze with a pensive expression. At length, he said, “Miss Ward wants to take Defense as badly as you wish her to. She was quite upset at the idea of having failed her entrance exam. It wasn’t a failure per se, but my decision stands.”

“She won’t get better without dealing with these problems, and I think you are perhaps best equipped to assist her of everyone here. Could she be contained somehow? Eased in? Frankly, I have hopes for her memories to start returning with exposure to your coursework, but we wouldn’t want to push that.”

Whit frowned, looking back to Dumbledore with eyebrows raised slightly in disbelief. “I suppose that I was the trained Professional in the situation, but stars, Albus! She isn’t an ordinary student, she has spellshock. There is no way that it would be safe for her or the other students.”

Dumbledore sighed, shaking his head. “A lot more of our students are going to suffer if we can’t prepare them, Whittington. You will be seeing more of this, no doubt sooner than we would expect.”

Whit waved his hand, “You don’t understand. What we have here is essentially the same trauma seen by the undercover fighters who survived the Grindelwald conflict without any of the context to better help her understand.” He shook his head. “Are you certain that we need to put her through
this? Can’t we just watch over her? I thought Poppy was going to eat my liver for even daring to test her, worried that she will relapse no doubt.”

Frowning, the Headmaster shook his head. “No, Whit. She has the aptitude and she needs to be able to defend herself, we can’t watch over her all of the time, even with Mr Snape’s assistance. No, training her is the path of wisdom.”

“I will have to tutor her myself. Pomona’s already suggested it. If Miss Ward has not shown improvement by the end of December, I don’t think that she will be able to join the regular class.” He straightened and turned away, looking across the sea of students, indicating that for him, this part of the debate was over.

Nodding slowly with provisional approval, Dumbledore said, “Thank you, Professor Nott. I may be able to spare some time for her, and perhaps Filius could help as well?” He turned his head to search out Flitwick, seated down the table, next to Professor Sprout.

Warming at the offer of help, Nott flashed a rueful smile. “That would be much appreciated. I’ve taken on elective training with Mr Snape at Professor Svartrunir’s request, so I find that my hands will be unexpectedly full.”

“Ah. Well, perhaps you might combine some of the sessions?” Dumbledore looked on with amusement as a silvery-grey owl swooped in, coming to land neatly on the chair behind Whit.

Considering the suggestion, Whit said, “No, not at first. They will each need individual attention and while I know they are friendly, I don’t think it would be a good idea just yet.” He pulled a piece of meat free from his roast chicken and turned, handing it to the owl. With a polite hoot, the bird extended a leg for Whit to retrieve the message. Once unburdened, it launched into the air as Whit examined the envelope with dismay. “Ocê, I don’t believe this. Uncle Nott doesn’t write. Maybe someone died.”

Folding his hands in his lap, Dumbledore waited as Whit dropped the missive as though it might be poisoned or trapped onto his empty plate. After a long two minutes of muttering and wandwork, one of which caused the envelope to start to exude a foul yellow smoke briefly, Nott finally used a severing charm to slice open the paper, leaving the wax seal intact.

Dumbledore turned to help himself to a bit of pastry-wrapped meat, commenting, “I don’t think I can spare you, Professor Nott. Terribly sorry to be such a tyrant.” He grimaced in delight before taking a bite.

“Of course you aren’t.” The handsome wizard, tapped the paper to his lips, eyes unfocused and staring as he spoke.

“Not a tyrant? I must not be trying hard enough to inconvenience you. I will have to do better. Kettleburn’s always looking for help mucking out the mooncalf fields? That might serve to fill in the gaps. Can’t allow you free time to go gallivanting all over Hogsmeade with that lute of yours.”

Whit turned his lively green eyes back to meet Dumbledore’s amused glance. “No, Albus. I meant that you weren’t sorry.” He flashed an unrepentant smile of his own before turning to apply himself to his food.

Dumbledore found himself laughing at the ridiculous joke, a forced laugh that conceded the point. Inwardly, his mind turned to a graveyard miles away. Sorry was such an inadequate word.

Deirdre was grateful for Professor Flitwick’s kind attention as he had collected her after she finished her last leg of testing that evening. He had a schedule already populated out with her classes for the week, which he pressed into her hand only moments before he steered her into the Great Hall.

Using his wand, Flitwick animated a scarf that he borrowed off of a younger student, causing it to wrap about his legs and lift him up several feet in the air so that he could better get the attention of the students. It was early so there were gaps on the benches still. “Ravenclaws, we have a new addition to our numbers, Miss Deirdre Ward, a transfer student who was sorted just this morning. Please help her in every way you can, she is very far from home.” Deirdre felt shy under the weight of so many interested gazes. She blushed as a number of students who were quick started thumping the table, cheering her addition to their numbers.

“Welcome, my dear. Now, I’ll see you tomorrow.” Flitwick sank back down to the ground and collected the scarf, handing it over to skinny lad with a perfunctory, “Thank you, Bartemius.”

Bartemius accepted it and turned to Deirdre. “You’re the one who got Lily Evans in the face with the pie. I’ve heard of you. That was brilliant! I’m just sorry I didn’t see it.”
Bristling, Deirdre arched an eyebrow at the plucky boy, “And you are?” Besides all ears and elbows, that she could see for herself. Didn’t they feed the children here? Severus was so thin too.

“I’m Barty. Barty Crouch. Fourth year.” He stuck out a hand which Deirdre took. It was clammy and damp.

The awkward hero worship in the kid’s expression rankled her for some reason, so her response was terse, “Pleasure.”

A change in the boy’s expression from awe to dismay tugged her attention away. A shadow fell over her shoulder and she turned to see two girls pause beside her, clearly sizing her up. They smiled pleasantly and Deirdre could feel herself being measured, judged by these two. “Thank you, Barmy. We’ll take over from here.”

“Um, oh. Right, thank you Miss Fawley. Miss Zhi.” He nodded to Deirdre with an expression of apology before scooting off. She found herself flanked on one side by the stately golden-haired Fawley and the other by Zhi who was staring at Dee’s hair.

“I’m Phoebe Fawley, and this is Miriam Zhi. We’re sixth years too, you see.” Not waiting for Dee to formulate some response, she went on, “You’re overcome I am sure, at being placed among the best and brightest like us. I am told that I am awe-inspiring.” She smiled with self-satisfaction.

Deirdre took a stab at responding in a friendly way, “Well I am new here, it is all overwhelming. Do you have any of these classes?” She pulled out her schedule and found Miriam plucking it out of her fingers before she could finish.

The witch’s almond shaped eyes crinkled in merriment. “Cor, you took Arithmancy? That she-man is a joke. Nice enough, but no one could take Rolle seriously no matter how much homework she gives out.”

Frowning, Deirdre opened her mouth, but was stopped by Phoebe’s response, “But no Care of Magical Creatures? Dear Deirdre, do reconsider. Why, you might be able to get some workable beauty tips. All of that hair, are you certain there isn’t a kneazle in there?”

Deirdre could only blink as Zhi pressed the parchment back into her hands, “Oh, Phoe. She’s got Potions, maybe she can cook something up in there.” She giggled lightly, the sentiment not reaching
her eyes. “I don’t do classes like that, myself. I don’t like getting dirty.”

“So lazy, Miri! Well, I’m starving so we’ll see you later. Welcome to Hogwarts, Deirdre Ward.” The two girls linked arms and walked off to find a seat farther down the table, bursting into fits of giggles, not bothering to get out of earshot.

Dee had thought today one of the most wonderful of the few that she could remember, but in one short encounter all of that inflated joy popped like a balloon licked by Zhi’s sharp tongue. Humiliation was shoved aside by the building ire inside of her. How dare they?

A witch down the table had watched the entire exchange and rose, wiping her mouth on a napkin. She rolled her eyes at the pair as they passed her, and she clomped over to Dee. “Why don’t you come sit with me, Ward.” A hand on her shoulder helped to yank her mind away from the firestorm inside that threatened to make her do something she would regret.

“I’m sorry, but who are you?” Belatedly she noticed the prefect pin on the girl’s starched white collar. She wore grey trousers, a wool vest, and the house tie that hung loose below her unbuttoned neck. She had her mousy brown hair cut in a short bob, bringing out some waves that caused it to stick out oddly. Her nose was large on her face, which wasn’t exactly pretty. No, she had too strong brows and a small mouth. She was attractive in her way, even regal, but not pretty.

“Right, I’m Ogden. Ruth Ogden, I’m also a sixth year. Hungry, Ward?”

Dee found herself nodding, words dead in her mouth.

The prefect gripped her arm and towed her back down the tables. “Wouldn’t do to let the food get cold, would it?” She barked at a serious looking dark complected wizard, “Move over, Shafiq. You take up enough space for three.”

Deirdre was, without ceremony, deposited on the bench in what must have been the prefect’s space. She looked around at all of the faces and found that only a few turned her way in interest. The displaced wizard barely seemed to notice her as he had a book open in front of him and he was indifferently shoveling food into his mouth as his mind feasted on better fare. She squinted, getting a better view in the low light of the hall, but she was interrupted by Ogden elbowing in next to her on the bench.

“That’s Vasim Shafiq. Don’t mind him. He’s obsessed.” She added, “Be nice to Ward, she’s new.”
A narrowing of his eyes and a grunt was all the indication that he gave to acknowledge the jibe. A girl across from them giggled and interjected, “What is it this time, Sha-freaky? More love potion case studies? I wouldn’t mind hearing more about those.”

“She’s right, Sherwood,” he made a shooing motion with his hand, and it sent a puff of wind the witch’s way.

The witch, Sherwood, giggled again. Deirdre watched her and was surprised when she said, “Hi, I’m Agatha Sherwood.” She stood and stuck out a hand towards Deirdre across the table. “Welcome. It must be pretty overwhelming to come right in the middle of term.”

Deirdre took the proffered hand, and out of the corner of her eye she could see Ogden digging back into her own food. “Well, um. It is. I mean, I just recovered enough to join classes.” She sat back down onto the bench with a thud. Whatever fire had been there minutes ago was smothered by the overriding exhaustion that set in now. The fatigue held open the door for melancholy which brought with it a sense of loss, both of purpose and direction. What was she doing here?

A plate appeared in front of her and she looked about her, after a moment pulling a tray of sandwiches toward her to select one. Agatha waved her wand, lifting the tray closer. “Be careful there. Shafiq doesn’t like it when people touch the food.”

It was fortunate that Dee had managed to choose a sandwich already because she dropped it on her own plate in startlement when the wizard next to her slammed his book closed. “It is a matter of respect, Aggie. You know this, if I have said it once I have said it a thousand times,” he took a deep breath and didn’t look surprised as the students nearby all chanted, “This food is a sacred gift. Do not get your dirty fingers between me and life’s blessings.”

Not knowing what to say, Deirdre picked up her sandwich and bit into it. It was dry and she looked immediately for her goblet, forcing down her first bite before tapping the goblet for a modified silent Aguamenti. The water was extremely cold, perfect for making her level of alertness rise.

Agatha was smiling cheekily at Shafiq who was doing his best to ignore her. A faint flush on his cheeks declared that he was failing. This was enough to satisfy her, as she allowed her attention to drift back to Deirdre. “You look tired.”

Finding herself warming up to the girl, Deirdre responded. “Well, it has been a rather long day. Feels
like I had breakfast with Auntie Pomona in another lifetime.”

“Auntie Pomona? Is that Professor Sprout?”

Deirdre nodded, not wanting to speak around the bite of sandwich she had just taken.

“I like her as a teacher. She is very patient with me. I ask a lot of questions, you see. Then what happened next?”

“I was sorted at the faculty meeting earlier, and then I had to take placement tests.”

“No wonder you look fagged. How many did you test for? Did you get your results already?”

Preparing to answer, Deirdre pulled out her schedule, hesitating a moment as she hadn’t had that much of a chance to look at it yet. A glaring hole existed where Defense Against the Dark Arts should have been, although she’d no idea of which study halls it should have occupied. She stared, at the paper, hoping beyond hope that it was there, hidden. A hand pulled the paper out of her numb fingers and laid it down on the table where several leaned in to read it.

Ogden was the first to speak. “Arithmancy and Ancient Runes together with Potions, Transfiguration AND Charms? You are in the right house.” She ribbed Dee with a grin. “I’m in three of those with you. You’re alright. No History of Magic, though?”

Deirdre shrugged. “Not sure exactly why, but I feel like I learned that subject better in my free time.”

“Ooh. Too bad. That’s the best class for catching up with all of the gossip.” Agatha pushed the parchment back towards Deirdre who plucked it away from some dribbles of gravy. She leaned in and added, ”My favorite would be Defense Against the Dark Arts. If I had known Professor Nott was going to teach it this year I wouldn't have dropped it.”

It was Vasim’s turn to tease. “You are terrible, Aggie. He’s at least fifty years old.”

“He’s far from elderly, unlike yourself Vasim. You already act like an old gaffer.” She lowered her
voice to a stage-whisper as she leaned over the table to Dee. “I think his parents slipped him an aging potion when he was a toddler.”

“Some of us could use more maturity, Sherwood.” With that, he flipped his book back open and turned pointedly away.

The girl turned her dark eyes to regard the teacher’s table with an impish grin, one which faded immediately. “Oh Merlin, he must have heard me. Professor Nott is coming this way!” She fussed with her robes, smoothing them out and plucking away a few stray hairs. She giggled, “Oh, I wonder what I’d have to do to get detention.” Biting her lip she turned away.

Ogden growled, “Merlin’s bones, you are an embarrassment, Sherwood.”

Deirdre covered her mouth in amusement and was somewhat surprised to find herself enjoying the company already. A sense of belonging began to wiggle its way in, loosening the grip of the sense of loss that she’d lived with since past the time she could remember.

Shafiq leaned over and started to chide her, “You need to eat. Your mind won’t expand if your stomach is empty too often, and you could use it.”

A thrill of irritation rose in her gullet and she took a hard look at the wizard. Was he implying that she was too thin? Who does he think he is? “Look Dad…”

The wizard cut off her response, “Just eat.” He shook his head before returning his attention to the book in front of him, but he did explain. “Lines on your fingernails. Don’t get all shirty about it. You’ve not been getting regular meals.” As if he knew that she was still staring at him he waved a vague hand. “It is mere fact, Ward. Now leave me be. I’m reading.”

Deirdre bit into the sandwich she picked out and chewed with angry emphasis. Perhaps a childish part of her hoped that the sound would irritate Shafiq. Would serve him right! She wasn’t the one that started it. Still it wouldn’t be wise to pick fights on her first day, or even the first fifteen minutes of arriving.

Professor Nott was standing right behind her and startled her out of her meditations as he spoke, forcing her to turn in her seat to look up at him. “Come find me in fifteen minutes. We need to talk.”
Whit watched Deirdre Ward hurry away. She took the news that he would not allow her in his NEWT classes shockingly well. As he explained the Headmaster’s insistence that she receive tutoring, her reaction was a curious mixture of disappointment and enthusiasm. The witch actually shook his hand, blinking tears away with a wide smile and thanking him before excusing herself.

Raking his hand through his hair, he almost missed a shimmer of movement out of the corner of his eye. Severus Snape materialised out of nearby shadows, and was the first to speak.

“Good evening, Professor.” The thin lad was watching the retreating girl as he asked, “What happened, if I may ask?”

Frowning, Professor Nott weighed his words, meting them out like a chemist treats grains of cyanide. “I had to deliver bad news followed by more bad news, and the latter was in fact received as good news. Extraordinary.”

“Deirdre didn’t place into Defense, did she?”

Sighing, Professor Nott answered, “I should not be discussing a student’s test results with another student, should I?”

“Of course. Apologies, Professor.” After a moment’s hesitation, the serious young wizard added, “Although if I am to be your assistant, it seems likely that I will be privy to more inside information than others.” He looked directly back at him, dark eyes fixing him in place. “You have seen evidence
that I am capable of keeping my own counsel.”

Whit nodded, for indeed that was true. If he had not, he likely would have been censured for his own talents. Severus was unofficially more than mere classmate to Deirdre Ward and he already knew much more about her than most. “Well, you might be right. However, you have not even shown up for your first day of training yet.”

Snape’s lips twisted in wry appreciation, “You’ve yet to set a schedule, Professor.”

“Tomorrow morning, 5 AM sharp. Meet me here. Wear clothes that you don’t mind getting dirty and won’t impede your movement. Leave your uniform behind, we might be getting messy.”

The student’s eyes widened a fraction as he nodded. “Of course.” He looked the way Deirdre went. “Is there anything I can do to help? I did promise the Headmaster that I would look after Miss Ward.”

Professor Nott smirked. No, he wouldn’t order him after the girl. He’ll have to do that himself. It was clear there was an attachment forming, at least on the lad’s part. The smile faded as he considered just how much all three of them were already entangled, knowing so little of the mysterious witch. “Not directly at the moment. For now Mr Snape, you need to go back and finish eating a hearty dinner. You will need the energy.”

Snape opened his mouth to protest, but after a moment he shut it again.

Nott gently steered the student back towards the Great Hall, ushering him inside.

Deirdre sat on a bench on the fourth floor overlooking the library, embarrassed by her own emotional response. Professor Nott had been extraordinarily kind to her, and she felt guilty for the burdens she had inadvertently become for her own frailty. It bothered her that the Headmaster himself wanted her tutored in the subject. Why would he intervene like this? Or was it Professor Nott’s idea? How could she make it up to the man, who was already plenty busy?

A low, muttering voice drew her attention. Walking toward her was a drab looking man, shouldering a wet mop over one shoulder, an empty pail balanced on its handle. In his hand was a burlap bag, tied tight. The bag was meowing and moving about, something inside trying desperately to get out.
“Drop this one in the lake, I would, but it’d give the Squid a sour belly. Nasty students never cleaning up their leavings, fiddling with magic outside of class, the brats. No, let old Filch do it, no matter it’s their magic that done it. Do it out of spite, to rub my nose innit, right enough. As if my life isn’t difficult already.”

Deirdre stood, her worries forgotten as the bag mewed piteously. “Excuse me sir. Might I be of service?”

Filch shuffled to a stop, the bucket swinging precariously as he turned to squint in her direction. “What’s this? A student in the hallway? Haven’t you got some place to be?” He shuffled closer. “I don’t recognise you. Where’d you come from, then?”

“My name is Deirdre Ward, sir. I’m a transfer student.” Her eyes kept drifting back to the bag as the movement therein seemed to have slowed down, as though whatever inside was listening too.

Thinning brows shot up and the man stepped closer. “Here now. I recognise you. You’re the poor girl I found knocked out in the Willow yard. That was weeks ago. I heard you weren’t waking up. What were you doing there? It was the crack of dawn, I wasn’t expecting anyone.”

Rubbing a toe into the stone floor, she summoned a smile. “Thank you for finding me, sir. I don’t know what would have happened if you had not been there. Might I know your name?”

“Argus Filch, caretaker here.” The bag squirmed and he eyed it. Gruffly, he said, “You are welcome, I suppose. Don’t make a habit of it. That Willow was the daftest thing the Headmaster has suggested to date. What are things coming to, enough dangers in these times without planting violent trees.” He squinted back at her, “You didn’t say how you got there, Miss.”

Blushing, she summoned the details of her story. This was the first of many times she would have to tell it. “My parents died in Africa. The Ministry sent me here by Portkey. I guess Auntie Pomona hadn’t expected me so soon either, sir. I am very sorry for the fuss.” Her eyes went back to the bag. “You know, I could help with that. What is it? A teacup kitten?”

The old man looked at her for a long moment, taking in her story. “I’m sorry to hear of your loss, young Miss. Professor Sprout is your Aunt, you said?”

Biting her lip she nodded. “Yes, sir.”
Looking between her and the bag, he said, “Well, I don’t rightly know what this is. I was taking it to Professor McGonagall seeing as it was trying to get into her mouse colony.”

“I would be happy to take it to her for you, if that would be agreeable.” She watched as the bag was set swinging in his hand.

He peered at her suspiciously. “You will take it directly to Professor McGonagall, and not allow it out of the bag until she tells you? I will know if you break your word.”

“I solemnly swear that I will take that straight to Professor McGonagall.” She reached a hand out, itching to take it from him.

Pulling back a fraction, he said, “Do you know where that is, Miss Ward? I’d hate for you to get lost.” He looked at her, one corner of his mouth pulling up in a ghastly parody of a smirk.

“Yes, first floor. West Tower. Do you think she’s there?” She waited, not daring to snatch the bag, which started to yowl in protest of its capture.

The smirk widened to a grimace. “Like clockwork, Professor McGonagall. She’s there at this hour. I’d knock if I were you. She might have a detention going after that fiasco Saturday. Worthless bunch of disrespectful brats. Unpleasant business, education.” He reached forwards, offering her the squirming bag.

Deirdre had no notion of how to respond, so she summoned a weak smile as she took the bag, grasping the top. “Thank you, Mr Filch.” She nodded to him respectfully. “Have a good evening.”

As she retreated down the hallway, she placed a hand underneath the bottom of the back and started to whisper to its unknown occupant. “There now, Professor McGonagall will sort this all out, just you wait.”

Deirdre did not find it strange that the small body slowed down in its frantic rotations under the support of her hand. “Mew?”

Encouraged, she maintained a low monologue with the bag, which formed a lovely counterpoint to
Filch’s foul muttering. His voice was out of range soon, in spite of the empty hall echoing unnaturally.

By the time she arrived at Professor McGonagall’s office, Deirdre was crooning to the bag in an effort to calm what she already had started to think of as her little friend. The bag was remarkably light considering the force with which its captive threw into attempts to escape. “Shhh. It’s alright. Shhh, little one.”

Frowning, Deirdre went down on one knee, carefully balancing the bag on her leg so that she could free up a hand so she could knock.

Carefully shifting the bag back into her hand, it came to pass that she was still down on that knee when the door opened, and there James Potter stood, looking down at her, flummoxed. He leaned forward to look up and down the hallway and when he returned his attention to Deirdre, he looked disappointed. “I know that I am quite the wizard, but there’s no need to kneel.”

Already back on her feet, Deirdre rolled her eyes. “I was looking for Professor McGonagall.”

Sneering, he stood looking down at her. “Already trying to fit in with Ravenclaw? No wonder you were down there. Practicing your bootlicking? Or was it to be arse…”

“Mr Potter! That’s another night detention and five points from Gryffindor. Hold your tongue!”

Her captive started to squirm wildly within its burlap confines, so she shushed softly, trying to calm it down. It responded with a yowl of defiance. Deirdre narrowed her eyes at James, and he sensibly stepped back out of her way before she decided to take more drastic measures.

Looking about the room, Deirdre noticed several things. First, Sirius Black was there too. Second, there were two wands laid out on the Professor’s desk. Third, a table was filled with boxes of broken pieces, both glass and porcelain, and she thought there might be bits of colourful plastic mixed in.

Sirius exchanged a glance with James who shook his head the slightest fraction. No sign of rescue.
Professor McGonagall spoke in clipped tones, letting there be no doubt of the extent of her ire with these two wizards in particular. “Get back to work.” She turned to Deirdre and eyed the bag in her hands. “What brings you here, Miss Ward?”

Approaching the desk, Deirdre turned so that her back was towards the wall, not the boys. “I am here on an errand for Mr Filch, Professor. He caught this in one of the fourth floor classrooms. He was muttering about throwing it in the lake, and I thought that perhaps he could do with some assistance.”

The Professor was looking over her glasses at the wizards, her lips tight with sour disapproval. She didn’t seem ready to respond, so Deirdre went on.

“He asked me to come straight here and present it to you.” She stood, trying to prevent the wriggling bag from escaping her hands here at the finish line.

McGonagall continued to stare at Potter and Black, and Deirdre noticed how both of them were now quietly applying themselves to the tedious task of sorting through the wreckage with tweezers. At length, the silence that fell between them was broken by a plaintive, “Meooow.”

Brow furrowed, the Professor patted the desk. “Set it down here, Miss Ward. Why would Argus put a cat in the bag? Surely he knew it would get out eventually.”

Deirdre carefully transferred the wriggling bag to the desktop, whispering to it, “There now, you are alright. It will be okay.”

The bag started to roll about on the desk immediately, letting out a long, frightened meooow. It knocked against the wands and Deirdre’s hand shot forwards, quickly snatching them as they rolled off the edge of the desk with a squeak of her own.

Professor McGonagall stretched her fingers in front of her, cracking her knuckles before she took out her wand. “Petrificus Totalus!”

The bag stopped immediately.

Satisfied, the Professor murmured another spell that Deirdre did not recognise. It took several minutes, and so Deirdre caught Sirius Black looking at her with a strange smile.
Deirdre glowered, wishing he’d just get back to his work. She didn’t like him staring at her like that. It was rather rude.

Black tilted his head, arched an eyebrow, and after checking to make sure that McGonagall wasn’t looking, he mouthed, “Like my wand, Ward?” She’d forgotten that she had the boy’s wands in her hands, much more interested in McGonagall.

Huffing, Deirdre turned and placed the confiscated wands back on the Professor’s desk with enough force that one of them emitted blue sparks. Her cheeks burned.

“Transfiguration and Charmwork both, no traps this time.” The stately witch looked over at Deirdre, remembering she was present. “Ah, you are still here. Go ahead and pull open the bag, Miss Ward.”

Trying not to take offense at the Professor’s tone, Deirdre did as she was asked, her fingers shaking only a little. The mouth of the bag opened wide and the fuzzy orange fur belonging to the plush kitten came into view. “Oh, it was you that whole time!”

“Kindly explain.” McGonagall was looking at the offending toy with a curious look. Her nose was twitching.

Deirdre swallowed, “Well, it was one of the subjects of my Charms placement. But Professor, this doesn’t make sense, the animation spell should have worn off hours ago.” She was internally berating herself for not dismissing the magic, but the little thing had disappeared before she left, and she thought it was already back to its usual state.

Tapping a finger on her wand, McGonagall asked, “And was it a live kitten?”

Confused, Deirdre shook her head. “Of course not. It is just a toy, one of many in Professor Flitwick’s demonstration box.”

McGonagall’s face clouded with irritation. “Grab it by the scruff of its neck, Miss Ward.”

Deirdre’s mind was already catching up with McGonagall’s reasoning. She had said there was transfiguration magic at work. Hesitantly she followed directions, wondering if she shouldn’t put on
some gloves first.

"Finite incantatem."

It was strange to feel the soft fabric under her fingers change to warm skin. Back in possession of its claws and teeth, the kitten dug into the wood of the desk, hissing. It’s fur was ginger and fluffy, with a bottle-brush tail that lashed about in agitation. It wasn’t nearly grown and as it squirmed in her hands, Deirdre got a glimpse of a squashed face and golden eyes. “Wait, I’m just trying to…” Deirdre yelped as the desperate kitten twisted around and got its hind legs latched into her forearm, successfully forcing her to let go.

Across the room Sirius’ grey eyes were observing the proceedings, and he nudged James. “Daft, that one.”

The orange ball of fluff raced about the office on tiny feet. Deirdre noticed that Professor McGonagall was standing, watching but making no move to pursue the frantic creature. “It will wear itself down in time, Miss Ward. We shall just have to wait it out.”

Rubbing her arm, Deirdre looked about. There weren’t any extra chairs, and she was rather tired. “Do you mind if I sit, Professor?”

McGonagall turned her eyes back to Deirdre, looking at her as though she were just seeing her for the first time. “Certainly. Would you like a cup of tea?”

If she were asked outright why she chose to sit on the floor, Deirdre would not have been able to explain. It just felt like the right thing to do. She sat on the cold floor and propped her back against the wall. Contact with the stone of the castle seemed to make her feel better, and the pain in her arm seemed less important as she allowed herself to relax, eyes closed for a moment.

“Oi!” James barked and stood up in alarm, knocking the chair out from under him. Deirdre opened her eyes in alarm, wand back in her hand and trained on the flailing wizard. “Get off!” The kitten was climbing his trouserleg with a malignant expression of determination, ears flattening as one of the wizard’s hands came near.

“Mr Potter, you are a wizard, not a savage. Control yourself! It is just a baby.”

James stood still at McGonagall’s admonishment, his hands curled into tight fists as he struggled to control his own reactions. Through gritted teeth he growled, “Kindly remove yourself from my leg.”
Nearby, Sirius was unsuccessfully attempting to keep from laughing outright at his friend’s predicament. “You’ve got to be kitten me!”

The kitten had ceased climbing and hung there on James’ trouser leg, staring up at him. Suddenly, it retracted its claws and slipped back down to the ground, landing neatly before disappearing under the table.

Sirius was looking down, chuckling. “Quite the catastrophe, now aren’t you?” The humour dropped from his face, the only warning before he lunged.

The kitten dashed out of Sirius’ reach, hissing at him.

McGonagall’s pinched face flickered with amusement. A tea service had arrived, and she asked, “Miss Ward, how do you take your tea?”

“Splash of milk only, thank you.” Deirdre turned her attention to the Professor, who had placed a biscuit on the saucer before floating the tea over to her student who was seated on the floor.

“I could find you a chair, Miss Ward.”

After plucking the teacup and saucer out of the air, Deirdre settled it on her lap. “Forgive me, Professor. I’ll get up in a few moments.” She was feeling some of the life coming back into her, and heat of the tea was welcome.

“Suit yourself. I’m asking for a few more moments of your time. I don’t want to let the little one out, and he’s quite unsettled.”

Unsettled? She was that way herself, wasn’t she? A stranger to herself, she didn’t even know her own name. Her arm ached, the deeper scars aching under the hot claw marks that she knew must be under her shirt. The Headmaster thought she was in danger, and someone attacked her, hurt her quite badly before she turned up here. Deep down she knew that she was safe here, but her tired mind didn’t have the strength to turn away such thoughts. The tea was cooling rapidly, the cup cradled in her hands.

The Professor murmured, “There you go. You are among friends, young kit. There is no need for fear. Mr Filch would not have dropped you in the lake, but all the same I think you owe Miss Ward a
A loud purring sound came from the desk, and Deirdre looked up over the rim of her teacup. The kitten sat next to the bag and was gobbling up what looked like minced fish from a similar saucer to hers.

“Och. Let me look at you, little miscreant. What were you into, I wonder?” Professor McGonagall’s face relaxed as she regarded the cat before her. “Reminds me of one my old co-workers.” She leaned back, trying to remember. “Sour man, good at finding things. Worked out of Glasgow. Julian Cruickshank.”

Deirdre whispered, “Crookshanks?” Deep inside, she knew that this was the right name. The kitten had always been Crookshanks. An ache started in her chest and she gasped, clutching at it.

The kitten whipped its head around, responding with a chirp that ended on a high note. Curious orange eyes regarded her, intelligent and uncertain.

McGonagall smiled indulgently. “Well, it is a good name. What do you say little one? Shall you be Crookshanks?” She reached out a tentative hand for the kitten to sniff, which he did quickly before turning back to stare at Deirdre.

Deirdre set the teacup down, rubbing at the knot of agony in her chest. It was deep, compelling. She reached out a hand, curious to see what the kitten would do.

Crookshanks looked down to the floor. Chirping, he shuffled back and forth a few steps before looking back at Deirdre. Just as she was summoning the energy to get up, he wiggled his hips and leapt down to the floor. Rather than heading for her directly, he sniffed the stone floor with feigned disinterest.

Patient, Deirdre sat still, waiting.

On the fourth approach, instead of scampering back, the kitten finally sniffed at Deirdre’s fingers. Deirdre stayed absolutely still, holding her breath. It tickled.

Apparently satisfied, the kitten turned its back on her and stalked back to the desk, melting into its shadow.
Deirdre looked up to see Professor McGonagall watching her intently. “Don’t take it personally, Miss Ward. He’s rather young and has yet to decide what he wants.”

“Is he going to stay here, Professor?”

Professor McGonagall replied, “A kitten like him needs a safe place. He may stay here with me for a time, if he likes.”

Casting about for something to cover a bewildering wave of disappointment, Deirdre collected her teacup and stood, brushing off her skirts. Shy, she asked, “I know this is irregular, but might I come check on him?”

“Of course, Miss Ward. Just be sure to knock.” She jerked her head at the wizards who were bent over their difficult task. “They have detention again tomorrow night. And the one after. You may visit during those times if you wish, as I’ll be here, monitoring those bumbling baboons.”

Deirdre smothered a snort of amusement. “Thank you, Professor.”

A ghostly figure faded into view, stepping through the door. The Grey Lady spoke without preamble, “I will lead the Ward to our tower. Come.” She floated, not quite treading on the floor. Her expression was distant, serene and to Deirdre, strange. Still, she was exhausted. Tower meant her bed and she was yearning for it.

“Careful when you open that door, Miss Ward. Don’t let the cat out.”

“Good night, Professor McGonagall. Thank you again!”

She glanced at the boys and they both were staring at her, rubbing at their noses. It didn’t look like a friendly gesture.

The Grey Lady turned and was already disappearing back through the hall door, and Deirdre hastened to follow. She wanted nothing more than to seek her bed.
As she slipped away, she heard a faint, “Meow?”

“She will be back, little one.”

Molly hummed to herself, content in her element within the cozy little kitchen at the Burrow. Married life agreed with her and nothing made her happier than motherhood. Arthur had come home tense and worried, although he’d not been able to speak of what was bothering him at dinner, and he’d retired to the shed in the back after the boys were in bed, ostensibly to look in on the chickens. Little Percy was snoozing in his sling, snuggled safely to her chest.

A secret smile curved up the edges of her lips as she considered what she might do to help her husband relax. Things were busy, and he’d been asked to work longer hours to help fill in a shortage of hands in the parent division of his favored Misuse of Muggle Artifacts department. He was a wonderful father and a good husband and she loved him deeply.

Soiled dishes danced through the air about her, dunking, getting scrubbed, rinsed and presented for inspection before going on to the towels readied to dry them. Her hands directed with crisp wandwork and a panache that her brand of enthusiasm imparted to even the most menial of tasks. She was quite good with layering her charms, adding intuitively as a talented musician might add a countermelody.

A knocking at the door intruded on her thoughts. It was rapid, frantic.

Surely Arthur hadn’t locked himself out, and family knew to just come in. “Who could that be? Just a moment.” Molly twitched her wand, causing all but the heavy cast-iron pan that was being dried to settle to rest in stacks or in their tubs. The towel with its pan edged behind her, as though it were a shy pet, curious to see who was at the door at this hour.

Biting cold air gusted around her as she pulled the door open, and the dim light fell onto a rather disheveled looking witch, a face that Molly knew well was distorted in distress. Muggleborn and pride of her year, Dorcas Meadows, fell weeping into Molly’s arms.

A loud clatter behind Molly made her jump. She’d let the iron skillet drop, that’d surely leave a mark. An edge of panic made Molly’s voice carry out into the yard. “Arthur! Arthur, come quickly!” Leaving the door open to the November night, she drew her friend into the kitchen, one arm
supporting her, the other rubbing at poor startled Percy’s back. He’d kicked out his legs in surprise at the racket and cold. He was such a good baby.

“Molly, I’m sorry. I couldn’t think of where else to go. I just finished with the Aurory…” She crumpled into the nearest chair at the table, wiping her eyes on her sleeves. The gesture was incredibly out of character for the dignified witch, human and messy. Vulnerable.

Whatever happened surely must have been devastating. Nothing phased the witch when they were in school together. She faced down every pureblooded berk who tried to rub her nose in the mud, meeting rampant ignorance with skill and confidence. Dorky Meadows would rather be caught dead than with tears in her eyes.

Lifting her head, Molly was gratified to see Arthur appear at the door, pulling it closed against the wind. Taking in the scene he swallowed before saying, “I’ll make some tea.” He stooped to retrieve the pan with a worried look at the women before he moved off.

“It’s terrible, Arthur. They won’t help me, and Mum’s missing!” The witch was becoming more coherent, trying to hold in her distress as she spoke, looking intently at Arthur’s back before catching up Molly’s hands, the grip spastic.

“Sit, Dorcas, and take a moment. We’ve got you, there there.” Molly took in the witch’s hallowed eyes and sallow colour. “When did you last eat?”

The practical question was safer ground. The witch paused to consider, dropping Molly’s hands to wipe at her eyes again. “Agent Mimsy found a pack of pasties that we shared over lunch, but they hadn’t let me leave since I arrived back in town Saturday.” She surely looked as though she’d had no sleep, poor thing.

Arthur, bless him, asked, “How do you take your tea?” Molly flicked her wand and a loaf of bread appeared on the table along with butter and a sharp knife and she busied herself with slicing and buttering, laying a few out to entice her friend’s appetite.

“Black is fine, thank you.” Her hands trembled as she reached out for the mug that was being offered. “Oh, that’s wonderful.”

A hiccup from her chest reminded Molly of her other charge, and she rubbed little Percy’s back, considering when he last fed. He’d settled down again and Auntie Miriam had opined that a baby this good was surely either going to be a perfect lamb or a simpleton. Little Bill and Charlie were boisterous, full of adventure with no fear of anything, and she had to keep close tabs on them, lest
they get up to real trouble. Percy was already different to his brothers. He slept well, and only fussed when he was put down.

Molly pushed up from her chair at the table, of a mind to warm up some stew, now that their visitor was starting to settle in. Arthur moved to help her, but she waved him away, casting a meaningful look at the chair she’d just vacated.

Arthur sat down next to Dorcas. His spoke earnestly, “Now, Dorcus, tell us what is this all about.”

“My mother is missing and the rest of my family have been slaughtered. Molly, I need your help. If anyone can find her, it’s you.”

Fumbling, Molly dropped her wand in the pot and a wave of nausea overcame her. She’d been having terrible, violent dreams, but she’d convinced herself that they’d carried no real import. Normal, terrifying dreams full of agonized screams, and far too much blood.

As though her ears were stuffed with cotton she could hear her husband’s shocked reaction. “That’s terrible! What happened?”

A cold sweat broke out on Molly’s brow and she dropped her hands to steady herself on the counter. No, no... no... no. It could not be. It was her hormones, nothing more, there was nothing more there. Not real.

“They claim that it was a random attack.” The witch’s voice wobbled, “Maybe werewolves.” A stunned silence stretched over several heartbeats before she added, “They said there wasn’t enough left of the remains for me to identify, although they were certain Mum wasn’t among them. No adult women.” Tears flooded the witch’s hazel eyes as she hiccuped. “That’s my hope, Arthur. I need to find her. She’s a muggle, she’s probably confused or lost.”

Molly’s voice sounded unnaturally high even to her own ear as she turned slowly around to answer, “What makes you think that I could possibly help? Surely the Ministry has their best people working on this?”

Arthur rubbed at his neck and looked away from his wife, a tell that she wouldn’t like the answer and that he’d an inkling of what was going on already.

Dorcas answered, “They’ve sealed the investigation. No one will talk to me, but I heard from a friend in the Department that they’ve pulled the detectives to work another case. They’ve already fed
a cock and bull story about a rabid dog attacking them to the muggle authorities.” Outrage rang in her voice, “Everything all tied up neatly with a bow, but Mum is still missing!”

“Of course we will do what little we can, but Dorky... You know I’m not trained like the Ministry.”

The pleading look in her friend’s eyes was enough to break Molly’s heart. “You’re the best, Molly. You’ve always had the knack for finding things. Please. My mum could be out there, hurt, scared, cursed… please, just try?”

Arthur met her eyes, “Molly, I don’t know if you should exert yourself like this.” He was giving her a way out, she knew, but something deep within her had already made the decision to help the moment she opened the door.

“I’ll be fine, Arthur.” She looked at her friend. “Do you have anything of your mother’s? A lock of hair, vial of blood?”

Dorcas rummaged in her pockets and brought out a brush, holding it out. “I’d borrowed this a month ago and it’d been packed in my own luggage. It is the best I have without being allowed near my parent’s home.”

Letting out a sigh, Molly accepted the piece. “Get some warm stew in you first, and then I’ll need you to tell me everything you know. I will see what I can do with this.” The brush had more than one person’s hair in it but some of it would belong to Mrs Meadows. It was better than nothing, but far from ideal.

Little Percy squalled from his place at her breast, fingers stretching out and then fist ing once more. A faint scent wafted up, and Molly said, “Arthur?”

Standing, Arthur closed the distance between them in one long stride. “Little stinker needs a change?” Molly easily accomplished the hand off, kissing her husband on the cheek. “Thank you, love.”

Relieved of that particular burden, Molly’s body felt light, energized. She’d not done an intentional scrying since Aunt Muriel lost her favorite sugar bowl. It had been tucked into the old woman’s liquor cabinet for some reason. Muriel claimed gremlins, but Molly suspected too much gin in her evening tea.
Molly Weasley née Prewett was descended from a long line of a particular type of Seer; those gifted with the ability to see the present. Everyone knew of the value of those with the sight for future events, but this was different. She was good at finding lost objects, and in the case of her family, she often knew where they were at any given time, and if they were in trouble. It was particularly handy growing up with twin brothers who loved a good joke at little Molly’s expense. Since graduation she hadn’t used it for anything more pressing than knowing when little Bill was out of bed, or where Charlie’s toy dragon had got off to.

Those same rotten brothers were now Aurors. Of course she loved Fabian and Gideon, but the two of them were the most irritating prats a sister could be burdened with, and she’d always felt as though she was always considered less of a witch by her family because she’d gotten married to the wizard she’d fallen madly in love with in school, and had thrown herself passionately into making a home and raising a family straight away rather than distinguishing herself. Auntie Muriel had made it plain to her on the night before her wedding that she thought Molly was making a mistake in her choice because Arthur was poorer than a church mouse and was certain that they’d end up miserable and on the streets, or worse… begging on Muriel’s doorstep for handouts. So far, she’d proved Auntie Muriel wrong and had taken pains to invite the old bat over for holidays to rub her nose in the modest riches that only an intrepid witch who was inspired by love of life and family could bestow.

Molly considered things like the stew she served up to her friend. It was warm, wholesome, and delicious because of Molly’s own touches and her herb garden. Stew was magic in its most subtle form: love stretching limited resources to feed many mouths. She set the bowl in front of Dorcas and retrieved a throw from the living room to wrap around her visitor’s too thin shoulders.

She was proud of her accomplishments as a mother and wife, but now it was her turn to help a friend in desperate need. Not Gabian and Fideon’s, they ostensibly had their chances already. She took up the brush once more and held it up to the light, her eyes already picking apart the tangle of dun and greyed hair.

A tight smile formed on Molly’s lips as she planned her attack on the problem, her heart lightening a trifle. “Yes… I think this will do just fine.”

She’d love to see the looks on Fabian and Gideon’s faces when they found out that “Wee Wolly-Bee” was the one who found Mrs Meadows when their whole department had failed. Oh yes, that would be quite a treat.
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

As always, a huge thanks to my dear Coromandel. It was a year ago, almost to the day that she answered my plea for beta-help on LiveJournal. She’s become a dear friend and I can’t imagine a day without her. She’s got another 2 weeks or so until her exams are over, she’s giving French verb conjugations the what-for!

My warmest gratitude goes out to all of you readers. Comments and kudos bring such joy into my days (and I am sure to send them on to Coromandel too!), so don’t forget how much they matter!

Happy Mother’s Day to all of you mothers, be they of creatures or creative works of the mind you all give life to miracles that make the world a little bit brighter.

Severus slipped into the Great Hall, hands jammed into his pockets, feeling uncomfortable without his uniform. As a rule, he only wore these rags when he was heading home, particularly the shoes. He hated the squeak his trainers made when he turned hastily. He loathed the sound his rubber soles made, eagerly gripping the castle’s stone floor with every step. The sound was loud in his ears compared to the quiet of early morning in the castle.

The psychic stench he associated with the clothes was difficult to shake off. He already used magic to lengthen the cuffs twice, and the fabric was faded from the abuse. His mother had repaired a rip near the back pocket with black thread, so they pulled strangely, like a poorly healed scar.

He knew about those, having many on his own back. Payment for prior indiscretions, ones that his mother was unable to shield him from, especially now that he was old enough to know better. Madam Pomfrey told him once that the deep adhesions from such old scars could loosen with painful treatments and effort, but the skin would never go back to normal. It would always remember.

That suited him just fine.

Professor Nott stood by the door in a sort of parade rest; hands folded behind his back, and his feet braced. He was dressed in a loose-fitting khaki uniform, trousers tucked into well broken in military boots. The wizard was painfully tidy in comparison to Severus, and the smile he offered in greeting was profanely cheerful. “Right on time!”

Severus felt measuring eyes looking him over and he met that gaze, squaring his shoulders out of his customary slump. He’d skipped the button-down and just worn the thin jumper. Its black suited his
mood. His hair hung lankly, framing his face. He’d not bothered to shower, given the hour and strong impression that he’d be getting dirty.

Perhaps noticing that Severus was not going to be answering verbally, Professor Nott nodded once.
“Right. Today we won’t be starting off with any spellwork. Students here aren’t offered nearly enough exercise, falsely suggesting that magic over might is all that is worth learning. Training for physical strength and endurance is still valuable, especially for those who plan on entering dangerous situations. Can you tell me why?”

“Wizards are vulnerable to physical attack.” Severus knew this all too well. “Especially when they do not expect it.”

Nodding slowly, Professor Nott prompted Severus to keep going. “What else?”

Frowning, Severus considered. “Sometimes it is better not to use magic at all.”

“Especially when magic is dampened or forbidden. While some train in wandless magic, it doesn’t make you invulnerable. There are poisons that block a wizard’s magic, or wards that can suppress magic in a certain area, rendering it practically useless. What’s more is that there are magics that can amplify your physical skills and strength, but the untrained get very little out of them.” Looking troubled, the older wizard said, “And Mr Snape, make no mistake. We are living in very dangerous times.”

Severus rocked back on his heels, taking in this statement. Before he could form questions, the strange wizard turned on his heel and pushed open the door, revealing a grey sky lit only by the faint light that heralded dawn.

“See if you can keep up with me, son.” Nott flashed him a fey smile before he was off and running down the steps.

Reminding himself that he would be getting paid for his work, Severus swallowed his objections and followed.

By the time Severus caught up with his teacher he had a cramp in his side that made his breaths come painfully. They slowed to a more sedate jog after the Professor noticed his presence at his side. Cruel
or kind, he spoke as they pressed onward.

“...You would think that with the powers of magic that we would be more aware of the world around us, more connected. Each of us has that potential, but it must be cultivated.”

They’d struck out to the path that would wind about the castle toward the lake when it came out on the other side. In spring it would be favoured by couples looking to get out from the eyes of the school. For now it was muddy and icy and miserable, and Severus thought it unfair that the older man beside him looked as comfortable and at ease as though he were headed for a lark on a tropical beach.

“As wizards we seek to dominate nature, twist it to our wills. It takes tremendous power to use magic in such a way. Magic’s effects can be just as impressive with small nudges, encouraging nature to act in a way that is already in line with its flow. The same is true of ourselves.”

The lake came into view, and the sky was changing to a pale yellow, darkness fleeing from that bright horizon.

“I seek not to encourage you to grow in unnatural ways, Mr Snape, but to encourage the potential you already possess.”

A wide hand smacked Severus in the middle of his back, sending him skipping forwards before he regained his balance. At least his shoes didn’t squeak on the gravelled path, but he did misstep into a muddy puddle. He tried to stay focused on what the Professor was telling him.

“You may well come to resent the exertion, and you may choose to stop at any time.”

Professor Nott stopped and Severus kept running a few paces before he understood and stopped too, turning back to face the man. He could see a faint sheen of sweat on the man’s brow, and that gratified the teen who was puffing hard.

“But I promise you that if you give me your full effort, in time the benefits will outstrip the Galleons you hope to earn. I see real potential in you, more than fancy wandwork and cunning. You’ve been given a charge, one who may well require much of you someday. Remember your duty when things are hard, lad.”
Breath thickening to mist in the cold air, Severus put voice to the thoughts that swirled to the surface. “I think that the Headmaster might have failed to mention to me what it is that he expects. Miss Ward is vulnerable and I understand that it is my duty to help integrate her into our classes and solidify her cover story. I feel like I’m being left in the dark. What should I be worried about?”

Lips tight, Professor Nott looked past Severus, unfocused. Severus was starting to shiver when the man shook his head and broke into a jog, faster this time. Severus followed, having recovered sufficient breath. Did he ask something he wasn’t supposed to know? He tried to push down a growing feeling of resentment. He could operate in the dark but understanding would make him more effective, surely? As the silence that should have held answers stretched on, he focused on moving one step after the other. Cold water squished between his toes in the right shoe, distracting him, so he was surprised when the man spoke.

“Miss Ward’s amnesia covers secrets, and given the evidence of torture at the hands of a dark wizard she bore when she arrived, we believe that her knowledge is of a nature that could be invaluable to us and dangerous in the wrong hands.”

Glad that he was managing to keep up, Severus asked, “Is anyone working to find who did this to her? Do we have any idea of whom we are guarding against?”

Professor Nott shook his head slowly. “Given her accent, she is most likely from a British family. Professor Dumbledore knows more than he is telling, I think. The Headmaster so determined to keep her close.”

“She had Professor Dumbledore’s ghost hiding in her head.”

Nott’s strides slowed as he absorbed the statement. “Are you sure?”

Severus nodded, breathing harder and his reply was interrupted with heavy breaths. “It was avoiding us, trying to stay out of view. Peeves pointed him out to us. He looked rather guilty about it all.” The professor was picking up the pace.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I think so. He kept gliding away to stay behind us, where we could not see him.” Severus recalled that well. Peeves acted rather strangely all along.
The professor’s voice broke into Severus’ musings. “I think I’d like for you to write out an account of what you experienced that day in the infirmary. You know I missed a large part of things, having been assigned to an entirely different path. Do you think you can do that?”

Hesitantly, Severus nodded. “Maybe if you tell me what you saw as well?”

Chuckling, Professor Nott nodded. “Seems fair enough.” He slapped Severus on the shoulder. “Merchant.”

Severus chuckled, retorting back, “Slytherin.”

After the sun was more than half above the horizon, they came to a stop at the base of one of the older sections of wall. Professor Nott was rubbing his hands together and looking up, a dangerous twinkle in his eye. “There are times where you need firm footing, or firm handholds as the case may be. Hold out your hands, lad.”

Not liking where this was going, he did as asked, and he watched as Professor Nott cast a wordless charm that made his hands feel as though they were enveloped in gloves that were filled with coarse sand. It was intriguing and uncomfortable at the same time. “I’ll teach you that one as a reward, later.” He did the same to Severus’ canvas shoes. “I might have some togs you can use.”

Severus’ cheeks burned at the mention.

“None of that, lad. Your Mum couldn’t have known you’d be running paces and climbing walls. This wasn’t on the equipment list.” The daft wizard pointed up to the covered walkway forty feet in the air above them. “See you at the top.”

As the man leapt towards the wall, Severus felt certain that he had gone micey. However, Professor Nott found handholds and started to climb with deceptive grace, as though he were part arachnid. Staring, jaw slack in surprise, Severus was brought back to the moment when the Professor looked down at him and grinned. “You don’t want all of the eggs and bacon to be cold by the time you make it to the Great Hall, lad. Get a leg on!”

Feeling entirely uncertain, Severus tackled the wall, one rough hewn brick at a time. A third of the way up, he made the mistake of looking down. His grip tightened in anxiety and his arms already trembled with fatigue. A shower of dust redirected his attention upwards, and he saw the Professor heaving a leg over the wall before his head came back into view.
Severus glared up at the teacher, shaking his head. “You realise I’m no use to you dead on our first day.”

“What do you think I am, Mr Snape?” Professor Nott laughed heartily. “I’d not give you an impossible task. I’m easing you in.” He watched with a critical glint in his eyes as Severus started to climb once more. “Use your legs more, lad. I picked this section as it’s blessed with plenty of broken sections. You don’t want to use your arms to pull yourself up.”

Severus grunted as he shifted his left foot, finding that the Professor was right. He continued to creep upwards, every foothold and grip uncertain. His mind drifted to plans to meet with Deirdre soon. Would she be in any of his classes before lunch? He knew she’d not be in Defense. He was certain that Slughorn had accepted her into his NEWT Potions classes.

Lily seemed more her old self yesterday, although there was still a significant amount of unease between them. Maybe it was just having her back in the lab on a Sunday that put him in mind of happier times. Lily and Deirdre worked well together, and that made him decidedly uneasy. What would happen if Deirdre and Lily really did become fast friends? A shiver ran down his back; sweat gathered in rivulets to trickle down his spine in spite of the cold November morning. Great Salazar’s ghost, what could that mean for him?

Severus had just started to wonder if Professor Nott had left him to find his own way up, his voice called down, “Of course, by the time I’m done with you, you’ll be able to scale this wall with just your arms.” That sounded like a promise that was both intriguing and terrifying, and the casual way in which the man said it only increased Severus’ belief that Nott was sincere.

Growling under his breath, Severus concentrated on making progress. He was past the halfway point. Looking up, he didn’t see the Professor’s face peering down at him. He thought he could hear some heavier breathing, but that could be echoes of his own exertions. Minutes crawled by.

Professor Nott looked over the edge again. “Ah, almost there. Jolly good.” He disappeared, although his voice floated down to Severus. “Just think of the hot shower waiting for you.”

Severus could hear the heavy breathing closer now, it was rhythmic. What was the daft Professor doing? His hand reached up and felt the top of the crenelation. A feeling of triumph and accomplishment surged over him as he used his legs to boost himself up and over, his legs collapsing under him as he came to a rest on the stone walkway.
Now he could see what Professor Nott was doing. Push-ups. His shirt was rolled back, revealing well defined forearms. Severus looked at his own, much thinner arm for comparison with chagrin. He asked the question that was nagging him, “So, you learned all of this to be a cursebreaker?”

Pushing himself off of the ground, Professor Nott smiled down at Severus. “No, lad. I learned most of this from my commanding officers during the war. Muggle soldiers are pushed very hard. And for good reason.” He offered Severus a hand, pulling him back to his feet.

Severus felt drained. His arms were twitching with fatigue, and his fingers cramped. A wave of the Professor’s wand, and the scratchy sand feeling dissipated. A supporting arm wrapped about Severus’ shoulders and the warmth of it seemed to bleed strength back into Severus’ own body. Embarrassed, he allowed himself to be steered around the corner to the Infirmary.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when the Professor spoke in a booming, theatrical voice, “Methinks I scent the morning air!”

Neat as a pin, Madam Pomfrey stepped out of her office, a sour smile on her face. “And here is a great windbag, blowing away any hopes I had for a peaceful start to the day.” Her eyes narrowed, homing in. “Is that you, Severus? I hardly recognised you.” Those watery blue perceptive eyes darted between teacher and student. “Now what have you been up to at this hour?”

Severus found himself being steered into a chair and his leg started to cramp, prompting him to spring up with a cry of distress.

“Well Poppy, I’ve taken the lad as my assistant, so we are going to be training every morning.”

Unwilling to stifle the groan that escaped him, Severus glared at Professor Nott. Every morning was going to be like this? Why was he doing this again? No amount of money could justify this.

Professor Nott kept talking, ignoring the strangled sounds of distress Severus made as he teetered on one leg, bent over and massaging the other.

“Must you torture him, Whit? It hardly seems civilised.”

Bending at the waist in acknowledgement, he went on, “Well, that is why we are here. I used to take a lovely tonic that the Ministry Mediwitch stocked for me when I was training with the Royal Army.
It helped me recover from the muscle fatigue enough that I could function. I was hoping you might have something like it?"

Madam Pomfrey made a face at Professor Nott. “You know it isn’t going to take away the pain.” She looked back at Severus and winced. “Oh, there, now. Sit back down with your legs out straight. That’s right.” She stood back and used her wand to do a further assessment. “’Righto. I’ll be back in two shakes.”

“You are an angel.” Professor Nott’s eyes watched the retreating form of the witch, and waggled his eyebrows when he saw Severus glaring at him. “Ahem. We did warm up but I’ll have to admit the afters was a shambles. We’ll start with stretching tomorrow. It will seem tedious but I imagine the lesson of the pain you are experiencing currently will be instruction enough. Stretching before and after increases flexibility and reduces the chance of injury.”

A voice interjected from the storeroom, “I expect you both to take proper precautions. There is no reason my morning should start like this, Professor Nott. I am quite put out with you.”

Rubbing at his calves, Severus chanced a glance at his teacher and was not terribly surprised to see the daft man grinning broadly. Professor Nott lived for a challenge, and while he’d mastered scaling the walls of Hogwarts castle, he’d yet to wear Poppy Pomfrey down. The man’s reputation was that of an unapologetic rake; a man who went through partners as quickly as a dragon goes through teeth. The Mediwitch wasn’t amused by his siege tactics, and Severus wondered what Professor Nott hoped to accomplish. He’d get a beating about the ears if he weren’t more careful.

“How shall I make amends, dear lady? Perhaps dinner next weekend? I know a snug place in Edinburgh...”

“Oh, leave off, Whit. I’m not in the mood.” Madam Pomfrey bustled in, carrying a bottle and a small glass that was filled with a fizzing liquid. “Bottoms up, Mr Snape.”

Severus had never encountered this particular tonic before, yet he downed it, “In Pomfrey I trust.” The canary-coloured liquid burned as it poured down his throat, and the heat spread from his stomach out into his back first, then his thighs and shoulders. Before long the heat filled every crack and cranny. His legs still burned, but the terrible shaking fatigue left him.

“Great. Alright, I expect you’ll be hitting the shower, so after just rub some of this into the worst of it. Hope you like the smell of camphor. Don’t worry, it won’t stick around too long.” She tapped the bottle with one fingernail.
Smiling broadly, as though Madam Pomfrey had fixed everything and it was all too easy, Professor Nott backed out of the infirmary. “Capital, Madam Pomfrey. Thank you very much for looking after my assistant. Well, I’ve things to be doing.”

“One moment, Professor.”

The way the smile disappeared from Professor Nott’s face was almost comical. “Yes, Madam?”

“If you are insisting on putting Mr Snape through such physical duties as your assistant, I expect you to be responsible for his welfare and that includes proper shoes and proper outerwear.” She smiled fondly down at Severus. “Those clothes just aren’t meant for this, I’m afraid.”

Professor Nott laughed heartily, “Why I’d already told Severus I could loan him a change or two. I’m sure some of my old kit would...”


Severus struggled to sit upright in his chair, embarrassed. “That’s okay, Madam Pomfrey, I can make do, you don’t need to make a fuss...”

A finger wagged in front of Severus’ nose and he was surprised to see her stern expression turned on him now. “None of that. I won’t be inconvenienced because you didn’t take precautions. Professor Nott is responsible for your well-being while training. If I feel that you are brought here because of neglect or oversight on his part, he is going to feel my displeasure. Wreckless wizards, both of you!”

Hands up in a placating gesture, Professor Nott surrendered. “Alright, alright, Poppy. I will see to it.”

The Mediwitch strode up to Professor Nott and glared up at him. “This isn’t the bloody Royal Army, Whittington. This is my school, and Mr Snape is my responsibility. I’ve put quite a lot of time into putting him back together as it is. Don’t you dare fool around.”

Mirth melting away, Professor Nott lowered his voice. “I might play the fool, but dear lady, we are
short on time. Make no mistake, I am quite serious about the training and safety of every student in my care. This one has potential and has volunteered to put himself in harm’s way. I cannot go easy on him.” He looked away, clearly troubled. “Merlin knows I wish things were different.”

Nodding, Madam Pomfrey let him go, and Severus wondered what the adults knew. Whatever it was cast a shadow over both faces as Professor Nott took his leave.

“Thank you, Madam Pomfrey.” Severus stood, shaking his muscles loose. They were sore, that was certain. “Is it alright if I take an aspirin?”

Pulling her thoughts back to the present, Madam Pomfrey shook her head. “It was in the tonic, Mr Snape, no need to gild the...” She swallowed the word before it came out. “Oh. You know what I mean.”

Severus felt a curious change in his response to the evocation of the word ‘lily’. It didn’t hold the same amount of painful weight that it once possessed. “Quite. Thank you again.” He glanced at the clock and found that it was still quite early. He’d be waking up soon on a normal day. The thought of a hot shower spurred him onward, and he was surprised at how good he felt, in spite of the sore muscles.

It had been a long workday’s night for the Auror corp. Suspicious activity was dramatically increased, and a number of calls had all of the on duty officers, even the newest pairs scurrying all over the countryside. Fabian and Gideon Prewett had been on all weekend, and they’d not had a chance to sleep in 36 hours or more.

They trudged down the hall into the huge room that served as home base for all of them. It was half past six in the morning, and both of them were a dangerous combination of sluggish and jumpy. Fabian snickered, elbowing Gideon in the ribs. “The look on that bloke’s face!”

A laugh was pulled out of some deep well from Gideon, hollow and echoing in the empty room. “Fey tree-buggering bastard.”

“With a face like that, I was surprised the poor victim hadn’t re-tree-ted.”
Groaning, Gideon countered, “Oak-Kay, you barmy git. Maybe he wooed the foliage with romantic poe-tree first?”

Wringing his hands the wizard raised his voice to a high-pitched wheeze worthy of one of the old dragons that sat on the Wizengamot, “I don’t want to beleaf what my own poor eyes reported. Rooted to the spot in terror, I swear it was so!” Fabian’s face was screwed up in an approximation of wrinkles, and he let one of his eyes drift about, making him look insane.

Not one to be upstaged, Gideon did a good impression of a thespian who happened to have a lisp, “Thy trunk is shapely, skin as smooth as birch. I pine for you, your breath is like moulden earth!”

Giggling, the pair paused at the coffee urn, one nodding to the house elf who was cleaning up with a dirty rag. “I’m Aspen for you to stop. Be the bigger wizard here.”

Pouring out two coffees, the Auror observed, “Yew started it. I was minding me own business.”

“Me?! I axed you to stop. Wood you want to be late for debriefing?” Fabian took a coffee and lifted it to his face to inhale. “Virgin’s own sweet exhalation.” He closed his eyes in appreciation and took a reverent sip.

“Cedar problem with you is that you lack imagination and determination.”

The red-head’s eyes flew open and he gasped. “That’s not what your girlfriend said Friday night.”

“Out of line, Prewett.” He flung a tripping jinx at his brother who neatly gamboled out of the way.

By the time they approached their cubicle, both of the aurors were juggling wands and coffees in a series of one-upmanship worthy of the Norse pantheon.

“You great lummox of an erumpent’s arse!”

A yelp carried far enough to make the elf minding the coffee cringe. “You’ll regret it when I do the
same to your bollocks before your date tonight!"

One brother backed against the wall, holding his coffee away from the other Prewett who was trying to get past the warding hand that was holding him at arm’s length by his face. “I’ll just have a better excuse to get her to use her soft lovely hands to warm up my…”

“Hullo, boys.” The voice was firm, piercing through the fog of exhaustion and mischief that surrounded the two Aurors.

Both of the twins froze in place, and not just because one of them had a hand - coffee and all completely encased in a block of ice. An audible swallow preceded an obviously edited reply, “... drink.”

A witch sat behind Gideon’s desk, looking on in open exasperation. That lovely face was altered from the last they had seen it. Shadows below her eyes looked much like bruises on her porcelain skin, and her hair was disheveled as though she’d come straight from a restless bed. “I… well. Molly sent me.”

“Meadows, isn’t it?” Fabian already had released his brother, and both brothers dropped the japery in favour of worry.

“Is something wrong at the Burrow?” Gideon wriggled his hand, a wordless *Finite* releasing him and his coffee from the enchanted permafrost.

Tears glittered in the woman’s eyes and she shook her head silently. Her mouth opened, but then she put her hand over it, as if whatever she had to say might escape like Pandora’s woes unto the world.

Both boys looked at each other in silent communication before Fabian set down his mug and hurried around to squat beside her, pulling out a clean square of linen to offer up.

“There now, shall I go check with Molly, then?” Gideon squinted at the clock, calculating just how fast he’d have to run to get to the apparition point and back before their morning meeting.

“No... don’t go. She’s fine, no need to wake her. I just came down here early because I couldn’t bear waiting.”
Shifting uneasily on his heels, Fabian’s gentle voice sought to draw her out, “What can the Prewett brothers help you with, dear lady? Surely there is something we can do for your immediate relief? Someone we can call to you, family, perhaps?”

Gideon stiffened, shooting his brother a warning glare too late.

The mention of family broke the dam that had held the witch’s grief back. “Oh, L... p-pray to Merlin you may be able to.” Hand trembling, she took out a piece of folded parchment and held it out for Fabian, who passed it over to Gideon so he could gather the weeping witch into a comforting embrace.

“Shite. Meadows, what is this? We’ve been ordered specifically to stay out of this investigation.” Gideon held out the parchment with an expression of disbelief for Fabian to examine.

Pushing Fabian away, Dorcas Meadows stood, her tears of grief burning away , quickly replaced by frustrated rage. “What investigation!?”

Jumping at the steel in the woman’s voice, Fabian backed off with his hands up in a warding gesture. “Quiet, hsst! Gideon, privacy ward?” That gave him the space to catch up the parchment to read Molly’s missive for himself.

“Right.” Walking about the area, the tired wizard took out his wand and muttered the incantation under his breath, making a full circuit of the desks. When he finished, he slid his wand back into its holster and nodded expectantly. “Set.”

Dorcas was trembling, fists clenched at her sides. “They aren’t even looking for Mum. She’s not a priority. You know the Ministry and muggles. The less done the better. That’s why I need your help. Mum’s not a witch, she can’t defend herself! Please…”

“First we all need to sit down, and you need to start from the beginning. Tell us everything, and then we’ll tell you how we are going to help.”

Shoulders slumping in relief, the poor witch folded back into the chair behind her and gulped, swallowing down grief and rage in a struggle to form a coherent narrative. “Yes. Of course.” Her voice sounded dampened, confirming that the privacy wards were active.
Gideon pulled over a chair and sat down, leaving Fabian to transfigure one of his own from a bit of wood in his pocket. As an afterthought he cast a duplication charm on his coffee and pushed the original over to their guest. “Take a moment. We’ve got about an hour before we’re expected at a meeting.”

A scimitar-sharp flash of teeth shone as Fabian drawled, “Old Moody will be delighted if we’re late. Make his week and it’s only Monday.”

Lifting a shoulder, Gideon countered. “We’ve a witch in distress, mate. What else can we do? We’re here to serve and protect.”

The unrepentant delight the brothers shared in tweaking the nose of their boss made Meadows unwind just enough to allow her to get started. The twin Aurors remained silent as she spoke, leaning in to capture every word and nuance, only interrupting to ask clarifying questions, of which they had few.

When her words finally slowed and stumbled to a halt, Dorcas repeated her earlier plea. “My mother is still out there. Please, the Ministry isn’t looking. I know it for a fact. They just believe that she’s gone or consumed.” She gestured to the parchment. “Molly says otherwise…” She thumped her chest, “My heart shouts otherwise. Please... help me find her.”

Gideon looked at the time and frowned. “Dorcas, you’ve got to get out of here. The others will be filing in shortly.”

“Go back to the Burrow, tell Molly to make meatballs for supper tonight.” Fabian’s voice was a contrast to his brother’s, soft and cajoling where Gideon’s was urgent and commanding. “Will you be able to make it safely? I could go with you…” He knew that Gideon could make the standard excuse.

Standing on shaky legs, the witch reached out and took one of each of the brother’s hands. “Thank you, but I wouldn’t want to draw any attention, or any more attention to myself as it is. Whatever happens, you’ve at least listened to me and that’s ten times what the Ministry has done for my mother already. Thank you.”

Discomfited Gideon squeezed the witch’s hand and let go, his expression guarded. “Go, quickly. Take the Floo.”
Fabian drew Dorcas into a quick, crushing hug before propelling her down the aisle and out of the room. When he returned, his brother was already seated, quill working frantically.

“What’s that then?”

Grimacing, Gideon replied, “I’ve got to cancel plans with Nancy, now haven’t I?”

“Shame, I was about to make good my promise to freeze your bollocks. You know, in the name of romance…”

Chuckling, Gideon took a swing at Fabian. “At least I’d a Date with someone more interesting than me own Palm…”

Gathering up the coffee mugs, the Auror looked wounded. “Just for that, I’ll expect you to fill out the written reports. We’ve got ten minutes.”

“Why can’t you do it?”

Smirking, Fabian held up his hand, “I have to go apologise to me girlfriend for your hard words just now.” He wriggled his fingers with a leer. “Got to make it up to her, somehow.”

“Just don’t let Moody catch ye.” Gideon blew Fabian a kiss, “And send dear Palmela my love.”

Fabian paused, held up his right hand to his face, and spoke to it. “Did you hear that, darling? I don’t think he’s sincere.” He held his hand up over his shoulder as he turned to walk away, flipping Gideon the one-fingered salute.

“Don’t make promises you don’t mean to keep, Palmela! Wait, haven’t you got a sister?”

Raucous laughter answered the jeer as Fabian retreated out of range down the aisle. “That’s twisted, you sick bastard.”
Mirth coloured Gideon’s shouted response, “Oi! Don’t bring Mum into this!”

“Go fuck yourself!”

“We can’t both go. One of us has to fill out this report. Besides, I’ve got a girlfriend!”

“That’s cold, mate. Real cold.”

Moody stood in the open doorway to the department workroom, his perpetual scowl firmly in place as he put an end to the banter. “Leave off, lads. You both can get back to your girlfriends after the debriefing, although I’ve no idea of why any witch would willingly go with either of you two.”

“We’re twice the man compared to most wizards. It is an indisputable fact.”

“Twice as useless, you mean.” The older Auror pivoted on his peg leg, not rising to the challenge as he stomped away. “Be ready to give your reports in five minutes. Don’t make me reassign you to different partners.”

“Did Moody swallow a lemon or is he actually sweeter than usual?”

“I’m stumped, brother.”

“That was acorn-y tree pun. Very low humour, that.”

“Why, its tree-ditional.”

Both wizards followed the slower Moody to the meeting room, and had to duck a hex cast back at them as their boss roared, “I said shut it! Can’t I get a moment’s peace? Merlin’s saggy nutsack!”

Giggling like first years back at Hogwarts the Prewett twins followed Moody shoulder to shoulder.
Deirdre woke abruptly, a displaced thrill of fear thudding in her chest as her eyes snapped open. The room was completely silent and the dim light strengthened a feeling of dizzied disorientation. A freezing cold breeze washed over her face and she shoved away the impulse to pull the covers up over her head and hide, letting the chill pull her further into wakefulness.

A quick survey showed she was couched in an unfamiliar bed that was draped about with dark blue hanging. Definitely not the infirmary. She sat up, scrubbing her face as confused snatches of sound and scent from vivid dreams slipped away from her to be replaced with recollection of yesterday’s parade of events.

It was early, about half past six by her Tempus charm. She shivered and reached for the dressing gown laid out at the head of her bed. Her thoughts rushed forward to the day ahead of her. Her first day of classes! Her lips pulled up in a smile. The unfamiliar bed might not be home, but school called to her and felt more right than anything else had since she woke up in the Hospital Wing.

“Who left this open?” Deirdre identified the cause of the draft as soon as she emerged from the warmth of her hangings. Not seeing anyone awake, she padded over and swung the door shut.

The answer came from a disembodied voice that was loud in the silence, and strangely edged. “Me. For me.”

Clutching her robe tightly closed, Deirdre used her other hand to cast a Lumos. The dim room came into clearer view, but she still hadn’t seen the source of the voice. “Who’s there?”

“Me.” A cascade of soft chirruping laughter sent a chill down Deirdre’s already cold neck.

Deirdre was so tired last night that she’d barely registered Ruth’s narrative explaining the dorm and her roommate who’d had the room to herself before this. Ruth had explained that “Pandy” kept odd hours, and the elusive witch hadn’t been there to make a proper introduction. Dee wasn’t concerned at the time as she was completely exhausted, and had succumbed to the soft enfolding comfort of her assigned bed almost immediately. Now, in the pre-dawn twilight, she regretted it as she had no way of recognising the voice. “Pandora? Is that you?”
A fluttering from above drew her attention and she held her wand higher aloft, casting her light up towards the ceiling. A bird was perched on the corner of the second of two beds in the room. A mix of white with black spangling identified the creature as a magpie. It tilted its head, getting a good look at her with one eye before twitching the other way to get a look with the other.

Tension bled out of her as she gazed upwards. “Oh, are you trapped? I’m sorry. Only, it is so cold…”

A different voice spoke right next to her. “He doesn’t feel the cold quite like we do.”

Deirdre jumped, almost fumbling her wand as she whirled to face the person who had just appeared at her side. Dee hadn’t heard her approach, so absorbed in investigating the bird.

The girl was short, but had an expressive face and displeasure twisted her mouth into a scowl. “Damn it Dòlas!” She glanced at Deirdre and offered her a fleeting grimace of camaraderie. “You know you are supposed to keep the window shut. We don’t have feathers.” Her tone lightened as she continued to grumble.

The name was strange and she rolled it about with her tongue. “Dòlas?’”

“Yeah, that’s what Mum named him. Seemed right for my first magpie.” She lowered her voice conspiratorially, “Dumbarse is more descriptive. He makes me laugh too much for such a morose name, but don’t let him hear you. He takes offense and will nick your quills. They seem to offend him anyway.”

Deirdre snorted, her breath forming a puff of mist in the cold room, even with the window closed. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

The bird squawked and it sounded suspiciously like an objection. “Oi! Oi!”

Rolling her eyes, the girl turned back to Deirdre. “I’m Pandora Ollivander, by the way. Most call me Pandy. You must be the new transfer.” The girl was pale and had straw coloured hair which was straggly with sleep. “I missed you last night, my experiment went well over time and I didn’t get back until late. Thought I really had something there, but couldn’t repeat the result.” She lifted a shoulder in a half shrug, her eyes wandering away as she followed some inner train of thought.
Dee extended her wand hand. “Deirdre Ward. Dee will do in a pinch.”

The exchanged handshake was cold fingered and desultory but a shade of warmth was present in Pandora’s watery blue eyes as they snapped back to the present and crinkled with humour. “Right. Welcome to the madhouse. I might not be the best guide but feel free to ask me anything anyway.”

“Thanks. I think.” Dee tucked her hand and wand into a pocket, trying to warm herself.

Pandy turned away. “You the early to rise type, or did my obnoxious bird wake you up?”

“Not sure, really. I’m still getting adjusted.” She blinked, looking out the window at the dark grounds. “I don’t think I could sleep any more now anyway.”

“I don’t have class until ten, so I think I’ll head back to bed.” She covered her mouth, hiding a jaw-cracking yawn.

“Sorry, Pandy. Not the best way to meet.” Deirdre stretched, half of her mind already attending to what she’d do next. Maybe Auntie Sprout would be around? Was she an early riser?

The witch offered a thin smile, “No need, I blame Dole-arse. See you in class?”

Deirdre’s mind was turning back to anticipation of her first day of class, starting with strategising plans to get organised and caught up. As a consequence, her answer was abstracted. “Probability is high given the expected parameters.”

A hushed voice tickled at the edge of her awareness as Deirdre flung open her trunk and set about getting organised. “Oh, she’s going to fit in just fine, Dòlas.”

“SwOT! Wot!” Did that bird just call her a swot?! “Wot!”

Dee twisted to look and found the magpie preening its pinions laconically. Deciding that she was just hearing things, Deirdre bustled off to the lav. Pandy could still be heard as she retreated.
“Shut it or I’ll take away that collar. I swear it on Rowena Ravenclaw’s grave.”

“Gaaaaw.”

Severus sat at his house table, dully shovelling in whatever happened to be closest to his plate. He fended off Avery’s offer of pumpkin juice sourly, “That crap’s for ickle firsties. Tea, black as your mother’s...”

A voice nearby cleared its throat, interrupting Severus mid rant. “Snape.”

Closing his eyes, Severus fought off a wave of exhausted disgust before turning to regard the owner of the voice. “Rosier.”

His classmate shouldered in beside him on the bench, permitting Severus to continue chewing something slightly more edifying than his present company. Barely. By the grace of house elves and good Irish butter.

“About that layered charms project?”

Familiar strains of disappointment coloured Severus’ tone, “Due today. What of it?” He emphasized the t, his awareness of enunciation heightened by his days of therapy in the hospital wing. He’d missed crisp vowels.

“I looked at the part you sent to me and I was wondering if I could switch incantations with someone? Or maybe do something completely different?” The young wizard’s heavy brow cinched together in distress.

Rolling his eyes, Severus growled, “You expected me while I had no tongue to come up with a layered charm for class. I don’t see how you get a vote after putting me entirely in charge of the project.”

Swallowing audibly, Rosier leaned in and admitted, “I’m no good with tonals. You know that, Snape. I’m going to screw it up unless you fix it.”
Severus pulled a mug of tea towards himself with a short nod to the witch who had poured for him, a look of pity in her eyes which he rather thought was directed at Rosier. “You have the parchment?” He drew out his words and enunciated the t once more. He wasn’t anything like his Da, who’d have cuffed the boy and told him to go shove his wand up his prick. No, he was much more civilised outwardly, although sometimes he was sorely tempted.

Smiling in foolish relief, Rosier produced the parchment for Severus who crossed out the whole line of Latin and replaced it with a repeating phrase that was much simpler. Looking over his shoulder eagerly, Rosier read aloud, “Solum stat et caseum, Solum stat et caseum, O summa ui fonticulo, Solum stat et caseum.”

A snigger from behind him reassured Severus that he wasn’t completely alone in this sea of idiocy.

Rosier frowned. “And, what will this do?”

“It will set the rhythm for the rest of us. Here, let me sound it out for you.” Severus reached behind himself to set a steadying hand on Avery, who was about to spoil his bit of fun. He hummed the tune for “Farmer in the Dell” to Rosier.

Rosier’s faint accent leaked through, so relieved he was to have something he knew he could do. “Oh, I’ve heard it afore. That’s alright, then. How many times will it repeat?”

“Thrice plus one. Avery and Mulciber have their own layers in addition to mine but you will go first.” Severus hissed as Rosier moved to take out his wand. “No, not here. We can practice at lunch, grab something and we’ll all head out to the courtyard.” Severus winced inwardly at the very idea of giving up his time to this lot, but it would be in their best interest.

Nodding, Rosier took the parchment back. “Thanks, Snape. See you later.” The dark haired Irish wizard took himself off, humming the tune poorly under his breath.

Avery leaned in with a knowing smirk. “You are an absolute berk, Snape.”

Severus’ attention was back on the monotonous bowl of gruel set before him. His stomach tended to be sour in the mornings, but today he had more of an appetite. “What of it, Avery? Going to correct him? If you’d taken the time to coach him Saturday, we’d have a better spell. As it is, the least I can do is minimise the damage by assigning him a meaningless placeholder.” He cocked an eyebrow at
his classmate who had pulled over a platter and was serving out sausage, of which Severus snagged one for himself. “He can maintain the rhythm for the rest, so it will help us anyway.”

“Are you certain that’s a completely benign spell?”

An eloquent lift of his shoulders was all Severus was going to admit. Of course, he had this feeling that the spell may result in something unlucky, like body odour akin to an expensive blue cheese. “If it isn’t, I’m sure either Flitwick or myself will set him to rights soon enough.” He sneered at Avery, “Or are you going to force me to pair him with you and double your line? It is a less amusing solution to Rosier’s problems, but it would keep him out of harm’s way.”

Avery’s brow rippled in consternation. “Forget I said anything.” Clearly, he had no desire to share.

“And yet already did, like your nosy fishwife of a sister.”

Knowing better than to respond in kind, Avery changed the subject, “You were up early.”

“Please, don’t let me keep you from some other more pleasant occupation than small talk. Unless you’re working up to asking me out to Hogsmeade? Sorry, you’re not my type.”

Draining the contents of his own mug, Avery glared at Snape. “Don’t you go taking it out on me, Snape. You’re the one insulting my sister. My behaviour is beyond reproach.”

Groaning, Severus sought out the older witch over at the Ravenclaw table. “Says the prat who was reading out her diary entries aloud to all who would listen in the common room. Honestly, Avery. You’ve no leg to stand on.”

Snickering, Avery spoke around a mouthful of sausage. “That poetry was the worst, wasn’t it?” He sounded rather proud of himself.

“Salazar’s beard, Avery. Swallow before you speak.”

The deep flush that spread on the wizard’s ears confirmed that he’d gotten the subtext. Not bothering to swallow, Avery retorted, “Get bent, Snape.”
“Not even for you.”

Malciber’s shadow loomed over them, “You gits coming to class or what?”

Severus rose with a pained expression, which he used to scan the Ravenclaw table. Deirdre wasn’t there when he came in and she still wasn’t there as he left. Where could she be?

A yelp from Avery followed by the tell-tale thud of a body hitting the floor heavily drew out a satisfied smirk from Severus, who resisted turning to mock the prone wizard as he struggled to get free, all the while swearing revenge.

Severus had taken advantage of Malciber’s distraction to place a sticking charm on Avery’s robe, pinning it to the bench with a sliding attachment point which added that extra little special touch. The time spent in the infirmary proved invaluable for wordless casting.

The wallowing sot growled as he found his hang up and was sorting himself out when Malciber lost his patience. “What’s your problem, Avery? Forget how to move without a broomstick? Feet too good for common ground?” Malciber helped Avery up and the two exchanged insults all the way to Herbology. By the time they arrived at class, the venom was gone and it evolved into a more amiable competition with an angle to creative cursing.

Severus kept his peace, even when Avery intentionally knocked him into the door on their way out to the Greenhouses. His mind was occupied with much more urgent thoughts of a certain curly haired Ravenclaw.

Herbology proved to be a wash. Deirdre was tucked up into the front row, arriving with her Aunt Pomona. Deirdre sat next to Vasim Shafiq, a nervous sort who was usually the odd man out owing to his irritating personality and general argumentative nature. She seemed to be giving back as good as she was getting, and Severus was surprised that Shafiq’s temper hadn’t ended their debate which lasted all through the seed collection project that was set for them that morning.

Transfiguration and Charms passed slower than a footsore streeler. Rosier did earn himself the appellation of Roquefort as the poor chap broke out in pustules that smelled of overripe cheese. Professor Flitwick was quite understanding, however he did make a comment speculating about the best wine pairing for that particular charm, as it was heretofore unknown. He’d even given Rosier
extra points for his effort and recommended a specific vermin banishing spell to use should he be accosted by a swarm of rats. Rosier was so chuffed that he didn’t do more than flicked Severus the bird when the little professor’s back was turned.

The three-layered spell was useful for containing explosions and Rosier’s part would have reinforced the floor charm, held in place by Mulciber as it was, Avery the top and Severus the sides. Naturally it still came out quite well and Severus was modestly pleased with the results, and they earned a E for their effort, which wasn’t too bad for a group project.

Finally, double Potions came around.

Severus and Deirdre arrived around the same time. Very short people were trickling out of the classroom and Severus approached Dee as she stood, arms crossed with a bemused look on her face.

“Sickle for your thoughts?”

“You value them so much?”

Severus dry swallowed against the sudden anxiety he felt at what was probably meant as a light-hearted question. “Actually, yes.” He looked away, on the pretense of watching people walk past too.

Deirdre leaned into him, and when he froze against the warm gesture she chuckled. “I was just thinking of how strange things seem, and yet so familiar.” She shrugged. “The whole day has felt like a continuous deja vu.”

Lowering his head to speak quietly, Severus murmured into her hair, “Any memories?”

Shaking her head, Deirdre looked troubled. “Just snatches of alien emotions. Feeling like I should know someone or that something is out of place but I just can’t do it.” Her lips twitched up in an anxious smile. “Like you, for example.”

Severus pulled back, looking at her. “What?”
Eyes sparkling with amusement, she teased, “Maybe it’s the haircut. Or the smile. Both seem out of place.”

Frowning, Severus raised an eyebrow.

Deirdre burst out laughing, “Oh, more of that! That’s exactly right.”

Grumbling, Severus broke away from her. “Come along, let’s find a spot.” He sensed her following after.

“Oh, don’t be cross with me, Severus.”

They clamoured into the classroom, eager to find a spot. Vasim Shafiq was already there and had claimed the front right bench. He usually worked alone, but Severus noticed that he’d left a suspicious amount of space open for a potential partner. Tough luck, bucko me lad. I’ve got the drop on you this time! “You can make it up to me later.”

“Scrubbing cauldrons? Oh, I could finish out the liquorice roots.”

Severus felt the stiffness in his back as he bent to shift his bag under the table. When he straightened again, he met her smirk with a leer of his own. “I shall have to think up something else. You are not deterred by the usual drudgery. There are other things I can think of that might mollify me.”

Deirdre blushed prettily and he felt an answering heat in his own ears. He had to pull his eyes away but didn’t miss her low comment that slipped in under Professor Slughorn’s overly jolly opening to class. “We’ll have to talk more on that later.”

A faint panic gripped his thoughts. What was he doing?! She was going to want to know what he wanted. What if she didn’t like what he asked for? Could he make it something she already wanted? What did she want of him? Surely she was only clinging to the only person she really knew. Wrong, wrong… all wrong. He was going to screw up, he was as sure of that as he was of his own name. Bugger it all to hell.
Morag MacMillan stopped by to say hello in Potions and Deirdre appreciated the distraction. Before she knew it, she had agreed to study together that evening in the library, and really she was looking forward to it. At least until she turned back to see Severus’ blank expression.

He’d been acting strangely all class. He stopped speaking to her in more than one word answers and he moved stiffly, nothing like the fevered labours they shared yesterday. She caught him staring at her once, but he looked away with a start.

The rest of class passed swiftly and she found that he was lagging behind, putting away his equipment with excessive care. When he returned to collect his bag, she thought she could see a faint sign of pain.

“Are you quite alright, Severus?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Deirdre watched him walk away before she trotted to catch up with him. “That’s a lie. You’re walking as though you’ve a board shoved down the back of your robes. Did someone hex you?”

“It’s fine. I can handle it.”

“Was it when my back was turned? I didn’t think I’d miss that…”

He cut her off with a decisive swipe of his hand, his tone edged with irritation. “Enough. If you must know, I am sore from working with Professor Nott this morning.” He might have read the true concern that she felt. The sour expression on his face softened as he added, possibly as an apology, “The tonic he had me take seems to be wearing off.”

Falling into a comfortable silence, they walked a ways before Deirdre noticed a pair of Slytherin girls behind them. She looked up at him with raised eyebrows and a slight tip of her head backwards to indicate their train. “You know them?”

“Williams and Cook. They’re alright.” His expression locked down to neutral once more. He’d started to relax, damn it. It made her want to just drag him off somewhere and force him to take a cup of tea. She knew she needed to unwind.
“How do you feel about cats?”

The confused look on his face made her want to giggle, but she bit her lip, holding it in lest he think she was mocking him outright.

When he didn’t answer she prompted him, “You know. Fuzzy creatures with sharp claws and teeth that purr when they are happy? They adore fish and ribbons and people who are allergic to them?”

“Pee all over the garden and leave half-eaten vermin on the back step? Those loathsome creatures? What of them.”

He wasn’t jollying up. Bother. She turned up her smile another degree, trying her best to look winsome. “I am going to visit a kitten. He’s in Professor McGonagall’s office. Want to come with?” Everyone loves kittens, right?

He scrubbed a hand over his face. “I have some homework to do.”

“So do I. I’m meeting Morag after dinner to work in the library. If you promise to be pleasant, I’m sure you’d be quite welcome. She’s really first rate. Did I tell you about the pie I flung at Lily Evans on Saturday night? It was her invention.”

Rumours flew about, and of course he’d seen the evidence of its lasting effects on his once-best-friend. Should he have tried harder to take advantage of the lull in open hostility? Severus covered these thoughts with a bland expression. “I am not certain I should promise you anything of the sort. Too easily broken in certain company.”

Undeterred, she bounced a bit in her toes and reached out to tuck a hand in his arm, a gesture of claiming. “Please, at least come see the kitten? It will be fun. Crookshanks needs to meet more wizards, it will be good for him too.” She frowned, “So far he’s met Filch, Sirius Black, and James Potter.” She felt Severus’ tension under her fingers.

Grumbling, Severus reluctantly agreed, “I’ll at least walk you up there. Don’t expect me to stay.” The last thing he wanted was to run into Black and Potter.
Deirdre skipped a step, feeling just a bit victorious as she propelled them forwards against his lead-footed lack of enthusiasm. “Come on, then!”

Once there, they gained ready admittance to find a little fuzzy orange kitten who seemed glad for the attention, as well as a harried-appearing Professor who had to pin the miscreant feline to her side to prevent him from escaping at the door. “Settle down Crookshanks, I’ll let you down in a moment.”

The forlorn mew she received in response pulled Dee into the room, and she determinedly dragged Severus in with her, not allowing him to escape. He did not mew but the look he shared with the kitten made Deirdre imagine them as fellow prisoners, entangled in the iron clad shackles of kindness.

Deirdre was quite relieved when Professor McGonagall indicated that Sirius and James were not due in for another hour or so for their detention. Severus seated himself at the round table in the corner, and had pulled out a book to read while Dee hunkered down, cross legged on the floor, tempting Crookshanks to pounce and jump with a strand of yarn she’d retrieved from her pocket.

Professor McGonagall returned to the tedious task of copying out multiple letters, stamping and sealing them with the intention of mailing them off later. A fire was alive in the grate behind her, bringing up the temperature in the room.

Among the Professor’s correspondence were two scrolls, each sealed with a ribbon and looking very official. One rolled off the desk and tumbled onto the floor, startling the kitten who positively levitated three feet in the air. His fur standing on end made his tail look a lot like a bottle-brush had attached itself to his bum.

Giggling, Deirdre watched as the wee fuzzy hunter stalked the scroll which was still rolling towards the side.

Crookshanks pounced and had the ribbon in his mouth before McGonagall could stop him, and when she stood to retrieve it, he backed away. “Now you little thief, give that back. It is very important.”

Narrowing his yellow-orange eyes, Crookshanks lashed his tail in challenge.

Professor McGonagall huffed and raised her wand, but before she could finish an incantation, he’d bolted off towards a bookcase behind Severus. “Catch him! I need to send that off tonight!”
Severus looked up from his reading too late and Crookshanks flattened his ears as he raced toward the case, which he leapt up onto. It was an impressive jump by kitten standards, but it still left the thief and his scroll only about four feet up. Dee had forgotten how long-limbed the wizard was, and watched in fascination as he casually reached out and wrapped his fingers about the kitten’s middle, prizing it off of the wood.

“Mew!!!” Crookshanks was so incensed that he dropped the scroll, forcing Severus to grab it with his other hand. Once secured, he pulled the kitten back to his chest in an unconscious gesture of comfort. Crookshanks squirmed, putting its claws out as it grabbed onto his robes.

A strange smile spread across his face as he stood, still holding onto Crookshanks and handed the kidnapped prize back to Professor McGonagall. The severe witch’s gratitude was difficult to detect to the uninitiated, limited to a bitten-out reply of, “Thank you, Mr Snape.”

Making a Herculean effort, the kit broke his captor’s grip, his mewing changing to one of distress as he wove his way across Severus’ shoulders. Both cat and wizard looked to Dee.

“Ridiculous, the pair of you.” Deirdre stood, a smile playing across her lips as she reached up to detach the notably shedding creature from Severus’ shoulder. “I keep telling you that you are too tall.”

Crookshanks leapt into Dee’s arms, and the claws that had come out in his anxiety to escape made her wince. “Ow!”

Severus watched her with a bemused expression as the kitten leaned up and licked her on the cheek before escaping her too. “I think he likes you.”

Deirdre’s heart lightened. “Oh, I hope so. I think he’s the cutest creature I’ve ever laid eyes on.”

It was clear from the boggled expression on Severus’ face that he disagreed, but was smart enough to not say so aloud. Any response he might have unwisely made was interrupted by a commotion on the other side of the office.

The fire behind McGonagall flared to life, green. Three grim-faced figures stepped through. One was the student who’d been dancing with Lily Evans before Potter interfered. His eyes were shuttered and he appeared deeply disturbed. The second was a pale-faced Gryffindor girl she’d yet to meet,
and the last was a haggard looking Professor Nott.

“Productive trip, Professor?”

Nott shook his head. “I’ll tell you later.” He reached into his inner pocket and took out a set of phials that were filled with silver liquid, covertly showing them to McGonagall before tucking them back away once more. He turned to the two students, “I’d like you both to write up a report. Shacklebolt, you are to focus on the victims and motive. Otto, I’d like you to come up with a list of theories as to what happened to the family based on the written reports and photos you saw today. Dismissed.”

Deirdre was intrigued, eyes hungrily taking in details, ears nuance. She stepped closer to Severus who she noticed was similarly engaged.

McGonagall, ever practical, “Are you heading up to the Headmaster’s office, then?”

A curt nod was his response. “Yes. Excuse me.” He managed a crooked smile for Deirdre and Severus as he made for the exit.

Severus placed a wide hand on Deirdre’s back and said, “We should be going too. It is almost time to go down to the Great Hall for dinner.”

McGonagall started at the sound of Severus’ voice, so taken in with her own inner speculations she had forgotten she was not as of yet alone. “Quite. Good Evening, Mr Snape. Miss Ward.”

Deirdre’s mouth opened, her mind bubbling over with questions, but her tongue pushed out the expected response, “Thank you, Professor. Have a pleasant evening.” She looked about for the little orange fuzz ball, but he was nowhere to be seen. With a pang of regret she let Severus steer her out of the office.

Neither spoke as they stepped out into the hallway, moments after Professor Nott. The man was gone from view. She looked up at Severus, who shook his head silently and offered her an arm that she took gladly.

The two Slytherin girls, previously perched on a bench next to the office, stood and followed them. They’d been looking after the Professor as well. One murmured, “Wonder what McGonagall did to him? He looked like he was running to a fire.”
The other answered in amusement, “Lucky fire.” Both smothered giggles.

Severus and Deirdre simultaneously rolled their eyes and turned away, walking towards the Great Hall in a mutual companionable silence.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks to Coromandel and ScarletDewdrops for help with beta'ing this chapter. It is a special week for me and Coromandel as about a year ago I published my first chapter of Time Immemorial with her help. She's helped me grow loads as a writer and I'm so thankful for her. I'm also thankful for the new people who I 'meet' through comments like ScarletDewdrops. FrancineHibiscus, JaneWeller, sej, Andante825, etherina, and many others have also been lovely (I can't mention everyone but all of you are the best!). I am having a fantastic time!

I'm hoping to see this story completed by the end of the year and have already started planning for Book 2. I am not yet certain of how many there will be, but I hope that you all will enjoy the story as it unfolds.

My heartfelt thanks to readers like you! Kudos and comments are always much appreciated and warm my heart!
Whit stood, looking out the window, his outer eyes unfocused whilst his mind picked over the events of the afternoon. Three days ago he penned an answer to his uncle, offering polite apologies and a suggestion that they take time over the upcoming holiday. Ideally one much more inconvenient. He had hoped that the old codger would be sufficiently put out with him that Whit would be condemned back into the company of those relatives deemed unworthy of his time or notice.

After all, Cantankerus Nott was the authority on wizarding bloodlines and one of the most arrogant creatures to tread the earth. When Whit returned a decorated war hero for his part in the defeat of Grindelwald, the old man had praised him as the scion of his house, parading their connection about like he was his own personal creation. He’d been deeply scandalised when his nephew refused to rebuff the rumours surrounding his wild behaviour and hedonist lifestyle. The unwanted missives and invitations and the familial obligations dried right up. It was glorious.

Therefore, Whit was completely unprepared when the elderly wizard nearly beat his office door down over his study period earlier that afternoon, demanding tea and his time. How did the old goat know he had office hours Thursday afternoons? Perhaps one of his cronies on the Board. No matter. The topics of the conversation were both predictable and discomfiting to both wizards, and Whit was suspicious. What had sparked this rekindled interest in his disappointing excuse for a nephew? Uncle Nott’s expression seldom strayed far from that which one usually makes when they smell something particularly loathsome. Some things will never change.

He opened by criticising Whit’s lack of manners, particularly in neglecting his familial obligation to attend upon his aging relatives, especially having been back in the country for months. He hardly paused to listen to Whit’s excuses when he changed the subject, inquiring after Whit’s plans to return to the Cursebreaking scene or to stay on at Hogwarts.

Whit safely retreated behind vagarity, as he was uncertain of what the future would hold and had not time to spare a thought for the future past his next week’s lesson plans and perhaps his next trip to the Three Broomsticks. After his service in the war, he’d always made a point of living in the moment. He was the opposite to this elderly wizard. Cantankerus Nott spent his waking hours divided between reminiscence of the good old days (which were by all accounts well over a century ago) and his fears for the future of the wizarding world, the latter being the dominant occupation of his thoughts today.

Lest Whit forget, the patriarch of the family discussed his views on the political mistakes made by the
Wizengamot over the past 200 years, a stark contrast to his satisfaction over more recent developments. Things finally seemed to be swinging back to the conservative wizard’s satisfaction after the disasters of the Squibs Rights riots. He placed the blame squarely on former Minister Nobby Leach’s shoulders, citing his progressive liberal ideologies.

When Whit pointed out that Eugenia Jenkins had done tolerably well handling things between the pureblood counter demonstrations, Uncle Cantankerus declared that she was too soft. She had been forced to step down last year because of her failure to stem the rising tide of wizarding crimes, in spite of her flare for diplomacy.

“Menchim, now here’s a better prospect, but if only he would be more firm. These attacks are a direct result of the softer and kinder Ministry. It has fostered a lack of discipline and eroded respect for the law. No, the Ministry needs to do more to preserve our way of life, and protect our sacred bloodlines!”

Whit was doing his best to be a good host, but it was difficult to maintain his composure with the old coot whose prejudices made Menchim look like a candidate for sainthood.

It was with genuine, chilling enthusiasm that Uncle Cantankerus voiced his support for the so-called Knights of Walpurgis, who had been featured in the papers just this morning for their work helping to extract a witch from a Muggle medical facility where she was being forcibly dosed with medications to try and cure her of the entirely natural magical behaviours that they didn’t understand. She had been forced to defend herself with her wand, but the spell failed and the Muggles disarmed her, every witch’s worst nightmare.

“The poor thing was being drugged and starved. She is very fortunate.” The mans jowls quivered in rage on the behalf of this heretofore unknown witch, whom Whit doubted his Uncle would have even spared a glance for in any other circumstance.

The picture featured on the front page of the Daily Prophet showed a thoroughly disheveled woman being guarded by masked “Knights” who took credit for her rescue. It all had the mark of theatrical propaganda. The dear girl looked as frightened of her escort as one might have been of the Muggles themselves.

“But Uncle, these are the same low-lives who were charged with Muggle-baiting three years back, are they not? I don’t think that such wizards should be admired for reckless vigilante behaviour, surely the Ministry should have handled it.”

Perched on a hard, straight-backed chair by his desk, the old man rapped his cane on the floor. “They
were young wizards with high spirits, and things just went too far. Besides none of the charges could be proved, my boy. This young man, Lord Voldemort, I believe he calls himself, is taking frustrated wizards and turning their energies to good works, filling in the cracks where the Ministry is failing. He’s worth watching, lad. A rising hope for Magical peoples here, and perhaps everywhere if his ambition comes to fruition.”

Whit was silently working out how he could possibly respond to such a pack of misconceptions when his Uncle changed the subject.

“Now, speaking of applying youthful energy to proper occupation, when are you going to finally give up gallivanting about and find yourself a proper wife? You need to do your duty by the house, strengthen the blood lines!” That was punctuated by a double rap of the cane, reminiscent of a judge’s gavel, calling the court to order. Please call the first witness!

How does one politely tell one of the most influential wizards in all of the United Kingdom to piss off and mind his own business? “I am certain that my younger brother and his wife’s efforts will secure that. You worry too much, Uncle. My mother hasn’t let the family down.”

In fact, Mrs. Nott had long since given up on trying to manipulate Whittington into a marriage, as nothing worked on her oldest son, not obligation, threat, nor promise of a sweet reward could tempt him into matrimony. When the time came, he would no doubt step aside for one of his younger siblings to take over the business of managing the family’s estate. He had no designs on the family fortunes because the strings attached were as restricting as the vaults were large.

Truthfully, Whit felt certain that no self-respecting witch of pure blood would ever want to be saddled with him, given his wild and publicly known escapades. Handsome War Hero status recommended one little when one was also considered a terrible and unapologetic rake. Sir Whittington Nott was always up for a romp, but he simply would never make proper husband material. He rather liked it that way.

“What is it that you’ve been wrapped up in that could be second to family obligations, young man? Explain yourself!” Those winter sky coloured eyes were remarkably penetrating, and a chill gripped Whit’s chest. This was no mere polite inquiry. This had the tone of an interrogation.

Whit produced a highly edited narrative about his work with the cursebreakers since the war, trying to stay ahead of where Muggle archaeologists had been eagerly sifting through the ancient lands and unearthing fascinating ruins that were riddled with dangerous magic.

Uncle Nott seemed marginally mollified by his tales of close calls and tragedies that could not be
averted, but at length the man asked specifically what Dumbledore had him doing. When Whit did not produce specifics, citing the long hours done preparing and tutoring, the manipulative bastard pointed out that Whit didn’t need to work for a living, which was very true, and he summarily dismissed his nephew’s protestations that he actually liked the work he was doing, which was also mostly true.

“You should come to meet with the Knights of Walpurgis. I can guarantee you an introduction to Lord Voldemort himself, a wonderful opportunity for you, Whittington.”

The fey glow in the old man’s eye worried Whit even more than the threat of renewed expectations for Whit to enter into a respectable marriage. Uncle Cantankerus took Whit’s silence for interest, and continued in his persuasion.

“Why, you are just the sort of fellow that the Lord could use in his plans to make the Isles a haven for Magical peoples, bring back the days of Avalon.” He spoke this propaganda line with a religious fervour that set off alarm bells.

It was with a rush of gratitude that he answered his door a quarter ‘til one and found the normally annoying but now quite timely Miss Flamel. She wished to discuss a seemingly unending list of questions about upcoming exams that were weeks away yet. Whit cheerfully expressed his regrets to his Uncle and ushered the man out with alacrity and false polite thanks and promises to consider his words.

The rest of the afternoon’s classes passed in a fog, his mind repeatedly casting back to that conversation. He was thoroughly unsettled, and his mind was busy working at ways to assure that he was unavailable when the dreaded invitation arrived. He wanted nothing more than to stay well away from any people who might associate with his Uncle when there was a third interrupting knock at the his door.

At his called, “Enter!” His door opened to usher in the welcome company of his second private student. “Of course, it is that time. Do come in, Miss Ward.”

Deirdre stepped into the classroom, having just watched a group of sixth years make their way out ten minutes before. Luckily, she wasn’t much noticed, thankful for the discrete waves from Pandy, her roommate, and Sherwood. She hadn’t spotted Severus in the crowd, but he must have been there. She’d felt the compulsion to knock, not wanting to intrude nor wishing to be left waiting and wondering if she was expected.
Professor Nott was standing by a window, and she’d seen him staring out over the darkening sky, but as he turned to consider her, she couldn’t help but shiver under the weight of those considering eyes.

Was she a cypher that could not be cracked? The longer the moment stretched out, the worse she felt about things. A surfeit of guilt. Fetch a cup of tea for the drowning witch. Or perhaps suntan lotion for the one burning at the stake? Gah. She wanted to slap herself, so morose and pathetic those thoughts.

Seeking distraction, she looked about, taking in the details of the classroom. A skeleton of a dragon hung from the ceiling and the candles strongly resembled the spinal columns, their upright direction strongly suggestive of humanoid origins. She blinked away the impression of flesh melting away from bone.

Movement out of the corner of her eye redirected her attention back to her tutor as he lowered himself into the chair behind his desk. He gestured at a chair to the side, using magic to pull it into position.

As she settled in, she forced herself to meet the Professor’s troubled eyes once more. It had been silent too long. She ventured an opening, falling back on prescribed forms. “Good evening, Professor Nott.”

Crow’s feet squinched into great relief at the address, a return of life and humour. That basic life raft seemed sufficient to pull the wizard back in from whatever current of thought was pulling him away.

“Good evening, Miss Ward. I’d like to start out by apologising to you for what happened yesterday. I should have been more sensitive to your responses, it need not have gone so far. Secondly, I want you to know that I don’t think that you are incapable of performing well in my class.”

Confused, Deirdre asked, “So you are saying that you have confidence in my skills? Sir, you hardly had started before you had to stop me. I can’t see how you think you know that.”

A corner of his mouth pulled up crookedly. “You forget, Miss Ward. I’ve seen the inside of your mind. I know how strong you must be, I’ve seen the evidence in your scars.”

Deirdre looked down at her hands, and on noticing that they were trembling, she clasped them.
tightly. A stinging in her eyes warned of another storm of emotion on the horizon. Her instincts told her to slide to the floor, back to the wall in the nearest shadow. “And yet I am weak. I can’t control my reactions. When faced with whatever horrible event that landed me here, my mind had to protect me by making me forget Gods know not what!?” She found herself leaning forwards, her arms crossed over her chest. The floor was there. Where she could see it. It was her foundation. There was always a floor.

“What your mind has done was an act of necessity, of this I’ve no doubt, Miss Ward. You are too hard on yourself. When you are ready, you will remember and not a moment before. Madam Pomfrey already consulted with a discreet mindhealer of her acquaintance. This is something more basic and visceral than Obliviation, and also more natural. It can happen to any person, magical or not, although it is quite rare.”

She had no idea of what to say to that. Logically it made some sense, but her heart was having trouble gathering these truths to her chest, so fragile but painful to handle, like her mind was probing at thoughts that were covered in shards of glass.

“Why, I’ve seen soldiers shut down completely to eliminate the good and bad emotional responses, as though the part of themselves that feels has been anaesthetised. Usually in response to something incredibly traumatic. The death of an innocent can do it, or prolonged torture such as was seen in...”

She gasped as a door of memory cracked open, incomplete but terrifying. It was dark and cold and she was falling, spinning into the blackness. There behind her was something too terrible to countenance. The world about her tunneled down to that sensation, the prattling voice of the Professor becoming muffled and incomprehensible.

Hands gripped her arms. Everything about this situation was wrong and she was going to die if she didn’t run, all of her instincts alive with the certainty that she wasn’t safe. She twisted, trying to escape into that suffocating blackness of the void. “Let me go! Please. I don’t know anything. Let me go!”

“You are alright, Miss Ward. Deirdre, come back to me. Shhhh. Shhh.” The fingers gripping her loosened their hold a fraction and she would have ripped herself free in that moment if only her legs weren’t treacherously weak underneath her.

Gasping for air and sweating, she forced her eyes open. Classroom. She was in a classroom, at Hogwarts. Quick, she had to go... go find a sheltered spot. Cast wards. Hide. “I have to go. I need to go.” Her voice was weak in her own ears.
“Deirdre, I will let go of you as soon as I can be certain you are back with me. Lean on me, let’s get you seated.”

Stunned, she didn’t recognise the voice at first, but her eyes sought out the moss green ones of the man before her. Her backside hit the chair and his grip loosened further. Wrong green. “Wrong wrong wrong wrong…” Rocking to the rhythm, she buried her hands in her curls.

“There now. You are safe at Hogwarts. Safe. Whatever that was, it is in the past. Over.”

The messy thatch of graying roan, tweed coat, and sharp moss-green eyes added up to one very disturbed looking Professor Nott. A wave of nausea washed over her. “I think I am about to vomit.” A trash bin levitated over to her side and she gripped its cold, comforting solid metal shell with both hands.

“What has happened to the Ward?” The voice was female, different, somewhat familiar.

A tut-tutting sound alerted her to another presence. That annoyed her, where did that one get off tutting at her.

“I thought for a moment there that she’d lost her head!” Sir Nicholas almost sounded jealous.

In spite of her frightening state, she strained her ears and yes… there it was. The gentle jingling of the chains of the Bloody Baron. All out in force. How did she know?

“Deirdre, here. Press this to your forehead. That’s a good girl. I’m going to fetch some tea.” The cold cloth felt wonderful on her forehead and she sat. She thought she could hear a silent amendment of “And Madam Pomfrey”, but wasn’t in any shape to protest anything. Instead, she kept her head down and waved a hand vaguely in answer.

“Carry on, tally ho, toodle pip.” The absurdity of it all set her giggling. It was a weird, high-pitched sound, and she tightened her lips, forcing the obscenity back down whence they came.

The ghostly face of Helena Ravenclaw appeared through the tile, looking at her with obvious concern. “She’s… laughing.”
That was it. She threw her head back and laughed, her eyes blurred with tears. “Merlin’s little green apples!” She looked about, finding Nearly Headless Nick, and tried to explain. “You, Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington, just made a wonderful joke.”

The ghost blinked, his face contorting into a series of expression that suggested that deep thought was painful at best, elusive at worst.

The Grey Lady floated up muttering, “Oh, stop that. You’ll break something and have yet another thing to moan about all year long.”

“I say! That’s rather rude.”

Covering her mouth with her hand, she tried to quiet the shuddering laughter that continued to trickle out of her, threatening to be endless like a fountain, taking up the same water and forcing it back into circulation once more. Surely, she must be going mad.

She was broken out of her mental hamster wheel by the appearance of a cup of tea at eye level.

“How do you take it?”

She straightened, easing the trash can down to the floor where it wobbled before settling properly in the upright position. It struck her as funny anew and her traitorous body shuddered in ill contained mirth. “Oh, thank you, sir. Plain would suit just now.” She reached out, her hands steadier now, following that up with, “Professor Nott. I... I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be such a burden.” She was using the cold cloth to wipe her eyes with her free hand, the other cradling her cup protectively on her thigh.

The Professor returned to her side, a cup of tea of his own in his hands. “Miss Ward. Surely you don’t expect to get through this on your own?”

The compassion in his voice tightened her throat. Oh, no. Not again. Anger flared to life, a hot spark that burned, burning away the grief, throwing her fear into shadow. Well why shouldn’t she be able to weather this out on her own? She wasn’t some silly little girl. “Sir, it is hardly appropriate of me to accost you, what is it, twice now with my problems.”

“I can’t think of anyone better. Unless you’d rather talk with the Headmaster, or perhaps Professor
Svartrunir.” He held her attention with his eyes. “But you must have someone who understands what you are suffering, Miss Ward.”

Deirdre reached out and grasped the anger, holding to it. “Professor. If you are too kind I won’t be able to stand it. Just, can you not?” Her voice was stronger.

A droll voice broke in. “I know suffering. Oh what humiliation and pain I’ve had to endure over the countless years…” Sir Nicholas was presenting her with his own personal credentials, and if she wasn’t careful he would list every single disappointment his afterlife added to those he accumulated prior to his poorly executed beheading.

“Not now, Nicholas.” The Fat Friar was facing off his counterpart, using his belly to crowd the unwanted apparition out of the room. “Go haunt the upper halls. I think there’s a couple of fifth years that were very interested in hearing your confessions of woe.”

“Really? Where?” He actually was buying the bait.

The Fat Friar bounced his belly. “They were leaving the Divination loft. Hurry along. I bet they’ll be heading for Gryffindor tower. You can still catch them.” He jerked his head at the Baron. “Follow, make sure he tarries elsewhere.” The Baron inclined his head, leaving them via the open door.

“Thank you, friends.” Professor Nott was sipping his tea as though this were all perfectly normal for an evening after a long day of teaching.

The Friar and The Lady drifted out of the room, walking arm in arm, both nodding to the Professor as they floated away.

Once they could be certain that the pair was gone, Deirdre sipped at the cooling tea. It wasn’t particularly good tea, but it was hot. She wrinkled her nose. Chamomile? Ugh. Straightening in her chair, she cleared her throat. “As I was saying, what I want from you is direction. I can’t go to pieces like this.” Her fingers itched. “Is there some way I could practice?” She could go for a good hexing right now. The humour that had carried her minutes before was draining away and the empty, lost feeling threatened her feeble reserves.

“Well, it is generally better to do so with a partner at your level of training.”
She leveled a flat stare at him.

After clearing his throat, his expression lightened. “Of course, you feel that you are not ready for that just yet. I see your dilemma. I might have just the thing.”

Standing, she pulled her wand out and looked at him, expectant.

He’d relaxed into a very casual posture, so he did a double take when he understood her intentions. “I see, you intend to practise right now?”

Deirdre blinked slowly, stifling the eyeroll that his response deserved. She did come here to learn, not fall to pieces. Although in this case the two appeared to be distractingly bound to one another. “Tired, sir? I suppose that if you just hand me directions and give permission I can take myself off to train. Alone.” A faint part of her gasped in the back of her mind. She’d not meant to be so forward.

Squinting, he shook his head in disbelief. “Not a chance, Miss Ward.”

Unable to resist, she added. “Just give me a list of spells and a reference book. I’m sure I can get on fine. What subject shall I cover in the 2 foot essay you’ll assign me before next week?”

A glint of humour reflected in her Professor’s moss-green eyes as his face pinched in exaggerated dismay. “Appalling. Are you suggesting that I’ve nothing to offer to your tutelage beyond setting a syllabus?” He clambered to his feet as he spoke.

She tilted her head, burying the smile that threatened to escape. “Of course not, sir. I wouldn’t want to take you away from your private pursuits, Professor. I know your time is valuable and you probably need your rest.” She cleared her throat and added, “Sir.”

He stepped closer, looming over her. His hair was backlit by the awful candles. “Did you just imply that I am getting old?” A narrowing of his eyes suggested that she’d either struck a nerve, or expression had betrayed her.

Deirdre flushed, as she recalled Sherwood’s unhealthy depth of knowledge about the wizard before her. Truthfully, he looked much younger than his fifty-eight years, and it was difficult to keep that in mind. Denial tumbled naturally from her lips, “That would be both rude and unwise, Professor. I only meant to say that you do seem tired and from what I understand, you start teaching before
dawn.” She softened her tone, “Your dedication does not go unmarked, sir. I do hate to add to your burdens.”

“Flattery is preferable to insult, Miss Ward. Still, I do like your bite.” He stared at her a long moment, and then appeared to come to a decision. “Let’s see what you are made of.”

Anxiety nibbled at its cage at the back of her mind. “Where are we going?” Her question was directed to the man’s retreating back.

“The firing range. Step to it, Miss Ward.”

“Yes, Professor.” She trotted after him, wondering if she had made an error. She’d accused him of being tired, but she herself was feeling frayed about the edges after that last attack. Still, the opportunity to let loose was too good to pass up. She needed this.

A series of winding halls and a stairwell down later, he led her into an underground hall, fashioned out of a tunnel that looked like it might have been taken from part of the London Underground. The ceiling was lined with tile, arranged in a staggered pattern that suggested its occupants were in a snake skin, turned inside out and petrified. At one end a series of cloth dummies stood in a row, much like scarecrows. Each was dressed differently.

Scowling, Professor Nott swore under his breath, but she couldn’t begin to make out the words. There was a sensation of thickness to the air, as though there was greater pressure here. Deirdre worked her jaw, trying to get her ears to pop.

“I have to check the safety wards. Someone’s been mucking about down here. Stay right here.” She had the idea that he was shouting but the words were muffled. Ah. A protective spell, cast to prevent hearing loss. Why they hadn’t just set a noise containment spell around the target area, she wasn’t certain.

Nodding her understanding, Deirdre watched as the cursebreaker set about testing the containment fields that would protect the casters and contain the effects of their curses. One of the dummies was better dressed than the others. Professor Nott seemed to notice it too, as he appropriated the robes off of it and banished the wig of long black hair. It had started to sing “Hooked on a Feeling.” Dispelling those pranks, Professor Nott looked like he had worked up quite the temper himself. He stalked back to the door, and she had almost decided he was going to step out before she saw him divert to a set of pegs by the door, where he deposited the robes.
He held up a hand, indicating that she should wait. Moments later, all six dummies were in shambles from a variety of hexes. Walking over to a lever set in the floor, he stepped on it, and the dummies pulled themselves back together, filling in the holes. Wasn’t magic wonderful?

Turning back to her, he gestured at the row, indicating that it was her turn.

“What spell should I try?”

Professor Nott’s crooked grin returned with a glint of challenge, sharp as a scimitar. “Impress me.”

Deirdre gathered her wits, squared up, and performed a formal salute, her wand briskly cutting the air with a swish as she brought it up to her face in deference to her imaginary challenger. Clearing her mind, she embraced the purifying fire of her anger and let it sing.

Half an hour later, Professor Nott signaled a halt. As she settled, Deirdre found herself feeling centered. The complicated knot of emotions that had bound rational thought so tightly before did not return.

“Forgetting the rocky start, I think we made progress today, don’t you?” He walked beside her through the halls, and she was having a small amount of success retracing their steps until he turned, taking her a different way.

Swallowing her confusion, but consciously deciding to trust the man, she nodded shortly. “I hope so.” She glanced up at him and narrowed her eyes in suspicion. “You aren’t trying to be kind, are you, Professor?”

Free hand waving in negation, he was quick to answer. “I shall endeavour to undo the decades of genteel behaviour my dear mother insisted upon in her sons. It won’t be easy, young lady.”

Digesting this, moments and another hallway later, Deirdre suggested, “Well, you were in the late war, or so you’ve implied. Can’t you just forget I’m a girl and treat me like a cadet? Or whatever they’re called? Surely you wouldn’t coddle them along.”
Raising his brows, he answered, “I doubt that you have an idea of what those poor recruits went through. I did it myself, although I had the benefits of magical potions to help me along. But this isn’t a camp meant to turn out soldiers. It’s a school, Miss Ward.”

“That’s what you are doing with Severus, isn’t it?”

He looked down at the robe folded over his arm, a faintly embarrassed expression over his face. “I am giving him the tonic that helped me through.”

“Why? What do you hope to accomplish in forcing him to go through the same suffering you did?”

He huffed out a short laugh, “Would you believe for love of Queen and country?”

“Honestly. You said yourself, this is a school, not the army.” Her breath caught in her throat and she looked at her Professor. No way. She didn’t miss the nervous bobbing of the man’s Adam’s apple, or the not so subtle increase in pace.

She looked away, mind picking at the problem. That’s exactly what he was doing. He was training Severus to be much like him.

“I have, at the recommendation of Professor Svartrunir engaged Mr. Snape to be my assistant. I have several projects that I work on outside of school hours and he remains in need of a steadying influence and some extra cash. I am not at liberty to say any more at this time, but rest assured, he is quite safe with me.” The smile that was produced along with this convoluted answer struck her as false.

Judging it best to keep her silence, to convince him that she accepted that load of tripe she said, “That sounds interesting. The life of a cursebreaker always seemed rather glamorous to me.”

Relaxing, Professor Nott shook his head. “Unless you find dirt and cobwebs of keen interest. Really it is long periods of dull grunt work, followed by what amounts to probably a quarter of an hour of life-threatening danger every few months.” He chuckled. “I suppose the charm wore off long ago.”

“I’d be interested to hear some of your stories sometime. Have you thought of writing a memoir?”
That slowed his steps. “Whatever for?” The alarm in his voice seemed genuine.

She lifted a shoulder in acknowledgement. “You’ve lived through exciting times. I am willing to bet people would be interested.” They’d returned to more familiar territory and she could hear voices echoing from the Great Hall, the clink of plates punctuating the din. Her stomach rumbled its enthusiasm for her to get in there right now.

“I fear I don’t have time for such things. Too busy with my glamorous life of teaching wayward wizards and witches who show up at my door, refusing genteel gestures and kind concern.” He chuckled at the scowl that must have appeared on her face. “Careful, Miss Ward. You wear your emotions too openly. One might think you sorted into the wrong house.”

She firmly clamped her tongue to the roof of her mouth, denying it the chance to respond in kind. When the moment passed, she answered, “When shall we meet again?”

“Surely not in thunder, lightning, or in rain.”

Surprised into a laugh, she quoted the next line, “When the hurlyburly’s done?”

He quirked an eyebrow up, “Very good, Miss Ward. But I must insist that it be before the battle’s lost and won. Thursday. I’ll send you a note with our intended lesson beforehand.”

“Thank you, Professor.” She smiled at him before hurrying off to join the crowd in the Great Hall.

Professor Nott stood still, watching Miss Ward’s disappearing figure as it was devoured by the shadows and distance. After he was certain she was gone he held out his arm and spoke. “I take it this belongs to you?”

A man-shaped ripple in the wall dissolved, revealing the slight figure of Severus Snape, Nott’s other project. He took the robe, examining it carefully. “I thought it lost weeks ago. Hadn’t thought to look down there.” NEWT students didn’t practice on dummies, but it didn’t need to be said.

“I’d be careful with it. I removed at least two traps from its folds, but whomever did this was
definitely not the usual variety of light-hearted prankster.”

The student’s expression hardened. “Of course. Thank you, sir.”

Sighing inwardly, Professor Nott prayed for patience. He intended to coax more information out of his trainee regarding the nature of the enmity between himself and what seemed to be most of the school, and this was not his first failure. The lad shut down every time. “You did very well with the disillusionment, but your shoes still need work. I could hear your laces clicking. I think there at the start Miss Ward might have noticed you.”

Colour drained from the lad’s face.

“I take it that would be a problem?”

He had to give Mr Snape credit. He seemed quite alive to the serious nature of the infringement. “I don’t think she would find it amusing, sir.”

“Well, someday hopefully we can all meet at a pub and laugh about it over a pint. Now, did you happen to pick up anything?”

Severus shook his head, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

Professor Nott coaxed, “Surely she was broadcasting at full volume upstairs?” Severus hadn’t denied it, so he pressed on. “I am specifically looking for clues of what to work on with her. It would be very helpful to know what has put her in this peculiar position. Surely you see this would be to her benefit?”

After a long moment, Severus responded, his voice tight, “There was an apparition of a strange face in a window. Crippling fear followed by falling through the air, and a crushing, twisting sensation.” He rolled his neck, sending it cracking. “I think she tried to disapparate on you.”

Nodding to himself, Whit sighed. “So little to work with. I wish I knew more. I feel like she’s a primed trap with a hidden trigger. I need to disarm it before anyone gets hurt.”
Lifting a hand to his forehead, Severus winced. “Lacking context, that is all one could expect, sir. Along with a wicked headache. I am glad your classroom is out of the way, at least.” His tone was withering.

“Right. So, I think it is time for you to pack off. I’ll see you tomorrow morning, bright and early, you can tell me then if any further revelations come to you.” Whit met the teenage wizard’s scorn with an inflated level of cheer.

A flash of defiance shone in the lad’s dark eyes. “Yes, sir.”

Good, very good. He was picking things up very quickly, and seemed unusually receptive to criticism. He didn’t like compliments either, but it was not surprising with a lad like Severus Snape. “Oh, and do something with those robes. You don’t want her to see you carrying them so soon.”

Severus Snape bent his head in respect and acknowledgment and then turned to follow Miss Ward.

Whittington Nott turned and left in the opposite direction. He had no energy to match wits with the Headmaster or Professor McGonagall tonight. Feet pointing back home almost automatically, Whit made his way back to his chambers to ponder further what he had seen in the Pensieve.

“Before the war is lost and won.” He grimaced at the memory of the crime scene, as bloody as any battlefield attended by wizard or Muggle kind.

He had put off a meeting with Dumbledore to share the findings of his investigation of the strange attack on the Meadows family. He’d gone over the memory several times and felt balanced at the precipice of revelation. A part of him knew that he was missing something... something big. Something peculiarly familiar. There was nothing else for it.

He paused at the door of his office, one hand poised lightly on the latch. His baser nature compelled him to turn right back around, to head to the staff room to seek out company and a nip of liquid comfort. He’d never managed to fully repress his sense of duty, try as he might. Pity.

“Ah, well. Once more into the breach.”

Chapter End Notes
A/N: Thanks to Our Lady of Britpicking and Propriety, Coromandel, and the Dutchess Of Details and Defender Against Douchbaggery, ScarletDewdrops for help with beta'ing this chapter. You are both saints and royalty.

My heartfelt thanks also goes out to readers like you! Kudos and comments are always much appreciated and warm the frozen cackles of my heart!
Deirdre waited in the common room for Alanna, a girl in her form who she’d felt a kinship with from the moment they first sat together in Charms. They’d devolved into a joking contest over a review of fire charms, and they’d managed to draw Professor Flitwick’s gentle reprimand on the first day. Alanna was close to Pandy, Dee’s roommate, so they spent quite a bit of time together. Alanna and Pandy were both dreamers, and Deirdre found herself inspired. Their perspective on magic was quite alien, adventurous and free and Deirdre was drawn to it like a bee to honey. To study magic for the love of it felt **right**.

Ruth and Vasim had planned to revise in the library as usual and went ahead, claiming one of the upper study rooms for their group. Morag was going to be waiting for her, and she really looked forwards to seeing her friend as she was the first girl in the castle who Dee felt totally comfortable with. Alanna was the second, thanks to her fantastic mastery of puns. Pandora didn’t spend a lot of time in the library, she would rather tinker about with experiments and had waved the pair away, already engrossed in relayering the enchantments on her familiar’s rig.

Alanna was highly distractible and didn’t seem to know how to study, and Deirdre decided that she liked having the goofy girl around enough to invite her to the study session with Morag. Ruth and Vasim both had invited themselves when they heard Alanna talking about their plans for that night. They confided that they’d claimed the best spot in the library tutorial rooms and suggested that they share. Everyone was studying for a big test next week in Herbology, and because Deirdre was related to Professor Sprout and had an encyclopaedic level of knowledge in the area, those two wanted to try themselves against her in a quiz.

“Hurry up, Beckwith! I don’t want to leave MacMillan hanging.”

Alanna banged down the staircase, her bag hitched over her shoulder and stuffed full of various things she felt needful. “Sorry, here I am.”

Deirdre eyed the bag skeptically. “Did you pack everything you own?”

“Dee, we’re going to be late. Fuss later!” Alanna grabbed her arm and towed her towards the door.
One of the best things about being a Ravenclaw was that the dorms were situated quite close to the staircase that let out right by the library only three floors down. While Hogwarts had no specifically required classes for physical fitness, it was a fact that everyone was subjected to obstacle course levels of trick steps and mismatched flagstones. When one was late all the time, like Alanna, it became an Olympic level sport.

As both girls reached the foot of the steps, Deirdre called a halt, out of breath. In between heaving breaths she grumbled, “Next time you can catch me up in the library and I’ll leave on time.”

“Then I wouldn’t know where to find you. Ruth and Vasim are always so secretive. This is a rare opportunity!” Alanna’s tone was wheedling but not a bit apologetic.

“Is that eyeliner?” Deirdre squinted at Alanna, whose cheeks tinted pink in response before she could dissimilate. “It is, isn’t it.” Dee answered her own question. “Looks nice, but why are…”

Alanna ignored her and turned and pushed open the door, “Come on, Dee. Morag’s waiting for us.”

Severus watched as the girls stepped into the library. He couldn’t hear what was being said, but he could tell that Deirdre found something amusing, her laugh light and musical as it echoed through the hallway.

He was practicing his disillusionment skills again. He’d been good enough to shake his minders. It hadn’t been a full week, but having someone around him constantly was making him itch inside. He needed to be by himself, or at least only in the rare company of one person who he felt comfortable with. It was a particular trial of strength to maintain his composure anytime the Gryffindor prats were around.

He had been relieved when Deirdre was sorted into Ravenclaw. He’d known she wouldn’t be in Slytherin, well, not with that slur cut into her arm, but an irrational stab of disappointment had shown itself immediately behind the relief. He’d indulged in a fantasy of being able to show her around the Slytherin commons, the pleasure of seeing her straightaway in the mornings, and sharing meals. Sure, they took some classes together, but she’d been buried in the rush of people who were drawn to her novelty.

Alanna Beckwith was a reasonably intelligent witch who lacked focus. She was always doodling in the margins of her parchment, her books, and sometimes other people’s books. Her skill at magic
was average but her skill with art was quite striking. He’d commented on a sketch of an Acromantula that she’d done in class once in Defense, and he’d immediately regretted the move as she had taken as an invitation for friendship.

The witch poured out her heart to him about her feelings and dreams for the future, quite different from what her parents expected. They’d hoped that she would take up Potions and become an apothecary, to take over her mother’s business when she was ready to retire. Alanna was talented in Potions, but she lacked the edge of ambition that could have made her outshine the competition. As it was, her talent languished as a stopgap for inadequate attention and preparation before class. He’d been afraid that she thought that he might actually like her in the following days as she sought him out and showed him little pieces that she’d been particularly proud of. He cooled towards her, only offering neutral responses and eventually she stopped trying.

Severus hadn’t stopped to consider what sort of awkwardness would result from Alanna’s association with Deirdre until now. Would Alanna try to poison Deirdre’s mind against him? Would his association taint Deirdre’s chances at a friendship with her? Well, he would have to pay close attention. His mandate from Dumbledore and Svartrunir to look after Deirdre was excuse enough to push aside those doubts. Besides, was he going to let some smarmy Ravenclaw chit get the better of him?

No, he just would have to be careful not to offer the girl overt insult. He’d a reputation for being a snarky bastard, so he wouldn’t need to bend away from that, and in fact he should not. It would draw attention, and already has. But how was he supposed to do his job without also being around her or with her? It was that internal argument that set him skulking about the halls in full disillusioned panoply under the guise of practice for Professor Nott. Very logical.

“Gods, I’m a fool.” He had a feeling that Deirdre would skin him alive if she figured out that he was ghosting after her like this. Well, he bloody well would make sure she didn’t.

Severus took a deep breath and slipped into the library behind the two witches, a few steps back.

There, waiting for Deirdre and Alanna were Morag MacMillan, Remus Lupin, and a very shifty looking Peter Pettigrew. Severus could tell from the stiff set of Deirdre’s back and the way she hugged her books to her chest that this was unexpected and possibly unwelcome company. He certainly felt that way.

Plan A had to be scrapped, so Severus quickly stepped back out into the hallway, and after a look up and down he stepped behind a pillar and took down the disillusionment charm. This version of the spell took longer to cast, but it came down just as quickly as any other cancelled spell. He summoned his school bag from the Defense classroom and shouldered back into the library. He didn’t need to draw down deep to school his expression to one of irritation. The door closed behind him harder than
was strictly necessary, earning him a glare from Madam Pince as he stalked past her.

His heart skipped a beat as he met eyes with Remus Lupin, the first to look his way. Deirdre was the second and the way her face lit up, that wasn’t in his imagination, now was it? He lifted his eyebrows a fraction and she waved him over. He deliberately looked over at Pettigrew, narrowed his eyes at the timid boy before striding over to stand next to Deirdre. He held out a hand to her, and when she took it he brushed her knuckles lightly with a kiss, meeting her eyes as he did so.

There are moments in a wizard’s life that he will remember all of his life. Deirdre caught her breath, a smothered sigh or stifled word held back by biting her lower lip. Her eyes widened at the gesture, and she blushed charmingly as she stammered out, “Severus? Hi. Were you coming to join us?”

He turned slightly to look at the others before looking back to her. “I wouldn’t want to impose.”

Lupin opened his mouth, “Actually we were…”

“You should come with us, Snape.” Alanna’s giggle was a nervous one as she threw Lupin a meaningful look. “This is a Ravenclaw study group, but that will make one of every house.” She turned a shade of red that was not particularly becoming on a redhead. “I mean, better together, right? And Snape is really good too. I bet Vasim will be pleased to have you with us. Some of the best minds in our class, oooh we’re going to do really well on this test. I can FEEL it.” She turned away, an exaggerated gesture. “Now, where did Ruth run off to?” She looked like she would have liked to shout for her classmate.

Peter elbowed Remus, prompting the Prefect to snap his mouth shut again with an audible click. “Sssh-shure, Alanna. We’re glad to be invited too.” Morag leaned into Peter with a warm smile, offering him support as he spoke and he stood taller.

Severus felt the air stir next to him and when he looked, Deirdre had her wand raised, completing a circuit above her head. White light trailed in the wake of the arc, and the shimmering rope dissolved into grains of magical sparks. He could sense the build up of power when an animal comprised of more of the ethereal light burst from the tip of the dark wood. Leaping gracefully through the air, a great cat sped away towards one of the upper levels of the library.

Libraries are usually very quiet places, but a busy school library like this usually has a certain amount of ambient noise - pages flipping, quills scratching, and the low mutter of students working. The kinds of sounds that you don’t notice until they are gone. At the appearance of the Patronus, for that must be what it was, the entire library stopped to stare, collectively holding its breath in wonder.
Severus was no different. They’d only started working on the theory of casting Patronuses this year. Only one person in his class had successfully cast one, and Professor Nott had been quite conciliatory, referring to the possibility that only some of them would find the knack. He watched with the rest until the shape was out of sight.

A clearing of the throat broke the spell and Lupin said quietly, “Actually. Ruth told me to meet them in the room closest to the Arithmancy section.” He glanced back the way the Patronus went before adding, “Although I do wish I could see the look on Vasim’s face when a glowing leopard breaks in on his concentration.”

“Oh.” Deirdre looked abashed. “Sorry, I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Alanna cast Dee a saucy wink. “I think I do.”

A loud snort from Morag answered. “Leave off, ‘Lana. We all know it was something very happy. Shall we get going then?” She tugged at Peter’s elbow and set off for the nearest stair and started to climb, two at a time.

The whole troop was greeted by a very stern looking Ruth Ogden, who waited at the top of the flight of stairs, hands on her hips and foot tapping. “I thought you would tell people where to find us, Remus.” When her eyes took in the wide array of students, she added, “Well, those who were specifically invited.” Her eye fell on Peter and Severus warily.

Alanna straightened. “Well, Vasim said that Deirdre could invite her other study partners since you both were asking her to change her plans.” When Ruth turned her glare to Alanna, she added mulishly, “Besides. You keep telling me that I need to study more. Hardly seems right to turn us away as an inconvenience now.”

Ruth rolled her eyes before looking about the small crowd, so though counting heads and weighing worth. Her mouth tightened and eyes narrowed when she came to Peter, and then Severus himself. If there was an internal court dispute, it looked like he was going to lose in judgement with no appeals.

Severus glanced at Deirdre to gauge her reaction. He hadn’t intended to create difficulties for her, but he disliked the idea of offering to leave her. She had stepped closer to him, and as he turned the back of her hand brushed against his, leaving a stripe of tingling sensitivity behind.
Dee’s mouth was set in a firm line before she interjected. “I can find another room to study in, Ruth. I’ll owe you a rain check if you like.”

The words that should have been appeasing were wrapped around a challenge. He rather liked the hint of defiance, and his heart clenched. She wouldn’t do that for him, would she? That was all backwards. He opened his mouth to speak, a counter offer of another time, but before he could put words to his thoughts he was interrupted.

A wide-eyed Vasim had appeared beside Ruth. “No no no, please. Come inside. All of you are welcome.” He was looking at Deirdre with an intensity that immediately put Severus on edge. Vasim didn’t appear to have noticed anyone else.

Deirdre stood beside Severus on the stair, perhaps waiting for the others to file in ahead of her. Only Severus felt her tremble as she leaned into him for support. Without thinking about it, he put his arm about her in a protective gesture. She looked back at him. Was that gratitude in her eyes?

Not free to say anything, he settled for a half-smile and gestured with his free hand, indicating that he would follow her. Having Vasim behind him made him itch between his shoulder blades, but he would be her shield.

Whether it was intentional or not, the last two places at the table were on opposite sides to one another. Alanna had taken the spot next to Vasim and already was doodling on her parchment, her mind already leagues away. Deirdre narrowed her eyes at Remus, who had seated himself away from Peter, and also next to an end set that was left open. The other seat still unoccupied was next to Alanna on the corner, where Morag sat on the end.

Severus was scowling, but his eyes were fixed on the spot next to Alanna.

“Let’s go sit over there, Severus. I’m sure Morag wouldn’t mind shifting if we asked.” Deirdre wasn’t entirely certain, but she hoped the witch would be civil.

Morag, bless her heart and her excellent hearing, sat up straighter with a wide smile, and set her braids bouncing as she hopped her chair closer to Peter, who blushed intensely. “There you go, plenty of room for everyone.” She patted the table with a thick hand before her eye fell on the place where a chair needed to be.
Deirdre recalled the time that Severus had split a chair in two in the infirmary, that day they had shared breakfast, and she looked shyly at him. “I think we can manage. Severus is a dab hand with transfiguration.”

He was stiffer than usual, his eyes cold and hard as though fashioned from obsidian rather than warming has he might have done when they were alone together. He was a reserved personality, she had seen that the few times she had tried to be friendly with him in classes.

When he didn’t answer, she temporised, “Or I am sure we can just move the chair around.”

Severus turned that flat glare on Lupin, and she now worried that she had overstepped some unknown, invisible line. Lupin wasn’t making any move to be helpful and he stared back at Severus blandly, relaxed in his chair as though he were a lord in his cups.

“Right.” That was all Severus did and she watched him as he dropped his bag on the table next to Morag and leaned over to grasp the empty chair with one hand. Wand out, he made a swiping motion and then leaned one of the halves against the table. The other he lifted to the side and casually shook it as though he were unfolding a napkin. The chair obliged by changing into a complete chair that he set in the place where the original stood. He stepped behind it and looked at her with eyebrows lifted.

“Oh, thank you, Severus.” Deirdre stepped around and took her seat, allowing him to push her in before he turned back to the remaining half which also obligingly shook out to a whole chair. She could see now where he was using his off-hand to cast the transfiguration, distracting the eye with the chair flourish.

Peter was leaning in, his mouth open. “That was slick, Snape.”

Acknowledging this compliment with the faintest hint of a nod, Severus settled into his chair. A sour look was back on his face and he sneered at the group, “I thought we were here to study?” Deirdre hadn’t noticed that everyone was staring at him until that moment - no wonder he was prickly. She tried to convey an apology in glances but there was no time and he didn’t see.

Ruth coughed, and with a bemused look on her face began the proceedings, explaining that they would have ten minutes to review the material, then they would take turns reading questions from old exams, and then there would be a game at the end.
Deirdre tried to immerse herself in the material, but found her mind wandering. She was distracted by the tension in the room, and didn’t understand why Vasim kept sending her strange looks. The only other person who was having a harder time of it was Alanna, so Deirdre cajoled her into at least drawing the plants as a way of retaining the information. They were all set to review the useful herbs of the African continent for the upcoming exam, and to say that the subject was dry was both an understatement and a clever joke.

The questions were dull, but Deirdre repressed the urge to blurt out the answers every time. She did manage to answer one that neither Remus nor Severus knew, which made her feel a bit giddy. Morag’s kind face was distorted with frustration, so she hurried to reassure her friend, “Of course, that was a trick question. *Uncaria tomentosa* or Cat’s Claw is not an African species and won’t be on the test.”

Morag’s round face relaxed back into a kind smile, “Oh thank Merlin.”

As a wave of disgruntled groan matched with relieved sighs were vented about the table, she threw Vasim a look of censure. “Perhaps that was supposed to be *Harpagophytum procumbens*, Devil’s Claw?”

Vasim smirked and answered, “Devil’s in the details, is it not?”

Between them, Alanna was holding her hand over her mouth, but a shiver of her shoulders and the slightly pained look on her face gave her away.

Deirdre rolled her eyes. “Shut it, Shafiq.”

“I thought that was pretty good.” The bespectacled wizard glanced at Alanna for backup, “Wasn’t it?”

Alanna put her head down on the table and hit it with her fist, “Aaaaah ha ha ha!”

Deirdre had to look away from the smug expression on Vasim’s face and muttered to Severus, “With friends like this, who needs enemies?”

Severus shook his head with obvious annoyance, twirling a black feather quill in his long fingers. He glanced at Lupin and the clock on the wall before returning his attention to Deirdre. “It is getting late.
I have a 5AM wake up again tomorrow.”

He had referred to his early mornings only once earlier in the week when she noticed that he winced when he sat down next to her in potions. “Professor Nott is really making you do this every day?”

“Well, no other way to improve is there? And if nothing else, he is getting a great deal of amusement out of making me suffer.” The severity of his expression softened a fraction, and he took in a breath. “I think I can stay a little longer.”

Beside them, Alanna had made a thorough spectacle of herself, and was wiping tears and eyeliner away. When Deirdre looked at her in alarm she dissolved back into giggles once more. Alanna was all blotchy and looked as upset as she was irreverent.

“Tsk. Here, take this.” Deirdre cast a cooling charm on her own handkerchief before handing it over to her friend. She was starting to have a suspicion of what exactly was going on, and she would have to talk to the girl later.

Ruth spoke up, “We’ll take a ten minute break and then everyone who can should come back and talk to me.” She smiled, genuinely smiled at that them all. It was rare from the reserved witch, and Deirdre expected that whatever would come next should be interesting.

Vasim spoke in her ear. She hadn’t seen him approach so she jumped at the contact. “Deirdre, I wanted to ask you… oh, sorry.” She must have glared at him, because he pulled back a few inches before going on. “I wanted to know where you learned to make your Patronus speak. It is most extraordinary magic, I’ve never heard of it before.”

Deirdre’s heart nearly stopped. “Well, um. I uh…” She looked down, mind racing over a plethora of lies and dissimulations. From her parents, no that’d invite questions, wouldn’t it? She hadn’t been to any school officially. From a book? He’d want to know the text and she knew full well that wasn’t true. To tell the truth, she couldn’t recall. Another shadow fell over her and she looked up to see Lupin very very interested in her answer.

A thin fingered hand covered her trembling ones. She felt like she was a million miles away, watching through a thick haze. Oh shit.

A hard voice got through, “She was home schooled, you twit. By her recently deceased parents.” Severus’ voice was both sharp and low, but it seemed to carry in the low din and others stopped to
Vasim recoiled, pity written in his face. “Oh, I’m sorry, Deirdre. I had heard, but I didn’t think.”

Alanna stood up and put a hand on Vasim’s shoulder, a sign of support, before looking down at Deirdre sadly as well. The sight swam in her vision as tears started to gather. No… no no no no no. She didn’t want to make a spectacle of herself. More of one. Alanna had Dee’s soiled handkerchief in her hand but didn’t seem to know what to do with it.

A hand appeared in her vision and a tatty handkerchief was on offer. Deirdre took it, uncaring of where it came from, only seeing that it was clean before burying her face in the linen. As her mind scrambled about, she calmed herself with a few deep breaths. Severus had let go of her hand, moments before, but it wasn’t his hand. Who? A growling voice behind her said, “Always had a way with words, haven’t you, Shafiq?” Lupin. Gods, she’d do anything to disappear right then.

Wiser than her tender years, Morag came to Deirdre’s rescue. “Dee, dear. Come with me to the lav. We’ll wash up there?”

Deirdre risked a peek and saw that Severus had stood up from his seat to allow Morag to get in closer. His expression was neutral, but the pressure of his dark eyes on her made her feel exposed anew. She didn’t want to be looked at right now, and the intensity was a reminder that she needed to stay in character, whatever that meant for someone who had no past. As she stood up and was taken under Morag’s wing she lifted her chin at him, a gesture that she hardly knew what it meant herself.

The visible intake of breath suggested that he understood, and he looked past her, glaring at the students behind her. The change in demeanor was so extreme that she almost started to laugh. Morag, misinterpreting the shift in Deirdre’s feelings, endeavored to steer her out of the room quickly.

As they passed Peter, Sirius and James on the stair, Deirdre overheard a whispered conversation. “…heard it while we were in detention. Hogsmeade weekend! Cancelled!” That was Black’s indignant voice. “I had a date lined up.”

Peter’s plaintive, “But why?” echoed Deirdre’s own curiosity, although she wasn’t crushed like the boys.

James’ answer was serious, “Another attack. This time in Hogsmeade. The Ministry doesn’t know
what is going on, so until they are certain it is safe, they are banning all Hogsmeade’s weekends. I hate to say it, mates, but it sounds really bad. They’re not releasing much information to the public, hiding things I’d say.”

“I have an idea of where we could get the truth, but we can’t discuss it here.” Sirius shepherded the little group away into the stacks, and only Peter sent a troubled glance in the witch’s direction.

Deirdre stumbled on the step and Morag’s strong hands steadied her. “There, now. Almost there.”

The sensation that everyone was looking at her had been bad on the way up to the study hall, but it was worse now. She had to pull herself together. A detached part of her reflected that if she wanted people to avoid talking about her past, she’d likely done a good job reinforcing that impression. It would be a small miracle if the whole ugly affair didn’t spread throughout the school by tomorrow evening. Perhaps the news of the cancelled Hogsmeade would overshadow it?

By the time the two girls made it to the bathrooms, Deirdre’s nerves had calmed a great deal. She washed her face in cold water, and that was enough for her to regain her composure significantly. Morag, bless her, had the sense to stay quiet. The gentle smile she gave Deirdre when she finally had the courage to look up was a thousand times better than the looks of pity the others had worn.

“Better now, Dee-dear?” The Hufflepuff’s voice was kind, soft, and she had no sense of expectations. She was there, for whatever Deirdre needed. Dee couldn’t put to words how she knew that, but it was astounding.

That was the most lovely thing she’d been called. “Oh Morag. I’m sorry, I didn’t expect that to happen.”

Morag’s braids flapped as she shook her head. “Don’t be silly. Vasim Shafiq has the sensitivity of a troll.” She chuckled, “He’s going to make a terrible healer some day, but all of his family are exactly like him. I suppose that’s part of the job, wading about in misery and pain. Being oblivious must give them an edge.”

Deirdre laughed. “Don’t let Madam Pomfrey hear you. She’s nothing like that.”

“Och, aye. Aren’t we lucky. There now, take a moment. If you decide you don’t want to go back I’ll walk you up to the tower.” She looked around, her eyes narrowing. “I don’t like the looks of whatever my Peter’s up to and I’ll have no part of it. Fool that he is.”
Unease returned to Deirdre. She had overheard somethings when she was visiting Crookshanks, and she was suddenly convinced that the seventh years who had been working with Professor Nott as well as the professor himself needed to be on their guard if they were bound to keep their secrets.

The bathroom door opened and Alanna rushed in and immediately assaulted Deirdre with a rather awkward hug. “Oh, Dee. I’m sorry that Vasim is such a prat.” She held out Dee’s handkerchief, adding, “Severus and Vasim nearly came to blows over who was going to clean this up, but Vasim won. He sent me in to say he’s sorry again, but I won’t blame you if you don’t accept immediately.”

Deirdre snorted. Alanna had most likely given it to Vasim. She was fairly certain that Alanna fancied him.

She grinned, “I’d make him suffer a bit, if I were you. He won’t learn if you don’t.” She relinquished her hold on Dee and looked at herself in the mirror, perhaps to hide her blush. “It is fun to tease him.” The mirth was muted a fraction as she added as an aside. “Severus said that he needed to leave and asked me to pass on his apologies after insisting that I make sure you got back to the Tower safe and sound.” She waved a hand, “Before I knew it he was gone. Strange fellow, that one.”

Morag exchanged a knowing look with Dee before saying, “Well, I rather like the care he takes of our Dee. Right gentlemanly, not matching up with foul rumours at all. I expect his usual manner doesn’t help. I am certain that Sirius Black and James Potter are both jealous of him, although I’ve no idea of why that is so. Peter lost his taste for it after that terrible business last year, although I doubt they’ll ever be friendly.” She brightened, “Maybe if I brought a pie?”

Deirdre snorted at the very idea of the major rivalry being ended by a sharing a particularly magical slice of pie. “Oh, I doubt you will ever get Severus to take a piece. If you do, I’ll march you up to the Ministry myself and make sure your powers are put to use.”

Alanna giggled, “World peace, brought to you by MacMillan’s pastries. Sounds rather pleasant. Have you plans for mass production?”

The girl’s round cheeks tinged and she looked rather flustered, “Oh, Alanna, you’re such a card.”

The redhead witch turned around and held up her hands as though framing a large sign, “I can see the headlines now.” She dropped her hands as a thought struck her. “Hey, you’ll need a logo, won’t you? I can help with that.”
She was glad to hear that her friends didn’t hate Severus. What would she have done without him? Probably something rash or even more embarrassing. She spoke softly, “I should remember to thank him.” She twisted her borrowed handkerchief in her fingers as she considered her scowling defender.

“Remus says you can keep the handkerchief.” Alanna sniffed, eyeing her. “He seemed to be concerned about you, Dee. And impressed. He was carrying on and on with Oggy about Patronus theory. I think he was hanging around, waiting to try and talk with you.” She frowned, “Do you want me to tell him off? I could, you know.” She seemed like she was trying to convince herself. “Or, maybe if you want to tell me what to say?”

Sighing, Deirdre shook her head. “Thanks, Alanna, but you’re not my owl. I’ll deal with him.”

“They can ruddy well mind their own business if you ask me. Insensitive gits, the lot of them.” Morag huffed. “Why do we put up with wizards again?”

Whit collapsed into a chair by the fire in the faculty lounge, exhaling his frustration. Why did he think it was a good idea to come and take up a teaching position at Hogwarts? Aloud, he groaned, “Dumbledore.”

Someone cleared his throat across the way. “What was that, Nott?” Firelight shone off of Conrad Rolle’s perfectly styled waves of hair, and for so late in the evening, his chin was too smooth. He sat upright, smoking, cigarette in one of those holders that made it look almost like he was holding a wand, the tip glowing as he took a pull on it.

“He’s trying to kill me, Rolle.” So tired that he was past caring, Whit dropped his head back and grinned at the ceiling. Really, things were so terribly grim, it was difficult to know what to do other than smile.

Rolle leaned forwards, staring at his profile. “Honestly, you do look like a reanimated corpse.” He flicked the ashes off of his cigarette and into the fire.

Slowly the words permeated Whit’s mind and he lolled his head so that he was looking directly at Rolle. “What was that?”

Looking at him steadily with clear blue eyes, Rolle shrugged. “You know what I mean. Like
Frankenstein’s monster, or zombies from Horror Films.” Mistaking Whit’s flat stare for confusion, he went on, “The Living Dead at Manchester Morgue?” He chuckled, “Oh my, Nott. You are missing out on quite the dating experience.”

Whit had seen ‘Night of the Living Dead’ years ago, and he blinked, sitting bolt upright, his fingers gripping his knees. “No, it can’t be.”

Raising his eyebrows, Conrad Rolle tilted his head to the side. “Well, I suppose you magical recluses call them something else. Inferi, wasn’t it? Ghastly business. I’ve never seen one myself.”

The coins dropped into place, one knut at a time, and all colour drained from Whit’s face.

A shadow fell over him, blotting out the dancing light of the fireplace beyond. “Here now, I think you need a drink.” He felt cool glass touch his lips, and he tipped his head back, allowing some of the noxious whiskey to trickle in, burning a path down his throat. One thin hand brushed against his forehead. “You’re freezing.”

He wasn’t cold at all, rather was burning in the fire of horrified suspicion. Moments later, Whit lept up, his agitation forcing him to pace back and forth in front of the large fireplace, his hands tangling in his mussed hair as he muttered under his breath.

Whit had no idea how much time passed, but the appearance of Albus Dumbledore in his path forced him to a halt. Peering at him from under shaggy white eyebrows, he said something that Whit didn’t catch. His voice sounded like a buzzing fly, and it was all Whit could do to not shake the man. This was vital information!

“I am afraid that Conrad has already inadvertently told me what is on your mind, Professor Nott.” Dumbledore’s voice was steady, mournful. “But the fact remains that it is a distinct possibility. I had thought the necromantic arts long buried, the books burned centuries ago.”

Rolle stood by the fire with one hand over his mouth, and expression of shocked disbelief wrinkled his smooth alabaster brow. He whispered, “You think that zombies attacked the Meadows family, don’t you, Whit?”

Squinting as though he could see through stone and distance, Whit nodded once. “Not werewolves. Not cursed. Not trolls or giants or vampires. What is left?” His voice sounded tinny in his own ears.
“We don’t have any clear evidence to support your theory, Whittington. Grindelwald didn’t use inferi, so we know it isn’t his influence. This isn’t something that just anyone might do. The knowledge on how to make an inferius has been suppressed thoroughly. It is strictly forbidden under International Wizarding Law. This is something that we all could agree on.”

“I sure hope you are right and I am wrong, Dumbledore. But I examined the files, and the memory of the scene as you asked. The similarities to what some of the undead guardians do to tomb robbers in Egypt is deuced difficult to ignore.”

As a cursebreaker Whit knew much about dealing with such guardians, and some experience. Inferi could be vicious in defending their charges and were unnaturally strong and unrelenting. Many spells would pass right through them as they possessed no soul. Detection spells were useless to find an inferius for the same reason.

Rolle whispered, “But why would anyone do such a thing? What was it about the Meadows that drew such a terrible attack?”

Looking away, into the fire, Dumbledore murmured, “It must be something that Dorcas Meadows has got herself entangled with. That angle is being investigated thoroughly by the Aurors.” He hesitated. “Nott, if this is true, we need to warn her about her mother.”

Something that he could do, at last. Whit rocked to his feet, letting the woolen blanket slide off of his shoulders and back onto the leather chair behind him. “I’ll send her a message with warning and suggest that we meet, shall I?”

Dumbledore nodded, “It would be best to do so quickly, I think.”

As Whit strode from the room, he could hear pieces of a hissed admonishment from Rolle. “...fool, you shall run him into the ground... You need more help, Albus.”

Whit paused at the door, smiling back at Rolle. Really, it was rather sporting of the man to stand up for him like that. “Good advice. What was it that you did for France?”

Rolle flushed in embarrassment, obviously having not intended for Whit to hear him. “I was an analyst. I did help with logistics as well.”

Crossing his arms, Whit felt the warm rush of inspiration focus his mind upwards to full alertness. “Headmaster. You have a treasure trove right there. Get Connie access to as much information as
you can.”

Dumbledore’s irregular teeth were visible as he smiled in amusement. “I’d admit that the thought occurred to me. What say you, Professor Rolle? Are you ready for this huge challenge?”

Eyes round as saucers, Rolle answered, “You can’t be serious. The Ministry would never give me access to the depth of information that I would need. The scope of the project is vast, even overwhelming.”

“Oh, I’m sure you can find something on your own, set boots on the ground. You know those tossers at the Ministry have been sitting on tragedies, suppressing them just like Dorcas Meadow’s family. Maybe they know more than they are letting on, but I suspect that they have grown soft since the war. Very lax.” Whit’s smile had grown feral. “You could run circles around them, Connie.”

Standing, Dumbledore placed a hand on Conrad Rolle’s shoulder. “I’ll look into access to the archives and the Tabulatorium for you in the morning, Professor Rolle. Purely for academic purposes, naturally.”

Confidence bled back into Rolle’s demeanour as he pondered, “Well, I wouldn’t mind doing anything to annoy Secretary Travers. Yes, I think I’d be delighted.” He bounced on his toes, considering. “What an adventure that would be. Perhaps I could take a few students in, for independent study?” He eyed Dumbledore, “I could use the help as I am sure Travers will find some excuse to get in my way, and the students would add verisimilitude to the request.”

Grinning, Whit took his leave, “I shall leave you to your plotting, gentleman. I have a missive to pen, and an early training session to prepare for.”

“Are you going to be able to sleep, Whit?” Dumbledore was looking at him in that way only Albus Dumbledore could, stirring memories buried quite deep.

It took Whit a moment to formulate a response, touched by the man’s concern. “I shall see to it, Headmaster.”

Dumbledore inclined his head in acknowledgement, turning away, apparently intent on further discussion with the expert Arithmancy Professor.

Whit saluted a bemused looking Connie with two fingers tapped to his brow, and fled.
Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks to my beta, Coromandel. Pity her, for she breaks out in rashes when exposed to passive phrasing! For those who are looking for updates on her fic — Tea, Black —, I swear she really is working on it. Really. I ask her almost daily. (PS, she likes Parma violet gin!)

My heartfelt thanks also goes out to readers like you! Kudos and comments are always much appreciated.
Severus woke with a start to see a white-breasted bird in a collar hopping about on his bed. Worried about waking his roommates, he grabbed his wand and cast a Muffliato. The scramble startled the bird into flapping wildly, jumping away.

“ASS!”

“What did you just say?” Severus blinked, trying to bring the creature into focus.

Hopping closer, the bird cocked its head to the side, training one black eye on him before carefully squawking, “Bird. Birds not talk.”

His brain begrudgingly dredged up memories of a student in his year who kept a magpie for a familiar. “If that is so, kindly shut the fuck up so I can get back to sleep.” He reached over and flipped his bed curtain to the side so he could see the dimly glowing hands on his alarm clock. 4:12 AM. “Bloody hell. I could have had another twenty…”

“Snake spits, wake chick. Angry mamas eat snakes.” The miserable creature drew out the vowels, flipping its tail when it was done with its declaration.

Severus flopped back on his pillow. “This must be a nightmare. In a moment, my alarm will go off and I will forget all about this.”

“ASS-SHITE!”

Propping himself up on one arm, “You’ve got a foul mouth. Shoo.. before I make you into breakfast for Deirdre’s cat.” He waved a hand, displacing the bird from where it was perched on his knee.
The wretched thing raised its head and started to emit a piercing chatter, flapping its wings to hop up and down.

“Stop that racket this instant! Before I sever your tongue and use it for potions ingredients!”

Still flapping its wings in an odd syncopated sort of way, the bird fell silent. It was nervous, it seemed. Good. Severus noticed the small piece of parchment attached to the magpie’s foot. Sitting up, Severus cast a Lumos and peered at the bird, considering what to do next.

Modulating his voice, Severus gestured for the bird to come forward with two fingers. “Come closer, feathered nuisance. You have a task?”


Severus sat up and regarded the bird for a long moment, his arms grabbing around his knees. “And which snake were you to give the paper to?” He was more awake now, less irritated than he was curious.

“Shiiiiiiite.”

Brows drawn down in confused offense, Severus answered mildly, “I think you have the wrong Slytherin.” He was considering how to shoo the bird away when it squawked.

“Snake! Snake! Sev-Arg-Us Snake!” It once again cocked its head an this time had its beak open in a parody of a grimace.

Suppressing a groan, Severus turned over his left hand. “Let’s have it, then.”

The magpie strutted over and presented Severus with a parchment encircled leg.

“This had better be important.” It took a little time to undo the knot and free the bird’s leg, but once he had, the bird leapt into the air, leaving through a rip in the canopy that Severus hadn’t recalled
was there. He’d need to mend that later. For the moment, he lit his wand and squinted at the tiny print on the parchment.

“Bugger it all.”

Severus threw off the covers and got dressed hurriedly, grabbing his trainers and wand before padding out of the room.

Whit had not yet risen, but an insistent knocking at his chamber door pulled him out of post dream ruminations. He always reviewed his dreams as they were telling, although never prophetic. He was a dreamwalker, which was a skill that was not altogether common in Wizards born in the UK. Some dreams, the kind that were imprinted on the memory in indelible ink, had to be considered very carefully.

Dreamwalking was much more commonly used in Africa and the Americas to communicate over long distances before Floo or owl. Children who were accepted to Uagadou received their letters by dream, waking with a token in their hands. Professor Svartrunir’s own seven year old granddaughter wandered into Whit’s bleak dreams long ago. At the time, he was a fugitive, escaping to Poland from Russia during the Grindelwald conflict. She carried news of his whereabouts after he escaped capture in 1941. Wandless, he was fetched up with a kindly witch and her brother who helped protect him and treated his injuries. The magical community in Europe was fractured, and the two were in hiding themselves as it was, placing them at great risk to harbour one more. He still wondered what happened to the woman whose voice was sweeter than birdsong.

It took several nights to convince the old general that Whit was really a British agent, not a figment of the seven year old’s imagination. The child helped to guide him into friendly territory after the intelligence he carried already passed on. Without her, he most likely would have been recaptured and dealt with immediately. Whit still sent her gifts for her birthday, and she had children of her own now. They still crossed paths and caught up.

*KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK*

Shaking these thoughts from his mind, Whit clambered out of bed, fingers touching the wand on his forearm holster to reassure himself that it was still there.

Severus Snape stood in the hallway, looking up and down. The student was justifiably paranoid, but
Whit could tell something different was going on. Doubly so when the Slytherin slipped around the partially opened door, smooth as an eel, without waiting for an invitation.

Closing the door firmly, Whit asked, “Snape, what is this about?”

“Apologies, Professor. I just received a message, and it seemed urgent. I hope I haven’t overstepped, but I wasn’t sure if it could wait.” The student was holding out a thin strip of parchment, covered in tiny letters.

Taking it, Whit gestured to a chair by the fire. “Have a seat, Mr Snape.”

Whit conjured a floating ball of light and squinted, making out the message with little difficulty. He did not recognise the handwriting.

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SS,

*Potter, Black, and Pettigrew overheard reports from the Ministry about attacks while in detention. They saw Shacklebolt and Otto too on that day, same as us. I think they’re going to steal those two’s notes, or maybe break into Professor Nott’s office. Either way, can’t be good, all over a cancelled date! While the whole affair really is none of our business, if the Ministry intends to keep the details quiet, then steps need to be taken immediately and the principles put on their guard.*

*I apologise for burdening you with this intelligence, but I know you will be seeing Professor Nott first thing and I couldn’t think of a better way to get him the message. Hopefully those marauding tricksters haven’t got themselves in over their heads already.*

*Also, try to ignore Dolas as he undoubtedly has said something unconscionable. I don’t have an owl and it is too late to slip up to the Owlery. We need a better way of communicating, I’ll put thought to that later. This is hopefully more subtle than my Patronus.*

DW
Severus looked around as he waited for Professor Nott to finish reading. He’d sat as requested, and was immediately drawn in by a feast of antiquities. Yellowing maps were pinned to the wall, and shelves were stacked with dusty scrolls. Rubbings, photos, and shards of pottery all attested to time spent in Egypt’s crypts. The Professor never spoke of his old career, but there were rumours about it that were outshadowed by salacious gossip about the man’s private life.

Checking to see what Professor Nott’s reaction was to the news, Severus noticed the tattoo on his right arm. Anatomically correct heart, dagger through it and a name. Squinting, Severus couldn’t quite make it out in the dimly lit chamber.

“Right, well. The Ministry had me gather the reports and all related material from Otto and Shacklebolt last night, secured in my office. So unless these curious students are willing to break into a Professor’s office or cast illegal charms OR use illegal potions on their schoolmates, I think we’ll be assured.” The man turned towards Severus and tapped the parchment on his open palm before asking, “This is from Miss Ward, I take it?”

Averting his gaze from the Professor’s bare chest, Severus nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“'A Patronus? I don’t understand the reference. I haven’t asked her to produce one, although her tests had to be stopped… No matter.” He paused, waiting for Severus to answer.

That one was easy enough, not likely a State secret at least. “Yes. Last night she produced a corporeal Patronus and sent it off to find her study group as they’d not seen fit to tell her where they were going to meet. I was with her but the students who received her message were quite sure that the Patronus spoke in her voice.” Severus frowned, considering how Lupin, Ogden, and Shafiq seemed to be able to talk of nothing else after Deirdre left.

“What was it?” The shock that showed on Professor Nott’s face annoyed Severus. Did he think that she was less capable? Because she was a poor traumatised girl?

“A leopard. Quite strong.” Warmth heated his ears as Severus recalled the teasing that Alanna directed at Deirdre, and a small part of him wondered just what the memory she used was.

Tilting his head, Professor Nott grunted. “Her core must be recovering quite well. Should probably
make sure Poppy takes a look at her after that exertion.”

Severus had forgotten about that particular problem. She’d seemed somewhat off afterwards, although he had thought it purely emotional.

“I’ll be back in a moment.” Professor Nott disappeared through a doorway near the fireplace, presumably into his chambers.

Craning his neck, Severus looked over the pictures that were set onto the mantelpiece. One in particular caught his eye. Two young men stood side by side, laughing and looking rather chummy. He recognised Professor Nott, although he was surprised to see him both young and in uniform. The other was an American, not someone Severus recognised.

“Let’s go, Snape.”

Severus jumped to his feet, glancing at Professor Nott to see if he’d noticed him snooping. Didn’t appear to be the case, so he kept his peace.

Once in the hall, the Professor took a moment and sealed the wards he kept on his rooms, placing a finger on the side of his nose with a wink. “Can’t have anyone snooping, now can we?” The magical writing that flared into relief for a fleeting moment about the door wasn’t in the usual runework. The Professor used ancient Egyptian writing, rather unusual.

Holding a hand up, Severus couldn’t feel the strange wards, and he looked to the Professor, forming a question. He himself would likely not have managed to even find the wards on this door. Suddenly, Severus was morbidly curious as to what would happen if anyone, say… an arrogant Gryffindor tripped them. “Sir, what would happen…?”

An unpleasant smile twisted the older man’s lips, “Oh, it would be very unpleasant for them. Not fatal, mind you. The last victim cried for his mummy.”

Feeling quite cheered at the thought of something unpleasant happening to Sirius Black or James Potter, Severus nodded. “Wicked.”

The laughter in Professor Nott’s eyes was answer enough as he waved Severus on. “Like that, do you? Come on, then. Let’s warm up on the way.”
Severus had to scramble to follow in Professor Nott’s footsteps. The older wizard’s energy was appalling and again he didn’t seem to be even breaking a sweat. All Severus could do was concentrate on keeping up, but after the fifth floor change, he started to suspect that he was being taken on a merry chase.

All levity was gone when they arrived at their destination to find the door slightly ajar. The Professor stopped them both several back. “Disappear, shadow 10 feet.” The command was whispered, but the clipped words carried weight.

Casting the silent disillusionment was getting easier, and the spell to dampen the sound of his shoes followed immediately after. He waited, trying to regain control over his breathing. Severus only began to follow once the Professor was completely inside.

The room was dim, but the light pouring in from the hall gave the impression of the expected shapes of shelves and desk within. The office was spacious, permitting the storage of specimens, live or otherwise.

A candle flared to life beside the door. Others about the room followed. The chair behind the desk had fallen over. On top of a scattering of parchment was a single shoe. Severus wanted to look under and behind the desk, but he had to follow directions.

Approaching the desk, Professor Nott picked up the shoe, weighing it in his hand. An expression of amusement came over him as he bent over to right the chair. Sitting down, he propped up his feet up on his desk, tipping the chair back so that he was looking up with a very serious expression. “Well, boys. I imagine at some point I will have to let you down, but for the moment I think I’ll go for my run first. You have to take care of yourself when you’re as old as I am. It is inadvisable to stray from a strict routine.”

Christmas had come early for Severus. There, trussed up in strips of cloth like mummies were three forms and it wasn’t his imagination. It had to be Potter, Black, Lupin... and where was the fourth? He’d dreamt of a moment like this since he’d spent hours dangling from the ceiling in the Great Hall, weeks ago. Limp strips of cloth hanging next to the form with glasses.

Professor Nott held the shoe, taking a long sniff and wrinkling his nose before shrinking it and stowing it away in his pocket. “I suggest that you use the time to plan your lives from here on out. Weigh your options, in case the Headmaster accepts my recommendation for immediate expulsion.”
Rooted to the spot, Severus tried to commit to memory every detail of the room, the hanging figures.

Nott stood and headed toward the door, forcing Severus to backpedal out into the hallway. As the Professor snuffed out the lights, he commented, “Oh, and if you are gone when I return, be advised that I have the power to place out a warrant for your arrest in the event. This isn’t a joke, gentleman.” He patted his pocket. “Even the fourth accomplice will not be able to help you. I recommend that you throw yourselves on the Headmaster’s mercy.”

Severus felt giddy. Potter and his flunkies exposed for the rulebreakers they were? Threatened with expulsion?! It was too good to be true. He walked behind Professor Nott, still shadowing and disillusioned. He was surprised when the Professor stopped and stooped as though to tie his shoe. Severus could just barely make out the low-spoken instructions, “I want you to see if you can find the fourth. I suspect he hasn’t got far. Use whatever skill God blessed you with. If no luck on this, the floor above or below, then return here in fifteen minutes.”

Not waiting for an answer, Nott stood and strode away, as though he were going on that run he had threatened.

There wasn’t time to cast a Hominem Revelio on every classroom. It was only barely past five as it was, so the area should be abandoned. Did he dare? Well, he was ordered to use his talent, now wasn’t he? Taking a deep breath, Severus stood still and cracked open his shields.

It felt something akin to opening an eye that was stuck together when one had a bad case of conjunctivitis. Painful and anything but smooth, but when the shield was fully open the morass of panic and self recrimination radiating from the office washed over him, and he had to steady himself. Idiots.

What he didn’t feel was the presence of anyone else. Steeling himself, he extended the search, edging down the hallway, using magic to walk on silent feet.

Whit was passing time with the Fat Lady, waiting for Minerva to produce evidence that Peter Pettigrew was in bed and asleep, as were the other students in question.
“Have you done something different with your toga, M’Lady? You are radiant at this time of the morning. Aurora’s got competition when you are awake.”

The fat lady blushed and waved a hand. “You are still quite the rogue with a honeyed tongue.”

“Guilty, madam.” Whit bent over in an elaborate courtly bow, favoring her with a boyish grin.

Mid-simper, the poor old girl jumped as though she were goosed, letting out an, “Oh!” of genuine surprise. The portrait swung open and Minerva stalked out, a scowl on her face.

“Not there. Well, you’d better show me the office.”

Before the portrait closed, a small fuzzy orange kitten hopped up, got caught on the edge and then scrambled into a poorly controlled fall that landed him at McGonagall’s feet. He sprung his feet and lifted his tail proudly, as if to say, “I did that on purpose.”

McGonagall frowned, addressing the kitten in severe tones. “Crookshanks, I thought I told you to stay in the office.”

The kitten widened its pumpkin orange eyes before flopping over on its back with a mew of supplication.

Whit couldn’t help himself, “Who’s this, Minerva? Family member?”

“Part kneazle. Deirdre rescued him from Filch. It’s a long story and we don’t have time for this.” Her white face was lined with tension, the expression in her eyes severe.

Leaping back to its feet the kitten went into a crouch, stalking towards a shadow. Whit cleared his throat. “Of course.” He pulled a shoe out of his pocket, one that was shrunk. “This was left behind. I assume it is Pettigrew’s.”

McGonagall waved it off. “Mr Pettigrew’s got a unique scent. I’ll be able to track him down easily.”
Let’s go.”

Whit held up a hand, watching the kitten crouch, wiggling its butt in the air ready to pounce.

“Crooks! Not now, we’ll play later. Come, or I’ll lock you back in my office.”

A kittenish growl and lash of the bottle brush tail let everyone know what Crookshanks thought of that. He chirruped up at McGonagall, who answered, “There are plenty of rats about the castle, but you’d do well to be gentle. Some of them are pets, and others are unusually large. That’s why I don’t want you wandering about by yourself.”

The kitten lowered its tail, looking back towards the shadows once more before scampering to catch up with the Professors.

After they left, a brown rat emerged from his hiding place and took itself off at a dead run in the opposite direction.

Minerva stretched languidly, enjoying the return to her feline form. The world opened itself to her, showing her much that humans could not even perceive. The first thing she picked up on was the faintest sound of fabric moving against fabric down the hallway towards the. There was nothing to see, but a scent came to her, one that she couldn’t quite place. It was a confusion of Whittington and someone else, someone younger and hormonal. Male, that was easy enough.

Crookshanks noticed it too. He’d been sitting, trying to be obedient so that she would give him more lessons later, but the kitten’s attention span was as short as a goldfish, and he’d already circled the bowl when the enigma approached. One moment he was seated by her, the next he’d launched himself into the air, an impressive three feet, claws deployed.

“Bloody hell!” The wee orange hunter had made contact, pausing in midair briefly before falling down to the side.

Minerva hissed, approaching the unseen cautiously, side-walking.
Whittington poked his head out of the office, attention drawn by the racket. “Stop, that’s my assistant!” He was already laughing, “Don’t kill him.”

Eyes narrowed, Minerva looked to Whittington then back at Crookshanks who was perched proudly on top of someone or something who remained invisible, purring loudly.

Moments later, a disgruntled Severus Snape came into view, propped up on his elbows so he could look back at the kitten. “What’s this little menace doing here?”

Shaking his head, Whittington said, “I take it you didn’t find Pettigrew?”

Minerva was impressed with the lad’s disillusionment. She was not impressed with his cat-skills. He didn’t react as the kitten got back up and did a quick cheek-rub on Mr Snape’s jaw before leaping off lightly to rejoin her.

The kitten trotted over, tail held high. Crookshanks needed no praise, he knew he was a mighty hunter. He had just caught himself a wizard, after all. He settled next to her, taking a moment to groom his magnificent tail.

The tip of Minerva’s tail twitched in amusement.

Snape leapt to his feet, brushing off the loose track pants he was wearing. “Regrettably, no. I’ve searched this floor and the next above and below. I found no sign of him.” After a brief moment of surprise, the student acknowledged her with a polite nod. “Professor McGonagall, I did not see you there. Good morning.”

Minerva bobbed her head, but she was anxious to get this painful business over with. Gryffindor was unlikely to recover from the points lost out of this prank. Hours of her precious time were going to be wasted in supervising even more detentions. Her ears flattened as it occurred to her that this might well cause permanent marks on the student’s records or even expulsion. There was no help for that now. Tail lashing, she stalked back to the door and began drinking in the air.

Normal cats had senses of smell that were over ten times more sensitive than humans. Minerva experienced the magical world in an even larger dimension, as she could sense magic as a feeling. The door to the office was warded, but the magic used was familiar, emitting a gentle energy that suggested almost politely that she should stay away.
“Mr Snape, I need you to go wake up the Headmaster, please.”

She made a circuit of the room, stopping to investigate several times before she found the smell she was looking for. Pettigrew always reeked of a mixture of sweaty palms and a Muggle washing powder that had become popular two decades ago.

Sensible of the time, she didn’t wait to see if she was being followed. She could deal with one errant student. The trail led her to a tapestry, and disappeared there. Investigation led her to find a passage behind it that led to a stairwell going up, which came out on the seventh floor via portrait-hole. The scent was stronger here and she trotted along faster, hope rising that he was back in the Gryffindor Tower after all.

A glance up at the Fat Lady showed the woman was cross with her, looking down at her over her poorly powdered nose.

“Prrrrt?” That was the best Minerva could do in the circumstance to be polite.

The portrait snapped, “No one has come through, madam.” She craned her neck. “Where is that lovely Professor Nott? I’m sure he could find your missing student.”

If cats could roll their eyes… Minerva did not dignify this with a response, attending to the evidence of her senses instead. The scent continued down the hallway to the main staircases. She checked behind her to find that Crookshanks was investigating his interesting shadow from before, nose quivering.

Trusting that he would follow, she hurried down the hall and the stairwell. It took at least four false turns before Minerva found the floor where Pettigrew left off, the basement levels where the Hufflepuff common room would be. She had noticed that the boy had a preference for Morag MacMillan, but she hoped that the witch had not got herself involved in his schemes. She’d been a good influence so far, as he’d not been caught in tricks for several weeks, which was a sort of record.

Odours from the kitchens intensified as Minerva followed Pettigrew’s trail. Following her gut, she made her way over to the barrell entrance, but she didn’t find his scent there. After circling twice, she turned back to see Crookshanks sitting up on his hind legs, batting at the painting that guarded the entrance to the kitchens. Hoping that he was wrong, she scouted the passage going in the opposite direction. No, the trail ended here. Somewhere in the kitchens was a renegade student who was in a whole world of trouble.
Her nose was not likely to be able to separate scents out so easily here, so Minerva released herself from the transformation, unfolding back to her full height and dulled senses of humanity.

A tickle to the pear, and the portrait slid to the side. “Crookshanks!” She should have picked up the kitten, but she had been too caught up in the chase to think of it.

She had to hurry to follow the streak of orange, although a succession of exclamations of surprise marked his path. He’d headed straight back to one of the large larders, squeezing in through a crack under the door. Really, she’d need to see about getting that door sorted, as it was letting out quite a draft. Soft light glowed from underneath, visible in the dim corner of the kitchens.

“Professor McGonagall, what might we assist you with today?” The elderly House Elf, Hedda, had appeared at her elbow, wringing her hands with a faint air of reproach. The elves felt guilty whenever anyone felt like they needed to come all of the way down there for food, so eager to serve.

Sounds of a tussle from the other side of the larder door drew McGonagall’s attention before she could answer. “Get off me, you bully! OW!”

The witch wrenched open the door to find Peter Pettigrew, one hand fending off a determined kitten who hung by its mouth from his backside, the other hand holding his wand. He froze on the spot, terrified by the appearance of his Head of House.

“What is the meaning of this, Mr Pettigrew?”

One-shoed, he wobbled unbalanced and then fell over under the force of the disapproval and shock of being caught. Crookshanks wisely let go and leapt away before he was squashed.

“I w-w-w-was hungry?” He recoiled as she held out her hand.

“Your wand.” She twitched her fingers impatiently when he didn’t move immediately.

The colour drained from the student’s face. Slowly he placed the wand in her hand and watched, round-eyed as she surveyed the mess. A small wheel of cheese sat on the floor next to him, and it appeared that it had barely been touched, a small hollow in its side where the student had taken what looked like only one bite.
McGonagall took a deep breath and then gestured. “Up, Mr Pettigrew. You will come with me quietly. Any funny business and I will see your wand snapped without hesitation.”

Pettigrew looked nauseated as he climbed to his feet, and Minerva shoved down an impulse to pity the lad. He’d made his own bed by making such friends. Now he’d have to lay in it. A glance at the clock that was kept on the wall told her that it was half-past six. Some students would be awake, but not many. They had better move if they didn’t want a disturbance. Things were bad enough as it was.

She couldn’t remember a worse moment in her Headship. Gryffindor valued bravery, but that wasn’t what this looked like. This was sheer stupidity and thoughtless selfishness. It was high time that these reckless boys understood just how very little they knew of the world. Why had she allowed the Hat to put her in Gryffindor? Ravenclaw. She should have been a Ravenclaw.

Her tone was clipped as she commanded, “Now, march! We’re returning to Professor Nott’s office.” She walked behind him, watching his every move as he limped along, steps uneven in one shoe.

Severus walked behind Professor Dumbledore, his heart racing in exhilarated anticipation as they approached the office. He was trying to be as discreet as possible because the last thing he wanted was to be dismissed from this tribunal.

Dumbledore stopped in the open doorway, his face dispassionate as he surveyed the scene. Potter, Black, and Lupin all looked much like juicy flies, caught in a huge spider’s trap.

“Curious trap, Professor Nott. Had you expected this?”

A groan came from the form that Severus identified as Lupin from the wisps of dun coloured hair that escaped between the winding.

The younger Professor had found a cup of tea and was enjoying the view, from the wall beside his door where he leaned. “No, honestly. The trap was intended to capture students intent on cheating. My intelligence suggested that these are guilty of attempted political espionage, not academic.”
Severus’ mind raced as he considered what reasons he might offer if his presence was challenged. Well, it was his warning that brought the break in to light, but would he expose Deirdre to retribution by mentioning his source? He hoped he wouldn’t have to reveal that in front of the wankers. He remained behind Dumbledore, in his shadow. After a moment’s thought, he decided to renew his disillusionment.

Noise from the hall drew Dumbledore’s attention and he turned with an expression of extreme irritation. “What is this?”

Professor Nott answered, “Hopefully the last of the defendants, fetched from where-ever he was hiding by the most excellent Professor McGonagall.”

Dumbledore’s sharp eyes appeared to focus on the space where Severus stood. It was so uncanny that Severus instinctually held his breath. It was a relief when Peter Pettigrew’s milk-white face came into view and the Headmaster turned away.

Stepping to the side, Severus managed to avoid getting in the way of the parade. Dumbledore turned back to Professor Nott and said softly, “You may release them now.”

One by one, each was cut loose and levitated down. Each wand was confiscated in turn.

Conversationally, the Headmaster asked, “Neith’s tangle? Interesting choice.”

A short bark of mirth answered him, “Very good, Professor. She is one of my personal favourites. Mother of all that is, was, and will be, she guards secrets well. It seemed appropriate. She is not as vicious as many of her progeny.”

Severus felt pressure on his shoe and looked down to see the kitten stretched up to paw at him. Blast! Making a mental note to ask more of this later, he bent to pick up the puffball whose weak protest was only a quiet mewl. Crookshanks’ eyelids were half closed as Severus settled the urchin in the crook of his arm, mentally extending the disillusionment to cover it too. A floating kitten would be an obvious tell. Its soft purring would be just as bad, but he was missing things.

The adults were talking in low voices and Severus could see James Potter glancing at the unguarded door with a calculating expression. Surely he wasn’t going to try and run? Well, he was an idiot, and a Gryffindor to boot. He found himself hoping that Potter would do it. He’d love to see the look of shock on that arrogant mug when Severus was praised for his quick wits and response to the
reprobate’s attempt to escape.

Professor Nott shouldered out of the room, swearing under his breath as a tinny voice was demanding attention. Torn, Severus decided to step back from the door, so that he still had a view of it, but was in a better position to overhear what was being said.

“… grievous attack. I’ve never seen its like, sir. I have to insist you come in. The Ministry is reactivating you back to full duty.” Professor Nott was talking into a palm-held mirror.

“I can’t possibly leave the school before the end of term. Professor Dumbledore needs me here. You know how hard it is…”

“Can’t be helped. The sooner this business is wrapped up, the sooner you can return to your cushy classroom, Notty. Now, meet us at this address. I’ll give you an hour to make arrangements out of respect for Dumbledore. One hour.”

Flipping the mirror closed, Professor Nott swore, “Да чтоб всё в ад провалилось! Хуесос!”

Stalking past Severus, Professor Nott muttered to him, “Go get dressed and be back here quickly. Grab us two bacon sandwiches too.” The Professor held out a hand. “Oh, and hand me the cat. Minerva will want to claim him back.”

Faint disappointment flooded Severus as he allowed the disillusionment magic to slip free. It felt strange as it receded, as it always did, but the tired kitten only twitched in its slumber. Okay, well. Maybe it was a little cute. Nott waved him away, and Severus sprinted off to follow orders. Damn Nott, he found a way to make him run after all.

“Headmaster. I am afraid that I am unexpectedly short on time. Quex reactivated my oath to the Queen.” Whit was frustrated. There was too much going on here, he didn’t want to leave now.

“Sinclair’s still alive? Surprising. They must have called him out of retirement. Extraordinary.” Dumbledore’s tone was calm, but the glittering intelligence behind those ice blue eyes were alive with the implications. “I will loan you to him for today as a consultant, but I insist that you finish out your contracted time here, Whittington.”
Albus was not going to give him up so easily, good. “I understand.”

Dumbledore turned away. “Now, Professor McGonagall, I will ask you to escort these four to Filch’s office. They will remain in his custody until a time as we will be able to take up these proceedings once more.”

Plucky wizard that he was, James Potter spoke up, “Sir, we can explain. We just wanted to know more about the attacks. Something doesn’t seem right.”

The Headmaster held up a hand, staying any further speech from the student. “You will have your moment to defend your actions, but I trust you understand the seriousness of the charges. You have stumbled willfully into affairs that do not concern you.” Black’s face was impassive, Lupin’s mouth was set in an angry line, James kept opening his mouth as though to speak, and closing it, and Pettigrew was quietly sobbing.

He waved a hand, “I have no choice but to place all of you on suspension until further notice. Professor McGonagall will retain your wands. I am highly disappointed in all of you. You are dismissed.”

A line of students filed out of his office, and Whit recalled that he still had the sleeping Crookshanks, who he handed over to McGonagall to stow in an inner pocket of her robes before she followed.

Having more pressing concerns on his mind, Whit passed over the sheaves of reports to Dumbledore. “These are the reports that I reviewed last night. I’d have passed them over sooner but my Dear Uncle chose yesterday as a convenient time to invade for tea.”

Albus’ bushy eyebrows lifted in what Whit understood as invitation, so he went on. “Usual rubbish. Loyalty to the family, need to get settled down and start running with the right people. Asking about you.”

The eyebrows shot up further and Albus prompted Whit, “What did he want to know?”

“Oh, I expect he was looking for reasons to label you a Muggle-loving philistine. Your support for Squib rights was very unpopular, Headmaster.”
The tension relaxed a fraction, Albus answered, “I have never made a secret of my opinions on the subject of proper treatment of our fellow men.” He looked about the room, “How did young Mr Snape come to be involved in this?”

Whit’s mind blanked for a moment before he answered, “It was he who alerted me to the possibility of snooping. Deirdre sent him a message which I gather took rather long to get to him by magpie. She’d overhead the students in question planning something yesterday.” Shrugging, “The lad has shown a deal of maturity and is coming along well in his training after a week. I intend to take him along with me when I leave. I’ll apply to Svartrunir…”

Dumbledore waved a hand, “No, do not concern yourself. I will inform Sigmund. It is perhaps for the best that the student in question be removed from classes after this morning’s excitement.”

“Very good, sir.” Whit thought of something, and then tapped the reports with a finger. “I think Shacklebolt was really on to something here.” He took one from the Headmaster and flipped it open. “Look at this.”

Dumbledore’s eyes scanned the page and then stopped, looking up in dismay before scanning the same line once more, which he now read aloud. “What is most peculiar about both cases is that in each the number of limbs does not tally correctly. Most predatory attacks come with the expectation that there will be less of the victim left behind, not more. To date the scrying attempts made to identify the additional remains have been fruitless, however one examiner reports that the times of death differ.”

“I have seen something like this before, Albus, but never on this scale of violence and never in this country. One victim. Maybe two. Not a whole family.” Whit sighed. He loathed fresh corpses. Half-decayed were worse. It was downright intolerable when they got up and tried to kill you.

“You are thinking there is necromancy involved, Whittington?” Dumbledore’s voice was weak, shocked.

Whit was nearly certain now, but he hadn’t been able to find any convincing evidence just yet. “I am afraid that we will need to prepare ourselves in the event that there is a rogue necromancer in the country. They are difficult to contain.”

“Quite. I shall have to speak with my contacts.”
“Professor Dumbledore, you do know that this needs to remain secret? Until I know more for certain, if this gets out, the Minister will have my wand.” Whit tried to sound unconcerned, but this was very serious indeed.

“Do not concern yourself. I recall that Professor Slughorn took up some alternate studies in his youth. Exchange program, I believe. He might be willing to consult.” There was a haunted quality to Dumbledore’s voice that made Whit wonder what the wizard knew, but wasn’t saying.

A knock at the door interrupted and Severus appeared, a bundle in one hand, a sack over his shoulder, and a grim look of determination in his eyes. “Shall I wait in the hall for you, sir?” He was oddly diffident. Whit was used to more of an edge of challenge from Snape, but he didn’t have time to consider that development just at the moment.

Whit winced, “My classes…”

“Shall be looked after, Professor Nott. Return to us safely, as soon as you may.”

Falling back into old habits, Whit saluted Dumbledore crisply, and then felt ridiculous as he turned to leave. Amusement melted away some of the frost from Dumbledore’s eyes and they clasped hands. A small part of Whit decided that the response was worth the cost.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks to Coromandel and ScarletDewdrops for beta'ing this chapter.

PS: I don't speak Russian and I shamelessly used Google translate. Assume Whit isn't happy and used bad words. He doesn't speak a lot of Russian either, but it can be rather satisfying when surrounded by tender ears.

My heartfelt thanks goes out to readers like you! I hope you are enjoying the story. :)
Dumbledore stood in the hallway with his head cocked, listening to the conversation on the other side of Filch’s office door. Therein waited four boys whose fates were held in his hands. Not only were they caught breaking and entering, they did so with the specific intent of discovering secrets that were Ministry classified and the boys knew it. Minerva had been so angry she was spitting incoherently when he’d sent her away to cool down and organise coverage for Professor Nott’s first few periods of class.

They all were awaiting the Ministry inspector who was to look into the case. Dumbledore himself was fairly confident that any intelligent adult would see reason, but he’d not been confident that the MLE had many of those to spare for such an event. It was a very delicate situation, one that would require the Headmaster to exert his influence so that all parties were mollified and the punishments were proportionate to the offense, a deceptively difficult task.

In this case, there was not the least bit of malicious intent. Arrogant, nosy, and foolishly short-sighted, certainly. Whose fault was it that the boys had been so concerned about what was going on out there in the world that they felt the need to steal the information directly from the Ministry? Dumbledore certainly knew much, more than Professor Nott. It was his inclination to try and keep the affairs away from the students, but was that right? These were sixth years, NEWT students who would be out there in less than two years, and if he didn’t miss the mark, he was fairly sure that they’d make excellent allies in the war that had to follow and may span decades, extrapolating from what he knew from Miss Ward.

In a way, Dumbledore struggled with the same exact problem. A fount of forbidden knowledge walked about the castle, knowledge that he should not have about what was going on out there, and what they were facing in the future. To try and force the girl to remember was too great a temptation, it beyond his own strength to leave her alone, and so he’d reached out to a Healer from St Mungo’s with the hypotheticals of the case, strictly omitting the fact that Miss Ward was a lost time traveller. He’d been surprised to find out that Poppy already had consulted with old Doctor Grizibello, an Italian Mind-Healer who taught at St Mungo’s and specialised in memory magic.

The conclusion there was disappointing. There isn’t a magical malady that is keeping Miss Ward’s memories locked away. There is no curse or obliviation to reverse. This is her own mind’s coping mechanism, and it is seen in muggles and magical people alike. It is also extremely rare, and has no cure. The most effective treatment is ‘tincture of time,’ as Miss Ward already removed herself from the source of her distress.
“I think he’s out of earshot.” James Potter’s voice had retained the clear tenor of youth, and was quite easy to hear. This brought his mind back to the situation at hand. What action would bring the desired outcome?

Dumbledore strained his ears, listening for sounds that would suggest any of them were foolish enough to try and move. As it was, the four Gryffindor offenders were instructed to sit and not to get up. The chairs they sat in were jury-rigged with wards that would bring down a world of woe on all of them should any attempt to move from the spot, Professor McGonagall wasn’t messing about. She forbade Filch from chaining them up and stoutly refused to petrify them before she left. Dumbledore mentally made a note to himself to make sure Minerva had some time off quite soon.

“Dumbledore wouldn’t actually let them use those shackles on us, Remus.” Sirius Black was a brilliant wizard with both talent and personal loss in frightening abundance. It was no surprise at all that he’d done something so reckless. The true surprise was that he’d got caught.

Filch initially fussed at being saddled with babysitting the quartet, but when he heard the charges he’d cheered up considerably. When Dumbledore last saw him he’d been muttering about oiling up the magic-dampening shackles that were stowed away, kept only for extreme cases. A faint tuneless humming could be heard from a distance within, Filch often did this when he was taken up with a task that pleased him.

“At least someone’s happy.” That was Pettigrew, an awkward half-blooded boy who didn’t seem to have an ambitious bone in his body. Much like his mother, as Dumbledore recalled.

“What did you make of the reports, Sirius?”

A low groan answered Potter. “That a date with Susanna Majors probably wasn’t worth this.”

“That isn’t what I mean, and you know it. The description of the crime scene was a horror show. And did you see whose family it was?” There was a pause, before James went on, “Dorky Meadows? You remember her? She was a prefect. It was her entire family, guys. Except, perhaps her mother who was listed missing. She’s muggleborn. I don’t think this was a random attack.”

Silence met this revelation.

James’ laugh broke in, strange for the contrast, “And that ridiculous theory that it was a werewolf? It wasn’t anywhere near a full moon. Rubbish.”
Remus Lupin finally spoke. “The Ministry has always been quick to blame werewolves for savage murder. Last time it was a pack of mundane attack dogs, but werewolves would have been more believable if you believe them.” He cleared his throat, “Those photos... It had to have taken something with enormous strength, like a giant or a troll. Whatever did this is terrifying. I want to know what did it, and why the Ministry isn’t warning the public to be on their guard.”

Peter’s timid voice was harder to hear. “... won’t really snap our wands? Y-you have a plan, right, Prongs?”

Of all of them, James Potter had the least to lose personally because his family’s influence was sufficient to protect his wand.

“I am thinking on it, Peter.”

Sirius spoke up, “I could take the blame. Say that you all were trying to stop me, that it was my own idea. Nearly was, so it would be a partial truth. Moony, you didn’t think this was a good idea to begin with.”

The Headmaster had been intrigued when Sirius Black was sorted into Gryffindor. While Dumbledore had witnessed the young wizard do extraordinary and foolhardy things, in this moment it was clear that the hat had measured out the youngster’s character with accuracy. The boy was growing up. Dumbledore was moved by the show of loyalty and willingness for self-sacrifice to help protect his friends.

The elder Black turned seventeen only about two weeks ago, and as the only one in that room who was of age, he was at risk to be subject to the full force of the Ministry’s legal system should they decide to press charges. He’d never recover, and would be stripped of his magic unless one of his more distant relatives stepped in. He’d been spending time with the Potters, perhaps Charlus and Dorea might…?

James interrupted that line of thought, “You won’t do anything of the sort. We’re blood brothers and we are in this together.”

Sounds of shuffling movement preceded the protest, “That’s stupid. Think, James. This could end your plans to be an Auror. You’d lose that. What would happen to Moony? Wormtail, I know you’d land on your feet but I could do this for all of us. I’m tough enough. You needn’t worry.”
“Sirius, no…” Peter’s soft voice was barely audible. “What if we suggested it was a set up? How did Professor Nott know we were there? He’d not come when the curse was triggered.”

Dumbledore knew from conversations with the Sorting Hat years ago that Peter Pettigrew was a hatstall who had almost ended up in Slytherin. The boy was so timid usually that he’d personally thought Pettigrew would have been better placed in Hufflepuff, yet here he was showing cunning. Wouldn’t work, but at least the lad was thinking instead of cowering.

“Snape was there. I bet he had something to do with it.” James Potter always was suspicious of Severus Snape. It was an obsession of Potter’s, and the Headmaster had gathered from Minerva that it was all over an intense rivalry for the affections of a witch. He had hoped that it would rest now that Lily Evans had repudiated Severus during a particularly ugly scene last May, but James and Sirius seemed even more determined to see Snape destroyed. It had to be stopped, he knew, but how to accomplish all of this without letting these boy’s talents go to waste?

Black’s growl was low. “I hadn’t seen that. Good eye, Prongs. Yet another line on the ledger. He’ll be called to account and will pay in full. Something about Snape just makes my skin crawl. He’s eyeball deep in black magic, you mark my words. Anyone that has that wide a repertoire of curses can’t be intending to merely defend himself.”

“I saw too, he was out of uniform. Strange to see him in sweatpants. Did you know that he’s been taking additional training with the Professor every morning? I’d forgotten to mention it but I’d overhead Avery complaining to Mulciber that Snape’s alarm was waking him up early, every day.” Lupin’s tone was more ponderous when he added, “I think it is possible he was just along for the morning, although I am willing to wager he’s pleased all the same.”

Peter spoke up, “He’s been civil to me. We were studying just last night.” A shocked silence fell between the boys, and then Peter added, “Morgie’s friends with that new girl, Deirdre Ward. The one that Snape’s been lurking after, right? We all studied for Herbology in the library last night, and it was fun until that prat Vasim had to make Deirdre cry about her dead parents. Honestly. Morag was ready to skin him for shoe leather, and she left early.” A nervous laugh followed this, and he added, “Remus was there too. Tell them, Remus.”

“If by civil, you mean ignoring you entirely, I suppose that’s true. He hadn’t been invited, but Ogden wasn’t about to force him out when Deirdre wanted him there. Everyone was curious to know about Deirdre’s Patronus. Extraordinary tale. I’m sorry I hadn’t heard it speak firsthand.”

James answered, “Speak? What’s this?”
Dumbledore frowned. This was news to him as well. He’d thought Miss Ward wasn’t particularly confident in her defense spells? Maybe Whittington had not managed to test her Patronus, he would want to see this in person.

Remus elaborated, “She’d used a corporeal Patronus to send up a message to Ogden to find out where to meet. The Ravenclaws are quite protective of their little enclave, I think they’d make their space secret-kept if they thought they could get around the castle’s wards. Anyway, I was supposed to tell her, but before I managed to get it out, she’d taken things in her own hands.”

Sirius, who’d been quiet said, “I don’t trust her. I can’t put my finger on it, but there’s something not quite right. She isn’t what she seems.”

“How about hanging with Snape has given you that impression, I imagine. Her grief wasn’t a show, mate. I believe the story.” Remus went on, “She’s a formidable witch. Tell me, Padfoot. Can you cast a corporeal Patronus? Had you thought to use one as a messenger like that?”

Not about to take that sitting down, Sirius quipped back, “You’ve got the hots for Deirdre Ward, Moony. I saw you two dancing to my amazing guitar and vocals. I was rather good, wasn’t I?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

Peter piped in, “Sirius might be right, Moony. You didn’t seem happy when she left the party without even saying goodbye.” Pettigrew seemed to have cheered up, his voice was stronger now. “Wow. I wish we had that scene on film. It takes guts to stand up to Lily Evans. I thought for sure Ward would be sorted to Gryffindor after that.”

“Good thing she wasn’t. Lily’s good mood seems to be passing off, and I wouldn’t want to stand between her and Ward.” James chuckled, “I’d love to see that. Lily’s glorious when she’s in a rage. Especially if it isn’t with me.”

Remus groaned. “This is no time to have to listen to you expound on Lily Evans’ virtues, Prongs. People are dying out there and we’re likely to be expelled. Your impossible romantic aspirations are the last thing you should be thinking about. Another attack happened last night and it sounded grim.”

“What?!” More than one voice answered.
“Another attack, the third one in the past week. I heard what was being said over the mirror when Professor Nott was called away. Are cursebreakers sworn to serve the Ministry? I didn’t think they were military.”

Ah. Dumbledore had forgotten that Remus’ hearing was extraordinarily good. That complicates matters.

“I’ve no idea, Remus. Why?”

“Professor Nott’s been called up to active duty, like he is some sort of special agent. He argued against it, but we might be losing another Defense Professor and it isn’t even the holidays yet.”

Peter suggested with that faint whine in his voice that set Dumbledore’s teeth on edge, “Well, maybe if he leaves we can talk our way out of trouble?”

Remus answered, “I would not count on it, Wormtail, not a bit.” His voice was thoughtful as he added, “Snape is helping Professor Nott. Right now, he’s out of classes. He’s getting a front row view on what’s going on. What I wouldn’t give to help out too. I don’t like what’s happening out there. Werewolves are having a worse time of it, and people are scared. Meanwhile I’m stuck here, learning how to make an enchanted handkerchief change colors depending on the expected weather.”

A snort sounded from Sirius. “I know what you mean, mate. We’re the good guys. We’re supposed to be the ones fixing the world. How did Severus Snape get such a plum position? I wouldn’t mind getting in on the action. I’m top of the class in Defense, aren’t I? Shouldn’t I have been asked?”

Silence stretched out, the uncomfortable question should have answered itself, surely. He hadn’t earned it.

Dumbledore was about to turn back around and leave when he heard James say, “Well, gentlemen. I’ve given this great thought. There’s nothing else for it but to throw ourselves on Professor Nott and Dumbledore’s mercy. We are going to compose the most epic apology that these halls have ever seen. We will be completely sincere and accept whatever punishment that is deemed appropriate except expulsion. No, Sirius. Whatever consequences happen should be shared equally among all of us. I am certain that we’ve already lost enough points in one day to make Lily set me on fire on sight and I probably deserve that.”
Dumbledore was certain that McGonagall was going to make Potter wish she’d hex him if Lily Evans didn’t get to him first. The lad was taking responsibility. The boys’ own attitude regarding their mistakes, if the right one, might go a long way towards improving their chances of staying in school.

“What I won’t allow is for our wands to be snapped over this. Yes, we were wrong. We were foolish, and not just because we were caught. But we do not deserve to lose our magic. No one was hurt. We can offer to take vows of silence or whatever Professor Dumbledore and the Ministry deem necessary to limit the damage from our intrusion.”

Peter’s voice was small and scared again. “What if the Ministry demands that we be Obliviated?”

James’ answer was simple, “We allow it. I’ll ask my parents to stand in on the process to assure it is done correctly, it is my right as a minor. They’ll stand in for you too, Sirius if you’ll let them.”

“Wipe away our sins? Well, why not? Tempting. Maybe they can take my whole bloody family while they are at it.” Black’s tone was wistful.

Subdued, Remus said, “I am not certain if I can be obliviated. The Wolf interferes with mind magics, at least so much as I’ve read. I would willingly take a wand oath and I think that is preferable for all of us.” After a moment, he added, “I suppose this means I won’t be a prefect any longer.”

James sighed morosely. “Goodbye Quidditch Cup.”

“Susanna Majors isn’t going to want to be seen with me after this. I suppose that’s a problem solved.”

Peter added, “We’ll have more time to spend together! I was reading about this new game that’s all the rage. You fight monsters and make up your own heroes. It has so many rules that you have to buy a whole book to do it right!”

Remus chuckled, “Sounds like a Ravenclaw’s wet dream, mate.”

Not catching the critical subtext, Peter asked excitedly, “Will you try it with me?”
Sirius sounded incredulous, “You must be very sure of your parents’ response to this, Peter.”

“Oh, well my Dad’s a solicitor. He won’t stand by and let me get expelled over something like this.”

James hissed, “Shhh. Filch is back.”

“That’ll be enough out of you wretches. I’m tired of your mewling prattle, so shut it before I get Professor Dumbledore to do it for you.”

Minerva McGonagall sat in her office, awaiting the answers to the missives she’d been forced to send out. A feeling of dread hung over her, and she was already mourning the loss of the young men for surely there was no way for them to escape consequences this time. There was little to dispute. The young wizards, bumbling baboons that they were, had been expertly caught red-handed in a trap set by Professor Nott. It was a fascinating bit of ward-work and she’d have loved to examine it more closely. She’d noticed something out of the ordinary on Professor Nott’s door when she’d been forced to find him there earlier in the term. Cheeky bastard had invited her in, and there was no way in Tír nAill that she was going to encourage him by asking after them. He’d no sense of propriety at all.

Turning her thoughts away from her infuriating colleague, she wondered how Peter Pettigrew had managed to escape, if only briefly, and why of all places he’d retreated to the kitchens? The stupid boy had left his shoe behind, cementing his own role in the affair. She had to conclude it was sheer dumb luck.

She already had an answer from the Black family. The owl she’d sent was sent back almost immediately with a declaration that the Black family only had one son, Regulus. Not content with that bit of vitriol, the matriarch went on to expound on the character flaws of the party in question, followed by an appalling tirade that iterated out in detail recommended curses to place on Sirius in addition to the much anticipated expulsion. The letter closed with an emphatic refrain to the tune of ‘don’t send him back to us, we don’t want him and he’s of age so we have no obligation whatsoever.’

Minerva had no doubt that Walburga wouldn’t lift a finger if Sirius were starving on her doorstep. She’d walk over him, stopping only to change into shoes with spiked heels. No, he would have no support from his family.
She’d thought on things the boy might be able to do if his wand were snapped. Perhaps he could assist Hagrid. Anything to avoid seeing that bright young mind thrown to waste, or worse, perverted to views he’d worked so hard to reject in defiance of his family. Dumbledore had been rather impressed when the young wizard left home, denying his family’s archaic pureblood values at great personal cost.

Hours passed since the issue came to light, and she’d had a chance to sit down and consider the offense and possible consequences. If only they’d not had such a record to begin with, they would have an easier time of it. Potter and Black were proud of their offenses and often made certain that no one else could claim their hard-earned bragging rights. That pride and arrogance were the foil to the house’s virtue of courage, paired with foolishness.

A very ugly episode from two years ago rose to mind, where Sirius Black had almost killed Severus Snape by luring him to the Shrieking Shack on a full moon, into the reach of the fully transformed werewolf, Remus Lupin. She wasn’t certain how James Potter managed to snatch Severus Snape away in time, but the werewolf did escape from the chamber created by Dumbledore to contain him. Divine providence of some sort kept Lupin under control and nothing untoward actually happened. McGonagall assumed at the time that Dumbledore had managed it himself.

McGonagall wasn’t certain at the time that Lupin would be allowed to continue at the school, however somehow the Headmaster secured Severus Snape’s absolute silence in the matter. The memory of a distraught Lupin presenting himself the following day with bags packed, in the expectation that he would be expelled, or possibly executed. The terror in the boy’s eyes broke Minerva’s heart. He’d not been a party to the prank, and the very idea that he might have infected or killed anyone, even Snape, had him ready to step off the battlements. He’d never trusted himself, his father made certain of it.

Privately, Minerva was quite proud of James Potter for saving his erstwhile enemy and had pinned her hopes on it being a sign of personal growth, a glimpse of a good man under the puerile prankster facade. Of course, one could argue that he’d been motivated mainly to save his friend and hadn’t a thought for Severus Snape.

Ultimately no one was harmed, therefore Sirius was let off with a note on his record and a week’s suspension from school. All agreed at the time that young Snape had suffered quite enough as it was. Madam Pomfrey had been beside herself with worry for both of the victims of the prank. She’d vowed to set Mr Black’s next broken bone the Muggle way in her cups the following weekend.

In a sense, this new offense was not as vile as others for it was not aimed at embarrassing anyone or of causing actual harm. The boys admitted to breaking and entering in order to get access to information, information that was being withheld from the general public as it was still under
investigation. Minerva herself intended to ask Elphinstone what he knew over lunch tomorrow. Disturbing rumours were being whispered in the halls, and while the shift of Professor Nott's flirtatious attitude to one of extreme sobriety initially gratified her it was now cause for worry.

She’d reviewed the little of what was uncovered by her troublesome cubs and none of it was good. Black magic was being used, of that she was sure and the short missive that demanded Nott’s expertise as a cursebreaker familiar with necromantic arts made her very uneasy. There had not been a Necromancer in the British Isles since the Great Plague of London in 1665. The wizards of that era were forced to burn nearly all of London the following year to handle an army of Inferi lodged all over the city. They had successfully prevented nearly all of the loss of mundane and magical life too, a point of curiosity for Muggle historians.

The flames in the grate behind her roared up, and the grim faces of Charlus and Dorea Potter came into view. “Professor McGonagall. May we come through?”

Minerva stood, dislodging a sleepy orange kitten from her lap. Crookshanks leapt to the floor, landing with a dull thud and a kittenish growl of reproach. She had no time to take thought for him as she waved the Potters through. “Of course. Mr and Mrs Potter, I regret the necessity for this meeting, but I am much obliged to you for coming so promptly.”

“Professor McGonagall, what is going on? When we read your letter we couldn’t believe it.” Mrs Potter’s mouth was set in a firm line. Mr Potter, however did not appear to be surprised in the least.

“I am afraid it is all true. In the early hours of this morning, your son along with his usual accomplices were found entangled in a trap in the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher’s office. Professor Nott is a cursebreaker and had set it as proof against those who wished to cheat on exams, however our boys were far more interested in the consulting work for the Ministry that is taking up Professor Nott’s time.”

Charlus Potter gripped his wife’s hand, stopping her from speaking. He was much calmer than his wife and he asked, “I should like to discuss this matter with the man in question directly. Perhaps there is a way to meet appropriate recompense? Nothing was damaged, I take it?”

“No one was hurt, were they? Our sons are such reckless, foolish boys. Oh, what shall we do?” Dorea interrupted before Professor McGonagall could speak.

Minerva’s brow snapped together in confusion, “Sons? I am sorry, I don’t follow.”
A weak chuckle escaped Charlus as he glanced down at the worried witch that was his wife. “Dorea
and I have welcomed Sirius Black into our home as a second son. We have offered Peter Pettigrew
and Remus Lupin the same courtesy, although Peter does not seem to be in need of additional
parenting. Have you heard from Mr Pettigrew yet? I received a query from his partner requesting
help to secure a magical solicitor for Peter.”

Shock registered on Professor McGonagall’s face and her eyebrows shot up to her hairline. “What’s
this?”

Tipping his head, Mr Potter smiled at Professor McGonagall. “Surely you are not surprised,
Professor? I did feel obliged to inform Mr Pettigrew of the consequences that Peter and the rest of
our boys might face should they be expelled.”

Bursting into tears, Dorea sobbed, “Hogwarts can’t use five groundskeepers. What will happen to
my babies?”

Sighing, McGonagall took out her wand and summoned two chairs to settle in front of her desk.
“Please, have a seat. I see we need to discuss this further. Tea would be appropriate, I think?”

Helping his wife get settled with a solicitous hand, Charlus nodded his consent. “Thank you,
Professor. Will the Headmaster be joining us?”

Sending the signal to her house elf assistant for the day, Minerva sighed. “Yes, although I am not
certain when he will join us. His attention is much divided, I am afraid. For this, he would want to
speak with you all.”

“Is this matter to be decided by yourself and Dumbledore then, Professor?”

McGonagall frowned as she poured the tea. “It normally would be, but the boys stumbled on
Ministry of Magic need-to-know information. We need to involve the Head of the Department of
Magical Law Enforcement before any final decisions are levied.”

“This Professor Nott, was it? Are we going to be able to speak with him?” Charlus accepted a cup
and passed it to his wife who fastened onto the ritual as grateful as a drowning woman would to a
life preserver.
McGonagall handed Charlus his own cup, “Later, perhaps. He was called away and we have had to scramble in order to cover his classes. Fortunately, Friday’s schedule is light.”

The fire behind her flared green and another head appeared in it. Mr Lupin nodded, “Ah. Professor McGonagall, I received your missive. I don’t believe any discussion on this matter is warranted so I am electing to stay here in London. Very busy time of year, you see. Remus is bound to get into trouble, can’t control his baser instincts, I’ve always thought this to be true. His friends seem to be a rather rag-tag bunch.” He snorted, “They would have to be to want to associate with a werewolf.”

A cracking sound directed attention to Mrs Potter, who’d just managed to fold her saucer in half. Waves of outrage radiated off of the witch, “James and Sirius are perfectly lovely, well mannered boys…”

Surprise was supplanted by disbelief in Mr Lupin’s face. “Ah, the Potters are there with, you, of course.” He craned his neck about, “I don’t see any representatives from the Black family. It must be true what they printed in the Daily Prophet, eh?”

Perhaps it was the smugness in his voice, or perhaps the sneer that broke Mrs Potter’s control. She stood up abruptly and stalked over to the fire. “I am here, Mr Lupin. As you have obviously forgotten, being too busy to heed such details of your son’s connections, I will remind you that I am a Black too. When Walburga and Orion gave up their claim on Sirius I took him up as my own in their place. As such, you will find that he is by no means friendless or unprotected.” By the end, she was shaking her finger so close to the flames she might worry about catching fire. She was so hot with anger that Minerva didn’t think the woman was likely to notice.

Mr Potter, a grandfatherly man with a kind face stood and joined his wife, placing a supporting hand on her shoulder. “We are also looking after Peter’s interests, although I expect his father will have things well in hand.”

Lips pulled back in a grimace, Mr Lupin spat out, “Well, why don’t you take on Remus and complete the set.” He was a bit too eager.

A woman’s voice filtered through the crackling flame, sound distorted in horror, “No, Lyall, don’t!”

“Hope, stay out of this. You couldn’t begin to understand these things.”

Hands grasped at Mr Lupin’s sleeves, tugging at him, “Please, Lyall. He’s still a child. Our boy!”
Mr Lupin growled and pulled free of the grasping hands. “He’s sixteen and old enough to bear the consequences of his actions, even if he was associating with the wrong people. If the rest of society knew what he was, he’d have no place anywhere at all.” He twisted to stare up at McGonagall, knowing she understood. Thunderclouds of ire built in the man’s eyes as he picked up his tirade once more. “And this is how he repays the Headmaster who has accepted him? How he tosses away his privilege to attend school when he very well could have been barred from his magic if public opinion ruled instead of Professor Dumbledore? No, Remus deserves the full force of whatever he’s got coming.”

“Lyall!”

“I’ll not intercede, woman, for all of your weeping. Now, leave be!”

Mrs Potter was shaking in outrage, her voice clotted in her throat. By the time Lyall was about to go she managed to choke out, “Hope? Mrs Lupin?” She narrowed her eyes now at Mr Lupin, “Let her by so that we may speak, mother to mother, you despicable cretin.”

Perhaps recalling that he had an audience, Mr Lupin visibly made an effort to control his behavior. “One moment, Madam.” With a nod, he focused on Minerva once more, “Professor McGonagall, if the decision is made to expel Remus, I request 24 hour notice so that I may make arrangements for suitable lodging until March. After that, he’s on his own.”

McGonagall was stunned, her only response a tight-lipped and curt nod.

Satisfied, Mr Lupin’s glare swept over the other occupants of the room as he took his leave. “I’d wish you a good day, but there cannot be anything of the sort to be had in these circumstances.” Not waiting for a reply, he withdrew from the green flames.

Moments later another head thrust into the fire, this time an anxious woman. Mrs Lupin wasn’t a great beauty, and gave the impression of poor health, her cheeks hollow and her hair a dull mix of mousey brown shot through with wilder strands of white. Her eyes were too large for her face, the liquid quality of strong black coffee, expressive and sad. As she glanced over her shoulder and in the direction of the office, her hands flew up in a warding gesture of surprise. She squinted, into the flame, as though the light was too bright.

“How could he? Our little Remus…” When her face tipped up to regard the three magical people looking back at her, she started backwards. “So this is what it is like? I’ve never talked by fire
before.” Curiosity distracted the woman from her grief.

Dropping down to her knees, Mrs Potter lowered her voice to gentler tones. “My name is Dorea and I’m James’ mother.”

A small smile answered as the muggle in the flames spoke, “I’m Hope. Your son is one of the noblest young men walking those halls. He takes particular care of my Remus, who couldn’t ask for a truer friend. Thank you for raising him so well.”

Crouching closer to the fire, Mr Potter spoke, “He’s far from perfect, but that is to be expected, isn’t it? You may call me Charlus.” He sighed as the Muggle in the fire offered a tentative smile and nod of greeting. “Mrs Lupin, I’m afraid that it is our sons who have dragged your boy into quite a hot cauldron this time. We have not yet seen them, but we expect to soon.”

“Yes, yes! I long to see our boys.” Mrs Potter reached up and grasped her husband’s arm but her fleeting smile disappeared and she turned back to the pale face in the fire. “Will you come through, dear?”

Fear pinched Mrs Lupin’s eyes, and she glanced over her shoulder before providing the answer. “I am afraid that is out of the question. My husband is very busy, and I am trespassing on his patience as it is.” Urgency pinched her features as she turned to Professor McGonagall. “Please, Professor. Please help my boy. I don’t pretend that he is innocent in this, but given how much he has to lose…”

Grimly, Professor McGonagall inclined her head in acknowledgement, “I will use my very best judgement, Mrs Lupin.”

Becoming more frantic in her quest for reassurance she reached out, her hand approaching the invisible boundary of the flame. “Please. Have mercy.”

Gritting her teeth, Minerva growled. “I. Will. Use. My. Very. Best. Judgement.” Internally she cursed and hissed, loathing her responsibility in this but determined to see it out all the same.

“Thank you, Professor.” The woman’s eyes darted about. “Thank you, friends.”

Moved by the obvious terror in the poor woman’s eyes, Mrs Potter spoke up, “We could speak up for Remus too, Hope. Charlus knows I don’t mind taking in another stray, and he’s so quiet and well
mannered. I do love a full home.” She leaned forward, her eyes shining with the light of a woman on a mission, “Please, might we look after your Remus? It would be such a pleasure. Please, Mrs Lupin?” She grabbed onto her husband’s hand and grabbed it, like a little girl who’d seen an Abraxan foal and was determined to have it for her own.

Clearing his throat, Charlus didn’t hesitate to support his wife’s request. They were an old family, one with resources enough to raise forty sons should they be so blessed. “You and your son will always be welcome in our home, Mrs Lupin. Those boys are already sworn brothers so think of it as inheriting a few more family members by association.”

Hope beamed. She was a woman who no longer was in the flower of her youth, but the joy in that smile was nearly blinding in its intensity. “Oh, thank you! Thank you both. Please, do look after him where I cannot. Tell Remus that I love him and think of him every day.” A look of consternation came over her, “Lyall left me, and there’s a strange sputtering…”

“Get back, Mrs Lupin, do it NOW…” Professor McGonagall whipped out her wand, and when the Muggle didn’t look like she was going go comply, she cast Reducto, pushing her backwards through the flames and out of sight. The fire immediately changed back to its usual orange colour. She’d acted quickly and not a moment too soon. “Daft wizard, leaving his Muggle wife in a dying Floo. She’s certainly singed.”

Looking at each other, a silent worried communication passed between husband and wife as Charlus helped Dorea to her feet. Charlus looked dazed, although one couldn’t blame the man. He for all intents and purposes became a father for the third time moments ago, something could not have anticipated in his dotage.

Dorea dropped her smile and looked to McGonagall. “I want to see our boys, Professor.” She was a mother and her children were under a serious threat. There would no stopping this woman once her mind was made up. Minerva would have done the same for her nephews.

“In short order, Mrs Potter. Now, I wanted to discuss with you the contents of what the boys…” She stopped mid sentence when Crookshanks leapt up onto her desk, puffing its coat out and twitching his bottle brush tail in agitation. His yellow eyes stared up at a nearby window as he chattered, emitting a string of nonsensical growls and chirrups.

An owl hovered at the window, carrying a thick envelope. McGonagall huffed, “What now?”

The creature hooted and then tapped politely at the pane which was kept shut against the November chill.
Mr Potter smiled and helped his wife back to her seat. He didn’t seem surprised as dismay wrinkled the harried Professor’s prematurely lined face.

“Goblin lawyers. You gave the Pettigrews the name of a Goblin law firm.” A headache was gathering in her temple, throbbing at her right temple. “Mr Potter, what possessed you…”

It was Dorea who answered, “Oh, it was my idea. Since your note kindly referenced possible charges from the Ministry itself, I felt it necessary to make sure that when the Pettigrews sought out advice that would be well informed and impervious to outside influence.” She might look old enough to be a grandmother with her graying hair done up in a bun, but Dorea Potter’s silver eyes were as sharp as a raptor’s.

The same intensity was reflected in the kitten’s yellow eyes as he continued to softly chirrup at the large owl who settled on the back of McGonagall’s chair. The messenger bird preened itself, seemingly unconcerned by the cat’s prowling. Crookshanks took himself down to the floor, and Minerva noted that he landed silently. The kitten was learning. It gratified McGonagall that at least one of her pupils were paying attention. Minerva’s attention was steered back to the Potters as Dorea spoke again.

“It seemed like a reasonable precaution, and I dare say Mr Pettigrew, busy man that he is with his own law practice was quite worried for his son.” She smiled brightly at her husband who had the good grace to look mildly embarrassed.

Flapping its wings, the owl hopped back to the windowsill, expression again haughty and not a bit concerned. The way it twitched its wings as it settled into place ruined the effect.

Blandly, Mrs Potter turned her gaze back to McGonagall. “Do you need to answer that note directly or can we get back to the matter at hand? I believe you were going to share the details of the alleged infraction?”

“No, I suppose it will keep for an hour or so.”

Charlus Potter, perhaps recognising the strain that their son’s Head of House was under, stepped about the desk and pulled back the chair, his bow an echo of courtly manners. “Please, have a seat, Professor.”
Seating herself, Minerva sighed and pulled her teacup back towards her. “Now, you have requested the facts surrounding the incident. I should start with events from earlier this week as you will need some context to understand better why the Ministry is involved.”

Mrs Potter smiled in encouragement, a smile that did not reach her eyes. “Of course, thank you, Professor.”

McGonagall directed her gaze inward and drew in a heavy breath, marshalling her thoughts as to weave the complicated tale. “I am afraid that this time your boys were inspired by something they overheard in this office while serving detention, one that they earned by fomenting a riot in my common room after last week’s Quidditch victory.”

By the time the whole sordid tale was untangled, Crookshanks had retreated to the seat of a shadowed chair, tucked under the work table that McGonagall kept for detentions. He determinedly attempted to blink away his fuzzy fatigue, watching the owl with the patience of the mighty hunter that he was going to be someday. His eyelids were getting so heavy. Perhaps if he just closed them for a moment… Zzz.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks to Coromandel and ScarletDewdrops for beta’ing this chapter. You guys are the best!

My heartfelt thanks goes out to readers like you! Don’t worry. Deirdre and Severus will return next chapter.
Severus wasn’t in Herbology, but Deirdre told herself not to worry about it. She had become accustomed to his grumpy exhaustion, for as the week wore on his temper turned to straight vinegar. His demeanour could not be likened to wine on a good day; Severus Snape was an acquired taste. Deirdre felt a strange connection to him, and to tell the truth, she didn’t mind his silences. Either Herbology wasn’t his favourite subject or he wasn’t a morning person as it was, because he didn’t interact with anyone there as a rule. Still, she missed his sullen presence.

By the end of the class she started to imagine what sorts of misfortune might have befallen him. Maybe the exertion was past what the tonic could smooth over? What little he’d shared with her of the activities sounded a lot like training for a sport, heavy on exercise and short on strategy for the initiate. Professor Nott wasn’t going to endanger his assistant, so everything must be fine. She fully expected him in Arithmancy since they had a test coming up, he wouldn’t skip that class.

She was beyond disappointed when Severus missed Arithmancy as well. To distract herself, she tried to take good notes, planning to share them with him, but this did little to assuage the feeling of misgiving that started to set in. By the time Professor Rolle dismissed the class, a cold lump of anxiety knotted in her belly. Instead of heading to the library for study period, she ran down four flights of stairs to check the infirmary.

Madam Pomfrey didn’t know where Severus was either. “No, Miss Ward. I haven’t seen him this morning, and I’d made a new batch of the tonic for him, too.”

“But… where could he be?” Now Deirdre was frightened. The Gryffindor troublemakers were absent from Herbology and Remus wasn’t in Arithmancy. Coincidences were clicking together, one after the next, fanning her worry to new heights.

She sat down in the chair that stood next to the bed she associated with him, hardly knowing what to think. Where should she look next? Should she go to Professor Nott’s office?

The mediwitch tried to reassure her, “Let me get you a calming draught. You have had a taxing week. I am sure that Mr Snape is fine.”

“I shouldn’t, I’ve got Charms in twenty minutes. Thank you, Madam Pomfrey.” Deirdre was going to wait right here, becoming increasingly convinced that something disastrous had taken place.
“What if Severus is trapped or hurt? Isn’t there a way you could find out? Perhaps ask Professor Svartrunir? He would know, wouldn’t he?”

Her lower lip was getting sore from all of the biting she’d done. A smaller, secret voice whispered in the back of her mind that it was her note last night that set events into motion, and that whatever happened to him was her fault. Tears of anger and misplaced loss welled up in her eyes, and Deirdre was terribly glad that she’d not done this in class.

“Tsk tsk. Severus Snape is one of the most resilient young wizards I’ve had the responsibility for patching back together repeatedly. It started the first day he set foot in the castle and I don’t see what’s different about today. Now, you must compose yourself.”

She knew that Madam Pomfrey was right, but she didn’t take any comfort from logic. She wanted to know what happened, and that he was alright. The suspense was too much for her.

A cup of tea swam into her wavering vision. “Drink this, Miss Ward. I insist.”

Reluctantly, Deirdre gathered the cup in her hands and breathed in the steam, her mind picking out the scents. The tea was bright in her nose, a mixture of assertive floral cut by lemony sweetness. On her second inhalation, the undertones of a deeper loam. The brew itself was a bilious yellow, but given Madam Pomfrey was watching her, she took a sip and rolled the liquid about in her mouth. A sour note of astringency made her reflexively screw her lips up into a pucker and she forced it down.

The Mediwitch sank down onto the cot, Severus’ cot, opposite Deirdre with an expression of thoughtful concern.

Strangely, her mouth was starting to water, and lacking anything else, Dee took another cautious sip. Sweeter earthen undertones bloomed in her mouth, and the bite softened as she swallowed. The ritual itself did seem to be helping her as the tears were no longer threatening to take control. Her mouth was left tingling, like she felt after brushing her teeth.

“Now, Miss Ward.” She paused, softening her tone and meeting Dee’s gaze before she continued. “Deirdre, I am sure that Severus is alright, but maybe you could send a message to him. Do you know how to send a Moiraig?” Madam Pomfrey fished out a slip of paper that she usually used to give students instructions on discharge from her domain. The heavyweight paper was mint green and stamped with a caduceus, right and proper.
Shaking her head, Dee frowned. “Can’t say I’ve come across that before.”

Eyes crinkling in amusement, the Mediwitch lowered her voice to suitable levels for conspiracy, drawing Deirdre closer, “Well, I’d ask that you not mention this to Professors, and if you get caught passing notes in class I’ll deny any knowledge.” She winked at Deirdre with a finger on her nose.

Brightening, Deirdre reached out to touch the paper. “How does it work?”

Rising from the cot, she motioned Deirdre over to a desk just inside her own office. Deirdre had been in here before and only spared a passing glance at the crowded bookshelves on the wall.

“The note will be enchanted to go to the recipient.” Taking out a quill, Madam Pomfrey wrote a quick missive to Professor Nott. The way she angled her body told Deirdre that she’d best not look too close, for fear of offending the witch. “So long as the paper is square, it will work, although it shouldn’t be too thin or too stiff lest the final result be flimsy or slow.”

Deirdre listened with keen interest, her fingers tracing a pattern on the wood in her distraction. “Might I try, Madam Pomfrey?”

“Certainly dear. Have you parchment?” Seeing Dee’s hesitation, “Of course you haven’t, you may use one of mine. Just cross off the top so there’s no confusion.”

Eager to try it herself, Deirdre fished out a quill and smiled nervously at the Mediwitch as she tried to figure out what to write. After a moment she settled on, “SS: It won’t be a surprise to you that you’re not in the infirmary or in class. You make this witch wonder! Send a sign that you are alright, for pity’s sake! - DW.” As she finished she noticed Madam Pomfrey watching her write with attention. “Done. What next?”

The Mediwitch breathed in deeply before continuing her instruction, “The incantation is Chartovili nuntius. You can add the name of an animal if you like, but when you are casting, be sure to focus on the intended recipient.” She proceeded to demonstrate, twiddling her wand over her message, causing it to start glowing with a faint violet light. “Chartovili nuntius cancer!”

Deirdre watched in fascination, and she could feel the tension of the magic as it built around the slip of parchment. After the fourth cycle she could see the light intensify right before Madam Pomfrey did a last tighter circle, snapping connection with a flourish. The magic rushed into the paper with an audible snap and a flash, to be replaced by a cleverly folded crab which Deirdre leaned in to examine.
more closely. “Oooh, how wonderful!” It would not have been possible to do in a short time without
magic’s help.

The little paper construct skittered nervously at the attention and when Deirdre extended a tentative
finger to prod at it, she was rewarded with a none-too-gentle pinch from the message’s claws.
“Ouch!”

Tsking, Madam Pomfrey fixed upon her creature with the end of her wand. “That’s quite enough
from you. Scuttle along. No dawdling!”

Sucking on the offending finger, Deirdre stared, mesmerised as the paper hopped off of the floor and
flattened itself to get under the infirmary door.

“Let me see, oh dear. Paper cut. My crab has defenses built in, since privacy is important.” Madam
Pomfrey drew Deirdre over to the sink where Severus had shaved that day, which felt like years ago,
and turned on the taps. “Rinse off. Mouths are not meant for healing, you know.”

Deirdre obediently put her finger under the tap, wincing as the cold water stung at first. “Can the
messages withstand a drenching?”

“Oh no, dear. They’ll get muddy or messy like any other. Really they only should be used indoors.
Hardly useful for anything other than passing notes in school, now that I think of it. They can go
astray as well, with the cat familiars that prowl about and feckless students, it would be easy for them
to get lost, so don’t entrust anything too important to this method.”

Staring into the mirror, Deirdre barely noticed when Pomfrey pulled her hand out of the water. Could
they be made to fly? What if the parchment was waxed? What animal forms worked best? What type
would be too complicated?

A flash of warmth ended the pain and Pomfrey patted her on the back. “There, dear. Now, we’d
better get going before you miss class.”

“I’ve Charms next but not until fourth bell.” Deirdre trotted after the Mediwitch back to the table, her
mind still abuzz.

Madam Pomfrey lifted her brows with interest before gesturing in invitation. “Your turn, Miss
Ward.”

Taking a moment, Dee closed her eyes and concentrated on her breathing. She turned her worried mind back to Severus Snape, picturing him clearly (although some quixotic part of her brain decided to dress him in rather well-fitted fighting leathers - now where had that come from?)

Cheeks burning, she snapped her eyes open and began repeating the incantation, “Chartaovili nuntius bufonem!” She could feel the magic tugging back at her as she twirled her wand, its own violet light building as Madam Pomfrey’s had.

“That’s right. You’ll know when it is done, keep focused.”

Her wand grew warm under her fingers. By some instinct she knew it was time and so she did the tight twirl, and panicked when the spell didn’t snap. Not having the time to look for guidance, she repeated the gesture, twitching her wand-tip more emphatically the second time and was rewarded with the loud snap and that occurred with the crab. “Oh!” She looked over at Madam Pomfrey who did not appear to be particularly concerned. “I didn’t get it right, I don’t know how to do this.”

The glowing paper was undulating and bending as they watched. “Don’t give up so soon, Miss Ward.” Madam Pomfrey put a steadying hand on Deirdre’s shoulder. The weight of it was comforting, bringing the frantic thoughts that threatened to fly away with her back down to safer latitudes.

A brilliant flash of light made both of the witches blink, and when their eyes readjusted, a toad complete with embossed warts on its back sat looking up at them balefully.

Heart leaping in her chest, Deirdre smiled in relief. “Not so bad after all. I guess I’ll need more practice.”

Clearing her throat, Madam Pomfrey’s voice was dry as she commented, “Try a little less hard next time. It need not be so detailed a construct. They only live for a few hours as it is and I’m worried that you’ll drain yourself too quickly if you put that much of your magic into it.” She huffed, “You’ve only been awake a fortnight.”

Deirdre did feel tired after the exertion, but the actual act of doing something vented enough tension from her worried mind that she still felt better for it. “Thank you, Madam Pomfrey. I’ll do my second-best next time, I promise.”
“Be sure that you do. Now, you had better get to class. Have you checked the library, by any chance? Might be prudent to ask Madam Pince if she has seen Mr Snape.”

Collecting her bookbag, Deirdre bounced on the balls of her toes, as though she were a sprinter preparing for a big race. “That’s a good idea, I’ll do that. Thanks again!”

The Mediwitch chuckled, calling after her as she slipped out of the infirmary, “And be sure to eat lunch!”

By the time Pandora, Alanna and Deirdre piled into Charms class fourth period, the whole school seemed to be buzzing in response to the sudden disappearance of Potter, Black, Lupin, and Pettigrew as well as Snape. Rumours flew thicker than the doxies in Flich’s cabinets, and teachers were having problems maintaining order. The stories wove wild stories of murder, arrests, and worst of all, expulsion of the entire lot.

As they settled into the back row, Alanna leaned over and whispered, “I heard Mary MacDonald say that the missing Gryffindor students hadn’t slept in their beds last night.”

Dee had been close mouthed about it all but she was getting tired of not knowing. “I’m sure all will come clear in time, ‘Lannie.” She hadn’t found Severus in the library either, and Madam Pince had snapped at her when she asked if she had seen her friend. He must have done something to offend the librarian since the woman appeared to believe it was a good thing that he wasn’t about.

Voice lowered to a whisper, Alanna leaned in. “Snape wasn’t in Herbology either. You know something, don’t you, Dee?”

Deirdre lifted a finger to her lips and tilted her head sideways towards Alanna, “Shh. Professor Flitwick is about to start.”

Pandora was the kind of witch who didn’t really talk much. People tended to forget she was even there. As a consequence, when she did choose to make herself known, it drew people’s attention. “Does it have something to do with that note you had Dolas take to him last night? He didn’t come back until early, and he was nattering on about snakes.” She bent forward to smile across Dee at Alanna, “Suggests that he made it to the right house. Good start.”
Face draining of colour, Deirdre made a show of opening up her scroll to start taking notes. Quietly she said, “You mean you aren’t certain that Severus got the message?” There was a hardness to her voice, cold like the stone of the castle itself.

The silver-blond witch didn’t seem to notice the drop in temperature and so she leaned back, looking up at the ceiling. “Well, he didn’t bring the message back with him, that is certain. He isn’t an owl, he’s smarter and more versatile. It does make him quite troublesome at times. He likes his little jokes.”

“Pandy, you know that was important.”

Brightening, Pandora went on as though Deirdre hadn’t said a word. “It is very good of you to talk with him, Deirdre. He barely uses any swear words with us, but outside the dorms he loses his composure. I need to work on the translation matrix. I think I made a mistake in translating the knots on the vocal diversion charm.”

Alanna whipped around to stare at Deirdre, one eye squinting at her. “What’s this about?”

Completely oblivious and taken with a fit of verbosity, Pandora leaned over and brightly replied, “Why, Dolas of course. And his fowl mouth. I wonder what would have happened with a snake-tongue translational error? Parselmouth? Lies?”

Mind whirling with what-ifs and gut weighted down with a growing cold knot of uncertainty, Deirdre was starting to believe that the absences had something to do with the Gryffindors’ plans. Their absences, which were much more remarked on than Severus’, made Dee worry that perhaps Severus had struck out to catch them on his own, rather than taking it to Professor Nott.

Alanna leaned in and spoke softly, her whispered tickled Dee’s ear. “Love notes to your boyfriend in the middle of the night? I’m shocked, Ward.”

Deirdre didn’t see the humour in this and Flitwick was looking up their way, so she pulled away and shook her head, mouthing, “Not now, ‘Lanna!”

“Oh ho. I see.” Alanna’s lips turned up in a saucy grin, as though she’d caught Dee wantonly snogging Severus in front of everyone.
“Hmmph.” Ears burning hotter at the way several parts of her own traitorous body heartily endorsed the notion, Deirdre ruthlessly turned her attention to the teacher down in front of the class.

Severus trudged through the Great Hall, looking at the clock that hung centrally. If he hurried, he could make the Potions lecture session. Slughorn usually was reasonable about tardies and he had a pass from Professor Nott. Even to his own dulled nose he smelled of sulphur and smoke, and he disliked it. Maybe if he sat in the back? No, he needed to get at least a robe over what he was wearing.

In his exhaustion, he was looking down at the tile floor as he put one foot in front of the other. He almost ran into Vrystrulk, a goblin in an official looking pinstripe suit and a powdered wig who was leading a shame-faced Peter Pettigrew. Too tired to even utter an “excuse me”, he inclined his head before stepping to the side.

“Wizard proceedings are always so abrupt and untidy. It is a good thing your father engaged our services, young Pettigrew. While it was remotely possible that the Ministry could demand expulsion, my interference saved you a great deal of paperwork.”

Severus turned his head to regard the damned party. “Expulsion? No one was even injured.” He’d not meant to say it aloud, but here they were.

The goblin stopped and squinted. “Ah. You are a witness, then?” He pulled out a card from his breast pocket and pressed it into Severus’ hand. “Whenever the Ministry gets involved it can be very messy indeed and they are rather twitchy I think. We have a stay in proceedings for investigation that I intend to make the most of. Might I call on you at your convenience, Mr Snape?”

Peter’s face turned white as a sheet, silently shaking his head at the goblin.

“I am not certain what good it might do, sir.”

Peter nodded his head up and down vigorously. He agreed, it seemed. At least he didn’t expect help, a fact that Severus found grimly satisfying.
The goblin noticed Peter’s gestures. “Oh, of course. Let me cancel that silencing spell. Very standard, wouldn’t want my client to say anything that could incriminate himself.” The goblin lazy flicked his fingers. “No need to say anything, you know.”

Coughing, Peter took in a deep breath. “Blimey, that wasn’t like any silencio I know.” He peered at Severus, “What happened to you? You look like you were chewed up and spat out by a volcano.”

Severus looked down at himself. There were holes in his pants and one of the arms of the jumper he’d selected for the morning run was ripped away entirely, with several long blackened scabs running down the length. “I was working on a project with Professor Nott.” One that he’d like to forget. “If you don’t mind, I’ve got Potions lecture, I’d rather not miss it.”

“Yes, yes. I’ll be in touch, Mr Snape. We must be off as well, have to get Mr Pettigrew back to his parents to serve out his suspension. Good day.”

Pettigrew flushed red, looking away in open embarrassment and was only too glad to get going. Severus watched the pair hasten away and he didn’t feel sorry for the fourth member of the team that’d made it their business to make his life a living hell. Well, not a whole lot anyway. What happened to the other three? Why was he being led out alone?

Trying to put those thoughts aside, Severus smiled. At last, long last! He wouldn’t have to watch his back constantly, and his housemates could stop the humiliating “Snape minding” duty. He wanted to believe that real consequences for the ridiculous things those four got up to were finally at hand.

He moved off from the spot, automatically turning for the stairwell leading down.

The thought of James Potter and Sirius Black potentially being expelled lent him a new energy. Perhaps if he hurried he could get into a set of robes at least and change his shoes. He’d not much time but student robes could cover a multitude of stains and sins.

When he opened the door to the common room, Peeves was circling about the common room, making a great whirlwind and pulling up everything that hadn’t been weighted or charmed down. When the door behind Severus snicked shut, the poltergeist soared over, stopping just before him. “Been visiting home then?”

Confused, Severus glared at the poltergeist. “I don’t know what you mean.”
“You know more than you should. Old Svartrunir in his wisdom, once whispered in private cloister of your uncanny abilities. You read the minds of men, read their desires, and learn their secrets with ease. But to what purpose?”

Shaking his head slightly in denial, Severus answered, “You know little and think of nothing but your own vile amusement.”

“Ah, but we are not so dissimilar, are we? I have long suspected that you are devilishly clever. I warrant that you are devil spawn, although it pains me to suggest that thy mother might have engaged in such blasphemous congress.”

“Watch your mouth, Peeves!” Severus withdrew his wand, turning to prevent the ghost from getting out of his range of vision. “Your mouthings mean naught to me, they lack weight.”

The ghost swooped close, and Severus’ short hair stirred in the breeze created by the spirit’s passage. “Have you been visiting home? You reek of the fiery brimstones of hell. I see it must be so for you are burnt and have the likeness of a charcoal lump, all blackened and greasy.”

Losing his temper, Severus loosed a hex in the poltergeist’s direction. The shot went wide of the mark, anger clouding the tired wizard’s focus.

Making a great show of it, Peeves inhaled deeply, causing a new wind to form at Severus’ back. “Ah, my fragrant friend. At least I prepared you a sort of welcome. Your return remains unmarked otherwise.”

Groaning, Severus cautiously edged through the common room, making his way closer to the dormitory door.

Cackling, Peeves did a somersault mid-air. “Want to know how I know there wasn’t a soul to greet you?” The ghost was not making much sense.

Severus glanced at his destination, thinking to keep Peeves talking as it seemed to please him. “No, but I am certain you will tell me anyway.” Only a few more feet to the door. A chill set into his injured arm, and he pulled back in reflexive startlement with a yelp.

His arm was under pressure and the poltergeist’s leering face came close to his, hands gripping
Severus and preventing him from leaving. “Stay a moment, young wizard!”

He started to shiver, cold in that terrible proximity. He struggled, trying to get away. “Peeves!”

“Verily, verily.” The ghost lowered his voice to a creepy, piercing whisper. “Hell is empty, soulless. All of the devils are here. On British soil. Understand me Severussss Snape? Beware.”

Severus couldn’t feel his arm any longer, “I hear you, now leave me, foul spirit!”

Eyes glittering with strange, terrible intelligence, Peeves let go of Severus’ arm all at once, causing Severus to slump backward onto the wall behind him in stunned silence. The pain didn’t return to the arm immediately.

A heartbeat later the poltergeist’s expression relaxed into his usual wide-mouthed leer. “Ha ha! You should see the look on your face!” Peeves drifted upside down, using his fingers to pull down on his eyelids before he ripped out a rather generous raspberry. When Severus had cleared the resultant ectoplasm from his face, Peeves was whizzing off, his transparent tail only just visible.

Severus had his wand out and used it to aim a stinging hex in the ghost’s direction, missing by only a hair this time. Muttering nonsensical curses under his breath, he pushed away from the wall. What had that been about? Hell was empty, the devils are all here? Up until this year he’d thought Peeves a fool and a distraction, much more trouble than he was worth, but now he was much much worse. He didn’t think the spirit was nearly as insane as everyone supposed.

A quiet girl from the year above glided into the room and looked him up and down with the expression of someone who had just got a whiff of something revolting. “You’d better hurry up, Snape. You’re going to miss another class.” She eyed the mess in the common room and used her wand to gather the scattered pillows and parchments, setting the room back to rights.

“Right. Thanks, Penny.” He turned away, pushing the door to the boy’s dormitories open.

Behind him, the witch called after him, “You’ve got a hole in your… Oh!” The quiet gasp told him that the aforementioned hole was big enough to afford a view of some of the mess on his back. Not wishing to discuss it, he walked on, pretending to not have heard.

Another surprise greeted him on entering his dormitory. A small mob of folded paper frogs hopped
over to him, leaping in an effort to climb his legs. There were three in all and he recognised them as the charmed messages that some of the Professors used. Who would be sending him notes? “I’m going to be late.”

The frogs hopped up and down in place, demanding attention. Morbid curiosity got the better of him and he leaned over and with some effort tapped each in succession. Smoothing out the paper, he did a double take when he say that while it was the infirmary’s paper for the first one, it wasn’t Madam Pomfrey’s handwriting.

He skimmed down to the bottom, and let out an unconscious exclamation, “Ah! Deirdre, you astound me.” Sinking onto the edge of the bed, he read over the words a second time. It was odd to have someone actually miss him. His worries disappeared under the cloak of wonder, its heat lifting his mood to unaccustomed heights.

The second note was frantic with undisguised worry, and the final note was short and resorted to threats if he didn’t find Deirdre immediately on reading her note. Nothing but his presence would satisfy as an answer.

Great, she was angry with him. Well, he knew he’d mess things up. It was inevitable. Severus rode the downward dip in his spirits, and irritation with his lot in life returned to the forefront of his mind. Silly chit couldn’t expect to be told of his every move, why should she? What would be next?

Unbidden, the memory of carrying the witch in her nightclothes back to the infirmary returned to the forefront of his mind. She was so light, so very soft in his arms. This was followed with the memory of her kissing him. It seemed so long ago, but truly it was less than a week.

He shrugged out of the ruined jumper and pulled on his white shirt, heedless of the black prints his fingers made, and switched out the shoes. He hadn’t time to change the pants as well, so he sped out of the dormitory, feeling all the while like his heart was leaping away, straining against all reason to get to Potions lecture and Miss Deirdre Ward.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Beta-love goes to Coromandel and ScarletDewdrops. Thanks especially to Coromandel for putting up with my tendency to write and rewrite over and over. Love you, duck!

For those who want to know, the tea selection was proctored by my friend, Havelocked.
It is a mixture of lemon balm, yarrow, and vervaine; crafted lovingly especially for our overwrought Deirdre, who still has classes to attend! If you wish to check out some of her other things, you could check her out at her tumblr account.
Deirdre felt like the day had stretched on forever. Rumours abounded regarding the absent sixth years and ranged from an outbreak of dragon pox to outright expulsion. The last made her very upset. She’d not wanted to believe it when she’d heard Peter wasn’t in class. She had come to like him, especially for Morag’s sake.

Morag and Deirdre hunkered down together for Friday Potions lecture. It was here that Professor Slughorn would present the theory that would lead the labs for the following week. Dee usually would sit in the front row, but today she’d dragged Morag to the back. Vasim and Ruth were down in front, and she’d noticed Visim glancing back her way. She wasn’t in the mood for debates and discussions. She was too worried, and so was her friend.

Usually being around Morag was a wonderful experience. She had a steady personality and wasn’t prone to chatter like Alanna. Morag was possessed of an unusual degree of natural empathy that made her easy to talk to, but this afternoon she wasn’t in a state to listen. Worry took its toll on her, making her quiet, her laughter nervous and her discourse distracted.

Deirdre spoke, “I’m sure they’re alright. I bet they’ve managed to work themselves into a spot of mischief. They’ll turn up.”

Playing with one of her flaxen braids, Morag’s answering smile was feeble. “You’re probably right.”

Both sat shoulder to shoulder in silence. The light in the room was dim except down in front at the lecturer’s desk. Professor Slughorn lazily flicked his wand at the slate and the outline for the lecture appeared at the side of the board and he turned to look up at the class, his walrus moustache flourishing with the impression of a pleasant smile. “Settle down, please.”

Deirdre ignored the sound of hurried steps of a student running in at the last moment, the door of the hall banging shut. She already had quill and ink out and set out to make another set of spectacular notes, muttering darkly to Morag, “I hope he appreciates this. I don’t just write notes for anyone.”

“Should I write some for Peter?” Morag flushed in embarrassment, “I hadn’t thought of that.”

The odour of sulphuric fumes wafted to her nose, odd but not completely out of place in the Potions
classroom. “Oh, don’t worry. I can give you a copy...” She cut off as a dark form vaulted neatly over
the row of seats a few down.

Deirdre dropped her quill, her hands nerveless in surprise. The smell was quite strong now. “What?!”
She froze when the face attached to the form came into focus. “You!”

Severus looked awful. He was pale and his face pinched as he settled down. He leaned over and
muttered, “Hello, Dee. Read your note.”

Controlling an urge to lean back, Deirdre whispered, “Don’t you hello me, Severus Snape. I’ve been
worried sick!”

Morag was leaning forwards to get a better look too. “Cor, you smell terrible. What’s happened to
you, then?”

Deirdre watched as Severus pulled out his wand to cast *Muffliato*. He was using his off hand to cast
and hadn’t straightened up, his face near enough to make a whisper practical.

“Professor Nott needed an assistant. It took a lot longer than either of us thought.” He tipped his head
back and sunk further into the chair, his long legs splaying out before him. A rip in the side of his
trousers displayed a jagged cut.

“You’re hurt!” Deirdre leaned down, taking out her wand to get a better look. Sparks cascaded out
of its tip as she sputtered. “Why aren’t you in the hospital wing?”

Severus frowned and shook his leg, causing the rip to fall into a fold, obscuring view of the injury.
“Well, there’s this crazy witch who threatened to never speak to me again if I didn’t come straight to
her on getting her message.” His dark eyes glittered in the low light with amusement as Deirdre
straightened.

Blushing, Deirdre muttered, “Well, I couldn’t find you and no one knew where you were!” She
looked down, “I wish you’d left word. When the others weren’t in class I was sure something terrible
had happened.”

“I didn’t have a way to tell you I’d gone and there was no time.” Severus shifted, and the movement
made him groan as it jostled one of his hurts.
Deirdre’s fingers itched and she looked down at her school bag. Why didn’t she carry any potions with her? She should at least have dittany and a mild pain reliever on hand.

Morag leaned forward, bent low enough that her head couldn’t be seen over the top of the chair in front of her. The hall had stadium style seating much like the Charms classroom. “Look, Snape... Severus. Have you any idea of what happened to Peter? Or his friends?” She was wise enough not to speak Remus, James, or Sirius’ names.

Severus dropped his wand in his lap and used his right hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. “I think he was suspended, MacMillan. I’d rather not say more, but I did see him walking out of the castle with a lawyer.” He looked uncomfortable, and Deirdre understood why.

A gasp of disbelief and anguish escaped the blonde before her hands flew to her mouth, holding in whatever might have followed. Deirdre rather thought it would be a very crude tangle of swearwords. Those wide blue eyes had narrowed in suspicion, and behind her hand the Hufflepuff whispered, “What did he get into now?”

Shaking his head, Severus turned his dark eyes to the front, making a show of focusing on the class. “It is not my story to tell, MacMillan. I don’t think he was hurt physically. I am sure he would be able to respond to an owl tonight. Does he have one of his own? I hadn’t thought so.”

“Oh, that’s an idea.” She whipped her head around, craning to see the clock.

One of the girl’s braids whipped past Dee’s shoulder, barely missing her and caused Dee to lean closer to Severus. He did smell strongly of smoke and sulphur.

Startled by her quick motion, Severus froze in place with his dark eyes locked on hers. After ten heartbeats he blinked and she could feel the tickle of his breath against her cheek as he slowly exhaled. She had to control an urge to squirm.

He whispered, “What?”

What indeed? Heat rose in her cheeks and she was rather glad of the darkened lights of the auditorium. “Why do you smell like Fiendfyre?”
“Because working as Professor Nott’s assistant is hell on earth?” The corners of his eyes wrinkled, a faint clue that he was at least in part jesting.

Frowning, Deirdre whispered back, “That is not a satisfactory answer, Mr Snape. Ten points from Slytherin. See me after class.”

Rather than show dismay, Severus’ eyes danced with amusement, his lips quirking up at the challenge.

The look on his face made her wonder just what it was that he was thinking. The silence between them drew out, and she felt even more uncomfortable. Her heart sped up, flopping about in her chest like a fish out of water. She was about to say something else when he moved.

Slowly, carefully he turned his head until his lips were quite close to her right ear. “And pray, what would an eager student like myself have to do in order to get extra credit?”

Severus’ heated breath sent chills down her neck, and all of her hair felt like it was stood up on end. His voice was a velvet purr, and all she could do was gasp in response. Every nerve ending she had was on high alert.

“Psst. You two, heads up! Professor Slughorn keeps looking this way.” Bless Morag, she was a saint. She could feel the hitch of Severus’ breath in controlled amusement before he straightened back up. Her ear felt the shock of his absence, cold air filling in the space, sending a second shockwave through her.

Down in front, she could see that Slughorn was partway through a review of commonly available poisons and pollutants. His schema on the board divided them into those that had to be ingested, the longest list, followed by those that could be absorbed and inhaled. The latter was the shortest list. “This list is far from complete, but it reflects what you are most likely to encounter on our home soil and on the test.” He harrumphed before continuing on. “The study of poisons and antidotes will take up much of this term and part of next. Each week every one of you will be assigned one poison to research and write a summary of what you believe important and useful. It needs to be on my desk by the end of the day on Wednesday. I shall check over your work and distribute copies to the rest of the class Friday. There will be a quiz on the previous week’s poisons every Friday at the start of lecture. I expect you all to be thorough and succinct, brevity is the soul of wit!”

It was obvious that no one met this new work with particular enthusiasm, and she thought she heard someone muttering darkly a few rows down.
Unruffled, the Potions Master chortled before adding in, “Remember, not only do your grades depend on it, so might also your lives someday.” He raised his eyebrows and looked about the room with a smirk.

The quip from Slughorn attracted the prescribed titter of nervous laughter from the assembled class. Severus growled quietly, “Very droll. I wouldn’t trust some of these idiots with making tea.”

Morag moaned in distress, “This is going to be dreadful. How are we supposed to do this? Antidotes are time-sensitive. What if I fail and make someone sick?”

“Wait, he’ll explain.” Deirdre reached over and patted Morag’s hand.

“In the lab I will be giving you access to poisons to study. I do have antidotes on hand, which you will learn to make after the holiday. As each week progresses, it will require more steps to determine the components of each poison and we will learn the methods necessary to parse them out.” Excited muttering could be heard from the front row where Vasim sat and Deirdre strained to listen as whatever the Ravenclaw said was difficult to hear.

Shaking his head, Professor Slughorn addressed the class, “I realise that last year a student was foolish enough to ingest their test poison and became gravely ill. I suggest that you all apply yourselves to the reading I assign and pay attention to the warnings. You are no longer OWL students, and I expect you to have more sense. This is one of the most important disciplines in Potions and I expect the danger to be as good a motivator, if not a better one than grades for many of you.”

The Professor was flicking his wand at the front board once more and new words appeared there, first an outline of topics, and then filling the words nearby. “Here is an example, good old Hemlock, properly named *Conium Maculatum*. Socrates chose this as his own personal method of execution, and it was popular in Ancient Greece as small amounts of the active component, Coniine, cause swift respiratory collapse. Used in combination with a soporific, it can lull the victim to an eternal slumber.”

Dee took furious notes as Slughorn continued to lecture, and she was gratified when Severus pulled out a notebook from his inner pocket and jotted down a few notes in a cramped hand. He arched an eyebrow when he noticed she was looking over at his work, a silent invitation for comment, although his attention was divided.
She looked away, straightening in her chair. Pursing her lips, she commented. “I took notes for you.”

“...an alkaloid, much like the active ingredient in tobacco that some of us are so fond of, can paralyse a man if he does not wear protective gloves while handling it, particularly if it is wet.”

Severus looked down at the board before glancing back at her once more. “Thank you?”

“I’ll give them to you later. After you’ve had something to eat and been to see Madam Pomfrey.”

He didn’t look back at her, grunting as he shifted in his seat. “I’ll be fine.”

“You’ll be fine if you do what you should, Severus.”

A classmate nearby looked over their shoulder, irritated at the noise. Her tone must have cut through the quiet more than she intended. Had the Muffliato worn off? She hadn’t seen him cancel it.

His answer didn’t please her, especially the droll tone in which it was delivered. “You have my whole evening planned out. Far be it from me to disappoint you, Miss Ward.”

Deirdre buried herself in her own notes, seething quietly. Did he have to act like a mule-headed man? She had every right to be worried about him! Anger rising, she took it in turns between copying and shooting angry looks at Severus, who was ignoring her. It made her want to bite him.

“...only magic means can counter the effects of poisons of this class. Muggle hospitals can use machines to stabilise a poisoned patient while the person’s body expels the offending agent. Mixed effects are seen at best. Now, does anyone know the name of the antidote used to treat hemlock poisoning?”

Movement beside her drew her attention, and she was surprised to see Severus leaning forward with an expression of attention. He was watching down in front with narrowed eyes as both Lily Evans and Vasim Shafiq raised their hands. A smirk grew as Slughorn called on the red-headed witch.

“Undine’s Undoing, sir.” Lily’s hair shone like a autumnal ritual fire as she swung it over her shoulder after answering. Vasim fell back into his chair with poor grace.
The Professor nodded, “Very good. Ten points to Gryffindor, Miss Evans.”

Deirdre couldn’t stand the self-satisfied look on Evans’ face and without considering, she put her hand up. Just to be certain, she waved her hand out a bit. Out of the corner of her eye she thought she saw Severus move his wand, must be cancelling that spell.

Horace Slughorn’s brow shot up past where his hairline might have been once upon a time, and he twitched his mustache in consideration before calling on her. By then, several students had noticed her hand waving, and several were laughing at her. “Yes, Miss Ward?”

“Thank you sir, but I had a question. Undine’s Undoing is a complicated potion with a short shelf-life and must be made at the time it is needed, but the poison can take as little as three hours to be fatal. Wouldn’t the use of a purgative along with a Blood-boiling draft be effective and more practical?”

Vasim’s expression was definitely impressed and he nodded slowly as Deirdre spoke. Lily fixed a smouldering glare on Dee as Professor Slughorn rocked back on his heels and grasped the lapels of his teaching robes in thought. “Quite so. The use of heat does render hemlock harmless and is a method that is used in a pinch, although you won’t find it listed as a top line therapy.” He brightened in understanding before he went on, “Of course, your parents studied magical plant varietals in the field, so your education has already been quite extensive, I see. You are quite right, while the use of Undine’s Undoing is an elegant solution to this problem and is considered practical in well-staffed institutions such as St Mungo’s in London, and I daresay… what is the hospital in Kilimanjaro, again, Miss Ward?”

Deirdre dropped her hand, happier now that she had her two Knuts thrown into the ring. The mention of her parents put her on her guard and she could feel the weight of Severus’ stare. She shouldn’t have said anything. Much more subdued she answered, “I believe you are referring to Huruma’Ya Wachaga. Can’t say I’ve visited.” A prickle of sweat broke out on her forehead. Good thing she’d spent some time researching a guidebook on Magical Tanzania. It was something to do in the long study periods on Tuesday and Thursday that could have been otherwise occupied with Defense classes. That was a close one.

Chuckling, he asked, “Very good, anything else to add, Miss Ward?”

Feeling quite foolish, Deirdre shook her head, “No sir. Thank you, sir.”
“Ten points to Ravenclaw for the addition, now I am afraid that our time for today is up. Please pick your poison assignment from Miss Evans before you leave.”

Deirdre packed away her notes in her bag quickly, shouldering it with a scowl as she noticed that Severus was already up and moving. “Wait up!”

Severus tucked his hands into his pockets and continued on as though he did not hear her.

She hated being left behind like that, and she had to scurry to catch up with Severus whose long legs ate the stair in a deceptively casual gait. He appeared to be intent on joining the mob of students who were descending on Miss Evans. “Severus!”

His back was to her, and she noticed how some of the students cleared a path for him. Must have been his fragrance. It was the work of moments before he was in front of Lily. Deirdre craned her neck about in time to see Lily turn her back on Severus. She also could see a slip of paper that was identical to the ones Lily was handing out in the witch’s pocket.

Students behind them turned about and were forming a queue on the other side, the direction that she was facing. Ruth, bless her, asked in a voice loud enough to carry, “Might I collect one for Ward and another for Snape?”

“No, they’ll wait. I’d hate to give them room to claim tampering, wouldn’t you?” She looked over her shoulder with a smug expression before turning back. “Next?”

Ruth stared at Lily for a long moment before stepping out of the way to talk to Deirdre. “Sorry, Ward. I did try. That was brilliant. Great way to end your first week.”

“Thanks, Ogden.”

The prefect turned to regard Severus and asked him if he’d been in an accident. Deirdre only used one ear to listen to Ruth attempting to make conversation with Severus while they waited. After a surreptitious look about, she used her wand and a wordless Accio to swipe the slip of parchment from Lily’s pocket. Taking a look at it, she bent down as though to tie her shoe and straightened, stepping forward to stand shoulder to shoulder with Severus. He looked quite ill and Oggy was pressing for details.
“I assure you, Miss Ogden that I can handle myself. Your concern is unnecessary.”

Feeling vastly cheered, Deirdre piped up, “That’s Snape-ish for Thanks for your concern. I don’t want to be noticed right now, please drop the subject. Have a lovely weekend.”

“I beg your pardon, Miss Ward.” The phrase, while it may have indicated regret or surprise when uttered in most cases of polite society, used in this manner by Severus Snape was a thinly veiled translation for, *Piss off.*

This rude answer and dark glance might have affected others, but not Deirdre. Not right at this moment. She’d almost forgotten to be annoyed with him. “Quite alright, Severus.” She leaned over, looking at the queue length which was rapidly shortening. “Shouldn’t be long now. Shall we go to dinner after this? Or the hospital wing?”

“What would it take for you to leave me in peace?”

“To lick your wounds? Hospital wing it is, then. I am sure we can get something up from the kitchens for us both if it gets too late.”

Severus continued to glare at Deirdre, who met his anger with a sweet smile. Try something else, sir. No one out-stubborns this witch! His right eye was starting to twitch. It made her want to do something shocking, just to see what would happen.

Ogden looked between the two, and came to the conclusion that she was definitely intruding. “Right. Well, I’ll see you both later, then. Have a lovely weekend too, Mr Snape.”

Deirdre chirped, “Later, Oggy.” She did so without breaking eye contact with Severus. After Ruth left Severus rolled his eyes heavenward and turned away.

Lily Evans turned about and was making a show of looking at the last two slips of paper with an expression of poorly feigned regret. “What do we have here? Ah. Oxalic acid or *Rhus radicans.* Which shall it be, Snape?” She seemed to be ignoring Deirdre.

Severus sneered and took *Rhus radicans.* “Rhubarb? That’s the most boring poison known to wizardkind.”
“Someone has to do it, it seems. It does make a good pie, I hear.” Lily smirked, holding out Oxalic acid for Deirdre to take and was surprised when Deirdre tucked her hand lightly into Severus’ arm and walked away. He looked about ready to bolt, so she wasn’t about to impede him.

Hand still thrust in her direction, the red haired witch objected, “Where are you going, Ward?” She waved the slip of paper in the air, as though that might peak Dee’s interest.

Deirdre called over her shoulder as she matched steps with Severus. “Oh, sorry, Evans. You must have dropped one. I’ve already obtained a topic.” She raised her eyebrows with a faint smile, not willing to miss a chance at a jibe. “I suppose you’ve had your fill of pie. Pity. Surely that isn’t the last one? Black and Potter will need theirs, I imagine.”

She tugged gently at Severus’ elbow to get him walking faster. He was just as eager as she to get out of range, but he was limping subtly.

Lily shouted, “What!? No, Ward, get back down here! That’s my topic. Give it back.”

“Rough break, Evans! I’ll keep Thorn Apple.” She smirked as she heard Evans calling out for Professor Slughorn. Deirdre guided Severus through the door and they were in the clear. She floated along in a cloud of her own delight.

Severus’ deep voice interrupted the flow, “Care to switch topics with me, Miss Ward?”

“Poison Ivy? Are you daft?”

The frown on his face, coupled with the way he kept looking behind him moved Deirdre to feel guilty, so she sighed, dramatically before conceding, “If you go to see Madam Pomfrey with me now, and eat something, then I will consider it.” She skipped a few steps, trying to keep up with his long legs, both of them more than eager to put distance between themselves and Lily Evans.

Severus groaned as they turned a corner, and he slowed down significantly, favoring his leg. “Pomfrey had hoped for a quiet night, she’ll be cross.”

“I don’t care. If we don’t get you up there, it most definitely won’t be a quiet night.”
“Was that a threat?”

“No, it was a promise to hex you if you don’t go.” Deirdre felt a pang of guilt, “Don’t make me ruin her evening, Severus. It wouldn’t sit right with me.”

A pair of shadows fell across their path and Severus inclined his head to the pair of Slytherin’s who were doing a fair job blending into the scenery of the dungeon walls.

Deirdre was having trouble making out their features. She lowered her voice to a whisper, “You know them?”

“Yes, of course.” He raised his voice, “Potter, Black, Pettigrew and Lupin are all out of the school tonight, so you can shove off, lads.”

Avery’s surprised face melted into view, as though a shadow that had enveloped him until now had melted away. “What?”

Tired as he was, Severus managed a grin. “It’s true. I met Pettigrew in the hall. If you don’t believe me, just wait for the house boards to update. Still, I think I can take it from here.”

Another face joined Avery’s, one that Deirdre didn’t recognise. “I think we can beat the crowd to the Great Hall if we hurry.”

Narrowing his eyes at Severus and Dee, Avery contemplated the pair of them. “You wouldn’t be angling for some alone time with the…”

“Shut it, Avery. She’s nagging me to go to the Hospital Wing. Unless you care to extract me from this harpy.”

“Hmmph!” Deirdre flushed in embarrassment at the suggestive nature of Avery’s comment. “Quite right there’ll be nothing to see. You’re wasting time, Snape. No one can save you now. Let’s go before I tie you up and drag you myself.” She tugged at his elbow.

The second Slytherin boy muttered, “Bossy chit isn’t she?”
Sticking her nose up in the air she started to walk, using her own force to propel Snape into motion too. She could tell that he was still hurting a great deal, and he was limping after they climbed a flight of stairs. When he noticed her looking, he controlled the movement to one that was more natural, but his face darkened with the effort. When they reached the Main Hall he stopped. “Right, off you go.”

“No.”

“What you you mean, no?”

“I’m going with you to the Hospital Wing.”

“Deirdre, I’m not some lost child. I can make it on my own. Merlin knows I can get there blindfolded.”

“Well, then I won’t be in your way if you are so capable.” She pulled at his elbow, fingers latched on firmly. “Come along, now.”

Groaning, he let her pull them to the nearest stair that would take them up to the hospital wing. He started to use his free arm to pull himself up the stair. He wasn’t even bothering to hide the obvious pain in his face now. He was panting when they made it to the first landing and she let him lean into the corner, releasing his arm so that he could hold himself more naturally.

“Severus, what can I do to help?” She gentled her voice.

“I will be fine, Deirdre. Just give me a minute.” She could see him squint up the stair as though even his eyes hurt to see. Or his reason balked at the anticipated pain it would take to make it.

“Okay, let’s play a game.”

“You’re mental.”

“No, really. You keep standing there, and I guess which bit hurts the most. Ready?”
He leaned his head back against the stone wall and let out an exhalation of exasperation.

“Your left shoulder.”

He cracked an eye. “How do you reckon that?”

Deirdre chuckled, “Well, you weren’t using your left hand for wandwork when you cast the Privacy spell, but you didn’t seem to be in agony when I took that arm, so the elbow had to be safe, and the hand I could see wasn’t overtly injured, so it stood to reason.”

Severus’ eye shut. Either he was thinking about it, or falling asleep.

“Or is it that right knee?”

He shook his head slightly.

“Right foot?”

Again a slight shake of the head no.

“Your poor back? Ouch.”

He snorted, but she noticed that he hadn’t denied it.

“What is it with you?”

That made him crack an eye again. “I’m not sure what you’re driving at.”

“I mean, with you getting hurt so much.”
“Live by the wand, die by the…”

“Bullshit.”

He lifted his head to look down at her. “Deirdre, it isn’t wrong. What I saw today, well I can’t talk about it, I’m not permitted. But it is insanely dangerous out there.” He spread a long fingered hand and waved it to indicate the castle, “What we are taught here barely scratches the surface of what magic is capable of, and war is coming.” He frowned, “I hardly know what to think. Men like Nott are incredible. I don’t even understand half of what he did today, but he’s only one man, Deirdre. He needs help.”

Deirdre bit her lip, looking up at him. “I know.” Her voice was small even to her own ears. “I don’t want to believe that things are that bad, but I can see it in your face.” She lifted a hand and delicately ran her fingers along his temple and down his cheek.

Severus held still like a statue under her touch, gazing transfixed back at her.

She dropped her hand and looked away. Words crowded her lips, fighting to escape. After a moment she said, “I know I’ve no right, but I was terrified for you when you weren’t in class today. I worried that my note had caused you yet more calamity. And then when you showed up in class reeking worse than a cat who’d fallen in the grease bin and obviously hurt, I didn’t know what to think.”

Silently, he reached for her hand and she gave it to him.

“I want to be angry with you. I still am, rather.”

His eyebrows flicked up in surprise and he drew her hand closer so that he could hold it in both of his, thumbs circling on her upturned palm. It felt amazing.

“Promise me that you won’t willfully put yourself in harm’s way? Please?”

He stopped massaging her palm. “I’ve been in harm’s way since I took my first breath, Deirdre. I don’t know if I can keep a promise like that. Would you have me locked up in a library somewhere, cut off from the world just to keep me from inconveniencing Madam Pomfrey on yet another Friday
Leaning in, she whispered, “If you put your hand in the fire, I burn. When you are cut, I bleed. If you choke, I can’t breathe. *I care*, Severus. I care about what happens to you. Sod Madam Pomfrey.” Anger rose in her, clotting her throat as she pushed out the last words. Tears rolled down her cheeks and she tried to pull her hand back, overwhelmed.

Severus’ fingers held her hand tighter. “Deirdre?”

Deirdre looked down, not willing to say any more. She was starting to feel like a fool. She’d only been here for a short while, but she felt like she’d known him most of her life. How strange that felt, but she wouldn’t deny it.

He gentled his voice, pleading with her. “Deirdre. Please, understand that I didn’t go looking for danger today. It found me. If Professor Nott and the Aurors hadn’t deal with it, it would have meant more attacks, more deaths. I intend to keep helping him as long as he has need of me. I learned a lot, and I don’t make a habit of repeating mistakes.”

“I know. I can’t stop you, but Severus.” She looked back up at him again, “Don’t die. Please. I don’t think I could handle it.” The rest of what she was going to say was choked off as she clamped her mouth shut against the sobs that threatened to undo her control. A deeper, darker grief that she had no name for was stirring and she desperately fought it down. Her knees were weak with the force of it as it bore down on her.

Deirdre’s distress was mirrored in Severus’ eyes and he tugged her into his right side, his good arm enveloping her in an awkward half-embrace. Gruffly he said, “For you, I will try.”

The two stood together long moments, taking comfort in one another until Deirdre’s feminine sensibilities couldn’t handle the tears dripping from her nose a moment longer. She pulled out a black handkerchief and mopped her face with it. “Ugh.”

She could feel the breeze of Severus’ snort in her hair, be it of amusement of derision, she couldn’t be certain.

“This is your fault, I remind you, sir.”
Severus looked down at the witch tucked into his arm, sniffling as she mopped at her face with his handkerchief that she’d saved. He ached all over and his left shoulder was seizing up. He had burns blistering on his back that he really should have attended to already. Deirdre was in a state too. Her face was blotchy, her hair a frizzy mess, her brown eyes bloodshot and her nose was running so hard that it might win a race against that of any snotty-nosed brat. She was still trembling when he wrapped an arm about her.

He let out a snort at the image, but then stopped. All of these details were nothing to the revelation that overwhelmed all else. She’d said that all of this was his fault.

Not because he’d been nasty to her, although he’d hadn’t been exactly nice either. No, she was a mess because she’d been worried about him. She hurt because he was. That sounded an awful lot like the love he’d read about.

His world tilted off of its axis and he wasn’t certain which way was up.

No. He struggled to remind himself that she couldn’t possibly like him, not truly. She had taken a head injury and lost her memory. Surely this was not a witch he should become attached to? Her safety was his assignment, his mission given to him by Dumbledore. She was sick and alone, and he was the first person of her age that she’d made friends with. It was that connection that permitted the familiarity, and forged the regard that she seemed to hold for him. She’d barely known him a week.

Still, he wanted to pretend that none of that was true. He wanted to believe that this brilliant, intelligent witch liked him, not some ideal that she’d built around a handful of interactions. She’d kissed him on the cheek Saturday, and claimed a second for luck Sunday. And here she was, fussing at him on Friday.

As these thoughts ran through his head, she was calming down. At last, after one last petite-elephantine blow, she performed a Tergeo on the poor sodden rag and tucked it back in her robes. She hadn’t stepped out of his arm, he noticed and now was looking up at him, a shy smile on her face. The blotchiness was still there, but less noticeable under the heated blush that blossomed on her face.

“Well.” She spoke into the silence that stretched onwards. “I suppose we had better get you up these steps.”

Severus cleared his throat, feeling lost. “Right.” He glanced up the stair. Shit. He kept his arm about
her shoulders as he limped up, leaning on her. She stole glances at her as they labored up the stairwell, and by the time they reached the top, he was sweating with the effort, and she looked more worried than before.

“I can get you a stretcher…”

“No, I can make it there.”

“Stubborn git.”

“Harridan, I asked you to leave off.”

“No.”

The pain itself wasn’t worse than what he’d had before, although burns added variety to his usual collection of bruises, lacerations, and sprains. A trickle of sweat travelled down his back under his robes and it stung. He closed his eyes for a moment as he pulled his flagging resources into line.

Mental discipline was his strength. He’d developed a method of shutting out the pain when he was quite young, and he fell back on it now. When he opened his eyes, he found that Deirdre was still gazing up at him in concern. Ruthlessly he shoved his petty aches aside, focusing on the very real, insane little witch.

Her eyes were warm, her hair mussed, and the weight of her against his side felt so right. “You alright, Severus?”

A traitorous corner of his mouth tugged up. He was more than alright. “Never better.” And he meant it, too. How strange.

Deirdre stiffened in offense, and it occurred to him that she thought that he was mocking her. “I don’t see how. You’re burned, bleeding, and can’t walk without a limp, and on top of that, cranky. You don’t need to get all stroppy with me…”

Severus stopped listening to Deirdre’s diatribe on reasons he should be miserable, an unwanted
refutation that showed no sign of stopping. It was a curious mixture of exhaustion, desperation, and instincts that encouraged him to act on impulse. He fixed his gaze on her lips.

“What is more, I bet you haven’t had a thing to eat all day and here I have you cornered in a stairwell. And you still haven’t told me what... “

Inwardly, Severus said a little prayer to the universe as he dropped to kiss the nattering woman’s complaints away, tilting to overcompensate for his nose. Her lips tasted of brine and what he supposed was witch.

Deirdre squeaked in surprise, but after a moment she leaned into the kiss, relaxing in his arm. A rush of feeling threatened to overwhelm his control, and his left hand tangled in her soft curls.

It wasn’t a kiss that would go down in the history books, but to Severus it was everything he dreamt of. They broke off, each taking a deep breath. His lips tingled at the loss.

Severus held Deirdre, starting to feel abashed as she looked down the stairwell, as if checking for witnesses. Had he made a mistake? The temptation to open his mind and take a look was pulling at his resolve. No, he would not do that.

His patience was rewarded when Deirdre lifted her chin once more. Her eyes were shining as she smirked up at him. After a long moment, he tried to speak, but his voice failed him, cracking so badly that his words were unintelligible.

The little harridan’s smirk grew wider, and he could tell that she was controlling her laughter.

Clearing his throat, he tried again, “Well, that worked.”

Her brow snapped together in consternation. “What?”

Controlling the impulse to tease her, and hard-pressed he was to do that, he answered, “Made you smile.” Yes. Much better than made you stop your nagging.

“We should go upstairs. I’d hate for Madam Pomfrey to be even crosser with us for lingering.” She turned out of his arm, stepping apart.
Severus pushed away from the wall with a sigh of resignation.

Halfway up the next flight of steps he caught Deirdre watching him, the smirk back on those wonderful lips. After two more steps he grumbled. “What, have I something on my nose?”

“No. I just think you’re feeling better.”

She was right. He still hurt but he was moving more easily, as though he were being carried along by a weight-subtraction charm. Tucking that notion away for later, he challenged her. “I shall have to come steal a snog every time I get in a fight, then.”

“Or if you have a headache.”

“Perhaps.”

“Or just a bad day.”

“I take it you aren’t adverse to such experimentation?”

“Well, I feel fantastic, so perhaps the benefits go both ways.” Deirdre claimed Severus’ hand at the top of the steps, her grasp firm and warm. She was real, not a dream or figment of fantasy.

Severus went quiet, walking side by side with Deirdre. It seemed so simple, and yet he felt uneasy. He had a lot of things to consider, but his brain was fuzzy and stunned, like after drinking gin for the first time. For now, all he could do is accept her attention and company with confused wonderment.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I hope you all enjoyed this chapter as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Beta-love goes to "Got-cha Girl" and Chieftainess of Britpicking, Coromandel and "Grammar Guardian," ScarletDewdrops. You are both more wonderful than words can express. Like gin at your Mother in Law's Birthday party. Essential for writer's life!
Thanks also go to my friend, Havelocked, for helping with researching poisons. She's an herbalist! If you wish to check out some of her other things, you could check her out at her tumblr account.
Dumbledore sat behind his desk, hands folded in front of him. The discussion that buzzed about him required only his divided attention. The rest of his formidable mental faculties were working on the problem of what to do about the four students who’d been caught earlier today.

Professor McGonagall was beside herself, her accent thickening as her emotional energies drew down. “But, Elphinstone, what really is going on out there? I’ve heard nothing but rumours and frankly I cannot fault the students for wanting answers. You can’t tell me that the Ministry isn’t hiding anything.” Her expression was reproachful and reminded Albus that Minerva had once worked quite closely with the reserved wizard who sat before the fire, his walking stick balanced against the chair, his legs crossed and hands temples together in front of him, as though prayer might fend off the troubles that plagued him.

He wasn’t a handsome wizard precisely. He had a flat nose and square chin that was framed by a trimmed silver beard and strong sideburns. His brows were bushy and curled at the ends much like some gentlemen would curl their mustaches and Albus wondered idly if he used wax to make them stay like that. His voice was a clear tenor, cutting through, “Minerva, you know I can’t say much. We honestly don’t know enough yet.”

“The Meadows family wasn’t the only to be attacked, and you know that. It is highly foolish for the Ministry to be suppressing these stories! Especially when we have to read the rubbish, such as that story Daisy Sanders.”

Inspector Urquhart turned to level a glance heavy with censure at Dumbledore. “Yes, well. The news hasn’t been as precisely suppressed as the Minister would like. It was under his direct order that our department was sent to investigate this breach in security.”

Albus summoned a confident smile and asked, “And what are the conclusions of your findings, sir?”

The pressure shifted back to the Inspector and Albus’ grimace widened when he took in Minerva’s beady-eyed glare that was tightly focused on Urquhart, as though he were a particularly unwelcome insect in her soup. He’d heard her mention the occasional luncheon with her old colleague in the past. The poor fellow was only doing his job.

Leaning forwards, the Inspector replied, “I do not find any evidence of neglect on Professor Nott’s
part in securing the files. However, the Minister will insist that the students in question be firmly disciplined, and steps must be made to assure that they won’t speak of the very little bit that they learned to the public. It is vital that we maintain a firm lock on things until we have...”

Grinding stone announced the arrival of someone else, and Dumbledore stood, cocking an ear. He’d not heard his password given in his attention to the Inspector.

“I will not have you put those students in harm’s way because the Ministry hasn’t been able to distinguish its arms from its arse. Complacency, isn’t that what you warned against?” Minerva’s voice was tight, and she didn’t need to shout in order to make her words heard. Even at this volume they echoed back in the stone chamber.

The footsteps on the stair were heavy and uneven. Perhaps one of the Governors? He murmured, “Excuse me a moment, I must see who that is.” Both of his guests subsided into silence, turning in their chairs to watch as Dumbledore stepped to the door and opened it.

A face emerged from the shadow of the stair, soot stained with one eye bloodied, hair and clothes wet with what smelled like perspiration. If it had not been for the fine quality of his shirt, or the boots, one might have thought that a Muggle bandit had wandered into the school and had demanded Root Beer Barrels of a random piece of Statuary. The man’s leg had a wand holster strapped to it, and a leather bag was hoisted over one shoulder. One couldn’t blame Albus for not instantly recognising his Defense Teacher.

“Headmaster.” The voice croaked, as though parched. The wizard coughed, trying again. “I have returned, as instructed, sir.” The bag on the man’s broad back twitched.

“Whittington! What has happened to you?” Minerva was already on her feet behind him, but it was Albus who stepped near and provided a steadying arm.

In contrast to the rest of the dirtied, tired look man, Whittington’s eyes were bright and clear, and danced with amusement. “Just like old times, sir.” The bag struggled again, swinging from side to side.

The arm underneath Albus’ hand trembled, a warning that the man was dangerously spent. “Sit down, Professor Nott.” A chair appeared two steps away, and Albus nodded his thanks to the thoughtful Inspector.
Whit was of average height, so when he folded into his seat it was easy to see the scalp wound that had painted the side of the man’s face in dried blood. He let out a long, controlled breath and unslung the bag onto the floor between his feet, tugging at the string to make sure it would stay secure.

Hissing in her concern, Minerva already had a cloth out and spat on it before she advanced on the poor man.

Urquhart wisely kept his mouth shut, but met Dumbledore’s eyes with a faint shrug of his shoulders.

“Oi, leave off, witch! I’m not some lost kitten who’s come down with ear mites!” Whit had both hands up and was unsuccessfully trying to ward off Minerva’s attentions.

She’d managed to get to his ear. “It serves you right for coming straight up to the Headmaster’s office in this condition. Now, hands down before I stun you.”

The pained look that Whit turned on Albus only made him chuckle quietly. “Perhaps I could offer you a glass of something fortifying?”

Urquhart looked down at his pocket watch in surprise. “It isn’t even five, man!”

“Under the circumstances, I think Professor Nott has taken enough punishment that allowances should be made, don’t you think?” He tilted his head to indicate the scene in front of them.

“Stop being such a bloody infant, Whittington and hold still!”

Changing tactics, Whit lowered his arms, leaned back and favoured Minerva with an appraising smile. “If you insist, Madam. I’d draw the line at use of your tongue. I’m not in proper form, and while I don’t mind the audience, I suspect our dear Inspector here wouldn’t understand.” His face twisted in pain and his knee pulled up reflexively. Minerva apparently had cast a rather good stinging hex at close range, aimed dangerously close to his groin. “Damn you, woman!” His eyes glinted with satisfaction, and Albus wondered if some of his reaction was exaggerated.

Whit’s machinations partially achieved the intended effect for Professor McGonagall stepped back, using her wand now to cast the appropriate and much less intimate cleaning spells necessary to see the damage. It was largely superficial, some burns and scratches. Nothing life-threatening. “Serves you right, you cretinous rascal!”
Dumbledore’s rueful grimace seemed to convince the Inspector that the hour was indeed not too early for a finger of whiskey. “I think I’d like a drink too, if you don’t mind, Albus.” The Headmaster turned to the little cart to the side where he kept such refreshments. “Mead, wine, or whiskey?”

“Whiskey, thank you.”

“And for me as well, Headmaster, thank you.” Whit’s voice was smoother and more controlled now, much closer to the man of breeding that he was purported to be.

A delicate sniff from Minerva grabbed his ear, “Is it the Glenkeir, or the Firewhiskey?”

“The Glenkeir, of course.” It was smoother, Using his wand to pour out four glasses, levitating them to the lady, before the Inspector and Whittington.

He saw Whittington shake his head out of the corner of his eye. “Fine by me. I think I’d rather freeze than be anywhere near a fire tonight.”

“Just a splash for me, Albus. Thank you.” Minerva returned to her favoured seat, a high-backed upholstered armchair situated closer to the fire.

Dumbledore let the silence grow between them, returning to his seat behind the desk.

It was Whittington who spoke next, wincing against the sting of what Albus thought might be a mended split lip. He shelved the impulse to do something about it.

“What was decided about the incident this morning? I regret that I was called away so suddenly, Headmaster.” Those steady moss green eyes swept the little company, perhaps the wizard’s hurts settling enough to allow for ordered thought.

Albus let out a long sigh, frowning. “It was most unfortunate that such a thing should occur here at Hogwarts, but the Inspector here was just sharing his thoughts on the matter.”
Rather than let Elphinstone speak for himself, Minerva provided the bare bones of events. “The students in question left the castle less than an hour ago, Professor Nott. Black and Lupin both were remanded into the care of the Potters for the space of their week’s suspension, and Pettigrew was escorted out by Vrystrulk, the lawyer his family sent in their stead. All four have surrendered wands to our custody for the time. I trust that all of the students were cooperative with your questioning, Inspector?”

“Tolerably so. I think they were rather terrified, and rightfully so. Between the little they learned before setting off your ingenious trap, Professor Nott, and the experience of being caught and brought before authorities in disgrace they had seen reason to be forthcoming.” The Inspector cracked a crooked grin. “Although I had expected more from Gryffindor madam. That Pettigrew chap sang like a lark when I merely frowned at him. I didn’t need to apply any pressure at all. Usually they hold out at least until we start talking about futures and permanent records, that’s what the other three required.”

A prick of worry broke through Albus’ calm and he turned a eye, exchanging a look with Minerva.

Clearing his throat, Dumbledore “One of the students in question, a student who I believe is worthy of trust notwithstanding his choice of friends, has a problem that I do not wish to be brought to light. The consequences would be disastrous and would far outstrip the severity of the infraction.”

“For the school and the student in question, I happen to agree with you.” The solemn man nodded acknowledgement to the shocked Head of Gryffindor. “Yes Minerva, I already knew about Mr Lupin’s irregularity. It will not be a focus of my report. I do think that his comrades might be aware of his condition. They were all hiding something and if they know, it would explain it. They are certainly quite loyal to one another.”

Minerva responded in a gentle tone, “Thank you, Elphinstone. I am quite alive to how fortunate the boys are that it was you who was assigned to this case. I am sorry it took you away from other, more important matters.”

The warmth in the Inspector’s glance told Albus much but he needed to move things along. That bag of Whit’s was twitching. “And what pray, did Mr Pettigrew say?”

Tearing his eyes away from McGonagall, the Inspector took up the debriefing once more.

“I gather that two of the students were serving in detentions with you, McGonagall, and overheard a conversation between you and Professor Nott here about the attack on the Meadows family. They were curious and quite worried as there wasn’t much reported in the papers so they took it upon
“themselves to find source material.”

Whit snorted, “Bloody good thing I didn’t keep the pensive in my office, now isn’t it? That’d have been enough to satisfy their curiosity and more.”

Minerva narrowed her eyes at Whittington, “I dislike it when you use such coarse language, sir.”

Nott’s lip curled in response, “I dislike it when I find four of your precious students breaking into my office. They seem to be labouring under the impression that they are royalty here and can get away with anything. After looking over their disciplinary records, I can see why. I expect them to be appropriately disciplined. They could have been exposed to very dark magic. This wasn’t just a student looking for test answers or to play a prank. This could have been very serious.” He turned his sharp green eyes to Dumbledore and the fury in them gave the Headmaster reason to pause.

“I have made it clear to the students and their parents, for what they are worth, that this was a very serious business. In addition to the suspension, they will be forbidden from going into Hogsmeade for the rest of the year.”

Urquhart added, “I have recommended that the Ministry will be satisfied with the suspension already imposed, and a probationary note on their records. Perhaps some community service or detention work under the eye of a Professor would build character?”

“Two of them are already doing detentions for me. I cannot say they’ve been effective to date. I do think that the suspension has got their attention.”

Whit’s mouth twisted in irritation. “Curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought it back. I wish that whatever is done, they glean not one iota of satisfaction to their curiosity.”

Albus spoke, “You are, of course, correct, Professor Nott, I have some ideas on the subject, but in any case, it would be remiss of me to promote the risk of exposure to dark magic. From here on out, I’d prefer your freelance materials to be housed entirely outside of the school grounds.”

The long look Whit gave him made it clear that the response that followed was precisely measured, “Very well, Headmaster. Although, you may wish to look about you for a substitute or supplemental teacher. I am afraid my expertise will quite pertinent until the Ministry is able to apprehend the Necromancer who is behind these attacks.”
Understanding lit on Urquhart's lined face. “Is that why the Department hired Dunnigan as a consultant? That’s lucky. You used to work together, I think. He is supposed to arrive early next week.”

Whit’s face shuttered, the emotion withdrawing inward in an instant. His voice was dull as he responded, “Wonderful. Just like old times.” He lifted the glass in his hand and downed the rest of it, making a face more appropriate to a bad tasting potion than the fine whiskey.

Dumbledore probably understood much better than anyone else in the room the source of Whit’s carefully polite response. Dunnigan was the head of Whit’s old cursebreaking team, and was guilty of plagiarism, one of many failings that drove Whit to resign. “I will discuss this with you further at a later time, Professor Nott. You are committed to a contract with Hogwarts, and the Ministry cannot be faulted for seeking out more help in times like these.”

A mulish frown was the only response that Nott could muster and turned in his seat towards the door, a caged man who was already beholden to two masters, wishing for nothing more than to escape. He’d always done his duty but found little solace in it. An unexpected flood of sympathy for the man’s position washed over Dumbledore.

“But is it certain? Necromancy hasn’t been practiced in the United Kingdom for decades. Where would one learn such terrible magic? Surely this is the work of a foreign wizard.” Minerva leaned forward, looking from face to face, her eyes wide as though she might spot the truth better that way.

A scrabbling sound from the bag at Whit’s feet drew Dumbledore’s attention. “The burns, Whittington. How did you come by them?” Dread mingled with certainty weighed him to the spot. He wanted to see what Whit had brought with him, but part of him already knew.

“Friendly fire. Two Aurors had been chasing down a series of tips regarding the Meadows case. Extraordinary pair, the Prewett brothers.”

Urquhart's grunt of recognition encouraged Whit onwards, but Dumbledore didn’t wait, “Inferi?”

“Quite so. Scared the devil out of the lads, so they unleashed fiendfyre on a whole crèche of the abominations. It will be a long day’s work for the Muggle Worthy Excuse goons. They’ll deserve a pay raise given how high the column of smoke was.” He raised a shaking hand and raked it through his hair, face wincing as he came across the sore spot on his scalp. Dumbledore disliked how tired Whit looked. He’d aged a decade in a moment, it seemed, although the darkening room did tend to emphasize the lines on everyone’s faces.
“I don’t believe it. The Prewett brothers would never use dark magic on such a scale.” The Transfiguration teacher and Head of Gryffindor clearly didn’t believe any of it. This was a point that she felt was fixed, immutable. The Prewett twins were in her house, after all.

The Inspector looked uncomfortable, “Minerva. You do recall that they’ve been mandated to use Unforgivables should they feel it necessary? We’ve lost too many Aurors as it is, and if there’s a Necromancer mucking about, I think we should expect them to use any means necessary.”

Whit spoke quietly, “They were entirely justified, Minerva. They’d been looking for Tabitha Meadows, you know. Found her, too. What remained, anyway.”

“Is that…?” Albus let the rest of the question hang in the air as he gestured to the bag at Whit’s feet.

“No, not exactly. They weren’t able to to subdue the Inferi that was Mrs Meadows, so she is gone now, but this is a specimen I gathered for study. Only a partial, you know. Arm. The description that Fabian gave suggested that the quality of the work was rather disparate. I’d give an arm and a leg to discover who was doing it.” The faintest inflection of his voice signaled the revival of the man’s sense of humour, “But they had extras so I helped myself to one of theirs.” He nudged the bag with the toe of his boot, and it shuddered in response.

Alarm shone in McGonagall’s eyes as she leaned away from Whit. “You mean to tell me…”

Not waiting for her to complete her query, Whit ground out, “...that I’ve got a reanimated dead arm in that bag. No, I do not jest, Professor McGonagall. As the expert in the room on the Dark Arts and a cursebreaker of some skill, I can assure you that the arm in this bag is from an Inferi. I can tell you that it used to belong to a man who was most likely pensioner or perhaps a beggar. Probably a Muggle like Tabitha was. I need to learn everything I can about this Necromancer and I needed a specimen to do that.”

Dumbledore suppressed a smile. He had begun to enjoy watching Minerva and Whit go at one another, but this time he had to assure that he understood the full implications. “You plan to keep an Inferi, or part of one, here in your rooms, Professor Nott?” He did not voice his thoughts of the wisdom of announcing this intention to the room, complete with a ruddy Inspector from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement practically sitting your sodding lap as witness?

Nott’s smooth reply was borne of well-practiced political experience over the years, “I will, of course, remove it to another location if you desire it, Headmaster. I do understand your concerns
regarding exposure of the student population to dark magic.”

“Quite right!” McGonagall’s voice was rather tight, and if she had the gift of fire mastery, the bag would have gone up in flame already with the force of her glare.

“I do think there is much to learn, and believe that the students are largely capable of handling the temptation. If this is what they might face when they leave these protected walls, would they not be better served by exposure, so that they will learn to recognise the foul constructs and know what to do with them? Mister Snape was invaluable as my assistant today as much as Shacklebolt and Otto were earlier in the week.”

Ah. Svartrunir’s request that Severus Snape receive more training had farther reaching consequences than Dumbledore had perceived.

McGonagall interjected, “That young man has already dabbled in the dark magicks quite a bit and is only weeks shy of reaching the age of majority. I can believe that one student so exposed could be handled and counselled appropriately, but what exactly are you proposing, Professor Nott? Field trips to bloody battle scenes? What if there isn’t enough to go around. Shall we go find the black hearted, twisted bastard who’s been setting these things on innocents and ask him to make some more?”

“Professor McGonagall, you are quite off base. No one has any intention of…”

Minerva jumped to her feet, her hair escaping from its bun in her agitation. “And what of the poor family? Is that all that is left of their loved one’s remains. There is a victim in this room and you propose to make it a conversational piece? A bloody prop for your classes? Surely not! What if that’s one of the Meadows family?”

The expression change on Whit’s face was subtle, but Dumbledore recognised that the younger wizard had not precisely worked out this complication. His usual run in with inferi were from ruins and tombs centuries old. There were no living relatives still hanging about to be offended in the usual course of duty.

Inspector Urquhart broke in at this point, “This is extraordinary! You know, Minerva, I don’t think I’ve seen one of these outside of a photograph. Is it really all that dangerous?” The spark of fascination in the older wizard’s eye was not what Dumbledore had prepared for. In fact, he’d expected more the opposite.
“No it isn’t, not compared to other creatures that live on these grounds. It has been imprinted with one command, a very rudimentary one at that. It should be no trouble to contain.” Whit nudged the bag with his toe once more and the thing started to wiggle about. Albus thought he could see where the fingers were trying to get purchase on a wad of the side of the bag which looked to be made of thick hide. Likely erumpent, by the greyish colour.

Minerva had unknowingly stepped closer to it in her effort to shame it out of existence and she recoiled in revulsion. That may have been exactly what the man wanted, as he didn’t bury a wicked smile swiftly enough.

Albus suppressed whatever amusement he may have been inappropriately feeling, “Whittington, don’t torment her.”

Urquhart bent, watching the movement, rather with a rapt attention reminiscent of a kitten with a grasshopper it its sights. Or perhaps a snapping turtle. “I say, any chance that I could get a look, before you remove it from the premises?”

Whit’s curls were slowly drying, but soot obscured some of the silver threads that interrupted the usually luxurious roan, lending him a more youthful appearance. He turned questioning eyes, still laced with laughter on Albus and for a moment, it felt much like it did when they worked together during the war. Or after. He’d resolved not to think on the past, but it was difficult in moments like this, with walking phantoms of what might have been are so close to hand.

When he didn’t respond immediately, Whit tilted his head, exposing his strong neck and jaw to the eye. One eyebrow lifted in askance, and Albus felt an unfamiliar feeling stirring, one that he’d left for dead. Discomfited, Albus lifted his glass to his lips, wetting his mouth and delaying his answer long enough to compose his thoughts.

Minerva crossed her arms across her chest. “Elphinstone. This is most irregular. This is a school, not a dog and pony show!”

The Inspector looked hopefully at Albus. “Oh, don’t be such a killjoy, Minerva. I expect this to be very educational.”

Whit raised the other eyebrow, “Speak now or forever hold your peace, sir.” He rummaged about in his pockets and drew out a stick of reddish chalk.
“Ah, you mean to cast a containment circle?” The Headmaster latched onto this lifeline, a concrete problem, easily resolved. He placed the tumbler down on his desk and stood.

The question left Whit’s face as he nodded. “Seems prudent. I was under the impression that you would want to see this for yourself, Headmaster. The Ministry has been conferring with you on this case as well.”

Dumbledore opened a hand twitching his finger in a silent gesture to indicate that he’d take the chalk. “Very well. Allow me, if you please.”

Anxiety showed prominently in McGonagall’s eyes as she watched him use his wand to push back her empty chair and roll the carpet neatly to the side and out of the way. Her voice squeaked as she asked, “And how will you get this atrocity back into the bag, Albus?”

“A petrification spell should do nicely, Professor McGonagall. I assure you that I am an expert in the matter.” Whit’s tone was dry, but it was clear that he could easily have taken offense.

Minerva had the grace to blush, in spite of her agitation, her cheeks ruddy like the chalk that Whit had passed over to Albus moments before, dropping it into his open palm.

Albus shut his eyes for a moment, organising the necessary wards and bindings and reaching out for the wards already contained in the castle’s foundations. Magic flowed to him and set his skin tingling with anticipation. The generous power was being lent to him by the castle and it made him feel light as a snitch’s tailfeather and as strong as acromantula silk. He sensed the Bloody Baron appear nearby, possibly summoned by the castle as a witness.

Uncertainty dropped away and he let his mind and magick be guided by base instinct. An image of the necessary circle and inscription sharpened into clear focus and he let the chalk fly out of his hand, copying out the diagram exactly onto the stone floor below his feet. As he monitored the process, he folded his hands reverently before him, denying his other senses lest he become distracted and lose his place.

Finally he felt the release of tension as the chalk completed its circuit, outer circle reinforced by six others interwoven, leaving a clearing in the center. Opening his eyes, Albus inspected his work before stepping outside of the warded area.

Whit stood and brought over the wriggling bag with grim look on his face. “McGonagall. You
alright over there? I’d not fault you if you want to step out.”

The look that Minerva shot at Whit was sharp enough that if he were a portrait, she’d have stripped the paint right from his canvas. “Laddie, did you just imply that I can’t handle myself?” She drew herself up and squared her shoulders, her wand at the ready, sparking malevolently.

The Inspector coughed, smoothing over a look of bemusement. “I’m sure he meant well, Minerva.” He looked at Whit, his eyes widening a trifle, most likely in warning.

“Quite. Now, shall we get this over with? I’ve got a date with a hot shower and a meal after this and I’d hate to make them wait.” He had the bag levitating and was directing it to enter the circle.

Dumbledore turned to Whit, feeling the corner of his mouth twitch. “Would you like a hand with that?”

Whit winced. “Headmaster, out of respect I’ll forget you attempted that joke.”

Inspector Urquhart chortled, “Oh, good one, Dumbledore. Jolly good.”

Chuckling, Dumbledore turned back to his warded circle. “Count of three?” He knelt down, extending his wand to touch the tip to the chalk.

A curt nod was Whit’s answer as he trained his own wand on the struggling bag. “One… two… three!”

Several things happened at once. The tie that had kept the bag shut vanished, the ward circle glowed red and the outer curves bent up to create the impression of a bowl, or a flower, and a withered looking hand burst out of the bag and into clear view.

Inspector Urquhart carefully stepped closer to the containment circle, watching in fascination as the disembodied arm, cut off above the elbow, painstakingly pulled itself along the stone floor. The stone was smooth and the hand’s nails, ragged and broken made a scratching sound. “Fascinating. And is this a typical specimen?”

Whit stood, wand at the ready. His head was bent, obscured in shadow as he turned further away from Albus. “Usually they are whole bodies, of course. I believe that they are not the work of an
amateur, however. There was a significant amount of variation in the level of sophistication. The best specimens were too dangerous and had to be put to the fires immediately. In fact, you Aurors were already doing that, along with a goodly part of Blackawton.”

Eyes still latched on the arm, which had rolled over and was rotating at the wrist to control the roll, Urquhart responded, “What on Earth were they doing there?”

“The ruins of the old town church, it transpires, was possessed of a rather fantastic cavern beneath it; one that was used as catacombs for the town. It was well hidden, and looked to be set up like some foul work room. Animals and humans were used alike.”

Dumbledore asked, “And how did the Aurors find the place?”

“Anonymous tip. The source specifically said that the missing Meadows woman was there.”

McGonagall asked, “And, did they find her?”

Whit looked over at McGonagall, his expression visibly bleak in the light. He swallowed before answering, “I am… very much afraid so.”

McGonagall turned away, blinking rapidly and visibly made an attempt to control her reaction, “How awful! What villainary is this?”

The Inspector straightened, his eyes hardening. “Necromancy for certain, and on a large scale. There can be little doubt as to who they are working for, but we need evidence! Did they find the individual responsible?”

“I do not believe so, sir. We were too busy wrangling Inferi, so I would not be surprised if the culprit got away clean.” Whit shook his head, as if to clear it of the fog of fatigue that was undoubtedly setting in. His energy always seemed so appallingly unending, so it concerned Albus that the well may be drawing down dangerously low.

“There is much to do, it seems. I must return to the Minister with my report. I believe that my recommendations will be accepted as Menchim has much more urgent matters at hand to concern himself. You may expect an official notice from my office early next week, Headmaster.”
Albus reached out to shake the Inspector’s hand. “Thank you.” On release of his hand he gestured to the door as he spoke, “Minerva, would you escort the Inspector to the Floo, please?” He knew what an inconvenience it was for the witch to teach and also be the gatekeeper for the one working Floo in the castle, but given their friendship, perhaps the duty wouldn’t be so onerous.

“Of course, Albus.” She glanced nervously at the containment ward, the arm still inching about the edge of its confines, searching for a way out. “Will you require more assistance?”

A knock at the door divided Dumbledore’s attention, “No, I believe we can handle this readily.” He raised his voice so that it would carry, “Enter, if you please.” He dimly recalled planning a brief meeting with Rolle tonight. One of the newest recruits to his staff, Conrad Rolle had been keenly interested in putting their talents to use.

Urquhart turned and retrieved his cane before skirting back about the red glowing ward to shake Nott’s hand with a gruff, “Excellent work, son.” With that accomplished he turned to Minerva and offered her his elbow.

The door opened to reveal the remarkable sight of Connie Rolle, dressed impeccably in lavender wool robes which were clearly expensive and tailored to fit them perfectly. Connie waxed and waned from masculine to feminine, and while there was no specific pattern to it, and with lashes done and hair transformed somehow into a stylish updo, it was evident that today Connie felt fully witchy. Rolle’s voice rang into the office clear as a bell, “Good evening! Am I breaking up a party? I could of course reschedule, Headmaster.” Bright and curious blue eyes darted about from face to face and there was no sign of intended retreat.

Being a wizard of breeding, Urquhart's eyes only widened perceptively before he nodded cordially. Minerva answered them, “Inspector Urquhart must return back to the Ministry, Professor Rolle. He has been here on official business.”

If Connie noticed the spasm of McGonagall’s possessive hand on the Inspector’s arm, she made no comment, but by the light in her eyes she immediately thought something of the connection. “Are you now? That’s a pity.”

McGonagall towed the Inspector to the open door without a backward glance, a move that made Urquhart’s fine brow wrinkle as he was forced to stammer his renewed leavetaking over his shoulder. “Good night.”
She stepped to the side, her long lashes sweeping down the retreating form quickly before turning back to the rest of the room. She smirked before commenting, “Bit old for her, isn’t he?”

Whit rolled his eyes, “Connie, be careful. Minerva has been known...” The end of what he was saying was obscured by a loud shriek.

“WHAT THE DUKE OF DUCKS IS THAT!??!”

Albus watched in sick fascination as the stack of parchment that had been cradled in Rolle’s arms was flung up in the air, the writing creating an obscuring cloud, as thick as any fog on the moor. As the paper settled it was hard to conceal the amusement produced by the sight of the usually poised Connie Rolle huddled on the top of his desk, wand at the ready and wig now askew. The way Connie was trembling was sufficient to dampen the merriment considerably.

Within its confines, the hand flopped around, rolling across the circle to catch a sheet with uncanny ease, which it then began to crumple into a tight wad.

“Connie, you are perfectly safe. That is a fraction of how my day has been.” Whit approached the desk, one hand outstretched, as a Lord might offer a Lady to assist her in stepping down from a carriage.

Eyes still round as saucers, Connie tore her gaze away from the horror in the circle, and her free hand flew to her mouth at the sight of Whit. The dishevelment was nearly as offensive as the Inferi. “Jinkies!” Her demeanour changed and her voice hardened. “Whittington, explain yourself.”

Shaking his head in amazement, “Connie, I can’t tell you much, but suffice it to say that I didn’t create the Inferi. It is here in an informative capacity.”

Accepting his hand at last, Connie sank down to sit on the edge of the desk before regaining her feet. “You expect me to believe that you disappeared, abandoning classes so you could go gather a Zombie arm as a teaching example? Extraordinary.”

“That story will do, I suppose.” The two stood close for a moment, looking at each other in mild concern. Whit reached up and pulled Connie’s wig back into place with a pat.

Connie’s expression froze at the gesture, but a moment later she regained her composure and turned
back to look at the arm, her nose wrinkling. “Good thing you reek of smoke, darling. Covers up the eau de cadaver.”

Albus watched the interaction, feeling as though he’d lost control of his own space. He cleared his throat and used a nonverbal Accio to collect the parchments back into a disorganised stack on his desk. “I apologise for losing track of the time, Professor Rolle.” He looked away from the pair, “Professor Nott, I would encourage you to go freshen up. I am confident that I can handle the ward for the moment, and you will of course be wanting an appropriate vessel for the specimen.”

Whit’s head whipped about and his green eyes narrowed. “You approve the containment of this specimen here on the grounds, then Headmaster?”

“I can’t think of anywhere or anyone else I’d trust to give the subject an independent and thorough study. We must learn all we can. Knowledge is our best defense.”

Ears reddening in pleasure at the compliment, Whit nodded back. “Thank you, sir. I believe I’ve got just the thing.” A boyish grin lit up his features, “I will be back by six, sir.”

A wadded ball of paper sailed through the air in their direction and Connie reflexively caught it neatly out of the air. A pained expression appeared as she processed what the wad had been only a quarter of an hour before. “Damn.” She shifted an accusing glare at Whit who stepped back.

“I am not the wizard who set the instructions for the arm to grab anything that gets near.” He followed this up with, “If we can manage to leave it be, it should go back to a dormant state before long.”

Connie didn’t seem impressed with this response. “You still brought it here, Nott. It was inconsiderate of you to neglect to warn me. That was an awful scare, sir. Not everyone is used to undead limbs flopping about.”

“Yes, quite so.” He cleared his throat, “Do try to avoid giving it any more ammunition, alright?” He threw a cheeky wink at her before turning back to Dumbledore. “Thank you, sir.”

Dumbledore inclined his head to the younger wizard, who then beat a hasty retreat.

Turning to the stack of disorder that had been a well thought out report and series of calculations,
Rolle let out a groan of dismay. “Well, that’s just perfect.” She gestured to the tumbler that stood empty on the desk. “I don’t suppose that you have any more where that came from?”

The Headmaster smiled to himself. “Of course. I think you’ve earned a drop.”

When Dumbledore returned to his desk, Rolle had composed her thoughts even to start articulating what was on her mind. “I’ve been watching the Muggle papers and as I used to do for the French, I’ve done a sub analysis and discovered several areas that might prove promising. What I need in order to give you better information is more data.” Busy fingers sorted through the pages, spreading them into sub-piles as she went.

After handing over the tumbler of whiskey with water, as Rolle preferred it, Dumbledore settled into the chair behind his desk, a new idea formulating in his mind.

“What sort of data are you interested in, Rolle?”

Over the rim of the drink, Rolle’s gaze turned introspective. “Deaths, missing person reports, accidents, calamities... you know. Muggle baiting. Anything that might seem off. Muggle and magical both.”

“So what you need is help to go about the town record halls and police stations to collect information?”

Eyes brightening, Rolle answered, “Why yes. And the local newspapers of course. But I’ve no idea of how this might be accomplished. I suspect it would be smart to focus on the less affluent areas first, and then rely on the papers to report on the others.”

Tapping his fingers on the wood of his desk, Dumbledore asked, “And would the data gatherers need to use magic to obtain what you need?”

“I don’t imagine so. It really is simple shoe-leather to pavement detective work. Hardly glamorous.”

Dumbledore leaned forwards, “And do you anticipate such work to be dangerous in any way?”
Rolle’s face constricted in thought for a moment before she gestured to the hand that was moving about the boundaries of its confinement slower. “Certainly nothing like that. Diplomacy and good manners should provide all of the defense one would need, and perhaps a good cover story.”

Nodding to himself, Dumbledore changed the subject, “Very good, I shall look into conscripting some assistants for the project. Now, show me what you have so far, Professor.”

Molly Weasley stood by as the officials from the Ministry entered her kitchen to pass through to the parlour to meet in semi privacy, having come to Ottery St Catchpole to find Dorcas. She’d put the kettle on already and was listening in as the two wizards, both dressed in formal black uniforms of the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol and matching somber expressions spoke.

“We regret to inform you that we have discovered your mother’s remains in a small town in Devon.”

Dorcas’ brave voice was clearly audible, “How? What happened to my mother?”

“The details are classified, but what we can say is that a detail of Aurors were given an anonymous tip that lead us directly to the location. She had been dead for some time, we believe.”

“I see. And what have you learned of the last hours of her life? Is there a coroners report?”

The gargantuan effort it took to answer this was audible as the wizard spoke. “I am afraid there will not be a report. There was an accident as the Aurors investigated the scene, and a fire destroyed a great deal of the evidence.”

Grief and anguish pulled at Molly’s heartstrings as she paused, standing now at the door with a tea-laden tray in hand. “And what will the Ministry be doing to apprehend whomever did this? Anyone with half a brain won’t believe that this was the work of a pack of werewolves. The full moon was a week ago!”

Her friend’s controlled mask remained in place, and the lack of response from her amplified the awkward nature of the conversation. Dorcas wanted answers and watched as the shorter of the two glanced at what Molly perceived to be the higher ranking officer who answered.
“We cannot share the details of the investigation, but rest assured that there is a mounting case building and it is designated as a high priority."

Molly set the tray down and used her wand to pour tea, floating over a cup of it to Dorcas. The witch spilled tea on the floor as she snatched the cup out of the air in front of her, but her voice was tight with focused and contained rage as she spoke. “A whole innocent family is rent limb from limb and you all write my mother off as gone some monster’s dinner, and now you consider the case a priority again.” She quirked an eyebrow, “I suppose you expect me to be grateful.”

Molly interrupted, “How do you take yours?”

“Bit of milk, please.” The taller one answered this question readily enough, but did not respond to Dorcas’ understandable outrage.

“Two lumps, only. Thank you, Mrs Weasley.” The shorter one was having difficulty maintaining a mask of impassivity.

Dorcas pressed the pair, “Is it true that there have been other attacks? Who is doing this, or what?”

“Madam Meadows, as a member of the Ministry, surely you understand that we cannot divulge the details of an ongoing investigation lest we endanger…”

“Inferi, alright?”

“Fenwick! You are out of line!”

“I think she has a right to know what happened to her mother…” The rest of the younger officer’s words were drowned out by the sudden rush of blood in Molly’s ears.

Numb with shock, Molly’s fingers dropped the sugar bowl, its fancy glass shattering as it hit the floor. A wave of dizziness passed over her. All of those terrible dreams. They weren’t just nightmares. They were real. “Oh please no, Merciful Merlin!”

“I say, Mrs Weasley. Do sit down. You look terribly ill!”
Gentle hands took hold of her by the elbow and guided her down to the sofa before placing a supportive arm about her shoulder. She forced herself to take in big gulps of air. “I… I’ll be alright. I’m sorry!” Embarrassment seeped in, and she hard-swallowed the bile that threatened to erupt.

A shadow passed over her vision, and the short one, Fenwick wasn’t it?, held out a cup of tea to her. “I’m sorry, I don’t know how you take it.”

“S’fine.” Molly turned to find Dorcas huddled next to her. “Oh, my dear. I’m so sorry!” She set the tea down on the table before her and flung both arms about her friend. “I had hoped for better news.”

“It is alright Molly. You’ve been amazing, I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

“If only I had thought to look sooner, oh…” Dorcas pinched Molly and she stopped talking and looked up, having forgotten they had official company.

The senior officer stood up and was clearly attempting to look everywhere but the weeping witch on the couch. The younger officer was staring at Molly with a startled expression.

Dorcas pushed away so that she could look into Molly’s face. “Hush now.” The recently confirmed orphan was oddly calm, the reassurances mechanically tumbling from her mouth. “If I hadn’t been away on that training mission. If I hadn’t applied for the promotion. If only, if only, if.”

Molly pulled a handkerchief out of her sleeve and used it to mop the tears from her face. “You’re right, of course.”

“Ladies, I am afraid that we have much to do. We will take our leave of you. Please accept the Ministry’s deep condolences for your losses, Madam Meadows.” The senior bent his head in acknowledgement and turned to go.

Fenwick pulled out a card from his inner robe pocket and handed it to Molly. “If you come across any other information that may be pertinent to the investigation, please send an owl or floo.”

Molly stared at the card long enough that Dorcas leaned forwards to take it. She extended a hand to him and pulled him closer so that she could whisper, “I thank you from the bottom of my heart for
your honesty, sir. Knowing something of what happened to Mum, well. I needed to know. I do hope it doesn’t bring you too much trouble.”

The young wizard turned to go, but as he reached the door he turned and offered them a two fingered salute. “Be well, ladies. We will do all we can to catch the bastard who did this.” Not waiting for their responses, he hurried away.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks to Coromandel for her help beta-ing. She’s a fantastic person and I do dearly wish the ocean were not quite so wide.

In this chapter I spent some time focusing on Conrad Rolle, who is a fantastic character who happens to be genderfluid. There are days when he is comfortable as a wizard, as he was born, and others where she is more comfortable as a witch. I realise this is to some a polarizing issue, and there is an inconsistency in pronoun assignation. Connie doesn't mind 'them or they,' but abhors 'it' and so uses whatever feels right at the moment. As a being who has access to magic, Connie can be whatever they wish, if one is particularly concerned about the wedding tackle (although the viability of the reproductive bits are up for debate). I did not set out make a belief statement or political challenge. Conrad is simply who Conrad was born to be, fully formed from my forehead and their gender and sexuality are secondary to the content of his character.
Professor Svartrunir tugged his dressing gown close with stiff fingers as he creaked his way out of his darkened bedchamber, fixing the ticking clock on his wall with a bushy-browed glare.

A wave of the wand later saw the lights lit about the room, and the wards and latch on the door unlocked even as the thick wood shuddered under an unrelenting fist.

“Coming, coming.” Svartrunir pulled open the door, and a draft wormed its way in. The witch standing there in the black hall was pale, and looked like a strong wind would blow her away as the draft tousled her fine, nearly white-blond hair.

Shattering the illusion of otherworldliness, she blurted out without so much as a greeting, “Sir, I need your help!”

“Miss Ollivander, this is quite irregular. While I enjoy reviewing your work, it is much too late to be up revising, even on a Saturday night. Have you seen the time?” This tipped over the line from dedicated to crazed.

Out of breath, Pandora attempted to explain in a broken fashion. “I’m sorry, Professor. It’s Deirdre. She’s acting strangely. You’ve the closest quarters.” She winced, looking at the wall clock inside. It’s hands pointed to roughly a quarter of two in the morning. “This cannot wait!”

Pandora Ollivander was not a flighty or silly witch. She was one of the more enjoyable students in his NEWT classes and spent a great deal of time working with him on her independent studies, applying runework to artificing. She was much more advanced than her classmates in such practical applications, although she had holes in her knowledge that only a more classical education could fill. She had an unnerving lack of concern for personal safety and was driven to test the limits of every combination, rarely being satisfied with standard textbook enchantments.

The elderly Head of House Slytherin considered her request for only a moment. Perhaps it was a sort of academic possessiveness that softened his wits, but when the usually unflappable girl prompted him with anxiety, he stepped out into the hall and followed with his wand lit.
“Please, sir. I don’t want to lose track of her. I’ve set Dolas on her and you know how short his attention span is.”

“Where are we going? Miss Ollivander, I demand an explanation, please!”

Shortening her steps to allow the much older wizard to catch up, Pandora hugged herself. “I think she might be sleepwalking. She’s... well, you’ll see. I can’t get near her. It is quite extraordinary. Did you know that Peeves is rather well read?”

Svartrunir didn’t answer, his breath occupied with keeping up with the student as she led him up a short stairwell. She waited for him at the top, holding the door and craning her neck.

A voice could be heard echoing in the empty hall, and the blast of air that penetrated the stairwell was winter-cold. The cadences were familiar but strange to his ear, warped by the application of tenderness and absence of mockery beyond easy recognition.

Ollivander’s familiar landed on her shoulder with a grating croak.

The voice’s words were clearer now, speaking in lyric poetry. "Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks, Within his bending sickle’s compass come."

Stepping through the door, Svartrunir recognised the hall as The Traveller’s Gallery. He’d not bothered with it in general, although he’d admired the view in the past. Late in the year, it was colder than a Jundkind’s earhairs. Not a place any sane person would linger.

An arch opened at the end of the hall to the darkened sky, as though the hall was intended to continue on, but failed to reach completion. Used as takeoff and landing point for broom travel, it was used only by younger, more daring faculty.

As Svartrunir’s wandlight fell on the scene, his heart seized in alarm. There stood Deirdre Ward, dressed in little more than a simple nightgown that whipped about her legs wildly by the strong wind. She swayed with each gust. They were several stories above one of the inner courtyards, but they were high enough to see the aqueduct bridge and the misty grounds beyond, all dimly lit by a sliver of the moon.

The girl’s voice echoed in the hall, an answer. “Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.”

All that stood between the girl and a fall to her death was the incorporeal body of the castle’s poltergeist.

Svartrunir cast a portal binding, one that he learned from having adventurous grandchildren, useful for preventing falls down stairs or out open windows. It was invisible but would be as solid as a wall should a person try to pass through it. Small things like wind and rain still would go right through. And poltergeists, it seemed, as the ghost didn’t react at all.

Peeves’ weird laughter set Svartrunir’s hairs on end. “Excellent well, milady. What of the past? Was love always there?”

“Out of sight, but never gone. I see in both directions now. I cannot love my new eyes. This knowledge scorches my reason.”

Peeves chortled, spinning like a top, setting the ruff about his neck flouncing out like a tutu. After a satisfying number of rotations, he stopped, as though caught by a Petrificus. He was eye to eye with the girl. “And what of the other? What does he do, hidden in there?”

“Him? Why, he’s our champion. The Boy Who Lived. He’s won twice already, you know.”

“Gobstones or something more noble? Thestral Jousting? Duelling with wand and sword?” Peeves appeared to be trying to invade the girl’s space, to herd her like a dog sheep, but she was unmoved.

The girl crossed her arms, her tone conversationally dreamy. “Well, he is a dab hand at Quidditch. I’d let him show you but I’m terrified of broomsticks. No, that won’t do, that’s for Harry.”

“A Champion Quidditch player? Is he seven wizards in one bloke?”

“No, no. Of course not. We occupy an uneven duality, that is all. We digress badly, I am afraid. No, he has saved us all twice. And I him more often than that, but it is more than a fair exchange.” Her voice dropped to a whisper, “He’d never forgive me. Not for what I’ve done.” She whipped around, her eyes closed, unseeing.
Peeves had caught sight of Pandora and Svartrunir now, and he brightened. “Ah, here you are. Flesh to converse with.”

Deirdre turned into the wind, paying no mind to Peeves. “He loved to fly.” She spread her arms. “Unassisted. Like Superman.” Her gown flapped about her in what some might have thought a romantic fashion, but Old Svartrunir could only shudder at the chill.

“Now see here. Come away from there, Miss Ward.” The old Professor’s heart leapt into his chest with a twist of pain. She was too close to the edge for his comfort. Surely she was not going to jump? His wand was in his hand now and he readied a spell to stop her.

She stopped, the wonder in her face crumpling to grief. “So… so much blood.” Starlight outlined the girl’s white gown as she covered her face with her hands and began to sob.

Svartrunir cleared his throat and glanced at Miss Ollivander who was taking all of this in with level-headed calm. “Miss Ward?”

The girl stumbled backwards with a startled scream, her shoulder catching the back wall. He couldn’t see properly in the gloom, but he rather thought that she was either laughing or weeping. Or perhaps a bit of both.

“Miss Ward, Deirdre, are you quite well?”

Peeves burst out laughing, and Svartrunir was quite glad the ghost was incorporeal because it was a rather vulgar, wet sounding laugh. “Oh, this may be madness but there is meaning in it.”


Almost forgotten at his side, Miss Ollivander spoke her mind. “I think she dream walks, although she has it quite reversed as the body is supposed to remain still. I had thought she was working on manifesting that talent. Tonight I could not keep her in the tower. She insisted on coming here, although I know not why.”

Deirdre slid down the wall, back turning to it, legs pulling in. “Dead. He’s dead and I did nothing. My fault. I should have, could have, would have done more. He gave everything. Everything.”
Pandora added, as an afterthought. “Although she did get into a right state about Severus disappearing yesterday. She wasn’t fully herself even after he returned.”

Softly, Deirdre continued to mourn on the floor. “I had all the pieces, right in front of me. It didn’t have to be that way. He wouldn’t have stood for it if the roles were reversed. Why did he just stand there?” She raised her voice a decibel, “He didn’t fight, he made no protest. Just let himself be cut down, turned into so much snake food.” She hit the wall with an open palm with a cry. “WHY!?”

Svartrunir frowned. Just how much did Ollivander know of Deirdre, really? “Miss Ward, I hardly think that a young witch as yourself should take responsibility of that magnitude. You must wake up, you are dreaming.”

The sobs quieted, and Miss Ward’s reply was harder than he expected, “You sound like him. Hypocritical, overbearing bastard. Brightest witch of my age, golden girl, insufferable know it all. That’s what he called me. Top in every class, but couldn’t save them both, be in two places, a fixed point in history. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Books and cleverness won the war but lost the battle and oh, I can’t bear it.”

“Miss Ollivander. Would you be so kind as to fetch Madam Pomfrey for me?” He would have to remember to give the girl points later. Miss Ward was raving.

“Oh course, sir.” She didn’t leave immediately, but added, “I find that interfering makes her worse. She casts in her sleep too, but until she changes back to a more normal slumber she will continue to babble, I am afraid.” The Ravenclaw gave him a toothy grin, adding, “Dream magic is fascinating. I do hope that the Headmaster will bring in an expert sometime.”

Svartrunir was starting to ache in the cold wind, and he was losing patience. “Off with you, then. I shall stand watch.”

A soft cry, more suited to a bereft kitten escaped the girl. “I needed him. He left. Bastard.”

Peeves crouched down in front of Deirdre, wringing his hands. “She walks the borders of sanity and pain. That way madness lies.”

Surprisingly, Miss Ward chose to answer the ghost. “I am decidedly lost. Out of place, out of step, out of order.” Miss Ward dropped her hands to glare at Peeves. “Utterly, gloriously astray. I have
given up everything. Too little remains. I won’t let you drag me back. Not yet.”

He rocked back and his body drifted away, like a depleted balloon left behind at a birthday party. Peeves held his hands up in a warding gesture. “Peace, Lady.”

She dropped her head down, her tone almost apologetic, “I don’t think I could bear it. Truth sears, like iron straight from the forge. I mustn’t get too close. No no no. Not yet. Someday, but not yet. Cast into the bath to be tempered, too soon and it will shatter. I like that. Apt. Truth is a tool, perhaps a sword?”

Svartrunir was lost and confused, surely nearly as much as the witch. “Miss Ward, might I persuade you to walk back to the infirmary? You are overwrought. You should rest.”

“No, I like it here. Wind in my face, solid rock under my feet. Like the point of a compass, it pulls me home.” She pulled her legs up to her chest and rested her cheek on her knees. She turned her face to the wind, her eyes reddened. “He used to come up here when he was troubled, you see.”

Frustrated and footsore, Svartrunir drew a chair nearby. It was a straight-backed rocker, nothing decadent. He sat with a quiet grunt, drawing his robe closer about him. As he set the chair rocking his memory cast back to times when he helped his little children and grandchildren go to sleep.

At length, he cleared his throat and began to speak.

“Once upon a time, in a land far to the North there was a wizard who was also a King. It was said of him that he was very wise, for he could look into the future and see anything that would happen at any time. He used his gift to predict crops and to know when their neighboring kingdoms were turning to thoughts of war. Sometimes the knowledge led to heartache, as the fate could not be changed, only prepared for.

Having seen what came of his predictions, he pledged not to look into his own future.”

The girl turned her head away from the wind and shifted as if to become more comfortable. He could tell in the dim light that she was listening. Heartened, he went on.

“The King and his wife were blessed with a son, and on the occasion of the boy’s fourth birthday his wife pled with her husband to use his power to look into the lad’s future for she could not rest for
worry of what may come for their precious child. They fought, but after a time the King relented and opened his eyes to look into the future for their son and Lo! He predicted that his son would one day wed a woman of low birth.

Father and mother both were horrified by the prospect of their son and heir marrying a mundane girl. Surely their line would weaken, its magic withering on the altar of so-called true love. And so, he set about discovering who she was or would be. Quickly, he tracked the thread of fate to a small village on the Gudbrandsdalslågen. There he found a young man weeping; for his family was starving and his wife had just delivered another baby, a girl.”

Eyes closed, the girl’s breathing was slowing, but the old man was not willing to take a chance, and so he continued to rock and tell the story after casting a warming charm on both of them. She was fast asleep by the time Madam Pomfrey bustled in, cap askew and face flushed.

Svartrunir held up a finger to his lips, silently nodding to the curled up witch who was sleeping peacefully at his feet.

The sad look in Pomfrey’s eyes made him wish to inquire further, but he did not dare risk waking the girl after he’d taken such pains to help her into a normal form of sleep. He’d have to call on Sprout in the morning.

Deirdre woke to a beam of cold, grey morning light falling on her pillow, turning her vision a disturbing mixture of red and shadow through her tightly shut lids. She felt as though she’d not slept at all, and her mouth was drier than the Sahara. It was too bright, so she threw an arm over her eyes, dampening the worst of it. Why had Pandy opened the curtains? It was Saturday.

The lightest of breezes brushed her cheek in a light gust and the rustle of paper that went with it drew her mental function to higher alertness. She flipped over, one hand surreptitiously feeling under the pillow for her wand.

It wasn’t there.

She cracked an eye open and peered about the room. Ah. The infirmary.

Another gentle breeze moved her hair and she twisted about, seeking out the source. There on a
straight-backed chair sat the sour-faced wizard. The sight of him there, waiting, annoyed with something (and she was getting the feeling that there almost always was something), made her heart flutter just a little, finding its way to her throat.

She watched him, observing the long lines of his face, the crooked nose crowned with a brow that was knotted in deep thought. He was reading a journal, no doubt getting ahead of her in Potions. The throbbing in her head made her close her eyes, but she tried to hold that image in her mind’s eye. Severus Snape. Her boyfriend.

Somehow that appellation seemed wrong when attached to him, not that it was inaccurate. It seemed so silly and yet it could be worse. A foreshortened version of his name, for example, just would not do. She didn’t really like “Dee” either. It didn’t seem to suit her, but she supposed it would have to do.

“I know you are awake.”

“Hnngh.”

“Quite.”

Deirdre cracked an eye and looked at the wizard who somehow had folded into the chair. His legs were stuck out straight and he’d propped them up on the frame. A faint upturn in the corner of his mouth along with a flickering glance made her consider the nickname thing again. Perhaps some sort of serpentine association. Viper. Too comic bookish. Mamba? Cobra? Python... Well, that was closer, she supposed. Wait, what did that say about her?

“Madam Pomfrey left you a light breakfast, a restorative tea, and a draught for headaches.” He folded the journal and tucked it into the bag at his feet.

“Headache.”

“I’d no idea you were such a stimulating morning conversationalist.”

Deirdre turned what she trusted was a hard glare in his direction and then sat up, clutching the covers to her chest. She held out a hand for the phial that she knew was coming and when Severus tucked it into her fingers, she brought it up to her mouth and took a whiff. Acrid, faint hint of cherry.
“That’s not one of mine but I think it should be adequate.”

Strengthening her resolve, she knocked it back with a grimace. It was very bitter and sour at the same time. “Ugh. Horrid.”

Having no suitable answer to that, Severus let his legs drop to the ground so he could reach the meal tray nearby. He put a splash of milk into an empty tea cup and then tipped the pot and filled it the rest of the way before handing it wordlessly over to her. There was something fascinating about the way his hands moved, a sureness in his grip that she liked.

The tea was tepid as she sluiced it about her mouth. “What happened?”

Severus’ brow rose and he answered quietly, “I’d hoped you could tell me. I’d come in with Professor Nott this morning as usual and here you were.” Something flickered in his expression, something dark, before he added, “I was wondering if you’d had a relapse of some kind.”

Deirdre took another hasty sip of her tea, tilting her head and considering. “A relapse?” She wasn’t ill, what was he talking about.

Her boyfriend awkwardly flushed. “You were here in the infirmary, asleep until moments ago. Recall that I’d first met you when you were in an unnatural coma that took you over a week to come out of, paired with that cursed scar.” He looked away, and it mollified her a little to see him uncomfortable admitting that he was worried about her.

After a moment’s consideration, she decided not to raise him one with the worry he’d cost her yesterday. It wouldn’t do. “I’ve no idea of what’s wrong or how I happened to arrive here overnight.” She pulled at the covers, loosening them enough to wrap about herself, letting her legs swing down so that she could sit on the side of the bed. Her headache was lessening with every breath. “I don’t feel sick. Just tired and achy.”

Madam Pomfrey noticed that Deirdre was awake and bustled over. “Deirdre, dear. How do you feel?”

Severus stood, taking a step back and moving his chair out of the way.
“Better, thank you.” She squinted, trying to read the Mediwitch’s expression. “Could you enlighten me? I don’t remember coming here and I don’t feel sick. Surely the castle wouldn’t shuttle me here for a headache?”

The witch glanced sideways at Severus, a subtle request for permission to speak.

Deirdre nodded, “It’s alright. It will save me the trouble of repeating it all over again.”

Startled, Severus moved to pick up his bag. “I should probably give you…”

Not wanting him to leave, Deirdre raised a hand to stop him. “Truly, I don’t mind if Madam Pomfrey doesn’t?” Surely the Mediwitch would not have allowed him to visit if something was deathly wrong?

A kind smile lit the woman’s eyes, laugh lines gentling the angles of her face. “No, I suppose it would be alright.” She spread her hands wide. “You were sleepwalking, Deirdre. Did you know that you’ve been doing this? Miss Ollivander says you’ve been doing it almost every night.”

Shocked, Deirdre shook her head. “She’d not mentioned it. I don’t remember a thing.”

Frowning, Severus asked, “But how did she end up here? Did she walk to the infirmary?”

“Happy thought, Mr Snape, but no. She was up in the Traveller’s Gallery, although how she found her way there, I’ve no idea. Old Headmaster Dippet placed a redirection spell on the door. I’ll have to mention it to Professor Dumbledore.”

“Traveller’s Gallery? That’s strange. I wonder why I was up there?”

Severus looked horrified. “Ollivander let you get that far?”

Too many people were talking now, so Pomfrey held up her hands. “I didn’t see it myself. Professor Svartrumir lulled you back to normal sleep by telling you a bedtime story of all things, but he’d said you were quite distressed, weeping for someone you lost.”
Deirdre scoured her mind for any hint of new thought or memory. Was it starting to come back? A thrill of anxiety rose in her. Why was she afraid? Still, the answer was the same, “I don’t remember any of it.” No wonder her head hurt.

Madam Pomfrey reached out to check Dee’s pulse, a frown on her face before she searched Deirdre’s eyes for something. Her wand was out and she did a few rather familiar spells. “Well, outside the stress levels, I think you are good enough to go back to your dormitory today.”

“Madam Pomfrey, wait a moment. What will we do to make sure this doesn’t happen again?”

Somehow, Deirdre imagined that she could just hear him tallying up 39 ways that she could get herself killed in Hogwarts just by walking about in her sleep. In fact, the tally was going up at a frightening rate if the tight set of his jaw was anything to go by.

“Mr Snape, you cannot do anything. I have asked Miss Ollivander down along with Miss Ogden as Professor Svarturnir has offered to teach them a few choice wardings that might serve to prevent you from leaving your room at night, Miss Ward.” The woman’s mouth twitched as she said ward.

Deirdre felt like there was a situation and she was losing her grasp on it. “Can’t I cast them myself? I hate to cause any trouble. In fact, I’ve a ward for my bed in mind that should work even better. I already ward it against sound. I’d no idea that I was a sleepwalker.” That admission made her feel more irritated with the whole affair. She doesn’t know anything about herself. Of course, she’d not know that she could sleepwalk. The flash of pity in Madam Pomfrey’s expression made Deirdre want to bite her.

“Miss Ward, why do you cast wards on your bed against sound?” Madam Pomfrey shifted to sit on the bed beside Deirdre, and that proximity drained Dee of her momentary wildness. The witch really only wanted what was best for her.

“I…” Wait. Why did she cast those every night? She warded for sound, a simple security perimeter, and another against hexes. “Habit, I suppose? Dolas is a menace and Pandy likes to stay up past hours tinkering.”

Neither Severus nor Madam Pomfrey seemed to believe that answer, but both were too polite to say so. Ah, there was that seed of irritation. She hadn’t lost it after all. Well, time to take control.
“Right. Well, I can’t be the only person who’s suffered from this. Why is this happening and what’s the prognosis?” She waved at Severus, “And do sit down. You are looming, Severus.”

“Well, some believe that you are acting out dreams or memories of stressful events in your dreams. In most cases, the problem will pass in time. Getting enough rest and dealing with stress are key, of course.”

Deirdre could feel Severus’ eyes on her. Yesterday was certainly stressful, but she was not about to bring that up. She was still digesting the information when Severus spoke for her.

“Are there any potions that might solve the problem? I’d be happy to help.” The way he leaned forward as he spoke made him seem like a supplicant, and Madam Pomfrey didn’t miss the gesture as her tone was gentle but firm.

“That is very kind of you, Mr Snape, but I don’t think it will be necessary.” She turned back to Deirdre, to ask, “Now, are you getting to bed at a reasonable hour? You need your rest.”

Back on the defensive, Deirdre straightened up, perhaps trying to look more healthy. “It was my first full week back. I hardly think it is surprising that I’m tired and a little stressed.”

Madam Pomfrey’s brow lifted in carefully couched amusement. “So you agree that you need to scale back and relax a trifle? I think a nap most days of the week would be welcome.”

Horrified, Deirdre rushed to dissuade her. “I couldn’t possibly do that, I’ve already got a lightened course load as it is!”

An indelicate snort escaped her boyfriend, who was about to get his nose flattened for that remark once she’d fended off the Mediwitch.

“Now Miss Ward, I hardly think that we’re being unreasonable. You have plenty of time to get everything done if you will only pace yourself.”

“But…”
Severus, being the insensitive boor of a wizard that he was, cut over Deirdre to ask that dreaded question, “Could you be more specific, Madam Pomfrey?” Had Deirdre no allies in this? Her heart sank as she glanced at the Mediwitch, quite regretting the absence of her wand. She was getting to the point that she didn’t care which, but one of the pair at least was going to pay for that conspiratorial spark that they shared between them.

“No more than three hours today and tomorrow on homework.”

“What!!?”

“And the rest of the time she is to spend relaxing. You know Severus, it really is a pity that there won’t be any Hogsmeade weekends. A nice walk about town would have been lovely. I suppose you will have to come up with something else.”

Tears of real anxiety sprung to Deirdre’s eyes as the lists of things she needed to get done zipped through her inner vision. “But… but… but… I can’t possibly!”

Shaking her head, Madam Pomfrey was quite firm. “You can and you will. That should be ample time to prepare any essays for the coming week, and revise for the Herbology quiz Monday.”

Deirdre took a moment to be impressed with the Mediwitch’s understanding of the workload. “How…?”

Smiling winsomely, Madam Pomfrey offered, “Well, I have been working here for over a decade. There are patterns that I’ve come to expect. Really, only Defense is the class that changes drastically year in and out, and I’ve managed to get most of those Professors to forward me a syllabus ahead of time so I can anticipate our students’ needs.” She had the grace to be embarrassed at the extent to which she went, modesty causing her to add, “Well, it is a matter of practicality.”

Severus didn’t seem in the least surprised. “I’d speculated, but it is good to know that you really don’t have the sight.”

That made Madam Pomfrey laugh, “Oh no, Mr Snape. Don’t suggest such a thing aloud. You’ll have the Headmaster prevailing on me to teach Divination and that is entirely not to my taste.”

Thankful to be discussing something other than her curtailed study schedule for the weekend,
Deirdre smiled too. “That’d be a waste!” Her stomach gurgled. “What time is it?”

“Ah, well. There you have it. It is past ten now. Plenty of…”

Deirdre struggled out of the covers, straightening the bottom of her nightdress as it had been rucked up enough to show some leg above the knee. She would have laughed at the deeply embarrassed flush that rose in Severus’ face, perhaps a reflection of her own, but that was nothing next to her need to get food and reclaim some of her time.

As Deirdre pulled on a robe, Madam Pomfrey contrived to make her life worse by adding, “No reading anything nonfiction for fun. I’ll know if you cheat. Don’t test me, I’ll tell Headmaster Dumbledore to reduce your classes, starting with Defense tutoring!”

That stopped Dee in her tracks. “You wouldn’t do that, would you?”

The Mediwitch stood, folding her arms across her chest. “I most certainly would. The Headmaster won’t be able to counter me, your Auntie Pomona will see to it!”

Mind blank with shock, Deirdre stood there staring at Pomfrey. Movement at her side brought her back into motion, her mind not able to accept the possibility that someone would take away her studies. Severus stood, arm out for her to grasp as she stepped into her slippers. She’d only a fleeting moment to resent that someone had thought to bring her robe and slippers but not her wand before she found herself getting towed away.

“It was time to leave, before Madam Pomfrey thought of any new tortures for you.” Severus was looking anywhere but at her, perhaps something to do with her state of undress, which was ridiculous. He’d seen her in her nightgown before. No, better not to examine that thought too closely.

As they passed through the corridors between the Infirmary and Ravenclaw tower, the longer and less travelled way, she was quiet. “I wonder what I said.” She’d have to ask Pandy. The witch had made some oblique references to things, and now that she thought of it, they made a lot more sense. She just thought the girl was being mystically odd.

Severus’ response was a noncommittal grunt, but it did remind her that she wasn’t actually alone. “So, what are you doing today?”

He shrugged and looked down at her sideways. “Studying. Maybe a nap later.”
Deirdre looked up at him with a scowl.

“Hey, I’m tired too! And I’m not going to push Pomfrey. I’m doing that already with training.”

Relaxing her hold on his arm, Deirdre was impressed. “Even on a Saturday? Has the Professor no conscience?”

Severus shrugged. “If I am going to be of any use to him, I need to be able to keep up.” He looked down, ducking his head a bit. “Studying in the library and spending time preparing potions hasn’t trained me for this.” He waved a hand at the air in general.

Feeling much more comfortable, she changed tactics. “You have been working awfully hard. Some relaxation is on order!” She tilted her head, considering. “I want to go see Crooksie of course, but that won’t take all day. We could see if Alanna and Morgie are up for some games? I think Shafiq wanted to do Herbology trivia again?”

Groaning, Severus shook his head. “Ravenclaws.”

“Whaaaat?”

“Bloody boring swots, every one of you.”

Resentment flared and she stopped in her tracks. “Well, if you’re so sophisticated, come up with something yourself. I don’t hear you suggesting anything.” She grinned, “What do you do on weekends that there isn’t studying or Quidditch or Hogsmeade? For fun, not working for Slughorn.”

A dangerously crooked grin flashed in response to that question. His teeth weren’t straight and it distracted her eye. “Oh, well. I like to mess around. You know, practice dueling. Learn a few new spells. Experiment a bit.” That last was enunciated with a lilting, playful cadence.

Deirdre smiled up at him and willed herself to remember that look. It was delightful. She liked to mess about a bit herself. So many ideas! “Oh, I wish I had access to henna inks. I had a wonderful idea for a new formula for the hand viewer enchantments.” She bounced on her toes as she fought to keep her excitement from running away from her, and her curls, now grown down to her shoulders,
bounced with her. “I’d thought to buy some this weekend, but as you know there won’t be any shopping.”

Taken with a coughing fit, Severus may have missed that last bit. His voice cracked as he tried to recover. “You can’t use regular ink?”

She shook her head. “No, they just don’t take the same way. Too impermanent.”

Severus was quiet as they walked. They were getting very close to the tower.

“So, I’ll have to pop up the tower and make my apologies. And I need to do a few things.” Yes, she’d rather not mention showering in the open hallway. “Um, so shall we meet up in about an hour?”

Walking her around so that she was facing the door, Severus neatly disengaged her hand, bringing it up to brush his lips across her knuckles. “Very well. Until then.” Another wicked smile of his sent her already somewhat giddy brain into leaps and twirls. Of course, he had to ruin it. “No studying. Strict orders.”

“Oh, I can’t believe you!”

“Do I need to alert your Prefects of the restriction?”

“That’s really low, Severus.”

He smirked at her, “Madam Pomfrey’s orders.” As if that obviated him of guilt!

“Goodbye, Severus.”

The wizard stepped backwards, putting distance between them lest she hex him.

The eagle knocker transformed, challenging her with the riddle of the day. “One is to three as three is to five as five is to four and four is the magic number. Why?”
Ah, an easy arithmancy riddle, “Because there are three letters in the word one, but if you continue
trough any chain, eventually you will always come back to four as it has the same number of letters
in its own name, but there are other digits with four letters such as nine and five, and others lead to
five which leads to four and so on.”

The knocker screeched, “Too easy for you, witch. You may pass.”

“Thank you.” She turned and raised a hand to Severus before heading into the tower. Maybe today
wouldn’t be so bad after all.

Rodolphus stood by his Lord’s side, waiting, anxious. He’d read the headline news from Friday
night’s Daily Prophet, and trembled within the influence of his Lord’s intense displeasure.

It was supposed to be a weekend for celebration and political planning in the wake of another
successful leg of their grand plan to bring about a new world vision. What happened yesterday was
just short of an unmitigated disaster. His younger brother had escaped the raid, but only barely. Only
the tiresome protocols used by the brothers had prevented the ruination of their family and the plan
entrusted to them by The Dark Lord himself.

An angel of reason, Rookwood managed to sequester Rabastan and use his connections at the
Ministry to conduct the critical process of discovering exactly how the Aurors were led straight to
their lab. As such Rodolphus hadn’t seen his brother, and was left to stand in his stead, accepting the
weight of responsibility for their failure.

The solarium was bathed in the grey light of the Welsh morning but there was no warmth in it. The
cold went deeper than that of November. This was the terrible winter of the Dark Lord’s
disappointment. A small table laden with delicacies was set at his Lord’s elbow, and Rodolphus’
beautiful wife knelt at the man’s silver slippered feet, silent and trembling. She was very young yet,
and as such they’d only wed three summers ago.

“My Lord!” The door to the Atrium was pushed open, and Rodolphus flinched at the sound. Heart
hammering, he tore his eyes away from Bellatrix to look into the terrified face of his brother, finally
brought to answer in full for his failure to maintain secrecy. He was accompanied by the taller form
of a masked Knight, probably Rookwood, whose hand held him steady as he propelled him forward
to kneel at the feet of their Lord.
Voldemort was dressed in morning robes of an elegant pale silver silk. His white hair was perfectly set, his face smooth as the marble it resembled. The irises of his eyes were colourless, and glittered with dangerous intelligence. Rodolphus could remember a time when they were darkest black, before he’d undertaken secret purifying rituals that the pureblooded community accepted as proof against his claim to be the one who had come to lead the Magical world back out of the shadows at last.

His voice was devoid of the anger they all could sense smoldering behind that alabaster facade, “Ah, Rabastan. I have been waiting for you. I am gratified to see you are returned to us whole.”

The handsome young wizard fell to his knees and took up the hem of Lord Voldemort’s robes, kissing it before bowing once more in deep abeyance. “My Lord.”

“We have all had a trying night, watching for your return. Rise and speak, for I wish to hear the story from your lips.”

Rodolphus was heartened to see his brother respond smoothly, his voice only faltering for a moment as he marshaled the explanation that followed. “I wasn’t in the lab proper when I was alerted to a breach of the wards. At first I’d thought it might be Muggles, as there were only two intruders. I saw the opportunity to test the newest constructs, so I commanded that they attack.”

Voldemort tapped a finger lightly on the armrest of his chair, making no move to interrupt.

Unnerved, Rabastan swallowed before continuing, but his voice was already hoarse from smoke exposure. “The perimeter containment wards had to be activated as we planned so that the lesser Inferi would not wander off, but this alerted the Aurors to the magical nature of their peril.”

Rodolphus’ mind teemed with questions, but he forced himself to remain silent.

“In the end, I failed to prevent them from calling for aid, and so the lab was discovered in spite of setting the entire force on them. They were too fast. Everything was lost.” He looked ready to prostrate himself once more, but held himself upright and steady as was expected of a Lestrange.

Their Leader listened with partially lidded eyes, deceptively placid as Rabastan gave his report. “Did they discover your identity?”
“No, my Lord. I am certain that I was not discovered.”

“And that of the intruders?”

Rookwood’s voice spoke from behind the mask. “Fabian and Gideon Prewett, sir. They were tipped off by someone outside of the Ministry, a Seer who was helping Meadows look for her mother.”

A sour smile twisted Voldemort’s lips, disturbing the illusion of beauty to reveal the man underneath as alien and grotesque. “I see. The identity of the Seer? Such a talent might be valuable.”

The silver masked man shook his head, “Regrettably they declined to identify their source. As it is, they are being disciplined for taking action independently without informing their superiors of the development, otherwise they’d have been contained well before they started. The Ministry exhibited some competence and called in an expert, Whittington Nott, to attend the scene after the number and nature of our forces came to light. After that, it was a route.”

Rabastan stood, his fists clenched as he silently listened, his dark eyes flickering back and forth between the Dark Lord and Rookwood.

“It is perhaps fortunate that the foolish young wizards were pressed as hard as they were, for in their panic they summoned fire and burned much of the crypt down, taking most of the lab with it. Very little was left to be examined by the time the fires were contained.”

Voldemort narrowed his eyes, “Dunnigan. Where was he in this?”

The so-called expert had been hired on by the Ministry, a careful manoeuvre intended to fetter their progress via controlling the information disseminated and also obtain secrets from the newly unearthed grimoire from the dig that he’d recently presided over in Egypt. The man was a sycophantic buffoon from what little Rodolphus could recall, easily bridled to their cause by a flash of gold and flattery.

“Recovering from a curse that he’d unwittingly triggered whilst working on the translation, my Lord.”

Voldemort stood, hissing in displeasure. “Useless fool. Was the book damaged?” As if from thin air, a wand appeared in the imposing man’s fingers and he lightly traced the straight line of it without
touching it, the corner of his mouth curling in a scowl.

Everyone in the room was instantly and intimately aware of the Dark Lord’s towering wrath. The sheer magnitude of the wizard’s power, which surely outstripped any since Merlin himself, pressed all present down to the floor under the weight of his deep disappointment.

Forehead pressed to the cold floor, the elder Lestrange could not see but he did hear and feel the agony that his brother was enduring under the Cruciatux Curse that was directed upon Rabastan.

Rodolphus’ heart lurched in his chest as he understood that it would be a miracle if the day ended with Rabastan still breathing and clinging to sanity. He had to do something, for the sake of his family. They must not fail if they were ever to see father again. It was his duty to watch out for his brother.

“My Lord, there is another, better equipped expert in Britain that we could recruit who is capable of translating that passage.”

The screams cut off, replaced with a sighing cry. Rabastan was alive.

Silver slippers came into view and the toe of one slipped under his neck, lifting in a way that made it very hard to breathe under the blanket of pressure. It was as though the Dark Lord had altered gravity, making it more effective for any but himself.

The hissing had not left the Lord’s voice as he commanded Rodolphus, “It is for the regard that I held for your father that I have restrained judgement in the face of the evidence of your growing incompetence. Speak carefully, Lestrange, for you have my entire attention.”

Darkening vision had begun to turn to fuzzy grey when the toe slipped out, allowing a rush of air to flow back into his burning lungs. Tears streamed from his eyes and his nose dripped onto the floor, back to where his forehead properly belonged in his Lord’s presence.

The drive to live forced his reeling mind back into motion, and he wheezed out, “The Nott heir, Lord. He is Dumbledore’s man, and Cantankerous reports that he is as deviant and defiant as ever.”

The Dark Lord’s voice breathed in his ear, unnervingly close. “And what of use would this ignorant filth be to me?”
Across the room, Rookwood spoke as if he’d read Rodolphus’ mind. “If he would correct his priorities, Nott could be an asset. He would be able to succeed where Dunnigan failed.”

Rodolphus felt a rush of heady gratitude for his brother in arms. It was a risk, but the idea was sound. If only the Lord would see it too… “If he joins us, it would certainly wound Dumble…” Rodolphus stopped short as the Dark Lord hissed at the mention of his hated Professor’s name. Trembling, he waited for pain to swallow him up once more.

“Cantankerous, my old friend. What are his expectations regarding this disappointing whelp of a great-nephew and heir to his family?”

Rookwood answered, “If it please you, my Lord, he has petitioned to place his bloodline in your service. He will eliminate Whittington himself if it is your will. There is another great-nephew who shall serve as heir.”

“Arrange a meeting. See to it that Whittington does not refuse.” The hissing voice faded as its owner walked away. “I will not be so merciful next time, Lestrange.”

Rodolphus, still gasping with air-hunger, turned his face to watch as the door to the solarium closed, obscuring the noble figure as it strolled away. Fear gave way to wonder and a giddy sort of adoration, eagerness to show his Lord just how well he could do.

A hand swam into his dazed field of view and the nearby voice belonging to Augustus Rookwood rang loud within the shocked void left in the wake of their Lord’s leavetaking. “Come, brothers. We have much to accomplish.”

Chapter End Notes

AN: Thanks to Coromandel, bestie-beta for the chapter. Thanks also to SnapeLove for alpha reading. Also, I’d like to thank all of the readers out there, like you. The comments and kudos do really make my day!

The line that sleepwalking Hermione quotes is from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 116. It really is lovely!
If you would like to see how the sleepytime story ends (although it is not exactly the same, it is the inspiration for the story) head over to World Tales. Also the riddle isn't one of mine. I found it in an anthology!

Cheers!
Deirdre hated the girls' showers in Ravenclaw. The builder of the tower had strange ideas about the requirements of witches who were in need of a wash. Five stalls were situated about a central column, and each was starkly different to the others. Two were extremes of temperature, one was scented, one had very metallic water, and the last tended to vibrate erratically. None of them was plain, normal water.

Not one to take discomfort lying down, Deirdre brought her wand with her when she showered, a habit that she'd developed in the mere week she'd called the place her home. Her favourite shower was the blazing hot one, but that one was almost always occupied. Not so this morning as she returned from the infirmary, and she made it her business to boil away her anxiety over just what happened.

As she stood in front of the fogged-over mirror, Deirdre's attention was primarily occupied with ambitious plans for the weekend's homework, made that much more challenging by the time limit set by Madam Pomfrey. She hummed to herself as her fingers worked oil into her tresses, and her mind neatly planned out a lightning session of revision for Charms, Potions and Herbology. She was only two weeks ahead in her review and while she’d already finished the written assignments due next week, she wanted to make a start on that poison essay. She’d not done one of these before and her heart lifted at the idea of running her work past Professor Slughorn on Tuesday to make certain it was complete.

The bliss was short lived as the two girls who’d been horrible to her that first night entered together. Both were still in their nightdresses and neither seemed pleased that Deirdre was in the room.

“Ew. What’s that smell?” The blonde Fawley was holding her hand over her nose with an expression of undisguised disgust directed at Deirdre.

Deirdre’s hands slowed, her fingers entwined in her curls as she smoothed in the oil she preferred.
“Might be Jojoba.” She was gritting her teeth and imagining a few hexes that might distract the vile girl from her olfactory offenses.

“Jojo-shit is more like it. Must be from Africa. That’s where you were, right?” Miriam stood at Phoebe’s side, her arms crossed. “I can’t believe you use that on your hair.”

Deirdre scowled. “Jojoba is a desert shrub from the American Southwest and is high in a waxy substance possessed of properties known for wound healing and more commonly used, conditioning of dry hair.”

Her aunt Pomona had brought it to her. Of course, Auntie Pomona wouldn’t notice if it smelled a bit earthy.

“How fascinating.” Phoebe giggled behind her hand.

Miriam tossed her head and muttered, “Smells like manure. Professor Sprout must love it.” She turned her back on Deirdre and whispered to her friend, a whisper pitched so that Deirdre could not hear.

Viscerally deep warning bells went off for Deirdre, overriding the flash of irritation she had for the insult of the woman who had agreed to be her sponsor. She was wand-ready when the ceiling opened to pour out steaming hot mud directly above her. Her reflexive shield deflected the loathsome liquid, but just before the flow stopped she managed to angle the resulting rebound jet towards the girls who stood shocked, spattered with their own filth.

“Finite.” As suddenly as it began the torrent of muck ceased, leaving two gagging witches standing in the centre of the bathroom, dripping onto the blue tile.

Ruth Ogden stood in the door, eyes moving from Deirdre to the two standing nearby. “What is going on in here?”

Words failed Deirdre, rage choking the expletives before she could give voice to them. “Those two… oooo.” Her hands trembled as curse after hex flew through her mind. None of them was good enough.

Looking on as the two mud-covered girls seemed to recover from their shock, the Prefect spoke over
the spluttering and whining coming from Zhiu. “This hot mess must have been a mistake. Some sort of laughable misunderstanding. I suggest you apologise.” There wasn’t anything amused about Ogden’s tone.

Deirdre spun on Ruth, “I didn’t…” She considered how it looked.

“Not you, Ward. Those two.”

“Us?” Spitting, Fawley turned cold eyes back on Deirdre. It was disturbing how the witch was so poised in the face of disaster. Somehow she made the mud look *fashionable*. “We thought we’d help Miss Ward get ready to go see her boyfriend. He’s a dirty slimeball, so we thought we should try and make her more appealing to his low tastes. Girls must help one another.” Impossibly white, her teeth looked sharp and dangerous as she smiled in what was meant to be a winsome fashion. The mud was drying like a masque already.

Miriam crossed her arms, trying to recover a measure of dignity. “She isn’t likely to enjoy any better society since she has no connections, no…”

Deirdre’s vision fogged over red as the wretch continued to prattle on, and a warning growl rose from her throat. Hands wrapped about her waist, holding her back. She’d lurched forward, arm pulled back in what would have been a fantastic slap, but the Prefect was strong enough to lift her feet off of the floor, stopping her progress.

Ruth barked, “Detention, both of you. Clean up your mess and march straight up to Flitwick’s office to explain yourselves.”

“What? It was just a harmless prank!” Miriam was taken aback. “I have plans!”

Fawley took the pronouncement with the calm of a repeat offender, fully expecting to escape punishment. “I think you are overreacting, Oggy. She is of no consequence.”

Another growl built deep in Deirdre’s throat and she strained once more, her bare feet meeting nothing but air and the legs of the witch behind her.

Ruth dropped her voice and spoke quietly into her ear. “Easy, there. I need you to calm down. Whatever this is can’t be worth the risk.”
Relaxing in the prefect’s hold, Deirdre took a shuddering breath. She didn’t feel like she’d even got started. Not by a long shot, but the sight of Miriam’s distress and Phoebe’s evil glares were a balm to her rage. The prefect was right, she needed to be smarter than those two. Her toes met the cold tile of the floor and the red fog drained from her mind, as though the stone was pulling it from her.

The arms let her go and Dee found herself off balance for a moment, rooted to the spot, staring at her adversaries. Ravenclaw was not immune to the evils of prejudice and these two were proof. Surely those who loved knowledge would be wise enough to attempt to see past bloodlines and surfaces? She licked her lips, considering the situation with displeasure.

Ruth hooked a hand in Deirdre’s elbow and towed her out of the bathroom, summoning Dee’s things with a wave of her wand and a worried smile. When they reached the narrow hall of the girl’s side of the tower, she asked, “You alright, Ward? I’d apologise for my cousin, but she’s never going to change. Try to not rise to the provocation, alright? If you stay unconcerned they’ll lose interest in time. Trust me.”

Deirdre took her little toiletry bag from the prefect, sensing a deeper story but not in the mood to ask. “It is your cousin who needs the warning, Ogden. She has no idea of who she is dealing with.” A light, crazed laugh left Deirdre. “I’ve yet to discover the full breadth of what I am capable. Professor Nott treats me like an unexploded bomb, and he’s a Cursebreaker. I may be that dangerous when provoked.”

Ruth blew out her breath, looking impressed. “I’d wondered why you weren’t in Defense.”

Choosing not to address that directly, Dee decided to make her point absolutely clear. “I know you believe that you rescued me and I thank you for your assistance, but it is they who are truly indebted to you. For if I were to curse them I would make sure they would never consider breathing around me again, much less spewing such filth from their perfect, privileged lips.”

Looking into Deirdre’s eyes, Ruth squeezed her arm before saying, “When you say it like that, I have no doubt that you have the capacity. But, consider carefully, Ward. The Fawley family is powerful and well connected. Don’t do something that will have consequences for you beyond what that little bitch can do to you here at the school.”

“I hoped Ravenclaw would be proof against such ignorance.” Deirdre turned to go.

Ogden called after Deirdre, “For Rowena’s sake Ward, if you are going to blow anybody or
anything up, take it outside of my tower if you please!”

Deirdre raised her hand in an acknowledging wave and made her way back to the room she shared only with Pandy. When she stopped at the door, the idea struck her that she’d not yet warded the door. “Well, I guess that’s part of the weekend gone.”

A blonde head popped up out from what most would consider a pile of rubbish, yet Pandora considered it her lab. “Oh, you’re back.” She had a pair of strange goggles strapped to her face that made her eyes look as big as a house elf’s, but the smile reached them all the same.

Dee looked at the clock, doing mental arithmetic and timetables. Did she have time for this? Well, she had better make time. “Pandy?”

Her roommate pushed up the goggles, which left red impressions in her fair skin about her eyes. “Every night.”

“What… how did you?”

Pandora lumbered up from her seat behind the bench and crossed the room, taking Dee’s elbow and leading her to her bed, sitting down on it before pulling Dee with her. “It seemed like a logical question. Even in your sleep, you have a very orderly mind, Deirdre.”

“If that is true, then why do I feel lost?”

A small smile lit on the strange witch’s face. “You said that the stars shifted. Perhaps you are using the wrong map? I’ve seen you sleepwalking every night this week. Last night was the first time you’d left the room.” The smile widened, “Good job, too.”

Questions swarmed in Deirdre’s mind like angry bees, “But why didn’t you say anything?”

Pandora looked away, her attention caught by a passing cloud perhaps, or a trace of ice on the windowpane. “I did. We had interesting conversations, but if you mean to your waking self, well. I didn’t think you would like it.”
“You are right.” Deirdre put her hands up to her face. “I don’t.” She chanced a peek over at Pandora through separated fingers. “What did we talk about?”

Lifting a shoulder in a noncommittal shrug, Pandora answered, “Don’t worry, nothing too private. This and that. Pieces of a whole, dream or reality I know not. Always terribly sad things.”

Dolas, Pandora’s mockingbird familiar, fluttered over, landing on his witch’s knee. He tilted his head this way and that, like a photographer taking pictures from different angles, looking for the best view.

Deirdre thought about the story that was spread about her, her parents dying in a Nundu attack in Africa. She couldn’t remember her parents, real or otherwise. When she thought about what came before, all she had were a few faint impressions, but nothing concrete. The details were out of reach, obscure and as tangible as mist. What was wrong with her? Unconsciously she ran her fingers over her left forearm, feeling for the scar there. It was fading rapidly, covered over by a concealing glamour. She flexed the fingers on her left hand, one by one, her nerves still tingling and angry. “I don’t remember.” The admission came out as a whisper.

“That must be very uncomfortable.”

Deirdre stopped rubbing. “I must have sprained it…”

Pandora’s hand on hers stopped the lie before it was fully formed. “To be so sad, but not remember exactly why.”

A huff of bitter amusement escaped Deirdre’s lips. “And here I thought it was my mind’s way of shielding me from pain.”

“Perhaps.” Pandora moved, her arm going about Dee’s shoulders in a comforting half-embrace. “If they weren’t obliviated away.”

“Madam Pomfrey says not.” She focused on her unshod feet. “They are still there.” Her throat was tightening, but dare she push the words out? Was it safe? “Without them, I hardly know who I am, Pandy.”

The arm pulled her fractionally closer. “Nonsense.” Pandora giggled, “You can’t stop being yourself. That’s the last thing that you should worry about.” She shifted and Deirdre looked up to see her
gesturing to the neat stack of books in the case that Dee transfigured from an old box earlier in the week. “Look at that. That’s not the work of some ghost of a witch.”

Swallowing, Deirdre shook her head. “That’s just the way you treat books. Everyone knows that, especially Ravenclaws. That’s not proof of anything special about me.”

“Well, what about how you got away from Gryffindor tower after throwing a pie into Lily Evan’s face? That’s not the work of a mindless construct. No, you can’t convince me that you’re that lost, Deirdre Ward.” She shook her gently. “You are exactly where you are supposed to be.”

A nervous giggle escaped Dee as she looked at the door. “Not everyone seems to agree.” She straightened, “That reminds me. I want to ward the room, is that alright with you?”

“Did something happen?”

“Hairrrrry.” The mockingbird flicked its wings in a strange gesture before hopping side to side. “Hairy hairy hairy.”

Deirdre glanced at the bird, wondering what he knew? “Fawley and Zhiu decided they didn’t like the smell of my hair oil. Jojoba isn’t the best scent, used unadulterated. Auntie Pomona got it for me since my curls are such a pain.” She winced at the memory of what happened to her hair on Monday. She was lucky to have Herbology first as Auntie Pomona took one look at the cloud of frizz that surrounded a very miserable looking Dee, and took matters into her own hands. That day she used a charm, one that was not adequate to the task, and in the end, it was a donation from the cosmetics club one of her house Prefects ran that she used now.

Pandora commented, “They both look in the mirror a lot. I wonder if they like what they see, or if they are searching for something?”

Shrugging, Dee continued on with her narrative, “Anyway, Miriam decided to get cute and tried to give me a mudbath. Oggie got there, stopped me from getting a good hex in.”

Shaking her head, Pandora didn’t appear to be shocked at all. “Petty. I am sorry that they’ve decided to pick on you. Usually, they take care to spread their nastiness around. I suppose you started late so they reckon they need to catch you up” A smile entered her eyes. “They leave me be, but that I think is Dolas’ influence.”
“SheeeeeeITE!” The mockingbird drew the word out, a birdish drawl steeped with pride.

Dee extended a hand to the bird, fingers outstretched but coming just short of touching him where he perched on the counterpane. Pleasure brightened her gloomy mood as the mockingbird leaned in, showing her by rubbing the side of his bill on her finger where he wanted to be scritched. “Who’s a clever bird?”

Snickering, Pandy let go of Deirdre and stretched. “I haven’t been to breakfast and Dolas likes the crumbs.”

They were interrupted by a soft knock at the door.

Attention refocused, Dee straightened but stayed true to her purpose. “I need to get to it, then. About the wards, do you mind if I key them to the two of us and Dolas?”

“Pan-Dee?” It was Ruth, who pushed open the door and leaned in. “Wards? Deirdre Ward is setting Wards?” Her lips curved up in amusement. “I needn’t ask what for. Wise, Dee.”

“Ah. Should I include you, Oggy?”

Ruth and Pandora glanced at one another in understanding before Ruth answered, “I think that would be a good idea. Madam Pomfrey told me about last night, and she taught Pandy and I a few helpful tricks to prevent your sleeping mind from walking off to dangerous places again.”

“Right, well. I can do something better later, but a quick redirection ward would be a good idea. Do you have any extra feathers of Dolas’? And I’ll need a strand of hair from you each.”

Dee pulled on grey cords and ankle boots, and a loose tunic that Auntie Pomona gave her. She rolled up her sleeves and accepted the three requested items from her friends, taking a moment to claim some wax from one of the tapers that lit the room. Closing her eyes, she summoned the formula she wanted and then used a spell to imprint the door lintel, on the side of the door with the latch. Next, she stuck three strands of hair - quirky blonde, straight brown, and a lighter curly brown along with a white-tipped blue pinion to the stone with the wax and a sticking charm for safety.

Pandora looked on, unconcerned but Ruth leaned in to read the glowing runes and commented aloud, “You’ve done this before, then?”
It was fortunate that Ruth was absorbed in the runes, because Dee was stricken once more with the strangeness of a memory that she could feel was there, but was well out of reach. She couldn’t say why or when, or with whom, but she knew that such magic was second nature to her. “I... yes.”


“Greedy bird. I suppose we had better get going. Breakfast awaits.”

Ruth snorted, “Breakfast? Lunch, although only a candle mark early, Pandy. Honestly. How you manage to make it to class during the week only Merlin knows.”

Dee pulled on her robes and picked up her rucksack, steeling herself as she followed her friends out. “Let’s compromise and call it Elevenses.”

The Great Hall was unusually busy, the low buzz of disappointed students thrumming after being denied the pleasures of a Hogsmeade weekend. Some grumbled with disappointment while other more enterprising souls plotted haphazard amusements. The weather outside was overcast, promising no relief from the rigours of castle life.

Deirdre considered taking her chances with the rain, finding the atmosphere oppressive. Her nerves were still jangling from earlier, but she’d allowed herself to be persuaded to join her housemates and found Alanna cheerfully sketching, using the other students as subjects.

In short order Ruth disappeared into the pages of the newspapers she subscribed to. Today she had The Daily Prophet, Warlocks Weekly, and The International Magical Times.

Pandora didn’t sit at the table so much as she stood with one knee touching the bench. Dolas was with her and was flying over the table, catching bits of food that his witch tossed up in the air with trills of birdish glee.

The pair were amusing to watch, and Deirdre contented herself with this until an article in Ruth’s
paper caught her eye. “Might I see that page, Oggs?”

Wordless, as she was still absorbed in a financial piece, Ruth passed the page over to Dee.

Heedless of the hall’s noise, Deirdre said to the table, “Listen to this! Aurors burn down Ancient Crypt in Wales, Representatives call for Inquiry. Early Friday am, claiming to have followed an anonymous tip, two junior Aurors trespassed on Church property looking for the missing Mrs Gladys Meadows, mother of Ministry employee, Dorcas Meadows.”

Alanna leaned in, “Oh, hang on. I remember her.”

Deirdre didn’t pause for long as she continued to read, “The Aurors claim to have located her remains and allege that the Crypt showed signs of Necromancy, and that the missing woman was dead and converted to an Inferi along with other corpses. Our sources tell us that there was little more than ash left at the scene, very little to work with indeed.”

Severus had been rather evasive last night when she asked for details of how he’d been injured, but the smell of smoke, those burns he thought she didn’t notice and his employment with Professor Nott left her in no doubt. That was where he was yesterday. Was he mental? She shoved her apprehension aside and pressed onward.

“The Ministry called in expert Walter Dunnigan, as well as one Sir Whittington Nott, who our sources tell us is currently holding the full-time post of Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts. See page 14 for a recap of Professor Nott’s service in the Grindelwald conflict.”

Eyes widening, Alanna reached out and tapped the table. “Oggy dear, might I borrow page 14?” She waved over Sherwood who was already looking on with rapt attention on hearing Professor Nott’s name.

Biting down annoyance at her housemate’s one track mind, she continued to read aloud, “The Department of Magical Law Enforcement has declined to comment on the case, stating that the woman is still considered missing, and they reassure the public that investigations are ongoing. See page 2 for details of the attack on Thursday night in Kensington and possible connections to the Meadows case. We at the Prophet sincerely hope that details of the Department’s findings will lead to an arrest soon as well as the return of Gladys Meadows to her family safely.”

Deirdre’s eyes wandered over the room, looking for her own very close-mouthed boyfriend. She had
a vague feeling of betrayal that he hadn’t said more than he was assisting Professor Nott in consulting work and they’d had to use the fire to dispose of cursed items. It was perhaps fortunate that he wasn’t to be seen at that moment. Where is he? A quick check of the time told her he wasn’t expected to meet her just yet.

“What’s the Headmaster doing?” Alanna had given up on trying to read the little special since Sherwood had shouldered her way in and was hogging the page.

Ruth let her paper sag so that she could observe. “Looks like he’s coming this way. I wonder what is going on.” One by one, the students at their section of Ravenclaw table stopped what they were doing to watch as Professor Dumbledore strolled up the line, stopping to speak at intervals with certain people. The tall wizard appeared supremely confident and comfortable as he moved among the students.

Something was different about him, and it took a moment to decipher what it was. “Did he cut his … beard?!” Dee knew exactly how old the wizard was because of his birthday being on the Chocolate Frog cards, but the change seemed to reduce decades from the man’s perceived age. He did not wear the half-moon spectacles, and he had dispensed with the shapeless kaftan-like robes he usually favoured and replaced them with a perfectly tailored suit of violently coloured violet pinstripe, with bell bottoms and a rust coloured waistcoat.

Vasim and a friend of his that Deirdre hadn’t really met yet stopped behind Ogden and the other, Paras was his name exclaimed, “De-aging potion! Has to be. The lucky son of a gun. Where did he manage to get that?”

Dee rolled her eyes. “He just trimmed his beard and changed his clothes.” She pushed the paper back to Ogden and finished the last few bites of the liverwurst sandwich that the elves in the kitchen somehow knew she was craving.

The tables were not arranged by year formally, but the students seemed to naturally arrange themselves with the eldest being nearest the exit and the youngest closest to the front, under the watchful eye of the faculty table that spanned the front of the hall.

The barely marked on, boyish wizard next to Vasim smiled down at her, “You don’t seem impressed, Miss Ward.” He stuck out a hand. “I’m Paras Patil, by the way. Forgive me for not introducing myself sooner.” They shared a few classes but never sat near one another.

“Righto. Deirdre Ward. Delighted.” Her tone was flat, distracted and she had shaken the proffered hand in a perfunctory way that she intended to convey a polite sense of poor timing on his part as her
mind was fixedly elsewhere. She was therefore taken aback when he changed his grip and kissed the back of it. He wasn’t as polite as Severus was, and his lips left her knuckles wet. Ew. Not delighted any longer.

“Enchante.” The entire attempt at being charming was completely ruined already, and then he went and winked at her as if she hadn’t already picked up on the heavy-handed attempt at flirting.

She barely smothered a rude reply, and pulled her hand out of his and turned away, surreptitiously wiping the back of her hand on her tunic. A quick search for any distraction, anything at all meant that she was the first to mark Dumbledore’s approach. She was grateful for the elderly Professor’s meddling now, oh yes she was! “Good Morning, Headmaster.” She stood up from her place on the bench.

Shafiq, who’d been holding his hand over his eyes in embarrassment for his friend, looked up and sprung to attention. “Professor Dumbledore!”

“Ah, good morning. It warms my heart to see you all taking care to make sure Miss Ward feels welcome. Five points to Ravenclaw, Mr Patel.”

Deirdre shot a quelling glare at Alanna who smothered a snort of amusement in an unconvincing cough, but it did at least distract her from having to respond to Paras’ flowery-worded ingratiating response.

“Miss Ward.” Dumbledore was looking her way again, so she met those sparkling blue eyes head on, thinking as loudly as she could that his interference wasn’t funny at all. He went on when he was sure of her attention. “I have volunteered to help accelerate your tutoring for Defense as Professor Nott finds himself overly committed at this time.”

The statement left her flat-footed. Deirdre didn’t need to voice the questions that were formulating her mind as she was surrounded by curious students, including Ruth Ogden who was never afraid to ask difficult or uncomfortable questions.

Ruth asked, “Is he alright? Professor Nott, that is?”

“Whatever makes you think he would not be, Miss Ogden?”
The Prefect frowned as she answered, “Well, in Potions, Snape reeked of smoke yesterday and was injured, so as he was out with the Professor for independent study, I assumed that they were both on the scene in Wales. Knowing the Professor from class, I would hazard a guess that where his protege was injured, he too might be. That assumption is supported as you have just taken on some of his responsibility.” She tilted her head as she waited for a response.

Sherwood gasped quietly, and Alanna too looked alarmed. She was in Potions but had not put the chain of logic together as Oggy had.

Nodding once, as though confirming something to himself, Dumbledore wove his dissimulation. “Professor Nott is whole and returned late yesterday. He has been engaged by the Ministry as a consultant to help in what I trust is a limited fashion as his contract guarantees that he will be with us for the remainder of the school year. Beyond that, you will need to apply to Professor Hare for one of her readings as even I cannot predict the Professor’s plans.” A flash of pain crossed the Headmaster’s face before he went on, “In any case, I’d like to meet with you.”

“Of course, Headmaster.” She tried not to show the disappointment she felt at the possibility of losing time she’d already planned, “What time did you have in mind?”

“Today, 4 PM, and again tomorrow, same time.” He flashed an ivory smile at her before he muttered, “I quite enjoy acid pops, don’t you?”

Deirdre maintained just enough control to not roll her eyes. “Certainly Headmaster. I’ll see you at four.”

As the Headmaster retreated, circling back to the faculty table, Deirdre turned about and put her forehead on the table, gently banging it.

“You’re going to get a bruise, Deirdre.” Pandora had finally found the bottom to Dolas’ pit of a gullet. “And hadn’t you better get going?”

Letting out a groan, Deirdre propped her head up on her hand. “I was supposed to have a good weekend. Free time.”

“Well, he’s just cut down on the time you’re allowed to spend on schoolwork by probably an hour.” Pandora was eating, her tone conversational, as if she hadn’t just delivered the worst news yet.
Deirdre gabbled, “How did you know?” Deirdre shot up, “Merlin’s callibisters! I’ve so much to do!” She hauled up her rucksack onto her shoulder, nearly clocking Pandy in the process.

Turning back to her salad, Pandora chuckled to herself. “Such a funny girl.”

As Deirdre sped off, she ignored the calls from her other girlfriends to wait, muttering. “Plan A… gotta revise. All hands on deck! Two hours... get it all done?”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I have to admit the Fantastic Beasts version of Dumbledore has my head spinning about. YES I do rather prefer the tailored version of the man over the long-bearded mumu wearing version, so I took the opportunity to shift. My rationalization, of course, shall be that Dumbledore knows that long beards are highly impractical for battle as are voluminous robes. Nothing to do how charming Jude Law’s Dumbledore is, especially from certain angles. ;) Nope.
Chapter Fifty-Seven

Chapter Notes

It is with great pride that I wanted to share with you all that Time Immemorial was nominated for a Marauder's Medal for Best Work in Progress. I am quite chuffed, thank you!

I would be grateful for any support, if you all could take a moment an click through to vote. You don't have to be a Member of the Shrieking Shack Society, anyone can vote. The deadline is October 22nd, about one week from today. The full list of nominations is available for perusal.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Severus waited for Deirdre in the library, crumpled into the chair nearest the librarian’s desk. His long legs stuck straight out as he skimmed the pages of a thin volume he’d located that morning on popular Indian henna tattooing. The moving pictures were useful for someone interested in
discovering the techniques and admiring the patterns, and the book included explanations of the prescribed mystical associations for each, but he’d been looking for more practical information on the Henna paste or ink as Deirdre referred to it.

Disappointed, Severus tossed the book into a pile on the counter nearby. He’d seen a very different sort of tattoo on people that his Dad drank with, these were quite foreign by comparison. Exotic. Still, the idea of using a temporary sort of ink was rather appealing, especially to his curious mind. They might be able to change things for the better. He’d once read a passage that described Celts, ancient warriors who’d covered themselves in such a wealth of woad tattoos that their skin looked blue.

These thoughts were interrupted when the appointed moment arrived and Deirdre burst into the library, using more force than necessary to push open the heavy door. The librarian hissed her disapproval, eliciting an unconvincing apology from Deirdre. “Sorry, Madam Pince!”

Deirdre came his way, her face stony; the picture of a witch on edge. He stood up as she crossed the room briskly. He mumbled a clumsy greeting, wondering what was wrong. “Ah, there you are.” Severus cringed internally. Smooth. Real smooth.

She paused for the briefest moment at his side. “Come on, then. Haven’t much time.” She’d changed from the white nightdress into a more practical ensemble, and her cheeks were pink with exertion. Her bosom rose and fell distractingly swiftly, adding to the impression that she’d run up here pell-mell. The pleasant notion that she was rushing to see him was dashed in the egg when she started off without waiting to be certain he was following.

“Hold on, what is the hurry?” Severus shouldered his bag, feeling ill at ease.

She turned and whispered over her shoulder, “I’ll tell you at the first break.” Deirdre kept a rigorous schedule with breaks at prescribed intervals. She’d explained to him that it was intended to balance her efforts for ideal mental energy and assure maximum absorption of the material as well as efficiency with task completion. It was a strange system, and he still hadn’t fully adjusted to it.

When he caught up with Deirdre, he found her already neatly arranged in a space.

“Oh, grand. You’re here. Would you mind watching my things? I need to go pull some references for Potions.” She was already at the door to the study room when she thought to look back and say, “Hi. Do you want me to bring you anything from the stacks?” She had a little smile on her face that worked to smooth away some of his irritation at her brusque manners.
Mystified, Severus shook his head. His mind finally caught up and he called vainly as she stepped out of the room, “Hello, and no thanks?”

She was off like a greyhound at the races, leaving him alone in the quiet space.

He claimed an end of the table, so that he had a view of the door. This fortunately didn’t interfere with Deirdre’s work which was already spread out, but he noticed that she too had taken a chair that afforded her a clear view of the only entry point to the room and her back to a wall.

All of Professor Nott’s NEWT students were assigned a term paper for Defense, which he could work on, but instead he’d taken down “Mummies: Guardians of The Dead,” which looked promising.

The basics of dealing with Mummies and Inferi were, according to Professor Nott, very similar. They were both magical constructs, and in both cases they were not re-animations, but new animations in their entirety. He’d been unnerved when the first one he’d dispatched wailed as it was consumed in the fire of his Confringo. Hesitating a moment too long, Severus earned a scratch on his leg for his confusion.

The individual constructs had no memory of their former lives or connection to the departed souls. The bodies retained the ability to speak, although it took a great deal of skill on the Necromancer’s part to animate an Inferi or Mummy to that level of detail. Even the shoddiest Inferi scream in the previous owner’s voice when set ablaze, resulting in misunderstandings.

One author cited the Resurrection Stone as proof that true reanimation was a possibility, but no one had claimed possession of the artifact in over a Century.

Severus was deeply curious about the process, so he read on through multiple accounts of the mischief attributed to Inferi over the years. The book covered other creatures such as Ghouls and Grims as well.

He was stirred from his reverie by a soft hand covering his own. “Ah. Break time.” His tone must have been overly sour, as she made a face at him.

“You don’t have to follow my schedule.”
He used the book in his hand to wave away the admonishment. “I know.” He tried to capture her gaze with his own, not wanting to move his hand lest she shy away.

“What are you reading? Is that for Defense or for your private tutoring?” He needn’t have worried; she was moving in closer to examine the text. Still fresh from her shower, he could smell the sweet yet earthy odour of her hair.

She might have seen the papers by now, and he didn’t really want to talk about his day away with Professor Nott. “Well, a bit of both, but mostly the latter.” He had the idea that she might give him more trouble over fighting zombies alongside Aurors and a Curse Breaker.

“That’s not a very reliable work on the subject. You can ask Professor Nott. I’m sure he’ll give you leave to examine the better texts that are back in the restricted section. Or maybe he’ll have something of his own to loan you.”

This was not the reaction he’d expected from her. He changed the subject, “How was the rest of your morning?”

“Oh, you know. Judgmental witches in the bathroom. I thought that members of Ravenclaw would manage to see past the fetters of class and breeding in favour of actual talent. There’s my hopes dashed. Followed up with a spot of hasty warding and Elevenses.”

Severus chuckled, “Are you allowed to call it that when you’ve not achieved a proper Breakfast or Second Breakfast?”

She smiled, humour bright in her eyes. “I suppose not, but it wasn’t quite lunch either. And not having furry toes I imagine I’m already overstepping myself.”

Dropping the book, Severus pulled out his wand with a flourish. “I could fix that if the lady desires?”

Deirdre pulled back, but he’d already turned his hand upwards to clasp hers more firmly, so she could only go so far. “Don’t you dare cast that spell, Severus Snape.” She looked as though she was intending to go on in her admonishment, but after she said his name a shiver ran over her. He could feel the tremor in her smaller hand.
When she didn’t continue, he waited for what felt like a long time before asking softly, “Are you alright, Deirdre?”

The witch looked back at him, at a loss for words. “I think so.” She visibly struggled to throw off whatever it was that she just had. “Felt like someone walked over my grave. My… someone used to say that.”

Ah. The memories again. “You said something about witches and a hasty warding. What did you use?”

“Nothing fancy, just on the door. I used a simple ward to make it quite hard to find for those looking for it, it uses similar principles to Muggle repelling charms. Pandy and Ogden are in on it, in addition to myself, of course.”

“Naturally.” He understood the need to secure one’s own space against those who would cause mischief but he wanted to hear more. “Are you going to tell me what happened?” He’d had nearly a whole day now without his personal adversaries from Gryffindor for the first time in the six years he’d been here at school. He hadn’t wanted to let it sink in, in case they managed to turn over the Suspension.

“It hardly matters. They decided to try and pick a fight, but Ogden stepped in before anything went too far.” She wasn’t meeting his eyes and her casual tone was obviously forced.

Severus wondered exactly who in Ravenclaw was smart enough to manage to make it through the riddle-bound door and yet still be so painfully foolish. “Who exactly could they be?”

She slipped her hand out of his and turned away. “If I tell you, you will likely feel the need to react and that would make this worse. I can take care of myself.” She lifted her chin in defiance as she looked back at him.

He needed to be very careful here; his instincts were shouting at him to get this right. He stood, slowly crossing the few feet that stood between them. “Dumbledore gave me a task. You know I am supposed to help keep an eye on you here at school.”

Instead of turning away she stepped closer, crossing her arms over her chest. “I don’t care, Severus. You can’t be with me all of the time, you know that. I’ve got to figure this out. For myself.”
He’d seen her in the practice hall and was taken aback by the wildness of her attacks - which would be brilliant if she were in control. From the way she approached her studies, he expected more of an orderly approach to her dueling. Instead she unleashed raw power, and generally was guided by what appeared to be blind instinct. Lucius Malfoy, an excellent dueller who had taken time to teach Severus, would have said she lacked finesse. Her emotional state had a profound effect on her performance.

“I am sure you are capable, Deirdre, but remember you are still healing.” She only needed time and practice, but how was he to convince her of that without giving away his own source of intelligence?

A gasp escaped her as she edged back from him. “You don’t think I can do it, do you?” Indignation was rising in the colour of her cheeks and the flashing of her eyes.

Severus was momentarily distracted by the witch’s flustered beauty, only managing to choke out, “No! I mean that I do think you can, but be reasonable, Deirdre. Less than a month ago you were still under a black curse. You almost died that night Filch brought you in bloodied and unconscious. You cannot expect to be in top form yet!”

“Ugh! I am not a Princess locked up in Ravenclaw tower. I don’t need you to rescue me. Trolls like that won’t catch me unawares, especially in the bathroom of all places.” He saw her shiver, one hand rubbing her shoulder, perhaps for warmth.

Stepping closer, Severus held out an arm to her, folding her in awkwardly before pulling back to look down into her upturned face. “I have little doubt that in time your enemies will cower before you, Deirdre Ward. The world is dark and dangerous; you have seen the papers. Can you blame me for wanting to protect you?”

Deirdre looked away, uncomfortable perhaps in what was as close to an admission that he cared for her as he’d managed as of yet. “Blame, no. Better still would be to help me get stronger.” Suddenly her bright eyes were fixed back on his, dancing with the fire of inspiration. “You’re good at Defense. Professor Nott would not have hired you otherwise. Would you help me practice?”

The glow of pride that warmed his heart at the flattery died on the spear tip of his good sense. “I don’t think that would be wise.”

Pulling back, Deirdre stalked away a few paces before spinning to face him, her hands on her hips. Oh, but she was glorious. “Wise? Professor Nott is going to be busier than ever and the Headmaster himself is going to accelerate my tutoring, but I need practice.”
“You said yourself, if the Headmaster is going to -”

“I don’t trust him.”

There it was, the elephant in the room. “He is a brilliant wizard.” Dumbledore had violated her privacy once already. Perhaps some part of her remembered the experience?

She turned away from him, as if to go. “I don’t know why. He hides things. I can’t say how I know, I just do. And he *pies* ...”

“I know he is overbearing, Deirdre. He must have been sorted Gryffindor, and yet what an amazing opportunity this presents. You are to be tutored in Defense by the wizard who defeated Grindelwald. Surely that is enough qualification for you?” He didn’t try to approach her; he could feel the waves of irritation and anxiety flowing off of her and he wasn’t even trying.

Deirdre huffed in annoyance. “That isn’t the point. I asked you to help me practice duelling because I’m more comfortable with you. If you don’t like that idea, we can limit it to defensive spell training. My *Protego* isn’t bad, but I still need practice on trickier shield spells.” She chanced a beseeching glance at him.

Severus opened his mouth as his resolve softened under the powerful allure of Deirdre’s trust. That wasn’t a bad idea, but he knew that such a session could still be dangerous. “I want to discuss it with Professor Nott first.”

Eyes narrowed at him, Deirdre scowled as she answered, “I suppose that is the best I could expect.” She turned to leave.

Heart stuttering into a gallop, Severus called after her. “Where are you going?”

“To find a Troll to beat up.”

“What? Wait!” A millisecond after the words left his lips he understood her joke, and he felt quite foolish.
She called over her shoulder, “Bathroom, dunderhead. I’ll be back.” A toss of curls was all he saw as she turned the corner and was out of sight.

Severus stopped in his tracks at the mention of the Ladies’, just as any other red-blooded wizard would. For quite some time he was left alone in the alcove with his thoughts and doubts. He reviewed the conversation, trying to figure out where exactly things had fallen apart.

When Deirdre finally returned she was distant, colder somehow. Try as he might, it was very difficult to focus on the printed words on the pages before him. They’d agreed to stop in and visit the kitten after dinner, and he’d saved some bits of herring for the purpose. Witches seemed to like kittens. What else...? Perhaps he should be looking for a volume of poetry to read to her?

He’d spent many a pleasant evening messing about with his housemates, but that wouldn’t do for tonight. Did she want to play a card game, or listen to music? It was too cold for evening strolls, but he could show her his new ability to climb the castle wall like a wizarding Spiderman. Would that be too weird?

His designs for the evening were shaky as a newborn unicorn, and in the heart of each was his desire to spend time with Deirdre, and hopefully make her smile. He caught her looking his way, her eyes unfocused. Severus admitted to himself that he’d very much like to find a way to get her to kiss him again. Agreement to help her practice duelling might work, but he stood by his instincts, as much as he really wanted to please her. Would she forgive him his caution?

As Deirdre chased her quill across the paper on the subject of Thorn Apples, Severus came to the conclusion that he needed to talk with Professor Nott about this, very soon.

As Deirdre spoke the password to the Gargoyle, “Acid pops,” her heart fluttered irregularly in her chest and her mouth went dry. To her surprise, the Headmaster met her at the door. He was composed as ever, but the short beard still made her feel as though she was interacting with a different man.

The pinstripes on his suit emphasized his height, and Deirdre felt somewhat intimidated as the tall stick of a wizard smiled down at her, “Good evening, Miss Ward. After reviewing the notes from Professor Nott’s curriculum I’ve decided that we should take a stroll to the library. Madam Pince tells me that there’s a pest in the map room that needs to be excised.”
“Yes, Headmaster.” She was uncomfortable with the warmth in his voice, but told herself sternly that he was taking his own valuable time to help her. That should count for something. Actions, not words. “Thank you for your consideration, sir.”

While he’d trimmed his beard, his eyebrows were untouched, each magnificent arc led the eye upwards in a curving line which came into stark relief as he raised them in faint surprise. “Ah. Certainly. Your education is very important and Defense is a subject near and dear to my own heart. Now, what have you already covered?”

“We’ve talked about defensive charms at length. Offensive spells, there I am erratic at best but Professor Nott is concerned about my spell shock and wants to take it slow.” She mustered a smile before adding. “I do enjoy practising on the dummies.”

Dumbledore ducked his head in acknowledgement. “Do you know what you want to do once you earn your NEWTs?”

Deirdre almost tripped over her own feet. “What?” She hadn’t thought that far, what with trying to figure out school and classes, and studying, and her own recalcitrant mind. “No, I haven’t. Not really.”

“Your NEWT class selections are ambitious, but let’s say you do not place into Defense. Would you want to pursue a career in Herbology like your Aunt? Or… perhaps Academia?”

She closed her eyes against distractions for a moment before saying, “Well, I suppose I was hoping to do something meaningful. Make the world better.” Lifting a shoulder, she glanced sideways at the Headmaster. “Why? Do you have something in mind?”

“The world is changing around us and not necessarily for the better, Miss Ward. It takes more than bravery and a strong light to turn back the darkness that threatens to overtake us.”

Without thinking, she drew an answer from some unused store room in the back of her mind. The voice that spoke it was familiar but not wholly her own. “No sir. You must use fire.” Her hand flew to her chest where a knot of pain blossomed. What was going on with her? Her misgivings were not soothed by the Headmaster.

“Fire is a potent force. It will burn the wielder if they are not cautious.” His tone was steeped in
“That precaution holds for any tool, does it not sir? Truth, for example. Words are another, or even a hammer.”

Chuckling, Dumbledore didn’t seem put off by her directness. “No, Miss Ward. I had in mind education. Making the world better by changing one mind at a time. Professor Flitwick has been quite impressed with your talents.”

A blush of pride coloured Deirdre’s cheeks and she found herself at a loss for words. “I’m flattered, sir.”

They passed through the hall and down a stairwell where he turned to hold the door open for her. His gaze stopped her where she was, still on the bottom stair, close to level with him. “Well, Miss Ward. Are you ready? I must ask you not to use fire on this little spot of darkness. Madam Pince would be most put out.”

“What exactly are we rooting out? Doxies?” The steel in the Headmaster’s blue eyes made her shrink inwardly, retreating to humour as a shield, “Bookworms?”

He swept a hand to indicate the Library, the doors shut. “That would be a very bad infestation indeed. A boggart has entrenched itself in one of the cabinets of the map room. No one goes up there very often, but I’m afraid poor Professor Rolle found it early this morning.” He smiled, “As Professor Nott is needed elsewhere, it falls to you and I to address it in his absence.”

Dread seeped in, making the ache in her chest go cold, and she rubbed it as she considered the assignment. The Headmaster was challenging her where Professor Nott treated her with white kid gloves. She rather suspected that was on pain of punishment from the Mediwitch. Dumbledore didn’t have such scruples.

“I realise that this will be a challenge given your condition, but I believe you are strong enough for this. It is an opportunity to face your fear, Miss Ward. Boggarts can only hurt you if you give them agency to do so.” He smiled at her, adding in what he meant as reassurance, “I will be with you the whole time.”

She stood there, looking at him another ten heartbeats. Was she ready for this? If not now, then when? Her earlier discussion with Severus plucked her pride and this conversation resonated with
her hope for signs of improvement in her condition. Her irritation would carry her through - she
could feel its strength rising at the very hint that she wasn’t ready. “Right. Let’s go.”

Her determination didn’t stop her from wanting to slap the triumphant twinkle out of those ice-blue,
know-it-all eyes.

Deirdre led the way through the library, stopping at the entrance to the Map collection on the third
floor. A “Closed” notice was magically affixed to the door.

As the Headmaster came up beside her, she straightened her shoulders and tried to ignore a queasy
twist in her gut. “Do you know the appropriate spell, Miss Ward?”

She recalled the spell, from the bottom of page number 89 of Arsenius Jigger’s “The Essential
Defence Against the Dark Arts.”

Blindly, Deirdre nodded before intoning, “Riddikulus!” She’d not used the motion, and yet the end
of her wand puffed out a cloud of orange mist.

“Very good. Now, I understand the boggart has inhabited the case in the left hand corner of the
room, although it may have moved. One can never be certain.”

Fidgeting, Deirdre did her best to master her apprehension. A little morbid corner of her mind was
dead curious as to what form the boggart was going to take for her, and for the Headmaster for that
matter.

He gestured and the door opened silently at the casual show of the force of Dumbledore’s will.
“Shall we?”

Not trusting herself to answer, she stepped into the room. Lights flared to life in the sconces about the
room, all magical. No fire was permitted in the library, and this type of illumination was steady, the
light soft.
She edged inside, her footsteps on the floor ringing too loud in her own ears as she listened for any sound. A large glass-topped table stood in the middle of the room, and it lit up as she brushed against it. The illusion of a topographically accurate map of the United Kingdom rose from its surface, like Atlantis in some bygone tale.

A rattle sounded across the room, and Deirdre looked away from the fascinating map to see Dumbledore silently pointing the offending bit of furniture out. It was a map cabinet, with long shallow drawers that allowed the maps kept therein to lay flat. The bottom of the cabinet was divided into two larger parts, presumably for keeping map books or other artifacts. The doors possessed a lock, and she looked over to the Headmaster in consternation.

“It is not locked, I think. That’s how the boggart got inside in the first place.”

She nodded, indicating her readiness. If not now, then when? Lifting her wand, she shouted, “*Aperta Portis!*”

A woman’s foot poked out of the cabinet, its black-laced leather boot high about the ankle and spattered with drops of scarlet. As the heel touched down on the floor, the rest of the witch - Deirdre was certain of that - poured out behind her, and in three heartbeats she was sauntering over to the table. She could have been an older sister to Deirdre, although her hair was tied up with tight ringlets escaping here and there. She was pale and pinched, but the severity was broken by her cracking a piece of gum in her mouth.

“Who… who are you?”

The witch looked at Deirdre sideways before turning back to the table to unsling a bag that landed on Dover with a thud. She wore an ugly grey leather duster and underneath it was a profusion of pouches and bags. A knife was strapped to one leather clad leg, gleaming dangerously in the magical light.

“I’ve come to collect the bounty.” The witch spoke with soft South London tones, and flashed a smile, large teeth straight and white. She opened the bag and out tumbled the severed forearms of people.

Bile rose in Deirdre’s throat, but she couldn’t force herself to look away. There were eight in all, male and female, and nearly all marked with the tattoo of a skull with a snake coming out of its mouth. A cold sweat broke out on Deirdre’s neck and she shivered at the sight.

“A thousand Galleons a piece. Come on, pay up.” She waved a hand at one in particular that did not
have the tattoo, “Well, alright. That one I’ll take half but I assure you he definitely was one of them, just too young to have received the Mark.”

As Deirdre looked on in revulsion, one of the arms changed into something hairy, with claws.

“And that one’s a werewolf too, so I’ll charge double. He was a loner who claimed to not be with the rest of the lot in the attack, tried to bargain with me. All werewolves might as well have been marked, after all, they are dangerous beasts.”

“N… no… That’s not true.”

The witch leaned on the table, blew a bubble with her gum and pointed at Dumbledore. “Take my advice, as some have called me the brightest witch of my age. Put magic dampeners on everyone who claims blood purity and give every one of them Veritaserum. Start with the Wizengamot and move outward from there. Put them through a course of mindbending to change their minds about Muggles. You’ll see. The world isn’t safe from blood bigots otherwise.”

Dizzy, Deirdre raised her wand and pointed at the witch. The Boggart. She had to act. This was too much. “Stop it.”

Noticing her, the boggart turned and smiled nastily. “Next, you should reassign the House Elves. They’re sympathetic to the Dark Lord, it is how we’ve failed them. They will be easy. Give them clothes and jobs for the ministry. Their magic will allow you to police the rest of wizarding-kind, and they are very good at following rules.”

Not the elves! “You can’t do that. It’s cruel.”

The witch grinned back at Deirdre. “Who’s going to stop me? No one will say no to me, I’m la maîtresse de la mort! The whole world trembles before me!”

Deirdre swallowed the gorge in her throat and rasped out, “Riddikulus!”

The witch jumped backward, out of the reach of the spell, and then abruptly fell to the floor, changing her face and hair before she hit the ground. The grey duster disappeared and was replaced with a light blue cotton dress. She wasn’t breathing.
A strangled sound came from the Headmaster, and his face drained of all colour. Two heartbeats and he had his wand up. “Riddikulus.” The girl turned into a goat in a dress. A very live and startled goat who got up and leapt away from the towering figure of Albus Dumbledore.

Better prepared, Deirdre waited until the goat blinked back into the ambling form of that witch. She was so familiar, and yet Deirdre didn’t know her. “Who are you?”

The witch pouted as she sauntered over to lean on the table. She unsheathed the knife and started to use it to clean her nails. “I’m offended, I should think you’d recognise us.” She brightened and then pointed the blade at Deirdre. “I know, do you remember the time that we broke into…”

Deirdre decided that for once she wasn’t that curious. The boggart preyed on her fears, built up from her own gullibility. Snarling, she jabbed her wand with more feeling, “Riddikulus!”

The dismembered hands piled upon the table animated. Foreshortened as they were below the elbow, it should not have been possible but they all crawled into action. One pair pinched the shrieking witch’s cheeks and stretched her face into a smile, whilst another stole a vicious looking wand from an inner pocket of the ugly grey coat.

As the boggart reached up to pull the two hands off of her face, two other hands dove into her shirt and started to tickle her about the waist, setting the witch writhing with laughter interspersed with pleading to leave off. The one with the wand somehow managed to cast Avis silently and sent a stream of chirping canaries to circle about the witch. A last set of hands was pinching and patting in very naughty ways, punctuating the flailing, breathless witch’s stream of profanity with yelps of indignation.

Dumbledore approached and the woman changed back to the girl, now alive and weeping into her hands. “Why… brother? Why did you…”

Before the girl could finish her question, Dumbledore roared, “Riddikulus!” She stopped and transformed into a girl made of candy of all sorts. Having no breath but quite the appetite she started to nibble on the floss that replaced her flaxen hair. The nonpareils that made up her face lit up on seeing Dumbledore and offered him a hand, as if she were asking him to join the feast.

Noticing that the Headmaster was still affected by the strange result of the spell, Deirdre shot the boggart in the back with a very well placed “Riddikulus!”
The boggart swung around and transformed into a huge rubber duck. The duck’s painted face was round-eyed with surprise, and Deirdre couldn’t help but giggle.

It wobbled and squeaked, trying to get to her, but Dumbledore followed suit, not giving it a chance to reform before it was hit with another powerful, “Riddikulus!” This time the Headmaster’s voice was laced with laughter as he cast the spell.

The giant rubber duck popped with a bang, followed by a burst of confetti which rained down on the pair.

Magic swirled about her, brushing against her like a cat. The air changed and the paper stopped falling and started to float as though gravity no longer held agency over it. A breath later and the bits started to move in a more coordinated fashion, and thoughts of a school of fish were pushed out of her mind when a form became discernible. For a moment Deirdre was afraid that the the boggart was trying to reform itself. She need not have worried, for the paper arranged itself into a herd of winged horses galloping wild and free through the edies in the fantastic clouds that were sculpted out of the excess.

Heart lifting, Deirdre hooted her approval. “Wow! That’s amazing, sir!” An idea occurred to her and with a flick of her wand, one of the clouds dissolved. Its parts spread out widely and she was afraid she wasn’t getting it right until she felt a snap in the magic, as though the magic itself had pounced. Hundreds of bits of confetti zoomed in on Dumbledore, reforming about his chin as a wildly curly beard that reached the floor.

“Oh ho, that’s a good one, Miss Ward.” He winked at her, tossed his “beard” over his shoulder and looked at her with a thoughtful expression that made her suddenly nervous once more. A gentle buzzing of magic tingled in her scalp, and while there wasn’t any weight to it, she had the sense that she now needed to duck if she were to try to traverse the doorway. Rounding about, she got a glimpse of herself in the glass of one of the cabinets. He’d fashioned a hat chocked full of tropical fruits, adding another two feet to her height.

A cough from the portal abruptly broke the spell, and gravity reasserted itself.

Dumbledore and Deirdre watched the bits of sparkling paper float down to cover the room in a light layer of sparkling, multicoloured snow. Bits of it were caught in Dee’s hair and the Professor’s beard, and Dee had to spit out a piece when she turned to look at the open cabinet. “That’s it, then?”
Brushing off the confetti, the wizard’s blue eyes twinkled. “Quite so. Perhaps we should leave before…”

A young woman, her black hair pulled back tightly in a severe bun, poked her head in at the door. “What is this!?”

“Ah, Madam Pince. What fortuitous timing.” Dumbledore brushed confetti off of his shoulders and flashed a wide smile at the lady scowling back at him from the door. “As you see, we’ve rid the Map Room of its boggart.”

The Librarian was neither impressed nor pleased. Her eyes flew wide and she clenched her fists in outrage as she stepped in to survey the mess. “What have you DONE with my MAPS?!” She stopped, realising that she was standing on paper and bent down to peer at the tiny pieces in suspicion. “Headmaster Dumbledore, if you’ve shredded my maps for this silly exercise I promise you I’ll have you sitting here piecing them back together with tweezers even if it takes so long that I die of old age!”

Deirdre smiled winsomely at the severe woman, trying to soothe her with reason. “Don’t worry, Madam Pince. These are only bits of what was left of the boggart after we laughed it out of existence.” Her smile faltered as Madam Pince started to turn a strange shade of puce.

Wizard senses being what they were, Dumbledore held up his hands in placation, backing away from her. “Please, Madam. We’ve handled your problem and educated this witch in the process. I believe this is a categorical success!”

Not one to be shy about things, Pince let everyone know what she wanted now. “Out! Out! Get out of my Cartography section! No more handling of anything!” She advanced on the Headmaster who slid about the table.

Deirdre and Dumbledore both were effectively herded to the exit by the distraught witch as she shook a slender, menacing finger at her superior. “I was warned about you, and I can see that Larkin was quite right. You are a menace, Headmaster Dumbledore. Don’t bother helping me ever again! This might be your school, but it is my library!”

Deirdre was already out the door, and Dumbledore was close on her heels as he called back over his shoulder. “Of course, Madam Pince. Glad to be of service. I’m sure we are all very busy so I shall, alas, have to take my leave. Good day to you!”
Stunned, Deirdre took a moment before running to catch up with the Headmaster who’d hot-footed it halfway down the stair already. A wild sense of hilarity took over as she scurried after the spry old wizard, and she had to hold a hand over her lips to not burst out laughing in the middle of the otherwise silent library.

Once out in the hallway, she found Dumbledore peeking around the corner furtively. “Is she following us?”

Pressurised with suppressed merriment muddled with hysteria, Deirdre exploded with the least ladylike snorting jag of laughter possible. Giggling and snorting she managed to wave him down, and thankfully her legs still worked so she made it over.

He whispered in between chuckles of his own, “Librarians have a long memory. They’ve never forgiven me for mislaying their only copy of ‘Demystifying Divination’ into the bin.”

Deirdre tried to stop laughing. “You didn’t do such a thing! That’s horrible.”

The Headmaster, who was supposed to be so dignified, did not look sorry at all. “It was utter rubbish.”

“I cannot believe you.” She was still, to her shame, giggling in spite of biting her tongue. Rather than smothering her laughter, the manoeuvre made her snort as the merriment escaped through her nose.

Dumbledore set about straightening his lapels and cuffs with an unrepentant grin. “Be that as it may, I think we are done for today. Let’s meet again tomorrow afternoon, same time. Bring Mr Snape with you, if you please. He might be of help for what I have in mind.”

Her traitorous cheeks heated up and she murmured, “Thank you, Headmaster. Good evening, sir.”

Inclining his head, “And to you, Miss Ward.” As he sauntered off he started to hum under his breath a tune that sounded suspiciously like “Rubber Duckie.”

Chapter End Notes

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