1998. Severus Snape has survived the Second Wizarding War.

Presumed dead, still dealing with the traumas of his past, having nowhere to go and no sense of purpose, he returns to Spinner’s End to battle his inner demons. Meanwhile, Dark Lord’s remaining followers begin to regroup and plan revenge with help from foreign allies the British Ministry has never managed to track down and is powerless to fight. The scattered Death Eaters suspect Snape is alive and still has sensitive information that could lead them to a powerful artifact.

To further complicate Snape’s already perilous situation, an Irish historian moves into the abandoned house next door. She brings a heavy baggage of family secrets and previously unknown connections to the magical world, and gradually becomes a fixture of Snape’s life, inadvertently changing it.

Alternative Universe/What if.
Chapter Summary

After surviving the War and moving back to Cokeworth to battle his inner demons, Snape receives an unusual visitor: a muggle History professor from Ireland. And she is moving to Spinner’s End?

Spinner’s End, Cokeworth, Northern England.

October, 1998.

Severus put down the book and puffed heavily. It was the sixth time the bloody doorbell had rung.

Probably the teenage delinquents who were in the inconvenient habit of roaming Spinner’s End on occasion. During the past few years, they had been coming over to that abandoned part of town whenever they felt bored or were being chased by the police. As a matter of fact, with the street’s alarming state of decay, most of its houses deserted, it was rather surprising that the juvenile gangster-hopefuls didn’t come around to “visit” more often.

Spinner’s End was after all a perfect hiding place...Nobody better than Severus knew that...

But the fact was that Spinner’s End was ruined to such a degree that not even those little punks took a more than passing interest in it. Sometimes they entered an abandoned house to smoke, played some loud music (that is, if that godawful cacophony could be called “music” at all), or just wandered around cursing, fighting and generally raising hell, before getting bored and moving on to more interesting acts of vandalism.

After Severus had moved back, the little dunderheads had decided to stick around for longer, thrilled to have a potential new victim to play with. But a couple of simple charms managed to convince the youngsters that Spinner’s End was haunted, much to Severus’ amusement...Soon they had disappeared...And yet, after months of complete peace, there they were at it again.

They would learn their lesson this time....

He yanked the door open, his other hand reaching for the magically locked wooden cabinet where he kept his wand, but instead of a rowdy bunch of brats, all Severus saw was a woman standing at his door.

"Good afternoon..." she let out in a husky voice, a courteous smile on her lips.

"Good afternoon" he answered grudgingly "And before you waste your breath: whatever it is you´re advertising, I’m not interested."

With a flick of his wrist the door moved. But her hand stopped it before it could slam in her face. Taken aback, Severus opened the door again. Her gall had managed to catch his interest. He inspected the woman before him from head to toe, his eyes both focused and disdainful.
Certainly a muggle... about 30-years old, quite tall, probably around 5'8 or 5'9 (she had heeled boots on, though, so he could be wrong), with a sturdy yet willowy build. Her dark brown hair was held back in a tight ponytail that showed off a rather particular face: strong eyebrows, alert golden brown eyes, a Greek nose and a somewhat wide mouth. Her olive complexion showed rosy undertones in the chilly Autumn wind. She wore a brick red blouse, brown scarf and brown skirt, with a beige overcoat that, although elegant, looked a bit too light for the temperature outside. She was good-looking, Severus conceded...But that only made her presence at his doorstep all the more odd... Good-looking, well-dressed people were not an usual occurrence at Spinner’s End...

"I’m sorry to bother you... My name is Evelyn, Evelyn Black." She stretched out her hand, but Severus merely looked at her, motionless and uninterested. She cracked a very uneasy smile. It was obvious she was forcing herself to be polite in spite of his bluntness. Only now Severus noticed his visitor had a slight accent... he couldn’t quite pinpoint where from... Irish, maybe? Definitely not Scottish... Well, it didn’t matter.

"Uh...-she continued- I just moved here and..."

"You just...moved" Severus raised an eyebrow "Here?"

"Well, yes. Just this morning..."

"Why would you do that?" Why would anybody do that?, he thought to himself, but said nothing.

"It’s a long story, actually...."

"It was a rhetorical question." Severus interrupted her, using a purposely condescending tone, a wry smile dancing on his thin lips. She was visibly annoyed now. Good. Only a matter of moments before she decided to leave him alone.

"Actually... I don’t plan on wasting too much of your time, let alone annoying you with unwelcome stories" She answered in a mellow tone filled with subtle contempt.

Severus rolled his eyes. He had obviously underestimated her.

"I’m just looking for someone..." She took out an old and rugged little notebook from her purse "Eileen Prince. Does she live here?"

Severus blinked and just stared at her for a long moment, completely disarmed.

"Snape..." He let out quietly

"I beg your pardon?"

"Eileen Snape... Prince was her maiden name..."

"Oh, so she does live here."

"Not anymore."

"I see..." Evelyn shifted on her feet "She moved then..."

"She’s dead.... Has been for twenty years actually."

Evelyn bit her lower lip, obviously embarrassed

"I’m sorry to hear that... In that case, I guess I should get going then..."
"Wait a minute, Miss...I´sorry, you said your name was..?"

"Black. Evelyn Black." As she relaxed and her accent came through more clearly... Irish...she was definitely Irish, Severus thought to himself "Mr... Snape, I assume?"

"Severus Snape..." He opened the door all the way and cocked his head back gesturing for her to come in.
Part 1- The Visit - Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

After surviving the War and moving back to Cokeworth to battle his inner demons, Snape receives an unusual visitor: a muggle History professor from Ireland. And she is moving to Spinner’s End?

Evelyn just stood there.

Why the heck was she hesitating so much? Wasn’t this what she wanted? To talk to the owner of that house. Eileen Prince...No, Eileen Snape... Who was dead, which probably made the grumpy man standing at the door the current owner. So, Evelyn had to talk to him. That was the whole reason she had decided to come to Spinner’s End wasn’t it?

When she arrived that morning, after spending the night at a hotel in a more lively part of Cokeworth, Evelyn had the vivid impression of walking into a ghost town. "Isn’t this how most horror movies start?" She had thought to herself, as she watched through her car windows how the rows of decrepit houses passed by. From the little she had researched, Evelyn knew the whole neighbourhood had been purpose-built to house the families of the mill workers. The mill itself towered ominously over the dark and filthy streets and alleys bellow, its long chimneys pointing up at a steel-grey autumn sky. It didn’t function since the 80s, and it just stood there like a fossil, a skeleton of a once living monster, now dead and abandoned.

In fact the whole of Spinner’s End felt dead. She knew most inhabitants of that part of town had long left, following the closing of the mill. From the newspapers she had read in the local library, the exodus had started long before that. It seemed the mill offered very poor working conditions and the machines were rather accident prone, with many of the workers sustaining serious injuries...Furthermore, the rejects piled up on the fields around it and into the river, severely polluting the water. When the competent authorities had finally closed down the mill, about half of the residents of the area were already gone, and the rest was soon to follow. Eileen Prince might not even live there anymore...

In retrospect it coming to Spinner’s End probably had been a quite stupid idea from the start. All that she knew was that her grandfather had a house in Cokeworth, located on a street called Spinner’s End. Nobody knew that until the day her father died leaving behind some old boxes filled with books and papers that he had hidden in the cellar after her grandfather’s death.

It all struck her as incredibly odd...

Evelyn was living in Dublin when her grandfather passed away. She had been thinking of coming back to Doolin, her hometown, and his death only sped up her decision. After the burial, her grandmother had given her father a number of old objects and boxes filled with bizarre stuff that her grandfather kept locked away in a spare room. Evelyn had a hard time convincing her father not to throw it all away. Instead he just locked everything up and never let her (or anyone else for good measure) anywhere near it. And those boxes stayed up there, abandoned in the cellar, collecting dust, for about two years, until her father passed away himself. Only then did Evelyn get to see what was inside...
Among the many bizarre things she found there was the deed of the Spinner´s End house. As far as she knew her grandfather had left England when he was a little over twenty, and lived in Ireland until his death. He had no relatives and no ties left with England...also as, far as she knew, he was from London... That he had a house on the Northern city of Cokeworth was a complete surprise to her and to the rest of the family. Maybe they shouldn´t have been so surprised...There was a lot of about him that nobody knew, not even her grandmother. Still, the house in Spinner´s End had intrigued her.

It had probably been a poorly thought-out move on her part to actually decide to move into her grandfather´s new-found house. But it only struck her as a downright bad idea when she actually saw Spinner´s End for the first time. She had arranged for the many books and objects she had brought with her from Doolin to be delivered on the morning after her arrival at Cokeworth. She had spent the day before researching the history of that part of town, but nothing could have prepared her for the reality of what was Spinner´s End. As she stopped her car in front of her new home, Evelyn had to pull the deed out of her bag and double-check the address, just to make sure it wasn´t a mistake.

The house was almost at the end of the street, there was only one more house separating it from the woods (precisely Eileen Prince´s house). It looked exactly as one would expect from a house that had been empty for decades: offensive graffiti and a thick layer of grime and dust covered the walls, to the extent that it was impossible to make out their actual colour, most windows were broken and the few that remained were so dirty the glass on them was opaque and the ceiling had many missing shingles. The stench coming from the nearby-river was almost unbearable, and the sheer amount of trash everywhere suddenly made her realize that a rat infestation was a very real possibility.

Still, she drew in a deep breath and entered.

Evelyn was surprised to find that the original furniture was still inside...For whatever reason the vandals that ran wild in the neighbouring areas had refrained from causing too much damage inside. A lot of the more delicate objects like mirrors and vases were broken, but the chairs, armchairs, tables, cabinets, paintings, rugs, books.....all were still there, albeit covered in a thick layer of dust and scattered around in complete disorder. But the most disconcerting part of it was not that the objects were still there.. it was the object themselves. Spinner´s End was a poor neighbourhood of mill-workers...And yet, that particular house was filled with very high quality furniture and decorations, mostly in an art-déco style, with lots of XIX-century looking stuff thrown in...It felt almost as if whoever had decorated it was purposely trying to hide all that luxury behind a working-class façade.

She thanked heavens for having had the providence to have the electrical wiring and plumbing checked. Spinner´s End wasn´t completely deserted yet so it had a supply of electricity and water and she imagined that, at the very least, she should make sure to have everything working if she was to move in. The wiring apparently dated from the 20´s which would have made it one of the first houses in the street to have it. The electrician and plumber she had hired for the job were both amazed that everything still worked...

After having her belongings brought inside, she decided to explore. Unlike the sitting room all the other rooms were closed. She had found many keys among her grandfather´s mysterious objects, and was pretty unimpressed by the fact that each one of them seemed to be a match for each of the locks in the house...

Although the house followed the street´s general and rather simplistic pattern of one sitting room, one kitchen, two bedrooms and one bathroom all in minuscule proportions, each of the rooms was as richly decorated as the sitting room. Also, aside from the dust, the other rooms didn´t seem to have
been touched in the least. Probably because they had been locked up until now. Everything looked as if the former occupants had just left home for a stroll in the park and never came back, leaving everything behind as it was. There were still clothes and personal objects, all organized and kept in their correct places, as if waiting for their owners to come back and use them. Among the seemingly normal things like shoes, spectacles or books, she could see numerous unidentifiable articles... She couldn’t even begin to phantom the utility of any of them.

But the most unsettling part was by far the alarming lack of rats, cockroaches or any other pest... How could a house abandoned for some seventy-odd years not have one single mouse? She had opened the wardrobes and cabinets, rummaged though the clothes and books, taken out the bedsheets, flipped the mattresses... and nothing. Not one insect, not one rat, not one sign of termite, clothes-moth or bookworms. Not even a single fly. More startlingly still, she found no traces of mold, no infiltrations, no cracks on the walls, no rips on the wallpapers...

It was all too..bizarre.

Curiosity had always been her most proeminent personality trait. Her father and grandfather often praised her inquiring nature, and gave her free reign to exercise it. They would feed her curiosity with books, movies, fairy-tales, everything that could serve as fuel for her intellect and imagination. She remembered how, growing up, her favorite past time had been investigating the old Celtic and medieval ruins and relics scattered around the valleys surrounding her hometown, always in the company of her big brother Paul. Her mother was less than impressed by their adventurous outings, but her father and grandfather were always openly proud of her intellectual pursuits. It was pretty obvious from an early age that she would follow on her father’s footsteps and become a Historian. Actually she had gone a bit farther than that...while her father was a History teacher in a small catholic school in a little Irish village, she was a professor of history, a successful one if her published books proved anything. Her inquisitive nature had brought her far and she was proud of it.

But this day, as she rummaged through the room of the freakish house her grandfather had left her, she started to think that maybe, for the first time in her life, being curious might not be so great... But her greatest flaw wasn’t curiosity, though...It was stubbornness. Which obviously meant that she was going to finish what she had started. She had moved into her grandfather’s house, now she had to find Eileen Prince.

Eileen Prince’s house was right next door, and all she had to do was come over an knock. It was simple enough. An yet, as she stood in front of that door, she felt quite disheartened... What did she know about Eileen Prince? Only her name and date of birth... What if she wasn’t there...Then what would she do? Go back to her grandfather’s papers and reread them all, look for clues in that indecipherable house...Trying to make sense of it all just seemed like something she couldn’t do alone. Eileen Prince, whomever she was, was probably the only person who could help...What would she do if she wasn’t there? She knocked and, as she feared, nobody answered. She kept knocking... Once, twice, three times, four times, six times. As if it would work...

Just as she turned to leave, cursing the day she had had the brilliant idea of starting this ludicrous investigation, the door opened and her heart actually skipped a bit. It obviously wasn’t Eileen Prince who had answered the door, but a tall, hook-nosed man with black over-long hair and sickly pale skin dressed in black from head to toe. For a moment she wondered if he was dressed for Halloween, even though they were in the first week of October. Relieved to find someone to talk to, she had tried to start a conversation, but he would have none of it. But it didn’t really matter how rude he was, Evelyn had to get the information she wanted. Making her best to remain calm in spite of his snarky replies, she insisted, not even acknowledging his resistance. After all, she hadn’t come all the way here to be have some random blockhead with poor social-skills thwart her plans. After a little verbal tug of war, she finally managed to ask what she wanted to know.
"I´m just looking for someone..." She said, using the gentlest tone she could muster in the midst of her crescent exasperation "Eileen Prince. Does she live here?"

Evelyn had never seen a man´s expression change so quickly. That condescending grimace vanished from his lips, and his dark, aggressive eyes turned to puzzled and then to melancholic in a split second.

"Snape" He said quietly, in a tone that was almost gentle.

"I beg you pardon?"

"Eileen Snape...Prince was her maiden name" His voice was suddenly filled with a unmistakable tone of sadness.

"Oh, so she does live here" Evelyn let out without thinking, just to keep him talking.

"Not anymore" His deep voice just grew graver and graver with each word. Only now the muted tone let her notice his voice was a quite beautiful baritone.

"I see..." Evelyn shifted on her feet, uneasy "She moved then..."

"She´s dead.... Has been for twenty years actually." That last sentence had been barely more than a whisper.

Evelyn looked at his face. His contemptuous expression had now completely vanished, and his face was merely somber. The dark eyes seemed to look right through her. Having lost her brother at a young age and both her father and grandfather not too long ago, Evelyn could say she knew what thousand yard stare meant. It was obvious this man was very close to Eileen... He was too young to be her husband or brother...A son maybe...Evelyn immediately regretted having pestered him so much.

I´m sorry to hear that...In that case, I guess I should get going then..."

But just as she turned away, his resounding voice reached her hears and there was no more scorn in its tone. Only a very pristine seriousness.

"Wait a minute, Miss...I´sorry, you said your name was..?"

"Black. Evelyn Black." She relaxed and, for the first time, felt like she could have a normal conversation with the man "Mr... Snape, I assume?"

"Severus Snape..." He opened the door all the way and cocked his head back gesturing for her to come in.

Evelyn just stood there.

Wasn´t this what she wanted? Eileen Prince was dead, but this man...Severus Snape...Severus Snape was standing right before her, inviting her in.

She wasn´t sure yet, but Severus Snape might be the one she was looking for...The one who would help her make sense of her grandfather´s secrets.

So, she entered.
Part 1- The Visit- Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

After surviving the War and moving back to Cokeworth to battle his inner demons, Snape receives an unusual visitor: a muggle History professor from Ireland. And she is moving to Spinner’s End?

The front door opened into a small sitting room. As Evelyn expected, the room was pretty much like the sitting room of her own house in dimensions and just as dingy. Unlike her oddly well-decorated sitting room though, the dreary atmosphere at the Snapes house was compounded by the rather drab choice of furniture and colours. Everything was brown and sepia, and the scant décor seemed to be right out of a low-budget late 50s early 60s movie, with lots of odd trinkets scattered about. An old armchair in front of the cast iron fireplace was in dire need of reupholstering, as was the small dark russet leather couch in the middle of the room, and the rug was in even worst condition.

What did strike her, however, was the sheer amount of books. They covered every single wall from top to bottom, leaving almost no space empty. In fact there were so many of them, that it just looked as if they sprouted about like overgrown plants in an unkept garden. The shelves were full to the point of looking ready to collapse at any given moment; there were even books in the spaces in between the shelves, and other shelves mounted on the back of the doors in what looked like a conscious effort to make as many books as possible fit the tiny space available; those that didn’t fit the shelves piled up on the floor, on top of a couple of wobbly chairs and wherever else they could go. But chaotic organization notwithstanding, they were mostly in excellent condition, particularly the many leather-bound volumes.

Evelyn had spent most of her life in libraries, churches, abbeys and other morosely silent locations. It came with the job, really. But as she walked past Severus Snape and into his sitting room, the sound of her heels onto the floorboards cut through the heavy quietude inside in an almost otherworldly manner. Mr. Snape´s house had the atmosphere of a monastery, but conspicuously lacking the same feeling of beatific contemplation often found in them. His house just felt...sinister, somehow.

The door closed behind her with a dry thud. Completely ignoring the usual ritual most civilized people tend to observe when receiving a guest, Severus Snape merely walked around her, almost as if she wasn’t there, or was nothing but a little obstacle on his way, and headed the kitchen.

"Tea?" He asked, not even bothering to look her way.

"Sure, thank you... Uh, do you need any help?"

"No," came the laconic answer from beyond the door.

Evelyn puffed heavily, renouncing to any hope of having some form of normal interaction with him.

Sighing, she hung her coat on a wall hook by the door, noticing there were a couple of coats already there, all pitch black, and laid her purse on the couch. As she waited for her unwilling host to come back with the tea, and against her better judgement, she decided to look around. It was probably not wise to snoop around his house, but those magnificent rows of leather-bound books were too tantalizing to ignore. She quickly looked through some of the titles...Classics of Medieval literature
she knew all too well... Chauncer, Dante, Mallory, Thomas Aquinas... Evelyn was overcome with amazement: it looked as if Mr. Snape had an exact replica of her own personal library... But there were lots of others she couldn’t recognize, authors she had never heard of gracing the spines of bizarrely titled books: "A History of Magic" by Bathilda Bangshot, "Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find them" by Newt Scamander, "A guide to Medieval Sorcery"... It was just too strange... Evelyn had spend most of her academic life writing about European religions and Witchcraft, and yet she didn’t know any of these books... She wondered what Mr. Severus Snape did for a living; judging from these books he could very easily be a fellow historian.

Above the fireplace there were some framed diplomas, so she approached curiously, hoping to get a glimpse at his professional credentials. But instead her eyes were drawn to the picture frames on top of the mantle. There were just three of them. In the first one, a teenage girl with long dark hair, thick eyebrows and a sullen expression posed for what seemed to be an official school photo, faded golden calligraphic letters at the bottom of the photo read "Eileen Prince". So, finally a face for the name. The sharp features, the deep black eyes, the thin lips... If Evelyn had any doubt that Severus Snape was Eileen’s son it would have vanished as soon as she saw that portrait. He was the spit image of his mother. On the picture frame next to it, a very similar school photo, only this time of a boy. Evelyn didn’t have to read the golden letters on the bottom to know it was Severus Snape as a young man.

The third picture frame was slightly set apart from the others, almost as if purposely placed in such a way as to give it more prominence. In it, a scrawny boy, around nine or ten years old (Evelyn assumed it was Snape again) smiled brightly. He was holding hands with a beautiful red-haired little girl who smiled just as cheerfully, glowing in a flowered yellow dress. Resting against the elegant wooden picture frame, there was torn photo, with no frame, missing one half. A young woman with red hair, smiled, the exact same sweet smile of the little girl in the other photo. Only now Evelyn noticed a small glass vase with a solitary white lily in it, sitting right beside the photos of the red-haired child and woman....

Her train of thought was cut short by a loud coughing sound coming from behind her back. Startled, Evelyn yelped and spun around to see Severus Snape standing a mere couple of feet away from her, holding two steaming cups of tea. How the hell had the man just appeared like this? She didn’t hear any footsteps, had the bloody bastard just materialized out of thin air?

"Your tea" he said handing her one cup, an unabashed cavalier expression on his face "I only had Hassam. I hope it’s not too strong for you"

She took the cup, an elegant porcelain piece with a dainty green pattern of leaves around the edge, matching the saucer. Something that most likely had belonged to Eileen. The fragrant scent of good quality camellia sinensis reached her nostrils, soothing her somewhat as she tried to catch her breath.

"Hassam is just fine, thank you" She smiled, feeling herself blush with shame and irritation. Busted like a bloody schoolgirl.

Severus Snape just stood there, looking at her with that alarmingly arcane aplomb that seemed to come so naturally to him. At such a close distance, Evelyn had the chance to give him a good look. He was tall, probably around 6’ or 6’1”, but more than tall he was intimidating. It wasn’t as much as his height, as it was the way the carried himself. He was certainly imposing, and there was something almost stately about him, bordering on pretentious... The man was oddly angular, and made himself all the more so by standing as up-straight as a sentry during the changing of the Queen’s Guard. His movements were brisk and measured, with an unusual touch of elegance. His black trousers and black turtle-neck combined with his almost mechanical way of moving gave him the appearance of a large crow. That raven-like quality he exuded was only intensified by his sharp set of black eyes and
very prominent hook nose. His dark, unkempt, shoulder-length hair made his sallow skin look dreadfully pale. Quite surprisingly, all these features combined didn’t make him exactly ugly, and although he was far from being good-looking, there was something almost magnetic there. Definitely not one who could be admired for his beauty, Severus Snape had something about his appearance that simply commanded attention.

After seemingly satisfying himself with how uncomfortable he had just made her, he turned quickly on his heels and walked over to the armchair.

"I’m sorry, I was just..." Evelyn trailed off

"Sit down" He cut her mid speech, gesturing the sofa, as he sat on the armchair. Evelyn raised an eyebrow. He was, quite clearly, doing a little power game here; creeping up behind her, ordering her around, refraining from using the most simple formulas of politeness such as "thank you" or "please", sitting down before she did, purposely placing himself in an armchair that dominated the room, almost like a school headmaster in his office or a lord receiving her in his domain...It was quite clear Severus Snape liked to be in control, and wasn’t the kind of man to be easily confronted... So let’s just humour his ego, she thought to herself...

"Thank you" she forced herself to smile as modestly as possible, as she sat in front of him, sipping her tea... He might be an insufferable sourpuss, but truth to be told he did make excellent tea...

"So..." he started, obviously aiming to control the conversation, as he brought his own cup of tea to his lips. "You were looking for my mother... May I ask where would you know her from?"

"I wouldn’t, actually...Just by name. It’s a long story, really"

"Then make it short" He sneered

"Very well..." she continued, unfazed "The house next to yours. It belonged to my grandfather."

"I don’t recall anyone owning that house...or even living there, for that matter..."

"Precisely. I don’t think he ever did live there. After he passed away we found this among his belongings" Evelyn laid her cup down on the coffee-table and reached into her purse. She got a copy of a house deed and handed it to him. Severus unfolded it and read. He looked surprised for a moment.

"Marius Black..." a heavy pause "...your grandfather I suppose" His rich baritone had dropped a few octaves.

"Yes"

Severus sat silent for a while, almost as if contemplating something he didn’t care to share with her.

"Anyway." Evelyn carried on "It seems your house was once connected with my grandfather’s house. There were some documents and letters pertaining to a separation of the houses, probably following an inventory. It appears that my family and your mother’s family were related somehow, and the two houses were once a common property which was latter divided. I wouldn’t know the details of it, since most of my grandfather’s old papers are too old to be readable..."

Severus frowned.

"I think you must have something wrong... I would have known if my mother was related to..." he stopped mid-sentence. "I mean, I know my mother’s family and there’s certainly a mistake here..."
He rested his chin on the knuckles of his right hand.

"As far as I can remember, Miss Black...Not a soul has ever lived in the house next door. My mother never told me anything about it belonging to any of her relations"

"Maybe she didn’t know of the house’s history...The two properties were severed in the 20s. But still, she should know that her family was related to mine...You see, there’s a family tree amongst my father’s old documents, with your mother’s name on it. She would have known that, no?"

There was a long silence. For a second Evelyn could have sworn Severus looked apprehensive. But as she looked for a further hint of an expression on his face, he put on his default blank stare. Leaning back on his armchair, he drew in a deep breath.

"Once again, Miss Black I would have known that...But even assuming our families are somehow related, which I find highly unlikely...Is not like I can provide you with any information other than what your grandfather’s documents already have... I’m afraid your search has reached a dead end"

She fell silent. It was obvious that, whatever the relationship was between Eileen Snape and her family, Severus Snape knew nothing about it, or wouldn’t tell her about it.

"Where are you from Miss. Black?"

"Ireland. County Clare." She answered, taken aback by the random question.

"You see, my mother’s family didn’t have any relatives in Ireland"

"My grandfather wasn’t Irish. He was from London."

Severus blinked.

"He was?"

"Yes...He moved to Ireland when he was around twenty. Which is what makes the existence of this house all the more odd. It seems he lived all of his life in London. How could he have a house in Cokeworth?"

"Did he ever talk about any of it?"

"He never talked about anything that happened before he went to Ireland"

"Maybe for a good reason..."

"What do you mean?"

"Did you ever consider the very obvious possibility that he never talked about his past precisely because didn’t want anyone to know about it?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"What I’m trying to say is, Miss Black, I can’t help you. My mother is dead, as is your grandfather. What’s the point of digging up old stories?"

"The point?! Isn’t it obvious enough?...It’s my family we’re talking about here..."

"Precisely...Your family... Don’t you fear you might find something that was better left undiscovered?"
Part 1- The Visit- Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

After surviving the War and moving back to Cokeworth to battle his inner demons, Snape receives an unusual visitor: a muggle History professor from Ireland. And she is moving to Spinner’s End?

Severus wasn’t really sure why he had let her in. The mention of his mother’s name had certainly disarmed him at first, but come to think of it how could that woman possibly know about Eileen? The true Eileen Snape, the witch, not the long suffering wife of Tobias Snape, the neighbourhood’s drunk. Whatever it was this Evelyn Black had to talk to him about was probably just some trivial muggle matter...Maybe something to do with the numerous debts his mother had contracted trying to make ends meet and clean up after his father’s messes...Over the years he had gotten many of those visits, but his years working in Hogwarts and having very few personal expenses had allowed him the means to sort out the finances of the Snape family after his parents’ deaths. Luckily Gringotts made currency exchanges with muggle money.

Even so, that someone would look for her to collect a debt after twenty years of her passing was just a bit too bizarre... And that woman...Most definitely didn’t look like some ordinary debt collector. Too well-mannered, to the point of sounding a little posh, too well-dressed, too patrician-looking... And much to his surprise she seemed genuinely upset when he told her Eileen Prince was dead. Stranger still, she had just apologized and turned to leave, as if whatever it was that she had to discuss it could only be with Eileen herself. For a second he thought she might know his mother... But it was an absurd idea...Miss Black was around his own age...definitely too young to have known his mother while she was still "Eileen Prince".

Maybe the months he had spent cloistered in his old childhood home after the end of the war had finally started to take a tool on him. This was probably the first time since July he had had an actual conversation with another human being. Of course he got frequent letters from Minerva. After Voldemort’s defeat and his subsequent stay at St. Mungo Minerva seemed to have become overcome with remorse, in spite of all his reassurance that whatever it was that he had done, it was his choice, and apologies or displays of gratitude were simply out of place. Still he could understand her...Throughout his teaching years Minerva had probably been the closest thing to a friend he had had, and the whole affair of Dumbledore’s death, his apparent betrayal and near-passing, as well as the ensuing revelations about his double-agent activities, had certainly had a huge impact on her. To this day he got weekly letters from her, all filled with an almost apologetic concern about his well-being.

But letters couldn’t substitute a real interaction with another person. As antisocial as he had always been, sitting alone all day long in the decrepit Spinner’s End house for months on end was starting to weight heavily on him. As Evelyn Black stood on his doorstep he had felt something he hadn’t felt for months...Interest. Not interest on her per se, but interest on something... Curiosity, so to speak. Maybe that was why he had let her in. She might give him something to do with his time, even if only for the brief time span of an inconsequential conversation. Something to take him out of his hibernation for a moment.

She looked frankly nervous as she came in.
"Tea?" He offered, out of a flatly conventional sense of hospitality he hadn´t exercised in a long time. Having guests was definitely not at the top of the list of his favorite things to do.

"Sure, thank you... Uh, do you need any help?" She asked, offering him some polite proximity he didn´t really care for.

"No." His answer came out harsher than he intended... It didn´t matter much, really.

As he heated the water for the tea, he could hear her footsteps in the sitting room. He looked over his shoulder and saw as she moved around slowly looking at everything, almost as if visiting a museum, arms crossed over her chest, her deep red blouse in a stark contrast with the brownish grey-sepia rows of books that covered the walls. She had her back turned to him but he could see perfectly how upright he posture was, which made her look even taller, and how surely she walked around, with an elegant stride not many women managed on such high heels. Her hair ondulated ever so slightly as she looked up and down, obviously reading the titles on the bookspines. Even if he couldn´t see her face, her interest was palpable, he could read it on her body language...Either she was an avid bibliophile or was just trying to get to know something about him by analysing his personal library. Maybe both. As she approached the shelves closest to the fireplace she seemed to do a little double take and bent over as to see more carefully. Severus smirked...That was where he kept his old books from Hogwarts. No wonder she was curious, a muggle wouldn´t understand any of that. Time to put an end to her fun. He poured the tea not bothering with sugar and returned to the sitting room.

Her curiosity about his books hadn´t bothered him...Actually he was faintly amused by the way she was snooping around as if his sitting room was some public library. But when Severus entered the room she was standing just in front of the fireplace, almost on her tiptoes, staring at the photographs on the mantle with vivid interest. Severus frowned. Somebody obviously had a problem grasping the concept of "private". He walked over with that swift and silent gait he had practised over the years on the stone floors of Hogwats, and stoped just behind her, so close he could smell the faint lavender scent that emanated from her. Still, she was so fixated on the photos that she never noticed his presence. Severus coughed loudly to get her attention. She spun around and let out a small shrill like a startled cat. As she looked up at him, her eyes were wide and her face had turned a lovely shade of crimson red.

There it was, that delightful expression of absolute fear and sheer embarrassment he had so masterfully gotten out of busted students over the course of seventeen odd years as a teacher. It still felt good to see it. For whatever reason getting that out of a full grown woman felt even better.

"Your tea" He handed her the cup "I only had Hassam. I hope it´s not too strong for you"

"Hassam is just fine, thank you"

Severus stood there for a while, enjoying her subtle agitation. But after only a couple of seconds she seemed to have gathered her wits and started to look at him attentively, petulantly even, almost as if studying him. Her eyes were focused and deep. None of his students had ever had the nerve to look at him so shamelessly after being caught red-handed (except maybe the ever-insufferable Potter). Actually most adults didn´t have the nerve to stare at him like that. Severus was well aware that her peevishness was only due to the fact that she didn´t know who he was. Most muggles wouldn´t have had the courage if they knew...But still her gall was quite remarkable.

Time to stop playing little games. Severus turned around and walked over to his chair. From behind him her voice reached his hears, a calculated gentle intonation in the husky timbre.

"I´m sorry, I was just..."
"Sit down" He cut her mid-sentence, gesturing the sofa.

"Thank you" She smiled an obviously fake smile and sat down sipping her tea, apparently not minding that there was no sugar in it.

Miss Evelyn Black had, quite clearly, underestimated his intelligence. Did she really think he couldn’t see through the smiles and the kind little "pleases" and "thank your"? She wanted something out of him, and was determined to get it, even if it meant playing the part of the "gentle sweet maiden". And "gentle sweet maiden" she was not, that much was clear to him. She was a terrible liar, though...her calculated words and inflexion might be meek and caressing, but the obstinate look in her eyes and the unabashed insistence that punctuated her actions told a different story. Still, he had to respect her determination to play him into doing her bidding. For such a poor liar, she seemed intelligent enough to know exactly how to play her cards...Certainly she had experience with making other people do what she wanted.

"So...You were looking for my mother... May I ask where would you know her from?"

"I wouldn’t, actually...Just by name. It’s a long story, really" There still playing the soft-spoken girl, Severus noticed, almost annoyed now.

"Then make it short" He sneered, hoping she would just drop the act and speak straightforwardly.

"Very well..." she continued, taking on a harder tone that pleased Severus a whole lot more "The house next to yours. It belonged to my grandfather."

"I don’t recall anyone owning that house...or even living there, for that matter..."

"Precisely. I don’t think he ever did live there. After he passed away we found this among his belongings" She laid her cup down on the coffee-table and reached into her purse. She then produced an old and crumbled piece of paper and handed it to him. Severus got it and ran his eyes through the elaborate calligraphy, doing a double take as he recognised the layout. It was an old muggle document, but with a layout style similar to that found on some wizarding documents, one that could be used on the wizarding legal procedures, while still being accepted by muggles, unaware of its origins. It was frequently used in negotiations between muggles and wizards, whenever they took place. This one however looked quite old and had many elements that had fallen in disuse long ago, particularly the ornate borders and baroque-looking calligraphic capitals. Most of it was impossible to read and the stamps were nothing more than smudges, but the name of the owner and his elegant signature were clear enough: Marius Black.

"Marius Black..." That name... it did ring a bell...But where had Severus heard it before? "...your grandfather I suppose"

"Yes"

"Anyway." Evelyn carried on "It seems your house was once connected with my grandfather’s house. There were some documents and letters pertaining to a separation of the houses, probably following an inventory. It appears that my family and your mother’s family were related somehow, and the two houses were once a common property which was latter divided. I wouldn’t know the details of it, since most of my grandfather’s old papers are old to be readable..."

Severus frowned. Clearly she had stumbled onto something she shouldn’t have. If that document had anything to do with a transaction between wizards and muggles (a transaction that seemed to have happened many decades ago) and her family had any connection to his mother’s family as she claimed, she should have know something about it. But quite obvious she didn’t. Whatever it was
that this document meant, it was not for her to know. Furthermore, her having that paper and Merlin only knew whatever else she had found among her late grandfather’s belongings could mean a high risk of breaking the statute of secrecy.

"I think you must have something wrong... I would have known if my mother was related to..."
Related to "muggles" he almost let slip, but bit his tongue. "I mean, I know my mother’s family and there’s certainly a mistake here..."

He rested his chin on the knuckles of his right hand, making an effort to come up with something to throw her off her trail.

"As far as I can remember, Miss Black...Not a soul has ever lived in the house next door. My mother never told me anything about it belonging to any of her relations” Severus almost kicked himself, feeling dumb as a post. Was that the best he could come up with? The months of isolation must have dulled his legendarily sharp mind.

"Maybe she didn’t know of the house’s history...The two properties were severed in the 20s. But still, she should know that her family was related to mine...You see, there’s a family tree amongst my father’s old documents, with your mother’s name on it. She would have known that, no?"

There was a long silence. Severus simply sat there mulling over that story. He couldn’t quite make sense of it. Indeed he had never heard any mention to the house next door belonging to anyone. Neither had him ever heard of anyone on the pure-blood Prince family being related to any muggles. But then again if his mother had married a muggle it wasn’t impossible that other members of the family might have muggle relations. Still without getting the full picture, he had no way of knowing anything, and all he had to go on was that house deed and Evelyn’s story...

But what really got to him was the fact that the woman sitting in front of him was completely unaware of what the house deed could mean. Clearly Evelyn Black had no idea of the connection her house might or might not have to the wizarding world... Her grandfather had clearly decided not to let his family know of that house and, consequently, anything, magical or not, that might be related to it. And yet, decades after the signing of that house deed, his granddaughter was there holding on to that piece of paper that could lead her to uncovering everything. And if the Wizarding world had anything to do with whatever this "everything" was, there would be trouble.

"Once again, Miss Black I would have known that...But even assuming our families are somehow related, which I find highly unlikely...Is not like I can provide you with any information other than what your grandfather’s documents already have. I’m afraid your search has reached a dead end" Indeed he couldn’t provide her with any information, that much was true. But somehow he just felt that excuse wouldn’t be enough to keep her from investigating.

"Where are you from, Miss Black?" He let out, grasping at straws, trying to extract any potentialy useful information out of her.

"Ireland. County Clare." She answered, looking a little taken aback.

"You see, my mother’s family didn’t have any relatives in Ireland" He said just for the sake of saying anything. He knew she was Irish, and the new information she gave him, about County Clare didn’t add much to it, but he had to keep her talking.

"My grandfather wasn’t Irish. He was from London."

"He was?"
"Yes...He moved to Ireland when he was around twenty. Which is what makes the existence of this house all the more odd. It seems he lived all of his life in London. How come would he have a house in Cokeworth?"

"Did he ever talk about any of it?"

"He never talked about anything that happened before he went to Ireland"

"Maybe for a good reason..." Severus said, more to himself than to her.

"What do you mean?"

"Did you ever consider the very obvious possibility that he never talked about his past precisely because didn´t want anyone to know about it?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"What I´m trying to say is, Miss Black, I can´t help you. My mother is dead, as is your grandfather. What´s the point of digging up old stories?"

"The point?! Isn´t it obvious enough?...It´s my family we´re talking about here..."

"Precisely...Your family... Don´t you fear you might find something that was better left undiscovered?"

She looked at him square in the eyes, a look of self-righteous indignation splattered on her face.

"Excuse me? What are you trying to get at?"

Severus almost smiled. Just a few minutes ago she was sitting there, feigning gentleness, trying to manipulate him with sugar-coated words and batting eyelashes, but at the slightest suggestion that her little world might not be as perfect as she imagined it to be, she had just let her emotions flow with laughable ease. Leaning forward, Severus rested his elbows on his knees interlacing his fingers, and tried to give his next words the kindest, most comforting tone he could muster.

"I don´t mean to be offensive, Miss Black, and I apologize if I was. What I wanted to say is... I imagine your late grandfather might have had strong reasons not to share this information with his family. Maybe you should just respect his wishes and not pursue this."

"I appreciate your concern, Mr. Snape, but I really don´t think it´s your place to decide that " Every single word out of her mouth was dripping with contempt.

"Of course not."

"Well, in that case" She grabbed her purse and stood up. Severus stood up almost in time with her "I guess I should get going. It obvious you can´t help me."

"I´m terribly sorry about that"

"Don´t be. I should be the one apologizing for wasting your time" She turned on her heels swiftly and went for her coat on the wall hook. Severus followed her closely, and walked past her as she headed for the door.

"Once again...I´m sorry I couldn´t help you" He opened the door for her. "But, if I may say so, do consider what I just told you"
"I will" Severus just knew she wouldn´t.

"And..." She turned to him, her foot barely out the door "If there´s anything else I can do to help you...Don´t hesitate in asking me"

"That´s kind of you...But I don´t think you´ll be able to do much to help me" She had a suspicious expression on her face...Indeed this woman was anything but stupid...And that only concerned him all the more.

"Still...I´ll see if I can find out anything that might help you. I´ll let you know if I do" He measured every word in order to make it sound gentle but not too sweet or too interested

As he closed the heavy wooden door behind him, Severus Snape smiled to himself.

Finally he had found something interesting to do with his time.
In which Snape’s new neighbour’s black cat bothers him. And for some odd reason she has an old copy of the Black Family family tree?

Severus couldn’t even remember the last time he had slept. Actual sleep, that is. A peaceful night of sound, restoring sleep. His brain shut down at times, when the body couldn’t take being awake anymore, but even then...To sleep...to rest...No more...Not since the late Albus Dumbledore had dropped the weight of the world onto his shoulders without ever wondering if he would be able to carry it.

Dumbledore was not the nice old man for whom so many took him... He was man of action, a man who did what had to be done, no matter what the cost. "For the greater good" was his motto. Severus respected that. He had long given up any ideals of a fair world where good triumphs over evil simply because that’s the way it’s supposed to be...More often than not, the "greater good" demanded sacrifice, blood, tears and less than noble actions...Sometimes things simply got ugly, and there was nothing anyone could do about it. Hard facts of life... Severus Snape had made his peace with them long before that night. Which was precisely why, even after all this time, he still couldn’t understand how Dumbledore’s plan had brought him to his knees like that.

Seventeen years before that Severus had given up everything. His life, his peace, his strength...He had laid everything at Dumbledore’s feet, had turned himself over to be used like a pawn. He had agreed to it...more than that, he had asked for it. Lily’s death left him no purpose other than continuously repenting for what couldn’t be fixed or forgiven. Following Dumbledore’s plans had become his sole reason to exist. To keep the boy alive...to keep whatever was left of Lily on this Earth alive...Until it came the day when he could finally rest...If the prophecy was right the day would come when Lily’s son would defeat Voldemort...through Lily’s son Severus Snape would finally find redemption... He waited for that day... For seventeen years he waited for that day...He did whatever it was in his power to make sure it would come.

Then everything came crumbling down... The boy had to die...Dumbledore had asked him to protect Lily’s son, just to have him dead at the right moment... "He has her eyes"...He said...That was probably the only thing that had kept Severus alive all these years...Knowing her eyes still saw the world through her child... And then, casually like that, Dumbledore told him those eyes would no longer see the light... Lily’s only child...raised like a pig for slaughter...with his help.

Severus was never quite certain as to whether Dumbledore didn’t realise the enormity of what he asked or if he simply didn’t care...Maybe Dumbledore himself didn’t know....He simply charged forward, doing whatever it took for everything to fall into place...and Severus had to keep up...On the day of Lily’s death, Severus Snape had given up his life, his happiness... Had given up himself, in a way...He had no right to claim his soul back, when he had lost it so long ago...And yet, Dumbledore asked entirely too much of him... To soil his hands with blood...Dumbledore’s own blood no less, and with those same blood-stained hands hold on to the helm, step into Dumbledore’s own shoes and keep Hogwarts safe under the attack of the birds of prey that swiftly descended upon it...and lead Lily’s child to his ultimate fate, like a priest leads a lamb to the sacrificial altar.
And once everything was said and done, all there was left to him was to hope for forgiveness that would never come...Too much, simply too much...

As he lay bleeding on the filthy floor of the Shrieking Shack, there was a moment of relief.

Over...finally over...to sleep, at last... He had fought it...Once he felt the first bite of Nagini´s teeth sinking into his flesh, he had fought it. But he had been caught entirely off-guard, let go of his wand, and the beast was just too strong, too fast and Severus too weak and broken. Like a wounded animal he recoiled, moaned, struggled...In foolish desperation he had tried to pry the mighty jaws open with both his hands, only managing to break his fingers... The attack was relentless...In the midst of the pain all he could think of was his incomplete mission...After seventeen years, he had failed...at the last moment he had failed...

Then he simply lay there, all energy drained from his body...warm blood soaking his robes, his consciousness slipping away from him with each drop...He waited for the jaws to come back and finish what had been started... Charity Burbage´s death still lingered in the back his mind, the haunting sounds of her bones breaking as Nagini feasted upon her body still echoed into his ears. He had watched, powerless to prevent it...and now it was his turn. But all he heard was the ruffling of the Dark Lord´s robes and the slithering sound of Nagini following her master, as he was left for dead.

Laying on the floor... bleeding his life out... Knowing with his last shred of consciousness that everything was lost... But even then he felt the most bizarre sense of relief...At least it was over...he could rest... Redemption had been denied to him...but sleep...just sleep...If there was anything like a God in heaven He wouldn´t deny him that...

Right at that moment he had been pulled out of his feverish reverie by a voice... a pair of deep emerald green eyes looking at him, filled with horror, sorrow... pity? Harry...Lily´s boy...all these years he had tried to see it...to look for her eyes in his, and yet he had never really seen it as clearly as now... His hope had never been in vain...peace would come to him...everything he had been asked to do, he would have accomplished...just as long as he made Harry see it, with his own eyes...Those green eyes...Lily´s eyes...they would see it...they would see everything he had always wanted them to see...

His task was complete...peace at last...sleep...

But even that had been denied to him...When he woke up, weeks later, at St Mungo´s, the light of a new day pouring from the open window, confirming his existence, hurt his soul more than the unhealed, infected wounds pained his body.

It wasn´t supposed to be like this...

Sleep...it was all he had asked for...

Severus simply lay on his bed, after yet another night of tossing and turning with eventual black-outs filled with nightmares. He had seen from the corner of his eye as the lights of a grey, foggy, autumn morning cut through the black veil of the night. He watched as the white milky glow entered his room, little by little, flowing lazily, drawing ample patterns on the ceiling... He watched in silence, entirely too incapable of doing anything else other than lay there, motionless. The spectre of light moved in front of his eyes for hours before he mustered the strength to look up at the clock.

09 o´clock...

Severus dragged himself out of bed, his back aching from being too long on the same position...He
closed the windows, rubbing his bloodshot eyes and welcoming the darkness back, then finally decided that, since the days stubbornly refused to stop going by, it was probably better to keep busy in the meantime...somehow...

Caffeine...that was what he needed...tea or coffee...whatever...

He welcomed the cold as he walked into the kitchen. The cool tiles felt like ice under his bare feet, and the breeze that made it’s way into the broken window felt gelid against his skin, barely protected by the worn out grey pajamas. The cold was almost painful, the warmth of the bed covers still lingering all over his body. It didn’t matter much...Lately the only thing that made him feel somewhat alive was pain...The wounds on his neck still hurt most of the time, and his left hand had never quite recovered...Probably shouldn’t be making such liberal use of anaesthetic potions.

Tea...a warm cup of tea would make him feel somewhat human again. After lighting up a cigarette, Severus reached for the tin box on the counter, just to find it empty. But of course...he had used the last bags of Assam left to make tea the day before...When that nosy Miss Black had visited him... He had almost forgotten about her...Lately he just kept forgetting things... And his mind was so blurry from the ill-slept night that the bizarre conversation he had had with his new neighbour the previous day just felt dream-like like it had never happened...

Bloody hell, he really needed caffeine...

"There´s still instant coffee in here somewhere" he muttered to himself as he rummaged through the cabinets, no mustering enough concentration to simply use a summoning spell. As he opened cabinet door after cabinet door, a soft mewling sound made its way into his ears...

At first he thought nothing of it, but soon enough the noise had started to grate into his nerves...Was it his imagination or it was actually getting louder?

He turned to leave the kitchen and look for something heavy to throw at the damned stray cat that was, most likely, messing up the trash cans outside. Then he saw it...a small black silhouette laying in front of his fire place. It turned around and in the dim light of the living room he saw a pair of bright amber eyes staring straight at him.

So that´s why the noise was so close...

"How did it ever..." Severus looked around and the answer became obvious...The broken window on the kitchen... Meanwhile, the cat leisurely approached, mewoing softly to get his attention, and started to rub against his leg. Severely annoyed by now ,Severus picked it up, ready to toss it outside the door when he realized it: this cat was no stray... It was obviously well fed, and its black coat was so shiny it looked blueish under the light...it also had a collar with a shamrock-shaped name tag on it. As the little beast made itself comfortable, purring against this chest, Severus examined the tag.

"Ciarán...If you find me call,...Evelyn B..." he rolled his eyes "Well, well...Cats...the ultimate staple of the obnoxious, over-thirty spinster...Why doesn’t it surprise me at all?"
Part 2 - The Cat - Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

In which Snape’s new neighbour’s black cat bothers him. And for some odd reason she has an old copy of the Black Family family tree?

"Well, Ciarán...or whatever you name is... you found your way here, you should have no trouble finding your way back"

Severus fought the urge to simply toss the cat out the window. True to be told it would be rather satisfying to just kick the insolent furball out and watch as it ran away terrified. But considering his owner was his new neighbor, it would probably be more prudent to just show him the way out. Miss Black was petulant and intrusive enough as it was, mistreating her cat would only bring him more annoyance, and quite frankly he was in no shape to deal with it.

So instead of indulging on his more aggressive urges, Severus merely opened the kitchen to and let the cat out. It sat there on the windowsill for a few moments and left, making him breath a sight of relief...

Where was he, again? Oh, yeah...Coffee...

Alas...no coffee, and no tea...Actually, no nothing...When was the last time he had gone grocery shopping?...Hell, he couldn’t even remember...Might want to take care of that now...Starving to death was not a very noble way to go...Dying of starvation and having his body discovered weeks later once it started to smell wouldn’t look too good on his obituary...Death by snake attack would have been more decent. But the mere thought of washing, changing into presentable clothes and going out to run such a mundane task bore him to death...

Grudgingly he washed, changed and left.

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Two hours...Two bloody hours just to walk to the nearest market, pick up a few bare essentials, pay for them and come back home....Damn... He knew muggles had a different way of life, and that not having magic entailed a certain difficulty of getting things done that was unknown to wizards, but that was effin’ ridiculous...Nobody need magic to know how to properly queue or change money...

Severus locked the door and kicked off his shoes. Tea and a decent meal...Finally...

"What?..." He almost dropped the grocery bags as he felt something touching his leg. He looked down and saw pair of big amber eyes looking up at him. In the dimness of the living room it was almost impossible to see clearly, but he didn’t have to see it to know exactly what the diminutive creature trying to climb up his leg was. "You again?"

Cursing through his teeth, Severus let go of the bags and picked the cat up by the scruff of the neck, nearly tossing it outside the door. Dear Merlin, was Miss Black so intent on getting on his nerves she had trained her cat to annoy him? He slammed the door shut and headed the kitchen as the cat stood
outside mewling and scratching the door.

"Damn cat..."

Trying his best to ignore the noise outside, he proceeded heat up a frozen meal. Luckily he was awake enough now to use his wand. For the life of him he would never reach an agreement with that old rusty stove in the kitchen. Opening the metallic container, he reached for a fork inside one of the kitchen cabinets and sat down to eat his undercooked Salisbury steak and bland macaroni and cheese with a side of nicotine.

Then the mewling and scratching finally stopped.

"Peace at last!" Severus mumbled to himself, welcoming the silence. Silence...his constant companion for months...Lately even the sound of his own thoughts had become unbearable to him at times...silence was all he could take...It was the closest to non-existence he could get...The sounds of his house, book pages turning, the kettle on the stove, the click-clack of glasses and silverware, the ruffling of his bedsheets...That was all he could bear without having a bloody migraine...

Damn it, his wounds hurt more than usual today...Maybe the dressing was too tight...Should check up on that after lunch...For now he´d just have to mind it when swallowing...Couldn´t very well go for another round of anaesthetics right now, had taken those before leaving the house...The cigarette would have to do as far as calming his nerves for now..

Morosely poking his steak with the fork as he watched the tip of his cigarette burn, Severus started to plan the day ahead of him. If anything the little black invader had, at least, helped him become alert enough to catch up on his reading. His teaching left him very little time for any kind of parallel intellectual pursuit...And with the business of having a bloody war to tend to, he couldn´t quite remember the last time he had sat down with a book for the simple pleasure of just reading an interesting story. Last time he had tried he didn't have the chance to reach the third chapter...

Just as he silently agreed with himself that the rest of the day would be better spent in Dostoyevisky´s fine company, Severus felt something touch his bare feet. Something furry...Severus bolted to his feet, just as the lean little silhouette walked from under the table and sat down on its hind legs, looking up at him.

"That´s it!" Severus was fuming. "I suppose I need to have a word with your owner about responsible pet-owning and common civility!"

Fighting the urge to hex the living lights out of cat, he picked it up and marched to the next house of the street. He banged on the door, probably with enough strength to yank it out of its hinges. Nothing...He tried again and again...nothing. Apparently nobody was home...

"So that´s why you snuck out..." He looked at the cat purring happily on his arm. "All right then..."

Severus had just noticed one of the front windows was partiality open. He carefully placed the cat on the windowsill and nudged him to enter. The animal merely looked up at him, seriously and mewed softly. Severus tried to make him go inside, to no avail. The cat looked inside the house then back at him and simply sat there, almost as if it couldn´t bring itself to enter.

"What the devil?..."

After a couple more futile attempts at making the cat get back inside, Severus simply stood in front of the window, wondering what could ever make the animal so reluctant to get back into his own home. Considering Miss Black had just moved, maybe the cat wasn´t yet used to the new environment,
although it was obviously very comfortable at his house. Nevermind, he thought, could just as well just leave the creature there on the windowsill...

As Severus walked away, he could hear the diminutive beast mewling following him. He didn’t really have to look back to know it was right after him. Stubborn little... Reaching his doorstep, Severus looked over his shoulder, and surely enough there was the cat, sitting on the side walk.

Accepting defeat, Severus opened his door and stepped aside, as the cat leisurely strolled in.

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It was the tenth time he had to go back and re-read the same page. The damn cat had been prancing about, hoping on the piles of books scattered about the floor, climbing up the shelves and dropping whatever object it could get its little filthy paws on. At the present moment it had just finished smashing a glass of water on the floor and was proceeding to menacingly make its way towards the antique wooden clock sitting on one of the shelves by the fireplace.

Closing his copy of The Brothers Karamazov, Severus walked up to where the little insolent fur ball was and proceeded to remove him from the shelf. It merely jumped from his arms onto the floor and walked over to the fireplace, lying lazily in front of it. Severus took a deep breath.

"Ok, so be like this." The cat simply looked at him and yawned.

The cat was tired of wrecking havoc, apparently. Good. Back to his book, then. Hopefully he’d get to finish that page now. But just as he sat down, there it was again... The bloody cat mewing at his feet. Without taking his eyes off the book, Severus pushed it away with a foot, but the unbearable creature would have none of it. It just leaped squarely onto his lap.

"I’m not petting you, damnit!" And back to the floor it went, mewing in dismay. Only this time it made no attempt to climb back. Instead it just sat quietly, as if listening for something.

"What now?"

Seemingly no longer interested on Severus, the cat walked briskly towards the door. Soon enough it was scratching it and mewing anxiously.

"Oh, so now you want to leave... Fine..."

Relieved, Severus opened the door and let the cat out. It sat on the pavement and looked on as a red Volvo approached. The car pulled over right in front of Miss Black’s house, and the cat mewed joyfully as none other than Evelyn Black herself exited the auto. Severus watched as the woman distractedly opened the trunk of her car and started to retrieve a mountain of shopping bags and grocery bags from it. Her high heels made a pleasant and regular little click-clacking rhythm onto the pavement as her dark jeans, red sweater coat and red crochet headband painted dynamic brushstrokes of bright colour onto the dull grey canvas of Spinner’s End.

"Well, there she is, at long last..." Severus crossed his arms over his chest and turned to go back inside. The cat, however, stayed exactly where it was, looking up at him.

"Just go already! She’s back." The cat mewed, still looking up at him.

"You don’t want me to escort you, do you?" Another mew. Scowling, Severus picked up the cat carried him on one arm as carefully as he would carry a stale baguette, slamming his front door
behind himself. "Miserable little runt"

He walked up to Miss Black just as she was starting to unlock her door.

"Hey!" He yelled curmudgeonly, making her turn around, startled.

"Yes?"

"Is this yours?" He asked, carelessly holding up the cat.

"Ciarán!" She dropped the bags and almost ran up to him, taking the cat from his hand and gently cradling it on her arms, showering the little pest with caresses. "You were sleeping when I left, how did you get out?"

Severus rolled his eyes. Crazy woman talking to her bloody cat as if it was a baby....

"Thank you so much for finding him" She smiled at Severus, her Irish accent becoming slightly ticker.

"I didn´t find him...he found me."

"Oh, I see...I´m so sorry he bothered you...In any case, thank you for taking care of him while I was out"

You should thank me for not turning him into a stew; Severus thought to himself, but kept his silence and just nodded.

"Why don´t you come in for some tea?" She offered, opening the door.

"No, it´s not necessary"

"I insist..."

"I mean it, it´s really no nece.."

Without as much as letting him finish the sentence, Evelyn put the cat back on the ground, and picked up the grocery backs she had just dropped.

"It will only take a minute. If you could just help me with these bags" Not even noticing (or not minding) his resistance, she handled him the bags and walked over to her car. "We can just put those in the kitchen and I´ll fix us something to eat in a second. I just bought some muffins on this new bakery downtown, people say they are excellent...."

As she continued to babble and pull shopping bags out of the trunk of the car, Severus stood there like a fool holding one shopping bag on each hand, completely at a loss of words...
Part 2 - The Cat - Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

In which Snape’s new neighbour’s black cat bothers him. And for some odd reason she has an old copy of the Black Family family tree?

If the old popular wisdom that dictated that pets were much like their owners in personality was correct, there was no point arguing with Miss Black, Severus thought to himself. Much in the same way her cat simply did as it pleased, it was quite obvious Miss Black wouldn’t take no for an answer. Just as well, if anything her impromptu hospitality fit would provide him with an excellent opportunity to gather information. Just the day before Evelyn Black had knocked on his door, telling a most bizarre story that apparently involved his mother’s family and could just as well touch the Wizarding World. According to her she had just inherited her house from her late grandfather, who was, if she was to be believed, somehow related to the Prince family. Stranger still, Evelyn Black was in possession of a strange house deed, a document of a type most common in wizarding transactions. Inadvertently her bothersome black cat had provided him with a perfect opportunity to look into that matter.

But carrying shopping bags was not his idea of investigating. Nevermind, a little common courtesy would go a long way in helping his plans.

"Can you put those on the kitchen table, please" She told him, while clumsily taking bag after bag from the trunk. It was quite evident a lot of those were not just groceries and obviously too heavy to for her to carry unaided. He balanced the two relatively small grocery bags she had just given him on his left hand, doing his best to hold on to them with his still fully functioning fingers and walked over to where she stood. Silently, and without as much as looking at her, Severus picked up the heavier bags, balancing them on both hands to the best of his ability and marched into the house. A little startled, Evelyn picked up the other bags and closed the trunk, following him.

"Oh, wait..." she called out, coming after him, her heels briskly click-clacking onto the pavement. "It’s too heavy, you don’t have to carry all of them at the same ti..."

"I can manage" he spat out. If there was one thing Severus couldn’t stand was pity disguised as politeness.

They made their way into the living room just as Ciarán was climbing onto the peach colored damask couch, stretching lazily before settling for a nap. Severus scoffed at him as he walked by. Finally catching up to him, Evelyn walked past both of them and prompted Severus to follow her into the kitchen.

"Could you put those here, please" She told him softly, gesturing a cabinet next to the door. Then she washed her hands and started to move around, busy like a hyperactive bee, sorting groceries and putting them away and filling up a kettle with water. "Have a seat...tea will be ready in a minute...I have green tea and Lady Grey, what do you..."

"I’ll just have whatever you’re having..." He answered distractedly, walking back into the living room. There was a strong smell of cleaning products in the air, and the furniture was moved around and cardboard boxes were scattered about.
"Don’t mind the mess," she told him from the kitchen, her voice dancing over the clatter of porcelain and silverware. "I still haven’t had to time to finish cleaning..."

He didn’t answer and just kept walking around. There was no way Miss Black had brought all these objects with her and had them brought inside in less than twenty-four hours. The living room was fully decorated in a sumptuous Art Déco style, with lots of delicate and ornate pieces and works of art, with a soothing abundance of muted greens and pale pinks. Draperies, upholstery, rugs, everything looked vivid and fresh...as if the house had just been decorated. The sheer amount of stained glass letting the light pour inside, the scattered boxes, apparently filled with books and personal objects, and the smell of lime from the recent, yet unfinished, cleaning only added to the fresh, comfortable feel of a house ready to start a new life.

Severus walked over to the boxes, all already opened, but still unpacked. The personal objects didn’t interest him, and he would feel outright ashamed looking at them, so instead he directed his attention to the books. The absolute majority of the boxes were filled with them, making up for a personal library of rather respectable size. Letting his curiosity get the best of him he opened one and picked up the first book his eyes fell upon. It was a rather new and elegant hard cover edition with a very high quality dark green dust jacket. On it there was a very simple black design of a Celtic cross and a title in a sleek and elegant black lettering "Witch trials in Ireland: the untold history" He read the index and saw the book was divided on groups of specific trials by dates, spawning all the way from the XIV century to, much to his surprise, 1911. The last pages had an exhaustive compilation of references and bibliography. Looked like a book worth reading, he thought, looking for the name of the author on the cover.

"Author...Evelyn Black?" Severus did a bit of a double take and opened the book again, looking for the flap. There it was. A rather elegant black and white portrait of Evelyn black, looking positively scholarly in a dark blouse, her hair pulled away from her face in a neat braid. The seriousness of her face seemed to belie an inner sunnier disposition that could be seen from the brightness of her eyes, that the dull shades of grey chosen for the photo did nothing to diminish, and the hint of an impending smile that her tightly sealed lips did a poor job of hiding.

Severus looked over his shoulder to where she stood, distractedly setting the table. He followed her swift and agile movements, as her long fingers busied themselves with cups and plates, knives, forks and the most colourful array of breads, cheeses and muffins. She was completely relaxed, her red sweater laying abandoned on the back of a chair and her immaculate white t-shirt reflecting the light in a way rather unusual for the dull and dark Spinner’s End, forming a striking contrast with her dark hair, in such a way that her face looked far softer and more radiant than he remembered it from the previous day. Hard to imagine that sweet tea-and-muffins, happy go lucky model-home-maker prototype busily arranging muffins on a glass tray was a witchcraft expert. But then again, considering their previous conversation, Severus wouldn’t be at all surprised to find a higher than average intelligence in her. More than intelligence, if the whole story about her grandfather and her adamant pursuit of answers was anything to go by, Miss Black didn’t only have brains, but she might just as well have the officiousness to match. Brains and curiosity, the mark of an outstanding scholar. Still, he had to laugh at the notion that a muggle would actually study witchcraft... as if they could do anything other than scratch the surface.

"Tea is ready" she called out softly. He put the book back in the box and went into the kitchen. There he found a simple but nicely arranged table set, cups and plates of refined powder blue porcelain, cold cuts and cheese, some croissants arranged in a little basket and the famous muffins, apparently in variety flavours. He wondered if it was just because she had a guest or if Evelyn Black actually made a ritual out of every meal.

"Sit down, please..." She poured him some tea. "Lady Grey.... I’m sorry I didn’t have Assam..."
"It´s ok."

"Once again forgive me about Ciarán..." She took his plate and proceeded to put some slices of cheese on it, without as much as asking him if he wanted it.

"Miss Black, please. Just the tea is quite enough"

"Oh, but you must try this. You know, I walked all over the neighbourhood looking for some place that sold good Irish cheese, but alas there doesn´t seem to be a wide variety of products avaible around here. Such luck I found this Burren Gold. It´s produced in Clare, you must try it..."

"No, really, please, don´t bother..." He was starting to get slightly alarmed as she served him a croissant and a muffin.

"Chocolate or blueberry?"

"I don´t really like swe..." he breathed in trying not to get angry "...blueberry"

"I wish I had something fresher to serve, but I was so busy with the cleaning that baking was out of question. I hope those are good. I heated them up a bit. Would you like some butter?"

"No, thank you. It´s all perfectly fine like this..." Severus studied her jovial expression as she sat down and proceeded to fill her own plate. She was simply "at home", in every sense of the expression. Whomever was to walk in at that exactly moment and saw them having tea and discussing Irish cheese and muffin flavours might actually mistake them for old friends, instead of neighbours that had met just the day before. The familiarity was completely disturbing to him, this little chit chat over afternoon tea was simply too surreal...He felt like he had just walked into one of those obnoxious domestic-bliss-selling margarine commercials. He wondered if the woman sitting across the table was actually this genuinely nice and welcoming or if she was just plain crazy.

"As I was saying...I´m really sorry about Ciarán. He´s not used to being left alone. My last boyfriend worked from home, so Ciarán really misses having someone around...I do think I´ve been babying the little fellow a bit too much lately. I hope he hasn´t disturbed you too much..." Her brogue was more evident than ever now.

"Not too much, no..." He lied. "Your...uhm...decoration is quite interesting."

"It´s not mine, actually. Everything was already here when I arrived. But I´m thinking about keeping it just the way it is. It´s absolutely lovely. But it was the most bizarre thing to find everything untouched like that. Except for all the dust it looks as if it was decorated yesterday, doesn´t it?"

"I´d say so..." he cocked an eyebrow, looking around.

"But the most bizarre thing is not even that..."

"Yes?..." He offered, amazed at how little it took to get her talking.

"There was no sign of bugs anywhere..."

"Indeed? That´s funny...this house has been closed for so long...One would imagine it was crawling with bugs."

"I know, right? And yet not a single one...I´m telling you, it´s the most amazing thing. This house is in such perfect condition is actually scary. I was fully expecting to have to spend some nights at a hotel while arranging everything to move in, and it wasn´t even necessary. Yesterday all I had to do
was change the covers and I had a perfect night of sleep in one of the bedrooms upstairs...I do admit it was a little creepy sleeping in this bed that once belonged to God only knows who...

"Well, if you intend to live in Spinner’s End, 'creepy' is something you might want to get used to..." he smirked

"I guess so..." she laughed softly

"I do imagine that for someone in your line of work, stumbling upon this house must be fascinating..."

"My line of work?..."

"You’re a historian, right? I just happened to see one of your books in the living room."

"Oh, you did..." she smiled and for a second he could have sworn she was a little embarrassed

"Yes...Witch trials in Ireland...Sounds interesting..."

"I did notice the subject seems to interest you...I mean, once again sorry for snooping around but..."

"Don’t worry...I suppose we can call that one even"

"Well, and judging from your library I’d guess we share the same line of work..."

"You’d guess incorrectly.."

"So, not a historian?"

"Teacher"

"What subject?"

"Potions." he let out with a straight face, savouring her utterly puzzled expression.

"Potions?...Oh, you mean chemistry." She laughed quietly.

"Yes," he smirked again.

"Then my guess was only partially incorrect..."

"How so?"

"We’re both teachers...just different subjects"

"Well, yes..."

"Where do you teach?"

"A boarding school in Scotland." he shifted uncomfortably in his chair "I’m currently on leave of absence due to injury, tough."

"I see..." She said in an almost apologetic tone. He followed her eyes as they looked down at the bandages on his neck and his crippled left hand. He removed his hand from the table, resting it on his lap, and shifted again. She immediately noticed his discomfort and looked down at her tea, silent.

"You?" He asked, trying to pull her back into the conversation.
"Oh, here and there....I graduated from Trinity College, got my Ph.D. there as well, then worked there for most of my life. I went back to Doolin after my grandfather passed away. I lived in Ennis for a while before that and worked at the National school, but I preferred to go back to Doolin...My father was teacher in a local school there. An all girl school I attended, so that´s where I was working past few years..."

"How long has it been since he passed away? Your grandfather I mean..."

"Two years...My father followed him just this year...." All the brightness of her voice was gone.
"I´m sorry to hear that"

Suddenly all her chattiness disappeared and the only sound filling the air was that of the tea cups clattering and the chilly wind blowing the leaves outside. For the first time in months Severus felt bothered by the silence he usually welcomed with such joy. He looked down at his partially eaten croissant, sipping his tea and calculating his next words. But before he could open his mouth Evelyn herself broke the tension.

"It was only when father died that I got those papers I was telling you about yesterday....I knew they existed before that, but for whatever reason, dad never let anybody near them. They just spend two years locked up inside this box in the attic..."

"Yes, you mentioned it....As a matter of fact, I probably should apologize for our last conversation, we seem to have started on the wrong foot..." Severus was pleasantly surprised that he didn´t have to bring up the subject himself. In fact Miss Black seemed all too eager to talk about it. He modulated his voice to the gentlest tone he could muster "I was really taken by surprise. You will certainly understand, a person I´ve never seen before standing at my doorstep, telling this convoluted story about an abandoned house..."

"Oh, of course I completely understand...I suppose I was a little too eager, knocking on your door like that and just spilling everything..." Her tone was at once mellow and serious, and Severus wondered if she was genuinely opening up to him, or just trying to charm him into helping her. Either way it suited his purposes. "It´s just that...It´s all so strange, this house, these papers, this whole part of my grandfather´s life we had no idea about..."

"As I said before, I don´t think you´ll discover all that much...You said it yourself, it has been a long time, and with both your father and grandfather dead, I don´t think..."

"You do understand why I have to try, don´t you?" Her eyes bore straight into his to the point of discomfort. It was obvious there was much more to this than a simple curiosity about her family´s history. But whatever her reasons were they were of no interest to him at the moment and he surely wasn´t about to use legilimency on a defenceless muggle to find out.

"I do...Would you mind if I took a look at those papers? Maybe something there might help..."

"Well, of course you can...I´ll go get them..."

She left the kitchen and walked towards a sleek wooden cabinet in the living room. Severus followed her with his eyes, watching attentively as she removed a small wooden correspondence box from it. On the peach-coloured couch, her cat was getting fussy, probably upset at not having their attention for more than half of an hour, and started to mewl softly. After quickly petting the little beast, she came back into the kitchen, pulled a chair and sat down besides him, putting the box on her lap. As she pulled her chair a little too close to him, Severus almost pushed his back, but forced himself to stay where he was and act naturally. Even if she didn´t seem to have much of a clue about what "personal space" was, Severus was thankful that at the very least she had the ability of choosing a
decent perfume. There was this very subtle lavender scent about her, certainly not one of those rammish blends of pretentious fragrances that muggle women seemed to fancy and were willing to pay ridiculous amounts of money for, but a very pure, unadulterated fragrance, as if she had just walked through a lavender field on her way back home.

Meanwhile the cat lay at her feet, pretty much demanding her attention. As she put the box on the table and bent down to pet him once again, and Severus took the opportunity to examine the object. But just as he looked at it, it became suddenly obvious to him that this was no common box. It took him a couple of seconds to actually convince himself his eyes weren´t playing a trick on him. He reached over and ran his fingers over the delicately carved crest that adorned the bid of the box.

"Miss Black..." He called her hesitantly "This crest...what do you make of it?..."

"Oh, this crest...don´t even get me started on it...I´ve been looking for it everywhere...I even contacted this colleague who´s a heraldry expert and asked him to try to locate it´s origin, but no luck...And this motto Toujours Pur, 'always pure', doesn´t appear anywhere in the documentation we consulted. We even contacted people in Ireland, North Ireland, Scotland, mind you even France and every specialist we consulted came up empty handed..."

"And the papers?" It took Severus some effort to look unaffected.

"Oh, sure", she opened the box and very carefully retrieved a bunch of yellowing letters tied by a black satin ribbon, so old they looked like they could fall apart just from being handled. "These letters I haven´t had the opportunity to read in detail. I´m even scared to handle them too much, to be honest, and I don´t believe they can actually be read, not without some extensive restoration...but this..." She laid the letter on the lid of the box and retrieved another piece of old yellowing paper, but this time in remarkably better condition and folded up like a map. She stood up and moved away some of the plates from the table, opening the paper on it. "This is the family tree I was telling you about..."

Severus stood up beside her and looked at it, completely at a loss of words. This wasn´t just a simple family tree...

"Here, you see?" She continued to talk, and pointed out one of the names scribbled in a tiny and barely readable calligraphy. "Marius Black... That´s my grandfather...His name is crossed out, like many others but you can still read it clearly... And this family tree connects to many others family trees it seems. That includes the Princes, as you can see here...And here´s what has brought me to you...Eileen Prince... Her name is also crossed out for whatever reason... Do you have any idea as to why this might be?"

"No...no idea..." He lied "I have to agree with you tough...It´s most certainly...remarkable. Do you still have that house deed?"

"Yes, right here..." she handed it to him. Severus re-read the document. Marius Black. There was little doubt in his mind, in fact it was pretty obvious, and Severus was about to kick himself for not realizing it sooner.

"Oh...It´s almost six..." He let out, pretending to be alarmed "I was supposed do meet a friend across town at eight, I have to get going..."

"Ah, of course I don´t want to keep you."

"Would you mind if I borrowed this?" he gestured the family tree "I might find something to compare it with among my mother´s belongings..."
"Oh, sure you can take it...and here..." she took a piece of paper from her purse and folded it along with the family tree "It’s a copy of the house deed, I have to hold on to the original, but you can take this..."

"Thank you, Miss Black...Now, I really should go..."

"Sure, I’ll walk you to the door..."

Resisting the urge to step on Ciarán tail along the way, Severus let himself be guided to front door, his mind still shrouded in contemplation of what had just been shown to him. Evelyn opened the door and he turned to her, putting on a mask of normalcy.

"Thank you for the tea..."

"Don’t mention it...Oh, by the way..." She walked over to one of the book boxes and came back with the book he had been browsing just a while before. "Here. I hope you enjoy it. But feel free to tell me if you don’t."

--------------------------------------------

It was past ten when Minerva MacGonagall finally managed to have a moment of much needed peace in her private office. Being a deputy headmistress for nearly two decades surely hadn’t prepared her for the herculean task of being the headmistress of a post-War Hogwarts. There was still so much to do, so much to fix... They had bravely managed to start the school year, trying to make things run as smoothly as possible considering the circumstances but... Hogwarts was not the same, and she prayed one day it would return to what it once was....Minerva knew, however that the road leading up to that day seemed too long and rocky...So many were missing, teachers, students....And those who remained would forever have to cope with the terrible events they had witnessed and the losses they had suffered... But Hogwarts still stood...and it would remain standing as far as she was concerned.

She sat on her favourite armchair, removing her glasses and closing her eyes, enjoying the cool breeze that entered through the window and listening to the soothing sounds of the night outside, when the abrupt sound of flapping wings caught her attention. She looked up to see a raven perched on her windowsill, looking at her. Minerva smiled and observed the bird, a fine specimen with lustrous black feathers that reflected the moonlight in dark blueish tones. "Well, it’s awfully kind of you to keep me company for a while, but it’s far too late for visits...." She stood up to shoo the bird away, when she heard a low raucous sound coming from the animal, almost as if it was chuckling.

She took a step back as the bird graciously flew into the room. In a split second, the sleek black silhouette grew and changed into that of a man, before her startled eyes. His amazement, however, faded away immediately as she recognised an all-too familiar face.

"Severus."

"Minerva"

"As I was saying my friend...it’s a little too late for visits" She smiled warmly "But it’s nice to see you nevertheless..."

"I do apologize for stopping by so late and unannounced...But I have something to discuss with you. Something that can’t wait until tomorrow..."
Part 3 - Autumn - Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Evelyn settles into her new life and Severus does what he does best: investigate and spy. As it turns out Marius Black didn´t simply ‘vanish’ when the Blacks banished him for his squib status.

October, 3rd

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardy, Scotland

Minerva MacGonagall’s office

"Your neighbour you say..." Minerva mumbled, deep in thought.

"I know, it sounds preposterous..."

They sat silently facing each other for a few seconds, as the fire gently burned, colouring Minerva´s office in soft shades of gold and orange. Severus sunk down in his chair, enjoying the familiarity of being back at Hogwarts even if momentarily. For good or bad Hogwarts was the closest thing to home he had, maybe even more so than his childhood home in Spinner´s End. Spinner´s End was a retreat, a place filled with memories and ghosts he came back to whenever life was too heavy to bear. Hogwarts, however was the place where his life had actually taken it’s course. Spinner’s End was dream and reverie, Hogwarts was reality, blunt and crude. Coming back was like revisiting what made him into what he was, and as much as he didn’t like what he had become, it was all he had.

"Well, what evidence do you have? " Minerva´s quiet voice brought him back to the earth.

"Just this afternoon...Miss Black invited me for tea..."

"She did?" Minerva chuckled lightly, obviously amused at the notion "And you accepted it?"

"Minerva, it´s serious."

"I´m sorry.." she smiled "Do carry on..."

"Well, the subject of her grandfather came up and I asked to see those papers she was talking about. Minerva, I´m telling you, there´s no doubt in my mind that Evelyn Black is a member of the proverbial Noble and Most Ancient House of Black"

"Are you sure this isn´t just one big coincidence. Her last name might have given you the impression...."

"That´s what I thought, until she showed me this..." He stood up and walked towards her desk, taking a bunch of folded papers from the pocket of his jacket. Minerva followed and watched closely as Snape unfolded a very large sheet of yellowing paper, revealing a most intricate family tree. Straightening up her glasses, Minerva leaned in and took a close look.
"But this is..." She looked at him completely taken aback by surprise.

"The Black family tree...In fact not just that, but a complete family tree of the Black family which includes the marriages the Blacks contracted with other pure blood families...The Malfoys, the Weasleys, the Crabbes, the Princes..."

"How could a muggle possibly be in possession of such a thing..."

"According to what Miss Black told me herself, this was among her late grandfather´s belongings... Also according to her..." He pointed out one of the names in the main family tree "this is her late grandfather."

"Marius Black?"

"Yes. The very same Marius Black who was disowned and banished from the family for being a squib, in the 1930s. According to her, Marius Black, left her this family tree, and this house." He handed her the copy of the house deed Evelyn had given him.

"But this document...is one of those documents used in wizard-muggle transactions, isn´t it?"

"It seems the house next to mine at Spinner´s End once belonged to the Blacks and the Princes, possibly due to a marriage, and for whatever reason, was passed on to Marius´ name."

"How much do you think she knows about the Black family?"

"Close to nothing...It seems her grandfather left England when he was around twenty, settled in Ireland, got married raised his own family never telling anyone anything about his past. As far as I could tell, all of this is a mystery to her."

"And it should remain as such...Severus, the implications..." She let out, her eyes fixated on the papers he had just shown her.

"I´m well aware of them, Minerva." He walked away from her and poured himself a glass of water from her cabinet. "Keeping this from her might be a bit of a problem though...She really is a Black, there´s no denying it...Even the family resemblance..."

"Indeed?"-Minerva raise an eyebrow.

"Yes." He nodded, swallowing a gulp of water. "Pretty hard to miss, you know the Blacks have this look about them..."

"Well, the Black family is known for producing some rather good-looking members..." she laughed lightly "But maybe you´re exaggerating a bit? Is not like they all have Black written on their foreheads"...

Severus put his glass down, and fumbled a little with the internal pockets of his jacket. He produced a hard cover book and opened it, handing it to her.

"See for yourself" He pointed at the black and white picture inside. Minerva brought the book near the closest source of light and inspected the photo.

"Oh, dear..."

"Told you..."

"Indeed you´re right, Severus...She´s a lovely lass." She smiled
"I never said she was 'lovely' "He hissed, annoyed.

Minerva looked at him with a hint of amusement in her expression. Shaking her head, she browsed through the book for a while, reading the summary with vivid interest. Then she took a long look at the cover.

"Evelyn Black...A charming name as well...So, she´s a writer..."

"A historian," he added "Graduated in on of the most prestigious muggle Universities, apparently she specifically writes about history of witchcraft, which leads me to think that her grandfather might have told her something about magic...This is no ordinary muggle we´re dealing with here, Minerva..."

"I can see that...It would be disastrous if any muggle we´re to discover the existence of the Wizarding world....But this muggle in particular...We must do something about it, Severus. If Miss Black keeps investigating, she´s bound to find something she shouldn´t."

"That´s precisely the reason I´m here Minerva."

"Before we do anything, you must discover how much she already knows and..."

"Minerva, Minerva..." he shook his head, his voice taking on a slightly aggrivated tone "I´ve been playing the spy for seventeen bloody years, I no longer have the patience..."

"Severus, listen to me, please...This woman lives next door to you, and she obviously trusts you, otherwise she wouldn´t have told you all of this"

"She doesn´t trust me..." he smirked, visibly annoyed "She is a parrot, that´s all."

"Oh, Severus..." Minerva chuckled ever so slightly, as if she was witnessing a small temper tantrum from a toddler.

"Don´t laugh Minerva, I´m serious, that woman just can´t keep her mouth shut. She would talk to whoever happened to be around to listen..."

"Precisely, my friend...You were around to listen...She just left her home and her country... And you happen to live next door. That make you the closest person to her right now...And since she´s such a chatterbox as you just said, I´m sure getting information out of her should be easy enough for one with your experience."

"Minerva, I just told you, I´ve spend too much of my life being a spy under Dumbledore´s orders...You seriously don´t think I will..."

"I´m sure I´m giving you a much easier, not to mention more pleasant, 'task' than those Dumbledore did back then, Severus." She smiled
Part 3 - Autumn - Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Evelyn settles into her new life and Severus does what he does best: investigate and spy. As it turns out Marius Black didn’t simply ‘vanish’ when the Blacks banished him for his squib status.

October, 4th
Cokeworth
Spinner’s End, 13

Severus woke up earlier than usual. Not that he had gotten much sleep anyway.

What Minerva had asked him was nothing but child’s play. All he had to do was set up some smoke and mirrors and throw a gullible muggle off her trail of investigation. It was simple enough, and he was completely aware of the obvious fact that he was the only one who could do it. Minerva was absolutely right, Miss Black had to be stopped before the Statute of Secrecy was broken, he was in a privileged position to do so, easily and without raising any flags...

Then why did her request made him so uncomfortable?

Maybe because, as simple as it was, it entailed things he currently had nor the patience nor the will for... It was evident enough that if he wanted to gather information and protect the Statute of Secrecy from that nosy woman he would have to approach her and play the part of a nice, concerned neighbour... The mere thought bored him to tears. He had gone back to Spinner’s End precisely looking for peace... Now he would have to socialize with an Irish parrot...

Not that she was unpleasant... quite far from it actually... Evelyn Black was anything but unpleasant... Actually, she was a little too pleasant for his liking.... Still, he was quite thankful that, at the very least she seemed intelligent and had remarkable manners... But still, she was so... common, so mundane with her tea, cleaning and home economics... And just so unnervingly sociable. Well, she was a historian, but... a muggle, writing about witchcraft... The notion almost made him laugh...

After pouring himself a cup of coffee and making some toast and beans, Severus sat down to eat and organise his thoughts. It wasn’t that bad, he told himself... at least he had something to do with his time... Being bored to tears by his chatty neighbour was still better than laying on his bed all day long just waiting patiently for his life to pass him by... Wasn’t it?...

As he sat down, he noticed the book he had left on the kitchen table the night before, after returning home. Evelyn Black’s book. That might be a good place to start. If his intuition was right, Marius Black had to have told her something about the wizarding world, even if only hints of its existence... Otherwise why would she pick precisely that subject for her research? Quickly finishing his meal, he cast a scouring spell on the dish and cup, picked up the book and headed for the living room.
With a flick of his wand he lit up the fireplace, sat on his armchair and made himself comfortable enough to spend the rest of the Sunday reading. Pushing everything else to the back of his mind, he relaxed and opened the book.

"Much has been written and discussed about witch trials all over Europe. Trial procedures have been painstakingly documented, and the proverbial witch hunts are well attested by various sources, be them legal, religious, literary or artistic, not to mention that official documents concerning this facts are, for the most part, well-preserved. In fact, it’s safe to say that historians of most European countries have an enormous wealth of material to work with when researching witchcraft and witch trials. That however has not been the case for Irish historians."

Severus almost jumped from his seat when he felt something lightly tickle his foot. Looking down he saw a pair of amber eyes staring up at him. Ciarán...Evelyn Black’s bloody pest of a cat. He rolled his eyes and closed the book.

"You again?" Ciarán seemed to have taken his exasperate hiss as a welcome sign, as it promptly jumped onto his lap. Carelessly dropping the book on top of a nearby pile, Severus picked up the animal by the scruff of the neck and put him back on the floor. "I have to remember to fix that bloody window in the kitchen..."

He stood up, walked over to the window, ignoring the all mewling, and pushed the curtain away. Soon enough Evelyn Black came into his field of vision and the, now familiar, click-clack of her heels reached his ears. Not wearing the gaudy shades of red she seemed to fancy, he noticed with a smirk. From where he was all he could see was a dark coloured skirt, a beige plaid shawl and high heels....Was the woman born with high heels on? She entered her Volvo and drove away.

"She never even noticed you snuck out, did she?" he chuckled, turning to the black cat, that was already comfortably nestled on his armchair. "And I guess there’s no point bringing you back..."

Severus shooed the cat away from his seat, and resumed his reading, as the animal settled lazily in the pile of books next to his armchair, purring happily.

"But I’m still not petting you, understood?"

"The country’s relative isolation, the separation between the ruling Protestant minority and the catholic majority as well as the absence of specific written sources about witchcraft are certainly determining factors in the apparent silence regarding the matter. References to such events are scarce and hard to come by, as most records have been destroyed overtime, lost into the tumultuous religious history of Ireland. That when recordings even existed, which was often not the case. The lack of an official apparatus as organized as that which could be found in countries where the Catholic Church held the religious and political hegemony, with Spain as a classic example, certainly contributed decisively to Ireland’s uncommon standing in the historiography of witch trials. That isn’t to say that witch trials were unheard of in the Emerald Island...’

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Severus had almost finished the book, without as much as noticing the passing of hours. Insistent mewling brought him back to reality. The clock on the shelf next to the fireplace has just struck four in the afternoon, making him suddenly aware that he had completely forgotten about lunch. He looked down at the cat. The wee beast had been unusually quiet, simply sleeping quietly, allowing Severus almost an entire afternoon of much needed peace. Maybe it had become accustomed to his house, having thoroughly explored it the day before. But now it was getting slightly restless, looking up at him and mewing incessantly.
"And now I suppose you want me to feed you, don’t you?" The cat simply continued to stare. Severus stood up and walked towards the kitchen, trying to shake away the soreness of spending hours sitting in the same position.

"Why don’t you simply go outside and kill a bird or something, you little useless runt?" he grumbled, roaming the kitchen looking for something to feed his "guest". After some fumbling he got a hold of a can of kippers, opened it, served some of it onto a small saucer and put it on the floor. The cat approached, sniffed it then looked up at him again.

"I know your owner probably feeds you like a bloody prince, but while you’re here is either that or starve...Your choice, fleabag."

The cat seemingly accepted his meagre offering and proceeded to eat, as Severus lit a cigarette. He watched as the smoke drew fine spirals onto the cool, grey sunlight, while mulling over what he had just read. It was evident that Miss Evelyn Black was an accomplished scholar, with a flair for writing that many would aspire to. Regardless of the theme matter, her writing was engaging and straightforward prose and her meticulous research work and analytical prowess were, quite frankly, impressive. But excellent muggle historians and writers were a common occurrence... Evelyn Black was certainly not just that.

The book wasn’t an overtly argumentative work, but rather a work of reference, and it fancied itself as such. There was nothing quite striking about it in the way of thesis or ideas. It was rather an almost entirely narrative history of witch trials in Ireland. It was a book written to shed light on past events that were, for the most part, forgotten by the general public. At that it was quite successful. But there was something there he couldn’t quite grasp that made it entirely different from all muggle books he had read on the subject so far.

Some of the wizards and witches accused in the trials Evelyn Black had covered in her book were well known in the Wizarding World, but practically unheard of among muggles as far as he could tell. She probably had gone through incredible lengths to have access to documents about such cases. He had eagerly read the bibliographic notes and the introduction where she detailed her process of research, learning that she had used the original trial proceeding as sources for her texts. Most of those were found in old monasteries, libraries and archives hidden in small Irish villages, or in the forgotten sections of larger libraries in bigger cities. Hardly a wealth of references to work with...and yet, her accounts of the trials were vivid and full of insights.

As expected, these very real witches and wizards shared space in her book with various muggles accused of witchcraft due to the public’s general ignorance about magic....He might as well be going crazy but he had the vivid impression that underlying her text there was a clear difference between those trials and the trials of actual wizards. In the case of falsely accused muggles, Evelyn Black seemed to have compiled some sketchy "alternative theories" explaining how such accusation came to be brought against them...When it came to actual wizards and witches however, there was a notably drier approach to facts. Granted, those were the cases about which she seemed to have the least amount of sources to work with. Certainly a lot of evidence that she could have used was erased by other wizards, working though the years to protect the secrecy of the Wizarding World, but still... Severus could’t quite dismiss the feeling that somehow she knew which cases involved actual magic, and which didn’t.

He pushed such thoughts away from his mind when he heard the faint sound of a car breaking the thick silence outside. Miss Black’s car certainly. She had spent the whole morning and a good portion of the afternoon out, on a Sunday... For a second Severus wondered if she was up to something he should know. Probably not. But even if she was, he would know soon enough. The noise had caught the cat’s attention as even before it did his own, as it had stopped eating to raise his
head, listening attentively. Severus followed the creature with his eyes as it swiftly jumped onto the kitchen counter and went out the broken window.

"Well, you´re welcome..." He let out with a smirk, picking up the abandoned saucer, quickly vanishing the left overs before scourging it. As he put the saucer back on the cabinet, he let his eyes wander out the window, following the little black silhouette of the cat as it strolled on top of the wall that separated the backyard from the woods. The cat quickly vanished from his sight, as it climbed down from the wall, just to reappear moments later, climbing up the windowsill of Miss Black´s kitchen. Severus had completely forgotten his kitchen window practically had a view to the kitchen next door...Maybe because nobody had actually lived next door for as long as he could remember.

The cat just sat on the windowsill for a while, almost as if it didn´t want to get inside...Or couldn´t get inside...Even though the window was wide open. Severus leaned in, puzzled. Either that cat was completely crazy, or something was wrong...Severus raised an eyebrow and watched as Ciarán kept beating on the glass with his paw. Suddenly, Miss Black made her way into the kitchen.

She sat by the kitchen table seemingly unaware that her pet was sitting on the windowsill and wouldn´t, or couldn´t, get inside. It was most odd...She did nothing other than sit there, her elbows on the table, one hand supporting her head, looking morose and tired. Once again Severus wondered what she had been up to...Maybe trying to find out more about her grandfather´s mysterious inheritance...He shook his head...No, it wasn´t that...It was something else...something personal. After a while she finally walked over to the window and pulled the cat out of the windowsill and into her arms. Severus leaned back, deep in thought, as she cradled the insufferable thing in her arms.

He was barely aware of the fact that he had simply stood in front of his window, looking into his neighbor´s kitchen like a bloody stalker, until she turned in his direction. Her face looked pale and tired, but she smiled at him. A faint, broken smile, quite unlike the frank, open and mildly annoying smiles he had seen from her up until now. She waved before leaving the kitchen with Ciarán still cradled in her arms.

"Something isn´t right over there", Severus mumbled to himself, his fingers drumming slightly onto the counter.
Chapter Summary

Evelyn settles into her new life and Severus does what he does best: investigate and spy. As it turns out Marius Black didn’t simply ‘vanish’ when the Blacks banished him for his squib status.

October, 4th
Cokeworth
Spinner’s End, 12

Sunday....The first in her new "home"...Although it certainly didn’t feel like home just yet. That would take sometime...Evelyn hadn’t even had the time to start feeling at home. Two days...cleaning, unpacking, organising, fixing, exploring....That house just puzzled her to no end. She had tried to look for clues, anything that might be related to her grandfather somehow, but no luck...Nothing that indicated that he had ever as much as set foot into that house.

Evelyn let her body fall heavily onto the bed, drawing in a deep sigh. She looked around at the room she currently called her bedroom. There were two bedrooms in the house, the other one had been turned into and office, where she had organised all of her books and papers. The bedroom she occupied most certainly had once belonged to either a female or a couple, judging by the ample four-postered bed and the delicate décor. It didn’t really follow the art-déco style of the first floor, although some elements of it were pretty obvious...Instead it looked more "transitional" with a heavy turn-of-the century feel, particularly in the objects, art and those magnificent stained glass windows that made the grey day-light outside change into a myriad of soft colours as it came inside...A rich tone of brownish-pink covered the walls making it all warm and welcoming...the faded pattern of the impeccably conserved wallpaper gave it an undeniable charm, just as the delicate curtains and dark art-nouveau style wooden furniture...But still...it didn’t feel like it was ever "lived in"...It felt more like a film set than a house where someday, someone had lived. All of the house had this slightly disturbing feel of never having been quite "alive". She smiled, feeling a little stupid...According to the neighbour nobody had lived there for forty years, so she shouldn’t be surprised that the house was dead, so to speak...

The neighbour...Severus Snape... Most unusual man he was...One day snarky and surly and the other, suddenly solicit...albeit always insufferably grumpy. Evelyn shook her head, a little ashamed of herself for thinking about him in such terms...Of course he was snappish and ill-tempered, it was rather obvious the man wasn’t going through the most happy period of his life... Recovering from injuries that had kept him away from work, seemingly without any assistance from family or friends...No wonder he wasn’t the cheeriest of men.

"Leave of absence due to injury", she recalled his words, lazily petting Ciarán, who had just climbed the the bed and laid his head onto her belly. Evelyn wondered what those words meant exactly, but didn’t have the nerve to ask...Not after seeing his left hand and the bandages on his neck... She hadn’t noticed when they first met, but when he awkwardly carried her shopping bags, she could see
something was not right with his left hand, and those bandages on his neck just looked like they hid a pretty awful injury, if the glimpse of unhealed scars snaking up his jaw were any indication. He was a chemistry teacher, so at first she thought it might be a work related injury, but what she saw were clearly the marks of an act of violence...

Regardless of whatever had happened to cause those injuries, what really puzzled her about him, was his staunch refusal to answer her questions with more than vague negatives. During their first conversation she couldn´t decide if he was simply being curmudgeon or if he was withholding information from her. Thinking about it later, she came to the obvious conclusion that he really didn´t know anything about the house or the relation between their families...And frankly how could he? Her grandfather had lived in Ireland since the 1930s and over the course of the decades had turned into the most Irish of all the men she knew, safe from his own son, born and raised in Doolin, a teacher of both Irish history and Gaelic to boot. Never had Marius Black Sr. set a foot in England again after moving to Doolin...Actually Evelyn could count on the fingers of one hand the times he left Doolin for anything...and even so, the farthest he had ever travelled was Dublin. That Severus Snape, an antisocial man, about her own age, apparently born and raised in Greater Manchester area and employed somewhere in Scotland up until recently would have any knowledge about her grandfather´s past was a downright ludicrous idea.

But after casually meeting her new neighbour and inviting him over for tea, she was forced to forget the notion that he didn´t know anything. Strangely enough he had been so solicit and patient this time around, that one might wonder if he had ulterior motives. But, she had thought to herself then, he could simply have felt bad for treating her so poorly the day before...Maybe he was having a bad day and let it get to him, and was now sincerely sorry... Maybe that polite, yet stubbornly quiet man she had had tea with was the real Severus Snape, and not the snappish and rude tyrant from the first day. She had let herself relax, happy to have at least on neighbour to talk to in that godforsaken street...but once they entered the subject of her grandfather, and she showed him the box of documents...Evelyn couldn´t quite put her finger on it, but he had changed...She could distinctly feel he was tense. The he made up some excuse about having to meet a friend across town and left hurriedly.

She laughed softly. Paranoid, she was positively paranoid. Severus Snape knew just as much as she did, and was, probably, just as puzzled as she was by all of it. She was letting it all get to her... The last three years...breaking up with Richard, then her grandfather´death, moving back to Doolin and her father passing away as well, and so recently, before she had even recovered from loosing her grandfather....And now all those mysteries surrounding his past. The last three years had been hectic, to say the least...After the death of her older brother, twenty five years ago, she had been hoisted to the position of "oldest child" with all the privileges and responsibilities it entailed and it has just hit her that maybe all this time she had been trying too hard. And now with all the men of the family gone, her mother and sister Caitlin expected her to take the helm. For months she had taken care of the family´s matters, her father´s assets, assisted her sister and two young nieces, kept her mother company...Caitlin jokingly called her "the man of the house" and it wasn´t far from the truth. She had spent so much time looking after everybody else, that only now, in the silence of that odd house, did it finally sank in...Her father was dead...Marius Black II, the kind, serious scholar loved by all, who had taught her everything she knew about the wondrous land where she was born...was dead...Like his own father, just a mere couple of years before him, a man just as gentle and admirable as his son, the one who had filled her childhood with wonder and fairytales...Within three years, nothing but three years, both gone...

Evelyn swiftly got up, fighting back the tears and started to get changed. She couldn´t just lay there, crying. Never in her life she had allowed herself to indulge in tears and inaction and she wasn´t about to start now...She had to find a way to keep herself busy, find something to do with her time... She slipped into a warm pair of stockings, an unadorned brown blouse and black skirt, put on a pair of the simplest pumps she owned, grabbed her beige plaid shawl and left, still not knowing where to go.
It was a grey, cold day and the streets mirrored the dull, cloudy sky. As fitting for a Sunday, not many people were on the street and those who walked around looked like nothing more than dark shadows with their shapeless coats. Cokeworth wasn’t exactly a lively place, but the neighbourhoods surrounding Spinner’s End were particularly morose at any given time, more so on a Sunday. As she drove forward the only semblance of vibrancy she saw were the bright shades of orange and red crowning the trees. The sight of Autumn leaves had always had a very soothing effect on Evelyn. To her Autumn had the scent of hot cocoa and leaves, of lazy afternoons spent in the backyard with her big brother, of the smoke of her father’s pipe, as he sat on his rocking chair, of her sister’s baby powder and her mother’s chamomile tea. Her sister was only five when Paul, the eldest, passed away at age eleven, and barely remembered him; but to Evelyn, Paul’s image was all too clear... On afternoons like this, Paul and Evelyn would spend hours outside, picking the prettiest leaves they could find so later, as night fell, they’d show them to Caitlin, using them as puppets to tell her silly stories that made her giggle uncontrollably... Then, the three would use them to make mishapen wreaths and collages that their mother used to decorate the house.

Evelyn had been driving around for so long she had lost track of time. She was somewhat familiar with the main part of Cokeworth, what people called “the nice part of town” or the “new town” on the other side of the river from Spinner’s End and surroundings, but other than a brief excursion two days before, this side of the river was still unknown to her. The history of the town was quite evident in every brick and crack she passed by... This side of town had once been a prominent part of the Industrial Revolution, and Cokeworth’s textile production was only surpassed by that of neighbouring Oldham. The rows of of brownish-red brick houses built to house the mill workers, the mill itself looming over the town like the dark shadow of a monster king, the narrow streets... all was evidence of a past that still lingered over the rundown neighborhoods this side of the river. Much like Oldham, however, Cokeworth’s textile industry fell into a decline by the mid-XXth century. The once rapidly growing town went into a state of stoppage, and only after new economical alternatives were found, its development had resumed, this time by the other side of the river. The once bustling industrial centre slowly turned into a ghost town.

After much wandering around, Evelyn finally reached the main bridge and made it to the other side, driving away from the “old town” and into the “new” one. It would be nice to get away from the river and its horrid stench... The "old" town was disturbingly quiet, so maybe revisiting the commercial centre would make for a more pleasant pastime. But just as she had made her mind to go into the main commercial area, her attention was caught by the sound of laughter. A little beyond the bridge there was a small park, with overgrown bushes. There were some kids playing there. That was a sight she hadn’t seen yet around here. She had seen plenty children playing in the more residential part of town, but the closer one got to the “old town” the more difficult it got to see kids or families. She quickly found a parking space, got out of the car and walked towards the park.

It was nothing but a little playground with rusty swings, a slide and a teeter-totter. The ground was covered in leaves and sticks surrounded by dry bushes. Still, the half-dozen kids running around didn’t seem to mind it much. There were benches, and she saw a small group of women sitting on one of them, talking, and eventually calling out to the kids. As run down as the park seemed to be, it was quite obvious that the families of the area still thought of it as a viable source of entertainment for their children. She walked around and tried to not think too much about the possibility of any of those children getting tetanus from the rusty toys, and instead looked on as they played. Evelyn almost laughed at herself... how come at the sight of playing children, tetanus was the first thing in her mind? She was starting to turn into her mother... She could still remember when her and Paul were little, running about, jumping over rusty fences, scaring sheep, running through grass, dirt and mud, climbing trees to get fruit which they would then eat with their dirty little hands, running off to the sea to swim and play at the beach without adult supervision. Evelyn was absolutely sure the two of
them had been personally responsible for at least half of their mother’s once golden blonde hair turning prematurely snowy white.

She leaned on the fence and looked around. Away from the park she could see the modern skyline of the new-town Cokeworth, an inverted mirror of the old mill town behind her. A few meters away from where she stood there was a little church, a XIX century Gothic revival building. The park and church seemed to mark the precise spot where old Cokeworth had stopped growing and gave way to the new one. Evelyn usually didn’t like revival Gothic...Maybe it was a little snobbish of her, but she was so used to visiting actual Gothic cathedrals, particularly in her many study travels to France, that the revival style just felt like a cheap knock-off of the real thing. But this particular church had something positively charming about it...It was rather small, but it was so well-proportioned and the details were so delicate that instead of a "copy" it felt almost like a miniature. She let go of the fence and walked over to the church, wrapping her shawl tightly around her shoulders to protect herself from the gelid breeze that shook the leaves off the branches of the trees scattered around her.

The church was almost empty and her heels echoed onto the marble pavement. She sat down on one of the benches in the back and observed the few people inside, middle-aged women sitting in duos or trios, talking quietly amongst themselves, probably waiting for the services to begin, and acolytes walking about preparing the altar. Evelyn took a deep breath, the scent of candles and incense bringing her back to a familiar place. Her mother was the most devout person she had ever known...To her being a Roman Catholic was as much a part of her identity as being Irish, and she was possibly the most Irish of all Irish mothers...Now that she was an adult, Evelyn could laugh about it, but growing up, having a Irish Catholic stereotype for a mother wasn’t always fun. But still, as overbearing and conservative as she was, Sophia Black was the sweetest, most devoted mother one could ever wish for...Maybe that was the reason that religion didn’t feel as oppressive to Evelyn as it might have otherwise... Once she started her studies, she had read the lives of saints with great interest and fallen in love with St. Teresa, St Catherine of Sienna, St Augustine and St Thomas Aquina’s writings all of which she read with a purely academic interest, in a subconscious attempt to go against what she saw as a "simplistic" and almost ignorant attitude towards faith of her mother. Over time, once the teenage rebellion wore off and she started to understand her mother better, Evelyn had learned to see things in a more flexible way...But still, she would never be as "good" a catholic as her mother would like her to be.

Actually, Evelyn was the text-book definition of a fallen catholic: she almost never went to mass, she firmly believed a lot of the church’s dogmas and positions to be flat out ridiculous, she had lived with a man for four years without being married to him...and yet, she kept her silver cross on her neck at all times, caught herself praying whenever she felt alone or depressed, and when things looked bleak didn’t have many qualms about looking for the next church for a bit of peaceful reflection...Like now. Sitting quiet inside that little "toy" version of a Gothic cathedral, watching the preparations for the mass, she felt a sense of amazing peace invade her...She clutched her shawl letting the quiet inside the building ease away the bothersome thoughts...

"Excuse me, miss?" A soft male voice brought her back to earth. She looked up and saw a man dressed in black clergy shirt with a collaret and a clerical collar. He was somewhat stocky, had greying blond hair and looked about sixty-something, but his bright blue eyes and soft expression lent him a certain youthfulness.

"Yes?"

"May I have a seat?"

"Of course.." she smiled, scooting away to give him more space
"Father Thomas..." he smiled

"Evelyn Black." She smiled back, shaking the hand he offered her

"I don´t remember seeing you here before...and I know each and every one of my parishioners"

"Oh, yes...I just moved..."

"From Ireland, right?"

"Yes...Is it that obvious?" she laughed softly

"Just a little bit..." he laughed heartily "But I would recognise an Irish accent anywhere..."

"Is that so?"

"My grandparents were Irish...Actually most of Cokeworth´s catholic community is of Irish extraction"

"I see..."

"And how is Cokeworth treating you so far, Miss Black?" His voice was quieter and more serious now, his blue eyes filled with concern

"I´ve only been here for three days, actually...So I guess is too early to tell"

"Are you living nearby?"

"Yes...Spinner´s End..."

"Spinner´s End?" his eyes widened slightly

"You seem surprised"

"In a way yes...I used to do lots of charity work there in the past... But ever since the mill closed nobody lives there anymore...Even the Snapes, who stayed there for longer...After Eileen and Tobias died, their boy moved to Wales or Scotland..."

"Scotland."

"Oh, you know Severus?"

"He´s my neighbor..."

"Severus?...Oh, my..never knew he had returned...But then again he was never the most sociable young man out there..." Father Thomas smiled sadly

"Were the Snapes your parishioners?"

"No, not actually...They are not catholic. But I did get the chance to meet them every time I went to Spinner´s End... They were...hard to miss, so to speak...Severus spend a lot of time playing in the park out there as well..."

"Did he?" Evelyn smiled, the thought of her moody neighbour as a young boy playing in the park amusing her greatly

"He did...Severus spend more time wandering on the Streets than home... I lost track of how many
times I stumbled upon him..." He chuckled, melancholic "This little scrawny lad, always so quiet... Didn’t have any friends, other than this little girl, about his age...they went together everywhere...What was her name...Linnie, Lilian..Something with an 'L'."

"And Eileen...do you remember her?"

"I never knew her too well...The Snapes kept to themselves, mostly...Tobias had some...issues..Severus moved away to a boarding school and from then on I only saw him on summer breaks and Holidays...I meet him sometimes after his parents died and he moved away, but...is not like we ever socialised...He’s very...guarded."

"Sounds like him all right..." She mumbled.

"But tell me about you...Where in Ireland are you from?"

"Doolin."

"County Clare...Lovely place....My grandparents were from Kerry, just next door from you. I’ve actually been to Doolin a couple of times, to visit the Cliffs...Most lovely sight on summer"

"Oh, indeed...the beach is wonderful..."

"Yes...great for surfing...not I’d know about it...as far as sports go I’m rather hopeless...But do tell, why would anyone leave such a gorgeous place behind? Work?"

"In a way...I’m doing some...historical research, so to speak..."

"Oh, really? That’s interesting...If you need any help, just drop by. We have some very interesting archives in the church"

"I most certainly will."

"Oh, well...I must go...service starts in a few, if you feel like staying..."

"I guess I will, thank you..."

"Good...Well, Miss Black...welcome to Cokeworth."

Evelyn watched as father Thomas walked away, shaking hands and greeting people left and and right on his way to the sacristy. As they sat there talking a quite larger number of parishioners had arrived, mostly middle aged or elderly women and families with children...Many greeted her discreetly, and Evelyn greeted them back. Soon enough she was sharing her bench with a young mother and her fussy toddler and a pair rather chatty elderly ladies. Evelyn allowed herself to stay where she was as the people made their way in and found their places. After hours wandering about town all alone, sharing an hour of her time with other people, even if for something as boring as mass, would do her some good.

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Unknowingly Fr. Thomas had provided Evelyn with some precious few moments of complete peace of mind. For some time she didn’t think of her father or grandfather, or her mother and sister in Ireland, or even the mysterious papers her grandfather had left behind. Instead she had just basked in the comforting aura of his father-like figure and allowed herself to just be another one of his parishioners. But some of the things he said had made an impression of her.
Severus Snape... There was certainly more to that man than met the eye. A scrawny kid, wandering about in the streets, possibly dealing with some serious issues at home... Evelyn had noticed he didn’t have family pictures in his living room... Only photos of his mother and a red-haired girl. Sure enough, his father wasn’t some “model dad” who would deserve being commemorated by a nice photograph on the mantle. And the red-haired girl... she could only be the one Fr. Thomas had talked about... Linnie or Lilian... Probably the very same young woman from the ripped photograph she had seen there... Maybe the little girl he shared his childhood with had turned out to be his girlfriend or wife... But torn photographs were an usual sign of love gone wrong, Evelyn knew it all too well...

She opened the door and threw her shawl onto the couch, shaking her head. What was she doing, snooping around the life of a man she had just met... It wasn’t like her at all... In fact why the hell was she so interested in this Severus? She had more important matters to be concerned with... Instead of thinking about her neighbour, Evelyn should be focusing on what she had vowed into Cokeworth to do. If only her father was still alive he might... Come to think of it... She wondered if her father knew the contents of her grandfather’s box... Once he had received the box and other objects from his own mother he had simply locked it away in the attic and never talked about it again... Now Evelyn had to ask herself if he had done this simply because he thought they were old stuff of no importance or if he had had any particular reason to do that... Suddenly she remembered what Severus Snape had told her on the day they first met... Maybe there was a reason her grandfather had never shared this with anyone else... maybe she would just end up stumbling onto something that might be better left uncovered... She shook her head as she walked into the kitchen, and sat down for a while... She was tired, her feet hurt and she hadn’t even had lunch yet... Maybe she was just too hungry and too tired for her thoughts to make sense...

Suddenly a little noise got her attention... she looked over to the window and saw Ciarán sitting on the windowsill, staring at her and beating onto the window-glass with his paw...

"I’m not in the mood to play today... Just come in already, window’s open, you silly..." she smiled. But the Cat remained still, looking at her as if he was just as puzzled as she was. "What’s going on?"

She stood up and walked over to the window, carefully picking him up from the windowsill and cradling him into her arms.

"You’re a really silly boy you know that? Silly and spoiled." Ciarán purred happily, nestling against her chest "You’ve been feeling lonely lately haven’t you? Where have you..." She looked up and around, only now noticing her kitchen window allowed her to see the kitchen next door. She saw a tall and slender figure standing over there...

Severus Snape.

Wearing the same usual cryptic expression on his face Severus looked at her. Evelyn could almost see a certain tension in the way he stood, some... preoccupation... Only now did it hit her that he was always like this... tense, alert, almost as if perpetually prepared for an attack, or anticipating a catastrophe. Before it had looked to her as merely a sour and unpleasant man being his sour and unpleasant self. But after talking to Fr. Thomas she couldn’t help but think it was something else... A little young scrawny kid... taciturn... without friends... She held his gaze for a while wondering why he was looking at her like that, but amazingly she didn’t feel uneasy... More than discomfort there was an incredibly pathetic sadness in all of that... Two people separated by the dirty walls of the run down houses of an old abandoned street... two people willingly buried in that ghost town of a neighbourhood... She knew what she was there for... but what about him?

She smirked bitterly... Did she? Did she really know what she was there for? What was the point of coming here, after all? It wasn’t about some silly house deed and her grandfather’s past was it? How
could she be so sure that she wasn´t going on what she knew was nothing but a wild goose chase, just because it provided her with the perfect excuse to run away from...from what? Her father´s death? The breakup with Richard? The fact that maybe, just maybe she wasn´t as strong as her mother and sister expected her to be? If only Paul were here, he´d find a way to laugh it off...But he wasn´t...Nor, Paul, or her father, or her grandfather...they were all gone and she had no idea where she stood anymore...She held Severus´gaze, quietly and attentively as if looking at her own reflection in a mirror, as if seeing into his dark eyes just how many years had passed for her without her ever noticing, watching in his arcane expression just how much of a blank she was inside.

Ciarán purred.

After a second she blinked and smiled at her own silliness...Obviously, Ciarán had been visiting Severus again...and her neighbour was probably looking to see if the cat had made its way back...Evelyn could bet he was just as amazed as she was at Ciarán´s bizarre reluctance to get back inside. Certainly Mr. Snape wasn´t expecting to see a silly woman standing like a fool at her own window, looking back at him like he was a ghost. No wonder he seemed puzzled.

"I see you´ve been bothering our neighbour again...You really like him don´t you?" She murmured looking down at her cat. Ciarán simply continued to purr lazily. She looked up again, a tired smile lingering on her lips and waved, trying to keep some semblance of normalcy. Then, feeling too exhausted to cook anything, she went back to her bedroom... Frankly, she wasn´t even hungry anymore.
Part 3 - Autumn - Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Evelyn settles into her new life and Severus does what he does best: investigate and spy. As it turns out Marius Black didn’t simply ‘vanish’ when the Blacks banished him for his squib status.

October, 5th
Cokeworth,
Downtown

Muggle bookstores....Severus couldn’t even remember the last time he had stepped into one of them, if ever. There was something just so annoyingly mundane about them that pretty much grated on his nerves. Books were precious and powerful objects, invented to impart knowledge, to put forward ideas and new concepts, to preserve wisdom and history. Entire countries, entire continents, the course of History itself had been changed by them. Leave it to muggles to turn such objects into just another commercial product, no different from toilet paper or domestic appliances. He walked into the large store and immediately frowned...fluorescent lights, that pretentiously pseudo-post-modern décor, tall and boxy bookshelves filled with decent books mixed together with muggle rubbish, the usual "child friendly" corner with gaudy toys and ridiculous costumed recreators that did nothing to confine the little brats to the space where they were supposed to be, novelty items that had no business being sold among books...

Severus just knew he´d leave that place with a splitting headache.

But there was at least one advantage to the muggles insistence in turning everything into a product...it meant some things were easier to find. After spending the whole Sunday reading Miss Black´s book and most of his Monday taking obsessive notes on it, Severus had come to the easy conclusion that if he wanted to discover more about her, and above all to discover more about what her grandfather had or had not told her about the Wizarding World, then her books would be a perfect start. She was a young scholar, and from what he had read on the back of her book, a very active one, with a number of recently published works, so most certainly the best shot at finding her other books would be a popular muggle bookstore chain, even if the mere thought irked him.

After some time trying to figure out his way among travelling guides, self-help trash, and popular titles that nobody with half a mind would dare call literature, he was approached by a smiling attendant, a young man barely out of his teens, with ginger hair and a pitiful expression that just screamed "doing whatever it takes to pay his way through college".

"Do you need any help, sir?"

"Yes...I´m looking for any book you have by this author." Severus showed him the book and watched as his eyes widened a bit
"Evelyn Black...Her books are really good, sir..." the young man smiled

"Don’t tell me she’s famous..."

"Well, if you’re a History student or have any interest in Medieval studies, then yes, she sort of is"

"Let me guess..." Severus glanced at the name tag "Andrew...you’re a history student..."

"Yes, sir. At Sanford" Andrew smiled, apparently very pleased to see a costumer willing to have a conversation with him. "Actually when this book was released she came over to give a lecture. It was really interesting...and it really didn’t hurt that she’s fit..."

"The books, Andrew!" Severus cut him off, mildly annoyed.

"Oh, of course" the young man let out a goofy giggle, making Severus roll his eyes "Follow me, they are right here, in our History section..."

They walked past the shelves all the way to the back of the back of the store, thankfully far away from the children’s section. Severus looked around and noticed that’s were most "serious" books were.

"Why that doesn’t surprise me?"

"Excuse me, sir?"

"Nothing...I think I can take it from here, thank you."

"If you need any help I’ll be right there."

As the young man walked over to greet his next client, Severus started to peruse the bookshelves. He breathed in the smell of new paper as his eyes roamed the rows of neatly arranged volumes fresh out of printing, following the somewhat disarranged supposedly-alphabetical order. Severus shook his head, silently deploring muggles’ disregard for simple things like organisation and knowledge, and took a quick look at the ensemble of works compiled before starting to look for those he had come for.

"Black...Black... Barlow...Barrow...Bauer...Black...Evelyn Black."

He found a total of four volumes authored by Evelyn Black...each and every one with the most interesting titles. "Merlin, beyond the legend" "Nicolas Flamel and the Philosopher’s stone- a historical perspective" "Bestiarum vocabulum – A compendium of medival beasts and heraldic symbols" "Unveiling the beast-The man-eater of Gevaudan"...other than those, Severus also found the same one he had just read with such vivid interest, "Witch trials in Ireland". A prolific writer Ms. Black seemed to be...One wouldn’t say so just by looking at her...she was what? 30, 35 years old at most...To have that many books to her name she must have started her academic career at a very young age...Severus knew muggles studied much longer than wizards, college, masters degrees, PhDs...The average muggle scholar started his or her career much later than the average wizard scholar...and yet Ms. Black seemed to have already somewhat made a successful career for herself before hitting her forties. More startling still, she seemed to have chosen nothing but magical subjects to write about...He wouldn’t be surprised if he happened to stumble upon books with those exact same titles in the Hogwarts library. But never mind the theme, to become such a prolific academic at her age, in any field of expertise, she had to be very bright...and that only worried him all the more. A woman with her brains wouldn’t take long to find out something, if not all about, the Wizarding World... Particularly judging for her origin and professional choices...Actually Severus wouldn’t be too surprised if she already knew something about it...Marius Black could have told her
or she could have discovered by herself, or maybe both. Minerva was right to be apprehensive...

Severus picked up all the books and made his way to the counter. As soon as he got back home he’d start studying. He had to make an assessment of what exactly he was dealing with here... who was Professor Evelyn Black and just how much of a threat she posed or could pose to the statute of secrecy.

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Severus walked up Spinner’s End, quietly enjoying the sound of his steps into the cobbled pavement... He had spent so much of the year trapped inside his house, that now he had, surprisingly, found a brand new appreciation for the world outside. Usually he might find a walk around downtown Cokeworth boring at best and hellish at worst...Wandering about among muggles, with their noisy and smelly cars, their ridiculously fast life-pace, their loud music, buses, advertisements plastered onto every single surface...it could be pure torture... But it for whatever reason today it had been almost...entertaining. In any case it was better than being locked inside all day long, or at least it seemed so, now that he actually had something to do with his time. Of course, he’d never really appreciate muggles and their ways...but a dose of muggle non-sense might just make a dull day a bit more interesting. However, returning to silent and dead Spinner’s End, where he couldn’t hear much other than the wind on the trees and the noises of animals on the woods behind his house, was still much more soothing to his nerves.

Of course his days were bound to become a whole less quiet if that Irish parrot really decided to move next door...with her car and small-talk...As much as Severus could appreciate the diversion that investigating her could bring to his life, he wasn’t really sure he’d take her cheerful and talkative demeanour in stride...

"Speaking of the devil" he rolled his eyes, hearing the familiar sound of Miss Black´s red Volvo coming from behind him. He kept walking as the car passed by and stopped just a few feet ahead, in front of her house. She came out of it, looking positively patrician in a turquoise-green shirt with a delicate brown pattern and a brown, knee-length skirt, wearing her usual insensible choice of footwear today in the form of brown leather shoes with impossibly thin heels( Severus had to wonder how they could support her weight without causing excruciating pain), her hair pulled up in a loose bun. She also had a large leather handbag and some folders. Certainly she was coming from some professional or academical appointment. As soon as she was out of the car she smiled at him.

"Hello!" she beamed, walking towards him balancing a brown leather coat and the folders on her left arm as she reached for her keys inside her bag.

"Hello, Ms. Black" he let out as he approached her, forcing himself to sound as neutrally polite as possible.

"How are you doing?" She smiled, making Severus roll his eyes...what was this crippling urge of making small conversation this woman had?

"Fine." He answered laconically, still unsure if he should stop and pretend he cared enough to converse with her or just keep walking and hope she’d get the cue and shut up.

"Oh, there’s Noble and Co. around here?" she casually told him, gesturing his bag

"Downtown around the corner from the subway station" he answered flatly, hoping she wouldn’t want to know what books he had just bought. A bagful of her books was an excellent way of coming off as a stalker.

"Thank you. I’ll make sure to drop by when I get the time...Tough it won’t be anytime soon, I’m
Still busy with your little research, I see?" He let out, almost acidly.

"Actually no...Looking for a job.." she smirked

"A job?"

"Well, yes. I left my old job at Ennis, and I can’t just sit around getting the royalties from my published works and doing nothing...I’d go crazy in less than I week..."she laughed softly

"So you’re really planning on staying in Cokeworth..."

"I don’t know for sure...It all depends on how things go...As it is finding a teaching position won’t be any easy, with the school year having started already..."

"I thought you were a College Professor"

"I’ve taught High school as well..."She opened the door and turned back to him "Actually I..."

Her sentence got cut off midway by the sound of a telephone ring in her living room. Relieved, Severus seized the opportunity to put an end to the conversation.

"You should get that."

"Well, see you latter then..." she smiled, making her way in, as Severus walked away, feeling somewhat relieved.

Closing the door behind herself, Evelyn hung her coat, locked the door and carefully set her folders on the coffee table before picking up the phone and letting her body fall lazily onto the couch.

"Well, a whole weekend in England and you already forgot you have a family, Lyn? Why haven’t you called yet?" a cheerful female voice on the other side of the line beamed

Evelyn’s lips curled up in a smile. Who else but her dear sister Caitlin would berate her for not calling even before deeming it necessary to say "hello" like any normal person would.

"And 'Hi’ to you too, Kitty-Cat" she let out softly, kicking off her shoes. "How are you doing?"

"Same as always...does my life ever change?"

"Count your blessings. And mam?"

"Well you know Mrs. Black...she’s always perfectly fine, even if the world is falling to pieces around her. She’s been extra annoying lately, with you moving away...Speaking of which, you should be giving me some interesting news. After all you’re the one who moved to another country and all." Evelyn could feel the Caitlin’s gentle laughter dying out to be replaced a more serious tone

"So...did your crazy mission bear any fruit?"

"Yes and no... As it turns out grandpa’s house does exist. It’s near an old deactivated mill, in the abandoned part of town..."

"Abandoned part of town? So you’re saying the house is a ruin, is that it?"
"Not at all...the house is standing, very well conserved...It’s even furnished. I’m living in it, actually"

"You’re kidding me..."

"No!" Evelyn chuckled, enjoying her sister’s amazement "I’m right on the living room couch as we speak...and let me tell you, it’s a gorgeous house! Art nouveau and art deco decorations, books, tapestries...You’d go bonkers if you saw it."

"Really? Wow...and all of that belonged to grandpa Marius?"

"According to the documents, yes. And I checked everything, the documentation is completely legit... It was all his..."

"Jesus, Mary, Joseph and a donkey, Lyn...How come he never told anybody?"

"This is what I’d like to know...I’ve been investigating this whole house in the past few days, and by the way this is why I didn’t call you before, but I digress..."

"And you found anything?"

"No...other than old books and some weird objects, nothing...Well, there were no bugs"

"What?"

"I mean no bugs, no roaches...and no mice either, no nothing...the house has been abandoned for so long and there’s nothing like that."

"Oh, leave it to Miss Clean-freak to notice that..."

"You don’t get it, do you...The house is...pristine. It was never even broken into...I mean everything seems intact" Evelyn heard a long pause on the other side of the line, as Ciarán hopped onto her lap, purring lazily.

"That’s not funny, Lyn...next you’re gonna tell me you hear voices at night"

"Okay, don’t believe me...But I’m telling you this house belonged to somebody and their objects are still here. It’s almost as if the owners just disappeared. And to be honest, I actually don’t think grandpa has ever lived here..."

"Maybe he inherited from someone and never claimed it...So whoever lived there before just left..."

"And left all their belongings behind?"

"Don’t ask me! You’re the one playing detective, Lyn...But, if I remember right, there was a family tree in those old papers dad left us, wasn’t there?"

"Yes. About that...remember that Eileen Prince I told you about...the one I thought could still be alive?"

"Yes, did you find her?"

"Not exactly. As it turns out she lived just next door from this house...You remember I told you the two houses were part of the same property, right?"

"Yeah, yeah...so you talked to her?"
"She passed away away some twenty years ago..."

"Oh..dead end, then..."

"No...Prince was her maiden name, she was married and had a son. He lives right next door."

"Oh!" Evelyn could feel her sister´s interest had pique just by the sound of her voice "And what is he like?"

"Quite a character....His name is Severus Snape and..."

"What the hell kind of name is Severus?"

"Well, for your information 'Severus' happens to be the name of several saints and Roman emperors..." Evelyn rolled her eyes, slightly exasperated "I swear to God is like you take pride in not knowing stuff...Dad was a history teacher for crying out loud"

"And I´m a nurse...I´m under no obligation to know emperors and saints...okay maybe saints...speaking of which is this guy catholic?"

"And why the hell do you want to know that?"

"Well...Just covering some bases...you know mam will be asking"

"Mam won´t be asking anything, because I have nothing whatsoever to do with Mr. Snape! Seriously, is that all you think about? You see, this is how you land losers like Sean fecking Sullivan"

"Oh, Lyn, chill out will you? I´m just kidding..." Caitlin laughed quietly "So tell me more about this neighbour with an imperial and sanctified name"

"Will you stop interrupting me with nonsense?"

"I´ll try."

"Well, no, he is not catholic so let´s keep mam out of this..."

"How do you know?"

"You said you weren´t going to interrupt!"

"Is what you get for trusting me." 

"My fault then...Well, the local priest told me he isn´t Catholic, so drop it, okay?"

"Damn it woman, already running a background check on him?! And people always said I was the boy crazy sister"

"I didn´t...Oh, forget it! Anyway I went over to his house last Friday looking for his mother and he welcomed me with the most obnoxious display of passive-aggressiveness I´ve ever had the misfortune to fall victim of...He apologised the next day tough...It seems he´s going through a rough patch in life..."

"How so?"

"He´s a chemistry teacher and had some sort of work related accident, so he had to take a leave it
seems..."

"Oh, the poor man...Is he cute?"

"CAITLIN!"

"It’s a legitimate question!"

"He is...normal I guess. About my age, tall, thin, dark hair, dark eyes, hooked nose...In severe need of some emergency Head & Shoulders, worst case of greasy hair I’ve ever seen...Nothing to write home about, really..."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really. Now can you stop being a annoying and listen?"

"Okay go on...so, did the holly-named greasy chemistry teacher tell you anything about grandpa’s house?"

"Nothing...he came around to visit Saturday...."

"Oh did he?" Evelyn puffed at the sound of poorly disguised giggles coming from the other woman.

"Shut up!"

"Okay, sorry..."

"...so he came over to apologize for being such an unbearable pain in the arse before, and I showed him grandpa´s papers...he seemed to be as confused about it all as I was...So, no luck there either. All I got out of him was a new reader it seems..."

"A new reader?"

"He borrowed one of my books...he likes history, I guess"

"He borrowed one of your books...because he likes history." Caitlin smirked "Seriously Evelyn, that’s the oldest trick in the book!"

"You know, is not because you take pride in being wilfully ignorant that the rest of world can’t enjoy a little culture"

"Oh, dear...I do realise you´re a great writer and a brilliant academic...but trust me...no man, intellectual or not, is going to knock on your door and randomly borrow a book just for your fantastic brains..."

"You obviously haven’t met Severus Snape"

"Oh, of course...He´s a serious teacher who enjoys books, intellectual conversation and cares only about the affairs of the spirit...and has a saintly Roman imperial name...frankly Lyn...this man is exactly your type!"

"Maybe if he had manners and a sense of humour...And washed his hair!"

"Well if all his flaws boil down to bad manners, being humourless and needing his hair washed, he’s still better boyfriend material than a lot of guys I’ve dated..."
"Well if we´re using the guys you dated as a standard for comparison I might as well date a baboon..."

"Oh get off your high horse...point me to one man who doesn´t have room for improvement"

"Caitlin, just stop, will you?...But tell me, the girls, how are they doing?"

"Great...Alice has been asking about you non-stop...She did this beautiful art project at school she wanted to show you. And Lizzie wants to know when they get to visit you in your new home"

"Are they home now?" Evelyn opened a broad smile. Caitlin´s two daughters just had a way of making her heart melt at the mere mention of their names. Alice and Elizabeth were the family´s pride and joy. Evelyn loved them both like they were her own children, and many a time she had had to be almost a second mother for them, seeing as their father was usually not in the picture and her sister had a lot on her plate between working to support the house and raising them...Actually Sean not being anywhere to be found most of the time was still better than actually having that lousy excuse for a father around the girls. Alice was six and Lizzie just three...both far too young to be exposed to the drunken shenanigans of Cat´s ex-husband.

Alice in particular had a hard time dealing...at her age, she already understood something was off, but was not yet old enough to figure out exactly what. Worse still, she was remarkably mature for her age, she had this insightful mind and deeply thoughtful nature...Caitlin kept joking that she might have given birth to Alice but she was Evelyn´s soul child, as both aunt and niece had a tendency to worry about everything, to overthink everything...Alice even resembled her physically, much more than she did either of her parents. As much as Evelyn adored both girls, she couldn´t deny having a special connection with Alice.

"No, mam just picked them up. I´m going to work in an hour, and she´s baby-sitting for me..."

"Tell them I´ll call tomorrow. Actually why don´t you tell Alice to send me one of her projects? Get Lizzie to send me something too. My living room needs some pretty things for decorating. "

"Oh, you think they aren´t preparing something already?" Caitlin laughed softly, a note of pride in her voice.

"A surprise then? Can´t wait to get it. And tell them that as soon as I has everything organised they can come to visit me."

"They´ll be over the moon. Oh, crap, look at the time. I gotta go now, Lyn. I can´t be late today, I´ve run out of excuses this month"

"Cat?"

"Yeah?"

"Is Sean behaving?" Evelyn asked almost apprehensively,noticing a soft sigh coming from her sister´s lips.

"Don´t worry..."

"Just let me know if...anything..."

"I will. Seriously, Lyn, don´t worry. I´m okay, the girls are okay...And you let me know how things go with you Imperially named greasy neighbour"
"Shut up!"

"Bye."

Evelyn pulled herself from the couch and made her way into the kitchen. After washing her hands she opened the fridge and took out the lambneck she had bought that morning before the job interview. A weekend away from Ireland and she was already home sick enough to go out of her way to buy lambneck to make an Irish stew to eat all by herself. Her mother was right, it didn’t matter how many books she wrote, how many conferences she gave, how many times she travelled abroad and how many world-renowned academics praised her feats...deep down Evelyn would always be a country girl. She laughed softly at the thought of her mother. Sophia would never get tired of trying to get Evelyn to “come back home, settle down and give her some grandchildren before it was too late”. Her last birthday had been naught but pure drama, as Mrs Black couldn’t bear the thought of her oldest daughter being 35, unwed and childless...Particularly after living with a boyfriend for four years without even even considering tying the knot. Shaking her head slightly, she got all the ingredients out and put them on the counter, before going upstairs to get changed.

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Severus closed the door and dropped his bag full of books on the couch. It was certainly odd having a neighbour after all these years, if not uncomfortable. He had yet to get used to these minor and pointless little rituals like asking "how are you?" in a way that it sounded like he meant it...Such a hassle...He tossed his jacket in the general direction of the coat hanging, never bothering to check whether he had missed it or not; and went into the kitchen to fetch himself a glass of water.

"The furry annoyance probably hasn’t come to visit today...." he smirked looking at the broken window Miss Black’s cat had made into his own personal passage to his house. He turned to refill his glass when the sound of flapping wings coming from the living room called his attention. Setting his glass on the table he walked out of the kitchen just in time to see an owl make its way in through the front window, drop a package on his coffee table and fly away. Sitting down on his couch, Severus picked up the package and opened it to find the latest issue of "The Daily Prophet" and an envelope with Hogwarts seal and Minerva’s signature on it.

Dear Severus,

I’m sure you’re wondering the reason for this letter, so soon after the last time we spoke. I’m writing to give you a bit of good news, which I’m sure will please you greatly. I just received word that the Lestranges, Rodolphus and Rabastan, have been captured and are, at the time of my writing you, being escorted to Azkaban.

After months of rebuilding the school and trying to get everything back on track, this comes as a great relief to us all. Our work is simply just starting, but at least we can all be sure we’re going in the right direction. I wish you were here with us, my friend. This school misses its most talented potions master( Professor Slughorn forgive me.)

I hope you are doing well. Don’t hesitate to write me if you feel like you need to talk, or at least to give me some news of your own.

Sincerely, Minerva

PS. Let me know how things are progressing with Ms. black.

Severus sneered as he put the letter back into its envelope and opened the enclosed issue of the prophet, uninterestedly browsing through the full front-page article on the arrest of the
Lestranges...Ms. Black...It almost seemed like Minerva thought he was having fun with this whole business of investigating his Irish parrot of a neighbour. He shook his head, dropping the newspaper and turning to the floridly decorated beige plastic bag containing the books he had just bought. Well, if anything investigating Miss Black would, at least, make for some interesting reading material, he mused, taking the books out of the bag and quickly scrolling through the pages...He should remember to show these to Minerva next time they met. She’d surely be as amazed as he was.

"Speaking of which...I still haven’t returned that book Ms. Black lent me...Might as well take the opportunity to pose a few more questions to the 'nice lady' next door, since Headmistress mcgonagall seems so keen on having me find out more about her. I surely would love to enquire as her as to her sources..." He thought to himself, getting up from the couch and reaching for the borrowed book that was sitting on top of a pile by the armchair.
Evelyn settles into her new life and Severus does what he does best: investigate and spy. As it turns out Marius Black didn’t simply ‘vanish’ when the Blacks banished him for his squib status.

Severus stood in front of his neighbour’s door, bracing himself to knock. If he knew Ms Black, and after a couple of days he was sure she was easy enough to read, he was about to voluntarily put himself through a lengthy ordeal of infuriating small-talk and pushy kindness. He sighed...It had to be done...Severus could hear music coming from inside...the mellifluous voice of some male singer he could vaguely recognise but wouldn’t be able to identify if he tried...Aznavour? Brel? Montand?...He could never tell these Frenchmen apart...It was just something that sounded nostalgic and sensuous like old French songs tended to sound in general. So this was the kind of music she liked...didn’t exactly come as a surprise. Taking a deep breath he knocked.

The music came to an abrupt end and he heard very soft and quick footsteps coming towards the door. As it opened, his eyes were immediately drawn downwards...Had Ms Black suddenly shrunk? He didn’t remember her being so much shorter than him. She still looked somewhat tall, but she was surely missing more than a couple inches from the last time he saw her. He looked at her, his eyes scrutinizing her frame from head to toe. She had one of those muggle exercising garments on, excessively tight black Lycra pants and a sleeveless red top that revealed a hint of beige underwear...Once his eyes reached her feet, Severus almost laughed at the realisation: of course she looked shorter than usual...for once she didn’t have her vertigo-inducing high heels on. Instead her she wore some ridiculous mix of shoes and socks, knitted from soft green wool that would have suited a toddler far better than a grown woman.

"Hello." she let out in a quiet voice, the face wearing an uneasy expression as she pulled on the top in a futile attempt to cover up a bra strap that insisted on showing. Severus wasn’t sure what bothered him more, seeing her standing in front of him wearing such "casual" garments, or the fact that Evelyn herself seemed less than comfortable with it. He could swear she was blushing...

"Hello...I see it’s a bad time..."

"Not at all, come in..."Before he could answer, she opened the door all the way and walked back in, awkwardly reaching for a sweater on a hanger and putting it on.

"Sorry about the mess, I wasn’t expecting any visits..." there was a tangible tension in her voice, as she pulled nervously on the oversized sweater, as if it didn’t fit her body in the way it was supposed to.  "Take a seat. Can I get you something, water, coffee..."

"No, please, don’t bother...I just came to return your book." He stretched out the book to her and she took a step forward, getting it from him and smiling, seemingly more relaxed.

"Oh, you’ve already..."Oh, sorry, I’ll be right back" she abruptly turned to get into the kitchen. Severus looked over and saw as she tied up her hair and leaned over the stove where it looked like she had something cooking.
"I should get going then..."

"No! Just a minute!"

"I really don’t want to bother..."

"You don’t bother at all."

"But you’re obviously busy..."

"It’s just a stew, once I get this done, it’s going to sit on the heat for a couple hours...there aren’t many ways you can disturb a stew, you know. Just give me a second and I’ll be with you"

Severus crossed his arms over his chest, shrugging inside his jacket. Seriously, this woman...he watched through the door as Evelyn fussled over a pan, the sound and smell of pieces of meat touching a sizzling hot bed of butter, onions and spices slowly filling the air around him. When was the last time he had smelled home made food as it cooked? Probably back when his mother was still alive...Ms Black certainly cooked well...just struck him as the type, with all the bland domesticity she exuded. He shook his head smirking...Probably shouldn’t have skipped lunch today, he was thinking nonsense.

Much in spite of himself, his eyes followed her. She had her back turned to him, occasionally turning to fetch some ingredient or another, the soft late afternoon glow coming in from the window that overlooked the backyard enveloped her frame and shed a golden light on her swift movements. The back-light allowed him to perfectly make out strong shoulders, a somewhat generous bust, and rather sturdy set of hips and tights....Those combined would have made any woman of a more delicate frame look frankly plump, but Miss Black was handsomely tall and built in such a way he could carry a few extra pound most women wouldn’t be able to afford. Yet as sensuously solid as she may have looked while resting, once she was in motion her movements were feather-light and fluid. Severus followed her hands as they picked up ingredients, mixed, combined...

There was something quite similar between potion-brewing and cooking, regardless of the obvious difference in the nobility of the two arts. But the simmering pan, so much like a cauldron, the ingredients mixing, loosing their original forms and connecting with each other to form something new, the necessary combination of technique and intuition...He remembered how, as a young boy, he watched his mother cook with much the same awe as he observed her potion making (which was a rare event given his father’s less than positive disposition towards magic). He took a step forward, immediately chastising himself...his curiosity was about to get the best of him...he must have been particularly bored to find something as prosaic as a muggle woman cooking a simple stew anything worthy of attention.

He let his eyes wander around the room, instead. There had been a considerable amount of changes since the last time he had been there. The number of books had, at the very least, tripled, all displayed in a pair of neatly arranged wooden bookcases. Some gaudy objects had vanished, replaced by more delicate and discreet alternatives...a small desk had been brought in, atop of which sat folders, papers and notebooks decorated with dainty flower patterns, the old-fashioned pink couch had new and colourful cushions and the walls had lost the heavy tapestries and gotten a wealth of photos and some of those obnoxious French-style turn of the century posters of cats.

"Crazy cat lady..." he chuckled as her black cat walked into his field of vision, making itself comfortable on a cushion laid out for him by the fireplace.

"I’m sorry about that...." she walked back into the sitting room, still looking very much awkward inside her sweater, her cheeks flushed...he wasn’t quite sure if from embarrassment or the heat of the
"Actually, if you could give me just one more second...I was about to go upstairs and take a shower, I promise it will be quick..."

"Ms Black, I think I’ve been enough of a nuisance..."

"Not at all! I’ve been looking forward to know what you think of the book, but I’m smelling of garlic and onion soffrito, and this is no way to entertain a guest" She smiled, still visibly uncomfortable "I promise it will take just a second. There’s fresh tea and orange juice in the kitchen help yourself of anything you want. I’ll be right back."

Severus raised an eyebrow...Was she really going to leave a man she knew for a little over a weekend all alone in her living room while she went upstairs to take a shower? Were all Irish people naïve yokels or was she a special case? The bloody woman had a handful of published academic works, graduated from one of the most prestigious muggle universities, was obviously intelligent enough to carry on complex conversations and yet, she could be this much of a rattlebrain? If this was her usual approach to dealing with people she hardly knew, he hoped for her sake that she had had some sort of security system installed in the house...or at the very least some strong lockers on her bathroom door. Still, her being such a blockhead was quite convenient for him. A few minutes alone in her living room might be precisely what he needed...

"Well, in that case..."

"I promise I won´t take long..." she smiled turning to hurriedly climb up the stairs

"Ms Black?" He called out before she could reach the top

"Yes?"

"Would you mind if I helped myself to your library for a second?"

"Make yourself at home."

Severus waited for her do vanish from his sight and looked around, quickly scanning the room for anything that might be interesting. After a few second taking in the layout of the room and where each object was, he turned to the wall covered in framed photos that dominated the room. Family photos...He approached and started to look at them one by one...

On the top row of photos there was a black and white picture of two men and a boy, all dressed in their Sunday best. The picture seemed to have been snapped on somebody’s front porch, the younger man was standing up while the older gentleman was sitting on a rocking chair with a boy of four or five years old on his lap, all smiling at the camera. The older man had a well-groomed greying beard and greying hair and a serene and dignified expression on his face that matched the younger man’s to a t...Actually they looked almost like the same person with the sole differences being the beard and the amount of years separating them. Father and son, surely. And the young boy with hair just as dark as the father’s, cut in a neat bowl-cut must have been the grandson. In another photo the same boy, a few years older now, in his swimming trunks, under a soft orangey glow of sunlight. Next to him there was a a younger girl....a little girl with wavy brown hair and serious brown eyes, wearing a red swimming suit. Both were wet and covered in sand, standing next to a black Irish Wolfhound that had a little blond girl of barely two years old ridding its back as if it was a miniature horse. Severus immediately recognised the brown-haired girl, Evelyn Black still had the very much same facial features from her youth. The boy and girl were probably her siblings...Some other family pictures...a picture of Ms. Black’s graduation...standing next to her was the same young man of the first picture, now much older and uncannily resembling his father (or the man Severus thought was his father, but he was more than quite sure).Another picture of Ms. Black wearing dreary 80s
fashion, striking a silly pose with a younger woman with blondish-brown hair in a ridiculous Madonna-like outfit. Finally some more recent pictures of her and random family members...One of the most recent photos depicted another pair of little girls, dressed for Halloween most likely, a blonde toddler wearing an Alice in Wonderland costume and a brown-haired girl of about five dressed as Dorothy, from the Wizard of Oz. Severus blinked and looked closely, the older girl was almost identical to Ms.Black...He tried to remember if she had mentioned having any children of her own...

Severus shook his head...Snooping though her happy family memories wouldn’t help him at all. Smiling faces in little perfect petit-bourgeois portraits of cliché family bliss wasn’t going to give him any useful information. He looked around once again and tried to recall where Ms. Black kept the wooden box her grandfather had left her. Last time he had been there it was in a cabinet, but that had been removed...So, where? He quickly located all the pieces of furniture that had drawers on them and proceed to open every single one. He had to find a locked one. She would surely have that box inside a locked drawer, those papers were just too important to her to have them laying around...He just hoped it was in the living room and not in her bedroom.

"The desk! Of course!" He walked up to her desk and pulled on the drawer. It was locked. Severus grinned "Jackpot!"

He pulled his wand from his pocket, silently congratulating himself for having the forethought to bring it with him, and unlocked the drawer. Inside, he found a couple of folders labelled "documents" and "bills to pay", some random papers neatly organised with coloured paper-clips and under everything the wooden box with the Black family crest carved on the lid. Trying to make as little mess as possible he removed the folder and papers, taking care not to disturb their order, and retrieved the box. Inside he found the same papers Ms. Black had shown him, the family tree, the house deeds and some letters....Two bunches of letters, both tied in satin ribbons. Severus quickly went through the letters bound in red ribbon...From the little he could see they were all from "Marius" to "Elizabeth" or from "Elizabeth" to "Marius"...Ms. Black’s grandfather was certainly "Marius"....maybe her grandmother was "Elizabeth"...Love letters, probably...he set those aside and moved to the bunch of letters tied in a straw-coloured ribbon.

Those looked more promising. They all had the the Black Family crest and seal on them...all of them to Marius from "Violetta Black"... Severus immediately remembered the family-tree he had been obsessively studying...Marius Black, the disowned squib, was the son of Cygnus Black and Violetta Black, née Bullstrode....These letters where from Marius’ mother...Ms.Black’s great-grandmother...Violetta Black had been writing her son after he was disowned...For a second Severus contemplated opening one of those letters, but he wouldn’t have the time to re-tie them in the same way as to avoid Ms. Black noticing they had been touched....

Hurriedly, he looked for something else, something he could read...but there was nothing...Severus heard the sound of water coming from upstairs stop. Ms Black had just finished her shower...There was nothing useful in this box...feeling a little disappointed he placed all the contents back and closed it. But as he picked it up to put it back in the drawer his fingers felt something odd in the bottom...He turned it upside down he found a very small latch. He gently tapped the bottom of the box and noticed it was hollow

"A false bottom?"

He carefully opened the latch...it was so small and delicate it seemed like only opening could break it. The bottom of the box immediately popped open to reveal another letter inside. Severus took it out and the surprise almost cut his breath short. He had seen so many letters like those in his life he could even recognised the particular smell of the paper they were written on...Severus himself had waited,
hoped and prayed to get one of these....and when it arrived...it had been one of the single most joyful
days of his entire existence... This letter, hidden away in a false bottom, had Hogwarts crest and seal....

The envelope was too old for the recipient´s name to be clear...actually it was so worn out even the
crest was blurry...it looked like that letter had been handled so many times, folded, unfolded, even
crumpled to such an extent the recipient´s name had simply vanished...Severus opened it, but before
he could retrieve the letter, the sound of steps upstairs brought him back to reality...He felt the urge of
shoving it into his pocket, but Ms. Black might notice...He wasn´t sure if she knew of the false
bottom or not, it was too much of a risk...Instead he just put it back. With meticulous care, he put
everything back into the drawer in the exact same order he had found before and closed it, listening
for any noises coming from upstairs. He moved away from the desk as soon as he heard the faint
sound of steps approaching the stairway. Shoving his hands into his pockets, Severus stood in the
middle of the room facing away from the stairs, putting on the most natural façade he could muster.

"I´m all yours now," the joyful voice of Ms. Black came from behind him and he turned, pretending
to have just noticed her return. She no longer had those dreadful muggle exercising garments on,
having changed into a pair of jeans and a burnt orange wool sweater. She had also gotten rid of the
ridiculous toddler-like footwear, now replaced by a much more sensible pair of black slippers. She
was visibly more at ease, and Severus himself felt more comfortable, he had to admit.

"That´s quite a collection of photos you have here..."he casually pointed to the wall

"Oh, just some family photos..."

"Is that your grandfather?" He pointed to the black and white picture at the top row.

"Yes, that´s grandpa Marius" she smiled "with dad and Paul."

"Your brother?"

"Yes..." Severus looked at her face as she stood besides him, looking at the wall, a subtle shadow on
her expression making her golden brown eyes suddenly appear darker. Evelyn shook her head
lightly, turned to another picture and continued talking, almost as if she was conversing with herself
rather than with him "There we are, Paul, me and Caitlin, our baby sister...She´s ridding Fergus. She
loved pretending he was her pony. I tell you, there was never a more patient dog in this world..."

"And the little girls?" Severus pointed at the more recent picture of the two girls in Halloween
costumes.

"Ah, Alice and Lizzie. They are Caitlin´s girls."

"The older one could pass for your kid."

"Everybody says that!" she laughed softly "Well, Alice is more like me and Paul, we take after the
Black side of the family. Caitlin was always the one that looked more like mam, a Finnegan through
and through..."

"Does Paul have any children?"

"No...Paul passed away when he was very young...But you didn´t come here to look at family
pictures, right? Please take a seat. I know is extremely pushy to just go asking what people think of
my works, but I´ll admit I was curious to know your opinion."Severus followed her as she sat down
on the couch, pulling her annoying wee beast of a cat onto her lap. "I know, I know...it feels like an
enquiry, doesn´t it? Like I´m giving you a test...I´m just really curious" She smiled as he sat down
"Not at all...actually I’ve been meaning to talk to you about it..." he reached for the book on the coffee table and opened it on the index page. "The trials you refer to...I knew some of them, but there are so many here that I’ve never seen listed into any other work I’ve ever had the opportunity to read before...I took a long look at your bibliography, and I saw you have a great number of primary sources and...what?" he did a bit of a double take as he noticed she was staring at him, her face filled with surprise.

"Are you sure you’re a chemistry teacher?" she smirked

"Last I checked..."

"Is just that you speak like a professional historian..."

"As you know, History is a hobby of mine..."

"You seem to take your hobbies seriously."

"It’s not just because it’s a hobby I shouldn’t take it seriously..."

"Of course...Oh, dear, I can’t keep my mouth shut, can I? Go on..."

"Uh, yes...Your sources...The primary sources you used for this book, the are quite interesting. Maybe I’m just not as well versed in the subject as a professional historian would be, but some of the documents you’ve consulted...I don’t remember ever seeing those mentioned anywhere, which is understandable seen as many of the events you talk about are quite unheard of...I hope you don’t think is a stupid question, but how did you discover these trials? They seem to have gone unnoticed by all other historians I’ve read so far” Severus bore his eyes into hers as he spoke, looking for any sign of tension or anything that might give away any knowledge about the wizarding world she could have. He hated the idea of using legilimency in a muggle, but if it was necessary...She let out a soft sigh, almost as if she was bracing herself for a long lecture.

"Would you believe if I told it all started with one of my grandfather´s books?"

"Your grandfather? I don’t recall you saying he was a historian as well...Is it a family business?"

"It is, in a way...My father was a history teacher, but my grandfather was just a history-buff...much like yourself... He was a fisherman, actually, but he filled any idle time he had with the most eccentric books and oddities..." She stood up and started to look for something in one of her bookcases "I swear to this day I have no idea as to how he found such bizarre things..."

She pulled out a book from one of the shelves, a very old and thick volume, bound in good quality red leather. Severus narrowed his eyes, trying to catch a glimpse of the faded golden letters on the spine, with no success. She walked back and sat closer to him, carefully laying the heavy book on her lap as if it was a relic. Severus could feel the faint smell of old paper and leather mingle with the soft lavender emanating from her and fought back the urge to scoot away from her...But the fresh perfume was still a better option to the appetite -opening scent of the stew that was starting to come from the kitchen...He really shouldn’t have skipped lunch today....

"You see..." she went on "my grandfather was a...how can put it?...A peculiar man. Growing up we used to go to his house almost everyday, some times we slept over...my grandmother made us cakes and cookies and he would tell these crazy stories about wizards and witches...I’m pretty sure he made all of them up, I have no idea how he didn’t become a writer...it was scary how imaginative he was...Anyway, he had this crazy books about witchcraft and history, and I’m pretty sure those
were where he drew inspiration for the stories he told us. This was one of his favorites." She handed him the book and Severus ran his fingers on the cover. There wasn’t a title.

Severus was trying his best not to look too interested, but under his emotionless face, he was shivering with anticipation. So Marius Black had indeed told her about the Wizarding World... In the form of fairy-tales. Quite cunning of him...No doubt, as any Blacks worth the family’s name, he would have made a fine Slytherin. Opening the book, he read the title page and swallowed hard.

"'Great wizards of Britain and Ireland'...this is..." Severus bit his tongue before saying anything. He knew this book. It was a comprehensive list of the most famous wizards and witches from the XIV to the XVI century. It was a rare book, the most recent edition had come out in the 40s. A book like this in the hands of a muggle History professor could be potentially catastrophic. "How did your grandfather find this book?"

"I have absolutely no idea. I never found one like this, until this one day back in college, when I took a trip to county Gallway and found another copy in an antique book store. The owner seemed so surprised when I told him I had the same book, I think he was under the impression his copy was the only one in existence...Actually it was rather amusing, he seemed genuinely surprised at the fact that I had walked into his shop at all...most odd little man with the most odd little shop...

"Interesting...this bookstore, does it still exist?"

"I don’t think so...I told a colleague of mine about it, even gave him the address, but he never found it. Must have closed. But anyway, I always thought this was some sort of fantasy literature, as grandpa Marius had many such odd things at home...But when I grew up I started to entertain the notion that maybe this book was the product of a time people believed in witchcraft, maybe an informative guide like the 'Malleus Maleficarum'. My grandfather’s edition doesn’t have any information concerning the year of the first print of even the editor. But it does have a wealth of notes concerning libraries and archives, some of which I had never heard of. So I decided to hunt down the original references, and let me tell you, it led me to the most strange places..."

"Strange...how?"

"Some odd little town archives scattered all over Ireland and Britain. Back then I was working specifically with Irish history, so I went back to Gallway, Kildare, Kerry...And to my surprise I found a wealth of forgotten trial procedures, books and other sources all hidden in tiny villages that I couldn’t even find in a map...almost as if people didn’t want them to be found."

Severus couldn’t believe his ears. Could it be that these archives, these small towns that weren’t in any maps...Maybe they were hidden for a reason...Could they be wizarding communities, wizarding libraries? No! Ms Black was a muggle, she wouldn’t have been able to see a wizarding library, let alone walk into one. Her sources were certainly simple muggle documents, lost to time and lack of care about conserving history...as it was usual with Muggles. But still, he knew now for a fact that her grandfather had told her about magic...she might not know about the wizarding world (and Severus still couldn’t rule the possibility out), but she surely knew where to dig...and if she kept doing that....

"Oh, excuse me....I’ll just check the stew for a second." She stood up, and went to the kitchen.

"All right" He answered absent mindingly, still staring at the book in his hands. Evelyn Black’s grandfather was certainly the same squib Marius Black that had been disowned decades before, Severus was convinced of that. And he had told his granddaughter about the Wizarding world, but in such a way she thought it was all a crazy collection of bedtime stories...Nevertheless his "fairy tales" had somehow encouraged her to pursue a career studying witchcraft. Why would he have
encouraged such pursuits? It was far too risky giving away such information to an impressionable child, he must have known this could result in a breach of the Statute of Secrecy...

Suddenly, Severus remembered the letter in the false bottom of her grandfather’s box...A Hogwarts acceptance letter...Severus stood up and walked towards the photo-covered wall, once again studying the pictures one by one. Who was that letter addressed to? Certainly not Evelyn or either of her siblings, Severus would have known if a Muggle-born Black had entered Hogwarts around the same time he was there...if any of Marius grandchildren they had gone to Hogwarts, he would have met them...Evelyn’s nieces were too young, even if one of them was a witch the letter wouldn’t have been sent just yet. Then who?!...

"You’re staying for dinner, right?" Evelyn asked from the kitchen

"It’s very nice of you Ms. Black, but I think I’ve taken up enough of your time."

She walked back into the living room, crossed her arms over her chest and rested her shoulder against the doorframe.

"Actually you’d be doing me a favour..."

"A favour?"

"You see I have enough food here for at least four people..."

"Do you have guests coming?"

"No...Is a bit ridiculous, really...This is probably the first time I’ve lived alone in my life...Pathetic, right? At age 35...I’m just not used to cooking for one. Today I was just craving some Irish stew and I just went and made enough for a whole family..."

Severus felt like coming up with an excuse, but he just couldn’t leave without getting more information out of her. And judging by how eager to talk Ms. Black seemed, he wouldn’t even have to bother with legilimency. To be quite honest, he was getting hungry and the smell of that stew wasn’t helping his situation much. Oh well...it wouldn’t hurt to be sociable for a little while longer...

"Well, then I don’t see any reason do decline..."

"Great! I hope you like Irish stew." She went back into the kitchen and Severus followed

"It sounds like you and your grandfather were very close..."

"We were...grandpa Marius, Paul and I...our grandma called us the three musketeers..or the three stooges depending on how silly we were being..." she laughed softly

"And your sister?" He asked for the sake of small’talk, taking off his jacket and putting it in the back of a chair.

"Caitlin? Oh, she was much younger than us. She was just five years old when Paul passed away...can barely remember him..."

"And how old was Paul?" He sat down and watched as her body visibly tensed.

"Eleven..." Her voice was barely a whisper. Severus knew he was better off not going down that road, as much as he wanted to...Eleven years old..no, he shook his head and decided to drop the subject..
"I´m sorry to hear that..."

"It was a long time ago...You drink?"

"Yes."

"Stout or lager?"

"Stout. It´s a weekday"

"There you go" She openeded the fridge and took out two bottles of Guiness, handing him one. Severus smirked. Guinnes and Irish stew...He wouldn´t be at all surprised if she wiped out some soda bread as well. The woman couldn´t be more Irish if she was a leprechaun.

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"It´s okay, you can leave it..."

"Well, I can´t just very well sit here doing nothing as you clean after my mess"  Severus had always hated the idea of being served. Even as a teacher at Hogwarts having the house elves cook and serve his his food had always been mildly annoying to him. He didn´t have Lucius disposition to sit around idly and just let other people do everything for him (which knowing Lucius probably also included the wiping of arse). Inactivity and self-indulgence were two of the things he most abhorred. And he had to begrudgingly admit, he didn´t quite remember having such wondrously cooked food in a long time. This was possibly the first time in about seventeen years he had had seconds. And decent conversation over dinner? Rare event. Helping clear the table and do the dishes just seemed like a fair compensation. He swiftly moved the dishes to the sink, trying to remember how when was the last done the dishes without magic, if ever...Well, he would be damned if he couldn´t figure out something as simple as washing a couple of plates and forks.

"You seriously don´t have to."

"I insist." he let out sternly, rolling up his sleeves and proceeding to the task. But she wasn´t about to give up and walking up from behind him, got a now clean plate from his hand."Ms. Black, please..."

"No, no wa..." the smile suddenly disappeared from her face when she looked down. Severus followed her eyes and immediately regretted having rolled up his sleeves. Evelyn was staring at his left forearm, where the scar-like remains of the Dark Mark were still visible, even if barely. It came as quite a shock to him that she had even noticed at all.Most muggles couldn´t see it, and even some wizards had a hard time doing so. He let go of the plate and looked up at her face, not sure if her shocked expression amused him or not.

It took her a second to snap out of it. Without looking at him in the face she reached for a tea towel and started to dry the plate, avoiding his gaze.

"It´ sogar, you can ask..."

"Ask what?"

"About this...on my arm."

"I´m so sorry." she looked up at him, sighing "I didn´t mean to stare. I have no issue with tatoos or scarifications, I swear, is just that..."

"Mine is different, right?"
"I...yes, it is..."

"Does it unsettle you?" He raised an eyebrow. Her reaction had been a bit too exaggerated for somebody who had simply seen a tattoo, or a scarification (which his Dark Mark resembled much more than a regular tattoo). Particularly considering how much of a cultured woman she was. Something like this shouldn’t shock her. Could it be that the Dark Mark made her uncomfortable? He wouldn’t be too surprised...muggles could have some rudimentary sensitivity to magic, particularly dark magic. It was almost like a sort of defensive instinct that every human being possessed.

"Well, it’s rather...distinctive, but I wouldn’t say unsettling"

"For a moment I thought it had scared you."

"Is just a tattoo" she smirked "Nothing scary about it."

"You think?" He grinned

"Why should it be scary?" she laughed "Don’t tell you got it into a cult initiation or something like this?"

"What if it was?" Severus simply looked at her, serious. Her eyes were wide and he could feel her tension. He shook his head, mildly amused "Don’t worry, I’m not a in cult..."

"Oh, my God. I’m such a ditz, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to imply..."

"It’s quite all right, Ms. Black.. You see.. I did a lot of stupid things in my youth...as many a kid my age. I’m sure, as a teacher, you’ve seen this happen more than once. You want to impress your peers, so you start getting involved with the wrong group of people and before you realise...there’s a stupid looking tattoo on your arm...and that will be it, if you’re lucky enough to get out"

"I understand."

"Does that bother you?" he let out acidly

"Not really. You know what? If you insist on doing the dishes then I’ll make some coffee...I didn’t prepare any dessert, but there’s ice cream in the fridge if you like..."

"Just coffee will be fine" He told her, as he finished with the dishes and reached for the tea towel.

"I’ll dry the dishes once I’m done with the coffee. Just leave them there"

"All right."

"I was starting to feel a little restless, maybe it was being reminded of the dark mark still marred his arm, but for some reason Severus was just agitated "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"You know smoking can kill you right?" she chided

"I just told you I was once part of a gang and you’re worried about tobacco killing me, Ms.Black?"

"Oh, well...since you’re living on borrowed time, by all means go ahead, Mr. Daredevil"

Severus couldn’t help the soft laughter that escaped his lips. "I’ll step outside for a second...."

"Oh, no...the backyard is a mess"

"You call this a mess?" He told her as he went outside."You’ve obviously never had eleven year old
students"
"Well if you count tutoring my sister"
"That hardly counts"
"You’ve obviously never met my sister."

"Touché..." he answered as he sat in one of the rusty iron cast garden chairs he found outside and lit up his cigarette. Severus breathed in the chilly night air, looking up at the dark star-studded cupola of the sky above his head, as the smell of freshly brewed coffee filled the air around him. Soon enough Evelyn stepped outside, bringing him a cup.

"Thank you." He breathed out, noticing she had a bowl of ice-cream floating on coffee on her other hand which she proceeded eating with gusto even before sitting down.

"Affogato" she smiled. "Do you want some?"

"I couldn’t possibly fit it. Actually I’m wondering how your stomach still has room for it after the massive meal we just had...I guess is true that the Irish have a very hearty appetite"

"Oh, trust me, you haven’t seen anything...You’d be shocked!" She giggled, taking in another spoonful of ice-cream

"Remind me to never treat you to dinner..."

"Dully noted"

They sat silently for a while. Severus closed his eyes for a moment, enjoying the stark contrast between the cool night air and the warm cup of coffee on his hand, the feeble smoke as it came out of his lips making idle arabesques in the air. Maybe he was a bit too relaxed, or the few beers he had over dinner were kicking in, but he could use a nap right now...How long had he gone without drinking any alcohol if a couple bottles of Guinness were throwing him off his balance? He glanced sideways, catching a glimpse of Evelyn’s figure locked between the golden light coming from inside the kitchen and feeble blue-white light of the stars above them. She sat on a cast iron bench next to his chair with one leg tucked under the other, completely relaxed, looking up at the sky, distractedly eating her ice cream. Indeed a Black...that patrician profile and sharp serious eyes were virtual proof.

"You know..." she told him casually "you should stop calling me 'Ms.Black'. We’re about the same age...and you’re my neighbour....You can just call me Evelyn...or Lyn, all my friends call me Lyn...

"Maybe is a bit too soon to start calling you Lyn. I’ll just try to get used with Evelyn"

"Meanwhile, can I call you Severus?"

He shifted uneasily on his seat, finishing up his coffee. "I think I really should get going..."

"But it’s still early..."

"I took up too much of your time. I don’t want to be inconvenient. Thank you for dinner, it was splendid."

"In that case, let me get your jacket"

"No, please...Just finish your dessert, I can see myself out" His protests were useless, as Evelyn
insisting on getting his jacket and escorting him to the door.

"Well, good night then." she smiled, almost motioning to kiss him on the cheek, but choosing to hold out her hand instead.

"Good night. Once again, thank you for everything." He shook her hand and walked away briskly, hoping he wouldn’t stumble on his legs. Why the hell was he feeling dizzy all of the sudden?

"Severus?"

"Yes?"

"You can drop by whenever you feel like...is no bother at all."
Part 3 - Autumn - Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Evelyn settles into her new life and Severus does what he does best: investigate and spy.
As it turns out Marius Black didn’t simply ‘vanish’ when the Blacks banished him for his squib status.

October, 6th

Cokeworth

Spinner’s End

It had been quite a while since Evelyn had last gone jogging. No matter what weather, temperature or day, she always started her morning with at least an hour exercise. That was under normal circumstances, of course...But the past weeks could hardly be considered "normal circumstances", and with moving in and getting acclimated to her new life in Cokeworth... Going so long without exercising, without going out in the morning to breath some fresh air was starting to get to her.

Evelyn had always had a slight tendency towards gaining weight, and in this past few days she had been on an emotional eating spree... actually, since the death of her father she hadn´t been watching her diet or even her health at all...She had let herself go, actually...taking care of his estate, going over his papers, taking care of her mother, explaining everything to her nieces, then moving to another country...Her routine was turned upside down, and she found herself constantly tense and indulging on food to calm her nerves. She really shouldn´t have eaten so much last night...she still felt heavy...

Evelyn smiled quietly as a she made her way to the kitchen and poured herself the usual cup of tea she always had before running. Dinner had been lovely, tough...Maybe she really had misjudged her neighbour, after all...Severus Snape...the man could be a gentleman when, and if, he wanted to be...of course he still came off and stiff and awkward, but there was no question, it was a man one could have a very interesting conversation with. They had talked about everything over dinner, and he had been the textbook definition of attentive...To sit there listening to her ramblings about family, teaching, food...

Evelyn knew very well she talked too much...A common flaw of people born into close knit families. Talking over meals was pretty much a religious ritual to her...That was precisely why eating alone was almost agonising to her. Maybe she shouldn´t impose on her neighbour so much, but she just needed to talk...and he was a good listener...so good in fact that if she was a tad bit more paranoid she’d think he was gathering information on her. She laughed softly... The man was just trying to be a civil neighbour, bless his heart. And they had so many interests in common that Evelyn just lost track of time talking to him...Suddenly Cat’s words floated into her mind...No man would show that much interest just for her brains...

"Dear God, Evelyn, what the devil are you thinking about?" She shook her head and walked out of the kitchen

As she made her way to the front door, Evelyn glanced over at the wall filled with pictures... Pictures of her childhood, of herself, Paul and Caitlin when they were little, pictures of her parents, her uncles
and aunts, her nieces...She drew in a deep breath, her eyes coming to stop at the picture of her
grandfather, father and Paul... Three generations of her family’s men, all gone... The boys, as Evelyn
and Cat called them... Her lost boys...She lightly touched her brother’s face on the picture...He had
been such a lovely child, inside and out...Severus had asked about him last night and even after all
these years it still hurt to answer such questions...But if she wanted to know what those documents
her grandfather left her meant, she’d be looking into her past a lot more...Might as well get used to it.

"I’m still as silly as ever, right, Paul?" she shook her head, smiling sadly. With one last glance at the
picture, she made her way out

This was probably the first morning in months Severus hadn’t lingered in bed for hours on end,
looking for the strength to pick himself up and start the day. Instead he woke up early, got dressed
and immediately went downstairs to write Minerva a letter in response to her latest one. For once he
felt energized after a night of moderately peaceful sleep. The recurrent nightmares were still there,
but he managed to get some sleep this time. Understandable enough, the night before he arrived
home feeling pleasantly tired and quite satisfied... "Satisfied"...that was good word to define how he
felt. Severus wasn’t the hedonistic type to indulge in food and drink, but he had to admit, having a
good conversation over good food and good beer was...yes, satisfying.

Evelyn Black was an interesting woman...for a muggle, of course. Superbly educated, well
travelled, well-read, mild-mannered, warm, cheerful...a more than just competent cook...Her
eagerness to please and the incessant talking could easily grate one’s nerves, of course, but he had to
commend anybody who talked so much and managed to spew so little nonsense. The woman had
brains, it was undeniable...and looks. It definitely didn’t hurt to look at her as she talked away like a
manic parrot. Severus smirked...well, parrots have pretty feathers, don’t they?

Much like he had predicted, she didn’t need a lot of encouragement to talk to him. Just a few
questions about her work and family and she went on and on...her parents, her sister, her
nieces...The only moment she had shown some reticence to speak was when he asked about her
brother...What was his name again? Paul, yes, that was it. Paul. Understandable...the boy passed
away at age eleven...Judging from the pictures he had seen, she must have been no older than ten at
the time of his passing. Surely a horrible blow for such a young child. But that wasn’t what piqued
his interest...

Little Paul Black...dead at age eleven... a crazy idea was making room into Severus mind, or maybe
it wasn’t such a crazy idea after all...particularly not in light of that letter...If he was correct in his
assessment, that Hogwarts acceptance letter hidden in the false bottom of Marius Black’s box could
only mean...Severus’ thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the a rasping sound coming from the
kitchen. He put down the paper and pen and followed the sound.

Severus smirked softly when he entered the kitchen. He knew this would happen. Just the day before
the had finally fixed that broken window so Ms. Black’s cat wouldn’t sneak in again, and yet there
he was. Ciarán was sitting on his windowsill, scrapping the glass, looking utterly puzzled to find his
usual entrance closed. Severus shook his head, still laughing quietly, and walked over to the
window. The cat looked up at him, pressing both his front paws against the glass. Severus
watched, mildly amused.

"Stupid furball...I was in your house just yesterday night and you miss me already? Or you just miss
using my wallpaper as scrapping post?" He taunted, reaching for the pack of cigarettes in his back pocket. "Where is it? I could swear I had one on me...oh, forget it"

Ciarán just mewed softly, looking at him with his big amber eyes, as Severus looked for a new pack of smokes in one of the drawers in his cabinet, trying to ignore the cat to the best of his ability. But Ciarán just wouldn’t stop mewing and staring. Severus fumbled around the kitchen until he finally found the cabinet where he had stashed the extra packs he had bought last time he’d gone grocery shopping.

“Oh, fine. If I don’t let you in you’re just going to bother me the whole day...” he opened the window and the cat jumped in, immediately rubbing against his legs. "You are just like your mistress, aren’t you? Pushy and inconvenient just like her...She’s not home right now, is she?"

The cat walked away from him and went to the living room, hoping onto a pile of books and curling up into a ball. Severus sighed and returned to his writing, tossing the pack of smokes on his desk without bothering to take any. He didn’t feel much like smoking anymore...

"At least you’ll be quiet today...lazy little bastard"

Indeed it seemed like today Ciarán would give him some peace. Instead of running amok and knocking fragile objects from their places, he had been silent as the grave...Come to think of it, he was a bit too quiet...Finishing his letter, Severus sealed the envelope and turned to the spot where the cat had been...Just to find out he was nowhere to be found. The former potions master rolled his eyes...

"I’m not in the mood for hide and seek, you little hairy nuisance!"

He looked around for a couple minutes. Surely the cat must have gotten bored and left somehow... Better like this. Severus, picked up the letter from his desk and started to adress it, when he heard soft mewing outside. Puffing, he walked over to the front door, yanking it open...

"You stupid animal, I swear, I’ll skin you alive and make a hat out of you one of these days..." Severus looked down to see a silver-grey tabby cat sitting at his feet, looking up quizzically. "...wait...you’re not..."

The cat walked briskly into his living room, swiftly changing form, the small silver animal turning into a bespectacled older woman wearing a tartan dress and a visibly outraged expression.

"Well, Severus, never in my life have I..."

"I apologize, Minerva...I didn’t meant to be rude to you." He closed the door, sighing "I merely thought it was...another cat..."

"Another cat?"

"Yes..."

"Have you been entertaining many feline guests lately?"

"Actually just one" Severus smirked "And there he is..."

Minerva turned around to see a black cat sitting on the bottom step of the stairs.

"Oh...Don’t tell me you have a cat now?" She smiled "It’s an excellent idea to have a pet. It’s a good distraction, and will help you relax a little"
"I beg to differ...And no, this fleabag is not mine...It’s Ms. Black’s cat...Ciarán"

"You’re taking care of her cat? How neighbourly of you" Minerva laughed softly and went to pet the wee beast.

"I’m not."

"he clenched his teeth, swallowing a curse "anyhow...I’m glad to have you here, I was just finishing a letter in response to yours. And before I forget..." he turned to his desk and took a small rectangular brown leather covered box from one of the drawers, awkwardly handing it to Minerva

"Happy belated birthday."

"Severus, you shouldn’t."

"Like I’d forget"

"With everything that happened this year, even I forgot."

"Just don’t mind it too much, you know I’m a terrible gift-giver." Severus sat on his armchair, gesturing the couch to her. Minerva sat down, Ciarán immediately jumping on the couch to lay next to her. She pet him again and opened the box. Inside there was an elegant fountain pen, decorated in a delicate green tartan print, with a fine golden tip. Minerva smiled, touched by the thoughtfulness in such a simple gift.

"Thank you, Severus. It’s a most lovely gift."

"I imagined it would go well with your new office, Headmistress Macgonagall..."

"I’ll be the envy of the entire faculty, having such a gorgeous muggle pen"

"As well you should, muggle writing devices can be much more practical than quills...much less of a mess as well...and I assume you already have too much of a mess to deal with on a daily basis"

"Severus, if you only knew..." she let out a tired, almost pained, sigh. "There’s just so much to do...sometimes I don’t even know where to start..."

"I’m sure nobody would do a better job of it than you, Minerva. But where is this coming from now? In your last letter you said things were starting to look up..."

Minerva’s face grew immediately sombre.

"Yes, that’s precisely the reason I had to come talk to you in person, Severus."

"What happened, Minerva?" Severus asked gravelly knowing full well what that subtle shift on his old friend’s tone of voice. Ever since his student days, Severus had learned to read the small changes in Minerva’s voice and expression. She had been his teacher, his co-worker, often times a sort of second mother to him...he just knew when something ailed her even before she said a single word.

"The Lestrange brothers...have escaped"

"What? How?!"

"I don’t know the details. I got a message from Harry saying they managed to escape while being transported to Azkaban...it seems they had help, two of the aurors escorting them were killed and one is gravely injured..."

"Well, no wonder..."Severus sneered "the ministry is just letting anyone become an auror these days"
"Severus, please..."

"I knew it...Harry Potter and the other fools in the ministry really thought everything from now on would be child´s play just because the Dark Lord is dead...frankly..."

"The ministry has been investigating Death Eater activities everywhere in Britain and abroad..."

"That´s only the tip of the iceberg, Minerva...the Dark Lord and his associates had sympathisers all over Europe...countless groups of blood supremacists will jump at the first opportunity to aid rogue Death Eaters..." he shook his head, nervously intertwining his nimble fingers.

"And it´s precisely the reason I had to talk to you..." Her voice was filled with urgency "You may be in great danger..."

"Yes...The Death Eaters know I´m a traitor to their 'cause'...I wonder if there´s a reward for my head..." he chuckled bitterly

"Severus, don´t even joke about such a thing..."

"Calm down, Minerva...Nobody will be coming after me for a while..."

"How can you be so sure?"

"They are scattered, on the run, trying to regroup...they have more pressing matters to tend to then seeking revenge. It would be suicide to try any direct attack on me with the ministry on their trail...Besides, they know I might be more useful alive..."

"You scare me talking like this..."

They sat for a while, in complete silence. Severus could feel Minerva´s clear eyes studying him from behind her glasses. She was certainly trying to assess his state of mind, worried about his well-being...maybe even his sanity. He puffed lazy circles of smoke and smiled, an exhausted and pale smile.

"Actually, there was something else I wanted to talk to you about, Minerva..."

"Yes..?"

"Evelyn Black."

"What about her?" Minerva´s lips formed a subtle smile that made Severus roll his eyes.

"It seems my suspicions were correct after all...There´s no longer any doubt in my mind. She is one of them...the Blacks"

"And how you came to this conclusion?"

"I went to her house yesterday. She invited me over for dinner..."

"You had dinner?" Minerva looked like she was about to burst out laughing

"Yes, we did." he tried to make his voice sound as neutral as possible"After we talked about her, I decided to do some investigation of my own. I´ve read one of her books."

"Did you gather anything interesting from it?"
"The woman has a very telling fascination with everything that has to do with magic..." he reached over to the table next to him to get his new volume of 'Witchtrials in Ireland' "here, you must read this to know what I’m talking about. And make sure to take your time with it. This is no ordinary muggle writing about wizards..."

"You seem impressed..." she raised a mischievous eyebrow

"I am...But not for the reasons you seem to imagine. Ms. Black really does seem to be on to something. Her writings are very unlike any muggle texts about magic I’ve ever read..."

"You believe her grandfather has told her anything about...us?"

"I don’t know... but is a possibility. A very likely one...Yesterday, after I bought this book and a couple others, I went to her house to return the volume she lend me..."

"And she invited you for dinner" Minerva’s voice danced in the air, filled with glee.

"Yes, as I told you" he ran an uneasy hand through his greasy-looking hair "...anyway...

"What did you have for dinner?"

"What?"

"What did you have for dinner?" Minerva repeated slowly, relishing in each paused word.

"How is that of a any importance?" he blurted out

"Humour me..."

"Irish stew..."

"Oh, that’s lovely..."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, it was..."

"I take that she’s a good cook."

"An excellent one..."

"Excellent' you say...beauty, brains and culinary skills...It seems you’ve found a keeper, my friend.”

"Minerva, this is not amusing..."

"Oh, is very much amusing actually..."

He simply stared at her, his face showing an indignant hue of crimson. She just laughed it off

"I remember the time you could take a joke, Severus... Relax, I don’t mean anything by it...we’re both in need of a laugh, aren’t we?"

"Actually what I’m in need of right now is some coffee...you want anything?"

"Tea, please...whichever one you have"

Minerva smiled as Severus stood up and walked into the kitchen, his movements brisk to the point of looking nervous. She had known him since he was a child. But he had spent most of his life hiding things from people around him, hiding far too many things and doing it so well, even Minerva herself
had been fooled. She felt sharp pains of regret at the thought...her dear friend could masquerade so well he had managed to make her come to the unthinkable point of hating him....Hate like she felt very few times in her life, if ever... Minerva could still remember the blind rage, the deep agonising disappointment, the utter sense of failure she felt when she discovered he had murdered Professor Dumbledore.... One of her brightest, most talented students, a misguided, troubled youth, an accomplished potioner she had the honour of calling her colleague and friend for so many years...a traitor, a murderer....Severus had hidden his true self so well, he had made everybody think of him as loathsome, calous criminal...He had set himself up to be hated, despised by all. All that while silently working to help all of those who turned their backs on him...Minerva included. That wound was all too fresh in her soul...

And yet, as much a good actor as he was, Severus couldn´t hide the slight nervousness that overcame him whenever she quipped about Evelyn Black. Severus had never had a way with women...actually he never had much interest in being around women...or people in general. Minerva couldn´t remember him showing interest in anybody, except...yes, Lily Evans...It was clear enough, clear as day for anyone to see, from their very first year in Hogwarts...But that never went anywhere, or rather it did go somewhere...a sad and ugly place...A sad and ugly place Severus was still living in, even now. Which was precisely why she believed Severus had never found it in himself to love again, or even to look at any other woman. He just immersed himself in his work and (as she latter found out) that insane, if ultimately successful, espionage plan he and Dumbledore had concocted together. That was his whole life...nothing beyond that...It was understandable that Evelyn Black would have him nervous...Severus was just not used to being social, he didn´t much care for it. And now this woman appeared out of the blue and just invited him for dinner...Severus of all people. It was almost amusing actually...

Her thoughts were interrupted by Ciarán suddenly running away of her and jumping on the windowsill. She stood up to get him.

"There, boy...what are you looking at?" she looked out to see none other than Evelyn Black, walking down the street in a pressed pace, wearing trousers that were a bit too tight to look comfortable (or dare she say even decent) and a long-sleeved jacket. She was dishevelled, blushing, looking down at her watch for some reason.

"I swear I´ll never understand the clothes muggles wear these days...what on earth is this lass wearing?"

"Exercising clothes." Minerva almost jumped when Severus´voice came from behind her "And you shouldn´t spy on my neighbours"

"Yes, spying on her is your job, pardon my meddling" Minerva said, fighting the urge to laugh. "Oh, well...exercising you say...don´t you think those pants are a bit too..."

"I wouldn´t know" Severus merely cocked an eyebrow, his eyes quickly glancing outside

"I do have to admit...Even in that crazy outfit she´s a very pretty woman. Maybe is the Black family blood in her, you think?" She sat down to take the cup Severus silently offered her.

"Again, Minerva. I wouldn´t know" He sipped his coffee and reached for his half smoked cigarette on a nearby ashtray

"Well, you were saying..."
Evelyn made her way in, taking off her track jacket and hanging by the door. God, she needed this. Exercise, air, the nice feeling of her muscles warmed by blood flow, her cheeks flushed... energy spreading through her entire body. She missed that so much. It helped clear her mind, feel like the day ahead would be productive.

She had to admit tough, those woods where Spinner’s End street ended were a bit of an odd place for running... dark woods, completely silent if not for the sound of birds and other small animals... nothing but an unkempt dirt path that just looked a bit too shady to be walked on with a rested mind.. But then again, where in Cokeworth could she manage to find a decent stretch of land to jog? It seemed like half the town was dead and the other half did little more than work and sleep in Cokeworth, spending all of their free time in Manchester or Oldham... The only park in Cokeworth was populated with vagrants and less than trust-worthy characters... Not a whole lot of places to go if you wanted to exercise or just do anything at all. And the biggest animals roaming the woods were, apparently, foxes... all too uninterested in humans at that... Not that any human seemed to ever go there. Oh, well... it was close enough to home and the irregular terrain provided extra exercise. As for it being dangerous... Downtown Cokeworth probably posed more of a threat...

Water, God she needed water... She felt like she was about to melt, regardless of the chill outside. As she passed by the answering machine on the way to the kitchen Evelyn noticed she had messages. She pushed the button and went for the much needed glass of water in the kitchen.

"You have four messages" the mechanical voice filled the air around her.

"Oh, great. I decide to go out for one hour and the entire world decides to call..." she smirked, pouring some cold water on a glass as the first message played

"Hello, Ms Black. I’m calling from Richmond-Hill secondary school. We just took a look at the resumé you send, and we would like to know if you’d be available for an interview tomorrow morning. Please let us know. Good day"

"Second interview this week... not too shabby."

"Hey, love! Fin, here. Cat told me you just moved to Manchester? What are you doing in Manchester, woman? And how come your sister is the one who tells me? I was in Italy, they have phones there you know... Leaving for work now. Call me tonight? Love ya!"

As soon as she heard that voice, Evelyn walked back into the living room with a smile on her lips. Emmet... He insisted on being called Fin, short for Finnerty, his last name. His mother was the only one besides Evelyn who still called him Emmet. God, how long had it been since she last saw him? He was still going out with that Scotish bloke then... five months? She couldn’t even be sure... He was always working somewhere, and being a photojournalist meant he had to, quite literally, be where the news were. He was her best friend and yet they would spend months on end without seeing each other, only talking by phone... She missed those days they shared a little cramped apartment in Dublin, cramming for tests while drinking unholy amounts of coffee and whiskey. Evelyn could use having him around right now. She should at least leave him a quick message...

"Evelyn, this is your mother. You were supposed to call me last night. What happened? Do I really have to hear from you only through your sister? Call me."

"Oh, feck!" She cursed under her breath, kicking off her trainers and sitting on the couch. She was
supposed to call her mother last night...Talking to Severus had her so distracted she completely forgot. Great, now she would have to call and spend at least an hour hearing nothing but incessant nagging about how much of an ungrateful and inconsiderate daughter she supposedly was... Never mind the fact that she had been living with her mother for the entire past year and doing everything for her...Irish Catholic mothers just never rested for as long as they could find something to nag their children till they made them tiptoe the brink of madness. Evelyn could bet Sophia was eager to let her know how much of a bad idea moving to England was, that it would have make her forget her family and get saddled with some good for nothing Englishman who wouldn’t marry her or worst would make her forget she was Irish... or any other impending "disaster" her mother’s melodramatic mind could imagine.

"Hi, Lyn. Richard speaking. Lewis told me you moved to England?Anyways...uh...just wondering if everything is ok. I’ll be in London next month, editor meeting, you know how that goes...Maybe we can catch up...Just...let me know how you’re doing, ok? Bye."

Evelyn took a deep breath. Richard...since their break-up he had called her very few times. They just drifted apart without much of a fuss...Even their split was bloody pathetic..they could at least a have had few arguments, like a normal couple...was it too much to ask? But no...Richard was too bloody civil even for that. A quiet break up and a few calls on Christmas and birthdays, that was Richard’s way of doing things...It was better like this, actually...Lat thing she needed right now was a clingy ex...Then what business did he have asking Lewis about her? No, it wasn’t that...It was Lewis who had run his mouth. It was just like him to do that.

Oh, well...she couldn’t be mad at Lewis, of all people... the man had been her editor for nearly a decade, a good friend,who cared about her almost as much as a father would...The first one to tell her her academic books could have a broader audience, the first one to trust she could write best-selling books that were also serious academic works. And she was the one who introduced him to Richard and convinced him to take a look at his first historical novel...Lewis had been there when Evelyn and Richard started dating, and he had been there when they broke up. Evelyn knew he cared deeply for both her and Richard. Maybe he imagined giving Richard some news of her whereabouts was no big deal...

Still, what could Richard possibly want with her now?As if her moving to England was some sort of big news he needed to call her about. He hadn’t even called when her father died, why now?

She reached for the phone and dialed her mother´s number absent-mindedly. The line was busy.

"Oh, typical Mrs. Black...calls me demanding I call her and when I do...she’s probably gossiping with some of her church-lady friends..." She sneered, dialling Emmet’s home number "Hey, Fin! Just got your message. Yeah, I’m living in Cokeworth. Just twenty minutes from Manchester. You’re gonna come see me some time, right? I’ll call you tonight and explain everything, ok? Love you"

Evelyn took a deep breath, wondering if she should call Richard...But what was the point? They didn’t have anything to say to each other two and a half years ago, why should they bother to talk now? No, definitely better not to call. If he had anything important to say he’d call again. As soon as Evelyn hang up and moved to go upstairs for a much needed shower, the phone rang again.

"Hello...Oh, hi, mam...Mam, I JUST called you! I did!" Evelyn took a deep breath "Mam, I was about to take a shower, can you make it quick, please? No I’m not avoiding you..Mam..mam, listen..."

Evelyn shook her head, mentally rehearsing the perfect protest that would make her mother cut the conversation short and let her get in the shower. Oh, sod it, she would just tell her she had a job interview...fine it was just on the next day, but she didn’t have to know that. Half truths...they always
work...particularly for overbearing parents.

Minerva put her cup on the coffee table and took a deep breath. Severus had just given her a rather detailed report of the night before, including all the information he had gathered on Ms Black’s family and she was very much inclined to agree with him. Her grandfather had to be the very same Marius Black that had been disowned from the Black family in 1929 and never heard of again. A man called Marius Black, born in London, who left home at age 14...that box with the Black family coat of arms on it, Violette Black’s letters addressed to him...There was no other explanation possible.

"So you believe her grandfather told her about the wizarding world...in the form of fairy tales?"

"Yes...rather cunning of him if I may say so..."

"But to what purpose?"

"That´s precisely what I was wondering...but I think I may have an explanation for that..."

"You do?"

"While I was there, Ms. Black decided to leave me alone for a second...to take a shower or something"

"With you there?"

"Well is not like I was in the bathroom with her, for Merlin´s sake...."

"Of course not. That´s not what I meant..." Minerva laughed softly

"Well, yeah... for somebody so smart she can be dreadfully trusting. She seems to have a bit of an obsession with cleanliness as well and couldn’t bear smelling of onions...silly woman..."

"Oh, you men just don´t get it do you?"

"Get what, Minerva?"

"Never mind, go on"

"Well, as I was alone in her living room I..." Severus was interrupted by soft knocks on the door.

"Where on Earth is this silly cat? Always disappearing on me..." Evelyn munched on her sandwich, newspaper in one hand, glass of orange juice on the other, precariously toddling around on her pair or high heeled green pumps, straps still unbuckled, because she apparently had waken up with a death wish today.
She had a full day ahead of her, if she wanted to make room for that job interview in the next morning. Still had to drop her resumé on a couple more places, buy some more stuff the house still needed, take care of paperwork, look for some pots and seeds for the garden, find somewhere she could have the garden furniture restored, pick up a package Cat sent her since, for whatever reason the mail wasn’t delivered in Spinner’s End, which reminded here she still had to rent a post office box and she had to be back home by 4pm to get the new bookcase she had bough for the office upstairs, which she had yet to start organising...Her mother had kept her on the phone for more than half an hour, so she had to take the quickest shower she remembered taking since the days she used to wake up early and hangover for morning classes at college and have her breakfast while getting dressed...And Ciarán just up and disappeared.

"Of course... he’s gotta be in the backyard..." She walked out, swallowing a last sip of juice, completely forgetting to let go of the newspaper, and almost tripping on her shoe straps. She looked around, but as far as she could see there was nothing in the backyard except for the old rusty furniture and desolate dry bushes. She sat down on the bench to buckle her shoes before she fell flat on her face, cursing softly under her breath. Only then did she notice there was a pack of cigarettes laying there abandoned on the bench.

"How did...Oh, Severus. He must have left this here yesterday. Speaking of which...Maybe Ciarán is over there again. Well, it won’t hurt to ask..."

"You better get that, Severus. It could be your neighbour..."

"You think?" He let out sardonically, walking towards the door

Minerva smirked, before returning to her animagus form, which caused Ciarán to jump from the couch and run to the other side of the room

"Great...surrounded with cats and all of them are out to torment me...I’m pretty sure I had a nightmare like this once"

"Hello!" He opened the door to find none other than Evelyn Black, as predicted. Smiling that broad and solar smile of hers, wearing a white and green paisley dress under a heavy jacket, back to wearing ridiculously high heels, and holding a newspaper in her hand. He didn’t know much about the Irish, but did they have any kind of tradition that forbid repeating an outfit or was it just her?

"Hello, Ms. Black. Can I help you?"

"You could stop calling me 'Ms. Black' for starters...as I asked you yesterday"

"I told you, I’d try" he forced a half smile

"Not trying hard enough are we?"

"I assume you´re looking for your cat?"

"Yes. He seems to like spending time with you..."

"Yeah, possibly...he´s right th..." before he could tell her where the cat was she walked in, not
bothering to wait for an invitation,

"There you are you little..." Before she got to the corner of the room where a still suspicious Ciarán stood, the silver taby on the couch caught her attention "You never told me you had a cat!"

"What? Oh...no, that is...not my cat"

"Then...are you running a cat shelter or something like that?" she laughed

"She just...appeared..."

"Aw, is a she?" Evelyn walked over to the silver tabby, gently petting her head, causing Ciarán to jump around her a little, as if trying to get his owner’s attention "Shh, Ciarán, behave! She’s gorgeous...Poor thing must be lost, look at this fur, she’s well taken care of...What are you gonna do with her?"

"Don’t worry, she’ll...find her way..." Severus rolled his eyes, mildly annoyed. Bloody hell... was Minerva purring? The Hogwarts headmistress had made it her mission for the day to drive him bonkers, apparently.

"You’re taking her to a shelter?"

"I guess..."

Evelyn picked Ciarán up and walked back to the door, which Severus was still holding open, in a vain hope that it would make her leave more quickly. How foolish of him to trust her common sense.

"If only I didn’t have my hands full with this boy here, I might take her with me...She’s so lovely."

"Oh trust me...you don’t want her around you all day...you’d loose your mind in no time... " Minerva hissed softly, causing him to smirk "See?"

"Oh, well...Let me know what happens to her...and you left this in my backyard last night." She handed him the pack of cigarettes.

"So that’s where I left them. I knew I couldn’t be having a premature onset of Alzeimers just yet. Thank you."

"You’re welcome...Uh...I gotta get going...Oh, by the way..."

"Yes?..."

"I don’t know if it may interest you but..." she stood awkwardly, shifting on her feet "I noticed you have a small Salvador Dali poster over there...."

"Yes...it’s from...my student days" Severus let out quietly. It was a little replica of Dali’s "Persistence of memory" that he and Lily had gotten in a local book store when they went there to buy some comic books...he had just forgotten it was still on that silly looking picture frame on the shelf next to his history books. He and Lily would always go this old book store and snoop around the art books, making silly comments on pieces of modern art.

They had discovered Salvador Dali together and he quickly became their favorite. His works just had that fantastical, nonsensical quality about it, that appealed to a pair of young wizards growing up in the 70s, heads filled with magic and psychedelic fantasies. That day they had bought two little posters of "Persistence of memory", one for himself another for Lily...then they went back to Lily’s
home, stole a couple of old clocks her mother didn't want anymore and spend the rest of the afternoon trying to use magic to melt them so they'd look just like the picture.

"I see...Uh...I was reading the newspaper this morning and...there's a Dali exhibition opening in Manchester this week. I thought it might interest you..." she handed him the newspaper

"Oh, I see...I...appreciate the thought, Ms. Black"

"I.. I gotta go now. Sorry for the inconvenience again. Bye!"

Severus closed the door and turned to the silver tabby cat leisurely sitting on his couch.

"You can stop now, Minerva" The Headmistress shifted back to human form, as he returned to his armchair

"Are you going?"

"Where?"

"This art exhibition..."

"Why should I?"

"Because you were just invited..."

"No, I wasn't..."

"Don't be silly, Severus...she just invited you..."

"Minerva, please..."

"All right. Be like this..."

"As I was saying...yesterday, as I was alone in her living room I found Marius Black's box as you know...with the letters."

"Yes..."

"Minerva...I need to ask you a favour...I need you to check if Hogwarts ever sent an acceptance letter to the city of Doolin, in Ireland...addressed to a boy by the name of Paul Black...probably born in the late 50s or early 60s"

"Paul Black? Who is Paul Black..." Minerva's clear eyes widened suddenly "...don't tell me..."

"Evelyn Black's older brother..."
Chapter Summary

Evelyn settles into her new life and Severus does what he does best: investigate and spy. As it turns out Marius Black didn’t simply ‘vanish’ when the Blacks banished him for his squib status.

October, 6th
Blackrock, Dublin, Ireland
Emmet Finnerty’s apartment

It was Doug’s turn to cook tonight. Emmet didn’t know what had possessed him to agree to this "shared cooking" arrangement. Douglas was a wonderful man of many qualities, but gastronomic talent wasn’t among them; still Emmet couldn’t really bring himself to tell him that his cooking was just plain horrible. Not that Emmet was a regular chef de cuisine, but at least he could fry an egg without exploding anything...In any case nobody could accuse him of being a man of little faith: he truly hoped that one day, with enough practice, Doug would learn. Evelyn’s mother even sent him some beginner cooking books and he had been studying them religiously. Emmet just hoped their kitchen would endure Doug’s practice without burning to the ground.

Emmet tried to focus on selecting the photos he was going to bring to the newsroom of the Irish Times the following day. Some silly segment on a new avant garde artist doing some run of the mill Irish-nationalism themed exhibition. He was as proudly Irish as anybody else, but if he saw one more artistic reference to the Potato famine or the Bloody sunday massacre of 1972, he was going to scream. Spreading the photos on his work table and ignoring the racket coming from the kitchen, Emmet tried to forget the phone that insisted on not ringing. Evelyn had left him a message this morning saying she would call in the evening. It was almost 9pm and nothing.... It wasn’t like him to treat her like a little girl who couldn’t take care of herself, but then again it wasn’t like her to just move out of the country without telling anybody.

The noise in the kitchen stopped for a second and he heard the door of the office open slowly behind him. He turned to see Doug standing there, wearing that silly t-shirt that read "warning: objects under kilt may be larger than they appear" which he insisted on wearing all the time, regardless of wether or not he was wearing a kilt. Doug looked at him seriously, lightly scratching his stubbly beard as he used to do whenever he was worried.

"Ready to order a pizza ? " Emmet smiled

"Very funny, Fin...Got a shepperds pie in the oven. Give it a chance, ye man of little faith. " Douglas smirked, his scottish accent coming out mockingly thick

"Please, don’t tell me you’re using Sophia’s recipe. It’s culinary suicide trying to duplicate her shepperds pie, unless your name is Evelyn or Caitlin....Must be a genetic thing...Ambition shall be your undoing."
"Fin, love..Ambitin is my middle name. How do you think I made it as network producer? A simple sheperds pie shouldn’t be a problem for yours truly here"

"My God, you even suck at bragging..." Emmet laughed with gusto.

"Made you laugh at least...As for the recipe, don’t worry...Evelyn simplified that one for me last time she was here,remember?"

"You know Evelyn’s idea of ‘simple cooking’ is way into Darina Allen territory, right?"

"Douglas 'ambitious' Leigh, baby " he smirked " Speaking of the devil...has she called yet?" Douglas walked over and took a seat next to him.

"No...not yet. I’m telling you, this is not like her at all..."

"What did her sister tell you, anyway?"

"Some convoluted story about a family inheritance...a house in England nobody knew about till now" Emmet pinched the bridge of his nose " The truth is...since her father died, Lyn has been a bit all over the place...Actually, scratch that, since her grandfather died...She broke up with Richard, then old Marius died, she went back to Doolin, then Marius Jr. Died, and there’s her sister’s ex-husband being a nuisance all the time...I swear, is like she hasn’t had a second of peace in these last two years. Now going to England because of some house inherited...Yeah, like I believe it..."

"You’re overreacting...Evelyn has more sense than you and I combined. So what she went to England? Maybe Ireland wasn’t giving her what she needed...This will be a fresh new start for her, you’ll see." Douglas gave his hand a gentle pat.

"I hope you’re right, but..." Emmet was interrupted mid-sentence by the sound of the telephone.

"Must be her. See? Told you not to worry "Douglas smiled broadly and walked out as Fin hurriedly picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Fin!"

"About time, woman!"

"Oh, no...not you too. I get enough crap from my mother about not calling her"

"I’m NOT your mother...which is precisely why I expect you to call me more often."

"Ok, ok...point taken. But if it’s any consolation, you’re not the only one I haven’t been calling. Things have bee crazy"

"Yeah, it happens when you move out of the fecking country. How did THAT happen?"

"Cat hasn’t told you?"

"She told me something about a house your grandfather owned in England. How come nobody knew about that?And did you have to go an move into it?"

"Are you sitting down? If not, go ahead and take a seat, ’cause it will be a long story"

"Go for it..." Emmet let out, as a stream of Scottish curses came from the kitchen " I have the
"slightly feeling Doug will have to re-start dinner from scratch"

"Oh, so Doug is still living there?"

"Oh, shut up. The way you say it, it makes me look like a manwhore."

"Well, dear friend...There was a time..."

"Evelyn, what happened in the 80s stays in the 80s. Now about this mysterious house...I hope to God there’s at least one ghost there or something...Please make the story interesting"

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Doolin, Ireland

Sophia Black’s house

"I know, mam!" Caitlin let out an exasperated sigh. She has lost track of how many times her mother had corrected her cooking. No matter how uncomplicated a mere Colcannon was, Sophia had to treat it like it was some sacred ritual. Even Evelyn who was a better cook than Caitlin couldn’t escape the eternal bawselessness of their mother. Come to think of it, Evelyn probably was the reason her mother was so much more annoying tonight than she usually was. Since Sophia had called Lyn this morning she had been cranky...Caitlin had to wonder what they talked about. She turned off the stove and reached for the marinated salmon fillets, looking over her shoulder to check on her daughters.

Alice, age six, and Lizzie, age three had been sitting quietly on the kitchen table, working on some pictures to send to their aunt in England. If there was a winning combination for keeping the two girls quiet it was crayons, colored glue, glitter and the mention of Evelyn’s name. Ever since they had learned their aunt was going to live in another country, the two girls didn’t talk about anything else...They kept asking about England, about Manchester, about great-grandpa Marius’ mysterious house and asking when was auntie Lyn going to invite them over to visit her there. Drawing a few pictures to send Evelyn so she could use them to decorate her new house was a sureproof way of getting them to sit down and focus while she cooked dinner. It was as if knowing those colorful drawings would be in Lyn’s house was almost as good as visiting her in person.

"How are auntie Lyn’s new pictures coming out?"

"Look, mama!" Lizzie beamed, raising her drawing above her head "I drew grandma’s house! And this is me, and Alice, you, grandma and grandpa!"

"Great!" Cat let out faintly, looking at her mother’s pained expression. Lizzie knew her grandpa had gone to heaven, but at three years of age she couldn’t really see the problem in drawing him in a family picture. In her young mind, drawing him with a pair of wings hovering over the house’s ceiling was enough of an adjustment.

"And you, Alice?"

"Drawing the play we had at school..."she let out distractedly, her big brown eyes focused on the paper "Auntie Lyn wasn’t there to see it."

"Oh, that’s a very thoughtful idea...Auntie Lyn will love both of them" Caitlin smiled, starting to prepare the salmon. She was all too aware of her mother hovering over her shoulder and walking around the kitchen like a restless spirit. "Is everything ok, mam?"
Sophia looked deeply into her daughter’s hazel eyes with her crystalline blue ones in that same way she did when Cat was a child...That deep serious look that wrecked any attempt of lying or hiding anything. "The eye of Sauron" as she and Evelyn jokingly called it

"Have you talked to your sister?"

"Yes, yesterday. You called her today, didn’t you?"

"Yes"

"Then, what’s the matter?"

"Nothing...But don’t you think is all too strange? That house over there..."

"Yeah, it IS strange. Isn’t that precisely the reason Lyn is there? To see what is up with that house and all?"

"Then why do I get this uneasy feeling about the whole thing?"

"Mam, please...Is not like Lyn has never lived away from home. Remember the ten years or so she lived in Dublin?"

"Dublin is not England. It’s another country, she doesn’t know anybody there...and their food is horrible...and this Cokeworth seems to be a hellhole, I heard they even have a serious gang problem there, is no place for a woman living on her own"

"Of course" Cat smirked "Poor Lyn is among barbaric Englishfolk..."

"Well, excuse me for worrying about my daughter. But yes, now that you mention, I’m not well at ease with any child of mine living in England, there I said it."

"Sheesh, mam...England is just fine, she said Cokeworth is a perfectly livable place, she cooks her own food and there’s a neighbour right next door who seems like a perfectly good man...relax"

"A perfectly good man? Then how come I haven’t heard of this perfectly good man through your sister?"

"Oh, crap."

"Mama, you said a bad word! You need to put a coin in the jar!" Alice told her seriously

"It’s ok, love. Mama has alread put a 20 pound note in there this morning, I got credit" she dismissed the child’s worries with a flick of wrist and turned back to her mother "Mam, you’re not gonna overreact about this, are you?"

"Should I?" Sophia raised a sharp eyebrow "Cat, who is this person and why hasn’t Evelyn told me about him?"

"Maybe because you think English people are all godless barbarians who worship the devil and eat little kids? Besides he’s just a neighbour, what is there to tell?"

"The English eat little kids, mam?" Lizzie turned to her with her green eyes wide as saucers, strawberry blonde waves bouncing about her face.

"No, stupid" Alice corrected her sister, tucking a lock of brown hair behind her ear and rolling her eyes "these are ogres. The English are the ones who have funny hats and a queen instead of a
"Alice, don’t call your sister stupid, is not nice. And Lizzie, your sister is right: the ogres are the ones who eat little kids, not the English. Unless it’s an English ogre. Now will you let mam and gran talk, please?" Cat turned back to her mother, indignant " See what you make me do? Now my kid thinks the English are cannibals! "

"And who is this man anyways?" Sophia blurted out, taking over the frying pan and pushing Cat aside.

"Her neighbour! The person who lives next door to her. Should I draw a picture?" Cat let out, frustratedly, crossing her arms over her chest " I think he’s the son of the woman she was looking for...Eileen something "

"...and?"

"What do you mean 'and'? Jesus, mom, he’s her neighbour and the son of the woman who owned the house next to grandpa’s house, what else do you want?"

"A name? Is he married, does he work...for all we know he could be a criminal"

"I can’t believe you want to run a background check on the bloke who lives next door to Lyn " Caitlin rolled her eyes and tried to ignore her mother’s nagging " Ok, girls, enough drawing for now. Put everything away and help mommy with the plates, will you?"

"Aunt Lyn has a boyfriend?" Lizzie let out, as Cat helped her with the papers and crayons

"I sure hope not" Sophia sneered from her corner of the kitchen, making Cat give her a nasty look

"Well, mam. I happen to think Lyn could use a new boyfriend. Time enough since the KeenanGate... and you are the one trying to run a background check on the very first man she runs into in Cokeworth, so who’s jumping the gun?"

"So, auntie Lyn has an English boyfriend?" Alice asked, seemingly amused by the concept, if only because it annoyed her grandmoter so much

"Is he an ogre?" Lizzie almost screamed, her face full of surprise

"Ok, now...NOBODY has a new boyfriend, English or not...unfortunately. And mam, relax. I’m sure he’s not a criminal or a cannibal. In fact he seems like a perfectly fine gentleman and in the name of everything that is holy and sanctified: being English is not a character flaw! Now please, can we try to act like a normal family and have dinner?"

October, 7th
Dublin, Ireland
Ireland Times building, Tara St.

Emmet ran into the lift before the doors closed. He had just left the photos of the exhibit with the editor of the culture section of the Ireland Times and now he had to meet with this woman who was about to launch a fashion event, and somebody had given her his number...Way across town in some fancy restaurant...might have to pick up something to eat on the way there if he didn’t want to starve.
As the floor numbers passed by his eyes, Emmet’s mind drifted back to that bizarre conversation he had with Evelyn the night before.

Evelyn’s grandfather was English, everybody in Doolin knew that. Even though he was pretty much like everybody else and sometimes even acted more like a born and bred Irishman than many, everybody knew he was English. He had never completely lost his accent and the older people in town still remembered when he arrived in Doolin, a lonely and pale teenager with fathomless grey eyes, bringing nothing but a trunk and the clothes on his body…All people knew about his life before coming to Ireland was that he was from London and his family had been rich, or at the very least well off…He was too polished, too well-mannered. His way of carrying himself, his way of speaking, the things he knew about the world, the books he read, the music he listened to, the importance he gave to appropriate behaviour and manners…Not to mention he had obviously received an excellent education, he could do any sort of accounting with the same ease he discussed politics and he even spoke French and some Latin…Nobody could understand how such a man would find himself in the Irish countryside, making a living as a fisherman, that is until he got married to a local girl and took over his father-in-law’s grocery store.

There were people who swore he came from a noble family and had been disowned for reasons that ranged from falling in love with somebody he shouldn’t, to some sort of heinous crime, but none of such assertions was ever taken seriously by anybody who met old Marius in person. Emmet remembered going to school with Paul, Evelyn’s older brother, and visiting old Marius after classes to hear his amazing stories of wizards and witches. He had some strange books about magic too. As a child, Emmet was convinced old Marius was some sort of wizard or even a witchhunter. Growing up he saw he was an eccentric man, with unusual intellectual interests that only made him all the more interesting to converse with. Evelyn was a lot like him, actually…That same intellectual prowess, kindness and patrician aplomb. Maybe because old Marius was nothing short of the most decent and respectable man Emmet had ever met, his mysterious English past was never a question for him. Actually it was never a question for anybody. The Blacks were jokingly called ‘The Royal family’ by many of their friends, a number that included Emmet’s own family, and it wasn’t out of spite, but pure and simple respect: old Marius was nothing short of a perfect gentleman, as was his son Marius Jr, Evelyn’s father. Emmet couldn’t imagine Marius Black doing anything wrong or malicious, therefore he never wondered what had made him leave his country and come to Ireland. To him he was just Paul and Evelyn’s grandfather, who was elegant, polite, told fun stories and let them eat cakes with jasmine tea before dinner.

Maybe that was the reason that whole story about a house in Cokeworth, mysterious letters and a family tree with a coat of arms on it just sounded entirely too crazy. Emmet, just as everybody else, had become used to the idea that old Marius Black was a fixture of Doolin, as much as O’Connor’s pub or the Cliffs of Moher…Everybody knew he was English and yet nobody could imagine him being anything other that the proud Doolin citizen he had always been. Nobody wondered about his previous life. And yet, he had a previous life that not even his family knew anything about. Emmet couldn’t fault Evelyn for trying to discover more. He would do exactly the same thing if he were in her shoes. And he couldn’t shake the feeling that something was very wrong in all that. Maybe he’d have to do some investigating of his own. He was actually mildly offended that Evelyn hadn’t asked for his help. She probably wanted to go about it her own way…Oh, well. Emmet was a photojournalist… barging in uninvited was one of his greatest talents.

He looked down at his watch and realised he had plenty of time to stop for coffee. Walking out of the building, he slowed down his step when he heard a familiar voice calling his name. Emmet looked around and saw a tall, lean man with sandy blond hair and glasses, wearing a boring grey suit with an even more boring light blue shirt. He stopped, mildly annoyed. Richard Keenan. Evelyn’s embarrassment of an ex-boyfriend. Emmet thought he’d never see him again after he had voluntarily checked out of Evelyn’s life even as a friend. Alas, no such luck.
"Hey, Fin" Richard blurted out, walking up to him" Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Walk and talk, Keenan" Emmet rushed his step, forcing Richard to follow him

"Can we stop for coffee at least?"

"I gotta run."

"Five minutes."

"Well, you’re just gonna follow me around till I say yes, aren’t you? Ok, fine. Coffee is on you and make it quick"

Emmet leisurely strolled towards the nearest coffee place and chose a table, never bothering to see wether Richard was following him or not. A waiter approached them as they sat down and handed them two menus. Emmet quickly glanced over the list of coffee based beverages and pointed out the most expensive on the list, without much caring what it was...something with amarula, chocolate and whipped cream with some pseudo-French name that cost ludicrous 15 pounds.

"Actually, make it two...Handsome here is paying" he smirked "And please make it to go. This won’t take long"

"Can you please, stop the shenanigans?"

"Oh, please, Keenan. You pretty much stalked me all the way to work, and you dare call shenanigans on me? Least you can do is get me a lousy cup of coffee for my troubles..."

"I didn’t talk you. We used to be friends. Remember? I know where you usually work and I had to talk to you. Enough with the scene"

"Well said, we USED TO BE friends. And yet, here you are, for reasons you and I both know well. Now just go ahead say what you came here to say, because I know you’re not here on account my lovely eyes and charming personality"

Richard took a deep breath and rested his elbows on the table, nervously entwining his fingers over the tabletop. "Lewis told me Lyn moved to England."

"Then Lewis has a big mouth...so what? Were you expecting to be invited to the open house party?"

"I called her yesterday....she never answered. I’m worried. I just wanted to know if she’s doing ok over there"

"Worried?...So, suddenly you care? Interesting it only took you two years to develop that ability. Quite remarkable if you ask me..."

"Ok, fine. " Richard’s grey eyes narrowed, his voice taking on a venomous tone "I got your point, I’m a jerk. Spare me the outraged gay friend routine."

"Well, first: yes you’re a jerk, glad to know we can agree on something. " Emmet lowered his voice almost to a hiss as the waiter came back with their drinks "Second: I’m not gonna give you the ‘outraged gay friend routine’ as you call it because I’m in the middle of a work day and quite frankly, it’s not worth the trouble. So what are we doing here anyway, other than wasting time?"

"Finnerty, I don’t want to argue about wether or not my behaviour with Lyn was appropriate...we
"I've been over that..." Richard took his glasses off, his eyes boring into Emmet's "But damnit, I care about her. I just want to know if she’s ok!"

"Why wouldn’t she be? Just because she moved? What does that ever have to do with you? You didn’t even call her when her father died, remember? Now that she moved to England you’re suddenly concerned?"

"She moved out of the country without giving anybody an explanation. Don’t tell me you weren’t worried as well!"

"Correction: she moved without giving YOU an explanation. As well she shouldn’t. The world doesn’t fecking revolve around you, Keenan! Now, please stop this, for your own sake, just stop. Do you even realize how that makes you look, asking ME about Lyn? What are we? In High School? Do yourself a favour and get over it. Thanks for the coffee, by the way" Emmet grabbed the disposable cup, closed it with the lid and stood up to leave when Richard reached for his arm.

"I know what you think about me, but believe it or not I care about her."

Emmet roughly removed his arm from his grip and walked away, without even bothering with an answer. Silly Richard really had fooled himself into thinking he cared about anyone other himself, the poor man.

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Lewis Murray’s office, St Stephen’s Green

Lewis Murray leaned over the papers that lined his work desk, pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, and ran his fingers through his white mane of hair. New author’s letters, novel chapters, editorial correspondence, notes, books...he could barely figure out how he kept track of it all... And yet, the massive mess of papers piling up in his office always managed somehow, to find some type of organisation, almost as if by magic. Method in chaos. But today he knew he wasn’t going to find what he wanted there: The latest chapter of Richard Keenan’s new novel, the first one after he and Evelyn had broken up. Lewis didn’t really want to think Richard’s slow process had anything to do with it...After all, two years had passed by since they had separated, he should be over it by now.

Richard was the kind of author Lewis had the most trouble dealing with. Not that Lewis couldn’t handle the eventual moody intellectual...in fact, he lived for this kind of challenge...It was not that. Richard was actually a method writer, the kind of author who would always have at least ten pages to show for any given meeting. But he was insecure...too insecure for his own good. He still remembered when Evelyn had asked him to read one of Richard’s novels, and give him an honest opinion. Lewis read it and his honest opinion was: Richard Keenan is a man of genuine literary talent. Lewis decided to edit his books because he truly believed they had solid quality writing. But somehow, Richard himself, never seemed to believe it.

Lewis couldn’t fault him for feeling a little bit insecure, at least on what concerned their professional relationship. Lewis and Evelyn had a long history working together. He had read her first book "Witchtrial in Ireland" almost a decade ago and had fallen in love with her work. A historian with legitimate professional credentials who could write a deep historic research that read as pleasantly as novel. She was Lewis’ Holy Grail. For years he had pursued the dream of making academic works more appealing to a broader audience without having to dumb them down and Evelyn Teresa Black was exactly what the doctor prescribed: a young and competent historian, who was pretty and charismatic enough to make readers want to buy her books even if they had no interest whatsoever in history. Lewis had hunted her down and badgered until he got her to be one of his authors. Actually she became his ‘pet author’, the apple of his eye... a best selling academic writer....Over time she also
became a dear friend. Evelyn had a way with people, particularly her elders and figures of authority...maybe because she was so close to her father and grandfather, and growing up with an older brother, she just had this way of making people do her bidding without even noticing, that innefable and dangerous charm some women have that makes men think they are in charge, when in reality they are just being bossed around, and happily...A talent typical of daddy girls like her.

She was the one that introduced Richard to Lewis. She was the one who helped him get a deal with a major publishing house. She was the one who helped him with the research of his most successful books, she even booked his meeting and events... Richard just couldn´t deal well with the fact that Evelyn was the one helping his career. His girlfriend acting as his manager proved a bit too much for somebody with his insecurity issues. He couldn´t see her as a partner, who loved him and wanted to make his talent acknowledged. Instead he started to feel emasculated by her. And that blinded him to the fact that Evelyn genuinely tought he was a good writer and wanted him to be sucessful, even if she had a little bit of an overbearing way to go about it. She couldn’t help it, Evelyn suffered from what Lewis liked to call "super-mummy syndrome ", she just felt like she had to always take care of everybody she loved. But Richard didn’t see things this way. At some point he started to see her a competition...She had more charisma than he did, more contacts than he did, her books sold more than his occasionally... mostly because her books were targeted to a very specific audience, while he was competing in a much larger niche. She was a medieval historian, he was a novel writer...there was no comparison, but he failed to understand that, and eventually pushed her out of his life, both emotionally and professionally.

And that’s what worried Lewis. After the break up, Richard had become erratic...Evelyn helped him focus. He was a bit of an airhead intellectual, having her around to help with the most practical aspects of his professional life had been a blessing to him, but now he even had trouble meeting his deadlines, something that never happened before. Lewis didn’t know if it was because he still loved her and wasn’t over the clumsy break-up, or if he needed Evelyn around to manage his professional life. But regardless, he better shape up and do something about it.

The phone rang and Lewis distractedly hit the speakerphone.

" Mr. Keenan is here. "

" Let him in, thank you "

Lewis looked up from the mountain of papers to see a slightly dishevelled and more than slightly tense Richard make his way in, his long limbs looking even ganglier than usual as he walked up to his desk briskly.

" Well, you don’t look too good... "

" I’m fine, Lewis. "

" Anything I can do for you, son ? "

" Yes " Richard sat down " I know I already asked you to postpone my deadline... "

" Richard, please...When was the last time you actually met a deadline ? Is there anything you want to tell me ? "

" No, is just... "

" I knew I shouldn’t have told you about Evelyn moving... "

" This has nothing to do with Evelyn "

" Mr. Keenan is here. "

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" No, is just... "

" I knew I shouldn’t have told you about Evelyn moving... "

" This has nothing to do with Evelyn "
"Richard, don´t even. I know you well enough..."

"It´s not. At least not in the way you think."

"Oh, do enlighten me...What is the 'way I think'?"

"I know you think I somehow need Evelyn to hold my hand through the whole process..."

"I don´t think that...But I´m starting to think you do"

"Lewis..." Richard sighed, and his voice became a whisper "...I miss her. I really do and it has nothing to do with 'the process'"

"It´s been two years, Richard. I tought you were seeing someone else"

"I was...but... I don´t know what´s happening to me, I just keep thinking about her lately..."

"You know what your problem is?" Lewis told him in a soft, almost paternal, tone "You need to trust yourself a little more. Evelyn always trusted you, and that was exactly the reason she was always on your case about being confident, going out there and making things happen. And since you don´t have her around to tell you this, you feel like you need her back. But is time you stop relying on other people to convince yourself you have genuine talent. You´re a big boy for Christ´s sake"

"Is not just that. That´s not the only reason I´ve been thinking about her....You know I...I screwed up everything with her. I know I did. I can´t help but think that, I should make things right somehow. I wanted us to be friends and I know I haven´t exactly been a good friend to her...with everything she´s been going through"

"Great. Then call her, look for her if you want...Say you´re sorry about everything, say you want to be there for her as a friend, talk this out...but, please move on. Trust me, whatever it is that happened between the two of you, she´s over it...it´s time you are too"
Chapter Summary

Everybody has ghosts in their past and sometimes they come back… Evelyn and Severus try to pretend everything is fine while bonding over tea and common interests.

October, 7th

Cokeworth, England

The newspaper Ms. Black had brought him laid on the couch, exactly where he had left it the day before. Severus picked it up, sipping his coffee distractedly. Salvador Dali....This brought back memories. He could still remember the scent of new books in that bookstore downtown where he and Lily would spend hours on end at least once a week. It was a small shop that also sold comic books, posters and art prints, a local landmark that had closed just like so many small businesses in Cokeworth did when the mill was closed. In the 80s Cokeworth became a ghost town. Without the mill there was nothing left for more than half the townspeople who depended on it directly or indirectly. The ones who were better off and had jobs in Manchester or Oldham fared better, but it took the city as a whole almost a decade to start getting back on its feet. And even now, Cokeworth was still nothing to be praised. Still a half-dead filthy town living on the shadow of Manchester.

But when he and Lily were children things weren’t as bad. They weren’t good either, but one could live. They’d play in the park near the church, under the watchful eye of Father Thomas. Lily’s family was anglican and moderately practicing while the Snapes had never bothered with religion at all, seen as his parents were more often than not too busy arguing and assaulting each other to care about something as superfluous as spirituality. But even tough neither of the children was a part of his congregation Father Thomas had always been kind to them. As he was to all the kids who played in that park. And concerned...Good grief, the poor man was always worried...Always asking them if their parents knew where they were(as if Severus’ parents would even care), and warning them not to stay out too late...sometimes he’d invite them to events at the church. Nothing religious, just little parties and get togethers...Severus’ mother had gotten most of his toys from Father Thomas’ toy drives...Used toys other children didn’t want anymore, but Eileen always commented on how Father Thomas made sure they were clean and in perfect state. But back then Severus didn’t care much about his kindness...he didn’t care much about anybody that wasn’t Lily, really. Even as an young man, whenever he ran into the priest, the two barely exchanged two words, if that much...Severus wondered if he was still in that church. It had been so long since he last saw him, maybe some ten years...He probably was...When Severus was a child, Father Thomas was barely in his forties, a blond and stocky dynamo with bright blue eyes.

Whenever Severus and Lily weren’t busy running amok the park driving the good Father to the brink of insanity or exploring the woods near Spinner’s End, they’d be in that little bookshop. They hardly ever bought anything, except the occasional cheap comic book or postcard, but the people who worked there saw nothing wrong with letting two moderately well behaved children sit around and snoop around the books. Thinking back that might have contributed to their running out of business...those people were too bloody nice to non paying-costumers. Their art section was Severus and Lily’s little private paradise. The books were big and printed in nice paper, with gorgeous hardcovers. They never bothered with the text but the pictures...oh, the pictures...They ate them all...
up. Their favorite pasttime was ignoring the titles and trying to make alternative stories for the pictures. Goya’s "Saturn eating his children" became a horrible ogre plaguing a medieval village, until it was defeated by Anthony Van Dyck’s "Equestrian portrait of Charles I"; Van Gogh’s "Starry night over the Rhone” became a nightly party of fairies celebrating the wedding of their queen and Renoir’s "Luncheon at the boating party” was an ever changing collection of short stories that developed into a true novel with so many twists and turns Severus could barely remember them all. He couldn’t suppress a small laugh at the thought of the dreadfully silly stories the nude paintings inspired, and how uncomfortable he was when puberty approached and they started to get to him...Maybe Severus should have tried to access his father’s dirty mags more often... The Spaniards proved to be the best providers of wild storytelling inspirations, tough... Dali and Goya in particular...both of them had been the source of the most flamboyant fantasy and horror stories Severus and Lily could think up.

Severus lost track of how many hours he and Lily had spend looking at those art books...then they’d come home and scribble the stories they had made up in loose sheets of paper, complete with drawings. Sometimes they bought little postcard-sized reproductions and cut them up to make collages. For some reason he had never cut up his little reproduction of Dalí’s "Persistence of memory". Sometimes they’d even roleplay the stories in Lily’s backyard. They’d create worlds together...and Severus was sure they’d spend the rest of their lives creating worlds...creating their own world, just for the two of them...a world filled with adventure, joy and...love. Even as a child he dared imagine it... Alas, it was not to be. That old bookstore had disappeared almost at the same time as his dreams and hopes of love. 1980. Lily had married James Potter...Severus came back to Spinner’s End on the eve of their marriage in a masochistic quest to walk the places of their childhood. The bookshop had a « closed » sign on it...Through the filthy glass windows he could see the empty bookcases inside, filled with nothing but dust...Their kings, princesses, monsters and knights gone...never to return.

He looked down at add for the Dali Exhibition. It had opened the day before. "Dali and his time".....what a very mundane and cliché approach for such an unique artist. But these types of chronologically linear exhibitions often provided the viewer with a very informative and relaxing experience. Which might be precisely what Severus needed right now.

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Manchester

Being a wizard living among muggles certainly had many advantages. No need for cars or public transpotation for starters. Severus had quickly changed into a more presentable outfit and apparated to an alley, just a block away from the museum. No more than five minutes. Of course that wouldn’t save him from having to walk among a nerve-wrecking crowd of muggles on his way from that little dark alley to the museum. Severus looked around, measuring the people around him from head to toe...He should have predictited the wave of young and loud muggleswearing washed jeans, oversized sneakers and abhorrently coloured, ill fitting t-shirts...And the children...Oh dear Merlin, the children. Of course a simplistic "artist and his time" exhibition would attract families desperate to forcefeed their rebellious brats some culture and youngsters desperate to look smarter than they really were. Should have known better. Severus observed the handful of children running amok in the lawn just outside the museum. What wouldn’t he and Lily have given to be brought to the Museum more often when they were that age. Alas, Lily’s father had almost no free time on his schedule, working as an accountant for some company in Manchester Severus never cared to know anything about, and her mother wasn’t all too keen on anything remoted related to culture...and even if she was, there would never cross her mind to bring him along with her daughters. It was enough that she let him into her house...almost as if he was a little bug she couldn’t keep outside just by closing the windows. She surely saw the act of letting him in her house as an immense gesture of kindness and charity on
her part. Everytime she opened the door for him, Severus could almost hear her mentally congratulating herself for being generous to the point of allowing the kid from Spinner’s End to breathe the same air as her family. As for Severus parents. He was often more comfortable when they just forgot about him.. It was less of a hassle.

"Here we are" he stopped at the front desk in the entrace hall where a plump blonde receptionist gave him a brochure and pointed him to the ticket office. Absentmindedly, he paid for the ticket and ignored her instructions, merely nodding and walking forward...Why do museum employees always assume every single visitor is a bumbling barbarian who never set foot in a museum and needs to be guided like a semi-retarded, half-paralysed toddler?

He passed by the line of posters at the entrance hall and walked into a smaller hall where an oversized screen showed a documentary. He needed no more than a few seconds to loose interest and walk to the next room. A biographical documentary...what a very imaginative way to open an art exhibition. Severus started to wonder if the curator had purposely organised this for high-schoolers...He couldn’t think of any other explanation for that big tv showing information that anybody with half a brain could easily find in any encyclopedia. Were muggles so lazy that they needed to be spoonfed the fact that Salvador Dali was born in Catalonia, had been the leading figure of the Surrealist movement, had lived through the two great wars in addition to the Spanish Civil war, married a woman named Gala and died of heart failure in the late 80s ? God forbid one had to actually study something when you can just let a tv set do your hard work for you.

He had to admit, tough, that the selection of paintings was superbe. Of course they were arranged in a predictable chronological order, but he had to give the curator his or her due share of credit on managing to bring so many important originals. He or she must have some valuable contacts with other museums. Severus let the sound of his own footsteps lul him into a state of mindless relaxation, as the familiar pictures paraded in front of his eyes, each single one an old friend. Severus and Lily had made up little stories for so many of them, used so many of them in little collages that decorated his bedroom, and most of them were still there, in his boyhood bedroom, which he never had the heart to change since his teenage years. He couldn’t help but get this odd feeling inside his chest at the sight of the originals, hearing the whispers of his distant childhood into the echo of his own steps on the marble floor.

He distractedly paced about for some twenty minutes before deciding to move on to the next room. It was a darkened room with yet another TV set. Severus rolled his eyes...This would be a constant theme wouldn’t it ? Noticing he’d have to go pass by that room in order to move on to the next part of the exhibition, he decided to just walk through it. A wise decision considering what the tv set was showing...nonsensical animation shorts, supposedly inspired by Dali´s work. Severus was now pretty certain the curator was trying to reach out to younger audiences and desperately so...He let his eyes get used to the darkness so he could find a way out through the rows of foldable chairs that wouldn’t disturb the very few souls brave (or stupid) enough to sit through that silliness. But as he looked around something, or rather someone, familiar caught his attention. Sitting on the front row and apparently very engrossed by the whimsical animations was none other than Evelyn Black.

Severus narrowed his eyes, trying to get a better look in the semi-darkness lit by the ghostly white light of the screen. There was no mistake. He had known her for a week, but that Greek profile framed by waves of thick brown hair was unmistakable. He looked around and noticed there was a row of chairs propped against the wall, turned sideways so whoever sat on them would get a good view of the screen. He walked over and sat on one of them, a seat that gave him a perfectly clear vantage of the woman sitting a few feet away. He smirked under his breath. Was she really interested in this collection of little pretentious art-school animations? He expected more of her. Severus looked at her from head to toe with the same critical interest he would have looked at one of the statues in the Greek-Roman section of the museum....and in fact under the light of the screen she looked like
she could very well be one of them.

It was truly remarkable how even a Black who was raised in complete ignorance of her origin would still have that aura of pride common to all members of the family...the way she sat, chin up, shoulders back, her spine almost perfectly straight, feet one in front of the other forming a graceful angle with her legs and hands lying neatly on her lap...Any etiquette teacher would praise her poise. Maybe the Black family was right when they professed having a natural sense of the aristocratic running in their very veins.She was a placid picture of an enthroned Juno...at least to the untrained eye. Severus lips curled into a quiet smile...She was restless...he could see her high heeled right foot tapping the floor ever so slightly...she checked her watch discreetly and looked over to the door on the other side of the room. Poor Ms. Black...She was probably bored to a near catatonic state, and yet was entirely too proud to just stand up and leave the room. It would hurt her sense of intellectual self worth: a true academic would never under any circumstance admit to be bored by a cultural event, particularly such an avant-garde one. Typical Black pretentiousness. Or maybe she just needed a seat, Severus mused, looking at her heels...how tall were those things? Five inches at the very least. Crazy woman.

The credits started to roll and the lights were turned on, signaling for the people inside to move along to the next room so the video could be re-started for the next batch of sleepy-eyed visitors to have their love of art crushed by a collection of experiments of visual torture in the form of videotaped watercolor animation. She stood up and reached for her red trenchcoat and handbag, carelessly abandoned on the empty chair next to her, the soft shade of pink of her dress making her stand out against the dark blue walls and white chairs.

Well, time to be a good neighbour and go say hello, he tought to himself, walking up to her.

"Severus !" She beamed at him, before he could even utter a single word. He noticed her moving forward slightly, probably to shake his hand or give him that customary kiss on the cheeks women like her loved to use for greetings. He kept a certain distance, left hand inside his pocket, his coat over his right arm, holding the exhibition brochure on his free hand. That seemed to discourage Ms. Black’s sudden display of familiarity, as she took a step back, smiling uneasily. "Nice to see you here."

"Likewise. I should thank you for letting me know about this. I wasn’t aware we would be treated to a little cinematic experience in addition to the art exhibition" he told her as they entered the next exhibition room, leisurely looking at the paintings.

"Oh, dear...what was the curator thinking ? That was atrocious !" she rolled her eyes, a husky and low little laugh escaping her lips.

"I could swear you were enjoying yourself." Severus raised an ironic eyebrow

"You know when you´re driving down the road and there´s a nasty car crash ahead...and you just can´t help yourself ?" she smirked, he tone filled with a certain acidity Severus quite enjoyed.

"I understand completely. In fact morbid curiosity and a desire to look at tragic carwrecks was half the reason I became a teacher."

"That´s mean." she laughed softly, her voice getting slightly higher as she ran a hand through her mane of mahogany hair. Evelyn Black was one of those women to whom flirting came so naturally they didn´t even notice they were doing it. He had to wonder how many of her students had fallen for her over the years...Annoying as she could be, Severus imagined the number would be quite significant. Amused, he decided to play along.

"Oh, please, Ms. Black. You´re a teacher. Don´t try to convince me you never enjoyed yourself with
the pathetic and pointless endeavours of incompentent students. Nobody can possibly be that nice."

"Well, I don´t flaunt it." There was something almost snarky in her tone. Yes, definitly he was in for an entertaining afternoon.

"Fair enough. Speaking of students...Those animated atrocities...really? Whose brilliant idea was it to add student movies to a Dali exhibition ?..."

"I know, right ? That was awful. But I guess I can understand what the curator is going for... "

"And what would that be ? Brain damage experimentation without consent?"

"You´re a horrible man, you know?"

"I´ve been told." Why was he smiling?

"What I mean is...look around. How many people under 30 do you see ? Not counting kids with their parents, of course. I can see why the curator went for something that might appeal a younger audience..."

"If that´s what it takes to grab the attention of the young, it´s no wonder being an educator can be such an ordeal."

"Oh, don´t be like this. You´re here aren´t you?"

"Only because I happen to like the artist."

"Dali is good enough a reason to leave the house for anything." she looked around and sighed "This brings back some memories..."

"How so?"

"Well...You see, we don´t have a museum in Doolin. Sometimes my father would take us to Limerick or Dublin so we could visit a museum. Most of the time we had to settle for his art books... » she took a small pause, laughing softly for no appearent reason « You know what used to do ? My brother and I would get my father´s books and look at the pictures, completely ignoring the titles and..."

"...make up stories." he let out flatly, the torrent of childhood memories coming to mind again.

"Yes!Don´t tell me you did that too ?"

"Well... " Severus felt dazed for a second "is what children do, right ? Make up stories...make belief..."

"Dali was one of our two favorites..."

"Let me guess the other..."

"I doubt you could... "

"Goya."

"Well, Mr. Snape. Aren´t you a mind reader?!"

"You have no idea." he told her seriously. She looked at him, those eagle-like golden brown eyes
wide almost as if for a split second she had truly believed she could her mind. "This one was easy enough. You were fascinated with magic and witchcraft from a very early age...you told me so yourself. Very few artists depicted the theme as prolifically and powerfully as Goya."

"Of course" as that a small sigh of relief he heard under her smoky contralto ? "You know they managed to bring the original 'Persistence of memory' from New York."

Severus´heart skipped a beat. His mind raced back to that hazy summer afternoon...In Lily´s backyard, trying to melt those clocks under the orange light of a 5 o´clock sun...her crystal-clear laugh, the smell of grass and melted rubber...the screams of her mother berating them about the danger and the awful smell of burnt rubber...They had missed the spell and hit a couple of old tires that Lily´s father had made into swings...running out that huge hole in the backyard fence to go to the playground near the church and regroup after the failure, while sharing the only ice cream cone the loose change he had on his pocket allowed them buy...For a moment he felt like his legs would fail him.

"Are you ok ?" he snaped out of his reverie and looked at Ms. Black. Her face was filled with so much concern he had to wonder wether his mind had given out for a second.

"Yes" He quickly regained his composure and smiled weakly at her, hoping this would keep her from asking too many questions

"Are you sure ?"

"Yes, I just spaced out for a second...I told you those godawful animations could cause brain damage"

"I guess" she breathed out, her face still tense, eyes still looking for any signs of discomfort on him.

"Well...in what room is 'Persistence of memory' displayed?"

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Severus Snape never ceased to amaze her. Evelyn looked at the tall, gangly, thin man dressed in black from head to toe. They had been talking for over an hour now, about Dali, about Goya, about art in general. He spoke of the paintings with the expertise of a critic and the passion of an aficionado. The words came out of his thin lips in a soft and clear baritone that was pleasant to the ear and commanded attention, even if he spoke quietly...he probably knew how to make himself heard without having to raise his voice at all. The piercing dark eyes, the pianist hands with long fingers that gesticulated in an elegant and contained manner, the proud instance and confident gait, the stylized face with sharp jawline, heavy eyebrows and hooked nose framed by curtains of unkept black hair...She couldn´t help but try to imagine how he would be in the classroom....Severus had an aura about him, almost as if he had walked out from the pages of a manuscript, the picture of a medieval scholar, buried in his Spinner´s End house among rows and rows of books until somebody bold enough could get a word out of him and then...marvel. She drank in every single word he said as if it was a fine cherry : rich in tone, full of meaning.

Very few times in her life Evelyn had been this impressed by the intellectual prowess of a man. She was an academic, conversing with intellectuals and bright minds was not news for her. But there was something deeper about Severus Snape...There was something about him that didn´t reek of reharsed intellectualism, that didn´t taste of pretentiousness...He was obviously proud of his knowledge and intelligence, as he should be, but he didn´t come across as trying to prove it. He spoke little and
appropriately, he chose his words carefully, his facial expressions were austere, with a hint of a smile sometimes appearing under the harshness of his appearance. There was something almost stately about him, a mixture of a spartan demeanour and economy of expression with an obvious sense of pride that would have felt like entirely ostentatious in any other man, but just plain suited him.

They had seen the entire exhibition and all the other collections... Evelyn didn’t feel the time pass. She didn’t even know what time was it as they came down the stairs leading back to the entrance hall, still engaged in a lively discussion about art before the rise of the third reich in Germany when she felt the floor disappear from under her feet. She had been so distracted, going on and on about the political implications of censorship in art under Nazi rule that she never paid any attention to where she was stepping. She felt her right foot turn sideways, the left one finding no support as her body fell into the void leaving her no time to think or reach for support. But before gravity pulled her to the ground shattering her dignity, if not some bones, Evelyn felt a hard yank around her waist pulling her backwards until she landed on her behind hard enough to make her moan in pain. When the walls around her stopped spinning, the first thing she felt was the smell of cigarettes and oak moss enveloping her even before her eyes met with Severus’ dark ones, his face only a few inches from hers. Only then she saw he had his arm around her and both had fallen down. She looked down the stairs ahead of them, and gasped at the thought that, had she fallen forwards, she might very well have gotten seriously injured or worse. If not for his reflexes... Evelyn felt so utterly stupid...she never tripped on high heels, and surely not in public. NEVER. It was a point of honor with her. Anybody who wore heels as high and as frequently as she did, better not fall with them least they endure a torrent of embarrassing 'I told you so’s. She was still mentally kicking herself when she heard Severus hiss audibly.

"Are you ok ?" she reached for his shoulder as he lowered his head and held his left wrist on his hand, grimacing in pain "Oh, my God, your hand ! Did you hurt your hand ?"

"It’s fine."

"No it’s not !" She yelped, suddenly remembering that he had serious injuries on that hand, precisely the one he had used to cushion their fall. She awkwardly reached for it, almost falling from the step where she was sitting, the inept maneuver pushing her skirt up in such a way she couldn’t decide whether she covered her legs or avoided a new fall.

"Be careful!” Severus sneered

"Here, miss. Let me help you" another male voice came from above her

She looked up to see an older gentleman offering her a hand to stand up. Evelyn took it, feeling her face go crimson with shame...everybody was looking at them. Actually, they were looking at her. She was the one who managed to fall down a flight of stairs and almost flash a whole crowd of museum-goers. Evelyn looked over at Severus who was pulling himself up with much more ease and grace than her. She thanked the other man and turned back to her neighbour

"I’m so sorry ! I’m not usually this clumsy.” She told him timidly, taking off her shoes just to be safe.

"It could happen to anyone.” He told her seriously, as they made their way down "particurlarly to anyone with your taste in footwear."

"Excuse me?"

"Frankly I don’t see what you mug..” he stopped himself for a second and Evelyn turned to him raising a suspicious eyebrow "what you women women find so enticing about high heels...they are unpractical and even dangerous. And is not like you even need them.”
"Well, I happen to like them. But seeing as you saved me from breaking my neck, I’ll let that one slide" She smiled, faintly amused at his display of typical male ignorance...Men, they just don’t get some things and there’s no helping them.

"Precisely: you just proved my point. You could have broken your neck." His tone was a very odd mix of concern and triumph...she could swear he was about to throw that dreaded ‘I told you so’ her way "besides, what aesthetical purpose do this monstrosities serve anyway?"

"Montrosities is a bit harsh, no? Is not like my feet are bound or anything.»

"I don’t see how comparing this to some extreme form of Chinese body modification makes high heels any less silly. I still fail to understand why standing with your feet stuck on little thin 5 inch sticks is anywhere near reasonable. "

"I never claimed it was reasonable. They make your legs look better, that’s it. Quit trying to apply logic to it" She let out softly, amused at his vendetta against fashionable female footwear.

"You don’t need that...you have prefectly fine..uh...I mean, it’s pointless." He frowned and shut his thin lips tight, in obvious frustration. Evelyn smiled...was he trying to give her a compliment ? He wasn´t very good at that, was he ? Was this the dignified scholar who was just discussing art and history with her ? Somehow he suddenly looked like an awkward teenager with little experience with girls.

"You know what? Since you saved my life I´ll pay you a cup of coffee...The museum has a little cafe and I need to sit down for a while anyway.God, I hope I haven´t broken the heels on these”

"Well, heels are intact, thank God." Evelyn let out with a sigh of relief, enjoying the way Severus rolled his eyes at her as the waiter came back with their coffee.

"That’s what you´re worried about?” he sneered over his cup of black coffee.

"Are you kidding me?” She laughed “These are my favorite pumps. Louboutins and the collection is not even being sold anymore.”

"Do you have any idea how vain that makes you sound?"

"Absolutely vapid." she smirked

"You take pride in that?"

"No, not pride...Just amusement. You should see your face, right now. Is absolutely hilarious."

"Oh, you were mocking me...I see, well played."

"Mocking is too strong a word. 'Teasing’ would be more appropriate." Severus shook his head lightly, a wry smile curving his lips. Evelyn was almost used to his dry sense of humour by now, and she was starting to like it. "Besided you dug yourself into a hole here, dear friend : never criticise a woman´s shoes. Particularly when they are Louboutins that cost over 200 pounds. It’s suicidal."

"Over 200 pounds?” He almost gasped

"Well...they were on sale."

"And you expect me to not find it ridiculous ? I could eat a week on that budget."
"You don´t eat very well, do you?"

"I´m a single male. I suppose I do not require as high maintenance as you do."

"Ouch ! Aren´t we snarky ? For what is worth...these are the most expensive shoes I own. I don´t make a habit of buying 200 pound pumps every other day. I just...needed them at the time." She bit her lower lip and shifted on her seat. No she wasn´t about to let a virtual stanger know that she had been self medicating her depression with expensive shoes.

"You needed 200 pound shoes ? You and I have very different definitions of what needs are."

"You see Severus, I can understand that one could eat for a whole week on a 200 pound budget. But that doesn´t mean you don´t deserve better. Sometimes indulging a little can be good for the heart...We all need bare basics, but that doesn´t mean we don´t deserve a little more...that we don´t need more than what we get."

"Are we still talking about shoes here, Ms Black?"

"Evelyn, please. And no...I don´t think we are, are we?"

"I have to say I admire a woman who can turn a conversation about shoes into an existencialist reflection."

"Wait till you see me drunk."

"That´s a fearsome prospect."

"You strike me as a brave man."

"Not brave enough to deal a drunken Irish intellectual who wears footwear that can poke one´s eyes out."

"You make sound less like a woman and more like a secret weapon for the IRA."

"The diference might be subtler than one can imagine."

"Remind me to wear flats if we ever decide to drink together... For your own safety, Englishman."

"Sounds like a reasonable plan. Speaking of plans... How is your little investigation coming along?"

"I hardly had any time to look into that. I´ve been too busy with the house. You have no idea the state some sixty years of abandon can leave a house. At times it seems easier to just tear the whole thing down and built a new one." she smirked

"I´m sure you´ve found a treasure of things that would make most historians jump for joy, though"

"That I did." she smiled, excited of having someone to share her discoveries with "Although I don´t really know what to make of a lot of things I found. I always knew my grandfather was an excentric, but it seems it ran in the family."

"You abruptly moved from Ireland to England on account of a few old documents and letters just to investigate your grandfather´s past. Ms. Black, I wouldn´t need any antique object to tell you excentricity runs in your family."

"I´ll take that as a compliment."
"It was. Normalcy is criminally overrated."

"Amen to that. But yes...so far, nothing but a very interesting collection of bric-a-brac. It seems I’ll be staying for a while if I want to untangle grandpa’s web of mysteries."

"Maybe it will take you less than you expect"

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, just this morning I happened to remember something that might help you."

"What was that?" Evelyn leaned in, staring into his dark eyes.

"I don’t know how that slipped my mind...but a couple times I heard my mother mention a certain aunt Violetta..."

"Violetta?!"

"Is the name familiar?"

"That...was the name of my great grandmother. Among my grandfather’s documents there were many letters written by her. I knew it. Ever since I saw that family tree I knew my family was related to yours somehow. That’s it!"

"Letters? I don’t want to be a bother but...is there any chance I could take a look at them?"

"I was about to ask you. It would be no bother at all. In fact, I imagine these letters are a little part of your family history as well. Let me just get the check and we can go right now" she said, gesturing for the waiter.

"I’m afraid that won’t be possible. I have to deal with some...paperwork right now. Is the whole reason I dropped by Manchester, actually."

"Well, I can drive you wherever you need to be, then we can just go back to Cokeworth"

"Better not. This will take a while and I don’t want to impose on you. Tomorrow, we’ll have more time" he told her, getting the check from the waiter’s hand.

"I invited you, remember?"

"Don’t worry, I get that."

"I insist."

"You already treated me to dinner once, remember? I get this and I’d still owe you."

"You owe me nothing!" she reached the paper in his hand but he swiftly moved it away from her."There’s no point fighting you on anything, right?"

"No." He smirked.

"Well, I won’t stand in the way of you being a gentleman, then...As for tomorrow, I have a job interview in the afternoon, but I should be home by 5"

"Very well. I’ll drop by at 5 then."
"And I might just treat you to dinner again. Nobody should live on a 200 pound food budget, let us correct that Mr. Snape."

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It was still a little before rush hour, so Evelyn didn’t face nearly as much traffic as she usually braved since she started living in Greater Manchester. It was a matter of some twenty minutes to make it back to Spinner’s End. Home early. Enough time for a long bath and a good book. Yet another job interview the next day, then Severus would come to see the letters. Aunt Violetta...she had to be grandpa Marius’ mother...Maybe together Evelyn and Severus could start making sense of that strange family tree...She had read the letters one by one, but other than her father being disowned, she knew nothing...there wasn’t a reason, no clues as to why and how. Maybe Severus’s mother knew something? Maybe Severus’s family history held any clues? It was crazy. In the beginning of the year she knew nothing about grandpa’s Marius’ past in England and now...She stopped the car and got off, looking for the house keys into her purse.

As she walked towards her door, she noticed something odd about the house next to hers. The lights were on. Didn’t Severus say he had errands to run in Manchester? He couldn’t possibly have arrived home before she did...Evelyn shook her head and went inside.

Severus had surely forgotten to turn off the lights.
Part 4 - Books and tea - Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Everybody has ghosts in their past and sometimes they come back… Evelyn and Severus try to pretend everything is fine while bonding over tea and common interests

October 7th
Cokeworth
Spinder’s End, 13

Severus looked up from his glass of elf made wine and stared down the man sitting in front of him. Tall, dark and stately Kingsley Shacklebolt. Still tranquil and commanding as Severus remembered him to be, but significantly older… Severus had noticed the same happen with Minerva as well… the war and its aftermath had greatly aged all its participants in just a few years… years that felt heavy as centuries… Maybe that was the reason Severus himself avoided looking at the mirror too often.

"Well, it’s an honour to welcome the new Minister for magic in my house. You will surely appreciate my concern tough, for I doubt someone is such high-ranking position would go through the trouble of coming all the way here if there wasn’t something serious underway..." His mind quickly drifted back to the flight of the Lestranges. The Ministry was surely in a dire position right now, if Shacklebolt’s presence told him anything.

"Interim, minister.’ Shacklebolt’s calm and resounding bass filled the small sitting room ‘And you guess correctly, I’m here on account of a serious matter of security. I came to warn you..."

"...that there’s a reward on my head. You seem to forget I was one of ‘them’ for quite some time. I knew this would happen if I was ever outted."

"Still, it is the Ministry’s duty to inform you that your life may be in danger. I’m sure you are aware of the latest events... When Headmistress Mcconagall informed us that you had resigned and she knew nothing of your whereabouts we we’re worried that maybe some harm might have come your way."

"Oh...the Ministry 'worries' now? That’s progress I guess.” Severus snickered

"Yes, the new Ministry does worry about your safety." Shacklebolt continued, unfazed "Your services during the war..."

"Please, spare me the violins...we all know what this is about. I have information, so you cannot afford to loose me... particularly now that the Ministry is in the process of being reformed and about half the new staff wouldn’t know their arses from their foreheads. Not that the old staff did, anyway..."

"Rude as your words are, you do have somewhat of a point. The Ministry is undergoing great reforms, and we have a lot of work to do, particularly considering we have only about half the known Death Eaters behind bars and yes, as you not so kindly pointed out, we still need to train many of our new staff members... It goes without saying that we cannot indeed afford to have
anything happen to you. Your status is far too privileged not only in terms of information but also in light of what you mean...symbolically speaking."

"Symbolically speaking? Next thing you’ll tell me there will be a monument erected in my honor."

"Many think there should be. Various media outlets are calling you a war hero."

"...and many others are calling me an opportunist double agent who narrowly escaped being sent to Azkaban just for being a collaborating coward. I do read the papers."

"Then you may have already stumbled on some reports of your ‘death’."

'I did." Severus laughed softly "I guess is what I get for not giving interviews."

'The ministry thinks these reports might turn out to be to our advantage."

"’Our’? Not that I’m complaining about the Ministry’s concern. But ‘our’ seems a bit too supportive."

"It is in the Ministry’s best interest that you remain alive and safe. It was rather difficult to get headmistress Maconaghal to reveal your status and whereabouts..." Shacklebolt put his now empty glass on the coffee table and leaned in "...and in hindsight, I have to say that your retreat to Cokeworth and the false death reports may have given us precisely the kind of shielding we were hoping for."

"In other words...you want me to stay dead."

"If you rather put in such terms. I must be honest with you, although I suspect you already know this...the Ministry, as it stands today, cannot provide you with protection..."

"Do allow me to explain a thing or two:" Severus sneered, leaning in an a swift motion, almost aggressively, slightly bearing his teeth, nostrils flaring "first, coming back to Cokeworth has nothing whatsoever to do with the price-tag currently attached to my head. I’m no coward, dear Minister. Second: you do expect me not to find humour in your contention that the ministry cannot protect me? As if the ministry was ever successful in protecting anything but their own salaries and pay-offs. And before you start lecturing me on how this is a new Ministry, yes I’m perfectly aware of the Ministry’s new structure...and seeing how you are filling your ranks with starry-eyed idealists and barely out of their diapers war veterans, not to mention the alarming influx of Gryffindors...forgive me when I say that I’m quite relieved to know you won´t be the ones looking out for my safety."

"You are entitled to have your misgivings about the Ministry."Shacklebolt continued, keeping his voice as quiet and calm as he could "I would urge you, however, to keep an open mind in regards to the possibilities of this new organization...and the ways you could help it, given your unique position."

"My unique position? So you expect me to be your informant, after years of being Dumbledore’s informant. Why is everybody in any form of authority position I cross paths with under the assumption that I’m some sort of glorified errand boy?" Severus leaned back, rolling his eyes.

"We simply expected that, considering your services to the Order..."

"My services, loyalties and motives are nobody’s business but my own, and I wish they remain so. ”

"And you’re entirely within your rights. In fact, the last thing I want is to seem intrusive...but you must understand that, at the current state of affairs, we need all the help we can get. "
"I do understand that. I let you into my house didn’t I? And I will do so everytime you knock on my door. I will answer your questions if you have any. But do not try to enlist me into another war when I already had two too many."

"You seem to forget you didn’t fight these wars alone. And while we’re in the subject...you do realize you still have pending matters concerning some of your activities?"

"You should know better than to try to blackmail a Slytherin, it can turn into a rather slippery slope." Severus’ lips curled into a sly grin.

"It’s not blackmail. I’m simply reminding you that the Ministry still has pending issues with you, and it might be in everybody’s best interest to address some of them"

"And I will kindly remind you that, officially speaking, I have no pending issues with the ministry. There are no legal charges to my name concerning activities as a Death Eater in the first war...As for my activities in the second war, they were all done in the name of the Order, an organization that you, minister, was also a part of...If you really want to open the can of worms that is labeling actions taken by the resistance during the second war as legal or illegal, then I wish you nothing but luck in keeping your current job."

"So this is your final position?"

"As I said: I won’t stand in your way. I shall remain dead, as you wish. Not because I owe anybody anything, which I certainly do not, but merely because it happens to be as convenient to me as it is to the Ministry."

"Then what are you planning to do? Assimilate into muggle society?" Shacklebolt asked him in a lighter, almost amused, tone

"Right now it seems like a very alluring prospect. Particularly when compared to living in a world where the likes of Potter and Longbottom may end up holding public office positions"

"In that case, I have nothing left to do but to, sincerely, wish you all the best." Shacklebolt stood up and outstretched his hand "And I hope I can count on your help in the future, if needed be."

"Not as much a matter of ‘if’ but ‘when’. "Severus shook his hand and escorted him to the door
"Lucky for you, the dead do tell tales."

"Anything you want to share or I need a séance for that?"

"Patience is a virtue, Minister."

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October, 8th
Cokeworth Academy
Headmaster’s office.

"Ms. Black, Mr.Nolan will see you now." the secretary told her softly.

Evelyn stood up and walked towards the door, promptly opened by the headmaster who joyfully let her in. The headmaster of Cokeworth Academy looked almost too picture perfect for the job. If anybody were to look for 'headmaster' in a dictionary they would surely find the picture of sixty-
something, broad-shouldered and slightly overweight Mr. Nolan with his thinning wavy grey hair, thick glasses, reddish complexion, broad smile and tweed jacket...Evelyn shook his hand and sat on the chair he pointed for her.

"So...Ms. Black." he sat across from her, taking his glasses off "I have to say I was rather surprised when I got to read your curriculum. I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but is not everyday that we get Trinity professors applying for a position here"

Evelyn smiled. Candid and straight to the point; she liked that in a potential employer.

"Well, I haven’t been a Trinity professor for quite a while. In fact, for the past two years I’ve been teaching high school, as you know"

"Yes...St Brigid school for girls" he muttered, putting his glasses back on and casting a quick glance at her papers before taking them off again ".your own Alma Mater, I see"

"Yes, that’s correct."

"I suppose you won’t mind me asking, but is there any reason in particular why you left Trinity?"

"Family matters. My grandfather had just passed away and my father wasn’t in his best health...so I decided that going back home might be a wise idea. And I needed a little peace and quiet to pursue other professional goals as well"

"Your writings, I assume...I will tell you that your name sounded a little familiar when I first read your resumé. I’ve read a couple of your works and allow me to congratulate you, they were very interesting."

"Thank you, sir."

"Ms. Black...I have to be honest with you, here...I don’t know what reasons made you come to Cokeworth, nor do I wish to be rude enough to ask, but I’m sure that by now you’ve already noticed that our little town isn’t exactly a cosmopolitan metropolis bustling with culture...to put it mildly. And I’m entirely sure you can appreciate that running a school in such environment can be quite demanding."

"I’m aware of it, yes" She replied softly. Somehow she was expecting this conversation to take place.

"What I’m trying to tell you is...Cokeworth Academy is no St. Brigid’s and it surely is no Trinity... I know you have experience with high schoolers, but our students can pose a little bit more of a challenge..."

"Yes, Mr. Nolan, I know. But I can assure you that I am no stranger to challenges. You see, I came to Cokeworth expecting to spend quite some time, so I might as well try to integrate with the community..."

"I see...but for somebody with your background..."

"Please, don’t tell me you find me over-qualified." She smirked, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, is not a question of being over qualified. As an educator I’m the first one to want my students to have the best professionals in charge of their education,...I just feel that that it is my duty to make sure you’re aware of the implications of working with us. Also I must clarify that what we’re offering is not a teaching job in the classic sense of the word...It is a program for students with learning difficulties, which most of the time means disciplinary issues"
"I know. Actually your idea of creating an extra-curricular program to support these students is one of the reasons I feel I may just be in the right place. Since we’re being completely honest with each other, Mr. Nolan...I know Cokeworth has many serious issues and I’m guessing, I suppose correctly, that such issues have a profound effect on your school. I don’t know many headmasters who would try to start a program like yours with all that can work against it. This tells me you and your staff are exactly the kind of people I’d like to work with. You see...my father was an educator as well, he taught children and teenagers his whole life. He was the one that taught me that giving children a good education should be the priority of any adult, teacher or not, and I have sworn by his book since I can remember. He would have wanted to be a part of a program like yours, as I know I want to... And I think it will be a great deal for both of us to let me."

"Well, Ms.Black..." Mr. Nolan smiled broadly "I will tell you this, for somebody who could very well retire and live off royalties, or find a position in any higher education establishment, you show quite a lot of will to roll up your sleeves. And I kid you not, when I say you’ll have your hands full...if you’re willing to compromise to that, then I’d be more than happy to welcome somebody with your credentials into my team."

"We have ourselves a deal then"

"You’re aware of the fact that this is a little more than part time job, and...if we may discuss salary for a second..."

"You said it yourself, Mr. Nolan. I have my book royalties currently invested. Money is not the reason I’m here. I really just want to do something useful with my time. If anything you’re giving me a chance to do it. So that’s that."

"Tell me...are there others like you in Ireland, because I could sure use some around here..." he laughed softly.

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Her car was still not there. No point in knocking, she was not home. 5:10pm. Maybe that job interview had taken longer than anticipated. Severus shook his head in disbelief. She was really serious about working in Cokeworth...in a school? Teaching Cokeworth’s youth, comprised of a hopeless equation of juvenile delinquents, uninterested blockheads and very few kids whose potential would certainly be crushed when pitted against real life? No, Evelyn Black could be a little bit of an airehead but she couldn’t possibly be that stupid...she’d probably find herself a job in Manchester...in the higher education system. She was a Trinity professor after all.

But that still didn’t change the fact that she was seriously considering living in Cokeworth. Who does that? Cokeworth is not a place people immigrate to...is a place people emigrate from. Severus knew that better than no one else. For his entire childhood and teenage years he had longed for nothing other than leave this rotten town and make something of himself. To be more than a roughneck Cokeworth boy, working in the mill and wasting his meager wages at the nearest pub, like his good for nothing father had been. His Hogwarts letter had been more than just a letter of acceptance...It had been his ticket out of hell.

Severus decided to take the time to walk up to the nearest tobacco shop for an extra pack. He shoved his hands into his pockets, shivering at the sharp chilly breeze, but not bothering to go back home for a jacket. It was laughable really...so much effort to leave Cokeworth and everything it meant behind...and in the end he found himself here once again. All that effort to end up having nowhere to go but the ratnest of a town he so desperately wanted to escape from.

And Miss Evelyn Black wanted to live here...Wasn’t Irish economy suposed to be having an
excellent moment? Celtic tiger and whatever else the muggle papers called it? To move from Ireland to Cokeworth was just insane. And yet there she was...looking for a job, making plans... Was her family heritage such a big deal for her to go through all the trouble? She must have really loved her late grandfather to go to such lengths just to find out about his past...or maybe she was just bored with her life. She seemed like the kind of person who gets bored rather easily, with being such an irritating bundle of talkative energy all the time. Did she ever get tired at all?

Severus got his pack of Dunhills and a lighter. Having Miss Black around reminded him that he couldn´t always light his cigarettes with his wand. "Do you plan to assimilate into Muggle society?" Shacklebolt had asked him, almost in jest. The former potions master chuckled softly to himself, puffing smoke as he walked back to Spinner´s End. Severus wasn´t joking when he had told the interim minister the prospect of assimilating was inviting...Severus had a lot to complain about Cokeworth, but at least he could be left alone here. That is until Ms. Black decided to appear...but she still was a better distraction than the likes of the Lestrange brothers. Severus wondered what they were up to...Actually he had a pretty clear idea, if his memory didn´t fail him...Now that Voldemort was gone, the remaining Death Eaters would try to keep his legacy alive somehow...And good old insane Rodolphus probably fancied himself the Dark Lord´s natural successor...Severus wondered if he´d succeed in removing his head from his rear end before coming after him...

His train of thought was cut short when a red Volvo passed him by, driving towards Spinner´s End. Well, finally...

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Evelyn looked down at her watch. 5:15pm. She truly hoped all they said about British punctuality was just a myth, otherwise Severus would probably be rather annoyed by now. And he seemed like the type to get very annoyed very easily. She had lost track of time talking to Mr. Nolan. He had shown her the school and presented the support program in detail. More and more Evelyn felt like Cokeworth Academy was the right choice. Sure the salary was far from being satisfactory, and the idea of dealing exclusively with the so-called "problem students" might seem less than appealing to most...But there was something about that school that just made her think this was the place she had to be for now.

Maybe it was the challenge of it. The last two years of her life had been morose, boring at best...depressing and exhausting at worst. Particularly after her father´s death, which left her with a lot of legal and financial matters to deal with, which she did not want her grandmother, mother and sister to worry about. Her mother had just lost her husband of almost forty years, her sister had two small children to mind and grandma Liz...Loosing her husband and son only two years apart form each other didn´t do her much good, predictably. It was Evelyn´s duty to step up and take care of everything.

She had dealt with funeral arrangements, she had been the executor of her father´s estate, she had even sorted some of the pending matters he had as headmaster of St. Brigid´s... Her mother spend months in a catatonic-like state unable to do any of the activities she previously cherished, like tending to her dogs, cooking, going out to visit friends... Grandma Liz staunchly refused to leave the house she had shared with grandpa Marius for 60 years and come live with Evelyn and her mother, which only made everybody worry about her more than usual. In the end, Evelyn had been dealing with paperwork, bills, house chores, work and two elderly and stubborn ladies who refused to be helped, but needed help anyway...With working odd hours at the hospital, dealing with her ex-husband and getting her daughters through the loss of their great-granfather and grandfather in addition to the normal perks of being little girls, Caitlin could only do so much to help.

When the storm was finally over, Evelyn just felt exhausted and numb...as if she had nothing to look
forward to, no plans to fulfill...nothing but this hollow feeling inside.

Coming to Cokeworth probably had a much to do with trying to find a new direction for her life as it did with investigating her grandfather´s past. She wanted to do something different, she needed a dosis of challenge or just something to get out of bed for...Four years in a relationship that went nowhere followed by two years of nothing but losses and preocupations would do that to a person.

Evelyn pulled over and got out of the car just in time to get a glimpse of Severus leisurely strolling down the street, wearing a grey long sleeved shirt with jeans, hands inside his pockets and a cigarette between his thin lips, leaving a trail of smoke behind him.

"There you are" he let out as he walked up to her, in that caressing yet acid baritone of his.

"I´m so sorry" she smiled "I didn´t mean to keep you waiting but the interview lasted a little longer than I anticipated"

"I imagined it would."

"I got us some take out" she told him, taking the bags out of the car

"Well..that was not necessary..."

"Of course it was. I knew I wouldn´t have time to cook anything...Here, can you get this while I open the door, please?" Severus got the bags and followed her in, almost tripping on her cat that had come up to rub against his legs. Evelyn giggled as he bit back a curse and got the bags from his hands, going into the kitchen. "I wasn´t sure what you liked because we only ate together once, so I played it safe and got us Italian, I hope you don´t mind."

"Anything is fine, really" he told her, trying to shoo the cat away "How was the interview, then?"

"Oh, excellent! I think Cokeworth Academy is it!"

"Cokeworth Academy ?" he winced in surprise. It was the school Lily attended before going to Hogwarts...He used to wait for her to come back from class, hidden behind the trees by the front gate so her schoolmates wouldn´t see him. He´d walk her home and listen to her as she talked about how the kids who would say awful things about her...and they´d make plans, waiting for the day that letter from Hogwarts would free them from having to deal with this kind of annoyance...Severus tought Cokeworth Academy had closed down. Well, he never cared to go back there after her death … last time he had been there, the old trees by the gate still bore the doodles he and Lily had carved into the bark...he never went back.

"Isn´t Cokeworth Academy a primary and middle school ?" he asked, pacing about and looking at the picture frames on the walls to distract himself from his own thoughts.

"Used to be. They have expanded to High school as well. And they have a wonderful program to help kids with learning difficulties as well, and that´s what I´ll be working on" she beamed from the kitchen.

"So...you´ll be in charge of the troublemakers. I tought it were applying for teacher, not warden." He chuckled softly as his eyes perused the diplomas and certificates on the wall...Evelyn...Teresa? How befitting...

"There you go being mean and spiteful again" she laughed soundly, coming back to the sitting room "You don´t even know these kids"
"Trust me I know them better than you currently do...But alas, you seem to have the Mother Teresa complex to go with your middle name"

"Oh, please. I´m Irish. We all have either Celtic names nobody pronounces right or saintly names"

"But Evelyn Teresa is quite...damning, no?"

"You came here to see the letters or pester me about my name?"

"My apologies." he smirked.

"Speaking of which, give me a second while I go get the box upstairs."

Severus looked on as she climbed up the stairs and disappeared from his field of vision. Her cat had jumped on the couch next to him and was mewling softly, begging for attention. He scoffed and redirected his attention to the pictures and framed diplomas lining the walls. By now he could give names to the faces...Marius Black...burnt from the Black family tapestry so many years ago, if the information first given to him by Regulus about the family traditions wasn´t an exaggeration and he was pretty sure it wasn´t, knowing the Blacks...There he was...Marius Black featured prominently in so many muggle family pictures...husband, father, grandfather...clearly loved and revered... He couldn´t deny there was a certain sense of poetic justice there. Severus wondered what would a woman with Evelyn Teresa Black´s personality and education think if she knew her beloved grandfather had been disowned from his family of origin for no reason other than an archaic set of beliefs about a bogus concept blood purity.

A squib...a blood traitor from birth according to some...For all the talk there was about the status of muggles and muggle borns, complete with two wars and ensuing mayhem, nobody gave much tought to squibs, that was sure. At least muggle borns had magic, and muggles had their blissful ignorance of magical matters...what did squibs have? Nothing really...trapped in a world where even house elves had magic,having to live without it, not muggles by virtue of their birth, not wizards by virtue of their powerlessness... So insignificant that not even the Dark Lord bothered much with them...Severus could still remember Filch, wandering the halls of Hogwarts...not a person but a shadow, a little more than a piece of furniture, looked down upon even by the muggle-born students of humblest origins, who, being able to do a few silly tricks with a wand, counted themselves worthier than him, forgetting that their parents and siblings back home were just as magically useless as the Hogwarts keeper. Self righteous little half-bloods and muggle-borns, waging heroic efforts against the Dark Lord´s reign of terror and blood supremacist opression...and having their meals served and clothes washed by virtual slaves and ridiculing a squib for his inadequacy.

Hell is the other people, indeed, Monsieur Sartre.

Miss Black would be better off not knowing any of this. It would be a cruel blow to know the man she so dearly loved and admired was nothing but a second class citizen at best, a non-person at worst to the wizarding community. Surely the day Marius Black was tossed out of his house and the world he had been born into, no laments were heard and no tears were shed for his departure. At his death, Severus imagined, all the people in these picture, his wife, son, friends and grandchildren must have wept for him, mourned his passing and talked about him with reverence and love. Given the option, who wouldn´t choose being a muggle over a squib, if that was the difference? That was obviously the reason he never told anybody anything about his past, and who could blame him? He was probably trying to spare his family...His granddaughter should let the man have his wish, instead of fussing
around his past. But then again, how much could she possibly know? In her place, Severus would be looking for some answers as well...

"Sorry, it took me a little long." Miss Black came down the stairs, wearing her, apparently favorite, burnt orange sweater and jeans, bringing the wooden box with the Black crest on it. It still made him do a double take to see her in anything other than tasteful dresses, skirts and high heels. Quite frankly seeing her without high heels was as good as seeing her naked, given the woman´s obsession with them. It was more than a bit awkward.

"It´s quite all right."

"Here we go." She let out, putting the wooden box on the coffee table."I should get us somethig to drink first. I don´t know about you, but I could use a glass of wine. Any preferences ?"

"Whatever you´re having..." he let out absentmindedly staring at the box

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Eastern Ore mountains, Erzgebirgskreis, Saxony, Germany
Near the Czech Republic–Germany border

"It´s insane..." Rabastan sneered, leaning back on his wobbly chair. He looked on as his brother paced back and forth into the claustrophobic single room of the shabby little abandoned shack they´d been hiding into since they had made it into Germany. He looked down at the nasty injury he had in his thigh from their clumsy apparating accident. It pulsed under the bandages, warm and infected. Rodolphus was in no better shape, having dislocated a shoulder and received a bloody injury to his head, which was probably the reason for his unreasonable plans. "To go after Snape? You don´t even know if the filthy mutt is alive."

"He is. I know he is." Rudolphus looked out the window and into the dark woods that surrounded them, his eyes foccused and still like those of a maniac. The haunting stare of a man lucid enough to know what he wants and crazy enough to actually try to get it.

"Let´s entertain that possibility that Snape is indeed alive." Rabastan continued, frustrated "He has to be collaborating with the Ministry. They probably have him under surveillance all the time."

"No...Snape wouldn´t have it. He´s too proud for that..."

"And what is your master plan? I´d hope it involves getting us out of this hole first."

"Quit your whining." Rodolphus snapped, giving his brother a disgusted look. "You should be glad we´re not in Azkaban as of now."

"I am. So glad indeed that I don´t feel like wasting our newly acquired freedom with the likes of Snape. We can´t afford the risk of going after him just because you want revenge."

"Revenge? No, revenge is for the weak." Rodolphus hissed, manically "What I want from Snape is simply what he owes us...retribution, Rabastan. Snape will pay the rightful price for his betrayal...And that price, dear brother, will be to undo his betrayal. He is everything we have right now, if we want to succeed."

"You´re delusional. What use is he to us, now?"

"Snape only got to betray the Dark Lord because he got his trust. Snape knows things we don´t, and
he will help us finish what the Dark Lord started."

"And you expect the traitor to help us?" Rabastan let out a roudous, spiteful laugh "You got hit in the head harder than I imagined"

"I don´t expect him to help us...voluntarily. Tomorrow our good friends across the border will come to help us get to Russia. Once there you will see it´s only a matter of time for us to get Snape do our biding, wether he wishes or not."
Chapter Summary

Everybody has ghosts in their past and sometimes they come back… Evelyn and Severus try to pretend everything is fine while bonding over tea and common interests.

Severus sat down on the couch and observed as Evelyn brought out a bottle of prosecco and two glasses. She put the glasses on the coffee table and sat next to him, mindful to keep a somewhat safe distance. She obviously knew by now her neighbour was’t given to too much familiarity and had finally started to act accordingly.

"This should open our appetite for dinner" She told him, dexterously removing the cork from the bottle, causing it to make a pleasantly soft popping sound.

"I assume this is in celebration of your new job" he asked as she filled his glass.

"I guess..."she smiled quietly.

"Being hired to teach at Cokeworth Academy is hardly a cause for celebration, you surely realize."

"Is this just you being your usual sour self or does it come from first hand knowledge?"

"A bit of both" he smirked.

"Well, then I assume being the kind and concerned neighbour you are, you will surely tell me what’s so dreadful about Cokeworth Academy?"

"It’s located in Cokeworth to begin with" he told her with a flawlessly deadpan deliver.

"Oh, Jesus, Mary, Joseph and the donkey..." she laughed "Do you make it a point of honour to be a royal pain in the neck all the time? So, I guess it’s safe to assume you attended Cokeworth Academy?"

"No, I didn’t. But all children I grew up around did...And back in my day that meant that Cokeworth Academy was filled with nothing but little hooligans, killing time before growing up and replaying their parents roles: the mill for the boys, the kitchen for the girls. And of course, one cannot forget the children of our illustrious middle class whose families could not afford private schools...little snotty brats most of them, truly believing the boat full of holes they shared with the riff raff had anything like a first class...And something tells me very little has changed since"

"This town hasn’t been kind to you, has it?" her husky contralto sounded pained.

"In case you haven’t noticed, this town has never been kind to anyone..."

"So, if you haven’t attended Cokeworth Academy..."

"Home schooled." He interrupted her flatly "One of the very rare instances in which my mother’s stubbornness and self-importance have done me any good."
"Well, your mother has done a fine job of it. She made a teacher out of you."

"Let there never be said of about Eileen Prince that she wasn´t ambitious or bright" he smiled sadly

"I imagine she didn´t home school you until college?"

"What is this, an interview?"

"You have yet to notice I´m curious?"

"Till I was 11. Then boarding school."

"Boarding school? I hope you don´t mind me asking, but..."

"You´re wondering how my parents could afford it. They couldn´t...it was a school for 'gifted' children so to speak. They didn´t pay for it"

"Then you of all people should understand why I want to work at Cokeworth Academy. Don´t you think their students deserve the chance you had? To have an educational system that helps them grow and succeed instead of just preparing them for the life of mediocrity you were just talking about?"

"You want the polite answer or the honest answer?"

"I suppose honesty is not always the best policy if one is to keep a polite conversation, eh?" She smirked.

"Depends on who you´re being honest to...and what your concept of honesty is"

"Why DID you become a teacher, after all?" she seemed more than a bit exasperated now. Evelyn Black didn´t strike him as the kind of person who was too fond of evasive and arcane answers.

"Masochnism." He let out flatly.

"Seriously."

"Do I look like I´m joking?"

"When did you become so disillusioned?" she sighed

"To be disillusioned you need to have some illusions to begin with."

"So you never even cared?"

"You see, there´s a difference between knowing the importance of teaching and, as you put it, 'caring' about it and trying to be some sort of moral saviour of the world."

"And you assume I´m trying to save the world?"

"Well, look at you. A successful academic, from a nice middle-class Irish Catholic family, graduated from one of the most prestigious higher education establishments in the world, coming from a country that just happens to be growing economically...Opening a bottle of not-so-cheap prosecco to celebrate getting a job in a shoddy public school of a troublesome neighbourhood of Cokeworth...teaching children with disciplinary issues. Do you see the irony here?"

"Oh, I see...You think I´m a bourgeois airhead, living in a ivory tower, who consider myself so
above the common man, that it is my duty to save the unwashed masses from their ignorance by sharing my enlightenment.” She told him in a deadpan manner that didn’t betray neither rage nor offense "Well, you sir are a dolt"

"I may be. But you are the one who misunderstood me"

"Then do enlighten me, oh master..." she almost hissed.

"You didn´t come to Cokeworth to teach underprivileged children..." Severus smiled, satisfied by the reaction he had gotten from her "Correct me if I´m wrong...You came here because your father just died...and your grandfather a while before him...You lost two of the most importante references in your life and you probably feel a bit lost. That´s why you cling to that box and this wild goose chase for your grandfather´s past. You left your home country probably because you had nothing that made you want to stay... And now you think these children will fill this void somehow..."

"So, if you´re Sherlock Holmes role playing was done right...I must be a selfish person, looking for something falsely selfless to occupy my time with in order to to make me feel better about myself..."

"No...quite the opposite, actually."

"I don´t follow"

"You invest too much of your happiness in other people" he raised his glass towards the wall "Look at those pictures...nieces, sister, mother, grandmother...all you talk about is your family...everything you do, you do for them. You even chose the same career as your late father....but of course being a consumate perfectionist, you surpassed him. But is quite clear that everything you do, you do for others, not for you. Even coming to Cokeworth"

"And that´s quite dreadful compared to living the lonely life you seem to live, I assume?" she shot back, her tone filled with venom

"You are alone in a way...Trust me, you and I are not that different. I´m just a little more honest about it than you are...and you are a lot more generous than I am...but when generosity is too much, it can become egoism"

"I´m not really sure if I should be offended"

"Feel free to... But I actually think you´re better than most people. And that´s why I wonder if you realize that is good to be mean and selfish once in a while. You have to if you want to survive.”

Evelyn stared at him for a few seconds and, without any sort of warning, exploded with laughter, almost dropping her glass.

"I fail to see what´s so tremendously funny, Ms Black"

"I´m sorry..." She laughed with gusto "I didn´t mean to laugh at you but...I mean, aren´t you just cute?"

"Excuse me?" He sneered back, outraged.

"You´re worried about me. You really think I´m a starry eyed idealist, who thinks the world is nothing but rainbows and cotton candy clouds,...And you are actually trying to warn me about the big bad world outside, ready to eat me alive. You are so cynical you´ve become naive..."

"And how am I naive, if I may ask?"
"Let me tell you something about myself." She told him in a suddenly serious and stern tone. "I come from a small town in the Irish countryside. You can’t even find Doolin in some maps. And yet, as you said, I attended one of the most prestigious universities in the world...an university that up until recently didn’t even accept Catholics. Not only I attended it, I went on to teach there. I have ten published books to my name, three of which made into the best sellers list for non-fiction books in Ireland, United Kingdom, France and United States. I’m not some small town schoolteacher, trying to get little kids to learn their abc’s. I’m an academic. And you surely know academia is a nasty environment, where you don’t succeed in it without having sharp brains and claws. And I didn’t only succeed...I thrived."

Severus put his glass on the coffee table and turned to her, suddenly interested.

"Go on..."

"But because I’m generally nice to the people around me, you think I must be a weak little Polyanna, yearning to be liked, and you feel obliged to warn me about the dangers of the world as if I was somehow inept to recognise them. You say I live my life to please others...Fair enough, maybe I shouldn’t. But I can tell you one thing: isolating yourself from the world is a sure way to failure. You need other people if you want to go anywhere in life. It’s better to pass for a silly goody-two-shoes and collect potential friends and allies than to be an aloof misanthropist with a superiority complex who has nothing but their own convictions. And convictions maybe a nice thing to flaunt, but they make for very lousy companionship"

Severus smiled. Not such a nice country girl after all... He looked deeply into her golden brown eyes and for the first time he saw something different than their usual limpid brilliance. There was spark there. Her eyes were limpid, boring right into his, like the sharp eyes of an eagle following the prey...Clear, aggressive, focused, tenacious. There it was...The Slytherin blood of the Black family. Blood so disgracefully wasted on the likes of Sirius Black, and yet running strong and thick into the veins of this otherwise meek and cheerful woman, even after two generations of watering it down with muggle blood. The pride, the self-importance, the words that bordered on shrew but still kept an obvious elegance of phrasing and softness of tone. The consummate Black aplomb. Severus could hear the centuries of generation after generation of haughty Black wizards speaking through her mouth, echoing under her pleasing Irish accent and mellifluous quiet voice, daring him to show any defiance.

Severus liked the sound of that.

"Wel, well, well...it seems I was indeed mistaken about you. My most sincere apologies for not noticing before how cunning you really are...You hide it fairly well"

"Is not about being cunning or hiding anything..." She told him seriously, now appearing slightly offended for the first time during their entire conversation"...is about living in society. Do I prefer to base my relationships in love and genuine affection? Of course. And for the most part, that’s what I do. I have family and friends whom I love and who love me just for the sake of love itself. But I’m not naive enough to think I can go through life without giving something to get something in return."

"Isn’t that being cunning?"

"Maybe for you..." she let out almost spitefully

"Now, now, Ms Black..." he smirked "you think me completely incapable of understanding love for the sake of love?"

"No. But you do strike me as the type who likes to brush it off as something unimportant, just to
"In short..." He shifted the subject, a sudden feel of discomfort running through him "I don't know as much about you as I first assumed I did...and vice versa"

"You started...and as my mother always says: don’t ever start what you can’t finish" she smiled, somewhat relieved.

"Fair enough...I dug myself into a hole." Severus conceded, his voice almost sweet. He definitely didn’t want to me on the wrong side with Ms. Evelyn Black.

"You know what? We had enough to drink I think. I don’t know about you, but I could eat something"

The wooden box now lay open on the floor, its contents tossed about and the Black family tree unfolded and laid out on the coffee table. Severus leaned in, fingers interlaced, elbows on his knees, looking at the large parchment, an intricate and artfully done tree with a multitude of branches that connected with other branches of smaller and incomplete family trees of other wizarding families. It was a complex piece, by far one of the most pleasing to the eye Severus had seen. It puzzled him as to why Marius would have decided to take that with him, when he was completely severing ties with his family.

"Violetta Black, née Bullstrode." Evelyn was sitting on the floor, across him, nursing a mug of black tea she had prepared to help recover from the two bottles of wine they had had before and during dinner. She spoke softly, almost as if speaking to herself, pointing at the name on the parchment."my grandfather’s mother..."

"You great-grandmother you mean..." he told her, carefully removing his steamy cup of tea from the coffee table to put it on the floor by the couch where it wouldn’t ruin the ancient parchment in case it tumbled over.

"Yeah, that..."

"Is hard to think of any of the people in this old piece of parchment as family, I imagine"

"You think?" she smirked bitterly"So you said your mother mentioned her..."

"In passing...I was young, and didn’t pay much attention to all the family members my mother talked about." Severus was only half lying. His mother never mentioned Violetta Black...But he did pay attention to what his mother said about her family and the Wizarding World...she didn’t talk about it much, tough...Nevertheless, the little she told him, he’d take in eagerly. I was his way of reclaiming the world he felt had been taken away from him. It wasn’t just Tobias that resented Severus for tying him down to Eileen... Severus resented his father just as much for his mere existence, the mere fact that this man was his father denied him the possibility of growing up in the world he felt he belonged to. Severus knew from a very young age that his mother came from a prestigious pure blood family...the Princes, a long line of Slytherins and Ravenclaws, a family known for their intellectual prowess, a family that had produced many accomplished academics and politicians... a family with ties with the Blacks and other respectable families. But Severus got stuck with a muggle father who worked in a bloody mill...not that muggles that worked in mills couldn’t be good fathers...Severus remembered some other children from the neighbourhood who had nothing but love and respect for
their muggle, mill worker fathers. But these were decent family men. Tobias George Snape was neither decent nor a family man. He’d hang on to whatever shred of information about the wizarding world that his mother ever let slip like a man lost in the desert would hang on to a bottle of water.

"According to this our families are not blood related. There was a marriage...between Cassiopea Black and Servius Prince, but no children appear as resulting from it. It seems to have been dissolved."

"Cassiopea being your great-aunt. That might explain why the house was passed to your grandfather."

"And Servius was your great-uncle, so I guess that explains why you have your house as well...But one thing still bugs me...other than what’s this obsession with Greek-roman and astronomical first names our families seem to obviously have"

"And what is that?"

"Grandpa Marius was from London...I assume so was your mother"

"Yes, she was..."

"Then why would their families own two houses in a poor district of Cokeworth? I mean look at this family tree...this box, this crest... These are well to do people we’re talking about. Maybe even rich. I remember my grandfather knowing French and Latin, and he even taught us a bit of etiquette. I know he didn't come from humble origins...then why? Why owning a house that was built to house mill workers in Cokeworth?"

"I wouldn’t know...I never had much contact with my mother’s family."

"Why was that...if you don’t mind me asking..."

"Much the same reason you never got to know your grandfather’s family."

"I see...what did she do for them to show her door?" a sad smile curled her lips

"Married my father. And in hindsight, I can’t really fault my grandparents for not supporting her decision...even if I don’t agree with how they decided to show their disappointment. But I assume that since your grandfather got married in Ireland, his unforgivable mistake must have been of a different nature"

"Well, that’s another thing I don’t get." She picked up the box and removed a bunch of letter from it, undoing the ribbon that tied them togehter

"These are Violetta’s letters?"

"Yes.I read most of them...I mean, the ones that weren’t half burned."

"You think your grandfather burned them?"

"Doesn’t seem like something he would do...but then again he was so young...According to the dates in these he was only fourteen when he was made leave his family. A fourteen year old boy, surely angry and disappointed. It shouldn’t come as much of a surprise that he’d burn her letters"

"And what did you find in those you did manage to read?"

"Nothing. Everything is too vague. Look at this:" she opened one of the letters and started to read out
"I know none of this is your fault. How could it be? But we did what had to be done. I would gladly take you back, but this is just a mother’s heart speaking. I cannot think with my heart, I must do what’s best for our family. As a Black you should understand"

"Does she ever mention what 'this' could be?"

"No. Just this bizarre rambling about the family’s best interests...as if my grandfather had done something to shame them...but she insists is not his fault. It makes no sense. Here’s another one, one of the earliest from 1930 'It has come to my attention that the house sits vacant. I understand you don’t want my help, you’ve always been the proudest of my children. After all the trouble I went through to find out your whereabouts you won’t answer my letters. There must be something better for you than selling cheap tobacco to the Irish muggle riff raff'... I have no idea what the hell a muggle is, but I assume it can’t be good..."

"May I?" he carefully got the letter from her hands and breathed a sight of relief to see the use of the word muggle was the only red flag in it. Still, this was getting too dangerous.

"All of them are like this. No straightforward accusations, no obvious references to why he was disowned...just self righteous passive aggressive ranting...I sure hope this isn’t a sign that mental diseases run in my family, because great-grandmama sounds positively crazy"

"Maybe is the inbreeding..." Severus smirked "If I was in your late grandfather I’d probably run away before being disowned."

"I know, right? But no. He was disowned, it’s the only thing his mother clearly states in these letters. Disowned! Who these people thought they were, the bloody Royal Family?"

"Never trust families who have coats of arms. Would you mind if I held on to these for a while?"

"By all means, be my guest. Maybe you can find something I missed...a different set of eyes might find something I’ve missed..."

"And those?"

"Those what?"

"Those other letters..." he pointed to another bunch of letters inside the box

"Oh, these..." she smiled warmly reaching for them

"From crazy great-grandma Violetta?"

"No! These are the letters my grandparents wrote each other when they were dating"

"I wasn’t aware people 'dated' in the 30s"

"Oh you know what I mean."she laughed

"I guess...did you have any luck with these? Maybe something your grandfather may have told your grandmother?"

"No...he never told her much about his life in England. I asked her...and these letters, lovely as they are, are not of much help. You know, when he first arrived in Doolin, grandpa Marius worked as fisherman...it was the only job he could get, being English and all...he and grandma Liz fell in love first sight...When he went to get his boat in the morning to go out to sea, he’d leave her romantic
letters on her windowsill...and she answered in the same manner...He picked her letters up from the windowsill the next day...These are those letters...A lovely read, but not very informative about his past."

"Don´t you find it bizarre that your grandmother of all people wouldn´t know much about him? It´s obvious they were very much in love, from what you tell me. Then why wouldn´t he be more open with her?"

"I know...but grandma Liz told me he always acted like he wanted to forget England existed. He kept telling her his life for all that mattered started the day he met her and decided he´d become Irish Catholic for her sake, if she agreed to have him. She never questioned it, and from then on he was nothing but her loving husband and father of her child. Like England really never existed"

"And judging from the difficulty you´re having in piecing his past together, I´d say he successfully erased England from his life."

Hogwarts
Headmistress Macgonagall´s office.

Minerva pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose, opening yet another file. At Severus request, she had pulled the records of students who had received their acceptance letters in the late 60s and early 70s. Severus had specifically asked about an boy born in the muggle Republic of Ireland, which promptly eliminated a good number of files from the lot. But even after discarding all the English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish students, and all the females ones, Minerva still had a significant amount of papers to go through. Each student file generated, over time, a rather large paper-trail. Subjects, grades, activities, events...everything was carefully documented. Minerva was glad she had a name to work with, otherwise the mission of finding what Severus has asked for would have been rather tiresome.

Paul Black

If Severus suspicions were correct, Paul Black would be a member of the Black family. The grandson of Marius Black, a wizard born after only two generations from a Squib. A somewhat rare occurrence but no unheard of. A muggle born wizard bearing the Black name would never go unnoticed in Hogwarts. And Minerva didn´t remember such child. And surely it wasn´t age catching up with her, for she remembered all the students that had passed through Hogwarts since she became a teacher...every single one of them. She took personal pride in following each of the students from their first day of school all the way to the beginning of their professional careers. Severus had to be mistaken. After all he didn´t remember any Paul Black himself, and they would have been roughly the same age, attending at the same period of time. So why was he even considering this investigation? But still, she decided to check it, just to put her friend´s mind to rest.

She had just finished going over the records of 1972, and was half way through the records of 1973.

"Paul Éamon Black." She murmured, finally finding the name she was looking for in one of the files of that year. So maybe, Severus was right after all. But then, why couldn´t she remember that boy? She looked down at the file, noticing it was quite different from the others. While most student files
had a large number of pages, containing detailed information, Paul’s file consisted of a single page. Upon reading it, Minerva suddenly realized why...and her heart sunk into her chest

Full name: Paul Éamon Black

Date of birth: December 22nd, 1961

Place of Birth: Doolin, County Clare, Province of Munster, Republic of Ireland.

Parents: Marius Éamon Black and Sophia Maeve Black (née Finnegan)

Blood Status: Muggle born

Acceptance letter status: received

Date of acceptance letter arrival: August 1st, 1973

Date of admission: None

Notes: Student never enrolled or attended for reason of death. Cause of death as reported by the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes: under-age magic related accident (fire spell of unknown nature). Date of death: July, 25, 1973

Signed and confirmed: Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Headmaster.
Everybody has ghosts in their past and sometimes they come back… Evelyn and Severus try to pretend everything is fine while bonding over tea and common interests.

"Why DID you become a teacher?"

Severus frowned. The female voice talking to him seemed to have changed midway into the sentence, husky contralto swiftly replaced by an airy soprano, but voices overlapping eerily for a split second. He looked up and gasped, the room around him was no longer the sitting room of the house next door to him, but Hogwarts teachers’ lounge. It was no longer Evelyn Black he was talking to…the bright brown eyes replaced by soft mossy green ones, the tall patrician brunette had vanished leaving a short and mousy blonde in her place.

"Severus, are you listening?" Charity Burbage asked him, her pleasantly round face assuming a concerned expression.

"Y-yes…I’m sorry, I got distracted for a second."

"You’ve been quite distracted lately. Are you worried about something?" she smiled, collecting her papers from the table.

"Not in particular" he let out still confused. He looked around once again. Yes, he definitely was in Hogwarts. And it was definitely Charity sitting across him, preparing the papers for her next class. She was supposed to be dead…Severus was supposed to be in Cokeworth…in Evelyn Black’s house. How?

"Are you sure?"

"Yes…uh…what day is today?"

"My, my…you ARE distracted. Thursday. October 7th, 1993. XXth century of the common era" she laughed softly

"1993…"

"Yes, 1993. The year after 1992 and before 1994. Severus, are you really ok?"

He shook his head. 1993. No! It was supposed to be 1998. After the war, after her death. October 7th 1998, not 1993.NOT 1993. The War…it was supposed to be over…Voldemort was dead, Charity was dead, Dumbledore was dead…the war was over. Not 1993, 1998. He couldn’t possibly have dreamed up five years. He couldn’t have imagined all of that. He couldn’t have imagined himself killing Dumbledore, he couldn’t have imagined her dying the way she did, he couldn’t have imagined Nagini almost killing him…his mind couldn’t be that twisted. 5 years. It had to be over, he had to be in Cokeworth…with Ms. Black, drinking tea and bickering over how bad Cokeworth was. He couldn’t have imagined that.

1998. 1998!
"Oh, no. I’m running late." she got all of her papers and notes and stood up "See you later, Severus. And do try to get some rest. You must be overworked"

She walked calmly towards the door and with the sound of each one of her steps a sense of ineffable dread filled him. He felt like he was watching her walk towards a cliff, unaware of the fall ahead. He stood up, not quite understanding how his body had suddenly gotten so light that he reached her in a heartbeat.

"Charity, don´t!" it was like somebody else´s voice had left his lips. He couldn´t recognise it at all. He tried to reach for her arm and pull her back, but she was out of reach. He squinted...she was just a couple feet away...why was she so far away now, why couldn´t he get any closer? Why wasn´t she listening?

She left. Opened the dor and left.

Severus stood there and now the room was again the same size. The floor beneath his feet was no longer stretching away from him. The door was close enough to touch. He opened it. The morning light coming from the windows behind him were suddenly sucked into a void. He felt his body move forward without his feet ever moving. His eyes took a while to get used to the darkness as the door slammed shut on his heels. A few feet in front of him there was a long table...a large assembly of gosthly shadows sitting around it.

He was among them. From where he stood he could see himself

"Severus..." his name, the Dark Lord´s voice...whispers, murmurs incoherences...he looked as his own face, wondering if he was there...or here. On that spot inside his chest where a heart was supposed to beat he felt nothing. He trembled and tried hard not to move his eyes. He knew what he would see if he did. He couldn´t see that...Once had been enough, he couldn´t see that again. He stared into his own eyes and wished he could claw those eyes out of their sockets for they were looking at it.

"Severus, please. We´re friends" the strangled plea came from beyond his field of vision, but he couldn´t look. The airy, cheery soprano of her voice filled with pain, terror...humiliation.

He turned his face, feeling something pull his head and twist it, forcing him to look. She was there, her honey blond hair a mess of sweat around her contorted upside down face. Her mossy green eyes were bloodshot.

"We´re friends"

"Please"

He looked back at himself.

He knew he´d let her die.

He had to let her die.

But why did it have to be like this? Her of all people? Dumbledore had gotten the luxury of choosing his own death, a death that made him a celebrated martyr... Lily had died protecting her child...Even Sirius Black and James Potter had gotten decent deaths, they got to fall while fighting. Why did Charity have to die like this? Mocked, exposed, humiliated.

Please kill her quickly. Just let her go. Do it quickly. God...if you exist, if you care...make this quick.
A flash...gone. Is over.

A slithering sound...what was that? It’s over. It has to be over. She´s gone. She´s gone, it´s over!

The hollow sound of bones breaking...

God...

...no...

...why?

You’re not really there, are you? You don´t really exist, do you?

He looked into his own unblinking eyes.

He was going to vomit.

When Severus regained consciousness his body was somehow out of bed. He found himself standing in the middle of his bedroom, trembling from head to toe, shivers shaking his every muscle, his skin drenched in cold sweat and an overwhelming nausea twisting his innards. He had yet to find his balance and yet he knew he had to rush into the bathroom, least he´d puke his guts all over the floor. Still not in complete control of his legs, Severus scrambled towards the toilet bowl, practically falling onto it, his knees hitting the floor tiles hard as the contents of his stomach came rushing back up leaving behind a trail of acidity in his throat and mouth.

Only after he was done with that did he feel like he could control his body once again. He reached over to the sink, grabbing onto it for support and pulled himself up. In the mirror above the sink he could see his face, but if felt almost like it belonged to ghost. His dark eyes were sunken unto his skull, his skin, already sallow as it was, had acquired a sickly greenish hue, his lips were visibly dry and his nostrils were flaring almost as if his entire body was strangling for oxygen. Severus threw some cold water on his face then rinsed his mouth.

After quickly putting on a pair of comfortable pants and a t-shirt he climbed down the stairs, eager for a cup of coffee and a smoke to give him back some sense of normalcy. Closing the windows to keep the cool morning breeze outside he sat on his armchair, cup of coffee in one hand, cigarette on the other, staring at fire that crepitated in the fireplace, the crackling sound of burning wood soothing his nerves a bit. His idle eyes scanned the room looking for some distraction. For a second he almost wished Miss Black´s annoying feline companion had snuck in again. Speaking of the devil, where was that book she had insisted on lending him? On the coffee table, where he had carelessly dropped it last night after coming home from her house. Severus couldn´t quite remember how their conversation had drifted from the subject of her family to that of Irish literature...He had to admit the most recent Irish author he had read was James Joyce, which made him more than a tad bit behind with contemporary Irish literature. So, predictably, Miss Black had taken upon herself to educate him. It had been completely uncalled for, but nevertheless entertaining...as it was often the case with her.
Severus lazily stretched his arm to get the book from the coffee table. "Paddy Clarke ha ha ha". Why on earth did that crazy woman think this was the kind of reading that would interest him? He looked at the cover...a young shirtless boy wearing red shorts was joyfully hanging from a wall. The back of the book talked about it being a bitter-sweet Irish coming of age tale...Surely the sort of thing that Evelyn Teresa Black would read. Oh, well...he had misjudged her once, so maybe it was better not to judge the proverbial book by the cover? If anything this would do to distract him from the grim images that had tormented his night.

But before he reached page two, Severus heard soft knocks on the front door. It was probably his neighbour. For some reason the idea of her dropping by this early in the morning didn’t seem as bothersome now as it usually would be. It was probably the prospect of listening to a known voice that made him breathe a sigh of relief. Severus put the book down and went to open the door.

"Minerva..." he let out softly, a small smile on his lips "Come in"

"I hope it’s not too early in the morning for a visit."

"Not at all. Take a seat, please...I just made some coffee..."

"Coffee would be lovely, thank you" Minerva smiled and took a seat by the fire, the ruffling of her green tartan robes giving Severus a soothing feeling of familiar tranquillity that only the providential and unexpected visit from an old friend could procure. He quickly filled a cup of coffee and brought it to her, taking his seat.

"How are you doing?" she asked

"Fine, thank you for asking"

"Severus..." He knew that tone. It was the exact same tone she used with him back when he was a child. That tone that commanded obedience in the most persuasively sweet way.

"I mean it, Minerva" he sighed, wearily

"I can see it on your face you’re not well."

"I just had trouble sleeping last night..."

"Nightmares again?"

He didn’t answer. Minerva knew about his recurrent nightmares. She had even witnessed a couple of them. In the long months he spent hospitalized in St. Mungo’s most, all of his nights were either dreamless death-like periods that left him in a semi-catatonic state for days or filled with nightmares that kept him from sleeping for countless nights. Minerva was his only visitor and more than once had spent the night at his bedside, as a loving mother would do to her child, unable to do anything to fight away the demons that crawled into his brain, but nevertheless stubbornly refusing to leave him alone. Severus couldn’t bring himself to lie to her.

"Yes. But it’s over now, don’t worry."

"It had been a while you didn’t have any nightmares...if memory serves me right...since Miss Black moved next door" she smirked, mischievously

"What are you trying to imply?"

"Nothing...nothing at all. I just think your new neighbour has been giving you something to distract
"your mind with. That´s good, isn´t it?"

"Positively therapeutic" he rolled his eyes

"Speaking of which...I found what you asked me."

"So, my assumptions were correct."

"Yes. Miss Black´s brother, Paul, indeed received a letter from Hogwarts. But he never enrolled"

"Because he died before that."

"How do you..."

"Miss Black briefly mentioned her older brother died when he was eleven."

"Did she tell you how it happened?"

"No. It seemed like too much of a sensitive topic for her."

"With good reason" Minerva pulled Paul´s student file from her robes and handed it to him.

"A fire spell gone wrong" Severus murmured flatly, after reading through it "This boy...accidentally burned himself to death? Is that it?"

"It seems so...It´s no wonder poor Miss Black doesn´t like to talk about it. Nobody deserves such a horrendous death...let alone a child"

"That explains it..."

"Explains what?"

"I found Paul´s letter...Miss Black keeps her grandfather´s old papers in a wooden box. I found it inside a false bottom in it when she wasn´t looking."

"So, her grandfather obviously knew about the letter."

"He had to...he was the only person in the family who knew about the existence of Wizards....as far as we know"

"Severus...you know what else is strange about this? I don´t remember Professor Dumbledore ever mentioning this boy. Surely I would have known about such extraordinary circumstances involving a would-be student...and yet he never as much as mentioned Paul Black"

"Did you go through his personal papers?"

"I can´t possibly..."

"Do that. Maybe there´s something there. If I had to guess, I´d say old Marius Black probably asked him to keep everything a secret. It seems he was hiding a lot from his own family..."

"Have you been talking to her about her family again?"

"Yes...she showed me some family letters...from Violetta Black to Marius, her son. He burned most of them, but I borrowed the surviving ones. I´ll keep trying to get more information out of her"

"You really think Miss Black knows something about her family´s past."
"I believe she doesn’t know anything. But she’s suspicious. And she’s smart enough to find the right clues if we let her. Just leave her to me and try to find Dumbledore’s personal notes."

"Severus...can I ask you something?" her expression seemed suddenly relaxed.

"Of course." he raised an eyebrow...he knew that Monalisa smile of hers was never a good sign.

"Why exactly are you pursuing this?"

"For the same reasons you are...the statute..."

"We could just turn this over to the ministry."

"The ministry..." he scoffed "speaking of the devil...the interim minister was here just yesterday. I should thank you for that"

"We both knew it was just a matter of time before you had to talk to the Ministry, Severus. Better go through with it already. I know I had no right to disclose your whereabouts, but I’m worried"

"I told you the Lestranges won’t try anything now..."

"Maybe not now...but eventually"

"I’ll take my own precautions"

------------------------------------------------------------

"Monday morning? Sure."

"Just for the sake of making things a bit simpler would it be possible for you to drop by tomorrow so we can take care of the paperwork?" the monotone voice of Mr. Nolan’s secretary asked from the other side of the line.

"Of course. I’ll be there first thing in the morning."

"Thank you very much, Miss Black"

"Thank you. See you tomorrow, then."

Evelyn hang up the phone, feeling very pleased with herself. New home, new job, new life. And now that Severus had told her he’d help with her grandfather’s letters she just felt like things would start to fall into place soon enough. Evelyn looked out the window, the chilly breeze outside was turning into a somewhat strong wind and dark clouds were gathering. Not a good day to go jogging. Oh, well. She’d start in her new job on Monday, she could afford a few days of dolce far niente. She closed the windows, changed her running shoes for wool slippers, and grabbed the copy of "Breakfast in Pluto" Cat had given her in her last birthday, lazily letting her body fall on the couch. Ciarán had been just waiting for that to jump on her belly, purring happily.

"Lazy little bastard" she smiled, petting his glossy black fur.

Then the phone rang.

"Must be Mr. Nolan’s secretary again" she mumbled, stretching to get the phone without having to leave her cosy position on the couch. "Hello?"

"Evelyn?" the male voice sounded hesitant.
"Richard." Evelyn bit back a curse. She should have let the answering machine take it. "How are you doing?"

"Fine. You?"

"Busy."

"I see...you didn´t answer any of my calls"

"So that´s why you went after Fin to get any news from me?" That came out harsher than she had intended.

"He told you" Richard´s soft voice was quieter than usual.

"He´s my best friend, of course he would tell me. And you knew it when you went looking for him."

"Well, how else could I get any news from you?"

"Listen, Richard" Evelyn sighed. Good Lord she had no patience for this "these past few weeks have been a mess...no, scratch that, the past few months have been a mess. You were not the only one whose calls I wasn´t returning"

"I understand...I just wanted to know how you were doing"

"Now you do."

"How´s England treating you so far?"

"Rather well. It seems I won´t be returning to Ireland for a while. In fact I just got a new job"

"Oh, where?"

"Local school. They have a lovely educational program for teenagers"

"That´s wonderful. I´m happy for you."

"What about you? How´s the new book coming along?"

"Lewis told you about the new book?"

"Much like he told you about my new address. As adorable as Lewis can be, but he´s a bit too prone to gossip"

"He means well."

"So...the new book?"

"It´s...coming along."

"Great." Evelyn went quiet for a second. Uncomfortable didn´t even begin to describe how she felt right now. Even over the phone it was too awkward to talk to Richard and pretend like they were good friends, after everything that had happened between them. She just didn´t have it in her to act like this...she didn´t have Richard´s vocation for little games.

"But...this is not what I wanted to talk to you about..."

"And what would that be?"
"Evelyn, I..." a deep sigh "I wanted to talk to you...but not over the phone."

"If it has anything to do with work, I’m sure Lewis can handle it on my behalf"

"No, is not about work...is about us."

"Richard...there is no us, anymore"

"I know...and that’s exactly why I...Tell me, you will be back in Ireland for the holidays?"

"Maybe"

"Any chance we can meet?"

"If I drop by Dublin, I’ll try to contact you, ok?" She conceded, just wanting that conversation to be over.

"Sure, that works..."

"I...got to go now."

"Lyn..."

"Yes?"

"Good luck...with everything."

"Thank you. Bye." She hung up even before getting an answer and dropped the receiver on the floor. Ciarán lazily raised his head from her chest, mewling softly. She scratched him softly behind his ear, sure proof to make him fall asleep. "New life, Evelyn. New life"

October, 11th

Wiltshire, England

Malfoy manor

Severus looked around. Somehow that house looked even darker and more decrepit than the last time he´d been there. The garden outside had been dead and dry for so long it seemed like it would never recover it’s former glory. The tall french doors and large windows were all broken, and had been broken for a while if the damaged floor and walls could testify to the continuous fury of the elements bursting uninvited. His steps echoed on a hardwood floor now covered with dirt, dead leaves and twigs, the cool, milky blue sunlight of a frigid early morning came in making his shadow dance bizarrely on the cracked and greyed walls and the skeleton-like ceiling, ripped of all ornamentation...paintings that once hung from them scattered about carelessly, the subjects depicted moaning their despair at the fall of the once proud Malfoys, creating a eerie cachophony that sounded like a never ending funeral.

His eyes fell on the woman preceding him as he made his way down the stately hallway. She had been avoiding looking at him in the eye since she had greeted him at the door. Severus knew
Narcissa Malfoy enough to know her behaviour had nothing to with him personally. She was a Black through and through...proud, shrew, full of herself. It pained her to be seen in such a state. Living in a ghost house, wearing the simplest dresses she owned, for the most expensive ones had long been auctioned off along with many of the family’s possessions, her hair already showing some premature signs of greying as impeccably groomed as ever, but nothing adorned it other than a cornflower blue ribbon of cheap material and her face, aged but still pretty, didn’t have a hint of make-up. Even as a shadow of her former self Narcissa still had the same perfect posture and elegant gait, which now he noticed was so similar to that of Evelyn Black’s. Granted the Irish Black had a certain grace and lightness about her that Narcissa with her delusional queen-complex would never muster.

They finally reached the door to Lucius Malfoy’s office. Narcissa finally turned to him, her eyes still avoiding his.

"You may go in. He’s waiting for you" Severus was a little taken aback...’He’...not ‘Lucius’. In just a handful of words spoken in a hushed and hoarse tone, Severus could feel Narcissa’s growing contempt for her own husband. He couldn’t say it came as a surprise, knowing Narcissa it was obvious it would take her a while to forgive Lucius for what their child had been gone through...that is if she ever did. Narcissa Malfoy could have all the flaws in the world, but she was a loving mother. Draco would always come before everything, Lucius included. It was one of the many reasons Severus managed to find in him to respect this otherwise insufferable woman. It surely put her way above many of the Blacks he knew. He could bet if confronted with the choice Violetta Black once had, Narcissa would have chosen her child over blood traditions. That required a strenght of character her husband lacked. Her strength was the reason the Malfoys were alive at all...his weakness was the reason they were reduced to the misery Severus now saw. It was enough for love to turn into contempt.

She walked away briskly as Severus opened the door. His eyes could barely make out the contours of the furniture and objects inside, the only light coming from a broken window covered by diaphanous curtains ripped to shreds. Against the light he could barely make out the silhouette of Lucius Malfoy, noticeably thinner, his hair longer and unkempt, his once obsessive care about his looks now gone.

"Severus Snape...the hero." he hissed, smirking acidly

"Lucius." Severus closed the door behind him.

"What are you here for? Shouldn’t you be getting ready to receive your Order of Merlin?"

"I came here to talk"

"Talk..."

"It’s in your best interest."

"Do I look like I have any interests left?"

"Maybe you don´t. But your family does. And there´s still something you can do for them...Unless you rather keep on carrying the burden of being responsible for their disgrace as well as yours"

"There´s nothing I can do for them anymore..."

"Yes, there is and we both know it"

"This is about Rodolphus and Rabastan isn’t it?"
Chapter Summary

Everybody has ghosts in their past and sometimes they come back… Evelyn and Severus try to pretend everything is fine while bonding over tea and common interests

Lucius stepped away from the window and sat on his chair, his face lost into darkness.

"Do you mind?" he let out acidly, making a broad gesture that indicated the entire room around them
"I can’t bring myself to have a serious conversation with anybody whose face I can’t see."

Severus retrieved his wand from the inside pocket of his jacket and with a swift flick of his wrist lit all the candles in the room. Lucius office remained for the most part unchanged, other than the growing amount of dust and spider webs covering everything and the missing decorative objects, the most expensive ones notably…all auctioned off. The Malfoys no longer had the luxury of house elves and surely Lucius wouldn’t bother with cleaning his office himself. Severus had noticed the entrance hall and main sitting room were clean and in perfect order, even if missing most of their furniture and art objects. Narcissa’s doing for absolute sure. Even if thrown in the most abject poverty, a Black would never be caught dead living in dirty lodgings or looking raggedy. Lucius on the other hand…then again, he had far more reason than his wife did to be a beaten down, hopeless mess.

"I would ask you to sit, but I imagine this conversation won’t take long. Not only did they take my wand, they have also taken away my privilege to entertain guests for as long as I please."

"It won’t."

"Severus walked over, standing near the large intricate mahogany desk, an heirloom from Lucius’ father and probably one of the very few things he had managed to keep from getting auctioned. A nicely executed piece, with a green slate top, an endless amount of drawers, supported by two exquisitely carved snakes. Severus remembered being thirteen years old, allowed into the Malfoy’s household, at Lucius’ request...that table sat in the middle of a massive library that was Severus dream come true. To this day he’d never forget how important he felt when Lucius’father allowed him into that room, even let him sit at that desk for a while. How little it took for him to be taken in...how ridiculously little.

"So...do I have to ask why you came here to ask about things you already know, or should I wait for a grandiloquent speech on why I should collaborate with the Ministry to save my own skin, like you did...or rather 'for the greater good'

"We’ve known each other for years Lucius...there once was a time I considered you my friend, even tough I wouldn’t dare say you felt the same, but nevertheless, I was at the very least useful to you..."

"Severus, please..." Lucius vomited a venomous smirk

"You can cut the act. I’m not going to pretend I didn’t use you in my own ways, much like you did to me. It was the entire point of our little contract, wasn’t it? I never complained, and never will. I was as guilty as you were"
"Then why are you here at all?"

"Draco."

"Let’s keep my son out of this. I’ve done enough to him"

"Your son is into this, up to his ears...through no fault of his own, as I surely don’t have to remind you. Once I took a vow to protect him..."

"And you’ve already fulfilled it...are you here to collect praise?"

"No, I’m here to remind you that you still have a debt to your son and wife. At the very least to not drag them down with you. I could go to the Ministry and tell them all I know. But I’m offering you an opportunity. If you take it...there will be leniency...you may even avoid Azkaban yourself."

"I don’t expect leniency from the Ministry...as for Draco and Narcissa. They are safe. As you may know, they have given Narcissa probation and Draco will never be prosecuted for things he did while still a minor and under my guidance."

"He’s not a minor now"

"I beg your pardon."

"Cards on the table, Lucius. You’ve sent Draco to France, didn’t you? To Claire."

"Claire is my cousin. Where else would you have me send my son?" Severus could almost hear Lucius’ jaw clench

"Don’t play dumb with me of all people. You know very well what I’m talking about. Only his inner circle knew about the Dark Lord’s plans to expand his rule beyond Britain as soon as Harry Potter died and Hogwarts had fallen. I was the one who dutifully helped him concoct that plan. Your dear cousin, Claire Brun, who currently answers by Madame Rott, after she married that Austrian pile of pureblood garbage, was the head of the French Death Eater cell...they were the ones Voldemort expected to help him start recruiting in the continent. Her and Dimitri in Russia. Nobody could ever prove anything against any of them and the French Ministry found no hard evidence for an investigation, let alone to hand her and he husband over to Britain for investigation. But I know better. And now you send Draco over to France, to her house. Are you really trying to disgrace your son?"

"The Dark Lord is dead..." Lucius replied faintly

"But the Lestranges are alive. And inside Rodolphus little delusional brain, they are the chosen ones to continue the Dark Lord’s work. I’m willing to bet Madame Rott and Herr Rott are the ones helping them escape."

"If you have so much figured out, then why are you here at all?"

"To give you a chance to do right by your child once. I can go to the Ministry now and tell them everything I suspect about the Lestranges’ flight and how you may or may not be involved in this. Draco is no longer a minor, so if they as much as suspect he’s in on it, he won’t be given a free pass. I’ll give you a few days to sleep on it. Bring Draco back to Britain and tell the authorities about the Rotts yourself."

"What if I don’t?"
"I that case, there’s nothing I can do to help you. Just make sure to have a good excuse ready when your wife finds out you are once again putting her dear boy in harm’s way. And be prepared for an even bigger case to be brought against you before the Ministry."

"You have no evidence."

"Lucius, Lucius..." Severus smirked "You don’t understand, do you? I was there, right next to the Dark Lord this whole time. He trusted me...blindly. I don’t need evidence. I AM evidence. Living, breathing, evidence"

"Which is precisely why you should have ‘stayed dead’. Is a dangerous game you’re trying to play...with Rodolphus at large."

"Rodolphus may be a simpleton inbred blockhead but he’s still smarter than you. He has figured out by now that he needs me...something you fail to get into your thick skull."

"Needs you? Why on Earth..." Lucius stopped mid-sentence, his eyes widening "No...so is true, isn’t it? The Dark Lord did tell you about the..."

"He did...down to every single detail, location included..."

"You’re bluffing..."

"...too bad the spell the Ministry has put over this house to keep you in house arrest will prevent you from telling Rodolphus just how alive I am, and much I know. But then again, he probably knows or at least suspects by now. You see, that’s the beauty of it... He wants me dead, yet he needs me alive. Let’s face it, the Dark Lord didn’t manage to get into my head, what hope do the Lestranges have? But if they kill me, the information dies as well. Isn’t it a thing of beauty? If I were in your shoes Lucius, I’d pick sides wisely now..."

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Cokeworth Academy

Monday, October 12th.

"Well, I think that’s enough for today. Class dismissed, I’ll see you wednesday."

The clatter of desks and chairs being moved as the students collected their belongings to leave filled the air around her. Evelyn took off her reading glasses and collected her notes and papers into her briefcase, that familiar feeling of relaxation after a day of work starting to make way on her shoulders. First day of work in Cokeworth academy. It went much better than she anticipated, but first days can often be deceiving, so no fireworks just yet. Evelyn had been warned about disciplinary issues with the students of the support program, and many would have been worried about a class full of teenagers raising hell. But she knew that, more often than not, the problem with teenagers was not exactly their supposedly noisy and rambunctious nature...it was apathy.

They were at an age where they were starting to discover that defiance comes in many forms, and passive-aggressive silence was a favourite. That was precisely why she had decided to not tackle the
regular curriculum just yet. These were kids who already had content shoved down their throats on a
daily basis and it wasn’t working. Not because they were incapable of absorbing it, but merely
because...they didn’t care much for it. Evelyn had seen that time and time again, even in Trinity. This
specific situation posed an extra challenge. For these kids, being in a support program was, in many
ways, an affirmation of failure. Forcing them to memorize dates and events wasn’t going to give them
any encouragement.

Instead, she had decided to use the first class to introduce some basic concepts of history. She had
tried to ask their impressions about history. What was it, why was it in the curriculum, why did they
have to study... more importantly, why they thought they didn’t have to study it. She tried to make
them voice the reasons for their presence in a support program, in a way that went beyond "my
grades are lousy". She wouldn’t say it was a great success. She was a new teacher, the class was not
motivated, there was no way she would get them to partake into an animated conversation about the
importance of the study of the past for the making and straightening of the social fabric or anything
like it. But at least she got them talking. They had told her about why they disliked history, why they
thought classes were boring... she had gotten them complain, joke, laugh, even to tease and nag her.
She had engaged them. Silence was broken. It was progress. It was far from perfect but it was
progress.

But of course, there was always a reluctant pupil in every class.

And there he was, in the back of the room, still sleeping on his desk. James Wright. A gangly 16
year old, with dirty looking blond hair, pale blue eyes and your run of the mill case of teenage acne,
dressed like he had been caught in the middle of a collision between the touring buses of Nirvana
and Marilyn Manson, where good taste was the first casualty. For most of the class he had merely
scoffed and muttered crass remarks under his breath, as if she couldn’t hear him. Then once he
realized he wasn’t going to get much attention for his antics he simply decided to check out. Now all
his classmates were gone and he was still snoring and drooling on that raggedy notebook that he only
used to practice his misshapen graffiti tags. Evelyn sighed and walked over to him.

"James?"
Nothing.
"Wright?"
She rolled her eyes, took a deep breath and returned to her desk to retrieve a pen from her briefcase.
"Wright!"
Silence.
"Very well then..." she leaned in and poked his ribs with the blunt tip of her pen. Hard. "WRIGHT!"
He jumped from his desk so suddenly and awkwardly his feet got tangled on the legs of his chair,
making him fall back, screaming a torrent of curses.
"Do you kiss your mother with this filthy mouth, young man?" Evelyn smirked.
"ARE YOU CRAZY, LADY?!"
"I could answer that, but scaring you witless this early in the game would be counterproductive."
He scrambled back to his feet, zipping up his ridiculously oversized jacket, and grabbed his
belongings, still grumbling under his breath.
"Where do you think you´re going?" Evelyn asked him coolly, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Class is over." he sneered.

"I´m perfectly aware of that. In fact I was the one who ended the class. But I don´t remember giving you permission to leave."

"What the..."

"Sit down."

"No. I´m going home."

"No you are not. Sit down."

"You can´t make me. Class is over."

"Sit.Down.Now."

"Class.Is.Over. You can´t keep me."

"Mr. Wright, allow me to clarify something for you, so our relationship can get a little easier from now on. You´re in a classroom. That means you do what I tell you to do, not the other around. Now that this much is clear, you are going to sit your pseudo-rocker, wannabe-thug, back-talking arse down...Now."

James rolled his eyes and scoffed, but did as told.

"Very well. Now, care to tell me what this class was about?"

"How the hell am I supposed to know?"

"Oh, yeah...you slept through half of it...and seemingly your brain is not competent enough to remember what you did witness, am I correct?"

"Did you just call me stupid?"

"I don´t know you well enough to say that. But you are surely making it a point to make everyone around you doubt your intellect and capabilities... Let´s see... you are wearing a jacket with the anarchist symbol on it, even tough given your built and attitude you´d probably not last a day alive in a society without a State to keep you protected. You´ve wasted about half your notebook trying to come up with a decent graffitti tag but you aren´t even be able to replicate other people´s tags, which is a clear sign that your artistic skills are as mediocre as your grades. Which is the whole reason you emulate Kurt Cobain with this silly hair of yours, isn´t it? You want to be a rebellious young artist or anything equally interesting, but not washing your hair is the closest you can get to it. I know from your file that you´re prone to putting up this juvenile delinquent act, but judging by how clean your shirt is and the fact that you actually bother to show up for school at all, I´m more inclined to think you´re less of a thug and more of regular teenager with and attitude. So forgive me if I´m too honest, but you have yet to give me a reason to take you seriously."

"Fine." She could hear his voice falter just slightly. Nerve hit. Good. "You don´t take me seriously and I´m a failure. Can I just go now?"

"I´m not done."

"Am I just gonna sit here while you...?"
"Do not interrupt me. As I was saying.... I see no reason to take you seriously. That doesn´t mean there isn´t a reason to take you seriously."

"Yeah, right..."

"Next class, I want a ten minute presentation, please write down the theme."

"What?!"

"Write down the theme, Mr.Wright....`What is History and why study it?`. I want it in your own words, no copying from any encyclopedia or book, got it? I will know if you do that."

"Is this all payback because I slept in your class? You don´t have to be such a bitch about it."

"First of: I´m not being a bitch. Trust me, you will know when I´m being a bitch and I´m not even started here. Second: yes, it is about your behaviour in class, but not in the way you think it is. You may believe that by disturbing my class, then just ignoring me you are, somehow, sticking up to authority and making yourself grander than you are. I hate to burst your bubble, but whether you pay attention or sleep, whether you succeed or flunk, whether you go from this school to a decent university, or to a good job or the unemployment line, or jail...I won´t be affected in the least. My life goes on, and my paycheck will be the same. What I´m doing here is giving you an opportunity to make me care at all about you. To make me see you as more than a waste of space, to see you as person with ideas and opinions I might be interested to acknowledge. Unless of course...you really are a waste of space. You may go now, Mr. Wright."

The boy begrudgingly collected his material and walked towards the door.

"Oh, Mr. Wright?"

"What now?!"

"Don´t think I didn´t hear those anti-Irish slurs earlier in class. I will let it slide for now because it was the first day and my expectations about you are not exactly high. But if that happens again, I´ll make you sit through the entire Michael Collins biopic and write a hundred-page essay about it...with focus on historical context."

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The tree was still there.

Severus stood in front of the old elder next to Cokeworth Academy, as his eyes followed the faded contours scrambled words and doodles he had carved into the ashen bark so many years ago. Before Hogwarts, this was where Lily went to school. Severus would hide behind that Elder so none of the other children would see him as he waited for Lily to come out of school. In a good day his mother would give him some loose change so they could have some ice-cream in that cheap cafe a few blocks away...Buckwheat pancakes, if it was a really good day. He never had enough to pay for everything, but if he had at least half the price so he and Lily could split the bill, it wasn´t so bad. He´d never have Lily pay his way, so if his pockets happened to be empty, then they´d go home so his mother could serve them some biscuits with tea.

When Ms. Black had told him she was going to teach at Cokeworth Academy, Severus had been
mildly annoyed...he couldn’t tell exactly why. Part of it was sheer frustration at the thought of Trinity professor deciding to waste time with playing schoolmaster...But maybe the main reason had been that school....It still reminded him too much of Lily. Evelyn Black was unintentionally forcing her way into his life in such a manner that made him less than comfortable. She was a muggle, a woman from a little village in Ireland...She was completely removed from his life, from who he was and the things he had lived. She should have no significant impact on him...just another muggle...And yet, she was inserting herself into his familiar surroundings in a way that felt both seamless and unnerving. He had known her for a little over a week, and yet she had already become a familiar habit, from the sight of that dreadfully red Volvo on the street, to the sound of her high heels on the pavement outside. Even as he opened his cabinet of potion ingredients, the lavender springs would immediately trigger an immediate association in his brain. She wasn’t supposed to be there, and it didn’t seem like she’d leave any sooner...But he shouldn’t be getting used.

Now he had to wonder why had he was standing there...in front of that school, of that tree...He had been avoiding this place and the memories that came with it for years....why now?

The school bell rang. It was probably a good time to leave, but he stayed. He didn’t know what he was waiting for, but he stayed. A horde of children and teenagers stormed from the building making an unholy racket. He couldn’t see her among the teachers who were coming out...maybe she had left earlier...She wasn’t a regular teacher, so her classes might have a different schedule. Still, he stood there...some twenty minutes later the sight of her red trench coat caught his eye against the greyish brown stone of the building. She walked briskly, papers, notebooks and briefcases on her left arm, car keys and an oversized bag in her right hand.

Severus stood still, resisting the sudden impulse to walk up to her. In spite of himself he had picked up the habit of seeking her, of going to her her whenever she showed up. Probably because he knew she would want to talk to him, so it as better to get the forced social exchange out of the way. It was just Evelyn Black’s way of doing things. She was a deeply gregarious creature, and Severus being her only neighbour often meant he was the victim of choice in her outbursts of sociability. After a little over a week of this, Severus had learned resistance was futile. And, if he was to be completely honest with himself, he had to admit it was not as infuriating as it was at first. Evelyn Black was a good distraction. She was energetic, smart, good-looking. Severus had fun observing her, giving her half clues about her search for her family’s past, teasing her about her job, her career choices, her eating and drinking habits, her Irish mannerisms to get her goat. In some ways it was like shaking a shiny toy in front of a curious kitten.

Another person came into his field of vision, startling him. A shorter woman with long blond hair wearing a hot pink duffel coat and ligt colored jeans came running after Evelyn. For a few seconds the two stood next to Evelyn’s car and talked cheerfully. Severus watched as red and pink moved into the dull greyish afternoon as both women got into Evelyn’s car and left.

Good. He needed a walk.

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They walked into the little café just a couple blocks from the school and found it almost empty. It was a tiny little place with a décor that looked stuck int the 50s, only with the colours almost entirely faded by the passing years. They chose a table by the window and sat down, leaving the coats and bags on the extra chair. A grumpy-looking waiter came over and handed them two menus, leaving them almost immediately.
"Well, service is not all that...and their tea is practically toilet water." Angela giggled "But they do make the best buckwheat pancakes. And this place is cheap....mostly because it sucks, but yay! pancakes!"

"Well, I can´t oppose pancakes. Just to be safe, whatever we drink let´s make sure it comes in a can or bottle." Evelyn told her, gesturing for the waiter to come back.

"Sounds like a plan." Angela turned to the waiter "We´ll both have the buckwheat pancakes, and a bottle of mineral water for me. You, Evelyn?"

"Mineral water is fine."

"Ok, then water for us both."

"How do you know this place?" Evelyn asked as the waiter walked away "I´ve passed by this street a couple of times and never noticed it."

"Oh, they´re not so grand in advertising...Or keeping the façade presentable for that matter. But anybody who grew up in Cokeworth knows this place. Worst tea and best pancakes of all Greater Manchester!"

"So, you´re from Cokeworth."

"My mother is. I was born in Liverpool actually. But we moved back to live with my grandmother after my father passed away. My mother worked long hours and nannies were too expensive."

"I see..."

"Eh...It was a long time ago." Angela smiled. They had known each other for only a few hours, but Evelyn felt at ease with Angela, actually, Angie, as she preferred to be called. She seemed to be constantly happy and would crack jokes at every given opportunity. In some ways she reminded her of her sister, Caitlin, at least on the surface. Angela taught English, and juggled both regular classes and the extra classes of the support program and the conversation they had at the teacher´s lounge during a coffee break quickly revealed she shared many of Evelyn´s views about teaching and education. So when she approached her at the end of the workday saying she had something do discuss with her, Evelyn was immediately interested. "So, how was your first day?"

"Not nearly as bad as people would have me believe it would, actually."

"Did you make Mr. Wright´s acquaintance."

"Oh, James...bit of a ruffian, no?"

"Like father like son..."

"So..problems at home...I´m not surprised"

"The classical case. Father is a good for nothing, mother is doing her best but...you know."

"Figures."

"Actually James is just a sample of our larger problem....ours kids are not motivated enough..."

"Not surprising, if I may say so..."

"You´re right. After the mill closed motivation became a rare commodity in Cokeworth. The city is
getting back on its feet, but those things take time..."

"Well, the support program is a start."

"It is. And that’s why I wanted to talk to you. You see, I’ve had this idea for quite a while, but the history teacher before you was very skeptical about it, and I think so is Mr. Nolan...Mr. Nolan is great person, but he can be a tad conservative. I was hoping that maybe you could help me sell this one"

"Then do tell..."

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Severus came out of a tobacco shop’where he had just bough a new pack of cigarettes and lit up a fag. His last pack had ran out on him just that morning, which was actually quite unusual. He rarely saw a single pack last him a week, but for some reason he had been smoking less lately. Of course after his conversation with Lucius he had returned to his old habits and gone through some four cigarettes on a row as soon as he had gotten home. Lucius stubborn stupidity just wore his patience too thin, and after a long while of most complete peaceful muggle anonymity, the mere sigh of Malfoy´s manor had made him instantly weary and moody. If only he could completely sever ties with that whole mess...

"Hello, Severus!" A soft male voice came from behind him, cutting his train of thought.

"Father Thomas, hello." he answered flatly, after a bit of hesitation. If the man didn’t have his clerical collared shirt under the heavy fisherman styled jacket, Severus might not have recognized him. It had been some years since they last saw each other and he had to admit the image of a young thirty-something Fr. Thomas was clearer in his mind...probably because his childhood memories in general were fresher, even tough they should be worn out from being overplayed in his brain.

"It´s been a while." The priest walked over to him, carrying a plastic shopping bag, his face mildly reddened by the cold.

"Yes...some years." Severus slowed down his steps, allowing the older man to walk along with him.

"I didn´t know you were back in Cokeworth. Weren´t you living in Scotland?"

"Yes, I was."

"Are you back for good?"

"It seems so."

"Weren´t you teaching in Scotland? What happened to that?"

"Not anymore...early retirement, so to speak"

"Oh...I didn’t know," Fr. Thomas seemed uneasy for a while as they walked side by side, silently. "How’s Evelyn doing?"

"Excuse me?" Severus turned to him, surprised. Why would he be asking him that? As if Severus was supposed to know anything about her. He bit back his tongue not to sneer something rude.
"Your new neighbour, Ms. Black. I met her when he came to the church about a week ago, lovely woman... but I haven’t seen her since."

"You probably won’t be seeing much of her...she just found a job."

"Oh, but that’s wonderful. She’ll be staying in Cokeworth then."

"It seems so."

"I’m glad. Say, where is she working?"

"Cokeworth Academy. She’s teaching history there." Damnit, Severus thought to himself. Do I look like her husband or father to be giving out information about her?

"Cokeworth Academy...is where that young girl you were friends with went to school, no? What was her name again? Lilian?"

"Lily. Lily Evans."

"Yes! Lily. You must forgive my lapse in memory. Age is catching up to me."

"Well Lily’s family wasn’t Catholic, so I don’t think you saw much of her. Is natural not to remember" Severus smirked bitterly. The Snapes weren’t Catholic either and yet Fr. Thomas saw plenty of them. But then again Lily’s family didn’t need church charity like the Snapes did.

"True, true. Whatever happened to Lily? It’s been so many years since I last saw her."

"It’s been a long time I don’t see her either..." Severus let his eyes wonder away and follow the silhouettes of the dead trees that lined the street near Our Lady of Cokeworth church.

He shouldn’t have left his house today. First the school and now Fr. Thomas...both aged and inexorable reminders of the time he spent running around these old, dull streets, following the sound of Lily’s laugh, the brilliant red of her hair as it waved around her shoulders, the click-clack of her red mary-janes as she played hopscotch on the concrete of the church’s playground. In some way, returning to Cokeworth made such memories at once closer and distant. Cokeworth had changed, the playground had changed, the school had changed...even father Thomas has changed, as the crow’s feet around his bright blue eyes and the extra padding around his midriff attested. But what was truly unsettling to him was how much things changed and yet remained the same. The church was still there, children still played at the playground, the school bell still sounded everyday at the same hour, and Fr. Thomas remained the talkative and debonair priest who’d stop him on the street to ask how he was doing. And maybe that was the exact thing that pained Severus the most. Lily wasn’t there. Things changed and things remained the same...and she wasn’t there. In many ways Severus knew the nine-year old boy who had met Lily in a sunny afternoon almost thirty years ago refused to die within him...but what use was for him to be alive when his only playmate was no longer there? Lily was forever young, forever joyous...forever gone. Her playmate who stayed behind, still lived...but what had become of him?

"Well, here we must part." Fr. Thomas smiled "It was nice talking to you, Severus."

"Likewise, Father."

"I hope yo see you again soon. It’s not everyday we get to see this city’s children come back all grown up."

"Maybe that’s for a reason, Father."
"Maybe...still, I’m glad to see you again."

"Thank you."

"Oh, Severus?"

"Yes?"

"Send my regards to Ms. Black. Tell her I’d love to see her in church one of these days, if she can make it."

"I will. I’m sure she’ll find the time."

"Maybe you both will"

"Aren’t we full of maybes today, father?"

"Is there anything else to life other than maybes, son?"

"I guess not."

Even before she got out of her car, Evelyn could see the tall man all dressed in black, casually standing by her door.

"Severus!" she called out, picking up her handbag and papers from the passenger seat.

"How was your first day?" he smirked, tossing away his cigarette.

"I’m afraid to say your prophetic abilities are not all you think they are. None of the catastrophes you predicted happened." She smiled. Severus could detect a hint of tiredness on her. Just a hint. That usual look most people had after a day full of activities. The papers and folders she had with her were a bit disorganised, her bag was open, her usually flawlessly styled hair was slightly messy and there was a slight paleness to her face. Surely it had been a long day.

"Well, my area of expertise is potions not prophecies"

"If you have a potion that makes teenagers pay attention, I’d love to have it."

"If I did, I would have used it myself already."

"Fair point. But, yes. My first day was rather good, actually. Thank you for asking."

Severus shifted uneasily on his feet as she opened the door.

"Ms. Black, I.."

"How long is it going to take you to just call me Evelyn?" She smiled

"Well, I..I know you probably had a long day, but..."

"Come in...I’ll make us some tea"
Part 4 - Books and tea - Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Everybody has ghosts in their past and sometimes they come back… Evelyn and Severus try to pretend everything is fine while bonding over tea and common interests.

"I just ate something at Café Yalta, but I can fix you something to eat if you want" Evelyn offered as she poured him some tea.

"Just tea will suffice, thank you. Café Yalta, huh? I hope to God you only had their buckwheat pancakes."

"You know the place?"

"Everybody does. Best pancakes and…"

"...worst tea of all Greater Manchester! So it IS true. Angela told me exactly that!" she laughed softly, sitting besides him and kicking off her shoes by the side of the couch.

"Angela?"

"Yeah, a colleague of mine. English teacher. She wouldn´t let me have their tea because it supposedly tastes like toilet water."

"She might as well have saved you from some nasty infection. 'Supposedly' is entirely too kind. I´m fairly confident that their tea is actual toilet water."

"Cokeworth should put that in touristic brochures, 'Come to Cokeworth and drink the world´s worst tea'” her silvery laugher was growing in volume around him, as she ran her fingers through her long hair making herself comfortable on the couch. Severus had noticed that lately she had started to get very much at ease around him. Worse still, it had ceased to bother him.

"I´m sure it´s there somewhere with the high crime rates and the most polluted river in Great Britain"

"You know, sometimes is just amazingly moving to see how much you love your home town."

"Wit that being said, you must agree, Cokeworth´s many touristic attractions are not what one can safely consider an interesting topic for conversation."

"I didn´t know that café was famous...or rather, infamous."

"Mostly among the people of my generation. The owners came from Ukraine...expatriates from the Soviet Union. It added to the charm, I guess. Many children and teenagers would go there...family-owned place, low prices, hyper-caloric foods, close to the city´s main school."

"Now I get why they have all that Slavic art on the walls. I quite liked it, actually. So, were you one of the children or teenagers that went there?"

"When we had money, yes."
"We?"

"Uh...yes. Me and a friend, usually. To split the bill" Severus swallowed hard. Had he really said 'we'? Of course he always went to that place with Lily...so, it was 'we'. He shifted on his seat, uncomfortably."So...I've read those letters..."

"Oh, great-grandma Violetta's crazy letters? What's your verdict?"

"Well, much like you I couldn't find an explicit reason for the Black family to have disowned your grandfather. Which only leads me to believe that there must have been some sort of intellectual disagreement"

"Such as?"

"From what you've told me about your grandfather he was a very...eccentric man, correct?"

"Very much so. It was half of what made him an excellent grandfather to have"

"And he was an intellectual, so to speak. One with some very liberal ideas, possibly?"

"I'd say. It was one of the reasons why some of the people from Doolin didn't really trust him when he first moved there. He was too...English, too urban too modern for their tastes. When my father was born the first thing my grandfather did was start saving up to pay for his studies, send him to university...he wanted my father to have the best possible education. It's funny, even tough he converted to Catholicism, he remained pretty much non-religious. He converted just so he could marry my grandmother and nothing else. He kept butting heads with my mother about how silly it was to be giving us kids a religious education. I guess more than being 'liberal' per se, he was a no-nonsense type of man...didn't have much patience for traditions, appearances or social norms he disagreed with..."

"And his family...it seems to me...was the exact opposite. A conservative, traditional family bound by appearances. I suppose that's where the problem lay."

"I believe you are right. But that still doesn't explain a number of things. This house for once. Why would they own a house in a poor district of an industrial town up North, if they were from London?"

"I can't say I have an answer for that, honestly."

"You know....something crossed my mind...but it might be too crazy..."

"...and what would that be?"

"Promise me you won't laugh?"

"Miss Black, in the realm of intellectual conjectures there's not such a thing as laughable. Do tell me"

"Well...I've been wondering...and in my mind the only possible reason a rich family from London would have a house in a city up north in a place most people would not associate with them is if they didn't want people to know about that particular house...correct?"

"Yes, correct."

"Now, why wouldn't they want people to know about it, is what I ask myself...Maybe I'm venturing into romanesque territory here, but I guess four years dating a novelist will do that to your
mind...but...what if this house was a cover for something or some activity they didn’t want publicized? Maybe something illegal?"

Severus frowned. No, this wasn’t crazy at all. Evelyn had no idea of who the Blacks really were, but she had inadvertently found the right track. It wouldn’t surprise Severus at all if this house was a cover for activities the Black family wanted hidden from the Ministry of Magic, maybe even some related to their blood supremacy agenda. Except...no that was not right... If they had been using this house for this purpose then why would they pass it own to their only Squib child? Marius had all the reasons in the world to want to rattle them out to the Ministry, after being disowned and expelled from the family, so why put a house in his hands that was probably as good as physical evidence of their wrong-doings? He looked back at Evelyn and noticed was biting her lower lip, which he knew was a sign of tension in her.

"And is there any reason in particular you think that?" he ventured, trying to get her to keep talking.

"I have something to show you..." She put her mug on the coffee table and turned to him, taking his hand into hers "Come with me for a moment..."

Severus left his own tea next to hers on the table and followed her, the warmth of her hand on his making him entirely too uncomfortable as they climbed up the stairs. As he imagined her house was built exactly like his, the narrow staircase that only made room for one person to climb up, forcing anybody else to follow in line, led into a tiny vestibule. Upstairs there were two bedrooms and a bathroom, much like his own house. But something was different. There was a fourth door there.

"See that door?"

"Yes"

Se walked over to it and opened it. It led into another staircase, on the top of which there was yet another door, painted in black, with something metallic on it that he couldn’t quite make out. Evelyn got up with some difficulty. The ceiling was too low even for her shorter frame, so to follow her up Severus had to practically fold his body in two. They reached the top of the stairs and now Severus could see somewhat clearly into the small and dark space. The metalinguistic shape he saw was a strange type of handle shaped like a dragon-like snake. There was no lock of any kind.

"A basilisk..." he whispered without thinking

"You’re right, it’s a basilisk. The mythical king of serpents..."

"How did you find this?"

"The keys my grandfather left me...one of them opens the bottom door...but look at this! This door has no lock. And no key. I have exactly six keys for this house: one for each bedroom, one for the bathroom, one for the front door, one for the back door and one for the bottom door we just came through. As you know the kitchen has no lock it opens directly into the living room. So how is this door supposed to open?"

"Maybe it’s not supposed to be opened." he told her coldly. He was at a complete loss to what he should think, but one thing he knew: her theory was becoming more and more plausible.

"Exactly! Is like they sealed this door so whatever it is that’s in there can’t be found! I’ve made up my mind. As soon as I have the time I’m going to find somebody to bash this open, with a chainsaw if necessary."

"No!" Severus almost yelled
"What do you mean, 'no'?'"

"You don‘t know what’s in there and for how long it has been there. It could be even toxic, with houses this old, it’s always a possibility. Besides, we don‘t know enough about the structure of this house to just go bashing it to pieces.” Severus swallowed hard. It was certain this door had a spell or charm attached to it. The Blacks wouldn’t have done any less if they wanted to hide something. There was no way to predict the consequences of taking a chainsaw to it.

"Oh dear, you´re right. Speaking about the structure of this house...."

"What about it?"

"Tell me...do your house has a third floor...or an attic?"

"No."

"Come with me..."

She went down the stairs hurriedly, like a raptor flying low, then down to the ground floor and rushed out to street without as much as waiting for him to keep up. He followed and looked at her in absolute puzzlement as they stood in the middle of the street outside.

"What are you trying to do, if I may ask?"

"Look up"

"Sorry?"

"Look up!" she pointed at the ceiling of her house "Do you see a third floor?"

He looked up. No, he didn’t see a third floor, or an attic. Just two floors, exactly like his house.

"I don’t." he answered flatly

"Then...WHERE does that door lead?"

That was it. That door led into a magically created third floor. One that muggles wouldn’t see from the outside. Actually wizards wouldn’t either, since he couldn’t see it. But that didn’t make any sense. If they had created a magical hidden room, then why leave the door to it visible to anybody? The right way to perform that spell would be to disappear with the room and any entrances to it. Of course him being a wizard he might have the ability to at least see the door (as it would be rather impractical to hide the door from magical eyes) but Evelyn Black surely wasn’t supposed to be able to see it.

"Maybe it doesn’t lead anywhere. Just an architectural prank"

"It´s not!"

"You seem awfully sure."

"I tried to bash it in. Almost disloacted my shoulder in the process. From the sound it made, I can tell you, there’s a room behind that door!"

"You tried to bash it in?! Are you insane? You could have killed yourself!"

"Killed myself?!" she laughed thunderously "Trying to bust a door open? I may be a weak little
woman, but I’m surely NOT made of glass."

"I mean..." Severus took a deep breath. This was NOT the right time to explain to her how disturbing a spell could get her killed "...you could have fallen from those stairs."

"Oh, that...I suppose you´re right. But then again...If can´t bash it in, If can´t bring a chainsaw to it...what am I supposed to do?!"

"For now? Get a hold of your destructive cravings. While we don´t get a clear notion of the whole structure of this house and what damages it could cause to break that door in, you´ll have to restrain yourself.” he told her seriously, hoping to buy himself some time.

"So, am I just supposed to go to bed at night knowing there´s a ghost third floor above my head?"

"Unless you start hearing spectral moaning and chains being dragged in the dead of night, that´s exactly what you´re going to do"

"And if that happens, can I break it or should I wait for the Ghostbusters?!

"I´m serious, Ms. Black. Give me some time and I´ll think about what we can do. Meanwhile find me the floorplan, or any other layout of the house. If you can be just a little patient we´ll find a solution to this."

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Cokeworth Academy

Tuesday, October 13th

James sat on the front steps of the school building, staring at the blank page of his notebook. Last night he had stared for a long time at that exact same blank page "What is history and why study it?"...In his own words. Ms. Black might as well have asked him to design a rocket for a space mission destined for Pluto. What was he supposed to know about why we study history? All he needed was to bump  his grades up enough not to fail the school year...Well, it wasn´t like he was doing anything about that either...but damnit, this was pure revenge. Just because he had slept during her class and made a few stupid jokes about her. He tought the Irish could take a joke...

"James!"

He looked up. Constance, or Tancey as everybody called her,was crossing the entrance gate, wearing her signature black fake leather boots, that red kilt she kept stealing from her sister´s closet and her favourite R.E.M t-shirt under a beat up dark green jacket. It was funny really how different Tancey was from himself, and yet out much they were similar. In many ways they were opposites Tancey was black, he was white, Tancey was short, focused and energetic, he was gangly and all over the place, Tancey had a normal family he had...a not-so-normal family, she had siblings, he didn ´t, Tancey had friends, James had...Tancey. But in the things that mattered they were pretty much the same. They both liked alternative rock, they listened to the same artists, they watched the same tv shows, the same movies... and they were friends, which was pretty much enough. Of course her parents weren´t too keen on some of the music she listened to, or the fact that she had James in tow almost all the time...but this was exactly why he liked Tancey: she didn´t give a hoot about what
anybody thought.
"You’re early." she sat besides him, trying to sneak a peak into his notebook.

"Trying to get this sodding assignment done."

"The one Ms. Black gave you yesterday?"

"Yeah...she’s trying to get even because I slept in her class."

"Oh, please...if anything she’d be trying to get even because you called her names. Pikey? Really? Couldn’t you at least have come up with something clever?"

"Who’s side are you on?"

"Nobody’s. I rather let you butt heads with her on your own lonesome self. I have my own stuff to mind, remember? I’m in her class too, after all"

"And I swear I don’t know why. Your grades are ok."

"Not my History grades. I mean, really? What use is it to me to know about the bloody Battle of sodding Waterloo? At least with math there’s a right answer and there’s that."

"Welcome to the party. I have to come up with some explanation to 'why we should study history'"

"Because the school tells us we have to?" she laughed

"I can’t put that! Crazy Ms. Black already has it in for me as it is!"

"Don’t be such a big baby. Ms Black is ok."

"Says you."

"Well, off course, I wasn’t sleeping on her class and calling her names like a looser wannabe skinhead, was I?"

"Ok, so it’s all my fault."

"Just saying, if you want to piss off the teacher, don’t expect her to love you."

"Moments of wisdom with Constance Rhea Francis. Thank you"

"You know you’d be lost without my precious advise." she gave him a playful push on his arm before turning to the side "speaking of the devil..."

James turned to see Ms. Black’s red Volvo driving into the parking lot of the school. He shoved his notebook into his backpack and made it to get up, but Tancey pulled him down by the back of his trousers making him fall back with his arse on the hard stone steps.

"Shit, Tancey!" he sneered

"Are you gonna run away from her, you nancy?"

"I’m not running away from her! I just don’t want her to be on my case, AGAIN!"

"Oh, shut up and sit down"
They looked on as their teacher got out of the car and walked towards the main entrance. James was starting to get royally annoyed at Ms. Black. Just look at her! With her expensive shoes and fancy clothes and leather bag...sodding woman was just a fascinator away from fitting right in with those weirdos that are always around the Royal Family like moths to a flame...shouldn´t she be going to the races in Ascot instead of giving him hell?

"Hello Mr. Wright, Ms.Francis" she stopped in front of them, with that smug smile of hers.

"Hello, Ms. Black" Constance answered, then promptly shoved her elbow into his ribs to snap him out of his stubborn silence.

"Hi..." he let out, curmudgeonly

"The two of you are quite early today."

"Yeah, James is working on that presentation you asked."

"Tancey!" James hissed

"Is that so? How´s that going?"

"Eh..."

"Do you need any help?"

"Help?"

"Yes, help, guidance, orientation, clarification.... Those things I´m paid to do, remember?"

"No, I´m ok."

"No, he´s not! Me neither, actually. There´s still a lot of stuff from last class that I didn´t get!"

"Nerd" James rolled his eyes

"Don´t be stupid, she just offered to help! If you want to fail history, good for you, but I don´t!"

"Ok, ok, kids." Evelyn checked her watch “We still have some thirty minutes before the first class starts. Why don´t we go in and brainstorm a little?"

"Brainstorm?" James lifted an eyebrow

"Are you familiar with the concept?" Evelyn smirked

"Of course..." he scoffed

"Very well. So let´s go inside and throw some ideas around, maybe things will become a little clearer for you."

Constance followed Evelyn inside the school, as James dragged his feet behind them, grumbling under his breath.

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Severus stared at the door of of Evelyn Black´s house for a few long minutes before finally deciding
to take is wand out of his pocket and get to it. The idea of breaking into her house while she was at work definitely bothered him. Severus never had any qualms about doing reprehensible things as long as it was for a good reason. As any Slytherin worth his or her salt could agree, the ends justify the means. But to break into Evelyn´s house of all things just felt markedly...wrong.

Still, it was for her own good. He didn´t feel well at ease knowing there was a magically locked up room inside that house, closed off with a spell he had yet to identify. As to what was hidden inside the room, it was anyone´s guess, which was, frankly alarming. Evelyn Black was a very stubborn woman, and extremely curious. A combination that was as fruitful for an intellectual as it was potentially dangerous when dealing with magic. Danger that increased significantly considering she was a muggle. Severus knew Evelyn wouldn´t find rest until she had opened that door and found what was inside. And he had no way to keep her from trying to do so without raising suspicions. So, what was left for him to do was to open it before she had the chance to try, and find out first whatever was in there.

She had gone to work a little earlier today. This Tuesday she would have a meeting with the principal so they could discuss some plans she and her colleague Angela had come up with for the students. Some sort of interdisciplinary approach to motivate students. It seemed like Miss Evelyn Black had found an equally idealistic educator in Miss Angela Holt. Well, if it kept her away from home enough for him to do what he had to...

"Alohomora" he let out softly, pointing his wand at the lock.

The door didn´t move.

"Alohomora!" he repeated, louder. The door trembled slightly, the doorknob moved a couple of times...but nothing.

So, there was a spell cast over the house. Predictable. If Evelyn´s suspicions were correct, and Severus was inclined to think they were, and this house was a cover for illegal activities, then it was only reasonable to cast a locking charm over it. The keys to the house were surely magical as well, which was the only explanation as to how Evelyn Black could go in and out without issue. Very well then...he´d have to exhaust the unlocking charms until he found one that worked.

"Dunamis!"

Nothing. Next...

"Liberare!"

Still nothing. Fine. Next one...

"Emancipare!"

Severus frowned. Obviously, harsher measures were in order. He´d have to break the door in. Nothing he couldn´t repair before Ms. Black made it back home.

"Portaberto"

Once again the doorknob twisted a few time, but remained closed.

"Open sesame!"

The door hinges squeaked loudly, but nothing else happened.
"Anihilare!"

The door trembled violently, but didn´t bust open.

Severus frowned. It was obviously a special spell...Inside, Evelyn´s cat had started to mewl. The violent shaking of the door must have scared him. Severus looked from the corner of his eye and saw the black cat climb up the window.

"Good day to you too, fleabag" he smirked. Ciarán squeezed himself out of the semi closed window and jumped outside onto the street, coming to rub himself on his legs.

The it suddenly hit Severus. Ciarán often snuck out of the house to go "visit" him, and never managed to make it back inside, even when the windows were wide open. So evidently it wasn´t just the doors and locks that were charmed. It was the entire house. He picked up the cat from the ground and put it back on the windowsill, gently prodding it to go back inside. As expected, he couldn´t. For the sake of experimentation, Severus tried to stick his hand into the small open space Ciarán had just exited through.

It was like hitting an invisible wall. His hand couldn´t make it into the window without being forced back.

The key. Of course, that was it. The key!

Ms. Black´s keys had to be the answer. Now he got it. Only the key could break the charm. Severus had heard about something like this. Of course he had! He remembered now...it was rare, but not unheard of. The Claudatur charm. A specific spell that was rather popular among pureblood wizards who wished to conceal their riches from outsiders to the family. It was usually cast upon safes, boxes and other similar containers, and it would take quite some effort to cast it over an entire house. But it was nothing that a skilled wizard or witch couldn´t do with enough experience.

What made this spell different from the others was the fact that there wasn´t a counter-spell to it. The only way to open a door or safe secured with Claudatur was to have the key and the right blood. What really set this spell apart was the fact that his efficiency was based on blood-ties (something purebloods were enough obsessed with). The key didn´t work with just anybody. It was the main feature of Claudatur that the magical key had to be passed on from one member of the same family to another. Only if the key had been given to a direct relative, somebody who shared blood ties with the giver would the key work. There was, however, a possibility to break or bend the spell, by creating a copy of the key that would work for anybody else, regardless of blood...but not only did it require a great amount of skill, the original key was necessary.

So that´s how Evelyn Black could come in and out of that house without any trouble, regardless of being a muggle. Violetta Black had given Marius Black the key, then he had given it to his son Marius Jr. who finally gave it to his daughter, Evelyn Black. Great-grandmother, grandfather, father and daughter. The same blood.

Severus would have to find a way to obtain the key from Evelyn...If he could find a way to bend the Claudatur by making a copy of the key, then he´d be able to let himself in in her absence. After that he´d have to come up with a way to open the door to the mysterious attic before she decided to take an axe to it.

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Our Lady of Cokeworth Church
October 21st (a week later)

Fr. Thomas had just finished listening to the last, and only, confession of the afternoon. It was a rare event to have more than one confession on any given day. Of course he would never admit this outloud, but it didn’t really bother him that his flock didn’t confess as often as they used to in the past. The sacrament of penance and reconciliation was surely of utmost importance and not at all something that should be brushed aside. But Fr. Thomas could remember the not so good old days when anything and everything was a reason to come to the confessional.

He believed in an intimate relation between man and God, one that didn’t necessarily had to be mediated by a priest. He much rather think of himself as a man to whom people could come when they needed solace, advise or just someone who would listen. That was how he liked to see the confessional...as a place a person in need can find somebody to listen and help, feeling confident that whatever is shared there will stay between them and God. It wasn’t a place for people to come in and list a string of obnoxious little pecadillos just so they could feel better about themselves without having to do any deep self examination.

The church was still empty. 5:30pm. He should start preparing for the 6pm service. As he closed the confessional he heard footsteps coming from the front door.

"Fr. Thomas?" a husky alto called out softly.

"Evelyn!" He opened his arms and let her walk into them for a short hug. "How are you doing, dear?"

"Busy." she smiled

"Busy is good. Busy is very good. Did Severus give you my message?" he offered her his arm as they walked towards the main altar

"He did. I meant to come last Sunday, but I was so tired I stayed home all day"

"No worries. You’ve worked all week. God appreciates good honest work as much as he appreciates prayer, I assure you. Speaking of which, how are things going in Cokeworth Academy?"

"Good...slightly crazy, but that’s how it goes with teenagers."

"Teenagers...bless the youth, but pray they don’t drive us bonkers."

"Actually...that’s what I wanted to talk to you about..."

"Your students you mean?"

"Exactly. Fr. Thomas...Halloween is coming up, and I hear you have a party every year for the neighbourhood children?"

"Yes, you heard it correctly. Actually, we are starting the preparations for it. Why?"

"Well, I just had a meeting with our principal, Mr. Nolan. And he agreed that a good way to help the students who are having difficulties with their grades is to give them some extra curricular activities. You know to motivate them, maybe help the school reconnect with the community"

"So you’re thinking of bringing your students to the party?"

"Yes, but not just bring them to the party. How would you feel about having some extra help?"
"Oh, you mean..."

"Yes, I´m thinking about coming here with my students and some teachers who have already volunteered so we can work at the Halloween party. Maybe we could even make a bigger party this year. What do you say?"

"Well, Evelyn what can I say? Bring them in. Bring them all in! You know what, why don´t you stay for mass and after the service we can discuss this in more detail?"

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A week.

It took him the whole week to finally manage to get the key.

In that week, it had become a sort of ritual for him to visit Ms. Black every afternoon after she came home from work, to have tea and talk. She´d talk about her work, her family, they´d discuss books, music, the news... whatever she felt like talking.... Severus just humoured her. It didn´t hurt at all actually. On occasion he had managed to get her to talk about her brother for a while, but the whole topic was too sensitive. He had yet to get any useful information about that...All in all, those evenings provided him with a distraction and gave him enough familiarity with the house, not to mention precious information about her and her grandfather. The subject of the mysterious attic would emerge frequently, and by now Severus wasn´t sure he could keep her from trying to open it by force. Her patience was running short, and he had to act.

But now he had it. He dropped by Ms. Black´s house in the morning, with the excuse of returning one of the books he had borrowed. He had barely read it, it was nothing but an excuse to go visit her before work so he could meet her exactly at the time she left the house. He escorted her to her car and managed to take the key from her purse as she got in. Easy enough. It was laughable that Severus Snape had to resort to petty pickpocketing to achieve his ends, but he couldn´t afford to care about it.

It had taken him a whole week of study, an entire morning and most of the afternoon worth of work, but he finally had it. A perfect copy of the original key, magical properties included. He looked up from his work table to the wooden clock on his mantle. 5:45pm. Perfect. He had more than enough to take the original key and carefully leave it on the ground by Ms. Black´s front door. This way when she came back from work she´d just assume she had dropped it there in the morning. Severus put the copy in his pocket and walked out with the original in hand. He quickly did what he had to do and returned home. Today there would be no time to do test his spare key, as Ms. Black should be home any minute. But there was always tomorrow.

However, as he walked back to his own house a shadow flying from above caught his eye.

An owl.

The bird came down swiftly and gracefully perched on his windowsill. It wasn´t one of Hogwarts owls, he could tell by the species. If memory served him right, that was an European Eagle-owl. Not that Severus was an expert in birds, but that particular one was easy enough to recognise: large, brown-black feathers with a rich and intricate combination of patterns like stripes, freckling and vermiculations and the very distinctive reddish-orange eyes. Furthermore, it wasn´t native e to Great Britain. Actually those could only be found in the continent...And Severus could bet that that particular one must have come from France.

The owl dropped a letter and took flight immediately. Severus picked it up. It was a blue envelope of
high quality parchment. On the crimson seal he could see the dreadful coat of arms of the Rotts, a
misshapen mess of bats and fleurs-de-lis. But the sender was not Claire, nor her beat up husband-
slave. Severus didn’t even need to read the name on the envelope to know it couldn’t have been
them. But the actual name written on the envelope didn’t surprise him any less.

"Draco Malfoy..."

Chapter notes:

Claudatur is a charm that does not appear in the original Harry Potter canon. It was created for the
purposes of this story.

The word Claudatur is the third-person singular present passive subjunctive of claudō, which is
related to the Latin clāvis ("key, deadbolt, bar"), clāvus ("nail, peg"), claustrum ("bar, bolt, barrier"),
claustra ("dam, wall, barricade, stronghold"). Cognate with Ancient Greek κλείς ("bar, bolt, key"),
Old High German slōzan ("to close, conclude, lock"), Old Saxon slūtan ("to close, conclude,
lock"). So basically "Claudatur" means "locked", "closed" "bolted" or "barred"
Chapter Summary

Everybody has ghosts in their past and sometimes they come back… Evelyn and Severus try to pretend everything is fine while bonding over tea and common interests.

"Professor Snape

I’m not entirely sure this letter comes as a surprise. But knowing you I’d say no. As you can probably imagine my father contacted me right after the two of you met. Of course he didn´t tell me exactly what you talked about, as well he wouldn´t if he wanted to keep me in line with his newest plans, but knowing what I know about you and your real role in the war, I have a clear idea of why you came to the Malfoy manor.

I’ll have you know that appealing to my father will get you nowhere. Of course, I assume you never wanted to convince him of anything in the first place. You wouldn´t be so naïve as to expect my father to see the error of his ways and give the ministry any sort of help. You were trying to get to me.

As it always is with your plans, it worked. You have my attention.

My father sent me to France to keep me away from the disgrace of our family...As if the surname Malfoy wouldn´t follow me around, with all that comes with it. At least that´s what I tought at first. But as Claire and her husband welcomed me into their house, I soon realised there were other plans in store for me. Plans I did not want to be any part of.

That´s why I’m writing you. Without my parents´ knowledge and at risk of being disowned by the family I still have left.

In confidence that you will keep the source of your information secret (not only on my behalf but also because we both know doing otherwise would be counterproductive), I tell you what I know so far. The Lestranges were rescued by people send by the Rotts. I don´t know any names, tough. Last I heard of them they were being smuggled across the border of Germany and Czech Republic. I don’t know where they went from there, but if I had to guess, I’d say Russia. Dimitri was to meet them in Ústi nad Laben, so I think he´d take them to Russia where all his contacts are. I’m confident you’ll know what to do with the information and whatever else I may come up with in the future.

I don´t think I´ll be coming back to Great Britain anytime soon, but I’ll be in contact. Please, don´t write back.

Draco Malfoy"

Severus folded the letter and put it on his work table, leaning back on his chair. He was right about Malfoy... He had feared his instincs were wrong, but fortunately that wasn´t the case. Draco Malfoy was still very much under his father´s thumb...a whole upbringing with the same ideas being obsessively knocked into his impressionable young mind couldn´t be erased. But he still had time to break free and Severus believed he would...and the process had started. The war had left deep scars on him, in some ways depeer than those of his peers. Potter and his fellows had all suffered
immensely, it couldn´t be denied...but they came out of the war as heros. Draco had seen and taken part in just as much death and mayhem, but when everything was said and done, he was one of "them", not one of "us". If that didn´t give him pause and a chance to finally grow up and do something of himself, nothing would.

But regardless of why the letter had been written, the important thing right now were the contents of it. Severus had just had the confirmation of his suspicions. Just as he expected Dimitri and Claire Rott were helping the Lestranges. He knew both of them were far too smart to believe the Lestranges were the Dark Lord´s natural "heirs". Claire and Dimitri were well aware they were only a pair of psychopathic yokels. But they were the only ones left from the Dark Lord´s inner circle...except for Severus himself, of course. If he had to guess, Severus would say the French and the Russian cells were going to use the Lestranges´knowledge to further their own agendas, then get rid of them. That plan only had one problem. The Lestranges didn´t really know much about Voldemort´s plan of action once Great Britain and Hogwarts had fallen. The only one who was privy to it was...Severus. So, surely, as soon as the two brothers had safely made it to Russia they´d start to think of a way to make him..."cooperate."

That gave Severus some time to think about what to do. But for now the most urgent issue to deal with was that sodding attic in Ms. Black´s house.

... 

October 22nd

It worked. Severus couldn´t say he was surprised. Clever as the Claudatur charm might be, it was amazingly easy to break once one obtained the original key. He opened the door and turned on the lights. Evelyn´s house, like his own, didn´t get a lot of natural light and he wasn´t going to open the curtains, at risk of forgetting to close them again and raise suspicions. Ciarán was rolled up in a ball, on a cushion on the floor, but hearing the sound of the door opening then closing, raised his head. Upon seeing it was Severus he went back to sleep.

"I guess that´s why dogs are the ones who guard houses..." he smirked.

Severus looked around. That house looked quite odd when it was empty. It had nothing to do with the Claudatur charm or any sort of magic. It was something entirely different. Over the course of the last three weeks Severus had gotten used to associate these walls with the smell of lavender, fresh tea and home-made meals, the sound of soft music played at the lowest volume just for the sake of breaking the silence, Miss Black´s husky voice, her frank laughter...of her full-bodied mezzo singing unintelligible Irish songs as she ran errands in the kitchen (surprisingly...perfectly in tune.). Looking around he could see her in every single detail. The art-nouveau posters on the walls, the rows of neatly organised books, the papers and notebooks, the piles of colourful cushions, the little bric-a-brac of small decorative objects and subtle Irishisms, the warm colours and rich patterns...The house just oozed a feeling of energy and domestic bliss that felt suffocating when it´s owner wasn´t it...Like a stage ready for the play to start, but missing it´s main actress.

Severus shook his head, laughing at himself. He must have been delirious. Maybe it was too much familiarity making him get strange ideas...maybe it was Draco´s letter the day before which, much like Shacklebolt´s visit a week ago that forced him to face everything he sought to distance himself from. Knowing Claire, Dimitri and the Lestranges were planning to start the war all over again...which made him weary and eager to find some space of comfort and calm...even if it had to be the house of his pushy and annoyingly bubbly Irish neighbour. Two wars and that´s what he got for a retirement,...Do they have medals for this sort of thing?

Instead of wasting any more time with futile contemplations he climbed the stairs and went straight
for the attic door Ms. Black had shown him a week before. Considering how much thought was put into locking the entire house, it was quite safe to assume the door to the attic would have been secured with a simpler spell.

He was right. It took him less than five minutes of experimentation with several unlocking charms for the lockless, keyless door to open, creaking loudly.

...

Cokeworth Academy

later that day

"Come ooon, Tancey!" James puffed, resting his back against the door and tapping his foot, anxiously.

"I´m almost done..." Tancey told him distractedly, as she scribbled the last words on her notebook.

"You know it´s called HOMEwork for a reason! Do you have to do it here?!"

"I don´t have to, but I want to! This way I get the rest of the afternoon free."

"For what? To run errands for Ms. Black?"

"You forgot she gave us the afternoon off today? We´re meeting Fr. Thomas tomorrow, you sourpuss! Are you still mad because she asked us to help with his Halloween party?"

"'Asked'?” he scoffed "She just ordered me to. And you volunteered because you´re a dork and the teacher´s pet."

"WRONG! I volunteered because it´s Halloween! Costumes, free candy..."

"Snotty brats running around and puking..."

"Do you happen to have anything better to do?"

"Actually I do. There´s gonna be a horror movie festival on Halloween night at the old movie theatre on Oldham Street. Only shorts. No American rubbish."

"Yeah, but that´s at night. The party is in the afternoon, we can do both" She finally closed her notebook and put it back in her briefcase, following him outside the classroom

"You really want to do this party thing?"

"Everybody does! Just today Mitch asked me about it"

James rolled his eyes..."Mitch"...It was so obnoxious that their P.E. teacher wanted to be called by his stupid nickname. He tried so hard to be the "cool teacher" he came off as desperate for attention. As if he didn´t get enough! All the girls had crushes on him and all the boys wanted to be like him. Actually not all the boys, just the "athletes"...they had a retarded little personality cult going on as if ol´pretty boy Mitch was their Messiah of all things manly. Pretentious wankers all of them...

" 'Mitch' asked you about it?” he asked, mocking her high-pitched, raspy voice.

"Yes, he did. He wants to help"
"'Help'. I'll bet you my autographed Ian Curtis photo dear old Mitch just wants to get into Ms. Black's knickers"

"Ew, James, don't be disgusting." She glared

"I mean it, wanna bet?" James shrugged.

"What if he is interested in her? He's a nice guy and they're both grown ups."

"Ms. Black is too good for him."

"Waaaait, didn't you think she was an authoritarian psycho?" Tancey raised an eyebrow and smirked

"She is. But he's a retarded arse. I'll take a psycho with a brain over a brainless wanker any day, thank you"

"Whatever you say...I'm starting to think you like Ms. Black after all..."

"Eh...I don't hate her." he grumbled "But she IS an authoritarian psycho."

"Yeah...right..."

... 

The large gray clock hanging from the white-tiled wall by the pool had already struck 6pm. Evelyn had lost track of time. One last turn...Evelyn pushed her feet against the wall, feeling her body move forward swiftly, gliding under water, piercing through it like an arrow, the world locked outside, nothing in her mind but the soft embrace of water, no weight, no effort, no cares, nothing but the clear, crisp blue surrounding her, and the complete conscience of every single muscle, of her breathing patterns, of her legs and arms...full control and total freedom.

Swimming had always been one of her favorite things to do. Being inside the water was much like being in the arms of an old lover. Growing up in a coastal village meant the sea was as constant a presence as the sky above her head. Doolin was a small town that rested upon the arms of three giants. The Cliff’s of Moher, the rocky plans of the Burren and the Atlantic ocean. Out of these three mighty titans that overlooked her tiny hometown, most people would be more suspicious of the sea. The fearsome waves that attracted surfers, the unphantomable depths that challenged divers and fishermen. In many ways Ireland turned her back on Europe and embraced the sea...the open, wide, majestic, formidable Atlantic...

The cold and boisterous sea that bathed the west coast of Ireland had always been kind to Evelyn...Like an old friend, who had, patiently and lovingly, watched her grow up, even before she took her first steps, even before she was born. Her grandfather had been a fishermen for years, her father, as much of an intellectual as he might have been, was just as fascinated by the sea and would spend a good amount of his free time swimming and teaching her and her siblings how to. Evelyn, her brother Paul and her sister Caitlin had all been taught to swim as babies. When her mother was pregnant with Paul she had terrible nausea almost throughout the gestation, but when she was carrying Evelyn she barely felt a thing. So her father would often take her on his father’s old fishing boat, some meters off the coast where it was still safe to swim in her condition. The waves seemed to calm Evelyn down inside her mother’s womb and Paul, then a little over one year old, was already an avid wee swimmer. Even as her mother was too big to safely be brought off coast, she’d still go to the beach at least once a week, even if just to get waist deep into the water for a while, as it helped with the backache that came with carrying a pregnant belly around. Evelyn’s grandmother would often joke that all that time in the sea was the reason Evelyn was born “a little fish”.
After she moved to Dublin she tried to come back home at least on the weekend and if weather allowed she’d go out to sea with her grandfather or her father. But since they both died, she didn’t swim in the sea as often. The family still had the boat, but it wasn’t the same… He cousin Cilian had borrowed it a few times to fish, and whenever she happened to be in town he invited her to come along… but that was maybe once every couple months. She had to settle for the beaches of Dublin… but the Irish Sea didn’t feel like the Atlantic… it didn’t feel like swimming into the abyss, like taking on a titan. When she moved to landlocked Cokeworth she knew she’d have to make peace with no having the beloved sea nearby, and decided to start looking for public pools. Then Mr. Nolan had told her the school had a brand-new pool and the teachers and students were allowed to use it for recreation when it wasn’t being used for curricular activities and her first instinct was to ask for permission to use it. Now she’d swim for at least half an hour everyday after class. It wasn’t the same as the sea, but it suited her just fine for now.

Evelyn felt her hand touch the opposite wall and halted, removing her googles. With her head over water now she could see she wasn’t alone. Sitting on one of the plastic chairs on the pool’s deck was the PE. teacher, Mitchell something… All his peers and students called him as Mitch, tough. Evelyn had been briefly introduced to him on her first day of work. A tall, athletic man who looked like he had walked out of Nazi or Soviet propaganda poster for the “model soldier”: bland and perfectly symmetrical good looks, blond hair styled in a neat buzz cut, light eyes, square jaw, broad shoulders, big smile… almost a grown-up version of your average High school sports hero from a 50s American advertisement illustration. Maybe that was why Evelyn hadn’t paid attention to him till now… to the point she couldn’t even remember his last name.

"Well, that was flawless, Black!" he beamed, walking over to the edge of the pool.

"Thank you." She answered, more than a little bothered to have her personal moment of peace and quiet disrupted and his unceremonious use of her surname. Well, she was about to leave anyhow, she conceded as she got out of the pool, taking off her swimming cap and tugging on the legs of her red swimming suit. For some reason Evelyn was now quite relieved now to have chosen one that covered her almost till her knees as opposed to the regular one which would hardly be appropriated for her workplace.

"I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to intrude. I just thought one of the kids had come in without permission. They do that all the time since the pool was installed."

"It’s quite all right. I was about done."

"You have some professional level skills."

"Thank you. Growing up by the sea helps…"

"Oh, yeah, I hear you’re from County Clare?"

"Yes, Doolin…"

"Don’t say… I love Doolin. Been there just last summer to surf. You guys have the most amazing sea for water sports. No wonder you’re such a great swimmer."

"That’s nice of you." she smiled somewhat awkwardly. Receiving praise was never her forte, particularly in such effusive manner.

"By the way, I meant to talk to you anyway and hadn’t had a chance till now.."

"Sure, what about?"
"I heard you´re helping Fr. Tommy organize the Halloween party of Our Lady of Cokeworth church this year"

"Yes, well not just me of course..."

"You know, I used to go to his Halloween parties every year when I was a kid. "

"That´s nice. It seems a lot of the teachers here have, you´re not the first one to tell me that"

"Yeah, a lot of the teachers here are born and bred in Cokeworth, myself included. So you´re having your students help? And some other teachers, is that correct?"

"Yeah, that´s right. I mean not all of my students, just a handful. The ones I´ve been having a harder time with..."

"Don´t tell me that´s punishment?" he laughed

"No...the opposite actually. I want to spend a little more time with them, have fun...you know, it helps when you get closer. But some other students have volunteered as well, and we have some three teachers so far..."

"So, yeah...I was wondering if you have room for an extra volunteer, by any chance?"

"Well, I´d have to run that by Fr. Thomas" she answered distractedly, looking over his shoulder to see Angela coming up to them and making broad and slightly manic gestures at her general direction. "Why don´t you drop by the church tomorrow after class?"

"Sure, we can..."

"Uh, if you excuse me, Angela is waiting for me. See you tomorrow then?"

... Sevérus looked down to see Ciarán had followed him back home. He opened his door and let the cat in. Obviously he wasn´t the only one to have fallen in a reassuring routine. Ever since Ms. Black had started teaching at Cokeworth Academy Ciarán would keep sneaking back into his house by the end of the morning and stay there until she came back from work and picked him up. When exactly had Sevérus conformed to becoming a cat nanny he couldn´t be sure, but Ciarán was not exactly the worst companion he could ask for. At least not since he had learned to refrain from knocking breakable objects down and using Sevérus´favorite armchair as a scratching post.

The cat wandered about his living room looking for a comfortable place to continue the nap Sevérus had interrupted when he got into Ms. Black´s house. Sevérus on the other hand didn´t feel all too relaxed. Now that he he had finally opened the mysterious attic, his mind was racing to figure out a way to keep Ms. Black from seeing that. Not only she wouldn´t understand, it would mean throwing the wizarding world and the existence of magic right on her face, starting by the most unpleasant aspects of it.

Sevérus went back to his work table, got pen and paper and quickly scribbled two short letters.

... Angela closed the locker room door and sat on the wide fake-marble tiled sink by the door as Evelyn got her bag from a shelf and withdrew a change of clothing, which she laid out neatly on a bench, a towel which she hung from the door on one of the shower stalls and a plastic necessaire containing
small bottles of shampoo, hair conditioner and soap.

"What´s Mitch´s story?" Angela asked, swinging her feet and resting her back on large mirror behind her.

"Story?" Evelyn distractedly took off her swimming suit and got into the shower.

"He´s never by the pool when there are no classes, and the lazy bastard closes his office as soon as the last class is out. So I know he wasn´t just hanging there. I heard he´s been asking students about the Halloween party."

"Yeah, he says he wants to help" Evelyn told her, raising her voice over the noise of the water.

"Is that so? And you believed him?"

"No." Both women burst out in laughter

"So, I´m not seeing things? I mean...he was kind of...flirty, was´t he?"

"I don´t know. Quite frankly I wasn´t really paying attention."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, it is. I mean, if he wants to help with the party fine, I´ll ask Fr, Thomas. But as to 'flirting' or whatever he was doing...I don´t really give a fiddler´s fart."

"I knew he was not your type..."

"Not by a long shot."

"That would be more like that neighbour of yours, am I right?"

"Severus? What does Severus has to do with anything?"

"Weeeell...he´s been popping up in conversation quite a lot lately."

"But of course...Other than you and other people from work Severus and Fr. Thomas are the only friends I´ve made so far in Cokeworth."

"Oh, so it´s 'friends only'. Most convincing phrase in the entire English language...not."

"Shut up, will you?"

"Ok, ok...Say, how about dinner? There´s a new Thai place at Rochdale I´ve been wanting to try"

"I´d love to, but I´m just too tired for that today. Maybe tomorrow?"

"You and Severus have some 'friendly' time scheduled?"

"Angela, just cut it out already!"

"Fine. I won´t say anything else. What about tomorrow, after we meet Fr. Thomas and the kids at church?"

"Tomorrow sounds great. Do you want a ride home?"

"Thanks, I was about to ask"
For over a week now Ms. Black had been returning home well past her usual 5:30pm curfew. At first he thought it was about the Halloween party she had been helping Fr. Thomas with. She had been on and on about it. The decorations, the costumes, the candy...how wonderful of an opportunity it would be to get to know some of her students better, to motivate them, to reconnect with the community...All that politically correct aggravating non-sense she loved so dearly. It was not to say it wasn´t amusing to see her so excited, like a five-year old on Christmas morning, but there was so much excitement over costumes and candy that Severus could handle coming from a grown woman.

But it couldn´t be that. A simple Halloween party for the neighbourhood children wouldn´t take daily planning to happen. And yet, she´d arrive well past 6pm every other day... Even more intriguing, Severus had noticed that whenever she arrived home late her hair was always wet, even when it wasn´t raining. He didn’t think much of it at first, but after a while it struck him as odd...She couldn’t be coming home from Fr. Thomas parish. Severus let his body sunk into the armchair, playing with his cigarrete and watching as Ciarán lay in front of the fireplace, the nearly spent flames fascinating him.

Maybe Ms. Black had found herself a boyfriend...why not, she was an attractive woman, it was only natural. No, he shook his head, it was possible, but not likely. She had been at Cokeworth for merely three weeks...even if she had found someone, she wouldn’t be that deep into the relationship to be indulging in "after school activities" that included a shower before going back home. Evelyn Black just didn’t strike him as that type of woman...And assuming there was really a man in the picture, Severus would have heard about him by now, wouldn’t he? How many times had he been to her house for tea, even for dinner listening to her endless yapping about work, family, friends and whatever else she felt like talking about. She would have told him if a man had caught her fancy...Or maybe not...Yes, probably not. She had never told him anything about any romantic endeavours, except for a very brief mention to her ex, why would she start now? This was something she´d be talking about with that friend of hers from work, what was her name again? Angela or something like that. Definetly the kind of thing she´d tell a woman, not her male neighbour, specially if it was a new relationship. Besides it was not like they were close at all.

He was rambling. That was not like him to be so distracted by something so trivial...

Severus was startled out of his thoughts by knocks on the door and went to open it.

"Hello!" There she was. Evelyn Black, once again late, and once again her hair was wet. It really shouldn´t bother him that much...

"Good evening..." he muttered

"And here´s my baby!" She walked past him to go pick up her cat from the floor.

"How´s the party planning coming along?"

"Oh, we didn’t do anything today. We can’t very well bother poor Fr. Thomas every day, can we?" she smiled "But I´m taking the students tomorrow to get started on some things."

"I see..."

"I think I owe you an apology..."

"And why is that?"
"Because...you’ve been so nice looking after Ciarán and I keep running late to pick him up."

"You’ve been busy...the classes and this party...it’s perfectly understandable"

"Oh, is not just that. Cokeworth Academy has a new pool and..."

"A new...pool?" Well, that explained the wet hair. Of course...Evelyn Black was not that type of woman, he should have known...

"Yeah...they let the teachers and students use it when there are no activities...and I got carried away. You see back in Ireland I’d swim at least four times a week, so when I moved to Cokeworth I was a little crestfallen to have to drive all the way to Liverpool for the beach..."

"You’d swim four times a week...at the sea?"

"Not even a month living in Cokeworth and you already forget where I come from?" she smirked, forcing her Irish accent for effect.

"I’d need to have a severe form of memory impairment to forget that."

"Well...I guess I got a little carried away. And it’s always better to use the pool at work then to go to a public one...In any case, I should have let you know, instead of just leaving Ciarán here until so late without asking."

"No harm done. He has learned to behave...somewhat"

"Oh, has he? Well, look who´s such a good boy all of the sudden" did she have to keep baby talking that bloody animal?

"Well, now that this has been cleared..."

"But, I wanted to make it up to you."

"No need."

"I insist. Why don´t we..get some dinner?"

"No, you don’t have to. You must be tired."

"I am. That’s why I’m not cooking tonight. There’s a little dinner two blocks from here...And there’s always delivery if you don’t feel like walking in this cold"

"I really don’t think..."

"Oh..."she suddenly got a glimpse to his work table, cluttered with papers and books "I’m bothering while you´re working. I’m so sorry."

"Oh, that...is not work. Just some things a former colleague asked some help with."

"Can I ask what is it, or is one of those things a non-scientist would never get?" she smiled, putting Ciarán back on the floor and walking straight to his work table, her curiosity obviously getting the best of her.

"Just some...formulas, nothing you’d find terribly amusing, I´m afraid” he walked ahead of her and collected some of the papers that contained obvious references to spells and potions, stuffing them inside a book "Come to think of it...I do believe I need a break from this."
"Well, that’s grand! Let’s go then." she beamed "But do get a coat, it’s freezing outside"
Severus got a bit too close for his own comfort. Featuring a trip down nostalgia lane, a Halloween party and a visit to the roof of the abandoned mill.

Severus looked down at the pile of papers on the coffee table. He picked one up and distractedly ran his eyes over it. A photocopied handout announcing the Our Lady of Cokeworth’s Halloween party in decorated letters and black and white drawings of spider webs, cats and flying witches. The way muggle culture saw magical matters never ceased to amuse him. Well, cliché witches with warts on their hooked noses were still better than the systematic persecutions. He put the paper back on its pile and leaned back on the sofa, listening to the sound of Miss Black’s voice as she talked on the phone.

"Yes, that’s right." she nodded her head, looking down at a flyer from a nearby anglo-Indian restaurant, then softly called out to him, covering the speaker with her hand "Severus?"

"Yes?"

"Are you sure you want me to order for you?"

"Yes, whatever you order is just fine, don’t worry...Just let me know how much it will be..."

"No, no, I invited you, I got this."

"Absolutely not, I insist.."

"Ok, we split the bill, then." she smiled, returning to her monosyllabic phone conversation "Yes, yes. That’s all. 40 minutes? That’s ok. Thank you, good night."

Severus watched as hang up the phone, pulled her hair up in a loose bun and put on an oversized green sweatshirt with Trinity college’s logo emblazoned over it with large capital letters over the simple cotton blouse and jeans she had changed into after returning from work. He was still at a loss at how at ease she was around him. Maybe daily visits over the course of weeks would have this effect on somebody who was naturally very social which was something that one of Severus’ reserved disposition could not understand. Or maybe he could after all...after all he was there wasn’t he?

"How about some tea while we wait?" she offered

"Sure..."

"So...what formulas were those you were working on?"

"Nothing much...just some studies on...toxic substances"

"Toxic substances? Doesn’t sound as boring as you said it was." she asked from the kitchen, over the clatter of porcelain mugs being removed from the cabinet.
"Oh, trust me, it is." Severus leisurely strolled till the kitchen door, his eyes following her around as she filled a teapot with water and put it to boil. "Speaking of work... I see the party preparations are in full force."

"Yes! We start working on the decorations tomorrow!"

"And how is the pedagogical aspect of it coming along, if I may ask?"

She turned around and crossed her arms over her chest, resting her back on the counter.

"Pretty well..."

"Pretty well? To be honest I expected a little more enthusiasm from you..."

"Don´t get me wrong. Things are going much better than I anticipated. And I´m well aware I have some advantages. Take this party for example... I wouldn´t be able to do this with a regular class, with more students. You know, the more students you have, the less time you can dedicate to them, so this project is just... perfect. I really think I´m getting closer to them..."

"But...?"

"You´re a teacher, so you probably understand what I mean... There´s always that one student who just... you just feel like you need to pay more attention to. You feel there´s something there... Something that has nothing to do with school, strictly speaking."

"I´ve had some of those..." Severus smirked.

"So you DO know!"

"You´re talking about that boy... the... The Cure fan..."

"James"

"Yeah, that" he scoffed lightly at the name "So... something going on with him?"

"James... he´s a very bright kid. But..." she sighed "... things are not going well for him at home..."

"How so?" Severus asked, wondering to himself why he was anywhere interested in that.

"His father..." she sighed, taking the teapot from the stove and pouring water on the mugs.

"Drinking? Beatings? Verbal abuse? ... All of the above?" he let out sardonically

"Drinking... as far as I know. And the man has been able to hold on to a steady job since the mill closed in the 80s. From what I hear from the school counsellors James´ dad has a tendency towards taking his frustrations on others... and James is a bit of a hot head himself, so I don´t think family life is all that calm... nothing as serious as beatings I would say, but... I just get this... this uneasy feeling about the whole thing"

"Well... isn´t that a a typical Cokeworth story..." Severus grinned bitterly "You should know that bloody mill has had an effect in this town that you can´t even begin to comprehend without having lived in this hole all your life. Your student´s family is hardly an exception on this side of the river... If I may ask... what about the the mother?"

"I´ve met her a couple times. Seems like a good woman, but terribly overworked. Emergency call operator, so you can imagine the workload... I don´t think the dynamics between her and the
husband are all that healthy, either. She seems...afraid of him"

"How do you gather?"

"Her reaction when I told her about the possibility of James failing..."

"I see..."

"I just...don´t really know how to go about here. I feel like a should do something..."

"If you feel like you must, then by all means..."

"I tried referring them to counselling, already...But you know, it´s hard to be an outsider and just insert yourself into this sort of situation..."

"She´s not taking your help?"

"She doesn´t think she needs it." she brought the tea mugs to the table and they both sat down

"Give her time...you´ve known them for what...three weeks?"

"I know, I know...Some people think things will fix themselves...And sometimes you have to give them time. But it gets frustrating to see somebody in a tough spot and not being able to help, when you know you can..."

"You seem to speak from experience..."

"Yes..." she whispered, looking into her tea "...family, you know..."

Severus looked over his shoulder to the living room wall covered with family photos. If his memory didn´t fail him, he had seen plenty photos of Ms. Black´s sister and her two young daughters...but none of the father of the girls. Maybe that explained it.

"Your sister?"

"Yes...How do you?" she looked up at him, wearing a shocked expression on her face.

"I apologize if I´m assuming but...The photos over there...I didn´t see any of your nieces´father."

"Thank God for that...the sodding bastard" she sneered. Severus blinked in surprise. This was probably the first time he could feel genuine hatred in her voice. He didn´t need legilimency to know she had no good feelings towards her brother-in-law.

"Well, then you must know these...situations sometimes arrange themselves"

"It´s different. My sister knew when enough was enough. She had the presence of mind to get out before things escalated...and she had us for support. Me and my parents. James and his mum on the other hand..."

"So that´s why you took an interest on this boy?"

"I suppose I´m pretty transparent, aren´t I?" she smiled "You know, when my brother died...I...I had been the middle child since I could remember things clearly, then Paul was gone and I, I felt like I had to fill in for him in some ways. And my sister was a huge part of that, of course, her being the youngest and all. I had to look out for her...But after I moved to Dublin...she got married and...you can imagine the rest. I´m just glad I was wasn´t too late to be there for her...and of course Caitlin didn
’t need me to get out of that mess of a marriage, she’s self-sufficient like that. But I still would have liked to be there early on...

"Your brother’s death did have a great impact in your life, didn’t it?"

"On us all...It changed everything..." The long, pregnant silence was broken by the sound of a motorcycle stopping outside and firm knocks on the door. She smiled, relieved, and got up to answer it "...dinner is here. I’ll be right back."

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October 23rd

Early morning

Kingsley Shacklebolt’s apartment, London, unknown location.

Kingley Shacklebolt locked himself into his private quarters. Even tough there was nobody but himself in the modest apartment he had been occupying since his appointment as Minister for Magic, he had picked up the habitude of locking the door to him bedroom, that doubled as a private office, merely because it helped him relax. It was probably because it gave him the illusory feeling that the mundane act of closing a door was enough to leave the world outside and give him some peace. The truth couldn’t be more different, however...He knew he had a daunting task ahead of him when he had accepted the position. He had never been a man to fool himself about the scope of his personal responsibilities and his capacity to handle them. But even for the most well prepared of men, the task of having to oversee the rebuilding of a world where old prejudices still lingered seemed Herculean at least. And off course the fact that there were many of Voldemort sympathizers and associates still at large did nothing to ease the weight on his shoulders, particularly with Severus Snape making it so clear that he wasn’t going to cooperate unless it was on his own terms.

He couldn’t fault the man, tough. Anybody in his position would be weary to say the least. 17 years of risking his neck as a spy, acting on Dumbledore’s orders without the knowledge of any sort of authority or ally who could provide them with a minimum safety or logistics for their endeavours... A brave, if mad, mission that had almost cost his life, and might have landed him in a trial, if not for Harry Potter’s testimony. But then again, without Severus help, what did they have? Foreign ministries would never give up information on any of their citizens without some sort of compelling evidence, and even if they did, where would they start looking? All they knew was that the Lestranges and several others had fled Britain...But where to?

He had barely closed the door when the sound of wings called his attention to the window. An owl landed on his windowsill, dropped a small envelope and took flight immediately. Kingsley picked it up and closed the window. It didn’t have a sender name or address, but that wasn’t necessary.

"To the (interim) Prime Minister

The Lestrages were last seen in Germany. They were helped out of the country via France, then send over the border border of Germany and Czech Republic. An associate known only as Dimitri has met them in the city of Ústi nad Laben. Keep your contacts well informed about strange events occurring in the French department of the Yvelines. See if you can find trustworthy Russian contacts as well. Watch France, Austria and Russia closely."
Snape
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Hogwarts
Headmistress Macgonaghal´s private quarters

Minerva looked on as the owl took flight from her windowsill. It was still early in the day and she could spare a couple minutes to read the newly-arrived letter before her work day started. From the spiky calligraphy on the envelope she could tell exactly ho the sender was. Severus. Minerva couldn´t deny she was a bit anxious about him and his whole ‘investigation’ into his neighbour’s family. After finding out the terrible fate of Ms. Evelyn Black’s brother, Minerva had been waiting for news from Severus, but none came for quite a while. She didn’t know what Severus was up to, particularly now after the new Minister had contacted him about the Lestranges. She preferred to think the lack of news meant everything was fine, but a letter should put her mind at ease.

"Minerva,

I have some unsettling news regarding Evelyn Black’s house. It seems the Black family left their Irish offshot some rather unpleasant surprises hidden in that house. If it’s not too much trouble, I’d very much appreciate if you could come over. Better make it in the afternoon, if class schedules allow you.

Severus"

Minerva pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose, folding the note and returning it to its envelope. "Unpleasant surprises"...she didn’t like the sound of that, at all. So much for being at ease. It was probably better get there as soon as possible. She could ask a fellow teacher to replace her in the afternoon classes.

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Cokeworth
Mill Road 1455

James munched on a bit of toast, his eyes uninterestedly following his mother’s motions as she walked around the kitchen, trying to organize the mess from last night’s dinner, all the while talking on the phone and getting the mail sorted out. He picked up some of the letters she had forgotten on the table and started to go through them.

"Mum..."

"Yes, dear?" she asked without turning to him, still to preoccupied with the phone call she was engaged in.

"Muuum!" He insisted

"What, James?" she finally turned, holding the phone on her shoulder and reaching for a tea towel to dry her hands, her pale blonde hair falling in messy thin strands around her tired-looking face.
"These are past due..." he told her flatly, holding up a couple envelopes.

"Shit!" she hissed under her breath "Uh..I’m sorry but I’ll have to call you later, ok? Bye"

James rolled his eyes as his mother caught the envelopes from his hands and looked for the due date on the bills.

"Telling ya, they´re past due..weren´t even opened till now, and they were due early in the month” James pushed his plate of toast and beans aside, and drank his tea.

"Your sodding father...I ask him to do ONE thing..."

"You should have learned by now, Meredith...can’t trust your husband with money, he’ll just drink it all"

Meredith sighed, but didn’t have the heart to reply. James had a point.

"Eat your beans, darling..."

"Not hungry..."

"But you have to eat...do you want me to fry you an egg?"

"No...I´ll just eat something at school"

"Speaking of which, you´re not running late, are you?"

"No, mum..I´m an hour early.." he sighed, a little exasperated.

"Oh? Oh, yes, you are." she rambled, looking down at her watch

"You don’t even know what time is it, woman? Bloody hell..."

"James, you watch your tone!" she poured herself some tea and sat across from him at the table.

"Sorry..." James glared at her in silence.

"I know, I know..." she whispered, almost apologetically, reaching over to squeeze his hand lightly over the table.

"Ms. Black called you again?" James asked, retracting his hand.

"Yeah...as if I don´t have enough to worry about, now your teacher is hounding me..."

"If you´d show up to the meetings..."

"James, I don’t know about the other kids parents, but I happen to work!"

"It’s your own bloody fault you have to work for two."

"James..."

"Yeah, yeah, Meredith..."

"I´m working late today..."

"Yeah, you already told me last night..."
"Good, thought I’d forgotten. Well, since you won’t eat, finish your tea and I’ll drive you to school today. I have to drop by the bank so we can eat something on the way..."

"Tancey’s mom is giving me a lift."

"But you’re early, aren’t you?"

"Yeah, going to the library with Tancey. Because we’re going in early her mom can drop us off on her way to work. And we’re going to see Fr Thomas after school with Ms. Black, then I’ll just sleep over at Tancey’s. I called her yesterday asking, so don’t worry..."

"You know what your father said about..."

"We all know exactly why he doesn’t like Tancey..."The sound of a car horn outside cut his sentence short.

"There’s your lift."

"Give me that one."

"Excuse me?"

"That bill. I can take care of it, I’ll just ask Mrs Francis to stop by the bank. It’s the one that’s due tomorrow, isn’t it?"

Meredith handed him the envelope and walked over to the cupboard, getting the biscuit tin where she kept the money for bills and immediate expenses. James pretended not to notice her annoyance as she found only half of what was supposed to be there for the expenses of the rest of the month. She quickly got some of it and closed the tin, as if it would keep James from seeing anything.

"Here’s the money. You can keep the change to buy something for lunch, but no junk food, ok?"

"Ok, mum..."

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"Good morning, James." Tancey’s mother, Olivia, greeted him in her usual cheery Caribbean-accented way.

"Good morning, Mrs.Francis, hey Tancey."

"Hey...you’re ok?" Tancey’s large hazel-green eyes focused on his face, showing a hint of concern;

"Yeah, why?"

"Nothing...Oh, mum, forgot to ask you, James can sleep over, right?"

"Of course he can. Henry is not coming over this weekend, he has a party with some friends” Tancey’s older brother, was off to college in London. James would usually sleep in his bedroom, when he spent the night. Which thanks to his father was a rather frequent event.

“Thank you, Mrs. Francis’

“Your mum is working late tonight, right?"
"Yeah. Uh..Mrs. Francis, would mind if we stopped by the bank. I have to pay something for my mother."

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Spinner’s End, 12
Early afternoon

Severus opened the door and stepped aside to let Minerva in.

“You have the keys to Ms. Black’s house?” The Hogwarts headmistress cocked a suspicious eyebrow at him.

“Yes.” Severus closed the door behind them and turned the lights on.

“I imagine she didn’t give them you”

“I made myself a copy.”

“Severus!”

“What? How was I supposed to get in, when she’s not here?”

“Well, that’s not very...honest.”

“Minerva, I have nothing but friendship and consideration towards you, so I say this with the utmost respect...Working with Dumbledore was more entertaining. You have too many scruples.”

“Oh, pardon me for my faults, Mr. Snape” she smiled “so...where is this mysterious room you were telling me about?”

“Upstairs...the attic”

Minerva followed him through the livingroom, but felt compelled to stop before they reached the staircase. She stopped in front of a wall covered with family pictures and felt a small pang in her heart. From the pictures she could recognise Ms. Black immediately, she hadn’t changed too much from her childhood years, the wavy brown hair and alert eyes were hard to mistake. So, that little boy next to her in some many of these photos had to be him...Paul. The little boy who died before seeing Hogwarts. It was devastating enough to have seen that file...those cold words stating his dead by a “fire related accident”...but to see his little face was...She sighed. He looked a lot like his sister. The same dark hair and brilliant, smiling eyes. Minerva couldn’t help but wonder...How was he? Was he as energetic and free-spirited as these photos showed him to be, or more introspective? What house would he have been sorted into? Slytherin like most of the Black family members? Or maybe, like Sirius, he would have gone to Gryffindor? Or would he turn out to be an intellectual like his little sister, and be welcomed into Ravenclaw? Maybe Hufflepuff? Why not? With that lovely, frank smile of his, he just might have a place in the house that valued a good heart above anything else. Which subjects would he be good at, which ones would he struggle with? Would he be a quiet student, or would he find himself in the headmaster’s office too often for mischief? It felt oddly melancholic to realize she would never know.

Severus stood next to her, silent.
“That’s him? Paul Black?” she asked, grimly

“Yes, that’s him.”

“They seem very close”

“They were.”

“And this blonde little girl?”

“Caitlin. Ms. Black’s younger sister. She was only five when the brother passed on, so I don’t think she knows much of what happened to him”

“What about Ms. Black?”

“She refuses to talk about his death. But my best guess is that she doesn’t remember much...or chose not to...”

“Where’s Marius?”

“Here...” Severus pointed to one of the pictures “…this is Marius Black, his son Marius Jr. and Paul”

“Marius Jr. is...Evelyn Black’s father, then?”

“Yes. Now shall we? We need to get this done before she comes back”

“Sure, of course”

Minerva followed Severus up the stairs till they reached the small stairway that led to the attic door.

“Watch your head” he warned before climbing up to open the heavy black door.

Severus made his way in, took his wand out of his pocket and cast the lumos spell so Minerva could see her way into the dark. It was a clear, if cold, day outside, but the attic had no windows, and was thus bathed in darkness, as it probably had been for decades. Once Minerva has made it past the door, Severus turned to the side. The day before he had noticed there was a flambeau beside the entrance. With a swift motion of his wand he lit it up. Under the flickering light of the fire they could see the room somewhat clearly.

It was a secret room that couldn’t be seen from the outside of the house. It wasn’t too big, neither did it have any sort of special features or decorations when seen from inside. It was, to put quite simply, an attic like any other, a square room with a ceiling only high enough to accommodate a tall man, and unadorned walls. It was quite damp and smelled of old parchment and humid stucco. There were numerous shelves filled with books attached to the wall on one side, and a large cabinet on the other side, hidden by a yellowing white cover. There was a heavy table on the centre of the room and on top of it a medium-sized trunk, similar to those Hogwarts students routinely used to keep their books and objects.

“Has this room been sealed all these years?”

“Yes...you can even smell it.”

“So...how should we go about this?”

“I’m not quite sure yet, but I do know one thing. Evelyn Black cannot even imagine these objects are here.”
“Well, off course, no muggle should...”

“Is not just that she’s a muggle. It’s a bit worse than just breaking the Statute of Secrecy”

“What do you mean?”

“As you well, know...her grandfather was disowned by the Black family due to his blood status.”

“Yes, I’m well aware of that awful story”

“The story is about to get a bit more awful...”

“Severus...” she whispered, tense “...what do you mean?”

“Take a look at those books over there...go on, just read their titles”

Minerva walked over slowly and ran her eyes over the book spines, with the help of her wand for light.

“Oh no...” she muttered weakly

“Yes. That charming library contains examples of the most vile anti-muggle literature I ever had the misfortune of laying my eyes upon. Most of these books were banned from circulation even before the Dark Lord had been born. This is the sort of rubbish that Purebloods had been writing and reading long before he used their blood purity obsession to entice them to his cause. Look at this lovely one” Life unworthy of life”, makes me wonder if the muggle Nazis had wizards among their ranks...this expression “life unworthy of life” is the exact same they used in Nazi Germany to refer to homosexuals, the sick and the handicapped and the supposedly racially inferior whose extermination they advocated. Well, this little book basically defends the same thing, the complete extermination of muggles. This other gem over there, it’s an eugenics manifesto that suggest us wizards taint the muggles´ water supplies with potions that will render their women infertile, so within some time they’ll disappear. Another one goes in the opposite direction: it proposes the use of muggle women and breeding marers for half-blood children, who would then be inter-married until the whole Earth´s population would be comprised of purebloods. I could go on...but the rest is just as bad if not worse...The bottom row over there...nothing but books about poisons and curses. Most of them I haven’t even seen in Hogwarts’ library´s restricted section.

“Oh, Severus, stop! This is...horrifying...” Minerva gasped, feeling her stomach churn.

“That’s not all...come over here” He walked to the other side of the room, and removed the white cover from the cabinet, opening it. It revealed a wealth of vials, bottles, flagons and flasks

“Potions?”

“Not just potions. Poisons. I took some of them home for analysis. See this purple liquid here? It causes paralysis on the muscles. That red one of there? Well, somebody decided to try that potion that would supposedly make muggle women infertile, according to that book’s suggestion. That green one is a mix of several different types of snake venoms all combined into a single poison that causes slow and painful death. I haven’t had the chance to go through everything, but the rest is probably more of the same.”

“I can’t even...we need to report this!”

“Minerva, no! This house belongs to Evelyn Black and her family. We can’t report this...who are they going to arrest? Muggles? Besides, if we report we will be doing exactly what those depraved
“I don’t understand...”

“The other day, Ms. Black posed me a question that intrigued me. All she knows about her laste grandfather is that he’s from London and born to a well to do family. Then why, she wondered, would he own a house in Cokeworth, in a poor, industrial district of it, of all places. After I opened this attic one thing became clear to me. They were trying to hide this. These books, these potions...they were all illegal, even in the 20s and 30s. This house was a cover, an almost perfect cover. Who would ever imagine a Black as much as setting foot at a muggle dunghill like Spinner’s End?”

“Then, by God, Severus, why a report would be ‘exactly what they wanted’?”

“Follow my line of thinking and tell me if I´m not right. Marius Black...a squib, disowned by his family...why would he be the owner of this house? If they disowned him, he shouldn´t keep any of the Blacks´ property, then why would they allow him to have a house? And THIS house on top of it?”

“Severus, you are not suggesting that...no, this would be too horrible even for them...”

“I´m not suggesting it, I´m saying it. The family put this house in Marius name so if this attic, and whatever illegal activities they were conducting in this house were ever to come to light, he’d be the only one directly implicated. Just think about it. A squib, who probably yearned to fit in with his pureblood family...it wouldn´t be too hard to make a case and implicate him in anti-muggle activities...”

“That poor child...and he was only 14 at the time, you told me. He was lucky this attic remained hidden...”

“He wasn´t lucky, he was cunning...”

“How so?”

“Marius Black might have been a squib, but I can assure you Slytherin would be proud to have him as a member. From what I’ve read in his letters to his mother, it´s clear he found out his family was setting him up, so, to thwart their plans, he left the country, taking the house keys with him.”

“I don’t see how taking the house keys would have done any good”

“There´s a particularly ingenious spell over this house, which can only be broken with a special key. That´s exactly the same key he left his granddaughter when he passed away. That´s why Ms. Black´s cat could get out of the house, but never managed to get back inside. The only way to enter this house is having the key, and it only works if the key is passed on by a person who shares blood ties with the author of the spell. That´s how Ms. Black can get in and out. She has the key, and she´s a Black. I only managed to make this copy because I got the key from her purse...if it hadn’t been on her person at the time I got it, the copy wouldn´t work. Marius knew that. His old letters don’t state it clearly, but they have heavy hints that he managed to steal the only available key when he left for Ireland. Not only that, he also took all the documents pertaining to the house’s ownership. And once in Ireland, he moved to a small little village in the country side and created an entire new life for himself, thus ensuring nobody would ever access the key, and therefore never open this attic. And it would have remained so, if his granddaughter wasn’t so bloody nosy. I’m telling you, Minerva. It’s a bloody shame Marius Black was born a squib. If he had this presence of mind at age 14, and with no magical abilities to fend for himself...I know he would have been one of Slytherin´s best had he been...
“Well, the Black’s blindness surely cost them a valuable member, magical skill or not...But there’s one thing I don’t understand, yet. If he wanted to keep this attic hidden...then why pass the key along to his granddaughter?”

“I don’t think he did it on purpose...According to Ms. Black he died of natural causes at age 81. Well, 81 is not too old for a squib, they have a life span similar to that of wizards. I’m sure what transpired between him and his family, and the premature death of his grandson had taken a toll on his health. In my opinion he didn’t have time to disapear with the key. And even if he did have time, I don’t see what he could do...he wouldn’t be able to destroy it...”

“Maybe...” Minerva cupped her chin between her thumb and her forefinger, deep in thought. “Call me crazy, but maybe he wanted her to discover this attic?”

“You think so?”

“It’s a possibility...you told me yourself he had been feeding his grandchildren stories about wizards disguised as fairy tales since they were very young...maybe he had some sort of plan for them. Specially considering the boy was, in fact a wizard.”

“You may have a point...but we will never know...I’m sure whatever his plans for the key were, they died with him...”

“What about that trunk on the table over there?”

“Oh, that! Thank you for reminding me...I didn’t think much of it at first...” Severus opened it “there are some materials for potion making, like these scales and a couple unused vials. Also these loose notes and notebooks also about the potions and poisons in the cabinet...but what really caught my eye was this...”

Severus removed a black velvet box, about the size of a large book. It had some discoloured patches on it, probably due to humidity, and the closure had a similar design to the ornament of the attic door: a silver dragon-like serpent. It popped open without too much resistance, revealing an empty interior.

“It’s empty...to state the obvious” Minerva told him

“Yes, it is. But look at all these divisions inside of it...it almost looks like a jewellery box. I don’t think anybody would just leave an empty box here for no reason. There was something inside...or some things...”

“Do you think Marius...”

“Well, he did take the key...why not take some more souvenirs with him, if he was to leave for good? I remember Ms; Black mentioning he had all sorts of old trinkets at home that he didn’t let anybody touch...”

“And where are these trinkets now?”

“According to her...locked up in a trunk, in the attic of her parents house along with all the family’s old rubbish. Her father has also passed away and her sister lives down the street with her children, so the only person there is her mother...who probably doesn’t even think about these old family heirlooms too much. Ms. Black did ask her not to toss them out, so we don’t need to worry about them for now.”

“Born a wizard.”
“But we do have something to worry about now...This attic. We have to close it.”

“Too late. Ms. Black knows it exists. It’s odd, really...they went through all the trouble of hiding this attic...why leave the door in plain sight for a muggle to see?”

“We don’t have time to ponder over that. If she knows the attic exists, she will want to know what’s inside.”

“Most of these objects are charmed to be invisible to muggles...but I still don’t think is wise to leave them here. Not to mention the utter depravity that is to let the poor woman sleep right under all this filth...and these potions are dangerous, as well...I can take the potions with me. I’d very much like to study them. As for the rest...does Hogwarts still have available storage room?”
Part 5 - Halloween - Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Severus gets a bit too close for his own comfort. Featuring a trip down nostalgia lane, a Halloween party and a visit to the roof of the abandoned mill.

Our Lady of Cokeworth Church
Rectory
October 23rd
Late afternoon

"So we have to do... paper decorations? What is this, kindergarten all over again?!" The boy sitting next to him by the large pinewood table in the main room of the rectory bemoaned his fate, but James barely heard him. He looked at the mess of purple, black and orange papers, stencils, tapes, ribbons and plastic decorations scattered all over the tabletop. Other than James and Tancey there were some other seven students working on decorations today. It was surely better than homework, but that still didn’t make it any good. Tancey had lucked out, she was in charge of music, so all she needed to do was bring some mixed tapes over. And yet she still insisted on helping with this silly "manual work". James couldn’t remember her enjoying Halloween that much, frankly.

"Hey, James!" speaking of the devil. There she came, running his way after giving the mixed tapes to Fr. Thomas.

"What is it now? Am I not cutting these bloody paper bats the correct way, Miss Halloween?"

"Don’t be silly! I just had an idea!"

"Another one!? Aren’t we all blessed..."

"Do you still have those spray cans?" she continued, giving no importance to his annoyance

"Some. Mum made me toss most of them..."

"Ms. Holt just told me she knows somebody who can built us a podium for the speakers and microphone"

"Speakers and microphone? We have those?"

"Now we do... Mitch said he can get new ones with a friend."

"Oh, Mitch... how surprising..."

"What ever do you mean by that?"

"Just look at him" James pointed out to the PE teacher, standing next to the rectory’s fireplace, cheerfully conversing with Father Thomas, Ms. Black and Ms. Holt "He’s trying to impress her. Can you smell the desperation?"
"Oh, whatever you say. The important thing is: we have a podium, speakers and a microphone. You know what else we should do? Get some spider webs. Nigel’s dad promised he’d get us some pumpkins, but Ms. Black suggested we also have turnips. You know what else I’m thinking?"

"What?" James rolled his eyes and puffed

"We can have a bonfire! Ms. Black was just telling me about Samháín, you know, that Celtic festival that originated Halloween, we could do something like that, with bonfires and celtic stuff."

"You’re high, Tancey?"

"Oh, shut up, you’re no fun!"

...

"Yes, the parents are offering help as well. And some mothers offered to cook." Evelyn briefly looked up from her notebook and turned the page so Father Thomas could have a look at the to-do list she had quickly scribbled. With about a week to go, the preparations for the party were in full swing, and it was evident that this year the celebrations would be bigger than ever before.

"I already have the list all sorted out with who is going to bring what. That leaves some things for us to buy and we need to get around to buying the fizzy drinks, but that is best done on the week of the party. Now all we have to do is finish the decorations and games.” Angie continued the list of activities, running her finger over the lengthy list of tasks marked out from Evelyn’s notebook.

"Well, with the speakers and microphones Mitchell procured for us and the kids helping with games and activities...I think we have it all covered... In fact I think we can give these poor children a break. It’s well past 6pm, they should be going home before it’s too dark.” Fr. Thomas smiled broadly, patting Mitch in the back and making his way to the large table where the students were working.

Evelyn closed her notebook and looked around. She had some ready-made decorations she’d need space for, but that could wait...the rectory was already filled with rolls of coloured paper and ribbons, plastic masks, cut-outs and all manner of cumbersome things, and until all of that was organised she’d have to find another place for the heavier decorations.

"That’s it for the day, Lyn?" Angie asked her as the students walked out, waving goodbyes as they passed them by.

"Yes, I guess...too early to put these up."

"What about the ones you bought?"

"I’ll just keep those at home."

"Need any help with that?" Mitch had been standing around silent for the past couple minutes...so silent Evelyn had forgotten he was even there. Truth to be told, she wasn’t really paying attention to him at all. She didn’t quite know why, but handsome and charismatic as he obviously was, Mitchell didn’t really bring out any sort of interest in her...too bad her lack of interest only seemed to fuel his. He seemed like the kind of person who didn’t take kindly to not being in the centre of attention...

"Thank you but that won’t be necessary. I have everything in my car...maybe I’ll just leave it all there for the time being...Well, it’s getting late..."

"Oh, yes, we should get going" Mitchell answered flatly "...I think I’m going to drop by this Mexican place on my way home, if you girls feel like tagging along..."
"Oh, sorry...Angela and I have a previous engagement...but thank you for offering."

...

"So...Pretty boy Mitch is on your case..." Angie snickered, getting into Evelyn’s red Volvo and putting her briefcases and bag in the backseat along with all of the Halloween decorations.

"Oh, Jesus..." Evelyn let out an exasperated sigh and started the car "Am I paranoid? Every time I’m in school grounds I always 'stumble' on him...Am I imagining things?"

"Hate to break it to you, but I don´t think you are...You do know the only reason he volunteered to help with the party was to be around you, right?"

"I was hoping that wasn´t the case..."

"Oh, dear...It’s Mitchell...he can’t stand the thought of any attractive woman NOT dropping to his feet on command...He can’t get over the fact that you are not swooning over him like his 14 year old students do..."

"Oh, God...how is he allowed near kids?"

"Relax...he’s just a self cantered imbecile..."

"A persistent one!"

"Just ignore him..."

"I’ve been trying to..."

"I´m telling you...he tries this sort of thing with every female teacher that happens to be good-looking, but he´s hardly a seasoned Don Juan..."

"Did he try this sort of shenanigans on you?"

"He did, actually" Angie snickered under her breath

"And..."

"My fiancé is a navy officer..." Both women exploded in thunderous laughter at the thought of Mitchell being confronted by a member of the Royal Navy. Evelyn was sure it must have been a sight to behold...too bad Angela probably didn´t have it recorded for posterity.

"What a specimen of man Mitchell is..."

"I know, I know...he’s more pitiful than anything...Seriously though..."

"Yes...?"

"My fiancé has single friends if you´re interested... Just saying...We can introduce you to some people and all that..."

"Thank you, but I´m not looking..."

"It´s been two years since that Richard bloke you told me about, no?...I´m not saying you need to get a boyfriend or anything but...it wouldn´t hurt to have some fun."
"Thank you, again...but no."

"Okay, if you rather spend your time drinking tea and discussing books with your Heathcliff-esque neighbour...which you haven´t introduced me to, by the way..."

"Angie..."

"Yeah..."

"You´re in a moving car...keep that in mind before trying to be funny..."

"Fine, fine..." Angela raised both her hands, feigning outrage "...no more talk about the tall, dark and mysterious man next door...That is, until you decide you´re ready to make the proper introductions.."

"Angie..."

"Yeah?"

"Moving car..."

...

"Mum, we´re home!" Tancey briskly walked into the living room, followed by a morose James.

"How was school?" Her mother´s voice came from the kitchen, loud over the television that broadcast some MTV programme her sister was watching mindlessly, not paying any attention to their racket.

"Fine! James and I are going upstairs to do homework before dinner, ok?!

"Wait right there, little miss...You and James get here for a moment, will you?"

The pair begrudgingly made their way into the kitchen. Take-out boxes were piled up on the table, and Olivia, still in her dark green trouser suit was taking out dishes, glasses and silverware from the cabinets.

"Need help?"

"No, dear, I just have to set the table. I had to stay a little later taking care of some paperwork and your father is having dinner with a workmate because of that project they´re working on so I got some take out on that Italian restaurant that everybody likes. There´s chicken parmigiana, pasta primavera and veggie lasagna. I also got some of that garlic bread James likes. We still have some time, so if you kids want I think I still have time to make some quick dessert."

"Can we have tiramisu, then?"

"Sounds good to me. What do you think James?"

"That´s fine, Mrs. Francis" the boy answered, standing awkwardly by the kitchen door.

"Good. Now go wash your hands, dinner will be ready in a few."

Tancey spun on her heels and made it past James and up the stairs within seconds. He motioned to follow her when Olivia´s voice reached his ears, a pang on concern hidden in it.

"How are things at home, James?"
"Same as always..." he answered, calculating his words...by now he had become an expert in answering the questions the adults posed him without flat out lying but carefully to not let them know the whole truth. Tancey’s mother was a hard one to fool though. In between her and Mrs. Black at school, it was getting increasingly difficult to pass his half-truths for plausible stories.

"And school? Tancey tells me Ms. Black is watching your kids like a hawk...making sure you behave and all that. She seems like a tough one..."

"..She´s ok."

"Is she? Tancey seems very fond of her..."

"Tancey gets along fine with teachers. Ms Black is nice too, I guess..."

"I´m happy to know..." Olivia took a long pause, as if measuring her next words "...your father called, by the way..."

"What did he want?" James tensed up and his words came out harsher than he intended.

"Just wanted to know where you were...You told him you´re spending the night, right?"

"Yeah...he forgets things sometimes...Uh...He wasn´t rude or anything, was he?" James stumbled on his words, embarrassed. "Rude"...codeword for drunk. He knew it wasn´t the first time he called Tancey´s house looking for him while completely intoxicated. Last time Tancey´s father had picked up the phone and after a heated argument he had forbid James to go back home, fearing for his safety. James had to spend almost an entire week at their house, until his mother called to say things were "better" at home. Back then, James had heard many things through closed doors and telephone extensions...Mrs. Francis had talked to his mother, tried to convince her to do something about it, she even gave her the number of a divorce lawyer. Mr. Francis offered to lend her money if she needed it for any immediate legal fees or a place to stay...

But nothing came out of it...as usual.

"No, not really" She was lying, of course. His father most certainly had been rude to her. Like his teachers, the school counsellors and most of his mother´s (now former) friends, Mrs. Francis had given up on the task of knocking some sense into his Meredith’s head and getting her to admit something was wrong and decided to keep her opinions to herself. James couldn´t blame her.

"I´m sorry about that..." James left the kitchen without waiting for an answer. That conversation wasn´t going anywhere...

Severus looked up from his notes as the sound of an upcoming car, muffled by his closed windows, came from the street outside. He glanced at the clock atop the mantle. I was well past 11pm. Ms. Black’s social live looked like it was steadily improving...she never came back home after 8pm on weekdays, even when she had extra work at the school. Considering the limited number of cultural activities available in Cokeworth and the fact that she had moved in less than a month ago that shouldn´t come as a surprise...But it was to be expected that she´d eventually find friends to go out and have fun with, being the social butterfly she obviously was. Evelyn Black was not meant to be indoors tending to domestic chores, skilled as she might be at it...she was not the type of woman who could be contained by the walls of a house.

For no reason other than sheer boredom he walked over to the window and pushed the curtains back, only enough to get a peek at the street without being seen. Under the precarious yellow-reddish light
of the few lampposts that still resisted in spite of the lack of maintenance and shed a dirty light over
the stones of Spinner’s End, he could scarcely see her with too many details. His eyes could make
out the tall figure in high heels and formfitting skirt that reached a little below the knees as she exited
her car, carrying bags and briefcases. She still insisted on that social experiment of teaching History
to the brats in Cokeworth Academy... Arriving late, bringing work back home, making little party
invitations and decorations...Quite a waste of a serious scholar...Idealism has a way of making even
the best among us look utterly silly he thought to himself before closing the curtains and returning to
his work.

...

The phone rang incessantly in the living room. Evelyn dropped her papers and bags on the couch
and ran to reach for it.

"Lyn?!"

"Hi, Cat."

"Jesus, woman, I´ve been calling you for hours!" Caitlin questioned her in a mockingly over-
dramatic tone

"Sorry about that...I went out."

"With...?"

"A friend..."

"A 'friend', you say? Does he live next door by any chance?"

"A friend of the female kind who does not live on this side of the bridge, you wannabe matchmaker.
Angela! I told you about her. We just had dinner and watched a film..."

"Oh...well, that´s disappointing..."

"Sweet Jesus, what is it with both you and Angela trying to set me up with Severus, if I may ask?"

"Maybe is because he seems like the only decent prospect in Cokeworth so far? Unless you´re
considering that PE teacher..."

"God, no! Why do I have to consider anybody at all?"

"Because at this rate you´ll have to join a convent soon enough!"

"And pray tell what are you doing parroting mam´s lines?"

"Am I? Ugh, sorry about that. She´s been giving me a hard time..."

"About?"

"Apparently I just turned 30 and have yet to get my life well organised enough for her standards..."

"Oh, dear...don´t worry, she gave me the very sane litany when I turned 30..."

"Except when you turned 30 you weren´t a divorced mother of two with no romantic prospects and
working overtime to pay the bills..."
"I had plenty other issues for her to complain about, in case you´ve forgotten...And since when mam´s standards of 'success' are anything to strive for? You know damned well if she had her way we´d be two bored housewives, with no careers, raising an army of babies. You should know better than to pay attention to her antics. And speaking of being 30, did you get my birthday gift yet? I wish it could have made it there on the 15th, but I didn´t have time to send it sooner and mail is a nightmare..."

"I got it today, actually, I left you a very sweet thank you message, but Ms. Busy-busy-busy only got home now!"

"Make up your mind, do you want me to go out or stay home?"

"Ok, ok, I´m done nagging. As long as you´re having a good time with whatever you´re doing. Just don´t let this Angela person replace me as your favourite partner in crime, will you?"

"Oh, so that´s what this is all about? Look how cute, my baby sister is jealous!"

"I´m entitled to, you weren´t even here for my birthday! For the first time since you were in college!"

"I´ll make up to you in December, I promise..."

"Ok, then. Now I´ll let you go, you must be tired...

"Tired and late...I was hoping to get Severus to finally help me with that damn attic, but he must be asleep by now..."

"Still with that attic? Or is it an excuse to run next door?"

"Enough with that, will you?...That attic does have me worried. I guess I´ll just find somebody who can bust the door open..."

"If you ask me, your neighbour seems to have a point. If it´s been locked for so long, there might mould and what not up there. These things can be toxic...You should get that checked by a professional..."

"You´re right...Well, I´ll think about that tomorrow. Now I need a shower and bed."

...

Evelyn´s eyes moved uneasily around the room as she finished drying her hair. After the quick conversation with her sister she had spent quite some time putting away materials for her classes on the next day before getting into the shower. The day had been long and she was still a ball of energy...she needed a break to unwind before a night of restoring sleep. Evelyn took her time under the warm water, letting the lavender scent of the shampoo and soap ease her into relaxation. But...it wasn´t quite working...

As soon as she got off the phone, Evelyn felt some vague sense of uneasiness. "I´m tired" she thought to herself...She had spent her whole day surrounded by loud teenagers, of course coming back to an empty house would feel a little strange. She just needed to relax, maybe watch something on the telly and that feeling would go away.

But it didn´t.

She was not the kind of person to be scared of noises, corner of the eye sightings or passing shadows. Being home alone was no news for her, and at 35 years of age she´d think she had
outgrown such childish concerns as the unsettling aura of a silent room, and the dead night outside, coming through the windows in the form of cool wind and uncertain noises...In spite of herself she brought the blow-drier with her to the living room and turned the tv on. She hated drying her hair outside the bathroom, but she needed some sort of sound to fill the hollow quiet that surrounded her in an almost oppressive manner.

It distracted her for a while.

But she couldn’t really focus on any programme...that odd uneasiness was quickly turning into something akin to dread...She had heard stories about people who felt that odd sensation right before something bad happened...Maybe it was silly, but it wouldn’t hurt to check the doors and windows, would it?

It might help her sleep better, if anything, Evelyn thought as she walked around the house checking on every single door, window and lock. It wouldn’t be too much to check those upstairs... just to be safe. She walked up and repeated the inspection on all rooms before heading back down.

She didn’t quite know why she had to stop at the stairs and look back. She just did...

The attic door...

...it was open.

...

1am. Who in the bloody hell would come knocking on his door at 1am?

Severus first thought of Minerva, but she’d never have this sort of discourtesy, unless it was a matter of life and death. And as far as he knew matters of life and death were, most fortunately, no longer an issue in Hogwarts. The only other people who knew his whereabouts were the Narcissa and Draco Malfoy and the current Prime Minister. Shacklebolt certainly wouldn’t pay him a visit so soon after the last and mother Malfoy and her dearest boy were unable and mostly uninterested in dropping by for tea and crumpets.

Then, who?! He mumbled surly incoherences to himself as he put on a fleece robe over his nightshirt and went downstairs to open the door, making sure to bring his wand with him, concealed in a pocket.

His late-night visitor wouldn’t require the use of his wand, but it didn’t startle him any less He looked down at the woman standing in the cold outside clad in a lilac bathrobe, matching slippers, her brown hair falling on her shoulders in humid waves and a frown over her golden brown eyes.

"Ms. Black?"
"Ms. Black?!

"May I come in, please?" Evelyn asked sheepishly, shrugging inside her lavender colored bathrobe. Severus was so stunned by her presence at his doorstep at that time of the night he could barely mumble an answer. A low chirping sound caught his attention and brought him back to reality. He looked down to see Ciáran in her arms, his fur and tail puffed, pupils dilated to the point his eyes couldn’t be distinguished from the rest of him. He was obviously distressed, making bizarre noises before running into his living room, as if seeking refuge.

"Of course, come in..."

"I´m so sorry to bother you this late at night, is just that...you´re my only neighbour and I didn’t know where else to go. I didn’t even get changed or got my purse and my car keys..." she walked in, frantic.

"Ms. Black...slowly. What happened?" Severus closed the door and walked over to her, then simply decided to stand about, awkwardly. He wasn’t sure if some sort of gesture was in order to calm her down...but if it was he had no idea which would be appropriate.

"I need to use your phone..."

"What for? Ms. Black, please, you´re not making any sense."

"I think I may need to call the police..."

"The what?! Police? But, why? Did something happen?!" He frowned, trying to recall the last hours. Severus was a light sleeper, if something had happened at her house he surely would have heard it...Maybe something had happened while she was out? No, no...it was impossible...He distinctively remembered seeing her coming back home...quite later than she usually did, but otherwise fine...and she looked like she had just taken a shower...Surely nobody who was a victim of a crime would worry about personal hygiene...right? In spite of himself, Severus let his eyes wander, looking for any sign of trauma or violence on her face and body, but finding none.

"I think somebody broke into my house..."

"You think? What do you mean you 'think'? Did you see somebody in the house?" Now he was worried...Severus was well aware of the possibility of Death Eaters coming after him, but would they be as incompetent as to target the wrong house? Even then, her house was under a rather potent protective spell, and he had made sure to not break it when he had been there that afternoon...Surely no wizard or muggle could possibly have entered.

"No, no...I didn´t! I just...I don’t know, I felt it! I just felt it!"
"Ok, Ms. Black, please, try to breathe and tell me what happened, from the beginning...Sit down..."

"Oh, yes, of course...I’m rambling..." she mumbled and sat down, still confused and tense. "I had dinner with a friend after work, then...I came back home, talked to my sister on the phone and took a shower...then I just felt it...some sort of...presence. You know that feeling when you know there’s something or someone around you, even if you don’t see it ? Have you ever felt that ?"

Severus fell silent...Of course he had felt that...He was a wizard, after all...Strange happenings and sensations were naught but daily occurrences to those of his kind. But Evelyn Black was a muggle...Severus knew for a fact the only persons who had been to her house uninvited that day had been himself and Minerva. He had opened her attic and then he and the Hogwarts headmistress had removed all of the potions, books and dark magic parafernalia from there. Obviously it was not safe having all of that laying around within easy reach of a muggle, specially a muggle of Evelyn’s background...He was well aware the left-over energy would remain for a while...It happened with the the dark arts...a bitter aftertaste so to speak...It took a few days to wear off, usually...

But Evelyn was not supposed to feel that...Was she ?

Severus had heard plenty of nonsense about muggles who were sensitive to magic...Some were called (or rather called themselves) mediums...Supposedly they could see ghosts and witness magical events, which they foolishly blamed on ‘poltergeists’, ‘demons’, folkloric creatures or aliens. The near-totality of those ‘supernatural sightings’ were merely wizards who had been careless enough to get caught red-handed...But some muggles claimed to see this sort of thing regularly and were believed by other muggles. Those were the supposed "mediums"...Some wizards, even a few respectable scholars, believed the abilities of some muggles to perceive magic on a small scale...It wasn’t that far-fetched...if animals could sense magic, why not some muggles ? Specially muggles that had wizard blood running in their veins. After all Evelyn Black was a great-granddaughter of wizards... However, Severus never quite believed that muggles could have any sort of special sensitivity...All who claimed to have it were nothing but charlatans, looking for an easy way to get money out of desperate and naïve souls.

Could he have been wrong ? She was obviously not making anything up, if her state was to be trusted,. And why would she have this reaction just hours after he had released a small wave of dark magic fumes into her house ?! The only explanation was that she had, somehow...felt it.

"You say you felt something...how so ? How was that feeling ?"

"I don’t know...It was...dread. It’s the best way I can describe it...something oppressive..." she seemed increasingly more agitated

"What did you do then ?"

"I checked all my doors and windows...then...when I went upstairs, I saw it...the attic. I swear it was closed when I left. Remember, we talked about it, I wouldn’t try to open it until I had contacted a professional to check for mould and infiltrations...Things have been so hectic at work with the Halloween party and all that I simply forgot about it. But today it was open ! The door was open ! Somebody has to have done that because I didn’t do it."

"Shit..." Severus hissed under his breath...he had forgotten to close the sodding door...

"See?You see ?! I’m not overreacting, am I ? We have to call the police..."

"No. We’re not calling anybody." he pulled her back before she could get up to find a phone
"What !? Severus, for Christ´s sake ! We have to !"

"Ms. Black, I hate to have to be the one to pull you back into reality, but I must remind you your new address is Spinner´s End. Cokeworth´s brave police officers wouldn´t be bothered to cross the river and come all the way down here for anything less than murder or an all out gang war, and ever then they´d drag their feet all the way...They´re not going to bother with a call from a person who thinks somebody may have broken into their home..."

"Then what am I to do !?"

"You stay here and wait for me..." he got an old, worn out trench coat from the hanger by the door and motioned to leave. Evelyn almost jumped from the couch and onto him, both her hands grabbing his sleeve and pulling him away from the door

"You´re not going there, are you ?"

"Give me ten minutes. Now you sit down and wait" he told her sternly, roughly pulling himself away from her and walking out of the door without giving her a chance to answer or stop him.

...

Evelyn stared at the closed door in complete disbelief.

Was Severus really just going to casually check her house for an intruder ? By his own admission Spinner´s End was not a safe neighborhood, and as much as she wanted to believe that he knew what he was doing, having lived there since his childhood, she couldn´t help but be petrified for his sake. She knew there was somebody there. Nothing else would explain the way she felt and that open attic...Evelyn didn´t believe in ghosts or magic, as much as she wrote about them... She knew something rather human was going on in her house...and Severus had just gone there...

She walked around in circles, not knowing what to do. Severus had told her to wait, but she wouldn´t just sit around waiting to hear a gunshot...She should have brought her mobile with her...Well, given her luck today she wouldn´t get service on it anyway. Severus had to have a phone somewhere...She started to look around for it...

"Not in the living room..." she mumbled to herself, looking at every corner as Ciáran´s eyes followed her around "Maybe the kitchen...no...not the kitchen...Jesus, this man doesn´t have a fecking phone?!"

Severus leisurely strolled back into Evelyn´s house. In her hurry she had left the front door open. He chuckled. Now, this way she might have a real intruder come in...Was she really that terrified ? It made sense if she could feel the residual dark magic...The dark arts could be overwhelming enough for seasoned wizards and witches...For muggles they were downright harrowing. But even then...it was residual energy from spells and potions that were decades old. No muggle should detect them. Maybe he had forgotten something in the attic when he and Minerva were removing everything...it was the only explanation...

He quickly made his way up the stairs and to the attic. Using his wand for light he looked around and found the attic as empty as he had left it. The rest of the house was undisturbed except for Ms. Black´s papers and folders laying about in the living room. There was nothing that could explain away her fear...except for the residual energy she wasn´t supposed to feel...

Severus turned on his heels and went right back to his own house, only to find her distracted, looking around and running her fingers through her mane of disaveiled brown hair.
" Anything you need, Ms. Black?"

"Oh my God! There you are!" She almost jumped and practically ran his way

"Well, of course..."

"Are you ok?"

"Yes, and so is your house...There’s nothing worth of note there..."

"Did you check the attic?"

"I checked everything...Unless the intruder is hiding in your underwear drawer, the house is safe..."

"But...I swear I..." she hissed and started to blur words he couldn’t understand...Was that how spoken Irish sounded?

"Go check for yourself..."

"I most certainly will!" she raged, marching past him.

..."I can’t believe this..." Evelyn climbed down the stairs, hands on her waist, befuddled almost to the point of disorientation...Severus was right...there was nobody...nothing. The house was untouched...And yet, she still had this vague sense of dread hoovering around her...

"You forgot this..." She looked down to the front door and saw Severus standing there, awkwardly holding Ciarán on his arm. The cat still seemed agitated and jumped from his grip, going to hide under the couch...That had to be a sign that she wasn’t going mad...something was indeed amiss, even Severus couldn’t feel it. Ciáran’s demeanour was proof enough for her.

"Ms. Black...Is everything all right?"

"I...don’t know..."

"Did you check everything?"

"Yes...There’s not as much as a pin out of place..."

"I told you there was nothing to worry about...Is not like burglars go around Spinner’s End of all places looking for valuable objects to steal...Even if your shoes might qualify..." he snickered

"Not funny, Severus..." she smiled in spite of herself "...I do owe you an apology, though..."

"Whatever for?"

"What do you mean ‘whatever for’? I just knocked on your door in the middle of the night for nothing...I could swear there was...I mean..." she could feel she’d start to babble again and took a deep sigh "I think I need a drink...would you like something? I’ll have some whiskey, but if you want something else..."

"There’s no need."

"No, no...I insist...it’s the least I can do, after all this trouble..."
Severus sat down while she went into the kitchen to get ice and whiskey, hoping she wouldn´t just drop the glasses on her way back and make an even bigger fool of herself. If he didn´t already think she was a complete and utter mess of a scatterbrain, then he´d sure start now. Imagining an intruder, then waking him up at 1am scared witless over nothing...Fortunately he had kept her from embarrassing herself further by calling the police...Not that it did much to ease her discomfort...

"I swear I´m not usually like this..." she rambled, mortified, sitting next to him "I´m not some scaredy histeric who hallucinates things and runs off to bother other people, I promise you. I really did believe something was wrong...I´m so sorry about all this, truly..."

"You´re probably overworked...Oftentimes when the body is tired, the mind tends to play tricks...it happens to the best of us..."

"Has it ever happened to you ?"

"Possibly more often than I´d care to admit publicly..."

"So you don´t think I´m insane, do you ?" she smiled shakely

"Not anymore than the average person...You´re simply tired, I believe."

"I guess...God, I can´t wait for this year t be over with..."

"It´s been long enough indeed..." he told her criptically before going quiet. She almost asked him what he meant by it...but that would be a silly question...The scarring on his neck and the paralysed fingers on his left hand were all the answer she needed really...Apparently,1998 hadn´t been too kind on him either...

"In any case...thank you. My intruder may have been imaginary, but I really do appreciate the help...and once again, I´m sorry for bothering you over nothing..."

"That´s quite all right..." he answered, quickly finishing his drink "Well, I should get going...It´s late and you have work tomorrow."  

"Sure..." she answered flatly...It was probably going to be too awkward if she asked him to stay a little while more, wouldn´t it? Yes, it probably would. "Good night."

...

"Lyn ? Hey, Lyn !"

"Yes, what ?"

Evelyn looked up from her papers to see Angela hoovering over her, looking rather concerned.

"You´re ok ?"

"Of course, why wouldn´t I be ?"

"Well, you´re filling out your notes on the wrong dates..."

"Oh, shite !"

"Here, have some coffee..."

The teacher´s lounge was almost entirely deserted. Neither Evelyn nor Angela had classes until later
in the morning, but they had decided to arrive earlier to take care of some paperwork. Evelyn’s mind
was all over the place, however. She pushed her datebook and papers aside, and took the plastic cup
filled with steaming hot coffee, taking a sip as if it was some sort of magical medicine.

"You look tired...I know we stayed out quite late last night, but..." Angela insisted

"No, is not that...I just...Oh, Jesus, I made an arse of myself..."

"What ? When ?"

"Yesterday when I came back home...I had the distinct feel there was somebody inside my house..."

"What !?" Angela gasped, running to sit across from her on the table "You had a break in ? Why
haven’t you told me sooner? Did they do anything to you ? Did they steal anything ?You called the
police, right ?"

"There is exactly where I made I fool of myself...there was nobody in the house...I thought there
was...I guess my mind was playing tricks on me.."

"Oh, dear...You must be tired."

"Yes...that´s what Severus said..."

"Severus ?..."

"I told you I made a fool of myself...I went to his house to ask him for help...I don’t even know how
I’m gonna face him again, after embarrassing myself like that..."

"Ok, hold it right there ! You went to his house to ask for help ?"

"Well, yes...what else was I supposed to do ?"

"Evelyn, dear...I know I promised I wouldn´t talk about it anymore, but for heaven´s sake, this
Severus just seems to keep popping up in conversation, doesn’t he ?"

"Angela ! I thought I had an intruder in the house and Severus is my only neighbour ! Of course, I
made a whole spectacle for nothing...The poor man had to get out of bad in the middle of the night to
check my house for a burglar...I might as well have told him I had monsters under my bed..."

"Oh, yes, the poor man...His attractive neighbour knocks on his door in a panic, in the middle of the
night asking him to save her from a non-existent intruder, thus giving him the perfect opportunity to
be all manly and heroic...Poor man indeed. Say, did you reward him accordingly ?"

"Oh, shut up, Angela !"

"Fine, fine...I’m just trying to cheer you up a bit. But since you don’t seem to have your sense of
humor turned on today...In all seriousness though...You have been working too much...Is no wonder
you’re starting to see things !"

"Yeah...I suppose it´s the only reasonable explanation..."

"Tell you what...why don’t we go out for drinks tomorrow ? Matthew is back in town, so I can
finally introduce the two of you... What do you say ?"

"Well...I guess I could use some time off...But..."
The door opened quietly, interrupting Evelyn’s thoughts. Mr. Nolan’s secretary walked in without much ceremony and called out her name, as if she couldn’t plainly see the two women were alone in the room.

"Yes, Ms. Brown?"

"Constance Francis’ mother just called asking to have a moment to talk to you this afternoon after class. I told her she could come."

"Mrs. Francis? Oh, well, thank you Ms. Brown, I’ll talk to her..."

"Tancey’s mother?" Angela mused, as Mrs. Brown left as quietly as she entered "Is everything ok with Tancey?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact she’s doing excellently...Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Nevermind..."

... Severus closed his window as the owl took flight, leaving an envelope behind, closed with the wax seal of the Ministry for Magic. Kingsley Shacklebolt had eased into his new role of interim prime-minister rather swiftly, hadn’t he? It had taken longer than he expected it to... One could only assume Shacklebolt had been taking precautions and putting investigations in place before contacting him about the information Severus had sent him. Nice to see a minister acting with some measure of forethought for a change.

The message inside the envelope was as to the point and laconic as Severus expected from him.

"We must speak. I’d like to meet you tomorrow at 6pm, at Aumbry St. Foret’s."

... The last class of the day had left her drained, but Evelyn still had one last thing to do. Olivia Francis was waiting for her in the teacher’s lounge.

"Mrs. Francis..."

"Ms. Black...I finally get to meet you. My daughter talks about you quite a seem to be her favorite teacher..." Olivia Francis was a short and somewhat stocky woman, with a pleasant face and sweet green eyes, sharply dressed and well mannered, who spoke with a subtle hint of a Caribbean accent. Constance resembled her greatly, both in appearance and in the graceful countenance. Evelyn knew Olivia worked as a paralegal in a rather successful local office, which meant she had surely taken time off a busy schedule to meet her. It had to be important.

"Oh, is that so? Well, that makes me happy. Tancey is a lovely girl, very bright and dedicated...But, please, take a seat..." The two women moved to a more reserved corner of the room where they’d be less likely to be disturbed. "It’s not always that a student’s parent actually asks for a meeting...I was a bit surprised, specially because Tancey is doing really well in my class. Actually she’s excelling, if I may be honest..."

"Oh, yes...she’s been really excited about your classes. But is not about her I wanted to talk..."
"Oh, no ?"

"No...it´s about James..."

"James ?...What about him ?"

"You probably know that my daughter and James are...well, they´re best friends. So, evidently, my family gets to spend a lot of time around him...I only came here because...I’m worried..."

Evelyn frowned. She was "worried". Evelyn didn’t like the sound of that. She had heard through the grapevine that James has engaged in some acts of vandalism and possibly petty criminal offenses in the past, and many a time other teachers would wonder out loud why a "good girl" like Constance would be friends with him. Evelyn also knew there had been some kind of altercation involving Tancey’s father and James’ father a few months before, but she never quite found out over what. Now her mother came to tell her she was "worried"...Precisely when James was starting to do well...As if her preocupations over James family situation weren´t enough...

"Worried about what exactly ?..."

"I think you know by now that...well, is not in my place to meddle but...You must understand James and my daughter are really close, and she really cares about him a lot...So as a mother, I have to do something...Well, James father...You know he..." Olivia seemed to be trying hard to pick the words.

"I do know James´father seems to have...issues..."

"I suppose I can just spell it out...He drinks...A lot. Always did, as far as I know...He used to work in the mill and after that closed he got himself a job in another place in Oldham...then he had an accident, went on disability and...it’s been downhill from there. Not that it was any better before...At least is what I know through Tancey...He´s...violent too..." the words came out of her mind in a rambling torrent, as if she had been holding them back for so long, that once the door was open, everything just came rushing out without any control or order.

"Violent ?..." Evelyn inhaled deeply, trying to keep her composure ".you know for a fact that Mr. Wright has been physically abusive towards James ?"

"Not towards James...well, not anymore. Not since James grew up enough to defend himself...Meredith is another story...I´m pretty sure he still hits her when James is not around...I don´t know how much better that is, if at all...No 16-year-old should be forced to defend his mother from his own father..."

"For how long has this been going on ?"

"I don’t know...All I know is what my daughter tells me, or what James lets slip...I never really witnessed anything myself...Except..."

"Except... ? Mrs. Francis, if you know anything, please..."

"A few months ago...He called us...James was at our house, working on some school assignement with my daughter, and he called us, completely drunk, looking for his son...We know he doesn´t approve of James being friends with Tancey...I don’t want to throw the racism accusation around, because we don’t know for sure, and it’s an awfully serious thing to say about anybody...But you do understand that...one has to wonder..."

"Of course, I completely understand...What happened then ?"
"My husband picked up the phone and they had an argument. We forbade James from going back home, because, well, it obviously wasn´t safe...I’m pretty sure he took it out on Meredith...I saw the bruises, which she insisted she got when she tripped on some stairs at know how that goes, right ? 'I ran into a door', 'I fell down some stairs'... There´s always an excuse to not admit it... We offered to help her find a divorce lawyer but...that went as well as you can imagine..."

"Yes, I know...I´ve had about the same degree of success when I tried to reach her for a conversation."

"Then you know what I´m talking about...I hate to say this, but...At this point I gave up on Meredith...But James is another story. It´s not his fault. My husband and I do what we can, but we´re not his parents, we´re not his family members. There´s just so much we can do if Meredith is not willing to accept any help. That´s why I wanted to talk to you. You´re his teacher, and Tancey tells me you´re the only teacher he actually respects. You might be in a better position to do something about it."

"Mrs. Francis...I understand...trust me I´ve been keeping an eye on James, but, I didn´t know for a fact how bad things were until now. Thank you very much for coming here and telling me all of this. I assure you I´ve been thinking about James´s situation for quite a while now."

"I know I shouldn´t be meddling but...I couldn´t keep watching it. You know ? I couldn´t just keep watching it all happen..."

"Of course not. Of course not." Evelyn shook her head, overwhelmed "And trust me...It is very important for James to have people who care about his well-being. I know Constance has been a really positive influence on him, and to know that you and your husband also support him is truly a relief. I know this type of situation may seem like a dead-end street and it can be frustrating for everyone involved, but I can tell you for a fact, that providing James and Meredith with a net of emotional support is a great first step...I´ll try to talk to James again and see what we can do, at this point to help him...I´ll make sure to keep you informed..."

"Thank you..."

Evelyn followed Olivia with her eyes until she disappeared through the door, making way for Angela who was just returning to the teacher´s lounge after her own long day of classes. She briefly greeted Olivia before walking up straight to Evelyn.

"So...anything wrong with Tancey ?"

"No, not Tancey...You know what ? Is that offer still up ? Because I could definetly go out for some drinks tomorrow..."

...

October 24th

Evening.

Severus put on the one still decent-looking muggle jacket he owned. It was a relic from the 1960s, bought from a thrift store when he was 17 years old. Thankfully it still fit him perfect, and the iron gray color of it distracted greatly from the outdated cut. It looked adequate enough for a business dinner... It was at times like these he missed living in Hogwarts. One could never really go wrong with black robes. Not having to worry about personal presentation sure saved up a lot of time and patience... Oh, well...It was not important what he wore as long as he could pass unnoticed among
muggles.

As he reached for his wallet on the nighttable, the blaring sound of a car horn disturbed the silence outside.

"What the bloody..." he pushed the curtains aside and looked down on dimly lit street below. Besides Evelyn Black’s red volvo, which was by now a familiar part of the landscape he saw from his window every day, there was a dark colored Ford parked across the street. Before he could make any assessment of the possible reason why that car was there and why the driver was making that unholy racket, he noticed somebody crossing the street then going around it to get in on the passanger’s side...Evelyn Black...wearing a dark colored coat over a green or turquoise dress, he really couldn’t be sure from far away. He did see she had her signature high heels on and her hair pulled into a messy updo.

Once she had gotten in they drove off.

...

"What about Matthew ? I thought he was coming with us." Evelyn asked distractedly, checking her makeup on a small hand mirror, as Angela drove past the bridge.

"He’s waiting for us there. I asked him to get us a table while I picked you up"

"Oh, good. Where are we going again ?"

"Picadilly Lounge, in Manchester. I’m glad you’re coming, by the way. You really need a little time off."

"I know, specially after that conversation with Mrs. Francis yesterday...Thank you, Angela."

"You’re welcome. But let’s not think about that for now. We’re just going to relax and have some fun. Work can wait till tomorrow."

"Yes, you’re right."

Angie’s green Ford Fiesta moved fast through the empty streets of Cokeworth. It was not at all surprising that the old industrial town didn’t have much of a night life to speak of. The residents looking for nightly entertainment had to seek it in Manchester or Oldham. Driving around Cokeworth at night was almost an unsettling experience, really. But somewhat more unsettling than the deserted streets passing by her window, was the silence inside the car. Evelyn looked at her friend as she drove, finding her to be oddly taciturn. After a few more blocks of silence, she started to find it more than a bit uncomfortable. Evelyn knew she could be a blabbermouth, but Angela usually didn’t fall too far behind her in verbosity, so why on Earth was she suddenly so quiet?

"Angie...?"

"Yeah?"

"Is everything ok?"

"Sure, why?"

"Well, you seem too quiet..."

"Oh, you know what?" Angela blurted "I better say it now, so if you want to be mad at me we can
"get it over with."

"What? Why would I be mad at you?"

"Remember how you told me you were not looking for a date or anything like it?"

"Angela, what have you done?" Evelyn yelped "You didn´t set me up with anybody, did you?"

"Weeell..."

"Angela, I don´t believe that!"

"Lyn, I know you´re probably mad at me right now, but at least give him a chance. His name is Ben, he´s a military engineer and has been friends with Matthew since before we started dating, I´ve known him for years now, and I swear he´s a really nice fellow. If you´re not interested in him you will at least meet a nice person...worst case scenario you get a new friend."

"Ugh, fine!" Evelyn grumbled, aggravated "I should make you drive me back home, you know? But I suppose is not the poor man´s fault that you decided to meddle into my personal affairs. If I know you you probably set him up as much as you did me. So I won´t be rude to him or Matthew...But I swear to God, tomorrow you´re going to hear it!"
Part 5 - Halloween - Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Severus gets a bit too close for his own comfort. Featuring a trip down nostalgia lane, a Halloween party and a visit to the roof of the abandoned mill.

October 25th
Aumbry St. foret restaurant
Manchester
6 pm

Aumbry was a small but elegant and well-regarded restaurant. A red-brick façade, two ample bow windows, discreet doors painted in black and a sleek inconspicuous sign barely called much attention in the small street off the main avenue. Of course the size and discretion only added to the value. Which was one of the reasons Severus tended to avoid places like this. As much as one could benefit from the privacy and quiet a place like that had to offer, the truth was that restaurants such as these, that prided themselves in being small-scale and therefore providing supposedly higher quality services, were little more than a nest of middle-class snobs who viewed themselves in such high regard that even their food had to be treated as some sort of ritual for the initiated, preferably including many French words none of the patrons knew the real meaning of and decorations that should make any sensible person weary of paying actual money for food that looked like rejected first drafts of Jackson Pollock’s paintings...

It didn’t surprise him at all that Shacklebolt should choose this place. He knew enough about muggle social circles to know exactly where he’d blend in the best. And the ever-elegant, ever-sharply dressed, aristocratic-looking interim prime minister would surely fit right in in this fashionable little temple to muggle savoir vivre. If anything, Severus couldn’t fault his choice. Aumbry’s was small enough as to not draw attention, expensive enough as to not draw crowds without being entirely impossible to afford, and, although well-known, not famous enough that any wizards in the area may have heard of it.

A perfect place for a business meeting.

Severus immediately spotted him, even in a room full of people. But as hard to miss as Kingsley was, with his striking features, bald head and impressive height that made him tower over the other patrons even while sitting down, it was undeniable that he did a remarkable good job of making himself pass for a muggle. Dressed in a sharply well tailored suit, of a warm shade of dark grey that flawlessly complemented his dark aubergine shirt and tyrian-purple tie, he sat by the window analysing the menu distractedly, seemingly very at home. The maître quickly guided Severus to his table.

"Minister..." Severus spoke softly, not missing the opportunity to address him by the title he didn’t seem to yet be too comfortable with.

"Professor Snape..." Kingsley smiled politely, as he got up to shake his hand, returning his subtle dig
with a healthy dose of good humour.

"Just Severus, if you will. I haven’t been 'professor ' anything for quite a while now, and you know
that..."

"You will agree to call me Kingsley, then. Titles are indeed not necessary, specially when we´re
among muggles"

"Agreed."

"I took the liberty to order a Pinot Grigio, but if you prefer something else, we can..."

"As much as a appreciate your intention to make this a pleasing little social meeting, I’ll pass...That’s
not why we´re here."

...

Lady PepperMint Lounge
Oldham
6:20pm

Evelyn looked around. It was still early, but since it was a weekday the lounge seemed filled with
young working people fresh out of their offices and cubicles, looking for some much needed down-
time after a stressing day. The Lady PepperMint seemed quite adequate for unwinding after work or
just spending some relaxing time chatting with friends. It was decorated in cool shades of absinthe
green and aqua, turn of the century styled posters filled the walls and soft greenish and yellowish
lights added to the ambiance where antique couches and ottomans shared space with distressed wood
tables, giving the place a cosy feel that matched well the soft-pop and soul tunes that filled the air at a
volume that it didn´t interfere with conversation, but still brought people to the dance floor.

Evelyn and Angela walked in, dodging a couple of over-excited twenty-somethings that couldn´t
decide whether they wanted to get a table or just stand by the bar, and walked about for a while,
looking for their table. Suddenly Angela waved at somebody across the lounge and took Evelyn´s
hand, pulling her all the way across the place towards a table in the back. Once they got there,
Evelyn saw two men get up from their table to greet them. One of them, slightly shorter than the
other and more broadly built, with blondish hair, and bright blue eyes approached Angela and gave
her a quick kiss on the lips.

"Lyn, this is Matthew."

"So we finally meet! Angela speaks so much about you is like the two of you are childhood friends!"
He shook her hand firmly, smiling broadly.

"Does she? I’ve heard a lot about you too. I’m glad that you´re finally back home."

"Yeah, this time around I should get some extended down time. Oh, let me introduce you two." he
turned to the other man, standing slightly behind him. "Ben, this Evelyn, Angela´s co-worker,
Evelyn, Benjamin."

"Hello." Ben shook her hand and let out an awkward greeting. He was slightly leaner and taller than
Matthew, had green eyes and a darker complexion, his hair was also dark and starting to grow out
his buzz-cut; he was also sporting a slight stubble so Evelyn assumed he had been on leave for
longer than Matthew.
"Hi..." she answered, uneasily. He seemed like a nice enough fellow, but the truth was, she was not comfortable. It was not Benjamin´s fault, of course...but she couldn´t simply pretend she was ok with the arrangement, it wasn´t really in her to act like that. Once they settled on their table, she ordered some white wine, hoping she´d loosen up enough as to not be a complete bore and ruin everybody´s evening.

... 

"I looked into the information you gave me..."

"And...?"

"We haven´t found any definite evidence connecting the Malfoys to the Lestanges´ flight, so far. Of course, that doesn´t mean they didn´t participate, but it´s a difficult lead to follow with Lucius Malfoy on house arrest. I´m afraid we might have to turn our attention to Draco Malfoy..."

"Draco has nothing to do with it..."

"Draco is in France. The Lestranges escaped through France and into Germany as far as we know...That´s the only possible link."

"I´m telling you, Draco Malfoy doesn´t have anything to do with it. He happens to be in France because his father desperately wants to keep some sort of connection to the Rotts, seeing as they now run the show."

"You´re talking about Lucius´cousin..."

"Yes, Claire Rott...I believe she is the one behind the flight of the Lestrange brothers."

"France doesn´t have anything on her."

"Claire knows how to cover her tracks. She was never implicated on anything simply because she was not a direct participant in the events of the war, but I know for a fact she kept her connections to the Malfoys, through wartime and after. Claire and her husband have supported the Death Eaters through anonymous transfers of money and they were just waiting for the final victory of the Dark Lord to help him dig his claws into France next..."

"While I do tend to believe you, you must understand, I don´t have anything solid to act on. I´ve sent people to Paris, but there´s not a single thing that we can use as leverage to ask them to open an investigation on the Rotts...Draco on the other hand...His participation on the war was open and well documented, as you surely don´t need to be reminded. Right now he´s the only connection between the Malfoys and the Rotts."

"Kingsley Shacklebolt...You´re a smarter man than that, or at least I thought you were. Draco Malfoy? Poor Draco couldn´t act as an agent even if he wanted, and I assure you he does not. As for his participation in the war...He was a minor for most of it and no charges were ever brought against him. You have no legal standing."

"I know you´re the youn man´s godfather, but..."

"I am, but one thing has nothing to do with the other. You should remember us Slytherins don´t always act solely based on self-preservation and personal interests. Sometimes we just happen to be thinking ahead. You´ll have to trust me."

"No, Severus. You have to trust me. If you know anything that exonerates Draco of any potential
participation you have to tell me so I can find another course of action."

"I can’t do that without jeopardizing his safety. He’s inside a pit of hungry lions, right now, and I can’t get him out. You will have to trust my word and not pursue any action against him. Not only it will be counterproductive, it will severely predispose me against you...and you do not want that. You may not like it, but right now you don’t have a strong Ministry in your hands, and your current roster of Aurors consists of naught but a band of shell-shocked children. Can you afford to lose my help, Kingsley? You may think having me as an ally is frustrating, but try crossing me...Minister or not, you will not touch Draco, understood?"

"Is that a threat, Snape?"

"A friendly warning. Threats are for those of histrionic dispositions and too little energy for real action..."

"You’re using him as a spy, aren’t you?"

"Believe whatever you feel you need to believe."

"That’s not much better than the dangerous stunts Dubledore pulled in the past..."

"Dumbledore and I didn’t have much in common other than one thing: we never tricked ourselves into thinking our actions had any sort of moral high ground or justification aside from the necessity of pursuing them. This is why we succeeded where you and the ministry failed..."

"Well, do give me the benefit of your superior advice, then...If I can’t go after the Rotts what am I supposed to do?"

"Have you checked your connections in Russia?"

...

Well, that was just grand. After more than half an hour of inane conversation, Matthew and Angela had suddenly decided they were in the mood for a little dancing. Evelyn was starting to get comfortable, listening to the stories Matthew and Benjamin had to share about how they met in high school, how they decided to join the military and the progress of their respective careers, Angela and her had talked about their work and their own daily issues, and everything was progressing towards what seemed to be a potentially fun night out with friends.

But Angela had apparently taken it to mean her little plan to get her and Benjamin together had worked and that Evelyn was somehow interested in him. Well, he was a great company, but this was not what Evelyn had come for. But Angela and Matthew had simply decided on their own accord to leave her and Benjamin alone...probably so they’d get to know each other better. Evelyn truly hoped those two never decided to open a match-making business or they’d be headed for bankruptcy in about three days.

...

"You know Russia is even less collaborative than the French. At least France has a progressive ministry. The Russians on the other hand..."

"I heard their new prime minister is known for his...conservative leanings..."

"That’s a kind way to put it. The man is a known supremacist. As is most of their currently ministry. They flat out denied us access to any documents."
"Another good reason for the Lestranges to be there. Dimitri should be waiting for them with open arms..."

"This Dimitri... You know him personally?"

"No, we were never properly introduced, I’m afraid. All I know about him is his first name and that was was supposed to be the Dark Lord’s contact with in Russia. It was the second base. France for western Europe, Russia for eastern Europe. Which is precisely why you need to be careful. We don’t know much about him, so any clumsy action may give him the upper hand."

"You do realize my hands are tied, right? If the ministries of France and Russia don’t want to collaborate, I can’t make them. Not without solid evidence that proves there are illegal activities under way, and even then, we could get ourselves into a mess of diplomatic issues."

"I’m well aware of that... Why do you think Dumbledore and I had to come up with our alternative strategies? The Ministry is bound by law to act in a certain way, and that’s exactly the reason its not all effective. But here’s the plot twist, Kingsley... I’m not the ministry"

"So you’re informing me that you are planning to act on your own? Without any legal standing?"

"I’m ‘dead’, remember? You told me yourself I’d be wiser to ‘stay dead’. Well, death sure does come with many advantages."

"I cannot allow this..."

"I don’t recall asking for permission..."

"Severus, this is wildly irresponsible"

"Not anymore than letting the Lestranges escape from under your nose to go seek support for their demented plans in countries you can’t even negotiate with."

"So you’re asking me to look the other way while you take matters into your own hands?"

"I’m not doing anything for the time being. If I know my former associates they’ll need time to recuperate. A lot of time. Meanwhile I’ll do my best to gather information. Is information that you want, right?"

"And how can I trust that you will report back to me?"

"You can’t. I don’t report to you, or to anybody for that matter. You have to trust me on the basis that, out of all of us involved, I’m the only know who knows what we’re really dealing with and I have as many interest on the matter as you do. Is that or nothing..."

..."

"They tricked you into this too, didn’t they?"

"Excuse me?" Evelyn was caught off guard by the casual comment and turned to Benjamin who was smiling at her, seemingly amused by something she didn’t quite understand yet

"Angela and Matthew. They tricked you into coming here and meeting me. It’s ok, they did it to me too."

"Oh, I don’t know what you’re talking about, I..."
"It’s ok, you don’t have to be nice. It was quite the naughty trick they did. I didn’t know you were coming, to be honest. I just thought we were celebrating that Matthew was back home, then when I got here he told me they had this nice girl to introduce me to...

"Angela did the exact same thing to me..."Evelyn let out a soft laugh, feeling suddenly relieved.

"The bastards."Benjamin laughed heartily "I’m so sorry, about this."

"It’s fine, you didn’t know. I guess some people just can’t leave their single friends well enough alone..."

"Well, they meant well."

"Don’t get me wrong, it was lovely meeting you but...I’m just not looking..."

"That makes two of us."

"Angela told me about you and your girlfriend" she told him, almost apologetically

"Well, Matthew told me about you and your ex, too...And that creepy teacher at school..."

"Oh, I’m gonna kill her!"

"Eh, don’t. That bloke’s antics are not exactly a secret..."

"Yeah, Angela told me Matthew had to deal with him once...Well, since they’ve been doing their fair share of gossip, I think there’s no harm in asking. Do you know what exactly he did to Mitchel?"

"The school’s Don Juan?...Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"All Matthew had to do was show up at the school wearing his fatigue and the big bad wolf suddenly turned into a choirboy."

"Oh, dear..." Evelyn let out before both started laughing uncontrollably.

"You should let me know if you need a similar favor, I’d love to see that face on him again!"

"If he ever crosses the line, I’ll make sure to ask, thank you for offering. Uh...Ben?"

"Yes?"

"Would you mind if I left a little earlier? Is not that I’m not having fun, but, I really don’t want to go back home with Angela and I should get a cab back home."

"I’ll take you."

"You don’t have to..."

"It’s ok, really. Besides, if I take you home I can get Angela and Matthew off my hair for a while."

"Well, in that case...

...

Severus left the restaurant and decided to walk back home. At this time of the night apparating would
pose no issue, as there were plenty deserted streets to choose from for a speedy sent-off, but he could use some cool nightly breeze, a smoke and a moment to think.

The plans he had laid out with Dumbledore, years before, didn´t turn out to work out as well as he´d like them to. Sure, the Dark Lord was gone and Potter was alive, but what now? Many a time he had warned Dumbledore that defeating Voldemort was only the beginning of something bigger. But he seemed confident that those brats could continue his legacy. Sodding Potter couldn´t even wipe his own arse without a whole safety net of people to watch his back, to imagine that he or any of those kids would be able to deal with the repercussions of what would came after the Dark Lord´s fall was unthinkable.

But he hadn´t worried about that.

Severus was supposed to have died. It was part of the plan. Voldemort should think he was the master of the Elder wand and kill him in order to acquire complete power over it. Taking Draco out of the plot to kill Dumbledore, and having Severus kill him instead, with his own permission, would assure not only the protection of Draco´s soul, sanity and criminal file, but it would also ensure that Voldemort would never be the true master of the Elder wand.

Severus had to die, and he had prepared himself for it. Whatever came after that, it was no longer his concern. But alas, even in Dumbledore´s seemingly flawless plan, some loose ends were unavoidable. Severus´accidental survival was one of them. Now, what a man who dutifully accepted death should do once he finds himself regrettably alive?

He had told himself many times that his mission was complete. He had nothing else to do with the aftermath of the war, whatever it was. He had done his part. It was over for him.

But the Lestranges´flight had filled him with a vague sense of trepidation he couldn´t quite explain. He wasn´t worried for his own safety...he had long given up such concerns. Living or dying made little difference now. And even if it did, he was reasonably protected by the fact that most people thought him dead. It wasn´t a general concern for the well-being of wizard and muggle-folk either. Severus had no illusions about the fact that bigotry, wars, death and violence were just a part of the collective experience of humankind and it would remain so till the end of our days upon Earth. He could do nothing to change that, neither did he particularly want to.

That why had he left the comfort of his self-inflicted exile to get himself into this?

..."Here we are." Benjamin parked his car behind Evelyn´s Volvo.

"Thank you. Again, I´m terribly sorry for everything..."

"Nothing to be sorry about. It turned out to be a rather enjoyable night after all."

"And so it did. Would you like to come in for a cup of coffee?"

"Oh, well, why not?"

Benjamin got out of the car and walked around it to open the door for her. A cool drizzle was falling, forming a ghost-like mist around the faint street lights. It wasn´t heavy enough to require an umbrella, but bothersome nonetheless. Evelyn reached for her keys into her purse in a hurry. She didn´t much like being out of the house at that time, specially after what had happened the night before. As much as she knew that nothing had really happened, she couldn´t ignore the fact that Spinner´s End was isolated, too close to the woods, dimly-lit and surrounded by the wasteland of former industrial town.
At that time of the night the whole area was so deserted all they could hear was the murmur of the rain and their own steps on the pavement.

"This is a bit isolated, don’t you think? For a woman living alone."

"A bit..." she continued to look for her keys, they must have had slipped to the bottom of the purse ".I haven’t had any problems so far, though..."

"I see. But still you should be careful...You don’t even seem to have any neighbours"

"Oh, I have one. Severus, he lives next door. Very kind man, a bit eccentric, but completely trustworthy. Found it!" she brandished the keys victoriously and moved to open the door.

"I’m glad to hear that..." he answered distractedly, looking away from her. "...Is that him?"

"Who?" she followed Ben’s gaze and saw a tall, dark figure coming down the street, dressed in a dark suit of a somewhat outdated cut that made his shoulders look even broader and more angled, hands inside his pockets, approaching at a swift pace. "Oh, yes. Speaking of the devil."

... Severus had seen the car pass by, but didn’t give it much thought at first. It only caught his attention once it made a turn into Spinner’s End. That wasn’t the green car that had picked Ms. Black up earlier that night...this one was dark blue trunk. He tossed his cigarette and rushed his step slightly, following from a safe distance as car slowed down and stopped right behind Ms. Black’s red Volvo.

After a few minutes he saw a man come out of it. A tall, athletic man, with very short dark hair, wearing a neat suit and leather shoes. He went around the car and opened the door at the passenger’s side. Evelyn Black stepped out, smiling and talking affably to the man, her red trench coat revealing the form-fitting turquoise wrap dress she wore underneath. The couple continued to talk as they made their way to her door and she looked for something inside her purse. Probably her house keys.

Severus would do better to just let them get in, and not making his presence known. But for some reason he had to keep walking. He shoved his hands into his pockets and moved forward quietly, his eyes focused on the cheery duo, scrutinizing their every action, trying to read the situation. He didn’t remember Ms. Black mentioning any man in her life, currently...But she wouldn’t have any reason to talk about such things to him, of course; even though she seemed to have no qualms about talking to him about every other aspect of her life. Still, it came as a surprise to see her coming back home at night accompanied... And very much enjoying the company, apparently.

Well, maybe if she got herself a boyfriend she’d leave him alone for a while. As much as Severus had come to enjoy her company, it probably wasn’t wise to let her get too close. He couldn’t really afford friendships right now... But this particular specimens didn’t look all too well suited for her.

"Severus!" she called out as they walked up to him. Only now did he notice he had come too close. Great, he had to engage in conversation. Should have known when to walk away. "Ben, this is my neighbour I was telling you about. Severus, this is Benjamin."

"Nice to meet you." ‘Benjamin’ offered his hand, smiling a bit too much for Severus tastes.

The wizard looked down at the man, his dark eyes measuring him from head to toe. He was more or less the same height as Severus, a couple inches give or take, but of a rather more imposing physique, noticeable even under that black well-tailored suit. It was rather obvious he was used to getting plenty of muscle building exercise. Severus soon saw the reason why: around his neck there were the two metallic circular dog-tags characteristic of the British army. A soldier... explained his
over-confident alpha-male gait. In fact, the poor man seemed to be trying a bit too hard...His five o’clock shadow was well-groomed, his hair, starting to grow out of the military buzz-cut, was neatly styled, his dark suit and light blue shirt scrupulously ironed, the absence of a tie seemed almost calculated in order to show off the dog-tags, and he had overpowering scent of cologne all over him, one of those over complicated muggle fragrances, combining green and citric notes.

A sign reading "I’m a manly army man, shag me!" hanging from his neck might have been a tad subtler.

Severus didn’t make it a habit of using legilimency on muggles, out of fairness more than anything, but also because muggles rarely thought of anything worth the trouble of getting inside their heads. But he couldn’t help himself... Besides, soldiers were far too-simple minded...as all people who made a living out of blindly following orders... Getting inside their heads was so easy, it required close to no effort, one could do it almost by accident.

As he imagined...a mundane little existence...a woman gone, some heart-break and tears...even more mundane military tasks and gadgets...No memories of Evelyn Black from before tonight...so, they had just met...Didn’t exactly go sterlarly either...Severus smirked and finally shook his hand, feeling sufficiently satisfied that Benjamin was indeed as uninteresting as innocuous as he looked.

"Likewise." he let out dryly. Was dear Benjamin feeling suddenly uncomfortable? Hopefully it wasn’t anything he said.

"Well, Evelyn...I should get going..."

"Oh, already?"

"Yeah, it’s getting late...I’ll come back for coffee some other day. Good night." He gave her a of polite and rather uneasy peck on each cheek, and nodded awkwardly to Severus before getting into his car and driving away.

"I hope I didn’t scare him" Severus told her, mildly amused

"No, I don’t think you did. " she smiled

"I suppose I should get going too..."

"Oh, Severus...I’ve been meaning to talk to you for a while now..."

"About?"

"Advise. You know, teacher to teacher...Would you mind coming in for a second?"

... 

Evelyn put her trench-coat on a hanger by the door and took off her constricting high heels, neatly placing them next to the couch, possibly to remind herself to put them away later. Severus looked away for a second in spite of himself. It was something rather silly, come to think of it, but, even though she might have been wearing a form-fitting and somewhat low-cut dress, seeing her take off her shoes was the thing that made him most uncomfortable. It was somewhat excusable of him to briefly glance at her cleavage or take note of how that dress hug her hips and arse...He was a man after all, certain things were just instinct, it couldn’t be helped...Specially if she decided on her own volition to walk around dressed to impress. But for some reason the fact that she felt so at ease walking around barefoot in front of him made him feel like a voyeur. Maybe it was the familiarity of the act, or simply the fact that she always made a point to wear such fanciful footwear everywhere
that seeing her without them was almost as intimate as seeing her undressed.

"I´ll make some coffee, I hope you don´t mind. I´ve gone past my share of alcohol for a week night" she asked, going into the kitchen

"It´s quite all right. I´m recovering from a rather sub-par Pinot Grigio myself" Shaklebolt might be an expert in all things muggle, but wines were certainly not his forté, he tought to himself, following her into the kitchen and sitting by the table.

"Sub-par Pinot Grigio? Where was this sin committed?"

"Aumbry St. Foret´s" He sighed, loosing up his tie and trying not to stare at her too hard. There was something rather fascinating about a woman doing something as common as preparing a cup of coffee while dressed up in a cocktail dress, even if her hairdo was completely undone by the drizzle. Not that it didn´t suit her.

"I heard they´re very good, though"

"They are...My 'date' is the one that can´t be trusted with wines"

"Your...date?" her tone was stunned.

"Yes. A 6-foot tall, black man who´s far too fashion forward to blend in with normal people and knows nothing about good alcohol" he smirked.

"Oh...?" she seemed even more confused. Severus couldn´t help but laugh.

"A potential business associate." he let out amidst his own snickering

"Oh, I see!" he mouth hung open for a split second before she joined his fit of sudden hilarity, laughing and lightly shaking her head.

"I had you fooled for a second, didn´t I?"

"Yes, you did! You´re just bad sometimes, Severus."

"I´m hardly being bad at all" If I was I´d have hexed the little tin-soldier you brought home just for amusement, he thought to himself. "Your night seems to have been much more pleasing than mine"

"Well, lovely man as he is, my date has about as much romantic prospects with me as yours has with you."

"Ouch...Poor Ben."

"Don´t be mean, Severus."

"That´s the one thing I can´t do for you, I´m afraid"

"Funny." she snickered "So this possible business associate..."

"Consulting work..."

"Interesting...what about?"

"Poisonous...things"
"So that’s why you were working on poisons the other day..." she started to pour the coffee and sat across from him by the table.

"Yes, exactly. But you said you wanted to talk to me about something..."

"Yes..." she looked down at her coffee, all gaiety disappearing from her features "It’s a bout James..."

"Your problematic student..."

"Remember I told you that...I suspected he had some issues at home?"

"I do...I’ll assume your suspicions were confirmed?"

"Unfortunately. And it’s worse than I imagined. It seems his father is a heavy drinker, and he’s emotionally and physically abusive towards James’ mother..."

"Only her?"

"Now yes, but I believe James has suffered some physical abuse in the past...Now it seems to be mostly emotional..."

"Daddy dearest wasn’t so brave once Jr. grew big enough to return the blows, I see..."

"Yes, that’s how it went. And now Meredith is being singled out for the brunt of the physical abuse. She systematically refuses to get help, even when it’s offered to her. I’ve been wrecking my brains trying to find a way to help them, but I can’t..."

"That’s where you’re going the wrong way about this..."

"Where?"

"Them...You’re thinking of ways to help ‘them’. But there is no ‘them’. The boy’s mother made it very clear she doesn’t want to be helped."

"Severus, it’s surely more complicated than this...Abuse victims develop a..."

"...crippling inferiority complex, fostered by the abuser’s tactics of breaking their psyche and isolating them emotionally, socially and economically so they don’t reach out for help thus enabling them to continue to abuse and to keep the abuse escalating till it usually reaches a tragic climax. I know how that goes, Ms. Black. But the ugly truth is, nobody can help this woman but herself. She’s an adult, and until she wants to be saved, she’s beyond salvation. Her son is a different story, though..."

"We’ve been doing what we can. James is taking part in many different after school activities, he’s spending more time away from home and off the street, and his grades are getting much better. He has a good support net too, his best friend’s family has really done everything within their power to help him cope with his problems, so I guess we have a good basis to work with him."

"How old is the boy?"

"I think he’ll be 17 next November...why?"

"Well, that gives you a year."

"A year for what?"
"A year until he’s legally an adult and able to move out of the house."

"And what would he do with himself then?"

"You’re his teacher...Help him find out...Prepare him for it."

"I think see what you mean..."

"You’re a smart woman, Ms. Black. I’m sure you’ll find some resolution to this."

"As a matter of fact...You may have given me an idea."

"Did I? Good. May I ask what idea is this?"

"Give me just a week. I still have a party to take of..."

...

October 31st

Spinner’s End 12

Morning

It was a good thing that among all the elegant pieces of furniture she had inherited with her grandfather’s house, Evelyn had also gotten a full length mirror. It made the task of getting dressed much easier, and when it came to putting together a costume it was surely a great idea to know exactly how all the components looked. Specially in a party for children and teenagers. Choosing an appropriated costume was key.

She twirled in front of the mirror, feeling quite satisfied with what she saw. It looked rather good for something put together with things she had laying about. High-heeled black boots, thick and warm black leggings, a black long sleeved top, a belt, black gloves, red lipstick and a couple of accessories from a random costume store in Oldham and voilà.

Ready to go.

But before...maybe she should make one last attempt...

After checking her make-up and hair one more time, she climbed down the stairs and went into the kitchen. The many different kinds of Halloween food she had spent most of the night preparing were all neatly accommodated in tinfoil and Tupperware containers. The party decorations and supplies were already in the trunk of her car, so that left space in the back-seat for the food, plastic cups and paper plates.

Once she had everything accommodated for the short trip to Our Lady of Cokeworth church, Evelyn quickly walked over next door. She knew Severus didn’t much care for parties or social events, and was particularly uninterested in any that involved costumes and children, as he had made abundantly clear. But it just seemed like an act of courtesy to ask one last time. It was unlikely that he had changed his mind, but it would be nice to tell him his presence would be missed.

It took him quite a while to answer the door...It seemed to take him evenlonger to make out who the woman in costume standing at his door was.

"Ms. Black?...Pray tell, why do you have cat ears on?"
Part 5 - Halloween - Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Severus gets a bit too close for his own comfort. Featuring a trip down nostalgia lane, a Halloween party and a visit to the roof of the abandoned mill.

"Ms. Black?...Pray tell, why do you have cat ears on?"

"It’s a costume, Severus...You see, there’s this very interesting cultural phenomenon mostly in the Western hemisphere and in English speaking countries called Halloween, during which people dress in costumes and go around giving or receiving sweets and just generally having fun...It happens to be today"

"Very funny...I know what and when Halloween is, thank you very much." He knew very well indeed. It was the only date of the year he could never forget, no matter how much he tried to. "Now you came here for a reason or you’re simply planning on lecturing me on the origins and history of Halloween next?"

"Who’s trying to be funny now? Well, yes, I did came here for a reason..."

"And that would be..."

"May I come in for a second? It’s a bit chilly outside"

"Will you ever take ‘no’ for an answer?" he sighed

"You seem to be starting to get used to me." she smiled, a hint of mischief on her crimson painted lips. Severus couldn’t help but stare at her face for a split second before snapping out of it. He had seen her wearing various styles of make-up, but never something quite as heavy as this...the deep red lipstick, her golden brown eyes framed by black mascara and eye-liner that enhanced their almond shape and made their colour seem lighter and more vivid than usual, their eagle-like sharpness more haunting than he remembered it to be. It was almost disturbing.

"Do come in, Ms. Black...but can you please take off those cat ears? They’re very distracting..."

"Sorry, but I can´t...I’ll mess up my hair if I do. I can remove the tail if it helps any..."

"You have a tail?" he rolled his eyes

"Actually no. Catwoman doesn´t have a tail, Severus. I just thought it would be funny to see your face if I said I had one..." she laughed, probably fighting the urge to yell "Got you!" as she passed him by and got inside. Severus had to restrain himself from actually looking down and checking whether she did have a tail or not. This was her idea of a costume for a children’s party? Oh, well... it was conservative enough for children, wasn’t it? It was just black pants and a black blouse... For sure the teenage boys present would beg to differ...but then again...teenage boys will lose their composure on account of anything. He closed the door and turned back to her, now noticing she had a package in her hands.

"I’m going to the church now. The party starts in about two hours and we have to put up all the
decorations and get everything ready for the children."

"Good luck with that."

"I know what you´re going to say, but just for the sake of my peace of mind I came here to ask one last time...Are you sure you don´t want to come?"

"Yes. Trust me, Ms. Black, you need not worry about your peace of mind...the last place on Earth I want to be today is at a party."

"I guess there´s no point in insisting then...But I´ll have you know Fr. Thomas is going to be disappointed"

"Don´t bring the good old priest into this, Ms. Black" he gave her an oddly melancholic smirk "Blackmail doesn´t look good on you, even if you´re dressed as a comic book villain"

"Is not blackmail." Her tone was so soft as to sound sad "Fr. Thomas did ask about you. He said you came to each and every one of his Halloween parties when you were a young lad, and he´d love to have you back...You know, for old times sake..."

"I´m afraid I´ve grown out of a lot of the things Fr. Thomas remembers me for"...maybe not all of them, he thought sombrely to himself.

"If that´s the case...I´ll tell him I tried. Here, this is for you." she handed him the package. It was wrapped in a tea towel, but he could feel a plastic container inside the bundle

"What is this?"

"Barmbrack. I´ve made two, one for Fr. Thomas and this one for you. I don´t think the children will respond well to Halloween fruit cake."

"Just cover it with enough sugar and you could feed them dirt...They wouldn´t know any better. Anyhow... thank you...This is very thoughtful of you."

"You´re welcome...Well, I should get going..." she moved to the door, but stopped on her tracks suddenly, then reached into her back pocket, producing a piece of paper and handing it to him "...here...an invitation, in case you change your mind...Party will be over at 5pm or so..."

...Evelyn´s car entered the church´s parking lot and she pulled over at the small area reserved for the cars of those who would be helping at the party. The rest of the space had been emptied so the stands with games and cooking tools could be put up. The little wooden structures with tent-like striped canvas covering made the parking lot look like a sort of miniature carnival. It was early but she could already see Fr. Thomas, or at least it looked like him in that Phantom of the Opera costume, and Angela, in a distinctive Cindy Lauper get-up´, walking around the stands, putting up signs. Matthew and Benjamin, wearing matching pirate costumes were carrying some boxes around, helped by a couple other men wearing brightly coloured costumes she couldn´t quite identify. Probably the friends they had brough to help put up the stands.

Before she could get out of the car, a tall and thin man in a blue jumpsuit and half mask that covered the bottom half of his face seemed to appear out of nowhere, walked over to the red volvo and leaned over at her window.

"Hello, Clarice" he rasped, badly imitating an american accent, while thin wisps of straw colored
escaped his slicked back hair.

"Dr. Hannibal Lecter, uh?" She smiled, getting out of the car "You look great, James"

"Thank you, Ms. Black" he removed the mask and gave her an awkward smile "I just borrowed some old overalls from one of my father´s mates and got the mask at a store. Just wait till you see Tancey, now that´s a costume."

"Oh really? What costume is that?"

"Blade. You know, the vampire hunter. But she made a girl version. She´s got a thing for Wesley Snipes, I think"

"Oh, wow! I can´t wait to see how she does in the Costume contest, then!"

"I think she takes Halloween a little to seriously"

"No such a thing as taking Halloween too seriously, my dear boy. But, I see the stands are all up already."

"Yeah, Ms. Holt´s fiancée and some friends of his came early to put them up. One of them has been asking about you...Ben something..."

"Ben and Matthew are here? That´s grand, we´re going to need some muscle for setting up those stands and the speakers. Speaking of which, has Mitchell arrived?"

"Mitch?" James chortled "You really thought he´d be here early, ?"

"Hoped more-so than anything..." she rolled her eyes "Oh, well, we´ll see to that later, for now can you help me get these boxes and everything else from the car?"

..."There he is..." Evelyn overheard Angela say, flatly. She turned around and saw Mitchell, dressed in a Capitan Britain costume so form fitting it made him look more like a speed skater than anything, leisurely making his way towards them carrying a cardboard box, followed by another man also carrying a box and dressed as, she assumed, Axl Rose. At least she hoped that was a costume.

Evelyn and Angela had just spent the last hour getting everything ready in the food stands: arranging all of the muffins, cakes and sweets Evelyn and the students mothers had baked, stacking all the paper plates, plastic cups and forks, organizing the multitude of store bought sweets, chocolates and confectioneries and filling the fridge they had borrowed from a local pub with ice, water bottles and fizzy drinks. Matthew, Benjamin and their friends were loading and unloading boxes full of toys and setting up the game stands with the help of the students, while the other teachers and Fr. Thomas finished with the decorations, signs and the ballot boxes, papers and pens for the costume contest. And now Mitch arrived. Evelyn rubbed her temple, pretty aggravated by now, then dropped what she was doing and marched over to where he was standing, apparently at a loss as to where he should begin helping

"About time."

"I´m sorry, Evelyn, I..."

"Let me guess, you were stuck in traffic...on a Saturday morning, in Cokeworth. Well, that´s simply unfortunate, isn´t it? The people will start to arrive in less than an hour and we don´t have speakers or
a microphone. You have ONE job, so get to it, will you? And do make it fast and mind the electricity, your costume looks awfully flammable, and I don´t want any traumatised children."

Mitchell opened his mouth to say something but she was gone before he could find the words.

...

He had lost track of how long he had been sitting on his armchair, staring at the photos on the mantle, listening to the monotonous ticking of the clock. As if, just by staring long enough they could somehow come to life...Foolish notion of course, but that didn´t stop Severus from continuing to stare...

What else could he do?

Over the years Halloween had, thankfully, become a bit less unbearable...The festivities in Hogwarts provided him with enough distractions in the form of out of control brats, stuffing their faces with sugary treats until they here even more hyperactive than usual.. It didn´t make things any easier by the end of the day, however...When the eating, drinking and games were all over and the students were sent back to their dormitories, he still had to go back to his own chambers and face a multitude of memories that refused to give him a moment of peace. At first the mere thought of Halloween festivities made him sick to his stomach...watching children celebrate, play and laugh on the date of Lily´s death felt somewhat obscene...But then he made his peace with the fact that this pain was his and his alone...

He learned to keep it inside.

After all, he had run out of tears to cry and curses to throw at God long ago. There was just so much a man could do with a 17 year old pain that won´t go away...What was once an open, bleeding gash, clawing into his flesh, digging it his heart, was now a dull ache that refused to leave him, chewing into his bones like age and disease chew at a dying old man. So, like a dying old man, he kept quiet. Back in Hogwarts he´d retreat into his room as soon as the festivities were over. Sleeping potions helped...It´s what the sick do, isn´t it? They sleep to make the pain and discomfort go away momentarily...After his release from the hospital, Severus had indulged on sleeping potions and pain-killer potions more than he would like to have...But when the nightmares started to become too frequent and vivid to allow for any rest he had decided to trade sleep for a numbing alertness.. He´d work on potions, read, study...anything that could distract his mind.

Ms. Black had been a welcome distraction in many ways. Going to her house to have some tea and talk about books and authors was a good way to help time pass...Getting small snippets of information about her family bordered on fascinating. The story of how her grandfather had adapted to Ireland was particularly compelling, like a pleasant little novel... specially with his knowing of things Evelyn Black herself ignored. It was almost a month since she had arrived and barged uninvited into his life, and those few weeks had proved entertaining. It was almost a relief to pretend he was something he wasn´t...As far as Evelyn Black was concerned he was a retired chemistry teacher, a regular, albeit moody man...Normal, mundane even...Just an acquaintance she enjoyed spending time with...For reasons he´d never really understand

But today that wouldn´t do...Not today of all days. Today Evelyn Black couldn´t distract him from who he really was...Not today...

Severus leaned back, feeling his back ache slightly from sitting on the same position for so long, and looked down at the coffee table. The brightly coloured piece of paper Ms. Black had given him was still abandoned there where he had left as soon as he had seen her off.
If only she knew...

He didn’t feel all too well at ease brushing her invitation off without a proper reason. She had, in fact, been nothing but kind to him, and as much as he could be a surly bastard, Severus had learned the hard way not to be ungrateful to those who were kind to him. But there were certain things that were better left alone. It was enough having those photos of Lily on his mantel...he didn’t have to go over to Fr. Thomas Halloween party...For what purpose? To stir old memories that crept into his every dream and nightmare more often than he could handle?

"Fr. Thomas did ask about you." She had said "He said you came to each and every one of his Halloween parties when you were little, and he´d love to have you back...You know, for old times sake...”

For old times sake...Severus wondered if fr. Thomas remembered Lily, if he knew what had become of her... He spent a lot of time at Spinner’s End with the needy...The Evans family was anything but. But when it came the time to hand out the invitations for the Halloween party, Severus would always get two. He would then rush to find Lily and give her one, so they could go together. They’d spend the whole day there, playing games and eating buckets of treats that would surely rot their teeth off if they indulged too often on them...Not that Severus had the option to indulge on anything as even basic food items were scare at the Snape household. Often times he’d leave Fr. Thomas party feeling nauseous from eating too much...It was a once a year opportunity, after all. But still, he’d put on his best face and follow Lily to the Cine Victoria, a cinema a few blocks away from the church. They´d have special screenings on Halloween...Horror classics with Lon Chaney and Vincent Price, among others. The screenings went on all night till the next morning. They had never stayed the entire night of course. But they had vowed that once they were old enough to spend all night out without requiring parental permission, they’d watch Cine Victoria’s classic horror Halloween festival till the end.

They never did.

He looked down at the invitation again. Ms. Black had been going on and on about all the wonderful things they were doing...the games, the costume contests with prizes, the food and music...It all sounded much like a festival, rather than the small little neighbourhood party he remembered from his youth. Lily would have liked to see that party getting bigger and welcoming more children...She delighted in seeing others happy...Much like Evelyn Black herself...The two of them would probably have gotten along well... He could feel a smile on his lips that almost hurt a bit...Lily would have loved being at that party. It had always been one of her favourite things... She loved Halloween...Bit of a cruel irony, wasn’t it?

Ms. Black said the party would be over at 5pm...He looked up at the clock on the mantel.

3:30pm.

...

The speakers had been blasting catchy pop-songs for hours now, and for hours children had been running about giving no sign of wanting to slow down. There were long lines of parents and children of all ages waiting to play games or buy snacks, teenagers walked about in groups, talking loudly, comparing costumes, being silly and having fun, while smaller children played as if they were in the backyard of their own homes.

The party was an undeniable success.

Evelyn was overwhelmed. Her feet were killing her from walking up and down, stopping at every
stand to make sure everything was running smoothly, fixing little issues here and there; in spite of the autumn chill a very thin layer of perspiration covered her forehead, and she could feel her throat starting to go a bit sore from talking too much and, and occasionally resorting to yelling so she could be heard over the music. Still, she was beside herself with joy. They had successfully welcomed over a hundred children and teenagers, not counting the parents, and everything was running smoothly. Food and toys were flying off the shelves, teachers, students and volunteers were working non stop to make sure all the beverages snacks and sweets were being handed out orderly, and the games were played non-stop, fishing, tossing, bowling and many others. Evelyn herself had spent the past hour working at one of the game stands, where they had they had improvised a little bowling game for the youngest children using plastic bottles filled with aniline-coloured water.

Of course, tending to children as young as two while they played a game that involved tossing a ball at a number of plastic bottles lined up on the floor, while wearing high-heeled boots was probably not the wisest idea at least as far as her calves and lower back were concerned. She let out a sigh of relief at the welcome sight of Jocelyn, Cokeworth Academy´s art teacher, who had told her she’d take over after the hour to give Evelyn some time to rest and get something to eat. Jocelyn had brought her two year old daughter, Sadie, who had been happily playing with her mother and Angela at the (relatively quieter) fishing stand, waiting for her father to arrive and take care of her so her mother could replace Evelyn at the bowling game. But much to Evelyn´s surprise, Jocelyn was coming over with a very fussy Sadie in her arms.

"Lyn, I´m so sorry. It seems my husband is running a bit late." Jocelyn apologized while trying to contain Sadie, who was on the verge of throwing a tantrum, violently trying to wriggle out of her mother´s arms, having already tossed her paper witch hat on the ground.

"Oh...that´s quite all right, I can continue for a while more"

"Oh, thank you, Lyn. I´m so sorry. I´d leave her with Angie for a while, but she´s so cranky..."

"She must be overwhelmed by the noise and the crowd...Here, let me try..." Evelyn took the irritated toddler in her arms and reached for a headband with tulle flowers that was amongst the game prizes and offered it to her. Sadie stopped struggling for a second to look hard at the colourful, fabric flowers. "You like them, Sadie? You like the pretty flowers, love?"

"Oh, well...that was easy."Jocelyn smiled, seeing her daughter was considerably calmer now "You´re good with babies."

"I have two nieces. Both of them like fashionable accessories as well."

"I´ve got an idea...If it doesn´t bother you too much, I can take over the stand if you watch her for a little while. My husband will be here in about half an hour, I promise."

"You´re sure?" Evelyn asked, but seeing the line grow and feeling her back ache she was most inclined to accept.

"Yes, positive. Go, have something to eat, give your legs some rest. I don´t think Sadie will give you too much trouble."

"Well..." Evelyn turned to Sadie and arranged the headband on her mass of curly brown hair, getting a little giggle for reward "Off we go, then, little Miss Sadie"

A sandwich, a glass of orange juice, a table located further away from the turmoil of the party and a
few paper toys was all that took to calm Sadie down. Evelyn finished her own sandwich looking on as Sadie nibbled on hers, her free hand playing with a pile of animal cut outs and origamis, as her little feet swung under the table.

"Lyn! Tiguh!" she blurted out with a full mouth, showing Evelyn a cut out of a tiger.

"Yes, that´s a tiger. And this one?"

"Doggie!" more bread crumbs fell on her pink tulle skirt. Evelyn laughed and wiped her mouth with a paper napkin.

"Very good! Your daddy has a doggie, right?"

"YES! A big doggie! It´s a girl doggie."

"What´s her name?"

"Bwondy"

"Blondie? Blondie is a very cute name."

"Lyn! Kitty!" She pointed at Evelyn´s ears

"Yes, you´re right." Evelyn mewled softly, giving Sadie another fit of giggles "You know, I also have a kitty at home"

"Is a girl kitty?"

"No, it´s a boy kitty. I call him Ciáran."

"Kweaawon?"

"Something like that, yes."Evelyn smiled as Sadie returned to the paper figures. She played with them for a while, before apparently becoming bored and letting her eyes wonder around. She looked on to the tall trees surrounding the church, the branches peering from above the parking lot´s walls, sitting perfectly still for a while, her half eaten sandwich forgotten in her little hand. The wind was blowing the leaves, making a rustling noise and creating moving patterns of gold, crimson and orange that seemed to mesmerize the toddler. Suddenly she turned back to Evelyn and blurted out, her big dark eyes wide and amazed:

"Birdie!"

"Oh, you saw a birdie? Where?"

"There!" she pointed to one of the trees outside "Black birdie!"

She turned back to the pictures scattered on the table and picked one of them up. A raven they had photocopied from an illustrated edition of Edgar Allan Poe´s complete works to use on the decorations. She looked at it and showed it to Evelyn.

"Black birdie!"

"Oh...a raven?"

"Wayen"
"Ra-ven." Evelyn repeated, amused

"Waven! There!"

Evelyn looked up to the tree. There was no bird there, raven or otherwise. And the tree was close enough to the parking lot that she would have seen it if it were there. Maybe it was gone.

"Lyn! There! We go there!" Sadie started to fuss about in her chair, dropping her sandwich on the paper plate, and pulling on Evelyn´s sleeve.

"You want to go see the raven?"

"Yes, we go!"

"But it´s gone, love."

"No!" She was getting restless and Evelyn could smell another tantrum.

"Ok, ok...We´ll go see the birdie. But just for a little while, then we come back and clean up this mess. Your daddy will be here soon." It wouldn´t hurt to humour her just a little. God forbid Evelyn discouraged the interests of a future biologist or bird watcher. Evelyn herself was a bit curious. Her father often took her bird watching as a child, and she could completely understand the fascination those winged creatures could wield, so why not give little Sadie her first bird watching experience? She stretched out her arms and Sadie awkwardly jumped on them, then off they went.

Evelyn made her way to the entrance of the parking lot, as Sadie happily babbled about birds and trees, wiggling and twisting about in her arms, excited at the prospect of seeing the "black birdie" up close. Once outside she quickly located the tree Sadie had pointed out, a tall birch crowned in gold and ruby leaves.

The wind started blowing again, momentarily distracting Evelyn as she removed a few strands of hair from her face. Once she resumed her path towards the birch, a lean and dark male silhouette appeared materialize out of thin air among the trees and into her field of vision. At first all she could make out in the midst of the mass of low branches and leaves blown by the wind was a black coat and equally black hair and pants, that made the figure look like an ink blob accidentally dropped on the canvas by a clumsy artist in the middle of painting a warm autumn landscape. But as the wind quieted down and the man slowly walked towards her she could finally make out his features.

"Severus!"
Part 5 - Halloween - Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Severus gets a bit too close for his own comfort. Featuring a trip down nostalgia lane, a Halloween party and a visit to the roof of the abandoned mill.

Severus had seen her even before she had spotted him. But that was still a close call...too close for his taste... He was getting careless... Maybe he shouldn´t have come after all. What was she doing outside the parking lot anyway?! And with a small child to boot. Oh, well, no point turning back now, was it? He walked on.

"Severus, you came! I didn´t think you would!" she beamed.

"I suppose I didn´t have anything better to do..." he told her, hoping to put a dampener to her enthusiasm.. pointless endeavour, he knew, but he´d never be faulted for lack of trying.

"You know what? I´m so happy you´re here I won´t even mind that you´re being rude and sour like that."

"Is the party over?"

"Oh, no, not at all! I just stepped outside for a moment because Sadie wanted to see a raven that flew by." Only then did Severus noticed the brown haired toddler was staring at him as if he was some sort of alien form of life.

"Well, I´m afraid that raven is gone now..." Had the girl seen him in his animagus form? He was rustier than he imagined, then.

"See, Sadie? The black birdie is gone, love" Evelyn was cooing, gently bouncing the baby on her hip. The girl was whining softly, mumbling something about a 'black birdie', Severus assumed she was indignant that she didn´t get the chance to see it. Evelyn continued to try and soothe her"Now, now, don´t be like this. We´ll see birdies some other time, ok?"

"So...you ditched the party for a baby-sitting stint? Or you just kidnapped a random child and I happened to catch you mid-flight?"

"Aren´t we funny today? Sadie´s mother works with me. I´m just watching her for a little while while her mother replaces me in one of the stands. We´re waiting for her dad to pick her up, but she´s getting a little fussy. Hey, Sadie, here, let´s be a polite young lady and say 'hello'"

She held the baby slightly up. The girl kept on staring at him before finally deciding to reach over, throwing her body forward, almost leaping from Ms. Black´s arms into his. Startled, Severus instinctively put his hands under her, but Evelyn was holding her expertly and there was no need for him to help. The woman looked like she had held her fair share of bouncy and fussy infants over the years. One would wonder how she didn´t have some of her own already, enamoured as she obviously was of them.

"You do have a way with youngsters" he told her flatly, as the baby babbled incoherences at him.
"And Sadie seems to have taken a liking to you...So much for trying to act like a bogeyman, uh, Mr. Snape?"

"She´s far too young to know what´s best for her."

"Oooh, such a scary, scowling man" Evelyn laughed with gusto and bounced the child some more, eliciting delighted giggles from her. "You´re not afraid of Mr. bogeyman, are you, Sadie?"

As if responding to the prompt, Sadie once again leaned in towards him, the tiny hand aiming straight for his nose. Evelyn pulled her away just before she could hit the target.

"You´ve been training her to do tricks before an audience?" he smirked, raising a hand towards the girl and allowing her to grab at his fingers, in spite of himself. Inspecting his digits seemed to distract her enough to allow them to talk in peace.

"No, she was just born this smart. I think Sadie is a people´s person" Evelyn smiled at him, a quiet smile full of a kind of warmth that struck him as somewhat different than what he usually saw in her

"Small wonder you two seem to get along so well."

"Shall we go in? Or you just plan to stand out here in the cold while everybody else is having fun?"

"I don´t think I have much of a choice now, do I?"

"No you don´t. And keep up that attitude and I´ll have to put you to work." She smiled, pulling him gently by the arm. He had the feeling she might actually keep that threat, so he better tag along.

... Not even ten minutes had passed and Severus nerves already felt raw. What was he expecting, though? It was a child´s party, after all...Loud music, screaming, manic running and overall havoc were all to be expected. He surely didn´t remember Fr. Thomas´ Halloween parties being that crowded. There had to be some two hundred people there. Was it his memory failling him, or had the festivities actually grown in attendance? He wondered how much of it had been Evelyn Black and her colleagues´doing. As they walked into the parking lot, she had shown him each and everyone of the stands and in all of them there was at least one student of hers or a member of the Cokeworth Academy faculty.

Sure it was a frenzied fandango from hell with all the brats running about like damned demons fleeing out of Tartarus, but he had to concede, Evelyn Black had good leadership and organizational skills. In fact given the number of children, it was no small feat that everything seemed to be running with no incident. Of course, a muggle Halloween party wasn´t Hogwarts, so he couldn´t expect hexes to be flying around...Come to think of it that might have made this party more entertaining to attend.

He didn´t expect he´d able to obtain alcohol in any of the stands, evidently, but maybe something caffeinated was in order. Evelyn had just left him alone for a moment, going to hand Sadie to her father at another stand, so he made his way to the stand where they were selling drinks. As expected, no alcohol, coffee or anything remotely suitable for adult consumption. He´d have to make due with some saccharine and fizzy cola concoction.

It was going to be a long afternoon...

"Severus?!"
He heard a male voice calling his name and turned to see a man in a cheap looking pirate costume.

"It’s Severus, no?" the "pirate" insisted "Don’t you remember me?"

Severus did a double take before he could place the stranger.

"Benjamin, right?"

"Yes! How are you, mate?" He shook Severus hand with that firm, almost forceful handshake military men took pride in. "I didn’t expect to see you here, Evelyn said you wouldn’t make it."

"She did?.." Severus had been under the impression that Evelyn and this little pantomime soldier hadn’t quite hit it off on that first date...At least it was what she had told him...So now he was a regular in her social engagements? He had lost some updates on that, apparently "So...uh...You and..."

"Who? Evelyn and me?" he laughed and got a bottle of water for himself "I should be so lucky...She´s a lovely lass, but I’m afraid I’m not much her type...and vice versa. Besides, I’ve got some...unresolved issues somewhere else..."

"Oh, I see...well, good luck with that."

"I’m afraid I’ll need it."

"One of those complicated love stories, uh?" Severus smirked, recalling the thoughts he had taken a glimpse of in that night when he briefly entered Benjamin’s mind, back when they were first introduced to each other. He couldn’t say he didn’t feel for the poor sod.

"Yeah...we’ve all been there, right?"

"Indeed..."

"I’ve got to be honest with you" Benjamin chuckled, sipping his water "I would be lying if I said I wouldn’t have liked it if things had gone well with Evelyn. I mean just look at her, right? What man worth his salt wouldn’t?"

"I suppose" Severus let out in a low hiss, rolling his eyes. He was no prude, and truth to be told he quite agreed with Benjamin. Evelyn Black was very attractive. He had caught himself many a time looking at her in...less than chaste ways. He was a man, after all...What normal, heterosexual man wouldn’t look when faced with a beautiful woman? But to actually comment on it like that? Now that was simply vulgar. Small wonder she wasn’t interested in the little tin soldier. Evelyn Black was not the kind of woman to lower herself to the standards of some unrefined testosterone fuelled creature whose sole talent consisted on following orders instead of thinking for himself. Severus expected her to have better taste than that.

"But it wouldn’t work, you know. Not only because of this other...eh...engagement of mine, but...Well, lovely lady as she is, I’m afraid Evelyn is a bit too smart for me"

"You like ´em stupid?" Severus sneered.

"Oh, no!" Ben laughed heartily, probably taking Severus dig as a joke "Is just that... Well, you understand, Evelyn is an academic and all that. I’m afraid she’d be terribly bored with me. I guess her type is more the intellectual kind, and I, unfortunately, don’t quite fit the bill."

"More of a man of action than a thinker, I see..." Severus smirked
"I guess you could say that."

Well, it was pretty obvious dear Ben was not a thinker in any sense of the word, Severus thought to himself, but held his tongue.

...

Angela saw Benjamin at the drinks stand, talking to a tall man dressed in black plain clothes and quickly approached

Father Thomas had just gotten the cardboard boxers they´d be using as ballot boxes for the costume contest. They´d have three competitions: one for children, another for teenagers and finally one for the adults, all of them with prized donated by neighbours: toys, books and gift baskets containing Halloween goodies and assorted objects. They had also gotten some cheap plastic trophies, just for laugh of it. Now that the party had been going on for a while, they could finally put the ballot boxes out so people could start voting.

And yet, Lyn was nowhere to be found. The costume contest had been her idea, and they needed her to set it up. Maybe Ben knew where she had gone.

"Ben!" She called out coming from behind him, then turned to the man he was talking to and mumbled an apology for interrupting. Benjamin made way for her to come closer.

"Angie, this is Severus Snape, Severus, Angela Holt..."

"Cokeworth Academy´s English teacher, if I´m not mistaken. Evelyn told me about you"

Angela did a double take and looked at him with wide eyes. So this was the famous Severus Snape Evelyn couldn´t stop talking about? Well, he definitely looked...unique. Tall, solemn-looking, sallow skinned, with sharp features, of which the most evident was a hooked nose that would make the envy of any bust of Julius Caesar. Not quite ugly, but far from being good-looking. In his all black outfit he looked like one of those sullen faced, pale Spanish aristocrats you´d see in XVIIth century portraits on a tour to a museum. Give him a goatee, and armour and a horse he might as well be more imposing and far less pathetic version Don Quijote. Not Angela´s cup of tea, but she could see how Lyn would find him... interesting.

"She told me about you as well. So nice to finally meet you!" she shook the hand he offered her.

"Speaking of the devil, did any of you gentlemen happen to see Evelyn? Fr. Thomas is looking for her to set up the costume contest..."

"No, I only saw Lyn when she arrived this morning..." Benjamin shrugged

"I believe she went to take Sadie back to to her father..." Severus replied quietly, his eyes searching the crowd...Come to think of it, she was taking a bit too long, wasn´t she?

"Oh, did she?" Angela seemed oddly relieved "Well, she should be back soon then..."

"You´re ok, Angie?"

"Oh, yes...It just hit me that...I haven´t seen Mitchell for a while either.."

"Oh, Angela, please..." Benjamin chortled "You´re worried about Mitch?! I think Evelyn can handle him just right... He´s just an overgrown tantrum-prone toddler."

"Excuse me, but I´m afraid I don´t quite follow..." Severus didn´t usually bother with idle gossip,
particularly not with people he had just met, but he didn’t really like the direction that conversation was taking.

"Evelyn didn’t tell you about our local Casanova? He’s got his sights on her...Quite pitiful if you ask me...He actually thinks he has a shot, bless his heart..."

"Ben!" Angela hissed.

"I see..." he tossed the empty can on a litter bin, shifting lightly on his feet. "If you excuse me, I think I’ll walk around for a bit. I’ll make sure to let her know Fr. Thomas needs her help if we happen to meet."

"Thank you" Angela smiled faintly as he walked away. As soon as Severus was out of sight she gave Ben a hard slap to the upper arm.

"What was that for?!" he yelped, rubbing the stricken area

"I should be asking 'what was that for?'! What were you thinking gossiping about Evelyn in front of him?! This is not like you, to do something this rude!"

Ben simply laughed and finished his bottle of water

"What’s so funny? You shouldn’t have done that!"

"Oh, Angie, sweet Angie...You need to learn a thing or two about matchmaking...First lesson: subtlety. Now let’s leave dear Severus to find Evelyn because we both should be going back to work."

... Mitchell...Evelyn had never mentioned this man...Were suitors really lining up like that? Well, not like Severus should be surprised, after all. He suddenly craved a cigarette, but with that many children around it wouldn’t be wise. He kept dodging the running children and their distracted parents until he made it back to the stand where he had last seen Evelyn, chatting with Sadie’s parents. The baby and her father should be gone by now, and the mother was probably working, but she probably knew where to find Ms. Black...So he walked over to the bowling stand to ask her. He didn’t have to go all the way, though, as a somewhat surprising scene unfolding just a couple meters away caught his eye.

She was hard to miss in her all black Catwoman costume, but the man standing next to her stood out far more and for all the wrong reasons. What the bloody hell was he thinking coming to a children’s party in a skin tight Union Jack? Some sort of superhero get-up, Severus thought...or rather hoped. But the unlikely duo of hero and villainess didn’t look like they were about to team up and save the world.

As he approached, Severus noticed the man take off his hood, revealing a blond buzz cut and a face as smug as it was handsome. Severus cursed under his breath...Mitchell...the name should have rung a bell, but what were the odds after all these years? That sleazy expression with the broad nauseatingly saccharine smile were unmistakable...The over the top, garish mannerisms and the vacuous self-importance based on no substance he’d only ever seen on two people and this little piece of muggle garbage had been the very first. Sure the last time he had seen the man was no older than twelve, but certain things don’t change. Or rather they do. That face looked even worthier of a good hex now than it did back when they were young.

Severus pressed his step, observing how Evelyn took a few steps back from Mitchell, her body
language showing all tell-tale signs of discomfort. She didn´t seem intimidated, but rather exasperated, rolling her eyes and pursing her lips in a way Severus could only interpret as disgust. That didn´t stop Mitchell from continuing to intrude into her personal space, leaning in and showing teeth like a hungry predator. The music around them was too loud for Severus to understand what they were saying, but what he could see didn´t testify to a pleasant exchange.

"Ms. Black." he called out not too loudly, just enough to be heard over the music, as he joined them. Evelyn turned to him and he could almost see her let out a sigh of relief. Even more telling, she automatically stepped away from Mitchell coming to Severus´ side in a swift stride. Severus turned his back on Mitchell, standing somewhat between the two "Fr. Thomas is looking for you."

"I was on my way, thank you, Severus...Uh..." she stood awkwardly, tucking an non-existent lock of hair behind her ear, almost getting her glove stuck on an over sized cat shaped silver earring

"Severus, this is..."

"Mitchell." Severus turned around as if only now he had noticed the other man´s presence, greeting him with an acidic half-smile "It´s been a long time"

"Excuse me, do I know you?" Mitchell´s face went from irritated to surprised in a split-second.

"No, I´m afraid you don´t. But I know you. Mitchell Daniels, Cokeworth Academy, class 2b from 1969 to 1970, used to walk around the mill district between Prince Edward Lane and the main street with a posse of some five boys. Your father worked in the mill, too...Lorry driver, if memory serves me right."

Severus memory served him right indeed. Mitchell Daniels, the good for nothing little thug son of one of Severus´father´s co-workers. Tobias Snape operated heavy machinery full-time, while Johnathan Daniels drove one of the the lorries...It was a part time job for him, which allowed for just enough time to work on a second job for the rest of the day. Because of this, their family was slightly more well off than the Snapes, which had spared them the fate of living in Spinner´s End. Predictably that had given the young Mitch an quite a superiority complex. Severus had never bothered with him much, until Lily got involved...Cokeworth was a small town, with only two schools, the only one of any repute being Cokeworth Academy...As chances were it was not surprising that Mitchell and Lily would both wind up studying there.

For the year leading up to Severus and Lily´s entrance in Hogwarts, Mitchell and his little posse of brats had made her life in school a living hell. Severus could still remember her coming back home in tears, telling him or Petunia how the other children found her weird, called her names and played tricks on her... And Mitch Daniels was the ring leader. One time, he had tried to follow her home to continue the torment outside school. It was a very, very stupid idea. All he did was give Severus a prime opportunity to try a new hex. Poor boy never knew what hit him. Alas, Severus couldn´t do much to defend Lily inside the school. Luckily, their acceptance letters arrived and soon enough Mitchell Daniels was a naught but a unpleasant footnote to their Cokeworth days.

After all these years, who would have thought Mitchell would return to school, as a teacher. Granted, a P.E. Teacher, but still...Well, Mitchell Daniels never struck him as the kind of man who´d be going places in life...Not surprising that he´d return to his old turf, the only place in the world where he could feel powerful and find some illusory confirmation of his non-existental merits.

"I´m really sorry, but I can´t place you" Mitchell seemed dumbfounded.

"Severus Snape, but the name surely won´t sound familiar to you. How about Lily Evans? Does that one ring a bell?"
Severus could feel Evelyn standing next to him, tense.

"Lily...Oh" Mitchell laughed uneasily "I remember her. Lovely girl."

"Indeed she was. But pray tell, how did this happen?"

"Pardon?"

"How did you go from school yard bully to teacher? I mean, congratulations, I’m very pleased to see you’re no longer the same little fucktard you were growing, if you pardon my language."

Mitchell’s mouth hung open, and he was visibly trying to collect his thoughts. Severus blissfully ignored him and looked at Evelyn through the corner of his eye. She seemed just as confused as Mitchell, but hardly as dismayed. In fact, Severus could see a hint of delight in her lips, slightly curved in a smirk. He failed to suppress a smile himself. Still, he should put an end to this little scene. She seemed to have read his mind, however, and acted first.

"I should get going. Fr. Thomas is waiting. I’ll leave you gentlemen to catch up" she told nobody in particular and walked away, purposely passing behind Severus and as far as she could from Mitchell.

"I should be going back to work as well.." Mitchell’s voice was barely audible, and his eyes were following Evelyn as she walked away. Even with Severus standing right at his face. The blockhead had no shame.

"I’m not quite done." Severus cleared his throat

"Yes, I believe you are."

"I see you’ve graduated from harassing little girls to harassing grown women. Say, how long till you grow some bollocks and start playing with somebody your size?"

"Well, that’s none of your sodding business, now, is it?" Mitch seemed to have found his lost courage.

Severus snickered.

"As a matter of fact...It is. I’ll simply give you a piece of sound advice, as I’m feeling awfully generous today. You better leave that woman alone."

"Or else?" Mitchell chortled. Severus shook his head and smiled, taking two steps forward so his face was a mere inches away from his.

"I have ways to make you disappear, Daniels" His Mancunian drawl was thick and raucous. "And by disappear I mean the police will need laboratory tests to identify whatever’s left. You’re not the little king of the school yard any longer, Daniels...do keep that in mind"

Evelyn kept looking over her shoulder as she helped Fr. Thomas put up the ballots and ballot boxes for the costume contest voting. She hadn’t seen Severus again since she’d left him with Mitchell. What were the odds that they’d know each other? High, actually, she reminded herself. Cokeworth was no metropolis, after all, and she knew Cokeworth Academy had been the main school there in the 60s to the 80s, until the mill went under. A huge chunk of the adult population, between ages 30 and 40 had attended that school, Mitchell himself had told her he had. Still, Severus had told her he had been home-schooled.
He mentioned a girl...Lily Evans...She had gone to school with Mitchell. Whatever had transpired there, it was surely not a happy story. Evelyn mentally kicked herself. She shouldn’t be making conjectures about things Severus had chosen not to tell her...

"Hello, Severus" Fr. Thomas voice caught her off guard. She looked up and Severus was right there, just a few steps away, talking to the priest. The man had a talent for appearing out of nowhere. "I see you decided to join us."

"Well, yes, I couldn’t turn down an invitation from you" the men shook hands and chatted briefly, but Fr. Thomas soon excused himself to go tend to other tasks. Severus then walked over to her.

"I see you and Mitch had a lot of catching up to do" She smirked, ironic

"You should have told me about him."

"Told you what? Mitch is just a harmless dolt with an overinflated ego. I don’t occupy my time with his antics."

"He won’t be a harmless dolt for long if you give him room to make himself comfortable."

"Don’t worry, Severus. I’m a big girl, I can handle myself"

"Still...Be careful. And do report him to your boss. It will go out of hand soon if you don’t"

"I don’t think that will be necessary...But thank you for the concern." she smiled and handed him one of the ballots "Want to be the first one to cast a vote?"

... 

"The winners, please, come on stage to receive your prizes!" Fr. Thomas bellowed happily on the microphone as the contest winners came up. Evelyn and Angela stood on stage to welcome each one of them, and distribute the plastic trophies and prizes. Toys, books and sweets, all neatly organized in baskets with orange, purple and black ribbons. To nobody’s surprise, Tancey’s very elaborate vampire hunter costume won her first place in the teenager category. Among the children a little girl whose mother had obviously slaved for days, if not weeks, to come up with a cotton-candy pink, rococo princess dress, complete with a white wig and fake jewellery that made her look like a miniature Marie-Antoinette was an easy enough pick for winner. In the adult category the father of one of her students’s costume of Pinhead, from the Hellraiser films, won him a basket of treats for his kids, but also a bottle of Jameson, courtesy of Fr. Thomas, for himself. They had decided not to put the children under five in competition, so instead gave out sweets and small toys as souvenirs for every baby and toddler in attendance.

There was a small bit of havoc as they handed out the prizes to the littlest guests. The ceremony took a little longer than expected, but they finally made it with minor issues. Once the contest was over most parents decided it was time to head home. It was almost 5pm and they still had to go back home and get the children ready for trick or treating. Evelyn wondered how those kids would fit even more sweets in their bellies, as they had cleaned out the food stands at the party, but she knew better than to underestimate the appetite of a child on Halloween. Parents should count their blessings that the next day was a Sunday...dealing with tummy woes on a school day was a fearsome prospect.

Before 5:30pm, most people were gone. Paper plates and plastic cups went to the garbage, speakers and sound systems were disassembled and left over food was accommodated in Tupperware and aluminium containers and put into the fridge in the rectory but Fr. Thomas decided to leave the cleaning up for the next day. Everybody had worked enough for the day, he said, it was now time to
enjoy the rest of Halloween as each one saw fit. The stands and decorations could wait to be taken down, so all volunteers were free to go home with his blessings and effusive thanks.

Evelyn didn’t quite like the idea of leaving the cleaning half-way done, but Fr. Thomas had a point. It was still Halloween and they should enjoy the rest of it. In fact, by the time they were done it was almost 6pm...and she did have that film festival at Cine Victoria. Tancey and James had told her about it. Every year for the past thirty years or so, that theatre had held a special event for Halloween. They’d stay open overnight, from 7pm till sunrise and have back to back screenings of horror films and thrillers all the price of a single admission. It was usually classics, but this year they had decided to go with foreign shorts. Evelyn had gotten tickets for herself and Angela. Matthew and Benjamin had had to pass, as they had a previous engagement with some navy mates. Evelyn knew the only reason Angela had accepted her invitation it was so she wouldn’t go alone, and to be honest, that upset her a bit, no matter how much her friend insisted she’d be more at ease at the a film screening than in yet another Halloween party.

Maybe she could ask Severus to join them? No...that was unlikely...he was probably gone by now. He had disappeared in the crowd as contest winners were announced. Well, she was happy that he had shown up at all. He probably wanted nothing more than go back home to his usual solitude, if she knew him. She sincerely hoped he had had some fun at least...and that Mitchell hadn’t spoiled it for him.

"Lyn!" she heard Angela call out as she walked out of the rectory and back into the parking lot.

"I was about to go looking for you. We should get going if we want to get decent seats, and I still want to change into another pair of shoes, these boots are killing me."

"Yeah, about that..."

"Is something the matter?"

"I’m so sorry, love...Matthew is not feeling too well. I think it was something he ate"

"Oh, no."

"Yeah, is what he gets for sampling the sweets from the party I guess." Angela giggled uneasily "He’ll have to skip the party so...If you give me just a half an hour I’ll drive him home, make sure he’s comfortable and meet you there."

"Of course, I’ll save you a seat, but...You know, if he’s not feeling well, and you want to skip the festival to be home with him, I don’t mind it."

".Wouldn’t you, really? I just...I don’t want to do this to you, and I was really looking forward to the festival, but I don’t know...He doesn’t usually get sick with food, and I’m a bit worried."

"It’s ok, Angela. I don’t mind it at all."

"Thank you, Lyn. And I’m really, really sorry." She fumbled with her purse to get her wallet and produced the ticket Evelyn had gifted her "Here, have my ticket, maybe you can invite someone else to go?"

"Thank you, but...I don’t think I have anybody to invite...Ben is gone, so is Severus and..."

"Oh, I think I saw Severus outside having a fag. By the parking lot, front entrance."
Severus finished his cigarette and put it out on a rusty lamppost outside the parking lot, before tossing it on an overflowing bin. The very last party goers were still making their way out as well as the teenagers who had volunteered to help. Some cars had left too, but surely most of the adult volunteers were still inside, cleaning up the place.

He had lingered for long enough.

Quite frankly he was still at a loss as to why he had come at all.

It wasn´t an unpleasant experience...but it was far from being enjoyable either... Except maybe from witnessing the look of sheer terror in Daniels face...Yes, that had been good...But even so...Sure, Fr. Thomas and his co-conspirators had put on quite the event, but the traditional Halloween party wasn´t as exciting to him now as it had been almost thirty years ago. He never came for the sweets and games...Well, not only for that, at least...He truly came for Lily. But Severus was no longer a child, Lily was no longer alive, and besides Fr. Thomas the only person in attendance that held any of his interest was Evelyn Black. Who was obviously too busy being the hostess. He had to admit, it was rather entertaining seeing her move around greeting guests, smiling left and right and ruling over the proceedings like a post-modern Marie-Antoinette playing pretend games in a doll-house sized Versailles of her own creation. But in that little mock bal-masqué of hers there was obviously no place for him.

He zipped up his jacket, shoved his hands into his pockets and braced himself for the walk back home, the bitterly cold breeze blowing on his face and making his nose and ears burn ever so slightly. It looked like rain too. We were in for a harsh winter, if this frigid autumn was anything to go by, he thought. As he waited for the red light light to cross the street, however, a familiar, husky contralto called his name in the distance. Even if he assumed it to be his imagination playing tricks on his hearing, he still turned around and walked back.

The sound of heels click-clacking on the pavement confirmed he was not, in fact, imagining anything. How the hell could Evelyn Black run in those blasted heels?

"Severus! There you are!" she stopped in front of him, breathing hard, the street lightS shedding a faint yellowish glow on her face, her cheeks flushed from the cold and the run.

"Ms. Black...is anything wrong?"

"Oh, no, not at all. I was just wondering...are you going anywhere this evening?"

"Home, I´d hoped. Why?"

"Well..." it took her some long seconds to find the words, slightly biting on her lower lip, her eyes lowering a little sideways, as if she couldn´t keep visual contact with him and her nimble fingers fidgeting with her gloves. "Would you like to... well...would you like to go to the cinema?"
Chapter Summary

Severus gets a bit too close for his own comfort. Featuring a trip down nostalgia lane, a Halloween party and a visit to the roof of the abandoned mill.

"Would you like to... well... would you like to go to the cinema?"

Severus winced, momentarily confused. Had he heard it right?

"Excuse me?"

"Eh...yes...I..." she seemed flustered, the crimson flush across her fine cheekbones growing deeper... he was pretty sure it wasn´t from the cold "Cine Victoria has a Halloween event and..."

"Oh, that" Severus almost laughed "The all-night horror films... It´s been a local tradition for some decades now..."

"I take that you´re a regular then..."

"I used to... Not so much after growing up. I didn´t even know it was still going on, I thought Cine Victoria had gone under"

"Some of my students told me about it. It seems this year they have an international short film selection. I was going with some friends, but they had a bit of an emergency..." she was shifting on her feet, her eyes seemingly unable to hold his gaze for too long

"... sorry to hear that... But I take that you´re still going"

"Well, yeah... There´s not much else to do, as I´m obviously a bit too old for trick or treating..." she smirked "So... would you like to go as well?"

"I..." He could hear himself stammer. The Cine Victoria Halloween Night. Last time he had attended he was still in Lily´s good graces... They had gone together like they did every year after Fr. Thomas Halloween party... Mr. Evans had decided to give them permission to linger until 1am, as opposed to their usual 11pm curfew. They had been so excited about that... It was a sign they were growing up. Eventually they´d be able to actually stay all night like the young adults they were soon to become...

That never happened, of course...

"I´m sorry..." Severus looked up as he heard her apology, confused. He didn´t know how long he´d been mute, but she looked concerned. His mind was starting to wander too deep into the past again... That wasn´t good... keeping track of time was getting harder... What was she sorry about? Did he say anything outloud?

"Whatever for?" he asked, coughing to bring himself back into the conversation.

"I´m being pushy... again" her smile was forced and melancholic "I didn´t mean to insist so much. You must be dying to get home after the party and I´m pestering you to stay up all night. You must
"I take that you´re not..."

"No...one of my many flaws...I didn´t come with a turn off button. Or so my mother would say. My siblings suffered from the same defect, and I´m not quite sure how our parents survived our childhood." Now her smile was genuine. Severus wondered if he could so easily tell the difference because he was used to reading people, or because she was too easy to read. Evelyn Black was too transparent. "Well, I best be going...Good night..."

Severus didn´t say a word as she gave him another smile (not one of the genuine ones) and started to walk away.

"Miss Black..."

Why was he doing that? He wasn´t a teenager anymore...The woman in front of him wasn´t Lily...They were not hoping into Mr. Evans car to go to the cinema... It was 1998...he was 38 going on a 100...Why must she insist, when he was less and less able to tell her no?...Who the hell was he trying to trick? Himself? Her?

"Yes?" she turned around

"I´m not that tired..."

He wasn´t a teenager...She wasn´t Lily...But then again, he didn´t want her to be...He didn´t want to be 15 again... Maybe he just wanted to watch a film with somebody...anybody...maybe her. That would do for now...better than going back home to sleep embracing ghosts...

... "My car is right over there" she announced as they went back into the church´s parking lot.

"Cine Victoria is within walking distance from here, you must know"

"I do. But there´s no such a thing as walking distance in these boots, specially after wearing them all day. I´m on the brink of gangrene here, Severus..."

"Unless you were forced into these boots, I can´t say I find it in my heart to have much sympathy for your current predicament..."

"I have a pair of flats in my car, I just need a moment to change into them, if you can keep the snark down for a second." she seemed more amused than offended at his berating of her fashion choices.

"You could have just worn the flats in the first place"

"Catwoman doesn´t wear flats, Severus"

"She doesn´t exist either, I´m afraid to inform you. Which makes her an unlikely candidate to loose her feet to gangrene as you seem to be striving to"

"Eh, everybody needs goals..."

"Yours is achievable at least..."

"You can´t fault me for lack of realism, then..." she laughed wholeheartedly. Severus wondered if his usual sarcasm had lost effect on her, or if she simply found it to be an interesting addition to their
conversations.

Evelyn finally stopped by her car and opened the door. He stood by the rear of the Volvo as she looked for something inside. After some fumbling she produced a pair of flat shoes and, keeping the door on the drivers side open, sat down on the front seat to remove her boots.

Severus shifted on his feet, uneasy. The parking lot was dimly lit, but he could see every single of her actions in detail...and the fact that he couldn’t quite avert his eyes was starting to trouble him. As the zipper of her boot came down, seemingly too slowly, Severus didn’t dare wonder why it felt so a clandestin to look on, like a peeping tom peering through a keyhole... For what? A pair of silly looking socks...Little cats? Did she shop for shoes in the adult section and for socks in the children’s one?

He could have hexed himself for being so foolish...what the devil was he expecting? Skin, maybe? As if the curve of her calves wasn’t plainly evident from the leggings she wore...Let us not play dumb here...he tought to himself...Let us not pretend he didn’t take notice of the fact that all the jogging he saw her doing every morning from his window didn’t give her an enviable pair of legs...It was only human, to notice...But for Merlin’s sake, boots? Really, Severus...a pair of boots is troubling you? Did seventeen years of no intimate contact with the fair sex turn you into a pathetic caricature of a Victorian puritan?

"Are you quite done?" He asked gruffly, knowing full well she was done, as her feet slipped easily into the flats.

"Just getting my purse" she reached into the backseat, stretching like a cat before getting out of the car and closing the door behind her. "Ok, we can be on our way now."

They had made it just in time. The first session was to start at 9:30, they entered the theatre at 9:15, with plenty time to buy a drink and a snack and comfortably look for their seats. Severus of course had declined anything aside from a bottle of water. Sometimes Evelyn wondered how he could be such an ascetic, specially in public. She knew for a fact he wasn’t always like this...At least not when they were sitting in her livingroom, talking about books and life...Severus Snape definetly knew how to properly enjoy food and drink, conversation and company...

But he seemed intent on denying such small pleasures to himself...

Even in private, over glasses of good wine and plates of good food, he was still quiet...somber in a way...He spared her very few smiles in between acid jokes she had learned not to take personally by now. He didn’t really laugh...ever. She wondered if he had ever gotten drunk in his life...Seemed unlikely. Had he ever allowed himself to be anything other than proper, she wondered, studying the man that walked next to her as they looked for their seats, decked all in black, from head to toes, hands into his pockets, black military-like jacket buttoned up all the way up to his chin.

And yet, he was here. Willing to sit with her for a night of pointless entertainment. Watching horror movies in a Halloween night...Such a silly thing to do...the kind of delightful silly thing teenagers do regularly with friends, and adults indulge on here and there, because life is too short to be a grown up all the time. Didn’t seem like something Severus Snape would do with his spare time. But he was here and Evelyn was happy for it. Maybe he wasn’t that much of an ascetic after all...

"Ms. Black! Over here"

They had just taken their seats when she heard her name coming from somewhere in the crowd of
young people in costumes looking for their own places. She looked back, trying to find whoever had called her when Severus lightly tapped her shoulder.

"Three rows ahead" he motioned with his chin. Tancey was standing between the third and fourth row, waiving at her.  

"I´ll be right back, Severus."

"Session will start in a minute"

"It´s just a second!"

...  

He looked on as Evelyn walked down the aisle to greet her student. Constance, was her name, or so he thought. Seemed like a good enough student, a well-behaved girl, from a good family from what Evelyn had told him. The blond lad that accompanied her was a slightly different case. James... Severus remembered that name well enough... Evelyn´s pet project. Severus couldn´t help feeling some sympathy for him, knowing his unfortunate circumstances in life, but that didn´t make him any more comfortable with how the brat was glaring at him. 

He nodded his head slightly when Constance waved at him. James sat down, still looking over his shoulder to where Severus sat. The young man did seem like he needed an attitude adjustment.  

Severus let out a small sigh of relief when the lights were finally turned off and Evelyn returned hastily to his side.  

...  

"What has gotten into you?!" Tancey hissed under her breath as the first film of the night started  

"What?!" James hissed back, his eyes glued to the screen.  

"You were staring at that bloke like you wanted to set him on fire!"

"Which bloke?"

"Ms. Black´s bloke"  

"He´s not 'her' bloke"

"Either way, it was not nice what you did."  

"Well, I´m sorry, but he´s just...weird. I don´t know, I didn´t like him ok? Can we watch the film now?"

Tancey sighed. James was impossible sometimes...  

...  

The lights were back on when the second row of films was over. Evelyn looked down at her watch. 2 in the morning. A significant part of audience had already left, James and Tancey included. Her mother had come to pick them up, apparently. She stretched. They had been sitting for almost five hours watching short film after short film and she had no intention of stopping now...The selection was delightful. But she was all too aware of the stiffness of her back.
She couldn’t even imagine how stiff Severus felt. He had been sitting in the same position since the first roll, arms folded over his chest, back straight, looking at the screen almost without blinking. Evelyn had stolen glances of him all night long and she was pretty sure he had not moved or changed position. He didn’t as much as use the arm rest between them. In the last interval they had walked around and talked about the film selection, the acting, the directing...But during the actual screenings, he seemed more like a statue, stiff and quiet. Although...she could swear she heard him smirk at times when she made a whispered joke at the expense of a less than talented actor or not so clever plot point.

"I need to go to the restroom for a second" she told him as they got up from their seats.

"Fine. I’ll step outside for a smoke"

"You know, you don’t have to stay till the end...You must be sore"

"I’m perfectly fine, don’t worry."

...

Severus lit up his fag and paced about in the smokers’section of the front hall. Looking around he could say he had a newfound appreciation for this place. As a teenager didn’t quite care for the Art Nouveau wallpaper and mirrors that decorated the place, or the elegantly geometric balconies, marble staircases, mahogany wooden furniture and deep blue velvet seats. But as an adult he could fully enjoy smoking a cigarrete there in the intervals of a quite decent movie selection. He wished he could have a glass of The Glenlivet, but nothing is perfect.

He was glad he had accepted Ms. Black’s invitation, after all. The organizers of the Halloween Festival were as sharp as they were when he was young. Small wonder Cine Victoria had remained open even after Cokeworth had gone into frank decline. They knew cinema, and definately knew how to pick their films. It was a shame he hadn’t set foot there for nearly two decades...Well, there was something utterly pathetic about going to the cinema alone...

He sat on one of the cushiony round seats that graced the corners of the front hall, and from there he had a great vantage to observe the parade of ill conceived costumes the attendance was sporting. He must have been the only one without a ridiculous outfit. Back in the day Lily would have fitted him with an appropriate costume, and they’d seat by the main staircase laughing at the other costumes as they waited for the session to start. It was an awfully silly thing to do now, but he missed it...

"Severus!" Evelyn Black emerged from the crowd with two paper cups in her hands. He moved a little as she sat by his side.

"I thought you had lost your way back from the restroom"

"No, not at all. I was getting us some coffee. I figured we’ll need if we are to stay here till the last film."

"Thank you..." he took a sip, and almost choked"...but this is piss poor coffee."

"I know, I know...here, this will help" she handed him a small bottle from her purse. He turned it to see the label.

"The Glenlivet?"

"You strike me as a The Glenlivet man...I’m more of a Tullamore Dew woman, but I can compromise"
"Did you smuggle alcohol into the movie theater?"

"Of course I did, they don’t sell it here. And don’t look so shocked, you never smuggled alcohol anywhere? I’m sure you were a teenager one day too..."

Severus smiled. By the time he was old enough to interested in things like alcohol or drugs he was already in too deep in his little circle of Death Eater companions. They did worse than smuggling alcohol into cinemas and staying out late...Much worse... He could clearly imagine Evelyn Black as a fresh faced teenager of 16 or 17, feeling dreadfully wicked and satisfied with herself for stealing a little whiskey bottle from her parents cabinet with her friends, with the same smug grin she had just flashed him on her lips...What would she say if she knew the things he did with his friends when he was 17? She surely wouldn’t be as amused...

"Last time I came to this cinema I was only old enough to smuggle sweets in my pockets..."

"It’s been that long, uh?"

"Yes...Over 20 years...Amazing how nothing has changed..."

"What happened?"

"Life..."

"Life does have a habit of just...happening upon us, doesn’t it?"

"Asking or telling?"

She didn’t answer...But that was enough of an answer for him, of course. They both knew just how much of nasty habit life had of just 'happening' upon a person. They could agree on it and leave it at that.

"Thank you for the coffee...and the scotch..."

"You’re welcome...Shall we go back? Last session is about to start, if you’re really up to it, that is..."

"Eh...what else do I have to do..."

"Enthusiastic much?!"

...

Those two had been in there for hours. The signs in front of the Cinema did say "all night", but he hadn’t expected they’d actually stay for the whole thing...Most others had left.

The tall, pale man shrugged inside his thick brown woolen coat, regreting his poor choice of outfit undeneath it. The street was deserted, the breeze outside was bitterly cold and a small drizzle of stabbing rain fell on his unprotected head. A simple coat worn over light clothes wouldn’t do much to protect him. He considered leaving...but he couldn’t.

If he had known they’d just spend the night, he could have left to come back later to catch them on their way out. Maybe he should have gone in as well...No...too risky...they’d see him...Well, he would see him...Severus Snape was dangerously perceptive...Better safe then sorry with that one...

He should wait outside...It would be dawn soon...
"I can´t believe we made it!" Evelyn yawned as they left the hall and walked outside in the blueish fog of the early, morning, still dark and untouched by the sun. "I can´t believe I made it, actually! I did I doze off for a second, I believe, but still!"

"Yes, you did doze off...But waking up right at the film´s scare jump climax must have made the experience all the more interesting..."

"For YOU maybe!" Her laugh sounded low and tired, but as ebullient as ever.

"Proud of yourself, I take? No small feat making it to the end of Cine Victoria´s famed Halloween Night...Not every local can say the same..."

"You mean yourself! I still can´t believe this is the first time you make it to the end."

Severus didn´t have a barbed answer for that. Without Lily there was no point in trying to make it to the end of the Halloween Night...But in a way he was glad he had come...It didn´t hurt as much as he thought it would have... Now that he could consider a feat. He´d thank Evelyn if he could find in himself to let her know any of what went through his mind as he walked back into that hall, into that screening room...for the first time in over two decades...without Lily...

But he couldn´t...It was enough that he had let her walk into that old memory of his...Cine Victoria was his and Lily´s alone...Until now...Maybe that was the reason it didn´t hurt so bad now...In an odd way, Evelyn´s presence had taken a bit of the weight from those memories and given them a fresh smell...Something different from the melancholic mothball-like odour of old things that are kept too long inside a drawer because we don´t dare contemplate them...Cine Victoria was no longer his and Lily´s alone...but that didn´t bother him as much as he thought it would.

"Thank you..." he murmured, half hoping she wouldn´t hear.

"What for?"

"For inviting me. I suppose I needed this..."

"So did I...And you know what else we need? Breakfast! I don´t know about you but I´m starving. Why don´t we go back to my place and I´ll fix us something?"

"That would be nice, but I believe I´ve troubled you enough..."

"Hardly..." she sounded disappointed. It bothered him a bit.

"I think I have a better idea."

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Evelyn wondered why they hadn´t gone back to get her car if Severus was planning to take her back to the old part of town, but she didn´t complain. After sitting down for hours, a long walk was more than welcome. They crossed the bridge over the river and moved forward for several bocks until they were back in the desolate part of town where Spinner´s End was.

The sun still made no mention of showing up as they moved forward into the azure twilight.

They passed by the crossroad that would have led them to Spinner End, and moved east, towards the empty lots that separated the residential streets from the mill property. The woods were far behind them, eerily dark, rising above the roofs of the old houses of Spinner´s End, their own homes included, making their blood red tiles look ike black gnarly gargoyles in the shadows. It had never
really downed on her that the house she currently resided did, in fact, stood between a somber forest straight out of a grim fairy tale and a wide expense of vacant lots, abandoned buildings and dismal streets littered with storage sheds. She never really thought about it when she drove her car to work and back. Maybe the car gave her a sense of safety that allowed her to ignore all of that. But walking around that place in the silence and dark of the wee hours of the morning felt...unsettling.

"All this area was commercial back when the mill was open." Severus told her, as if he had just realized her trepidation. "Markets, butcher shops, bakeries...the like. This is where the families of mill workers went about their shopping and daily life... Some of the storage space was rented out to the mill as well. Once the mill closed...well, you know how that story goes...Now it’s all vacant. I heard about drugs being sold from some of these sheds, but nothing more alarming than the occasional police round ever came of it...There are some nightclubs... If you could call them that...At least the owners were considerable enough to have them sound proofed...All and all, it’s pretty harmless "

"Severus...What are we doing here?" She hoped she didn’t sound too much like a scaredy little girl. She trusted Severus’ word well enough...but they were in the middle of nowhere.

"Trust me on this one. It may look spooky, but everybody here is too drunk or drugged to pose any inconvenience. Just coming out of their holes to feed before sunlight turns them into powder, I imagine... And there is one place worth visiting, if you can bear with the company..."

She could see Severus was right. One or two of the sheds were opening their doors to let out small groups of teenagers and young adults dressed in punk, post-punk, grunge styles and a myriad of other current underground fashions that Evelyn had stopped keeping track of after 1985. The sight of people did calm down a bit, however. They were all young and looked like they were more interested in having fun than bothering anybody. None of them seeemed to notice her or Severus, and if they did, they were not interested. Much better than the unnerving silence of an abandoned lot of sheds.

Severus turned into a corner and made his way towards a small coffee shop. "Here we are."

They went inside. In spite of how ludicrously early it was, barely 5:30 according to her watch, the place was operating at full speed. Most of the tables were taken by the same colorful groups of nightclub patrons she had seen outside, coffe was flowing like wine flowed in the rivers of the mythical country of Cocagne and food was just as copious. She wasn’t too surprised. Evelyn wasn’t as old as to have forgotten that a night out and about dancing and consuming mind altering substances could engender unholy hunger of gargantuan proportions. Back in her Trinity days she had spent many a morning quaffing liters of coffee and hastily swallowing full breakfasts of bread, bacon, eggs and black pudding that would normaly serve two, before heading for the first class of the day and hoping the professors wouldn’t notice how hung over she was.

"I know it’s not the most refined place in the world" Severus told her quietly, almost apologetically "..but their breakfast is decent...and they know how to brew proper coffee, unlike our better mannered friends at Cine Victoria. The mill workers always came here for their meals ...I had many a breakfast here myself, so I can vouch for it, in case you’re worried about the service."

"I’m not. It smells delicious. And I’m starving."

"Anything you’d like, or I may just order the house special?"

"Well...If I am to have the whole Cokeworth experience, then house special it is, I guess..."

"Fancy a heart attack, then?"
"Eh...didn’t kill me in college, it won’t kill me now..."

Severus approached the counter with easy familiarity, and curtly shot his order as the girl behind the counter wrote it down quickly, while taking at least three others at the same time and shouting them at the kitchen in the back.

"Two coffees, two bacon butties with mustard and cheddar. All to go." He had said, barked moreso, in a thick mancunian drawl that made his voice sound deeper and more guttural than it already was usually. Evelyn was slightly startled by how it sounded, but she shouldn’t have been, really. Severus was born and raised in Greater Manchester, she figured that was his natural accent, or at least the one he grew up with before going to Scotland to study. Much like herself with her own west Irish twang, he must have toned it down to make himself more personable to the posh students of his elite school, or to potential employers later in life. Surely, his mancunian drawl was always subtly noticeable under the more standard and polished elocution he tended to adopt, but hearing it on full blast like that was still a bit jarring...though not exactly unpleasant.

Their order took less than five minutes to get ready, as the kitchen was working on full speed. Severus picked up the bags, paid and headed for the exit.

"They have an empty table, Severus..." she tried, but he was already holding the door and urging her out.

"I know. But we’re not eating here. I’m not subjecting you to have breakfast among the riff-raff...I’m not that much of an uncouth brute."

Evelyn almost laughed. Under any other circumstance Severus making decisions for her and ordering her around like that would have earned him a slap to the back of the head at least...But she was too curious to be bothered. And he did hold the door for her, so not that much of an uncouth brute after all...just a bossy one.

"Where are we going then?"

"You’ll wanted the complete Cokeweorth experience, didn’t you?"

......

Evelyn should have been scared out of her wits. And yet, she wasn’t. It was probably worthy of serious concern that Severus could have led her out into a vacant lot without her as much as questioning him, but her first instinct was to trust him. And so she found herself standing in front of the old mill. All the area around it was littered with trash, weeds and wild grass growing everywhere. The square block of red bricks stood in the middle of the industrial wasteland like a sleeping kraken, its massive chimney pointing to the skies as Leviatan accusing God of his own damnation.

Severus walked on, comfortable in that barren desert as Evelyn would have been walking around the Doolin Pier, watching the ships leave to the Aran islands. He crossed the front patio, or what once was the front patio, when the mill was still functioning, and walked in. Evelyn followed him into an enormous room with an oppressingly high ceiling. Heavy machinery was scattered about, covered in dust, spider-webs and God only knew whatever else that had turned the metal a ghastly white where it wasn’t simply rusted. Their steps echoed like they would have echoed in a cathedral, and the very first rays of sunlight filtered through broken glass like they were pouring in from vitrals that had long lost their colors.

Severus didn’t waste much time in that room and went straight to the back, where a flight of stairs led them to the second storey. He didn’t linger there either, climbing a second flight of stairs, then a third,
then a fourth. In each single floor Evelyn saw the same panorama of dusty brickwalls, abandoned machinery and unrecognizable debris. Finally they reached what looked like the last stairwell, much narrower than all others and uncomfortably steep. Severus had to give her his hand in the last few steps, least she lost her balance. At the top of the stairs there was a door, boarded up. The wood was starting to rot, for it only took Severus a single kick to break it in.

When they stepped out onto the mill´s roof, Evelyn could hear herself gasp.

They had emerged from the darkness inside the building to be engulfed by a sea of flaxen light. The sun was just rising above the green blanket of distant hills outside the city, a huge golden disk floating into a liquid sky of orange and red, where warm pink clouds floated as vaporous jelly fish in the sea. The river that crossed Cokeworth cut through the hill was a glistening snake, its waters much like liquid gold, nothing like the dirty stretch of putrid water she drove by everyday...Then it disappeared into the woods, under the tall trees and red-yellow leaves that reflected the light in such a way they shone as much as the river waters. And after the woods, she could see Spinner´s End, and the dark red tiles of the roofs made a soft crimson, warm like spent embers in a fireplace. Behind Evelyn, the windows on the tall skyscrapers of the new part of town glittered like jewels as the sunrays hit them little by little, pulling the town from the dark.

"This Mill may have had its flaws, and they were to many to count, but for what is worth, this is the best place in Cokeworth to see the sunrise." She heard Severus say behind her "Surely it´s not a gorgeous daybreak over Caribbean seas, but one must make do with what´s give to them..."

"Are you kidding me, Severus? It´s magnificent..."

"I´m sure you got much better in Ireland, with the ocean and cliffs right at your door...Now, shall we seat and have breakfast before the coffee goes cold?"

"Yes, of course..."

Severus went to the ledge of the roof and sat down, swinging his long legs over it, so his feet were hanging on the outside of the building. Evelyn felt her stomach sink as she watched him, but he had done it with such practiced ease it was obvious that was not the first time he had sat on that ledge facing the abyss below. Once seated he took off his jacket and laid it out next to him, gesturing for her to approach. She complied and sat on the covered space he had offered her, mindful of the vertigo inducing view of the drop.

"Thank you" she said to no answer from him.

They sat in silence and ate their breakfast, taking in the view laid out at their feet for quite a while before Evelyn felt like speaking at all

"Say..." she finally asked "How did you know this is the best place to see a sunrise?"

"My father worked in the mill, as you know..."

"So, you came often to visit him?"

"Not exactly...I had to work some summers with him...Just a few before he was treated to an early retirement..."

"And why was that?...If I may ask..."

"Asbestos...But don´t worry, they changed all the roof as soon as too many employees started to get ill and the authorities decided to visit...Didn´t help them much, they closed anyway a little while
"I’m sorry about that..."

"Don’t be..."

"Did he..."

"Die from it?" Severus’ smirk was rascous and slightly disconcerting "No...Dying from a work related disease was far too noble an end for Tobias Snape...He retired and decided to dedicate his time to making my mother’s existence a living hell before getting himself killed in some pub across town..."

"Severus..."

"As said, don’t be sorry...If it hadn’t been his temper, it would have been the asbestos poisoning, or the chain smoking, or the alcohol...He had been looking for it...no reason to be sorry...Except maybe the fact that he managed to get himself killed before we could collect any compensation on the whole asbestos affair to pay the debts he left us...Fine man, Tobias Snape...even in death you couldn’t count on him for anything..."

She was at a loss for words. Severus was always so guarded about his personal life, that the confessional torrent pouring from his lips was entirely too startling. There was no feeling in his words...he had simply recited them with the same non-chalance he would have told her the weather forecast. He hadn’t looked at her face once as he spoke, his stabbing black gaze focused somewhere out in the hills. He didn’t seem like he was talking to her as much as he was talking to himself. She didn’t want to pressure him, but at the same time...He never talked about himself...She felt like, if there was any a time to ask, this was it.

"Then...how did you manage...You and your mother, I mean...It was just the two of you, I assume?"

"Yes...We just got by as we always did. I was in school back then...My mother worked some odd jobs, sold some of her personal belongings...I did some... things, here and there...Borrowed money from school mates...We managed...Then she got sick, passed away and I inherited the house and some more debt. Got that sorted out when my old headmaster hired me...It all got settled eventually."

"I’m so sorry, Severus...I mean it...I can’t even begin to imagine how you..." Evelyn didn’t know what to say. Every word coming out of her lips sounded dull, hollow and utterly meaningless. There was nothing she could say that would have mattered much...Instead she simply put her hand over his. His hand was much larger than hers, his long spindling fingers cold and dry. He let his hand linger under hers for a moment before sliding it away.

"As I said, nothing to be sorry about...I’m here, am I not?"

"So you are...But you never really answered me..." She smiled, feeling he had had enough of the bitter subject "How did you ever find this spot...It wasn’t working down there in the machines, I’m sure..."

"Well, you’re right...I would...come up here to smoke behind my father’s back...since I made it a habit of stealing his fags..."

"Oh, so you WERE a teenager once, after all!"

"I’m afraid is a rather universal condition for which no treatment is available as of yet..."
Evelyn wasn’t quite sure that was a smile she saw on his lips. He smiled so little that when he dared crack a grin it often came out more like a grimace. Regardless, she was relieved...That dark curtain of unpleasant memories had been lifted for a moment. Maybe Severus could take a little friendly teasing now.

"Say...did you ever bring many girls up here?"

"Just one..." His voice was whispered and almost sweet.

'Just one'...she may have been something else, this one girl, if the mere memory of her was enough to mellow his gruff baritone like that. Her mind drifted back to the red haired girl in the photos on his mantle...Maybe her? Maybe...What was the name..Lily...That was the name he had said when he talked to Mitchell back at the party, the same one Fr. Thomas had told her about?...Surely...Maybe they were all one and the same, she wondered...Regardless...whoever she was, that one girl must have been rather unique. All of the sudden it downed on her how much of a big thing it must have been for Severus to bring somebody else on this rooftop.

"So I´m only the second?...I feel special now..." It probably came out sounding like a quip...but it wasn´t.

He turned his gaze to her, sharp features catching the sunrays in such a way that his complexion didn´t seem as sallow as it normally did. For a split second she could see something akin to surprise in his eyes, before he looked away...and what she saw on his lips then looked more like an earnest smile than anything he’d ever shown her before...an awkward one, for sure, but an earnest one nevertheless...

...

"Thank you so very much...for everything."

The night was over. The sun was fully out and the clouds from the night´s rain had completely cleared out to give way to a crisp autumn day and a slight chill pervaded the streets as they walked down Spinner’s End, stopping at her door.

"Nothing to thank me for...Just making up to you for last night´s invitation..."

"So I invite you to the cinema and you thank me with breakfast and a sunrise...I feel like I still owe you..."

"Breakfast was nothing impressive...As for the sunrise...I can hardly take credit for making the sun rise in the morning... Trust me, we´re even."

"Still...thank you..." Evelyn knew it would make him uncomfortable, but she stepped forward and tiptoed to give him a light kiss on the cheek. He made no mention of stepping back, but she could feel his body stiffen, a slight tension tightening his muscles. But he didn’t back away as she feared he would. He simply stood, silently, his eyes betraying nothing of his feelings. "I guess I’ll take a nap now...I still have to back to church and help Fr. Thomas with that mess...and get my car...You should get some rest as well..."

......

Neighbours...They were neighbours.

How very convenient.
He had to follow them an entire night, but it had been worth it in the end...Even if he had to wait like a fool until they came back from the blasted mill. It wasn´t safe to follow them in there, where he could have easily been spotted,... But why would anybody take a woman to an abandoned mill and spend close to an hour in there?

Well, why else?

Severus Snape may have been a presumptious, cocksure, stilted prick, but he surely wasn´t above a quick shag in a vacant lot, he was sure of that much. Why else would he take a woman to an abandoned mill, if not to bend her over a piece of machinery and have a jolly good time. Well, with that particular woman, he could understand the urge, frankly.

Didn´t make his stomach churn any less. Some nerve the bloody wanker had...

She had just kissed him. From where he stood he couldn´t see much other than Snape´s back, but that was a kiss for sure. Neighbours...Friendly neighbourhood, it would seem...Very, very friendly, indeed.

And now the love birds made their way into their respective nests...That was his cue to leave...He had seen what he needed to see.
Chapter Summary

Severus Snape is officially dead, but the Lestrange brothers and their new associates suspect otherwise. Snape worries, Kingsley Shacklebolt makes a deal and Evelyn gets caught in the middle. Dueling happens.

November 1st

Spinner’s End 13

Deep down he knew what he was looking for as he examined his face on the mirror. As much as he knew he wouldn’t find it. Severus smirked at his own reflection as he brushed his teeth, washing away the taste of coffee and bacon from the sloppy breakfast he had shared with his Irish parrot of a neighbour. Much like a cheating husband looking for evidence of his betrayal before slithering back into his wife’s bed, he was looking for lipstick marks...Metaphorical ones, moreso than real ones...He knew for a fact that chaste kiss on the cheek had left no visible marks behind. The red lipstick she had chosen to go with her Halloween costume had long wore off from her lips as they hours passed and she was much more interested in chatting than she was in reapplying her make up.

He didn’t have lipstick on him. But that didn’t make him feel any more at ease walking back into his house and facing the pictures of Lily on his mantle with the warmth of another woman’s lips still burning on his face. It was ridiculous he knew. He had never had any qualms about getting into other women’s bed when Lily was alive. But it was different then... He was trying to forget her, trying to make himself not love her...Trying to forget the fact that he was to spend every night alone while Lily was a happy young wife and mother who had no place for him in her life anymore. She was Potter’s wife...the mother of his child. It mattered little wether he found himself in the arms of some random pure-blood witch eager for a risky liaison with a death eater or a muggle prostitute merely doing her job...It mattered very little, really. He sought them as he’d seek alcohol, drugs and potions. They were not really other people as much as they were distractions.

Then Lily died and he had no interest in distractions anymore. He had no interest in forgetting her anymore. It was the opposite. He wanted to remember her. And in his masochistic quest for punishment, and maybe some measure of redemption, he had made sure that every breathing moment of his was about her, about her memory. There was no space in life for distractions, of the sexual kind or otherwise. He had been lucid, focused, driven. For seventeen years, he had tought of nothing else but Lily and what she would have wanted him to do, what he could do for her, even if it was too late to actually do it for her and he had no choice but do to it for that boy that was everything left of her.

Then it was over. He had done everything he could, he had nothing else to offer, and he still didn’t feel it had made any difference. So what then? Nothing really. She was dead and he was done with the war but his every breathing moment was still about her and he didn’t know what to make of it.

He didn’t want distractions, he couldn’t seek distractions like he had done in the past. He didn’t quite know what he wanted, but he knew it wasn’t some random woman to make him feel some momentary pleasure to forget Lily for a couple hours. And yet, he had allowed himself to go out, to
go to that party, to that movie theatre...to the mill. Place he had shared with Lily, that were theirs and theirs alone and nobody else’s. And he had allowed himself to go back, with somebody else.

It felt like cheating. Which was frankly ridiculous, and he knew it. Sleeping with other women hadn’t felt like this. This was different...Evelyn Black had no romantic or sexual interest in him. There couldn’t possibly have been a more innocent demonstration of affection than that kiss she had given him as a token of a appreciation for a good night out with a friend. She wasn’t at all like those women he’d been with years ago. She was not a distraction. He had nothing to be embarrassed about. But he still felt compelled to march back into his house without as much as looking up at the photos on his mantle and go upstairs to check on the mirror for visual evidence of some imagined betrayal.

"You are the most pathetic man in existence, Severus Snape" he muttered to himself after rinsing his mouth.

Had it been worth it? To let some other woman walk into his memories like that? He didn’t really want to admit it...but it had. Lily would have to forgive him for this one...He had peace for a night. He had fun for a night. It was worth it feeling like that again. That feeling of having a special secret to share with someone, to see awe and wonder into another person’s eyes as they marvelled at something only he could give them. He dared say he was happy. For the first time in years as he opened the door and let Ms. Black walk onto the roof of the mill only to be greeted by a spectacular sunrise only he knew about, he had been happy. She had said he’d given her a sunrise. Well, is not everyday you get to give somebody a sunrise, is it?

He didn’t care much for that sunrise. The sun rose everyday. But seeing her face...Evelyn Black was a beautiful woman as it was, but in that moment she might as well have been the most gorgeous woman to have ever lived. Much like Lily had been the most gorgeous girl to walk the earth when he first saw her smile, her green eyes wide like pools of clear water when he first showed her he had magic too, just like her. There was some inherent beauty to be found in the joy of another, specially when it’s someone close to your heart. Did that mean Evelyn had made some way into his affections in spite of himself? Maybe. She cared about him, at least as a friend, he could return that much. He could allow himself that, couldn’t he? A friend...

He didn’t quite know how he felt about Evelyn Black just yet, but he suspected he liked her well enough, as a matter of fact. He liked being with her, annoying as she might be on occasion, he did like that he could talk to her, that he could make her smile, that she could enjoy a simple sandwich and a cup of coffee on the roof of the mill or a silly Halloween film festival with him...And he did like that a sunrise could make her eyes widen in joyful childlike wonder like that...He surely did like the way the rising sun reflected on them, lighting them up, its rays of flaxen light going though her irises and turning their usual warm brown into fiery amber and liquid gold so vivid it made him wonder if he hadn’t just found the proverbial “girl with the sun in her eyes” from that Beatles’ song.

He could have that, couldn’t he? Just for a little while, he could be happy...right?

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Later that day

Our Lady of Cokeworth Church

Evelyn had slept all morning.

It had taken a little while for her fall asleep though. When Severus dropped her off at her doorstep
she had been so exhilarated, she didn´t feel like sleeping at all. Sure, her body was exhausted. She wasn´t in the habit of spending all night awake. Every single muscle of her body was protesting the hours sitting at Cine Victoria, followed by the long walk to the old mill and her eyes were bothered by the lack of rest and heavy mascara. But he mind was wide awake and doing somersaults. When she washed her face, brushed her teeth, changed into a nightgown and crawled under the covers, her body had been thankful, but her brains refused to turn off. It replayed every second of the night non stop.

Particularly that magnificent sunrise. Evelyn had received her fair share of gifts from several different men, but never before had she been treated to anything quite like a sunrise to go with breakfast. Severus Snape was surely not a man like any other. He certainly lacked the ease and calculated social graces of some men, and most definetly he wasn´t interested in cultivating any of it. But when he wanted to, he could turn out to be frankly delightful. Maybe it was precisely the fact that he wasn´t trying to be. Severus had no interest in cajoling, captivating or ingratiating himself to others. He was guarded, dry, at times even abrasive. Evelyn had learned in the past weeks that it was better to just take him for what he was, and not take it personally. It had been a good decision to make.

As they sat on the roof of the old mill and Severus suddenly poured his heart out, she felt rewarded. Evelyn knew he wouldn´t have done it to just anyone. It was too intimate... Which coming from a man like Severus was a precious gift, and she was all too aware of it. That he had allowed her into his most private memories was all the proof she needed that he considered her a friend, and she was happy for that. He wasn´t going to stop being the taciturn, caustic hermit anytime soon, and that was fine with her. She knewin her heart where it mattered he was a good man.

Eventually exhaustion got the best of her and she dozed off. She was up by noon, however. Fr. Thomas had told everyone clean up would continue in the afternoon for anybody who wished to drop by and help, and she definetly had to be there for it. After a quick shower, she changed into a comfortable pair of jeans, flats, her favorite burnt orange sweater, found herself a cab and headed back to the church. Evelyn had left her car in the parking lot, so before anything else she had to go and take some of the rubbish out of it. As she opened the volvo and took out papers and decorations she had left inside the night before, the backdoor of the church building opened, as a man came out carrying two empty bin bags.

“Matthew!” She called out

“Hey, Lyn” Angela´s fiancé walked up to her “Just in time, we´re starting get the rest of the decorations down, need help with anything there?”

“Just this” she tossed her own trash into one of the bin bags “And how are you feeling now?”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. You seem to be feeling better.”

“Feeling better? How so?”

“What do you mean, how so? Angela told me you weren´t feeling well last night”

“Who, me? No. Angie was the one who was a little off. That´s why we skipped the film marathon at Cine Victoria. I thought she had told you, didn´t she?”

“No, she told me that you...wait a minute...Is Angela inside”

“Yeah, in the rectory with Fr. Thomas, looking for more bags for all the rubbish...”
“Thank you”

“Evelyn, what the...” Matthew stood puzzled as she walked past him and into the building.

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Angela was putting away a miriad of toys and games used in the party into a big cardboard box when Evelyn walked into Fr. Thomas office. The good priest was nowhere to be seen, probably somewhere looking for more plastic bags as Matthew had told her.

“Evelyn!” she sounded surprised “You´re early.”

“Hardly. By the way, Matthew looks great.”

“Oh, yeah...He´s much better now.”

“Funny, he just told me you were the one who wasn´t feeling too well.”

“Did he, now?” Angela laughed softly.

“Oh. My.God. You set me up´! AGAIN!” Evelyn didn´t know if she was indignant or amused by it.

“I most certainly did not!”

“Don´t act all offended! You DID! You made up that story about Matthew being sick just to make me invite Severus to the film festival!”

“Like you needed any encouragement! You wanted to invite him, I just gave you the opportunity, that´s all. So, technically, I did NOT set you up.”

“Well, still!”

“Come on, look at your face! You´re not even mad. The opposite, you seem very happy. And if the dark circles under your pretty brown eyes are anything to go by, I´d say you had a very good night”

“Well, as a matter of fact...”

“I KNEW IT!”

“Yes, we had a good night...No, it was not in the way you´re imagining right now”

“Oh, please...You´re trying to tell me you and Severus didn´t stay up all night? You can´t stop yawning!”

“We did stay up all night...watching films.”

“Watching films? That´s it?”

“That´s it.”

“So you mean to tell me you left here in that sexy form fitting Catwoman outfit, you took Severus to the cinema, you two staied up all night and...that´s it.”

“Yes.”
“He didn´t even try anything?”

“Try’ what, Angela?! First: Severus and I are friends. Second: even if he was interested in me, and I assure you he´s not, he happens to be a perfect gentleman.”

“A perfect gentleman...Is that code for gay?”

“What!”?

“Just asking...is he gay?”

“Just because a man doesn´t have any immediate interest in getting into a woman´s knickers, that doesn´t make him gay.”

“Of course not!”

“Then, what? Sweet baby Jesus...why is it so strange to you that Severus might not be all eager to get anything other than my friendship?”

“Well, is just that... Let´s be honest: you and Severus have this weird...thing...going on.”

“I beg your pardon!?!”

“Come on, Evelyn. You talk about him all the time, he visits you almost every day, you´re always inviting him to everything, you go out to dinner on the regular...he babysits your cat, for Christ´s sake”

“We are friends!!And he´s my neighbour to boot!”

“So...that´s all? You just watched some films?”

“Well, that´s not all we did...”

“Oh?”

“He got me breakfast...”

“Oh, now, did he? So where did the perfect gentleman took you? Some fancy restaurant?”

“No...The old Mill.”

“The what?”

“The old mill.”

“THE old mill? That creepy abandoned one on the edge of town that looks like a portal for H.P. Lovercraft´s Old Gods to take over the Earth and anihilate humanity? THAT mill?”

“Yes, that creepy abandoned one on the edge of town that looks like a portal for HP Lovercraft´s Old God to take over the Earth. Which also happens to be the best place in this town to watch the sunrise. Did you know that? You can see all the woods and the hills from that rooftop, AND the skyline of the downtown, it´s breathtaking”

“Let me see if I got this right...Severus watched the whole film marathon with you, then he got you breakfast, then he took you to see a breathtaking sunrise at the roof of an old abandoned mill just the two of you...Ok, I take back what I said. He´s definately not gay...Just sneaky.”
Evelyn could have died. She had turned around to pick up one of the plastic bottles from the bowling set, and Fr. Thomas was standing there, holding an empty cardboard box and some more plastic bags.

“Hello, Evelyn. Thank you for coming,” he smiled and gave her the customary kiss on the cheek he always greeted her with. He didn’t seem to have heard the conversation, but if he had, he was gracious enough to pretend he hadn’t. “I’ve finally found those bags, and another box for the toys. Maybe we should take care of the decorations and the rubbish outside first, seen as Matthew has started. We should take advantage of the sun too, later it’s going to be rather cold and dark.”

“Of course.” She mumbled, getting one of the plastic bags and briskly walking outside. She could feel her cheeks burning. One look at Fr. Thomas kind blue eyes and she was back to school again, when the nuns would catch her discussing boys with other girls and tell everything to her father. What a nightmare it was for a hormonal teenage girl to not only go to Catholic school, but also to be the daughter of one of the teachers. Didn’t help matters much that her mother was a regular at church and knew all the priests, deacons, ministers and nuns in the county by name.

Oh, well, she wasn’t a hormonal teenage girl anymore...was she?

............

The rustle of wings reached his ears as his mind drifted between sleep and alertness. The sun was high up in the sky when Severus opened his eyes to see the silhouette of an owl taking flight from his windowsill. He wasn’t sure how long he had slept, or when exactly he had fallen asleep. He had tried to remain awaken enough to review some correspondence but sleep got the best of him, he hadn’t even changed out of the shirt and trousers he’d worn the night before, he was so tired. Still, he pried his eyes open and dragged himself out of bed. As expected he found an envelope on the windowsill.

He knew it wouldn’t take long for Draco to write again.

“Professor Snape,

I’m afraid I don’t have too much to write in the way of news. Claire and Herr Rott rarely say anything relevant in front of me. I don’t think the suspect anything, but I can’t be sure. I do know the Lestranges have safely arrived in St Petersburg a couple days ago. There have been owls coming and going. All letters are coded, however. I’ve copied some, but not all of them. I can’t make sense of any.

There was, however, one thing that had me suspicious. I heard Claire say something about a dagger the Lestranges want to recover from somewhere. She seemed terribly annoyed by the idea.

About a week ago, I received another letter from my father. He had Ministry officials come to Malfoy Manor. He insists I shouldn’t say anything to anybody and come back to England as soon as I can. I don’t know what he thinks I could know that interest the Ministry, or if he suspects I’ve been writing you. I haven’t answered him just yet. I’m afraid I can’t leave now without raising any suspicions. I’ll just stay put for now.

I’ll write you as soon as anything new comes up.”

Severus sighed. The Ministry was probably pressuring Lucius to keep his son in France. This way he’d continue feeding Severus information that Severus could pass on to them. As he expected they had tracked the boy’s correspondence and Shacklebolt had connected it to the information Severus
had supplied him... Using Draco as a spy... That was a plan Severus was starting to feel rather uncomfortable about. Sure it was useful having Draco inside the Rotts` residence, but at what cost? Draco was at risk spying for him... and frankly, the boy was no spy. He didn`t have the cold blood necessary for the task, and it was just a matter of time before he got caught. And Severus doubted Claire would be merciful if that happened. What was Lucius thinking sending his son into the claws of that harpy? And now that the ministry was breathing down his neck, he wanted the boy back home. One would think the war would have taught him a thing or two about putting the welfare of his offspring above other concerns, but alas, even in his schoolboy days Malfoy wasn`t known for his intellect... Severus had to come up with a way to return Draco to England and continue to get information from the Rotts` house through other means. He`d have to pay Lucius another visit soon...

For now, as far as spies went, poor Draco would have to do. But maybe Severus underestimated him. That was only his second report and he had already given him two very valuable pieces of information: the Lestranges` location and the fact that they did, indeed, want the dagger. Exactly as Severus had imagined they would. Unfortunately there wasn`t much else Draco could possibly find out about the second one. Severus knew for a fact that the Dark Lord hadn`t disclosed his suspicions in regards to the location of the dagger to anybody else, and even Voldemort himself wasn`t confident about its whereabouts. Most people didn`t even know it existed, many more didn`t even believe it could be recovered. If it existed at all, of course.

Knowing Claire, she surely had other priorities. She had always been a pragmatic woman. Her foremost priority had always been enlarging the ranks. Whereas the Dark Lord was selective about his followers, but Claire Rott knew the power of numbers. Money, people and connections were much better than magical objects as far as she was concerned, and Severus tended to agree. In fact, the Dark Lord`s love of intricate and arcane magic and objects had been his downfall. He was a self-professed Messiah, not a real leader. Claire was the opposite. Which was precisely why she was in some ways more dangerous. It was all a business to her.

……

“Well, that`s the last of it.” Fr. Thomas closed the door to the storage room after putting away the last box of toys. “Tomorrow I`ll think about what we`ll do with those, if we keep them for next year or we can just do something with them next Christmas.”

“You`re already planning Christmas?” Evelyn laughed softly, filling a teapot with water and putting it on the tiny stove of the diminute kitchen the rectory was equiped with. She had made tea for all the teachers and students who had shown up to help with clean up but didn`t have time to have some herself. Now that everybody was gone she could enjoy some. It had been a quick clean up with that many helping hands. Almost everybody had come, with the predictable exception of Mitchel, which didn`t bother her in the least.

“Of course! You`ll see how November is going to zoom right by...” Fr. Thomas sat on a wooden stool by the corner. The rectory kitchen was so small it could barely fit two stools and a foldable table in addition to the tiny oven and even tinier cabinet. The constricting lack of space was somewhat compensated by the amount of natural light coming from a window that occupied most of the only free wall. She could see a timid, pale sunset peeking through grey clouds and naked black trees outside, the wind gently blowing the dry branches and taking away their last leaves. Days were getting shorter and shorter...It would be winter soon.

“I barely saw October pass by. It feels like I`ve been in Cokeworth for months. Would you believe it
´s been just a month?...Tea?”

“Yes, please...” He got up to unfold the small table and get a small sugar basin and two spoons from the cabinet. “And yes, it´s hard to believe it´s only been a month...you seem perfectly adapted. I´m glad.”

“I should thank you for it.” She put the tea bags into two chipped porcelain cups and poured the boiling water over them, watching the clear liquid turn into a dark amber color. “Actually I have plenty of people to thank for it. You, Angela, Matthew...”

“...Severus.”

“Yes...” she sat across from him “...Severus. Fr. Thomas...about that...conversation Angela and I...”

“You don´t have to explain anything, Evelyn. If anything I should apologize for barging in like that.”

“I just want you to know that...Angela was just trying to get my goad, there´s really nothing to it...I mean, Severus and I...” she could feel herself getting flustered

“Evelyn, Evelyn” he called out softly “Relax, my dear. Whatever it is that´s going on between you and Severus is none of my business, you have nothing to explain.”

“Is just that...NOTHING is going on. We´re just friends.”

“And that´s good. And if you happened to be something other than just friends that would be good as well. Look, I´m glad that you and Severus are growing close, regardless of the manner. You´re in a new town, you needed friends to help you adapt...and Severus....Well, I´m sure he can use the company as well.”

“You...you care a lot about Severus, don´t you?”

“Well...I´ve known him since he was a young lad. Sure we´ve never been close, and...I can count on the fingers of one hand the times I´ve even talked to him after he moved out of Cokeworth to study... But...I won´t lie I do have a bit of a soft spot for him. He was a good boy growing up... Quiet, for sure...didn´t have many friends...”

“Only that little girl you told me about...”

“Yes. Life wasn´t kind on him as far as I know...He deserves some hapiness...don´t we all?”

“You always seem sad when you talk about Severus...”

“I don´t know if sad is the word...I mean, Severus turned out fine in the end, in spite of it all. But in some ways...I guess I feel like I failed him.”

“You mean...because of his father...”

“Did he...”

“Yes, he told me about him...”

“I should have done something. But I was young back then...I had just been ordained and this was my first parrish. The Snapes weren´t parrisioners and...I should have done better, but I didn´t know any better. It´s not an excuse, I know...But I regret it...I still do.”

“What could you have done?” her words were more of consolation than anything else.
“Anything would have been better than not doing anything, Evelyn. Any action is always better than inaction”

“Fr. Thomas...”

“Yes, dear?”

“Can I ask you for some...professional advise? Just between the two of us.”

“Evelyn, my child. I´m a priest. Privacy is sort of part of what I do for a living. Do tell, what troubles you?”

“It´s about one of my students...”

Malfoy Manor

Narcissa closed the door behind her back and exhaled. She had lost track of how many arguments she had had with Lucius in the past couple weeks. He refused to answer to her questions. She had had enough. Weeks had passed since Severus had visited her husband and she still didn´t know what they had talked about. It had been enough of a surprise to see Severus alive standing on her doorstep...What he could possiblly still want from Lucius after everything was said and done? Narcissa knew she owed Severus her gratitude. If Draco was alive and free it was because of him. But she couldn´t help the fact that Severus mere presence left a bitter taste in her mouth. He was alive. Not only alive, free. People were calling him a hero. He had lied to them all those years. She wondered if the friendship that once bound her husband to Severus had an ounce of truth to it, or if Snape had just been lying from the beginning, sly snake as he was.

She had gone to him in her moment of darkest despair, pleading and begging him to help. He had stood before her and promised to protect her son. He killed Dumbledore in Draco´s place, sparing her only child´s soul from irreparable damage, eventually saving him from a certain life sentence in Askaban after the war was over and the authorities started compiling the list of crimes commited. She should be grateful, and she was. But she couldn´t shake the feeling that Severus had toyed with them, that he had seen her cry and fret needlessly, all the while knowing Dumbledore was setting up a farse, a farse she eventually played a role in, to save her family... But now Severus Snape was a hero. And they were disgraced.

Of course, that was nobody´s fault but their own. Hers and Lucius. They had followed the Dark Lord...All that befell them afterwards, they had done it to themselves. They had done it to their child. If she didn´t love Lucius so much she´d hate him with all her might. If she didn´t hate herself so much for allowing Lucius to do the things he did, for standing by his side as he ruined their family, she´d probably have abandoned him by now. But they were, in all possible ways, birds of a feather. They loved each other and their child, and that love had both doomed and saved them.

They were alive, but they had lost everything. She was determined to save what little they had left. She was determined to stand by her husband once more. She had been with him when they walked into a trap of their own making, she wasn´t going to abandon him now. They had to be together, for they they were everything their son had left, and their son was everything they had left. The ministry could take away their possessions, her jewlery, her gowns, their books and antiques, everything. But
they weren’t going to take her family away from her. That was the reason she had agreed to send Draco to France. To protect him. To keep him away from the sordid state they had been reduced to. They endured their humiliation quietly, hoping for a better future for him.

And then Severus Snape came back from the dead to stir things up. Lucius insisted Severus wanted him to disclose things he knew nothing about. She wasn’t sure she believed that. It had been a while since she last trusted her husband’s word. Then, just a few days ago, two Ministry officials showed up. Not the usual officials who were in charge of checking if they were keeping to the terms of their arrest. They had come asking questions. About Death Eaters in France and Russia. About Claire... Narcissa started to wonder if it was a good idea to ask her to lodge Draco. If Lucius was expecting to drag her son back into that black hole once more, he had another thing coming.

Well, if Lucius wouldn’t answer to her questions, maybe Severus himself would...

........................................

November 2nd.

Cokeworth Academy.

Evelyn felt a chill as she left the pool and walked barefoot on the cold titles. Cokeworth Academy’s pool was indoors and the area heated but the autumn outside was unforgiving. They were surely in for a harsh winter this year, she thought, rushing to get a towel and cover herself with it. She looked around to see if Angela was coming. She always met her after classes in the pool, but today she seemed to be running late. Oh, well...Evelyn was cold, her hair smelled of chlorine and her muscles were pleasantly sore...She needed a warm shower, so if Angela really wanted to meet up she would have to wait.

It felt good to have the restroom all to herself so she could shower in peace. The entire complex that housed the pool and other sports areas and equipment was pretty deserted after classes ended. On occasion some small groups of students would show up after classes to play. But as autumn advanced and the cold got harsher Evelyn found herself alone more often than not. It was peaceful if slightly unsettling. At least Mitchel hadn’t shown up to bother her. Actually she hadn’t seen him once since the Halloween party. Maybe he’d finally leave her alone. Yet another thing she had Severus to thank for.

Evelyn took her time washing and drying her hair, putting her things back into the gymbag she brought with her when she planned to swim after classes, then finally bundled up as warmly as she could to brave the temperatures outside. Sometimes she felt it wasn’t just a humorous cliché that Irish women were always freezing. Evelyn had on a cotton shirt, a blouse, a wool coat and an overcoat, in addition to wool thights and jeans and she was still cold. Her mother had always marvelled at how she could swim in the frigid ocean even in the bitterest of winters but on dry land the smalled drop in temperature had her reaching for cover. Her grandfather often joked that she might have some mermaid blood on her, so the cold water didn’t bother her as much as cold wind did. She shook her head at the memory of her grandfather’s tall stories, and zippered up her boots. Angela was still in no show. Her last class must have taken longer than usual, maybe she should go and get her in her classroom.
Her thoughts had her so distracted that she didn’t see the restroom door was blocked. It was only when she lifted her eyes from her bag and found herself less than a foot away from a regretably familiar face.

“Mitchel...”

“I was looking for you.” his saccharine smile was wider than usual.

He was just standing at the door, still technically outside, but blocking her way out. The tall tiled walls on each side of him made it impossible for her to leave without pushing him out of the way. And she knew how effective it would be for her to try to push a six-foot athlete out of her way.

If this was a joke, it was very much in bad taste.

“I´m sorry, I don´t have much time now. Just look for me in the teacher´s lounge tomorrow, now I gotta run” she tried to make her voice sound sweet but stern, her lips opening in a shaky smile

“It´s going to take just a minute”

“I´m afraid I don´t have a minute, Mitchel. I´m running late.” she couldn´t hear a sound coming from outside. Nor would she. Most students and teachers were likely gone by now. Where the hell was Angela?

“I won´t keep you, I promise. It´s important.”

“Important enough that you have to come into the girls´restroom? This wildly inappropriate, Mitchel. We´ll talk some other time.” It was probably her nerves that made her words come out harsher than it would have been safe...but she had to do something... Evelyn could see him motion slightly forwards, not quite a step, but almost. She shivered. “Mitchel, get out of my way, will you?”

“Look, I know I haven´t been quite a gentleman with you lately, but I need to tell you...”

“We can talk outside...” she offered, hoping he´d at least unblock the door. He didn´t seem likely to move, however. Evelyn opened her purse with trembling fingers...“I can give you a lift, if you want...my...my car keys are in here somewhere...” She was sure she still had that pair of scissors she had used to cut the Halloween decorations in her purse...Where was it?
Chapter Summary

Severus Snape is officially dead, but the Lestrange brothers and their new associates suspect otherwise. Snape worries, Kingsley Shacklebolt makes a deal and Evelyn gets caught in the middle. Dueling happens.

“It’ll just take a minute, Evelyn, I promise.” He continued speaking with a monotone voice that was almost as unsettling as his proximity. “It’s important.”

“Fine, I’ll listen to you. Let’s just step outside, ok?” she tried to suppress a tiny sigh of relief as her fingers finally found the pair of scissors inside her purse. It was a big pair of scissors, heavy and well-sharpened metal that she usually used to cut thick materials like cardboard or heavy fabric. She grabbed them by the hilt as she would have held a knife, but kept her hand inside the purse. There was no telling what he might do if he saw what she was doing, but if bad came to worse she knew the blades were long and sharp enough to handle the matter just fine.

“It’s about Severus Snape. I know you don’t like me, but listen: you shouldn’t be around that man, he’s dangerous.”

“Severus? Look, Mitchel, whatever bad blood there is between you and Severus, I want not part of it, ok? It’s got nothing whatsoever to do with me. If this is the serious matter you wanted to discuss, then I should probably...”

“Listen, I know you must be thinking that I’m here just because I have a personal problem with him, but is not.” he was starting to ramble “You don’t know him. I don’t know what lies he has been telling you, but Severus Snape is a criminal, has always been, and everybody always knew it. Even before his father died he was a little delinquent at best! Then Tobias Snape died and he started to support his mother with money and nobody knew from where, but p, it was the only explanation... then he disappeared for years and he’s back to Cokeworth now? Like he’s running away from something...”

If she hadn’t been so intimidated, Evelyn might have laughed. Severus had told her all of that himself... His life of criminal, gang member, whatever that was... That Mitchel would dig that up for petty gossip...whatever for? Cornering her in a bathroom to badmouth Severus? He was crazier than she gave him credit...Severus was right, she should have reported him a long time ago. Suddenly she felt more offended than afraid.

“Ok, Mitchel...I understand. Now for the last time, move or I’ll have to move you out of my way.” She held on to the scissors tighter, taking a step further. If Mitchel wouldn’t move on his own, she’d have to take care of it herself. But just as she readied herself to take another step further, a male voice reached them from outside the restroom.

“Mr. Daniels, pray tell what the devil are you doing in the girls restroom!? Step outside immediately!”

Evelyn couldn’t see who had spoken, but she had no doubt that voice belonged to Mr. Nolan. Mitchel seemed cross and confused, but stepped outside as told. As soon as he moved away from the
door, Angela came rushing in, to Evelyn’s relief. She could feel her heart beating in her throat, as she dropped her bags and coat, collapsing with her back on the wall behind her, right hand still clutching the scissors with a convulsive grip, as if her fingers had yet to process that the threat was gone while the rest of her body relaxed.

“It’s ok, darling” Angela whispered, prying her fingers open to retrieve the scissors

“Where were you!?”

“I´m sorry! I took a little longer with the last class and when I came over I saw Mitchel heading to the restroom, so I went to get somebody. Thank God Mr. Nolan was just leaving his office.”

“Ms. Black and Ms. Holt, would you two kindly step outside as well?” Mr. Nolan called. Angela practically had to drag Evelyn out, her body felt so numb. Mitchel was standing in front of Mr. Nolan, like a schoolboy about to be lectured by the principal.

“Now, Mr. Daniels, you may go. But I warn you, if I catch you engaging in such improper behaviour once more, there will be consequences. You may go now.” Mr. Nolan’s tone was bitting enough that Mitchel left without protest like a dog kicked out of the house.

“Mr. Nolan, I swear...”Evelyn begun, shakly

“It’s ok, Lyn...I told Mr. Nolan everything”

“Angela!”

“Yes, Ms.Black, she did tell me everything. Which begs the question, if this was going on why didn ´t you come to me and report it?”

“Well, I...didn´t think much of it. Untill now...”

“Let´s go back to my office, so you can tell me this story from the beginning, shall we?”

……

She was running late. Not her usual late...Severus knew she would be in the pool, doing her usual after-work exercise as she did nearly everyday, but that never delayed her more than an hour or so. But it was already 8:30pm and he hadn´t heard the sound of her car pulling over. He had been distracted writing letters and reading the latest wizarding news, trying to come up with a solution for the matter of the youngest Malfoy, so maybe he hadn’t heard her arrive, but even if that was the case, she would have knocked on his door by now. He looked over to the black cat pacing back and forth like a diminutive panther locked up in a stressfully small cage, stopping only to scratch the door.

“I know, I know...She should have come to pick you up by now. Trust me I´m as eager as you are to see you out this door, furball.”

Ciarán mewed plaintively, looking up at him before returning to his incessant pacing and scratching. Severus left his desk and opened the curtains. No sign of the red volvo, as far as he could see. Maybe it was a good idea to check, he thought, opening the front door and getting out, carefully to not let the cat out. Ciarán’s noises grew lowder.

“I’ll be right back, you aggravating little runt.” he hissed.
Outside nothing but the sound of his steps on the pavement. Her car was not there.

“What the...something must have happened.” He reached for his pack of cigarettes inside the back pocket of his trousers and lit one up with his wand, shifting on his feet. She should be at school still.. Would they be open at this time, however? Certainly not... Severus shook his head. Of course she wasn´t there...Probably had gone out with Angela...that must be it. He turned to go back in, when car lights caught his attention. Even in the dark her bright red volvo was unmistakable. He puffed a lazy cloud of smoke as she pulled over and got out of the car.

“Your cat was driving me bonkers...” He told her, his voice trailing off as he noticed she was supporting her weight on the side of her car as if she couldn’t walk properly “...are you ok?”

“Yes...yes, I am.” she smiled shakily.

“What happened?” Severus shot pointblank, walking up to her. She looked up at him, trying to maintain her smile and failing. Her expression looked pained and her eyes seemed moist, as if she had just cried or was about to start. “And don’t say ‘nothing’...something obviously happened.”

“You were right, Severus”

“About?”

“Mitchel...”

He felt his jaw clench and took a deep breath

“What has he done this time around?”

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The tall man by the corner shoved his hands into his pockets, as the couple entered Snape´s house. From where he stood he couldn´t hear a word they said, but he watched. He watched as her car pulled over and she stumbled out of it, looking like she was about to cry. He watched as Snape walked over to her, and for a moment it seemed as if he would take her into his arms. She stood before him, looking tiny and fragile, as if she wanted him to embrace her...For a moment it looked like he would. He just put a hand on her shoulder and led her into his house. Severus Snape wasn’t one to show affection in public after all...They’d probably take a while inside. Alas...time to retreat for the day.

.........

“Are you sure you don’t want any tea, or something else...I can..” Severus stumbled on his words pathetically. There were a great many things he could do well, but consoling a distraught woman was not one of them. He had to remind himself to keep his own temper under control. At least for now. It wouldn’t exactly be productive to react before she even told him what had happened. He was sure whatever it was it would warrant his anger, but all in due time.

“Just water, thank you” Evelyn replied quietly, taking the glass he offered her.
“So?...” he sat on his armchair, and waited.

“You were right about Mitch...I should have reported him. It was foolish of me to think he wouldn’t try anything other than his usual Don Juan antics...”

“And what...exactly...did he try?”

“I’m not even sure what he was getting at...I...I had just finished showering after my swimming session and he was there, blocking the door...Insisting he had to talk to me...”

“WHAT?...” Severus felt his muscles tense at the thought of over 6-feet of pure dumb muscle cornering her in a school bathroom, but bit his tongue and attempted to keep his composure as best he could. “I mean...Why? What was he...did he hurt you? If he assaulted you in any way...”

“No, he didn´t. He just...stood there. Vomiting a mess of nonsense...”

“What kind of nonsense?”

“Things...about you. Trying to convince me you are some kind of dangerous criminal. He wasn´t making any sense...Severus, if I may ask...What the devil went on between you and Mitchel!? The man seems to hate you!”

“Just an old childhood rivalry. To be honest, until I saw that twit at the Halloween party yesterday, I had forgotten he existed.” What the hell was Mitchel trying to accomplish with that little pantomime?

“I’m afraid he feels differently.”

“So, he acosted you in the restroom to talk about me? I’m afraid dear old Mitch is off his rocker...”

“I know...If it wasn´t for the fact that I was terrified, I might have laughed at his face. A grown man spouting neighborhood gossip...and what for?”

“Neighborhood gossip?”

“Yes...apparently your old neighbours were talking about you behind your back when you father died... That you were a juvenile delinquent...”

“Well...they weren´t exactly wrong if that was the case...” Severus smiled. He knew what his father´s coworkers and associates thought of him. Surely none of them had shown up to offer any help when good ol´Tobias had gotten himself killed leaving Severus and his mother to fend for themselves with an amount of debt that rivaled those of small third world countries. But they were surely quick enough to point out that Severus was a good for nothing git, getting money from nebulous origins. Nebulous origins being the Malfoys bank account and his own part time job as a potioneer for less than reputable shops in knockturn alley...thanks to recommendations letter of several known Death Eaters. Maybe if Mitchel had know the entire story, he’d think twice before spreading malicious rumours behind his back, or threatening people close to him. For a moment Severus wished he hadn´t grown so excessively scrupulous over the years.

“Severus...” she smiled “I know you´re not a saint...You´ve told me about that part of your life yourself. I´m not going to act like it bothers me, because honestly, I don´t really give a fiddler´s fart about things you did decades ago.”

“In any case, my troubled youth is not the question. That Daniels decided to harrass you within school grounds is what concerns me...”
“Mr. Nolan arrived just in time to catch him. I made an official report about it. There’s nothing Mr. Nolan can do as of now, except keeping an eye on him...He hasn’t done anything illegal, after all.”

“Just barely...Give him time, however...I’m afraid his interest in you has grown into unhealthy levels...To the point that any other male in your vicinity has become an immediate threat in that peanut sized brain of his...He might go from futile gossip to turning his aggression on you eventually. Maybe is not a sound idea for you to be spending time after classes in that school.”

“What am I supposed to do? Give up my regular activities because Mitchel might jump from a dark corner at any given moment?”

“All I’m saying is that, maybe, you should be more careful from now on. At least for now...we don’t know what he’s going to do next. Maybe this was just a little display of idiocy and nothing more...but better safe than sorry don’t you agree?”

………

St. Petesburg, Russia

Rodolphus stared at the large, silver haired man entering the room. His steps echoed on the polished floor and empty walls, the cool, colourless sunlight that came through the white curtains made him look like a vaporous ghost in his pale grey overcoat.

The Lestranges had arrived in Russia days ago, and after being moved from one hiding spot to the next, they were finally allowed entrance into Dimitri’s favorite hide away: a two storey mansion in St Petersburg, which he kept under a false muggle identity. The place couldn’t have been more pedestrian. A square-ish neo-classic terraced house with close to no ornamentation, hidden in a corner of a muggle residential area. Inside, only the bare necessities: tables, chairs, beds. No decorations, no books, nothing that could give away anything about the owner of the house. Rodolphus and Rabastan were kept there for nearly a week, had their wounds tended, and their basic needs fulfilled, but nothing more. No newspapers were allowed, no radio, no news from the outside world, no visitors...

Evidently, they were in no position to complain. Anything was better than Askaban. But Rodolphus wasn’t stupid. The only reason Dimitri was keeping them isolated, and denying them any information or access to the world outside was to show them exactly who was in charge now. It was laughable really. In France Claire was under the impression that she had control over the entire operation, while here in Russia Dimitri believed himself to be the leader of the pack. But the truth was that neither of them knew what Rodolphus knew.

He would be patient if needed be. Claire had helped them escape and cross Europe to safety, and Dimitri was willing to protect them in Russia. If allowing both of them the illusion of power was the price Rodolphus had to pay to put his plans in motion, then he more than willing to do just that. He had played along, perfectly fulfilling the role of grateful refugee..No questions, no demands, no rebellion. He simply waited for the day Dimitri would finally give them the honor of his presence.

That day had arrived, at last.

“Rodolphus Lestrange. I’m honoured to finally meet you, even if under such circumstances.” For a man his size, his voice was surprisingly soft and cool. His accent was barely noticeable, which gave credence to the stories that he had spent most of his youth away from his homeland. Where, nobody knew exactly...As a matter of fact, nobody was even sure if 'Dimitri' was his actual his name, let
alone where he had spent his time before becoming a minor celebrity in the small and close-knit circuits of anonymous dark wizards operating under the radar of the many eastern-european wizarding ministries and agencies.

“Likewise.” Rodolphus got up from his seat by the spent fireplace, but made no mention of a greeting.

“I do apologize for the less than desirable accomodations. Given the recent events we had to favour secrecy over comfort. I’m sure you will understand.”

“It’s certainly a marked improvement ove my last address...I’ve got no complaints. But I assume you have not come to discuss wether or not our lodgings are adequate.”

“I have not, in fact.”

............

November 4th

Once more Severus watched from his window as Evelyn Black left for work. Mercifully, Mitchel had been avoiding even as much as being in the same room with her after the restroom incident. At least that was what she told him. She hadn’t seen him in the teacher’s lounge, or in the school halls, or anywhere else in school grounds. She seemed relieved, but Severus believed it was too early for celebrating.

He drew the curtains and went back to his room, looking for the small box of everyday use potions stored in his bathroom. Severus had had a good stretch of two weeks with only occasional moderate migraines and nearly no muscular pains, but in the past couple days they had come back full force. He wasn’t sure if it was just the usual symptoms of stress coming back or if his body was getting too used to the pain-killing potions that now demanded more of them. Finally finding the small vial he was looking for, he went to the kitchen. Maybe diluting it in some water would be better than drinking it straight.

It was remarkable how some people had a seemingly God-given gift to be a nuisance. Mitchel Daniels had always been one of these uniquely blessed individuals. As if Severus didn’t have enough to worry about as it was. He had sent out two owls the day before, and still no answer. Lucius Malfoy was most likely stalling, biding his time and deciding on a way out of his current predicament. Unfortunately for him, the Ministry wouldn’t be generous this time. They would pressure him until they got what they wanted. And Malfoy would rather sacrifice his child once more than simply give them the location of the Lestranges. Which was the reason for Severus´ second letter, adressed to the new interim minister. Shacklebolt would also bide his time in answering. Severus knew he wanted to use Draco as a spy, regardless of risk, even if the sanctimonious minister would never openly admit it. Maybe they hadn’t sacrificed the well-being of enough children during wartime. Or maybe the ministry was trying to teach Slytherins a lesson: make yourself useful now, or face consequences. Ah, the brave new world, run by the ever-heroic and just Gryffindors...

Severus had done what he could until here. Both Malfoy and Shacklebolt were warned about his misgivings regarding the whole arrangement. None of them would have reasons to complain once Severus decided to take the matter into his own hands. Using Draco was out of the question. It was dangerous and counterproductive. The boy clearly knew very little of the Lestranges’ whereabouts,
and more glaringly he knew even less about Claire’s schemes... more importantly, he had no idea of
the existence of either Dimitri or the dagger. Indeed, very few people knew about the first, and only
Severus could be sure about the second. If anybody was to recover information, it surely wouldn’t be
a teenager whose sole qualification for the job was having the misfortune of being the child of a self-
serving coward. All the Ministry would accomplish was eventually getting Draco harmed, or worse.

It was decided. One more week was all the time Severus could spare. After that Draco would be
returned to Great Britain whether his father and the Ministry liked it or not. For now, however, he had
other concerns.

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Going back to the pool was probably not a wise thing to do after what had happened in the restroom
just a couple days before, but her last class had been cancelled due to a field trip to a planterium, so
Evelyn imagined she might as well take the chance. Angela was one of the teachers in the excursion
and had told her Mitchel had been one of the designated chaperones as well so, at least today, he
wouldn’t be bothering anybody on school grounds.

Evelyn had decided she deserved to relax for an hour, and there was no better way to do so than
indulging on a hard swimming session. One hour of full speed swimming... until her muscles were
sore and her skin flushed bright red. That was what she needed... the isolation of being immersed in
water and the pleasant tingle of endorphins rushing through her weary limbs. And she wasn’t about
to let an entitled overgrown brat ruin the one thing that could give her feeling right now.

Her hand touched the wall for the upteenth time, brought her head over water, rested her arms on the
tiled poolside, feeling it pleasantly cold against her warm muscles and worked on bringing her
breathing down to a resting rhythm.

“I knew you were an accomplished swimmer, but I have got to say I’m still impressed.”

Evelyn would have startled if she hadn’t immediately recognised Severus’ deep, caressing baritone.
Surely enough he was standing there, wearing his usual black, standing out like a longlineous dark
silhouette among the white tiled-walls of the attached building that housed the pool.

“Thank you.”

“You could race a mermaid if you wanted to...” he smirked, walking over to her, his steps so agile
and light they barely echoed on the tiles

“Now you’re just flattering me”

“I’ve seen merfolk much less skilled than you.” he crouched next to her so they could speak closer

“You’ve seen merfolk!” she laughed

“When I lived in Scotland: on a regular basis. Lakes in are infested with them over there...”

“Really?” she laughed even harder “Mermaids? Let me guess, they were also otherworldly beautiful
and tried to bewitch you?”

“Oh, thanks heavens, no. Horrid creatures the lot of them. At least the ones in Scotland. I hear the
Mediterranean ones are better looking, but I wouldn’t know.”
“I wish my grandfather was alive so he could meet you.” She sighed, getting out of the pool “I swear the two of you gentlemen have the same bizarre sense of humour. I’ve never seen anybody else who could say this kind of bold faced fibs with a straight face.” As she stood before him, Severus seemed to avert his eyes, focusing on some non-existing point in the bottom of the pool. Evelyn was amused by it. At times she truly wondered if Severus Snape hadn’t stepped out of a time machine, straight from victorian times. She ignored the temptation of poking fun at him. He was easy to offend, and the last thing she wanted was to upset a man who consistently showed her nothing but kindness and affection. And to be honest, his quirks were oddly endearing... “But, what are you doing here?”

“I told you I didn’t feel like it was a good idea for you to be coming back to this pool.” His tone had gone from light hearted to serious, hands shoved into his pockets, shifting his weight between his feet, his eyes insisting on fleeing away from hers. “Knowing you, I imagined you’d be eager to come here as soon as that excursion to the planetary was out the school’s front gate.”

“Mitchel is with them.” She removed her cap and goggles and walked over to a bench to get her towel and pat herself down. She wondered if Severus would dare look at her once she turned her back, and the mere thought put a smile on her lips that she had to force herself to close.

“Still. There won’t be an excursion every day, and you don’t seem inclined to change your routine on account of Daniels. So I imagined it might be a good idea to have some company other than Angela.”

“You don’t have to do that.” Sure, he didn’t have to do that. But she liked that he had decided to anyway. That smile tugging on the corner of her lips was getting harder and harder to suppress

“I know I don’t. But I want to. I can’t help but feel I have... insufflated his antics towards you, somehow.”

“You have not. Idiots scarcely need encouragement to act like idiots. Well, since you’re here, maybe we could go somewhere to eat? All that exercise really opened my appetite, I’m starving. If you’ll just give me twenty minutes to shower...”

“That was it, Severus thought to himself, sitting on the bench and staring at the pale blue water, the hydrous sounds of the building feeling queerly calming to his ears. If he hadn’t made a fool of himself before he surely had accomplished that task now. At 38 years of age, he had just acted like a sodding teenager. What kind of grown man can’t bear to look at a woman simply because she’s wearing a swimming suit? A rather modest swimming suit at that.

Well, that wasn’t exactly the truth, now was it? He did look... He was just too much of a bloody coward to look at her when she could actually notice it... But he did, indeed, look...Possibly more than he should have. It wasn’t the first time either. Once or twice it would be understandable. Evelyn Black was a good looking woman, and good looking people draw attention. It’s simply human nature to contemplate beauty. But he had caught himself staring more than it should be tolerable. What was it about that woman that troubled him so much it made him act like a bumbling idiot?

Oh, sod it...who was he kidding?... It was simply hypocritical of him to try and downplay it now... Evelyn Black was downright alluring. She was far from being a perfect beauty, that was for sure. Her facial features were perhaps a bit too intense, with those large almond shaped eyes framed by
dark, thick eyelashes and strong angular eyebrows, a greek nose and thick lips, her rosy-olive skin showed a barely noticeable sheen of freckles, which probably became more evident after being out in the sun, in addition to a few birthmarks...He had also noticed a large scar on her right thigh, most of it covered by the shorts of her swimming suit. It looked like it had once been a severe burn...

All and all her body was not willowy or even slim, but sturdy and abundant... She would never find herself on the cover of any muggle magazines, which obviously favoured bland, pale, eerily polished waifs...Evelyn Black’s lavish amount of curves would have made a fashion designer frown in frustration, but Severus be damned if it wouldn’t make any other man drool... There was a stately air about the way she carried herself, a joyful exuberance on the way she laughed and wiped her thick mane of dark hair as she talked, an obvious sweetness in her sprightly golden brown eyes. Simply put, she was beautiful, and only a blind fool wouldn’t see that. Which only made his troubles even more understandable, perhaps... An adult man can’t help but notice beauty when it parades in front of him, specially if clad in a wet swimming suit.

An adult man, Severus Snape. Emphasis on 'adult'. He had been acting like a bloody child. Evelyn Black was his neighbour, and a muggle to boot. He shouldn’t be as taken with her as he was, even if it felt unavoidable at best, fateful at worst. He had far too much to worry about, to indulge in such juvenile fondness. Things Miss Evelyn Teresa Black couldn’t even dream existed...

“Sorry it took me so long... I had to blow dry my hair.” she was back, mercifully covered by a crimson red overcoat, buttoned up almost all the way to her chin, and thick dark jeans that ended on brown boots...high heels, as always.

“That’s quite all right. Shall we?”

..........

The was no question about Severus Snape’s intentions. Why else would he be fawning over her like that? For days now, since that Halloween outing, he had religiously watched over her as she left for work, and welcomed her on the way back. The two would retreat into his or her house and spend hours together before parting for the night. Tonight in particular their little chivalrous romance had a new interesting development: now the stoic Severus Snape was picking his 'special' friend from work. Quite the gentleman...and not so stoic after all...

They had just arrived in her car and, as usual, went inside for another of their long 'chats'...Well, if one was naïve enough to think 'chatting' was all they were doing with their intimate time...It was a shame he couldn’t simply approach and take a look through the window...He wondered for how long that little courtship had been going on...It certainly put a damper on his plans for now. Nevermind that...If anything this little romantic subplot might have just given him more leverage.
Chapter Summary

Severus Snape is officially dead, but the Lestrange brothers and their new associates suspect otherwise. Snape worries, Kingsley Shacklebolt makes a deal and Evelyn gets caught in the middle. Dueling happens.

She knew she shouldn’t be snooping around, but Evelyn truly couldn’t help herself. Severus rarely invited her into his house; everytime they’d meet for dinner or tea, or simply for a chat, he would come to her house, almost never the other way around. He was a fiercely private man, who kept to himself, she was well aware...But there was something more than that. In every interaction they had, Evelyn had the distinct feeling Severus was trying to keep tight control over how much of himself he allowed her to see. At first that had bothered her, but as she got to know him better, she made her peace with it. Severus Snape hadn’t had an easy life, and as it often happens with people with difficult pasts, he had trouble opening up completely. The little she knew about his history had been revealed in the small doses he could handle sharing at any given time. She hadn’t pushed, as much as she wanted to get to know him better. Evelyn knew the seemingly little amount of insight he gave her was anything but little to him. So she humored him. If he stopped by her house she’d let him in, but she’d almost never request to be received in his house, and even when she had to drop by for any reason she usually made it quick. She’d tell him about her family and her everyday life, but never asked him about his day, or his family or friends, unless he breached the topic first, which he rarely did.

But tonight, oddly, he had invited her in, without prompting. For coffee, he said. Evelyn wondered how much the events in the past few days had to do with it. Something had changed after that morning at the old mill. Severus seemed more comfortable around her...He was still stiff and laconic most of the time, but he smiled more, his sardonic japes had become less acid and more playful...It had only been a couple days, but the change was evident to her...she couldn’t be imagining it. Then, there was the whole story with Mitchel. Severus was worried about that, to the point of actually coming out of his comfort zone to offer to scort her home. He could be borderline agoraphobic, so that must have meant something... and she’d be lying if she said it didn’t please her that he was showing that much concern for her well being.

Now she stood in the middle of his sitting room as he prepared coffee in the kitchen, and, knowing she was taking quite a chance, Evelyn was looking into his stuff. Running her fingers over the bizarre titles in his library, eagerly observing the odd decorative objects on his shelves, running her eyes on the scribbled papers scattered all over his desk. She couldn’t understand a single line of them. His handwriting was small, spiky and cramped, and the notes went in every direction, occupying every inch of the paper without any apparent order. It was nearly impossible to read on a passing glance, and she couldn’t very well take her time with it when he could come back in the room at any second and catch her in the act. Aside from the unreadable notes, there were loads and loads of seemingly complicated formulas.

Evelyn could hardly deal with everyday math, so these might as well be Chinese written backwards to her. Her sister Caitlin was the exact sciences expert. Caitlin had sailed through math, chemistry, physics and biology at school, unlike Evelyn who struggled with all of them, being much better suited to languages, histpry and social sciences. Caitlin’s vocation for caregiving and her aptitude for
natural sciences made nursing as much a natural and easy choice to her as it had been for Evelyn to become a historian. If Caitlin was here she’d probably make sense of every single one of Severus’ scribbles and probably debate him at length on them. That would have been nice... Severus didn’t have many friends, if any... At least Evelyn didn’t know of any. The fact that she couldn’t make sense of his work gave her a little pang of sadness. She wondered if he would have liked to tell somebody about this. It was rewarding to be able to tell somebody about your work and share things you’ve accomplished. Severus was patient enough to listen to Evelyn talking about her professional achievements, but he never discussed his own. She probably wouldn’t understand a thing if he did, but she wished he’d try...

"So you talked to Fr. Thomas on the subject of James, after all" she heard Severus ask from the kitchen.

"Yes. He asked me to tell James to drop by the church and chat with him."

"You think that will work?"

"I don’t know" she answered distracted, still looking at the papers on his desk "I suppose he can at least give me a second opinion after he talks to James."

"It’s a start I suppose"

"Yes..." She trailed off... Evelyn was about to give up on understanding his notes when she noticed something odd... A piece of paper that didn’t seem to belong with the rest. She picked it up, completely forgetting to continue the conversation. It was an envelope. She had thought at first it was a mock parchment paper, like those you can find in novelty stationery stores, but once she touched it, it was obvious it was actual parchment, good quality one at that... No stamps or postmarks of any kind, as if it had been delivered in person, or via messenger. It beared Severus name on the space traditionally reserved for the addressee, written in an excessively flowery handwriting that looked like a calligraphy exercise designed to impress moreso than convey a message. Above that, there was a fanciful green wax seal, an elaborate "M" over a crest sided by two reptilian creatures, dragons or snakes, she couldn’t be sure... It looked almost fake, like somebody had tried to replicate an antique letter just for the fun of it. Curious, she turned it around. In the same rococo-ish penmanship it read "Narcissa Malfoy"

“Entertained?” she almost jumped at the sound of his voice. Always sneaking up on her like that

“Oh, I... I’m sorry... I was just curious about your work. Not that I’d understand any of it...” she smirked, uneasy and thanked him for the steaming cup of coffee he had brought her.

“That’s nothing but drabbles... To keep the mind sharp, nothing much.” he looked down at his desk, smiling as if the complicated equations were nothing more than silly doodles a child does on the edges of a notebook during a particularly boring class. “But you were saying?”

“Oh, yes... I... I’ve talked to James today”

“And...?” It didn’t escape her notice that Severus had swiftly and discreetly put the envelope under a small pile of papers before turning away and sitting on his usual armchair. Obviously, she had been looking into something private... She was relieved that he didn’t seem to have noticed.

“I told him Fr. Thomas wanted to talk to him, that’s all.”

“You didn’t tell him why?”

“No. I know it’s not very honest, but... Knowing James, if I told him the reason for the meeting he
probably wouldn´t go…”

“That’s true... Well, I suppose all that’s left now is to hope for the best…”

“Indeed.” she answered, still eyeing the envelope hidden under the papers

“Ms. Black...Is everything all right?”

“Yes” she looked up at him confused, “Why?”

“You’re awfully quiet…”

“I’m just…”

“Worried? About James...or is it about Daniels?”

“A little bit of everything...” she wasn’t lying, but... Evelyn wasn’t really thinking about Mitchell right now...

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At times Severus regretted his excessive escruples. Other wizards in his place wouldn’t have resited the temptation of going into her mind to find out what was wrong. Evelyn Black was definitly not her usual talkative self tonight. Well, maybe not through the entire night...she seemed normal enough over dinner...But for some reason, as soon as they had entered his house she seemed uncomfortable. They had coffee and talked for a while more, before she excused herself rather hastily. Maybe it was the fact that she didn’t visit him all too often. Severus had himself to blame for that lack of consideration... he went to her house regularly, but never invited her to his. Evelyn was a muggle, the less she knew about him the better...or so he tought. But things had started to change, and as he felt like he could trust her, at least insofar as his muggle life was concerned, he thought it would be appropriate to invite her in. Maybe that had thrown her off her balance?

No, it wasn’t like her to be awkward in unfamiliar environments. Not Evelyn Teresa Black, beguilling social butterfly that she was. Truth was that she was worried about a multitude of things...Small wonder she should be tense, with Daniels threatening her safety and James’ situation showing no improvement. That was probably the reason her demeanor had changed once he returned the topic of James and Fr Thomas meeting. It was the only explanation. If Severus had learned anything about her in the month or so they had known each other, was that she was hopelessly uncapable of deception, almost down to the physical level. She couldn’t as much as utter a benign falsehood without blushing furiously. She wasn’t exactly an expert in hiding her feelings either...she wore them on her sleeve instead... It both irritated and endeared him, but if anything he had to respect her candour.

Severus finally decided to let it go. Evelyn was such an open book that whatever it was that was bothering her he would know it sooner than latter. Sitting by his desk, he chose to focus on the unpleasant task of answering Narcisa’s letter. He had gotten it earlier in the day but hadn’t bothered thiking up a response just yet, so he just left it in the middle of his notes. It was a strike of luck that Evelyn hadn’t found it.

As he expected, Narcisa was suspiscious of her husband’s reasons for sending Draco away to France. And she suspected, rightfully so, that Severus knew something she didn’t. He pinched the bridge of his nose, looking down at piece of fine parchment the Malfoys couldn’t afford, filled with her ornate handwriting. In the direst misery, Narcisa had to keep on playing the role of 'grande dame', even if it meant using expensive parchment to write her letters when the entire Wizarding
Community knew that even her gowns had been auctioned off.

He quickly scribbled a couple of dismissive sentences, denying any knowledge of Lucius machinations and urging her to direct her questions to him, then sealed it. As much as he could empathize with her concerns, Severus wasn’t the one who owed her explanations....

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Narcisa Malfoy...

The name echoed stubbornly inside her mind... It was an odd name. Fitting of that bizarre letter, Evelyn thought. Why the hell would anybody write and send a letter like that? Well, it had no stamp or post marks...So she must have delivered it in person...But Severus never received guests...let alone women. Except for herself, that was... But he certainly didn’t receive women who wrote flowery letters in fine parchment...right? Why would anybody write a flowery letter in fine parchment in 1998, anyway?! She seemed like a piece of work this Narcisa Malfoy... Probably a snob...That “M” in the wax seal must have stood for her last name...Who, outside of aristocracy, had a family seal!? And what business could such a person possibly have with Severus? Severus the hermit Snape, a man slightly more frugal than Zeno of Citium and somewhat more Spartan than King Leonidas. It was nearly impossible to imagine Severus associating with people who had their own family seals and wrote snobbish parchment letters with baroque callygraphy in the bloody XXth century.

And yet, the letter was there, in the middle of his personal papers. Severus obviously intended to answer it...it was open on his work desk, after all. No, no...she was overthiking it...It could just be a practical joke among friends, maybe... Not that Severus seemed to have any friends...In over a month the only 'friend' of his she had heard about was Lily Evans, whoever Lily Evans really was...definitely not any Narcisa. Still...she was starting to wonder if that one girl he had brought to the mill before herself was, indeed, Lily, as she had imagined...

“Evelyn?” Jocelyn’s airy voice pulled her back to Earth

“Yes?”

“Your mobile is ringing...”

“Oh, shite...” she hissed under her breath “Thank you, Jocelyn”

Evelyn fumbled with her purse for a moment before finding the phone.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Evelyn. Fr. Thomas speaking. How are you doing, dear?”

“Oh, quite fine, thank you, Fr. Thomas. What about you?”

“Good, good. I’m just calling because...James dropped by this morning before school.”

“Did he? So...how did it go?”

“Better than I expected. Which is why I’m calling, I’d like to have a word with you if that’s possible?”

“Sure, I was just informed that my last class of the day was cancelled due to the Planetarium project we’re having this week, so I can meet you today if you want. I just have to drop my my house first. Severus is supposed to pick me up from work, but he’s a ludite who apparently believes phones are
the work of the devil designed to eat his soul, so I have no way of telling him not to come to school.”

“I’m afraid my day is a bit full today” Evelyn could almost hear the smirk in his voice “there’s a meeting scheduled to start planning for the Christmas festivities, which I must attend. And I’d hate if you and Severus changed your plans on account of me...But if you could drop by the rectory tomorrow, I’d very much like to have a chat.”

“Sure. After class is a good time?”

“Perfect. Thank you, dear.”

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Severus was expecting this to happen, but not that soon. How long had it taken Narcissa to apparate at his door step after getting his letter? 24 hours, maybe, if that much? Severus knew his letter wouldn’t please her, but this was frankly ridiculous. She must have run out of ways to badger her husband for answers, if she was as desperate as to come to Spinner’s End on a whim like that.

“May I come in?” she asked with an icy voice, standing so upright and tense at his doorstep, Severus had the impression of a bow ready to shoot an arrow at him.

“I suppose I can’t very well say no...But do try to make it brief, if you will” he glanced at the clock on the matle. Almost 5pm. He should be meeting with Evelyn at 6pm...Trust Narcissa to derail one’s plans with her demands, even if unknowingly...It was a talent that came with being a Malfoy, by birth of marriage...

“I intend to.” he rolled his eyes and stepped aside, making way for her to step in, dragging her long dark green skirts behind her with his her haughty and martial gait.

“Do take a seat.”

“That’s not necessary...I’ll make it brief, as you requested. In fact, I have only one question for you Severus.”

“I suspect which question it is, and I’ll save you the trouble: ask your husband.”

“You think I’d be here if I hadn’t done just that?...Over and over again.”

“Narcissa...” he mellowed his tone, aggravating as she was, Severus couldn’t fault her actions. He wasn’t a parent, but if he had children of his own, he’d probably do the same.

“Severus, please...This is not the first time I come here to plead with you, to beg you for help. I know a second time is one time too many to ask, specially after everything that happened, but …We have been punished enough...If my husband is hiding something from me, anything that can put Draco at risk once more, I beg of you, tell me.”

The ice in her voice was melting rapidly, and once more Severus could see the distraught mother who had come to him less than a year ago, desperate to save her child. He had a hard time denying her.

“Narcisa...I’ll tell you once more, it’s not in my place to tell you anything. But if it makes you feel any better, I don’t plan to let anything happen to Draco.” he walked up to her, insisting she took a seat. Her composure was only as strong as a broken vase glued back together. Under the proud posture, the gelid expression and tense shoulders, she was ready to fall apart.
“Then, there is something you’re not telling me, isn’t it?”

“I can’t be sure of what your husband is planning...I have suspicions, but he never confirmed any of them.”

“Severus, don’t make me implore you”

“You know just as well as I do where Claire loyalties laid when the Dark Lord was among us...Why do you think she would receive your child after your family has been disgraced and shunned by both sides? You know better than I do what’s the extent of her generosity.”

“So...Lucius wants to start it all over again? Is that what you mean to tell me?”

“You know your husband better than I do, I should expect. Why do you think the Ministry officials have visited your house? To start a book club?”

“They can’t possibly think Draco would...Lucius, maybe, but Draco wouldn’t get involved in this. Not after everything he’s been through, Severus...”

“You’re right. Your son has better sense than his father. Draco is not aiding the Rotts.”

“And by the certainty of your tone, I should conclude that you do, indeed, know something about what’s going on with my son. You lied to me...”

“I did no such thing. I don’t really know what your husband is hiding from you. He has told me exactly the same he told you: that Draco was shipped off to France for his own safety. I simply happen to know Lucius better than to believe anything that comes out of his mouth. It’s not exactly hard to figure out what he wanted when he decided to have Draco move to Claire’s mansion”

“There’s more, right?” she sounded defeated. “The ministry officials...they...”

“Have a seat...” Severus let out a deep sigh. It was about time to end this. If anybody could get Draco out of France, and out of danger it would be Narcissa. Lucius should listen to her, at least, Severus hoped

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“Are you sure you don’t want to tag along? We just got free time, that doesn’t happen everyday.”

“Yes, I’m sure, Angela. Thank you for offering but...” Evelyn grabbed her coat from the hanger on their way out of the teacher’s lounge. Angela and a couple other teachers had decided to use the extra time they had gotten from the cancellation of the last period of the day to go out for drinks. It was a lovely idea, but Evelyn just didn’t feel like it. She couldn’t stop thinking about Fr. Thomas and James’s meeting, and the entire plantarium project had made her fall behind schedule. “...I’ll just use the time to catch up with some things.”

“You mean catch up with Severus.”

“Here we go again...”

“He came to pick you up yesterday, after all, didn’t he?”

“Yes, thanks to Mitchel...Severus is just trying to help me out...”
“And I believe he’s coming today too, isn’t he? That’s why you’re won’t come with us?”

“No, Angela...I’m just tired. And if you must know, yes, Severus was coming, but since I’m leaving early...”

“Just call him. Ask him to join us.”

“Severus doesn’t have a phone.”

“What? He doesn’t have a phone? You mean his phone is broke, no?”

“No, I mean he doesn’t own a phone.”

“He doesn’t own a phone? Evelyn, in what century did you dig this man up?!?”

“I thought you had promised me you wouldn’t do that, anymore...”

“Do what?”

“Be on my case about Severus!”

“Ok, I won’t. So...you’re really not coming?”

“No, not today. Thank you for asking, but I really need some rest.”

“Well, you have my number if you change your mind.”

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Severus held Narcisa’s gaze for a long moment. The momentous break down seemed to have subsided, and she had put the icy mask back on.

“Speak, Severus. I’m listening”

“The Ministry officials who visited your husband...They don’t think Draco is involved in Claire schemes... I have given them every assurance that he isn’t”

“You have...how?”

“You son has written me...twice thus far. Draco isn’t planning to go along with Lucius plans to support Claire’s designs to protect fugitives abroad...It’s the opposite, actually.”

“The opposite? What do you even mean by that?”

Severus shouldn’t be telling her what he was about to tell her. But he knew Narcissa, and he didn’t need to read her thought to know he could trust her. She had stood in front of the Dark Lord himself and lied, without as much as blinking, to his face. All for the sake of her child. Narcissa had many, many flaws...but she was a good mother. She didn’t care about Death Eaters or the Ministry, she cared about Draco. And for that, Severus could trust her.

“Draco has been giving me information about them, I’ve passed them on to the responsible authorities as I saw fit. Thanks to him the Ministry is now very close to tracing the Lestranges...”

“You mean to say...” her voice was suddenly hard and emotionless “…the ministry is forcing Draco
to act as a spy?”

“No. It was Draco´s own decision. I´ve been trying to dissuade the Ministry from doing that, specially considering they already got plenty of information, far more than I´d expected Draco to come up with. But considering the fact that the information he has been sending out has, thus far, proven legitimate, I´m afraid they are not inclined to give up his help.”

“Severus...If Claire finds out that Draco is spying from inside her own house...”

“I know. Which is why I´m telling you all of this, even though I shouldn´t. I know your only interest in this is to keep your son safe. And trust me, Narcisa, I have not forgotten the vow I took. I´m trying my best to protect him, as I promised you I would. But the fact is: your son is no longer a young boy, and your husband is not inclined to enforce his paternal authority to convince him to come back. And the Ministry is going to pressure Lucius into not doing that. I´m trying to come up with a solution, but, honestly, there´s little I can do.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“First of all. Lucius can´t as much as imagine you´ve been here and that I told you all of this. He´s not to be trusted... I know I don´t have to ask, but...”

“Severus....I´ve betrayed the Dark Lord just as you did. Rodolphus and Rabastan probably want my head as much as they would want yours if they knew you´re alive.” her sigh sounded pained, as if she was about to cry. However, Severus had a more than passing suspicion that she had run out of tears by now. “If anything, Lucius is probably trying to convince them we´re still loyal, by sending Draco to France... I´m afraid my husband has gone mad...”

“If he has, then there´s little hope for us to protect Draco without him trying to ruin everything...”

“Severus...I have an idea...it might work...” her sudden revelation was cut short by the sound of soft knocks on the door.

Severus startled. Who could be knocking at his door at a time like this? Evelyn was at work...Minerva and Shacklebolt rarely visited without a previous announcement...Unless it was an emergency...If not them...

“You made sure you weren´t being followed, Narcisa?” he asked, for the sake of being safe. One could never be too paranoid.

“Of course! What kind of a bumbling idiot you take me for? You probably have a visitor, that´s all...If anybody was to follow me here with any ill intent, they wouldn´t knock.”

“Only if they had a dreadful sense of humor...At least trick or treat season is over”

“Excuse me?”

“Nevemind...” Answering the door with Narcisa in his sitting room was a stupid idea any way he approached it, but the knocking got more and more insistent. Whoever that was, they weren´t going away.

“Severus? You´re home? It´s me, Evelyn.”

Severus cursed under his breath, looking at the clock once more. 5:20pm. She should have been at work. Maybe Mitchell had been acting up again?
“I have to get that...”

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Hello, Severus.” she smiled, as usual, but there was something about his face when he opened the door that gave her pause. He seemed tense.

“Weren´t you supposed to be at work?” the words sounded harsh, but with Severus she could never really be sure if he meant to be harsh or if it was just his usual stern self speaking.

“Yes, I was. But that Planetarium project just made them cancel my last class. Since I couldn´t call you to let you know I was getting off work earlier, I had to drop by to let you know you didn´t have to pick me up today...”

“So you just came home on your own...”

“Well, I would have called you if you weren´t allergic to technologies developed in the past couple of centuries” she smiled

“Oh, well...You´re home safe, at least.”

Evelyn studied his face. He didn´t seem tense as much as...irritated? She was familiar with the that rigid, aggravated expression on his face. She remembered it clearly from the first time they met, when she knocked on his door and he nearly kicked her off his door step. What had happened?

“Is everything all right, Severus?”

“Yes, of course.” for a moment Evelyn had the distinct impression he was trying hard to tone down his annoyance and adopt a mellower tone “I´m...just in the middle of something.”

“Oh, I see...I´ll let you be, then...” she was about to bid Severus good night when a female voice spoke from inside his sitting room.

“I´m dreadfully sorry to interrupt, but...I believe we haven´t been properly introduced.”

Evelyn looked over Severus shoulder. Standing a few steps behind him there was a tall, willowy blonde woman. A beautiful, tall, willowy, blonde woman, Evelyn corrected herself. Her hair, tied in a meticulous low bun, was almost as golden blonde as that of Evelyn´s mother, before she had started to go grey, but her eyes were pale blue, cold and distant, unlike her own mother´s warm cerulean ones, and her fine ruby red lips formed a scornful grin. She had a long black cape-like coat over a long dress in a peculiar shade similar to bottle green that Evelyn had rarely seen in fabric. The ensemble was, at best, unconventional, but the woman wore it with undeniable aplomb, a haughty elegance that gave her an air of aloof refinement, like she was an old Hollywood starlet that had just walked walked out of a photo taken on the set of her latest period film.

Evelyn was so taken aback by that bizarre apparition in Severus sitting room that it took her a while to notice his scowl had grown more somber. He looked over his shoulder at the blonde as if silently lecturing her for interfering in their conversation. Her grin grew wider, as her pale blue eyes looked on, ignoring Severus to focus on Evelyn, as if she was appraising the quality of new curtains or a new decorative object...and finding it below her standards of quality.
“Well, Severus?” she insisted, in the perfectly posh and polished Queen´s English “Do be a gentleman, will you?”

He sighed, looking defeated.

“Evelyn...Narcissa Malfoy. Narcissa...Evelyn” he made the introductions begrudgingly, with a quick hand gesture, as if he wanted to get it all over with. Narcisa walked over to the door, followed by the soft ruffle of her dress and stood next to Severus

“I´m very pleased to meet you, Evelyn...” Evelyn noticed she smiled with her lips, but not with her eyes “Now, as much as I hate to be rude, my dear, Severus and I have some rather urgent matters to handle...if you don´t mind.”

Evelyn could feel a warm rush of blood running fast to her cheeks, but she wasn´t quite sure if from embarrassment or anger. Probably both. For a moment she expected Severus to say something, but he stood silently, still wearing that enigmatic scowl on his face, his eyes avoiding hers. Well, as her mother would always tell her, a true lady knows that leaving gracefully is always preferable to lingering where she is not wanted.

“I do apologize for the intrusion” she smiled back, purposely adopting the sweetest tone she could muster “I was just on my way, as a matter of fact. Lovely to meet you as well, ma´am, have a nice evening.” Evelyn turned on her heels and walked away without sparing a word to Severus. Judging by how quickly he closed the dor behind her, he didn´t seem to mind it that much.

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For a “dead” man, Severus Snape definitly had an interesting social life. Not only did he routinely fraternize with his, admitely very attractive, muggle neighbour, now he was getting visits from hard on their luck wizarding socialites. Claire would be very interested in knowing what mother Malfoy was up to. Considering Narcissa had betrayed the Dark Lord in the foulest, most cowardly way, it was not surprising that she´d come crawling to Snape after Lucius had sent their dear boy to France. It was obvious what was her stand in the matter...It was left to discover wether Malfoy Manor was a house divided, or wheter all three Malfoys were plotting something.

A shame she´d probably be less interested in the little romance novel scene that was playing out before his eyes, the tall man smirked to himself. Wonder what that poor muggle was thinking when she found another woman in Severus´s house. She didn´t seem too pleased...Severus would have to come up a very good excuse for that... Alas, that was for another episode...Now he had an owl to send out.
Part 6 - The Stalker - Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Severus Snape is officially dead, but the Lestrange brothers and their new associates suspect otherwise. Snape worries, Kingsley Shacklebolt makes a deal and Evelyn gets caught in the middle. Dueling happens.

"Pray tell what the devil were you trying to accomplish with this ridiculous scene?!" Severus hissed as he slammed the door.

"Excuse me?! I was under the impression we were discussing something serious. Don’t get bent out of shape just because I put some muggle in her place."

"Must I remind you are currently in no position to put anyone on whatever your frivolous opinion considers to be their place?"

"All of this over a muggle, Severus? You really had us all fooled." she smiled wryly. Severus could almost hear his own jaw clench.

"I do not appreciate your tone, Narcisa. As many character flaws as you may have I’m sure stupidity is not among them."

Narcisa seemed caught off guard by his words, and Severus could tell she was struggling not to snap back at him. Prepotent as she might be, Narcisa knew she needed his help, and was not dumb enough to cross him.

"Very well...were were we?"

"You had just had an idea...Here´s to hoping it´s any better than anything I´ve had to hear from you this evening..."

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As soon as Evelyn closed her living room door behind her the phone began to rang. She was very much inclined to let the answering machine handle it, if it wasn’t for the fact that she just remembered she had been expecting a call from her sister.

“Hello?” she almost growled into the receiver, startling herself with how aggressive that sounded.

“Evelyn? Jesus, what happened?” surely enough it was her sister.

“Oh, uh...Sorry, it´s nothing.”

“Yeah, right 'nothing', she says...What the hell bit you?! Let me guess, it´s either work or Severus?”

“What?! What do you mean 'either work or Severus', why does it have to be one or the other?”

“Well, after that romantic post-Halloween breakfast I’d think you´ve made some progress...did he go
and do something stupid?”

“Jesus Lord, Caitlin! How many times do I have to tell you that Severus and I are just friends. He has every right to do whatever the hell he damn pleases with his spare time and...” she stopped midway, realizing what she had just said...WHY had she said that?

“So...it IS about Severus...What did he do?”

“Nothing, Severus did nothing! What the hell you’re getting at, Cat?”

“Still as terrible a liar as always, Linz”

“Ok, fine. It’s not something Severus did...exactly.”

“Come on...tell me what has he done.”

“It’s nothing...I just went over to his house and he had a very rude guest over and she pushed my buttons...No big deal really.”

“She? Did you just say ‘she’?”

“Don’t go getting ideas, ok?”

“I’m not getting any ideas!”

“Yeah, right...”

“Who IS this woman, anyway?”

“I don’t know. Some posh socialite type I’ve never seen before.”

“Socialite type? Where did that come from? Isn’t Severus a hermit who’s always locked up at home and only ever interacts with you, because you obviously have a very specific fetish for awkward intellectuals?”

“Caitlin, will you please stop? And your guess is as good as mine. As soon as he introduced the two of us she told me to feck off, only no in so many words...And he just stood there. Needless to say I didn’t offer to stay and socialize...”

“She just sent you off like that?”

“As if she owned his house...”

“How did she look like?”

“How is that important?”

“Humour me...was she..you know...pretty?”

“She sort of looked a fashion model”

“Really?”

“Yeah, overdressed, thin, blonde and with a face like she’d just sucked a dozen exceedingly sour lemons.”

“It’s always some skinny, blonde bitch, ain’t it? Men...”
“I’m not jealous if that’s what you’re trying to get at…”

“You said it, not me.”

“Oh, do shut up, will you?”


It was close to 7:30 in the morning. It was the time Ms. Black usually left for work. Severus should probably have gone and apologized to her on the spot, but he couldn’t just leave Narcisa unattended or she’d make an even bigger scandal of it all. Still, there was no excuse for her childish behaviour and an apology had to be made, even if not by the offender. Evidently Narcisa would never “stoop so low” as to apologize to a Muggle...It never ceased to amaze him how even in the direst distress Narcisa Malfoy couldn’t quite shake off the signature haughtiness of the Blacks. None of them could really... Narcisa, Bellatrix, Sirius...They could all be thrown in the pits of hell and yet...a Black remained a Black. Severus smirked under his breath, leaning on the door frame and lighting a cigarette to warm himself up face the chilly breeze outside.

Evelyn was also a Black, he reminded himself. As a matter of fact, Severus could see that in her more and more. Worse still, he mused with a chuckle, she was at least three quarters Irish, a stubborn and fiery lot, if muggle history books were anything to go by. She didn’t have the quick temper the tired cliché assigned to her people, but neither was she one to take any abuse laying down...Evelyn Black had a way of telling people to fuck off in the gentlest terms that was, frankly put, quite delicious. He had had a taste of her biting sweetness himself more than once. It had been quite the treat to see that rare talent directed at Narcisa Malfoy. Lucius’ wife would never admit it, but it had hurt her to receive that amount of subtle contempt from a muggle.

Severus wondered what both Evelyn and Narcisa would say if they found out they were actually related. Cousins. Narcisa would surely have a fit. It was no small blessing that that was precisely the one Black trait Evelyn conspicuously lacked: the hystronics. In fact one would be hard pressed to believe the affable dark-haired scholar and the conceited wife of one of the once-richest wizards in Britain shared a single strand of DNA. They couldn’t be more different if they had intentionally tried to be.

And yet, Severus had to admit, if you looked close enough...

Maybe it had been the healthy doxis of muggle blood that two generations had injected into her, or maybe it was simply the fact that she considerably less inbred than her wizarding relatives, but Evelyn Black somehow had managed to keep most of the best traits of the Blacks while avoiding most of the worst. She had the dark and solemn beauty of the Blacks, but not nearly as much of their vanity, she had their innate elegance, but none of their haughtiness, their assertiveness without any of their tyranny... Surely enough she was irritatingly stubborn and proud just like every last of them, but her willfulness had been directed towards study and work, and her pride was mostly justified by actual achievements, which was more than he could say for any of the members of the magical branches of the family who had mostly made it far in school and life more through marriage and connections than actual merit. Maybe instead of marrying their cousins the Blacks should have tried marrying some muggles...Hybrid vigour was a scientifically proved way of improving genetics...and the wizarding family line wouldn’t have come so close to extinction. Severus couldn’t decide whether it was funny or sad that the wizarding Blacks were on the verge of disappearing, shrowded in infamy, while the ‘impure’ branch Evelyn descended from seemed to be perfectly happy and striving... Poetic justice, perhaps.

He put out his cigarette on the doorframe as soon as he saw Evelyn come out from her house, carrying her usual multicoloured multitude of folders and bags. She made her way to her car so fast
he almost had to run to get to her before she got inside and drove off.

“Miss Black? Can I have a moment please?”

“I´m dreadfully sorry, Severus, but I´m running late.” she spat without as much as looking at him, carelessly throwing her folders on the passenger seat.

“It´s about that unfortunate encounter last night, I assure you...”

“I´d really rather not discuss that.”

“I understand and I agree you have every right to be upset about..”

“Actually, I don´t, and I´m not.”

“I´m sorry?”

“I showed up at a bad time, and I was told as much. That´s all there´s is to it. Now if you can excuse me...”

“Ms. Black, please. It´s simply that Narcisa is...”

“Narcisa was your guest and I was intruding. My parents happened to teach me manners...”

“Yes, Narcisa was my guest, but she had no right to treat you that way. You should know you are welcome to my house at any time you wish, and I will not have anyone...”

“Severus...” she looked like she was about to say something harsh but took a deep breath and paused before continuing “Ok, fine, Severus...apologies accepted. Now will you let me go?”

“I was under the impression you had something to talk to me about yesterday? If you´re running late now, maybe later we can...”

“Actually about that...I just wanted to tell you that have a meeting with Fr. Thomas after work. I don´t know how long it will take, so you don´t have to bother to accompany me home today.” with that she got into the car and sped away not giving him any time to reply.

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The conversation was probably serious. Fr. Thomas didn´t receive her in the small and cozy rectory where they usually talked over tea and cakes, but in a meeting room in the main church building. It was an ample and gloomy room that smelled of mothballs, paper and incense, with a long table and wooden chairs on its center and cabinets filled with books, papers and registers covering the right wall and a few religious paintings decorating the opposite one. A large ebony sculture of Christ hanging from the cross looked down gloomily on the table with deep empty eyes on his long angular face.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, my dear.” he told her, pouring coffee from a thermos flask into two plastic cups. “Mrs.Murphy came in for a surprise confession...It had been a while, actually.”

“No problem at all, I´m early myself.”
“I apologize in advance for the coffee. I’d have made it fresh but we just ran out of ground beans... You take sugar, right?”

“Yes, please...Well...You said you talked to James?” she asked, trying not to mind the bad coffee too much.

“Yes, I did. As you had predicted, James is rather hesitant to discuss his private matters, as one should expect from a lad in his situation...”

“Tell me about it...His mother is no better, I must say”

“I’m afraid it will take him time to open up, but...he seems to trust you. He told me himself, he wouldn’t have come to meet me if you hadn’t asked him to do so. I think you have a good chance of reaching out to him...”

“From your mouth to God´s ears, Father...”

“I had no illusions of being able to get him to talk about the issues that are really troubling him, but we did discuss other things. James is a good young man under that whole rebel act.”

“That he is. I think if he had more activities to occupy his time and find some sense of purpose...”

“About that...Were you aware he´s a quite gifted musician?”

“Oh, yes! He can compose too, you know? TANCEY showed me some of his works, a couple 80s-rock style power ballads, very good stuff actually. I’ve been wanting to ask him for a copy of some but I’m a bit afraid he’ll get upset if he knows TANCEY showed me those...and my piano is back in Ireland, so I can’t make much use of music sheets anyway...”

“You have a piano?” Fr. Thomas’ face seemed to light up.

“Well, my mother does, actually...It belonged to my father, now she has it.” she smiled, sadly, memories suddenly washing over her “Not to brag or anything but dad was a gifted musician and singer. After he came back home from college in Dublin he and some friends started a little amateur music group... Traditional Irish music and all that. He compiled traditional songs and arranged them on the piano and they performed in family get-togethers and local events...”

“So I take that you can play the piano, then”

“Not expertly, but my father did give us all piano and singing lessons. My brother was quite better than me, God rest his soul. It was a bit of a family tradition, so to speak.”

“That...that actually gives me an idea...” Fr. Thomas has a huge smile on his face now“As you know James can play the guitar...”

“Yes, I’ve heard him; he’s actually very good. And he taught himself, I should note.”

“Precisely... I was wondering how James would feel about maybe accompanying our choir. We also have a piano, in bad need of tunning, but it still works...I wonder what James would think of maybe...learning to play it? Since he could teach himself to play the guitar, I don’t see why he can’t learn the piano...It should help him compose his own songs too...You can help him, if you can spare the time”

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“Heeey? You in there?” Tancey snapped her fingers on his face, startling him.

“What?” he grumbled.

“You´re planning on sitting out here forever?” she sat by his side on the front steps of the school building. Most other students were long gone by now.

“What about you, what are you still doing here?”

“I wanted to return some books I borrowed from Ms. Black, but she´s gone. The secretary told me she left earlier today…”

“Did she? Why?”

“I don´t know...Why you´re asking?”

“I think Ms.Black is up to something…”

“Up to something?” she smirked “Paranoid much?”

“She had me meet with Fr. Thomas yesterday…”

“Fr. Thomas?! Whatever for? You need an exorcism or something?”

“Ha.Ha. You´re so funny. And yeah...she asked me to drop by the church,´cause he wanted to talk to me...When I got there he asked me these nonsense questions about my music and whatnot…”

“Maybe he needs help with the church choir” she laughed.

“I rather have the exorcism... I just hope she didn´t leave early to go talk to my mother.”

“There´s a way you can find out…”

“Which is?”

“Well, since I couldn´t find her to return the books and she told me she needed them...we could go to her house to return them...If she´s there is because she hasn´t gone to talk to your mother, if she´s not, we can ask around...Wasn´t that bloke she brought to the party her neighbour? ”

“You know where she lives?”

“Spinner´s End…”

“You´re bonkers? Nobody lives in Spinner´s End.” James used to go to Spinner´s End with some other lads to break into the abandoned houses to smoke and drink. They had stopped after a few of them had become convinced the whole street was haunted a few months earlier. James himself had seen some strange events. but he didn´t believe ghosts so he never thought much of it...Still, Spinner´s End was, at best, a dump. “Ms. Black can´t live in that hole!”

“She does. She told me so herself. So, want to come or not?”

.................
As her car took the turn that led into Spinner’s End, Evelyn felt relaxed. Fr. Thomas idea was actually very good. Some days before Severus had told her she had to help James find something to do with his life, something that could get him away from his father and the whole dysfunctional situation he had to endure back home and maybe direct him towards a better future. Maybe Fr. Thomas had found the solution. If James spend more time in church, playing his guitar, learning the piano, composing and refining his musical skills...maybe he could find a path for himself?

It would be good for her too...How long had it been since she had played the piano? Months...her father was still alive last time...She hadn´t had the heart to touch the keyboard since he had passed on, and that old relic of his remained untouched on the corner of her mother´s sitting room. Months had passed...maybe it was time for her to try her hand at it again...Her father would be pleased if he knew she was teaching someone else what he had taught her.

Evelyn stopped the car and remained inside for a while, debating wether she should knock on Severus´door. She was dying to tell him about Fr. Thomas´ idea but...she hadn´t exactly been very nice to the man that morning. She wasn´t even sure why she had treated him so poorly...Maybe she should head over and apologize...But what would she say? “I´m sorry for being rude to you for reasons I can´t explain even to myself, so please don´t think I´m completely insane”...That probably wasn´t going to go over particularly well. She should sleep on it. In the morning, with a fresh mind, she´d talk to him.

Having decided that, Evelyn stepped out of the car.

As she opened her front door, a sharp pain shot through her skull as she felt something pull her hair so hard her neck snapped back violently, making her lose her balance and fall back against something..someone. Someone strong enough they could single-handedly pull her whole body weight back by her hair only, she realized in horror. Nothing but a scream fuelled by all the air she had in her lungs could escape her lips. She felt an arm grab her around her torso, before a large gloved hand covered her mouth, fingertips digging into her cheeks. Her body struggled almost without her control, as if her every muscle was instinctively fighting to get away, her feet kicking back, heels first, and elbows hitting back as hard as she could against what she assumed was her attacker´s chest and stomach. But the person holding her felt like a giant, the arm around the torax nearly crushing her ribs. The hand covering her mouth moved away and she hoped screaming again might help...

Severus had to be home. Maybe he´d hear her...

Then she felt something cold against her throat. She brought her hands up to try and get it away but all she managed to do was cut her fingers...

...a knife.

Before she could think of what to do, Evelyn felt herself be dragged inside.
How wrong he had been.

As Snape’s neighbour’s red car stopped in front of her house he was nearly calling it a day. He was so bored, in fact, that he had started to get slumberous...Which probably accounted for the fact that he never saw that indistinct shadow approach behind the woman.

It all happened too fast for his eyes to catch every detail. He had heard her scream before even noticing anything was amiss. When he looked up there it was: a tall hooded man had grabbed her from behind. She struggled, kicked and screamed like a captured animal.

But she suddenly went quiet. Then he dragged her inside.
Part 6 - The Stalker - Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Severus Snape is officially dead, but the Lestrange brothers and their new associates suspect otherwise. Snape worries, Kingsley Shacklebolt makes a deal and Evelyn gets caught in the middle. Dueling happens.

Evelyn tried to drag her feet with all the strength she had. Outside there was some chance Severus could hear her, or that she could run... Inside, she’d be trapped. But the man was much stronger and bigger than her; big and strong enough to almost lift her off the ground with a single arm, his free hand pressing the blade against her throat. If she trashed too much the blade would sink into her... She grabbed at his wrist, vainly trying to move the blade away, to give herself some leeway to move, she kept on screaming for help as loud as she could... I was all pointless, she got dragged in anyway, pushed and pulled like a ragdoll.

As soon as she felt he had pushed her through the front door, Evelyn made a last ditch attempt at trying to get away: she stomped on his foot, heel first as hard as her leg muscles would allow her. She felt her stiletto heel sink into his foot before everything spun around her. It took her a while to get her bearings: her attacker had let out a loud yell before pushing her away, the pain on his foot momentarily bewildering him.

Evelyn looked around. He was still between her and the front door. She couldn’t see the knife, and there was no way to know whether he had dropped it or not. She couldn’t make it past him... The backdoor. If she could reach the backyard and jump over the fence to Severus’s side... She had jumped enough fences in her childhood to be confident it would work. Before the man could get his balance back, she pulled the coffee table between them, turning it to make it so that he’d have to jump or push it away before reaching her. It might buy her a small advantage. Surely enough he pushed the table away to get to her, just as she made for the kitchen door, kicking her heels off.

She should have kept them on.

As she took off her shoes, Evelyn lost balance for a second, almost falling. It was enough for him to catch up. She didn’t see how he did it, but he was on her again. He pulled her arm and spun her around, slamming her against the wall. Trapped once more, Evelyn reached for a small stone statue she kept on her bookshelf and tried to hit him over the head with it. He simply stopped her hand midway, grabbing and twisting her arm.

She then felt her body being flung through the room... the side her head hit something hard...

...............  

Severus should have known something was amiss. Ciáran had been pacing about his living room, obviously distraught. Miss Black’s cat had come to his house as he usually did when his owner was away, but he’d been restless all day, and as the time approached that she should be back home from work it only got worse. The wee beast had started to desperately meow and scratch at the door at around 5pm, half an hour before she was to be back to pick him up.

At first, Severus had chalked it up to the usual eccentricity of cats. Felines where known for not
being the most predictable creatures in Earth, and Ciáran was particularly...spirited. But when he heard a loud piercing scream come from outside...he knew something was, indeed, very wrong. A second scream came immediately after the first and Severus’s brain went into full alert.

A multitude of thoughts, none of them pleasant, coursed through his mind as he instinctively looked for his wand before rushing out. He had told her not to come home alone. He had told her, insisted even, that he wanted to keep her safe. But she was stubborn, stubborn and hot headed. She didn’t think anything of Mitchel as being a threat, she thought she could handle him with just an official complaint and a shrug. He should have hexed the bastard. As the cabinet where he kept his wand refused to open for a few long seconds, he hoped to himself that it was indeed Mitchel.

In the small eternity that it took for him to finally make it out of his front door another possibility filled him with dread...Severus was sure the Lestranges wouldn’t come after him any time soon. Not without Claire or Dimitri backing them up. What if his calculations were wrong? It wouldn’t be the first time. If that was the case then...why would they come after her?...Hell, why not? You should always hit a man where it hurt more, and Severus didn’t care much about himself, right now. She was another matter entirely...

Her door was wide open and the lights were out but he could hear more screaming and an unholy racket coming from inside. There was no time to look for the lightswitch...Secrecy be damned...

“LUMOS MAXIMA!”

A fountain of light filled the room to reveal a dark, hulking figure standing in the middle of it. He, for Severus immediately realized it was a man, stood still, dumbstruck. Severus’ eyes, sharp as he had trained them to be through years of spying, immediately told him his worst fear had not, in fact, come true...Trainers, jeans, a hooded sweatshirt and a knife...This man was no wizard, but a muggle. That wasn’t what troubled him, however...It was the sight of a female form laying limp on the floor...Evelyn Black...

“AVA...” he stopped himself midsentence. He couldn’t do this. As much as the rage running fast and hot through his veins blurring his mind and judgement told him to, he couldn’t. He bit back the curse, quickly adopting an alternative plan. “EXPELLIARMUS”

The knife went flying across the room, landing somewhere behind the sofa, as the man fell squarely on his arse, frantically scrambling away, trying unsuccessfully to get back on his feet. Severus couldn’t see his face, hidden behind some scarf of sorts...But he could see his eyes...And they were filled with the most abject terror...

“Good” he thought, walking forward in long strides.

Finally, the man managed to get himself off the floor, crawling on his hands and knees, struggling to get away as fast as his panic would allow him to, shrieking in horror and stumbling on everything, knocking furniture and objects down on his wake. Severus was half tempted to practice a few curses on him, but there was no time for that...Not when he didn’t know the state of Evelyn, still unconscious on the floor. He had to incapacitate this man and quickly. As the hooded man tried to go for the kitchen door, probably trying to escape through the back, Severus blocked his way, moving a table with a flick of his wand.

Desperation gave the man some measure of courage: once he realized there was no way out and Severus stood between him and the front door, his only possible way out, he charged forward. Severus stepped aside letting him fall to his face, possibly breaking some facial bones, if the cracking noise he heard was anything to go by. Severus could think of a few dozen spells that would have solved this in a clean and quick manner, but he couldn’t use deadly force on a muggle, no matter
how the idea seemed appealing...He raised his wand once more, but the proximity to the door had
given his target his energy back and he found use of his legs once more... Just as well, Severus
thought...Chasing him wasn’t his main priority right now. As the man rushed out the door like a bat
out of hell, Severus turned on the lights and rushed to Evelyn’s side.

She was laying on her stomach, out cold. He carefully turned her over, gathering her in his arms as if
she were a broken porcelain doll too delicate to handle without breaking, carefully cradling her
head to his chest, hoping that his moving her wouldn’t cause further harm. There was a nasty cut
above her eyebrow which bled profusely...as head wounds tend to, even when they’re not
particularly serious, he told himself, trying not to think much of it...In any case, it was a head
injury...Passing out after a head injury was never a good sign. He put the thought aside and decided
to focus on what he could do for now. Remembering her attacker had a knife on him, Severus
frantically looked for any open wound. There were no other cuts but what he did found gave him a
sinking feeling into his stomach: her arms had red marks on them, her knees were badly scratched,
her blouse was half open and the skirt partly torn. There had been no time to do anything other than
bash her head to render her unconscious, but the mere thought of what could have happened made
him queasy. Severus could feel his voice tremble as he murmured the incantation that should heal the
cut on her forehead...The soft song of the vulnera senetur came out broken from his lips, steeped in
thick panic...It didn’t seem to work

“Evelyn...talk to me...”

“..............

“I still can’t believe she lives in Spinner’s End.” James grumbled as they approached the crossroad
that led to Spinner’s End

“I know, I wouldn’t have believed it if she hadn’t told me herself. I even asked her why she lived
there, she said her grandfather left her a house there or something like that”

“That’s some inheritance...That’s a dangerous place to live...”

“You should know, isn’t that where you and those rotten wankers used to go when you were up to
no good...I’m glad that stopped...Why DID it stop anyway?”

“Stupid Max Brent was convinced Spinner’s End was haunted...He kept saying some 'invisible
force' knocked him on his arse. 'Invisible force' he said it exactly like this like one of those wankers
who hunt ghosts in those American tv shows”

“So that’s why you didn’t want to come here? Because is haunted? I tought you didn’t believe in
such things.”

“I don’t! I don’t wanna come here on my own because there’s people selling drugs and God knows
what else in those old shacks by the mill”

“Some juvenile delinquent you are...The worse you do is smoking pot and doing some grafitti on
abandoned houses and your mother thinks you’re ripe for the jail house. If she knew she only needed
a ghost to get you in line...”

“Tancey I...” James had an indignant answer for her teasing but it got cut short as someone came
running their way and, on trying to make it between the two, bumped on both, tossing Tancey to the
ground.

“HEY YOU! YOU’RE BONKERS!!” James yelled, helping his friend to her feet
“James...James!” she pulled on his sleeve, suddenly scared

“What?”

“He was coming from Spinner’s End”

His eyes widened from the sudden realization of what she was implying.

“You go check on Miss Black.” he barked before running away from her, following the direction of the man who had just passed them.

“JAMES, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?”

“JUST GO!” he yelled back not giving her time to react. Grunting in frustration, Tancey ran in the opposite direction, towards Spinner’s End.

………………

Tancey ran as fast as she could. When she finally made into Spinner’s End, she saw the lights on and the door ajar on one of the houses. She quickly made her way down the street, glancing at the numbers atop of the doors. Surely enough that house was Miss Black’s, the number 12. She entered without announcing herself to find the room in complete disarray and a man kneeling in the middle of it cradling something in his arms. Soon she realized that was the man Ms. Black had introduced to them at the Halloween movie festival and what he was cradling in his arms was Miss Black herself.

“Constance? What are you doing here?” he sounded surprise, but seemed too concerned about Miss Black to pay much attention to her.

“I came to...” she stammered “What happened?”

“Quick, find the phone. I can’t wake her up, we need an ambulance.”

“Was it...that man?” she asked, frantically trying to find a phone in the middle of the mess. “The one who just ran past us?”

“What do you mean ‘us’” He asked, carefully leaving Evelyn on ground to help the girl.

“Me and James”

“James? Where is he,?”

“He ran after him” she told him blankly

“What? Fuck, just what we needed!” he rushed past her

“Where are you going?”

“To get that idiot friend of yours back! You call emergency and wait with her. If she wakes up you try to keep her awake for as long as you can, but don’t move her!”

………………

Oh, muggles...Always so entertaining...
Even more entertaining sight was to see Severus Snape bent out of shape on account of that woman, he tought, leaning against the window, lazily following the night’s events. So some muggle had broken into her house, small surprise in a place with Cokeworth’s reputation for criminal activity...Then in came rushing Sir Galahad to save his lady. If only that poor muggle criminal had known he had just had the misfortune to face one of the most powerful wizards in Britain...Remarkable restraint Snape had shown, not outright killing him.

He had tought the show was over, when a muggle girl entered the scene...There would be act II, then, he mused, watching as Snape made his way out of the house and rushed down the street, swiftly taking on he form of a Raven.

James´ pursuit had been fruitless. He had kept up with the fleeing man well until the bridge and almost had him within arm´s reach. But the man had hopped on an old piece of rubbish motorcycle that was waiting for him by the bridge, and there was no way to get him unless James could grow wings. At least he had managed to get a good look at him...He was sure he had seen that...

“What the hell were you thinking, running after that maniac?” A cutting, hissing voice came from behind James, as he felt someone yank him by the collar of the jacket and spin him around roughly.

“I lost him him!” the boy yelped, more surprised than angered. Wasn´t this the bloke that had come with Ms. Black to the Halloween party? Where had he come from? James never saw or heard him approach.

“Good thing you did! That lunatic just assaulted your teacher and you go chasing him like some dimwit with a hero complex! I have enough to worry about without you getting yourself killed, you dunderhead!”

“What did he do to her?”

Severus didn´t dignify his question with an answer, choosing instead to just drag the lad along. James wiggled himself out of his grip, but followed him anyway.

“Snape! That´s your name, right? I saw him!”

“We all did, you want a medal?”

“No I really did see him!”

“His face you mean?” Severus stopped and turned around.

“Yes. I mean, no, I saw...” James stumbled on his words, trying to put togheter a coherent sense while running out of breath.

“Great.” Severus rolled his eyes and walked away “Let´s go. I had to leave your friend all alone with Evelyn back in the house.”

James kept on trying to explain himself, but Snape kept on walking, forcing him to follow, flustered and short of breath. They arrived back at Spinner´s End in a hurry and James tried to get him to listen one last time, but he wouldn´t.

“Snape, I...”

“Just shut your gob for now, lad!”
“But that window...” James stood for a moment, staring at one of the windows of one of the abandoned houses that stood ominously around them...

He must have been seeing things...

.................

“She’s coming to!” Tancey announced as soon as the two made their way in. Evelyn was mumbling softly as her eyes fluttered, half-open.

“Keep on holding her head steady” he ordered the girl, kneeling beside them.

“Severus...” Evelyn slurred, obviously confused.

“Talk to me, Evelyn...” he begged, hoping she’d be coherent at least. But, as usual, Severus had underestimated her. As soon as she managed to get her eyes to open, she looked around and sat up almost as if nothing had happened.

“What are you two doing here?” she shot at the two youngsters, still slurring but certainly not confused anymore.

“Let’s not worry about this now. Now you have to stay down. You were hit in the head, and we don’t know if...”

“I’m perfectly fine, Severus, but these two...” she immediately brought her hand up to the open gash Severus had been too incompetent to heal with magic, wincing in pain. “God, my head...”

“That’s it, we need to get you to a hospital” as if on cue, he heard sirens approaching...”Well, finally...”

.................

“She can give a statement later.” Severus barked at the police officer who stood next to Evelyn’s bed as a nurse finished her stitches. They were waiting for her to be moved to a different room to get a CT scan and screen for any possible brain injuries or broken bones, and this insolent muggle thought nothing of barging in demanding a statement. Muggle authorities...Just as useless as wizarding ones, and considerably more brutish. Cokeworth officials managed to be even worse than average, somehow...

“Excuse me, Mr...?”

“Snape.”

“Are you a family member?”

“Excuse me BOTH of you gentlemen!” the nurse seemed almost as annoyed by the officer as Severus himself “The patient is about to undergo a CT scan, so nobody will be answering any questions now.”

“Very well” the office let out, indifferently “I’ll just talk to the kids then”
“Not without their parents presence you won’t” Evelyn, who had been quiet thus far, stated harshly, her eyes narrow. Severus knew what she was afraid of...James had a bit of a record with the police. Vandalism and minor offenses but still... If the lad was put in the scene of a violent assault, even as a perfectly innocent witness, God only knew what his father would do to him.

“Constance has already called her parents, and they’re on their way. Don’t worry.” Severus assured her, then turning to the officer “I’m sure we can wait till they get here.”

“Sure, sure” the officer strolled outside nonchalantly as the nurse shooed them away. Without skipping a beat he turned back to Severus again as soon as they were out in the corridor “Mr. Snape, is it your testimony that...”

Severus sighed, looking over his shoulder to see Evelyn being wheeled away to another room. James and Constance were sitting near the front desk waiting for her mother to show up accompanied by Angela and Matthew. Severus had called them before to ask if they could drive the two teenagers to the hospital, as Severus went with Evelyn in the ambulance. There was nothing else he could do but give the bloody statement once again to this badge-decorated fool.

.............

They had scanned, checked, prodded and poked her everywhere just to tell her what she already knew: aside from the fact that she had a raging headache, as expected from someone who had banged their head against a coffee table, a sprained wrist, a cut on her forehead and soreness all over her body, she was fine. They still wanted her to stay overnight, “to be safe”.

Then that obnoxious police officer had returned to get her statement.

A statement. Easier said than done. How do you even begin to describe some random stranger jumping on you as you return home from work, in the middle of the street, violating the sanctity of your house, beating and hurting you for no discernible reason, if there was a “reason” possible for such a thing? How do you describe the shattering your entire sense of safety all in a matter of seconds?

How do you begin to describe complete helplessness?

How the hell had that happened? 35 years on God’s green Earth and never had she found herself in this position. An “assault victim”...Evelyn wasn’t used to being a victim... She let out a frustrated sigh.

“Excuse me...” she heard Severus walk in, his voice, sounding sweeter, so much sweeter than it ever did before, to the point of being hard to recognise “The nurse told me Officer Selfrighteous Wanker was done with you.”

“Not a moment too soon”

“He’s pestering your students now...Mr. and Mrs. Francis are there, tough.”

“You didn’t call James’parents, did you?”

“No. Constance’s parents seem well capable of handling it. They’re taking them both home too...Your friend Angela just left to get a change of clothes and some supplies for you”

“Oh, God...I’ve disrupted everybody’s night, haven’t I?”
“You did no such thing.”
“I feel so fecking stupid...”
“Enough of that now...”
“Thank you...”
“Whatever for?”
“If it hadn´t been for you, I might have...”
“I said ‘enough of that’...You need rest. I hear the doctor thinks you should stay for observation”
“Yeah, that´s not going to happen.”
“Evelyn, please, don´t be obstinate.”
She gave him a bizarre look before laughing softly
“Pray tell what´s so funny?”
“You just called me ‘Evelyn’”
“And...?”

“’Evelyn.’ Not ‘Miss Black’” she mimicked his deep voice and mancunian accent so exagerately he couldn´t help buy smirk “I tought I had heard you call me that before, when I was coming to, but I imagined it was just the head injury making me have auditory hallucinations...But you did call me ’Evelyn’”

“Well, it is your name.”
“So it is...And look what it took for you to finally use it. I fear to imagine what it will take for you to start caling me ’Lyn' like all my other friends do...”

“Don´t make this sort of jokes...”

“Well, I guess we have to wait for Angie to come back with my stuff so I can finally go home.”

“The doctor AND the police said you can´t go home.”

“Well, I AM going home.”

“We´re in a bit of hurry, aren´t we, Ms...Black?” The door behind him opened to let in a short, graying woman in a white coat and thick glasses, holding a clipboard that must have had Evelyn´s file on it. She immediately recognised her as the doctor who had been tending to her. Severus stepped aside and let her approach the bed, visibly relieved. He was probably hoping she´d have more success than him in convincing Evelyn to be a good, obedient patient.

“I´m in no hurry...I just don´t see the point of me staying here. My exams came back fine, didn´t they?”

“Yes, yes they did. But we can never be too safe when dealing with head injuries. Your friends reported that you were unconscious for quite a while... It´s wiser to keep you in observation for the time being, just in case.”
“Well, I can go home and if anything is off, I’ll come back then...I’ll just sign a document taking full responsibility...” It was quite enough that she had been attacked in her own house...She wasn’t about to let that bloody eejit keep her from going back home...

“Ms. Black, I can’t keep you here against your will, but as your doctor I strongly urge you to reconsider.”

“Duly noted, doctor, but you still can’t convince me to stay...”

“May I ask, is there anybody who can take care of you? Because given your injuries and the head trauma, I don’t think it’s a good idea to be on your own...”

“I can handle myself just fine...” Evelyn almost laughed at herself...Just like she could handle herself just fine when that man jumped her at her own doorstep and did as he pleased until Severus stepped in...Yeah, she truly knew how to handle herself. Now everybody was treating her like a bloody child...Evelyn refused to cry, but the sheer frustration was almost enough to make tears well up in her eyes...She lived alone and no, she wasn’t safe. Had probably never been but only now she realized it...If it wasn’t for Severus she could have died and nobody would even find her until it was too late...She should be able to handle herself, she always had...She never had to rely on anybody for anything, and yet here she was...requiring a nanny just to be allowed to go back to her own house. “I just want to go home...”

“That officer said your house still needs to be checked for evidence” Severus pointed out matter of factly. Evelyn had forgotten about that detail... “He also said it might not be safe to go back there so soon, and I tend to agree, as a matter of fact...”

“Your friend just arrived with your personal effects, maybe you can stay with her? It would be safer to have someone to look after you if you insist on leaving” the doctor offered, obviously not willing to debate her for the rest of the night.

“Angela? Absolutely not. This is the last week she has with Matthew before he has to return to work, and I’ve spoiled it enough for them.”

“Fine, then” Severus grumbled, approaching her bed “If you absolutely must be that stubborn, then I may have a good enough solution”

“As long as I get to leave the hospital...”

“...You’re coming to my house.”
Part 5 - Halloween - Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Severus Snape is officially dead, but the Lestrange brothers and their new associates suspect otherwise. Snape worries, Kingsley Shacklebolt makes a deal and Evelyn gets caught in the middle. Dueling happens.

Evelyn had protested, but what use would that be? Severus was right: she couldn’t go back to her house, at least not until the police was done sweeping it for evidence, and since she didn’t want to bother Angela any more than she already had, the only option left was going to his house. She had nowhere else to go, really... Even if it had been his idea, Evelyn still felt uneasy about it. In a single night Severus had not only rescued her from a violent assault, but also accompanied her to the hospital and through every single medical procedure, dealt with the authorities, with the hospital staff, the nurses and doctors, made sure James and Tancey were safe and assisted by responsible adults and called Angela and Matthew, so they could take care of anything he might have overlooked ... It was downright abusive to expect him to take care of her for the rest of the night as well.

As much as she didn’t want to admit, Evelyn did need assistance. Her doctor was right: her head hurt and she had lost consciousness for quite a while...She couldn’t be alone for now; there was still the risk of brain injury, loss of consciousness or balance and God only knew what else...Her sister had told her of many head injury cases in which people were seemingly fine, only to collapse hours later, sometimes even fatally. Evelyn was in no position to reject Severus’ offer. Particularly not when he phrased it in the form of an order. She knew Severus wasn’t prone to negotiating. He was rigid to the point of being authoritarian...probably a remnant of his teaching days...Evelyn didn’t really hold it against him, as she could be quite bossy herself. The few disagreements they had had in the month or so in which they had known each other had always ended in very close ties after endless verbal sparring...But not today. She simply had no energy to protest. She was tired, frustrated and in pain. For once it would be good to leave the decisions to somebody else...and to be honest, it was comforting that it was Severus...If she already trusted him before, now she´d gladly leave him in charge of her life if needed be.

She just needed a good night of sleep.

Too exhausted to be hard-headed, Evelyn simply got into Angela´s car and they all drove back to Spinner´s End.

Severus looked on as Angela and Matthew bid Evelyn goodbye, showering her with advice and concern. It was quite remarkable how she could make friends so fast and easily. When he had called Miss Holt, she had pretty much flown to help. One would imagine they had been friends for decades, instead of colleagues for barely a month. Matthew had been just as forthcoming, even tough he had seen Evelyn maybe a handful of times, if that much. Her two students went without mention,
Severus could see the fear and concern in their eyes. Even Severus, in spite of himself and his futile attempts of resisting, had to admit, there was something about Evelyn Black that made it nearly impossible to be indifferent to her. Maybe there really were people in the world who could naturally inspire deep affection and draw others in with the same irresistible power stars could make planets orbit around them... Severus had met one such person in his life thus far and he thought he wouldn’t live to encounter another... Evelyn Black, as it was becoming a habit of hers, had proved him wrong...

Matthew gave him the bag Angela had packed for Evelyn, offering once more to come over if needed. Severus reassured him that it wouldn’t be necessary, and the couple finally drove off. Severus opened the front door to let Evelyn in, offering his arm for support. She accepted it. He wasn’t sure if she really needed the help or was just too tired to protest.

“What a night...” she sighed, flatly, once they were inside.

“I’ve had worse...”

“I won’t even ask...”

“Don’t. Trust me on this, you don’t want to know...”

“It’s past 10...” she stated dully, looking up at the clock on the mantle.

“You must be tired...I’ll show you your room now if you like...”

“Actually...I really need a shower...”


Severus led her upstairs, keeping a featherlight hand on her back as they climbed up the narrow and steep staircase, as if fearing she might collapse at any moment. He was obviously exagerating, but she didn’t say anything. Evelyn wouldn’t admit it outloud but that light, nearly imperceptible touch was comforting in a most strange way, and she wasn’t quite willing to let it go. The events of the night had shaken her so deeply that she’d cling to anything that could give her back some of that sense of safety that had been so crudely shattered. Regardless of how silly the notion in on itself might seem. So, she simply decided to allow Severus to treat her like the invalid she (hoped) she wasn’t. Once upstairs, he led her to one of the rooms, opening the door and letting her in, being careful to stay behind, standing at the door, as if silently telling her that he’d only go in with her permission. The poor man was obviously walking on egg shells.

“Severus, could you bring the bag in, please?” she asked, making a pathetic gesture to her own sprained wrist, as if to justify the request, but really, it was just for the sake of getting him to step in. He quietly walked into the room and set the bag on the bed, a very simple iron framed bed that looked at least a few decades old. In fact, much like the rest of the house, this room seemed frozen somewhere between the late 60s and the mid-70s: the geometric pattern on the pale green wallpaper had faded nearly into oblivion and posters of a few Protopunk and Punk bands and football pennants were the only decorations on the walls: The Who, The Cure, Joy Division, Sex Pistols; Cokeworth FC and the national team. As far as furniture went, aside from the bed there was a tall bookcase that looked about to collapse under the weight of more books than it was designed to contain, a fair share of which looked like school manuals and textbooks, an old dunk on a corner with more books piled
over it and next to it a very rickety looking set of desk and chair.

The room looked like that of a child. The football memorabilia and a handful of toys on a small shelf over the bed, one action figure and a couple metal cars, made it clear that it had been a little boy. Above this shelf, a bizarre looking banner was hung: deep green with dark grey details, with a crest drawn on it, and inside the crest a snake rendered in a lighter shade of green, rampant as if about to attack. She couldn’t identify what team that could possibly be, assuming it was a team, even though she fancied herself quite a connoisseur of football, from watching so much of it on the telly with her father and bother growing up. Most interestingly, the room looked pristinely clean and well organized for a bedroom that apparently hadn’t been used since around the time Ian Curtis was still alive….as if it had been carefully kept that way.

“I know is not ideal” he told her, almost apologetic

“It’s perfect Severus, don’t worry….This room...if you don’t mind me asking...”

“It was mine. Well, when my parents were still alive, that is. After my mother passed on I moved into their old bedroom and never quite did anything with this one. I would have given you the other bedroom if there had been enough time to prepare it properly, there’s more space and a bigger bed but…I’m afraid I’ve turned into a bit of a hoarder over the years, so you wouldn’t exactly be much at ease there...” he smirked somberly.

“Severus, I told you not to worry. You’ve gone well out of your way for me as is. The bedroom is perfectly fine.”

“For what’s worth I can assure you the bed is comfortable. Anyway, I’ll leave you alone. Bathroom is the last door to your right. I can get you a towel or anything you need...”

“I don’t think that will be necessary” she smiled at him, and started to unpack the bag. “I think Angela had everything covered...Oh, no...”

“Is there anything wrong?”

“Oh, no, it’s nothing important” she sighed, momentarily forgetting he was there and starting to ramble to herself.”I think she forgot to pack me something to sleep in. Well, makes sense, she thought I’d be spending the night at the hospital, so of course I wouldn’t need a nightgown, the hospital would give me one. Oh, well, I suppose I’ll just sleep in my clothes...Severus?”

He had disappeared. She stood dumbfounded for a few seconds before he returned with a pile of neatly folded linens and wordlessly set them on the bed. She looked down at it to see it was a bedding set, crisp white and smelling of freshly cleaned. On top of it there were two other articles of different fabric, both grey in color, that she didn’t quite identify at first.

“It should be comfortable enough to sleep in for tonight...” he told her quietly.

Evelyn picked the first grey article up and unfolded it. It was a male nightshirt, its color faded by time and use. It was as methodically clean as the bedding set, but the softness of the fabric and a few threadbare spots indicated quite a bit of wear. The second was an equally clean-yet-worn-out fleece robe, surely meant to be worn with the nightshirt.

“Thank you, Severus...You didn’t have to...” How many times had she thanked him tonight?...

“I’ll leave you be. You know where the bathroom is, and I believe you have everything you need. The doctor said you could still get vertigo, so do be careful with wet tiles and whatnot. I’ll be downstairs, call me if anything.”. His tone had shifted back to his usual matter-of-fact, cold one and
once he was done with his laundry list of recommendations, he left without giving her the time to answer.

Evelyn stood where she was, holding his nightshirt, slightly confused by his abrupt change in demeanour. It shouldn’t be surprising, though. Severus was naturally guarded and withdrawn, she could only imagine how bothersome it could be to have an unexpected house guest. If anything it only made his gesture all the more meaningful. She looked down at his worn nightshirt, cracking a smile...She shouldn’t expect an eccentric hermit to wear regular pajamas to bed, after all...An old nightshirt that could have been designed for a Mr. Scrooge costume seemed to, indeed, fit him better. Absent-mindedly, she brought it to her face. It smelled of soap, not cigarettes and oak moss, she noted, with a small pang of disappointment.

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Severus suddenly felt his body getting heavy. The adrenaline rush had run its course, so now his muscles relaxed into an aching state of rest...What a night...It was barely 11pm and he felt drained...Sure, his body was tired, but his mind was still racing.

Fortunately it hadn’t been this time...But it would come eventually...There would come a time when the remaining Death Eaters would come after him...Sure, he was “officially” dead, but Severus knew better than to take solace in that. Rodolphus was as obsessive and paranoid as his, thankfully late, wife had been. If Draco was right and the Lestranges had found their way to Claire and Dimitri, it was only a matter of time before he could convince them that coming after the traitor would suit their plans. After all, he needed them if he wanted to get to the dagger, and Severus knew that was what he wanted...

It was a matter of time before they came after him...And, only now he realized, Miss Evelyn Teresa Black would be right there, right next door when that happened, blissfully unaware of it all: wizards, wars, espionage, murders...Even the fact that she was, through an amazing series of twists of fate, related to it all. It was almost funny that this muggle woman who lived right next door to him was, in fact, related to the maniac who would love nothing more than to murder Severus as soon as he got the chance...Small world.

For now he had nothing to worry...Today’s events, while terrifying enough, were nothing compared to what could happen if she was caught in the middle of a Death Eater revenge plot that could be just waiting to unfold. Severus was used to always think in terms of worst case scenarios...It was a habit born of necessity...The “worst case scenario” had a nasty habit of actually happening, and it had caught him unprepared once...No more, he had decided years ago...Once had been enough.

Before Evelyn moved next door, the “worst case scenario” worried him very little. Should his former associates show up at his doorstep, he wouldn’t be too bothered about the possibility of meeting his demise at their hands. Severus had outlived his own plans and calculations on nothing but dumb luck, and to be honest, it would be entertaining to watch them scramble to get information out of him that he’d never give them. It’s impossible to extort information out of a man who doesn’t fear or care for his life anymore. What will you threaten him with, if he has nothing of value to lose?

But what was the worst case scenario now? The thought made him shudder. Severus remembered the gelid rush of panic that overcame him just a few hours before when he saw Evelyn bleeding on the floor. Yes, panic, there was no way around it. Panic like he hadn’t felt in over 17 years...Panic so thick and paralyzing he couldn’t even bring himself to perform a simple healing spell. What would happen if...Severus couldn’t bring himself to even formulate the thought...Not tonight. Evelyn was safe, and the Lestranges were far away...If only tonight, he could afford to not think of the worst case scenario.
For now, his most pressing concern was the fact that his pantry was a barren wasteland and neither
him nor Evelyn had had dinner yet...

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Evelyn had gathered her personal items, towel, soap, shampoo, and everything that Angela had
packed for her, and locked herself in Severus’ bathroom. Mechanically, like an automaton, she
undressed and removed the bandages protecting the her wrist, her scrapped knees and the stitches on
her forehead. That bloody sprained wrist made the task of undressing and cleaning herself slow and
uncomfortable. She tried not to think of it. In fact, the less she thought, the better. At least for a while
she wanted to operate on auto-pilot, tending to her basic needs first: to get clean, to get the stench of
hospital off her skin, to wear something comfortable, to ease the dull pain on her head and wrist, the
stabbing, burning pain on her knees, to finally get a bit of rest.

She stepped under the shower, trying to rub off the miasma of powerlessness and terror that seemed
to stick stubbornly to her, ignoring the unpleasant burn of the warm water hitting her abrasions and
sutures. Even if it hurt, the feeling of warm water running down her body was comforting. Water
could wash away anything, she knew. Salt sea water or warm shower water, as long as she could
immerse herself in it, she knew it would get better, eventually. If only she could find a way to
prolong that feeling of complete, womb-like oblivion. But she couldn’t. She needed rest...Sleep
before facing the world again the next morning. There would be a lot to deal with. She’d have to go
to the police station, clean the mess at her house, check on James and Tancey...She’d have to call her
mother and sister, eventually...Oh, she could already hear her mother’s shrieking through the phone
“How many times have I told you it was insanity to move to that pigsty of a town. I told you crime
was rampant over there and you didn’t listen to me, you just have to be stubborn, now look what
happened.”...

If only that had been the worst of it.

The worst of it, the one thing that made her feel like screaming in frustration, was that whoever had
done that was still out there somewhere. For what she knew he could be right outside on the street
this very moment. The mere idea that the only thing that stood between her and God only knew what
dreadful fate was the lucky coincidence that her neighbour just happened to be home was
maddening. The fact that none of it would have happened if she hadn’t told Severus to not pick her
up from work. Yes, Evelyn Teresa Black, who had made such a point of being self-sufficient her
whole life, now had to deplore the fact that if only she had accepted the company of a man, she
would be safer. Because you never think awful things will happen to you, even though awful things
happen to millions of other women like you every single day. And the kids... God, James and
Constance were on their way to her house when it all happened. What could have happened to them?

She had tried not to look at herself in the mirror, but as she got dressed, Evelyn couldn’t avoid
catching a glimpse. It looked bad...The suture on her forehead was an ugly, raggedy metallic line that
looked almost cartoonish, there was a small bruise on her cheekbone that would probably be purple
in the morning, and a tiny cut on her lower lip she hadn’t noticed till now.

This face couldn’t be hers, could it?

Evelyn had resisted till now, but looking at her reflexion in the mirror did her in. Tears started to
swell up in her eyes, and she was entirely too exhausted to fight them.

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So, apparently Severus was not completely inept as far as cooking went...That is, if instant soup with
some extra vegetables thrown in to make it look more like food fit for human consumption could be
considered cooking at all. It would have to do. It was the best he could do with his meager pantry, and his mind torn between worry and desperately fighting to ignore the fact that Evelyn was showering right upstairs. It was not only pathetic but ridiculously impudent of him to even let his mind wander in that direction, particularly considering what chain of events had brought her to his house, but there was no controlling where his thoughts went.

Severus had quite a few reasons to have reservations about inviting her to stay over night, and the chance that she might accidentally stumble onto a magical object or end up in harm’s way due to whatever magical event were only the first in the list. But he couldn’t have predicted he’d suddenly turn into a bloody hormonal teenager and become entirely too bothered by her presence would even make it into the equation. It was plain laughable, but nevertheless predictable. After all, he had spent the past couple weeks trying his best to ignore the fact that, yes, his neighbour was indeed a lovely woman, in more ways than one, and yes, it had been quite a while since he had been thrown off balance by any member of the fair sex in the same way he had been by her. He had no trouble admitting that, and he shouldn’t have...All part of the natural order of things...But to actually entertain certain thoughts while she was under his roof, distressed and trusting him to be a gentleman was a bit beyond the pale...

Sipping some hastily made black coffee he glanced at the clock. Over half an hour...Could she still be in the bathroom? Maybe she had gone straight from the shower to bed...She must have been tired enough...It was better to take a look in any case... Severus went upstairs to find the bedroom empty. He looked over to the bathroom and saw the light was still on. Had she really been in there for 30 minutes? He immediately thought of the worst. Her doctor had warned them about vertigo and possible loss of consciousness...she could have...

He walked over and knocked. No answer.

He knocked again.

Silence.

“Evelyn? Evelyn, are you ok?” By the third attempt, Severus was nearly banging on the door. It was impossible that she hadn’t heard him. When no sound came from inside he started to consider opening, even if by force. “Evelyn, I’m coming in.”

He didn’t have to make good on his warning. The door opened slowly, only a narrow crack at first, then hesitantly wider until Severus could see her standing in front of him. In his drab grey robe, that was more than a bit too big on her, her thick made of hair still humid, silent and morose she looked wilted; a far cry from the exuberant dynamo he had become used to to. She was so huddled inside the robe, arms folded around her own body, that she actually looked smaller, and without her signature high heels the effect was even more flagrant. He wasn’t quite sure if it was cold that was making her shrink into herself like that, but if he had to guess, he’d say it wasn’t. But that wasn’t what tugged at him...It was her eyes. Their luminous golden brown had gone dull, and they were clearly bloodshot.

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“You were taking a while...I was afraid you weren’t feeling well...” Severus told her apologetically. Evelyn could see from his expression he was more than a bit stunned by the state of her. Severus wasn’t stupid, and it was clear for anyone with half a mind and functioning eyesight the she had been crying. But, bless him, Severus was courteous enough to act like he hadn’t noticed anything, and allowed her to maintain some measure of dignity.

“Is a bit hard to shower with my wrist like this...And I didn’t want to move too fast either, because
everything aches...” she faked a smirk “I´m sorry I had you worried...I´ll be right out.”

“You´re going to need help with the bandages” She could tell he made sure to keep all his remarks flat as possible, like he wanted her to know he wasn´t patronzing her, and Evelyn couldn´t thank him enough for it.

“Oh, it´s not necessary...”

“At least your wrist. You can´t do it with a single hand. If you´re done with your shower, then come downstairs, I´ll help you with that before we eat something.”

“I´m not hungry...”

“You? Not hungry? I refuse to believe that.I know you´re upset, but the day something takes away your apettite, then surely the end of times is near. Now stop with this nonsense and come downstairs.”

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Evelyn sat awkwardly on the sitting room sofa as Severus wrapped her wrist in the bandages the hospital had supplied them with. He proceeded with the task silently and carefully as a professional would have done, but that only made her more uncomforatable. Now that she had finally settled down, Evelyn suddenly remembered how poorly she had treated him this morning. And after all he had already done, as he sat in front of her, personally tending to her wounds, she couldn´t help but feel like the worst person in the world.

“Severus...”

“yes?...” he answered, too distracted by his task.

“I want to apologize.”

“...what for?” he looked up, seeming genuinely confused.

“For this morning...I was a complete bitch to you for no reason” A tiny voice inside her mind screamed at her...No reason? No reason? Why that was fine joke if there ever was one. There was a reason, she just wouldn´t be caught dead admiting it...

“Oh, that...”

“Yes, that...I´m so sorry. I wasn´t mad at you. I just got upset with that...your guest. And I took it out on you.” More lies. It wasn´t that. It really wasn´t that, Evelyn, and you know it.

“No harm done. I was under the impression I had done something to offend you...I suppose that´s cleared up then.”

“It was really stupid of me. Particularly not knowing your guest or the circumstances, I mean..Here I was, like a bull in a glass store, barging in when you´re obviously dealing with something important...”

“Something important? With Narcissa? Oh, dear... ” he smirked and scoffed lightly.

“I mean...uh...Is none of my business, of course. You´re a single man, so whoever you fancy seeing...” great, she was rambling. One day she´d learn to think before speaking, but that day was
obviously not today.

“Wait...” he looked astonished for a moment, then a second later it seemed as if he was about to burst laughing “You think Narcisssa and I...”

“I didn´t say that! I mean, is none of my business if you are, I just mean, I shouldn´t be getting into your personal life like that and...What´s so funny?”

He was snickering so hard it was almost frightening.

“I´m sorry, Evelyn...Is just that...the notion that Narcissa and I could be remotely involved in any way with each other is entirely too ridiculous to even entertain.”

“You just lost me.”

“Narcissa and I are, for lack of a better word, friends.”

“What do you mean 'for lack of a better word'?”

“Narcissa is the wife of an old friend of mine I´m not that close to her, if that´s what you´re wondering, but her husband and I were friends growing up, and I´m their son´s godfather, so I get to socialize with her a wee bit more than I´d prefer.”

“I see...” well, if she wasn´t feeling stupid enough...

“That´s why she was here, as a matter of fact...on acount of the boy. Teenagers doing stupiding things, you know how that goes...She thought I might know what he´s up to...”

“Oh, my God. I thought she was being rude to me, and she was just a mother worried about her child? Now I actually feel worse.”

“Well, don´t. She WAS being rude to you.” he seemed even more amused “Nothing personal...That´s just how she is. Mind you, Narcissa is not a bad person but...she can be a bit of a...how do I put this nicely...a tremendously pompous and self-important shrew...I guess is what happens when you grow up in a rich and pretentious family, so is not entirely her fault, I suppose.”

“Still...I shouldn´t have...”

“I believe we cleared that up. Now you really should get something to eat and go to bed. You must be exhausted.”
Chapter Summary

Severus Snape is officially dead, but the Lestrange brothers and their new associates suspect otherwise. Snape worries, Kingsley Shacklebolt makes a deal and Evelyn gets caught in the middle. Dueling happens.

Shacklebolt looked up from his paperwork when John Dawlish walked into his office. Dawlish had been an auror for decades, a battle-worn veteran who had seen two wars and worked his way up the ranks, being, at one point, the assigned bodyguard of Cornelius Fudge himself. Dawlish had served honourably for a long time, possibly for far too long, but refused to retire. He was stubborn, it was known, but the interim minister had a more than passing impression that Dawlish’s insistence had more to do with the fact that he simply couldn’t forgive himself for “failing” his duty in the Second War.

Even though he had been cleared of all charges of collaboration with Death Eaters once it was proven that he had acted under the Imperius Curse, Dawlish himself couldn’t let it go. His hair had gone from gray to nearly all white in a matter of months, and his usual stern expression had turned into a frozen mask of weariness. Shacklebolt knew he could trust him. Dawlish might a tired and disillusioned old auror, but he was still one of the best. If anyone could keep tabs on Severus Snape without raising suspicion, it was him.

However, Dawlish’s presence in his office tonight worried him. The auror reported to him a weekly basis only. They had detected a Death Eater spy operating in Cokeworth, watching Snape’s every step, and since then Dawlish had been "watching the watcher", as he said himself. The Spy in question was a low-ranking Death Eater, too unimportant to raise any suspicion during the massive purge that followed Voldemort’s demise. Which was precisely why the Rotts had selected him for the job.

Ludwig and Claire Rott. Lucius Malfoy’s cousin and her German husband. Snape had been correct in his suspicion, particularly concerning Draco. Malfoy had sent his son to France, ostensively to spend some time with their relatives, but it was only his way of maintaining a connection to the Rotts, while they provided support for escaped Death Eaters. And of course, rumours of Snape’s status changing from "very much dead" to "potentially alive" had immediately inspired the Rotts to send in a spy.

Dawlish had managed to intercept every letter the spy had send to the Rotts and replaced them with fake ones that didn’t provide any information. The ministry was sure Snape’s status and location were protected but they had decided to allow the spy to continue to act, in hopes of gathering information about the Rotts’ future plans through intercepted mail. However, all information they did manage to gather came from Draco, and even that wasn’t much. Ludwig and Claire never answered any of the fake letters.

The whole situation had come to a stalemate.

But now Dalish was standing in front of him, when he should be reporting a only few days later. Something must have happened.
"So..?"

"Snape´s muggle neighbour."

"Did something happen to her?" Shaklebolt had feared that. Apparently, Snape had grown close to a muggle woman, and while that wasn´t in any way relevant to the investigation, having a muggle in such proximity to a Death Eater spy plot was extremely dangerous. But, thus far, it didn´t seem like that would be of any consequence. With the spy´s letters being intercepted even before the owls made it out of the Greater Manchester area, it was certain that nobody other than Dawlish and Shaklebolt knew anything about Snape´s connection to this muggle. Or so he expected...

"She has been attacked in front of her house tonight."

"What?!" The minister nearly shouted, bolting from his chair “I thought you had intercepted all the letters! Nobody is supposed to know Snape is even alive, much less who he associates with. Don´t tell me this is a retaliation attack. On a muggle?!"

"No, it wasn´t." Dawlish answered with his usual ennui-filled tone "A common muggle criminal. Nothing too serious happened."

"Well, then..?"

"This is the last letter. It was sent out immediately after the attack on the muggle woman." he handed him an envelope "It details the entire event and outcome, as well as Snape´s action and the fact that she is now sheltered in his house. It also suggests it would be a good idea to target her somehow. I believe this little farce has gone on for long enough. We´re not getting anything out of this, and if anybody finds out about this woman we might end up with a dead muggle in our hands. And I don´t think Snape will be too willing to collaborate if anything happens to her."

“Fair point. I suppose this game of cat and mouse will lead us nowhere. Aprehend him, and continue the fake correspondence as to not arise any suspicion. We can´t risk having the Rotts suspect Snape is alive. In due time we´ll spread word that this man has been arrested on an unrelated charge outside of Cokeworth, which should provide enough cover. Also..Do something about this other man.”

“Which other man?”

“The muggle who attacked Snape´s neighbour”

“Sir, with all do respect, this matter doesn´t concern us. We should leave him to the muggle authorities.”

“You said it yourself that Snape might be less inclined to collaborate if this woman is harmed, so let´s make sure this doesn´t happen, shall we? A `muggle common criminal´ shouldn´t be too much of a hassle to deal with...See if you can obtain any information from the Cokeworth´s police files. They must be easy enough to break into overnight.”

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It shouldn´t come as a surprise that she would have trouble falling asleep, Evelyn thought. She was exhausted, but her brain refused to allow her body any rest. After lying in bed for some 30 minutes, forcing her eyes to stay closed in the vain hope of falling asleep, she finally gave up.

Finding something to read might help...But she expected the shelves to hold naught but school books and story books. This had been Severus childhood bedroom after all, and he admitedly hadn´t changed it since. She didn´t want to go downstairs either. Evelyn knew Severus was a night owl, so
he was probably still up, and she had bothered him enough for the night. And if he had gone to bed, she still wouldn’t feel too comfortable going through his personal library while he slept. She knew he was quite particular about those books of his...Well, school books would have to do then. They were probably more sleep-inducing anyway.

Evelyn scanned the spines of the rows of volumes that perilously filled the shelves to full capacity. Nearly all of them were so old that the titles had vanished. She felt like pulling any of them out would make the whole thing collapse. There was, however, a small volume tucked in between two rows of books that looked like it could be safely removed without bringing everything down with it.

It was a small paperback that had been covered with powder blue paper, much in the same way children used to do to their school books to protect the cover from wearing when she was little. Upon opening it, the first thing she saw, on the blank page preceding the title, was a dedication, written in very regular, small, rounded handwriting

“To my Prince.
January, 9th, 1966”

The dedication wasn’t signed, but no signature was necessary for her to know who had given Severus that. It couldn’t be anyone other than his mother. It didn’t really take much thought to figure it out. “Prince” or “princess” were some of the most common terms of endearment mothers directed at their children, Evelyn’s own mother not being that much different in that regard. Judging by the fact that Severus looked to be in his late 30s or early 40s, he would have been a young boy in 1968. Finally, no mother needs to sign a dedication for her child to know she was the one who wrote it. None of the books Evelyn’s own parents had given her over the course of her life bore any signatures on the dedications, as she knew their handwriting as well as she knew her own...This had to have been written by Eileen Snape.

Severus had told her about the hard times him and his mother had gone through, a bitter tale of neglect and abuse so personal and difficult it had made Evelyn wonder why he would share it with her at all. Seeing this short, simple dedication on the first blank page of what was presumably a story book gave her a glimpse into something much more pleasant. She had no doubt Severus was close to his mother, but seeing physical evidence of such closeness warmed her heart. It felt good to know there had been love somewhere in his childhood.

Judging by the date it was probably a birthday gift. There was no special calendar celebration on January 9th that would merit a gift, so that had to be Severus’ birthday. Evelyn should make a mental note of it. It was November which meant January would roll in soon, so she should keep this in mind. It seemed fitting that Severus would have a winter birthday. Was he a Capricorn, then? Or an Aquarius...Nevermind that, her sister had always been more into horoscopes than she had.

Having decided this would be the perfect nighttime reading, Evelyn turned the page, curious to see what Eileen had chosen as a birthday gift for her “prince”.

.........

Severus had always been a light sleeper. As both a spy and a teacher in a boarding school where every student was capable of producing magic, being a light sleeper was pretty much a matter of safety. He had dozed off on his armchair, sitting by the fire, when the nearly imperceptible creaking of the floorboards startled him awake as easily as the loudest alarm clock would have.

“I’m sorry.” Evelyn seemed just as startled as him, standing on the last step of the stairs, staring at him. “I didn’t mean to wake you up.”
“You didn´t.” He lied. “What´s the matter?”

“Couldn´t sleep...Would you mind if I...” she gestured the sofa, hesitantly

“By all means.”

She sat quietly for a while before speaking again.

“...Severus...? Can I ask you something?”

“Sure...”

“I´m really sorry but...I couldn´t sleep so...I took a look at your bookcase...I swear I didn´t mean to prod, I just wanted to read something to see if I could fall asleep”

“Ah... and did you find anything that piqued your interest?” Only then did Severus notice she had a book with her.

“This...”

"Woah-wait...” he choked on his own saliva when he realized what book she was holding. “H-How -- how did you find this?”

"It was on the bookshelf by the bed...I´m sorry, is it something I wasn´t supposed to...I uderstand if it is, really..."

Severus should have disguised his obvious shock, but he couldn´t help his mouth hanging open. She wasn´t supposed to have found that... His mother had cast a spell over all of his books that had anything to do with magic or the Wizarding community...School books, story books, any volume that was remotely related to magical matters had been carefully charmed in order to make it invisible to muggles. It was Eileen´s way of making sure Tobias wouldn´t go into another violent fit as he usually did whenever magic came up. Even after her passing, Severus hadn´t lifted the spell. In fact, he had used the same charm to conceal more objects, specially after he moved out of the house. It was too risky to leave such articles in a house that was empty and vulnerable to potential break-ins for most of the year.

How could Evelyn have found this? More than just finding it: she wasn´t supposed to even see it. Not only did she see and find it, she was handling it...reading it.

"Ahh...I don´t” He walked up and took the book from her, looking at the cover, pretending to be trying to remember it, to buy himself time “I didn't think I still had this. Was one of the books my mother read to me when I was a boy.”

"Yes, I saw the dedication" she smiled. Severus couldn´t remember the dedication, so he opened the book to see it again. It was mildly embarassing, to be honest.

"You did.” he cleared his throat and returned the book to her “I see no reason for you not to read it. I suppose some stories are dull and childish enough to knock you into a relaxing slumber after all.”

"About that...I´ve already read it...Years ago"

"WHAT?! H-how is that possible?!" he yelped, surprise forcing him to toss caution to the wind.

"I´m asking myself the same thing! My grandfather gave me a copy of this book when I was little. A much older edition than this, though...I´ve looked literally everywhere for a newer copy and never
found it. I even tried to locate the editing house but it’s like they don’t exist anymore. Then I found this, here in your house! How bizarre is that!?”

"Errr... Well, it's been out of print for decades” he lied “Do you by chance happen to still have your grandfather's copy, if I may ask?"

"Yes, I do. But it’s in my office back home. I can’t go back there for the time being it seems. It’s a very old hardcover his mother gave him when he was little."

"Of course…” Obviously, Severus thought to himself. Every magical child had that book, why would those born in the Black family be any different? “I mean, of course it was. So did you like it?"

"Like it? It was one of my favorites growing up, right up there with Andersen"

"How intriguing! Which tale did you like best?"

"'The Warlock’s hairy heart' kept me awake for quite a few nights, I liked that one...I got to enjoy the 'Fountain of fair fortune' once I was old enough to understand the moral in that. But I guess the 'Tale of the Three brothers' has to be the best one of them all, it’s the one I always went back to...still do at times"

So, she had indeed read it...A muggle who had read Beedle the Bard...Merlin only knew what else she could have read, seen or heard about. He grandfather really was giving his grandchildren information about wizards...Which made sense for her older brother, who was a wizard...But Evelyn and her sister were both muggles...Why tell any of them those things? And how could a muggle see his books, with concealing charms still active? How many objects and books in his house was she able to see that she shouldn’t be seeing?

"'Three Brothers' was always my favorite too."

"Really!? I could never get over how well-tought and complex it is. So many folkloric themes you can find in other fairy tales combined and you can take a million different interpretations out of that one. I see something new every time I return to it”

“Indeed…” he could barely pay attention to what she was saying as his mind raced to find a plausible explanation for all this “...by they way -- Ohhh... where are my manners -- but would could I interest you in a bit of a nightcap? I personally like a small shot of whisky before bed."

“Oh, thank you, but no. I make it a point to never mix alcohol with traumatic events. But I would take a cup of chamomile tea if you have?!"

"Of course, by all means”

Severus left her perusing his book and went into the kitchen to prepare the tea and get himself a glass of whisky and a time to reorganize his thoughts.

"Thank you, Severus. Sláinte!” She playfully raised her mug once he returned with the tea

"Tired?” he asked after a long moment of silence, noticing she was starting to yawn

"Starting to get. Guess my batteries are finally giving in..I think it's time to turn in... what about you?!”

“I’ll linger a while more…” he smiled, relieved that, at least for now, she wouldn’t be asking questions about magical books she wasn’t supposed to know anything about.
“Thanks for the tea, my friend.”

……

“It’s seven in the bloody morning...” Meredith hissed softly under her breath as she rushed to open the door. Who could be at the door at this time, she wondered, glad her husband had left early for work...

“Good morning, ma’am.” a white-haired man in a ill-fitting purple suit was standing outside, looking quite grumpy.

“Good morning...May I help you?”

“I´m officer Dawlins, I´ve been informed a young man residing in this house was witness to a crime yesterday...”

“Yes, that would be my son, James... but he already talked to the police yesterday...”

“Oh, yes, but there are a few things we need to clear up. Details, mostly. It won´t take too long.”

……

Severus was used to going to bed late and waking up early. Functioning on little sleep had never been an issue. He didn´t, however expect Evelyn to have been up so early after such a long night. It was barely 7am and there she was, dressed and rummaging around his kitchen, making breakfast, if the smell of fresh coffee, eggs and sausage was anything to go by.

“I see you´re feeling better” he grumbled, still not entirely awake.

“Oh, good morning, Severus.” she beamed without stopping.

“Where did all this food come from? My pantry was quite empty last night...Don´t tell me you woke up at the break of dawn to go to the grocers?”

“No, I got this from my pantry.”

“You weren´t supposed to go back home...”

“I know...But there´s an officer there who let me in to get some things...”

“Already?” he blinked “Our police is not usually this efficient...Nor are they early risers, for that matter...

“It was just one officer, he said he was waiting for the others who will sweep for evidence or something to that effect...Anyway, I didn´t know what you usually had for breakfast so I made a little bit of everything...”

“You shouldn´t have.”

“Least I could do.”

“So, eh...If you don´t mind me asking, are you going anywhere? Not work I hope...”

“Why not?”

“Evelyn, did you listen to ANYTHING your doctor said? You´re supposed to rest. Wasn´t Angela
“going to inform your headmaster about what happened so he could give you a couple days off?”

“Yes, I know...Not that I agree at all, but I’m sure if I go against doctors orders I’ll never hear the end of it from you and Angie...”

“So, where are you going, then?”

“I have to check on Constance and James.”

“You’ll do no such thing. Those two have parents who are well equipped to care for them.”

“At least Tancey does.”

“So that is what this is all about...James?”

“Well...”

“He’s going to be fine. Now do stop rummaging and sit down for breakfast...Bloody hell, woman, do you ever stop?”

“What is that supposed to mean?” she laughed

“It means I have no idea where you get all this energy from. It’s frightening, to be honest...”

“It’s how I deal with things, I guess...” she told him, a somewhat sad smile curving her lips as she finally sat down to have breakfast. “By the way, I got the book from my office. Left it on your desk, if you want to take a look.”

…….

Claire Rott looked on as her husband tossed yet another letter into the fire. She reclined lazily on her favorite ottoman, bright red hair spilled around her like a flaming halo, catching the light from the fire and reflecting it into the darkness of their room.

“Another pile of non-information, I take?” she asked quietly.

“He probably got caught...” Rott answered flatly pouring himself a glass of brandy.

“That much goes without saying...I’ve been telling you that for a while now...None of these letters came from him. The ministry would benefit from hiring more Slytherins...Gryffindors can’t fake letters if their lives depended on it...”

“How bothersome...These aurors truly think they’ll get any leads by sending us fake letters?”

“They’re not trying to do that.”

“You insist on this? I expect this sort of nonsense from the Lestranges, not you...”

“Even a broken clock is right twice a day, so the same can happen to the Lestranges.Why would the aurors be going through the trouble of feeding us false leads if Snape wasn’t alive?”

“Maybe to make us think Snape is alive and force us to divert from our original plans to chase a ghost...There’s nothing to gain from this...”
“Humour me for a while more, then...What else do we have to do while we wait for Dimitri to finally make up his mind about the Lestranges?”

“Fine, have it your way then...”

“Don’t I always?”
Chapter Summary

Severus Snape is officially dead, but the Lestrange brothers and their new associates suspect otherwise. Snape worries, Kingsley Shacklebolt makes a deal and Evelyn gets caught in the middle. Dueling happens.

Severus looked on as the police officers canvassed Evelyn´s house. She stood by his side, fidgeting nervously. It probably wasn’t a good idea to come back while this was being done, but she had a hard time knowing people she didn’t know would be going through her personal things without her presence. It had taken some persuasion to get the officers to allow them back in.

Severus wasn’t too worried about that, however. Earlier Evelyn said another police officer had let her into the house so she could get food from her pantry. Now these officers wouldn’t allow them to go in any further than the living room. That was odd. When enquired about the first officer none of these men seemed to know what they were talking about. Maybe there had been some miscommunication, which was common enough in inept police departments, or maybe there was something else. Evelyn didn’t seem to make anything of it, but Severus had to wonder...

"Severus, you don’t have to stay here till they finish..." she told him as they stood by the door, trying to stay out of the way of the work being done.

"I don’t have anything better to do, I´m afraid..."

"But you seem tired..."

"I´m not."

"Don´t lie to make me feel better...I know you got very little sleep last night."  

"I don´t usually sleep much more than I did last night..."

Sure, he had gotten very little sleep the night before. But certainly not for the reasons that worried her. Severus couldn´t very well tell her how it had taken him hours to fall asleep due to how troubling it was to have her sleeping under his roof...in his clothes... He couldn’t tell her he had suddenly gone back to the time he was fourteen and barely able to reign over his hormones. And above all, he couldn’t tell her he had gone into her room, after she was long asleep, telling himself he was simply going to check to see if she needed anything...And that what he really had wanted, in spite of all his good intentions and scruples, was to get one last look at her as she slept, to make sure she truly was there and this was not one of those feverish dreams that constantly assaulted in the past few days. But mostly, to make sure she was sound asleep before fleeing into his bedroom and locking himself up to allow his mind and body to indulge on feelings he, trully, shouldn´t be entertaining.

Severus had managed to stave off such urges thus far, but the events of the night, the knowledge that she was so close...seeing her in his old, worn nightshirt, which looked much less like a sack of potatoes on her, with those bewildering curves to fill it out...It all had converged in such a way that he couldn´t resist it. It was wrong, very wrong of him to even think of her in these terms...She trusted
him... Blindly almost. Even if she would never suspect it; even if was just a solitary, feeble attempt at satisfying urges he believe long dead, it was still quite wrong. But, he told himself, it was a simply matter of seeking relief. At some point imagination will get the best of a man, and palliative measures must be taken before one goes insane with need and want. It was pathetic and embarrassing, but forgivable as long as it stayed in his mind and in his bedroom.

"I’ll step out for a moment. I need a smoke. Call me if you need anything."

His current infatuation, or whatever it was that led him into a sleepless night filled with indecorous reverie was not what he should be thinking about now... Too many parts of the previous night’s events were not addiding up as far as he was concerned. And Severus had a hard time believing Cokeworth’s inept police department would be of any help with it.

"Mr. Snape!"

Severus didn’t recognise the voice until he looked towards the main street and saw the lanky denim-clad figure of James coming from the corner.

"If you’re here to talk to your teacher" Severus told him in a bored tone, going up to meet the boy.
"she’s quite busy at the moment. And shouldn’t you be at school?"

"No, it´s you I want to talk to."

"Me?"

"Yeah. I wanted to ask..."

"Just spit it out, lad!"

"A police officer came to my house this morning."

"I thought you had given your testimony last night?"

"I did. But then this bloke showed up. It wasn’t one of those who talked to us yesterday."

"And what did he want?"

"So...uh... yesterday I thought I had seen somebody in the house across the street"

"Wait, what? Why didn’t you tell me that?"

"You wouldn’t let me talk! I told the officers yesterday and they didn’t look like they were taking me seriously either...Then this other one shows up at my house asking about it..."

"I see..." Severus could smack James for this. Why the devil hadn’t he told him?

"I don’t think it was anybody though..." the lad was shifting on his feet and looking around nervously.

"Why not?" Severus pushed.

"I just saw a shadow for a second then it disappeared. It must have been my imagination."

"A shadow? Then it...’disappeared’? How exactly?"

"I don’t know. It was there one second and then poof! Gone. That’s what I told the police last night. I
could tell they didn´t believe me, but now they sent somebody else to ask me about it."

"Don´t tell me you´re afraid it will get you trouble?"

"Somewhat, yeah...I mean, I wasn´t lying, but...Do you think I should be afraid?"

"What did you tell the officer this morning?"

"The same I just told you. I thought I saw something like a shadow and it disappeared."

"What else did he ask you?"

"About the man who attacked Miss Black. A description."

"Could you provide one?"

"Yeah, of course. Not his face though..."

"He had a mask on, I remember."

"Yeah, but I saw his clothes and the motorcycle...That should help, no?"

"Of course. Just do me a favour?"

"Yes?"

"Don´t go around telling anybody you saw something in that house."

"Why not?"

"Because nothing will come of it. It was probably your imagination. You were nervous that´s all...Now...you wanted to talk to Evelyn?"

"Can I?"

"She´s inside. She´s been meaning to go and visit you and Constance anyway, so...Just go there and reassure her you´re both fine if you will."

Severus waited for the boy to go inside before heading for the house he had pointed out. The door was closed. Of course he could break in, but not with a team of police officers across the street. He walked to the window and looked in instead. Surely enough, the house was as abandoned as Severus had always thought it was. Still... He doubted James had just imagined that...

Severus had to cut his investigation short as he noticed the small group of police officers leaving Evelyn´s house. The one who had taken his and the children´s statements the previous night was the last one out, and Severus noticed he was lingering outside, taking more notes.

"Hey!" Severus shouted, moving towards him "Office...whatever your name was"

"Perry, Officer Perry"

"Oh, I´m sorry, I didn´t mean to give you the impression that I cared."

"Mr. Snape..."

"Yeah, yeah, we´ve been through that. Just tell me, is harrassing witnesses really the way you want to go about this?"
"Pardon?"

"Did you send another police officer to James´ house this morning to ask all the same questions he has already answered last night?"

"Wait a minute, did he tell you that? Because I can assure you..."

"Well, someone went there!"

"Not any of my men...And frankly Mr. Snape, if I were you I wouldn´t put much weight on whatever that boy says. He´s clearly troubled and I ran a background check on him..."

"Yes, I´m aware that James has been charged with minor offenses. Which doesn´t invalidate anything he says."

"Unless he´s trying to cover for something..."

"All right, let´s stop right here, officer, for your own good. This fine municipality´s police department is already known across the entire Greater Manchester area for being grossly incompetent, even by local standards, which is saying a lot... I´m sure being a Cokeworth police officer adds no bonus points to you curriculum, so you probably shouldn´t go looking to get yourself sued for harassing witnesses... I don´t care for your opinion of James but I was there and I know the lad is not involved in any way with what happened."

"Excuse me, Mr. Snape, but this conversation is over."

Officer Perry rushedly walked towards his car, but Severus suddenly remembered something.

"Officer Perry!"

"Now you remember my name?"

"How many men were assigned to collect evidence here today?"

"What the hell kind of question is that?"

"Can you just answer it?"

"I shouldn´t, but since you´re so intent on ruinning my morning I don´t believe you´ll leave me alone if I don´t...Three...the three men you saw yourself with your own eyes, for that matter."

"You didn´t send anybody earlier?"

"Dear Lord! We´re understaffed as is, why do you think I´d waste time and resources sending rogue officials on imaginary missions!?"

"So nobody was here early this morning."

"Of course not. Get it through your thick skull, sir, nobody questioned that boy a second time and nobody was here before our team arrived. Even if I had sent anybody, we´d have to wait for Miss Black to wake up and let us in, or would you prefer we bust the door open?"

As Perry walked away muttering insults under his breath, Severus hurriedly walked into Evelyn´s house.

"Severus, where were you?" She asked him. James was awkwardly sitting on the sofa, and looked
up at him as if begging him not to tell her anything of they had just talked about.

“Just checking some things with that officer...”

“Well, James came to see how I was doing.”

“I know, we talked a little while ago...”

“I´m going to get him tea and something to eat back at your place...can you believe this boy left the house without breakfast?! Do you want anything?”

“No, I´m fine...Thank you.”

Evelyn had barely left the room before Severus swiftly and quietly lunged forward towards James, asking in a low, hissing tone.

“What did he look like?”

“Who?”

“The officer who visited you. What did he look like?”

“I don´t know...Normal I guess...”

“Elaborate. Height, hair color, clothes.”’ Please don´t make me have to go into your head for this, kid’ Severus thought to himself.

“Average height, I think. Hair was grey...almost white. I don´t remember the eyes. And he was wearing a stupid looking suit.”

“How was it stupid looking?”

“It just was. It didn´t fit him right...and it was purple, with a green tie...He looked like a bloody cartoon. Why?”

“You remember his name?”

“Dawlins, I think...Or something like that.”

“Daw...lins?...But of course.”

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“Severus?...”

Severus had been quiet, too quiet, the entire time James was there. Evelyn had taken the opportunity of James visit to start to ease him into the idea of an extra-curricular project. Before that awful event the night before, Fr. Thomas had suggested James would make a good addition to the church choir. They needed a pianist and even though the boy didn’t play the piano, he could be taught. He had learned the guitar by himself, so it wasn’t a stretch... Evelyn knew she had to proceed with caution. James would say no if she told him right the way. She had to get him to open up to the idea of a project first...something outside school.

She had asked him about his latest piece, an instrumenal ballad he had been toying with. As usual,
James gave her monosyllabic answers. The boy really didn’t think of himself as a composer or considered his work any good. Evelyn asked him whether he had ever thought about learning an instrument formally, whether he considered music as a career...He looked at her as if she was speaking in tongues.

Severus had looked on without interfering, and she couldn’t quite decide if because he didn’t want to override her or if he just wasn’t interested in the topic. Severus had acted normally all morning. Well, about as normally as Severus could act. He still seemed extremely awkward around her, moreso than the night before, if possible. Over breakfast he barely made eye contact, and talked little as usual. She had gotten used to Severus’ aloofness, and had learned not to take it personally, but he seemed particularly detached now that James had shown up.

Once the boy was gone she had to ask.

“Are you ok?”

“Yes, of course...” he answered, not even looking at her, as if his mind was lost somewhere else.

“You’re sure? I know it’s been a rough night...”

“More for you than me.”

“I’m fine...So, what do you think?”

“Of...?”

“What I was telling James...”

“I don’t know. It looks like you’re going to have some trouble getting him to accept any project...Is this what you and father Thomas discussed? Music lessons?”

“Yes...” she studied his face. Sure he was talking to her, but his tone sounded mechanic, as if he was simply answering for the sake of being polite but wasn’t really ‘there’. “What do you think?”

“You’re a better judge than me. Your student, after all” he got up from his seat, where he had been for the last hour without moving. “I should get going”

“Already?”

“You’re home, and everything seems fine. The officers said you could come back.”

“True...” suddenly she felt like he was trying to get rid of her. In all fairness she had indeed intruded on him quite a bit, and an unexpected houseguest could be a nuisance even to the most hospitable of people, but still...

“I have some matters to tend to. I should be back in a few hours. Will you be fine till then?”

“Sure...I may go to school. To talk to the headmaster, explain what happened.”

“You should probably stay in...Angela already talked to him, didn’t she? And you...”

“I know, I heard the doctor.” she smiled. “So you will be back in a few hours?”

“I will.”

“I’ll wait then...”
“Do try to be quiet for a while, will you? I don’t want you to have a dizzy spell and hit your head again when I’m not here.”

“Yes, I’ll try to stay alive while you’re away. I’ll manage somehow.”

……

It wasn’t wise to go back today. Snape was probably on full alert. That muggle woman that was so important to him had been attacked and he would surely be feeling very protective and paranoid. It wasn’t safe to be around them now, he’d be easily caught.

As a matter of fact, he wondered how he had managed to go undetected for over a week. Maybe Snape had gone soft after the war... Or maybe, and considerably more likely, he was too distracted by his little tryst with this woman to be as observant as he was known to be. To be perfectly honest, he couldn’t really blame him. Looking at that woman it was difficult to believe she was naught but a baseborn muggle. It wasn’t that she was pretty, which she surely was, but there were plenty of pretty women of better, cleaner birth... This mongrel Snape had found himself was downright enticing. It almost made it worthwhile to be a blood traitor when he imagined the fun Snape must be having with her.

Distracted as he may have been, however, now that little toy had gotten hurt, testing Snape would be dangerous. Not to mention the fact that he was almost certain that muggle boy had seen him in his hiding spot.

The ruffle of wings came from outside the window of the room he had rented in a shabby muggle hotel across town. He looked up to see an owl perched on the windowsill. Well, well, finally her highness had decided to answer one of his letters. If he had known working for the Rotts would be this thankless...”

“Midnight behind the old mill. Wait for further instructions”

He folded the note after reading the laconic message. Maybe the idea of using the muggle woman as bait to get to Severus had pleased her enough to stir a reaction? Oh women, even those without a heart would still be easily swayed by a romantic plot...

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Severus didn’t feel well at ease leaving Evelyn all by herself, but given the circumstances...

“Dawlings”... The dolt hadn’t even bothered to come with a proper fake name. Of course it was Dawlish. Who else would be as un-creative as to cover his identity by changing only the last two letters of his own bloody name. Then again he had always been a straight-laced, unimaginative, by-the-book boor. Severus had heard about his readmission into the auror office and how Shacklebolt had vouched for him, and personally advocated his return. Evidently the new minister would try to prove his point by giving Dawlish the important assignment of keeping an eye on the most important living evidence and resource the ministry had: Severus himself.

But to what end had he gone after James asking questions about Evelyn’s attacker? Whoever that criminal was, Severus knew beyond a shadow of a doubt he was a muggle... What interest would Shacklebolt have in a muggle criminal, he had wondered... And then it hit him... It wasn’t the criminal... It was Evelyn. The ministry sent Dawlish to spy on him. Would it be too much of a stretch for them to use Evelyn in some way to get him to cooperate? With so many Death Eaters still unaccounted for, and the Rott’s money financing them, Severus could understand the desperation.
He could understand, but he wouldn´t be pressured. Kingsley was enough of a big boy to take care of his duties without having to resort to this. Severus refused to let the Ministry play with his personal life. He had told Shacklebolt more than once he wasn´t not at his disposal. Maybe the interim minister needed a reminder, even if he had to apparate to London and deliver the message in person.

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“Was it really necessary to threaten the secretary to gain access to my office?” Shacklebolt asked him coolly, without even leaving his seat, as Severus burst into his office unannounced, slamming the door behind him.

“He should count his blessings that I didn´t curse him.”

“For a man who wanted to stay dead and hidden, you´re sure making a spectacle of coming into the Minister´s office. I imagine something serious happened…”

“Spare me the act, Shacklebolt. You know why I´m here. You know, you could have told Dawlish to come up with a better fake name if he wants to spy on me.”

“It doesn´t´t surprise me that you´d detect him. Do take a seat, will you?”

“I rather stand, this won´t take long.”

“As you wish” Kingsley crossed his fingers over the tabletop and leaned in “How did you find out?”

“Your obtuse pet auror is not exactly subtle. So, the ministry doesn´t take 'no' for an aswer, I gather? I told you I wasn´t at your beck and call, and you send an auror to spy on me?”

“To protect you.”

“Oh, please!”

“Your neighbour had a little mishap last night, didn´t she?”

“Leave her out of this.” Severus lunged forwards towards the desk, his face inches away from Kingsley

“I can´t.” the interim minister leaned back, opened one of the drawers of his workdesk, retrieved an envelope and dropped it on the tabletop in front of Severus.

“What is this?”

“Open it.”

Severus eyed him suspisciously before picking up the envelope. He didn´t recognise the handwriting, of a penmanship so poor it took him a while to understand, but once he did, Severus felt a punch in his stomach.

How could this have happened? How did he fail to notice? He had been a spy for years, and yet he had missed this? How? Had he gotten this careless?

“We have intercepted more of these. None reached its destination I assure you.”

“Since when?”

“It started on Halloween, so not too long ago. I had asked Dawlish to keep an eye on you, and he
had been on the case since mid October, so you can rest easy that the Rotts got no information concerning you...or your personal connections.”

“Dawlish was there yesterday?”

“Not on the scene, no...He has kept his distance from you. We didn´t want you to notice, evidently. But he did learn about your neighbour’s misadventure as soon as it occurred. Our dear Death Eater friend was quick to report it...”

Severus looked down on the letter once more, feeling his blood run cold inside his veins

“...Snape’s muggle whore...”

“...the baseborn is probably going to come in handy, he seems to hold her dear...”

“...he might be more incline to cooperate if...”

“It’s not signed...” Severus asked, after finally finding his voice “...who?”

“Selwyn.”

“Can’t say that surprises me...” Selwyn was notorious for his sadism, Severus remembered well. The man’s mere presence had always disgusted him. A sleazy coward with a nasty tendency of preying on the vulnerable and weak, and a penchant for girls and women. It had been quite the task to get him to keep his paws off Luna Lovegood when she was in their custody. Even the average Death Eater had more moral standards than this brute. Small wonder he would suggest hurting Evelyn to get to him...He probably would have wanted to do it himself if he could get his way. “I thought he was dead”

“He ran away right after the Battle of Hogwarts...Now he’s probably trying to get back in the good graces of his former associates.”

“Once a coward...”

“We will deal with him in due time. As for what happened to your neighbour, we are also looking into it...”

“What do you want?” Severus asked in a low, defeated tone.

“Pardon?”

“What Do you Want?” he hissed

“I thought you said you were not ’at my beck and call’? Your own words.”

“Just tell me what you want. I’ll do it.”

“What I want depends on what you’re offering.”

“You wanted my help, didn’t you? Fine. I’ll do it.”

“And in return...”

“Don’t let anybody near her”

“Your neighbour?”
“Yes. This...this has nothing to do with her, and she shouldn´t suffer for it. She´s a muggle, a schoolteacher. I´m sure you don´t want the scandal if any harm comes to this woman. Attacks on muggles so soon after the war would be a publicity disaster for the ministry.”

“Yes, that´s true. But that´s not what you´re worried about...is it?”

“It´s none of your concern what I´m worried about, Minister. Do we have a deal?”

“Yes.”

Kingsley stood from his seat and walked up to Severus, stretching out his hand. Snape sneered and turned away, walking to the door.

“Do I have your word?”

“Yes.” Severus nearly barked, his hand gripping the doorknob till his knuckles went white.

“Can I count on you for anything?”

“Anything. I gave you my word, didn´t I?” he turned “Just let me know when and where.”

Shacklebolt nodded, knowingly.
Severus Snape is officially dead, but the Lestrange brothers and their new associates suspect otherwise. Snape worries, Kingsley Shacklebolt makes a deal and Evelyn gets caught in the middle. Dueling happens.

Dawlish nearly jumped out of his skin when a raven descended upon him in a dark alley close to Spinner’s End, only to swiftly reveal the form of none other than Severus Snape. He would never guess the former potions master was a (most likely unregistered) animagus, but it didn’t really surprise him, come to think of it. It was a valuable skill to have if you were a spy and Dawlish would have liked to have had enough talent for it himself, but alas, he was seemingly destined to be a bureaucrat.

"I hope I didn’t startle you" Severus offered with a sardonic smile.

"Snape." he scoffed "You really are intent of making everything more difficult for us all, aren’t you?"

"Quite the opposite, in reality."

"I thought you were going to keep a low profile. First you storm into the minister’s office and now this? Why don’t you just give them your location already?"

"I knew the minister would inform you of my visit. Is that why you’re scrambling to get to Spinner’s End to convince me to behave before I spoil whatever plan it is you’ve concocted to apprehend Sewlyn? You and Kingsley both have quite a bit of nerve. Like I’m enough of a fool to believe any of you have my best interest in mind."

"How did you even find me?"

"You’re not that hard to track, ‘Officer Dawlins’... Merlin gracious, at least put some thought into it..."

"That still doesn’t answer my question: what you’re doing here?"

"What do you think I’m doing here? And what are YOU and your band of Aurors thinking of doing now? And don’t try to lie to me, Sewlyn may be in the wind, but if he had left Cokeworth you wouldn’t be here."

"He’s in a hotel across town. We are going to proceed with his arrest tonight, so if you could kindly not stand in the way"

"Stand in the way? You Aurors really are a bloody joke. You really think you can simply arrest him? Sewlyn is not going to surrender without a fight and by now he may even have reinforcements."

"We haven’t located any other..."

"Of course you haven’t...The Rotts are not dumb. Claire is a dangerous loose cannon, but Ludwig is
far more calculating than she can ever hope to be, and definately more than most give him credit for. He won’t simply let you apprehend Sewlyn, specially the dirty coward decides to give information away to save his own carcass from Azkaban...And there’s always Dimitri. God only knows where his interests are at the moment.”

"So what’s your plan, then?" Dawlish seemed defeated moreso than convinced. He knew he couldn’t afford to be on Snape’s bad side, and there was no way he could keep the former potions master from doing as he pleased. Merlin willing tonight’s arrest would be a success and they would stop worrying about Snape’s current status being leaked. It was wiser to play along.

"How many men do you have?"

"Two."

"Do you trust them?"

"With my life. I’ve trained both myself."

"Where is it going to be?"

"At the old mill. Is the most accessible place where we can avoid muggles in this town."

"My, my...maybe you do have a brain after all. Just your luck, Dawlish, I happen know that old mill almost as well as I know my own childhood home...How about the other one?"

"Which other one?"

"The muggle degenerate who attacked Evelyn."

"No need to worry about that."

"Oh, but I do. What will be made of him? I don’t believe you would delegate that task after personally going after James."

"I didn’t ‘go after’ that boy"

"And why was he so terrified, then? For the state of his nerves, I bet you’ve used legilimency on him, haven’t you?"

"Don’t act so indignant. We both know you have no qualms about using legilimency or whatever other spell or curse to get your way. That’s why Dumbledore used you in his insane plans, after all. In any case, thanks to the muggle boy’s memories we were able to locate the man who attacked your neighbour...The poor lad was under such distress he didn’t even consciously remember he had seen the license number on the motorbyke. I wouldn’t have gotten tha information out of him without using legilimency."

"...so...?" Severus urged, his patience running thin.

"Your neighbour is a very, very lucky woman, Severus. Apparently the man who attacked her crashed his motorcycle as he was escaping from the scene. Seen as you were acting in her defense, I won’t even ask what you’ve done to scare the wretched bastard into having an accident, but it seems he was so distressed the muggle doctors who saw him thought he was under the influence of hallucinogens and put him under surveilance. Tonight Cokeworth’s police will be receiving an anonymous lead about a possible suspect fitting the description James has given them that checked into a hospital last night and is still there. We did everything but wrap the wanker a nice wrapping
paper with a bow and deliver the package at their door step."

"Good...even tough it hardly justifies scaring a teenager half to death. I´m sure you could have
found this man without resorting to this."

"And what do you care about a muggle boy´s hurt feelings. From what I heard you were never one
to spare children´s feelings. Has the war made you soft? Or...well, of course. Is not the boy you care
about, is it?"

"What time will you and your men be proceeding with Selwyn´s arrest" Severus trailed off.

"Within the next hours. We´ve sent him a fake letter so he should be at mill at midnight."

"Fine. I´ll be there."

"I don´t recall asking for your help."

"I don´t recall offering any help. You´re in my hometown, snooping into my private life and trying to
aprehend a man who´s a threat to me and those close to me. This is much more my business than it is
yours, so do try not to ruin everything, will you?"

Evelyn nearly ran to the door as soon as she heard someone knock. It had to be Severus. He had
been gone for hours now, and she wouldn´t stop fretting no matter how much she told herself it was
stupid to worry. She was just shaken by what had happened the previous night, she thought, there
was nothing to worry about. It was a reasonable enough train of thought but she couldn´t stop that
sinking feeling of dread that overcame her more and more as the hours passed and Severus didn´t
return.

It wasn´t him, however.

"I just decided to drop by to check on you and tell you that Mr. Nolan has decided to give you the
rest of week off, more if you need." Angela went in, not even noticing Evelyn´s disappointment "I
showed him the copies of your hospital papers and the police report you gave me and he said you
can take as much time off as you need. Since you´re only giving the remedial classes and extra
curricular projects, there´s no harm done suspending your classes for a few days."

"What am I going to do with a whole week off?" Evelyn asked, offering her friend a seat on the
couch "Besides, remedial classes can´t just be suspended like that, a lot of these students are
struggling and finals week will be..."

"...in December...It´s still early November. You´ll have plenty of time to catch up on everything,
relax. I thought I´d find you feeling better."

"I am better."

"It doesn´t look like it. Evelyn, dear, you wear your emotions on your sleeve. I can tell you´re tense.
Is it about that man who attacked you? If you don´t feel safe here, you can spend some time at my
place..."

"No, thank you, but that won´t be necessary..."
"Well, of course, you´d probably prefer staying at Severus" Angela laughed heartily "How did that go, speaking of which?"

"It went just fine."

"Let me guess, he was a perfect gentleman again, which means you have nothing interesting to tell me...Pity."

"Angela, please"

"Evelyn! I know what happened yesterday was awful, and you´re still very upset, but frankly you sound more agggravated today than you did at the hospital. Come on, spit it out. Did something else happen?"

"No, nothing happened...But I´m afraid it might."

"Why?"

"The police came here earlier today, then James showed up to visit. Severus spend a lot of time outside talking to that officer Parry and I´m pretty sure he talked to James as well, when I wasn´t around. He seemed very worried about something, but he wouldn´t tell me what it was. Then he left. Hasn´t come back since."

"He didn´t say where he was going?"

"No. Just that he would be back soon. It´s getting dark already and nothing."

"Evelyn, what kind of ideas are you getting into your head?"

"I´m not getting any ideas." She took a long pause before deciding to tell Angela of her true concerns "But you have to agree that it´s odd. Severus has a temper, you know... "

"You´re not thinking he...He wouldn´t do that."

"I hope not..."

......

Angela had stayed for the rest of the evening. It was past 11 when she finally had to leave; she had to work in the morning after all. That distracted Evelyn for a while, as her friend was kind enough to talk only about work and other matters that had no connection with either Severus or the events of the previous night. But once she was gone, Evelyn couldn´t do anything but start worrying and fretting again.

After escorting Angela to her car, she walked over to Severus´ door. It scared her half to death to be outside at night..But she had to check. The lights were off. She knocked just to make sure, but she knew he wasn´t home. He would have let her know if he had arrived.

Evelyn rushed back into her house, locking the door behind her and closing the blinds. After double checking the back door, she decided going to sleep was afoolish endeavour. She went up to her office and started to look for something to do...a book to read, assignments still left to grade, notes in need of revising...Anything that could distract her from the fact that Severus wasn´t back yet and she was terrified.
Perched on the roof of the old mill, Severus could see the silhouette walking down the path that led to the front gate, faintly illuminated by the street lights. The mill was sinister enough in daylight...at night one would have to be entirely bonkers to venture inside. As soon as one crossed the gate, leaving the lights of the streets behind, it was pitch black. Cokeworth’s skies were morbidly dark, and stars were hard to see all thanks to the smog most industrial cities had to deal with, but at least tonight there was a full moon.

Selwyn had walked into the trap so willingly Severus was suspicious. Did he really trust Ludwig and Claire that much, or was he simply stupid? He watched as Selwyn stopped a few steps past the gate and pulled out his wand. He seemed to hesitate before casting a lighting charm to see his way. He crossed the patio that was once used to load the lorries and stopped in front of the main entrance. Dawlish’s two men hadn’t moved from their positions inside the building, one at the entrance and another at the backdoor of the main machinery room which led to the second floor, as Severus suggested. The building had no back door and to leave that room one could only use the front door or go up, and more one went up the more claustrophobic and difficult to navigate the building became. The only open spaces were the patio and the roof where he had taken Evelyn after the Halloween party. For a wizard leaping off the roof would be no issue, so it was necessary to block that access, regardless of how unlikely it would have been for Sewlyn to have the idea of using it. Once lured into the machinery room, which was dark and cluttered enough that he wouldn’t see his surroundings well enough to escape, even with magic and a surprise attack would leave him no time to get his bearings and react, Sewlyn would have nowhere to go. If he was smart, he would surrender and the whole thing would be over in minutes. Severus was to stay back unless he was needed, which Dawlish found unlikely. It seemed like a straightforward and simple plan, but something still bothered Severus.

It was too easy.

He wouldn’t put past the Rotts to sacrifice a spy, but that could come back to bite them. If Sewlyn was under their orders, he would certainly have useful information about them, which the Ministry would gladly bargain for...And Sewlyn was never a loyal man...he would jump at the first chance to collaborate. Severus wondered if the Rotts would indeed abandon him like this...Unless of course they trusted their connections with the French ministry so much that even Sewlyn’s possible testimony wouldn’t hurt them. That was a hell of a gamble as far as Severus was concerned. Which is why he refused to believe Sewlyn would show up alone...that the Rotts would allow him to...

As if the whole scene had been rehearsed, Sewlyn finally walked in, certainly tired of waiting outside. Patience had never been his forte...Severus moved from his perching spot outside to one of the high beams of the machinery room ceiling, from which he had a panoramic view of the yet-to-unfold drama. The clutter and machines cast long shadows on the walls as the faint light of Sewlyn’s wand lit the way, and the more he advanced the less the moonlight could be of any help. If Sewlyn had an ounce of critical thinking he would turn around now, but he didn’t.

It all happened faster than his eyes could discern in the dark. As soon as Sewlyn found himself in the middle of the room, both aurors had descended upon him with swift efficiency. Confundus followed by a full body binding spell was a tough combination of attacks to pull off on a moving target and in the dark, but if well executed it would end the action in seconds. Alas, as Severus predicted, the plan was much too smooth on paper to go well on the field. While the confundus charm did its job, the
body binding spell missed the mark by centimeters by sheer luck, or lack thereof. The confused 
Sewlyn was such an erratic moving target that the second auror could not have aimed no matter how 
he tried and using any light-casting spell would give their positions away. The fumble had allowed 
Sewlyn time to counterattack. But caught off guard and confused, he had mere seconds to decide on 
a spell and figure out where to aim it, having no idea how many attackers were coming for him. Of 
course he would do something stupid, Severus thought. And something stupid he did, indeed.

The yellowing white sheets of dusty fabric covering the machinery all went up in flames in a matter 
of seconds.

Fiendfyre. That lunatic was going to kill them all.

As he left his post on the high beam and dove in, Severus could see Dawlish and his two men 
casting spells to try and put out the rapidly spreading inferno. A fire in the mill was the last thing they 
needed, it would alert the muggle authorities and with the amount of rubbish piled up outside, it 
might spread into the neighbouring houses. The whole thing was a fiasco if he had ever seen one. If 
Severus could accept the notion that Sewlyn had a brain after all he would say he had done it on 
purpose, to give himself time to flee. But the dimwit was still struggling to get his bearings as a circle 
of fire of his own creation closed in on him.

Suprisingly, Sewlyn seemed to immediately recover most of his wits the moment Severus landed in 
front of him, fully reverted to his human form, as if sheer hatred had dispersed the confusing effects 
of the first attack he’d suffered. Dawlish and his men had succeeded in keeping the fire from 
spreading, but Severus knew there was no way they could get to epicenter of the blast. It was up to 
him to end it, and he had to do it fast.

“Snape.” Sewlyn grimace maniacally “‘been a while”

“I may have missed an invitation for tea or two.” Severus quipped before raising his wand. Severus 
had half a mind to simply throw him into the flames and call it a suicide, but he had enough of a 
body count to his name. Still, nobody had asked him to go nicely about this.

“SECTUMSEMPRA”

Severus slashed him twice. The first time on his wand hand, a gash deep enough for the blood to 
gush out painting a dark crescent on the ground, the dark red liquid looking ominously black under 
the flaming lights. The second time on his face. A small token of Severus’ appreciation for that little 
piece of elegant prose in Evelyn’s hommage. Sewlyn fell back, screeching from the pain.

Then it happened. Precisely as Severus had feared.

As Sewlyn lay on the ground powerless to do anything but shriek in agony, and Dawlish and his 
men were finally putting out the last embers of the fire, the deafening noise of breaking glass and 
howling wind came from above them. Severus and the aurors looked up to see two shapeless, 
smokey clouds of black burst in with the violence of a tornado, obliterating the windows and sending 
a rain of glass shards down on them.

“Well, fuck me...” Severus hissed “...the cavalry has arrived.”
Chapter Summary

A new unknown player emerges and the crisis in the newly reformed Ministry deepens as information leaks and orchestrated prisoner escapes threaten the public’s safety. Evelyn finds a new editor and some other things she didn’t bargain for.

The attacks rained on them before they could get their bearings. Even as he was expecting something like this to happen, Severus was only barely able to deflect the fast succession of curses and hexes coming his way from all sides. From the corner of his eye he could see Dawlish doing no better, as one of his aurors was already on the ground and the other one nowhere he could see. It was impossible to tell how many wizards were attacking them, but from the sheer intensity and speed of the orchestrated hits Severus knew they had to be outnumbered.

Eventually, Dawlish managed to get his wits about him for long enough to cast a protective shield over himself and the wounded auror. As bolts of light ricocheted in the darkness, Severus moved to the back of the room. Dawlish needed the magical shield to make sure at least one of his men left alive, but that wouldn’t help them reach anything other than a stalemate, he thought. They had to fight back or their defenses wouldn’t last. Severus tried to think fast: he needed some protection to reduce his vulnerability so he could attack without having to guard his back, and thankfully, he knew the floorplan of the mill well enough that he could move effectively in the dark and under a storm of hexes.

Oddly enough, as Severus finally found himself in relative safety, with a solid wall shielding his back and a large piece of machinery protecting his front, he had the distinct impression that the attacks were starting to subside. There was nothing but complete darkness as far as his eyes could see and he heard the zapping and thundering of hexes die down until there was silence. He wondered if they were trying to locate him order to strike again, seen as Dawlish and the wounded man were somewhat out of reach behind a protective spell and his other auror was nowhere to be seen, and likely incapacitated as well. Severus couldn’t afford to wait to find out. It might be suicidal, but they couldn’t crouch and hide in the dark, waiting for the next strike, they needed light. The only problem was that he couldn’t perform a lighting spell without immediately giving away his position.

Suddenly, the entire building lit up as if an aurora borealis had exploded from within its walls. Severus’ eyes followed the stream of light to identify its origin, only to see the auror he thought had disappeared standing on the opposite side of room. He didn’t know if he should be thankful for the heroic sacrifice, or if he should decry the young man’s recklessness, but he had time to do exactly neither, as a looming shadow descended and a flash of light knocked him out of Severus’ field of vision.

Now he could see there were six attackers, three men and three women as best as he could see, all standing in the middle of the room, close to where Selwyn had fallen just minutes before. Even with light, Severus couldn’t recognise any of their faces. But there was no time to think of that, he decided, as two members of the group started to collect Sewlyn’s unconscious carcass from the ground. A rescue attempt, as he had feared. Over his dead body they’d take the pleasure of giving Sewlyn to Azkaban’s dementors away from him, Severus thought.
"Deprimo" he hissed and the ground under their feet collapsed. The basement bellow was even darker and more cluttered than the machinery room, so falling into it would stun them for long enough that he could attack from above or so Severus planned, hoping Dawlish would take his cue and help. He moved towards the edge of the crater but suddenly he heard Dawlish yell.

"SNAPE, STAY BACK!" Severus stopped dead on his tracks only to be knocked back by a gust of wind so sheerly powerful he had to struggle to stand. The deafening noise made it seem like Dawlish ´s voice was was miles away in the middle of a storm. Severus felt the impact of something non-physical, a hex most likely, hit him on the chest, and send him flying, tumbling like leaf caught by the wind, only to fall squarely on his face meters back. Collecting all strength he had left, Severus stood up and readied himself to finish the job Sewlyn had started. He´d destroy the mill if needed be, but their assailants weren´t going anywhere, he thought, aiming his wand at the ceiling.

"LET THEM GO!" Dawlish had somehow managed to reach him and grab his arm before he could do anything.

Then there was silence and darkness again.

"They came for Sewlyn. There´s no point in killing ourselves to stop it" the auror barked at him.

"I knew this would happen." Severus hissed back. "They got him."

"Yes, they did. And count your blessings that this is all they got. You could have been killed .All of us could "

"And you don´t seem half as concerned about them getting away as you should be"

"We have other aurors posted outside the area. Hopefully they´ll get to them. For now I´m more worried about getting ourselves out of here. I´ve got two wounded men, in case you´ve forgotten.” his tone was exasperated at best “I told you not to get involved."

"Would you have fared any better if I wasn´t here?"

"Maybe not, but now they have hard proof that you are alive."

"Sewlyn would have told the Rotts regardless."

"Did you recognise any of those people?"

"No, but what does that have to do with anything?"

"They were not sent by the Rotts, I bet. You wouldn´t have known them if they were. Claire and Ludwig have written Sewlyn off a long time ago. I´m sure they´d just use their contacts in the French ministry to discredit any testimony Sewlyn might have provided implicating them with Death Eater activities. They just threw him to the lions."

"If not the Rotts..."

"I have no idea, nor do I want to think about it now...You´d probably know better than me, in any case” he scoffed
Severus and Dawlish carried the two wounded men out of the building and clumsily apparated with them to St. Mungo’s where a group of healers and nurses was waiting as if they knew ahead the mission would be a fiasco. Severus himself had sustained minor injuries, a small fracture to zygomatic bone and a cut on the inside of his lip from the fall, but nothing worthy of worry. Dawlish seemed to be the only one relatively unscathed, but he was fuming.

Within the hour he got informed that the group that attacked them had indeed managed to escape, and, no, they were not identified. A search party had been dispatched out but they had lost them after they had made it into the continent. The chase had injured another three aurors non lethally. There were no casualties, fortunately. Dawlish was pacing about in quiet fury. Severus was aching to go into an "I told you so" lecture about how carelessly he had gone about arresting Sewlyn, but that wouldn’t help anybody.

He simply kept thinking about what Dawlish had told him. Severus refused to believe Claire and Ludwig Rott would have abandoned Sewlyn, but if Dawlish was right and they had...then who had sent the rescue party in? And what for? Well, that was a stupid question. The Rotts were not the only ones who wanted the information Sewlyn currently had. Dawlish and his men had managed to keep information about Severus’ whereabouts from reaching the Rotts, but whoever had Sewlyn now would have easy access to everything he knew, which included Severus location and even Evelyn’s existence. “Properly paranoid” didn’t even begin to define how he was starting to feel.

"You have to stay out of this mess from now on, Snape. And I mean it. Sewlyn was the only Death Eater who knew you were alive, we kept him from passing the information on for as long as we could, but now whoever has him will know about you and where you’re located." Dawlish voiced Severus inner fears in such a clear way it all felt even more hopeless.

"Nobody will be coming after me for now." Wouldn’t they, he asked himself. He wasn’t so sure any more.

"And you know that how?"

"We still don’t know for sure if this was the Rotts, but regardless...The minister has people all over the Greater Manchester area. Whoever has got Sewlyn, they’ll bide their time. Doing anything now would be suicidal."

"That may be. But do take some precautions. And I don’t just say that for your own sake. If you care an inkling for that muggle woman, you better stop sticking your neck out and start listening."

......

Evelyn had long lost track of how many times she woke up through the night. And at every turn she’d go to the window and look out to see nothing but the dreadfully quiet night outside. After 5am she could no longer keep on falling asleep at short intervals on any random chair or piece of furniture welcoming enough...she was wide awake and frightened.

Severus had spent the entire night out.

Enough was enough. She changed out of her nightgown into a comfortable pair of trainers, jeans and a warm jumper and, going against all the fear and dread that steadily had piled up on her shoulder since that attack, headed out to the street into the blue cold dusk. And before she had taken five steps in the faint light of dawn she saw the silhouette of a man coming in the opposite direction.
"Severus! Finally!" he yelped, rushing to him. Only as she approached did she see the state he was in. One of his cheekbones had a large bruise that had already started to go a dreary shade of purple and his lower lip was swollen. More troubling still, his shirt had patches that looked and smelled burnt.

"Evelyn? What the devil are you doing out at this hour?"

"I could ask you the same! You’ve been out the whole day and the whole night. What happened?"

"Something came up."

"Something came up? Is that all you have to say? Do you have any idea how worried I was? What were you thinking disappearing like that, on day after a bloody criminal invades my house? And coming back like THAT?"

"I didn’t mean to keep you waiting. I ran into an acquaintance...We had some old issues to deal with and it took some time..."

“And did you solve those issues in a fistfight followed by arson? Your face is all banjaxed and you smell like barbecue gone wrong!"

"I tripped.... I tripped and fell on my face like an idiot."

"Severus...."

"It’s true."

"Fine, be like this, don’t tell me...To be frank, I’m not even sure I want to know."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Let’s go inside, I have some rubbing alcohol and ice for that"

"It’s not necessary"

"Oh but it is. And don’t think you’ve got many bargaining rights left after keeping me up all night, let’s go."

Severus didn’t offer much resistance as she brought him in and made him seat on the sofa. He looked tired. Not just tired, but exhausted. Evelyn couldn’t even begin to imagine what he had been through over the course of over twelve hours that would cause him to come back home in that state, but she knew asking would get her nowhere. She had learned that much about him: Severus wouldn’t tell you anything he didn’t feel like telling, no matter how much you pestered him, so she simply stopped asking questions and went silently about the task of tending to his wounds.

He winced sharply as she put a pack of ice to his face. His right cheekbone was a swollen ruin.

“I’m sorry. You have to keep this pressed.... This looks nasty”

“I know."

“The bone might be broken.”
“I don’t think that’s the case. You worry too much.”

“You have to see a doctor anyway.” she countered, kneeling on the floor between his parted knees to get a better look. She could feel him tense as she did so. “Relax, I’ll try not to hurt you any more than I have to.”

Severus didn’t reply, seemingly concentrated in keeping still as she continued to examine his face as delicately as she could. As she tended to him, she studied his face, beyond the injuries. His expression was unreadable, but Evelyn could see more than a hint of concern on his frown, which was deeper than usual, forming a crisp line between his thick eyebrows. She looked at him, agitated.

One feature of Severus’ face that had immediately seemed striking to her from the first day they met was how focused and sharp his obsidian-black eyes were. He usually looked straight at people, intensely, his eye colour so dark it was hard to make out his irises from his pupils, which lent his eyes a strange, almost dizzying abyssal quality, as if one was staring into two a deep bottomless holes. At first it had alarmed her a bit, but she eventually became used to it. It matched his personality, and as she came to know him better, his eyes stopped being disconcerting and became more and more familiar, reassuring even, a mere sign of his usually straightforward personality. It was when he avoided eye contact that she worried. And as she looked at him with barely a few inches separating her eyes from his, she could see he was forcing himself to look away.

“Your mouth...” she noted

“I´v bitten my lip when I fell, it´s nothing.”

“Let me see.” Severus complied as she gently turned his face toward her. He was right, there was a cut on the inside of his lip, but it didn’t look too serious. She wouldn’t have to do anything about it but make sure it was disinfected.

His warm breath tickled her face comfortingly, as Evelyn got lost within herself, contemplating his face as close as she ever had. Nobody in their right mind would ever say Severus Snape was a conventionally handsome man, but the more she got to know and observe him, the more she found a certain arid elegance about the lines of his features. There were, however, two physical traits of his she found unambiguously attractive: his hands and his lips. She had to police herself not to look at his hands too much, as she knew he was self-conscious about the fact that he couldn’t move at least three of his fingers, but at times she would catch herself staring at his mouth as he talked for long moments, to the point she had their shape memorized. Severus had thin lips as crisply defined as all of his other facial features that sloped downwards slightly at the corners and a wide cupid’s bow that made his mouth appear somewhat broader than it was. Devoid of emotion as his face could often be, his feelings tended to betray him through his lips...Evelyn knew by now how he unconsciously pressed them together when he was frustrated, pursed them when aggravated, and how their corners twisted upwards just slightly when he smirked. Smiles were rare, but on the few times they happened, Evelyn saw there was something under all the scowling and frowning that was, in fact, surprisingly beautiful.

A strident noise shattered her quiet contemplation.

“You better get that” he whispered

“Of course” she stumbled back onto her feet and got to the phone. The voice of Officer Perry greeted her with a sleepy drawl.

“Ms. Black, Good morning. I apologize in advance for calling so early, but I thought you would like to know the news as soon as possible”
“News? Which news?”

“You assailant has been apprehended overnight. I know you haven’t seen much of his face, but I know your neighbour got a better look, so it would be good if both of you could drop by as soon as possible so we can wrap this up. I’ll be calling your students shortly as well.”

Perry continued on as Evelyn looked over to Severus, who was still sitting quietly on her couch, showing not a trace of curiosity about the call.

“Sure, officer. I’ll go as soon as I can...Today. Thank you.” she answered mechanically before hanging up

“Officer Perry?” he asked blankly.

“Yes. He says they arrested the man.”

“You’ll have to go to the police station then.”

“You don’t seem very surprised”

…..

Everything hurt. Even his eyes hurt as Sewlyn opened them to the unforgiving light. He groaned and tried to move, but any movement he made sent stabbing sharp burning pain through his muscles, like his flesh was being torn apart. Snape had ripped him nearly to shreds. That he was even alive seemed like a bad joke in on itself.

“We weren’t expecting you to wake up so soon...” a soft female voice with a thick accent he couldn’t identify reached his ears. He turned to where the voice was and saw a beautiful woman, wearing white robes and a white bonnet that contrasted with her black hair, pulled back in a bun. A nurse, he thought. So his captors had been kind enough to send him to a hospital before giving him over to the dementors.

“Wouldn’t have been better not to have.”

She didn’t answer, and instead proceeded to check his bandages with a subtle smile frozen on her face and no detectable emotion in her bright blue eyes. There was a long silence before Sewlyn heard steps coming into the room, and a male voice came next.

“Anyah, dear...I’ll need you to step out for a moment if you don’t mind it.”

Sewlyn simply figured it was a healer, even if the fact that he too had that same accent as the nurse felt odd...Then he saw the man, and noticed didn’t have robes on, but a grey muggle suit. His hair was almost the same shade of grey as his clothes, and his eyes were eerily pale, blue or grey it was hard to tell. His face was calm, bordering on cheerful. As soon as the nurse left, the man approached his bed.

“Good morning. I’m glad to see you’ve come to...”

“You’re not a healer...”

“Well observed. You’re alert, that’s excellent. We have a lot to discuss.”

“Am I under arrest?”
“Quite the contrary... You’re a free man. Free from the British Ministry and free from the Rotts. Of course everything comes at a price, but you will soon find out you could do far worse than negotiating with me. But first things first. You may call me Dmitri.”
Chapter Summary

A new unknown player emerges and the crisis in the newly reformed Ministry deepens as information leaks and orchestrated prisoner escapes threaten the public’s safety. Evelyn finds a new editor and some other things she didn’t bargain for.

Cokeworth’s police station had operated for over a century from a small and unimpressive three storey red brick building close to the old commercial centre. The town grew as the small, square building became obsolete, more and more unfit to handle the criminal occurrences that inevitably increased along with the cycle of urban development and decay. As a result, papers piled up in complete chaos, archives and boxes had to be squeezed into tiny cramped spaces, and the staff laboured on tiny desks where reports and occurrences came in faster than they could be dispatched and dealt with.

Evelyn noticed the tendency towards maddeningly slow bureaucratic process from the moment she set foot in the place. Phones ringing non-stop, files and documents being stacked, moved, shuffled and passed around, people sitting around waiting for their own complaints or occurrences to be processed, people running amok trying to accomplish ten tasks at the same time. She wondered how such an understaffed and overwhelmed agency could have possibly found the man who assaulted her so fast? Surely there were many more serious cases ahead of hers...

It took her and Severus a good five minutes to locate Officer Perry’s desk. He was on the phone, talking about some other case he was working on, and she wondered how many cases did the average officer in Cokeworth had to work on at the same time.

"My apologies" he smiled as he finished the call and offered them each a handshake "please, take a seat."

"Officer Perry," Evelyn started, as Severus remained oddly quiet "I have to say I’m surprised. I didn’t think this would be solved so soon..."

"Neither did we, and trust me, that’s not usually the case. But you seem to be a lucky woman. Yesterday we got a call saying the man who attacked you had been admitted into a local hospital. They even provided his name: Peter Henley"

"A hospital? What happened to him?" her heart skipped a beat and she briefly looked at Severus from the corner of her eye. He was as quiet and still as a statue.

"Apparently Mr. Henley fled the scene in a motorbike, which is consistent with James Wright’s statement. He then suffered an accident. Nothing too serious, some bruises and scratches, a broken arm and a fractured foot. The foot injury is not related to the crash from what I gathered, however."

"Yes, I know. I stomped on his foot wearing high heels. The heel broke off even..."

"That explains it, then."

"So his condition is not serious?"
"Physically no. But the hospital staff was keeping him in observation due to what they described as ‘erratic behaviour’. They said he appeared to be having hallucinations, so he got tested for drugs. The results haven’t come back yet."

"What kind of hallucinations was he having?"

"Well..." Perry looked at her obviously taken aback by the question " The doctor who saw him said he was paranoid, claiming that someone was after him, and that he was going to be ‘cursed’. I went in to talk to him, and he practically admitted to having assaulted you before I even asked anything. Then he told me I could arrest him, as long as I didn’t turn him over to ‘that man’...whatever that means. I’m betting good money that the drug screening will come back positive for a laundry list of substances"

"Are you considering running a psychological test?" She felt her stomach drop. Did that man have mental issues? What would become of him if that was the case?

"At this stage we don’t know. He may seem like lunatic, but he also has a criminal record, which includes battery and at least one count of sexual assault, so I wouldn’t put him in the ‘poor sod who didn’t know any better’ category just yet. And as I said the test results haven’t come back yet, he may just be drugged out of his mind. But let us worry about that. I just wanted you and Mr. Snape to come so we could get the whole identification part done and you can put this behind you as soon as possible"

"I haven’t seen my attacker’s face. He grabbed me from behind...and he had a scarf over his head."

"But you’ve seen his clothes and general built. I know Mr. Wright saw his face, and Mr. Snape has taken a partial look as well from what he told me. I have contacted Mr. Wright’s mother and she’s bringing the lad in later for an identity parade, so if you two could be so kind as to take a quick glance at Henley"

"I can’t verify his identity for sure...I’ve told you I haven’t seen that man’s face."

"And I’m not asking you to. I told you, he confessed before I even asked. This is merely a formality. Just tell me if he matches what you did see: height, built, any detail you feel like you can be sure of. You don’t have to confirm his identity. He left plenty forensic evidence behind. We just need the extra evidence to wrap this up neatly and avoid problems down the line. Same for you Mr. Snape, you..."

"Sure, whatever is needed." Severus replied icily without letting Perry finish "So, shall we get this over with at once?"

Perry guided them into a small room. It was fitted with one of those two-way mirrors that she had only seen in the American investigative TV series her sister loved watching. They stood in awkward silence for a few moments as Perry lit the light on the adjoining room, so they could see it through the mirror. After another few moments a police officer in uniform come into the other room bringing a sallow faced hulking man with dark hair and blue eyes, his right arm in a cast, face all bruised and limping from one leg.

"Remember, you don’t have to make a definitive positive identification.” Perry reassured her “Just tell me if there’s anything about him that rings a bell."

"He’s tall and he’s wearing jeans and a black jacket...That’s about all I can say. I’ve told you, I can’t help you much..."
"It’s him." Severus let out flatly.

"How can you be so sure?" Evelyn turned to him, not quite believing her ears.

"I am. That’s him. May we go now?"

"Of course." Perry knocked on the glass to let the other officer know they were done before opening the door for them. He led them out and back into the main office, so Henley could be removed from the room without crossing their path. “Standard safety measure”, he explained.

“Shouldn’t he be in the hospital if his tests haven’t come back yet?” Evelyn asked, looking over her shoulder as Henley was let out of the room.

“He’s not officially under arrest. We will wait for the tests then interview him officia...” Perry was interrupted mid-sentence by beastly screams, and Evelyn suddenly felt Severus roughly grab her arm and pull her back behind him before she could figure out what was going on.

Henley was howling, struggling violently to get away from the officer who had custody of him. In a matter of seconds, he broke free of the officer’s grip and body slammed him to a wall. Even in handcuffs Henley’s required three men, Perry included, to wrestle him to the ground and restrain him as he kicked and bit, grunting profanity-laced incoherences. For a moment she thought he was trying to lunge at them, and surely Severus had had the same impression, which explained why he had stepped in front of her. But as Henley was restrained she realized that wasn’t it. Now she could hear clearly what Henley was saying.

“Get him away from me”.

The giant of a man who had terrorized her less than 48 hours before was on the ground, sobbing in terror, struggling, not to attack, but to get away. As Perry and his men forced him back onto his feet, Evelyn saw it...Henley’s eyes were staring at Severus as she trembled from head to toe.

He wasn’t having a fit of rage. He was petrified. And Severus was the reason for the panic attack.

Evelyn turned to look at his face and found, much to her shock, that Severus was as calm and collected as before, as if the event hadn’t shaken him in the least. In fact, aside from pulling her behind him, he had barely moved.

“We better go.” he finally spoke “I don’t think officer Perry needs us anymore.”

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"That man..." Evelyn ventured as they stepped out of the police station.

"What about him?" Severus answered distractedly, lighting up a cigarette.

"He was scared out of his wits."

"He’s just been arrested, I’m sure he’s not having a very good day thus far."

"He was scared of you"

"Evelyn, please..."
"He acted like he had seen the devil in person the moment he laid eyes on you."

"I’m sorry but I can’t give you a good explanation for that. You heard the officer, that man is a drug addict, he could be high as the Everest or going through a withdrawal for all we know..."

“Or he has a mental condition of some sort. I heard the officer as well, Severus.” He studied her expression as she stood in front of him, arms crossed over her chest. She didn’t look like she would let this go until she got the answers she wanted from him.

“Or that.” he shrugged “See? We’ve got way of knowing what’s going on through his mind, and nor should we care. It’s over. You should be relieved.”

“Yes, that’s the thing. I’m not.”

“And why is that?” he sighed, starting to get irritated.

“I thought you had seen as much of my attacker’s face as I did. But you identified Henley without any hesitation. Then he comes out and has that reaction to you. I’m sure you can understand that I should have some questions.”

“What are you getting at?”

“I don’t know, you tell me.”

"Let me guess: you think I’ve done something to him.”

“Have you?”

“Evelyn, don’t be ridiculous. Not that I didn’t want to, but I can promise I didn’t lay a finger on that wanker. You heard officer Perry, he has had an accident. Or maybe some other lowlife did that to him, who knows....I’m sure he doesn’t spend his spare time playing bridge with his granny.”

"Then where were you last night?"

"I’ve told you."

"God, how stubborn can you be?"

"About as much as you apparently. You’re working yourself into a state for no reason!"

"Severus, look... I..” her tone mellowed. More than irritated she sounded upset “I care about you, ok? A great deal. I don’t want you to get yourself in trouble, specially on account of me."

“I’m not...Evelyn, don’t do this...” he let out after a small shocked pause. Was she really that worried about him? She seemed tired and weary, as if all her usual energy was gone and there was nothing left but confusion and fear. He would have loved to give her some form of reassurance, but there was nothing else he could feasibly do but deflect her questions. For the sake of them both “Trust me you’re twisting your metaphorical knickers in a bunch for nothing.”

"I hope I am.” she wasn’t, and he knew it. Little did she know, Evelyn actually had all the reasons in the world to be in that state. He just couldn’t let her know. Which was getting more difficult by the minute, specially when she gave him that pained look with those big brown eyes of hers.

"Let’s just stop this right here, ok? That man has been arrested and we should be celebrating, not bickering. Let’s have dinner somewhere. You chose the place..on me."
"Severus, are you trying to distract me with food?"

"It usually works..." his forced smile didn’t even begin to convince her.

“I’ll pass for today...”

“Evelyn...”

“I hope you don’t mind walking back home.”

Severus looked on as she walked towards her car and drove off. Maybe it was for the best that she wanted some time away. He needed some time himself, after all.

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Evelyn stared at her phone for what seemed like ages before finally working up the courage to pick it up and dial. But the moment she heard officer Perry’s voice answer her resolve faltered. Suddenly, she wasn’t sure making this phone call was a good idea.

“Ms. Black? Is everything alright?” He sounded surprised to get a call from her less than hour after she had left the police station, and Evelyn herself didn’t know what had come over her to call him the moment she had set foot back home.

“Yes...I hate to bother you but...” she still had time to hang up. Or make up something. Just tell him you lost your handbag and ask if it was in the station, Evelyn. He’d say no and the conversation would be over.

“You’re not bothering me at all, Ms. Black. Is there anything I can help you with?”

“I...need to ask you a favour”

“Sure, I’m listening.”

“Please, don’t think I’m crazy, but...”

“Ms. Black, I would never think that. Just tell me what’s on your mind and I’ll do my best to help you, ok?” his voice was soft and calm. Evelyn imagined how many distraught victims of violent crimes he dealt with on a regular basis to have developed that obviously calculated tone.

“I need to talk to Henley.”

“Pardon me?”

“Henley. That’s his name, right? That man... I need to talk to him.”

“I don’t think that’s advisable.”

“I know it’s not. Under different circumstances the last thing I’d want to do would be to look at his face again...But I have to do it. I have to talk to him.”

“May I ask why?”

She paused. Did she know why? The truth of the matter was that the only thing Evelyn had to go on was her intuition. Which had always served her well, it should be noted. She trusted her instincts, and more often than not they were right. But this time... Everything was so confusing she couldn’t even convince herself that her intuition was right, let alone convince somebody else.
“I´m afraid I can´t give you a good reason.”

“Then I´m afraid I can´t help you.”

“Officer...”

“Ms. Black, you can appreciate the fact that I can´t simply let you talk to him without, first, having a good reason for it, and second, going through all the appropriate legal and bureaucratic measures. Henley is the only suspect in a crime of which you are the victim, letting you two have a chat flies in the face of all proper procedure. So if there´s anything you can tell me that would help me understand this request...”

“It´s too complicated.”

Evelyn could hear him sigh on the other side of the line.

“Ms. Black...Let´s try this. My shift is ending in half an hour. There´s a little café around the corner from the station. Why don´t you meet me there and, calmly, tell me what this is all about?”

“I had no idea things were getting to this point...” Minerva looked up at him from her armchair.

“Neither did I until now...I´ve miscalculated everything” Severus leaned against the window frame, blowing a cloud of smoke into the cold, crisp air outside.

As his fingers played with the spent cigarette, he looked on the vastness of hills and lakes that surrounded Hogwarts, wondering how he could have spent two decades locked inside those walls, when a vast world continued to live on outside. As dangers other than Voldemort lurked, waiting for their turn to come out and play. He had definitely miscalculated...his whole life. So focused on the Dark Lord he had been, fighting his own private war inside the school walls, a war fed by old resentments and broken love and friendship, he had never accounted for the possibility that he´d eventually move beyond these walls and have to face other enemies. In fairness, that was never part of the plan.

And, in a way, that possibility didn´t seem to occur to anybody else either. There was a sense among the British wizarding population that things would be well and settled now that the Dark Lord was gone. The general public had no idea of what seeds had been planted and would begin to sprout soon.

Only a handful of people, himself included, were beginning to realize that two wizarding wars had merely opened the Pandora box...

“What about her?”

“Evelyn? She´s...fine. Worried but fine. I don´t blame her. She´s not stupid you, know. It is to be expected that she suspects something is amiss...”

“What have you told her?”

“What am I supposed to tell her? Not the truth, that´s for certain.”

“Then?..”
“I can’t lie to her” he spoke quietly. The hushed confession startled his former colleague.

“You’ve done it before.”

“Not to her.” he moved away from the window, taking a seat in front of her, his shoulders sloping forward. “I simply can’t. I keep trying to come up with a convincing story, and I should be able to. As you said, I’ve done it before. But it just won’t come out of my mouth.”

“You mean you can’t lie to her?”

“Ridiculous, isn’t it?” he grimaced, leaning back. “But I can’t. Evelyn Black has this way of just disarming me. And as I said, she’s smart...Too smart for her own sake, I feel at times. And more stubborn than I can ever hope to be. She’s been asking questions, and won’t swallow my excuses. She knows something is wrong and I can’t convince her otherwise. Her patience seems to be wearing thin as well.”

“Did you two have an argument?” she smiled

“I guess you could call it that...”

“So that’s why you’re so bent out of shape”

“Sure, that’s why” he scoffed “not the fact that people seem to be tripping over each other for the honour of having my head on a silver platter, and that these same people might pose a threat to the safety of the entire wizarding community. I’m ‘bent out of shape’ because Evelyn and I had an argument. Minerva, for crying out loud...”

“You’ve been through two wars, Severus, and never once I’ve seen you like this. You can deal with dark wizards and life threatening events quite well, and you have for most of your life. But I don’t recall you ever feeling this ‘disarmed’ by anyone quite like Ms. Black...your words not mine.”

“This is hard enough without having her involved. She just won’t stop asking me questions...”

“You care about her.”

“Of course. I can’t have this mess end up in a muggle casualty, can I?”

“Don’t play dumb”

“Pardon?”

“Is not just her safety you care about. It’s killing you that you have to lie to her, which you apparently can’t bring yourself to do, even though you’re enough of an expert liar as to have fooled the Dark Lord himself...What’s worse, now she’s upset and you can’t deal with that.”

“Minerva, you have it all backwards.”

“Severus I’ve had enough little lovers’quarrels of my own to know exactly what I’m talking about.”

“It was NOT a ‘lovers’quarrel, Minerva, damn it. I have no romantic relationship with her nor do I intend to, for the last time! Can’t you Gryffindors even entertain the idea that a Slytherin may care about anybody’s well-being without ulterior motives?”

“Us Gryffindors don’t consider ‘love’ an ‘ulterior motive’.”

“There’s no ‘love’ in this equation. Friendship perhaps...I’ll give you that. Evelyn is a friend, and I
care about her. That’s all.”

“You have feelings for her in any case. To the point that you can’t bring yourself to be dishonest with her, even if it’s for her own safety.”

“Yes. Yes, I have feelings for her. Is that what you wanted to hear? I will, however, remind you that ‘feelings’ is a broad category so don’t go putting your own narrative in my mouth, if you will.”

“Merely making observations”

“Did Dumbledore leave you in charge of tormenting me after he passed? Wouldn’t surprise me if it’s actually written on his bloody will.”

“Fine be like this...But if you want my opinion...”

“Not particularly at the moment.”

“Regardless...you might want to talk to her. Maybe say you’re sorry”

“I’ve done nothing to be sorry about”

“Lesson number one about dealing with a woman’s feelings: you may think you’ve done nothing wrong, but apologize anyway. There probably is a reason to, even if you don’t think so.”

“I’m not in the mood for riddles.”

“Is not a riddle. She’s upset and worried...Obviously this woman cares about you. Maybe acknowledging this would be a good idea? Giving her a little reassurance?”

“How?”

“You’ll find a way. She suspects something is amiss, so just try to make her feel like everything is fine. I’m sure you don’t need to lie for that. I trust that the minister and his aurors will handle more pressing matters at the moment, so, why don’t you go back home and work on making her feel a little safer, so you can put your mind to other matters that also need your attention?”

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“I don’t even know why I’m doing this. But...” Evelyn told him, her eyes staring into her steaming hot coffee.

“It has to do with Henley’s outburst, I imagine.”

“I suppose that much is obvious.” she finally looked up.

“Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“This won’t be making into any official report is it?”

“My shift is over, remember?”

“It’s about my neighbour.”
“Mr. Snape? What about him?”

“I think Henley’s ‘outburst’ as you call it...was directed at him.”

“I had that impression as well. If you’re worried about your neighbour’s safety, I can assure you that, with his record and everything else, Henley won’t be walking around to do anybody harm any time soon.”

“I’m aware but...”

“This is...not what you’re worried about?”

“Not quite. You see...yesterday Severus sort of...disappeared. He was out the whole night. Then Henley got arrested and...that scene happened. And I’m not sure what to make of it all. There, that’s it. I know it makes no kind of sense.”

“Ms. Black, I hope you don’t mind if I ask but...Are you and Mr. Snape, how can put this in a respectful way...”

“No.”

“No?”

“No...I mean...”

“It’s complicated?”

“Well...”

“I see...So, let me see if I got this. Are you afraid that Mr. Snape and Mr. Henley may have had any sort of altercation we don’t know about. Is this what we’re getting at here?”

“I suppose.”

“And you believe that to have happened after the actual break-in into your house”

“Yes. Last night. Severus had a few injuries when he came back home.”

“I noticed Mr. Snape has a bit of a temper, but do you honestly think he’d go after Henley?”

"I honestly...don’t know. You must understand I’m not saying Severus is violent or anything. But, as you said, he has a temper. And I don’t want him to get in any trouble.” Evelyn knew Severus had a less than model background. Of course she wouldn’t share that with Perry, but if he had gone after Henley...What if Henley had any connections, friends and whatnot. Even if that wasn’t the case, she didn’t like the idea of Severus going around risking his own safety dealing with people like Henley...All the possible scenarios were rushing through her head and any way she looked at it, it simply wasn’t good.

“You want my professional opinion? Even if your suspicion is right, and Mr. Snape did have...ahem...'words' with Mr. Henley. I wouldn’t think much of it. It wouldn’t be the first time somebody close to a crime victim went after the perpetrator to teach him a lesson. As a police officer I’d even let it slide. Misdemeanour assault under strong emotion? In Cokeworth we have about ten of those per pub on any given Monday. Not even worth the resources we´d spend.”

“That doesn’t do much to calm me down I’m afraid.”
“Well, if it will make you feel any better...” he called the waiter and asked for their check.

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“This is completely off the record, Ms. Black.” Perry told her as they made their way back into the police station and headed for the cells where incoming suspects were detained before being moved elsewhere for the adequate procedures.

“You´re sure you won´t get in trouble for this?”

“As I told you, I can´t allow you to talk to him on your own, but there´s nothing that specifically forbids you to be in the general vicinity when I ask him a question not in the context of an actual statement. But let´s make it clear: it´s one question and it won´t be on the records of your case. Understood?”

“Yes.”

“Ok, stay back a few steps if you will.”

She looked on as Perry approached one of the cells where some three men were being held and called out Henley´s name. Only then she saw him sitting in the back, propped up against the wall. He didn´t move until Perry called him out a third time. He looked up and Evelyn could swear there was a hint of a smile on his lips as he realized she was standing behind the officer.

“I have a visitor?” he drawled.

“Don´t fancy yourself so important. Now listen up, and I´ll ask you this just once, so don´t try to be smart. How did you end up in the hospital last night?”

“You know how, don´t be daft. Don´t tell me she´s worried about me, now” Evelyn could hear a raucous snickering coming from him.

“You wish. So...just an accident. Nobody you want to press charges against? Nobody laid hand on you?”

“He would if I had let him, but I ran away before he could curse me. Hey, you” he was looking straight at her now. “you think I´m scary, dear? If I were you I´d run the hell away from that man next door to you. I don´t even think he´s a man. He´s a demon, I know. He´s not human. You think I ´m bad? He´s going to do things to you.”

Evelyn stepped back as Henley started to rant about magic, blood and satanic rituals, working himself into what looked like another fit. Perry shook his head and escorted her out of the dingy corridor.

“See what I mean, Ms. Black.? That outburst was just that:the ravings of a madman on drugs and nothing else. Here, let me show you something.” They walked back to his desk as Perry pulled some papers from inside a folder.

“When I answered to your occurrence, I got the names of all the witnesses, that is your students and you neighbour. When you were in the hospital that night, Mr. Snape gave me quite a bit of an attitude, and he continued to do so the following day, so I admit, I pulled his criminal record. When
you’re in my line of work anything can be considered suspicious until it’s checked.”

“He...has a criminal record?” She braced for what he had to tell her, but he merely handed her the sheet.

“Yes. As you can see, your neighbour has a grand total of three occurrences to his name. One for vandalism, one for getting into a fistfight on the street and one for breaking and entering into the old Mill where his father was an employee at the time. Both happened when he was under the age of 18. Not as much as a littering fine since then. Hardly the type of man to go around taking justice into his own hands. Sure he’s got a nasty temper, but that’s not a crime as of yet.”

“I guess it was all unfounded paranoia then...”

“Ms. Black, I have no lost love for Mr. Snape and frankly, I’d have loved to have found something on him after he had the nerve to come around trying to teach me how to do my job. But I have to admit he’s only guilty of being a self-important, ill-tempered know-it-all.”

“Well, thank you in any case...And my apologies for wasting your time like this.”

“No problem.” he snickered “It was more entertaining than the paperwork I have to fill out on any given day.”

“I suppose” she smiled back, giving the piece of paper one last look. But something caught her eye then “Officer..I see here these charges resulted in fines.”

“Yes, as I said they weren’t anything serious.”

“And...this” she pointed at a name on the paper “would this be the person who paid the fines and bond?”

“Yes, precisely. Lucius Malfoy.” he shrugged “Why?”

“Nothing. Thank you again.”

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Her car wasn’t there when he arrived, but Severus only had to stand around for a few minutes before spotting the red Volvo driving up the street. She came out of the car and walked up to him, wearing the same serious frown from before. He took a deep breath. It was going to be yet another long conversation, he could feel it.

“Severus...” she started

“We need to talk, I know” he conceded.

“We most definitely do. Come in.” she walked past him and opened the door without as much as waiting for a reply.
Part 7 - The Pale Devil - Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

A new unknown player emerges and the crisis in the newly reformed Ministry deepens as information leaks and orchestrated prisoner escapes threaten the public’s safety. Evelyn finds a new editor and some other things she didn’t bargain for.

It was the first time Severus entered her house and Evelyn hadn’t offered him a smile, a seat, a cup of tea or something to eat. She walked about for a while, sighing, as if planning what to say next but finding herself at a loss of never happened. Evelyn rarely ever took too long to put her thoughts into sentences. Her mind was wickedly fast like that. It was one of the things that made her a terrible liar: she had no patience for even taking the time to contruct a lie before uttering it, so she simply didn’t. It was more than simple honesty, Severus imagined, she simply found it a waste of time. But now she seemed to be measuring her next words.

"I went back to the police station" she finally said.

"Pardon?"

"What you heard"

"What for, if I may ask?"

"To talk to that man."

"Have you lost your mind?"

"Aren’t we off to a good start here?" she chuckled in a way that didn’t become her "Yes, I lost my mind. It’s got nothing whatsoever to do with the fact that you’re blatantly hidding things from me."

"If that man said I laid as much as a finger on him, he’s lying."

"He said you didn’t. He also said you’re some sort of demon who will do unspeakable things to me."

"Hopefully you didn’t believe the second part." he smirked. Henley was not wrong about the second part, however. He was simply thinking about a different type of 'unspeakable things'... But it was better that Evelyn remained ignorant of the sort of ideas Severus had been getting regarding her as of late.

"I’m glad you’re amused because I’m not." her brown eyes where sparkling with what he could only imagine was anger, or at the very least outrage.

"What do you want me to say? I’ve told you where I was. I can’t do anything if you don’t believe it."

"You know...Sometimes I think I’m going crazy. I always get this feeling that you know things I don’t...Things I should know but you won’t tell me."

"What are you talking about?"
"When I first arrived here, you wouldn´t even talk to me...Then you started to get interested in my grandfather´s papers...Then there was that attic, which I´m still not over...You were not too suprised about it, if I recall correctly. Now this...Is like there´s always something you´re not telling me."

She sounded both irritated and scared. If he knew her, Evelyn probably was scared out of her wits. It was not in her personality to be paranoid...she was a level-headed, no-nonsense person for the most part. What she was saying, what she was feeling...She was right. She was absolutely right. He was hiding things from her. But those were magical things that not only she couldn´t see, but she wasn´t supposed to. She was right, but what she suspected to be true was far too absurd for a muggle to contemplate, and from that came her fear. The confusion of knowing something was off, but at the same time not being able to pinpoint what it was. It must have been wrecking havoc in her head. She was right to be scared and confused, and there was nothing he could possibly do to ease her worry.

"If that´s what you think...there´s nothing I can do, I´m afraid." he let out, defeated.

"That´s all you have to say?"

"What will you have me say? Trust me, there´s nothing I can possibly tell you that will change your mind." Strictly speaking that was the truth. There were many things he could say to clear up her questions...but he couldn´t really say any of them, on penalty of breaking the statute of secrecy. There literally wasn´t anything he could say to change her mind.

"You know...Officer Perry pulled your record." she told him flatly, as if hoping to get a rise out of him.

"He did what?"

"Apparently your attitude made him suspicious...Goes without saying he´s not a fan of yours."

"The feeling is mutual...So how many murders could he trace back to my person?"

"Severus don´t joke like that!"

"What should I do?" he shrugged, tired of it all "I have to laugh at the absurdity of this exchange, because, honestly, there´s nothing left for me to do at the moment."

"I din´t ask him to show me your criminal records, for what´s worth. I was surprised you had criminal records at all."

"Oh, were you really? Because it seems to me you´re pretty convinced I´m up to some nefarious deeds...I guess I should thank you for giving me the benefit of the doubt on this at least."

"Put yourself in my shoes for a second!"

"Ok, fine. I will. So just go ahead and say it clearly. What do you think I´m up to? C´mon, tell me what´s on your mind, Evelyn."

"Frankly...I don´t know. I don´t want to accuse you of anything, but you´re doing nothing to convince me I shouldn´t worry about you. Can you look at me in the eye and say you´re really not hiding anything from me?"

"As a matter of fact, no, I cannot." he spat without thinking or pausing, venomously "There´s plenty I´m hiding from you. And you know why? Because we barely know each other. I´ve lived 38 years of a life I´m not particularly proud of before you came along, but it is what it is, and I had made
peace with it. And now you show up and start to throw everything in disarray again and demand answers from me I don’t owe have no right to go investigating my past. I never gave you that liberty. I never gave you the permission to just barge into my life in the way you’re doing."

Severus had no idea what came over him. He didn’t want to say that. But there, he had said it. Deep down he wondered what he truly meant, because honestly Severus himself didn’t know. Maybe he was just trying to be hurtful on purpose. End that conversation. More than that, end...whatever it was that was beginning to happen between them. Yes, it was probably that. Evelyn had, indeed, thown everything in disarray... But he didn’t stop her. He let her in. And now she was stuck in a very dangerous situation that she had no idea about. She was suspicious and afraid, but Severus was in panic. It was probably for the best that he sent her away from him, somehow. To take back the space he had given her and make it so that she wouldn’t feel welcome anymore. It was the most sensible course of action. He had too much to worry about without her making everything all the more complicated. It was enough that the thought of her kept him up at night.

"You’re right." her tone was lifeless. "We barely know each other. I have no right to demand anything from you...And I can’t trust you enough to just take your word. So that’s it, then."

"I suppose." he answered, forcing himself to sound spiteful.

"This was all a mistake." she seemed to be talking to herself before looking back at him "I’m...I’m very thankful for everything you’ve done for me so far, but...You should probably go. Whatever it is that is happening between us is obviously not going to work. None of this, this house, that attic, us...none of it is going to work."

"What do you mean...?" Severus let out dully, stopping himself before completing the question...What did she mean by ‘whatever is happening between us’, he wanted to ask...but he didn’t dare. He couldn’t...he shouldn’t. Whatever it was, it wasn’t indeed, going to work and it wasn’t supposed to have even begun.

"Well, Severus, that’s not your problem, now is it? We’re not friends. We’re not...well, frankly we’re nothing to each other. So...if you would kindly leave now."

..."Where AM I?" Sewlyn tried to sit up, but his whole body ached. Dmitri smiled warmly and walked over to the side of the bed, pulling a small lever that propped the bed up to a sitting position in a gentle motion.

"There, there. You are safe. That’s all you need to worry about for now."

"Herr Rott didn’t send you to help me...did he?"

"You’re smarter than you seem. You must have realised by now the Rotts sacrificed you."

"They wouldn’t."

"You know your bosses better than I do. Truly ask yourself: wouldn’t they? Really?"

Sewlyn didn’t answer. There was no need to. Dmitri pulled a chair and sat, crossing his legs and resting his elegant hands on his lap, an odd mixture of amusement and sympathy colouring the way he looked at his interlocutor.

"The Rotts have no criminal record and their names never appeared on any investigations by the British Ministry. Ludwig has contacts in the French Ministry, so even if their names did show up in
any investigation he could make it go away. You, on the other hand" He continued, softly "I understand you were one of the many tried in absentia. Convicted, from what the news tell me. Life in prison. Standard conviction for almost all of Voldemort´s followers. Am I correct thus far?"

"Yes."

"So...do ask yourself: If you were the Rotts...what would you do?"

"They...left me to die"the realization dawned on him all at once.

"Not to die, perhaps." Dimtri chuckled. The sound was strangely metallic "You´re not that important to them that they´d want you dead. But you were no longer useful so the aurors could have you. And if you rattled on them, it would be your word against theirs, with no evidence and all their influence against you."

"The letters! The Ministry intercepted them, I´m sure. That´s how they found out about me."

"They intercepted your letters. Not theirs. They never sent you a single one."

"How do you know?"

"The Rotts are not the only ones with friends in high places. Trust me. They never wrote you back. The note setting up the meeting at the mill was a trap by the British Ministry. They probably were observing the Rotts before you were even sent you back to England, due to their connection with the Malfoys. I´ll bet Dawlish caught up with you before you even sent the first report back."

"So they did leave me to die. They had to know Snape would kill me the moment he found me."

"Would he? What I heard about Severus Snape tells a different story. I believe his only known fatal victim was a mercy killing, no? At least this is what that boy Potter is telling everybody who cares to hear."

"You don´t know Snape."

"But you do."

"What do you want from me?"

"The real question is: what do you want from me?"

"What?"

"I have many flaws, as any person is ought to." Dimitri shrugged, his smile getting a little warmer "But I do pride myself in keeping a sense of fairness in my relations, particularly in business. So, I´d like to let you know that whatever contract we now agree on, it will be as fair and mutually satisfying as possible."

"You saved my life. I already owe you."

"I saved your life because I wanted your undivided attention and access to any information you currently have. Now we negotiate the rest. But before, I need to know your conditions. What´s your price?"

"Snape."

"That´s all?"
"He’s a traitor. He must pay."

"I see. Before I make you any promises to that regard, I’ll present my conditions, shall I? First of all: considering you already owe me a debt of gratitude, you will tell me exactly what you’ve found out about Snape’s current status."

"Your informants, whoever they are, must have told you something."

"I want to hear it from you. I know he’s alive. What else can you tell me?"

"Well, while the Ministry is trying to come up with a good story to convince the public he died a hero, he’s been playing house."

"Care to elaborate?"

"This woman...she moved into a house in that muggle rat hole of a street where he lives now. He grew up there, so I guess he had nowhere else to go, but her? I don’t know why anybody would do that...Well, Snape is going with her."

"Are you sure about it?"

"What else would he be doing? He spends most of his time at her house, till very late most times, they go out every other day...A couple nights ago a muggle criminal, as they seem to have plenty of them, broke into her house. Attacked her. Snape couldn’t have come faster to her aid. Took he to a hospital, then she slept at his house. On his bed, I’d bet...She’s good-looking for being a filthy mongrel. He’s not enough of an idiot to pass up a..."

"Do spare me the commentary. We’re among gentlemen here"

"I mean...Yes, I’m sure. They have got to be together."

"This woman...tell me about her. Not her looks. I want to know about her. Who is she?"

"There’s nothing to tell...She’s a muggle. I was surprised that Snape would have done that, but, truly, I shouldn’t have been. He betrayed the Dark Lord, of course he would get mixed up with their disgusting ilk."

"Are you confident she’s a muggle?"

"Yes."

"Antything else?"

"She’s a teacher. That’s all I know."

"Which school?"

"Cokeworth Academy...Or something like that"

"Well, you must be tired. Get some more rest. Dimitri got up pulled on the lever again to return the bed to a flat position. "I’ll come back tomorrow so we may continue talking. Is there anything else you need?"

"Only what I’ve asked you."

"In due time. Now, I’ll have Anya come back, she’ll provide you with anything you might need. I
hope to see you in better spirits soon."

.....

Dimtri left the room quietly and held the door open so Anya, who had been waiting outside, could go back in. Once she closed the door he made this way up the long corridor that led from west wing of the mansion to the main staircase. His personal office was on the top floor, a spacious room with tall French doors and an elegant ample balcony overlooking the Neva river. It was the kind of location one couldn’t easily obtain in this day and age, as muggle Russia grew in a maddening pace. But that house had been an unlikely easy purchase. It was an elegant Petrine baroque four-story mansion, painted in the vivid tones intercalated with white details the architecture of the old Russian Imperial capital was known for under Peter the Great. It had belonged to a very ancient and respected family of aristocrats.

That was until the muggles started another one of their wars. A "revolution" they had called this one. It made no difference to Dimitri’s father what muggles were killing each other over this time around as long as he could get what he wanted out of the situation. And so he did. He always got what he wanted.. Dimitri’s family had outlived the Romanovs, just as it outlived that unique collection of muggle states they called Soviet Union that came after them, just as it had outlived every single dynasty of Tzars and those before them, all the way back to the Princes of Novgorod in the Middle Ages. Muggle politics concerned them little and meant even less in the grand scheme of things.

He walked into his office to find Arseniy already waiting for him, sitting on a chair by the window, taking in the cool sunshine of the late morning, his overlong long black slicked back, short trimmed beard and aquiline nose silhouetting him against the cloudy sky outside like a caricature of an Orthodox mystic. The old man insisted on donning old fashioned wizarding robes that had gone out of style before Dimitri’s grandfather was even born which made him look less like a wizard and more like one of those icons painted on the walls of muggle cathedrals. Dimitri’s mother had told him that Arseniy was already old when his grandfather was still an old man and in three generations Arseny had changed little. Dimitri had tried to guess his age many a time, but had resigned himself to the fact that he would never know.

"How is he?" Arseniy asked, never tearing his eyes from the milky sky.

"Better than I expected for someone who was cut, nearly crippled and almost burned. At this point his hatred towards Snape may be what’s keeping him alive"

"I still don’t know why you’ve saved that wretch..." Arseniy turned to him with bird-like movement, long fingers like claws scratching his beard "He’s a lunatic who has nothing to offer us. Much like the Lestranges, if you ask me. His spying of Snape was amateurish at best. What has he told you that we don’t know already?"

"Nothing. He told me about the muggle woman, but he doesn’t seem to know anything about her other than her address, occupation and blood status. Doesn’t seem to be important to him..."

"Precisely. Your contact in the ministry has reported that only Dawlish and Shacklebolt know anything about her. This idiot was following Snape day and night and couldn’t even get her name."

"Typical narrow minded pure-blood mentality. He believes because she’s a muggle knowing anything about her is a waste of time. He can only see her as a tool to punish Snape." Dimitri sat by his desk, distractedly looking at a bunch of neatly stacked notes.

"I assume you won’t be sending him back then..."
"Of course not. Not only is Sewlyn as dumb as a doorknob, he´s also violent and vindictive. He wants nothing less than to kill Snape. It´s beyond me why Claire and Ludwig thought it would be a good idea to use him as a spy. Dawlish didn´t even need to put on any effort to blow his cover."

"They thought they could control him...precisely because he´s imbecile. Or he was the only one available. The Rotts´ connection with the Malfoys and other known Death Eaters must have tied their hands. Most of their close associates have been arrested or are on the run, and the few people they do have they can´t afford to lose. Isn´t that why they sent the Lestranges here, after all? Too keep those two fools alive? But you didn´t say what are your plans for Sewlyn, anyway.

"I´ll send him back to the Rotts. As you said, they facilitated the Lestranges entry in Russia, so is just fair that I reciprocate the favour."

"For how long do you think you´ll be able to keep the Rotts trust?"

"I never had it to begin with. The Rotts trust nobody. It´s their one redeeming quality. But if they believe I´m willing to collaborate with their plans they´ll be more forthcoming."

"Sewlyn resents the Rotts now that he knows they set him up to get caught. You´re sure is a good idea to send him back to them?"

"His resentment is precisely what I´m counting on. I´ll offer him a deal...Sewlyn is far too amateur to spy on the likes of Snape, but Claire and Ludwig´s special brand of hubris will keep them from suspecting such a base-life form as Sewlyn."

"What about Snape?"

"Now, that...We need more information on this muggle woman. Arseniy, will you please see what our friend at the ministry can come up with? And have someone look into Cokeworth´s city´s archives . We have this woman´s address, so we should be able to come up with more. If she has a house, there has to be a paper trail. Oh and Selwyn said she´s a teacher at a school called Cokeworth Academy, so look into that as well.

"Anything else?"

"Everything. I want to know everything I possibly can about this woman. And I do mean everything: family, friends, favourite colour, star sign, where she buys her morning tea. Nothing should be overlooked. But above all, I want to know the true nature of her relationship with Snape."

"You don´t think Sewlyn is correct in thinking they have a romantic involvement?"

"He may be...But Sewlyn is a dimwitted pervert, so I rather not go on his feelings on such a matter."

"Very well" Arseniy got up from his seat slow and rackety like a dead tree that had suddenly started to move on its own accord. "As you command it shall be done."

Dimitri watched as the old man left the room before getting up and walking out into the balcony, the cool autumn breeze carressing his face as the mazarine-blue waters of the Neva ran lazily under his eyes. He smirked.

"A woman. There´s always a woman."

....

"Are you sure of that?" Mr. Nolan looked saddened but not particularly surprised. It was probably
not the first time he had that conversation with a teacher.

"Yes, I am" Evelyn could barely hold his gaze, focusing instead on her own fingers as she fidgeted with a paper clip she’d found on the headmaster’s desk. "I’m very, very sorry, Mr. Nolan. You have no idea how sorry I am. I just can’t stay."

"Is it because of what happened? I don’t mean to intrude but...It’s understandable, you’re shaken. Anybody would be after going through something so violent. Maybe you need more time?"

"No it’s not because of what happened. I mean, not only. I...I have some personal matters I need to take care of. I will stay till the end of the semester, of course, or at least until you find a proper replacement"

"A 'proper' replacement won’t be easy to find I’m afraid. But if you have decided, there’s little I can do but hope that something will happen to change your mind."

"I’m afraid that’s unlikely." she smiled "I would also like to ask you if I could return to my classes immediately"

"I gave you a week off."

"I know, and I appreciate it. But I’d rather be working. I still have a lot to do before the semester is over."

"If you feel comfortable coming back so soon, then by all means. Your students will be pleased. They were all very worried about you. And I can tell you, they’ll be devastated to see you go..."

"No more than I will, Mr. Nolan."
Part 7 - The Pale Devil - Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

A new unknown player emerges and the crisis in the newly reformed Ministry deepens as information leaks and orchestrated prisoner escapes threaten the public’s safety. Evelyn finds a new editor and some other things she didn’t bargain for.

It was still early in the day. First period wouldn’t start for another hour. Tancey had decided to do her homework at the library, to make sure nothing would interrupt her. Her assignments had piled up. First there was happened to Ms. Black, then the police enquiries, then James’ father found out about it and, of course, threw a fit. Anything was a reason for him to throw a fit. James had to spend a couple nights at her house on account of it, but then again what else was new...

She made her way to the library and found some other early arrivals. It was usual as the end of the year approached bringing final exams with it. But none of them seemed as interested in studying as they were in commenting the fact that there had been a break in of some sort into Mr. Nolan’s office and that Ms. Black was back to work. Nobody was expecting her to return so soon. Mr. Nolan had given her some days off after all, and she had been quite badly hurt. But it didn’t really surprise Tancey, to be honest, knowing her and all... Then it occurred to her that she had never had the chance to give that book back to Ms. Black. If she was there, Tancey might as well do that now.

"What’s with this idea of quitting?" Tancey heard Ms. Holt’s voice from the other side before knocking on the door to the teachers’ lounge.

"You’re listening behind doors now, Angela?"

Quitting? Was that Ms. Black Ms. Holt talking to? Why would she quit?

"Evelyn, we work in a school, you know as well as I do that nothing stays secret for long inside a school. And don’t evade my question. Are you really quitting?"

"Can we...please talk about this some other time?"

"Ok, fine. Look, Matthew will be spending the night at his parents to get some things sorted out before he has to go away again, can you drop by for dinner, so we talk?"

Tancey tried to read anything unusual on Ms. Black’s demeanour and surely enough she had found it. Ms. Black was really bad at disguising her feelings, and Tancey had learned that observing her in class. Students could usually tell whether she was pleased or displeased with them just by looking at her face. And she definitely wasn’t her usual self. It looked like the mere act of walking around the school grounds came as a chore to her today. She hadn’t been as energetic as usual in class, and she hadn’t laughed or smiled once. Nobody made mention of it, probably because everyone thought she was still reeling from what had happened. Obviously the news of it had spread like wildfire and nobody could stop talking about it. The break-in of Mr. Nolan’s office was positively boring by comparison (specially considering nothing had been stolen).

But after what she had overheard in the teacher’s lounge, Tancey wasn’t that sure that was the reason Ms. Black was unwell. She found it had to believe a teacher like her would quit over that, terrible as it had been. If she was quitting at all, that was. Maybe she had misheard it. She hadn’t stayed around to eavesdrop any more, the memory of her mother’s strongly worded advice about listening to conversations that didn’t concern her was vivid enough to keep her from listening in any longer.

James was sitting by her side on the steps of the main staircase, distracted by a complex music sheet he’d been trying to master when Ms Black emerged from the hallway and walked up to them. Tancey looked over to him, noticing the admiration-filled gaze he gave their teacher. She had been
aware of it for a while now. It didn’t bother her, if anything she found it entertaining that James of all people would fancy a teacher...But now she wondered how well he’d take it if she was actually leaving.

"Ms. Black." she spoke first, while James gathered his wits, reaching inside her bag to retrieve the proverbial book that accidentally had put her in the scene of a crime days before "I forgot to return your book in class."

"Did you like it?"

"Yes. I think I’m going to write my book report on it. Ms. Holt said I could even though is not on the list."

"Let me know if you need any help with that. I’d like to read it when you finish if I may?"

"Of course."

"James..." her smile seemed weary, forced "Are you doing anything after your last clas today?"

"No, I’m not."

"With everything that has happened I’m afraid Fr. Thomas and I didn’t have the time to properly discuss that idea with you. Why don’t we pay him a visit today?"

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"This is about that project idea you told me about, right?" James let out the moment Fr. Thomas opened to door to let him in. "Hello, Father."

"Take a seat, my lad." The priest pulled a chair across from Evelyn at the large rectory table "Your teacher has got some things to discuss with you."

"Look, Ms. Black...I told you I can’t really do anything like this. My grades are already bad, if I waste time with other things my father will..."

"James, before you say anything can you hear us out?"

"Sure" he sighed, finally taking the seat that had been offered to him

"So...the other day I asked you if you had any idea of what you wanted to do with your life, professionally speaking..."

"Yeah, and I told you I had no idea, because I don’t."

"Or maybe you do, but are not willing to say it out loud...I’ve seen your music scores, James. You definitely can compose."

"No, I can’t."

"I don’t think you realize it, but you can. You have never had any formal training, have you?"

"No..."

"Then how do you even know how to write music? I’ve seen your work, it’s a bit crude, but everything is there: chords, harmony...Who taught you?"

"My mother had some stuff laying around when I was younger..." he trailed off

"So your mother taught you?"

"Who, Meredith?" she smirked "No, she could’t tell the difference between a note and a chord if her life depended on it."

"Then how did she have any material?"

"Her father studied music, I think, but he had to give it up to work at mill. That’s what she told me. But she kept his notebooks, books, stuff like that. My father threw it all away once when I was five or six, but I got it from the trash, so she doesn’t know I have it."

Evelyn knew why he was telling her that, even though he refused to debate the topic of his compositions. James didn’t want either of his parents to know he had his grandfather´s study materials, lest he’d be in trouble. He was asking her not to tell.

"So...you taught yourself how to compose with old music sheets and notebooks from your grandfather? James, do you realize how impressive that is? There are people out there who can´t learn half of what you know even if they have professional help."

"So...?"

"I’m going to ask you a question. Just one. And I want you to look into my eyes and answer it honestly. Ok?" he nodded and she continued "Have you honestly never considered the possibility of being a musician? Be honest."
"Does it change anything if I have?"
"That's not an answer."
"Yes. Of course I have thought of it." Evelyn looked up, over James's shoulder to see Fr. Thomas standing behind the lad, his face lit up with both surprise and excitement, his hands clasped together almost as if in prayer. "But what difference does it make? I can think about winning the lottery all I want and it won't make me rich" "But, James..." finally intervened, taking a seat between the two of them "This is not like winning the lottery. It's not a longshot. You actually have a real, tangible chance of being a musician. You've got talent."
"But I've got no training, and no money. Talent alone doesn't do anything, father."
"You're right." Evelyn told him flatly "Talent alone is not enough. You need training, money...and let's be realistic you need connections. Nobody goes anywhere in life without those things. Now, I can't provide you with money...But when you know where to look, money can be the least of your troubles."
"What are you talking about?"
"You've got no formal training. That much is true. No serious music school will take you as you are now. But if you prepare... There's a small school down town that has classes on introductory level for..."
"Yeah, I know the one. They charge more for a week of sessions than both my parents make in a month."
"But they give away scholarships. It's in their best interest to find talented people who can make a career and put the school's name in the map. If you can get in, you're set. Just one year of formal training there, maybe even less and I'm sure you'll be able to join an actual conservatory. How does the Royal Northern College of Music sound to you?"
"The Conservatory in Manchester? Ms. Black are you crazy? I could never..."
"Where's your ambition, James? They'll be holding the last auditions of the year before Chistmas."
"That's only a month away"
"It's enough. It's just a first step. I just need you to trust me."

They had decided James would be stopping by the church everyday after school, so Evelyn could coach him. She wasn't sure of how much she could do for him, to be honest, but she would figure it out. Maybe she could get the school's music teacher to help out. She would think of something. The important thing was that James was prepared for an audition by December 16th. It could be done. She knew it could be done. Once that happened nothing else would tie her to Cokeworth.
"Evelyn...may I ask you something?" Fr. Thomas let out quietly as soon as James was out the door. "Sure, Father."
"Don't you think a month is too little a time for him to prepare? To be honest, after what happened I wasn't expecting you to be in any shape to" "He's perfectly capable of doing it in a month. Besides, James doesn't have a lot of time...I don't have a lot of time either."
"What do you mean by that?"
"Father...I haven't been to confession in quite a while..."

"Finally! I thought you weren't coming." Angela told her in a tone that reminded Evelyn a bit too much of her mother's. She supposed her friend had some reason to be upset at her, so she didn't begrudge her tone. In fact, Evelyn almost welcomed the feeling of being chided as she crossed the door, while the smell of food filled the air around her.
"What are you cooking?"
"Salmon and spinach rice. I got some wine too. What took you so long?"
"Sorry. Had to stop by the church to talk to Fr. Thomas, and confess"
"Confession? I thought you were one of those fallen catholics who never does that."
"Usually, but I needed it today"
"Cheaper than therapy I guess." Angela brought her into her glorious-smelling kitchen, and poured two glasses of wine. "I hope he put some sense into your head and convinced you not to quit." "It’s not his job as a confessor to do that, Angie." "Then you’re really quitting?" "Yes. I’m going back to Ireland." "W-Wha...Oh, sweetie. Don’t tell me it’s because of what happened. I didn’t think you were that shaken by it..." "It is and it isn’t...I suppose that just triggered it...but...It’s really not just that." "What is it then?...If you care to elaborate, that is." "Coming to Cokeworth was a mistake right from the beginning. I did it on a whim...It was an act of cowardice more than anything else.” "You’re not making any sense, dear..." Evelyn stared into her glass for a moment, deciding on whether or not to just tell her everything. She couldn’t make much sense of it all herself. Nothing made much sense. It wasn’t just Severus behaviour, although that had been the last straw. She feared she was going bonkers. Sure Cokeworth was not the best place in the world to live, much less if one lived in Spinner’s End. Wanting to move for safety reasons would be reasonable, specially considering what she had been through. It would be easier to just say that. But that would be a lie. On the other hand, where would she begin explaining everything to Angela? She definently couldn’t tell her she had been feeling a vague sense of unease inside her own house since the attic had opened by itself...Or that, sometimes, she felt like she was being watched when she stepped out of the house. Ciáran had been less than happy as of late and that was neve a good sign. But she couldn’t say those things...She would just sound crazy. Then there was the fact that she suspected Severus was meeting up with people from his past that, for the sake of his own safety, he probably shouldn’t be. She wondered who Lucius Malfoy was, and whether he had anything to do with that awful tattoo on Severus’ arm. He had mentioned it was from a time he was involved with a gang...Around the same time as the police reports she had seen, with Malfoy’s name on...and a woman by the name of Narcissa Malfoy had visited Severus just the other day. Then that odd disappearance from which we returned all black and blue saying he had "run into an old acquaintance" Any way she added up these elements, she didn’t like the results. Where would she even begin to explain everything, when she couldn’t explain it all to herself even? Finally Evelyn decided it was just easier to start from the beginning and work her way from there. "You know why I came to Cokeworth? Because my life back in Ireland quite a mess, that’s why." "You’re talking about your ex, aren’t you...What’s his name...Richard, right?" "Yeah...I guess there’s that too." Evelyn wondered how long had it been since she last thought of Richard. But truly, it had all started with him in a way "You never told me much about him..." "There’s nothing much to tell. It wasn’t the kind of love story you cherish for life but...when we moved in together I thought things were going to be fine. Maybe not exciting, but...fine. I mean, I had a well established career, had a good publishing deal, just gotten my first apartment, a car...I thought maybe finally I had a stable relationship to go with the rest of my life...Like I had it all, you know.

"I take that the ones before him weren’t too good either."

"Not much a matter of them being bad as me being unable to deal with them, I think. You know, right after I finished my Masters I started dating this fellow...Charles."

"You never told me about him."

"That one still hurts a little" she smiled "I loved him, he loved me back. He may have been the man I loved the most in my life to be honest. But then he proposed, and I said no. I’m not saying I regret it. Charles wanted children, a nice house in a smaller town, a dog. I wanted to write, to teach, to travel, to go out with my friends. I loved him so much, but we weren’t on the same page on anything. It was the right thing to do, trust me. But it took a while for me to get it. Because it hurt to make that decision, so it didn’t feel right, when it actually was. Then I just got into this awkward place, like I couldn’t forgive myself for putting my career first and stated thinking I would end up alone. Irish
Catholic upbringing creeping up on me and all. I was young too. Everything seems so final when you're in your 20s. Around that time I jumped into another relationship with an older man, because being young and foolish I thought a man 15 years older would give me the stability I craved. Well, that didn't work out so well either. It was just...toxic. Very toxic. Then along came Richard, and he was gentle, quiet, smart and so supportive at first. He was a writer too, so I felt like he 'got me'...I thought, well, finally, a grown-up relationship, somebody who I can trust, somebody I can have a partnership with... Finally I can be a functioning adult. I was quite disastrously wrong."

"What happened to end it after all? If you don't mind me asking."

"I still don't quite know what happened. We just started drifting apart once his books didn't sell as well as he expected them to. I got home early one evening and...well...At least I found out why he was less and less sexually interested on me, and it had nothing to do with work...He was getting it somewhere else. It's obvious looking back, but I never saw it coming."

"Oh, dear...I'm sorry."

"Don't be... not the first time I'd been cheated on. That's not even what screwed everything up. It was that and, well, everything else. Things with Richard went sour, then I threw him out of the house and not a month later my grandfather died. I left my job, moved back home. And my father died less than two years later. I just sort of lost it. It was too much at once, like a vortex swallowing me and I couldn't fight back. Had to deal with my father's inventory, because my sister had enough on her plate with work, kids and an ex-husband who couldn't be bothered to take care of himself, let alone help her, my mother was a nervous wreck, and my grandmother, Oh God...You have no idea the state my grandmother was in after losing her husband and only child only two years apart from each other like that. I swear to God, I don't think I got more than three full nights of sleep between 1996 and 1998. When I discovered that house in Spinner's End...I was like I had gotten a chance to get away."

"But you said it was cowardice, and that's just not true. It's natural. You had a lot going on, anybody would have jumped at the opportunity to try something new, to start again in a different place... And how you just want to go back to Ireland like that?"

"Because I shouldn't have come here in the first place. I don't know what I was expecting to find besides an old house. I didn't think that decision through, I just did it on a whim..."

"That may be...But you have something good going on here. The remedial classes are going so well. The students love you. And don't think I haven't noticed their progress. I've had kids who never picked up a book unless they had to, coming to me and asking about books and authors you suggested. Just look at James and how much he improved. And is not only the students, you've got friends, and is not just me or Matthew, all your colleagues like you, there's Fr. Thomas, there's Severus..."

"Yeah, sure, Severus."

"I know you don't like it when I bring him up, but I'm not trying to be funny this time around. The man does seem to care a lot about you, even if it's just as a friend..."

"About that...I gotta admit, Severus was probably another big mistake on my part."

"What? You're not even making sense."

"Feel free to rub it on my face, but..."

"Oh no...You're not going to tell me...Evelyn, so that whole "we're just friends" thing was all bull? OH MY GOD, THE HELL YOU GAVE ME!"

"Ok, hold your horses, Ms. 't start doing the 'I told you so dance just yet. I didn't say there is anything going on."

"But you're..."

"Yes, yes. I am. I am starting to feel...something. More than just something, to be honest. But it's not going anywhere, trust me."

"Why not? Don't tell me he *is* gay after all."

"That would probably make it easier."

"Then...?"

"To make a long story short, last time a man kept things from me I wound up finding him in my bed
with a barely-out-of-college girl. I don´t have the time or energy for mind games and two-timing anymore, I´ve had enough of that.

"Wait, what is he keeping from you?"

"I don´t know and I don´t care to find out. He´s been sending me mixed signals on just about everything. One day he´s the gentlest, kindest man on Earth, and I truly feel from the way he looks at me and talks to me that something really special could happen between us. That he wants it to happen. But then the other day he´s cold, distant, then he up and disappears out of nowhere, starts acting strange and snaps at me for asking questions, as if we are complete strangers and how dare I worry about him. I just can´t deal with this sort of thing right now."

"So you think he´s got somebody else, or.."

"No, is not that." She wasn´t going to say it. It was enough that she had gone to Officer Perry. If Severus was up to something dangerous, she had done enough to tangle him even more.

"Ok, be honest. This isn´t about you regretting moving to Cokeworth, or going after your grandfather´s story, or that man who invaded your house, or anything like it. It was Severus who triggered this, wasn´t it?"

"What difference does it make?"

"A world of difference. Are you really leaving because you feel like you´ve got nothing to accomplish in Cokeworth and you´re unhappy here, or because Severus is arsing about?"

"Probably both."

"Well, then tell Severus to kindly go fuck himself if he´s gonna be like this, and keep your bloody job! Are you going to punish yourself and your students because he can´t man up?"

"It´s not just him, I´m telling you..."

"What else then?"

"What else? I don´t know, maybe the fact that I don´t know what the fuck I´m doing with my life right now. Or the fact that sometimes I feel like I´m going crazy inside my own house, the fact that horrible man who attacked me is in jail and I still can´t feel safe, and Severus acting all cryptic around me does nothing to help. It feels like I´m living in some weird Hitchcock film, where there´s always this vague feeling that something disastrous is going to help, and I keep telling myself I´m just paranoid, but I know I´m not."

"Evelyn, love, you´re under a ton of stress. In the space of, what, three years, you´ve lost two close family members, you moved and changed jobs two times, you finished a relationship, and you´ve been the victim of a violent crime,and that´s without even mentioning what Mitch has been doing, harassing you like he did. Feeling disoriented and paranoid is to be expected. Just don´t let it get to you. And if Severus is going to be a wanker and play little mind games just tell him to fuck off. Is not like the two of you have something going anyway...Look, you want to spend some days at my place? Or find another place, you don´t have be living in Spinner´s End, dealing with all this..

"I don´t want to impose on you..."

"Matthew is leaving tomorrow, remember? I can use the company. And hell, if Severus decides he wants to get serious about you, maybe he could use a little shock therapy. Will be good for him to miss you a little. That´s it. Pack some things up and I´ll pick you up the day after tomorrow"

.....

Severus didn´t think much of it when he didn´t see her car parked outside the night after their argument, and it still wasn´t there the following morning. It was understandable that Evelyn wanted to avoid him after that exchange. If he had to bet he´d say she was at Angela´s house. But then...the car wasn´t there the second day...and the third...A week passed and he saw no shadow of her. She could be at Angela´s. Or maybe she had used the week off her boss had given her to visit her relatives in Ireland. But at the end of a full week, he started to wonder. She couldn´t be out of town...She had to go back to work after a week.

Wasn´t this what he wanted? He wanted her to be away from him. It would make everything easier if she stopped asking questions, if she stopped worrying...If she stopped being a part of his life. Which she was never supposed to be in the first place. Any attachment to this woman only complicated everything. Then why couldn´t he stop thinking about that bloody car that wasn´t parked outside her
house? Why couldn’t he stop wondering where she was?
"Severus! Did you hear a single word I just said?"
Severus looked up at Dawlish, who seemed more than little annoyed.
"I’m afraid not." Severus let out, bored, leaning back on his chair. Dawlish had called him to his
office at the Ministry in order to inform him about the latest developments. Or lack thereof... "And I
’m at a loss as to what I could possibly contribute to this conversation that I haven’t already told
you."
"Not much in any case..."
"I gave the Minister himself my word that I’d collaborate, but I can’t simply give you information I
do not have. Is not like you did much with what Draco sent us concerning the Rotts."
"Our hands are tied on the Rotts...You know we can’t force the French Ministry to help us."
"You truly think you’ll have better luck with the Russian Ministry?"
"Well, we’ll have to try. According to the Malfoy lad the Lestranges are in Russia, and you seem to
think Sewlyn might be there too..."
"It’s a wild guess on my part...I don’t know if the Rotts would send Sewlyn to Russia, like they did
with the Lestranges...Say what you will about them, they would at least honor the fact that the
Lestranges are family...Sewlyn, on the other hand..."
"Would this man...What’s his name again?"
"Dmitri...That’s not his real name. Nobody knows his real name. Or even if he exists for that matter.
I heard Ludwig Rott mention him maybe once, on one rare occasion that he went in person to meet
with Lucius in order to negotiate a loan to pay off the bribes for a series of Ministry officials.
Apparently some of the money came from this man, but Rott was never in the habit of being honest
about much anything. As far as I know Dmitri may not even exist."
"So that’s it? A name?"
"Possibly a fake one" Severus sighed. It was a desperate call. Most people in the Dark Lord’s inner
circle had always assumed ‘Dmitri’ wasn’t even a person in the strict sense of the word. Nobody ever
saw him and the only people who mentioned his name were the Rotts, whom very few outside of the
Malfoys trusted. Voldemort certainly never made it a point of reaching out to him, but then again he
was too interested in securing control over the British Isles to worry about something as distant as
potential future ally abroad. The Dark Lord didn’t operate on the basis of ‘maybes’ ...there was a
reason the man had split his soul into so many pieces after all, he was as paranoid as he was
cunning...Not that either quality had helped him much.
Severus himself hadn’t considered Dmitri’s name until he had received Draco’s most recent letter,
telling him he had overheard the man mentioned in a particularly heated argument between Claire
and Ludwig. Why would he? A name dropped in maybe two occasions, just another foreign
sympathiser the Dark Lord would make time for later, once his business with Harry Potter had been
settled. Patience, patience he would say, one must first secure the borders before building an empire.
But even if this Dmitri was an actual person...
Then what? Where would they go from there? Demand a list of every wizard registered by the
Russian ministry and try to compare it with the scarce information Severus possessed, and hope they
’d find a man whose real name they ignored and whose very existence was in question? Laughable
endeavour.
"So, we sit and wait for their next move, I suppose" Dawlish threw his hands up, exasperated.
"...and pray nothing too bad happens."
"A stalemate is better than nothing. I thought the Ministry was deploying aurors to France?"
"To do what? Break into the Rotts house to gather intelligence? It’s enough that you want to
minimize Draco’s participation in this, He’s our only lifeline."
"He’s nobody’s ‘lifeline’...He’s a boy."
"They were all boys and girls...all the wounded and dead that won us the war. You didn’t seem to
care then."
"I wasn’t making the calls then. Saint Dumbledore saw nothing wrong with sacrificing children for
the greater cause, but I’d rather not deal with the unpleasantness of dead children if it can be helped.
Not if us adults can handle the matter."
"What if we can’t?"
"Don’t blow this out of proportion. We have three important former Death Eaters at large, with all
the other significant players behind bars. There’s just so much the Rotts can do about that. Right now
all they have is a ragtag band of desperate low-ranking idiots who think they can do what the Dark
Lord himself failed at accomplishing. As for whoever ‘Dmitri’ is… Might be a red herring for all we
know."
"You don’t even believe that yourself, Snape."
"I beg your pardon?"
"You understood me just fine. You say we’re blowing this out of proportion and shouldn’t worry
that much about it. Now tell me: would you bet your life on that? Better still… would bet hers?"
"Dawlish I swear to…"
"I know she’s part of the deal you made with the Minister. Of course, that’s none of my business, but
we all know someone might decide to come for her at some point. You can’t possibly convince me
this doesn’t worry you. It does. To the point you’re sitting in front of me trying to convince yourself
everything is fine when you know it isn’t."
"Fine.” Severus could almost hear his teeth gritting. "What will you have me do, then?"
"More than what you’re doing now, that’s for one. Contact Draco again, pressure Lucius Malfoy and
his wife, blackmail them if you must, I know it’s never been beneath you to do that. But do
something. Hell, I don’t give a damn if I have to go to Russia in person and knock on every bloody
door to find this man, but give me somewhere to start, Snape. You’re the only one who can."

….

It never ceased to amaze him how many opportunities were wasted on account of wizards disregard
towards muggles. Not that he expected much from Sewlyn, but even the most dimwitted of men
would have been able to see that if Severus Snape had indeed, as he claimed, entered a relationship
with a muggle, anybody targeting him would have to add her to the plan somehow. Sure it was a
cliché, to target a woman in order to get at the man whose affections she has, but clichés had a raison
d’être… they were, more often than not, effective. Furthermore, muggles were so easy to track it was
a very low cost investment for the all the potential profit, Dmitri thought looking down at the papers
Arseniy had brought him.
"Evelyn Teresa Black" he let the name roll off his tongue softly, savouring every syllable.
"Born in Ireland, in the 10th of September of 1963. History professor, author. Second child of
Marius and Sophia Black. Studied in a prestigious muggle university, later worked in the same
institution. Six books published to her name… Anya suggested we got a picture of her. She knows
you enjoy these things” Arseniy continued to report, his tone betraying his usual disdain for
photographs. "One of our men managed to get one as she was leaving the school where she works”
"Let me see it then."
Arseniy handed him the photo showing as much interest as he would have had for a speck of dust on
the floor. Dmitri looked at the moving image for a long minute, studying every detail. The woman in
it was impressive, he had to admit: tall, long brown hair neatly styled, only slightly disturbed by a late
autumn breeze, immaculately elegant clothes that hugged her forms like they had been sewn on her
body for a flawless fit.
"Brains and beauty, it seems. I can’t say I’d expect less from Severus Snape, knowing his reputation.
A beautiful, smart woman compliments an ambitious and cunning man like gold compliments
marble. That is assuming Sewlyn is correct in his assessment of their relationship, of course”
"I can tell by your tone you don’t consider their relation an assumption any longer.”
"It’s a safe bet by now... Unless Snape is stupid, which we all know he isn’t. Not like a Slytherin to
pass up on such a prospective match, even if she’s a muggle. Have you found all of her books?"
"Nearly all of them. Anya will bring them to you later. You’re really planning to read this woman’s
books?"
"Of course. Let’s see if Snape was attracted to her wits, or if it’s just this lovely pair of brown eyes.”
"No man has ever fallen in love with a woman for her mind, Dmitri.” Arseniy smirked wolfishly
looking down at the photograph "Severus Snape is a man like any other"
"No, not like any other." He leaned back, picking up the copy of Evelyn Black’s professional profile
one of his men had managed to obtain by apparating into her boss’s office late at night. He ran his eyes
over her personal information and let out a quiet laugh. "September 10th. A Virgo. Arseniy...You
know who is the virgin represented by the sign of Virgo?"
"I’m afraid my Greek mythology trivia knowledge is a bit rusty..."
"Persephone. The daughter of Demeter, the Earth Goddess. Hades, the god of the dead and the
Underworld, kidnapped and turned her into his queen"
"I’m sure there’s a metaphor in there, but I’m afraid I missed it entirely."
"None, actually. Not everything has inherent symbolism. But it does get me thinking...How far into
hell would a man like Severus Snape be willing to go for a woman?"
Having a brother eight years older than you had quite a few ups and downs, as Tancey had found out over the years. Clement had always been like a third parent of sorts. Both their parents worked, so he had to babysit her often, and no matter how much older a sibling will always be more permissive than a parent, so she liked that. Clement let her get away with a lot when he was in charge. Sure he had always been a bit of a nerd, so he still made her do her homework and go to bed early on school days, but he still let her have pizza and cake for dinner and watch horror films on weekends. Maybe because he was that much older, Clem was always nice to her. She heard stories from her schoolmates who had older siblings, stories about how annoying they were, and the horrible things they did and how the got them in trouble with their parents. Clement never did any of that. He was too mature for this sort of thing. He actually covered for a lot of the bad things she did, so her parents wouldn´t be mad at her. Sure Clement himself always gave her a lecture whenever he found out she was up to something bad, but she´d take him over either of their parents. And of course when your brother is that much older than you, there´s no bully at school who will want to get on their bad side.

But as much as she enjoyed the perks of having a brother who was old enough to drive before she was ten, there were also some downsides. Namely the fact that, as they both grew older Clement had started to have his own life, independent from hers. He had his own group of friends, none of whom were interested in having a little girl tag along, he started dating girls, going out to places she wasn´t old enough to go to. Then he left for college. Clement went to university in Oldham, a half-hour car drive away, so in the first couple years it wasn´t that bad. They still saw each other everyday. But then he got an internship at a big, prestigious marketing company, so she started seeing less and less of him. At some point the workload and the commute became so difficult he moved into a flat with a schoolmate so things would be easier. Now he came home every other weekend, and maybe once a month in times when the company demanded too much of his time. James slept in his room more often than Clement did. And he was about to be made a full time employee now, so he probably wouldn´t even be home for the holidays. His company was working on a campaign for some posh department store that required a lot of time, he told her. That was the reason he was home this week. To spend some time with them before he was too swamped with work. So if she wanted to talk to him, it had to be now.

"Hey, Clem" she let out quietly knocking on his door.

"Hey yourself." he dropped the book he was reading and sat up on his bed "I thought I wouldn´t see you at all before going back to Oldham. Are you having classes 24/7 now?"

"Nah" she giggled, jumping on his bed like she used to do when she was little and wanted to annoy him while he was studying "It´s that after school programme. And they are having us volunteer too...with Christmas coming and all, that´s taking up a lot of time"

"Yeah, mum and dad told me all about it. They´re really happy, dad can´t stop talking about how your grades in History and English are improving. He says they´re on par with your maths and physics now."

"That´s just because Ms. Black and Ms. Holt are the only two teachers I can stand."

"Your maths grades have always been outstanding, don´t you like that teacher?"

"Mr. Barbery? Eh, he´s ok, I guess... But scoring high in his class is easy. By the way, Ms. Black told me I can try and apply for some advanced algebra classes in college next semester if Mr.
Barbery’s classes are that easy for me. Salford City has a course that is open to the community. She said she can help me apply, gave me a brochure and all.

"Are you applying?"

"I think so. Ms. Black and Mr. Barbery both said I can make it."

"You really like Ms. Black, don’t you? Mum told me that now everything is ‘this, Ms. Black that’...I think she’s getting a little jealous"

"Mum likes Ms. Black too, though."

"This woman is making you read books aside from those they assign at school, of course mum loves her. Speaking of which, how is she doing? I heard somebody tried to rob her house..."

"She came back to school today. She didn’t look very well though..."

"Figures. You can’t just go straight to normal after something like that happens. I’m sure she’ll be feeling better soon"

"I don’t know about that."

"Why is that?"

"I think she’s leaving."

"Has she told you that?"

"I...sort of overhead her saying something about it to Ms. Holt"

"Overheard or eavesdropped, Constance?" he cocked an eyebrow in the same way he did when he caught her trying to sneak out of the house without permission or lying about having done her homework.

"I was trying to return her book! Not my fault that they were talking about that as I arrived...But, yeah, I think she’s moving back to Ireland."

"Oh, that’s a shame. Is that the reason for the long face? You’re sad that she’s leaving?"

"Well...yes, of course... can I ask you something?"

"Shoot."

"James...he just called me. He said Ms. Black convinced him to apply for music lessons. There’s a music school that is giving grants to new students. They’re having auditions to decide who gets in. Ms. Black thinks if he studies there for a year or so to prepare, he can be admitted into an important conservatory once he graduates from school. She’s even talking about the Royal Northern College of Music."

"Oh, wow. That’s wonderful. James has talent. I mean he can compose without formal training, I’m sure he can get into a good music school if he prepares for it."

"But he’s worried. She wants him to try out next month, and he thinks he won’t be ready by then. He doesn’t know why she’s pushing him to do it so soon..."

"And you think is because she’s leaving?"
"Yeah. And...I almost told him that. Should I? I mean, if she´s going to push for him to do this in such short notice, she should at least be honest with him, no? What if he fails, and she leaves? I know he´s going to give up if she´s not around to keep him going. Nobody else believes him"

"You do."

"But I´m not...her. It´s different when a teacher trusts you, you know? He´s never had that before. If he fails..."

"Maybe she thinks he won´t fail, maybe she just knows he will make it and doesn´t want to put any more stress on him by telling her she´s leaving. I´m sure she has her reasons to go back home, and they´re personal. It can be something she can´t really help, we don´t know. Would it really help James if he knew?"

"What if..."

"Tancey, enough with the 'what if´s'?...I´m sure your teacher is not a lunatic. She wouldn´t be putting James in this position if she didn´t know what she was doing."

"So...I should just stay out of it?"

"No. Just keep doing what you´ve always done, be James´ friend. That´s all he needs from you. Leave the rest to Ms. Black. If she could make you read Albert Camus, I´m sure she can get James into a music school. It´s probably going to be even easier."

"What is that supposed to mean?" she yelped, offended.

"Nothing." he laughed "Why don´t we stop worrying about James and enjoy the time off I have? Let´s pick mum up from work, dad said he´s treating us all to dinner tonight."

It had taken James only a week for the first full chords and rudimentary melodies to flow from his fingers and out in the air. Less than that for him to actually learn which keys would give him the notes he wanted, and how to combine them. They were entering their third week of daily practice, two hours sometimes three everyday, even on weekends, and she could say James had learned basics of the instrument. Evelyn had transcribed some of his compositions and they were trying to get him to play them on the piano, slowly but surely. The melody was always correct, if a little stiff, but with more practice he would be able to play them with ease.

"Do you realize what you´ve done here, James?"

"Crippled my favourite composition?"

"You´ve learned the basics of the piano. In two weeks."

"If I present this they´ll laugh at me."

"I know, it´s not optimal. But you´ve made more progress in two weeks than most people make in months."

"I still don´t think the piano is a good idea. Can I just play the guitar?"

"If you feel more comfortable, yes. The objective of teaching you the piano is simply so you can have more formal structure. More clarity when composing. Your work is quite messy right now, but
if you have a clear idea of the elements of your composition everything will come more easily to you. Honestly though, I think the piano might be more of your instrument. You’ve been practising with the guitar at home, right?"

"Yeah. Not like I can find a piano anywhere else."

"Have you decided on a song, yet?"

"I’ve been working on something..."

"You think you’d be able to play it on the piano?"

"I can try."

"Whenever you’re ready." Evelyn stood from the stool and sat on a chair a few steps behind him. There was a long pause before the first notes filled the silence around them. The melody was continuous, contained, through-composed like a madrigal, with a very clear, simple, almost melancholic melodic line. It sounded vaguely baroque...As the melody advanced she could recognise at least one line that called back to Monteverdi.

"James, stop for a moment"

"Why?"

"Repeat this last part"

"This one?" he repeated it. There it was, the first lines of ‘Zefiro torna’, by Monteverdi, reworked into a new, slightly slower and completely original melody. James had just composed a variation over a baroque theme.

"How did you..."

"Fr. Thomas lent me a tape. It had this song in it. I just played with it till I got something different."

"You composed it on the guitar, so...Get your guitar and play it again exactly as you composed it, please."

Evelyn barely moved as he did as she asked. The acoustic guitar fit the melody much better than the piano could, recalling the strings of the Monteverdi’s original flawlessly. Once James was done and she could find her voice again, she smiled like she hadn’t smiled in weeks.

"James, I think you’re right. Let’s just go with the guitar for this one. But do try and write it down for the piano just in case."

......

Three weeks. Three weeks since Severus had last seen her car parked outside. Even longer since he had last seen her. Evelyn had simply vanished. At first he thought nothing of it. She had a week off from work due to that incident, so he simply assumed she had gone away for a while. Possibly to stay a few days with her family. Evelyn had mentioned in passing how much her mother worried about her, so it was only natural that she’d go spend some days with her. She most definitely could use some time away from everything, himself included. Severus hadn’t really contributed with creating an environment conducive to relaxation.

When that first week came to an end Severus still didn’t think much of her absence. She was
certainly avoiding him and he didn't fault her in the least. But now he was starting to get a bit anxious. Going to the school to enquire was out of the question. She certainly wouldn’t appreciate him going to her workplace to ask questions regarding her activities when he had scolded her for doing exactly the same. Knowing Evelyn, the hypocrisy of it would very much not amuse her. Trying to contact Angela was an equally silly notion. He didn't know Angela enough to have this kind of conversation, and even if he did it would still come off as stalking at the very best.

So he decided to wait as the two weeks turned into three. He knew nothing bad had happened. He would have known by now. Severus was pretty confident that the Ministry was keeping an eye on her. It was, after all, the price he had charged them for his cooperation. Evelyn would return eventually...even if it was to collect her belongings and leave for good. No, certainly she wouldn't do that. The thought had crossed his mind more than once. That she would leave. There was nothing in Cokeworth for a woman like her. The pursuit of her grandfather's past, which had become an odd sort of obsession for her, would never lead anywhere, as the statute of secrecy would block her at every turn. And that was her whole reason for living in Cokeworth...Actually, no, it wasn't. Not any more. She was entirely too invested on that school, on her students...James and Constance in particular.

James had become a sort of mission for her. She had taken upon herself to ensure that boy wouldn't be just another bum among the thousands populating this god-forsaken city. Severus had his doubts about whether she'd succeed. The girl. Constance, yes. Severus could see that one going somewhere. Evelyn raved about her talent for maths, her studious nature, and how hard-working and responsible she was. The girl seemed ambitious and willed enough to go places. And from what he had seen of them, her parents would do anything to make sure that happened. Nevertheless, Evelyn dotted on both of them with a quiet and loving resolution that was all hers. For their sake, she wouldn't be going anywhere anytime soon.

So, he waited. But waking up everyday to see the deserted street below his bedroom window had been chipping at his patience. It had him disquieted, anxious. But then again, it wasn't just that...He had enough going on around him to worry about, and Evelyn's sudden disappearance was just the latest event.

Much to his own dismay he had finally written Draco another letter. A more pointed one, with clearer instructions, and a litany of advice as to how he could keep himself relatively safe. The ministry would continue pushing him, using his father's current status as leverage to get the boy to cooperate, and Severus had a more than passing suspicion that Draco's personal safety wouldn't even make the top ten list of their concerns. Being pushed around, pressure into docile cooperation and forced mea culpas had become the lot of every Slytherin, regardless of actual crimes or participation. And Draco had participated, so he would see even less mercy than most others.

Now that the Dark Lord was gone, it had become the duty of his house of origin to expiate for his deeds. Severus was starting to believe the only reasons the ministry hadn't tried to force Minerva to disband Slytherin, as popular clamour called for, was to have a neat package of clearly labeled "evil wizards" to use as scapegoat. And if the newspapers were anything to go by, it had already started. Even Slughorn of all people, had been brought in for questioning. Of course he couldn't be charged with anything other than committing the cardinal sin of being a Slytherin and a decent man simultaneously, but that didn't keep certain so-called journalists from trying to smear him anyway. Slytherin students and their families were also targeted for abuse, and probed by authorities. There was talk of a registry. A registry to list all Slytherin individuals as well as families with a history of members sorted into that house so they could be 'monitored'.

There wasn't much Severus could do about any of this, but he could at least try to protect Draco to some extent, even if it meant continuing to push him to work as a spy. Overseeing Draco's actions
himself was better than leaving him on the hands of a ministry that only saw him as a means to an end. So here he was, cloistered in his house, waiting for an owl to deliver a message from Draco, getting report after report that Dawlish was helpful enough to send him, reading the lies plastered on every wizarding newspaper and tabloid and listening to more of their lies on the radio.

Severus felt like he was slowly going insane...The small relief of Evelyn's presence was gone, and the nightmares and night terror were creeping back...The pain, too, had been getting worse, and his potions could only do so much about the ravaged muscles and ligaments of his neck, jaw and hand. He couldn't rely on numbing agents too much if he wanted to be alert enough to be of any service to the ministry, so he just had to deal with the pain for the most part. Every healer had agreed: he would suffer the sequelae of Nagini's powerful jaws and venom for the rest of his days. He'd never get rid of the pain, he could only manage it. From the dark mark on his arm to the scar on his neck, dark magic was etched into his flesh, a sore reminder of all the ways in which he had ruined everything through the years.

He had, however, made peace with it, to a certain extent. The physical pain had subsided for a while. He wasn't stupid enough to believe it had nothing to do with Evelyn. There was plentiful muggle literature about the ill effects of stress and depression on physical health. Evelyn herself pressured him about it. She went on about how he had to eat better, he had to go out, how he could use some fresh air...It bothered him at first, but now he had to admit, it had helped. Not only that but ... Just her being there made him feel better. That much was painfully clear to him now: with Evelyn around he was more at peace...happier, would he dare say?

...

The last three months of the year always rushed by. One day Fr. Thomas was preparing the annual Halloween party, the next day December had rolled in. November always felt like the shortest month of the year, even shorter than February. It felt like he always finished all of his preparations for Christmas right in the nick of time. November was the month of organizing, making lists, phone calls, going from door to door asking for donations, hoping, expecting. There were the food donations to receive, catalogue and store, and finding proper refrigeration for the perishables was always a concern, specially around the holidays when the amount of donations doubled compared to the rest of the year.

Of course, there was the Christmas dinner to think of. People came not only from Cokeworth but from neighbouring towns. Migrant workers from other towns, recent immigrants, struggling families with children, so many people who had nowhere else to go on Christmas...They had to find a way to make sure every last one of them had a decent Christmas meal, and their children got at least one gift. That meant there was an endless amount of lists, phone calls and delegating of tasks to make sure everything ran smoothly. It wasn't difficult to get the local restaurants, bakeries and markets to donate food and ingredients, but finding volunteers who could cook and would be available was never easy, and donations of toys and children's book always required even more work, as they had to be organised and wrapped appropriately. Once they found the volunteers, making sure everyone's schedules matched was always tricky, after all everyone had personal lives, work schedules and families to think of. So there was always a gap between what had to be done and what the available volunteers could get done. Evelyn and Angela had managed to get a sizeable number of volunteers, including their students and fellow teachers, so he could leave much of this part to them. Which was for the best in any case given how he lacked the ability to even turn a computer on, let alone create and manage spreadsheets.

Evelyn...He was starting to worry about her. After that awful incident in her house, she had moved to Angela´s house for a while, presumably so she could get all her affairs in order before moving back to Ireland. It saddened him to see her go, and he did wonder what impact that would have on
Severus, who seemed so close to her, but it was not in his place to question her decision. So, once she was done with the semester at school, and James had passed his audition, she would leave.

All seemed well enough until he started to notice a troubling pattern: Evelyn would go about her day at school, then come over to the church every day to tutor James for a couple hours and, once the lad was gone, would stay well into the evening, working on donation lists, making phone calls, wrapping Christmas gifts and whatever else she could find. If there wasn’t anything to do she would just review what she had already done. The rectory’s secretary had to ask her to leave sometimes, so she could close for the night. Angela had confided in him that even after she went back home, Evelyn would continue working maniacally. She had received some correspondence from a friend, another historian, containing some facsimiles of what looked like ancient documents, illuminated like medieval books or scrolls. That had prompted her into a sort of “research frenzy” according to Angela. She would spend hours taking notes, writing and reading from books and manuscripts that seemed to materialize out of thin air over night on her work desk.

Fr. Thomas knew Evelyn was an energetic woman but he’d been wondering if she wasn't stretching herself too thin. He had tried to talk to her but she gently deflected his questions at every turn, so he dropped the subject entirely. It was already the first week of December, soon it would be Christmas and then she would leave. Maybe it was best to just allow her to go about it all in her own way. So, once more, he asked not questions as she sat at the desk of the rectory’s small office on a Friday afternoon working herself to exhaustion. He didn’t recognise the papers she was writing on as having anything to do with the church, but lately she had been bringing work with her...Angela was probably complaining that she worked too much at home.

"Evelyn, dear." he called out softly "I’ll drop by the pub to collect Mr. Palmer’s donation before it gets too busy. When you’re done let Margareth know so she can close the office, will you?"

"Oh, sure. I’ll be done in a little while." she smiled, looking at him over the lenses of her reading glasses before returning to her seemingly endless labour.

......

Severus had never been much of a drinker. He had dabbled with countless other mind altering substances, magical and not, and had been chain-smoking since he was at least 17, but somehow alcohol didn’t hold much of an allure to him. He suspected it had to do with his father, his drunken rages and the ravages they had caused his mother’s health and mind. Severus was keenly aware of his own vices, but he did hold a sort of aloof contempt for alcohol and the act of getting drunk.

It wasn’t that he abstained from drinking. He didn’t. But he never went beyond a glass of wine to accompany a meal (when he bothered to have a proper meal), a taste of firewhisky with a fellow faculty member or mulled mead when it got too cold, as it often did in Hogwarts damp dungeons. He was always careful no to get drunk, however. As of late he had got into the habit of sharing a drink with Evelyn when she got home from work, a habit he appreciated more for for the comfort and familiarity than for the intoxicating effects of the beverage per se. But Evelyn was more of a drinker than him, so he humoured her.

Walking into a pub solely for the purpose of ordering a drink like he had seen his father do so many times growing up was an alien concept to Severus. And yet, here he was, seated by himself at the bar of Palmer’s, a little before 4pm on a cloudy and dreary Friday afternoon. Friday’s were Evelyn’s day off from school, so at that time he’d normally be sitting on her couch, sipping tea or coffee, watching her grade papers and making sarcastic comments on her student’s work, something she chided him for, but which made her smile anyway. Instead he was nursing a glass of sub par whisky in a pub that had just opened as waiters washed glasses and moped the floors, preparing for the evening as
nobody with intact mental faculties and a paying job would be getting pissed that early in the day.

So, understandably, seeing Fr. Thomas walk in was quite the surprise.

But Severus soon realized the priest had come in for much more wholesome reasons than himself, as he saw him walk over to Mr. Palmer, the owner, and the two started to joyfully talk about the preparations for some Christmas events and a donation Fr. Thomas had come to collect. Severus tried his best to not be noticed on his little dark corner of the bar, and Fr. Thomas seemed oblivious to his presence anyway. Still, as old habits tend to be hard to kill, he couldn’t help himself from listening into the conversation, his interest awakened by the mention of Evelyn’s name.

"It’s going to be big this year, I see" Mr. Palmer talked as he poured a glass of water. "My granddaughter’s been telling me her teachers got most of students to volunteer for extra credits."

"Yes, yes. Angela and Evelyn are in charge of the group who’s volunteering at my parish, but we have students over at the mosque on Hill street, the synagogue at Clareton and community center down town. We hope we can keep this project all year long, instead of just the holidays, you see."

Severus smirked. So, that’s what she had been up to? Getting her students to volunteer for charity. It was so hilariously like her to do such a thing. He almost felt like walking up to and ask how much of his church’s affairs she had been running with an iron fist and an engaging smile on his behalf. If he knew her probably most of them. Hopefully she had put the gossiping old women who always gravitated around poor Fr. Thomas to work as well. He didn’t have to ask, however, as the priest had just spotted him and was about to walk over and presumably give him a full report.

"Severus!" he beamed, taking a seat next to him without invitation

"Father."

"You’ve disappeared!"

"I’m exactly where I’ve been for the last few months, . It wasn’t me who ‘disappeared’" Severus said, with a hint of venom on his voice.

"Oh, you’re talking about Evelyn?” the intent colouring expression was almost palpable.

"The poor dear, she’s been working so much lately.

"Yes...I couldn’t help but overhear that"

"Well it’s not only at church, there’s school and James..."

"The piano lessons, right? She told me something about that."

"They’ve been working hard, considering the limited time they have before the lad auditions."

"And when is that?"

"In a couple weeks. On the 16th"

"That’s quite soon."

"Oh...so you don’t know?” his tone made Severus think that he was fully aware that Severus didn’t know, and was eager to inform him.

"Don’t know what?” he played along.
"Well, Evelyn is going back to Ireland once the semester is over."

"She´s...what?"

"She didn´t tell you?"

"We haven´t been speaking much as of late."

"I see. Must be harder to keep in touch with her working so much"

"She must be. I can´t recall the last time I´ve seen her home."

"She´s been at Angela´s. To get everything ready before she goes back to Ireland."

"I suspected. She never told me anything..."

"You know..." there was a small pause and Severus could swear Fr. Thomas was measuring his next words "I just left Evelyn at the rectory´s office, doing some paperwork. You can drop by and..."

"Actually, I should get going" Severus stood up, leaving some money on the counter, much more than his drink had cost, but he couldn´t be bothered with change, and moved to leave. However, as he turned his back on Fr. Thomas, an idea crossed his mind. "Father?"

"Yes?"

"James´audition. Could you tell me the address? And the time, if possible."
Part 7 - The Pale Devil - Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

A new unknown player emerges and the crisis in the newly reformed Ministry deepens as information leaks and orchestrated prisoner escapes threaten the public’s safety. Evelyn finds a new editor and some other things she didn’t bargain for.

"I knew I had heard that name before" Evelyn muttered to herself, looking down at the papers scattered on her desk.

A few days after she had moved to Angela’s, Nathaniel, one of her students from Trinity, contacted her in regards to a doctorate thesis he was working on about William the conqueror the impact of the Norman Conquest and the flight of Anglo-Saxon nobility to Ireland that ensued on the British Isles. She had welcomed the distraction and asked him to send in his work as well as the bibliography he had been working with. She missed the process of researching, taking notes and reviewing work. Her last book had come out before her father had passed away and she had only worked on articles since then. She had a tacit agreement with Lewis that she would take some time off for herself and as soon as she felt like her life was back in order again they would start talking about her next work. So, in the meantime, helping a former student with his own research was a very nice way of oiling the old machinery.

Soon she had immersed herself in documents and books about the Norman Conquest she had laying around, and whatever else she could obtain from the library of the local college. William the Conqueror was one those inevitable characters any medieval historian always has to go back to over and over gain, and she was more than happy to return to that familiar place and rediscover all about it. Angela called it a "researching frenzy" and she wasn’t wrong. Evelyn knew Angela and Father Thomas were worried sick that she was overworking, but neither of them had known her long enough to know "overworking" was exactly what she needed. Evelyn craved it, the mad dash from classroom to library, to archives, then back to the office, taking notes, writing drafts, reviewing, editing, the ungrateful job of writing bibliographic references and organising them alphabetically so you could go back to them when needed, the multitude of colourful sticky notes on every page of a pile of books that never shrank...It was the kind of routine she was most comfortable with, what gave her the comfort of familiarity. So, in her spare time, usually before bed, Evelyn went over her former student’s work, and his references, pointing out corrections, suggestions or additional bibliography. It relaxed her, and took her mind off things, specially as James’ audition approached and she found herself almost as nervous him.

One of the documents she had come across in her last visit to the library was a list of people and families known to have been a part of or been connected to the Norman invading army she had photocopied from a book titled "Norman families of France and England". That’s where she found it. That name.

Armand Malfoy. A Norman mercenary who had earned himself a title under William the conqueror in exchange of services of an unknown nature. If the French root of the name stood as testament to its meaning of "bad faith", she could imagine what kind of services Armand offered his protector. She knew she had heard the name 'Malfoy' before. Could they be the same, however? Surely whoever the Malfoys Severus knew were, they were people of means, so...it wouldn’t be that far-
fetched to think they were connected with the Malfoys of the Norman conquest. The notes on the list
didn’t give her much. Apparently the Norman Malfoy family was extant until at least the early
Elizabethan period, for a certain Lucius Malfoy had attempted to court Elizabeth I, probably with
dire results, as no further mention to the family was recorded after the event.

"Lucius Malfoy." he smirked "You can´t make this shite up."

"Talking to yourself, Lyn?" Angela was standing at the door, neatly dressed in a yellow and black
floral dress, black tights, a wool sweater, with ballerina flats completing the look.

"You look great. Going out?"

"Matthew´s sister invited me for brunch. Want to come with?"

"Oh, thank you, dear, but I´ll have to sit this one out."

"Evelyn, it´s Sunday. If you don´t want to come with us, at least go out for a stroll or something.
There´s finally sun outside, take advantage of it."

"I will, don´t worry."

"Evelyn, I honestly think..." Angela was getting ready to go into one of her long speeches about how
Evelyn should work less and go out more when, mercifully, Evelyn´s mobile rang.

"Hello? Oh, hello, Lewis!" Angela shook her head as she heard the name of Evelyn´s Irish editor
and left the room, surely hopeless that she´d even convince her friend to get some rest.

"Hi, dear! How have you been? Feeling better I trust?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Sorry for calling on a Sunday, but I thought I´d have a better chance of catching you. You´ve been
working all the time now it seems. What are these boorish Brits doing to you, love?"

"Oh, not you too, Lewis. I´m quite fine I assure you."

"Look, I know we agreed you´d take a wee bit of a break, but I got a call last Friday and it´s seems
to me like a very good opportunity."

"Do tell."

"Apparently there´s a Russian publisher interested in your work."

"Russian? Well, that´s random."

"I know, I know. I got a call from the man´s secretary, apparently he stumbled on one of your books
while he was in London and really liked it."

"Which one?"

"The magic word"

Evelyn smiled. 'The Magic word. Mythical and political rhetoric in Pre-Christian Ireland.' was the
full title. It had been her second published book, coming in the wake of 'Witch trials in Ireland.'s
modest success, and had quickly outsold its predecessor. Of course the public´s growing interest in a
commercial version of Celtic mysticism that smelled of cheap incense and sounded like 'Enya´s
greatest hits’ had helped boost the sales, but Evelyn was nevertheless proud that she had managed to reach a wide audience with a book that talked about political rhetoric in the mythic narratives of the Celts.

"I love that one. So...this man read it and wants to publish it in Russia? I didn´t know Russians were into pre-Roman Irish history?"

"Oh, dearie, it´s the 90s. Everybody is into everything Celtic these days, they watch one performance of Riverdance or read "The Mists of Avalon" and have a sodding spiritual awakening. In any case, he doesn´t just want to publish this one book. It seems he has read all of your work and wants you to sign a contract for more than one translation. We have done translations of your work to French, Spanish and Italian already. If this man says there´s an audience for you in Russia, why not? He seems very impressed."

"Well, that´s...amazing."

"I just wanted to ask you if I can give your number to his secretary. I told her I can´t OK anything without your ‘amen’ so they want to talk to you."

"Of course, of course you can."

"Grand, love. I’ll do that immediately and keep you posted."

"Thank you, Lewis."

"You’re welcome, darling. Now I’ll let you go. And do take care of yourself, you had me worried, lass."

"Yes, mammy." she laughed

"You wish old softy Lewis here was your mammy." he laughed that full, musical laugh of his that always managed to calm her nerves " Don´t think I don´t know you haven´t told her what happened and I know ‘la grande dame’ will eat you alive if she finds out through somebody else. Give her a call, specially if you´re thinking of going back home on account of it."

"It´s not on account of it."

"You know what, Evelyn. Drop by my house when you come back. I have a feeling you need to talk. Or just call me. I’ve been rather bored Sunday nights."

……

Dinner at the Rotts were always stilted, silently awkward affairs. Draco actually preferred it that way. Whenever Ludwig or Claire tried to engage him in conversation he felt like stepping on egg shells. He had to measure every last word coming out of his mouth in order not to give anything away. In fact, every last one of his actions ans gestures had to be planned and mentally rehearsed. Every time Draco sat with them for a meal, when he pretended to be reading or studying in their palatial library, as they had a party or invited guests over and he had to play the role of polite cousin on vacation...he was always pretending, thinking long and hard before any gesture, any word, any step. Draco spent his days uttering pleasantries in the calm and cool style his mother had instilled on him with her properly tight control of etiquette, becoming of a born and bred Black, listening meekly as Ludwig and Claire repeated all the venomous things he had heard over and over through his young years, all the callous things he had learned the hard way were not true about muggles, about muggle-borns.

Draco spent his days playing the role of dutiful pupil as his nights went by sleepless, as he slid
silently through the house looking for anything that could give him a clue that the Rotts were involved in the recent Death Eater attacks and flights. As he read Professor Snape’s letters, taking careful mental notes, memorizing every word of advice as if his life depended on them, writing back, letters that he knew were of no help. Draco could imagine the Ministry officers breathing down Professor Snape’s neck, pressuring him. He said nothing, but Draco knew what they expected of him. And as time went by he despaired that he wouldn’t be able to provide them with what they wanted.

Why was he doing this, the young man wondered at times, laying awake in bed or looking out of the windows counting the last leaves of the withered trees outside. He didn’t quite know the answer. Something had changed. That earth-shattering change, that comes like a painful ripping of the soul when one realizes everything they believed in was a lie, everyone he ever looked up to was a fraud, and everything he took as granted, as rightfully his, everything he thought he was and everything he believed he could accomplish turned to ashes under his grip.

What was Draco seeking, lurking on the halls and corridors of the Rotts mansion, sneaking into the library and studying spells that could open their safes and cabinets? It wasn’t redemption of any kind. Maybe just the chance to prove he wasn’t the same boy who stood in the astronomy tower the year before, trembling before an all too grand Albus Dumbledore, unable to go forward, unable to turn back, lost and trembling, smothered by the realization that, after all, he wasn’t what he thought he was, what he had been raised to be, but didn’t know how to be anything else.

"Have you had any news from home, chèr?" Claire’s voice sounded hollow and flat, barely raised over the clatter of crystals and silverware. She didn’t even look at him as she asked, he lack of expression betraying her lack of true interest.

"Nothing much. Mother worries too much about everything as usual."

"I can appreciate her concerns. The new Ministry is a joke. Have you heard about the registry? And they expect pure-blood wizards to collaborate."

"I don’t think the registry will come to pass," he said, for once truthfully. Draco knew Kingsley Shacklebolt would never let that happen.

"Don’t ever doubt the length to which blood traitors will go to ensure pure-bloods are underfoot," Ludwig told him, sternly "We must look out for our own. There has been a slew of new arrests."

"Last I heard they got Selwyn" Draco offered, trying to sound like he didn’t give the story much importance. He knew Selwyn hadn’t been arrested, but maybe he could get something if he threw it at them. "Mother said the media made a big deal out of it."

"To make themselves look better after they failed to trap Rodolphus and Rabastan." Claire scoffed, her temper flaring suddenly.

"They say they’ll get to them soon."

"Not likely." Ludwig let out "You sound defeated. I’m sure your mother has been filling your head with her fearful nonsense again. Don’t listen to her."

......

Later that night Draco saw the lights on in Ludwig’s studio, as he sneaked out of his room to go to the library as he did every night. He could hear their voices from down the hallway

"I had hoped he’d get himself killed, but it’s Selwyn. He managed to get himself arrested instead."
Claire sounded mildly intoxicated. So she did believe the Ministry had Selwyn after all.

"I doubt it."

"He’s doesn’t have half the brains necessary to successfully escape the aurors."

"And how come this is the only recent arrest that didn’t get a photo feature in every newspaper? The aurors have been making a point of parading every single one they get their hands on."

"I told you the Ministry had him and were using the fake letters as a cover to keep us off Snape’s track from the beginning."

"So you did. But if they had him since the beginning, why announce it now? And how come they can’t produce him for a photo op?"

"What are you getting at?"

"You were right."

"About?"

"Snape. You were right, that snake is probably alive. Why else would they announce the arrest of such a low ranking agent as Selwyn if not as a diversion? And providing no evidence to the press? They’re lying about Selwyn to get us to believe Snape is not part of the equation and Selwyn’s arrest was a routine one."

"So Selwyn is somewhere, with information about Snape."

"Yes. And I have the feeling he’s going to come back to us soon."

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December 16th

Evelyn stood by door of the small auditorium of the music school James was applying for, "Da capo academy", noticing it was was only half full. It was a small school, that mostly took in upper middle-class kids whose parents were eager to find more and more activities to fill up their kids schedule outside of their school hours so they wouldn’t have to deal with them. Music lessons made for a good distraction and even better bragging fodder, as little Mary or John would play or sing in family gatherings and school plays, and mummy rubbed her little darling’s ’natural talent’ on her friends faces while daddy arrived too late to see the presentation, if he made it at all. Needless to say not many kids were applying for a scholarship. From what Evelyn had seen, this year there were only seven candidates for two spots on James age category. James had a foot in, she told herself.

She studied her pupil from afar. He looked rather uncomfortable sitting still in the in the neat black dress slacks and crisp light blue shirt Tancey’s mother had picked out for him. Evelyn’s eyes moved from James to hallway and back. No sign of his parents. Evelyn had picked him up herself, expecting his mother to come along, but only him had emerged out of his house and got into her car without a word.

"Are they coming?" she had asked.

"No."

"Not even your mother? They can’t do this." she had insisted, outraged "It’s important for you."
"All the more reason they shouldn’t go. Tancey asked me to drop by hers first. I think her mother is going to put me in one of Clem’s dorky outfits that he wears for work."

Unsurprisingly it had been Tancey’s mother who picked James’ outfit, and made sure he was properly combed and clean. It had been Tancey’s father and brother to give him supportive pats on the back as he moved to his assigned seat on the front row. And it was the Francis family who were sitting few roads behind him, on the seats assigned to family members, all of them dressed up and each one nearly as anxious as James. Not Meredith nor her husband, who cared so little about his own child that Evelyn didn’t even know the man by name, were in show. Standing by the door, even now Evelyn hoped Meredith would show up. The woman had her issues, but there was no doubt in her mind that she at least cared about her son. Then it hit her: knowing James he probably hadn’t told his mother anything about the audition. It was entirely in-character for him. Maybe he feared she would ruin it somehow. Maybe he just didn’t want her there.. James’ trust in his mother was waning.

With a sigh she turned away from the door and started to make her way towards James for a last pep talk before they started the event and ushered her back to her proper seat, next to Tancey in the family section.

"How are you feeling?” she asked, seating on a vacant seat next to the boy. On the front row the other six candidates seeking the same spot as James we’re being fussed over by their parents and music teachers just as much as the child candidates. Girls dressed in gowns, boys in expensive looking suits and polished shoes. James looked slightly out of place, his tall frame slouching over his guitar while the other teens proudly paraded their violins, cellos and clarinets. Even the small children, competing in the under 11 category seemed more confident than him.

"What do you think?"

"Remember what I told you: this is a step. You already have what it takes, from now on it’s a question of polishing it."

"I hate how you act as if I have this in the bag."

"Because you do. You’ve taught yourself the guitar, you’ve learned the basics of piano in a couple weeks, you’ve learned to read music in even less, and you can compose. Look around you. How many of these snotty brats would even know how to hold their instruments the right side up if they didn’t have the help of God only knows how many music teachers? How many of them will stand on that stage and play something they created? James, look at me."

His gaze fell on hers, blue eyes filled with questions she hoped she could answer.

"This right here” she gestured their surroundings "This school, this is not your objective. It’s a stepping stone. Your objective is the Royal Northern College of Music. Or any other proper music academy you chose. Because you can choose. You’re that good."

…….

Severus made his way in with the last members of the public. The auditorium was half full, but he wasn’t expecting an audition for a small music school to be a big event. There were many seats to pick from, but he chose to remain on his feet, in the back of the room, by the door. So he could flee without being seen.

When he left the house, Severus had all intention of talking to her. That was the reason he had asked Fr. Thomas for information on James audition. He would come and talk to her on a neutral place, some place where it wouldn’t cause a scene. But as he caught the bus and got off on the nearest stop
his resolve faltered. What would he tell her? Or rather what could he tell her? Just a couple days ago
Draco had sent him a letter. The Rotts were sure Severus was alive. And, as he suspected, they didn
´t have Selwyn He now had to worry about the Rotts trying to get to him again, as well as Selwyn
spilling information on Dmitri´s ears. He had to keep Evelyn away, and yet here he was.

Evelyn returning to Ireland was the best possible resolution to his situation. No more worrying about
her finding compromising information on magic and wizards, no more fretting that she would
accidentally get involved in the risky business he was conducting against his will. And Kingsley
would no longer have leverage over him. If Evelyn was out of his life, everything would be easier,
most of his problems would be solved. Severus would have nothing to worry about. And yet, he had
got on a bus intent on talking to her. Did he want to convince her to stay? He didn´t even know.

He should probably leave. He wasn´t about to work up the courage to talk to her, and even if he did,
what would he accomplish? Still, Severus stayed. He stayed as people took their seats and a man
walked on stage, approached the microphone to ask everyone in attendance to take their seats. He
saw as the people standing by the front row started to make their way to the back, presumably to
their assigned seats, leaving young children and teenagers, the ones auditioning, on their spots to wait
for their turn to go on stage.

Then he saw her.

Her hair was pulled back in a complicated braid, her face had but a hint of make-up, blushing cheeks
and rosy-lips that matched the pale pink of her jacket, as well as the roses of her white dress. It was
mildly amusing that she looked every bit the proud mother as her child´s school presentation, but
Severus couldn´t help but finding her overwhelmingly breathtaking regardless. He froze in place as
she walked to her seat, next to Constance, with her usual rapid, dance-like gait, light feet trapped in
unforgiving heels as always. She was nervous, he could tell even from afar, just from her body
language, how stiff her shoulders looked, how she shifted her purse from one hand to the other and
pulled a non-existent strand of loose hair behind her hear. He couldn´t see her face as she sat, but if
he had to bet, he´d say she was biting her lower lip. She always did that when her nerves got the best
of her.

After that, everything dragged. He looked on as young children, some barely able to hold on to their
instruments gave wooden, laboured performances of barely recognisable classic pieces. One after the
other they came on stage and looked bewildered for a while, before lacklustre applause ushered them
off stage. The teenagers were slightly better in that they could operate their instruments with more
physical ease, but there were only so many times Severus could stand Liszt or Haydn be played in
such a sleepily adequate fashion.

It felt like hours before James was on. They announced he would play a piece he had composed
himself, on the guitar. Severus wondered about the piano lessons, but imagined they had decided to
go with something the lad was more comfortable with. It was a long, awkward, litter eternity as he
made his way on stage and sat on a stool in front of a microphone, properly positioned in front of his
guitar.

"Don´t ruin everything, you twit" Severus found himself whispering.

......

Her heart was pounding so hard Tancey felt like it would land on her lap any second now. She
desperately tried to read any sign of hesitation on James´face as he moved on stage, but saw none.
He walked on stage quietly his expression betraying no visible emotion as he sat down and prepared.
There was no music sheet in front of him. For weeks he had rehearsed with Ms. Black without ever
letting Tancey know what he was planning to play. It would be a surprise, he said. James had been
studying day and night, scribbling notes, trying and retrying chords and melodies. Sometimes he’d spend hours in the rectory, and still continue studying when he got back home. When his father was home he would stay at school past their class hours to play. As much as he tried to act like it didn’t matter to him, like he was doing this to humour Ms. Black, James had been putting all his will and energy into this. And Tancey knew why. Music was the only thing he still gave a damn about, and now he believed it could get him somewhere in life, finally. He had to get this, she silently prayed, as his fingers touched the strings.

Clement squeezed her hand when she breath out a sigh of relief as the music filled the auditorium. The room went quiet and perfectly still. She looked at Ms. Black sitting by her side, and saw her eyes were glistening as if she was about to cry. Tancey herself felt a lump on her throat. This song was unlike anything she had ever heard him play, and yet, it was so much like him; it had a hint of darkness and sadness under the intricate array of notes. She looked around at people’s faces. Everyone looked enraptured, like they had just seen and heard something out of this world.

Thunderous applause erupted when he finished. Tancey stood on the tips of her toes, trying to get a glimpse of the judging panel over the standing audience.

They were clapping as well.

They hadn’t clapped for anyone else.

……

"He did brilliantly." Severus turned towards the quiet voice next to him, barely audible over the storm of applause.

"Fr. Thomas..."

"I’m glad you came, Severus."

On stage, the organisers thanked the candidates and their families and started the proceedings of announcing the winners of the available scholarships.

"He will get it." Severus spoke quietly to himself.

……

Everything was a blur after they announced James’ name. Evelyn jumped from her seat pulling Tancey into a tight hug. The audience started to disperse, as the families of the approved candidates loudly celebrated and moved to the front to congratulate their kids. Olivia ushered everyone to the front row, where James was still sitting, looking stunned, as if he didn’t understand what was going on.

"You made it, you dork!" Tancey near screamed pulling him up from his seat to hug him, as Clement messed up his for-once-in-a-lifetime neatly combed hair.

Evelyn stood back as the Francis's smothered James in affection and praise. The boy finally seemed to get his wits back and started to return their gestures. To her recollection, it was the first time Evelyn had ever seen him smile. He disentangled himself from his friends and approached her.

"What did I tell you?" she asked him, pulling his lanky frame by the shoulders into her arms.

"Thank you, Ms. Black."
"You got nothing to thank me for. You did it on your own. All I did was remind you that you could."

"And nag me every step of the way."

"It’s what I do best." she pulled a small package neatly wrapped in a pretty blue paper from her bag and handed it to him "Here. To practice."

He opened the wrapping eagerly. It contained a box set of CDs.

"Santiago de Murcia, Francesc Guerau, Battista Granada" he read "Baroque guitar selections"

"Start studying. I think we’ve found your style, and may The Cure and Joy Division forgive me, this is where it is."

....

"Shall we?" Fr. Thomas gave him a pat on the back

"What?"

"Let’s go, Severus, congratulate him."

Severus looked on. James and Evelyn were talking surrounded by Constance’s family. There were hugs and smiles all around. The boy looked dazed, Constance was beside herself, and Evelyn looked like she was fighting back tears as she gave the lad what looked like a nicely wrapped present.

"You go ahead, Father." he said.

As Fr. Thomas approached the celebrating group, Severus realized it was the perfect cue to leave. Nobody would notice. Instead he stayed. Not because he made a decision to, but because he couldn’t bring himself to leave. He stood where he was, watching her, her resonant laugh carrying to his ears across the room, over the noise and clatter of chairs and conversations. She caressed James face with one hand as the other pulled Constance to her side showering both youths with mother-like endearment as the other adults in the group talked joyfully. Then he saw Fr. Thomas join them and, after giving James his congratulations, approach her and say something on her ear.

Severus saw Evelyn turn her face in his direction, her smile fading away as those intense eagle like eyes of hers looked straight at him, filled with surprise and something else he couldn’t quite identify. For a moment he could no longer hear all the noise surrounding them. Only then did his feet finally move and he slipped out of the door, into the hallway, slithering through the crowd.

When he made it out of the building, Severus realized there was no chance for him to apparate to a different location without being noticed. That neighbourhood was too busy, which was precisely the reason he had taken a bus to get there in the first place. Logically he’d have to hop back in a bus to leave and there were none at the bus stop across the street.

"Severus, wait!" She was standing in front of him before he could properly take in the feeling of hearing her voice say his name. It was the first time in nearly he heard that. It felt oddly satisfying. "You came."

"Father Thomas...He told me about the audition so I came to see what’s so amazing about James´ musical skills. I’m genuinely impressed."

"He’s incredibly talented." she smiled, a wide, frank, disarmed smile, one that almost convinced him
everything was fine between them.

"Indeed. I guess I’ll have to take back everything I said about him being a lost cause."

"So...why don’t you go in and tell him that. If you came all the way here to see him perform, after all."

"Maybe some other time."

"Severus..."

"I need to go..." he took a first step away from her, but the second one was impossible. He had to ask. "Is...Is it true?"

"What?"

"That you’re going back to Ireland. Is it true?"

"I bet Fr. Thomas told you..."

"Can I take that as a yes?"

"Yes...Yes, I’m going back home. As soon as the semester is over."

"You didn’t tell me anything."

"We went over this, Severus."

"But...why?" It was everything he could say. It was a stupid question, but he had to ask it regardless.

"I just...don’t belong here."

"That’s nonsense."

"How you figure?"

"I know. Everyone knows. You have friends, your students...How can you say you don’t belong here?"

"I..."

"They need you, you know that? Constance, James, Fr. Thomas...He told me you’ve been helping him with his charities and whatnot. They need you...and I..." he stopped midway through the stream of disconnected words.

"You...what?"

"Evelyn..." he sighed. He couldn’t believe what he was doing, what he was saying, right there in the middle of a busy muggle street, but he feared if he didn’t say it now he would never say it "I’m not going to stand here and pretend that anything I’ve been doing or saying makes any sense, because I know it doesn’t. And I’m not going to ask you to change your decisions regarding your own life on account of me, but the truth is I...I need..."

"Ms. Black!" Constance appeared out of nowhere running to Evelyn, still visibly drunk of excitement. She stopped dead on her tracks as soon as she saw Severus was also there. He enthusiasm vanished and he shifted on her feet uneasily, her eyes going back and forth from him to
Evelyn "Oh...Mr. Snape. I didn´t see you there."

"I was about to leave anyway, Constance. I just came to see James play."

"Then don´t leave." she stammered, obviously desperate to correct her little gaffe. "We´re going to celebrate in my house. Mum made us all lunch and dad bought dessert, why don´t you come with us? Have you ever had Bahamian food before?"

"No, I haven´t." Severus forced himself to smile, without quite managing to tear his eyes off Evelyn, who stood stiff in front of him. "But I´m in a bit of a hurry now."

"Severus, you could..." Evelyn offered.

"Go, go celebrate with them. I´ll catch up with you later. And...do give James my congratulations... sincerely."

......

"I´.sorry" Tancey let out, mortified, when Mr. Snape crossed the street leaving them behind. She wanted the earth to open under her feet and swallow her whole. "I didn´t know he was here, I thought you had come out to get your car, my dad wanted to know if you were ready to go."

"It´s quite alright, Tancey." Ms. Black smiled faintly. "Tell him I´m ready. You and James can come in my car. And do ask Fr. Thomas if he´s got his car or if he need a lift."

"Ms. Black?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Pardon me asking, but...I overheard the other day that you´re going back to Ireland. Is it because of him?"

"Tancey!"

"I know I shouldn´t be eavesdropping. But...is it?"

"It´s a little more complicated than that, I´m afraid. And I don´t recall giving you the liberty to..."

"He fancies you, you know? I mean he really does."

"Constance, what did I just tell you?"

"You really think he came here for James? He doesn´t even like James all that much. He came because of you. And you like him too, don´t you?"

"Constance!"

"I know." the girl rolled her eyes "It´s none of my business."

"Just go in and tell everybody I´ll be waiting in my car."

"What is it with people making everything more complicated than it needs to be? I mean really..." Tancey shrugged, going back inside.
Chapter Summary

A new unknown player emerges and the crisis in the newly reformed Ministry deepens as information leaks and orchestrated prisoner escapes threaten the public’s safety. Evelyn finds a new editor and some other things she didn’t bargain for.

"You seem to have re-adapted to muggle life rather successfully. I would never imagine you of all people taking a bus." Kingsley Shakclebolt was the only person standing at the bus stop when Severus got off, but even if there had been a crowd around him, he’d be impossible to miss in his sharp plum coloured trench-coat, worn over an impeccably tailored black suit and bottle green shirt and tie. He definitely didn’t look the kind of passenger who would take the bus in that area, or one who would be taking a bus at all.

"You try apparating to and back from a busy street in the middle of the afternoon on a weekday. In any case, you haven’t come here to enquire about urban mobility."

"Indeed I have not."

"What have I done this time? It must be serious, for the minister to come in person. I was under the impression that I’d be dealing exclusively with your minions."

"Trust me, Dawlish is having about as much fun as you are."

"I hope he is. So...?"

"We should probably talk back at your house."

...

Evelyn couldn’t just leave things as they were. If anything she needed closure. She couldn’t simply allow Severus to walk away without clearing everything up once for all. She couldn’t let him push her away, then come around with the excuse of watching James’ audition, just to walk away as if nothing had just happened.

"Tancey!" she called out before the girl could get back inside the building. Constance turned and rushed back to her, startled."Tancey, I need you to do me a favour. I just remembered something and I don’t think I’ll..."

"Go." Tancey smiled, knowingly "Maybe he can convince you to stay"

"Constance..."

"I’ll tell James you had an emergency, now go talk to him. I’m sorry I got in the way and all."

…..

Severus let Shacklebolt in and closed the door, carelessly gesturing an armchair as way of offering a seat. The interim minister was used to Snape’s unique brand of etiquette by now, so he merely hung
his coat and took a seat.

"I take that you got my latest message." Severus observed, going into the kitchen to pour himself some whiskey from a bottle Evelyn had left there the last time she had come over. "Fancy a drink? I’m afraid I only have muggle whiskey"

"I’ll have water if you don’t ´s a bit early in the day for a drink"

"Of course." Severus snickered bitterly, returning to the sitting room and handing Kingsley his glass of water. "Pardon me, drinking to early in the day is a bit of a family tradition in this house, I’m afraid."

"Severus..." Kingsley’s eyes were filled with what looked suspiciously like genuine concern "Are you ok?"

"Never been better." he strained a smile, drinking his whiskey on a single gulp, before putting the glass on the coffee table, then leaning back on his armchair, forcing his body to relax through the throbbing pain on his neck and the headache alcohol, potions and sleepless nights wouldn’t help him with. He was feeling effin’fabulous indeed. "Anyway, you were saying..."

"Yes, I did get your message. It seems Draco has provided us with independent confirmation of what you suspected. The Rotts are biding their time and Selwyn is some location unknown to them. And to us."

"He can’t verify whether Dmitri is involved. Which either confirms he´s a Red herring, or it simply means the Rotts don’t suspect him."

"You´ve said the Rotts were the first ones to mention Dmitri. Nobody else has ever seen or contacted him?"

"Not directly. He was never there, he just funneled money, which the Rotts and others used to bribe officials in the Ministry or for logistic purposes, maintenance of hide out locations, supporting strategical actions...the works. I have seen the Rotts maybe a handful of times at Malfoy Manor and Dmitri was never more than a name."

"Do you know anything else about him?"

"No. It was only ever 'Dmitri'; no last name, no accurate location. All we all knew was that he lived in Russia and was filthy rich. Richer than the Blacks at their prime even, by some estimates. Many Pure Blood families have contracted debts with him, the Rotts included."

"How do you know that?"

"You hear things. I’ve seen my share of Pure-Bloods drowning in debt joining the Dark Lord´s cause out of desperation. They thought their misfortunes all could be blamed on muggleborns. And they came to us, hoping the Dark Lord would return them to their former glory. People of influence would gladly broker deals, so other Pure-bloods would join and remain tied to the cause either by gratitude or debt. And the money came from all corners of Britain and from abroad. Pure-bloods from other countries, hoping the influence of the Dark Lord would expand past the Isles so one day they would be rid of their own muggleborn populations. Dmitri´s name was thrown around often. I never thought much of it, till now."

"He’s a perfect contact to have, seen as he keeps such a low profile. Almost all the foreign connections are known by now. Certainly we can’t do anything about most of them without causing diplomatic incidents, but we can keep tabs on them. This Dmitri person is virtually invisible."
"The one thing that I can’t quite understand, is how the Rotts are seemingly unaware of his recent activities, specially in regards to Selwyn. It always seemed to me like he had dealings with them. He even helped them get the Lestranges out of the country. But if he has Sewlyn and they don’t know about it, this changes everything..."

"He’s going behind their backs. Maybe he was using them all this time."

"The Rotts are being closely monitored due to their connection with the Malfoys. I believe Dmitri might be distancing himself from them for the sake of safety."

"Why would he help Sewlyn, though? What does he have to gain from him, besides information about you, which he could have gotten from the Rotts if he played them right?"

"He probably has different plans for me." Severus smiled grimly, lighting up a cigarette. "I’m sure the Lestranges, if they also have made it to Russia, have informed him about the Serpentine dagger."

"You mentioned that bloody dagger before, but how can we be sure it even exists."

"The Dark Lord seemed to believe it did."

"Do you?"

"Voldemort was a bloody fanatic with Freudian issues and an unhealthy obsession with overcomplicated flowery plans, but crazy he was not. We are talking about a man who managed to get his hands on Rowena Ravenclaw’s diadem, Helga Hufflepuff’s Cup and Salazar Slytherin’s locket and transform them all into horcruxes...If he thought a magical object existed and had any interest in it, I’d take his belief seriously."

"And what would he had done with it? There’s no literature about Salazar’s dagger and what it could possibly do..."

"Indeed. All I know is what Voldemort himself told me, and I have no idea where he got the information. Possibly family stories passed down by the Gaunts, but I couldn’t be sure. As it goes, Slytherin created the dagger when he was hiding in the Caliphate of Córdoba, and it’s supposed to contain some of the darkest magic he has ever performed."

"Another act of revenge?"

"Who know what was going through his mind at the time...Point is, if the dagger exists and was created by Salazar Slytherin then whoever gets their hands on it will be in a prime position to do some damage."

"How come the Lestranges know about it..."

"I don’t know. I was sure he never discussed it with anybody but me"

"After all, do you know where it is?"

"If I knew where it was do you think I’d be sitting here talking to you?"

"Frankly?" Kingsley laughed warmly "Yes. For all it’s said about you, I have a slight suspicion you’ve lost interest in power, if you ever truly had any. I don’t think this dagger is of any use for anything you want at the moment."

"Oh, you know me so well then pray tell what is it that I want at the moment?"
Kingsley seemed ready to throw a cheeky comment back at him when they both heard knocking on the door.

"You have a guest." the minister remarked.

"I´m not expecting anybody. They´ll go away." Severus shifted awkward, putting out his cigarette on an ashtray, as the knocking grew more insistent.

"Doesn´t seem like they will. You should probably get it."

"Severus?" a female voice came from outside "It´s me, Evelyn."

"She´ll go away" Severus insisted.

"That´s her, right? Does she suspect anything?"

"She suspects everything. Bloody woman is too smart for her own good." Severus tone contained equal parts of annoyance and admiration.

"We need to do something about that then." Kingsley told him flatly, before standing up and walking to the door.

"What are you doing?" Severus hissed.

......

Evelyn sighed and stopped knocking. She knew Severus was home, so if he didn´t open the door it had to be because he didn´t want to see her. She wouldn´t insist. If this was how he wanted it to end, then he could have it his way. Well, she thought, at least she would make it to James´celebration lunch, which she shouldn´t have skipped to begin with.

But the, the door opened. It wasn´t Severus however, but a handsome and very tall black man, someone she had never seen before, but then again how many of Severus´acquaintances did she know, come to think of it. He was completely bald, had a single earring on his ear, a small golden hoop, and wore a perfectly tailored black suit, with a combination of bottle-green tie and shirt. The man smiled at her as if he knew her.

"Miss Evelyn Black?"

"Yes..." she answered dully, completely taken aback. "Who...How do you..."

"Please come in."

"Wait a minute, how do you..."

"Don´t worry everything is fine." he smiled and pulled what looked like a badge from his pocket, quickly flashing it before putting it away again. "Now do come in."

She did as she was told, unsure if under the pressure of seeing an ID, or if she truly believed him that everything was fine. She suspected everything was *not* in fact 'fine', but the man had a way of speaking that almost made her believe it. Severus was standing in the middle of the room, looking tense.

"Severus, what the devil is going on?"

"Don´t worry" he told her quickly before turning to the man "What the hell are you doing?"
The bald man walked past Severus and towards her

"Ms. Black, my apologies if I startled you. I assure you nothing is amiss. Now if you care to listen to me for a moment."

"Are you...a police officer?" she offered the first thing that came to her mind. Evelyn thought about the night Severus spent out, and how he came back all bruised and dishevelled, his strange behaviour through the whole Henley affair, and his behaviour towards officer Perry, all the questions he had refused to answer and all the ways he avoided responding to her concerns.

"No, I´m not. I do work for the government, though"

"Kingsley, stop." Severus sounded frantic now. "You can´t do this!"

"Ms. Black." Kingsley, as she just learned was his name, continued reassuringly "I’ve been told of what happened to you a few weeks ago, and I’m glad to see you’re fine. And trust me, I completely understand your concerns."

"My...concerns?"

"Severus has told me that you’ve been worried about him. And knowing him I can safely assume he hasn´t told you anything about our agreement with him. While I’m not at liberty to disclose much information, I feel like, in light of your closeness to him, I should reassure you that Severus is not directly involved in anything dangerous."

She looked over at Severus who was staring at Kingsley, mouth agape as if he couldn´t believe what was happening before his eyes.

"Directly involved? Ministry...What the hell is he talking about, Severus?"

"You should have told her." Kingsley remarked before turning back to her "We are using Severus’ services as a consultant. That’s all."

"What...consultant? He’s a chemistry teacher..."

"He´s the best available professional at his field of expertise." Kingsley smiled "Nobody is better than him in the study of toxic chemicals."

"Toxic...chemicals?"

"What?" his smile grew warmer and friendlier "Don’t tell me you thought he was involved in some kind of international espionage plot? All Severus is doing is offer us technical feedback."

......

Severus couldn´t believe Kingsley had just done that. The wanker almost gave him a heart attack. He breathed in a sigh of relief, but then the minister started to speak again, and Severus felt the overwhelming desire to hex him.

"Strictly speaking, I’m not supposed to tell you any of this" Kingsley put a gentle hand on her shoulder "but Severus and I have been friends for a long time, and I know he cares a lot about you. He told me you were worried about him, so I just wanted to make sure you knew he’s fine. Now if the two of you will excuse me, I’d love to stay but I must be on my way."

"I’ll show you the door" Severus almost shoved Kingsley´s coat in his hands and pulled him outside.
"What did you just do?" Severus spat at him as soon as they were out of earshot.

"Gave you an alibi."

"She’s not going to believe that load of bull."

"Well, you should have come up with something better as soon as things between you two started to get serious. Look, Severus, I know you´re head over heels with her..."

"I´m not!"

"...but for Merlin´s sake I thought you could come up with a convincing lie." Shacklebolt sounded more amused than annoyed and Severus did not care for it at all "If you don´t want her to find out about your status but you still want to keep her around, you will have to lie to her. Or just get a permit to disclose your status and get it all out in the open. But I can´t waste time because you can´t decide whether Ms. Black is part of your personal life or not. We have bigger fish to fry."

"You know the status disclosure permits they issue are for immediate family members or muggle spouses only. I can´t tell her anything."

"Then you have to lie to her. You can lie to her, you can marry her, you can ditch her, but whatever it is that you want to do, get this situation sorted out, so you can put your mind to more pressing matters than Ms. Black´s and the infatuation you claim not to have regarding her."

"I..."

"I promised you I can guarantee her safety, but you need to help me and keep her out of this mess. Understood?"

......

"What just happened?" she shot point blank when he walked back in.

"Take a seat"

"I´m fine." Severus had expected her to be mad, indignant. She wasn´t. As she stood in the middle of his sitting room, shifting on her feet, fidgeting, he could see she wasn´t mad. She was confused, dazed, lost. He wanted to take her in his arms so bad it almost physically hurt him.

"I can explain."

"Please do...Because lately I just don´t know what to expect from you any more. I feel like you´re always lying to me, always hiding something, and I thought you respected me more than to do that, so please, explain, please tell me I´m wrong."

"I never lied to you. I couldn´t if I wanted, and trust me I have wanted."

"What have you wanted to lie about? What is so awful that you can´t bring yourself to tell me? It isn´t just that you´re doing consulting work for a governmental agency, is it? I´m not stupid."

"No you´re not." he smiled, fighting the urge to push a strand of brown hair away from her face.

"Then?"

"What Kingsley told you. It´s all true. I am working for the government...in a way."
"Ok, fine. What’s the catch then..."

"Kingsley and I really do know each other from a long time ago. Back from when he was in law enforcement and I was..."

"Officer Perry showed me the..."

"I’m not talking about that. Yeah, Cokeworth authorities apprehended me on a couple of small charges as a teenager, but Kingsley was never a small town police officer. There were other things..."

"Stop beating around the bush, Severus. Where does this man know you from?"

"From back when..." he walked past her and let himself fall on his armchair, exhausted. His neck and head hurt so bad he found himself craving an overdose of magic anaesthesia mixed with morphine. Wouldn’t be the first time.

"When what?"

"Remember when we talked about how, when I was younger, there were some bad influences in my life?"

"Yes."

"Back then Kingsley was a member of an unit tasked with investigating groups like the one I belonged to...Hate groups."

"Hate groups?...Like...White-Supremacists?"

"Something like that."

"You’re telling me you were part of a hate group as a youth?"

"Kingsley didn’t deal directly with me, but we got to know each other after I left that group and became an informant."

"Wait, wait..." she grimaced, bringing her hands to her temples as if she had caught his migraine. "You’re telling me, you were once part of a hate group, and then you became an informant for the police?"

"In a nutshell, yes."

"You told me you were a teacher"

"I’ve told you I never lied to you, didn’t I? And I didn’t. I was a teacher. For over seventeen years. But some of the things we do don’t ever go away."

"So this whole talk about you being a consultant on toxic substances."

"Among other things...Kingsley didn’t lie to you either. My knowledge of toxic substances did play a role when I was recruited. They needed a smart person who knew their way around deathly substances and who was in such desperate need for approval they would do anything they asked. And I did. Until it became too much for me to bear and I left them to cooperate with the authorities. Not something they’ll likely ever forgive me for."

"So they are still..."
"The leadership has been disbanded, but they’re still active, yes."

"Severus..." her eyes widened with a sudden realization "Those injuries, on your neck and your hand. They were not a work-related accident like you told me, were they?"

"They were work-related. But they weren’t accidental."

"But those injuries are new. From a year ago You said you left them..."

"It’s more complicated than that."

"Did...Henley have any..." she was walking around, frantic, as if trying desperately to order her thoughts, as if trying to remember every single little thing that didn’t add up, every single little thing she had wondered bout, everything she had found unusual and weird. As if trying to make sense of all the ways he had misled her and made a fool of her.

"No, Henley has nothing to do with any of this."

"The police apprehended him so fast, I remember you didn’t seem the least bit surprised when officer Perry called me...Did you..."

"Kingsley."

"Kingsley?"

"I...I told him about you. I told him I worried about whether being around me would present any danger to you, I asked him to keep an eye on you. So, when Henley attacked you, he had some people investigate it off record and inform officer Perry. That’s all."

"But that night..."

"I really did run into an old acquaintance and really did fall on my face." he smiled wearily. There was no way he could downplay the duel at the mill and turn it into a story he could tell her. Severus knew that even the watered down version of events he had just given her, with all magical events edited out, was hard to swallow. But he owed her at least some measure of honesty no matter how small. Soon she’d be gone for good, back to Ireland. Maybe telling her all that would make it easier for her to leave, would make it easier for her to hate him enough to leave. And then everything would be back to the way it was before she had shown up. And she would be safe, back home with her mother, her sister, her friends and all the things she should never had left behind. And he’d finally learn to stop wanting what he couldn’t have.

Severus looked on as she stopped moving and sat down on the sofa, her eyes staring at nothing for a long while, as if her brain trying to process everything, limp hands on her lap shoulders slouching, like the breath of life had left her body.

"Now you know why...I couldn’t tell you anything." he got up from his seat and walked to where she was, dropping to knees in front of her so he could look up at her face. Her eyes snapped back from emptiness, becoming alert once again. It pained him to notice how she stiffened when he tried to reach for her hands, but he pretended not to notice. "I couldn’t just tell you all of that."

"Of course you couldn’t...A hate group, Severus? I thought I knew you, you were around my students, Jesus, you..."

"This was over twenty years ago..."
"But you´re still in contact with then aren´t you? I mean...Malfoy, Malfoy bailed you out of jail back in the day, did he..."

"Yes, he was in it too. He´s in house arrest now..."

"His wife was here just the other day. You´re still in contact with them."

"Because of their son. He´s only eighteen and none of this is his fault. I couldn´t abandon him. And his wife was never in it. She just happens to have shit taste in men" a family trait it seemed, he thought to himself. "It was twenty years ago, I´ve grown past that and I´ve been paying for it every day since, believe me. I don´t expect you to understand or forgive it nor do I want to play the repentant criminal role, I know that´s beneath both of us. I just had to be honest with you. And now that´s over with and if you want to leave and never look at my face again I understand. I just had to tell you. At the very least you deserve my honesty."

"Severus..." the look of disgust in her face changed into something else "Remember when you took me to the mill, and we watched the sunrise after Fr. Thomas Halloween Party?"

"Yes. Yes, I do."

"That morning...That morning I thought something could be...happening between us."

"It was."

"What do we do with that now?"

Severus wanted to wipe the tears rolling down her cheeks marring her face with black lines of liquefied mascara. He wished he had the fortitude to just lean in and kiss her, tell her to stay and promise he´d make it all better somehow, even if that was a bold faced lie. But alas, he couldn´t lie to her.

"Nothing. It wouldn´t work regardless."

"How can you know that?"

"We both know it wouldn´t."

"Is this the moment you give me the 'I can´t be with you for your own sake' speech like they do in shitty romantic films?" she laughed softly, wiping her own tears.

"No. This is the moment I tell you that, no matter how much I want it, it would never work out."

"You think I can´t get past everything you just told me."

"I think you shouldn´t have to try to. You deserve better than to have to deal with that. And regardless of that, we would never make it anyway. I´m not the one for you. I wouldn´t do you any good."

"Don´t say I ´deserve better', that´s the cheapest of lines."

"I won´t."

"So that´s it, then."

"Yes."
Well...thank you for the honesty, I guess. I’ll see myself out if you don’t mind." Severus got back to his feet and stepped back, making way for her to leave. He couldn’t look, but he heard the door close. ‘You can lie to her, you can marry her, you can ditch her, but whatever it is that you want to do, get this situation sorted out’ Kingsley had told him jokingly.

“Well, it’s sorted, Minister” Severus muttered, going to fetch the whiskey from the kitchen. He didn’t bother with a glass this time, taking a swig straight from the bottle. It was the first time in his life that he somewhat understood what kind of solace Tobias could get from it. It was probably better than hitting his potion stash again.

Evelyn was driving back to Angela’s place on a daze. She wanted to be mad, to cry, to break something or to have any sort of normal reaction, but it felt like her mind couldn’t process all that had just happened. It was too much at once. All of her questions had been answered and all of her anxieties had been put to rest, but she felt much worse than before. She knew Severus had had a troubled youth. But that? Her first instinct had been one of disgust. His revelation had conjured up images of Neo-Nazis, racist segments of Skinhead groups, race riots, signs filled with hateful words about ethnic minorities, gay people, even Catholics and the Irish, back when The Troubles were in full swing, bomb threats and everything that came with the concept of a "hate group". Things she only saw on TV never in person. She had never seen any of that in person, protected in her little village by the sea, and then immersed in the academia of Dublin and she certainly had never had any contact with a person who was part of this sort of group. Knowing Severus had been involved in this made her physically ill.

But once the shock subsided, she realized with a sense of both shame and awe that she could get past it. He was over it, wasn’t he? He had worked as a teacher for years, he had collaborated with the authorities, he had got out of it. He was reformed, wasn’t he? She wondered whether she felt like she could get past it because she did believe he was reformed, or simply because she was in love with him and wanted to believe he was worthy of being loved. And what did it say about her if that was the case?

She hadn’t had enough time to try and figure that out before he sent her on her way. It was all too fast. Finding out he wasn’t what she thought he was, trying to reconcile what she knew of him with what she had just discovered about him, and then he closed the matter by shutting her out of his life. There, problem solved, done. Quick and easy, She had known him for a little over two months, and he had become such a big part of her life. But she didn’t know half of his life. Not until he threw it all on her face and decided for her that they had no place on each other’s lives.

Because she deserved better than to try and see where it lead, when it was clear it was a waste of time. Because she deserved better than to try and live with his past. Because he wouldn’t do her any good.

Severus was right, she thought. He probably wouldn’t do her any good. She probably wouldn’t be able to live whatever else he had been hiding, and she knew from the way he looked at her that he was hiding more, that he was hiding worse. She shouldn’t have to try and live with the weight of that. It probably wouldn’t work out between them.

Then, damn it all to hell, why did it hurt so much to know he wasn’t even willing to let her try?

Evelyn stopped her car in front of a park, fearing she’d do something stupid. She was in no shape to drive. She needed to cool down. She turned the engine off and leaned back, closing her eyes, trying to clear her mind. When her mobile rang she had half a mind to just let it, but it occurred to her that it could be Angela wanting news of James’ audition, so she picked it up.
"Hello?"

"Hello, Ms. Evelyn Black?" a soft female voice with an accent spoke.

"Yes? Who´s this?"

"My name is Anya. I´m Mr. Mirolyubov´s secretary. Mr. Murray gave me your number."

"Oh, oh, yes. I remember" Lewis had called her a week or so before to tell her about this Russian editor, she recalled. What amazing time did his secetary have, she thought wipping her tears and trying to sound composed with a stifled nose.

"I believe Mr. Murray has already told you about Mr. Mirolyubov´s interest in your work."

"Yes, he has." Evelyn answered tiredly. She didn´t want to hang up on this poor woman´s face, but she didn´t want to talk about business either.

"Ms. Black. Is this a good time?" Anya asked sweetly all of the sudden "I can call back."

"Oh no, it´s perfectly fine. I´m just a bit tired."

"I see. This time of the year is always exhausting for those working in education, isn´t it? Pardon my intrusion, Mr. Murray mentioned you´re currently teaching history."

"Indeed." Evelyn smiled, oddly soothed by this unknown woman´s voice. "And Mr. Murray does talk too much."

"He has spoken very fondly of you."

"He´s a dear friend and a bit of a flatterer, so don´t take anything he says about me at face value."

"Mr. Mirolyubov has read your work, as you know, so we know your editor wasn´t exagerating." Evelyn could almost hear a smile on Anya´s voice "Which is why I´m calling you. Next weekend Mr. Mirolyubov will be in Manchester to visit a friend, and he would like to know if you would accept an invitation for lunch so he can discuss a possible publishing contract in person."

"I don´t see why not."

"Is Saturday at 1pm ok? In a restaurant of your choice."

"Sure, how about Don Giovanni?"

"Perfect. I´ll make the reservations and he´ll see you then, Ms. Black."

... 

"I´ll find Don Giovanni´s number and make the reservations right away" Anya turned the speaker off and looked up at Dmitri who had been following the conversation comfortably installed on his chair across the desk from her.

"Thank you, Anya. Make it a table for three."

"Three?"

"You´re coming with me. I think Ms. Black will be more comfortable if there´s another woman at the table, and seen how the two of you seem to have hit it off. Besides Mr. Mirolyubov will need his
secretary to make the business official."

"Of course."

"You noticed something off with her, didn´t you?"

"Maybe she was just tired."

"Or there´s trouble in paradise..."

"Whatever it is we will find out."

"You will."

"Me?"

"Yes. It will come off as rather awkward if I try to be too friendly with her if we´re alone."

"And maybe you don´t trust yourself around her?" Anya smirked.

"Why wouldn´t I?"

"She´s beautiful."

"You act like you don´t know me."

"Nobody does, Dmitri. Now excuse me. I´ll go make our reservations"
Part 7 - The Pale Devil - Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

A new unknown player emerges and the crisis in the newly reformed Ministry deepens as information leaks and orchestrated prisoner escapes threaten the public’s safety. Evelyn finds a new editor and some other things she didn’t bargain for.

When Angela woke up she found Evelyn cooking. It was only 7am, but she was all dressed up as if their first class was in thirty minutes, rather than two hours.

"Good morning." She offered, not knowing what to say. The day before Angela had managed to get out of work a little earlier to go to James’ celebratory lunch, but Evelyn hadn’t been there. Constance told everyone she had an emergency. Angela came back home to find Evelyn locked in her room, from which she hadn’t emerged till now.

"Good morning." Evelyn answered quietly. "I made breakfast."

"I see that. But isn’t it a bit early? We don’t have to be at work till 10..."

"I couldn’t sleep"

"You went to bed awfully early last night..."Evelyn said nothing. "I dropped by Constance’s house. You missed on some great food."

"I can imagine."

"How did it go with Severus?"

"What?"

"Constance told me he went to the audition. And she told James you had an emergency and couldn’t be there to celebrate with them."

"So you jumped to the conclusion that I..."

"I put two plus two together." Angela didn’t like to prod, but this whole thing was getting out of hand. "Is not like the two of you are even discreet about it any more. Did you finally get everything sorted out or you’re planning to pine over him till you go back to Ireland?"

"There’s nothing to sort out."

"Really?"

"Yes, really." Evelyn finally sat down and started to eat quietly. Angela didn’t quite know what to say. The whole story between Evelyn and her neighbour had her completely mystified. She didn’t pretend to understand it, and she knew there were things about it Evelyn wasn’t comfortable sharing with her. And that was fine as far as she was concerned, but it did worry her. Evelyn was so level-headed about everything, but there was something about this man that turned her into a mess.
"Do you have plans for the weekend?" Angela finally broke the silence.

"Actually, yes" A small, timid smile "I got a call yesterday from a publishing house. Their director wants to meet me for lunch and discuss a deal next Saturday."

"You’re changing publishers?"

"No, this would be an international edition."

"Oh, wow. That’s amazing! You should be happy, Lyn."

"I think I have too much in my mind right now..."

"Evelyn..."

"Yes?"

"How long has it been since you last called your family?"

"Longer than it should"

"I know you don’t want any advice but... Maybe you should give them a call. It might help. Or you’re avoiding them?"

"To be honest... After I made such a fuss about moving here, my grandfather’s papers and the house... I don’t really want to tell my mother I’m just going back just yet. And I really don’t want to tell her what happened that night... I know I’m never going to hear the end of it."

"She’ll have to know eventually."

"I guess" she sighed getting up and grabbing her purse from a chair. "I may call my sister..."

"You’re leaving that early? You haven’t even finished eating!"

"I need to take care of some paperwork. After class I’m going to pass by the house and start packing."

... 

He couldn’t focus. He could scarcely move. Everything was a blur.

Severus glanced over to the half empty bottle on his night stand. Had he drunk that much? He didn’t remember drinking that much... He did remember falling asleep, but... what time was it? He could see sunlight outside, so morning at least.

It hurt. It hurt so much. The muscles and ligaments of his neck were burning. Moving his head was hell. His left hand was mostly numb, but there was that lingering ache just under the skin telling him the pain would be back. He had had his usual dose of the painkilling potion the night before, an infusion of Papaver somniferum, sassafras and natural opiates extracted from poppy. Maybe he shouldn’t have mixed it with alcohol.

He tried to get himself out of bed, but his body felt like lead. The room was hot and stuffy and he was drenched in sweat. Surely it couldn’t be that hot... not in Cokeworth in December... Was it still December? The last time he had fallen asleep so heavily he had woken up in a hospital bed months after finding himself on the business end of an abnormally large snake... He tried to prop himself up, but his entire left side was irresponsive. He tried once more only to collapse on his arm, feeling a stab
go through the tendons of his injured hand.

The pain was becoming too much to bear. And it was spreading. His jaw and neck were a raw bundle of nerves, his head was pounding, as if something was gnawing its way out of his brain. He would need something stronger, Severus thought. He knew he had more opiates. Oxytocin, the synthetic stuff muggles used, stronger and more concentrated than the natural opium wizards flavoured, which was treated with magic and mixed with other ingredients to make it safer for use. Maybe an injection would work faster? If he could manage to prepare and apply an injection, given his dizziness and the fact that his left hand was useless. On a good day he wasn’t able to close three of his fingers and fine motor skills were all but a distant memory, but he managed. Now not only he could barely stand on his two feet, but he might as well forget using both his hands for anything. His left hand wouldn’t move, twisted into a claw-like distorted, spastic mess as it was. But he had to try, or the pain would drive him insane. For a moment he felt like maybe letting himself faint from the pain was a safer course of action, but he was sure it wouldn’t happen. His whole body felt awake and scattered, like every bit of him had been drawn and quartered but remained somehow alive.

Somehow Severus managed to get to his box of personal use potions. As he expected he had the muggle opium there. All he had to do was mix and inject. An easy task on any given day, even with three working fingers less. Today wasn’t a normal day, however. While putting everything on his work desk, he waited for his vision to go back to normal. He couldn’t do that while seeing double. Then he fumbled with the small vial of potion for a good 5 minutes, miraculously getting it open without spilling the contents. A few grams of oxycotin...He wasn’t measuring, and something inside his mind told him he would regret it later, but right now he didn’t care, he couldn’t think.

The syringe kept sliding from his fingers...he lost track of how long it took for him to fill it up and prepare the shot. But that was nothing compared to finding a vein. He simply couldn’t feel them under his skin. He couldn’t feel anything but the stabbing pain, and every other part of his body seemed to have disconnected. There was only pain, as if he was all exposed flesh, tendons and nerves. He finally gave up trying to focus and just shot blindly.

..."What’s the matter with you?” Evelyn let out, exasperated. Ciarán looked up and meowed plaintively before going back to the door to continue scratching at it. "I thought you missed this house, now you can’t wait to leave...Crazy cat."

Ever since she had moved to Angie’s flat Ciarán had been restless. He missed the house in Spinner’s End, but more than that he missed Severus and Evelyn knew that. For almost two months Ciarán had lived in that street, explored the backyard of her house and the other, mostly abandoned, houses in the grim surroundings, catching bugs, mice and little lizards, some of which he brought her. And for two months he had gone to Severus house, every afternoon without fail. As soon as Evelyn left for work, her black cat would sneak out and go to her neighbour’s and just stay there till she came back home to reclaim him. He had even started to bring Severus the little animals he hunted as gifts. He would curl up in that armchair by the fireplace, the one she knew was Severus’ favourite and sleep there for hours. Severus would never admit to liking Ciarán, but Evelyn had caught a glimpse of a little plate with cat food in his kitchen, she had noticed he never chased Ciarán away from his armchair and the way he called her cat "fleabag” sounded more like a term of endearment than anything else. Whenever Severus came over to her house Ciarán would walk all over him, or sit besides him on the couch.

When she decided to go back to the house and start packing, Evelyn had decided to bring Ciarán along hoping that maybe being in the house one last time would be good for him. But he seemed even more stressed being there, and there was no doubt in her mind that it had to do with the fact that
Severus was nowhere to be seen.

"You want to see him, don’t you?" Evelyn put down a box of books she had been packing and walked to the cat, still desperately scratching at the door. She tried to pet him, but he would have none of it. "I can’t take you there just because you miss him. I’m not friends with him anymore. I don’t even know if I ever really were…"

Ciarán meowed again, more insistently this time.

"If you want to see Severus so bad why don’t you just sneak out of the kitchen window like you always do?"

Come to think of it…Why didn’t he do that, she asked herself. She knew the kitchen window was half open, she always left a crack so Ciarán could sneak out and she always had to open it all the way for him come back in, which was something that, to this day, she could’t wrap her mind around…Ciarán always went out no problem, but had to be let back in…

Maybe she had closed the kitchen window and forgotten about it?

"Come on, you little eejit. I’ll open the window for you. You go visit your friend and get your arse back." She went to kitchen with the cat fast on her heels, only to find the window slightly open as she always left it.

"Really?" she rolled her eyes as the cat made some more odd noises before hoping on the kitchen sink and sneaking out of the window. "Crazy cat…"

..."You JUST left, you crazy creature!" Evelyn laughed as she saw Ciarán back again. He ran past her and went back to the front door, scratching it and meowing as he had done before. "Didn’t you *just* go next door?"

For no reason she could put her finger on, Evelyn felt a shiver run down her spine, a feeling that something was very wrong, but she didn’t know what. She had felt that before many times since she had started living in this God-forsaken house on this unsettling abandoned street. It had gotten worse when she discovered the attic, then that feeling of being watched all the time, which turned out to have been Henley, then everything else that happened. Since she had moved to Cokeworth there was always this sense of something happening right under her nose, but invisible to her eyes.

Ciarán was making noises he never made. He sounded like he was under some stress she couldn’t understand.

"Ok, fine, let’s go." She let out frustrated, picking the cat up and walking next door. She didn’t really want to see Severus anytime soon, but Ciarán wouldn’t give her peace if she didn’t do this. She wouldn’t be in peace if she didn’t, actually. As much as their last conversation had left a bitter taste in her mouth, Evelyn still felt like she should check on Severus, at least make sure they didn’t leave it off on a bad note. Soon she’d be gone for good and they probably wouldn’t see each other any more, which all things considered might be for the best, but still, she shouldn’t completely avoid him, it wouldn’t be fair to either of them.

..."Severus, are you home?" she called out. She had been knocking for a long time, but nothing. By the looks of it nobody was home. And yet something told her she should keep trying. Something was off. Evelyn had half a mind to just ignore that unsettling feeling nagging at her mind, but she couldn’t...
Thinking of everything that had happened over the course of the past weeks, she couldn’t convince herself Severus was ok. And all he had told her about the type of people he had previously associated with, and the fact that a government official was in his house just the day before gave credence to the feelings of paranoia she had been experiencing.

She tried to force the door open but it was locked. She looked down at Ciarán, walking circles around her feet in obvious distress.

"This better be a real emergency, or you won’t have any wet food for the next year, you awful little thing."

....

The place was in complete, quiet darkness. As she made her way upstairs she noticed the heating was off, which made the whole house cold like a grave. Why would Severus turn the heat off? Maybe he wasn’t home after all?

"Severus, I’m coming up..."

Having spent a night at his house, Evelyn knew which room was his, so she made her way directly to his door. It was half open, but she knocked before poking her head in.

"Severus, you’re there? I hope you don’t mind me coming in, but you weren’t answering the door...You’re going to think I’m crazy but... You’re in there?" It took her eyes a moment to get used to the dark, even deeper in that particular room than in the rest of the house. The curtains were drawn, windows closed and despite the cold there was a heavy stuffiness making the air thick. "I’m coming in, ok?"

Then she saw him. Half dressed and flung across the bed facing up as if he had fainted in the middle of putting on his clothes, his legs awkwardly dangling over the side, arms open, his chest going up and down in a fast motion as if he was struggling to breath right. A wave of panic rushed over her as she slowly walked to to his side, not knowing what to do.

"Severus? What happened?" she asked, sitting by his side. From the corner of her eyes she could see a bottle of whiskey on his night stand, so she leaned over, trying to detect the smell of alcohol off of him. And surely enough she did. As if responding to her proximity, Severus drowsily opened his eyes and tried to lift his head

"Sanctorum laudabilis ..." he muttered on laboured breath "oh... it’s you... Evelyn... I mean Lyn. You like to be called "Lyn" by your friends. Hello Lyn. You... you look” the sentence got cut mid way by an awful noise she couldn’t quite tell was laughter or the beginning heaves of vomiting.

"A-are you...ok?"

"OK? OK is... OK... is a very permeable membrane... of life!"

"Are you drunk?"

"Yes... Drunk on ... woman, what is it with you that has me melting into this bloody fabric. It's hot as hell in here. And it got hotter when you came in."

"Do you want me to...open a window? What did you drink? Whiskey?" She hoped he hadn’t killed that bottle by himself.

"Win...dow... Yeah! Yeah do... that..." she went to open the window as he continued to mumble
incoherently "I drank... an infusion of Papaver somniferum and sas...safrass...asss...Fuck me, you´ve got a nice...ass.. argh...I was in a ... a lot of ... pain... yesterday."

"Did you just say you were in pain? Severus, look at me...did you take something for the pain? Did you mix medicine with alcohol, Severus?" her panic was now very immediate, as her eyes started to scan the room, looking for any traces of medicine laying around. Returning to his side she realized he was covered in sweat, even though the room was frigid. She touched his forehead "Jesus, I think you have a fever..."

"Your hands feel nice... I like them." he grimaced, clumsily taking a hold her hand and bringing it to his chest. She could feel his heart beating fast.

"Severus, Severus, focus. Look at me!... ? Do you remember?"

"I just told you, Lyn. God, you're fucking gorgeous. I had... pain. All over. And - Merlin, it was horrible... and now ... it's hysterical! That's why I took... D-d-o I have ... more left?"

"Mary mother of God..." He sounded like he was high on something. The way he was slurring, spewing nonsense that was completely out of character for him and laughing for no reason had her petrified. "Severus...where is it? The medicine you took, where did you leave it?"

"If... I got any more, it's... there" he pointed to the night stand. Then she finally saw the syringe, laying by the bottle of whiskey

"Severus... What did you inject yourself with?"

"... I told you... an opium sol-... oh God... " His entire frame seemed to suddenly reanimate as he lunged his body forward reaching for a rubbish bin by the side of he bed and promptly rejecting all the contents of his stomach in it.

"That´s it, I´m calling the emergency" she reached into the pocket of her jacket, thankful for having the presence of mind to bring her mobile with her.

"NO" He growled, still heaving into the bin and panting "... whatever you do, do... not... they'll ... It's not a good... idea!"

"Severus...I can´t help you. You need somebody who can. Whatever it is that you took, I think you ´re overdosing on it."

"I ... I don't... need... any help." he fell back on the bed, a bitter smile on his discoloured lips "Just... let the effects pass. But perhaps... first... Water? Please..."

She took the glass from his night stand and went to bathroom to fill it with water. Her hands were shaking as she returned to the bedroom and helped him drink.

"Thank you" he told her, after struggling to take a few sips "...just sit here with me. Talk to me... please."

"Maybe...m-maybe I should call my sister..."

"She's ... why?"

"She´s a nurse, remember?...She can tell me what to do to help you" she sat by his side, pulling him to her so his head could rest on her lap and started to dial. He kept on mumbling incoherences as if trying to keep himself awake. Meanwhile Ciarán had jumped on the bed, purring loudly and licking
his face, as if that would help him."Please pick up, Cat...Severus, you’ve got to stay awake...Hello, Cat?"

"Mortuary! Oh! Hi Lynz! How’s the Queen?" she never felt more relieved to hear her sisters flat jokes before.

"Caitlin, I need your help!"

"What happened, Lyn?"

"I think Severus is overdosing on painkillers"

"SHITE! How... and where is he!?"

"Right next to me on his bed..." she ran her fingers through his damp hair "He sounds delirious, he just vomited, he’s lethargic...I don’t know what to do..."

"Yeahhh that sounds like it could be any of the opium receptor offenders... heroin, ocycontin, codeine, morphine..Is he lucid?"

"He’s...awake...But he’s not coherent...He mentioned opium...and more things I couldn’t understand... There’s a syringe on his nightstand..."

"Did you call an ambulance?...Because, come to think of it, he may have a point: God only knows what emergency services are like there. Ugh,so just keep him lucid. Don't let him pass out, and make sure he's breathing. Also, he's probably thirsty, but don't let him drink too much water. The GI is probably paralysed and it would have adverse effects. Don't leave him."

"That’s all?"

"Pretty much... thing about these hard drugs is that all you can pretty much do is wait out the half life for the chemical to metabolize and get excreted. If it's heroin, an injection of Naloxone would reverse the effects quickly, but we're not sure that's what he took. Shite... How do you feel about helping him pee into a jar?"

"...what?"

"Thing is, that he could hurt himself walking to the bathroom. Anyhow... Listen Lyn. I am getting paged about an emergency. If he's talking, he should be OK - could he have hit his head on something before you got there?"

"I don’t think so...the syringe is right next to his bed, I don’t think he went anywhere after injecting..."

"OK, ask him if he did, and just keep him awake. Once he's can walk, offer him some fruit to bring his potassium up a bit. And make sure he's aware of how good a friend you are... the wanker! I gotta go Lyn! 2nd Page. Please keep me posted!"

"Ok, go. Thank you."

"Anytime, sis!"

"Severus" he was talking to Ciarán, still delirious "You have stay awake...so we’re going to talk. Is that ok?"

". That'd be lovely..."
"Can you tell me if you went anywhere after you took this"

"Sureeee... I sailed offff... in the ship... of dreams... or was it lies..."

"So you were in bed all this time? You weren´t hurt or anything?"

"I was hurt... 7 ... no 8 months... ago."

"So that´s why you´re taking painkillers? Because it still hurts?"

"Yesss... ughhh... My guts are going to be in knots for a week!"

"Yeah...I don´t think it will be pleasant..."

"Yeahhhhh..." he laughed bitterly "It was a strong batch. Hey... could you see... somethin'?"

"Su...re?"

"In my ... bathroom. See if there are... green... glasss... vials... and ... a leaf... in a test tube. In the basket... under my sink."

"Ok...I´ll be right back"she fumbled for a bit before finding what he asked and bringing it back

"Severus...Are you self medicating? This is dangerous, you know?"

"It's... antidotal, somewhat."

"You shouldn´t be doing this...are you seeing a doctor?"

"Feh! What do those clowns know? And thanks" he rummaged through his drawers and found another syringe "Care to do the honours? I´m afraid my motor skills are lacking"

"What exactly is this?" she hesitated

"It... will ease the effects ... of the 'pain killer' as you so eloquently put it... but only slightly, lest I sink back into a pain episode."

"I wasn´t aware you were in that much pain..." she sighed, preparing the syringe as he had asked

"It ... comes and goes. Sometimes it can get bad. Now... how do you feel about needles?"

"I´m not fond of them if that´s what you´re asking..."

"Shit... I need some assistance in finding a vein. They're pretty dilated still and shouldn't be too difficult."

"I´ve only done this a couple times, but..."

"Have you?" he cocked an eyebrow as she tied a rubber band around his arm

"It doesn´t mean I´m any good...My sister taught me...In case our grandmother needed help..."

"Well, then... go for it!"

Her hands trembled as she did it, but it was over in a second

"That actually barely hurt." he looked like he was starting to become himself again "Not bad..."
"...You SHOULD be seeing a doctor..."

"Whatever for? Look, I know what... you're... you're trying... I don't do this often. I am a... pharmacist. I can ... synthesize my own medications. I am NOT an addict!"

"I just found you laying on your bed, high as a kite in your underwear, Severus..."

"Fuck" he cursed under his breath as if he had just now realized his state of undress and reached for the sheets to cover up. He had this look on his face of a little boy who got caught doing bad things and frankly, Evelyn didn't know if she should smack him or give him a hug. Half of her was mad as hell at him, and the other half just wanted to hold him tight and make it better.

"I'll give you a moment to get dressed and wash up...You think you can manage that on your own?"

Severus desperately tried to remember what he had said and done, but the last thing he recalled was Evelyn sitting by his side, looking like she was about to cry. That would be a nice last impression he’d give her before she moved away, he thought sombrely. She must have been disgusted and with all good reason. What the hell had possessed him? He hadn’t misused potions or drugs in years, and even at his lowest period of drug usage he had never overdosed. And alcohol? The last time he had gotten drunk was in a House party when he was still a student, and even then he had more peer pressure to blame than his own interest on the stuff. What the devil had happened now to make him lose control like that? It wasn’t just the physical pain, it couldn’t be. He had been in pain before, in fact he had been in naught but pain for months after waking up from his coma in St. Mungo, but now his grip on self control was slipping, and he couldn’t for the life of him figure out why.

Sober and with a raging headache Severus finally managed wash up and put some clothes on. He couldn’t fathom how he must have looked and smelled when Evelyn found him. She surely must be thinking that in addition to being a self-professedly-reformed white supremacist and gang member, he was also a drug addict. That was just grand...

Well, time to go downstairs and try to save face somehow.

He found her sitting in his kitchen, her long fingers entwined, fidgeting and twisting over the table top. He could see and hear her foot tapping. Her entire body was a nervous, twitchy mass of stress barely contained by her skin.

"You just had an overdose..." she told him matter of factly.

"I did not!" he snapped, before calling himself back to his senses. Of all the people she was the last one who deserved abuse from him, Severus reminded himself. If anything he should apologise to her, again, for everything. "Yes, I should have used less, you’re right."

"Is that why you retired from teaching?"

"No! First of all, I have an injury. An injury that sometimes causes pain. That's why I took that medicine. Oh... Don't - Don't look at me like that!"

"...You never told me it was that bad. That you had to take opiates, or whatever it was in that syringe...And now you tell me you’re self medicating...Severus...what are you doing?"

"Evelyn, don't worry about me." He sat across her, more out of fear his legs wouldn’t support him,
than any will to look at her in the eye. He couldn’t bear her eyes. "I'm alright, aren't I? And I told you, I don't do this that regularly. I was in pain, and I took a strong medication. It happens. It's actually not too unpleasant. So what's the matter? And Why - nevermind HOW did you get in here, anyways?"

"You’re going to have to have your window fixed. I can pay for it."

"THE HELL possessed you to do that?" he laughed in spite of everything.

"CIÁRAN! He snuck out, then he came back home acting like he had just seen a demon, then he rushed back here...I just followed him and found you lying there, delirious"

"The bloody furball..." as if summoned, Ciarán jumped on his lap. "I... I suppose I should... err... thank you!"

"You have to eat something...and I have to clean the vomit out that rubbish bin before it starts to smell"

"Ugh... did I do that? I’m sorry... I think I can get up to clean it now."

"No, you stay there...I’ll clean that out as soon as I find you something to eat...Assuming you have anything in your pantry at all...Do you even remember puking?"

"I don’t remember much of the last several hours."

"You don’t remember telling me I was gorgeous?"

"I...did?" He wanted to find a hole to crawl into.

"You also commented on my arse. Apparently you find it...nice."

"My apologies. I really didn’t meant to...say any of that"

"I’m not offended" she smiled "I do have a very nice arse for what’s worth. Now let’s find you something to eat."

"Evelyn..."

"Yes?"

"You should probably leave now..."

"What?"

"It’s for the best...I’m going to be fine...Now go...Please."

"Severus..." her voice was tiny, as if she couldn’t get the words out. He didn’t look up at her. He couldn’t. If he did he’d beg her to stay. "Well...if that’s what you want..."

"Yes it is."

No... it wasn’t.

Ciarán jumped from his lap, and all he heard was the front door slamming, then he was alone again.

....
St. Petersburg

Selwyn looked out of the window of his bedroom. There was a stunning view of the Volga river, at least this was what Anya told him it was called, surrounded by trees disrobed from their leaves by the last winds of Autumn, and re-dressed in fine snow by the cool breath of Winter. White was starting to take over all the browns and mossy dark greens, and a cool breeze hit his face, reminding him sorely that he was alive.

"Lovely view, no?" He didn’t hear Dmitri coming in, and the man was already standing by his side.

"I’m just wondering for how much longer I’ll have to stay here."

"Not much in fact." Dmitri didn’t look at him as he spoke. He rarely ever did and it bothered him a bit, but Selwyn had learned not to think much of it. Dmitri was a lot like a ghost, the Death Eater had noticed, with his whispering voice, and the lack of colour from his hair down to his clothes. But ghosts, Selwyn also knew, were sometimes worthier of trust than the living "Next Saturday I’ll go on a short business trip. Once I return we will start the preparations so you can go to France"

"To the Rotts"

"Yes. I think is about time you, the Rotts and the Lestranges have a nice get together."

"Whatever for?"

"I’ve looked into the information you gave me. About the woman Snape is...seeing, let’s put this way."

"And..."

"I think you’re absolutely sure that she’s the best way to get to him. But I can’t let the Rotts botch it, and we both know they will...And that’s not even taking the Lestranges into account."

"Do elaborate..."

"Rodolphus is blind by his desire to get revenge against Snape at any cost, Rabastan is scared and weary of everything, but untimely will follow his brother’s lead. Now, Claire, dear Claire, is a ticking time bomb who’s nowhere near as cunning as she believes...and Ludwig is bovine bureaucrat who barely has any control over her...You see what I’m saying? Snape’s new paramour...She’s a delicate matter, one that requires a certain refinement to be dealt with."

"I’m afraid I don’t follow."

"I understand a muggle woman may seem of no consequence to you, but this is no ordinary muggle. First there’s Snape, who I bet would be willing to move heaven and earth to protect her, then there’s the Ministry. I known from a trustworthy source that Shacklebolt wants Snape on their side so bad he’s willing to employ a lot of manpower to make sure this woman is safe. Going after her would be suicide. Now, knowing the Rotts and the Lestranges, they would try to do this as soon as they learned about her existence...And that’s where you come in."

"How?"

"You’ll go back to France. And you will repeat to Claire and Ludwig exactly what I’m going to tell you now: Snape has a muggle lover, and she’s under the Ministry protection. Trying anything against her will be suicide...for now. I’ll put you in contact with a friend of mine in the ministry. You will give them this person’s name as a contact, the one who’s giving you internal information on the
matter of the muggle woman. Tell them this person was the one who saved you. That will make them back off for now."

"They won’t believe me."

"They will if you do it exactly as I tell you."

"For how long am I supposed to hold them back?"

"For as long as I deem necessary. I will help you through it."

"Then what?"

"We need to get Rotts and Lestranges to leave this woman alone, which at the same time will give Snape and the Ministry enough of a sense of security that they let their guard down. We are going to wait till the right moment comes. And when that moment arrives I don’t want Claire or Rodolphus’ claws on her. This woman may have the heart of the man who just might be the most powerful wizard in existence, and the only one alive who knows the full extent of the Dark Lord’s plans. Do you realize the importance of this? I don’t care if she’s a muggle, Ms. Evelyn Black is the key to a lot of secrets. If anything happens to her we all lose. She’s far too precious for the Rotts or the Lestranges to handle her."

Cokeworth

"So, how is your patient doing?" her sister asked before even saying hello. As soon as Evelyn arrived back at Angela’s Caitlin called her mobile. She didn’t want to linger in his house for long after what had happened. She was trying to cut ties with the man, not make herself even more attached to him, and if she started to believe he needed her help she would stay. She shouldn’t stay.

"Better. He said it was an accidental overdose."

"It could have been. You mentioned he’s on medication for some injuries...He could have accidentally given himself a wrong dosage."

"He’s also been drinking."

"Well, then there’s that too...Lyn...Is there something going on that I should know? I mean other that what just happened."

"There’s a lot going on that you should know. I’ve been meaning to call you for a while, but every time I try I don’t know where to begin."

"Try the beginning, then. My shift is over, I got time."

......

Constance found James in the library, headphones on, scribbling on his music sheets with one hand as the other pushed buttons on his discman, probably going back and forth to take notes on whatever he was listening. As she approached, she spotted the CDs Ms. Black had given him open, the leaflets that came with them scattered and full of tiny haphazardly handwritten observations. She sat across from him trying to make as little noise as possible, getting her textbooks out of her rucksack. Not that she was truly planning to study, but she couldn’t just interrupt him.
"Hey..." he looked up at her, dropping his headphones.

"Hi..." Constance paused before shooting the question point blank "Have you told them?"

"No. Not yet."

"You have to. Or you’re just planning to have music classes without telling your parents?"

"Not like they’d notice."

"You still need them to sign up the paperwork so you can enrol. They told you you have a week."

"I’ve been waiting for Meredith to have some free time."

"You want to ask Ms. Black to talk to her? We can do that."

"Ms. Black has been weird lately...Speaking of which, what happened yesterday?"

"She had an emergency, I told you."

"What kind of emergency? She came to class today..."

"I don’t know."

"You’re lying."

"I’m not going to talk about Ms. Black behind her back. And we’re talking about you. You have got to tell your mother you passed that audition. So she can sign the papers. Your father doesn’t even have to know."

"She’ll be home for the weekend...He’s never home on weekends."

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"Say something..." Evelyn asked, tense. She had told Caitlin everything that had happened to her since Halloween in a single breath: the morning on the mill’s rooftop, Henley’s attack on her, Severus mysterious disappearance the day after, his unwillingness to open up to her, her misgivings about living in Cokeworth, about the house their father had left them and how much it creeped her out, the visit of that government official whose name she didn’t recall, and finally the revelation that Severus had belonged to a hate group in his youth. Her sister had been quiet for a while. Caitlin was never at a loss of words, ever.

"Ok...so let me see if I got this right: you and your neighbour have kind of a thing, somebody broke into your house, which, by the way may or may not be haunted from what you’re telling me, then you found out that the neighbour who you have a thing with used to be a white supremacist and is still collaborating with the police, and may be hiding even more from you...oh and he might have an opiates addiction. And you want to come back home because of...well, all of that. Did I cover everything?"

"Yes."

"Woman, why the devil you haven’t called me before? Or even better, send me a plane ticket so I can live with you for a while, do you know how bored I’ve been?"

"CAITLIN!"
"I’m sorry, Lynz, but you’re living in a sodding film, and I can’t get over it." Evelyn could hear Caitlin laughing and wished she could reach over the phone and slap her.

"What’s so funny? The fact that a man assaulted me in my own house, or the fact that the man I’m falling in love with used to be a bloody criminal, may be a drug addict and God knows what else because he won’t tell me."

"Hold on...Did you just say you’re falling in love with him?"

"Yes, I did. And I think I am. After all that has happened I don’t think I’d even look at his face if I didn’t have feelings for him...so what’s the point in claiming otherwise."

"Then why do you want to come back home?"

"Because...well, everything. The house grandpa left us is nothing but that...an old house with old rubbish inside that won’t give me any insight on his past. This town is making me miserable. And Severus...It’s hopeless. I can’t fall in love with a man who has that many issues. I need to go before I get in too deep."

"Then what? You come back to Ireland empty handed after making such a fuss about moving to that house and finding out about grandpa’s past? And still thinking about this man, because...honestly, love, if you’re really falling for him as you said, leaving is not going to solve anything. All you’re going to achieve is a lifetime of wondering what could have been..."

"I’m afraid, Cat. I keep having this feeling that something bad is about to happen."

"You say because of Severus...eh...legal issues? Or because of that Henley bloke? I mean he’s in jail now..."

"Both...I don’t know. All I know is that I’m afraid and on the edge at all times."

"So you’re making a decision based on fear instead of thinking."

"What should I do then?"

"You’ve always been a better judge of character than me, so tell me: do you think you can trust Severus? As in, enough to have a relationship with him, I mean."

"Even if I did, I think a ‘relationship’ is out of the question now. He made that much clear."

"And it would pain you to stay in Cokeworth and be around him if it didn’t happen?"

"What do you think?"

"How about the house? How about your job? You quit Trinity and moved from Dublin after you caught Richard with that tart, are you going to do that again? Change your whole life on account of a man breaking your heart? Really?"

"That’s not the only reason...For one, I don’t know if I want to stay in that house anymore."

"But that’s not only your decision to make. Grandpa left that house to both of us, remember? The whole reason you moved to Cokeworth was because we wanted to find out more about our grandfather and you were the only one available to move. OUR grandfather, Evelyn. You don’t get to just give up on that for both of us. And there’s the whole matter of your job. This school where you’re working, is not Trinity, is not a big fancy university...It’s a small town school...Don’t you
think they’ll be negatively affected by any of their teachers leaving? And so suddenly. I thought you had a project there? You’re going to give up on all of that because of...what? Severus? Because you’re frustrated with everything life is throwing at you and don’t know what to do?"

"Caitlin..." she hated when her sister switched off the buffoonery and started to make sense. When that happened she always made way too much sense.

"Darling, I know I’m not the best person on Earth to get advice from but, if you really want to know what I think...Don’t make that same mistake twice. Don’t let the situation decide for you. And I know that scared as you may be, you want to stay. I know you love that bloody school, you love those brats you teach, you love that shitty house because it was grandpa’s and it makes you feel closer to him living there, and you love this wanker who lives next door to you. And I swear to God if you come back home and just start moping around and giving mam even more excuses to nag both of us, I’ll take you back to Cokeworth myself, because I have enough to deal with at the moment."

"You sure sound like her..."

"Mam is annoying but she’s right most of the time...It’s just hidden under layers upon layers of sarcasm and judgement."

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Saturday, December 19th

Evelyn examined her reflection in the mirror carefully. She didn’t usually put on that much make up so early in the day, but considering how little she had slept in the past couple of nights, and how she had cried herself to sleep at least once after her last encounter with Severus, nothing but a good layer of concealer would hide the dark circles under her eyes... It had taken a lot of time and meticulous skill to cover up the obvious sings of exhaustion while still retaining a fresh subtle effect, but upon careful examination she was finally content with the result. This was a business lunch after all, she should look well rested and polished, but not too made up. Except for the lipstick. Lipstick was never too much as far as she was concerned, so she chose a deep, rich plum colour.

Once she had made sure her face didn’t look like a that of a sleep deprived zombie, she got up, trying to get a look at her outfit in the mirror of the vanity table. If there was one thing she missed about her Spinner’s End house it was the ancient art nouveau style full length mirror in her bedroom. Still, she was confident this was adequate enough. Knee length purple dress with a bateau style neckline and a-line skirt, with no embellishments other than perfectly crisp tailoring. Then a black belt cinching her waist, matching black pumps, and a tightly waisted thick black trench coat over everything. She thought of pulling her hair up, but ultimately felt letting it down would give the otherwise pristine look just that hint of messiness it needed to make it approachable.

"Bloody hell, are you going to a business meeting or trying to make that Russian fall in love?"
Angela whistled from the door.

"Well...There isn’t that much difference now is there?"

"Excuse me"

"You know...When I was in talks to publish my works outside of Ireland for the first time, Lewis scheduled a meeting...The two of us and the representative of the publishing house we were hoping to close the deal with. Lewis made me drop by his house two hours in advance to make sure I was prepared. I showed up with all my mental notes ready in a perfectly neat and neutral business suit but before I could even open my mouth he looked at me with this face...I swear he was appalled. Then
you know what he said next?" she mimicked Lewis´ posh southside Dublin intonation "'Evelyn, my love, go back home and change. Put on something that will make this man fall in love with you.' And I was wondering...do you want me to dress provocatively? I was livid. Offended, really. So Lewis goes all serious and tells me 'Of course not. I said dress to make him fall in love with you. I’m not saying make him feel like you’re flirting with him for a contract, I’m saying make him feel like he’s the most blessed person on Earth just to be in your magnificent presence, let alone having the honour of publishing your book. Got it?’"

"What did you do, then?"

"I went back home and came back like was 1965 Sophia Loren going to a press conference. We got that contract signed in a matter of ten minutes"

"That’s a very...interesting strategy."

"If decades of living as a gay man in the wealthiest and most conservative circles of Dublin and London high society taught Lewis anything is that you take what you have and use it to your advantage in any way you can, be it brain or looks. That much he taught me."

"I need to meet this Lewis."

"That can be arranged. You know I’m taking you to Dublin as soon as I can, right? Well, I should get going..."

"Lyn..."

"Yes?"

"Are you really ok...I mean with everything, Seve..."

"I’m fine. I’ve just decided that for now on I’m tackling one thing at the time. I’ve been neglecting a lot of the things that made me feel...you know...alive. Writing, researching, meeting with editors, travelling for conferences, symposiums, events, parties. The hustle and bustle of it all. All of that has always been my life. I’m starting to forget who I am. So today I’m not thinking about Severus, or that house, or Henley...I’m just going to have lunch with this man and make him love me and my work so much that he’ll have no other option than to sign me."

"And so you will. Just don’t drink too much. I have a celebratory bottle of wine for when you come back."

"Yes, ma’am."

.....

She hadn’t come back after that afternoon, Severus acknowledged, as he looked out of his bedroom window to the deserted street below. He couldn’t blame her. He pretty much told her not back, and he knew she was not the kind of woman who begged to be let back in. Better like that. Severus couldn’t face her. If she saw him again she would try to help him. Because he needed help. He had issues, oh so many issues...He didn’t want her to help him. He didn’t want her to feel sorry for him. In fact ever since that day back in October when she had knocked on his door for the first time Severus had given her nothing but reasons to worry and fret. And it killed him that she felt like she should help him, or worry about him. Because she never would change anything of what was wrong with him. It was all beyond fixing.

It mattered very little that he felt like he was falling in love with her. It matters even less that she
Severus couldn’t bring himself to contemplate the possibility that she could love him, because it was an impossibility in on itself. Even if she did love him, she didn’t really. She loved a character he created to hide his wizard status from her. She loved Severus Tobias Snape, the retired chemistry teacher. She didn’t love Severus Snape the former Death Eater, notorious murderer of Albus Dumbledore and controversial double agent nobody seemed to be able to trust. She would never love him because she would never know he existed. For her own sake.

But without even going into the merit of his lies, there was the fact that it would be wholly pretentious of him to expect her to love him. What reason had he given her to love him? What good had he done her? What could he offer her? Deep down he feared that her attachment to him was just that...a sort of bizarre attachment that had nothing to do with love, but rather with her own need to feel a sense of purpose.

Maybe he wasn’t that different from James, or Constance, or any of the youngsters she taught...A project, somebody to rescue, somebody to worry about, somebody upon which to pour all of her motherly attention and martyr-like desire to be of service. She had affection for him, he didn’t question that, but love? Or anything resembling whatever it was that feeling that made him lay awake at night, feverishly imagining how she would taste under his lips and feel under his fingers... That bizarre sort of mania that gave him the urge to rip her clothes off and shag her senseless every time he laid eyes on her, and, at the same time, made him feel like he could hear her talk about her work and “the kids” for hours on end without being bored...That quasi-disease filling his mind with nothing but her...her eyes, her voice, her words, her body...

He doubted that she felt anything remotely similar. No, that addiction was all his own. It was all him drowning in passion all alone again, without a single hope of rescue in the horizon until he consumed himself and was left hollow once more.

She had to leave, she had to go. They’d both be lost if she stayed.

......

"Don Giovanni’s" was a quaint and sufficiently refined restaurant, boasting a neat location close to the City hall, the Central library and Bridgewater Hall. Dmitri had to admit, Ms. Black had chosen a very adequate place for a business meeting. A rather efficient Maître D welcomed then and swiftly showed them their table. The place was busy, but not crowded and there was a nice ambient sound of people talking and delicate clatter of silverware. The fluid moving back and forth of waiters, clients being seated immediately as other clients left cheerfully were all the hallmarks of a successful and well managed business. Dmitri sat quietly observing his surroundings. The bulk of the clientele were couples having a romantic interlude from real life outside, a few families with surprisingly well behaved children, one table with a group of friends seemingly having a long discussion about the latest offerings of muggle cinema. Dmitri could see how blending into this pedestrian universe could be appealing to a man like Severus Snape. The peace of anonymity, the comfort of disappearing in the midst of the mundane.

The maître was on the process of fetching them a wine menu, when Dmitri spotted her. She walked in with a confident step as if she owned the place. The hostess helped her take off her black coat to reveal a rather stunning if remarkably simple dress underneath, of a deep shade of tyrian purple like that cherished by Byzantine royalty, a pigment some of his ancestors had made trade of centuries back. Dmitri knew from the photos he had seen of her that Ms. Black was a good looking woman who was in the habit of dressing well, but he was frankly unprepared for what he was seeing. Knowing what he knew about Severus Snape, it struck him as frankly bizarre that this woman would be connected to the former Death Eater at all, let alone be his lover. By all accounts Snape was a
moody, surly, aloof man, known more for his scowling and scheming than for any social grace or charisma. In fact, even his associates seemed to barely tolerate the man. The woman who just entered was a cheerful palette of warm colours, from dress to exuberantly long brown hair she flicked to the side while giving the hostess and the maître a solar smile, and moving among the tables in their direction with expansive grace. Snape and her were as different as a Winter and Summer, night and day...

...Hades and Persephone, he thought, with a wry smile.

"Ms. Black. My name is Anya Aleksandrova, we talked over the phone." Anya greeted her first
"Allow me to introduce you to Mr. Mirolyubov"

Dmitri got up and shook her hand. Her handshake was firm, and she looked at him straight into the eyes as he greeted her. It would be nearly in poor taste to say her eyes were merely 'brown', as flecks of golden glittered in her irises, giving them a strangely penetrating quality.

"It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Ms. Black."
Chapter Summary

A new unknown player emerges and the crisis in the newly reformed Ministry deepens as information leaks and orchestrated prisoner escapes threaten the public’s safety. Evelyn finds a new editor and some other things she didn’t bargain for.

Mirolyubov was younger than Evelyn imagined him to be. In fact she wouldn’t presume him older than forty, but his neatly-cut hair was such a pale shade of blonde one would think he was greying. He was good-looking, remarkably tall and built much more like an athlete than an intellectual. There was something odd about his choice of a rather light off-white linen suit in December, but she didn’t think much of it. Evelyn had dealt with her fair share of eccentrics, writers and editors alike, and even dated one such man for years. What truly struck her as odd were his eyes: they were of a dubious colour, blue, grey or green she couldn’t tell even though he looked at her so intently as to almost make her uncomfortable. It was not like Evelyn never had a man look at her a little too long and a little too intently, and sometimes such occurrences actually flattered her or at least played to her advantage, but this felt differently. It felt like he was studying her. Not as a woman, but rather as...a specimen?

His secretary Anya Alexandrovna was almost his exact visual opposite in every way, even if equally attractive. Her long dark hair framed a doll-like face illuminated by big innocent-looking blue eyes. She was petite and slender, and there was a constant shade of smile dancing on her small lips. Her severe black dress made a stark contrast with the overall aura of delicate softness she seemed to emanate, but fit her like a glove nevertheless. She spoke first, once they were seated:

"Ms. Black, before we start I’d like to thank you for accepting to meet us in such short notice."

"There’s no need to thank me, I’ve actually been rather intrigued since Lewis told me about your contact."

The waiter brought them the wine menu, handing it to Mirolyubov, but he promptly handed it over to her.

"Just water" he told the man, turning back to Evelyn with a smile "I don’t drink... But by all means..."

Anya asked the waiter for wine suggestions, while Evelyn decided against having any alcohol, and both women placed their orders. Mirolyubov continued the conversation without giving his own order leaving it for the secretary to do. Obviously she had been working with him long enough to know his preferences down to food and drink.

"Your editor seems to consider you the star of his roster of writers, and after reading some of your work I can definitely see why."

"He’s a very dear friend. Which probably leads him to overestimate my skills quite a bit, if I should be entirely honest."

"That’s not the case at all."
"Mr. Mirolyubov, I..."

"Call me Pavel, please...May I just call you Evelyn, if you don´t mind?"

"Not at all. But, could I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Is not that I´m not flattered by your interest but, and I hope this question doesn´t come across as rude, but...I mostly write about Irish history. Rather specific Irish history at that, niche I dare say. I found it to be a wee bit unusual for a Russian published to show interest..."

"I see your point, but I´ll have to disagree. Maybe you see this particular subject as something close to home, but what I´ve observed in recent times is a growing interest on topics like Celtic culture and witchcraft has been increasing among the non-specialists."

"I guess we can blame it on the current Irish revival"

"That and Ireland has been experiencing an excellent economical moment. Economists have been using the term ´Celtic tiger´ even"

"After the Asian tigers, yes. You seem well informed about current Irish affairs."

"I must admit, current cultural trends are not the only reason I´m interested in your work. Historical perspectives on witchcraft and folk religions have always been among my interests, and I have a more than passing interesting on Celtic religion as well."

"I see."

"I understand you´re from Western Ireland?"

"Yes, Doolin."

"I´ve heard the most well preserved traces of ancient Celtic cultures can be found in that area of the country."

"Yes, indeed. My late father was part of a conservation committee for most of his life, actually. I got to see a lot of the conservation and cataloguing process first hand as a child."

"I can see how that would influence your career choices. If you don´t mind me asking, I was under the impression that you still lived in Ireland?"

"I did until recently. I moved to Cokeworth last October."

"Cokeworth?" Anya finally spoke after being silent for most of the conversation. "Isn´t Cokeworth that former industrial town close to Oldham?"

"Yes, that one."

"Seems like an odd place for a scholar to live. I mean, don´t take offence but, from what I´ve heard Cokeworth is not exactly a cultural hub."

"None taken. And you´re right. Cokeworth hasn´t been in the best shape since the closing of the mill, I´m afraid. I only moved there for personal reasons, nothing work related. And to be entirely honest, I´ve been thinking of moving."
"Manchester?" Mirulyubov offered.

"Probably back home. I still haven´t made up my mind."

"I understand. Well, I hope this doesn´t get in the way of our arrangements. As I said, I truly believe there´s a public for your work. Which is why I wanted to talk to you in person. Assuming we close a deal I absolutely want your input on everything starting which works we should consider for publishing down to graphic project and marketing. I´m aware that Mr. Murray always deals with such minutiae, and knowing you two are so close I definitely want to make sure you are as comfortable as possible with the terms."

"That´s all very nice of you, but I haven´t said yes just yet." she observed with a smile. The transaction was all but decided from the moment she talked to Lewis. He thought it was a good deal, and she trusted his judgement. But that was no reason to just say yes to Mirulyubov without making him put some effort into it.

"Pardon me, I´m getting ahead of myself. First things first. I´ve invited you, so I´ll present our proposal."

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Hotel Gotham, Manchester

"You actually had a publishing plan prepared down to the marketing strategies?" Anya observed as they made their way into Dmitri´s suite.

"Obviously. This woman has published several books and is very familiar with editing procedures. I couldn´t just expect her to believe all I said because I had on a nice suit. Besides...she´s not stupid."

"She´s a professor, one should hope she´s not." she smirked, starting to make herself the proper drink she had been craving. Anya had been careful to not order anything too strong at the restaurant, as Ms. Black has decided to be polite and just order water not to make "Mr. Mirolyubov" uncomfortable.

"I don´t mean that..." he said with a dismissive hand wave, opening the door to the balcony so the cool evening air could make its way in "Surely she has the academic intelligence once would expect of her...But it´s not only that. The whole time we were talking I had the vivid impression that she could tell something was off. She was studying us as much as we were her, make no mistake, Anya."

"What do you think she´ll do when she realizes there no publishing deal?"

"Says who?"

"Don´t tell me you will..."

"I offered her a publishing deal, didn´t I? She´ll have it."

"How?"

"I know a good publishing house, and one of the partners owes me some debt."

"Muggles?"

"Of course, how else will Evelyn Black believe us? Regardless, muggles are an excellent way of
making money without having the Magic authorities breathing down your neck. And muggle connections make everything easier. You and Arseniy need to learn the advantages of being more flexible."

"Business with muggles..." Anya barely hid her disgusted grimace. "So you will have them actually publish her book."

"If anything they´ll thank me. I wasn´t lying when I said her work is remarkable."

"But...why? I thought all you wanted was to see her for yourself, make sure she trusts you so you can..."

"How do you expect her to trust me? I promised her a book deal and I´ll give it to her. This way she ´ll have no reason to suspect anything."

"Then what?"

"We´ll have established a firm, honest business relationship. It´s a start. I need to get her to view me as an ally, a friend even."

"You are sending Selwyn back to France so he can tell the Rotts about her. What´s the point of courting her like this?"

"I will. Selwyn will go and tell them about her. They will want to go after her immediately, since neither of those fools has any sense of foresight. Then my connections in the Ministry for magic will step in."

"The same connections that have been giving away sensitive information to facilitate prisoner´s escapes?"

"Yes. The Rotts know that and will trust them. They have no idea these people are working for me."

"What´s the point of having the Rotts know this woman exist if they won´t do anything about it."

"Oh, but they will. On my terms."

"You´re going to use the Rotts as dumb muscle to kidnap her without getting implicated?"

"And with Selwyn working with them, all I have to do is ask and he´ll give her to me, then turn the Rotts over to the authorities. He wants revenge on them for leaving him to die."

"Then what? You will blackmail Snape into giving you the location of the dagger? We don´t even know if he knows anything. And we don´t know if she´s really his lover as you believe."

"Which is all the more reason we must wait. I need time to get her to trust me, so I can access the true nature of her relationship with Snape...and so my friends at the ministry can find out what Snape has been telling Shacklebolt. Once I know all of that, I´ll release the Rotts on her. And Selwyn will bring her to me like an obedient hound."

"That´s all too risky. You can´t predict what the Rotts will do for sure."

"Any plan needs a certain level of risk or it´s simply not worth it."

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"You seem awfully blasé for somebody who just closed a great business deal..." Angela asked,
pouring her another glass of wine. "Or was the deal not that great?"

"It’s not that.." Evelyn mused. The business part of the meeting had been amazing, in reality. The Russian editor had given her full details of all his ideas for marketing, publishing dates, selected works and even some on cover design ideas. The profit participation was more than satisfactory as was the publishing rights sum. It was a deal no writer would turn down. But she still felt like something was...off.

"Then..?"

"It’s nothing..." she shook her head. "I´m being silly."Evelyn shifted on her seat, poking her food with the fork.

"Come on, spit it out."

"Have you ever had the feeling of being analysed? Like somebody looking at you as if they were evaluating you."

"You mean the Russian bloke? Well, he kind was, no? If you were closing a deal."

"It wasn´t that. He was looking at me like..."

"You´re trying to tell me he was eye-fucking you?"

"No. That would have made me less uncomfortable."

"You´re thinking too much of it." 

"Maybe. I´ve been thinking too much of everything lately, it seems."

"Yes, you have. Which is why we´re having wine. So you don´t."

"Angela?"

"Yes?"

"Would you mind coming over to the house to help me pack?"

"You´re really going through with this?"

Evelyn didn´t answer.

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Minerva Mcgonagall´s office

The last full moon had come and gone and no trace of Fenrir Greyback had been found, other than a couple of dead muggles teenagers found in the vicinity of the Port of Immingham in the beginning of December. Muggle authorities had been baffled by the injuries found in the bodies, and couldn´t decide whether they had a serial killer in their hands or a bizarre instance of animal attack. They had released a note to the public in order to avoid panic, and the news outlets were going bonkers, eager to peddle a gory, sensationalist crime story. The whole thing had become a local scandal, which magical authorities were working hard to suppress. Harry knew it would blow over. The Immingham police wouldn´t discover any more victims of the mysterious serial-killer and the case would eventually go cold. Their killer was long gone.
Fenrir was only the latest to escape right under their noses. Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrange had managed to flee while in the process of being moved from Azkaban to the Wizengamot for a preliminary hearing. One veteran auror dead, two injured. Many others like Fenrir had never even been apprehended after the Battle of Hogwarts. Voldemort’s forces had scattered once it was clear their cause was lost, and the defences of Hogwarts Castle were too exhausted to give them chase. The Ministry was non-existent at the time. Shacklebolt and a other remaining officials had to hastily put together a new interim organization, and recruit aurors with no formal training from the ranks of Hogwarts battle-weary surviving students. It was all they could do, but it was far too little for the task at hand. Voldemort had made a good job of dismantling the Ministry and taking over most levels of civil society and that was without going into the supporters they had that nobody knew about. Wizards living abroad, families with money and connections, officials from foreign ministries...What Harry once saw as a compact entity to defeat, "The Death Eaters", had become a faceless, fragmented monster with tentacles everywhere...They seemed to vanish into thin air, fleeing under assumed identities, mingling with muggles...Some of them were never even known to the public. For all they knew there could still be Death Eaters in government agencies, safe behind carefully crafted disguises.

Harry sighed, tired...There was once a prophecy...about a boy born to defeat the Dark Lord. The prophecy had come true. But it had never mentioned the fact that evil rarely exists in the form of a single person. Evil can’t be defeated with the flick of a wand and an incantation. Evil was much more complicated than that.

Harry was no longer a boy and prophecies felt much more like fairy tales now.

"I thought I wouldn’t see you that soon." Professor Mcgonagall’s familiar voice was a balm to his ears. He walked up to her as she entered her office, giving her a warm hug. "To what I owe the pleasure of your visit?"

"I don’t have good news..."

"I heard about what happened in Immingham. I assume the reports weren’t exaggerated...It was Fenrir Greyback wasn’t it?"

"Yes. We tracked him for months, but somehow he slipped away."

"They found those poor children dead near a port, didn’t they? Do you believe Greyback simply hopped on a boat and left?"

"It’s the theory we are working with."

Minerva’s eyes were clouded with worry and she stood silent, as if at a loss of words. Harry’s heart sank. As a child he could always count on Minerva and Dumbledore to know the right thing to say and do. But he had realized part of becoming an adult was finding out adults don’t always have the answers to everything.

"First the Lestranges, now Fenrir...There are others...People are still dying..."

"You believe killing Voldemort would be the end of it, didn’t you?" she smiled sadly "I’m afraid we all did. I guess we forgot the kind of hatred he fed on has always been there."

"And always will be..." Harry thought of the refusal by foreign officials to give them resources to track fugitive Death Eaters. He had, to his chagrin, found out that many public figures barely hid their support of supremacist ideals. Diplomacy and international laws were their favourite excuses, but everybody knew the real reason.
"Does the department has any substantial lead? If I´m allowed to ask, that is..."

"No. We are following any clues we can get, but most of the time it seems like we don´t know what we are doing or how to go about it..." he paused for a long while, unsure as how to put his next thought into words that didn´t seem too childish, but finally decided there was no way to "I miss him...He would know what to do if he was here..."

"I know..." she whispered "But he trusted you to know what to do in his absence."

"No, not me. Snape. He trusted Snape to know what to do. But he´s gone as well." Harry smirked bitterly "I never thought I´d miss Snape. I mean...Professor Snape. But here we are."

"Miss him?" Minerva laughed quietly and moved to sit on her chair. Harry felt his body relax hearing her laugh. It almost felt like old times. Then he remembered "old times" was not that long ago.

"Maybe ´miss´ is not the right word? But...I can´t stop thinking that if he was here all this would be easier. He knew them, he spied on them for so long. Dumbledore knew he could help us all. I wonder if Dumbledore imagined it would all end like this, that Snape would..."

"I think he did. I think both of them did. And they were willing to take the risk so you could prevail. That should be enough guidance for you."

"But it isn´t. And...honestly...sometimes I feel like they...They planned everything and just...left." Harry felt a pang of melancholy and anger he couldn´t explain or admit without feeling ashamed of himself.

"You defeated Voldemort."

"Then what? It´s not over. He´s dead but he´s not gone. How do I defeat that? "

"You persevere. You´re alive because many people made sacrifices for you...Carrying on all you can do to honour them."

"I´m...sorry..." Harry blurted out suddenly, the weight of her words falling on him like a huge, heavy rock. "I didn´t mean to...I mean, I know Snape was your friend..."

"Tell me, Harry...If Severus was alive..." he voice seemed to crack slightly. "What would you tell him? What would you ask?"

"I don´t know." he trailed off. What would he say to Snape? Knowing everything he knew now, would he even dare? "He would probably call me a dunderhead, then refuse to answer most of it. But..."

"But..."

"Nothing..." he shook his head "It´s pointless now, isn´t it?"

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Fenrir Ggreyback looked at the dark expanse of the North Sea, milky skies above it, threatening storm. The cargo ship made it´s way through miserable, freezing, wet weather.

He had been careless. The last full moon got the best of him and he left a trail for the aurors. But now he was out of their reach, at least temporarily. The Swedish Ministry wouldn´t be too willing to cooperate with them. Durmstrang Institute´scode of ethics still had immense sway over government
and people alike, and the northern governments would never fully cooperate with anything remotely pro-muggle.

The next full moon would be in early January. He had time. The Lestranges had promised to contact him in due time. He’d wait meanwhile.

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Moscow, Russia.

Muggles were having another one of their wars. Rabastan had been reading the muggle news Dmitri’s assistant brought them. Violence was raging in Kosovo since the beginning of the year, and there was no sign of it ending any time soon. Apparently Eastern Europe was in shambles. Just a few short years before Yugoslavia had ravaged Bosnia. Massacres, rapes, torture, entire cities wiped out. Now they were going at it with the ethnic-Albanians from Kosovo. The whole area was unstable. As much as it was entertaining to watch the mudbloods killing each other off, the whole thing would be rather bothersome to Rodolphus plans. He insisted the Dark Lord had left clues as to the directions of the Serpentine Dagger somewhere in the forests of Albania. Dmitri promised them the necessary funds to pursue that lead, but warned them against doing it too soon and without a proper plan of action. Rodolphus was eager to go as soon as possible, and there was only so much Rabastan could do to stop him.

To placate his brother, Dmitri had placed them in a safe house in a calm residential area of Moscow and provided them with news daily. In the past few weeks alone Selwyn had been arrested, Fenrir Greyback had escaped, an investigation on the Rotts had been dropped for lack of evidence. The auror department was in a tight spot, as public opinion grew tired of their excuses. There was a general frenzy. People wanted arrests, they wanted trials, they wanted punishment. There was talk of making a Slytherin registry, families with Slytherin members were under surveillance.

Nowhere was safe.

That seemed to keep Rodolphus in check for now, but Rabastan didn’t know how long that would last. They had to find an opportunity to go to Albania as soon as possible. And if his brother was correct in his assumption that Snape was alive, even if Rabastan hoped he wasn’t, then he would soon give the ministry information on the dagger. Or go after it himself.

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December 20th

Cokeworth

Severus had received the morning paper only to be greeted by a picture of Greyback’s snarling snout on his mugshot topped with a headline that occupied almost a quarter of the front page: "Fenrir Greyback on the loose”. After the initial shock he had read the whole report avidly, reaching for a pencil to underline any important information. It was worse than he imagined. This was the first prisoner escape with a body count, two muggle teenagers included. Not only the bloody aurors let him escape, they let him kill muggles, and allowed the press to print it all in capital letters. All the other escapes had been successfully hidden from the public, but Fenrir fucking Greyback made the front page.

He left the house without as much as having breakfast, and headed out to the nearest newsagent, quickly picking up all the newspapers he could find. In the major publications he only found a couple somewhat sober notes, but with their usual taste for gore, the tabloids were giving out every
lurid detail as to what had happened to the two youths, with special focus on the girl, even including an angelic school photo of hers for added dramatic effect. Apparently the carnage had taken place much earlier in the month, on the 3rd, but only now did the press get wind of it after the police release a public statement, following a three week investigation and at least two autopsy reports. They believed the amount of damage found on the bodies could only have been inflicted by an animal, but public opinion turned on them, with many journalists citing the amount of time they kept the information from the public as definite proof that they were covering up something else. They were peddling theory of a particularly vicious serial-killer with gusto...It was a mess.

Severus had half a mind to storm Shacklebolt’s office and give him a piece of his mind. How could the Ministry have allowed this to happen. Being outsmarted by the Lestranges was bad enough, but this? And then covering it up for three weeks before letting it blow up on the news like that? Severus wondered who had leaked it to the Wizarding press. Then something crossed his mind... seen as the muggle press was only covering the Immingham case now, it might as well not have been a leak, but simply a journalist who had access to muggle press making assumptions about the deaths falsely linking them to Greyback? Certainly if he had escaped Shacklebolt would have told him...Severus hoped so, but hoping was not enough...

He had to talk to the minister.

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"Can I see the attic?" Angela asked her, after closing a box of books. Evelyn had asked her to come along and help her pack. Since she had made the decision of leaving Cokeworth she had made very little progress with packing. Evelyn kept telling herself she was too busy to take time and go back to her Spinner’s End house to pack. But the reality was that she wanted to avoid running into Severus. Angela insisted deep down she didn’t want to leave, and stalling was an unconscious way of avoiding it for as long as possible. Maybe it was all that combined.

"What for?"

"I’m curious. You kept talking about how weird it was."

"Ok, go. I’ll make something for us to drink meanwhile"

"You’re not coming?"

"I told you there’s nothing there."

"Party pooper" Angela giggled, going upstairs.

"Take a torch with you, it’s pitch dark there."

"Do you have one?"

"Kitchen cabinet, second drawer from the top"

Once alone, Evelyn stood in the middle of the living room and looked around. She had been living in that house for only two months but it felt oddly like home. There were only three boxes packed, and everything else was still in place, everything that was in the house before she moved in, rugs, books, furniture, the bizarre assortment of bric-a-brac she never had the time to make sense of... and all the things she had added, the cushions, the throw blankets, the vases with flowers, the photographs on the wall. Those photographs should had been the first thing she packed. Why didn’t she, Evelyn asked herself stepping closer. The pictures of her mother, father, sister...brother. That thought chipped at her heart.
In two days it would be his birthday. Paul was three years older than her, even though they were so close and looked so much alike most people who didn’t know them would have mistaken them for twins. He would have been 38, had he been alive.

What would he say if he was here? Growing up they used to listen to their grandfather’s wild tales about magic, wizards and witches, and plan adventures together. They would go around the world and see everything there was to be seen, visit palaces, climb mountains, swim in far away beaches and cross deserts with caravans.

When had she become such a coward?

"Evelyn! Come up here!" Angela’s voice shattered her train of thought and Evelyn rushed upstairs.

"What happened?" She asked poking her head through the door.

"Have you seen this?" Angela kneeling and pointing the light to something she couldn’t see from where she stood.

"What?"

"Come closer and you’ll see it."

Evelyn approached and kneeled beside her friend and then she saw it. It was a crude drawing of a snake coming out of skull’s with tiny scribbles running around its length.

"How did you find this?"

"I tripped and fell face first on this whatever it is...Creepy, uh? What does it say?"

"This wasn’t here last time I came up..."

"Stop, Evelyn, that’s not funny."

"It’s not a joke, Angela. It wasn’t."

"What does it say?"

"It’s too small..." she squinted and leaning in until her face was about a foot from the floor "I can’t make out everything...There’s a W...Wal...purgis?"

"As in...Walpurgis Night? Ok, NOW you’re pulling my leg."

"Shh, let me try and read the rest" her nose was almost touching the floor, but she still couldn’t make out what it said "I’ll need my reading glasses for the rest"

"Or maybe we could forget we found that and continue packing..."

"Who’s the party pooper now? Come on, go get my glasses."

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Part 8 - Home Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

In which Severus surrenders, enemies close in, and Evelyn contemplates her place in the world.

"There you go. I brought this too" Angela walked back in the attic with her reading glasses and another torch.

"What took you so long?"

"Trying to find batteries. So what does it say?"

"I think it’s Latin. Or something like Latin"

"Ugh, my Latin is so rusty...I think the last time I seriously studied it was back in college."

"Lucky for you, reading Latin is part of my job ..." Lyn smirked

"Ok, show-off, go ahead and read it then..."

Evelyn put her reading glasses on and arranged one of the torches so it shone light on the inscriptions, while Angela held the other one from the opposite direction. Lit from both sides the scribbles were easier to see, but the crude writing still made it difficult to read.

" 'Walpurgis milites'..." Evelyn started "...well... 'milites' can be nominative, accusative or vocative plural of 'miles'"

"So...soldiers'"

"Or knights. In medieval texts it refers to knights. I have found some Medieval history books in the house when I arrived, so whoever lived here, assuming they wrote this, were most likely thinking of medieval knights, rather than roman soldiers..."

"Ok, go on..."

"Walpurgis milites... I’m guessing it means 'Knights of Walpurgis', but there should be a genitive here..."

"Knights of Walpurgis? What the devil, is it a knightly order of some kind?"

"Not any chivalric order I ever heard of in some 20 years of studying the Middle Ages..."

"I don’t think any would want to associate themselves with Walpurgis Night."

"Well, originally Walpurgis was simply the feast of Saint Walpurga. So it wouldn’t be too farfetched that a chivalric order would be named after her, specially in France. It was only later that 'Walpurgis Night' became connected with witchcraft in Central and Northern Europe, mostly because it fell on the day before May Day, so it was associated with Pagan Spring rites. But regardless, I never heard of such an order."
"Even if...why would anybody scribble their name in an attic on a late XIXth century house in Cokeworth..."

"I told you this house was bizarre. Whoever lived here before me wasn’t all that right in the head." she shook her head and moved to read the second line of text.

"What’s next?"

"Tenebris Dominus iterum surget"

"Ok, I got Dominus...Isn’t it "Lord" and.. 'tenebris'...isn’t it ‘darkness’? I don’t like the sound of that...Are we summoning some entity by reading that?"

"We might be...'Tenebris Dominus'.. "The Lord of Darkness'...'iterum surget'...'surget' is the third person singular future active indicative of the verb 'surgo..."

"And ‘surgo' is...?"

"..an alternative form of 'subrigo' which formed from 'sub' which means 'below' or 'under' and 'rego' which means to 'lead' or 'to rule'...combined into a verb, it means to 'rise up',

"As in rising up from below...like an insurrection?"

"Or merely rising, as in 'getting up' from below..."

"And 'iterum'?"

"Iterum means 'again' or more closely 'a second time' or 'repeatedly'."

"So...put everything toghether..."

"Well, there are two texts, the first is 'Knights of Walpurgis' the second, which is more linguistically accurate, reads something like 'The Lord of Darkness will rise up again' "

"Ok, this just stopped being entertaining right there. Who the hell wrote this?"

"I don’t know...Somebody with a lot of time in their hands and a creepy sense of humour? This looks more like a stupid prank than anything else."

"Anybody who would go out of their way to write THIS in Latin, in the attic of a house is probably scoring quite high in the 'most likely to be a serial-killer' scale."

"Well, whoever it was they’re long dead, or at least very old. This house has been closed for at least some 50 years."

"And you know for sure nobody has ever broken in here in 50 years?"

"Pretty confident. But even if that had happened, then what? Some bored satanists held a session up here at some point?" Evelyn laughed.

"You told me the attic door was decorated with a snake..."

"A basilisk moreso...It’s still there, if you want to take a look."

"Aren’t snakes a symbol of the devil in most Christian traditions?"
"It’s not that black and white. In Mesopotamian mythologies, from which a lot of Pre-Israelite and early Israelite symbology comes from, snakes represent the cycle of life, as can be seen in the ouroboros. Sure Adam and Eve were tempted by a 'serpent' in the book of Genesis, but Moses and Aaron’s staffs were turned into snakes as a display of the power of God in Exodus. In the Bible God uses snakes as depositories of power quite a few times: in Numbers Moses used a bronze serpent as a cure for the bites of the fiery serpents God had sent to punish them for speaking against Him. Figurines of serpents were uncovered from archaeological sites, and a bronze one was supposed to be kept in the Temple of Jerusalem, said to represent the sovereignty of the God of Israel. Now, if you look outside of Judeo-Christian cultures, you’ll see snakes being associated with protection, wisdom, healing, fertility and a plethora of other mostly positive things in cultures and civilizations all across the globe, from the feathered serpent of the mesoamerican pre-Columbian societies to the Nagas of Hinduism and Buddhism. Even in Christian medieval Europe you can find documents that use snakes a symbol of healing, or wisdom, particularly in alchemy treaties. ...So you see snakes aren’t always bad."

"You...sure do know a lot about snakes...I’m a tiny bit weirded out, to be honest, no offense."

"None taken...My late grandfather actually liked snakes. A lot of his personal objects were engraved with snake motifs. My brother was fascinated by snakes too, my father even got him a book about snakes species of the whole world that he used to read together. The snake enclosure was one of our favourite spots when we went to the zoo in Dublin. I think that’s why I was never really scared of snakes. You know, my grandfather actually gave me a snake ring as a gift when I left for college. A gorgeous silver serpent with emerald eyes that used to belong to his mother. After he died and I got a hold of those old papers I finally realized why he liked snakes that much, it turned out that they are part of his family crest."

"It’s so bonkers that your family has a crest..."

"I can’t really call them my family all things considered...You want to know something crazy?"

"Sure, we’ve come this far down the rabbit hole already..."

"I’ve had dreams with snakes all my life from some reason. Specially after Paul died...When he passed away I had this recurring nightmare with barn owl killing and eating a green-silver snake. To this day I’m scared of barn owls, but not of snakes."

"Still, it’s very creepy that there’s a basilisk on the attic door and then we find this. And isn’t this attic built in a way that you can’t see it from the street?"

"What then? This attic was build as a secret spot for dark magic rituals to take place? That’s nonsense."

"Maybe not dark magic rituals, but you have to agree something is odd about this house."

"That yes. And you know, I’ve been thinking...My grandfather left his family, or rather was driven out, when he was 14...That was around 1929. This house belonged to his family, and all of this...the attic, the location, this weird inscription...Everything points out to something they wanted to hide."

"And..."

"You know what was starting to gain terrain in 1920s UK and Europe in general? Fascism. I did some reading and the first Fascist party in the UK was founded in 1923. And you know what fascists loved? Secret meetings, pseudo-medieval history, and occultism. They were all obsessed with some sort of fundamentally european identity based on distorted Christian values, mixed in with pagan
clichés and some pantomime of chivalric ideals and crap like that."

"So...you´re thinking your father was driven out of the family because they were fascists and he wasn´t on with the programme."

"Can you think of anything else?"

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"Going back home?" Claire eyed him suspisciously. Draco sat down, forcing himself to seem relaxed.

"Just for Christmas. I want to spend Christmas with my parents. And it will seem odd if I don´t go. People may start asking questions."

"You´ve got a point, I suppose."

Claire wasn´t even looking at him. When Draco entered the study, she was distracted, a pile of open letters by her side, a quill in her hand, and a blank piece of parchment in front of her. She looked as if she was trying hard to concentrate, trying to write something but not finding the words. Draco could imagine what she was trying to write. The Lestranges in Albania, Fenrir Merlin only knew where, her friends at the French ministry working around the clock...Claire was in no shortage of pen-pals.

Draco had taken to wandering the halls at night, after everybody was asleep, his insomnia getting the best of him. He had been caught at more once by a house elf, but the creatures hadn´t rattled on him. The boy had noticed none of them seemed too fond of their mistress and imagined that Claire´s horrid tratment of them had something to do with their lack of loyalty, so unlike the usual demeanour of their kind. Regardless, Draco had taken advantage of it. He asked the house elves seemingly unassuming questions about the Rotts which they answered more earnestly that he would have expected, and whenever Claire and Ludwig were out, or sleeping, Draco had access to every room in the house, courtesy of their despondent servants.

That way Draco had overheard a lot. He had seen a lot. He had given the Ministry the location of the Lestrange brothers in Albania, which he found out in one of the letters Claire had received from them. He hadn´t found any information as to who Dmitri was, but at least he could confirm he had facilitated the Lestranges passage to Russia and from there to Albania. He had given the Ministry independent confirmation that the Rotts suspected Professor Snape was alive and had sent Sewlyn after him. Dmitri was the only piece missing from the puzzle, and Draco was starting to feel out of his depth to find anything about him.

Amd now this...

The night before as he walked through the halls of the third floor, which was almost always empty, hoping the sound of his own steps would relax him enough that he could sleep, Draco had seen a small commotion in the front gate through one of the windows.

He could tell someone had apparated in the distance. The grounds of the Rott manor were protected against aparitions, but the night had been clear and quiet enough that sounds in the distance could reach his ears. He heard it, the loud crack, followed by tree branches snapping. He looked out of the window and saw as the lights of Claire and Ludwig´s room turned on, and minutes later he saw two of the few human servants of the house, followed by elves and finally Herr Rott making their way to the front gate. He pried himself from the window and rushed to the top of the stairs, looking for a vantage point from which he could see what was going on in the entrance hall. Thanks to the manor
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 dozens intricate French renaissance and Baroque mishmash architecture it was easy to hide on that blind spot and get a view from the front door.

Claire was standing there, wearing a long dark green dressing gown that billowed around her as she walked about nervously, her hair lose about her shoulders like wild flames. The front door opened letting Ludwig´s imposing figure in, followed by Selwyn. Draco did a double take, not believing his eyes. Selwyn was supposed to be under arrest. But then it hit him. If word got out that Selwyn had escaped, people might find out Professor Snape was alive. The Ministry was lying to protect him.

Draco listened to the entire conversation, his heart pounding against his ribs as if it wanted a way out. Nothing of what he heard made sense, and yet it made a lot of things much clearer. Selwyn told the Rotts he had been rescued by somebody in the Ministry. There was an infiltrated agent in the Ministry facilitating former Death Eater escapes.

Of course there was.

It was obvious in hindsight. The Lestranges had been 'rescued' while en route to a secret hearing. How could the Rotts have known when and where the Lestranges would be, if the authorities hadn´t released that information to the public, precisely because they wanted to avoid a rescue attempt? Then there was Fenrir, and at least some four or five others. Nobody wanted to say it outloud, specially now that the Ministry was being restructured, and so many of its members had been in the front lines of the resistance against the Dark Lord...but many of the bureaucratic positions were still filled by the same people who had willfully ignored the Dark Lord´s rise, and kept on working while the Ministry was occupied. Collaborators the lot of them.

And that wasn´t everything..

Draco stood in shock as they started to talk about Professor Snape. Selwyn seemed to be taking great pleasure in telling them about Professor Snape´s current status. So much for the Ministry´s precautions. Now the Rotts knew he was alive, and where he was. However, Draco knew that neither Claire nor Ludwig were a match for Professor Snape. The fact that they knew where he was, oddly enough, didn´t bother him.

No, what truly made Draco´s spine go cold was what he said after. Professor Snape apparently had a lover. A muggle.

The whole idea of Professor Snape having a lover was ludicrous to even begin with, and that she could possibly be a muggle downright laughable, but Draco didn´t doubt it for a second as he heard it. Selwyn was all too content, all too delighted to say that. The way the words "Snape´s muggle whore" rolled from his lips into the Rotts ears was all too ominous for it to be anything less than the truth. He knew her name, where she lived, how much time she had been spending at Professor Snape´s house, how much time they spend together, and was delighting in detailing all of it.

Draco didn´t know what to make of the information, of the mere idea that Professor Snape could be having an affair with a muggle woman. It was absurd, but assuming it was the truth, and it was a safe assumpton to make from the tone of the conversation he was witnessing, then his own bewilderment would have to wait.

"Well, fine." Claire finally told him "Go, spend Christmas with your parents. Enjoy it. But you will be back as soon as the new year starts"

"Sure." Draco breathed a sigh of relief and excused himself.

Draco trusted, or rather hoped, that there would be enough time for him tell Professor Snape what
was going on before the Rotts made their next move, whatever it was. He had risked too much, writing letter after letter. This time he’d have to talk to Professor Snape in person. If this muggle woman existed, if he really had that type of relationship with her... then Draco had to tell him everything in person. Between that and the information that the ministry had at least one infiltrated agent, there was no way he could trust owls now. He sensed Claire was starting to get suspicious and he couldn’t imagine what she would do if she caught him writing any of that down. Thankfully Christmas was just around the corner to provide him with an excuse. Nobody would think anything of Draco wanting to spend the Holidays with his parents.

As soon as he closed his bedroom door he started to pack, barely paying any attention to which articles of clothing he was carelessly stuffing in his suitcase.

....

"It looks like we’re not going to get any more packing done...I’ll go get us a beer." Angela went into the kitchen while Evelyn looked into the piles of books laying about waiting to be packed.

"It was here somewhere..."

"Why did you get a book about Fascism? I thought you were helping that guy in a research about William the Conqueror..." Angela asked from the kitchen, as she got two bottles of beer from the fridge. Evelyn pretended not to hear her. She couldn’t tell her friend the real reason she had been researching the history of fascism and white supremacy in Northern England.

After finding out Severus had been a part of one of those groups in his youth, Evelyn had done what she always did when she didn’t know what to do: headed to library. She picked up everything she could get her hands on that would tell her something about the political landscape of the UK in the 70s, and the politics of White Supremacy. Eventually she found a particular publication that dealt with the phenomenon in the Greater Manchester area.

Evelyn had obsessively read about what was going on in the 1970s. There had been fascist groups before like the British Fascist Leage or the British Union of Fascists, but more relative to recent times there was the National Front, founded in the late 60s, its electoral base largely consisting of blue-collar workers and the self-employed who resented immigrant competition in the labour market and for scarce housing.

Evelyn thought about Severus’ father.

A factory worker with a drinking problem, struggling to make ends meet. Evelyn could imagine a young Severus living under the influence of such a man... the child of a broken, abusive home, living in appaling conditions...She knew he had eventually found a way out, going to a prestigious school, certainly on a scholarship. Severus was amazingly bright, and she could see him as a child prodigy. But how would he had fit in with other children in that school? Children who were certainly better off than him? Maybe he didn’t fit in, after all, maybe he felt inadequate, maybe he wanted someone to blame... Was it really that strange that Severus, no more than a teenager by the time would, like so many other youths, fall prey to the siren song of fascism?

"Here, drink something" Angela plopped on the sofa, handing her a bottle.

"Found it." Evelyn sat beside her friend, beer in one hand and book in the other.

"Fascism in the Greater Manchester area’. Is that what you call a light read?"

"Anyway... I was just reading up on Oswald Mosley..."
"...Oswald 'Tom' Mosley founder and leader of the British Fascist Party in the 1930s" Angela recited, deadpan "I read about him in school, and only because our History teacher happened to be Jewish, and she made sure we knew all about Fascism, racism and whatnot, since her father had been in camp. It was a point of honor for her to teach students about Fascism... Anyway, Mosley’s family was an old established Manchester family...You know, Mosley Street in Manchester has their name. Nobody thought any of it ."

"Fascist ideology was also strong outside of Germany leading up to World War II, people tend to forget that"

"Fascist ideologi is still strong.. Combat 18 is still around, I mean..."

"Combat 18?"

"A neo-Nazi group tied to hooliganism, they originated in the British National Party. They’re not even the only ones...Evelyn, why do you have this book? This is not about that inscription in the attic, we don’t know what that is or if it has anything to do with Neo-Nazis or..."

"It’s Severus..."

"Severus? What does Severus have to do with anything?"

"We were talking the other day...About his life..."

"And...?"

"He used to be in one of those supremacist groups as a teenager."

"Oh...well, fuck." Angela almost dropped her bottle. "You’re joking?"

"And now that inscription in the attic...I’ve been reading about Cokeworth’s history and these... 'ideas', they were strong here in the 70s and 80s, weren’t they?"

"What do you think? Cokeworth is an industrial town that basically crashed when the mill closed in the 80s. And that was after economically underperforming through the 70s worse than New Mills in the 1977 Manchester Football League. People had no jobs, the mill workers were getting sick from the inadequate working conditions, living condition were appalling, I mean Spinner’s End and all the streets around it were nothing but a huge slum...Everybody wanted a scapegoat. So these conservative, rightwing wankers told everybody it was the immigrants´fault. It wasn’t the economy, it wasn’t the government...it was the Bahamians, the Indians, the Pakistanis, the Irish, the Catholics, the Jews, the Muslims...And people bought it. Just ask fr. Thomas, his church has had offensive graffiti written all over it more than once. And he personally helped with clean up when the same happened to the synagogue and the mosque. It’s gotten better now, but back in the day we would go home after school and overhear the adults saying nasty things about anyone who wasn’t ‘like us’...A lot of kids my age got into it way too deep."

"Kids like Severus, you mean..."

"I’m not defending him but...Yes. People don’t just wake up one day and go ‘Oh, I think I’m going out to beat up some folks of a different color on the street. You wake up in the morning and find out your dad is out of a job because the mill closed, and your mother now has to make the food that used to last a week, stretch for two or even three weeks...You grow up and you can’t find a job because the economy collapsed, you turn on the news and they keep telling you the Irish and the Catholics are bad because they blow things up and kill little kids, they show politicians saying you can’t find a job because immigrants are taking them, and immigrants are dangerous, that crime is on the rise
because of them...Next you know there’s some bloke with a swastica tattoo on his arm on the corner of your house telling you you’re better than all of those people because you’re white, because you’re a ‘true Brit’. For a lot of people that’s all they need, something to feel superior about, specially if they feel like they don’t have anything else to hold on to...I’ve seen it happen in my family even."

"You did?"

"A cousin of mine. He wasn’t as lucky as Severus, though... All I’m saying is... You just moved to Cokeworth, and... you come from a different place. I’m sure there are no gangs of skinheads roaming the Irish countryside."

"No, where I’m from it’s little old ladies who talk ill about immigrants over tea after church services, I’m afraid."

"So... Severus, uh..."

"Apparently he left the group and collaborated with the authorities. Then he became a teacher and put it past him. That’s what he says at least."

"You have any reason to believe that’s not the truth?"

"You know... after he told me that, I kept replaying every interaction I’ve had with him in my head, every interaction he had with my students... And I do think that if at some point he truly embraced this kind of ideas, it is past him now..."

"I don’t think that matters much now, no? You’re leaving."

"Actually... Look around us. In two weeks I’ve packed what? A quarter of my books? I think I may have made a stupid decision..."

"Wait, you lost me..."

"I can’t go now... I’m going to spend the rest of my life wondering about everything. About the house, about Severus, about that stupid inscription in the attic."

"What? You’re gonna be on your deathbed at age 90, wondering who the hell wrote that in the attic and wether Severus really loved you and how good of a shag he could potentially be?"

"Something like that..." Evelyn laughed "But in all seriousness, I don’t think this thing with Severus is going anywhere... Too complicated. I’d like to remain his friend if that’s possible, but I’m not really ready to deal with a new relationship at all, let alone as complicated as this one would be. But the more I think about it, the more I think I should stay and do what I wanted to from the start, which was to find out what really happened to my grandfather before he moved to Ireland. And this house is the only way I can do that. And I have the feeling this house has more of a history than I first gave it credit."

....

December 23rd

Severus stared at the letter he had received from Kingsley. He had tried to arrange a meeting with the Minister but he was out of the country. Certainly trying to do some damage control. However, he had been considerate enough to write a letter to inform Severus on the Fenrir situation. A nice gesture even if it reeked of ‘too little, too late’.
The news were accurate. Fenrir Greyback had escaped and killed two muggle teenagers while doing it. First the Lestranges, then Selwyn, now this...There were talks of continuing the use of Dementors in Azkaban. Kingsley had been adamant about ending the policy that he considered inhumane, but besides the question of what could be done with Dementors if there was no practical use for them, the string of prisoner escapes made people wonder if they weren´t a necessary evil after all. People were scared, the memory of the war too fresh in their minds for any comfort to be found in words and promises.

The sound of somebody knocking on the door interrupted his thoughts. Severus rolled his eyes, putting the letter in his work desk drawer. He wouldn´t be surprised if it was Dawlish, bringing more advice for which he had no use for and admonishment for which he had no patience.

…

The mere thought of talking to Severus felt exhausting, but Evelyn still couldn´t help but think about him almost all the time. She didn´t know what to make of it all anymore. She knew for quite sure she was falling in love with him, but she also knew she couldn´t deal with everything that came with it. She had enough on her plate as it was.

It had been Paul´s birthday the day before. She had called her mother to check on her. She sounded fine over the phone, but Evelyn knew she wasn´t fine, she had simply learned to hide it better as the years went by. Evelyn had been with her for Paul´s last birthday and they had gone to church, put white roses on his grave and taken a long walk along the harbour. It had been nice, peaceful. But this year she wasn´t there, and she knew her sister was working a long shift and couldn´t be there either. Caitlin had left her daughters with their mother in hopes that they could distract their grandmother and they seemed to have succeeded. Grandma Liz had dropped by for tea as well, which Evelyn was sure had cheered her mother up. She was more of a mother than a mother-in-law to Sophia, and they had grown even closer as they shared the loss of loved ones, first Paul, then grandpa Marius, and finally Evelyn´s father a short two years ago. But still, as much as she knew her mother was being cared for and comforted, she still couldn´t shake that pang of guilt.

Guilt. Concern. Inadequacy.

She had been taking all those to bed with her every night and they wouldn´t let her sleep. She thought of Paul, of her father, of her grandfather, of Severus, of everything she wanted to fix but couldn´t. All the things she wanted to understand but couldn´t.

She couldn´t fix everything her brother´s loss had irrevocably changed in her family and in herself. She couldn´t fix the fact that her mother still kept the half knitted sweater she had been making for her father and never got to finish because he passed away before she had a chance. She couldn´t fix the fact that her grandfather had died without trusting any of them enough to tell what really had happened to him in his youth, not even her grandmother. She couldn´t fix the fact that her grandmother had been hurt by that decision, even if she still pretended it was fine. She couldn´t fix Severus past and have him come to her free of any weight, of any pain.

But there was the house.

And unlike Paul, unlike her grandfather, unlike her father, Severus was still there, alive, withing reach. She could still reach him, even if she didn´t know how just yet.

Severus looked flabbergasted when he opened the door. Surely he wasn´t expecting her to come after everything that had trasnpired. Evelyn herself didn´t think she´d come.

"May I come in?" she asked as softly as she could.
"Of course" he almost whispered "Of course you can."

....

Severus was keenly aware of how hungrily he looked at her as she walked into his sitting room. He wondered how much of her beauty was truly hers and how much of it just came from how fiercely he longed for her presence. He had feared he wouldn’t see her again. He had tried not to think of her. Fenrir’s escape, Draco’s letters and matters of the ministry had been a welcome distraction. Severus had feared that if he thought about her, he would somehow snap. Still, he went to bed every night with nothing but her in his mind.

At firste chalked it up to lust. He was a grown man who hadn’t had a sexual relation with a woman for close to two decades, most of his adult life spent living in a school where the only possible female companies were old enough to have been his teachers when he was a boy himself, or too young or simply had nothing in common with him. Even if that hadn’t been the case, his still lingering feelings for Lily were too strong, and to a certain extent not allowing himself to even look at another woman seemed to be part of his self-imposed punishment.

Evelyn was a whole different story. She had come into his life in a completely different way than any other woman. She didn’t know he was a wizard, she didn’t know he had been a Death Eater and a spy, she didn’t know his name was plastered on newspapers along with every kind of fanciful conspiracy theory.

Evelyn came from another world, quite literally.

And yet, they had much in common. They read the same books, liked the same art, enjoyed a lot of the same things... She gave him the kind of intellectual provocation he craved. And maybe because she had no idea of what and who he really was, she had very little tolerance for his most unpleasant quirks. She constantly called him out on his mood swings, on his brooding, on his bitterness, she lectured him, she nagged him. She could be so overbearing sometimes, and yet it was entertaining, delightful even.

And damn her, an enviable brain wasn’t the only delightful thing about her.

It wasn’t just that she happened to be good-looking, and realistically speaking she probably wasn’t as beautiful as Severus’s love-sick mind made her out to be. It was something else. She carried herself with an awareness of being desirable and wore it effortlessly. She moved, dressed, walked and just plain existed operating under that knowledge. There was just so much of it Severus could handle, without letting his eyes wander, mentally caressing the thickness of her thighs, the generous curve of her arse or the fullness of her breasts, without fantasizing about running his fingers through that thick mane of hair and crushing his mouth into hers.

It was only lust he told himself, as he lay awake at night imagining the expanse of skin hidden under the brightly coloured dresses and low necked blouses and the firmness of the flesh underneath it. But how could it be lust when there was so much more...

It wasn’t just lust.

Everything would be easier if it was.

Evelyn walked past, enveloping him in that scent of lavender he had become so familiar with he could close his eyes and smell it even when she wasn’t around. She took her jacket off and made herself at home with that cat-like grace of hers. Then he noticed that she on the same blush pink dress she had worn when they had visited that Dalí exhibition a month or so ago, when she had fallen
down the stairs into his arms.

"I thought I wouldn´t be seeying you anymore" he let out without thinking..

"You know me better than that. I had to come and see how you were doing at least."

"I haven´t given myself another overdose if that´s what you´re afraid of" he smirked shakily

"I didn´t think you would."

"Have you...uh...I mean, is everything ready to move out?"

"No." she said, seating on his favourite armchair by his fireplace and warming her hands.

"I thought you were leaving before Christmas..."

"No anymore."

"When, then?"

"I´m not."

"Excuse me?"

"I´m not moving back home."

"You´re...not?"

"Don´t presume it has anything to do with you..."

"I wouldn´t presume that."

"Good. Because it wasn´t."

Severus pressed his lips together to keep the corners of his mouth from curling into a smile. Evelyn finally turned to look at him and he couldn´t figure out what the expression of her face meant, but he sincerely hoped that it meant something that she had come to give him the news in person. For as much as he knew they would both be better off of she left, knowing she would stay made him feel a certain kind of way he couldn´t understand, lightheaded almost. He wouldn´t presume she was staying for his sake, but he didn´t need her to stay for him. He just needed her to stay.

"Tea?" he managed, finally.

"In a while. First I need to talk to you."

"I can imagine the topic."

"You´re probably wrong. I´m not going to ask you about the pain killers, or the kind of company you kept twenty years ago. I believe we´re clear enough on both fronts."

"Then what?"

"I have found something rather funny up in my attic...I thought you would enjoy a little spooky tale. It´s a good time of the year for that."
It felt safer going to Cokeworth first.

His parents knew he’d be arriving soon, but Draco hadn’t told them exactly when. This way he could see Professor Snape before heading to Wiltshire without giving his family reason to suspect anything. He could trust his mother, but he had to face the fact that his father was unpredictable. After the war he had become withdrawn and increasingly bitter. He would either spend all his time in his study, taciturn and unreachable, or he’d get irritable and snap at the slightest provocation, or with no provocation at all. The Malfoys’ fall from grace had been a harsh blow to them all, but while his mother was trying her best to get the family back on their feet, to move forwards with at least a shred of dignity, his father was utterly defeated.

Draco had decided there was very little he could do for his father, all things considered. His mother kept saying they had to give him time. Meanwhile she would spend all of her time worrying and fretting about everything, while trying to on put an optimistic front. She wrote him daily letters that read much the same but Draco appreciated every word. They were a sweet drop of normalcy in a world that had turned upside down, and they made it feel like they were still a family somehow, and that this much hadn’t changed even when everything else had.

So, for her sake, he continued to do as the Ministry told him. Perhaps if he proved to be a valuable asset some of the sanctions on the Malfoy family would be relaxed, or even lifted. Draco didn’t feel very hopeful most of the time, but he had to try. He had to fix at least some of what they had done. Looking back on everything, he found nothing but confusion, his previous beliefs shaken and nearly destroyed leaving a vast nothingness in their place. He found himself not thinking of muggles or muggle-borns, or pure-blood or any of the things that seemed so urgent before, but instead just worried about surviving, saving himself somehow. Not literally, he didn’t stand formally accused of anything after all, but...he felt like he had to save something inside himself, something unknown and undefinable, but which was there nevertheless and felt like the only thing he had left that was still whole.

As he made his way to Cokeworth Draco found himself watching them.

Muggles.

He had taken the Channel Tunnel from France, gotten off at St Pancras International and taken another train to Oldham. He wasn’t sure why he had done that when apparating would have been much easier and faster... maybe to buy himself time, maybe not to call any unwanted attention upon himself... He had watched them all along the way. Parents and children going to school or visiting family, adults rushing to and back from work, teenagers just slightly younger than himself travelling in cheery packs... It felt strangely comforting to silently witness that loud type of tranquility. They were always on the move, muggles. Always going somewhere and doing something. There was an odd sort of restless energy about them that was at once infuriating and fascinating.

Once in Oldham, Draco had struggled to find his way. Eventually an elderly man had given him a leaflet with information on the bus service connecting Oldham to Cokeworth, adding that it was brand new and apparently working ‘like a swiss watch’. Eventually Draco found himself a couple blocks away from Spinner’s End, as the remarkably efficient bus service apparently didn’t reach that far.

A red car had passed him by as he dragged his feet onto the old cobble stones covered in a fresh, thin layer of snow, but Draco thought nothing of it. Those ugly metal boxes on wheels were everywhere, and after a short while one stopped paying them much mind. But then he saw it take a turn into Spinner’s End and rushed his step.

That’s her, he thought to himself, still unable to believe it. A woman stepped out of the car, and
knocked on one of the doors. Professor Snape opened it and let her in. So Selwyn was right. Draco had hoped it was a lie. He suspected Sewlyn wasn’t being truthful, simply because Selwyn was never truthful about anything. But now she was right there in front of his eyes. The idea of Professor Snape having a lover at all was at least strange. That she was a muggle was downright unthinkable.

Draco stood outside, unable to decide whether to wait or leave.

....

Severus sat quietly as she told him about the bizarre inscriptions she had found in the attic, asking himself how could he have missed it when he had been there to remove all the magical objects so she couldn’t find them. But then neither he nor Minerva had had the idea of analyzing the flooboards, so it may just as easily have been there.

"I don’t know what to tell you." he answered earnestly. He didn’t, in fact, know what to tell her. It was clear to him that the house she now occupied had once been a meeting place for pureblood supremacists, most likely well into the early years of Lord Voldemort’s, then Tom Riddle, career.

For a brief moment he wondered if his mother knew any of it. He didn’t give as much thought as he probably should to the proximity of his childhood house and a house that belonged to the Blacks, even as Evelyn had moved and started asking questions. He simply imagined it was a property they bought as money laundering or to conduct illegal business. Now there was a possible direct connection to the Dark Lord himself.

The inscription mentioning the Knights of Walpurgis, would put it at least in the 1940s, when Riddle had graduated. That was assuming the house hadn’t been used for spurious activities after that, but the inscription she described looked much more like something a teenager would do. A teenager like the members of Riddle’s gang. Severus knew his mother had moved into Cokeworth in the early 1950s. It never occurred to him to enquire as to how his mother had ended up in Cokeworth. He knew his father was born and raised there, but her... It never even occurred to Severus to ask her how she had met his father. He suspected it was no fairytale love story so why bother? But now he wished he had asked.

"I’ve done some research on Cokeworth’s history of far right and fascist movements, so I assume it’s no big surprise that something like that would appear somewhere in this town, but I’d be lying if I said it doesn’t scare me to see it inside a house that at some point belonged to my family, and which just happens to be in my possession now."

"You did your research because of this graffiti?" he asked, duly, attempting to make the question sound neutral and failing.

"You of all people shouldn’t ask me why I’d be doing such research."

"Indeed." he lowered his eyes

"We will talk about that some other time..."

"There isn’t much to talk about, I’m afraid."

"We still have a lot to talk about, Severus. And since I don’t plan on going anywhere for the time being, and if we are going to continue being neighbours, we have time for it"

"You’re coming back to Spinner’s End?"

"After New Years. Fr. Thomas will be having an event on the 24th that I’m helping with, then I’m
"I remember those events of his." Severus smiled sadly. Every December 24th Fr. Thomas would organize that event to distribute food, so when December 25th came the needy families of Cokeworth would have something to put on the table. There were also toys for those who had children. Second hand toys Fr. Thomas managed to collect through arduously-sought donations, but still, much better than the prospective alternative of getting no gifts at all...And if one was to ask any of the children who got them, it would be easy to see they didn´t give a damn about their new toys being new or not. "You´ve been helping this year, right?"

"Yes. We will start early, so everybody can get their stuff before Midnight mass. Fr. Thomas doesn´t want anybody to feel obliged to stay for services, so we´ll do it through the afternoon and have it end before night."

"I assume you´ll be there all day? Knowing you..."

"Yes. Then go back home to change for mass."

"Feeding the poor all day, then mass. Your middle name really does stand for 'Mother Teresa', doesn´t it Ms. Evelyn Teresa Black?" he smirked.

"I would give you the answer you deserve, but this is not the time of the year to be saying nasty things to people." she tittered. "In any case, I figured you might want to drop by, if you don´t have anything better to do. We´ll start at..."

"9am. Food and toy drive till 7pm, mass at 10pm. I remember. My mother and I never stayed for mass though. Us not being Catholic and all, I suppose it didn´t feel right to stay." That wasn´t true...As a child, Severus had been curious to stay and spy into what people did inside the church. But his father wasn´t fond of Catholics or the Irish...His mother wouldn´t dream of even letting him know they were accepting charity from "micks" ...

"Anybody is welcome. But...if you don´t fee like coming, maybe you could meet me afterwards?"

"I assumed you had plans" he trailed off, she always had plans...

"Angela is spending the night at her mother´s. Helping with cooking, last minute shopping and gift wrapping and whatnot. She invited me to go over, but... I don´t know her family that well, it could be a bit awkward. I´m going on Christmas day, of course, at least to say hello...But I´d much rather spend Christmas Eve with somebody I´m closer to...all things considered..."

"I didn´t think you´d want to spend much time with me...all things considered..."

"And who will help me make sense of every creepy and unexplained thing I keep finding in my house?" she smiled.

....

The woman stayed there for over an hour. When the front door finally opened he could see her walk out with Professor Snape and the two of them embraced. It was long, slow... not the kind of hug two friends would share casually. He looked like he didn´t want to let her go. He stayed outside as she got in the car and left, his eyes following her as if it pained him to see her leave. If Draco had any doubt, it was gone. There was some sort of close connection between them, that much was evident and anybody who happened to be casually walking in front his house would see it, so clear it was.

Draco had been hoping it wasn´t true. He didn´t really want to think of all the possible implications.
He shook his head and tried to put such ideas on hold. Once he saw the red car disappear in the distance Draco crossed the street. Professor Snape was still standing by the door and didn’t see him until he called his name.

"What the devil..."

"We need to talk." was all the boy could utter.

"Get in." He said, grabbing Draco by the arm and pulling him inside roughly, slamming the door behind them.

"What are you doing here?"

"I have something to tell you!"

"What is so bloody important that you couldn’t put in a sodding letter? If the Rotts as much as suspect you’re here...I promised your mother I’d keep you alive, you dunderhead!"

"You’ll know what happened if you let me speak!" Draco didn’t even notice he had raised his voice until he saw the expression on his former head of house’s face change from furious to stunned.

"Very well, then. I suppose is high time we start treating you like the grown up you are, seen as you’re making decisions and prioritizing on your own now."

"That woman...It´s her, right? Your lover?" Draco let out, dully, his thoughts tripping over each other on his head in a confused mess. The words just came out of his mouth before he could weigh them, before he could think about what they meant. The burned in his tongue and he had to spit them out. As much as he kept reminding himself he owed the man standing in front of him a debt of gratitude, and maybe for that precise reason, he couldn’t bring himself to simply accept it or find it normal.

"I didn’t give you the liberty!" Draco felt his heart miss a beat as Snape lunged towards him, grabbing him by the lapel of his jacket as if he was about to hit him. For a moment he thought he would.

"That’s what Selwyn told the Rotts." he blurted as if that would protect him.

"Sewlyn..."

"He arrived at the Rotts´estate a couple days ago."

Snape stepped away from him, seemingly regaining his composure, and pointed to the sofa.

"Take a seat and start from the beginning."

…

"He just appeared out of nowhere at the gate, in the middle of the night. I could see and hear them from the second floor, but they didn’t see me." Draco continued uninterrupted, as Snape looked at him, emotionless. "He said somebody in the ministry helped him escape. There seems to be a person there, infiltrated, leaking information and facilitating escapes. Nobody knows who it is. Sewlyn said it was this person who helped him escape, that they gave those dark wizards the mill’s location as they knew Dawlish and the other aurors would be there. I don’t know if they knew you would be there, though."
"They couldn´t possibly know. It was a last minute decision on my part. Only Dawlish and his men knew in advance." there was no traceable emotion on Snape´s voice and that, somehow, scared Draco more than the anger he had witnessed just a moment before.

"Selwyn said he was taken out of the county and had his injuries treated, but he couldn´t tell where. He claimed he was unconscious and didn´t see much of what was being done to him. I don´t really buy it."

"You are getting smarter after all."

"He told the Claire and Ludwig that all of his letters had been intercepted, but the British Ministry had nothing on them, and they shouldn´t worry because that person could make it disappear if it happened. He said the only reason he almost got caught was because his case ended up in Dawlish´s hands, and he´s supposed to be incorruptible."

"Not supposed to be...he is. Being unwaveringly honest is one of his few redeeming traits, I´ll give him that. Kingsley would have trouble finding a dog more loyal than Dawlish."

"Then he told them about her...the muggle woman who was just here" Draco measured each word carefully, studying Snape´s face for any sign of displeasure.

"What did he say about her?"

"He said she´s your...lover"

" ´Lover´ was not the word he used, was it?"

"No.″ Draco didn´t want to repeat what he heard, so he averted his former teacher´s gaze. That seemed informative enough.

"What does he know about her?"

"Her name. That she´s a teacher in a school around here and she lives next door to you. And that she´s your..."

"She´s not...Selwyn´s sordid little mind is creating the stories he wants to fantasize about. The woman who just left is not my lover or anything of the sort. She´s just a muggle who happens to live in the vinicity."

"Well, this is not what Claire and Ludwig are thinking. And Claire is very excited about it. Sewlyn told them the infiltrated agent is running checks on her for more information so they shouldn´t do anything, but..."

"Patience was never one of her virtues."

"Ludwig has decided they won´t be doing anything until they know more, but she´s jumping out of her skin...She keeps telling him they´ve waited too long, and at this pace the Ministry will catch up with them. I heard from one of the house elves they got a visit from an investigator with the French ministry before I arrived, so I guess she´s afraid somebody will find something on them before they can do anything."

"What is it that she wants to do?"

"Rodolphus is in Albania looking for something. I don´t know what. They only ever call it ´it´. Whatever ´it´ is all of them seem to think you know where to find it, because the Dark Lord trusted
you more than he did anybody else. Claire is convinced you will tell them if they do something to that woman."

"You know 'that woman’ s name, don’t you, Draco? You heard Selwyn say it."

"Yes." Draco blinked in confusion

"Then address her by her name. She’s not ‘that woman’."  

"Whoever she is...they want her. They want her to get to you. "

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December 24th

Our Lady of Cokeworth Church.

Midnight Mass.

The day had been so long. By the end of the food and toy drives her legs ached from standing all day long and her feet were so sore she could barely walk. But they had made it. Over 200 hot meals had been distributed through the day and she had lost track of how many children walked away with toys. A dozen or so of her students had shown up to help as well and everything had run smoothly like clockwork. Of course, that meant she had to spend nearly ten hours on her feet along with all the other volunteers to make sure each person who walked into the parking where the whole operation had been set up was properly assisted. Volunteers from a local shelter were also there, handing out cards and information for anybody who happened to need a place to stay. All of that for hours into the day, outside in the bitter cold. Thankfully it wasn’t snowing, but the sleet wasn’t that much better.

Evelyn desperately needed a hot bath, a duvet, a nice mug of mulled wine and a nap.

Fr. Thomas would understand if she had skipped the night’s mass, and she could always come to the next service. But she couldn’t miss it. Not after telling Severus she’d be there. So after the day’s work was done and everything was cleaned out and tidied up, Evelyn gathered what little energy she still had left and headed back to Angela’s flat to get ready.

"Is all of that for the Baby Jesus or for Saint Severus?" Angela asked, giggling, as Evelyn re-emerged from her room, showered and fragrant, makeup and hair meticulously done, wearing an outfit so pristine it almost glowed. She had picked a knee length white lace dress her mother had given her two Christmases ago, so well tailored it hugged her body as if she had been sewn into, and nude colored pumps that made her legs look endless.

The Catholic school girl still alive and well within her kept nagging that it wasn’t a church appropriate attire, but Evelyn wasn’t really dressing for church. Regardless, for the sake of modesty she put on a cream colored princess-style coat, did the most angelic makeup she could, pulled her hair up in an unassuming loose bun and finished it all with simple pearl earrings. Then she finally folded her lace mantilla before storing it in her clutch bag. Growing up, her mother always made her wear one to church, as if Vatican II hadn’t done away with the tradition. As an adult Evelyn went to mass sporadically, her friendship with Fr. Thomas improving her church-going habits only marginally, but she still made a point of wearing a mantilla on Easter and Christmas.

And now here she was sitting on one of the front pews nervously twisting the glass beads of her rosary between her fingers, looking over her shoulder at the main door, hoping to see a glimpse of him. He wasn’t coming, she told herself as the services came to an end and Fr. Thomas gave the congregation the final blessings, wishing them merry festivities. She collected her coat and purse
from the pew, and stood in line with other parishioners to greet the priest before leaving.

"Thank you for everything, Evelyn. Today was a success." he told her, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. Evelyn thanked him half-heartedly, said her goodbyes and moved aside for the next person.

"Severus! I didn’t think you’d show up for mass." she heard Fr. Thomas yelp, and turned sharply. Had he been right behind her the whole time?

"I didn’t. I just decided to pass by and wish you a Merry Christmas." Severus told the priest before turning to her "I happened to have an engagement around the area."

…

"You look stunning" Severus let out as soon as they stepped outside, in a tone that felt more like a statement of fact than a compliment. Evelyn wouldn’t expect anything else from him. Severus wasn’t the kind of man who had a natural aptitude for cajoling or flattering a woman. A compliment from him would always come in the form of a point-blank statement rather than flirtation. She actually preferred it like that, it felt honest.

"Thank you. You don’t look that bad yourself. Look at this" she touched the green wool sweater under his black overcoat with the tip of her fingers. "Color. Very avant-garde. I was under the impression you owned nothing but black and grey clothes"

"You could call it personal style I suppose"

"Aren’t you a regular fashionista? Suits you regardless. So…let’s take advantage of the fact that we’re both dressed in our Christmas Eve best and find somewhere nice to eat? I’m starving."

"I know a place, but it might not be up to standards."

"As long as they have decent fish’n’chips."
"So, I’ve been living here for three months now and you never told me there was an Irish Pub in Cokeworth. What gives, Severus?" Evelyn asked playfully as they approached the small establishment. It had a simple facade adorned with ebony wooden panels and tall windows decorated with an elegant logo featuring a rampant stallion composed of delicate Celtic knots. A large sign over the heavy wooden door read 'An capall dubh-tavern' in flowery letters.

"Honestly, I’ve never been here. It’s a fairly recent addition I believe. According to Fr. Thomas they’ve only been open for a few months."

"You’ve been getting restaurant recommendations from Fr. Thomas?"

"It felt more like a demand than a recommendation, to be honest, but something like that, yes."

"How so?"

"He was very insistent that we try this place. The owner is one of his parrishioners I believe."

"Do we get a discount if we mention Fr. Thomas by name?"

"It won’t hurt to try."

They made their way into a large room covered in wooden panelling that matched the outside in design but made in mahogany instead of ebony. The walls were decorated with Irish landscape photographs, the floor was a wide expanse of complex marquetry designs and an imposing ebony and marble bar dominated the ambient featuring a khaleidoscope of different glasses and liquor bottles in such a great number and variety that they covered the entire wall. The subdued indirect light and mishmash of different styles of chairs and sofas, all decorated with colorful cushions and throw blankets gave the place a rather home-like feel. It was not yet so crowded that one couldn’t walk, but it was definitly lively, filled with young people, a few doning Father Christmas and Elf hats.

Severus approached a waiter and told him something Evelyn couldn’t hear over the sound of the patrons’ chatting and the ambient music. The young man then guided them through the crowd towards a pair of wooden sliding doors with stained glass details that opened into a secluded booth with a table and upholstered benches covered in woolen throw blankets. Once inside they could hear each other again.

"Did you have reservations?" she asked as the waiter brought their menus.

"No. But apparently mentioning Fr. Thomas can get you more than a discount here."

"Bless him." she smiled as Severus ordered them both the fish and chips they had come for.
"Anything to drink?" the young server asked, pulling out the beer menu.

"Just water for now, please."

"Water? You come to an Irish pub and order water? You of all people?..." Severus let out, amused.

"I´m not in the mood to drink...I´m tired, it will get to my head faster."

"Really?"

"Yes, really..." she lied, badly as always

"Evelyn...come on." he sighed, seeing right through her "You always drink when we go out, even when you´re tired. What changed now?"

"I´m tired, I told you"

"It´s it about what you saw the other day, isn´t it?..."

"Severus let´s not..."

"I know you found a bottle of whiskey by my bedside that day, but I assure you, I´m not my father. That´s not to say I don´t have issues, of course, but drinking has never been one of them."

"I´m not saying that..."

"But you´re thinking it."

"You can read people´s thoughts now?"

"Actually, yes, I can. But that´s beside the point and is not like I´m doing it right now."

"That´s not funny, Severus. Put yourself in my shoes for a moment."

"I am. And I know what it looks like from where you stand..." there was a heavy silence before he continued, emotionless "I do rely heavily on pain killers. Opiates, to be exact. I can hardly go a day without them, and at this point I truly don´t know how much of it is a real medical necessity anymore. But alcohol? I have seen my father come back home drunk and violent enough times that it taught me restraint on that regard. I shouldn´t have mixed opiates and whiskey that day and it certainly played a role on what happened. I definently should have watched my medicine intake as well, but wasn´t drunk and I do not have a drinking problem. Bloody hell I think I was in my 20s the last time I got actually pissed."

"So...opiates. For your injuries." she reached over the table, brushing his fingertips slightly over his mangled left hand.

"Yes."

"I wonder if you will ever tell me how you really got those."

"I´ve been trying to forget about it myself. It´s nothing personal, really, don´t get offended."

"I´m not. I know I have no right to demand anything from you. And you certainly don´t owe me any explanation."

"I don´t. But I can tell how much you worry. I don´t know why you bother to worry about me, but
you do. And I don’t want you to think I don’t appreciate it. About that day...I was in pain. Simple as that. It’s somewhat constant, but can get into worse episodes if combined with stress and physical strain. We had just had that argument about my, how should I put, past proclivities. I wasn’t in my right mind and had some whiskey. A glass, nothing more. The bottle was already open, we had had some of it the day you brought it over to my house. That’s all that happened."

Their order arrived and Evelyn finally decided to get a beer. For the sake of her peace of mind Severus stuck to plain water.

"You can be so weird sometimes..." she let out faintly.

"What?"

"The way you talk about yourself...You’re sitting there explaining me all of this like it’s somehow a nuisance for me that you want to clear up. So business like, as if we’re talking about a dent you accidentally left on my car or a domestic appliance you borrowed and forgot to return. It’s like you can’t fathom the notion that somebody would genuinely care about you, and you have to rationalize everything somehow."

"It’s not...that."

"What is it then?"

"Honestly? In your place I wouldn’t be here. Most people wouldn’t. And yet you are here, sitting in a pub about to have dinner with a man who, quite frankly, gave you nothing but reason to be wary. Evelyn, I know what I am, and I have made my peace with it, but I don’t think you are quite aware what you’re getting yourself into."

"Then why did you go to the church? Why did you go there and pick me up and brought me here to have dinner if you really think you’re so bad for me and I shouldn’t be around you?"

"Because… I can’t help myself. I want to be around you."

"So do I, Severus. Believe it or not..." she smiled, sadly "Why do we have to complicate everything like that? We enjoy spending time together, we care about each other. At the very least we’re good friends. There’s nothing wrong with any that. So you used to hang out with the wrong people when you were a teenager and happen to have health issues that make you depend on pain killers. So what? I have a deceased brother whose death put me into therapy as a child and a fecking string of failed relationships some of which were downright toxic. Everybody is messy in their own way. I guess we’re both grown up enough to least be friends without making it so excruciating"

"Therapy?" Severus asked timidly after a moment of silence.

"I had an overactive imagination as a child. Which is to say I saw things, lots of things. Fairies, ghosts, mermaids you name it. My parents always assumed it was me and my brother playing make-belief with the stories we read. But it got worse after Paul passed away..."

"How so?"

"I don’t remember much about it, but my mother told me I’d hear things at night, sleepwalk, talk to myself and have strange dreams with snakes, owls and people wearing long robes...Sometimes I’d wander out into the fields on my own at night for no reason, and once I claimed to have seen a banshee near the window of Paul’s hospital room before his passing. To this day I’m irrationally afraid of barn owls because, before he died, my brother told me they sound like banshees and I never shook the idea. After he died I’d dream about barn owls every night and go into full panic attacks.
whenever I heard or saw one. So my parents took me to a therapist. It wasn´t too bad, she was a nice
woman. According to her the fanciful things I imagined were my way of processing grief, or
something like that. The fact that I was ten and on the onset of puberty may have had an influence as
well."

"I didn´t know that. I´m sorry you had to go through this." Evelyn couldn´t read his expression, but
his words rang genuine. She hadn´t told many people those things, and whenever she did the
reactions were always varying degrees of awkward, but at least he had the decency of not showing it
much.

"Eh, it´s in the past now...You see? You´re not the only one who doesn´t want to talk about every
ugly thing you´ve been through. But we´re here aren´t we? Alive and well, and celebrating
Christmas. Let´s make the most of what we have now. Which, at the moment, is fish and chips you
promised me were good, so I´ll hold that against you if they´re not"

…. James closed the door behind himself carefully, trying to make as little noise as possible. The house
was dark and quiet. Tancey´s parents had invited him to sleep at their house, but James knew his
father would be out for the night so he thought of going back home to be with his mother. She had
an early shift and should be home for the night.

His father had been spending less and less time home. Sometimes he would go for days without
showing up at all, for which James was quite grateful. But he worried. His father´s constant absence
meant his parents had had another falling out. It had happened many a time before. And every time it
happened, his father would disappear for a while, then come back even worse and drunker than
before. James felt like a ticking clock was hanging over their heads, marking the minutes till the
peace was shattered once more. He wouldn´t think of that tonight, however. It was Christmas Eve
and his father wasn´t home. That was all that mattered for the time being.

Miss Black had packed some food, enough for himself and his mother to have dinner and have
leftovers for the next day. James didn´t want to accept it at first, as it was supposed to be for
donations, but she told him they had made more than needed so the volunteers all could have some.
A lot of them hadn´t had time to prepare anything for themselves and their own families, she said.
James didn´t know if he believed it, but he chose to pretend he did. Knowing his mother´s work
schedule, he was sure there wouldn´t be any food ready when he got home. Besides, it felt good to
be the one bringing home something for her, rather than the other way around.

"Mum?" he called out, turning the lights on. Nobody was home. It was still early, though, he thought
to himself. She should arrive soon. Surely enough, as James was busy unpacking the tupperwares
full of food, he heard the front door open and her voice calling out his name.

"In the kitchen" he called out.

"There you are." Meredith was carrying shopping bags, which she placed carelessly on the table so
she could hug him. "What´s all of this?"

"Leftovers from Fr. Thomas´s food drive. There was enough food that all volunteers got something. I
didn´t know if you´d have time to make dinner."

"You didn´t have to, I was planning on cooking today" she gestured the grocerybags.

"I didn´t know." he shrugged.
"We didn´t have time to do much planning, did we? But you know what, I´m to tired to do anything for dinner tonight anyway, so it actually works perfectly that you have dinner covered. Tomorrow I´ll cook and we will have Mrs. Arterton over. Poor thing is spending Christmas all alone, her son has travelled to visit his wife´s folks with their children."

"Why don´t you call her for dinner now?"

"I just did, but she´s turning in for the night. Said she´ll come for lunch tomorrow, though."

"Oh, ok, then."

"James..." she let out as he started to set the table and put away the groceries.

"Yeah?.." he answered, distracted.

Meredith stood in the middle of the kitchen quietly for a moment as if picking her next words. The boy stopped what he was doing, looking up at at her, bracing for whatever it was that she had to tell him.

"What happened, Meredith?" he smirked grimly, expecting the worse.

"I know Christmas is only tomorrow but..." she reached for her purse and got an envelope out of it, handing it to him.

"What´s that?"

"Your Christmas gift. Come on, open it."

James frowned in confusion as he opened the envelope. Inside, he found the enrollement papers from the music school, all signed.

"How long were you planning to keep this from me, James? Did you really think I wouldn´t sign them if you asked?"

"I...I don´t know."

"There´s something else in there."

James looked inside the envelope again to find another, smaller piece of paper. A cheque. Filled out.

"I found the supplies list they gave you. I thought it would be more impressive if I bought everything and surprised you, but I couldn´t understand half of what was in it, and I was afraid I´d buy all the wrong things so...It might be best if you went to buy the supplies yourself. Let me know if it´s not enough. I can go with you if you want."

James couldn´t really think of anything clever or cheeky to say so he just hugged her, in the same clumsy way he would hug her when he was little and she happened to have enough time to pick him up from school so they could walk back home hand in hand. It felt like an eternity ago, but somehow now he remembered it again.

…..

Narcissa looked at her son sitting across the table from her as if she hadn´t seen him for years, a faint smile on her lips.

"Mother..." he smiled ".what?"
"I´m sorry. I´m staring again." she laughed softly "I just can´t believe you´re here. I didn´t think you´d come home so soon".

"It would look suspiscious if I didn´t." The Malfoys didn´t really celebrate Christmas, as many other pure-blood families. It was too riddled with muggle-influenced traditions for it to be entirely accepted. Some marked the date with neutral celebrations, specially those who spoused Christian or Christian-like beliefs, but even that was a topic of debate. Regardless, the rest of the Wizarding World celebrated it, and forgoing the date might have been seen as adhering to pure-blood cultural standards which were now, more than ever, being looked upon with disdain at best and suspicion at worst.

"That´s it? Don´t tell me that´s the only reason you came." she started to pick at her food like a pouty child.

"Of course not. I wanted to see you. It´s been a long time. I couldn´t stand being around Claire and Ludwig much longer either."

"If it was up to me you wouldn´t have to."

"I know." He said softly But let´s give it time. It will get better I promise."

Draco reached over to give her hand a gentle squeeze. Narcissa eyed the empty seat at the head of the table then turned her eyes back to her son. He was no longer a boy she could see. No, she had a young man in front of her. A composed, quiet young man, doing his best to do right by her, doing his best to keep himself from failing, to keep his hope from faltering, doing what he could to save them. She tought of her husband, locked upstairs in his study scribbling nonsense on scattered papers, slowly losing his grip on reality as he blamed everyone but himself for their misfortune.

And it comforted her to see that in face of adversity her son could be a better man than his father.

....

"Mam..?" Caitlin had just tucked hte girls in to find her mother still downstairs in her powder blue dressing gown, hair still up in that intriccate bun she favoured, sitting by the fire. The day had been long. Caitlin had had a grueling shift at the hospital, leaving Alice and Lizzie with their grandmother, who had spent the day cooking and preparing everything for the next day´s Christmas party, an annual celebration that gathered the whole family. Even if her feet hurt from walking around the hospital halls all day, Caitlin had helped with the cooking once she got back from work, and the girls were properly exhausted by the end of it all. She had expected Sophia to have been long asleep by now. Caitlin walked over the sat in front of her mother, on the armchair that had been her father´s for so long, but now remained vacant most of the time. "It´s late."

"It´s not even midnight." Sophia scoffed soffitly

"But tomorrow is Christmas and the girls will be up and running around like bats out of hell as soon as dawn breaks. And there´s the party too. You should get some rest."

"What makes you think I´m tired at all?"

"I don´t know...Maybe because you´ve spent all day cooking for a whole army? Seriously you could feed the whole former Soviet Union with what´s in the kitchen. How many people are coming for the party anyway?"

"Colin, Aiden, Elaine and their children."
"And their spouses, and their children’s spouses and their children’s children...Uncle Aidan alone will bring some eight people, I reckon. You need rest, mam."

"I’m perfectly fine, Caitlin."

"No, you’re not. You’re thinking of Evelyn, aren’t you?"

"Well, of course I’m thinking of your sister. What kind of mother wouldn’t think about her child while they’re away on Christmas Eve?"

"She’s fine."

"She should have come for Christmas at least. It’s not the same if she’s not here."

"I know. I miss her too."

"You don’t get it."

"Maybe I don’t. But sitting here like that won’t fix it. And she said she’s coming for New Years..."

Sophia didn’t answer. She kept looking at the burning embers in the almost spent fire and Caitlin saw a familiar frown on her face, an expression she only wore when entertaining dark thoughts... thoughts of Paul, and their late father, of things Caitlin didn’t dare ask her about. She had grown up keenly aware of the fact that there were certain things about her mother that she didn’t have any access to.

But Evelyn did. She didn’t resent her sister for it, at least not anymore.

Now she understood it. Sophia had a different relationship with her than she did with her older sister. Caitlin had been born a full five years after Evelyn and had grown up with all the coddling a last born could get. She was Sophia’s precious baby daughter. Evelyn on the other hand...Evelyn wasn’t just Sophia’s daughter, she was in many ways her closest companion. It was a bond forged by Paul’s demise. Sophia and Evelyn had shared that pain, and it was a connection only themselves could fully comprehend. Because of that Evelyn, then promoted to older child, had matured fast, while Caitlin, had been allowed to stay a child for longer.

In many ways this made Caitlin’s relationship with their mother easier and more affectionate. They rarely ever argued, and growing up Sophia doted on her in a way she didn’t dote on Evelyn. Sophia expected a lot more from Evelyn, who in turn spent every waking moment trying to compensate for Paul’s absence, while Caitlin could get away with almost anything. But once she was mature enough to examine their relationship, Caitlin realized that her privileged position as Sophia’s "baby" also meant her mother would never confide in her in the way she confided in Evelyn. Sophia and Evelyn had a tumultuous coexistence: they disagreed about almost everything, Sophia nagged Evelyn relentless about every little thing, they argued and butted heads all the time, and sometimes it seemed like neither Evelyn did was quite good enough. And Caitlin knew that all of that was simply because they were equals in a bizarre way she’d never fully comprehend.

"Something is going to happen." Sophia finally let out, cryptically. "I feel it in my bones. Something is going to happen to your sister."

"You’re just worried because she’s living far away from you, and there was that disgusting man that assaulted her...But that’s over. She’s safe now. She’s spending some time with a friend from work."

"She has lived away from me before, and she has been in danger before. It never felt like this. I don’t know why she insists on that house. She should have come back home when that deranged animal
attacked her. The day she showed me those papers from your grandfather’s box I knew it...There’s something wrong about that house. Now I can’t shake this feeling that...that something very dark is looming over her..."

"You know what I think? I think Paul’s birthday has gotten the best of you. Evelyn wasn’t here for his birthday for the first time in years, and it has gotten to you and now you’re all locked inside your head again. And it’s normal, mam, but you can’t let it defeat you like this."

"Maybe you’re right...I hope you’re right."

....

Severus had decided to finally order himself a beer after Evelyn had already had three. He knew she wasn’t prone to getting drunk so easily, but her spirits were visibly more ‘lit’, so to speak. They had been sitting in that booth for well over two hours talking about everything and nothing, as if whatever it was that had put a barrier between them had been shattered and they had been returned to that blessed state of normalcy from before she had found out about a tiny bit of his past.

Evelyn had filled him into everything that had been happening in her life: work was going fine, her boss was happy she had decided to stay and she had a prospective contract with a foreign publishing company. Mitchel had been sacked for harrassing yet another teacher after Evelyn had spurned him, the fact that more than one student and faculty member had immediately suspected him when news of Evelyn’s assault had reached the school certainly didn’t testify on his favour. But most importantly all of her students now had at the very least passing grades and she had been helping a former student from Trinity College with his research on William The Conqueror, which was something she seemed very excited about . Finally, she was making arrangements to spend New Years with her family in Doolin. Everything was going smoothly in her life now. Severus tried to shake the idea that it had anything to do with her cutting almost all contact with him for a whole month and just be happy for her.

"So when do you leave?"

"In a couple days. That’s why I’m still at Angela’s. It would be stupid to bring all my stuff back to Spinner’s End just to have to pack again and go to Doolin. I’ll just move all at once when I get back from Ireland"

"And when will that be?"

"I don’t know yet. My niece’s birthday is early in January and I’m staying for that, of course. But I have to be back to work"

"Which niece is that, Alice or Elizabeth"

"Alice. Lizzie’s is June. Speaking of birthdays, I know yours coming up as well. In fact, you and Alice are only a few days apart."

"How do you..."

"January, 9th, right? It was written on that copy of 'Beedle the Bard' I 'borrowed' when I spent the night at your place, remember?"

"Ah, yes, January 9th" he confirmed, suddenly noticing he often forgot it himself.

"So yes, I’ll be back for that, of course. You know what, we should do something, I’ve been thinking..." an electronic sound interrupted her, coming from her purse. Her mobile. Severus had yet
to get used to that bloody contraption "Oh, sorry. I have to get that, it could be my mother. She gets into these moods around the holidays..."

"By all means."

She fished the gadget from her bag, quickly looking at the screen to check who it was. Apparently those things could identify the caller, Severus had learned, amazed at the leaps and bounds muggle technology had taken while he had all but completely retreated into the magical world. Back when he was young there were barely landlines in every house, and now muggles walked around with personal phones that could even tell them who was calling.

"Ugh, I can’t believe this..." she scowled before turning the mobile off to return it to her purse.

"Not your mother, I assume."

"No. My ex, Richard. Who the devil calls their ex from two years ago on Christmas Eve?"

"Maybe a man who’s still not over his ex?" Severus wondered, the words coming out of his mouth with a hint of bitterness that surprised even himself.

"Richard? I doubt he misses me much at all. Even if that was the case, it takes some nerve to believe I’d want to talk to him on Christmas Eve of all days."

"I take that things didn’t end on a good note between the two of you."

"If you can call walking into your fiancé shagging a college girl on your own bed 'not ending on a good note'."

"Excuse me, what?" Severus did a double take not quite believing his ears.

"What you heard." she sighed "He had given a lecture on historic fiction at a college campus and found himself a fan. An autograph and a few weeks of fanmail later and they were doing the deed on my sheets. My grandmother gave me those, rather rude if you ask me."

He just stared at her at a complete loss for words before she smiled somberly.

"God only knows how a man who never managed to give me a proper orgasm would end up a Casanova, but then again I don’t think a girl that young would know any better. Or maybe the problem was me."

"I sincerely doubt that." Severus told her seriously.

"Sorry" she smiled, slightly awkward "I have verbal diarrhea when I drink. Don’t mind me."

"And you may have had a bit too much to drink come to think of it."

"I only had three beers."

"One on an empty stomach and two Trappistes Rochefort. Those are 11% alcohol. You’ve also been working all day. Alcohol can act faster when one is tired."

"You’re such a science teacher. Which makes it rather weird that you blushed when I mentioned orgasms"

"I did not."
"You did, like a Victorian gentleman. It’s fine, Severus, it’s been a while for me too."

"What makes you think..."

"Please..."

"Fine, you’re right. It’s been a while. Why are we discussing this again?"

"Because I’m drunk and I have verbal diarrhea."

"In which case I’ll get the bill and take you home. You need rest."

….

"You drive like my mother, you know?" she said out of the blue, giggling, as they stopped in front of the door of Angela’s flat, after stumbling out of the lift, a rickety old relic of the 1940s that had been in activity since the building had been a hotel. The hotel had then been deactivated and eventually, as the early 90s rolled in and slightly improved downtown Cokeworth, was transformed into a residential building. It wasn’t impressive by any means, but it was clean and affordable, and the neighborhood was decent enough. But well lit as the nice and clean hallway was, she didn’t seem to be able to find the keys in her purse.

"What is that supposed to mean?" he laughed in spite of himself.

"Mind you, you’re not a bad driver, you’re just...slow."

"Forgive me for being cautious. And to be entirely honest, anybody would seem slow compared to you, have you seen how you drive?"

"Are you saying I’m a bad driver?"

"No. You’re actually rather skilled for someone who drives like they are being chased by all the demons of hell."

"Says the expert. I didn’t even know you could drive, what’s that even about?"

"My father taught me. He used to drive the lorries at the mill and sometimes I had to help him over the summer holidays."

"How many years ago was that?"

"Some...twenty-three or twenty-two..."

"Jesus! Did you even get a licence back then?"

"Knowing what you know about my father you think he bothered making sure I did before he shoved me on the driver’s seat of that bloody lorry?" he laughed heartily, finding that memory oddly amusing in hindsight.

"You should have let me drive. If a police officer had stopped us and seen you had no papers."

"Yeah, I should have let you drive drunk so we could get into an accident. Your imaginary police officer wouldn’t be that much happier."

"You drank too."
"Not as much as you." he smiled. Severus did have to admit he had a slight, if rather pleasant, buzz. And while Evelyn wasn’t devastatingly intoxicated, she was clearly a little too 'happy' and much too tired to be trusted with a car. It was rather impressive that she could still walk on heels, even if making a straight line was, at the moment, out of question.

Evelyn rested her back against the door for balance, still fumbling with her purse to get the keys. Severus had to prop himself up with a hand on the wall. Maybe he had drank a bit too much after all.

The fact that in this position he was leaning of her didn’t bother him as much as it should have.

"You want to come in?" she asked, her head thrown back, resting against the door, golden brown eyes peering at him from under long lashes thick with mascara.

"You need to go to bed and so do I."

"There’s a bed inside. And Angela is not home."

"Evelyn, don’t."

"What?" she laughed quietly, a husky, deep sound resonating from within her throat that sent shivers down his spine.

"I thought we agreed that..."

"...that we both enjoyed each other’s company and wouldn’t complicate things."

"Exactly. Let’s not complicate things." Severus was all too aware of the fact that she stood a mere few centimeters from him, close enough that he could feel her breath on his mouth, as hot as the air around them was cold. He didn’t move. He couldn’t move. Still he gently pulled the keys from her hand and started to open the door behind her "Come on. Let’s get you into bed."

"Yes, please." she moved from the door, closing the distance between them. Her body was now fully resting on his and her breath was on his neck, brushing against the scarring on his jaw. The shiver on his spine started to impertinently move to his crotch and Severus inhaled. The bloody key refused to go into the key hole.

Severus didn’t know how it happened. The keys slipped from his sweaty hands, falling to the floor with a clunking sound far too loud in the silent, empty corridor.

Then his mouth was on hers and he knew he was done for.

...

Through the alcohol induced daze, something in her brain told her she was a stupid hypocrite who was making a very, very, very bad decision. Just a couple days before Evelyn had told Angela about how she wasn’t ready for a relationship yet, and how anything with Severus would be too emotionally draining at that stage of her life. She had had enough relationships like that, and she knew how they ended up. But as Severus leaned into her and the intoxicating mix of cigarettes and oak moss emanating from his skin and clothes enveloped her and his dark, guttural laughter brushed her lips from such close proximity that she could almost see herself in the bottomless inky black pools of his eyes, Evelyn knew her common sense would fail her. And it did.

She barely recognised her own voice when she had started to tease him, flirt with him, challenge him to do something. Which, despite all her protestations on the contrary, was precisely that she wanted. It had been all that she wanted since that morning at the abandoned mill’s roof. A full month as a half
trying to convince the world and herself that she simply wanted to be his friend, all the while going
to bed with his name on her lips, dreaming of his mouth on her skin, of his long, slender fingers on
her... in her...

When he leaned in to open the door, the frame of his body towering over hers was all too inviting, all
too comforting. Her body sought his as if by instinct, as if her muscles and limbs knew where she
belonged even if her head insisted on denying it. There was so much about him that should have kept
her away, and still, something about his man beckoned her to trust him, to put herself on his hands, to
surrender into him.

Evelyn’s head was spinning wildly as Severus pulled her closer, tight against his chest, his mouth
frantically taking hers like a wildfire too far gone to put out. She felt his hand sink into her hair,
releasing it from the hair clips keeping it tamed, grabbing a fistful and pulling at it, not too rough that
would hurt her but with just enough force that her head leaned back exposing the column of her neck
to his prowling mouth. Goosebumps erupted all over her skin as she felt an ever so slight graze of
teeth as his other hand slipped up the hem of her skirt, pawing at her tighs and arse. One of his legs
pushed between hers, nudging them apart and she pressed on him, pressing her hip into his crotch,
air leaving her lungs when she felt the hardness under the fabric of his trousers.

"Are you finally getting me into bed?" she whispered into his ear.
Chapter Summary

In which Severus surrenders, enemies close in, and Evelyn contemplates her place in the world.

They stumbled blindly through the apartment, unable to let go of each other. Severus had never been to Angela’s house and in the dark he could only trust Evelyn to make sense of his surroundings, but that didn’t matter much. He couldn’t see or notice anything that wasn’t her. The furniture, objects and walls around him were nothing but bothersome reminders of the world outside, and even them seemed to dissolve into thin air. Nothing felt real to him except for her, the scent of her skin, the waves of her hair caught in his fingers, her lips yielding under is, her hips pressing into his, the soft, near-purring sounds she was making.

Severus felt physically unable to pry his hands from her as she opened the door to what he assumed was the guest bedroom she had been occupying to let them in. He slammed the door behind them when they got in, feeling the pull of her legs bringing him closer to the bed. His fingers clumsily groped at the buttons of her dress, the damaged nerves and ligaments of his left hand doing so little to help him that he had to nearly tear at the lacey fabric to get to the warm skin underneath. Before he could finish the task at hand Severus felt himself fall onto the mattress. Her thighs were strong enough that they could simply maneuver his hips closer into her and pull him onto her with little effort... the mere thought of what else they could do made him dizzy with excitement. As his body fell on top of hers, Severus found enough breath to pull away slightly to get rid of his jacket and jumper. It took a moment for him get it all off, during which he realized her fingers, much nimbler than his, had undone his belt and were working their way inside his trousers.

It only was then that he felt something snap within his mind.

"Evelyn, plase" he let out, strangled, voice still drenched in arousal, even as his brain commanded his body to stop. She didn’t listen, or if she did, she took it for approval, her hand still on him, fondling his arousal over his underwear. Severus pulled it away, trying his best not to be too rough, all the while fumbling for the night stand, hoping to find a lamp there.

"Stop." he begged, choking.

He finally managed to turn the nightstand lamp on. It broke the spell somehow, as he finally felt his strength return to him so he could support his weight on his arms and wring himself from her. Under the faint, yellowish light the the enormity of what he was about to do hit him like a slap across the face. Evelyn lay beneath him, so utterly ravishing it hurt him to look at her...half closed eyes, unfocussed, gleaming with desire, lipstick smudged over parted lips, rosy-red blushing her cheeks, shoulders and chest over the faint sheen of freckles. Merlin help him, she was breathtaking. All it would take was a word. One word from her and he’d do it. But she didn’t say anything. Evelyn simply looked up at him, dazed, partly disrobed, still mercifully covered by delicately lacy, nude-colored undergarments that Severus feverishly suspected had been picked specially for the occasion. One word was all it would take.

"I can’t." Was the only thing he could say before slithering away from her. She sat up, not bothering to cover herself, as if sitting in front of him half-naked was something they did every other day and
looked at him.

"You don´t want to?" she asked, without a hint of irony or irritation in her voice.

"I do..." Severus snickered, bitterly. "God, you have no idea how much I do...But not like this."

"Let me guess...you don´t want to take advantage of the fact that I had a little too much to drink, and it´s Christmas, and I´m..'vulnerable'...Is that it?"

"Don´t talk like this...We both know you deserve better than a drunken shag..."

"What if I want a drunken shag?"

"I know you don´t. Nor do I."

...

Her head was light and her body, now free from the febrile contact of his, was going slowly torpid. Evelyn looked at the man sitting in front of her, he blush of arousal slowly fading away as he came to his sense right before her , looking ashamed of himself all of the sudden. She stared into his eyes and tried to be mad at him. But she couldn´t. He was right. This wasn´t what she wanted. Evelyn mentally recalled the night, counted how many drinks she had had and tried to remember at which point it had seemed like a good idea to use Severus´desire for her to soothe her frustration.

The frustration of not knowing what to do now that she seemed to have accomplished what she was supposed to want from life but still felt like something was missing, of not being able to just fix the things that were broken, of never feeling like she was quite enough, like her place in life was truly her own. Very early on she had been keenly aware that she wasn´t Paul. That her not being Paul meant she was lacking. And lacking she felt as she grew up, trying to be perfect, to do what was expected from her, without never quite being enough. She wasn´t enough for any of the men that came before Severus. Drunkenly stumbling into bed with him wouldn´t change any of that. And it wouldn´t make that messy, complicated relationship they had work any better than any of the messy, complicated relationships she had had before.

Did she want him? Certainly. She wanted him. She needed him. Today more than ever. As the weight of all her inadequacy came crashing down on her just a few days after Paul´s birthday, it would be so easy to just let Severus pleasure her into forgetting it all. Evelyn knew that if he hadn´t halted everything like he did there would be nothing in the world that would keep her from shagging him there and then. She had craved that man for weeks, there was nothing she wanted more on this precise minute than to simply let him have his way with her, let him fuck her until she forgot her own name and everything that made her hurt. Did she love him, though? She was sure she did. And that made it all so much worse. Quick release is not something you ask from somebody you love...

But, objectively speaking, who was the man she loved? Did she truly love him, or the idea of him? The idea of a man showing up in her life precisely at moment she felt lost, a man seemingly as lost as her, who needed the same things she did. A man with whom she could walk towards a way out. But was Severus that man, or did she just want him to be?

Her mind raced wildly through the events of the past couple months and it all came back to her like snippets and images that made little sense, like mismatched pieces of an incomplete puzzle. An old house her grandfather had left her, a closed off attic with bizarre inscriptions on its floorboards, an abandoned mill in a near abandoned part of a decadent town, the pain of a past she hadn´t lived and could only glimpse through half truths, whispered confessions of hatred, of violence, of drunken rages, of regrets she could only imagine, yellowed papers from a police station archive, detailing
juvenile crimes, of bonds and debts paid people whose name kept popping up in Severus’ life... And that photo of a woman with long red hair, ripped in half sitting on a mantle, next to a solitary white lily on a vase...

Suddenly Evelyn felt like crying.

"Severus..." she started, but whatever else she wanted to say, it didn’t come out. There was a knot on her throat, threatening to undo in tears if she spoke.

"I should go..." he told her, sweetly "You need rest."

"No, don’t..."

"Evelyn..."

"I just...I don’t want to sleep alone, that’s all..."

...

She sounded like a little girl afraid of the dark, begging to be let into her parents’ bed for the night so the monsters under the bed wouldn’t get to her. Severus couldn’t deny her, even if all he wanted was to leave that bedroom. It hurt to be so close, knowing he couldn’t give her what they both craved...

It was a strange notion, to desire a woman after so many years...more than that, more than desire, to feel himself falling in love. It was uncomfortable, almost. Severus had fallen in love only once in his life, and nearly two decades had done nothing to erase those were still there, in fact. Severus knew that the moment he walked into his house again, the photo of Lily on his mantle would remind him of how much he still loved her. But Evelyn was here, now...she was alive, breathing, warm and so willing it felt like a crime to carry on with this.

He loved her. In an entirely different way.

It wasn’t something Severus had ever felt before, loving somebody who’s within reach, who’s so close...someone who loves you back. He could entertain the notion now, that she could, maybe, love him back. But he didn’t know what to make of it. In some ways continuing to love Lily had been natural because Lily wasn’t there. Loving a memory is an oddly painful sort of comfort. Memories can’t do much to hurt you. Memories are flawlessly frozen in time, only to be cherished, contemplated. The memory of Lily would still torment him, remind him of everything he had done, of everything he had lost, but it would be there in the end. Nothing could take that away from him.

Evelyn on the other hand...She was right there in his arms, she could love him back, she could make him happy...But only if she didn’t know who he was. In the moment she found out, unlike a memory he could hold on to, she would leave. You can keep a memory, you can trap it in an album, in a picture was all that Lily was. He had never had the chance to truly have Lily, to make love to her, to be loved by her. Her memory was only that, a memory of something that never was. It hurt, but it couldn’t be tainted, it couldn’t be broken. Evelyn...if Evelyn happened to love him, if she became his, if he could make love to her...if all of that happened, he would have to tell her. And that would destroy illusion would shatter. She would find out that the man she loved never existed, that what truly did exist in his place was a not anything worthy of her love. And she would leave.

Or worse. The consequences of mistakes might catch up to her, like they did with Lily once. And Severus couldn’t begin to imagine how much harder it would to lose something that was his, or that he thought was his, compared to losing something he could only desire from afar. Lily had never been his to lose, but Evelyn could be...and it was petrifying.
Still, she had asked him to stay and he couldn’t deny her that. Severus didn’t know what was going through her mind, and she declined to tell him, but he knew saying anything would do little good. Now was not the time. He kicked off his shoes, pulled away the covers and climbed into bed, slowly, giving her time to put her dress back if she wished. She didn’t. Carefully, as if he was afraid he might hurt her, Severus gathered Evelyn into his arms, letting her rest her head on his chest, and pulled the covers back up, shielding both their bodies from the cold. It didn’t take her more than a few minutes to fall asleep.

…

Angela had called Evelyn’s mobile a few times during the night but nobody answered. She knew her friend had a date, as much as she denied it was truly ‘date’, so maybe she was distracted. But when Angela called again in the morning and nobody answered, she started to wonder… Angela had to pass by the house anyway to get some things for her mother’s Christmas lunch that she had forgotten the day before… might as well check on Evelyn…assuming she was there. With some luck she just might be waking up in Spinner’s End with that moody neighbour of hers by her side.

First sign that something was up was the fact that she found the front door unlocked. The second, and most telling, was finding Evelyn’s jacket on the floor of the living room. Evelyn would never leave her clothes on the floor unless something happened. Carefully not to make any noise, Angela approached the guest room, carefully opening the door to peer inside. The curtains were drawn and the room was dark, but she could definitely see Severus sleeping with Evelyn on his chest, both cocooned inside the covers.

"I knew it..." she whispered to herself, giggling.

…

"Fuck" he hissed, eyeing the digital clock on the night table. 8AM. Severus had planned to leave as soon as Evelyn had fallen asleep, and yet here he was, in the morning, still in her bed. There was a faint clatter of silverware and plates coming from the kitchen. Seeing as Evelyn was still fast asleep in his arms, it had to be Angela. Wasn’t she supposed to be spending Christmas day at her mother’s?

Well, there was no way this wasn’t going to be extremely awkward.

Getting out of bed proved more of a chore than he anticipated. He wasn’t hungover and had, in fact, slept soundly through the night, but the chilly winter air was making it’s way in, and the bed was too warm…Evelyn’s head still resting on his chest, one arm around his waist, legs tangled with his made the process of getting up seem even more taxing. What wouldn’t he give to just be able to stay in that bed all day and forget there was anybody or anything outside the door. Still, he had matters to tend to. If Kingsley had had the time to read the message Severus had written him the day before, right after talking to Draco, he would be on his way to meet him soon.

So, begrudgingly, Severus moved Evelyn’s arms and legs away just enough to free himself without disturbing her sleep, and slipped from under the covers. She moved slightly, muttering something he couldn’t understand but fell back into blessed sleep. Severus fixed the covers, pushing a stand of hair away from her face and started to pick up his discarded items of clothing.

…

"Good morning" Angela greeted cautiously from the kitchen as she saw Severus come out of the bedroom, tousled, jacket draped over his arm. He seemed at a loss as to what to do for a moment, before approaching to awkwardly greet her back.
"I´m making breakfast. I´m sure you and Evelyn must be starving. We can all go to my mother´s for lunch afterwards if you want. Unless you two have other plans, which I´ll completely understand..."

"Actually I should get going."

"What..." she blinked, confused "Severus, look I...It´s me, Angela. I´m Evelyn´s friend, remember? I know you two are...you know. And it´s fine, I don´t mind it at all, I mean..."

"Angela, I´m sorry but I really should be on my way. When she wakes up can you please tell Evelyn I had an emergency. I´ll drop by later today to talk to her."

"Of course."

"And...ahem...apologies for the 'invasion'. We didn´t mean to but..."

"I get it, don´t worry..." 

....

Kingsley sat quietly for what felt like hours, trying to digest all the information Severus had just given him. They were sitting in the interim minister´s personal office, in his apartment at Severus request. Not only couldn´t the former potions master even dream of showing up at the Ministry headquarters at risk of blowing his own cover and putting himself at risk, but the conversation they were to have needed to happen away from prying ears. Nobody was to be trusted, most unfortunately. It wasn´t an easy or comfortable task to inform the interim minister that he had a traitor among his ranks and Severus could understand he´d be shaken by such knowledge, so it was best to do it somewhere more private.

"Are you sure?" Shaklebolt managed finally

"Draco came to tell me that in person, at great risk to himself. I have no reason to doubt him."

"Sewlyn doesn´t know who this person is?"

"No. He was very explicit in saying nobody does. Not even those who have been getting help know exactly where it´s coming from. Only now did the Rotts themselves have found out it was coming from within the Ministry. If Selwyn had known he would have told the Rotts. He´s eager to put their plans in motion, whatever they are."

"Yes, I remember the content of his letters...You say this person, this...traitor... had information on the dates a we were moving prisoners from Azkaban to court and back as well as the routes we used?"

"Yes. And they also leaked the information about Sewlyn´s pending arrest that night at the old Mill in Cokeworth, so he could be rescued at the nick of time."

"This is what I don´t get...Moving prisoners is regular procedure...As secret as the procedure is a number of people must be informed, in order for the paperwork to be properly filled out. But Sewlyn´s activities in Cokeworth were not a regular investigation."

"Who knew about that?"

"Besides myself, only Dawlish and a few of the men of his unit, those who were there with him...as well as my personal staff."
"Is there anybody among this group you would suspect?"

"No, I´d trust each and every one of them with my life."

" Trusting anyone with your life is seldom a good decision to make."

"The information could have leaked from somewhere else."

"You find that likely?"

"Not likely, but possible."

"Regardless...There´s something else bothering me about all this."

"It has to do with Evelyn Black, I gather?"

"Sewlyn has told the Rotts about her...Which puts me in a difficult position as you can appreciate."

"I promised you no harm would come to her."

"Yes, and I trust your word. But I also know Claire...And if there´s somebody infiltrated in the ministry who could help her, that gives me even more reason to worry... Evelyn will be going back home for New Years, to spend it with her family. That means I won´t be around her for some two weeks. If Sewlyn is pushing the Rotts to do something against her, it would be a good opportunity."

"Why don´t you go with her? I mean you two are..." Kingsley trailed off as Severus glared at him "are you not?"

"How many times do I have to tell you..."

"...that you two are just friends. I got it the first hundred times you said it...I just don´t buy it."

"Well it´s none of your business either way, Minister."

"Fine, would you like me to assign somebody to keep your 'friend' safe? Dawlish can see to it..."

"You should keep Dawlish around. The Rotts and Sewlyn know he was involved in the mill fiasco, and whoever is leaking ministry information would let them know if Dawlish suddenly travelled to Ireland. They´d know Evelyn is there. Is there anybody else who could do that discreetly?"

"I don´t want to involve any other unit in this. It´s enough that Dawlish knows you´re alive, so...He currently has six aurors working with him. You know some of them from the Mill incident."

"How about the others?" Severus asked, keeping to himself the fact that he didn´t trust the two men who were at the mill, or anybody was directly involved in the mill stint. Surely, he wanted to be wrong, but...

"All of them are currently assigned to mission, except for Virgil Shafiq and Alastair Smith. They´ve been in charge of the training of new personnel, and haven´t been on the field recently."

"Virgil Shafiq?" Severus repeated, pulling the familiar name from the deepest recesses of his memory "Of course...I remember him. I believe he was among the students in my first year as potions master. Slytherin, excellent grades, very disciplined. He´s in charge of training now?"

"One of our youngest to reach that rank. Extremely talented wizard as you must to think of it, he´d be perfect for this assignment. That settles it then, I´ll have Virgil meet you in Cokeworth. When
"Does Ms. Black leave?"

"December 27th."

"Very well. Virgil will be at your house first thing tomorrow so you can give him all the information you believe he’ll need."

....

"Looking for Severus?" Angela asked, pouring Evelyn a cup of coffee. She had come out of the bedroom completely disheveled, a long robe carelessly thrown over her skivvies, rubbing the sleep off her eyes along with the last remnants of mascara.

"He’s gone?" it was more of a statement than a question. Evelyn had woken up to an empty bed, and Severus’ jacket and jumper which he had thrown somewhere on the floor were gone. It shouldn’t come as a surprise to her that he’d leave like that, but it still hurt. Not she could demand anything from him, all things considered. He had stayed the night as she had asked him to.

"He had an emergency. Said he’d come back later to see you, though. Poor thing was mortified to see me. I think I may have scared him away, sorry about that." Angela giggled excitedly "But you know what they say about the shy types, and judging by the state of you, it would seem St. Severus isn’t much of a saint, after all."

"What did you make for breakfast?"

"The usual, rashers, eggs. I brought from french toast my mother made this morning, I know you like her recipe. Now, eat up and tell me everything."

"There’s nothing to tell." Evelyn fixed her robe and sat on the place Angela set for her and proceeded fill her plate like she hadn’t seen food in ages.

"Oh, stop. I saw you two. I want all the filthy details."

"There is nothing to tell. We didn’t do anything."

"You...didn’t?"

"No."

"You’re shitting me."

"No."

Angela stared at her blankly while Evelyn wolfed down her food.

"So...did he...eh...you know..."

"What?"

"How do I put this...didn’t he...you know...fail? As in...didn’t get it up...You know what I mean!"

"Nothing of the sort. Quite the opposite actually..."

"Then..."

"I...had a bit too much to drink so he didn’t feel comfortable going all the way."
"Oh...that’s...considerate of him I guess..."

"Yes, I’ll say..." Evelyn knew she shouldn’t resent Severus as much as she did, but she couldn’t help it. Bloody wanker of an honourable man.

"I’m sorry..."

"Do we have ice cream in the house?"

"You know what?...I’m making some pancakes as well."

"Tell me more about her.." Claire looked up from the fire as Sewlyn entered the study. Ludwig was not around, gone to deal with business. While muggles and a sizeable part of the wizarding world celebrated Christmas, her husband had decided to pay a visit to certain acquaintances and remind them of favours and debts. With the information they had about a person infiltrated in the Ministry, now more than ever it was paramount to assure their associates and business partners were on the same page as them. They didn’t know how soon they’d have to call in their services.

"I told you about her already." he smirked, taking a seat by the fireplace.

"You told me she exists. You didn’t tell me much about her." her hazel eyes pierced through him

"What is it that you would like to know?"

"What her name again?"

"Evelyn Black"

"Sure. Evelyn Black. What does she look like?"

"How is that important?" he laughed "

"Humour me..."

"You want to know if she’s good looking? I’ve told you she is..."

"Tall, short? Blonde, redhead?"

"Tall...Brunette...you know, the kind that tans nicely in the Summer...Quite a body on her, too. I suppose if Snape must bed a muggle he’d at least show some taste in picking” he spoke slowly, admiringly, knowing it would push Claire’s buttons.

"You seem interested."

"I could easily forget she’s a muggle if that meant I could get some fun out of it, if that’s what you’re asking. Snape is certainly well served as far as I could observe."

"She’s a teacher, you say?"

"Something like that. A writer too, I guess? I didn’t pay it much attention."

"I can tell you were...distracted."

"You wouldn’t blame me if you could have seen her. But then again, I know admiring other women
“She’s beauty doesn’t come easily to you.”

“She’s a muggle. There’s nothing admirable about them.”

“Snape disagrees.”

“Snape is a traitor. In any case, Ludwig thinks we should wait before doing anything about her.”

“And you think otherwise.”

“Yes.”

“You want to know what I think?”

“I’m certain you will tell me regardless”

“Let Snape enjoy his pretty muggle whore. Give him space to get comfortable, let his guard down.”

“Not for long.” she paused, getting up from her seat to look out the window at the fresh snow outside "They say Fenrir Greyback is travelling up north..."

“What does Fenrir had to do with anything?”

“We could find some use for him..."

“Snape’s mistress s a bit too old for his taste, I’m afraid.”

“You’ve always liked them young as well, and yet here you are, gushing about how desirable you find her.”

“I don’t know if bringing Fenrir into this is a good idea. There’s no controlling him once you set that beast lose. I’m telling you, give it time. Our contact in the Ministry will give us more to work on.” Sewlyn smiled, tense. He had promised Dmitri he’d keep Clair from doing anything rash, but hearing her talk like that made him realize it would be no easy task. The mere fact that she was bringing up Fenrir...Dmitri had made it clear he wanted that muggle alive.

"Kingsley Shacklebolt is anything but stupid. If there’s a traitor in the ministry he so lovingly put together, I doubt he won’t find out eventually."

"You give the minister too much credit. Calm yourself. Once Rodolphus finds a lead for the dagger in Albania and our friend in the ministry gives us the logistics of how to get to Snape’s whore, you will have what you want. Patience..."

…..

“I told you he’d come.” Angela told her, moving to park the car. Severus was standing by the building’s entrance when they spotted him. Evelyn didn’t doubt he would show up. She wasn’t so sure as to wether she’d have anything to say to him when he did.

"Lyn, if you two need some alone time, I get it. I have some errands to run..."

"That won’t be necessary. Just go ahead and go upstairs."

"Don’t leave the poor man out in the cold, though.” Evelyn ignored her last comment and exited the car. "Fine, be like this...But be nice to him, ok?"
Severus didn’t move from where he stood, silently giving Evelyn the option to either come to him or pass him by. Angela locked the car and walked past them both, quickly nodding at Severus as a way of greeting or maybe tacit encouragement.

"Do you want to go up?" Evelyn asked

"Would you mind it terribly if we just walked?"

"Not at all...I need to stretch my legs anyway."

"I see you went to Angela’s mother’s for lunch."

"You were invited, I believe."

They walked silently side by side for a while, making their way down the nearly deserted street. It was already dark outside, and a bitterly cold breeze swept over them. Evelyn shoved her hands into the pockets of her trenchcoat, fighting back the sudden urge to come closer to Severus for warmth.

"About last night..." he started quietly.

"You were right." Severus stopped and looked at her, confused.

"You were right. " she repeated. "I’m glad we didn’t do it. Not now, not at the point we stand. It would mess it all ...I need to ask you something..."

"Of course..."

"How do you feel about me? I know it’s a pathetic question specially shot point blank like that but...I need to know. What are we, after all? And don’t give me that old ‘I care about you’ malarkey..."

"I..." he hesitated "I’ve been trying to make sense of it but..."

"Severus, I’m not cut out for this type of game. Maybe I’m a blunt idiot who has no sense of self-preservation, I don’t know, but here’s the truth. I have fallen for you. Pretty hard. I love you. And I need to know if I can try to take this somewhere or if I should just give up now. I know you care about me, that you love me at least as a friend, so...If you think there’s a chance of making this work..."

"I do. I want to. Right now, I, I...can’t bear the thought of not having you around me. I can’t let go of you anymore. I suppose that’s love. That you have come to mean so much to me that just the thought of losing you drives me insane..."

"Why would you ‘lose’ me, Severus? Can’t you see this doesn’t make any sense?"

"It will...It will, I promise. All I need is for you to have some patience...Can you do that? Please..."

"Sometimes it feels like you’re trying to drive me insane."

"The last thing I want is to make you feel like that. But I have too much I need to sort out. And you deserve better than to be caught in the middle."

…

Evelyn gave him a sad smile that almost split his heart clean in two.
Severus knew he owed her an explanation that at this point he couldn’t possibly give her. He hoped she’d at least give him time. Time to find the courage to do what he had to do. Severus knew in his heart of hearts that there was no going back now. He couldn’t dismiss her from his life anymore. She was part of it, and he needed her. He loved her, and he couldn’t bear the thought of letting go. But if she could just give him a chance, then maybe...maybe he could find a way to make it work.

"Let’s try this..." she finally spoke, softly "I’m going back home to Doolin the day after tomorrow. I’ll be back for your birthday. Will we be able to celebrate it together? You think you’ll have 'sorted everything out' by then?"

"I hope."

"Fine. It’s a deal then." she walked up to him and reached up, kissing his lips were warm against his frigid skin. As she pulled away he reached for her waist, on pure instinct, without even thinking to and pulled her back, closing his mouth on hers. There was a lot he couldn’t tell her, but at least he could give that small assurance that he did, indeed, love her. He would find a way to sort out anything else.

"Promise me you will take care..." he breathed out against her lips as they parted from his.

"I think I know my way to my mother’s house, Severus." she laughed softly

"You do. I just worry about you finding your way back to me"

"Well, don’t."

…

"She can’t possibly be that much of an idiot" Dmitri pinched the bridge of his nose, carelessly throwing the letter he had just received on his desk, in Arseniy’s general direction. The old wizard picked it up, carefully reading, while his master paced about the room.

"It amazes me that you’re surprised. Claire has always been fond of gratuitous bloodshed. It should come as no shock to you that she means the muggle harm."

"But to actually consider enlisting a werewolf? Claire can barely reign in her own instincts, how does she believe she can control a beast?"

"Nobody has any clue as to where Fenrir Greyback is...Probably scavenging in the tundra somewhere up north of Scandinavia. Claire won’t be able to find him, let alone interest him in any of her plans. Dangerous as he is, he’s a simple minded predator, he won’t get involved on any complex plan that could put him back in danger when there’s much easier prey out there to satiate his cravings. And knowing Ludwig he’s probably calling in favours and debts from his investors as we speak. He won’t let his wife do anything until they have themselves covered."

"As if Ludwig has any control over her. In any case I don’t like that she’s entertaining these notions. We need Evelyn Black alive and have any idea the position we’d find ourselves in if something happened to her? Snape is not just any wizard. We’re talking about a man who lied to Voldemort himself for nearly-two decades without flinching until he brought him down from the inside. And the only one he ever took orders from can’t pull the leash now. If anything happens to his mistress, you know what we’ll have in our hands? Severus Snape out for revenge. Is Claire enough of an imbecile to think that she can handle that?"

"Well, you trusted that Sewlyn would be able to keep them under control..."
"He better...for his own sake. The Rotts are an important part of my plans, but they’re by no means essential and Sewlyn even less. If any of those three does anything stupid, I can easily forget I have any use for them."

"I understand the British Ministry has been keeping tabs on the Rotts with information provided by Draco Malfoy" Anya made her way in unceremoniously carrying a piled folders "We’ll be able to keep an eye on them if Sewlyn fails."

"I’ll rue the day I have to depend on a Malfoy to get anything done." Dmitri scoffed. "Have you got everything?"

"Yes. That muggle editor you hired just finished all the paperwork. All we have to do is send it all to Lewis Murray so he can get Evelyn Black to sign."

"Fax it all to Mr. Murray now."

"It’s Christmas over there."

"It’s not here. Send. And try to schedule a meeting between myself and Mr. Murray as soon as possible. It seems he is a mentor of sorts to Evelyn Black, it will do us well to be on his good graces."

"And the Rotts?" Arseniy tittered, raucously.

"I’ll give Sewlyn some time to prove he can do what I’ve asked of him. I have more pressing matters to tend to right now to than to worry about that redhaired lunatic wanting to feed Evelyn Black to the wolves"

"Like?..."

"...finding out whether Rodolphus and Rabastan have finally uncovered anything in Albania, for one. If they have a lead, I may be able to dispatch the Rotts without having to deal with their incompetence"

"One could hope."
Chapter Summary

In which Severus surrenders, enemies close in, and Evelyn contemplates her place in the world.

December 26th

Spinner’s End.

Virgil Shafiq was at Severus’ door first thing in the morning as Kingsley had promised. He looked rather different from how the former potions master remembered him. Shafiq was now considerably taller and somewhat thinner than he had been as a teenager but retained the same athletic frame from his quidditch days as well as the same focused, alert expression on his almond-shaped eyes. His angular face now sported a short, well trimmed beard and his hair was cut neatly, very different from the messy halo of thick curls he had growing up. Virgil had been a near model student back then except for being a tad bit too overconfident and full of himself, Severus always had to remind him to fix his uniform, to pull back his hair, so none of it fell in his potions and to never take his natural talents for granted or as an excuse to slack. Looking at him now, neat haircut, tailored three-piece suit and a position as one of the ministry’s youngest elite aurors Severus could see he had learned his lessons.

"Professor Snape." Virgil greeted him with a reverential tone, shaking his hand firmly and smiling with rows of perfectly regular white teeth.

"I haven’t been a professor for a while, Mr. Shafiq. Severus will suffice. Come in, take a seat."

"I have to say it was quite the surprise to find out you are..."

"Alive?" Severus laughed quietly "I´m afraid the reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated."

"And I´m glad that´s the case. Well, the minister has briefed me on the situation at hand and..."

"Dare I ask how he phrased it?"

"He simply told me I’d be in charge of the safety of a close friend of yours, who happens to be a muggle..."

"Kingsley is truly a gentleman." Severus scoffed and reached for a book on the shelf showing Shafiq Evelyn’s picture back cover. "Her name is Evelyn Black."

"Do you happen to have a picture I can take with me?" the auror asked, studying the photo as if to memorise the traits of the person he was about to follow.

"Keep the book."

"Anything else I should know?" Shafiq produced a notepad and quill from his inner pocket, which started to write on their own accord as Severus begun to speak.
"In a couple hours she’ll be driving a red Volvo from Richmond 313, West Cokeworth to Liverpool. Here’s the number plate" Severus handed him a piece of paper before continuing "There she’ll get the 11am ferry to Dublin, where she’ll sleep over at a friend’s place. His name is Emmet Finnerty, better known as "Fin". I don’t know his exact address but he lives in an apartment in Blackrock, Dublin’s South side with his boyfriend. The next day she’ll drive to Doolin, county Clare, on the M7 passing by Limerick and Ennis. Her sister works at Ennis Hospital so maybe she’ll meet her. She’ll be staying in her mother’s house for a little under two weeks before returning to Cokeworth. You don’t need an address for that, Doolin is a small village, you’ll probably stumble on the house without trying."

"I’ve been told she has other family members who might need attention as well?"

"Besides the mother and sister, an elderly grandmother two young nieces."

"How young?"

"Alice will be turning 7 in January and Elizabeth is three I believe."

"You have any reason to believe the children may be at some risk?"

"Let’s work under that assumption" Severus told him seriously, his mind drifting back to Fenrir Greyback. Maybe it was paranoid of him, but until they could safely locate the werewolf, he wouldn’t be taking any gambles.

....

Severus wasn’t expecting her to show up today, but then he heard the familiar sound of a car engine outside, not even an hour after he had dispatched Shafiq.

"I thought you were getting ready to leave" he told her, walking out of the house before Evelyn had even left the car.

"I’m on my way actually," she told him, getting a pair of boxes from the passenger seat and walking inside unceremoniously, planting a kiss straight on his lips on her way in. Severus did a double take, still not used to that level of intimacy, but enjoying it nevertheless "I just thought I’d drop by. With everything that happened I almost forgot I had got you a Christmas gift."

"Well, this is quite a bit awkward...I didn’t get you anything, I’m afraid." Severus could smack himself across the face. It hadn’t occurred to him to get her anything. In fact, up until the last moment he wasn’t even sure he’d actually go to the church and meet her on Christmas Eve, so buying a gift wasn’t a concern that crossed his mind at any point.

"You didn’t have to. To be honest, I wasn’t even going to get you anything because I wanted to bring you something nice back from Ireland, but I couldn’t pass this one up. It’s nothing much really. Come on, open." she announced, handing him the smaller package, wrapped in lavishly decorated blue and golden paper, after setting the other package, a plain white box, on his coffee table.

Severus didn’t quite know what to do with himself as she stood in front of him, almost bouncing from the excitement as he opened the gift. Inside the wrapping paper he found a box containing a set of three elegant and sleek black leather bound notebooks, each with decorated metal closures featuring a tree design.

"I noticed your work notes are bit scattered, so I though you could use those. As I said, it’s nothing much."
"It´s lovely. Thank you." he let out uncomfortably "Still...I should have got you something."

"If you absolutely must, then do it when I come back. It will give me something else to look forward to" she smiled

"Wait...I have an idea...Let´s try this. Why don´t you pick something from my library, and that will be your gift."

"Something from your library?" she raised an eyebrow, looking both intrigued and excited "Severus, are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Anything? I can really have anything from your library? When we first met you didn´t even like having me peruse it, now you´re going to let me just have anything from it?"

"Things have changed since we first met..."

She eyed him cautiously for a moment, bitting her bottom lip, before turning to the book covered wall behind her. Severus was sure she knew most of the titles there by heart. After all she’d eagerly explore whenever she stopped by to visit, many a time behind his back as he was busy with something else. But he wouldn´t rush her...he had to make sure of something, something that had been bothering him since she had found the copy of 'Beedle the Bard' in his bedroom.

As expected Evelyn didn´t take long to pick something.

"Can I have this one?" she asked walking up to him with a thick tome in her hands.

"A history of Magic' by Bathilda Bagshot..." he read the cover, shocked. One of his old school books...all of which were carefully charmed to be invisible to muggle eyes. For a while Severus had though 'Beedle the Bard' may have escaped his and his mother´s frantic effort to charm his books and school materials to hide them from his father. It was just a storybook so maybe his mother hadn´t deemed it worthy of hiding. Children, magical or not, owned storybooks with magic narratives in them, after all. So when Evelyn had found it, after the initial shock, he shrugged it off. But "A history of magic” was a core Hogwarts textbook. No, he was confident those had been hidden, and he had never lifted the spell.

"Severus? Are you OK?"

"Yes, yes, of course..." he blinked, still staring at the book.

"I can pick a different one if you want."

"No, that´s fine. It´s yours. I promised you could have any of them, didn´t I? Just be warned, this one is naught but codswallop. It´s not actual history."

"I figured as much by the name of the author." she laughed "Still, I can use some light reading for the ferry. Anyway, love, I should get going. My ferry leaves..."

"...at 11, I know." he pulled her closer, a bit surprised by how easily the gesture came to him by now "I don´t want you to get late on account of me. Remind me again what time do you get to your mother´s.."

"I should be there by tomorrow afternoon. I’d call you if you had a phone"
"I can call you from the pub, how about that?"

"I´d love that."

"Maybe I´ll get the bloody phone after all."

"I think you should get the bloody phone after all" she giggled against his mouth "By the way there´s cake in the other box. Coffee cake. My grandmother´s recipe."

"When the devil did you have time to bake a cake?"

"Yesterday before bed. Couldn´t sleep. I always get antsy before I travel, so I bake."

"You always get antsy, period. I frankly don´t know how you manage to do everything you do and still get in enough hours of sleep."

"Magic." she laughed, planting small kisses on his neck and nipping lightly at his jaw.

"Actually...I can believe that. Now go already, before I start getting ideas and make you miss the damned ferry."

…

Blackrock, Dublin

Later that same day

"I´m sorry half the welcome committee is missing, love." Doug pulled her into a bear hug, lifting her off the ground as soon as she exited her car. Evelyn still found it a bit hilarious that Fin, for all his art degree, professional photographer, film and literature connoisseur snobbery, would end up with a 6 ft tall clumsy bear of a man who produced a sports show on local TV and acted more stereotypically straight than all of Evelyn´s exes combined. But it worked so well she found it hard to imagine her best friend with anybody else. Besides, once Doug came into Fin´s life, she finally would have somebody with whom she could watch football and call the referee names over a few pints like she had done with her father in the past. Win-win for all involved.

Doug and Fin lived in a rather charming red brick building overlooking Dublin bay, within a short walk from the Seapoint beach and its shops and cafés. As passionate as Fin was bout Dublin´s hustle and bustle, Evelyn knew deep down he missed their little home town by the sea as much as she did. Blackrock was a perfect choice for him. It was close enough to Dublin´s urban excitement and events but at the same time gave him the seaside peace and calm from their childhood years. She envied him a bit, to be honest. Evelyn had adapted well in Cokeworth, but being away from the ocean, rolling green hills and wild windy sprawl of rocks and cliffs of her homeland pained her more than a little bit. Cokeworth´s grey, industrial landscape felt so claustrophobic by comparison.

"Where´s Fin? Let me guess...Boxing Day shopping?"

"Is the Pope Catholic? When you told him you´d pass by, he made a whole other shopping list, it´s like bloody Christmas all over again."

"I´m only staying a day."

"Actually we were thinking...Here let me help you with everything."

"You can leave it all in the car, I have an overnight bag in the back seat is all I need for tonight. Can
you get that while I get Ciarán’s carrier? I brought you guys some stuff but we can get that later. But yes, you were saying..."

"So, we couldn´t go to Doolin for Christmas because I was working. I´m sure your mother told you."

"Somewhere in the middle of nagging me about not going either, yes, she did" Evelyn laughed as Doug slung her heavy bag over his shoulder like it contained nothing.

"So, since you´re dropping by, he´s been thinking of going for New Years. I suspect Fin´s last minute shopping frenzy has something to do with it."

"Oh, that´s lovely. Mam will be thrilled."

"How is she by the way?"

"Oh, you know...this time of the year is not kind on her...Oh, there he is." she interrupted herself upon seeing Fin´s blue Alfa Romeo approaching the parking.

"Well, if it isn´t Miss Ireland" he beamed, pulling her into a hug before giving Doug a peck on the lips "I´m sorry for the delay, Linz, the shops were pure chaos"

"It´s Boxing Day, I´d be surprised if they weren´t."

"What are you two doing out here, it´s cold like the 9th circle of hell out here. Let´s get inside"

..."So Doug is trying to cook...We have some time before we order a pizza for dinner." Fin announced, coming into guest room where Evelyn was getting her clothes and other personal things ready for the night. "Come on, spit it out...What´s going on?"

"Nothing." she rolled her eyes, aware of where this conversation would go.

"I haven´t had news from you in weeks so I called your sister to know what the devil is going on, and she tells me you were thinking of moving back to Ireland, then you changed your mind..."

"Caitlin has already told you everything you need to know, I´ll bet."

"She didn´t. Give your sister a little more credit than that." he chided

"Well, then...have a seat. This is going to take a while"

... 

December 27th
Ardenica Monastery
Lushnjë, Albania

Dmitri had never had the chance to visit this place, even though he had been in that region of Albania before. So many of his travels were for business instead of pleasure, that he did end up missing on a lot...like the simple yet elegant XIIIth century stone monastery that seemed to have sprouted right from the soil in the middle of the solitary green plain with it´s immaculate arches and imposing tower like a miracle. Inside, rows upon rows of serene saints looked down upon the visitors from their lavishly decorated golden frames, their dark faces stern and unreadable. Dmitri had grown
up around similar looking icons, and as a child they scared him a bit. His mother revered them, but to Dmitri they always seemed like severe reminders of his own fragility, their staring gaze following him around as if to watch his every movement and his every sin. As his mother became more and more withdrawn due to the disease and her own writings and studies, Dmitri had started to feel even more uneasy around such images.

But now as a man grown, he saw them with different eyes. Maybe it was nostalgia, maybe it was simply that he now understood his mother better, after having had the chance to read the papers, letters and notes she scribbled obsessively while alive. Saints, monasteries, churches and cathedrals were no long oppressive signs of things he didn’t understand. They had become a refuge, a place to go when he felt like he was losing control of his actions and plans. Saints were, by definition, people who had given up everything, even their lives to uphold their duty, to protect their faith...If their gaze seemed intimidating was because there was something deeper behind those unblinking eyes, something common men were not meant to contemplate or understand.

Now he knew. Now he could understand.

Dmitri had to come here and look into their eyes before going further. He needed that reassurance. Even saints needed reassurance from God that their path was rightful. Doubt, he had learned from his mother, was nothing to be ashamed of; it was simply another hurdle, another trial to overcome. It was part of a plan.

He walked out into the cool winter air, a frail, white sun shining down on him, shedding light without warmth. The inn the Lestranges had set out to find was not too far from there. Apparently it was now abandoned. The mysterious murder of a certain Bertha Jorkins in the woods surrounding the place was certainly not a good advertisement for their services, but further than that, Dmitri suspected, the Civil War muggles had engaged in the year before had probably taken a toll on all tourism-related business in the country. Which begged the question as to how the Lestranges had set out to find an abandoned inn in the backwoods of Albania weeks ago and never truly reported finding anything worth of interest in it.

…

Severus thought he´d never live to see Draco Malfoy of all people become a regular visitor of Cokeworth. But then again he had thought the same of the lad’s mother once, and yet she seemed to be making a habit of visiting Spinner’s End whenever she needed help with anything. So he shouldn’t be all that surprised to see Draco sitting on the bench of the little park where himself and Lily used to play as children. He shouldn’t be too surprised about anything coming from the Malfoy family, really.

Severus had decided to go out for a stroll around the neighbourhood after spending the night laying awake in bed. Evelyn had left the day before, Virgil following right after her. It was an odd, bittersweet feeling of kissing somebody goodbye and staying behind as they travel, waiting for their return. Not like anything he had felt before at least. He stood by his door watching the red Volvo disappear around the corner, at once anxious and despondent. He knew Virgil would follow right after and keep her safe, and yet...Kingsley had asked why couldn´t he go with her, and Severus found himself wondering the very same thing.

But more pressing than the longing for her presence, which he knew would last only for as long as she took to return, Evelyn had left him a small, baffling, enigma. Severus still couldn’t wrap his mind around the fact that she could see things that were charmed not to be seen by her kind. He had reviewed all of his book, he found all of them to still be under the same spell his mother and himself had cast decades prior. He couldn’t even begin to understand what had happened. Then he thought
back to what she had told him a couple days prior. "Ghosts, mermaids, fairies...you name it and I could see it." she had said.

It couldn’t be...could it?

After spending the night awake obsessing over questions he had no good answers for, Severus had found himself back in that familiar place, that park where he played as a child. It was too cold out for children to be playing, and the peace and quiet would do him well. And yet, the sight of Draco Malfoy told him, he wouldn’t find much of either.

"Have you been stalking me?" he asked, half jokingly, walking up to the boy.

Draco shrugged.

"What are you doing here?" Severus insisted

"I’m...I was...deciding if I should go visit you again. I had no idea you’d pass by."

"What happened this time around?"

"Nothing. I just...wanted to talk to you before going back to France."

"It’s too cold out for a casual chat. Come on...you look like you need a cup of tea and something to eat."

....

"It took us days to even find this inn. This bloody country is in shambles." Rodolphus let out as a way of explanation as Dmitri walked around the empty room that had once been the main hall, examining the damaged furniture and rotten floorboards and panelling, running his finger over the layer of dust and dead leaves that covered everything in obvious disgust.

"I´m aware. Still no good enough an excuse to keep me waiting." Dmitri’s pristinely white fur-hemmed coat covered him from neck down to his heavy leather snow boots making him stand in stark contrast with the ruined and dim interior of the building. It never ceased to amaze Rodolphus how the silver hair, colourless eyes and white clothes always made Dmitri look like a corporeal ghost, but now, as he stood in front of them as if having emerged from the snow-covered earth itself quietly staring them down as the bitter winter winds howled on his wake, Rodolphus wondered whether he was indeed fully human.

Rodolphus shifted on his feet uneasily while Rabastan walked to the window, as if he wanted to disappear into the shredded, mouldy wallpaper. He was well aware his brother didn’t trust Dmitri, but he had taken to cowering into corners in the man’s presence like a scaredy dog. Now he was starting to wonder if Rabastan was right.

Rodolphus had hoped to keep Dmitri at arms length while they were in Albania, long enough for them to find Helena Ravenclaw’s tomb. Once they did, they wouldn’t need his help any more...it would be the other way around, Dmitri would need them. But he had failed. Dmitri had just appeared out of the blue to call in their debt. How he had found out they had located the inn was anybody’s guess, and truly it mattered little at this point. He was standing right there in front of them like an apparition and they had to answer to him.

"So?" Dmitri demanded, calmly.

"We have found it."
"The grave I assume"

"Yes. There was nothing worthy of note here at the inn. If the Dark Lord had any document that gave him the location, he took it with him. But we found a man...He worked here when inn was still functioning. We found him in a village nearby. He remembered seeing Wormtail and Bertha Jorkins before she died."

"And...?"

"Muggle authorities found her body in the woods, but they never found out who did. Wormtail was long gone by then and so was the Dark Lord. They interviewed people who worked at the inn, but nothing came of it. The Ministry officials must have claimed her body to take back to Britain and given the muggles some made up story to cover the tracks, so the muggle police never really pursued the story. But this man kept something...he wanted to give it to the police but they closed the investigation."

"What was it?"

Rodolphus reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and retrieved a folded crumpled up piece of paper. Dmitri snatched it from his hand without giving him time to hand it over. It was a map of the area, one of those handed out to tourists. Scribbled over it was a route that led well into the woods, in the middle of nature reserve. It ended in an "x" marked with "HR" scribbled next to it.

"It’s not the Dark Lord’s handwriting. Must be Wormtail. It was found in his room."

"This man you speak of...just gave you this? Something he held on to in hopes muggle authorities would come back to investigate a murder he was a potential witness of?"

"Not willingly, no..."

"Where is this man?"

Rodolphus and Rabastan exchanged looks but said nothing.

"Did you murder a muggle for a piece of paper? Are you so daft that you can accomplish nothing without leaving a trail of destruction behind you, you thoughtless idiot?"

"It was a muggle."

"All the more reason you should have been able to get this without using deadly force. Are you so incompetent you can’t take what you want from a mere muggle without killing the bastard? The two muggles Fenrir Greyback massacred have already made headlines, so by all means let’s litter half of Europe with muggle corpses for shits and giggles."

"Dmitri."

"What part of 'be discreet and don’t leave a trail' have you failed to understand? I’m aware of the sort of sordid little games you and your late wife played for fun, but I have bigger plans, and I refuse to let them be ruined by your little blood-kink. Get off on it on your spare time, not when you’re working for me, get it?"

Rodolphus felt something hot burning through his chest and going up his throat, as his vision clouded. He had been in a state of constant anger for months, to the point he had gotten used to it, but this was something else entirely. Dmitri hadn’t been there when the Dark Lord had clawed his way back from oblivion, when He had conquered the ministry and matched Harry Potter and his
supporters blow for blow until being ultimately defeated, he hadn´t been there when the Dark Lord´s most trusted followers had been either slaughtered or arrested in the battle of Hogwarts, when the Dark Lord had been defeated leaving them all behind to pick up the pieces of what he had fought to accomplish.

No, Dmitri had been in his comfortable mansion in Russia, making money from his dealings with muggles and mudbloods. What made him think he could simply swoop in and demand anything from them, as if he was entitled to Salazar´s dagger...The founder of Slytherin house of whom the Dark Lord had been the rightful and sole heir. Without sparing a second to think about what he´d do next, Rodolphus drew his wand. If there was a moment to get rid of Dmitri it was now, in the middle of nowhere, with nothing but broken walls and dead trees for witness.

Then he heard it.

Horrible choking sounds coming from behind him, followed by barely human screeching. Dmitri hadn´t moved, he kept on staring at him, and for a moment Rodolphus wondered if the sounds were only in his head. He turned, keeping his wand up, positioned for attack if needed, and looked at his brother.

Rabastan was on the floor, gasping for air, every muscle on his body tense almost to the point of tearing, limbs twisted in awkward angles, his whole frame convulsing. Then came the wailing again, piercing screams coursing through Rodolphus ears, echoing on the walls constant, relentless, hollow in the dead of the freezing night outside...He had seen that happen before, but it was never one of them at the receiving end...only their enemies.

The Crucius curse

It couldn´t be, he despaired, looking back at Dmitri.

Dmitri hadn´t drawn his wand..he hadn´t even moved.

"Put your wand away, Rodolphus" Dmitri told him quietly. "Your brother is not strong enough to handle much more of this. Neither are you."

Rodolphus felt his legs fail him, his hands fall to his sides. All strength was drained from him, and he his body faltered as if fainting.

Dmitri caught him before he collapsed, pulling him up by his collar, his face coming within inches of his, so close he could smell the mint on his breath.

"Now listen to me, Rodolphus. I own you. I´ve bought you and your brother, and you two idiots didn´t even cost me all that much. Get it through your thick head. You know what´s the difference between you and a muggle? When we kill a muggle, we leave a trail. But one less Death Eater is nothing other than one less thing for the Ministry to worry about, a file to stamp and put away in an archive. You and your precious Dark Lord lost the war. All the Ministry wants is for the lot of you to disappear and they don´t care how it happens,...even your allies will sell you out when the aurors show up on their door. You´re disposable. So do try to make yourself useful, so I don´t have reason to discard you. Now... Where´s Helena Ravenclaw´s grave?"

....

"It´s early, did you have breakfast yet?" Severus asked, putting a steaming mug full of tea and a slice of cake in front of the boy.

"No" Draco looked up at him as if unsure he should touch the food, or just plain uneasy to have
Severus served him.

"You can trust the cake. I didn´t bake it." the former potions master told him vaguely amused

"She did, right?"

"Yes. I expect you won´t take issue with food made by muggle hands, uh?"

"Where is she?"

"You didn´t come here to ask me about her...Or did you?"

"I don´t quite know why I came here, to be honest."

Severus poured himself some tea and sat across from the boy, sighing.

"Go ahead. Ask."

"Selwyn is right, isn´t he? She´s your..."

"My lover? My mistress? ...My whore? Whatever word Selwyn has put in your head it´s not what I´d use. But if you want to know if there´s a romantic connection between us like he claimed, the answer to that would be yes."

"Why..."

"Why not?"

"She´s a muggle."

"I´ve noticed, but thank you for pointing it out."

"I don´t understand. You´re a wizard...No, you´re not just any wizard, you´re Severus Snape! You used to be one of the best teachers in Hogwarts, both Dumbledore and Dark Lord agreed you were one of the best, if not the best...and they didn´t agree on much else...You...with a muggle...it´s..."

"Draco, I´ll have to ask you to stop right there, as I don´t particularly feel like throwing you out of my house..." Severus looked at the boy, who had confusion painted all over his face, and mellowed his tone "Do you have any idea what all of what you just said means?"

"What..."

"Nothing. It means absolutely nothing. Look around you, Look at this house, look at this town. I grew up here, with a muggle father who worked on that mill you can see from the sidewalk outside. And this is where I returned when everything was said and done and neither Dumbledore nor the Dark Lord had use for me anymore. I´m a Half-Blood. There´s as much muggle in me as there´s wizard. Magical skills, my teaching position, Dumbledore´s trust, the Dark Lord´s trust, all the nonsense the newspapers are printing about me being a hero...It doesn´t mean shit. And you know what´s funny, Draco?"

Draco didn´t answer, merely letting him to on, paying more attention than Severus remembered him ever paying in class.

"People here...them, the muggles you´ve been seeing now that you started to pay attention... A lot of them think the same way you do, in a manner...Evelyn, to them, is not just any muggle, much like I´m not just any wizard to you. She too has been a professor in a prestigious school, probably with
more success than me if all her books, lectures and honours are anything to go by. They look at her and where you see a muggle whose name you can’t even be bothered to say, they see an accomplished, well travelled, incredibly smart and beautiful woman, born to a respectable family with the world hers for the taking...and they’ll probably wonder why she’d be interested in me. To them I’m barely more than some random nobody from a bad part of a bad town who got lucky enough to get out for a while only to return eventually, on a disability retirement with an addiction to pain killers."

"I never thought of that..."

"No, you didn’t. Because you never stopped to think about anything other than what your parents taught you. Which is not really your fault, but it did you on the losing side of a war. But’s different now, isn’t it? You’ve seen there’s more to things than you saw before...That’s a start."

"Was she...you know. The reason you did all you did? I mean back then..."

"I didn’t know Evelyn back then. I’ve known her for scarcely three months."

"Three months?"

"You’re probably old enough to understand we have no say over how fast or how slowly attraction works."

"So...you two really are...a couple" Draco seemed to measure his words carefully, and Severus didn’t quite know if out of fear to offend him or if he was getting used to the idea.

"...Yes" It felt strange to say it, considering where things stood between himself and Evelyn, but Severus didn’t know what else to call it.

"Selwyn is not that crazy in wanting to do something to her after all. I thought he was delusional."

"I’m afraid you’re right. Targeting her would an easy way to get to me, yes."

"There’s something else I need to ask."

"Go ahead...we came this far."

"They were talking about using her to get you to give up the location of something..."

"Draco..."

"I’ve stuck my neck out, I think I deserve to know what for..."

"Fine..." Severus sighed. Draco was right. He was in too deep now to be denied information. And as things precipitated, with Evelyn dangerously close to being caught in the middle, Severus began to see how having Draco knowing everything would be beneficial to everyone involved. "I’m sure you recall the Dark Lord’s little interludes in Albania..."

"Yes."

"It was there he turned Nagini into a Horcrux...but that hadn’t been his initial idea. Bertha Jorkins got in the way by showing up unexpectedly and recognising the rat. The Dark Lord never intended for Nagini to become a horcrux. Animals are not stable horcruxes, and frankly, that snake was the only thing he had some semblance of affection for. He wouldn’t have used it, unless the opportunity to kill Bertha hadn’t presented itself. He had another horcrux in mind."
"The diadem, we all know that now..."

"Yes, and no. There was something other than the diadem in Albania that he wanted to get his hands on. Helena Ravenclaw told him about the diadem, but there was also the didn´t tell him about that, he only found out when he got his hand on Slytherin´s work notes."

"Dagger?..."

"Salazar Slytherin´s Serpentine Dagger. A dark magic item he had created as a twisted intellectual exercise. Nobody knows its properties for sure, and even fewer people know it existed at all. It´s been briefly referenced in some of his writings, but he was still in the process of creating it when that mention was written down, so most didn´t think anything of it. When Slytherin got exiled he left it at the care of the Bloody Baron, who had been one of his favourite students. Little did he know the Baron would use that exact same dagger to kill his daughter."

"Salazar Slytherin´s daughter you mean?" Draco was confused "He didn´t have a..."

"He did...Helena Ravenclaw...formerly Helena Slytherin."

"You must be joking."

"Did you really think Helena´s falling out with her mother was only about intellectual rivalry and jealousy? Even for a Ravenclaw that´s preposterous. It takes more than that for a young woman to go against her mother like she did. When Salazar Slytherin was exiled, he had to divorce his wife, and his daughter had to stop using his name. Helena never quite forgave her mother for allowing this to happen, for staying behind as her father left. The rift between the two of them started there."

"So...Helena was killed with the dagger her own father created?" Draco seemed fittingly horrified.

"Yes. Helena was an unstable child of a broken home and the Baron was a irascible spurned lover with a deathly blade ready at hand, supplied by Salazar...Not a match made in heaven I´m afraid."

"And the Lestranges want that dagger?"

"They do. Nobody quite knows what the dagger is truly capable of. There´s a chance that the dark magic it contained may have played a role in the Baron´s murderous madness, even."

"They´re looking for it in Albania, then...What if they find it?"

"They won´t."

"How can you be so sure?"

"The dagger hasn´t been in Albania since Salazar got word of his daughter´s death."
Part 8 - Home - Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

In which Severus surrenders, enemies close in, and Evelyn contemplates her place in the world.

The stretch of woods they entered was dark and thick, and the foliage seemed to get denser as they advanced. The canopy of leaves above them swallowed any sunlight that might have otherwise peered in from the clear, sunny sky above. They kept advancing into the dead of night in the middle of a crisp sunny winter afternoon.

More startling than the darkness however, was the silence. Dmitri was used to hiking and trekking through heavily wooded areas, and was familiar with the sounds that populated them. No forest was silent. Even when all one could see was trees, Dmitri knew the leaves, branches and trees hid a multitude of life. He had been taught at an early age, in the numerous hunting in which trips in which his father brought him along, how to spot animals in places where most people wouldn’t notice them. A completely silent area in a forest could only mean all the living creatures had left, which usually only happened in the case of a serious catastrophic event.

Rodolphus led the way huffing and puffing from the effort, obviously not used to navigating irregular terrain without the help of magic. Dmitri had forbidden the two brothers to use their wands except as a source of light. If Helena´s grave was indeed in this forest, there was a real possibility of protective spells having been cast over the area, and they should minimize the chance of disturbing them.

As they moved on, Dmitri tried to imagine Voldemort descending into the valley and into the darkness in search of a grave. After the dust from the Second Wizarding War had settled bits and pieces of Harry Potter’s exploits started to be revealed by eager reporters desperately looking into what little the Ministry allowed to be divulged to the public. Trials were still being set up, so most of what anyone knew was hearsay at best. There was talk of Horcruxes, one of them being Rowena Ravenclaw´s diadem, supposedly recovered from wherever it was that her daughter had hid it before dying under mysterious circumstances. That Voldemort had turned it into a Horcrux and hid it in Hogwarts itself was precisely the sort of joke in bad taste he seemed to enjoy, so Dmitri didn´t doubt that particular part of the popular narrative.

If he had indeed recovered the diadem from her grave, why then would he leave the dagger, if it was there as the Lestranges claimed? Could it be that the diadem hadn’t been in her grave, but somewhere else? Voldemort had obviously found the grave, but maybe he hadn’t had the opportunity or hadn’t succeeded in getting to it. Bertha Jorkins had gotten in the way, so there was a chance he had changed his plans. Rodolphus claimed to have overheard the Dark Lord confide in Snape that he’d get to the dagger 'later' when circumstances were more 'favourable'. Besides, Voldemort was all too eager to put magical objects into he had Slytherin’s dagger, it would be known by now.

"This must be it." Rabastan let out with evident relief in his voice.

A few meters away stood a group of ruined stone walls, overtaken by ivy and moss. The way they were positioned suggested at one point they had been part of a small square building. The roof was
non-existent, the tall, elegantly arched entrance stood almost by itself, most of the wall around it gone, so you could see the inside as if the structure had been gutted. The still standing side-walls featured narrow windows which once had been adorned by stained glass, of which just a few discoloured shards remained in place. A lonely metal double-barred cross laid in front of entrance, fallen and rusted.

"A chapel." Dmitri approached as the two brothers stood back.

Inside, Dmitri could barely make out what was left of the icons that once covered the walls, their eyes peering from under a thick layer of grime. The once-white marble floor was covered with centuries worth of dust, leaves, twigs and whatever else wind and rain had brought in through time. In front of him a marble table, presumably the altar, stood in front of a triple window on the back wall, three tall arches formed by flowers sculpted from stone opening the chapel to the woods around it. Using his wand, he proceeded to inspect that area for any protective charms, but found nothing.

"Tergeo" he whispered and the dust, leaves and grime started to gently slide away, revealing the marble underneath. Now he could see it. A rectangular marble slab in front of the altar. It was as big as a person of average height and not much wider. On top of it he could see a simplified heraldic bas-relief. An eagle rising with wings displayed and a nowed serpent under it. No names, words or dates.

Dmitri got on his knees and pushed the stone slab, opening a small crack. It had moved much more easily than he had anticipated.

"This has been opened before." he told himself.

…

It took them a while to finally muster the courage to follow Dmitri inside. Rodolphus wasn’t sure if his brother felt the same, but there was something keeping him from going in the way Dmitri did. Maybe it was just the fact that it was a bloody church, after all. Or maybe it was just something about the way Dmitri had so readily gone in, as if the building itself had called him.

Once they did enter, the brothers found him on his knees next to a slab of marble in front of the altar. In the cold silence of the woods they could hear him whispering things that sounded nothing like any incantation they had heard before. Only when they saw him make the sign of the cross did they realize he had been saying a prayer.

Then he reached over and pushed the marble with all his strength. The stone moved smoothly.

"There she is." Dmitri said with a bizarre tinge of sweetness in his voice

"Or what’s left of her" Rabastan remarked dully, walking over.

"Do show some respect." Dmitri hissed in his direction.

Rodolphus approached, looking over Dmitri, using his wand to shed light into the open grave. Rabastan was a tactless idiot, but he wasn’t wrong, he thought. It was what was 'left' of her.

Helena Ravenclaw was laid in front of them, a collection of darkened bones, her skull was laid on a delicately embroidered pillow and she wore the remains of simple gray gown, mostly rotted by the centuries and the elements, leaving her ribcage exposed. Her fleshless hands were oddly still poised in the traditional manner in which the dead are laid to rest. A thin, translucent shroud embroidered with roses covered her from head to toe. As they expected, the diadem was not with her. In fact, she only wore two pieces of jewellery: a long necklace made of blue and green beads that ended on a silver ouroboros pendant and rosary made of small bright blue beads interlaced on her fingers.
"Prosti menya" Dmitri spoke before pulling away the shroud.

"The dagger is not here." Rodolphus said dully

"I´m not entirely surprised. But we can still find something."

"What?"

"Look here, Rodolphus. Come on, get closer. She won´t do anything." Rodolphus knelt besides him begrudgingly "Do you see any blood?"

"No."

"Obviously whoever buried her changed her clothes. It´s only reasonable not to bury a murder victim in her bloodied clothes. But they didn´t change her jewellery." Dmitri reached for the necklace, and carefully rolled the beads between his fingers. Quite a few of them were stained with some dark and dry substance. "There it is. Blood. The beads are also chipped. She must have been stabbed in the chest, look at the marks on her ribs. The necklace got caught by the blade...In fact..."

Rodolphus and Rabastan looked on horrified as Dmitri reached into the ribcage from underneath as if looking for something. After an awkwardly long silence, his hand re-emerged with something green and glittery on his palm.

"An emerald? "

"Her necklace is made of jade and aquamarine beads. I´m willing to bet this little stone was part of Salazar Slytherin´s dagger. Probably an embellishment on the hilt. Whoever killed Helena stabbed her with such force a small part of the weapon broke off into her chest."

"That´s all very interesting but it doesn´t answer the real question. If the dagger isn´t here, then where is it?"

"Take a look at the grave slab. What do you see engraved on it?"

"An eagle and a snake."

"The eagle is easy enough to understand. It´s Ravenclaw´s emblem. But how about the snake? Why would there be a snake engraved on her tomb? Her pendant is also a snake for that matter. Why would that be if she was murdered with a weapon created by Slytherin as you claim Voldemort believed?"

"Nobody knows who killed her an why. All I heard from the Dark Lord was that Slytherin´s dagger was the weapon they used. You think Salazar killed her? Why, as revenge? "

"That snake wouldn´t be engraved alongside Rowena Ravenclaw´s eagle if he had been the responsible for her daughter´s death. But it all starts and ends with him. His dagger, his snake emblem..."

Dmitri reached into the grave once again, carefully removing the necklace from her chest and the rosary from her hands. After putting them into his jacket´s inner pocket long with the emerald, he covered the bones with the shroud once more and used his wand to reposition the marble slab back in place.

"Spasibo, Helena" he said softly as the grave closed and Helena´s remains returned to the darkness.
"What will you do with those?"

"If we can determine exactly when and where her jewellery was made, it could help retrace her steps before death. I have a feeling there’s more to Helena’s connection with Slytherin than a simple murder weapon. The cutting of the emerald may give us something about Salazar’s whereabouts as well. As for the two of you...You’ve done quite enough."

"What, why? We can still..."

"No, you can’t. The only living person who may know something useful about the dagger is Severus Snape and you’re not going anywhere near him. I gave you a chance to bring me something and all we have is a dead woman’s jewellery. I happen to find having to resort to grave robbing to get anything done in very poor taste, for that matter. You two will stay out of this."

"You promised us..."

"I promised you I’d give you a chance at revenge against Snape, but not in detriment to my own interests. You will go back to Russia and wait till I tell you what to do. Unless you rather return to Azkaban. Or worse."

... 

"How do you even know all of that?" Draco finally asked after a long, confused, silence.

"As a student, Tom Riddle, managed to get the location of Rowena Ravenclaw’s diadem from Helena’s ghost, whom you and all other Hogwarts students know as The Grey Lady. That’s how he got to it in Albania and transformed it into a Horcrux, then hid it back in Hogwarts until Harry Potter uncovered it, again with Helena’s help. But evidently, Helena had no way of knowing where her murder weapon was, or even exactly which blade was used. Such small details tend to escape one’s notice if they’re in the process of being stabbed to death, I’d imagine. So at that point in time the Dark Lord didn’t know of the dagger. That happened much later. When he came upon something else. A letter, written by Salazar Slytherin to Rowena Ravenclaw, after the death of their daughter."

"Where would he even find this letter? I mean, Slytherin was banished, did he still keep corresponding with Rowena? And if he did, wouldn’t Hogwarts have those letters? We’d know they were married if these letters still existed."

"You’re absolutely right in thinking that, Draco." Severus nodded in a teacher-like manner, pleased that Draco’s intellect seemed to have gotten sharper "As a matter of fact, no, Salazar didn’t correspond with his wife after leaving Hogwarts. But the death of a child warrants at least a letter, wouldn’t you think? And this one was, indeed, the only letter he ever wrote her."

"What’s in it?"

"Would you like to see it?"

"Y-you have it?" Draco stared at him in complete disbelief.

"The Dark Lord had intended to go after the dagger once his control over the British Isles had been firmly established. At that point I occupied the position of Headmaster and he gave me the letter so I could keep it safe in my office. I did keep it safe, but not in the Headmaster’s office. I never really moved any of my personal effects there, as I knew I wouldn’t occupy the position for long. Instead I left it in my old office, hidden among my work notes, knowing nobody would give them much importance. After my presumed death, Minerva collected all my affairs, but had nobody to hand them over to, as I have no living next of kin. So she carefully put everything away until she could
decide what to do with it all. Then Shacklebolt informed her I hadn’t, in fact, passed away."

"And she handed your stuff back to you...with Salazar’s letter in the middle."

"Come hee"

Draco went back into the sitting room, following close behind Severus who walked wide strides toward his work desk. He opened the bottom drawer to retrieve some notebooks and scattered papers and parchments before opening a false bottom. He carefully reached into it, producing a small piece of dark parchment scrupulously stored in a clear plastic envelope. As Snape walked back towards him, Draco could tell the parchment was not only dark, but stained in several places, and the edges were blackened as if the material had been exposed to the fire.

"I imagine Rowena or somebody else who got a hold of this letter intended on burning it, but never really got around to doing it, for whatever reason. Fortunately the text is intact."

"May I?"

Severus silently handed him the letter. Draco held very carefully, even though the plastic sheath seemed secure enough. Maybe it was just the thought that he had a letter written by Salazar Slytherin’s own hand that made him so anxious about treating it with the proper respect. Respect that had never been accorded to him in life or in death, the young man thought to himself.

In a strange way discovering Slytherin had been married to Rowena, that Helena Ravenclaw was actually his daughter, and that her folly may have been caused, at least in part, by the loss of her father made him feel strangely sad. Any Slytherin worth his or her salt knew deep down that there was more to that story than what all of them had been told. Godric Gryffindor had had his way, and history is written by the victors. Gryffindors for all the show of dignity they put on, were not above this simple fact of life. Now Draco caught himself wondering...If Slytherin had been like people said he was, Rowena wouldn’t have married him, would she? And what did she do once he had gone into exile? Had she tried to stay by his side, or had she deserted him? And Helena, had the loss of her father truly played a role in what became of her in the end? How much had Godric Gryffindor successfully erased from Salazar’s life and family?

Draco took a seat and started reading the letter out loud, for no other reason than convincing himself it was real.

"My dearest Rowena,

I shall not claim to understand how you feel or what you think of me and how my foolish actions resulted in the predicament in which we now find ourselves. The time for that is long gone. I don’t wish to tell you about my own sorrow either, and I won’t pretend it to be as great as yours. You suffer through no fault of your own, while I merely carry the burden I have by my own hand placed on my shoulders. You trusted my judgement, you trusted a man I told you was worthy of such trust. He betrayed us both, but the fault for it lays solely at my feet.

I write this letter to assure you that I have, to the best of my abilities, seen to it that Helena finally finds the peace I failed to provide for her in life. As you requested, she won’t return to Hogwarts. It would be much too painful for both of us. I took the liberty of choosing a resting place where both of us can mourn her, away from prying eyes. She shall stay in Illyria, in the same forest where she so dreadfully encountered her demise. I have found a small a chapel in these sad woods, once built so that travellers and lost souls may find solace. It seemed a fitting choice.

Also, as per your request, the diadem shall stay with her. I know you would find no joy in having it
returned, and I’m in agreement that it should never see the light of day again, for all the grief it has caused. I take the blade that cut her life short with me. You shall not hear from from me again. I accept that with Helena gone nothing ties us any more. I no longer expect your forgiveness, or your affection. Hate me, if you must. I’ve done enough to deserve it.

I love you still, as I always will.

Salazar"

A long, heavy silence fell upon the room as Draco stared down at the letter, trying to take it’s contents in. Severus sat on an armchair in front of him, patiently waiting for his former student to recover.

"Horrible story, I know." Severus finally spoke, sweetly, as if consoling a child who just found out Father Christmas isn´t real. "But long passed."

"They made him out to be a monster."

"Every story needs a villain. Sometimes you have to make one up."

"Then, Helena was buried in...where is this?" Draco seemed to have finally found his composure

"Illyria. Modern day Albania. It was part of the Byzantine empire at the time of her death."

"She was buried there with the diadem and Salazar Slytherin took the dagger with him. But, where?"

"Nobody knows for sure."

"Claire and Ludwig seem to think you do."

"Claire and Ludwig have a lot of opinions about a lot of things, almost all of them worthless."

"Not about this...right? You do know where it is, don´t you?"

...

"So, long story short, you´re dating this neighbour?" Fin cocked an eyebrow, his words flat with suspicion.

"I wouldn´t call it dating, as of now."

"Evelyn, love, are you sure this is a good idea?"

"Just go ahead and say what you want to say."

"Look, I´m not even going into the fact he used to be a skinhead, neo-Nazi or whatever when he was a teenager, or any of that, even though I should, but let’s unpack one thing at the time here. You barely know this fellow."

"You´re one to talk."

"Yes, I know. I moved in with Doug after four months, but one: I do know he´s not a former neo-Nazi and two: neither of us had the baggage you two you sure this thing with your neighbour isn´t Richard all over again?"

"What is that even supposed to mean?"
"OK, let’s go back to when you and Richard started dating. Remember why you got together with him in the first place? Let me refresh your memory: a year before that, Charles proposed to you, and you said no. Then you two broke up and you had this crisis of conscience because you loved him, but wanted to focus on your career, he wanted kids, you didn’t, and you didn’t know if saying no was the right course of action yadda, yadda and what did you do?"

"Fin..."

"You started dating Professor Pervert."

"Jordaan. His name was Jordaan Kruger."

"Whatever, I don’t speak Afrikaans. So, he was about a decade older than you and had been your professor in college to boot. Like that was going to go anywhere. But he was ‘mature’ enough to ‘get’ you and your ambitions without feeling threatened, or so you told me. Then, Mr. Older and Mature goes and cheats on you after what, a couple weeks? And what did you do?"

"I get what you mean bu..."

"You started dating Richard. He was nice, and you had things in common, and he seemed like the type of man who would never hurt you...and what did he do? Cheats on you with some college girl barely out of her diapers. See a pattern already, babe?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"You pick very shitty men when you feel vulnerable. Then you try to fix them. Charles was the last decent boyfriend you’ve had to my knowledge. And that was some five years ago. It’s been downhill since then. This what’s his name again?"

"Severus"

"Jesus, his parents did set him up with that one...Anyway, this Severus I don’t know him, so I’ll keep an open mind, but what you’re telling me is not all that promising. He seems to have some issues, and you have some other issues of your own."

"Which is precisely why I’m not diving head first into it."

"You dove head first into his breeches on Christmas Eve, woman."

"Not 'head' first."

"OK, 'hand' first. Because you’re a nice Catholic girl...It was only 'hand' first, right?"

"Yes."

"You’re sure?"

"YES! Feck, you sound like my mother."

"Speaking of Dame Sophia Black, how do you plan on telling her that you’re sort of dating an English, non-Catholic, unemployed..."

"Retired."

"..an English, non-Catholic, ‘retired’ hermit who happens to have a criminal record? That’s not really the son-in-law she dreamt of, is it?"
"The son-in-law Dame Sophia Black dreams of is a Frankenstein´s creature comprised of the parts of Michael Collins, Fionn mac Cumhaill and Mr. Darcy. And yes, she´s impervious to the irony of Mr. Darcy being both English and Protestant. No living man can measure up to her standards."

"Unfortunately true, but are you sure you want to test her boundaries like that? Anyway, just take it easy. I don´t know, Severus just may be the best man in the world and truly repentant about his past, and I´m sitting here judging his character without even knowing him, but I rather do that than see you get hurt again, that´s all."

"He´s a good man, Emmet. I promise you that."

"He better be." Fin smirked "Because that old Mauser rifle your mother keeps in the kitchen still works and your father, God rest his soul, is not around to stop her from using it. And she bloody well knows how to use it. You know she´s been fixing´s to go after Sean with it if he comes anywhere near your sister?"

"Can´t blame her on that one" Evelyn rolled her eyes, the mere mention of her ex-brother-in-law irritating her.

"Does this Severus even know what he´s getting himself into?"

"The poor devil hasn´t got a clue." she conceded, smiling.

"Lyn," his tone was suddenly serious once again "I´m not just saying that because I know your mother will be difficult, which she WILL. What I mean is, if this is really serious, then..." 

"Emmet. I love him."

"Wow...you never said that about anybody since..."

"Charles I really do think Severus is the first man I´ve really fallen for since then"

"I hope he can appreciate that."

"There´s a fully working loaded Mauser rifle in my mother´s kitchen if he can´t."

...

"What took you so long?" Sophia opened the door before Evelyn even had the chance to knock. Surely she had been looking out the window waiting for the car to pull over so she could scold her. Unsurprisingly, Sophia had dressed up to welcome her with the same meticulous care she dressed up for pretty much anything. Evelyn rarely saw her mother looking anything less than flawless, and flawless she was in a pale lilac knee-length dress, pearl earrings, a thin golden necklace with a delicate flower pendant, hair styled in a chignon and naught but a hint of makeup on her face.

At age 57, Sophia could still be considered a beauty. Time had been kind to her as well: the silver starting to grow into the golden of her hair only made her features softer and more comely, her dazzlingly blue eyes had some wrinkles around them, sure, but their beauty was untouched and the high cheekbones she had passed on to both her daughters retained much of the freshness of decades past. Looking at her mother now, Evelyn could see the proud beauty that had made her father, then an awkward young teacher fresh out of college, fall hopelessly in love.

"I missed you too, mam." she laughed, walking into Sophia´s embrace, letting the scent of her perfume envelop her "and I´m not that late."
"I thought you’d arrive in the afternoon."

"Lewis asked me to drop by his office and sign some papers for the Russian publisher."

"Isn’t Lewis ashamed of making you work in the holidays?"

"I just signed some papers. And I wanted to see him too. He’s my friend, remember? We exchanged gifts, had tea. T’was fun. "

"Where are Emmet and Douglas?"

"At Edith’s. But they’ll have dinner here if you don’t mind."

"Of course I don’t mind it. But leave that at the door, Cillian can help with all that later" Sophia gestured the suitcase and bag Evelyn was hauling in with some difficulty.

"Cillian is coming over for dinner?" Evelyn asked, releasing Ciarán from his carrier. The black cat immediately went towards the corner where BB, Sophia´s corgi, was taking a nap in her little bed to start poking and bothering her.

"Yes, he knew you’d arrive and wanted to talk to you about your grandfather’s boat. I think he finally got around to fixing that old thing. I told him to bring Grainne as well. But come on, come take a seat and let me look at you."

Sophia held her hand and pulled her towards the sofa, sitting by her side looking at her as if she hadn’t seen Evelyn in years, before lovingly running her fingers through her hair. When Evelyn was little Sophia always did that, first thing in the morning, before tucking her into bed and whenever they spend any amount of time away from each other: she’d run her fingers through Evelyn’s hair, usually after brushing it. Growing up her mother would religiously brush her hair every day and carefully style it in complicated braids. It was sort of a time when she was little, Evelyn remembered complaining about not having blonde hair like her mother. Sophia hadn’t said anything, but merely made a point of doing Evelyn’s hair even more carefully than before, picking different styles from magazines and using various ribbons and barrettes. Evelyn had forgotten the idea of being blonde, but she remembered vividly how happy she felt looking in the mirror and seeing the beautiful the contrast between her dark hair and brightly coloured ribbons Sophia picked out. Even as an adult she still looked forward to that feeling of her mother’s hands touching her hair. It felt like home, it felt like being loved.

"You’ve lost weight."

"A little."

"You must be working too much."

"Not really."

"I made coddle. It’s good for the cold and you need the extra calories. I’m sure that place where you’re living now hasn’t got much decent food."

"I do cook for myself, mam."

"Not when you’re overworked. I know you, you just buy whatever from any restaurant and eat it in a hurry. It was the same back in Dublin, I had to give you tupperwares full of food to take with you every weekend when you visited just to make sure you’d eat. But now you’re too far away for me to do that."
"You worry too much."

"I worry enough. Besides what else have I got to do?"

"You have the dogs, and your friends, and church..."

"I do, I do. But it’s different. You must be tired. Dinner will be served in about half an hour. You think Emmet and Doug will make it?"

"I’m sure they will. Is Cat coming for dinner too?"

"No, poor dear is working the night shift at the hospital. But she asked me to tell you she’ll drop by tomorrow first thing."

"Where are the girls, then?"

"At Elaine’s. I’ve been cleaning all day I couldn’t have them here."

"Cleaning? You should have done that after I got here, so I could help..." her mobile started to ring

"Sorry, I have to get that."

"If it’s Lewis..."

"No, it’s a friend. Just checking up on me to see if I arrived well, I’ll get it in dad’s study, if you don’t mind. It will be a minute."

....

"Hello?"

"Lyn?" Severus said not really meaning to use her nickname, but enjoying how it rolled off his tongue regardless.

"Severus." her voice sounded light and cheery "I just got to my mother’s."

"I thought you be there earlier, did anything happen?"

"No, I just had to drop by my editor’s office."

"Because of the Russian edition, right?"

"Yes. Everything is signed and ready to go."

"You’re really excited about that, aren’t you?"

"You can tell?" she laughed quietly

"You’re not very subtle when you’re happy about something."

"Happiness has no business being subtle."

"Well, aside from that, how’s everything?"

"Fine. Fin and Doug came with me, they’re at Fin’s sister’s now. My cousin is coming for dinner with his wife and my mother is already trying to fatten me up. She thinks I’m too thin. How about you, what have you been up to while I’ve been gone?"
"I´m afraid I don´t have much anything interesting to do when you´re not around. I´m calling from the pub, so, that´s it, really." he snickered softly

"Maybe I should have left Ciarán to keep you company."

"I´d eat him for dinner in less than a week."

"No you wouldn´t. You love him."

"I tolerate him for your sake."

"Ah, you´re such a romantic. That´s the best proof of love I´ve ever gotten."

"Considering how insufferable that demonic little furball of yours can be, it should count for something."

"By the way, have you thought about what you want to do for your birthday?"

"Not really."

"Well, start then, because if you don´t decide on something, I´ll have to decide for you, and I intend on celebrating it with a bang."

"Should I be scared?"

"You should be trembling with excitement. Anyway, I have to go, people are getting here for dinner soon and I still have to freshen up and throw something a little nicer on. I look exactly like somebody who´s been driving for 3 hours. Call me again tomorrow, I´ll have more time to chat then...love you."

"I love you too"

Severus put the phone back on the receiver, wondering how the devil that last sentence had come out of his lips so easily. Sure, muggles had a tendency to overuse their 'I love yous', specially in phone conversations, but...

"Mrs is out of town for the holidays?" the bartender asked humorously, putting the phone back behind the counter.

"Visiting her mother. Glenlivet, please"

"I see." the man poured his drink, still faintly amused "Your mother-in-law is one of those, uh?"

"I don´t know. Haven´t met her yet."

"Well, good luck with that."

"Severus?"

Severus didn´t have to turn around to know it was Dawlish, so he merely gestured the empty seat besides him.

"Care for a drink, or you don´t drink on the job?"

"I´ll have water. Is this your idea of a good place for us to have this conversation?"
"Do you have any idea how much nonsense the bloke behind this counter hears on the daily?"
Severus smirked once the bar tender brought Dawlish´s water and moved away to tend to another
patron "I´m sure ancient graves and magical objects won´t even make to his top twenty. I assume this
is about Helena´s grave, right?"

"Yes. The Lestranges are indeed seen in Albania, so you were right. We haven´t been able to retrace
their steps after they left Tirana, however. Our envoy lost them."

"Why am I not surprised? Regardless, you didn´t need to send anybody. I´m pretty certain they´re in
Fier District."

"How..."

"That´s where they found Bertha Jorkins´body, right? Near some hotel close to the Ardenica
monastery. It´s a very touristic area, I´m told, but I don´t know how things are over there after the
Civil War. Regardless, very easy for them to travel around undetected. Particularly when the ministry
keeps on sending clueless aurors who have no clue as to where they should start looking. But don´t
worry. They´ll find nothing there."

"Are you really sure the dagger is not in her grave?"

"Positive. You´ll have better luck trying to retrace their way out of Albania. Have your envoy wait in
Tirana, monitor the airports maybe. They´ll probably try to use muggle transportation as to not leave
any magical clues that can be followed. Dim as the Lestranges may be, they do know the ministry is
looking into any suspicious instance of use of magic."

"Very well, I´ll do that. One more thing..." Dawlish produced an envelope from his jacket´s inner
pocket and slid it over the counter on Severus´direction. "The Minister has scheduled a meeting with
you. I understand Headmistress Mcgonagall was invited as well."

"What?"

"Don´t ask me" Dawlish smiled "I´m just the messenger."

....

It was cold.

So dreadfully cold it hurt her bones and burned her skin. Bitter gusts of wind hit her face mercilessly,
making it difficult to keep her eyes open. The snow under her bare soles felt like needles. Evelyn
looked down at herself, confused. She was still wearing the long white cotton nightgown she had put
on before going to bed the night before. But on top of it she had a long red woolen cape with a hood,
that Evelyn couldn´t remember from anywhere.

How come was she outside? She had gone to bed, in her old bedroom, in her mother´s house. Had
she been sleepwalking? No, she hadn´t done that since she was a child. Evelyn turned around, trying
to make out her surroundings.

There were dead trees around her, scattered within a large distance from each other, all black and
contorted in impossible shapes. Apart from dead black trees and rocks, all she saw around her was
white. A milky, shapeless white. No horizon, no sun, no moon, clouds, stars or anything that could
help her find her way. Just foggy white. Evelyn looked back, hoping to find out from which
direction she had come.

She was standing on a rocky path covered in a thin layer of snow, but she could see no footprints on
"Calm down." she took a deep breath, trying to control the shivers running through her body. "If there’s a path it must lead somewhere."

She walked trying to ignore the pain in each step. One step, after the other, after the other, shifting her weight from the balls to the heels or to the sides of her feet in a vain attempt to soothe the pain, hoping less pressure, less contact with the snow would help. The landscape around her didn’t seem to change, as much as she walked. Evelyn had no idea for how long she went on, it could have been five minutes, it could have been an hour. The dull relentless aching pain started to spread up her calves as if she had been immersed knee deep into ice water. Her feet were bruised and the toes were turning purple. She looked up, desperately trying to see something through the dense fog but saw nothing. The path just went on ahead, never even finding the horizon, stretching into the white nothing.

"LYN!"
That voice...

"Paul...?"

"LYN!" the little boy voice seemed to struggle to carry over the howling wind. She forced her weary eyes to focus, to see through the fog.

There he stood. The same as she remembered him from that awful Summer afternoon, with his wide dark eyes, brown hair cut in a pageboy style, wearing the navy blue shorts and powder blue button shirt their mother had picked out for him to wear on the morning of the day he died.

"Paul..." she choked though the tears.

"They’re coming. They’re coming for you." he told her, sombrely

"W-who?"

"Them." he pointed to something behind her, and as much as she didn’t want to tear her eyes away from him, Evelyn turned back to look.

Wolves.

A whole pack of them. Too many for her to count. Standing in a semi circle growling and snarling at her, drool dripping from their bared teeth, heavy breathing coming out of their snouts fogging up in contact with the frigid air. They were all grey except for one. Bigger than any other in the pack, and entirely white, down to its otherworldly eyes. The white wolf stepped forward. Evelyn felt a small, cold hand grab hers and tug at it.

"Run." Paul’s voice whispered

She ran. Paul was right ahead, even when she couldn’t see him ran until she couldn’t breathe, until her legs gave out and she stumbled on her nightgown. Evelyn could hear the growling behind her, not too far, not far enough to be safe. She could almost feel their breath on her heels as she awkwardly got back on her feet.

She looked up to see Paul standing in front of a tree, beckoning her, urging her to catch up with him. She did catch up, but soon realized she couldn’t go on. He was gone. Evelyn looked around, calling his name, but he was gone. Her chest hurt. It hurt so bad she had to lean against the tree and gasp for
air, for cold dry air that scratched the lungs from inside as it went in. Her heart was beating so fast it felt like it would break out of her ribs. She could feel a strange warmth spreading from the left side of her chest. Her father had died of a heart attack, she remembered suddenly for no good reason.

The pack approached. She was surrounded from all sides. Holding onto the tree for dear life Evelyn brought her hand to her chest, feeling a hot, thick liquid coat her fingers, and a metallic smell fill her nostrils. She looked down and saw bright crimson blood pouring down her white nightgown from an open wound to her left side. She could see her heart beating through her chest, so red it almost glowed; a crude, gruesome parody of the Sacred Heart of Christ as it was drawn the picture that her mother kept on a shrine.

As the blood dripped on the snow below her feet, she leaned back on the tree, defeated, knowing she could neither run nor fend off the wolves on her own. The black bark seemed oddly comfortable beneath her, and she leaned into it as if into a lover’s embrace...The she felt it. Scales. It wasn’t tree bark that she had under her fingers when she touched it, it was...scales. Iridescent green-silver scales. She struggled to raise her head and look up.

The sight of a fearsomely large snake should have scared her but it didn’t. Nor did she think of how absurd its mere presence was. As the massive animal moved slowly, she felt her body relax into it, her eyes carefully studying its appearance, fascinated. The green-silver scales turned black as they reached the head with was sharp and slightly triangular, the classic indicative of a venomous snake. The serpent looked down at her opening its black mouth in which two very white fangs shone like mother-of-pearl on black velvet. The tongue was silver and the eyes were emeralds.

Then it moved again. It surrounded her, coiling around her body. Evelyn could hear the wolves yelping, terrified. All of them. Except for one. The White One.

The snake kept its head high, its emerald eyes staring at the white wolf. Then it hissed, a chilling, rattling noise coming from deep within its black mouth. White fangs unsheathed and silver tongue darting out.

The wolf seemed unruffled, as the pack retreated.

The snake and the wolf stared each other down for what felt like an eternity, before the wolf finally pounced with a low growl, teeth sinking into the snake right under the head.

…

"Lynnie, wake up!"

"Cat?" Evelyn opened her eyes to see her sister leaning over her. Somewhere on the room Ciarán was meowing loudly.

"Are you OK?" Caitlin asked, her hazel eyes wide with concern.

"Yes..." Evelyn sat up, scanning the room, making sure the bed, furniture, windows and walls were all the same as the night before. Ciarán jumped on her lap, finally calming down.

"Mam said you were sleeping in, so I came up to get you out of bed and found you tossing and turning. I thought you were seizing for a moment there." Caitlin rubbed her back slowly to calm her down. "You’re having nightmares again? I thought those were over."

"It wasn’t about Paul this time. I mean, he was there, but it wasn’t about him."

"Mam said you looked tired, and had lost weight. I thought she was exaggerating as usual but...you
do look a little off."
"I just had a bad dream. I think I overate last night that’s all."
"Well, bollocks, I came here to invite you for breakfast. The girls are downstairs waiting for you to wake up, so we can all go together."
"Give a moment to get dressed and we’ll go."
"You’re sure?"
"Of course. Don’t worry I’m fine."

..."Your guess is as good as mine" Minerva told him quietly as Severus entered Kingsley’s personal office and shot her a questioning look. After being around her for decades, first as her student, and then as her colleague, Severus knew ‘What the devil is going on?’ was the kind of question he could ask her without the need of words. Minerva was sitting by Kingsley’s desk, hands crossed over her lap, looking every bit as confused as him. The Interim Minister was sitting on his chair across from her, with a puzzlingly calm expression on his face, and said nothing.

"Minister" Severus spat out with more than a bit of venom towards Kingsley "may I ask what’s so important that you needed to summon not only me, but also the Hogwarts Headmistress?"

"In a moment." Kingsley smiled "We still waiting for one person."

"Who If I may ask?" Minerva asked, vaguely annoyed.

Kingsley simply looked over to the door as it opened to let his last ‘guest’ in. Severus narrowed his eyes, not quite believing the trap he had just walked into.

"Potter?"
Harry had expected this to be just another briefing, which had been common as of late. Everyday they got news, usually bad ones, that had to be reviewed and put in perspective with Kingsley’s overall plan of action. Harry usually met him alone, sometimes with Ron. According to the minister, having him attend briefings along with other aurors would be more than a bit awkward. Harry’s position in the ministry was a rather peculiar one: on the one hand he was Harry Potter, the proverbial chosen one, and the one who had brought about the demise of the most formidable foe the Ministry had ever faced in their long history. However, he was still a teenager, a recent school drop out who hadn’t even gone through the proper training any other auror had to undergo. Finally, his 'high profile', so to speak, meant that any mission he found himself involved in was bound to encounter some level of distraction.

Kingsley had decided to have Harry focus on training, keeping both him and Ron away from actual field work for the time being. No matter what they had accomplished, the interim minister wouldn’t be making any exceptions. It was not a time for Harry to continue being the 'the chosen one', it was the time to grow up and start thinking about the rest of his life and how the fall out from the war would affect it.

The briefings were usually just that, a way for the minister to follow Harry’s training and give him information he would need to make sure he would be prepared when the time came for him to actually go on field. Which meant these meetings were usually boring and fairly uneventful. Harry walked into Kingsley’s office distractedly, expecting this morning to be just like any other.

Obviously, he was wrong.

Harry stopped dead on his tracks, believing for a moment he had been the victim of a morbid joke. His brain immediately recognised the face of the man standing in front of him. A face which Harry had, through the years, looked upon with suspicion, doubt, weariness, rage and, eventually, reluctant respect and sorrow. Something was off, though. It was him, but he didn’t quite look the same. It wasn’t simply the fact that he was alive, when Harry was sure to have last seen him as he bled to death on the floor of the Shrieking shack. There was something else.

The man standing before Harry was wearing muggle clothing, dark jeans, heavy winter boots, and a black waxed cotton jacket, over a grey woollen jumper. Maybe it was the bulk of the clothes, but it seemed like he had put on some weight. Not much, only enough that but he wasn’t nearly as gaunt as Harry remembered him. He had also lost some of his sickly, sallow pallor. His overgrown hair was carelessly pulled back in a sloppy attempt at a ponytail, obviously meant to get it off his face and out of any style-related concern. All that seemed to connect this man with the Severus Snape Harry remembered were the same cold, prying black eyes and the very noticeable scar that slithered up from his neck ending on his jaw, a gloomy reminder of the last time he had laid eyes on the former Portions Master. Aside from that, Harry could have met this man on any muggle street anywhere in England and never thought anything of it.
"Y-you´re alive" was all Harry could say.

"I´m glad to see your keen observation skills have remained well honed, Potter" Snape spat out, and for a second, all seemed fine, a bizarre sense or normalcy washing over Harry at the sound of Snape being...Snape.

"Come in, Harry." Kingsley said, unaffected "We´re having a different kind of briefing session today. Have a seat. You too, Severus."

....

The Ivy Cottage
Fisher street, Doolin

Evelyn looked around, taking it all in. She had been away for a mere three months, but it felt like so much longer. It was a too cold outside for the girls, so they got a table inside, instead of out on the stone the patio as Evelyn always did when she came to thee Ivy cottage. She didn´t mind it much, though. The cool sunlight poured in through the red windows that seemed to glow against the white walls and the lace curtains, it was warm and the food was fresh and fragrant. It was all she needed.

"Auntie Lyn, is it true that a man tried to kill you?" Alice asked seriously, deadpan. Caitlin´s oldest daughter had a way of asking and saying things that often caught others off guard. Just a few days shy of her seventh birthday, Alice was already intimidatingly perceptive and straightforward. Sophia often reminded Evelyn that she had been quite the same at that age, inquisitive and prone to asking questions that left adults at a loss. Caitlin always joked that Alice looked and acted much more like Evelyn´s child than hers, and it was to an extent true. Cat´s youngest, Lizzie, had her father´s strawberry blonde hair and green eyes with Cat´s gentle, sunny disposition, and delightful penchant for fun and games, but Alice... No, Alice was all Evelyn, with her thick brown hair and wide, alert golden brown eyes that betrayed the the inquisitive, intense mind behind them.

"This is not a very nice thing to ask, Alie." Cat chided "Have you been listening behind doors again?"

"I can hear gran from my room. She said it." Alice shrugged.

"It´s OK, Cat." Evelyn smiled. "And no, nobody tried to kill me, pet. A man tried to steal things from my house but nothing bad happened."

"Did he steal your things?" Lizzie asked distractedly, poking holes on her sausage with a fork.

"No, he didn´t."

"Her neighbour saved her" Caitlin informed them, smirking like she always did when she was trying to poke fun at Evelyn.

"And now he´s your boyfriend?" Alice continued

"Caitlin, don´t go telling the children this. I don´t want mam to know so soon."

"Why not?"

"Because...we´re not quite dating just yet."

"Oh, yeah. Because he´s...problematic."
"You and Fin should get together and discuss my personal life, I´m sure you´ll agree on many points."

"OK, I won´t say anything. What are you doing later?"

"I´ll go see gran when we´re done here. Want to come along, bring the girls?"

"Can we, mam?" Alice asked, prim and proper as usual.

"Of course, I took the day off. We can go to grandma Liz then walk along the pier, how about that?"

....

"I know is a lot to take in, Harry." Kingsley offered, kindly.

Harry sat quiet for a moment, dazed.

Snape was alive.

Snape was alive and the ministry had been hiding him for fear of reprisal from remaining Death Eaters. That much was easy to get. A small voice in Harry´s mind kept nagging him that maybe if he hadn´t been so adamant about making it clear that Snape had been on Dumbledore´s side all along, if he hadn´t gone out of his way to tell ministry officials that, and the information hadn´t leaked to the press, then maybe he wouldn´t be in danger.

It was pointless to think so, of course. At some point people would know how the war had been won. Nobody would ever know Snape´s true secret, what had made him act like he did, that would die with Harry if he had it his way. But it wasn´t fair to let people think he was a traitor, a monster who had helped Voldemort seize Hogwarts, who had murdered Dumbledore. That shouldn´t be his legacy. That in trying to clear his name Harry had inadvertently put a price tag on his head made him feel queasy. He should have known, they should have told him.

"I didn´t know..."

"Nobody was supposed to. At first we didn´t even think Severus would pull through. And once he did there was a long recovery process, and the political climate was...is... not the best. We all did what we believed was best with the hand we´d been dealt. Now, we have other matters at hand."

"The dagger, you mean." Minerva offered.

Snape had been standing by the window the whole time while Kingsley spoke of him as if he wasn´t there. At some point he lit up a cigarette, something that was incredibly jarring to Harry and only enforced the sense of unreality of the whole scene. Professor McGonagall was the only one acting normally, asking questions from the minister, apparently attempting to keep the whole situation from derailing into awkward silence. Harry noticed her eyes darting from him to Snape, and back to him, as if expecting them to go at each other´s throats at any given moment.

"Yes, the dagger. This is where Severus comes in."

"I´ve told you I don´t know where it is. I´ve given you all the information I had." Snape finally spoke, not even bothering to look at Kingsley.

"I know. And I appreciate it. But you know as well as I do your involvement doesn´t end here. Harry..." there was a long pause there "We cannot afford to have the existence of the dagger be known by the public. And that includes our aurors. Too many people know about it as is. I´ve been
keeping you out of the field work, but I think this could be a good opportunity for you to have your first mission."

"But..." Harry choked. The Lestranges were on the run, Fenrir had escaped, many Death Eaters were still unaccounted for. And the ministry wanted him to find a dagger? One that they didn’t even know was of any actual importance?

"The Lestranges have been after Salazar Slytherin’s dagger. We have reason to believe someone is funding them, and we don’t know why. As much as the existence of this object may seem inconsequential, somebody out there wants it and is willing to put in the effort to get to it. And more than the dagger itself, this mission may lead us to the Lestranges location and potentially others. I don’t predict you’ll be engaged in any direct confrontation, as there’s mostly investigation groundwork to be covered. Seems ideal for your first real assignment, and Severus will be there to assist you."

"What?" Harry gasped

"What?" Snape echoed him, turning on his heels and walking up to Kingsley desk as if forgetting Harry and Minerva were even there. "I most certainly will not. Kingsley, this must be a joke. I’ve had my bloody share of babysitting this self-important brat."

"Severus, please. Let him speak before you fly into a rage." Minerva’s tone was calm but pointed.

"Minerva, stay out of this, please."

"I will not. The minister does have a point. Who else you expect would give Harry support in this..."

"Why is Potter even being considered for this?"

"Severus, I don’t have to explain my reasoning to you, but I’ll do it anyway. Out of respect for you and everything you’ve done" Kingsley stood up from his seat, walking around Snape as he spoke. "You happen to be the only one with any solid idea as to where the dagger could be. While I know it’s nothing but suspicion and educated guessing on your part, is all we have. But you will agree that you cannot expose your status. We can’t afford to have more information about the dagger reach more people. We’ve been having leaks. I can’t think of anybody worthier of trust than Harry Potter. And I’ve been keeping him away from direct action this far, so he will not be a distraction. We’ll keep all of this as discreet as possible, and this is the best way to do it. Is it clear enough?"

"If you’re unable to control leaks in your own administration, so I should suffer for it, then? I’m sure there’s somebody else..."

"I have too many people already involved in this for your sake, or should I remind you that Dawlish is engaged, two of his men are on medical leave and I just dispatched Shafiq to Ireland to deal with your … ‘personal interests’ in the matter?"

"You’ve got some nerve Kingsley."

Harry kept watching the scene unfold as if he was watching it on a muggle TV screen. He took in to every word being spoken, his eyes moving from Snape and Kingsley, trying to make sense of it all. There was something they weren’t saying openly, but Harry didn’t feel like he should ask. If he had learned one thing from Dumbledore it was that sometimes patience and planning paid better than jumping into action, and there were some mistakes he wouldn’t be making again if he could help it. So he let them talk, and he listened. If allowing them to make decisions for him was the price Harry had to pay to understand what was truly happening and his place in all of it, he could deal with it, for now.
"Can we talk for a minute?" Harry caught up with Severus in the corridor, after the former Potions Master had stormed off, defeated by Kingsley´s intention of firmly standing his ground. Minerva had stayed in the office as Harry stepped out, hoping to catch Snape before he vanished from sight.

"I don´t see what we could possibly talk about."

"This is uncomfortable for me too, for what´s worth."

"Potter, stop. We´re not doing the 'we have to get along for the greater good' scene. You know as well as I do that you´re the last person I want to be in amicable terms with, all things considered."

"But we have to at least be able to stand each other. You said you accepted working for the ministry, and if they say we have to work together, what can we do? I don´t like it any more than you do."

"Kingsley had no right." He seemed to be about to say something else, but didn´t.

"But it´s done. We can at least try to be, I don´t know, civil."

"Civil?" Snape scoffed, almost laughing.

"I´m not going to lie and say I don´t have a questions I want to ask, things I want to know. But I know I can´t ask more than you´ve already told me. And I´m fine with it. I think. Everything that happened in the shrieking shack...it´s all in the past if you want. But I need you to help me. I need guidance and you´re the only one who can do that."

"You never welcomed my guidance without putting up a fight. Why would it be any different now?"

"We both know why. We don´t have to be friends or anything. I´m not expecting you to tell me childhood stories about my mother over a cup of tea. I´m not that naïve. But we can at least be in the same room without it being too much of a burden."

"No we can´t. You will always be a burden to me to some extent. It´s not your fault, mind you, it´s just what it is." he sighed "I suppose you do have a point, though. If we have to endure each other´s presence, we might as well try to be civil. And the sooner we sort this out, the sooner I won´t have to stand your presence any longer."

"That´s a way of staying positive." Harry shrugged

"I didn´t appreciate your humour back then, and I certainly don´t appreciate it now, Potter." Severus walked up to him, his voice mellowing "Kingsley´s personal assistant has my address if you need it. The minister will contact us for whatever he feels like is the next step, but you should probably know where to find me in case you need."

....

Lizzie burst into the room as soon as Elizabeth opened the door, and jumped into her great-grandmother´s arms. Alice followed right after, offering a more polite, delicate hug. Elizabeth greeted the girls back, her laughter like wind chimes in the breeze. Paul, Evelyn and Caitlin used to greet her in the same manner when they were little and their parents brought them along to visit the grandparents. Back then Elizabeth had been a fairly young grandmother, with plenty of games up her sleeve, and a never-ending list of recipes and crafts they could all do together. Thirty years later, the soft brown of her hair was gone, replaced by grey curls, her delicate doll-like face had gained lines and wrinkles, and her eyes didn´t see as well as before, but not much else had changed. Grandma Liz
Elizabeth’s house still smelled of fresh linens and cakes, her hugs still smelled of gardenia and her skilled hands still painted watercolours and made colourful paper crafts to entertain her babies. Everything was still right in the world when they crossed her threshold.

Looking at Elizabeth, one would be pressed to believe she had recently lost her only child, and not a full two years before that her husband of over 60 years. Evelyn couldn’t begin to imagine the kind of pain she had endured, and yet she had emerged from it with grace very few could muster in the face of tragedy. The same grace and sheer willpower she had used to keep her family apart when Paul had died, two decades before. Evelyn was convinced that without her around her parents and her grandfather would have gone insane from the grief. But not her, not Elizabeth. The world could fall apart around her, and she’d still be standing.

Elizabeth let go of the girls to give Caitlin a hug, leaving Evelyn for last.

"Gran..." Evelyn told her quietly into their embrace, so quietly nobody else in the room would hear. "I need to talk to you for a moment."

…

"They’re back. The nightmares." Evelyn whispered looking out the window, pulling away the curtains. The trees and bushes in the backyard were covered with frost and the sky was a dull shade of grey. On the kitchen table, Caitlin oversaw as the girls worked on creating collages with the coloured pieces of paper and fabric scraps Liz had laid out for them.

"About Paul?" Liz asked just as quietly.

"Yes and no. I mean..."

"Come, child...Let’s go into the sewing room for a moment."

Evelyn quickly glanced at Caitlin, who offered a supportive nod, and followed her grandmother.

That room had been her father’s boyhood bedroom before he got married and moved out. It had then been turned into a delightful little refuge filled with boxes, drawers, pastel colours and florals where Elizabeth could work on her sewing, knitting and crocheting. Once Sophia married into the family she’d spend long hours in it with her mother-on-law, learning specific and intricate lace designs and knitting patterns. Elizabeth had tried to teach Evelyn and Caitlin, but Evelyn lacked the interest and Caitlin the focus, and neither made it past the basics. Enough that none of them needed to pay to have clothes fixed or hemmed, but not enough to create dresses, sweaters or blouses like Elizabeth did. Evelyn wanted to pick up sewing again, now that she was a little more mature, but alas, she never found the time.

"What did you dream of?" Elizabeth asked, rummaging to find a knit she had abandoned halfway done. Knitting while listening helped her clear her thoughts and concentrate.

"I was in a forest. It was dreadfully cold and there was snow all around me. I was lost. Then I heard him call my name."

"Paul..." Liz offered, looking at her over her glasses

"He was there. Leading me through the forest as a pack of wolves chased after us, grey wolves led by a white wolf. They chased us till Paul vanished, and there was a snake, a giant snake..."

"The snakes again...It’s been a long time you don’t dream with them...What happened to it? This snake?"
"I woke up when the white wolf attacked it...Straight in the jugular. It doesn´t mean anything, does it?"

"You tell me, dear...The person dreaming is often the best one to tell what the dream means."

"I´m afraid not...It made no sense. None of my dreams ever did..."

"That´s not true."

"Gran...would you read my cards?"

"I don´t do that any more, pet, and you know it."

"Please, I was leaving for college last time you did."

"And it didn´t help you then."

"Didn´t do me any harm either..."

"Fine...But not now. Not with the little ones in the house. Come back to dinner tonight."

Claire was nowhere to be seen. Selwyn walked the halls of the Rotts manor anxiously, not knowing what to do with himself. Dmitri hadn´t contacted him since his arrival and Ludwig had been away for days, which had left him alone with Claire and her escalating mania. She´d lurk around corners or lock herself in the study for hours, and whenever she bothered to speak to him was to ask the same questions about Evelyn Black over and over again. He didn´t know what to do to placate her, so he had been awfully relieved once Ludwig was back.

Herr Rott had managed to alert his closest acquaintances to the fact that the British ministry was closely monitoring activity in France, but had been careful to keep all information pertaining to Severus Snape and the infiltrated agent to himself. While at it, he had also proceeded to put some order into his finances, calling in debts and finishing some business he had left unattended. Ludwig wanted to be in a stable position for when the time to spring to action finally came. There was no way of knowing who they´d have to bribe, what documents they´d have to forge and how much manpower they´d have to hire to deal with Snape. Ludwig and Claire agreed on one thing: attacking Snape directly was a stupid idea, but targeting his lover, while dangerous, was a much more feasible alternative. A simple kidnapping, which wasn´t all that simple, if one took into account everything that could go wrong.

Selwyn´s peace lasted very little. Not a day after Ludwig had arrived, Claire herself was gone. Without any warning or explanation. But then again why would she tell him anything? She could barely hide her annoyance at Selwyn´s presence, his inability to provide any clue she could immediately act upon, and his constant attempts to curb her impulses seemed to be starting to chip at her, naturally not very generous, patience. Selwyn feared that the Rotts suspected his presence in their house had ulterior motives, and refrained from insisting or looking too interested. Ludwig went about his business as usual, dropping an oddly casual line about Claire spending New Years with some acquaintances of theirs in Austria, as if to answer to any questions Selwyn had not asked yet, but might.

Selwyn didn´t have a lot of time to think about whether Claire really was in Austria or if he was being lied to, as Ludwig proceeded to find him a place to stay. Draco Malfoy would be returning soon, and they couldn´t just cross each other´s paths in the hallways. The Rotts didn´t believe Draco would rattle on them, but the Malfoys had been trying to publicly dissociate themselves from any
remaining Death Eaters, as part of Lucius’ arrest conditions. Draco was then purposely left in the dark about everything.

So Selwyn meekly moved away, hoping to keep himself in the Rotts good graces would allow him to maintain access to them. Now, comfortably installed in a small apartment in a nearby town, a mere bus ride away, he had time to think. And the more he did, the less he liked the picture. Claire knew the name of Snape’s lover, her profession, her place of birth, and she knew where to find her and where to find Snape. And now Claire was out of his radar.

He had to contact Dmitri.

....

After dinner, Evelyn had started to do the dishes when her grandmother called her back into the dinning room. The tablecloth had been removed and the lights dimmed, a solitary candle burned on the table, as the two women sat across from each other and the cards were shuffled and dealt.

Elizabeth had been doing tarot readings for fun, for friends and family since her girlhood. Her mother had taught her, behind her father’s back. She didn’t know where her mother had learned it, but quite a few in the family suspected she had learned from one of the groups of travellers or Roma which were somewhat more common around the countryside in the XIXth century than now. A couple people even joked she may have been one of them. Such colourful family legends amused Evelyn, even if she found they didn’t have much in the way of evidence to stand on.

However, since the deaths of her husband and son, in such close proximity of each other, Evelyn’s grandmother had put away her deck of cards and never opened it again for anybody. It’s commonly said that fortune tellers can’t read their own destiny in the cards, and Elizabeth had never had any interest in doing so, but when life sneaked up on her that way, she lost the will to even do it for other people. Evelyn knew that if she had agreed to read her cards, it was only because Elizabeth could see she needed.

Elizabeth chose the quick three card reading method, which Evelyn suspected had something to do with her wanting to get it over with. Three cards. Past, present and future. Evelyn drew each one and waited.

"Six of cups." Liz announced, turning the card that was supposed to represent her past. Upon it Evelyn could see two children, a boy and a girl surrounded by golden cups from which white flowers blossomed.

Then she opened the second card, present.

"Death." Evelyn stared at the the Grim Reaper, whose skeletal frame was wearing a black armour as it rode a pale horse over the body of a cleric, scythe in hand and rabid laughter in its fleshless face.

Finally the third card, future, was turned

"Knight of pentacles" under a golden sky, a man in silver armour, calm and collected, rode a black horse across a field, holding an orb with a pentagram drawn upon it.

"OK, so what do they mean?"

"Six of cups" Elizabeth started after a long pause "Nostalgia. Innocence. You need to look back upon your life as it was before so you can move forward. You’re tied to something in your past, and you need to break free. And you will, you like it or not. See, Death is next to the Six of cups. Death is change, it’s transformation. But not just any change, it’s drastic change. When Death appears in
your cards it always indicates a time of significant transformation. I feel it will be sudden and out of your control. Something big is coming your way."

"Well, then.." Evelyn shifted on her seat "How about the last one."

"The knight." Liz smiled. "The best place in your reading for the Knight of Pentacles is in the future. The Knight of Pentacles is your knight in shining armour when he is in your future. If you want to go through the trials the other two cards posed for you, the Knight of pentacles can help you. This card is telling you you have to prepare to call upon your own strength, or rely on someone´s help."

"So, whatever is coming my way...it means I´ll overcome it?"

"It means you can overcome it but it will take hard work. The knight of Pentacles is a card that speaks of faith and patience. There will be someone by your side, but it depends on you, that you´re willing to take a leap in the dark and gather the strength to make the changes the other two cards say you must."

"I´ve taken enough leaps in the dark for a lifetime, gran..."

"And you´ll have to do it again. I don´t foresee peace for you anytime soon with this spread. I can see you´ll have the fortitude to face what´s coming, but not that it will be over any time soon. All I can tell you is that I have the feeling you won´t go through it alone."

"That´s comforting" Evelyn smirked

"I´m sorry, pet." Liz sighed, collecting the cards "I wish I could tell you different, nicer things."

"Actually, it wasn´t as bad as I feared." Evelyn, smiled, getting up "I´ll finish the dishes and make us some tea"

"Linnie..."

"Yes?"

"There´s a man, isn´t there?"

Evelyn blinked, surprised, but didn´t answer.

"Don´t tell me if you don´t want to, dear. It was just a guess. The Knight of pentacles almost always represents a man, specially in a young woman´s cards."

"What kind of man?"

"My mother used to say the Knight of Pentacles is always a dark haired man of great intelligence. A merchant or professor." she laughed softly "I don´t know how serious she was about that or if she just wanted to give the girls who came to her something romantic to look forward to. But from my experience when knight of Pentacles is related to man always signs an honourable, reliable one."

"I hope so."

"We can open the cards again if you want, it should be clearer with a more specific question."

"I think I rather not know about this one just yet."
Working with Polyjuice was definitely not his favourite part of the job. The sense of physical dysphoria and depersonalization that often came with it could be quite overwhelming, specially if one made a habit of it. And for this particular mission Virgil Shafiq would have to make a habit of it. Doolin was a small town, he couldn´t risk running into Evelyn Black multiple times wearing the same face over and over again. He was supposed to keep an eye on her, not come off like a stalker. For this particular mission he had been provided with an array of ten different mixes, each carefully brewed to last no more than 10 hours. He checked into a hotel with his own face, and once outside he would change appearance at will, so he could always follow Evelyn Black with a new persona, and finally, at the end of the day, return to his room as himself again, so the hotel staff wouldn´t suspect a thing. The operation demanded control of time, but Doolin seemed to function on a typically predictable small town schedule.

She had been out an about with her sister and nieces for hours. An uneventful day, all considered. She went back at her grandmother´s house at night, without ever noticing the same 50-something white man with grey hair and thick rimmed glasses just casually lingering idly everywhere she went. Mercifully the effects of the potion had started to wear off while she was still inside the house and Virgil was comfortably sitting in his own car parked in an alley, so nobody was around to see a white older gentleman suddenly turn into a middle-eastern young man in his late 20s right in the middle of the street. Not that many people ventured outside at night as Winter became more and more inclement with each passing day. There would be snow soon, he reckoned.

Finally, she exited the house. Virgil looked on as she got into her car and drove away but...that was not the direction he expected her to go. She wasn´t going home, apparently, but instead was taking Fisher Street down to the...coast?

…

The air was frigid as she left her car and started to walk. The booths where one could buy tickets for the ferry or rent boats were closed, empty and dark, only a couple lamp posts shedding some glow on the tarmac upon which big yellow letters indicated the waiting area for visitors boarding for the Aran Islands. The crescent moon shed a pale golden-silver light over the water and the rumbling sound of waves and wind reached her ears, erasing her uneasy thoughts, worries and anxiety. Evelyn closed her trench coat, put her hands inside her pockets and walked past the waiting area and onto the rocks. Even with the heavy boots she was wearing, Evelyn could feel the water lick her feet.

The Atlantic could be vicious in the best of times, but Winter made it specially nasty and angry. Evelyn didn´t mind it. She was used to its temper, growing up with the ocean as her backyard the roll of thunderous waves lashing at the rocks had been her lullaby in many a sleepless night. She couldn´t tell how many times she had sneaked out of the house in the dead of night to come to these rocks and hear the song of the water and the wind, sung into liquid darkness. When the sky was clear, she´d stare up for what felt like hours, relishing on the feeling the she could dive into the sea of stars above just as easily as she could have done it into the water. On fair, warmer Summer nights, when the sea was calm and content, she would sometimes go in. She didn´t care what her parents would think about her coming home in the middle of the night, or even in the morning, wet and salty after diving into the night sea like a raving lunatic. It was worth it for the feeling of floating under a canopy of constellations and nebulae, feeling like she was the only person awake in the world and the sky gave her a personal display of lights.

Some people felt the ‘appel du vide’, the ‘call of void’, those odd, overwhelming intrusive thoughts about the abyss. ‘What if I jumped’ suddenly popped into their head as they stood close to the window of a tall building or atop of a cliff. Evelyn´s abyss was the darkness of the ocean. She always found herself drawn to its formidable depths. Her grandfather once told her she had mermaid blood, which was why the call of the sea was so seductive, so overpowering...why it felt like home.
She wondered if there was a bit of true to that, as even now, standing on the rocks, facing the turbulent waves that roared at her, cold and unforgiving, Evelyn felt like going in.

"Hey! Get out of there it´s dangerous!"

....

Virgil hated to blow his cover like this, but better safe than sorry. He didn´t know Evelyn Black well enough to guess if she was the type who would jump into the choppy freezing sea in the middle of the night, but after watching her stand there for so long, still like a statue, staring at the waves, it really looked like she was about to do exactly that. She was shin deep in when he finally decided to call out to her.

Evelyn turned to him, forceful winds blowing her hair over her face, and started to calmly make her way back to the concrete stairs that led from the tarmac to the rocks, as if she had been awakened from a trace. Shafiq rushed towards her, not quite knowing what to say. "Hi, I was just wondering if you would be crazy enough to jump in the sea and freeze to death" was not a very good conversation starter.

"Is everything OK, ma´am?" he finally decided for a more neutral approach. Once she was within reach, Virgil offered a hand to help her climb back up the wet slippery steps, which she gently waved away.

"Everything is perfectly fine" she smiled, cryptically, as if amused by his concern.

"I´m sorry, I thought you were about to fall...And it´s not a nice night to go swimming."

"Don´t worry. I wasn´t about to fall. And I´ve swam in worse weather before. I´m terribly sorry if I scared you."

"Oh..." he stared at her, the placid expression on her face, barely lit by the moonlight, catching him off guard. She didn´t look like a person about to fall in the sea, by accident or otherwise, but more so like she had emerged from deep within the bowels of the ocean itself, and his all-too-human fretting for her safety was laughable. There was something oddly intimidating about it.

"My name is Evelyn."

"Virgil." he shook her hand, not quick enough on his feet to think of an alias.

"Do you need a lift?" she asked, as they walked back to the road where their cars were parked.

"No, my car is over there."

"So you just happened to be driving around the coast at this time?"

"Much like you just happened to be taking a stroll on the beach at this time."

Under the artificial light from the light poles, Virgil could finally make out her features clearly. He had been following her around for a day, but only now he felt like he was truly seeing her. Nobody had told him anything in that regard, and he wasn´t inconsiderate enough to have asked, but Virgil suspected she was romantically involved with his former Head of House, just from the way the minister had framed his assignment. It was a strange idea, but Shafiq wasn´t hired to have opinions about anybody´s personal lives. Yet, looking at her from up close, Virgil somehow understood it.

"What brings you to Doolin?" she finally asked
"I’ve been told the scenery is nice, unique."

"It is, but not many people come for the scenery this time of the year."

"I didn’t have the chance before. It’s still nice, though. If a bit scary."

"Sometimes there’s more raw beauty in rough stormy skies than in peaceful sunny hills. True beauty should make you at least a bit scared. It should humble you. Not everybody can appreciate that."

"I can see what you mean..."

"Well, I should get going. As much as I’d like to keep chatting, it’s getting late. Good night, Virgil. I guess I’ll see you around?"


Claire would never cease to be disgusted at how intertwined with muggles the Parisian wizarding community could be. Of course, being such an old city, exclusively magical spaces and settlements were often ancient, preceding the establishment of segregating laws. So wizards and witches had to resort to charms, spells and strategies to hide in plain sight, while rubbing elbows with muggles at every turn. Most Parisian wizards found it to be mildly amusing, the bulk of them being eccentric and liberal urbanites who lacked the understanding of how serious and dangerous such proximity could be.

She couldn’t stand Paris. Only pressed by important matters would she ever bother to set foot on that muggle-ridden stretch of land. As she sat by the window of a café located in one of the very few truly exclusively wizarding areas of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, looking out at the men and women leisurely strolling outside, most of them wearing a grotesque mix of wizard clothes and the latest muggle fashions, Claire waited.

"My apologies for the delay." a man approached her table. She looked up at him for a brief moment, just enough to tell he was tall, probably in his late 50s or early 60s, wearing a well-tailored suit, and sporting a moustache. As he took a seat she didn’t offer, her eyes wandered back outside.

"Well, then?" she let out without greeting him

"I hope you can appreciate that we are going out of our way to help you here. Should the French Ministry find out..." he said, obviously miffed by her dismissive attitude.

"Spare me. You’ve been paid well enough for your help and at this point scruples about the ministry shouldn’t be a concern. So...is there an infiltrated agent or not?"

"If there is, they haven’t contacted anybody in France."

Claire sighed. Selwyn obviously wanted her to take his word for it that there was an infiltrated agent, and that he somehow was privy to that information. While the idea of a spy wasn’t a stretch, for Selwyn of all people would be their contact in France was ludicrous. He was not that important that a spy infiltrated in the British Ministry would risk their cover to save him and send him back to France, then promptly make no contact with anybody else. If this person existed, Claire had some reservation as to whether they really wanted to collaborate with any of the French groups currently aiding British fugitives, or simply throw dust in their eyes.

"We do have confirmation that there have been leaks from the British ministry. Our intelligence
sector has been alerted about it." he continued "Which explains the recent stream of detainee escapes. Their rescuers have been tipped off about schedules and locations for the legal proceedings as well as the routes the ministry is using to move prisoners from one place to the other. None of that would have been accomplished without help from inside. Kingsley Shacklebolt is suspiciously quiet about it though."

"Probably trying to keep up appearances and avoid panic while he launches an internal investigation. How about the other favour I asked you?"

"Oh, that..." he smirked "Everything you have on this woman checks out. It was easy to confirm it all. Anybody with access to a library card and the public records of Trinity college’s former employees can tell you all you need about her."

Claire smiled. If everything Selwyn told her about Evelyn Black checked out, then...What was the name of her hometown again? Ah, yes...Doolin. She still had family there; family she would probably be visiting for the holidays, if she was anything like most muggles.

It was worth the shot.
Chapter Summary

In which Severus surrenders, enemies close in, and Evelyn contemplates her place in the world.

December 31st

Severus´ breath caught on his throat at the realization that she was there. In his room. In his bed.

He didn´t have to see her in the dark to know it was her. He knew her scent by now, he knew the way the lavender mingled with her skin to create something unique, something all hers. It was a fragrance he could pick out from any other scent. Severus felt the mattress cave under her weight and that scent overwhelmed him. He raised his hands, groping at the dark, till he found skin. No clothes, just smooth, warm skin. He palmed at her sides, finding her waist, shaky fingers sliding down the generous arch of her arse, grabbing at that curve where it met the thickness of the thighs straddling him. Severus felt her breath on his lips followed by the caress of laughter and a kiss. A long, lingering, overpowering kiss.

Severus didn´t know which one of them turned the side table light on, but he was glad of it. In the yellowish light he could see her face, golden brown eyes glowing liquid gold, just like they did in that morning at the top of the mill, red lipstick smudged over her lips. There was something on her face, the glint of mischief of a cat as it´s about to knock a fragile object from the table just to watch it shatter. Severus felt a twinge of satisfaction in knowing himself her plaything, in how much he ached to get shattered.

"Missed me?" he purred, her voice s dark thick and sweet as warm caramel poured on his tongue.

Severus didn´t answer. He simply grabbed her by the arse, roughly pulling her down onto his body, pushing his crotch up against her so she could feel just how much he missed her. With an impish grin she ran her lips against the ragged scars on his neck and jaw, her hips rolling into him, slow, pressing down, grinding on his pelvis, drawing strangled, elated sighs from his mouth.

Reality roughly pulled him back with the loud ring of the alarm clock announcing 6am.

Severus found himself sweating, covers and clothes trapping his body. Still half asleep, he kicked the covers off and clumsily peeled off his nightshirt, forcing his eyes shut, desperately trying to cling to the last traces of that dream before it was completely gone. The cool morning breeze crept into the bedroom, painfully licking at his overheated skin, making him all the more aware of the tension in his muscles and nerves.

How many times had he done this, he wonders, and shaky hands pushed his underwear down, fingers wrapping around himself, stroking erratically towards a desperate release. The image of Evelyn had started creeping into his dreams scarcely a couple weeks after they met. He didn´t think much of it then. He had been isolated from nearly all human contact for months, and she had been the first person to show any interest in interacting with him in a rather long time. And she was beautiful. Sexual release is a biological need, he´d tell himself. His brain just drifted to the nearest attractive woman it could think of when his body acted up on him. It was awkward and
embarrassing, but ultimately it meant nothing.

Then it came a point where it wouldn’t be just dreams. He would intentionally evoke her to get himself off. He’d intentionally picture her, try to imagine her body under the clothes, imagine how she sounded when pleasure overcame her, her face when she climaxed. Then there was that bloody Christmas Eve, and now he knew. He knew the taste of her mouth, the sound of her moans, the way her eyes fluttered under heavy eyelids when she got aroused, the exact shade of rose her skin flushed over the faint sheen of freckles, the precise shape and feel of her body. And now his entire body craved it, like it had just been exposed to a drug for the first time and needed a bigger dosage. Severus felt like a starving man denied entrance to a feast he could smell from the street outside.

"Fuck" he cursed as the jolt of pent up energy washed over him, his body finally relaxing in the afterglow of his climax.

6am. Why the hell had he set the alarm for 6am?

Oh, yes. That was the time she’d be waking up. It was the last day of the year and he had promised her he’d call earlier in the day. Something about a party her mother was having that night and she’d would be busy helping...

…

"Hey, love..." she slurred, and Severus heard a faint yawn on the other side of the line.

"Did I wake you up?"

"Not really. I’ve been awake for a moment. But you sound wide awake for 6 in the morning. Did you sleep well?"

"Quite."

"Did you dream about me?"

"I..." his voice trailed off as he was taken aback by the bluntness of the question

"You know you can tell me those things. In fact you should. I dream about you most nights too, you know?"

"'Most' nights?"

"Well sometimes it’s Daniel Day-Lewis"

"Who?"

"Begorrah, Severus, you need to go to cinema more often. We’ll take care of it when I come back, don’t worry."

"Well, what are you up to?

"Just enjoying my bed before mam drags me out of it to start the preparations for tonight’s dinner"

"She’s really throwing another party?"

"It’s just a little dinner party to celebrate New Years. Alice’s birthday is on the second of January, so she’ll keep today small. I told her we should skip New Year’s, so we could focus on Alice’s party, but mam will use any excuse to organise a soirée."
"Well, that’s where you get it then."

"I guess" she laughed and he tried not to picture her stretching lazily on her bed "By the way, not that I’m complaining, and I’m not at all complaining, but isn’t it a little early for you? I know I asked you to call me in the morning but you didn’t have to leave the house before 6, it must be frightfully cold outside."

"I’m home, actually."

"You finally got a phone?" she almost shrieked

"Yes." he sighed, recalling the pain it had been to have the bloody thing installed "I told you I would, didn’t I?"

"And you’re a man of your word. This is grand, now you can call me before bed so I can give you something more interesting to entertain yourself than just these dreams are those you’re having."

"How do you know what kind dreams I’m having?"

"Well if they’re anything like mine..." he could hear her voice drop a couple octaves and get throaty. "Bloody hell, woman..."

"Has anybody ever told you you sound quite sexy when you’re bothered?"

"You’re getting ideas, aren’t you?"

"Yes, and I’m keeping notes on them for when I come back."

......

Severus put down the phone and glanced at his desk, on top of which lay the keys to Evelyn’s house. She had been gone for a little under a week, and he still hadn’t been over there to check the attic. He had the intention several times, but as soon as he headed to the door, the will left him. A month and a half prior it had been easy to sneak into her house while she was away, at work. He and Minerva had cleaned her attic of all the dark magic artefacts, a process which involved going in and out several times with no regard whatsoever as to the ethics of doing what amounted to breaking into a muggle’s private property to retrieve objects that technically belonged to her family. Why did the idea bother him so much now?

Because, he concluded, she wasn’t just any muggle now. And because everything inside that house had suddenly become awfully personal for him. Severus knew Evelyn wouldn’t mind if he went in, in fact she had left him a copy of the keys with the suggestion that he watched the New Year’s fireworks on her television if he didn’t have anywhere to go for the night. She probably wanted him to see that bloody inscription and give some, hopefully reassuring, input. So his discomfort had nothing to do about her authorizing his entry or not. It was probably that, while he was far from being just an intruder now, he was still a long way from being fully part of that small world she had build for herself in the house next door. Maybe that was the thing that bothered him. However, regardless of his personal feelings, he had to go.

...

"Mam...?"

Her mother hadn’t gone up to call her. Maybe she was letting her sleep in, Evelyn thought, but that
wasn’t very much like her. Since Evelyn had arrived she noticed her mother had been keeping herself busy, conjuring dinners and parties out of thin air in an obvious attempt to distract herself. It had been the first Christmas after Evelyn’s father’s passing, and today it would be the first New Year’s Eve. The fact that her mother seemed to be taking it at stride had reassured her for a while, but now she was starting to worry that things were not as well as they seemed. Evelyn finally found her sitting in her room, on her favourite powder blue armchair, the one right next to the small altar she kept with a Bible, the sacred heart and images of numerous saints, among which St. George, St. Paul, St. Brigid and St. Teresa of Avila were shown prominently.

"Evelyn, you should get some more rest. We’ll be up late tonight."

"I know, but I was wondering if you need help with anything." Evelyn came closer, noticing her mother was knitting. "Is that...?"

"It’s almost finished." Sophia smiled, showing her a moss green Aran jumper with the intricate pattern of upright Vs and inverted Vs flanked by chained knots typical of the Byrnes. It was the pattern the Black family wore. Grandpa Marius was an Englishman, so he couldn’t trace his roots back to any of the traditional Irish clans, but grandma Liz was a Byrne, so he simply adopted the Byrne’s Aran jumper pattern. Just like he had adopted a whole new Irish identity when he married her, thus erasing his English past so well that even now Evelyn had trouble piecing it together.

"You decided to finish it?" When Evelyn’s father passed away last February, a couple weeks short of his birthday, that jumper was nearly finished. It was a gift intended to replace an old favourite, which was worn from wear. Sophia had simply abandoned it inside a drawer, neither finishing nor unravelling the piece.

"It’s not good to leave things unfinished. Unfinished things can keep you from moving forward. And I suppose I have to let go of this. Is not like he’s ever going to wear it."

"What are you doing with it once it’s finished?"

"I’ll give it to somebody who will wear it, of course. In fact, I believe I have a good candidate for it."

"Who?" Evelyn smiled, mentally listing all male relatives and friends who could inherit the jumper.

"That’s neighbour of yours, what’s his name?"

"Severus? You’re giving it to Severus?"

"The man saved your life, as your mother the least I can do is give him a lousy jumper. You think it will fit him?"

"I think so, yes..." she nodded, muffling a little giggle with her hand.

"What are you laughing at?"

"I just remembered green happens to be one of his favourite colours. In fact is the only colour he wears aside from black."

"All the better then. Get me the yarn and I can make a black one if you want. Now, shall we go to the kitchen? We have an awful lot of things to do"

…..

Exactly as Evelyn had described. The Latin inscription surrounding a rudimentary Dark Mark was
indeed engraved on the floorboards of her attic, and Severus wondered how on Earth both he and Minerva could have missed it. Maybe they just hadn’t bothered to look down at the floor as they moved all the books and paraphernalia out, working in semi-darkness and pressed for time. He pulled a piece of paper from his back pocket and a chunk of drawing charcoal he fortunately happened to have laying around and got to work. Laying the paper on top of the inscription he carefully rubbed the charcoal over it so the image was transferred. Under the light of his wand he compared the original to his improvised copy, deeming them similar enough. Having done that he exited the attic and went down the stairs.

Severus knew Evelyn had turned one of the bedrooms into an office that doubled as a guest room, and he suspected that, if she had any papers or documents that could provide him with more clues about the house, they’d be there. The two bedrooms were side by side, both closed. Opening the first door, Severus realized it was her bedroom, not the office. He felt tempted to step inside. Her presence was everywhere. In the containers of make-up and perfume neatly lined up on the rosewood vanity, in the art posters on the walls, the lace curtains, the crisp bedsheets and the large, round plush cat bed on the richly decorated oriental rug. He sought refuge on the next door, only to be enveloped on that aura once more. Her office was no less full of Evelyn than her bedroom. The same choice of pillows and covers on a couch that doubled as a bed in the event of overnight visitors, the same Mucha, Beardsley and Klimt reproductions covering the walls, the same elegantly calculated chaos of books, papers and trinkets.

Severus approached the desk taking a peek at her recent work. Large, flowery handwriting filled notebooks, printed articles had entire paragraphs highlighted in bright pink or yellow and multicoloured bookmarks spoked from the pages of reference books. The only thing that seemed to break the harmony of that desk was an ungainly, boxy computer, the unsightly object muggles used for work and study, which had recently become a more and more common household staple.

Over the desk, on the wall, a large cork panel overflowed with photos. Severus smiled to himself once he realized those weren’t just any photos. They were milestones on a wall full of accomplishments. Evelyn in her graduation gown, family members surrounding her. Evelyn as a child wearing green Irish step dancing garments. Then a little older, early into her teens with the first traits of womanhood accentuated by a red dress with tiers upon tiers of skirts, marking the time she switched from Irish dance to Flamenco. It was a choice her her mother had disapproved of, but turned out to become a life long passion of hers. A photo of her at the beach, the first time she had travelled abroad by herself, to the Côte D’Azur, and the white swimsuit she had bought for that occasion. Behind her parents back, of course, as it was too revealing for a good Irish Catholic lass of 18. Photos of her with friends and family at parties, graduations, birthdays, trips. All the happy stories she had told him in their lazy evenings together. Something tugged inside his chest as he wondered, against his better judgement, if his own photo would one day end up on that wall.

Enough of that, he thought, springing into action. Luckily for him, the chaos on that desk was only apparent. Under the papers and books he found neatly labelled folders, with personal documents, research papers, letters and everything else scrupulously organised and tagged. Carefully clearing a space on the desk upon which he could work, Severus sat down, got a blank piece of paper and a pen and started to go over the documents, sketching a tentative history of that house.

The house deed that contained Marius Black Senior’s name dated from 1928. At around the same time he had been exiled, give or take a year. Of course, supremacist ideas were around for long before that. All such literature Severus and Minerva had recovered from the attic was late XIXth to early Xxth century. None of it later than 1928. He had assumed the house had been closed since then, serving as a mere deposit for material that could be seen as incriminating. The Dark Mark in the attic had his mind about that.
Tom Riddle was born in 1926. He started attending Hogwarts in 1938 and by the 1940s he already had a small following of fellow students who would later become the first Death Eaters. In their early stages the group had called itself "Knights of Walpurgis". Which told Severus that inscription had been made at around that time or immediately afterwards. It did look like the sort of simple graffiti a group of self-aggrandizing teenagers flirting with dark magic would scribble. So, that meant Riddle, or someone in his little club had been in this house, and maybe conducted meetings. Which made him wonder. How many times? For how long? Were they still meeting here while the Snapes lived right next door?

The screeching of the telephone interrupted his thoughts. He couldn’t pick up, so he’d have to wait until whoever was calling to simply gave up. He had, however, forgotten about the existence of that handy muggle invention called answering machine, so the sound of Evelyn’s voice caught him off guard. An yet it wasn’t nearly as surprising as the voice he heard after the beep.

"Hello, Lyn? It’s me...Richard. I...I wasn’t sure you’d be spending the holidays in England or back home, so...I called you on Christmas but you didn’t..."

Whatever words that came after that man’s name barely registered on Severus brain. On an impulse he got up and picked up the phone, without a single clue as to what he could have to say to this man, or why he should bother to say anything at all.

"Hello."

There was silence on the other side of the line for a moment.

"Pardon me, but...who..."

"I’m afraid Evelyn won’t be able to talk, Mr. Keenan."

"How do you..." another long pause. Severus savored the shock in his voice like he would an expensive, fine wine "I see..."

"Would you like to leave a message?"

"No, no thank you. Just, let Evelyn know I called."

"Of course. Good day and..." he paused, before striking the coup de grace "good luck with the new book. We heard you’ve been struggling with it."

... 

"A glass of champagne for your thoughts," Fin came into the office holding two glasses and clinked them to get her attention.

Evelyn had retreated into her father’s old office sometime after the last guests arrived. Sophia’s idea of a small dinner party would make some wedding receptions look humble. The family had showed up en masse, so had all the ladies from church as well as the people from the kennel club, then there were the family friends, neighbours and whoever else happened to be passing by the street, really. She usually had as much fun with these parties as her mother did. The excitement of preparing, cooking, then talking to everyone, listening to the same old jokes that somehow became funnier the more they were told, catching up with the news. Even the clean up afterwards was fun. Evelyn and Caitlin would usually do it for early the next morning, blasting music and dancing with the mops as Sophia got her well deserved rest, basking on the laurels of another well planned event. When their father was alive he’d take her out to have breakfast somewhere as they got the house back to pristine condition and rewarded themselves with whatever leftovers were there from the evening.
But today she wasn´t feeling all that enthusiastic.

"I´m not sure my thoughts are worth that much." she smiled as he sat across from her handing her the glass.

"Don´t tell Lewis that then, the man has been investing good money to have your thoughts printed. He´s even selling them to the Russians now. You know the Russians don´t care for anything cheap. But why are you hidding here? The old folks out there are about to bust into rave mode, love, you´re missing on all the fun. I´m sure somebody just broke out the dominoes."

"I just wanted to sit down for a moment. Breaking in new heels, my feet are killing me."

"The nerve endings on your feet went completely numb somewhere between 1988 and 1991, Lyn. Try another one."

"Ok, fine...It´s my mother."

"She seems fine."

"She always does. That´s what worries me. She finished dad´s jumper..."

"She did? That´s good, then. She had that thing sitting there for months."

"She wants me to give it to Severus."

"Oh...You told her you two are..?"

"No. Because we aren´t. Strictly speaking."

"I´d worry about sorting that out then. Your mother will be fine."

…. 

Anya knocked on his office door and entered without even waiting for an answer.

"You´re making a habit out of this, Anya." Dmitri smiled, not truly bothered. Anya knew exactly how much liberty she had within the household, and his office was never off limits for her. Chiding her was more of an affectionate formality than anything else. They had, after all, known each other since childhood. She was probably the only person in the world who didn´t need to bother knocking. Not even Arseniy had that much freedom.

"We have news from France and Britain." she got two envelopes from her folder and slid them across the desk in his direction. "The test results on the stones is back as well"

"On to the news first, then we´ll look into the stones."

"Selwyn reported that Claire hasn´t been in the house for days now. She´s supposed to be visiting relatives, but he doesn´t believe it. Draco just arrived in France and reported the exact same to the Ministry. Our liaison has informed us that Shacklebolt has deployed a lone agent to Ireland. Doolin to be more precise."

"So, we´re back to Evelyn Black. She´s in Doolin I assume."

"Yes. I´ve checked with Liverpool and she boarded a ferry headed to Dublin on December 27th. Certainly she went from there to Doolin."
"How about the agent they sent to Doolin, do we have any information on him or her?"


"Only the best for Snape I see. It wouldn´t surprise me if he picked this lad personally. He´s got Shacklebolt wrapped around his finger."

"Are we doing anything about this?"

"The Ministry seems to have this under control but we´ll need to monitor regardless. From afar."

"Should we intervene?"

"If, and only if, it seems like Mr. Shafiq fails his assignment. If not, just observe and report back. Now, on the artefacts recovered from Helena Ravenclaw´s grave."

"We´ve got the full report on the stones. The rosary is made of lapis lazuli. The pendant also had lapis lazuli as well as jade. According to my research lapis lazuli only started to be imported in bulk to Europe in the end of the Middle Ages, before which it was common in the Indus Valley and Northern Africa. At the time it was mined mostly in the Badakhshan province in North-East Afghanistan. Jade, however, was more common. The variety we found on Helena´s body was nephrite jade, which has been found in Europe as far back as the Neolithic Period."

"Let´s focus on the lapis lazuli then. If it hadn´t been introduced into Europe at the time Helena was alive, how did she have a rosary made with it?"

"My guess? Salazar Slytherin. He was the one took care of her burial, he may have put the jewellery on her body as part of whatever religious rituals were conducted. That would explain why she had a rosary made with a stone she wouldn´t have easily come across while alive, and it would also explain the ouroboros pendant containing the same stone. The Snake was Salazar´s personal emblem. Speaking of which, I did some research of my own into the mounting and chain of the pendant. Gold as we thought. But the specific technique and embossing look more distinctively Iberian."

"Iberian?"

"Caliphate of Cordoba, Ummayad dynasty to be exact. The Ummayads were in decline at the time Helena died and about to be replaced by the Hammudids, following the Fitna of al-Andalus, but the pendant could have been commissioned before. In any case, the Iberian provenance explains the stones. Even in times of crisis, commercial trade between Islamic Iberia and other regions such as the North of Africa and the Middle East was thriving. It wouldn´t be that difficult to obtain lapis lazuli, jade and other gems and precious metals, specially if one used the political unrest to their advantage. Which I´m sure is something Salazar Slytherin would gladly do."

"Well, then...If this pendant proves Salazar was in the Iberian Peninsula at the time...Then the dagger could be somewhere in Spain or Portugal."

"Exactly."

"Change of plans. Anya you will get me everything you possibly can in terms of documentation on the Caliphate of Córdoba between the time of Salazar Slytherin´s exile and the death of Helena."

Ravenclaw. I want to know what exactly was happening and what he could be doing there. We need to retrace his steps. Send Anatoly to Ireland to keep an eye on the situation with Evelyn Black. Pass him the same instructions I just gave you: do not intervene unless it seems like Virgil Shafiq won’t be able to handle his mission.”

…. 

Virgil switched between channels absent-mindedly. It made little difference to him that all of them had either live broadcasts of fireworks somewhere in the world where it was already 1999 or just reruns of American sitcoms. He simply needed white noise. He finally settled on some random black and white film, turning the sound down to a whisper and reached for his notes. He had been keeping a log, but there wasn’t much to report. Shafiq was starting to think that aside from that brief interaction with Evelyn Black on the beach the other night, his mission would consist of slowly boring himself to death.

Nothing happening was obviously better than something bad happening, but still. Wandering about the streets of Doolin in different disguises, he had found some things to entertain himself, but the novelty wore off fast. Doolin was a charming village, but a small village nevertheless. There really wasn’t all that much to do. There were pubs with live music, and stores catering to tourists that were not numerous in Winter. The main attractions, however, were all outdoors: the Burren, the beaches, the cliffs and the ancient ruins scattered about the countryside. But with the foul weather the only ones brave enough to enjoy the great outdoors the hardy locals.

Hardy locals like Evelyn Black. Virgil couldn’t shake the image of that woman standing alone on the beach on a stormy night as if she was about to let herself be swallowed by the waves.

When he was given the assignment, Virgil didn’t think anything of her. It wasn’t part of his mission to have an opinion. All he knew was that he had to ensure the safety of a muggle who had a personal connection to Professor Snape. He was eager to prove himself worthy of his trust and that was it. Severus Snape had been one of his favourite teachers. Growing up, he looked up to him, and sought his approval. Other students often accused him of being a boot-licker, of sucking up to Snape because he was his head of house, or trying to get on his good graces so he’d be spared the Potions Master’s infamous outbursts. It was very much the opposite. Virgil actually appreciated Snape’s supposedly unsavoury attitude.

Virgil had never tasted the bitterness of struggle as a child. He was the youngest of three boys, born to a well-off family of purebloods. His parents were moderate Muslims which meant they were fairly liberal with their upbringing. Coming to Hogwarts in the wake of his two older brothers graduating with near perfect scores, Virgil had a metaphorical red carpet laid out in front of him. Every teacher assumed he’d excel in everything just like his brothers had, and only ever showed surprise when he didn’t perform any less than stellar.

Every teacher except Snape.

The only thing Snape assumed about any student was that they’d be a failure. And it was up to them to prove him wrong. It was the first time Virgil was challenged. Snape had been a very young man then, only 21 years old and in his first year as a teacher. He hadn’t taught any of Virgil’s brothers, so he didn’t compare Virgil to anybody except Virgil himself, and with that he was never pleased, never satisfied. ‘Fix your tie, Mr. Shafiq’, ‘watch the cauldron’s temperature, Mr. Shafiq’, ‘do it over, Mr. Shafiq’. Praise from other teachers was such a common occurrence it meant close to nothing to him, but Virgil could distinctively remember the first time he got a nod of approval on a potion brewed to perfection from Professor Snape and how much that had meant to him. "Well, done, Mr. Shafiq.”

Finding out Severus Snape was alive and that he had personally requested Virgil to be in charge of
the safety of a personal acquaintance of his had brought Virgil back to that day, to that "Well done" he had strived for months to get, when everyone else gave him praise too easily for him to care. So, of course, he asked no questions. Shacklebolt hadn’t disclosed the nature of the relationship between Snape and the muggle he was supposed to protect. Shafiq recalled him using the term "friend" and that was the extent of it. He didn’t think much of it when Snape himself gave him information about her. Even then he still didn’t bother contemplating who exactly was this woman. He simply followed her as she moved along roads and streets and went about her life. Just a woman like any other. Maybe better looking than average, but just another person in a world populated by billions. Just an assignment.

Something had changed when he had spoken to her. Only then did he seriously stop to contemplate what could possibly connect Professor Snape to her. He hated to be that person who immediately assumed there could only be a romantic or sexual connection between a man and a woman, but the more he gave it consideration the more Virgil believed that whatever there was between them it couldn’t be just 'friendship'. He wouldn’t have been assigned to protect her if she was just his friend, he should have suspected from the beginning.

Yet somehow that only became clear when he actually looked at her. Not from afar, not as a potential target, but up close. As she talked to him, hair swept by the salty sea wind. The idea that Professor Snape might be in love with anybody sounded bizarre to him, growing up under his strict and overbearing tutelage. But somehow, looking at her Virgil suddenly understood it.

…

"Happy New year, love." was the first thing she said when she picked up the phone. Severus smiled to himself.

"Happy New year, love. Your mother’s party is over?" he checked the clock on the mantel. Half past midnight. Maybe there were still guests left.

"It was hardly a party. But yes, it is."

"How did it go?"

"Better than I expected, all things considered. My mother had fun."

"How about you? Did you have fun?"

"I don’t know. It was a bit, how do I put this? Bitter sweet. A lot of my father’s old friends were here. Telling stories and whatnot, so... I guess I deal better when I’m away."

"You’ve been away from home for months. Some nostalgia is natural. Give it time."

"You stayed home after all."

"Actually, I went to your house. To check that thing in the attic."

"Freaky isn’t it?"

"Yes. Honestly I can’t make any sense of it. But I wouldn’t worry if I was you"

"I’m not worried, I’m curious. Angela thinks the house is haunted, though."

"I didn’t run into any ghosts...except..."
"What...?"

"You ex...Richard. He called. To wish you a Happy New Year, I imagine."

"Seriously? I guess I’m going to have to change my number."

"I don’t think he’ll be calling again any time soon"

"Severus...Don’t tell me you were mean to him."

"Me? I would never."

"Right..."

"I’m not ‘mean’"

"Indeed you’re not... you’re awful. It’s half your charm to be honest."

"Has anybody ever told you you have really poor taste in men?"

"I may have been told something to that effect before, yes. But if I recall correctly we had planned to discuss more interesting things next time you called."

"All the guests left?"

"Yes."

"Your mother?"

"Sound asleep."

"You’re in your room?"

"Yes, Severus." She laughed, that husky laugh of hers that sent an electric current down his spine when he heard it from up close. "Would you like to know what I’m wearing too?"

"Sev."

"What?"

"Call me ‘Sev’...We’ve reached that stage, no?"

"You never told me you had a nickname...Sev. I like it."

"Say it again, then."

"Sev." she said, the name rolling from her lips drenched with delight.

"And yes, since you’ve brought it up...What are you wearing?” he snickered, making himself comfortable.

"You feckin´ eejit." he hear her laugh again and felt like the year was probably off to a good start.

....

January, 1st.
"Mam, this is too much!" Evelyn rolled her eyes putting the last grocery bags on the kitchen table after getting them out of the trunk of Sophia’s car. "Ca made it very clear that they’d only invite a few of Alice’s friends from school and the cousins. " They had all agreed there was no point in having a big party right after Christmas and New Years. But now Evelyn realized they should have suspected it would spiral out of control the moment Sophia said she’d have to go all the to Supervalu market in Ennistymon, a full 15 minute drive away to buy supplies. On the first day of the year no less.

"I got some other things we need because I don’t feel like driving all the way to Ennistymon again any time soon"

"That’s the thing, we don’t have to ‘drive all the way to Ennistymon’, have you seen your pantry? And we have left overs from TWO dinner parties!"

"Evelyn do me a favour, dear? Get those bags over there and bring them to your grandmother? She is baking the cake so I got her the list of ingredients she asked me. Here take my car"

"Your car? I’ll get there faster on foot, thank you. I don’t even know how that old thing still moves"

"It moves just fine, but do whatever you want. Now out of my kitchen, I need to get this going."

"Mam, remember, it’s just a small birthday party."

"I know, and it’s also tomorrow. Now shoo..."

"Are you shooring me out of the house?" Evelyn let out amused, noticing from the corner of her eye that Alice was making her way in, curiously eyeing the bags like a kitten eyes brand new boxes.

"Yes! And take Alice with you, while you’re at it. I don’t want her snooping around and ruining any surprises."

"I’m not!" Alice protested.

"Come on, pet. Your sister will help grandma Sophia and we’re going to help grandma Liz"

...

"Can I go outside?" Alice asked, nose pressed against the window that overlooked the backyard.

"It’s cold out, love." Evelyn told her, putting away the groceries they had brought.

"Pleeease, I want to see if we have sparrows."

"I believe we do" Liz remarked "They must be fluffy now with their Winter plumage."

"Pleaaaaase..."

"Ok, fine" Evelyn relented "but just for a little bit. And take your coat."

"Thank you!" Alice hopped from the windowsill and ran past them, grabbing her coat from a chair on the way out.

"She’s excited for her birthday." Liz remarked as soon as Alice was out of earshot "It’s because you’re here."

"Whatever the reason, I’m glad. Last year was hard enough on these girls."
"On all of us, dear..."

"Speaking of unpleasant things, you think Sean is going to show up for her birthday? I meant to ask Cat, but honestly I don’t even know how to approach it..."

"Sean hasn’t been around lately. You know how he is, we can go months without seeing him."

"I know he’s her father, but I honestly prefer it this way. I’m sure he’d find a way to ruin everything if he showed up."

...

Nobody else knew about that hole in the backyard fence but Alice. She hadn’t even told Lizzie. Lizzie was just a baby, anyway, she’d tell everybody if she found out. Then Grandma Liz would have it fixed and Alice wouldn’t be able to sneak out anymore. She had found it last November. It was great-grandpa’s birthday. Everybody was worried that Grandma Liz wouldn’t be doing well, because both great-grandpa and grandpa were dead now. Alice kept overhearing relatives talking about how she must have been so sad because her husband and her son were dead. She was sad, but the way people talked, it was like she’d die soon too. Alice didn’t believe she would, not any time soon. Great-grandpa and grandpa were dead, so surely nobody else would die for a while. It wouldn’t be too fair. So she didn’t worry as much as the adults did.

That day, while Lizzie was watching cartoons in the living room and her mum and grandma Liz were talking in the sewing room, Alice had got out through the kitchen door and found the hole in the fence. It lead into an empty lot. Grandma Liz lived in one of the last houses before the hills went into rocks by the sea, and from that empty lot behind her backyard you could see the ocean and even hear it, if you paid enough attention. There wasn’t anything in that vacant lot except for a tree. Alice remembered that in grandpa’s office there was a big book with drawings and photos of trees and leaves, so she got a leaf from the tree and asked grandma Sophia to help her find out which tree it was using the book.

Grandma Sophia told her it was a Hawthorn. Aunt Lyn once told her that in the old times people said Hawthorns were ‘fairy trees’, that is trees in which fairies secretly lived. So, back then, nobody would cut down those trees so they wouldn’t disturb the fairies. That was the reason you would, sometimes, see a lone tree in the middle of a farmer’s field. That explained that tree. It had to be a fairy tree. So Alice had made it a habit of collecting pretty stones and gathering them at the base, just like aunt Lyn said people used to do in the past. She also got some Christmas ornaments and ice lolly sticks with which to make a fairy door. The teacher had taught them how to make fairy doors for garden decorations at school. When she made some for grandma Liz, she had also made one for the fairies.

Whenever she could, Alice would sneak out and see if she could catch a glimpse of a fairy. She even left them little bits of biscuits and fruit sometimes. The offerings were always gone when she came back, but she couldn’t be sure if it was fairies or just the birds. Today, once again, there was no sign of any fairy activity. Just a fluffy sparrow in her nest, who had probably eaten Alice’s last offering. With a sigh, she turned to sneak back in before they noticed she was out. Then she heard something.

A voice.

...

It wasn’t ideal. Evelyn Black was the target. But her niece was almost as good a replacement. Severus Snape wouldn’t allow a child to pay his debt, would he? Of course not. And if this child was related to his mistress, all the more reason for him to care. Very few things are as precious as a child. Which made them perfect bargaining chips. No risky moves would be considered if a child’s
life was in danger. The life of a child is worth any price you put on it, no matter how high. This was almost better than getting her hands on Evelyn Black herself.

It would be easy enough Claire thought as she saw the little girl come out through a crack in the backyard fence. Luck had been on her side when she had decided to avoid the street leading up to the front of the house and go through the vacant lots behind the houses. The open field made her vulnerable, but nothing a simple invisibility spell couldn´t handle.

That was it. She didn´t even have to do anything. As soon as she had made her way around the house, contemplating a plan, trying to come up with something, the girl came into her field of vision. A pretty little girl with long, wavy brown hair wearing a purple coat and yellow rain boots, making her way towards a solitary hawthorn.

All she had to do was call, hidden behind the veil of invisibility, and she had the girl´s full attention.

"Hello?" the child answered back, unsure, as if she didn´t believe her ears.

"What´s your name, love?" Claire asked, coming closer

"Alice..."

"What are you doing all alone out here, Alice?"

"I´m..." Alice´s brow furrowed, and she took a small step back in the direction of the house. "Who are you?"

...

"Me?" the invisible voice laughed softly, sweetly. "What do you think I am, Alice?"

Alice looked down at her little altar of stones, flowers and Christmas ornaments, doubting her own ears.

Could it be?

"...a fairy?"

"Almost..."

...

Something wasn´t right. That gut feeling hit Shafiq like thunder on a sunny day. Today he had decided to go out in his own regular appearance, and forgo any potion induced disguises. He had seen Evelyn Black go to her grandmother´s house, taking one of her nieces with her, but she didn´t seem to notice him as he passed her by, or maybe she wasn´t paying attention. He kept his distance, not feeling like it was important to follow her too closely. Visiting her grandmother was a mundane event, something she had done many times since he had been watching her. Shafiq had then decided to take a stroll to kill time. These visits sometimes dragged on for hours, and with a child in tow this one could last even longer.

Then it happened. Hardly had he reached Gus Pub a little up the road, Virgil felt...something. It could be an impression, it could be intuition, it could very well be nothing at all, but he turned back on his own steps. There was an odd sort of atmospheric disturbance, ever so slight, almost undetectable, like the subtle switch in the air pressure before a storm. Shafiq reached into his pocket for his custom made sneakoskope, a silent version, modified for professional auror use. Shacklebold
had had them commissioned so they could be used in ambushes, or by spies, who could have their cover easily blown by the traditional sneakoscope’s shrill alarm. This version, considerably more accurate version of the detector merely emitted a faint orange-hued glow when it picked up deception or danger nearby. And the closer he came to Elisabeth Black’s home, the brighter the sneakoscope glowed in his hand.

…

Alice blinked and rubbed her eyes like she did when she woke up in the morning and had to adjust back to reality. She wasn’t sure if she was dreaming or not as the sweet voice started to materialize into a person before her eyes.

The woman standing in front of her was tall, slender and beautiful. Her skin was very pale, and her hair was a dark shade of red, long and straight falling about her shoulders. She was wearing a long black cloak with fur trimming. Alice stared in awe as the woman smiled at her with ruby lips. She didn’t look like fairy, but more like a one of those expensive dolls they had in the shop windows for Christmas.

"I´m a witch. Have you ever met a witch before, darling?" The red-haired woman in black came closer and got to her knees, running her long fingers through Alice´s hair. Her nails were red, like her lips.

Alice shook her head and the woman reached inside her coat pulling something from within the folds of heavy fabric.

"This is a wand. Do you want to see it can do?"

With a smooth sweep of her hand and an incantation that could barely be heard, green light poured from the wand onto the ground surrounding Alice´s feet. Suddenly the frost-bitten, yellowed blades of grass began to glow and return to their original green and tiny white flowers sprouted from the frozen earth beneath.

…

"Alice! Come back inside!" Evelyn called out from the kitchen door before turning back to Liz
"What the devil is she doing out there?"

"She must be playing in the back." Liz offered, focused on beating the eggs to stiff peaks for the cake. "She has been putting up some fairy doors there."

"Well, it´s too cold to be playing outside for so long and her mother is going to kill me if she comes down with a cold the day before her birthday. I’ll go get her."
"Shit." Virgil cursed under his breath as he assessed the situation, hidden behind the outer corner of the fence. He had an unidentified witch approaching Evelyn Black’s niece, and now Evelyn herself was coming up to check on the child. The suspect matched Claire Rott’s physical description, and he had been warned that she was unaccounted for in France, but he couldn’t say for sure it was her unless he could approach. Regardless, her identity was was a secondary concern, at the moment. He ´d worry about that later.

He quickly weighed the possible scenarios. If he engaged her there was the possibility of a duel, which would put the girl and every muggle in the area in danger. If he didn´t, there was no way of predicting what she would do when Evelyn finally approached. She could simply snatch the child and take her away...or worse. Whoever this woman was, she wasn´t here to give Alice a birthday present.

Shafiq soon realized his only option was to wait for her next move to adapt his reaction accordingly. Making the first move and give away his location could be a disaster. As he expected she didn’t wait long to react. The yellow-green light coming from her wand was not a good sign. "Salvio hexia" he whispered drawing his wand. As he predicted, his protective spell caused a reaction and the tip of her wand lost its glow, the curse she has about to cast aborted before it was fully summoned. She immediately bolted to her feet, roughly grabbing Alice with one hand and pointing her wand in his direction with the other. The girl seemed too stunned to react at first, but as soon as she felt the woman´s grip on her she let out a blood curdling screech.

"Great" Shafiq grumbled, coming out from his hideaway. The witch stared at him, surprise quickly turning into fury at the sight of a potential obstacle to whatever plans she had. Shafiq approached cautiously, wand drawn. Alice’s screams had alerted her aunt, and he could hear Evelyn’s voice calling out to her from inside the yard. The area had to be secured before he proceeded any first. Evelyn could not get anywhere near, or he´d have two muggles in danger.

"Repello Muggletum!" he turned his wand to the house and yard, creating a pale hazy film around it, then pointed it back at Alice´s captor. "This is just between us two, no need to involve any more muggles."

"An auror." she stated flatly.

"Alice, darling, are you ok?"

Alice, pressed against the woman´s body, unable to wiggle out and utterly terrified, simply nodded.

"I’ll take you back to you aunt in a minute, don’t be scared, love."

"No, you won´t." The woman taunted.
"Her aunt is coming. This is going to turn into a full blown mess in about a second if you try anything funny. Just let the girl go."

The woman simply gave him a demented smile before a flash of light blinded him.

…

"ALICE!" Evelyn was screaming now.

She wasn´t anywhere in the backyard. Evelyn went to the back where Liz said she´d been building the fairy doors. Then she heard it. That scream. It was Alice´s voice. For a second Evelyn could swear she´d heard other voices as well.

No, she was imagining things.

There was a hole in the fence, hidden behind some tools, rusty buckets and a wheelbarrow. A hole big enough to fit a child of Alice´s age. Forcing herself to stay calm, Evelyn calculated that it was too small for an adult.

Adrenaline rushing through her veins, Evelyn ran back into the house, then through the house, knocking furniture and objects down, leaving shattered glass and fallen cutlery on her wake. Slipping on the fresh snow outside, she went around the house, following the fence into the empty lot behind.

A strange mist seemed to be surrounding the house, very thin and nearly invisible to the eye. Evelyn walked through it, wondering if it wasn´t smoke, then pushing the idea from her already panicked brain. As she reached the end of the fence and the empty lot in the back a bright flash of light exploded in front of her.

…

Alice couldn´t see anything for a moment and then she fell. Sand got into her eyes and mouth, and she could feel her elbows and knees sting.

When she opened her eyes, Alice saw she was on the beach, wind blowing sand and sea water on her face. Then she heard somebody grunt and turned towards the sound. That evil woman with red-hair had fallen a few feet away from her and was getting back on her feet.

…

Virgil got back to his feet and struggled to get his bearings. He saw Alice a few meters away, free from her captor´s grip. He didn´t know how it worked, but he had, somehow, managed to thwart his opponent´s escape, landing them in a beach outside of the village.

Now he had to ensure Alice´s safety before he could neutralize the threat.

"PROTEGO!" The shield knocked the would-be kidnapper back the moment she reached for the girl again.

Angered, she let out a nearly inhuman shriek and pointed her wand in his direction. An orange, fire-like ball of energy came straight at him. Shafiq steadied his feet, trying to shove them into the sand for balance, and raised his wand, deflecting the blast and sending it into the waves, where the flames imploded into themselves at the contact with water, shock waves almost knocking both of them off their feet. She recovered quickly enough to send another spell in his direction, which he deflected once again, this time directly, tossing her into the water, momentarily stunned.
"ALICE! " He shouted at the terrified child, snapping her out of her shock. As if feeling her safety depended on him, Alice rushed to his side.

"Listen to me, love." he fell on his knees in front of her, nervously looking over his shoulder to make sure no new attack was launched and tried to keep his voice as calm as possible "You have to run and don´t stop running till you see somebody from your family. They must be looking for you. You understand me?"

Alice nodded.

"Smart girl. Now, go!"

As soon as Alice was far behind him, he turned back to the red-haired woman. He face was a snarling mask of frustration and raw anger, blood coming out of the corner of her crimson lips, hair wild, tangled with sand and salt water.

"Now it´s between us grown-ups." he smirked. "EXPULSO!"

…

She wasn´t anywhere.

Anywhere.

Vanished into thin air.

This could´t be happening.

Evelyn rushed back in and told her grandmother to call everybody. Uncle Collin, Uncle Aidan, Cillian, Gabriel, Irene, Catherine, all the neighbours, everybody. She thought of calling the police, but they wouldn´t come for a child that had been gone for only half an hour, no mater how much of a gut feeling that something was disastrously wrong Evelyn had. She had to wait before calling them. And they certainly couldn´t tell them there had been an explosion that left no trace behind, not as much as a burned blade of grass.

They wouldn´t believe her.

Just like nobody believed them when she told them her brother had accidentally created a fire balls with his bare hands when they were children. That he had died because he could make fire out of nothing. They thought she was going crazy.

Evelyn needed to get people to help. She had to find her.

"Fin?" she almost screamed into her mobile.

"Evelyn, what happened?"

"Alice! Alice disappeared."

"What?!How?!"

"Get Doug, get Edith and her husband, get whoever you can find along the way and come to my grandmother´s house. NOW. We have to find her."

"Ok, we´re coming."
Ennis general hospital.

Caitlin had just sat down for lunch when Anika popped in.

"Your sister is on the phone. She said it’s an emergency."

"You know, if we’re gonna keep on trying to kill each other we should at least be on a first name basis don’t you think?" Virgil taunted as she got up once again. "No? Ok, fine."

Her body slammed against the rocks under the force of his repeated attacks, but she was relentless. Whenever Shafiq was confident he had at least incapacitated her, she got right back up, seemingly feeding off her own fury to keep going. This wasn’t good. He couldn’t afford to have this duel go on any further. They were on an open area, close to a muggle village. He had managed to bring them to a stretch of beach within a safe distance from Doolin, but it was still close enough that sooner or later somebody would notice the firework display going on at the beach and come see what it was. He needed to wrap this up before it got out of hand.

Incapacitate her and make an arrest, he thought. We need information, we need her interrogated. But how if she kept fighting back? Making her stop moving first might help.

"PETRIFICUS TOTALUS!"

The white light of the binding curse hit something...something semitransparent like a fogged up glass wall. All Shafiq heard was a low, resonating thud, like a muffled explosion, before seeing his own curse shatter like a water balloon prickled with a needle.

Then the shock waves came.

They had been looking for well over an hour now. Family, neighbours, acquaintances, everybody they could find was out searching the fields. Cillian and Gabriel had decided to drive out of town, search the country, the farms, the Burren. Sophia called the police and threatened them with every circle of hell till they finally sent somebody. Caitlin had arrived in less than half an hour after Evelyn called her, after driving down N85 at full speed like a lunatic.

"How did this happen?" she immediately shrieked at Evelyn the moment her eyes found her at Sophia’s house, talking to a police officer.

"I don’t know! I’m sorry! She was playing in gran’s backyard and then she was gone. There was hole in the fence she must have got out."

"Or somebody got in! It was Sean, it has to be Sean! I swear to God, I’ll kill him with my own hands. Did you call the police?"

"Mam did."

"Perfect." She hissed, marching past her and towards the police officer ready to give him a full description of her ex-husband.

Evelyn was dizzy. Terrified. Deep down she knew Sean had nothing to do with this. It was
something else. Something else entirely.

Evelyn knew it was her fault.

Again.

…

Alice had no idea where she was going. She knew they were close to the Burren. She had been there many times but always with an adult. But she kept running. That man must have been a wizard. A good wizard, because he had saved her. And he told her to run, that her family would find her. So she did what he told her to do, even though she was tired and her feet hurt.

Alice reached the road and saw a car coming. It was a blue truck, like the one cousin Cillian drove. The car approached and pulled over, and a large man with red hair and a red beard got out.

Even in the distance Alice knew who that was. She could stop running now.

Cousin Cilian ran across the road and picked her up, giving her a bear hug.

"Your mam is waiting for you back home."

…

Caitlin immediately took Alice to the hospital without as much as allowing anyone near her. A police officer had gone with them to get a statement from both.

Evelyn was exhausted, but she gathered whatever last bit of energy she still had in her aching body and went to Caitlin’s house to stay with Lizzie, who was still confused and scared. Explaining everything to her in a way that wouldn’t twist her three-year old mind and scare her even more had been a delicate task, but eventually Lizzie settled down, ate dinner and watched ‘Home Alone’ till she fell asleep on the couch. Evelyn had just put her to bed when she heard Caitlin come in with Alice.

She went to the kitchen to do the dishes and set the table again in case they wanted to eat, while Caitlin went upstairs with Alice, to get her to shower and get her to change.

"How is she doing?" she asked when her sister finally got downstairs.

"Fine. She’s got scratched knees and a bruised elbow, but nothing else. They took her statement."

"What happened then?"

"She told them a red-haired witch tried to kidnap her, but she was saved by a wizard. They asked her to describe them, just to get her to calm down, and filed a report but of course they won’t do much about it. They said she probably wandered off and got lost, and now she’s is making up a story so I won’t be mad at her. Worst case scenario it was her father and she’s making it up to protect him, so they’re going to check to see if he has an alibi."

"That’s is not like Alice. She never lies."

"I know. But she had a rough year. Maybe she does believe what she said. Maybe somebody really did try to kidnap her and somebody else really did help, and she just convinced herself they were magical creatures…You know how children are, it’s hard for them to separate reality and imagination sometimes."

"That’s was my problem at her age…"
"Speaking of which...Lyn, we need to talk." her sister crossed her arms, leaning back on the kitchen counter, looking like she hadn´t slept in days. Evelyn felt like a child about to be scolded. And she deserved it.

"I´m sorry." Evelyn said, earnestly "You have no idea how much this is killing me, I should be watching her, I should..."

"It´s ok, Linnie. It´s not your fault. I´ve let her play in the backyard by herself a million times, it could have happened when I was with her. Is not about that I want to talk."

"What, then?"

"Lyn, you need to stop telling her those stories. Reading her those books." Evelyn immediately knew what she was talking about. They had had this conversation before, but she had the feeling it would be much more serious now.

"They´re just fairy tales, Cat."

"No, not when they come from you. She believes everything you tell her. She adores you. Feck, she wants to BE you. You know why she got out? She thought she´d found a fairy tree, and you told her about fairy trees."

"Those are stories our father told us when we were her age, stories grandpa and grandma told him. They´re just that...stories."

"Yes, but now my daughter is sitting upstairs convinced that an evil witch and a good wizard just battled in front of her eyes, and frustrated that nobody believes her. She told me wizards and witches are real because you write books about them."

"But I do write books about them. She´s just too young to understand my books are not about actual witches, but historical witch-trials. How do you expect me to explain the difference to her? She´s about to turn seven."

"Evelyn, on the way back from the hospital she told me she saw a letter from a witchcraft school in your stuff! With Paul´s name on it. Did you show that thing to her?"

"NO! Of course I didn´t. I´m not crazy. She must have found it in my room when I still lived here..."

"So you still have it? Evelyn, one thing is keeping Paul´s pictures, his drawings, his things...But that? That damned piece of paper is not a memory of our brother! It´s a stupid, cruel prank somebody pulled on us to mock his death. Dad almost went mad with grief and humiliation when we got that thing in the mail! And you kept it? Why?"

"I don´t know."

"But you did. You did, and Alice saw it. And now she thinks wizards and witches are real, and there´s a real School of Wizardry and Witchcraft in Great Britain, and that Paul would be a wizard if he was alive..."

"I promise you it was never my intention to..."

"Evelyn you need to let go. Paul is dead. He´s gone. Holding on to everything that can be remotely connected to him won´t bring him back."

"Caitlin, I know you´re upset but it doesn´t give you the right..."
"Yes, it does give me the right! Because your issues are affecting my daughter. You need to get this sorted out."

"You don´t understand..."

"He was my brother too, Evelyn..."

"You don´t even remember him!"

"I was four!"

"Exactly. You were four. You don´t remember him. You don´t remember the days he spent in the hospital with most of his body bandaged, getting skin grafts that hurt as much as the burns. You don´t remember that mam was bedridden for weeks when he died, and we all thought she´d die of sorrow. You don´t remember dad hiding in his office to cry so we wouldn´t see him be anything less than strong for us all. You don´t remember how people looked at me like I was crazy, gossiping behind our parents backs, because I was making up stories to cope. You don´t remember that they sent me to a therapist who gave me anti-depressants at age 10. He was your brother too, but you don´t remember."

"So you can´t let go of the things that were going on in your head back then, and you feel like it´s ok for Alice to do the same? To make up stories to cope? She just put herself in danger..."

"...and it´s my fault."

"I didn´t say that...Evelyn, look...This is difficult for me. I´m trying to raise two little girls on my own with no help from their father. Our father is dead. Our grandfather is dead. Our mother and our grandmother are keeping it together I don´t even know how. And you´re off in England, obsessing about this fantasy you have with grandpa´s mysterious past and running away from your present. Like you always do. But I´m here. And I have to deal with all of this, everyday. I´m not asking you to give up your life, your goals or the things that are important for you, I just want you to please try not to make everything harder on me. Can you just be on my side on this?"

"I see..." Evelyn swalloed hard, trying not cry and to ignore her sister´s tears. "Can I see my niece now? Or you´d rather I..."

"Of course you can see her. Just, please.."

"Don´t fill her head with any of my nonsense. I got it, Cat."

...

Shafiq stared at his own bruised face in the bathroom mirror and groaned in pain and frustration. As he finished writing his latest report, the true dimension of his failure finally hit him. On the one hand Alice was safe back with her family. On the other, Virgil had lost the suspect, and worse, he had no idea how it happened.

All he remembered was that his curse had been blocked by an obstacle then burst back at him. He felt his body be thrown back and lost consciousness almost immediately afterwards. When he finally came to, Shafiq found himself half submerged by the rising tide and the sun was already low in the horizon, deep purples and blues washing away the orange of the sunset.

She was gone.

He didn´t understand. He wasn´t supposed to even be alive. He had a more than passing suspicion
that the mysterious witch was none other than Claire Rott herself, and according to Professor Snape
she was known among Death Eaters and other underworld Dark Wizards for being an exceedingly
aggressive duellist with a manic taste for blood and death. During their confrontation she certainly
seemed out of control enough to go for the kill. She would definitely take the chance and finish him
while he lay unconscious.

Why didn’t she, then?

How come he was still alive?

....

Evelyn found Alice sitting on the window bench, gaze lost in the night sky outside. Lizzie was fast
asleep on the top bunk, and all lights were out except for a little cow-shaped night-light by the door.

"You think I’m lying too," she said quietly, without turning around. Evelyn’s could see the sadness
on her little face through the reflection on the darkness of the glass.

"No, I don’t." she sat on the floor facing her niece. The girl turned to her slowly. Her eyes were red,
like she had been crying. "I know you never lie."

"Mam thinks I’m lying"

"She doesn’t. She was scared and worried about you. Your mother would never think you’re lying."

"Aunt Lyn, I saw it. It was a witch."

"Alie, listen to me. You need to do something for me, ok? If you ever see anything strange, anything
you don’t think people will believe... Tell me."

"I can’t tell mam?"

"We’ll decide together how we tell her."

"That’s lying."

"No, it’s not. Look, Alice, your mother’s been working a lot, and she has a lot to worry about. So we
shouldn’t give her more reasons to worry if we don’t have to. From now on, if you see something
strange, don’t go after it, if you see someone strange don’t talk to them. Go straight back home and
call me. Then I’ll find a way to tell your mam, so she’s not scared anymore. Deal?"

"Deal." Alice went quiet for a moment, before asking, unsure "You really believe me?"

"Of course I do." Evelyn pulled her into her lap, kissing the top of her head "I will always believe
you. Always."

...

"I didn’t expect to see you here so soon." Severus grimaced, eyeing the mantel to make sure Lily’s
photo was well hidden under the other picture frames. Luckily a few days ago, for some reason, he’d
felt compelled to move it to a less prominent position. Maybe for fear of upsetting Evelyn, but he
wasn’t truly sure. Now he was thankful he had done that.

Never in his life would he have imagined he’d one day open the door of his Spinner’s End home to
Lily’s son. That the Chosen One would be sitting in his living room, out of his own volition. That he
’d welcome the son of James Potter into his home and have a cordial chat with him. But nearly one
year into this strange new life he had accidentally made for himself following his accidental 'rebirth', Severus had learned that the most unexpected outcome would often turn out to be the most likely one.

"I know it’s soon, but I had to come." Harry offered, less as an explanation and more as an apology.

" Doesn’t surprise me. Our meeting with Shacklebolt left you with more questions than answers, am I right?"

"Yes."

"You want to know about the dagger. Funny how it’s supposed to be a secret and yet we keep adding names to the list of people who know about it."

"Who else?"

"Thus far, the both of us, at least four members of the aurors’ office, the minister and his cabinet, and Draco Malfoy."

"Draco Malfoy?"

"He’s a spy for the Ministry now. In fact not two weeks ago he was sitting exactly where you’re sitting now, while I briefed him on the dagger"

"...why?"

"Why not? Come on, Potter. You were there, you know the Malfoys have amends to make... Let me guess, you don’t trust him."

"I don’t. But there was a time I didn’t trust you and I was wrong. So, maybe I’ll be wrong this time as well."

"Draco is trying to prove himself worthy of the mission the Ministry has given him. He’s trying to rise from the ruin of his family. He’s been successful thus far. He has uncovered very useful information, at the risk of his own life."

"You don’t really care whether I believe Draco’s good intentions or not, though."

"I don’t. But if we’re all on the same side, we should keep each other informed. I don’t wish to pull any last minute surprises on you. I’m not Dumbledore."

"He had his own style of doing things I guess."

"That he did. So, the dagger. Where should I begin..."

...When Snape was done telling him everything, Harry was almost dizzy. It was worst than he thought. Death Eater’s escaping with foreign help and funds, a possible traitor in the ministry, a hidden dagger that could potentially unleash powerful dark magic being hunted not by one, but many dark wizards...How did it get to that?"

"I know it seems like a lot, but Shacklebolt wants us to focus on the dagger. You must be thinking that the prisoners escapes and leaks are what we should be focusing on, but trust me the dagger not a simple diversion. It’s the axis upon which everything else will converge eventually"
"Because they all want it."

"Exactly."

"Do you think they know where it is?"

"I have no way of knowing that. But whether they do or not, we need to get to it first."

"But we don’t know where it is."

"Not for sure we don’t. But I’ve looked into Salazar Slytherin´s writings. Some of them are still in Hogwarts, sealed away from the general public. After reading some of his studies and journals, I have reason to believe he may have travelled to the Caliphate of Cordoba."

"The what?"

"Ugh, I forget you brats don’t study proper muggle history at school, or proper Wizarding foreign history for that matter. Here’s to hoping Minerva reviews that bloody outdated curriculum."

"While she doesn’t, would you kindly enlighten me?"

"You should have brought Miss Granger along for this, but let’s give it a try. In the VIIIth century the Muslim Dynasty of the Hummayads conquered what’s now Spain and Portugal, or rather most of their territories. The north of the Peninsula remained under Christian and European control. The Hummayads founded the Emirate of Córdoba, which later became the Caliphate of Córdoba under their rule and then passed the rule of several other dynasties that followed through the six-century long Muslim control of Peninsula. It was a complex period of History which I don’t feel particularly compelled to summarise for your benefit, but suffice to say the Caliphate was powerful, rich and many arts and sciences flourished under their political influence. And that wasn’t only for muggles. Wizards had considerable influence in the politics of the Caliphate. Many worked in the court of Granada as astrologers, alchemists and in various other academic areas. Salazar Slytherin maintained correspondence with a number of them, and has cited numerous studies and works by these authors as sources in his own studies of alchemy and dark magic. It’s an educated guess, but I’d start our mission there."

"Ok. So Spain or Portugal. That’s a start but where exactly?"

The incongruous sound of a telephone ringing interrupted him, and Harry wondered why would Snape own such a gadget. It was silly of him of course. This was a muggle house, in a muggle street of a muggle town. A telephone wasn’t at all out of place. As Snape excused himself to pick it up Harry’s eyes wandered curiously about the room idly, looking for something to distract himself.

That was when something sparkly at the foot of the sofa caught his eye. Harry squinted, trying to identify to the tiny object on the floor. It was a small golden tube. It could be a vial or some other small container, Harry thought, picking it up.

Once he had it in his hand however, Harry realised it wasn’t a potion container. Letting curiosity get the best of him, he opened it.

It was...lipstick? 

....

"Sev?" her voice was trembling. Severus glanced over his shoulder to make sure Potter wasn’t paying attention and lowered his voice.
"What happened?"

"I just...I just needed to hear your voice." she was crying? "I just needed to hear you tell me everything is going to be ok."

"Give me a moment."

Severus covered the speaker with his hand and turned to Harry.

"Potter, I need to get this call. Will you kindly show yourself out?"

Severus waited till Potter had collected his surprise and outrage, his faint attempt at a protest effectively killed with a simple stare down from the former potions master. Once his guest was out the door he returned to the phone.

"Tell me what happened, Lyn."

...

When Sophia approached the door to Evelyn´s room, she caught her voice. As much as she disliked listening in, she couldn´t help but catch the end of the conversation.

"...Alice´s birthday is tomorrow, so I´ll leave the day after...Yes, I´m sure... I know, but I don´t think I´m helping any of them...No, my sister is right, I need to sort this out on my own... I will. Love you, too. Good night."

"What is this I hear about you leaving right after Alice´s birthday?" Sophia asked, going in without knocking. Evelyn sighed, seemingly not surprised by the intrusion, or simply too tired to complain about it.

"I need to go home, mam."

"You ARE home."

"I know...I just think it´s probably time I find a home of my own somewhere else."

"Nonsense."

"I can´t keep looking at my past and ignore my future, mam."

"And you´re telling me your future is away from your family?"

"Maybe. I don´t know. I do know that I have to figure it out on my own."

...

January 3rd
Liverpool

Evelyn had left Doolin first thing in the morning, hoping to get to Cokeworth before nightfall.

Angela offered to meet her, but she declined. Spring term was at the door and Evelyn knew her friend had family matters to tend do while she still had some free time. In any case, the drive from Liverpool to Cokeworth would help her relax after over three hours stuck in a ferry.
Just the thought of everything she had to do when she got to Angela´s had her tired before she even drove out of Canana Boulevard. Packing whatever she had left was the first task in the list. She wanted to be back at her Spinner´s End as soon as possible. She had abused her friend´s hospitality enough. Then contact James. She needed to make sure he hadn´t had any issues enrolling in his music lessons. Then came all the school work for the new term. Returning a few days earlier than originally planned at least gave her more time to get to it all. Evelyn was so distracted worrying in advance about everything she almost missed the man in black waving her car down.

"Sev?" she pulled over and opened the window as he leaned by the car door

"I thought you´d enjoy having a welcome committee." he smiled. "So, shall we go home?"

Evelyn didn´t answer. She just reached out of the car to grab his jacket and pulled him down for a kiss.

She was home.

…
They drove back to Cokeworth in near silence, basking on each other’s presence after weeks apart. Severus offered to drive, but Evelyn declined. Driving was relaxing, and deep down she wanted his undivided attention, even if that meant just having him sit next to her while she focused on the road. It felt comforting to have him by her side. Evelyn had asked a few questions, just for the sake of making conversation and hearing the sound of his voice. Severus answered quietly, keeping his answers short as if the small talk would somehow ruin the moment. She could feel his fingers steal little touches of her hair or her hand whenever they stopped at a traffic light or when she didn’t have both hands on the wheel. She caressed his fingers back and they glanced at each other with timid yet satisfied smiles, before their eyes were back on the M62 stretching in front of them.

Evelyn had been overjoyed to find Severus waiting for her. It was silly, yes, but she couldn’t help it. She was still reeling from whirwind of bottled emotions that had been released back in Doolin and his presence felt like reaching a safe port in the aftermath of a storm. All she wanted was to feel the reassurance of land under her feet and he seemed content to simply let her. It was only when they reached the familiar landscape of Cokeworth that he finally asked:

“How´s your niece?”

“She´ll be fine.”

“And your sister?”

“She may take a little longer.”

“Did you two sort it all out before you left?”

“There´s nothing to sort out.”

“Lyn, that´s not true.”

“What am I supposed to do? I feel terrible for what happened to Alice, and I know it was my fault. I wasn´t paying attention. But I can´t help everything else. I can´t help who I am.”

“I´m sure your sister didn´t mean it that way. She probably doesn´t even know what she meant. I don´t know her, but I´m sure she was just overwhelmed and took it out on you. We all say things we don´t mean when we´re upset.”

“It´s deeper than that. I love my sister dearly, but I can´t pretend there isn´t a wedge between us.”

“Because of your brother, you mean?”

“Because of everything that happened after he died. She loves me too much to say it to my face, but I get this feeling that she´s afraid her daughter will turn out like me.”
“A respected scholar?” he smirked.

“No,” she cracked a bitter smile. “Crazy.”

“You’re not crazy, that’s nonsense, Evelyn.”

“I’ve been having scary dreams again. Of snakes, and wolves, and blood...”

“Dreams are just dreams. If recurring nightmares were a sign of mental disease then a sizeable chunk of the world population, myself included, would be certifiable.”

“I’ve been seeing things again, too.”

“What things?” he asked cautiously

“Don’t worry. Nothing like fairies or mermaids. I’m not that far gone yet.”

“I don’t like it when you talk like this. It’s not like you to sound that bitter, that’s supposed to be me.”

“I have my moods too, you know?”

“What did you see?”

“When Alice got taken away. I went looking for her behind the house. Then I saw an explosion.”

“Maybe there was an explosion.”

“I thought the same. It could be a firecracker laying around. Some kids in the neighborhood had them because of New Years. But it wasn’t that. It was too loud. Like actual explosives. There wasn’t a single blade of burnt grass nor did it smell at all. Just the flash of light and the noise.”

“Lightning?”

“No, didn’t sound like it. There was a weird fog surrounding the house too. It was a clear day. Lightning and fog on a clear day?”

“Evelyn, you’re thinking too much of it. And I mean that about your sister as well. At any rate, at the moment it’s pointless to contemplate what happened. It’s over.”

“It’s not.”

“Give it time. The nightmares will go away soon too.”

“You seem sure of it.”

“I think you will understand everything that’s happening in due time. You just need patience.”

“You know, sometimes you sound like one of those wizards in fantasy novels or RPG games.” she finally laughed in earnest “You know those who keep telling the heroes to wait until the right time when everything will be revealed.”

“A wizard, me? Good one.”
January, 5th.

Saint Petersburg

"Claire’s alive, yes. Out of comission for a while, but alive. Don’t tell me I was supposed to have killed her?" Anatoly smirked in that cold, scheming way that always sent shivers down Anya’s spine. When Dmitri assigned him to track Claire in Doolin, she had feared he’d do just that. Kill the bitch. For the entertainment of it. Anatoly had an unpredictable mean streak. Oddly, he showed a canine loyalty towards Dmitri. Still, Anya often feared that one day on which Dmitri would lose the grip on his leash.

"You know what you were supposed to do. I’m just making sure you did as told." Anya had no lost love for Claire, and she wouldn’t mind in the least if Anatoly had taken the chance to erase her from existence. But that would create more problems than it would solve. Not worth it.

"I always do what I’m supposed to do." Anatoly’s smile disappeared. He looked offended. He lit up a cigarette and found a seat on the armchair by the fireplace “Not that it was easy. Claire Rott’s fame is earned. That woman is a crazed beast but a very skilled duelist. Lucky me she was too distracted trying to kill that brat to even see what hit her.”

“Speaking of Virgil Shafiq...”

“I left him on the beach. Knocked out cold, the poor child. He’ll make a full recovery, don’t worry. The bruising on his ego might take longer to heal, I’m afraid.”

“Very well. You’re excused for now. Get your rest and wait for further instructions.”

“Anya...” he called before she reached the door.

“Yes?”

“You’re not going to tell me what this whole fuckery in Ireland was about, are you?”

“No. You know what you need to know.”

She could hear his eerily raucous tittering as she closed the door behind her back.

...

January 6th

Ministry for Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt’s office

"Your report seems rather...incomplete." Kingsley Shacklebolt told him rather matter-of-factly after a moment’s pause. Virgil shifted on his seat, as embarrassed as he was frustrated.

“It’s not. At least not intentionally.”

“You really have no idea what happened?”

“No, sir. I lost consciousness and then she was gone.”
“She hasn’t returned to her house thus far.” Kingsley sighed.

“Ludwig?”

“Left the house in a hurry yesterday morning and has yet to return.”

“So both are unaccounted for. It’s all my fault.”

“Your mission was to make sure Evelyn Black and her family were safe, which they are. Now you need a few days off.”

“With all due respect, I can’t simply...” Shafiq’s retort was cut short when the door opened behind him. He turned to see Severus Snape coming in unannounced, leisurely as if he was walking into his own house. Certainly Kingsley had summoned him, and Virgil felt just a little bit betrayed.

“Professor Snape, I...I’m sorry.”

“What for? Evelyn is back home safely. Alice is a little shaken, but otherwise unharmed. You did what was asked of you, Shafiq.”

“Did Evelyn report anything noteworthy, Severus?” Kingsley asked

“What I expected her to tell me. She did see some mist and a flash of light followed by a loud bang when she got out of the house, but nothing that posed an issue, I believe. I managed to calm her down.”

“When did she get out of the house?” Shafiq asked, suddenly

“Probably right as you and Claire apparated on that beach. It would explain her seeing a flash of light.” Snape studied the young auror, detecting his confusion. “Why?”

“She wasn’t supposed to. I cast a muggle-repelling charm surrounding the house. Doolin is such a small town that anything would have alerted people to our presence. Ms. Black shouldn’t be able to get out of the house, let alone get anywhere near us, definetly not close enough to witness any magic being used.” Shafiq explained “And before you two ask, yes, I’m positive I cast the spell correctly.”

Severus and Kingsley exchanged befuddled looks, but the former potions master’s expression soon changed into something else that Shafiq couldn’t quite read.

“Severus?”

“I’ve been wondering, but...”

“I take that this is not the first time something like this has happened?” Kingsley pressed.

“No.” Snape answered, flatly. “I thought I was imagining it, but there’s a pattern”

“Which pattern?”

“Evelyn being able to see things she shouldn’t, technically, see. It has happened several times now.”

“Like...?”

“For one, I have several objects in my house which I’ve personally charmed to keep them hidden from muggles. Time and time again she’s been able to spot and interact with each and every one. Not just that. I didn’t think much of it at first, but apparently, when she was younger she could see
magical creatures.”

“How younger?”

“Her whole childhood. Untill sometime after the death of her older brother in a domestic accident.”

“Children imagine things...” Kingsley countered. “And there’s much inconclusive debate on how much of the magical world muggles can perceive and interact with, and how much they ignore simply because they have no frame of reference to understand it. Muggle children might simply be more open to magical events because the idea that magic isn’t real hasn’t been taught to them yet.”

“Yes, but none of that accounts for the fact that Evelyn can find magical objects in my house with more ease than a bloodhound can find deer. Her family does have magical DNA, her brother was a wizard.”

“Wait a moment” Shafiq tried to follow the conversation “Her brother was a wizard? Are we discussing wether Evelyn Black could be a witch, is that it?”

“Not at all the case. She’s not much younger than you, right, Severus? If she was a witch she would have gone to Hogwarts and you would have known. Her brother got a a letter, no?”

“He did. He would have been a year behind me, had he lived to attend. A Slytherin, certainly, from the little I know about him.”

“Her brother died in an accident, you said?” Shafiq chimed in, uncertain

“Yes, and?”

“Did she witness it?”

“She...did.” Severus paused, seeing where his former pupil was going with that question.

“There’s some literature about wizards and witches whose magical abilities got supressed by trauma.”

“Obscurials? No, that’s absolutely impossible, Virgil.” Kingsley shook his head “Obscurials are children who were forced to supress their abilities through systematic physical or psychological abuse. Nothing of the sort has ever happened to Evelyn. Has it, Severus?”

“Of course not.”

Shafiq observed Snape’s face, finding a small frown that suggested he wasn’t completely sure about his answer. He continued, filling the uneasy silence, refusing to believe a muggle could have simply waltzed through the barrier of his repelling charm.

“Still...there have been recorded cases of late bloomers and wizards whose abilities were supressed in some other ways. There’s a lot we have yet to figure out about the magical gene and it’s mutations or different manifestations. What other explantion could there be?”

…

January 7th, 1999

Cokeworth

For once Evelyn was thankful that she had dragged her feet in preparation for the departure that
never happened. She hadn´t brought a whole lot to Angela´s house, so packing everything had barely taken half an hour. Looking back, it was rather funny how she she deluded herself into believing she was actually going to leave, when in reality she had never truly wanted to.

Evelyn wondered where things would go from here on with Severus. In spite of everything that could have pushed her away, she found herself unable to desert this man. She would try to make it work. They had come this far, after all, if she had to regret anything, Evelyn would rather regret trying, than regret that she hadn´t even bothered to.

When the last bag was zipped up, Angela poked her head inside the room

“Guess who´s here to help you load everyting into the car?”

...

“Where are the boxes?” she asked before even entering her house. It was the first thing she noticed. The boxes full of books she had packed in preparation to leave Spinner End were not where she had left them. “Where are my books?”

“They´re there, go in.” Severus nudged her inside, carrying the last of her luggage and closing the door.

“Wait a minute...” she looked around, and only then realized the books were all back in the shelves. “Did you..”

“Art, cinema, fashion, decoration, hard covers and special editions in the sitting room, cookbooks in the kitchen next to the cabinets, paperbacks, novels and fiction in general in your bedroom, history, humanities, non-fiction and travelling guides in your office. Arranged by author, then by alphabetical order. Is that correct?” he stated, looking rather pleased with himself

“How do you...”

“You think I never noticed you have a system to arrange your books? It´s pretty well thought out, actually.”

“So that´s what you´ve been up to while I was away?”

“I was bored enough, so why not do something useful with my time. I´m sure there are some misplaced ones, though.”

“Severus, this must have taken you forever.”

“Just a few flicks of a wand, to be honest.”

“Because of course you have a wand” she laughed heartily

“Of course I do” he plopped on the couch to watch her explore the room.

“Why not a staff, Gandalf?”

“Too cumbersome. A wand can be kept your pocket.”

“Sure, how silly of me. And these?” she turned to the coffee table upon which sat an Art Nouveau glass vase which had been in the house when she moved in. Inside there was an elegant arrangement of red cattleya orchids “They´re gorgeous, Sev.”
“Thank the bratty girl from the flower shop downtown. She picked them. When I went into the store I realized I knew your favourite color but not your favourite flower. The girl kept insisting on red roses but I thought that would be a bit...”

“Too cliché?” she guessed, tremendously amused “You owe that flower shop girl apologies then.”

“Don’t tell me red roses are your favourites, after all.”

“Yes. My mother grows them in our backyard, so I they were always my favourites. But I do agree with you, they’re a bit cliché to give to a girlfriend. These cattleyas are just perfect, and they go so well with the vase. I can never find flowers that compliment it.” she sat by his side, resting her head on his shoulder so her lips were close to his ear. “You do realize what you just did with the books and the flowers basically amounts to foreplay for a woman like me, right?”

“I assure you that wasn’t the intention” he replied with a wolfish grin.

“Right.” her smile faded into his lips. He pulled her into his lap, running his hand up her back, feeling the warmth of her skin under the heavy woolen pullover. Her cat was meowing somewhere, freed from his carrier, and Severus couldn’t help but marvel at how much Evelyn herself was like a cat. A sweet, dangerously smart and very spoiled house cat. The way she slowly and gently insinuated herself into his life, making herself at home, the liquid, pliable softness of her body, the way she melted into him, demanding attention, the calming effect her mere presence had on him, that sensuous feeling of sheer contentment...

Severus had never truly experienced this feeling of refuge, of being able to let his guard down. Sure there was Lily once. She had given him a short solace, a small taste of what it felt to feel wanted and cared for. But he had been a child then, and there was always something in the way. His father’s presence looming over him even when he wasn’t around, with all the unpredictability of his rages, then Hogwarts, Potter and Black always prowling for a chance to catch him off guard, resentful of Severus’ mere existence. There was always this feeling of having to defend himself against everyone at every waking moment. Always standing in attention, always waiting for the worst, the shadows of his fears and regrets fast at his heels. That had been had been his life for as long as he remembered.

This was different. Inside Evelyn’s house he could at least pretend the life he lived wasn’t truly his, that everything that happened up until this very moment had ceased to exist. There was only Evelyn, and she loved him, and that was enough. More than enough. Severus was sure this was it, that feeling of home he’d only ever heard of. Evelyn in his arms, a house protected from the cold and memories outside, surrounded by her books and the happy photos of her life on the walls, her cat purring by the fireplace.

Yet, there were certain things in the back of his mind, nagging at him.

“Lyn...” he tilted his head back, barely breaking from her lips. “I’ve been thinking...”

“About?” she asked, distracted, trying to reclaim his mouth.

“What we were talking about the other day, in the car coming from Liverpool”

“I thought we were done talking about that.”

“I know. I’m a little worried, that’s it.”

“Don’t be.”

“Lyn...can I ask you something?”
“Sure.”

“You mentioned this doctor your parents took you...”

“Dr. Cahill. What about that?”

“We never really talked about it.” Severus knew there was a reason she didn’t tell him any details. It’s not the kind of thing most would make casual conversation of. It pained him to press the issue, specially as could tell it was still sore.

“There’s nothing to talk about. Dr. Cahill was nice but it was a different time. My parents wanted to do what was best for me. My grandparents thought it was absurd, that all they’d do was travel all the way to Ennis so some hack could just tell my parents I was crazy and have them send me to a church run asylum for the insane.”

“Did she try to do anything of the sort?”

“Dr. Cahill? Never! As I said, she was a nice woman. She diagnosed me as both depressed and hyperkinetic, which was the word they used for children who had any of the symptom associated with hyperactivity or atention defict back in the day. I was prescribed antidepressants to keep me 'manageable'. It was rare for a doctor to diagnose a child with depression back then, but that’s what I had. Finding the right dosage for a patient my age was hell. The pills messed with my energy levels and concentration. I had to wear myself out studying to try to keep my grades from dropping. Mood shifts became worst rather than better.” she blurted out the torrent of information as if trying to get it all over with at once.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“My mother was so desperate she actually tried taking me to church, to see if talking to a priest and getting blessed would help the treatment.”

“A priest?”

“Yes. Don’t look at me like that. I know. Nobody these days would trust a priest around a child, specially in Ireland. But the worst thing he did to me was making me pray a few too many Hail Marys. My grandfather was furious though. He never trusted priests or nuns. Or doctors for that matter. He started to pressure my parents to pull me from the treatment.”

“Did they?”

“Eventually. Once grandpa Marius pulled me to the side and told me to just tell Dr. Cahill what she wanted to hear. No more stories of fairies, banshees or mermaids. Just talk about school, boys, homework, things all other girls talk about. I did. I didn’t even have to lie. I was growing, hormones were kicking in, growth spurts, boys starting to notice me. I knew I couldn’t act like a child anymore. I couldn’t go around yapping about magic and fairies. I had to grow up.”

“That’s why you started writing about folklore and witchcraft?”

“To get a little bit of it back. Or something like that. You understand, don’t you?”

The look she gave him split Severus heart clean in two. Her eyes seemed to beg him for reassurance, for him to tell her 'no, you’re not crazy’. Instead he simply pulled her to rest onto his chest. He immediately regreted pushing her into this conversation. Severus had to know if there was any chance of Shafiq’s theories being accurate, but not at the cost of upsetting her like that.
“I do. Of course I do.”

... 

The Burrow

The sound of chatter and laughter mingled with the clatter of silverware and plates filled the house once again. Eight months later, some semblance of normalcy had returned to the Weasleys´ home. Sure, they were not children anymore, and as time went on adult responsibilities started to pile on their young shoulders, still tired and weary of war. The day they´d all find their own paths in life and leave the nest for good approached. But that day was not today.

Nobody found it strange that Harry seemed to be in his own little world. He had become more withdrawn, quieter. Nobody begrudged him that. They knew what he had gone through, and they weren´t about to deny him the right to heal from it however he saw fit. They all needed time and patience. There would always be a shadow behind Mrs. Weasley´s warm smile, George would always be missing a part of himself that hurt more than any physical injury would, Mr. Weasley would always have that tiny drop of sorrow in his voice. They had learned to accept that and to give each other enough space and time for the wound to close. They weren´t doing a bad job of it.

There was something different about Harry today, though. It wasn´t just the usual haunted silence that came suddenly and went away within the space of a smile or a joke. Hermione poked Ron, silently directing her gaze to where Harry sat, by himself, near the fire. He gave her a knowing nod. He had noticed too. Under the cover of the family´s distraction, Hermione and Ron quietly approached their friend. They didn´t have to truly ask him anything. Harry looked around for a moment, before getting the other two to follow him upstairs, as Mrs. Weasley´s voice behind them warned dinner would be ready in a little while.

... 

“Snape is alive” Harry blurted hushedly as soon as they were out of earshot. The revelation got nothing but silence and confused stares in response.

“Snape...alive?” Ron finally spoke, perplexed

“How? You saw him dead, didn´t you?”

“I thought I did, but I was wrong. He´s alive.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I am. I´ve talked to him, Ron. Twice. I´ve been to his house a few days ago.”

“So he pretended he was dead this whole time?”

“Seems more like the Ministry made him pretend. When they went to recover his body from the Shrieking Shack, they found him alive, but he was in a coma. He stayed that way for months, so they didn´t disclose his status. They weren´t sure he would pull through. When he finally recovered everyone already thought he was dead so Shacklebolt decided it was better to leave it like that.”

“Whatever for?” Hermione frowned, trying to make sense of the information Harry clumsily laid out for their consideration
“To protect him. So he could work for them as an informant. That’s why I met with him the other day.”

“Hold up.” Ron shook his head dully “You’re saying Snape is alive but pretending to be dead, so he can work for the ministry?”

“Yes. Remember that lead we got that the Lestranges has escaped through France? It came from him. Actually, no...from Draco.”

“Draco?!” Hermione and Ron both gasped

“Yes. The Malfoys have relatives in France who are helping Death Eaters escape through the continent. Draco is spying on them and sending the information to Snape. I think Snape knows about a lot of Death Eaters connections from the time he spied for Dumbledore, so they’re using this to track the ones who fled. Now Shacklebolt wants me to work with him.”

“On what? Tracking fugitives?”

“Something else. And you two won’t believe it.”

…

“I’m sorry.” Severus murmured running his fingers through her hair. She didn’t she seem particularly upset. Just tired. As if this was a conversation she had had a few too many times before. He could tell the subject physically drained her. Severus would try to keep that in mind.

“It’s ok.” she turned her face up to him and smiled shakily

“We don’t have to talk about any this again if you don’t want to.”

“I don’t want to. But there are many things neither of us want to talk about that we will have to talk about anyway. If we want to make this work I mean.”

“Doesn’t have to be today, or any time soon.”

“It doesn’t hurt as much as it seems, I promise. It’s been over twenty years...Want to hear something funny?”

“Sure.”

“My grandmother read my cards.”

“You...what?”

“My cards. You know, tarot cards.”

“Your grandmother does that?”

“Yes, don’t make that face.”

“What face?”

“Like you’re about to laugh.”
“I would never dare laughing at your grandmother.”

“Yeah, right...”

“So what did your she see in your cards, if I may ask?”

“A knight in shiny armour.”

“How exciting.”

“And that I have to let go of my past”

“That’s always sage advice.”

“And always hard to follow. Which is why...” she got up to get something from one of her bags. A big package wrapped in blue paper, which she threw it at him. Severus startled, but the package was much lighter and softer than he expected. “...we’re going to start worrying about the future. Starting with your birthday.”

“You didn’t have to..”

“It’s not from me, it’s from my mother. A belated Christmas gift, but since your birthday is the day after tomorrow, I guess it works as a birthday gift just as well.”

“From your mother?”

“To thank you for saving my life and whatnot. I’d cherish it if I were you. She’s not usually this nice to any boyfriend of mine.”

“Does she know I’m your...ahem...'boyfriend’” Severus hated the word. It sounded juvenile at best, but what else would he call himself? Frankly, he didn’t know.

“We’re still testing the waters aren’t we? Now open the gift.”

“A jumper?” Severus himself was tiny bit surprised at the fact that he did like the gift.

“My mother made it herself. It’s the family pattern too. Try it on.”

He got out of his own old dark gray woolen jumper to try on the brand new green one. It was ever so slightly loose around the stomach, but otherwise a perfect fit. While he did that, Evelyn went for her purse, getting something from it, and returning to his side, nearly hopping from the excitement.

“This is from me.” she handed him an envelope. Inside he found two tickets for a concert.

“The Manchester Camerata will present a selection of Haendel and Purcell arias for mezzo exactly on your birthday. And I have reservations for The French for afterwards.”

“What?! Evelyn, The French? The one in the Midland Hotel? Even I know that place is expensive.”

“Remember that Russian publisher I told you about? I just got the paycheck for the publishing rights of my book, and you won’t believe how much they’re paying me. And Lewis told me we might have a two book deal next.”

“Still, I can’t possibly...”

“It’s your birthday!”
“Absolutely not.”

“Sev...”

“You got me tickets for a concert, that’s fair enough, but I’ll pick up the tab at the restaurant.”

“But...”

“Evelyn...”

“We split the check, then.”

“Evelyn...”

“50-50, Severus. You pay for my dessert if you want. It’s fair enough, no?”

“Ok, fine. Speaking of which, this Russian publisher...”

“Before you ask, Mr. Unbearably stubborn and suspicious of everything under the sun, they’re legit. Lewis triple checked them. They’re based in Moscow, traditional publisher of history and humanities. Some of Europe’s most prominent scholars have published with them.”

“Well, congratulations then.”

“Thanks. Now stop being such a grouch and let me plan a nice evening for the two of us, will you? Jesus...”

…

“I’ve never heard of this Serpentine dagger. It’s not mentioned in any book I’ve read about the founders.”

“And she has read every book ever written about them.” Ron told Harry pointedly “If Hermione hasn’t heard of it, how do we know it exists? Because Snape says so? I mean, I know he’s supposed to be on our side, but this is all just...strange. No?”

“Snape is not at all happy to be involved in this, I could tell. Shacklebolt convinced him somehow.”

“Snape not being happy about something, now that’s a shocker.”

“We have to admit he’s been right about most things. Even when we thought he was trying to set us up, Snape usually knew what he was doing” Hermione countered “If he says Salazar Slytherin created a magical dagger that can yield enough power that the every other dark wizard running around wants it, I don’t see why that’d be a lie.”

“Well, yes, but..” Ron conceeded “Of course, now we all know Snape was Dumbledore’s spy all along, and he helped save Harry, but that doesn’t change the fact that he’s a bloody...”

“What are you three up to?” Mrs. Weasley walked into the room without any warning, startling the three of them.

“Just chatting, mum.” Ron told her, as good an actor as usual.

“Well, come down or we will have dinner without you.”

Mrs. Weasley left as unceremoniously as she had come in, and the three got up to follow, least she
came back to drag them by their ears. As they reached the door, however, Harry gently pulled at Hermione´s sleeve, letting Ron go as they stayed behind.

“There´s something else...” he got something shiny from his pocket and slid it into her hand. Hermione examined it quickly then looked up at him.

“Lipstick?” she blinked, opening the container.

“I found it at Snape´s house.”

“And you just took it?!”

“Shhh! That´s not the point! I didn´t even meant to. I found it when he was on the phone and...”

“Snape..has a phone?”

“Yes, he does. When the phone rang, right after he picked up he told me to leave so I wouldn´t hear the conversation. He was in such a hurry to kick me out, I forgot to put the lipstick back where I found it. ”

“She´s going to want it back.”

“She?”

“The woman this belongs to. Or you´re trying to tell me Snape is also wearing lipstick now?”

“Of course not!”

“It was probably her on the phone. It´s got to be a muggle then...”

Harry was about to say something when Mrs. Weasley called out, telling them to hurry.

...

January 9th

“Happy birthday.” she said the moment she opened the door, kissing his lips ever so lightly before letting him in. “You´re early, I´m not even ready yet.”

“You look perfect to me.” he examined her from head to toe, taking it all in. Evelyn was stunning as ever, but tonight´s choice of outfit was far from the virginal get up she had picked for Christmas. She looked like sex on heels in a form-fitting emerald green knee length dress with sheer long sleeves and a plunging neckline. Her lips looked sinfully kissable, tinted burgundy red, just like the nails and her eyes were adorned with dark eyeliner. He noticed, with satisfaction, that her make-up didn´t cover the galaxy of freckles that dusted her face and breasts, between which the silver celtic cross she always wore sparkled, elegantly matching the dress. Severus was glad that most of the clothes in his wardrobe were dull shades of grey and black, so it wasn´t too painfully obvious that his newest suit was older than a Hogwarts graduating student and hadn´t been fashionable for at least half as long.

Evelyn went upstairs and came back a moment later, wearing a black trenchcoat. He had gotten used with her obsession with details by now, the tedious process of picking the right piece of jewellery or shade of eyeshadow. Running his fingers along the line of her jaw, he lifted her chin looking for those tiny details, for the sake of his own petty amusement. Silver hoop earrings and, he could notice as she got closer, a ring. A strangely snake-shaped silver ring with delicate carved scales and tiny green gems for eyes.
“My grandfather gave this to me when I got accepted into Trinity.” she explained noticing his interest. “To bring me luck.”

“Family heirloom?”

“How do you know?”

“His family crest has snakes on it, no?”

“Yes. It belonged to his mother.”

Odd, he thought, feeling a rather subtle burning ache spread across his left forearm. He winced, trying to disguise his discomfort, pretend like nothing was happening. Could it be another episode? No, it didn’t feel like it. It wasn’t that unbearable burning pain that spread through his neck, shoulder and arm. This was bizarrely focused on a single spot.

“Is everything all right?”

“Yes, just a little discomfort on my arm.” he opened and closed his hand, trying to get the soreness to go away.

“Let me see...” she unbuttoned and rolled up his sleeve, running her fingers lightly over the Dark Mark etched in his skin. It seemed to make it worse, like touching a fresh, if superficial, burn. “Your skin is warm. You don’t seem to have a fever though.”

“It will be fine.” he told her, buttoning his sleeve and getting his jacket back on.

“Are you, sure? We can stay home order something.”

“No, of course not. I don’t want you to complain that you can’t get me out of the house even for my birthday.”

…

“What is Hermione up to?” Ron asked distractedly as they finally sat down to get some rest. It was a Saturday and they had spend the day helping Mr. Weasley with his tinkering. Since he had successfully fixed Sirius motorcycle, through a long process of trial and error, Arthur had become rather proficient in all things concerning muggle cars and motorcycles. Surely, he was nowhere near a professional, but he had learned the basics. In the months following Fred’s death, he had used that hobby as a way to keep himself sane.

His latest undertaking was a 1924 Chrysler Model B-70, he had bought for the price of peanuts. It was worth nothing that Hermione had warned him that the model was so old and outdated, not to mention in such bad shape, that even a muggle mechanic might not be interested in making it work again. But Mr. Weasley was adamant about fixing it. And without magic.

Ron and Harry would usually spend their days off helping him, happy for the distraction. And in that cold Saturday afternoon, what better way to distract themselves?. Hermione would always drop by to offer input or titbits of information she got from the fancy hardcover on classic cars she had given Mr. Weasley as a gift last Christmas. But today she hadn’t shown up.

“I saw her with some books in the living room, taking notes.”

“Of course, she is.”
“Well, I think we’re done for today, boys.” Mr. Weasley remarked, stretching his back “Why don’t you two go see what she’s doing? We can have something to eat afterwards.”

…

“There you are.” she told them without lifting her eyes from her notes

“And there you are. What’s this about? I thought you had aced your N.E.W.T.s?” Ron smirked, sitting on the couch next to her while Harry took the armchair.

“I’ve been thinking about everything you told us last night, Harry.”

“And…?”

“I knew I had a good biography of Salazar Slytherin somewhere…” she grabbed one of the books, and retrieved some scribbled notes from it

“Does it say anything about the Serpentine dagger?”

“No, it doesn’t. But I’ve found something else that might help. Here it says Salazar Slytherin’s mother was almost certainly a Spanish or Portuguese witch of Muslim origin. Her last name is lost to record, but we do know her first name was Saadyah because her marriage to his father Saebeorht Slytherin is on record.”

“How does any of that help?” Ron asked, impatient.

“I’m getting there. It seems Salazar learned a great deal about spells, charms and curses commonly used in Al-Andalus through his mother’s teachings. Al-Andalus was the name for the part of Spain Muslims controlled at the time.”

“What makes you think we don’t know?” Ron observed, slightly offended, even though he didn’t, in fact, know.

“I didn’t know till Snape told me.” Harry shrugged.

“As I was saying, Salazar’s mother was said to be particularly gifted in Astronomy, and rumour had it that she learned it from a wizard who worked in the muggle court of Córdoba. Some sources say this man may have been her father or uncle. So I thought, if we find out who he was, maybe we can find out more about her.”

“Let me guess. You found a book somewhere about famous wizards in Al-Andalus, or whatever that place is called.”

“Not me. Percy. He found one for me in the reference library of at the ministry. An owl just delivered it.”

“Percy working Saturdays. Because of course he’d do that”

“Did you find out who’s this wizard?” Harry was starting to get anxious.

“I made some quick calculations. If Salazar was born in the 990s, then his mother would have been born two decades or so earlier, in the 970s. In that period of time the greatest expert in Astronomy in the wizarding community of Al-Andalus was a man by the name of Saqr Ibn Rashid. Who later in life did serve the muggle Caliph of Córdoba.”

“Then, the dagger is in Córdoba?” Harry offered
“I don’t think so. Too obvious. But look at this” she showed him the page with the entry on Ibn Rashid, “He was born in Al-Maryya. That’s the city of Almeria today. If Saqr Ibn Rashi was his grandfather, I would bet Salazar Slytherin still had living relatives there when he got sent into exile.”

He stared at the page for a few seconds before whispering under his breath:

“Snape needs to know this. We have to tell him.”

“Well, not now. If we leave, my parents will ask questions. And I can guarantee George doesn’t even want to hear Snape’s name, so forget about explaining to everybody he’s alive and working for the ministry. We’d be here till next month.”

“We can’t tell them anything. The ministry wants to keep all of this secret. I wasn’t even supposed to tell you two.”

“We’ll go after everybody is in bed.” Hermione suggested “This way nobody will notice or ask questions.”

... 

The dull ache on his arm persisted through the night, but it didn’t bother him much. Severus had been through worse, and tolerating some mild discomfort was a fair price to pay to enjoy a couple pleasurable hours without any care other than Evelyn on his arm. Severus didn’t mind baroque music at all, or any classical music for that matter. He would never love it with the passion Evelyn did, but then again he’d never be passionate about anything to the extent she was passionate about...well, everything. Nevertheless he appreciated the program. Haendel and Purcell’s slower, more romantic arias. A deliberate choice on her part, and the delicacy of her intent was not lost on him.

It weren’t the hauntingly complex melodies or the admittedly rather beautiful blonde singer on stage that had his full attention. Severus had found out he got a lot more enjoyment out of watching Evelyn’s reactions to music, than he got from the actual music. He knew she had been raised in a musical environment. Her family enjoyed music, plenty of her relatives could play instruments, and she had an unbridled love for dancing. From the few times he had had the opportunity to overhear it, she was actually a moderately skilled pianist and singer herself. Her natural aptitude for music shouldn’t come as a surprise, seeing the small miracle she had operated on James. He wasn’t surprised that she knew the whole selection of arias by heart, and could mouth the lyrics in sync with the mezzo. Severus could easily pinpoint Purcell’s “Sweeter than Roses” as her favourite out of the entire programme, as her enjoyment was so transparent. Even though this concert wouldn’t have been his first choice, he was glad she had picked it.

“You know...” she remarked as the maître led them to their table at The French “...I can’t shake the thought that I may have picked a concert that was more my thing than yours.”

“I actually enjoyed it quite a bit.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I enjoy being around you when you’re happy like this.”

“That’s a very sweet way of saying you didn’t like it.”

“That’s not what I meant at all, Lyn.”

“Next time you pick.”
“You keep saying yourself that if it was up to me we wouldn’t leave the house.”

“You keep saying yourself that if it was up to me we wouldn’t leave the house.”

Severus nearly choked on his water. Flashbacks to the Christmas fiasco ran through his head, making him uneasy, a cold feeling sinking into the pit of his stomach when he finally contemplated where this evening could lead them. He would be lying if he tried to convince himself he wanted anything other than have her in his bed by the end of the night. For weeks now they had danced around the subject, every conversation filled with innuendo, phone calls full with barely contained desire, touches, embraces and kisses that barely satisfied their longing for each other.

It tormented him. Evelyn was a profoundly physical, exuberant woman. It came easily to her to embrace him, to kiss him, to crack jokes about wanting to have sex with him or to simply tease him with small gestures loaded with a thick sensuality. She wanted it, and she wasn’t the least bit shy about letting him know. It was easier for her. For him? Not so much. It was humiliating for Severus to admit that at 39 years of age he was actually afraid of having sex with a woman. He couldn’t coherently explain why.

In Severus’ experience love and sex were two completely different entities, opposites almost. He had only ever loved Lily until Evelyn came along. Lily, a woman he had never dared treat as anything other than a friend. A woman who definitely didn’t see him as anything other than a friend. Surely he fantasized about being more than her friend, but he had never worked up the courage to act on it. He didn’t have James Potter’s aggravating confidence or Sirius Black’s easy, cheap charisma. Eventually puberty sneaked up on him giving his hopeless awkwardness an extra layer of pitifulness. There were, admittedly very few, girls who found his gaucheness endearing enough, Charity Burbage had been the first. Eventually he found out that his connection with Lucius Malfoy and other pure-bloods yielded some benefits. There were women who found that attractive. He had never loved any of them, and he knew none of them had loved him either, but love was not a requirement for a quick shag. And when that failed a professional could always be found anywhere in Cokeworth.

It was his way of trying to forget Lily. Or spite her and her perfectly pristine, wholesome familial happiness. Or punish himself. It didn’t matter. What he knew was that the proverbially transcendent experience of having sex with a person you love, that ultimate pleasure extolled by every poet, writer, artist and paddler of easily breakable dreams had never been his to enjoy. And once Lily died, even the quick and easy release of an anonymous loveless fuck lost its thrill. For over seventeen years Severus had forgotten what desire was.

Now here she was. This woman he loved, maybe just as much as he had loved Lily, and whom he desired probably more than he had desired Lily. And she was ready, willing...she wanted it. And he didn’t know how to give it to her; he didn’t know whether he’d measure up to what she seemed to expect, whether he’d actually know what to with a partner who wasn’t just a warm body to vent his frustration. And yet he knew what would happen before the night was over. He knew it and he craved it, the butterflies in his stomach be damned.

…

It wasn’t like her to pounce a man like that, but the way Severus kept looking at her throughout the evening was slowly tearing at what little self-control Évelyn had left. She wondered if he was doing it on purpose. He was ever the self controlled, stiff type, but under the carefully composed exterior she got glimpses of something else hiding beneath the surface, hardly making ripples. As much as Severus tried to come off as aloof, his eyes usually gave him away. They were so intense as to be almost scary sometimes, those black eyes of his. The way they studied her every movement, the way
they bore into her hungrily, as if undressing her, it was enough to leave her dizzy.

When they arrived back at Spinner’s End, Evelyn’s heart skipped a beat when she realized he wasn’t about to walk her to her house, but stopped at his own door instead. She was all over him before her could turn the lights on. There was a moment of hesitation, his body tensing slightly, as if startled, but didn’t last. She drank the low grunt that poured from his lips when he returned the kiss, grabbing at her, pulling her close.

Evelyn lost herself into the scent of tobacco and oak moss that emanated from his skin. The darkness around them somehow made it all more vivid, more potent. His hands and lips were everywhere. She could feel his teeth nipping at her jaw, her neck, her collarbone and shoulders. Before tumbling on the couch he had already hiked her skirt up to her waist so his fingers could roam freely at the expense of her thighs and ass. She could barely suppress a tiny self-satisfied giggle when she felt his crotch grind at her. Hard. Not even semi-hard. Hard, bursting-out-of-his-pants hard.

“I´ve been a good girl tonight” she quipped, hearing the sound of the zip of her dress breaking from how hard and clumsy he pulled at it with his left, injured hand. “Not a single drop of alcohol.”

He let out a throaty chuckle and roughly pushed her bra out of the way, cupping her breast and closing his mouth over it, sucking and nibbling, taking his time before turning his ministrations to the other one. She shivered and leaned her head back against the armrest, letting her body relax and be engulfed in the haze of pleasure. It was as if, once the initial hesitation had been conquered, any inhibition or scruples he might have had were flung out the window. Severus´ prowling, relentless, fingers and tongue were having his merry way with her, and frankly, it excited her to be manhandled like that. She would have liked to reciprocate more actively, but all she could do was run her fingers through his hair and wrap her legs about his waist, holding on to him for dear life as the pure bliss of it all battered her like the waves of the Atlantic battered the rocks on Doolin´s shore during a storm.

“Not such a good girl, I see” he rasped when his hand slipped between her legs finding nothing to separate his fingers from her heated skin.

“D-din’t...ah...didn´t want a knicker line...Oh, mo Dhia, Sev...”

“Sure...”

Evelyn was well beyond any embarrassment she may have initially had as she lifted and spread her legs to give him access. Nor did it bother her in the least that she was surely making near-inhuman noises when he started to fondle her dexterously. For all that she had fantasized about what his long, elegant fingers could do to her, she had to admit her imagination had fallen decisively short. Maybe it was the fact that she hadn’t been properly touched by a man in a long time, or that the tension, the longing between them her on the edge for weeks, but it took her very little to feel her climax looming.

“I-inside” she whispered into his ear. He obliged. One, two, three... “..deeper”

…

Every inch of her skin was flushed, feverish, down to the tight wetness surround his fingers. If he had the heart to pry himself from her arms, to tear his mouth from hers, to abandon the feeling of her flesh, her scent, her voice pulling him in, he would have liked to turn the lights on just so he could add the visual pleasure to the already overwhelming onslaught his senses were subjected to. Yet even under the dim light that streamed into the room from the street outside he could make out the curve of her breasts, full and heaving under his chest, the outline of her high cheekbones, and the glistening on her parted lips. He wished the darkness would allow him to see the blush of her skin, that rosy
colour that looked so lovely over her freckles.

Her breath was laboured and Severus had no idea what half the words she was saying meant, but he ’d be damned if he didn’t love how it sounded. He had expected her to be vocal. And she was. How she was. The room was filled with her sighs, moans her a soft, breathless litany of Irish embroidered into English that sounded prettier and endlessly more moving than any piece the Manchester Camerata could ever play. Then there was that, that little purring, drawn out whimper in the back of her throat, followed by trembling and shivering, and the wet, slick pulse around his fingers. He could have finished himself right there and then.

“’It’s not fair.’” she told him with a tiny little bit of her voice left.

“What?” he barely managed, the feeling of her hand on his cock nearly choking the life out of him. She giggled, her fingers closing on him, palming and fondling as if trying to make out his shape, and size under the fabric.

“It’s your birthday and I’m having all the fun. Come on, birthday boy, let me take care of you.”

Severus thought he was in control, he thought he could lead this where he wanted it to go. He was obviously wrong. Her voice, heavy, smoky, soaked post-orgasmic euphoria was enough to break his will. She started to undo the buttons of his shirt, his belt...

...she pushed his trousers down, along with his underpants...

“Who wants to see me take off Snivelly’s pants?”

“Let him down!”

“Don’t make me hex you, Evans...”

“...filthy mudbloods like her...”

“...take off Snivelly’s pants?”

“And I’d wash your pants if I were you, Snivellus.”

“...filthy mudbloods...”

“...snivellus...”
The sound of laughter filled his ears all of the sudden like thunder on a bright Spring day. It was all he could hear till there was silence again.

…

“Sev? Love, what’s the matter?” Evelyn’s voice had a heartbreaking note of fear under it even when she was trying to keep her tone calm. The light of the lamp besides the sofa seemed to make everything around him real and tangible again, but it hurt his eyes. He found himself sitting away from her, his breath short, the feeling of something suffocating him and tightening inside his chest, not sure of what had just happened. She touched his cheek with the back of her fingers, lightly. “Sev, you’re scaring me.”

“Nothing...It’s nothing” he murmured, fixing his trousers as swiftly as he could with one good hand. “I just don’t feel very well.”

“What is it?” he gave her a shaky smile, then ran his fingers through her hair as a reassurance not even himself believed. He could see the concern on her face. Merlin, she was beautiful. Maybe even more with her lipstick smeared on her lips and the mascara running ever so slightly. She had covered up as best as she could, and yet there she was still a beguiling picture of bare thighs, barely covered breasts and wild locks of hair in seductive disarray. He let his hand linger, on her hair, her cheeks, till his thumb ran over the lips, wondering how he would explain to her what had just happened.

“Sev...we should probably get you to a doctor. First that thing in your arm, now this...”

“It’s nothing, love. Nothing physical, I mean. I just need a moment. I’m a bit overwhelmed all of the sudden.”

“Sev...”

“It’s fine, I promise.” he pulled her in, kissing her lips then her forehead, as way of inept apology.

“Tell me what happened...”

“It’s not...I just...I just can’t do it.”

“You just...can’t.” She pulled away looking at him with those knowing golden brown eyes that had the power to readily disarm him.

“I’m sorry...”

“Here’s an idea. Why don’t we just try and relax a bit, uh?” she smiled, rubbing his back reassuringly, and brushing her lips against his “I’ll fix us a some tea, we can go to the bedroom if you want, get a little more comfortable. We don’t have to do anything. I mean, we can, but we don’t have to. How does that sound?”

…”

“He must be sleeping.” Hermione let out as they stood in front of the house. All lights inside were off.

“Snape?” Ron laughed “The same Snape who used to patrol the corridors all night? I doubt it.”

“We have to talk to him whether he’s sleeping or not so...” Harry knocked
“You should get the door.” she observed, a little bemused by his irritation. It had been a bit of a relief that the insistent knocking on the door had at least snapped him out of the haze he seemed to have fallen into. Even if it meant he was now quite annoyed.

“They’ll go away.”

“This late at night it’s got to be something important.”

“If it’s something important they’ll come back tomorrow.”

Hardly had he said that a young-sounding male voice came from outside, followed by more knocking.

“It’s me Harry. I need to talk to you.”

“Of course. Harry Fucking Potter.” Severus grunted, hiding his face in the palm of his hand.

“Who’s...Harry Potter?” she asked, genuinely curious as to who this person could be to elicit such a reaction out of him.

“The bane of my miserable existence, that’s who.”
“It’s an old student of mine. A problematic one.” Severus offered offhandedly as explanation picking up their jackets from the floor and fixing his own clothes to make himself presentable again “I suppose I’ll have to open.”

“You do that, then.” Evelyn told him “I’ll go to the bathroom for a moment to freshen up then I’ll be heading home. Whatever brought the poor lad all the way here it must be important and I don’t want to get in the way.”

“Not that I’d mind if you did.”

“Here.” she retrieved a small plastic package from her handbag, got a piece of wet paper from inside it and handed it to him. Severus stared blankly back at her. “Make up remover. You have lipstick all over your face, love.”

They heard some muffled noises from inside before lights turned on and the door opened violently. Hermione and Ron looked at each other then back at Snape, who stood in front of them, solid, palpable, very much alive and very much exasperated.

One would think he’d be less intimidating in muggle clothes instead of the ominous black robes they’d always seen him in, but it turned out he was just as imposing as always. Perhaps even more, in a rather bizarre way. This Snape lacked the familiarity of all the things they had come to associate with his figure over the course of the years they had been his students. This wasn’t the Potions Master. It was a different man, who emerged from death after living a whole life carefully calculated according to a plan that demanded he hid his true self. The banality of his surroundings and clothes, also lend Snape’s presence a certain unnerving quality, as if it was the first time they’d ever seen him and didn’t quite know what to expect.

“Potter” he spat out, his eyes moving from Harry to his two companions, then back to Harry “I hope you have a good explanation for this buffoonery. My house is not The Three Broomsticks where you can bring your friends at your leisure.”

He went back inside, leaving the door open so they’d follow in, not bothering to extend a proper verbal invitation.

“I...we...” Harry started, trying to look for the right words to come across as confident, and failing,

“We know about the dagger. And we think we can help” Hermione blurted out, eager to get the pointless preambles over with.

“What part of ‘the Ministry doesn’t want anybody else to know about the fucking dagger’ was too hard for you to understand, Potter?” Snape continued, talking only to Harry, as if Hermione and Ron
weren´t there.

“I needed their help.” Harry told him quietly, calmly.

“That might explain Ms. Granger presence, IF that much. Come on, don´t just stand around. Take a seat. I can´t wait to hear what invaluable contributions the strength of your combined intellects has come up with.”

The trio awkwardly found their places on the couch as Snape stood, arms crossed, looking down on them. It was like being called to his office over a grave misdeed, but without the consolation that Professor McGongal would be the one giving out the final ruling on their fates. All at once it downed on them that they weren´t in Hogwarts anymore.

The uneasy silence was broken by steps coming from upstairs. All three turned in the direction the sound was coming from as if choreographed. The high heels were the first thing they saw. Then followed the trench coat, long brown hair and a smiling face. By the time the woman made her way down and they put together all the parts of what added up to her, the sense of unease had been replaced by sheer absurd.

Hermione knew right off the bat she was a muggle. Even muggle born wizards and witches, by virtue of their continued interaction with the magical world and withdrawal from the non-magical realm, usually looked uncomfortable, mismatched in muggle attire. Specially when it came to trendy, more fashion-forward pieces like those impossibly high stilettos. Stilettos were a muggle staple through and through. So was the flow cut green dress she could spy under the coat. And there was the make-up. Magic make-up didn´t smudge, and could be easily removed with special potions leaving no trace behind. It was clear this woman had non magical make-up on, which she had just removed, if the translucent remains of red on her lips and black around the eyes were anything to go by.

Obviously, glaringly, a muggle. But it wasn´t that fact that made her presence strange. It was just how relaxed she seemed, almost happy, in stark contrast with Snape´s grim figure brooding in the corner and the desolate Spinner´s End surrounding them all. She smiled at them, walking into the room as if she lived in that house, entirely at ease.

“Good evening.” she broke the silence with a caressing, husky voice “Which one of you is Harry?”

“Me.” Harry answered dully, as if on auto-pilot.

“I´m Evelyn.” she streched her hand and Harry shook it, still visibly shocked. “And your friends are?”

“I´m Hermione and this is Ron.” Hermione said, shaking the woman´s hand. Ron looked as if he had seen the Basilisk, for all he could manage was to nod his head, gobsmacked, until Hermione elbowed him on the side, so he´d at least say `hello`.

“All former students of yours, Severus?”

“To my chagrin.”

“Was he always mean like that?” she asked Hermione, noticing the girl was the only one to have her wits about her.

“We´re terribly sorry to interrupt but it´s a bit of an emergency.”

“Darling, don´t worry. You didn´t interrupt anything that Severus and I can´t continue some other
time” she glanced at Snape’s direction, her smile slowly turning into a meaningful Monalisa grin. For a moment it seemed like he smiled back. “I should be on my way regardless. Sev, will you walk me to the door, please?”

Hermione bid her good night as she walked out with Snape close by. Without as much as bothering with them, he let her out and followed right after, closing the door behind himself, presumably, Hermione imagined, to say his goodbyes away from the their presence.

“‘Sev’?” Ron let out, stunned, the moment the two were out of earshot. “What the hell?”

“I think we just found the owner of that lipstick” Hermione told Harry.

…

“You don’t want to kiss me in front of the children?” Evelyn laughed softly into his mouth.

“Just trying to keep my private life private.” he chuckled.

“By the way, you owe me a new dress.”

“Do I?”

“You ripped this one, you brute. I don’t know if I can fix it.”

“Fine, get a new one and send me the bill. Make it red.”

“I thought you didn’t like red?”

“I don’t. Which is why I won’t feel too bad if I happen to destroy it.”

“A brute and proud of it. Shame on you. Now, go. For the look on their faces, those three have some huge problem they need help with.”

“When don’t they…”

…

“What are you two tal…” Ron’s question died on his mouth when Snape entered the room again.

“Then? I’m waiting for your presentation…”

“We think we may have an idea. About where we should start looking for the Serpentine Dagger.” Harry started. “Hermione does, actually.”

“Isn’t that surprising? Ms. Granger having ideas. For the life of me I would never expect such a turn of events. Well, Ms. Granger, I’m listening.” he prompted, taking a seat.

…

Hermione went through the entire research process that had led her to think Almeria would be a good starting point. The identity of Salazar Slytherin’s mother, her reputation as a good astronomer, the possibility of her being related to Saqr Ibn Rashid, who was born in Al-Maryya, currently Almeria, in Southern Spain. Snape let her speak without interrupting once, not even to ask questions or offer any input. Once she was done, he shifted on his seat and drew out a sigh.
“You theory is interesting but I’m afraid it rests on a rather weak foundation.”

“Why?”

“For one your starting point is, at best, vague. There’s no hard evidence on the identity of Salazar Slytherin’s mother, as we don’t have his exact date of birth. Saebeorht Slytherin had two wives, Saadya was the second, and Rhoswen the first. Of course, given that Salazar eventually emigrated to Al-Andalus, it’s a relatively well informed guess that the woman with an Arabic name is more likely to have been his mother. But well informed or not, it’s a guess. Which takes us to your next logical leap. That if Saadya was a talented astronomer, then she must have been related or connected in some capacity with the most famous wizarding astronomer of Al-Andalus at the time. Again, it seems reasonable enough, but we lack proof. The Caliphate was in no shortage of scientists and academics both magical and muggle. Nevertheless, let’s consider for the sake of debate that all this line of thinking is factual. Saadya is Salazar’s mother, she was born and educated in Al-Andalus, she was connected or related to Saqr Ibn Rashid. Why would Salazar hide the dagger in the hometown of a presumed grandfather, relative or connection he may not even have met in person? That’s quite a lot of “ifs.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that.” Hermione answered, firmly “But unless you can produce a letter or diary written by Salazar Slytherin’s own hand containing a map with the location of the Serpentine dagger, all we can do is guesswork. We have documentation that proves Saadya was married to Saebeorht Slytherin and that she was a reputed astronomer. There’s at least two scientific papers written by her in Hogwarts Astronomy section. It’s not that much of a leap to think that maybe she was connected to to Saqr Ibn Rashid in some capacity. In fact her work references his several times.”

“Fair enough. But that still doesn’t prove the the dagger is in Almeria.”

“It gives us a place to start.”

“Fine. We’ll start from there. How would you go about it, then? I hope your plan doesn’t consist on randomly asking people on the streets of Almeria if they happen to know where a magical dagger is buried.”

“Saqr Ibn Rashid worked for the muggle caliphate. There must be archival records of his birth and life in Almeria and Córdoba.”

Snape paused, as if giving the idea some thought “We don’t need to go to Spain find such material. As a matter of fact, I know a person who may have access to documentation of the period. Muggle libraries and archives usually keep copies that can be accessed by the public.”

“We should look into it then.” Harry chimed in. “Get as much information as we can about Ibn Rashid. Maybe...compare that with Salazar’s papers?”

“Hogwarts has those. They’re just locked away.” Ron offered, timidly.

Severus smiled, and for once there wasn’t a hint of venom in it “Here’s what we’re doing. I’ll send Minerva an owl requesting Salazar’s Slytherin’s works from the Hogwarts library. As soon as she confirms my request, the three of you will meet me there. As much as I dread the prospect of putting historically significant documentation on the hands of this pair of dunces, four sets of eyes are still better than two. And you Ms. Granger, do you think you can find out more on Ibn Rashid?”

“I can try.”

“I’ll need an overview of the man’s life. We must find something that connects him to Saadya and
Salazar. Places in particular. Maybe that can narrow down the scope of our search.”

“What do we do?” Ron, asked

“Don’t mention a word of this to anybody and try not to get on her way. Now off with you. It’s well past your bedtime, and mother Weasley won’t be happy to find any of you out of bed.”

Snape, having given the assignment, ushered them all out, with an all too evident ‘run along and get to it’ attitude. Hermione didn’t expect courtesy and could definitely deal with that business-like approach. At least Snape was cooperative and they had a clear plan of action, which was more than she expected to get out of this encounter. It would be be wise not to test Snape’s patience, so, as requested, she got up to leave, urging the lads to follow. Ron seemed all too relieved to comply, but she could tell Harry was itching to say something.

“Sir?” Harry said as Snape let them out.

“Yes, Potter?”

Harry reached into his pocket to get the tube of lipstick, handing it to Snape. He really couldn’t help himself, could he, Hermione thought, hiding her face on the palm of her hand.

“I think your friend dropped this. It was on the floor.” the tone with which he had said ‘friend’ almost made Hermione smack him upside the head. Snape got the tube of lipstick and gave him an odd smirk, before closing the door on his face.

…

“Did you really have to antagonise him, Harry?” Hermione hissed, as they sneaked back in the house and into Ron’s bedroom.

“Now can you two tell me what I missed? You didn’t know that woman, did you?

“No, we didn’t. Not in person.” Harry explained. “We knew she existed, but it was the first time we saw her.”

“Harry accidentally found her lipstick the other day, and swiped it so he could use to take a jab at Snape for the fun of it.”

“I just gave it back.”

“Spare me, Harry. We gain nothing from provoking him, specially now that he agreed to work with us.”

“But who is she?” Ron insisted.

“From what I could gather, Snape’s girlfriend or something of the sort.”

“Snape’s…” Ron blinked for a second, before erupting into laughter, trying vainly to keep it quiet

“Hermione, are you completely out of your mind? What woman would…”

“Ronald Weasley, you can’t possibly be that dense.”

“We don’t know for sure…” Harry offered.

“Oh, of course, she just happened to be in his house well after midnight, dressed like that for no reason. And he just happened to have lipstick on his face because he accidentally fell head first into
“Her purse...”

“He had...” Ron stammered.

“We probably interrupted them in the middle of...”

“Don’t even finish that sentence” Ron interrupted, dramatically waving his hand as if to shoo away the mental image. Hermione ignored him to focus on Harry. He was too quiet, a strange frown upon his face.

“What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing.”

Hermione wasn’t convinced, but decided not to press the subject.

“In any case, Snape’s personal life is not our problem. Let’s go to bed. We need to start the research as soon as possible. I’m going to the library tomorrow first thing in the morning and you two need to be at the Ministry.”

....

“What’s in this?” Evelyn grimaced at the steaming mug Severus offered her.

“Cramp bark, valerian and chastetree berries.”

“You just happened to have all if laying around?” she sat up slowly, the dull pain in her lower abdomen, back and thighs making her movements slow and laboured. She had just spend the last half an hour laying on the couch with a hot water bottle on her belly and Ciarán nestled against her side, while Severus went out to get something for the pain. He had returned with some small flasks and plants, then gone into the kitchen where he spent a long time working on something that looked more like something brewed by one of Macbeth’s witches, rather than a simple herbal tea for menstrual cramps. She took a sip, wincing at the taste. “This tastes about as good as I expected.”

“It’s medicine. It’s supposed to be good for you, not tasty.”

“How is this nasty witch brew supposed to help me again?”

“Cramp bark is as a uterine relaxant and contains scopoletin; which helps with menstrual cramps that radiate to your lower back and thighs, Valerian is known for its sedative effects and it’s useful for mood swings, insomnia and irritability. Chaste tree berry helps balance progesterone and estrogen levels. It’s also an anti-aphrodisiac, I’m afraid.”

“Lucky us I don’t feel in a particularly sexy mood at the moment.”

Evelyn sighed, annoyed. She had always been regular. Monthly, like clockwork, she could track and plan her life around her period flawlessly. Unless of course she was travelling, or under a lot of stress, or overworked. Then her cycle went haywire. Not simply disrupted, no...It went full blown bonkers. And in the past few weeks she had checked all the possible boxes for cycle disturbances. But for her period to start the exact day after her and Severus had had their fund spoiled was a bit like a bad joke. She had hoped to pick up where they left off the night before.

So much for that...

“I only happened to have valerian extract at home.” he continued, matter of factly, sounding more
like a doctor than a boyfriend “I use it to sleep sometimes. There’s a homeopathy store some blocks away from here where I found everything else. I can’t vouch for the quality of the ingredients, to be honest, but it should work. Now quit stalling and drink up. It works better while it’s warm.”

“How in the hell do you know precisely which plants are good for period issues and how they work, Severus?”

“I don’t. My mother did.”

“You mother?”

“No, I didn’t summon her from beyond the grave to give me a recipe for your womanly woes” he laughed softly, sitting on the floor next to the couch and stretching his legs. “She kept a notebook of brews and concoctions for common health ailments, with notes on the properties and historical uses of each plant. I suppose that’s what got me into p...chemistry. Back in the day she had a garden of medicinal plants in the backyard. I certainly wish I had kept it, it would be useful now. When we had neighbours, before everyone left Spinner’s End, they would come to her for medicines. Specially the women.”

“That’s so sweet.” she smiled, running her fingers through his hair as his head rested on her thighs.

“What is?”

“That you keep your mother’s medicinal recipes.”

“Well, they work.”

“I hope they do” she finished the tea with big gulps, trying to ignore the taste.

“You’ll see.”

“By the way...” she started, giving him the empty cup and curling back under a blanket. “What did the kids want?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve been asked not to.”

“Student teacher privileges? I can respect that. They’re in trouble aren’t they?”

“That’s usually the case with them.”

“Harry is the handful, right?”

“Potter has a talent for finding himself in impossible situations and needing rescue all the bloody time. It’s infuriating, really. Weasley goes along for the ride, and Ms. Granger seems to be the only with some sense. Put those three together and you have exactly one brain to spare, and it’s the one that doesn’t come with a Y chromosome.”

“You know, for a man who tries to come off as misanthropic curmudgeon who hates teaching and despised his students, you surely seem to care a great deal about them.”

“Whatever gave you that impression?”
“I don’t know. Maybe the fact that three youngsters who are not even your students anymore came
to you of all people for help. That they had your personal address, that they knew they could show
up in the middle of the night and not have the door slammed at their face. And the way you talk
about them. Like you know each of their quirks and personalities and even if they get into your
nerves and drive you absolutely insane you’d still do anything for them.”

“You’re incorrigibly sentimental.” He snorted. “To actually think I have anything akin to affection
towards those three?”

“It comes off that way. Maybe not affection, but concern at least.”

“Not everybody is as tender-hearted as you, Lyn. I simply don’t want them to do anything stupid that
could endanger their lives. It’s called common decency and being a responsible adult.”

“Silly me,” she rolled her eyes. “Must be the hormones making me all soft and emotional.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Is this tea supposed to make me sleepy?”

“It’s the valerian. Are you awake enough for me to tell you something?”

“For now, yes. What is it?”

“Remember Kingsley Shacklebolt?”

“Yes. What about him?”

“He sort of has a job for me.”

‘Sort of’?"

“Yes. He wants me work for his agency. On research.”

…

“He wants what?” she tried to sit up, but Severus stopped her.

“There, don’t move. Let the tea take effect.”

“It’s not anything dangerous is it?” Severus could imagine what was going through her mind. She
had tensed up at the mere mention of Kingsley’s name. Severus remembered the half-truths he had
told her, about his criminal record, his involvement with ‘hate groups’ and his work as ‘an informant’.
All the things that made her have second thoughts about their relationship. He could tell it scared her.

“Relax. It’s research. In my own areas of expertise.”

“I swear if you get yourself involved in something that...”

“Evelyn, please. I wouldn’t do anything that could put me in any risk. I’m too old to pull this sort of
stunt in any case.”

“Promise me.”
“Evelyn, don’t be dramatic.”

“Promise me.”

“Ok, fine, I promise you. No danger, no risks. I am going to have to do a bit of travelling, that’s all. The office I’ll answer to is in London and I need to report in person regularly. And some documentation and papers are only available on site, so I’ll be spending some hours in archives.”

“What kind of documentation?”

“State records, academic papers and publications. It’s all technical material, but due to sensitive information and security concerns it’s only available in person and upon request.”

“So all you’re going to do is sit in an archive, reading, studying and producing research on ‘sensitive’ topics for the government. Right?”

“Yes. What do you think I’d be doing? Jumping off planes and getting into gun fights with foreign terrorists? I’m a teacher, not James Bond, Lyn.” he smiled, petting Ciarán. The cat purred and rolled on his back, offering his belly for a rub. “You worry too much.”

“You don’t worry about yourself nearly enough. Somebody has to. When do you start?”

“Probably this week. I’m waiting on a telegram. You go back to work soon as well, don’t you?”

“Yes. Tomorrow.”

... 

January, 11th

Hermione looked over the pile of books she had checked out from the Ministry archive and spotted Harry entering the reading room. He still looked a bit awkward and uncomfortable in his auror uniform, like little boy trying on his dad’s suit that fit a little too loose. When Harry and Ron had decided to go straight into auror training without going back to school, Hermione had some misgivings about it. It wasn’t that she doubted them, at all. She knew them both well enough to know they’d do their best to excel. But it was too much, too soon. They all needed some time to rest, to breathe, to be young even if for a little short while.

Harry and Ron, however, felt like their work wasn’t done and that they couldn’t rest until it was. They had this somewhat naïve notion that it would be easy. That all they had to do was hunt some fugitives for a little while, and clean after the mess of the war. Nothing was that easy. They didn’t account for the politics, for the international laws, for the sympathizers supremacy ideas still had, and how much the Ministry was still corrupted from inside, as it had always been even before Voldemort had started to put his plans in motion. Adulthood, as it turned out, wasn’t a battle between good and evil, but constantly negotiating with all the shadows of grey in between.

Harry in particular seemed to be in a constant state of exhaustion. She suspected the whole reason he had gone into auror duty was to keep himself from thinking too much about everything that happened. As if going on in continuous, unstoppable motion through life would keep him from having to confront his battle wounds. Not the physical ones, which had healed long ago. Harry had emerged from the war changed, and sometimes she worried about it.

“Got anything?” he asked, sitting across from her. The room was empty except for a half deaf
librarian, so there was no reason to keep his voice down.

“I did find some more biographical information. Mostly things I knew from the book Percy got me, but now I have detail. I couldn’t find any of his work, though. It seems a lot of it hasn’t been directly translated into English yet. There’s mentions and notes in other authors, though. I do remember some of his books being in Hogwarts, but in Arabic.”

“Where are we going to find somebody who can read Arabic?”

“I don’t know. I hope we don’t need to.”

“Have you heard from Snape?”

“Not yet. But it’s too soon. Maybe tomorrow or later this week. Speaking of him...” she looked at him and drew a deep breath, before shooting the question point blank. “Harry, what’s you problem with Snape?”

“Are you really asking me this? He lied to us, he pretended to be dead, he...”

“You said it yourself the Ministry made him do all that. And even if that wasn’t the case, what explanation does he owe us? He had every right to not contact anybody if he didn’t want to. Is not like we’re his friends. Come on, I know there’s something else. It has something to do with her, right? Evelyn?”

“Of course not.”

“First the lipstick, then you teasing him about it. Is there something you know about her that you didn’t tell me?”

“I don’t know anything about her. Honestly I can’t even believe Snape and her are...what you said.”

“Dating?” Hermione laughed softly. The mere idea of Snape 'dating' was so absurd it bordered on hilarious. But come to think of it, why would it be absurd? Snape was a person like any other. Well, maybe not like any other, but a person regardless. People fall in love, date...

“He can’t be...” Harry mumbled, dully

“Why not?”

“Because he’s not supposed to...” he stumbled on his words, trying to string a coherent sentence

“He’s not supposed to what?...Love?”

“Not her.”

“You’re not making any sense.”

“I need to tell you something but you have to promise me it stays between the two of us.”

“Of course.”

“Remember that day...the day Snape died. Or we thought he did...”

…

When Harry was done telling her everything, Hermione could only stare at him. 'Shocking' didn’t
even begin to cover it. How little had they known about Severus Snape. She thought back to the night before, when he had opened the door to his house and she had the vivid impression of seeing another man, another completely different man from the one she thought she knew. How right had she been.

“He loved her.” Harry let out, dolefully “My mother. All he did, he did because he loved her. He was even willing to die for her. And now...”

“Harry...I thought you had made peace with him. You were so insistent that we saw Snape for what he was, for the good he had done. I thought you held no grudge.”

“And I thought he was dead. I thought he had died for her. That’s why I... And now I find him alive and...”

“Happy? ...with somebody else?”

“My parents didn´t have that chance” he snapped, retracting his hand from hers “Lupin and Tonks didn´t have that chance, Teddy is going to grow up without them just like.... Why should he..”

“Harry, listen to yourself. Would you prefer him dead? You can´t possibly mean that.”

“I didn´t say that.” he shook his head, shutting his eyes, like a small child on the verge of a tantrum.

“It sounded like you did”

“You don´t get it.” he insisted, sounding lost and defeated. Hermione felt the urge to hug him, but she knew she had to be firm. As his friend, she had to be honest even if it wasn´t what he wanted to hear.

“It would be easier for you to make peace with Snape if he had died? If he had died a heroic death, for the sake of the unrequited love story you just told me. It would be easier to admire him then?”

“If he really loved her...”

“Don´t say that. So what he´s with somebody else now? That doesn´t mean he didn´t love her or that everything you believed about him was a lie. What did you expect him to do? Spend the rest of his life alone and miserable? Is that what you want from him?”

“He loved her for his whole life. That´s what I believed, that´s what I saw.”

“You sound like a child whose parents just divorced. And dad has a new girlfriend you can´t accept because you think she´s trying to replace your mum.” she smiled.

“Oh come on, Hermione.”

Hermione moved to his side. “He is human, Harry. Just as you and me. We all deserve to move on. We all deserve to be happy.”

“It´s not fair.”

“Maybe not. But he´s alive, and that´s a good thing. So many died.”

“I thought...When I saw him again I was, I don´t know, a little relieved. That he hadn´t died. But now...”

“It´s easier to have compassion for people who act the way we expect them to. The way we want
them to. Resenting Snape because he´s alive or because he´s moving on with his life won´t do you
any good. It won´t change any of the bad things that happened before. And whatever Snape may be,
if it wasn´t for him...”

“None of us would be here. I know that. I know I´m being selfish, you don´t have to tell me... but I
can´t help the way I feel about this.”

“I know. It´s alright. But can I ask you something?”

“Yes.”

“Let´s try to cooperate with him without bringing any of this into it. As much as it may hurt you, you´re an auror now. Your personal feelings shouldn´t interfere with your work. For your own safety.”

... 

February 25th

Hogwart´s Library- Restricted section. 1AM.

Severus rubbed his eyes, pushing the book away. The leather-bound tome slid across the polished
wooden table to join a pile of other similar ones. He could feel the blood pumping through the veins
and arteries of his head, he could almost hear the sound of its flowing ringing in his ears. If the little
white stars he saw blinking behind his eyes were any indication, he was on the onset of a massive
migraine.

“We´re going on circles.” Harry stated. He wasn´t wrong. Weeks upon weeks they had been at this.
Weeks during which he had been lying to Evelyn, making up business trips, only so he could lock
himself into his old office and read until it felt like his eyes were about bleed. Then, at night, he´d
come to the library, under the safe cover of the night, away from the eyes of the sleeping students, to
confer with his four ex pupils. Shafiq had been enlisted to take care of the Arabic texts, as the only
one who had any mastery of the language, Granger had read and re-read all of the material they had
on Slytherin. Potter and Weasley did their best to organise the written notes Severus, Hermione and
Virgil produced in industrial quantities, to see if they found any coincidences, anything that could
possibly be used to give them a start.

Over a month of labour and...nothing.

“How many times will we go over the same stuff?” Ron asked, leaning back to stare at the ceiling.

The echoing of steps called their attention to the door. Severus turned not surprised to see Shafiq
enter with a couple heavy tomes in his arm.

“Sorry for the delay. As it turns out my Arabic is a bit rustier than I expected. I had to ask my mother
to help me with these last ones.”

“Shafiq, for the love of God...”

“None of this is classified material, Professor Snape.” he took a seat by the head of the table and
flashed that charmingly nonchalant smile that had carried him through his Hogwarts years without a
single detention in his résumé.

“Well, then?”

“Nothing in the astronomy tomes as we´ve seen with the other ones” he declared and all the
occupants of the table groaned in shared disappointment “I did finish comparing them with Saadya´s writings, and I think we have solid proof that if she didn’t study under Ibn Rashid’s tutelage, she at least read a lot of his work. They have similar theories, she just adds some details and calculations to his material, but overall, same line of research, specially on what concerns planet orbits and the conjectures of the nature of stars and their age. His name also appears on her notes quite a few times as Hermione observed before.”

“Hooray...” Ron let out sarcastically.

“Now, here is something you will find interesting.” Shafiq continued, brandishing a book, smaller than the others, bound in red leather.

“Spit it out, Virgil” Snape sneered.

“Here you go.” he opened it and turned it in their direction. The page contained a number of drawings depicting what appeared to be a fortress. “It’s a description of Almería´s Alcazaba.”

“Alca-what?” Ron asked

“Alcazaba. It comes from Al-Qasbah, meaning 'fortress' or more specifically 'citadel'. In 955 Al-Maryya got the title of Medina that is official city from the Caliph of Cordoba, Abd ar-Rahman III, so a defensive citadel was built in the upper sector of the city. As Al-Maryya became a busy port town the citadel was expanded under caliph Al-Mansur and, later, under Al-Jairan, first king of the independent Taifa of Al-Maryya.”

“Very interesting, but we’re not here for a casual game of History trivia, Shafiq”

“As I was saying...in this book Ibn Rashid makes an analysis of the Alcazaba´s architecture, and how it’s position coincides with a number of astronomical phenomena. It´s very unlike any of his other works”

“How so?” Hermione asked, looking much more interested than anybody else in Shafiq’s select audience.

“Probably due to his work under muggle rulers, Ibn Rashid usually kept his language and tone rather mundane, without a lot of mentions to anything that could be interpreted as magic. He’s more strictly scientific if you will. At least as scientific as a medieval astronomer can be, mind you. But in this book he goes into long tangents about astrology and magical topics. This was not meant for muggle readers. Now here’s the kick. I went and looked into the book’s file in Madam Pince’s archive to check for its origin, and lo and behold...”

Shafiq opened the book to the title page and pointed to the lower left corner of the title page, under the frontispiece. A small green snake signet was barely visible, the ink faded by the passing of time. It was the exact same signet that graced every piece of Salazar’s surviving correspondence. With a triumphant grin, Virgil announced.

“According to the library register, this book belonged to Salazar Slytherin. He donated it to the original librarian, but it was 'lost ' around the same time he went into exile. It was only re-entered into the library’s register in the XVth century as a donation made by a Portuguese wizard. Apparently he was Jewish and came to England fleeing the 1506 Lisbon Pogrom.”

“Salazar Slytherin was long dead by then.” Harry added.

“You know what that means?”
“He left Hogwarts taking this book with him.” Hermione concluded, excitedly.

“And when he died it probably passed on to other people before making it’s way into the hands of our Portuguese friend. Lady and gentlemen. I believe we have a lead. And it takes us to the Alcazaba fortress.”

...

Spinner’s End

February 25th

Evelyn tossed and turned in bed, unable to find a comfortable position. It was one of those nights in which she got home from work so tired she was unable to sleep. Her feet and back hurt from standing all day in heels and she was too aware of the pile of assignments waiting for her on her work desk, which she knew she wouldn´t get to tonight.

At least she had successfully completed an article for a publication organised by one of her former Trinity colleagues. Mairéad had contacted her earlier in the month to say she was compiling works on female figures of Celtic religion, and potential survival traces of Celtic worship in early Irish Christianity, as well as the role of women in the process of Christianization of Celtic Ireland. Then she asked if Evelyn had any interest in contributing an article or essay. Evelyn was excited with the concept, and had immediately accepted.

She had written a fair bit on the overlapping imagery of solar goddess Breo-Saighead and the Virgin Mary in early Celtic Christianity, as well as similar instances of worship, so she was more than eager to go back into the topic with a fresh perspective. So for weeks she obsessively went over her previous work and sources, taking notes, streamlining it, re-organising, editing, trying to fit it all into a 30 page chapter. It ended up much longer, even after eliminating some material, but she was pleased with it. Still, in between that and work she barely had time to breathe.

And there was Severus.

Severus and his new job. Apparently he needed to acquaint himself with the lines of work the ministry adopted as well as his initial attributions as a researcher, which demanded long periods of study. He’d be away for days at the time, when he was back he’d material to work on from home. Whenever he happened to have time for her, both of them were entirely too exhausted to fully enjoy each other. Once she had started working on the new article even that small respite of each other’s occasional company became rarer to the point they had gone full weeks without even seeing one another.

Sex was evidently out of the question. Not for lack of wanting. It wasn´t just that they didn´t have time for each other. In the momentous occasion that they did have a night off, it seemed like something hung in the air between them. There was a thick, dense clout of unfulfilled desire surrounding them that was all too conspicuous, opaque and heavy, clinging to their every movement, gaze and touch. They’d fill their the limited amount of time with eager, suffocating kisses and feverish, demanding caresses, so heavy and intimate they amounted to sex in every sense but that one way most people deem essential for it to be considered, well, sex.

By now Severus had every inch, crevice, curve and fold of her body memorized through his fingers and tongue, down to the most intimate and hidden places. He held a mental map of all her weak spots, which type of touch made her gasp or sigh, how hard he should press, and how softly he
should kiss. He could read her like a book. But for some reason that eluded her, there was a leap he wouldn’t make. For a man who had given her more climaxes in a month than her last boyfriend did in a year, Severus seemed reluctant to just go ahead and fuck her. It was a terribly crude way to put it, but there was no way around it. Evelyn had reached a point in which the sheer need of proper completion had become so unbearable she would welcome a quick over-the-kitchen table honest-to-God fuck as much as she would a Valentine’s Day night-long love making session on a bed of roses and silken sheets.

She had chalked it up to nerves at first. Severus was so introspective, so introverted that maybe he was simply nervous. Then there was work and his business trips. More than once she had simply fallen asleep right in the middle of it, and some other times she had found him snoring on her couch before anything remotely “entertaining” could even begin. But as time went by she had started to believe something was wrong.

Talking to her sister hadn’t helped matters one bit. Sometimes Caitlin was a nurse first and a sister second, so it had been rather the opposite of fun to answer a questionnaire about Severus drinking and smoking habits as well as his drug history, and have to entertain the notion that he just “might be impotent”. Sometimes having a relative in the medical profession can be a blessing, but some other times it just made her want to shut her sister up with the adhesive plaster she used on her patients. Evelyn knew there wasn’t anything physically wrong with him as Caitlin insisted. And she most definitely knew he desired her as much as she desired him. No one could fake the level of unmitigated raw want she felt irradiate from his every pore whenever he touched her.

It was something else making him shut down and avoid taking their encounters to their, under any other circumstance natural, conclusion. Severus had told her about some of his misgivings with certain aspects of sex. The fact that he never had a proper romantic relationship, that most of his sexual experience, if not all of it, had been rather mechanic and...quite loveless. He had gone through long periods of self imposed abstinence simply due to lack of interest. Apparently there had been an incident at school when he was 15 which he refused to talk about. He didn’t give her details and she didn’t press him for them.

Evelyn was sure that was the issue lay. She was also sure that the woman in the photo played a part in it. That photo he kept on his mantle, which he had recently removed, even though she knew it was still hidden somewhere. She didn’t dare ask him about it. Not because she was afraid he’d lie to her, but because she was nearly certain he wouldn’t.

The phone startled her. On the other side of the line, as if summoned, she heard his voice.

“Hey, love. Did I wake you up?”

“Not really. Insomnia. Still in London?”

“Yes. Having a beer with a friend I happened upon before turning in for the night.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re having some fun at least. I was starting to worry about much you’ve been working.”

“That’s funny coming from you” she smiled at the sound of his low, raspy chuckle “I’m just calling to let you know I’ll be home tomorrow. And we’ll have the weekend all for ourselves.”

“Really?” he breath hitched from the excitement.

“Yes. The first stage of research is done, so I’m going to have some time off. Just wanted to let you know.”
“What time you arrive?”

“After you’ve left for work. Don’t worry about that. I’ll come by and pick you up at school, how does that sound?”

“Sounds lovely, Sev.”

“I’ll let you go now, you have an early day tomorrow and so do I. Good night, love.”

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Queen’s head pub
London

Severus hung up the phone, tipped the bartender for letting him use it and went back to the table where Shafiq was waiting for him with two pints.

“Here you go. Lager. I went with the waiter’s suggestion.”

“You drink?”

“Not all Muslims are strictly practising. We’re not that different from any other religious group in that regard.”

“Apologies for my ill-informed generalization” Severus smirked, taking a gulp of his beer.

“So...where do we go from now?”

“Frankly, I don’t know. I doubt Shacklebolt will give us permission to conduct an operation abroad.”

“Maybe if only one of us goes to Almeria. That wouldn’t involve much in the way of logistics.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Shafiq. Ms. Granger and I will try and procure material about the Alcazaba. At the very least we need floor-plans, to get a sense of the structure. If the dagger is hidden somewhere in there then we need every square inch of the place mapped out first.”

“The place is a tourist attraction. How do we go about investigating it without any muggles around? It’s virtually impossible.”

“Exactly.”

Shafiq nodded, sipping his beer, before speaking again.

“How is she doing?”

“Pardon?”

“Evelyn. You were talking to her just now, no?”

“Yes. She’s fine, I guess.”

“You guess?”
“She’s been working a lot. And I’ve been stuck in that bloody library with you brats, so I haven’t seen much of her lately.”

“You’ll have some time off to be with her now. Dawlish told me you wanted me available to watch over her again if needed. You think it will be, you know...needed?”

“It’s possible.”

Severus looked at the younger man, analysing his expression. Shafiq had this very unique kind of face that always seemed joyful, as if perpetually a moment away of cracking a smile. Even when crossed he still came off as warm and friendly. As a child Virgil was already effortlessly personable. Severus thought of it as a ‘natural poker-face’. It must have come in handy to his work as an auror, specially in intelligence. He could picture Shafiq interrogating a suspect and being so utterly nice the poor devil he happened to interview would feel compelled to trust him with their darkest secrets. Under the 'nice proper lad' veneer though, Severus saw a man who was hard to figure out, hard to read. The way he had asked about Evelyn struck him as a bit...odd

“Have I told you I accidentally ran into her in Doolin?” he continued, casually

“No, you haven’t.”

“On the pier one night. Had to blow my cover and come up to her without any disguise. The water was rough and I though she was about to fall in.”

“So that was you.” Severus took another sip of his beer, looking at Shafiq from over the glass. Evelyn had mentioned in passing that a young man stopped her at the beach one night, when she was taking a walk because the 'poor dear' feared for her safety. Little did Shafiq know Evelyn was nearly as comfortable as merfolk when it came to rough, deep waters.

“She told you.”

“Lyn can’t really help herself when she starts talking.”

“She’s...very unlike you, then.”

“She is.”

“I guess it’s part of the attraction?” Shafiq smiled “Opposites and all that.”

“Shafiq, I requested that you be left in charge of Evelyn´s safety because I trust your competence. That doesn’t mean you get to have an opinion about...”

“I know, I know...I´m being indiscreet. My apologies.”

...

February 26th

Spinner’s End

Severus could hear the shower running in the bathroom. It would take a while. He cracked a smile, taking a seat in the small sofa in her office. He knew each and every one of Evelyn’s little rituals by heart. How long she took to get ready for work. How many times she double-checked her bag to make sure she wasn’t forgetting anything. How long she took to shower. The semi-religious
ceremony of the application of toners, moisturisers, and perfume that came after the shower. In that order. At first, it all struck him as obnoxiously vain, but over time he got used to it.

At some point he realized it wasn’t really about her looks. It was just the way she did everything. The same painstaking care she took with her appearance was lavished on the house, on her classes, her writings, on everything she did. Deep down Severus knew it all came from a sense of insecurity. That underneath it all what she craved was a sense of stability. He vividly remembered the difficult talks they had about her years of therapy, her fear of being anything less than perfect, of losing her grip on reality, of letting her family down, of not being enough. At that moment he realized why she needed all these small ceremonies, why they made her feel safe and in control of her life.

On Friday nights, she took her time with all the little rituals. The long minutes spent under the shower, then in front of the mirror were her own reward to herself at the end of a tiring week. That gave him time to finish reading her article. She had raved about it over dinner, proud of her latest achievement. Seen as that bloody thing had taken so much time away from them, Severus thought it was only fair that he get to to read it before anybody else. Sure, he had spent over a month caught up in a reading frenzy, and his eyes felt like they’d pop out of their sockets if they had to go over one more line of text, but she was so inordinately excited about this bloody piece of writing, that he had to read the blasted thing.

Religious history was nowhere near his favourite topic to read about, but he had to give it to her, it was outstanding. It didn’t surprise him, having read all of her books and re-read at least half of them, Severus expected the article to be good as per usual. So good it almost excused all the time the bloody thing had taken. Not that Severus was in any position to complain. He hadn’t been around much for her either.

“Do you think it’s ready for submission?” the scent of her perfume hit him before her voice reached his ears.

“It is. It’s excellent to be honest. I mean, speaking from a layman perspective. You know the topic doesn’t exactly draw my attention.”

“It’s a publication for a general audience, so I you’re a good thermometer to gauge it.”

Evelyn was casually resting against the door frame, wrapped in a bathrobe, skin still glistening and hair damp from the shower. An aura of lavender filled the air around her. He had thought of maybe taking her out somewhere nice, but now he was glad he didn’t. As much as he loved seeing her dressed up, and took no small amount of pride to have her on his arm in public, this was much more enticing. She was so beautiful underneath it all, beautiful in a way that almost hurt. Bare of make-up, fancy clothes, jewellery, and all the metaphorical armour she used to protect herself from the world, wearing nothing but lavender, droplets of water and a piece of cloth she looked vulnerable and majestic all at once.

“You’re staring” she smiled

“I know. Can’t help it.”

She walked up to him, pulled the article from his hands and tossed it on work desk, smoothly sliding onto his lap.

“You don’t want a full review of the article, do you?” he smirked when she leaned in to kiss him, one hand sneaking under the hem of his shirt, the other stroking lightly at the back of his neck.

“Not right now.”
Severus let his body relax under the pleasant weight of hers, resting his hands on her hips, pulling her closer. There was something different about the way she kissed him tonight. Evelyn usually submitted under his lips, giving him leeway, letting him lead. Not today.

Today she had him gasping for air.

“I missed you so much.” she said, breaking away just slightly.

“I´m here now. And not going anywhere for a while.”

“How long a while?”

“A week or so, I think. Maybe more.”

“But you´re not sure.”

“Let´s not think about that now.”

Her mouth claimed his again, hungrier and more demanding. He let her. It killed him that he had to lie, specially when she gave him those lost puppy eyes. Evelyn wasn´t stupid. She knew something was wrong, she worried, she lost sleep over it. He pretended not to notice for the sake of keeping that relative peace they´ve had been sharing for a while, but sometimes he wondered how long it would last.

“Fu...” his words broke apart when Evelyn loosened his trousers and pushed his underwear out of the way, freeing his hardening cock from the confine of clothes. Any chance of forming a coherent sentence died when he felt her hand close on him, stroking the length of his sex with agonising, slow precision.

“Lyn...”

“Shhh...relax.”

Severus was vaguely aware of her free hand lightly brushing his hair, fingertips running along the side of his face and playing with the curve of his ear. He could feel her shift to a more comfortable position, and then the barrage of pleasure hit him once again. There wasn´t any uncertainty about the way she was gripping him now. As if emboldened by his surrender, Evelyn had decided she´d just have her merry way with him. She rarely took the initiative so boldly. She´d usually tease him into starting something, then let him take control of how far things went. Not tonight.

Severus tried to relax as she asked. He kept his eyes closed so he could ignore that the lights were on. They never really did anything with the lights on. Over the course of the past weeks, they had indulged in benign, bordering on juvenile sexual play, usually in semi darkness. Furtive little games that never really went anywhere other than the rushed pleasure he´d give her using his hands or mouth, almost as an apology for his own failure to properly satisfy her in other ways. He was all too keenly aware of her frustration, but the ghost of what had happened on the night of his birthday seemed to stand by his bed, the fear of shutting down again paralysing him. Then there was that nagging feeling that his lies and secrets stood between them, bringing a dimension of shame into every occasion he touched her. Evelyn obliged him, meek and understanding, barely able to hide her discontent, yet unwilling to pressure him.

Tonight was different, he thought, feeling her hand seize him firmly, pumping his cock, hard and demanding. The upward donward motion only relented long enough for her to swirl her thumb over the tip, or play with the foreskin, rubbing the glans through it. He´d compliment her technique if he had been able form a single intelligible thought. It was too much. Too hard. She pushed him to the
brink, then brought him back, pressing and letting go, playing him like a well-tuned instrument.

So close, so achingly close... The muscles on his lower abdomen started to contract. In the last desperate throes, he opened his eyes and looked up at her. She looked so pleased with herself, drunk in the power she had over him. Through the fabric of his pants he could feel the warmth pooling between her thighs as she straddled him, undeniable evidence of the pleasure she was taking from his torture.

Severus felt his climax wash over him all at once, sudden. In the last, excruciating seconds before blessed release, he pulled her closer, forcing her hand away, groping at her arse with both hands and pushing his groin into her, burying his face into her chest, to muffle his grunt against her skin.

“You never let me do that before” she said as he tried to catch his breath.

“I should have known better...”

“Enjoyed yourself?”

“Yes. But it may have been a bit counterproductive to make me come so soon.” he smirked

“Why? We have all weekend, don´t we?” she pulled herself up, hands sprawled on his chest “I´m not in any hurry....Are you?”

…

Falstad forest

Norway

Ludwig left the car by the side of the road on the edge of the forest and proceeded on foot. His only companion in the darkness of a moonless night were the sounds of his own steps over dead leaves and thick snow, and the sound of his own breathing. He pushed forward into the forest, grasping with all his might at this last resort. He was well out of his depth and desperate times called for desperate measures.

He couldn´t trust Sewlyn anymore. The story of his rescue didn´t add up, and Ludwig refused to believe a man like him would be abandoned just to meekly come back to those who left him behind him and offer his services again. It didn´t fit with him. Nevertheless, Ludwig kept him close, just not close enough that he´d pose any threat. The Lestranges had vanished into thin air. No news since they had made it into Russia. Counting on their support made no sense at this moment. There were the connections in the French ministry, but they could only take Ludwig so far. The spy infiltrated in the British ministry remained a mystery. Not knowing who this person was, there was no way of guessing where their loyalties truly lay.

Ludwig had tried to summon his connections, every single wizard or witch who owed him money or favours, everyone who could potentially give him any information about the infiltrated agent in the ministry. Nobody knew anything. Worst yet, with Kingsley Shacklebolt in the prowl, nobody was willing to stick their necks out to help him.

Then finally, the came the last straw. Claire, exasperated by the lack of progress in their plan, had decided to walk all over his authority and take matters into her own hands. Of course her idea of doing that was to attack Snape´s mistress on her own accord, without any proper safeguards or backup. As Ludwig predicted, the traitor´s whore was well guarded. So well guarded Claire escaped
certain death by the skin of her teeth.

So it had come to this.

He would have to give his wife the satisfaction of actually listening to her demented ideas. What else could they do, when all the possible alternative leads to the dagger’s location eluded them one by one? Snape was all they had, and that muggle woman was the only thing they could use to hold any sway over him. Given that she had what seemed to be two aurors in charge of her safety, Ludwig counted as certain that Snape must have cared a great deal about her. It wasn’t that much of a stretch to think she was his only weakness. He would have preferred to go about it differently, but Claire had botched the first attempt with her absolute lack of discernment and forced his hand and made him revisit her original, borderline insane plan.

Fenrir Greyback.

He knew controlling a werewolf was a futile endeavour. There’s no reasoning with a beast. And it was doubtful that, fresh out of Azkaban, Greyback would be willing to show himself and risk arrest. Everyone assumed he’d go into hiding, and continue to do what he did best: bring havoc and destruction wherever he went without picking any sides but his own. Politics were of little interest to werewolves. Even under the Dark Lord’s orders, Fenrir was barely more than a glorified hunting dog, a hell-hound with no agenda other than to maim and kill as many as it would quench his thirst for blood. But if beasts couldn’t be negotiated with, they could at least be appeased to some extent. Even a creature like Greyback still had its own personal interests, revolting as they might be. Ludwig was counting on that.

Getting here wasn’t easy. The British ministry had no jurisdiction to demand investigation from other countries’ governments, and other Death Eaters had no interest in finding out his whereabouts. After slaughtering those teenagers in England, Greyback had vanished without a trace. Ludwig lost count of how many port workers, railway personnel, ship crew members and bureaucrats all over England, France, Netherlands, Sweden and Norway he had to bribe so he could even begin to sketch Fenrir’s escape route. The last trace of him led to Norway.

That was when luck smiled at him.

By complete coincidence, Ludwig had decided to occupy his idle time reading the muggle newspapers over breakfast, upon arriving in his Oslo hotel. There was a small note, almost hidden in the local news page, detailing the disappearance of a young man in the village of Ekgne, municipality of Levanger.

Apparently the fourteen-year old had been among a group of students visiting the Falstad memorial, a former concentration camp set up during the Nazi occupation of Norway, which now stood preserved as a museum. At some point the lad wandered away from the rest of the group, presumably in the direction of the nearby Falstad Forest. By the time the teacher in charge of the excursion realized he wasn’t in the bus that would take the class back home, it was too late. Days of search turned up nothing, not even a body. He wasn’t heard from again.

It didn’t surprise Ludwig in the least that the date of the boy’s tragic disappearance happened to match the last full moon.

Fenrir found Ludwig before Ludwig had the chance to find him. When a towering shadow was cast upon his path, Ludwig knew he had succeeded. Emerging from the shadows and the protection of the trees, Fenrir Grayback stood in front of him with an amused grin twisting his maw. Ludwig drew his wand so there’d be light.
“I didn’t expect any visitor would find me this far.” Fenrir looked precisely like one would expect a man who’d been living in a forest, scavenging like a lowly animal would look like. Even in his human state Fenrir was a hulking, beastly abomination.

“You can expect more visitors if you keep appearing on the news. Ekgne isn’t a particularly big town. For how long do you think you can get away with killing children before the ministry shows up to spoil your fun?”

“Ludwig Rott, you’re supposed to be smarter than this.” Fenrir’s smile widened, and even without fangs, he still looked well capable of biting Ludwig’s jugular open for the insolence.

“Smart enough to know you won’t do anything to me before you hear my offer.”

“You have nothing to offer me”

“Protection. A place to hide. And more..”

“More...what?”

“I’m aware that a man in your, let’s say, situation, has some needs to tend to. But you’re leaving a trail behind, and sooner or later the Ministry will pick up on it. There’s plenty muggle children out there who won’t be missed or appear in the papers. Muggles themselves make trade of them. Girls, mostly. They’re easy enough to procure.”

“I imagine none of ll these generous gifts will come for free.”

“No. But they do come at small price...Severus Snape’s mistress.”

Getting his body to obey again was an herculean task. His limbs were heavy with post-orgasmic bliss, and his head was so light he felt wobbly. But Severus pulled himself up and followed her into her bedroom. There was nothing else he could do but follow her. Had she asked him to follow her beyond the Veil he would have done it with a smile on his face.

The moment he crossed the threshold, Severus pulled Evelyn back into his arms, the momentary distance she had put between them suddenly too much to bear. She let him, regaining some of the compliant demeanour she usually adopted in their. Yet there was this pulse under the surface, when she clumsily got him out of his shirt, and raked her nails along his back and sides, not hard as to draw blood, but just deep enough to leave a maze of red lines all over his skin. As much as she let him manhandle her, his hands roaming free under the bathrobe to paw and grope at her flesh to his hearts content as his mouth razed hers, there was a fierce demand about her gestures. She broke free of lips to nibble at his neck, sucking on the skin, drawing the contour of his scar with her tongue. Come morning he’d be covered with scratches and love bites. Which didn’t bother him one bit. If anything he took a bit of perverse delight from it.

There was still a dreadful feeling at the back of his mind eating away at him, that voice taunting inside his head. But the feeling of Evelyn marking him, demanding him. It shut that voice down for the first time in weeks. This was the first time he let instinct overtake reason. Once her bathrobe was on the floor and she stood gloriously naked against him, Severus saw himself reduced to a state of pure lust and compulsion from which he knew there was no coming back.
This was what she wanted. Something had snapped within him, that invisible rope that pulled him away had unravelled. Evelyn had decided that tonight she wouldn’t allow him to get away, she wouldn’t allow herself to let him back away. Whatever it was that tormented him, that kept him from being entirely there for her, whatever that was, Evelyn wouldn’t let it win tonight.

Tonight Severus was hers and hers alone. She wouldn’t think of the ripped photo of the redhead woman on his mantle, she wouldn’t think of his past, she wouldn’t think of the secrets she suspected he still kept from her. And she wouldn’t let him think about any of those things either. Tonight, Evelyn had decided, she would be the only thought in his mind, the only voice in his ears, the only taste in his mouth. He would forget there had been anybody or anything before her, before now, before this.

Yesterday didn’t exist.

Tomorrow didn’t exist.

“I’m yours, Sev. You can do whatever you want....Please.” she whispered, hoping it would inflame him.

Severus growled under his breath and pulled her up from the ground covering the short distance towards her bed. They fell upon the freshly washed sheets in a mess of tangled limbs and flustered, heaving flesh. His body was heavy, suffocating on top of hers. His fingers grabbed a fistful of her hair, pulling her head back as he sank his teeth into her neck, ran his tongue along her collarbone, as his lips closed over her breast, sucking, licking, devouring her alive. As if wanting to get even, he left his own trail of marks on her body to match those she had just inflicted on him. She was sure she would faint when she felt a puff of cold air touch her castigated flesh, when he pulled away from a nipple just enough to blow on it before nipping at it again.

“You sodding bastard.” she cursed. He laughed, and the subtle vibration of it made her shiver.

“Call me names all you want, but you started this, love.” he declared, showering kisses all over her belly.

“Then finish it.”

“I intend to” he smirked before dipping his head between her thighs. Evelyn almost floated off the bed when his tongue dragged across her folds, slow, wet and hot, tracing her shape, tasting her. He took his time, savouring for what felt like forever before his tongue got to where she wanted it, licking and sucking up loudly, messily. He grabbed the back of her knees to push her legs up and apart, humming into her engorged flesh. It took close to nothing. For a wondrous few seconds she was reduced to that one, quivering bundle of nerves under his lips and the sensation flowed from there to the tips of her fingers and toes.

“Lyn?” his voice in her ear brought her back. At some point he had discarded his pants, she noticed, when her hands found no fabric as she slid them along the sides of his hips, while he settled in the cradle of her parted legs. He was hard again, his erection resting against her abdomen, hot and heavy.

“Well, that was something...” she told him, wiping the moisture from his mouth and chin.

“Are you...” Severus shifted his hips, trying not to lay too much of his weight on her.

“I can take it, Sev...Shit, wait a second.” she mumbled, reaching for the side table, fumbling with the drawer under Severus inquisitive gaze.
“What are y...”

“Here.” she told him, holding an unwrapped condom in front of his face.

“That didn´t even occur to me.” he admitted, apologetically

“Aren´t you glad I´m provident?” she laughed quietly. “Do you...want me to...”

“Please...”

Evelyn ripped the package with her teeth and tried to make it quick, without teasing to much, but she could still sense him tremble as she rolled the condom down the length of his penis. His body shivered so hard she felt him quiver under her palms.

He entered her slowly, carefully. Once he was all the way in, Evelyn inhaled sharply, spreading her legs a little further, trying to get her muscles to relax around him, to yield under the stretching pressure of his cock inside her. It had been a long while she didn´t feel that...full. Severus certainly noticed. He didn´t move at first. He pet her hair and kissed her, tenderly, but didn´t move. Not until she moved her hips first so he would know she was ready. Only then did he move, tentatively.

She didn´t know at which point his initial, shaky, hesitant movements became more confident, more precise. She held on to him for dear life, his weight pushing the air out of her lungs and leaving her pleasantly light-headed, as his hips moved into hers, driving, pounding, shifting pace and speed...short, quick and stabbing at one moment; then long, smooth, drawn out at the next.

Until he got...there. It blinded her and forced a hoarse cry from her throat. Her legs lifted, feet resting against the small of his back, Evelyn was nearly folded in two beneath him, whimpering and mumbling nonsense Irish-English not even herself could understand. He continuously hit that one spot, drowning her in tide of pleasure so devastating it came close to hurting her. How did he...She had the vivid impression Severus could read her mind, anticipate her wishes and give her precisely what she needed and how she needed before she asked for it.

And he gave it to her. Unrestrained. Unabated.

Then came the second wave. This time it was deeper, longer, all encompassing, all consuming. Nothing like the quick, explosive release from before. It flowed richly, smoothly from where his body bore into hers to swallow her in the same way a flash flood swallowed everything on its path, in the same way the sea bleeds into the shore during a storm. It lasted longer as well. She had no idea how long it was, but through it all Evelyn was all too aware that he continued to move through her spasms into her over-sensitive flesh, desperately seeking his own climax.

…

Tight. Wet. Clenching. Too fucking much. Pulsing and squeezing around him. Forcing his release from him. Liquid, warm, viscous, mind bending. Propping himself up on his elbows, Severus gazed at her face under the golden light of the beside lamp. Evelyn had been transfigured into breathtaking mask of pleasure, flustered, short-winded, eyes glistening with fresh tears, a halo of wild, tangled brown hair crowning her like a dark, debauched Madonna, his name pouring from her swollen lips as she sobbed and smiled at the same time.

It undid him. A few more erratic, urgent thrusts and he lost himself, plunged into the abyss the last of his energy abandoning him.
Then there was silence. Severus rested his head on her chest so he could hear her heartbeat slowing down, back to normal. He basked in the safe haven of her body, of the sound of that heart that somehow, for some reason he couldn’t begin to comprehend, loved him.

For that tiny piece of eternity, he was at peace.

…

The clock on her bedside table showed 10AM. Evelyn smiled to herself. Thank God it was Saturday or she’d be disastrously late for work. She closed her eyes again, feeling the sunlight and the cool winter breeze caress her exposed skin. Every inch of her body ached deliciously, specially around her hips and legs. The same dull, soothing ache she’d get after a good exercise session. Which wasn’t that far from the truth, she thought, satisfied.

“Sev?” she slurred, reaching behind her, expecting to find him still fast asleep next to her.

But she found nothing but an empty bed.

“Sev?” she called again, raising her head from the pillow, pushing her messy hair away from her face.

His clothes weren’t there. The sheets on his side were cold.
Part 9 - "Sweeter than Roses" - Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Love, pleasure and the struggle and sorrow that sometimes come with it all.

What now?

The question drummed inside his brain, persistent, deafening and, worst of all, unanswerable.

Severus tossed his spent cigarette in the bin next to the bench and lit up another. Any other Saturday children would be running amok in the park, but it was too cold for that today. The whole town seemed to have decided to sleep in. Including Evelyn, in her bed all the way down in Spinner’s End.

What now?

The previous night played out in his memory like an astoundingly lucid and detailed fever-dream. Severus could recall every second of it. Even now if he closed his eyes it would all come back to him. The sighs and moans, the scent of lavender, the salty taste of her sweat as his mouth licked, nipped and kissed her skin leaving marks and bruises in its wake, the feeling her heated, welcoming flesh, of her body engulfing his.

Once sated, Severus had fallen into a dreamless sleep, for once not haunted by spectres of days past. The frail morning sun had found him still holding her, his arms about her waist as her soft forms curled into his hard, lean frame, his head resting on her back and the calming sound of her breathing drowning out any memory that could possibly disturb his peace.

Before his mind could reconnect with reality Severus had been happy. Deliriously happy.

He had pressed his lips on her shoulder, inhaling her scent. Evelyn shifted with a content little purr, snuggling closer up against him without waking up. She was a heavy sleeper, unlike him. Severus propped himself up on his elbow and took all of her in, trying to figure out if this was just another one of his yearning dreams, or if she was indeed there. It was a sight he had imagined obsessively, but his fantasies hardly compared to the real thing.

Severus vaguely recalled how, as a young boy, he was fascinated with the hard-cover art books he’d find when he hid inside the local library, or sneaked into a book store. As puberty crept up on him, the pages featuring nudes became a bit more interesting, and for a short while, between his 13 and 15 years of age, the Rokeby Venus had become a mild obsession of his. The brown haired beauty reclined on her bed, looking into a mirror with her back turned to the viewer was a voluptuous reverie of curves, legs and buttocks committed to canvas. Little did he know then he’d one day end up bedding her, Severus thought, self-satisfied, running the tips of his fingers down the curve of Evelyn’s arm. The faint dotting of freckles on her rosy-olive skin made him wish it was Summer already.

Yes, for a blessed few minutes, before the world outside caught up with him, Severus had been the happiest man on Earth.

But when the rose cloud of drowsy beatitude evaporated and his mind cleared, something whispered
the question he didn´t want to answer into his ear.

What now?

That same voice in the back of his mind, threw the barbed, bitter accusation at him.

He was lying to her.

As Evelyn slept, he knew in his heart of hearts that even then he was lying to her. He had been lying to her for months. Maybe not always in words, but his actions amounted to it. She had given all of herself to a man who didn´t exist. Severus Tobias Snape, retired chemistry teacher, by all accounts a common, ordinary man, in no way distinguishable from any other muggle inhabitant of Cokeworth didn´t exist. That man was his own invention, a façade he used because he didn´t know how tell her the truth. Because he was terrified of telling her truth

How would he even begin? By telling her he was a wizard. Like her brother. That all the things she witnessed growing up were not figments of her imagination, that she had been medicated for mental conditions that were never real in the first place. That would go over well. And then, what would he tell her? That he was a murderer. Both by action and inaction. He had murdered a man, the closest thing he had to a mentor, no less. But it was a war, and that was a mercy killing. He had let other people die, as well, but again, it was a war. A reasonable enough explanation, even though Charity Burbage’s terrified eyes still haunted him some nights.

Not only had he let them die. He had a hand at it. Surely he knew what he was doing when he told Voldemort of the prophecy. He had to know somebody would end up dying. He just didn’t expect it to be the woman he loved. Years of service under Dumbledore’s orders would surely buy him some forgiveness, right? And Harry, dear Harry, whom Evelyn had met in a little impromptu gathering at his house, yes, him. His parents were dead because of Severus. That would make for an interesting dinner time conversation one day, maybe next time Harry dropped by. Wouldn´t it be charming?

What would Evelyn think if she knew the man who shared her bed had been responsible for so much death and destruction? That the lips which kissed her had lied and told secrets which cost lives, that the hands that caressed her were covered in blood. How disgusted would she be?

And how would she feel about the fact that, even almost twenty years later, Severus still thought about Lily. A woman he had loved more than his own life, for whose sake he had gone to hell and back. How would Evelyn feel if she found out that he still felt guilty about Lily, that he still held on to her memory as a sanctified entity, and that her photo was still on his mantle, a sombre reminder of decades of unfulfilled longing. That deep down he still felt like didn’t have permission to be happy, that he still felt like he was betraying Lily’s memory whenever he held Evelyn in his arms. After all this, would she stay by his side? Did he expect her to be that much of an idiot? Severus smirked rancorously. Prince Charming, indeed.

Severus didn’t doubt Evelyn’s love. Not for a moment. But it wasn’t him she loved. It was the man he had created for her to love. The one who didn’t exist. And once she found out...

He couldn’t stand the thought of losing her, so he’d continue to lie. He’d continue to pretend to be the man she thought he was, for as long as he could. There was nothing moral about it, but he was so bloody tired of being moral. He didn’t care. He loved her. And he wanted her to stay. He needed her. Desperately.
Severus had no idea how long he’d been wandering aimlessly, trying to re-order his thoughts, trying to come up with something convincing, something reasonable to tell her. Failing at that, he decided to simply go back and hope for the best. He knocked on the door several times, but she didn’t answer. He called, but she didn’t answer. Only then did he notice the door was open.

She was in the kitchen. Sitting by the table, nursing a cup of coffee. Severus could smell the freshness of the recent shower she had taken, certainly to cleanse herself of his scent. She seemed calm. Her air was gathered in a braid, and she wearing leggings and a wool jumper, what she usually wore around the house for comfort. There was a deceptive air of normalcy about her.

She didn’t even look at him as he came closer.

“I knocked but you didn’t answer.”

“I know.”

“The door was open.”

“I left it open. I knew you’d come back. You always do. It’s the game you play.”

“I had to...”

“Let me guess. You had to buy some fags. And it just happened to take you a couple hours.”

“Lyn.”

“You know, Severus” she finally looked up at him, her expression filled with quiet contempt. “I’ve had problems with men my whole life. I guess I don’t know how to pick them. I’ve been cheated on, I’ve been with control freaks, I’ve had my career interfere in my relationships, I’ve had men try to interfere with my career, you name it. But this? This takes the cake.”

“I didn’t mean to...”

“What, Severus?” she got up and took the cup to the sink to wash it, turning her back to him. “What didn’t you mean to do this time around? You never ‘mean to’, do you?”

“Evelyn, stop.”

“You know, this is a first.” she turned around and laughed. Not her usual warm, sweet laughter. It was biting, mocking. “Of all things I’ve ever done wrong when it came to men and relationships, I always thought I at least had the sex part figured out. I swear it’s the first time in my life I had a bloke sleep with me then run away in horror the morning after. Does wonders for a woman’s self-esteem, I must say.”

“For fuck’s sake, Evelyn!”

“What? What the hell happened this time? Tell me, Severus, because for the life of me I’m this close to giving up on trying to understand you!”

“I’m an idiot, that’s what happened.”

“That much has been established.”

“...I’m an idiot and I was scared out of my wits..."
"Of WHAT?"

"I wish I could explain."

“You know what? I’m tired. I’m tired of your little games. I’m done.”

“I’m NOT playing any games with you!”

“Then what the hell ARE you doing? Trying to make drive me raving mad? If that’s the case, you’re doing a grand job of it. I’ve had it, Severus. You can’t keep doing this to me. You can’t keep me at arms length, then let me in for a little while, then push me away again. I’m not at your disposal to use whenever you feel like it.”

“I never thought of you like that!”

“You don’t even take me seriously enough to tell me to my face that you’re just not that interested in having anything serious. And I may be a great many things, but an idiot is not one of them. I refuse to be anybody’s plaything. Not even for a man I love.”

“You have it all backwards.”

“Just spit it out already!” her voice grew louder, harsher. “Just admit it. I’m convenient for you, aren’t I? You like me well enough, you enjoy spending time with me, I guess I’m educated enough to have a good conversation, and you certainly did seem to enjoy fucking me into the mattress last night, but that’s it, right?”

“Where did you get all this nonsense from?!” Severus could feel his frustration building up into anger. He could hear his voice rising. If only she knew.

“I don’t know! I have no sodding clue where I got ‘all this nonsense’ from. Let me see...Ah, yes. One day you want to be with me, the other day you have ‘doubts’ and ‘it’s complicated’. One day you’re caring and kind and I can trust you, the next day you’re distant and full of secrets. And you keep secrets from me, don’t think I don’t know. Like that bloody photo on your mantle? How about that? I know it’s still there.” she paused to take a long, deep breath, before continuing, struggling, her voice dropping to a whisper “You still love her...Don’t you? Lily. That’s her name, right? ”

“How do you know that?” he hissed.

“Fr. Thomas once told me you had a best friend growing up. A little red-haired girl named Lily. She’s the woman in that photo, isn’t she?” Severus would much prefer her to be angry. Rage would be better than the wounded, sad look she was giving him.

“Yes.” he admitted, his rage subsiding so suddenly he felt dizzy, like his blood pressure had suddenly dropped.

“And you love her.”

“I did.”

“Don’t lie to me. Whatever you do, Severus, don’t you ever lie to me.”

“She’s dead.” He drew in a deep breath, trying to ground himself. “Lily’s been dead for years. And yes, I loved her. A part of me still does, if you must know.”

Evelyn stood speechless, pressing her lips together, blinking to keep tears from flowing.
“What’s next Severus? What’s the next surprise you have in store for me? Do you have any idea how exhausting it is to live like this?”

“Lyn, please.”

“Please, leave. I can’t do this anymore. Just go.”

"Evelyn, listen.” he reached for her but she wiggled her way out of his grasp, and walked towards the front door.

“Get out.” she begged weakly, holding the door open. Severus reached over and slammed it closed. If she was going to kick him out she’d have to listen to him first.

“Evelyn, I’m a coward. I make it a habit of destroying whatever good happens to me as if out of pure spite. I’ve spent my whole life bracing for the worst because it always felt like any little bit of joy I could possibly have would always be ripped out of my hands somehow. I was scared because this morning when I woke up I was happy. Like I can’t remember being in a long, long time. And it terrified me. I know it makes no sense but...”

“Get out.”

“Please.” he reached for her again, trying to pull her to him, as if physical contact could better express everything he couldn’t find the words to say. She pushed her fists against his chest, struggling to get away. It hurt. Her hands were stronger than they appeared. Evelyn had grown up with an older brother, and a horde of male cousins, and knew very well how to throw a punch. But he didn’t care if she hurt him. In fact, he took a masochistic pleasure out of it. Anything was better than having her turn her back on him.

“You son of a...” she shrieked before switching to Irish curses he didn’t understand.

“I am. I’m a bloody son of a bitch. A wanker, a spineless coward.” he grabbed her wrists containing her, if only barely. “And I love you. I love you. Now tell me to leave. Say you don’t want to see me again. Say it now and I promise you it’s over.”

She pulled away only enough to give him a slap squarely across the face. He couldn’t say it took him by surprise. What did surprise him was what came after. Severus didn’t know which one of them started it, or even how it started. All he knew was that after the tiny moment of complete stillness their mouths found each other in a kiss that tasted of rage and passion.

…

Severus Tobias Snape would be the death of her.

Evelyn knew there was no quitting this man. She was too far gone. She wanted to send him away. To close that door on his face and forget she had ever been stupid enough to fall head over heels in love with him. But she couldn’t. She had promised herself she would never let another man play with her, that she would never fall into the trap of giving up her self-respect for crumbs of affection.

And yet, there she stood in his arms, surrendered.

“ ‘Say you don’t want to see me again. Say it now and I promise you it’s over.’ ” he had said. In the same breath he said he loved her. He looked into her eyes, told her he loved her, and dared her to send him away, dared her to give up on him. She should have. But she couldn’t.

She took offence at the notion that after all that had happened between them, a mere word was all it
would take to end everything. That it would be that easy. She refused to be dismissed like that. Then she wanted to hurt him. Like he had hurt her. However, once she let out her anger, after she slapped him for having the gall to say such things to her face, something came over her, something wild, feral. A desperate need of him, of his touch.

She loved him. She loved him in a way that made her doubt her sanity. How much more would she take before it was enough?

He kissed her roughly, sucking the air from her lungs, pushing her up against the door she should have slammed on his face, if she hadn’t been so foolish. Whatever little was left of her good judgement it was obliterated. What was even the point of struggling, of pretending she didn’t want him?

Through the shadows of his half-truths and barely concealed secrets, Evelyn knew Severus loved her. Even if he was hopelessly unable to be straightforward about his feelings, even if he carried a burden of memories, guilt and sorrows that always seemed to come between them, he loved her. As he clumsily undressed her and pawed at her body, as his mouth retraced the paths it had laid out on her skin the night before, Evelyn felt wanted. Not simply desired, but wanted. Needed.

Her body responded to his, recognising the touch, the scent. Raw instinct, unmasked by the protective cover of the night and the civilizing veneer of crisp bedsheets and fluffed pillows. Evelyn offered no resistance as Severus pushed her leggings down roughly, the tight fabric refusing to give out, almost ripping at the side seams.

“Couch.” she gasped. Dutifully he pushed her down on the cushions, finally freeing her from the flimsy protection of her garments. She had no idea how she had managed to get him off his clothes as quickly as she did, her hands were shaking so much. She felt his fingers slide down between her thighs and touch her as gently as he could manage, offering some polite semblance of foreplay within the mist of his own desperate eagerness. She appreciated it, but it wasn’t necessary.

“Fuck.” he pulled away slightly “I don´t have any...”

“Next time you take three hours to get a sodding pack of Dunhills, remember to get some condoms too.”

“I have to go upsta...”

“You’re not going anywhere.”

“But...”

“Pull out if you have to.”

“Goddammit, Evelyn.” he smirked, aroused, and she could see his eyes darken and the tense, lean muscles quiver under his skin.

Yes. Severus Tobias Snape would be the death of her.

She loved him. She loved him in a way that made her doubt her sanity.
through her half-loose hair. Evelyn laughed softly against his chest, pressing her lips on that spot where his heart still raced.

“Try being a randy teenager in a Catholic-majority little town in the Irish countryside and you’ll master some techniques.”

“You have quite the repertoire of them.”

“I’ve got compliments before, but I swear I never sent a man into a full panic attack mode.”

“As I said: I’m an idiot. And I’m sorry. For everything”

“Why must you complicate everything?”

"It’s a talent really."

"Severus,” she raised her head from his chest, looking into his eyes “I’m way past the days I dreamed of Prince Charming and a castle. I don’t expect a lavish wedding, a joint bank account or a house with a car in the garage and three children and a dog playing in the backyard. I’m living the life I want to live. I have my career, my hobbies, my own ambitions. I enjoy being who I am. I just want somebody I can share that with. Somebody I can trust. That’s all.”

“Look” he sighed “I know I’m a walking catastrophe. But I do love you. You can trust that whatever happens, and I do mean whatever, I love you. Madly. And I’d do anything it takes to be by your side for as long as you have me.”

“Why do you always make it sound like something disastrous is about to happen any moment? You haven’t even met my mother yet.”

“Goodness gracious, how bad can she possibly be?” Severus chortled “The poor woman is your mother for God’s sake.”

“Go ahead, underestimate her. She loves it when people do that.”

“I should meet her, eventually.”

“I’m just joking, you don’t have to rush into that.”

“You said you wanted me to prove I take you seriously, no? I don’t see a better way to start.”

“You have no idea what you’re getting yourself into” she laughed again, resting her head back on his chest, the tips of her fingers lightly running along his sides, drawing the outline of his ribs.

“Sev?” she trailed quietly, after a moment’s pause.”Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll understand if you don’t want to talk about it. You don’t have to answer if you don’t feel comfortable.” she spoke quietly, without looking at him, doubting her own resolve.

“Lily?” he offered, knowingly.

“Yes.”

“Go ahead. Ask.”
“You don´t mind it?” she insisted seeking reassurance.

“Not with you.”

“Were you and Lily, you know, together?”

“No.”

“Really?” she raised her head to look at him again, and Severus was almost amused by her surprised expression.

“I was in love with her. Hopelessly. But Lily only ever saw me as a friend.”

“I see.”

“Then not even that. Not that I blame her.”

“What happened?”

Severus paused, looking for the right words. Lily wasn´t a topic he expected they´d broach so soon, but it happened, so it was better to get it out of the way, then, at least for now. Oddly, he noticed as he began to speak, it wasn´t nearly as awkward as he had expected it to be.

“She didn´t approve of the kind of company I surrounded myself with. Rightfully so. We started to grow apart and one day we had a huge argument. I said things to her that I should never have said. That nobody should ever say to anybody, to be honest. She never forgave me and that was the end of our friendship.”

“What became of her? I mean, you said she...” Severus could tell she was avoiding the word. Death, dying. Even just saying it was heavy.

“Lily and I graduated, she married an obnoxious tool, had a baby and moved on with her life. I lost nearly all contact with her and her family. Then it happened. He went into their house and...” he couldn´t finish it.

“You´re trying to tell me she was...”

“Murdered. Both of them. Her sister took her son in and raised him. If you could call the way she treated that boy ‘raising’."

“How do you know that?”

“I crossed paths with her son again. In fact, you´ve met him.”

“I have?”

“Harry.”

“Wasn´t he s your student?”

“He was. He went to the same school his mother and I went to. A legacy scholarship of sorts. And I was a teacher there, remember?”

“That´s why he has your home address. ”

“Yes. I gave it to him in case he needed anything. I owe the lad that much.”
For a while all Severus could hear was the sound of the crackling of burning wood in the fireplace and Ciarán’s occasional contented purr, as he casually lounged on a cushion next to the couch. Severus closed his eyes lulled by the warm, soothing weight of her body on top of his. She must have been cold with naught but socks on. He pulled the throw blanket over her body, hoping it would be enough to keep her warm. It probably wasn’t a good idea for him to fall asleep on the sofa in his underpants either, he thought feeling the slight chill of the late afternoon come through a crack in the window, but he didn’t dare move. He didn’t dare break the silence.

Then he felt her move, and her warmth was gone. He opened his eyes and saw her reach for the discarded jumper on the ground, put it on and slide away from him, curling up on the opposite corner of the sofa.

“So, she’s the reason why you never dated anybody.”

“Before you.” He added, hoping to turn her thoughts away from the path he could see them go down. Evelyn offered him a shaky, unsure smile. Severus sat up, scooting closer to her. She didn’t move as he rested a hand on the small of her back and leaned in to press a soft kiss to the side of her neck.

“I would be lying if I said Lily isn’t very important to me. To this day.” he told her quietly “We grew up together. She was my best friend for years. My only friend. The first woman I ever fell in love with. But Lily was a dream. A dream that turned into a painful memory I can’t let go of.”

“And what am I, then?”

“Reality. And hopefully, my future.”

“It’s hard to compete with the memory of a man’s first love, though.” she admitted, with a sad little smile.

“Was it Oscar Wilde who said that all men want to be a woman’s first love, but what women want is to be a man’s last romance?”

“I think so.”

“Well, then... You’re my last, Evelyn.”

…

Monday, March 1st.

Cokeworth Academy

Teacher’s Lounge

Evelyn sat down with a pile of assignments, a can of coke and sandwich, hoping to get through with grading over lunch break so she wouldn’t have to take any more work home. Severus had decided he’d take care of dinner, which freed up some time from her nightly schedule, but on Mondays extra work seemed to magically materialize on her desk, and she still had an article and two reviews to edit before the week was out. And the more she got out of the way, more time she’d have for him, after all.
“Evelyn, for the love of God, don´t work while you eat, you hopeless workaholic” Angela chided, sitting across from her.

“I´ve got to get this done while I still have the energy. I don´t know if I´ll be able to lift a finger when I get home.”

“I was about to ask if you wanted to go to eat out somewhere after work, but I guess that´s a no.”

“I´m afraid so. Sev is in charge of dinner tonight, and I still have to pass by the market to get...”

“Wait, rewind it back. ´Sev is in charge of dinner tonight´? What did I miss?”

“I was going to tell you.”

“Don´t tell me you two are official, now?”

“I guess so

“Like that? You didn´t tell me anything!”

“It just sort of happened.” it was an accurate description, she figured

“Does that mean you finally did the deed?” Angela´s conspirational whispering tone was hilarious enough that Evelyn decided to have some fun at her expense.

“Yes. Repeatedly.” she said, knowing it would sent tickle her curiosity.

“Oh, you little...” Angela shrieked then lowered her voice when Evelyn shushed her “No wonder you came into work prancing this morning. NOBODY is that happy on a Monday morning, not even you. I want the full report!”

“Not now, Jesus, we´re at work!”

“You´re running back home to your Sev as soon as the last bell rings, so no time like the present.”

“Ok, but no details.”

“Fine. There´s just one thing I´m dying to know.”

“I´m going to regret this but go ahead.”

“Is it true what they say about men with big noses?”

“What?”

“You know!” she whispered “That big nosed men are also well-endowed elsewhere.”

“I´ll pretend I didn´t hear that.”

“And I´ll take that as a yes.”

...

“He´s back.”

Tancey found James by the river, throwing rocks on the surface of the water, watching the circles form and disappear. He had been quiet all day at school, and as soon as the last bell rang, he
vanished. Tancey knew something was off, and she knew where he came when he didn’t want to talk to anybody, not even her. The riverbank. She sat by his side and waited. Waited till he decided he was ready to talk. And truly, there was no real need to ask questions. That one sentence was about as much as she needed to know.

January had been a good month. James was excited about his music classes, and his mum was even more excited than him. She had helped him buy all his material and pick out notebooks, they had visited various bookshops looking for the manuals he needed, she had even saved up some money to get him a few CDs and DVDs. The more he looked into baroque music, the more James fell in love with it. He still listened to his punk rock and grunge albums on his down time, of course, but little by little Nirvana and Joy Division started to share the space on his bedroom shelves with Handel and Vivaldi. It was probably the challenge of it, the technical difficulty, the combination of preciseness and passion. It all fascinated him.

School was also back, and Ms. Black had chimed in with more material, more books, more excitement. James didn’t visit her as often as before, but Tancey didn’t mind it. It meant he felt safe at home. So she started to go to his house more often, to listen to his practice. Sometimes they went to the rectory where Fr. Thomas gave James full access to the piano for his incipient compositions. Even though James had a certain contempt for any form of organised religion, he had agreed to play in church sometimes. He had been trying his hand in the pipe organ, with moderate success.

February was filled with the same deceptive air of peace. Life was good for the first time in a long while. He had almost forgotten that it never really lasted. And it didn’t.

But March brought back his worst fear.

His father.

“He said he changed, that he’s sorry about everything. Going to AA meetings. He even told my mum he’s ‘proud’ of me for going to music school.” he smirked, bitterly “Meredith believed it, of course.”

“Maybe he’s being honest this time.” Tancey offered, but she didn’t believe her own words.

“He will never change.”

“Want to sleep over at my house today?”

“No. If I know him, he’ll be nice for a while. I don’t want him to think I’m trying to stir up anything.”

“Just say we have a school assignment.”

“I have to go.” he started gathering his things.

“James.” she pulled at the sleeve of his jacket “Talk to Ms. Black. She will do something if you ask her.”

“How many times have your parents tried? They called the police before, but she always drops the charges. What makes you think Ms. Black can help?” he spat out before scrambling to his feet and walking away. Tancey let him go. She didn’t have any solution to offer, so she might as well stay out of his way.
Ron found Harry sitting by the kitchen table, staring intently at an open book laid out in front of him. A detailed plan of Almeria’s Alcazaba covered two pages, and Harry slowly ran his fingers across the lines and numbers, like he was trying to memorize them by touch. Sometimes he pried his eyes away from the pages just long enough to reach for a Spanish-English dictionary laying within easy reach.

“Hermione found the floor plans?” Ron asked, rhetorically

“Yes, but they’re all in Spanish.”

“Shafiq is still trying to get the Ministry to give us permission to do something. By the time he gets it, you’ll probably be fluent already.”

“Why do we need permission?” Harry sneered. “Since when have we needed permission?”

“Since we work for the Ministry, and this whole business with the dagger is top secret and there’s an army of people trying to find it as well.”

“We don’t even know what the bloody thing does. It’s the blade that killed Helena Ravenclaw...So what?”

“Hermione and Snape think Salazar must have cast a curse on it. Or maybe there’s residual dark magic from Helena’s murder. I don’t know. If the Lestranges and that Russian bloke both want it, there must be something to it.”

“It feels like a waste of time.”

“Somebody is in a mood...” Ron smiled

Harry gave him a cross look, but said nothing, simply pushing the book away.

“Everybody can tell something is going on, Harry. I know you rather talk to Hermione about some things, I get it. I would prefer her advice over mine too, but I’m your friend too.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“You still haven’t got over the fact that Snape’s alive and all, right?”

“It seems not.”

“I’m still gobsmacked myself, to be honest. Can I ask you something? Just between the two of us...”

“Yeah?”

“Remember that woman we met at his house? Do you really think they’re together?”

“I think so.”

“I can’t believe that. Did you see her? Why would a woman like that date Snape? Maybe he used a love potion.”

“I doubt it.”

“I was joking, Harry.” Ron let out, flatly, before pulling the book towards himself so he could take a
look at the picture. “This is not as complicated as I expected. Knowing Salazar Slytherin, though, there’s probably some lethal trap here somewhere. You’ve got to give him credit, the old chap knew how to set up surprises.”

“Must be a Slytherin thing.”

“Remind me to never leave one of them in charge of a surprise birthday party then.” Ron looked up at Harry with the corner of his eye. “How much worse than the basilisk can this be?”

“It’s the dagger that murdered his daughter, so...”

“Oh, well...Nobody becomes an Auror for the cushy desk job.”

…

Minerva McGonagall’s office

Severus didn’t quite know what he was trying to accomplish when he decided to visit Minerva in the middle of the day for a chat, but solitude wasn’t a good counsellor, in any case.

Existence had been bliss over the weekend, as he spend it in Evelyn’s house, or rather in her bed, gleefully ignoring the rest of the world. Reality knocked at the door first thing Monday morning, however, as he woke up to his lover getting ready for work. Left alone with his own thoughts, Severus’constant paranoia caught up to him almost immediately.

There were no news from the Ministry. Not on the situation with the Almeria investigation, not on Sewlyn, or Fenrir or the Lestranges, or the Rotts. Some say no news is good news, but that had never been Severus’opinion. It drove him insane to not be able to plan ahead. Draco’s last letters revealed nothing he could use, but at least they assured him that both Claire and Ludwig were accounted for. Herr Rott had just returned from a trip, ostensibly to Germany, but Shafiq had some evidence that he had been to Norway. That unsettled him. Fenrir was rumoured to have headed North. Not that he believed Ludwig was insane enough to ally himself with a werewolf, but maybe his wife had finally chewed away the very last remains of his good sense.

Severus trusted Shafiq, however. He seemed to be taking his assignment as Evelyn’s quasi-bodyguard seriously, and his run with Claire left his ego bruised enough that he now obsessed over any potential source of danger no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. However much Severus wanted to let his guard down and enjoy the quiet interlude Evelyn’s affections offered him, the endless wait had him on the edge.

“I thought the Ministry didn’t want you to expose your status?” Minerva remarked “They’ll probably have some other agent deal with the matter of Salazar’s dagger in the end.”


“Severus,” she smiled, well-humoured. “Forget the Ministry for a moment. It’s probably not in your best interest to go out there. And I’m sure you and Evelyn must have a lot to catch up on.”

“I don’t know why I talk to you about my personal life, Minerva.”

“Because we’re friends, and your happiness is my happiness. And I’ve been rather bored as of late, so I welcome the distraction.”
“You welcome it a little too gleefully.”

“You’re snappy for a man who supposed to be lost in the throes of newly found love. And it took you long enough.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“How long have you been stalling things with poor dear Evelyn? Because I distinctively remember the first sparks being there, what...four, five months ago?”

“Is my struggle just a joke to you?” he asked, in a purposely melodramatic tone.

“Oh, what other men wouldn’t give to be ‘struggling’ in your place.”

“Very funny, Minerva.”

“However, I feel obliged, as your friend, to ask. When do you plan on telling her?”

“What?”

“That you’re a wizard. Surely you don’t plan to keep her in the dark about that? Specially given the circumstances.”

“The circumstances are part of the reason I want to wait a little. It’s too dangerous to get her involved in all this.”

“I didn’t mean ‘those’ circumstances.”

“What did you mean then?”

“Severus, my dear, Evelyn is a Black. Muggle or not, she is a Black. Her brother was a wizard. You tell me she shows signs of, at least, some level of awareness of magic. She has two very young nieces, and I see a strong possibility of any of these girls being a witch. And should you the two of you have children of your own, they would certainly...”

“Getting ahead of ourselves are we?”

“My point, is that Evelyn comes from a magical background, and being with you she’ll get exposed to magic much more often. If she truly is more sensitive to it, it’s probably better that you tell her already. We both know keeping this sort of secret rarely ends well.”

“You seem to forget secrecy laws only allow for exceptions in the case of family members or spouses. Evelyn and I are not married.”

“That can be fixed.”

“You’re impossible.”

…”

March 9th
Saint Petersburg

Arseniy looked on, utterly bored, while Anya brought in the papers pertaining to the editorial project for Evelyn Black’s book. Dmitri ignored him and turned his attention to the cover art. After several
rejected ideas, the publishing house enlisted an artist to work on an original illustration for the cover. Combining an elegant pattern of Celtic knots with a style of human-figure drawing vaguely reminiscent of the late Middle Ages, the illustrator had managed to create a rather elegant design of black upon beige that closely resembled a page out of an actual codex. Dmitri was very pleased with it.

“Send this to Lewis editor for approval, and have him get feedback from Ms. Black. I want to make sure she’s happy with the result.”

Arseniy was not at all impressed by the whole concept of buying the rights to Evelyn Black’s books as a plan of action to get to Snape. He had voiced his opinion enough times as well, but Dmitri did as Dmitri wanted. The older wizard was quite sure he was actually honestly interested in that woman’s work. He had read all of her books, and was now going through her articles and other assorted publications.

Dmitri had a soft spot for muggle culture, which he had inherited it from his mother. Vera owned a library full of muggle classics. Philosophy, literature, poetry, theatre; any genre or author one could name, she was likely to have it. Dmitri had spend most of his childhood years in there, specially as his mother grew too sick and feeble to be outdoors. He sat at her feet and and they would read for hours on end. Once she got too sick to read for herself, Dmitri, then in the onset of his teenage years, would read to her.

His father didn’t approve of it. Making business and profiting off muggles was one thing, but what use were their books to a properly raised Pure-Blood? Yet, Vladimir humoured his wife’s whims. He loved her far too much to deny her anything, and as it became clear the disease would soon take her, he didn’t have the heart to ever tell her no.

“Any news from Sewlyn?” Arseniy asked once Anya was gone.

“Nothing much, but enough to make me worry. Ludwig has been travelling up North.”

“I would forget the Rotts and focus on the Lestranges if I were you. How long will you keep those two buffoons eating you out of house and home?”

“Until we find out where I can send them to retrieve the dagger.”

“You want to send them after it?”

“Why not? Who knows what kind of traps there are in the path to Salazar’s dagger. The Lestranges are expendable if anything goes wrong. For now I just need them away from Snape.”

“And his mistress.”

“Exactly.”

“I thought we needed Snape for the dagger.”

“We do. But if I can find it without him, all the better. And honestly if it comes to it, I’ll gladly let him dispose of the Lestranges.”

“Then why are you throwing money at that woman for her book?”

“You really think Slytherin’s Serpentine Dagger is the only thing Snape has to offer? Maybe the Rotts are this short-sighted, but it wounds me that you would ever think I lack the foresight. Snape is probably the most powerful wizard alive. He can do much more than just giving us the dagger. He
was a Death Eater once, give him the right motivation, and he can flip again.”

“You think this woman’s well being will be ‘enough motivation’?”

“I’m sure of it.”

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Saturday, March 13th

Spinner’s End.

Severus could hear her voice from downstairs as he made his way in. She sounded excited. Evelyn was always loud when she was excited about something, and depending on just how excited she would even throw a slew of words and phrases in Irish into her speech. He was starting to pick up some of it. In the near two weeks of their being 'official', as Angela put it, Severus, had started to spend so much of his time with Evelyn that the subtlest nuances of her voice and countenance were now transparent to him. Severus had the rhythm and pace of her moods, her home and work life committed to memory down to the smallest detail and variation. That the Ministry hadn’t required his presence at all recently also meant Severus had a lot of free time to settle himself into what Minerva only half-jokingly called his “newly married life”.

For all intents and purposes Severus had moved to Evelyn’s. He’d sleep and wake up by her side. They shared their mornings and plans for the day ahead over breakfast, he saw her off to work and welcomed her back in the end of the day, and they’d talk about everything and nothing, go out if she wasn’t too tired or stay in if she needed rest. Severus only ever went back to his own house when Evelyn was away and he had to work on any potions or read ministry issued paperwork that she couldn’t, under any circumstance, lay eyes on. Thanks to an old and trustworthy contact at J. Pippin’s Potions Severus now had a steady, if modest, income as supplier of potions which was something to keep himself occupied while Evelyn was working and the Ministry took their time deciding whether the Serpentine Dagger was a priority or not.

Evelyn had been absolutely delighted when Severus had taken upon himself to take care of most of the domestic chores while she worked and just happened to handle them flawlessly, even to her legendarily high standards. That had been a source endless amusement to him. One day Lyn would be more than a little fussed to find out he achieved it using magic instead of hard work, but for now Severus was more happy to receive unearned laurels for a job too easily done. Angela had taken to refer to him as Evelyn’s ‘house husband’. She meant it as a benign joke at his expense, but Severus didn’t actually mind the label at all.

The routine they had quickly established for themselves in the short while they had been officially together was beyond satisfying, and lulled him into a comfortable idyll that almost made Severus forget all about life outside the walls of their home. Their home. He could now think of it like that without feeling the least bit awkward about it. It was the sort of life he could easily get used to.

Severus closed the front door, dropped the shopping bags on the couch, and headed for the kitchen to get himself something to eat. Muggle stores were utterly exhausting. Every time he had to go out to buy anything, no matter how small, it felt like he had just run a bloody marathon. Shopping was the one household responsibility he’d gladly leave entirely up to Evelyn if he could. He put the kettle on, started to rummage the kitchen to find something to eat and, as old habits die hard, listened
intently, trying to make out the topic of her conversation.

“I love the cover art, Lewis.” he heard her say, her voice approaching as she climbed down the stairs. “It’s gorgeous. It’s even better than the one we picked out for the original edition, if you don’t mind me saying.”

She was talking to Lewis. Certainly about the Russian edition of “Witch trials in Ireland”. A translator had been picked about two months before, and the publication deadline had been set for somewhere after June. Evelyn had taken a while to agree with the Russians on a final cover art. They had sent her some early ideas she disliked, so they came up with alternatives, hoping to find one she would approve. Severus didn’t know much about how the process went in muggle publishing companies, but it did seem to him they were showing her a certain level of deference.

Their chief editor, Pavel something, Severus couldn’t quite remember his last name, was intent on pleasing Evelyn, certainly hoping to secure more book deals. At least Severus hoped that was the reason. He had a vaguely uneasy feeling about this man. There may have been a hint of jealousy in his assessment, he had to admit to himself (he’d never admit it to Evelyn, though). Severus had never seen the editor in person, but by all accounts he was perfectly respectful and courteous. He was also supposed to be young and good-looking, and Severus had half-hoped he’d be a grandfatherly scholar like Lewis. (With some luck, perhaps also gay like Lewis.) Severus was fully aware that it was a pathetic display of juvenile possessiveness coloured with some casual prejudice on his part, so he readily dismissed his own predispositions against the Russian editor as nothing of importance.

But something still didn’t sit right with him.

“Sev, you’re making tea?” Evelyn asked from the sitting room after hanging up.

“Yes, do you want some?”

“See if there’s any Lady Grey left, please?”

“We’re out. I’ll add it to the shopping list.”

“I’ll have whatever you’re having then. Thanks, love. You went to the bookshop? Why didn’t you call me?”

That was stupid of him, Severus thought as he heard the noise of her curious fingers going through the plastic shopping bags he had carelessly left on the couch. He couldn’t simply expect her not to snoop through a bag full of books left out in plain sight. He could swear she had been a cat in a previous life.

“Here, let me put that away.” he offered, getting to the living room only to find the empty bag on floor, already claimed by Ciarán as his favourite toy for the next hour, and Evelyn curiously examining the books he had bought.


“I have enough books about the European Middle Ages, but my library was lacking some Spanish-Muslim history. A friend recommended these so...”

“And the travel guide?” she asked, bemused “Don’t tell me you’re thinking about travelling to Spain?”

“Not right now, of course.”
“Why not? Come to think of it, it’s a wonderful idea. You know I absolutely love Spain. And you won’t believe the coincidence, I happen to have a friend who owns a beach house in Andalusia.”

“You do?”

“Yes. She’s a researcher with the University of Malaga, and her partner teaches geology, so they have a little house near Cabo de Gata-Nijar Park. It’s the only region in mainland Europe with a true hot desert climate, so it’s a great place for scientific field research. Gorgeous place too.”

“And where exactly is that park?”

“About an hour or so from Almeria.”

“Dear me, that IS a coincidence...”

“Here’s an idea. Why don’t we go to Spain for the Easter holidays? I can call my friend and see if we can borrow the house. I’ve done it before, they never spend Easter there, they always go to her in-laws in Barcelona.”

“I thought we had other plans.”

“I know we were thinking of going to Doolin to visit my family” she smiled in that sly, feline way she smiled when she was trying to get something out of him, and circled his neck with her arms “but honestly, Sev, I’d much rather our first trip as a couple be just the two of us, don’t you agree? We can go to Ireland for Summer and stay a little longer.”

“I don’t know.” Severus was about to come up with some excuse when the phone rang.

“Hold that thought.” She said, going to get it. The kettle started to whistle in the kitchen.

“Where?” he heard her tone change. He left the steaming cups of tea on the table and went back to the living room. She was scribbling something on a notepad. “Ok, I’ll be right there.”

“What happened?”

“James’ mother is in the hospital. They say is serious.”

“What? How? Don’t tell me...”

“Yes.”

“I thought his father had left.”

“The sodding bastard came back. And what was James thinking not telling me!” she roared, frustrated

“Calm down, Evelyn, what could you possibly have done?”

“Something! Anything!” she snapped “I’m sorry, Sev, I have to go.”

“I’ll take you, you can’t drive like that.”

...

Cokeworth General Hospital.
Evelyn stormed through the emergency, ignoring the front desk nurse´s feeble attempt to get some identification from her. Severus stayed back to ask for information and go through the bureaucracy. He somehow managed to get it done without answering too many questions. When he finally saw James the boy was sitting on a chair in the waiting area, staring at nothing, surrounded by Constance and her parents. Evelyn frantically checked him for wounds. Which he had aplenty. From where Severus stood he could see the fresh stitches on his upper lip, a black eye and a reddish-purple bruise on his cheekbone.

“What happened?” he asked Tancey´s father, trying to keep his voice down.

“James walked in on Oliver beating Meredith” he told him, through clenched teeth. “and tried to get in the middle.”

“Has anybody called the police?”

“We did.” he sighed “But I don´t know how good will it do.”

...

Severus kept his distance as Evelyn talked to the doctor in charge. Constance and her parents were still surrounding James, trying to convince him to go home with them. This felt all too familiar. Overbearingly familiar. Severus had to stay back.

“Then?” He asked when Evelyn finally approached him.

“Meredith has broken ribs, a broken nose, fractured jaw. She was unconscious when they brought her in, so she´ll be monitored for any brain damage.”

“How about him?” Severus asked, looking at the boy. Evelyn let out long, heavy sigh.

“No serious injuries. His cheekbone is bruised but not broken. I´m not worried about the physical damage though. He hasn´t said a word.”

“He´s in shock. Was it ever that bad before?”

“I don´t think Meredith ever needed hospitalization before. The doctor said if James hadn´t walked in and stopped his father, it could have been much worse.”

Severus looked at James, trying to read any emotion on his face, but found none. He had seen that vacant look before.

In the mirror.
Part 9 - "Sweeter than Roses" - Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Love, pleasure and the struggle and sorrow that sometimes come with it all. (Contains explicit depictions of consensual sexual acts and descriptions of domestic violence)

The only thing that felt real and tangible to James as he sat in the hospital corridor and people fussed and spoke to him in words he could not hear was the cool metal inside the pocket of his jacket. The scissors he had in his pocket were the only thing he could get his hands on when his father came after him.

He had heard the screams and the sound of shattering glass and plates even before he made it through the front door. He rushed in, knowing exactly what he was going to find. It was, somehow, even worse. His mother was curled up in the corner of the living room as his father pummelled and kicked her.

James’ first reaction had been to get him away from her, even if he didn’t know how. He just lunged forward and grabbed his father about the shoulders with both hands and pulling him with all the strength he had. That’s when the man turned on him. James could hear his mother plead with his father as he came for him.

James had taken the first punch standing but fell flat after the second, scrambling across the floor before finding his balance and managing to get away. He stumbled across the hallway, dizzy from the pain and the shock, and tried to reach the kitchen. The knives, he thought. His father was twice as strong as he was, but he’d have a chance with a knife. He was pulled back before he even made it across the hallway. His father grabbed him by his jacket and slammed his body against a wall. James tumbled and toddled then fell clumsily through the door of his parents bedroom.

The gleam of the scissors sticking out from his mother’s box of sewing supplies on the vanity table caught his eye. Suddenly, the dizziness vanished and he got up to his feet completely in control of himself again. He got the scissors and turned back just as his father made his way in.

He would have done it. He knew he would have done it.

All he needed was for his father to take one step forward and he would have done it. It would be the end of it. He raised the scissors, pointed them to his father and stared at him, daring him to step forward, to lay his hands on him on more time. If he had done it then, it would have been over. It would be all over.

His father looked at him in disbelief for a few agonizing seconds before laughing.

“What do you think you’re gonna do with that, you pansy?” he slurred, still laughing. Just take a step forward, James thought.

But his father still had one last humiliation in store for him.. He turned away and left. He knew James wouldn’t do it if he wasn’t provoked into doing it. Even in his drunken stupor, he knew that. So he walked away, leaving James behind, powerless to stop him. Defeated.
When he finally was able to move, James put the scissors into the pocket of his jacket and ran back to the sitting room where his mother lay on the floor, unconscious, blood coming out of her nose and pooling under her head.

He called Tancey, and that was the last thing he remembered.

He still had the scissors in his pocket.

He couldn´t let his father escape. He wondered if the scissors would be enough. He knew Tancey´s father had a big knife, the one he used to cut the meat when they had barbecues in the backyard. But he couldn´t do that. He didn´t want to get them into trouble. The scissors would have to do. He just had to hold on to them until everybody left him alone.

... 

Severus didn´t have to break his own self-imposed rule of never using legilimency on muggles. He knew exactly what was going on inside James mind as he sat still, shell shocked, barely responsive. Severus had been in that lad´s shoes and he remembered vividly each and every desperate thought that had gone though his own mind then. He still remembered that feeling of angry hopelessness.

Still, something nagging at the back of his mind told him he should go into James´mind. Against his best intentions, Severus did just that. And he didn´t like what he saw one bit.

He looked over his shoulder to see Evelyn and Constance´s parents talking.

They had no idea.

He walked over and lightly tapped Evelyn on the shoulder

“Can I talk to you for a moment? It´s important.”

Evelyn excused herself and they walked away a few step until Constance´s family was out of earshot

“Check James´ jacket. Inner pocket.”

“What, why?”

“He´s got something in there, and I´m afraid he´s thinking of using it.”

“I don´t get it.”

“Scissors. He´s got a big pair of scissors in his jacket. I don´t know what he wants to do with, it but better safe than sorry.”

“Scissors? Where did he get scissors”

“I don´t know, but nobody in his situation should be handling sharp objects.”

“How do you know for sure he has it?”

“Trust me on this one. Try to make it seem like you didn´t know. Just go there to check on him and act like you just noticed he has something in his pocket, then get it away from him. Unless you want me to.”

“No, no. I´ll go.”

Severus stood back as Evelyn approached James and sat down next to him, resting a hand on his
shoulder and leaning in to quietly speak to him. He couldn’t quite tell what she was saying but after a
couple minutes the lad finally seemed to react and looked up at her. He seemed stunned at first, as if
he was just realizing the extent, the seriousness of everything that had happened. Dazed, he took his
hand from his pocket, fingers still clutching the scissors, and Severus could hear him sniffle, fighting
back tears.

Evelyn got it from his hand, doing it in such a way nobody would see unless they were paying close
attention, all the while continuing to talk to him, and patting his thin, blond hair. James hid his face in
his hands, crying, and she hugged him tightly.

Severus drew a sigh of relief. It wouldn’t be today.

Problem was...when?

... Constance was trying to stay calm. It had never been this bad before. Not since she knew James, at
least. Her parents spoke quietly, so nobody would hear the frantic concern in their voices. They were
trying to come up with arrangements for James. The only thing they had decided was that he would
sleep at their house, which was always what they did when his father was up to no good. But this
time it was way more serious. James couldn’t go back home, at all. From the corner of her eye she
saw Ms. Black talking to him, and then she heard him cry, quietly, oh so quietly. It was strange that
Constance felt relieved to hear that, but she did. To hear him cry was better than seeing that lost,
dead lack of emotion he had on his face before.

At least you can comfort somebody who can still cry.

What would they do when the morning came? Should they try to convince James’ mother to press
charges? What if she didn’t, would James be in danger? Would she even be awake to press charges?
It was terrifying for Constance to see her mum and dad looking so lost. Ms. Black too. Ms Black was
always so confident, she always seemed to know what to do, but anybody could tell she was
overwhelmed. Feeling useless, she walked away from them, going nowhere in particular. She just
needed yo walk. The gentle pull of a hand on her arm stopped her

"Constance?"

She startled before seeing who it was. Mr. Snape. She didn’t even notice he was there. But then it hit
her. Of course, he had come with Ms. Black. He was always with her lately. Everybody at school
talked about a man all dressed in black came to meet Ms. Black at the end of classes every other day.
When the rumor started, Constance knew immediately who it was. So they were dating now. Tacey
was glad of it, really, and just a wee bit proud that she had known about it before anybody else.

"Are you ok?" he asked softly

"Yeah. I’m just worried about him."

"I know I have nothing to do with any of this, but,” he looked over his shoulder and paused before
lowering his voice “I need to ask you a question. If you don’t mind."

Constance, nodded, confused.

"You know James better than any of us. Do you believe he is thinking of...doing something stupid?"

"I-I don’t know." she paused to weigh every word of his question, her mind drifting back to that day
on the riverbank, when James had made it so clear that he saw no way out. "Maybe. I kept telling
him to ask Ms. Black for help, but he said it would make no difference. I’ve never seen him like this."

"Constance, I need you to promise me one thing. If you think James is about to do something he might regret, you must call one of us. Evelyn or me. Immediately."

“But Ms. Black can´t do anything” she told him, despondent

“Maybe she can’t, but I can. I’ll be there when you call. I know you have no reason to trust me, but please, do.”

There was something in his voice that soothed her. He sounded like he knew what to do, if it needed to be done. He was no stranger, she reasoned. He had rescued James when he had decided to chase after the man who broke into Ms Black’s house months before. He had been there for James recital. He was here offering help when none of this was even any of his business. He was Ms. Black’s boyfriend. She could trust him.

“Ok. I’ll keep an eye on him.” she nodded.

…

It was late when they go back home. Between talking to the police and discussing James´sleeping arrangements for the next days, they had stayed in the hospital past 10pm. On the way home they picked up something to eat. Evelyn was definitely not in the mood to cook, and she suspected Severus didn’t have much of an appetite anyway. He always lost his appetite when he was worried or upset

And she could tell he was upset. Severus wasn’t an easy man to understand; he hid and protected his feelings fiercely and always did whatever was in his power to appear composed and in complete control of himself. But he let his guard down a bit around her. Or maybe Evelyn had learned to read his cues. Since they’d been together he smiled more, relaxed a little more often, laughed more. His jokes were still dry and biting, but that was his brand of humour and she actually enjoyed it. So when his frown deepened just slightly, when his lips pressed together a tiny bit more tightly, or his eyes wandered away for a few seconds, she knew something was up. She could feel it, almost.

And how could he possibly not be upset? Evelyn was sure the events of the night had reawakened unpleasant memories for him. Memories of being in the exact same situation as James, but probably even more hopeless. Severus had told her about his father’s drinking, his violent temper, the fact that he emotionally and physically abused both him and his mother, but had never gone into a lot of detail. She never pressed him for it either. She knew it hurt. He would tell her when he felt comfortable. If he felt comfortable. And if he didn’t, she had promised herself she wouldn’t take it personally. It was his pain to share or not, and he had the right to deal with it on his own terms. She wished she could be more helpful, but at the same time, she understood his need for privacy. Evelyn also had many things she didn’t feel comfortable talking about, dwelling on. Severus was always patient with her, so the least she could do was show him the same courtesy.

Today, however, was different. She knew the wound was open, and it hurt. Severus had barely uttered a word since they came home from the hospital.

“You’re awfully quiet.” she began, choosing the most cliché way possible to start a conversation. But it had to start somewhere.

“I’m sorry. It hasn’t been a particularly pleasant evening, I’m afraid. I imagine you’re not in high spirits yourself.”
“No, I´m not. I´m worried about you, though.”

“You should be worried about James.”

“I am, of course. But he´s got Tancey and her family looking after him now. I can tell what happened tonight made you uncomfortable.”

“I´m fine.”

“Severus, I can tell you´re not fine. And it´s perfectly ok not to be. It´s understandable, I mean.”

“I went through the same thing growing up, therefore James´ situation must have triggered an emotional response from me, is that so?”

“That´s not necessarily the case, of course. I know nothing is that simple. But I don´t believe it didn´t affect you in any way.”

“You´re right. It did bring back memories.”

“Do you want to talk about them?”

“No.”

“That´s fine. But if you want...”

“I know.”

…

The two of them rarely went to sleep at the same time. Evelyn, being the solar creature that she was, thrived in daylight, Severus felt more at ease in the stillness of the night. She got up early and, whenever possible, went to bed early; Severus, on the other hand, ran on a schedule more fitting of an owl than a human.

Severus would always join Evelyn at her usual bedtime, however. To keep her company till she fell asleep, to talk about the events of the day, to take a peak at whatever book she happened to be reading or simply to make love to her. Once she was fast asleep, Severus would get back up, now bursting with renewed energy, and read, study or work for the rest of the night. He´d only return to her side only the wee hours of the morning to enjoy a few hours of blessed sleep basking in her warmth.

As full and peaceful as his evenings now were, specially if compared to the lonely and tormented nights he had suffered through for months after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus still had nightmares. They were just less frequent now. He had bolted out of bed on a cold sweat a few times, shaking, shivering and having palpitations. Evelyn was a heavy sleeper, but somehow she always woke up immediately after him, as if she instinctively knew something was wrong. The first time it happened he had tried to get her to go back to sleep with some excuse. It was just a bad dream, don´t worry, go back to sleep, he lied.

Those weren´t just bad dreams. In some way she knew that. She refused to just go back to sleep. She could hear him struggle to breathe, she could feel his whole body tremble. That night she told him about her own nightmares. Dreams and visions of her own, of death and suffering. Of her brother and so many other things she didn´t understand. Evelyn had had strange vivid dreams since she was a child. She dreamt of owls and snakes, of fire and stormy seas, and so many other things she could never make sense of. After he brother died she had had the same dream for weeks on a row. Of a
barn owl silently gliding through the night then flying under the branches of a mighty oak. From within the oak would emerge a snake. The owl killed the snake and it’s blood tinted the roots from which red roses would then grow. She was convinced it had to do with her brother. Evelyn had always been afraid of barn owls. Many an Irish folk tale she had heard growing up equated these birds with banshees, and she remembered seeing one in the cemetery when her bother was laid to rest. Barely 9, then, she had convinced herself that owl was the Grim reaper in disguise, and that the snake in her dream represented her brother, who happened to have a fondness for reptiles in general and snakes in particular.

That night Severus almost told her everything. That he was a wizard, that her brother was a wizard, that her parents had sent her to a therapist for no reason, that all her dreams had an explanation. Severus was by then convinced that she indeed had a certain level of sensitivity to magic. It was rare, but it happened among muggles, there was literature on the subject. Her dreams were the final confirmation of a suspicion he had held for months. But in the end, he didn´t say anything.

It was painful to think about the past, to try and face it. He could tell Minerva all the lies he wanted; that he didn´t want to hurt Evelyn, that it was just not the right time to tell her, that it was too dangerous. Those were just excuses. The truth was that Severus didn´t want to tell her. Maybe he loved her too much to tell her. The sentiment that you must always be honest with those you love was a noble one, but reality was anything but noble.

He just didn´t want to ruin everything. He couldn´t bear the thought of losing her. He was happy for the first time decades, maybe ever. At peace. He woke up in the morning knowing Evelyn would be there. He went about his days in peace because he knew she would be there. He was the one she came home to in the end of the day, the one she shared her joys with, the shoulder she cried on when she needed.

Once again he had a reason to exist. But this time it wasn´t a debt to pay, a penance, a labour of love unrequited.

This time it was living, breathing, shared love.

He was too selfish, too broken to muster the nobility of throwing it all away out of principle. He needed her like he needed air. She was the only thing in his life that felt right, even if he had to do everything wrong to keep her by his side. Sometimes it even felt like he had only truly begun living on that October afternoon when Evelyn showed up at his doorstep, demanding entrance into his little grey world like the sun forcing its way through the rainclouds. Sometimes it felt like everything before her had been a nightmare, like the ones he still had at night.

Every time he woke up in a panic he sought refuge in Evelyn´s arms and in the lies he told her to try and pretend like those dreams weren´t real. Every time he woke up in the middle of the night choking on the blood of Lily, Dumbledore, Charity and so many others, he would turn to Evelyn, and silently beg her to help him forget, even if only for the space of a night. She had no idea what he wanted to forget, but her arms were always open for him, she would always kiss his tears and put her hand over his heart until it stopped racing within his chest. She asked him no questions beyond those he was willing to answer. And the few questions she did ask, he cut them short with desperate kisses. Before he knew he was all over her, inside her, silencing his pain with the music of her pleasure.

Evelyn was right, that night in the hospital had brought back memories he wished he had forgotten. And bad memories had a nasty habit of inviting more bad memories, of sending his brain down a spiral of mental self-harm he couldn´t fight once it started. Soon his mind would be going places he didn´t want it to go. Places he couldn´t allow it to go. He could already feel the panic creeping up his spine to grab his head with cold, unforgiving claws.
 Severus came to her in the dead of the night as he always did, but this time he found her still awake, reading.

“Can´t sleep?” he asked, getting under the covers, and pulling her body into his. She was warm against him, warm and soothing like a Summer morning´s first rays of sunlight.

“No.” She put the book on the night table along with her reading glasses and curled up against him, catlike. “I think I´m going to be wide awake for a while.”

“Nervous energy. You always get like this when you´re worried” he stated, resting his head on the crook of her neck and pressing his lips to her skin, inhaling her scent, watching the goosebumps erupt all over her body. Instinctively his hand found her breast, feeling up the familiar weight and shape, the faint feeling of her heart beating underneath. She sighed, closing her eyes, and he let his mouth wander down her collarbone...

“I suppose I should to use up that 'nervous energy'...somehow” she countered “Any suggestions as to how? ”

“Several.” he answered, snickering into her skin, pushing the thin fabric of her nightgown out of the way, his mouth closing over her breast. He could feel her fingers tangling into his hair, her hands pushing him closer. He let his tongue swirl and his teeth grip, ever so slightly, before sucking. He pulled her hips closer to his, feeling the curve of her arse, sinking his fingers in the firmness of the flesh. One of her thighs made its way between his legs, pushing up against his crotch, and her hips moved, slowly, calculated. Severus felt his trousers start to get a little tighter

“You know,” she said quietly, teeth grazing the shell of his ear “I prefer when you sleep in that old nightshirt...easier access.”

“I´ll keep that in mind”

He hissed when Evelyn licked the outline of the scars on his jaw and neck. He didn´t know why, but that always did it. The first time she had used that little trick, he nearly came all over himself before even being inside of her. She knew it got him going. He pulled her nightgown up, finding her bare as usual underneath. She never slept with knickers on. He rolled over her, pushing her down onto the bed and kissed her, deeply, messily.

Severus felt a certain sense of relief. He had expected her to say no. He needed her tonight, he needed to be with her, in her. But he knew his need for release to calm his nerves, was just that: his need, not hers. She had been tense all evening, he´d understand if she didn´t even want it. But that husky growl she let out when he pushed her legs apart and delved his hand between them told him otherwise. He obliged her, his fingers sank into the soft, wet warmth. He didn´t go too deep. She wasn´t ready just yet, and he wasn´t about to go about this raw. He took his time playing with her, drawing moans from her lips.

It began to feel stuffy and hot under the covers, so he kicked them off. She let out the faintest of protests, mumbling something about the cold. Her skin was flushed rose and warm. The contact with the cool air must have been nearly unbearable. He pushed his fingers deeper, all three of them, watching how her thighs spread wider apart and her own hand started to make its way down to join his ministrations.

“Eager are we?”

“Smug son of...”
“Do it, love.” he crooned, looking down to see how she touched the engorged bundle of nerves and flesh above her entrance, as he continued to fuck her with his fingers

“Good girl...”

...

Evelyn wasn’t sure this was a healthy way of coping, but she honestly couldn’t help herself.

One of the first things she realized about Severus once they had starting sharing the same bed was how utterly touch starved he was. She knew he had never been in a proper relationship, even though he had bedded many women before her. The simple, seemingly natural combination of love and sex had never been a part of his personal experience. And for a sizeable chunk of his life he hadn’t even bothered with sex at all. The one time he told her he had gone years without it, she had thought he was pulling her leg.

But knowing him, it shouldn’t have been a surprise.

Severus experienced emotions quietly but with an amount of intensity that almost scared her. He bottled everything in until it exploded. So, of course once the gates were open and his hesitation to take their relationship a step further had been vanquished, Severus went about sex in the same way he went about everything: with quiet, relentless passion. For somebody raised Catholic, or maybe for that exact reason, Evelyn had very little qualms about her sexuality, so she welcomed the frenzy, and revelled in the undeniable desire that drew them to one another.

It was inebriating, addictive.

Evelyn couldn’t remember desiring a man in the way she desired Severus Snape. She loved to see how the lean flesh under his skin quivered and tensed when he moved above her and within her, how his usually stoic expression changed, as he flushed with pleasure, and his thin lips curled into a wolfish, near predatory grin. She loved to watch his own pleasure and satisfaction as he brought her to the brink and beyond, the sound of his deep voice breathlessly whispering dirty sweet nothings in her ear as he had his merry way with her. There was something perversely delightful to see a man who was always so proper and collected just completely lose himself to lust in the way Severus did.

But at some point she noticed that, as much as he truly desired her, and as much as sex was an honest expression of his feelings for her, there was something else underneath it all. Evelyn came into that relationship knowing Severus had issues to work through, and she wanted to help him, and be there for him. But sometimes she wondered. When he sought her body in the dead of the night, in the wake of a particularly bad nightmare or after a few hours of stubborn silence and detachment, she wondered. The thought intruded in her mind for a few seconds before the wave of delight took over, leaving her unable and unwilling to think.

While she had no doubt that Severus had a very deep and sincere affection for her, sometimes she wondered if he loved her, or if she wasn’t just a convenient escape for his emotions. Sometimes she thought about Lily. Severus still loved her after all these years, Evelyn was sure of it, but was it with the same intensity as he did when she was alive or was she just a bittersweet memory of his youth he continued to cherish? The fear that she was a sort of replacement who just happened to be available and willing, upon whose body Severus could vent his frustration, that fear reared its ugly head from time to time.

Evelyn then pushed the thought aside. She couldn’t think about it. Not now, not when he was.
“Oh, God..Sev...” her thoughts fluttered and vanished like little puffs of smoke when Severus found that one spot within her, and started to mercilessly torment it until whatever little was left of her sanity was gone in a haze of liquid heat.

“Warmer now?” she heard him laugh softly

“Fuck you, Severus”

“I would prefer the other way around if you don´t mind it?” His cock was straining hard, pushed up against her hip, still trapped in his pants. “Unless you don´t feel like it right now.”

“You know me better than that.”

What the devil was wrong with her? Her thighs were still quivering from the first release when Severus settled between them, taking the time to put on a condom, like a proper gentleman. The weight of his body above hers awakened a second wave of passion where she should have been spent. What was it about this man that made her like this?

Evelyn lost herself in yet another long, drawn out kiss, and there it was, the delicious pressure of him pushing inside.

...

Severus was barely in his body now. Objectively he could feel the locks of her hair in his hands, her nails digging into his skin, her chest moving up and down with ragged breaths, his cock moving within her, the feeling of her dripping wet, so hot and snug around him he could barely keep a hold of himself. It was all there, the raw biological facts of it. And yet, there was more to it. There was more to the way her eyes fluttered, looking up at him, and the tingle on his spine as he thrust into her body, there was more in the mantra of grunts and moans the sang together, the way she smiled at him, running her hands on his neck and shoulders, as if the kindness of her touch could silence what raged within his soul.

There was...more.

When her second orgasm hit her, Severus was afraid she´d faint. He could feel her trembling beneath him. He feared it was too much. It was always too much, he thought sometimes. He was addicted to her. It wasn´t right. It wasn´t fair.

He cupped her face and kissed her again, slow and sweet this time, almost an apology, a token of affection, as his own release neared and he continued to move roughly within her. Spent, she hugged him to her, pulling her lips away from his just enough to shower small little kisses over his face.

That was it.

Severus felt his body waver, then empty itself, pouring out all he had within. He muffled his groans into her shoulder, as if ashamed somebody would hear them and rode out his own climax, barely catching breath.

...
The bedroom was a bit warmer now. Somehow Evelyn had found the will to get out of bed and turn up the heat, all the while complaining about the cold, and telling him he should live in a dungeon or in Siberia if he liked it so much. Severus watched her stroll about as unashamedly naked as Eve on the first dawn, with a smile on his lips. Where the devil did she find the energy, he thought, bemused, when he could barely move. Tossing the used condom in the garbage bin under her night table, Severus rolled to her side to lay on his stomach, relishing on the warmth she left there.

“Excuse me, you’re in my spot.”

“Your spot is better.”

“I’ll have to use you for body heat then.” She came back to bed and rested against his back.

“Didn’t you just do that?”

He felt the cascade of her hair cover his shoulder and the tips of her fingers trace the maze of scars on his skin. Faint, nearly invisible irregular lines that formed map on his back, arms and legs.

Severus sighed.

Evelyn had noticed them early on. She knew the scarring on his neck, hand and jaw had a fresher, more immediate history. Those were the result of an accident, he had told her, and she accepted it. He was quite self conscious about the fact that his left hand had limited mobility, which made that some finer motor skill tasks harder for him to perform, and he tended to favour high-collared shirts, jackets and turtle-necks, but Severus could live with that. Sure he couldn’t tell Evelyn that he had got those scars from being on the business end of a magical snake, but Severus never had an issue actually addressing their existence.

But the other scars, the ones only Evelyn could only see when he was out of his clothes, those were a whole different story.

As the two of them went through the first awkward stages of achieving true intimacy, Severus wasn’t all too comfortable being completely naked in front of her. Evelyn had caught on to it. At first she chalked it up to his being naturally reserved, and to their relationship being just too new. As time passed, as he mindless fire of their first encounters subsided to give way to something deeper and more serene, as they grew closer and bolder in their exploration of each other, Severus finally shed that initial unease. The memory of having his body exposed and ridiculed was still there, but he could finally disconnect that feeling, from the entirely opposite sensation of being exposed to a lover’s encouraging gaze. Then he felt more confident in letting her explore his body. By now she knew each and every one of the scars, blemishes and marks on his body like the back of her own hand.

Evelyn herself had a collection of memories etched onto her skin, open for Severus to read at leisure. Most of them were souvenirs from all manner of childhood games and small domestic accidents, as it’s likely to happen to an energetic, playful child, growing up free in the countryside. The exception were the large burn scars that spread over her right hip and thigh like ragged spiderwebs. Those were living evidence of the fire that took her brother’s life, carved on her flesh. Scars Severus gently traced with the tips of his fingers whenever she laid curled up against him, in his own silent way of showing he loved her, all of her, even parts of her that were not as beautiful and joyous as everything else about her.

The marks on her body were no secret to him, and yet his were never a topic of discussion.

...
“My father had a fondness for a hard leather belt with a heavy buckle on it.” He said, his voice monotone and detached. He sat up to face her, his back resting against the bed frame. Evelyn wrapped the sheet around herself and scooted over to his side. She held his hand into hers, running her thumb over his knuckles and looked at him intently, encouraging him to go on.

“He didn´t even wear the bloody thing, just kept it in the house to ‘discipline’ me.” he continued

“Sometimes I wanted to strangle him in his sleep with it. I probably should have.”

“Don´t even say that.” she said quietly, reaching to pull his hair off his face “You would never have done such a thing.”

“You think?”

“I can´t imagine you killing anybody.”

“Really?” he laughed without any joy.

“For how long did it go on?” she asked, hesitantly.

“My father decided I was good and ready to be properly disciplined at age 5, but I left for boarding school at 11. In the meantime I learned how to stay out of his way and make myself invisible. My mother was the one more readily available to his outbursts.”

“Even then, you have so many...” she trailed, touching the faint criss-cross of lines on his side.

“I wouldn´t give all the credit to my father.” he smirked again “You know I wasn´t popular at school. It was like they could smell the weakness off of me. Like lions know which is the weakest in a herd of zebras. And lions hunt in packs. But at least there I could defend myself to some extent. It´s different when it´s in your own home.”

... 

“You were not 'weak'...You were just a little boy, for God´s sake! Severus, wasn´t there anybody, a single sodding responsible adult who could..” she blurted, in hopeless, impotent rage, not knowing what to do with it.

She was furious at ghosts that weren´t even hers. Or weren´t they?, she wondered, as her mind was flooded vivid images of her sister showing up at their parents´ house in the middle of a stuffy Summer night with the girls in tow, Lizzie still a baby and Allie barely three. Of their father, a mild-mannered scholar whom Evelyn always thought incapable of harming a fly, storming our of the house like a fury out of hell.

“Hey, there, there” Severus let out softly, pulling her to his chest. “It´s all said and done. Don´t worry about me. You have your hands full with James, in any case.”

“Sev. You just said that... that sometimes you wanted to.” she couldn´t repeat it.

“Kill my father? Yes. Fuck, the bastard’s been dead for over 20 years and sometimes I still do.”

“Do you think James could be feeling something like that?”

“He most certainly is. But he won´t do anything of the sort.”

“How do you know?”

“I just know. I have ways of knowing things.”
“Yes…” she smiled “you´re a wizard. I must have forgotten.”

“What are you planning on doing now? About James I mean…”

“I´ll go see Meredith tomorrow. I hope she´ll be awake so I can talk to her. Tancey´s parents said they´ll help with anything she needs, but first we have to see what we can do now.”

“That´s good. I hope that little dunderhead is aware of how lucky he is.”

...

Sunday, March 14th

Cokeworth General Hospital.

“You didn´t have to come.” Meredith let out, forcing herself to smile as Evelyn walked into her room. James was sitting next to his mother´s bed, looking like he hadn´t gotten any sleep at all. Evelyn studied the woman before her, trying not to show her shock. Meredith was conscious, but she was still in bad shape. Her face was badly bruised and swollen, with stitches here and there. They had put her in support braces for the cracked ribs, and her arm was in a cast.

“Of course I had to, dear. I´m glad to find you awake.” she answered, not quite knowing what else to say.

“It looks bad, I know.” she smiled, touching her bruised cheek with a shaky hand

“James, can I talk to your mother for a second, please?”

“Go ahead, darling.” Meredith told him “You´ve been sitting here all morning. Go get yourself something to eat, Olivia told me you barely touched your breakfast today. My wallet is in the bag over there, get it.”

James hesitated for a moment, before getting out of the room, dragging his feet.

“Olivia brought my wallet and some other things. I didn´t even have any ID on me yesterday.” she told Evelyn, pointing to a neatly packed duffel bag on a chair. “Oliver wasn´t home when Olivia and Anthony went there to get everything, thank God.”

“Do you have any idea where he could be?”

“Who knows? He can go months without turning up. I never know where he´s been until he´s back, sometimes not even then.”

“You really don´t know?” Evelyn offered, cautiously, approaching the bed.

“I´m not lying, if that´s what you mean”

“I didn´t mean it like that”

“I know what you´re going to say. You came here ready to have a long serious talk with me about how I must press charges and stick with them, for my and my son´s sake. To tell me I have options, and places where I can go.”
“Yes, that’s exactly why I came.” Evelyn let out, weary.

“I will save you some time, in that case.”

“Meredith, I know it’s easy to stand here and tell you what to do with your life. And I also know how hard it is to be in your position.”

“Just looking at you I can tell you you don’t know the first thing about how it feels to be in my position.” Meredith scoffed.

“Not from first hand experience, I don’t. But at least two people I love dearly have gone through that.”

Meredith’s frown relaxed and turned into a mix of confusion and surprise. Evelyn smiled and took the seat James left vacant before continuing

“My sister’s ex-husband is...not as bad as Oliver, but only for a lack of opportunity. They got married when she was in nursing school. She would spend her every waking minute studying and working, while that gobshite was out partying with his mates. Couldn’t hold on to a job either. When her first daughter was born, he cleaned his act for a while but by the time she had the second baby, he was back at it. My sister was working long hours, she had to leave the girls with our mother, because Sean couldn’t be trusted to take care of two little ones. My father and I were helping pay the bills. We begged her to drop him, but she wouldn’t.”

“But she did eventually.”

“Yes. This one night she showed up at my parents in the middle of the night. I was back home on vacation. She had the baby in her arm, and her older daughter by the hand. He had hit her. It was the first time he ever laid hand on her. Our father was fuming. Mind you, he was the sweetest man on the face of Earth, but that night...He had a Colt revolver, some old thing my mother’s father insisted on giving to him when they got married. Well, he got the revolver and went to my sister’s to run the bastard out of there.”

“Your sister still has two daughters with him.”

“She does. But he’s not her husband anymore.”

“I know you want this to be some sort of example but it’s different.”

“It is and it isn’t. My sister didn’t stick around because she knew she had somewhere to go, and family to help. But for a long time she did think he was going to change, and she had two little ones, and she thought they needed their father. But they don’t change, Meredith.”

“I thought he had changed this time around.” Meredith looked away, wiping fresh tears from her eyes “You don’t have to tell me it was a stupid mistake.”

“I’m not going to tell you anything of the sort. I’m here to tell you you have somewhere to go, and people who are willing to help. James is not a little boy anymore, he wants to be there for you as well.”

“Don’t worry, Ms. Black, I know that. I’ve been stupid before, but not now. What he did to James.” Evelyn could tell she was struggling not to cry “There’s a lot I can take, but not that. Oliver had never done anything like that before. He had screamed as James, argued with him, called him names, smacked him when he was younger. But punching him like that? Like you punch a grown man?...No, never that. You don’t need to convince me to press charges.”
Relief washed over Evelyn.

“You scared me there for a moment.”

“I may be an idiot, but I’m not that much of an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot. It’s a difficult decision to make. And if you need anything, if there’s anything I can do.”

“I do need something, actually.”

“Tell me. Anything.”

“Anthony told me I can only get a restraining order during sentencing. That I have to report him to the police and then take him to court. I can’t go back home, but I don’t want to go to some shelter”

“You can stay with me if you want, I have a spare room. Feck, my boyfriend has even more spare space than I do in his house now, I could ask him...”

“Thank you, but I wouldn’t burden you like that. I have money saved, I have a job. I can rent a smaller place just for the two of us. What I need is help finding one.”

“Finding you a new place shouldn’t be too hard. Lots of vacancies in Cokeworth these days. But where will you stay while we find a place?”

“James is staying with Anthony and Olivia for now, I could stay with them too for few days.

“You’ll need a lawyer too. Divorce proceedings and whatnot. Can you afford one?”

“I don’t know yet. I think I can. I need to check my account, see how much I have there. Anthony said he’ll help sorting my finances out.”

“Leave your bank account alone for now. You and James need to have something to fall back on. Leave the lawyer to me. I’ll find somebody.”

“Absolutely not. I can’t let you spend that kind of money on me.”

“Darling, please” Evelyn smiled “If you knew how much of my disposable income I spend on clothes, shoes and make-up, you’d be glad I’m putting it to something useful for a change.”

Meredith gave her a tiny smile, and Evelyn had to fight back her own tears.

“Well, look at me” she let out, fanning herself with her hands “I’ll ruin my mascara.”

“Ms. Black, ca I ask you one more thing?”

“Of course, dear, but call me Evelyn, please.”

“Don’t tell James about any of this just yet. I know he’s going to be fine with Tancey and her family, I don’t want him to worry about anything now. Not while I’m in the hospital. Our life is going to change a lot from now on, he needs a break before it happens. As soon as I get discharged, I’ll sit him down for a talk. Explain everything...apologize.”

“I see. Of course, Meredith. You need to focus on getting better now. James will be fine. He’ll be so proud of you.”
“I hope.”

... Severus was sitting on the couch with his feet on the coffee table reading some random historical novel he had found in Evelyn’s office when he heard her open the door. It was early, he thought, he had expected her to take much longer. She had left first thing in the morning, intent on not leaving that hospital until she had convinced Meredith to press charges. He feared such an early return was a sign of bad news, but when he raised his eyes from the book, Severus saw her walk in with a big smile on her face.

“How did it go?” he asked.

Evelyn dropped her handbag on the vacant armchair and well nearly jumped into his lap, planting series of little kisses on his lips.

“She’s pressing charges. I left when the officer was done taking her statement.”

“She has pressed charges before, no?”

“She’ll stick to it, this time, I know. Oliver hitting James was the straw that broke the camel’s back. I don’t think she’ll give him another chance after that.”

“Good.” Severus answered with a forced smile.

“Meredith is stronger than we were giving her credit for.”

“Maybe.” he let out flatly “But I’ve seen that film play out before and the end is always the same.”

“I know, darling” she told him quietly, resting her hand over his heart “but the end doesn’t always have to be the same. She can do this. I may not be a witch, but I know a thing or two about people myself.”

“I can’t dispute that.”

“By the way, I wanted to thank you.”

“What for?”

“Last night.”

“Love, I know we had a good time, but you never thanked me before.”

“No, not for that!”

“For what then.?”

“For opening up to me. I know it was hard. And I know part of the reason you did was because you care about James. I really appreciate that. You’re a good man, Severus Snape, deep down under all the snark.”

“That’s the nicest backhanded compliment I’ve ever gotten.”

Evelyn was about to say something when they heard a flapping noise coming from outside. She
turned to window and let out a blood-curdling scream, jumping from his arms. Before Severus could ask what the devil had gotten into her she pointed to the window

“Get that bird out!”

A barn owl. Severus swallowed his laughter before Evelyn could notice. He knew she was terrified of these birds, and he did understand and respect her reasons, but sometimes the idea that a woman like her would be so scared of a mere bird was almost too funny to resist.

“You know this poor animal is more scared of you than you are of it, right?”

“I doubt it!” she shot back, almost running upstairs. “What is it doing flying around in broad daylight anyway?!”

Severus did a double take. She was right...Barn owls don’t fly during the day, unless...

“You have something for me, don’t you?” he asked, petting the owl’s head.

...

Thankfully, Evelyn had found something in her office to keep busy, just so she didn’t have to come back downstairs and risk facing the owl again, which gave him time to read Dawlish’s note.

“Change of plans: Almeria investigation has been put on hold.

We’ve received reports of suspicious activity in Northern Europe: Fenrir Grayback’s track has been lost in in Norway. We’ve just been informed that Ludwig Rott was spotted in Norway at roughly the same time.

With the Lestranges still unaccounted for in Eastern Europe, it seems the Rotts are going in a different direction. It’s possible that they are not, after all after the dagger, if the connection to Fenrir is anything to go by. And if they are thinking of aiding and abetting, Fenrir, whatever their interest in doing it is, we can certainly expect more muggle casualties in the near future. Kingsley is giving that investigation preference over the dagger affair.

Stay put for any additional information.”

...

“Is everything all right?” Evelyn asked when she finally mustered the courage to come back downstairs and found him sitting on the couch pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Migrane.”

“All of the sudden like that? There’s ibuprofen in the kitchen somewhere.” she said, immediately marching to the kitchen to get it.

“Lyn, I was just thinking about something.”

“What?”

“Do you really want to go to Spain for Easter?”

“I always want to go to Spain.” she laughed softly, giving him the pills and a glass of water, then sitting by his side and putting her legs up on his lap kicking her shoes off. “Why? Did you change your mind about going?”
“It’s not a bad idea. James and his mother should be settled by then, I imagine.”

“How about your job?”

“They won’t need me for a while. Research project is halted for a while. Internal affairs and what have you.”

….

Monday, March 15th

Oldham

Virgil Shafiq didn’t expect to have Severus Snape knock on his door first thing in the morning on a Monday, but the man was famously full of surprises.

“I know it’s too early” Snape shrugged as Virgil let him in.

“No, not at. I’ve been awake for a while” he yawned

“I see that” Snape smirked, pointing at his pyjamas.

“Can I get you something? I’m making coffee.”

“Sure, why not.”

Virgil went into the small kitchen to get the coffee while Severus walked around, inspecting the small and largely empty little flat. The Ministry had insisted that if Shafiq was to be in charge of Evelyn’s safety and aid Severus in the investigation on Salazar’s dagger, then he’d have to be closer to Cokeworth. So they put him in a small studio apartment in a little charmingly bohemian neighborhood of Oldham. A young Muslim living on his own would probably call some attention in the provincial and still overwhelmingly white and conservative Cokeworth,(one mosque and one synagogue nonwithstanding) but in Oldham Shafiq fit right in.

“So this is where the Ministry has you live?” Snape asked, sitting on the tiny white couch. The livingroom was almost bare, some black and white cityscapes graced the overwhelmingly white walls, and besides the couch the only furniture he could see was a couple of folding chairs, a coffee table and some bookshelves, stacked to capacity. Lacking the space, Shafiq had to resort to piling up the remaining books on the floor, and while it didn’t look half bad as weay of minimalistic décor, it didn’t make for much comfort if he was ever to entertain any guests.

“The place was adequate enough for an auror. In this line of work you get used to to forgoing creature comforts” Shafiq smiled, serving Severus an exceedingly fragrant cup of coffee and unfolding a chair for himself “I would have liked to have some proper sitting for guests but…”

“Virgil, my lad, I live in Spinner’s End. Your flat may be a bit bare, but you have me beat on location at least. But I didn’t come here to talk about your living arrangements.”

“I imagine you didn’t.”
“Did you get the news on the Almeria affair?”

“Yes, Bullshit if you ask me. I doubt the Rotts gave up on the dagger. I Fenrir is either a distraction or a part of their plan.”

“I agree. It concerns me that they can´t see that. Anyway, by hseer coincidence I was talking to Evelyn just the other day about some unrelated matter and it gave me an idea.”

Evelyn. The mention of that name made Virgil shift in his seat. He knew he was there to watch over her. It was half his actual stated mission, And he didn´t mind it at all. But there was something about hearing her name in Severus voice that bothered him for reasons he couldn´t quite explain. The concept of Evelyn in on itself was actually quite pleasant, and he had caught himself thinking about her often as of late. He had read one of her books recently, even. Quite enjoyed it too. Having had a grand total of one interaction with her was enough to make an impression on him, so much that he caught himself wanting to get to know here better. But then there was Severus Snape. His former professor, a man whose authority he never questioned, whose talents he always admired. Making the connection between Snape and Evelyn made him uncomfortabl couldn´t begin to understand why.

“...and?”

“She´s been dying to go to Spain. And the Ministry doesn´t get a say in what I do on my free time, so...”

“You´re not thinking of..” Virgil

“Any other idea?” Snape shrugged

“You can´t do this all by yourself.”

“Why do you think I´m here?”

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Part 9 - "Sweeter than Roses" - Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Love, pleasure and the struggle and sorrow that sometimes come with it all. (Contains depictions of consensual sexual acts)

Thursday, March 18th

“Evelyn, what are you doing up?” Severus called out from the warm, cozy chaos of covers and pillows.

The worst part about being a light sleeper and former spy was how sensitive he was to any change in environment. He had learned to capitalize on his natural inability to fall asleep and stay asleep through the night and weaponized it to the point that he would automatically wake whenever anything out of the ordinary happened, no matter how insignificant. The tiniest sound, the faintest smell, the slightest change in light, literally anything would wake him up. It was very useful when his entire mission in life to make sure hundreds of children and teenagers, and Harry Potter in particular, were alive and reasonably unharmed. But now that he was neither a teacher nor a spy any longer, and thus entitled to a full night of sleep without disturbance, that particular skill was much less useful.

Getting used to sharing a bed with Evelyn had been easy enough, though. Unlike him, she slept like a baby. Of course Evelyn would probably suffocate him with a pillow if he ever mentioned she snored. It wasn’t loud enough to bother him in any case and in a way, it was somewhat endearing, like the sound of a purring cat. Ciarán sleeping with them had proven to be much harder to tolerate. But all and all, Evelyn always slept the sleep of the just, which meant Ciarán was mostly quiet and Severus got to enjoy long, peaceful, undisturbed hours of sleep himself.

Until the clock rang 6:30 and the morning lark he shared his bed with had to fly away and go about her day. Over time, Severus had gotten used to that too. She would get up, trying to do so as quietly as a possible. He would pretend to continue to sleep, while she got ready, and by the time the smell and fresh coffee hit his nose, she’d go back upstairs, kiss him and be on her way. Then he’d fall back asleep enveloped in the faint residue of lavender she left in her wake, until it was his time to get up and eat the breakfast she had laid out for him in the kitchen.

Anything that deviated from that perfectly synchronized morning routine was jarring. He knew something was off the moment he felt the empty space by his side. It wasn’t the time she would wake up normally, and he could feel it. He waited for her to get back to bed, but noticing the delay he glanced over to the clock. It was still 6am, and she had been up for at least twenty minutes. Poking his head out of the cover he saw a glimmer of light coming from the bathroom. The smell of coffee hit his nostrils immediately afterwards.

“I’m sorry, love, did I wake you up?” She answered. Severus turned on the bedside lamp when she emerged at the door.

“It’s too early even for you” he grumbled, blinking his eyes to try and focus on her as she stood by the door against the semi darkness, ready to go, wearing knee length floral dress, a style she had
taken to as Spring approached and high heels, her hair and make up meticulously done.

“I know.” she answered, coming to sit on the bed next to him. “I have a doctor’s appointment before work. It’s a bit of a long way and I want to see if I make it in time to visit Meredith as well.”

“Doctor’s appointment?” he sat up, suddenly awake “Why? What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. Just a routine visit with my gynaecologist.”

“So, you’re not sick or anything?”

“Of course not. It’s just been a while I don’t go to the doctor and I thought it would be wise since I’m sexually active again. I’ve been off the pill for so long that I should probably get everything checked out before I get back on it” she sighed “

“The pill?” he asked him dully before it hit him.

“You’re not fully awake yet, are you?” she laughed softly “I mean, we’ve only been using condoms and sometimes not even that.”

“You don’t think you could be...” he offered, on batted breath

“No, not a chance! I’ve just had my period last week, remember? But we do need to be more careful, so... Not that I miss the side effects, but maybe we can find one that works better for me.”

“Which side effects?” he echoed, genuinely curious. Severus had never really studied the properties of muggle birth control pills. Why would he, a potions master who had access to fail-proof magical methods even bother. He was vaguely aware side effects existed, as with every muggle medication, but he never truly stopped to consider them.

“Don’t get me started.” she smiled “It’s different for every woman. For me it was always the sodding migraines and nausea. Put on a little weight too, not that it bothered me so much;”

“There are other methods, I...” Severus bit his tongue before continuing. Indeed he wasn’t fully awake yet to be having this conversation. It was frustrating, though, that after being a potions master for years, his own lover had to resort to waking up at 5 in the morning for a doctor’s appointment in some muggle public hospital to get inferior methods of birth control, when he could brew something a 100% effective in his own kitchen. Severus had to admit he was a little bit ashamed at how many small, everyday ramifications there were in the fact that she didn’t know he was a wizard. He felt somewhat selfish for it.

“Yeah, and they don’t work. Anyway, I should get going. Lord knows if she’s going to prescribe any exams. Bloodwork at least, with how things are getting out there, with STDs and whatnot. She may ask you for a blood test too, by the way.”

“Sure, of course if she...it’s a she, right?”

“Yes, you dunderhead, it’s a she.”

“What? Don’t look at me like that, it was a perfectly innocent question.”

“Of course it was.”

“Do you want me to go with you? I can just...”

“No, no...go back to sleep.” she gave him a lingering kiss on the lips, running her hand along his
jaw. “I´ll be back by 5”

“About that, I may not be home.”

“Why is that?”

“I need to get some work stuff sorted out at Oldham.”

“I thought it all was sorted out.” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, that was before. If we´re going to Spain next month I need to make sure I won´t be needed.”

“I see. You´re going to London any time soon?”

“Maybe. I don´t know. Now, go, I don´t want you to be late for your appointment.”

...

Cokeworth Academy,
later in the morning

“How´s Meredith?” Angela asked her after Evelyn had settled on the large wooden table in the middle of the teacher´s lounge and gotten her materials out to start going over her notes for the first class. “You went to see her, right?”

“Yes. It wasn´t visiting hour but I did get to see her for a few minutes.”

“You smooth-talked the head-nurse, I bet.”

“Having a nurse for a sister will teach you a few tricks. But yes, Meredith is doing better. She´s still in pain, poor thing, but much less. They even lowered the dosage of her meds.”

“Speaking of hospitals and meds...” Angela approached, lowering her voice just a tiny bit “How about you? How did it go with the doctor?”

“Fine. Got the prescription, but she wants me to do some exams.”

“Which exams?”

“You know, the regular. SDT check, HIV, pregnancy. All the bureaucracy of it.” Evelyn answered distractedly, going over her papers.

“Not a chance you´re up the duff, right?”

“What?”

“Pregnant, silly.”

“No, not at all.”

“Then, why the long face?”

“What long face?”

“Lyn...”

“It´s nothing.”
“Whenever you say “nothing’ I know you mean 'Severus’ .We still have some twenty minutes before the first class.” Angela brought her a cup of tea and pulled a chair to sit across from her. “Tell me, what’s going on?

“Just me being paranoid.”

“It’s about Severus´ weird government job, right? If you want my opinion, I do think it’s a bit...off. But then again, what do I know about how government research agencies work.”

“I´m not going to be the lunatic who thinks everything her boyfriend tells her it´s a lie. But sometimes it does feel like he´s hiding something.”

“How so?”

“Every time he goes to London, I never get a hotel number, it’s always him calling me. And he rarely discusses work at home. Just these vague updates, like ‘we’re in a preliminary fase’ or ‘I won’t be going in for a few weeks because it’s on halt’. Like he’s trying to throw me little bits of information so I won’t ask any more questions. Never a word about his co-workers, or whether he’s happy, frustrated, worried... Nothing.”

“Maybe he can’t. Classified information and all.”

“What is he, a spy!? Angie, he’s working on scientific research. I get it that the actual research is probably classified, but I’m sure there’s no breach of governmental protocol in just telling me if he had a good day at work, or went out for a pint with some colleagues, Giving me the number of the hotel he’s staying at least! I mean is not like he’s working for MI6, for Christ’s sake!”

“Maybe he is. You could be dating the real life 007 and not even know.”

“It’s not funny.”

“Ok, Lyn, let’s try a little exercise here, shall we? What ARE you worried about? Tell me in the simplest, most in my face way you can.”

“Honestly? I have the feeling this job of his is a cover for something else.”

“So you think he has no job at all?”

“No, is not that. He’s been helping with the bills, and he does have money coming from somewhere, more than enough to live comfortably. And I met the man who hired him, he showed me a government ID and everything. So, no...is not as much as I think he’s lying about having a job, as much as I’m afraid he’s lying about the nature of this job, or his hours.”

“To cover up what exactly?”

“Best case scenario...it IS something important and classified and he really can’t tell me...”

“Worst case scenario?”

“Who knows...”

“There’s a whole list of possibilities, darling. That gang he was affiliated with back in the day? Drugs? Alcohol? Another woman?”

“Enough of this, Angela.”
“Look, Evelyn, if you don´t even know what you´re so afraid of, then how do you expect to confront him about it?”

“What if I´m imagining it all?”

“As far as I can tell you are not being paranoid. Severus can be secretive, and he did hide things from you before. Which is a lousy beginning for a relationship if you ask me, but you’re enough of a big girl to figure out what you want to do with your life. You’ve told him time and time again you wanted the truth and nothing but the truth from him. So, if you have any reason to doubt he’s being truthful, then ask him. Or go through his stuff and try to find something if you’re too scared of putting on your big girl pants. You won’t be the first woman to do so.”

“I´ve never in my life have been scared of confronting a man about everything, and that’s certainly not the case now.”

“Then?”

“Honest to God, I have nothing solid to confront him about. Just this unease. I’m not going to be irresponsible enough to pin something on him that I could be imagining.”

“You know what I think? I think you do think you have enough reason to doubt him. But you love him, and he’s been this sort of prince charming who’s always there for you when you need him, and you’re afraid he’s going to turn out like Richard, or Jordaan, or any of the exes who broke your heart. So it’s just easier to ignore the signs.”

Evelyn had no good answer for that accusation. Maybe because there was more than a grain of truth to it. Severus was very much unlike other men she had been with. He did have this aura about him. He was always there whenever she needed him, and it did make her feel a certain kind of way, that a man who was so snappy to nearly every other living soul, treated her with that sort of profound, quiet affection. And yet, no matter how close they were or how unique their bond, there was so much about Severus that was problematic. His past, his addictions, his standoffish personality, his refusal to interact with the world beyond the walls of their house. It was nice enough to spend her days talking to him, being showered exclusive attention, making love for hours on end and never even leaving the bed on weekends. It was easy to lose sight of things. It was easy to forget that she should probably be wary of sharing her bed with a man who apparently had no friends, who went away ’for work’ so much, and somehow barely talked about work at home, who only let her in on his own terms.

It was easy to lose sight of what was reasonable when she loved him so much.

…

Virgil Shaffiq’s flat
Oldham

“Are there any vacant apartments in this building?” Severus asked when Virgil came back from the kitchen with a a bottle of whisky on one hand and two glasses on the other.

“I don’t know, to be honest” he answered, pouring “I can ask around, if you want.”

“I’d appreciate it if you did. Since the ministry is paying your bill, I’ll assume you don’t know how much is the rent, right?”

“I don’t, but I don’t think it’s too expensive. Why? Don’t tell me you and Evelyn are thinking of moving out of Spinner’s End?”
“It would be nice, but I doubt Lyn wants to leave that old house. It was her grandfather’s after all”

“I see” Shafiq let out. Hearing Snape call his girlfriend by her nickname was still jarring to his ears. “What for then? If I may ask, of course.”

“One of Evelyn’s students... His mother is getting a divorce and they need a new place. Something small like this. Lyn promised she’d help them find something.”

Virgil sat on the couch watching the former potions master rest his back against the window frame and look out, distracted. It seemed that everything he did as of late always had “Lyn” as a justification. Shafiq knew, and nobody had told him, that even the cooperation with the ministry had Evelyn for a motivation. Why else would Kingsley have personally assigned Shafiq to be her bodyguard if it wasn’t part of a deal? Snape made no secret of the fact that it aggravated him to work for the ministry, and after his heroic actions in the war, Kingsley would never have denied him if he had declined to ever work as a spy again. Virgil was positive Evelyn Black’s safety was the bargaining chip Kingsley had used to make Snape cooperate.

He was head over heels in love with her.

“For how long do they plan on keeping us waiting?” Severus grumbled, sipping at the whisky Shafiq had poured him and staring outside at the urban skyline of Oldham.

“They’re late by ten minutes” Shafiq laughed, amused “We’re not in school anymore, professor.”

“All the more reason to take appointments seriously. Not that I had any hopes that Potter and Weasley would change with adulthood, but I expected better from Ms. Granger.”

“I’m sure they...” soft knocks on the door interrupted him “There they are.”

... Severus swallowed his drink before Shafiq could get to the door and let the trio in. Hermione walked in first, immediately heading his way.

“We’re sorry we’re late. It’s not as easy to sneak out unnoticed this early.”

“Any reason we’re not meeting at night, like we usually do?” Harry let out in Shafiq’s general direction, as if knowing the question would rouse Snape’s anger.

“Not everything has to be convenient to you, Potter. I had hoped you’d have learned that by now.” Severus spat out. He would never admit Evelyn was the reason he had set up an afternoon meeting. While the night was a better cover for their activities, the “quick trip to London for work” excuse he always used to justify his absence at night was starting to wear thin, and she was starting to get frustrated about going to sleep in an empty bed. She didn’t say anything, but Severus could see she was suspicious. He could tell her over and over again that work was boring and he had nothing interesting to report back home, but he knew at some point she would stop believing that. He didn’t want to have to outright lie. Not saying anything was somewhat more honest. But it was a precarious balance to keep, and it became harder and hard to do so.

Severus had decided. This trip to Spain would be the last mission he´d perform under such circumstances. He would go to Spain with Evelyn, act the part of tourist to get more information, then find some way aparate into the Alcazaba without Evelyn noticing him gone. It had to be quick, at night, when the place would be empty, he’d have to avoid any security or surveillance cameras, find something, anything that could point out to the location of the dagger, and get out. Once he had something solid, he would be able to get Kingsley off his back for long enough to finally sort out his
situation with Evelyn.

He couldn’t go on like this. They couldn’t go on like this.

The barely concealed suspicion in Evelyn´s eyes wounded him deeply, and worst, he couldn’t fault her for it. She was right to doubt his honesty, because wasn’t indeed being honest with her. Minerva was right. It was a bit ridiculous that at his age Severus had no close friends or acquaintances from whom he could seek relationship advice, and had to resort to Minerva, but in a way she had been his only friend for years. And for weeks now she had been insisting that nothing good would come from keeping that farce.

She was absolutely right. It had to end. But Spain first.

Deep down, Severus knew nothing would be the same once he told Evelyn. She might not believe him, think he was certifiable, or worse, she might believe him. It would open old wounds for her, wounds Severus wasn’t entirely sure she could deal with, she’d feel betrayed. And if he really did tell her everything, down to the smallest, nasties detail of all he had done with his life, she just might leave him. But at least they’d have Spain. At least he’d have whatever memories they could create there, they’d have a beach house in some charming coastal town, the sunsets over the Mediterranean sea, all the things she looked forward to share with him...at least they’d have that, before everything changed.

Severus waited for everyone to take their seats, before starting:

“As you know, the Almeria investigation has been put on hold.”

“Which is a nice way of telling us to piss off while they try to save face with the whole Fenrir mess” Weasley let out. Severus found his observation surprisingly accurate.

“The ministry is still in the process of rebuilding. They have to pick their priorities.” Shafiq offered

“I’d say a magical artefact that interests so many fugitive Death Eaters qualifies as a priority” Hermione answered

“Not when Fenrir is out there leaving a trail of muggle bodies behind him.” Shafiq objected

“And it doesn’t look good on the papers, I’m afraid.” Severus continued “But Fenrir is far beyond our reach, so let the Ministry handle him. The dagger is what interests us. That´s why I called you here,“

“You have a plan.” Potter told him, with a smile that distinctively lacked his usual smugness. It seemed like he genuinely was looking forward to hearing what Severus had to say.

“I´m going to Spain myself.”

...

There was silence for a moment. Ron was the first one to break it, offering an obvious, but quite necessary observation.

“The ministry won’t allow that.”

Snape looked at him and laughed quietly. It really struck Harry how very much not like Snape that laugh was. It wasn’t just that he laughed, which in on itself was strange enough, but moreso the fact that it did sound like the normal laughter or a normal man: light, earnest, without a hint of sarcasm to
“I don’t work for them, at least not officially. And what I do with my free time is none of their business. If I want to take a short trip abroad with Evelyn, who’s to stop me?” he told them, amused.

“I don’t quite follow.” said Hermione

“By sheer coincidence, right after the ministry informed us this investigation would be put on hold, Evelyn expressed the desire to go to Spain. She’s been there several times, she loves the country and she misses the sea and a warmer climate. A friend of hers happens to own a beach house close to Almeria. I’m sure the Ministry won’t raise any objections to me visiting the Alcazaba as a tourist.”

“It could be dangerous.” Harry countered, finally starting to understand his plan. “We all know there’s an informant in the ministry. If anybody finds out you’re in Spain, on your own, with a muggle. You’d be vulnerable” for a moment Harry thought of asking if she knew, if Evelyn knew who he was. If she knew what she was walking into.

He didn’t, though. Snape probably wouldn’t take kindly to it.

“I’m aware of that. That’s precisely why I asked you to meet me. Don’t think I’ll be going into this with any convoluted or potentially dangerous plan. I wouldn’t do this with Evelyn nearby. I’m planning to collect information. You know my opinion about the possibility finding the dagger in the Alcazaba. It’s a shot in the dark. But if Miss Granger’s research adds up, then it’s not that much of a stretch that the Alcazaba holds potentially important clues. That’s all I’m planning to do, gather information.”

“Death Eaters don’t know that.” Ron interjected.

Snape drew in a long sigh and put his now empty glass on the coffee table in front of him, as if taking a moment to pick the words before he said them.

“I believe there has been a significant shift in dynamics when it comes to me and...you” he said, his eyes moving from Harry, to Hermione and Ron. “You are adults now, and no longer my students. More than that, I now find myself in the position of having to work with you all: as equals. It’s not something I’m particularly thrilled about, but such is the situation as it is. I suppose is only fair that I trust you.”

“Professors Snape, I assure you I’m more than capable of...” Shafiq started, bothered.

“I know, Shafiq. Believe me, if I had an inkling of a doubt that you are the best man to make sure Evelyn is safe, you wouldn’t be here. That’s not what I’m saying.” he turned back to the trio “We will find the dagger, and we have to do that before the Lestranges and the Rotts. We can’t wait for the ministry to act.”

“Fine. What’s the plan?” Harry finally relented.

“I’ll go to Spain and look for clues in the Alcazaba. I’m a dead man after all. Who better to move around without calling any attention?”

“Evelyn will be with you, though” Shafiq said “She’ll suspect something is amiss.”

“Leave Evelyn and her suspicions to me.” Snape continued “You will continue to do your job as it has been assigned to you: to watch over her. I need you to do that so I can go after the information we need knowing she’s safe.”
“What will I tell the Ministry?”

“Tell them Evelyn and I will be going to Ireland, to spend Easter with her family. You will follow as her bodyguard.”

“That’d be filling a false mission report”

“And we both know as Slytherins we shouldn’t be above creatively filling out paperwork if the situation calls for it.”

“What about us?” Harry insisted.

“The three of you will stay put. I’ll need you to be in the Alcazaba at some point, and I’ll let you know exactly when.”

“We can’t just sit around while you go into this alone” Ron observed.

“You’ll have to. There’s no way to justify your absence while you two are in training, and Ms. Granger is back at school and taking her N.E.W.T.s soon. If there really is a spy in the ministry, any odd activity is ill advised at this moment. You will wait for a command to go. I’ll lay out a plan first.”

The three of them sat in silence, looking at one another, not quite knowing what to say. Snape was right. The Ministry wasn’t giving this matter the importance all of them felt it deserved, but their hands were tied to do anything about it. Snape, the ‘dead man’ as he put it himself, was the only one with autonomy to do that. Even if it meant having a muggle in toe, and going out into this mission without any plan other than some conjectures and a floor plan of the Alcazaba.

“When?” Hermione finally asked.

“April. Easter week.”

…

Severus wasn’t home when she arrived from work. Well, he had told her he wouldn’t be home.

“Nothing to lose your mind about, Evelyn.”

A note written in his tiny, meticulous handwriting was laying on the coffee table, carefully placed under the crystal ashtray she had bought for him, so he could smoke his stupid Dunhills without having to go out in the backyard in the cold.

“I’ll be back soon.
Don’t worry about dinner, I’ll get us something.
That wine you wanted is in the kitchen.
Love, Sev”

Evelyn looked around. The bottle of wine was on the kitchen table with a solitary glass next to it. Probably for her in case she wanted to have a sip before he arrived. Severus never drank more than a glass anyway. As always the kitchen was pristine, much like the living room. She honestly had no idea how Severus could keep everything so clean and organised when she was away without seemingly lifting a finger.

It wasn’t that she thought men were incapable of keeping house, far from it, but there was something
a bit odd about how fast and effortlessly Severus could do it. More than once she had left the kitchen
after cooking dinner to go the bathroom or take care of something else for a moment, only to find the
dirty pots and pans she had left there to wash after the meal pristinely clean and put away in the
cabinets. And after they finished eating, the plates got cleaned with the same promptitude. Loads of
linens and clothes, washed, dry and folded faster than Evelyn herself had ever managed. Even food
and drink spills in rugs would disappear as if by magic, not leaving a single stain behind. Severus
was a near perfect house-husband, except for being a sub-par cook. Not that Evelyn minded; she
loved cooking after all. But everything else? Yes, Severus, somehow managed to do it all without
breaking a sweat. “Magic” he would tell her, with a self-satisfied smirk on his lips.

And sometimes she almost believed him.

In the midst of the meticulous organisation, the jacket carelessly thrown on the couch stood out. For a
moment she thought he might actually be home, but he wasn´t. He must have forgotten it. He must
have been in a hurry to have left his jacket behind. A work meeting, he had told her. In the Oldham
office. Something important.

“Evelyn, stop.” she shook her head. “He just forgot his jacket, there´s nothing else to it. Don´t be
stupid.”

She picked up the jacket, taking a second to, despite herself, bring it to her nose and sniff his scent
off of it, like a lovestruck teenager. She wondered at which point the smell of tobacco had ceased to
disgust and started to arouse her. Or maybe it just had that effect when combined with the oak moss
cologne and the unique fragrance of his skin. His scent. Uniquely his.

Severus was such an inveterate smoker, the scent of cigarettes radiated from him and his clothes. She
wished he´d stop. Smoking was part of the reason her father had passed away before even reaching
67 years of age. She worried about Severus´habit. But at the same time, whenever she took a whiff
of tobacco, of that particular brand of cigarettes, something happened to her that made her knees go
weak. It reminded her of Severus even when he wasn't around. It reminded her of his skin, warm and
sweaty against hers; it tasted of his mouth when he kissed hers, hard till she couldn´t breath and he
lips were swollen. It smelled like her bedroom after he made love to her, when he quietly got out of
the tangle of her arms just as she was beginning to fall asleep and moved close to the window to
smoke, because he knew it bothered her.

The scent soothed her thoughts for a moment. Just a moment, before she snapped out of her reverie
and started to fold it to put it away. Evelyn was so distracted, she almost didn´t notice a piece of
paper falling from the inner pocket.

At first she thought it was a receipt or a bill, but it was too big. Picking it up she saw it parchment
paper, neatly folded as a letter. Severus´ name was written on it. It wasn´t any of the notes she had
ever written him. The handwriting looked feminine, but it definitely wasn´t hers. It was rounded and
perfectly symmetrical, reminiscent that teacher handwriting one expects to find on an exceedingly
well organized secondary school blackboard. It wasn´t Evelyn´s bold, flowery script and definitely
not Severus tiny, spiky style.

Her first instinct was to open it, and so she did. But a jolt ran through her and forced her fingers to
close it again the moment she read the “Dear Severus”.

She couldn´t do this. She had promised herself she wouldn´t do this. But...She turned the piece of
paper around to see if there was a name on the back, not sure what she was hoping to find there.

“Minerva.”
Severus checked the time on the wristwatch Evelyn had insisted on giving him for Valentine’s Day. They hadn’t celebrated the date. It was too close to the anniversary of her father’s passing, and Evelyn has been, understandably, in very bad shape about it. They did exchange gifts the week after. No amount of explaining would convince her that Severus had never worn one of those and would probably never get used to it. She was adamant that he needed a proper watch, if anything for work. Severus didn’t have the heart to deny her, so he wore it. He’d dare say he was almost getting used to it.

6pm. He was earlier than he thought he’d be.

“Lyn, I’m home.” he announced himself as he entered. He went into the kitchen for a moment to put the bags of take out from her favourite restaurant the table. The bottle of wine he had left was open, and the glass next to it had lipstick stains on it. She was home then. He went back into the living room “Lyn?”

A subtle shiver of excitement went up his spine when he saw her come down the stairs wearing the that champagne-rose-colored robe. She always wore that with a matching nightgown, one with a plunging cleavage up front, and an even deeper one behind that left her back almost entirely bare. His favourite.

“Are we celebrating something?” he smiled wolfishly. Evelyn gave him a non enthusiastic smile and walked past him to refill the glass with wine, then made her way back into the living room.

“What’s the matter?”

Without answering, she sat on the couch, sipping on her drink, unreadable as a sphinx. Then he saw it. The piece of paper on the coffee table. With his name on it.

“What’s this?” he asked rhetorically. Where did she get one of Minerva’s letters?

“I don’t know. It fell from the picket of the jacket you forgot.”

“You didn’t read it?”

“No. I’m not in the habit of reading letters not addressed to me. Why? You think I should have?”

“Evelyn. I don’t know what you’re thinking but...”

“Minerva is not a very common name. Then again neither is Severus. Relative of yours?”

She really hadn’t read it? Apparently not. Severus smiled, amused. Could she possibly be thinking that...that he was cheating on her? The idea was entirely too absurd, but what else would any woman think in her situation. He pressed his lips together, trying to keep from laughing. He should just clear up that misunderstanding but...he felt like playing a little before doing that. Maybe it was the thought of Evelyn being jealous of him, him of all men, inflating his ego, but he had to get some fun out of it.

“Former co-worker.”

“I see. You’re still in contact with her.”

“Yes. She’s very dear to me, actually.”

“Is that so?”
“Well, she was one of my very first teachers when I was a child, so of course, she’s very close to my heart.”

“What?” Evelyn let out flatly.

“I get why you would be bothered. Minerva is the only living woman who can compete with you for my affections. If she was some 60 years younger, you might even have some reason to worry.”

Evelyn stared at him for a moment. Severus actually felt terrible, but he was one breath away from bursting into mad laughter. He was beyond relieved to see Evelyn press her lips tightly, trying and just barely succeeding to swallow a chortle herself. That’s when he let himself go. The absurdity of that entire exchange had them both trapped in a fit of nervous laughter peppered with utter disbelief for a good few minutes.

“You know what? Fuck you, Severus.” she blurted, wiping little tears at the corner of her eyes in between gulps of breath “Making a fool out of me like that? How dare you?”

“Did you really think I was cheating on you?” he sat by her side and playfully ran his hand through her hair, messing it up, while still riding the last convulsions of his own tittering.

“What was I supposed to think?” she asked before throwing a cushion at his face. She might be laughing, but Severus was pretty confident she would throw a punch at him if she wasn’t weak from cackling so hard.

“If you had read it, you’d know you were wrong.”

“I would never read another person’s personal correspondence.”

“Of course not, you just passively-aggressively corner them while wearing the most sexually suggestive outfit you own to make sure they’re caught of guard and with no blood-flow going up to their brain. Which is very good strategy for what’s worth.”

“That’s not true.”

“Oh no?”

“This is not the most sexually suggestive outfit I own.”

“Well, I’ll be damned.”

“We’re far from going through my entire lingerie drawer, love.”

“I guess I need to make you mad more often, then.”

“And I owe you an apology...or something like it.”

“What would you apologize for? Thinking I was cheating on you or believing I’d be so stupid as to leave evidence in plain sight if I was? Because I actually take offence to both”

“Suddenly I don’t feel like apologizing anymore.”

“Ok, I’m sorry. I didn’t meant to be smug about it.” he sighed, his voice serious again “I know I’ve given reason for you to be wary.”

“I didn’t say that.”
“You didn’t because you want to give me the benefit of the doubt. But I can tell you’re not comfortable. I haven’t been upfront with you in many ways before. I have no right to be offended if you presume I’m not being honest, when I know I gave you reason to suspect me before.”

“So…”

“You’re right, I don’t tell you everything. But I really can’t tell you anything about work. I just can’t. I know I’m away too frequently, and the hours can be bonkers, but I swear there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“That’s all? Work, and nothing else? No drugs, no alcohol, no women? Nothing illegal?”

“No, no, no and no.” he snickered again “Come on, Evelyn, drugs, alcohol, illegal activities, I can see where you’re coming from there, but women? If anybody should be insecure it would be me, I mean, just look at you. There’s not a day we don’t walk out of the house that I don’t see men tripping over themselves to gawk at you. Where would I find another woman with the same misguided taste in men as you?”

“You’d be surprised.”

“If you say so.”

“Dinner must be getting cold.” she gave him a light slap on the knee and got up to walk to the kitchen “I’ll heat it up. Help me set the table?”

“Lyz, come here.” he tugged at her hand as she passed by, pulling her to his lap. She came to him without any resistance, a bubbly giggle on her lips.

“Yes?”

“Minerva has been asking when she’ll get to meet you.”

“She has…”

“I’ll be meeting your family soon, so I think it’s only fair that that I introduce you to my family. The closest thing to a family I have, that is.”

“And that’s Minerva.” she added, knowingly.

“She’s known me since I was a boy, we’re been friends for decades. Minerva was the only one there when I was in the hospital for…” he made a vague gesture in the direction of the scars on his neck “So yes. I can’t introduce you to my mother, but Minerva is the next best thing. If you want.”

“Of course I do!” her face lit up like that of a child standing at the window of a candy shop. “Next weekend, how does next weekend sound? Saturday? Invite her over for dinner. Or lunch, maybe lunch is better, this way we have more time; You have to tell me what she likes to eat though, I have to..”

“Well, I guess that’s a yes” he said, amused “Next Saturday sounds perfect.”

…

“Where is he?!” Claire demanded one last time, walking back and forth like a lioness in a cage. The clicking of her heels on the floorboards was grating on Ludwig’s last nerve. “You have to tell me!”
“I most certainly don’t have to tell anything.” Ludwig told her coolly, looking at her over his reading glasses “As a matter of fact, if I were you I’d refrain from telling me what I have to do or not.”

“We’re in this together, Ludwig.” she lunged forward, leaning over his work desk and pushing away the papers he was working on.

“Oh, now you remember that?!” he leaned back on his chair giving her an acid smile “Where was that sentiment when you went to Ireland on your own accord to try and get your hands on Snape’s little whore without telling me?”

“Fine, you’re punishing me for that! So be it! But you seem to forget Fenrir is much bigger than that.”

“But that’s precisely the reason I won’t tell you anything. What do you want Fenrir for? Let him lose on that woman? What do you think Snape will do if we give his precious little plaything to a werewolf? Where’s our leverage in that?”

“What do you want him for then?”

“You’ll know when I decide it’s time for you to know.” Ludwig gathered his papers and pointed to the door “Now if you’ll excuse me.”

…

Draco slid into the nearest room when he heard Claire stomping down the hallway. He waited until he heard the sound of the front door slamming on the floor below to come out of his hideaway and follow.

Claire and Ludwig had been at each other’s throats for weeks now.

It all started when she had decided to go to Ireland, after Evelyn. They knew about her, they knew she was with Professor Snape. Draco had reported that immediately. The ministry already had an auror assigned to protect her, but Draco doubted that would stop Claire. Thus far Ludwig had managed to appease her, but there was no knowing how long that would last.

Now this.

Fenrir. They knew where Fenrir was. Draco did believe that Ludwig would be able to keep Fenrir stashed away somewhere where he wouldn’t be a lose canon. It had been weeks since the last report of a muggle child “killed under mysterious circumstances”. That meant Fenrir wasn’t on the prowl. Draco shuddered to imagine exactly how Ludwig was keeping Fenrir docile. But for now, he knew Fenrir was somewhere, under control. Claire was the one they should be worried about. Failing to get the location of Fenrir from her husband, she was increasingly more frustrated.

Draco suspected she did want to use Fenrir to get to Evelyn Black. Which was the wrong strategy to get a living hostage, but Claire wasn’t about to let that get in her way. Sometimes it almost seemed like she wanted Evelyn dead, as if she would get some sort of pleasure out of letting Fenrir tear her apart just to get at Snape.

As her arguments with Ludwig got more frequent, Claire started to spend long hours out. Draco didn’t think much of it at first, but soon he began to wonder where she could be going.

Today he’d find out.
That frantic knocking could only mean one thing. Selwyn went to the door, dragging his feet. Claire needed to learn how to wait, and he wasn´t about to give her the satisfaction of running to her.

“Took you long enough.” she huffed, pushing him out of the way to enter.

“Good evening to you as well.” he smiled “There´s vodka in the kitchen. You look like you need a drink.”

“Vodka?” she spat, taking off her coat and gloves, and throwing them somewhere by the couch. “I bet it´s the muggle stuff too.”

“Let me guess. Ludwig hasn´t caved to your sweet feminine wiles.” he remarked, getting the half empty bottle of vodka and pouring her a glass, which she snagged from his hand in spite of her earlier reservation about the quality.

“Don´t mock me.”

“You know he won´t tell you no matter how much you nag him. Not after what you´ve done in Ireland.”

“Evelyn Black, beautiful, precious, delicate Evelyn Black” she scoffed and rolled her eyes. “I wish I could feed that trollop to a Lethifold.”

“That´s disappointing and nowhere near as gory as I would expect from you. Come on, I know you want to see the bitch bleed.”

“You know me too well.” she smiled, walking up to him, so close he could smell the vodka off her ruby red lips.

“If I didn´t know you so well, I´d say you´re jealous of her.” Selwyn grinned “So much hatred has to have a reason. Don´t say you and Snape were ever...”

A slap across the face cut him mid-sentence.

“Watch your mouth, Selwyn. Don´t ever again suggest I´d fancy a mugglewaller like Severus Snape.”

Selwyn rubbed his cheek, tittering raucously, before grabbing her by the hair and pulling her to him roughly.

“Be careful, darling. I’m not Ludwig. Don´t think you can whip me into submission like you do to him.”

“I know.” she smiled “Why do you think I keep coming back, espèce de salaud?”

Her mouth crashed into his, and her teeth sank into his lips till he could taste the metallic twang of blood. Still holding her by the hair, Selwyn dragged her around the room till he had her where he wanted. He spun her around, bent her over the back of the sofa and pushed the skirt out of the way.

Draco stood on the street in front of the residential hotel Claire had just entered. Wasn´t this the building where Ludwig had hid Selwyn away? Draco was pretty sure it was. She was conspiring with Selwyn behind her husband´s back? It made sense for her to try to find somebody else to help
her with the schemes Ludwig refused to take part on...but Selwyn? The entire reason Ludwig had put him in an apartment away from the house was that he thought Selwyn couldn’t be trusted. Would Claire be stupid enough to disregard that?

Draco made his way into the entrance hall. He could very well apparate into the building, but he didn’t even know in which floor was Selwyn’s apartment, and he couldn’t risk to go around searching in all of them. He’d have to find out.

The hall was empty except for the concierge, sitting behind the front desk, distracted, listening to something on the radio. On the news they were saying something about an Amsterdam Treaty, that was supposed to be ratified by the senate. Draco waited till he noticed his presence.

“Bonsoir, monsieur.” the man said, scrambling to his feet, obviously embarrassed to be caught listening to the news during workhours. “Que puis-je faire pour vous ?”

“Ah, bon, euh” Draco pulled all the French he could remember from his memory. “Je cherche Monsieur Selwyn.”

“Desolé, monsieur, il n´y a aucun M. Selwyn chez nous.”

“Ah..” time to play the part of the dumb British tourist. Draco did his best to look like a poor lost boy and started to stammer “Il est...uh..a tall, et...anglais.”

“I´m sorry, but I´m afraid I can´t help you, sir” the concierge answered, in very proper English, with a thick accent.

“Could you check, s´il vous plaît?” he insisted, purposely mixing French and English to give off more of an air of being utterly lost. The man, probably feeling sorry for him, opened the guestbook and ran his finger down the names of the guests currently staying

“The only English person we have staying with us is Mr. Solomon” the man told him apologetically.

Bingo. Of course Selwyn had given them a fake name. Draco looked down at the page to where the tip of the man´s finger was still resting. Apartment 412.

“I see. Wrong hotel.” he sighed, sadly and pretended to head to the door, before coming back “Could I use the restroom for a minute?”

“Of course, on the hallway to your left.”

Draco walked in the direction he pointed to, and as soon as he was in the hallway and out of sight, apparated to the 4th floor.

…

The corridor was neatly decorated, clean and well lit, but there wasn´t a soul in sight and the utter silence made Draco´s nerves jittery. He moved forward in the most natural way he could muster, hoping that anybody who saw him would just assume he was a guest. Indeed, two maids passed him by and merely gave him a a polite “Bonsoir, monsieur” before going about their business. That calmed him down a bit.

With a slow, leisurely step he checked the numbers on each door to find 412.

The noise reached his ears before he even approached the room. It was faint, muffled by the walls and barely perceptible, but in the dead silence of the corridor there was no mistaking the grunting,
moaning and rhythmic banging sound it for anything else. Draco stood still, feeling much more embarrassed than he should be.

Could it be that he had seen the wrong number? Great, some unsuspecting muggle couple having sex in the privacy of their own room, and there he was, standing right outside their door and listening in like a pervert. Draco spun on his heels as fast as he could but just as he was about to make his way back, he heard it. Selwyn´s voice. Whispering series of obscenities and profanities. Draco stopped dead on his tracks, finally identifying the female voice speaking in French.

“What the..” he cursed under his breath

So this was her deal with Selwyn. No wonder Claire felt she could trust him, when Ludwig so blatantly didn’t. Draco didn´t really know what to feel about this, but he decided he had heard more than enough and went looking for a secluded place from which he could disapparate without alerting any of the hotel staff.

…”

“That tickles” Evelyn squirmed, feeling Severus stubble brush against her neck. He looked at her through the bathroom mirror with those deep dark eyes of his, with that unblinking intensity that made her feel completely bare. She put her toothbrush away and melted into his embrace, running her hands along his forearms as the closed about her waist. He leaned into her, nuzzling her hair and softly sucking at the skin of her neck, still holding her gaze through the reflection.

“I forgot to shave this morning.”She raised a hand and touched his face, lightly scratching the stubble that shaded his jaw.

“You would look handsome with a beard.”

“You think?”

“I do.”

“I suppose it would hide the scars”

“That´s not what I meant, though. You have strong, bold features. A beard would compliment them. Or a goatee, this way I could still see the scars. You´d look very...I don´t know....worldly”

“ ‘Bold features' sounds like a polite way of pointing out I have a big nose.” he laughed

“You do have a big nose” she smiled, running a finger down the bridge of his nose till the tip “And I love it.”

“There are worse fetishes out there.”

Evelyn pulled him into a kiss. Eyes closed, she could only feel his hands grab her hips. She pushed her ass up against his crotch, swaying her hips slowly. He pulled the nightgown up and pushed forward, trapping her between his body and the sink.

“Sev?” she muttered, opening her eyes again to look at the reflection of the two of them on the mirror.

“Yes?”
“You think she’ll like me?”

“Who?” he muttered, not really paying much attention, more preoccupied with pushing her hair out of the way so he could nibble at the back of her neck.

“Minerva. You think she’ll like me?”

Severus stopped and spun her around to face him, a soft smile gracing his lips.

“’Like you’? Lynz, Minerva is already pestering me about having babies with you.”

“That sounds like something a mother would say.”

“Well, that’s Minerva for you. And don’t worry. She already loves you.”

“She doesn’t even know me, how can she love me?”

“She believes you’ve saved me from myself. She’s right, you know?”

His lips pressed against hers, slowly, smoothly, deliberately.

“So..” she asked when his mouth broke away from hers for a moment “you’re planning to shag me up against the sink, or in bed like a proper gentleman?”

“Propriety is overrated.”

…

Friday, March 19th

St. Petersburg, Russia.

Anya was waiting for him in his office, standing by the desk. Dimitri found it odd. That early the morning she would normally be in her own study downstairs, sorting out the correspondence to bring it up to him before he went about his workday. For her to be standing there, it could only mean she had found something so interesting in his correspondence it required immediate reporting.

“News from Selwyn or the Ministry?” he asked, going around her to sit on his chair.

“Both.” she said, laying two envelopes in front of him “Selwyn has confirmed Ludwig is hiding Fenrir Greyback. He could be close to discovering where. And it seems that Virgil Shafiq has filed a travel permission form with the ministry. Severus Snape and Evelyn Black will be travelling abroad, and he’ll be following as security personnel.”

“Where are the love birds going?”

“Officialy, Ireland.”

“You know something I don’t.”

“A few weeks ago, Percy Weasley checked out a book about Ibn Rashid and the building of the Almeria Alcazaba from the Ministry’s library. Hermione Granger consulted several similar ones a few days later, as well as some tomes on Salazar Slytherin. Harry Potter was seen with her in the reading room of the Ministry library on that day.”
“I see..I’ve heard Spain is delightfully romantic in Spring.”
Part 9- "Sweeter than roses" -Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Love, pleasure and the struggle and sorrow that sometimes come with it all.

Saturday, March 20th

“How about this one?”

Severus lifted his eyes from the newspaper and examined her from head to toe for what seemed like the hundredth time. It was a white dress this time, with a red flower print, well-tailored and cinched at the waist. Before this one she had tried on a turquoise chemise with a brown paisley print and a braided belt. And before that it had been an austere grey skirt with a purple blouse. Severus had already forgotten what had come before.

Severus sighed and measured his words before speaking.

“It looks perfect. Just like the one before. And the one before. You never needed my opinion to find the right clothes for any occasion, Lynz. What gives?”

“Well, no other occasion involved meeting somebody so close to you.”

“If I know her, your outfit will be the least of Mineva’s concerns.”

“The turquoise one then.”

She turned on her heels and went back upstairs. Severus folded the newspaper and put it on the coffee table before following.

“Unzip me, please?” she asked, after going through her wardrobe in a frantic rush till she found the turquoise dress she had just put away not ten minutes before.

“You're nervous?” it was a statement more than it was a question.

“Of course I am.” she answered, stepping out of the dress the moment it pooled around her ankles, then bending over to pick it up and fold it. Severus sat on the bed and watched her as she moved about in her underwear, a peach coloured matching set with a hint of lace in the details, and almost hoped Minerva would cancel at the last minute.

“Are the agate earrings too much for this dress?” she asked, holding the dress next to the jewels.

“They’re fine. And you’re nervous for no reason whatsoever.”
“Easy for you to say. These or these?” She asked holding up a pair of shoes in one hand and sandals on the other.

“If I pick one you’ll just go with the other.”

“You’re right, neither. I have some espadrilles that go with this dress. Just you wait till you meet my mother and you’ll see how nerve wrecking it can be.”

“Apples and oranges, love.”

“You said it yourself that Minerva is almost like a mother to you.” she finished getting dressed and sat by the vanity table to give her make-up the finishing touches.

“I did. But meeting Minerva is nothing like meeting my mother would have been, trust me.”

“How so?” she swivelled on her seat to look at him.

“My mother was...hard to please.”

“So what you mean to say is, your mother wouldn’t have liked me?” she smiled.

“You’re right.” he answered flatly. “She wouldn’t”

“Well, that’s nice to know.” the was a little touch of disappointment to her seemingly amused tone.

“Nothing personal, Lynz. My mother was raised in a certain way.”

“What way? If I may ask.”

“The Princes were...traditional. Posh. Fancied themselves aristocratic. When it come to my mother it never quite wore off completely, to be honest.”

“What you’re trying to say is that since she came from a ‘traditional, posh, aristocratic’ family, she probably wouldn’t appreciate her only son bringing home some middle class Irish-catholic country girl.”

“Not one bit. And I realize how silly this sound, considering your family is leagues better off financially than us wretched Snapes ever were. But the truth is that even in Spinner’s End, my mother never stopped being a Prince. It was a matter of pride for her, not money.”

Evelyn had no idea that her being a “middle class, Irish-Catholic country girl” was just the tip of the iceberg of all the reasons Eileen wouldn’t have appreciate their relationship much at all, Severus thought.

Eileen had been educated to be the perfect pure-blood daughter of an old and prestigious pure-blood family. She had been raised to marry some eligible bachelor from one of the many respectable pure-blood families related to the Princes and to birth and raise more perfect pure-blood children. But Eileen had married a muggle nobody, a man with whom she shared a life of poverty and abuse. Sometimes Severus wondered whether she would have been better off if she had married someone her family chose for her. Of course, they’d never know, but he was sure his mother often wondered.

Severus knew that at one time in her life Eileen had no issues with muggles. She married one, after all. He even wondered if she had at any point been vocal against her family’s supremacist values. Maybe she had. Over the years, however, Eileen had come to rightfully resent Tobias and, not quite as rightfully, to extended her resentment to all other muggles by association. Human emotions can be
strange that way. Once it became clear that her marriage would never be a happy one, Eileen started
to plan for a future that excluded Tobias and any other hint of the muggle life she so despised. She
was eager to be a Prince again. She dreamed that Severus would excel at his studies at Hogwarts and
become an important man, maybe a civil servant, a bureaucrat or even a politician. He would make a
good name for himself and marry into an important pure-blood family. Reclaim his rightful place and
inheritance as a proper Prince, and leave the stain of his muggle origins behind. After all, with
enough money and prestige anybody could erase the muggle dirt from their pedigree. All pure-blood
families had done it at some point.

None of that had ever happened,. The Princes had gone bankrupt and there was no inheritance for
Severus to reclaim. Instead of walking a path of dazzling success, as his mother expected, Severus
gave up any professional ambition he might have once had in order to dedicate his life to fulfilling
Dumbledore’s plans. And in the end, Eileen died in poverty without ever amounting to anything
other than the title of Tobias Snape long suffering wife.

Severus could only imagine what Eileen would have thought if he brought Evelyn home to meet her.

Evelyn Black. A muggle with the blood of the Black family running through her veins. A beautiful
muggle in elegant clothes and expensive shoes, with a confident smile on her lips and the sun in her
eyes. A muggle who had the successful career and professional recognition Eileen had once dreamed
for her son. A muggle born to a family that had everything Eileen had always dreamed of: a nice
home, enough money in the bank, and so much love to go around it seemed to exhude even from
the photos on the walls. A happy, picture perfect muggle family that had started exactly in the same
way as Eileen’s own miserable family had. But when Eileen was disowned, she found herself living
in a rundown, hellhole of a town with a violent husband, while Marius Black had found himself a
loving wife and built a happy life with her in a charming little town by the sea.

Evelyn, with her beauty, her professional success, her exuberance was the crown jewel of Marius
Black’s victory where Eileen Prince had failed. Evelyn was the very embodiment of everything
Eileen had ever dreamed of, and for that exact reason her presence would only serve as a reminder of
her own humiliating defeat.

No, Severus thought, his mother wouldn’t like her one bit.

“It makes no sense. She married a mill worker, you’d think she wouldn’t be so...”

“...prejudiced? Stuck up?” Severus helped, noticing she hesitated, carefully choosing her words as to
not to offend him

“I’m sorry, I didn’t meant to...”

“No offence taken, love. You’re right. As I said, my mother was raised a certain way. She could be
difficult and she didn’t always make sense. Being married to my father certainly didn’t help much.
For what’s worth, she would truly appreciate your intelligence.”

“Would she?”

“My mother took pride in coming from a family of scholars.” he laughed to himself all of the sudden
“You know, I can actually imagine her measuring you up and down, scoffing and saying ‘at least she
’s got a brain’ ”

“That’s something.” she laughed softly before getting up “How do I look?”

“Lovely.”
“What time does Minerva arrive again?”

He looked at his watch.

“In some 30 minutes.”

“You should get going, then! Come on, off with you. I still have a rack of lamb in the oven, and the salad and dessert to finish.”

“Salad? Don’t we have some three different sides already? And I thought you had made dessert yesterday?”

“I did, but then I remembered not everybody likes the texture of panna cotta, so I made a chocolate tart as well, but I still have to decorate it.”

“Bloody hell, Evelyn. It’s just Minerva, not the bloody Pope.”

“Can you just go? You’re making me even more nervous.”

…

He found Minerva waiting for him right outside the train station’s main entrance, as he had asked. It was ridiculous to have to plan a meeting like this, but Evelyn was under the impression that Minerva would be taking the train to Cokeworth to visit them, so Severus had to get her car and go “pick her up” from the station to keep the charade.

He found the Hogwarts headmistress standing by the kiosk where they had agreed to meet, distractedly looking at the newspapers and magazines. It was a bit jarring to see her dressed like a muggle and looking at muggle tabloids, but she looked very well at ease in her grey below-the-knee skirt, and a periwinkle cardigan with a string of pearls peaking from under the lace of the white blouse underneath it. Anybody would simply take her for a grandmother enjoying a nice Saturday afternoon out and about town, maybe waiting for the train to go visit her grandchildren somewhere.

Sometimes Severus forgot that much like himself Minerva was also born and raised among muggles.

“Sorry I kept you waiting,” he asked, accidentally startling her.

“Oh, no, not at all.” she turned and smiled “I’m a bit early.”

“Between you and Evelyn I’m starting to feel underdressed for the event.” he offered Minerva his arm.

“You look quite adequate to me. Nice to see you wearing some colour for a change. This jumper is new?”

“Evelyn’s mother made it.”

“Her mother made you a jumper? Look at you, practically married.” she laughed quietly.

“Something like that, I suppose.”

“How’s Evelyn doing?”

“Bursting out of her skin with excitement. You have no idea how anxious to meet you she is. There’s a veritable banquet in the kitchen just for you. Evelyn broke out the best wine and I think she must have changed outfits some twenty times, because nothing in her wardrobe was good enough. You’d
think she’s about to meet the Queen herself.”

“Oh, she’s such a dear.”

They walked to the red Volvo, and Severus opened the door on the passenger’s side for her. Minerva looked at the car, then back at him and gave him a cheeky grin:

“Can I trust you with one of these machines, Severus?”

“Evelyn treats this bloody thing like it’s her first born child. If she can trust me with it, so can you, Minerva.”

“You asked me to meet you at the station, wearing muggle attire and we’re going to Evelyn’s house in a muggle vehicle.” Minerva said when he sat on the driver’s side, before he could even put the key in the ignition. Her smile had gotten a little smaller all of the sudden. “I’ll take a wild guess and say you haven’t told her yet.”

“I will. After Spain.”

“Severus, this has dragged on for long enough.”

“I just need to sort the Almeria situation first.”

“You know what I think about that.”

“It’s going to be fine. Everything is going to be fine. I promise.”

“I’m not the one you need to promise that to.”

…

Evelyn looked around one last time. The house was pristine and the table was set. She was glad she had thought of bringing the porcelain dinner service and matching set of floral tablecloth and napkins her mother had given her years ago. Back when everybody, including herself was under the impression she would marry Charles. It seemed like a century ago, she thought. Looking at herself in mirror above the mantle, Evelyn wondered one last time if this wasn’t too much make-up. “Minerva doesn’t care about these things.” Severus kept reminding her, so she took a deep breath and decided to let go and relax. No pacing about like a caged tiger, Evelyn told herself. No double checking everything. Just relax. It’s not that big of a deal.

Evelyn’s resolve almost faltered when she heard the front door open and turned to see Severus letting their guest in. Her very first impression of Minerva McGonagall was that of standing before somebody who commanded respect and awe simply by entering a room. She had a stern look about her, with her square glasses, and her hair, mostly black but showing some grey streaking, pulled back in a neatly styled bun. The spotless shoes that looked like they’d never as much as seen dirt, the perfectly cut skirt, the immaculate cardigan, the pearls peeking from her collar...everything about her seemed to scream “teacher” in a way she only had seen in her own father, God rest his soul. If only this woman had been wearing a nun’s veil and a crucifix in lieu of the pearls, Evelyn would have immediately been reduced to her own 10 year old self, standing in front of the classroom with her trembling hand outstretched, waiting to get the ruler.

Minerva’s stern facade crumbled almost immediately the moment she laid eyes on Evelyn, however. Her face lit up and she walked over to pull her into a hug even before Severus had finished the proper introductions.
“Finally, my dear, finally I get to meet you.” she beamed, breaking the embrace to hold Evelyn’s cold hands into hers.

Minerva looked at her. She looked at this young woman she had only ever seen in photos before, and felt her heart swell.

Minerva hadn’t had the chance to have children of her own, and it seemed like an eternity since the time she had wanted them. For she had, at one point, wanted to be a mother. Life, however, has the habit of taking our plans and desires and tossing them aside, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse.

Life gives, life takes away.

Minerva once thought she had found the man she would spend the rest of her life with, only to be forced to part with him. Then she found love again, when she no longer expected to. And she was loved, maybe less passionately than she had dreamed as a girl, but certainly more tenderly and diligently than she ever expected. Minerva had once wanted to have children, but time passed and took that away from her, only to give her so many children to look over, more than she could possibly count, each and every one of them as special and dear to her as the children she hadn’t had herself.

Severus had been one of them.

He had been one of the quietest ones. One of those who slip through the cracks despite all the best intentions in the world. And looking back, Minerva freely admitted she had failed him many times. She had failed to reach out, failed to protect him, failed to guide him. He had grown into a man almost entirely on his own. He had grown into a man and returned to Hogwarts. One of the few of her children who did. She had taken solace on it. That he had, despite all the ways in which Hogwarts had failed him, returned. No longer one of her children, but a professor, her colleague, her friend.

And then she failed him again.

She didn’t trust him. There was no way for her to know, Severus had told her with a pained, sad smile, holding her hand into his weak, shaky fingers, as he lay on a bed in St. Mungo’s. Dumbledore’s plans...Nobody was supposed to know. It wasn’t her fault. How could she imagine? It wasn’t her fault, he told her.

But she knew she had failed him again.

Sitting by his bedside as Severus slowly and painfully came back from the brink of death, Minerva swore she wouldn’t fail him again. She wrote him, religiously, visited whenever she could. She witnessed his slow, torturous recovery, she knew all about the nightmares he had at night, and all about all the ways his body and soul ached and hurt, still ragged from wounds that would never completely heal. She worried, she nagged, she fret. She wondered if she would live to see Severus feel something that wasn’t unrelenting remorse and bitterness. She wondered what she could have done differently.

Then this girl came along. Evelyn Black. The first time Minerva heard that name she had entertained the hope of it almost as a daydream. She didn’t truly believe that it would come to this, but she had dared hope for something. Anything. A friend, maybe. A neighbour at least. Someone. Just someone who could be there for Severus, without any of the accusations that everybody else seemed so eager
to lay at his feet. Just someone who would be there for him.

And now, there she was. There was a table set, with fine silverware and porcelain plates, and fragrant food served. Around that table there was a house, no...not a house...a home. She noticed Severus’s picture was there among the pictures of her family on the wall. A photo of the two of them, taken inside what looked like a café. He was sitting in front of her, wearing a jumper her mother had knitted for him, and he sometimes reached for her hand over the table, almost as if unsure as to how much intimacy was too much with a guest in the house. Their house.

Minerva looked at Evelyn and wished she could properly thank her without sounding like a crazy old woman. Because Evelyn had no idea. Evelyn had absolutely no idea. She didn’t know all the toil and strife that had brought them to this day, to this table. She didn’t know what the man by her side had gone through, that man who so in love with her. In love again, so long after the first time.

Evelyn talked, laughed and fussed, trying to make Minerva feel welcome, trying to impress her as any woman would try to impress any mother-in-law. But she had no idea that Minerva already loved her with all her heart, even before she laid eyes on her. Because of that one child, the child who came back a man to Hogwarts, the child Minerva had failed so many times. Because he was happy. Or something close to it. And Evelyn Black didn’t have the slightest clue that she had done that, and that Minerva would forever be in her debt.

“I wish we had got to meet sooner” Evelyn´s commented, as she finished serving Minerva´s plate. Her voice brought the Hogwarts headmistress back from her reverie.

“Me too, my dear, me too. But Severus seemed intent on keeping you all to himself. Not that I blame him. You two have been together for what? Barely two months, I believe?”

“About that, yes.”

“It certainly feels like more. You are all Severus has been talking about for the past six months. I’d say it was love at first sight if I didn’t know him any better.”

“You two realize I’m sitting right here, don’t you?”

“You’re free to join the conversation any time, Severus.” Minerva joked “If I were you I’d do it now. The food smells so delicious I doubt we’ll be talking much.”

…

Cokeworth hospital

James looked as his mother when the doctor left the room, defeated. They should be happy. They should be excited. The hospital would release her on Monday. There would be no permanent damage, no sequelae, nothing. His mother would be free to leave the hospital, and she would be in good enough physical shape to go back to life as usual.

But what was life as usual?

Tancey’s parents had helped him pack their stuff and take everything to a storage unit. Ms. Black had hired a moving truck and paid for a storage unit so they could take the furniture as well. Not all of it. They had no use for all of it. James had been sleeping in Clement’s bedroom, and there was a
guest room ready for his mother when she came over. But they still had nowhere to go. They had looked at every house, every flat, everywhere. They couldn´t afford any.

“Come here” his mother smiled, patting the space next to her on the bed. James walked over and sat next to her, resting his head on the crook of her neck. Rested her hand on his head, caressing his hair. “It´s going to be ok. We´ll find a place, I promise.”

“We can move, maybe...to some other town” he offered.

“We´re not going anywhere. Your school is here. And you have your music classes now, you can´t lose the scholarship. We´ll find a way.”

“Maybe it´s better if we move. He could come back...”

“He´ll get arrested if he does. I promise you. Don´t worry, love. You´ve already worried too much for somebody your age. You should be thinking about school, about your music. I´m the one who needs to worry now, ok?”

...  

“Severus tells me you two will be travelling soon?”

Severus could notice the hint of mischief in that question. A question Minerva knew the answer for. He shifted on his seat.

“Yes, in a week, if we can sort some things out first.” Evelyn answered, refilling Minerva´s wine glass. ’Some things’ of course meant Meredith and James´living situation. Severus was starting to think Evelyn would postpone the trip on account of it. She simply couldn´t focus on anything before finding a place for them. Even today, as she cleaned the house and prepared a lavish meal to receive Minerva, Severus had caught a glimpse of the newspaper on the kitchen counter, open on the ads sections, and several numbers already crossed out.

“Where will you two be going?” Minerva also knew the answer to that question.

“Spain. Andalusia, actually. A friend of mine has a beach house near Almeria that we can borrow for a couple weeks.”

“That´s marvellous. I´ve only been to Spain once.”

“I didn´t know that.” Severus was genuinely curious.

“It was so long ago I´m afraid I barely remember. Such a short trip unfortunately. My husband had to give a lecture in Madrid, and I tagged along. We only stayed a couple days.”

“We´ll be staying in Madrid for about the same.” Evelyn offered

“Are we?”

“Of course we are. I can´t possibly go to Spain and not make a stop at the Prado Museum....For shame Severus! Our first trip together and you think we would skip the Prado of all things.” she laughed, turning back to Minerva. “I don´t know if he told you that, but the first time we went out together, I mean, as friends, well, we went to a Salvador Dali exhibit. We spend the whole talking about Spanish art. When I found out we both loved Goya, that´s when I thought 'well, maybe we do have something in common'. So of course we have to go see the Goya collection at the Prado.”
“I take it that you´ve been to Spain before.”

“You¿re sure you want her to tell you about that, Minerva? We´d be here till Christmas.”

“I have plenty of time.”

“Severus is right, I could sit here and talk about it for hours if you let me. Spain is one my favourite places to visit. I lost track of how many times I´ve been. When I was little, my father had a collection of art books about the Spanish Golden century. Velazquez, El Greco, Murillo, you name it. He even chose my middle name as an homage to St. Teresa od Ávila, mind you. Long story short, by the time I was twelve I was taking Flamenco lessons and dreaming that one day I´d travel to Andalusia where some dashing Spaniard would sweep me off my feet.”

“Suddenly I feel a bit inadequate.” Severus smirked, as the two women shared a hearty laugh.

“Oh, love, I´m pretty confident that the man of my dreams at age twelve would bore me out of my mind if I were to meet him today. You on the other hand...” she trailed off, mindful of having guests, but the smile told him all he needed to know “You could use a bit of a tan, though. We´ll take care of that.”

“I´ll let you know in advance that I don´t plan on sunbathing. You can go by yourself if you want.”

“I don´t think I´ve ever seen Severus out in the sun.” Minerva added, amused “Not even when he was a boy. Whenever we had a sunny day he would immediately find a tree to hide under with his books. If he went outside at all. Remember when some students started that silly rumour about you being a vampire?”

“No?!” Evelyn yelped.

“Well, what can you expect, he´s always in black and avoids the sun like the plague..”

“Well, now I absolutely must take you to the beach, Sev.”

“Not all of us are blessed with your complexion, Evelyn. I quite literally cannot tan, even if I tried. I ´ll just burn.”

“You just need a base tan.”

“There´s no such thing.”

“Do you even own a bathing suit?”

“Not since I was thirteen.”

“You two need to go shopping then.”

“Minerva, please don´t encourage this.”

“She´s right, Severus. You can´t go to Andalusia this time of the year with nothing but pants and black long sleeved turtle-necks. You´ll die of heatstroke!”

“Obviously it is a good idea to have weather-appropriate clothes, but that doesn´t mean...”

“Excellent. How long will you be in town, Minerva? You could come with us. I may need help to drag Mr. Snape here to the shops.”
“As much as I’d love to see that, I’m afraid I need to be on my way back home this very evening.”

“That’s a shame.”

“Maybe when you two come back home from Spain I’ll drop by for another visit.”

Severus could almost hear the implication. When they came back from Spain, Minerva expected him to tell Evelyn everything when they came back. She had given him a wordless look that spoke volumes. She’d drop by after they came back home, after he had finally come clean with Evelyn. She’d come back to see them when there were no more lies between the two, when everything was out in the open. Then Minerva would come back, and they wouldn’t have to pretend they were what they weren’t. Minerva had much more faith in him than he did himself. She obviously believed Evelyn would still be there, with a smile on her lips and a heart full of love for him when he finally told her everything she needed to know. She believed everything would work out for the best, eventually.

Severus wanted to be that sure.

….  

“He can’t shake that horrible habit.” Evelyn sighed, pouring tea for herself and Minerva. Severus was in the backyard, smoking, as he always did after every meal. He had the courtesy to not do it inside the house, but she wished he’d at least try to stop all together.

“He’s been smoking a little less, I noticed.” Minerva told her as they sat on the living room couch, next to each other.

“With how much I nag him about it, I should expect he did.” Evelyn gave her a sly smile

“Old habits are hard to break. And Severus has plenty of them.”

“Tell me, about it.”

The two women smiled at each other and there was silence. The kind of comfortable silent that is only possible between two people who understand each other. Evelyn could tell how much Minerva cared about Severus, and how well she knew him. He was right to talk about her as being “the closest thing to a mother” he had. It did feel like she was, just by the way she knew him, the way she could anticipate his snarky remarks, how she could recite all manner of trivia about his childhood, how she teased him on his quirks as a teacher.

Evelyn was glad she had come. Minerva was obviously very important to Severus. Having Minerva there, in her house, having lunch with them, it gave her confidence. Confidence in their relationship, in the fact that he loved her, and that they’d make it work. Despite everything. Despite...

“Minerva...can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“I probably shouldn’t but...” Evelyn hesitated. She hesitated for long enough that she saw Minerva’s relaxed expression change into concern.

“What is it, dear?” she asked, lightly laying her hand on top of Evelyn’s.

“She was your student as well...right? Lily Evans, I mean.”
“She was.” Minerva smiled knowingly. “Has he told you about her?”

“Some things. Not everything. You’ve known him for much longer than I have. Do you think he still...” she stopped mid-sentence. What was she doing? Lily Evans was dead. Why bring her up now? “Nevermind. It’s nonsense to ask you such a thing. I mean, she’s...”

“It’s different.”

“Pardon?”

“It’s different. What he has with you. Severus and Lily were friends. At some point he believed himself in love with her. But what you two have... Severus never had this with anybody.”

Evelyn paused for a moment, letting her words sink in. Severus walked back inside to put out his cigarette before she could answer.

...

“I’m sorry for making you do all this.” Severus told her quietly as they drove down Spinner’s End and back to the station so she could pretend to get on a train and go back home. To keep up the pantomime. The lies.

It was almost night time. They had lost track of time. It would have been lovely if there wasn’t the haunting feeling that he was playing a role. And forcing Minerva to play a role as well. Severus was happy, regardless. The fact that Minerva and Evelyn not only got to meet, but had taken an immediate liking to each other warmed his heart.

But it was all tainted, somehow.

They had to chose their words, what to say and how to say it, paying attention not to let out any detail that might make Evelyn suspect anything. It hurt him to have to do that, but to drag Minerva into it as well, that was plain mortifying. The fact that she had so readily gone along with the whole thing only made him even more embarrassed of himself. He didn’t want to put her in this position, and knowing she was willing to do it because of their friendship was even worse.

“There’s no reason to apologize. It was such a lovely afternoon. I had almost forgot how it felt like to have a family reunion like that. I can’t wait to do this again.”

“If it happens again.”

“It will.”

“Minerva...”

“She loves you, Severus. Anyone can tell. You’re right to worry about her reaction. It won’t be easy. But she does love you. You need to trust her a little.”

“You don’t know Evelyn. She can’t stand being lied to.”

“You know what I think?”

“What?”

“I think some day soon I will retire from my duties as a headmistress, and when that day comes I’ll find myself a cozy little place to live, with a garden. And then I’ll have you and Evelyn over for tea and the three of us remember this day, while the children you two will have play outside.”
“You know what I think?” he snickered

“What?”

“You really shouldn´t day-drink.”

…

Evelyn was on the phone when he returned.

“That´s wonderful.” he overheard her say with a tone that didn´t really indicate anything was remotely wonderful. He decided to go steal some leftover dessert from the kitchen while she finished the call.

“What´s the matter?” he asked once she was done.

“Meredith will be released from the hospital on Monday.”

“Well, that´s excellent news. You should be happy.”

“I promised I´d find her and James a place. She´s leaving the hospital in two days and she´s got nowhere to go.”

“You´re doing all you can. It´s not your fault this God-forsaken town doesn´t have any half-decent lodging that doesn´t charge an arm and a leg for rent.”

“Still…” she got up from the couch, but Severus pulled her back, so she fell onto his lap.

“Don´t be like this.” he told her, pulling her close “If there one thing I know about you, Ms. Black, is that when you put your mind to something, you do it. And you do it flawlessly. Just look at what you did today. Who else would have had the energy entertain a guest like you just did, with everything you have on your plate? And I´ve seen the pile of assignments you finished grading last night just so you could have the free up time to spend with Minerva. She absolutely adored you, if you must know. And is not like Meredith and James are homeless. They have Constance´s parents helping them out as well. You don´t have to stretch youself so thin trying to fix everything for everybody all the time.”

“But I promised.”

“And you will do it. Just not tonight. Here´s an idea. Why don´t you go upstairs and run a bath for us while I do the dishes? Then we can spend the rest of the evening watching those saccharine BBC dramas you love so much.”

“You always fall asleep to those.”

“I´ll make myself some coffee, then”

…

Sunday, March 21st

“How did you find out I have a phone, Snape?” Dawlish seemed more amused thsm bothered by the surprise call.
“You seem to forget I was a spy for twenty years. Also, Shafiq.”

“If I had known you’d use your leverage over Shafiq to find new ways to bother me, I would have veto’d his choice as your girlfriend’s bodyguard. It’s Sunday morning, for fuck’s sake!”

“As if it isn’t common knowledge that you work on weekends. And that you don’t sleep.”

“What do you want?”

“A favour.”

“You asking me for a favour?”

“I don’t like it any more than you do. But it’s not for me.”

“For Evelyn, then? I’d be more inclined to comply if that’s the case.”

“In a manner. It’s about a student of hers. And his mother.”

“What the devil do I have to do with the mother of a student of your girlfriend? What sort of six degrees of separation game are we playing here?”

“This lad’s is mother is in the hospital because her husband beat her within an inch of her life. The man is a raving maniac.”

“That’s very unfortunate. And I don’t see to see how I can possibly help...unless you’re asking me to put a hit on this man or something to that effect?”

“Do you think I’d ask you of all people, if that was the case?!” Severus laughed

“I’d certainly hope you’re not thinking of handling the matter yourself.”

“Not for lack of trying; but the wanker is unaccounted for.”

“Please tell me this was a joke.”

“As much as I’d love to have him snuffed from existence, I’m well aware of all the pesky legal implications that come with murdering a muggle.”

“What do you want, then?”

“The mother...she’ll be leaving the hospital in a few days, and they still have nowhere to go. Evelyn has been trying to find a decent place they can afford on her salary alone, but no luck this far. And she refuses any financial help Evelyn offers her.”

“And...?”

“I’ve seen the flat the ministry rented for Shafiq. He tells me there are available units for rent in the same building.”

“You’re not suggesting the ministry rents a flat for some random muggle just because your girlfriend happens to have a soft spot for her kid...are you?”

“Of course not. That would be misuse of resources. But I’m sure you can contact the company that owns the building and put in a word for her, maybe get a discount. Don’t think of it as favour to me, but as an act of kindness, if it makes you feel any better. I know you’ve placed aurors undercover
there before Shafiq, so I know the place is safe. It would cost you naught but a phone call.”

There was silence on the other side of the line before Severus could hear Dawlish sniggering quietly.

“I never thought I’d live to see the day Severus Snape would become a philanthropist”

“That’s hardly the case. I just need Evelyn to let go of this whole mess. Her and her Mother Teresa complex. She has convinced herself she needs to save these people from their plight, and she won’t shut up about it it’s driving me right bonkers.”

“Of course it is.” Dawlish was downright laughing now, but Severus couldn’t be bothered to care.

“You seem amused.”

“It is amusing. You, going out of your way to call in favours to help somebody you seem to barely know, all because Evelyn Black and her kind little heart have got a case of the feelings. You’re not trying to get her to let go of this because it annoys you. You’re trying to please her.”

“What if I am?”

“If you ask me it’s quite lovely that she has made a charitable man out of you.”

“Dawlish...do fuck off. Are you helping me or what?”

“Tell Evelyn that a friend of yours found a good deal on a place. She can take this lad’s mother there and take a look at it whenever the poor woman is in good enough health. If they like it, they can sign the contract on the same day.”

…”

“Good morning.” Severus voice was the first thing she heard before she opened her eyes.

Severus never woke up before she did, specially not on a Sunday, and specially not after they’d been up till late the night before. And yet there he was, fully awake and dressed at 7AM, sitting on the bed next to her. The little smile on his face told her that whatever it was that had made him wake up before she did, it had to be something good.

“Did you fall off the bed?”

“I had some business to attend.”

“What kind of business did you have on a Sunday?”

“This”

“What’s this?” Evelyn asked, still half asleep, looking at the piece of paper Severus was holding.

“Hopefully, Meredith and James’ new address.”

“What are you talking about?” she sat up, trying to rub the sleep from her eyes.
“What you heard.” he gave her the piece of paper. There was indeed an address on it.

“Sev, I’m not quite awake yet, so you’ll have to explain this to me.”

“I have a friend who knows somebody in a company that administers a building in Oldham. I asked him to let me know when they had a vacancy. They do.”

“That’s wonderful, love, but I’ve found many vacancies and yet...”

“This one is exactly within Meredith’s budget, I made sure.”

Evelyn looked at the paper again, trying to remember why the address seemed familiar. Then it hit her.

“You made sure? Severus, this is not possible.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve seen some ads in this same neighbourhood, and the average rent there is not within Meredith’s budget...at all.”

Severus went quiet for a moment, as if deciding whether or not to tell her everything.

“They’re willing to accommodate.”

“Sev...Which friend is this?” she pressed.

“He’s not exactly my friend, to be honest. We work together. I just asked him to put in a word.”

“He works for the government, then? In the same agency you’ve been providing services for?” she asked, rhetorically.

“I know what it looks like. It’s not like that.”

“You asked an acquaintance of yours who just happens to work for the government to facilitate things so Meredith and James can have a place to live...Am I correct?”

“You make it seem like I bribed a public employee to meddle with the city’s housing plans. It’s a private company, they can rent to whoever they want. If they’re willing to help, I don’t see why we shouldn’t accept.”

“That’s all it is?”

“No, Evelyn, I paid the Russian mafia to put a gun to the landlord’s head. Merlin’s beard, Lynz!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry...I just I wasn’t expecting that. Yesterday we were talking about this...Why didn’t you tell me that before?”

“I got the news this morning. I did ask around a some days ago, but I didn’t want to set your hopes too high without any confirmation. So there’s the address, when Meredith gets discharged you two can go take a look at the place. It’s a nice area...safe.”

Evelyn looked down at the piece of paper, at the address written in Sev’s tiny, messy handwriting, and she felt the weight of the world lifted off her shoulders. She suddenly found that she didn’t care how Severus had done it, just that he had done it. Somehow he had done it. ’Thank you’ would fall flat. Not really knowing what else to say, she just leaped off the bed, crashing into his arms, almost
falling out of the bed and taking him with her in the process.

“Don’t even start.” he scoffed “You were driving me insane with this. Now it’s sorted. End of story. No need to get all emotional.”

Evelyn kissed him before he could keep on grousing. God forbid Severus Snape let it show that he had a heart underneath all the sarcasm and sneering. Of course he would say he did because of her, because he was tired of listening to her fretting and nagging. Of course he would. He would never admit he did because he wanted to. Because it was the right thing to do, and that’s what a good man does. He does the right thing. She would let him have it this way, if that’s what he wanted. She would pretend she never noticed the hint of sadness under his long silences when he went to the hospital with her to visit Meredith. She would pretend she didn’t notice the way he looked as James, almost as if he was staring into a mirror of the past, unable to reach in and change it. She would pretend she didn’t know. If that’s what he wanted. But she did know, and she did see. And she loved him more for it.

“Are you coming down for breakfast or I have to carry you downstairs?” he asked when she finally broke away.

…

He was having his tea like nothing happened. Like he hadn’t just done what he did. Or better like what he had just done was nothing. Meredith and James had a place to stay. “End of story” Like it was that simple. Like it was nothing. Evelyn would never understand why Severus was so intent on pretending he didn’t have the heart he did. On pretending he didn’t have a heart at all.

Sometimes as he lay sleeping by her side, she ran her fingers along the jagged edges that nasty scarification on his arm. Where one day he had a scar. The entry ritual into a criminal organization he didn’t dare speak of. There was still so much he didn’t dare speak of. Sometimes she didn’t want him to. Because she knew he had gone through so much, she was afraid the mere memory of it would wound him. So much that he somehow convinced himself he wasn’t the man he was. What could have possibly have happened to him to make him see himself as anything other than the man he was? The man she loved. The man who held her till she fell asleep when nightmares assaulted her at night and whose own nightmares only subsided in her arms. The man who was too reserved to show her any affection in public, but showered her in attention the moment they stepped inside the house. The man who was once a haunted little boy, the little boy Minerva had told her about with such love in her voice. The man who remembered that little boy so well, he simply had no choice but to care about James, regardless of how much he droned about not caring.

“I don’t want be in the way of whatever you think you’re doing standing there, but it might be a good idea to eat something.” he finally told her, flatly.

“Sev, I know you don’t want me to be all emotional about it…”

“Then don’t be.” he poured her some tea “Have a seat. I just made toast and there’s still some of that chocolate tart left from yesterday, if you don’t mind having that for breakfast.”

“Not at all.” Evelyn took her seat across from him and cut herself a bigger piece of the tart than it
was wise to eat so early. Maybe it was her sudden gargantuan appetite giving it away, but the little smile Severus cracked for a split second told her she was, as usual, wearing her emotions on her face. There was no way she could just act like this was nothing.

“When does she leave the hospital again?”

“Monday. I’ll go visit her at Tancey’s to break the news.”

“Good.”

“Want to come with? I mean, you’re the one who...”

“No. Besides you shouldn’t be so excited just yet. she still needs to see the place, sign the lease...”

“One of us has to be excited, Mr. Lets-not-get-emotional.”

“I suppose.”

“I guess I can find something else to channel my excitement.”

“That would be nice.”

“Like...Shopping, maybe.”

“Evelyn, I swear...”

.....

Spindles town square shopping centre, Oldham.

“Don’t we have enough, already?” Severus grouched “We’re just visiting Spain, not moving there permanently.”

Evelyn just looked back at him, smiled and kept walking.

That place was like a human-sized anthill. Sure it was spacious, its corridors were wide, lofty, and the stained glass roofs above them let in the daylight rather nicely, but it felt claustrophobic regardless. Maybe it was the sheer amount of people and the droning of their conversation ringing in his ears, or maybe it was the fact that, not matter of how spacious it was, it was still an enclosure of shops piled on top of each other and packed with so many articles on display it was impossible to take all the visual information in.

When he was a boy Severus had wanted to be able to go in there and just buy things. He wasn’t sure of which things he wanted, but he knew it would be nice to just be able to buy them. He had been inside once, with Lily, Petunia and their mother. It was around Christmas time and Lily had nagged Mrs Evans until she agreed to take him along. She even got him something, a Cokeworth F.C. Jersey, if memory served him. At that time Spindles had seemed to him like a place of wonder and joy.

Returning a few years later as a teenager, he found that it had already started to grate on his nerves. Leave it to Evelyn to make him come back. Of course he would never tell her, but the look of joy on her face when he told her about the flat for Meredith and James almost made it worth it to suffer through a shopping spree.

Almost...
“Evelyn, for fuck’s sake, what else do you think we need?” he asked, catching up with her, even though the bags were weighting him down

“Severus, dear, it’s not my fault you need a whole new wardrobe. Most of that is for you.”

“Pray tell how do I need three button shirts, three t-shirts, two pairs of pants, two pairs of shorts, shoes, sandals and a two suits? For two weeks?”

“You needed lightweight shirts and pants, you didn’t own a single pair of shorts, and how exactly did you plan on walking around by the beach the clunky shoes you own? And the one suit you own is older than Hadrian’s Wall.”

“We should be done then.”

“Almost. We both need beachwear.”

“I’ve told you...”

“You can get yourself black full-body wetsuit if you want, but I need a new bikini and I’m getting it.”

The business of getting himself, some appropriate beachwear had been easier than he expected. Severus simply grabbed the first pair of sensible black swimming trunks he spotted that happened to be his size and that was done. Evelyn on the other hand... He could swear she had picked at least ten different bikinis and bathing suits as she pranced about the store, and now she had all of them with her inside the fitting room. And she had been there for some twenty minutes.

“Are you quite done?” he asked, resting against the outer wall of the booth.

“Can you come here a second?”

“What?”

“Just come here for a second.”

“I don’t think I can.”

“There’s nobody else here but me, come on.”

Severus looked around to make sure nobody was around to protest him going into the women’s fitting room and walked over to her booth, poking his head in

“I’m between this one or this ” she said, Severus had to take a moment to process the sight of her standing there wearing two two pieces of turquoise cloth that amounted to a little more than nothing before even registering the question. Only then he realized she was also holding up a stripped red and white bikini, still on the hanger.

Both looked exactly the same to him.

“Either seems fine to me.” he blurted, mad at himself. How many times had he seen Evelyn completely naked by now? So how come a bloody bikini made him stutter like a schoolboy? Looking over his shoulder, sure that one of the girls that worked at the place would materialize right behind him any second.
“The turquoise one fits me better but I’m not sure I like this frill on the side.” Was there a frill on the side, he wondered? There was nowhere near enough fabric to call that a frill. “Oh well, I might just go topless.”

“You might just...what?”

“I knew that would get a reaction from you,” she snickered, obviously pleased with herself.

“Are you done?”

“Yes,” she answered, starting to undo the top with calculated slowness. “Unless you want to get in here and...”

“I’ll wait outside.”

…

Tuesday, March 23rd

“How’s the flat?”

James had barely set foot inside the classroom when Tancey practically jumped on him, bouncing with excitement. Anyone would think she was the one moving to a new place. James couldn’t muster the same enthusiasm when Ms. Black had dropped by with the news. He had assumed it would be just another place they couldn’t afford.

But no, this time around it was different.

“It’s good. My mother signed the lease.”

It had yet to dawn on him that they had a place to live after all. Somewhere safe, without his father around. They had gone to see the place early that morning, before school Tancey had wanted to go with them, but her parents felt like the two of them should go there first, by themselves. To see how they felt. They had signed the lease on the same day.

“So when are you moving in?”

“Monday. But my mother wants to get everything inside over the weekend.” he answered, trying not to smile too wide, and keeping his voice low so none of the other students would hear. The rumours about his father beating his mother were bad enough, he didn’t need anybody snooping around his business anymore than they already did.

“And when can I see it?”

“Whenever you want. I think my mother and yours are out getting kitchen stuff right now.”

“Oh, my God mum is going to help you decorate! By the way, Clement said he’s going to be in town, so he and dad can help getting all the furniture in.”

James smiled at her. It would take him a while to really be happy. To feel like he was allowed to be happy. Happiness took confidence, it demanded a lack of fear that he didn’t have. That would take time. He didn’t know how long, but it would. But he did feel something. Maybe not happiness just yet. It was more like hope. It felt like he could entertain the idea of happiness.

That alone was good.
Severus was waiting for her in the parking lot at the end of classes. She had expected him to do just that. As cavalier as he tried to appear, Evelyn knew deep down inside he wanted to know if everything had gone well, if Meredith and James had liked the flat, if they had signed the lease. It was only natural that he did.

“She loved it. They’ll move in over the weekend.” she said before he even asked anything, throwing her arms about his shoulders to pull him in for a kiss.

“That’s good.” he pulled her closer, resting his back against her car. He rarely lingered into displays of affection when they were outside. Maybe it was just because the parking lot happened to be empty, maybe he was just as happy as she was.

“I did it exactly as you asked. Not a word about you or your friend or any favours. To be honest, I think it’s better like that. Meredith would probably not accept it if she knew. She can be so stubborn.”

“One has to marvel at the irony of Evelyn Teresa Black calling anybody ‘stubborn.’”

“Excuse you?” she yelped, entirely unable to get annoyed at him or to pull away from his embrace.

“What you heard.”

“You’re fecking awful. Remind me why am I going on a romantic vacation with you?” she pulled the flights tickets from her purse for effect.

“When did you get these?”

“After I took Meredith to see the flat.”

“Well, I guess now I have no choice but go.”

“I appreciate the sacrifice. It must be very difficult for you to be coherced into such horrendous activities as going to beach and wearing shorts.”

“Hopefully I’ll live.”

“Eejit.” she shook her head in feigned disapproval, but he just leaned into a kiss, laughing into her lips.

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