Moonlight

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by NoelleZingarella

Summary

A Comedy of Errors about an Unstoppable Force meeting an Immovable Object

Miranda Rose had always enjoyed more than her share of good luck, which served her well in avoiding the consequences of her frequently impulsive behavior. But when her penchant for risk-taking leads her into the middle of a war—and an entanglement with the enigmatic Severus Snape—her luck may not be enough to save her.

Notes

This is a romp about the desire for freedom conflicting with the weight of responsibility.
An Unexpected Encounter

Professor Severus Snape hated summer. He hated the heat. He hated living in his house at Spinner’s End. He hated the idle time. It was not due to lack of imagination of how to fill this idle time that he hated it. He researched and improved potions and spells. He read copiously. And he spent a good deal of time maintaining his balance on the ambivalent knife between Lord Voldemort and Albus Dumbledore.

It was this last project that exacerbated his hatred of the summer holidays. They were long enough for him to become bored and begin to contemplate how precarious his balance was on that knife’s edge. During the school year, he had enough extra work at Hogwarts that he did not have time to think about his double life. He also had plenty of people around on whom to sharpen his wit and relieve his often gloomy temper. He did, of course, hate being around people too. If it were up to him, he would choose solitude over company. Unfortunately, when he was alone it was all too easy to fall into ruminating about his past. Thinking about how he had come to this point in his life was dangerous and interrupted his focus. And he needed to stay focused on the task at hand.

That evening, Severus was striding irritably away from Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, half wondering if he should have stayed for dinner. The smell of Molly Weasley’s cooking had made him realize that he actually was hungry. He hadn’t had a proper meal since the feast at Hogwarts two days earlier. He often forgot to eat during the holidays, yet another reason he hated them. He supposed he should return home and wondered if he had any food in the house. It was late enough that the horrid Tesco on Main Street would be the only option for supplies. He detested the place due to its obnoxious size and overwhelming amount of merchandise. Why muggles required twenty-five choices for mustard he would never understand. With that in mind, he decided that he would rather take the risk of going hungry and wait for Reed and Bell’s on River Lane to open in the morning. Surely he had a tin or two of something in the pantry and, either way, he had his potions to distract him. He was working on an universal anti-venom. Considering the amount of time that he was spending with Nagini, he liked to be prepared.

His mind returned to debating the amount of unicorn horn he should add to the anti-venom as he silently stepped into the next dark alley to Apparate back to Spinner’s End. He glanced around to ensure he was alone and, almost immediately, he realized he was not.

“Just play along,” said a female voice with a distinctly American accent.

In the next instant, the owner of the voice had wrapped her arms around Severus’s neck and was kissing him thoroughly. He inhaled sharply and his hands snapped to her shoulders with the intention of pulling her away from him. However, in the brief time it took for his hands to reach her, part of his mind had registered that her kiss was the perfect balance of tease and promise. If it had been an age since Severus had eaten, it had been an eon since he had been kissed. The less rational part of his brain began to demand control and his hands slid down to explore the exquisite
She released his mouth and trailed her soft lips across his cheek to his ear.

“Kiss my neck,” she ordered throatily and Severus found that he was only too happy to comply. She rewarded him with a delightful sound rather like a purr.

“Good…” she murmured. “Now, when I count to three, you get down and stay there.”

Severus’s rational mind attempted to assert itself. “Who in the name of Merlin…” he hissed, but she cut him off, suddenly focusing her attention entirely on something else.

“One…two….three;” she counted in a tone that left no room for argument.

Severus had been in enough strange situations throughout the course of his life that he knew when it was time to debate and when it was time to obey and question later. His instincts told him that this was one of the latter occasions, so he ducked and the woman neatly vaulted over him. He whirled around as quickly as possible while still crouching, feeling like a complete idiot. His eyes widened slightly as he saw a creature, fangs and claws bared, flying at the wild woman.

*Vampire*, his mind supplied as he reached for his wand. Before he could bring it into play, the woman and the monster met in mid-air. There was a sickening thud, the two landed, and Severus found himself covered from head to foot in ash and blood.

“Ugh!” grunted the woman, scrambling to her feet and pulling her own wand out of her soot and blood covered tunic. “I hate it when that happens! It must have just fed. When they’re dry, you just get covered in the ash. Much more pleasant.”

She sounded cheerful, as though she were discussing gardening rather than monster killing. She conjured a box from thin air and with a flick of her wand began blowing all of the ash into it. The task took long enough for Severus to realize that he was still crouching on the ground like a fool and that he still had not drawn his wand.

*What is wrong with me tonight?* he wondered.
She snapped the box shut and concealed it with another wand flick. “Tergeo,” she said lazily, passing her wand over the street and the walls of the buildings. The vampire blood flew into it like a fountain in reverse. When she finished, she returned her wand to some interior pocket, and offered Severus a grime-covered hand. He took it, a bit stupidly, and rose to his feet.

“Sorry about that sir. I usually work alone, but you were in the right place at the right time. Thanks for being a good sport,” she said politely.

Anger flooded into him, displacing his confusion and he glared at the strange woman. What the hell was she playing at?

“Not at all,” he said caustically. “I can think of no better way to spend the evening than covered in gore.”

She did not seem disturbed by either his glare or his tone.

“Me either,” she quipped back, rummaging in a pocket. Eventually she found what she was looking for and removed what appeared to be a palm-sized diary. “This is a port-key,” she went on, snapping it open. “I think we should head somewhere more….ah…private so that we can deal with this mess.”

“There is no ‘we,’” he snapped. “And you must be completely mad if you think that I am going anywhere with you.”

She smiled at him, but her tone was firm. “I’m afraid I have to insist. You’re covered in vampire ash. I’m sure you’re a very competent wizard, but I have to collect all of the ash and bury it within three days or the vampire will rise again. Then I’d be back to square one and very irritated to boot. It’s not the sort of job I can entrust to a civilian.” She eyed him and asked, “You don’t have a wife or someone at home waiting for you, do you?”

If possible, his glare became even blacker. “No,” he answered tersely.

“Good. That makes things easier.” She looked up at the moon and then back at him. “Listen, I’d love to stand here arguing with you all night, but there’s a No-Maj cop due to come ‘round on his beat in about five minutes and I’d rather not have to obliviate him.”

“You don’t appear to speak English. What are you talking about?”
“A policeman. He’s on his rounds.” She gave Severus an exasperated look. “What if I make a show of good will. Here.” She drew her wand and his hand flew to his pocket.

“Whoa, steady there,” she said, a note of laughter in her voice. “I’m trying to impress upon you that I’m not going to hurt you. At least, not at this particular moment.” She tossed her wand lightly in the air to flip it around and offered it to him, handle first. “Now, will you come? Surely you’re not afraid of little ol’ me.”

Even in the shadows, Severus could see that her eyes were twinkling with mirth. His lips were still tingling from her kiss and he had to admit that his evening had become much more interesting than it had been twenty minutes earlier.

“I can’t imagine being afraid of a mad-woman such as you,” he said silkily, taking her wand and putting it in his pocket.

“You’ll learn,” she bantered, holding out the port-key again. “Shall we?”

“Very well, but I will do the counting this time.”

Her smile returned. “You probably like to be on top, too.”

His eyebrows went up at that. “My, you are vulgar, aren’t you?” he commented dryly.

“Only some of the time,” she replied easily. “The rest of the time I’m a perfect lady. On three?”

He found himself suddenly very curious to know how she believed a lady behaved. His eyes glittered at her and he counted, “One…two…three.”

They touched the port-key together and the world spun away into darkness.
They landed in darkness. With a crack, a fire and a number of candles lit. The woman closed the port-key and watched Severus expectantly, her stance both relaxed and alert. They were standing in the main room of a small log cabin. Severus paced around the wooden table and chairs next to him in order to walk the perimeter of the room. There were two doors on one wall; the first leading to a cozy little bedroom, the second to a large closet filled with potions equipment and ingredients stacked haphazardly on shelves. He shuddered at the mess, but closed the door without a word. A comfortable looking sofa and a long, low table stacked with books and parchment sat in front of the brick fireplace. The mantel was cluttered with photographs of various family groups—none of which moved—and a print of a medieval looking religious painting. The Crucifixion was depicted in the left panel of the painting, while a vivid scene of the Last Judgement, complete with a skeletal angel of death and a multitude of suffering souls condemned to hell was detailed in the right panel. He raised an eyebrow and continued around the room past another door which led to a neat bathroom, a tiny kitchen in much better order than the potions closet had been, and the door out of the place. The final wall held a roll-top desk, and several bookshelves packed with bottles, barware, and books. The only window in the room was also on this wall, and moonlight streamed in through the sheer curtains.

“May I have my wand back now?” The woman asked politely.

Severus gave her a calculating look, but returned her wand.

“Thank you. If you wouldn’t mind standing still for just a moment, I’ll get some of that ash off of you.” Before he could argue, she waved her wand and a gentle breeze started blowing the bits of ash into the same box she had used earlier in the alley. When she was satisfied, she directed the breeze to herself and said, “You’ve already found the bathroom. You can clean yourself off and then there will be some dinner. I don’t know about you,” she looked at him with those twinkling eyes, “but near death experiences always make me starving.”

Severus started to argue, but his stomach rumbled loudly. He settled for giving her an irritated look before complying.
“Set out your shoes and anything from your pockets you want to keep,” she called after him.

“Excuse me?” he snapped, turning to look at her in annoyed askance.

“I’ll have to burn our clothes before I bury them,” she explained quickly. “There’s vampire ash embedded in them. I’ll clean off our shoes, but I’m not going all that trouble for clothes that I can replace.”

She studied him intently for a moment and then flicked her wand. A set of clothing identical to what he was currently wearing—minus the vampire ash and blood—appeared, neatly folded and floating in the air before him. He gave her another irritated look, but she simply smiled and turned away from him to the kitchen. She started waving her wand in short, practiced movements, and pots and pans appeared on the stove. Soon the most welcome smell of onions and meat sautéing wafted through the room. Severus’s stomach resumed growling, and he stalked into the bathroom to do as the woman had ordered.

When he emerged she, still grimy from their earlier encounter, smiled broadly at him. “I’ve set a bite out while dinner finishes. Help yourself to something from the bar if you like, or there are tea things by the stove. I’ll just be a few minutes.”

She glided past him to the bathroom and Severus surveyed the table. There was a rather strong-smelling cheese and a loaf of crusty bread. He passed his wand over them and muttered “Revelio venenum.”

When nothing appeared, he tore into the offering and briefly considered the tea before turning to the bar. It was set in the middle of one of the bookshelves and contained firewhiskey, rye, elf wine, a few unlabeled bottles of neon color, glasses, and a bucket of ice. After repeating the same search for poison, he poured himself a double of firewhiskey and took a long sip.

The other shelves were packed with a variety of books on the magical arts—most of which
Severus did not recognize—and an assortment of literature. His fingers itched to start pulling volumes off of the bookcase, but he restrained himself. This woman was a total stranger and he knew how he would react if some unknown person started pulling books off of his shelves at home.

He wandered over to the fire and sat on the sofa. The uneven stacks of parchment on the coffee table agitated him but, again, he managed to restrain himself from touching them. The tower of books on the table, however, was another story. It looked so unsteady that he set down his drink in order to sort the books by size and replace it in a more stable stack. He read the titles as he did so; *Kim, The Brothers Karamazov, Twice told Tales, My Ántonia,* and *The Poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay*. He only recognized the first two and briefly eyed the book of poetry before retrieving his drink. His eyes then wandered to the fire and he started wondering why, exactly, he had followed this strange woman home.

Severus had never been what one could call lucky with women. His school days had been a living hell, a fair amount of which was self created. The girl he’d loved with his entire being had run off with his primary tormenter and that tended to sour one on romance. Certainly, he had taken advantage of the women who were available and willing at the Death Eater revels in his younger days, and he had never asked questions about where they had come from or why they were so willing. He’d quickly lost a taste for that, however. What was the use of shagging a woman who was too drunk or too enchanted to participate? Especially when the woman he really wanted was out of his reach.

Lily’s face appeared in his mind and he frowned as the familiar mixture of love, pain, and guilt twisted in his chest. Snippets of memories started flashing before his eyes but before he could scourge himself overlong with these whips of the past, his hostess emerged from the bathroom. She flicked her wand and started another fire in a basin standing next to the fireplace into which she sent both of their ruined clothing. Then she sat down on at the other end of the sofa, and smiled warmly at him.

Now that they were clean and not standing in a darkened alleyway, Severus fixed her with a closed, but appraising stare. She was lean, shapely, and dressed in trousers and a dark tunic embroidered with silver flowers. Although she looked relaxed, it was the relaxation of a cat that could leap in any direction at any moment. She had an arm draped across the back of the sofa and was toying with a tassel on one of the pillows with her elegant fingers. Her face was dominated by her intelligent grey eyes and high cheekbones. Her chin was a bit too pointed and her nose a bit too sharp for conventional beauty, but her lips were full and seemed made for smiles and kisses. She had left her hair loose and it fell to the middle of her back in thick waves of silver. She looked young though, younger than he was surely. Her eyes moved to the stack of books on the table and
she raised an eyebrow at him as she noticed his rearranging.

“‘My candle burns at both ends
It will not last the night,
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—
It gives a lovely light!’” she quoted. “Do you like Edna St. Vincent Millay?”

“I am not familiar with her. She sounds a bit foolish.” he answered dryly.

The woman shrugged. “She did win the Pulitzer Prize. But that’s an American No-Maj award, so I suppose you wouldn’t give a fig about it. Would you care for dinner?” She flicked her wand and the delightful smelling contents of the kitchen appeared on the table. Severus, finally overcome with hunger, did not feel the need to answer her. The woman seemed to concur, and neither spoke as they ate their way through multiple helpings of steak, potatoes, bread, and cheese.

When they finally sat back in their chairs, their plates empty, she refilled his glass with firewhiskey and procured one for herself. Then she took out a golden cigarette case with a mosaic of a sphinx on the cover and offered it to him. Severus wrinkled his nose in disgust and she shrugged, removing one for herself and lighting it with a snap of her fingers. With another glance at his disgusted look, she rolled her eyes and waved her hand. This started a gentle breeze that wafted the offending smoke away from him.

She inhaled deeply and blew out a long line of smoke rings. Then she took a large sip of firewhiskey, leaned back in her chair, and closed her eyes looking extremely pleased with herself. When she opened them, she let them slide sideways until they met his cold ones.

“I suppose introductions are in order,” she murmured, still smiling.

“Why bother with such niceties at this point?” he replied sarcastically.

“Only out of deference to your refined manners,” she laughed. “My name is Miranda Rose. I’m
an American."

"Obviously," he drawled, as though that were the worst thing a person could be.

She didn’t seem to notice his sneer. “I’m from Kansas to be more exact.”

“Really. I thought you were all from Texas.”

She laughed, low and throaty. “Why do all you Brits think that?” She took another drag on her cigarette. “I’m a bounty hunter. I’ve been taking cases here for the last few months. Vampires are predictable, but they take a certain amount of luring to get them in the right position for staking.”

He blinked. He wasn’t sure what he had expected her to say, but that wasn’t it.

She seemed to sense and enjoy his confusion. “That one had been lurking about the district all night and he’d gotten away from me three times already. When you stepped into the alley, I had to take the gift.” She blew a few more smoke rings, “You see vampires can always be counted on to attack when they think their prey is, well, amorously occupied.” She met his eyes with hers. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“I see,” was all he would give her. Of course it had been business. He had been a fool to let it affect him.

“I only needed a few moments to get him in position, and then it was just a stake to the heart and gathering ashes.” She took another pull from her firewhiskey. “Tomorrow I’ll take the ash to my clients and they can take it from there.”

“I seem to recall that vampire hunting is illegal in England,” he observed dubiously.
“Oh, I have a permit. That jerk had a rap sheet a mile long too. Drowning kittens, putting babies on spikes, the whole nine yards,” she said seriously, but her eyes were dancing. Severus’s lips twitched into a brief smile and she added, “I do bring in my mark alive when I can, but given the choice between subduing a frenzying man or beast and saving my own skin, I’m going to choose the latter every time.”

“How very sensible of you. And do you often throw yourself at innocent bystanders in the process?” he asked smoothly.

“I use what I’m given,” she replied lightly. She ran her eyes over him and added, “But I’m usually not given such an appealing option.”

Was she flirting with him? Women didn’t flirt with him. They ignored him, or scorned him, or shrank from him. A few, such as Narcissa and Minerva respected him, but no one ever flirted with him.

His eyes gleamed at her and he asked in a gently mocking tone, “Are you really a bounty hunter?”

"Oh yes," she replied. "It's a family business. For generations. I mean, until now we've only hunted regular No-Maj types. Or what are they called here, Muggles? But then I came along and that really opened up our opportunities."

“How so?”

"I mean, I'm the first witch in my family that anyone remembers." Severus raised an eyebrow at her, and she blew some smoke at him. The breeze, thankfully, kept it on her side of the table. "It's true, my family has always been particularly lucky, so there might be something there. But, I'm the first certified, been to school, registered witch. Ilvermorny, class of '83. Mama didn't want me to go to boarding school, but she knew I couldn't learn magic at home. Papa wasn't too happy about my joining the business either, or my brothers, but it was only a matter of time before I wore them
down. Now I take on the supernatural type cases. So, what about you?"

“I am Professor Severus Snape,” he answered in his loftiest tone, “Potions Master at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

Her eyes widened and Severus found that she was gripping his hand, pumping it up and down.

"Are you really? I am delighted to meet you! I loved that piece you wrote about improvements to Coagulum Sanguis in the Potions Journal last year."

Severus felt his lips trying to smile again at this unexpected praise. “You read the Potions Journal?”

"I do, although I must confess that I really only pay attention to poisons, antidotes, and the like. I wasn't a natural at potions but I forced myself to learn at least enough to be useful in the business. Speaking of which," snuffing out her cigarette, she rose and went to a desk, which rolled open as she approached, "I should offer you something for you assistance tonight." She rummaged around in the many drawers until she found a drawstring bag and started pulling galleons out of it.

The alcohol and the food were working their mundane powers on Severus’s temper. The adrenaline rush of the earlier events of the evening had passed and a pleasantly heavy feeling of quiet had replaced it. He studied Miranda in the glow of the candles and knew that he did not want this evening to end with a business transaction. Emboldened by this unaccustomed sensation, he rose and silently stalked to her desk.

She froze as she felt him soundlessly approach her and lay his hand over hers.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit late in the day for business?” he asked quietly in her ear.
She turned until they were nose to nose and replied, “Business always comes before pleasure, my good man.” She gave him a calculating look and added, “But if you’d rather not be paid in something so base as gold, I think I have just the thing for you.”

She slipped past him and out of the room. Severus ran a hand through his hair as his anger flooded back to him. He was acting like an idiot and he had had quite enough of this adventure. He strode towards the door between the kitchen and the desk to salvage whatever dignity he had left.

As his hand reached the knob he was stopped by her voice. "Wait," she said, a bit breathlessly as she returned to the room. She crossed it quickly and stopped in front of him, holding out a lumpy pouch the size of a lady's handbag.

"Take it," she went on in a soft, but urgent voice. "It's from the Snakewood tree at Ilvermorny. Maybe it will help you in your research."

"The Snakewood tree?" Severus had heard of this unique tree and its miraculous healing powers. "But I thought it was forbidden to remove any part of it from the school grounds."

Her impish smile returned. "And maybe that's true. So, don't go blabbing that you have it. And if you get caught, you didn't get it from me."

His anger cooled and he felt his lips yet again wanting to smile.

"Take it, please, for my sake. I couldn't face my father if he thought I had help from someone and hadn't given recompense. We don't like to carry debts."

Severus controlled his smile, but took the bag. Her smile broadened and his eyes glittered at her in the firelight.
“Now, as you already mentioned, it’s a bit late in the day and I don’t want to keep you up past your bedtime,” she said playfully. “But I won’t be busy tomorrow after I tie up the case. There’s a little pub in Shoreditch that serves our kind. The Queen Mab, say ten o’clock?”

She was most definitely flirting with him. He ran his eyes over her slowly and asked, “Are all American women as forward as you?”

“Hard to say,” she answered, her tone turning from playful to sultry. “Are you complaining?”

Severus took her hand and replied, “No. Not at all.”

He raised her hand and bent over it properly, the way Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy had taught him during all those tedious hours of etiquette lessons. Then he turned her hand over and burned the inside of her wrist with his lips. He was pleased to feel her pulse quicken, though she kept her breathing even. They stood for a long moment and then, without warning, he let go and left without another word. He heard the door close behind him and, when he turned for a final glance, he discovered that he could not see the house any longer. He wondered for a moment if his strange evening had been a mirage; but the bag of Snakewood was still in his hand, and the feel of her wrist was still on his lips as he Apparated home.

Chapter End Notes

According to JKR, the Snakewood tree at Ilvermorny grew from Slytherin's wand and has miraculous healing powers.
It was half-past ten when Severus decided to leave The Queen Mab and go home. He had been sitting at the bar since a quarter to the hour, nursing a firewhiskey and feeling like more of an idiot with each passing moment. At least no one knew him here. The pub was a small, smart-looking place done in dark wood and filled with antique furniture. Groups of Art Nouveau maidens winked down from the walls, whispering and giggling to each other. An aging pianist tinkled away in the corner, playing popular wizarding tunes, and the other patrons talked and laughed over the music. No one seemed to take note of him, for which he was grateful.

With a final irritated glance at the clock, he finished his drink, tossed a few coins on the bar, and stalked out into the warm summer night. The Queen Mab was located in an alley off of High Street that had been enchanted to keep Muggles from noticing it. He frowned darkly as he emerged onto High Street proper, berating himself for being fool enough to think that a woman would actually be interested in him. He was so focused on his ruminating, that he walked straight past the cause of it.

“I didn’t think I was that late,” Miranda said lightly as he went by.

Severus halted in front of Shoreditch Church, almost unwilling to believe his luck. He slowly turned to face Miranda, frown still in place. She was wearing a calf-length emerald sheath dress and an amused smile. A bracelet of copper laurel leaves wound its way demurely around the upper part of one of her bare arms. Her hair was mostly loose, although a few braids wove themselves cleverly through the locks to keep it out of her face. She looked like a wood nymph escaped from some bacchanal.

“You aren’t one of those people who’s early to everything, are you?” she teased.

“Punctuality is a virtue,” Severus said in his sternest professor voice.

“And, unfortunately, one that I lack. Along with prudence and humility to name a few. I don’t suppose you could overlook my flaws this time and come to dinner? It’s Tuesday and Mrs. Mab always makes Bubble and Squeak and Eve’s Pudding on Tuesdays.”

He ran his eyes over her and allowed, “Perhaps just this once.” He offered her his arm, which she took, and they headed back to the pub in the alley.
“I am sorry to keep you waiting,” she said a bit later over plates of the day’s special and glasses of bitter house-brewed ale. “It took a bit longer than I expected to tie up the vampire case. There was some arguing over proper burial practices followed by some arguing about proper payment practices. I’m always amazed at how short some people’s memories are when it comes to fees and rates of exchange.”

“I would have thought that the life of a bounty hunter was all excitement and danger,” he observed. "It sounds rather dull to hear you describe it. How disappointing."

“It’s a bit of both, like everything. I imagine most people think that your work is tedious, but I know from personal experience the tedium is punctuated by thrilling moments of danger. I once blew up half of a classroom at Ilvermorny trying to make an Exploding Potion. Fortunately, Professor Wright had eyes in the back of her head and was the fastest Shield Charm caster I’ve ever seen.”

“What on earth do they teach you in that backwater?”

“I was supposed to be making the Draught of Peace, but I was bored.”

“I would have had you expelled if you had been one of my students.”

“I don’t doubt that. I expect you’re a perfect beast of a professor. You probably hang students up by their toes for fun.”

“Only if they deserve it.” He sipped his ale and studied her a moment. “How do American Muggle-borns find Ilvermorny?”

“The wizarding families in America all know about the school, so they send their children at eleven, sometimes regardless of ability. Ilvermorny has a reputation for rewarding grit as much as talent, so anyone with the nerve to try is usually given a chance. Periodically MACUSA sends agents around the country to look for prospective students among the No-Maj population. I was spotted at a baseball game when I was nine.”

“A what?”

“Baseball,” she repeated with a laugh. “I’m sure you have no idea what I’m talking about. It’s the
No-Maj national pastime in America. My whole family is wild for it, but I know it’s an acquired taste if you’re not born into the insanity. I was a pitcher, meaning that my job was to throw a ball at another player who was trying to hit it with a bat. I was supposed to keep the batter from hitting the ball if at all possible. At nine, it’s usually a feat in and of itself simply to throw the ball to the right spot. But I realized that if I held the ball and imagined where I wanted it to go, about half of the time I could make it do what I imagined. And by that, I mean I could make it curve, sink, turn loops, all sorts of things. One Saturday, after a game, a gentleman introduced himself to my parents. We thought he was recruiting for one of the more elite baseball teams, but it turned out he was going to offer me something much more exciting. So here I am. How does it work here?"

“A Magic Quill notes when a witch or wizard is born in the Book of Admittance and an owl arrives with a letter of acceptance sometime during their tenth or eleventh year.”

“How organized. I’m guessing you’re from a wizard family.”

“My mother is a witch,” he said shortly.

She seemed to notice the change in his tone and turned the subject. “I’ve been kicking around an idea for a potion for a while now. I don’t usually have a master of your caliber at my disposal, so I’m going to torture you with it.”

“An inauspicious beginning, but do continue,” he said, glad to discuss something else.

“Well, I tend to get ripped up a bit in my line of work, so I’m always looking for ways to cope with that.”

“I don’t suppose you’ve ever considered a change in profession.”

“I’m afraid I’m addicted to it. Do you know what an epipen is?”

“No.”

“It’s a syringe full of synthetic adrenaline. There was a girl I went to No-Maj school with as a child who was so allergic to a protein in milk that her throat would swell shut if she came into contact with it. She carried one of these epipens around with her all the time in case of accidental exposure. If needed, she could stick herself with the syringe and the synthetic adrenaline would keep her
airways open until she could get further help. Now, I want to know if it’s possible to use a similar delivery system for a suitable potion. It’s not always practical for me to swallow a vial of something when I’m in the middle of a battle. And then there’s the extra time it takes for the potion to work through my stomach into my bloodstream. Imagine if that could be bypassed.”

Severus’s brow furrowed as he considered. “Interesting idea. It would be extremely dangerous to test.”

“That’s probably true. But do you think it would work?”

“Assuming you found the proper potion to use, I don’t see why it wouldn’t.” He was quiet for a while, pondering this.

She lit a cigarette and let him think in silence. When she’d finished smoking, she said, “It’s really a beautiful night. Would you like to talk a walk?”

“It’s a wretchedly hot night,” he replied, “but perhaps the company would be worth the bother.”

She looked pointedly at his long black sleeves and high collar. “I think I’ll choose to take that as a compliment.”

He allowed himself a smile. “I suppose I meant it as such.”

They left the pub and he offered her his arm again. She took it and inhaled deeply as they turned onto a deserted High Street.

“I know that the days in can be oppressive, but this time of night in summer is simply the most delicious time to be alive,” she said.

“I’m sure I have no idea what you are talking about,” he replied, but his tone was teasing.

As they passed Shoreditch Church again, she let go of his arm and twirled around like a nymph dancing in the forest. Infected by her madness, he caught her wrist and spun her to him. Her hands landed on his chest and he kissed her with an eagerness that would have embarrassed him had she not been reciprocating with equal fervor. His arms went around her waist and hers slipped about his
neck. Her fingers were tangled in his hair when they broke apart to gasp for air, but before he could continue his work, he noticed that they were no longer in London. He stepped back from her and his suspicious eyes saw rolling hills and a country lane rather than the city street he had expected.

“Where are we?” he almost growled.

“Oh, I thought it would be nice to be somewhere a bit out of the way,” she answered with an impish grin.

He was not amused. He grabbed her arm over the bracelet and gripped it until the leaves cut into his hand. “Where are we?” he demanded again.

Her jaw set in an annoyed look of her own. “We’re near my cabin. I used a Homing Spell. It’s something we learn in the backwater I’m from. I didn’t use it last night because you have to be a bit relaxed in order for it to work. You must have wanted to come tonight, or I wouldn’t have been able to bring you with me. Now let go of my arm, you’re hurting me.”

He held on for a moment longer before releasing her, then they walked on in silence for a while.

“Are you always that jumpy?” she asked pleasantly, as though enquiring about the weather.

“Usually,” he answered, rather more honestly than he had intended.

The half-moon shone brightly over the downs and Severus realized that the sea was visible beyond them. The breeze off of the water was cooler than it had been in the city and he had to admit that there was something to the idea of being a bit out of the way. As he studied Miranda out of the corner of his eye he found it difficult to say where the moonlight ended and her hair began. He offered her his arm again and she took it, as though the earlier exchange had not happened. Considering her occupation, perhaps she was used to people being what she called ‘jumpy.’

“How many brothers did you say you have?” Severus asked dryly.

“Four. Only three living, though,” she answered. Then she added with a note of mirth, “Don’t worry, they’re all in America. No one will be waiting for you with a shotgun.”
Before long, he saw the cabin from the night before waver into view ahead. Miranda’s arm felt good in his as he led her up the path to her front door. She ascended the first step and turned to face him, eyes level with his and lips inches away.

“Would you like to come in?” she breathed.

“I should think that were obvious,” he answered, a bit breathless himself.

She put her hands on his shoulders and kissed him with those ardent lips. He was starting to lose track of his rational mind when a stabbing pain flew up his left arm. He broke off the kiss with a grunt and knew that the Dark Mark under his sleeve was glowing black and angry. Of course he would be summoned at this particular moment. He had been a fool to think that this evening would possibly go the way he had hoped.

“Are you all right?” Miranda asked, sounding concerned.

“I have to leave,” he said harshly.

She paused, curiosity etched on her face, but she did not ask him where he was going. “Can you come back?” she asked simply.

“No.” He traced her cheek with a long finger, unaware of how the regret he was feeling glittered in his eyes.

“Will I see you again?”

“Probably not.” His lip curled in a wistful smile. “Unlike your family, I’m afraid I am not terribly lucky.”

The pain in his arm throbbed again and he turned, striding away from her.

“I wish you luck all the same,” she said after him. He didn’t wait to hear any more and Apparated to his Master’s call.
Hours later, Severus stumbled into Spinner’s End, even paler than usual and shaking. His mind had been full of moonlight when he had appeared before the Dark Lord and Severus had been unable to keep it as blank as he usually could. The Dark Lord, still wary of Severus’s protestations of loyalty, had invaded Severus’s mind and begun sifting through the fresh memories of a silver-haired woman. Severus had managed to turn the hair red, to focus on Lily instead. Finally the Dark Lord had turned his attention elsewhere, bored with Severus’s obsession. Severus supposed the Cruciatus had been applied to him that night simply for being dull.

He gulped some water and fell into bed, not able to undress. Every nerve was still screaming with pain, but he knew it would dull to an ache by the morning. He slept fitfully and dreamed of a smiling woman whose hair changed from red to silver, and whose eyes flashed green and grey.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A week after the vampire killing, Miranda knew that she could put off her visit to the Ministry of Magic no longer. She approached the innocuous phone box and rode the elevator to the guest entrance, flexing her hands and fidgeting with her clothing as though everything itched her. She had been depressed and restless, particularly since Severus’s disappearance. If she were honest with herself, she knew it was probably for the best. The man’s jumpy behavior made her strongly suspect that he was wrapped up in something less than legal and she barely knew him. It wasn’t her usual practice to fall into bed with complete strangers, but she knew it was most likely to happen when she was coming down from a case. The thrill of the hunt and the kill had to run its course. Sometimes she managed this in more virtuous ways—meditation, exercise, and the like. Sometimes she stayed awake for three or four days and the slept for the same amount of time. Sometimes she smoked and drank the feeling to oblivion. In her younger days, sometimes she would indulge in a one night stand; but they had usually been disappointing. After a few times of pretending that an inept lover was a Casanova, she’d mostly given up the practice. Men’s egos were so fragile and she had no patience for stroking them when they didn’t deserve it. Once, a long time ago, there had been a man worth the trouble and her throat tightened as his face appeared before her eyes.

The doors of the lift snapped open and Miranda shook her head to clear it. Now was really not the time to be thinking about such things. She knew there would be a mountain of paperwork waiting for her. She walked quickly past the fountain, her boots clicking on the marble floors. She was so intent on controlling herself and crossing the atrium, that she didn't notice a tall man dressed in black until she had knocked into him. For a brief, hopeful instant, she thought it might be Severus, back from the dead. But as she looked at the cold grey eyes and saw the long blond hair, she knew this man was not who she had hoped.

"So sorry," she muttered and pushed past him.

"I'm sure," he drawled lazily after her.
Miranda's eyes were crossing as she finished and filed the final form. It seemed to her that the process became more complicated each time she followed it. She supposed it was worth it to some degree. If she had a good track record for following procedure, then the Ministry wouldn't see the need to prod into anything that didn't quite fit. That was her hope in any case.

"Just a moment and I'll have your receipts for you," squeaked a short, balding wizard from behind the desk.

She drummed her fingers impatiently on the counter, studying the wanted posters that decorated the walls. They all seemed to be of the same hollow-eyed wizard, one Sirius Black. The price on his head was high enough that her interest was piqued. Perhaps she'd do a bit of digging in a week or two and think about taking up the case. He'd been at liberty for quite some time, and with a Hippogriff too. That might make for an entertaining chase.

"Thank you. Have a pleasant day," the bureaucrat finally said.

"Same to you," she said, exhausted and thoroughly sick of being indoors.

She had just reached the fountain in the atrium again when she noticed the same tall, blond wizard from earlier. He was striding towards her purposefully, followed by an older, white-haired man in a purple suit. The older man looked vaguely familiar and as they approached she realized the older man was Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic. They were on a collision course with her and she stopped, standing out of their way with a slight frown. To her surprise, both men did indeed appear to want to talk to her.
"Good afternoon, Minerva Rose, isn't it?" Cornelius Fudge asked, sticking out his stubby hand to her. His tone was jovial and smooth like the politician that he was.

She smiled blandly at him and corrected, “It’s Miranda Rose, actually. Although Miss Rose will do.”

He went on as though he were only half listening. “I am Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic. I don’t think we’ve had the pleasure, but your work has come to my attention. Excellent job on the ghoul hunting a few years back.”

“I think it was a graphorn that time…”

“Quite so, quite so. What brings you to London just now?”

She extricated her hand, but kept her tone polite. "I just finished the paperwork on the Islington Vampire case."

"Excellent, excellent. Allow me to introduce my companion, Mr. Lucius Malfoy."

Lucius inclined his head to her, but did not try to take her hand.
"Charmed," he said.

She returned the nod. "Is there something I can do for your gentlemen?"

“Indeed there is,” Cornelius said. "I'd like to talk to you about something that I hope could be your next case.”

"Mr. Fudge, I'm terribly sorry, but I have a bit of a waiting list at present and it will be at least a week before I'm ready to think about another case anyway.”

"Come now, Miss Rose," Lucius said coolly, "I'm sure we can make it worth your while."

Miranda could tell by looking at Mr. Malfoy that he was a man used to getting his way. He was sneering down his nose at her like a prince would sneer at a serf. The back of her neck prickled in warning and she knew he was not a man to be trifled with.

"Well, in that case, throw this into the fire in a week to remind me and I'll come discuss it with you then. I'm afraid I'd be utterly useless to you now, I got a bit banged up in the last fray you see.” She pulled a silver card printed with M. Rose out of her pocket and handed it to Cornelius with a charming smile.

"Of course, perfectly understandable," Cornelius agreed.
Miranda started to leave but Lucius blocked her path.

"One week, Miss Rose." His voice sounded like a threat.

She held his gaze fearlessly, but calmly and replied, "Good day Mr. Fudge, Mr. Malfoy."

Lucius blocked her path for a moment longer, and then let her pass. She kept her pace unhurried although she wanted to run. It wouldn't do to show any discomfort in front of a man like Lucius Malfoy. He would pounce if he scented fear. She was very glad when she finally reached the street.

Later that evening Miranda found herself loitering up and down Grimmauld Place. She’d returned to the alley where she’d met Severus several times since his disappearance. She knew she was being ridiculous—for all she knew the man had been dead since the previous week. She told herself that she was doing this mostly to keep herself from getting into worse trouble. Surely wasting her time in a fruitless search was better than sitting alone in her cabin in a drunken stupor, or picking up some fool at Prospero’s night club. At least this way she was getting some exercise. But she knew that part of her hoped that she might succeed in tracking her quarry, ill-advised as that might be. Her instincts were usually spot on when it came to judging people, which served her well in her profession. Severus was obviously an ass, but he also seemed to possess the intelligence necessary to observe what would give a lady pleasure and the self control to give her the time to enjoy it. As impulsive as she knew she was being, she ached to continue what they had started.
She leaned against the wall of one of the dilapidated houses and lit a cigarette.

"Nox" she whispered, and the light at the butt of the cigarette went out, even as she continued to smoke it. The shadows of the building covered the smoke as she watched and listened. She told herself that this would be the last night she'd waste this much time.

As the minutes ticked by, she gradually became aware of a spot between two of the houses a bit up the street from where she was standing. She settled deeper into the shadows, but noticed that there seemed to be quite a few people who wandered up to the spot, and then disappeared. The silence was eerie, and she could have sworn that it was punctuated by the angry shrieks of a woman. Her eyes narrowed and she slowly made her way to a better viewing point across the street. Just as she reached a new length of shadows, her patience was rewarded.

She heard a crack that sounded like a wizard Apparating from somewhere close. A few seconds later, Severus swept into view, cape billowing like giant bat wings. Her eyes narrowed as he approached that same spot between the houses, but she could not see exactly when he disappeared. She crossed casually to the spot. She could almost smell the magic, but she doubted she would be able to break whatever spell was in place. Instead, she followed Severus’s trail to the alley from which he had emerged. Grinning, she realized that it was the same alley where they had had their first meeting. Moving like a cat, she climbed up to a fire-escape and lit another cigarette. The magic spot up the street somehow slipped from her mind and she settled in to watch and wait.

 Severus was in a very black mood as he swept out of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. He'd taken his anger out on all of the members of the Order and felt a bit gratified that he had put a few of them out of temper as well. Since his interrupted tryst of the previous week, he felt rather at the end of his rope. Tasting the promise in Miranda’s lips had lit a fire in his blood that had been long dormant. He was like a starving man given a crumb of bread--his hunger was harder to bear after
the tease of the morsel. He tried to tell himself he was probably fortunate that they had been
interrupted. She had seemed relatively honest, but how could he really be sure that she wasn’t
playing some other game? As much as he hated teaching, he really would be glad when he had his
duties at Hogwarts again to distract him.

He turned into his usual alley to Apparate back to Spinner's End and felt, rather than heard,
someone drop to the ground behind him. He whirled around, wand drawn, and found that he held it
pointed at Miranda Rose's lovely neck.

"Oh, that's right," she said with a note of laughter in her quiet voice, "you're jumpy."

"You are fortunate I didn't kill you," he snapped, wand still at her neck. What the hell was she
doing here?

"You're right," she said, more seriously than before. "Stupid of me. It must be the moonlight. Do
you think you could point that thing somewhere else?"

He lowered his wand very slowly and demanded, "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you. Hey!" she snapped, temper rising as his wand returned to her throat. "What do
you think you're doing?"

"Who are you working for?" His voice was soft, smooth, and dangerous. There was no possible
way she was waiting for him for any good purpose. Wasn't there a saying somewhere about not
"I told you before. I work for my father. His name is Conor Rose. You can check my story at the Ministry of Magic if you don't believe me. Now put that wand away before I get angry."

"I don't think so. Why are you waiting for me?"

She raised her chin in defiance and said irritably, "Well, if you must know, I was hoping that you weren't dead."

"Obviously I am not. Why should you care?" He was sneering at her and her face had turned so red that he could tell that she was blushing, even in the shadows. He relaxed his wand a fraction of an inch and arched an eyebrow as he waited for her answer. Blushes and brazenness, what an interesting combination.

Despite her blush, she met his eyes boldly. "I thought that we could pick up where we left off before we were so rudely interrupted."

"Did you?" He dragged out those words as though he were tasting them.

Very slowly, she brought up a hand and placed it over his. Just as slowly, she stepped closer to him, pinning his wand, and their hands, between them. She turned her face up to his, and murmured, "I suppose I'm being a bit forward, but I hoped you wouldn't mind."
He raised his free hand and traced her lower lip with his thumb. Her lips parted slightly and this was rather more temptation than he cared to resist. He leaned in to taste those lips and they were warm, yielding, and eager. He slid his fingers over her cheek and buried them in her thick hair, knocking pins asunder as he did.

A few moments later, he became aware that the moonlight was much brighter than it had been. He opened his eyes and saw that they were standing on that same country lane as they had been the previous week.

"Homing Spell," she reminded him quietly.

"I suppose I wanted to come," he replied, smirking. It was a much more pleasant way to travel than Apparation or port-keys. The cabin wavered into view and he finally pocketed his wand.

She started up the path and he followed silently behind her. When she reached the door, she turned, a little smile on her face. "You don’t have any appointments tonight, do you?" she asked.

“Nothing planned,” he replied, suddenly hyperaware of the skin on his arm around the Dark Mark. It felt raw for a moment, but the Mark remained quiet for once.

“Good.” She opened the door and entered the cabin, removing pins from her hair as she went. He closed the door after them and stood near it, eyes glittering as he watched her. When she reached
one of the shelves, she turned and held his gaze as she released her hair from the pins, one lock at a time. She put the pins on the shelf and ran her fingers though the waves of silver, smiling at him invitingly.

He crossed the room to her, took a lock of her hair, and wrapped it around his hand.

It wasn’t red hair, but it would do.

He brushed her lips with his, and then trailed them over her jaw to her throat. She let out a delicious little sound somewhere between a sigh and a moan.

She wasn’t Lily, but she would do.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and her body moulded to his.
This wasn’t love, but it would do. It would do very nicely, indeed.

Chapter End Notes

One of my favorite things about this story is the opportunity to imagine what sort of a magic and American would do. The Homing Spell is one that is particularly useful throughout the tale. This is a spell that is put on one specific place by one specific person. It enables the person to return to the place by picturing it in her mind, relaxing, and “stepping sideways,” sort of the way one enters the Land of Oz (but not quite). The spell caster can bring another person with her, assuming that person wishes to go, as relaxation is key to the spell working. The spell also keeps the place hidden from anyone the caster doesn’t wish to see it. There is a limit to how far away from the place a person can be and have the spell still work, and you can’t perform the spell from anywhere that is warded to prevent Apparation. I’ll write more about my American spells as they come up.
The Morning After

Severus felt the late morning sun on his face as he gradually swam back to consciousness. The delectable memories of the night before swirled through his lucid dreaming and he dreaded to open his eyes. He knew that if he did he would be back in his wretched house at Spinner’s End, looking up at the pesky water mark that he could never quite remove from the ceiling of his bedroom. He kept his eyes stubbornly closed, trying to continue his dreaming, but he was awake enough now that that was impossible. He ran his hands experimentally over the bed and, while he was alone in it, he realized that the sheets were smoother and finer than his sheets at home. The bed was softer and smelled faintly of lavender. He opened his eyes and a smile spread over his lips as he saw Miranda’s airy bedroom rather than his own gloomy chamber.

He heard a pleasant clatter of pans and dishes through the closed door and smelled a mixture of tea, coffee, and sausage. He stretched languidly and got up to dress. He took his time doing up the buttons on the front of his frock coat and idly studied the room as he did. The bed stood under the window that was letting in the sunlight. There was a bookshelf on one wall filled with novels and poetry and a handsomely carved cherrywood armoire standing on another. The final wall was covered with children’s drawings inscribed with the names of the various artists and dedicated to ‘Auntie.’ A framed piece of needlework with the inscription ‘From Mama’ hung in the middle of this gallery. The embroidery was a nicely executed border of roses surrounding a piece of Latin prose: ‘Nisi Dominus ædificaverit donum, in vanum laboraverunt qui ædificant eam.’ He scoffed at the sentiment and turned to the mirror hanging on the back of the door. His hair was a bit tangled from the previous evening’s exertions and he did what he could to neaten it. He turned and considered the bed for a moment. The twisted sheets both pleased him with their implications and irritated him with their disorder. He was toying with the idea of returning to the bed rather promptly following breakfast, but he decided it would be more entertaining to scramble the linens again rather than to leave it thus. He flicked his wand and the bed made itself up neat as a pin. Satisfied, he emerged from the bedroom to find his partner in crime.

Miranda was standing by the stove, flipping omelettes with the efficiency of a short-order cook. She wore a long blue sheath dress and her feet were bare. Her hair flowed over her back, restrained by a copper colored scarf as she cooked. He approached her and pulled aside the curtain of her hair to drop his lips onto the back of her neck.

She made a sound strikingly similar to a purr but said, “I’m afraid I’ll have to eat if you’re hoping for another round. For some reason, I forgot to have dinner last night. I can’t imagine why.” She smiled impishly over her shoulder at him.
“I suppose I can overlook such weakness this once,” he replied smoothly, returning her smile.

She handed him a plate of omelette and sausage and they convened at the table which was already set with toast, butter, marmalade, tea, coffee, and The Daily Prophet. They ate and read in companionable silence and, if she spent much of the meal running her bare foot up his leg, he certainly wasn’t one to complain about it. When they had demolished the food and were loitering over coffee and tea, a bell over her desk started ringing loudly.

She glanced up from her half of the paper and gave the bell an annoyed look. “I’m going to have to answer that,” she said. “It’s my father trying to check in and he’ll think I’m dead if I don’t talk to him. It’s been a few days since I gave report and I don’t want him to send someone looking for me.” She smiled at him and went on, “Would you mind terribly pretending you don’t exist for the next few minutes?”

“Are you saying that you’re ashamed to have your father know that I’ve stolen your virtue?” he teased.

She laughed and kissed his cheek lightly. “I knew you’d understand.”

She went to the desk and took a small mirror out of one of the drawers, then she headed into the potions closet. He returned to the paper but, as the closed door did not completely muffle the sound, he could not help overhearing her conversation.

“How are the Royals doing, Papa?” she was saying. “I can’t get a paper or anything on the radio
There was a whistle of disapproval and a deep male voice replied, “Not good, pixie, not good. The Yanks pummeled them last night. They’ve been on a losing streak for a while now. They don’t get their act together soon, they can forget about the playoffs.”

“Hmmm, maybe I’m glad I can’t witness it then.”

“I sure wish I couldn’t. Did you finish the paperwork on the Islington case?”

“Yes Papa, and I swear they make it more complicated every time I do. I don’t even want to think about what I’m going to have to go through after the next case.”

“Better you than me. It looks like you’ve got a lot of work rolling in over there. Do you want to stay?”

“I think so. I have enough to keep me busy through the first quarter of next year at least. Honestly, I wonder if there’s something stirring things up. That vampire was harder to catch than he should have been and I usually don’t have a waiting list this long. The Minister of Magic himself approached me yesterday and wants to meet about something.”

“That’s my girl, hitting the big time. You behave when you meet with him, do you hear me? Don’t be telling your dirty jokes just to act cute.”
“Papa, I do know how to behave when I want to. But where do you think I got my material in the first place?”

“Don’t go blaming me for things that are my fault. Watch your back. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“I won’t, and I will. Love to Mama and the rest.”

She came back into the room and replaced the mirror in its drawer, but she was frowning a bit, as though she were pondering something. She returned to her seat at the table and asked, “You don’t happen to know of anything that might be stirring up a load of Dark Magic over here, do you?”

It was an innocent question, and if she had asked it of another wizard, he would have shrugged and shook his head. However, Severus was unfortunately very aware of who was behind the rise in Dark Magic in England at the moment.

He kept his eyes on the paper and his expression blank. “No,” he replied shortly.

“It is strange, though. Usually there are only a few cases in a given year in England. And the darker creatures that I’ve been rounding up are stronger than I would usually expect. There must be something egging them on.” She sipped her coffee and went on, half to herself, “I’ll have to do some digging. Who’s that Headmaster at your school? Albus Dumbledore, isn’t it? Do you think he’d have time to meet with me? I imagine if anyone had his thumb on the pulse of magic in
“Albus Dumbledore is a very busy man.” He stared unseeing at the paper, his mind starting to go down an unpleasant path.

“Hmmmm. I seem to remember some incident in the fourteenth century where St. Patrick’s Purgatory at Lough Derg opened a bit wider than usual and all sorts of things got out. I wonder…” Her voice trailed off and she wandered over to the bookshelf, scanning the titles. Eventually she picked out an enormous leather bound tome and scooted some dishes over so that she could open it on the table. She started leafing through the aging pages, completely unaware that Severus’s expression was darkening.

This had been a mistake. He was a thirty-five year old wizard, and one would think that he could enjoy the favors of a willing female without any terrible consequences. However, he was Severus Snape and nothing good ever happened to him. He was embroiled in a plot to bring down the Dark Lord. He spent his days teaching the ungrateful child of his murdered love and her wretched husband, and his nights playing the role of a faithful Death Eater. One false move, one unguarded thought could bring instant, painful death to himself and any number of other people. And really, how much did he know about Miranda Rose anyway? Who was to say that she wasn’t some sort of trap set for him? Merlin, he hated his life.

He sighed and decided it was best to end it quickly. He hoped that she wouldn’t cry or do whatever embarrassing thing women did when their lovers jilted them. He set down the paper and said in a cool voice, “I think it is time I were leaving.”

She closed the book and looked up at him with a smile. “You don’t have to leave. I can do this later.”
He stood slowly and summoned a bland, cold expression. “I don’t think you understand, Miss Rose. This was a mistake that will not be repeated.”

She arched an elegant eyebrow at him. “Oh?”

“You’ve been a charming diversion, but I’m afraid I simply do not have time for any more such foolishness.”

She leaned back in her chair and crossed her bare feet on the table. The skirt of her dress slid up her legs, exposing them to the thigh. She took out a cigarette and lit it, her face a mask of amusement.

She blew out a long line of smoke and murmured, “Goodness me. The dreaded morning after attack of scruples. I’m disappointed in you, professor. I had thought your moral code sufficiently flexible not to be bothered by them. What a shame.”

Her mocking tone angered him in a way tears would not have done. He could not help trying to take her down a peg and said silkily, “Perhaps my moral code is not the problem. Perhaps I was simply dissatisfied with your performance.”

She smiled nastily at him. “Please. I don’t think I’ve ever witnessed such a pathetic display of eagerness and gratitude as you provided last night. How long had it been? A year? Five years? Ten?”

“What a disgustingly vulgar trollop you are,” he sneered.
“Sticks and stones, professor, sticks and stones.” She swung her pretty legs off of the table and sashayed to the door. When she reached it, she opened it gracefully. “This is a door. Feel free to use it.”

“I sincerely hope that your next mark separates your obscene head from your indecent body,” he snapped as he stalked out of the cabin.

“From your mouth to God’s ears,” she returned. “Have a nice life.”

She slammed the door after him and angrily started cleaning the breakfast mess. She scrubbed the dishes without magic in order to better vent her anger on them. What the fuck was wrong with him? He’d seemed perfectly fine and even rather amorous this morning. Then he’d suddenly turned cold and nasty for no apparent reason. And really, even if he hadn’t been completely thrilled with their encounter, there was no call to be an ass about it. Hadn’t he ever heard of a one night stand?

She finished the dishes and stalked into her bedroom to air the bed clothes. It was her habit to do this most days, and she definitely wanted to do so today. She had no desire to sleep on sheets that smelled like that cold fish of an Englishman. She jerked open the bedroom door and stopped short.

He’d made the bed.

Men never thought to make the bed.
She sighed and opened the window, letting in the breeze off the Channel. She flicked her wand at the bed and the linens pulled themselves backwards and hung on an unseen clothesline, fluttering gently in the wind. She sat down and stared out the window without really noticing anything.

It had been a lovely night. She thought she had hit rather close to the mark with the gist of her insult this morning, but there had been nothing pathetic about him. They had both been a bit awkward and sloppy at first, but they had soon managed to remember how everything worked. Indeed, he had seemed so intoxicated by the heady drug of rendering one’s partner helpless with pleasure that she had half wondered if he had ever experienced it before. She felt a bit sorry now for being quite so cutting with her tongue, but it didn’t matter. She wouldn’t be seeing him again and that was that.

She supposed she really should get to work. There was research to be done and potions to brew and bullets to make. She got up, intending to be virtuous and start with the potions—her least favorite—but a particularly delicious waft of sea air blew in through her window. She changed her mind and went to pack her leather messenger bag instead. Bathing suit, towel, sun hat, novel. She braided her hair, put on her sandals, and headed down the the village. A little sun bathing and a swim in the Channel would be just the thing. She could be virtuous tomorrow.
Werewolves in Cokeworth

Chapter Summary

N. B. No Lupins were harmed during the writing of this chapter. :-) 

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Some nights Severus wanted nothing more than to burn down his house at Spinner’s End. He never did, of course, as he strongly suspected that doing so would cause the sort of problems with the Ministry of Magic that he’d rather avoid. He’d lived alone in this house since the summer he’d graduated from Hogwarts, yet it was still haunted by the memories of his wretched childhood. He could have sold the place, but once he’d started teaching it hadn’t seemed worth the bother. After all, he only had to spend the summer months here. He was very good at tolerating uncomfortable situations--especially if they were familiar ones.

Tonight, he sat in his library attempting to focus on the book in front of him. He’d spent the last month trying to convince himself that it was best to keep his indiscretion with Miss Rose to a one time event. As enjoyable as her company was, there was simply too much risk involved to begin even a casual relationship at this time. This had been much easier to believe directly following their parting that morning with her insults fresh in his ears. However, as the days passed, he found that his thoughts dwelt more on how her hair shimmered in the moonlight and all the delightful little sounds she made when he touched her.

He irritably threw down his book and began pacing the room. The silence of the house felt oppressive and he decided to take a walk. It was near midnight but he felt far too agitated to sleep. The full moon shone brightly above him as he headed out into the night. He started up the narrow street with no particular destination in mind. The depressingly shabby rows of houses spread out in front of him and he was too busy trying to keep his mind from dwelling on that bothersome American witch to pay any attention to them. He was so lost in his thoughts that he almost didn't notice the lights in the street being extinguished, one by one, as though by an unseen lamplighter. Frequently the streetlights in Cokeworth refused to shine due to disrepair, but they never went out in so neat a fashion. After the third light disappeared, he began to take note of the phenomena. He drew his wand and scanned the street for the source of the trouble.
Suddenly a massive, snarling, wolf-thing exploded from an alley onto the street, wrestling with a much smaller human. Severus’s eyes widened as he recognized the silver hair, now done up in a tight bun. He would not have thought it possible that Miranda was mad enough to take on a werewolf alone, but here was the proof before him. He debated a moment as to whether he should intervene, but decided against it. He hated unsolicited help himself and he rather expected that she would not want help from him after their exchange at her cabin. He leaned against his house to watch in case she lost control of the beast.

She had a chain looped around the beast's muzzle, which he was desperately trying to scratch off. She was pulling tightly on another chain wrapped around his neck and they tumbled over and over across the cobblestones. They were obviously grunting and growling, but the fray was oddly silent, like a muggle television on mute.

The werewolf slashed Miranda cruelly from shoulder to hip and she kicked it with both legs which, augmented by a spell from her wand, hurled him away from her. Severus stepped forward, wand extended, but she rolled into a crouch, drew a pistol, and shot the beast three times in rapid succession. The werewolf staggered a few steps and fell to the ground. By the time he came to rest, Miranda was on top of him, securing him with further chains. When he was finally subdued, she got to her feet, staggered herself, and slumped to the ground beside her quarry, panting heavily. When she did not rise, Severus decided he had watched long enough and trotted across the street to her.

"You!" she gasped. She tried to rise and fell again.

"Stay put," he ordered, eyeing the werewolf. "Are you sure this thing is secured?"

Her breathing was very labored. "Yes. Those are silver chains and he has at least seven silver bullets in him."

"Good," Severus nodded. "I'll come back for you."

She looked like she wanted to argue, but was in too much pain to do so, so she settled for rolling onto her back and glaring at him. He waved his wand and the werewolf floated eerily in the air behind him. He quickly took the beast to a concrete room in his basement, triple locked him in, and hurried back to Miranda. Severus found her where he had left her, lying in the street as still and pale as a corpse. He knelt over her and put a hand gently over her mouth, feeling for her breath. He held his own while he waited and, after what seemed like an eternity, her slow, shallow breathing tickled his fingers. He pulled his hand away and quickly flicked his wand over the alarmingly large
puddle of blood on the street. As it flew into his wand, he told himself that surely most of it had to have come from the werewolf. When the incriminating mess was cleared away, he pocketed his wand and gently lifted her in his arms. He wouldn’t be able to tell the extent of her injuries until he had her in better lighting, but he knew that the werewolf’s Curse would render it impossible to cure them by any sort of charm. He would have to clean and bind them by hand.

It took him less than ten minutes to lay her on the bed in his spartan bedroom and gather his supplies. He had always liked to be prepared for trouble—especially since the return of the Dark Lord. Her clothing was in shreds and did not seem worth saving, so he flicked it away with a wave of his wand. He blanched briefly at the state of the flesh underneath, recalling both the pleasure he had taken in it, and his parting wish to her that she be killed by her next mark. A mixture of guilt and panic starting rising in his chest, but he forced it away. Emotion would not be of any use at present; only action.

Her eyes fluttered open as he worked.

"Damn Strengthening Solution," she whispered hoarsely. "Always starts wearing off at the most inopportune times."

"Perhaps you need review the basics of brewing it," he snapped back.

"You are such a bastard," she retorted, stifling a moan as he began cleaning her injuries and dressing them with Wound Reducer.

"And you are a madwoman, taking on a beast like that alone," he hissed. "Now, silence, so I can work!"

Her eyes rolled up in her head and Severus felt his panic threatening to return. He forced himself to focus on his task, first cleaning, then binding the wounds. When he was finished, he risked leaving her long enough to procure a draught of Blood-Replenishing Potion from his stores. When he returned to the bedroom, her breathing was alarmingly slow.

Without hesitation he waved his wand.
"Imperio," he commanded.

She sat up and drank the potion without opening her eyes, then lay back down on the bed, deathly still. He sat staring at her for a long time, willing her to breathe. As the sun rose, her breathing became more regular and her color started to return, although she did not awaken. Satisfied, he went to start a new batch of Blood-Replenishing Potion and Wound Reducer. The Curse would render the potions less effective than they would normally be and each took several days to mature. Severus feared he would use his entire store before Miranda was fully healed.

Three days later, Miranda was still unconscious. Severus was beginning to wonder if he should move her to St. Mungo’s, but he wasn’t sure what else they would do beyond what he was already doing. He had continued changing her bandages and using the *Imperio* Curse to force her to imbibe his potions, water, and broth. He felt strangely possessive of his patient and the thought of depositing her at St. Mungo’s and walking away was unappealing to him. Perhaps some superstitious part of him felt responsible for her current situation, although he knew this was ridiculous. He hadn’t been the one to attempt to bring down a frenzying werewolf alone.

He was dozing in a chair next to the bed on the evening of the third day when her eyes finally opened.

"Professor..." she whispered, her voice thin and shaky.

Severus’s eyes snapped open and he hid his relief with a frown. “It is high time you awoke,” he said dryly. “I was about to go through your things for valuables.”

She smiled weakly. "I suppose I owe you more Snakewood after this."

His face softened a bit and he laid a finger over her lips. "Save your strength. We'll discuss payment later."

He tilted her head up and gently poured more potions and broth down her throat. When he finished, her eyes stayed closed so long that he thought she had fallen asleep again. He decided to risk
sleeping on the sofa instead of the chair for a few hours, so he quietly rose and started to leave the room when he heard her say again,

"Professor..."

He stopped and said curtly, "Could you please stop calling me that? You sound like one of my students, and it's unnerving."

She opened one eye and her lip curled into a weak smile. “Are you saying you’d like to go back to using our Christian names?

“Considering the amount and variety of your bodily fluids I’ve come into contact with during the course of our association, it seems stilted to use anything else.”

She snorted and said quietly, “Thank you, Severus.”

"You're welcome, Miranda."

Her smile widened and she drifted off to sleep. He left the door open and sleep eluded him as he lay on his sofa, staring up at the ceiling and wondering what he had gotten himself into.

The werewolf perished during the three day vigil Severus spent by Miranda’s side. He initially wanted to incinerate the remains, but thought that she might require a body to claim her fee. As he did not feel like skinning the beast, he settled for using the Glacius spell to prevent decay. On the fifth day of her stay at Spinner’s End, he was sitting at his desk in the library, methodically planning out the coming term’s lessons when he heard her shuffle out of the bedroom. She was holding onto the wall for support and had a look of grim determination on her face.

“What are you doing?” he demanded, frowning fiercely at her. “Go back to bed.”
“I’m looking for your bathroom. Or whatever you Brits call it,” she snapped back. “I think we’d both be happier if I use it from now on. And I can’t just lie there all day, I’ll go insane.”

He couldn’t argue with her point about the loo, so he set down his quill and grudgingly escorted her to it. She was able to walk most of the way unaided, and she used the wall, rather than him, for whatever support she required. He stayed at her shoulder, though, until she was safely back in bed. The most massive wound she had sustained was barely closed and he did not care to have it reopened if she fell.

An hour later, he was still at his desk when he heard her shuffling step heading towards the kitchen. He set down his quill again and stalked silently towards the noise. She had just pushed open the door when he reached her.

“Is it your habit to go spying in other people’s houses?” he asked dryly.

She gave him an exasperated look. “I didn’t see the need to bother you for a glass of water.”

“Go back to bed,” he ordered, “and I will bring it to you. In case you have forgotten, you were almost cut in half by a werewolf a few days ago. I would rather you did not render my work useless by walking around before your wound is sufficiently healed.”

Her eyes flashed, but she went back to bed. He brought her a glass of water and then returned to his desk, satisfied that he had won his point. She was quiet for the rest of the morning and even fell asleep after lunch, so he took the liberty to spend the afternoon in the potions room in his basement. It was a bare, dark place, but contained all the necessary equipment and ingredients for his current projects. It also had the benefit of being much cooler than the rest of the house. He had been known to sleep there on the concrete floor during the worst part of the summer heat. His back tended to complain the day after he did this however, and so he kept the practice to a minimum.
The anti-venom was coming along nicely, although he still was not convinced that he had the proper ratio of unicorn horn to mugwort. He had just started to crush the unicorn horn, when he heard that shuffling footstep in the library above him. He closed his eyes and sighed irritably. Very well. It was time for drastic measures. He put away his potion work and headed up the stairs, being sure to make enough noise that Miranda would notice him coming. He smirked to himself when he heard the sound of her hurrying back to the bedroom as quickly as her injured state would allow. He gave her time to sneak back into his bed before going to the kitchen to brew tea.

When the tea was ready, he brought it, along with toast and a chess board into his bedroom. Without asking if she cared for any, he poured her a cup and set it on the night stand, along with a plate of toast and jam. He flicked his wand at the chess board, and it floated obediently next to the bed. With another wand flick, the pieces began clambering noisily over the board, each looking for its proper place. While they were arranging themselves, he poured himself a cup of tea, and sat down in the chair that he had been spending so much time in of late.

“I’m sure you have work to do,” she said irritably. “You don’t have to entertain me.”

“This is to keep you from getting out of bed and ripping open your wound by falling,” he replied. “I assure you it is not for my own pleasure.”

They played fiercely, but in silence, and the sound of the chess pieces echoed through the room. By the end of the game, both Miranda and Severus were suppressing smiles of pleasure as they battled each other to a stalemate. She wanted to play again, but he dosed her with more potions and insisted that she rest. When she started to argue, he picked up her book from the bedside table and began to read aloud.

“‘Alone

From childhood’s hour I have not been
As others were—I have not seen
As others saw—I could not bring
My passions from a common spring—
From the same source I have not taken
My sorrow—I could not awaken
My heart to joy at the same tone—
And all I lov’d—I lov’d alone.

Then—in my childhood—in the dawn
Of a most stormy life—was drawn
From ev’ry depth of good and ill
The mystery which binds me still—
From the torrent, or the fountain—
From the red cliff of the mountain—
From the sun that round me roll’d
In its autumn tint of gold—
From the lightning of the sky
As it pass’d me flying by—
From the thunder, and the storm—
And the cloud that took the form
(When the rest of Heaven was blue)
Of a demon in my view.”

He raised an eyebrow, turned the page, and read on,

“To Helen

Helen thy beauty is to me,
Like those Nicéan barks of yore,
That gently, o’er a perfumed sea,
The weary, way-worn wanderer bore
To his own native shore.

On desperate seas long wont to roam,
Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,
Thy Naiad airs have brought me home
To the glory that was Greece,
And the grandeur that was Rome.

Lo! in yon brilliant window-niche
How statue-like I see thee stand,
The agate-lamp within thy hand!
Ah, Psyche, from the regions which
Are Holy-Land!”
He closed the book to take a better look at the cover, and enquired, “Who is Edgar Allan Poe?”

Miranda had lain back on the bed, enjoying his reading. “He was an American No-Maj author. Nineteenth century. More famous for his horror stories than his poetry,” she explained. “He’s been accused of being a ‘jingle man’ in his poetry, but the French are wild for it. I’ve always found it to be quite moving and expressive.”

“I prefer Coleridge and Blake personally,” he said. “This Poe does have a fine sense of rhythm, though.”

“You should try his short stories. Excellent at capturing a mood.” She leaned up on one hand so that she could better meet his eyes. “You read very well. We always had reading and music in the evenings at home.”

“I thought muggles all watched television in the evenings.”

“Maybe the normal ones do, but my parents had other ideas. We also had to learn to ride a horse and skin and dress an animal. Without magic.”

“How perfectly barbaric.”

She laughed, “No more so than some of the things you have to do to prepare ingredients for potions.”

He allowed himself a smirk. “I suppose that is true.”

She was wearing one of his nightshirts and her hair was spread over her shoulders and his pillow. The late afternoon sun was slanting in through the window, haloing her in its orange glow. She looked so enticing that he impulsively leaned forward to trace her cheek with his finger. She closed her eyes and turned her head towards his touch, but for some reason this made him feel awkward,
rather than encouraged.

He removed his hand, cleared his throat, and ordered, “Lie down and I will keep reading.”

She did as he commanded and he opened the book again to continue. He read until she fell asleep and he sat for a long time afterwards, watching her dream.

Their days settled into a comfortable rhythm as she recovered. Severus would bring her breakfast and a stack of books in the morning, and she would obediently read until lunch while he worked. After lunch, they played a game of chess, and then she consented to sleep for at least an hour. The rest of the afternoon was spent playing cards—he had been unaware that there were quite so many Muggle card games, but he quickly learned the rules to several of them—and debating about what she had read in the morning hours. Following dinner he would read to her until she fell asleep, and if he spent far too much time watching her dream, he certainly wasn’t going to tell anyone about it.

A week after the attack, her wounds were well on their way to healing, and her step was firm as she wandered his house. One day she made her way into his basement and, as he was in the middle of adding mugwort and mistletoe to the cauldron, he ordered her to take dictation while he worked rather than bother chasing her back upstairs. This may have been a mistake on his part, as she then felt bold enough to insist that they go for a walk after dinner when the heat of the day had passed. He argued vehemently against this, and she laughed at all of his reasons. Finally he stipulated that she sleep for three hours following lunch, which she did, and they emerged from his house with her holding his arm for support as the sun was setting that evening.

They walked slowly up the street, and he received more than one curious glance from his neighbors. He knew they would ignore him, though, and keep their gossip among themselves. That night Severus and Miranda only went to the end of the block before he insisted that they return to his house, but after that first concession, it was impossible to deny her a walk on any subsequent evening. He hoped it would rain at least once to prevent the foolishness, but the weather was stubbornly fine and even a bit cooler than it had been all summer.
They walked a little further every evening, and by the end of that week they went as far as the river that ran through Cokeworth. It was a sad, dirty river, much like the rest of the sad, dirty town, but Miranda seemed drawn to it and they followed it upstream. Eventually, she managed to find a place where the water flowed in such a way as to clear the sludge out of sight. They went down to the bank and she started searching for smooth stones among the bits of rubbish and broken glass. When she had a handful, she started throwing them across the water, skipping them lightly with a practiced flick of her wrist.

“There’s a river on the farm at home,” she said as she skipped the rocks.

“You still live with your parents?” he asked, watching her lithe body move.

“I do. So does my brother Finnian. Patrick and Seamus live within a mile too, with their families.”

“That sounds oppressive.”

She shrugged. “Nah. We get along well most of the time, and there’s a lot to do to take care of the horses.”

“I thought you were bounty hunters.”

“We are. But you can’t hunt marks all the time—that’s no way to live.” She skipped a rock into the center of the river and went on, “I used to spend most of my time by the river, skipping rocks,
making boats out of tree bark and flowers. Don’t get me wrong, I couldn’t ask for a better family, but I’ve always been restless. Being by the river made me feel like someday I could go wherever I wanted to. Just the way it rushed over the rocks and the sound that it made. I’ve never liked being in one place for too long. Wanderlust, you know.”

“I expect that your brothers were jealous that you could perform magic when they could not.”

“Only if I used it when we played baseball, and our parents instituted a house rule that no magic was allowed during baseball. They said it was unsportsmanlike.” She grinned at him and added, “But I can strike out my brothers without magic anyway.” As though to prove her point, she skipped her last stone all the way to the other side of the river.

“I suppose you expect me to be impressed by that,” he teased.

“No. It probably takes a lot more than that to impress you.” She gave the river a final look and then took his arm for support. “We should go back before I overdo it and you have to carry me.”

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The next morning, Severus awoke to the smell and sound of sausage cooking. He was tempted to go into the kitchen and see what Miranda would do if he were to greet her the way he had that other morning in her cabin, but he was far too wary of her to do something so foolish. They had never spoken of the insults they had exchanged that day, but he doubted that either had forgotten them. Not to mention the fact that the Dark Lord still hovered in the background, poisoning everything connected to him. Severus knew that it would be best if Miranda walked out of his life today, never to walk back into it and he was displeased by that knowledge in a way that he did not care to admit.
He was more stoic than usual during breakfast, and Miranda seemed content to read the day’s Prophet and leave him to himself. After the meal, she gathered her bag and he went to collect what was left of the werewolf. He had cast a Reducio charm and it now fit into a matchbox. When she was ready, he handed her the box and she stowed it in her bag.

"Well," she said, "I'm sure you'll be glad to have me out of your hair. I know you don't like complications."

He snorted to hide his disappointment. "You certainly are a troublesome houseguest," he replied.

She started for the door, but as she reached it, she turned back to him, her face softer and more open than he usually saw it.

"Listen, Severus, thank you," she said earnestly. "I know you saved my life. It's going to take me a week or so to tie up this case, but I'd like to see you after that if you wouldn't mind."

Severus found he very much didn't mind, but he wasn't sure he wanted her to know that. "I will be returning to Hogwarts in a few days," he said, nonchalantly. "Term begins in a week."

"Of course," she replied.

She studied him and seemed to be debating something. After a moment, she walked back to him and took his face in her hands. Slowly, giving him plenty of time to pull away, she brought his lips down to hers. It was a sweet kiss, and he did not resist—but he did not embrace her either.

"Thanks just the same," she murmured after she had released him. Then she turned and headed out the door.

She was about to close the door after her when he heard himself saying, "I simply wanted you to know where to find me."
He saw her pause on her way out and, while she did not turn back to him, he could picture the smile playing on her lips.

*Severus, you're a fool,* he thought harshly, but he couldn't really bring himself to care.

Chapter End Notes

*Both poems by Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), text copied out of The Complete Poetry of Edgar Allan Poe Signet Classic 1996. I think Severus knows exactly what Poe is talking about in Alone and I think To Helen might be the best poem that Poe wrote. The two poems actually are on subsequent pages in my copy of this book :-).*
"Hem, hem, May I assist you?" asked a high, girlish voice.

Miranda had been accosted by the stout, pink-clad woman almost the instant she had set foot inside the massive doors of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. She eyed the shorter woman and thought she strongly resembled a pink toad.

Miranda forced a friendly smile and replied, "I hope so. Would you mind showing me to Headmaster Dumbledore's office?"

"And what might your business be at Hogwarts?" the other woman demanded in a sickly sweet tone.

"It's private," Miranda said lightly, easy smile still on her face.

"I don't think I caught your name Miss?"

"Rose," Miranda shook the toad’s pudgy hand firmly. "I'm from the other side of the pond."

"I can see that." The other woman stared at Miranda long enough that she was beginning to wonder if the woman was ever going to comply. Finally she drew herself up to her full, if diminutive, height and said importantly, "Well, this way."

Being as Miranda did not know any of the school passwords, the pink toad accompanied her into Dumbledore's office. Miranda studied the magnificent assortment of objects with obvious pleasure as they waited. They did not have to wait very long before a thin wizard with a long white beard and bright blue eyes entered the office.

"Ah, Miss Rose, very punctual I see," he said pleasantly. "That will be all, Professor Umbridge, thank you." Umbridge puffed up as though she were going to argue—or croak—but settled for sniffing and waiting just outside the door in a futile attempt to overhear their conversation.

“I’m not always punctual,” Miranda confessed after the door was closed on Umbridge. "but I
wanted to make a good first impression."

They sat and tea appeared for both of them. “I appreciate the effort and the honesty,” Albus said, smiling at her over his half-moon glasses. “What brings you to my office?”

Miranda felt a bit of pink creeping across her cheeks. "Actually, my business is with one of your staff. Since I'm a stranger, I thought it best to introduce myself to you first, rather than simply barge in."

"I see. A wise decision. Which of my staff is the fortunate one?"

"Professor Severus Snape."

Albus's eyebrows raised and his eyes twinkled merrily. "Really? Is he expecting you?"

"No, I doubt it. Perhaps I should explain a bit more. I’ve been working in England for the last six months. I’m a bounty hunter and twice over the summer Professor Snape was kind enough to assist me. I wasn't able to repay him after the second incident, as term started just after it. I wanted to wait until everyone was likely to be settled in here before coming to finish up the business."

"I see.” Albus steepled his fingers, "Severus is a very useful man. May I ask what he did this time to deserve such a visit?"

Miranda hadn't intended to tell the Headmaster any details, but the merry twinkling of his eyes put her at ease. Perhaps they reminded her of her own father's eyes and she found herself recounting the events of both the vampire and the werewolf case more completely than she had planned. "I'd probably be dead if he hadn't taken it upon himself to help me. He proved to be a proficient healer, much to my surprise,” she finished.

"Severus is proficient in many things," Albus observed.

Miranda's blush returned and she felt frustrated that she was acting like a schoolgirl with a crush. "I was thinking that if I came by on a Friday afternoon when classes were over it would be a good time,” she said.
"Well, I don't keep tabs on my staff during their off hours. Is there a reason that you didn't send him an owl?"

"I like having the element of surprise."

Albus didn't seem shocked by this answer. "Understandable. Well," he said, glancing at a clock with twelve hands and no numbers, "there is about a half an hour left in Severus's class. Why don't you go down to the dungeons and sit in on the end of it?"

"Oh, I wouldn't want to interrupt him while he’s working," Miranda protested.

"I understand that, however it would be wisest if you were not wandering the corridors with Professor Umbridge again. She will be trapped in her own classroom for the next half hour as well. If I know Severus at all, he'll have you stowed away before the dear woman has a chance to catch up to you."

"Understood." Miranda smiled broadly at the Headmaster. "Thank you for the advice. And the tea."

"You're most welcome dear. Oh, one more thing."

"Yes?"

"If you intend to return another time, do let Severus know that you have my full permission to use the staff entrance."

"Thank you, Headmaster."

"Of course. Now off with you!"
Severus sat at his desk marking scrolls, looking for all the world like a malevolent bat. School had been in session for a month and he was now sure that Miranda would not be making her promised appearance. He was displeased by this thought and angry with himself for caring. He was also angry with himself for having wasted so much time with her after the werewolf incident. He hated wasting time and he hated feeling like a fool and his anger bubbled just beneath the surface of his cold exterior. Most of his students could sense it and took extra trouble not to draw his attention. They worked quietly and tensely, dreading the time that he would rise from his desk and begin stalking up and down the aisle of the classroom, criticizing their work.

“Your potions should be purple by now,” he snapped.

“Purple, purple, has no rhyme, hope to get it right this time,” Luna Lovegood sang quietly from the back of the room.

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. He found teaching potions to Luna Lovegood even more trying than teaching them to Neville Longbottom. She was not a bad student per se— in fact, she was usually rather capable. However, it was impossible to tell when she would simply begin working on something completely different. She was impervious to both criticism and sarcasm and neither extra assignments nor detentions seemed to have any effect on her. Honestly, he was a bit concerned that she would blow up the potions room before she earned her O.W.L. He settled for pairing her with Margaret Baskerville, a quiet Ravenclaw with very good reflexes, and sitting them in the back of the room far away from the supply closet.

“Oh look, an American!” Luna observed, pointing at the closed door to the potions classroom.

In spite of their fear of Professor Snape, most of the students could not help looking from the closed door to Luna and giggling.

“Silence!” Severus hissed. Immediately, the offending students choked down their laughter and tried to appear focused on their work.

As soon as order was restored, the classroom door creaked open, and everyone’s heads turned to see the disturbance. Severus, expecting to see Professor Umbridge—he knew she had begun sitting in on other teacher’s classes and “evaluating” them—rose slowly from his desk and turned to glare at her. His face froze however, when he saw that Miranda Rose was standing in the door of his classroom, and not Professor Umbridge.
Miranda had the grace to blush when she realized that the entire classroom was staring at her. She put on a brave smile, entered the room, and closed the door behind her. She crossed to Severus, very aware of how loud her boots were on the stone floor, and leaned in to whisper in his ear,

"Sorry to interrupt. Headmaster sent me down so I wouldn't run into that Umbridge woman again. I'll sit in the back until you're done."

Potions forgotten, the class continued to stare at Miranda as she took a seat in the back of the room, near Luna and Margaret.

Severus barked, "Get back to work!" Then he sat back down at his desk, making a show of marking scrolls while he attempted to rein in his racing thoughts.

Miranda smothered a smile and pulled out a book, trying to pretend that she was invisible. The students were busily adding ginger root to their cauldrons and the room was again silent, except for Luna who was chanting,

“Moses supposes his toeses are roses,
But Moses supposes erroneously;
For nobody's toeses are posies of roses,
As Moses supposes his toeses to be.”

“Miss. Lovegood!” Severus snapped. “How many times do I have to tell you not to chant foolish incantations in my class? Ten points from Ravenclaw.”

Luna stopped chanting, but did not look at all troubled by his outburst. Miranda bit her lips to keep from laughing, and tried to focus on Death Comes for the Archbishop.

By the time Severus had regained control of his mind, class was over. The stern look on his face warned most of the students not to talk as they hastily bottled samples of their potions and set them on a shelf for grading. Their eagerness to begin the weekend overcame their curiosity of who the
stranger was, and they quickly cleared their desks and filed out of the room.

Luna, however, lagged behind. She had taken time to draw a few flowers on her vial’s label and painstakingly rearrange a few of the shelves in the store closet, muttering something about “good energy.” She returned to the back of the classroom, put away One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi, and pulled out a magazine and a spiral bound notebook with a quill attached. She approached Miranda, who looked up from her book to return the girl’s smile.

“Hello. I see you’re almost finished with your book. I expect you’ll be waiting around quite a bit this evening, so I thought this would help you pass the time,” Luna said, handing Miranda the latest issue of *The Quibbler*.

“That’s very thoughtful of you. Thank you,” Miranda replied seriously. She took the magazine and put it in her bag.

“I was wondering if you’d like to sign up for a subscription. Its completely secret,” Luna explained, showing her the blank notebook. “Once you put down your information, nobody can see it. And you can cancel at any time. My father’s the editor, you see.”

“I’d be delighted.” Miranda took the quill and wrote down her information, which glowed briefly and then disappeared.

“Have a nice weekend. I think it’s going to rain,” Luna said.

“You too,” Miranda replied.

Luna took her things and headed for the door. “Good afternoon, Professor,” she said, as she passed Severus’s desk.

During Miranda’s conversation with Luna, Severus had finished closing up his classroom for the weekend. He locked the door and shuttered the windows, stalking ominously towards Miranda, his face an unreadable mask.

When he got to the back of the room he ordered, “Come.” Then he turned and started striding away.
Miranda quickly put her book in her bag. By the time she had done so, he had disappeared through another door and she had to run to catch up with him. They passed through a narrow passageway filled with potion ingredients and books. This led to a tidy, if a bit disturbingly decorated office. He didn't stop there, but went through another passageway, narrower and darker than the previous. With a flick of his wand, the door at the end of the passage opened, and they entered a dark sitting room, walls lined with books. He slammed the door and locked it with another flick of his wand.

They stood facing each other, both catching their breath after the flight.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded curtly, his dark eyes unreadable.

"I came to settle up after the werewolf case," she replied. She kept her voice even, although she was beginning to wonder if coming had been a good idea. "I thought I should give you time return to the school routine before I came barging in."

He paused. "That was...considerate," he allowed. "Who else knows you are here besides Albus and Umbridge?"

"No one. And Umbridge doesn't know who I am or why I am here. Headmaster knows basically everything."

"Does he?" He ran his eyes over her body and she felt a blush creep over her cheeks.

"Well, I didn't go into all the scandalous details, but he seems shrewd enough to have inferred at least some of them."

He managed to look both amused and annoyed at this. A bell rang, magically amplified, signaling dinner and his amusement disappeared.

"If I do not appear at the staff table after your interruption of my class, there will be questions that I do not care to answer. Stay here. I will deal with you after dinner," he commanded. And, without waiting for a response from her, he strode out of the room, locking it behind him.

She felt a bit less confident now than she had when she had first arrived at Hogwarts that
afternoon. Perhaps she should have sent an owl first. She supposed that not everyone appreciated being caught off guard. She started pacing restlessly around the gloomy sitting room. It had small windows, high on the walls, that seemed only to view the indoors. What little light they let in only served to make the room appear darker. There was a fire burning in the stone fireplace and one armchair covered in black leather. On one wall stood a desk with quills, ink bottles, and parchment all neatly stacked. The other walls were lined almost to the ceiling with leather bound books. She started shelf-reading and noticed that while many of them were on magical subjects--potion making, charms, dueling, dark arts--there was also Coleridge, Blake, Byron, Shakespeare, Dante, and Kipling.

After pacing around the room and resisting the urge to rifle through Severus’s desk, Miranda started looking for the washroom. There was only one interior door and as she went through it she realized she was in Severus’s bedroom. It was also dark and filled with books. There was a wardrobe on one wall and a four poster bed draped in black and green on another. A third wall held a door that led to a washroom done in dark marble and green mosaic tile. It was scrupulously clean and she again resisted the urge to snoop.

When she emerged from the washroom, she spent a few moments in the bedroom, considering whether or not she should stay. He had not seemed particularly happy to see her. Perhaps she should simply leave his payment on his desk with a note of explanation and cut her losses. While she was contemplating her next course of action, she wandered over to his night table and picked up the book that was sitting on it. It was *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*. A slow smile spread across her face and she set the book back on the table. Then she went back out into the sitting room, settled herself into the armchair, and took out her book to wait.

An hour or so later Severus reappeared, carrying a tray for her. She had indeed finished the Cather novel, and had started on *The Quibbler*. When he saw what she was reading he snorted and said, “That girl is a lunatic.”

“I thought she was rather nice,” Miranda replied. “Don’t you think the tray looks as suspicious as you not showing up for dinner?”

"I went down to the kitchens and returned by another passage," he replied curtly. "The house elves aren't going to tell anyone."

"Thank you. It's kind of you to think of me," she said honestly, taking the tray.

He sat down at the desk and started marking scrolls while he waited for her to finish eating. When she had, he spirited away the empty dishes with a wave of his wand. She reached into her bag and pulled out a package wrapped in brown paper.
"This is for you," she said, depositing it on his desk. She leaned her hip against the desk and tried not to look too eager as he opened it.

The book was thick, old, and bound in dark leather. He raised an eyebrow and opened it carefully. As he perused its contents he realized it was full of spells and directions for potions that he had never seen.

"Where did you get this?" he asked.

"More secret wisdom from the States," she replied with a grin. "And just like the Snakewood, you don't have it. And if someone catches you with it, you didn't get it from me."

Engrossed in the book, he stood and wandered over to his armchair. As he sank into it, Miranda watched him, a pleased expression on her face. Severus read for perhaps twenty minutes before he remembered her presence. When he did, he set the book down on the table next to his chair and gave her the barest hint of a smile.

"Thank you," he said shortly.

"Thank you," she replied simply, looking up from The Quibbler. She set it on his desk, crossed the room to him and took his hand. "I said it before, but I doubt I would still be alive if you hadn't helped me. And considering how I had insulted you on our previous meeting, I appreciate it all the more."

His expression turned sour. "As I recall you were not the only one doing the insulting during that previous meeting," he muttered. Her hand was warm in his and he turned it over, bringing her wrist to his lips. He smirked as he felt her pulse quicken. "I presume you are fully healed from your idiotic scrape with death?"

"None the worse for wear," she answered, her silver eyes glittering in the firelight.

"Good," he drawled, pulling her onto his lap. "Then I can do some damage of my own."
Much later, she lay on her stomach on his four-poster bed, practically purring with satisfaction. He lay next to her, idly tracing patterns on her bare back with a long finger and studying her in the candlelight.

"How long can you stay?" he asked quietly.

"I'd say the entire weekend, but I suppose I shouldn't seem too eager," she replied playfully.

"I think you've already expressed your eagerness," he said, his eyes gleaming arrogantly. "I'm surprised you can spare that much time from your usual sport of trying to get yourself killed."

"Oh, I have a case, but I'm taking it slowly."

He arched an eyebrow in question.

"I've been asked to take up the bounty on Sirius Black."

His finger paused on her back and he looked at her sharply. "Who hired you?"

"That's why I'm taking it slowly. Minister Fudge and someone named Lucius Malfoy put me on the job. They approached me about it while I was finishing the vampire case and were very unhappy that I put them off while I tracked the werewolf, especially since it put me out of commission for another month."

"Why are you stalling them?" He had resumed his idle tracing, but his tone sounded serious.

"I don't like Malfoy. He makes the hair on the back my neck stand up on end. I can tell when a job is bad."

"Why did you take it then?" He was beginning to sound angry.
"Malfoy doesn't seem like the sort of fellow you just say no to."

"That is true."

She shrugged, "I've dealt with men like him before."

"I seriously doubt that."

"I see that you know him."

"I do. Tread very carefully around him. He is ruthless, powerful, and extremely well connected."

"I already know all that. I'm starting by investigating him and Minister Fudge. Something seems off about the job, and I'm not going to haul someone in until I know that it's the right thing to do."

"I don't like it."

"I'm an American. They're not going to do anything to me, it would be an international incident. My family knows where I am, I talk to them almost every day. If something happens to me, they will know and they will raise hell."

"I still don't like it."

"Severus, you care. How touching."

"Why aren't you asking me for more information about Malfoy and Black?"

"I try not to mix business and pleasure. During the course of this investigation I may decide to question you officially, but for now I'd rather enjoy you. That's why I haven't been snooping through your rooms or asking you about your business."
"You mean like I am asking you now?"

"You are being rather nosey, but I seem to have less to hide than you do."

"You are a very strange woman."

"You certainly know how to make a lady feel special." Miranda's temper was beginning to flare. She hadn't really meant to tell him quite so much about her business and was irritated with herself. "Look, I can leave if I'm bothering you."

"No." He spoke very slowly, as though savoring each word. "You are going to stay." He turned her onto her back, the better to expose her to his mercilessly clever fingers. "I don't like ordinary women."

Severus was sorry to see Miranda go when Monday morning arrived. It was true, he had accomplished almost nothing that weekend with regards to his work, either for his job at Hogwarts or for his two masters; but he had found the time exceedingly well spent. He was, however, a bit disturbed that she was now connected to Malfoy, and this seemed to be on her mind as well.

"So, do we know each other, or not?" she asked, all business. "I didn't mention you in any of my official Ministry reports. Papa knows I had help, but he doesn't know from who and Umbridge doesn't know I was here to see you. I assume Headmaster won't be saying anything, so we can keep our lives totally separate if that seems best."

He mulled this over in his mind. There was no longer any question that he would be seeing Miranda again, as often as possible. He told himself that it was a calculated risk. She was an outsider, and thus could not call his loyalty to the Dark Lord into question. She was simply a bit of recreation. True, it would perhaps be better if she were pure or even half-blood, but he thought the Dark Lord would only deride him for having common taste in women.

“I don’t think we should print it in The Quibbler,” he answered dryly, "but in the unlikely event that anyone is entitled to know our private business, it would be safer to be honest than to try to
invent a story."

"Understood," she nodded. "So, we met the way we met, jumped in the sack together, and have been fucking like bunnies ever since?"

"It sounds so tawdry when you put it that way," he mocked. "I fear for my reputation."

"Your reputation?" she laughed merrily. "I'm the one who's going to bed with some Brit she knows next to nothing about." She kissed him hard. "In fact, I think I started this whole thing."

"You did," he agreed. "It is, in fact, all your fault. You have no one but yourself to blame." He returned her kiss, his hands roaming freely. "And if you are not in my bed by nine o'clock on Friday evening, I will come looking for you."

"Speaking of," she murmured, "Headmaster said to tell you to show me the staff entrance."

"Meddlesome wizard," he muttered. "Give me your wand." When she complied, he used it to unlock and lock the door of his sitting room. Handing it back to her, he explained, "Now you will be able to unlock this door. When you come, take yourself straight to the bedroom and don't get caught."

He showed her to the private entrance to his dungeon and gave her the password--"Lily." She raised an eyebrow at this, but didn't ask any questions.

"Until Friday," she said, and ducked out into the morning sun.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I'll be late.

-M.

Severus crushed the note in his hand and glared at his breakfast. It was Friday morning and he didn't care to admit to himself how much he'd been anticipating that night. He also didn't care to admit to himself that he was worried over the reason that Miranda would be late. The idiot woman seemed hell-bent on getting herself killed or at least maimed on a regular basis and he would much rather that she were in one piece.

“Hem, hem, bad news?” Professor Umbridge twittered next to him, trying to read over his shoulder.

He turned his glare on Umbridge until she cleared her throat and returned to her own breakfast. Then he angrily tore open his second letter and saw Lucius Malfoy’s haughty script,

Severus,

Join us for dinner at Malfoy Manor tonight. Eight o'clock. Bring the usual.

-Lucius

Severus crumpled this note as well. Who knew how long he would have to stay at Malfoy Manor. He was in an evil mood for the rest of the day and took it out on all of his students, who were sent away with enough extra homework to keep them indoors all weekend.

Severus’s mood had not improved by the time he reached Malfoy Manor that evening. The house elf led him into the sumptuous drawing room, but he did not spare a glance for its vaulted ceilings or prized artwork. Vincent Crabbe and Walden Macnair were already present, nursing drinks and exchanging rude stories. Lucius poured some firewhiskey into a crystal tumbler and handed it to Severus.

"I am always ready to be of service," Severus shrugged, his face a mask of boredom. He knew Lucius didn't care a bit about causing inconvenience to anyone but himself.

"We wanted your particular talents tonight."

Severus raised an eyebrow in question and waited.

"We're having a little tart over for dinner. She's been given a task that will benefit the Dark Lord and she’s not being entirely compliant. We’re going to encourage her to return to business."

"Over dinner? Why the pageantry?" Severus inquired dryly. He was beginning to worry that he knew exactly who this little tart was.

“It is not quite time for the Dark Lord to return publicly. This woman is a foreigner with some connections and would be missed if she simply disappeared.”

Severus eyed Vincent and Walden. "I don't see why you require my presence then. Surely those two are capable of frightening a single woman," Severus remarked.

"Afraid to get your hands dirty, Snape?" Walden growled.

Lucius held up a hand to stop the usual bickering. "I want you to slip her some veritaserum after dinner. We want to know who she is working for, particularly if that person may be Dumbledore."

“I think I would know if Dumbledore had begun hiring foreigners,” Severus said.

Lucius smiled patronizingly. “I wouldn’t assume that Dumbledore tells you everything. The old man didn’t live to his age by telling his secrets to everyone, even if you have hoodwinked him into thinking that you are his man.”

Severus shrugged and sounded bored, "As you like. Does this woman have a name?"

“Miss Miranda Rose,” announced the house elf, leading the owner of the name into the room.
Severus groaned inwardly. Why did this woman have such a stupid occupation? What was wrong with her father that he let her work for him? If it were his daughter, he would spank her for her impertinence. Hell, he felt like spanking Miranda. He would not be able to protect her if Lucius and the others decided to torture her. He would probably have to participate to maintain his cover. He tried to tell himself that it would serve her right for her reckless behavior, but an icy fear was sitting just beneath the surface of his anger.

If she was at all nervous being left in a room alone with four larger men, she did not show it. She wore an easy smile and a stunning mermaid gown of lapis lazuli blue. Her silver hair was swept up in several braids, pinned in a complicated pattern to the back of her head. Sapphire earrings dangled from her ears and she carried a silver handbag, slung over her pretty wrist.

"So glad you could join us," Lucius said, bending over her hand and eyeing her appreciatively.

“I was delighted to receive the invitation, Mr. Malfoy,” she said, receiving his attentions gracefully.

He turned, still holding her hand, to introduce her to the rest of the company. "My associates. This is Mr. Vincent Crabbe.”

Vincent lumbered over to Miranda and took his turn bending over her hand clumsily. “Miss Rose,” he said, gruffly.

“So nice to meet you, Mr. Crabbe,” she replied, smiling warmly at him.

“And this is Mr. Walden Macnair,” Lucius continued.

Walden took the liberty of actually kissing Miranda's hand, rather than bending over it properly. “Miss Rose,” he leered.

“Mr. Macnair, good to meet you,” she answered with another warm smile.

“And this is Professor Severus Snape,” Lucius finished.
Severus took Miranda’s hand and bent over it courteously, his face still a mask of polite boredom.

She smiled brightly and said, "Professor Snape and I have already had the pleasure."

"Really?" Lucius eyed Severus shrewdly. Severus kept his face still, and wished that he could strangle Miranda. So much for keeping things quiet. What on earth was she going to say next?

“Yes, he was so good as to put me back together after the werewolf incident. If you recall, it happened in Cokeworth," Miranda explained smoothly.

“How fortunate,” Lucius commented, still eyeing Severus, who still said nothing. Perhaps Miranda would keep the rest of their association to herself.

“It was indeed. You have a lovely home Mr. Malfoy,” Miranda said warmly, as at ease as she would be if she were in the house of an old friend.

“Thank you. My wife supervises the decorating.”

“You are a lucky man.”

Lucius offered Miranda his arm and led her into dinner. She openly admired the arched ceilings, imposing columns, and glittering chandeliers of the dining room. The usually massive table had been shortened to accommodate a more intimate group and provide a better view of Miranda to the other diners. Lucius seated her at the foot of the table, with Walden on her right and Severus on her left and took the head of the table for himself. Vincent was between Lucius and Severus, and they made a bit of an awkward party.

Although Lucius’s intention had obviously been to isolate and frighten the woman, he did not seem to notice that it was failing spectacularly. Miranda positively scintillated at dinner, radiating charm and wit. Lucius, Vincent, and Walden were almost tripping over each other for her smiles. Severus maintained his expression of polite boredom during dinner, but he had to admit it was amusing to watch Miranda work.

“An executioner, Mr. Macnair? How daring!” she was saying, her eyes wide. “What sort of
Walden preened like a peacock and answered, “The Ministry’s tried to get me to upgrade to the new Sharp-Strike Broadsword, but I can’t give up my old Miserecordiæ Battle Axe. It’s been in the family for generations and it’s like an old friend.”

“My! You must look magnificent when you’re called to duty. How do you stand it?”

“Nerves of steel, my dear, nerves of steel.”

Vincent snorted at this and Miranda turned her smile on him. “And you, Mr. Crabbe, what do you do?”

“Do, Miss Rose?” Vincent asked. He was a stupid man, and always spoke very slowly.

“I mean, I can see that you must be a pure-blood and a nobleman, so I’m sure you spend most of your time managing your estate, but what do you do for fun?” Miranda prompted.

“Well,” Vincent was mesmerized by Miranda’s smile. “I don’t get the chance very often, but Occamy fighting can’t be beat.”

“No! Isn’t that illegal? How clever you must be to elude the authorities. And such a dangerous sport! Aren’t they known for mauling their captors?”

“Yes!” Never in his life had anyone referred to Vincent Crabbe as clever, and the already large man puffed up even more. “It’s ripping good fun though.”

“I’d love to see such a thing.” Miranda’s eyes were glittering at Vincent. “I hope an opportunity will arise while I’m in England.”

It was Lucius’s turn to scoff and Miranda turned her attention to him. “Of course, you must indulge in only the best entertainments, Mr. Malfoy,” Miranda said admiringly. “I have never seen such a fine estate as Malfoy Manor. I don’t think such things exist in America.” She lowered her eyes demurely and added, “I must admit that I was simply dying to see such a place, but I never dreamed
that I would have the chance.”

Lucius gave her a patronizing smile and said, “I’m delighted to be of service.”

About this time, Severus felt Miranda’s stocking-clad foot begin to travel up the inseam of his left leg. It took all of his powers of concentration not to drop his fork.

“If I may be so bold, Mr. Malfoy, it’s so impressive to watch you advise Minister Fudge during our meetings. He must rely on you quite a bit,” Miranda observed.

“He does indeed,” Lucius confirmed arrogantly.

“And you’ve been so kind to me. I know that it’s quite exceptional for someone of my birth and connections to enjoy the notice of someone like you.” Her voice was almost a purr and when she raised her eyes to Lucius, they were smoldering.

Lucius smiled at her invitingly and drawled, “Exceptions are made for exceptional women.”

Miranda lowered her lashes again. “It’s a shame that your wife wasn’t able to join us.”

“I’m afraid she’s traveling at the moment,” Lucius said quietly.

“And your son is at school?” Miranda murmured. She was still running her foot up and down Severus’s leg and he had begun mentally reciting the one thousand magical herbs and fungi in both English and Latin to maintain his control. Merlin, this woman was reckless. And intoxicating.

“He is,” Lucius replied, completely unaware of what was going on at the other end of the table.

“You must be lonely in this big place all by yourself.” Miranda’s voice was husky and pitched just above a whisper.

“I find ways to pass the time, Miss Rose.”
“I’m sure you do.” Miranda turned her glittering eyes on Severus and asked, “Do you teach Mr. Malfoy’s son at Hogwarts, Professor?”

“Yes,” Severus answered. His voice was harsher than he meant it to be, and he finally batted her foot away with his knee. If he was going to be expected to talk, he did not want to deal with quite that much distraction, enjoyable as it was. She took the hint and kept her foot to herself. “Draco is one of the few students who shows any promise,” Severus added, his voice much steadier.

“I must say, I am glad I never had a teacher like you at Ilvermorny. I’m sure I would have been in detention constantly.” She turned her gaze back to Lucius and said conspiratorially, “I’m afraid Professor Snape thinks that I am a perfect barbarian.”

Tired of being left out of the conversation, Walden put in, “Snape’s not the best judge when it comes to women.”

Miranda rewarded Walden with a smile and continued steering the conversation for the rest of dinner. Severus was glad that the attention turned away from him and his mind wandered to how he hoped the evening would end, presuming Miranda was not murdered before he could get her back to his rooms at Hogwarts.

After dinner, they adjourned to the library. Vincent loitered in front of the door and Walden by the large bay window. Miranda still seemed completely unconcerned and allowed Lucius to seat her in a large arm chair in front of the fire. Severus’s fear that the evening would spiral out of control returned. He pushed down the fear and covered it with anger that Miranda had put herself in this situation in the first place.

"Severus, be so good as to fetch us all a drink," Lucius ordered lazily.

Severus complied, hesitating briefly before adding the veritaserum to Miranda’s glass. If truth were to be told, he rather wanted to know her secrets as much as Lucius did. If she was who she said she was, she would probably escape mostly in one piece. If she wasn’t, it was probably best to find out now before his involvement with her went on any longer.

"Do you mind if I smoke, Mr. Malfoy?" Miranda asked.

Not at all Miss Rose," Lucius replied.
She pulled a cigarette out of her sphinx covered case and Lucius lit it with a snap of his fingers. She took a long drag and crossed her legs, exposing most of one through a slit in her gown. The temperature in the room appeared to rise a few degrees and Severus presented her with her drink. She took it and Lucius proposed a toast.

"To Miss Rose," he offered, eyes glittering.

The men all drank, but Miranda simply smoked for a few moments, twirling her glass in her fingers, a little smile playing on her lips. Finally she looked sideways at Lucius and purred, "Now Mr. Malfoy, do you really expect me to drink this?"

Lucius stiffened. "I beg your pardon?"

She gave a throaty laugh. "Here I am, alone in a locked room with four former Death Eaters--alleged, of course. The Potions Master of Hogwarts just handed me a drink. Why on God's green earth would I be fool enough to drink it?"

Lucius’s tone was icy and smooth, "If you know who we are, you know it’s in your best interest to do as you're told."

She uncrossed her legs and rose from her chair like a dancer. She slinked to the table and set her drink down, then crossed to Lucius and blew a line of smoke in his face.

"Why don't you just ask me what you want to know, Mr. Malfoy?" she challenged.

"How would I know you were telling the truth when you answered?" he demanded, his anger rising.

"Let's play a little game," she circled him and then crossed to Severus and circled him as well. Severus glared at her, but said nothing. He felt that the situation was completely out of his control and he did not like the feeling.

"We're going to pretend that we're all adults and that you have hired me to do a job," Miranda went on. “We're going to assume that I really don't give a shit about whatever your European
Wizengamot is up to. Besides,” she circled back and leaned against the chair, grinning at Lucius, "I'm immune to veritaserum."

Vincent and Walden stepped forward menacingly, but Lucius shook his head.

"Or, if you'd rather do it the hard way, that's an option too," Miranda went on smoothly. "I promise not to be too rough on you."

Lucius let out a short bark of laughter. "You are a madwoman!" he exclaimed.

"That's what Professor Snape said after the werewolf incident," she replied. "Look, Mr. Malfoy, I know you think I'm dragging my feet on the Black case but with all due respect, I work best when left to my own devices. You've called me to the Ministry for a meeting twice a week since you hired me, excepting the two weeks I was laid up at Professor Snape's house." She advanced on Malfoy again as she went on, "Every time I get some momentum going, I have to drop what I'm doing and listen to you and Fudge patronize me and now you are threatening me with a pack of thugs who obviously don't have a pair of brain cells between them to rub together. Excepting you of course, Professor Snape." She threw Severus a grin which he returned with a glare. "I simply cannot work under these conditions!" she finished dramatically.

Lucius laughed again and asked, "My dear Miss Rose, are all Americans as insane as you are?"

"Probably," she answered, smiling. "Look, I will update you via mirror once a week and I will meet with you in person once a month, like I do with all my clients. If you have a problem, you can use the mirror to contact me, or you can contact my father, I talk to him every day." She finished her cigarette and made the butt disappear into thin air. Then she ran a long finger from the bridge of Lucius’s nose down to the middle of his chest. "Now, do you think that will hold you, or do we need to get ugly?"

Lucius took her hand and kissed it hotly. "Very well Miss Rose, we will try it your way."

"Just what every woman wants to hear," she purred. "Now, if there is nothing else, I'd like to say good night to you gentlemen. Severus and I were supposed to be fucking at least an hour ago and I'm a perfect bitch when I'm horny."

Lucius laughed harder at that than anything else she'd said all evening. Severus continued to glare at her as though he were as likely to kill her as do anything else to her. Lucius kissed Miranda's
cheek, slapped Severus on the back, and ushered both of them out of the Manor.

"To Hogwarts?" asked Miranda when they were outside.

"Indeed," Severus growled and they disappeared.

Severus made a grab at Miranda's arm when they reappeared outside the wards at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, but she eluded him and started striding purposefully and fearlessly towards the entrance to the dungeons. She kept well ahead of him and he followed her, becoming angrier by the second. What did she think she was doing? Didn't she realize how much danger she had been in? She might think that her status as an American protected her, but Severus strongly doubted this. Were all Americans as insufferably arrogant as this one?

"Lily," Miranda murmured as the reached the entrance. She had her wand ready and unlocked his door when they reached it as well, and disappeared into his sitting room. He slowed his pace, like a cat stalking its prey. He entered his rooms and closed the door behind them extremely slowly, then turned, intending to give Miranda a thorough tongue lashing.

Before he could begin, she was in his arms, kissing his cheek and laughing merrily. "You see, I told you I've dealt with men like Malfoy before."

"You are fortunate that you aren't dead," he snapped. Honestly, underneath his anger, he felt rather relieved and a bit impressed that she'd managed to talk herself out of that situation, but he didn’t want her to know that. The last thing he wanted to do was encourage her foolish behavior. Who knew when her luck would run out?

She rolled her eyes at him, "Don't be silly. Malfoy’s a bully. When I didn't cower or cry, he didn't know what to do with me. The rest was easy."

"I seem to recall that we agreed to keep our involvement quiet."

She sighed. "That is true and I am sorry. I was a bit surprised when I saw you in the drawing room
tonight, and I had to improvise.”

“And what would you have done if I hadn't been there?” he demanded. "They could have done anything to you.”

“I would have done basically the same thing I did with you there,” she shrugged. “It would have taken longer and been much more tiresome, though. I would have been stalled in the library after dinner while Malfoy, Crabbe, and Macnair all competed to get me into bed. I’d have had to jolly them along until they were too drunk to see straight, and you would have been in a perfectly awful mood by the time I was able to get here. Not that you’re in a very good mood right now.”

"You are seriously underestimating these men!"

She laughed again. "They aren't the sharpest tools in the shed. Some wizards have realized that magic is the great equalizer, and that a witch can be as dangerous as a warlock. Malfoy didn’t even take my wand away when I entered his house. Men like that so easily manipulated by beauty and a little flirting. Now, if you had planned the evening, then I might have been worried. You are obviously the most dangerous one of the lot.”

"You won't get anywhere by flattering me.”

She finally pushed away from him, "Relax, Severus! I think you're just angry that I didn't need to you come to my rescue. I can take care of myself!"

"I seriously doubt that."

He glared at her silently as she threw herself into his armchair and kicked off her shoes.

“How long have you known I was a Death Eater?” he finally asked quietly.

She shrugged. "I know a lot about you. You're linked to Malfoy, so I've been investigating you as well. Professor Severus Snape, born January 9th, 1960 in Cokeworth, England. Son of Tobais Snape, an alcoholic laborer and Eileen Snape, née Prince, a witch, Hogwarts, class of 1950. You were usually found in the company of one Lily Evans as a child who, interestingly, became the mother of one Harry Potter, the so-called ‘Boy Who Lived.’ You attended Hogwarts 1971 to 1979 and particularly distinguished yourself in Potions and Defense against the Dark Arts. You became a
Death Eater, I assume shortly after graduation. You became Potions Master at Hogwarts in 1981 at the tender age of twenty-one. You received a pardon the end of the First Wizarding War and continued in your position at Hogwarts. Although you apparently keep in touch with your old friends.” She gave him a tired smile and added, “Shall I go on? I was hoping to be off the clock by now.”

His face had become a cold mask while she went through her recitation. When she finished, he slowly drew his wand and crossed the room to her. He placed the tip of it on her lovely throat and drawled, "Doesn't it concern you in the least that you are alone with me?"

She held his gaze, looking amused by his show of aggression. "You've had plenty of opportunities to kill me so far. If you haven't done it yet, why would you do it tonight?"

Her boldness only fed Severus’s’s anger. He wanted to scare her. He wanted her to take seriously the danger she was courting. "Are you so sure I haven't been planning to do just that?"

She ran a graceful foot slowly up his inseam again. "Now, darling, if you wanted to kill me, you'd have done it the minute we walked in the door. I am very confident in my ability to judge character. You are an efficient killer. You don't make things complicated, you just do what needs to be done." She reached her hands up to his throat and began undoing the buttons of his dress robes.

"You are the most insufferable woman I have ever met," he growled, trying not to let show how much she was affecting him.

"I get that all the time.” She laughed, dark and throaty. "But can you honestly tell me that you didn't love my performance? Can you honestly say that you weren't absolutely wild to have me?"

His wand drifted away from her neck. His anger at her and lust for her had been at war all evening, and lust was finally getting the upper hand. “Stop fishing for compliments, you little minx,” he murmured.

"Do you know what I like best about these high collars that you wear?" she asked.

"Hmmm?" He didn't trust his voice.

"That they'll hide whatever marks I make under them," she purred, and bit him.
He groaned and swept her off the chair, into his bedroom, slamming the door with his foot as he went.

Chapter End Notes

N.B. According to Pottermore.com, Occamys are plumed, two-legged winged creatures with serpentine bodies. I imagine this is the cock-fighting of the wizarding world.
"Ah, Severus, thank you for joining me," Albus said pleasantly as Severus took a seat in the headmaster's office.

Severus nodded and waited for Albus to get on with what he wanted. Thanks to his spying and his extracurricular activities with Miranda, he was a bit behind in class preparation and sleep, both of which were making him irritable.

"I've asked your friend Miss Rose to join us," Albus began, a knowing smile on his face.

"She's not my friend," Severus interrupted petulantly. He hated Albus’s knowing smile, especially when it was directed at him.

"As you say," Albus said, eyes still twinkling. “I am sure you are aware of Miss Rose’s interesting occupation.”

“Unfortunately.”

"She's been turning her attention to our friend Sirius."

"He's not my friend either."

"Of course, of course. The point is, she's been coming rather closer to the Order than is perhaps prudent. It is time we discover what side she is on."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"I think your talents will be most beneficial during this meeting,” Albus observed.
"That's what Lucius Malfoy said a few weeks ago,” Severus commented dryly.

"If you've already read the lady's mind, you could simply divulge the information and save us all some time."

"I...haven't." Severus drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair as he realized that it had never occurred to him to do so. Legilimency was much more invasive than veritaserum and he supposed he respected her too much to try to invade her privacy in such a way. He was extremely annoyed with himself for this.

"No?" Albus asked, amused.

“No.” Severus answered shortly. He clearly wanted to end the discussion.

“Does that mean that you believe her story?” Albus asked, ignoring Severus’s irritation.

“As far as I have been able to verify it.” He did, in fact, trust Miranda, although he could not say exactly why. She seemed honest, but she might simply be an excellent liar. There was a trail of documents at the Ministry of Magic confirming her address and occupation. He’d checked the school records at Ilvermorny and those also agreed with what she had told him, but he knew such things could be falsified. It was entirely possible that she was working for Voldemort to test Severus’s loyalty. Hell, she could be a spy for MACUSA for all he knew. Disturbed by his carelessness he added, “Without further interrogation it is impossible to be completely sure.”

“I agree,” Albus said. He frowned and then asked, “Do you know if it was Lord Voldemort who put her on Sirius’s trail?”

“I don’t. Lucius has not been keeping me informed of his plans. The Dark Lord has not mentioned her in my presence. It is entirely possible that hiring her was an independent action by Cornelius Fudge that Lucius commandeered.”

“That may be hoping for too much,” Albus observed. “I wonder if it would be wise for the young lady to return to America.”

Severus snorted. “You try to tell Miranda to do something wise.”
There was a knock on the office door and Miranda strode into the room.

"Hello, Headmaster, thank you for taking the time to see me," she greeted, smiling.

“Of course, Miss Rose. Punctual again I see," Albus replied, gesturing to a chair next to Severus.

She eyed Severus as she took her seat. "I wasn't aware that we were going to have company," she said evenly.

“Yes, this must be rather distressing,” Albus said, eyes twinkling, “particularly since Severus has informed me that the two of you are not friends, but I thought that he might be useful during our meeting. I hope you can endure it, my dear. Would you care for a lemon drop?”

Her jaw tightened, but she took a lemon drop. “It’s just as well,” she said, her voice cooler than it had been, “I have questions for Professor Snape also.”

“I am afraid that I must tell you something that you will not like,” Albus went on pleasantly.

“Oh?” She asked, arching an eyebrow.

"You came to this meeting thinking you were going to be asking the questions. I'm afraid you were mistaken. The time has come for me to ask you questions."

"Really?” Her expression was a mask of amusement as she wondered what was going on here. "Do you mind if I smoke Headmaster?"

"I do, in fact," he replied easily.

Severus raised an eyebrow at this, especially as he noticed her fingers twitch as though she wanted to reach for her wand. How interesting that she was so tense in Albus’s office when she had seemed so relaxed at Malfoy Manor.
"I think you should hand Severus your wand as well," Albus ordered politely.

She hesitated a moment, but then did as Albus demanded. She smiled blandly and asked, "Well, gentlemen, what can I do for you?"

"You have been asking many questions about former Hogwarts students," Albus began. "You have been drawing quite a bit of attention to them and, as a result, raising questions about their current locations and activities. I want this to stop."

"I wasn't aware that tracking a murderer was an activity that the Headmaster of Hogwarts would want to stop," she observed.

"Sirius Black is many things, but not a murderer."

"Do you have proof of this?"

"Unfortunately the eye witness and the culprit are one in the same and currently at large."

"That is unfortunate."

"Miss Rose, how much do you know about the Wizarding War that took place here about twenty years ago?"

She shrugged. "I know the basics. Some fool styling himself ‘Lord Voldemort’ got a lot of folks worked up over blood-purity and used it as an excuse for a lot of destruction and murder. He mysteriously vanished after attacking a baby named Harry Potter who, as I understand, is currently at Hogwarts and is Professor Snape’s least favorite student." She smiled wryly at Severus and he gave her a withering look. Then she turned back to Albus and quipped, "I wasn’t aware there was going to be a quiz on British History today, or I would have studied harder."

"It’s quite all right. You do seem to have the basics correct, but I wonder if you quite understand the depth of terror that reigned here during that time," Albus commented.

Her smile vanished and she looked rather serious. "No, I don’t, but I do understand that it is not a
joking matter." She studied Albus for a long time and then asked, “Headmaster, is there a reason that you are raising an army of witches and wizards against the Ministry of Magic?”

“We are not arming against the Ministry per se.”

"Then what exactly is going on?"

"Voldemort has returned. Minister Fudge is determined to deny this fact and I am determined not to be taken by surprise the way we were when the last Wizarding War began."

“I see,” she said slowly, her fingers fidgeting with the lemon drop and her mind racing. If Albus was correct, than Severus’s checkered past was not quite so much in the past.

She eyed Severus again. “No wonder you were so tense at Malfoy’s,” she said dryly.

His eyes were glittering as he stared back at her. He found it highly amusing to see her caught off guard. “Indeed. I told you it was fortunate that you weren’t dead,” he gloated.

“Well, I didn’t know Malfoy was an active Death Eater when I took the invitation, did I?”

“Perhaps you should have been more careful in your research. It seems as sloppy as your potion making.”

Her eyes narrowed angrily. “You could have volunteered a bit of information, you know.”

His lip curled and he replied, “You made it clear that you don’t like to mix business and pleasure. It is not my fault if you are not as clever as you thought you were.”

“Not as clever!” she sputtered, shooting out of her chair. “I’m the one who talked us out of that situation, as I recall. You didn’t do anything but try to slip me veritaserum. What was your plan after that? A bit of Imperio? Some Cruciatu for giggles?” She whirled back to Albus and said with a forced smile, “Headmaster, I think I need a cigarette. I can keep the smell away from you, I promise.”
"The smell is not the problem, my dear, the magic you do with the smoke is," Albus replied calmly.

Severus snorted. "So that's what you've been doing."

"Not on you," she retorted. "I didn't need to use any magic on you."

"Do stop bickering children, we haven't the time," Albus interrupted. "Miss Rose, I am afraid I can no longer ignore you. I want to know whose side you are on."

"I'm not on a side," she deflected. "America stayed out of the last Wizarding War and I expect we'll do the same if another one begins. I'd probably be sanctioned by MACUSA if I were officially to declare a side."

"Everyone must choose a side, official or not. Politics don't matter to anyone but people like Cornelius Fudge."

"The man is my client. If I gain a reputation for betraying my clients, it'll be bad for business," she protested angrily.

"I'm not asking for an outright betrayal. I am simply asking you to cease investigating the Order. It would also be very good if you would continue to track Sirius Black, but fail to find him."

"Oh, so you just want me to look incompetent?"

"In a manner of speaking," Albus said patiently. "Voldemort is one of the strongest wizards ever to live. If he comes to power, he will spread death and destruction throughout the wizarding world, I daresay, even in America. I believe Severus mentioned that you are of Muggle descent. Witches like you will be the first target if Voldemort is triumphant."

Miranda had started pacing, trying process everything that Albus had revealed. She was furious that she had somehow missed such an important detail as the resurrection of Lord Voldemort, although she supposed that might explain all of the extra activity among the darker magical creatures. She was also fighting to regain control of her temper. While she might have been willing
to take on Severus in a fight, she could tell she was no match for Albus. She was at their mercy as long as she was in this office. She’d assumed that they were trust-worthy, but she’d just been shown that several of her assumptions were rather incorrect.

Severus was watching her intently and seemed to have guessed her train of thought.

“Sit down, Miranda,” he ordered quietly. “We aren’t going to attack you. At most, we may have to modify your memory, but you have a much better chance of leaving this room unharmed than you did of walking out of Malfoy Manor at all.”

She stopped pacing and glared at him. “And I’m supposed to trust you? If Voldemort is back, it seems you’re an active Death Eater rather than a former one.”

“Miss Rose, I trust Severus completely,” Albus stated firmly. “And, moreover, I believe that you do as well.”

She inhaled sharply, but allowed, “I suppose that is true, although Heaven knows why.”

She sat back down and was silent for a long time. She finally said, in a business-like tone, “I think we have two issues at hand: the first being what I’m going to do about Mr. Black and the second regarding an English civil war that you’re asking me illegally to take sides in. I think we should deal with the issues one at a time.”

“I understand that this must come as a shock to you Miss Rose,” Albus observed, “but I believe that you are of a strong constitution. I am willing to give you the time you require to take a decision.”

“I am going to take your word on Black’s innocence.” She smirked and added, “Honestly, it is my inclination not to trust government authorities and Malfoy gives me the creeps, so I’d rather not do his and Fudge’s bidding anyway. I can also promise not to reveal what you are up to. I can’t promise to help you beyond that just yet, although I am willing to consider the matter.”

“Thank you, Miss Rose.” Albus smiled at her. “However, there is still the matter of vetting you.”

“How do you propose to do that?”
"I would like you to allow Severus to see your thoughts. He is an expert Legilimens. If he thinks that we can trust you, we will trust you."

She looked grim and asked, "Is it really necessary to use Legilimency? Is there nothing else I can do?"

"Do you have something to hide?" Severus demanded.

"No more than anyone else. It's just..." Her voice trailed off and for a moment she looked rather vulnerable. "It's going to be unpleasant. I can't let you into my mind, it simply won't work. I was telling the truth the other evening at Malfoy Manor. I really am immune to veritaserum. When you enter my mind, there will only be a wall. You can bore through it, but I can't lower it to let you in. I also can't get out to perform Legilimency myself without boring through the wall. It's a shame, it would have been a useful skill in my profession"

"I am sorry, Miss Rose, but I must insist," Albus said firmly. "Perhaps you would prefer to create the necessary entrance?"

She shook her head, looking resigned. "No. It will be faster if Severus does it. I have a hard time maintaining consciousness when I try to cut my way out." She folded her legs underneath her in the chair, closed her eyes, and began to breathe slowly and rhythmically. After about five minutes, she opened her eyes and said, "I am ready."

Severus rose and drew his wand. He had never heard of the strange mental protection that Miranda had described and he did not relish the idea of cutting his way into her mind. He half wished that Albus would do his own dirty work. He frowned and held her silver gaze with his black one. "Legillimens," he said.

He was standing on a dusty road inside her mind, facing a smooth, gray wall. It reached as high as he could see. He pushed at it, hoping there would be another way in, but it felt as hard as physical stone. In her mind's eye, he drew his wand and commanded, "Scalpero."

Red sparks began drilling a hole through the wall. Miranda was sweating, fighting to keep her breathing even. Severus knew he was hurting her, but he put it out of his mind. He had a job to do and the sooner it was finished the better. Slowly and steadily the hole grew larger. Finally he forced his way through the barrier and her thoughts were swirling around him.
……Miranda was wrestling the werewolf, grunting in pain as it slashed her from shoulder to hip…She was lying on Severus’s bed and he was reading to her…She was six years old, singing and twirling around the parlor of a farmhouse in winter. A large man with bright blue eyes was playing the fiddle while a kind-faced woman wearing spectacles and four boys older than Miranda were singing along with her…She was fifteen, terrified, and walking slowly up the aisle of a dark church to a coffin surrounded by six tall brown candles. When she reached it, she saw the body of a silver-haired boy a bit older than she was….She was twenty, lying in a heap on the floor amid the ruins of a bookshelf. She pulled herself to a sitting position, her left arm dangling uselessly at her side. She pulled a vial of turquoise liquid out of a pocket and gulped it. Tossing the vial aside, she pulled herself up to standing and drew a knife out of her boot. She crept silently out of the room and through a dark hallway, towards the sound of a battle. Through a broken door at the end of the hall, she could see two wizards dueling furiously. As she reached the door, the dark-haired wizard disarmed the light-haired wizard. She quickened her pace and stole into the room as the dark-haired wizard cast the Killing Curse. The light-haired wizard slumped to the ground and Miranda plunged her knife into the neck of the dark-haired wizard, whose eyes widened in pain and surprise before he too slid to the ground, dead. She wiped her blade on the dead man’s robes, kicked him in the head, and continued past him to the side of the light-haired wizard. When she reached him, she sank to the floor beside him, and silently laid her head on his chest….

Severus was sweating himself as he combed through her thoughts.

_Show me what I need to know_, he ordered.

_I can’t! It hurts…. she whimpered._

_The sooner I have what I need, the sooner it will be over._

She shuddered, but tried to direct her thoughts to something relevant to his search.

……She was eleven, standing on the engraving of a Gordian Knot in a large, circular room. She was surrounded by the wooden carvings of four odd looking creatures. Suddenly one of them flapped its wings and she rushed towards a group of students, smiling….She was eighteen, arguing with the large blue-eyed man in the farmhouse. Three other men sat around the room looking irritated and amused….She was twenty-five, on the trail of a strange reptilian creature that moved like a kangaroo….She was riding a gray horse through the woods…She was walking by the sea near her cabin…She was having tea with Professor Horace Slughorn…She was knocking on the door of an old woman Severus recognized as having lived near Spinner’s End for his whole life… She was sitting in Cornelius Fudge’s office, feigning interest in whatever he was prattling on about….She was running her foot up Severus’s inseam, flirting with Lucius….She was in Severus’s bed, arching her body against his…. 
Severus became aware that she was trembling like a leaf in her chair.

"Please, stop," she whispered. He broke eye contact and she fell forward in a faint. He caught her before she hit the floor and gathered her to his chest.

Without looking at Albus, he said, “She is who she says she is. Was that really necessary?” His voice was very quiet in his anger.

Albus looked grim but answered, "You, of all people, know it was.”

"Were you worried about the Order, or were you worried about her compromising your spy?"

"Does it matter?"

Severus turned and glared at Albus, but the older wizard looked exhausted and waved him away. "Take her down to your rooms, Severus, before Umbridge gets out of class."

Severus paced the length of his bedroom, waiting for Miranda to awaken. She was lying on his bed and had been unconscious for perhaps twenty minutes since she had fainted in Albus’s office. He had no idea how long she would be out or if there would be any lasting damage from his entry into her mind. He was angry at Albus, although he knew that the older wizard was right to be cautious. He was angry at Miranda for making what should have been a simple excursion into her thoughts a traumatic one. He was angry at himself for hurting her and he was angry that he cared. After all, it was not his fault that she had a strange mind. Why should he feel so guilty, then? He had not really taken any time to consider what exactly he was doing carrying on with her. Obviously the physical part of the relationship was exquisite. He had thought that was his primary motivation for seeing her, and that had probably been true at the start. He had been telling himself that his concern for her safety was simply due to his selfish desire that she continue warming his bed. If he were fair,
he supposed he enjoyed her company as well as her body. She was competent; a trait he usually did not find in others. She was comfortable with silence and did not feel the need to prattle on constantly. She knew what questions to avoid asking him. She actually seemed to like him; something he had rarely experienced. And she was certainly never dull.

Miranda suddenly opened her eyes, although they did not seem to notice their surroundings. “David?” she whispered. "Where are you?"

He stopped pacing and went to sit next to her on the bed.

She sat up, her voice urgent and frightened. "David? Where are you? I can't see you."

He put his hands on her shoulders. “Miranda, it's Severus.”

Her eyes focused on him, but she still seemed completely confused. She asked for David a few more times before finally recognizing Severus. He handed her a glass of water, which she drank, hands still shaking.

After she had drained the glass, he asked quietly, “David is one of the young men I saw dead?”

She looked away from him and gave a short nod. "We went to school together. We were going to be married. Had a date set and everything. Then we set out after a dark wizard, Isidore Carter. He must have taken a page out of Voldemort’s book, he was murdering No-Majs right and left.” She inhaled deeply to calm her voice. “I suppose you saw the rest.”

“I did.”

She was still in her memories and went on, speaking half to herself. “David was a bit like my brother Columba, always a kind word for everyone, always looking on the bright side of things. He was no match for me in a duel, but he never minded. He was more patient than I was and his potions always turned out perfectly.” She covered her eyes with her hand. “He never should have taken on Carter alone. We were tracking him together, but Carter separated us and got ahold of my wand in the process. By the time I got to them, I was too late. But I had my poisoned knife, so at least Carter couldn’t hurt anyone else ever again. I don’t know why I’m telling you all this. You saw it anyway, it must be terribly dull to listen to.”
“No. It isn’t.”

“Well,” she smiled angrily and tried to turn the subject, ”I’m glad Malfoy wasn’t bright enough to ask you to do that. Fainting is so undignified.”

“It is unfortunate that Legilimency is so painful for you.”

“Unfortunate that Legilimency is so painful for me?” she repeated incredulously, still avoiding his eyes. “I’d say it’s unfortunate that you and Headmaster Dumbledore thought it was necessary.”

“Come now, surely you realize that we had to be certain that your story was true,” he said, a bit patronizingly.

“All I realize is that you and Malfoy are rather more similar than I had thought,” she replied coldly.

"Miranda, look at me," he demanded.

"Why, so you can mentally rape me again?"

“Stop being melodramatic,” he snapped defensively. “You agreed to it. It is not my fault that your mind is so unusual.”

“I agreed because I had no choice,” she said in a low voice. “I could have taken my chances with you, but Dumbledore obviously had me outmatched even before he relieved me of my wand and my cigarettes. What else was I supposed to do?”

A heavy silence descended on the pair. Eventually her trembling stopped and the color returned to her face. At last, she stood.

"May I have my wand back now?” she asked, finally looking at him. ”I'd like to go home.”

Severus handed it back to her reluctantly. He didn't want her to leave like this, but he had no idea how to convince her to stay. He certainly wasn’t going to apologize for doing something he felt
justified in doing.

Suddenly her eyes flashed and she pointed her wand at him, "Legilimens!" she hissed.

Severus was so startled that she was in his mind, seeing his thoughts before he could do anything to stop her.

…..He stepped over the corpse of a bespectacled man that lay at the top of the stairs. He did not want to enter the room at the end of the hall. He could hear a baby crying and he knew what he would see, but he could not stop himself. He opened the door and a red-haired woman lay dead on the floor, her child in the crib behind her. His knees buckled and he leaned against the wall for support, then he gathered her into his arms, holding her and weeping….

Miranda withdrew. She lowered her wand and said caustically, “It will take a while for the hole you made to close again. I thought I’d take advantage of it.”

Severus stood up slowly, his eyes blazing murderously at her. “How dare you,” he hissed.

They looked daggers at each other for several minutes. Then she pocketed her wand, walked away from him, and leaned her shoulder against the wall near his wardrobe. Her hands were shaking slightly as she took out her cigarette case. She drew out a cigarette, lit it, and took an extremely long drag of smoke. A gentle breeze started, and she stood there smoking, meeting Severus’s glare with her own.

“The dead woman was Lily?” she finally asked indifferently.

“Brilliant deduction,” he bit back at her.

She smoked to the end of her cigarette in silence, snuffed it out on his wall, and vanished the butt into thin air. Then she muttered, “Severus, I think we need to go out and get shit-faced.”

“Am I supposed to understand that charmingly plebeian phrase?” His asked, his voice a knife of sarcasm.
“Drunken,” she answered condescendingly. “We need to get drunk.”

She stalked to the bathroom and when she reached the door she turned and gave him a once over. “You know how to dance?” she asked dubiously.

“Of course I do,” he spat. “What does that have to do with…”

“Good,” she interrupted. Then she turned on heel and entered the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

He shook his head in disbelief as he heard the water start running. How dare she? How dare she invade his mind? He never wanted to see her again! He whirled around, stormed through his sitting room, into the hallway, and slammed the door behind him. He did not stop until he reached his office, where he slammed the door so hard that the jars on the shelves on the wall rattled in protest. He sat down at his desk and started furiously marking scrolls. He had work to do! He did not have time to waste on that vulgar, imperious harpy!

Half an hour later, his breathing had returned to something resembling normal. He threw down his quill and sat back in his chair, his eyes staring blankly at his desk. He knew exactly how Miranda felt. How many times had he submitted to the Dark Lord’s invasion of his mind? How long had it been since he had had a choice? It was true that he took a grotesque sort of pleasure in knowing that he was able to fool the Dark Lord with his powers of Occlumency, but it still made him want to vomit every time. He inhaled sharply. He was livid with Miranda for what she had done and furious that she was attempting to order him about. However, sitting in his office reading the twaddle his dunderhead students had written seemed even less appealing than whatever Miranda had planned.

“Very well,” he muttered. “Shit-faced it is.”

Chapter End Notes

Miranda finally gets caught using one of her tricks in this chapter. Her cigarettes contain tobacco as well as other useful magical herbs (although not marijuana--that's a thing unto itself). She can use the smoke to relax herself and to help herself heal more quickly. She can also use it to relax other people and make them more pliable to her manipulation of them. She has not used this trick on Severus, although she certainly used it at Malfoy Manor. Smoke and magic will appear later in the story.
Prospero's

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Miranda stood in Severus’s shower, letting the water run over her and leaning her aching head against the tiled wall. She felt as though someone had attacked her skull with an ice pick and then stirred her brain like a Christmas pudding. She heard Severus stomping away, followed by the door slamming and assumed that he had decided not to join her on a drinking binge. Good. She was glad to be alone. She turned the water up hotter and slapped her hand against the wall. Her palm came away stinging, but the pain in her hand momentarily distracted her from the pain in her head.

*Fuck Albus Dumbledore and fuck Severus Snape!* she thought viciously. She supposed that Voldemort was worse, but the wizards on the side of light were certainly willing to get their hands dirty.

It suddenly struck her that Voldemort might actually be the one behind her assignment to hunt Sirius Black and she shuddered at the thought. She was reckless, but she wasn’t stupid. She knew that Voldemort was the last person she wanted paying any attention to her. Maybe it was time to cut her losses and go back home. That would be the smart thing to do, but she’d been acting rather foolish since she’d met Severus Snape.

Severus Snape. She’d noticed the red tattoo on his left forearm even before officially investigating him. Americans weren’t completely ignorant of events happening in the rest of the wizarding world; whatever the rest of the world might say about them. It hadn’t particularly bothered her that he’d been a Death Eater. Lots of people did stupid things when they were young. But he was still a Death Eater! She suspected from their meeting today that he was Dumbledore’s spy in Voldemort’s camp, but that was the sanguine view of things. Being as Severus was still alive, Voldemort must believe that Severus was his spy in Dumbledore’s camp. Was she willing to bet her life on Dumbledore’s vote of confidence?

She turned up the water again. She’d been avoiding thinking about what the hell she was doing with Severus. She barely knew the man and she’d basically thrown herself at him. She’d been completely reckless and it served her right that he turned out to be a spy—or evil. But for some reason, she believed in her heart that he wouldn’t willingly hurt her. She had never been afraid of him, even this evening when he had been livid at her for using legilimency on him. She appreciated his genius. She usually found his sarcastic remarks amusing. He wasn’t intimidated by her magical prowess—something she’d rarely found in men. Usually wizards either pretended she was less competent than they were, or they shied away, preferring less powerful witches. She wasn’t actually sure if she could defeat Severus in a duel, but she knew that she could give him a run for his money.
She supposed what drew her to him most was his veneer of complete control. It was as though he were challenging her to break through that control to see the emotions that he was hiding underneath it. That and the fact that he only had to look at her to make her want to fall into bed with him. Good Lord, she was being an idiot, but she couldn’t seem to stop herself.

She stayed in the shower for more than an hour, trying wash off the feeling of violation. At some point, she heard the door slam again, so she stayed in for an extra fifteen minutes out of petulance. As her anger cooled, she admitted to herself that she did understand Dumbledore’s concern about her. She was sleeping with his spy after all, and it made a harsh sort of sense that Dumbledore would want to be sure that she wasn’t some sort of spy or trap herself. But why did Severus have to be such an asshole about it? Why didn’t he know when to quit?

When she resembled a wrinkled, boiled lobster, she emerged and wrapped herself in a large, black bath towel. She wiped some steam off the mirror, examining herself critically and picking up her wand from the sink.

“Ventula,” she said, directing the breeze to her hair. When it was dry, she brushed it until it shone and painstakingly arranged it in a pile of braids on the back of her head.

“Formosa.” A subtle color came into her face, highlighting her lips, eyes, and cheeks. She turned to her tunic and trousers hanging on the back of the door and flicked her wand at them.

“Multatio vestimentia.” They transfigured into another gown of lapis lazuli blue. She considered it for a moment and made a few alterations before slipping it over her head. She pulled the sapphire earrings out of her bag and then transfigured the whole thing into a silver handbag. Her boots she changed into silver shoes with heels low enough for some serious dancing. She pulled her silver cloak out of her bag and wrapped it around her shoulders. She put on her earrings, slung her handbag over her wrist, and strode out of the bathroom, head held high.

Severus was sitting at his desk, marking scrolls. From the set of his jaw and his shoulders, he still seemed furious. He did not look at her as she came out of the bedroom, so she sat down stiffly in the arm chair in front of the fire. There was a tray of sandwiches and water sitting on the end table next to the chair. When he still did not speak, she pulled her novel out of her handbag, bewitched it to float at eye level, and silently started eating.

A few moments later, he laid down his quill and stalked into the bedroom. She heard the water start running and wondered if she should feel victorious or apprehensive that he had decided to obey her command that they go out. She turned the page angrily and kept eating. If he was going to be vile, she would do the same.
After her second sandwich and third chapter, she was actually feeling a bit better. Her head did not ache nearly so much and she had managed to lose herself pleasantly in her book. She was so focused that she did not notice Severus silently approach her and begin reading over her shoulder, until he started to do so aloud.

“‘Before she could withdraw her mind from its far places, his arms were around her, as sure and hard as on the dark road to Tara, so long ago,’” he began in the tone that he reserved for reading his students’ confiscated notes aloud in class. She made a grab for the book, but he was faster. He snatched it and went on, “‘She felt again the rush of helplessness, the sinking yielding, the surging tide of warmth that left her limp. And the quiet face of Ashley Wilkes was blurred and drowned to nothingness.’”

“Give that back, you ass!” she snapped, turning in the chair and climbing to her knees. She made another futile attempt to retrieve the book, but he dodged easily and paced away from her, his eyes gleaming wickedly.

“No, it’s just getting interesting,” he mocked. “‘He bent back her head across his arm and kissed her, softly at first, and then with a swift gradation of intensity that made her cling to him as the only solid thing left in a dizzy swaying world. His insistent mouth was parting her shaking lips, sending wild tremors along her nerves, evoking from her sensations she had never known she was capable of feeling. And before a swimming giddiness spun her round and round, she knew that she was kissing him back.’”

Miranda, her face beet red, drew her wand and snapped, “Accio, book!”

He laughed softly as the book flew to her hand. She shrank it, returned it to her handbag and turned back to her sandwich, her anger returning. How did he manage to ruin her moods so quickly?

“What are you reading, my dear?” he asked smoothly.

“Gone with the Wind. It’s about the Götterdämmerung of the American South,” she replied loftily

“Not on that particular page.”
“More generally it is about people who have gumption and people who don’t.”

“Perhaps you would rather stay in with your novel. It seems rather lurid.”

She looked at him coldly and conjured a map of Melrose in Roxburghshire. The map floated in the air and she said, “This is Prospero’s. You’ll hate it. It’s full of Americans and other barbarians. You can join me or not, I really don’t give a shit.” She tapped the map and a circle glowed around the club’s location.

He had actually felt his mood lighten as he teased Miranda for her choice of reading material, but her cold look reminded him that he was still furious at her.

“I think I shall see this childish whim out to its conclusion,” he replied icily. He studied the map until he thought he could Apparate to the place, then he followed her out of his rooms and into the night.

The waxing moon shone brightly over the hills and trees when they appeared with a crack fifteen minutes later. It was warm for early November, although there was a chill in the wind that held the promise of winter. The grass was still mostly green under their feet and the dark, hulking shapes of the Eildon Hills slumbered silently in the distance. An owl hooted somewhere in the trees, but otherwise the green was quiet and peaceful.

Miranda drew her wand, whispered, “Lumos,” and a blue light appeared at its tip.

She began awkwardly picking her way over to a copse of trees behind them, the heels of her shoes sinking into the still soft earth. Severus almost reached out a hand to steady her, but decided against it. If she wanted help she could ask for it.
When they reached the copse, she began searching the trunk of a gnarled old oak tree. Eventually she found the knot she was looking for and tapped it with her wand. A jagged doorway appeared and she descended the wooden staircase, heels now clicking on the hard surface. Severus followed her, the door snapping shut behind him. At the bottom of the stairs, the word *Prospero’s* glowed in neon green light above the gaping mouth of a cave. It was cool and damp inside the stairwell, the air stagnant and heavy. He fancied there would be something at the bottom warning all sane people not to enter. But warning or no, enter they did.

He blinked hard as he was assaulted by light, noise, and smoke. He suppressed a cough and surveyed a large room done mostly in metal and glass. The high ceiling was hung with chains on which were suspended thousands of multi-colored hurricane lamps. The weird, rainbow colored light that the lamps provided was reflected by the mirrored walls. The cement floor was hard under his feet after the grass and the wood. It was painted in black and white spirals that made one rather dizzy to observe. At the front of the club was a wooden dance floor, also done in black and white spirals, and a metal stage etched with a dance macabre. A six piece band dressed in obnoxiously bright robes sat on the stage, grooving along through some American swing. Although it was a Tuesday, several couples were whirling around the floor like dervishes and, as Miranda had threatened, Severus heard as many American accents as anything else.

Miranda wandered through the groups of converted industrial spool tables until they reached a curved mass of wrought iron topped with a thick layer of dark wood. This apparently served as the bar and Miranda tried to hail the short, curvy barmaid over the music. It took a few tries, but eventually the curly-haired brunette sauntered their direction.

“Miranda!” she chirped, leaning over the bar to peck Miranda on the cheek. “Where’ve you been hiding? We haven’t seen you in here since September!”

Miranda smiled and said, “I’ve been busy, Cynthia.”

Cynthia eyed Severus appreciatively as he removed his cloak and shrank it to fit in his pocket. He was dressed in his usual black, but tonight there was no trace of white at his high collar or long
cuff. The buttons down the front of his frock coat were dark green cabochons and a silver snake pin glinted at his throat. He had managed to get most of the fumes from the potions classroom out of his hair for once and Miranda, as angry as she was, wanted to run her fingers through it.

“I can see that,” Cynthia giggled. “Why haven’t you brought him around before? Keeping him all to yourself?”

Miranda pulled out a cigarette and rolled her eyes as she lit it. “Please. He doesn’t get out much. He hates crowds, and noise, and probably me, but we need to blow off some steam.”

“Well, when you’re done with him, I’ll take him. Steam, huh? You want the usual, or are you after the rye tonight?”

“I think the rye’ll do it for me. Neat for the first round, up after that. He can order for himself.”

Cynthia turned to Severus, who gave her a calculating look. “I suppose it would too taxing on a place such as this to request a Monte Cassino,” he commented dryly.

Miranda snorted as Cynthia’s eyebrows went up.

“Classy guy,” Cynthia purred, turning to fetch bottles and glassware from their perches among concrete flora and fauna.

“But only if you actually know how to make it,” he stipulated.

Cynthia turned back to Severus with her hands on her hips. “Equal parts Benedictine, Yellow Chartreuse, fresh squeezed lemon juice, and rye whiskey. Stir sixteen and three quarter times clockwise from the perspective of the bottom of the mixing glass with eight and a quarter ounces of ice. Strain into a coupe and garnish with a two inch twist of lemon peel.”

The corner of his lip curled. “Proceed.”

Cynthia nodded and turned to her work. A few minutes later she slid a tumbler of dark amber liquid to Miranda, and an elegant coupe to Severus.
“To the past,” Miranda said, her eyes and smile hard as she clinked glasses with him.

Severus sipped his drink, and gave Cynthia an approving nod. Miranda shot most of hers down in one, set down her glass, and removed her silver cloak. Severus was glad that he was so practiced at maintaining a blank expression, but he could not stop his pulse from racing as she stowed her cloak in her handbag and leaned against the bar in such a way as to display herself to her best advantage. Her dress had a high, mandarin collar and bell sleeves that slit up past her elbows. Despite the high neckline, the dress was fitted perfectly to every curve and he could not help picturing everything he knew was under it. The skirt fitted across her hips and trailed down to her lovely ankles, but it was slit up to her thighs in several places, so it in no way impeded her movement.

“I thought I wouldn’t bother introducing you to anyone,” she said casually. “After all, we’re not friends or anything.”

“Good. I’d rather not have it known that I set foot in a place like this,” he answered in kind. “Does the band play music, or only this cacophony?”

“They’re versatile. I’m sure they’ll play something that you can keep up with.” She finished her cigarette as the band switched to a plaintive waltz. “Stogy enough for you?”

“Quite.” He gave her a short bow. “If I may have the pleasure.”

She took his hand, her eyes still hard. When they reached the dance floor, he put his right hand properly on her left shoulder blade in preparation for a classic waltz.

“You sure you know what you’re doing?” she goaded.

In response, he slid his hand down to her mid-back, and swept her into a Viennese waltz rather than the simple box-step. Her eyes widened slightly in surprise, and she had to cling to his shoulder as her feet left the floor for a few seconds before she caught up with him. They glided gracefully around the dance floor and she had to admit that he did, in fact, know what he was doing. She felt as though she were floating supported by his arms and their momentum. It was a very agreeable sensation and she felt some of the tension she’d been carrying all day drain out of her. She thought she saw the gleam in his eye lose some of its maliciousness as well and her hopes rose that the evening would end better than it had begun.
Severus held onto her a bit longer than strictly necessary at the end of the dance so that he could admire the flush that had come into her cheeks. Then they went back to the bar and Cynthia set them up with another round.

“Not bad,” she allowed with a smile.

“You seem to have mastered the basics,” he replied, his tone less caustic than it had been earlier. Then he smirked and added, “Impressive for a barbarian.”

“Oh, we still do a few things across the pond.”

“Miranda!” A drawling male voice interjected.

“Aaron!” Miranda cried, turning to the owner of the voice. Her face broke into a real smile and she embraced a tall wizard with a dark pompadour and a chevron mustache. “It’s been ages!”

Aaron stooped to kiss Miranda’s cheek and said, “I know. I’d heard you were in England, but we’ve been busy at the embassy night and day and it seems you’re never here when I am.”

“It’s actually been a while since I have been here. I’ve had my plate full since I got to England. Although, I guess we’re in Scotland now. Whatever.”

“Anything you can tell me about?” Aaron asked, motioning to Cynthia for one of what Miranda was having.

“Oh, you know, same old, same old.”

“Vampires or graphorns this time?” Aaron removed the vermillion cape covering his slate blue pinstripe suit and took a seat on the stool next to Miranda.

“Wizards actually.”
Severus cleared his throat and she suddenly remembered his presence. She frowned, not exactly sure how to introduce him.

“Oh, of course,” she began, sounding a bit flustered. “Severus, this is Aaron Lee. He works for MACUSA. We were in the same year and house at Ilvermorny. Aaron, Severus Snape. He’s the Potions Master at Hogwarts.”

Aaron stuck out his hand and Severus shook it. “Nice to meet you, Professor Snape.”

“Mr. Lee,” Severus answered tersely.

“But don’t go telling anyone you saw him here,” Miranda went on. “You know how the English expect their professors to live like monks. We don’t want him to get fired for coming to this dive.”

“And with you, no less,” Aaron agreed, teasing. He sipped his rye and added, “Watch her, she broke my heart.”

“I did not!” she exclaimed. “You always had eyes for Rachel.”

“Only after you ditched me for David. I thought I’d never recover.”

“Good Lord, we dated for two weeks fifth year and you never stopped talking long enough to kiss me even once. David knew how to put some pauses in a conversation.”

“I was terrified you’d hex me if I got fresh!” Aaron protested good-naturedly.

“Well, I’d never have put up with your constant chattering, so it’s a good thing Rachel took you. How is she anyway?”

“Eh, she’s been under the weather. That’s why she kicked me out tonight. Said I was driving her crazy with all my talking.”
“So you thought you’d drive me crazy instead? Lucky me!”

The band struck up another swing number and Aaron grinned at Miranda. “Come on, old girl, you still got it?”

“Do you, old man?”

“Try me!”

“You don’t mind, do you Severus?”

“Why should I mind if you wish to make an exhibition of yourself?” Severus replied in that smooth tone that he used whenever he was angry.

She decided to take him at his word and linked arms with Aaron. Severus leaned against the bar, drinking his cocktail and glaring at the pair of them. He had actually enjoyed waltzing with Miranda, but he was most displeased that this prat had interrupted his evening. He had hoped to bait Miranda until his anger passed and the wretched band played something worth dancing to.

He was also angry to watch Miranda’s easy manner with her old school friend. She never seemed quite that open with him. Severus supposed that she was responding to his guarded nature and perhaps she was wary of how much to share with him. This was perfectly logical, but it didn’t make him feel any better about it. He frowned darkly as he watched Miranda and Aaron execute the athletic swing steps as easily as if they had danced together all their lives. And really, perhaps they had. They somehow even had the breath to talk and Miranda seemed to think whatever Aaron was saying to her was hilariously funny. Severus almost cast an eavesdropping charm, but decided he was above such low behavior. He settled for finishing his drink, ordering another, and brooding.

“Knut for your thoughts?” Cynthia asked as she sat another coupe in front of him.

He gave her a withering look, took his drink, and went back to glaring at Miranda and Aaron.

Cynthia cleared her throat, and he turned his glare on her. “It’s none of my business, but maybe you’d rather I set the two of you up at one of the back corner tables. It’ll be harder for Miranda’s crowd to interrupt you there. If you stay here at the bar, I guarantee you it’ll keep happening. She’s a good time, as I’m sure you already know.” She smiled at him and added, “And we’d really rather
there not be any hexing if you don’t mind. It scuffs the floor and when the band’s instruments get wrecked, we have to replace them.”

Severus’s face relaxed a bit. “Duly noted.”

“So what’s with the fella?” Aaron was asking as he and Miranda rock-stepped to catch their breath.

“Oh, you know, it’s complicated.” Miranda deflected.

“As in, he’s married complicated?”

“More like, he’s addicted to his job complicated.”

Aaron flipped her around his back and when she landed he asked, “Is it serious?”

“No!” Miranda answered a bit too forcefully, and Aaron grinned at her. “I mean, not really. I mean, I’m pissed off at him right now, so I don’t know that I’m even going to see him again after tonight.”

Aaron laughed and flipped her over his arm. “From the way he’s glaring at me, I’d say he’s planning to see you again. I just hope he doesn’t murder me. Make sure you talk about how much I love my wife, okay?”

She scoffed at the idea of Severus being jealous. “Come on, he doesn’t give a shit what I do.”

“I don’t know about that.” They executed a complicated pretzel move, and when they were back to the rock step Aaron pressed, “What’d he do to make you so mad?”

“He’s an asshole that’s what! He just doesn’t know when to stop acting like an ass and give it a rest.”
“Miranda, I’m going to tell you a little secret. Now, I don’t know if this guy is worth it, but I do know you haven’t really dated anybody since David died a decade ago. So if this guy has got you interested, it might not be worth throwing him over just for being an ass.”

“But he’s such an ass.”

“Silence and listen to my wisdom, woman!” Miranda laughed out loud and he flipped her around his back again.

“Now,” he turned her so that they were dancing side by side and went on in her ear, “men, in general, are the same amount of asshole all the time, day in and day out. But women, you see, women have patience, a quality that many men lack. We men are the benefactors of this patience but, sometimes this patience runs out. When that happens, women get angry with men. And we men are confused, because we have been doing the same thing and being the same amount of asshole and suddenly, the women are angry. And then, the women regain their patience, usually after a good fuck, and the cycle starts over.”

He tried to flip her over his arm again, but Miranda was laughing so hard that she lost her balance and slid to the floor. Aaron twirled her around on the floor, stepped over her, pulled her between his legs, and flipped her around so that she ended balanced on his hip. He held her there until she stopped laughing enough to put her feet back on the floor. She kissed his cheek and wrapped her arms around him.

“Hey, knock it off before he hexes me!” Aaron laughed, pushing her away playfully. They linked arms again and Aaron started to take Miranda back to Severus, but when they looked towards the bar he was no where to be found.

“See, I told you he didn’t give a shit what I did,” Miranda pointed out with a tight smile.

“More likely he’s waiting outside in the alley to jump me,” Aaron replied humorously as he scanned the room for Severus. “Do you have time to come by on Thursday for dinner? Rachel’d love to see you, she’s been a bit down lately.”

“I’d love to.”

“You can bring the fella if you want. Assuming you don’t dump him tonight.”
“Thanks, but I don’t think he’d be interested. He’s a bit of a lone wolf and company is not his natural habitat.”

“Fair enough. But think about what I said, okay?”

“Are you quite finished?” Severus demanded silkily.

Miranda and Aaron both jumped. Neither had heard his approach over the music which, while not a waltz, was at least no longer swing.

Aaron smiled pleasantly at Severus and said, “She’s all yours. Nice to meet you Professor Snape. Thanks for letting me borrow her.” He gave Miranda another quick kiss on the cheek and added, “Bring some of that toffee you make, will you? If that doesn’t cheer Rachel up, nothing will.”

“Oh, I think you have a few ideas on how to cheer her up,” Miranda replied. “But I’ll bring some. Anything for Rachel.”

Aaron waved and headed over to a group of men who had started a card game at a table in the middle of the room. Miranda turned to Severus, her shoulders and jaw tensing at the sight of his cold expression. The good-will that Aaron's easy presence had inspired in her disappeared and she had half a mind to join her friend at the card table. Before she could step away though, Severus took her in his arms and led her into a foxtrot. His touch was light, but firm and unyielding, leaving no room for argument as they moved.

“Toffee?” He might as well have said 'maggots' for how appealing his tone made the confection sound.

“What? So I know how to make toffee, is that a crime?” she said defensively. “I’m sure you don’t even like toffee.”

“Actually, I do.”

“Really? I never thought I’d see the day you admitted to liking something.”
“I like you when you aren’t acting like a child,” he allowed.

She wasn’t sure quite how to take that. She settled for smirking and saying, “Is it at all possible for you to say something without an insult attached?”

“Not when you are so provoking.”

“There you go, blaming me again.” She sighed and her face softened. “Severus, I actually do understand that you and Dumbledore had to be sure I wasn’t some kind of MACUSA spy out to get you. It was more the presentation than the content that pissed me off.”

“You are so full of charming vulgarities,” he mocked. “Are you even speaking English?”

“Pissed off is a delicate way of saying furiously angry,” she snapped. “Look, could you just shut up while I explain, or do you even care? If I’m just a piece of ass to you, then do let me know so that we can stop wasting our time. It’s entirely possible for us to fuck without speaking and it would be much more efficient.”

“That idea has some merit. Perhaps we should try it.”

She clenched her jaw and tried to disengage from him, but he wouldn’t let her go. After a moment he said in a slightly less sarcastic tone, “Why don’t you keep explaining.”

She glared at him but didn’t try to escape. Instead, she stepped closer to him, dancing cheek to cheek so that she could speak quietly in his ear. “I suspected pretty early on that you were wrapped up in something dangerous. I had no idea how dangerous it was until today. You might think I’m a madwoman, but I’m not a complete idiot. I’m everything Voldemort hates without actually being a No-Maj. Do you think I want to be anywhere near him? How likely would it be for me to walk away alive?”

“As likely as my consenting to swing dance,” he drawled softly.

“And, even assuming that you are on the right side of this conflict, if I wound up in his clutches it’s not like you could do anything to save me. I’m sure that having you as a spy is worth more than any one person’s life.”
Severus knew this was true and he was startled at how awful it sounded being spoken aloud.

“I don’t think I’m much of a risk as far as giving away your secrets,” she went on matter-of-factly. “I’ve endured Cruciatus before and he wouldn’t get anything out of me that way. I am able to reinforce the wall in my mind quite a bit and, while I expect he would be able to get in eventually, the pain and shock of it would kill me before he saw anything useful.”

They had drifted to the edge of the dance floor behind one of the wide steel beams holding up the ceiling. By the end of her calm description of her own torture and death, they had stopped dancing completely.

“In any case,” she concluded, “you’ll forgive me if I lose my temper with you once in a while for never giving me a break from your charming wit. Especially when I’m willing to take that kind of a risk to be with you in the first place.”

Severus took Miranda’s face in his hands and kissed her forehead, her words echoing in his mind. What kind of selfish bastard was he asking anyone to take that kind of risk? This wasn’t her home. This wasn’t her fight. There was no reason for her to stay; no good reason anyway. He still had no idea if the Dark Lord was aware of Miranda or not, or how he would react if he were. But how could Severus do anything besides assume the worst? He suddenly had a vivid image of the Dark Lord doing everything to Miranda that she had described.

“I don’t think it is worth the risk,” he said, his lips still brushing her forehead.

She looked up at him in surprise. “I think I get to decide what I’m willing to risk,” she replied.

His eyes glittered strangely at her in the swirling light. “No. You don’t. Good-bye, Miranda.”

He let go of her face and left without a backward look.

Miranda stared after him, feeling as though she’d been punched in the stomach. Where in the world had that come from? Surely Severus had been more aware of the risks involved in their relationship than she had. After all, he had been the one hiding his place in Voldemort’s army, not she. Why was he suddenly running scared now? She blew out the breath she was holding and started blinking furiously. She simply was not going to cry over Severus Snape. What an absolutely wretched day this had been.
When she felt that she had herself under control, she emerged from behind the beam and her eyes fell on the group of men playing cards. She forced a smile and stalked over to them.

“Deal me in boys,” she said, her voice as hard as her smile.

Aaron glanced up at her and frowned. “Lover boy gone away?” he asked when he saw the look on her face.

“Can’t stand the heat, I guess,” she said, swallowing the knot in her throat.

“His loss. And I mean that, Miranda.” Aaron dealt her in. There was simply no accounting for Englishmen.

Chapter End Notes

A note on Yellow Chartreuse: Chartreuse began its life as a potion, an elixir of life. The Carthusian Monks turned it into a liqueur and have been producing it since 1737. Only three monks at any one time know the full recipe. I think it is exactly the sort of thing that a Potions Master would drink.

Quoted text is excepted from Gone with the Wind by Margaret Mitchell, Macmillan Publishing Company 1964, pgs 775-776.
Rumination

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: Brief allusion to miscarriage.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Twilight was falling as Miranda slowly approached the beautiful Scottish Deerhound. It was loitering near an ancient ring of stones scratching itself and, as yet, unconcerned about its human observer. The air was cold but, as there was no wind, the temperature was not yet so unpleasant as to make outdoor tracking uncomfortable. Miranda started to ease her wand out of her pocket and the dog started, skittering a few feet and halting by another stone. She froze and waited for the dog to settle again, then she pulled a baked pig’s ear out of another pocket. The dog sniffed the air and began warily circling back towards the temptation.

Miranda squatted down and held out the treat, motionless except for her breathing. Little by little the dog came closer to her, until finally it snapped up the pig’s ear and bounded a few feet away from her. It stared at her for a moment and then plopped down on the ground to chew at the morsel. When it was fully engaged in gnawing and ripping the pig’s ear, Miranda managed to draw her wand. She waved it at the beast, lips pursed in concentration as she attempted to force the possible animagus into human form. Nothing happened.

She sat back on her heels and sighed. She knew she was wasting her time and it irked her. She felt as though she had tracked every large black dog in England, Scotland, and Wales. Now she was on the Isle of Man and she was planning to cover Ireland next. She had no idea how long Albus Dumbledore expected her to keep up this charade, and she was starting to lose her patience with the game.

She was also growing concerned about the state of Lucius Malfoy’s patience. He had decided to be amused by her performance at his Manor rather than admit that she had outwitted him. She suspected from their most recent meeting that his amusement was gradually turning into anger. He’d made a few passing remarks about how numerous and exposed her family was. She knew that America was only a port-key away and that he had the power and the resources to do whatever he wanted to them. True, the Rose clan was more dangerous than your average No-Maj family, but she knew that if Malfoy decided to take them out, there wouldn’t be much they could do to stop him. She couldn’t be everywhere at once. She had thought of asking Aaron for help putting some sort of MACUSA detail on them, but she trusted MACUSA to be about as competent as the Ministry of Magic. She also knew her family too well to imagine that they would be any good at being baby-sat. She would have to play this game out to the end.

The dog finished its treat and padded over to her, hoping for more. She held our her hand and it sniffed her, cautiously at first, but soon it decided that she was a friend. She scratched it behind its ears and then fished out another pig’s ear for it. This time it sat down at her feet, happy to have
company during its chew. She obligingly continued to pet the animal, and tried unsuccessfully to keep her thoughts from turning yet again to Severus Snape.

He was on her mind constantly these days and it exasperated her how much she missed him. He was a spy. He was an ass. He was the most irritating man of the face of the earth and, if he were suddenly to appear and crook his finger at her, she would fall back into his bed, no questions asked. She missed his hands. She missed his body. She missed his dry humor and their verbal sparring. She missed his rare smiles and the way he studied her when he thought she wasn’t looking. She didn’t completely understand why he had ended things so abruptly at Prospero’s. She found it hard to believe that he had only just become aware of the risks of their association, but maybe that was the case. Or maybe he was just afraid that she would blow his cover. She knew him well enough by now to understand that he hated not being in control of everything. And she knew herself well enough to understand that she wasn’t very good at taking orders or being predictable.

At the end of the day, maybe that was the real issue. She was probably too wild for him. She had thought there was some part of him aching for freedom but, even if that were the case, he was firmly resolved to see out his mission to the end. If she had been more to his taste, maybe he would have been willing to put up with the risk. As it stood, whatever fleeting pleasure he had had with her simply wasn’t worth the cost. It was a bitter pill, and she was doing her best to swallow it.

She gave the dog a final pat and stepped away to Apparate back to the mainland. She was due to have Thanksgiving dinner with the Lees and she was looking forward to Aaron’s complaining about the difficulties of procuring proper supplies in England. They had insisted she come by frequently after that night at the club, supposedly to ‘cheer Rachel up.’ She knew it was more about them trying to cheer her up, but she was happy to have the company all the same. It was good to have a pair of familiar faces in this sea of strangers. Severus’s memory would fade in time. She just needed time.

“Do you know how hard it was to find canned pumpkin?” Aaron said with a laugh as he distributed pie and rye-laced coffee after dinner. The three of them sat companionably around the farmhouse table in Lees’ airy kitchen. Aaron and Miranda had stuffed themselves with turkey, cornbread, sweet potatoes with bacon, cranberries, and rice.

“I had to go to five No-Maj grocery stores. I finally found a can in the back of a Waitrose and I had to elbow three No-Maj grannies to get it,” he added.

“I’m glad to know you’re not above elbowing old women in your pursuit of comestibles, Aaron,” Miranda quipped.

“Aw, they were armed. I was black and blue from their canes and umbrellas by the time I got home.”
“He was,” Rachel agreed, smiling wanly. She had only managed to eat a few bites of rice at dinner. She declined the pie and nibbled at a piece of toffee from the tin Miranda had brought. She had dark circles under her black, almond shaped eyes and her face looked rather sallow. “He earned that can, no doubt about it.”

Miranda smiled at Rachel but she was a bit worried about her friend. She hadn’t seemed herself these last few weeks. “Are you feeling any better?” Miranda asked. “I know this gloomy English weather can get anybody down.”

Rachel exchanged a look with Aaron and he said slowly, “Well, about that. We’ve got something to tell you, Miranda.”

“Yes?” Miranda sincerely hoped this wasn’t going to be bad news.

Aaron’s face became very serious. “We’re going to have a baby.”


“To be fair, I’m going to have the baby,” Rachel clarified. “Aaron’s going to try not to faint during the process.”

“I’m so happy for you! When are you due?”

“In the spring.”

“And, is everything going…” Miranda’s voice trailed off. She was well aware that the Lees had been having a rocky time trying to start their family.

“Everything is going fine,” Rachel said firmly. “I’m exhausted and can barely stand the sight of food.”

“That’s wonderful! I’m ecstatic for both of you. I can’t think of two people more suited to being parents than you both.”

“And we were hoping you’d agree to be godmother,” Aaron said.

“Of course! It would be an honor. I’ll even go to confession first.”
“I would expect no less,” Aaron said mock-seriously. “And there’s one other favor we’d like to ask.”

“More than looking after your child’s immortal soul? Do tell.”

“There’s this party I have to go to for work at the end of December. I know that’s a long way off, but it’s a highfalutin pure-blood shindig and I have to answer the invitation now. Do you think you could behave long enough to be my date? Rachel wants to take it easy gestating this time and you know she hates this sort of thing.” Aaron took his wife’s hand and smiled kindly at her.

“Are you sure I’ll fit in?” Miranda asked, her eyes twinkling wickedly.

“You know how to behave when you choose to,” Rachel said. “And I really would appreciate it. I’m in bed by eight o’clock most nights and this thing doesn’t even start until nine.”

“You know I’d do anything for the two of you. When and where?”

“It’s on the twenty-eighth of December,” Aaron said. “We can meet here at say eight-thirty, tuck Rachel into bed, and head over to Malfoy Manor together.”

Miranda dropped her fork. “Did you say Malfoy Manor?”

“Yes. It’ll be about as exciting as watching grass grow, but the house is something else. We can snoop and see how many priceless works of art we can admire while everyone else gets sloshed.”

Miranda swallowed hard and forced a smile. “Sounds divine. I’ll be there with bells on.”

Severus grated the Snakewood meticulously, careful not to waste a speck. Several cauldrons bubbled next to him, each filled with the base for a healing potion. He’d completed the anti-venom and had turned his thoughts to something more global. He had read through the book of American magic that Miranda had given him in September, and he was incorporating some of the ideas he had gleaned into his repertoire. He began adding specks of Snakewood to the first cauldron, recording the amount and the number of times he stirred on the scroll next to him. Fortunately, he was quick enough to duck as the potion exploded out of the cauldron, shooting into the air like a
“Evanesco,” he muttered, vanishing the mess and making a note on the scroll. He moved to the next cauldron and a memory came to him, unbidden.

……. “Nice one, Sev” Lily was giggling as his potion exploded. They were in their fourth year, and Professor Slughorn had allowed them extra time in the potions room for their own projects. Severus couldn’t remember what he had been working on that day, but he vividly recalled the shade of the green scarf holding back Lily’s hair and the way she had smelled of cinnamon and pomegranate juice.

“It will work next time,” he had muttered as she vanished the mess……..

How he hated this room. It had not been so unbearable when he had first started teaching, flush with the importance of being the Dark Lord’s spy and creating a brave new world for wizards. He had enjoyed terrifying his students and playing at creating a new world order. After Lily’s murder, there had been a long period during which he could go no where at Hogwarts, especially the potions room, without seeing her before him. Eventually, that had faded with regards to most of the school—but here—she was always here.

It had been particularly awful since Harry Potter and his friends had come to Hogwarts. There was Ron Weasley with his ridiculous red hair—as though Severus had not had enough of teaching Weasleys to last several lifetimes. Hermione Granger—the muggle-born witch brighter by far than any of the other students and bold like Lily had been. And, of course, there was Harry Potter himself—strutting about the school like a second James Potter, just as arrogant, just as unteachable. Except, once in a while, when Harry would be focusing intently on his work, and his eyes would gleam like Lily’s had when she was working. It was in those moments that Severus hated Harry Potter the most.

Severus finished adding the Snakewood, stirring, and taking his notes. It was Saturday evening and he would come back in the morning to take the first cauldron off the flames. He packed away his supplies and went to his rooms to sleep. His rooms had been the one place at Hogwarts where he was not constantly assaulted by memories of his youth. They had been the one place in the world that he considered his, the one place that was private and safe. Now, however, they were filled with memories of Miranda. It had been more than a month since he’d left her at Prospero’s. He knew it had been the saner thing to do, but sometimes it was almost impossible to resist the urge to find her and drag her back to his bed. He told himself that she had probably returned to America and would soon forget him. It had been a mad fling, and it was best that it were over.

The logic of this reasoning did not stop him from hoping that she would suddenly appear. Every time he entered his rooms he half expected to find her sitting in his armchair. He could almost see her, looking up from her book and smiling at him; saying something that would make him want to smile and kiss her. Frequently, when he woke from sleeping, he would be sure that she was next to him in the bed. He would keep his eyes closed, dreading to open them and see that he was alone. But eventually he always did open them, and he always was alone.
Soon it would be the Christmas Holidays. Usually he looked forward to this break from most of the students and many of the teachers. He could stay at Hogwarts, work on his own projects, and not have to return to Spinner’s End. This year he was dreading them. They stretched before him as ominously as the summer had, full of idle time and memories. Why was this his life? Why had he never been anywhere but Cokeworth and Hogwarts and London? He had never even been to the Continent.

He sat down in his armchair, intending to read until he nodded off. He couldn’t seem to focus on his book and found himself staring into the fire, brooding about Lily and Miranda. He had loved Lily so much that losing her to James had felt like dying. He knew, however, that he had lost her before that. She had been horrified by his interest in the Dark Arts and that, combined with his own brutish behavior, had driven her away. He still loved her so much that it took his breath away. That was why he continued on this path that Albus had set for him. If he kept Lily’s child alive, if he helped to vanquish the Dark Lord, then—-someday—-Lily would forgive him.

Thinking of Lily always caused him a comfortably familiar feeling of pain and guilt. He had carried it so long that not feeling it was unnerving. Thinking of Miranda though, that tended to make him dizzy. She had burst into his life and he had felt off kilter since the moment he had met her. She was like a force of nature and he had been swept up in her madness. Even his fevered adolescent sexual fantasies about Lily had paled in comparison to the carnal pleasure he and Miranda had shared. He sometimes thought that Miranda understood him better than Lily had or at least accepted him. She saw his dark side and did not seem to be bothered by it. Many of the qualities that had driven Lily away from him seemed to draw Miranda to him. Part of him envied Miranda her freedom; her ability to accept the uncertain without anxiety or complaint. She seemed completely unconcerned for her own safety, but not because she was unaware of the risks that she faced. She was intoxicating, but he did not want to bear the guilt for her death if, or when, it came.

Sometimes he would let his thoughts roam, creating fantasies of a more perfect life. A life where he had avoided all of the many mistakes he had made. In his younger days, he would imagine that the Dark Lord had murdered James and Harry, but left Lily alive. Severus would have been there to comfort her and, in time, he would have won her back. Since he had met Miranda, the fantasy had mutated into one where he had never heard that blasted prophesy in the first place. Lily had her perfect little family and they had all grudgingly reconciled. Severus dreamed of having met Miranda the first time she had been in England. She would have swept him up in her madness again and, because this was a dream, the Dark Lord would be dead and buried. Severus felt that Lily and Miranda would have liked each other. And Miranda would have hated James with him, and he would have quit teaching and joined her in her ridiculous bounty hunting business, and…..

Severus shook his head to stop his idiotic flight of imagination. His life was what it was. Nothing would change that. Dreaming was a waste of time, and Severus hated waste
I'm thinking that American wizards in England would totally celebrate Thanksgiving. :-)
Sometimes it’s best to take matters into your own hands, Miranda thought as she appeared outside the wards at Hogwarts on a cold Tuesday a week before Christmas. The wind cut through her cloak like a knife and hurried clouds across the inky blackness of the sky. She strode towards the school, sincerely hoping that she would not encounter its Potions Master. She still missed him more than she would have liked, although now she was also rather irritated with him for his imperious way of ending their affair. Whenever her thoughts turned to Severus, she firmly told herself that it was really neither here nor there how she felt about him. With a bit of luck, she’d be leaving England soon and she expected the distance would help her forget.

Miranda hoped that Albus Dumbledore would be the man to aid her in accomplishing her escape. She was due to meet him at eight o’clock that evening about her troubles and, while she was a bit trepidatious to return to his office after that last difficult meeting, she was sanguine enough to expect that this one would be better. She walked with a swift, but measured step, keeping her eyes focused straight ahead of her, and trying to ignore the growing feeling of butterflies in her stomach. Fortune was with her, and she met no one as she entered the oaken doors and wound her way through the maze of corridors and staircases.

“Squashies,” she said to the gargoyle guarding the entrance to the headmaster’s office. It slid aside and she made it to the griffin-shaped knocker with five minutes to spare. She tapped lightly and the office door swung open, revealing Albus standing near the window, studying the Pleiades peeking shyly through the clouds.

“Ah, Miss Rose. Still punctual I see,” he said, crossing to his desk. “Do sit down.”

“I wanted to thank you for taking the time to see me. I know you must be very busy,” Miranda replied, taking the chair across from his desk.

“It is my pleasure, though I must admit I was rather surprised that you wanted to see me. I know your last visit to my office was an unpleasant one.”

“It was, and I hope this one will be better.”

“That is my hope as well.” Albus plucked a cigarette out of the air and offered it to her.

She smiled slowly and accepted the offering. After it was lit, she said, “I wanted to talk to you about the task you’ve given me.”

“Yes, you’ve been doing an excellent job failing to find your quarry. Do you require
compensation? I realize that we are interrupting your work, perhaps to your detriment.”

She shook her head. “Not at the moment. The Ministry will cover my expenses for the duration of the actual tracking. Of course, there won’t be a pay off at the end.”

“I will ensure that there is. Please do not concern yourself about that.”

This was going better than she had hoped. “Thank you, Headmaster.”

“I would be delighted if you would call me Albus.”

She studied him a moment before answering, “Very well, Albus. And please call me Miranda.”

“Thank you, Miranda. I want you to know that your current assignment, however tedious, is extremely helpful at the moment.

“Yes, that is what I wanted to talk to you about. I don’t think it is a good idea for me to continue searching for Mr. Black here. Minister Fudge seems content to wait, but Mr. Malfoy is starting to breathe down my neck. I’m not terribly concerned for myself yet, but he’s been making comments about my family in America. I think it would be best if I could put some distance between us, but I still need him to think I’m doing my job.”

“I see. That is rather troubling.” Albus’s brow furrowed as he considered this for a few moments. Finally he said, “I hear that Romania is an excellent place to hide this time of year. I expect that you will receive some intelligence very shortly concerning the sighting of a large black dog and a Hippogriff.”

“How marvelous. I’ll be ready to leave by twelfth night.”

“Excellent. And have you given any thought to the second issue we discussed?”

“You mean, am I willing to help the Order of the Phoenix?”

“Precisely.”

Miranda looked very thoughtful. “I don’t want to risk MACUSA sanctioning me by joining the Order, but I am willing to help, unofficially. Do you have something in mind?”

“In fact, I do.” He snapped his fingers and a file folder appeared on his desk in front of her. “When you get to Romania, I want you to look in on a young man named Charlie Weasley. He is recruiting for the Order and he tells me that he could do with a witch experienced in dueling
wizards and subduing magical creatures.”

She opened the file and a stocky red-headed man waved at her from a photograph. “Sounds entertaining. I’ll do it.” She picked up the file and began studying its contents.

“Very good, thank you Miranda. Please take your time with Charlie’s file. You may leave it on my desk when you are finished. I’m afraid there are a few things I must attend to.”

“I will. Should I contact you?”

“I will contact you, or you can send a message through Charlie when you get to Romania. Oh, and one more thing.”

“Yes?”

“It would be best if you mentioned as little of this as possible to Severus. The less each of you knows about your respective missions, the safer it will be for you both.”

Miranda kept her eyes on the file. “That won’t be a problem Albus. I haven’t seen Severus since the beginning of November.”

Albus’s eyebrows went up at that, but he did not ask any questions. “Well, I wish you good night and good luck, my dear.”

“Thank you. The same to you.”

It was close to ten when Miranda thought she had memorized everything she needed to know. She replaced the file on Albus’s desk, stretched, and began the trek back to the first floor. She felt the butterflies return to her stomach as soon as she passed the silent gargoyle. Affecting an air of nonchalance, she resumed her measured pace, humming *The Minstrel Boy* quietly to herself. She had every right to be here, after all. Why should she care if she saw anyone?

When she reached the fourth floor, she got a bit turned around. She stopped humming and spent a few minutes trying to remember the way she had come before. Eventually she chose a path and she was passing the library when she heard the voice she had been hoping to avoid.

“Good night, Minerva,” Severus was saying somewhere behind her.

Miranda forgot her intention not to run and soundlessly dashed around the corner. She found a darkened classroom and, without thinking, she ducked into it, closing the door behind her.
“Looks like we’re caught, Fred,” said a voice.

She turned and saw the identical smiling faces of two young red-haired men. Young men who looked a bit like the man whose file she had spent the last hour memorizing. Who, as she recalled, had a pair of twin brothers.

“Fred and George Weasley, I presume?” she asked with a smile.

“Guilty,” began Fred.

“….as charged,” finished George. “Who are you?”

“Someone with a soft spot for troublemakers,” Miranda said.

The pair exchanged a look and fixed her with an imploring expression. “We don’t suppose you could give us a hand then?” asked Fred.

“That depends. What is it?” she asked good-naturedly.

“Well,” said George, “Professor Snape has been lurking around for the last half-hour and we really should get back to our common room before we get expelled.”

“Do you think you could create a diversion?” Fred asked.

“Not that we’d mind being expelled,” George added, “but we had planned to stay in school a bit longer. We’re not quite finished with our product line…”

“Who’s there?” demanded Severus’s voice as he rounded the corner.

Miranda’s eyes snapped to the door, and then back to the twins. She sighed, gave them a bemused smile, and said, “Of course I’ll help you. Stay here until I get him out of the way and then get back where you’re supposed to be. And don’t get caught.”

“Will do.” they said together.

She gathered her nerve and gripped the doorknob.

“Show yourself,” Severus hissed in the hall.
Now or never, she thought, opening the door and fixing an exasperated expression on her face.

“Oh for goodness’ sake, Severus, it’s only me,” she said in an irritated tone. “I don’t know how any of you can stand to navigate this place. I’ve been wandering around for half an hour trying to find the front door. I should have left a trail of breadcrumbs.”

The look on his face was worth her discomfort in seeing him. He was staring at her incredulously, his eyes wide and his mouth ever so slightly open.

“Don’t just stand there staring,” she chided, tapping her foot impatiently. “Are you going to help me or not?”

He snapped his mouth shut and gave her a dubious look. “This way,” he said.

She kept pace with him and they walked in palpable silence. She let her face relax into a mask of calm unconcern, but her heart was racing. She wished that she were not quite so aware of his physical presence next to her, but surely she could manage the feeling for the brief time it would take to reach the front door. She had no idea what he was thinking, but knowing him he was probably incredibly annoyed to encounter her so unexpectedly. Well, no matter, she’d be out of Hogwarts in five minutes and off to bigger and better things. He was a grown man—he could deal with it.

When they reached the entrance hall, he suddenly ordered, “Stay here.” Then he turned and stalked off without a word of explanation.

She shifted her weight from foot to foot, eyeing the front door. Where the hell did he get off giving her orders? And what the hell was she doing following them? He’d made it clear he wanted nothing more to do with her. Why on earth would he want to talk to her now? Somewhere in the back of her mind, she had a tiny, hopeful thought that perhaps he was regretting his decision to end things so abruptly. She immediately tried to squash the idea but, to her annoyance, she stayed where she was.

Five minutes or so later Severus returned wearing his cloak and they stalked out into the cold night together. The wind had died down, but the air stung the nose and their breath fogged the space in front of them as they walked. The clouds had fled, and the stars shone brightly without the competition of the jealous moon. Miranda turned her attention to them, picking out constellations in order to avoid looking at her companion.

When they were approaching the lake, he asked silkily, “Have you received sufficient blows to the head that you actually mistook a classroom for an exit?”

“Orion is bright tonight,” she replied, completely ignoring his jab.
“What are you doing here?” he demanded.

“What are you doing here?”

“Buying postage stamps. They’re hideously overpriced in London.”

He stopped walking and grabbed her arm. “Don’t toy with me. What are you doing here?”

She turned her flashing eyes from the stars to his, her jaw set. She held his gaze and slowly peeled his fingers off her arm, one by one.

When she had finished, she said smoothly, “Severus, have you ever heard the expression ‘You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar?’”

The corner of his mouth twitched and he replied, “I only collect flies in order to murder them. Honey seems somehow disingenuous.” He paused for a moment and then added, “You’re looking well, Miranda.”

She raised an eyebrow and allowed, “So are you. I thought we weren’t supposed to be talking.”

His expression darkened. “No. I suppose not.” He made no move to leave and, after another pause he said, “I’m surprised you haven’t returned to America.”

She shrugged. “I have a case. It’s not glamorous or exciting, but it’s work I’ve committed to. Besides,” she smiled wryly, “Malfoy’s not going to let me go that easily.”

“How unfortunate.”

“It is what it is. I sent home a nice package of bullets with the Christmas presents and I can always ask Aaron to put an Auror or two on my family if things get too hot.”

He frowned and said, “I should think that Lucius would send someone capable of casting a shield charm sufficient to block a bullet.”

She smiled and answered, “Not the kind of bullets I make.” By this time Miranda’s face was raw with the cold. She glanced up at the stars then back at Severus and said, “I’d better be going. I was supposed to meet Aaron half an hour ago and he’ll think I’m dead if I’m much later. Good night,
For a instant he looked as though he were going to take a step closer to her, but he must have thought better of it. He gave her a short bow and said, “Good night, Miranda.” Then he turned and started back towards the school. When he reached the door, he glanced back over his shoulder, but she had already been swallowed up by the night.

Miranda was crossing the Atrium on her way out of the Ministry of Magic the next afternoon, mostly pleased with the way her meeting with Fudge and Malfoy had gone. She’d presented her new ‘intelligence’ and the men had agreed to her expanding her search to Romania. Malfoy had seemed less enthusiastic about the idea than Fudge but, in the end, he had not argued with her overmuch. She had even managed to put off the next meeting to the beginning of February.

She was trying to make a mental list of supplies she would need and research that should be done, but her thoughts kept straying back to her unexpected encounter with Severus the night before. She had sufficient pride that she was not about to go sniffing after him again. However, she also realized that he’d gotten under her skin enough that she probably wouldn’t make it terribly difficult for him if he were to decide to come sniffing after her. Not that it mattered, of course. In the next week or so she’d be out of the country and she highly doubted that their paths would cross before then.

“A moment, Miss Rose,” Lucius Malfoy’s oily voice interrupted her thoughts.

She sighed and pasted a smile on her face. “Yes, Mr. Malfoy?” she replied, turning to face him.

He gave her a cold smile and said, “Miss Rose, Cornelius may be patient with you, but I expect results. I have been giving you a long leash up to now. Don’t force me to shorten it. If you think that leaving the country will put you out of my reach, rest assured that I can find you, where ever you run.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Mr. Malfoy, I am shocked that you would suggest that I am intending to run out on a job. I would have thought that my references and track record speak for themselves.”

He took a step closer to her and said, “I am simply reminding you of your place.”

“Oh, I’m well aware of my place.”
“I doubt that.” He pulled a photograph out of a pocket and handed it to her. “Such a handsome family you have, Miss Rose. For Muggle scum, of course.”

She took the photograph slowly and saw that it featured her entire family gathered at Thanksgiving. She put it in her bag and said coolly, “How kind of you to think of me. I’ll put it on my mantel.”

“Did you know that your sister-in-law Anna is pregnant? My, you do breed like puffskeins.”

“I get the point, Mr. Malfoy.”

He looked like a cat playing with a mouse. “I’m glad to hear it.” He took another step closer to her and added, “I do hope that you and Severus are being more circumspect in your liaison. The Prince line has been polluted with enough Muggle blood as it is.”

Her eyes flashed and she said in a very low voice, “I’m going to pretend that I didn’t hear you say that. Really, that entire evening at Malfoy Manor was ridiculous, and I’m sure we’d all rather forget that it happened.”

Lucius’s face contorted in anger, but before he could do anything Aaron’s voice echoed through the Atrium.

“Miranda?” Aaron called. “Where have you been? We’re supposed to be having lunch and I’m starving.” As he caught up to the pair, he added, “Lucius, how are you? I’m looking forward to your Christmas party.”

Lucius gave Aaron a short bow. “Aaron. I’m glad to know that you and your wife will grace us with your presence.”

Aaron returned Lucius’s bow. “I’m afraid my wife won’t make it. She’s in the family way and not feeling her best at the moment.”

“How unfortunate. But, of course, we do have to indulge our women when they are breeding.”

“Ain’t it the truth? Miranda here has agreed to accompany me. Narcissa said it wouldn’t be a problem, and I hope that you don’t mind. Miranda and I are schoolmates from Ilvermorny and she’s going to be my child’s godmother.”

A terrible smile spread across Lucius’s face as he turned back to Miranda. “No. I don’t mind at all. Good day Miss Rose. Aaron.”
Lucius strode back into the Ministry as Aaron and Miranda headed out of it. Neither spoke as they wound their way through the busy London streets. They managed to find a deserted alley a few blocks away for Apparation purposes and they appeared with a crack next to a dumpster behind the Waitrose in New Union Square. Miranda followed Aaron to a drab green door marked ‘Deliveries.’ He tapped the door with his finger and a eye appeared in a crack in the paint.

“Shenandoah,” Aaron said, and the crack split open enough for the two of them to pass through. They slid down a long chute and landed comfortably on the springy floor below. They scrambled to their feet and Aaron waved to a gruff-looking guard sitting behind a desk emblazoned with the imposing MACUSA eagle.

“‘ello Mr. Lee,” The man grunted.

“Hello Nick. Quiet afternoon?”

The other man shrugged and Aaron did not feel the need to continue the conversation. He led Miranda between a row of bronze beaux arts goddesses; Temperance, Silence, Order, Resolution, Frugality, Industry, Sincerity, Justice, Moderation, Cleanliness, Tranquility, and Chastity. Humility stood above the entrance to the stairwell, her head held high in challenge. Aaron’s office was on the level below and Miranda was always impressed by the jewel colored stained-glass windows depicting scenes from MACUSA history that lined the marble staircase leading to it.

When they reached their destination and the door was safely shut behind them, Aaron leaned against his desk and said, “You want to tell me what’s been going on?”

“I thought we were having lunch,” she replied.

“I already ate with a fella who works at the Ministry; that’s why I was over there. I didn’t know I was going to be getting you out of hot water.”

“I was managing fine by myself.”

“That’s debatable.” He conjured a cigarette for Miranda and one for himself. Once they were lit, he went around his desk and settled himself into his large rolling chair. “Now spill it.”

She sighed and threw herself into the intricately carved chair across from his desk. “I don’t even know where to start. I guess the short version is, Voldemort is back from the dead. Albus Dumbledore has the Order of the Phoenix up and running again and they’re trying to stop Voldemort from rising to power. The Ministry of Magic has its head buried in the sand. Oh, and Lucius Malfoy is a Death Eater.”

“And why are you wrapped up in it? Not that I’m surprised, you have a knack for getting yourself
“Sirius Black—that wizard I’m supposed to be tracking—is a member of the Order. Dumbledore asked me rather forcefully not to find Black.”

“What else did you agree to?”

Miranda frowned and wandered over to the window next to Aaron’s desk. Although they were far underground, the window had been enchanted to give a view of the Lee estate back in Rockingham County. The sun was shining on the snow covered grounds and Miranda watched a cardinal pecking at the bird-feeder that hung from a barren dogwood tree for a moment before answering.

“I’m going to Romania in the new year. There’s a fellow there I’m going to help with recruitment to the Order, under the table of course. And I didn’t join myself, I’m just cooperating.”

Aaron frowned. “As consul I have to say that this isn’t a conflict we want to get wrapped up in.”

“But don’t you think we should do something to help? If Voldemort succeeds there’s no reason to think he’d be happy to stay in England. And we’ve seen Dark Wizards sneak into America before.”

Aaron smoked for a while in silence, considering. “Speaking as consul, we should keep an eye on the situation, but it’s not our problem.”

Miranda rolled her eyes. “Could you tell the consul to take a hike? I want to talk to my friend.”

He smiled. “As your friend, I agree with you. Last thing we want is another Grindelwald.”

“So you’re not going to stop me?”

“I know better than to try. You sure you want to get involved?”

She shrugged. “I’ve never been a mercenary. It’ll look good on my résumé.” He gave her a look and she added, “Joking aside, I can’t just skip out now. Malfoy’s threatening to send some goons to mess with my family if I don’t stay in line.”

Aaron’s brow furrowed. “Is he, now?”

“That’s the only reason I didn’t hex him today. Someone needs to take that man down a peg.”

“You gonna be able to behave yourself at his party?”
“I solemnly swear not to be the one to start anything,” she said in a serious tone. Then she smiled brightly and added, “But if he starts it, I’m going to finish it.”

Aaron snorted. “You just be sure he starts it. You sure you want to be there at all?”

“Are you?”

“I can’t really get out of it.”

“Then I’m game. It’ll be like old times.”

Aaron gave her a wry smile and let the full force of his southern drawl creep into his voice. “Well, I can’t think of anyone I’d rather walk into a den of Death Eaters with than you.”

“Thanks Aaron. I feel the same way.”

Chapter End Notes

The virtues depicted by the beaux arts statues are taken from a list of virtues compiled by Benjamin Franklin.
Severus hated the Malfoy Christmas party. It was a grand affair, full of dignitaries and the upper crust of wizarding society. He knew that many witches and wizards would give up their wand in order to procure and invitation and that he only merited one due to his personal connections to the Malfoy family. Unfortunately, he found it a tedious waste of an evening. To be sure, the food and drink were incomparable, but he hated small talk and most of the other guests. He considered declining the invitation every year, but he knew that would cause more trouble than it was worth. So, every year he put on his dress robes and made a game of seeing how long he could make it through the party without having to talk to anyone after greeting Narcissa at the door. His record was two hours and he sincerely hoped he would break it this year.

He was loitering near a column in the drawing room, nursing a glass of champagne and avoiding making eye contact. Between Nagini’s failed attempt to either retrieve the prophecy or murder Arthur Weasley in the process and Albus’s growing concern about the Dark Lord’s access to Harry Potter’s mind, he had plenty to occupy his thoughts. And there was always the small matter of preparing seven levels of potions work for the spring term to consider. However, he was thinking of none of those things tonight.

Since his brief and unexpected conversation with Miranda the previous week, he had been applying much of his deductive reasoning to devising a way to renew their affair without admitting that he had perhaps been a bit hasty to end it in the first place. He was never one to apologize, but he did realize that he had probably upset her and she might be less than eager to return to his bed. He needed to find a way to lure her in without actually admitting fault—he did have his pride after all. After seeing her though, he was finding his pride rather a cold bedfellow. He felt that if the foolish woman was determined to put herself in harms way by remaining in England, he might as well benefit from her stupidity. But he expected that saying something along the lines of ‘Darling, since you are bound to get yourself killed whatever I do, do you fancy a shag or two before that happens?’ was not the best way to ingratiate himself to the lady in question. While he was brooding about all of this, his thoughts were interrupted by the aforementioned lady.

“Isn’t this a Bruegel? I think it looks like one,” Miranda was saying.

“It does, but it was almost certainly done by Pieter Huys or one of his other followers,” Aaron answered. “I’ll ask Narcissa about it next time I talk to her. She’s the art critic in the Malfoy family.”

“So I heard.”

Severus sighed inwardly. What was that idiot woman doing here? Did she really have a death wish? He turned and saw Aaron and Miranda peering at a painting on the wall. Miranda was dressed in purple and silver tonight, a stately off-the-shoulder a-line gown that somehow inspired more imagination with its relative modesty than what she’d worn last time at the Manor had with its lack thereof. Her hair was swept up in another complicated mass of braids and she wore a pendant of a primitive looking bird around her neck. He shifted so that the column was between them and continued to eavesdrop on the conversation.

“Rachel’s had ‘round for tea a few times,” Aaron went on.
“Really?” Miranda said dubiously. “How’s that going?”

“Fine. Narcissa comes off as a bit cold, but she’s really a peach and smart as a whip.”

“Why do you have to deal with the Malfoys? Shouldn’t the Ambassador be doing that?”

“It’s our pure blood—Robert’s only half. Only the best for the Malfoys, you know.”

Severus could hear Miranda rolling her eyes. “That does come in handy. I’m surprised Mrs. Malfoy let a filthy No-Maj born like me in. Maybe I should go help in the kitchen.”

“Hey, she was very understanding about it. I told you, I like her. And you promised to behave.”

“If you get me another drink, I will continue to behave.”

“As you wish, old girl. Don’t get into trouble while I’m gone.”

“I’ll do my best.

Aaron obligingly headed off to collect more drinks, and Severus silently stalked up behind Miranda. She was still studying the painting intently and he was at her shoulder before she noticed him at all.

“That was fast……oh” she began without looking. Her eyes snapped from the picture to Severus and back again, and a blush started creeping over her cheeks. “Hello Severus, I didn’t realize you would be here.”

“For a woman who continually protests that she is not an idiot, you certainly offer plenty of evidence to the contrary,” he observed. “What on earth are you doing here?”

“If I had a galleon for every time you demanded why I was somewhere, I would be able to retire,” she replied, still looking at the painting. “Do you like Bruegel? Or whoever this is?”

He opened his mouth to make another remark about her intelligence, but controlled his tongue with great effort and turned his attention to the painting. It depicted a mad scene of an army of peasant women storming a hell-mouth. After a moment he admitted, “Yes. I do.”

Miranda looked at him out of the corner of her eye. “See? Was that so hard?”

He let his eyes slide sideways and the corner of his lip curve upwards slightly. “Yes. It was.”

“I imagine it gets easier with practice. Do you think Mrs. Malfoy was trying to tell Mr. Malfoy something by putting a Mad Meg picture in the drawing room?”

He actually smiled at the idea. “Perhaps. I seem to recall there is a proverb of some sort that goes with it.”

“Yes, something to the effect of the Devil himself having no weapon against six or more women.”

“I shudder at the thought.” Silence fell for a moment as Severus attempted to formulate a way to steer the conversation in a more productive direction, but Miranda preempted him.

“If you’d like to continue flirting, now would be a good time to comment on how nice I look,” she prompted.

He raised an eyebrow. “I see no reason to waste breath telling a woman she looks enticing when
she is already well aware of that fact.”

“Professor Snape, nice to see you again,” Aaron said, stepping neatly between the two of them. He handed Miranda a fresh glass of champagne and Severus frowned as he noticed Aaron’s fingers dwell on Miranda’s much longer than was necessary. “How was the rest of term?”

“How is it ever? A waste of time and effort attempting to force incompetent students to retain the most basic amount of knowledge,” Severus answered.

Miranda and Aaron exchanged and inscrutable look.

“Would you like to join us?” she asked, taking Aaron’s arm. “We’re giving ourselves an art tour.”

Her casual intimacy with Aaron stirred Severus’s anger. “No, thank you.” he replied coldly.

Miranda pursed her lips and said, “Good night then.”

He gave them a short bow and they strolled off. They had reached the other side of the drawing room when they were intercepted by Lucius Malfoy. Severus was too far away to hear their conversation, but he could tell from Lucius’s expression that he was enjoying it immensely. He could also tell from the set of Miranda’s shoulders that she was not. Before he could wonder overlong about what Lucius was saying, he was completely distracted by the fact that Aaron’s fingers had drifted to the back of Miranda’s neck and were stroking it gently. So, that’s how it was. Severus suddenly found the noise of the drawing room unbearable and left to find somewhere quiet to regroup.

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One more word out of Lucius Malfoy and I’m going to hex him—I don’t care what Aaron says Miranda thought as she stormed out of the drawing room. Men! Between Lucius’s baiting and Severus’s vacillating she had had enough of them to last her for a long time. She found that she was near the library and decided she would retreat there to calm her anger. With any luck she and Aaron would be leaving soon and she could focus on everything she needed to do to prepare for her Romanian adventure.

She slipped into the library and closed the door behind her. Fires crackled merrily in the fireplaces and the candles in the lamps gave the room a pleasant glow. She sighed and leaned her head against the door for a moment, trying to let go of her anger. She knew that Malfoy was nothing more than a bully and that she shouldn’t let his stupid remarks get to her. She decided to find something to read for the next half hour or so and turned to find a likely shelf to start perusing. As she did so, her eyes fell on Severus standing near the bay window, studying her disapprovingly.

“I’m beginning to believe that the storied Mrs. Lee is a will ‘o the wisp,” he said bitingly.

Miranda’s brow furrowed. “Rachel?” she asked. “She wanted to stay home so I said I’d come instead.” What in the world was wrong with this man?
“Still ill is she? How convenient for you and Aaron, is it?”

“Not really. Spending the evening here isn’t my idea of a good time.”

“I’m sure you’ll find a way to make the most of it. Really, could the two of you be more shameless about your affair?”

“Affair? What are you talking about?”

“If he were more obvious about his fondling, he would be undressing you in the drawing room in front of the entire company.”

“Fondling?” A slow smile spread across Miranda’s face and she came a few paces into the room. So that’s how it was. “Severus, I think you are jealous.”

He snorted. “Don’t flatter yourself. I’m merely making an observation.”

Her smile widened and she sauntered over to an armchair. When she reached it, she leaned her elbow on it and rested her chin on her hand. “Yes you are. You’re so jealous you’re turning green. That’s so strange—I thought you didn’t even like me.”

His look of disdain became one of exasperation. “I told you I like you well enough when you aren’t acting like a child,” he snapped. He frowned and his tone became a bit less caustic. “I’d even say that I respect you, and I can count the number of people who have won my respect on both hands.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “How romantic. If you were any more florid I’d have an attack of the vapors.”

He stalked across the room, jerked her into his arms, and kissed her furiously. Her hands pushed against his chest for a moment in surprise, but then they slipped up around his neck and her fingers wound their way into his hair. He made a strangled sort of noise in his throat as he crushed her against him. Merlin, she was sweeter than he had remembered. His lips found their way over her neck to explore the flesh just above the neckline of her dress when he realized that she was shaking with barely suppressed laughter.

“Severus, I swear you are giving me whiplash,” she said breathlessly. “I don’t suppose you could make up your mind as to whether or not you want to be my lover for longer than five minutes, could you?”

“I might accuse you of the same crime, as I cannot seem to escape from you,” he replied as he searched for that lovely spot on her throat that always forced the most delightful sounds from her. “I would swear you had slipped me a dose of Amortentia if I did not know that you lack the proficiency to brew it.”

“Why you arrogant…” she began, but her voice trailed off as he found that vulnerable spot. He worried it for a while to keep her from finishing her thought.

When she was sagging against him, he drew back and demanded silkily, “Now, you are going to tell me exactly what your little friend was doing to you earlier.”

She laughed and looked up at him, her eyes twinkling. “It’s a code.” He raised an eyebrow at her and she explained, “It was invented by a No-Maj painter. Papa made all of us learn it as children and I taught it to Aaron at school. It’s very simple, but extremely useful in wizard society where no
He brought her wrist up to his lips and bit her lightly. “Show me.”

She put a finger on his cheek. “Each letter of the alphabet is assigned a combination of long and short pulses. Then you simply spell out what you want to say. For instance,” she started tapping gently on his cheek and spelling aloud as she went, “Y-o-u-a-r-e-a-n-a-s-s”

He snapped at her finger with his teeth and she laughed at him again. “And what was he telling you so secretly?”

“He was telling me to get lost for half an hour so that I didn’t kill Malfoy, who’s on my last nerve. Then Aaron and I are going to consider our duty to MACUSA finished for the evening and get out of here.”

“I see.” Severus glanced at the clock above one of the fireplaces. “That means you should go now before Mr. Lee thinks you are dead.” He released her and fixed her with a stern look. “Go to his flat and I will follow you in twenty minutes. Then you will use that primitive spell you know to take us to your cabin. I feel the need to renew my acquaintance with all the bits of you I may have forgotten.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Do tell me why I should be letting you boss me around without even a please?”

He put a long finger on that useful spot where her neck met her bare shoulder. He slowly ran it down to the top of her dress, and then traced the skin above the neckline to the middle of her chest. From there he drew his finger up over her throat. When he reached her chin, he tilted it up and leaned in until his lips were almost touching hers. “Please.”

She shivered and replied softly, “Well. When you put it that way.”

His eyes gleamed at her arrogantly. Perhaps honey had its uses after all.

Miranda tripped lightly back into the drawing room, delighted with the recent turn of events. True, she had neglected to mention that she’d be leaving the country soon, but that was a matter to deal with in good time. She wanted to put in another week or so learning Romanian before she left anyway. She had procured a volume of Pollyanna Polyglottos’s *Romanian in Conversation* and she expected it would take her at least that long to complete it, assuming that the new distraction of Severus’s attentions did not completely derail the process.

Aaron was not waiting for her by the piano as she had expected him to be. She loitered next to it, unconcerned, assuming that he would meet her shortly. He had probably assumed she would be late and she laughed to herself over Severus’s scrupulous punctuality. She had not been waiting very long when she was approached by a wizard. Unfortunately, it was not the wizard she was hoping to meet.
“Miss Rose. Alone at last,” Lucius said. “I had thought it would be impossible to separate you from your bodyguard and yet, here you are.”

Miranda pursed her lips, but attempted to maintain decorum. “What a lovely party, Mr. Malfoy. Thank you for having me.”

He gave her that feline smile again. “It’s only just beginning. I must say, I was rather surprised that Severus did not request the pleasure of escorting you. But I supposed he would rather not have it known that his taste in women is so base.”

“Don’t you have better things to do than bait me?” she asked impatiently. “I really don’t understand why you find it so entertaining.”

“Because you offend me, Miss Rose. You are an upstart, mudblood tart who does not know her place. You are in my employ and I intend to teach you to respect your betters.”

“I think you’d be better off taking up some other hobby. Where I come from blood lines don’t mean much.”

“A tragedy I hope will be remedied within our lifetime.”

She scanned the room for Aaron, but he was nowhere to be found. She knew she should keep her mouth shut, but she found it irresistible to continue bantering with Lucius. “Honestly, Mr. Malfoy, what makes you think that you and your other in-bred pureblood friends are so wonderful anyway?”

His eyes narrowed. “The Malfoy family has been the elite of the wizarding world since its inception. We trace our line back to Armand Malfoy himself, the power behind William the Conqueror. We are—and always have been—the best of the best.”

She gave him an amused look. “Well, I was born on a farm in Kansas and I guess that’s just as haughty and respectable as living in a mansion, licking the Dark Lord’s boots. And if it isn’t, I’ll just have to stand it, that’s all.”

He grabbed her chin and said in a low voice, “My dear Miss Rose, I think it is time for us to retire to a more private room in order to finish this conversation.”

“Why Lucius, are you challenging little ol’ me to a duel?”

“Yes Miranda. Yes I am.”

“How grand. I thought you’d never ask.”

He let go of her chin and offered her his arm. She took it and the two of them strolled out of the room together.
Severus was in a wonderful mood when he left the library, punctual as ever. He fully intended to be ensconced in Miranda’s cabin within the hour, enjoying her favors. It was one of the few times in his life he could ever remember being glad to have attended a party. He briefly considered finding Narcissa to make his excuses, but he decided it was early enough in the evening that her duties as hostess were commanding all of her attention. He would write her a note tomorrow to apologize for not saying a proper good night. Perhaps he would even use Miranda’s back as a desk in order to do so. He allowed his mind to wander along this train of thought as he collected his cloak from the house elf and strode out into the lightly falling snow. What an excellent night this was turning out to be.

Lucius led Miranda into a long, torchlit room, away from the noise of the party. The walls were hung with rich tapestries depicting the members of the illustrious Malfoy family. Statues of grotesque beasts were spaced between the hangings. A beautifully carved dueling platform sat in the middle of the floor and he handed her up the stairs to one end of it like a courtier handing his lady into her carriage. He mounted the platform at the other end, and the two approached each other slowly, savoring the moment. When they reached the middle, they bowed low to each other, then retreated to twenty paces to begin.

They turned as one, slashing their wands silently through the air. Red and white sparks met in the center of the platform, sizzling wickedly. Another round, brighter and louder followed before the first group could fade and soon the cracks and pops of the magic echoed through the room. Lucius’s smile began to fade as Miranda advanced on him, flicking her wand like a whip and hurling curses at him almost faster than he could parry. He stood his ground, but could do nothing to curb her advance.

“Oppugno!” he cried suddenly, and a chandelier came crashing down, hurling shards of crystal at her. She ceased her assault and the deadly leaded glass bounced harmlessly off her shield charm.

“Confringo!” he followed, slicing his wand at her and she was knocked back to the edge of the platform by an explosion. She skidded to a halt and he ran at her, casting another bombardment.

“Crosse!” she shouted, and a white sling bloomed out of her wand. It spiraled through the air, catching Lucius’s hex and hurling it back at him. His eyes widened, but he was quick enough to cast his own shield against the blast. He slid back a few paces and she chuckled softly at his surprise. He gritted his teeth, flicked his wand, and a jet of flames burst from it, curling into a monstrous serpent and striking at her. She jumped over the fiery beast and it curved back on itself for another attack.

“Erstickte!” she commanded. A giant white shroud grew from her wand, wrapping itself around the snake and reducing it to smoke. She turned on him again, still smiling, but he was finished playing games.

“Crucio!” he hissed. She crashed to the floor, body contorted in pain. He stood over her, his smile returning as the red sparks form his wand tortured her. He let it continue until he was panting with
the effort, his eyes shining with delight.

The instant the curse ceased, Miranda whipped her wand at him. A blazing white rope lashed out, wrapping itself around his ankle and pulling him to the ground. She drew herself up to her knees and snapped her wand upwards. The rope dropped away from the tip of her wand, but the rest of it remained shining around his ankle.

“Huhuk!” she said, her voice shaky from the pain of the Unforgivable. She flicked her wand through the air and a huge, white, swan-like bird flew forth, its forked tail trailing behind it as it soared into the room. Lucius could only stare at the majestic being in fascinated horror as it turned on him and a bolt of lightening hissed past his head, singeing his cheek. He rolled away as more bolts struck, leaving scorch marks on the dueling platform. He managed to scramble to his feet and run to the end of the platform. He jumped off the end of it, turned, and fired a bolt over Miranda’s head. The red sparks hit one of the jewels that lined the oaken doorframe, and the floor opened underneath Miranda, dumping her unceremoniously into a black pit.

She hit the ground with an awful crack. The trapdoor closed above her, shutting out the light and leaving her in darkness.

Rachel yawned and drew her embroidered dressing gown around her shoulders as she headed for the door, wondering who could possibly be knocking at this hour. She had been up making her nightly trek to the bathroom. She hadn’t expected to need quite so many bathroom breaks at this stage of the pregnancy, but she tried to be patient about it. Aaron and Miranda weren’t home yet, but she thought it was early for them to have returned anyway. She opened the door and greeted her two visitors with a curious—if tired—smile.

“Hello, Mabel. Can I help you?” Rachel asked the house elf.

“So sorry to wake you Mrs. Lee,” Mabel said in a squeaky voice as she wrung her hands.

“It’s all right. I was already up.”

“Oh, good. This is Professor Snape. He says that Miss Rose and Mr. Lee are expecting him.”

Rachel eyed the pale, stern looking man in black dress robes with a bemused expression. Last she had heard, Miranda and Professor Snape were not keeping company, but she supposed sometimes things changed rapidly in that department.

“Thank you, Mabel, that will be all. Please come in, Professor Snape.”

Severus entered the flat, his expression blank, and Rachel closed the door after him.

“Do sit down,” she continued, indicating a chair at the kitchen table. “Would you like a cup of tea while you wait? Aaron and Miranda aren’t back yet.”

She started filling the kettle without waiting for him to answer. When she had it on the stove, she noticed that he had not taken a seat and that he was frowning darkly.

“I am sorry to disturb you, Mrs. Lee,” he said coldly. “I had thought the others would have returned
“It’s still rather early,” she replied, bristling a bit at his tone and countenance. “Do you think something has happened?”

“I fear that may be the case.”

Her brow furrowed. “Well, I’m glad they are together, whatever the case may be. I’m sure they will be home soon.”

“I hope you are right,” he said, his tone implying that he maintained no hope whatsoever.

It took some time for Miranda to regain her breath. When she did, she dug out a cigarette and lit it with shaking hands. She smoked it slowly and it temporarily reduced the pain from the Cruciatus Lucius had cast on her. When she had finished, she checked her limbs carefully for damage. She was bruised and sore, but nothing was broken. She gingerly got to her feet and found that she’d even escaped any damage to her ankles. She knelt back on the floor and started patting around for her wand. She froze when she discovered that it had been broken into pieces on impact.

“Shit,” she muttered. She picked up the pieces and tucked them into a pocket. After they were safely stowed away, she touched the pendant around her neck and started tapping.

Aaron reluctantly ended his conversation with Narcissa and headed for the drawing room. They had been discussing the merits of St. Mungo’s for childbirth versus Rachel’s plan to employ a midwife-witch and have the baby at home. Aaron was vacillating between letting Rachel make the decision and admitting that he was absolutely terrified by her idea. Narcissa agreed with him, but he knew if he even brought it up Miranda would come down on his head and take up Rachel’s cause. He was annoyed when he reached the piano in the drawing room and saw that Miranda was nowhere to be found. He was used to her tardiness, but he really would have rather talked to Narcissa a bit longer if he’d known Miranda was going to be this late. He was strumming his fingers on the piano when he felt the Thunderbird pin on his robes begin to pulse.
He sighed. Nothing was ever simple with Miranda.

“How long ago did you leave them?” Rachel asked Severus calmly as she poured the water from the kettle over the tea leaves.

“Less than an hour,” he replied irritably as he paced the kitchen.

“I suppose that is long enough for them to have gotten into trouble.” She started handing him tea cups and saucers to give him something to do besides pace. He gave her a withering look, but set the dishes on the table and went back for the teapot without being asked.

She glanced at the clock “At this point I’d rather not send anyone to the Malfoy’s. For all we know Aaron got distracted talking to someone. If they aren’t back in two hours, I’ll send out an Auror after them.”

A muscle in his jaw twitched, but there was nothing else to be done, so the two of them sat down for an awkward late night tea party.

The air was chilly in the pit. Miranda was still in total darkness and she stretched her hands out in tentative exploration. There was a wall three paces behind her and she felt comforted to have something at her back. She settled against it, expecting she could wait out the ten minutes it would take Aaron to find her. The nerve of Lucius Malfoy! She supposed she should have expected him to cheat, but really! What kind of nobleman was he? And a bout of Cruciatus too! Her nerves were still on fire, but she had enough adrenaline running through her system that it, combined with the smoke, enabled her to ignore the pain.

She started playing a parlor game to keep her thoughts from straying away into fear induced panic. “I love my love with an A because he is adorable,” she muttered. “I hate my love with an A because he is arrogant. His name is Adonis, he comes from Arlington, and I gave him an arrowhead. I love my love with a B because he is beautiful. I hate my love with a B because he is beastly. His name is Byron, he comes from…”

Her voice trailed off as she heard the distinct sound of an animal snorting and its hooves hitting the stone floor. She slowly pulled a piece of her wand out of her pocket and lit the end of it with a snap of her fingers. When her eyes adjusted to the new source of light, they widened in horror as she beheld a giant, ash-colored warthog.
“Shit,” she muttered.

Rachel did not bother trying to make small talk with Professor Snape. Although his face was completely composed, agitation was rolling off him in waves. She had known her husband and her friend long enough that she strongly believed in their ability to handle whatever mess they might have landed in. In fact, she wasn’t altogether convinced that anything had happened at all. Aaron’s gift of gab was legendary and she knew from personal experience that between making a decision to depart a gathering and actually exiting the door could take him an hour or more to execute. She acknowledged that the professor was convinced that something terrible had happened, and she really didn’t want to sit with him in strained silence until the others returned.

Mind made up she stood and said, “Professor, would you mind taking a look at our potions room? I’m sure it doesn’t hold a candle to what you have at Hogwarts, but it has everything required for the basic necessities. Could I trouble you to start a new batch of some items in case we have to use up our store of first aid tonight?”

She thought he looked a bit relieved to have something to do. “Very well,” he replied curtly.

Miranda moved quarter inch by quarter inch. After an unbearable time she managed to nestle the burning wand into a niche in the wall. Her hands now free, she continued the agonizingly slow movement to a slit in the side of her skirt. The tebo stared at her, confused by the light and frozen for the moment. She eased her pistol out of its holster around her thigh, ignoring the pain that shot up her hand as she grabbed it. She and the beast stared at each other for a long moment and she began to hope that it would decide she wasn’t a threat.

Suddenly the beast disappeared and she heard its hooves pounding across the floor. So much for that hope. She gripped the pistol and turned her thoughts inward. Her wand might be broken, but she wasn’t completely out of tricks. The hoofbeats pounded in her ears, echoing off the stone and making it difficult to tell exactly where they were coming from. She counted silently to herself, gathering her magic.

5…..4…..3….2…..1

She jumped, bounding up the wall and over the invisible beast. She rolled across the floor and, as she did not hear an impact she assumed the tebo had swerved away from the wall at the last second. She ran to the edge of the light cast by her wand torch and then stopped dead, listening for the tebo’s hooves. As she listened, she undid her skirt and pulled it off, forcing herself to move slowly and silently. She tucked the pistol into the waist of the trousers she was wearing underneath her dress. She was glad she had decided to put on her boots tonight rather than dress shoes.

Holding the skirt like a matador’s cape, she waited for the tebo to charge again. She could hear it snorting and pawing the ground again, but she kept herself poised and ready even though her heart
was pounding. After what felt like an hour, it charged again and she held her ground to the last. She managed to catch her skirt on one of the beast’s tusks, but it tossed her angrily and she flew across the room, slamming into the wall. She dragged herself up off the floor with a grim smile, ignoring the slash on her arm that was bleeding freely. The tebo was furious now, trying to shake the skirt off its head. The fabric was caught on a tusk, outlining the head of the creature like an eerie No-Maj Halloween ghost.

Miranda drew her pistol again and crouched, waiting. The tebo stomped and spun wildly, head jerking against the impediment of the skirt. Finally it scented the cause of its trouble and charged again. Miranda took aim and waited.

*Saint Barbara, don’t fail me now,* she thought.


She pulled the trigger and the noise exploded through the pit, deafeningly loud.

Aaron dropped lightly through the trapdoor in the abandoned dueling hall. There was a dimly burning something on the wall next to him. Rather than wait for his eyes to adjust, he cast Lumos and scanned the room for signs of his wayward friend.

“How much of that blood is yours?” he drawled when he saw her.

“Not much,” she grunted. She was methodically skinning the now visible body of the tebo with a wicked looking knife.

Aaron sighed. “How long is it gonna take you to do that?”

“I don’t know. An hour maybe. Can you conjure me a couple of bags? I want to take some of the organs and the hooves and tusks too.”

“Mother of pearl, woman! This is is a fancy party, not a hunting trip!”

She grinned at him and continued working. He conjured up the bags and settled in to smoke while he waited for her to finish.
Narcissa stood at the door, waving away the last of her guests. She knew she had outdone herself this year and she hoped that Lucius would take the trouble to mention it. He had seemed in a particularly good mood earlier that evening, although it had been a few hours since she had seen him. As the front door closed, he appeared from the hallway and kissed her cheek, a smug smile on his face.

“Excellent work my dear. The best yet,” he said smoothly.

“It was my pleasure. I’m glad you enjoyed it,” she replied, delighted to be admired.

“Lucius, Narcissa, I want to thank you for a lovely evening,” Aaron’s voice interrupted.

Narcissa turned and blinked, startled by the sight that greeted her eyes. Aaron was smiling at her charmingly, a large bag slung over his shoulder but otherwise looking as trim and dapper as he had at the beginning of the night. Miranda walked beside him, completely disheveled. Her hair had partially escaped from its braids and the top of her gown and her jewelry was incongruous with the trousers and boots on her bottom half. And, of course, she was covered in dried tebo—and human—blood. She carried a large bag as well and she smiled brightly at her hosts shocked expressions.

“It was wonderful,” she agreed. “I don’t know when I’ve had such a good time at a party.”

Lucius was staring at the two Americans incredulously, his lips pursed and his face pale.

Narcissa recovered first and gave them a tight smile. “All you quite all right, Miss Rose?”

“She? Never better. Like I said, a most entertaining evening. Although you might want to send a house elf down to deal with what’s left of the tebo. There’s some meat you might be able to use if you hop to.”

“Tebo? Merlin, what happened?”

“Eh, Miranda needed the exercise,” Aaron put in, “but we’d better be getting home. I don’t want my wife to wake up and worry. Good night Narcissa. Lucius.”

A curious house elf scurried over with the Americans’ cloaks. Then Miranda took Aaron’s arm and the two of them sauntered out of the Manor into the snow together.

Chapter End Notes

Purple and silver are the Thunderbird house colors.

The painting is a copy of Pietor Bruegel's Dull Grie.

The proverb mentioned is from a 1568 Antwerp book of such and runs:
"One woman makes a din, two a lot of trouble, three an annual market, four a quarrel, five an army, and against six the Devil himself has no weapon."

The code is, of course, Morse Code.

I think that American spells would be in all sorts of languages, so I used a combination of French, German, and Pawnee for this set.

Saint Barbara is one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers. She is the patron saint of firearms and is invoked against sudden death. As early firearms tended to explode unexpectedly, killing their users, this association seems to make a morbid sort of sense.
Severus worked steadily in the Lee’s potions room, his movements as controlled and methodical as if he had been at Hogwarts brewing without a care in the world. A batch each of Blood Replenisher and Wound Reducer bubbled quietly in the cauldrons before him. It was a peaceful scene from the outside and one would never know by looking at him that the usually aloof man was fairly sick with worry and anger within.

How was it that Miranda had managed to disappear within twenty minutes? Why did she possess this special talent for getting herself into trouble? How long could she possibly hope to survive living her life this way? And how long could he stand the anxiety of waiting for her to return either maimed or dead? It was one thing to face danger and death himself; that was used to. But he had never been comfortable with the idea of those he cared for facing the same. Not that he was admitting to caring overmuch for her—no, not at all. But he found that his mind kept creating worse and worse scenarios, all of which ended with Miranda being murdered by the Dark Lord.

He had been watching the clock obsessively for the last hour and a half, impatiently waiting for two o’clock in the morning. at two, he would go and demand that Mrs. Lee send an Auror after the idiot Americans. Why was Aaron Lee so incompetent that he couldn’t be trusted to keep track of Miranda for a few hours at a party? Severus couldn’t be expected to watch the fool woman every moment. Even when he was watching her, it didn’t seem to do much good.

At one minute before two, he decided he had waited long enough. He set a cold, intimidating expression on his face and started out of the potions room to frighten Mrs. Lee into doing what she should have done an hour ago. His hand was on the doorknob when the silence in the flat was broken by the slamming of the front door and the obnoxiously loud singing voice of Mr. Lee.

“My Cindy got religion, she had it once before! But when she hears my ol’ banjo, she’s the first one on the floor!”

Aaron’s voice resounded through the flat and Rachel and Miranda’s laughter soon mingled with it. Relief rushed through Severus so strongly that he put a hand on the doorframe to steady himself. If Miranda was laughing, then she was alive and probably not terribly injured. He felt as though he could draw breath for the first time since he had realized she was missing. He turned back to the cauldrons, wanting to compose himself before he went out into the fray. The three Americans were talking so quickly and laughing so loudly that it was impossible to understand anything they were saying through the closed door. It was just as well. He needed a moment of quiet before he could face them.

He was not quite ready when he heard the door to the potions room open.

“Sorry I’m late,” Miranda said cheerfully. “I hope you were nice to Rachel.”
“Being as I am working for her without pay, it would appear so,” he replied, his voice cool and even. He kept his back to Miranda and his eyes on the cauldrons. Now that he had absorbed his initial relief that she was alive, he had time to be properly angry at her.

“Oh, don’t be angry, Severus. I have a good excuse.”

Her lighthearted tone only made him angrier. “Don’t you always?”

She sighed with what sounded like exasperation. “Honestly, man, don’t you think you’re being a bit unfair? Are you actually angry at me because I inconvenienced you?”

“No,” he answered. His voice was quiet, but he used it like a whip. “I am angry with you because thanks to your inability to follow simple instructions, I have spent the last two hours assuming that you were being tortured and killed.”

He heard her come into the room and felt her put a hand on his shoulder.

“It’s much easier to face the danger than it is to wait for someone to come back from it,” she said. “I’d rather do the former than the latter myself.”

He finally looked at her and couldn’t quite keep his face from showing how startled he was by the state she was in.

“Bathing in the blood of virgins again, I see,” he said dryly.

She smiled. “Your friend Lucius decided it was time to consummate our relationship with a duel. I was winning, so he dumped me in a pit with a tebo. I’d have been back an hour ago, but I couldn’t just leave all that wonderful hide there, now could I?”

He shook his head at her and said sarcastically, “No. I suppose you would have been a fool to leave it.”

She continued to smile and replied coaxingly, “I brought you a present too.”

He raised an eyebrow and noticed the large bag sitting on the floor by the door. It felt heavy when he lifted it onto a table for examination. He opened it slowly and his eyes widened a bit as he realized what it contained.

“I seem to remember an article you published a few years ago about how tebo parts would make stronger variants of certain potions. Unfortunately, they are prohibitively expensive,” she said
He stared at the perfectly butchered organs, hooves, and tusks all cozily nestled in their own pockets in the bag. His anger melting away, he lifted his head and his eyes gleamed at her.

She was reckless.

She was barbaric.

She was completely mad.

She was magnificent.

“As I said, you always have an excuse,” he repeated, his tone losing its bite. He closed the bag and started to pull her into his arms, but she inhaled sharply and flinched.

“What is it?” he demanded.

“Malfoy thought it would be fun to hit me with a bout of *Cruciatus*,” she answered, her voice starting to sound exhausted. “I’ve had better, but I guess the smoke and the adrenaline are starting to wear off. I’m afraid I’ve been a bit of a tease. I doubt I’ll be able to make good on my implied promise of physical bliss tonight.”

“I think it is time to take you home,” he said quietly.

With a flick of his wand, the bag rose into the air and hung there, as if on a string. He put his arm around Miranda’s shoulder to steer her out of the room. She flinched as his arm came in contact with her cursed body, but then she settled against him, apparently glad for the support. The bag floated obediently behind them as they came into the kitchen where Aaron and Rachel sat at the table, heads together like a pair of turtledoves.

“I think I’ve had all the fun I can handle for now,” Miranda said with a tired smile.

“It was just like old times, wasn’t it?” Aaron replied, grinning at her. “Leave what’s left of your wand here. I might be able to find traces of the curse on it.”

“I’m not planning to press charges against Malfoy.”
“I figured that. But I think it’s a good thing to have in our pocket, just in case.”

She shrugged and fished out the pieces of her wand.

“How encouraging to see that you take such good care of your things,” Severus said as she tossed them on the table.

She rolled her eyes at him. “It broke when I fell into the pit. Actually, I don’t mind. Now I can replace it with an unregistered one.”

“Your wand is registered?” he asked incredulously.

“All wands in America are registered and it’s a royal pain.”

“How draconian.”

“Well, you can bet I won’t register my next one unless someone makes me.”

“I’m not hearing this conversation,” Aaron said pointedly.

Severus frowned. “I believe that Mr. Ollivander takes his vacation at this time of year. I doubt you will be able to replace it until late next week.”

“I guess you’ll just have to baby-sit me until then,” Miranda teased.

“Or you can leave her here,” Aaron said with a wink. “We’re used to her antics.”

Severus gave Aaron a withering look. “I suppose I require some sort of trouble to occupy me during the Holidays.” He gave Rachel a short bow and added, “Thank you for the tea, Mrs. Lee.”

“You’re welcome professor,” Rachel replied good-naturedly. “Although I think you should call me Rachel. Those of use who know the difficulties of managing these two have to stick together.”

Severus wasn’t sure he cared for the American’s casual address, but he wasn’t sure he cared to alienate her either. He gave her a noncommittal nod and flicked his wand at the second bag of tebo harvest that sat on the kitchen floor. Then he guided Miranda out of the flat with the bags floating behind them. When they reached the street, a fog blew in by way of an unfelt breeze. It was oddly warm as they walked through it, and when they emerged on the other side, they were standing on the lane leading to her cabin. She was limping openly by then, so he lifted her as gently as he could and carried her the rest of the way. She flinched and started to protest at first, but then she gave a sigh of resignation and laid her head against his shoulder.
After they entered the cabin, he deposited her on the sofa and drew her a bath. He rummaged in the potions closet, muttering irritably about its disorder. No matter—he would remedy that problem tomorrow. It took some time, but he eventually found a bottle of dittany and a measure of healing herbs. He added the latter to the bathwater and then went about the task of removing Miranda’s bloodstained clothing. She did what she could to help, but it was obvious that movement was becoming more and more difficult for her as the night progressed. He ended up carrying her to the bath as well, and she did not bother to argue.

A quiet moan of pain escaped her lips as she slid into the hot water, but once the initial shock passed, she relaxed into the tub. He applied a dose of dittany to the gash on her arm and then took down her tangled hair. She closed her eyes while he combed it with deft, practiced motions and by the time he had finished, she had started to doze off. He woke her reluctantly before she was completely asleep and helped her out of the bath. She leaned heavily against the wall while he dried her and dressed her in a cotton nightgown. Her face was pale and drawn with pain by then, so he picked her up a third time and carried her like a child to the bed.

He puttered around the cabin for another hour or so, storing the tebo parts for processing the next day. He thumbed through an American book on potions and indulged in a glass of wine from the bar. The potions in the book involving native flora intrigued him and he wondered how many of the plants might grow in England. Perhaps he could drop a hint to Pomona about the more interesting varieties. To his pleasant surprise, he discovered one of his nightshirts in Miranda’s armoire. He felt a bit foolish that he was so pleased that she had kept it—much as he felt foolish for keeping the comb she had forgotten in his chambers in the drawer of the table next to his bed.

He changed and finally lay down next to her. The light of the setting moon filtered through the curtains and he marveled at how deceptively innocent she appeared when she was asleep. A lock of her hair had fallen across her face and he brushed it back as he studied her. He fully expected that she was going to be the death of him. But he was well aware that there were worse ways to die.

It was late afternoon by the time Miranda awoke the next day. She stretched her aching body and climbed slowly out of bed, quite pleased with the previous evening’s events. As she paced her room to work out some of the kinks in her limbs leftover from the tebo toss, the scent of fresh bread and chicken soup wafted through the door. A bemused smile spread across her face and she recalled the time she had spent at Severus’s house after the werewolf incident. He was a good, if utilitarian, cook and she was touched now—as she had been then—at the care he took of her when she was injured.

She decided it was a day for night clothes and pulled on her dressing gown before making her way to the bathroom to wash the sleep from her eyes. She spent a longer time than strictly necessary to comb and arrange her hair. As she braided just enough of it to keep it out of her eyes, she tried to control that giddy feeling that always threatened to overtake her when Severus did something thoughtful. His demeanor was so bristly most of the time and he worked so hard to act as though he didn’t care a fig about her that his sporadic acts of tenderness knocked her a bit off kilter. They made her want to let down her guard in spite of how she had been burned by love in the past. But
she doubted that was a wise thing to do with him. He seemed so tangled up inside that she hesitated even to consider offering him more than he might be able to appreciate. Especially when she was so ambivalent herself.

She did indeed find a pot of soup simmering on the stove when she emerged from the bathroom. Her stomach started growling as she gave it a stir and she dished herself up a bowl. She set it on the table to cool for a bit and noticed that Severus had already packed the tebo hide in a tub of salt to cure.

“I see you are remarkably lazy today,” he said as he appeared in the doorway of the potions room.

“And you are criminally industrious,” she replied, crossing to him. She wrapped her arms around his neck and tilted her face up to be kissed. He obliged her, but handled her as though he were afraid of hurting her. She parted her lips to deepen the kiss and, while he made that strangled noise in his throat again, he pulled away.

“No,” he said sternly as he traced her lips with his finger. “You are going to rest today that I might have the full use of your body tonight.”

“If that’s the price of your cooking and cleaning, I guess it’s worth it,” she said playfully. She glanced over his shoulder and started at the state of her tiny potions room. Slipping past him into it, she saw that it was more than half empty. Most of the potions she had made were missing, along with all of the clutter. What was left was meticulously arranged and labeled in a cramped handwriting.

“What did you do to my potions room?” she demanded in a mock-angry tone.

“Your potions room was a disgrace to wizarding kind. I am in the process of making it acceptable, to which end I must make a trip back to Hogwarts for supplies. I don’t suppose it is possible for a civilized person such as myself to find this cabin without a barbarian to show me the way.”

She raised an eyebrow at him saucily. “I don’t know. If you decide to run away in a week or two because I’ve pissed you off it will be a lot of trouble to change the hearthstone.”

He gave her an exasperated look and she laughed at him lightly.

“Sit down,” she said. “I’ll take care of it.”

As he went to the sofa, she knelt stiffly in front of the fireplace. She waved her hand over the flames and they started burning a rich, deep red.
After a moment she thrust her hand into them, all the way down to the hearthstone. Gathering some of the ashes, she withdrew her fist from the fire. As soon as her hand was clear, the flames returned to their usual orange color. She pushed herself up off of the floor and brought the ash to Severus. She had to put a hand on his knee to steady herself as she knelt in front of him.

“Close your eyes,” she said.

When he complied, she smeared ash on his eyelids and then on his hands as well. Each bit of ash shown brilliantly white for a moment, and then disappeared into his skin. She knew it was burning him and pricking him like a thousand tiny needles, but she also knew it was not a painful sensation.

“You can open them,” she said when the ash had vanished. “Now when you Apparate here, you’ll be able to see the cabin and open the door.”

He smirked at her. “Am I still to be denied the famous Homing Spell?”

“I’m afraid so. Only family members can share a Homing Spell.”

“How sentimental.” He gave her his hand to help her up from her knees and onto the sofa, then he brought her the bowl of soup and some bread and butter to go with it.

“You will stay here until I return,” he said imperiously. “If I find that you have left this cabin, I will strangle you myself.”

“Your wish is my command,” she replied sarcastically, tearing into the food. It was delicious, but she didn’t want to further inflate his ego by telling him so. He gathered his cloak and pulled back her hair to kiss the back of her neck. She couldn’t contain the purring noise this elicited and he left the cabin with an expression of smug superiority on his face.

She enjoyed a leisurely meal and even helped herself to seconds. When she had finished, she cleaned the dishes and then read through Part VI of *Song of the Lark*. She didn’t want to start another novel straight away, so she examined the new, improved potions room. She would have to make an effort to maintain it after Severus had put so much work into reorganizing it. It amused her that he was so fussy about some things, but that was probably part of what made him good at potions in the first place.

The silence started to sound too loud, so she switched on the wireless. She fiddled with the dial for quite a while without finding anything agreeable, so she switched it back off and opened a drawer in the front of her desk. Out popped a small turntable and a pair of matching speakers. Another drawer revealed ten or so records and she flipped through them, debating about the kind of mood she was in. Finally choosing one, she set it spinning and a scratchy female voice filled the cabin.

“…You say that it’s over now…”
Satisfied, she went back to the sofa and fished out the most recent issue of the Quibbler from a stack on the coffee table. She lit a cigarette and settled in to read.

“….Freedom is just another word for nothin’ left to lose…”

“What on earth is that loathsome din?” Severus demanded when he returned from his errands laden with packages.

She laughed. “Part of the soundtrack of my misbegotten youth. But we can listen to something else if you’d rather.” She pulled herself up from the sofa and took the needle off the record. After returning it to the drawer, she started flipping through the choices again, wondering what could possibly please the man.

He shook his head at her and started unpacking in the kitchen. “I was surprised to see that someone who likes to eat as much as you do had let her stores dwindle so low,” he mocked.

“Oh, that,” she said nonchalantly. “You see, I’m going to be leaving the country soon.”

He stopped unpacking and turned to give her a withering look. “When exactly were you planning to give me that pertinent information?” His voice was soft, which meant he was, of course, getting angry.

She kept her tone light and her eyes firmly on the records. “I’d like to remind you that you’ve been entitled to know my business for less than twenty-four hours. During which time, I might add, I’ve bested Malfoy in a duel and single-handedly killed and butchered a tebo.”

“I don’t require reminding. Where are you going?”

She paused over the records, debating what to tell him. All the secrecy was beginning to get on her nerves and she wondered, not for the first time, why Albus had warned her against telling Severus much of her mission. If Severus was such an expert Occlumens, then why did it matter if he knew?

Finally she said, “I’m going to Romania. I went to Hogwarts the other night to ask Albus for help putting some distance between Malfoy and myself. Distance that I think is even more warranted after last night’s festivities. Albus pointed out that Romania is an excellent place to hide this time of year and, lo and behold, I received a tip about a large black dog and a Hippogriff keeping company around Săpânța.”

“I see that you and Albus are now on a first name basis.”
She shrugged. “He gave me a cigarette and promised to pay me off when this charade of a case is over. I guess I’m easy.”

“I’m well aware of how easy you are,” he snapped.

His tone irritated her more than his words did. “You know,” she said coolly, “you could just say that you’re going to miss me instead of being nasty.”

He clenched his teeth and a muscle in his jaw started twitching, but he returned to unpacking the groceries without saying whatever insult had popped into his mind.

She pulled a record out of the drawer and went on, “I’ll be back for those monthly meetings, so it’s not as though you’ll never see me again. It’ll probably be better for your productivity anyway. I expect I’m a terrible distraction when I’m around.”

“I find that my productivity markedly improves after a bit of recreation,” he muttered. He added in a louder voice, “How do you intend to keep Lucius from murdering you at these farcical meetings?”

“By scheduling them so that Aaron can collect me when he goes to have lunch with his friend in the Ministry.” He glared at her and she quickly added, “On time too! Aaron knows I’m always on time to work obligations.”

“Somehow I find that difficult to believe.”

“You’ll just have to believe it.”

“I don’t like it.”

“I don’t really like it either, but I didn’t know that a war was starting when I took the job from Fudge and Malfoy. Even if I had known, I probably wouldn’t have been allowed to say no. There’s not much I can do about it now.”

“As you say.” He finished unloading in the kitchen and took the rest of the packages to the potions room as an awkward silence fell.

She sighed and called, “Do you like opera?”

“It is more acceptable than the trash you were playing earlier.”
She rolled her eyes. “Mama sent this one for Christmas. She and Papa went out to San Diego earlier this year to see it, so please keep at least half of your cutting remarks to yourself.”

“Now I will have to think of twice as many. What a bother you are.”

She set the record spinning and went back to the sofa and the Quibbler. The lush music slowly dissolved the tension in the air and Miranda felt her shoulders relax. After about twenty minutes, the soprano on the record launched into a melody that was so hauntingly divine that Miranda put down her magazine in order to listen more closely.

“…řekni mi kde je můj milý…”

She let her eyes fall closed as the music washed over her. Her mother had grown up with opera and her father had been wise enough to indulge the interest until he developed an actual interest himself. As the baby of the family and the only girl, it had been a very special thing when it was Miranda’s turn to put on a party dress and accompany her parents to the theatre. She didn’t understand much about the music, but she knew what she liked and what she didn’t care for. The one playing in the cabin now was definitely going to be one that she liked.

She opened her eyes in surprise when Severus joined her on the sofa, liner notes in hand. He was reading them intently, but he put an arm around her shoulders and she settled against him with a smile. He started idly stroking her hair and they sat there for a long time, listening to the music.

___________________________________________________________________

They were sitting together on the sofa in much the same way two days later. It was an hour before the New Year and Severus was reading Dickens aloud under duress. He had protested that it was sentimental dreck and Miranda had argued that if one couldn’t be sentimental at Christmastime, when could one be sentimental? He wasn’t sure if it was her argument or her caresses that had swayed him, but there he was, reading about Scrooge’s encounter with the spirit world.

“ ‘Again the Ghost sped on, above the black heaving sea…’ ”

He flinched and dropped the book. His shirtsleeves were rolled up to the elbows and the Dark Mark was clearly visible as it writhed angrily.

“Surprise party?” Miranda asked quietly.

“So it would seem,” he replied grimly.

Without another word, she got up to fetch his frock coat and cloak. He did not meet her eyes as he drew them on.
When he was ready, he said, “You should go to bed.”

“Of course. I’ll be asleep five minutes after you leave.”

He traced her cheek with his finger and walked out into the frigid night.

After he had gone, Miranda lit a cigarette and sat back down on the sofa. She stared into the fire while she smoked, letting the flames hypnotize her. Without meaning to, she let her mind wander back to the that night when she had first realized what her father did for a living. She had been supposed to be asleep like all good seven-year-olds, but she had heard her parents talking and had crept to the top of the stairs to listen. After her Papa had left, Miranda had gone boldly down the stairs, demanding to know what a ‘bail jumper’ was and why Papa was after one. Mama had refused to answer at first, but Miranda had badgered her until she had explained. Miranda had asked if Papa would get hurt trying to find the fugitive. Mama had hugged her tightly and had said that Papa was very good at what he did.

Miranda shook off the memory and finished her cigarette. It wouldn’t do any good to dwell on the past. She was not a scared little girl and she would not admit to being a scared woman. Severus was good at what he did, too. He would be fine. And, if he weren’t, then there wasn’t much she could do about it at the moment anyway. She went to her tiny kitchen and started pulling ingredients out of the pantry.

The anteroom was dark and cold as Severus waited for the Dark Lord’s pleasure. Since his return to bodily form, the Dark Lord no longer seemed to notice temperature and he did not trouble himself to keep his quarters comfortable for those mere mortals among his followers who did. He also did not trouble himself to keep any sort of furniture in the anteroom, and so the Death Eaters milled about awkwardly in the gloomy chamber, trying to act as though they were not apprehensive to enter the Dark Lord’s presence. Severus did this most successfully of the men gathered tonight. He had claimed a spot near the only window in the room. It was small and smeared with filth, but at least it gave him a place to focus his attention. His face was impassive as he stared out the window, motionless except for his breathing. Avery and Crabbe were also in the room, but they could not manage to keep themselves still. They fidgeted with their robes and paced restlessly. A few times they made abortive attempts at conversation, but every man in that room was too deep in his own concerns to care about any of the others.

It was impossible to say how long Severus would have to wait before the Dark Lord called him into the makeshift throne room. It was within the realm of possibility that he would be sent away without an audience tonight. It amused the Dark Lord to keep his flock off balance, and every one of his sheep was a close and familiar friend to anxiety. Once in a while, the wait was short and the meeting almost positive. Severus did not hope for such a meeting tonight. He wondered if he
would be asked about the events of the Malfoy party, or if he were going to be taken to task about his association with yet another Muggle-born witch. These thoughts were not helpful to his composure, so he pushed them away lightly as they arose, like a breeze blowing away the clouds. As he did so, Miranda's face appeared in his mind, and he pushed that away too. This image was more stubborn than the others, so he called up Lily's face to replace it. He spent a long time picturing the exact shade of Lily's hair and recalling the lilting pitch of her voice.

When Lily was firmly fixed in Severus’s mind, Lucius emerged from the Dark Lord’s inner chamber. He gave Severus a contemptuous look, took up a spot as far away from the potions master as he could, and started whispering violently with Avery and Crabbe. Severus wanted to gloat over Lucius’s humiliation at losing so spectacularly to an American Muggle-born. He knew that Lucius was not a flexible thinker and wished he had been present to witness the older man’s floundering in the face of unfamiliar spells. He felt a smile tug at the corner of his lips and put a stop to such thinking. He needed to keep his mind blank. He let these amusing thoughts drift away and called up his memories of Lily and the desires of his youth.

Miranda poured the scalding liquid swiftly into the pan on the counter next to the stove. The chocolate she scattered over it started melting instantly, and she gave her work an approving nod. She scrubbed the dishes, trying not to obsessively watch the clock. Severus had only been gone for an hour and she knew that clock watching would not bring him back any faster. By the time she had finished the dishes, the silence in the cabin was starting to agitate her. She put the final dish back in its place and went to the turntable. As the scratchy female voice started singing again, Miranda dug out a bucket and some rags to start cleaning. Nothing really needed to be cleaned, but it was a ritual she had learned as a child. When Papa was away, if the Roses could not sleep at night, they would clean the house from top to bottom. It had been a warm, companionable way to spend those long and sometimes frightening hours of the night. During the day, it was easier to believe that Papa would come home safely. Night was always harder to manage.

She started with the walls now, scrubbing and singing along with the record. She couldn’t stop her imagination from creating nightmare scenarios, but she didn’t have to dwell on them. She let the images flow through her mind like a river and refused to hold onto any of them. She focused her eyes on the grain of the wooden walls and forced her hands to notice how rough the wet rags felt. Severus would be fine. And, if he weren’t, worrying about him wouldn’t help. Best to wait and deal with whatever came when it came.

Harry Potter and his friends would have been shocked to see their haughty professor kneeling like a slave before the Dark Lord. Indeed, Severus would rather have died than kneel to anyone else. In his youth, this posture had been acceptable to him because he had known that soon enough, he would have slaves of his own to give him obeisance; even as he paid his homage to the Dark Lord. Now it was simply part of the role he had to play in order to carry out the plan. It was humiliating, but the feeling of humiliation was familiar to him now, so he buried it deep with all of the other painful emotions that were not conducive to survival.
His mind was firmly in the past as he knelt on the hard wooden floor. He willed his knees not to give out before the Dark Lord got on with whatever it was that he wanted. Standing still for so long had made Severus’s legs numb, and the brief walk between the anteroom and the throne room had not been long enough to restore circulation. The pins-and-needles sensation was painful, but he remained still, his eyes hovering somewhere between the floor and the chair where the Dark Lord sat. Severus knew from experience that he had to keep his eyes available in case the Dark Lord wanted them, but he would not look directly at his master. This was something he did both as a sign of submission, and in the faint hope that if he did not offer the opportunity for Legilimency directly, perhaps the Dark Lord would decide not to invade his mind.

This turned out to be a vain hope, and Severus felt the familiar feeling of revulsion threaten to overtake him as the Dark Lord bored into his mind. He knew the feeling would pass though, and he let it wash over him like a wave. He allowed the memories and fantasies of Lily that he had called up in the anteroom swirl through his mind. He mixed in conversations with Albus and dull scenes of him teaching. He added the memory of him greeting Narcissa at the Malfoy party as a calculated risk. If the Dark Lord was planning to meddle with his relationship with Miranda, part of Severus wanted to know it now. But another part of him hoped that the Dark Lord was still unaware of her, and so he did not think of her directly.

After an unbearable time, the Dark Lord withdrew and Severus let his eyes drop completely to the floor.

“Do you never tire of that mud-blood woman, Severus?” the Dark Lord asked in his eerily high-pitched voice.

Severus did not answer because he knew he was not expected to. He kept his eyes on the floor and his face still.

“Do you know why I have called you here tonight?” the Dark Lord asked coldly.

“I am sorry to say that I do not know why I have been so honored, my Lord,” Severus answered humbly.

The Cruciatu s hit him more quickly than he was expecting. He dropped to the floor, body contorted in pain. He let the pain wash over him, his mind focusing on the tip of his left index finger. He kept his mind there, curiously examining how much pain that one spot could hold.

When the curse stopped, Severus gasped for breath.

“Arthur Weasley is alive when he should be dead,” the Dark Lord said cruelly. “I am sure you know why.”

Severus knew that he had to answer, and he knew what his answer would bring.
“I am sorry to say that I do not know, my Lord.” His voice was shaky, but he was ready for the *Cruciatus* when it came this time. His mind was already on the tip of his finger, marveling again at its capacity to hold pain.

When the curse stopped, the Dark Lord hissed, “Weasley was given an anti-venom. An anti-venom made by you.”

“I am most humbly....” Severus began, but the *Cruciatus* hit him a third time. It was all he could do to keep his mind on the tip of his finger. The curse lasted until he lost consciousness.

Miranda finished drying her hair and pulled on a nightdress and a dressing gown. The cabin sparkled from top to bottom and the toffee was stored away in a tin. She had plans for it, assuming that Severus wasn’t killed tonight. Her stomach was in knots and she started picking through her bookshelves for something to distract her. She knew she wouldn’t be able to concentrate on a novel, so she pulled down *Romanian in Conversation* and opened it to the next lesson. She obediently parroted the phrases that Polyanna’s voice modeled from the book, but her mind was more focused on the slow ticking of the clock than it was on her da-s and nu-s. It had been more than four hours since Severus had left, not that she was counting. She started pacing and covered her eyes with her hands for a moment so that she wouldn’t be able to stare at the clock.

“*România este o țară minunată,*” the book chirped.

She uncovered her eyes and directed them to the book as she paced. “România este o țară minunată,” she repeated.

“*Trebuie să mai exersez la română.*”

“Trebuie să mai exersez la română.”

“I thought I told you to go to bed,” Severus said in a tight voice as he stumbled into the cabin.

Miranda quickly closed the book and went to him. His face was white as a sheet and he leaned heavily against the door after he closed it.

“You didn’t say please,” she replied, keeping her voice even. She knew the last thing he wanted from her was pity.
He gave her half of a painful smile and she wrapped his arm around her shoulder. He flinched and resisted at first, but then he gave a sigh of resignation and put some of his weight on her. She helped him limp first to the bathroom, and then to the bed. She brought him a glass of water which he took with a shaking hand and gulped greedily. She brought him another which he managed to drink more slowly, and then she knelt to remove his shoes. He gave a hiss of pain as she pulled them off, but did nothing to stop her. She undid his cloak and the buttons of his frock coat. Although she worked as gently as she could, he could not completely stifle a moan as she removed them. When she was finished, she helped him to lie down and pulled out a cigarette. She lit it and held it out to him.

“I am not going to smoke that vile thing,” he snapped.

“Yes, you are,” she answered firmly. “It will help with the pain so you can sleep.

He glared at her, but after a moment he relented and took it. He inhaled the first draught deeply and, as he exhaled, his face relaxed a bit.

“Do you want me to leave you alone?” she asked.

He took another drag off the cigarette before replying, “No.”

She went to the other side of the bed and lay down next to him.

“Do you want me to touch you?” she asked.

“Yes.”

She laid her head carefully on his shoulder. He flinched as he wrapped his arm around her, but then seemed content. The room was dark except for the moonlight filtering in through the curtain and the red point at the end of the cigarette. The smoke curled in the dim light and she lifted a finger, swirling it into patterns.

After a long time, Severus said, “He didn’t say anything about you.”

“I wasn’t worried about that,” she replied.

“I was.”

She frowned. “Do you think he knows about me?”
“I have no idea.”

She was quiet for a while and then said lightly, “I see the Dark Lord is less patient with your cheek than I am.”

He made a sound between a laugh and a groan. “Don’t get any ideas.”

“Did he have a reason, or was this just for fun?”

She thought he wasn’t going to answer, but after a while he said, “He was angry that my anti-venom was used to save one of his intended victims. But he doesn’t require a reason.”

She closed her eyes and wondered how long Severus would be able to play this part. She knew that he was brave and tenacious, but it seemed like a lot to ask of a man.

“I’m glad you’re back,” she said simply.

He made a scoffing noise as he blew out a line of smoke. “I’m surprised you would admit that.”

“Severus, I actually do like you. Most of the time anyway.”

“High praise indeed.”

She laughed quietly. “I wouldn’t complain if I were you. It’s more praise than you’ve ever given me. And you’re already the most arrogant man on the face of the earth.”

“Fishing for compliments are we?”

She smiled. “From you? Why would I bother?”

He was silent for a long time, smoking down the cigarette. She went back to swirling the smoke into patterns with her finger, assuming that the conversation was over.

He surprised her, however, by saying finally, “I realize that your powers of observation are no match for mine, but surely you are aware that I think you are magnificent.”

A blush spread over her cheeks and that giddy feeling bloomed in her chest. But she kept her voice light as she answered, “Of course. That goes without saying.” She paused and then added, “You do realize with all your mighty powers of observation that women like to hear that sort of thing once in a while, don’t you?”
“What bothersome creatures you are.”

His voice sounded exhausted, so she didn’t continue bantering with him. He finished the cigarette, snuffed it out in the ashtray on the bedside table, and wrapped his other arm around her as well. Gradually his breathing slowed and before long he had dropped off to sleep. She lay there awake for a long time, listening to his heartbeat. She really didn’t know what she would call their relationship and she doubted that it was the sort of thing that could last until death did they part. But she felt that she wanted to hold onto whatever it was that they had for as long as she could.

Chapter End Notes

Notes and Quoted Text:

“Cindy” is an American folk song

“Move Over” by Janis Joplin and “Me and Bobby McGee” by Fred L. Foster and Kris Kristofferson; both from Janis Joplin’s 1971 Pearl album.

Miranda would have been six when this album came out, but what are older brothers for?

“Song to the Moon” from Act I of Rusalka by Antonín Dvořák. Rusalka is based on Undine by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, which is a retelling of the little mermaid fairy tale. This is not the Disney version, or even the Hans Christian Anderson version: the prince dies and Rusalka (the mermaid) has to wander the earth as a spirit forever. It makes a great opera, though. Many fine sopranos have recorded this aria. My favorites are Renee Fleming and Lucia Popp.

Conor and Monica Rose (Miranda’s parents) flew out to see Rusalka at the San Diego Opera in January of 1995. The role of Rusalka became one of Renee Fleming’s signature roles after she sang it at the Seattle Opera in 1990. She would also have sung the performance in 1995 that the Roses were fortunate enough to hear.

The final bit of quoted text is from A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens.
“How was your New Year?” Rachel asked cheerfully on Friday morning.

Miranda paused in the middle of pouring herself a cup of coffee from the press-pot on the Lee’s kitchen counter and glanced at Severus. He was leafing through a book that he had found sitting on the table, but he looked up long enough to give Miranda an ironic smirk.

“How was yours?” Miranda said evenly. “How was yours?”

Rachel either didn’t notice, or chose to ignore the exchange and she said, “Just fine, although I was in bed well before 1996 started. Do you read Japanese, Severus?”

“No. Not at all,” he answered, still studying the volume. “Is this a book of spells?”

“Not exactly. It’s a facsimile of the Murakami Tenchi hajimari no koto, which is the sacred book of the Kakure Kirishitans.”

“Kakure Kirishitans?”

“It means, ‘hidden Christians.’ During the Edo period it was punishable by death to be a Christian in Japan, so those that remained faithful practiced in secret. The Tenchi existed as an oral tradition as much, or more, than a written one, and I’ve been comparing the different versions that we have records of. It would be fascinating enough as a religious study, but there is also evidence that the Kirishitans coded magical knowledge that they learned from their contact with the western missionaries and traders before Japan closed its borders in the seventeenth century.”

Rachel had started to speak excitedly as she explained her research, but she broke off when she realized that Severus was staring intently at her. Her pregnancy-flushed cheeks turned a deeper shade of pink, and Miranda smiled behind her coffee mug, recognizing the greedy look Severus’s face always wore when confronted with some heretofore unknown piece of knowledge.

“I’m sorry,” Rachel said sheepishly. “I tend to get carried away when I’m talking about Edo Japan. I know it’s not the most interesting thing to listen to.”

“On the contrary,” Severus replied, “I would be interested to read your findings.”

“Oh. Well, I’d be happy to send them to you. Will you be joining us this morning?”

“I’m afraid not. I am here only to prevent Miranda from falling into another tebo pit before she
manages to replace her wand."

"Which you’ve done admirably," Miranda said, blowing on her coffee.

Rachel smiled and said, “I’ll be ready as soon as I get my things. Have a good day, Severus.”

When Rachel was out of sight, Severus closed the book and crossed the kitchen to where Miranda was leaning against the counter. He tilted her chin up with the tip of a long finger.

“You are to stay out of trouble today,” he said sternly.

She opened her eyes wide and replied innocently, “What? Me get into trouble? Perish the thought.”

He gave her a withering look, and set her coffee mug on the counter in order to kiss her soundly.

“Do you need anything from Diagon Alley?” she asked, toying with his hair when they broke apart.

Despite the fervor in his kiss, his face was still stern and his tone imperious. “Salamander blood and unicorn horn. Although I hesitate to entrust the choosing of such subtle ingredients to you.”

Rachel was showing no signs of returning to the kitchen, so Miranda used the opportunity to apply her lips to a spot on Severus’s neck that was never quite protected by his high collars. It tended to render him incoherent when stimulated, something she found useful when he was becoming overbearing. The muscles in his neck tensed and his frown became fiercer as her lips began their work, but, before long, his breathing became a bit ragged, his eyes drifted closed, and one corner of his mouth curled into half of a smile.

She pulled back, the better to admire her handiwork, and asked saucily, “What was that? I didn’t quite hear you.”

“Hmmm?” he said distractedly. “I seem to have forgotten whatever it was that I was saying. When should I expect you?”

“I’m having lunch with Rachel, so late afternoon. Do try to remember to eat something. There’s some leftover stew in the icebox.”

“I make no promises. Until then.” He traced her cheek with his finger and headed back to the cabin, where his lesson plans--and Miranda’s potions--awaited.

“Miranda, if you don’t tell me everything that’s been going on with that man, I might have to stop being your friend,” Rachel joked when she returned to the kitchen.

Miranda laughed. “Over lunch, I promise.”

“I’m going to hold you to that.”

The ladies made their way up to the main floor of the Embassy and queued for the communal fireplace. Rachel shifted her weight from foot to foot as they waited, as though she were not quite used to the new weight she was carrying. She was a small woman and the baby was already rounding out her middle nicely.

“Rachel, you’re absolutely glowing. How are you feeling today?” Miranda asked.
Rachel sighed and rested her hands protectively on her belly. “Pretty well. My hands ache most of the time, but the nausea’s finally gone. I’m still exhausted in the evenings and Aaron keeps teasing me about going to bed so early. But I keep telling him that we have to sleep while we can. Once the baby’s here, there won’t be the opportunity for years.” She smiled slyly at Miranda and added, “Speaking of sleep, I was surprised to see you so early.”

“I know. You can blame Severus for that. I thought that Patrick was punctual, but Severus takes the cake.”

“How is Patrick?”

“Well. He and Anna are expecting a baby in the spring too.”

“That'll be four for them, right?”

“Yes. I think they're hoping for a boy to balance out all the girls.”

“And how's the Romanian coming?”

“More quickly than I'd thought. Severus seems to be a natural at picking up languages and I'll be damned if I'm going to let him learn it faster than I do. Especially since I had a week's head start.”

They reached the front of the queue and Rachel stepped up to the fireplace first. She took a pinch of Floo Powder from the mouth of the bronze Piasa bird on the mantel and tossed it into the fire. The green flames flared up impressively and she shouted “Diagon Alley” as she stepped into them. Miranda followed suit and the ladies emerged into the dimly lit dining room of the Leaky Cauldron.

“Good morning, Tom,” Rachel said pleasantly as they dusted soot from their cloaks.

“Mornin’ Mrs. Lee. Will you be wantin’ anything this mornin’?” Tom grunted as he wiped the bar with a rag of questionable cleanliness.

“No, thank you.”

Tom shrugged and Rachel followed Miranda out into the sunny January morning. It was one of those cold, eerily bright days and they pulled their cloaks more closely about them and huddled together as they hurried over the cobblestones to get out of the frigid weather.

Ollivander’s shop was on the south side of Diagon Alley and Miranda held the door for Rachel as they ducked into it. The shop was long and narrow with so many wand boxes stacked in every available spot that the light from the windows was almost totally obscured. Miranda and Rachel craned their necks upwards as they stared, awestruck at the selection.

“I don’t know how I’m ever going to choose one,” Miranda murmured.

“You do not choose the wand,” came a clipped voice from the back of the shop. “The wand chooses the witch.”

Miranda’s body tensed instinctively and her hand went to her empty wand pocket. Rachel seemed unconcerned, and she gave a friendly smile to the thin, wrinkled man who appeared behind the counter and eyed the women somewhat suspiciously.

“Americans, I see,” he sniffed.
"I'm afraid so," Miranda said easily, relaxing her stance. "My wand broke in an accident a few days ago and I need a replacement."

He gave her a horrified look. "I hope that you intend to take better care of this one."

"Of course," she answered, but then she snapped, "Hey! That's getting a bit fresh I think." Several tape measures had begun attempting to examine most of Miranda's body and she swatted at them. They drew back as though affronted.

"Ahem," Mr. Ollivander cleared his throat. "Young lady, I am afraid that you will have to be measured if you hope to be fitted with a wand. I had thought that you had been through the process before."

Miranda pursed her lips. "We do things differently where I'm from."

Mr. Ollivander gave her a look of barely concealed contempt, and she allowed the tape measures to continue. They did so, although it seemed grudgingly. Mr. Ollivander began examining his stores, fingering the boxes fondly as he did. He went up and down ladders, pulling out box after box while he muttered to himself. Each time he chose one, he would shake his head and push it back into its stack. At long last, the frisky tape measures floated away and Mr. Ollivander set two fine wooden boxes on the counter.

He opened the first to reveal a plain, but beautiful dark brown wand. “Alder and Dragon’s Heartstring, ten inches, rigid,” he said. “Excellent for nonverbal spells and exceptionally loyal once won over. Extremely proud and difficult to control before that happens. Perfect for the duelist.”

Miranda picked up the wand and savored the feel of the smooth wood in her hand. She decided to start with something basic and flicked it experimentally as she thought, Wingardium leviosa. A stack of twenty boxes shot into the air, and clattered noisily to the floor.

Mr. Ollivander sighed and waved his wand to clean the mess.

"A bit sensitive, aren't you baby?" Miranda said with a smile.

She replaced the wand and Mr. Ollivander opened the second box. This wand was also made of a dark wood, but it was intricately carved.

"Dragon's heartstring and Spruce. Ten and three quarter inches, flexible. A powerful wand, perfect for the brazen spellcaster, particularly if she has a good sense of humor."

This wand also felt good in Miranda's hand. She repeated her test and the quill sitting on the counter floated gracefully up and down. She tried it on a few other items in the shop and each one behaved obediently.

"This one seems easier to manage," she observed. "Although I wonder if the other might give better results after I got over the learning curve."

She set down the Spruce wand and went to pick up the Alder. Her hand was still six inches away when the wand leapt into it. Mr. Ollivander raised his eyebrows and she curled her fingers around it.

Wingardium Leviosa she thought as she flicked it at her messenger bag where it sat on the floor. The bag rose quickly into the air and began to set itself lightly on the counter. All seemed well,
until the Alder decided to try to set the bag on top of the Spruce wand. Mr. Ollivander snatched the Spruce away just in time, a look of patient long-suffering on his face.

"Hmmm..." Miranda repeated her test and a few more items rose and fell evenly. By the fifth try, the items were rising and sinking exactly as she chose, and even seemed to move with more grace and panache than they had with the Spruce wand.

She turned back to the counter and said, "Why don't I give the Spruce another go, just to be sure." She tried to set the Alder back in its box, but when she uncurled her fingers, the wand stuck stubbornly to her hand.

Rachel laughed and said, "I think it likes you."

Mr. Ollivander nodded solemnly. "The wand chooses the witch."

"I guess I can't argue with that," Miranda agreed with a smile.

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It was almost noon by the time Rachel and Miranda hurried out of the cold into The North Wind. They stood in the doorway, stamping the snow off their boots and enjoying the warmth from the enormous fireplace. When they had some feeling back in their faces, they approached the bored-looking waitress by the cash register. She was young, obviously on break from school, and her electric blue hair made an odd contrast with her prim, black and white dress.

“Welcome to The North Wind,” she muttered around a wad of chewing gum. “Do you want a damask, a linen, or a checked cotton?”

“Damask, I think,” Miranda answered.

The waitress shrugged, flicked her wand, and a richly patterned green damask tablecloth floated up from behind the counter. Rachel and Miranda followed it through the wooden longhouse, underneath a ceiling that was littered with shields, spears, drinking horns, and a viking longboat. When they reached the back corner, the tablecloth unrolled and settled itself neatly over a round table.

Rachel sighed heavily as she sat down, and she took the liberty of putting her feet up on the chair next to Miranda.

“Are you sure about the damask?” Rachel asked after they and their packages were settled.

Miranda smiled easily. “Oh yes. This is a business lunch charged to Lucius Malfoy by way of the Ministry of Magic. I mean, surely Malfoy was simply testing my abilities at his party. That would make the damage done to my wand a business expense. And we have to eat after all that exertion replacing the wand. So, yes, it's definitely a damask day.”

Rachel laughed and they put their hands on the tablecloth. Immediately, platters of Swedish pancakes, lingonberries, sausage, meatballs, and cakes appeared, alongside mugs of coffee, tea, and mead. It was a feast fit for warriors and the ladies happily tucked into it.
They had done quite a number on Diagon Alley after Ollivander’s. First they had been to Flourish and Blotts for Strega Ilithyia’s Wanderings with your Wee Wizard or Witch, followed by Slug and Jiggers for the potions ingredients. Miranda had sent the poor clerk back and forth so many times before she approved of the salamander blood and unicorn horn, that he had muttered something comparing her to Professor Snape in terms of choosiness. She felt sorry for the young man, but she knew that she had succeeded in selecting specimens that would meet with Severus’s approval. Next, they had taken a turn through Thumbelina’s Things for Tykes to finger the outrageously priced baby trousseaux. The last stop before lunch had been Kircher’s Kabinet of Kuriosties. Miranda had been looking for something specific among the astonishing array of antiques, and it had taken her nearly an hour to find it.

“Romania is absolutely fascinating,” Miranda began, avoiding the topic she knew Rachel most wanted to discuss. She did this partly to tease her friend, and partly to put off the moment when she would have to decide exactly what to say about Severus. She had spent the morning deliberating, and she still had not quite settled on what she should share and what she should conceal. “Did you know that they don’t have a school?”

“No, I didn’t,” Rachel answered. “That does sound fascinating, but…”

“Some of the families send their children to Durmstrang,” Miranda interrupted, “but most of them stay in Romania and are trained by teachers called Solomnari. There are ten Solomnari, one for each district, and the children spend a year with each.”

“That must make for a varied education. Now, about…”

“They learn to ride dragons, if you can believe it. I hope I get the chance…”

“Miranda!” Rachel gave her as stern a look as was possible while still smiling, “You had better tell me what’s going on with tall, dark, and silent, or I’ll lose my temper.”

Miranda laughed. “You couldn’t be angry with me. But I’m glad you think he’s silent. He must have behaved the night of the party.”

“He was…intense, but polite. Is he not usually?”

“He’s got a mouth on him, that’s for sure.”

“As bad as Finnian’s?”

“Worse. Finnian had Patrick and Seamus to keep him in line, so he developed a filter. Although, in fairness, I usually find Severus’s remarks amusing. Usually. He’s also very intelligent and can be quite thoughtful when he wants to be. He took it upon himself to brew all the potions I’ll need for my first month in Romania when he really should be writing lesson plans.”

Rachel swallowed a forkful of pancake and lingonberry. “That’s sweet. How did you meet him?”

“At work.”

“Oh dear. Which case?”

“The vampire one. He wandered into the alley at just the right moment, so I made him my accomplice for the night.”

“It seems as though it’s been longer than a night.”
Miranda shrugged as she cut up a piece of sausage. “It’s been off and on. He’s completely devoted to his work.”

“I think a lot of teachers are.”

Miranda shook her head. “No, I don’t mean the work at Hogwarts.” She glanced around and, when she noted that the nearest patrons were on the other side of the dining room and deeply involved in what appeared to be an argument, she added quietly, “He’s in the Order and his assignment’s dodgy. I don’t know exactly what it is, but I gather that it’s not the safest thing in the world for him to have a relationship at the moment.” She hoped Rachel’s usually keen insight wouldn’t see through her bending the truth a bit. She decided not to add anything about the Voldemort connection. That was something that she hoped she would never have to discuss with the Lees. They were understanding, forgiving people, but Miranda doubted that they would be eager to have her involved with a Death Eater—even a former one.

Rachel looked thoughtful as she sipped her tea. “It sounds like it’s getting serious if you’re risking so much to be together.”

“No,” Miranda said lightly. “It’s a fling. A great fling, but a fling nonetheless.”

Rachel’s thoughtful look turned dubious.

“What?” Miranda asked, a little defensively. “I’m a grown woman. I can’t have a fling if I want to?”

“You know I wouldn’t judge you,” Rachel reassured her. “He just seemed so worried about you when he thought you’d gone missing the other night. I wonder if he cares more for you than you realize.”

Miranda blew on her coffee before answering. “I don’t think so. If I had to guess, I’d say that he’s in love with his childhood sweetheart.” She took a sip and added, “But I don’t mind. I don’t think he’s the marrying kind anyway. Hell, I don’t think I’m the marrying kind.” This was true, for the most part. Whatever pull Miranda might have felt towards something deeper than friendship and fucking was severely tempered by a desire not to be responsible for another wizard’s undying love and devotion. It hadn’t gone terribly well the first time and she was not eager to repeat the experiment.

“You used to be the marrying kind,” Rachel observed mildly.

Miranda sighed. “That was a long time ago. David was different. I was different.” She spooned some sugar into her mug and stirred it for a moment, watching the black liquid form a small whirlpool. “I expect that eventually I’ll go back home and Severus will stay here and I’ll have a lot of spicy stories to season my memoirs.”

Rachel was silent for a long time and when she finally spoke, it was with some hesitation. “Miranda, is it possible that this is really about Isaac?”

Miranda felt a wave of panic in the pit of her stomach. It had been years since anyone had dared to mention that name to her. Every muscle in her body tensed and she said icily, “I’m going to pretend that you didn’t bring him up.”

“So you haven’t told Severus about…”

“Of course not!” Miranda snapped. “And I’ll thank you to drop the subject.”
Rachel looked distressed and said softly, “I didn’t mean to upset you. I was just surprised, that’s all.”

Miranda took a deep breath to calm herself. She knew that Rachel meant well. She laid a hand over Rachel’s and said, “I’m sorry for snapping. I simply don’t want to talk about it.” Forcing a smile, she went on, “Tell me about the baby and the pregnancy instead. I want to hear every detail.”

Severus flipped the pork shoulder with a flick of his wand. It was simmering quietly in its pot and the milk was well on its way to coagulating into a delicious brown mass. He had been dubious when Miranda had made this dish for him in the fall, insisting that her sister-in-law’s recipe was foolproof. She had proved her point, though, when the result of the three hour simmer had far surpassed the sum of the two simple ingredients. There was at least another hour left now before it would be ready, and he set the lid back in place for the duration.

The sun was low in the sky and he threw on his cloak to go out into the afternoon. The wind whipped violently off the Channel, and as soon as he was free of the wards surrounding the cabin, he Apparated to Miranda’s makeshift training ground five miles inland. He appeared with a crack in a clearing surrounded by gnarled, bare trees and covered in sloppy piles of melting snow. There had been a thaw during the last few days, and dirty puddles of water sat sullenly where the still frozen earth could not absorb them. The wizened trees did manage to block some of the wind and this, combined with a ring of torches that Miranda had conjured around the edge of the tree line, made outdoor training tolerable. Miranda was standing in the center of the clearing, hard at work with her wand when Severus found her.

“Expecto patronum,” she cast with a flourish. A silvery feline about twice the size of a house cat sprang forth and ran towards him. She turned and smiled at him as her Patronus circled him.

“A lynx?” he asked, studying the animal.

“No,” she corrected. “A bobcat.”

“I am not familiar with that particular breed.”

“They’re wild American cats.”

He smirked. “I would have expected something larger, although a wild cat does seem to suit you.”

“I wouldn’t scoff if I were you,” she chided. “A bobcat can bring down a deer if it wants to.”

His face must have shown his amusement, because she asked, “What’s so funny?”

He waved his wand and commanded, “Expecto patronum.” A silvery doe leapt from it and bounded around the clearing. Miranda started laughing and the bobcat stopped circling Severus in order to chase the doe. The witch and the wizard watched the Patroni chase one another until the shimmering beings disappeared behind the trees.

When they were gone, Miranda turned to Severus and asked, “Are you up for a sparring match?”
He stipulated, “If you are certain you have that thing under control.”

She had spent quite a bit of time practicing with the Alder in the cabin, which had resulted in a fair amount of destruction and minor injuries. Severus had found the process highly amusing to watch, although the wand had paid him back in spades on the one night they had spent at his quarters at Hogwarts. He had wanted to set her wand to open his door and, when he had cast the necessary spell, the blasted thing had shocked him. Miranda had laughed and said that her wand was very loyal to her. And, the more she learned to use it, the truer that seemed.

“It’s all in the way you talk to it,” she said.

Severus took this as answer enough, and they bowed formally to each other. They turned to mark their twenty paces, and then whirled back to cast the first attack in one fluid motion. Her white sparks and his red ones met and sizzled, but it was a languid exchange, more of a tease than anything. Another volley went forth, quicker and stronger the first, followed by a third, and a fourth.

Severus felt that Miranda did indeed have her wand under control and decided to test her further. If the truth were to be told, he was eager to see what she was made of. Without further preamble, he slashed his wand at her, and a whirlwind twisted out of the tip. She grinned wickedly when she saw it ripping its way across the clearing, spewing snow in all directions as it bore down on her. She snapped her wand violently, and a jet stream of hot air shot underneath the tornado. The windstorm slowly lost speed and, before Severus’s eyes, it started spinning back towards him. He darted away to give himself time to halt the spell.

By the time the tornado had fizzled into nothingness, Severus was underneath the canopy of the trees. Miranda was right behind him, and she flicked her wand to pull a branch down on his head. He blasted it in half, and she immediately brought down another. He deflected this one to her, but she vaulted it and it clattered harmlessly to the ground ten feet behind her.

As soon as she landed, he was ready with another wand flick and she was jerked into the air by her ankle. He had started to smile by now as she rose towards the tree branches.

“I’ll bet you do this to all the girls,” she quipped, sounding completely relaxed as she undid the clasp of her cloak and let it fall to the earth below her.

“That was my reason for inventing it,” he bantered back. “Although it is much more satisfying when the ladies in question neglect to wear trousers under their robes.”

“Ha! You’d have to ask awfully nice if you wanted that sort of a thrill.”

By this time, she had floated high enough to be among the tree branches and she slashed her wand at him, knocking him to the ground. With another slash, she liberated herself from his spell. In one motion, she pocketed her wand and caught hold of a nearby branch, swinging around it like a circus performer, and landed lightly in a squat on the upper side of it. She had her wand out as soon as she landed, and sent a string of hexes at him from her perch.

“Thanks for the high ground!” she laughed as he dodged her onslaught.

“A miscalculation on my part,” he returned. “I should have realized you were part monkey.”

After he had physically dodged the third hex, he was able to start parrying them with his own hexes, but could not make any advance on her.
“This will never do,” he chided.

Miranda had fallen into a somewhat predictable rhythm with her attacks, and Severus took advantage of the mistake to counter and thrust during one of the pauses. A shower of arrows appeared over her head, and she had to ignore him for a moment in order to turn them into a harmless spray of flowers. In the time it took her to do that, he sent a stream of ice onto the branch and trunk of her tree. She lost her balance on the branch and fell towards the earth, but she slowed her descent with a flick of her wand, hit the ground in a somersault, and rolled to her feet in a fluid motion.

He applied the ice spell to the ground between them, turning it into a treacherous path of frozen earth. She turned her attention to maintaining her balance, and he used the opportunity to snatch her wand out of her hand and call it to his.

“You naughty boy,” she purred, but she did not try to retrieve her wand immediately.

Instead, she backed away a few paces, and then charged him, going into a slide as she hit the icy patch. He was so focused on catching her wand, and so surprised by her physical attack that he made for easy prey. She crashed into him, feet first, and he went tumbling over her, landing awkwardly on his side. As she reached the end of the ice, Miranda pushed herself to her feet and snapped her fingers to call her wand back to her. Severus tried to keep hold of it, but the Alder wand started sending stabbing pains into his hand again, and he had to let go.

“What on earth was that?” he demanded, but he was having difficulty restraining his desire to laugh.

“The result of having four older brothers,” she replied jubilantly.

Her face was radiant with exertion and mirth, and Severus was distracted by its beauty long enough that she was halfway across the clearing before he realized that she was headed for the ruins of a stone wall and staircase tucked into the edge of it. He scrambled to his feet and gave chase, but he could not stop her from once again claiming the high ground.

She climbed to the top of the crumbling staircase and whirled back to him, just as he had managed to leap onto the lower part of the wall. As she flicked her wand, a massive, fork-tailed bird flew forth, shooting lightning bolts at him, to his astonishment. The first one grazed his shoulder, and he had to physically dodge the next bolt before he managed to cast a shield charm. The lightning slammed into his shield, knocking him backwards off of the wall, but the shield held firm. After a few moments of the attack, he noticed that there was a pause after every seventh bolt, and he used the opportunity to cast his favorite curse at her.

The Sectumsempra flew silently at Miranda, but she sensed its approach and deflected it to the side. It grazed her arm, neck, and cheek, causing her to lose her balance on the edge of the staircase. She let herself fall lightly and rolled across the wet snow. The Thunderbird disappeared and Severus bounded over the wall to her. She was lying on the ground, singing the quiet incantation to heal the wounds from his final curse.

“You have to show me that one again,” she said as he gave her his hand to pull her to her feet. “As in, right now. Where did you learn that?”

Pride expanded in his chest and he answered, “I invented it.”

“Of course you did. Where have you been all my life?”
She said it flippantly, and he knew that she meant it lightly, but it was a wonderful thing to hear all the same. In fact, he felt rather foolish and awkward at how good it was to hear, and he frowned slightly in order to cover the reaction.

Clearing his throat, he faced a nearby tree to demonstrate. “Sectumsempra,” he cast. The bark of the tree exploded as gashes appeared on the trunk.

It took her a few tries, but soon she was casting it as viciously as he always did.

“Show me how to cast the lightning bird spell,” he ordered, when she had mastered his curse.

“I’m afraid only Thunderbirds can do that. But there’s another one I can teach you,” she replied.

“I had no idea that barbarians were so exclusive until I met you.”

“We’re full of surprises,” she bantered back, her eyes twinkling. She turned back to the unfortunate tree and cried, “Fulgur!” Several bolts of lightning struck the already damaged trunk.

He followed suit, but instead of lightning, a shower of soot and ash spewed out of his wand.

She laughed out loud and said, “You’re not saying it correctly.”

“Excuse me?” He was torn between amusement and irritation.

“You’re rolling your ‘r.’”

He tried again to the same result and she laughed harder.

“You’re flipping it now. You have to sort of swallow it.”

“Are you saying that I have to butcher it the way you do?” he asked mockingly.

“Only if you want the spell to work.”

He shook his head and then flicked his wand, imitating her lilting, mid-western twang perfectly. “Fulgur.”

Lightning struck the tree so sharply that it lit on fire. They extinguished it together with a fountain of water and exchanged a satisfied glance.

Later that evening, after the pork and peas had been demolished, Severus set the last vial of Strengthening Solution in its box. Miranda was in her bedroom, haphazardly throwing items into her bag. He took his time tidying in the potions room so that he would not have to watch her do so, both because her cavalier attitude towards packing agitated him, and because he did not care to think about the next day. It had been a very comfortable Holiday and he was more disappointed than he cared to admit that it was ending. Once he had resigned himself to Miranda’s mission, they had settled into an agreeable routine of work and recreation. After that unfortunate New Year’s Eve, the Dark Lord had not deemed it necessary to summon Severus again, and even Albus had left him to himself. Severus had found that if he ignored some of the details regarding what exactly he and Miranda were preparing for in their work, he could pretend for brief stretches of time that his
life was actually rather normal.

When he could dally with the potions no longer, he emerged into the main room and noticed a tin and a package wrapped in brown paper sitting on the table. They had not been there when he had gone into the potions room and, when he went to examine them, he saw that his name was written on the paper.

“Miranda,” he asked, “what is this?”

“It’s your birthday, isn’t it?” she called back from the bedroom. “Or don’t you civilized Brits remember each other’s birthdays?”

It had been at least ten years since anyone had remembered his birthday. He raised an eyebrow and opened the tin, discovering that it was full of toffee. He selected a piece to sample and found that it was indeed as good as Aaron had made it out to be. He closed his eyes as he swallowed it, hand already going back for another piece.

Severus’s father had never cared much for him or his mother. Severus had never understood why and certainly no one had ever talked about such matters. He had learned early that it was best to stay out of his parents’ way—his father’s because the man was free with insults and fists, his mother’s because she was usually exhausted and impatient with him. But there had been times when his father had been out of the house and his mother would make an effort to give him some attention. This had been particularly true once he had grown old enough to begin to use his magic purposefully rather than doing so accidentally. His mother had also managed, on his birthdays, to slip him a tin of some treat or other. Consumable presents were safer as there would be no evidence for his father to find. His father considered gift-giving a waste, and so nothing of the sort ever happened in the house, except secretly, once a year in January.

His mother had continued to send him a letter by owl to mark the day through early adulthood, but it had been years since she had done so. The last occasion he had spent any length of time with his mother had been just after his father had died. He had felt the need to attend the funeral—if only to see the corpse and know that the man was truly gone. He’d stayed a week with his mother then, settling matters with an irritating Muggle solicitor. He had noticed during that visit that she seemed to find him difficult to bear. He had gone to see her once or twice after that, but she had been withdrawn and had tended to flinch whenever he frowned. He didn’t understand why this was either, and he didn’t intend to ask her about it. He doubted she would have told him the answer even if he had asked. He had simply stopped visiting and stopped writing, and she had done the same.

“You’ll make yourself sick if you eat it so quickly,” Miranda teased as she came back into the main room.

“It’ll be worth it,” he muttered, but he forced himself to stop and put the lid back on the tin. He wasn’t a little boy hiding from his father anymore. He could save the rest to eat at leisure without fear of repercussion.

He picked up the other package and unwrapped it slowly. The brown paper gave way to reveal a silver cigarette case with a mosaic of a serpent on the cover. He flipped it open and found it was full of cigarettes.

“For when the Dark Lord gets tired of your cheek again,” Miranda said over her shoulder as she continued packing at her desk. “And that’s not all it does.”

“No?”
“Watch.” She pulled out her own case, set it on the desk, and started tapping on it.

Before his eyes, the tiny bits of colored stone rearranged themselves into a new pattern of dashes and dots. He flipped over the wrapping paper and saw that the key to the code was written on the back of it. It took him a few moments to decipher the message:
HAPPY BIRTHDAY

She had turned back to her desk, and so he did not try to suppress his smile of pleasure. Slowly, with much reference to the code on the wrapping paper, he tapped back:
THANK YOU

She paused in her packing to reply via code:
YOU ARE WELCOME

He laboriously decoded her message and then sent one of his own:
WHEN IS YOUR BIRTHDAY

She laughed and smiled at him over her shoulder before sending back:
MAY 4

He fingered the case, enjoying the cool, smooth feel of the metal as he studied Miranda in the firelight. He slipped it into his pocket and felt rather as moved as he had been when she had presented him with the unexpected tebo harvest. He supposed that if he were less of an ass he would say something sentimental to her. But his mind, that was so quick to invent insults, was rather stunted when it came to praise. It seemed trite to speak of friendship, crass to speak of shagging—and dishonest to speak of anything else. So he said nothing at all.

He went back into the potions room and retrieved the box he had made for her. Bringing it to her, he silently set it on the desk, letting his fingers linger on the top of it. She smiled at the box when she saw it—she was so quick to smile—and put her hand on top of his. Their eyes met and he brought up his other hand to trace her cheek with his finger. Perhaps, for now at least, there was nothing that needed to be said.

Sunday evening found Severus irritably pacing his sitting room at Hogwarts. He had finished most of his lesson plans that afternoon—although he had pointedly ignored the lessons that he most detested to give. Albus had demanded that he teach the Potter brat Occlumency and Severus was petulantly refusing to prepare. It was going to be a disaster, he knew that much already. Potter was completely unable to control himself. He wore his heart on his sleeve and Severus believed that it would take nothing short of a miracle to teach the boy.

Severus had argued heatedly that Albus should take on the task himself. After all, Potter liked Albus and the boy would probably make more of an effort for him. But nothing Severus had said had made any difference. Albus still insisted, and now all Severus could do was try and watch the experiment fail. He had stipulated that he be given use of Albus’s Pensieve. Severus did not want Potter anywhere near his mind, and there were certain memories that he wanted to ensure the boy never saw.
After half an hour of pacing, the glint of the cigarette case on his desk caught his attention. The corner of it was peeking out from beneath a scroll with the final month of the First Years’ plans. He sat down at his desk, intending to finish the scroll, but his eye kept moving to the case. Surely Miranda had only intended the thing be used to summon him to put her back together after the next time she got herself maimed. And, whatever her intention, she was probably asleep. It was almost eleven o’clock where Severus was, so it was close to one in the morning in Romania. But, despite all these reasons not to, he found himself tapping:

ALBUS WANTS ME TO TEACH OCCLUMENCY TO POTTER

It took him some time to tap all of that as he had only just committed the code to memory. He almost put the thing away in a drawer of his desk, he felt like such a fool by the time he’d finished. He left it where it was, though, and went back to his scroll. And, before long, a message arranged itself back to him from Miranda:

MY CONDOLENCES TO YOU BOTH WHAT IS ALBUS THINKING

Severus still felt like a fool, but he replied:

I HAVE NO IDEA

And she answered:

THAT SOUNDS LIKE A DISASTER

Lesson plan forgotten, he tapped:

I AGREE HE WOULD NOT LET ME REFUSE

She replied:

TRY NOT TO KILL POTTER

An idea to turn her sympathy to his advantage occurred to him:

I MAY NEED SOME INCENTIVE

There was a pause, and he could almost hear her laughing. Finally, she replied:

YOU ARE A BULLY

He smirked and tapped:

I THOUGHT I WAS AN ASS

She answered:

THAT TOO BUT I WILL MAKE IT WORTH YOUR WHILE FOR THE BOYS SAKE

He raised an eyebrow and asked:

JUST FOR HIS SAKE

She replied:

AND FOR YOURS AND I EXPECT I WILL ENJOY IT MYSELF

Pleased with her agreeableness, he set down the case and wrote another line or two of his lesson plan. But he found his eyes kept wandering to the serpent mosaic, and before long he had asked:

HOW IS ROMANIA

The mosaic rearranged itself to say:

IT IS BEAUTIFUL I WISH YOU WERE HERE TO SEE IT

Severus studied this message for a long time, hesitating to respond. But, finally, he replied honestly:

SO DO I
Chapter End Notes

The Kakure Kirishitans and the Tenchi are real and have a fascinating history. The Beginning of Heaven and Earth: The Sacred Book of Japan’s Hidden Christians, translated and annotated by Christal Whelan (1996 University of Hawai‘i Press) is a great introduction to this if you’d like to know more. I totally made up the part about the Kakure Kirishitans coding magical knowledge into the Tenchi, though. I do think, if JKR’s world were real, such a thing could have happened.

The descriptions of the wand woods, cores, and flexibility were taken from pottermore.com.

If anyone missed it in chapter 6 (as I added it in an edit after posting), Miranda’s living brothers in birth order are Patrick, Seamus, and Finnian.

The North Wind restaurant was inspired by the Norse folk tale, Peter and the North Wind.

The magical education system in Romania was inspired by Romanian folklore, which includes legends of wizards called Solomnari (singular, Solomnar) who live in caves and collect children with magical abilities in order to train them into future Solomanri. They also ride dragons.

Pork cooked in milk is awesome.
Miranda threw her head back, laughing as she and the other dancers began to stumble while they circled the waning fire. They had long since worn a line of compacted snow around it, and the heat of their constant movement was all that kept the path from freezing to ice. It was a frigid night, but the fire, the music, and the palinka were working together to keep everyone unaware of it. As she gazed up into the sky, she could see Orion shining brightly in the heavens, a familiar face far from home.

Ensconced in a pavilion was a quartet of musicians who, benefiting from their own fire and the shelter of the battered wooden walls, were urging the night along. Their music was wild and haunting, strange to Miranda’s ears. But, though she did not yet completely recognize the melodies, the sound of it evoked a familiar sort of nostalgia that the music her family made always did. The impromptu Sunday evening party also reminded her of home and she was a willing and eager participant. This weekly custom had charmed her immediately and, as it was her fourth such experience of it, she knew the steps to the usual dances well enough that she no longer felt awkward.

The group ground to a halt, dropping hands as the musicians finished the current song. Some of the dancers huddled closer to the fire, and some broke away in twos and threes, chattering merrily. Miranda wandered over to the pavilion, its dragonhead carvings casting dancing shadows in the dying firelight.

“{Are your fingers frozen yet Domnul Cojoc?}” she asked the fiddler politely.

“{Not quite, Doamnă Rose. I think we have one more in us,}” Domnul Cojoc replied with a grin.

He tucked his fiddle under his chin and began scratching out the Irish tune Miranda had been singing for him since her first such party in Săpânța. She returned his grin and looked around for her host’s daughter, Catalina, as she headed back towards the fire. The younger woman met Miranda, as though by appointment, and the two stood facing each other for a moment before both breaking into an Irish step. If there was one thing Miranda had learned about Catalina in the short time she’d know her, it was that Catalina intended to be the best at everything she attempted. After she had taught Miranda the steps to the usual Sunday dances, she, like the musicians of the village, had demanded that Miranda teach her something in return. Miranda had obliged with what she could remember of the Irish dancing that her nieces and nephews enjoyed, and Catalina had proved to be a quick learner. The two women circled the fire now, feet flying, and Miranda laughed.
merrily at the way they looked. Catalina’s face was flushed and her short black hair was bouncing wildly as they grasped hands and started whirling in place. By the end of the dance, Catalina’s sharp laugh had joined Miranda’s bell-like one, and they spun until the song ended. It took them a moment before they could come to a halt themselves, panting for breath and holding onto each other for support.

“{I’d say it’s a draw this time,}” Miranda said as she caught her breath. “{Although I don’t know how long I’ll be able to keep up with you. I’m so much older after all.}”

“{Five years isn’t that much older,}” Catalina objected. “{But come in now. The others will feel that they have to stay as long as you are here, out of respect.}”

“{I will if your father will tell us another one of those wild stories.}”

“{You are like a child wanting to hear fairy stories! But he likes to tell them and I am sure he will oblige you.}”

Miranda waved to Domnul Cojoc and the rest of the musicians before following Catalina to the edge of the square where Catalina’s father Nicolae stood with the other men who considered themselves too old or important to dance.

“{You learn quickly, Doamnă Miranda}” Nicolae observed. He had his dark cloak wrapped around his whip-thin body, but his hood was thrown back and Miranda could clearly see the enigmatic smile on his shrewd, chiseled face. He had perhaps never been handsome, but anyone who spoke with him quickly became aware that he was clever—and not a man to be trifled with.

“{I’ve had a good teacher,}” Miranda replied, taking the glass he offered her. She sipped the burning, plummy liquor and enjoyed the warmth that spread through her body as it hit her stomach.

“{I learn quickly too, father,}” Catalina said. Her tone was friendly, but it was tempered by the fierce expression that her pale, almost waif-like face usually wore.

“{You do,}” Miranda agreed. “{My sister-in-law would be impressed and would try to make you join her dance troupe and compete.}”

The wind picked up and, now that she was no longer near the fire or dancing, the cold began to creep into Miranda’s body. She pulled her hood over her head and her cloak around her as she followed Nicolae and Catalina up the snow covered street to their cottage. Although it was one of the major port-key entrances to Romania, Șapânța was a small village, and in many ways it reminded Miranda of her home in America. There were the modest houses scattered in a spiraling circle around the square, as well as the limited choices for shopping, entertainment, and company. However, whatever the place lacked in variety, it made up for in the quality of what was available. And the way that wizards and No-Majs existed side by side as an open secret was an incredibly welcome change from the atmosphere of wariness and suspicion in England. MACUSA upheld the
Statute of Secrecy, but in the little hamlet of Edgewood, Kansas, everyone knew what Miranda was, even if no one would have mentioned it out loud in public, or to a stranger.

Miranda ran her hand along the rail fence that lined the road, knocking snow off of its weather beaten planks. It had been an uneventful month since she had left England. She had decided it was best to begin ‘searching’ for a black dog animagus right away rather than seeking out Charlie Weasley. She hadn’t been sure about Malfoy’s state of mind and, should he have decided to set someone on her tail, she wanted to appear to be doing what he expected her to do.

Within a week of her fruitless search, she had been approached by Catalina Dragnea and invited to dinner. Miranda had been impressed by the small, intense young woman and by her father, Nicolae. Nicolae served as the Boyar of the wizarding community in Maramures, and Miranda quickly realized that the invitation was as much about security as it was about hospitality. The Dragneas were proud, but friendly and, Miranda was a frequent guest in their home. Her most recent meeting with Fudge and Malfoy had also been cordial, and she felt bold enough that she intended to drop in on young Mr. Weasley at the Dragon Sanctuary within the next week or so.

The Dragneas’ charming, bright blue cottage was a very welcome sight by the time the chilled group reached it. It sat regally at the top of the hill furthest away from the square, standing guard over the village in spite of its small size. They came through the door stamping snow from their boots before stooping to remove them and line them up neatly under the row of flower-shaped hooks on the wall. Miranda hung up her cloak and nodded to the icon of the Virgin nestled in the corner before settling into a cozy, if threadbare, armchair next to Nicolae in front of the fire. The first few nights she had visited with the Dragneas she had attempted to help with the work of serving and, if only Nicolae and Catalina were home, they would indulge her. She had learned, however, that if there were other guests in the house, she was expected to sit and be waited upon with them. There were three other wizards gathered tonight; Andrei Naghi and his young wife Silvia, and Vasile Ursu, the venerable Solomnar of the region.

“{Miranda wants to hear another story, father,}” Catalina said as she set a platter of fresh cheese, bread, and more palinka on the table before the company, her sharp eyes glinting with amusement.

“{Does she?}” Nicolae asked, looking similarly amused. “{Well, we must humor our guests. But only if you give us one in return, Doamnă Miranda.}”

“{It would be my pleasure,}” Miranda replied honestly.

Nicolae waited until the food and drink had been passed around and the cigarettes had been lit. He had a flare for drama, and knew how to wait just long enough that his audience was leaning in to hear him, but not so long that they would become restless.

“{I think I should tell you the tale of the three miners,}” he began. He took a drag off his cigarette
and the smoke spiraled out of his mouth when he exhaled. “{Once there were three miners who went to the funeral of their friend. After the funeral and the burial, their friend’s solicitor gave the three miners a letter from the deceased. It told of a treasure buried in the mine, a treasure rich enough to keep all of the miners free and easy for the rest of their lives. Grateful for this good fortune, the three miners went home for their picks and shovels, and began their search immediately. There were three tunnels in the mine that their friend had dug, so each of the miners chose one.}

“The first miner had been searching for only an hour when he felt a chill come over him. He looked up and, to his surprise, he saw a black cat crouching on a rock above him. Something about the cat filled him with a thrill of horror, although he tried to tell himself it was simply a stray, lost in the mine. He started to scare it away when the animal spoke to him. ‘I know where the treasure is,’ the fiend hissed, ‘but you must give me the head of one of your fellows in order to reach it.’ The miner was horrified and, when he could not force the beast to flee, he tried to ignore it. But the cat kept hissing its demand, and slowly doubts crept into the miner’s mind. Finally, he could take it no longer, and he went back to the place where the tunnels joined.

“He found one of his fellows there and that man had also been visited by the mysterious cat. It did not take long before the two men went into the third tunnel and murdered the final miner, decapitating him with their shovels. The murderers separated, returning to their own tunnels to search. But the demon cat continued to prey on their minds, and the two men met again. The first miner overpowered the second, and he again performed the morbid deed with his shovel. He went down for a final time into his tunnel, and for a final time he met the cat. He stared into the cat’s yellow eyes until he could see nothing more, until he knew nothing more.” Nicolae paused and sipped his palinka.

“{And then?}” Miranda prompted. “{Don’t stop there!}”

Nicolae’s teeth flashed in the firelight as he smiled wolfishly at Miranda. “{In the morning, when the rest of the miners of the village came to work, they found the bodies of the two murdered men. But their heads—and the third miner—were never seen again. Not in this world, in any case.}”

“{And no one ever found the treasure or the cat, I assume.}”

“{The treasure—no. But the cat still lives.}”

Silvia Naghi shivered and murmured, “{I’ve never liked that story, not since I was a little girl.}”

“{That’s because you’re afraid of your own shadow,}” her husband Andrei teased.

“{I think it’s thrilling,}” Miranda said, smiling at Nicolae as he handed her a cigarette and lit it
with a snap of his fingers.

“{Now it is your turn,}” Nicolae ordered. “{Tell us more about that wild Irishman, Finn MacCool.}”

“{Hmm, I’ve already told you about how Finn MacCool became the wisest man in Ireland—that is before St. Patrick and Christianity and other such more civilized things of course. Well, one night, Finn MacCool sat at the High King’s table at Tara, with all the other great men of the land. And they were feasting and drinking and making poems until late into the night. But it was Samhain night, of course, and the High King knew that, before the end of it, he really should send out some stout warrior to do battle with Aillen mac Midna, who was on his way to destroy them all. You see, some wrong or other had been dealt Aillen, and so once a year, on Samhain, he was allowed out of the realm of the Shi to do his best to make an end to Tara. As the feast waned, the High King asked of his brave men who would go out to defend them, and their courage froze in them to a man. Except for Finn—who knew all there was to know after eating the Salmon of Knowledge—but also lived in happy ignorance of the awesome terror that was Aillen.

“And so Finn MacCool went out alone and unafraid into the darkness of the worst night of the year. He settled himself outside the walls of Tara, waiting for his enemy. But a friend came first. Fiacuil had felt himself man enough to come to Finn and warn him of the danger. For Finn had no plan except the young man who thinks he is immortal’s plan of attacking Aillen. Fiacuil told Finn of Aillen’s magical music that would put him to sleep and of how Aillen would burn him to death with his fiery breath at leisure afterwards. And he gave Finn Aillen’s own spear, brought out of fairyland by Finn’s father. At the proper time, all Finn had to do was unwrap the point of the spear and the horrible stench caused by the spear’s corrupt nature would keep him awake—for no man could sleep through such a thing.

“Armed now and ready, Finn MacCool watched in the deep darkness until the bewitching music of fairy met his ear. It was music to make a man walk into Hell, but Finn did as he’d been told and distracted his senses with the foul smell of murder from the tip of Aillen’s spear. The music failing, Aillen blew a jet of flame at Finn, who caught it with his cape and sent it down into the earth, creating a ridge and a glen that stands to this day. And now Aillen knew fear as his spells had failed. And he knew that he was not in his own world and that Finn MacCool’s world would favor Finn MacCool and not Aillen. So Aillen tried to do the wise thing, which was to run away, but Finn’s aim was true and his throw faster than thought. And so Aillen died by his own spear, plunged into his back.

“Of course, when Finn MacCool did not die, the High King took the ruling of the Fianna away from Goll mac Morna and gave it to Finn MacCool. And Goll mac Morna, who could do anything with more grace than a man should possess, gave his hand to Finn MacCool and pledged to obey him. And there were no two greater friends in all of Ireland than Finn and Goll. But this did not stop Goll from killing Finn’s brother, when the time came. And it did not stop Finn from killing Goll, when the time came. And all of that did not stop Goll from waging war on Hell itself to free the Fianna when the new Christian God sent them there. For this is a world of both good turns and bad turns and we all must live with that.”
Vasile Ursu laughed quietly, his wizened face crinkling into thousands of wrinkles as he smiled. “{I think that Finn MacCool would have made good friends here.}" he commented.

“{I would rather know Goll,}" Andrei objected. "{He sounds like the greater of the two.}" 

“{I don’t see how Goll could have been such great friends with the man who defeated him.}" Catalina remarked. She had finally allowed herself to join the circle around the fire. "{And I don’t see how he could have been bothered to free a man from Hell who had killed him in the first place.}" 

“{Maybe Goll was the crazy one, and not Finn MacCool.}" Silvia laughed, tossing her pretty brown hair.

Catalina frowned. "{Or perhaps it’s just a silly fairytale, like the story about the cat, and doesn’t mean anything.}" 

“{What do you say, Doamnă Miranda?}" Nicolae asked, eyeing her intently.

Miranda smoked for a while, considering. "{I think that when you meet your match, you cannot help but appreciate him, even if he is also your enemy.}" 

The usually unflappable Charlie Weasley was getting nervous. He paced the length of the locker room, trying to release some of the extra energy before he went out to tend to the juvenile dragons. They could tell when he was agitated, and he hated to make them more skittish than their youth already inclined them to be. Unfortunately, the fact that he had every reason to be nervous did nothing to help him achieve his goal. It was a week before the celebration of Dragobete and Miranda Rose had yet to make her appearance. Albus had made it clear that the American witch was in the middle of some other mission and that Charlie was to wait for her to initiate contact for her own safety. While Charlie accepted Albus’s warning, Albus was not the one who would have to face Ileana Lupul empty handed if Miss Rose didn’t show. Albus wasn’t the one who would have to watch every thing that he’d worked for since the Order had re-formed slip through his fingers.

He glanced at the hourglass on the shelf above the tagging equipment and sighed. Nervous or no, it was lunchtime for the dragons and he never liked to keep them waiting. He hung his graphhorn-hide gloves from his belt, pulled on his cloak, and flicked his wand at the buckets of raw goat meat. The buckets floated up behind him just as Magda, the Sanctuary’s stern secretary caught up with him.
“There’s a Miss Rose to see you Mr. Weasley,” she said in her clipped, accented English. “She said it was urgent, but I should ask her to make an appointment, yes?”

“No, send her down, Magda,” Charlie answered quickly, his voice dripping with relief.

“Are you sure? The little ones don’t like to be kept waiting.”

“I’m sure. I’ll bet that Miss Rose would like to see them anyway.”

Magda pursed her lips in disapproval at the disruption to routine but did not argue, and Charlie resumed his pacing while he waited, unaware that the feed buckets were obediently following him as he did.

About ten minutes later a young woman with silver hair and easy grace came into the locker room. She gave Charlie a winning smile as she stuck out her hand to him. He grasped it and noted that her shake was as confident as the rest of her countenance.

“Charlie Weasley, I presume,” she said. “I’m Miranda Rose. I’m sorry that I’m so late, I know you’ve been waiting for me. I couldn’t be sure of getting safely away before now.”

Charlie found himself returning her smile, although her apparent youth made him question Albus’s decision to send her. “That’s fine, Miss Rose, you’re here now. I was thinking you could join me out by the lake. I can fill you in while I feed the juvenile longhorns. It’s their lunchtime and they get cranky if they aren’t fed on time.”

“Don’t we all? And yes, I’d love to.”

It took a few more minutes for Charlie to find her a pair of gloves, but soon enough they were outdoors. Almost immediately, he felt his shoulders relax as he inhaled the cold mountain air. No matter what was happening in the rest of the world, the Sanctuary always seemed to be just that; a safe place untouched by violence and care. Today the sun beat down brightly, an early promise of spring, and the majestic peaks of the Carpathian Mountains jutted up into the sky, surrounding them and protecting them like sentinels.

“Good Lord, Mr. Weasley, this is stunning,” Miranda breathed next to him, her eyes wide with delight.

“Mr. Weasley is my father, Miss Rose. Call me Charlie,” he replied, pleased with her reaction.

“And Miranda will do for me.”
“Miranda it is.” They started down a rocky path, its steep progress kept clear of snow by charmed rocks. He noted approvingly that she had little trouble keeping up with him and decided he could start in on the business at hand. “How much did Albus tell you about the situation here?”

“Just that you were in need of a witch who could handle herself around wizards and beasts.”

“So basically nothing.” He frowned a little, although he couldn’t say that he was surprised. “Well, the long and the short of it is that most of the wizarding community in Romania is willing to back the Order, but there’s a very vocal minority that wants to join Voldemort instead.” He hated how he still flinched when he said that name, especially when he saw that Miranda didn’t seem affected by it at all.

“Really?” she asked, raising her eyebrows. “I would have thought that the relationship between wizards and No-Majs was friendly here. Everyone seems to know that we exist.”

“They do, and things are usually pretty comfortable. But there are regions of the country where the Communist rule of the Ceausescu regime was crueler than others. Any region that resisted the Ceausescus at all was punished and in those places there were many times when the muggle community turned against the wizarding community, which caused a lot of harm to both. Most of the trouble comes from those regions—they want to make sure that such a thing can never happen again.”

“But don’t they realize that the Dark Lord isn’t exactly a force to be contained?”

Charlie started at Miranda’s use of the term ‘Dark Lord,’ but as they had reached the lake he decided to let it pass. “They think they can contain one man more easily than they can control all of the muggles here. Now, I’m going to have to ask you to be quiet and still for a few minutes. The longhorns will be able to smell you and, since you’re new, they won’t want to come out at first.”

She nodded and fell silent as she followed Charlie to the edge of the lake. He squatted down and she followed suit, moving nothing but her eyes, which darted about drinking in the landscape. The ice covered lake could be circled in about twenty minutes on foot, and it ran into the base of a rough line of rocks. There were plenty of outcroppings and indentations in the rocks just the right size to hide youthful dragons, and Charlie watched these patiently, his practiced eyes searching out the ones that he knew were his charges favorites. He flicked his wand and the feed buckets set themselves silently on the ground next to them. As he pulled on his gloves, he tapped Miranda on the shoulder, and pointed out across the lake.

He felt her shoulder twitch, but she managed to keep quiet as she saw the shy, brown and yellow mottled head of a young longhorn poking out of a gap in the rocks. The dragon seemed to sniff the air, trying to decide if Charlie’s familiarity was enough to offset Miranda’s strangeness. Its red, unblinking eyes studied the humans critically and, after several long minutes, it crept out onto the ice, stretching its gangly legs and shaking its lean, muscular body. Charlie took this as a sign of acceptance, and flicked his wand, sending a chunk of the meat skidding across the ice to the dragon. Shyness forgotten, it pounced on the treat, swallowing it whole. The smell of the blood
brought three more young ones out of the rock face, and soon Charlie was hard pressed to keep up with the demands of the hungry babies.

“If you move slowly, you can put on your gloves and help,” he said, his voice pitched just above a whisper.

Miranda did as she was told and, with her assistance, the dragons’ appetites were soon sated and the buckets mostly empty. When the food was gone, the dragons began rolling and sliding across the ice, tumbling over each other like a pack of enormous puppies.

“It should be safe to talk now, if you keep it down,” Charlie said.

“They’re amazing,” Miranda murmured.

“They are. I’m lucky to be here.”

“So, what do you need me to do, duel the leader of the opposition?”

“Not exactly. Next week is the Dragobete festival. It’s sort of like Valentine’s Day. Ileana Lupul, the leader of all the wizards in Romania will be visiting her home in Săpânța to hear grievances and settle disputes. I’m supposed to bring you as a sort of champion for the Order, and the opposition will present their own champion. Then you’ll have to undertake the challenges that she has in mind and whichever side’s champion wins the day will decide which side Romania backs in the coming war.”

“What do you think she wants to happen?”

“It’s hard to say. I think she acknowledges that Voldemort is a threat, but I think her top priority is keeping her people together. The years under the Ceausecus nearly ripped the wizarding community apart, and she’ll do anything to heal it.

“I see.” Miranda watched with interest as Charlie dipped his gloved hands into one of the buckets, smearing them with goat blood.

“Sometimes one of the dragons will be brave enough to come over for a taste,” he explained as he extended his hands towards the still frolicking dragons. “You can give it a go if you want.”

She dipped her hands into the bucket and held them out, palm down as well. “What’s the challenge going to be?”

“I don’t know all of the details, and I’m sorry about that. Doamnă Lupul has been a little vague. I
do know that it has to do with rescuing a group of children.”

“Children?”

“The Ceausecus decided to punish the wizards in the disobedient regions by sending their children away to Russia for schooling against their parents’ will. Once you’ve been here long enough, you’ll understand how much of an insult that was. The Romanians wouldn’t accept that lying down, and so they made a deal and sent the children to be trained and guarded by the Iele instead.

“I don’t think I know what those are.”

“They’re like Veelas, only worse.”

“Let me guess: the Iele don’t want to give the children back.”

“You got it. They want to keep the kids in order to feed on their youth.”

“That’s disgusting.”

Two of the longhorns had broken away from the group and were cautiously picking their way over the ice, holding tails the way human children would hold hands to cross the street. Charlie and Miranda stopped talking for a moment, patiently waiting in silence, although excitement buzzed through Charlie. No matter how many times this happened, he doubted he would lose the thrill of connecting with these marvelous creatures. He glanced at Miranda out of the corner of his eye, noting the wondering look on her face. The smaller of the two longhorns broke away from its partner and came to a halt in front of Miranda, studying her boldly. Then it nuzzled her glove-covered hand, its purple tongue darting out to lap up the goat blood, and Miranda let out a quiet laugh when the dragon started purring deep in its throat.

The larger dragon came to Charlie, as though not wanting to be left out, and he rewarded the pair of them by letting them clean out the rest of the buckets. When both dragons were fully occupied and purring, he said quietly, “It has to be female champions because any male that even looks at a Iele falls under her spell.”

“Lucky me.”

“I think there will be three challenges in addition to the actual rescue and, if you succeed, Romania will back us against Voldemort.”

“I take it that the competition between the champions is to appease both sides?”
“You’re quick. I can see why Albus likes you.”

“Well, I can’t say that was anything like what I expected, but I’m here and I’ll do my best.”

“That’s all I can ask. Do you need any help getting to Săpânța?”

“No, I’m actually staying there.”

“Really? Have you met Nicolae Dragnea yet?”

“Yes, he’s been very friendly. Why do you ask?” The dragons had finished with the insides of the buckets and had started to knock them across the ice like a pair of quaffles.

Charlie sighed. “He’s the leader of the opposition. I take it you know his daughter?”

“I do. Doamnă Catalina is lovely.”

The dragons had returned to the rest of their group, and the racket of the bucket game echoed off the rocks.

“Her brother is one of the kids in question. She’s the other champion.”

“Aren’t you going to pick snowdrops, Doamnă Catalina?” Miranda asked playfully. They were working together, hunched over the venerable wooden table in the Dragnea’s cottage, carefully funneling the last of the melted snow into bottles. There were rows and rows of the mis-matched glassware lining every available surface, and Miranda was reminded of all the hot August days she and her brothers spent canning tomatoes and peaches with their mother. The snow that she and Catalina were saving today was for use in potion making, and Catalina had offered her a share of the bounty in exchange for help with the tedious work. Miranda wondered if the snow would be any different than the usual dew or rain water that she had been taught to use, but she was sure that Severus would be interested to experiment, and so she readily agreed to help.

Catalina made a face. “{Bah. That sort of thing is for fools and lovers. Besides, by the time we are finished with this, I will have to go to Silvia’s to help with the food.”}”
“{Will I meet you at the dance in the square tonight?}”

“{Perhaps. It depends on what happens when father and I meet with Doamnă Lupul today.}”

There was a hungry gleam in Catalina’s eyes as she said this and Miranda felt a pang of guilt about the meeting to come. She had not mentioned anything about her connection to Charlie or the Order, and she expected that the Dragneas were not going to be happy when it came to light.

“{I hope that it goes well,}” Miranda said honestly.

“{It will,}” was Catalina’s confident reply.

Later that afternoon much of the village was crowded into the narrow church in the Merry Cemetery for Vespers. Miranda had gone inside long enough to confirm Charlie’s presence, but she had found the crush of bodies more than she wanted to endure at the moment and had decided to wait outside until the service ended. Usually she found the place charming, but a nervous excitement was thrumming through her body and she needed to move. She paced amid the bright blue crosses that marked the graves in the cemetery, adjusting her cloak every few seconds and practicing her Romanian as she attempted to read the inscriptions on the markers.

“Woe is me, I sleep poorly, Saulic Ion is my name…something…cut off my head and buried me like that, may he be damned,” she muttered to herself as she haltingly translated one of the more morbid illustrations. She wondered briefly what her own cross would one day say, but her musings were interrupted as the first group of worshipers streamed out of the church.

Miranda made her way to the bottom of the stone steps leading up to the base of the spire, wanting to be close enough to catch Charlie when he came out. Although he had been near the front of the church when she had seen him inside, he had managed to escape with this first line of people, and his face, tense as it looked, was a welcome sight to her.

“Are you ready?” he asked shortly.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” she answered easily.

He nodded once. “Let me do the talking.”

“It’s your show.”

They did not have to wait long before Nicolae and Catalina came into view, flanking a woman wrapped in black. By the way Charlie immediately straightened, Miranda assumed that this was
Doamnă Lupul. The older woman paused at the top of the stairs, her eyes scanning the cemetery. She gave Charlie a curt nod when she saw him, and then her eyes continued to Miranda. There were times when Miranda felt that Severus’s dark gaze could see through her, but it was nothing like the eyes that pierced her now. Doamnă Lupul’s eyes swallowed her, and she knew in her gut that even her mental wall would do her no good against this woman. She forced herself to keep still and to maintain her relaxed stance, but her mouth was dry and the palms of her hands sweaty with the effort. God forbid she ever found herself at odds with Ileana Lupul.

Doamnă Lupul abruptly dropped Miranda’s gaze and glanced at Nicolae before descending the stairs. She moved with the grace of a wolf and the speed of young woman at the height of her powers, although to Miranda’s understanding Doamnă Lupul was much older than she appeared.

“{You have done as you were asked, Domnul Weasley?}” Doamnă Lupul asked without preamble. Her voice sounded like velvet over steel and it hummed with power.

“{I have, Doamnă,}” Charlie answered, his tone calmer than Miranda had expected it to be.

“{I take it this is the Order’s champion?}” Once again Miranda felt Doamnă Lupul’s piercing eyes on her and, while the older woman studied her as one would a horse that one was thinking of buying, she was ready for it and it did not startle her as it had the first time.

“{Yes. This is Miranda Rose.}”

“{Very well. Bring her to Vasile’s tomorrow afternoon.}”

Charlie bowed his assent and Miranda followed suit. This seemed to be the end of the interview, but then Doamnă Lupul cocked her head towards Nicolae and asked brusquely, “{You have an objection, Nicú?}”

Miranda had never heard even Nicolae’s closest friend Vasile Ursu use a diminutive when speaking to him, and she wondered how the proud man felt about it now. The nickname had no hint of affection in it; indeed it carried the air of a mother scolding a naughty child.

“{I mean no disrespect, Doamnă Ileana, as I am confident in Domnul Weasley’s ability to select a capable witch.}” Nicolae’s eyes darted briefly to Miranda, and she knew she was not imagining the veiled contempt in them, although it was nothing compared to the look of betrayal on Catalina’s face. He glanced away and continued, “{However, I do question Doamnă Rose’s right to take on such a challenge. Catalina’s own brother is one of the children that the Iele are holding. I do not see how it is acceptable for this woman, so young, and a stranger, to take on such a task.}”

Doamnă Lupul’s nostrils flared briefly in irritation. “{I had thought it enough to stipulate that a woman be chosen for this purpose—both to resist the magic of the Iele and because she would feel an affinity for the children more easily than a man. I also wished her to be chosen by the Order so that it might prove itself to us. Would it satisfy you if Domnul Weasley’s champion were a mother
as well?)”

Nicolae bowed his head in assent, but not before Miranda saw his mouth curl into a triumphant smirk. “{It would, of course. A mother would understand the delicacy of the situation.}”

Charlie stepped forward suddenly, his face clearly betraying his anger. “{With all due respect, I have followed every one of your requests faithfully. It is unfair to add yet another condition at this late moment. There is simply no time to find anyone else.}”

Miranda put her hand on Charlie’s arm, shaking her head at his questioning look.

“{I believe that Doamnă Rose has something to say,}” Doamnă Lupul observed.

“{I do. I simply wanted to say that we do not need to argue, as there is no problem here,}” Miranda swallowed hard, and forced herself to continue. “{I am a mother.}”

Chapter End Notes

Doamnă=Ms
Domnul=Mr

The story of the three miners is a Romanian folk tale and the story of Finn MacCool comes from Irish folklore.

The Ceausecus were in power from 1967 until 1989, when they were executed on Christmas Day by firing squad. They lived lavishly while much of the population of Romania suffered oppression, poverty, and chronic food shortages.

The Merry Cemetery is the handiwork of Stan Ion Patras (1908–1977), who made a living carving fences and grave markers. He started to paint the crosses in order to protect them from the weather, eventually adding geometric flower designs as well as depictions of the deceased and inscriptions.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Miranda had been crouching on the tree branch so long that all of her limbs were stiff. It was a comfortably warm day; the trees were budding, the grass had returned, and the nesting birds spoke to the true arrival of spring. She had been tracking a pair of bohemian waxwings for hours, her sharp eyes following the bright yellow tail feathers through the forest, and patiently waiting for them to settle down for an afternoon rest. That hoped for afternoon rest was quickly becoming an evening one, and she did not like the idea of having to use lumos to continue her practice. In her experience, magic tended to startle most animals.

She was about to call it a day, when the birds finally nestled themselves cozily against one another. Miranda felt a bit sorry to disturb them, but she only had another month to perfect her bird-catching technique before the first trial. She and Catalina had been tasked with capturing a pair of Birds of Paradise during the spring migration at the Danube Delta. To make the job more difficult, the birds had to be taken alive.

A quarter of an hour passed in silence while Miranda watched the waxwings on their perch. There was an odd bird call or two, but nothing to disturb her marks. Finally, she flicked her wrist, sending a net over the birds and pulling it tight. The waxwings gave a startled cry and flapped their wings in protest, but they were caught fast. Miranda made her way quickly through the branches to scoop up the net, cooing quietly before drawing her wand.

“Somnus,” she cast, and the captured birds instantly fell fast asleep. Satisfied, Miranda climbed nimbly down the tree and dropped lightly to the ground.

“{Nicely done, Doamnă Rose,}” Vasile Ursu commented.

Miranda’s body automatically tensed at the intruder, but she let herself relax when she recognized his perpetually sad-looking face and bushy eyebrows. She set the captured birds on the ground and carefully removed the net.

“{Thank you, Domnul Ursu,}” she replied, wondering why he had decided to travel to Transylvania. When she had released the birds, she waved her wand over them. They sprang back awake and flapped away, as though their adventure with the strange human had not happened. Miranda watched them until they disappeared into the trees, but she kept Vasile in the corner of her eye as she asked, “{What brings you this far from home?}”

His smile did not quite reach his eyes. “{The pleasant company.}”

After the extremely tense meeting between Doamnă Lupul and the champions, Miranda had not seen the Dragneas or any of their friends. Some of this was certainly due to Miranda’s decision to leave Săpânța as soon as Doamnă Lupul had dismissed her, but she knew that Catalina had been training at the Dragon Sanctuary, just as Miranda was, and their paths had not yet crossed there. Learning to ride a dragon was proving more grueling than Miranda had expected it to be, and so she had decided to keep her silly ‘search’ for Sirius Black as close to the Sanctuary as possible until she got the hang of it. Fortunately, Charlie was an expert at healing burns and broken bones, and she had until the summer to figure it out.
"{Would you care for a cup of coffee, then?}" she asked politely.

"{That would be very good of you,}" Vasile replied, falling into step next to her. For such a large man he was light on his feet and happy to match whatever pace she set. Between Doamnă Lupul, Domnul Dragnea, and Domnul Ursu, Ursu worried her the least. She could tell that he was more powerful than she was, but she could also tell that his nature was a gentle one, and he would not strike unless provoked.

They reached a flower strewn clearing and, at the snap of Miranda’s fingers, a round, purple and silver tent appeared. She was irritated that she would have to move camp so soon after finding this secluded spot, but she was curious enough to know what Ursu had to say that she supposed it was worth the trouble. She led the way up the stairs of the wooden platform and pulled open the carved door, stepping back politely so that Ursu might enter first. He smiled approvingly at the cozy interior, so unlike the No-Maj camping that Miranda had done with her father and brothers as a child. A small, wood burning stove sat on a spiral of bricks in the center of the tent, its smokestack snaking up through the skylight above it. With a flick of Miranda’s wand, a pair of chairs and a little table sprang out of the canvas floor in front of the stove. Another flick started the fire and Vasile took up residence in one of the chairs while Miranda went to the cabinet across from the stove for a kettle of water and the coffee pot.

"{How are the Dragneas these days?}" she asked, waving her wand over the kettle to set the water boiling and digging the coffee and sugar out of the cabinet.

"{They are well,}" Vasile answered evenly. The latest edition of The Quibbler was on the little table and, when he tapped it with his finger, the type rearranged itself into Romanian. He picked it up and began perusing the screaming headline and the picture of the sheepish, scarred boy on the front cover. "{Although they are still angry, if that is what you are asking.}" The coffee beans were grinding themselves into a fine powder as Miranda pulled the kaymak out of the ice box. She spooned the grounds and the sugar into the pot, poured the water over it, and then started carefully skimming the top off of the kaymak and adding it to a pair of blue and white cups.

"{You’ll have to tell me if I’ve got it right yet,}" she said. "{I am sorry about Doamnă Catalina. I liked her very much.}" Miranda leaned against the cabinet and studied the set of Vasile’s broad shoulders. Although his voice was friendly, his body was tense. "{And are you also still angry?}" "{I was never angry, Doamnă Rose. But I will thank you to keep that to yourself, and I will deny it if you tell anyone.}" She gave the pot a stir, mentally replaying the conversations she’d had with Vasile in the past. "{I thought you and Domnul Dragnea were close friends.}" Vasile was still reading The Quibbler, and he answered simply, "{That does not mean that I agree with every choice he makes.}" The coffee seemed to have reached the proper color, so she poured it carefully into the mugs, trying to leave as much of the grounds in the pot as possible. The dark liquid turned a cheerful, milky brown and she brought the little cups to the table before settling herself in the chair next to Vasile. He put down the magazine and the two of them sipped in silence. Miranda found the hot,
sweet drink especially welcome after the long day of bird tracking, and Vasile’s shoulders relaxed as he swallowed.

“{You’ve done well, for a foreigner,}” he said, “{but, next time put the grounds and the sugar in the pot before you boil it. Then it will be perfect.}”

“{Thank you. I will.}”

“{This Voldemort. He murders children?}”

“{He’s a madman. He murders whomever he likes.}”

Vasile took another sip of his coffee, and then sighed heavily. “{I should not stay long, Nicolae is expecting me this evening. But there are important things I have to tell you.}”

Miranda smiled wryly. “{Anything as important as the fact that I’ll die if I leave Romania for longer than three days for the duration of this contest?}” At the end of the meeting in February, Vasile had been kind enough to mention that little stipulation to Miranda. “{Thank you for informing me of that, by the way. It would have been a short competition otherwise. I didn’t realize that I was basically taking an Unbreakable Vow when I signed up for this business.}”

He chuckled. “{Yes, sometimes Doamnă Lupul forgets that the rest of us are not as experienced as she is. She expects everyone to know as much as she does. This is perhaps not as personally important to you, but it will help you just the same.}” Reaching into his robes, he withdrew a long braid of thick, white horse’s hair, and set it reverently on the table between them. “{Do you know what this is?}”

It took all of Miranda’s control to keep her mouth from dropping open. “{It’s unicorn hair. But where did you get so much?}”

He ignored her question. “{I will assume that you know what to do with it. And I will also assume that you understand that I did not give it to you.}”

“{Thank you. I might stand a chance at catching those birds now.}” She ran her fingers over the braid and it was cold to the touch. “{Are you sure?}”

“{Sure about what?}” A real smile wrinkled his face, and he finally seemed to be at ease. “{Be so good as to put that away, if you please.}”

“{Of course.}” Obediently, she gathered the precious hair into her arms and carried it to the scuffed steamer trunk that stood next to the one bookshelf in the tent. It popped open as she approached and she nestled the gift carefully beneath her clothing before shutting the trunk tight. “{Is there anything else I should know?}”

Vasile’s smile became a grimace. “{It is probably too much to hope that you are an expert potions mistress in addition to being an adventuress.}”

“{That is true, I’m only passable,}” Miranda said honestly as she came back to her chair. “{May I ask why you want to know? I thought that I only had to gather the ingredients for the Iele’s Youth Potion. Won’t they brew it themselves?}”

“{It is not for the Iele, it is for the children. They have been between worlds for so long, that they will need something to help them transition back to this one. Without it, they may die of shock when they return.}”
“{Is this another part of the competition that Doamnă Lupul forgot to mention?}”

“{Something like that.}”

“{Does it have to be me? I may know just the man for the job.}”

“{If he is one of yours, that will do. When can you bring him to me?}”

Miranda frowned, considering how difficult it would be to convince Severus to take a jaunt to Romania. “{Can’t I just bring him the instructions? He’s very accomplished.}”

“{No, it is far too complicated. It will be better if I show him what he must do. Then he can brew it wherever he likes.}”

Well, she’d just have to try. “{Then I’ll bring him in a few weeks, say just before Easter. Will that be enough time?}”

“{ Barely, but we will make the best of it.}” He finished his coffee and stood, his joints creaking and popping as he stretched. Miranda stood as well, and he surprised her by putting his hands on her shoulders and leaning down to kiss her on both cheeks. “{Bring him to my cave when you have him.}”

“{I thought you didn’t want to be seen with me.}” she said playfully.

“{ Nicolae knows better than to watch my cave too closely.}” He winked at her and started for the door.

“{ Domnul Ursu, may I ask why you came to me with this and not to Doamnă Catalina?}”

“{ Who says that I haven’t gone to her as well?}”

“{ Ah, I see.}”

“{ No, you don’t. Not quite. The truth is that Catalina is desperate to prove herself and to win her father’s approval. If I give her the potion, her father will forbid her to share it.}”

“{ And you think that I will?}”

He eyed her shrewdly. “{I know that you will.}”

““And then they crashed right into the Whomping Willow!” Arthur Weasley finished through his laughter. “It was a miracle that they didn’t die, and another miracle that Molly didn’t kill them afterwards.”

“That sounds like the time my brother Finnian and I made off with the family truck,” Miranda laughed. “Only without the flying.”
“Did you crash it into a murderous tree, too?”

“Sort of. Neither of us were tall enough to drive it alone, so Fin sat on the floor and worked the pedals while I did the steering. It took us about five minutes to crash into the horse barn and Papa grounded us for six months. I’ve always thought that night had something to do with my becoming a bounty hunter. After facing my livid father, fugitives and monsters seem downright cuddly.”

“I never did anything of the sort when I was young,” Aaron said loftily. “I was perfectly behaved at all times.”

“Says the man who put and Exploding Scarab on my chair in the very first potions class we ever had together.”

“I just wanted to get your attention,” Aaron protested.

“Which you did in spades.”

The three of them were sitting together around Arthur’s desk in his private, if tiny, office, eating pimento cheese sandwiches and Molly Weasley’s lemon cake. Arthur had covered the top of his desk with a faded blue tablecloth, and Miranda had brought a bottle of palinka to share. The fiery plum brandy had given Arthur a coughing fit at the first sip, but Aaron took to it like a duck to water.

“How’s the dragon riding coming?” Aaron asked.

Miranda made a face. “I spend most of my time on the ground at the moment, convincing the dragons that I’m worthy to ride on them. Half the time they decided to scorch me for fun. And when I actually do mount up, I usually can’t keep my seat during take-off. It’s a good thing that Charlie’s around to fix me up afterwards. I’m glad that I have until June to figure it out.”

“You raise horses at home, yes?” Arthur asked.

“We do. Honestly, I’d rather ride a horse than a broom.”

“Do you use magic to help care for them?”

“That’s the funny thing—horses hate magic. Sometimes, if we’re in a big hurry, Fin’ll take the horses out and I’ll use magic to clean the stalls. But the horses can always tell and they’re usually off the next day if I do. So it’s mucking, feeding, and grooming by hand most of the time.”

“What a mess that must make!” Arthur’s face lit up at the idea.

“If you ever make it out to Edgewood, come stay with us and I’ll show you how.”

“Only if you teach me to ride one too.”

“Of course! You should come and bring the family. It’d be a hoot!”
“Speaking of hoots and your family,” Aaron put in, “could you please tell Conor to leave the physical wards the Aurors set alone?”

“I told you he was no good at being baby-sat,” Miranda replied. “He says he can’t sleep with strange wards around. But I thought you had Malfoy under control. He was perfectly polite today.”

“I’ve got him for the moment, but Rachel says Narcissa’s been excited lately because Lucius has something big in the works. Can’t be too careful.”

“I see. I’ll talk to Papa, but I can’t promise anything. If Mama bakes some cookies for the Aurors, will that help them keep their patience with Papa?”

“Couldn’t hurt to try.”

“I’m constantly amazed at what good baking can accomplish,” Arthur observed.

“And how.” Aaron finished his palinka and poured another round, topping off Arthur’s mostly full glass despite the man’s mild protest. “Arthur, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you.”

“I hope it doesn’t involve anything too dangerous. Molly thinks I’m in deep enough as it is.”

“No, not dangerous. It’s about the baby.”

“Is everything all right?” Miranda asked sharply.

“Yes, yes, everything’s fine,” Aaron replied, waving his hand to shush Miranda’s clucking. “It’s about the baptism. My brother, Jeremiah, is going to be godfather, but he insists there’s no way he can make it to the actual ceremony. We’re going to have it as soon after the birth as possible, and Rachel and I were wondering if you’d mind being proxy godfather.”

“A stand in? I think I can do that,” Arthur grinned. “It would be an honor.”

“It’ll be a quiet to do, but we’d love it if Molly came too.”

“Only if you’ll let her fuss over your lovely wife.”

“It’s a deal. To Arthur and the baby,” Aaron toasted. The three clinked glasses and sipped, and Arthur managed not to cough this time. Aaron gave Miranda a teasing grin and asked, “You think that fella of yours would want to come?”

Miranda snorted at the idea of Severus at a baptism. “I’m guessing no, but I’ll ask him, if only to see his eyebrow start twitching at the idea.” She did an impressive imitation of Severus’s irritated expression, the one that was just on the cusp of anger, and Aaron choked on his palinka.

“I don’t know this chap, do I?” Arthur asked. “I feel as though I’ve seen that expression before.”

“You do,” Miranda laughed. “He’s tortured all of your children for years in potions classes at Hogwarts.”

Arthur’s mouth dropped open when he realized who Miranda meant, and he threw back his head, laughing. “You…and Severus…no!”

“You’re the second person who’s laughed out loud at the thought,” Miranda commented good-naturedly.
Arthur choked his laughter into a cough, turning red in the face. “I’m sorry, that was rude of me. It’s just that you are so cheerful and he is so…not.”

“What can I say? He won me over with his sunny disposition. But don’t be sorry, I know we make an odd pair.”

A bright red cuckoo bird popped out of the clock on the wall, chirping the hour. Arthur gave the thing a frown, but said reluctantly, “I’m afraid I have to get back to work, I’ve a pile of leads to research before my afternoon meetings. But I will have the pleasure of seeing you in a month, I hope.”

“You can count on it,” Miranda said.

“Wonderful, I look forward to it.”

There was a bustle of wand flicking, dirty dishes cleaning themselves and stacking neatly, and the tablecloth rolling up and flying back to its place on top of the filing cabinet. Arthur shook hands with Aaron and gave Miranda warm hug.

“Good luck, Miranda,” he said. “Give my love to Charlie.”

“I will,” she promised, but her smile had fallen away. “Arthur, I hate to be a bother, but I should probably ask you not to tell anyone about Severus and I. Security, you know?”

A kind, thoughtful expression replaced the mirth on Arthur’s face. “Of course, I understand. It wouldn’t be safe for either of you if it were common knowledge. That must be difficult.”

She shrugged. “It is what it is. Thank you for understanding.”

“Do you have time to come by and see Rachel now, or are you going straight over to Hogwarts?” Aaron asked when he and Miranda reached the street.

“I’d love to,” Miranda agreed. “Severus has to teach one of those private lessons that he hates tonight, so I have some time to kill.”

“How are those going?”

“I don’t ask, but I gather that they’re going very badly.” She rolled her eyes. “Between you and me, I don’t think that teaching is the best career for him. If we’d had a teacher like him at Ilvermorny, we’d have blown up his office in protest and been expelled.”

Aaron laughed. “We still could, if you think it would help.”

“I’ll let you know.”
“Reparo,” Severus hissed through clenched teeth. The shattered jars flew back together and floated silently to their places on the shelves. Unfortunately, there was nothing to be done to salvage their contents, and he berated himself for the waste as he vanished the mess before it could spread any further across his office floor. The fit had done nothing to calm his anger either, although it had perhaps prevented him from murdering Potter.

How dare he? How dare that brat poke his arrogant head into the Pensieve? Severus had clearly ordered the boy to leave his office so that he could clean up yet another Gryffindor produced mess. Graham Montague had almost killed himself escaping from the no-man’s-land inside the vanishing cabinet. It did seem that the Slytherin would make a full recovery, but for Severus then to return to his office and find Potter relishing one of the worst moments of his life? It was the final straw. He didn’t care what Albus said—he would never teach Potter private lessons again and, as soon as possible, the boy would be out of potions classes forever. At this moment, Severus didn’t care if the Dark Lord did take over Potter’s mind. In fact, if the Dark Lord were to summon Severus right now and demand that he hand over Potter immediately, Severus would be hard pressed to resist the temptation to fulfill the order, promises be damned.

Mess cleared away, he stormed out of his office. The thought of being disturbed by either a student or a staff member was more than he could bear. He needed to be alone. He dodged one of the Weasley twins’ infernal fireworks and mused that what he really wanted was to leave Hogwarts and never see it again. At least it was Wednesday and he would not have to look at Potter’s arrogant face again until after the Easter Holidays. Except in the Great Hall of course; Merlin, why was this his life?

Murder was still on his mind as he jerked open the door to his quarters, relieved to be somewhere private. Baring a total disaster, no one would dare to bother him here. He stepped into the sitting room, closed the door, and stopped short.

“Are the fireworks in my honor? Darling, you shouldn’t have,” Miranda said, smiling up at him. She was lounging in his chair, her legs draped over one of the arms, a book on her lap. “Rachel said to let you know that she’ll have some research to send your way in a week or two…”

Her voice trailed off and those grey eyes that always seemed to see more than he meant to show her studied him intently. Finally she asked lightly, “Bad day?”

Curse her. Curse her and her concerned look, and her beautiful face, and her graceful body. Curse her for caring. Curse her for being kind when he only wanted to be cruel. Curse her for being here when he wanted to be alone.

“Is there anything I can do?” she asked calmly.

“Just go away,” he growled, stalking past her to his desk. He sat down heavily, his back firmly to
her, and started viciously marking a scroll. His hand moved evenly while his rage pounded inside him, and he was glad to vent his spleen on an essay so full of idiotic mistakes. After a moment, he heard Miranda put her book in her bag, slide off the chair, and head for the door. The silence was palpable, but he did nothing to break it, he simply kept writing and waiting for her to be gone. She paused at the door, set her bag on the ground, and soon her light step was crossing the room to him. Curse her, why wouldn’t she leave?

His already rigid shoulders tensed even more when she put her hands on them, and he stubbornly kept writing, attempting to ignore her touch.

“I thought I told you to leave,” he said acidly.

“You did,” she replied. “I’ll go in a minute.”

Her strong fingers went to work on his shoulders, expertly finding every knot of tension and coaxing it away. She went slowly, as though she had all the time in the world and nothing better to do with it than patiently draw the anger out of his body.

His quill slipped out of his fingers and he murmured, “You are insufferable.”

“I know.”

Gradually, his head drooped forward and he gave himself up to the sensation. She really had no business being so nice to him. Didn’t she realize how arrogant, petty, and cruel he was? But he was also selfish and, if she wanted to waste her time with him, who was he to complain about it?

He did not know how much time passed before she slowed her pace to a halt. She placed a kiss on the top of his head and went back to the door without saying another word. He heard her pick up her bag and turn the knob. In another moment, she would be gone and he would finally be alone. But, for some reason, that no longer seemed so important.

“Wait,” he ordered quietly. “I’m coming with you.”

“I have to go back early tomorrow,” she reminded him over coffee and tea in the morning. They were sitting together in her cabin, reading the paper over breakfast. He was dressed except for his frock coat, and she was lounging in her dressing gown, her feet comfortably resting on his lap under the table.

“I remember,” he replied as he idly stroked her bare legs with one hand. “I’ll be finished with classes by mid-afternoon.”

“Are you coming back here, or do you want me to come to you?”

“At the moment, I wish to see as little of Hogwarts as possible.”

“Does that mean that you’re going to keep yourself in the dungeons all day?”
“It is best for Potter’s life expectancy that I do.”

“Then could you please let the house elves feed you lunch?”

“No.” He could feel his lips tug into a smile. It amused him how much it annoyed her when he skipped meals.

Predictably, she let out an irritated sigh. “Then you’ll be a ravenous beast when you get here.”

“Fortunately, you happen to be a bounty hunter. Dealing with ravenous beasts is your specialty.”

“I guess it is,” she said, sounding resigned. “And my brothers will never let me hear the end of it if they find out I’m on a case collecting ingredients for magical femme fatale beauty cream. Although, anymore, they’re only impressed when I take down vampires and werewolves on my own.”

He felt his mood darken and he fixed her with a sharp glare. “I thought we agreed that you were no longer hunting werewolves.”

She raised her hands in protest. “I’m not! At least, not until the tebo hide is ready to stitch into a tunic. Then I’ll be protected from pesky things like werewolf claws.”

“In that case, I suppose I should be grateful to have another six months of peace while it cures,” he said, going back to the paper.

“What are you going to do for the Easter Holidays?” she asked casually.

“The usual. Marking scrolls. Running hither and yon at Albus’s and the Dark Lord’s capricious whims.”

“Why don’t you come visit me?”

His eyes snapped up from the paper and the impish gleam in her eyes unnerved him. What was she up to now? “No. I couldn’t possibly.”

“Why not? I can meet you at the Merry Cemetery on Friday evening when you’re finished here. I
get the feeling that a break from all this would do you good.”

Merlin, she was like a siren. “What if I were summoned?” he objected.

“You’d take my port-key to my cabin and be no later than if you had to walk outside of the wards at Hogwarts from your rooms in the dungeon.”

“I doubt that either the Dark Lord or Albus would be pleased with my leaving the country.” He set down the paper, gave her legs a final squeeze, and pushed them off of his lap before rising to collect his frock coat.

She picked up his half of the paper and asked matter-of-factly, “Why do they need to know?”

“It is strange, but each of them seems to think that he is my master.”

“Here and I thought you were an expert Occlumens.”

“I am,” he said testily as he swiftly did up the buttons of his coat.

“So, don’t tell them. And, if they ask, just lie.”

He scoffed at her audacity although the thought of defying both Albus and the Dark Lord was enticing at the moment. As he pondered this, he went back to the table and put his hands on her shoulders.

“You are a terrible influence,” he chided.

She leaned her head back in order to look up at him, her eyes wide and innocent. “Come on, you know you miss me. And it won’t do anyone much good if you murder Potter.”

Her breath tickled his throat when he bent down to kiss her, and her lips were as sweet and tempting as her ridiculous idea.

“You may, perhaps, have a point,” he allowed.

“About you missing me, or about the merits of you not killing Potter?”

“Have I mentioned how amusing it is to watch you fish for compliments?”
“And have I mentioned that women like to hear them once in a while?”

He dropped one more kiss on her forehead. “I should think it were obvious, but if you must have it in so many words then, yes, I miss you.”

She went back to the paper, but not before he saw the blush that spread over her cheeks. For some strange reason he found it utterly charming that she was such a brazen woman, and yet she could still blush.

“Think about my invitation, will you?” she asked as he plucked his cloak off the hook by the door and pulled it on.

He cleared his throat in order to assume his sternest and most disapproving professor voice. “I will think about it. But I will probably say no.”

The note of laughter in her good-bye made him suspect that he had succeeded in sounding neither disapproving, nor stern.

She really was a terrible influence.

Chapter End Notes

Kaymak is something like clotted cream.

3 July 2019: I wanted to let y'all know that I am participating in this month's CampNaNo and will be focusing on drafting out the rest of Moonlight. Since I will be concentrating on drafting, it will probably be a few weeks before I update this story. In the mean time, I'd love to know what you think of it so far.

As always, thank you for reading!
Romanian Holiday

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your patience! I’ve finished the draft of Moonlight, and plan to post the finished chapters roughly every other week. I hope you enjoy and, if you get a chance, let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was Monday morning before Severus finally arrived at the Merry Cemetery in Săpânța, spinning into sight alongside a stout Frenchman and his sharp-featured wife. Severus’s stomach lurched as he landed, and his entire body ached from the *Cruciatus* that the Dark Lord had cursed him with two nights earlier. It might have been wiser to have stayed at Hogwarts for another day before traveling but he did not care to put himself in Albus’s sight line longer than necessary. Sunday’s dressing down over the Potter fiasco was as much as he wished to endure.

“You came!” Miranda said, her smile bright as the morning sun that was beating down on him.

“I said that I would,” he replied tersely, muscles tensing as she wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her warm lips against his. They were enticing, and tasted pleasantly of coffee and cream, but he could feel the French witch’s curious eyes watching, ruining the pleasure that he would usually have taken in such a gesture. Thankfully, Miranda kept her greeting short, releasing him and putting a respectable distance between them.

“I know you did. But I thought you might chicken out in the end. You kept putting me off.”

“There was nothing to be done about the demands on my attention,” he said defensively. “Perhaps I have been spending so much time around you that your bad habits are beginning to affect me. Aren’t you the one who is constantly tardy?”

“I guess I am,” she allowed. “Well, you’re here now, that’s the important thing.” She grabbed his hand and started pulling him along, pointing at the garishly painted grave markers. “Have you ever seen anything like this?”
His stomach was still reeling from the covert French port-key trip—why Miranda had connections to an illegal international port-key he had decided not to ask—and a headache was beginning to bloom between his eyes.

“No,” he answered, his hand limp in her tight grip. He felt completely disoriented; the sun was too high in the sky, the air smelled like fecund earth instead of like the sea, and a riot of blues, reds, and greens assaulted his eyes. His corner of Hogwarts was a sober gray and black, predictable and constant. This place hummed with a promise of the unexpected, and Severus knew that at any moment the Mark on his arm or the mirror in his pocket would demand his attention, ending this ill-advised venture before it even began.

She stopped in front of one of the markers and mercifully dropped his hand.

“Mental note, no hand holding,” she said under her breath before explaining, “All of these were painted by one man, his pet project. Aren’t they beautiful?”

Severus studied the image of a young man in old-fashioned dress riding a bicycle. The somewhat amateurish portrait was bordered by doves, poppies, and that bright blue that was the theme throughout the strange graveyard.

“If by beautiful, you mean garishly morbid,” he commented.

“That too. I thought you’d like them. The artist even wrote a little verse about how each person died. This fellow met with a knife, if you can believe it.”

“Charming.”

“When I get back to Edgewood, I’m going to try to talk Papa into doing this in our family plot.”

“Somehow that does not surprise me.”

“Mine will say something like, ‘Here lies Miranda, she was cut in two by a werewolf’s bite. Pray for her soul, lest she gnash her teeth with those who’ll never see the light.’”
“That is a terrible rhyme.”

“How nice of you to say so. Yours will say ‘Here lies Severus, he died an ass. Now kindly take your tears off his plot of grass.’”

A smile tugged at his lips in spite of all of his worries. “Fitting. Although I fail to see how I will come to be buried in your family’s graveyard.”

“No, of course not,” she said quickly. “I’m sure English earth will be the final place for you.”

“Obviously.”

“Listen, maybe this was a bad idea. If you’d feel more comfortable back home, you can just take the port-key back. I’ll understand.”

Why on earth had she said that? He finally looked at her and, while she was still smiling faintly, there was a tension around her lips and the brightness of her eyes had clouded over.

“I am here, aren’t I?”

“Yes, but I get the feeling you’d rather not be. I don’t understand it myself, but I do know that not everyone likes to travel. My mother and my brother Finn hate it. I just wanted you to have a chance to relax, and if this isn’t the right place for you to do that, then maybe you’d better go somewhere else where you can.”

He let his eyes wander back to the exotic grave marker. It was true that this vacation of his was an unnecessary risk. While he was not a coward, his life currently involved so much risk, that taking on more seemed like the highest form of idiocy. He wasn’t sure exactly why he’d agreed to come in the first place. Was a petulant act of independence or the pleasure of Miranda’s company really worth it? It made far more sense for him to turn around and go back the way he had come.

Just as he was about to concede her point, a group of plants growing out of the unfortunate bicyclist’s resting place caught his eye. They were shy things, struggling up amid the otherwise neatly kept rows of graves. He wondered why the caretaker had let them be, they were so gangly. But their hairy leaves and sweet, purple flowers were reaching up to the sun, determined to live in spite of their deathly surroundings.
“Lamium maculatum,” he murmured, as though greeting an old friend. Pomona had some growing in the staff greenhouse, and it had been one of the keys to unlocking the anti-venom that had saved Arthur’s life.

“I’m sorry, what?”

Severus’s stomach had finally settled and, while his headache had not disappeared, it hadn’t grown any worse either. He took Miranda’s hand and tucked it into the crook of his arm, taking his decision.

“(It seems a waste not to stay after I have spent so much time learning the language,)” he remarked.

The lines of tension around her lips softened into a real smile, and the light in her eyes came out from behind the clouds. Although he called himself a fool for thinking it, in that moment he felt that all of the uncertainty and discomfort was worth it if it pleased her so.

“(I agree. What would you like to see first?)”

Miranda stretched luxuriously and propped herself up on her elbow in order to study her sleeping companion more closely. It was unusual for her to wake before Severus and, when she did, she liked to take advantage of the opportunity to observe him without his practiced reserve in the way. In sleep, the marks of care and displeasure that marred his countenance were missing. She wouldn’t say that he looked exactly innocent, but he looked striking, and really rather handsome.

She didn’t have much time to admire him this morning, though. He didn’t know it yet, but they were due at Vasile Ursu’s within the hour, and it was time to wake him and break the news. Yesterday had been such a lark, between showing him the sights of Săpânţa, and exploring the natural treasures of the Rodna mountains where she’d pitched her tent, that she hadn’t found the time to mention this other project. She laid a finger between his eyes and started tracing his nose lightly, suppressing a laugh when his nose started twitching. After a moment of this, his hand snapped up, catching hers in its grip.

“And what torture do you have planned for me this morning?” he rumbled without opening his
“Me torture you? I should be the one complaining. I think I was very indulgent to let you drag me around all afternoon and evening looking at weeds and wildflowers.”

“It was research.”

“You’re on vacation.”

“You said you wanted me to relax. Research is how I relax.”

“I’m glad to hear that, because I have a job for you.”

He opened one eye and arched an eyebrow at her. “Et tu, Brute? I had thought that you were the one person in the world who wanted to have me around simply for the pleasure of my company. Now I find you only wish to use me.”

“I like you for many reasons, Severus, and you know it. Besides, I thought it might amuse you to help a damsel in distress.”

He let out a bark of laughter and nipped her wrist. “You are the furthest thing from a damsel in distress that I’ve ever met, and I shudder to think what you might require my assistance to accomplish. I must insist on tea before I hear whatever your mad idea is.”

“{You are late, Doamnă Rose,}” Vasile said when she and Severus arrived on his doorstep an hour later. But he smiled fondly at her and kissed her cheeks. “{I was beginning to give up hope.}”

“{You should know that I’m usually late. It’s one of my many flaws, I’m afraid,}” Miranda replied, returning his embrace. “{And Severus wouldn’t go anywhere this morning until he’d had his tea. English, you know.}” Severus glowered at her and she grinned back at him. “{Vasile, this is Severus Snape, the Potions Master at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Severus, Vasile Ursu, the Solomnar of Maramures.}”
The men shook hands briefly, sizing each other up like a pair of fighting occamys.

“[This way, if you please, best not to be loitering in doorways,]” Vasile said, leading them over the rock hewn staircase and into a narrow tunnel. The low ceiling was lit with incandescent stones at regular intervals, and their feet echoed as they descended into the cave.

“[You will have studied with Horace Slughorn, then?]” Vasile asked with the air of a professor examining his student.

“[Yes. And with Nadia Angouleme. I completed my masterwork under her.]”

“[Ah, Nadia.] ‘C’est un songe que d’y penser.’” Vasile’s voice was a dreamy sigh for an instant before he came back to the interrogation. “[Good. Then you know what you are doing. Nadia does not suffer fools. What was your master-potion?]”

“Suspension de l’incréduilité. [Its purpose was to enable the imbiber to master flying spells more easily.]”

“[And you were successful?]”

Miranda’s attention was riveted on Severus. He had never mentioned either this project, or flying spells to her before.

“[Yes,]” Severus answered. “[Although it was a primitive attempt. Too much mercury. Many… undesirable side effects.]”

“[Your most recent project?]”

“[An universal anti-venom.]”

The corridor came to a divide, one path leading downward and the other curving away in a gentle incline. Vasile led them on the upward path, which was brightly lit by a row of torches that ignited
as they passed by. Portraits of witches and wizards with narrow, stylized faces snored gently on their shelves, although a few shook themselves awake long enough to observe the new-comers. One dangerous looking fellow even had the audacity to wink at Miranda, but they did not linger long enough for conversation.

“{How did you solve the mistletoe problem?}”

“{Tumeric added at each stage of preparation.}”

“{Nicely done.}”

A rush of fresh air blew past them as their path opened into a domed cavern, and Miranda was surprised to see sunlight streaming in through a skylight cut in the ceiling. She had not thought that they had climbed high enough in the cave to be this close to the surface, but the blue sky was clearly visible, and the breeze felt and smelled too real to be an enchantment. The skylight was placed above a circle of leather cushions and low chairs that were equipped with portable writing desks, parchment, quills, and bottles of ink. The enormous walls were fitted from bottom to top with bookshelves carved directly into the stone, and books of all shapes, sizes, and conditions were crammed in every available nook and cranny. Miranda was a little disappointed that they did not pause in this wonderful room, but passed through it to another chamber.

This chamber also sported high ceilings and skylights, although they were slits rather than true windows. Numerous floating candles flamed to life upon their entrance, reflecting off row upon row of neatly labeled jars, beakers, bowls, cauldrons, and other well-kept equipment. The supplies sat proudly on their fancifully carved wooden shelves, waiting like chessmen to be brought out to play. Across from this bounty was an L-shaped table, one half wood, and one stone; the perfect height for standing while working. Miranda was impressed that the floor near this workspace had a springy give to it, which must be a mercy one’s feet and legs during long hours of brewing.

“{Doamnă Rose has explained why you are here?}” Vasile asked, rolling up the sleeves of his embroidered peasant shirt.

“{Yes,}” Severus replied, quickly removing his frock coat. He hung it on a hook near the door and rolled up his own shirtsleeves, greedily eyeing the contents of the shelves all the while.

“{Then we’d best get started.}”
Vasile waved his hand and a fire started under one end of the stone table, while a small waterfall began flowing under the other side of it. Severus raised and eyebrow and curiously ran his hand along the top of the stone, studying the cauldron-shaped inserts that were carved at regular intervals.

“{One end is made for heating and the other for cooling,}” Vasile explained.

“{The stone must conduct the temperature immediately,}” Severus observed. “{But how do you prevent the cauldrons from cracking?}”

“{They are tempered first. I can show you how when we finish if you would like.}”

“{I would.}”

Jars and bottles began floating from their places and setting themselves expectantly on the wooden table.

“{Three chopping boards,}” Severus muttered as he studied the wooden table more closely.

“{Yes, wood for most things, marble for what must remain cold, salamander leather for what must stay hot,}” Vasile explained quickly as he fished ingredients out of jars and set them on the table. “{Three Rhodiola, two swift eggs, a seven inch piece of young horntail claw. Dice it, please.}”

Severus produced his favorite knife from some pocket and started dicing the claw into perfectly matched pieces as he ordered, “Miranda, take dictation.”

She had expected this, and had already made herself at home in a bearskin covered armchair that had appeared near the work tables. She pulled a large, leather-bound book from her bag and positioned it atop one of the portable writing desks. By the time she had her quills and ink bottles floating beside her, the men were on to the next step, but she wrote quickly in her clear, even hand, and soon she was apace with them. Her mother had insisted that all of the Rose children learn decent penmanship and Severus had once remarked that he preferred to read notes written in Miranda’s handwriting than his own. This admission had pleased her inordinately and, while she had no intention of becoming Severus’s private secretary, she did not mind taking notes for him from time to time.
Although Miranda did not care for making potions herself, she did enjoy watching Severus brew. He was in his element, and his movements were quick and sure. When he was fully engaged in his task, something wonderful happened to his face. It was focused and excited rather than censorious and worn. Sometimes, as he did now, he would tie back his hair, which made him appear younger than he did with it hanging in his face. She thought that it suited him, but she kept this opinion to herself. That black curtain of hair probably served as a convenient shield, hiding his thoughts from the world. And he had so much to hide.

By the end of the day, Miranda’s shoulders ached and her hand was cramped from all the writing. It had been difficult to translate the instructions from Romanian to English as quickly as Vasile spoke. There were several times that she’d had to explain some of Vasile’s colloquialisms to Severus, making all three of them impatient. When Vasile had finally proclaimed that they had completed enough work to be satisfactory, Miranda was more than happy to stretch her legs and explore the bookshelves in the larger cavern while the men tidied the potions room.

Vasile was a stern taskmaster, but he was also an excellent host. When the potions room had been put to bed for the night, he led his guests all the way down to his private quarters. These were nestled in the heart of the cave, cool and quiet. They were well furnished with comfortable chairs, amusing books and games, and ample light for reading. A hearty dinner of sarmale and miciunele was waiting for them, laid out by unseen hands, and Vasile entertained them with more of the fanciful folktales that Miranda found so fascinating. After dinner, the three of them played several rounds of tablă, which Vasile won handily, but he also soothed the blow with an excellent bottle of mastică.

Severus and Vasile soon dominated the conversation, exchanging stories of nightmare students and commiserating about the difficulties of teaching. It was amusing to listen to them, particularly since Severus could be quite verbose when he wanted to be. At some point, he absently reached over to massage the aches out of her writing hand, and then flicked her hand with some practiced maneuver, which immediately cured the pains in her wrist that had been caused by the day’s work. The pine-scented liqueur and the warmth from the fire encouraged a pleasant sense of well-being that spread through Miranda’s body, and she settled herself cozily in her chair to enjoy the company. Eventually she felt her eyes growing heavy, and she did not realize she had fallen asleep until Severus’s hand on her shoulder startled her awake.

“{My apologies, Doamnă Rose,}” Vasile was saying. “{I should have noted the hour. I will need you again tomorrow, but I believe we will be able to finish our task then.}”

“Are you able to walk, or will I be forced to carry you?” Severus asked in English, a teasing gleam flickering in the depths of his dark eyes.

“Is that an offer?” Miranda replied.
“I suppose. But I will throw you over my shoulder and I doubt you will enjoy it.”

“Promises, promises.” She let him pull her to her feet and gave Vasile a parting embrace.
“{Goodnight, Domnul Ursu. We’ll be back in the morning.}”

When the pair of them were out of the cave and walking through the cool, spring night, Miranda turned to Severus and asked, “So, about that flying potion. Did you ever get it to work?”

He smiled mysteriously at her and replied, “Yes and no. Perhaps I might be convinced to show it to you someday.”

“I’m sure I can make it worth your while. I know you’d like to learn how to do some of the smoke magic.”

“That is true. I should think that we will be able to come to an arrangement to our mutual satisfaction.”

On Thursday evening Severus sat in a transfigured armchair in Miranda’s tent, perusing the notes for the Changeover Potion, and feeling mentally and physically sated in a way that he rarely achieved. This potion was a welcome challenge, and the time working with Domnul Ursu had stretched Severus’s mind, giving him a plethora of ideas for his own projects and for his workspaces at Hogwarts. Miranda sat tailor-style on the bed, weaving a length of unicorn hair into a fine net, and it was a pleasure to watch her graceful movements as she worked. A disobedient voice in the back of Severus’s mind was whispering that, if he liked, there was no reason for him to return to Hogwarts the next day. He could stay here in this tent with Miranda, like Merlin in Nimue’s cave. Since he knew that he wouldn’t stay, he felt free to indulge in this fantasy, and the idea of staying with Miranda, either in Romania or in Britain, grew more appealing to him with each passing day.

“Aren’t you glad you came?” Miranda asked smugly as she looped and knotted her net.
“I suppose it would be a lie to say otherwise,” he replied.

“And nothing bad even happened.”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say that yet. There are a few hours left before I return home, after all. Around you that is enough time for the world to end. Chaos follows ever on your heels.”

“I think that you need a little chaos.” She bent her head over a complicated part of her weaving and added, “If you come back in the summer, we can go to Bucharest and see an opera.”

Several sarcastic quips automatically leapt to Severus’s mind at this suggestion, but he took an effort to refrain from letting them out of his mouth. He ran his fingers over the beautiful lines of potion notes that Miranda had taken for him, admiring their form.

After a moment, he glanced up from the book and said honestly, “I should like that very much.”

There had not been many occasions in Severus’s life where another person had looked at him with such delight as Miranda did now, and he felt his ears heat up with embarrassment at the sentimental emotion that was growing in his chest. He cleared his throat awkwardly and added, “That is, assuming that you do not manage to get yourself killed on these ridiculous quests.”

She laughed lightly and went back to her net. “Oh, it’s just bird catching and flower picking. How hard is that?”

“As I recall, dragon riding is part of the second task.”

“It is, but I’m getting much better at it. By the time June gets here, I’ll be an expert.”

“I still do not understand why this ordeal is being dragged out for so long. Why on earth can’t you retrieve the children now?”

“They aren’t in any immediate danger. And we can’t even get to them until the veil between the worlds is thin enough. That won’t be until October.”
“I don’t like it.”

“I’m not surprised, but that’s how it is.” She smiled slyly at him and turned the subject. “When you see him tomorrow, tell Malfoy that I miss him.”

“I think I shall not mention that to him, if it is all the same to you. When will you be coming back in May?”

“Whenever Rachel’s baby comes. I’m godmother, remember?”

“I remember. I’m surprised you were able to convince Lucius to wait for that.”

“Aaron was the one who convinced him. Actually, I think Aaron convinced Narcissa, who took care of Lucius. I guess she is understanding after all. I assume that the answer is no, but do you want to come to the baptism? There’ll be a little party at the Lees’ afterwards.”

“It is entirely possible that I will be struck by lightning if I set foot inside of a church, but I suppose it is a risk that I would be willing to take.”

“I understand, of course you wouldn’t want to… Wait a minute, did you just agree to come?”

Her head snapped up and Severus chuckled softly at the shocked expression on her face. He so rarely managed to catch Miranda off guard, and he treasured the moments when it happened.

“I am aware that being a godparent is an important honor. And I do find your friends tolerable, surprising as that may seem,” he chided.

She opened and closed her mouth more than once, and that charming blush bloomed on her cheeks. “I should tell you that Arthur and Molly Weasley are going to be there too. Arthur is acting as proxy godfather because Aaron’s brother can’t make it over from the States. I know we’re trying to keep things quiet, so I understand if that changes your mind.”
“That does complicate things slightly.”

“I may have mentioned to Arthur that we were seeing each other, though.”

“Did you?”

“It just popped out, he’s so friendly. But he seemed to understand that it was important to keep it under his hat.”

Severus frowned, mulling this over in his mind. In some ways, he would prefer the world to know that he was capable of holding the interest of a woman like Miranda, and his irritation over her carelessness was tempered by his excellent mood.

“Arthur does know how to keep his mouth shut,” he admitted. “Perhaps better than certain persons in this tent. I will think about it.”

“Speaking of secrets, you’re not supposed to know what I’m doing here. So if Albus, or anyone else asks, I never told you anything.”

“If Albus or anyone else asks, I was never here.”

She set down the net and flexed her fingers, grimacing as though they hurt, and he set the book of notes aside in order to take her hands in his.

“If I can tell that your hands are cold, they must be frozen solid,” he remarked, bringing her chilled fingers to his lips.

Somehow this gesture led to her sitting on his lap, running her hands through his hair. Their kisses were lazy, and while he hadn’t thought he had the energy for another round of that sort of recreation this evening, her delicious sighs were convincing him that he might be persuaded otherwise.

She had just started toying with the buttons on his shirt when she stiffened in his arms and jerked her head away from his, listening intently.
“What is it?” he asked, and she laid a finger over his lips.

With a snap, all of the lights in the tent went out and she tapped on his cheek with her finger:

THERE IS SOMETHING OUTSIDE PUT YOUR SHOES ON

She slid off his lap and he pulled on his shoes while she quickly laced on her boots. He retrieved his wand from the table while she crept to the door, peering out of the glass for an endless string of moments. When she was satisfied, she padded back to him and tapped on his hand:

PRICOLICI 5 OF THEM

He tapped back:

WHAT ARE THOSE

She explained:

PART VAMPIRE PART WEREWOLF PART ZOMBIE THINGS

Merlin, could nothing be simple in this place? He tapped quickly:

HOW CAN THEY SEE YOUR TENT

She replied:

THEY CAN SEE THROUGH ENCHANTMENT THEY ONLY BOTHER YOU IF THEY ARE SENT AFTER YOU

He asked:

WHO SENT THEM

She rolled her eyes and tapped:

WORRY ABOUT THAT LATER FIRST WE HAVE TO KILL THEM
He gave her a disgruntled look and asked:

HOW DO WE DO THAT

Miranda patted his shoulder and went to the trunk at the foot of the bed. After a bit of rummaging, she pulled out a double-headed ax, along with two vials of Strengthening Solution. She tossed one of the vials to Severus, and when they had both drunk, she returned to him and tapped on his cheek:

YOU CAN KILL MOST ANYTHING BY CHOPPING OFF ITS HEAD YOU SET THEM UP AND I WILL KNOCK THEM DOWN ON THREE

By now, his eyes had fully adjusted to the darkness, and he moved towards the door, wand at the ready. He shook his head silently, musing that he had been quite correct—chaos did follow ever on Miranda’s heels. Her hand was on his shoulder, and before he could wonder overlong about whether she, the Dark Lord, or Albus was most likely to be the death of him, she was tapping out:

ONE…TWO…THREE

The door flew open and Severus surged through it into the moonlit clearing. After the dark of the tent, the moonlight was more than sufficient to reveal the hulking figures of two werewolf-like monsters. The beasts froze for an instant, as though startled by the humans’ attack.

Without hesitation, Severus flicked his wand and hissed, “Sectumsempra,” casting rapidly at each of the creatures in turn. They reeled backwards as the curse hit them, wounds exploding and sending bits of pus and fur-covered flesh in all directions.

“Left!” Miranda shouted, and Severus whirled to cast at another charging monster.

His curse hit the mark again and he instinctively ducked, knowing without words that Miranda would come vaulting over him to cleave off the head of the third creature. He allowed himself an instant to admire her form, before shifting to one knee and casting at the fourth attacker. This pricolici had managed to advance closer than the others, and Severus bombarded it with slash after slash of his signature curse, until Miranda appeared beside him, and used his leg as a stair-step. He seamlessly gave her his free hand, helping her up like a dancer, and she neatly decapitated the monster before swinging behind Severus’s back and onto the ground.

This last move had perhaps been unnecessarily showy, as it had given the final pricolici ample time to charge. It caught Miranda up in its hairy arms and threw her like a rag doll across the clearing. Severus cast viciously at the attacker, but his eyes kept involuntarily searching for Miranda, and he found himself knocked to the ground. With a muttered expletive, he blindly cast a bombarding
curse and scrambled to his feet, but an instant later the pricolici caught him from behind in a death grip. Severus cast again, and the pair of them were thrown across the clearing, rolling until they came to a halt with Severus on the bottom. With great effort, and the aid of the Stregnthing Solution, he managed to turn himself in the beast’s deadly embrace in order to see where he was casting. He conjured a rope that wrapped itself around the toothy snout, but the enraged beast snapped through the bonds easily. This he followed with another round of Sectumsempra, and pus and flesh poured over him from his victim. The pricolici whimpered like a kicked dog for a moment, but the whimper became a growl, and its snapping jaws descended to rip out Severus’s throat.

Severus gritted his teeth and cast a final curse, fighting the urge to close his eyes against his own impending doom. But when a wet flood of something hit his eyes, he could not resist closing them. The beast collapsed on top of him, and he accepted with finality that Miranda was going to be the death of him after all.

The teeth on his throat never came though and, after a time, he noticed that the clearing was still except for the sound of Miranda’s bell-like laugh. His face was still wet, and when he opened his eyes he discovered that he was pinned beneath the now headless pricolici. Miranda was disentangling him from it the best that she could, hampered by her high spirits and her laughter. Her soiled ax was sitting on the ground next to them, resting from its labors.

When she finally had him free of the corpse, he sat up and pulled out a handkerchief to wipe the gore off of his face. She offered him a hand to pull him to his feet, and he rose, recalling their first meeting. Her eyes were astonishingly bright in the moonlight, and he wondered if they had been so that first night, hidden in the shadows of that fatal alley.

“Well done!” she said, her voice ecstatic. “Only next time, don’t get so distracted by what I’m doing. That last one wouldn’t have caught you if you hadn’t been worrying about me.”

“Why am I not surprised that you would criticize me for my chivalrous impulses?”

“Chivalry has no place in a battle. I can take care of myself, you know.”

“I am well aware of your competence. It is one of your most attractive qualities.”

This seemed to please her so much, that she caught his hands and started waltzing around the battleground with him. And he was so giddy from the rush of the fight and the victory, that he went along with her, grinning like a fool. The contours of her face and her body were clearer than he’d ever seen them, and the moonlight bathed the world in brilliant blues and silvers and purples.
While they danced, he became aware of the smell of hyacinths, and the perfume was so strong that he marveled that he hadn’t noticed it before. Every nerve of his skin was hyperaware of the tiniest sensation.

“I think that you could swing dance if you wanted to,” Miranda teased.

“Of course I could. It is not a question of ability, it is a question of decorum.”

“Oh, that English decorum.”

She pouted prettily, and her lips drew him in like a magnet. He spun her to him, as he had in front of Shoreditch Church the summer before, and kissed her now as eagerly as he had then. She tasted of elf-made wine and honey, and he felt more delightfully intoxicated than mere alcohol had ever helped him achieve. The perfume of the hyacinths was overtaken by her scent, lavender and sweat from the exertions of the battle. She tugged open the collar of his shirt, and seared his cheek with a line of burning kisses. When she reached his neck, she bit him playfully, laughing against his skin when he growled at her. He ran his hands along the curve of her waist, and then scooped her up and threw her over his shoulder the way he had threatened to do the other evening.

“What happened to your precious decorum?” she yelped in surprise.

“Decorum is doing the proper thing at the proper time, and this is the proper way to carry barbarians to bed,” he replied, heading for the tent.

“Says who?”

“Says your English lover. Do you mean to complain about it?”

“No,” she purred. “No, I don’t think I will.”

They did decide to transfigure one of the chairs into a bath before retiring to bed, but removing pricolici gore turned out to be a much more entertaining chore than it had any right to be.
"Severus, are you listening to me?" Lucius demanded on Friday evening, breaking off his long-winded tale to glare at his companion. Severus had joined the Malfoy family for dinner, and the two men were sitting alone in the library so that Lucius could talk about himself.

"Hmmm?" Severus replied, swirling his glass of firewhiskey. "Of course I am. You just said that Cornelius Fudge is the stupidest Minister we’ve ever had."

"Well, yes, to say the least." He shot Severus one more suspicious glance, but went on with his pompous story of his own cleverness.

In point of fact, Severus had long since perfected the art of listening with one ear while thinking of something else entirely. Usually this skill was put to use in his meetings with the Dark Lord, enabling him to keep hidden what needed to be hidden while gleaning information and constantly evaluating what his next move should be. At the current moment, he was employing his skill much more agreeably, reliving his Romanian Holiday and dwelling on his magnificent Barbarian. He was somewhat troubled that a band of undead monsters had presumably been sent by her rivals to kill her, but she had promised to speak to Weasley and Albus about the matter. And he had to admit that she could, most certainly, take care of herself.

"And now, about your little tart, Miranda," Lucius said, finally capturing Severus’s full attention.

A chill of warning crept up Severus’s spine, but he schooled his features and kept his tone indifferent as he asked, "What about her?"

"It is unfortunate that I’ve had to send your little playmate abroad, but I think it would be for the best that you don’t become particularly attached to her. She is quickly becoming more trouble than she is worth."

"Dallying with a woman does not indicate that a man wishes to spend the rest of his life with her. I’m sure you are well aware of that."

"I’m relieved to hear you say that. I’d hate to think that your mind had been addled by the mud-blood upstart."
“It would take much more than that to addle my mind,” Severus remarked, covering the tension in his jaw by finishing his firewhiskey.

“Then let us be frank. There is no possible way that Sirius Black is in Romania. I know it, The Dark Lord knows it, and I strongly suspect that you know it, even if your tangled mess of allegiances prevents you from saying so.”

Severus arched an eyebrow and his stomach twisted. “What makes you think that?”

“That is for me to know and you to wonder about,” Lucius said condescendingly. “How long has Miranda been working for Dumbledore?”

“I was not aware that she was. You do understand that I do not spend time with her in order to discuss her work.”

“Very good, I suspected as much.” Lucius refilled both their glasses. “Then she is not in the Order?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“But she is cooperating with them. She’s been working with that Weasley brat at the Dragon Sanctuary in Romania, and she’s involved with some scheme there.”

“Is she?”

Lucius’s eyes were shrewd and calculating as he studied the younger man. “Do you really have no idea what she is up to?”

“I’m afraid not.”

There was a long moment of silence while the men stared each other down. Severus knew that Lucius was no legilimens, but he kept his mind on teaching and the Dark Lord to be safe. He also
did not dare risk invading Lucius’s mind, although he dearly wished to do so. What a relief it would be to know what the other man was hiding, but Lucius would notice if Severus attempted a mental search. If Severus wished to keep Miranda, he needed Lucius and the Dark Lord to think that she meant nothing to him. And he found it surprising how much it had come to matter to him that he keep her.

At last Lucius said, “If you have the opportunity, it would behoove you to pry what you can out of her as far as her association with Dumbledore and the rest of those fools goes. The Dark Lord is suspicious of you, as I’m sure you’re well aware. I’ve known you for a long time, Severus, and I respect you. I would like to bring you along with me as I ascend, but I will not let you drag me down. Even for the sake of old times.”

“I understand.”

“To the Dark Lord,” Lucius said, raising his glass.

“To the Dark Lord.”

Severus lifted his glass in time with Lucius and drained it dry. The burn of the alcohol did nothing to warm him, and the dregs sat ashen and bitter on his tongue.

Chapter End Notes

C'est un songe que d'y penser: It is a dream even to think of her.
This is a quote from Charles, duc d’Orléans’ (1394-1465) poem “Dieu! qu'il la fait bon regarder” or “God, what a vision she is.”

Suspension de l’incrédulité: Suspension of disbelief. Many thanks to Chiara for helping me research! This phrase was coined by the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834). I promise there will be more about this potion later.

Sarmale are sour cabbage rolls stuffed with various fillings. Minciunele is a dessert of friend pastry. Its name means “little lies” in Romanian.

Tablă is something like backgammon. Mastícă is a liqueur made with a resin from the mastic tree, giving it a piney flavor.

Pricolici are monsters from Romanian folklore—because werewolves, vampires, and
zombies aren’t scary enough by themselves.
Miranda knew better than to follow it, but knowing better had never stopped her before. The bright blue ball of light was hovering patiently among the reeds as she hauled her little row boat, *Molly Brown,* out of the Sulina branch of the Danube. It had been yet another disappointing day on the river, and she was beginning to wonder if she would find the birds she sought before she died of boredom.

“*Packaway,*” she cast, passing her hand over the boat. It shivered and stretched its sides upwards before flattening out on the uneven bank. Folding the silly thing caused her to swear under her breath with frustration. Like maps, boats had to be folded just the right way, and Miranda had little patience for either finicky item.

All the time that she was wrestling with her task, the light creature was creeping closer and closer to her, until she felt she could no longer ignore it. The stories that her father had told her on camping trips about hapless travelers being led astray by mischievous will ’o the wisps came back to her, but the hair on her neck did not prickle her with warning.

“Can I help you?” she asked pleasantly. To her understanding it was best to be polite when addressing the fairy folk.

The wisp didn’t answer, rather it darted away towards the thick woods that lined the river bank. It made a beeline to Miranda, and then pedantically floated back to the woods, as though crooking its finger at her to follow.

“You aren’t planning to lead me into a bog and turn me into butter, are you?”
The light flickered and she could have sworn that she saw the faint outline of a tiny human figure inside of it, quivering with laughter.

“I’ll take that as a no,” she said, encouraged by this show of good spirits. “Lead on.”

The wizened trees were so close together that she had to push low-lying branches apart in order to enter the virgin forest. This part of the country was almost unpopulated, and Miranda had seen no one for days as she followed Charlie’s map up and down the winding distributaries of the Danube. Birds from all over the world, magical and non magical alike, flocked to the delta on their spring migration; so when the Iele had demanded each champion bring them a mated pair of Birds of Paradise, this seemed the most likely place to find them. Charlie had marked the map with the Birds’ favorite haunts, but there were still many miles of river to be searched. It was a tedious and lonely job, and Miranda wished that she were back at the Dragon Sanctuary, dealing with bruises and broken bones.

“Raasta,” she cast, and the tangled mass of tree branches and underbrush folded itself under her feet, creating a path for her to tread. She did not have to worry about leaving a trail though, as the flora sprang back behind her, unharmed. The light of the setting sun soon disappeared, but the wisp’s glowing body was enough to see by, even if it did create eerie, dancing shadows outside of its circle.

The quiet of the woods pressed in on Miranda until her own heartbeat pounded in her ears. After a time she became aware of a low hum emanating from the wisp. It sounded like speech, or a song, or some combination of the two. But no matter how hard she tried to listen to it, she could not make out either the tune or the words.

“Are we going far?” she asked, trying to fill some of the silence.

As though in answer, the sprite disappeared, leaving her at the edge of a clearing just wide enough for a traveling tent and a fire. Sentinels of trees surrounded it, their tops stretching up and creating a canopy of shelter. The spot was such a perfect campsite, that it was already occupied by another
canvas tent. Miranda had not taken a step either into the clearing or away from it when Catalina Dragnea emerged from her shelter, her eyes blazing and a fierce scowl on her face.

“{Doamnă Rose,}” she said shortly. “{You have recovered from your recent visitors then?}”

“{I have,}” Miranda replied, cool but cordial. “{I’m sorry to disturb you. I can find somewhere else to camp.}”

“{No. That will not be necessary.}”

Miranda’s arms were relaxed at her sides, but the Alder pricked her wand hand, ready to leap into it if needed.

“{I am happy to see you again, Doamnă Dragnea, but I’d rather not duel you at the moment. Even for practice.}”

Catalina pursed her lips. “{I am not going to fight you. Not yet, in any case. I wish for you to stay here because then there will be no more such…incidents.}”

“{Really? What makes you so sure of that?}” She could feel anger shooting from every fiber of Catalina’s small frame, but Miranda wasn’t sure that this anger was directed at her.

“{You should know that my father did not send those things,}” Catalina spat on the ground and crossed herself, “{after you. That was Andrei and his friends.}”
“{I see. I guess I should have sent the head and the note to Domnul Naghi then. My apologies to Domnul Dragnea.}”

Catalina’s voice was sharp and bitter. “{You do not need to apologize. Father let it be known that he approved of Andrei’s actions. But I do not approve of them. When I defeat you, I will do it fairly and openly. And I will not have that honor denied me by those who would send undead assassins after a sleeping woman in the night. You will be safe if you stay here. I promise you that.}”

“{You mean, I’ll be safe until you decide to kill me?}” Miranda knew there had been a reason she liked Catalina.

The younger woman’s lips smiled briefly. “{Exactly.}”

“{I don’t think I can ask for a better offer than that. I’d be delighted to share this campsite with you. Thank you.}”

Catalina nodded curtly and disappeared back into her tent while Miranda went about the business of pitching hers. She was glad to have company after so many days alone, even if her company was in the form of her rival.

“Miskawew,” Miranda rasped, drawing her wand listlessly through the air and sending a rainbow-colored wind whistling above the surface of the river. “Sail on, Molly girl.”
Molly Brown obediently cut through the water, riding the current easily beneath the tracking spell. Miranda settled in for another dull day with her rucksack and her empty gilded cage. The tracking spell would last for a good mile before she had to recast it, but she did not dare pull out a book to pass the time, lest she miss her quarry should she be so fortunate as to encounter them. Her throat was killing her; it had been sore when she had woken up that morning, and the sight of the mist burning off the river in romantic spirals was beginning to lose its charm.

As the sun climbed higher into the sky, Miranda let herself recline in her boat, watching the scenery for flashes of jewel-colored feathers through half-closed eyes. It was an elegant place, bordered by reedy banks and trees that bent gracefully to kiss the water. The Danube accepted all these attentions, humming along like an aristocratic matron, well schooled in the ways of the world and of love. The peaceful murmur of the current mingled with the calls of various birds, and Miranda wished that her mother were with her—both for the company and because she knew that her mother would be able to identify each and every song.

The thought of Monica Rose drew Miranda’s mind back home to Edgewood, and to the river that had witnessed so much of her childhood. Unlike the wise, old soul of the Danube, her river was young and boisterous. Even in the stretches of water that were smooth enough for swimming and rock skipping, it still crashed along, barely contained by its banks. Monica had never cared for her children playing by the river, even after they had learned to swim, but nothing had been able to keep Miranda, Columba, and Finn away from its shores. While their older brothers had played at being adults, these three had spent their days in and out of the river, playing and fighting and dreaming.

Her river had been such a faithful friend that Miranda loved it fiercely, even after it had taken Columba home. Finn had refused to go near it after that fatal day, but Miranda had not been able to stay away, even when she had tried. She had railed at the river, and fought with it, and, at last, she had made her peace with it. In her mind she pictured the spirit of her river as a wild young man, something like the river gods in the old stories. He was careless and powerful, and he did not understand that his heartless ways hurt the little mortals that splashed on his shore. He couldn’t help his cruelty, it was woven into the spirit of his terrible beauty.

David hadn’t understood her fanciful talk, but he had understood the beauty of the river. He had taken her brothers’ place as her companion there, and they had spent many hours dreaming and loving in the secret places on its shore. The river had been the place where one night, drunk on too
much wine and burning hot in their youth, Miranda’s recklessness had won out over David’s reserve, and they had become lovers in every sense of the word.

As wonderful as it had all been, Miranda could not look back on it now without a twinge of guilt. David had desired her, but he had also believed strongly in all of the teachings of his newly adopted Church. He had wanted the two of them to come to their wedding day unsullied, the way that the priests and the Bible expected. It had troubled him that he had not had the will to resist both his passion and hers. Miranda had felt that he was right, but she had lived her life begging forgiveness rather than asking permission as she followed her impulses wherever they led. Now she could not help wishing that her younger self had resisted the urge to push David into temptation, especially considering the way it had all ended. He had never been able to refuse her anything, and she’d always known it. She wished she had used that knowledge to protect him the way he had wanted to protect her.

A painful lump formed in her throat as she drifted through her memories. Swallowing it hurt enough that her mind came back to where she was, and she realized that she hadn’t been watching her spell as closely as she should. She was coming to the place where the Sfântu Gheorghe distributary forked off of the Sulina, and her tracking spell fizzled out just before the split. It really didn’t matter which way she went since she was equally likely to fail in either direction.

“Molly, my dear, come about starboard. Let’s give the Sfântu Gheorghe a try today.”

It was late afternoon when she found them. The final flicker of her tracking spell halted above a floating island of reeds in the middle of the river. They were smaller than she had expected, these Birds of Paradise, and whether they had actually ever been to the place they were named for Miranda didn’t know. But they certainly looked the part, shining like gems in the otherworldly light of the low-lying sun.
“Poni-nokusiw,” she breathed, concerned that she had waited too long to end the spell and that the birds would be startled into flight. They did pause in their pecking, heads cocked as they listened.

“Wakeless speed, Molly sweet.”

The good Molly Brown slowed to a crawl and Miranda held her breath until the birds went back to their business, deciding that there was nothing to fear. She didn’t want to risk disturbing them by actually attempting to tie her boat to the island, and she ordered another slow down as Molly Brown crept alongside it.

“Dead slow, my girl.”

Molly Brown pushed against the current just enough to keep her in place beside the reeds. Miranda’s eyes were fixed on the gorgeous creatures as she eased the net into her hands and silently shifted herself into position to throw it over them. Impulsively, she brought the fruit of her many nights of weaving to her lips, kissing its ice cold threads. When her arms were in position, she paused and counted her breaths, waiting until her whole range of vision had narrowed to the hapless birds. An instant later she broke the stillness with a flick of her wrists, letting the rope attached to the net trail between her fingers as it sailed through the sky.

The unbreakable net hit the mark squarely, wrapping itself around the birds before they had a chance to twitch a single radiant feather. They started up with a cry like a horse’s scream, pulling the net with them. In a flash Miranda had the rope wrapped around her hands, and she jerked it backwards in an attempt to bring them down. They were too strong though, and in the next moment they had lifted her up, dragging her out of the boat and into the river.
Miranda plunged into the frigid water, gasping as she wrapped the rope more tightly around her hands. She was astonished that chicken-sized birds were so strong, much less that they managed to fly hampered by the cold and the constraints of the net. But they beat their wings wildly against the weight of their hunter and she skidded through the water, shoulder deep but clinging on. Their shrieks grew louder and louder, scattering all of the other animals from their hiding places in and along the river, and filling Miranda’s ears with their rage.

She had not been expecting such a fight, and after some time of this dragging, they showed no sign of tiring. Her muscles screaming with the effort, she started to pull herself up the rope in a laborious attempt to climb it. She was shaking and sweating when, all at once, they came crashing into the river, as though they had given up the fight and decided to attempt drowning instead. Somehow she managed to wrap her arms around them, and they fell beneath the surface together. It took all of her concentration to keep her wits about her as the cold of the water and the cold of the unicorn-hair net shocked her body. She closed her eyes, held her breath, and hoped that she wouldn’t splinch them all as she Apparated to the shore.

Air came into her lungs in greedy gasps as she lay on the bank an instant later. The drenched birds were gathered on her chest, their wise eyes sad and angry as they gazed at her. Unlike the waxwings, these creatures seemed to understand their fate. For a moment, Miranda was seized with the urge to let them go free rather than consign them to eternal servitude among the Iele. But as her breath came back to her, she knew that this was impossible. Too many people were counting on her and on these birds. Too many for her to give in to her impulse; however well-meaning it was.

“I’m sorry,” she said heartfully, drawing her wand. “Somnus.”

The Birds of Paradise glared at her until the spell overpowered them and they succumbed to sleep. With numb fingers, Miranda tugged the net free and dropped it next to her on the ground. The birds felt as cold as she did, and she flicked her wand over the lot of them, basking beneath the jet of hot air until they were all mostly dry. Exhausted and throat still aching, she stroked the birds’ silky feathers and laid there on the shore with the reeds poking painfully into her back.

She may have dozed off briefly, for when her eyes snapped open the sun had almost disappeared below the horizon. Disoriented, she pushed herself up to sitting and nestled the birds in her lap. The boat was nowhere in sight, and she closed her eyes in order to shut out the complaints of her aching body while she gathered her magic. A long, low whistle came from her lips and, before it died
away, the faithful *Molly Brown* floated up beside her.

It took her some time to gather her net and climb aboard, but she managed to do so without dunking either herself or her quarry in the water. The magicked cage popped open when she touched it, and she gently laid the birds inside, making sure to keep them cuddled up together the way they had fallen asleep. She conjured a blanket to wrap herself in, and pulled her canteen and the last of the meat pies out of her rucksack.

“*Molly, love, take us home.*”

———

“{You look terrible, Doamnă Rose,}” Catalina said while Miranda huddled next the fire later that night.

“{How kind of you to notice,}” Miranda muttered. She did not bother to ask if Catalina had been successful as well that day. One look at the other woman’s cocky bearing and satisfied smirk was enough to answer that question.

“{You should go inside right now and shut all the flaps of your tent. This evil wind will be the death of you if you don’t.}”

“{I’m fine. The fresh air will do me good.}”

Catalina shrugged and sniffed, making it clear that she thought Miranda was acting like an idiot.
But she went into her own tent and returned a short time later with a mug of steaming tea. Miranda took this offering gratefully, comforted by the floral aroma.

“{Did you really defeat five pricolici by yourself?}” Catalina asked, joining Miranda, but taking care not to sit too close.

“{No. I had help,}” Miranda admitted. The tea tasted of jasmine and, oddly, asparagus, but it did take the edge off the pain in her throat. “{From my Englishman.}”

“{Domnul Weasley?}”

“{A different Englishman.}”

Catalina raised her eyebrows, but did not pry further. “{It is good that he was there to help you.}”

“{Yes, it was.}”

Miranda finished her tea and handed the mug back to Catalina, who took it with the tips of her fingers, muttering a spell under her breath that blasted the thing with a jet of cleansing fire.

“{You should go to bed now, or you won’t be able to move tomorrow.}” Catalina said bossily.
Miranda held up her hands in submission. “{You’re probably right. Thank you for the tea.}”

“{You’re welcome. I wouldn’t want you to die before I had a chance to kill you.}”

“{Likewise.}”

A wave of dizziness hit Miranda as she stood, and she picked her way carefully to her tent, trying not to let Catalina know just how weak she was at the moment. Against the Romanian’s advice, she left the window flaps wide open, and collapsed like a sack of potatoes onto the bed, fumbling with her boot laces. The Birds of Paradise slept peacefully in their gilded cage, and she was more than ready to call it a day.

When she had her feet free of her boots at last, she stripped off her outer layer of clothing, dropping the articles unceremoniously on the floor, and curled up under a pile of blankets. Her head was still spinning, but she pulled her cigarette case out from under her pillow in order to give report to her waiting Englishman.

SUCESS, she tapped

The reply came almost immediately:

WELL DONE I DONT SUPPOSE YOU COULD SPARE ME AN EGG OR TWO

Always the Potions Master he was. She sent:

WHAT THE IELE DONT KNOW WONT HURT THEM I WILL TRY THE BIRDS DID NOT GO QUIETLY AND NOW I AM GETTING A COLD
He helpfully pointed out:

YOU REALIZE THAT THERE ARE POTIONS FOR THAT

She complained:

UGH I HATE PEPPER UP POTION IT TASTES LIKE OVER SPICED SEWER WATER

He persisted:

THERE ARE OTHER OPTIONS

She countered:

NONE OF THEM WORK ANY BETTER THAN NOMAJ REMEDIES MY COLDS LAST SEVEN TO TEN DAYS NO MATTER WHAT I DO I WOULD RATHER SUFFER THAN DEAL WITH THE TASTE AND THE SIDE EFFECTS OF A POTION

He replied:

UNFORTUNATELY I HAVE NO SPARE TIME AT THE MOMENT TO PROVE YOU WRONG BUT YOU ARE WRONG

She rolled her eyes and sent:

YOU ARE THE MOST ARROGANT MAN ON THE FACE OF THE EARTH

He qualified:

I SIMPLY WISH THAT YOU WOULD TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF
This soothed her rising temper and she pointed out:

SAYS THE POT ITS JUST A COLD I WILL BE FINE

By now she was shivering, even in her cocoon of blankets. She sighed and added:

I MISS YOU

She could picture the hint of a smile softening his face when he responded:

OF COURSE YOU DO I MISS YOU TOO.

Sometime during the dark hours of the night, Miranda jerked awake, snatching her wand from its place beneath her pillow and sitting up so quickly that her feverish head started spinning again. She scanned the room for the disturbance that had pulled her out of sleep, but saw nothing besides the slumbering birds in their lonely cage. Her teeth chattered as she blew out her breath, and she pulled back her soaked sheets in order to use a drying charm on them. The night breeze wafted through her window, chilling her further. Deciding that Catalina might have a point about the ill effects of night air on a fever, Miranda made to close the window flap. When she tried to stand, a wave of dizziness swept over her, and she sat down hard on the bed.

“It’s a good thing I found you two yesterday,” she grumbled to the captive birds. “I’ll be in no condition to do much of anything tomorrow.”

With a listless sigh, she cast the drying charm over her own clothes, and waited for her head to stop
spinning that she might make another attempt to close the window. Before she had quite regained her bearings, the little will ‘o the wisp that had led her to camp zipped into the tent and zigzagged around her. She had the fanciful notion that it was trying to give her some sort of sympathetic gesture, and she smiled in spite of her discomfort.

“Hello, friend,” she said. “What can I do for you?”

It didn’t speak to her in words, but she hadn’t expected it to. Instead, it hovered in front of her, shimmering and sparkling, and then darted over to the cage.

“I’m very sorry, but I can’t give those to you. Is there anything else?”

Even as she said these words, she found herself rising from the bed, no longer dizzy. She joined her fairy visitor at the birds’ side and knelt by their cage, considering the request that the wisp made without speech.

“Well,” she said slowly, already opening the cage to comply, “if it’s only that, I guess it would be alright. I expect they grow back, after all.”

Without taking any more time to consider, Miranda deftly plucked a feather from each of the birds. Neither stirred, and the wisp started flashing and pinging around the tent with excitement. She closed the cage and held the feathers up to the wisp, which grew until it engulfed them. The feathers disappeared from view, and the wisp shrank back to the size it had been before. Now heavy with exhaustion, but no longer chilled, Miranda slumped back to bed and pulled the dried covers around her. The wisp flitted down and brushed her cheek in what could only be called a fairy kiss, and she fell asleep easily, untroubled by fever dreams.
“I come bearing gifts to the world’s crankiest cold sufferer,” Charlie said the following Monday. He had been looking in on Miranda for almost a week now and, while the worst of her illness had passed, she was still a sight to behold.

“If it’s more Pepper Up Potion, I don’t want it,” Miranda croaked out. She was curled up in the armchair by the wood stove, surrounded by crumpled handkerchiefs, half-drunk cups of cold tea, and re-read novels.

“I’ve given up on that,” Charlie reassured her. “This came for you by way of my Dad.”

He set a package wrapped in brown paper on the table in front of her, and then bustled about her tent, cleaning up the handkerchiefs and various other items that littered the floor, and digging a pot out of the cabinet by the wall.

“Still ignoring Doamnă Lupul’s advice about the windows?” he asked as he set the pot on the hob and produced a jar of chicken soup from his robes. He emptied it into the pot, and stirred it while it heated.

“I don’t care how many Romanians say fresh air will kill me, I’m leaving the windows open,” Miranda replied, pulling the package onto her lap and untying the string. “I found the birds, didn’t I? I don’t see why I should have to let Doamnă Lupul boss me around any more than she’s already doing.”

“I’m just teasing you.”
She blew her nose and relented. “How are the birds anyway?”

“Resigned. They sang the saddest song I’ve ever heard for the first few days they were at the Sanctuary, but they seem to have acclimated themselves to their new home.”

“I hope they will be alright when I take them to the Iele.”

“They’ll have to be. But I wish we didn’t have to hand them over.”

“So do I.”

Miranda opened the package and found a bundle of linen and a scroll inside. She unrolled the parchment, recognizing Rachel’s neat handwriting immediately.


Dear Miranda,

Happy Birthday my dear! I have been told that you were successful in your recent venture, and so congratulations. I have also been told that you are ill. I hope that you are resting and taking your potions, although I doubt that you are. Please get well quickly, as I think that the baby will be coming sooner rather than later. I look and feel like a beached whale, and the baby is kicking me all the time. I guess that they make the end of pregnancy this uncomfortable so that you’ll be willing to go through labor.

Aaron sends his love and also the latest Robert Jordan novel. Do take care of yourself. We can’t wait to see you.

Love,
“Well, what is it?” Charlie asked as he ladled soup into a bowl for Miranda to ignore.

“It’s from a friend. It’s my birthday.”

“Is it really? Happy birthday! I wish I’d known, I’d have made you a cake.”

“I wouldn’t have wanted to eat it if you had. Thank you for checking in on me, though. I know I’m terrible company right now.”

“It’s fine. You’re not as bad as my Mum is when she’s sick. But let me know when you’re feeling up to coming back to the Sanctuary. Old Balaur misses you.”

“You mean he misses tossing me.”

“It’s the same thing.”

Miranda ignored the soup and untied the cloth. Inside was the promised novel, and a large glass bottle containing a dark amber liquid. It was so lovely that she pulled it out immediately and held it up to the light, which made it glow warmly. The label on the front of the bottle was written in a
spidery scrawl, as was the letter waiting for her in the bottom of the box.

Miranda—

Apparently I did have time to prove you wrong. One glass of this twice a day for the duration of your cold may not cure it, but it will enable you to go about your business untroubled by the illness. I believe that you will find both the taste and the side effects tolerable. You're welcome.

—Severus

P.S. I expect to have your actual present completed by the time you come for the baptism of the Lee child. I trust you will forgive its tardiness. Happy Birthday.

“Charlie, would you mind getting me a cup?” Miranda asked.

Her curiosity was piqued, although she doubted it would be much better than any other potions she’d ever had. She was already composing a smug rebuttal to Severus's claims as Charlie handed her a glass and she poured a measure of the potion into it. It smelled like lemon balm and springtime, and even the scent of it opened up her breathing passages slightly.

“Aqua Vitæ Number Seven,” Charlie remarked. “I’ve never heard of that.”

“Me either. It’s a custom blend, I think.”

She put the cup to her lips and sipped cautiously, bracing herself for nasty flavors and vile reactions, but neither happened. The potion was pleasantly cool, like well water, and thick like honey. It tasted of lemons and elderflower, with a hint of mint after she swallowed it. Within
seconds, a warm feeling of well-being unfolded in her stomach, spreading quickly through all her limbs. It soothed her throat, cleared her sinuses, unfogged her brain, and cured her bodily aches. When the sensation worked its way to her skin, it set all of it tingling briefly, the way Severus’s hands and lips did, and she could not help laughing with delight.

“I hate it when he’s right,” she said. “It makes him insufferable.”

“Who’s that?”

“Just a friend.” Her appetite finally asserted itself and she tucked into the soup.

“You know,” she said around mouthfuls, “I think I might be up for a Balaur ride today after all.”

Chapter End Notes

In Romanian folklore, a Spiridus is a sprite something like a will ‘o the wisp.

I had a lot of fun with the spells in this chapter:

Raasta, is Hindi for “way.” This spell creates a path through uncut woodland without hurting any of the flora or fauna it affects, making it both environmentally friendly, and useful for hiding your tracks. The word to cast it was inspired by the quote “Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints, kill nothing but time.” from The Yard by Aliyyah Enaith. Many thanks to Shreya (and her mom) for helping me figure out an appropriate Hindi word!

Miskawew and Poni-nokusiw are Cree for “find” and “disappear” respectively. I found them in the online scan of an 1874 French-Cree dictionary.

The Molly Brown is named for the American socialite who survived the sinking of the Titanic. I did my best with the nautical terminology, land-lubber that I am.

The Robert Jordan novel in question, A Crown of Swords, was not actually released until 15 May 1996, but I’m sure that Aaron has some connections that got him around that little problem.
Severus paused at the top of the steps leading into St. Thomas’s Church and exchanged a glare with the green copper head of a wild man that stood guard over the door. He tugged at the sleeve of his dark gray suit, agitated that it was not nearly long enough. In spite of Mr. Frost’s insistence that Muggle clothes became Severus far better than the ‘damned clerical dress’ that was his usual attire, Severus hated wearing them. They reminded him of all the days of his childhood that he had spent in clothes from Cokeworth Priory’s charity bin that had neither matched nor fit. It wasn’t as though his father had been unable to afford proper clothing for his son. Tobias Snape had never paid for anything that he could get for free. And he had been very good at getting things for free. Ever since Severus had attained his majority, he had taken all of his clothing, magic and muggle alike, to Mr. Frost, Cokeworth’s venerable tailor. The man was free with his opinions about Severus’s sartorial sins, but he did good work and he was far more affordable than Madame Malkin’s or Twilfitt and Tatting's in Diagon Alley.

But the christening of the Lee child was to be held in this Muggle church, and so Muggle clothes it had to be. The brass knocker dangling from the wild man’s mouth was rough and heavy in Severus’s hand, and he was once again plagued by the indecision that had been troubling him all afternoon. A fit of good humor had addled his brains after his pleasant excursion to Romania, and he had accepted the Lees’ invitation to the event. He hated changing plans once they were made but, the closer the actual day came, the less his mind dwelt on Miranda and her smiles, and the more it dwelt on everything that could go terribly wrong. Being caught in a church with his Muggle-born lover and a slew of Muggle-loving purebloods would not do much for Severus’s precarious reputation among the Dark Lord’s minions. Not that it was terribly likely that any of those minions would cross his path today in this church or at the Embassy afterwards. He had gone to Spinner’s End to change after his classes, rather than risk leaving Hogwarts dressed as a Muggle, and had lost some time taking a circuitous route from Spinner’s End to St. Thomas’s in an attempt to ensure he was not followed. Beyond going home now and forgetting the whole thing there wasn’t much else he could do. With a sigh that was equal parts irritation and resignation, he jerked the ominous door open and took his decision.

“Bless my soul, Severus, you did come!” exclaimed Molly Weasley in a loud whisper.

She appeared from the shadows of the dimly lit church. It was late afternoon on a lethargic, cloudy day, and the flickering candles grouped around various pictures and statues provided more light
than what managed to filter in through the windows. For a terrible moment he was sure that she was going to attempt to embrace him, but thankfully she stopped short and her outstretched arms dropped to her sides so that her hands might fidget with her bag. She looked a mess, her dress a clash of patterns and colors that had no business being seen in the same room, let alone on the same person. There was a reason that Severus stuck to black and gray.

“Molly,” he said shortly, barely inclining his head to her.

“It’s so good to see you somewhere outside of a meeting about You-Know-Who or a meeting about one of my children making trouble,” she went on bravely.

“Indeed.” Merlin, how long was this tête à tête going to last? “I was under the impression that Arthur would be here as well.”

“He should be along any minute once he finishes up at the Ministry. Did you have a nice day at school?”

“Not particularly.”

“That’s a shame. I hope it wasn’t one of my children’s fault.”

“No more than it is any other day.”

“Aren’t Aaron and Rachel lovely people? They’ve come by for dinner a few times and it’s so sweet to see a nice young couple right at the beginning of starting their family. Makes you nostalgic,
doesn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

Her eyes widened and she started laughing. “How silly of me, of course you wouldn’t know. Yet. Arthur tells me you have a friend that you’ve been hiding from everyone and that she’s quite a catch. Maybe you will know before too long.”

Severus was starting to feel dizzy from Molly’s chattering and, worse, the back of his neck was getting hot the way it did when he was particularly embarrassed. He had a strong desire to turn up the collar of his coat and he wished that he had left his hair down instead of tying it back. All of his usual masks were gone in these wretched Muggle clothes, so he made do tugging at his sleeve and glaring at his companion.

“I hope that Arthur was not remiss in explaining to you the dangers both to Miranda and to myself if you were to repeat that nonsense anywhere, even to our allies,” he said coldly.

The effect was instantaneous. She stopped laughing, the smile fell from her face, and the intelligent woman who sometimes hid behind the facade of the doting mother revealed herself.

“I understand completely,” she said seriously, putting a hand on his arm. “And while I’m sorry that things have to be this way for you, I am happy to know that you find other things to do with your time besides disciplining students and risking your neck. Your secret is safe with us.”

She gave his arm a brief squeeze that he supposed she meant to be consoling, and released him.
“I am aware that you and Arthur are capable of keeping a secret,” he allowed.

They lapsed into a silence that lasted long enough for her to return to fidgeting with her bag and him to wonder if he would fray the hem of his sleeve with tugging on it. He would have been perfectly happy to remain silent until the others arrived, but he was concerned that Molly would not allow such a thing to happen. In an effort to avoid speaking any more about his friend, he attempted to think of some topic of conversation, but neither magical tactics nor the behavior of potions students seemed quite the thing for the occasion.

“How did you meet her?” Molly asked abruptly, returning to the unfortunate topic.

Severus could feel his eyebrow start twitching. “By the caprices of fate.”

Thankfully he was preserved from having to continue that explanation by the noise of the door opening and the arrival of the rest of their party. Both he and Molly turned at the sound, perhaps equally grateful to be rescued, and Molly was halfway across the church to meet the group before Severus could blink. Amidst the tumult of embrace, introductions, and the crying infant, Severus took the opportunity to drift up the aisle, making a show of studying the stained glass pictures in the windows as he worried the hem of his sleeve. The sun outside made a feeble attempt to break through the clouds, and the rich colors of the glass responded with a pleasing glow. Judging by the obscured, but undressed figures and the riot of animal and plant life, it depicted the Garden of Eden. He busied himself picking out the various flora in an attempt to ignore all of the doubts that were creeping to the fore of his mind.

“You look nice,” Miranda said, her light step coming to a stop next to him.

She was near enough that he could feel the warmth of her body, but she did not attempt to touch him. He looked from the window to her and, from the blush that panned her cheeks when he did, he rather suspected that his own face was betraying how pleased he was to see her.
“And you appear to have recovered from your illness,” he replied.

“Now, I already admitted you were right. I don’t think I should have to keep stroking your ego.”

“But it makes me so agreeable when you do.” Her flaring temper amused him, as usual, and he could not deny even to himself that at that moment he didn’t give a damn if all the Death Eaters in the Dark Lord’s army burst into the church and caught him.

“I don’t think you’d know agreeable if it bit you.”

“Fortunately I have you to explain these things to me. And perhaps I merely commented on your appearance in order to admire it.”

This won him a smile, and, as the others were busy settling the child and speaking to the priest, he allowed himself the indulgence of returning it with one of his own. The sun outside the window continued its mission to break through the clouds, drawing his eyes back to the image.

“There is a fascinating mix of plants in this window,” he observed.

“Is there?”
“Yes. There are chamomile and comfry tangled together with belladonna and cicuta. I had thought that this was supposed to be a picture of paradise, but perhaps it is some other strange, Popeish thing.”

“No, it is the Garden of Eden. But it’s before the Fall.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Before the Fall, all of the plants were helpful and benevolent. It was only after that some became deadly. Or, that’s what my brother Columba used to say.”

“I see.”

“I’ve always wondered what those sorts of plants were like before. What sort of good use they might have been put to.”

“Interesting question.”

Footsteps approached and a well-dressed but obviously sleep-deprived Aaron interrupted their conversation. His face was haggard enough that Severus decided not to glare at the new father when he gave Severus’s back a friendly slap.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to steal Miranda for a while, Severus. Thanks for being here,” Aaron said.
“Of course,” Severus replied.

He followed the Americans to a small alcove in the back of the church where a pair of clerics and the rest of the company were waiting. Severus fell back to stand behind Molly, the other extraneous person in this business, and his height enabled him to observe the rite from that spot. A pale but lovely Rachel cradled the infant who was all but swallowed up in a voluminous gown of satin and lace, and the efficient, owlish priest began intoning Latin texts with a rapidity that bespoke his understanding. At first Severus took the trouble to translate the words to himself but, before long, the rhythm and the quiet lulled him and his mind began to wander.

During his childhood, Severus had gone to service most Sundays, morning and evening. As Tobias had refused to darken the door of Cokeworth Priory, unless it was to receive some embarrassing form of charity that the Snape family did not actually require, this had been a welcome escape for both Severus and his mother from Tobias’s mercurial temper. Severus had found the morning service to be tedious, especially when it was interrupted by overlong and circular sermons, but he had found Evensong to be much more pleasant. There had been something about the way the afternoon light would break into the run-down church. It lit up the sad, neglected space, making it seem clean and otherworldly—almost magical. Sometimes, if they were lucky, Tobias would be gone when Severus and his mother returned home, and they would spend the rest of the evening together. Those were the times when his mother had given him the most attention, and he had held those moments close during the long hours and days when she had none to give. If he were asked, he would say that he had seen too much evil in the world to believe that God and Christianity were anything other fables and fairy stories, but he did remember the peace of those Sunday afternoons with something that bordered on fondness.

That same magical afternoon light broke through the clouds now, and came slanting in through the windows of St. Thomas’s, haloing the infant, her tired parents, and Miranda in its radiance. As Miranda held the child over the font, her face displayed an open, honest joy that made Severus’s breath catch to see.

“Magdalene Tokoyo, ego te baptizo in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti,” the priest murmured, pouring three measures of water over Magdalene’s head.
The infant blinked, as though surprised, but did not cry. Silence really was the order of the moment, and Severus found that he could recapture that fleeting feeling of peace that he had experienced during Evensong, far from his tormenting father. He could forget for a moment about the Dark Lord, and Albus, and the war, and Potter, and all the rest of it. He could just be.

“Eh, you’ll be in the same boat soon enough, Severus,” Aaron observed between puffs of smoke. “It’s only a matter of time before…”

“Before what?” Miranda interrupted as she came out onto the Lee’s charmed porch. It was a nice piece of spell-work, just worn enough to seem real. Aaron, Severus, and Arthur were seated in the group of well-used chairs that looked out over the white painted wood and onto a lawn that was a replica of Aaron’s childhood home. The false sun had set, and the sky was a hazy grey as the stars started showing their faces. There was even a breeze of sorts, and it was easy to pretend that they were not far underground. Aaron’s face was jovial and pink, Severus was giving the man a narrow glare, and Arthur was staring up at the slow-turning fan on the ceiling of the porch, apparently trying very hard not to laugh. Miranda raised her eyebrows in order to give Aaron the ‘you’d better quit while you’re ahead’ warning.

“Oh nothing. Nothing at all,” Aaron hedged, offering Miranda a cigarette.

“No, thanks. I’ve been sent to collect Severus. Rachel wants to thank you for the present you gave to Maggie.”

“That would be preferable to continuing this conversation,” Severus said.
He rose silently and followed Miranda into the living room, both of them pretending not to hear the laughter that erupted from Aaron and Arthur as soon as they were off the porch. Rachel and Magdalene were snuggled together in the rocking chair and Molly was cleaning up the wrapping paper and dirty plates. Severus’s offering was currently floating above the sleeping baby; a rotating mobile of animated figures on silver strings. The figures went about a soundless play of a young woman slaying a sea serpent at a stately pace.

“Severus, thank you,” Rachel said, her tired face serene. “It was so nice of you to come and to bring this for Maggie. Wherever did you get it?”

Miranda could see the tips of Severus’s ears pinking and he cleared his throat before answering.

“I made it. You can change the scene as well, thus,” he explained.

He flicked the top of it with his long fingers, and the players transfigured into a new set. Now there was a young woman, flying up to the sky in a chariot of flowers.

“A nicely done piece of magic,” Miranda said, moved that Severus had taken so much trouble. “I had no idea that you made children’s toys.”

“It is not my habit but, as I did make one for Draco Malfoy on the occasion of his christening, I thought it would be acceptable to do as much now.”

“Draco Malfoy’s christening?” Molly asked. “What was that like?”
“Obnoxiously loud and insufferably crowded. Not at all like today.”

“I assume you didn’t put scenes from Japanese fairy tales and the Tenchion Draco’s mobile,” Miranda said.

“No. Constellations. I thought it best not to depict the Miss Lee’s actual namesake. Rachel, I have no idea why you would choose to name your child after a woman who was murdered by being hung upside down in a vat of refuse.”

Rachel laughed. “Catholics sometimes make little sense to people who aren’t Catholic. But there are many martyrs with more gruesome deaths.”

“Besides,” Molly added, “you invoke a martyr to prevent whatever happened to them from happening to you.”

“It still seems macabre to me,” Severus insisted.

“It’s important to give expression to all sides of the human condition. And Magdalene is a lovely name,” Miranda countered.

“I never said that it wasn’t,” Severus protested.

“I’m afraid it will be a while before I’m able to finish the translations of that potions book I mentioned,” Rachel said, stifling a yawn.
“I quite understand. I look forward to when you are able to complete it, but I am aware that you have other demands on your time,” Severus said. “I do not have much reference for judging, but you appear to have produced a fine child. She has all of her limbs and seems able to eat and cry.”

“Why thank you. She cries especially well at night.” Rachel was not able to stifle the next yawn.

“So I see, I shall take my leave of you then, before those festivities start. Thank you for your hospitality.”

“And thank you for being here. I’m sure I’ll be back to normal one of these days. Maybe three years or so from now.”

He gave Rachel a short bow and Miranda accompanied him out of the room, amused by his gruff kindness to Rachel. But Rachel was a woman who made it easy to be kind. When they reached the door, his eyes darted about the room briefly. It was empty, and his kiss was surprisingly tender, but his expression when he pulled back was dark, as though he were thinking of something unpleasant.

“You are staying here tonight, correct?” he asked.

“I am. Tomorrow night too. Maggie doesn’t like to sleep unless someone is rocking her or walking with her, so I’m going to take a shift to give Aaron and Rachel a chance to rest,” Miranda replied.

“And you are meeting with Lucius tomorrow?”
“Yes. But don’t worry, Arthur will be there right on time to escort me away.”

He frowned and started tugging at the sleeve of his suit coat. “You should know that Lucius is fully aware that Black is not in Romania. He doesn’t know what you are doing there, but he is certain that whatever it is, it is not his bidding.”

Ah, that must be why Severus was acting so seriously. Miranda was touched by his concern, but she’d been handling Lucius Malfoy for the better part of a year now. She could take care of herself.

“Well, the Aurors are doing a pretty good job of watching my family. It may simply be time for me to cut ties with Malfoy. We’ve had a good run.”

His frown deepened and he traced her cheek with his finger. “Do try to be careful tomorrow. Lucius is not to be trifled with.

“I know. You warned him about me months ago.”

“I did, but sometimes warnings seem to go in one of your pretty ears and straight out the other.”

“Why don’t you come by tomorrow evening for supper? You can sit up with me while I rock the baby and we can hold hands like a pair of love-sick teenagers.”
This wrung a smile out of him, and he replied haughtily, “I have never been a love-sick teenager. I was born at the age of forty-five. But I will come, if only to hear about the afternoon’s disaster.”

“And to give me my birthday present,” Miranda reminded him.

“Yes. And to do that as well.”

“Good day, gentlemen, it’s been entertaining. Papa will send over the exit papers tomorrow,” Miranda said as she sailed out the door, shutting it in her former employers’ sputtering faces.

Her heart was pounding in triumph, although she knew Papa was going to give her an earful. He’d understand though, he’d been at this long enough to know when a job was sour. Albus might be angry as well, but he’d just have to deal with it. She was doing enough for the Order in Romania that he’d better be happy with that.

The meeting had been unexpectedly short and Arthur wasn’t there waiting for her. The lift was out of the question at the moment, for she was far too jittery to be that confined. The stairway was deserted when she reached it, and her boots echoed off the ceiling as the torches flared to life and helpful signs on the walls chirped at her to watch her step. She was nearly to Arthur’s floor when she heard another set of footsteps on the stairs above her. Their rapidity and haughty sound told her they were Lucius’s. She quickened her step, but did not run, and she was not surprised to find the door leading out of the stairway locked. With a bored expression fixed on her face, she turned to watch Malfoy descend the final flight of stairs.

“A moment, Miss Rose,” he sneered.
“Mr. Malfoy, I think we’ve said everything we need to say to each other. I’m no longer in your employ, you may wash your hands of me and my behavior.”

He halted an arms length from her and his height forced her to look up at him.

“I don’t think you understand,” he continued. “You are meddling in forces that are far larger than Cornelius Fudge and the Ministry.”

“I think I understand plenty.”

“All the more reason that you should watch your step. You are still my pet to do with as I like.”

Only the knowledge that whipping out her wand and hexing Lucius within an inch of his life would bring down a host of Aurors and mountains of paperwork kept Miranda from doing so.

“Mr. Malfoy, I think we both know that I can kick your ass any time, anywhere. When you’re ready for a rematch, you just let me know and I’ll be happy to oblige you. And this time let’s say that the Unforgivables are on the table from the start. I think a nice round of *Crucio* followed by a quick *Avada* is just what you need.”

He grabbed her chin the way he had the night of his Christmas party, and Miranda decided she’d had enough. The way that his face blanched in surprise and confusion when the barrel of her pistol hit his chest was worth all the trouble of the day. He stared at it stupidly, and then let go of her chin to retreat a few steps.
“That’s better,” she said. “Now if you have anything further to say to me, why don’t you do it from right there.”

“If you think that Severus won’t hand you over when the time comes, you are sadly mistaken. And he will be the first in line to torture you when it comes to that,” he said, his voice shaking with rage.

She laughed harshly. “Do you think you’re telling me anything I don’t already know? Of course he’ll hand me over. I’m nothing but his plaything. All American women exist for the sole purpose of fulfilling the sexual fantasies of repressed Englishmen.” She cocked the gun and aimed it at his nether regions. “Go back upstairs, Mr. Malfoy. Before I get really angry.”

“You wouldn’t dare! We’re in the middle of the Ministry of Magic!”

“You sure you wanna try me? I do this for a living. I can get rid of you in two shakes of a lamb’s tail, and no one will know where to start looking for the pieces.”

Lucius glared at her, but continued his retreat. When he reached the landing, he turned and started stomping back the way he had come. The door behind Miranda unlocked itself, but she kept her gun in her hand until she was safely through it. Just as she was closing the door, she heard Lucius’s parting shot from above her.

“I am going to thoroughly enjoy your demise, Miss Rose. I promise you that.”
“Sit down, Miranda, your pacing is making me dizzy,” Severus complained that evening. He was sitting on the sofa in the Lee’s homey living room, reading Coleridge aloud while Miranda paced with the sleeping Lee infant in her arms. The constant movement was distracting Severus from sorting the many thoughts twisting through his mind into appropriate categories in a vain attempt to pretend that he was in control of the situation. He knew he must bring up a terrifying subject this evening, before Miranda returned to Romania, and he found that he would prefer a meeting with the Dark Lord to the current situation.

“I’ll try, but I’ll probably be up again in five minutes,” Miranda agreed. She lowered herself into the rocking chair smoothly and Magdalene remained asleep. After the two of them were settled, she added, “You should have seen the looks on Malfoy’s and Fudge’s faces when I quit. I’ve never seen that particular shade of purple.”

Severus snorted. Although he would rather not deal with this new complication, part of him did wish that he had witnessed the scene in the stairwell. It was not often that Lucius met someone willing and able to stand up to him.

“I suppose it was impossible for you to continue playing that game any longer. I wish that I knew why Lucius is so sure about Black’s whereabouts. The idiot must have left cover when he well knows he is to remain indoors at all times.”

“What’s Black like? I’ve been pretending to hunt him for so long that I feel like I ought to know him.”

“He is a disgrace of a wizard and I do not wish to discuss him.”
“Sorry. We can talk about something else. I hear you have a birthday present for me.”

Yes, the present. That was by far the more comfortable topic. He was more than willing to postpone the other, even if this show of sentimentality on his part embarrassed him almost as much. He cleared his throat and pulled a small black box out of his pocket.

Eyeing Miranda’s full hands, he said, “Perhaps I should do the honors.”

“Please do.”

As uncomfortable as he was, he could not deny the warm rush of pleasure that went through him when he opened the box and saw her reaction to the tear-drop filigree necklace that waited inside of it. A lovely line of pink spread over her cheeks, her lips parted in surprise, and her eyes became the soft, calm gray of the sky after a storm.

“It’s beautiful.” She smiled up at him and added playfully, “Although Mama would say I have no business accepting jewelry from men.”

“I assure you that this is purely a practical present.” He hung the necklace lightly around her neck so as not to disturb the infant. It was a handsome piece of frippery if he did say so himself. He’d passed it in the village near Miranda’s cabin several times before finally going back to purchase it. With a few well-placed charms it had become the perfect vessel for the real gift he had made for her.

“Oh? I see, there must be a potion inside of it. Is it a new one?”
“Correct on both counts. A Stasis Potion.”

“What does it do?”

“The next time you decide to get yourself maimed, you will drink it and it should keep you alive long enough for you to find further help.

“Should keep me alive? I don’t remember volunteering to be your test subject.”

“One of the hazards of keeping company with a Potions Master. I have tested it and it shows great potential.”

“Potential?”

“Being as you should only take it in a dire emergency, you will have nothing to lose should it fail to work. Of course, if you don’t care for it, you needn’t keep it. I am certain I can put it to another use.”

“No,” she said quickly, putting a protective hand over the pendant. “I love it. All of it. Thank you.”

“It was my pleasure.”
He leaned down to kiss her but, before he could make contact, the infant started fussing again, requiring Miranda to resume her pacing. Reluctantly, he reclaimed his spot on the sofa and opened the book. His agitation returned full force as he fidgeted with the pages without starting to read. Aaron’s off-handed remark from the day before had been plaguing him, as it had brought on the realization that he had been careless in the extreme. Carelessness was a trait that Severus despised and one that he could ill afford. Much as he dreaded the next topic of conversation, he knew that it was as unavoidable as it was tardy.

“You should keep reading,” Miranda said. “I think your voice was helping Maggie stay asleep.”

Best to get on with it before the infant started squalling again.

“There is something that I need to speak to you about first,” he began. It was good that he had left his hair down tonight. He could already feel his ears growing hot.

“If it’s about Malfoy, I know that you’ll hand me over to the Dark Lord if you have to. I understand.”

“That’s not at all what I was going to say. And I would not give you to the Dark Lord.”

“Yes you would. If your cover depended on it, you would do what you had to do.”

“I should think that I am clever enough to avoid doing that if at all possible.”

“I know that too. I just wanted you to know that I understand that it’s a risk.”
“Now that I have your permission to sacrifice you, would it be quite acceptable for us to discuss a more pressing difficulty?”

“More pressing? What might that be?”

“It has come to my attention that we have not been terribly cautious in our relationship.” Not his best opening.

“I’ve never been cautious in all my life. So?”

“I don’t think you take my meaning. I was referring particularly to the carnal aspect of our relationship.” She blinked and bit her lips, and he knew she wanted to laugh at him. “I mean to say...I am concerned that long term consequences may develop...or may already be developing....”

Mercifully, she interrupted him, although she couldn’t quite keep the laughter out of her voice. “Severus, are you asking me if I’m pregnant?”

He was almost pathetically grateful she’d said it for him. “Yes, I am.”

“It’s a little late to worry about that, don’t you think?”
Did that mean she was? “Be that as it may, there are plans that need to be made. I cannot think of a worse time for such an event, but that is all the more reason we should deal with it purposefully.”

“I see you have a plan.”

In an attempt to manage his discomfort, he stood and paced over to the fireplace, tapping his fingers irritably on the mantelpiece. The figures in the framed pictures perched on it were whispering and grinning at him, but his stern glare sent them back to minding their own affairs. His eyes drifted down to the merry jumping of the flames and he forced himself to continue.

“I always have a plan. There is no escaping from either your current obligation in Romania, nor can I leave my position at Hogwarts. I will explain the situation to Albus and I am certain that he can be persuaded to spare us a member of the Order to help you and to ensure your and the child’s safety. Once you are free of your blasted mission, you will return to your family in America and stay there until the problem of the Dark Lord is resolved. We should also get married sometime before the child is born, but I expect that you will have some opinions about how that is to be accomplished.”

“You’ve really thought this out, haven’t you?”

“I was remiss in not thinking of it before. I hope never to be so incautious again. It is highly unusual for me to be so careless.”

“Severus, stop. I’m not pregnant. And, before you ask, yes, I’m sure.”

“Ah.” God, he was an idiot. “Well. Good.”
“Did this have to do with whatever Aaron was teasing you about yesterday? For a diplomat, he can be pretty tactless when he’s sleep-deprived and inebriated.”

“His comments merely reminded me that I had not been cautious with regards to that aspect of our relationship. I could not recall ever seeing the necessary potions in your cabin, nor the ingredients for them. And, in any case, I would rather prepare such potions myself.”

“You didn’t see any of those potions because I don’t need them. I can’t have children.”

Her voice was light, but there was a strange undercurrent of tension in it. When he turned his gaze from the fire to glance at her, the mask of her smile reminded him of the one she’d shown him during that wretched exchange of insults at her cabin when they had first met.

“There’s no need for you to worry, you’re quite safe,” she went on. “We can be as careless as we like and there won’t be any mud-blood brats running around afterwards.”

“Don’t use that word,” he said, his brow furrowing.

“Call a spade a spade. Why else are you so relieved that I’m not knocked up?”

“I should think that it were apparent that now would be a terrible time to have a child. You are trapped by bond in a dangerous mission in Romania and I am bound to the precarious life of a spy.”
“It’s not because you don’t want to further pollute the Prince bloodlines?”

“When did I ever say that?”

She closed her eyes for a moment, her mask falling away. When she opened them, they were soft again, but with sadness, not with pleasure.

“You didn’t,” she conceded. “That was unfair of me.”

The sorrow in her eyes hurt him, and he came away from the fire that he might run his fingers over her dry cheek. She leaned into his touch, and the sweet smell of the balsam oil the priest had put on Magdalene’s head the day before filled his nose. Miranda held the infant tucked under her chin with a natural grace, the way she did everything. The pair of them made such a comfortable image that he felt irrationally disappointed he could not hope ever to see Miranda pacing by his fire, cradling a dark-haired child of their own.

“It is true that I have never desired to become a father,” he said, his eyes on Magdalene’s downy black curls, “but, if it had to happen, I would not be sorry that it was with you.”

The child began to stir and Miranda broke away to resume her pacing. He could not bring himself to look at her face after such an admission, and he was relieved that her voice was returning to its usual sanguine tone when she spoke.

“I…I could use a cup of tea, I think. Would you mind?”
“Not at all.” Relieved to have something mundane to do, he started for the kitchen. But he could not quit the room without his curiosity prompting him to say, “Miranda, I must ask why you are so certain that you cannot have children.”

“Just trust me on this. I don’t think you want to hear all the gory details.”

“No. I suppose I don’t.”

His thoughts were a tangled mess as he went into the kitchen and began the calming ritual of making tea. Methodically filling the kettle, setting it to boil by charm and measuring the tea leaves into Rachel’s white and blue teapot brought him back to earth. All the while, his instinct was pricking him, telling him that there was more to Miranda’s explanation, and he had the urge to continue digging until he uncovered what it was. He did his best to crush the urge and let whatever it was lie. Their relationship was quickly becoming confusing and more complicated than was at all prudent.

It was for the best that she would be returning to Romania tomorrow. Distance would help to put things back into their usual places. Their casual relationship was perfectly pleasing as it was. Best not to think of anything else.

Somewhere in his heart he knew this was a lie. He embraced it like a lover and poured out the kettle over the leaves.

Chapter End Notes
Belladonna is deadly nightshade and Cicuta is water hemlock.

Magdalene Tokoyo Lee is named for St. Magdalene of Nagasaki, who was brutally martyred in 1620 and Tokoyo, a young lady who killed a sea serpent.

Newly baptized babies are the best smelling creatures in the world.
“Avada Kedavra!” A shock of acid green light blasted from Severus’s wand, striking its target with a sickening finality.

Bile rose in his throat as he stared down at the crumpled body of the old Muggle. He forced himself to slow his breathing as the nausea threatened to overtake him. Most of the time he was able to avoid murder. Sometimes he was even able to prevent it. Killing had never been particularly enjoyable to him, even when he had truly been what he pretended to be now. It was so wasteful.

“Finished already?” Lucius asked from the stairwell leading to the crumbling basement of the warehouse that was to be this unlucky group of Muggles’ tomb. His face was obscured by his etched silver mask, and a smaller Death Eater was on his heels. “I left that one specifically for you.”

Severus shrugged, his stomach mostly settled. “He was a good tailor. I thought he’d earned a quick death. Bella took more than a few bites out of him before you threw him down to me.”

“I think you’re getting soft, Snape,” hissed Bellatrix’s voice from behind her mask. “It’s no wonder that you are going to be left behind when…”

“Bella,” Lucius interrupted, “go upstairs and help Vincent with the rest of the mess.”

She gave Severus a final glare before flouncing away, her shoes clicking noisily on the metal staircase. Lucius continued into the basement, avoiding the heaps of rubbish littering the floor. He glanced indifferently at the corpse and prodded it with the tip of his polished shoe. Severus continued to force himself to breathe slowly as the bile rose up again, worse than before. It would not do to lose control in front of Lucius, so Severus willed himself to think of anything other than the current moment. Perhaps because he had been so stern during the last month about forgetting the scene by the Lee’s fireside, it immediately came to mind. He did not bother to question it, he merely allowed the warmth and comfort of the thought of Miranda holding the sleeping infant to flow through him. Gradually his nausea subsided, and he held onto his memory like a dragon clings to gold.
“I’m sure it will come as no surprise to you that the time has come for you to deliver your little plaything to the Dark Lord,” Lucius commented.

“Has it?” Severus hoped that he sounded as bored as he meant to. He was glad that his mask covered the twitching muscle in his jaw. “I am rather busy at the moment. A jaunt to Romania to subdue her would be impractical.”

“No doubt you have your ways. And fortunately for you, you have until Thursday to complete the task.”

“Why Thursday?”

“That is my business. Your business is to do as you are told. I doubt I need to explain the consequences if you fail to do so.”

“I understand you perfectly, Lucius.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Be so good as to clean up down here before you leave. Best that this look like a Muggle crime for the time being.”

Severus inclined his head to his ambivalent friend and Lucius started back up the stairs.

He paused halfway to add, “I am sorry to deprive you of your whore and your tailor in such rapid succession.”

“Of the two, the tailor will be the more difficult to replace.”

Lucius laughed. “Truer words were never spoken. What a cold bastard you are.”

Severus waited until Lucius was gone before stooping to close Mr. Frost’s eyes. It was not lost on Severus that his neighborhood and his neighbors had been targeted tonight. He knew a warning when he saw one. Lucius must be smarting under Miranda’s humiliations of him more than Severus had thought.
Merlin, he hated his life.

Miranda dismounted easily and gave Balour a firm scratch just behind his purple, scaly ears. He snorted flames and rubbed against her appreciatively. She knew now just how to lean into him so that his affection wouldn’t knock her to the ground. It offended him when she stumbled under the weight of his mighty head. Although the second task was less than a week away, she felt they were more than ready to take on the mountain.

“Thanks for the ride,” Miranda murmured.

He nodded imperiously, and she waited politely until he had lumbered off for his lunch and afternoon doze. When he was out of sight, she started down the path to the locker-rooms and her own meal. As she approached the lake, she saw Charlie and another man coming around to meet her. Even from a distance, she could make out a long white beard and brightly colored robes. Miranda furrowed her brow. What was he doing here? She quickened her pace and confirmed that Charlie’s companion was indeed Albus Dumbledore.

“How was the ride today?” Charlie asked as they met.

“Good. I think we’re ready,” Miranda replied. “Albus, what a nice surprise. How are you?”

“Well, very well,” Albus said. “Charlie, thank you for helping me locate our wayward American. I will speak with you in your office soon.”

Charlie accepted this dismissal, although his face bespoke his curiosity, and he headed back up the path. Albus waved his hand and a pair of the rocks bordering the lake shifted into a pair of comfortable armchairs, complete with umbrellas to shade them from the noonday sun. They seated themselves and Albus produced a basket from his robes. A pair of table legs popped out of it and, when he set it on the ground between them, it opened to an inviting spread of ham, watercress, plum cake, and butterbeer.

“All this for me? What do you want?” Miranda said wryly as she helped herself to the bounty. Dragon riding did tend to give her an appetite.
“Merely a concession to the time of day,” Albus reassured her as he did the same. “You look well. I take it that the Romanian climate is agreeing with you.”

“It’s a lovely place. Although I won’t be sorry to be released from it when this is all over. I’ve never liked being trapped anywhere.”

“Trapped is such a strong word.”

“What would you call it? I’m under the equivalent of the Unbreakable Vow.” She took a sip of her butterbeer. “But if I can help those children, it’ll be worth it.”

“Yes, you are quite a helpful person, as I have seen. Even if you are also rather a headstrong one.”

“There’s good and bad in all of us. So, what’s happened? Do you need me to take another vow?”

“Not exactly. I don’t suppose that Severus has communicated with you about recent events regarding our friend, Lucius Malfoy?”

“Friend is not the descriptor I would have chosen. And no. I actually haven’t heard all that much from Severus since I visited in May. I assumed he was busy with the end of term troubles. But I take it something else is going on?”

Albus sighed. “Plum cake is a delightful confection, is it not?”

“It is.” Miranda raised an eyebrow suspiciously.

“Apparently Lucius is planning some large, and presumably unpleasant event that will occur this week on Thursday. He wishes for Severus to have you on hand to bring to Tom.”

“Tom?”
“Pardon me, Tom Riddle is the true name of Lord Voldemort. At least, that is how I knew him when he was a student. Old habits die hard.”

“It’s good to know that Hogwarts turns out such promising pupils.”

“Everyone comes from somewhere. Alas, I cannot take credit for some of Tom’s more, shall we say, impressive accomplishments.”

“I assumed as much. This is the first I’ve heard about Malfoy’s plans. Why am I hearing it from you and not Severus?” The hair on the back of her neck pricked her in warning. She did not like the direction this conversation appeared to be headed.

“I believe that Severus wishes for you to remain ignorant.”

“Then how is he going to introduce me to his other boss?”

“I believe that he does not intend to do so.”

Miranda frowned. The plum cake no longer tasted quite so good, and she pushed her plate away.

“This is a test, isn’t it?” she asked.

“A test for whom?” Albus responded. His face was pleasant and inscrutable, and his tone was incongruously cheerful.

“I’m guessing it’s a test for both of us. Malfoy and the Dark Lord want proof that Severus is on their side, and you want proof that I’m on your side.”

“I’ve always thought that you were a clever young lady.”

“Thanks.” She choked down another sip of butterbeer and twirled the bottle slowly between her fingers. “If Severus doesn’t bring me to Tom, as you call him, they’re going to kill him, aren’t they?”
“That is entirely within the realm of possibility. Of course, I do understand that Severus is not the most pleasant individual and he may not have secured your loyalty to the point that you would feel the need to walk into the lion’s den for him.”

Her loyalty? Good Lord, this was not exactly the moment that Miranda wanted to contemplate what Severus meant to her. And, in any case, she wasn’t about to discuss it with Albus Dumbledore.

“Albus,” she said, letting the edge of her anger into her voice, “let’s not muddy the waters with that kind of game. It’s beneath you.”

He smiled as one would smile at a child who has said something particularly adorable, but his eyes lost their customary spark. “I thank you for the reminder, my dear. Your relationship with my spy aside, if he were to be killed it would be a gross loss for the Order. I’m certain that you realize this. His information and the information that he may be privy to in the future could be the difference between victory and defeat.”

“I know.” She blew out her breath. “Should I just go to his rooms on Thursday then?”

“That would be for the best. Then you would be in a position to adapt to whatever is required of you.”

“Fine. I’ll be there with bells on.” She stood up quickly. “Have a good day, Albus. Thanks for lunch.”

He was beside her before she could storm off, his wrinkled hand on her arm to stay her.

“Please know that I do understand what I am asking of you. If it could be any other way…”

“Then it would be another way. I guess Catalina Dragnea will have to save the children herself,” she snapped.

“Perhaps it is not quite time to give up hope. Severus is a clever man and you are extremely resilient. All may not be lost.”
“I haven’t given up yet.”

“Very good. I shall inform Severus of your arrival as soon as I have finished meeting with Charlie.”

“No. I’ll tell him. Have a safe trip home, Albus.”

She shook off his hand and stalked back towards the mountains before he could say anything further. Severus was going to hate this but, as infuriating as Albus was, she was angrier at Severus for not telling her about the problem in the first place. It was her own fault that Malfoy wanted her dead. She’d known what kind of man her former employer was when she’d baited him and beaten him all over town.

If there was a lion’s den to walk into, she and Severus were going to walk into it together.

__________________________________________________________

“Coffee. You do like me,” Miranda said.

It was ungodly early on Thursday morning, and she was pleased to see that Severus had thought to have breakfast ready when she arrived. His sitting room had gradually been acquiring more furniture during the time she had known him. In addition to the arm chair and desk, the space now held a sofa, and a table just large enough for two. She poured herself a cup and started buttering some toast. Severus paced with his teacup, irritably straightening his already immaculate desk and the perfectly aligned books on his shelves.

“You should eat,” she chided gently. “I get the feeling it’s going to be a long day.”
“I do not require a nursemaid,” he snapped, but he did sit down and follow her advice.

“I take it Malfoy is still being coy about his plans for tonight.”

“Unfortunately. We shall have to think on our feet.” Severus stabbed a sausage with his fork as if the entire predicament were the banger’s fault.

“Well, assuming the worst happens and I get the pleasure of meeting the Dark Lord, I’ll just taunt him until he kills me. Then you won’t have to.”

He gave her a ghost of a smile and shook his head. “I believe that now I understand how you came to destroy your potions classroom. Subtlety is not your strongest quality.”

“Do you have a better plan?”

“I should hope so.” He pulled a small round box out of his pocket and pushed it across the table to her. “Keep this with you. There is a pill inside that contains the Draught of Living Death. When we are summoned, you will conceal the pill in your mouth. When the torturing begins, break it and drink it.”

Miranda eyed the box. “This plan didn’t work so well for Romeo and Juliet.”

“That is because they involved a third party. We do not have such complications. I am certain that the Dark Lord will find it most appropriate for me to dispose of you. Then we will simply have to hide you back in Romania the best that we can.”

She pushed her food around with her fork and sighed. “Severus, I don’t think you should take this chance. I knew what I was risking when I pushed Malfoy the way I did. If you’re caught…the Order will lose one of its best assets.”

Severus set his fork down and fixed his black eyes upon her. “I told you that I would not hand you over to the Dark Lord. I will thank you for not arguing with me about it.”

Miranda returned his gaze steadily. “Were you going to tell me about what happened last week at
all?”

“No.”

“So I have Albus to thank for cluing me in on everything.”

“I don’t believe that thanks are the proper sentiment for Albus’s interference.”

“Do you have anything you’d like me to do while I wait around for my impending doom?”

He sighed with resignation. “There are always flobberworms to be juiced if you wish to borrow trouble.”

“Borrowing trouble is my middle name. And I’m the world’s fastest flobberworm juicer.”

“Dare I ask why?”

“What do you think I did in detention all those years I was at Ilvermorny?”

“Ah. My sympathies to your professor.”

A bell chimed, warning that it was nearing time for classes to begin. He started for the door but, when he reached it, he stopped and returned to her side. Before she realized what he was about, he had pulled her to her feet and kissed her with a combination of tenderness and regret that made her heart ache.

“Miranda, it should not have come to this,” he said roughly.

“It hasn’t come to anything yet,” she replied, with rather more bravado than she felt. “Go teach. I’ll be here when you need me.”
He took the time to trace her cheek with his finger, and then he was gone.

“Miranda, put your boots on!” Severus ordered as he burst into the sitting room around dinnertime that evening.

His tone left no room for argument, and Miranda set aside her book and silently accioed her boots before bothering to ask why.

“Quickly!” he barked.

“I’m going as fast as I can. Can’t Malfoy and the Dark Lord wait two minutes?” she asked as she tied the final knot.

“It isn’t them. Dolores took Potter and Granger into the Forbidden Forest hours ago. They never returned and you are going to help me find them.”

Without further explanation, he whirled and strode back out the door so quickly that Miranda was hard pressed to keep up. They made a beeline from the dungeon to the forest, cutting through the strange twilight shadows heedless to whether or not they were seen together. Miranda could tell by the way that his jaw muscle was twitching that her companion was in no mood for conversation, which was just as well. She needed her breath to keep up with his long strides. Although she was not a slow walker by any means, he was a head taller than she was, and by the time they were half-way across the lawn, he had broken into an outright run.

The Forbidden Forest loomed ahead of them, ominously quiet. Only a few feet into the trees it was already full dark. Without speaking, Miranda and Severus split apart, both of them stooping to study the mess of footprints marring the ground. The light was so dim that Miranda drew her wand, and the doxies flocked to her, tugging at her hair and clothing in protest of a stranger’s magic. She swatted them away and continued her search, but the battered ground was not giving up its secrets willingly.

“It looks as though the entire school has been over this patch of dirt today,” she muttered.

Severus grunted, his face drawn with worry and anger as he searched. A quarter of an hour passed
and they were squatting shoulder to shoulder. He passed behind her, going over the ground that she had already covered, and she sat back on her heels. Instead of redoing the work he’d done, she let her eyes drift over the torn grass, slightly unfocused. For a time, patterns formed and faded before her until they suddenly snapped into place. She leapt forward, stopping over a trio of prints—two sets of trainers and one set of sensible heels.

“Bingo! I’ve got you. Miskawew.”

The rainbow colored light shot out of her wand, skipping over the trail and into the forest. She and Severus were hard after it, making far more noise than was prudent in their haste. The dark pressed in on them as they wove through the trees, but she refrained from casting Lumos. The creatures lurking here were sure to be more used to Severus’s magic than hers, and they could make due with the light from his wand. Best that they not draw any more attention than they were already doing.

They were both panting for breath when they halted ten minutes later in a jagged clearing. The rainbow light from the tracking spell fizzled away and Severus held his wand high as Miranda dropped down to explore the floor of the forest.

“Well?” he demanded.

“There’s too much damage to the ground,” Miranda explained, running her hands over the trampled earth. “Severus, there was a herd of centaurs here! They were everywhere. They wouldn’t have hurt the children, would they?”

“They usually leave the young in peace, but it is possible,” he replied grimly.

Miranda scoured the ground, patiently following the tangled hoof prints. The marks spiraled around and around, and it was difficult to make any sense of the stampede. Severus followed, keeping the light over her. When she reached the edge of the clearing she gasped in surprise.

“What is it?” he snapped

“There was a giant too! Good Lord, what goes on in these woods?” she breathed.

“They are forbidden for a reason.”
“So I see. And I had thought that Bigfoot was trouble.”

“Bigfoot?”

“Never mind. I’ll tell you later.”

The height difference between the forest floor and the giant’s footprint made it easy to distinguish, but there were still a host of prints littering each one. She searched methodically, hoping that she would not miss a trainer among the hooves. Severus’s eyes darted about the darkness, vigilant for centaurs or anything worse as he lit her way. She greatly appreciated that he held his impatience in check, but she knew that they were losing time. Wherever the children were, it was almost certain that they were in some sort of trouble.

“I see them!” she said at last. “Miskawew.”

The rainbow light took off again, and they ran after it. Miranda was starting to wish that she’d brought a broom after all, when the spell circled a new clearing and faded away. They began their tedious search again and, before long, their patience was finally rewarded.

“I see Potter and Granger, but Umbridge is gone.”

“She is not important. Where did they go?”

“They were joined by three, no, four other people. They look lighter than adults, but not by much. Miskawew.”

“I suspect their little friends must have escaped Dolores’s office,” he said irritably, watching the tracking spell skip between the twisted trees. “I shall have to see what damage they did to the members of my house when we return to the castle.”

The rainbow light circled the clearing twice and disappeared.
“What does that mean?” he snapped.

“It means they didn’t leave the clearing. Not on foot anyway.”

“Brooms then.”

“I’m not sure of that.”

She chewed the inside of her cheek as she traced one of the teenager’s footprints. While she didn’t think that they were deep enough to suggest that their owners had been carrying anything beyond wands, it made more sense that they would have gone off on brooms than anything else. She followed the tracks around the clearing once, twice, coming to no satisfactory conclusion. On the third circuit, her stomach lurched as she caught a whiff of something terribly familiar. She dropped to her knees, burying her hands in the earth and bringing a handful of dirt to her nose. Myrrh. Tentatively, she touched the tip of her tongue to the dirt in her hands. The taste of blood and aloe was unmistakable, and she could not stop the image of her dearly departed from flashing before her eyes.

“There were thestrals here too.”

Now that she knew what she was looking for, the flickering tracks of the ghostly creatures were obvious. She could see where they and the children had come together, and she could see where the children’s footprints had disappeared. There was a clear depression where the thestrals had pushed off the ground to gain the air.

“The children rode the thestrals out of the forest,” she said, astonished.

“That’s impossible!” he protested, pulling a mirror out of his pocket, even as he denied the reality of the situation.

“That’s what happened. I’m sure of it. But where would they have gone?”

He didn’t answer her, his attention was on the face in the mirror.
“Albus,” he snapped, “Potter has gone to the Department of Mysteries.”

Waiting was the worst part of any hunt. It made perfect sense that Severus could not possibly risk his cover by joining the Order at the Ministry, but staying behind might well drive the man insane. After the few moments it had taken him to disperse Bat Boogey Hexes and give his students a dressing down for allowing the missing members of the DA to escape, there had been nothing left to do but watch the minutes turn into hours. In an attempt to pass the time, Severus had decided it was necessary to undertake the annual purge and deep clean of the Potions room and supply closet. Miranda hadn’t argued with him, she had simply rolled up her sleeves and started scrubbing. Every half hour or so Severus would break something in the closet and swear under his breath. She wisely let him be.

Sometime in the small hours of the morning, she gave in to her rumbling stomach and excused herself to the kitchens. He didn’t acknowledge her errand, but she did take the trouble of bringing back a tray of roast beef sandwiches and a pot of tea for him. She set the sustenance on his desk, put a warming charm on the teapot, and went back to scouring cauldrons. The smell of the tea wafted through the room, drawing him out of the closet to irritably partake of it.

“It must have taken them hours to fly from here to London,” Miranda observed calmly. “There’s every chance that the Order was able to get to the Ministry in time to help.”

“I’m aware of that,” he replied tersely.

“This must be the big event that Malfoy was talking about.”

“Obviously.”

“Look, it’s not my fault that Potter and the others decided to go out on heroics. You don’t have to be sarcastic with me.”

Severus glared at her and opened his mouth to retort, but she never heard what his caustic wit had devised for her, due to some obnoxiously loud singing that began that moment in the hallway.

“Severus, Severus, Severus Snape!”
Looks like he’s dressed in electrical tape!

His nose is an uncircumscribable shape!

Severus, Severus, Severus Snape!”

“Peeves!” Severus roared, setting down his cup with a rattle and storming out the door after the naughty poltergeist.

Miranda laughed out loud, but she managed to get herself back under control by the time Severus returned. From the way he was fuming, it appeared that he had not managed to catch his tormentor.

It was impossible to resist. “Dare I ask the provenance of that ditty?”

He answered her with a black glare, but the laugh had rid her of her irritation. She glided over to him and traced his nose with the tip of her finger.

“I think your nose is perfectly circumscribable. It’s an aquiline nose, in fact. You probably have Roman ancestors lurking in your family tree somewhere,” she commented, placing a kiss on the end of his maligned facial feature.

He did not smile, but he did stop glaring and went back to his tea and sandwich. She curled up in his desk chair, tucking her legs under her and suppressing a yawn and watching him pace as he ate.

“This is exactly the sort of self-aggrandizing stunt I would expect from Potter. I should have known that he would not allow his betters to deal with matters,” he said bitterly between bites.

“From what you said earlier, the boy thought that his godfather was being tortured. I can see why he would feel compelled to do something.”

“He should have left it in my hands.”

She shrugged. “In his place, I would have done the same thing.”
“Merlin, woman. I should hate to think you capable of such stupidity.”

“I think we’re all liable to do stupid things when someone we care about is in trouble. Why do you think I’m here now?”

The change in his countenance at that observation was something remarkable. The angry mask fell away to display the fear and anguish that had been lurking beneath all night, and he turned away from her, leaning heavily on the doorframe of the supply closet.

“I haven’t been summoned yet. There is still time for you to leave.”

“And miss my chance to play Juliet? I’ve been waiting my whole life for this.”

“Be serious, Miranda. You know as well as I do that this plan is foolhardy at best.”

She contemplated his taut shoulders and rigid back. It had been longer than she could remember since she had thought about the future, and she’d been careful not to think about the startling revelation that he’d considered with pleasure the prospect of them having children together someday. It was entirely possible that her future would end tonight. But she couldn’t bring herself to be sorry that she had met her fascinating, infuriating lover. And she wasn’t sorry that she was with him now.

Pulling herself up from his chair, she crossed the room to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. He tensed under her touch, but she left her hand where it was.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said firmly. “I trust you.”

He froze for a moment at her words. Then a shudder went through his body, and he turned to her, pulling her into his arms and holding her tightly. She wasn’t sure exactly why, but she had the distinct feeling that she’d said something exactly right.

“Whatever else might be said about Peeves, he does think of catchy tunes,” Albus said as he entered the potions room, humming the ghost’s most recent song.
“Albus! What has happened?” Severus demanded. His mask was firmly back in place, and he released Miranda from his arms, stepping away from her.

“Is everyone all right?” she demanded at the same time.

Albus held up his hands, and Miranda could see that they were shaking slightly.

“All in good time. I only have a moment, as this is one of many meetings I must attend this morning. In short, Harry and the rest of the children are all fine. Lucius and his friends have been arrested and taken to Azkaban, all except for Tom and Bellatrix, both of whom managed to escape. Cornelius cannot deny reality any longer and will be publicly announcing the state of things shortly. And the Order came through mostly unscathed, save for one.” He paused and swallowed before continuing. “Sirius Black did not survive the battle.”

Miranda crossed herself automatically. “I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“Not as sorry as Harry is.”

“That poor boy.”

“Yes, Harry has been given more to bear than a child of his age should be given and I must soon add to the burden.” Albus mustered a smile that did not reach his eyes. “But do try to take some rest now. Severus, I suspect that none of your students will object to a free hour today in lieu of a potions lesson. Please join me this afternoon so we can discuss the day’s events more thoroughly.”

“That is, assuming Miranda and I are not summoned in the meantime,” Severus remarked angrily. “The Dark Lord will be furious with Lucius’s failure.”

Albus’s body seemed bent with exhaustion. “All the more reason for you both to rest while you can.”

With that, Albus withdrew before either Severus or Miranda could say anything further. When the older wizard was gone, Severus reached over to take Miranda’s hand, but absently, as though he were not quite aware of what he was doing.
“I will say that I could use a nap at least,” Miranda said. “Should we go to your rooms while there’s still the opportunity to do so?”

“Actually,” Severus said slowly, “I was thinking that a walk in the downs by your cabin would be a more effective aid to composing myself for sleep, if that is not disagreeable to you.”

“And watch the sun come up over the Channel?” she asked with a tremulous smile. “I can’t think of a better way to spend my last hours on earth.”

Friday afternoon found Miranda only mildly refreshed as she attempted to sort though the various stacks of papers scattered throughout the cabin. This was one of her least favorite chores, but she’d already cleaned everything that could be cleaned and she was in no state to be distracted by a novel. Severus had been in a foul mood when he’d left an hour ago to see Albus and she wasn’t sorry to miss that meeting. As the day dragged on though, her anticipation of being summoned grew exponentially. She almost wished that the Dark Lord would just call them already and get it over with.

A ping sounded in her ear and she jumped involuntarily as she felt the prick of the wards tripping. Her wand was in her hand in an instant, but when she saw who it was that had disturbed her, she threw open the door happily.

“Aaron! What brings you here?” she asked.

Aaron embraced her and leaned down to kiss her cheek. “I tried to get you through Charlie Weasley, but he said you were here. I thought I’d take the chance that you were home and not at Severus’s.”

“Severus is in a meeting with Albus, but he’ll be back later,” she explained as Aaron settled himself on the sofa. Just having her friend nearby put her at ease, and she filled the kettle, setting it boiling with a charm. “That still doesn’t answer my question. Are Rachel and Maggie alright?”

“They’re just fine. In fact, why don’t you and Severus come by for dinner, we’d love to see you. You won’t believe how big Maggie’s got since you saw her last.”
“It’s a deal, but what’s going on?”

“Robert just had a hell of a meeting with Cornelius Fudge. Thought you’d like to know about it.”

“Let me guess. Fudge finally admitted that Voldemort is back?”

“You are always stealing my thunder, woman,” Aaron complained good-humoredly.

“Sorry. It’s a specialty.” When the tea was black enough, she started pouring sugar into Aaron’s glass, stopping when she’d added two spoonfuls more than David had thought perfect. When the tea had submitted to the invasion of the sugar, she cast another charm to chill it to cellar temperature. She didn’t care much for sweet tea herself, but she had learned to make it for David in a fit of teenage affection.

“How did you know about it? Don’t tell me you were at the battle?” he asked, taking the glass she offered.

“No, I was at Hogwarts. But I did help Severus figure out that Harry Potter had gone off to the Ministry. And Severus got the Order to the Ministry in time for there to be a battle instead of a slaughter.”

“I’ll drink to that. And did you also hear that Lucius Malfoy is snug in prison as we speak?”

“I did. Good riddance.”

“Agreed. I feel bad for Narcissa though. She deserves better. And there’s that kid of his too. I can’t imagine what it’d be like being brought up by a man with that kind of sick view of the world. You’d have to be crazier than an outhouse rat to want to join the Death Eaters.”

Miranda almost choked on her tea, but she covered it with a smile. “I don’t know. People join extremist groups for all sorts of reasons.”
“They join them for a few reasons, all of them bad. And I’d find it hard to believe that they’d ever really get over it, even if they learned to act housebroken later. Look at Lucius.”

“Point taken.” She’d been fairly certain that keeping Severus’s former loyalties to herself was a good idea, and she was glad that she’d listened to that instinct. “Did you just come to gloat together?”

“Pretty much. And for your sweet tea. Rachel’s never been able to get it right. She thinks sugar and tea together are an abomination.” He finished his glass and started for the door. “I’ve got to head back to the Embassy, but I’ll see you and the fella later. Do you have any idea how much longer you’re going to be on this Romanian assignment?”

“I should be able to come back in October. Why do you ask?”

“Robert wanted to know. He’s got some ideas cooking and I expect he’ll want you to be part of it.”

“Do I want to be part of it?”

“With Robert, it can be hard to tell. But he’s at least worth listening to.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. See you soon.”

She kissed his cheek and shut the door after him. Severus was probably going to complain about going out, but she thought it would be better than staying in and driving each other crazy while they waited for her doom. If the Dark Lord was going to kill her in the next twenty-four hours, she’d rather spend some of them pleasantly.

The wild metal knocker of St. Matilda’s seemed to throb with life as Miranda pulled open the creaking door later that night. Dinner had been a welcome diversion, but she knew she was far too wired to go home yet. When her walk with Severus had taken them past the church that had witnessed such happiness the month before, she felt compelled to go in.
“Thanks for agreeing to stop in,” she said as they crossed the threshold. He grunted noncommittally and she left him to pace the back of the church alone.

Ever since she had been a little girl, walking into a church at night had sent a thrill of anticipation down her spine. Her brothers had not been shy about telling ghost stories to their baby sister, and more than one story had involved the spirits that supposedly haunted such sanctuaries. Upon entering the magical world, Miranda had met more than her share of ghosts, most of whom were perfectly decent folk. But something about encountering a ghost in a church still struck her as different. It was as though the veil between the worlds were thinner here, and legions of spirits and other beings were watching and whispering just beyond it. As she drifted up the aisle lit only by flickering candles, she felt that at any moment Sirius Black himself might appear from behind a pillar and give her his hand.

Her rambling led her past sober statues in their lonely alcoves until, near the transept, she found the perfect spot. There, set apart from the others, sat a charming carving of a young woman holding her laughing Son. Unlike graver representations of the Holy Child, Miranda was drawn to this playful moment and the honesty of the amused and exhausted face of the Virgin. She dropped a coin in the waiting box, lit a candle on the rack of sentinels sending prayers up to heaven, and knelt on the prie-dieu before the statue with her beads in her hand. Although she was not consistent with her prayers, she did try to pray them with her whole heart when she took the trouble.

Most of her thoughts tonight were on the late Sirius Black. Severus might be convinced that Black was the worst creature ever to crawl the face of the earth, but Miranda felt oddly connected to the unfortunate man. She’d spent almost a year trying to protect Black by pretending to work for his enemies. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she had thought that they would meet someday and laugh over her charade of a hunt like old friends. And the idea that he had left behind a lonely boy who had known so much loss already tugged at her heart.

As the smooth beads ran through her fingers, other faces appeared, calling for their own attention. Columba and David were never far from her mind when she thought of the dead, and she spared prayers for them even though she presumed that they didn’t really need them. A gust of wind blew through the church, making the candles sputter. She shivered and the superstitious thought occurred to her that death and sorrows come in threes. As the candle flames righted themselves from the assaulting breeze, she began fervently and selfishly praying that her Englishman was not going to be one of those three. This intention was on her heart until she finished the round and rose to join him and say good night to the church and its secrets.

“Are you quite finished?” Severus asked when she fell in next him.

“I think so,” she replied, her mind still on the living and the dead.
He shook his head at her. “I have no idea why you insisted on coming here.”

She shrugged absently. “I guess I wanted to say thank you that I’m still alive.”

“Those thanks may be premature.”

“Maybe. But maybe not. And I had a few souls on my mind that I thought could use a word.”

He smirked as they walked out of the church into the warm June night. The streetlights obscured all but the brightest stars and the light of the crescent moon was feeble in comparison to them.

“For a woman as intelligent as you are, I find it astonishing that you can be so superstitious,” he observed.

“I wouldn’t complain if I were you. You are one of the souls I mentioned. If you don’t need prayers, I don’t know who does.”

She was certain that he would have a snide remark to give her in return, and she was surprised when he took her hand instead and pressed his lips to it.

“I have never complained about you wasting time on me before. Far be it for me to do so now.”

An unceremonious crack broke the quiet of the woods, sending birds shrieking into the air. Severus stumbled, caught his balance on the trunk of one of the trees, and sank down to the ground, leaning his back against the rough bark. He hated apparating that soon after enduring the Cruciatus, but he would rather risk splinching himself than stay a moment longer than necessary in the Dark Lord’s presence. The man was a hyena. If he scented weakness, he would attack without mercy.

With a shaking hand, Severus fished the cigarette case out of his robes. He dropped it more than once before he managed to extract a cigarette and light it. One drag. Two drags. The smoke filled his lungs and the magic spread through his body, soothing the pain. The heat was unusually
welcome to him, warming him after the chilling effects of the curse. For a long while he simply sat and smoked, thinking of nothing at all.

Presently the cigarette case on his knee reminded him of his Barbarian. He had promised to inform her if the Dark Lord called him after her return to Romania, but he was tempted to let it be. All she could do now was worry.

The cigarette kept him company as he deliberated. In the end though, a promise was a promise, and he took pains never to make them idly.

I HAVE BEEN TO SEE THE DARK LORD

His fingers were slow at tapping, but he managed.

ARE YOU ALRIGHT

was the instant reply.

YES THE CRUCIATUS WAS LACKLUSTER TODAY HE MUST HAVE SPENT HIMSELF ON BELLA

WHEN DID HE CALL YOU

AN HOUR AFTER YOU LEFT

I AM SORRY I WAS NOT THERE

DO NOT BE SORRY HE DID NOT MENTION YOU AT ALL I THINK WE MAY HOPE LUCIUS TOOK HIS PLAN TO MURDER YOU TO AZKABAN WITH HIM

THANK HEAVEN FOR SMALL MERCIES ARE YOU SURE YOU ARE ALRIGHT

He shifted against the tree, trying fruitlessly to find a comfortable position.

YES I HAVE THE CIGARETTES AND IT IS NEAR ENOUGH TO EVENING THAT I WILL
USE THE OCCASION AS AN EXCUSE TO MAKE UP FOR LOST SLEEP

YOU WILL EAT SOMETHING BEFORE YOU GO TO SLEEP RIGHT IF ONLY FOR MY SANITY

He snorted, but capitulated.

I SUPPOSE BUT ONLY FOR THE SAKE OF YOUR SANITY THE LAST THING I NEED IS A MAD LOVER

YOU ARE TOO GOOD

DO YOU HAVE SUFFICIENT TIME TO FINISH PREPARATIONS FOR THE NEXT TASK

I AM READY DO NOT WORRY ABOUT THAT JUST WISH ME LUCK

He was worried, but not because he doubted her abilities.

YOU DO NOT REQUIRE LUCK YOU REQUIRE SKILL WHICH YOU HAVE

THANK YOU I WILL LET YOU KNOW HOW IT GOES

YES DO

He hauled himself to his feet and set off towards the castle, moving at a slow but determined pace. The pains he had taken during the previous month to put Miranda out of his mind proved useless now, and his thoughts were full of her. Trust was a gift that Severus found he prized above all others. It was a gift that he had rarely been given and a gift that he had been known to mismanage when it had been bestowed. He had neither expected nor hoped to receive such a gift from Miranda, and it had startled him as much as it had warmed him when she’d presented it to him with no questions or reserve.

As unexpected as it was, he found he wanted it the way he wanted air to breathe.

Chapter End Notes
Many, many thanks to Potionspartner for beta-ing this chapter and saving me from an enormous blunder!

I think that Thestrals would smell and (shudder) taste differently to different people, based on their experience and beliefs.

Peeves’s song was written by my husband, Mr. Zingarella. It was featured in my one shot, Mairi’s Ghost--check it out if you’d like to know the whole story.

The term “uncircumscribable” means “not able to be circumscribed” or “not able to draw a circle around.” It was used during the debates in the Eastern Church about whether or not God could be depicted in icons. The iconoclasts argued that God was “uncircumscribable,” or that one could not depict Him in icons, and the iconodules, argued that He could be depicted, most often as the Ancient of Days. Was that too much information? Anyway, Peeves is just using that fancy word here to make fun of Severus’s nose.

Miranda is praying the rosary with her beads. Catholics do all kinds of things for the dead.

Churches are totally haunted, but only by souls looking for prayers.
“You’re sure you didn’t bring anything besides the bag and the harvesting knife? No wand? No guns? No potions?” Charlie asked again.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Miranda answered patiently. “But I did bring a rope. Doamnă Lupul gave me permission for that.”

They were standing in the foothills of Moldoveanu Peak, studying its tree-spiked slopes and waiting for the first rays of dawn to come creeping over the horizon. Miranda had returned just in time for Sânziene, or St. John’s Day, as she knew it, and the second task. Although she’d spoken of it flippantly to Severus, the sight of the mountain towering above her made her shift from foot to foot in a buzz of nervous excitement. As she gazed up at the mountain in all its mist-crowned glory, it was clear that the time for practicing was past. If she fell today, she wouldn’t have Charlie nearby to put her back together again.

“You ate, right?” Charlie was sounding more and more like a nervous hen.

“Yes, I did. And I brought one loaf of sweet bread and a wedge of fresh cheese, just as I’m allowed. Do you think there will be any water up there, though?” Miranda asked.

“I honestly don’t know. But if there is, make sure you ask the fairy folk before you go grabbing any of it. I don’t want you thrown off the mountain before you get a chance to gather anything.”

“I’ll be on my best behavior.”
“And you’ve got the list memorized?”

“Loosestrife, Shooting Star, Alpine Avens, Alpine Bistort, Alpine Sainfoin, Lady’s Bedstraw, do you need me to keep going?”

“No, that’s fine. I know you’re ready. But stay calm on the way up. Balour likes you now, but if you act nervous he’ll get frustrated and toss you.”

She gave her coach a pat on the shoulder. “You’re not really helping me relax, Charlie.”

He finally cracked a smile at that. “I’m just trying to be nervous enough for the both of us.”

“Sounds like a plan. You worry, and I’ll stay calm.”

As the sky turned pink, the pair of them were shrouded by Balour’s shadow as he swooped overhead. He circled them thrice and landed more lightly than a creature of his size should have been able to manage. Charlie gave Miranda an encouraging slug in the arm and backed away slowly. He had done everything in his power to prepare her; she would have to do the rest on her own.

When Charlie had withdrawn, Miranda turned to face Balour with a stance both respectful and relaxed. She went down on her knees and touched her head to the ground before the mighty beast, and she could see approval in his massive golden eyes when she came back to her feet. With a firm step, she approached, giving him a good hard scratch just behind his scaly ears. When he was snorting smoke with pleasure, she gave him a final pat, and bounded up onto his back in two jumps, the way he liked. He gave her just enough time to hook her hands and feet into the chinks between
his purple scales before tensing his fearsome muscles and launching them both into the sky.

The morning air brought tears to her eyes as they sped up into the atmosphere. Before Miranda’s stomach had time to settle, they were above the tree line, leaving Charlie a tiny speck below them. Miranda kept her eyes on the horizon and her attention on moving with her mount. As long as she stayed in sync with the undulating rhythm of his flight, all would be well. He knew exactly where they were going and how to get there. All she had to do was stay out of his way and go along for the ride.

The moment she relaxed, she felt a ripple of what could only be reptilian laughter go through her companion, and he teased her with a barrel roll mid-flight. She let out a breathless laugh at the danger and the joy of it. Balour must be in a good mood today to make with such tricks. He indulged in a few more loop the loops, buzzing around the base of the mountain. Miranda had to mind her breath to keep herself steady as they flew. To her, a mere mortal, it seemed they were coming at the wall of rock far too quickly; but she did not want Balour to know that. Dragons were jealous beings, hoarding respect and trust as surely as they hoarded food and jewels. It would not do to have him think that she was lacking in trust for him today.

She needn’t have worried, for a hair’s breadth from impact, Balour shifted direction to bring them shooting up the sheer rock face in front of them. The wind was so loud on the ascent that all she could hear was its roaring, and the morning sun broke forth behind them, warming her back as they flew. While Balour expertly dodged the pines clinging to the mountainside, Miranda registered that a dark green streak was keeping pace with them on their flight, smaller than Balour, but quickly outstripping them. She didn’t have to look twice to know that Doamnă Dragnea was aboard, and she could not help but admire the other woman’s skill. Doamnă Dragnea appeared to have been born on the back of a dragon. Miranda might have learned enough to get by in the few months granted her for study, but Catalina and her beast moved with the type of synergy that only years of experience could bring.

The mountainside that they were chasing upwards abruptly dropped away, and Balour snorted in anger as he was obliged to circle the summit to allow his speedier rival pride of place. Catalina slipped gracefully off her dragon’s back, giving the creature a pat and sending him on his way. Balour growled and, as though the entire incident were Miranda’s fault, he landed barely long enough to buck her off his back before flying off, leaving a trail of black smoke behind him.
Miranda had not been prepared for this unceremonious leave-taking. She rolled over the ground, gaining speed as she crashed into Catalina and sent the two of them hurtling over the edge of the cliff. They bounced along the rocks, unfortunately tangled together, until they came to a halt on a narrow outcropping of stone; where they lay winded and motionless, dangling high above the forest floor.

“{Doamnă Dragnea, are you awake?” Miranda asked, perhaps half an hour later. The younger woman was sprawled out on top of her, and the ledge that held them so precariously was far too small for its task.

“{Yes,}” Catalina whispered.

“{Did you break anything?}”

“{I don’t think so.}”
Miranda raised her head and shoulders off the rock in order to get a better look at Catalina. As she did so, she became acutely aware of the ledge shifting under them. By the way that Catalina’s lower lip was trembling, Miranda suspected that the younger woman had also noticed their plight.

“{What do we do?}” Catalina asked in a small voice, so unlike her usual, confident tone.

“{Well,}” Miranda blew out a breath, trying to harness her racing mind. “{I have a rope. We can use it to climb back up to the top.}”

“{No!}” Catalina’s answer was vehement enough that it shook a few more stones from their perch.

Miranda’s voice became very smooth, the sort of timbre she used to soothe frightened horses. “{I’m afraid that’s what we have to do.}”

“{I can’t.}”

“{The dragons won’t be back until tomorrow morning and I expect that at least one of us will have to go to the bathroom before then. Besides, you just rode a dragon up here. If you can do that, you can do this.}”

Catalina’s lips twitched in spite of her terror. “{Dragon riding is easy. This is different.}”

“{I know it’s different.}” Miranda went on, taking the risk of moving enough to stroke Catalina’s cheek. “{But we’re going to do it, and we’re going to do it together. I’ll be with you the whole time. I promise.}”
Catalina swallowed hard, but acquiesced to the inevitable. “{I guess we have to try. Just...just tell me what to do.}”

“{I can do that. We’re going to take this nice and slow. In a minute, you’re going to scoot yourself off of me and as close to the mountain as you can get. And before you start, I want you to think of a poem or a prayer or a story or something. Make it a long one.}”

“{Why?}” It was almost funny how suspicious Catalina sounded. She must be getting her spirit back.

“{Because you’re going to recite it on the way up so you don’t have time to think about what you’re doing.}”

“{That’s the silliest thing I’ve ever heard!}”

“{Maybe, but it’s what you’re going to do. Are you ready?}” Catalina glared at Miranda, but nodded once. Miranda paused for the space of a breath and ordered, “{Scoot!}”

If she had been able to stand, Catalina would have reached the face of the mountain in less than a dozen steps. As it was, it took her more than a quarter of an hour to reach it. Fear restrained her movements to a snail’s pace, but that was just as well. Any time that Catalina made a larger motion, Miranda felt more of the ledge crumble away. When Catalina finally reached her goal, she leapt up to grip the rock until her knuckles turned white with the effort.
“{Good work,}” Miranda soothed. “{I’m coming after you. When I get to you, I’m going to tie my rope around both of us. I’ll have to work slowly, so why don’t you start reciting. It’ll help pass the time.}”

Catalina glanced over her shoulder, and Miranda thought the younger woman was going to vomit when she saw how small the ledge was. Snapping her head back to the rock face, Catalina muttered, “{I can’t believe I’m doing this.}”

“{Recite,}” Miranda ordered.

“{Fine,}” Catalina snapped back. She inhaled deliberately and began, through gritted teeth,

“{Where a mountain valley lies
Beautiful as Paradise
To a pasture green and deep
Came three shepherds with their sheep.}”

By the end of the verse, Catalina’s voice was angry, hopping from dark vowel to dark vowel in an irritated sing-song. Moving inch by painstaking inch, Miranda started to ease her rope from its place around her waist. Every time she shifted, she could hear bits of rock sliding into oblivion, and she hoped that the ominous sound was not reaching Catalina’s ears. She had no idea how long it took her to get the full length of the freezing rope in her hands, and she tried not to think about how much of the ledge was still underneath her. Closing her eyes, she gathered her magic into her hands and pulled a section of the rope away. She set the longer length on her belly and quickly tied the shorter part into a harness, and then she looped one end of the longer rope into a lasso. These tasks took long enough that she had to discipline herself to listen to Catalina’s ballad rather than let her thoughts spiral into the abyss.

With the harness and the rope firmly in hand, Miranda eased herself into a sitting position, only to feel the ground shift beneath her. Catalina stopped reciting immediately, and her eyes turned back to Miranda, wide and full of fear.
“{Keep on, you’re doing fine,}” Miranda reassured her.

Catalina’s voice came out in a squeak as she continued,

“{Whitest little lamb of mine
Tell to me that pain of thine
For three days, so mournfully
Crying, thou hast followed me}”

While Catalina tortured the verses, Miranda inched her way over and wrapped the harness around the smaller woman’s thin body. She deftly attached the harness to the climbing rope, and tied the free end of the rope around her own waist. When all was secure, she gazed up at the summit above them, looking for a likely tree branch. There weren’t many options and, before she could think over much about the decision, she took aim and hurled the lassoed end of the rope into the air. A sickening amount of ledge slid away while Miranda was willing the rope to catch its mark. It caught, she pulled it tight, and heaved a sigh of relief when she was at last able to roll to her feet and crowd Catalina against the rock face. Catalina’s breath washed over Miranda’s cheek in hot puffs, but the Romanian bravely kept reciting,

“{Shepherd, O my shepherd dear!}”

”{Alright,}” Miranda said, calmly interrupting the recitation. “{the next thing you have to do is take hold of the rope. Then you’re going to put your feet on the rock and start walking up the mountain. Use your hands and your magic to pull you along and keep your eyes on what’s in front of you.}” Catalina glared at Miranda, who quickly suggested, “{Pretend it’s the ground. I’ll be right here, holding the rope steady for you and I’ll climb up when you get to the top. And, whatever else you do, keep reciting.}”

Catalina nodded shortly and did as she was told, gripping the rope with white hands and laboriously dragging herself upwards. Her recitation continued, punctuated by gasps for air as she ascended.
“{If Fate wills I die today
In this meadow, thou must say
Bold to him of Hungary
Boldly to the mountaineer
That they lay my body here.}”

“Cheerful selection,” Miranda muttered at her post below. For someone who had presumably never climbed a mountain before, Catalina did well, tenaciously moving, hand over hand, foot over foot, not once looking up nor down. Miranda held the rope as still as she could and let herself follow the words of the ballad now, doing her best to ignore the shifting rock under her feet.

“{Say I wed a royal bride
Wooed of all the world beside.
Say that when our faith was given
A bright star fell out of Heaven.
Sun and moon stood holding there
A Marriage-wreath above my hair
Mountains tall were priests to me
Guests were pine and alder-tree
Torches were the flaming stars
Thousand birds my lute-players.}” Catalina’s voice transmuted the final word into a whoop of joy as she gained the top. For a moment, she disappeared from Miranda’s sight completely, collapsing on the solid ground. When she lifted her head to peer over the edge and call down to Miranda, her voice was shaking with relief.

“{What do I do now?}” she cried.
“{Unhook yourself and get away from the edge so you don’t fall again. I’ll be right up after you.}” Miranda called back.

“{Me fall? You’re the one who fell!}” Catalina protested as she disconnected her harness from the rope and disappeared again.

Miranda felt the new slack in the rope, and she put her foot up to kick off the ledge. Before she could get clear of her treacherous perch, the rock gave way completely. The rope slipped from Miranda’s hands, and she plummeted down, letting out an involuntary shriek.

“{Miranda!}” Catalina shouted.

“{I’m fine!}” Miranda yelled back.

And oh, she was fine. She was phenomenal! The rope around her waist had prevented her from being impaled on the the trees below, and she was suspended in mid-air, arms and legs outspread, the closest to unaided flight that she’d ever been. Brooms and dragons had their good points but this—this was like nothing she’d ever experienced. She laughed gaily as she caught hold of the rope again and swung herself back towards the mountainside. It had never been easier to gather her magic together, and as her feet hit the rock, she bounded upwards like a hind. In no time at all she had reached the top, still laughing, and wondering what she would have to do to convince Severus to let her try that flying potion.

“{You are insane!}” Catalina said as Miranda dropped down beside her.

“{You’re not the first person to tell me that.}” Miranda observed, impulsively throwing her arms around her companion. “{I knew you could do it! Well done, Catalina. I mean, Doamnă Dragnea,}” she corrected, quickly letting the other woman go.
Catalina gave her a hard look before breaking into a grin. "{Enough of that. After what just happened it’s Catalina and Miranda. There’s no help for it.}" 

"{I’m so glad,}" Miranda replied happily. 

"{I am too. But I’m still going to win, remember that.}" 

"{I will. Do you think there’s any water up here? I could use a drink after all that…}" 

Miranda’s voice trailed off as she finally gave her attention to the place they had fought so hard to reach. A meadow filled with a riot of color spread out beneath the trees, winding in all directions. The rich verdure grew close enough to kiss the snow that clung to the highest parts of the peak, and Miranda had to shade her eyes against the sun’s bright reflection even as she struggled to drink in the sight. Catalina pushed herself off the ground and shyly extended a hand to Miranda, who took it without hesitation. There was a hush over the peak, even the birdsongs were muted, and the women walked reverently through the green, unwilling to disturb the silence. It was evident that they were in a holy place. 

Remembering Charlie’s words, Miranda inwardly begged leave of the Sânziană to partake of their bounty before dipping her hand into the snow. Her hand did not wither, and she thought this was answer enough. When she tipped a frozen handful into her mouth, it melted instantly, flowing into her and healing all the pains and anxieties of the morning. That one drink quenched her thirst so completely that she wondered if she would ever need to drink again. She felt ready to take on a pack of pricolici all by herself, let alone spend the rest of the day in this Eden gathering wildflowers. 

"{Come,}" said Catalina, when the ladies had had their fill. "{Let’s finish what we came here to do.}"
“{I haven’t seen my brother since he was five years old. He was in the first group of children that we sent to the Iele,} Catalina said.

She and Miranda were sitting along the edge of the meadow, watching the sun set while they wove extra flowers into crowns to pass the time. Since their bags were full and their meals shared and eaten, there wasn’t much else to do but stall until it was late enough to fall asleep.

“{Why was he sent so young? I thought only the school-aged children were in danger of being taken to Russia.}” Miranda asked, twining the flowers together.

“{He was the boyar’s son. They were going to send him to Russia in order to punish my father. My father…he was a different man before my brother went away. He and my mother had wanted a large family, but they lost all their babies except for Gabi and me. Mother knew that sending Gabi to the Iele was the only way to keep him in Romania, but her heart never accepted the separation. She wasted away, longing for him. At the end, she couldn’t even do magic anymore. After she died, Father went crazy with hate. He was a good man before. Maybe not a nice one, but a good one.}”

“{My Papa went crazy for awhile when my brother Columba died.}”

“{He was young?}”
“{Seventeen. He died in the river, saving a little boy who had fallen in when it was in flood. The boy lived, but Columba didn’t make it. Papa didn’t say a word; not one word all through the wake or the funeral. When Columba was in the ground, Papa disappeared for two months. When he finally came home, he walked into the parlor and said ‘The river giveth and the river taketh away.’ Then he went out in the barn and started doing the chores, like he’d made peace with everything.]”
She bit a flower stem to cut it and went on quietly, “{I was at school when it happened, but I should have been home. I had stayed behind to study for some stupid tests that seemed so awfully important at the time. I wish I had gone home. If I’d been there, my brother would still be here today.]”

“{You don’t know that. We never know what would have happened. It’s one of God’s mercies, I think.]”

Catalina finished her crown and set it on Miranda’s head, her lips closed in a soft little smile. Miranda returned the smile, but her fingers became clumsy at her work as she thought of her favorite brother.

“{Miranda, I have something to say to you, but I will deny it to the end of my days if you tell anyone that I said it,]” Catalina said, breaking through Miranda’s reverie.

“{For some reason I’m getting a strong sense of déjà vu, but please go on.}”

Catalina’s forehead furrowed, but she did not press further. “{I want us to work together to complete the final task and to rescue my brother and the rest of the children. If we bring them home at the same time, the competition will be a draw. Then we can duel each other to determine the winner, the way it should have been in the first place.]”

“{That’s a wonderful idea,}” Miranda said warmly, setting her completed crown on Catalina’s brow. “{I agree.]”
“{We will have to keep acting as though we are rivals,}” Catalina stipulated.

“{Understood.}” The last rays of the sun were mingling with the first light of the stars, but the air was still warm and comfortable. Miranda wondered how cold it was going to get and hoped that Catalina was proficient at wandless warming charms, as she wasn’t sure she could keep enough going to cover the two of them throughout the night. By way of broaching the subject, she asked, “{What are we going to do now? It’s too early to sleep and we can’t light a fire.}”

Catalina’s eyes were sparkling mischievously. “{Shhh. If you’re quiet and watch, you’ll see.}”

Twilight enveloped them, and again Miranda was struck by the silence in the place. The women sat, shoulder to shoulder, watching the atmosphere turn from gray to blue to black. Then, in the space of a blink, they were no longer alone on the mountaintop. Perhaps they had never been alone, all that long day. First two, then a dozen, then a score drifted down over the snow. More followed the train, but Miranda was so enraptured by the wonderful beings that she forgot to count. They were tall and lithe, glowing with a rainbow colored light that warmed the meadow more surely than any fire could ever do. Their silvery robes and the feathery locks of their hair trailed behind them, floating like they were submerged in some unseen river. Miranda forgot to breathe until her chest hurt with the omission. Barring unicorns, she had never seen creatures so unearthly, or so lovely.

“{What…}” Miranda whispered, but her voice trailed off before she could finish the thought.

“{The Sânziană,}” Catalina whispered back. “{We must have pleased them.}”

The fairy beings were busy forming circles around the meadow, and two of them broke ranks to glide across to the witches. Miranda followed Catalina’s lead, bowing before the Sânziană even reached them and, when they stood, they found that the fairies held out golden cups as an offering. When Catalina did not hesitate to take the cup and drain it, Miranda followed suit. The liquid inside tasted of spring water and moonlight, and it quelled the hunger pains that had begun to gnaw at
Miranda’s insides.

“{Thank you,}” Miranda said, handing the cup back to the Sânziană before her.

The cup vanished before her eyes, and the fairy extended a long-fingered hand to her. This time, Miranda did not hesitate, grasping the Sânziană’s warm hand in hers and following her into the circle. By the time they reached the ring, the sound of the drums and the pipes were clearly discernible, and Miranda joined hands with another Sânziană as well. Catalina’s smiling face mirrored her own from across the meadow, the only other human in the fairy ring tonight.

Somehow, Miranda was not surprised in the least when the dance began and she glanced down to see that she floated above the earth as lightly as the fairies did. And when Balour came to fetch her in the morning she, unlike the famous dancing princesses, was not tired in the least.

Chapter End Notes

Sânziene is a Romanian festival held on June 24th, or St. John’s Day. One of the traditions of the day is for maidens to go picking flowers, one of which should be Lady’s Bedstraw. The day even has its own set of gentle fairies, called the Sânziană.

Catalina is reciting the Miorita, which is the Romanian folk ballad. It is a dialogue between a shepherd and a magical sheep, who warns him that he is going to be murdered by rival shepherds. Rather than try to escape, the shepherd calmly accepts his fate and instructs the sheep how he wishes to be buried while comparing Death to a beautiful bride. It is traditional in Romania to bury unmarried people in wedding clothes because they are marrying Death just like the shepherd in the story. The version quoted here was Englished by Sophie Jewett in 1913.
Miranda rapped on the door of Severus’s tattered house at Spinner’s End on Thursday a week after Sânziene, her bag slung over her shoulder and a bouquet of flowers from the mountaintop charmed to freshness in her hands. The aging neighbor at the end of the block came out of her house to collect the morning paper, and Miranda mused that Severus must be in the basement brewing to have left her on his doorstep so long. When the neighbor gave her a lingering stare as she dawdled on her lawn, Miranda raised her hand to knock again, but the door opened, saving her the trouble. Before the neighbor could stare any longer, Severus’s hand had snaked out and pulled her firmly inside, while his other hand closed the door against prying eyes.

The morning light filtered in through the shuttered sitting room, lingering on the piles of neatly stacked books and the threadbare furniture. Severus was in his shirtsleeves, and his hair was tied back the way he did when he meant to do some serious work. His eyes were warm as he ran them over her, and she smiled back at him as she handed him the posy.

“I suppose I should be the one to bring you flowers,” he remarked as he held the collection up to the sunlight in order to better study the array.

“You could. But I prefer books and whiskey if you’re taking notes,” she replied.

He nodded absently and muttered, half to himself, “I’ve never seen some of these species before. This one appears to be a *Cruciata laeipes*, but I’ve never seen it quite this color or shape…”

Miranda hung her bag on the lonely coatrack by the door, giving company to Severus’s winter cloak and a dusty bowler hat that she had never seen—nor could imagine—him wearing.
“Still no invitation for me from the Dark Lord?” she asked cheekily.

“No. I’m afraid you are completely ignored. The cut direct.” He gave her half of a smile and caught her hand, turning it over to press his lips against the inside of her wrist. “Come. I require help decanting the Changeover Potion and you are just in time.”

Two hours later they were both sweating as the heat of the day began seeping down into the basement. This, combined with the blazing fire under the cauldron, and the tedium of her task, had Miranda nearing the end of her patience. Severus was syphoning off the liquid parts of the potion into jars, dropper-full by dropper-full, and she had to keep the mass turning clockwise at a constant speed while he worked. It had taken a full twenty minutes before he had been satisfied that she was doing her job correctly, and only the lingering kiss he’d dropped onto the back of her neck when she had finally “gotten it right” had stopped her from hexing him in retaliation. Her arm had long since passed the stage of sensation, but she knew better than to bother suggesting using a charm to keep the spoon moving. For a wizard, Severus was inordinately fond of what her Mama would term ‘elbow grease.’

“Only a few more moments. Excellent work, Miranda,” Severus murmured as he painstakingly transferred the potion.

The sight of the dregs at the bottom of the cauldron, paired with such a hearty compliment, cheered Miranda and she teased, “That’s awfully pleasant of you. Maybe you aren’t such a beast of a teacher after all.”

“Then please allow me to assure you that I am only pleasant with you, and I have ulterior motives for being so,” he replied, his eyes still on his work.
“Really? What might those be?”

The corner of his mouth turned up in his trademark smirk and, when he spoke, it was in his most silken rumble. “I should think you are perfectly aware of what my motives are.”

Her face went hot and her stomach flipped deliciously. “I see. How much longer is this going to take? I wouldn’t want you to be too tired to put those motives into practice. Especially on such a hot day as this is shaping up to be.”

His smirk transformed into one of his rare, full smiles. “Patience is a virtue, Miranda. And being as I’ve thought of little else since Monday evening when you informed me that you were planning to grace me with your presence, I doubt I will be too tired.”

“What a relief.”

“Feeling neglected, are we?”

“Well it’s not as though my last two visits were very conducive to fucking, now were they?” Good Lord, her face must be beet red by now, and her voice was even betraying a quiver of excitement. Maybe he wouldn’t notice.

“I shall endeavor to make it up to you.” He glanced away from his work long enough to take in the state of her cheeks and added, “Have I mentioned how amusing it is to watch you turn that particular shade of pink?”
“You have, more than once. One would think I’d grow out of blushing at some point.”

“I should hope not. It’s one of your more charming attributes.”

He finished his work and charmed the cauldron to float on its side while they scraped out every last bit of the solids in the bottom onto squares of cheesecloth. These they wrapped into bundles to hang over bowls to drain further, in an effort not to waste a drop of the precious potion. Severus flicked his wand once to return the cauldron to its place on the workbench, twice to smother the fire, and a final time to flip one of the hourglasses that sat on a shelf of other timers of various sizes. The sand in the chosen glass began running, and Miranda and Severus took turns scrubbing their hands at the gleaming stainless steel sink. While Severus was busy at his task, Miranda rolled her head and shoulders to relieve the strain of the morning’s work. She forgot what she was doing though, when he fixed her with a heated gaze, and stalked across the room to her with the air of a cat approaching an amusing morsel of food.

“There is half an hour before the Changeover Potion will require filtering,” he began, running a long finger over her cheek and down the side of her neck. “I trust that will be sufficient time to take the edge off our appetites.”

“We can certainly try,” she murmured, her breath catching as his finger dipped under the neckline of her tunic.

He laughed darkly and her head tilted back to receive a kiss that was aborted before it reached its destination. His lips and his laughter twisted into a frustrated snarl, and he snapped away from her, jerking his sleeves back into place and fastening them around his wrists. The Dark Mark writhed on his forearm, taunting her before he hid it from view, and she forced a smile to cover the disappointment that was, at that moment, choking her.
“The Dark Lord has the worst timing,” she said, pleased that her voice was mostly even.

“He does,” Severus agreed in a similar tone as jammed his arms into his frock coat with a violence that should have torn it apart at the seams.

“Is there anything else I should do besides filter the Potion?”

She could see his measured breathing as he did up his buttons, and his voice was completely calm when he answered, “It would be helpful for you to scrub out the cauldrons. You’ll have to do it the Muggle way.”

“That’s not a problem. I’ll be here when you get back.”

Buttons fastened, he crossed the room in three steps, caught her in his arms, and kissed her with the sort of single-minded concentration that she had only witnessed him give to his most interesting subjects of study. She stared up at him in a daze when he finally released her.

“Good,” he said roughly.

He released her so quickly that she found herself clinging to the edge of the workbench for support. Her lips felt bruised and she was breathing as though she’d run a race. The sight of her thus inspired a shadow of good humor to flit across Severus’s face, and he was halfway up the stairs before he had fully disciplined his features into the cold mask of indifferent displeasure that was his protection.
The fact that she had felt his heart hammering in his chest when he had crushed her against him had her smiling for quite some time, in spite of the interruption and the lonely chores left behind.

Curse the Dark Lord and curse Peter Pettigrew! The simpering fool was trotting along at Severus’s heels like a yappy dog; asking question after question about where Severus lived; and what would he be assisting with; and would it be terribly dangerous; and did Severus know that he was allergic to strawberries; and on and on until Severus was certain he would go stark raving mad with the constant onslaught. He would rather have endured a bout of Crucius any day of the week than be saddled with the task of nursemaiding this idiot for an entire summer. To make matters worse, Severus was perfectly aware that Pettigrew would be reporting anything he saw or heard to the Dark Lord. Pettigrew was no doubt expected to spy on Severus as much—if not more—than Severus was expected to spy on him.

Pettigrew continued his yammering without respite as they mounted the steps to the house at Spinner’s End. Severus blocked out the sound of the other man’s voice that he might apply his attention to the problem of removing Miranda from the scene without Pettigrew realizing who she was. The Dark Lord still seemed either unaware of, or uninterested in her, and Severus was determined to keep it that way for as long as humanly possible. A plan quickly formed in his mind; inelegant, but it would have to do.

They entered the house and, before the door was completely closed, Severus addressed his unwanted guest in his sternest professor voice. “Wait here, Wormtail.”

The cold authority made Pettigrew jump, but he loitered in the sitting room while Severus smoothly collected Miranda’s bag from the coatrack and stalked into the kitchen, where he could hear her rustling the dishes. He found her plating a lovely collection of cold meat, cheese, and fruit, and the smile she greeted him with made him renew all his curses towards the Dark Lord and the Rat. Before she could speak, he laid a finger over his lips and silently pushed the kitchen door shut behind him, locking it with a flick of his fingers. Merlin bless her, she confined her questions to the cocking of her head and the concerned expression on her face, and she waited patiently for him to pull a bottle out of the pantry and dump it into a pot on the range. As the murky contents came to a simmer, Miranda drifted to his side. He took her hand, lacing his fingers through hers, although
whether this was to reassure her or to reassure himself he did not know.

When the potion was ready, he let go of her hand to pour it into a mug. A few moments of rummaging in the cabinet next to the icebox produced a vial of curly brown hair, which he dropped into the mug to complete the potion. He put the mixture into her waiting hands, and she drank it down without protest or hesitation. His heart skipped a beat, both in remorse for the pain that this transformation was surely causing her; and in elation at this further proof of her trust in him. Soon, brown eyes were blinking up at him from a heart-shaped face, and he flicked his wand to transfigure her tunic and trousers into a smart set of green dress robes to fit this shorter frame.

“{What was that phrase you used the night we met?}” he asked in Romanian. “{Ah, yes. Just play along.}”

She obediently fell in behind him and he shoved the kitchen door open without ceremony. This unnecessary use of force rewarded him with a painful squeak from Pettigrew, who had been huddling just on the other side of the door, eavesdropping. Clearly the Rat hadn’t moved fast enough, and he cradled his nose where the door had smacked him, whimpering pathetically. Severus did not bother to check his progress through the sitting room, and he and Miranda were halfway to the front door before Pettigrew started trailing after them.

“{That is Wormtail.}” Severus explained quickly, in a bored tone that belied the importance of his words. “{The Dark Lord wishes for me to keep close watch on him this summer.}”

“{And for him to keep watch on you, I expect.}” Miranda replied, imitating his rhythm and his timbre.

“{Indeed. I’m afraid I shall have to ask you to leave.}”
“{I assumed as much. I guess this means no opera in August.}”

“{No. I should think not.} They reached the door and Severus held it open for her. “{I shall need the rest of the day to secure the house from Wormtail’s prying, but I intend to be at liberty to visit you at your cabin tonight, if that is agreeable to you.}”

Although her face was the wrong shape, the wicked expression on it was unmistakably Miranda. “{I tremble with anticipation. Is there anything in particular you’d like for dinner?}”

He allowed himself to relax enough to brush his lips against her cheek. “{Surprise me.}”

She gave him one final smile, and tripped lightly out the door without a backward glance.

“I didn’t know you spoke French,” Pettigrew whined from the sitting room. “Who was that? I wouldn’t have minded being introduced.”

Severus gave Pettigrew an icy expression and replied coolly, “I met her at a Potions Conference a few years ago. She drops in from time to time and I would like her to continue to do so. I doubt this would happen if she were to think I kept company with the likes of you.” He drew his wand and hexed Pettigrew in one motion, sending the other man yelping across the room. “Go upstairs and get to work cleaning. The attic hasn’t be touched in years. You will start there.”

“I believe you are enjoying this,” Albus remarked in a voice strained with pain. He was propped up
in an armchair in his personal library in his quarters, stubbornly refusing to lie down while Severus attempted further treatment for his cursed hand. The older wizard had already been dosed with potions, but the application of the poultice was the worst part of the operation.

“I am. Thoroughly,” Severus replied dully. He performed his task as quickly and gently as he could, but there was no sparing his mentor from the pain. By the time the final bandage was wrapped around Albus’s damaged hand, the man was visibly gritting his teeth.

Severus left Albus to recover from the ordeal and went about the business of packing up his supplies in silence. When all was in order, he scrubbed his hands, trying not to look at his sallow face reflected in the mirror over the sink in the loo. Although he had done his best to mitigate the havoc he and his fellow Death Eaters had been wreaking throughout the country this week, there was only so much he could do. The destruction of the bridge weighed on him particularly for some reason. Whenever he closed his eyes he was standing on the shore, watching—and worse—hearing the event over and over again.

“Severus?” Albus called weakly.

“I’m coming,” Severus replied, dragging himself back to the present as he dried his hands.

“I would like to lie down now, if it is not too much trouble,” Albus said when Severus rejoined him.

“That would be for the best.”

It took some time, but Albus managed to walk under his own power from library to bedchamber, only leaning on Severus’s arm from time to time for support. Severus did have to help the older man into bed, as well as remove his mentor’s shoes and tuck the blankets around him.
“There are a few things I must tell you,” Albus said, winded from the treatment and the walk to his bed.

“You should rest. You’re exhausted,” Severus protested. He had no desire to hear what would surely be more bad news.

“I am afraid it cannot wait. The fewer times you interrupt me, the sooner I will gain my rest.”

Severus sighed and drew up a chair next to the bed. Whatever it was Albus wanted to tell him, Severus was certain he wanted to hear it while sitting down.

It took some time for Albus to gather his strength to continue. “I want you to tell Tom that Emmeline Vance has been instructed to retrieve the notes from the most recent meeting of the Wizengamot for me. I was unfortunately unable to attend, and Scrimgeour is being less than cooperative about allowing me access to them. She is to fetch them tomorrow night, late in the evening, and she will be quite alone.”

Severus stared out the window across the room, not wanting to meet Albus’s tired eyes. “If I give that information to the Dark Lord, he will attempt to have her murdered.”

“Yes, that is the point of the exercise. She will be murdered on your intelligence. We must do everything we can to convince Tom that you are his man.”

“I don’t like it.”
“Emmeline is aware and most accepting of her fate.”

“Is she?”

“She is ill, with a Muggle disease of all things. After consulting with both Healers and Muggle doctors, it has become apparent that there is no hope for a cure. She would rather die this way than waste into nothingness. I must say I know exactly how she feels, and I share her sentiments.”

Severus turned his eyes to Albus and was struck by how very old the man appeared. Although he felt as though he had swallowed lead, Severus knew that there was no use debating. The decisions had all been made. All that was left for him to do was bring them to fruition.

“Do you wish to add anyone else to the list of people whose deaths you require me to orchestrate?”

“Not at the moment. How is Miranda?”

Had it really only been a week since he’d seen her? It seemed as though an age had passed rather than a few days. “She was well when I saw her last.”

“She is a very resourceful and adaptable person, isn’t she?
“Yes.” Severus raised an eyebrow. It was unusual for Albus to ask him about his private life.

“A curious person as well, I expect.”

“I suppose.”

“As amusing as her company must be, I must ask you to remember it is vital that Tom trust you. To this end, no one outside of this room may know the truth of our plans. If Miranda—or anyone else for that matter—were to be privy to this information and fall into the hands of our enemies…”

“It would be disastrous. I understand Albus. Rest assured that Miranda and I do not talk about my work for the Order.” Severus frowned and returned his attention to the night sky out the window. This conversation was reminding him unpleasantly of similar ones he had had with Lucius Malfoy.

“And I trust you will keep it that way.”

Albus’s eyes drifted closed, and Severus decided not to say anything at all in response to this command. If Severus had learned one thing over the years, it was that Albus was very good at ensuring that the promises made to him were kept. There was a niggling voice at the back of Severus’s mind warning him not to make a promise that he might later regret.

Albus seemed to take the silence as answer enough. He went on without opening his eyes, “I am going to give you the DADA position this year.”

Severus started as though someone had hit him with an *auguamenti* of ice cold water. “Now?
Aren’t you concerned about the jinx?” he asked dryly.

“I am counting on the jinx. After your year is up and I am dead, I intend for Tom to make you Headmaster.”

“Absolutely not. I would rather murder the whole of the Order myself than run this foul school.”

“Then it is good that you will have some time to become accustomed to the idea. I trust you recall your promise to me to protect the students as best you can.”

He did remember, and he knew that arguing with Albus was an exercise in futility.

“You should rest now, Albus,” Severus said, standing and making his way to the door. He had had quite enough of this interview, and he had Albus’s unpleasant errand to the Dark Lord to discharge before the night was spent. “Let the treatment do what it can for you.”

“Good night, Severus. And good luck.”

“I do not believe I can agree with either sentiment.”

Severus shut the door behind him, putting an end to the conversation. It was a much longer time before he managed to shut his mind to the revulsion he felt towards the tasks he had been set.
Molly Weasley had outdone herself. Every surface, on the ground floor at least, of Number Twelve Grimmauld place gleamed. True, the cracks and subtle signs of decay remained present as sullen, silent witnesses to the long years of neglect—but today—today they were, at least, clean. Severus paused awkwardly in the doorway long enough to notice that Mrs. Black’s portrait was unveiled. Uncharacteristically, the lady inhabiting the frame did not scream. She eyed Severus imperiously from beneath her draperies of black lace and crepe; noted him and did him the politeness of ignoring his existence. Severus frowned and continued into the hallway, feeling like a grindylow out of water.

The drawing room, when he reached it, was laid out to receive guests as cheerily as was appropriate to so somber an occasion. A table near the door was set with a few pictures of Sirius Black, from his school days and shortly after. They were flanked by vases holding bouquets of red gladiolus, ostentatious flowers, suited to the man they honored. Severus studied the pictures only long enough to cause the subject of them to sneer at him and look away. It was just as well. Severus hadn’t really come to pay respects to Sirius Black anyway.

“Why, Severus!” exclaimed Molly as she bustled into the room, overseeing the transportation of a polished but ancient samovar as it floated to the refreshment table. “I didn’t expect to see you tonight.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you then,” Severus replied. “Especially when Black would no doubt have detested my presence at such a moment.”

“Now, that’s enough of that. You’re one of us, and I’m glad you’re here. Let me get you a cup of tea while we wait for the others. How do you take it?”

Realizing it would be far more trouble to argue Molly out of her hostessing than it was worth, he answered, “Cream. No sugar,” and accepted cup, saucer, and spoon without further comment. Duty
done, Molly scurried away to see to the final preparations, and Severus drifted towards the back of the room, to nurse his tea and brood out the window.

By the time the clock above the mantel had struck a quarter past the hour, the room and the hallway were filled with most of the Order, along with those of their family that were sympathetic to the loss of Sirius Black. Although the mood over the gathering had begun in a hushed moan, it was steadily mounting to a dull roar as reunions of all types took place, and the inevitable tedious round of “do you remember when” began. Severus bristled at the din, especially when he discovered Remus Lupin at his elbow, apparently determined not to leave Severus to himself.

“Severus, it’s good of you to be here,” Remus said, nervously buttoning and unbuttoning the cuff of his left sleeve with the air of one who was not quite aware of what he was doing.

“Lupin.”

“This isn’t exactly the way Sirius would have wanted it, of course. Too solemn. He’d have wanted a full-out party. But we’ll try to get to that before the evening’s through.”

“And I shall endeavor to be gone well before that begins.”

An awkward silence fell between them, but Remus broke it before long by saying sheepishly, “Harry’s asked me to give a speech. You’d think that after a year of teaching I wouldn’t be nervous about giving a speech about one of my best friends.”

“Indeed.” Why wouldn’t Lupin leave him in peace? It wasn’t as though Severus belonged here, and everyone knew it. More than one eye had lingered on him, ranging from the curious to the accusatory, where he stood lurking in the back of the room like some wallflower party-crasher.
Molly appeared through the crowd, putting an end to the painful conversation. “Remus, I think it’s time. Best to get the speeches over first, and then everyone can relax and, well, enjoy isn’t the right word, but they can talk and remember.”

“Right then,” Remus said, clearing his throat. He shot a not unfriendly look at Severus and said wryly, “Wish me luck.”

Severus declined to comment and, although he turned to face the room rather than the window, he drew himself as far towards the back as he could. Why in Merlin’s name had he given in to his idiotic impulse to come here today? The summer must be wearing on him more than he wanted to admit. He flexed his right arm involuntarily. Sometimes he swore that the bonds of the Vow burned him as much as they had the moment he’d taken it. He’d been a fool then too, but he had found he could not bear the sight of the proud Narcissa Malfoy, humiliating herself at his feet, sobbing herself sick for love of her son. Until that moment, Severus had believed that he would find some cure for Albus, some way out of the unacceptable position he was in, called upon to murder one of the only people in his life who had ever been willing to give him a second chance. But now that hope was dead. It was kill, or be killed. And Severus had every grim intention of doing the former rather than the latter. It wasn’t so much that he was afraid to die. Some days he longed for it. But he had made a promise to Albus on Lily’s sacred name. He would carry out that promise as long as he had breath, no matter how bitter the consequences.

“Thank you all for being here today,” Remus said, his quiet voice instantly bringing the room to order. “I’m going to keep this short. Sirius would have wanted more laughter and less tears today. Sirius Black was a man who loved his friends…”

“The old place cleaned up nicely, wouldn’t you agree, Professor Snape?”

Severus raised an eyebrow and turned to the source of the question, which was the heretofore empty portrait hanging on the wall next to the window.
“It would have been better, of course, if my useless great-great-grandson had bothered to maintain his patrimony, but I suppose we unhappy dead must be grateful for what tatters of respect we are granted,” Phineas Nigellus continued. Severus made no answer, and Phineas had no need for encouragement to continue, “You’ll have noticed that dear Walburga has held her tongue today. All that infernal screaming gave me a right headache and would be most unseemly now. Must stand together on an occasion such as this, although I don’t know that I care for this Lupin giving the opening address. At least that Weasley fellow realized the importance of rehanging my portrait in the drawing room for such an occasion.”

“I take it you will be speaking as well?” Severus asked.

“Of course I will! Sirius was my great-great-grandson, wasn’t he?” Phineas’s voice trembled momentarily as he added, “The last of the Blacks. It is the end of a dynasty. It must not go by unmarked by history. And I am delighted to see a that rational man such as yourself will be present to witness it.” Phineas eyed Severus suspiciously and added, “Although I don’t know quite how rational you are, what with joining the Order. It would be far better to keep your head down. I wonder at the Slytherins they produce these days. Things are not at all the way they used to be.”

A burst of applause mingled with a few hearty shouts of “Here, here!” signaled the end of Lupin’s words. Phineas straightened his robes and said, “Ah! The crowd is warmed up for the main event I see. Be so good as to toddle off so as not to block their view of me would you?”

Severus was more than happy to escape from the former Headmaster, although he found himself to be swimming upstream of a crowd that did not seem at all disposed to listen to the wisdom of Phineas Nigellus at the moment. With some difficulty, Severus managed to deposit his empty tea things on a side table. Then there was nothing for it but to push through the crush to the door. Thankfully, no one attempted to engage him in conversation. He did feel Potter’s glare on the back of his neck but, when he turned his level gaze on the boy’s tear-streaked face, Potter looked away without comment.

It was much quieter in the hallway, and Severus halted for a moment under one of the flickering gas-lamps to catch his breath. If he were honest with himself, he did know why he had come here tonight. The deaths of Amelia Bones and Emmeline Vance haunted him, specters in the periphery
of his mind pointing fingers of accusation at him for all that he had done and all he had failed to do. Although he had not known Amelia Bones beyond her reputation for being a reasonable and right-minded person, Emmeline had been another story. The formidable Hufflepuff had been one of the few people during his school-days outside of Slytherin House who had treated him with any decency. He had liked her—at least, as well as he liked anybody. Attending the funeral for either of these witches had been out of the question. To have done so would have been to waste the credit with the Dark Lord that their blood had so dearly bought. He had come tonight, to the memorial of a man that he hated, out of remembrance of them, in a useless attempt to assuage his own guilty conscience.

In the middle of his self-flagellation, Tonks wandered down the hallway, dressed decently for once in formal robes, her mousy brown hair shrouding her downcast face. Severus expected her to pass him by, but when she realized who he was, she stopped, an arms-length away, and her chin came up, her jaw set in anger.

“Were you there?” she asked abruptly.

“Excuse me?” he returned. He was in no mood for games, especially with this half-grown Auror.

“When Emmeline was murdered. Were you there?”

“I was.” Severus’s voice was perfectly even, as was his gaze as he met her tear-filled glare.

“Did you do it? Were you the one that killed her?”

“No.”
This answer only seemed to enrage her more. “Why didn’t you stop it?”

“How long do you think the Dark Lord would believe that I am his man if I rescued every member of the Order who managed to put herself in danger? Why was Emmeline alone that night? If she had been accompanied, as she should have been, perhaps she would still be alive today.”

“So it’s her fault?!” Tonks’s voice had risen to a shrill pitch, and she took a step closer to Severus. Before she could draw her wand, Remus appeared from the room. By the concerned expression on his face, he had guessed the gist of the present altercation.

“Tonks, there you are,” Remus said in a soothing voice. “Why don’t you come back in…”

But Tonks was not to be placated. She ignored Remus as though he were under an invisibility cloak and persisted, “You just stood there, didn’t you?”

Severus summoned his coldest stare and his iciest tone. “You’ve no idea what happened. Don’t speak of things you do not understand.”

“Tonks, Severus, please. It’s Sirius’s memorial,” Remus said, his hand on Tonks’s arm. “There’s nothing to be gained by this.”

“Yes there is!” she shouted, her hair turning from brown to red in her anguish. “Emmeline baby-sat me when I was a kid! She taught me to ride a broom! She’s dead and Snape could’ve saved her, but he’s too worried about saving his own skin that he didn’t even try!”
“Are you calling me a coward?” Severus’s voice had lost some of its icy indifference.

“Severus, Tonks, please!” Remus pleaded, but neither heard him.

“Yes!” Tonks hissed. “Coward!”

Severus drew himself up to his full height and let his anger at the Dark Lord, Albus, Wormtail, and the whole damned mess that was drowning him blaze out of his eyes and into hers. He closed the short distance between them and, while she pursed her lips until they were a thin, white line, she did not look away, even for an instant.

After a full minute of this, he said softly, “Do not speak of things that you do not understand, Nymphadora.”

He held her gaze for a beat longer than was comfortable for either of them, and then swept silently away. Before he had gained the comfort of the street, he heard her growl after him,

“Don’t call me Nyphadora.”
By the time Severus’s mind had cleared sufficiently for him to take note of his surroundings, his feet had led him to the alley he typically used for Apparition to and from meetings at Grimmauld Place. He was about to storm home to nurse his foul temper, but the knowledge that Wormtail’s company awaited him there gave him pause. To put off the inevitable time when he would have to endure the Rat’s unwanted presence, he pulled out his cigarette case, leaning against a grimy brick wall to light it and think. Since the previous summer, it was impossible to enter this alley without it bringing Miranda to mind, and he found himself musing over what she would say if he could speak to her now. She would no doubt advise him to relax and forget about the previous hour’s entertainment; but she would also sympathize with his impossible position in a way that he coveted—but surely did not deserve.

As the cigarette burned lower, he started turning ideas over in his mind. In less than a week he intended to return to Hogwarts along with those teachers who preferred the benefit of an early start at preparation for the coming year’s troubles. His class preparation was long since complete, but he intended to escape from the confines of Spinner’s End at the earliest possible moment. The Changeover Potion would be complete within the next day or so, and he supposed the time was drawing near when he would be obliged to request that Albus arrange the potion’s safe delivery to Miranda. He had yet to confess that he was more involved with the Romanian project than he was strictly supposed to be. In light of Albus’s comments earlier this summer, Severus was anticipating some sort of unpleasant backlash.

When the cigarette was spent, the threads of ideas had woven themselves into a new plan. Before he could think better of it, Severus set out to put it into motion.

“I don’t know why I play with you,” Charity Burbage complained good-naturedly, “you always win.”

“Not always,” Severus countered.
“Yes, there was that time in ’85. And again in ’91. But I seem to remember you were ill on both of those occasions, so I don’t know that it really counts.” She plucked her knitting out of the air beside her, where it had been hovering during their game, a charm keeping the work that formed the olive-colored yarn into neat, cabled rows growing. The chess pieces scrambled back into place to start a new game, but Charity’s resuming her knitting was the usual cue that chess was over for the evening.

“Victory counts however it is achieved.” Severus settled back into the comfortable, doily covered armchair to sip his tea and put the earlier events of the evening out of his mind. He let his eyes drift around the living room of Charity’s flat, studying the ever changing collection of Muggle appliances and knick knacks that crowded every available surface; from the upright piano to the china cabinet to the mantel over the faux fireplace.

“Now, tell me the truth, Severus. Did you really come here tonight for a game of chess?”

If he weren’t so accustomed to the surprisingly penetrating gaze coming from Charity’s pleasant, laugh-lined face, he would have bristled at such a direct accusation. However, he had spent enough time with her throughout the course of his teaching career at Hogwarts, that he well knew how observant and intelligent she was.

“Perhaps I did. Why do you ask?”

“I wouldn’t ask, except that I haven’t seen you at all this summer.”

“I have had an inordinate amount of work occupying my time.”

“You look like death warmed over. When was the last time you ate?”
“This afternoon.”

She clearly did not believe him, but her concentration was too occupied by the demands of casting on to pursue the falsehood.

“There is a small matter about which I wish to consult you.”

“Yes?” Her curiosity was piqued enough that she risked her counting by glancing up for a moment. “If I can help you, I certainly will.”

He set his teacup down amidst the piles of books and paraphernalia on the coffee table, and began plucking at a stray thread on his cuff. “I’ve decided to take a short Holiday before term starts.”

“Have you? That’s wonderful!”

It took a distinct effort not to flinch at the surprise in her voice, but he controlled himself and soldiered on. “I would like it to be as discreet as possible.”

“As suits you. I know you like your privacy.”

“Indeed. To achieve this, I intend to avail myself of certain Muggle establishments.” The end of the
sentence came out in a garbled sort of mutter, and he cringed inwardly, waiting for her to laugh at his plans.

She surprised him, though, by nodding in agreement. “That’s an excellent idea.”

He felt his face relax, and the thread on his cuff no longer seemed so troublesome. “I suppose that sounds unusual.”

“You’re not the first wizard to look for anonymity in the Muggle world. Although I will admit I’m surprised at your being willing to take a Holiday at all.” She paused in her counting long enough to give him a motherly smile. “But that makes me all the happier to hear you decide to take one. I assume you want some help making the arrangements?”

“I do.” This was turning out to be easier than he had feared it would be. “While there may be the ghost of a telephone at Spinner’s End, it certainly hasn’t been in working condition at any point during the last decade.”

“I expected as much.”

“And I trust I can rely on your silence in the unlikely event that anyone should ask you where I am.”

“Of course! Mum’s the word.” Her casting finished, she looked at him with eager curiosity and asked, “Where will you be going?”
He cleared his throat. “Bucharest.”

“Bucharest?” She raised her eyebrows in surprise. “Isn’t that in Romania?”

“It is.”

She opened and closed her mouth once or twice, obviously fighting the urge to pepper him with questions he would refuse to answer. “Alright. Bucharest. Do you have anywhere specific in mind?”

“I do. Lodging for two in a decent hotel and tickets to whatever is playing at the Romanian National Opera.”

Her eyebrows were firmly fixed in her hairline, but she made an heroic effort to resist prying further. “I think I can help you, but my Romanian’s pretty rusty.”

“I can handle the Romanian.”

“Good to know. I want you to notice how many questions I’m not asking you.”

“I have. You are the soul of discretion and I shall sing your praises from the mountain tops as soon as I find the proper time to do so.”
She laughed heartily and even he found that he could smile in spite of his embarrassment.

“Why don’t you come back tomorrow for lunch,” she suggested. “I’ll feed you a real meal and we can see about setting up your trip.”

“Thank you. I shall.”

He might come to regret this decision in time but, for the moment, all seemed right with the world.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to Mr. Zingarella for beta-ing this chapter; and to Bunbury (Jane) for encouragement and inspiration!
There were entirely too many people on this staircase, and there was not a bloody thing Severus could do about it. The glare of the lobby lights assaulted his eyes after the dimness of the theatre, even as the din of the patrons released from the confines of their seats drove the pleasing strains of the music from his ears. The lofty ceiling, marble floors, and Classical design only served to amplify the noise to an uncomfortable degree, and he actually flinched when a doddering matron accidentally stumbled into him. It seemed that the entire population of Bucharest had chosen this particular Tuesday for their cultural enrichment. Every muscle in his body tensed tight as a bow-string as the crowd hemmed him in, all but suffocating him, and he fought the urge to Disapparate on the spot.

Somehow, he managed to descend the entirety of the staircase without either slipping on the slick red carpet or resorting to murder. However, gaining his footing on the ground floor did nothing to relieve his position of being one among many attempting to exit the building. One of his eyebrows twitched involuntarily as he attempted to cleave through the mass of humanity, but he was startled out of this unpleasant task by the feel of Miranda’s warm hand grasping his and slipping its fingers between his own.

“If you think this is bad, you should see the lobby at the Met in New York,” she said, smiling up at him as he risked being crushed in order to glance at her.

His head stopped spinning at her touch and he drew her closer to his side, replying, “I think I would rather not see that if it is all the same to you.”

“Just trying to put things in perspective for you.” She surveyed the crowd shrewdly and then glanced back at him, a playful challenge sparkling in her eyes. “If you think you can handle cutting through the crowd without trampling anybody, I think I can keep up.”

“Very well,” he agreed, his face relaxing despite his agitation. “But it will not be my fault if you are lost in the crush.”

Somehow her laugh managed to float above the roar of the myriad conversations around them the
way that the voices of the singers floated above the force of the orchestra, and the sound of it soothed the uncomfortably quick beat of his heart. He faced the river of people with renewed vigor and began to weave his way to the edge of it. Miranda’s light step kept time with his, and soon they burst out into the summer night, free and unfettered from all encumbrances save the glaring spotlight illuminating the facade of the opera house. He descended the stairs outside without slowing his pace, determined to escape from all annoyances, even this small one. The sudden change from the brightness of the stairs to the darkness beyond finally forced him to slow his stride as he hit the gravel walk below, and Miranda stumbled as her less-than-sensible shoes skidded in response to the impact. Fortunately for her ankles, his reflexes were still strung on a hair-trigger. His arm was around her waist in an instant, swinging her through the momentum of the stumble to rest flush against him, chest to chest. The night air mingled with her lavender scent, and he found that this, together with one of her smiles, was all that was required to restore his equilibrium.

They were far from alone, however, and he kept the gesture briefer than he might have otherwise liked it to be. Tucking her hand into the crook of his arm, he led her down the footpath, away from the opera house and through the neatly manicured garden, with its sprays of flowers all trained into tame little spirals. By the time they reached the end of the plaza, the crowd had thinned enough for Miranda to risk using her wand to transfigure her shoes into flats more suited to the landscape. Taking this as indication that she wished to continue their walk, he led her out of the garden and into the dimly lit park beyond.

“Did you like it?” she asked, an undercurrent of excitement running through her voice.

“The crowd?” he replied, keeping his voice dry in order to tease. “Not in the least.”

“No!” She swatted his arm playfully with her program. “The opera.”

“Ah, that.” They were far enough into the safety of the wooded landscape that the crowd was but a memory, and he slowed his pace at last as they crossed over a foot bridge just wide enough for the two of them “On the whole, I would say that it was not a complete waste of time.”

“Coming from you, that’s high praise. What was your favorite part—no, let me guess. Was it when Don Giovanni was finally pulled into Hell?”

“That was obviously the highlight of the performance. I would imagine that it required a great feat of ingenuity for the Muggles to create the effect of the netherworld breaking through the stage floor without any magic. One almost wonders if they did have a wizard or two secretly employed for the purpose.”
“I don’t think it’s fair to assume that every Muggle accomplishment was actually done by wizards.”

“Not all. But most.”

She swatted him again and he chuckled at her as they walked beneath the trees. Before them stood a high fence of woven wood covered with wild grapevines, and he led her through the open gate to a hidden paradise of moonflowers. The moonlight filtered through the foliage and glinted off her hair where it kissed the locks. She was dressed once again for a bacchanal, copper laurel bracelet winding coyly up her arm and all, and the garden seemed the perfect spot for such sport. Unlike the tamed garden near the opera house, here one half expected Pan to burst forth from the wilderness, playing his pipes and leading a band of dryads behind.

“Do you think Mozart was a squib?” she asked, letting go of his arm to examine a vine bearing superb white blossoms, wide as her hand.

“If he were, would that not be more proof that Muggles require magical help for their greatest accomplishments?” he countered as he ran his hands over her shoulders, savoring the feel of the contours of her flesh under his fingers.

“Not necessarily. It could mean that No-majs have more magic than we think they do. Rachel and I used to wonder if there are far more squibs than anyone knows about, and that they have more magic than we give them credit for. Maybe that magic comes out in ways like being brilliant at music, or art, or engineering, or really anything. Maybe everyone has some magic inside them, if you know where to look for it.”

“Merlin, woman, watch your tongue,” he said, mostly in jest. “That sort of revolutionary talk would not be tolerated in certain circles.”

“I can guess which circles those are. And Lucius Malfoy will tell you how likely it is that I’d watch my tongue if I were to land in one of them.”

“Spoken like a true Barbarian from the Colonies. I simply cannot take you anywhere.”

His lips found the back of her neck, and the sigh that his kiss drew from her convinced him that this was a better use for them at the moment than continuing to debate her wild ideas. It was so easy for him to draw more sighs from her with a well placed kiss, a well timed touch, and the
sound of her pleasure had done much to drive the memories of that wretched summer underground—at least for the time being.

As his lips did their work, she soon lost interest in the flora and her hand drifted back that she might tangle her fingers in his hair.

“Shall we retire?” he murmured, when she was leaning hard against him.

“Must we?” she breathed.

He swallowed a groan at the thought of taking her here, but he was not so unrestrained that he would yield to the desire, however alone they appeared to be. “Decorum, my impatient Barbarian, decorum.”

“Oh, damn your decorum,” she purred, moving against him until the groan he was stifling broke free. “Someday I’m going to take you to my river back in Edgewood and have my way with you. You just wait and see.”

“If such a thing should come to pass, I will know I have gone completely mad,” he assured her, in a voice less steady than he meant it to be.

She gave a husky laugh. “Now that’s a challenge if ever I heard one. But I’ll go back to the hotel with you if you promise to eat when we get there.”

“I do believe that you wish to fatten me for slaughter. I’ve done nothing but eat, sleep, and ravish you since I arrived.” Not that he was complaining. He would never say it aloud, but the effect of this week on his sanity might be the saving of it.

“And it must be doing you good. You’ve got your fighting spirit back now. A few days ago you were like a ghost.”

He turned her in his arms as she said these words, and pressed her to his heart, kissing her with an emotion that he could not name, that was almost painful in its intensity.
“Very well,” he said when he released her mouth. “Come back with me now and I will allow you to do with me as you like.”

Severus’s good mood lasted precisely long enough for the two of them to Apparate to the alley behind the Hotel Diana, cut through the surplus of patrons milling about in the gleaming lobby, and climb the stairs to their snug second floor retreat. He had even allowed Miranda to hold his hand—in public no less—his mind was so addled by his desire for her. But as he slid the key into the lock of number 214, a chill of warning shot up his spine, and he suddenly felt as wrecked and twitchy has he had when he’d arrived in Bucharest a few days before.

WHAT IS WRONG

Miranda tapped her question on the palm of his hand, but he shook his head, sliding his wand out of his sleeve and shoving her behind him. He heard her snort of frustration at being protected, and he knew she had her own wand at the ready, but he did not wait to hear any arguments for her. He flicked the key in the lock and kicked the door open, charging into the darkened room ready to murder whatever intruder had broken the wards he had set.

The room was empty.

Miranda flicked the electric lights on, and the two of them began searching for evidence in silence. Severus was systematically unpacking Miranda’s overstuffed bag, muttering darkly about her lack of organization when she found proof of the intrusion.

“Bingo,” she said, scooping up an unassuming pad of paper from underneath the telephone on the desk and tapping it with her wand. “Aparecium.” Her brow furrowed and she held the paper out to Severus. “You can’t read Romanian, can you?”

Severus dropped her bag and snatched the paper out of her hand. “It’s from Vasile. He was at the opera. He says he didn’t want to sneak up on us, but he wanted us to know that you should not go to the church on Thursday alone. Why? What haven’t you be telling me?”

“Nothing!” she protested. “I mean, I did tell you that the final task is on Thursday, right?”

“You did.”
“And I told you that I’ll be spelunking for water from an underground river, beneath the One Wood Church right?”

“Yes.”

“That’s all I know. I expect it to be dull as dirt, but if Vasile wants you to come with me, you’d probably better. Especially if he thought it important enough to break into our hotel room to tell us.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Of course you don’t! You don’t like anything much. I’m going to call down and order some dinner.”

With that, she turned her attention to the telephone and was soon deep in a conversation with the maitre d’hôtel about the night’s specials. Severus felt as though someone had knocked the wind out of him. While he was well aware that people found him abrasive, hearing the words he had used to describe his worm of a father applied to him by his own lover, however teasingly, was enough to send him into a tailspin of loathing. He tore Vasile’s missive from the notepad and folded it meticulously. After he had put it away in a pocket, he sat down on the edge of the bed and began repacking Miranda’s bag with deliberate care. His anger flailed out in all directions; at Vasile, at Miranda, at Albus, at the Dark Lord, at his father—but mostly—at himself.

“It’ll be up soon,” she said, sliding next to him and kicking off her shoes. “I ordered some mici and ciorbă de burtă, I hope that’s alright.”

“Being as I don’t like anything, why should it matter what you order?” he replied icily.

She eyed him shrewdly. “Are you doing that thing where you get angry because you’re worried?”

“I am a rational adult. I do not do things because of childish emotions.”

“I see.” She scooted across the bed so that she could kneel behind him, and began to rub his shoulders with her strong fingers, but he shook off her hands and stalked over to the closet to pour
himself a glass of palinka, chilling the liquid with a wordless flick of his wand.

“You promised you’d do what I wanted tonight if I came back with you, remember?” she reminded him playfully.

“A foolish gesture made in the heat of passion. I shall be more careful in the future, I assure you,” he said bitingly, tossing back half of the glass in one motion.

“I predict you’ll be in a better mood after dinner.”

He turned his back to her to stare out the window overlooking the still-busy street below and muttered, “I will not.”

“Is there something you want to talk about?” she asked carefully.

“No,” he replied flatly.


A knock at the door heralded dinner, and when the clerk was gone, Severus mechanically transfigured the desk into a decent table for dining. Miranda made one or two attempts at conversing about the opera and the weather, but Severus was too caught up in the malignancy of his thoughts to make a proper answer.

When dinner was over, Miranda cleared the dishes and set the trays in the hallway while Severus pulled a book out of his valise and made a show of reading it; although his eyes never moved beyond the first sentence. Miranda stood near the closed door for some time, watching him with her arms crossed, before finally breaking the awkward silence.

“Severus, did I say something that upset you?”

“I am not upset.”
“Yes, you obviously are. One minute you’re ready to fuck me until I can’t walk straight, and the next you’re sniping at me and giving me the cold shoulder. What happened?”

“Nothing that need concern you.”

“It sure as hell does concern me!” She strode across the room and snatched the book out of his hands. “If you’ve got a problem with me you could at least do me the decency of talking about it instead of sulking like a petulant child. I’m not a mind reader, you know.”

He sneered at her and retrieved his book with a deliberately slow movement of his hand.

“Miranda, it is painfully clear to anyone who knows you that you are not a mind reader. Indeed, often you barely seem to think at all.”

“I know you’re an ass, but that’s way out of line.”

“I only speak the truth. Pity if it is too much for your delicate sensibilities.”

He snapped the book back open and she stared at him, her face flushed with anger. After a moment, she launched into a flurry of motion, swishing from room to room as she gathered her things and stuffed them into her bag.

“Thanks for the evening,” she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “I hope you enjoy the rest of it alone.”

“Some quiet would be welcome after that disgusting fit of pique.”

“Oh, fuck you,” she spat in parting, swinging her bag violently over her shoulder and storming out the door without another word.

Severus read to the end of the page without comprehending a single word, and threw the book across the room savagely enough to leave a satisfying mark on the wall. The urge to go after her nearly overpowered him, but he choked it down with another glass of palinka. After all, what would he say if caught her? I do beg your pardon, darling, but you’ve reminded me that I’m exactly
like my worthless father and so I thought it best to punish you for your impertinence. Perfectly reasonable, don’t you think?

No. That would never do. He retrieved his book with a silent accio and sat back down with the palinka bottle close at hand to drink and be miserable.

She was better off without him, anyway.

On Thursday morning Severus tromped up the hill towards the One Wood Church, once again a slave to his unfortunately uncompromising sense of duty. He’d spent the day before nursing ghastly hangover (Merlin help him if he ever so much as looked at a glass of palinka again) and a bruised ego. In the afternoon he had started a letter of explanation (not an apology) more than once, but he’d been unable to put any of his mangled thoughts into words. He’d burnt the lot of them and spent the rest of the evening wandering the streets of Bucharest and feeling like an idiot—a feeling that, along with the headache, had not yet dispersed. He would have gone back to Hogwarts, but for this damned task of Miranda’s. Even though he hadn’t actually said he would accompany her in so many words, he felt honor-bound to do so.

The drab, hexagonal building squatted in underwhelming solitude at the top of the lonely hill, surrounded by whitewashed grave-markers and a grossly unkempt garden. Steely grey clouds covered the sky, threatening a summer storm, and Severus grimaced as his mind started making a list of all the possible ways this morning’s events could go wrong. Even if they successfully completed the task, he would be returning to Hogwarts that night three days earlier than planned, alone, hated, and in a more wretched mood than he’d been in before he’d taken this damned trip in the first place.

When he gained the top of the hill, he glanced reflexively over his shoulder and saw Miranda making her way up the cobblestone walk towards him. She started in surprise, but continued her progress, pointedly avoiding his gaze.

“What are you doing here?” she asked coldly as she reached him.

“Perhaps you have forgotten Vasile’s demand that I accompany you on this infernal mission, but I have not,” Severus bit back.
“Don’t bother. Catalina and I can handle this ourselves.”

“If Vasile thought that, I doubt he would have taken the trouble to break through my wards to inform me otherwise. You may wish to put the Order’s interests in danger with your reckless behavior, but I will not make the same mistake.”

“Whatever. Just stay out of my way.”

She swept past him, and he fell in behind her, cursing himself for baiting her even as he renewed his resolution against apologizing. They circled around the squat structure to find a smooth door with no handle. She ran her hand over the wood and the door opened, allowing them access to the dark, claustrophobic interior, and Severus could feel an unfamiliar power thrumming through the place. The door swung shut behind them, and Severus found himself fidgeting with his fingers as his magic recoiled from the forces swirling inside the church.

“[It is about time you got here,]” said an irritable female voice, its owner emerging from the shadows and holding her glowing wand aloft. “[Where have you been?]”

“[Good morning, Catalina. Nice to see you too,]” Miranda replied shortly.

The Romanian eyed Severus suspiciously and demanded, “[Who is this? Why is he here?]”

“[This is Severus Snape, a member of the Order. Severus, Catalina Dragnea,]” Miranda explained in an extremely annoyed voice. “[A little bird told us that it would be useful if he were to come along this morning.]”

“[A little bird, or an old bear?]” Catalina asked rhetorically. “[Never mind. Come, you must trace one side of the icon while I trace the other, so that we may gain entrance to the cave.]”

Miranda and Severus followed Catalina across the tiny space to the opposite wall. Severus drew his wand and cast a quiet *Lumos,* and the blue light from his wand joined Catalina’s in illuminating an image of a primitive Christ, perched on a vine, teaching the apostles while they sat among the branches. The paint and the gold were as worn and dull as the literal-minded image, and Severus glared at it malevolently.

Catalina placed the tip of one finger at the base of the vine, and Severus snorted derisively as she
kissed the feet of the Christ in the image. The Romanian ignored him and looked expectantly at Miranda, who threw an angry glance at Severus before kissing the icon herself and tracing the middle root. When the women reached the bottom of the image, they stepped back, waiting.

Nothing happened.

“{I think I see now why you were told to come,}” Miranda said, bitterly.

“{Indeed.}” Severus sneered.

“{If he touches the icon and it opens, he will have to come down with us.}” Catalina pointed out.

“{Obviously.}” Severus drawled.

“{Best get on with it then,}” Miranda snapped.

Catalina glared at Severus, but repeated her reverence of the icon and set her finger to follow the same root as before. Miranda also kissed the feet of the painted Christ, and slid her finger to its position at the base of the tree in the image.

“{Is there a problem?}” Catalina demanded.

“{Do you expect me to kiss that thing?}” Severus asked, incredulously, feeling that he would rather kiss a dead rat than place his lips on this crude painting.

“{You probably should. The magic might not work otherwise,}” Miranda said. “{But don’t worry, you don’t have to mean it.}”

“{In all my days…}” Severus muttered, but did not bother to give voice to the rest of his thought. He gave the thing the briefest and most nihilistic kiss he could manage, and jerked his head away as his lips encountered an unsettling burning sensation, as though they had encountered a fire instead of a wall of dead wood. His finger felt similarly uncomfortable when he traced it along third root, and he snatched his hand back as quickly as humanly possible.
At the end of the ritual, a river of light welled up from beneath the floor, and rushing up the painted vine, until there was a wall of light that blinded them in the darkness of the church. They stood blinking furiously until the light faded away, leaving an opening in the wall where the image had been. Severus stepped forward before either of the women could react, holding out his wand to illuminate a narrow tunnel of packed earth and an ancient staircase of moldering wood.

“[Perhaps I may be so bold as to go first?]” he said dryly.

Catalina’s eyes flashed in the dim light. “[Only if I bring up the rear,]” she said.

“[I feel so safe,]” Miranda said sarcastically. “[Nothing will be able to get me if I’m between the two of you.]”

Severus began the descent without waiting to hear any more of Miranda’s spleen. The women barely had time to enter the tunnel before the wall slid shut, leaving them alone in the dark, with only their wands as guides.

The dank earth pressed in on them as they picked their way down the rotting staircase. The wood groaned under their feet, but the sound was swallowed by the packed dirt. Severus proceeded without hesitation, his posture alert and sure. Miranda could hear Catalina keeping pace behind her, but the sound of her footsteps was oddly muffled, as though some strange being had thrown a blanket over the three of them that smothered any sign of life.

While Miranda had started out counting the number of steps twisting down into the darkness, somewhere around three hundred or so she lost patience with it and started whistling instead. Within seconds, Severus’s voice drifted back to her.

“[Do stop that racket, Miranda,]” he snapped.

“[What’s wrong with trying to pass the time?]” she protested.

“[He’s right. We need to be able to hear trouble coming,]” Catalina put in.

“Like a cave in,” Severus said, as though he were explaining to a small child.

“Fine,” Miranda replied grudgingly, and fell silent. Soon after, she started switching her wand from hand to hand, tossing it lightly back and forth in an attempt to burn up some of the restless energy that was buzzing through her. The trick started out every dozenth step or so, but the time between throws grew shorter and shorter, until she was switching hands every other step and causing the light cast by her wand to blend into a dizzying zigzag of blue.

“Miranda, stop it!” Catalina chided.

“Good Lord! Would the both of you stop picking at me?” Miranda snapped back.

She tossed the wand a final time in defiance, but then she held it aloft in a mocking salute, until the ceiling began to slope down towards them, and all three of them had to pull their wands closer to their bodies and stoop to avoid hitting their heads. Miranda started pacing her breathing, three steps in, hold for three, out for six, and repeat in an endless round, but even still her fingers tingled and her head felt disconnected from the rest of her body.

“Why did it have to be a cave?” she muttered to herself. Her companions either didn’t hear, or chose to ignore her grumbling.

By this time they were almost crawling their way down, and Miranda was starting to see stars in front of her eyes. The urge to scream choked her, welling up from the core of her being and demanding to be released. She held it tight in her throat, out of concern that she might actually trigger a cave in, rather than for the rest of the party’s sensibilities. But the longer she held it in, the more sure she became that it was only a matter of time before it would rip free.

Just as she knew she could hold in her shriek no longer, she stumbled into the bottom of the staircase, and rolled across the packed earth floor, covering herself in dirt from head to toe. Severus loomed over her, and the light from his wand revealed a small cavern of scarred stone.

“Were you planning to lie there all day, or will you be accompanying us on the rest of the journey?” Severus asked mockingly.
“[I thought a nap might be a good idea after all that,]” Miranda replied nastily, rolling to her feet and dusting herself off.

“[Did Vasile tell you which tunnel we are to take from here?]” Catalina asked brusquely. Although she had emerged from the staircase last of the three, she was the first to survey the road ahead. Three tunnels were before them, unmarked and apparently untouched for God knew how long.

“[No. He didn’t tell you?]” Miranda countered.

“[No.]”

“[No.]”

“[What direction is the river?]” Severus demanded impatiently.

“[I don’t know,]” Catalina snapped back.

“[Typical.]”

“[Excuse me?]”

“[The Four-Point Spell will be useless. Miranda, your tracking spell, if you please.]”

Miranda nodded and braced her feet, trying not to imagine how much earth was pressing down on them. “Miskawew,” she cast.

The rainbow light burst forth from her wand and circled around the cavern thrice before fading away into nothing. She frowned and cast again to the same effect. A third try produced no light at all.

“[Why isn’t it working?]” Severus asked.

“[Something’s interfering with the spell, but I don’t know what,]” Miranda said, shivering
“{We’re wasting time,}” Catalina said. “{There are three of us; one for each tunnel. Whoever finds the river first can send a Patronus to the others.}”

Miranda could tell from the set of Severus’s jaw that he did not like the plan. But, as he did not seem to have any other ideas, he restrained himself to saying, “{You seem unusually certain that you can reliably cast a Patronus down here.}”

“Expecto Patronum!” Catalina spat. A silvery chamois appeared instantly, pawed the ground with its hoof, and leapt passed the three of them, up the stairs and out of sight.

“Expecto Patronum,” Severus cast lazily, his doe gracefully bounding around the cavern and then following the path that the chamois had taken.

Severus and Catalina turned to Miranda, who swallowed hard, her throat suddenly dry. She closed her eyes and thought about her river, but she could only picture it carrying the body of her drowned brother Columba. She quickly shifted to Ilvermorny, calling for David to run with her through the mountains—but David was lying cold and dead under the Snakewood Tree, and would not come to her call.

“Fuck!” Miranda cursed, twitching her wand in frustration.

“{What’s taking so long?}” Catalina demanded.

“{I just don’t like caves. Be quiet so I can concentrate.}” Miranda replied, amazed her voice was as calm as it was.

She flexed her fingers around her wand and the weight of it in her hand soothed her. This brought her to another memory, and she breathed more easily as she recalled that day in her childhood when she’d had that perfect baseball game and her whole future had changed.

“Expecto Patronum,” she cast. Her silvery bobcat burst forth and bolted for the stairs, disappearing almost before Miranda had time to see it.
“[Good. We’re ready,]” Catalina said tersely. “[I will take the tunnel on the left. Professor Snape will take the one on the right, and Miranda will take the middle.]”

“[Exactly who put you in charge?]” Severus asked.

“[Can we just get on with it,]” Miranda said, before the other two could start another argument.

“[Agreed. I’ll see you at the river.]” Catalina said, and she strode into her tunnel, the light from her wand disappearing as she rounded the first bend.

Miranda started for her assigned penance, but she was halted by Severus’s hand on her arm.

“Are you all right?” he asked angrily.

Miranda matched his glare with her own. Although she had come to the church that morning ready to forgive and hoping he would come, the fact that he was still acting like the world’s biggest ass had her as infuriated with him as she’d been when she’d left him in Bucharest.

“I’m fine,” she said, defiantly shaking off his hand.

He looked at her dubiously, but acquiesced to the inevitable. “As you say.”

She held her wand high and trotted off into her tunnel, wanting nothing more than to get this thing over with as quickly as possible.

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“[At least I don’t have the other two complaining about my making too much noise now,]” Miranda said aloud to herself. She’d trotted long enough to feel winded, and though this new tunnel was luxuriously large compared to the one they had first squeezed through, it was still dark enough and the stone floor was uneven enough, that stumbling was a concern. She restrained her pace to a quick walk, her feet hitting the ground in a rolling motion to glide her over the ruts and cracks beneath her. The light from her wand cast dancing shadows where it bounced off the jagged shapes scratched deep into the walls and ceiling of the tunnel, as though some giant had tried to claw its
way out of a suffocating tomb. The echo of her voice rebounding off the same features made her feel slightly less alone. She knew she was acting like a child whistling in the dark, but since there was no one here to see her, who would be the wiser?

“*Dig a hole, dig a hole in the meadow, gonna lay darlin’ Cory down,*” she sang under her breath. “Okay, maybe not that song. Something else. Think cheerful Miranda. You know, sunshine and moonbeams. Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kit—ahh!”

Her monologue ended in a shriek and she dropped to the floor in a crouch, and covered her head with her hands as a burst of movement exploded from the ceiling and darted at her head.

“It’s just bats, Miranda, just bats,” she muttered, swatting at the creatures as they swooped over her and out of sight, but she stayed huddled on the ground, even after the tunnel was silent again.

“Come on girl,” she said, slowly and reluctantly unrolling from the safety of her crouch. “Only way out is through.”

She turned to continue her mission through the tunnel, and started at the sight of a large black tomcat, sitting in the middle of her path and staring at her boldly with its bright yellow eyes. The back of her neck pricked in warning, but she addressed it with a boldness that she did not feel.

“Hello there. How did you get down here?”

The cat twitched its tail and a buzzing sound started in Miranda’s ears. “Are you lost?” she persisted, squatting so that she was eye to eye with the creature.

An unpleasant shock of energy pulsed from her wand into her hand, but she was too mesmerized by the cat’s stare to wonder what it meant. She had never seen such captivating eyes on any living creature, and they expanded until they filled her whole world with sickly yellow light. A foul, sulfurous odor filled her lungs, and she covered her mouth and nose with her hand, coughing and choking on the smell. The cat hissed and spat, then lunged at her, its claws unleashed. Miranda flicked her wand at the frenzied feline to cast a Shield Charm, but the cat—or whatever it was—vanished before making impact. She whipped around in search of it, but though the hairs on the back of her neck still stood on end, as far as she could otherwise tell she was again alone.

She blew out her breath in an unsteady shudder and turned to continue down the tunnel in search of the river. Before she could take another step, the stone around her melted away into a sunny
afternoon in an all too familiar place.

“What…” she said, but her voice trailed off in confusion as her eyes drank in the sight of her own river on the other side of the world. It flowed freely, rushing over the rocks and under the footbridge, reminding her, as it always did, that she was free to go wherever ever she wished. Entranced, she scooped up a handful of stones and started skipping them across the surface, the cave fading to the back of her mind like a dream fades in the light of day. The sun warmed her cheeks and she felt safer than she had in a very long time.

A hand broke through the water, catching one of the stones. The rest of the rocks slipped through Miranda’s fingers, clattering noisily to the ground as she watched Columba emerge from the river, green and bloated in death. She wanted to run, or even take a step away from the specter, but she could no more escape from him than Persephone had been able to flee Hades.

Her brother stopped on the bank and smiled at her with his dripping lips.

“Hello Miranda,” he said. And it was his voice; but there was an unnatural burr marring it, like something was stuck in his throat and vibrating as he spoke. “It’s been a long time.”

“It has,” she whispered.

“I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too.”

“Really? I don’t believe you.”

When she didn’t answer, he threw the rock in his hand at her. It cut her cheek as it sailed by, but the pain pounding in her head numbed her to smaller injuries.

“You do know that this was all your fault,” he continued in a vicious sing-song.

“I know. I’m so sorry. I should have been here.”
“Then why aren’t you crying?” Oh God, he was moving again, his hand outstretched, and she would die if he touched her.

“I don’t know, Columba. I haven’t cried in years,” she blurted in terrified frustration. “I don’t think I have any more tears left at all.”

“It’s hard to believe that you care when you don’t cry over the dead,” said a voice behind her. It too was painfully familiar, lower than Columba’s, and polluted by the same repugnant burr; and though Columba’s hand reached for her, it was the hands of this new phantom that grasped her.

She shut her eyes tightly as David’s hands took hold of her shoulders, caressing them the way he had in life—the way Severus had in the garden not two days earlier. The dead man ran his hands down her arms, turning her towards him, and she was helpless to escape his embrace. She gasped in horror when she felt his cold fingers on her face, and she unwillingly opened her eyes to look into his sightless blue ones.

“Hello David,” she said dully.

“Hello Miranda,” he replied, leaning down to kiss her with his clammy lips. She whimpered against their touch. “Don’t worry. I already know you’ve found someone to replace me.”

He was still nose to nose with her, and he smelled of dank earth and lost dreams.

“No one could replace you,” she choked. “But you’ve been dead for ten years. I’m sorry you died, but I still have to live.”

“You should be sorry I died. After all, it was your fault.”

“I know it was.”

“I don’t believe you.”
“If you can’t cry for us,” Columba said, drifting up to stand next to David, “maybe there is something else you can do.”

She desperately looked from one accusing face to the other. “Anything. I’ll do anything,” she promised rashly, and whether it was from fear or from sorrow she could not tell.

David brushed his lips over her forehead, scraping it like the door of a sepulcher sliding shut. She nodded once, understanding without words what they wanted. David pulled away, and she reached out for him, closing her eyes and tilting her face up to his, desperate to prove that she did love him, even after all this time.

She staggered and fell as she clutched at the empty air before her. When she opened her eyes, her river was gone, and she was again trapped in a tunnel, a mile beneath the surface of the earth.

Catalina’s chamois came bounding towards her from the darkness and said with Catalina’s voice, “I’ve found the river! I’m waiting for you here.”

The chamois stood staring at Miranda until she gave a ragged, aching sob, and pushed herself up off of the floor. As it started trotting back up the tunnel to lead her to Catalina, Miranda followed it with shaking steps. There was an almost unbearable pain in her head, and the relentless voices of the dead pounded in her ears.

The longer she walked, the sturdier her step became. By the time she reached Catalina’s tunnel and started down to the river, she knew exactly what she had to do.

Although the sight of Miranda and Catalina kneeling beside the river allowed Severus to draw breath freely for the first time in perhaps an hour, it did nothing to alleviate the state of his nerves. Since the three of them had separated, he had drawn his wand enough times — to threaten bats, stalagmites, and his own shadow — that he was beginning to question his own sanity. At this rate he was going to require a vacation to recover from his vacation.

At the sound of his footsteps echoing through the oddly silent cavern, Catalina rose, stoppered her bottle and stowed it somewhere in her robes. Unlike the dark stone from the tunnels leading up to it, the rock in this space appeared to be covered with a thick layer of ice. The light from their wands bounced about the space, reflected and bent by the faceted formations, but the artificial
brightness was unsettling; too much, too soon after the darkness before it. There was a ghostly chill
in the place, and even with the lapping flow of the river, it seemed silent as a tomb.

“{Are the both of you quite finished?}” Severus asked, his voice harsh but involuntarily quiet, as
one speaks in a mausoleum.

“{I am. Miranda, do you have what you need?}” Catalina replied in a similar tone.

“{Almost.}” Miranda’s voice was dull and flat, and Severus arched an eyebrow at her back. He
had never seen her so unsettled, and he wondered how close to breaking she was.

“{It is a strange place, but it has its own beauty, don’t you think, Miranda?}” Catalina said,
surveying the otherworldly site with a touch of pride.

“{Yes. Beautiful.}”

Miranda ponderously put her bottle in her bag, and laboriously pushed herself up from the floor of
the cavern. She trudged towards them, her head bent, her eyes on the ground, and Severus knew
that something was very wrong. Catalina seemed oblivious; she had already turned and was leading
the party back to the world above. As Miranda passed Severus, he caught her arm to stop her.

“Are you certain you can make it all the way back?” he asked, the tightness of his voice betraying
his concern.

“I don’t have much choice, do I?” she replied listlessly, shaking off his hand again, and plodding
into the tunnel behind Catalina.

Severus shivered and brought up the rear, sure that the malevolent eyes of some obfuscated
creature were watching them, waiting for an opportunity to pounce.

There were twenty-three turns in the tunnel before the opening that led to the stairs out of this
godforsaken place. Severus was sure of the number, having meticulously counted them on his way
through it the first time. They made it all the way to number twenty-two before the trouble started. Although he had been obsessively watching Miranda for the entirety of the journey back from the underworld, even to the point of tripping several times over ruts in the rock beneath his feet for want of attention, it was in the instant that he looked away that it happened. One second he was watching Miranda’s sagging shoulders, his muscles coiled and ready to spring forward to catch her when she inevitably faltered; the next second he was glancing to the left, his attention drawn by a flash of some shadow flickering through the light cast by his wand; and in the third fatal second, he was sandwiched between the opposite wall and Catalina’s body.

“What the devil!” he shouted, pushing the Romanian off of him in confusion, but his words died on his lips when he raised his eyes to see Miranda standing over the two of them, her magic crackling around her, her hair standing on end, her eyes veritably rolling as she rained curses down on them like a fury from the depths of Hell. He slammed his Shield Charm in place; shoulder to shoulder with Catalina who, thankfully, seemed capable of casting a reasonable Shield Charm of her own.

“Miranda, what are you doing?” Severus demanded, but she only bared her teeth at him and redoubled her efforts. He knew she was angry with him—that she probably hated him—but surely his sins were not so grave that they warranted murder.

“[Don’t bother, Professor, she can’t hear you,]” Catalina said, crouching close enough to him that he wanted to flinch away. “[It’s the Spirit of the Mine.]”

“[What in Merlin’s name are you talking about?]”

“Confringo!” Miranda shouted, her voice strangled with an unearthly vibration that he had never heard from her.

Catalina’s face was white with the effort of maintaining her Shield against Miranda’s relentless onslaught. “[A dark spirit. I thought it was a fairytale but apparently it’s true.]”

“[Are you telling me Miranda is possessed? I don’t believe it.]”

“[Unless this is some kind of sick foreplay, do you have another explanation? She must have met it down here and it’s taken her.]”

“Oppungio!” Miranda ripped a stalactite down from the ceiling, and Severus released his Shield
long enough to blast the thing into powder. Perhaps the Romanian witch was right. Miranda rarely needed to cast spells verbally in a duel. If she were in the power of some other force...he slammed his Shield back in place as Miranda sent another hex his direction.

“{Why her and not one of us?}” he argued, unwilling accept the disastrous implications.

“{Her fear. It must have preyed on her through her fear.}” Catalina explained.

“Confringo!” Miranda cast again, knocking them against the stones. Catalina’s head cracked off the rock with sickening violence, and Severus grunted painfully as another hex caught him in the shoulder. He parried Miranda’s next round of curses with his own, advancing on her and driving her back to give Catalina time to recover.

“Miranda! That’s enough!” he ordered in his most stentorian tone, but she gave no sign that she had even heard him speak. Her eyes were wide and focused, but he could see no light of recognition in them. She fought like a marionette with some dark creature jerking the strings.

Suddenly she spun in place, shooting curses at the four corners of the tunnel with terrible precision. Severus did not understand her intention until the rock started vibrating under his feet.

“Expelliarmus!” he shouted, calling her wand to his hand and shoving it a pocket. He followed immediately with, “Incarcerous!”

Thin black ropes slithered out of his wand and wrapped themselves around Miranda, who staggered and fell. He managed to catch her and lay her down on the ground, but the damage to the tunnel had already been done. As Catalina lunged for the two of them, the tunnel came down over their heads. And while he and the Romanian managed to cast their Shield Charms in time to keep the three of them from being crushed, they could do nothing to stop the tunnel from collapsing around them and burying them alive.

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“{Dragnea, are you injured?” Severus demanded when the dust had settled around them.
“{Nothing serious. You?}” Catalina replied tersely.

“{I appear to have escaped unscathed.}” He peered out through the translucent wall of their Shield charms, surveying the load of rock that lay between them and liberty. “{If you can manage to hold the Shield on your own, I should be able to dig us a way out.}”

“{I can manage. But we must deal with Miranda first.}”

Catalina’s voice quavered over Miranda’s name and Severus shut his eyes briefly, dreading to look at Miranda, as he had absolutely no idea what to do to help her. But he forced himself to open his eyes, and to examine her as dispassionately as he could. Her body was breathing peacefully, marred by cuts and bruises but otherwise unhurt as far as he could tell. Still bound by his spell, she made no move to attack them, and her wide, unblinking eyes showed no sign of anger; or even of recognition.

“{I’ve never seen her like this,}” Severus growled in impotent fury.

Catalina stooped over Miranda, running the fingers of her free hand lightly over the American’s face. “{I have an idea.}” she said slowly. “{Hold the Shield, I will need both hands.}”

Severus grunted as he took the entire weight of the rock on his own Shield. Catalina swiftly pulled a candle from the depths of a pocket, set it in a rut in what was left of the floor, and lit it with her wand. A low chanting in a language that Severus did not understand emanated from her lips and she produced a leather-wrapped bottle from another pocket as she sang. With a quick flick of her wrist, she shook something from the bottle onto her fingers, then crossed herself three times. She repeated the operation to cross Miranda, chanting all the while, then turned to Severus.

“{This is hardly the time for superstitious nonsense,}” he snapped at her, catching her wrist before her fingers could reach his forehead.

“{You don’t have any better ideas,}” she snapped back, jerking her wrist away.

He glared at her but, as her accusation was true, he grudgingly relented and allowed her to cross him with her wet, cold fingers. “{Now what?}”
Catalina passed her hand over Miranda’s face again, but there was no response.

“{I fear that the Spirit is still in her mind.}” Catalina said hesitantly. “{I…if I use Legilimency I might be able to help her defeat it.}”

“{No!}” Severus objected sharply, remembering his own painful intrusion into Miranda’s mind. “{Absolutely not.}”

“{Snape, digging out of this trap is going to take all of our strength. We cannot drag her out or fight her; and we cannot leave her here. The Spirit is the thing preventing her from moving now. She must be fighting it, otherwise she would be struggling to free herself from your spell so that she could keep trying to kill us. If I can help her defeat it, then she might be able to at least walk under her own power.}”

“{She is a natural Occlumens. Dismantling her mental protections without hurting her is an impossible task even when she is a willing participant. If she is warring with a dark creature in her mind, adding another intruder, even a benevolent one, may kill her.}”

“{So will being crushed by a ton of rock. No Shield Charm can last forever.}”

As much as he hated to admit it, Catalina was talking sense. But if anyone was going to undertake the wretched task of breaching Miranda’s mind, it was going to be him.

“{Very well,}” he said acidly. “{You will hold the Shield and I will do the Legilimency.}”

Relief flashed across Catalina’s face. “{I think she would prefer that anyway.}”

“I’m not certain of that,” he muttered, but the Romanian ignored him.

It was the work of a moment for Catalina to set her Shield in place, and it held firm and steady when Severus removed his. Decision taken, he wedged himself into a seated position on the ground next to Miranda, ignoring the discomfort from the jagged stone that jutted into his back as he did. Impulsively, he pulled her into his lap, tilting her head back so that he could gaze into her blank eyes, and discovered that he need not concern himself with her defenses—the wall had already been breached.
“Legimens,” he whispered, falling into her mind almost before the spell was completely cast.

He landed hard on his knees on the dirt road before her protective wall. The structure still stood, but there was a jagged hole missing from the middle of it, as though some creature had clawed its way in. He scrambled to his feet and climbed through the opening in the fortress, wand drawn. Unlike his previous, chaotic excursion into her thoughts, this time the landscape of her mind was eerily quiet. Beyond the wall was a tiny attic, empty save for a few cobwebs and splinters. Gray light filtered in through a partially boarded window, but when Severus examined it, he could see nothing on the other side. A quick survey of the room revealed a door, which opened into a staircase that twisted away into the shadowy distance. Muffled sounds floated up from the darkness, and he attacked the stairs with a vengeance, taking them two at a time, as fast as he could go with out falling.

He did stumble when he reached the bottom, it came so suddenly, green grass rushing up to meet him. When he glanced above him, the staircase was gone, and he was in a verdant paradise; groves of sycamores and willows crowded the banks of a river that rushed under a charming footbridge and broke over rocks as it ran. It could only be Miranda’s river, Severus thought he would know it anywhere from her description, and he hurried to its shore, searching for her.

“Miranda,” he called, when he could not find her.

“Go away!” hissed a voice from above.

He saw her at last, obscured by the branches of a sycamore tree, and she huddled closer to the trunk of it when she realized he had discovered her hiding place.

“I can’t do that,” he said calmly. “I need you to come down.”

“Why would you want me to do that? I’m an idiot, remember?”

He absorbed the blow and persisted. “Miranda, I know that you are aware that you are one of the most intelligent people of my acquaintance. Now stop this nonsense and come down.”
“Not until you say you’re sorry for being nasty to me.”

“Women,” he muttered.

“What was that?”

“I said I should take more care not to let my temper rule my tongue.”

“That’s…actually better than I was hoping for,” she admitted, swinging nimbly down from the tree.

He swallowed the snide remarks that leapt to his mind and opened his arms, and a foolish joy beat in his heart when she willingly stepped into them.

“May I safely assume that you do not hate me?” he murmured, his face buried in her hair.

“I never hated you, Severus. But I suggest you work on your apologies. For a man who is as big an ass as you are, you’re going to need them.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Oh, God,” she whispered, tensing in his arms.

“Surely that isn’t as shocking a revelation as all that,” pulling back to see the fear on her face.

“No, it’s…it’s them again.”

He whirled to see what had her so horrified, but saw nothing.

“What do you see?” he asked as Miranda huddled against him.
“David and Columba. Don’t you see them? They’re coming for me across the river. They want me to kill you. They won’t be happy until I kill you. It’s my fault they died and…”

He grabbed her, cutting off her babbling. “Listen to me, it isn’t them. It’s some other creature, and you must fight it.”

“It is them!” she insisted, trying to escape his grasp.

“Think, Miranda! Would either of those men wish for you to do murder? Whatever you blame yourself for, do you believe that either of them would blame you for their deaths?”

“No…”

He pulled her wand out of his pocket and placed it in her hand, cupping his around it and willing his strength into her.

“It’s dark magic Miranda. But you can fight it. I know what feats you are capable of.”

Her jaw set in grim determination, and she stepped clear of him, her wand ready to engage the unseen threat that bore down on her. As he watched her, he became aware of a bottle in his hand, small and covered with leather, identical to the one that Catalina had held in the tunnel. Without stopping to think about what he was doing, he shook some of the water from the bottle onto his fingers, intending to seal her forehead with the sign of her God.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, you little shit?” boomed an unwelcomely familiar voice.

Severus jerked back like he had been slapped and gazed in visceral horror as his father appeared from behind one of the trees.

“Hiding behind a woman, just like the sniveling coward you are.” Tobias continued, advancing on his son.

The world around him seemed to grow, or perhaps Severus shrank, but soon he was looking up at the Tobias-thing that towered over him, spewing venom and stinking of cheap liquor. The smell
turned Severus’s stomach, and for a moment he feared he was going to vomit, the way he sometimes would when he had been a child at the mercy of his father’s fists.

“And what’s that you’ve got?” Tobias sneered at the bottle Severus grasped in his hand. “Didn’t I tell you that religion’s for women and poofs? But maybe that’s what you are—some nancy cocksucker who takes it up the ass because he’s not even man enough to give it, you goddamn woofter.”

Tobias’s meaty hands reached for Severus’s throat, but Miranda dropped to her knees at the same instant, her wand forgotten on the ground, her hands at her neck wrestling with invisible fingers as she gasped for air. Although every fiber of Severus’s being cried out for him to run, he turned away from Tobias and traced a cross in water on Miranda’s forehead with a steadiness that he did not feel. Her hands relaxed the instant he finished the task, and she gathered her wand while he faced the Spirit that wore his father’s face.

“I suggest you take yourself off to hell, or wherever it is that you belong,” he said as he traced a cross on his own forehead with the tip of his thumb—perhaps the most spiteful and defiant use of the sign ever made by a unbeliever on this earth before or since.

The Tobias-thing wavered and vanished in a hiss of black smoke. Miranda gripped Severus’s hand, and the bottle of water was gone.

“They disappeared,” she said, “when you touched me.”

“Then it is high time we removed ourselves from this place. There is still much work to be done before we earn our rest today.”

She grabbed his cheeks and kissed him on the mouth, full and achingly sweet. And when he opened his eyes, he held her in his arms, huddled beneath the canopy of Catalina’s Shield.

It took a tedious amount of time before they were finally free of their prison. Severus had to take a turn holding up the weight of the rock so that Catalina could rest. Miranda was in no fit state to do
anything besides work to keep her wits about her in the tight space and drag herself out through the
tunnel that Severus created when Catalina was ready to take up the task of Atlas once more. But
eventually they all managed to squirm their way back to the limbo at the foot of the stairs leading
to the world above. And when they burst out of that unending flight into the minuscule church, the
outer door was open to the world, and Miranda rushed through it, and Severus did not try to stop
her.

Catalina wiped her grimy hands and her robes, then held one out to him. “{Not bad.}” she said
when he grasped it. “{For a foreigner.}”

He snorted and returned, “{I am overwhelmed by your gratitude.}”

“{You’ll take care of her?]” she asked as they emerged from the church into an afternoon as clear
and bright as anyone who had spent the bulk of the day buried alive could wish.

“{Yes, I will.]”

The Romanian nodded and set off down the cobblestone walk while Severus scanned the grounds,
searching for a sign of the direction Miranda had taken. An inviting meadow of wildflowers
bordered the church, and he wandered into its open arms for quarter of an hour before he caught
site of her. She was lying in the grass, her arms spread out as though she might embrace the whole
of the sky. He approached her slowly, bearing the full burden of his awkwardness now that his
anger was well and truly spent. Though he felt like the fool of the world, he lay down next to her
when he reached her; but he kept scrupulously apart, fidgeting with the blades of grass while he
waited for her judgement.

“I think,” she said after an unbearable moment, “that in an hour or so, when I can get up again, I’d
like to go back to my campsite and cook a huge dinner over an open fire.”

“Yes?” he said, wondering if he was going to be welcome at this dinner.

“And then I think I’d like to stay outdoors all night and sleep under the stars.”

“Yes?”

He felt the touch of her hand on his, and wrapped his fingers around the precious weight.
“I was hoping you’d join me.”

“That would be most agreeable.”

“Good.”

He was raw and open, like a wound, and if she had asked, in that moment he would have told her anything. But she didn’t ask; and the moment passed with them lying together, alive, and reasonably whole, watching the wisps of clouds drift above them through the endless sky.

Chapter End Notes

We're getting close to the end of part one of the series! Let me know what you think :D

Endless thanks to everybody who cheered me along while I wrestled with this beast of a chapter; especially to Chemical_Pixie, Lost_Robin, Bunbury, RonsGirlFriday, Pixileanin, CheekyTorahLex, Unwritten Curse, belgian quaffle, poppunkpadfoot, Tidal_Dragon, and anybody else I may have missed. I could not have finished this without your support.

Endless thanks and love also to Mr. Zingarella, who beta-ed this and encouraged me through many revisions. Any mistakes leftover are mine.

The One Wood Church; or rather, the One Wood Monastery, is a real place. It was built by a monk from a single tree to house a miraculous icon that he found inside the trunk. I invented the interior, and the cave underneath--at least, to the best of my knowledge.
Draco Malfoy sat rigidly in the chair across from Severus’s desk, silently glaring at the top of the professor’s head. Severus kept the boy waiting on purpose while he completed his notes from *Magick Moste Evile*, both to give himself time to control his unwieldy temper, and in the hopes that Draco might be made uncomfortable enough by the pregnant silence to betray something. Draco’s pointed face was paler than usual, punctuated by dark smudges under his eyes. Though he draped himself across the chair in an imitation of his incarcerated father, Severus recognized the all-too-familiar signs of the insomnia that was undoubtedly plaguing his protégée. In spite of his promise to Narcissa that he would do all in his power to protect and aid her son in his impossible mission, he had, since the beginning of term, accomplished nothing on that front. The few forays he had made at gaining Draco’s confidence had been sullenly rebuffed; and even his attempts at investigation had brought nothing to light.

Notes completed, Severus slowly closed the book and slid the brown package that had caused today’s disaster across the top of his desk. With deliberate care he unwrapped it before Draco’s eyes, observing the boy for any minute twitch. He was certain that Draco was responsible for this unforgivably sloppy assassination attempt, but he felt a twinge of pride at the way the boy maintained his impassively angry facade, even when the gleaming opal necklace lay completely exposed before him.

“I believe you know what this is, Draco,” Severus said, searching Draco’s face while the boy scrupulously avoided his eyes.

“An early Christmas present, sir?” Draco retorted.

“Detention. Wednesday night. I will not take cheek from you.”

Draco shrugged. “It’s a cursed necklace from Borgen and Burkes and it almost killed that Gryffindor cow, Katie Bell. Everybody in school knows that by now. What’s it got to do with me?”
“You know very well what it has to do with you. If this is your brilliant plan to assassinate one of the greatest wizards in the world, I have truly failed you as a teacher.”

Draco flushed at the rebuke and glared at his mentor. “Sometimes I think Aunt Bella might be right about you, sir. How can you be on the Dark Lord’s side and still call Dumbledore great?”

“I realize you are far too young to grasp this concept, but only fools underestimate their enemies. Unfortunately, at the rate you are going, I doubt you will live long enough to gain that wisdom.”

“I had nothing to do with it!” Draco insisted. “I wasn’t even in Hogsmeade today, ask Professor McGonagall. And as for the necklace, why don’t you talk to Cassie Borgin about it? It came from her uncle’s shop. She’s more likely to have planted it than me.”

Severus’s eyes narrowed. “Are you accusing a member of your own house?”

Draco retreated and tried to cover his misstep with more anger. “No. I’m only saying that it could have been anybody.”

“Go back to the common room and stay there for the rest of the night. If I hear of you leaving, you will spend enough time in detention to make any other tasks impossible.”

“Yes, sir,” Draco spat, pushing himself noisily out of the chair.
“And send Miss Borgin here when you see her.”

Draco slammed the office door in answer and Severus pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers. While Draco was firmly on the path to becoming an angry young man, he was still young enough to be a scared boy as well. It was a dangerous combination, and Severus was beginning to doubt that he would uncover Draco’s plans before the boy managed to kill someone—or himself.

The last grain of black sand in the top of the hourglass on his desk trickled down onto the gleaming heap below, and Severus irritably tore his mind away from the innumerable problems plaguing it at the moment. The antidote he was brewing for Miss Bell hissed and foamed on his private workbench. It was the perfect slate blue color when he went to check its progress, and he began adding bits of unicorn horn, stirring laboriously after each addition to ensure complete emulsification. He did not actually expect this potion to revive her; but he believed it would not hurt her either. Avoiding the tedious trouble of transporting her to St. Mungo’s and dealing with her potentially irrational parents was well worth the attempt.

He had just finished adding the unicorn horn when Miss Borgin’s cautious knock announced her.

“Enter,” he said, returning to his desk and flipping the hourglass.

The door opened quietly to admit Cassandra Borgin, a plain slip of a girl with mousey, but neatly plaited, hair and a smattering of freckles across her upturned nose.

“Draco said you wanted to see me sir?” she said meekly, taking the chair that Draco had vacated without any other indication of nerves. The amount of time she’d spent in detention during her fifth year as a result of her daring to be the lone Slytherin to join Dumbledore’s Army had done much to cure her fear of her Head of House. And the gumption she had displayed by her willingness to learn Defense Against the Dark Arts by any means—even those illicitly provided by Harry Potter—had caused Severus to reexamine her overlooked potential.
“Miss Borgin, am I correct in assuming that you, like the rest of the school, are privy to the details of Miss Bell’s injury?”

“Yes sir. Everyone’s saying that she was cursed by a necklace from Uncle Orestes’s shop.” Her eyes flitted over the opals on his desk and she added, “That necklace, in fact.”

“Do you know anything about this?”

“Sir, the last time I was in this office you warned me not to be caught making trouble again. My memory is not so short that I would be taking chances. Besides, what do I have against Katie Bell? I don’t even like Quidditch.”

“But you were in Hogsmeade today, were you not?”

“Yes, sir. I was with Morgana Mulciber and Freya Flint the entire time.”

“Did you see anything?”

“No, sir. We went to Honeydukes and Madam Puddifoot’s today. We missed the whole thing.”

He steepled his fingers and studied her in silence, and she returned his gaze with a calm, open one.
Only the constant clasping and unclasping of her hands betrayed her discomfort, but it was enough to prompt him to continue the interrogation.

“I should think that this unfortunate event will put your uncle under some inconvenient scrutiny.”

“He’s dealt with such things before. Luckily the shop can’t be held responsible for damage done by items after they are sold.”

“How fortunate.” Her busy hands were still—that must not have been her worry. Time to try another direction. “But your uncle is a canny man of business.”

“Yes, sir. He is.”

“From all reports, you are keeping pace with your classwork. Do you still make time for your music, or has that become a casualty of the demands of N.E.W.T preparation?”

Her hands started clasping and unclasping again—good. “I…I still play, sir,”

“And when you play, you must be so enraptured by the music that you are oblivious to whatever conversations may be occurring in the Common Room at the same time.”

“I…I don’t know, sir.”
“Because if you were to happen to overhear anything that I might find interesting I would be most disappointed if you failed to share it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, sir.”

“See that you do. I should hate to see our House pulled down by its own members.”

She was bursting to ask him something—he could see it in her eyes—but he did not attempt to dip into her mind to discover what it was. He would be shocked if she were not at least nominally versed in the arts of Legilimency and Occlumency. Better to have her think she could trust him, and come to him with the information he desired of her own volition.

“I understand, sir.”

“I expect that you do. You may go.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He gave his attention to his book, and he kept his smirk to himself when she paused at the door and turned back to him.

“Sir?”
“Yes, Miss Borgin?”

“I’m not sure if this would at all interest you, but Draco Malfoy has been acting, well, strange since term started.”

“How so?”

“It’s hard to explain…he hasn’t been studying like he used to. I mean, he always used to act like he didn’t have to try to get good marks and like he owned Hogwarts, but he also was always the last one to pack up his books and leave the Common Room at night. I’ve barely seen him open a book this term. At least, not one for class.”

“Miss Borgin, this is exactly the sort of interesting information I wished to hear.”

She nodded once and said firmly, “If I hear anymore, I’ll be sure to pass it on, sir. And I won’t get caught.”

“I would expect no less from you, Miss Borgin. Good night.”

“Good night, sir.”
Cassandra shut the door softly behind her and Severus sat back in his chair, rubbing his aching temples. The worm of conscience turned in the back of his mind, calling into question whether it was justifiable to set a student to spy on her own housemates, but he pushed it away. There were simply too many lives at stake to neglect any possible advantage. He glanced at the hourglass; another twenty minutes before the antidote would be ready. With a sigh of resignation, he pulled his cigarette case out of his pocket, finding the message from Miranda that he had been dreading all day.

WISH ME LUCK the mosaic spelled out. Luck indeed. He wished she’d been free to come back with him after the disaster in the caves, or better, that she had never gone to Romania in the first place.

YOU DO NOT REQUIRE LUCK YOU REQUIRE SKILL WHICH YOU HAVE he sent.

The tiny pieces of cut stone rearranged themselves immediately with a reply; she must have been waiting for him.

I WISH YOU WERE HERE THE FEASTING AND DANCING EARLIER WERE TO DIE FOR AND THERE IS GOING TO BE A PROCESSION TO SEE CATALINA AND ME OFF TO THE LAND OF THE IELE

His stomach twisted uncomfortably and he wondered if he would ever become accustomed to Miranda’s penchant for plunging headlong into danger.

IF I HAD MY WISH YOU WOULD BE HERE RATHER THAN ON A RECKLESSLY DANGEROUS MISSION IN ROMANIA

He could almost hear her roll her eyes in her reply.

BECAUSE THE UK IS SO SAFE AT THE MOMENT DONT FRET I WILL BE BACK THERE WITHIN THE WEEK
He slid the case back into his pocket and watched the final minutes of sand pouring down through the hourglass. The memory of their parting embrace crashed over him so strongly that he swore he could feel her warm arms wrapped around his neck. And what if that were the last embrace allotted to them?

With an Herculean effort, he pushed this useless sentiment to the back of his mind, to keep his tattered conscience company. He bottled Miss Bell’s potion with a steady hand, and headed to the hospital wing with a heavy heart.

Merlin, he was ready for this whole bloody business to be over.

The midnight procession twisted along the dirt road, stretching through the forest all the way back to the church in the Merry Cemetery from which they had set forth some time ago. Miranda and Catalina were near the front, just behind the icon bearers and the priest, and just before Ileana Lupul, Nicolae Dragnea, and Charlie Weasley. It seemed as though the entire population of magical folk had descended on Săpânța to see the resolution of the long trial. Miranda and Charlie in their dress cloaks were plain in comparison to the sea of colorful embroidery and dyed wool around them. The choir chanted hymns and prayers as they made their way through the chilly autumn night, and Miranda marveled once again at the casual way that the Statute of Secrecy was ignored. The non-magical people of Săpânța had turned out in support of their magical brethren, and Miranda was sure that their good will would do as much as anything else to bring the captive children home safely.
The moon had almost reached her zenith when the clerics and laymen ahead of the champions fanned out around a dusty fork in the road. The trees surrounding them were already naked, and their leafless branches reached out like gnarled fingers towards the little humans below. Doamnă Lupul led Miranda and Catalina forward, and the rest of the procession began to crowd in untidy clusters, whispering and attempting vainly to see the main event.

Miranda and Catalina knelt before the priest, who blessed them both in a voice that rumbled from the depths of the earth. Whether it was from the cold, or the magic, or the excitement; or all of this combined, Miranda shivered deliciously. She had been waiting for this moment since the beginning of the year, and all of her work was about to come to fruition. But no—she was about to step into another world altogether. She had been waiting for this moment for her entire life.

“{The time has come.}” Doamnă Lupul said as the women rose to their feet. “{Remember, you must gather the children and return to us by noon, or you will all be trapped in the Iele’s realm.}”

A ray of moonlight pierced through the trees, so bright and thick Miranda was sure that, if she touched it, she could break a piece of it off to hold in her hands. It shot down into the road, throwing bits of dirt into the air as it plunged into the dry earth. Doamnă Lupul stepped forward, shaking back her wolfskin cloak and rolling up the sleeves of her finely woven blouse. With a manic gleam in her eye, she thrust her hands into the moonbeam, and sucked in her breath through gritted teeth. Her booted feet dug into the ground as she forced her hands apart, tearing open a human-sized gash in the air itself. Task completed, she stepped back with her hands extended, and a thick, black liquid oozed off them, dripping onto the ground with an unappealing plop. Nicolae hurried forward, bearing a bowl of water that the Cezara might cleanse her hands of the primordial glop. The moon continued its celestial arc, and a jagged, pulsating rip remained behind for the adventuresses to pass through.

“{God be with you.}” panted Doamnă Lupul, winded from her effort.

Miranda and Catalina exchanged a glance, gathered their offerings for the Iele, and entered the ragged door together.
The world on the other side of the crossroads was flooded by an unnerving, monotonous steel-blue light that emanated from nowhere that Miranda could ascertain. The usual division of land and sky was likewise absent. The ground upon which they stood blurred into the distance, but no comforting curve denoted the horizon. A tangled mass of brambles covered the ground before them, save for a narrow path that twisted through the uninviting mess to a white castle gleaming in the distance. The air was hot and sticky, and within minutes both Miranda and Catalina had stripped off their cloaks and rolled up their sleeves.

“[That must be the place, yes?]” Miranda said, eyeing the elusive structure that wavered in the heat.

“[It must be,]” Catalina agreed, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand and studying the empty sky above them. “[There are no stars. How will we know the time?]”

“[We’ll just have to go as fast as we can.]”

This was easier said than done. The heat hampered their progress, and they were soon gasping for air even at a walking pace. Miranda’s clothing stuck to her sweaty body, chafing her skin and fraying her temper. As they approached, the castle seemed to recede into the distance rather than become any closer. Miranda wondered if the whole thing were a mirage and they had missed some important point. What if there were some trick or riddle that they needed to understand in order to gain entrance to the Iele’s home? What if it were like in a fairy story where the unappealing bramble actually held the treasure they sought? Would they wonder forever here in this purgatory and never reach either the castle or their home?

All at once, the castle was upon them. Miranda had the wild thought that she and Catalina had been walking in place and the castle had moved instead. Up close, the building was iridescent rather than white. Its walls were formed from dragonfly wings, woven tightly together, and they, like the doorway between the worlds, pulsed like a giant, disembodied organ. As the women approached,
the middle of the thing peeled open with a wet, slurping sound, and Miranda was suddenly very thankful that her Papa had insisted she learn to overcome her squeamishness at an early age. Somehow she doubted that the Iele would look favorably on guests that vomited at the sight of their storied home.

The churning in Miranda’s stomach only lasted long enough for she and Catalina to enter the forbidding place. Inside the castle was a lush forest, as cool and green as any earthly paradise. A rainbow of birds played among the branches, and a low, enchanting music washed over the enclosure. The base of each tree was guarded by a burly, jackal-headed man. They stood at silent attention, watching the intruders with dull, disinterested eyes.

“{What do we do now?}” Miranda whispered.

“{We wait. They will come to us,}” Catalina replied.

These words had barely left Catalina’s lips when out of the forest floated a marvel of a woman; so painfully beautiful that it hurt to look at her. Like the Sânziene, her dark hair and her simple white garment flowed out around her as though she were drifting in water. Her feet hovered above the forest floor, and she smiled graciously at the human women with pointed teeth. Miranda’s neck prickled in warning, and she was sure that this creature was far more dangerous than her brawny guards.

When the Iele did not speak, Miranda and Catalina knelt as one, spreading their offerings before the fairy woman; the gilded cage with the sorrowful birds of paradise, the bouquet of flowers from the Sânziene’s mountaintop, and the bottle of water from the river beneath the One Wood Church. The Iele waved her hand indifferently over the treasure, vanishing them with a lack of ceremony that made Miranda bristle. With barely a gesture inviting them to follow, the Iele turned and floated back into the forest, leaving the women to scramble clumsily after her.

The forest was so thick that they had to go single file through it; hurrying after the Iele until Miranda lost all sense of direction. The further they went, the more Miranda’s neck pricked her,
and her hands started sweating despite the cool. At last the forest path opened into a wide clearing beneath an undulating dome of dragonfly wings. A little pond sat in the center of the deserted place, ringed with laceflowers and lilies of the valley. The Iele led them up to the edge of the rippling water, and vanished without ever saying a word.

“{I don’t understand,}” Miranda said, frustration creeping into her voice.

“{Look,}” Catalina said grimly, pointing to the pond where twenty silver fish darted beneath the surface of the water. “{The fish are the children.}”

Miranda blew out her breath. “{I take it this is what the Changeover Potion is for?}”

“{No. We will give them that at the doorway between the worlds.}”

“{But how do we change them back into children? I think their parents might object to having them come home in this condition.}”

“{You brought your net, yes?}” Catalina was already pulling her own unicorn hair net from a pocket.

“{I did.}”

“{We will each catch half of them, and pull them out together. Vasile said that should break part of the spell.}”
“{Should break it?}” Miranda circled to the opposite side of the pond, and retrieved her own net from a hook on her belt.

“{Just fish,}” Catalina ordered tersely. “{We’re wasting time.}”

Miranda crouched down amid the beautiful, deadly flowers decorating the shore of the pond and cast her net.

She did not like this. She did not like it at all.

__________________________________________________

Severus was in a foul temper when he landed at St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries early Sunday morning. Minerva had bestowed him with the unenviable task of escorting the still unconscious Katie Bell thither for further treatment. As they spun into the triage station by way of the portkey from the Hogwarts hospital wing, a tall woman in Healer’s robes and a black headscarf was in place to catch Miss Bell and lay her on a waiting bed. By the time Severus’s head had stopped spinning, the Healer was briskly examining her new patient.

“Peace be upon you, Professor Severus,” she said as she gently probed and prodded.

“That is unlikely to happen anytime soon, Healer A’isha,” he replied in a voice scratchy from lack of sleep.
As usual, she was unfazed by his lack of civility. “Has there been any change in her condition?”

“No. Not since she was brought to the hospital wing yesterday.”

“What have you…”

“Katie!”

A shrill cry interrupted the Healer, and Severus turned to see a bull of a woman barreling into the room with a spindly man on her heels. Severus barely had time to brace himself before Mrs Bell accosted him, baying for blood and explanations.

“Let me see her!” Mrs Bell tried unsuccessfully to push past Severus. “How did this happen? What are you going to do about it? Who is responsible?”

“Mrs Bell,” Severus said, breaking her name into several unappealing syllables in order to gain her attention. “We have no further information than was owled to you this morning. It would be best for you and Mr Bell to wait in the lobby until you are called.”

“Like hell we will,” Mrs Bell growled.

“Breathe, Greta,” Mr Bell said, laying a hand on his wife’s shoulder. “Let the people do their jobs.”
Mrs Bell shook off her husband’s hand “That’s my baby! And why are you here instead of Professor McGonagall?”

Merlin preserve him from irrational parents. “Professor McGonagall’s duties as deputy headmistress prevent her from leaving school grounds during Headmaster Dumbledore’s absence,” Severus explained tersely.

“Dumbledore’s not even there? With You Know Who gadding about? No wonder students are getting cursed! Do you even care what happens to them? These are our children that we trusted you to protect!”

“I assure you, madam, we are doing everything within our power to protect them.”

“Well it’s not working, is it?”

“Considering your daughter’s devotion to Quidditch, I would think that you are no stranger to her being injured. Fortunately, Miss Bell is possessed of a remarkably thick skull.”

Mrs Bell went white with rage. “You’re head of Slytherin house, aren’t you? I’d bet my broomstick that one of your students knows all about this.”

How dare she? Severus opened his mouth to give the avenging harpy the set down of her life, but Healer A’isha intervened, leaving Katie’s side to slip between the warring pair.
“Good morning, I am Healer A’isha Shafiq. You are Miss Bell’s mother, am I correct?” she said in a stern, but pleasant tone.

“Yes, I am, Healer Shafiq.” Mrs Bell drew herself up to her full height, but her lower lip was quivering dangerously. Severus assumed that fear of sending Mrs. Bell into further hysterics was the only thing that kept Healer A’isha from launching into one of her passionate explanations regarding proper forms of address. Or perhaps she had finally mellowed enough to accept British niceties without protest.

“Then you must be eager for answers, as are we all. I requested Professor Snape accompany your daughter himself. He is an expert in curses…”

“I’m sure he is,” Mrs Bell spat.

“Greta!” Mr Bell cajoled.

“…and I wish to speak to him about what he has attempted thus far,” Healer A’isha continued as though the others had not spoken. “Perhaps you would both be so good as to wait in the lobby or the cafeteria while I make my preliminary examination and settle your daughter in a room. Then I will be able to give you more information than I can at the present time.”

Mrs Bell wavered, tears glistening in her eyes. Mr Bell took her by the arm and she allowed him to start to lead her away, but then she yanked her arm out of his grasp again and turned on the potions master.

“You brought her here by portkey, didn’t you?” she demanded.
“Yes, Mrs Bell. We have a portkey in the hospital wing at Hogwarts that comes directly to triage,” Severus said impatiently.

“Traveling by portkey is dangerous for an injured person!” she all but shrieked. “You probably hurt her even worse!”

“Mrs Bell,” Healer A’isha said sharply, “while you are correct that traveling by portkey is unadvised in the case of broken bones or certain internal injuries, it is perfectly harmless in your daughter’s case. She has not been physically injured. Indeed, it is much better that the professor brought her in this way, rather than lose precious time taking her all the way outside the wards at Hogwarts to Apparate her here. Surely you agree that time is of the essence.”

“I…” Mrs Bell’s voice trailed off and tears started rolling over her cheeks.

“It’s not a Quidditch injury, Greta,” Mr Bell said soothingly. “Why don’t we go upstairs and get a cup of tea.”

“I don’t want any tea,” Mrs Bell protested.

“I know, but they’re terribly slow in the cafeteria, and by the time we’ve had a cuppa, the Healer will be able to tell us something about Katie.”

Mrs Bell eyed Healer A’isha suspiciously.
“I will take good care of your daughter, Mrs Bell. I promise.” Healer A’isha said calmly.

Mrs Bell’s face crumbled as she gave way to tears, and she allowed her husband to lead her off in search of tea—or perhaps something more bracing. Healer A’isha turned back to her patient and resumed her examination as though nothing had happened.

“Merlin, Healer A’isha, how do you stand it?” Severus muttered when the Bells were out of sight.

“It happens all the time, Professor Severus. What good does it do to let fly my temper when I am strong enough to curb it?” she replied. “Now tell me everything you can about this child and the curse.”

“Come on, little guy, you’re the last one,” Miranda coaxed. Her net was full save for one shy straggler who kept darting away from his captured brethren. Catalina was sitting on her heels, waiting impatiently on the other shore, and all of Miranda’s limbs were so stiff that she doubted she would be able to stand up, even when she managed to catch the stray fish.

“{Are you finished yet?]” Catalina demanded, her voice tired and sharp.

Miranda ignored her. “Come on….GOTCHA!” With a flick of her wrist, the net scooped up the final changeling. “{I am now. Ready?]”
Catalina shook herself and nodded. "{And…pull!}"

The exhausted pair heaved their nets out of the water together. At first, Miranda’s net lay on the shore, a shining, dripping mass of flopping silver fish. Her mind started racing in panic, but in the space of a blink she was granted a minor miracle. Before her eyes, the net pulled itself into a long rope, and each fish morphed into a solemn faced child, ranging from grammar school age to near adulthood. One by one, the children took hold of the rope and stared at her with bland, impassive faces.

When they did not bolt, she picked up the end of the rope and said, "{This way, little ones.}"

They followed her passively around the pond to Catalina and her matching brood. As Miranda reached her rival’s side, she could see that the younger witch’s face was wet with tears.

"{Gabi!}" Catalina breathed, her eyes riveted on the lanky boy at the head of Miranda’s group. He did not give any indication that he recognized his sister, he merely stared straight ahead, lost in a dream-like trance.

"{We’d better get going,}" Miranda said quietly. "{It’s a long way back.}"
The trek from the castle to the door between the worlds seemed even hotter and longer than before. Miranda was openly panting by the time they reached the ugly rip, but the children tromped along as placidly as Madeline and her schoolmates strolling through the streets of Paris.

“{The potion,}” Catalina wheezed when they came to a halt at last.

“{I think you should do the honors,}” Miranda said with a tired smile.

She pulled a dark bottle and a metal cup from her bag, and handed them both to her comrade. Catalina’s eyes were shining as she poured the first measure of amber liquid from the bottle. She offered the cup to her brother, but he did not seem to notice the libation. With a grunt of frustration, she held the cup to his lips, helping him drink as though he were a small child. The first drops of the potion dribbled over his chin, but then he trembled, grasped the cup, and drank deep.

“{Catina?}” he asked, blinking his soft brown eyes at his sister.

She pulled him into a fierce embrace, nearly dropping the bottle. “{We’re going home.}”

Miranda’s throat was tight as she watched Catalina go down the lines, offering the potion to each enchanted child. One by one they blinked awake and, while they did not all recognize their liberator, one reassuring nod from Gabi was all that was needed to keep them in their docile lines. A haze of goodwill rushed through Miranda’s body, turning her bones to jelly. She let herself sink to the ground to rest and savor the moment.
A howl that would have put the Hound of Baskervilles to shame shattered the peace of the little band. The children who had already received the potion huddled around Gabi, wide-eyed with terror. Miranda shot to her feet, whirling to face the source of the harrowing cry. A pack of the jackel-headed guards was advancing on them, axes drawn.

“{Hold this,}” she said, handing her rope to Gabi and drawing her pistol.

“{What is it?}” Catalina asked as she distributed the potion to the final child. “{My God…}” She drew her wand, but Miranda waved her off.

“{No. You get the children out of here. I’ll hold them off.}”

“{But you’ll be trapped here!}”

“{No I won’t. I’ll take care of these mongrels and be right behind you. I have excellent timing.}”

“{No you don’t!}”

“{It has to be done. Goodbye Catalina.}” Miranda fumbled in a pocket, searching for her vials of Strengthening Solution.

“{But if I go back alone, Doamnă Lupul will back Voldemort!}” Catalina’s bluster ended with a broken crack.
“{I don’t give a shit about that right now. Just get those children home,}” Miranda replied firmly.

She tossed down one more vial than was prudent and started towards their pursuers at as quick a pace as the heat would allow. The potions and the adrenaline blended into a heady cocktail of berserker rage, and she leveled her pistol at the fiends. They fanned out into ranks as they cleared the bramble patch, and the instant the creatures were in range, Miranda started putting bullets between their eyes. Until the ammunition ran out, she brought them down in rapid succession. Apparently the things possessed no more brains than clay pigeons, for the ones behind trod over their fallen brothers with no concern for themselves.

“At least they’re stupid,” she muttered to herself as she spent her last bullet. She whipped out her wand, planted her feet, and started hexing for her life. “Sectumsempra!”

The curses ripped through the lines, and the jackel-men yelped as their flesh exploded. But, though not one of them made a move to protect himself, the unending stream started to gain on her. She backed away slowly, loathe to give up any ground. As sweat stung her eyes, she risked a glance over her shoulder, hoping that Catalina and the others would be gone, and that she might make a break for freedom.

They were gone. As was the jagged door. All that remained was an endless swath of steel-blue wasteland, an infinite army of drones, and her.

She flew at her enemies like a demon. No sense in making the inevitable easy.
Catalina and Gabi emerged from the pathway between the worlds to a crisp, October day under a cloudless sky. Most of the procession was either still intact, or had reformed, waiting in worried, lethargic groups. As the first child came through, they roused themselves from their torpor into a flurry of chaotic motion, engulfing the bewildered foundlings and pulling them away to be petted and marveled at. Catalina was in an agony of anxiety as she watched the door between the worlds pulse, but the mass of humanity had caught her as well. Before she could start screaming, her father’s hand plucked her out of the crush, pulling her into the shelter of a poplar tree where Doamnă Lupul sat, calmly surveying the reunions, and Charlie paced in nervous agitation.

“{My, Catina! You’ve done it!”} Nicolae exalted. His arm was around Gabi’s shoulders, and his son smiled faintly from father to sister, as though he were still half asleep.

“{Where’s Miranda?}” Charlie demanded.

Catalina grabbed Charlie’s arm. “{She stayed behind. We were attacked and she stayed behind so that we could escape. We have to go back for her!}”

She dragged Charlie through the crowd, barely registering her father’s shout of protest. Her hand was inside the gateway as the sun reached the pinnacle of the sky. A blinding ray of light shot down into the earth, singeing her fingers. With a sharp cry, she jerked her hand away, cradling it to her chest. Tears blurred her vision, but she could tell, even before the sunbeam had dissipated, that it was too late. The door was gone.

“{No!}” Catalina’s strangled cry was lost in the riot of joyful conversation around her.

Vasile appeared, moving through the well-wishers and taking Catalina’s throbbing hand in his. He chanted a healing incantation as he rubbed his fingers lightly over her skin.
“{I take it our American friend is lost?}” he said when he finished his work.

Catalina nodded numbly. “{The Iele sent their guard after us and she fought them. We have to go back for her.}”

“{I’m sorry, Catalina, but that is impossible. It will be another year before we could even hope to reach her.}”

In the midst of the joy around her, Catalina felt like she had a millstone around her neck. Her limbs were like lead and she hardly noticed that Charlie now had her by the arm and was leading her to sit on an unoccupied tree stump. The midday sun beat down on her, a silent, accusing witness to her failure. The events in the other world played through her mind in a sick pantomime. She struggled for another answer, but was at a loss to think what else she might have done. If Miranda had not challenged the căpcăuns, they all would have been recaptured or killed.

Merciful God. What was Professor Snape going to say?

“{Catalina, well done.}” Doamnă Lupul said, dragging the young witch out of her mire of regrets.

“{Thank you,}” Catalina replied automatically. “{But Miranda should be here too.}”

“{Yes. We are sorry to have lost her.}” The Cezara’s voice was low and brittle. “{She will be not forgotten.}”

“{It is truly a blow for your cause, Domnul Weasley.}” Nicolae’s tone was just shy of mocking. As
he stood before his daughter, with his son at his side, he looked like a conqueror awaiting his laurel wreath.

“{Am I the victor, then?}” Catalina asked, a spark of inspiration igniting in her darkened thoughts.

“{Who else has brought the children home?}” Doamnă Lupul replied.

Catalina licked her dry lips and lifted her eyes to the Cezara’s. “{Miranda and I have been working together since the day on the mountain. If she had not sacrificed herself today, we would not have escaped. Her cause is now mine. We will back the Order.}”

“{Hear, hear,}” Charlie said, clapping Catalina on the back.

“{How dare you!}” Nicolae growled, taking a step towards the weary champion.

“{Nicú,}” Doamnă Lupul warned. “{Your son is tired. Take him home.}”

The defeated boyar rounded on the Cezara, but he did not dare to argue.

“{You planned this, didn’t you?}” he spat.
“{Domnul Weasley, be so good as to take this letter to Albus and assure him of our support.}” She placed a roll of parchment into Charlie’s waiting hand, and turned to Nicolae with a wolfish smile. 

“{Nicú, I am very well pleased with your daughter. And I think that Vera would have been pleased, also.}”

The mention of his late wife’s name knocked the wind out of Nicolae, and he sagged like an empty sail. Gabi, suddenly more alert than Catalina had yet seen him, began looking around eagerly, searching for his mother’s face.

“{Father,}” Gabi ventured, when he could not find the one he sought, “{where is mother?}”

Nicolae avoided his son’s question and ordered brokenly, “{Come, Catalina. We’re going home.}”

“{No, father,}” Catalina objected quietly.

“{Catina?}” Gabi’s frightened voice finally roused Catalina. She dragged herself up from her seat, and went to embrace her brother.

“{Don’t worry Gabi, I’ll be back soon, I promise.}”

“{And where do you think you are going?}” Nicolae demanded.

Catalina looked at her father, her heart weighted down with the sorrowful knowledge of all that he had lost, and all that he might never understand.
“[I am going with Domnul Weasley, if he will allow it. There is someone who should hear the news of Miranda’s death from the lips of one who witnessed it.]”

Nicolae made a gesture of helpless frustration. “[Do as you like.]”

“[And I wish to join the Order.]”

Charlie grasped her hand warmly, and she could see Vasile behind him, hiding a smile.

“[Doamnă Dragnea, we would be honored to have you,] Charlie said earnestly. “[Would tomorrow be too soon to leave for Scotland?]”

Nicolae did not wait for any further humiliations. Gabi looked at his sister with a mixture of sadness and confusion, but hurried after their father, eyes still watching hopefully for the mother he would not find. Soon the pair of them were out of sight, concealed by the crowd and the forest beyond.

“[Are we too late for the afternoon portkey?]” Catalina asked. She did not want to witness her father breaking the news of their mother’s death to Gabi. Not when she had her own horrible tale to tell.

“[If you hurry, I think you will just make it,]” Doamnă Lupul said gently.
"{Then there is no sense in waiting for tomorrow.}"

"{Agreed.}" Charlie said.

As they set off towards the Merry Cemetery, Catalina’s heart beat with a new vigor, strong and bittersweet. She was different now, and she knew, when she returned home, things would be different there as well. Perhaps, in time, her father would change too, and she could hope it would be for the better. But she was at peace with her choice, regardless of whether or not he decided to approve of it.

Soon the village was in sight, and the cross crowning the top of the church spire hovered over it, like a steadfast guardian. Catalina breathed a silent prayer for her fallen friend; begging that Miranda’s end was swift and painless; begging that her sins were forgiven; begging that she was finally at peace.

If anyone dared to hand him one more wretched form to fill out, Severus was going to consign the whole of St. Mungo’s to the flames. Between consulting with Healer A’isha, placating Miss Bell’s hysterical parents, and fulfilling the demands of the hospital’s bureaucracy, the day was more than half spent. The weather was still abysmal, and he appeared outside the wards of Hogwarts in a cold, driving rain that did its damnedest to soak him before he could say *Impervius*. As he strode towards the castle, he postponed checking his cigarette case for news of his questing lover. She hadn’t bothered to send a message any of the other thousand times he’d looked already that day; why would there be anything now?

As he approached the gates, he saw a stocky wizard and two witches huddling outside them, waiting for admittance. His heart jumped into his throat when he recognized Charlie Weasley’s unattractive red hair and Catalina Dragnea’s dark bob. Breaking into a run, he reached the trio just as Minerva arrived, tapping the chains to allow them entrance. The second witch turned as she heard his footsteps, and he froze in his tracks at Nymphadora Tonks’s frown.
Charlie was saying something to him, but his blood was pounding in his ears so loudly that he could not hear what it was, nor what he said in reply. The Metamorphmagus and the Weasley followed Minerva towards the castle, and Severus became vaguely aware that Catalina had remained behind, watching him with a mixture of sadness and pity that turned his stomach.

“{There is no sense standing in the rain, Doamnă Dragnea,}” he said flatly.

He set off for the dungeons like a man condemned, astonished that he was able to walk so easily considering he could not feel his limbs. Catalina matched his pace and mercifully held her tongue. His fingers pricked uncomfortably as he unlocked the door to his quarters, sensation returning in the form of pain. Catalina sat down stiffly on the edge of the sofa at his curt invitation. Like an automaton, he procured tea from the shelf above his desk, lost in the memory of the first time he had led Miranda here. He had barely been able to keep his countenance then, his heart had been beating so erratically, electrified by her presence. Perhaps, if he shut his eyes very tightly, when he opened them and turned around, she would be sitting there on his sofa instead of the Romanian witch.

Merlin, Severus, pull yourself together. You’re not a schoolboy, and this is hardly a surprising ending for the whole misadventure.

Catalina took the tea he offered her, but didn’t drink it. He sat down in the chair opposite her, and stubbornly forced himself to take a bracing sip, even though it was scalding and his throat was twisted into a knot.

“{Miranda is dead,}” he said after the liquid had burned a path down to his bilious stomach.

Catalina shuddered, and for a moment he was terrified that she would start to cry—not so much because he feared her tears—but because he feared, if he saw them, he would no longer be able to contain his own. But the witch rallied and controlled herself, save for the tremor in her voice when
she spoke.

“{Yes. I’m so sorry.}”

He nodded, once again astonished at his capacity for absorbing pain without dying. “{How?}”

“(The Iele’s guard attacked us at the door between the worlds. She fought them while the children and I escaped, but the door closed before I could go back to save her.”” Her tale was tired, like story worn out with telling.

Thoughts ground together in his mind and he struggled to make sense of them as they passed. “{You did…you did not actually see her die?}”

“(No,)” she said slowly. “{When I led the children out she was still alive and fighting.}”

“(Then…she may still be alive.)”

“(I’m sorry, professor, but I think that is impossible. I left her hours ago at the mercy of an army of beasts. And even if she were somehow still alive, we cannot reach her. The door is closed.)”

“(This is Miranda we are talking about. She has more lives than a cat. And if you are unwilling to search for answers, I am not.)”
Severus sprang up from the chair, knocking the teacup and saucer to the floor where it shattered on the stones. He trod over the pieces, heedless of the way they crunched under his feet, and attacked his bookshelves with a violent passion. One after another he tore the books from their places, pouring over the pages before casting them aside, unable to comprehend the slightest notion in his whirlpool of grief. The empty shelves mocked him, and he slashed his wand at them, causing an explosion of splintered wood. By the time the shards settled, his humiliation was complete, and he sat on the back of the sofa, weeping tears that were all the more bitter for having been restrained.

The room was filled with a mortifying silence, punctuated at intervals by his ragged breathing. As he gradually regained some measure of control, he wondered how difficult it would be to Obliviate Doamnă Dragnea without her noticing.

“{She was very brave,}” Catalina said when he had stopped his disgraceful sniveling.

“{She was very foolish,}” he countered petulantly.

Catalina did not dignify that with an answer, and he started flicking his wand at the mess of shelving and books. As the chaos slowly succumbed to order, he made a mental list of items requiring his attention in a vain attempt to prevent the overwhelming flood of memories from drowning him again. He had promised Healer A’isha that he would lend her his copy of *Luma’at al-nuraniyya* that had been glossed by wizard of Tamerlane’s court. He would have to take it to her himself; it was not the sort of thing he wanted to trust to an owl. There was a stack of essays on Boggarts by the dunderheaded third years that required marking. Miranda had smiled when he’d asked her what her Boggart was, and kissed him until he knew she was not going to answer. If he were to venture a guess now, he would say that it was small, enclosed spaces. He would ask her the next time he saw her.

Except that he wouldn’t. Because he would never see her again.

The books marching through the air to the repaired shelving clattered to the floor a second time. He
stormed away from them, grabbing his still-wet cloak and flinging it around his shoulders. Catalina rose from the sofa, fetching her cloak as well.

He had to get rid of her. He had to be alone. He had to be anywhere but here.

As though she had read his thoughts, Catalina offered, “{Domnul Weasley asked me to meet him in Professor McGonagall’s office when we were finished. Perhaps there is someone who could show me the way.}”

“{I will take you.}” he said inhospitably, wrenching the door open and flinging himself into the hallway.

A snitch-sized ball of bright blue light darted towards him, and he recoiled from it to prevent a collision.

“What in Hades are you?” he growled, drawing his wand to threaten the devious thing.

“{Stop!}” Catalina ordered, and she had the gall to grab his hand to push his wand away. “{It’s a Spiridus.}”

“{A what?}” he demanded, for some reason resisting the urge to swat the overgrown, flashing mosquito.

“{A Spiridus. They help people who help them.}”
The witch was staring at the thing as though her mind were addled by it.

“{I can’t imagine what it’s doing here then,}” he sneered.

“{Be quiet, professor,}” she snapped.

“So you may commune with the spirit world? I suppose I better had,” he muttered. But he did fall silent, stacking up a score of insults in his brain, ready to launch them at the slightest provocation. The Romanian nodded to the creature, and it darted away, vanishing through a wall at the end of the passage. She watched it to the last, then turned to Severus, her face fixed with such an idiotic expression of hope that his own halfwitted heart lifted in response.

“{Miranda has a home here, yes?}” Catalina asked quickly.

“{Yes.}”

“{Then lead the way. That is where we will find her.}”

He knew it was futile, but he plunged into the downpour with Catalina at his heels. With every step towards the edge of the wards, his heart beat the refrain:
Merlin let her be there; let her be alive; let her be safe.

Chapter End Notes

Many, many thanks to Mr. Zingarella for Beta-ing this chapter. Any remaining mistakes are mine :)

Osămbritul is a Romanian festival held during September and October that centers around the preparation of sheep for the winter.

You can read the tale of how Cassandra Borgin came to join the D.A. in my story, Rota Fortunae: https://archiveofourown.org/works/18839641

Cezara= Caesar. This is the title of the leader of the witches and wizards of Romania.

Căpcăuns are dog-headed monsters that capture women and children.

Luma’at al-nuraniyya (Bright Lights) is a twelfth century text by the Sufi mathematician Ahmad ibn Ali al-Buni.
Wherever she was, it was quiet and safe. It was also dark. She thought that her eyes were open, but she could not see anything at all. It was like the time her family had gone to that cave that Jesse James had hidden in, and the tour guide had turned off all the lights so they could see how dark it was. She and her brothers had waved their hands in front of each others’ faces, laughing themselves silly at the fact that they couldn’t see them. But she wasn’t worried; not now. The taste of elderflower tickled her tongue, she was bone-weary, and whatever she was lying on was deliciously soft. A sound like water lapping at the shore rocked her, and she felt no pain in this half-world.

It was her time; and she was ready to go.

Something cool touched her; something sharp and prickly that prodded her forehead, her cheek, her chest. She wheezed and tried to protest the invasion, but no words came out. It was like trying to talk underwater. A babble of sounds mixed with the rushing noise in her ears; and though she thought she heard voices, she could not make out their words. Her eyes were shut after all, and she had not the energy to pry them open. She wished they would stop, these things that tormented her. As the voices grew louder and came into sharper focus, she tried to flinch away and failed. Being touched hurt. The voices hurt. Moving hurt. Breathing hurt. Everything…

“….Miranda…."

Oh. *That* voice. She knew *that* voice. It washed over her like dark honey and she panted, desiring more of its soothing tones.

“Severus?” Her own voice was a pathetic plea, but she was past caring about trifling things like dignity and pride. She was thirsty for his voice, thirsty for his touch, thirsty for his very presence, and dying—of thirst or something else—but dying all the same.
“I’m here. Don’t talk. I’m taking you to St. Mungo’s.”

Her heart tripped; and though she had surfaced to intolerable pain, she was willing to bear it for a little longer, if only for the pleasure of hearing him speak. She was no longer content to lie still and wait, she had to move, had to touch him. But her limbs ignored her like rebellious children, and she could only whimper her disapproval as the thing underneath her jerked her body. White-hot streaks of agony stabbed her everywhere, and she heard him swear brokenly under his breath. That wouldn’t do. She would be brave for him. She quieted her complaints and willed her eyes to open. And, though it took every ounce of strength she had left, open they did, and she saw him.

His face was pale, like always, and his hair hung limply on either side of his angular cheeks. It was oily today, like it was when he’d spent too much time in the potions room, or when he’d forgotten to wash it for too long. When they had first met, he had been careless about that aspect of his appearance. But after she’d gone to Romania, every time she saw him, his hair had been scrupulously clean. She’d never mentioned it, but she had noticed. He must not have expected to see her today.

“Severus,” she whispered, “it’s been good.”

His tone was stern when he answered her. “Miranda, I absolutely forbid you to die. It is completely out of the question.”

A laugh bubbled up in her, and she tasted blood in her mouth. “I don’t think there’s anything that can stop that now.”

“You took the Stasis Potion, did you not?”
She struggled to remember, but her brain felt soft. “I…think the Spiridus…fed it to me.”

The ground jerked beneath her, and her stomach rolled as the world around her started to spin. A sickening heat flashed through her body, and she thought she might retch. She could not tell how long the torture continued, but just when she thought it might go on forever, it stopped abruptly. Now she was blessedly still, and a soft, wet rain was kissing her face. God she was thirsty.

“Kiss me, Severus.”

A shattered moan escaped his throat, and he brought his lips down on hers. She drank the life she knew he was willing into her, even though she could feel it pouring back out of the innumerable wounds that had destroyed her body. Everything she’d ever felt for him; desire, anger, friendship, compassion, blended together into a brilliant mass. She sank into it, and as it washed over her she felt a tenderness beating at its core. As the jackel-men had ripped open her body, this feeling wrenched open her soul, and she was undone.

His heart was in his eyes, and he was close enough that she could feel his breath. She would tell him now, before she lost the chance to do so.

“Severus, I want to tell you…”

He laid his finger over her lips, and she closed them against the weight. “I said you are not allowed to die.”

His hand rested gently on her cheek, and she turned her face towards it. Then there was darkness again, and an awful sensation; she was being sucked dry, pulled apart, suffocated.
Then there was nothing.

Apparating in a state of agitation, particularly while bringing the body of an injured person along for the ride, was a feat that Severus did not desire to repeat any time in the near future. He glanced at Miranda’s inert form, finding that the experience had thrown her back into unconsciousness. As he choked on the malodorous stench of decay that hung in the air, he reflected that it was probably better that way. Whoever was responsible for the brilliant idea of placing the emergency entrance to St. Mungo’s between a line of Muggle dumpsters should be submerged in one and lit on fire.

He flicked his wand violently at the stretcher he’d transfigured from Miranda’s sofa, levitating it off the filthy street with a sickening jerk. Berating himself for his carelessness, he ran his fingers lightly over her battered face. Her breath was still coming in shallow, irregular pants, and the pulse at her throat was thready. A steadier wand swish set the stretcher moving, hovering through the air on invisible strings. He hurried up the delivery ramp with his patient close behind, to a large metal door painted with the warning “Do Not Block.” His slapped the ‘D’ with far more force than necessary, and an unpleasant pulling sensation drew both of them through the entrance into the brightly lit passage beyond. A witch with dark hair and enormous, rectangular glasses was perched at a desk, imperiously directing a queue of witches and wizards in various degrees of distress. He joined it begrudgingly, burning through the remainder of his patience with the speed of an inferno devouring tinder.

“Welcome to St. Mungo’s,” the witch said in a voice like a strangled goat when she finally deigned to notice him. “What is the nature of your emergency?”

“Severe injuries sustained in battle,” he replied tersely.

The welcome witch was unimpressed. “Name of the injured party?”
“Miranda Jane Rose.”

“Affiliation?”

“Order of the Phoenix.” He put his hand on Miranda’s wrist, reassuring himself that her heart was still beating as the inane interrogation continued.

“Magical I.D.?”

Would the witch never get on with it? “I don’t have it.”

She gave him a disapproving sniff and thrust a stack of parchment into his hand. “I see. In that case, you’ll have to fill out all of these.”

“I hardly think this is the time for such nonsense. Or is it the hospital’s practice to allow patients bleed to death while they attempt to satisfy the insatiable demands of pointless bureaucracy?”

“Hospital protocol exists for a reason, sir.”

“Apparently so. The more patients who perish in the anteroom, the fewer you actually have to bother with treating.”
“It’s not my fault you forgot the necessary parchments. Residence?”

“A cabin at Upper Diddling, near Brighton.” Two more questions and then he was going to cast a *Confundus* and take her to triage, protocol be damned.

“Place of birth?”

“Edgewater, Kansas.”

“Kansas?” The welcome witch peered over the rim of her oversized glasses. “Do you mean the Kansas in America?”

“No, I mean the Kansas in Northumberland,” he sneered. “Of course I bloody well mean the Kansas in America.”

“Is she a MACUSA citizen?”

“Yes.”

She clucked her tongue. “Why didn’t you say so at the beginning? Foreign citizens require a completely different set of parchment.”
“What this woman requires is a healer’s attention immediately,” Severus growled, sliding his wand out of his sleeve. “And if you possessed the brains of a flobberworm, she would already be receiving it.”

“One more word like that out of you, sir, and I’ll be calling security.”

“Professor Severus, I wasn’t expecting to see you again today.” Healer A’isha appeared from around the corner, and Severus quickly replaced his wand. “Has something happened? There is blood on your lips.”

His hand automatically went to his mouth and his fingers came away streaked with red. “It’s not mine. It’s…”

“What is going on here?” Healer A’isha had cleared the desk and now had an unobstructed view of Miranda’s mangled body. “Is she one of yours?”

“Yes.”

Healer A’isha began barking orders. “Miss Rhea, I am taking this woman and Professor Severus to triage.”

Miss Rhea put her hands on her hips and snarled another attack. “Healer A’isha, these people are not cleared to enter the hospital. I was just about to pull the files with their security questions. That is, assuming they’re even on the Order’s list at all.”
“I am overriding that protocol.”

“If they turn out to be Death Eaters, I want it noted that it was your rule-breaking that let them in.”

“I’ll put it in my report. This way, Professor Severus.”

“But the parchments,” the welcome witch whined as they maneuvered Miranda around the impediment of her desk.

“Send them up with Healer Augustus. He will be on the hourglass within the next ten minutes. And send up Healer Hippocrates, too.”

“Healer A’isha, you know he hates to work when he’s already flipped his hourglass for the day!”

“He’ll hate it more if he misses this, I promise you.”

Severus could have kissed her. As they moved swiftly through the candlelit corridors, he felt air moving through his lungs for the first time since he’d seen Catalina at the castle gates. Even as they walked, Healer A’isha was making her preliminary examination, her long brown fingers moving lightly over Miranda’s motionless form.
“Tell me what happened,” she said in a tone both firm and gentle.

“She was in Romania on a mission for the Order. There was a battle with an army of creatures. We thought she was lost, but a being called a Spiridus brought her here.”

“A Spiridus? I have only read about them. What potions has she taken?”

“At least three vials of Strengthening Solution.”

“Ah. That accounts for her pulse. She should not have taken so many.”

“I am aware of that. She also took a Stasis Potion.”

“I am not familiar with that potion. Is it one of yours?”

“Yes.” Unlike the welcome witch’s sniping, this volley of questions was somehow soothing to him.

“When Healer Augustus comes, I will need you to list the components of the completed potion to him.”

“I understand.”
“What were the creatures she fought?”

“I don’t know what they are called. I lent her comrade my portkey to come here. She will be able to tell you more about the battle itself.”

At last they entered the winged doors of triage, and Severus brought the stretcher to a halt. Healer A’isha ran her wand slowly over Miranda’s body. As she traced each limb, an image of her patient’s bones and organs appeared in color-coded light. Green for health, yellow for mild injury, purple for severe injury, red for mortal injury…Merlin there was so much red…

“I should have brought her via portkey as well, it would have been faster,” he blurted. “All the members of the Order have been carrying portkeys since Arthur’s attack. But I remembered what you said this morning about moving injured persons and I thought…”

“Peace, Professor,” she said, halting his babbling. “It was better to bring her the slower way and avoid moving her as much as possible. You did the right thing.”

“Thank you,” he choked, his vision blurring for a moment. He shut his eyes, he was not going to cry again, not here, not now.

“Healer A’isha?” A disgustingly chipper nurse in blue robes swept into triage, with an irate Romanian witch close at hand. “I’m not sure, but I think this witch is looking for someone. She came in with the finger-print linked portkey, so I don’t think she’s a Death Eater; but the Rosetta Stone is acting up again; and she doesn’t speak any English; and we’ve just been going round and round for the last twenty minutes.”
“Thank you Nurse. That will be all,” Healer A’isha said, dismissing the woman briskly.

“(Professor Snape, this is the most disorganized hospital I have ever seen. Things are not like this in Romania,)” Catalina complained.

“(I don’t disagree, Doamnă Dragnea,)” Severus replied.

The next half hour was a blur of answering questions, translating between Healer A’isha and Catalina, and doing his best to avoid staring at the lighted map that revealed the extent of Miranda’s internal injuries. He could read the thing well enough to tell that his Stasis Potion had worked better than he’d ever hoped that it would. Unfortunately, he found that he was in no way gratified by that knowledge. Rather, he felt vaguely sick when he realized that his efforts at brewing an experimental potion were the only thing standing between his lover and her grave.

A rotund Healer with spectacles and a white handlebar mustache joined them presently. He barely bothered to introduce himself as Hippocrates Smethwyck before he and Healer A’isha whisked Miranda away for treatment. For a moment, the ground seemed to shift beneath Severus’s feet, as though he had been running for hours and had come to a sudden and unexpected stop.

He had no idea what to do next.

An athletic boy in lime green robes, surely too young to be a Healer stepped up to him, saving him the trouble of taking a decision.

“Hello, Professor Snape,” the boy said with the wide-eyed eagerness of a Hufflepuff. “You probably don’t remember me. I’m Augustus Pye.”
Severus eyed the boy—young man—shrewdly. “Of course I remember you. Class of ’89. Decent N.E.W.T. work.”

“Thank you, sir. Coming from you, that’s a compliment. I’m a full Healer now.”

“Congratulations.” A headache was starting to pound behind his eyes, and he was beginning to see stars at the edge of his field of vision.

“Why don’t we go find somewhere quiet to sit,” Augustus suggested. “I’m afraid we’ve got a little more parchment work to fill out. Might as well be comfortable while we do.”

“As you say.”

Answering yet more questions sounded as appealing as taking tea with Dolores Umbridge, but Severus had not an ounce of fight left in him. He allowed the new Healer to lead him and Catalina into a deserted alcove, fitted up with a low-burning candelabra and three enormously comfortable armchairs. Catalina promptly curled herself into a ball and fell asleep, and Severus couldn’t say that he blamed her.

“Okay, Professor. Let’s start at the top.”
Severus’s throat was raw when he pried his stinging eyes open sometime later. He did not ever remember closing them, but when he had rubbed them with the backs of his chapped hands, and glanced out the arched window that graced the alcove, he saw the moon was high in the sky. When he’d arrived at the hospital on this second errand it had been barely sundown. It must be near midnight now. Catalina still slumbered in the chair next to him, and Healer Pye was nowhere in sight. He made an attempt to extract himself from the armchair, but his joints were so stiff that it was not worth the effort. His stomach rumbled, requesting his attention, but he ignored it, as though his discomfort might somehow aid Miranda in surviving the night.

Light footsteps drew his attention, and he saw Healer A’isha enter the alcove. She had dark circles under her eyes, and her expression was implacably serene. As she sank into the vacant chair, he braced himself for the blow that he knew he could no longer avoid.

“Miss Miranda is alive, Professor Severus.” Healer A’isha’s voice was as cool and calm as her bearing. “Healer Augustus and Nurse Grace are settling her in a room, and then you will be able to see her.”

“Thank Merlin.” It was as close to a prayer as he’d ever said in his adult life.

“Infidel,” Healer A’isha teased with the ghost of a smile. “We have done as much as we can tonight. We must wait until her body has cleared the Strengthening Solution before we attempt anything further.”

“It is dangerous to wait, I take it?”

“Yes, but it is more dangerous to add to the stress on her systems now.”
“I see.” He no longer felt hungry—he felt like his stomach was full of lead.

“It will be as Allah wills, but do not lose hope. She is strong, and we will do our best by her. I promise.”

He snorted. “You say that to everyone.”

“I do. And I mean it every time.”

“Healer A’isha, I am well aware that your promise is worth fifty of any other Healer’s. But don’t lie to me. If she is dying, simply say so.”

“We are all dying, Professor Severus. But if she has any family or friends who would want to see her alive, you may wish to give them the opportunity.”

She did not torture him by completing the thought, and he nodded numbly, grasping the mirror she held out to him with stiff fingers.

“Just return it to a Nurse when you are finished. I must go home now, but you are in good hands, and I will return in the morning.”

“Thank you, Healer A’isha.”
“It is my pleasure, Professor Severus.”

He forced his creaky legs to stand so that he could return her bow. Once he had gained his feet, he paced the alcove, loosening his limbs and avoiding the calls that he knew he had to make. He allowed himself five minutes of procrastination, then he turned the mirror over in his hands.

A wizard with bright eyes and a voice too cheerful for the witching hour appeared in the glass. “Good evening, sir. Where can I direct your call?”

“Mr Aaron Lee, number 76, MACUSA Embassy, London.”

“I think she looks worse now than when we brought her here,” Catalina said darkly. “I don’t recall asking for your opinion,” Severus retorted, privately agreeing with the Romanian’s assessment.

The three of them were alone at last in a cramped, windowless, but mercifully private room in Jude the Unfortunate’s Ward for Hopeless Cases. In addition to the poisoning from the extra Strengthening Solution and the physical damage to Miranda’s body, the căpcăuns contained a venom in their claws that was spreading a slow, deadly infection throughout her system. Add to that the Stasis Potion which, while it was working for her, was also, in some ways, working against the Healers, it was anyone’s guess as to whether or not she would ultimately pull through.
Severus was pacing the paltry length of the sterile space, dodging chairs not nearly as comfortable as the ones in the alcove. His attention was divided between staring at the charmed etching on the wall that claimed Miranda was still breathing; and staring at the body on the narrow bed that was so still he hardly believed that the etching was correct. Miranda was laid out as for the undertaker, as pale and motionless as a marble *gisant* waiting to grace a tomb. She was clean though; someone had washed away the blood and sweat and dirt. The wounds were staunched and dressed where required. Her caretakers had even taken the trouble to comb her hair and plait it into a shining braid that snaked over her shoulder. She looked like the storied princess, patiently awaiting the live-giving kiss.

Unfortunately, he was not that kind of a prince, and this was not a fairy tale.

Around two in the morning, according to the miniature astronomical clock above the door, Rachel Lee joined the somber trio. She came bearing a pair of bento boxes and a thermos of hot tea, and she would not be satisfied until both Catalina and Severus were crammed into the chairs, balancing the offerings on their knees. Catalina dug in immediately, but Severus picked at the miso salmon and the rice, until Rachel cajoled him into trying the cucumber salad. The tanginess of the vinegar married with the depth of the sesame oil coaxed his dormant tastebuds to wakefulness, and he found he had more than enough room to demolish the whole of the dish and wish there were more.

“{I can’t stay long, Maggie is waking up constantly to nurse these days. Growth spurt, I think.}” Rachel said in ponderous, but intelligible Romanian.

Severus cocked an eyebrow at the American witch. “{Rachel. You didn’t tell me you spoke Romanian.}”

She winked at him. “{You didn’t ask. I picked it up when I was procrastinating translating all those potion texts. Why don’t you both come back and sleep for a while? We have loads of room in our...}”
Catalina’s exhausted eyes brightened at the mention of a bed. “{But only if it will not be any trouble,}” she stipulated wearily.

“{No trouble at all,}” Rachel insisted. “Well, Severus? Won’t you come too?”

“No, I thank you. I want to be here when Aaron arrives with Miranda’s parents.” He did not, in point of fact, want to be there when Miranda’s parents arrived, but he felt that he owed them his presence, even though he doubted they would return the sentiment.

“I understand, and it’s a standing offer. Anytime you want to drop in, day or night, no warning necessary.”

She collected the dishes and left him with a MACUSA eagle that would gain him admittance to the Embassy. Catalina trailed after her, yawning. He shifted in the chair, but every position was equally uncomfortable. Eventually his legs fell asleep, and he sat, staring at Miranda over his steepled fingers, wandering in and out of a doze as the minutes ticked away.

Mercury was halfway across the painted sky on the clock, and Severus’s sleepy brain registered it was nearly dawn, when the door opened again. Aaron, almost unrecognizable without his carefree grin, led a pair of Muggles into the hushed room, and Severus rose stiffly to his feet with all the eagerness of a man facing the gibbet. Miranda’s father was a barrel-chested man, nearly as tall as Aaron, with piercing blue eyes and a neatly trimmed, hoary beard. Her mother was a willowy woman, her dark hair peppered with silver, her grey eyes the mirror of Miranda’s and brimming with tears.
“Conor, Monica, this is Severus Snape, the fella I told you about,” Aaron said, breaking the silence. “Severus, Conor and Monica Rose.”

Now that he was facing Miranda’s parents, pinned by Conor’s suspicious glare and Monica’s gaunt sorrow, Severus wished he had taken Rachel up on her offer of respite. What a damned, sentimental idiot he was to think he should be here at a time like this. What was he even supposed to say to these Muggles? 

So nice to meet you Mr Rose, I’m the one who’s been fornicating with your daughter for the last year or so. Mrs Rose, how enchanting to finally make your acquaintance. I am a great admirer of your embroidery work, especially the piece gracing the wall of your daughter’s bedroom, with which I am intimately familiar.

In the end, when Mr Rose crushed his hand in an iron grip, he simply muttered, “Good morning Mr Rose. I am sorry we did not meet under better circumstances.”

Conor pumped his hand once and released him. “So am I, son. So am I.”

Severus bristled at the epithet ‘son,’ but bit his tongue. Conor had obviously not meant it as a compliment, and in any case, he had already moved past Severus and drawn up a chair to sit at his daughter’s shoulder.

Monica held out her hand to him in a polished, but distracted greeting.

“Professor Snape, we’re glad to meet you. From what Aaron was telling us, we have you to thank that Miranda is still among the living,” she said warmly, but her eyes kept darting between his face and her daughter’s body.
Her gratitude made him feel worse than Conor’s spite ever could have accomplished. “I’ve done nothing to deserve your thanks, madam.”

She neither confirmed nor denied his statement, and he let go of her hand in order to place a chair for her by Miranda’s side. She slipped into it, and brushed a stray lock back from her daughter’s bruised face. Aaron took the final chair, and Severus backed away as far as the room would allow, feeling as unwelcome as Actaeon in Diana’s wood. He wouldn’t put it past Conor to turn and rend him if the opportunity presented itself.

“I don’t know, Conor,” Monica said in a strained voice after she’d examined the state of her child. “She looks better than she did after that time with the Jersey Devils. Remember? It took the Healers a week to set her straight and we still had to get Father Donnelly to exorcise her.”

Conor glanced up at his wife, and a boyish smile broke across his face, making him appear years younger. “You might be right, Butterfly. Do you remember that, Aaron?”

Aaron let out a low whistle. “Sure do, Conor. The Tin-Hat Brigade was busy for a month, writing copy for the tabloids, trying to convince the No-Majs that the whole shebang was a result of fumes from a putrid cranberry bog.” He gave a jaw-splitting yawn. “She’ll pull through. She’s too tough to die.”

“Don’t I know it. Takes after her Ma.”

“You’ve got the eagle I gave you?”

“Yessir.”
“Good. The welcome witch’ll be able to call an escort for you when you’re ready for a break. Rachel’ll be around later this morning, and I’ll be back after work.”

“Thank you Aaron, for everything,” Monica said.

“No trouble at all. I’ll see you soon.”

The room seemed smaller after Aaron had taken his leave, rather than more spacious. Severus was painfully aware of the awkwardness of the situation and, much as he was loathe to leave Miranda’s side, he was becoming more certain by the second that his presence was not at all desired by her progenitors. With a sick heart, he slunk towards the door, Bellerophon repulsed for having dared to sully paradise.

He was in the hallway when Monica spoke his name; but he pulled the door shut after him, pretending not to hear.

He would rather wander the world blind and broken by his own decision than give the gods the pleasure of casting him out.

On Tuesday the Healers decided to risk administering the first round of antidotes to the struggling patient. That night, Miranda was feverish, tossing and muttering nonsense; still unaware of her surroundings. In the small hours of the morning, she finally settled into a quieter sleep; although her face was still flushed and her breathing rapid and shallow. Monica dozed, feet tucked up on her chair and her chin resting on her knees; Conor sat, busily whittling with a large pocket knife,
letting the scraps of wood fall heedlessly to the floor; and Severus paced, determined to wear a track in the tile beneath his feet. He had not bothered to enquire if the Roses desired his presence at their daughter’s sickbed, and he had come into the room, both this evening and the one previous, prepared to insist on his entitlement to be there. He had a list of reasons, carefully curated and impeccably logical; not one of them stooping to the baseness of feeble-minded emotion. Neither of his antagonists condescended to question him, and while Monica was unwaveringly polite, Conor's adroit blend of silence and pointed observation communicated his opinion of his daughter’s paramour with perfect clarity.

“Miranda never mentioned you,” Conor said matter-of-factly without looking up from his creation.

Although he had thought his armor impervious to slights, Severus was taken aback by how much that revelation stung him.

“That does not surprise me,” he replied evenly.

“Aaron mentioned you’re wrapped up in some dodgy shit over here.”

“That is not untrue.”

“Aaron talks too damned much.”

Severus was going to hex that American blabbermouth at the first available opportunity. “Aarone talks too damned much.”
“He does, don’t he?”

Conor let that comment hang in the air for a while and continued his work; slowly transforming the smooth wood into a trim little sparrow. Severus resumed his pacing, dividing his attention between crafting an appropriately acrid diatribe with which to revenge himself on Aaron Lee, and berating himself for the mistake of giving the man that much information in the first place.

At last Conor spoke again, and his voice was soft, unmarred by the edge of hostility that had been present in it up to now.

“You know, I’ve always been proud of Miranda. Couldn’t ask for a tougher, smarter girl. And sweet too. Sweeter than she ought to be. But damn if she don’t scare the shit out of me something regular. I suppose every father comes to the understanding that he can’t protect his children, ‘specially once they’re grown. But most fathers don’t have to watch their girls get cut to pieces by things that ain’t supposed to exist except in nightmares or Hell. Humbles a man.”

“Most unfortunate.”

“Eh, a man has to be humbled now and then. It ain’t good to have too much pride, makes your head soft.” He looked up from his whittling finally, and his eyes had the twinkle in them that Severus had only witnessed when Conor was talking to those in his favor. “What I’m saying is, I’m glad that she’s got you at her back. Even if you are stuffed shirt Englishman.”

It was the most flattering insult Severus had ever received, and he was embarrassed at how much it soothed his troubled heart. “I take it you expect me to thank you for that.”

“Nah. I expect you to sit down and play a round of Rummy with me. That pacing’s driving me nuts.”
By the end of the week, the Healers were cautiously hopeful that Miranda would recover. The balancing act continued between the spells and potions she required, and the amount of stress her damaged body could stand; but the scales seemed to have tipped decidedly in her favor. Severus found that he was firmly ensconced in the strange little coterie of her family and friends; and—stranger still—he found that he was pleased to have been accepted into it. His days had settled into a grueling, but satisfactory, routine which allowed him to spend most of his unscheduled time in Miranda’s hospital room. He did yield to Monica’s insistence that they take a walk in the early evenings, and he did consent to eat whatever food Rachel foisted on him. But he drew the line at actually retiring to the Lees’ flat to sleep, preferring to catch what rest he could at Miranda’s bedside, or in his office between classes.

On Saturday evening, the entire party conspired to drag him away to the Embassy for dinner. Rachel had prepared a feast of sushi, sukiyaki, pickles, and sliced mango. Intoxicated by the mutual good-will, and one glass too many of sake, he had relented to Rachel’s gentle commands that he lie down after dinner for a catnap. When he opened his eyes several hours later and stumbled into the darkened kitchen, he cursed to himself that he’d let so much time slip through his fingers. With clumsy hands he lit the lamps and put the kettle on for tea, flinching at every clang and clatter that he made. He did manage to wrestle both the tea leaves and the water into the pot without breaking anything or burning himself by the time Catalina slipped into the flat.

“[Good evening, Severus,]” she said, looking amused by his state. “[It is good that you finally slept. We were becoming worried for your sanity.]”

“[A concern I share every day, considering the company I keep,]” he quipped. But the nap had done him good—though he’d never admit to it. “[How is she?]”

“[The same. The Healers say it is only a matter of time before she wakes up, and that then they will have a better idea of how long it will take for her to recover.]”
He poured them both a cup of tea and they gathered companionably at the table to partake of it.
“{Will you be returning home soon?}” he asked.

“{Yes. I want to stay until she wakes if I can. But I cannot put off going home for much longer.
Gabi is waiting for me.}” Her brow furrowed at the mention of her brother, and she hastily turned
the subject. “{Before I go, I would like to meet your son, if opportunity permits.}”

Severus choked on the tea he was attempting to drink. “{Pardon me? I do not have a son.}”

“{I…you don’t?}” Catalina eyed him dubiously. “{Are you certain of that?}”

The memory of the appalling conversation he’d had with Miranda in this very flat sprang to mind
and he shook his hair forward to ensure that his ears were concealed. “{Quite.}”

“{Oh. Well. Never mind then.}” She took a prim sip. “{Is English weather always so dismal this
time of year?}”

“{Catalina,}” he said in as stern a tone as he could manage in another language. “{Why were you
under the impression that I had a son?}”

Her cheeks colored and she pursed her lips. “{I was making assumptions where I shouldn’t have. I
knew that Miranda had a son and I thought that her child would naturally be yours as well. Pardon
me for the mistake and for prying.}”
Had the lights in this room always been so blinding? And why had he suddenly forgotten how to breathe? Quick, fool, pull yourself together and get whatever information you can out of her.

“{How do you know about Miranda’s son? It’s not something she talks about with most people.}” Like her lover, for instance.

Catalina gestured like an angry bird. “{We talked about it on the mountaintop when we were waiting for the Sânziene. I already knew she was a mother because Doamna Lupul made it a stipulation that she be one to participate in the competition. I was exempt from that requirement because my brother was one of the lost children, but Doamna Lupul said that a mother would have true sympathy for the families who had lost their sons and daughters, and so could be trusted with competing, even though she was a foreigner.}”

“{Naturally.}” It took every ounce of restraint to hold his tongue in the hopes that she would continue and reveal whatever else she knew.

The silence discomposed her and he was rewarded. “{She said his name is Isaac and he’s eleven this summer. I assume he is in America?}”

“{Where else would he be?}” Merlin, if he were that old he must be David Clearwater’s progeny. He would be at Ilvermorny by now. How could she never have mentioned him?

Catalina hastily finished her cup and excused herself to bed, but Severus hardly noticed her going. He let his tea go cold and left it sitting on the table as he wandered out into the night towards the hospital. But when he reached Purge and Dowse, Ltd, he kept walking, venting his frustration on an empty beer can that he hexed up the deserted street as he fumed.
A son. David Clearwater’s son. And she’d never told him—never even hinted—insisted she couldn’t have children at all. But then, he’d never thought to ask the devious woman if she already had children, had he? None of it made any sense to him. No, that wasn’t true. Some of it did make sense; and as the threads wove together, he did not like the picture they made in the least. But he was a logical man; a sensible man; and so he did what any man of his ilk would do, and made a list.

Item the first; Miranda had a life that he knew nothing about; moreover, it was a life with which she wanted him to have nothing to do.

Item the second; Miranda was pleased enough with his company as a companion and a lover that she had spoken favorably of her return to Britain following her Romanian misadventure. As far as he knew, she had no immediate plans to return to America.

Item the third; Miranda was a capricious witch, and he would not be at all surprised if one day she left him with no warning whatsoever.

Item the fourth; she had beguiled him to the point that, if he were not already in love with Lily Evans, he would think that he harbored the traitorous emotion for her instead.

Item the fifth; he had even started to hope that one day—in some far off nebulous time that would surely never come to pass because he would be dead before it could—they would make a home together with a stone cottage and a potions room and a dueling hall and a garden in the back (not that he’d imagined it in any sort of depth, thank you very much).

Item the sixth; She obviously was making no such plans. How could she wish to make a future with someone when she could not even be bothered to tell him such pertinent information as the fact that she had a bloody child back home that called her Mama?
Item the seventh; if he were wise, he would end this whole incautious affair immediately. It was an irresponsible whim and indulging it—especially since she obviously did not suffer the same doltish regard for him—was moronic at best.

Item the eighth; Hecate’s Withered Tit, he did love her. Thank Merlin he’d never been stupid enough to say so.

Item the ninth; he was a damned idiot.

He slashed the can with a savage hex and it skittered through a broken grate into the sewer. His breath came in pants and he raked his fingers through his hair, as though he might plough some sense into his brain. The moon was his only witness; and he thought that he could see the cold goddess’s face; heartlessly taunting him from her chariot on high.

Something was resting on Miranda’s chest. Something warm and comfortable. She wanted to wrap her arms around it and keep it there, but she couldn’t seem to move them. She also wanted to scratch her nose; the itch there was driving her crazy. But there was no sense in fretting about things she couldn’t manage, so she just floated along in this dreamy limbo; certain that at some point she would be directed what to do next. She knew she was dead. And since she wasn’t in torment, she assumed that she’d avoided Hell. Maybe this was Purgatory, and soon she’d be handed her load to carry up the mountain where she would sing the praises of God with her fellows on the climb to Heaven.

Gradually a chill seeped into her bones, and the pressure on her chest became crushingly burdensome. She struggled to breathe against it, and wondered why she bothered. If she was dead, what use was oxygen? But struggle she did, and with every pant, another part of her body joined the chorus of pain. Her head hurt. Her legs hurt. Her stomach hurt. Her chest hurt. Good Lord, even her fingernails and her hair hurt.
Maybe she was in Hell after all.

There was a scraping noise in the world outside her body, and for a sick moment she thought it was a demon preparing a blade to vivisect her like she’d seen in a picture once as a child. She thought she’d been shriven before she’d made that final quest, but maybe it hadn't taken.

Deciding it was better to see the evil threatening her than imagine what might be there, she bravely pried her eyes open. At first everything was a confused blur of light and shadows, but as she ponderously blinked, her vision cleared.

“You look like hell, Pixie,” said a voice that was almost as comfortable as the weight she’d left behind.

She peeled open her dry, cracking lips and mustered a smile at the sight of her dear Papa. “You should see the other guy.”

“I’ll bet you handed those mongrels their asses.” He leaned down to kiss her, and his whiskers tickled her cheek. “It’s good to see you, girl.”

“Where’s Mama?”
“I’m here, darling.” Her mother came into view next, kissing her with cool, soothing lips. “You gave us a scare.”

She tried to lift her arms to embrace her parents, but they were too heavy. “Why can’t I move?”

“You’ve been mostly dead for a week now. The Healers are pretty sure you’ll be right as rain eventually, but it’s going to take time,” Conor reassured her.

She should have been happy. Hell—she’d cheated Death—she should have been ecstatic. But instead she felt like an abandoned shell; like a stranded traveler who’d missed the last train; like the lame boy who had hobbled along after the pied piper only to be shut out of paradise.

“Mira, are you alright?” Monica’s discerning eyes were searching her face with concern. It would frighten them to know that their daughter was lying there wishing she were dead. They mustn’t know. She wouldn’t let them know.

“I mean, all things considered, I’m peachy.” She tried to smile for them and doubted she managed. “How long have I been here?”

“Severus brought you here a week ago tomorrow,” Conor said with an ease that startled her.

“Severus? When did you meet him? And when did you get to be on a first name basis with him? He’s usually a stick in the mud.”

Her parents exchanged a knowing look over head, the kind that usually made her want to roll her
eyes in irritation. Unfortunately, her eyes hurt too much to roll at the moment.

“What can I say, Pixie, we bonded over our mutual terror that you were going to kick it.” Conor laughed. “I’m not denying that he’s a stuffed shirt, but the man’s crazy for you, that’s for sure.”

Miranda no longer felt the pressure on her chest—she felt like she was in free-fall. She hadn’t said anything stupid had she? She did remember being emotional when Severus had found her dying in her cabin, but she hadn’t thought she’d actually said anything about it. Hadn’t he stopped her before she’d passed the point of no return? God she hoped so.

“I don’t know about that,” she protested weakly, but the door opened, and her admirer swept into the room, commanding everyone’s attention.

He looked angry, but that was usual. Her parents greeted him like an old friend, which was strange to witness, but not unusual for them. Her parents had a way of befriending even the most standoffish persons. In a whirl of hand-shaking and congratulations, her parents tactfully excused themselves to the tea room, and before she could speak a word to defend herself, she was alone with him.

When he turned to her, he was a man at war with himself, and she could see the battle playing out in his eyes. The ever-present pique yielded to something softer, and while she told herself it was melancholy or fatigue that effected the change; she suspected it was something else that she did not wish to see.

“It is as I said,” he observed, “More lives than a cat.”

“I’m durable. It’s one of my more useful qualities.”
He smirked at her, burying his heart beneath his sardonic mask. But his lips trembled on hers when he kissed her, and she could taste the salt of his tears. She tilted her head back, taking what he offered, and refusing to think about the implications.

He did not linger there, but seated himself next to her bed and retrieved a book from the folds of his robe.

“As I recall, the only sure way to keep you in bed when you are convalescing is to read to you constantly.”

Her relief at the realization that she would not have to make conversation was palpable. She was far too exhausted to know what to say.

“You remember right. Although I don’t think I could move now even if the room were on fire.”

That softness flickered across his face again, and he reached out to grasp her hand with his.

“Soon, my Barbarian. Soon.”
He was a genius, if he did say so himself.

When he’d first volunteered to superintend Miranda’s recovery, he hadn’t been certain he could manage the necessary alterations to his quarters that the situation required, but it had all come off without a hitch. The Extension Charm had worked perfectly, enlarging the interior of his rooms without requiring him to go about the drudgery of moving any of his books. There was space enough for Miranda’s turntable, for her pictures, for her books and sundries. He’d selected the best of her nieces’ and nephews’ drawings to arrange on the wall by her side of the bed, and he’d widened his armoire for her clothing. The pièces de résistance were the windows. Each room now sported windows running from floor to ceiling; charmed so magnificently that one could open them wide to let in a magical breeze and smell the air outside. It had taken a fair amount of trouble but, as he expected her sojourn in his rooms to be a lengthy one, he wanted her to be comfortable.

He set himself to the pleasant task of arranging her books on an empty bookcase, sorting them by subject and author as he did. If he were honest, he would admit that he harbored the foolish desire for her stay to be indefinite. But he was practical enough to realize that she would not wish for it to be so. Two weeks at St. Mungo’s and she was already chaffing; already longing to fly. He would keep her here for as long as he could, but in the end, he knew that she would leave him behind.

When he had been a child, he had learned to live on scraps. Scraps of food. Scraps of attention. Scraps of love. He had hoarded each paltry piece and squeezed as much good out of it as his tiny hands could muster, like a man squeezing blood from the proverbial stone. It hadn’t been enough, but he hadn’t had a choice. As a man, he had yet to come to a place where he truly had a choice. For fettered as he was by his vows to Lily, Albus, and the Dark Lord, how could he possibly be free?

Miranda was a better woman than he deserved, and even her trifling regard was preferable to being alone. He knew that, when she left, it would be worse than if he had never met her at all. But he also knew that, although the scraps of affection she let carelessly fall from her fingers would not satiate him, he would accept those scraps like priceless pearls and store them up against the black day when she finally left him for good.
It wasn’t what he wanted, but it would have to do.

By the beginning of November, her parents and Catalina had returned to their respective homes, and Miranda had been released to Severus’s care. She had a daily routine of disgusting potions to take, and painful exercises, both physical and magical to perform; as well as a diet to follow that was designed with more strength-building than palate-pleasing in mind. Severus was a cruel task-master, and she was beginning to see the side of him that his students whispered about behind his back. But he also touched her with a tenderness that broke her heart, and fretted around her like a worried hen caring for its brood.

One Friday evening they sat in front of the fire while the rain pattered on the enchanted windows, echoing the mournful storm outside. He was at his desk, marking a pile of essays and muttering to himself about the idiocy of his students. She was curled up on the sofa, whittling away at a chessman for her nephew Brendan. Although she was going out of her mind from her confinement, she was trying to embrace the sedentary time as an opportunity to renew her acquaintance with the almost-forgotten hobby. If she were diligent, she might be able to make a present for each of her nieces and nephews by Christmas.

Severus threw down his quill and rubbed his temples. “Enough. If I read one more word of this rubbish tonight I shall go mad.”

“Encouraging words from their teacher.”

“It is not my fault that these dunderheads have had a string of incompetent teachers before me. Not only do I have the students’ natural stupidity to contend with, but I must repair all of the mistakes made by their previous so-called instructors as well.”
“I have every confidence that you will succeed, or die trying. You’re as tenacious as a pit bull when you get your teeth into something.”

“Your words of praise never fail to overwhelm me.”

He retrieved a stack of books from his shelf and deposited them in her lap.

“What’s this?” she asked, curiously examining the covers.

“Miss Lovegood gave them to me after class today. She said she used to read them when she was ill and she thought you would enjoy them.”

She opened the top book and smiled to see the opening of the first story. “‘To Sherlock Holmes she is always the woman. I have seldom heard him mention her under any other name.’ Did you ever read these?”

“I?” he said, feigning indignation. “I, muddle my brain with such common twaddle? Surely you jest.”

“Well if you haven’t, you should. A little light reading is good for the soul. How did she know I was down here anyway?”
He sat down on the sofa and took her feet in his lap, rubbing his fingers over them in practiced circles until she sighed and sank back on the pillows; content.

“Ah, that. She claims that the thestrals told her.”

“The thestrals? Does she talk to them often?”

“Only once a week when they have tea.”

“Tea?” Miranda laughed merrily at the idea. “I can see her doing that. Have you been to this exclusive tea?”

He cleared his throat and she could see the pink tinging his ears. “Certainly not.”

“Don’t you lie to me, you have!”

“I will not dignify that with an answer.”

“Do you think she’d let me come along?”

“Of course she would, she delights in the ridiculous. And I’ll have you know…”
His words ended in a hiss and he dropped her foot like he’d been burned. His playful mood turned instantly serious, and he got up without a word to fetch his cloak and mask. She bit her lip to keep it from trembling. She hated to see him this way. Hated to watch him go into the lion’s den alone. But she tried to keep her anxiety to herself. He needed all his wits about him, not the burden of a silly woman worrying for him at home.

“Tell the Dark Lord I said hello.”

“I think that I shall not say that, if it is all the same to you.”

He kissed her heartfully and she gave him a careless smile. Then he traced her cheek with his finger and left without saying goodbye. Neither of them ever said goodbye. It was a good luck charm; as though by refusing to acknowledge the parting they could ensure the return of the one who had gone.

She stretched like a cat and braced herself on the back of the sofa to complete the arduous task of getting up. Although the silence in these rooms never bothered her during the day, at night it pressed in on her with bony fingers; like a boogie man that only crept out from under the bed when the parents were asleep. Her turntable was nestled between two of the bookshelves, and her records were lined up neatly close at hand. She pulled one out and set it spinning, letting the rich, mellow voice cover her fears.

At the dark end of the street, That's where we always meet...

The renovations to Severus’s quarters were beautiful. They must have taken him days to complete. He’d brought all of her favorite things to keep her company while she healed. He showed her every day by his actions how much he cared for her. And though he still often adopted the role of the cold, callous Englishman, he was letting her glimpse the man underneath the facade with such
casualness that she wondered if he was even aware that he was doing it.

She loved him, she couldn’t lie to herself about that. But she was never, ever going to tell him. There was simply too much standing in the way.

A pile of wood scraps from her whittling had accumulated on the floor by the sofa, glinting in the light of the fire. She knelt down to scoop them up, even though bending that far made her body scream in protest. She welcomed the pain, as though she could expiate her failures with it. When she had pushed herself up to her feet again, she swayed unsteadily, then limped across the stones to the fireplace, and cast the scraps into the flames.

They sparked, and danced, and crumbled to ash, like the dross of obliterated dreams.

Chapter End Notes

The Rosetta Stone is a charmed translation aid that works about as well as google translate.

Gisant: a recumbent effigy for a tomb, representing the deceased.

Jersey Devils are something like wyverns.

Miranda is quoting from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s story, A Scandal in Bohemia.

The song she is listening to is At the Dark End of the Street by James Carr.

This story is the first of a trilogy. Keep a look out for book two, libera nos a malo, sometime in early 2020.

As always—thank you for reading!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!