To Know Who I Am

by firefly124

Summary

It's been over six years since the fall of Voldemort and Professor Sprout has retired. There is something strange about the new Herbology teacher, and Professor Snape is determined to find out what. Trouble seems to follow her, or is it his past seeking him out? And then there's a prophecy. Isn't there always a prophecy?

Notes

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Chapter 1

I don’t want the world to see me,
‘Cause I don’t think that they’d understand.
When everything’s made to be broken,
I just want you to know who I am.
-- “Iris” by The Goo Goo Dolls

The Great Hall of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was just a wee bit overwhelming. Okay, it was a tossup whether it would be more overwhelming in a couple of hours when it would be full of hundreds of kids. Still, it was an insanely long walk up to that table where she would meet the rest of her new colleagues, who had all arrived before her, some by as much as a week. Not that she could have come sooner. There were way too many things she had needed to handle before coming here. It was a miracle she’d finished her lesson plans and owled them in for the August twenty-fifth deadline. Okay, not a miracle. Just a bit of unorthodox magic.

At least she felt a little less conspicuous next to Hagrid. Well, anybody would be less conspicuous next to Hagrid.

It’s not like they’d be staring at him, she thought. But it beats walking in here al... wow, it really does look like the sky. She’d heard about the enchanted ceiling, but had not visited the Great Hall the one other time she had been up to the school before today. There were unlit candles floating in the air, too, presumably to be lit later on. Sure, let’s just use massive amounts of magic for something we won’t be using until later. And, you know, the ceiling’s pretty, but not exactly essential. I am so not in Kansas anymore. Not that I’ve ever been to Kansas.

As she arrived at the dais where all of the faculty sat at their table, Headmistress McGonagall rose and stepped around the long table to greet her.

“Thank you for bringing in our new colleague, Hagrid,” McGonagall said. She turned and led her new teacher to meet the others. “Everyone, this is our new Herbology professor, Celia Reese. She comes to us from the United States and is very highly recommended by an old friend of mine.”

Celia noted with interest that the Headmistress did not name her reference. Well, it was always possible they might recognize the name and, for whatever obscure reason, her mission here was
being kept under wraps.

“Your new colleagues,” the Headmistress continued. “Professor Sybill Trelawney, Divination.”

Celia instinctively held out her hand for a shake, and found it instead being turned over and examined.

“Such a strong hand!” Professor Trelawney began.

“Yes, well, a bit of weeding will toughen the skin up,” Celia said with a faint laugh, snatching her hand back. Like I want to be read!

She just barely kept from rolling her eyes. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Professor Trelawney looked like a puppy who just had her favorite toy taken away, but at least she wasn’t actually whining.

“Professor Firenze, also Divination,” McGonagall was saying, and Celia turned her attention to the centaur. This time she kept her hands clasped behind her back and merely smiled, nodded, and responded to the fairly generic “Pleased to meet you.”

In fact, she found that worked fairly well for most of the rest of the introductions. She should have realized handshakes weren’t the way things were done here, at least for ladies. She wasn’t used to thinking of herself as a “lady.” For that matter, she could think of quite a few people who would find the idea fatally hysterical.

“Professor Harry Potter, Defense Against the Dark Arts,” said the Headmistress.

“Pleased to meet you,” said Professor Potter. She did her smile, nod, and echo routine, but then found it interrupted as he continued with a grin, “It’ll be a nice change to no longer be the youngest on the faculty.”

“Only by a couple of months,” she replied, raising her eyebrows to indicate she didn’t think that ought to mean much at all. Not even. Six weeks. Never mind that you were all saving the world from Big Bad Voldemort when I was just getting my powers. I wasn’t the only one just getting my powers that day, and I’ll bet any one of us could take you. Okay, what am I, five? Good going. Send myself back to preschool when I should be projecting how I’m totally your equal. I’m still smiling, right?

“Still,” he was saying, “even a contemporary is a novelty for me.”

She pasted the smile more firmly on her face, nodded, and moved on to the next introduction. And the next. And the next. The end of the table loomed into view. Almost literally.

“Professor Severus Snape, Potions Master and Deputy Headmaster,” McGonagall said.

Right, this would be the one I was warned about. Shields up, then, not that they weren’t already. Smile, nod, look him in the eye, Reese.

“Pleased to meet you,” he said, though he obviously wasn’t, unless you were looking up “pleased” in some alternate universe’s dictionary where “pleased” meant “something in here smells seriously rank.”

“As am I,” she replied steadily. No pressure against her mind, which was good. She supposed he really wouldn’t have any reason to go poking around. Yet. And apparently he didn’t just randomly Legilimize new people. It would be quite easy to fall into the hypnotic depths of those eyes and
become vulnerable, though. An odd shiver ran down her spine, which she completely ignored. *Move along. Move along.*

Except she couldn’t move along because Headmistress McGonagall was wrapping up the introductions. “And of course you’ve already met Hagrid,” she said, waving Celia to the empty seat between Hagrid and Professor Snape.

*Perfect. Just … perfect.*

Somehow, she made it through the faculty meeting that followed. It seemed kind of odd to hold one in this large room and all stretched out over a long table, but apparently a charm of some sort was making it easier to hear one another than she would have expected. At least this way they were already here before the students arrived, rather than having to all trek over from some other place, considering you couldn’t Apparate on the grounds of Hogwarts.

Professor Aurora Sinistra was announced as the new Head of Hufflepuff. Celia hadn’t realized that her predecessor had held that job as well. Professor Sprout must not have lived in the cottage next to the greenhouses, then. From the sound of it, the Heads of the Houses had to be a lot more accessible for midnight emergencies than that.

Some stuff about the new Prefects, the Head Boy and Girl, and patrolling schedules, and then Hagrid excused himself to go into Hogsmeade to meet the train and the rest began talking about their summers. Some of them had gone to some seriously cool places! She demurely mentioned that she had largely spent the summer months working on some hybridization research, hoping that would be enough to get her off the hook. Sadly, it was not.

“Really? What sort of research?” asked the diminutive Professor Flitwick.

“Well, there are certain potions that I think might be more effective, or variants that might become possible, if certain plants were crossbred rather than added individually.” At his encouraging nod, she continued, “My particular focus is on a set of ingredients for a pair of dream potions, one to suppress prescient dreams, and another to facilitate working with such dreams after the fact.” *There, that should do it, right? At least she’d said nothing that was not already known to anyone who cared to check out ongoing Herbology research projects. And that’s approximately fifty people on the entire planet, if that.*

Instead, she found herself once again the focus of those arresting eyes beside her. They looked astonishingly cold. *Oh, hell. I’ve stepped right into a conversational minefield, she barely had time to think. And I so should have known.*

“Really,” Professor Snape drawled. “And whatever gave you the idea that it would be possible to suppress that particular type of dream?”

“Actually,” she replied, steeling herself, “the idea came to me from a letter on another subject entirely in *The International Journal of Potions.* I’m sure you can appreciate that the ingredients for such a potion are intuitively obvious, except for the fact that they do not interact well, or in fact at all, when combined in a potion together. Nor can the effect be achieved by using each in its own potion and taking them separately. The author of this letter seemed quite convinced – stated quite vehemently, in fact – that the only way certain herbs would ever work in the complementary fashion one might hope for, would be to alter their basic genetic structure. I rather thought he was on to something.” She had also kind of thought there had been no need for being so rude when commenting on another researcher’s article, but considering the way he was sneering at her right now, maybe he’d thought the letter had passed for polite and professional. Actually, for him it probably *was* polite and professional. Not that she’d had any plan to get into such a conversation, with him of all people, but
she was moderately happy that she appeared to be holding her own.

“I see,” Snape said, eyes narrowed. No, he did not appear pleased at all to hear his own words quoted back at him. Except, you know, back in that pleased-equals-stinky alternate universe.

Finally, the first wave of students for the Welcoming Feast roared in. Not exactly saved by the bell, but it’d do.

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The feast itself had been fascinating. How did they manage to serve up that much food and still have it taste good? Okay, magic, but still. The Sorting process was amusing, but she still wasn’t crazy about the basic idea. Defining kids’ whole personalities when they’re eleven? Well, she supposed it was something she’d have to get used to. At least she hadn’t allowed the Headmistress to talk her into getting Sorted back when she was first hired.

On the way back to her cottage, she decided to have a look through each of the greenhouses. It wasn’t that she didn’t know which ones had which plants, or which classes would be in which. She’d been through them all this afternoon. Still, she wished she could have arrived a week or even a day earlier, to have a more thorough feel for her botanical charges before introducing her human charges to them.

She felt like she was being watched as she reached the last greenhouse, the one attached directly to her cottage and containing her experimental plants as well as some of the more dangerous herbs she was expected to maintain for use in the Potions classes and hospital wing. Looking around, and then up at the castle looming overhead, she saw nothing. Just the sense of being in a still-unfamiliar place, maybe? She shrugged and went inside.

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Professor Snape was not impressed by Pomona Sprout’s successor. True, she was not quite as young as he had been when he had first begun teaching at Hogwarts, but that had been a rather different situation. His first thought, upon being introduced to her, was The students here will eat her alive. His second thought, however, was that there was something quite different about her. Not just that she was an American, although that was certainly a count against her, but something odd in the way she had held herself when they were introduced. Then again, their later conversation proved she knew at least a bit about him, so perhaps that was all it had been.

After she had left the Great Hall, he had gone to the South Wing of the castle to see if anything else about her appeared odd. Old instincts, he supposed. All she had done, however, was to go through the greenhouses on her way to the cottage. He supposed it was not all that strange that she had chosen to have her quarters in the Herbology cottage. Pomona had often said she would prefer to be outside the castle if her duties had allowed it. He imagined Herbologists must have a preference for dwellings that allowed more sunlight than an ancient castle.

What did surprise him was when she paused before entering the last greenhouse and whipped her head around and then up, as if she knew she was being watched. She was, of course, but how had she known? He drew back from the window just before her eyes scanned over it and then watched as she apparently dismissed her concern and went inside.

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Inside her cottage, Professor Reese took off her teaching robes and hung them carefully. She only had two sets: one for school days and one, slightly more casual, for weekends. Both were in earth tones of green and brown, which seemed appropriate for her subject and would hide any grass stains and soil nicely between Cleansing Charms. It had been a difficult decision which to wear today, and she had finally decided upon the school-day set. Really, for the Welcoming Feast, her choices were either those or something even more formal, and that was clearly “not done.” She sighed.

So much to get used to here.

She rechecked her parchments for tomorrow’s classes and placed them on the coffee table in her “sitting room.” What else could you call it? It had a small couch and a coffee table, as well as the desk and chair, so obviously it was supposed to be more than a study. She’d probably only ever use it for a study, though.

Looking at the fireplace, she thought about trying out the Floo. Most of the fireplaces at Hogwarts were connected only to the internal Floo network for travel, but could also be used for external communication. Hers was one of the few that could be used for external travel as well, but she hoped she wouldn’t need to use it for that. There was no reason to expect things would ever go that badly. For now, it was probably a little late for a Floo-call. It was late here, making it an hour past late in Hamburg. Too bad none of the people she might want to call were in the States at the moment; then the time difference would work in her favor.

She sank down onto the couch, instead, and started undoing the knot she had put her chestnut hair into for the meeting and feast. Why she bothered keeping it long when she had to keep it braided and up out of the way was a mystery to her, but she didn’t like the idea of cutting it. Besides, if she were in a rush, there would be no repercussions for using magic to deal with it here. In fact, it would probably be a good idea to get into the habit of using magic for everyday things soon. Now, even.

Pulling out her wand, she pointed it at the desk, and Summoned a piece of parchment, a quill, and a jar of ink. Maybe she should also get into the habit of speaking spells out loud even when she wasn’t specifically teaching them. She rarely did, unless for some reason she needed to conserve the extra energy used for nonverbal spells. That would be something to ask Minerva. She wasn’t sure Hagrid would know. He had admitted he wasn’t supposed to use magic at all despite having been cleared a long time ago of the crime he he’d been expelled for in his third year.

Filing that question away for later, she began to write.

G.

How are things in Hamburg? If you’re still sniffling, there should be more Pepper-Up in the storage room. No, I haven’t found a way to deal with the smoke. Not high on the priority list. Deal.

I seem to be settling in fairly well. The Welcoming Feast was nothing short of amazing. I’m still not crazy for the way they Sort the students. Yeah, yeah, my school had “houses” of a kind, but they were based on academic track, not personality traits that can’t possibly be as cut and dry as everyone tries to make them sound. No, I still haven’t put that raggedy hat on my head. What could it possibly matter what House I’d have been in if I’d been a student? Better that I don’t have any reason to subconsciously favor any one batch of kids. Bad enough it’ll seem like I have a pet eventually.

Classes start in the morning. You’re going to regret telling me to keep in touch. I’m so going to be asking a thousand and one questions on how not to be an “ugly American.” I think I’ve done all right so far. The one person I managed to offend probably gets offended by anyone breathing too loudly – or possibly at all. I know you told me to try
and stay clear of him, but Minerva’s stuck me between him and Hagrid at the table, and it sounds like the seating doesn’t change often, if ever. So that should be interesting. Even more interesting is that I’m realizing this is already the longest continuous period of time I’ve spent in the wizarding world, and it’s only been twelve hours. No ill effects to being around so much magic that I can see, but it’s going to be a while before I’m completely comfortable using it for just anything. Oh well. That will just show my Muggle upbringing, which isn’t the worst thing. Might even be a useful distraction.

Are you sure there’s no way to hook up my laptop here? E-mail would be so much more convenient than owls and fireplaces.

Yours truly,

C.

Celia waved her hand over the wet ink, then snorted and cast a Drying Charm. Rolling it up, she decided it would be easy enough to detour to the owtery before breakfast. Probably the best idea, really, so no one else would likely be around. With a stretch and a yawn, she got up and took the approximately two and a half steps required to cross to her bedroom door. She looked around the quaint little cottage. It was tiny, but better than many of the apartments she had lived in, and probably warmer than the castle, come winter. She smiled. While she had a lot of adapting to do, that was something she had always done well, and once she got the hang of it, it should be a treat not to have to hide her magic.

She turned and went in to bed, closing the door softly behind her.

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Professor Snape swept into the Great Hall and strode past the Slytherin table on the way to the staff table. Most of the older students were present, and all of the N.E.W.T.-level students. The first-years were, of course, the least well-represented. They would learn the value of early rising soon enough if they truly had the requisite ambition.

He nodded to Hagrid before passing behind him and the empty Herbologist’s chair to reach his own seat. He regretted for a moment that this was the spot that gave him the best angle of vision over the Slytherin table. If not for that, this would be the perfect year to acquiesce to Minerva’s insistence that the Deputy Headmaster should actually be sitting at the right hand of the Headmistress. Being sandwiched between Pomona Sprout and Septima Vector had always been annoying at the later meals, as they would talk across him about the most absurd subjects, but they were blessedly quiet at breakfast. This new teacher was an unknown quantity and quite possibly the sort who would be bright and cheerful in the morning.

Then again, she was also late, so perhaps she either was not a “morning person” or else preferred to spend her pre-class time working with her doomed experimental plants.

A disturbance at the Slytherin table caught his attention. A disturbance that quickly quieted down when one of the miscreants realized they were being watched by their Head of House. He might still favor his own House, as all of the other Heads did to some extent, but it had been years since he had turned a blind eye to misbehavior among the Slytherins. One or two first-years with siblings who had left Hogwarts before the end of the war always appeared to think they would still be treated as above the law, and often the older students would egg them on, which looked to be what was happening now. Unfortunately, he could not determine who had done what to whose breakfast first. Fortunately, he still had no objection to simply disciplining all involved with no regard for such trivialities. All three would have detention on their first day of classes.

“Good morning, Hagrid. Professor Snape,” an accented feminine voice said from his left. He turned
to offer a curt nod in reply and then returned his attention to his breakfast. There was no point in
encouraging conversation in which he did not desire to participate.

“Mornin’, Celia,” Hagrid replied. “Sleep well?”

“Like a log. I’m already beginning to feel spoiled rotten, too. One of the house-elves, Lulu I think
her name was, has already scolded me for making my own bed.”

The half-giant snorted.

“Yeah, they’ll do tha’,” he said.

Professor Snape dearly hoped they would both just eat their breakfasts and be quiet now. He took it
as a hopeful sign when Professor Reese picked up her pumpkin juice and took a large sip. That hope
was lost, but replaced with amusement, when her eyes appeared to swell to twice their normal size
and she swallowed her juice as though it were the vilest potion ever concocted.

“Is there something wrong, Professor Reese?” he asked mildly.

“I did warn ye, Celia,” Hagrid said at the same time.

“It’s orange, it’s juice, and it’s breakfast,” she replied, apparently to both of them while clearly trying
to erase the grotesque expression from her features. “It was an honest mistake before coffee.” She
peered into her empty teacup. “Is it possible to have coffee, right?”

“Sure,” Hagrid replied. “Mos’ like their tea, bu’ all ye have to do is say what ye want over t’ cup.”

“Is pumpkin juice not a common morning beverage in the Americas?” Snape asked before he could
remind himself he did not want to have conversations at breakfast.

“Not where I’m from,” she answered. “Our orange breakfast juice actually comes from oranges. I
was a bit surprised when Hagrid told me how fond of pumpkin juice the British wizarding
community is, considering they’re a New World plant. On our side of the pond we tend to stick with
making pies and breads out of them.”

Snape made a noncommittal noise in his throat and took a sip of tea to excuse himself from further
comment. Clearly he was not to be allowed to finish his breakfast in peace, and the woman was now
poking at her breakfast plate with an expression caught halfway between confusion and disgust.

“And this is …?” The expression on her face suggested she already had a fair idea.

“Black puddin’,” Hagrid supplied. “Don’ think you folks have tha’, either.”

“No.” She pulled another face. “We generally leave the blood-as-food thing to the vampires.”

From the corner of his eye, Snape saw her slide the slice of pudding to the edge of her plate. He also
noticed Hagrid shooting her an aggrieved look and was slightly startled. Was he offended? Snape
bristled on the half-giant’s behalf, but before he could say anything, the irritating American was
already speaking.

“It’s just more culture shock, is all, Hagrid, don’t worry. Well, that and nerves, I guess.”

Hagrid snorted. “Ye can’ be scared of a bunch o’ eleven year-old kids, now, can ye?”

“Heh, I’d trade them for a nice simple two-headed dragon at the moment. Unarmed. No, it’s just
first-day nerves. And really, it’s not the first-years that worry me so much. All their teachers are new
today. It’s the ones who are disappointed not to have Professor Sprout back.”

Hagrid nodded sagely. “I worried abou’ the same thing when I took over fer Professor Kettleburn.”

“How did that go?”

Hagrid appeared uncomfortable again. Was the woman deliberately needling him or just foolish?

“Well, I wouldn’ recommend jumpin’ in wi’ t’ mos’ int’restin’ stuff ye can think of, t’ get their attention. If they aren’ ready to take ye seriously yet, they migh’ get hurt from not listenin’.”

“Good advice,” she agreed. “Well, I wasn’t planning on introducing any seriously lethal plants to anyone below N.E.W.T. level this week, and they, at least, should have the sense to listen to precautions regardless of who is giving them by that point. I hope.”

Snape finally managed to tune out the remainder of the conversation as another case of first-year baiting arose at the Slytherin table. Interestingly, the first-year in question seemed to have avoided implicating himself, although the second-year student next to him was clearly trying to make it appear that the younger student had flung that bit of sausage at the Ravenclaw table. Both students finally looked up to the staff table and quailed under their Head of House’s glare. That settled the issue of detentions, then. If the boy was going to behave as though he were guilty, even if he were not, then he would serve detention as well. One had to learn to do better than that in Slytherin House.

She stood as straight as possible, willing herself to appear more than her five feet and three inches tall. As the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff first-years clustered around the long central table were well under five feet themselves, this was probably unnecessary but felt like a good idea anyway.

“Good morning, class,” she called loudly from what she had decided would be the front of Greenhouse 1.

“Good morning, Professor Reese,” the students replied in something approaching unison.

“I imagine several of you are disappointed to be starting your magical education with plants, because you do not think they are very magical at all,” she began. “Others are probably horrified that the climbing roses behind me are actually climbing up the wall, because where you come from, roses just don’t do that sort of thing.” Some of the vines were, in fact, tangling up with one another and apparently wrestling for dominance. “You will be relieved to know that they are generally much better behaved than this in the wizarding world, so long as you do not overfeed them.” She had, of course, deliberately spiked their pots with extra nitrogen on her way to the owlery this morning for just this purpose. “Also, they will not leave the trellis they are climbing on, so unless you are very foolish and stick your hand amongst them, you have no reason to fear their thorns.”

She thought she saw a few sighs of relief and one or two mischievous looks. Oh well. If they insisted, a puncture from a thorn or two would get them over it real quick and with minimal damage.

“Some of the things you will learn this year are basic to all plants. Some are specific to magical plants. All of what I will teach you has the potential to be useful to you at some point in your life, whether you choose to become an Herbologist, a Healer, an Auror, or even if you choose a job that never involves plants or keep a garden of your own. You will learn plants to avoid, plants that have various magical and medicinal uses, and plants you can eat if you find yourself stuck in the middle of nowhere without a wand. You will learn little about plants that are simply interesting or ornamental, though if any of you particularly want to do so, you can do a side project about such plants for extra
Looking out over the group, she saw a mixture of interest, disbelief, and boredom on their young faces. *More or less what I'd expected. I'm glad I got to start with the little ones.*

“We’ll mostly focus on practical work during class, but I encourage you to bring any questions from the reading. Don’t be afraid to ask them. If you found something confusing, the odds are at least three of your classmates did as well, and it would be a good idea for someone to bring it up. With that in mind, I expect you to read all of chapter one by our next class meeting and turn in a paragraph or two of your thoughts about it. You may include questions that occurred to you while you were reading, things you found surprising or interesting, or even that you found it deeply boring. The catch is that I want you to explain the reasons for whatever you write and give me some evidence that you have actually read the chapter.

“I don’t mind at all if you discuss the homework with your classmates.” *What is that I see? Shock? Disbelief? Think the new teacher is letting you cheat? Hah!* “In fact, I encourage you to bounce ideas off each other. That’s an excellent way to learn. What I don’t want to see are homework parchments that appear to have been copied from each other. You learn nothing by simply copying someone else’s ideas. Yes, there are facts you will all need to learn, but you need to do your own thinking about those facts to really make the knowledge your own. To help keep you honest, I’ll be giving quizzes from time to time, without warning, so stay on top of your homework.”

She smiled at them and waved to the relatively tame and mostly Muggle plants before them.

“And, let’s get our hands dirty!”

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“You,” he said slowly, deliberately, “are the few who have succeeded in obtaining a grade of Outstanding on your O.W.L. Potions exam.” He walked slowly across the front of the classroom, looking at each student in turn. “Some of you may believe this renders you among the elite. Some of you may think this means you have a natural predisposition for the exact art and subtle science that is potion-making. What you should realize is that you have passed the minimum standard necessary to attempt N.E.W.T.-level Potions, nothing more. You are in no way guaranteed to pass this level. You will find this class more challenging than any you have taken with me thus far, and you will be brewing far more volatile potions and handling far more dangerous ingredients than you were allowed to in your first five years.”

Professor Snape turned on his heel and returned to the front of the dungeon classroom, drew his wand, and snapped it at the board, where a list of potions appeared.

“These are the potions you will be expected to brew this term. You will need to do more than follow your books as though they were simple cooking recipes,” he continued. “You must bring to bear all that you have learned in the last five years and apply it to the instructions as you read them.”

He saw several startled looks, most on the faces he had expected to display them: students whose essays had always shown their ability to memorize facts but little in the way of critical or creative thought.

“Today, you will begin by brewing the Draught of Living Death, which you will find on page ten of your books. If you are unable to produce the potion successfully by the end of the class, your homework will be to write two feet of parchment explaining why. I trust that by now you all know I will not tolerate cheating, either while working on your potions or on your essays.” He smirked in the intimidating manner he had cultivated over the years. “If you are able to produce the potion...
successfully by the end of the class, I will be most surprised. Well? What are you waiting for?”

The students quickly opened their books and began scurrying to the store cupboard for ingredients. He watched them closely to see whether any would show signs of the independent thinking necessary to truly excel in the art of potion-making.

A/N: I should note the inspiration for the climbing roses that get frisky with too much nitrogen comes from Lois McMaster Bujold’s *Cetaganda*. 
Chapter 2

The first few weeks of classes seemed to fly past as Celia settled into a routine. Her N.E.W.T. students were every bit as challenging as she could have hoped. The younger students were, of course, more of a mixed bag. They were all required to take Herbology until they took their O.W.L. exams, but most couldn’t care less about the subject. All things considered, she actually preferred the “firsties.” They could go from adorably eager to infuriatingly dense and back in less than ten seconds and this made for some interesting classes. At the moment, eagerness seemed to be winning.

She scanned the greenhouse workbench, and noted the progress that they were – or in several cases were not – making with their nettle and sow thistle plants. Those had been good picks. No permanent damage if they got stung or stuck, but it taught them to treat their plants with care. Quickly.

Something at the far end of the workbench caught her eye. What the hell was that kid doing? He wasn’t actually … she whipped out her wand.

“Impervius! Immobulus!”

The child froze, as did the water he had just started to pour. She walked swiftly to his side and looked with horror. *Yup. Dragon blood.* And he’d been about to dump an awful lot of water in it. That was all kinds of brilliant. The water couldn’t get in now, but still she carefully moved the dragon blood safely to the center of the bench and worked the pitcher out of the boy’s hand, taking care not to knock him over. She placed the pitcher under the “frozen” water and prepared to unfreeze it and the boy, positioning herself to catch him if he fell.

“Finite Incantatem.”

The water splashed down into the pitcher, and young Michael Harrington looked up at her, startled, then guilty. *Goddess, I hate this part of the job.* She’d managed so far to reprimand students privately but he could have seriously hurt himself and several classmates. And her. And the greenhouse. Possibly the south wall of the castle. She had to be firm, and they all had to understand. “Mr. Harrington, would you care to explain what you thought you were doing?”
“I was, um,” he said, then stopped, looking around him wildly.

“You were about to something so amazingly—idiotic and stupid, not to mention—dangerous that I had to Immobilize you. I don’t appreciate having to use that sort of magic on my students. I never thought I would have to use that sort of magic on my students.” She took a breath. Her heart could slow down any time now. “What I want to know is what you thought you were doing. Then I’ll give you a small idea of what you would have done.”

The boy swallowed. “Well, you said that we needed to make the soil more acidic. And we ran out of the stuff you were having us use…”

“The pH adjuster, yes.”

“So, I looked at the label, and decided we could make some more of our own.”

“I see.” Ambitious. Right. “And where did you find the undiluted dragon blood?”

“Umm.”

“So you thought you would get in less trouble for going into my supplies and stealing a dangerous substance, than for asking me what you should do?”

The boy nodded weakly. She sighed. Let’s try to impress the teacher by doing it all ourselves, and then she’ll forget we broke into her supply cabinet. Great idea, except for the part where it’s not. Let’s see, ethics or safety first?

“And have you been sleeping through your Potions classes these past two months, Mr. Harrington?” she asked.

He looked at her blankly. “No, Professor Reese. I do quite well in Potions.”

“Really? Then how is it possible that you did not know you should never, ever add water to dragon blood?”

“But the bottle said…”

“I didn’t ask what the bottle said. I asked how, if you have been paying attention and doing well in Potions, you could have thought it would be wise to add water to dragon blood.”

“It never came up?”

One of the other students snickered. Celia closed her eyes and prayed for strength.

“So you mean to tell me,” she said, “that if I were to ask your Potions Master whether you ought to know that you shouldn’t add water to dragon blood, he’d tell me that he hasn’t burdened you with that knowledge?”

The boy blanched. “I don’t see what Potions has to do…”

“You can’t simply leave what you learn in one class when you enter another, Mr. Harrington. Adding water to dragon blood is dangerous, whether you are in Potions class, my class, or not in any class at all.” She sighed again. Seeing is believing, right? “All of you, pick up your plants and take several steps back from the workbench.”

Once they were all out of range, she dipped her fingers into the pitcher and flung several drops toward the ceramic dish holding the dragon blood and quickly jumped back. With a loud pop,
several tongues of flame leapt up from the dish, joined into one, and actually reached high enough to scorch the greenhouse window above before dissipating. She turned back to look at the boy, who was suddenly looking very pale, as were most of his classmates.

“You were about to pour this entire pitcher in there, weren’t you?” she asked. He nodded dumbly. “Fifty points from Slytherin for unauthorized use of dangerous substances and nearly blowing us all up. And a week of detention for breaking into my supplies. In the future, Mr. Harrington, if you need supplies and cannot find them, *ask*. You’ll get in far less trouble that way.”

The students were all looking at her oddly. Right, she had never corrected a student so publicly before, nor had she ever docked House points for a student’s error. *Well, so far none of them tried to blow the place up!* Maybe it was a good thing she’d proved that she would punish them if it came to it. Among other things, this incident would probably be burned into their memories, and maybe none of the rest of them would try anything so foolish. *And there’s this bridge and this swamp land. Great deals, both of ‘em.* She looked at the clock.

“You might as well start cleaning up, class,” she said. “It’ll be time for the next period soon enough. Yes, Miss McEvoy?”

“If the pH adjuster really is water and dragon blood, and it’s so dangerous to add water to dragon blood, how do they make it?” asked the young Gryffindor.

She smiled. “That, I believe, you will probably learn either later this year, or sometime next year, when you have a bit more background. If you’re curious to know exactly when, I suggest you ask your Potions Master.” The young girl looked daunted at the prospect.

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Once the students had left, Celia straightened out the greenhouse and restored the dragon blood to its proper spot in her cupboard. Who’d have thought one of them would pull a stunt like that? Well, it’d be the last one. Several minutes later, as she was putting the finishing touches on a complex series of locking charms, there was a sound at the doorway.

“Professor Reese?” a rich baritone voice spoke. She turned.

“Professor Snape, come in, come in,” she said. “I expected I’d hear from you sometime today though not so soon.” He raised an eyebrow as he entered. “About Mr. Harrington?”

“What about Mr. Harrington?” he asked.

“Ah, that’s not why you’re here then.” She sighed. “Perhaps he does have some sense of self-preservation. Tell me, Professor, at what point in your curriculum do you explain to your students that one should never add water to dragon blood?”

His eyes did an impressive imitation of … well, okay, not saucers, but something much rounder than his eyes usually were.

“On the first day,” he replied. “We discuss the various and plentiful ways they are capable of damaging themselves. And, of course, it is mentioned in their book, as well as every time I have them handle it.”

“I thought so,” she said. “Mr. Harrington decided he’d make his own dilution of dragon blood to adjust the acidity of his nettle plant’s soil.” She pointed up at the scorched window. “After I unfroze him, I … explained why that was a very bad idea. And reminded him he ought to already know as much. I didn’t exactly believe him that ‘it never came up.’”
Professor Snape’s lips quirked into something that might have been a distant cousin to a smile. “I see.”

“It’s the first time any of them have done anything foolish enough to warrant my taking House points off, so I thought he might have complained in hopes it could be reversed.”

“I would never ask another teacher to reverse a disciplinary decision. That simply is not done,” he replied, his eyes narrowing. “How was he able to access undiluted dragon blood in the first place?”

“He went into my supply cabinet. Not,” she added, holding her hands up, palms out, “the classroom supply cabinet. And for that little stunt, I get to invent a week’s worth of detentions. Just now I’ve been adding to the security spells.”

“I see.” His tone implied she had been an even worse idiot than Harrington not to realize this danger sooner. Sadly, he was probably right. “Do American students not raid their teachers’ stores in order to try things they are by no means prepared to do? I hadn’t thought our students were unique in such things.”

“I don’t know,” she replied honestly. “My training was all one-on-one. I didn’t have the advantage of a school like Hogwarts.” Unauthorized use of the chem. lab was pretty standard, though. So, yeah, I should’ve known.

He looked at her for a moment, his expression unreadable as ever. “At any rate, that is not why I came here. I am in need of fresh aconite and vinca.”

“Oh, of course,” she answered with some relief. She could see why the man’s students were so intimidated by him. That was, of course, what she was feeling. Intimidated. That flash in his eyes was just incredibly … intimidating. With a whirl of robes, she exited the first year classroom greenhouse, locked it behind them, and headed for the greenhouse she thought of as hers.

Once inside, she quickly located the plants. “Will you be wanting whole plants again, or will cuttings suffice?”

“Whole plants, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” she replied, simply picking up a pot that had a reasonably sized specimen of each and handing it to him. At his questioning look, she continued, “The Headmistress asked me to keep a ready supply of them. When you requested them just before the full moon last month, I decided it would be easiest to simply have them ready for pickup in the future.”

“And there will be no difference in effect, growing them together like this?”

“No, they wouldn’t hybridize without deliberate magical interference; they’re reproductively isolated,” she answered. At his questioning glance, she added, “Yes, I have tried it, and the result was exceedingly useless. Merely growing them in the same pot appears to have no effect one way or the other on their biology or their magic.”

“I see,” he replied. After a few seconds he continued, “And the fact that someone is in need of Wolfsbane potion does not worry you?”

“Not so long as they’re taking it,” she replied with a shrug. “Why, should it?”

He looked at her oddly but merely thanked her and left. She felt strange about the turn the conversation had taken though she couldn’t say why. Thinking back to their conversation – if one could call it that – at the faculty meeting before the Welcoming Feast, she wondered if he was simply
bothered by the idea that she did Potions work. No way. How many Herbologists could there be who didn’t make at least some Potions from their plants? Well, other than that fellow Longbottom at Diagon Alley, who was obviously devoted to his plants entirely for their own sake. Maybe a little too devoted. With another shrug she relocked her greenhouse and hurried to meet her sixth-year N.E.W.T. class.

As he made his way back to the dungeon that housed the Potions classroom, his office, and his quarters, Severus Snape replayed this latest interaction with his new colleague. He was more convinced than ever that there was something very strange about her. It was not surprising that she had deduced the reasons he would need these particular herbs, which had to be used fresh. Any Herbologist worthy of the title should be able to figure that out. It was a trifle more disquieting that she had experimented with such a volatile potion, but that seemed simply another symptom of her clearly rash nature.

No, what disturbed him was that she seemed entirely too well-versed in the matter and much too complacent about the notion that there might be a werewolf on the school grounds. She had no way of knowing, nor any reason to suspect, that he was preparing this for someone as far away as London. Surely she was not one as well? Minerva had to have learned from Albus’ mistake. He resolved to keep an eye on her for the next few days. He knew the limitations of the Wolfsbane potion. If she were taking it, she would only retain her mind during the transformation. She would still be quite ill after and probably unable to teach at all.

He had arrived at his classroom which was blessedly free of students until the end of the next period. Satisfied that he had decided upon a course of action to address his concerns, he began working on the Wolfsbane potion for Remus Lupin.

The staff meeting was already well under way when a somewhat disheveled Professor Reese quietly entered and slid into her seat. The Deputy Headmaster did not pause in his discussion of the upcoming Hogsmeade weekend and Halloween Feast but rather waited until he was done to address her tardiness.

“And how nice of you to join us, Professor Reese,” he said archly. “I trust we are not keeping you from something more pressing?”

“I apologize for being late,” she replied. Her words were demure, but her expression suggested some rather more forceful emotion.

Well, if the chit is going to be rude, she should expect rudeness in return.

“It is unfortunate that, as the staff member most in need of the information, you have missed much of what was said in regards to staff responsibilities during the upcoming visit to Hogsmeade.”

She now appeared to be nearly seething, but before she could say a word, Madam Pomfrey spoke up.

“What happened to your hand, Professor Reese?” she asked.

The Herbologist looked down at her hand on the table and appeared surprised to see that it was badly scraped and bleeding slightly. She appeared embarrassed and removed her hand to her lap.

“It’s nothing,” she replied. “Please, can we get back to the meeting?”
“At least let me heal it,” the school matron insisted.

Professor Reese looked as if she were about to argue, then pressed her lips together and held her hand out. Poppy murmured a quick charm, and the skin promptly knit itself together.

“If that is all,” he began, once Reese had thanked the matron, but found himself interrupted.

“Such an odd abrasion,” Poppy commented. “It looks as if your hand had been caught in a vise.”

The young teacher flushed crimson and mumbled something to the effect of having an argument with one of the staircases as to her destination en route to the meeting.

“That’s a very bad idea,” Potter chimed in. “They always win.”

A brief chuckle went up around the table, and Professor Snape deeply wished Minerva were the one dealing with this mutinous crowd. Surely they all wanted this infernal meeting finished as soon as possible. Why, then, were they encouraging this time-consuming, attention-seeking behavior?

“I’m sorry,” Professor Reese said. “I didn’t want to cause such an interruption.”

“Nor did I wish to have one, but here we are,” he replied. “Now, if that is quite all, I would like to move on. It has come to my attention that several of you have been delegating your responsibilities to the prefects with some regularity. This should be a rather more rare occurrence …”

After the meeting had ended, Professor Snape was dismayed but not surprised to see that Professor Reese had remained behind.

“May I ask what I missed regarding the Hogsmeade weekend?”

“I do not enjoy repeating myself,” he snapped.

“I have already apologized for being late,” she retorted. “However, if you find repeating yourself so bothersome, you might have considered that before going over information that was old news to everyone but the one person who was missing.”

“Which is it, then?” he demanded. “Did you not wish to cause an interruption, or did you think I would rearrange the entire agenda to accommodate your tardiness?”

“I’m only pointing out that you could have spared yourself the repetition if you chose,” she said in what was clearly a deceptively calm voice. “Now, is there some reason you wish to drag this out, or are you going to tell me what is expected of me this weekend?”

He looked at her consideringly for a long moment.

“You will be escorting the third-year students with Professor Vector on the walk to and from the village. While in Hogsmeade, they and you may pursue any reasonable errands or dine in one of the pubs or the tea shop. Then you will escort them back to Hogwarts after assisting Professor Vector in accounting for them. Should any trouble break out among students of any year, you will make yourself useful resolving the problem.”

“Thank you,” she replied, then turned to leave.

“Professor Reese,” he called after her. She turned. “You might speak with Filius about teaching you the charm to control the staircases, so as to avoid any future ’arguments.’”

For the briefest of seconds, she looked as if she were going to ask why he did not just tell her
himself. The expression passed, and she merely nodded and said, “I will,” before finally leaving him in peace.

The day was going well, Celia thought. The third-year students were too excited about their first trip to Hogsmeade to get into any trouble on their way there. Now they seemed to mainly be stocking up on every sweet imaginable from Honeydukes.

*That should make for an interesting trip back,* she mused. Sugared-up thirteen year-olds were not, as she recalled, the most docile of creatures.

She went into a few of the shops herself. Dervish and Banges had an impressive selection of magical equipment, which they also serviced, and a fair selection of not-exactly-magical-but-you’d-never-see-it-in-the-Muggle-world items as well. She spent several minutes looking over their assortment of Sneakoscopes. They came in a more impressive array of sizes than she had previously seen, and she knew quite a few friends who could probably use them. She’d have to see how far her Christmas budget would stretch. Owling them would probably be more expensive than the actual Sneakoscopes. Maybe she’d stick with just … well, maybe she’d keep it to a minimum.

The apothecary was surprisingly poorly stocked, at least in comparison to the one at Diagon Alley. However, it had most of the items she needed, and the clerk agreed to order and owl her the rest. Good thing she wasn’t in a hurry. She could probably borrow from the school supplies if she really needed to, but that was a conversation she didn’t particularly want to have.

One of her more productive stops was Scrivenshaft’s Quill Shop. They had some very fine stationery, all of it parchment. What, exactly, did the wizarding world have against paper? She passed over the more decorative items and purchased a box of plain parchment for letter-writing. She wished there were some with grid-lines to make it easier to record students’ grades and made a mental note to send for some Muggle graphing paper.

Browsing through some of the quirkier offerings at Gladrags was amusing despite the fact she didn’t really need any clothes right now. The wizarding world had apparently discovered toe socks. Possibly they had invented them. Celia almost laughed out loud when the image of her teacher wearing thigh-high purple and orange toe stockings popped into her head. Her teacher probably would wear them, too. *I really owe her a letter.*

As she turned to leave, she noticed they had a limited supply of fancier robes and gowns. She could have waited on that, then. Blinking back tears, she hurried out of the shop. Buying fancy things was probably always going to hurt, and she was glad she had taken care of it before coming to Hogwarts.

When it got close to two in the afternoon she headed to the Three Broomsticks to wait for Professor Potter. He had informed her that several of the staff often stopped in for a late lunch on these outings and promised that she would absolutely love her first taste of butterbeer. An actual beer would be more her speed. She wasn’t at all sure she wanted to drink something that sounded like the bastard lovechild of butterscotch and rootbeer, much less warm, but she had agreed to give it a try. Among other things, she felt she should probably be making more of an effort to socialize with the rest of the faculty. What they would possibly find in common to talk about besides the students was the big question, but there had to be some safe topics.

As she stood with her back to the pub – not its door or windows, of course, but a nice expanse of wall – she watched the students milling around. Quite a few of the older students seemed to have wiped Zonko’s Joke Shop out of inventory and were having fun pranking each other. Nothing appeared to be getting out of hand, so she let them be. Down the road a bit, a couple of third-years
were apparently having a contest to see who could shove the longest bit of a sugar quill into their mouth. She smiled wryly. *Oh yeah, the trip back is going to be all kinds of fun.*

Suddenly, she felt a hand on her shoulder and reacted instinctively, grabbing it and spinning to twist it behind its owner’s back, pinning the assailant against the pub wall so forcefully his glasses flew off.

*Wand!* she thought with a surge of panic, and with a flick of her wrist, it was out of her sleeve and in the hand that wasn’t keeping his arm locked in place just before he managed to turn his face and look at her.

*Oh shit.*

“Professor Potter!” she exclaimed, releasing him and taking several steps back. Her hand flew to her mouth, and she felt as if her eyes were going to roll straight out of her skull. *No, no, no, no. I did not, not just attack one of my colleagues and the Hero of the Wizarding World while I was at it. I’m going to wake up now. Wake up! Damn. “I’m so sorry! You startled me.”*

“Obviously,” he said, warily bending to pick up his glasses. One lens had a crack running across it now, and she thought she should probably offer to fix it. Before she could, he had already drawn his own wand, done it himself, and put them back on.

“Why would you … ,” she started, only to find herself interrupted by the person who had just approached. Fortunately for him, he had stepped into her line of vision before getting too close. Unfortunately for her, he was the last person she wanted to see.

“What is going on here?” asked the Deputy Headmaster, his voice low and dangerous. “Teachers brawling in the streets of Hogsmeade? Possibly preparing to duel, from the look of things?”

She looked down and realized she still had her wand out, as did Professor Potter. Forcing herself to keep the movement slow and deliberate, she re-sheathed hers and watched as he did the same.

“It was a misunderstanding, Snape,” Professor Potter said.

Celia was not sure what he replied, because she was becoming very uncomfortably aware of the fact that she had summoned an awful lot of magical energy and had yet to do anything with it. It crackled along her nerves, and she was surprised her hair wasn’t standing on end, braided or not.

“Professor Reese,” the Deputy Headmaster said in a tone implying he had already said it more than once. She turned to face him. He narrowed his eyes and looked at her appraisingly. “I strongly suggest you Apparate directly to the Hogwarts gates and then take yourself to the Headmistress. She should have returned from the Ministry by now.”

*That’s not a half bad idea. The Apparating part, anyway. That’ll use up a nice chunk of this energy.*

She nodded to him, then turned to face Professor Potter again. She had been about to apologize again, but suddenly a wave of resentment washed over her. He’d come up on her blind side and touched her without making his presence known. *He’s supposed to be a war hero and the Defense instructor and should totally know better, but I’m the one being sent to the Headmistress like a naughty student!* She fought the anger back down.

“I apologize for my overreaction and for almost hexing you,” she said carefully, “but of all people, I’d have thought you’d know better than to sneak up on someone like that.”

With that, she turned on her heel and Disapparated.
When he returned to the castle that evening, Professor Snape went directly to the Headmistress’ office. This was, of course, the usual routine. She invariably expected a report as to the students’ behavior and what punishments had been meted out. Tonight, however, should be rather different. His report on the two fights that had occurred would pale in comparison to whatever Minerva would have to say about this nuisance of a teacher harming poor, dear Potter in full view of several students, not to mention residents of Hogsmeade. He could feel an evil smirk forming on his lips as he climbed the stairs, and not a few first- and second-years on their way to dinner scuttled out of his way.

It had, of course, been rather pleasant to watch someone take the Hero of the Wizarding World down a notch, both in pinning him and in pointing out his extremely elementary mistake. The boy should have spent a few more years actually working as an Auror before coming back to Hogwarts to teach. Perhaps then, instead of simply preaching Moody’s dogma of constant vigilance, he might actually practice it. While one did not normally expect someone whose life revolved around plants to have such hair-trigger reflexes, the point was that one also did not just walk up on the blind side of any wizard or witch and tap them on the shoulder, war or no war.

So it was with some surprise that he found an entirely calm Minerva McGonagall in her office awaiting his report. She offered him tea and listened calmly to his description of the two sets of students that had been caught dueling.

“And are you satisfied with the discipline set by Filius and Septima?” she asked.

“Indeed,” he replied. “I am, however, far more interested in hearing your thoughts on the other incident today.”

Minerva took a slow and deliberate sip of her tea and then set her cup down carefully.

“I will speak to Harry,” she said. “In fact, if you see him before dinner, please send him to me.”

Snape raised an eyebrow. This was as far removed from his expectations as anything he could have imagined. Granted, he would most certainly enjoy relaying that message, but it did seem out of character for Minerva to hold him responsible for the incident.

“While Potter’s actions may have been unwise,” he said, “and demonstrate my point that he was not ready to begin teaching after only two years working as an Auror, I rather thought you would be more concerned about the teacher who pinned him up against a wall and nearly hexed him.”

“As you say,” she replied evenly, “his actions were unwise, and the result may well have undermined his authority as a Defense instructor. I have already spoken with Professor Reese about her … overreaction.”

“It sets an awful example for the students if we have teachers brawling in public,” he persisted, hardly knowing why.

“They were not brawling, Severus. Professor Reese tells me that she withdrew as soon as she ascertained she was not being attacked. Is that not what you saw?”

“Yes, it was,” he admitted.

“And as he has not been up here himself to present his side before now, I presume Harry’s interpretation will be similar.”

“Perhaps. However, I am surprised that you are taking this woman’s word before hearing Potter’s
side of the story. Of course she will have cast herself in the best possible light.”

Minerva looked at him oddly.

“I never thought I would see the day, Severus, that you would be defending Harry when it was not a matter of life or death,” she said. “In fact, Professor Reese did nothing of the kind. She was quite embarrassed by the entire scene. She will no doubt be more embarrassed by the announcement I shall have to make at dinner in order to quell the worst of the rumors that must already be spreading.”

He could picture it now. There would be some sympathetic statement about misunderstandings followed by an exhortation to take various lessons from the incident with a grand handshake between the two for pudding. Even as he condemned the idea as utterly nauseating, he had to concede that it was the best way to handle the matter. By tomorrow morning, the rumors would include the possibility that the entire thing had been staged as an object lesson.

“And do you truly think that ‘embarrassment’ is sufficient?”

“Unless Harry suggests otherwise, then yes, Severus. Or did you have anything to add that might change that?”

He sighed. “No.”

“Well, then. Please do send Harry up if you see him before dinner.”

With a curt nod, he rose and left. Something about the entire incident still bothered him although he was hard-pressed to name it. Perhaps it was simply that such a response seemed so incongruent with the woman who chattered so endlessly with Hagrid at the staff table. That was close but not quite it, he felt.

The one thing that was utterly certain was that his suspicion of her being a werewolf was clearly unfounded. The full moon had been only three days ago, and were she one and taking Wolfsbane, she could not possibly have responded so quickly. In fact, she would hardly have been healthy enough to chaperone the trip at all. No, if there were, indeed, something off about her, that was not it.
It was well into November before Celia found it necessary to take points from another student. Considering the incident in Hogsmeade, she wouldn’t have been surprised to see a lot more students acting up in her classes. Luckily that hadn’t happened. No, this time it wasn’t even in her class at all. She was just leaving the study hall that she had been overseeing when she heard a scuffle down a side hallway. As she turned the corner, a student shot past her, but her attention was riveted to the two she saw further down. A large boy was holding a smaller one up against the wall, the smaller child’s toes several inches off the floor.

“What’re you going to do now, featherweight?” the larger boy sneered as she caught sight of his face.

“Mister Jarvis,” she said in the most intimidating voice she could manage, “put your fellow student down. Slowly.”

The boy complied but looked unrepentant and not all that worried about being caught.

*Oh, we’ll just see about that.*

“Twenty points from Ravenclaw for bullying,” she said. “And you will serve detention with me this Saturday at ten o’clock.”

“In the morning?”

“In the morning.” As if she would start a detention at ten o’clock at night.

“But that’s Quidditch!” he protested.

*No kidding Mr. “I’m the star quarterback, I can do whatever I want.”* At least, she thought a Seeker was pretty much like the team’s quarterback.

“Would you like to make it two Saturdays?” she asked.

The boy shook his head mutely.
“I didn’t think so. You will also bring with you two rolls of parchment filled with a discussion of why you feel the need to pick on people smaller than you.”

“But my Head of House will be furious if I don’t play!”

“You could, of course, try to persuade him that I ought to change the time of your detention, Mr. Jarvis,” she said. “I am sure you can make a compelling case to Professor Flitwick that you should not be punished so severely for bullying someone because of their size.”

The boy finally had the grace to look down at his shoes.

Twit.

“Get back to your common room and get ready for dinner,” she ordered. He fled. The shorter student made to follow until she held up a hand to indicate he should remain.

“Thank you, Professor,” the sandy-haired boy said.

“Don’t thank me, Mr. Lightfeather,” she replied. “He can’t strike back at me for punishing him, so he’s going to take it out on you.”

The boy nodded mutely.

“You need to learn how to deal with bullies, Mr. Lightfeather,” she said to the young Slytherin. “There won’t always be a teacher around to deal with them for you. Nor should there be.”

“But I’m too little to fight back!” he wailed.

“Who said anything about fighting back?” she countered. “That never works. You fight back, so then he picks on you more, you fight back more. It doesn’t end well. No, the way to deal with bullies is to stop being an easy target.”

“How do I do that?”

She looked him up and down. “First, you square your shoulders and lift your chin. Standing, sitting, always. If you’re all hunched over like that, you look like you are expecting to be attacked. Bullies take that as an invitation.”

His eyes opened wide at this and he straightened up immediately.

“There you go,” she said. “Second, if he’s just teasing you verbally, what you do is either ignore him or outright tell him that you don’t care what he says. I don’t care if it’s true or not; what matters is he needs to believe you mean it. Say it often enough, and you might find out it’s true after all.”

“But what about other stuff?”

“Like dangling you off the floor? There’s not much you can do about that without getting yourself in trouble for striking back. But, if you manage to act bored rather than scared, he’ll probably get bored himself, and then one of us teachers gets to have a similar talk with his next target. For most bullies, that’s enough. They don’t actually care about hurting you; it’s the humiliation and fear they’re after. If it’s more serious, then either get away or have a friend go for help like you just did.”

“And magic?”

“Have you learned how to block jinxes yet in your Defense classes?” she asked. When he shook his head, she sighed. “You could ask your Defense professor, or your Head of House for that matter,
and see if they think you’re ready to learn that. In the meantime, use your size to your advantage.”

“Professor?”

“Duck, Mr. Lightfeather. Jump out of the way. Being smaller gives you an advantage, because you’re already harder to hit. If you can make yourself a moving target, that’s all to the good. And if he doesn’t miss, Madam Pomfrey’s very good at fixing the things students do to each other here. Remember that and don’t let him rattle you. Again, he’ll get bored and move on.”

“Yeah, I know,” said the boy. “About Madam Pomfrey, I mean.”

“Already, huh?” she replied. “Well, I’ve just given you kind of a lot of homework, but unlike what I gave Mr. Jarvis, it’s not supposed to be a punishment. But if I find you making yourself an easy target again, you’ll be writing me an essay, too, and the topic will be how to deal with bullies appropriately and why it’s important to do so.”

“What if the bully is a teacher?” he asked, a quiver in his voice.

She smiled. Gee, I wonder who he could be talking about? “Mr. Lightfeather, none of the teachers here are bullies.” He looked ready to argue the point, but she cut him off. “Many are very strict. We each have our own way of looking out for our students.”

He closed his mouth and nodded, clearly unconvinced.

“Now,” she continued, “you’re going to be late for dinner. Get a move on.”

“Yes, professor,” the boy said. “Thank you, professor.”

She watched as he darted back down the hall and then stopped short as he rounded the corner. His steps continued at a brisk walk once he was out of sight. Celia took her time returning down the hall herself with a fair idea who she would find on the other side of that corner.

“Professor Snape,” she greeted him. “I should have realized that other student was off to get you. How long have you been there?”

“Long enough,” he replied, gesturing to her to proceed toward the Great Hall with him. “That was a very interesting approach.”

She shrugged. “I’d think that dealing with bullies would be a pretty universal problem.”

“No doubt,” he replied with a sneer. “However, I’m surprised that someone with such a privileged background would have any familiarity with the problem.”

Dumbstruck, she turned to look at him. “Whatever gave you the idea I come from a ‘privileged background’?”

“You mentioned that your instruction was through private tutoring,” he replied.

She scoffed. Assume much? “My magical training, yes, but that was not exactly a matter of privilege, more like necessity. And I never said I hadn’t been to school, just not a magical school.”

“Indeed,” he said, and then fell silent.

Well, she thought, if he thinks I’m going to start spilling my life story just to fill the conversational dead-space, he’s not as smart as I thought. She held her peace until they were nearly at the Great Hall then excused herself to the bathroom to wash before dinner.
Stalking into the Great Hall, Severus Snape pondered the mystery of Celia Reese. He grudgingly admired the advice she’d given young Colin Lightfeather. For a Slytherin, the boy was entirely too lacking in confidence and, as she had pointed out, made himself a target. Snape had tried pointing this out to the boy in the past, clearly to little effect, as he only left those conversations cringing all the more. The boy reminded him of himself at that age. That was an uncomfortable thought.

Stopping on his way past the Slytherin table, he said, “Mr. Lightfeather, you will stop by my office immediately after dinner.”

The young boy swallowed whatever had been in his mouth as he turned to answer, “Yes, sir.”

When he began to walk away, he heard one of the other first years say, “What are you in trouble for?”

The answer was unfortunately mumbled too softly for him to hear. He continued up to the staff table and took his seat between Aurora and Professor Reese.

He studiously avoided anything beyond the most perfunctory of greetings, ostensibly keeping a close eye on his Slytherins but actually wondering about the strange witch beside him. Giving good advice was all very well, but she still remained a disturbing mystery. The only thing truly unusual about her behavior that he had observed since the Hogsmeade incident was that she had gone to Hagrid’s hut before breakfast twice, and they had gone somewhere out of view from the castle. At breakfast, she had been her usual self, but both times Hagrid had appeared somewhat the worse for wear. He supposed she might be helping him with the dietary needs of some of his more interesting “pets” but staying well out of their range herself. That did not quite track, either.

Once he had finished his dinner, he left the table and the Hall without another word and returned to his office to await the arrival of Colin Lightfeather.

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A timid knock sounded at the door.

“Enter!” he barked.

The small sandy-haired boy opened the door cautiously and stepped inside. He looked around at the shelves of potions ingredients and barely suppressed a shudder.

Professor Snape remained seated at his desk. Perhaps this was not the best venue for this conversation, however it would hardly do to invite a student into his own quarters, and the Slytherin Common Room was out of the question.

“You wanted to see me, sir?” Lightfeather asked.

“I want to speak with you about the altercation with Mr. Jarvis before dinner,” Professor Snape replied.

“Oh.” The boy was still standing almost as far across the office as possible without actually clinging to the door. Interestingly, he suddenly straightened his posture and appeared more confident, if still rather frightened.

“I see you have taken the lesson to heart,” he continued, his tone of voice deliberately dry.
Now the boy blanched. He retained his improved posture. *Good.*

“*You heard?*” Lightfeather asked.

“*Enough,*” he replied. “*Professor Reese’s advice was … adequate, no doubt. Why did you not come to me when Mr. Jarvis’ bullying continued?’*

The boy looked down at his shoes.

“*Look up, Mr. Lightfeather,*” he ordered sharply. “*When you respond to a challenge in that manner, you appear either dishonest or weak.*”

When the boy lifted his gaze again, there was a spark of determination in his eyes that had not been there previously.

“I gather you need to learn how to deflect unfriendly spells,” Snape said, crossing his arms sternly.

“Yes, sir.”

“I will not teach you how to cast hexes or jinxes,” he warned. “*You must only defend yourself or possibly disarm your attacker until an adult arrives to handle the situation.*”

Lightfeather nodded solemnly.

“I do not like to see the students of my house made to look weak, but neither will I tolerate behavior that perpetuates the notion that Slytherin equates to evil. Am I making myself clear?”

“Perfectly, sir.”

Professor Snape examined the boy’s face for any sign of impertinence and found none.

“*Very well. We will begin tomorrow evening, directly after dinner. There is a room on the seventh floor that will suit our purposes well. Do not be late.*”

“No, sir. *Thank you, sir*,” Lightfeather replied.

“You may go.” He waved the boy toward the door and made a show of turning his attention to the stack of essay scrolls before him.

Once the door had closed behind the boy, he leaned back into his chair and tapped his finger on the desk thoughtfully.

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“What’s bothering you, Professor? *You’re not yourself at all today.*”

“It’s nothing Pro … *look, will you please just call me Celia?*” she replied a bit awkwardly. “*I know I probably haven’t passed whatever probationary period it takes to get to first names around here, but it’s really starting to feel ridiculous.*”

Professor Potter shrugged. “*Sure, Celia, and you can call me Harry.*”

She blinked at him stupidly.

“What just happened here?”
“You told me I could use your first name, so I invited you to use mine, too,” he said as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“It was up to me?”

“Well, yeah. Didn’t you know?”

She rolled her eyes.

“Obviously not.” *So much for worrying about looking like some stereotypically super-familiar American!* “So is that a British thing or a wizarding world thing?”

“I’m not sure anymore,” Harry admitted. “I think Muggles just go straight to first names, though.”

*I am going to kill … no, I’m just going to throttle him until his jaw shakes loose. No killing. Too messy. Also there’s the slight problem that he’s in another country. But he’s supposed to be explaining these things to me!*

“Well, now that’s sorted, what’s bothering you?”

*And so much for getting this one off the subject.*

“I suppose you’d call it a sort of homesickness.” Between adjusting to living full-time in the wizarding world and adjusting to living in Britain, she supposed she was due for a bout of homesickness. *Yeah, but homesick for where?*

“Why … oh, that’s right, you Americans have that holiday coming up this Thursday,” he said. “Wishing you could go visit your family, then?”

“No,” she replied with a half-smile. *That would be slightly impossible.* “I think I’m still full from the Halloween Feast for one thing.”

“That’s been over three weeks!” he laughed then added, “And?”

“And I don’t exactly have any family to go have Thanksgiving with, anyway,” Celia admitted, surprising herself. “That’s not why, anyway. Today’s kind of an anniversary. That, and a couple of first year Gryffindors had themselves a combination freak-out and homesick cry last period, which I suppose put me in a mood.”

“Which ones? And what did they ‘freak out’ about?” he asked.

She sent out a mental note of thanks to the two girls for helping her distract their Head of House. She probably should have told him right away, but they had been so embarrassed, and anyway this was much more convenient. Why had she decided to start doing her grading in the staffroom again? *Oh, right. Everyone else is doing it. That’s always a good reason.*

“It was Misses Dissanayake and Hollingberry. We were having one of our walks on the grounds – last one of the term, actually – to see how some of the plants I’ve had them observing have changed for the winter. We’ve gone by the Whomping Willow before, of course, but this time a rabbit ran in close so they got to see it in action.” She sighed. “I guess seeing smaller plants with minds of their own really wasn’t enough preparation for that.”

“Ah.” Harry looked enlightened and possibly a little … nostalgic? “Did the rabbit get away?”

“Oh yes,” she replied. “Thankfully, or they’d really have been traumatized, I think. As it was, that
was pretty much the end of class. They were too shaken, and some of their classmates were not very understanding, so I dismissed the rest and had a chat with them.”

“You get rather a lot of that, don’t you?”

“Well, yes,” she admitted. “I suppose it makes sense that the homesick ones would run to the teacher they know is here from another country.”

“Especially the Muggle-borns,” Harry pointed out.

“Well, they have the most adapting to do, don’t they?” she said with a shrug. “They’re not just away from home for the first time but in a completely different world after all.”

“Definitely,” he said. “It’s a bit of a shock when you’ve not even known about magic the first eleven years of your life.”

She looked at him. “That’s right; I forgot you’d been Muggle-raised, too.” She paused for a sip of tea, looked at the parchment she was supposed to be correcting, then back at him. He was looking at her oddly. “What?”

“What do you mean, ‘Muggle-raised too’?” he asked.

“Oh.” She hadn’t meant to let that slip. Guess that distraction worked both ways. “Um, well, I was Muggle-raised as well. So I guess I understand what a hard time they have adjusting. That’s all.” She turned back to the parchment, inked her quill, and scanned for something she could mark. Anything. Good, bad, this student had to have said something she could comment on. She was uncomfortably aware that not only was this conversation treading into dangerous ground, but there were two other faculty members in the staffroom, too. Professors Flitwick and Snape probably didn’t care what she and Harry were talking about, but they’d probably like some peace and quiet to continue their own essay-grading.

“Muggle-raised, though, and not Muggle-born?” he pressed.

She put down her quill. “Nosy much? Were you ever not in detention when you were a student?” She heard a snort from behind her.

“Well, it’s just a bit unusual,” he said. At least he had the grace to flush slightly. “Sorry, I don’t mean to pry.”

“Yes, you do, but it’s my fault for saying anything in the first place.” She sighed, then continued in a rush, “I don’t actually know whether I’m Muggle-born or not. Most likely. But I was raised by foster-parents and don’t know anything at all about my biological parents. That’s what today is, the anniversary of when I turned up at the Department of Children and Families. There. Satisfied?” She picked her quill back up and noticed her hand was shaking. Willing it to stillness, she tried very hard to look like she was focusing on the parchment again. Instead, her mind was racing. She hadn’t said anything truly compromising so far, but she really didn’t want to get into a discussion of her past. Why was she saying so much, anyway? She should have stuck with her prior habit of doing her grading in her cottage rather than the staff room. Yes, she was getting very lonely, but there was good reason to keep her distance from the rest of the faculty, and this was exactly it.

“Sorry,” Harry said. Silence fell for a few moments. Then he spoke up again, “How did they take it, when they found out you were a witch?” She slapped her quill down and thought about just getting up and leaving.

“Potter, leave the woman alone,” Snape drawled. “Some of us would like to get some actual work
done, here.” Celia turned and offered a smile and nod of thanks which, unsurprisingly, went unacknowledged. Her smile turned to a frown. *Fine. Let him get some actual work done in his dungeon, then.*

“They never knew,” she replied, then cut herself off abruptly. Okay, and why was she saying all of this? To annoy the person who just gave her a way out of this conversation that she should absolutely not be having? Never mind that he had rudely ignored her thanks, this was ridiculous. She looked suspiciously at her cup of tea and wondered if she were being tag-teamed.

She picked up the tea, took a whiff of it, and wordlessly cast a revealing spell over it. Nothing, just tea. She took a sip. Yes, just tea. Still, she’d best get out of here before she said anything else.

“And if I have quite satisfied your curiosity,” she said, “I think I’ll be going now. Clearly I’ll get more done in my own office.” She gathered her things and swept out of the room without another word.

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Several minutes after she’d left, Snape decided to listen to his instincts and follow her. As heavy-handed as the boy had been, and as much as Snape hated to admit it, Potter had at least managed to get more information out of Professor Reese than he had in all this time, and this might be the opportunity to find out more. He reduced his great pile of parchments, placed them in his pocket, and left the staff room without a word.

Once outside and certain no one was watching, he cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself and proceeded to the Herbologist’s cottage. There was no sign of her. He was not surprised and turned instead toward Hagrid’s hut. When he arrived, she was sitting at Hagrid’s table sipping tea. He positioned himself by one of the windows. Celia had her back to him, but he could see Hagrid and hear them both quite well.

“I just don’t know what came over me,” she was saying. “Spilling my guts like that? I know better. I don’t *do* that.”

“Mebbe yeh jes’ needed to,” Hagrid replied. “Yeh figgered Harry’d understand, seein’ as how he had a similar start.”

Snape barely heard her give a soft snort. “The only similarity is that he was raised by Muggles. He knows who his parents were, and he came into his powers at a normal age.”

“Well, yeah, there’s that,” Hagrid conceded. “Still, it’s like yeh were sayin’ about those kids: when yeh need to talk about summat, yeh find someone yeh think will understand.”

“Maybe.” She sighed. “But I can’t just go doing that. I know better and I never have before. I got paranoid enough to check my tea for Veritaserum, not that there was any. I’d have really done it if there had been. And how ridiculous is that? Where would he have gotten it, after all? As far as I can tell, those two can’t stand each other, never mind teaming up to, what, find out what the weird American is all about?”

“What two? Oh, Snape?” Hagrid snorted. “Nah, he’s never had much patience for Harry’s type of curiosity. Yeh’d have to have done something pretty suspicious to get him pokin’ around.”

“Suspicious like what?” she said. “The man used to be a spy, Hagrid. Everything about me probably screams ‘suspicious,’ and it’s so stupid. There’s no good reason why the faculty shouldn’t be in on this. Well, except maybe Sybill. I can see keeping her out of it. She’d have half the girls convinced
they’re the one I’m here about, and oh wouldn’t that be fun. Doom with a side of gloom, just what every adolescent needs.”

“Well, that’s the thing, now, innit?” Hagrid said. “Yeh can’t keep summat from just one, without keeping it from ’em all. And I’m sure McGonagall has her reasons.”

Celia sighed. “I’m sure she does, too. I’m afraid it’s just an old, bad habit, though. There isn’t a war right now, and if there were, it would be even more important for the faculty to know. At the very least, the Heads of the Houses ought to know, and Pomfrey.”

“Well, Poppy does at least know to go to McGonagall if any lasses show up with the sort of symptoms yeh’re lookin’ for.”

“Assuming they go to her,” she retorted. “If the girl turns out to be a Slytherin, who’s to say she won’t just go to her Head of House and ask for a Dreamless Sleep Draught? That’s what I’d do. Probably happens all the time. It’s not fair to him, especially. Not just Head of a House and Potions Master, the man’s Deputy Headmaster, for Goddess’ sake! Of all people who ought to know and could probably help and he doesn’t know what to look for, or even that there’s anything to be on the lookout for.” Her teacup clattered into its saucer.

“Well, yeh did say the potion wouldn’t work.”

“No, it won’t. So at least he’ll figure it out. No, he’ll at least figure out that something is wrong, something more than just a few nightmares. Hell, no matter what House she’s in, if she’s good enough with potions herself, she might just try to make something rather than admit she’s going out of her head with dreams that nothing will stop. Hopefully she’d go to someone before trying every potion under the sun until she’s so sleep-deprived she’s begging for the Draught of Living Death, thinking that might actually do it. And that won’t work either. She’d just be trapped in her head with horrors that even most students here probably couldn’t imagine.”

“How d’yeh know that?” Hagrid asked. “That ’un ought to work, even if she’d be in a bloody coma.”

“Because they tried it on me,” she said, so softly Snape almost could not hear her. “I was so far out of my head that they tried putting me in a coma to stop the dreams and give my body and mind some time to recover. It was complete, total, no-holds-barred torture. From what I’ve heard about Dementors, it was like being around a swarm of them. The difference is it’s not memories, it’s stuff you’ve never seen before. It’s hideous and it’s terrifying, and I don’t know if a Hogwarts student would be better or worse off for knowing that stuff is at least possible. Probably better off. At least she won’t think she’s losing her mind. I hope.”

A few moments of silence fell, during which the two seemed to be simply drinking their tea. Snape gripped the window frame tightly. He had been right. There was something strange about this woman, and somehow it related to a danger to the students or at least to a student. Clearly Hagrid and Minerva knew, and no one had informed him. Deliberately. He seethed silently.

“I’m sure he keeps his supplies well enough warded that no student should be able to break in for the ingredients to do that,” she said at last. “He certainly disapproved of me being lax with mine. I still wish he knew. Hell, I wish I could ask for his help.”

“Well, yer research isn’t a secret, now, is it?” Hagrid pointed out. “Why couldn’t yeh ask for help wi’ that?”

“Because I’ve completely alienated him, right from the start,” she said throwing up her hands. “I let
him bait me into a sniping contest the very first time I met him. Which, while satisfying for about two seconds, was monumentally stupid. Among other things he probably thinks I’m poaching on his territory. Besides, I was warned to keep clear of him because he’s the one most likely to see straight through me.”

Snape supposed he had been somewhat affronted that her research was not neatly confined to her field, though it was somewhat unrealistic to expect otherwise. It was just that most Herbology research that related directly to Potions research was undertaken as a joint effort, and she had the audacity to be doing the thing entirely on her own. Of course, from the sound of things, that was not working out terribly well. He smirked.

“He does have a way of gettin’ right into people’s heads,” Hagrid agreed. “Harry tol’ me a bit abou’ that, years ago.”

“Yeah, well, until an hour ago, I’d have said ‘not my head.’ But, considering what actually just poured out of my mouth in there, I guess I need to rethink that.” She sighed. “The worst of it is I let slip more or less how recently I came into my powers. I mean, ok, I didn’t exactly, but I said my foster parents never knew, so all it would take is a quick records search, assuming he knows how, to figure out when they died, and then that marks the earliest time I could have gotten my powers and it’s not off by much. Thank Goddess there’s no internet here, after all. I don’t know if Harry’ll bother putting it together, but he seemed awfully persistent, and if he gets that information it’s not exactly differential calculus to figure out when, and therefore probably why, I’d have been woken up, activated, whatever you want to call it, six and a half bloody years ago, and from there, it’s a really short walk to what I’m doing here.”

Not surprisingly she finally had to stop for breath.

“Well, it’s not like too many people seem t’ know about it.” Hagrid offered.

“Yeah, I know. I mean, obviously the textbooks and curriculum don’t cover it, and I get that everybody over here was a little busy at the time, but I can’t imagine the faculty are completely unaware of what happened. The Ministry certainly aren’t; they just ignore it.”

“Hmm, yeh’d best tell McGonagall about tha’, then.”

“I will. After dinner, probably.” She took a sip of tea. “I doubt Harry’ll put it together. Far as I could tell, Flitwick and Snape were just annoyed that we were talking, not actually paying attention, but that’s still three people who potentially have enough information to blow my … well, it’s not really a cover, is it? On the plus side, at least it’s three of the four that really ought to bloody know.” She vented a short laugh with no humor in it. “Maybe that’s why I couldn’t shut up even when I’d been given an out. I thought it was just because I was aggravated with … well, whatever.” She fell silent again.

“Mebbe yer jes’ not cut out for spyin’,” Hagrid suggested.

“I’m not spying, Hagrid,” she snapped. “Not exactly, anyway. Hell, it would probably be easier if I were.”

Oh she thought so, did she? Clearly she would not last five minutes in such a role.

“Well, it’s gettin’ on dinner time, Celia,” Hagrid said, obviously not knowing what to say to this. “Best get yerself ready an’ all.”

“I’m sorry Hagrid. It’s just … I don’t know,” she replied. “Maybe I ought to just take dinner in my
cottage tonight, then go meet with Minerva later. Who knows what’s going to come out of my mouth next if I’m on this bad of a roll?”

“Suit yerself,” he said. “I’m headin’ up t’ the castle.”

“OK, then. Thanks for the tea and the ear,” she said.

“Anytime, yeh know that,” he smiled.

As they made to exit, Snape ducked away from the window and around a corner. Celia stopped on the first step leading from the hut and looked straight at where he’d just been.

“What is it?” Hagrid asked.

“Thought I heard something,” she said.

“Prob’ly a squirrel,” the gameskeeper shrugged.

“Big squirrel,” she replied. “But yeah, probably nothing.” They continued down the steps and up the path. “By the way, you planning on doing any hunting anytime soon?”

“Sure, why?”

“I’d love to come along, if you don’t mind some help,” she said. “A straight-up stalk and kill would be a nice change of pace.”

Hagrid laughed. “All right, then. Bring yer bow and meet me Saturday dawn.”

Whatever reply may have followed was lost on the breeze, as Severus Snape carefully took a different route back to the castle, pondering all he’d just heard. He ate his dinner in customary silence in the Great Hall, mindful of the empty seat next to him, and returned to his office as soon as he was done. Pulling out the scrolls of parchment from his pocket, he returned them to normal size and set them out to start grading, then leaned back into his chair, tracing his lips with a finger as he thought.

So. This strange American witch was here on a mission to save some student, some specific student, from nightmares that would not let her sleep and could not be stopped by means of normal potions. That explained her bizarre research, at any rate. Additionally, she had not known of her powers at all until six and a half years ago, roughly when Voldemort fell. She clearly thought that it would be obvious why this had happened and that it would explain her presence at Hogwarts now. He did not find it obvious at all.

Most interestingly, she seemed to think she needed his help. While he was put out with the Headmistress for not confiding in him, apparently this bothersome woman was not at fault in this. Perhaps he should find a way to help her, without revealing what he knew, and learn more in the process.

She might be poor at subterfuge, but he most certainly was not. A plan began to take shape in his mind as he bent to correct the essays before him.

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Several days later, Celia had just finished chopping the last of the valerian roots before her, when she heard a knock at her door. She glanced over and saw Professor Snape standing there. Severus, she corrected herself. Who’d have thought it would be so easy to obtain his help? Considering how grumpy he’d been the last time they’d talked about her research, she figured it had to be an ego thing. Doing it herself? Bad. Need help from the big important Potions Master? Much better. Picking up her wand, she flicked it at the door absently and invited him in.
“You’re early,” she said with a smile then looked at the clock, “or rather, I’m running late. I’ve gotten a bit carried away with this. Please, have a seat. I’ll get the tea started and then just finish this up.”

“If you’d rather reschedule,” he said, “I completely understand.”

“No, not at all,” she replied, setting the teakettle to boil. “There’s only a bit left to this, and then it needs to sit awhile. Please, have a seat.” She returned to her counter, added the chopped valerian root and powdered asphodel to the wormwood infusion already in her cauldron, and placed a sopophorous bean onto the cutting board. She looked at it for a minute.

“Problem?” Severus asked from her kitchen table.

“Not exactly,” she said. “I just remembered there’s a better way to extract the juice from this, but I hadn’t tried it yet. It’s just at the edge of my memory, but I can’t quite find it.”

“Oh, that,” he said. “All you need to do is …”

“No, please,” she interrupted. “Don’t tell me. I’ve got to either remember it myself or at least remember where I found it.”

He subsided, looking at her curiously. She looked over his shoulder at a bookshelf behind him and drew her wand. “Now, which one was it … Accio Moste Potente … no, that wasn’t it, back you … that’s right, it was a margin note. Accio Advanced Potion-Making,” she cast, and an oddly asymmetrical book flew toward her. She caught it easily, opened the cover that looked rather too new for the rest of it, and flipped to page ten.

“That’s what it was,” she said. “I knew it was a matter of crushing it but couldn’t remember with what.” She sent the book flying back toward the shelf, but Severus caught it en route. She raised her eyebrows in surprise, then shrugged, fished a silver dagger out of a nearby drawer, crushed the bean, and poured the juice into the cauldron that held the rest of her potion. She began stirring the mixture, seven stirs counterclockwise followed by one clockwise.

“How very interesting,” Severus said as he flipped through several pages. “Wherever did you come by this book?”

“When I was up here for the interview when I was hired, I told Minerva that I felt I could be more effective if I had a better sense of what my students were studying at the same time in their other classes. I had thought, perhaps, a listing of topics and schedules might be helpful.” Celia smiled and chuckled a little, still stirring as the contents of her cauldron continued to pale. That much is true enough. He doesn’t need to know any more than that. “I didn’t expect to end up with a complete library of all the books the students would be using. She brought me to this ‘Room of Requirement,’ told me how to activate it, and I found myself the proud caretaker of an awful lot of textbooks.” She waved at the shelf. “Most of them were new or had just been conjured fresh. This one obviously isn’t new at all, though it looks like someone tried to make it appear that way. It’s been a damn sight more useful than the rest.”

“I imagine it would be,” he murmured. She set the now-clear potion aside and popped a knot of ginger root into it. “What in the world did you do that for?”

“You didn’t think I was actually making the Draught of Living Death, did you?” she asked. “While there is one pair of second year witches who might barely quiet down a bit with a drop or two of it, I’m not planning on putting anyone in a coma.” She thought he might have just suppressed a smirk. Well, the young ladies were probably nearly as bad in his class. Then again, they were still breathing,
“So what, then, are you trying to do?” he asked.

“It’s part of my research,” she replied, clearing away her work area. “And thank you for coming over to discuss it with me. I’d really like to hear your thoughts on it.” She arranged the teapot and cups on a tray with a few slices of nutbread and led the way to the sitting room. She was surprised that he brought the book with him and continued looking through it even as she poured his tea.

“Recognize the writing?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said dryly, “I should think so.”

“No surprise there, I guess,” she said. “Must have been one of your best students. Brilliant, obviously, not the kind of student you’d forget. Did he or she figure all that out for themselves, or were those suggestions you made?”

“Er, yes,” he replied. “I suppose you could say it was rather both.”

“A bit of both?” she echoed. “That makes sense. Not too many students would have sussed all that out entirely on their own.”

“Not a bit of both,” he corrected her. “Celia, this was my N.E.W.T. Potions book.”

Celia thought her eyes might actually bug out of her skull. “How interesting,” she said at last. “Any idea why it showed up in that room, then?”

“I imagine it had been hiding there for nearly eight years,” he said wryly. “The student who put it there probably ‘required’ that I not be able to find it, and so I never did.”

She blinked a few times trying to digest that. “A student stole your old Potions textbook and then hid it from you? Are they still doing detentions for that to this day?”

“Sadly, I did not have the opportunity to punish him appropriately at the time,” Severus replied with a quickly suppressed grimace. “However, you were correct that he spent much of his time as a student in detention for one thing or another.”

Celia clapped a hand over her mouth and tried to stifle a giggle. When she thought she had control of herself, she asked, “I’m sorry, but … why on earth … hasn’t he returned it in the time … he’s been teaching here?” Several more giggles leaked through.

“A very good question that I propose to put to him at dinner,” he answered. He looked seriously annoyed with her.

“I’m sorry,” she repeated, fanning her face in some reflexive attempt to catch her breath. *Stop laughing. Stop laughing!* “It’s just … I mean, I can see the appeal of using a book with such helpful notes in it, but it seems deeply stupid to steal something of yours. You’re not exactly known for being lenient. And now he teaches here, too, and he still hasn’t returned it? That’s just … that’s just not right.”

“He did not know it was mine at first. As for why he never bothered to return it, I’m afraid you would have to ask him,” he replied stiffly. “I know I intend to do so.”

“Well, I’m not the one owed that answer,” she said. “Anyway, at least you have it back now.”
“I’ve not had particular need of it,” he said. “You may continue to borrow it, if you like.”

“Thank you.” That was a relief. A little unexpected, but definitely a relief. “As I said, your notes have been quite helpful.”

The conversation moved to the intended topic of her research. She was surprised to find that he actually appeared quite interested in her work. Though she had to steer him away, several times, from the reason she was so focused on suppressing prescient dreams, he gave her several suggestions that she thought sounded very promising. Once she explained her reasoning for steeping a chunk of ginger in the Draught of Living Death, for example, he offered some ideas on how to prepare the resulting brew for the addition of her hybridized ingredients.

It really had seemed too easy to get his help. Right up until he arrived she had still thought he might resent what she was doing and try to sabotage her. However, now that they were talking, really having an actual conversation, she found it almost impossible to distrust him. She checked her mental shields several times to see if he was influencing her somehow, but if so, then he really just was too good for her to detect.

After he had left, she thought about the change in him. What brought that on? Or is it really a change? Was I just assuming things because of all the warnings everybody dumped on me? Okay, and that snarky letter he wrote? Maybe. However, she still planned to remain on her guard. She’d already demonstrated just a few days ago that her desire to clear the air with her colleagues could get the better of her and she had no intention of repeating that little performance.

~ ~ ~

Back in his quarters, Severus Snape contemplated what he’d learned from Reese this afternoon. She was clearly back on her guard, as she had dodged every question or comment that might have led to a discussion of the reasons behind her research. That was not surprising. In fact, it was part of the point. She probably thought she had not allowed anything at all to slip through since she had deflected all of the obvious bait. However, he had run a series of tests in parallel with their conversation and now knew that, while her range of hearing was the same as any human’s as far as pitch was concerned, she could hear things that were far too soft for an ordinary person’s ears. She did not appear to have seen any of the colors he’d cast over her tea set that were outside the human visual range, but unfortunately there had been no way to test her distance vision. He suspected that would match her hearing. There was one test he had not even needed to perform himself. Advanced Potion-Making was a heavy book, and the Summoning Charm would not lighten it, but she had caught it as though it were no heavier than a scroll of parchment.

Then there was all he had learned about her already. She was not a werewolf but could make and had experimented with the Wolfsbane Potion. She had come into her powers when the Dark Lord had been vanquished while she was half a world away. She was, or at least believed herself to be, an accomplished Occlumens. Her research and her reason for being here had something to do with a female student she could not identify but expected to begin experiencing severe nightmares that would not respond to any known potion. That led back to the additional new bit of information: she still had these dreams and planned to test her experimental potions on herself. Rather interesting potions, from the sound of it. Steeping that ginger in the Draught of Living Death was something he would never have considered, but he believed her claim that it altered the potion to allow restful sleep with the ability to remain alert and wake oneself if necessary. It certainly would no longer put one into a potentially irreversible coma. He was less certain that her ideas for hybridized herbs to add to it were going to work, but at least he had been able to offer some suggestions that might increase the possibilities.
It was still not much to go on, but it was a start.
Chapter 4

The way Minerva explained it, ever since the Tri-Wizard Tournament ten years ago, students had expressed an interest in continuing to have dances at the school. The Muggle-born students had especially agitated for this, citing the dances held in Muggle schools and – more importantly – movies. So, in her second year as Headmistress, Minerva McGonagall instituted two annual dances: one just before the Christmas holidays and one on the weekend closest to Valentine’s Day. They had gone surprisingly well and thus had become an annual tradition. Hence the gown Celia had been told to bring. She figured she could just transfigure its color for the two events. Red could be Christmas or Valentine’s, so she went with green for Christmas. A simple strand of pearls and long white gloves trimmed in silver thread – and shoes to match – completed her look, she thought. Even after talking with Aurora and Minerva, she wasn’t sure if this was really what was expected.

They said it sounded fine. Too bad the faculty don’t try out their outfits together like the students probably do. Feedback before I make an idiot of myself would be nice.

Wearing her hair down was the one decision she wasn’t questioning. Mostly she pinned it up to get it out of the way, but what was the point of keeping it long at all if you couldn’t let it loose for dressing up? A couple of combs kept it from falling into her face and several dollops of mousse should be enough to keep it from frizzing up halfway through the night. She forced herself to stop fussing with it as she made her way from her cottage into the castle.

When she entered the Great Hall, she gasped at the transformation it had undergone. The twelve giant Christmas trees had been there for a week, but now they were fully decorated and lighted with what appeared to be either very large fireflies or faeries. The walls were swathed in evergreen branches and holly, decorated in bows of each House’s colors, one wall dedicated to each. The House tables were lining the walls tonight, covered with an insane amount of food considering it was only two hours since dinner.

Many of the other faculty had already arrived except the Heads of the Houses. She supposed they had all sorts of last-minute problems to deal with. Hagrid was there, as were Septima, Firenze, Irma, and Poppy. She approached the dais that normally held the staff table a little nervously.

At least I’m early enough that I can fix this if anyone gives me weird looks.
“What a lovely color on you,” Poppy said by way of greeting.

“Thanks,” she replied with a sigh of relief. *Wait, the color’s okay, but does that mean otherwise it’s horrible? It was kind of hard to be sure what would be appropriate. You don’t think it looks too young or … anything?”*

“No, it’s fine,” the nurse assured her.

“That’s a relief. You look great, too,” she added belatedly. Poppy just smiled.

_Good, now I only needed to worry about chaperoning – and possibly dancing. I wonder if I’m supposed to dance with Firenze or Hagrid. Or Filius, for that matter. They’re sweet, all of them, but how would that work? I’d probably embarrass myself and them while I was at it._

As she thought this, the doors of the Great Hall opened wide, and streams of students entered, led by their Heads of House. Her eyes went immediately to Aurora Sinistra, the next-youngest female faculty member, and she was relieved to see she was wearing a gown only slightly more concealing than her own. *And I see dress robes are almost as good as tuxes,* she thought, catching her breath as her gaze settled briefly on Severus. *Or possibly better. Damn, that formalwear’s dangerous._ She tore her eyes away and forced her attention back to the doors, where Minerva was entering at last. When Severus stepped up onto the dais before her, she very deliberately avoided his eyes and offered a brief nod, which he echoed before turning in a swirl of robes to face the student body.

Minerva gave some sort of speech, but about what Celia had no idea. At least it was short. Then the music began and the faculty spread out to their assigned posts to keep an eye on the students. She noted with interest that Minerva was dancing with Harry and Poppy with Filius, who was using a levitation charm that canceled out the height difference. *Of course. I should have realized. Though I’m still not sure how anyone would manage to dance with Firenze._ After two songs, those four faculty members left the floor, and she found herself being invited to the floor by Hagrid. She accepted gracefully and wondered if she ought to put some sort of strengthening charm on her shoes.

Fortunately the music playing was a very slow waltz. Reaching his shoulder was out of the question unless she used a levitation charm herself, so she settled for his elbow. When it switched to a much faster two-step, she begged off.

“I – don’t think I know this one,” she said with a wobbly smile.

“Tha’s all righ’,” he replied with a wink. “Think I migh’ jus’ have a bit of a snack.”

He actually did walk over to one of the tables and grab some cakes. At least he didn’t seem offended. Walking back to her post, she wondered if that would excuse her from the floor for the rest of the night. _That’d probably be a good thing. Love the dancing. Less crazy for the music. And when the good stuff comes on later, I’m pretty sure it would be undignified for a teacher to be dancing._

She watched the students impassively. So far none of them had done anything that she thought required a reprimand of any kind. Most likely the mere presence of all the faculty was enough to keep them in line for now. _The real fun comes later. At least odds are none of them will go outside where I’ll be patrolling, because me dumping cold water on horny teens? Pretty ironic._ She shook her head at the thought.

“No? But I have not even asked yet,” Severus said. She turned to face him and flushed, looking down at her hands quickly. _And for my next act, I’ll hold a conversation with myself out loud in a crowded room._
“I was thinking about something,” she said, looking back up but still not meeting his gaze. “Sorry, what were you going to ask?”

“I was going to ask you to dance,” he said, his tone clearly conveying that she had just asked a question every bit as stupid as any he heard in his classroom.

“Oh,” she looked up. “Right. Sure.” She fixed a pleasant but neutral smile on her face and allowed herself to be led onto the dance floor. This was seriously dangerous. Why did he have to look so—well, handsome wasn’t exactly the word, maybe striking? She focused on controlling her breathing and her mind as he swept her into position for the Viennese waltz that had just begun. A jolt of static startled her as she set her hand on his shoulder.

“Lovely gown,” he said, making what she assumed was polite conversation as they started to dance. That was unexpected, considering that even during their more pleasant discussions of her research he wasn’t much for the small talk.

“Thank you,” she replied.

“Declaring yourself a Slytherin, are you?”

Startled, she looked up and caught his eyes. “Hardly,” she said with a little laugh. “Green seemed appropriate for Christmas and, you know, an herbologist.”

“I see.”

“Since it’ll be red and gold for Valentine’s, I guess that would be seen as a declaration for Gryffindor?”

“Perhaps.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever understand the importance you people put on House membership. Rivalries in the States tend to be between whole schools, not parts of them.”

He didn’t reply, and she pulled her eyes from his. No sign that he’d tried Legilimency on her, but there was no point in pushing it. She focused on the music and allowed her eyes to close. I can’t believe he’s so graceful. I mean, it shouldn’t surprise me, considering the way he moves. But I never imagined him dancing till a few minutes ago when he was with Irma. Even in this whirling dance, she could pick up his every cue literally with her eyes closed though she couldn’t quite say how. It was enjoyable. She imagined his robes and her gown as they must be swirling about them.

“It is generally considered polite to at least look at the person you are dancing with,” he said after a moment.

Her eyes flew open. “Sorry,” she said. “It’s just that you lead very well. With my eyes closed, it felt like we were dancing on the music itself.”

He raised his eyebrows but said no more until the song ended and he led her back to where he had found her.

“Thank you,” she said with a little bob that was about as close as she would ever get to a curtsey.

“You’re welcome,” he replied evenly with a small nod. She watched as he swept away from her and through the sea of students back to his position along the Slytherin side of the room. And I’m supposed to make what of that, exactly? Just a mandatory faculty dance or what? She turned her attention to the students nearest her and schooled her features to as neutral a smile as she could.
manage.

~ ~ ~

Gazing impassively at the swarm of dancing students, Severus mentally added the new data he had collected on Professor Reese. She still avoided his gaze whenever she could. He did not believe that outrageous comment about “dancing on the music” for a minute. He did, however, think it would be a very bad idea to actually try Legilimency on her. Clearly she was afraid he would and would no doubt know it if he did. But to the list of her unusual abilities, he now added a rather amazing cardiovascular capacity. He had chosen the nearly frantic Viennese waltz for that reason, of course, and had taken *Eloquor Spirabilis* so that he would not end up gasping for breath himself. She, he was quite sure, had taken nothing of the kind but had spoken and even laughed while they were dancing without seeming at all discommoded. Even now it looked as though she had done nothing more strenuous than walk across the room.

He noticed also that a strand of her hair had attached itself to his sleeve. *That could be useful to analyze*, he thought, plucking at the sleeve as if fussing over it and transferring the hair surreptitiously to one of his pockets.

~ ~ ~

When he returned to the Slytherin dungeons after finishing his rounds, Severus bypassed the portrait that guarded his quarters and went instead into the Potions laboratory, warding the door shut behind him. Almost reflexively, he Summoned a cauldron and stirring rod onto his preferred work surface as he proceeded to his storage closet for the ingredients he would need. Once he had arranged the ingredients, he pulled out the hair and examined it. It was a long one, fortunately, and even more fortunately it had a partial follicle tag. A bit of flesh would be much more effective in one of the tests he had planned. It was also coated in some Muggle concoction, which he removed with a Cleansing Charm and a sneer. He stretched the strand out on his work surface and cut it into four equal pieces, which he then set carefully aside.

He meticulously weighed, sliced, chopped, ground, and finally added and stirred the first set of ingredients over a low flame. Once the brew had reached a creamy consistency and a vaguely blue-grey tone, he stood back to let it simmer and took a moment to remove his dress robe and frock coat. Even on the longest night of the year, even in the dungeons, standing over a potion for nearly an hour had him sweating. And students thought his classes were held here for the atmosphere. His hair, which he thought might have actually been passable for the dance, was once again hanging limply about his face. He grabbed a leather thong from his pocket and tied it back.

After fifteen minutes had passed, he returned to the cauldron and saw that the color had developed nicely to the precise shade of slate blue he wanted. Stirring slowly, he added the first piece of hair and watched intently. After nearly two minutes, he had to admit there was no change. Not only was she not a werewolf, which he had already deduced logically, but she was not any other type of animal-human hybrid nor even an Animagus. He picked up his wand.

“*Evanesco,*” he cast with a note of regret in his voice, and the potion vanished. It would have been the simplest explanation, after all.

He donned his protective gloves and began the next – more volatile – potion immediately. Nearly another hour had passed before he was ready to add the second piece of hair to this mixture, which was a violently boiling acid green. Once he had added the hair, he took a prudent step backwards and waited for several breaths before approaching it. No change here, either. He sighed. He hadn’t really thought she was using Polyjuice, but he’d had to rule it out. After all, while whatever Celia Reese’s mission here was might be legitimate, she would not have been the first Hogwarts professor.
to be impersonated. He vanished the potion and started to work on the third.

This one took less time but required excruciating precision. Once the ingredients were prepared, he took a moment to strengthen the wards on his lab and added a silencing charm. Then he relit the flame beneath the cauldron and began.

In mere minutes it was ready, shimmering a pearlescent white. He added the piece of hair that had the follicle tag, stirring it in slowly, poised to get out of the way if the reaction were positive.

*That’s … odd,* he thought, as he watched the hair dissolve, leaving a trail of smoky grey behind it that swirled across the potion’s surface. He continued to stir, anticipating some sort of delayed reaction that never came. Had she been a demon, even part demon, the reaction should have been immediate and potentially explosive depending on the species. This, however, was unprecedented. *Human, then, but with just the slightest touch of … something. How convenient that she “does not know” her true parents.*

He vanished the potion and began to work on the final test. He had thought it almost irrelevant, a habitual test more than anything, something left from his Death Eater days. There was a potion that would determine whether a potential recruit was actually Muggle-born and it had been used regularly to screen for infiltrators. Not that any Muggle-borns had ever tried to join up, to his knowledge. The young woman claimed not to know her heritage but for some reason referred to herself as *Muggle-raised, not -born.* That was something she had clearly not intended to reveal in that interesting conversation with Potter last month, but he wasn’t sure why. What little she had said suggested a near certainty that she would, in fact, have been Muggle-born. So did she hedge out of a scientist’s need to say only what was certain, as would be consistent with what he’d observed in their discussions of her research, or because she knew or suspected otherwise? The potion would not tell him that, of course. However, now that the possibility that she had at least some trace of demonic heritage had been raised, well, perhaps the answer to this question might be of some use.

After more careful measuring, chopping, and stirring, it was ready. He added the fourth and last piece of hair to the simmering red broth-like potion. If she were a pureblood, it would remain as it was. If she were Muggle-born, it would turn a muddy brown. As he stirred, it began to darken. His eyes narrowed, and the crease between his brows deepened. The particular rusty shade it had turned indicated that she was a precisely half-blooded witch.

*Interesting. But what does any of it actually mean?* he thought as he vanished the potion and cleared away his tools and supplies. He glanced at the clock. Nearly four-thirty. Tomorrow morning most of the students would be leaving for the Christmas holiday, and he would have to deal with any number of problems with his Slytherins. He sighed and forced himself to let his questions go for now so that he could get at least a little sleep.

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With a gasp, Celia sat straight up in bed, her eyes wide and her heart pounding. She swallowed several times and allowed her breathing to return to normal, then swung out of bed. Grabbing a piece of parchment and quill from her desk, she jotted down a quick note, threw on some clothes, and headed for the owlery. Once there, she glanced over the note one last time before giving it to one of the school owls with delivery instructions.

*G.*

*The dreams have started again. I’m already here!*

*C.*
Satisfied that was the best she could do at this hour, Celia returned to her cottage. She briefly considered swinging by the hospital wing to see if Poppy had had any customers for Dreamless Sleep, then decided against it. If the girl had been activated tonight, the last thing she needed was one of her teachers running in half-dressed and asking about her. Grateful that she did not have any particular duties related to the students’ departure in a few hours, she sank back into bed.

~ ~ ~

The next afternoon, Celia was late arriving for lunch. She had skipped breakfast completely and stopped by the hospital wing to check in with Poppy on her way to the Great Hall. Despite the letter she had owled, she had a sinking feeling she knew why her dreams had returned: the girl she was here to guide and protect must have come into her powers. The message was as simple as it had always been. “Please, get to Hogwarts and protect my baby,” the woman had said. Over and over and over. And over. Well, she was already here, so obviously something had happened.

Or was that really it? Most of the students had left for the Christmas holiday this morning. Maybe that was the key. The girl might be one of the few remaining at Hogwarts over the break. That would certainly narrow things down. There were only about a dozen students staying, and of the girls, there were three Ravenclaws, two Hufflepuffs, and one each from Gryffindor and Slytherin.

As she entered the Great Hall, she noticed that it had been changed again since the dance. The usual House tables were gone, and the staff table was no longer on the dais. Instead it was in the center of the Hall and set for all the remaining students and faculty to sit around it. The meal had already started, but there was an empty seat between Hagrid and a Hufflepuff second year. She made her apologies and slipped into the chair.

“Missed ye at breakfast,” Hagrid said.

“Mm,” she answered around a sip of pumpkin juice. “I got a bit of a late start.”

Hagrid’s eyes narrowed. “Ye don’ look like ye slept a wink.”

Celia smiled weakly. “You sure know how to make a gal feel good.”

“I didn’ mean …”

“I know you didn’t; I’m just teasing,” she assured him. “I’m sure most of us didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“Hmph,” was all Hagrid said to that as he applied himself once more to his lunch.

The rest of the meal passed with moderate amounts of small talk. If nothing else, Celia managed to determine that Miss Boulstridge, the second-year Hufflepuff, had had a very good night’s sleep, thank you, was looking forward to Christmas, and was thoroughly intimidated by the prospect of any more personal conversation with her Herbology teacher.

Most of the other teachers appeared reasonably well-rested, she thought, though Severus was rather glaringly absent. Surely any trouble with his students had been resolved by now, as the three who had not left, one fourth-year boy, one fifth-year girl, and Lightfeather, were all here at the table. She shrugged mentally. He probably knew from experience what the dining arrangements would be and preferred to stay away. Even though she felt she’d come to know him a little better recently, there was no arguing the fact he was terribly standoffish, particularly with the students.

When lunch was over, Celia made to return to her cottage, but Hagrid waylaid her just outside the castle.
“Celia, are ye all right?” he asked gruffly.

“I’m fine, Hagrid. Don’t tell me I look that bad!”

“It’s just … well, I was out early this mornin’ and I saw ye rushing off to the castle.”

“Oh,” she said. “That.”

“Yes, tha’.”

“I was just off to the owlery.”

“At that hour?”

“Yes, well …” she looked around to be sure no one was nearby. “I had that dream, Hagrid. Same one that sent me here in the first place. So I reported in.”

“Have ye tol’ McGonagall?”

“Of course. And I checked in with Poppy. I thought for sure she’d have had a visit from our mystery girl, but so far, no.”

“What do you suppose, then?”

“Well, if she was activated last night, she hasn’t decided she needs Dreamless Sleep yet. Or maybe the dream just indicates she’s one of the seven girls who stayed for the holidays, even though she hasn’t been activated yet. Or maybe … some other thing that I haven’t thought of.”

“This dream stuff’s pretty slippery, innit?”

“Yeah,” she sighed. “Even when they seem straightforward, half the time they’re just vague clues. Useful when you can figure them out, of course, but frustrating as hell when you can’t.”

They had reached her cottage.

“Hagrid, what did you think …”

“Well, that’s just it, innit?” he replied. “I couldn’t imagine what had ye tearing around looking like that so early. And then ye weren’ at breakfast …”

“No worries, Hagrid,” she said. “But if you were that concerned, you should have just checked with Minerva.”

“Hmph. Wasn’ sure that’d be a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Well, doesn’ matter now,” he said, turning to leave. Before he had quite turned, though, Celia thought she saw a hint of a blush peeking out from just above his beard. “Jes’ glad to know ye’re okay.”

“See you later, then. And thanks.”

“For what?”

“For worrying. It’s kind of sweet.”
Celia was almost sure now that he was blushing. *Oh, boy. I hope he’s not thinking … I really don’t need any more complications right now.*

Turning to open the door to her cottage, she noticed an owl perched in the branches of a nearby shrub. She let the owl in, dug around for an Owl Treat, and retrieved the letter from its leg. She read it twice before setting it down on the kitchen table, disappointed.

*C.*

_I warned you. W. says your aura shows signs of tampering, although she believes your secret is still safe. Inform Minerva but take no action yourself._

*G.*

With a sigh and an almost absent wave of her wand, she reduced the slip of parchment to ashes.

~ ~ ~

The next morning, Celia made it to breakfast in plenty of time. She sat next to one of the Ravenclaw girls and again tried striking up a leading conversation that ultimately led nowhere.

She periodically looked over at the Christmas trees in mild wonder. They looked exactly as they had since the dance the other night, but now she knew a bit more about the magic involved. Yesterday afternoon, she had persuaded Harry to accompany her to Hogsmeade so that she could find appropriate presents for the other faculty members who had remained. She’d been horrified to learn that the faculty and staff who stayed did, in fact, exchange gifts. The few jobs she’d held where gift-giving was done at all had always used either a Secret Santa or some other system that reduced the problem to coming up with just one gift for someone she barely knew.

Hagrid had been easy: his crossbow needed tuning, and she’d found the perfect kit at Dervish and Banges. After their conversation yesterday, she was a little concerned he might misinterpret the spirit of the gift, but it really was the perfect thing for him. The rest were getting stationery and quill sets, decorated for the appropriate House. In exchange for his assistance, she had tried to help Harry find a gift for his friend Hermione Granger. _I’m not sure anything I said was helpful, and I’m pretty sure that she’s not actually going to be ecstatic over a bunch of tricks from Zonko’s, but what do I know? At least he seemed happy with them. And he’s got a point about buying books for bookworms._

He’d been even happier to show her how the trees worked and looked way too amused as she’d placed her wrapped and addressed gifts each under the appropriate tree and watched in shock as they vanished. The gifts would, he’d told her, turn up at the foot of the addressees’ beds on Christmas morning. She shook her head as she thought of it.

An owl landing beside her coffee snapped her out of her reverie. She offered it a bit of bacon and slipped the parchment off its leg. She leaned back in her seat and unrolled the letter carefully.

*C.*

_I warned you. W. says your aura shows signs of tampering, although she believes your secret is still safe. Inform Minerva but take no action yourself._

*G.*

Calmly, she rose and walked around to the head of the table. She handed the letter to the Headmistress and excused herself, saying there was something she needed to take care of.

“Certainly, Professor Reese,” McGonagall said. Then she read the letter. “Professor Reese,” she
called out, “please wait.”

Celia had already left the Great Hall and ignored the Headmistress’ request as readily as she was ignoring the directive to “take no action.” *Take no action? Who does he think he’s kidding? If somebody around here has been “tampering with my aura,” then I know exactly who it is, and he’s going to explain himself.*

There really weren’t a whole lot of likely suspects. Spells to spy on her wouldn’t leave that sort of evidence. But potions using some part of her essence? Oh, that would do it.

*No physical violence,* she told herself. *Probably shouldn’t hex him either. But he’s not getting away with this.* She considered and discarded a number of possibilities before she arrived. As she approached the public door to his office, she drew her wand and then pounded loudly.

~ ~ ~

Someone was pounding heavily on his office door. *Could they not last two days without some emergency?*

“Enter,” he called out without looking up from the essay he was grading.

Two feminine hands slammed down on his desk, one holding a wand.

“What the hell did you do?” she demanded.

He looked up briefly at the distraught Herbology professor, then returned his attention to the essay before him.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” he replied calmly.

“I’m sure you do,” she snapped. “Two nights ago, someone did a bit of magic that caused my aura to look visibly tampered with. I have a fair idea what and how, and you’re the only person here besides myself likely to know how to brew those potions.”

“And what potions would those be?” he asked, still writing. *And how, exactly, could she know that?*

“All I know for certain is you didn’t hit the right one,” she admitted, “so I’m actually pretty interested to know what you tried and what the hell you thought you were going to accomplish.”

Finally, he set down his quill and looked up at her. He was startled when she locked her gaze on his.

“I have not said I did anything of the sort,” he said, his eyes narrowing but not leaving hers. He was tempted to determine exactly how much she knew, or rather, how much she thought she did. However, there was the minor problem that she would most likely realize what he was about and might even be capable of blocking him. *In fact ... * Though I am quite curious what you think you are going to accomplish.”

“I’m not leaving this room without answers and an apology.”

“Then you are going to be in this room for a very long time.”

“I really doubt that.” She hadn’t released his eyes from hers, and her expression was so studiously blank it was obvious she was practicing an extremely rudimentary form of Occlumency with some effort. Small wonder, considering she was obviously quite upset.

“By all means,” he was saying, his voice low and dangerous, “try it. You really do not know who
you are dealing with. I have stood before two of the world’s most accomplished Legilimens. Do you think you can do better than they? Or perhaps you are simply planning on a staring contest.”

Her fingers convulsed around her wand, and he wondered if she would actually attempt Legilimency on him. It might be amusing if she did, as he was quite certain she would not find what she was seeking or, indeed, anything at all. The Headmistress might be displeased, however. Unlike Albus, she had on many occasions expressed a severe distaste for the art and would probably overreact. He watched the set of Reese’s features shift ever so slightly just before she averted her eyes. He smirked.

“The fact that you invaded my privacy doesn’t justify me invading your mind,” she said. “But I still want answers and I still want that apology.”

“Yes, of course, it’s not that you cannot do it,” he sneered. “You are simply too noble. I’m quite certain you would have been an excellent Gryffindor.” After her comment about inter-House rivalries, I trust she will realize that was not a compliment.

“I notice you didn’t try either,” she pointed out. “Funny, considering you were willing to analyze … what was it, by the way? Some of my hair, I’d guess. That’d be easiest. So, yes, you were willing to put yourself through what must have been hours of work to try and figure me out, but when I’m standing right in front of you, staring you down, you don’t even try to have a look in my head? As I understand it, that’s not very Slytherin of you. Maybe you should have been a Gryffindor.”

“I think,” came a voice from the doorway, “that I am quite glad neither one of you have ever been Gryffindors.” The Headmistress stepped into the room. “I am also glad that you have both showed at least some restraint. It would be most difficult to find replacements for either of you at this point in the year.”

Celia winced, clearly surprised to find Minerva standing there. No, there had been no sound to indicate her arrival, but then cats did have their ways of getting about quietly.

He pushed his chair back from his desk to stand.

“Remain seated, Severus,” the Headmistress continued. “And Celia, you sit down too.”

The younger woman complied as Minerva walked around to the side of the desk so that she could stare down at them both as if they were a pair of students she had caught throwing jinxes at each other in the hallway.

“I am very disappointed in you both,” she said. She held up a rolled-up bit of parchment and pointed it first at him. “Severus, did you or did you not perform experiments to learn more about Celia and her origins?”

“Yes, Headmistress,” he replied, allowing a slightly embarrassed tone to slip into his voice.

“If you had concerns about another member of the staff, why didn’t you simply bring those concerns to me?”

He did not answer right away.

“I’m waiting,” she said.

Quirrell? Lockhart? Lupin? Moody? Umbridge? Well, all right, everyone agreed about Umbridge. Still, really, woman, how many reasons do I need?

“I thought I should have evidence before making any accusations,” he said at last.
“I see.” The rolled-up parchment swung to point at the Herbologist. “And Celia, why did you disobey a direct order to take no action beyond informing me of this problem?”

She winced again before she spoke. “I let my temper get the better of me, Headmistress.”

“I see,” McGonagall repeated. “I am glad to see you reined it in before doing something irrevocable.”

Silence fell as the Headmistress appeared to consider the situation.

“Severus, I am fully aware of Celia’s nature and her reasons for being here, and she has my full confidence. When it is time for the rest of the faculty to be made aware of these things, you will necessarily be the first to know.”

“Yes, Headmistress.”

“Now, will you please tell me, and Celia, exactly what sort of tests you did and why?”

With a much put-upon sigh, he described the four potions. When he came to the third, Minerva looked questioningly at Celia.

“That tracks,” Celia said. “I don’t entirely understand it, but … it makes sense that the result would be odd like that.”

She is not surprised. There is something vaguely demonic about her, she doesn’t quite understand it, and she is not surprised.

The Headmistress nodded and returned her attention to Severus, who continued. Celia appeared baffled when he explained the final test he had run.

“Why would you even care about that?” she asked. “I can see the others. Obviously I’d be a potential danger if I were a demon or a Polyjuiced imposter. Maybe not so much the animal thing. But what possible difference could it make whether I’m Muggle-born?”

He shrugged. “You had let it slip that you did not know your ancestry. And I confess it was something of an old, bad habit.”

Her eyes narrowed and he realized belatedly that he had quoted something she had said that day in Hagrid’s cabin. A foolish slip. She took a long, slow breath and said nothing.

“Aren’t you going to ask the result?” He knew it was not considered as important a matter in the Americas, but surely someone who knew nothing of her origins would be at least mildly curious?

“Why would I? It’s not like it would tell me anything meaningful about who my biological parents were.”

“Perhaps not, but I thought you might find it interesting to know that you are not, in fact, Muggle-born.”

She appeared stunned.

“I see,” was all she managed to say.

“You are, in fact, precisely half-blood,” he continued.

“That doesn’t exactly narrow things down, then,” she said with apparent difficulty. “Either parent
could be magical or Muggle.”

“That is true.”

She appeared to give the matter some thought.

“I didn’t think I needed to know that,” she said at last, “but … it does at least answer some old questions. I’ll admit I’m grateful for that bit of information, but I’m still furious that you ran these tests without my knowledge or consent.”

“You would hardly have permitted me to run them if you were, in fact, hiding something.”

“That is not the point …”

“Enough!” The Headmistress glared at them both. “Severus, I believe you owe Celia an apology.”

He glared at her as he said, “I apologize for violating your privacy.”

“Celia?”

She glared back at him. “I accept your apology.”

“Good,” Minerva said. “Now, one last item. While I cannot tell you the precise nature of Celia’s mission here, I have decided to tell you one part of it.”

Celia’s eyes widened at this.

Severus maintained his most studied blank expression.

“She is here to look after a specific female student who has yet to be identified. This student is as unaware of her special status as the rest of us are of her identity, and one of the first signs Celia expects is for the young lady to begin having recurrent nightmares that resist the usual potions to suppress them.”

“I see,” he said noncommittally. “That is not precisely news, though it does indicate the dreams are not the entire problem, merely a symptom.

“Ultimately, this student will need to learn to cope with these dreams, and that is part of the work Celia will undertake with her when the time comes. In the meantime, this is the reason behind her research.” She paused. “I understand you have been collaborating with her on that research, and I am asking you to continue to do so.”

Celia bit her lip.

“Yes, Headmistress,” he said.

“Do you think you can trust my judgment and refrain from any additional ‘research’ on her, Severus?”

“Yes, Headmistress.”

“Celia, can you continue to work with Severus on this and keep better control of your temper?”

“Yes, Headmistress.” She swallowed, and he wondered what she had to be nervous about. “I do still think the other Heads of House should know at least this edited version.”
Ah. Well, that would seem prudent, or it would have in September. Now they will wonder why they were kept in the dark until the holidays. Better to wait until the student is identified, I should imagine.

Professor McGonagall looked at her carefully. “I will take your recommendation under advisement.”

Celia nodded, clearly realizing that was the best she was likely to get today.

“In the meantime,” McGonagall continued, “you will both hold everything we have discussed here in the strictest confidence.”

“Yes, Headmistress,” they said, nearly in unison and then glared at each other.

“Good, then I expect you both to get back to whatever you were planning to do today, and Severus, I expect to start seeing you at meals again.”

He only grunted in reply to this.

Celia nodded to McGonagall, turned, and left.

Severus looked down at the essay he had been grading briefly before setting it aside with a snarl. How had the chit learned of what he had done? How in Merlin’s name had Minerva become aware of it? He would never be able to pry that information from either of them now.

Damn them both for getting me to agree not to investigate her any further!

That brought him up short. He had only agreed not to investigate Reese specifically. That actually left rather a lot of room for other research. Truly, if he were to be of any real assistance with her research, he should understand more of the implications for the student who would be in need of this experimental remedy. Any changes in metabolism would, of course, have serious ramifications in terms of the development of any potion.

Picking up his wand, he spoke the password that opened the tapestry leading from his office to his private quarters and wordlessly Summoned a book. Several disarming spells later, the book would no longer flood the room with toxic vapors when he opened it. He paged through the index until he found a handful of references to humans with “demonic qualities and/or heritage.” He skipped the first few sections. She spent far too much time in direct sunlight for anything there to be applicable.

~ ~ ~

The morning of Christmas Eve found Celia puttering around “her” greenhouse. She had finally sent off an exceedingly terse note after breakfast.

You’ve probably heard from M. by now. The situation’s under control. I told you this secrecy business would backfire.

Her continued attempts to draw the young ladies who had stayed for the holidays into conversation were clearly hopeless, she was still furious over what Severus had done and what she had almost done, and she was more confused than ever about what the recurrence of the dream meant. It had returned several times last night, disturbing her sleep and leaving her even more irritated than she would have been anyway.

Of course, this wasn’t the plants’ fault, and she was trying not to take it out on them as she repotted several bubotubers. As she set yet another newly repotted plant down, a small reddish-brown snake slithered out onto her work surface. Surprised, she picked it up and looked it over carefully. She shook her head.
“You do realize you should have stayed outside and hibernated, don’t you? There’s really not going to be many mice or bugs for you in here.” The smooth snake flicked its tongue at her. She sighed. “Yeah, yeah, I’ll find you something. Goddess knows what you’ve been living on all this time. You should’ve been asleep months ago.” She chuckled softly and set it back down onto the table. It slithered over to another batch of potted plants, and she frowned when she noticed which ones.

Right. Two days until the full moon, so Severus was going to need the aconite and vinca today. Maybe she should just summon a house elf to bring one of the pots to him and then bring her a bit of raw meat for her guest. Forget that. It’s not like the elves don’t have enough to do without me making more work for them. I should just deliver them and go to the kitchens after. Her mind made up, she squared her shoulders, cast a quick cleansing charm on her hands and robes, donned her mittens and cloak, selected one of the pots containing the two plants, tossed a cloth over it, and headed out. The cloth was probably overkill for such a short walk, but oh well.

Once she was in the castle, she had to admit it had been a very good idea to shelter the plants. She felt just short of frostbitten from the few moments she’d been outside, and now, while it was nice to be out of the wind, she was wondering if she would thaw out any time soon.

*Castles are all dramatic and romantic but even with magic they really don’t exactly stay warm.*

As she turned into the hallway toward the dungeons, she was greeted by young Mr. Lightfeather, who was running in the opposite direction.

“Hi Professor!”

“Hello, Mr. Lightfeather. Where are you off to?”

“I’m supposed to go help Hagrid with something.”

She widened her eyes. “Well, get to it, then.”

She watched as he ran back toward the Entrance Hall. *He’s come so far. And what a difference when Jarvis isn’t around to torture him.* Something about that gave her pause, and she became thoughtful as she continued on her errand.

When she arrived at Severus’ office door, she knocked a bit more quietly than yesterday. There was no answer. She sighed and wondered where she ought to try next. She didn’t know where his private quarters were and doubted he would be in his classroom. He probably had another lab somewhere for his own work, after all, but she had no idea where that was.

*Well, the classroom is pretty much the only place I can just up and leave the plants, and he’ll probably go in there sometime.*

She barely gave a quick knock before opening the classroom door and walking in, so she was surprised to hear his curt “Enter” as she was already doing so. She only allowed herself to stop for a split second before continuing down the steps toward the front table where he was working over a large cauldron.

“Professor Reese,” he said, “to what do I owe this … pleasure?”

She set down the pot containing the two plants and removed the cloth that was covering them.

“I believe you will be needing these shortly. I needed to come into the castle anyway, so I decided to bring them.”
She paused, not expecting a response but also not sure how to say what she wanted to say next.

He nodded, then asked, “Was there anything else?”

“Yes.” She took a breath. “I encountered Mr. Lightfeather as I was on my way here, and he reminded me of something.”

A raised eyebrow was the only acknowledgement that she had spoken. He did not interrupt his stirring nor look away from the cauldron for more than a split second.

“I’ve always been very protective of children. I’ve even been accused of being a bit overprotective, especially of the smaller ones, and if I believe a child is being seriously threatened, there is very little that I won’t do to prevent them coming to harm.” Insane mother bear on crack, according to … well. He looked up at that. “You have the care of these children on your shoulders more than any of us except Minerva. I’m still seriously annoyed about what you did, but I can’t say I wouldn’t have done something similar in your shoes.”

He flicked a measuring glance at her as she continued. “I was warned before I came here not to trust you. However, from the first staff meeting, I have never seen any reason I shouldn’t. As you have helped me with my work, I felt we were building a decent professional rapport, which is why I felt betrayed by what you did the other night. I apologize for my … excessive response to that.”

He nodded guardedly.

“Why did you think you needed evidence just to raise a concern to Minerva?” she asked. “I would need evidence, but I’m new around here. You’re the Deputy Headmaster.”

It took a moment for him to answer. “I have raised concerns about colleagues before. Those concerns have never been acted upon until damage had already been done.”

“I see.” She paused. Something about that felt ever so slightly off. “That’s not all of it, but I can see that’s all you’re going to say.”

He shot her a questioning look.

“Even without actively using Legilimency, I can almost always tell when someone is lying to me or even telling partial truths,” she said with a shrug. “Useful when students are trying to get away with some version of ‘a dragon torched my homework.’”

His eyes narrowed, and she felt an odd chill in his gaze. She shrugged again to shake off the odd feeling.

“Good day to you, then,” she said.

“Good day,” he replied, returning his attention to the Wolfsbane Potion.

She left the dungeons and headed for the kitchens, her mind already working over the question of what sort of meat a smooth snake might eat safely, or whether there might be a mouse or two around. What she was absolutely not doing was replaying the conversation she had just finished. Or if she were, it was only because Severus had looked at her very strangely, and if he were still nosing around after everything, well, that would be bad. Except for the part where she thought this secrecy bit was ridiculous. What had made him look at her like that? Why was she thinking about how he had looked at her at all?

She rolled her eyes, stopped in front of the painting that led to the kitchens, and tickled the pear.

A/N: Smooth snakes are smallish constrictors on the idea of the garter snakes one finds in the U.S. They actually belong in Southern England and are endangered, but stranger things have turned up at Hogwarts. If you’re curious about them, there’s more info at http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/wildfacts/factfiles/280.shtml.

A/N 2: I originally thought the magical present-delivering Christmas trees were canon, but they’re not. If I’ve picked up the idea from some other fic, and you know which one, please let me know so I can give credit where it’s due.
Chapter 5

On Christmas morning, Celia found herself with a dilemma. She had several presents at the foot of her bed, but was she supposed to open them right away? The students would, obviously, but what was expected of the faculty? On the one hand, she might look greedy if she opened them before breakfast and the others had not. On the other, if she didn’t open them, she might look ungrateful. Details like this really ought to be included in the nonexistent new faculty orientation, immediately after “how to control the staircases.”

Curiosity won out, and she rationalized that it would be better to appear overeager than ungrateful as she brought the gifts into her sitting room. She started with the gifts from her colleagues. Hagrid had given her a fletching kit that promised to improve the range of her crossbow. Harry had clearly taken the hint he’d pried out of her and spread it around, as she had chocolates from him, Filius, Irma, Poppy, and Aurora. No Cockroach Clusters, she noted with relief, though he had included a Sugar Quill in his own gift.

Severus’ gift was a small book on experimental Potions theory. It was one she had often seen referenced in her review of the literature but had been unable to find. Had she mentioned that? Perhaps. Whether she had or not, however, it was very thoughtful. She wondered when he had placed this beneath the tree and whether it was supposed to be a peace offering.

The Headmistress’ gift made her smile: a calendar with photos of rare plants for each month. Wizarding photos, of course, that showed changes of light, dark, and wind periodically.

Finally, she opened the present from her own teacher, wondering briefly how it had arrived. It felt rather heavy to have been sent by owl. She tore the paper and lifted the note off the box.

*Thanks for the Sneakoscope Dreidel! That is such a cute idea! I hope this will come in equally handy.*

Celia gasped as she lifted the cover. A Foe-Glass. Clearly her teacher was still concerned about what had happened. She had to confess, it would be interesting to see what it showed the next time she met with Severus. She winced when she thought about how much it must have cost. Yes, her teacher had married into money and didn’t tend to think much about it, but Celia felt her own Hannukah and
Christmas gifts to the couple now looked horribly cheap by comparison.

_Idiot. Like it’s a contest or something._

She looked over the sitting room for a good place to put it. There was one spot, visible from the kitchen as well as the bedroom, that looked as if it would be perfect. There was a small booklet underneath the Foe-Glass, explaining how to key it to oneself, how to mount it properly, and other useful information. She re-closed the box, resolving to read it thoroughly before doing anything with it. First, she’d better get to breakfast.

~ ~ ~

Breakfast on Christmas morning was pretty informal. The students drifted in and out, though there was always at least one faculty or staff member present. No one had spelled out a particular schedule for this to Celia, so she wasn’t sure exactly how this was supposed to work. When she arrived in the Great Hall, Harry was sipping his tea and reading a letter with a large snowy owl perched on his chair while a couple of students were nibbling at toast and talking animatedly about their gifts.

She took a seat and smiled as her cup filled with strong coffee, and eggs, sausage, and toast appeared on her plate. Her usual. The continual and casual use of magic here still often felt overwhelming to her, but she couldn’t deny that it was often very convenient.

“Merry Christmas,” she said to the table generally, then blushed as Harry and the students replied, “Happy Christmas.”

“Right, I’ll get the hang of this whole ‘separated by a common language’ thing yet,” she said in a tone she hoped was lighthearted.

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “I think a little variety spices things up a bit.”

Celia smiled and took a large sip of her coffee before beginning her breakfast. She waited until the students left before speaking again.

“Thanks for the sweets,” she said.

Harry smiled. “Thanks for the writing set.”

She laughed a little. “Sorry I couldn’t come up with something more original.”

“No, it’s perfect,” he replied. “Why do you think I suggested it?”

They fell into a companionable silence until another pair of students arrived.

“Well,” he said, “I’d best go check on the Gryffindors and see what trouble they’re up to. Your turn to mind the breakfast table, then.”

Her eyes widened. “So are there some sort of shifts nobody bothered to explain?”

“Not exactly,” he replied. “It’s your turn until the next faculty or staff member arrives.”

“Oh, okay then,” she said, wishing she had brought something to read. “See you at dinner. Happy Christmas.” This last was directed to the next cluster of arriving students.

“Stick to your usual,” Harry said with a smile. “You sound like you’re trying too hard.”

She rolled her eyes at him. _Comparing gifts has to be way higher on their priority list than analyzing_
what I say. Then again, maybe that was his point.

Once she had finished her breakfast, she found herself sorely wishing she’d brought the booklet about her new Foe-Glass or maybe the potions theory book or really anything at all to read. *Well, I could try Summoning one of them, but with my luck, it’d go straight through a window or something.* Instead, she contented herself with sipping at her coffee and watching the students’ animated faces until Poppy Pomfrey arrived and took the next “shift.”

~ ~ ~

Christmas dinner was enjoyable enough, he supposed, once the students finished pulling crackers and devouring everything in sight and left to go play with their new toys or whatever it was they did. Not that he was overly fond of socializing at length with his colleagues, but after an hour or so of drinks and inane conversation, most of them had wandered off to visit whomever it was they all went to visit, leaving him in relative peace. With so few students about, he did not even particularly worry about patrolling, unless he wanted to. The ghosts could keep an eye on things and let him know if anything required his attention. It was something to look forward to, and for now, at least, the students had gone.

He barely registered most of the conversations around him, once he had got through the requisite “thank yous” and “you’re welcomes” related to everyone’s gifts. Mostly.

“Had I mentioned that I’d been having a hard time finding that book?” Celia asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “Once or twice.”

“Well, it will be very helpful, I’m sure. Thank you,” she said. She looked as though she wished to ask him something else but thankfully did not.

She did, however, excuse herself almost as soon as Filius had left, even though he knew she was not planning to leave the school. Reflexively, he almost considered investigating but then recalled Minerva’s edict. Fine. After the holiday was done, however, he could make it a point to speak with her, and perhaps they could resume what was apparently becoming a collaboration on her experimental potion. And he would have his eyes open.

~ ~ ~

Two mornings later, there was a knock at his office door just as he was preparing to leave for breakfast. He turned from the portrait that led directly to the hallway and went instead through the tapestry that led to his office. When he opened the door, he was startled to see young Mr. Lightfeather with Miss Hollingberry of Gryffindor in tow.

“What in Merlin’s name are you doing here, Mr. Lightfeather?” he asked. “Shouldn’t you both be on your way to the Great Hall?”

“Good morning, Professor Snape,” Lightfeather replied. “I just wanted to ask you … well, you said tomorrow we could do some more practicing with defensive spells after Christmas was done, and I wondered if Gwen could join us.”

Severus looked down at the tiny blonde. She was staring at her shoes and trembling slightly.

“And is there some reason why Miss Hollingberry cannot approach her own Head of House, who happens also to be this school’s Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor?”

The girl’s flush told him all he needed to know. How incredibly … silly.
“I see,” he continued before either could respond. “And why do you require this additional tuition, Miss Hollingberry?”

“I … I don’t really know, sir,” she stammered, a hint of tears in her voice, and turned to leave. “I’m sorry.”

Lightfeather held on to her hand, rendering her unable to actually leave. Severus found that both compelling and disturbing.

“Sir, only she’s so afraid all the time. She didn’t grow up with magic, you see, and we won’t even start learning any of the things you taught me until the second term in class. So I thought maybe she wouldn’t be so scared if she knew she could block things if anyone ever really did try to hurt her,” the boy explained. “She wouldn’t be any trouble, I promise, sir. You’re already teaching me, so I thought maybe you wouldn’t mind showing her, too?”

Severus leaned back against his desk and pinched the bridge of his nose. There truly ought to be some rule about springing bizarre ideas upon one’s Head of House before breakfast. He would have to propose one.

Afraid all the time?

“Miss Hollingberry, are you by any chance suffering from recurrent nightmares of some sort?” he asked.

“N-no, sir,” she replied. “I mean, I had a few when I first got here, but Madam Pomfrey gave me a potion that made them go away, and after a couple of weeks they stopped.”

So, whatever else may be going on here, she is not the mystery student. He pondered how to handle the situation and briefly longed for the days when he could have simply ordered them both to leave and cease wasting his time.

“Miss Hollingberry,” he said at last, “do you realize the trouble this might well bring you?”

“S-sir?” she asked.

“Young fellow Gryffindors would no doubt consider it a personal affront if they were to learn that you had passed over your own Head of House to request the assistance of the Head of Slytherin, not to mention what they would most likely think of your apparent friendship with Mr. Lightfeather.”

“I … I can be friends with who I want, sir,” the girl replied. 

So, she does have a bit of a spine, then. That will bring her trouble if she does not have the skills to go with it. However …

“I did not say otherwise,” he replied. “I am merely pointing out that while inter-House rivalries are not remotely what they once were, you should be aware of the potential problems if you pursue this course of action.”

He watched with interest as the girl straightened her shoulders slightly and set her jaw.

“If they want to pick on me for being friends with Colin, they’ll do it anyway,” she said.

She has a point. Very well, then.

“Mr. Lightfeather, while prejudice against Muggle-borns is no longer sanctioned in Slytherin House,
you may also find yourself at odds with your housemates regarding your friendship with Miss Hollingberry."

“They don’t seem to care,” the boy said. “But if they do, well, I can be friends with who I want, too.”

With a nod, Professor Snape turned his attention back to the young witch.

“You will first approach your Head of House, Miss Hollingberry. As a matter of professional courtesy, the professors in this school do not teach one another’s subject matter without good reason.” He looked down his nose at Mr. Lightfeather. “In the case of a student from my own House, it was entirely at my discretion to choose to tutor Mr. Lightfeather, and I simply notified Professor Potter of this. Your situation is entirely different, and you will first ask for the assistance of your own Head of House. If he does not wish to tutor you himself or does not have the time to do so, you may, with his knowledge and permission, accompany Mr. Lightfeather to his tutoring sessions.”

“Thank you, Professor Sn …”

He held up his hand.

“If you do join us, I will not be increasing the length of these sessions, nor do I intend for Mr. Lightfeather to sit through a repetition of all he has already learned in the past two months. Therefore you will read the relevant sections of your Defense text and observe for the first two sessions before attempting to participate. Do I make myself clear?”

Both children bobbed their heads. Miss Hollingberry’s face was once again quite red. He raised his eyebrows and looked down at them.

“Yes, sir,” they said in unison.

He let out a resigned sigh.

“Get to breakfast, both of you,” he snapped. “And for heaven’s sake, don’t walk about holding hands like that. You are only eleven and twelve.”

After a flurry of “no, sir,” “yes, sir,” and “thank you, sir,” the pair finally left. Severus stared at the door for several moments, wondering just what exactly had possessed him to agree to this at all.

~ ~ ~

Later that afternoon, Celia was just finishing repotting the Venomous Tentacula when she heard the door at the other end of the greenhouse open. She glanced over her shoulder and was surprised to see Severus striding toward her.

“Good afternoon,” she said absently, turning her attention immediately back to the temperamental plant. She patted a bit more soil down firmly and set it to one side before turning to deal with her visitor.

“Good afternoon,” he replied.

“Was there something in particular you wanted?” she asked.

“Yes. Now that the holiday is past, I thought we could speak about …”

“Excuse me,” she cut in, turning toward the motion she had just seen on her workbench and
grabbing for it. She turned back to him holding the little reddish-brown snake. Awkwardly, she fished for her wand and Summoned a covered basket. As she lowered the snake into it, she said, “For the last time, that is not a bunch of other snakes for you to play with. It is a plant that will gladly eat you for lunch. So until I can figure out how to stop you going after it, I guess you’ll have to stay in here.” She closed the lid and shook her head. “Foolish thing. I’m sorry, you were saying?”

Severus just looked at her oddly.

“What, you’ve never seen anybody talk to a snake before?” she asked.

“Not in English,” he replied dryly.

“Oh, right. Sorry.” Think before you speak much?

“You keep a snake?”

“No exactly. It apparently decided to winter over in here, instead of going into hibernation when it should have. I only discovered it on Christmas Eve.”

“I see.”

“I used to keep snakes when I was younger. Corn snakes. I’m not sure how different this type is, but I’m pretty sure it would just die if I put it outside now. Considering it seems determined to commit suicide by plant, maybe that’d be worth the risk.” She shook her head. “Anyway, you were saying?”

“What? Oh, yes. I had planned to ask you at lunch when you would like to resume work on that potion of yours; however, you were not there.”

“Is it that late already?” She pulled off one of her protective gloves and looked at her watch. “I guess it is. Quite a bit past, in fact.” She thought for a moment. “If you have a bit of time now, why don’t you come in for a cup of tea, and we can talk about it then.”

“That would be acceptable,” he replied.

She pulled off the other glove and tossed them both on top of the basket, picked up her wand and tucked it away, then led the way through the doorway that led directly into her kitchen. Pulling her wand back out and giving it a few flicks, she set water to boil and Summoned the tea set onto the counter. Severus hung his cloak on the hook by the door as he entered. She waved him to his usual seat as she stepped into the sitting room to Floo the elves for sandwiches and cookies. They giggled at her request, as they always did, but she just couldn’t order biscuits without expecting a side of gravy to go with them. At least they had gotten over punishing themselves for it.

As she turned to go back into the kitchen, she glanced quickly at the Foe-Glass. Cloudy, but empty. Well, that was good to see. If Severus were her enemy in any sense, she should have seen his image there.

The water was just beginning to boil as she returned to the kitchen. She set the tea to steep, picked up the tea tray, and gestured for Severus to join her in the sitting room. Once they were seated, she said, “So, now we can dispense with the polite fiction that you agreed to help me out of sheer intellectual curiosity.”

“Indeed.”

“Not that I believed that,” she continued. “It was obvious that you were looking for information. A little too obvious, actually. But I can’t deny that you’ve given me some very useful ideas, starting
with the one that launched this project in the first place.”

The tray she had ordered from the kitchens appeared on the coffee table. She offered it to him, and he selected a sandwich before saying, “I truly never intended that remark as advice.”

“I didn’t suppose you had. However, it was about the only thing that hadn’t been tried. The best I had managed prior was the Living Death variant, and all that accomplishes is the ability to become lucid in the dreams and choose to wake up from them. There’s therapeutic value in that, but it’s still a long way from a solution.”

“You ought to come up with a new name for it, you know. It’s sufficiently different that it is misleading to simply call it a variant.”

She shrugged. “It’s not a priority.” Deciding the tea had steeped long enough, she poured two cups and handed one to him. He accepted it and glanced up at the wall that held her Foe-Glass.

“That’s new,” he said archly.

She chuckled. “A Christmas gift from the person who discovered your research. Or, at least, discovered that someone had been poking around my essence somehow. Apparently she decided I could use the help.”

“I see.”

“Actually, the point is that there is nothing to see in it right now.”

“Are you sure you’ve charmed it properly?”

“Are you saying you ought to show up in it?”

“I am not saying anything. It was a simple question.”

“Yes, I am quite sure I have charmed it properly.”

“Hmm.”

Quiet fell as both nibbled on sandwiches and sipped tea, and when the conversation resumed, it focused on Potions theory and plans to test the latest batch of hybridized herbs when they matured in a few weeks.

~ ~ ~

Two days later

“Are you completely mad? If you add the bearweed/milfoil cross first, then all this … mint soup that follows will negate everything you were hoping to accomplish by hybridizing it in the first place.”

“It needs to simmer far longer than the mugwort and the spearmint, which are not ‘mint soup’ and will lose their protective and strengthening qualities if they go in first.”

“Not if you add diced silverweed.”

Silence.

“Oh.”
Five days later

“I don’t suppose you considered the possibility that the crushed aneton seeds will simply evaporate if you do not reduce the heat before adding them, while reducing the heat would cause the rest of your ingredients to congeal into a pile of useless sludge?”

“That would be the reason for the ‘insufferably complex stirring pattern’ at that stage. The Arithmantic pattern derivation came almost directly out of *Potions Development Theory*. You remember … the book you gave me?”

“Oh.”

“Speaking of books, didn’t you say you have the cover that belongs to your *Advanced Potions* book attached to the book *this* cover belongs to?”

“Yes.”

“And didn’t you mention something about bringing it today?”

“I may have done.”

“Is there some reason not to switch them back?”

“I suppose not.”

“So, are you going to remember to bring it next time?”

“Perhaps.”

“Now who’s hiding something?”

 Silence.

“Fine. I will bring it next time.”

One week later

“You do realize there is absolutely nothing more we can do with any of this until the bloody plants mature, Severus.”

“Yes, but the Headmistress wishes to see us continuing to work on the project.”

“I’m fairly certain that the Headmistress is aware that plants can only be magically hurried to a certain point without losing the very properties for which they are grown.”

“When you’ve known her for more than thirty years, I will take your assessment of her patience seriously.”

“Oh. Well, then, there is always the second potion for actually working with the dreams.”

“And what is that one supposed to accomplish?”

“Ummm … let’s say you needed to be able to share the content of a prophetic dream with one or
more people, directly, without the use of Legilimency or a Pensieve.”

“And why would those tools be unavailable?”

“Can you just trust me that there are situations in which they are?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Not so much.”

“And how is this potion supposed to accomplish this?”

“It has to give the ability to project images and sound. I’d say ‘like a hologram,’ but that probably wouldn’t mean much.”

“Wouldn’t a charm work better for this?”

“Probably, but that isn’t an option, either.”

“Why ever not?”

“I really can’t say.”

“I think I liked it better when you had to at least pretend to come up with an answer. At least that was amusing.”

“The students are coming back tonight. I’m sure they’ll be happy to amuse you.”

Silence.

“So what were you planning for the base of this potion?”

~ ~ ~

The return of the students and resumption of classes necessitated a return to only weekly meetings over tea, but then there wasn’t much more to discuss about the dream-blocking potion, and less to work with for the dream-projecting potion. Meanwhile, the much-rested students were providing additional challenges.

The term was barely into its second week when Celia, hurrying on her way to the weekly staff meeting, was startled to hear sounds of hexes being fired back toward the main entrance. She followed the noise and discovered the culprits to be Messrs. Jarvis and Lightfeather, surrounded by several other students. Lightfeather was deflecting Jarvis’ spells pretty well and not firing off any of his own, so for a moment, she considered letting them just have it out. Then she saw a Tripping Jinx ricochet onto one of the spectators.

“That’s enough,” she called out, storming forward through the watching students. “Break it up, now!”

Jarvis fired off one last spell, and time suddenly slowed to a crawl. Lightfeather turned toward the sound of her voice, shifting his wand arm and the angle of the shield spell he was using. Jarvis’ spell glanced off the canted shield and ricocheted almost straight up, where it collided with a second-floor staircase that was in the middle of shifting to a new position. The hideous sound of shattering stone assaulted Celia’s ears and, as she watched in horror, the stone staircase swung down, dangled precariously, and plummeted toward the two boys.
“Move!” she yelled, then ran to the boys, who appeared frozen in fear, and pushed them out of the way. The staircase landed behind her with a crash that felt as though it shook the castle's very foundations. She turned and was shocked to see that it had landed on end, cracks running through it, and was beginning to topple lengthwise toward the students on the far side of the hall. Without time for thought, she ran underneath the leaning structure and caught it before it could complete its descent.

“Move!” she repeated, this time to the shocked children behind her. “I said move, now! Clear this hallway!”

A few students shook out of their stupor and began to leave, dragging their friends with them, just as several other faculty members arrived to investigate the noise. As quickly as she could, she walked her hands along the stairs and her feet backwards along the floor, easing the staircase down as she went, until finally she reached the end and lowered it to the floor with an almost gentle thud.

She turned to see who had arrived. Minerva, of course, and Severus, with Filius and Harry not far behind. Soon it seemed that the rest of the faculty was clustering behind them in an odd visual echo of the now-scattered students. Celia looked at Minerva and winced.

“Professor Reese, what on Earth happened?”

“Dueling students,” she replied simply. “Well, Jarvis firing off spells and Lightfeather just trying to block them. One ricocheted and hit this staircase,” she gestured to the fallen stone structure, “while it was moving, and it fell. It would have landed on the students who were watching the altercation.”

“I see.” The Headmistress considered for a moment. “Professor Snape, Mr. Filch, please see what you can do about this … rubble. Professor Reese, please join me in my office where we can discuss this further. The rest of you, please return your students to your classes and try to conduct them as usual. Whoever has Mr. Jarvis and Mr. Lightfeather this period, please send them to me.”

The crowd dispersed as everyone followed her instructions. Severus gave Celia a long, measuring look before turning to Filch and joining him in assessing the damage.

~ ~ ~

Once they were seated in the Headmistress’ office, Celia allowed herself to realize how sore she was. She rubbed at her arms absently.

“Are you hurt?” McGonagall asked.

“Not really,” she replied. “Just a few strained muscles. I’ll be fine.”

“When you are finished here, you should see Poppy.”

“That’s really not necessary.”

“Please do so anyway.”

Celia nodded and waited anxiously to hear what would come next.

“First, thank you,” Minerva said. “I gather we would have been sending Poppy several badly hurt children, or worse, if you had not acted.”

Celia nodded again.
“But now I must ask: why did you not use magic?”

Celia looked down at her lap and then back to her employer.

“It wasn’t my first instinct,” she admitted. "It is so deeply ingrained in me to use magic only when there is no other way, especially when there are others around. It might actually have been better if they’d hit a different staircase, higher up. If it had been going to explode into shrapnel, magic would have been my only recourse. As it was, once it hit and started to lean, on some level I knew I could ease it down physically, so that was my gut reaction."

Minerva sighed. “I don’t know how we can explain this away,” she said. “Quite a few students and most of the faculty saw you holding a staircase, which, unless I miss my guess, would have been difficult for Hagrid to support.”

“That’s true.” Celia thought for a moment. “I’ve had similar things happen around Muggles. They’re actually easier; they’ll convince themselves of almost anything to avoid seeing something that doesn’t fit their expectations.”

“Wizarding children, on the other hand, are far less likely to do so, to say nothing of the faculty and staff.”

“Well, if we’re still going to keep this all secret, then I’d say something true but misleading is probably the way to go …”

Minerva narrowed her eyes.

“Not the truth about me, or only the least significant bit, just things that are true and lead to reasonable conclusions. First of all, the whole truth about the hexing that caused the accident. Maybe that will discourage the next foolish students who decide to duel in the halls.”

Minerva nodded, though her expression was dubious. I guess that might be kind of asking a lot.

“Then, as far as my response, we can use two facts. First, until coming to Hogwarts, I’ve been accustomed to being almost continually among Muggles, and so my first instinct was not, unfortunately, to reach for my wand. Second, there are many documented cases of women performing astonishing feats of strength to protect or rescue children, usually but not always their own. It’s not a huge stretch that a childless teacher might manage the same sort of maternal protectiveness toward her students. And it is true, even though it has nothing to do with what happened today. But, letting it get spread around will lead to a logical connection. Some of the Muggle-born students may have heard and might share similar stories about mothers lifting automobiles off their kids and whatnot, which would help.”

“That may work for the students,” the Headmistress pointed out, “but what about your colleagues?”

“Well, Severus already knows there’s something odd about me, so this is just one more bit of proof. You’d be a better judge than me whether the rest will buy this diversion or will at least pretend to, knowing that you are obviously okay with it.”

Minerva became thoughtful. “I will take your recommendation under advisement and let you know what I decide. For now, though, I want you to see Poppy. Surely women who lift automobiles off of children suffer from bruises and other injuries after the fact.”

Celia looked down at her unblemished hands and arms. She concentrated briefly. Her hands and
wrists became mottled in bruises, and her robes developed a ragged tear along one shoulder. “Will that do?”

“You might add one along your cheek,” advised the former Transfiguration professor. Celia complied, adding a scrape along the cheek adjacent to the tear in her robes. “You can remove them once you reach the hospital wing. Poppy would be able to tell they are not real.”

Celia rose to leave.

“Please send up Messrs. Jarvis and Lightfeather,” said the Headmistress, as Celia turned to leave.

“Minerva, I know I only arrived at the end,” she said, “but I would like to reiterate that I only saw Mr. Jarvis casting spells at Mr. Lightfeather, and Mr. Lightfeather shielding himself.”

“I know. However, I shall want to hear all of it from both of them before rendering any decisions.”

Celia nodded and exited. As she made her way to the moving staircase, she began to hold one of her wrists as though it pained her and tested to see whether she could feign a convincing limp. When she reached the gargoyle at the bottom of the stairs, the two boys were standing there, waiting anxiously. They looked at her with expressions that were a mix of awe and fear, and in the case of Lightfeather, guilt. She glared murderously at Jarvis but took pity on Lightfeather.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “Madam Pomfrey will have me fixed up in no time. However, you two had best get up to Professor McGonagall. She doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

The boys stepped onto the staircase, which began to rotate as soon as they were on it, cycling them up to the office. Celia started off down the hall toward the hospital wing by a route that used only staircases that remained firmly in place along the castle walls, limping slightly and cradling her right hand. She encountered only a few students before she reached the hospital wing, and had no doubt they would add her “injuries” to the tales that were no doubt already circulating and growing.

~ ~ ~

The following afternoon, Severus kept his appointment with Celia for their weekly tea and collaboration. He was, of course, primarily interested in the previous day’s events.

“You seem to be healing quite remarkably,” he said in a casual tone.

“Poppy is very good at what she does,” she countered.

“I find it truly amazing that she managed to reattach your arm, mend your skull, and have you back in perfect condition in time for dinner last night.”

“Is that what they’re saying?” Celia appeared amused. “I’m surprised it hasn’t escalated to a near-death experience yet. Oh well, give it another day or two.”

“I have also heard more tales about the amazing feats of women lifting large objects in the defense of children than I would ever have dreamed possible.”

“Oh? Well, that’s good. They seem to have the sense not to talk about it in my classes, so I wasn’t sure. I’m glad to hear that the supporting evidence is flowing as freely as the gossip.”

He raised an eyebrow at that. He had not expected her to admit to the deception quite so blatantly.

“What?” she protested. “I didn’t expect you to buy it in the first place. I don’t really expect that most
of the faculty and staff really do, but obviously you wouldn’t.”

He nodded, conceding the point. He had been aware she was uncommonly strong but had still been taken aback by what she had done. He and Minerva had arrived just as she yelled for the gathered students to leave and he thought his heart might have actually skipped several beats at the sight of this young woman being crushed under the stone staircase before his mind finally processed what he was actually seeing.

“I think it does strain credulity to compare moving a one-ton object off the ground to catching a one-ton object as it falls,” he pointed out.

She rolled her eyes at him. “I didn’t catch it as it fell,” she said. “One end had already connected with the floor before I looked back and saw how it was going to land. If most of the force hadn’t already been absorbed by that first impact, I’m sure I would have been squashed like a bug.”

“Pleasant image,” he said, suppressing a most uncharacteristic shudder.

“Not particularly,” she replied. “So, are we going to rehash this all afternoon, or shall we talk potions?”

He felt oddly relieved by the change in subject. While the incident had made him more curious than ever about just what, exactly, this woman was, something about it all was disturbing him on a level he did not care to experience much less examine.

He set with relish to the much more familiar and less fraught task of demolishing her latest propositions. A potion to cause a person to be able to project visual images into the air for others to see? Ridiculous.

It would be useful if she continued to come up with these absurd notions, however, as it would be several more weeks before the hybrid plants would be ready for the first trials in the far more realistic, but still highly unlikely, potion to suppress prescient dreams. If Minerva did not continue to receive updates on their progress, and he had no doubt she was asking them both separately, she would surely start hounding him to speed the process, which was already progressing at the fastest possible rate.

If it were possible to hasten things, I certainly would. I cannot wait until that first potion either fails, as it almost certainly must, or even succeeds. These meetings have become a waste of time, for all that they keep Minerva pacified. Add in the time I now spend tutoring Lightfeather and his little friend – also Celia’s fault, by Merlin’s beard! – and it is no wonder I have barely finished reading half of last month’s International Journal of Potions. The sooner this foolishness is finished, the sooner my life can return to some semblance of normalcy.

He took a sip of his tea and wondered briefly if the house-elves might start serving some of these blends she used. They did tend to grow on one, and he rather thought he would miss them once these meetings finally became unnecessary.
The next several weeks passed in relative peace, and eventually the Splinching of an unlucky sixth-year boy took over the rumor mill. Celia anxiously watched over her precious hybrid herbs, silently willing them to mature more quickly but knowing they really couldn’t. She was also worried that her charge hadn’t yet been identified. While she wanted the potion to be ready for her, it would not be the end of the world if it weren’t, and she would feel much more comfortable if she at least knew who the young witch was.

The days began to grow almost imperceptibly longer, though the weather seemed to grow much, much colder. Apparently February was still February, even at Hogwarts, and they were, after all, pretty far North. There was, at least, an insulating coat of snow on the ground. The first of it had fallen just in time for Christmas – Celia had no doubt that had been carefully planned – and it had just continued to accumulate ever since. There were well-worn paths to her greenhouses that were cleared amazingly quickly after each new layer had fallen, and the students seemed quite happy to be in class, even those she expected would drop Herbology as soon as they were able. It was understandable enough. The greenhouses were much warmer than the castle.

Almost before she realized it, even February was nearly half gone, and it was time for the Valentine’s Dance. Valentine’s Day itself fell on a Monday this year, so the dance was held on the preceding Saturday. This time, Celia felt much more confident getting ready. She Transfigured her gown to red with gold trim and smiled at the memory of her conversation with Severus about it at the last dance. It was too bad there weren’t four dances in the year so that she could rotate through all of the House colors. Or not. There just really wasn’t any way that Hufflepuff yellow and black wouldn’t come out looking like a bumblebee.

Checking herself in the mirror one last time, she added an extra holding charm to her hair, then carefully put on her cloak and exited her cottage, walking swiftly to the castle. On her way, she noted that even the snow off the paths appeared to be fairly well packed with a thin glaze of ice over it. She wondered if it had actually started to thaw a little today and then refrozen. It glinted prettily where it caught the lights from the castle.

When she entered the Great Hall, she felt a distinct sense of déjà vu: some of the wintery decorations
from the Christmas Dance had made a return appearance, but instead of boughs of holly there were
vines of roses that she had provided (not over-nitrogenated, thank you very much) with faeries
perched along them here and there. She took a closer look at one, to see if it had been dressed as a
Cupid, but fortunately not. No, the decorations were certainly breathtaking but also undeniably
tasteful.

No giant lamé hearts, no heart-shaped confetti everywhere. Nothing like Cleveland Heights at all.
Also? This chaperone business is way easier the second time.

That still did not stop her from losing her breath for a moment when Slytherin House arrived. When
Severus stepped onto the dais, he scowled at her, presumably due to the colors she was wearing. She
smirked in reply and, when he turned to face the students again, focused on breathing.

Just like at Christmas, Hagrid was the first to ask her to dance. This time, they’d practiced a bit, and it
went much more smoothly. Surprisingly, Harry asked her for the next song.

“Don’t tell me, let me guess,” she teased. “It’s the colors.”

Harry laughed. “That and I was reminded I have a responsibility to show a good example to the
students.” He punctuated this by stepping on her toe.

“Not a huge fan of the dancing, then,” she said sympathetically.

“Yeah, sorry about that.”

“No worries.”

A few bars later she was hoping it would be a very short song. She wasn’t sure if she was more
embarrassed for herself or for him. There was plenty of embarrassment to go around.

After they parted, she remained at her chaperoning station watching the staff and students dance. She
nabbed a couple of students who had tried to duck out of the Hall, but so far that was about the most
excitement she’d had.

That’s okay. That’s good, even. Boring is good. Also good that it’s way too cold for necking or
snogging or whatever you want to call it outside. Short night, uneventful patrol, it’ll all be good.

Quite a bit later, she was startled to hear some very familiar, haunting chords echo across the Great
Hall. This must be the start of the kids’ music. Kind of a golden oldie, though, even if it is rock and
roll. She looked with interest at the handful of young couples moving onto the floor, trying to discern
who must have made this request.

“Something amusing?” asked Severus, a silky tone to his voice sending an odd shiver down her
spine.

“I’m just trying to figure out who requested this. It’s a little unusual for a Valentine’s dance.”

“I see. Perhaps I should leave you to it and wait for another song to ask you to dance in that case.”

Celia turned and looked at him oddly. “Severus, do you have any idea how long this song is?”

“As a matter of fact, I do, though it is growing shorter as we speak.”

“There’s also the slight problem of me having no idea how to dance to it. At least,” she amended,
“not in any kind of ballroom style.”
“I had thought, at Christmas, that you were reasonably competent at following a partner’s lead. However, if you do not feel up to the challenge …”

“Following a waltz is one thing,” she started.

“Surely, with your many … talents, you should be able to predict my steps with ease. That is, if you are as good as you think you are.” She raised her eyebrows at the implications of this. His eyes flashed with challenge and, it appeared, amusement, as he added, “Then again, things did not appear to go very well when you were dancing with Professor Potter earlier.”

“Fine, you’re on,” she said, taking his elbow. She couldn’t imagine why he was doing this, but if he gave her carte blanche like that, she certainly couldn’t resist.

He led her onto the dance floor just as the music picked up and quite deliberately looked her in the eye. She checked her own mental shields and wordlessly cast Legilimens a split second before he made his first move. To her relief, he began with a sort of rolling waltz that cycled through the four-beat measures before the music shifted to something a bit more complex, requiring steps to match. She began to relax. It was easy enough to follow even completely unknown steps when she could read his intentions a second or two in advance, but the concentration needed to look past his eyes and into his mind allowed her to ignore just how compelling she found those eyes.

*But why is he doing this? If he were trying to get into my head, that would make loads more sense. He shouldn’t want me anywhere near his!* 

She caught a flicker of something at the edge of his mind and almost missed his next step. For a moment, she wondered what it had been, but then the music became almost frantic, pulling her full attention to where he, and therefore she, was going to step next. Several trickier combinations ensued, requiring her to break and resume eye contact, and she barely had time to wonder whether he was doing this on purpose.

*Of course he is.*

When the music slowed, violins trilling softly, he spoke again. “So, what theories were you developing about whomever requested this song?”

“Well,” she replied, “I didn’t get that far, but whoever it is, they’re into Led Zeppelin, but for some reason took a pass on ‘Stairway.’ And you’ve got to admit – ‘Kashmir’? Not so much what you think of when you cross-reference ‘Zeppelin’ and ‘Valentine’s Day.’”

The pace of the music picked up again, and the conversation was put on hold.

When the song ended and he led her from the dance floor, she asked, “Where in the world did you learn to dance like that?”

“It was a necessary skill in my former line of work,” he replied.

She gave him an incredulous look. “Um, right. I can believe that dancing in general may have been a necessary skill for schmoozing with the ritzier Death Eaters, but I’m not buying that Muggle music would have been high on their hit list.” Well, except maybe for Wagner.

He didn’t answer, so she pressed on with another question. “You’re the one who requested that song, aren’t you?”

He smirked. “It took you long enough to work that out. Apparently you are not as good as you think you are.”
“I didn’t go poking around for anything other than what you chose to broadcast at me,” she pointed out, feeling a bit defensive. *Great Goddess, could anybody else have me practically apologizing for not invading their mind when handed an all-but-open invitation?* “And anyway, I was good enough to keep up with you.”

“I suppose,” he allowed.

She rolled her eyes. “So, let me guess, your objective was, what, to show off this talent that has gone unneeded for several years? And so you chose me, despite the colors I’m wearing, because either I’m the only Legilimens among the female faculty, or at least I’m the only one likely to strike at the bait you presented.”

He smirked again as they arrived at the spot where she had been standing when he first approached her.

*Of course. What did you think he was up to?*

“Congratulations. I’m not sure whether the students are horrified or impressed, but it looks like several are going to need to see Poppy to have their jaws relocated.”

“Then it seems my work here is done.”

She shook her head as he gave her a small, mocking bow and turned to walk over to Minerva. On the other side of the room, she saw Harry scowling at him. *Ah, that’d be the rest of the puzzle, then. Not just to show off but to show up Harry. Better still.* She stopped herself from rolling her eyes again. Barely. As her gaze returned to Severus, she pointedly ignored the electric current that had been flowing between her shoulder blades and down her arms since somewhere in the middle of the song.

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He had finished his patrol of the dungeons and issued more detentions than even he cared to supervise by the time he was ready to go check the Quidditch Pitch. Minerva was right, of course, that it was largely pointless in such weather. He had only caught one couple there in the winter in all his years as a teacher, but if it happened once it could happen again. Really, it should have been added to Celia’s patrol, as she covered the grounds in general and left the castle to the rest of the staff, but it was rather hard to delegate a task that Minerva saw as pointless.

As if his thoughts had conjured her, Celia came into view as he reached the Entrance Hall, swearing under her breath.

“Such language is really not appropriate for a teacher, Celia,” he said with a smirk.

“It’s not like there are any students around to hear me,” she retorted. “With any luck, those two I just delivered upstairs will be the last I run into tonight.”

“Ah, so that’s what you are doing indoors.”

She merely nodded in reply.

“If you are done with your patrol and are going back outside, would you care to accompany me in checking the Quidditch Pitch?” he asked.

She narrowed her eyes at him, and for a moment he thought she was going to decline. Then she shrugged and turned to walk toward the large doors.
“Sure, why not? It was my next stop anyway.”

He stared at her.

“How?” he asked.

She stopped and turned to look at him as if he had asked an utterly stupid question. He found it most disconcerting.

“Probably the same reason you’re headed there: it might not be on the official patrols, but that’s all the more reason to think some kids might be there trying to get frostbite or worse.”

He allowed himself a moment of self-castigation for not simply delegating this to her in the first place. She had probably patrolled the pitch in December, as well.

At least it will be faster work with two of us.

He cast a Warming Charm on himself and followed her through the main doors, taking a well-worn path toward the pitch. Several times she looked as though she were about to speak but then did not. It was quite unusual that she had nothing to say really. Something of a relief.

The crescent moon had set several hours ago, and many of the castle’s lights were now darkened as most of its occupants slept. So when he chose a path that edged toward the Forbidden Forest and grew substantially darker, they had to light their wands.

Severus turned to her and was about to explain why he preferred this route to the pitch when she held up a hand for him to be quiet. Nothing. He began again, “Celia…”

“Wait,” she hissed. “Something’s not right.”

They both looked around warily, Severus growing impatient. What was wrong with the chit, behaving as if she were afraid of the dark? He spoke again. “I’d hardly expect you to be so skittish, all things considered.”

She glared at him, but when he turned to resume their journey, she joined him.

Suddenly, a shape broke from the tree line and raced toward them across the snow. In a fluid movement, Celia pushed him behind her with her free arm, nearly knocking him over, then withdrew something from a pocket in her cloak. When the figure came in range of the glow from their wands, she hurled it at the intruder. It found its mark, and what had to have been a vampire disappeared in a billow of dust. She continued to scan the tree line and surrounding area.

He put his back against hers, similarly searching for others. They did not often hunt in packs, it was true, but then they should not be able to get on the grounds at all.

After several minutes, she relaxed slightly. “I think that was it,” she said, “but stay alert anyway while I see if that one left any clues.” He nodded and continued to cover her back as she went to examine the vampire’s remains.

Once they reached the pile of dust on the snow, she brightened her wand-light and bent close. What in Merlin’s name is a witch doing carrying a stake? He looked over his shoulder briefly to see what she was examining. Glints of blue light reflected from the snow, but there was nothing to be seen besides the dust.

“Damn,” she murmured. “Couldn’t leave some clue what you were doing here, could you? Talisman to get you in, maybe?”
She stood and turned to face him. Not letting his guard down for a second, he glanced over at her before returning to his survey of the area. All of the clues finally fell into place.

“You’re the Slayer.”

“I’m one of them,” she corrected. “Look, I don’t trust that there aren’t more, and someone had to invite it in. That means someone could invite another into the castle. You need to get back to the school, and I need to patrol the grounds. Preferably a bit faster than we can do on foot. Accio two brooms!” she cast, pointing her wand toward the pitch and walking back toward the more solid path. A cracking noise could be heard as the brooms broke through the storage shed at the pitch and zoomed toward them.

“Check the Quidditch pitch first,” he said, attempting to regain some of his authority.

She just rolled her eyes at him, catching both brooms and tossing one to him.

“Get going,” she said. “I’ll feel better when y- … when we’re not on the ground.” She nearly mounted her broom, then apparently realized she was still wearing a long gown and cloak. Impatiently, she scanned her wand along its length, transfiguring it into a more practical turtleneck, trousers, and jacket, all black, then climbed aboard the broom.

“Too bad you did not simply restrain it,” he pointed out. “You can’t question a pile of dust.”

She nodded, a chagrined look flashing across her features. “I should have. Not my first instinct.” She kicked off somewhat unsteadily. “All right, let’s go.”

He kicked off as well and urged as much speed as he could out of the broom, sending a Patronus message ahead of him to Minerva as he rode.

~ ~ ~

By the time the sky began to lighten, she had been through the Quidditch Pitch three times and covered the rest of the grounds twice. The Forbidden Forest was the one area she felt the least confident about, but she had hesitated to enlist Hagrid’s aid there. He was strong and an excellent shot – but slow. If he was going to be hunting vampires in the Forest, she’d rather he did it by daylight and not alone. She expected he wouldn’t agree and decided not to mention that she had checked on him during her first sweep of the grounds to be sure he was sleeping safely.

It was a relief to get off the broom and back onto solid ground. There was no doubt it was faster and gave her a better range of vision, but it would never be her favorite mode of travel. At least she had stopped wobbling after the first hour or so. She set it against the wall of Hagrid’s hut and knocked at the door.

It took him awhile to answer and, when he did, he was bleary eyed and disheveled.

“Wha’ is it, Celia?” he asked. “It’s … five in the bleedin’ mornin’! An’ it’s Sunday!”

“There was a vampire attack,” she said simply. “It’s been dealt with, the grounds are clear, and the rest of the teachers are looking after the students in the castle. I need your expertise on the Forbidden Forest, and we need to go see the Headmistress.”

The half-giant was now completely awake and seemed to take all this in without missing a beat.

“When di’ this all happen?”
“About two.”

“An’ yer jes’ tellin’ me now?”

“I didn’t want another person on the grounds,” she improvised, realizing there was actually some
truth to that. “Now there’s a little light, there’s less chance of confusion.”

“Hmph.”

“Besides,” she added, “I want your input, not your hunting skills just yet. That’ll be up to Minerva,
and it’s high time I checked in with her.”

“Jes’ lemme grab my things then,” he said, turning back into the hut. He returned in a few moments,
dressed and gripping his crossbow.

“You might want to grab your umbrella, too,” she advised. When he reached back inside the door to
grab the pink umbrella that hid his wand, she continued, “I doubt we’ll run into any at this point, but
if we do, and you’re in imminent danger, use the bow or Incendio. If you can, though, use
Incarcerous. We need some answers, and unfortunately I dusted the one earlier.”

“Righ’ then, let’s go,” said Hagrid.

~ ~ ~

When they arrived, Celia was unsurprised to find the main doors locked and unresponsive to her
attempts to open them. She was more surprised when Hagrid’s key also failed to work.

“McGonagall’ll know we’re here,” he said.

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than a silvery cat came through the door and ran straight
to Hagrid. He reached down and petted the small Patronus, nodding as it dissolved.

“We’re to go ‘round to the North Entrance,” he declared. “Then go straigh’ t’ her office.”

Unfamiliar with the North Entrance, Celia followed him around the perimeter of the castle until they
reached a small door, barely visible in the castle wall.

“Um, Hagrid,” she asked, “how are you going through there?”

He just winked at her as he inserted one of his many keys into the lock. The door instantly tripled in
size and opened. Celia blinked in amazement as Hagrid bowed her through. She stepped into a dim
but large corridor and lit her wand as Hagrid closed the door behind them.

“Does it shrink back?” she asked.

“O’ course,” he replied. “Now, blimey, it’s been awhile since I’ve come this way. I think once we
get t’ the end o’ this corridor it’ll be a left. I think.” He looked her over in the dim light as if seeing
her for the first time that day. “Yer goin’ in like tha’?”

She looked down and realized her “practical patrolling outfit” would probably raise a few eyebrows
including Minerva’s. She scanned her wand along her body as she had done before and reversed the
transfiguration, so that she was once again wearing her gown and cloak.

On second thought, best add a cleansing charm or two. No point stinking the place up.

“Tha’s better,” Hagrid said, turning to lead the way.
Severus and Minerva were in deep discussion when Celia and Hagrid arrived, but they stopped speaking as soon as the new arrivals entered. Celia had, somewhat surprisingly, changed her clothing back to what it had been earlier. Severus surmised that Hagrid must have found her more practical attire … embarrassing. It had been rather closely fitted.

Celia nodded to them both, but her attention was immediately drawn to the large map that now covered most of one wall in the Headmistress’ office. It was a map of Hogwarts covered in little colored dots that had names beneath them. Most were stationary and collected in the dormitories of the four Houses, but a few were moving along the hallways. Minerva noticed her interest.

“It’s an improved version of a map Harry owns,” she said. “This map shows everyone who is in the castle, including ghosts and vampires, if any. Ghosts are in blue. Vampires would show in red.”

Celia’s eyes opened wide. “That’s useful.”

“Unfortunately and unlike the original, it only works within the castle walls. Filius will be attempting to generate a similar map for the grounds.”

“Most of the grounds are easy enough to patrol by air,” Celia pointed out. “What would be really helpful would be a map like this for the Forbidden Forest. Also probably the most difficult to create.”

Not even the original map’s creators were foolish enough to do the necessary explorations to accomplish such a thing, Severus thought. Even Hagrid most likely does not know all of the Forest well enough to leave literally no stone or stump unturned.

“Indeed,” Minerva agreed. “I gather that you found nothing further?”

“No, I didn’t. The grounds and as much of the Forest as I could cover are clear of vampires, students, and suspects. All the students have been accounted for?”

“Yes.” Minerva took a breath. “As much as it pains me to ask, who were the two Gryffindors you found outdoors?”

“Mr. Helling and Miss Lowsley,” Celia replied. “I get that they’ll have to be questioned, since they were the last students known to be outside the castle, but I really doubt that if either of them had just invited a vampire onto the grounds, they’d have been looking for a romantic hideaway in Greenhouse Five.”

“You are probably correct, but we must be thorough.”

Celia nodded.

“Obviously this changes things quite a bit.”

Minerva’s ability to state the obvious has just reached new and previously unattained heights.

“Do you have any idea why this may have happened?” she continued.

“No, I don’t.” Celia shook her head. “While it’s true that vampires and demons will often seem to home in on a Slayer, there’s been exactly zero demonic activity in Hogsmeade up till now. All I’ve seen on my patrols there have been a few drunks. Having a vamp show now could mean that the new Slayer is close to being activated, but that would just draw them close, not allow them to enter the grounds without an invitation by someone who lives here. Everything you’ve said and I’ve read
about the enchantments protecting these grounds is pretty clear about that: when it comes to vampires, the entire grounds fall under the same rules as a private home.”

“That is correct. So, then, our problem is who would have done such a thing?”

“My first guess would be an extremely naïve and adventure-seeking student. Problem is, issuing that invitation would have been the last thing they did.”

“Thank Merlin it wasn’t.”

Severus felt compelled to speak up. “Why would a vampire pass up an easy meal, whoever it was that invited them in, and then attack us?”

“It wouldn’t,” Celia agreed. “That was insanely stupid and demonstrably suicidal. I could believe that a vampire sensed me and/or the new Slayer and tricked someone into inviting it onto the grounds. I can’t believe that if it was smart enough to do that, it would then charge us – or, really, any adult at Hogwarts – across an expanse of snow rather than lure us into the Forest where it could attack from cover. I’ve been thinking about it while patrolling, and my best guess is that someone was pulling its strings a la Imperius, which leads to the obvious question of why.”

He spread his hands and lifted his shoulders. “Assassination, perhaps?” he said, in a snide tone.

“Not likely,” she replied. “Anyone competent enough to get it onto the grounds should have been competent enough to pull off a more convincing attempt. On either of us.”

“So, you think you were intended to kill it?” Minerva asked.

“Or someone was. I wasn’t supposed to be on that part of the grounds, after all.”

“Indeed. Severus, why did you ask Celia to accompany you on your usual futile search of the Quidditch pitch?”

Of course. Let’s worry about the fact that I have only found students snogging there once. Pass over the fact that if at least one of us had not been there, the vampire would have gone undetected until someone was killed.

“I had thought to split the task in half, Minerva,” he replied, in a tone that said this should be obvious. “Also, apparently Celia already intended to check the area, despite not being required to do so.”

“I see,” Minerva said, infuriatingly refusing to ask why that was.

Well, and why would she? From the sound of it, she’s been patrolling the entire grounds and Hogsmeade since she arrived, apparently with Minerva’s blessing.

“You were not, then, conducting further ‘research’ into her abilities?” the Headmistress continued.

He scowled darkly. “I gave you my word I would not,” he said in a low, dangerous voice. “And if I had been inclined to break it, I would never have done so in a manner that would endanger anyone in this school.”

“Minerva, Severus was as surprised as I was,” Celia said. “Actually, more surprised than I was since I’d heard its movements just before it charged us.” She closed her eyes and appeared to think for a moment. She opened her eyes and said, “Besides, I was between him and the vampire much of the time. If he had been holding it under the Imperius, I’d have felt the energy flow.”
Minerva’s lips were pressed tight, forming a thin line. “I’m sorry, Severus,” she said at last, “but if someone brought a vampire onto Hogwarts grounds, placed it under the Imperius curse, and had it attack Celia so that she would reveal her identity by killing it, then it had to be someone who at least suspected her.”

“We don’t know any of that,” Snape retorted. “It could simply have been an incredibly stupid vampire. And in case you have forgotten, there was that impressive display with the staircase a few weeks ago. It may not have been explained away as effectively as you thought.”

“Um, Professor McGonagall,” Hagrid said. “Beggin’ yer pardon, but – would it have to be someone who lived in the castle wha’ invited it in?”

“No,” she replied. “To invite it into the castle itself, they would have to live in it, but not for the grounds. What are you suggesting?”

“Well,” he said, “wha’ ’bout someone livin’ in the Forbidden Forest?”

Severus regarded him with interest. *An excellent point.*

“The centaurs?” she asked.

“I don’ think tha’s likely, but it’s at leas’ possible, innit?”

“Yes.” The Headmistress sank down into her chair and rested her head in her hands. “And that opens up a world of unpleasant possibilities that I cannot even begin to consider yet.”

“We all need sleep,” Celia said. “The sun’s not actually up yet, but so long as none have gotten into the castle, and you’ve got this map to warn you if any do, the students should be safe for now.” Now that she’d said the words, she was beginning to register just how tired she was, not that she expected to be able to sleep.

“Yes, you’re right. I’ll have the elves keep an eye on the map and sound the alarm if anything shows up. Hagrid, would you please go relieve Harry from his patrol?”

Hagrid nodded and left the office.

“The Main Entrance will remain locked for now. Severus, would you please show Celia to the South Entrance? That will bring you out close to your cottage, Celia, unless you would prefer to remain in the castle?”

“No, thank you, I’d rather go there. It’s safer than the castle, really. I’m the only one who can invite a vamp in there. Besides, I’ll need to Floo Giles and update him.”

“Of course. I’ve already informed the rest of the staff that there will be a meeting at eight-thirty to discuss what we will be telling the students at breakfast. I dismissed most of them to bed once Filius finished this map.”

It was now almost five-thirty. “A couple of hours sleep will do us all good, I think,” Celia said.

“This way, then,” said Severus, gesturing toward the office door.

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The South Entrance was at the end of a corridor much like she’d seen at the North Entrance, but the door was entirely normal in size, and once they had passed through, it could not be seen at all from
the outside. Celia was surprised that Severus had not simply turned around and gone to his own quarters once he’d opened the spelled lock for her, instead walking with her toward the greenhouses and her cottage. She decided to take advantage of the situation.

“So, what was the real reason you invited me to join you?” she asked.

He glared at her.

“I don’t think you had anything to do with that vamp,” she added, holding her hands up in mock-surrender. “It’s just that the reason you gave Minerva was an absolute lie.”

“I suppose I just wanted company,” he answered at last.

She looked at him. That was true as far as it went. She returned her gaze to their path. *It’s not like that thought hadn’t crossed my mind before, she thought. Is that why he’s walking with me now?* She didn’t quite want to ask that, so she just said, “I see.”

As they approached the cottage, she wondered about him walking back alone. He would probably be fine. He would probably be insulted if she suggested he use her Floo. He was a perfectly capable wizard who had survived a brutal war while pretending to be loyal to a lunatic. He could certainly handle any vampires that might still be prowling about in the pre-dawn twilight. How upset would he be if she suggested he take the Floo?

“I’m sure this will come up in the meeting,” he was saying, “but may I ask why, exactly, are you here?”

She sighed before answering. “What Minerva told you before was true. I’m here because of a student. We’re expecting one of the female students to be activated as a Slayer sometime soon.”

“And the story about the nightmares?”

“That’s often one of the first signs of a new Slayer. We’re prone to prescient dreams about all sorts of … interesting things as well as memories from other Slayers. If you don’t know what’s happening, it’s terrifying. Actually, it can be pretty terrifying even if you do.”

“I see.” He paused a moment, then continued. “Why are there more than one of you?”

“There are a couple hundred of us. I’ll give you the short version: a spell was cast several years ago to activate every potential Slayer. It is still in effect, and every potential Slayer still becomes active, usually when she hits puberty.”

“And yet you are also a witch.”

“There are nine of us who are. There’ve been a couple in the past, though the last one was in the 1500s.”

By now they had reached the cottage, and the conversation died as Celia once again tried to figure out how to make sure he returned the castle safely, preferably without insulting him. She turned to face him.

“Severus,” she began.

“Celia,” he started at the same time.

Both fell silent again.
“I’ll see you at the meeting, then,” she said at last, turning to open her door. As she did, her foot slipped on an icy patch that had formed overnight, and he caught her right arm to steady her. She turned back to him and found her hand was now gripping his shoulder, even as he was grasping her arm.

“Thanks,” she said softly. She really ought to remove her hand. She wasn’t going to fall now. But it felt glued in place, and that same electric current she had felt earlier as they danced was back – and stronger. It seemed to pulse back and forth between them along the bridge formed by their arms. He was not moving to release her, either.

“You are welcome,” he replied, equally softly, and her breath caught at the sound. Slowly, the space between them shrank, and then he was lowering his face to hers and brushing her lips with his. Her hand released his shoulder and slid behind his neck as his arm slid around her shoulders. The kiss was soft, gentle, tentative at first. Then he pulled her closer and parted his lips, probing at hers with his tongue. After the briefest hesitation, she allowed her mouth to open and relaxed into his embrace as he explored her mouth thoroughly.

When they broke for breath, she realized they were still outside and could be seen if anyone looked out of the castle. She opened the door with her left hand and drew him inside. This time, she initiated the kiss, drawing his face down to her with the hand that had never moved far from his shoulder and neck. She pressed into his mouth, learning the patterns of his crooked teeth, dancing with his tongue, and then pulling back to nip gently at his lips.

Oh, Goddess, it’s been so long, she thought, as his hands caressed her hair and back. This can’t be a good idea. She brushed his lank hair out of his face, less bothered by its slight oiliness than she might have expected. Vampires, staff meetings, and Hogwarts itself fled her mind entirely as she lost herself in their embrace. When one of his hands slipped under her cloak to her waist, then slid up to cup a breast, she gasped softly against his lips. Immediately he pulled away and took a step back, as if suddenly realizing what they had been doing.

“I should go,” he said, his gaze sharp and his expression unreadable.

That’s probably best, she thought. Maybe someday, but this is too soon, too fast. What she said, however, was, “Please don’t.” He hesitated, and even as she thought again that it was just too sudden to be asking him to stay with her, she reached for his hand and grasped his fingers gently. He looked as though he was going to say something, then suddenly stepped toward her again, sliding both arms around her waist and lowering his face to hers.

She kissed him fiercely this time, hungrily, and he responded in kind. Freeing her mouth from his, she trailed kisses along his neck so that she could see to undo the complicated silver clasp of his cloak at his throat. She returned her lips to his as she removed the cloak and tossed it on a nearby chair before adding her own on top of it. His hands now wandered freely over her while hers traced the lines of his face and jaw, neck and chest. A small corner of her mind kept insisting this was probably a bad idea. She mentally slammed a door on it, but it continued a muffled running commentary with which she argued.

This is too sudden … I don’t care … He’ll turn from you. They always do. … No, he’s different …

They had moved through the small, darkened kitchen and into the sitting room and were approaching the door to her bedroom. For a moment, it seemed as though he sensed her inner struggle because he
grabbed her wrists and raised them over her head, pressing her against the wall next to the door.

“Are you sure you want this?” he growled, his face inches from hers.

She leaned forward and reclaimed his lips as an answer while the inner voice continued. See? He’s giving you a chance to back out. Take it! It’ll hurt less now than tomorrow. … No, he has no reason to …

In a lightning fast movement, she broke his hold on her wrists, spun him around so that he was now the one against the wall, with his arms pinned behind him, and she pressed downward on his entrapped wrists so that he had to bend his knees, putting his eyes just below level with hers.

“Are you?” she asked.

For a long moment, he said nothing, did nothing. She swallowed. Tears stung the backs of her eyes. See, they never want you, not all of you. She released his wrists and took a step back.

Slowly, he straightened his legs, his eyes never leaving her face. She started to take another step back, and he reached out to her, took a step toward her, and cradled her face in his hands, kissing her first lightly, then more deeply. She reached around him to open the door to her room.

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They moved into the bedroom and closed the door, never breaking their increasingly fierce kiss. The candles in the wall sconces lit, but dimly. He barely noticed that she had not used her wand, as her hands were busy, frantically unlacing his robes and Banishing them to the chair by her window even as she began to unbutton his frock coat and the shirt he wore underneath. The fastenings on her gown frustrated him, and finally he tore at them and allowed the gown to slide down and pool around her feet.

She leaned into him, pinning him against the wall once again. He relished the sensation of her breasts pressing against him, the way she was devouring his mouth, the feel of her hair as he tangled his fingers in it. As she slid his shirt and coat off his shoulders, he removed his hands from her briefly, allowing her to Banish them to join his robes. He stiffened as she traced the scars on his chest. A small groan escaped him as she passed her thumbs over his nipples. He felt her fingertips on his shoulder, exploring the last souvenir Lucius had left him. Was she obsessed with scars? It was no worse than many of the others, a silvered black starburst on his left shoulder. At least she did not appear repulsed, though her own skin was surprisingly smooth. He traced a finger along a pale pink line on her arm. Not completely unmarked, then. Her lips brushed over the curse scar on his shoulder before trailing kisses along his collarbone and back to reclaim his mouth, encircling him in her arms.

He allowed her to pull him toward the bed, then watched as she bent to fish her wand out of her gown and place it on the nightstand before they could step on it. The sight of her wand reminded him of something. He pulled back a few inches and asked, “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

Obviously perplexed, she replied, “No, I don’t think so.”

“Contraceptive Charm?” he pressed.

“Oh.” She smiled. “No need, I take a monthly potion.”

He was surprised but accepted her reply. He removed his wand from his trouser pocket and laid it beside hers.

She unbuckled his belt and backed toward the bed until she had removed it, then Banished it and her
gown to join the rest of his clothes. Leaning against the heavily-laden chair, he quickly removed his trousers, boots, and socks as she sat down on the edge of the bed and removed her own delicate-looking ankle boots. Her eyes raked over him, sending a thrill through him that sharpened the ache in his groin. A range of emotions played across her face, finally settling back into lust. She shifted, tucked her legs under her briefly, and knelt up on the bed.

In two strides he was upon her, devouring her mouth and then ducking his head to taste and suckle her breasts. Her fingers dug into his arse as he grazed a nipple with his teeth before soothing it with his tongue. She leaned back onto the bed, pulling him with her until he lay over her and the only things stopping him from plunging into her were his pants and her knickers. She moaned as he continued to play with her breasts and buried her fingers in his hair, clearly intent upon keeping him right where he was. He stopped and pulled back to look up at her, and she released her hold immediately. Then she grinned at him wickedly, and suddenly he was the one on his back.

She stroked, kissed, and suckled his nipples and feathered her fingers through the sparse hair of his chest but soon became as distracted as he was by the way his erection was pressing into her belly. She slid a hand between them and caressed him gently through the soft fabric that covered him, taking his breath away, then climbed off him and quickly removed his pants. Feather-light, her fingers caressed his balls and stroked slowly up along his length, making him wild with need. Then he felt her spread the bead of moisture around the tip of his cock with her thumb, almost ending things before they had truly started. He pulled her hand away and drew her face up to his, kissing her thoroughly before rolling her back onto her back.

He tore her knickers and stockings off and cast them onto the floor, then traced his hands up her thighs, forcing himself to slow down. When he nuzzled her legs apart, she complied eagerly and gasped softly into his mouth when his fingers begin to explore her more intimately. She closed her eyes as he traced her folds, circling but never quite touching her clit, dipping into her and then spreading her moisture over her. He brought his hand up to anoint one of her nipples, then licked the sweet fluid from it. The musky scent threatened to overwhelm him and suddenly she was wrapping her legs around him, lifting her hips to meet him as he pressed into her, nearly undone by the tightness of her body.

His eyes flew open. “You can’t be …”

“No,” she cut him off, “just … out of practice.”

He stayed utterly still for a moment, and she pulled his face back down to hers, pressing her lips to his in a searing kiss. Gradually, he felt her walls relax slightly around him. When he began to move again, she released his mouth to cry out in pleasure. He barely managed to remove one hand from her hip so that he could press against her clit as he thrust into her again and again.

She gasped and dug her short nails into his back, and the pain helped him hold back just a bit as he felt pleasure, pressure, and a strange energy building in him. Sooner than he would have expected, she came undone, calling out his name in three long syllables, and he felt her climax like a physical wave crashing over him as her walls clamped down on him and she fastened her mouth to his shoulder, sucking fiercely at it.

His thrusts became more erratic as her climax subsided. Her tongue darted out to soothe the sore spot on his shoulder, then her head fell back onto the bed. His back arched sharply, and he growled wordlessly as his orgasm overtook him, and he felt magic explode from him as he exploded inside her.

He collapsed onto her, boneless with satiation. After a few moments, he lifted his head and claimed her mouth yet again with a kiss utterly different than any other they had shared so far, though how he
could not say. Slowly, he slipped out of her and rolled them both onto their sides. She whimpered at the loss of contact, and he chuckled softly against her lips, pleased by her dismay.

“You seem very pleased with yourself,” she said. He smirked at her, and she added, “Well, you should be,” and then kissed him again.

Swimming in the softness of her kiss, he slowly became aware once again of the slight chill of February air leaking into the room and defeating her Warming Charm and fire. The events leading up to this very pleasant moment began to clamor for his attention, and he groaned as he remembered they had very little time before they had to return to Minerva’s office. Her answering hum vibrated against his lips and sent an aftershock of pleasure through him.

After a few moments, he pulled back and said, “We should set an alarm.”

She nodded with obvious reluctance, sighed, and Summoned her Muggle alarm clock. He could see that it read nearly six-thirty. She set it for quarter to eight and Banished it to the nightstand, still not bothering to retrieve her wand from the table behind him.

When she turned back to him, he kissed her again, then surprised himself by gathering her to him, tucking her head under his chin, and stretching a leg across her hip and hooking it behind her. Nuzzling his neck, she seemed to drift off.

Fast approaching sleep himself, he wondered briefly if this had been a mistake. He could not bring himself to regret it even if it were, at least not yet. He fingered a lock of her hair. Briefly, he considered conjuring something to cover them as it seemed too much trouble to get under the duvet, but the strange energy he felt still swirling in the room lulled him to sleep before he could muster the will to do so.
A/N: The giant, color-coded Marauder’s Map is a variation on the one used in selened’s *Love and Parenthood* and is borrowed with permission.
Chapter 7

She was outside again, but this time there was no snow. It had to be a new moon, to go by the poor light, because the sky was clear. Or perhaps the moon simply hadn’t risen yet.

She heard noises from the edge of the Forbidden Forest and went to explore. Before she had taken a dozen steps, she heard noises behind her. She turned and found herself surrounded by vampires. Vampires and … what had they called these others? Turok-Han. The vampires that vampires are afraid of.

“Accio Stakes,” she yelled. “Accio Lots of Stakes!”

As a pile of wooden ammunition formed at her feet, she continued to measure the shrinking circle of vampires. She prepared a spell to launch a circle of stakes outward, but just as she was about to speak, she found herself in a … bookstore?

Dawn was standing in front of her, looking very young and screaming at the top of her lungs as a gargantuan cobra with … arms? … glared and hissed menacingly at her but did not strike. Something grabbed her shoulder and shook her. She grabbed back.

“Ow! Celia, wake up!” Severus was yelling.

Oh, shit. She released his hand quickly, praying she hadn’t broken it. “Severus? What …” She looked at his hand and winced as he flexed his fingers and rotated his wrist gingerly. Not broken, but it would be sore for awhile, even with a spelled bruise salve.

“I believe you were having a nightmare,” he said testily. “Do magic in your sleep often?”

That was when she noticed the stakes. Everywhere. At least one of which had clearly hit him a glancing blow near the temple. She winced again before Banishing them all back to the chest in her closet.

“No, not for years,” she said in a small voice. “Accio Arnica Salve.” The bathroom door opened and a jar the size of her hand floated through the air toward her. She caught it deftly, opened it, and gently applied some to his hand and forehead. “Sorry.” As she continued to massage the salve into his wrist and hand, she noticed they were covered by a thick quilt that she had never seen before. He
must have conjured it after I fell asleep. Good thing, too. She closed and Banished the jar, wiping her fingers discreetly on the duvet beneath them.

“You disposed of that vampire so quickly, I’d have hardly expected it to give you nightmares,” he muttered.

She looked over his shoulder at the clock. Seven-fifteen. “I wasn’t even asleep long enough for that to be a normal dream,” she grumbled. “It’d be nice if Slayer dreams followed those rules.”

He looked abruptly interested.

That gave her an idea.

“I’m not sure what it means,” she said. “But have a look. A second set of eyes can be helpful interpreting these things.”

He hesitated a moment, then nodded. As he looked into her eyes, she focused on the dream memory, pushing it to the front of her mind while keeping the rest of her thoughts Occluded. She could feel him instantly inside her mind with her and willed herself not to let anything else leak through or to let any interpretation of her own contaminate the relatively fresh memory. She watched the vampire attack as if she were at the movies. She bit her lip to avoid speaking the spell along with her dream-self. The scene melted into the shop again – The Magic Box, she realized this time – and the huge snake. As the dream memory ended, she felt him pull back, a polite guest not wanting to outstay his welcome.

“I see why you called for all the stakes,” he said. “What were those? They weren’t all vampires.”

“No, some of them are an older species, called Turok-Han. They’re worse. I’ve never seen one in person.”

“And that last bit?”

“I have absolutely no idea. I know the girl, but she’s much older now.”

“Another Slayer-witch?”

“No, just another Slayer’s sister.” Well, more than that, but that’s a longish story for some other time. Or possibly never. “So, any thoughts about any of that?” she asked.

“No, not really,” he replied. “Except if that really is a prescient dream, it would seem to suggest that last night was not an isolated incident.”

She nodded wearily. That was about what she’d come up with. “How are your bruises?”

“Your salve is quite effective. I’m sure they will be all but gone presently.” High praise, she thought. She wondered briefly if she ought to have treated the mark she’d left on his shoulder, too. Not unless he asks. I kind of like it. She reached out and gently ran her fingers across her love bite and his adjacent scar.

They both seemed to realize at the same time that they were still naked. Celia chuckled, “Good morning, by the way. And thank you.”

There was that near-smile again. She thought she could get very used to that.

“Yes, good morning. You’re welcome, of course, but it is a bit unusual to have someone thank me
for poking around in their mind.”

“I did ask,” she pointed out. She leaned over and kissed him and said, “Besides, that isn’t all I was thanking you for.” Leaning back, she enjoyed the slightly uncomfortable expression on his face as he assimilated the compliment. A moment later, she let him off the hook.

“Try to rest a little more if you can,” she said. “I’m going to get dressed and make a Floo-call that I should probably have made earlier if I hadn’t been so … distracted.” Pressing a quick kiss to his forehead, she pushed herself up and out of the bed and hurried into the small bathroom for a quick shower.

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Flinging a bit of Floo powder into the fire, she said, “Rupert Giles, Watchers’ Hamburg Headquarters.” She stepped back, brushed off her hands, and started to work at braiding her spell-dried hair.

“Celia,” a voice called from the emerald flames, “is that you?”

“Who else would it be, Giles?” she replied, fussing with a tangle. “I’m multitasking here, so if you need a visual, you’ll have to be the one with your head in the fireplace.”

As she watched, the face of the Chief Watcher appeared in the flames.

“Sorry to bother you at this hour, Giles.”

“It’s not the crack of dawn here, you know.”

“Good point. Anyway, I’m reporting in on two things. First, I dusted a vamp last night.”

“A vampire? Well, good for you.” He appeared unimpressed.

“Hi there. You awake? I’m at Hogwarts, Giles. There shouldn’t have been a vampire here at all.”

“You mean it was on the grounds? Not in Hogsmeade?” His suddenly looked much more concerned. “I trust you didn’t wait until now to let Minerva know.”

She dropped her braid and scowled at him. “Of course not. It was Defcon One here until just before sunrise. Everybody’s going to be seriously sleep deprived today. Well, staff-wise, anyway. It’s been a long night all around, and she’s called a meeting in,” she glanced at the clock, “twenty-five minutes. So far it was just the one, and he’s dust, but obviously we’ve got to figure out how it got here and why and whether there are likely to be more.” She finished off the braid and began her habitual checks of her wand-sheath, stakes, and the dagger in her ankle sheath.

“Are the students and staff all accounted for?”

She snapped the dagger back into place and glared into the fire. “I may be functioning on less than an hour’s sleep, Giles, but I’d’ve headlined with it if anyone had been hurt or killed.”

“Right, right,” he said in a pacifying tone. “Any theories so far?”

She scoffed. “The only one I’ve got that fits the facts makes Andrew’s theories sound sane.”

“And that would be?”

“Someone invited it onto the grounds and then put it under the Imperius.”
Silence, then, “You’re right; that is ridiculous. Why would anyone do that?”

“I don’t know, Giles, but the attack was idiotic. We were several yards away from the Forbidden Forest, and it came at us across the snow instead of luring us in. Even with just wand-light, it was incredibly easy to sight on it, and there was more than enough time to respond. If the vamp was stupid enough to do that, it should have been too stupid to trick someone into inviting it in. If it was smart enough to cop an invite, it should have been too smart for an attack like that. Ergo, someone was controlling it and had it attack two adults, here, where even if one of us hadn’t been a Slayer, it would have still been suicide, which is also stupid. So, really, the only solid theory I’ve got is that whoever was involved in it all was deeply stupid or possibly nuts.”

“Until and unless you find more information, I have to admit I’m inclined to agree,” Giles said. “And the second matter?”

*Sigh.* “I had a nightmare.”

“And?”

“I’d barely been asleep forty-five minutes, not long enough for a normal dream. Plus it felt important.”

Silence.

“Have you any idea what it was warning of?” he asked at last.

“Vampires. And Turok-Hans. Lots of them, here at Hogwarts. I … wish there were some way to show it to you.” *Not quite badly enough to suggest you grab a Pensieve and step through, of course.*

“I know you feel it’s important to have a second observer, Celia, but really, just describing it should be enough.”

“There was a second, separate part, though, that I think you might recognize. It was at The Magic Box. Dawn was there and some giant snake-thing. She was screaming her lungs out obviously. But the snake wasn’t attacking. Did that actually happen?”

Giles’ eyes widened. “Yes, in fact. That was, Good Lord, that was near the beginning of her life. Her human life, I mean. When Glory was looking for her.”

“Oh,” she said. “What could that possibly have to do with anything? Glorificus is long gone.”

“I don’t know. But that snake had been Transmogrified from a normal cobra and sent to find the Key. That might suggest someone is looking for something. Or someone.”

“Duh, I am,” she pointed out. “Someone else, though? Looking for whom? Me? The new Slayer? Neither of us specifically but just picking up on our energy? Or some other fun option?”

“You said ‘we’ when you described the attack. Who else was with you?”

Just then, Severus entered the room. Giles looked over her shoulder.

“Snape? Severus Snape? Good Lord, Celia, you’re worse than … first it’s Buffy with vampires, and now you with Death Eaters?”

She could practically feel sparks shooting out of her eyes. “Giles, you bloody hypocrite! First, I’d think it would be incredibly obvious, from all the research I’ve been doing and the motivation behind
it, why I would ask the foremost Legilimens in Britain – by your description, I might add – to have a look at one of these dreams before it has time to fade.”

“Well, I suppose I can see that, but …”

“Second, how dare you assume that he was already in my quarters when I asked?”

“Well, it is practically dawn there right now, and …”

“Finally, and most importantly, you, of all people, telling me, of all people, that you think someone can’t redeem their past? That’s so loaded with irony there should be magnets flying into this Floo from ten miles around, Ripper!”

The image of Giles in the fire removed its glasses, and she could tell he was polishing them out of her view. He replaced his glasses but did not meet her gaze.

“Giles,” she said warningly.

“You may have a point,” he admitted.

She rolled her eyes. “You know I bloody well have a point.” She let out a gusty sigh and let his issues go for now. Time enough for that later.

“I don’t know if anything’s happened in Hogsmeade. If it has, we’ll hear about it at this meeting. Obviously my priority is, and will continue to be, the school and the students, especially the Potential. It might not be the worst idea to send up another Slayer-witch to patrol Hogsmeade. I don’t know how often I’ll be able to, now.”

She turned to Severus to see what he thought of this idea, but he merely shrugged, his expression unreadable.

“I’m not sure any are available,” Giles sighed. “Besides, adding another Slayer so close by might just attract more.”

“That’s … ugh, no, you’re right.” She glanced at the clock. They would have to leave soon. “Any other thoughts about that dream?”

“No, that particular case involved creating something to seek out the Key, but there are any number of possible uses for a Transmogrified animal. It also doesn’t have to be a snake, though that was the Temple of Sobek’s usual preference.” Giles paused. “Perhaps someone is going to use a similar Transmogrification. Or you could ask the Slytherin standing behind you for other possible meanings that would have little or nothing to do with the actual scene in your dream.”

Celia closed her eyes, shook her head and muttered, “Goddess help me before I reach through this Floo and … ” She opened her eyes again and said, “Or I could try asking the faculty member who speaks Parseltongue what it was saying, which is actually probably what I’m going to do, although that’ll mean a Pensieve.” She groaned. “Get over your assumptions, Ripper.”

“Would you stop calling me that?”

“Stop giving me reason to, and I will.”

“Fine, fine,” he said. “One other thing. You might consider proposing an added layer of protection on the boundaries of the grounds.”
“The Slayer spell?” she asked. “I don’t know, Giles. There’s a whole bloody list of reasons I can think of for why that might not work, right off the top of my head, and I mean that kind of literally.”

“Try me.”

“First of all, there are a thousand years of layered wards guarding this place. Adding a foreign spell on top of them might not work well. It’s a totally different flavor of magic.”

“You could push the boundary out a bit,” he suggested.

“That … that could address one of the other problems.”

“Which is?”

“Some of those spells were cast by Salazar Slytherin.” She caught herself before she glanced at Severus to see his reaction. “They might not play nicely with a spell that requires the use of my blood. Any Slayer’s blood, really, except Shemekiah, since she’s the only pureblooded Slayer-witch. But putting it a bit outside the boundaries could get around that.”

“It could. What other problems do you see?”

“Well, the way they look at things here, they’ll consider it Dark, never mind that the blood would be voluntarily given, so Minerva may not go for it. Also, the idea that the only person it could be keyed to is me may not go over very well, seeing as I’m the new girl in town.”

“That is, however, the whole point, that only the Slayer whose blood was used can invite a vampire across the barrier.”

That’s … oh, that could work.

“What is it?” Giles asked.

“That actually might help me pitch this,” she said. “Not so much as protection, though it would be that, but as a trap.”

“What?”

“Think, Giles, if we let it be known – unofficially so that it’s more believable – that now I’m the only one who can invite a vampire onto the grounds, then if there’s someone who actually wants to bring more in, they’ll have to try to get me to do it. And the best way to manage that …”

“Would be the Imperius Curse.”

“Exactly.” She could feel an almost feral grin form on her face.

“That could be worth a try,” he agreed.

Celia looked at the clock above the fireplace. “The meeting’s in fifteen minutes, Giles. I have to get going. I’ll let you know what’s what later.”

She ended the call, stood, and turned to face Severus.

“What was all that about?” he asked, his expression shuttered.

She sighed. “Ummm, let’s see. Rupert Giles is almost all that’s left of the original Watcher’s Council that oversees the Slayers. He’s rebuilding the Council and has trained several new Watchers.
Because he’s far more experienced both in watching Slayers and in magic, the Slayer-witches report directly to him instead of any of the newer ones, though we work with them, sometimes, too.”

“That wasn’t exactly what I meant,” Severus replied. “I never heard him make the accusation over which you became so … impassioned.”

Celia looked at him incredulously. “He called you a Death Eater. I thought that was plain enough.”

“Well, I was,” he pointed out, his expression and voice very flat.

“*Was* being the operative word.” *I stuck up for you, and this is a problem why?*

“And the rest of it? Point number two, I believe it was.”

“Oh. That. That was … he mentioned another Slayer with a colorful history of having affairs with vampires.”

“I notice you didn’t deny it.”

“I’m sure he noticed that, too,” she sighed. “But it’s none of his business, and it’s certainly possible I could have Floo-called you, and you could have Flooed over here. Barely requires any time at all.”

“Are you ashamed?” he asked coldly.

“What? No!” She stepped closer to him, raising a hand to his cheek. *Dear Goddess, where’d he get that idea?* “It’s just … private. I’d have thought you’d want to be discreet.”

His expression softened slightly. She wondered how to express what she felt. This was so new and felt so fragile, yet the magic that had flowed between them felt so strong. She didn’t think she was in love with him, but she had a feeling she was heading in that direction and possibly had been for some time. What should she say?

“Severus, I’m not sure exactly what’s wrong, but we need to get to this meeting. Can we please talk about it later?”

He nodded curtly. “May I use your Floo, then?”

“Of course.” She stepped aside so that he could pass by her and watched as he cast in the Floo powder, spoke, and stepped into the emerald flames. As the fire returned to a more normal color, she wondered aloud, “What the hell was that all about?”

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When he arrived in his quarters, Severus quickly changed his clothes and cast several Cleansing Charms on himself. He had lost too much time already to wash and brush up more traditionally. Stopping by his storeroom, he grabbed a large bottle of Invigoration Draught, which he quickly decanted into single dose phials and pocketed. The simple, familiar activity soothed the anger he still felt simmering just below the surface of his thoughts, helping him focus on the upcoming meeting rather than the more troubling situation he had just left.

Only Minerva and Poppy were already in the staff room when he arrived. The central table was set with teacups at each chair, and he placed the phials next to them. Minerva nodded approvingly as she poured hers into her tea. Soon the others began to trickle in.

When Celia arrived, he noticed she went a step beyond her usual coffee and mumbled, “Espresso,”
over the cup before adding the potion to it. He shifted his gaze away from her uneasily to notice who was arriving next.

**Potter. Did he not bother to sleep at all once Hagrid relieved him?**

Severus noticed that Minerva waited until he ordered his beverage and began to sip at it, then started the meeting, interrupting only a very little buzzing of conversation.

“Good morning, everyone,” she began. “As Hagrid and Mr. Filch are continuing patrols until breakfast, we are all here and can begin.” She paused briefly. “As you all know, two of our faculty members were attacked by a vampire on the grounds last night. So far, that appears to be an isolated incident, but there are obviously concerns that it may not be. Severus, Celia, would you please each tell what happened? And save any interpretations for after, please. I would like to hear some fresh ideas before revisiting the theories we have already discussed.”

Severus noted that the only material difference between his account and Celia’s was that she’d had a better look at the vampire’s face. As the strange looks around the table increasingly focused on her, he wondered how long it would take the rest to put at least part of it together. Sadly, Potter was the first one to speak up.

“Wait, why were you the one who took it out? And what are you doing carrying stakes around with you? Why not just use magic?”

He saw her dart a look at the Headmistress, who shrugged as if to indicate there was no point in dissembling now.

“To answer your last question first, Harry, it’s not exactly news that in a pinch I don’t tend to reach for my wand first,” she said. “As far as your first two questions, I’m a Vampire Slayer. So, yes, I’ve always got a stake or two handy and have a bad habit of dusting first and asking questions later.”

Potter sat back into his chair, looking stunned. “Oh,” was all he managed to say, before taking another sip of tea. His phial of Invigoration Draught was still entirely full, the fool.

Looking around the table, Severus saw a few similarly stunned expressions, others appearing to assimilate the information a bit better, and a look of triumph on Sybill Trelawney’s face.

“I knew that your arrival foretold dire times ahead,” the woman proclaimed. “My dear, I am so sorry to have to report that I have seen that you will die a young and violent death.”

“A very safe prediction for any Slayer, Sybill,” Celia said dryly. “Thanks for bringing it up.”

She treats the matter quite lightly. He set his jaw and glared at the Seer, very deliberately not looking at Celia.

“Please,” Minerva interrupted, “I would like to hear anyone’s thoughts on the behavior of the vampire, first.”

“Well, it is a bit odd,” Potter said. “First off, who invited it?”

Celia shrugged as Minerva said, “We don’t know, yet. Believe me, that question is a very high priority.”

“Second, why did it attack like that? You say you were near the Forbidden Forest?”

“Just a few yards away, yes,” Celia said.
“Then why wouldn’t it try to lure one of you in, so it could attack, then get the other when they came to investigate?”

Neither Severus nor Celia replied. Instead, both looked to Minerva, who asked, “Do you have any ideas about that? Or does anyone?”

Aurora Sinistra spoke up. “The moon would have set several hours earlier, perhaps it appeared dark enough to attack openly?”

“We had our wands lit,” Severus replied. “The snow was reflecting the light quite efficiently, so the area around us, at least, was not particularly dark.”

“That might have just made you better targets,” Septima Vector pointed out.

“Indeed,” he acknowledged.

“We’ve accounted for all the students, faculty, and staff,” Harry continued, “so why didn’t it attack the person who invited it?” He looked back and forth between Celia and Severus. Celia spread her hands to indicate he should continue, but it was Filius Flitwick who spoke next.

“What I wonder is why you were there in the first place, Celia?”

“Severus had asked me to assist him, as I said, in patrolling the Quidditch Pitch in search of out-of-bounds students,” she replied.

“Are you quite sure that is the real reason?” the diminutive wizard asked with a suspicious glance to Severus’ end of the table.

_After all these years, Filius. What must I do to regain your trust?_

It was foolish to be so bothered by it. That anyone had decided to trust him again after it all was almost incomprehensible. Of course, Filius was the only person in the room he had ever attacked directly, if only to Stun him.

“I’m positive that he wasn’t setting me up to be attacked by a vampire, if that is what you’re asking,” she replied.

Severus scowled at that. It was true, of course, and there was no reason for her not to say so. Still, something about it bothered him, though he could not say why. He focused his scowl on his fellow Head of House instead.

Filius did not appear convinced but said no more.

“Right,” Potter said, “so someone invites a vampire onto the grounds, probably someone who was alone, and it doesn’t attack them. Instead, it goes and attacks a wizard and a witch who already have their wands out, never mind that one happens to be a Slayer and the other happens to be an ex… excellent duelist. That about sum it up?”

Severus nodded with a shadow of a smirk at the slip.

“Well, that’s just completely mental,” Potter continued. “I mean, okay, the person who invited it might have been covered in garlic and crosses, but that’d just keep it off them, not drive it insane.”

“Even insane vampires aren’t necessarily stupid,” Celia pointed out.

“And all right, maybe it was wandering around for awhile, looking for a midnight snack, but why
would it even be looking over that way and not closer to the castle? You said you didn’t hear it until just before it attacked, right?”

“That’s right.”

“So it sounds like it was waiting for you.”

“Not me,” Celia pointed out. “Nobody knew I’d be there. If I hadn’t had to escort those two Gryffindors upstairs, I wouldn’t have run into Severus at all, much less been on that path. I mean, I’d have been patrolling, but this wasn’t a night I’d have been focusing on the Forbidden Forest.”

“Fine, so it sounds like it was waiting for him. That’s still suicidally stupid, even if someone was controlling it.” Potter paused. “Unless the vampire was the one that was supposed to end up dead.”

“My thoughts, exactly,” Celia admitted. “Except for the part where that doesn’t make any sense, either.”

“Has anyone managed to develop any other theories?” Minerva asked. When no one answered, she continued. “Well, then. As this one does not lead us anywhere particularly useful, may I suggest we focus on who extended the invitation to this vampire and whether they are likely to do so again?”

“Have Mr. Helling and Miss Lowsley been questioned yet?” Severus asked.

“Yes,” Potter replied. “They started off being evasive, but when I told them about the vampire, they were terrified. I don’t believe they had anything to do with it.”

Celia nodded. “I didn’t much think they had. And Hagrid brought up a very good point last night, er, earlier this morning that is. It didn’t have to be a resident of the castle, just someone who lives on the grounds, which opens it up to anyone and anything in the Forbidden Forest capable of communicating with a vampire.”

“You mean the centaurs or the Acromantulas could have …” Potter’s voice trailed off.

“They could have issued the invitation,” Minerva pointed out. “And they very well might have. An Acromantula, in particular, could have extended the invitation, intending to eat the vampire, not realizing what it was. Or perhaps it might not care. However, it could not have then controlled the vampire, which I agree, it sounds as though someone was doing.”

“As far as the centaurs,” Severus said, “I have given that matter some thought. While they have no love for us here in the castle, they also do not bother us so long as we do not bother them.” He nodded to Firenze. “And they would hardly invite a vampire into their own territory. They are far too protective of their foals.”

“Couldn’t a foal have been tricked into it?” Celia asked. “It doesn’t have to be a sincere invitation. It would be enough if the vampire convinced one to say something like, ‘Oh, yeah, come on over here and say that.’”

“No centaur foal would fall for such a trick,” said Firenze. “They are also never without an adult. If one had been so foolish, the vampire would have been shot with a dozen arrows within seconds.”

Celia nodded. “Then that brings us back to humans, and unless we spike breakfast with Veritaserum, it’ll take awhile to narrow that down.”

“Tempting thought,” said Severus, “but unfortunately quite illegal.”
“That was not intended as a serious suggestion,” Celia replied with a wry half-smile.

He smirked, first at her use of his own words and then at her attempt to look away casually. Then he caught himself and tamped down his incipient amusement. He could not be … amused by her. Not after this morning.

“The question, then,” said Minerva, “is what we do toward the students’ safety in the meantime. I would like to be able to reassure the Ministry that we have the situation well in hand.”

Celia’s eyes widened. She clearly hadn’t thought about the fact that, of course, this would have to be reported to the Ministry of Magic.

Severus could sympathize. He never looked forward to involving the Ministry in anything. He firmly ignored the emotion, however, and focused on Minerva’s question.

“I believe we could re-institute precautions we have used in the past when the security of Hogwarts was compromised,” Severus said. “No students out of doors after dark, for one thing, and when they are not in their dormitories, they must be escorted by a staff member. Added patrols, of course, though Filius’ map should make that somewhat simpler.”

“There is also something I can do,” Celia said. “It would be an added protection for the grounds and actually might help smoke out whoever is behind this.”

“And what would that be?” Minerva asked.

“There’s a spell that can be used to protect the boundaries of a place from vampires, probably similar to what was already cast here, but it’s more focused. The spell is bound to one Slayer, and then she’s the only one who could invite a vampire across its line.”

Filius looked at her with interest. “That is not a charm that I’m familiar with,” he said.

“My teacher devised it a few years ago,” she said. “It’s not exactly a charm, either. It’s a sort of hybrid spell that utilizes both incantations and a potion.”

“What sort of potion?” Severus asked.

In answer, Celia pointed her wand at the table before him, and a scroll of parchment appeared there. She turned to Minerva and sent one to her as well. As he read, he heard her repeat the possible problems with the spell that she had raised earlier. Before she could say anything about the spell itself, however, the Headmistress interrupted her.

“Celia, this looks like Dark magic, to me.”

Severus said nothing, wanting to see how she handled this.

“Minerva,” she replied, “I realize some of the ingredients are sketchy and would probably have to come from the apothecary at Knockturn Alley. But none of them are outright Dark.”

“I should think the use of blood would be enough of a deterrent.”

“I would, obviously, be giving it voluntarily,” Celia argued. “Where I come from, that makes the spell pale gray, at worst. Off-white is more like it, or even a light cream. Not so much Dark.”

It crossed his mind that she should be far more wary of how their colleagues would perceive her rather flexible attitude to the Dark Arts than what her Watcher had thought about his presence in her
quarters. He deliberately ignored the vast differences between the two situations.

A brief silence followed this until Potter spoke up to ask, “How would this help find who was behind this?”

“That would require people finding out that I’m the only one who could invite a vampire in. Then, if they want to do it again badly enough, they’d have to try to make me do it.”

“And how does that help?” he pressed.

“The most obvious way to try that would be to use the Imperius Curse, and since whoever it is has shown all the subtlety of a bull in a china shop, or … or a hippogriff in a room full of crystal balls … I’m pretty sure they’d go straight to it. Since Slayers are immune to it but can sense it, I’d be able to catch them as soon as they tried it.”

“Why are you immune?” he asked. “And hang on, Slayers and Slayer-witches? Plural? There’s more than one of you? And what are you doing here, anyway?”

Severus saw Celia and Minerva exchange another glance. The Headmistress shrugged.

“No one’s sure why we’re immune. It could be some esoteric magical reason, or maybe we’re just too stubborn to take orders. I kind of like that one.” This drew a few chuckles. “As far as the rest, the nutshell history lesson is that on May 20, 1998,” Severus looked at her sharply and both saw and sensed the heightened attention of the rest of his colleagues, “another epic battle took place, this one in Sunnydale, California. While everyone here was fighting Voldemort and his Death Eaters, an elemental force calling itself the First Evil was trying to gain a foothold in this dimension by way of the Sunnydale Hellmouth. As part of that war effort, a massive spell was cast to activate every Potential Slayer at once. There are now a couple of hundred Slayers.”

Severus rubbed absently at his forearm as he listened to this slightly less abridged description. He also noted with some annoyance that she had left the specific timing of this “Slayer activation” out of her earlier “nutshell version” to him.

“The same day?” Potter asked.

“Yes. We don’t know why. There are a few theories, none of them relevant.”

*It might not be relevant to this situation, but surely she cannot believe such a thing to be a coincidence.*

“And some of you were already witches?”

“Twelve other witches besides me were activated as Slayers, yes.” She paused and debated with herself a moment. “So I’m not unique in that.”

"But you said your foster-parents never knew you were a witch."

Another glance was exchanged with Minerva, who gestured for Celia to continue. Celia looked rather uncomfortable for someone who claimed to want to share this information.

*Not quite as eager to tell everything after all, then.*

He felt vaguely mollified that at least their … encounter was not the only thing she appeared to wish to keep “private.”
"I knew that was going to come back to bite me," she sighed. "No, they didn't. They died in a car accident that March, and my magical powers became active at the same time as my Slayer powers."

No wonder she does not turn to her magic immediately. Though if she received both sets of powers together … something still does not make sense.

Potter clearly took a moment to digest this, then asked, "And why are you here?"

"Girls born as Potential Slayers still become activated all the time, usually when they first hit puberty. We have reason to believe there is a Potential Slayer here at Hogwarts, so I was sent here to keep an eye out for her and take on her Slayer training when she’s identified.”

Potter fell blessedly silent at last.

"Excuse me, but if you only became aware of your magical powers seven years ago, how is it that you are now a teacher?" asked Filius.

Celia took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Most of my schooling was Muggle," she admitted. "My magical education was … compressed. As you can imagine, I’m sure, a seventeen year old who suddenly has magical powers is a bit of a risk to everyone around her. With new Slayer powers as well, I was even worse.” She winced at some clearly unpleasant memory. “It was … bad. Finally, the witch who found me, my teacher, tried a radical experiment that boils down to a massive data dump of her magical knowledge.”

Only years of discipline kept Severus from reacting visibly to this. That she stole a quick glance at him confirmed his suspicions.

There is only one way that one could possibly do such a thing, and very few witches or wizards who could manage it.

"Mind-magics are her specialty,” she continued, “so part of that knowledge included ways to accelerate learning. That made it easier to continue my magical education independently while I went to college.”

Yes, as would actually remembering every spell this teacher of yours ever cast. A teacher who apparently spent at least some time on a Hellmouth.

"Trust me when I say it won’t catch on. The data-dump part, anyway. The side effects are … well, I know I’d never try it on someone without a damned good reason.”

He quelled an urge to shudder.

Minerva intervened, “The Ministry decided to accept Celia’s Muggle credentials on the condition that she take the N.E.W.T.s last summer and be evaluated by a Master Herbologist, so she does, indeed, have the appropriate credentials.”

And that would be a far more sensible reason to hold a collection of seven years’ worth of textbooks. Another obfuscation.

Minerva gave the others a moment to digest this before continuing.

“I am sure that many of you have other questions related to Celia’s mission here, but may I remind you that the matter of prime importance is the current situation?” As everyone nodded, she continued, “I believe that we should institute the protective measures Severus has proposed, and I
will announce this at breakfast. I will also forward that information to the Ministry. Celia, I give you permission to cast this protective spell, but as some of these ingredients appear quite volatile …” She glanced questioningly at Severus, who nodded.

_Volatile, Minerva, would be a supreme understatement._

“I request that you do the Potions work in a proper laboratory here in the castle, not in your kitchen.”

Even as he acknowledged the sense of this, Severus found himself wrestling with the notion of allowing the woman into his own laboratory. It was foolish, really, but it seemed a far greater intimacy than what they had shared such a short while ago. And after that conversation with her Watcher … well, there was nothing for it. Minerva was right.

“I have not yet decided whether we will ‘leak’ information about the spell to the students,” the Headmistress was saying. “How soon can you have it completed?”

“As long as I can obtain all the necessary ingredients, I should be able to have it prepared and cast by sundown tonight.”

“Very well. I will not make my decision as to whether we make the students aware of it until tomorrow, at the earliest. Also, I would like to ask you all to keep Celia’s identity as a Slayer, and more importantly her mission here, known only to the faculty.”

“But why?” asked Aurora. “Wouldn’t the students find it reassuring?”

“Other than this spell,” Celia pointed out, “I’m really no more protection than any other member of the faculty. The concern, though, is for the Potential. I doubt we want them all wondering whether they’re the one. Even once she’s identified, the fewer who know, the better for her.”

“Why?” asked Potter.

Celia looked at him oddly. “You’re the last person I would have expected to ask that,” she said. “Granted, I missed the high school part, but even in college, it can be a nightmare trying to go through school and be kind of normal, knowing you have some sort of mystical destiny hanging over your head. Having everybody else know? From what I hear, that makes it a whole lot worse.”

He had the grace to look abashed at this.

On that note, Minerva McGonagall adjourned the meeting so they could join the students in the Great Hall for breakfast. As the rest of the staff left, Celia remained behind.

“How extensive was her knowledge of the Dark Arts?” Severus asked once the door had closed.

“Very,” Celia replied warily. “Kind of went with the Sunnydale territory.”

“Theoretical?” he asked blandly.

“Mostly,” she said. Now she appeared distinctly uncomfortable.

_Interesting._

“Severus …”

“We have much to do,” he interrupted. “We should join the others in the Great Hall.”

She nodded, her lips pressed into a tight line.
As they left the staff room, he very deliberately stayed directly beside her as they headed to breakfast. He was uncertain precisely why it was so important that she not be allowed to distance herself from him. He only knew that it was.

~ ~ ~

Celia took her seat between Severus and Hagrid in the Great Hall and was grateful that it was necessary to start out in silence while Minerva made her announcement. Word had already traveled through the student body, it seemed, because there were very few surprised faces at the news that a vampire had been on the campus the previous night. Most, unfortunately, were already looking pretty terrified. She scanned them all carefully, trying to see if any looked guilty or unusually intrigued. It was hard to judge from this distance, so she didn’t think the fact she hadn’t found anything told her much at all.

Once Minerva had finished describing the new security measures, and the students had groaned in all the appropriate places, breakfast was served, and Hagrid broke the silence at their end of the table.

“How was tha’ meetin’, then?” he asked while making his usual odd-looking sandwich of bacon and fried potatoes.

“You’ve just heard most of the key points that would have been news to you,” she replied. “The rest … still wouldn’t have been news to you. Just everyone else.”

“I see,” he said. “Well, tha’ mus’ be a relief for yeh.”

“To a point,” she agreed, starting in on her own eggs and toast. She tried to catch Severus’ eye or to think of something worth saying to start a conversation but came up empty. This obviously wasn’t the place to talk, or the time for that matter, but did that have to mean the silent treatment? He was really taking the awkward morning-after breakfast to new levels. When he pulled out a bit of parchment and began scribbling on it, she gave up.

After several minutes, Hagrid spoke again.

“Uh, Celia, why do the other teachers keep lookin’ down this en’ o’ the table?”

She closed her eyes, sighed, and reopened them. “They’re probably waiting for me to start rubbing my hands together, cackling, ‘I’ll get you, my little pretty, and your little dog, too,’ or something.”

“Wha’?”

She turned to take in his flummoxed expression and replied, “Wicked witch of the West?” No comprehension showed. “Wizard of Oz? Ruby slippers, yellow brick road, Emerald City?” Still nothing. She sighed again. “Never mind. The point is, Minerva had me reveal a bit more than I would’ve chosen to, and now some of them are probably more worried about having me around than about the chance of more bloody vampires showing up.”

“Oh, I see,” he said. “Why d’ye suppose she di’ tha’?”

“Your guess is probably better than mine.” She sluged down the last of her coffee and pushed back her chair. “Now, if you’ll both excuse me, I have some shopping to do.”

“Shoppin’?”

“I’m sure Minerva will fill you in,” she said, as she rose and made to leave. She was surprised when Severus turned to stop her, holding out the parchment she had given him earlier.
“Here is your list of ingredients,” he said. “I have crossed out those items which we already have here.”

She thanked him and allowed her fingers to brush against his as she accepted the parchment and smiled tentatively. She thought she saw an answering twitch of his lips but wasn’t sure. Tucking the small scroll into a pocket in her cloak, she nodded, turned, and left.

~ ~ ~

Once the students had finished their breakfasts, Snape accompanied the Slytherins back to their common room. Once inside, they began to disperse until he strode into the center of the room and called for their attention. The ones who had been halfway up the stairs to their dormitories returned nearly as quickly as they had gone.

“I trust,” he began, “that you will all follow the precautions set out by the Headmistress this morning.”

As he looked about the room, he saw a mixture of fearful and thoughtful expressions. That boded reasonably well.

“If I learn of any Slytherins wandering about outside Slytherin House unaccompanied by a staff member, they will spend the rest of the term serving detention.” He paused to glare at a pair of fifth-year troublemakers. They looked suitably frightened, though whether the source of their fear was the threat of more vampires or the threat of detention, he could not say. “And if I learn that the unspeakably stupid person who invited that demon onto the grounds was a Slytherin, that person will wish they had never been born.”

Three students wore vaguely guilty expressions. He quickly used Legilimency on each. Two had apparently been snogging in a niche off the fourth-floor corridor after the ball. He would have to pay extra attention to that location during future patrols. The third was one of Slytherin’s Beaters, and she had been planning to sneak out to the Quidditch Pitch for a bit of extra practice.

“May I remind you all,” he added, “this ban extends to the grounds outside the castle. Daylight should not be considered adequate protection.”

That drew several startled looks.

“We do not know why the vampire was here. There may be a student involved, but there may also be an outside wizard or witch or even some other type of demon behind it, and sunlight would be no threat to most of them. You will only go out onto the grounds for scheduled classes or Quidditch practices or games and only with staff supervision. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir,” the students answered, more or less in unison.

He nodded curtly and turned to walk back to the blank stone wall that served as the entrance to Slytherin House. Just as he reached it, someone ran up to him.

“Professor Snape,” Lightfeather said, “may I ask you a question?”

“You already have,” he replied sharply. The boy was clearly beginning to consider himself some sort of favorite. That was unacceptable.

“Um, I suppose I did,” the boy stammered. “But I just thought I should ask how I should report for my …”
Pity he would need to use his wand to employ the Muffliato spell. He wondered briefly if the sort of wandless magic Celia clearly favored was inborn or could be learned. He stifled the thought almost as quickly as it arose.

“I believe, Mr. Lightfeather, that project shall be suspended until this situation is resolved.”

The boy appeared disappointed and for a moment looked as though he were going to argue.

“I will inform Professor Potter as well,” he added sternly.

“Thank you, sir,” the boy replied, looking somewhat relieved. He turned and ran back to his friends, who had begun a game of Exploding Snap.

After he exited the common room, Snape found the Bloody Baron waiting for him.

“You will inform me immediately of any students who leave Slytherin House unescorted and of any unusual activity in this corridor.”

The ghost nodded silently.

Satisfied, Severus walked back to his private laboratory, where he cleared away a single workspace and set out the ingredients that Celia would need for her strange spell. The idea of her working in here still bothered him, but it was the best option. The classroom would not suit for something as volatile as this, nor would the kitchen in her cottage.

He firmly refused to let his mind stray to her cottage at all.

Shrugging off his discomfort, Severus decided to speak with Minerva about the concerns Celia had raised about her spell’s possible interaction with the enchantments already in place on the boundaries of the grounds. As she had not raised them, it appeared she intended simply to follow her Watcher’s suggestion. However, the Forbidden Forest also fell within those boundaries, something she did not appear to have considered. Patrolling it thoroughly was a nearly impossible task. He had some ideas, however, that might simplify matters.

Just before leaving, he altered the protective charms on the room to allow Celia to enter and added another to alert him when she did. As he left and walked up the stairs, he rubbed his shoulder, trying to dispel the odd tingling sensation that had been there all morning.

A/N: Yes, I’ve played with the Buffy timeline a bit. To get “Chosen” and the (hypothetical) end of Deathly Hallows to happen at the same time, I had to shift the Buffy timeline back five years. I kept the “Chosen” air date of May 20, though. And as more than twenty chapters of this were written before the first comic came out, this story is definitely not compliant to them (starting with how many Slayers Willow activated), though the occasional reference might sneak in during revisions.
This day was just getting better and better. Except not. Celia had spent the past hour or so playing the impossible customer, haggling with the apothecary clerk over the quality and cost of several of the ingredients she needed. She couldn’t do anything about the accent, so why not take the “ugly American” shtick to its limit? It seemed to fit the Knockturn Alley atmosphere and was nothing like what anyone would expect from a Hogwarts teacher in general or her in particular. Just to break things up a bit, she’d even bickered over a few things that she didn’t need, just so that she could decide not to take them after all. Not that she was taking out her frustrations on the clerk or anything. Not at all.

Now the last two, which should have been the easiest, were not available at all.

“What do you mean out of stock?” she demanded, her irritation now far more sincere than it had been previously. “How can you be out of stock?”

“I’m sorry, but we’re just out,” said the young girl, who looked barely old enough to be out of school. “I can’t just conjure it from nowhere.”

“Let me speak to your boss,” Celia insisted. The girl disappeared through a curtained doorway. When the curtains parted again, a wizened man came into the front of the store.

“What exactly is the problem here?” he grumbled.

“The problem is that I need two very simple, common items, and your clerk tells me you’re out of them. How can you just run out of Wartcap powder and Doxy venom?”

“As it happens, miss, I had a large order for both items just yesterday. Wiped me clean out.”

“Wonderful. Then where would you suggest I go in search of more?”

“You could go find some Doxies and Wartcaps yourself.”

She thought of several anatomically improbable things he could do with that suggestion.
“Do you think I have nothing better to do with my time? I need those ingredients today. Wartcaps have to dry for at least two weeks before they’re any use at all. Who’s your supplier?”

“I don’t give out that sort of information.” The shop owner’s eyes gleamed. “I could, however, point you to the customers who cleaned me out. Maybe they’ll part with some of what they bought.”

Well, that’s deeply unlikely. Anyone who’s buying that stuff in quantity is going to be using it.

Still, maybe it was worth a try. OK, it was more like she didn’t have a real choice if she was going to cast this spell today. She agreed, and the shop owner gave her a scrap of parchment that read WWW – 93 Diagon Alley. As soon as she had paid for her purchases and had them packaged, she left the apothecary.

Just before entering Diagon Alley, she ducked into a small gap between stores and dropped the glamour she had been using. She kept the hood of her cloak pulled low over her face, checked to be sure no one was watching, and exited Knockturn for Diagon. A few stores in, she let the hood fall back and began looking for number 93.

When she located it, she almost turned to storm back to the apothecary.

_A joke shop. He sent me to a frickin’ joke shop._

Not that it wasn’t obvious that he was trying to get rid of her, but this was ridiculous.

Then she noticed some of the items advertised in the window. Puking Pastilles? Nosebleed Nougats? Toothache Taffy?

__Or maybe they might have some use for sketchy ingredients.__

She squared her shoulders and went inside.

Since this time she was looking for a favor rather than normal business, she decided to take a different approach.

“Excuse me, miss,” she said to the woman at the counter, “are you the owner?”

“No,” she replied. “I’m just helping my brothers out.”

“They’re the owners?”

“Yes.”

“May I please speak to one of them?” Celia asked. “I have a … rather odd request.”

“Sure,” said the woman, who then turned and yelled, “Fred! George! Customer wants to see you!”

_Don’t worry. I didn’t need these eardrums anyway._

She scrubbed at one of her ears to dispel the ringing.

Two identical redheaded men hurried through the door behind the counter.

“No need to yell, Ginny,” said one.

“We don’t want to frighten the customers away,” said the other.
The woman named Ginny pointed at Celia and said, “This lady wants to ask you something odd.”

“Oh she does, does she?” asked the first man.

“We specialize in odd,” said the second.

“Well,” Celia said, plastering a smile on her face, “It seems you gentlemen bought up the last of some ingredients I need. Urgently. Wartcap powder and Doxy venom? I’m hoping to convince you to sell me a little.”

“Now, what would a lovely American lady like yourself,” began one, leaning his elbows onto the counter.

“Want with the makings of Skiving Snackboxes?” finished the other, copying his twin’s posture.

It took her a few seconds to translate that.

“Skiving …” she crossed her arms over her chest and glared at the two men. “You know what? I really don’t want to know what that is. Nor do I really want to explain why I need this stuff.”

“Sorry, then,” said number one.

“It’s one thing keeping kids from dying of boredom in hideous classes,” continued the other.

“But we’re not selling valuable resources –”

“—without a good reason.”

“Would one hundred percent profit constitute a good reason?” she tried.

“Maybe,” said number one.

“Long as you convince us you’re not up to no good,” said number two.

She rolled her eyes. “And helping kids skip class doesn’t qualify as ‘up to no good’?”

“Well, now, that all depends –”

“ – on your point of view.”

Celia had the distinct impression that announcing she was a teacher at Hogwarts was not going to be a useful strategy. Unless … there was something tickling the back of her brain. Her eyes rested on a side display.

Mates get their jollies with jinxes?
Knock ’em back with our Shield Hats!
Bouncing hexes for over eight years!

“You’re those Weasleys,” she murmured. Looking back at the twins, she said, “Right, so would it help if I said it was Hogwarts business?”

The men looked at each other, then at her, and in unison said, “Prove it.”

“Right,” she repeated. “Got a Floo?”

“Of course,” said Ginny, who had been listening with interest in between completing sales with
regular customers.

“Then will you please Floo Headmistress McGonagall,” she said, wandlessly casting a quick Muffliato spell on the other customers, “tell her Professor Reese is here to buy the Wartcap powder and Doxy venom you two wiped out of the Knockturn Alley apothecary, and take her word for it when she says you should sell it to me?” She released the muffling spell.

The twins looked at each other, shrugged, resheathed their wands, and went through the door behind the counter.

Celia looked at Ginny questioningly, but the redheaded woman just raised her hands as if to say she was no part of this. She also looked at Celia oddly, as if trying to work out something about her. Celia wasn’t sure why that should bother her, as it made perfect sense that she’d be curious about this weird customer. She shook it off and ordered herself to wait patiently.

In a few minutes, the two men returned, holding a very promising-looking package wrapped in brown paper and looking a little shell-shocked.

“Here you go, then,” said one of them.

“Our compliments,” said the other.

Celia’s eyebrows shot up. “I wasn’t planning to just take them,” she said. “My offer still stands. At least let me reimburse what you paid for them.”

“No need,” said the first.

“Always happy to help,” said the second.

“And this really is what I need?” she asked, suddenly suspicious at the abrupt turnaround. “Or is it something that’s going to blow up in my face and turn the Potions lab fluorescent orange?”

*Because it’s not like he’s not acting weird enough today, so it’d be loads of fun to just really piss him off.*

“We wouldn’t do that,” they said in unison.

“Not about something that makes McGonagall look that serious,” said one.

The other, for a change, nodded mutely rather than building off his twin’s statement. The woman named Ginny nodded seriously, too, the strange, measuring look still on her face. That did sound consistent with what little she knew of them. How much had Minerva told them?

*Who cares? Let me just get out of here, get the damned spell done, and maybe get some actual sleep.*

“Well, thank you, then,” she said, accepting the package. She looked around and saw that the store was temporarily empty. “Any objections if I just Portkey straight from here?”

“No at all,” said twin number two.

Celia smiled, nodded, and pulled her “shopping list” out of a pocket. Making sure she had a secure grip on her packages, she activated the Portkey, mildly annoyed that Severus apparently thought she couldn’t have just made one herself. She made a mental note to add that to the conversation she’d promised him, whenever they finally had it. Immediately, she felt the familiar sensation of a hook grabbing hold behind her navel and pulling her through a swirl of wind toward Hogwarts.
When the swirling sensation stopped, Celia landed a bit harder than she might have liked, but kept her feet and did not lose any of her cargo. It was too bad that several of these ingredients didn’t do well if Apparated, but then she’d have had to walk from the Apparition point just outside the grounds. For that matter, if she had made her own Portkey, she’d probably have set it for there, anyway, since she wasn’t sure she could make one that would get her across the boundary enchantments. As it was, she had landed right in the middle of what appeared to be a private Potions lab. There were a few tables containing what were probably potions in progress.

*Experiments, maybe?*

One table was obviously set up for her use. Beside the empty cauldron were all the ingredients that had been marked off her list. Cabinets lined one wall, which ended with a storage closet. She set down her packages and began to open them.

No sooner had she started than Severus stormed into the room.

“Do you have any idea how lucky you are?” he demanded.

Her heart, which had given a little jump when she first saw him, seemed to stop in the face of his anger. *What the hell is he mad about now?*

She blinked at him and replied warily, “Why don’t you tell me what it is I should feel lucky about before I answer that.”

“If that had been any other shop, you would have compromised yourself by pulling a stunt like that,” he all but shouted.

“If that had been any other store, instead of one owned by two Order of Merlin recipients and former members of the Order of the Phoenix, I never would have ‘pulled a stunt like that,’” she replied, watching intently as he absorbed this.

*So, first you think I can’t even manage a Portkey. Now you think I’m stupid enough to just randomly tell people what’s going on here without some clue who they are? I repeat: what the hell?*

“Besides,” she continued with forced calm, “all I did was tell them that I’m a teacher here and suggest they confirm with Minerva that it was okay to sell that stuff to me. If something in the past few years had changed so that they were no longer trustworthy, she probably would have just told them I was lying. They’d’ve thrown me out, end of story. No harm done.”

“No harm ...” he trailed off and shook his head. “How did you know so much about them?”

She shrugged, hoping she looked more nonchalant than she felt. “I did my homework before I came here. One of the bonuses of the Rosenberg speed-reading method is you don’t miss the footnotes. Though if I hadn’t seen some of their defensive merchandise being sold as gag items, I probably wouldn’t have put it together.”

“How did you end up there in the first place?”

“They’d bought up all the Wartcap powder and Doxy venom from the apothecary. Apparently I annoyed the apothecary’s owner enough that he sitched me on them.”

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. It was kind of endearing, except that it reminded her of Giles a little and that was just weird. Besides, he wasn’t allowed to do things that were endearing while
pissing her off. She gritted her teeth.

“Do I want to know why Messrs Weasley were buying large quantities of Wartcap powder and Doxy venom?”

“Probably not. It sounds like it involves students skipping classes.”

He muttered something about things not changing. Looking at the way Celia had begun arranging things on the stone table, he asked, “Do you have everything you need, then?”

“All but the flasks,” she replied.

*So that’s it? He’s over it? Not now. Stuff to do. But seriously, what is his problem?*

“You will find a selection in the leftmost cabinet,” he said.

“Thank you.” She resumed unwrapping and organizing her supplies, taking deliberately slow breaths to calm herself. After looking around briefly for a waste bin, she remembered herself and vanished the paper wrappers. When she had everything as she wanted it around the cauldron, she looked up to see Severus watching her. “Are you planning to stay for this? Much as I wish teamwork would speed things up, it’s just a long, slow process.”

“No,” he said. “I thought perhaps, before you begin, we could speak.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Now? All right then.” She stepped away from the worktable but did not move closer to him. This didn’t sound promising, at least not in a good way.

“What occurred between us earlier cannot happen again,” he said, and the bottom dropped out of her stomach.

“I'm sorry, what?” she asked.

“I believe you heard me,” he sneered.

*So, not over it, then. Or moving on to a whole different “it,” which is … over? Already?*

“I heard what you said, I'm just ... surprised,” she replied, glad that the jar she was gripping had an Unbreakable Charm on it. “Um, why?”

“I should have thought it would be obvious. Clearly we were both experiencing the strain of the night's events and were too exhausted to exercise better judgment. Obviously you realize this, as you immediately tried to obfuscate the reason for my presence in your quarters.”

“I told you I wasn’t ashamed of what we’d done,” she said softly, firmly. “I'm still not. I still don't regret it, either, but apparently I'm alone in that.”

*Starting to regret it now though!*

“Apparently.”

Both were silent, as that little voice in Celia's head began chanting several versions of *I told you so.* It was always the same. She shouldn’t be surprised. It just usually took a little longer than this.

“I should have seen this coming,” she said at last. “I reminded you of what I am before things had gone too far. If you were going to pull the typical ‘I don't want to deal with a Slayer’ bullshit, that would have been the time to back out.”
“I believe I have already pointed out the lack of judgment being exercised.”

She scowled at him, then looked away. “I really thought you’d be different.”

“Why?” he snapped. “Did you think me so desperate that I would be unable to resist the lure of being your dirty little secret?”

“What?” she demanded, whipping her head back around to face him. “No, dammit. I thought the fact that you’re so powerful might mean you wouldn’t pull the usual freak-out. Obviously I was wrong!”

“Clearly.”

She seethed in silence for a moment.

This is just so typical, and yet not making any of the usual sense. He doesn’t get out of it that easily. No way.

“What I don’t understand is how you’re rationalizing this.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll agree that things got a little ... accelerated last night ... this morning ... whatever. But as far as I can tell, things were heading in that direction anyway. And whatever that magic was ... that had to mean something.”

“It appears someone has a very high opinion of herself.”

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it!” she retorted.

“And how would I know that?”

“You could try listening to what I’m actually saying,” she said. “Or ... you could look.” Oh, brilliant! Get all emotional and then invite him in. Have I completely lost what’s left of my mind?

“What?”

“I said you could look,” she repeated, stepping closer and looking very deliberately into his eyes. For a moment, he appeared to wrestle with the idea, and then she felt his presence abruptly in her mind. Quickly, she pushed forward a series of images: her reaction to his letter in the Potions journal ... meeting him on the first day of school ... feelings of friendship when he expressed interest in her work, increasing when they moved into open collaboration ... dancing with him at Christmas ... dancing with him last night ... the secure feeling of having an experienced fighter at her back after she’d dusted that vamp ... kissing him ... arguing with herself about him ... the surge of anger when she saw the scars on his body … that twin surge of magical energies that had crashed through each of them and then flowed into one another ... the certainty that meant something significant ... her realization she was probably falling in love ...

The memories she’d chosen to share reached an end, and still he was in her mind. She was a little unsure she should have let that last bit through. Was that why he hadn’t left yet? She left her mind blank as a signal that she was done, and still he remained. A twinge of doubt flitted through her mind, quickly suppressed, but not quickly enough.

“Since your prior experiences,” he made the word sound filthy, “were all with Muggles, you should not assume that a surge of magical energy is anything unusual when you are having sex with a
wizard. Nor should you impose some great meaning on a single encounter."

She glared at him. She wanted to order him to leave, except for the slight problem that this was his lab. She couldn’t storm out either; she had work to do. Seething, she finally said only, “Maybe.”

“Then we understand one another,” he said flatly, eyes narrowed.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” she snapped. “But you’ve made your position pretty clear. Now, may I please get to work?”

“Of course,” he replied and left, closing the door none too gently on his way out.

She spent several minutes disciplining her mind into calmness before she started a wand-lit flame under the cauldron and began to work.

*The mission comes first. I can think up creative ways to deal with him later. Right now, I’m all about keeping the vampires out. Too bad the students who think he’s a vamp are wrong.*

~ ~ ~

As he slammed back into his office, Severus nearly growled out loud. That arrogant … who did she think she was? Did she honestly think that … that … display of emotion would convince him she had some sort of real feelings for him? So she became upset at the sight of his injuries. That sort of thing was probably hard-wired into Slayers, part of what made them tick. As for the rest, he’d already known she had enjoyed herself. That meant nothing. He’d had to be good, with his looks, or he’d never have got laid by anyone other than whores. But there was a world of difference between the sort of casual encounters he usually enjoyed and some sordid clandestine affair with a colleague. The one “relationship” he’d attempted in recent years had not gone well and was clearly irrelevant. Or perhaps not. That had also been with a much younger witch. Clearly that was a formula for disaster. Even if Reese hadn’t been too embarrassed to admit what had happened between them, it would have been a bad idea to allow this to continue.

He wasn’t sure why he cared about that. It wasn’t as though he suddenly wanted to maul her at the staff table in front of everyone, though that proved a momentarily distracting thought. She was right that such things were private. Something about the way she had not even deflected but somehow just dismissed her Watcher’s innuendo, however, had chilled him to the bone.

And then there was everything else that had happened since. Her revelations at the staff meeting might have stunned some of the others, but they had shaken him profoundly. If he understood her correctly, her head was half-filled with some other witch’s memories, at least some of which included work in the Dark Arts. Then she’d run off to Knockturn Alley, and she’d been going to leave without a bloody Portkey. What was she going to do, walk back? She had to know some of those ingredients would not survive Apparition. So he’d charmed the parchment and scrawled instructions on how to activate it, and when their hands had brushed as he’d handed it to her, for a moment he’d thought perhaps there really was something there that could grow between them.

But then, not one hour later, Fred and George Weasley’s heads had appeared in Minerva’s fireplace while he had been sitting there, talking with her, and they were saying there was a Professor Reese there, and was she really a Hogwarts professor, and should they really sell her some of the Wartcap powder and Doxy venom they’d bought up from the Knockturn Alley apothecary? And was that truly less than half an hour ago? He’d been furious at her lack of discretion. What if the store to which she’d been sent had been … well, had been someone with a grudge against Hogwarts. He supposed nobody here would have actually known her or had any reason to wish her harm personally. Still, with all she undoubtedly had in her head, and considering the fact that she was a
Slayer, she ought to have the sense to be far more careful. Anything could have happened. Of course, she had said that the only reason she’d spoken up was that she’d realized who the twins were. Now that he thought about it, they really hadn’t appeared to know anything more than exactly what they had asked, and that had not been much. Perhaps he shouldn’t have blown up at them quite so severely. Then again, would they have expected any less from him?

That was not the point. She was infuriating, rash as any Gryffindor, and again, clearly ashamed of what they’d done, regardless of what she had said. Taken all together, it was clear that their liaison had been a mistake, and he’d had to nip this thing in the bud before he let her get any further inside his defenses. And, no, he was not going to suddenly begin making Herbological metaphors of things. That wisp of doubt he’d caught, when she’d thought, What if it was just because he’s not a Muggle, had been the perfect weapon to sever any lingering attachment. It wasn’t true of course. He’d been with plenty of witches and had never experienced anything remotely like that swirling crash of energies. Whatever it was, he could still feel it, and he hoped it would wear off soon, as it was very distracting. So, yes, something had been unique about that experience, but it didn’t have to have some sort of profound significance just because a naïve twenty-four year-old witch thought so.

Determined to waste no further thought on the matter, he grabbed a pile of essays and began to mark them viciously.

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By the time she had finished the potion, reduced it to a powder, and divided it into five equal flasks, it was late afternoon. She healed the cut she had made across the palm of her left hand, cleaned the cauldron and table meticulously, and returned the ingredients to the storeroom. After a moment of looking at the careful ordering of the shelves, she decided to leave the newly purchased items on the worktable so that Snape could decide whether and where to put them. Using a slicing charm on her cloak, she removed a large piece which she transfigured into a sectioned carrying bag for the flasks. With one last look about the lab to ensure she hadn’t left anything else for him to fly off the handle about, she exited the room and headed toward Minerva’s office.

When she arrived, the Headmistress appeared surprised to see her.

“You’re done already?” she asked.

“Only with the potion-making,” Celia replied. “I thought I should touch base with you before I go out to actually do the spell. Also, I should probably apologize if my handling of the situation with the Weasleys was inappropriate.”

“I admit I was surprised to hear from them. However, from the way in which they inquired, clearly you had not told them anything about your reason for seeking the items in question. Severus appeared rather more concerned.”

“‘Livid’ might cover it a bit better.” Celia made an effort not to roll her eyes. She hoped Minerva didn’t have any more to say about him. That would really mess with her plan to not think about him at all, at least not until this was done.

“Indeed.” The Headmistress gave her an odd look, but said no more on the subject. “So then, the spell. I have spoken with Filius at some length about the problem of finding any vampires that may be hiding in the Forbidden Forest and the concerns Severus said you raised about how this spell might interact with the existing Charms warding the grounds. Filius feels, and I agree, that the best approach would be to define the boundary as you see here.” She pointed to a small map of the grounds on which a red line had been drawn, outlining the boundary she was to use.
Celia’s eyes widened in surprise. She’d completely forgotten to raise that issue earlier and was surprised that Severus had done so, all things considered. The scrolls she’d conjured had simply made the assumption that the spell’s boundaries would be slightly outside those of Hogwarts. She was even more surprised by the solution they’d decided upon. She decided to focus on that part. Much safer … and also what she really should be focusing on.

*Severus who?*

“You want me to work on the inside of the enchantments then, and keep the Forbidden Forest outside the bounds of this spell?”

“That would seem to solve the problem of any vampires that may already be hiding in the Forest, and Filius is certain there will be no difficulties with your spell being cast within the protective charms already in place.”

Celia nodded. “That should actually make it a little bit easier.”

“How long will it take you?”

“About an hour, maybe a little more,” she replied. “Once I’m done, I’ll be wiped out though. I’d like to go straight to my quarters and sleep a few hours before patrolling tonight. Could you show me how to communicate by Patronus, the way you did to Hagrid and me earlier? That way I can let you know when it’s done without having to come back into the castle.”

“It is actually quite simple,” said Minerva. “When you form the Patronus, you think very clearly of the person to whom the message is to be directed and what you want to say. It is best if you keep the message brief.”

“Sounds simple enough,” Celia agreed. “May I run a quick test?”

“By all means.”

Celia summoned the memory she had always used to fuel the Patronus Charm: the day her foster-mother had taken her to buy a gown for her junior prom. She had made such a big deal of it, saying how she had once thought she would never be able to enjoy such clichéd mother-daughter moments, and thanked Celia for being that daughter. They had hugged and cried, and while it was only one happy memory among many, it had always stood out to Celia as one that defined the bond between them. With the memory firmly in mind, she focused and thought *Tell Minerva testing 1-2-3* and silently cast, *Expecto Patronum!*

A silvery mist flowed from her wand and coalesced into the shape of a ball python, slithered across the Headmistress’ desk, and raised its head expectantly before her. Hesitantly, Minerva touched its head, and the form dissolved.

“Testing 1-2-3?” she asked.

“It’s all I could think of,” Celia said with an embarrassed smile.

“And your Patronus is a snake?”

“Yeah. I used to raise little corn snakes when I was a teenager, so I suppose it makes a kind of sense. I’d always wanted one that was a little bigger, but my foster parents seemed to think I’d pushed my luck far enough. So now I have a nice big silvery one, and I don’t even have to clean up after it.”

“I see.” Another odd look. She was collecting a lot of those today. “Well, it seems you have the
technique, so I will await your message that the spell has been completed. You may use the Patronus to send an alert to the castle, as well, if you encounter anything on your patrol.”

“I don’t expect to, but if I do, and it’s, say, one in the morning, will the Patronus wake you automatically? Or do I need to include that intent as well?”

“Include that with your message. And if it is something that urgent, send one to me and one to Severus, as he will most likely be patrolling within the castle and able to respond more quickly.” The Headmistress paused, then added, “One more thing, Celia. There will be another pre-breakfast staff meeting tomorrow. If, as I suspect, there will be little to report other than the casting of this protective spell, you will most likely face quite a few questions from your peers.”

“How far would you like me to go in answering them?”

“I would like you to be completely honest about anything to do with your purpose in being here and your plans for how to train the new Slayer-witch. In fact, you might provide copies of the curriculum you plan to cover with her. That would satisfy many of the curious questions I have overheard from the staff today.”

“And the rest?”

“I think you will find that most have already accepted your … unusual background.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I will await your message in approximately one hour then.”

Celia nodded in acceptance of this dismissal and left, completely focused on the task at hand. Had she looked back over her shoulder, she might have noticed one of the usually slumbering portraits on the wall watching her keenly as she departed.

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The gates to the grounds were the perfect starting point, and Celia stopped just inside them, knelt in the snow, and cast a quick Melting Charm so that she could reach the ground. Once a largish patch of ground was clear, she used another charm to dig a small hole in the frozen earth, poured in the contents of one of the flasks, and covered it back up. She drew energy from the land into herself and channeled it into the spell as she spoke the incantation aloud.

“No undead creatures here may roam, Lest I invite, as to my home.”

Walking quickly but unhurriedly, she traced out the inner boundary of the grounds, moving toward her next stop just this side of the Forbidden Forest. She repeated the melting and digging charms, buried the contents of the second flask, drew up more energy from the land, channeled it into the spell, and repeated the incantation.

Three more times she repeated the pattern, but when she came to the fifth point, by the lake, there was something different. The power she drew up from the land seemed to flow from the bottom of the lake itself, and it had a darker quality to it. She made a mental note to ask Minerva later what that was about, but didn’t interrupt the spell.

Finally, she traced out the last leg of the boundary of her spell, returning to the spot just inside the main gates. Closing her eyes, she visualized the continuous line she had walked and the protective powder containing her blood that she had planted at five key, equidistant points to act as sentries.
Tapping this time into her own energy, into the essence of what made her a Slayer, she projected that energy to all of the sentry points simultaneously, lighting up the irregularly shaped boundary with bright golden light, repeating the incantation one last time,

“No undead creatures here may roam,  
Lest I invite, as to my home!”

She felt the unmistakable SNAP of the protection locking into place and staggered a few steps backwards as she disconnected herself from it. She hoped briefly that none of the students had happened to look out the window just then.

*Oh well, how weird is it, really, to see a teacher obviously doing some sort of protective thing out here? They don’t need to know details. Plus, if Minerva does leak it, maybe it’d even be good that they saw me.*

Still reeling slightly from the massive expenditure of energy, she summoned the memory of that day with her foster-mother, thought *Go tell Minerva it’s done,* and cast the Patronus Charm. She watched for a moment as the silvery snake made its way across the snow, until it dazzled her eyes as the late afternoon sun caught both snow and snake, then walked slowly and a bit unsteadily toward the greenhouses and her cottage.

Once she arrived, she wanted nothing more than to tumble into bed, but she couldn’t let herself do that until she had cleaned the flasks. It was never a good idea to leave spell residue lying around, after all. She washed them thoroughly and set them to dry. She considered repairing her cloak but decided that could wait. Carrying the flasks to return them would be easier if she kept the chambered bag a little longer.

Bleary-eyed, she stumbled into her room, ripped off her boots, and climbed under the covers fully clothed. She set the alarm for an hour after sunset, and as soon as her head touched the pillow, she was fast asleep.

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“*Professor Snape,*” Hagrid said around a mouthful of mutton, “d’ye know if Celia’s back yet? This is the second meal she’s missed.”

“She returned several hours ago,” he replied across the empty seat separating them. “As it is nearly sunset, no doubt she is preparing to patrol the grounds.”

“On an empty stomach? Tha’s not a good idea.”

“Perhaps she’s had the elves bring her something. She certainly knows how to contact them if she needs anything.” *Manages to keep track of what sandwiches and biscuits her guests like, too. Which is not important.* He scowled at his plate.

“Di’ she cast tha’ … you know?” Hagrid winked in what was clearly supposed to be a subtle and conspiratorial manner, and Snape wondered at Minerva entrusting him with any secret more sensitive than the next Hogsmeade weekend’s date.

“Yes, of course,” he replied with a narrowed gaze meant to warn the man off further discussion.

“Then why would she need to patrol? Won’ be nothin’ to find, righ’?”

“Perhaps you should ask her yourself, if you run into her.”
“Hmph.” The half-giant tucked back into his dinner, clearly not satisfied, but at least not pressing the matter further.

It was a good question, though. He supposed she might plan to catch the person who had invited that other vampire onto the grounds, but as they had not yet leaked anything about the new protective spell, much less that she was the only one to whom it was keyed, it was rather unlikely unless she just stumbled into them. There was that dream, too. She didn’t mention it at this morning’s meeting after all. She also didn’t say whether those other vampires, Turok-Han, are subject to the same constraints as regular vampires. Will the spell work against them? Surely she would have said something if not.

Suddenly, dinner was over, and he had to escort the Slytherins back to their Common Room and start his own patrols of the castle. It promised to be another long night.

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It was. And in the morning, he was glad he had spent a portion of the pre-dawn hours brewing another batch of Invigoration Draught. Not everyone needed it today, but he was going to need several doses to get through his classes. From the look of Celia as she dragged in the door, so was she. Minerva, at least, seemed to have got some rest. Phials of the potion were set beside both women’s cups, as well as Potter’s. He had already taken a dose before he arrived.

He was surprised when the Slayer came down to his end of the table and presented him with a sectioned carrier bag containing the flasks she’d taken from his lab.

“I only needed them to divide the mixture evenly and transport it,” she explained.

He grunted and removed the flasks to examine them. They did appear thoroughly cleaned. He shrunk them and placed them in his pocket with a nod. She merely pressed her mouth into a firm line and went to her usual seat.

The actual news portion of the meeting was unsurprisingly short. No one had, after all, encountered any vampires or really much of anything last night. Precautions were remaining in force for today, including staff escorts between classes, with an announcement to be made at dinner that the defenses on the grounds had been enhanced. As a result, only Celia would need to continue the extended patrols tonight. On Tuesday, tomorrow, they would allow a couple of gossipy students to overhear a conversation revealing that these new defenses were keyed to a single person and that the newest professor had been chosen as the least obvious option. Then perhaps they would get to the bottom of this.

Celia spoke up and mentioned her dream, saying she had now had it twice. She slept? Doesn’t look it.

“Since we were already taking precautions against any more vampire activity, I didn’t mention it the first time,” she said. “Now I’m concerned that it showed up again after the protective spell was cast. I’ve tested the perimeter, and it’s active: no vampire of any sort can get through it without my express invitation, which I obviously won’t be giving. So maybe it’s more metaphoric.”

Everyone turned to look at Sybill, but she predictably had nothing useful to offer on the subject of dreams featuring Turok-Hans and giant snakes.

“Harry,” Celia continued, “if you have a Pensieve, can I ask you to have a look at the dream later? I doubt the snake said anything useful, but just in case, would you please translate?”
“Yeah, sure,” he replied drowsily.

The idiot hasn’t taken any of the Invigoration Draught at all.

Just as Severus was about to ask if they could now adjourn the bloody useless meeting, Filius piped up with a completely irrelevant question regarding what Celia planned to teach the new Slayer once she was identified. Worse, it appeared that Celia had expected the question, as she had little scrolls of parchment for all of them with a list of the topics above and beyond the Hogwarts curriculum she would be covering with the young lady. She was saying something about adjusting as necessary based on the girl’s aptitudes, but he focused instead on the list.

The first several items were obvious. They did not teach physical forms of self defense at all, so obviously she would need to cover that. Some of the potions that were not in even the N.E.W.T. curriculum seemed reasonable enough until he saw “contraceptive potions, minimum two variants.”

“Excuse me,” he drawled, “but why in the world would you teach the girl to brew contraceptive potions? Surely you realize we do not encourage the sort of behavior among the students that would render such a thing necessary?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Don’t worry. I have no intention of imposing some sort of stereotypically loose American morals on a proper British young lady,” she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “However, rape is a very real job hazard for a Slayer, and she will be protected against any additional consequences if it should happen.”

Severus felt as though she had physically slapped him. He had not thought of that possibility. It had seemed odd that she would be taking such a potion herself while claiming to be “out of practice,” but he had not given it much thought. Was that truly such a danger?

Potter finally seemed to wake up. “What? I’d think a Slayer, especially one who’s a witch, would be at less risk for that, not more.”

“You’d think,” she replied. “But we’re not invulnerable. We can still be stunned, drugged, or just plain knocked out. It shouldn’t happen, but it can, and we’re far more often in situations where any of the above could happen than the average woman. Besides, human men aren’t the only, nor even the primary, concern.”

Potter looked a bit green at that. So, for that matter, did several of the other teachers. Minerva, however, clearly already knew about all of this, damn her.

“I see you have some idea what is involved in a demon-human pregnancy,” she continued. “Even trying to terminate one can be fatal, and trust me, it’s a horrible way to die.” The look on her face suggested she had witnessed just such a death. “Obviously that risk is not to Slayers alone, but as I said, we’re just more often in situations that make it possible, so she will be protected. If she doesn’t have the aptitude to learn to make it herself, then I’ll make it for her for as long as she is in my care, and someone else will take over after that. Obviously, it’s preferable that she not be dependent on others for that, or the healing potions that are listed for that matter, so if she’s one of those students that melts cauldrons in every class, I’ll be making every effort to forcibly drag her up to par.”

Silence fell over the table, and several eyes were now on him. Since he had raised the question, after all, he merely nodded and made it obvious that he was moving on to read the rest of the list.

“Resistance to torture?” Potter sputtered. “Minerva, you can’t seriously tell me you’re going to sit back while someone casts the Cruciatu on a student!”
Minerva, however, merely gestured to Celia, who responded. “I have no intention of casting the
Cruciatus on her, Harry. Not planning to allow anyone else to, either. In fact, you'll notice there is a
mark next to that one, showing that I’m not the one who will be teaching her to resist torture. One of
the older Slayers has developed a program on coping with non-magical forms of torture.”

“You run into lots of demons that are into torture, then?”

“Demons, vampires, hell-gods, whatever. Yes. Sometimes they aren’t just on a killing spree.
Sometimes they want something. And if they even think it’s something she could give them, yes,
they’ll probably try to torture her. So she needs to be prepared for that possibility, as best as can be.
That’s why she also needs to learn Occlumency. Legilimency will be useful for her, too, if she has
the aptitude, but she absolutely has to try to learn at least basic Occlumency.”

“And next I see you’re planning to teach her to cast the Killing Curse?” Potter continued, obviously
incredulous.

Celia had clearly had enough. “Harry, what part of the word ‘Slayer’ do you not understand? Of
course I have to teach her to kill, preferably while keeping herself alive. And, okay, there’s a whole
boatload of demons the Killing Curse won’t kill, especially things like vampires that are already
walking cadavers, but there are many more that it will. So, yes, she has to be proficient with it.”

“Who the hell are you going to use for practice?” he demanded.

“Animals that are either fatally injured or terminally ill,” she replied impatiently. “Obviously that
means field trips to a couple of veterinarians we work with.”

“So you’re going to teach her to kill little defenseless animals?”

“No, I’m going to teach her to use a tool that, among other things, can end the suffering of little
defenseless animals. And when she’s learned to manage doing that, even while being as sad as I
expect her to be about it, then maybe she’ll be able to cast it when faced with some giant demon with
too many heads and teeth, rather than freezing in terror or trying to close in on it with a blade when
she doesn’t have to endanger herself like that. I’ll also remind you that obviously using it on an
animal or a hostile demon is not considered ‘unforgivable.’”

Severus watched this exchange with interest. It wasn’t often that anyone else put Potter in his place,
and it was rather enjoyable to watch in spite of everything.

“Are there any other questions?” Minerva asked. When no one replied, she continued, “If not, then
I’d like to focus on the business at hand. When the young lady is activated, we will certainly need to
discuss her schooling, particularly if she needs remedial work in any key areas. For now, however,
I’d rather that you all focus your energies on dealing with whomever brought that vampire onto the
grounds, and that starts with getting the students in to breakfast.”

With that, the meeting was finally adjourned, and Severus returned to Slytherin House to escort his
students to the Great Hall. On his way there, he stopped into his lab to retrieve two more doses of
Invigoration Draught.

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He noticed that Celia was unusually silent at breakfast. It was not surprising that she was not
speaking to him, but she’d barely said two words to Hagrid either, and that was unusual. She must be
truly exhausted. That was only important because of the possibility her classes would suffer, of

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course.
Since they had the only classes currently being held out of doors, Hagrid and Celia would be the first to escort their students out of the Great Hall. When Hagrid rose and called for the fourth year Gryffindors and Slytherins to follow him, Severus pulled the phials of Invigoration Draught out of his pocket and placed them on the table next to her. She looked at them, then looked at him questioningly.

“We can’t have you falling asleep in class,” he said and watched her reactions as she processed this. No change of expression crossed her face.

“Thank you,” she said quietly and pocketed the phials before rising, pointing her wand to her throat and calling out, “Third year Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, please proceed to the Entrance Hall.”

Once she had left, following her pack of students, he rose and summoned the first year Slytherins and Gryffindors to proceed to the dungeons. As if having first years for first period on a Monday was not bad enough any other week.

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At lunch, Celia was absent once again. This time it was Severus who asked after her.

“I dunno,” Hagrid answered. “Maybe she wanted t’ do some markin’. Patrollin’s been takin’ a big chunk out of everyone’s nights, an’ everyone bu’ her’s goin’ t’get a break.”

“I suppose that’s true,” he replied. “It can’t be helped, though.”

“Oh, I know tha’,” said the half-giant as he returned to his meal.

Severus narrowed his eyes and scanned over the four long tables of students. Which one of these dunderheads thought it would be a brilliant idea to invite a vampire onto the grounds? All of this, everything that has happened since Saturday night, falls squarely on that student’s shoulders.

As he was thinking this, Celia appeared at the doors to the Hall and called for the N.E.W.T. students to join her for their class. He noted that she still looked quite drawn, but resolutely ignored this observation. She had the Invigoration Draught to get her through her classes, and that was his only concern. After Hagrid led the fifth year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws out of the Hall, Severus rose and called for the fourth years from the same houses. Following them to the dungeons, he wondered when he had started minding a quiet lunch.

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At dinner, she appeared to be ravenous. Oddly enough, the fact that she was eating unusually fast seemed to have brought out her extremely inefficient American dining style, something she had abandoned last autumn. He found himself amused at the sight of her dance of utensils from hand to hand, then shook it off. Despite his intentions to the contrary, he found himself asking, “Did you actually skip lunch completely?”

She shot him an indecipherable look, then shrugged and said, “Pensieves don’t agree with me, and I had Harry take a look at that dream during the free period we both had right before lunch.”

“What do you mean they ‘don’t agree with you’?” he asked, annoyed with himself for finding this bit of information … annoying.

“I mean I get very nauseous, and it takes me a couple of hours to recover,” she replied.

“Why?” He supposed it could have something to do with what had been done to her mind, though
that did not quite make sense. Had that teacher of hers blocked off other memories at the same time? That would be a much more logical cause for such a reaction.

“How should I know?” She appeared irritated. “And why would it matter?”

It would not. It was none of his concern, and he was unsure why he had asked at all.

“I don’t suppose it occurred to you that I could have provided the memory,” he said snidely.

“I wasn’t planning to ask you for any special favors.”

When she did not continue, he asked, “And did you learn anything useful?”

“No. All it said was ‘I’ve found her, my Master will be so pleased.’ Since it was, in fact, looking for Dawn, that doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with the current situation.”

“But it could refer to your charge,” he pressed. He found the idea of a giant viper saying anything remotely like that profoundly uncomfortable. It seemed far too much like something best left in the past.

“It could,” she agreed, face and tone still unreadable. “However, since the only outsider who has found anyone in the past couple of days is now dust, that’s not the most helpful lead ever.”

“No, I suppose not.”

She set down her utensils, wiped her mouth briefly with her napkin, and pushed back from the table. “Time I set out, then. I’ll send a message if I find anything.”

Turning so that he could speak more softly, he said, “You should send an all-clear message every hour and when you finish for the night.”

She raised her eyebrows. “To both you and Minerva?”

“No, send to Minerva only if there is trouble.”

She nodded, though her expression was guarded. “Okay then. I have six-thirty now.”

As she turned and left, he felt oddly pleased that they had managed to have such a civil, professional conversation.

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By the time her final Patronus arrived at half past twelve with the message, “All clear. Calling it a night,” he thought he might finally be getting used to having a silver snake slithering down the hall or across his desk at him. At least it had stopped unnerving him after the second time. Minerva had told him what to watch for yesterday, but as there had been no problems to report during the night, Celia had not sent any until he’d requested tonight’s check-ins. Ironic that the Head of Slytherin House should be so uncomfortable around snakes, but then, anyone who had spent any time at all around the Dark Lord surely would be.

Such an odd form for a Patronus to take. He’d never heard of anyone with a snake or really, any reptile Patronus. He had no idea what the Dark Lord’s Patronus might have been. Obviously he would have had no need to use one to repel Dementors, as they answered to him, and he had never discovered that it was possible to use them for communication. Fortunately. But if anyone were to have a serpent of some kind for a Patronus, he would have expected it to be the Dark Lord, not a
Slayer. Shouldn’t she have a bear or a panther or something?

It was obvious that he needed to get some sleep. There was only so long even he could function running on Invigoration Draught. That was the only possible explanation as to why he was wasting time wondering about this at all. Just because her Patronus brought up old memories was no reason to dwell upon them much less speculate about what he thought it should have been. He pushed away from his desk, went to the tapestry that guarded the door to his quarters from this office, spoke the password, and walked through, determined not to give the matter any further consideration.
The sunlight on her face told Celia that, whatever her body might think about it, she had obviously overslept. Prying her eyes open, she confirmed that if she were going to put in an appearance for breakfast, she had about ten minutes to get herself together. She seriously debated skipping. After all, they were done with escorting the students, right? She could just Floo the house-elves for some breakfast and then go to Greenhouse 4 for her first class. Except she’d been skipping a lot of meals lately and, if the “leak” planned for today were to be effective, it would help if she were kind of, well, visible. With a groan she hauled herself out of bed and into the bathroom.

She was slightly late arriving but not the last to do so. Aurora, unsurprisingly, was not much of a morning person and would most likely arrive a good ten minutes later. As she greeted Hagrid and took her seat, Celia noticed that there was a now-familiar phial next to her cup. For some reason that annoyed her.

“Good morning, Severus,” she said flatly. When he nodded, she continued, “Thanks, but I think I’ll be fine with just caffeine today.”

“Take it with you, anyway,” he said. “I do not want to be disturbed when you suddenly need it later.”

“Fine,” she replied and turned her attention to her breakfast. Bastard.

Not soon enough, the bell rang, and she got up to lead her N.E.W.T. students out to the greenhouses, happy to have something nice and normal to do like teach.

As much as he preferred his seventh-year N.E.W.T. class to any other, Snape found them annoying this morning. When they arrived, they reeked of Gurdyroot, and that only served to remind him that their prior class had been with … her. Fortunately today’s assignment would require boiling Stinksap, and that would soon overpower the onion-like odor of the plants they had worked with this morning.

He walked amongst them as they prepared their ingredients. Several, he noticed, were powdering
their wormwood too finely, but he declined to correct them. They learned better, he felt, when they had to sort out what had gone wrong on their own.

Soon the Potions lab was filled with noxious fumes. A distinct improvement. It was bad enough he would have to see her at lunch; he did not wish to be reminded of her during his class.

The irony that he was thinking about her anyway did not escape him. His resulting scowl caused one student to fumble his sneezewort and add entirely too much, sending a puff of lilac smoke up from his cauldron. The others, apparently, had not noticed the scowl, though a few had glanced over to see what their classmate had done.

This was absurd. He and Reese were managing to interact professionally and put that … indiscretion behind them. There was no call to be thinking of her at all during his classes. He had said all that needed to be said to her. Why did thoughts of her still intrude at such inopportune moments?

As he made another circuit amongst the students, he decided he should do something about that.

~ ~ ~

By lunchtime, she was seriously tempted to take that Invigoration Draught after all. She could take it for at least another three days before having to worry about side effects. Sheer stubbornness, however, forced her to do without and simply order an extra espresso with her lunch.

She darted looks at Severus occasionally. Were there going to be more quasi-thoughtful gestures with a side of sarcasm? Apparently not. He hadn’t even noticed her looking at him. That was weird. And annoying. Then again, what about him wasn’t weird and annoying these past few days? To be fair, what about anything wasn’t weird and annoying these past few days?

She wondered if, once things settled down, they could rebuild the friendship that had been forming between them. She’d never managed to actually “just be friends” with someone she’d slept with before, but she’d really like to this time. Even if he was being a complete bastard. There were lots of things that had happened in her classes, both today and yesterday, that she would have enjoyed telling him. He seemed to find amusement in the fact students weren’t only morons in Potions. Hagrid or Harry might commiserate, but it wasn’t the same somehow. As much as Severus’ rejection stung, she still missed him, even while he was sitting right next to her.

That was really annoying, but her mind seemed relieved to have something to ponder other than the identity of the Idiot-Who-Invited-the-Vampire and continued in a similar vein for most of the meal, punctuated by small talk with Hagrid. So she was taken aback – and seriously wondered if Severus had developed some new form of Legilimency that didn’t require eye contact – when he spoke just before the bell.

“Celia, I would appreciate it if you would see me in my office following the last afternoon class.”

She looked at him, but he was as inscrutable as ever. “I thought you didn’t want to be disturbed,” she said.

“Nevertheless.”

*Thanks for clearing that up.*

“Fine,” she huffed. “I’ll see you shortly after the last class.”

*Why can’t he make this just the littlest bit easier?*
On Tuesdays, she had a free period just after lunch. Having caught up her grading while skipping lunch yesterday, she actually had some free time on her hands. There was nothing to be done with her research, and if she started puttering around the greenhouses, she’d just end up doing work that was supposed to be done by the students. She decided to take a walk, indoors for a change.

Eventually, her feet led her to a staircase that she’d never taken before. Surprising, really, that she hadn’t. This one was built into a narrow hallway and didn’t move on its own. Always a plus. There was a soft breeze coming down it, so wherever it spiraled up to was outdoors. She decided to explore.

At the top, she found the most incredible view of the grounds she’d seen yet, and that included while patrolling by broomstick. The telescopes positioned in various places confirmed this was the Astronomy Tower. A look to one side showed Hagrid’s Care of Magical Creatures class, students the size of ants and Hagrid the size of a mouse. She couldn’t tell what sort of creatures they were working with today though. Turning a bit, she saw the lake, utterly brilliant in the afternoon sun. Something about it gave her a chill, and she turned again to look out over the Quidditch Pitch.

She rested her hand on the stone ledge before her and was surprised to notice it felt as though something was carved on it. She looked down and saw a simple yet elegant carving of what was clearly a phoenix. Right, this is where that all happened.

This was where Professor Severus Snape had killed Headmaster Albus Dumbledore eight years ago. Never mind that the man was already dying, that was a hell of a thing to have to do. The incident was kind of abstract to her, of course, since she’d never met the famous Headmaster. Not even his portrait, really, since it always seemed to be sleeping. Still, she knew something about being faced with that kind of choice.

That thought brought her up short.

How could she have thought Severus’ rejection had anything to do with what she had come to see as standard intimidation by or outright fear of her Slayer powers? If he’d had the strength to do what she couldn’t …

She was 20 and Lydia was 18 when it had happened. Lydia had gone missing somewhere in South America, and Celia had been the one to find her in Peru, already heavily pregnant after only a week. Once she had killed the demon and they had escaped its lair, the problem had been how to travel. Lydia was in bad shape and had needed help to run until they’d found a suitable hideaway. Apparating was out of the question for her, and Celia was afraid to either attempt Side-Along Apparition or leave her and go for help. She knew Apparition was contraindicated during pregnancy, but she couldn’t remember why. If only the fetus was at risk, that would have been fine in this case. But was there danger to the mother, too?

She’d tried to contact Willow, but they were out of range. No cell phone towers out here, no owls or fireplaces. So she’d stayed close to their little cave, going out in search of food and herbs. If she could come up with something to help Lydia abort and then get her a little healthier, maybe then she could Apparate them both away. It was too bad that it would be another year and a half before she learned how to create a Portkey, though there was no guarantee it would have made any difference.

She had found a few herbs that could be used to end the pregnancy, but not the ones she would have preferred. Still, she brewed it as soon as she had gotten some food into the
other Slayer. It was a simple enough potion. It should have worked or, at the worst, not worked. And at first it seemed to do the job, because half an hour after taking it, Lydia began cramping and spotting. Then everything had gone south.

First there were the sores on her hands. They both thought that they could have been caused by some sort of insect bites, except that Celia didn’t have any. She’d been closer to the fire and brewing something that smelled bad enough to keep bugs away, though, so they decided that was all it was. Until the sores started to grow. And spread. And soon Lydia was screaming as her body seemed eaten away as if by acid.

Celia had tried every healing charm she knew. There was no time to try to brew an antidote, so she tried simply crushing the herbs she would have used for one and applying their juices to the wounds. Worst of all was the sight of Lydia’s stomach roiling like something out of a horror movie. She kept trying everything she could think of, but nothing helped. For the last terrible minutes that seemed like hours, Lydia had begged her to end the pain.

“I’m dead anyway, please make it stop!” she had screamed before she lost the ability to do even that. Celia had not been able to even consider it, still trying to find a way to save her friend. She tried to Stun her unconscious, but the demons’ immunity to that spell seemed to have transferred to Lydia. When it was over, she finally used the Killing Curse on the disgusting things still trying to escape her friend’s body. She wished she’d done it sooner.

Giles, Willow, and the others had all reassured her over and over again that she had done everything she could have. But she knew she hadn’t. She could have spared her friend those last horrific minutes at least. Which was worse? To kill a friend, or to stand by and watch her die in agony?

Tears ran freely down her face unacknowledged. After yesterday’s staff meeting, she should have known this memory was due to pop up. There had been enough other things to keep her from thinking about it, but now, with nothing else to occupy her mind, there was no escaping it. She knew better than to try.

After several minutes her tears stopped. She wiped her eyes and cast a quick Cleansing Charm on her face. She looked again at the small carving that had triggered the memory. No, he had no business being intimidated by her, but that might not be the only reason he would choose not to become any more involved with a Slayer. Maybe he’d just had enough of death, tragedy, and fighting for one lifetime.

He’d earned that.

Oh, she had too. So had every other Slayer and lots of other people. But he had the option to live a normal life now, and he’d been doing that until she came along. Could she really blame him for wanting that?

No. But he doesn’t have to be such an ass about it.

A glance at her watch told her she had better start heading to Greenhouse 2 for her next class. As she descended the stairs, she found she was grateful for the upcoming double period of routine activity.

~ ~ ~

When her class ended, she felt much more like her normal self. As she locked up and headed into the
castle, she found herself far calmer at the thought of a private conversation with Severus than she would have expected. Why not, though? He’s been either professional or his old snide self for the past two days. This is probably about the ‘leak’ and how tonight’s patrol should be planned. He’s obviously more the strategist than Minerva. I need to get my head out of the clouds and move on. He has.

She was therefore surprised to find, when he answered her knock with a curt, “Enter,” that there was a small table she didn’t remember from her last visit, and it was set for a light tea. He rose as she entered, took her cloak to hang on a nearby coat rack, and gestured to her to take one of the chairs opposite his desk. She noticed the chairs were angled about the small table rather than facing straight on to the desk as they normally did. They also looked more comfortable than she remembered, but then, the last time she’d sat in one, she’d been getting yelled at by Minerva. Well, they both had. She took a seat.

He stepped around the desk, took the other chair, and proceeded to pour.

“Thank you,” she said, accepting the cup.

“Sandwich?” he offered.

“Not just yet, thanks,” she replied. She wanted to see where this was going first. If she needed to yell at him, she didn’t want to have to do it around a mouthful of bread.

Silence fell as both took tentative sips of the steaming tea. Finally, curiosity got the better of her, and she set her cup down and fixed her eyes on him intently.

“What was it that you wanted to see me about?” she asked.

He didn’t answer right away but set his cup down as well and looked at her for a long moment.

“You gave me much to think about the other day,” he said at last.

She thought her eyebrows might have gotten lost in her hairline. “I was under the impression that that conversation was closed,” she said, sitting back into the chair and crossing her arms over her chest protectively, “and that you thought very little of anything I had contributed to it.”

“That is not entirely accurate,” he replied, picking up his teacup for another sip. She had the distinct feeling he was hiding behind it.

“Nor were some of the things I said.”

Oh really?

“Such as …” She wasn’t sure whether she wanted him to finish that or not. Except if he didn’t, she was going to have to scream. That was sounding like a good idea anyway.

“Your … original assessment of the magic that passed between us was most likely accurate.”

She blinked several times, unfolded her arms, and rested one on an armrest, propping her chin in her hand. She hoped that looked a lot more casual than she felt.

“So why did you lead me to believe it was normal?”

He appeared to be staring at the leaves at the bottom of his cup. “I suppose I did not wish to accept the implications.”

She couldn’t think of any response that she could actually voice, and so she just looked at him in
confusion.

“I suppose,” he repeated, “I did not wish to accept the implications of having formed some sort of magical bond with a witch young enough to be my daughter.”

Her brain stuttered processing that. There was something distinctly odd about his tone.

“Well, I’m not,” she finally managed to say.

He fixed his dark eyes on her. “How do you know that? You have no idea who your biological parents are.”

“You can’t be serious,” she said. “If you were actually concerned that was a possibility, there are ways to test that. Magically or scientifically. But it’s not possible.”

He continued to stare at her. Something inside her fluttered as she took in the idea that this might explain some of his bizarre behavior. It probably wasn’t, in general, a good idea for women who didn’t know who their fathers were to sleep with men old enough to fit the bill. She hadn’t thought about it because it wasn’t an issue.

“Look, it is entirely possible, since obviously you were no more virginal than me, that you fathered a child you weren’t told about some quarter century ago. It’s even possible that the mother decided things were getting kind of too wild over here and took off for the States. But even if we take this coincidence all the way and have her giving the kid up to live as a Muggle in, of all places, Cleveland, Ohio, that child still wouldn’t be me,” she said. “Because while I know next to nothing about my birth parents, one thing I do know is that as of at least three years ago, they’re both dead.”

“How do you know that?” he repeated. Was that a flicker of relief in his eyes?

“I went to a Seer, looking for information on them,” she replied. “I know he saw more than he told me, but he said I should stop looking because I couldn’t contact them since they’re dead. He wouldn’t say when, or how, or anything else about them, but he was very clear on that point.”

“And you trust this Seer?”

“He’s good. Notoriously good. Kind of eccentric. Definitely uses a completely unique method of reading people, but accurate. Even his predictions. They’re mutable, but right on target. Anything to do with the present or past? He’s just not wrong.”

After a long pause, Severus spoke again, “You are still young enough to have been my student.”

“I wasn’t, though,” she said. “I mean, if I had been, that would be kind of weird, but I wasn’t.”

He shifted uncomfortably in his chair, and she briefly wondered why.

“Then why,” he snarled suddenly, “were you so damned anxious to hide the fact that you’d been fucking some ugly, scarred old man.”

“I told you! It was none of Giles’ business, and if you hadn’t noticed, I spent far more time defending you than anything else!” she snapped. She barely noticed that he winced at that. “It was too soon, too new, too fragile. And you saw enough of what I felt to know that I don’t think about you like that at all!” At his answering scowl, she continued. “You’re not ugly to me, Severus. Never have been. Yes, you’re scarred. How could you not be? So what? If not for the way we heal, I’d look like a bloody road map myself. And old? Give me a break! Forty-five isn’t even middle-aged for a wizard. Meanwhile, for a Slayer, twenty-four is practically ancient, so if we’re going to play the age game,
maybe the problem is that I’m too old for you!”

As silence fell once again, her thoughts were forcibly dragged back to her visit to the Astronomy Tower, and she closed her eyes in a vain attempt to block the obvious conclusion. She swallowed hard to keep the tears from returning.

Not now. He’d think it was about him, and even if it might be just a little bit about him, he doesn’t need to be thinking that.

“That would seem to be a radical reinterpretation of the facts,” he said dryly.

She let out a short bark of utterly humorless laughter. “Sybill may be an old fraud, but she had this much right: there’s no such thing as a retired Slayer … at least not so far. We’ve got two that are pushing thirty, which is an all-time record, and one of them has died not once but twice. From your point of view, I’d call that an excellent reason not to get any closer to me.” She paused for breath and steeled herself to continue. In for a penny … “Though from my entirely selfish point of view, that’s an excellent reason not to question little details like age when I find something or someone who makes me happy.”

His next question startled her. “Why did you ask a Seer about your parents?”

“I guess I just wanted to know,” she said, shaking off the feeling of mental whiplash, “who I am, where I come from. He was right, though. Biology aside, for all practical purposes I come from Nathan and Melissa Reese.”

“How did your foster-parents die?” He hid behind his teacup again.

“A car accident. Why does it matter?” Where’s he going with this? Really don’t need to go visiting more sad memories today.

He set down his teacup and looked at her intently. “Slayers do not have exclusive rights to young, violent deaths then.”

“Of course not. Your point?”

“Perhaps you are right, and your age is not important.”

She sighed. This conversation had gone in one too many circles, and she thought she must have missed one or two loops. At least she didn’t feel like she was going to tear up again. For now.

“Severus, you gave me a lot to think about, too. I took a little walk this afternoon to clear my head.”

“And?”

“Among other things, I realized I’ve missed you these past couple of days.”

He looked startled. “I haven’t gone anywhere.”

“No, I mean, I’ve missed this.” She waved at the cooling tea. “I hadn’t realized before how many times during a day I file something aside to tell you later, how much I’ve come to look forward to our teas and even just the short conversations we have in the Hall.”

“I have missed that, too,” he said softly. “Although, technically, we still have not missed any of our weekly teas.”

“No, I guess not.” She picked up her cup, cast a warming charm on it, and took a sip. “I’d like it if
we could have that again.”

She looked back to him and found that he was watching her intently again. She lowered her eyes and forced herself to say, “But if you’d rather not, I can understand that.”

“What if I want more?” he asked.

Her heart skipped several beats … then made them up all at once. “Do you?”

“Yes,” he said simply, firmly.

“Why?” she asked. “Considering everything we’ve just been talking about, why?”

“Because you are right. There are some things one should simply accept and not question too closely.”

She reminded herself to breathe. She wanted to leap out of her chair, kiss him senseless, and drag him off to his rooms, wherever they were. She wanted to run screaming before he did another about-face and completely ripped her heart out of her chest this time. Was there some kind of middle ground, maybe?

“I’d rather not have another implosion,” she said after a long pause. “We should probably take things more slowly.”

He nodded, then said, “Even so, I cannot promise a lack of further … implosions. No one can. Particularly me.”

“Fair enough,” she agreed.

Just because there’s no guarantee is no reason not to try, right?

“What would ‘taking things more slowly’ mean to you?” he asked softly.

She thought about that a moment. How do we have a normal relationship while both of us work at a magical boarding school and, oh, by the way, deal with some idiot inviting vampires onto the campus and prepare to train up a new Slayer? I don’t think there is a ‘normal’ for this.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “Can we go back to how things were just, I don’t know, more personal? Maybe keep up our teas, maybe go back to having them twice a week, and use at least some of the time to just get to know each other? That might be a good start.”

He nodded slowly.

“Is it really that important to you for this to be public knowledge?” she asked. “I mean, this early, while we’re still figuring things out?”

“No,” he said. “But I don’t want it to be a secret, either. If other staff members find out, then so be it.”

“That’s reasonable,” she agreed, a smile pulling at her lips. All of a sudden she felt giddy. “I feel like we’re negotiating a peace treaty, not just figuring out how to … date, if that’s even the right word.”

She was rewarded with that little half-smile of his. Maybe she’d get a chance to see that more often after all.

“I suppose, in a way, we are,” he replied.
“This isn’t what I expected when you asked me to come here,” she admitted.

“For what it’s worth, this is not what I had planned either.” He picked up the plate of sandwiches and offered them to her again. She selected one with murmured thanks and took a bite as he continued, “What did you expect?”

She used the time she spent chewing and swallowing to consider her answer. “I’d about convinced myself that this was going to be a strategic discussion of today’s ‘leak’ and how to conduct tonight’s patrol,” she said, adding, “Not completely though. Hence the walk earlier.”

“It’s not a particularly good day for a walk,” he observed.

“No, so I stayed inside mostly.” She hoped he wouldn’t ask any more. She’d answer if he did, but she didn’t think a discussion of where she had ended up – much less her musings when she got there – would be all that helpful right now. To her relief, he didn’t.

“I confess, I do not know yet whether the information has been successfully planted.”

“Who’s supposed to do it?”

“Sybill,” he replied. At her widened eyes, he continued, “She has the advantage of two opposing student opinions. Her favorites believe her every word. The rest consider her flighty and just foolish enough to let something like that slip.”

“I suppose that makes sense.” She thought for a moment. “Last night’s patrol approach seemed to work well. Were the hourly check-ins your idea or Minerva’s?”

“Mine,” he admitted.

“A very strategically sound approach,” she said, her lips twitching. Possibly sweet, too. I’m thinking I shouldn’t say that part.

“Do you plan to cover the same time period?”

“Probably, at least at first. I should start mixing it up, though, if nothing happens for a couple of days. I’m still hoping for it to be simple.”

“Do you really think it is?”

“No,” she sighed. “Three nights in a row with this dream – it’s warning me about something. I just wish it would be clearer. Plus the other dream is showing up with it, so I think they’re connected.”

On the mantle behind her, a small clock chimed.

“I imagine we both have things to accomplish before dinner,” Severus said.

“True.” She rose from her seat, setting down her teacup and napkin. When she looked up, he was already standing. “Thank you,” she said. “This has been … much nicer than I expected.”

“You’re welcome,” he replied as he brought her cloak from the rack. She allowed him to drape it across her shoulders and smiled as he fastened the clasp and asked, “Does ‘taking things slowly’ allow for a kiss when we part?”

“I’m thinking it’s a requirement,” she answered, lifting her face to his.

He brushed his lips across hers gently, briefly. She reminded herself to breathe again as she felt a
sensation of rightness wash over her as if an orchestra that had been tuning had suddenly converged upon a perfect note.

“Right,” she said after a moment. “See you at dinner then.”

He traced her jaw line with a finger, nodded, and opened the door.

~ ~ ~

Once she had left, Severus summoned a house-elf to clear away the remains of their barely-touched tea tray, Vanished the small table he had conjured, and settled in to mark some essays before dinner. He found himself momentarily distracted, however, by thoughts of his earlier conversation with Celia. If nothing else, she certainly had not been intimidated by that humiliating outburst of temper. Then again, he supposed that was not surprising.

There was something still bothering him, though he could not determine what. Once the idea had occurred to him at lunch that she was not only young enough to be his daughter but also did not know who her parents were, he thought that was it. He had planned to cast a Paternity Charm on her during the meeting, which was to have been a discussion of security and her patrolling responsibilities as she had guessed. Had the result been negative, she would never have known. Had it been positive … well, fortunately it had not been necessary. He’d had no intention of actually speaking of it.

Now, if he could only determine what it was that still troubled him about her, perhaps he could actually enjoy the prospect of getting to know her better. Their agreement had eased the feeling of wrongness that had been bothering him for the past couple of days, though it seemed strange to take such a planned approach to it. Artificial. However, it was not an approach he had ever tried before. Perhaps trying something so different could lead to a better outcome? Considering some of the things he had said to her, he was surprised she had agreed to give this another try, even on such careful terms.

When she’d said she had missed him, he’d been shocked. When she had elaborated and it seemed she wished only to rekindle their friendship, nothing more, it had almost physically hurt. It had frankly surprised him to find himself admitting aloud that he wanted more. That was a risk he had not taken in … a very long time.

He was not even sure what outcome he wanted in the long term. Right now all he knew was that the discordant feeling he’d had for the past two days had resolved. The … annoyance he felt at having had to admit he had not actually wished to end their relationship was a price worth paying for the calm that had settled over him, he rather thought.

Calm? I could almost call it happiness.

He scoffed softly as he absently twirled his quill. He still wished he could determine the source of the rather ominous sense that this would go very badly wrong. Other than his rather dismal history with women. Or perhaps that was all it was?

Shaking off this irrelevant line of thought, he returned his attention to the essay before him, slashing through several lines of idiocy with red ink and writing a comment that was somewhat less scathing than he had intended. Well, why not? Nothing else about this day appeared to be going according to plan, and so far that appeared to be a good thing. A very good thing.

~ ~ ~
Looking across the lake, Celia wondered again what that odd energy here had been. She would have to mention it to Minerva. The boundary was holding. That was the important thing.

Turning her back on it, she headed back toward the castle, another night’s patrol completed. Still no sign of any further disturbances. That was all to the good, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something ominous about the quiet. She’d have to patrol Hogsmeade some night soon just to be sure no problems were cropping up there.

When she reached her cottage, she paused to summon her happiest memory and thought, *Tell Severus all clear and I'm going to sleep. Expecto Patronum!* The silvery snake issued from her wand and shot off toward the castle wall. She watched with amusement as it flowed straight through the stone. Still smiling, she entered her cottage, hung up her cloak, and got ready for bed.

~ ~ ~

Wednesday found her meeting with Minerva to discuss the strangely dark energy she had felt near the lake.

“It didn’t feel like part of the lake,” she explained. “I doubt it has anything to do with the merpeople or even the grindylows or the Giant Squid.” She spared a moment to wonder what a squid was doing in fresh water in the first place, then continued. “It really felt like it came from under the lake somehow. Not just under the water, but under the bottom of it. Do you know of anything under there?”

The Headmistress looked disquieted by this information. “You say it did not interfere with the spell?”

“No,” Celia confirmed. “I’ve rechecked the sentry points every night, and they are all working properly. There’s just a different, rather Dark flavor to the energy there. Why? What is it?”

“According to Harry, Salazar Slytherin’s Chamber of Secrets extends beneath the lake.”

Celia’s eyes widened. “Well, that answers two questions then.”

“Two?”

“That must be the source of the Darker energy, and apparently it had no problem interacting with a spell involving the blood of a half-blood witch. In fact, tapping into energy connected to something of one of Hogwarts’ Founders may have increased the effectiveness of the protections.”

“That is true.” Minerva looked less relieved than Celia would have liked but didn’t express any further concerns. Celia decided she would have to see if there was anything in the library with more to say about this Chamber of Secrets.

~ ~ ~

“Severus, what’s the Chamber of Secrets?” she asked during their next tea on Friday afternoon.

He shifted uncomfortably on her sofa and wondered why she was asking this.

“I thought we were supposed to be discussing more personal matters,” he said. As artificial as it felt, he vastly preferred learning more about the person she was when she was neither teaching nor researching to discussing anything to do with the Dark Lord.

“We are,” she replied. “We have.” She began to tick things off on her fingers. “In the past hour we’ve discussed both of our favorite authors, whether or not black qualifies as a favorite color, what
it was like to go to a Muggle university as a Slayer, and why, when you returned to Hogwarts, you chose to teach Potions instead of Defense. So it seems like we’ve been working our way back around to business anyway. It’s supposed to be Slytherin’s chamber, you’re Head of Slytherin House, so you must know about it, right?”

“What do you know about it so far?” he asked resignedly. “And why are you interested in it?”

“I’m interested because it seems like it’s the source of some distinctly Dark energies I picked up when I was drawing power into the protection spell,” she explained. “As to what I know so far … very little. It was thought to be a legend for centuries and then, for no apparent reason, it was opened some fifty years ago and again a dozen years ago. The first time, a student died. The second time had students Petrified, one kidnapped, and then somehow it was all resolved, apparently involving Harry, but not a single book in the library here has any details, and Minerva looked way uncomfortable when I asked about anything under the lake that might give off that sort of Dark energy.”

He groaned internally. She was right, of course. As Head of Slytherin, he really ought to know more about it. However, depending on just what she needed to know, she should probably be speaking with Potter. Hoping to avoid making that referral, he gave as complete an account as he could of that extremely difficult year from the first Petrification to the discovery and destruction of the Dark Lord’s diary-Horcrux. When he finished, he waited somewhat anxiously for whatever questions she might have.

“Has anyone been back down there since?”

“I do not believe so. Potter would be the only one able to open the chamber, after all, and I doubt he has.” Now that he thought on it, it did seem odd that Potter had not been asked to reopen the Chamber so that it could be examined further. Who knew what was still down there?

“So, we have no idea whether there are any other basilisks or other creatures down there?” she asked, echoing his thoughts.

“You’re not thinking of going down there to look for any, are you?” However good an idea it might have been to examine it before, surely it was best to leave it alone now.

“Not without a very good reason,” she said, sounding like she was trying to reassure him. “It’s just … there’s got to still be something down there generating that energy.”

“Could it not simply be the spells cast to create and protect the Chamber itself?”

“Maybe, though it felt more organic than that.” She appeared to become lost in thought, sinking back into her end of the sofa and drumming on the armrest with her fingers.

“Is there anything more?” he asked. “Or can we move on to discussing your rather ecletic taste in music? What was that you had playing when I arrived?”

He was relieved when she smiled at this and accepted the diversion. The story of the Chamber tread awfully close to matters he knew she must ask about eventually but that he truly did not want to remember much less share, none of which could possibly have anything to do with that vampire or with whomever had brought it onto the grounds.

~ ~ ~

The following Tuesday, she decided to find out what had made him so uncomfortable telling that tale. They were back in the dungeons this time, though in the sitting room of his quarters rather than his office. She noted with interest that the walls were practically lined with bookshelves, some of
which appeared to be double-stacked. As she carefully phrased her question, she wondered if being on his own territory would relieve any of his discomfort.

“That was when I knew for certain,” he answered, “that the Dark Lord would find a way to return. He had already tried the year before.”

She watched him carefully. He was too practiced at concealing his emotions to reveal much, but his discomfort was clearly every bit as intense as during their last conversation.

“Is it just that the memories are bad or is there something else?” she pressed.

“I would prefer not to discuss it,” he replied.

“Severus,” she said, “I’m not going to ask you to talk about anything you don’t want to.” At his guarded expression, she took his hand and continued, “I don’t need to know all your deepest, darkest secrets, unless you need to tell them.”

His hand twitched in hers, and she loosened her grip in case he chose to pull away. He didn’t. He didn’t answer, either.

She decided to take a guess at what was bothering him. “I don’t need to know the things you did when you were a Death Eater. I know the only thing that matters: you left.”

“How can that be enough?” he asked, the words sounding as though they were ripped from his throat involuntarily.

Noting the way his shoulders stiffened and his expression became defensive, she decided she’d hit it. “Because I know how the Dark Arts can draw you in, I know what it is like to revel in that kind of power,” she said, “and I know what it takes to pull away. There’s always been a core of decency in you, a strong one, or you couldn’t have done it.”

“Your teacher’s memories?”

“Yes.” She squirmed a little. “Her trip down that road may have been shorter, but I can almost guarantee you never went as far as she did.”

“You give me too much credit,” he said hoarsely.

Ha! Wanna bet?

“Ever try to destroy all life on Earth?”

He blinked. “No.”

“All right, then.” She picked up his hand and pressed a kiss to his palm, then let her fingers trace over his forearm to where she knew the faded remnants of the Dark Mark lay beneath his sleeve. “This is just another battle scar,” she said softly, then drew his face to hers for a kiss that became longer and deeper than she had intended. Pulling back, she took a moment to catch her breath, then said, “So then, how about instead you tell me about the town where you grew up?”

“It wasn’t a particularly pleasant place,” he said after a brief pause.

“There must have been something you liked about it,” she replied. “But if there wasn’t, then it’s your turn to pick a topic.”

It took a little while, but his reluctance faded as he settled in to tell her about how his mother had
taught him to play Gobstones and then adapted the game so that he could play with his Muggle friends using regular marbles. She drank in the boyish joy that periodically crossed his face during this tale, thinking he should do this much more often.

~ ~ ~

Friday’s tea in her cottage began with a discussion of how soon the hybridized herbs would be ready for testing, moved on to a discussion of the comparative merits of wizarding and Muggle music, and then became derailed by a dance step demonstration that evolved into an embrace.

When they parted for breath, Severus asked, “Celia, have we been taking things slowly long enough?”

She swallowed, gratifyingly flustered, and said, “I think so.”

He tried to force himself to think logically. It would be dinnertime soon, and he did not want them to be rushed. Then she was going to patrol immediately after, and she’d mentioned a plan to cover Hogsmeade again tonight. But tomorrow was Saturday, and they could sleep in. There was not even Quidditch to worry about, and so long as the Slytherins did not act up and require his attention, they should be relatively undisturbed.

“Will you come to my quarters after your patrol?” he asked softly.

“Yes,” she whispered, gazing at him with an expression that nearly destroyed his resolve to wait until later.

He leaned his forehead against hers. “Let me know when you are back on the grounds, even if it is not time for another check-in, and I will be waiting.”

She smiled and nodded, then took a step back, saying, “I should get ready for dinner.”

Taking his cue, he nodded firmly and left.

~ ~ ~

There had been, as usual, little point to patrolling Hogsmeade. Tonight hadn’t even provided any rowdy drunks for her to deal with.

*So whatever it is, it’s not there. That’s of the good. I just wish I knew what it is, where it is, or anything at all for sure.*

As she approached the gates, she dropped the glamour she had been wearing and pulled out her wand to tap out the sequence that would let any Hogwarts teacher enter. She stepped through and rewarded the gates, then, with a smile, sent her Patronus to let Severus know she would be arriving soon.

Walking toward the castle, she was glad that the ground had frozen back up tonight. The thaw over the past couple of days basically traded all the snow for mud. She preferred patrolling on foot, even though a broom offered a wider view, so a firm surface was a definite plus.

Nearly halfway to the main doors, she saw movement to her left and turned quickly. A dark-robed figure was clearly silhouetted in the light of the full moon, and for a moment she thought Severus had come outside to meet her. Then the figure turned to face her, and her jaw dropped at the sight of the skull-like mask. She fired off a Stunning Spell, but just as she saw it hit, she felt another spell hit her from behind. Her world exploded as pain seared along every nerve like liquid fire, and she fell to the
frozen ground.

~ ~ ~

After dinner, he’d gone back to his quarters and contemplated how they should be arranged for this evening. He’d set a bottle of elf-made wine to chill, built up the fire to warm the rooms and, after much debate, turned down the covers on his bed. Then he’d forced himself to leave and conduct his own patrol before he could become carried away.

He was now arriving at the kitchens under pretext of seeking out students after a late-night snack. In truth, he was looking for the Malfoys’ old house-elf, Dobby, to ask for a tray of late-night snacks to be sent to his quarters. While all of the elves necessarily answered to all of the staff, Dobby was the one who seemed to mind him the least. He would like to think it was because he had treated the elf decently when he was the Malfoys’ servant; however he knew it had far more to do with the number of times he had saved Harry bloody Potter.

“Professor Snape,” said an elf named Loozy, “no students is being coming tonight.”

“Thank you,” he replied, “but I am actually looking for Dobby.”

“Dobby is here!” said an eager voice, preceding its owner around a corner. “What is Professor Snape be wanting? No students is being here tonight, sir.”

He placed his request, ignored the puzzled look it generated, and left. He had not gone more than halfway down the hall, when he saw the familiar silver snake approaching him. He knelt to touch it with his left hand. I’m back, and I’ll be there soon, it relayed, then began to dissipate.

Smiling, he began to stand, when suddenly the silvery mist sent a shock of pain into his hand that shot up his arm and knifed through his shoulder. His blood ran cold, and he quickly stood, drew his wand, and ran.

~ ~ ~

Pain. Pain was everywhere. She breathed it. It flowed through her veins. The only thing that existed besides the pain was the annoying voice that kept telling her to open her eyes. Part of her wanted to laugh at the voice. Didn’t it know she would never do what it said? Part of her was terrified of what it asked. Opening her eyes would be bad. People could steal things if you opened your eyes. But all there was to steal was pain. Why would they want that?

But she wouldn’t let them in. She screwed her eyes more tightly shut as more waves of pain coursed through her. She felt hands on her face. Trying to open her eyes, she realized. Stupid. If they wanted pain, she’d give it to them.

~ ~ ~

Once outside, he ran for the gates, hoping this was the path she would have taken. Before long, he had only to follow her screams. Soon the scene came into view, and he saw three figures wearing sickeningly familiar robes and masks. Two had their wands trained on her. A third was bent over her. In the split second he prepared to cast a volley of spells at them, the bent-over figure flew back from her.

Still running, he disarmed the other two and bound the first. The two he’d disarmed recovered quickly and, before he could hit them again, winked out of sight. He fired several more spells toward where they had been, sweeping out in increasingly wide arcs, and connected with nothing.
Now he was practically on top of where she lay. He cast a Shield Charm around them both and tried to reach for her, only to find that she was under a Shield Charm herself. That must have been what threw the remaining assailant away from her. She was twitching and shaking in the all-too-familiar aftermath of the Cruciatus.

“Celia,” he barked, “let me in. We have to get away from here, and I can’t reach you.”

No response. Could she even hear him?

“Celia,” he repeated more loudly. “They’re gone, for now, but we have to leave. Drop the damned shield!”

A brief hesitation and the shield winked out. He wasn’t sure if she had heard him or had simply been unable to continue holding the spell. Gathering her into his arms, he scanned the area again. The only remaining assailant appeared to be unconscious as well as bound. He would freeze if he was out here for very long. Not particularly caring, Severus started toward the hospital wing, moving as quickly as he could while holding the barely conscious Slayer.

~ ~ ~

The pain stopped. How? She hadn’t let them in to steal it. The pain she threw at them was different. Wasn’t it? Slowly, she realized there were other things they would have wanted to steal, though she didn’t know what they were. They were all locked away nicely, so it didn’t really matter, did it? The only thing that mattered was that nobody could get in to steal them. Ever. That she knew beyond any doubt.

There was a new voice now. She didn’t know what it wanted, but it wasn’t annoying like the other one. This voice sounded different. Safe. It wanted something, but she didn’t know what. She was so tired. Now the pain was gone, maybe she could stop pushing. Maybe that was what the Safe Voice wanted. She let go.

The Voice came with Robes that smelled sour and spicy. She felt herself gathered up into the Robes. The Robes were Safe just as the Voice was Safe, and they were taking her somewhere that must also be Safe. It took her a long minute to manage it, but she convinced the fingers of her free hand to move just enough to tangle tightly in the spicy-sour Robes. Her other hand was gripping something hard and thin and important, but she didn’t know what it was or why she shouldn’t let it go. The Robes shifted their grip on her, and she felt warmer air pass over her. They were in the Safe place then. She relaxed a little.

~ ~ ~

“Poppy!” he bellowed once they were inside, thanking Merlin the hospital wing had a direct entrance from the grounds.

“What is it?” the matron asked as she rushed to meet them, drawing her dressing gown on as she went.

“Cruciatus,” he gasped. “Death Eaters. I know what I saw!” This in response to Poppy’s incredulous look.

“Set her down over there,” she directed, gesturing toward one of the beds. “I’ll Floo Minerva and be back to examine her.”

He brought Celia over to the bed Poppy had indicated and set her down gently. When he tried to rise, he realized she had his robes in a death grip. He tried to pry her fingers loose but could not.
“Celia, you have to let go,” he said. “You’re in hospital now. You’re safe. And I have to stand back up.” In fact, if he didn’t change his position soon, Poppy would have another patient. As she still did not let go, he went to one knee on the stone floor. He stroked her hand and continued to speak. “It’s all right – you can let go now,” he repeated over and over as he wondered what was taking Poppy so long.

~ ~ ~

She was somewhere soft now. The Robes and the Voice were still there, but someone was trying to make her let go of the Robes. She didn’t want the Robes to go away, so she held on. The Voice was saying things, but she didn’t know what those things were. She didn’t want the Voice to leave either. It was very soothing to hear it, though, and soon her grip slackened. It worried her when the Robes slipped from her grasp, but they didn’t leave, and the Voice continued to speak.

~ ~ ~

“Severus, what happened?” demanded Minerva, brushing soot from her dressing gown.

“She was on her way back from patrolling Hogsmeade, had just sent a Patronus reporting an all-clear,” he said as he finally worked his robes free of her grip. “Just as it finished delivering the message, it sent a bolt of pain into me, and I knew she was hurt.”

“Poppy said something about Death Eaters?”

“There were three,” he said as he straightened. “I know we got them all, but there were three people in Death Eater robes and masks. Two had their wands on her, at least one of them casting the Cruciatius, possibly both. The third had his hands on her. I don’t know what he did, but she managed a Shield Charm to push him away before I had time to respond.”

“Where are they now?”

“Two of them disappeared. They cannot have Disapparated, and they were not simply invisible. I cannot explain it.”

“And the third?”

“Still out there in a full Body-Bind. Someone should probably get him before he freezes, if we are to have any answers.”

Minerva looked surprised, probably wondering why he had not already done so. “Yes. Would you …”

“I am not leaving her.” He was startled by his own resolve on that point. It was not as though there was anything he could do for her that Poppy could not. Except … it was clear that she was suffering from more than post-Cruciatius symptoms. The way she was burying her face in the pillow, the way her eyes were screwed so tightly shut. Something else had been done to her, and he was certain without knowing why that he absolutely needed to remain.

“I see,” Minerva said after an uncomfortable silence. “Very well then.”

He did not turn to see her expression nor what she would do next. His attention was entirely on the diagnostic spells Poppy had been casting since she had returned with Minerva.

~ ~ ~
There were other voices now. As long as the Safe Voice was there, she didn’t mind the others. They were nothing like the annoying voice. Funny how she’d been able to understand the annoying voice, but not the Safe Voice or these new voices.

Different fingers touched her face and she flinched, grinding her eyelids tighter than ever. She couldn’t let them in, no matter what. This new voice was not Safe, then, although the Safe Voice was still speaking. Sharply. The hands that went with the Safe Voice were still holding the hand they had removed from the Robes, and the new hands left her face.

Now the Robes were helping her sit up. She really wanted to sleep, not to sit, but she didn’t fight it. The new voice was speaking again, and she felt something being pressed against her mouth. She pressed her lips tightly together and tried to move away, but the Robes were in her way. She buried her face in the Robes so the new voice could not get near.

The Voice spoke, and a large hand stroked her hair. The new voice seemed to have gone, and slowly she relaxed. The large hand moved and lifted her face away from the Robes while the Voice continued to speak. Another of the hands attached to the Robes brought the thing to her mouth again. The Voice was speaking very evenly and making the same sounds over and over. The Voice wanted to put the thing in her mouth. The Voice was Safe. So it must be okay to put the thing in her mouth, right?

She parted her lips and felt something press between them. There was liquid, and it tasted bad, but the Voice was still repeating the same sounds. She swallowed the liquid, and the object went away.

The softness under her shifted, and she felt the Robes pull her to lie back against them. A heavy, comforting weight rested on her head, and the large hand was stroking her hair again. She felt the shaking in her body lessen and began to fall asleep. A drop of water landed on her cheek, and this bothered her. It shouldn’t rain here. She whimpered and burrowed further into the Robes until unconsciousness claimed her.
Severus Banished the latest set of empty potions vials back to Poppy’s storage area, sat back on the edge of Celia’s hospital bed, and stroked her hair. That seemed to soothe her. It was disturbing to watch her tremors and the way she would grab fistfuls of his robes as if hanging on for her life. This afternoon … yesterday afternoon by now, this had been the woman he had planned to take to bed. Now he was, in fact, on a bed with her, and she seemed hardly more than an infant in an adult’s body. He supposed he should be repulsed. He wasn’t.

He looked up as he heard his name being called. Minerva was standing near the foot of the bed, and she gestured towards the matron’s office, clearly intending him to follow her there. He extricated himself from the sleeping Celia and watched her a moment to see if she would wake, but she did not stir. As he moved away from her, he had the odd sensation of walking against a headwind or swimming against a strong tide. He tried to ignore it.

In the office, they found Poppy consulting what appeared to be a very old and ragged medical manual. She looked up as they entered.

“Poppy, may we borrow your office for a moment?” Minerva asked.

“Certainly.” The matron marked her page, closed the book, and stood to leave.

“Have you found anything?” Severus asked.

“No yet.” Poppy’s eyes looked strained. That was not encouraging.

“What is it?” Minerva asked.

“This is not a normal reaction to such a short exposure to the Cruciatus. And a Slayer should be more resilient, not less.” Poppy rested her hand back on the book as though she wanted to open it again and resume her research.

“But that is not all they did to her.” He crossed his arms tightly.

“No. The way she responds to any attempt to open her eyes suggests, as you said, that they were also
trying to use Legilimency. No one ever tried to use both simultaneously on you, Severus, only sequentially, and so far I am finding nothing in the literature about the effects of doing so.” Poppy sighed. “I’ll keep looking.” She nodded and left her office to them.

He stilled his own mind and thought about her words for a moment. It was odd that they would have tried to use both concurrently. Even if one were not trying to defend against Legilimency, it was a normal response to pain to shut one’s eyes tightly. That was, no doubt, the reason the Dark Lord had preferred to alternate the two when testing to see if one of his followers was hiding anything. Being hit by different curses at the same time often caused unforeseeable results, but Legilimency was a very different type of magic to curses. Would the combination cause something like this when rapidly alternating between the Crucius and Legilimency did not? That seemed unlikely. Fury and frustration welled up inside him again, and he firmly tamped them back down.

Minerva closed the door and turned to her Deputy. She appeared to be considering carefully what she would say.

“Harry has dealt with the assailant you left lying on the grounds,” she said at last. “Two Aurors have taken him to be questioned. Harry is now checking the grounds with Septima, both to verify that there are no more intruders and to attempt to determine how these intruders arrived.”

He nodded guardedly.

“Now, I want an explanation of your actions or rather the lack of them.” She peered over the rim of her glasses at him as though he were a first-year she had caught throwing hexes in her class.

He banished that thought, narrowed his eyes, and asked, “What would you like to hear?”

“I would like to know why, when you first realized Celia was in trouble, you did not alert me or any of the other staff, and I would like to know why you did not send an alert of any kind before you went to the hospital wing.”

She was right, of course. That it had been nothing but sheer instinct was no excuse. His instincts should have included raising the alarm immediately. Had the last half-dozen years of relative peace atrophied his responses so badly as that?

“I … do not have an adequate answer to your first question,” he admitted. “For your second, it was clear that Celia was the focus of the attack. They had already incapacitated her. If what they wanted was to proceed into the school, they would have attempted to do so before I arrived. Instead, once I arrived, the two who could do so fled.”

“You still should have alerted me immediately when you first became aware of the problem,” she said, her hands on her hips. “There could have been others. You could have been injured as well. Shall I continue?”

“No.” He clasped his hands behind his back. “You are correct, Minerva. I should have notified you immediately.”

Her expression became, if anything, even more stern. “I can see why you responded as you did, Severus. However, your first responsibility is the safety of this school and especially its students. I rather imagine Celia would agree.”

“Yes, Minerva.” There was no point in arguing. She was probably right. As far as he was concerned, Celia was welcome to side with Minerva against him because that would mean she was awake and speaking. However, he was sure Minerva did not see at all why he had responded as he had. He was
not certain that he understood. Even from this short distance, he felt something tugging at him, insisting he go back to Celia, though not nearly as forcefully as before. When he had first felt that jolt of pain from her Patronus, doing other than running to her side had never entered his mind. He found that as troubling as Minerva did.

Minerva’s face softened, and she asked, “When did all of this happen?”

“I do not believe that is your business,” he snapped.

“If it is affecting your judgment, it most certainly is,” she retorted.

Seething, but keeping his expression impassive, he replied, “It’s hard to say exactly. The vampire attack, however, seemed to act as a sort of catalyst.”

“I see.” She stared at him intently, no doubt wondering how this had managed to escape her notice. “I should be glad to see you find some happiness, Severus.”

“I do not believe that ‘happy’ would describe my current state, Minerva,” he sneered before reeling his emotions back in once again.

“No, of course not,” she agreed. “Not now.” She paused. “You are the last staff member I should have thought I would ever need to remind not to allow your feelings to interfere with your duties.”

He acknowledged this with a stiff nod. It was more than that, but until he understood the magic involved, he did not care to try to explain it. Most likely he would not care to do so once he did understand it.

Minerva sat behind Poppy’s desk and gestured for him to take the other chair. As he sat, he observed that she was tapping her fingers thoughtfully on the desktop.

“Severus,” she said, “have you spoken with Albus’ portrait recently?”

That startled him.

“No,” he replied. “You know that I prefer not to do so.”

Her fingers tapped some more.

“I Flooed my friend, Rupert Giles, the Head Watcher,” she continued. “I shall have to inform him that her condition is more serious than I had realized. At any rate, I told him that I would have to consider whether it is advisable to retain Celia, and …”

“What?” he roared. He barely kept himself from launching back out of the chair.

Minerva looked at him sternly. “As I explained to both Rupert and Albus, if these attacks have been, indeed, directed at her primarily, then I must decide whether she poses more risk to the school as a whole than she represents protection for this one student who has yet to be identified and for all we know may not exist.”

He did not respond. Her words made sense, but yet they did not. If Celia was in danger, how could they send her away? Hogwarts had never refused anyone protection. Granted, this situation was very different. Among other things, he rather imagined she would not fancy the idea of being “protected.” He focused on the one bit that seemed not to fit.

“And why does this lead you to ask if I had spoken to the portrait?”
She pressed her lips into a thin line. “Because he disagreed with me, and he has always put the safety of the school first.”

“Oh, yes,” he scoffed, “even when a would-be murderer had entered the castle not once but twice, he certainly put the safety of the school as a whole above keeping a particular student here.”

Minerva dismissed this with a wave. “That was a very different set of circumstances, and you know it, Severus.”

He decided to drop that line for now but to keep it in reserve. “And so you believe I would have convinced the portrait to keep her here because I would wish it, and to hell with the safety of the school? I would not do such a thing, and were I so persuasive, Minerva, he would not be a portrait,” he snarled.

“Really, Severus,” she said with a sigh.

For the briefest moment, he regretted his words as he took in the pained expression on her face. Then he hardened his resolve, but before he could say anything further, Minerva was speaking again.

“Do you plan to stay here tonight?”

“Yes,” he bit out. The pulling sensation was growing more insistent. He knew she was safe here, knew Poppy would watch over her. How many times had she done so for him, after all? But he couldn’t bring himself to leave.

“You may spend as much of this weekend here as you choose, Severus. I will tell the Slytherin Prefects that you are working on a special project and that they should report any problems directly to me.”

He was taken aback by this, and it took him a moment to deliver a cool, “Thank you.”

“On Monday, however, I do expect you to return to classes,” Minerva continued. “If she has not improved substantially by then, we will have to consider transferring her to St. Mungo’s.”

He closed his eyes, willing that possibility away. Reluctantly, he opened his eyes and nodded.

“The rest of the faculty will deal with security. Depending upon the results of the Ministry’s interrogation, they may send Aurors to assist. I expect that when I contact Rupert, he will want to send his own reinforcements. I have not yet decided whether to accept.”

“If the target is Celia personally, then additional Slayers in the area should be a help, not a further danger,” he pointed out. “If they are simply targeting Slayers, then the student Potential is at risk, and multiplying the targets is one more way to protect her.”

“I will consider that.” The Headmistress looked as though she had not thought of the second possibility before and was not best pleased to do so now. “We still cannot be certain this Potential even exists. Celia may have been misled.”

He crossed his arms. “Perhaps, when you contact her Watcher again, you should request further information about how they came to this conclusion as well as further information on her unorthodox training.” He thought back to her conversation with Hagrid last fall, the one she still did not know he had heard. “I believe she has been trapped within her own mind before. Her teacher, Madam Rosenberg, may be able to offer some suggestion as to how we may reach her now.”

Minerva nodded. “I will have Poppy join me to discuss the implications for her treatment, of course.”
She rose and stepped around the desk.

Severus stood and opened the door for her.

She paused on her way through the door and turned to say, “I believe she may be good for you. I would have expected you to tear apart the one assailant you caught, Severus, possibly with your bare hands.”

“If she does not recover,” he said coldly, “I very well may.”

~ ~ ~

Outside, something felt different. There was different cloth against her skin and less of it. The Robes and the Voice were gone, though the spicy-sour scent of the Robes remained on some of the cloth that covered her. Somehow she found that reassuring.

Inside, she was pacing a long room lined with cupboards and closets, all of which were so tightly sealed and locked that not even air could pass through their doors. She checked each lock as she passed it, testing to ensure no one could break in. Some of the cupboards had blue doors. They had special locks because they weren’t exactly hers, but it was important that she guard them. Most of the cupboards and all of the closets had green doors. Some had heavy-duty locks like the blue doors; some had simpler ones. In the corner was a cheerful little jelly cabinet that was covered in painted flowers and bright green leaves. There was one cupboard that held the keys to all the locks, but it was very well hidden. Unless someone knew exactly where to look, they wouldn’t see it at all, and she planned to keep it that way.

The door at the far end of the room led not to a closet or cupboard, but the basement. That door had more locks than any of the others, and she checked it far more carefully than the others each time she reached it. No one was going to get past her to reach any of these doors, least of all this one. And if they did, they wouldn’t be able to open them. She examined a particularly large padlock carefully. Satisfied that it was sound, she let it fall back into place, turned, and resumed her inspection of the rest of the doors.

Outside, time passed. Sunlight fell onto her eyelids, and as she woke, she nearly opened them. Then she remembered and screwed them more tightly shut.

The Robes were back, and when she turned to reach for them, they jumped. That made her sad. She didn’t want to frighten the Robes. She knew she frightened people sometimes, though she didn’t know how she knew that. The Robes and the Voice were Safe. They shouldn’t be afraid.

Another voice came. It was low and kind, and she liked listening to it. Then it tried to make her drink something, and she pushed it away. Hard. It was another trick, like the voice that tried to make her open her eyes. The new voice made a loud noise, and she heard glass shatter. She had to get away, but if she couldn’t open her eyes, how could she run?

The Voice made soothing noises, and she allowed herself to be calmed. Then the Robes gave her more things to drink. Some of them tasted horrible, but some tasted very good. The Robes tried to give her a different kind of thing to put into her mouth, but she wasn’t sure what to do with it. It was soft and fluffy and tasted good, but she couldn’t just swallow it, so she moved it around in her mouth until it was almost liquid and then swallowed it. After that, the Robes just gave her more things to drink while the Voice made more calming sounds.

She was very tired after drinking all those things, so she was happy when the Robes laid her back down so that she could go back to her guard duty.
“Poppy tells me there is no change,” Minerva said softly.

“No,” Severus replied. He set down the flask he had just convinced Celia to drink from next to the other empty flasks and the plate of fresh bread. That last was an experiment he would not repeat soon. He eased her back down and watched carefully until he was sure she was asleep, then stood to join Minerva by the window at the far end of this curtained-off corner of the hospital wing.

“You cannot let her become so dependent upon you.” Minerva rested a hand on his arm.

“I can hardly let her starve, Minerva,” he snarled, “and she will not let Poppy or anyone else feed her, much less give her the potions she needs.”

“If she needs to spend time at St. Mungo’s, she will need to learn to trust others, Severus.”

“I know.” He focused on the grounds outside the window. That was a topic he preferred not to consider. It bothered him to be so pleased that she had refused to accept help even from Hagrid, though he had befriended her first. He did feel badly that she had dislocated the half-giant’s elbow when he had tried to give her one of her potions this morning, but it had been a rather impressive accomplishment considering she still would not open her eyes. “Has Madam Rosenberg been reached?”

“I have not heard, and Rupert promised to contact us as soon as he made contact with her. It has only been a few hours.”

“I know.”

Silence.

“Have you heard from the Ministry?” he asked, turning from the window to face her.

“Not yet.” She was still looking outside, an abstracted expression on her face.

“What is taking them so long?” he demanded, gripping his own arms tightly. “A Veritaserum interrogation should have been conducted immediately.”

She turned to him and replied, “I am sure the Ministry will explain themselves every bit as thoroughly as they always do.”

“That is hardly comforting.”

“It was not meant to be.” She looked at him for a long moment and then nodded before exiting through the curtains.

His thoughts on the incompetence of Aurors were interrupted when Celia began to stir. He returned to his spot on the edge of the bed and stroked her hair until she settled back down again. Exhausted, he stretched out beside her and dozed.

Almost every time she woke up, the Robes were there, sometimes lying next to her, sometimes sitting nearby but just out of reach, and usually with more things for her to drink. She’d noticed that the Voice made one particular sound quite a bit. She wondered if that were her name.
“Severus, have you slept at all?” Minerva asked, looking down at him reprovingly.

“When she sleeps,” he answered, straightening his robes as he stood.

“You first class starts in less than an hour.”

He could hardly forget. He had been dreading it throughout the night. “I will be there.”

“You should bathe and change first.” She wrinkled her nose as if to protest the inadequacy of the Cleansing Charms upon which he had depended throughout the weekend.

Unable to summon the energy for the sort of reply that deserved, he ignored it.

“Rupert said he has reached Madam Rosenberg,” she added.

His eyes snapped to meet the Headmistress’. “And?”

“She is working on the problem.”

That could mean anything. Most likely it meant she was duplicating much of Poppy’s research. No, Minerva would have seen to that. Would she come here? Then why not say so? What had she done the last time Celia had been trapped inside her own mind, as she appeared to be now? Would it work again, or were the circumstances too different?

“Severus …”

“I will be there, Minerva,” he said as he forced himself to follow her through the curtains and out of the hospital wing. As he drew further from her, he once again had the odd sensation of walking against a strong wind.

~ ~ ~

“Celia?”

That was the sound the Voice made so often, but this was a new voice. No, not new. Not new at all. And Safe.

Pacing the length of the room, she checked all the locks again. This voice could come in. It wouldn’t break into the cupboards and closets and especially not the basement, but it would want to see how she had guarded them.

“Celia, I’m coming in,” it said.

She stood in the middle of the room with her feet slightly apart and her hands behind her back, and about a yard away from her, the form of a redhead woman flickered into being. She was happy when the woman came over to give her a nice, warm hug. Then the woman stepped back and looked around the room.

“Oh, Celia, what did you do?” the woman asked, her brow crinkling.

The woman’s voice sounded sad. Hadn’t she done it right? She pointed to some of the locks to show how well she had protected everything. She grabbed the woman’s hand, dragged her over to the door that led to the basement, and showed her how very many locks and what good locks she had used. The woman smiled but still looked sad.
“I know. You did … it’s really good that you didn’t let them in, Celia, but now you can’t get out. You can’t even talk!”

She looked down at the floor, feeling ashamed.

“No, no,” the woman said, putting a hand under Celia’s chin and lifting it. “It’s ok. You just have to come out now.”

She shook her head vigorously.

“You have to, Celia. You’re safe now.”

She looked at the woman warily. The woman was Safe. The Voice and the Robes were Safe. Was she Safe?

The woman was looking over the cupboards now.

“Which one of these has you in it, Celia?” the woman asked.

She smiled and ran over to the little jelly cabinet in the corner. The redheaded woman joined her and examined the lock.

“Where did you put the keys?” the woman asked.

She ran over to the opposite side of the room and pointed to a door that was so flush with the wall it could hardly be seen. It had no handle and no visible lock.

“How do you open it?” the woman asked.

She shrugged. That was the whole point, wasn’t it? That you couldn’t open it?

The woman sighed. “If I can get this open, do you know where they all go?”

She nodded. Of course she knew where they went. She’d put them there, hadn’t she?

“Okay, then. Here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to open this door, so you can get at all the keys. Then you need to open all the locks, starting with that one,” the woman pointed at the jelly cabinet.

Celia pointed at the basement door and shook her head violently.

“Yes, that one, too,” the woman said. “You don’t have to open the door, but you have to undo the locks. I know the things in there are scary and dangerous, and no, you shouldn’t use them all the time, but if you need them, you’ll need them fast.” The woman gave a lopsided smile. “I kinda think that’s why you’re all locked-up coma-girly in the first place.”

She hung her head again.

“We’ll talk about that later. When you can, like, you know … talk?”

She smiled a little.

“Okay, then, let’s get started.” The woman put her hands on the hidden door and said, “Open.” Bright yellow light flared from her hand and into the slight cracks that defined its edges. The door swung open, and the woman snatched her hand back. A large pile of keys poured out onto the floor around both of their feet making pretty tinkling sounds as they fell.
“There now.” The woman smiled brightly. “Let’s find the key for your little cabinet thingy first. I’ll stay with you until we find that one, but then I have to go, or you’ll just get way confused. Once that one’s open, you should be able to figure out the rest.”

They pawed through the pile of keys together, until the woman held one up that was very shiny and pretty.

“I’m betting this is it,” the woman said. “’Cause … with the shiny and all.”

She nodded and smiled.

“Okay, then. Here, you take it and go open the cabinet. But now I have to go.”

She stopped smiling.

“I’ll see you soon, I promise,” the woman said, coming over to give her another hug. That was nice, and it made her feel a little less scared. “Don’t forget, open that one first, but then you have to unlock all the others. And Celia? When you do that, it’s time to open your eyes.”

She was a little frightened of that, but she nodded anyway. After the woman flickered and vanished, she walked over to the jelly cabinet and put the key in the lock. A tremor of fear ran through her, but she steeled herself, turned the key, and opened the door.

A/N: For those who may not be familiar with them, jelly cabinets are little free-standing cabinets, usually about three feet tall and fairly narrow, theoretically used for storing home-canned jellies, jams, and other preserves, but more often used for storing other things and kept around to give a countrified feeling to a home. They can range from very plain to highly decorated. You can see some variously decorated jelly cabinets at http://www.funkshonalart.com/Home_Accents/Cabinets.htm.
Severus looked out over the room full of Slytherin and Gryffindor first-years as they chopped their nettle leaves. Some were taking appropriate precautions. Others had forgotten to bring their dragon hide gloves and were stinging themselves regularly. Most had learned not to make any noise about it. Except one.

“Mr. Clayworth,” Professor Snape intoned darkly. “Why are you making those abhorrent noises in my class?”

The boy cowered.

“Answer me!” Snape barked as he loomed over the boy’s cauldron.

“I … I forgot my gloves, sir,” Clayworth replied.

“Did you think that once you were finished growing them the nettle plants would lose their sting?”

Celia was delusional when she decided these imbeciles would learn a healthy respect for the things they handle by starting out with something that caused no lasting effects.

That entire line of thought was infuriating.

“No, sir?” The boy gave him a look that suggested he was seeking mercy.

“Then why, Mr. Clayworth, did you come to class without the protective gloves you were told to bring?” Snape placed his hands on either side of the boy’s cauldron and leaned over to look at the pile of mangled leaves.

“I forgot,” the boy managed, yanking his hand back from yet another sting. Silently, for once.

Snape pushed off the desk and straightened to his full height. “Fifty points from Slytherin for carelessness and coming to class unprepared,” he said. “And you’ll lose another five for each time I hear another sound out of you. Do I make myself clear?”
“Yes, s-sir,” Clayworth replied as he bent to resume his pitiful attempts at slicing the leaves.

As he turned to go back to the front of the class, Snape saw Lightfeather mouthing something to his little Gryffindor girlfriend.

“Another fifty points each from Slytherin and Gryffindor,” he snapped, “for talking in class and possibly cheating. You are to do your work alone, Miss Hollingberry, and you are not to help her, Mr. Lightfeather.”

Both children flushed and turned their eyes to their desks.

This promised to be a truly hideous day.

~ ~ ~

Her eyes shot open, and it took her several minutes to realize where she was. The cot-like bed surrounded by a white curtain told her it was a hospital. Great Goddess, why was she in the hospital? *In hospital,* she corrected herself. *That’s how they say it over here. Here? Where am I? They say it like that in Britain, right? What am I doing in Britain?*

She noticed her wand lying on the nightstand, and things began to come back into focus. *Hogwarts.* *But am I in the hospital wing or at St. Mungo’s? And why? Did I hit my head?* The curtain opened, and Madam Pomfrey stepped in.

“You’re awake!”

Celia looked at her dumbly. Apparently this was big news. She wondered why. The matron was scanning over her with her wand and appeared pleased with what she was finding.

“What …” Celia tried to say, but her throat was dry and barely any sound came out at all.

Poppy gave her a measuring look. “If I bring you some water, will you drink it for me? Or will we have to wait for Severus?”

Wait, *what?* Celia’s eyes widened, and she sat up and mimed drinking the water herself. The matron left and quickly returned with a large goblet of water.

“Drink it slowly,” she cautioned.

Celia sipped a little of the water until her mouth and throat felt well-moistened, then took a much larger swallow. Setting the goblet down on the little table beside her bed, she asked, “What happened?”

“What is the last thing you remember?”

Celia closed her eyes. “I was patrolling Hogsmeade, then I came back onto the grounds. I sent a Patronus saying that all was clear …” She decided she didn’t need to fill in the whole message. “And then I woke up here.”

Poppy looked unsurprised by this. “I’m not sure how much I should tell you,” she said. “It may be best if you recover the memories on your own.”

Celia fumed. “What good am I supposed to be to anybody if I don’t know what happened?”

The matron was clearly not going to be budged.
“Fine,” she conceded with a huff. “Would you at least tell me if anybody else was hurt?” Apparently not Severus, anyway, even if I still don’t get what she said about him before.

“No, although Minerva has increased security substantially over the past couple of days.”

“Couple of … Poppy, how long was I out?” she demanded, swinging her legs over the side of the bed.

“Almost three full days.”

“It’s Monday?”

The matron nodded.

Celia’s shoulders slumped. What the hell could have knocked me out for three days?

“Has anything else happened since … whatever happened to me?”

“No.” Poppy resumed casting what were apparently diagnostic spells.

“And you’re really not going to tell me anything else?”

“I’m sorry.”

She scowled. “Okay, last question for now, then. May I take a shower?”

Poppy considered this. “First I want to see how you do standing,” she said.

Celia swung her legs out from under the covers and noticed for the first time that she was wearing a very simple white shift. “At least it’s better than a johnny,” she said wryly.

“A what?”

“Muggle hospital gown. I like your version better.”

“I should think so.” Poppy held out her hand to guide her patient to her feet. Celia winced at the cold stone floor, but she stood readily and took a few steps when asked to do so. Poppy pronounced her safe for a shower and conjured a dressing gown and slippers for her before pointing her to the hospital wing bathroom.

~ ~ ~

It was debatable whether anyone had actually learned anything in a Potions class today, except perhaps the upper limit of House points that could be lost at one time. Severus thought it might actually have been better to simply cancel his classes. If this went on much longer, he might try to pry Slughorn back out of retirement and take a leave of absence. Ironic that he had managed to live a double life – complete with multiple bouts of the Cruciatu – for years while managing to continue to teach, hardly missing a day until he’d had to leave the school entirely. Now, suddenly, he was contemplating a leave of absence for someone else?

As he drew closer to his destination, he tried to impose some sort of discipline upon his emotions. This became easier as the distance lessened, and he felt the pressure to hurry back decrease proportionally. He focused on the fragment of an idea he’d had during the aftermath of a particularly noxious student error. The fool had mixed hellebore with moonstone powder in a base of vervain. An infusion of hellebore and vervain, however, minus the moonstone powder, might form a worthwhile base for a potion that could help her. Looking at possible solutions to the problem...
helped, at least when he was not looking at her lying there with her eyes so tightly shut.

If any of his students ever saw this side of him, they would undoubtedly collapse on the spot. Perhaps they would call St. Mungo’s to come collect him. Perhaps they should because his behavior and his actions were incomprehensible even to him.

He took a breath and let it out slowly before opening the hospital wing door. He heard voices inside, and that meant there was probably a student in hospital now as well. It had been too much to hope that the privacy they’d had could last.

Surprised to find no students occupying any of the other beds, he walked quickly to the curtained-off bed at the far end, seemingly the source of the voices. He expected to find Poppy and Minerva holding some sort of conference. When he opened the curtain, he wondered how he had not registered the identity of the second voice.

Celia was awake, eyes open and standing, and Poppy was helping her detangle her hair, which appeared to be damp. Their conversation stopped when they heard him enter, and he wondered irrelevantly what they had been discussing.

“You are back,” he said softly.

“Yes.” She smiled slightly, and Poppy nodded confirmation.

He wanted to go to her and take her in his arms. He wanted to yell for joy. He couldn’t do either of those things, so he crossed his arms tightly over his chest and glared.

“You could have been killed,” he snarled. “You could have spent the rest of your life in St. Mungo’s. What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Severus!” Poppy admonished. She was ignored.

Celia scowled back at him. “Hell if I know! Nice to see you, too!”

“You don’t know? You don’t know? Is that the best you can do?” he demanded.

“Probably,” she snapped. “Right now it’s definitely the best I can do, considering I really don’t know what happened.” She crossed her arms, echoing his posture seemingly unconsciously. “I did warn you,” she added more softly.

“You don’t remember?”

“No.”

He swallowed hard. There might still be permanent damage then.

Some of that thought must have been evident in his expression, as she proceeded to ask Poppy to give them a moment of privacy. The matron nodded and stepped around them, exiting through the curtain, though not without giving him a last warning glare.

She looked up into his eyes and demanded, “What is it, Severus?”

“I would not have you remember being tortured,” he said hoarsely. “That … is good. But what else …”

Her eyes widened. “I think I’d probably rather not remember that either,” she agreed. “But I need to know what happened. Why was I tortured? By whom? Why have I been out for three days? Have
they been caught, or do I maybe have some sort of clue that we need?”

“Poppy has told you nothing?”

“No.” She scowled. “She thinks it would be best to recover the memories myself.”

That was a reasonable theory.

“What do you think?” he asked.

She sighed, some of the fight appearing to go out of her. “You want objective? Not my department right now.”

“Then perhaps it is best to wait and see.”

“Do we have time for that?” She straightened once again and looked at him sharply. “Poppy did say there are Aurors here now, though she also said no one else has been hurt.”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “One of your assailants was captured. He died of an apparent allergic reaction to Veritaserum.”

She blinked several times – a sign he was coming to recognize indicated she was working to assimilate a new bit of information that seemed not to fit.

“That sounds like something out of a science fiction novel,” she said at last. “Is there any way to tell if the allergy was natural or somehow induced?”

“I am unaware of any way to induce such an allergy or of any test to discern that it had been done.”

She closed her eyes briefly. Thinking, he realized, though the sight bothered him. He was relieved when she opened them again.

“There was more than one assailant, then, and apparently human.”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s a start.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Why don’t you tell me everything you can, without spelling out the parts I ought to remember. Maybe then I’ll be able to fit the pieces in.”

He considered this, nodded, and almost returned to his accustomed spot on the edge of the hospital bed. Catching himself, he instead took the chair beside it. He gave her an extremely abbreviated explanation of his own part in the events surrounding Friday’s attack, leaving out any description of her assailants or what they appeared to have been doing to her. When he finished, he watched her face carefully. As her expression darkened, he thought she must be starting to remember and was surprised to see her face set into anger that was apparently directed at … him.

“You did what?” she demanded loudly. “Are you insane?”

He was dumbstruck.

“You realized that I was in over my head, and you’re going to have to explain that in a minute, and you came after me alone? Without notifying anyone? Have you completely lost that supposedly cunning Slytherin mind of yours?”

“It is so rare for me to have the opportunity to say this, Severus,” came McGonagall’s voice from behind him, where she had just pulled aside the curtain, “that I find I simply must point out that I told
you so.”

He turned and glared darkly at the Headmistress, then whipped back to face the enraged Slayer.

“Apparently I have,” he snarled and stood to leave.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” she snapped, jumping up grabbing both his arms in a viselike grip.

_Clearly she retained no physical impairment_, he thought somewhat irrelevantly.

“You do _not_ get to come in here, yell at me for something I don’t even remember, and then run off as soon as you get yelled at for something you do remember,” she continued. “Don’t get me wrong – I’m grateful you came after me. I’m grateful for what Poppy tells me you’ve done while I’ve been in here. I’m also frustrated as hell that no one will tell me more than bits and pieces of what happened, because if there’s some big bad out there, then I should be helping to deal with it, and I can’t do that if I don’t know what or who or how or why, because whatever the hell I walked into, I’ll probably walk right back into again, and that’s about as much use as running out of the castle in the middle of the night without telling anyone else that there’s something wrong!” She glared at him as she appeared to run out of breath.

He glared back in stony silence.

“So you do not remember what happened?” Minerva asked.

Celia appeared startled that the Headmistress was still there.

“No,” she replied. “I’m starting to remember being here in the hospital wing. I think I remember Willow, my teacher, doing something … that’s still a little fuzzy. Was she here?”

“No.”

“Not that she’d need to be.” She paused. “But there’s still a giant gap between when I arrived back on the grounds and sent an all-clear and when I woke up. I know it involved humans, not vampires, and that one was captured but died during interrogation. I know it apparently involved torture of some kind. I know that fortunately no one else was hurt. And I know there are Aurors here now. But that’s it.” She looked up at him. “Are you still planning to storm off?”

“No,” he admitted reluctantly.

“Good.” She released his arms. “Then can we please sit back down and discuss this?”

He nodded and extended his hand to the single chair beside the bed, gesturing for Minerva to sit first.

“I believe that chair is yours,” the Headmistress said, drawing her wand and conjuring a chair of her own. She seated herself, and Celia followed, perching on the edge of the mattress. Severus sat last, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at the two determined witches as Minerva cast a Privacy Charm.

~ ~ ~

Half an hour later, Celia had no more idea what had happened to her than she had before. They were determined, it seemed, to let her restore her memories on her own. She was relieved that there had been no further attacks but appalled that Minerva was considering dismissing her for the safety of the school.
“If we can apprehend these assailants,” the Headmistress was saying, “then there should be no further concern. Otherwise, I am afraid that your presence may simply pose too high a risk to Hogwarts and its students.”

“So you’ve decided that these attacks are focused on me personally?” she asked. “And have you forgotten the whole thing we talked about last summer where an untrained Slayer is at least as dangerous to have around as an untrained witch or wizard?”

“This Potential Slayer has yet to be identified,” Minerva pointed out, “and you could have been misled.”

“I told you, the message couldn’t have been clearer …”

“It could have been planted,” Minerva spoke over her.

Celia snapped her jaw shut. It wasn’t like the Powers had never messed around with dreams, prophecies, and visions before. She didn’t think that was happening now, but how could she prove it? Without stinking up the Great Hall and lighting the poor girl up like an orange Christmas tree anyway.

“Celia,” Severus added, “can you not think of any enemies you might have made who would have tracked you here?”

“Not human ones,” she replied. “And if I had left any lying around that I couldn’t round up, I’d like to think they’d be just a teensy bit more competent.”

“What do you mean?” Minerva asked.

“Well, we’re sitting here having this conversation,” she replied. “If they wanted me dead, they obviously had their chance. So they wanted something else, but instead of stunning me and taking me off the grounds, they stuck around, got one of themselves caught and killed, and unless it’s part of what you’re not telling me, didn’t get whatever they were after.”

“That is a reasonable analysis,” Severus said, “though surely not the only one.”

“No,” she agreed. “We thought we had a reasonable analysis of the vampire incident, and assuming the two are connected, that was wrong. Or incomplete. Or something.” She let out a harsh sigh, closed her eyes, and tried to fish around inside her mind. When she found her usual room of cupboards and closets filled now with padlocks that had clearly been very recently undone, doors left ajar, she thought she might have at least part of the answer. Her eyes opened and she blinked several times, her gaze focusing on a speck on the floor.

Quickly going through and checking behind all of the doors, she found things organized the way they always had been. They just had seriously stronger locks now. The basement door had a really impressive number of new locks on it. They had all been undone, but it was still closed. She left it. Next to it was a small, square door built into the wall. It, too, had been unlocked but left unopened. It was completely new. She tugged at it experimentally, but it wouldn’t budge.

Looking up at Severus and Minerva, she said, “I think I’ve got some idea what happened, and where that information is, but I can’t seem to get at it.”

“What is your idea?” Minerva asked.

“Someone tried to break into my mind,” she replied, “and I locked absolutely everything down completely and totally. Does that fit any theories you’ve come up with?”
“Yes.” Severus’ face darkened.

She sighed, more softly this time, and ran her fingers through her hair. “You said I was tortured, Severus. I think the reason I can’t access this last bit is plain old repression.”

“If that is the case,” he said, tilting his head slightly as he looked at her, “perhaps you could access the memory using a Pensieve. I know they ‘do not agree with you,’ but that might be preferable to actually remembering it and could bypass the repression mechanism.”

She considered that for a moment, then nodded. He drew his wand and flicked it in the direction of his quarters, Summoning his Pensieve. It would take a moment to arrive.

When it floated into the curtained area, she was amused to notice that it was accompanied by a vial of Anti-Nausea Potion. Smiling, she thanked him and was troubled by his stiff acknowledgement.

He set the Pensieve and the vial on the small table that held her wand and water glass, then handed her the wand. She accepted it and sat for a moment thinking about how to do this. She had never used a Pensieve to retrieve a memory she couldn’t actually … remember. Finally, she shrugged and decided to focus on that little door and whatever was behind it.

She placed her wand at her temple and willed it to connect with that memory. A wisp of silvery threadlike substance seeped around the crack of the door and connected to the wand. Carefully, she drew the wand away from her temple and felt the familiar, nauseating sensation that always accompanied a memory extraction. As she pulled the wand further away, the thread became taut. She tried to pull at it more firmly, but it wouldn’t budge. Frustrated, she gave it a stronger tug. Instead of pulling further away from her head, it snapped off the end of the wand and back into her mind, where it hit the little door and cracked it open. The wand fell from her hand.

“All right, then.” She heard Severus call as if from very far away.

She saw a figure in black before her, and it turned so that she could see its skull-like mask. As she fired a Stunning Spell at it, she felt another spell hit her from behind, and pain ripped through her. She became aware that she was screaming and shoved her fist in her mouth to stop the noise, gripping something cold and hard with her other hand. This isn’t happening. It’s just a memory. Ride it out. It’s just a memory.

Someone was telling her to open her eyes … someone was trying to pry her eyes open … the pain stopped, and Severus was speaking, but she couldn’t understand … she felt herself being carried …

When it stopped, she tasted copper and realized she had bitten the hand she had stuffed into her mouth. She thought to apply pressure to it with her other hand, but it seemed locked into place. Carefully, she forced herself to release it. She gradually became aware that Minerva and Severus were speaking.

Before she could process what they were saying or reassure them she was okay, her stomach roiled, and she vomited onto the floor. The mess was quickly Vanished, and the Anti-Nausea Potion pressed into her trembling hand, already unstoppered, as well as a handkerchief. She wiped her mouth and took a small sip first, then gulped it down when she was sure it would stay put long enough to do its job. Looking up at Severus, she smiled wanly. Without saying a word, he exchanged the empty vial for another that contained a potion she didn’t recognize. She drank that one down as well and was relieved to feel the residual pain slip away and to see the tremors in her hand subside. The bite looked nasty, but it had already stopped bleeding. The water on the little table beckoned, and she took a large swallow of it. Severus and Minerva were looking at her warily, she
“I’m okay,” she said weakly.

“I do not believe that is possible,” Severus said, his eyes narrowing.

“Maybe a slight exaggeration,” she agreed. She set the goblet back down on the table.

“What happened?” Minerva asked.

“It looks like when I locked everything down, I locked some of the pain in, too,” Celia replied. She tried to smile. “Not one of my better ideas.”

“Clearly,” Severus replied. “You should lie down,” he added. “The Cruciatus Relief Potion will have you asleep soon.”

She nodded, beginning to feel that effect already. Then she shook her head. “Wait a sec – don’t you want to know what I saw?”

Severus’ jaw was set tightly. No wonder. Minerva, on the other hand, nodded for her to continue.

Fighting the sleepiness that was creeping over her, she gave as clear of a description as she could. She could tell from Minerva’s expression and Severus’ lack of one that there was nothing new here. Minerva confirmed as much.

As the two of them rose to go, Celia pulled down the sheets and toed off her slippers. She wished Severus wouldn’t leave, but squashed that thought. From what she could tell, he’d been here most of the past three days, and he looked like he’d barely slept. He deserved a break, and she didn’t need a babysitter. Anymore. She really didn’t want to think about that part even more than she didn’t want to think about being tortured. Pain? Part of the job. Being helpless? Really, really not.

There were other things she wanted to say, wanted to ask, but this wasn’t the time, and she was quickly losing the battle against sleep. She pulled the sheet over her legs and watched as he approached the break in the curtain. Minerva was dropping the Privacy Charm.

“Severus,” she called out softly, and he turned. Minerva nodded at her and exited.

“Yes?” he answered.

“What would people dressed as Death Eaters want with me?” she asked.

He came back over to her side, guided her to lie back against the pillow, and kissed her on the forehead more tenderly than she would have expected. “I don’t know,” he murmured as she felt herself drift into sleep.

The contrast in leaving her for a couple of hours in order to do some marking and attend dinner compared to leaving for class this morning was amazing. The sensation of being drawn back to the hospital wing was still present but far less insistent than it had been earlier. Severus was able to eat his dinner in relative peace and to make a quick inspection of the Slytherin common room before returning to check on her.

When he arrived, Poppy was predictably hostile.

“You’re not to upset her again, Severus,” she said, shaking her finger under his nose. “I know she’s

realized.
supposed to heal quickly, but if she is not allowed to rest, I don’t see how she can. She’s only just woken up and then been made to relive what happened! I still cannot believe you and Minerva …”

“I am not here to upset her,” he said firmly. “I merely wish to see how she is doing. You had no objection before …”

“Come to join me for dinner, then?” Celia asked brightly as she exited the loo and tightened the belt on her dressing gown.

“Actually,” he replied, “I have already eaten, but may I join you anyway?”

Poppy looked them both over sternly, huffed, and stalked away to her office.

“Of course.” Celia took his arm and led him to her curtained-off “room.” Once inside the curtain, she turned to him, no longer smiling, and asked, “Are you over your little snit?”

“For now.”

“Good.” She reached up and drew him down to her for a kiss. He was surprised at first. When she teased his lips open with her tongue, he found himself relaxing into the embrace. His arms stole around her as she caressed his face with her fingertips.

“Now that’s a decent greeting,” she said with a grin once they broke the kiss. “Much better than the yelling and recriminations for future reference.”

“You seem awfully cheerful,” he replied as he drew his wand and cast a quick Privacy Charm.

She shrugged, led him over to his chair, and seated herself on the remade bed next to the table that held her mostly-liquid dinner. “Nothing like a nice little late-afternoon nap to make excruciating pain feel like a distant memory,” she said.

He winced.

“That and whatever was in that potion you gave me,” she added. She looked over her tray, picked up an extra teacup that seemed to have just materialized, and handed it to him.

“It is the standard post-Cruciatus treatment,” he said, surprised.

“Remind me to ask you how to make it so’s I can add it to the Slayer-witch curriculum,” she replied. “Coffee,” she added to her own cup.

“Why is it not part of your curriculum already?” And why did I not notice this glaring deficit? He muttered, “Tea,” over the cup, and it filled. He took a steadying sip.

“You couldn’t have asked me that two weeks ago?” she asked wryly. “You know, when you were upset over the other potions I’m planning to teach her?” She tasted her soup and washed it down with a sip of coffee. “Seriously, though, it hasn’t been needed. The post-Cruciatus thing, I mean. I’m the first Slayer we know of to get hit with the real thing, witch or otherwise. And the other Slayer-witches went to school in areas that weren’t at war in the recent past. So, unfortunately, I’ve now proven that the Imperius is, in fact, the only so-called Unforgivable we’re immune to. And, apparently, the first to learn that there is a standard post-Cruciatus treatment.”

“I see.”

She tore up a piece of bread and added it to her soup. She looked at it for a moment, appearing very
uncomfortable.

*How much does she remember? Too much, from the expression on her face.*

She looked up and seemed to be debating whether to say anything. Fortunately, she opted to merely eat a spoonful of soup and bread and then continued speaking. “Do you know how I recognized you? Your voice, of course, even though I couldn’t understand the words. And the scent of your robes.”

He felt mildly affronted. “I do not wear scent.”

“Not on purpose, maybe, but your robes pick up the smells from everything that you work with, or that your students work with in your classroom.” She smiled a little. “Obviously one of the ‘dunderheads’ did something pretty foolish today, for example. How bad was it?”

He rolled his eyes and treated her to a description of the afternoon’s fiasco with the moonstone powder. It didn’t escape his notice that this gave her a chance to eat without needing to do more than make the occasional encouraging noise. He probably ought to be annoyed at her manipulation but merely found himself amused. By the time he had finished, so had she.

“What happened with my classes today?” she asked. “And where do the students think I am?”

“Free periods for today,” he replied. “I believe your sixth-years chose to work on their projects anyway. And they were told that you were ill. Minerva had already called Pomona to see if she would come out of retirement until you were well if you did not recover soon.”

“I guess she still might,” Celia said.

He did not answer. He hoped Minerva would see reason on that.

“And she’s explaining the fact that there are Aurors here how, exactly?”

He rolled his eyes. “Training exercises.”

She set down the coffee she had just refreshed. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Unfortunately, I am not. While the staff has been told what really happened, Minerva does not wish to panic the students or their families.”

“Right. Wouldn’t want the kids on the lookout for anything that can attack in daylight and apparently doesn’t need an invite!”

He shrugged. She was correct, but had less experience in managing a school under threat. Panicked students or, worse, students determined to be heroes were dangers in and of themselves, and for the moment it appeared that the key was to keep the school boundaries closed.

“If the matter is not resolved by the next Hogsmeade weekend,” he said, “that will be canceled, as it appears they came in with you through the gate.”

She glared at him. “Okay, not that they didn’t manage to get behind me without me noticing, but I think I’d have seen someone actually coming through the gate with me, Severus. I mean, I did look!”

He shook his head. They had no idea how the Death Eaters had left either. There was no point in arguing this now.

She propped one elbow on the table and rested her chin in her hand. “So we come back to my
question from earlier, but with a twist. If I weren’t here, and those Death Eater wannabes might have come onto the grounds anyway, then what were they after? Then the next question is why did they come after me since I was here? Was I just in the wrong place at the wrong time? That seems a little unlikely.”

“Why do you call them that?” he asked, perplexed.

“Well, they can’t be the real thing,” she said with a shrug. “The remaining loyal Death Eaters were all accounted for, right? If any of them had managed to either successfully fake their deaths or escape unnoticed from Azkaban, you’d think they’d have been just a little more effective.”

His mood darkened considerably. “It seems they were effective enough.”

“No, I mean, whatever they wanted, they didn’t get it and didn’t take the most obvious precautions to get it without being caught,” she said. She closed her eyes and shuddered.

“What is it?” he asked. She should not be experiencing further tremors so soon after that last dose. What now? “Celia?”

She opened her eyes, and a palpable wave of relief washed over him. “What if … what if they actually accomplished exactly what they intended?”

“How do you mean?”

“If I hadn’t been the person attacked, if three people dressed as Death Eaters had appeared on the grounds and been caught before they had a chance to do anything, who would be their assumed target?”

Of course. The thought had crossed his mind more than once. But then why attack her? That explanation works for the vampire attack, but not this one.

“Their timing was either really, really bad or … hugely cruel,” she continued. “Well, okay. Cruel was definitely the goal, what with the torture and all, but … I don’t know how they could have known. I can’t imagine that they’d consider it worth dying to accomplish. But if they picked that night deliberately …” She swallowed hard. “Maybe they weren’t exactly after me. Or not only me.” She touched her cheek and looked at him strangely, as if remembering something. “Seems to me they managed to hurt you while they were at it.”

“And that is something any real Death Eater or sympathizer would consider a worthy goal,” he finished for her, a cold, leaden feeling forming in his stomach. “As would sending the message that they can arrive easily on the grounds of Hogwarts.”

“We need to speak to Minerva,” she said, standing up as she spoke.

He rose as well, saying, “I don’t think Poppy will want you to leave.” He was not sure he wanted her to. She seemed back to herself, but there could still be residual damage, something he would prefer to be discovered or ruled out here in the hospital wing.

“I think this conversation needs to happen in Minerva’s office. I want her and Giles in on it.” She began looking about for something. “I can’t go like this, though.”

No, she certainly could not. “Dobby!” he called out.

With a loud CRACK, the house-elf, wearing what had to be a dozen hats in a riot of colors, appeared at the foot of her bed. “Yes, Professor Snape?” he asked. “What is Professor Snape be
wanting?”

“Where are Professor Reese’s clothes?”

“Oh, Madam Pomfrey sent them for elves to be cleaning. Only it took a long time, because …”

“Yes, yes, that’s all right, Dobby.” He waved off the tide of explanations that threatened. “But are they ready now?”

“Dobby shall get them, Professor Snape. Dobby will be right back!” And with another CRACK he was gone again.

Celia looked at him curiously. “Is he yours?”

“No,” Severus replied. “I simply knew him before he came to work at Hogwarts. He used to serve the Malfoys.”

“Oh.”

There was another CRACK, and the elf had returned, this time standing on the bed itself. He was holding out a neatly folded pile of Celia’s clothing with her cloak on top. He looked very sad.

“Dobby is sorry,” he said, “but Professor Reese’s cloak is being damaged.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said quickly. “It probably got torn when I fell or something.”

“No, no,” he said anxiously. “It was still waiting to be cleaned, and when Dobby went to clean it, the button fell off, and it will not go back on.”

“I’m sure it’s all right,” Celia replied hastily. Then she appeared to realize what he’d said. “Button? What button? It has a clasp, but that’s not really a button, is that what you mean?”

“No, Professor Reese. Dobby means this.” He handed her a small white disk, which she let lie in the palm of her hand.

They both looked at it curiously.

*It could hardly act as a button anyway, he thought. There is no way to attach it to the cloth save a Sticking Charm.*

She flipped it over. It was the same smooth white surface on this side, too.

“Did you see where it was on the cloak before it came off?” she asked.

“It was on the hem,” Dobby replied. “It was looking very pretty, but there was dirt, so I cleaned it, and then it fell off.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be there,” she assured the elf. “It must have gotten stuck there somehow, but it wasn’t part of the cloak, so don’t worry about it, okay?”

“Yes, Professor Reese.” He looked much relieved. “Is Professor Snape be needing anything else?”

“No, Dobby, you may go.”

“Thank you,” Celia said, just as the elf disappeared with a last CRACK.
“What is it?” Severus asked.

“I’m not sure.” She picked up her wand, waved it briefly over the disk, and said, “Reveal.”

A haze of light formed over the disk, and within it, a shape took form that slowly resolved itself into an image of Celia, sitting on a hospital bed, looking at the disk in her hand projecting an image of herself. And that image was sitting on a hospital bed … and so on. Her eyes widened in alarm. With a quick jab of her wand, she said, “Reverse!”

Another image started to form, but then the disk started to smoke. Before she could react, it disintegrated completely, not even leaving any particles of itself behind. She looked at Severus, tension written harshly on her face.

“What was that?” he asked dangerously, all too certain he already knew.

“That was how they knew,” she replied. With a wave of her wand, she checked the pile of clothing for any other magical artifacts. With another wave, she was wearing them, and the shift and dressing gown were folded on the bed in their place. “Let’s go see Minerva.”
As they walked to Minerva’s office, he reflected that it was a good thing she wore fairly traditional, if darkly colored, robes to patrol in Hogsmeade. Her usual garb for patrolling on the grounds would have been as noticeable as the dressing gown, if not more so.

When they arrived, the Headmistress wasted little time before getting the Head Watcher on the Floo.

“Celia, it is a relief to see you up and about so soon,” the man said once the initial greetings were out of the way and all had assumed their seats.

Due to the quantity of participants on this side of the conversation, the Watcher once again was the one whose face appeared in the flames.

“Thanks, Giles. Actually, thank Willow.”

“She’s not here just now, but I will tell her you said so.”

“Did she explain what I’d done?” She looked a bit nervous as she asked this.

“Yes.” The man pinched the bridge of his nose. “Whatever possessed you?”

She slumped her shoulders a little as she answered, “It was just instinct. Not a particularly good long-term instinct, obviously, but in the short term, at least it kept them out.”

“Have you any idea what it was they wanted?”

“Actually, that’s why we came to talk to Minerva. We just discovered something that may shed some light on that.”

“What would that be?” asked Minerva, bringing Celia’s focus back from her Watcher to Hogwarts.

“I think I was a secondary target,” she said, “and was also being used as a weapon of a sort.”

Minerva pursed her lips. “What brought you to this conclusion?”

“I decided to try and look at the problem without me in it first. If I’m not here the night of the vamp attack, then there is only one possible target: Severus. Then, fast forward to last Friday, and there are
people playing dress-up as Death Eaters attacking someone. Again, regardless of who they actually attacked, it would be a fair bet he’s who they were after.”

“But you are here, Celia,” the Headmistress pointed out.

“And that’s where it started to not make sense until we discovered that there had been a magical transmitter on my cloak. By my guess, it had been there since the vamp attack, probably intended to end up on Severus since they’d have expected him to be alone.”

“And where is this object now?”

Celia made a face. “It disintegrated once I’d discovered it. I had a feeling it might be set to do that once it was found, so I tried to cast a reversal to see who was watching it, but I just wasn’t fast enough.”

“How did you find this, Celia?” the Watcher asked.

“One of the house-elves discovered it while getting my cloak from the laundry. When I cast the Revealing Spell to see what it was, it showed me myself, as if I were on camera.”

“And you are quite certain that is how it was planted?” Minerva asked.

“I can’t be sure, obviously, but it makes sense. One of the things that didn’t fit was that these three attackers seemed to know too much. I mean, think about it: Legilimency, the Crucius, and the Imperius, all at once? That’s freakin’ overkill, unless they knew I’d be resistant and/or immune to two out of three and not that well-prepared to deal with the third.”

“Not well-prepared?” The face in the flames looked affronted.

Celia shifted her focus again, looking apologetic. “As well as possible, Giles, but, um, no. Sorry, but that simulation doesn’t even come close.” Severus noticed a change in the set of her expression as she continued, “We’d been working under the assumption that it’s just pain, only more of it. But it’s way more. It does something to your nervous system, more than just some sensory overload. Seriously, I’m shocked that I managed even a basic shield.”

So was Severus.

“I see.” The Watcher looked thoughtful. “We’ll have to discuss the training ramifications of that later. Meanwhile, why does this convince you of the timing with which the device was planted?”

“Because all of that came up at the staff meetings the next two mornings after the vampire attack.” She sat back into her chair as if resting her case.

“That does not rule out a leak.” The Watcher fixed a glare on Severus.

“No, but I don’t believe that to be the case. Also, things narrow down substantially when you add in some information they would have to have gotten from a private conversation.”

“How private, Celia? And what information?”

She glanced at Severus, and he nodded to her. This would not be comfortable for her, but he hoped she would not deny him again.

“Private enough, Giles,” she said and took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. “When they attacked, I wasn’t, as you’d expect, on my way back to my cottage.”
“Oh?” asked the Watcher. “Where were you going?”

She shot a disdainful look at the face in the emerald flames, one that Severus thought was almost worthy of himself.

“I see,” the man said. “You realize this does nothing to reduce my suspicions.”

“I didn’t think it would. Why do you think I started with finding the bug?” She shook her head.

“And you do not agree that this looks suspicious?”

Severus felt a sudden and almost irrepressible urge to wipe that expression off the Head Watcher’s face. He had never tried striking someone through a Floo, but it was a tempting idea. Instead, he held his own features still, knowing they would be quite unreadable. Except, apparently, to her. He shrugged off that uncomfortable thought.

“I absolutely agree that it looks suspicious,” she retorted. “My suspicions are just completely different than yours. I suspect that, for whatever reason, the transmitter was supposed to have been planted on Severus two weeks ago. Instead, they got me and a lot of very different information than they expected. Then on Friday, they went for two-for-one torture with a side of obscure and dangerous Dark Arts knowledge.”

I would prefer to think the order of priority was reversed, Severus thought.

“What do you mean ‘two for one’?”

Minerva spoke up, “Rupert, you were not here. Severus was clearly distraught by what had happened and scarcely left Celia’s side while she was in hospital.”

The face in the flames did not appear convinced. Severus didn’t blame him. If their roles were reversed, he would be similarly difficult to sway. The one point in the man’s favor was that he was clearly concerned for Celia’s well-being.

Minerva turned to Celia and asked, “And what is your theory as to why they would have set up the original attack, then?”

“I don’t know,” Celia admitted. “I’m working under the theory that these people are real Death Eaters who are somehow at large despite proof to the contrary. I mean, it’s not like being dead’s a guarantee someone won’t show up to cause trouble.” She shot a meaningful look at her Watcher. “Ditto for prison. Either that or they’re sympathizers who wish they had been Death Eaters back in the day. Either way, discrediting Severus or trying to get him sacked might be enough of a motivation at the start, or they might have something else up their sleeves.”

“I do hope you are not closing yourself off to other possibilities,” the Watcher said.

“Of course not,” she replied, shooting a disdainful look into the flames. “Becoming too complacent about the last theory is probably half the reason they were able to ambush me like that.”

“And the other half?”

That you thought it was me. I was not even there and I managed to distract you to your cost. He’d been certain of that since she had described the seconds before the attack. She had not said that she thought that first figure was him before it turned, but he was sure of it, and that knowledge sickened him.
“They were human,” she mumbled.

Severus found himself brought up short by this.

“Celia, you can’t … You’re not Willow,” the Watcher said.

“No, really? I hadn’t noticed,” she snapped. “What was your big clue? The lack of red hair?”

“The reluctance to attack humans,” her Watcher replied. “Willow does still manage to defend herself quite effectively.”

“I did at least Stun the one.”

The face in the flames sighed. “I should have either found some way to manage magical sparring practice for you without raising suspicions long ago, or failing that, you should have set something up with one or more of the other teachers once your secret was out.”

And had we not been so caught up negotiating the beginning of a “relationship” at the same time, one of us should have thought of that.

“Then again,” she said, “they’d have known everything I did so long as my cloak was nearby, so it might not have made a huge difference.”

Severus found that thought only mildly reassuring.

“What do you think of this theory, Headmistress?” the Watcher asked.

“I am not sure,” she replied. “For the immediate future, however, I believe that it raises enough questions that I will not ask Celia to leave Hogwarts, as she may not be the sole target of these attacks, and thus her presence or absence would not affect the degree of risk to the students.”

Severus noted with a mix of satisfaction and frustration that sending him away had not, apparently, crossed Minerva’s mind.

“And my request?” asked the voice from the Floo.

“Yes, yes, send your reinforcements.” Minerva waved a hand as if to indicate her surrender on that point.

Celia appeared to perk up at this. “Who are you sending?” Her expression was filled with anticipation, suggesting she already had some idea.

“As I told you before, I cannot send another Slayer-witch …”

“So you’re sending me one of each?” She looked for all the world like a child on Christmas morning.

She should do that more often.

“Willow told you?”

“She said she’d see me soon. Not that ‘soon’ might not mean ‘during summer vacation’ or something.”

The Watcher’s image shook its head, presumably at the appalling syntax of that last statement.

“When are they coming?”
“Madams Rosenberg will be arriving in Hogsmeade on Thursday,” said Minerva, drawing Celia’s attention back into the room once again.

*Madams?*

“What will they stay?” Celia asked.

“They will rent a house in Hogsmeade,” the Watcher explained. “Kennedy will take over patrolling the village – with Willow obviously. I think we are agreed that you should not leave the grounds.”

“I was attacked on the grounds, Giles,” she pointed out.

“Yes, but they must have come in with you somehow.”

“Probably.” Her mood dampened a bit. “Will they come up to the school then? Or will I not be able to see them?”

“You will be able to Floo to the house,” Minerva said. “It will be under a Fidelius Charm, by the way, which should help avoid exposing them or you. We should also see about Detection Charms, for there as well as for the school, to prevent any further use of magical listening devices.”

*So, this decision had already been made before we arrived. What changed her mind?*

Celia winced and said, “Yeah, there’s that. I’m going to have to try to replay everything I’ve said and done anywhere near my cloak for the past two weeks. Wish I’d sent that thing to the laundry sooner.”

A lull fell in the room. Severus watched as she appeared to be starting the process of sorting through those conversations, and so he saw the moment that her expression became one of horror. She turned to face him.

“Severus, when I came to your office the Tuesday after the vampire attack, do you remember if I had my cloak on?”

He thought a moment and vaguely remembered taking it when she arrived. It had felt awkward at the time, and that was probably the only reason he remembered it at all. “Yes,” he said, “I believe you did.”

Her look of horror intensified.

“What is it?” Minerva and the Head Watcher asked in near unison.

“Um … I think we have a much bigger problem than we realized,” she said, a quaver in her voice. “They might not have been looking for *random* obscure Dark Arts knowledge at all.”

“What do you mean?” her Watcher asked.

“I mean, in that conversation, I kind of mentioned … um … Buffy.”

“What about her?”

“The part where she’s been dead a couple of times and just had a birthday last month.” Celia appeared to be trying to make herself very small in her chair.

If it were possible for a Floo image to blanch, Severus thought the Watcher’s image would have done so. He was quite sure he himself had.
“Did … did you say precisely …”

“No! No. Just … it might be enough to give them ideas.”

“And you’re sure they didn’t …”

“Positive. Nobody and nothing got in or out. Everything got battened down, hatches and all. Especially that stuff. That’s why with the coma-thingy …”

“Still, that was extremely rash and may indeed be the reason …”

“Would one of you kindly explain yourselves?” Minerva demanded.

Celia turned to face the Headmistress. “The first time wasn’t as big a deal. She wasn’t all the way dead, or CPR wouldn’t have brought her back. But the second time, Willow resurrected her. Ergo, I remember resurrecting her. So if they’ve put the pieces together, it’s a fair guess these Death Eater wannabes, who are already not looking like the brightest bulbs in the box, might be stupid enough to want to resurrect Voldemort.”

Severus rubbed his left forearm absently to soothe the burning that had flashed at the sound of the Dark Lord’s name, vaguely wondering if his heart would resume beating soon. He looked up at Albus Dumbledore’s portrait, which had not made a sound throughout but was clearly no longer asleep.

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Celia wanted to get up and pace. If they’d been sitting in front of the Floo in her cottage, she would have, but she didn’t think Minerva would appreciate her doing so here.

“We don’t know anything of the kind for sure,” Giles said.

“Of course not,” she snapped. “But, as worst case scenarios go, it has the advantage of pretty much requiring an apocalypse to top it.”

“There is that,” he agreed. “Also, they may have been aware of that situation already. Half the demon world seems to.”

Celia was only slightly mollified by this. So far her experience had been that no humans around here knew anything much at all about the events of the relevant years in California, so it would most likely have been news to them. I realize they had their own problems at the time, but it’s been awhile. And they say Americans ignore everyone else’s history?

“Why would you even mention such a thing in the first place?” her Watcher demanded.

“It just … came up in the context of conversation,” she replied. “Anyway, you’re not exactly winning any prizes for super-secretiness. I’m pretty sure my cloak was in the kitchen at the time, but we don’t know what kind of range that thing had. Remember the first thing you said when I described the second part of that dream?”

He appeared to be concentrating, then widened his eyes and said, “I take your point.”

_Not like we have any idea whether anyone could still use Dawn to open ... anything, but would we really want them trying to find out? I mean, okay, all he said was her human life was newer than her whole life, but still!_
“Could they do this?” Minerva asked, her voice betraying only the slightest quaver.

“He was killed magically, right?” Celia asked in turn.

Severus nodded.

She sighed. That was what the documented history said, but she’d been hoping that was just to glamour up something a little more decisive like smashing his head in.

“If they can get everything they need, yes,” Celia replied. Knowing what was coming next, she reluctantly reached through the basement door in her mind and pulled out a file.

“And what, exactly, would they need?” the Headmistress pressed.

“Well, first of all, his body,” Celia explained. “Also an Urn of Osiris and a handful of Dark substances including vino de madre.”

Minerva looked substantially relieved.

“What?” Celia asked. That wasn’t the reaction she’d been expecting at all.

“His body was destroyed completely, and his ashes taken by the winds to prevent any remaining followers from making any use of them.”

“Oh.” Celia sighed in relief. “That’s … that’s good. I mean, there are ways to fake that. Wouldn’t be the first time.” She shot a look at Giles, who had a grim expression on his face. “You’re sure he was actually dead first, right?”

“I assure you,” Severus said blandly, “no one was willing to risk that he was not.”

“Good.” She still had her doubts. People who were supposed to be dead had a strange way of turning back up. But for now, let’s stick with the theory that he’s dead. “Then the chances of bringing him back wrong increase exponentially with every substitution, and lack of body? Kind of a big one. Besides, bringing him back wrong might not be all that bad.” At the stunned looks she received, she continued, “Well, come on. If you take a sociopathic mass murderer and bring him back wrong, what are you going to get? Gandhi, probably.”

“Or a sociopathic mass-murdering zombie,” Giles pointed out dryly.

“Well, yeah. Spoilsport.”

“I do not believe your Hogwarts colleagues are accustomed to Slayer wit.”

She looked at Minerva and Severus, both of whom looked pretty horrified. “Probably not,” she relented. “Seriously, though, they’d have to pretty much come up with a first-degree relative to get around the lack of a body.”

“A portion of his father’s remains were used to regenerate his body the last time,” Severus said.

“That wouldn’t work for this,” she replied. “That time, bits of his soul were still lying around, and one of them had been possessing things. This time, his soul is somewhere else. And probably not the nice shiny place that … anyway, for this, without his body, they’d need someone alive.”

“Both of his parents are deceased, and he had no siblings,” Severus said.

“Children?”
“None that any of us are aware of.”

She pondered. “I wonder … what if the child I’m supposed to be here to protect isn’t a Potential at all? What if she … or he …” Her voice trailed off as she did a bit of mental math. “Well, no, they wouldn’t be here. Even assuming he went on a wild night of partying when he first got his body back, the kid would only be turning ten next month at the oldest.”

“Howmsmeade?” Minerva asked.

“Maybe,” Celia replied. “Willow and Kennedy should keep a lookout for any kids around that age while they’re there, just in case.”

“They would still need the Urn,” Giles pointed out, “and the last one was destroyed resurrecting Buffy.”

“The last one we know of. And that one, Anya found on frickin’ eBay.”

“She … what?”

“You never heard that part? Xander so needs to tell you about that.” She grinned.

“The point is, it should be relatively easy to keep them from obtaining what they need to carry out that spell, even assuming they find it,” Giles said. “That does not excuse your carelessness, however.”

“No, it doesn’t,” she agreed bleakly. “Maybe I should sew my mouth shut.”

“I believe you know a spell for that,” the Watcher joked.

She rolled her eyes.

“I saw that.”

“You were supposed to.”

Minerva spoke up, her voice returned to its usual firmness. “While I am glad to hear that this does not appear to be an imminent threat, I would be far more relieved if we had any certainty what these Death Eaters were doing on Hogwarts grounds in the first place. I agree that it is quite probable that at least part of their plan involved harming Severus in some way, given all that we have now learned. However, I find it very unlikely that this was the extent of their motive.”

Silence fell in the room. Celia looked up at the very awake portrait that was regarding her intently.

“Headmaster Dumbledore,” she said, “you look really interested in this. Got anything to add?”

“I am afraid I cannot,” the portrait replied. “While the fact that we are approaching the seventh anniversary of Voldemort’s death would suggest that any remaining sympathizers might attempt … something, that was not the sort of thing I was considering at all.”

“What was the sort of thing?” she pressed.

“I was actually far more concerned about the Dark energy you reported sensing from the vicinity of the Chamber of Secrets.”

She blinked several times. “What about that energy?”
“There should be nothing of the sort other than the signature of whatever spells Salazar Slytherin may have left in place, and you reported it was of a more living quality.”

“That could just mean there’s more basilisks down there,” she said. “Though, I admit, it didn’t exactly feel demonic either.”

“What did it feel like, Professor Reese?” the portrait asked.

She closed her eyes and tried to remember it. Her stomach churned at the memory of how Dark it had felt. “Organic. Living. But not sentient.” She opened her eyes. “I’ve never felt anything else like it, so that’s the best I can do.”

The portrait nodded at her gravely. “It would be well to keep an eye on it. Whatever it is, I am almost certain it is new. I myself never sensed anything of the sort, including when we were seeking the Chamber.”

“I will,” she promised, “once I can resume patrolling.”

“Celia,” Giles spoke up from the flames, “I must insist that you not patrol alone anymore.”

“She will not be alone,” Severus said firmly.

“Um, guys?” she said, looking back and forth between them. “Don’t I get any say in this?”

“No!” they answered in unison.

She was unsure whether she was more amazed that they actually agreed on something or annoyed that they were being so protective. She knew, however, that she didn’t exactly have any grounds for an argument. Looking at Minerva, she could see that she’d find no assistance there either.

“Celia,” Giles continued, “you are too accustomed to patrolling as part of a group. No doubt that is at least some part of the reason you were able to be ambushed.”

She gritted her teeth. Not like it was a problem for the last six months! But, again, leg to stand on? Haven’t got one.

“Fine,” she conceded. “I’ll have you know, though, that the lovely complacency about how safe it is here has been replaced with a heaping helping of good old Hellmouth paranoia.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Giles said. “Good luck convincing Willow when she arrives.”

Celia winced. Willow had promised a bit of a “talk” during her visit to Celia’s mind. As much as she looked forward to seeing her teacher and friend, she was not particularly looking forward to that conversation.

“I would also prefer to move your quarters into the castle,” Minerva added.

“What!” That was just … no. After growing up as an only child, for the last six years she’d slept in college dorms, Slayer dorms, and assorted field arrangements. Having that little cottage to herself was something she wasn’t ready to give up. “No, Minerva. That’s overkill.”

“Your argument that your cottage is safer than the castle,” Minerva replied, “is no longer valid now that vampires are not the only concern.”

“I don’t see you making Hagrid move inside!” Celia snapped.
“Hagrid is not and has never been a likely target,” Severus supplied.

Celia whipped her head around to face him.

“Just whose side are you on anyway?” she demanded.

He didn’t reply, but she caught a flash of something across his features. It looked dangerously close to fear.

*No, probably not the best idea to push him right now.*

She turned back to face Minerva again and decided to try a different angle.

“If you think they’re likely to attack the cottage while I’m sleeping, then that would actually make it a good trap. A few extra spells, the occasional trip-wired sword, problem solved!”

Minerva looked horrified.

*Maybe I should’ve left out the sword bit?*

“There is something to that,” Giles admitted.

“Thank you,” she muttered.

“But all that requires is for it to look as though you are sleeping there,” he continued. “You could go into the cottage at your normal time and then Floo over to your new quarters.”

“What? Giles, that much Flooing and I’ll have black lung disease in a week!”

“You are exaggerating, Celia. There are no known cases of anyone in the wizarding world developing respiratory problems from utilizing the Floo system.”

“I don’t think most of them are using it two or more times a day!”

“Actually,” Minerva pointed out, “there are many who do exactly that to commute to their places of employment. And I agree, you could continue to use the cottage as your office and even for research, but sleep in the castle.”

“But …”

“You have pointed out, yourself, that the reason you were able to be ambushed was that your defenses were lowered,” she continued. “Either you will similarly let your defenses down when you sleep …”

“Not likely at this point.”

“… or you will not sleep adequately …”

“Slayers don’t really need all that much sleep …”

“… and your teaching will suffer.”

That shut Celia up. The possibility of being dismissed was still very real. She couldn’t risk being sent away – especially now. Minerva probably wouldn’t let another Slayer-witch be brought in, and anyway it had seemed pretty specific that she was the one supposed to be here. Also there might be … other reasons she’d rather not leave just now. Which actually brought up another point.
“I still say I don’t need to hide in the castle,” she huffed. “I mean, didn’t we agree that it’s pretty likely I wasn’t the only target here?”

“Severus is already living within the castle,” Minerva said. “You are the one in less well-protected quarters.”

“But don’t you think you should do something about increasing his security, too?” she pressed.

“I believe you are right,” he said, startling her.

“I’m … you believe I’m what?” She turned to look at him again.

“You are correct. Despite the ancient enchantments, both students and teachers have been assaulted, even killed, within these walls, though not for several years.”

“Well … right. So what are we going to do to increase your safety then?”

This was more like it. She could work on planning for other people’s security. Other people worrying about hers was just all kinds of wrong. Maybe a few less kinds of wrong this week, but still wrong.

“I believe it would be useful for me to have a bodyguard,” he said silkily. “Perhaps someone with unusual strength, a trained fighter of course …”

It took her a few seconds to realize her mouth was hanging open. She shut it with a snap.

“Yes, well,” Minerva said after clearing her throat. “I suppose that would solve both matters. And I do not wish to pry into the private lives of my staff, of course, provided that the students remain blissfully ignorant that their teachers have private lives.”

There was really no way to argue herself out of this, was there?

*Not that I mind having official permission to spend the night in his quarters … but every night? And for security reasons?*

He looked like he was trying very hard not to appear smug.

*Guess he got that supposedly cunning Slytherin mind of his working again, because I not only walked straight into that, I think I set most of it up myself.*

Giles’ face in the flames looked murderous, but he couldn’t really argue the point either.

She could feel the first bit of tremors returning to her hands. It was nearly time for her to have another dose of Cruciatus Relief Potion, and standing here shaking wasn’t about to make things any easier.

*Won’t add much to the “don’t worry about me” argument either.*

“Fine,” she sighed. “Fine, that’s how we’ll do it, then.”

Now Severus did look smug. She couldn’t decide whether to be angry or pleased. She settled on annoyed.

~ ~ ~

As he escorted her back to the hospital wing, Severus sorted through the meeting they had just left.
He could not begin to try and sort the whole day. Far too many things had happened.

They had not, of course, come to any conclusions as to the reasons behind the attacks, other than that he was apparently the primary target. He was deeply disturbed by that. Also, Celia’s theory was extremely worrisome. This time, everyone had been sure that the Dark Lord would stay dead. What would happen if someone were truly able to bring him back yet again? Of course, it was entirely possible this was not what these supposed Death Eaters planned at all. What they needed was information.

That used to be his job.

Being not only without the information but also unable to see any way to obtain it was an extremely uncomfortable position for him. Add to that the fact that this woman about whom he now cared a great deal had already been hurt, presumably at least in part to hurt him, and he thought he might actually feel worse than he had while worrying she might not recover.

He glanced at her, assessing her set expression and purposeful stride, and allowed himself the ghost of a smile but repressed it quickly. Whatever else may be wrong with the world, she was herself again and would be staying in his quarters as soon as she was released from the hospital wing. He scowled at himself.

They arrived at the hospital wing, checked in with Poppy, and went to her little curtained off corner of it. She cast a quick series of Detection and Privacy Charms. He almost smiled approvingly, then stopped himself. She began to pace the length of her little “room.”

“You tricked me!”

He raised his eyebrows questioningly. “I agreed with you.”

She stopped pacing long enough to glare at him. “That wasn’t where I was going with that, and you know it.”

“Are you upset with the outcome?” he asked, watching her warily.

“I … well, no. Not exactly,” she admitted, “but that is so not the point!” She resumed pacing.

He was reminded of a caged animal of some kind. Perhaps a lion or bear.

Not exactly? What, precisely, is that supposed to mean?

“So, we’ve got Aurors on the grounds, students are back to being escorted everywhere and not allowed out after dark, and no idea what the enemy’s next move will be, much less when.”

“That is correct,” he agreed.

“So … we’re on the defensive, and that’s almost never good. All we’ve come up with so far for me to do is ‘keep an eye’ on that weird energy spot. Oh, and not patrol alone.” She stopped mid-pace and narrowed her eyes at him. “Or sleep alone.”

“I do not believe that was Minerva’s original intention,” he said with a smirk that he knew conveyed rather more confidence than he felt. “And you’ve just said you are not upset about that.”

She shot a quelling look at him but didn’t comment further. Instead she shifted back to the larger problem. “What about the one you caught? Did they learn anything from him or about him?”
“No. He was identified as an Alan Locksley, no prior record of any kind.”

“Did he have the Mark?”

“Yes.” That might be the most uncomfortable bit of information they had learned.

“But he was not an original Death Eater.”

“No.”

“That’s … troubling.”

“Is it? I hadn’t realized.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “So either there was another cell, of which neither you nor anyone else had any knowledge, or someone has figured out how to place the Dark Mark on people, which used to be Voldemort’s sole prerogative.”

“Correct,” he hissed, rubbing at his forearm again.

She stopped pacing and furrowed her brow. “Why did you just do that?”

“Do what?”

“Rub your arm like that?”

He scowled. “Where were these powers of observation when you were being surrounded on Friday?”

She didn’t dignify that with a response. “Does the Mark react when someone says the name in your presence?”

“Yes,” he admitted reluctantly.

“Oh, for Goddess’ sake, why didn’t you tell me that sooner? How many times have I said it around you and didn’t know I was hurting you?”

“I have not kept count.”

“Very funny.”

He glared at her, willing her to just drop it.

Eventually, she rolled her eyes and did. “We’re not likely to get any further tonight anyway,” she said. “And you must have all sorts of grading piled up, not to mention your rounds.”

“Yes,” he agreed, not feeling in any hurry to deal with either of these things.

“You should go,” she said. “And then get some sleep.”

He nodded as she drew her wand and dropped the Privacy Charm. She shot him a smile that only confused him further until she stepped closer to him and pulled him down to her for an almost chaste and all-too-brief kiss.

“Good night,” she whispered. “And don’t you go patrolling alone either.”

He turned and exited the curtained area and barely acknowledged Poppy when he passed her on his
way out of the hospital wing.

*Bloody infuriating witches, the lot of them.*

~ ~ ~

Hours later, Celia woke fuzzily, trying to figure out what had roused her. Poppy had given her a Sleeping Draught so that she would stop jumping every time she heard a noise, and apparently it was wearing off. As she woke, she became gradually aware that she wasn’t alone, and she wasn’t alarmed. Behind her in the bed – but on top of the sheets, the chivalrous idiot – was a comforting presence with an arm around her waist and a chin resting on her head. Funny how familiar this could feel considering that the past several times he’d done this, she hadn’t known his name.

*He’s lucky he didn’t end up with a bloody nose.*

She slid a hand down to cover his and intertwined their fingers. Once she was discharged from the hospital wing, she was essentially going to be living with him for at least several days. Part of her was glad not to give this up. Part of her was annoyed at how he’d manipulated her. And part of her was taking bets on how long it would take for this new arrangement to destroy what they’d been building back up these past couple of weeks.

With a sigh she slipped back into sleep.
A subtle hum of magic surrounded her, and it felt warm and safe and solid. Something very solid was pressing against her backside, and as she slowly woke, she became gradually aware of the arm around her waist tightening and her neck being nuzzled. She wriggled her hips to press back against him a bit, and he moaned quietly just below her ear.

_Thank Goddess whatever this magic is means he can’t seem to startle me into thwapping him. That would seriously ruin the mood._

The past two nights since she had been discharged from the hospital wing had been … uneventful. They had both been too exhausted from their respective patrols to consider doing anything but collapsing into sleep.

It seemed Severus was recharged now.

Celia glanced at the clock. They’d probably be late to breakfast, but not by much.

She reached behind her to bury her fingers in his hair, and he took advantage of the opening this gave him to cup her breast and run his thumb over and around the nipple through her nightgown. It hardened under his touch, and she sighed contentedly. She wanted to turn and kiss him, but then he might stop what he was doing, and this was very, very nice. Also, she was pretty sure she had a bad case of dragon breath and made a mental note to bring some fresh mint leaves to keep by the bed next time.

Unable to resist the urge any longer, she wriggled around to face him and kissed his lips tentatively, keeping her own firmly closed, then more confidently trailed kisses along his jaw to his ear, flicking her tongue out to tickle the lobe and draw it between her teeth. His hiss of indrawn breath sent sparks of arousal through her, and she slid a hand down to grip his buttocks possessively. He mimicked her and pulled their hips more tightly together. If not for his nightshirt and her nightgown, she thought he might have slipped into her right then. That sounded like a wonderful idea, come to think of it, and as she moved her kisses to his neck and throat, she reached down to find the hem of his nightshirt.

A bell sounded in the room, and for a moment she couldn’t figure out what it was. Severus stiffened...
and pulled back from her, his expression murderous.

“What is it?”

“Trouble in Slytherin,” he growled, tossing off the covers and grabbing his dressing gown as he lunged out of the bed and into his slippers. He stopped at the doorway and looked at her as if he wanted to say something but then turned and stalked out muttering, “Bloody common room better be in flames if they know what’s good for them.”

She lay there for a few minutes hoping he’d be right back and they could more or less pick up where they’d left off.

A few minutes turned into ten. Fifteen. Still no sign of him. With a sigh, she dragged herself out of bed, pulled on her bathrobe, and stuffed her feet into her slippers.

*The one compensation there ought to be for this ridiculous arrangement, and I’m doomed not to get the chance to enjoy it.*

She shuffled out to the sitting room and found a scrap of parchment and quill to leave Severus a note.

*Something witty about continuing this later would be good.*

She thought a minute.

*I don’t do witty before coffee.*

Lame note on the pillow, she went back into the sitting room, tossed a pinch of powder into the fireplace and Flooed back to her cottage to get ready for the day.

*Goddess help any Slytherin who so much as breathes wrong in my classes today!*  

~ ~ ~

“What is the meaning of this?” he shouted over the din.

Several chairs had been overturned, two third-years had bloody noses, all six Prefects were holding onto students who had presumably been fighting and showed signs of hex damage, and in a corner, Lightfeather was shaking his hand trying to get something off it. None of them answered him, but at least the room grew silent.

“What in Merlin’s name have you dunderheads got to say for yourselves?” he demanded.

None of them answered, so he caught the eyes of the likeliest suspects.

*Merlin’s beard, this started over a photograph?*

“Lightfeather! What is that on your hand?” he barked.

The boy held his hand out wordlessly. As the glimpse in Harrington’s mind had suggested, it was a picture of Miss Hollingberry.

*Sentimental fool. I warned him his housemates would be unsympathetic at best.*

“*Finite Incantatem,*” he cast sharply, and the photograph fell to the floor where the boy wisely did not scramble immediately to retrieve it.
Fortunately Harrington’s Permanent Sticking Charm was imperfect. Not that any first-year should have attempted one.

“Since none of you will explain yourselves,” he continued, “you can all serve detention with Mr. Filch tonight. Prefects,” he added, “I expect to see you in my office during the lunch hour to explain why you were unable to prevent a squabble between two first-years from turning into …” He surveyed the room with a sneer. “… this and found it necessary to disrupt my morning.”

By the end of this speech, he knew his voice had become a snarl, but he hardly cared.

“Now, get yourselves to breakfast or to the hospital wing if you must, but not before you put. Right. This. Room.” He turned and stalked out of the Slytherin Common Room and back to his quarters.

Returning to find his rooms empty did not help his mood in the least, though Celia’s note mentioned that she did wait awhile, soothing his ego. A little.

He quickly bathed, dressed, and made his way to the Great Hall in order to ensure the rest of Slytherin had not lost their minds as well. On his way in, he saw Celia in the hallway talking to a very familiar Auror with hair a violent shade of green. He ignored the look of indignation on Celia’s features as he passed them.

By the time she joined him at the staff table, her expression had shifted to one far more neutral, but she barely spoke as she quickly ate her breakfast.

The Slytherins in the Great Hall were reasonably well-behaved. A few quailed under his gaze, and he resolved to watch those particular students more carefully throughout the day.

When she stood to leave for her first class, Celia did not speak, merely shooting him a clearly annoyed look.

For a day that had started with such promise, it did not appear to be going well.

~ ~ ~

Celia stood in front of her mirror, putting the finishing touches on her hair. It was not as though Willow would care how she looked, and really, after a trip through a Floo, nobody looked their best, but she still felt as if she were heading into an inspection, and everything ought to be in place. Also, she was just enjoying the moment of increasingly rare solitude and simply being in her own quarters.

Nervous as she was, Celia was very much looking forward to this meeting with Willow and Kennedy. It would be a relief to be around people she’d known for more than six months. For that matter, it would be a relief to wear Muggle clothing for an evening without feeling like she had to hide it. She finished off her braid, smoothed an almost invisible wrinkle from her shirt, and went to the sitting room to meet Severus.

He had opted to wear a modified version of his usual garb, leaving off only the teaching robes. It had been something of a toss-up, she thought, whether he was going to feel more out of place wearing wizarding clothes when everyone else was in Muggle outfits, or whether he’d be more comfortable wearing clothes that were familiar. It was probably going to be uncomfortable enough for him to be the oldest person and only man present.

And really, am I going to complain about the frock coat? Of course not.

“Are you ready?” he asked when she entered the room. His tone was clearly impatient.
“Almost.”

She proceeded to re-check her wand’s positioning in her sleeve-sheath, the knife in the ankle-sheath of her boot, and the stake beside it.

“Is all of that really necessary?” he asked, as she looked critically at the sword she’d just pulled out from under the sofa.

She glanced at him. “If one of your former students had just screwed up so massively you had to travel from who knows where in the middle of doing who knows what to not only bail her out but then back her up, wouldn’t you start things off with a little test?”

He gave a little nod to concede the point.

“Even if she doesn’t specifically test me, I’d really better show up prepared. But not over-prepared.”

She tucked the sword back under the sofa and stood. “Ready?”

“I have been,” he said dryly.

“It’s not like you actually need to come, Severus,” she pointed out for what felt like the eightieth time.

“Minerva was quite clear, I thought.”

She glared at him. “She said she wanted a full report. I can report just fine all by myself.”

“Yes, but your perspective is likely to be quite different,” he replied blandly.

With a huff, she re-cast the Anti-Eavesdropping Spell just in case, grabbed a bit of Floo powder and tossed it into the fireplace and, when the flames flashed green, said the address of the house where Willow and Kennedy were staying and stepped in. She spun rapidly and then tumbled out of the other end of the connection, bringing up a Shield as she did.

“Gee, happy to see you, too,” Willow said with a smile.

Celia dropped the Shield, though she kept her guard up, cast a quick Cleansing Charm to remove the soot, and gave her mentor a hug.

“It’s wonderful to see you, Will,” she said with a grin. “I’m just waiting to see what you’ve got up your sleeve for me.” Releasing the redhead, she turned and gave Kennedy a somewhat briefer hug just as Severus stepped out of the Floo. She almost tossed a Shield over him but decided to wait and see what would happen. Nothing, it seemed, as he rid himself of soot without incident.

“I can never remember what order you’re supposed to do this in,” she said, “so I’ll just wing it as usual.” She took his arm and gestured to their hostesses. “Severus Snape, I would like you to meet Willow Rosenberg, my teacher, and Kennedy Rosenberg, her wife and my fellow Slayer. Willow, Kennedy, this is Severus, Deputy Headmaster of Hogwarts.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Willow said, extending her hand to him.

He accepted and gave it a firm shake. “I am pleased to make your acquaintance as well,” he said, then repeated the exchange with Kennedy.

*Is he always so into the all-black thing?*

*Pretty much.*
*I guess I can kind of see what Giles is talking about.*

Celia scowled. *I see no comparison whatsoever.*

“I hate when they do this,” Kennedy complained.

“Legilimency?” Severus asked.

“No, telepathy,” she replied. “There’s a difference, but don’t ask me to explain it.”

Celia rolled her eyes at her fellow Slayer and turned to him, saying, “Telepathy only communicates audio and visual information, no emotions or other sensations, and doesn’t require eye contact. Willow can broadcast to pretty much anybody. I can only ‘talk’ to her, and I have a much shorter range. If not for the spell she did to ‘teach’ me, I probably wouldn’t even be able to do that.” She turned back to her teacher. “Where were you, by the way?”

“When?”

“Monday.”

“Oh. India.”

Celia’s eyes opened wide. She turned back to Severus. “We still don’t know the maximum of Willow’s range, but, um … I think that’s the maximum distance so far.”

*Oh, I don’t know,* Willow continued. *Tall, pale, lots of black, sketchy past. Yeah, I see Giles’ point.*

*For Goddess’ sake, Will, let’s start with the basics: I prefer my men with a pulse.*

*There is that.*

Celia decided she’d had enough teasing and added rather nastily, *And without their own lunar cycle.*

“Ouch!” Willow said aloud with a smirk.

“What?” Kennedy asked, looking as if she were getting ready to pound Celia for whatever she might have just said. After a pause, she smirked, too. “Oh, well, that might explain that little anomaly in your past, Red.”

Celia just rolled her eyes. “Can we maybe come the rest of the way in and get comfy, then get on with the real interrogation?”

“Oh, where are my manners?” Willow exclaimed in obviously false domestic horror. She gestured for everyone to follow her over to the very comfortable-looking chairs and sofa.

Just as she began to follow, Celia felt rather than heard something off to her side. Turning, she saw a vampire headed straight at her. She bent, pulled out the stake, and took advantage of her lowered position to use the vamp’s momentum against him, flipping him onto his back. She swung her arm down in a quick arc and stopped with the stake resting just over his heart.

“Oh, what, you’re gonna stake me now, are you?” asked Spike indignantly.

“Give me one good reason not to,” she retorted.
“I did save the world, you know.” The ridges on his face faded and his fangs receded.

She shrugged. “Name me one person in this room who hasn’t. You want to impress me, you’ve got to try harder.”

“How often is a bloke supposed to save the world before Slayers stop trying to stake him every chance they get?”

“Weekly,” she replied, as she replaced the stake and offered him a grudging hand up. “What the hell are you doing here, Spike?” she asked.

“Still with all the hostility,” he said with a smirk. “And here I’d heard you were all in favor of the reformed bad boys now.”

She didn’t flinch and forced herself not to look and see Severus’ reaction. “Accent on reformed, Spike. Still got that coat, I see.”

“I like this coat!” He pulled on the lapel and looked down at it as if trying to find some flaw.

“Yeah,” she said, “see, as far as I can tell, reformed murderers don’t continue to wear trophies they’ve ripped off their victims’ corpses.”

“It’s not even the same coat,” he retorted.

“Better still. It’s a replica of the coat you ripped off the still-warm corpse of the last Slayer you killed. Yeah, huge improvement. What are you doing here?” She rounded on Willow, keeping Spike well in view. “What’s he doing here?”

“You mean besides proving whether or not something’s wrong with your reflexes?” Willow asked, her eyebrows raised meaningfully. “Why don’t you come sit down and we’ll talk?”

Celia crossed her arms and widened her stance to indicate she was not going anywhere until she heard some answers.

“Well, the main thing is,” Willow said, “that we need information.”

“Obviously.”

“I’ll be working on that magically. And Kennedy and I will be patrolling Hogsmeade, so we’ll see if we pick up anything here. Meanwhile, Spike …”

Celia did not hear the rest as she started to laugh. At first she tried to suppress it. After the first few bursts escaped, however, she gave it up for a lost cause and just doubled over in uncontrollable bitter mirth.

Spike stared at her, then started to chuckle. “What’s so funny?” he asked. His chuckle turned into a full-scale laugh.

“Giles …” she gasped, “has completely … lost … his mind.”

“Well, yeah,” Spike agreed, still laughing.

“The only … possible … thing he could … hope … to accomplish … by sending you here … is to piss me off!” She made a valiant attempt to stop laughing. “The wizards … will make you … for a vampire … and the vamps … will smell your soul … a mile away! It’s the most insane thing … I’ve ever heard in my life.”
Spike stopped laughing. “Hey!”

“I think Giles kinda has something else in mind,” Willow said, taking Celia by the arm and leading her to sit on the sofa by which Severus was standing.

“Oh, really?” Celia asked, her voice dripping with sarcasm, the laughter finally abating. She sat and Severus joined her once Kennedy and Willow had sat as well. “Gee, I think it might be too subtle. No, wait, I think I’ve got it. He’s done ranting at me, so instead he’s decided to send me a spy I don’t trust and don’t believe has actually reformed. And apparently that little message was more important than coming up with an effective strategy.”

“No, I don’t think …” Willow looked at Severus, who scowled at her, and then at Spike. “Well, okay, that might be part of it. But he does actually have a plan, and we didn’t have any better ideas. I mean, we could try using someone Angel could get through what’s left of Wolfram and Hart, but you never know if they’re going to stay bought. And Spike does actually have a good track record since the whole getting his soul back thing.”

“Yeah. Because having a soul keeps loads of people from being all evil,” Celia felt compelled to point out. “And if using a vamp with a soul was the best idea anyone had, why not send Angel?”

“He’s still got his hands pretty full trying to de-evil Wolfram and Hart. Celia, I know the thing with Nikki really bothers you,” Willow said. “I get that. But even Robin has managed to deal with it, and she was his Mom.”

“Right, well, apparently Giles and I have this much in common then: we both have trouble letting go of things that don’t directly involve us.”

“Yeah, about that? Not so much,” Willow said.

“Come again?”

“You need to let up on Giles.” Her teacher looked at her sternly, leaning forward in her chair.

_I should’ve known she wouldn’t back me up on this_, Celia thought. _He must have told her about that Floo conversation last night._ She’d told him what she thought of his attitude towards Severus and had been treated to a long list of things she already knew cited as supposed evidence. That conversation hadn’t ended well. “Oh, really? Why should I do that?” She stole a glance at Severus who was doing an impressive imitation of a statue.

“How much do you remember from when I first came over here?”

“When you …” Celia thought a moment. “Nothing, really. It pretty much goes from The Yellow Crayon Speech to when you started working with the coven. You weren’t doing any magic or having any done on you in between.”

“I kind of thought that might be the case. Giles didn’t believe me.” Willow sighed. “You actually should, you know. Maybe I was just so drained, being around all that magic didn’t permeate the memories the same way.”

“Being around all what magic? What does this have to do with anything?”

“See, when Giles brought me over here, we didn’t go straight to Devon. He decided he wanted to see if his old mentor could help first. The one who helped him get straightened out back in his Ripper days.”
Celia didn’t think that clarified anything, so she simply gestured for Willow to continue.

“So instead of going straight to Devon, we came here.”

“Here? Hogsmeade? Who was it? And why ...”

“Not Hogsmeade. **Hogwarts.**” Willow settled back into her chair as if resting her case.

“Oh,” Celia said. This still wasn’t fitting together. “But who ... oh!”

Willow nodded, and Celia did a quick comparison of dates that she’d never thought to compare before.

“But that means, you would have gotten there either right before or ...”

“Right after, actually,” Willow said, sadly. “It was kinda chaotic. Lots of Ministry people running around talking about closing the school. We only stayed long enough to find out what had happened and then bailed.”

From the corner of her eye, Celia saw Severus stiffen.

“So that time, the day you sensed the Hellmouth preparing to open, when you said Giles had gone all ...” Celia swallowed hard, finding it impossible to even say the former Headmaster’s name all of a sudden.

“Yeah, I was being literal.”

Celia slumped back into the couch. “He only ever told me he knew Minerva,” she said. “Said she was his contact when he was the Council’s liaison to the Order in the seventies and then again for a bit after Buffy ... and before you ... and then again until the Bringers kind of refocused the Council, but he never said why the Council assigned him the job in the first place.”

“Does this make sense to anyone else?” Kennedy asked, looking very annoyed. She shot glares at them all, mainly at Celia but some at Willow and even Spike, as if he’d know anything.

“Not a clue,” said Spike.

“I believe I have some idea,” Severus said. His expression was pained, though she was sure it appeared unreadable to the rest of them.

Celia turned to him, hesitated for only a second, and reached to give his hand a reassuring squeeze. The look he gave her wasn’t something she’d describe as reassured. If she’d had any idea they’d be bringing that up, she’d have insisted a lot harder that he stay behind. He never talked about it, at least not on purpose, but it was obviously a very painful memory for him. She wondered if he had any idea he sometimes talked in his sleep.

She turned back to Willow.

“He knows why it had to be that way. It’s in the damned history books he had me read, for starters. I understand it still has to hurt. A lot. But ... he knows.”

“Emotions aren’t always big with the logic,” Willow said. She turned to Kennedy. “I’ll explain later.”

“You’d better,” Spike replied.
“Well, yeah,” Celia answered Willow. “But … he’s the one always going on about not letting emotions dictate strategy.” She sighed. More complications. “Fine, so he’s not going to let up anytime soon. But there had better be more of a reason than his little ‘message’ for sending him. So, if we can stop being morbid for a sec here, can we talk about what the Evil Undead is supposed to be able to do for us?”

“Well, yeah,” Celia answered Willow. “But … he’s the one always going on about not letting emotions dictate strategy.” She sighed. More complications. “Fine, so he’s not going to let up anytime soon. But there had better be more of a reason than his little ‘message’ for sending him. So, if we can stop being morbid for a sec here, can we talk about what the Evil Undead is supposed to be able to do for us?”

“Actually,” Willow said, rising and gesturing for the rest of them to join her, “first let’s see just how much rust you’ve accumulated these past few months.”

~ ~ ~

He sat on a bench watching Celia sparring with the vampire and the other Slayer in a basement that looked like nothing so much as a cross between the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom and a gymnasium, if that gymnasium involved the use of swords, spears, and a truly magnificent-looking axe of some sort. Severus allowed himself a moment to reflect on the events thus far tonight. He had expected to be mostly invisible this evening. His role was primarily that of observer, and frankly that was more at his own insistence than anything Minerva truly wanted. He simply did not feel comfortable with the idea of letting Celia that far out of his sight. He was rather afraid she realized that and did not approve. Too bad.

A particularly loud clash of swords startled him out of his reverie. She had the vampire pinned against the wall with a blade at his throat, but the other Slayer was getting up from the floor behind her and getting ready to have another go at her.

What is the point to this? Why is she not using magic? She could have had them both Stunned or in full Body-Binds by now. And what in Merlin’s name is Combat Drill Protocol Five?

She kneed the vampire, and Severus winced in masculine sympathy as the creature doubled over. Celia knocked him to the floor, coming around smoothly to block the other Slayer’s sword strike.

Now he began to see their strategy. The two other combatants had maneuvered Celia so that her teacher was behind her and clearly preparing to attack, magical energy sparking along her fingertips. Faster than he could see what had happened, the vampire and the other Slayer were lying on the floor, tightly bound in black ropes, and Celia was repelling an onslaught of what looked like purple and black lightning. A stray bolt came towards where he was sitting, and Severus blocked it with a negligent flick of his wand.

A series of hexes and curses flew back and forth, neither witch scoring a hit on the other, and Severus noted that the vampire and the other Slayer appeared to be encased in shields as well. He, on the other hand, found himself needing to deflect a few that made it to where he sat. He smirked when he recognized a few of his own devising.

Suddenly, both witches stopped. Her teacher’s hair and eyes had become black, and Celia looked oddly stiff and still. She turned and began to walk towards him, her features strangely blank. After a
few paces, however, she stopped, frowned, and turned back to face her teacher, a look of
determination now firmly on her face.

“You do realize you’re supposed to use that to make people do things they don’t already want to do,
right?” she asked.

*Imperius? What happened to the supposed Slayer immunity? And what, precisely, was she trying to
make her do?*

“Yeah, but it actually took hold for a couple more seconds this way,” her teacher replied with a grin.
Her hair and eyes were returning to their normal coloration.

*And why is her use of Dark Arts so … literally expressed? That would seem rather a liability.

Though her back was to him, Severus was certain Celia had just rolled her eyes. He could almost
hear it.

“And the point to that was?” Celia had her hands on her hips now.

“Just more tests,” the other witch replied with a shrug.

“Since you’re the only one who can cast it on me and make it stick at all, it’d make more sense to
have someone else test it.”

Now her teacher shrugged, then waved a hand in Celia’s direction.

Celia flipped her hands out, palms up. “Um, ow! But yet, um, not so much.” She tilted her head as if
thinking. “Maybe try it with your wand? Helps me for some spells that I’m not so great with. So does
going verbal.” She paused. “You did get a wand, right?”

“Yup, I’m all registered and official now.” The redhead Summoned it from a case on the wall.

Severus suppressed astart at that. It was unusual enough that these witches preferred wandless
magic. This Willow had not even owned a wand previously?

“And yet the world still turns,” Celia said with a smile in her voice. “So, what kind is it? No, wait, let
me guess … willow?”

“No, silly. Rowan with unicorn tail hair. Yours?”

Celia flicked hers out of its sheath in her sleeve. “Yew with dragon heartstring.”

“So you got the willow wand?” The redhead giggled.

“Y. E. W. It’s a type of tree,” Celia explained, sounding somewhat impatient.

*And one not used frequently for wands. Though I suppose a wand from the “tree of death” is
appropriate for a witch who is also a Slayer.*

“Oh. Well, I should probably get used to using it anyway.”

“Good point. You’re going to feel foolish waving it around at first, or at least I did.”

That Celia was also new to having a wand … was troubling but actually explained rather a lot. *There
is something very different in how these two work with magic, far more than I had realized.*
“Um, guys?” the other Slayer said. “Can we get up now?”

“Just a sec, baby,” Celia’s teacher replied. “Lemme give this a try while you’re all shielded.”

“Not that a shield does jack against it if you do manage to pull it off,” Celia pointed out. “Trust me on that one.”

The other witch’s eyes and hair flashed black again as she cast, “Crucio!”

Severus was on his feet before he realized it and lunged towards the two witches before bringing himself up short.

Celia’s shoulders hunched, and from this new angle he could see her wince. “Okay, ow!” she said. “But yet still, um, no.”

Severus willed his breathing to resume. Despite the fact her teacher had obviously tapped more efficiently into the Unforgivable this time, she had still not been able to channel enough will to cause real pain. Celia was fine.

Her teacher’s appearance began to return to normal once again. It seemed strange that the shift should be so immediate.

Perhaps because she was unsuccessful? Because there was no true intent to torture? More questions I shall want answered.

He felt extremely foolish standing where he was but did not return to his seat.

“Makes it hard to test that theory,” the redhead replied with a frustrated wave of the hand not holding her wand. “Still, I think the problem is your Occlumency. It’s all Slayerish.”

Celia scowled. “And that’s surprising because?”

The two on the ground were abruptly unbound and began clambering to their feet.

“Not surprising so much as I-told-you-so-ey.” The woman bent to give her wife a hand rising and dusted her off before turning back to Celia. “Occlumency isn’t supposed to be three-foot-thick titanium shields or military grade titanium padlocks once you get inside. We’ve talked about this.”

Celia waved a hand, apparently conceding the point. “I’ll work on it. Wasn’t ever a real issue before. Either I wanted someone to stay the hell out or I’d invited them in to see something.”

That also explains rather a lot actually. I wonder if she will accept my help to improve this?

“So, other than that, not all that rusty then,” the redhead said.

“I guess,” Celia agreed, “but then, fighting you has always been like fighting myself.”

“Still,” her teacher insisted, “what the hell happened, Celia? If you’re still this good, how’d they ambush you?”

Is it not glaringly obvious? They were not people she already knew and had fought before, and apparently she has scruples about engaging other humans in combat.

As they walked over to join him, Celia replied, “I still don’t know. Well, I know some. Obviously I was too locked into the idea that if anyone was going to attack me once I was back on the grounds, it would be a student and probably just using the Imperius. Which, you know, not being you, would be
kind of useless.”

Severus appended that to the question he already planned to ask her later.

“And?” the redhead pressed.

“And I didn’t hear them, didn’t feel them, didn’t anything them until that one caught my eye.” She scowled. “Best Silencing Spell in the world shouldn’t have kept me from feeling their magic at least, and there’s not supposed to be any way to cloak that.”

“Not supposed to be any way to get onto the grounds either,” Willow pointed out.

“Or out. Doesn’t matter if you call it teleporting or Apparating, you’re not supposed to be able to do it,” Celia agreed.

And not a Vanishing Cabinet to be found, he thought as she took his arm and led him back to the bench to sit.

“Well, that’s some of what we’re hoping Spike can find out,” the other Slayer chimed in.

“No offense, Spike,” Celia said, then paused. “No, wait a minute, get as offended as you want, but I don’t see how you’re going to do that.”

Severus winced inwardly. While she was nowhere near as snide about it, her attitude towards the vampire was entirely too reminiscent of the way Moody had behaved towards him. Still, this was a vampire and, from what she had said, one who had killed more than one Slayer. He was not very inclined to trust such a one either.

The blond vampire shrugged. “Same way I always do. Get a few demons drunk, maybe even a wizard or two. There’s always a few hanging out in demon bars these days. Then, I find anything, I go follow it up.”

“And I’ve taught him how to use owls,” Celia’s teacher added. “Most of the owly post office places open early enough he should be able to get in and out without worrying about daylight.”

Celia cocked an eyebrow. “And the birds don’t freak out?”

The other witch shrugged. “Maybe they can smell his soul.”

Even Lucius managed to send owls. I do not believe they are very discriminating creatures.

“I guess that’s the best we’ve got for now,” Celia admitted with a sigh.

“Yeah,” the vampire said with a glare, “it is. So get off your high horse and say, ‘Thank you, Spike,’ like a good little Slayer.”

Celia crinkled up her nose as if she smelled something foul, causing Severus to experience that internal wince again.

“You know, you’d think it was your mum I killed.”

“You stayed in the States for a long time after Nikki,” Celia pointed out with a glare. “For all I know, you did.” She took a deep breath and her features relaxed. “Fine. Thank you, Spike.”

“There, that wasn’t so hard, now, was it?” the other Slayer asked with a yawn.
“It’s getting kind of late, isn’t it?” Celia said.

“Yeah,” the other witch replied, punctuating this with a yawn of her own. “Plus it’s like four in the morning in New Delhi about now.”

Celia shook her head. “We should get going. Saturday afternoon then?”

With a nod, Willow reached for her wife and guided her to stand up, then led the rest of the group back up into the main house, where they said their good-nights and tossed in the Floo powder to travel first to her cottage and then to his quarters.

~ ~ ~

When they arrived in Severus’ dungeon sitting room, Celia decided that a Cleansing Charm wasn’t going to cut it tonight. The soot from the Floo was fast turning to mud with all the sweat, and much as she preferred the shower in her cottage, she decided to take a bath before bed. He had grumbled a bit, then made his own use of the bathroom quickly so that she could take as long as she liked.

She didn’t know whether all the faculty quarters in the castle had bathtubs like this, or whether it was one of the perks of being Head of a House, but Severus’ tub was impressive. Carved out of green marble, it almost created the impression that she was stepping into the ocean. There were several faucets that each offered soap of a different scent. After testing a few, she settled on the sandalwood that he clearly favored. The idea of Severus taking bubble baths made her smile, even though this tap was the least bubbly of the lot.

She dunked her head under the water and scrubbed at her scalp as she resurfaced, reminding herself that she had best bring and leave some shampoo here if this arrangement was going to continue. Plain soap wouldn’t hurt once in awhile, but her hair was too dry to do well with it for long.

*And you’d think a Potions master would know better.*

She picked up a facecloth and washed the rest of her body. When she had finished, she let the tub begin to drain and positioned herself under the one faucet that ran with only water, trying to get rid of the last of the soap residue. She got out of the tub, dried herself, and put on the bathrobe she’d grabbed during the brief stop at her cottage, then stood in front of the mirror to brush out her still-damp hair. She ignored the mirror’s occasional commentary on her appearance. How did anyone stand these things? Hers was a Muggle mirror. She couldn’t have tolerated it otherwise.

Once she was done, she Charmed her hair the rest of the way dry and gave herself a lopsided smile. *Maybe we can pick up where we left off this morning.*

“I don’t know what you’re smirking about,” the mirror said. “You haven’t done a thing with that hair, nor have you bothered with the most basic Cosmetic Charms.”

“You know,” Celia said, “I’m really surprised Severus hasn’t hexed you into a million pieces by now.”

The only reply was an indignant sniff.

With a shrug, Celia left the bathroom to go see where Severus was and what he was up to. She found him in his sitting room reading a bit of the latest *International Journal of Potions* in his shirtsleeves.

“Got another letter in it?” she asked.
He made an indignant huffing noise and set the periodical down.

She perched on the arm of his chair. “I didn’t mean to make you stop reading.”

“That article was designed to replace every sedative potion ever invented,” he replied with a smirk. “You have saved me from the indignity of falling asleep out here.”

Funny. He didn’t look bored. Not that I’m arguing.

“So, are you over it now?” she asked. At his questioning look, she continued, “Over thinking you have to keep watch on me every second?”

His eyes narrowed. “You did quite well under controlled circumstances against others you have trained with before.”

She sighed. “And if you think any of them were holding back, especially Willow, you’re really wrong.”

“It is still rather different to actual combat,” he insisted.

“I’ve been in real combat,” she replied. “Lots of it. Granted, something like seventy percent of the time, magic is my unfair advantage in those situations because we’re talking demons who don’t have it. And before I came here, my visits to the wizarding world were measurable in hours because it just made more sense to assign those few cases to Slayer-witches who had grown up with it. But I didn’t get to be the fourth-oldest Slayer by being unable to defend myself and take down some pretty nasty opponents.”

“And yet …”

“And yet, when three assailants – who somehow managed to cloak their magic from me, which is supposed to be impossible – ganged up on me using one of the few curses I’ve been unable to train against, we reached a stalemate.” She looked at him intently. “A stalemate, Severus. I couldn’t fight back actively, but they didn’t get what they wanted either. Well, not all of it, assuming part of their goal was to get at you. Also? One of them ended up dead. Me? Not so much.” She pushed a lock of his hair away from his eyes. “Thank you for breaking the stalemate. Even if I should still throttle you for coming after me by yourself.”

“I will still not agree to your patrolling alone,” he replied.

She held up her hands in mock surrender. “Not arguing that one. But I don’t need an Auror to escort me to and from my cottage in broad daylight either.”

He made a noise that might have signaled agreement. Or not.

“Madam Kennedy seems uncomfortable around you,” he observed.

“You’re probably right, but that’s not what we were talking about,” she replied with a pointed look.

He stared back at her with a look in his eyes that she’d call defiance if she saw it in a student. It faded and he gave a slight nod. “Agreed.”

“Good.” She stood and moved to sit on the coffee table instead of his armrest. “As far as Kennedy … and if you call her Madam Kennedy she’s probably going to either laugh or hit you … yeah. I guess it still bothers her that Willow and I have this weird connection.”
“Do many of your shared memories include her?” he asked.

“Fortunately no.” She leaned forward resting her elbows on her knees and propping her chin in her hands. “Only a very small handful since Willow did very little magic during the start of their relationship. What bothers her more, I think, is how very many memories I have of Tara, Willow’s first female lover.”

“She is a witch, too, then?”

“She was. And they were both still learning, so a lot of their relationship involved magic. Ergo, lots of memories.”

“Was?” His expression had become guarded. Defensive.

“She died. Was killed, actually.” Celia paused briefly. “It’s still very strange to remember being in love with, and mourning, someone I never met.”

“That must have been confusing for you.”

No, not at all. Why would it be confusing to suddenly remember being in love with a woman when the idea had never crossed my mind before? Do we really have to have this conversation? I’ve left your past well enough alone.

“Yes. It was” she said finally. “Does that bother you?”

“Which part?”

“Any of it. The connection with Willow? The … confusion?”

“I can hardly fault you for having a past,” he said, his face predictably unreadable. “I have many questions about the memories and the mental link you share with Willow, but it does not bother me,” he said. He looked over to the blazing hearth several feet away, as though it would be easier to speak to it than to her. “Why did you not mention that you were vulnerable to her Imperius?”

She sighed and sat up a bit straighter. “Probably because it didn’t occur to me. It’s not like she was here, and even now that she is, it’s not like she’d use it for anything but training.”

“So only she is able to cast it on you?” he looked at her pointedly.

“Yeah. And I can throw it off, as you saw.” She shrugged. “Some side effect from the data dump, I guess.”

“You still should have mentioned it.”

“You’re right,” she conceded. “I will. We’re meeting with Minerva tomorrow anyway to talk about how tonight went, so I’ll bring it up then.”

He was still looking at her kind of strangely.

“More questions?”

“Many.”

Lovely.

“But as you said before, it is growing late.” His features softened slightly.
“Then if that’s enough for now,” she said, relieved if not completely reassured, “can we maybe try to take care of some unfinished business?”

The light in his eyes told her he knew exactly what she was getting at. Of course, the fact that they had flicked down to where her dressing gown had slipped a bit open was pretty clear, too. She stood and took his hand to lead him to his own bedroom.

Once inside, she pulled him down to her for a kiss that quickly became hungry. She made quick work of his shirt as she backed him towards the bed. Reaching around him, she tugged down the covers.

He pulled his lips back from hers. “A bit impatient?”

“I was already impatient before the stupid bell went off this morning,” she murmured. She slipped a hand down to remove his trousers and discovered that he was already becoming hard. Palming his partial erection through the material elicited a very satisfying sound from his throat.

He unfastened the belt of her robe and eased it off her shoulders to pool on the floor behind her, then glided his hands down along her back to cup her buttocks.

Soon she had divested him of the rest of his clothes and nudged him to sit on the edge of the bed and then to lie back. She climbed into the bed next to him, and they spent a long moment just looking at each other. Then he reached for her, tracing the line of one of her breasts gently, teasing the nipple into a hardened nub. She caught his hand and kissed the palm and the inside of his wrist. Passing over the Mark, she trailed kisses along his arm, shoulder, and collarbone, before reclaiming his mouth. This kiss was, if anything, more intense and demanding than the last, and she felt him yield to it. A thrill ran through her. His hands found their way back to her breasts, and she moaned into his mouth.

Shifting position, she moved her attention to his chest. She nuzzled the sparse hair and caressed his nipples delicately with her tongue before grazing them with her teeth. Her hands traveled along his sides as she continued to kiss her way down his torso. He buried his hands in her hair until even that was out of reach, as she continued down along one thigh, skipping the part of him she knew was most begging for her touch, though she let her hand feather over him as she moved.

She kissed her way back up his other leg and slid her hand behind his sac, cupping it and being very careful to keep her touch light as she kissed him gently. A line of kisses along his shaft ended as she circled his tip with her tongue before taking it into her mouth as she continued to fondle him with her hand. His groan sent a thrill through her.

Not wanting him to come too soon, she backed off a little and caressed his tip with her tongue, flicking, lapping, circling. When his hips jerked towards her, she backed away again and blew a little air over him before placing a final light kiss to his tip and then working her way back up his torso.

At least that was her intention until he growled, pulled her up by her shoulders, and rolled her onto her back, bruising her lips and invading her mouth.

“Minx,” he muttered when he broke the kiss, “let’s see how you like it.”

With a wicked smirk, he glided a hand over her breasts so teasingly she almost wondered whether he was actually touching them or just moving the air slightly above them. When she tried to arch up into his hand, he pulled back. Then he was caressing her stomach, barely brushing over the curls below and pulling away again as she sought more contact.
When he finally slipped a finger into her, she couldn’t hold back a moan of relief. He removed it almost immediately, and she whimpered until he slid down and replaced it with his tongue. As he used it to map every fold and corner, she heard herself begging for more. He flicked his tongue over her clit lightly once, twice, sending sparks shooting through her, and then stopped.

Suddenly he was kissing her, and she thrilled at the taste of herself on his lips and tongue as his cock nudged against her, begging for entrance. With a quick movement, she had him on his back once again and looked down into his intense black eyes as she very deliberately sank down onto him, watching them widen deliciously as he filled her. He took hold of her hips, and for a moment, she let him hold her still.

Then it became too much, and she had to move. She glided along his length, enjoying the feel of her breasts brushing his chest every bit as much as the feel of his cock inside her. Soon even that wasn’t enough, and she tried to find the right angle so that he would hit … yes! If she stayed right there, every downstroke managed to reach just the right places, inside and out. That this gave him a bit of room to caress her breasts as well was an added bonus.

His grip on her breasts tightened, and his face became a rictus of pleasure that could as easily have been pain as he thrust up into her suddenly, sharply, and as she felt him come, something inside her chest seemed to swell unbearably even as she followed him over the edge.

When she came back to herself, she looked down at him fondly and kissed first the tip of his nose and then his lips. She rolled to her side and took him with her, trying to keep them connected. He tried to comply but soon slipped from her as they continued to exchange lazy, sated kisses. Celia noticed that he appeared to be fighting the urge to fall asleep. Once again, the room practically buzzed with magic, and though it wasn’t as pronounced as the last time, it still had a very lulling effect. Her eyes fluttered closed. She forced them open again, wanting to continue looking at him just a bit longer.

“If you are tired, you should sleep,” he said softly.

“I was about to say the same to you.”

She let him draw her to him and smiled as he tucked her head under his chin and wrapped an arm around her waist. She was amused when, after the briefest of hesitation, he also hooked a leg around both of hers.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she murmured.

He didn’t reply.
Severus deflected another of Potter’s curses and spun to cast several spells of his own at Celia, varying the angle of each. She was playing the two of them against each other, either dodging his spells so they went to Potter or deflecting Potter’s spells at Severus.

A clearly useful technique, but she is not quite managing to get herself enough space to Apparate or otherwise escape. This is supposed to be a simulated ambush, not merely a defensive drill. Her failure to end this is allowing me to see the pattern she is following, and that is unacceptable.

The next stream of hexes and curses he cast included several that had, with the slightest change in wand movement, been made to flip around her shields as she angled them to intercept the spells and redirect them. A *Sectumsempra* slashed her robes even as she tried to dance out of its way, and a Tripping Jinx laid her out on the floor, though she quickly rolled back up into a combat stance.

*It seems the more physical training she’s had as a Slayer is useful in magical combat as well. At least, it seems so while she is on the defensive.*

The remainder of his spells ricocheted to the walls and ceiling rather than at Potter, giving the other wizard the opportunity to take advantage of her momentary distraction. Potter’s Blasting Hex forced her to duck and roll again, and he caught her a glancing blow with something that pinned her wand arm to her side, but not completely. His next several spells were deflected towards Severus, who quickly blocked them.

“Time!” Willow called out just as Potter let one final Stunner fly, only to end up ducking it himself as it bounced off her shield and hit the wall behind him.

All three lowered their wands and looked to the redhead witch.

“All right,” said Willow. “That was good. Mostly.”

Celia Summoned a towel and used it to wipe her face and neck. Severus opted to use a Refreshing Charm instead, though he noticed Potter Summoned another towel from the same pile. All three followed Willow’s gesture towards the table where Kennedy was sitting.
“Okay,” Celia said as she took her seat, “why with the ‘mostly’?”

“You could start with the fact you’re using that wand way too much,” Kennedy said with a scornful tone. “Might as well tie one hand behind your back. Get two if you’re going to be that dependent on it.”

*Using two wands? That would be rather conspicuous, even assuming one could wield them both accurately.*

“No, that part I’m okay with,” Willow said with a small frown. “Making your opponents underestimate you is fine. As long as you don’t start to buy into it.”

“I don’t,” Celia protested. “I’m not. I’m not even really using it half the time.”

Severus found the idea of using wandless magic while actually holding a wand rather more disturbing than the fact she preferred wandless magic in the first place. *Why would one do such a thing? And how?*

“But you are using it half the time,” Willow replied. “So the question is whether that’s choice or habit.”

Celia shrugged. “Can’t it be both? I told you, for some spells it really helps, mostly for some of the Charms I’m not great at.”

“Hang on,” Potter spoke up. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s like I was trying to explain before about different kinds of magic,” Celia answered. “Willow’s basically a Muggle, so the way she learned to do magic is different than how it’s taught in the wizarding world. Not as different as some make it out to be, but definitely different. Starting with no wand.”

“I’m still having a hard time believing that,” Potter said. “I mean, Willow, Celia here says you’ve done some pretty incredible things. Things that aren’t even supposed to be possible. And I’ve seen you do magic today. So how is it you’re a Muggle?”

“The difference is I wasn’t born to it,” Willow explained. “Celia, did you bring the …? Oh, good.”

She took two phials filled with amber liquid from Celia and handed one to Kennedy. Severus thought he recognized the potion but wondered what she hoped to demonstrate. Celia, he saw, had retained one and was adding a bit of her own hair to it, as were the other two women.

“This was my first bit of magic ever,” Willow said with a smile. “Everybody always thinks it was Angel’s soul.”

“Well, you’ve got to admit, using beakers and Bunsen burners does take some of the mystique out of it,” Celia said.

*Apparently Potions are not treated as magic by those who practice it outside the wizarding world either. How very … predictable.*

She turned to Harry and added, “This potion will indicate whether the person being tested is a witch or wizard or not. At least, if they’re one by birth. Pureblood, half-blood, Muggleborn, doesn’t matter.” She tipped the phial over her hand and the amber liquid immediately changed to dark blue.

Willow did the same. On her hand, however, it did not change color. Considering the rather amazing
display of magic she’d given just two days prior, Severus found that incredible.

“And just to show it’s not really testing for Slayerness,” Kennedy said as she tipped some onto her own hand, also with no reaction.

“Then how do you do magic?” Potter asked, saving Severus the trouble.

“It’s harder,” Willow explained. “And to start out, it actually takes more props, not less. And lots of ritual. Way too much Latin. But anyone *can* learn to do at least a little.” She waved her hand – without use of a wand – and the spilled potions vanished from all three women’s hands.

“Even so, Willow’s pretty unusual,” Celia added. “There’s … a lot of reasons for that.”

The two witches did nothing so obvious as exchange a glance, but something told Severus that several of those reasons involved the Dark Arts.

“Bottom line,” Celia continued, “being wizarding-born, including Muggleborns, gives a huge edge with the magics. We still don’t understand why, and if anybody in the wizarding world has studied it, it’s all pretty hush-hush. Seems like we generate more of our own magic somehow, while Muggles who learn it have to tap into what’s around them as well. Once in a huge while, someone like Willow taps into enough that she starts generating more on her own too, but there’s still just enough difference she tests as Muggle. And again, since she taught me, her way comes easier.”

*No doubt, if anyone has studied such things here, they would keep such information in the Department of Mysteries and possibly Obliviate the researchers. The very idea that any Muggle could become as powerful as this Willow clearly is would cause panic.*

“Which, to get back to the point, is why you need to be sure why you decide to either use your wand or not,” Willow said. “If you’re using it as a decoy, that’s fine. If you’re using it because it amplifies some of your spells, that’s fine too. But if you’re getting dependent on it, that’s a problem.”

“Well, we’ll just have to see about that in the next round,” Celia retorted. “What else?”

“Hmm?”

“What else was wrong?”

“Oh.” The redhead looked at her sternly. “You’re not using Legilimency at all.”

Celia spread her hands. “Why would I waste energy on that against these two? Not like it’d get me anywhere.”

“Actually,” Severus cut in dryly, “Potter has never entirely mastered the art of Occlumency.”

The look on Celia’s face was priceless. Potter, on the other hand, looked furious.

“Then how did you …?” Celia began. “Never mind. Okay, I’ll use Legilimency.”

“It should be second nature, Celia,” Willow said. “It used to be.”

Celia shrugged. “Still is mostly.”

“Then when that one Death Eater turned to face you, why couldn’t you tell …? Oh, the mask?” Willow appeared to deflate a bit.

“Got it in one. No good line of sight at the eyes. Which begs the question why someone who used
Legilimency to keep his followers in line put them in masks in the first place.” Celia looked to Severus curiously.

“The Dark Lord had no reason to be circumspect with his followers,” he explained with a shrug. “He would simply order us to look him in the eye when we would report to him. But you are quite correct that the masks do make it difficult to perform Legilimency on someone who is wearing one.”

“You still got yours?” Kennedy asked.

Severus felt his lip curl into a sneer. “Certainly not.”

“Damn,” she said. “Would’ve been useful for training.”

Severus had to admit she was correct. However, he was loathe to conjure a new one, even for such a purpose.

Celia appeared to sense his discomfort and none to gracefully changed the subject. “Maybe, but who knows if they’ll pull that again. In costume, I mean. More likely they’ll lay low or at least not advertise who they are. Speaking of, have you seen any strange people hanging around watching the kids in Hogsmeade?”

Willow was clearly not fooled but answered, “No. Not that that means anything. We can’t exactly do a locator spell unless we want to risk doing their work for them.”

And no doubt she would have said something earlier, had there been anything worth noting.

“But Celia could,” Kennedy pointed out somewhat resentfully. “At least then you’d know for sure whether or not it’s a Potential you’re here for.”

Celia shrugged. “Same reason Willow didn’t use it to find me: it’s got some serious limitations.”

“Yeah, but at least they’re all in one place,” the other Slayer retorted.

I have seen second-years too mature to pout like that.

Celia rolled her eyes. “Yes. One big, huge, labyrinthine stone place. We’d have to gather all the girls into the Great Hall or something and then light one of them up like a Christmas tree. A smelly, orange Christmas tree. Say bye-bye to anything like a normal adolescence after that.” She shook her head. “Not without a damned good reason to put her through that. It’s a stretch to think there’s no connection to this Death Eater business, but it is possible.”

“At least you’d know it really was a Potential you’re here after.”

Celia’s eyes flicked to the weapons wall. “Not a good enough reason. You run into any Bringers on patrol? ‘Cause that’s about what it would take to convince me.”

“What’s a Bringer?” Potter asked.

In answer, Willow Summoned a book from upstairs, opened it, and passed it over so that Potter and then Severus could see the illustration and description. What he saw in the pictures appalled him. These were not demons. They were, or had been, human.

“There’s been nothing to suggest they’d be showing up,” Celia said in a tone that sounded as if she were trying to be reassuring.

But whom is she trying to reassure? Us? Or herself?
“Not even that dream with the Turok-Hans, really.”

“Legilimency would be rather futile against such opponents,” Severus observed. “I believe I have new appreciation for the Dark Lord’s desire to have us mix in normal society.”

Kennedy pulled a face. “I don’t think the First was really interested in them being able to pass for normal. Surprising how little the lack of eyes slowed them down though.”

“So, combined with the utter lack of news from Spike, we’ve still got nothing,” Celia said.

“Pretty much,” Willow agreed.

“So, back to this kid you’re looking for. If she’s not a Potential Slayer, and it’s your other theory, you’re sure she’d have to be a relative?” Potter asked.

Willow looked thoughtful. “Every spell I know of would need one, yeah.”

“So a magical connection wouldn’t be enough,” he pressed.

Celia’s eyes flicked immediately to Potter’s forehead and Severus’ own arm. He felt his lip curl at the implication.

“That’s … something one of us should’ve thought of sooner,” Celia admitted. “I don’t know if it’s possible, but maybe.”

*Whether or not it is possible is perhaps not as important as whether these supposed Death Eaters believe it to be so.*

“So that’ll be more research,” Willow said.

“Don’t look so broken up about it, Red,” Kennedy teased. “You’re already asking Giles to send more books, aren’t you?”

“Am not!” the redhead snapped, then relented and added, “Yet. Right now it’s time for, you know, more training. Ready for round two?”

“And this time you’re pulling out all the stops, right?” Kennedy asked.

Celia looked wary, Severus thought, as she answered, “Right. No stops.”

~ ~ ~

She tracked both their movements carefully. Harry really wasn’t giving anything away, whatever Severus thought of his Occlumency, and she wasn’t about to put whole bunches of energy into figuring what Harry was going to do and get blindsided by Severus. This time, however, it seemed they were waiting to see what she would do.

Casting a shield with her free hand, she sent a Stunner, a Slicing Hex, and a Trip Jinx at Harry in quick succession, then reversed and sent a Confundus Charm, a Stinging Hex, and a Disarming Spell at Severus. Both deflected them all and retaliated, and things started to get interesting.

She couldn’t stay on the offensive and use their spells against each other. In fact, the spells were coming in so fast she couldn’t really take the time to care where they went once she blocked them.

*Besides, Severus figured out how to work around that anyway. Figures.*
Still, it was invigorating. Slayer speed worked in her favor for avoiding their spells or responding to block them. She couldn’t quite get past their shields though.

“This is supposed to be training, not playtime!” Willow called out.

“What?” Celia retorted. “It can’t be both?” She narrowly ducked a Stretching Jinx and deflected a Body-Bind.

“What if you had to get past them?” Willow insisted. “You don’t have time for this. You said you were going to pull out the stops – now do it!”

“I am! I’m stopless!” Celia yelled as she felt her wand yanked from her hand and knew it was Willow who’d done it.

*That doesn’t change anything.*

She cast Freezing Charms and Body-Binds at them both in rapid succession, then ducked and shielded herself against an onslaught of curses she didn’t even recognize. After they blocked her next attempts, she tried using the ropes already on the floor from all their attempts at *Incarcerous* to entrap them. Someone Vanished them, probably Severus.

“That’s a little better,” Willow yelled over the sounds of spells and shields colliding, “but still not good enough. Step it up already!”

Celia knew what Willow wanted her to do. She was probably right. Using spells the two wizards already knew how to counter wasn’t going to get her anywhere. She drew on the energy crackling around the room and channeled it through her hands.

Severus looked slightly less shocked than Harry, but then he’d seen her do the lightning bit before. Both of them threw up heavy shields that kept it out, but she was sure she could wear them down. They might be stronger magically, in fact she was almost sure of it, but she was certain her Slayer strength would tip the scales so that she could outlast them. Once she got through, she should be able to immobilize them both.

She should have known that wouldn’t be enough.

“Take their shields down, Celia,” Willow said loudly.

“No,” she answered. *Not that way.* “This will work!”

“Yeah, eventually! You won’t have time for that in a real fight,” her teacher argued. “Now turn it around and take them down!”

“I won’t,” Celia insisted.

“You will, or whomever you might be protecting, or trying to rescue, or whatever, will run out of time.”

“But that’s not happening now, and I won’t do it!” She could feel them both reinforcing their Shield Charms. *It would be so easy. And so much faster. But I won’t!*”

“If you won’t use every tool you have, then you’re a liability!”

An image blossomed in her mind, the woman from her dreams begging Celia to protect her baby. Celia let out a wordless cry and reversed the pull of the energy flowing through her, sucking the
power out of both men’s shields. She could feel them struggling against the unfamiliar magic, but they weren’t doing it quite right. The power flowed into her with some resistance but not enough to do more than slow it down. She didn’t stop. The power was intoxicating, but she was determined not to let it win. Her stomach roiled as she sought to keep the two energy flows separate, and when first Harry and then Severus fell to the ground, she closed her fists and cut off the flow.

The rush was incredible.

*I could find those bastards like this. Find them and make them pay. But not just for revenge. Stopping them would be right. Sending them to Azkaban. Then whatever their plan is, they couldn’t complete it. That couldn’t be wrong.*

She looked at the two wizards. She could feel both of their energies surging through her, each with a very distinct flavor. Severus’, she already knew well. Harry’s felt oddly familiar, too, though she couldn’t say why. Something deep inside her hurt to see Severus crumpled on the floor.

*If he knew, he’d want me to use his magic to stop them. And he’ll regenerate it. They both will. It might take a couple of days, but it would be worth it, wouldn’t it?*

Willow was saying something. Celia couldn’t hear her and didn’t much care to either. She knew more or less what it had to be. Something about how having too much magic would make her reckless, impair her judgment, or some other nonsense.

A feeling of serenity swept over her. She knew she could push it away, but with it came Willow’s voice, and she was telling Celia things that she knew to be true. There was a dissonance in the magics she held. They weren’t hers. And running on stolen magics … that never ended well.

*She can’t make me. Not if I fight it. But … she’s right.*

Energy crackling along every nerve, Celia Summoned both wizards closer to her, knelt between their unconscious forms, placed her hands on their chests, and pushed the energy back into them both. In a flash, the rush was gone. Horror trickled in to take its place.

She sat back on her heels, forcing herself to be calm, and watched carefully as both men’s eyes flickered open. She pressed her hands against her knees to keep them from shaking and to keep herself from touching Severus’ face and sweeping that lock of hair from his eyes.

*He’ll never want me to touch him again. He won’t want me anywhere near him.*

“So you happy?” she snarled over her shoulder as she felt Willow’s Imperius lift.

“Not really,” Willow answered sharply. “You took way too long and were much too hesitant.”

“Yeah, and I think I proved it was a bad idea! Look what you had to do! I wouldn’t hesitate over enemies,” she added in a low voice. “You know I wouldn’t.”

She and Willow stared at each other for a minute, neither saying anything, aloud or otherwise.

“They’ll need Restorative Draughts,” Celia continued, forcing her voice to sound steady. In control. She hoped. “Chocolate would be good, too. They’re coming around.”

Kennedy was way ahead of her, it seemed, as she was already coming over with two vials of Restorative Draught and two large bars from Honeyduke’s.

When Severus moved to sit up, Celia gave him a hand and pressed one of the vials into his hand,
then helped him guide it to his lips. Next to her, Willow was doing the same for Harry.

Suddenly, Harry stood up and scrambled away, staring at Celia in horror. Before anyone could say another word to him, he Disapparated, probably to just outside the Gates of Hogwarts. Or maybe just as far away from her as he could get.

She looked back at Severus warily, but he didn’t pull away from her. In fact, there was a strange look burning deep in his eyes. She couldn’t imagine what it meant.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Like you just sucked the life out of me and then put it back in,” he replied with a glare that would have been more effective if he hadn’t still looked half out of it.

“Hey, at least she put it back,” Kennedy supplied with a wry grin.

Celia shot her a dirty look. “Do you feel like you can stand?” she asked him.

He nodded and grudgingly allowed her to help him rise.

“If you could do that,” he said grimly, “why were they able to incapacitate you?”

“It just takes one lucky shot,” she answered.

“Could you not have drawn in the energy of the curse, as you did with our shields?”

*Suck* in that kind of pain? *No, I think that’s one spell that’d never work for.*

“I don’t think so,” she said, not bothering to explain. “And once I started locking everything down, I pretty much lost the ability to do much of anything else.”

She watched him closely, waiting for the inevitable retreat.

*Maybe he’s just waiting until we don’t have an audience.*

“I think this little exercise is done for today,” Willow said at last.

“Gee, you think?” Celia replied. “I’m not doing that again, Will. Not on anyone who doesn’t deserve it.”

Willow acknowledged this with a gesture that neither accepted nor rejected her statement as they all walked toward the stairs, Celia absently picking up her wand along the way, and Severus following close behind her.  

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The meeting with Minerva was brief and to the point. Celia had passed the ambush simulation test, though Severus had only rated her efforts “A” for “Adequate.” Harry’s assertions that something about her was too dangerous to keep at Hogwarts were silenced with her reluctant promise to teach both him and Severus how to do and defend against what she’d done to them. She thought he still looked suspicious of her, and she couldn’t blame him.

As she returned to her cottage to do some grading before dinner, she found herself wondering why Severus didn’t seem to share that suspicion.

*If anything, I’d’ve expected him to be more paranoid. Not less. Bad enough I did that to Harry, how could I do it to someone I’ve … slept with? Oh, screw it. At least in my own head I can call it making*
love, can’t I? And how much worse does that make it for me to turn around, take his magic, and
almost not give it back?

She hung her cloak, cast the now-habitual scans around the cottage for any type of surveillance, and
then just sat at her kitchen table to think.

The hero of the frickin’ wizarding world ran away from me. I think that’s a new record. Everybody
else I’ve scared off has been a Muggle, and it was usually more about the Slayer stuff, even if they
managed to rationalize it as something else.

There was something else going on here though. It wasn’t just about her being different. It was about
her.

Obviously it’s not about the demon and vampire stuff. He might not have been crazy about my
methods at first, but he’s gotten used to the idea. I think. It seemed like it. No, something felt very
weird about his magical energy while I had it, and I think something felt weird to him when I put it
back. He just looked too … creeped out.

Maybe he’s right. Maybe I shouldn’t be around impressionable young wizards and witches with
magic like that. But I’ll be damned if I’m going to leave this kid I’m supposed to be protecting. I still
think it’s a Potential. That makes the most sense.

And it’s supposed to be me protecting her, right? I mean me specifically? None of the other Slayer-
wiches or regular Slayers have had that dream. That’s weird enough that it’s got to mean
something. But what if this woman’s wrong? What if I really am just … wrong somehow?

She knew that feeling. Every Slayer currently alive knew it. Maybe every Slayer who’d ever lived
had known it, but definitely all of them now, when there were way more of them than there were
supposed to be. Giles said it was a natural fear, and one that kept Slayers firmly in touch with their
humanity. Right now, it just made her feel dirty.

Pushing back from the table, she headed into the bathroom to take a shower.

~ ~ ~

As he patrolled that night, Severus found himself repeatedly distracted by thoughts of what had
happened earlier.

Small surprise. It is not every day one has one’s magic pulled from them like a feather from a
Jobberknoll.

“Ten points each from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw,” he snarled at the couple he’d just found. “And
get back to your dormitories before I add detentions as well!”

He ought, he supposed, to be furious with her for that. Possibly he should fear her as Potter clearly
did. It was obvious from the looks she had given him while they met with Minerva and during dinner
that she expected him to do so.

Another image intruded into his mind of the same woman trembling in his arms and allowing no one
but him to touch her or feed her. Was it merely that he had seen her so nearly defenseless, then, that
made it seem so impossible to fear her?

He thought of Hagrid’s dislocated elbow and dismissed the notion with a barely audible snort.

There may be some connection to that incident, but she was hardly defenseless even then.
Entering the Slytherin common room, he found surprisingly little mischief afoot. He wondered whether they were merely lying low after the mass detentions of the other day. After a few words to a group of fourth-years who would do better spending their time doing actual homework than animating something called a “graphic novel,” he left to return to his quarters and mark essays.

It was hardly surprising that she was not there when he arrived. Between her own patrolling and marking, he did not truly expect her for at least another hour or two. She had said, upon leaving the dinner table, that she would see him later, and so he was not concerned that she wouldn’t come.

When midnight had passed and he had finished his marking, he did begin to wonder. She’d been patrolling with Aurora, and surely one of them would have sent word if there had been trouble. He resisted the urge to send his Patronus to ask her when she planned to arrive and instead changed for bed and began reading the article she had interrupted the other night.

Several articles and an editorial later, he heard his Floo activate. She did not, however, come straight into the bedroom or go into the bathroom. Instead, what he heard sounded like books being pulled from the shelves and then the rustle of parchment being rapidly paged through. After several minutes, he succumbed to his curiosity and got up to investigate.

The sight that greeted him was startling. The books she had selected were unsurprising, given Potter’s earlier speculation about the possibility that either his scar or Severus’ Mark could be used in some way by these new Death Eaters. He had mentioned those specific books himself during their meeting with Minerva, though he had been through them many times already in hopes of finding a way to remove the last vestiges of the Dark Mark. No, what was strange was the way she was reading them, if one could call it reading. She had her hands over one of the books, and its pages were flipping rapidly beneath them. When she reached the end, the cover slammed shut, and she rested her hands on it, looking as though she were catching her breath.

“This, then, would be the ‘Rosenberg speed-reading method’ you mentioned?” he asked archly.

She didn’t startle, clearly having heard him enter, though she hadn’t acknowledged him. She merely nodded and said, “Be glad she worked out the bugs and the print’s still on the pages.”

*I’m fairly certain I do not wish to know what she means by that.*

Did she have any idea how seductive she appeared, standing at his desk in that unflattering dressing gown and wielding strange magic? His cock stirred as he remembered what she had looked like as they had sparred earlier. Graceful. Powerful.

“Do you plan to spend the night ‘speed-reading’ every Dark Arts book I own on the topics of magical branding and communication?”

“You should get some sleep.” She set aside the book she had just finished and picked up another. “You’re probably going to be exhausted tomorrow as it is.”

He walked over to the edge of his desk and looked at her carefully as she set down the second book without opening it and looked over the other titles, apparently trying to decide which to “read” next. Her eyes, he noticed, were rather red. He did not think that was due to what she had just been doing.

“I believe you are far more likely to be exhausted,” he said, catching hold of one of her wrists as she reached for yet another book.

She looked up at him, shock written on her features, but she didn’t pull away. “You’re the one who got the life sucked out of you today.”
He raised an eyebrow. “And yet I feel oddly energized. It seems you returned my magic with interest.”

She looked down at the desk.

He reached for her chin and lifted it, wondering what to say, how to express the thoughts that had plagued him all evening, the things he felt but didn’t understand. Seeing the darkness of which she was capable had made him want her more than he already did. Seeing her apparent shame over it made him want to shake her until she saw sense.

“Wielding the Dark Arts without becoming enslaved by them …” he began.

“Is insanely dangerous,” she finished, eyes narrowing. “You still shouldn’t probably be anywhere near me. I’m not safe.”

There. That was the word that had escaped him in his ruminations earlier. Even in the horrible moments when he’d felt his magic being drained and had known he was about to lose consciousness, he’d somehow known he was still safe with her.

*That is easily the most absurd thing I have ever thought. And yet it is somehow true.*

Rounding the desk corner, he bent and captured her lips in a bruising kiss. As she first startled and then responded, what surged through him wasn’t just lust, wasn’t just magic, but was somehow both and neither. Wanting more and unwilling to waste time walking back to the bedroom, he swept the books from his desk and pulled at the belt of her dressing gown.

She pulled back to say, “You realize you’re completely out of your mind.”

“Probably,” he growled as he pushed the dressing gown from her shoulders and grabbed her nightdress to pull it over her head.

By the time they crawled awkwardly off the desk, spent and gasping for breath, he was certain she was correct. He didn’t care.
She woke suddenly, every muscle taut and ready to respond. Severus was still asleep, so he hadn’t heard it. She shifted slightly and scanned the room but saw no sign of any disturbance.

*Celia, wake up!*  

*Oh Goddess, it’s Willow!*

*What is it? What’s wrong?*

*Spike’s back. He’s been poisoned. You need to get here and bring some Blood Replenishing Solution.*

*You don’t have any?*

*Already used it.*

“Shit!” she said aloud, waking Severus, who, like her, came instantly awake and alert.

“What?”

“I have to get to Hogsmeade House. Do you have any Blood Replenishing Potion here, or is it all in the Hospital Wing?” She threw on her bathrobe and quickly Transfigured it into a nondescript shirt and jeans.

“I have one dose here. What …?” He rose and began to dress as well.

*After three weeks of nothing, Spike’s gone and brought a crisis back with him.*

“One more dose may not be enough.”
“I’m coming with you,” he said as he Summoned the small flask from his bathroom cabinet.

She was already heading into the sitting room, and as she grabbed a pinch of Floo powder, she answered, “Go straight there. I’ll be right behind you.”

*Thank Goddess Minerva opened his Floo for offsite travel. We’d be tripping over each other if we both had to go to the cottage first.*

Without waiting for a reply, she tossed in the powder, said, “Celia’s cottage,” and stepped through.

Once in her own sitting room, she raised her hands and Summoned two rather larger flasks of Blood Replenishing Potion. She stowed them safely in her pockets and Flooed to Willow’s.

When she arrived, Severus was examining Kennedy, who was lying on the loveseat looking pale and clammy, as Willow looked on with worry. Spike was on the sofa. Celia went straight to Willow.

“How much did he take?”

“About three pints. She’s … she’ll be okay, right?”

“Yes, but that is the most she could have given,” Severus replied. “She appears to be regenerating her blood quickly. She should wake soon.”

Willow nodded mutely. On the floor next to the couch, Celia spotted a glass on the floor that had obviously contained blood. Then she looked at the angry wound on Spike’s chest and the sickly black tendrils that extended from it, forming bizarre patterns that reached up towards his shoulder and neck as well as down towards his abdomen.

“He needs more, doesn’t he,” she said flatly. It obviously wasn’t a question.

“Yeah,” Willow replied. “It stopped spreading, but he’s still bad.”

She pulled out the two flasks of potion she had brought and set them on an end table, then picked up the glass and set it beside them. As she pulled up her sleeve, she wandlessly Vanished the traces of Kennedy’s blood from the glass.

“You would do this for someone you hate?” Severus asked, leaving Kennedy to stand by her.

“I don’t hate him,” she replied. “Not trusting and hating are two very different things.”

She sat down, positioned her wrist over the glass, and used a Slicing Hex to open an artery. Watching the blood flow into the glass, she wondered why it always seemed to pulse out of a person so quickly when you were racing time to stop it, but now, just watching, it seemed so slow. When the glass was nearly full, she murmured a Healing Charm and the wound sealed promptly. She picked up one of the flasks, opened it, and drank half the contents, then looked up at Severus.

“Can you give it to him, please? I know that’s barely a pint, but I’m a little dizzy, and I really don’t want to spill it.”

He nodded reluctantly. She watched as he dragged Spike into a sitting position, pressed the glass into his hand, and ordered him to drink. As he did, she saw the wound appear to shrink slightly and the black lines seemed to recede. But not completely. It wasn’t enough.

“Give me the glass, Severus,” she said. “He’ll need more.”

He didn’t look like he was going to, so she Summoned the glass. As the glass left Spike’s hand, he
reached out with his other hand to catch it, his left, which had been draped across his stomach, and something caught Celia’s eye. She caught the glass, set it down, and stared briefly.

“Spike,” she said, “what’s on your arm?”

He looked down at his own forearm as though seeing it for the first time, then scowled, or at least she imagined that is what he was attempting to do. It was difficult to tell since his face was already in vampire mode.

She could see it more clearly from this angle. A skull and snake. Unlike the faded Mark on Severus’ arm, this one was inky black.

“Bloody wankers really did put this thing on me,” he said weakly, as he let his arm fall across his belly again. If she hadn’t known better, she would have thought he was drunk.

“Well, now we know they’re definitely casting new ones,” she said as she set her wrist over the glass again.

“Are you sure he needs more?” Severus asked tightly.

She looked at the wound again. It hadn’t shrunk any further since he had finished drinking.

“Yes,” she said. “Hopefully just another pint.” With that, she recast the Slicing Hex and let more of her blood flow into the glass. She noticed Kennedy beginning to stir.

When she resealed the wound this time, she was much dizzier, and her hand shook as she picked up the unstoppered flask of Blood Replenishing Potion and downed the remainder. She willed the potion to hurry up and work as she watched Spike drink still more of her blood. The wound shrank further and finally disappeared.

Severus was returning to her, the look in his eyes reminiscent of that afternoon in the Hospital Wing after she’d first woken up. She noted, completely irrelevantly, that this had to be the first time she’d seen him in shirtsleeves outside his quarters or hers. In the next instant, she was yelling at him to look out as Spike jumped up from the couch beside him. He turned, putting himself between her and the vampire, and drew his wand. In the same instant, black ropes shot from her fingertips and the end of his wand. His wrapped tightly around Spike, who fell back against the couch. Hers sort of fell short.

“More. Need more!”

“Like hell you do,” Severus snarled, his wand still pointed at Spike.

“Don’t,” Celia said, afraid he was about to incinerate the vampire. “They sent him back like this for a reason. We need to find out what.”

“Need more,” Spike repeated.

“No, you don’t,” she said. “But I see your taste for Slayer blood hasn’t exactly gone away.”

“More.”

She looked over at Kennedy, who was now sitting up with Willow’s help.

“You’ve had something like five pints, Spike – you don’t need more, and you’re certainly not going to get more,” she said. “What the hell happened to you?”

“More!” he insisted.
After several more minutes of this, it was clear he wasn’t going to answer questions any time soon. Willow brought in one of the kitchen chairs and sat him in it, adding more ropes to hold him there, then Levitated Kennedy upstairs to their room. Celia noticed that Spike paid little attention to the other Slayer. When Willow returned, Celia asked about that.

“Did he get like that when Kennedy cut him off?”

“No, but he was still pretty weak.”

“Hmm.” Why would he get more demanding instead of less once he was cured? Maybe something specific to the poison they used? Did they know we had more than one Slayer here? How much did he end up giving away?

The odds were she wasn’t going to get any of those answers, and she could just feel even more questions piling up in the meantime.

“You probably have to get back, huh?” Willow looked less than thrilled at the prospect.

Celia looked at the clock. “Yeah, I guess we do.” She wished there could be time for a nap before breakfast. Maybe she could get away with skipping it today. The dizziness was fading, but she was so tired. She looked at Severus, who looked like he wanted to not be there anymore – or maybe it was more like he wanted Spike to not be there anymore – then back to Willow. “You got this under control?”

“I think so,” she said. “He pretty much only seems interested in you.”

“Great,” Celia replied.


“Great, you’ve added a new word. Maybe later you’ll even graduate to sentences.” She wrinkled her nose. “Did Angel get like this?” she asked Willow. Celia knew that Angel had once been poisoned and had drunk Buffy’s blood to be cured of it, but that was about it.

“I don’t think so,” Willow said. “I wasn’t exactly there for that part though.”

Celia hoisted herself to her feet, willing the room to stay still, and gently touched Severus’ arm. “Let’s go,” she said.

With a nod, he followed her to the fireplace, never taking his eyes off the bound vampire. Just before they activated the Floo, Celia decided she needed to say one more thing, “Oh, and Spike? Just in case there was any confusion: you are very explicitly not invited to Hogwarts. Not now, not ever. Got it?”

“Need more,” he replied. “More dark.”

Shaking her head, Celia tossed in the powder, said, “Celia Reese’s cottage, Hogwarts,” and stepped through.

~ ~ ~

When he arrived in Celia’s quarters, Severus almost tripped over her. Clearly the spinning of Floo travel had exacerbated her dizziness from blood loss, and she had barely crawled away from the space immediately before the hearth.
“Don’t try to get up,” he said sharply.

“No worries,” she replied, her voice barely stronger than a whisper.

He knelt beside her and passed his wand over her using the same diagnostic spells he had on Kennedy. She was certainly in better shape, having lost less blood, but it would still be awhile before she would be back to normal. Her color was improving and her skin was not cool or sweaty as Kennedy’s had been, and that encouraged him. He considered and rejected the idea of bringing her to the Hospital Wing. At this point, she primarily needed rest. He gathered her into his arms and cast a Lightening Spell, then carried her into her room and lay her down on her bed.

“I’ll be ok,” she mumbled. “Just need a minute to get un-dizzy.”

“At the rate your blood is being regenerated with the help of the potion, you should be recovered by lunchtime,” he said. “I will cancel your morning classes.”

Her brow furrowed, then relaxed. “Thursday. All first-years in the morning. O.W.L.s in the afternoon, though.”

“It would not matter if the morning students were N.E.W.T.-level,” he said firmly. “You are in no condition to stand, much less teach.”

“I’m not arguing. I’m just glad it … it’s just less bad for the little ones to miss.”

Smirking a little at her stubbornness, he sat next to her on the bed and brushed a stray hair from her face. Surely she could have used Legilimency to learn what he knew. She did not have to endanger herself.

“Why?” he asked.

She looked puzzled. “Why what?”

“Why would you give your own blood to save a vampire?”

She sighed. “Whatever I think of him, he is on our side. Supposedly.”

“And yet you don’t trust him.”

“I think he proved I was right. He’s still a vampire, and when the chips are down, he pretty much just wants blood.” Her eyes closed and her breathing, while still rapid, began to slow. He decided to wait until he was certain she was asleep before leaving. After several minutes, he folded the duvet over her and carefully stood to leave.

“Severus,” she called softly, and he turned back to face her. “Thank you.”

For what? he wondered. She certainly had not required his protection, though he had given it.

Seeming to sense his confusion, she added, “For everything.”

Still not understanding, he nodded and turned to leave once again. He had several arrangements to make, and first he would need to report the morning’s events to Minerva.

She groaned and turned to her side, her feet tangling in the comforter. Her eyes blinked open and she found herself looking into two gigantic eyes in a very strange face.
“Dobby!” she cried. “Goddess, you startled me.”

“Dobby is sorry,” replied the house-elf, “but Professor Snape is telling Dobby to watch over Professor Reese until she wakes up.”

She looked around and realized she was in her own bed. Where she wasn’t supposed to sleep because it was outside the castle. It took her a second to remember why she was there. “And what are you supposed to do now?”

“Dobby is bringing Professor Reese breakfast and telling Professor Snape that she is awake.”

“Breakfast?” she asked. “That would probably involve sitting up.”

The elf nodded. “And Dobby is supposed to get Madam Pomfrey if Professor Reese is going back to sleep when she sits up.”

“Very thorough,” she murmured. Good thing he didn’t bring me to her in the first place though. She’d never let me out for afternoon classes.

She rolled onto her back and pushed herself up into a seated position. The room only wavered a little. “So far so good.”

The house-elf snapped his fingers, and a tray appeared, hovering over her lap. It had a lavish breakfast on it: a spinach omelet, ham steak, toast, and hot chocolate instead of her usual coffee. She blew on the hot chocolate and took a sip. “It’s very good, Dobby, thank you.”

The elf smiled and continued to stare at her.

“Are you supposed to watch me eat my whole breakfast?”

“Yes, Professor Reese.”

She shook her head and began to eat. Then she thought of something. “Didn’t you say that you’re also supposed to tell Professor Snape that I’m awake?”

“Dobby already did,” he replied, looking surprised at her question.

“How … never mind.” She returned her attention to her breakfast and took a bite of the omelet.

It was nearly ten o’clock when the note appeared on the desk at the front of the Potions classroom. Severus was, at the time, examining the cauldrons of the third-year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, and thus did not notice its arrival immediately.

Have these dunderheads been sleeping through my classes for the past two and a half years? Every last one of these cauldrons should be filled with a liquid that at least approximates the color yellow. Instead, more than half are blue or even black. How is it possible after all this time not to understand the difference that will be made to a potion by dicing a shrivelfig as opposed to mincing it?

Abandoning them to their fates once he had determined they were at least not creating anything that should involve toxic fumes or explosions, he returned to his desk. There, he found Dobby’s missive. His face remained impassive as he picked it up, read it, then folded and placed it in a pocket of his teaching robes. In the time he had been surveying the students’ work, she had not only awoken but had eaten and appeared healthy if not fully strong again.

If fewer points than usual were lost by students during the remainder of the class, surely this was due
only to their unusually good behavior and relative lack of idiocy.

~ ~ ~

*Will?*

*Hey, you’re up!*

*How’s Kennedy?*

*Just about dealing with sitting up. You?*

*Just finished breakfast and about ready to try for the bathroom.*

*Already?*

*Don’t forget, Kennedy lost more blood than I did.*

*That’s true.*

*Any improvement with Spike?*

*He was driving me nuts, so I stuck him in the basement.*

*You put the homicidal vampire in a basement full of weapons?*

*I locked them up, silly.*

*Oh.*

*What do you think got into him?*

*Slayer blood, obviously.*

*Why didn’t he get that way over Kennedy then? Even after you left, he only wanted to go after you, not her. Not that I’m complaining, of course.*

*One of the many questions I want answered. Um, the bathroom thing’s getting kind of urgent. Talk more later?*

*‘Kay.*

~ ~ ~

After dinner, Severus allowed himself to be persuaded to return to Hogsmeade House. Reluctantly. Celia had a point. If the vampire had any information, they needed to hear it. He was less convinced she needed to be there, but clearly she would go with or without him. Minerva had agreed it would be preferable for him to attend.

When they arrived, Willow and Kennedy were sitting on the shorter of the two sofas. Willow rose to greet them, but Kennedy remained seated. Celia embraced her friends, as was her custom. He simply wished them both a good evening and asked after Kennedy’s health.

“I’m doing better with the standing and the walking. Still pretty dizzy, though,” she replied.

“That is to be expected. If you were not a Slayer, you might well still be unconscious,” Severus replied.
“You look all up-and-around,” Kennedy said to Celia, sounding very put out.

“You’ll catch up.” Celia looked about the room. “Spike still in the basement?”

“Yep, and still insane,” Willow replied.

“Basement insane?” Celia asked as she led him to the couch.

The question obviously meant something to the other witch, who answered, “The button-button thing would be a welcome bit of coherence.”

“Wonderful. Shall we try anyway?”

The redhead nodded and left the room.

“I hate when you do that,” Kennedy grumbled. Since the exchange had made little sense to him, Severus found he agreed.

“Sorry,” Celia said. “It’s just kind of shorthand, you know?”

“No, I don’t. That’s the point.”

Celia sighed. “Can we not have this conversation again?”

“Fine.”

After a short silence, Celia added, “You don’t want to know. Not like that.”

“How do you know? How does she know? If you can handle it, so can I.”

“That’s not the point.”

“She thinks I’ll stop loving her.”

Celia closed her eyes. Severus wished he were not present. While he had become more comfortable interacting with Celia’s friends, even to the point one might almost – but not quite – call socializing, he did not care to be privy to a discussion of their marriage and the ways Celia apparently complicated it.

“She might be afraid of that, yeah. You’ve met her parents; you know what she grew up with. Can you blame her? But it’s more about protecting you.”

“From what? I already know the stuff she did when she went all evil. It’s this other little stuff.”

“Kennedy … the basement thing. She was so filled with shame she unintentionally willed herself invisible. Do you not get that? Think of the stupidest or worst thing you ever did for a second. Now, you want to make her ‘remember’ that? Do you?”

Severus could not imagine inflicting such a thing upon someone he cared for.

“No! Of course not.” Kennedy fell silent, then said, “That’s the real reason?”

“It’s the main one. That’s kind of why we joke about it. Makes it a little easier for her. For both of us.” Celia closed her eyes briefly again.

Severus abruptly realized she was communicating with Willow and had probably asked her to delay
until this conversation had finished. While it was certainly useful to be able to do so, he found he had a certain amount of sympathy for Kennedy’s discomfort.

Before Kennedy could say anything else, Willow returned, the vampire still lashed to the chair and floating before her. Severus saw Celia shudder, and he barely restrained the urge to cast several painful hexes on him.

~ ~ ~

Spike was giggling like … well, like crazy. Willow was right. It was the Sunnydale High basement all over again. Willow set the chair down so that Spike was facing the corner space between the two couches, then joined Kennedy on the loveseat.

Celia was very disconcerted to see Spike turn his head and focus his gaze on her for a moment before returning to his giggling. The look in his eyes was not the feral, hungry look from this morning. Still, having him so focused upon her was disturbing.

“So, are you ready to try talking again?” Willow asked.

No reply.

“ ’Cause I’m not crazy about you drinking Kennedy’s and Celia’s blood and then not even telling us what happened.”

Spike continued to giggle. He was getting on Celia’s last nerve.

“Spike!” she yelled at him. He shut up, turned his head, and fixed his eyes on her again. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Too much,” he said. “Much too dark.”

“At least that’s new. Can you maybe explain that, please?”

He looked at her as though she were the one who had lost her mind and said, “No.”

“Can you at least tell us what happened?” Kennedy asked.

No reply, though he began to giggle once more.

“Spike, cut it out!” Willow said.

He merely laughed louder.

“Spike, enough!” Celia yelled.

He stopped.

“What the hell?” she demanded.

“I don’t … I don’t know,” he said. He looked seriously confused.

“Severus, you’re the only one who hasn’t tried. Say something to him.”

He looked at her for a moment, then said in his most intimidating classroom voice, “Mr. Spike, explain yourself.”
The inane giggling resumed, and the vampire became fascinated with his own left knee.

“Spike,” she whispered, barely loud enough for Severus to hear her from inches away. The vampire whipped his head around to look at her. “I repeat, what the hell? Why are you only responding to me?”

“You’re the only one what’s real,” he replied.

Celia exchanged a glance with Willow.

*You’re right. Basement insane.*

*See if he can at least tell you what happened.*

“Spike, what happened to you?” Celia asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Caught me listening. Thought I’d just got there though. Stupid buggers.”

“Who caught you?”

The look he gave her suggested that she was the world’s largest imbecile. “Those Death Eater blokes you lot sent me out to find, who else? You saw what they did to me.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, “we’ll get to that in a minute. First I want to know where you found them, how you found them, what you heard, and what they think you heard.”

He looked thoroughly confused, but at least he stayed focused on her. She sighed.

“Okay, start with where. Where did you find them?”

“Big run-down house, town called Little Hangleton.”

She sensed rather than felt Severus tense and turned to look at him questioningly.

“The Dark Lord’s father’s home.”

“That’s … surprisingly obvious. Why is that even possible?”

“Without any active Death Eaters left, why would the Ministry continue to keep an eye on it?”

She supposed he had a point. “And sending Aurors to check it out now would be pointless, I’ll bet. They’ve probably left, now that they know they’ve been found.”

“Perhaps.”

She returned to her interrogation. “How’d you find them?”

“Bloke in a bar told me there was some bad mojo around those parts, so I went to check it out. People think the house is haunted, you know. Made it easy to figure where it had to be going down.”

“I’ve got to give you credit, Spike. That’s more than I thought you’d be able to find. Why didn’t you report in?”

“I did!” the vampire protested. “Sent an owl that said I was getting close.”

She rolled her eyes. “That was days ago. You couldn’t have been poisoned more than thirty-six hours before you got here.”
“I was trying to hear what they were on about. Wasn’t about to send any of that with a bloody bird.”

Now we get to the really important part.

“What did you hear?” she asked, edging forward in her seat slightly.

“Lots for the first two days. Most of it didn’t make much sense.”

“Tell us anyway.”

“Who’s us? You’re the only one here.” Spike looked genuinely confused.

Just what I always wanted: my own personal vampire to whom I am apparently the entire universe. Yay.

“Right, so tell me then.”

His eyes narrowed. “Why should I? You’ll probably stake me once I tell you.”

“I won’t stake you, Spike. You know that.”

“Oh yeah? You’ve certainly tried often enough.”

“Spike, if I was really trying to stake you, you’d be dust already.”

He snorted. “You wish. Even Buffy never managed it.”

She decided to ignore that, not least because it was true. Also, Buffy’d kill me if I actually did it. If Willow didn’t beat her to it.

“You went to a lot of trouble and got yourself poisoned over whatever you heard, Spike. Why not tell me?”

“What, you’re not going to hold it over me that you and that other Slayer saved my worthless life?”

He raised an eyebrow at her.

“That was coming next actually,” she admitted.

He appeared to consider this.

“Right, so this lot want their old mate back, just like you said. They’re not that interested in Red though. Already had a plan before you went and told them about Buffy.”

“I didn’t …” she started. “Never mind. What plan?”

“I didn’t get all the details.”

“Got any?”

“Well, yeah,” he snorted. “They need three sacrifices: a boy, a girl, and a traitor. Dunno what exactly that’s supposed to mean. Traitor’s probably hard to find, but they didn’t seem to have a boy or a girl yet, either, and that ought to be easy enough.”

Celia felt as though her blood had been replaced with liquid nitrogen. The slightest tap, and she was sure she would shatter. “Did they say ‘a boy, a girl, and a traitor,’ Spike, or ‘the boy, the girl, and the traitor’?”
“Might’ve said ‘the,’” he agreed. “That’d make more sense, if they needed specific ones, why they didn’t have ‘em yet.”

Once she’d deciphered that, she buried her face in her hands while absorbed it. It was one thing to suspect and quite another to have that suspicion confirmed.

_Harry was right._

She took several deep breaths to calm her nerves and thaw her veins while Spike, no longer held by her attention, began laughing again. She forced herself to look up.

“Celia,” Willow said, “it doesn’t have to mean that.”

Celia gave her the look she had practiced on at least a dozen students with missing homework. “Of course it does, Will. Two out of three, anyway, were marked directly by what’s-his-face, one on purpose and one most definitely not. They’ve found a way to do it using a magical link, rather than a blood relation. The ‘Boy Who Lived’ and the traitor who helped bring what’s-his-face down are obvious enough. I wonder who the girl is though? ‘One girl in all the world’ hasn’t fit for years, but it could still be our Potential.”

“Oh perhaps Ginevra Weasley,” Severus offered.

“The woman I met at the joke shop?”

He nodded. “The Dark Lord possessed her for a time when she was quite young. She was the girl I told you about when you asked about the Chamber of Secrets.”

“Shit.”

“Indeed. Excuse me a moment.” He rose and left the room, though Celia had a feeling he had only gone just out of sight, probably to send Patronus messages to a few key people. His guess might be wrong, but it would be seriously stupid not to take steps to ensure Miss Weasley’s safety in the meantime.

“Spike, do they know you heard that part?”

“No, I heard that early,” he said. “They didn’t catch me until the third night.”

She shook her head. These people were clearly careless idiots. Unfortunately, that probably made them more dangerous, rather than less.

“What else did you hear in the first two nights?”

“Lot of mumbo-jumbo.”

“Spells?”

“Some of it.”

“Like what?”

“Uncle-something, parry-cuss, mack-you-la, vixet-filly, stuff like that.”

She shook her head again. A mangled rendition of poorly-remembered and probably poorly-spoken Latin wasn’t going to do them any good.
“Spike, will you show me?”

It was always interesting to watch a vampire pale.

“Don’t like people muckin’ about in my head,” he said just as Severus returned.

“I know,” she said. “Nobody does, and you’ve got more reason than most. Trust me when I say that I have absolutely zero desire to ‘muck about in your head.’” More than a hundred years of vampire fun and games. Who’d want to see all that? “But if you can focus on just what you saw, I can look at just that and nothing else. It would really help to know exactly what sort of incantations they were using.”

“What do I have to do?”

She was shocked. He really should have put up more of a fight. Between the chip and the programming the First had done to him, he should be much more resistant to the idea of having Legilimency done on him, even with as much control over the situation as she was offering. Once she had as much information out of him as possible, she really needed to know why he was so fixated on her.

“What did Giles tell you about Legilimency before you came here?”

“Don’t look them in the eye if I can help it. And if I can’t, just think real hard about something they won’t care about.”

She supposed that summed up Giles’ idea of Occlumency lessons pretty well. We should’ve had Willow work with him on it a bit before he left.

“So, now you do the opposite. You look me in the eye and think about exactly what you need to show me. And only about that, Spike.” She thought for a moment and drew her wand from her sleeve. It did make some things easier, and she still wasn’t at one hundred percent.

Spike looked her in the eye and said, “Okay.”

“Legilimens,” she said, not wanting to waste energy on nonverbal casting, and promptly found herself looking through a window from a very weird angle.

The room within was dimly lit with candles, the glass in the window grimy, and so she couldn’t make out the faces of the several figures in black robes poring over books.

“Parcius Iunctio,” said one of the figures, in a rough, deep voice. “Couldn’t they come up with something easier to say?”

One of the others snapped, “Raising the Dark Lord was never going to be easy, you idiot.”

“Why do I have to do the Macula Iunctio?” asked a feminine voice. “Why does he get the Boy and I get the Traitor?”

“Because I said so,” replied the one who had snapped.

“I don’t see why we need the girl,” said another, this one male.

“Because of the prophecy, you dolt,” said the one who was clearly in charge.

The woman added, “‘In the seventh year shall come a girl of ancient line and powers untold, and she shall hold the key to the return …’ What was that?”
The scene had shifted slightly just before the woman had broken off, and now the view was nothing but leaves. Spike had obviously been lurking in a tree. She broke off the spell.

“The incantations seem obvious enough,” she said. “I suppose I should’ve been able to decipher your version of them, really. Did you ever hear any more of that prophecy?”

“No,” he said.

She repeated what she'd seen to the others. Willow looked thoughtful. Kennedy looked like she wanted to jump up and go round these people up. Severus just looked … cold. Like he'd been turned to stone. She couldn't deal with that right now.

“‘A girl of powers untold,’” Willow mused. “I get the seventh year part. Obviously this May will be the seventh anniversary of his death. That’s significant. The ancient line doesn’t tell us much. Everybody’s ‘of an ancient line’ of some kind.”

“I'm thinking they mean one that's important somehow,” Kennedy interrupted.

“Yeah, probably,” Celia agreed. “And she’s just arriving, so that probably lets out Miss Weasley. Although maybe she was away and just got back?”

“Not that I am aware of,” Severus replied. He appeared disturbed.

So did Willow. “Celia, what if that means you?”

She considered it. “I suppose it could, but if those are the powers, then you’d be a candidate, too.”

“Yeah, but … they didn’t attack me. Plus, ancient lineage? Not so much with the impressive pedigree here, what with the being a Muggle and all. And you've got the Slayer thing going on.”

“You weren’t here yet, so of course they couldn’t have attacked you. And obviously if I have no idea who my ancestors were, they can’t either.”

“Could be the Potential,” Kennedy said. “I mean, none of us are really ‘girls’ anymore, right? And since we don’t know who she is, we don’t know what powers she has yet or what sort of ‘line’ she might come from. Maybe it’s the Slayer line.”

“That’s true,” Celia agreed, wondering if she was about to eat her words about not using the Potential Slayer Locator Spell. She turned back to the vampire. “Spike, did you learn anything else the first two nights you were there?”

“No really. The first night was more of the same, and I left after they heard me the second night.”

She crossed her arms and frowned. “What did you see and hear on the third night before they caught you?”

“I’d just got there. Which was good, because they thought it was the first time I’d just got there.”

“So they don’t know you heard anything?” That sounded just a bit too good to be true. “They didn’t check?”

“They tried,” he sneered. “I showed ’em some lovely scenes from the bad old days. They … actually kind of liked that.” Spike actually shuddered.

*Huh. Maybe the having a soul thing affects him more than it looks like.*
“Tried giving me Veritaserum, too, idiots.”

“Didn’t they make you for a vamp? Or were they just that stupid?”

“No, they knew. Why else would they use that poison?”

“Good point,” she conceded. “So, smart enough to make or obtain vamp-specific poison but stupid enough to waste precious Veritaserum on a vampire. Did they put the Mark on you before or after they stabbed you with the poison?”

“After.”

“Will you show me that?”

“Why?”

“I want to see what the differences are in how they are doing it.”

“How could you tell?”

She had almost forgotten that he didn’t see the others in the room as real. “I know someone who’s seen the original version cast, so we can compare the two.”

Spike snorted. “You mean your bad-boy loverboy what’s sitting next to you. I’m not stupid, you know.”

She shook her head, trying to dislodge the images that characterization had conjured from her mind. “I thought you couldn’t see the other people here.”

“I can see them,” Spike replied, as if he were trying to explain particle physics to a three year old. “They’re just not real like you.”

“Right,” she said, baffled. “For now, let’s focus on the Mark. First I want a closer look, see if it’s visibly different. Did they even say why they did it? I mean, besides to turn you into a walking locator beacon?”

“That was pretty much it, I think,” he said. “I’d show it to you, but there’s all these ropes here.”

“Yeah, that’s on account of you trying to drink the rest of my blood earlier,” she said. “You going to try that again?”

His eyes narrowed. “No,” he said.

She didn’t believe him. “Kay, then. Will, would you do the honors of re-securing his left arm so that we can see the Mark, but he still can’t actually use it?”

“Sure.”

The ropes binding his left arm to the chair loosened, his arm flipped over, and the ropes reattached at the wrist and elbow, leaving the forearm visible.

Celia blinked several times, trying to clear her vision. Obviously there was something wrong with it, because all she saw was blank skin. She turned to Severus.

“You saw it, too, this morning, right?”
“I did.”

“Maybe it doesn’t take on vampires,” Kennedy offered. “You know, that thing where they’re eternally unchanging and all?”

“Maybe,” Celia said doubtfully. Spike was looking at his arm in mute shock. “Look at me, Spike,” she commanded, and he obeyed instantly. “Now think about when they put it on you. Legilimens.”

Now they had on their masks. She could tell by the emotions that went with the memory that Spike was immobilized, probably with a full Body-Bind as there were no restraints visible, and she heard the voice of the one who seemed to be in charge, saying, “So let’s see if we can’t find who sent you then. They may have figured out how to detect our transmitters, but they won’t see this until it’s too late for them and for you.” A wand was driven into the flesh of Spike’s arm. “Morsmordre!” the voice cast.

For the briefest instant, Celia felt searing pain in her own forearm, and she broke off the spell. When she released her grip on the flesh and looked, she half expected to see the Mark there, the pain had seemed so real. She was relieved to find the only mark was the already fading scar from this morning’s bloodletting.

She turned to Severus. “I was going to have you look, but there’s not much to see and no point in activating your Mark. If it hurt me, it’ll probably hurt you more.”

He appeared pained already. “I can certainly stand a bit of pain.”

“I know that,” she said, resisting the urge to roll her eyes at him. “But there’s no point. All the guy did was jab his wand into Spike’s arm and say the incantation Morsmordre. Is that all what’s-his-face did?”

“Verbally, yes,” Severus said. “I do not know what nonverbal spells he may have embedded in it, however, but I am certain there must be several.”

Celia thought about this. “Most likely they don’t know, either. He seemed to think it would still have the tracking abilities though.” She turned back to Spike. “How did you get here?”

“Walked a fair bit while I could, then used a keyport thingie from Red.”

“Portkey,” she corrected absently. “That’s … that’s good. They probably couldn’t really track much then, and they can’t find you here.”

“They can, however, obtain the general location,” Severus said. “Only the house itself is under the Fidelius Charm. So they will know to look in Hogsmeade, though they will not know if he or we have left since the time that the Mark disappeared.”

Celia was sure that her disappointment was clearly evident. She shrugged it off. “Did you hear or see anything else, Spike?”

“Not really.”

She wasn’t sure how much she trusted his judgment but decided to accept that for now. “Fine, so fast forward a bit. Why did you decide you needed more of my blood once you’d already been de-poisoned?”

His eyes glazed. “More dark.”
“Ye-ah, you said that. Repeatedly. How’s about explaining what that means?”

“Different. Richer. Intoxicating.”

“Well, that explained absolutely nothing.” She thought a minute. “Is it the magic? The other Slayers you’ve drunk weren’t witches, right?”

“No, they weren’t.”

“Right, so Slayer-witch blood makes you nuts. Got it.”

“No.” He had that physics-to-a-toddler look and tone again.

“No? Spike, you’re nuts,” she retorted. “You went nuts this morning, and you’re still nuts.”

“No, I mean it’s not the magic. I’ve drunk Slayers. I’ve drunk witches. I’ve drunk wizards. Yours is more.”

“Is that why you think I’m more real?”

“You are more real,” he said. “The others are getting more real though.”

“Oh, good. It must be wearing off,” Willow said.

“I hope so,” Celia replied. “I’m not so crazy about having him fixated on me like this.” In fact, it’s seriously creeping me out.

“I can hear you,” Spike complained. “I’m right here, you know.”

“Sorry,” she said. “Wait a sec – why am I apologizing to someone who downed a couple of pints of my blood and then wanted the rest of it?”

“Because you’re tired?” Willow suggested. “Also, possibly the insanity is contagious.”

“Let’s go with tired,” Celia replied. “Kennedy looks like she’s half asleep, and I’m really not all that far behind her, for all that it’s …” She looked at her watch. “… okay, almost ten o’clock. Still pretty early, but later than I thought. Good thing you took us off the patrol roster for the night.”

Severus made a noncommittal noise that probably meant that wasn’t the reason he’d done that.

“We should get back though,” she said. “Because of the needing sleep and the needing to report in. Not necessarily in that order.”

“What do you want me to do with Spike?” Willow asked.

Celia shrugged. “Up to you. I’d keep him restrained until he’s back to himself or maybe send him back to Giles and let him play guard for a bit.”

“Maybe. I’ll see how it goes when I fill Giles in.”

“At least you don’t need to use a Floo to do it,” Celia said. “I really miss phones.”

“But you can’t just up and decide to step through a phone,” Willow pointed out.

“True.” She stood and stretched. Willow and Severus stood as well. Kennedy got up last and leaned on Willow a little for balance. “Speaking of, time to do just that.”
She embraced Willow and Kennedy and took in Severus’ stiff nods with a smile. A few short steps to the fireplace, a pinch of Floo powder, and soon she was spinning furiously toward Severus’ quarters.

~ ~ ~

When Severus returned to his quarters several hours later, he glanced automatically at the chair where Celia would sometimes sit and read while he graded papers. She was not there now, of course. If she had any sense at all, she was sound asleep. There was, however, a basket on the chair. He walked over to it and looked inside. It held snake skin, tumbleweed, and chrysalides, among other things. So, she had resigned herself to the conclusion at which he, Minerva, Potter, and her Watcher had arrived in their discussion earlier and had retrieved the spell ingredients from her cottage before turning in. He sighed.

*She was so resistant. I can understand her desire to allow the girl a normal life, but if these new Death Eaters have targeted her, it is far more important to ensure that she is allowed to live at all.*

He completed his toilet quickly. If this was to be the last time she shared his bed, he did not wish to waste another minute. He slipped under the covers gently, silently, both wanting and not wanting to wake her. Leaning on one elbow, he simply watched her as she slept for awhile. After several minutes, she turned towards him and opened her eyes.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“It is almost three. You should go back to sleep.”

Instead, she studied his face and raised a hand to tuck a lock of hair behind his ear. “You, Minerva, and Harry talked for almost three more hours after I left?”

He nodded. “Yes. She is still debating whether Potter and I should also leave.”

“There’s so little to go on,” she said with a sigh. “A fragment of a prophecy taken from the mind of an insane vampire? Not your most reliable source, especially if that’s your basis for kidnapping someone, even if it is for their own safety. Miss Weasley still seems a far more likely candidate.”

“Miss Weasley will continue to be guarded. Discreetly. Depending upon which student it is, there may be other options.”

“And yet I’ll bet the house-elves are packing my belongings in the cottage as we speak. Actually, it probably took them about two minutes.”

He leaned down and kissed her forehead.

“I really don’t like the idea of letting you out of my sight,” she said softly. “But if Minerva decides you should leave, the point would be to head in different directions.”

“Yes,” he murmured into her hair. He pulled back and smirked at her. “And to quote you, I am entirely capable of taking care of myself.”

“I know. Doesn’t change the fact I want to protect you. You are, I believe, familiar with the phenomenon.” Her smile took the sting out of her imitation of him. She traced a finger along his cheekbone and down to his lips. “And you know that isn’t the only reason.”

“Your duty must come first.”
“I know. It does, but …” She looked very much as though she wanted to say something but couldn’t find the words or perhaps couldn’t decide whether she should. Finally she said, “My duty comes first, but when this is all over, I’ll try to come back.”

“You might change your mind,” he said, as much to caution himself as her.

“I won’t.”

She sounded so certain. He had probably been very certain about many things when he was twenty-four. Less so than when he had been only a few years younger, of course, but nevertheless. Once she was away – and around others her own age – she would lose that certainty.

“If you do not, you would be welcome,” he said at last.

“I won’t change my mind, Severus,” she said. “I …” Instead of continuing, she drew him down to her for a kiss that sent surges of electricity through his veins and straight to his groin.

If this was to be the last time, he was determined it should be memorable for both of them. Soon he realized she had a similar agenda, as she seemed intent upon memorizing every inch of him with eyes and fingers, lips and tongue.

Later, as they exchanged sleepy kisses, each flavored with the taste of the other’s body, she whispered something against his lips so softly that had he not felt the pattern of her breath, he might have missed it entirely.

“What did you say?” he asked. When she did not reply, he added, “I did not hear you.”

Pulling back a few inches and looking into her eyes, he saw that she wore the same expression she had earlier.

What could she possibly fear saying to him?

“Tell me,” he insisted.

“I love you,” she whispered. She swallowed and then said aloud and more steadily, “I love you, Severus. I just … I thought you should know that before I go.”

He stared at her for a moment in something that was not precisely shock. He’d known that she fancied herself falling in love even before the first time they’d fallen into bed together. After all, she’d shown him as much when she’d let him into her mind after that first time. And now, here was proof he’d been right, that they should never have allowed this … this relationship to progress. And she was professing her love for him? At least she possessed the sense to say only that she would “try” to come back to him.

_She will expect me to say something. No, her hesitance was because she knew I would not. I cannot. Tomorrow she will identify this Potential, and unless the girl is one of a select few, she will take her away and most likely never return._

No, he could not put words to the feelings that had been growing within him. Instead, as she looked about to say something else, he silenced her with a bruising kiss.

As her lips parted, he slid his tongue eagerly inside. Already he was hardening again, as if they had not just sated each other. But this … this was different somehow. She arched her back, her breast seeking out and finding his hand, and he cupped it, passing his thumb gently over the pebbling nipple.

He trailed kisses along her jaw and down her neck, stopping briefly at the mark he’d made on this
breast earlier. Soothing it with his tongue, he wondered if it would last long enough to remind her of him once she was gone or whether her Slayer healing would erase it too quickly. Pushing that thought from his mind, he nipped her again, and she made a delightful noise that reverberated through him as she tangled her fingers in his hair.

Then, despite his best intentions to wait, to make this take as long as possible, he was cradled between her thighs and sinking into the welcoming heat of her body. Her eyes widened as he filled her, and her expression was more open than he had ever seen. He stilled himself as she reached up to touch his face. When her palm drew near his lips, he turned into it and kissed it, closing his eyes to block out everything but her touch.

It was soon impossible not to move. He shifted so that one arm held most of his weight, and with the other hand, reached down to press against her clit, trapping it between his thumb and his cock, as he began to slowly stroke in and out of her body. It was hard to keep just the right angle, but the soft sounds she made urged him to continue.

When her body began to pulse around him, he stilled his hips but continued to caress her with his thumb, watching with as much wonder as if it were the first time as she writhed beneath him and cried out her pleasure, hanging onto him as if she never intended to let go.

*So beautiful.*

Losing all pretense of control, he moved his hand to take hold of her hip and began thrusting with abandon. In moments, he was pouring himself into her as waves of ecstasy and magic pulsed through him.

Spent, he rolled onto his side so as not to collapse on top of her. She kept a leg hooked firmly around his hip and turned with him, trying, as she often did, to maintain their connection even as he began to soften. He’d never really thought much about that quirk of hers except to note that it was a bit awkward and rarely worked for long. If he had given it any more thought, he’d have assumed she simply found it pleasurable. In this moment, it suddenly felt … more. He tightened his arms around her.

As sleep stole over him, the words she had said and he hadn’t seemed to hang in the air, but not accusingly somehow. She pressed one last, sleepy kiss against his throat, and he felt certain she understood.
“Please don’t go.”

“I have to. I’ve already explained …”

“Please don’t abandon my baby!”

This was going nowhere. Celia squinted at the woman, certain she ought to know something about her by now.

“I’m going to take her with me. I told you that. That’s the whole point!”

“You don’t understand.”

The woman’s forehead was creased in obvious pain and worry. Celia was just frustrated. Why was that the one thing about this lady that she could make out? She used to be able to see her more clearly – she was sure of it.

“Then explain it to me. Why can’t you tell me who your ‘baby’ is or who you are or something? I’ve got nothing to work with here!”

Her eyes shot open as they always did whenever she tried to find out who the woman was.

_Dream over. Thanks for playing. Score: Dream Lady – something like a thousand, Celia – zero. I need your help, but I won’t tell you who I am or who my kid is, and if you try to look at me too closely, I’ll get all wavy and hard to see. Because that makes sense when what I want is your help._

Knowing it wouldn’t really work, Celia tried to carefully disentangle herself and slip out of bed. Severus woke immediately, of course, and completely disregarded her suggestion that he try to catch a few more winks. At least he let her have the bathroom first.

A quick dip in the tub – damn, she missed her shower sometimes – and she hurried back into the bedroom.
Her teaching robes were hanging on the knob of his wardrobe, no doubt brought by a house-elf. She decided she’d rather not think about when that had been done or if and how they knew when it was safe to pop in. A lump in one of the pockets turned out to be her trunk, miniaturized. Once she was dressed and Severus was in the bathroom, she enlarged the trunk to check its contents.

Her research notes and journals were there, of course, and the clothes from her closet. Fortunately there weren’t many, as she relied on Transfiguring them for what little variety she needed. Her Foe-Glass was carefully layered between the clothes, and she hoped it would be as well-protected when she put it back as when the elves had packed it. There were only two books, and that was actually one more than she had expected. She’d have to ask about that. They hadn’t packed any samples of her hybridized plants, but she wouldn’t have expected them to know how. She hoped she’d have time to collect them herself, but if not, she already planned to return as soon as she could.

Or else I can start over from scratch. Wouldn’t that be fun?

She closed and re-miniaturized the trunk and stowed it back in her pocket. When Severus came into the sitting room, she was examining the contents of the basket of spell ingredients. She smiled sadly at him and was unsurprised that he answered this with a frown.

“The elves brought everything,” she said, patting her pocket. “There are a couple of things I ought to take care of in the greenhouses, but am I not supposed to go back there?”

“Pomona will undoubtedly arrive by Monday,” he replied. “I am certain that she will be able to take care of any issues with the plants, including your hybrids.”

So. Apparently I’m not supposed to take even that much time. Aloud, she asked, “Maybe someone could let the little snake out before she comes? I don’t know how she feels about snakes, and it should be warm enough by now for it to be outside. I hope.”

He nodded, clearly not thrilled at the idea.

“How are we doing this then?”

“We will exit by way of my office. What you are carrying should be sufficient explanation of your presence,” he said, nodding at the basket of ingredients. “We will proceed to the Great Hall, where you will prepare for your spell. When you are ready, the Headmistress will make an announcement that we have information for one of the girls, who has to be identified by way of a spell, and that the boys should leave. The Head Boy and male prefects will be charged with keeping the rest in order in the Entrance Hall until we are done. When the girl has been identified, you and she and Minerva will go to the Headmistress’ office along with her Head of House, whoever that may be, and then decisions will be made.’”

“Did the options change at all after I left the meeting?”

“A bit,” he admitted. The light in his eyes suggested he had been the one to orchestrate whatever changes had been made. “In most cases, you will be charged with removing her to a safer location, and Minerva and I will have the task of informing her parents. In some few cases, you will be able to go to the parents first and may be able to keep guard over her and undertake her training at her home. There are three of the older girls who are considered sufficiently skilled in Defense Against the Dark Arts that they will be allowed to decide whether they wish to stay at Hogwarts.”

“Best I don’t know which ones they are, or I might influence the spell.”

“Quite.”
She shook her head slowly. “I hope this is the right decision. I mean, I get the whole drive to make sure she’s safe. I’m on board with that. Really. But we’re operating on such fragmented information. What if all of the ideas we’ve had so far are wrong?”

“So, while we wait for further information, we should simply continue as we have been? I suppose it would be helpful if they actually abducted her. Then we would, indeed, be certain.” He gave her a pointed look. “On this much, Minerva and I agree.”

Something still felt wrong.

“I had the dream again,” Celia said. “Only this time she was telling me not to leave her baby. I tried to explain that I’d be taking the child with me, but she wouldn’t listen.”

Severus looked at her thoughtfully and asked, “And you still cannot describe her?”

Celia closed her eyes. “Anytime I try to get a good look, she goes all fuzzy. It’s like she’s under a Fidelius Charm. Well, kind of. Not exactly. I can and have described her to Giles, shown her to Willow even. But when I’ve tried to talk about her to anyone here or to show you … nothing.”

“Perhaps you should discuss it with Sybill.”

She glared at him. The woman might have coughed up an occasional prophecy through no fault of her own, but she didn’t seem to have the slightest grasp of the realities of more normal forms of Divination. Oh, sure, she could recognize her Tarot cards and explain how one ought to use a crystal ball or interpret dreams, but no conversation Celia had had with the woman suggested she really understood any of it. Not really.

“It’s not as though there’s going to be time for that. I’m not crazy about doing this anyway, and the dream just adds fuel to the fire. Every instinct I have is screaming to stay here, that we don’t know enough to take any kind of action, even if removing her as a possible target does make strategic sense.”

His eyes narrowed, and she wondered what he was thinking.

Probably that I’m not Ms. Objectivity about this. Which is a valid point. But this isn’t about that. I probably shouldn’t have said anything.

She considered asking him about the book, then decided it would probably offend his sense of Slytherin subtlety, not to mention the emotional buffer zone he was obviously trying to create. Clearly the elves had been informed that, while the only bound book in the cottage that was truly hers was *Potions Development Theory*, they should also pack the tatty, much written-in *Advanced Potion-Making*.

“We should be going,” he said at last. “Soon, students will be cluttering the hallways on their way to breakfast, and surely you will need time to prepare.”

She shrugged. “Actually, there’s not much preparation needed. It’s pretty much just throwing stuff into the fireplace. It’ll take longer to get the girls organized than anything else.”

He nodded curtly, went to the door that led to his office, and held it open for her. On her way through the door, she stopped and looked up at him.

*I’m coming back. Stop looking at me like you’ll never see me again because I’m coming back!*

She shook her head and preceded him out of his quarters.
She’d been right. There was essentially no preparation on her part for the spell other than arranging
the students in a semicircle that began at one side of the Great Hall’s fireplace and ended at the other.

At least they are sufficiently curious to be watching rather than chattering incessantly. He glared at a
couple of exceptions to that.

He supposed they must think it odd that their young Herbology professor was the one performing the
spell, but then, considering some of the odd rumors that had flown after the heavily edited
information about her protective spell had been “leaked,” perhaps not.

The teachers formed something of an arc outside the semicircle of girls. He noticed that Potter had –
somewhat predictably – taken up a position that put him as far as possible from Celia. His continued
suspicion of her was annoying.

I do wonder how much of that is due to that training session and how much is simply because she is
involved with me. He has more than once implied as much, though it is unclear whether he believes
her corruption to be the cause or effect of our … association.

Well. The Boy-Who-Lived would not have to worry about having her about much longer, now,
would he? Severus scowled at him.

“Once I finish the spell,” Celia was explaining, “a large orange light will appear, and it’ll go to the
student we’re looking for and light up her aura. It’s pretty simple really. Unfortunately, it also smells
really bad, or at least it will until we clear it out once we’re done.” He could see she almost had to
bite back the words “Are there any questions?” She could not have answered them, in any case.

Kneeling before the hearth, she appeared small and vulnerable. And she was. She was also a force
with which to be reckoned, and he supposed it was to her advantage that this was not obvious. She
pulled the snakeskin from the basket, and he was reminded that he had agreed to see to her stray. He
suppressed a shudder and wondered if Dobby would be able to find a suitable place to let the
creature free.

“To light the aura of the new,” she said, “skin of snake and chrysalis, too.” She tossed both items
into the flames.

“To indicate the fresh reborn, tumbleweed and rosebush thorn.” So far none of the items gave off
much smell at all. The vague scent of rose was actually somewhat pleasant.

“An egg that means the life to come: take this, oh spirits, and my spell is done.” It was surprising,
however, just how exquisitely bad a burnt egg could smell.

She stepped back quickly from the fire and through the semicircle of girls who were now pinching
their noses shut and, in a few cases, casting Bubblehead Charms on themselves. As she had
described, a brilliant orange light took shape in the centre of the semicircle and moved slightly first in
one direction, then another, as though it could not make up its mind. Though Celia was several yards
away from where he stood watching, the anxious tension pouring off of her was palpable. He saw
her mouth the words, “Come on.”

He glanced at Miss Hollingberry. She had yet to report any nightmares or demonstrate unusual
strength or speed, but she did seem to him the most likely candidate, if only because she had sought
out additional Defense instruction. Besides, she was a Gryffindor. Despite Celia’s insistence that the
girl could reside in any House, this was one area in which he agreed with her Watcher.
Suddenly the light moved, shooting directly at Miss Lowsley. Surprising that it should be a seventh-year, as Celia had said Slayers usually became active at puberty. He was startled when it shot over Miss Lowsley and slammed straight into Celia, knocking her back several steps and surrounding her with its bright glow.

*It didn’t work. What does it mean that it failed to work? Was her mission here a mistake from the outset?*

“Well *that’s* not particularly helpful,” she seethed, looking first to him and then to the Headmistress. With a flick of her wand she Vanished the glow and the odor along with it. “Now what?” she asked.

“Did the spell just backfire?” Potter asked.

“I don’t think so,” Filius said. “Everything appeared to be in order. It simply could not find the girl it was intended to locate, and so it returned to the one who cast it.”

“I believe, Professor Reese, that you, Professor Potter, and Professor Snape should join me in my office, and we can discuss this over breakfast in private,” the Headmistress said firmly. “Students, you may return to your tables; the young men will join you shortly.”

A buzz of conversation began and grew as the girls milled about and found their seats while Severus followed Minerva and Celia out of the Great Hall.

*Of all the contingencies we discussed, both with and without her, this is the one for which we have the least preparation. Will Minerva send her away regardless? Or will Potter and I be the ones asked to leave?*

He glanced at Celia briefly, then focused his eyes straight ahead. This was going to be an even more difficult meeting than last night’s had been.

~ ~ ~

“And you are certain you did the spell correctly?” Minerva asked for what had to be the tenth time.

“Yes, I’m positive,” Celia replied through clenched teeth. “Filius said so, too, if you remember, and if anyone should be able to recognize a botched Charm, which, okay, that wasn’t exactly a Charm in the traditional sense, but still, I’m sure he could tell if it had gone wrong.”

This time she was pacing, Headmistress’ office or no. There was too much to process, and she needed to keep the blood flowing to her brain if she was going to cope with it. She was also nibbling at her thumbnail, a habit she had broken by the age of twelve. Her breakfast sat ignored on the table they were supposed to be sitting at.

“Has the spell ever failed before?” Severus asked. She stood still a moment to look at him sharply, trying to gauge how he was faring. No better than she was, probably. He could still be sent away, but maybe … no, her dream had been right. She could not leave the child she was here to protect, a child who was apparently not a Potential Slayer after all. She resumed pacing.

“Not exactly,” she replied. “It gave a false positive the first time Willow used it because another girl was standing between it and the actual Potential. That’s why I had the girls standing the way I did and why I left the circle immediately.”

“Couldn’t it have been more attracted to a full Slayer than the Potential it was supposed to find?” Harry asked.
“That’s just it. It shouldn’t have. It’s supposed to focus on the one who’s about to be transformed, to begin a new life. Nearly seven years doesn’t remotely qualify as new.”

“Any new life? Or specifically a Slayer on the cusp of activation?” Severus asked sharply.

She took in the strained expression on his face and realized what he was getting at. She shook her head firmly. “No, not just any new life.” After all this time, does he seriously think I’m that incompetent with a cauldron?

Harry looked like he’d picked up on the subtext and was kind of grossed out.

She shot him a look, thinking, Oh, grow up! I guess it’s an improvement over looking at me like I’m the next Big Bad, but still!

Severus noticed and smirked evilly.

Boys. Fifteen, twenty-five, forty-five, they’re all still just boys!

“So then, it appears your mission here was never what you thought,” Minerva said.

“Guess not,” she admitted, dragging her focus back to the task at hand. “I mean, it seemed like the only reasonable interpretation, but lately reasonable interpretations have a habit of being badly wrong.”

“Indeed,” the Headmistress replied. “The question, then, is what do we do now?”

“I’m not sure,” Celia said. “I mean, we have some strongly suggestive fragments of information, but nothing even close to solid.”

“Still, my first priority must be the protection of the students.”

Severus, Celia, and Harry all nodded agreement to that statement of the blindingly obvious.

“So, as apparently we will not be able to remove the student who is in the most danger, assuming that ‘the girl’ is, indeed, even a student here, do we then remove the two targets of which we are nearly certain?”

“If you’re asking for opinions, Minerva” Celia replied, “I’d have to say I think it’d be a big mistake to do that. On the strategic side, doing that would remove two exceptionally powerful wizards from Hogwarts when we have reason to believe there could still be a student, just not a Potential Slayer, who’s a target. On the academic side, it’d be a lot harder to replace two professors and Heads of House than one professor with no administrative duties.”

“You are hardly unbiased in this,” Minerva said, looking at her guardedly.

“I’m not claiming to be,” Celia agreed. “But without better information, I think sending them into hiding or even openly drawing fire away from Hogwarts would be a mistake. A bad one.”

She tasted copper and realized she had bitten her thumb a little too hard. Casting a quick Healing Charm, she continued to pace.

“Must you do that?” the Headmistress asked.

“Sorry.” She forced herself to sit down. Needing to keep doing something, she picked up her coffee and sipped it, then nibbled on a piece of toast.
“Severus, your opinion?”

“While I loathe the idea that my presence might endanger the students, Minerva, you already know I agree that it would be precipitous to take such drastic action without complete information. History has already shown what can come of taking action based upon a fragment of a prophecy.” He jerked his head to indicate Harry. “While Mr. Spike believes he was unobserved before he was caught and also believes that he successfully Occluded his mind, the possibility exists that these Death Eaters may be aware we have this information or may even have planted it.”

The Headmistress appeared to give this rather more weight than Celia’s opinion. As it matched hers for the most part, she really didn’t care. Much.

“And you, Harry?”

“There’re times you should scatter your targets,” said the Auror and Defense professor, “and times it’s better to keep them together. We still don’t know which time this is.”

“So then, we do nothing?” Minerva asked, incredulous.

“If we do nothing,” Severus said, “and the information was indeed intended to drive Potter and myself from Hogwarts, then we may force them to reveal what they are planning when they try again. On the other hand, if the information is legitimate and they do not know we have it, acting upon it would reveal our knowledge and potentially cost us an advantage.”

Celia’s mind churned. There had to be some angle they were missing … besides the rest of the prophecy, definitive knowledge whether Spike’s information was planted or legitimate, the identity of “the girl,” and what her connection or contribution was supposed to be. Somehow, the girl was key. The prophecy even said so. Her tired brain ran on. The key is the link, the link must be severed … Well, duh. I was already trying to figure out how to do that anyway.

“Ultimately, we need more information,” Severus said. “While they may have already abandoned the site, I believe it would be good to send someone to investigate before any more time passes.”

*It can be done, at least on a vampire. I mean, we saw Spike’s disappear. Just because none of the books so far say how …*

“No doubt the Aurors have already been and gone,” Minerva replied. “Whether we will learn what they have found is another matter.”

This is why getting the government involved is never a good idea. Even magical government. But if the link can be severed …

*Will?*

*Yeah?*

*I’ll catch you up in a few, but right now I’ve got a question. Angel has a tattoo, right?*

*I think so.*

*Did he get it before or after he was turned?*

*I dunno. Why?*

*Can you find out? Like now?*
“I should be able to find out,” Harry said. “Though I’d be much happier if they just gave you a complete report.”

After.

Thanks, Will. Fill you in soon.

“Do you have anything to add, Celia?” Minerva asked.

“Actually, yes,” she said. “The thing is, what we have here, so far as we know, is a really bizarre hostage situation. Just, nobody’s been taken yet.”

Three pairs of eyes looked at her oddly.

“So, the first impulse we all had was to get the most vulnerable potential hostage, pun intended, away. And that’s one way to deal with a hostage situation: get the hostages away. Doesn’t always work, but it’s a valid approach. Without the ability to remove her from the situation, the next option was to remove the other two, who are way less vulnerable, and we’ve already gone through most of the reasons that would be a bad idea, at least for now.”

“That’s all well and good,” Harry said, looking at her suspiciously again, “but I don’t see how we can turn it around and make it their problem, which is what it sounds like you’re going to suggest.”

“Uh, no, that wasn’t what I was going to suggest,” she replied. “Though if we find a way, that would probably be easier. No, I was going to say that a better idea, especially when the bad guys haven’t gotten their hands on the hostages yet, is to remove their value. Plus, of course, make sure the bad guys know you’ve removed it.”

Severus grasped it first.

“Do you think I have not tried?” he asked, his voice dark with anger. “You have read everything I have on the subject. If it were possible to erase this link to that madman, do you not think I would already have done so?”

“Anything made by man can be unmade by man,” she countered. “Just because we don’t know how doesn’t mean it can’t be done. In fact, we know it can be done. We saw it happen just yesterday.”

“We do not know why …”

“No, we don’t know why. Maybe they don’t know how to cast it permanently, though the one on Locksley lasted past his death, right? Or maybe it just doesn’t ‘take’ on vamps. But I just checked, and there’s at least one vampire running around with a regular Muggle tattoo that he got after he’d been turned, and it’s still there. So it’s at least possible for something to be made permanent on them, and Spike’s is gone. Maybe if we figure out why, we can figure out how to do the same thing for your Mark, and the same principle might work for Harry’s scar, too. And when we find the girl … or boy, whatever … and work out what their link is, maybe we can break that, too.”

Harry, in particular, was staring at her with impossibly wide eyes.

“You’re as mad as Hermione,” he said in an awestruck voice.

“Should I take that as a compliment?” Not that she knew much about Hermione Granger, but going by what little she had heard, the woman was brilliant. “The point is there are angles we’re not seeing,
and that’s only one of them.” And the alternative, the only other way to render them useless, is unthinkable. “Meanwhile,” she continued, “whatever the Aurors find will almost certainly be nearly as incomplete as the information we already have, though with any luck it’ll confirm or rule out a few things. So we need another information source.”

“I thought you did not care for my earlier suggestion that we turn to tea leaves and crystal balls,” Severus sneered.

Celia gave him a quelling look as Minerva answered, “That would hardly be an improvement upon what we already have, Severus. While some sort of Divination might be called for, I would prefer something far more reliable.” She looked at the clock. “For now, you should all prepare to start your classes for the day. If we are to project an air of normalcy after the way this morning has started, then classes as usual are the first order of business. I will contact Kingsley and see what the Aurors have learned thus far.”

The three professors rose and left for each of their classes. Just before they reached the gargoyle at the bottom of the stairs, Celia grasped Severus’ hand and squeezed it gently, smiling when he turned to her. He nodded once sharply and strode off toward the dungeons.

As she left the castle and prepared to set up her first class in Greenhouse Four, she took advantage of the speed with which telepathy allowed her to update Willow.

~ ~ ~

It was somewhat astounding. Students were rightly afraid to speak in his classroom, and yet still he managed to catch bits of the rumors that this morning’s events had spawned. This information was, obviously, the next thing to useless. It had once been his place to gather information that was actually of value.

Ironic, that.

Something that Minerva had said earlier haunted him throughout the morning, that comment about something more reliable than Divination. As students placed parchment scrolls on his desk to be marked before fetching ingredients for today’s assignment, he ran through their options for obtaining information yet again. The Aurors would most likely find little. He could suggest one or two places they might look for these new Death Eaters if they were going to stick with the obvious.

However, spying on them is likely to be harder now that they’ve caught someone at it once.

“Mr. Hughes,” he barked at a hapless Gryffindor, “what, precisely, do you think you are going to accomplish by grinding your dung beetle wings to a powder in that manner?”

“But, you said …”

“I said nothing that could possibly resemble such a thing!” He looked over at the next student who was similarly pulverizing his beetle wings. As was the student next to him and the one behind her. “Have you all taken leave of your senses? Clear away your work areas immediately and commence writing an essay on the various ways to prepare dung beetle wings and why one would choose each one.”

Glancing at the board, he winced. He had, in his distraction, somehow managed to Charm two sets of instructions onto the board, quite scrambled, and they did, indeed, imply that one should powder the beetle wings.

I suppose fourth year is not too early to introduce them to the misdirections they will find in some
Potions texts as well as the need to apply their prior knowledge despite what is written. Thank Merlin I caught them before they actually began combining ingredients.

They scurried about for a few minutes and then settled in to write, giving him further opportunity to think about the notion that had been teasing at the edge of his mind.

“He’s just not wrong,” Celia had said about the Seer who told her that her birth parents were deceased. He wondered why she had not suggested approaching this Seer before now.

~ ~ ~

“That’s … that’s a very good idea,” she said. Why didn’t I think of that? Besides the fact I have no idea where he is right now, of course. “Give me a sec to find out where he even is.”

Severus nodded and returned to his lunch. She noticed that he paused every so often to glare at the students who kept stealing covert glances at her and whispering. Well, what did he expect after that spectacle this morning? Not to be sitting next to each other at lunch, for starters. She took a steadying breath and let it out slowly. Also, I think I’d have kept my mouth shut a little longer if I hadn’t been so sure I’d be gone by now.

She stirred her soup absently and reached out with her mind.

*Will?*

*Yeah? Not more catching up, I hope. I’m still kinda headachy from the last round.*

*No. Anything new on your end?*

*Spike’s a little more responsive. We’ve graduated to the occasional yes or no.*

*That’s an improvement, anyway.*

*How’s things there?*

*Students are freaked and making stuff up randomly to explain the big stinky spell that bombed.*

*Oh, joy.*

*Listen, Will, what do you think about asking Lorne’s help?*

*I think … why didn’t we think of this sooner?*

*We still didn’t. Severus did.*

*Huh.*

*Yeah. Can we find out where he is these days? I mean, I know he was creating more Caritas sites, but that was a couple of years ago.*

*He’s still not so much with the talking to Angel, but I’ll see what I can find out.*

*Thanks.*

“Willow’s checking to see where he’s operating these days,” she said to Severus. She looked at the empty chair on her other side. I really do need to talk to Hagrid, too. I worry about him.
*Celia?*

*Yeah, Will?*

*He actually opened one in England. Giles is trying to reach him to see if he’s going to be there soon or if we need to catch him at another site.*

*Where in England? London, must be, right?*

*I don’t know. If that’s where we end up going, obviously I’ll find out.*

*Kay. Thanks.*

*Thank Severus for thinking of it.*

“Willow says thanks for thinking of it. We’re still not sure where he is just now, but we may be able to set up a meeting at some site in England.”

“That is not terribly specific.”

“No. If we’re going there, obviously we’ll get the details. But it beats trans-Atlantic Apparition, which I’d love to avoid.”

“Hmm.”

*Got him!?*

*That was fast.*

*I decided to cut out the middleman.*

*Oh.* Willow didn’t do that often. Most people kind of freaked out over suddenly hearing her voice in their heads if they weren’t expecting it. Or even if they were.

*He’s in Beijing, but he said he’ll meet us at this mill … * Celia received an image of an old, clearly abandoned mill and a sense of the surrounding area, including a safe place to Apparate in. * … at eight o’clock tonight.*

*I’m sorry, this is Lorne, right? Mister “Okay, go ahead and sing for me, but I’m only reading you because I read everybody”?*

*Yeah.*

*And he’s dropping everything and coming halfway around the world for this?*

*Apparently he was expecting it.*

Now, that just couldn’t be good.

*Does that make you as nervous as it makes me?* Celia asked.

*Maybe more.*

*Thanks again. See you around seven forty-five, unless something changes.*

*See you then.*
“Okay, it’s set for tonight.”

“The location?”

“Have a look.” She turned to face him and focused on her last exchange with Willow. He swept through the words and images like a feather in her mind, then turned back to his meal.

“Interesting location,” he said in an odd, neutral tone.

“He’s always been big on the large, abandoned buildings. I’d have bet on a warehouse in London, but I’d’ve been wrong.” She took a sip of tea, then said, “Looks like he was expecting us to contact him.”

“It is not all that far from the place we believe was recently abandoned. No more than twenty miles.”

She correctly interpreted this to mean the place Spike had found the Death Eaters. *Too bad that Muffling Spell of his doesn’t do anything about lip readers. I’d rather be talking more directly about this.*

“The place itself should be safe,” she said. “He’s always used strong Anti-Aggression Charms. We’ll need some sort of ‘don’t notice us’ Charm to make sure no one sees us and carries tales, though.”

“And who, exactly, are ‘any of us’?”

“Probably all six of us.”

He gave her a look.

“What? At the very least, you and Harry have to be there. And if my teacher or I are … candidates … then we need to be there as well. Plus, Spike’s the one who heard … stuff.”

“Madam Kennedy, I imagine, would not agree to remain behind.”

“Definitely not.” She toyed with what was left of her soup. *At least he doesn’t call her that to her face anymore. You’re going to need more aconite and vinca today, right? Walk me to the greenhouse now, and I’ll explain some of the details about how he does his readings.” And that’ll be way easier walking outside than sitting up here on a frickin’ stage practically! Stage. Oh, he’s really not going to like this.*

Severus nodded shortly, rose, and then followed her out of the Great Hall.

~ ~ ~

Potter was right. The woman was mad, far more mad than … If she thought for one moment that he was going to sing in a bar full of demons. Actually, she was utterly insane if she thought he was going to sing in public at all.

“That’s how he reads your aura, Severus,” she had said. “Something happens when a person sings that opens it to his vision. Well, not always a person.”

That would be when she had explained that he was a demon, as were most of his customers. Apparently this anagogic demon was every bit as neutral as Ollivander: he would not reveal what he read for them to anyone else but would not hesitate to read for anyone else either.

He stormed back down to the Potions dungeons, potted plants firmly in hand. The very idea of anyone reading his aura, seeing into his soul, was utterly anathema to Severus Snape, quite apart
from the matter of public singing.

He might, after what she had said, consider singing just for her. After consuming a large amount of Firewhisky. Perhaps.

“I doubt you’ll enjoy it, though I imagine I will.” She had lowered her voice then. “Just listening to you speak is like being bathed in silk, Severus. I can only imagine how amazing it must be to hear you sing.”

It was obvious that she was trying to make light of the situation or at least make the best of it. He supposed he should be relieved that she hadn’t attempted to address the reprieve they had been granted – and he was certain it could only be a temporary reprieve – more directly. Moving forward, rather than looking back, was indeed the thing when circumstances became so fluid. To do so in such a lighthearted manner, however, was completely outside his experience.

*Considering what she … professed last night, I imagine I should be grateful that she is not taking a great many things amiss.*

He had no intention of participating in this ridiculous exercise. If not for the fact that he was the only one who had any familiarity with the area and the fact that he still preferred to be on hand when she might be at any sort of risk, he wouldn’t be going at all. Among the multitudinous problems with this plan, just this morning he had been fully prepared never to see her again. Or if not fully prepared, at least resigned. Now he was supposed to accompany her to a bar full of demons and sing in front of them? Preposterous.

Approximately ten minutes remained for him to add these ingredients to the Wolfsbane Potion, which could then simmer until his two double-period classes finished. On top of everything else, he would then need to travel to London and back to deliver it, after which he would need to mark papers (no time for their usual Friday afternoon tea, which they had kept up despite or perhaps because of their current de facto cohabitation), go to dinner, and then revisit a part of his life he had hoped never to see again en route to this demon bar.

She had thanked him for reminding her of this Seer. It had better be worth it.
When she stepped out of the Hogsmeade House fireplace, the first thing Celia saw was Severus’ back. Not surprising, considering he’d come through right before her. Except he wasn’t moving.

Stepping sideways a bit, she saw why: he had his wand trained on Spike. Ahead of him on the other side, so did Harry.

Spike wasn’t paying attention to either of them. When he noticed her, however, his gaze locked on her.

“So, Spike, you still nuts?” she asked.

“No,” he muttered.

“He’s doing better,” Willow said from somewhere out of Celia’s line of vision.

“Forgive me for being unimpressed that the vampire is less insane,” Severus drawled, his wand not wavering.

“Hey, for Spike, ‘less insane’ is about as good as it gets,” another male voice chimed in. It took Celia a second to place it.

“Xander?” she asked stepping the rest of the way out from behind her human shield. “What are you doing here?”

She kept her eyes on Spike. If they were letting him free around a non-magical non-Slayer without bloodshed, he was probably safe. Probably. His eyes stayed locked on her, but he didn’t attack.

“Giles wanted a Watcher here,” the one-eyed man replied. “Willow convinced him the odds of avoiding a major explosion were better if he sent someone other than himself.” He nodded in Severus’ direction.

Okay, but why send Xander? I can think of at least three others that would make more sense.
Being around Xander was weird. She’d built up enough of her own experiences and memories with Giles that they sort of outweighed the Willow memories. But Buffy, Dawn, and Xander … they were a whole different story. She’d trained under Buffy for a little while, but in a group of fifty other neo-Slayers. Dawn she’d talked to a few times when she’d needed expert translation help with something really obscure. It was never quite enough to get past the weirdness entirely, but at least they both treated her like any other Slayer. But Xander … she’d only met him a couple of times, and he’d obviously been really uncomfortable around her. That didn’t mesh well at all with her best-friendy memories and probably bothered her more than it should.

“And Spike’s under control?” Celia asked.

“I’d feel better if he had his electronic choke-chain back …” Xander started.

“He’s been fine,” Kennedy interrupted. “So how’s about you two lower your wands, and we’ll see if he stays fine.”

“Room’s full of Slayers, witches, and wizards. Don’t see what you lot think I can do anyway,” Spike grumbled, hands jammed in his pockets.

Harry sheathed his wand slowly. Severus took a bit longer with his.

“We may be required to bring you to this Seer since you heard that bit of prophecy,” Severus said in a low and dangerous voice, “but if you make a single move like you did yesterday, I will incinerate you.”

“Not gonna drink any more of your bird’s blood,” Spike retorted with a scowl. “Gave me a hell of a bloody hangover.”

“Good.” Severus finally put his wand away.

Celia considered pointing out she could incinerate Spike just fine all by herself but then decided it wasn’t worth it.

“So, um, introductions seem kinda beside the point now,” Willow said. “Or am I supposed to do them anyway?”

“I think we’ve figured it out,” Harry answered, holding his hand out to Xander. “Pleased to meet you, Xander.”

“Likewise. Always happy to meet more people who like to point wooden things threateningly at Spike.”

“Hey!” Spike finally took his eyes off Celia to shoot a glare at the two young men.

“If you don’t mind my asking,” Harry continued, “have you ever considered getting a magical replacement eye? I have a friend who uses one, and he can see straight through all kinds of things. I’d think that’d be useful for one of you Watcher types.”

“Nah, I’m not so much with the magic,” Xander replied. “About all I can manage is abra…”

Celia and Willow turned as one to glare at him, and suddenly Xander couldn’t speak. He scowled at them both. Willow released him first, and he proceeded to emit several grunting noises around his tongue, which was still glued to the roof of his mouth.

“You going to finish that little bit of stupidity?” Celia asked.
Xander shook his head. She released the spell.

“What the hell?” he demanded. “It’s not even a real incantation!”

“No,” Willow agreed. “But it’s a mangled version of a real one, and you know that.”

“You also know,” Celia said, “that there is a very good reason you’re ‘not allowed to speak Latin in front of the books.’ And let’s not forget the love spell from hell.”

He shuddered theatrically. “It’s so creepy when you do that.”

For once, she was just as glad to have weirded him out. With the amount of free magic floating around Hogsmeade, there was no telling what he might accidentally do.

Severus was watching the interplay with interest, though his eyes darted frequently back to Spike. Celia thought he was probably wondering what they were talking about and most likely getting kind of impatient about it, but Harry saved him the trouble of asking.

“Wait, if you can’t do magic, then what’s the big deal about saying a fake incantation?”

“Xander can’t do magic on purpose,” Willow explained. “Even having someone else do a spell on him can backfire pretty, um, spectacularly.” Her cheeks reddened, and Celia was afraid her own might, too. “But, um, he seems to be able to pull off the occasional spell by accident. No point taking chances with a fake incantation that’s just a little off from a real one. Especially that one.”

“So, let’s get him to Caritas, then,” Celia said briskly, wanting off this subject in a hurry. “And Spike for that matter. None of us can do any damage there, intentionally or otherwise.” She and Willow quickly cast the “Nothing To See Here” Charm on the group as a whole. Anyone who saw them would find them too nondescript to notice. Well, anyone but Lorne. He seemed to be immune to that sort of thing.

“Great idea,” Kennedy said, putting her arm around Willow, who already had hold of one of Spike’s arms. “So which one of you is taking Xander?”

“I guess I am,” Celia replied. Could we not maybe use a Portkey instead? Oh, right. Permits and crap. Easier to get caught with a group using one that’s not authorized. Damn. “Seeing as how I’m the only remaining magical person who’s known him for more than five minutes.” She didn’t like the idea of Willow doing a double Side-Along Apparition with Spike, but it didn’t make sense for Severus or Harry to take him either. And she wasn’t quite uncomfortable enough with Xander to offer to trade.

“Have I mentioned lately how much I hate Apparating?” Xander asked.

“Probably,” she replied. “Just not to me. Hang on tight, okay?”

“Am I going to lose a hand for that?” he asked, clearly looking at Severus.

“Hey,” she snapped, “worry more about what I’ll do to you. And no, not so long as you hold on where you’re supposed to.”

“And that would be …” He waved his hands in the general area of her waist.

“Not anywhere that you’re not supposed to.”

“Right.”
Celia rolled her eyes and put his arm around her waist, firmly ignoring any disturbing memories, and waited while Severus Disapparated first, then Harry, as they had arranged, then closed her eyes, focused on the destination they had been given, turned, and Disapparated them both.

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When he arrived at the bank of the dark, dirty river, Severus barely restrained a sneer. He had thought never to come to this part of the world and his past again. Clearly selling his former home last year had not been enough to avoid any need to return.

He climbed the riverbank and looked across the road where once had stood rows and rows of brick houses including his own. In their place, now, was the foundation and beginning framework of some large store surrounded by an enormous car park. He did not recall the name of the store. It was no matter: the check had long since been cashed, converted, and deposited in Gringotts.

Potter arrived as he was taking this in but did not immediately climb the bank to join him. Celia followed with Mr. Harris, who nearly jumped away from her upon their arrival. He could see that she was scolding him, but the wind carried her voice away, so he didn’t hear the reason for it. She didn’t actually appear angry, merely annoyed, so he decided to take no notice. For now. Willow and her wife followed shortly, and then the group came to join him atop the riverbank.

“Okay, the abandoned mill I get,” said Willow. “The middle of nowhere, not so much.”

“It’s like the anti-Cleveland,” Celia agreed. “Guess he was looking for someplace with lots of demons and few people, except a. why the demons and b. once that’s built, there will be lots of people.”

“There is some Dark magic here,” Willow pointed out. “It’s faint, like it’s been gone awhile, but it’s here. Doesn’t feel like enough to attract much in the way of demon activity though.”

Potter shot him a look, but Severus shook his head slightly. They all crossed the road and began to walk towards the old mill. When they reached the corner of the new car park that had once been the site of the last house on Spinner’s End, he saw Celia finally register what her teacher had picked up from nearly a half mile away. She stopped in her tracks, looked around, and then looked at him curiously for a moment before turning to continue walking towards the mill. Had she picked up the signature of his long-dismissed wards? If so, she was clearly not going to ask about it now.

As they approached the abandoned mill, its monstrous chimney looming over them, he saw a change come over her. Her stride and her posture, always confident, became notably more so. The vague traces of worry that had marred her features of late were replaced by a grim look of determination. This might be his former hometown, but she was the one who appeared to be returning to familiar territory.

That this was true became even clearer when they entered the mill and came face to face with a green, horned demon wearing a loud purple suit. He had drawn his wand, as had Potter, before either of them registered that the other four were not only unalarmed but smiling. Slowly, both wizards re-sheathed their wands.

“Whoa!” said the demon. “Good thing those new and improved Anti-Aggression Charms are up and running.” He gave the others a reproving look. “Did you maybe forget to mention a thing or two to your guests?”

“You know how the automatic reactions go, Lorne,” Celia said. “I knew I was going into a demon bar the first time, and I was just as bad.”
“Ah, yes, those were the days, my friend,” the demon replied. If Severus was not mistaken, the demon cast a look that was not at all nostalgic at the vampire as he said this. “So, aren’t you going to introduce us?”

Willow stepped forward. “Lorne, this is Severus Snape and Harry Potter, like you didn’t already know. Severus, Harry, this is Lorne. His name’s really much longer, but I can never remember it, and nobody ever uses it.”

Severus nodded his acknowledgement. He saw that Potter actually shook the demon’s hand.

“Always a pleasure to meet an Auror who doesn’t hex first and ask questions later, Harrykins,” the demon said before turning to acknowledge Severus. “Ditto for you, Mr. Tall, Dark, and Dangerous.”

Severus snorted.

The demon turned to Celia, “So, what brings you here?”

She raised an eyebrow in an eerie if clearly unconscious imitation of himself, Severus noticed, as she said, “You got here in less than eight hours from Beijing without knowing why we were coming? I find that a teensy bit hard to believe.”

“What, I can’t just miss old friends?”

She narrowed her eyes at him, and Severus wondered whether she was taking exception to his use of the word “friends” or his apparent disingenuousness. Perhaps both. He noticed that the vampire appeared outright amused.

“Well, Willow wouldn’t have T.P.’ed me from out of nowhere if it wasn’t important.”

The redhead nodded as if to concede the point.

“Lorne,” Celia said, “you have been so spectacularly neutral since LA that I’m surprised the Swiss haven’t offered you spontaneous citizenship. You weren’t surprised Willow contacted you. You dropped everything to travel halfway around the world. This tells me something is up. You going to try and say otherwise?”

“Oh, it is,” he agreed. “You’re right, I don’t take sides. Except if you don’t get this situation under control, going home to Pylea might start to look like a good idea.”

Now both her eyebrows appeared in danger of becoming permanently lost in her hairline. What was Pylea?

“So, let’s get down to business, then,” Celia said. “First off, what’ll it be, pounds or Galleons?”

“You wound me,” the demon said, placing his hand over his heart. “Also, shouldn’t that be her line?” He indicated Kennedy.

“Usually, yes,” Celia agreed. “But for once I’ve got a job that actually pays half decently and no living expenses, so this one’s on me.”

Startled by that, Severus found himself scanning over his memories of various conversations they’d had. She had always managed to avoid any mention of how she supported herself or, more likely, was supported prior to coming to Hogwarts. He would have to ask her about that later.

“Pounds are much more spendable around these parts,” the demon said. “I’m pretty sure my manager
would prefer them.”

“Pounds it is then. This should take care of the cover and a deposit against our bar tab.” She handed him a few notes. Severus wondered when she had had the opportunity to obtain them. “Next, who do you need to hear from?”

The demon looked them all over and replied, “All of you.”

That is not going to happen.

“Um, Lorne, you sure?” she asked, looking a trifle nervous.

“What, you think Xander’s just here for the ride? Of course all of you,” the demon replied with a wave of his hand to encompass the group. “But if you want to check, you could start by giving me a few bars of any old thing.”

She appeared to think a moment, then crossed her arms and sang.

“Do you bury me when I’m gone?
Do you teach me while I’m here?
Just as soon as I belong,
Then it’s time I disappear.”

Severus wasn’t sure which bothered him more, the song she had chosen or her apparent tin ear.

The demon looked at her shrewdly. “So is that what you think your mission is?”

“Impossible?” She gave a short, humorless laugh. “It better not be. No, that song’s been stuck in my head all day, considering it was supposed to start out with me pulling a disappearing act.”

“And do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Belong?”

“Is this therapy or part of the reading?” Celia was scowling now.

The demon gave her an unimpressed look.

“Lovely,” the vampire muttered. “So you’re still all with the mysteriousness. That’ll be helpful.”

“Can we at least go in and sit down?” Celia asked, gesturing to the door beside him and the barroom beyond it.

“Not until you answer.”

She looked uncomfortable. The demon waited. Potter gave Severus a questioning look, to which he merely shrugged.

“No,” she said at last. “I pass, mostly, but ‘belong’ would be stretching it. A lot.”

The demon looked oddly pleased. Severus, on the other hand, was dismayed by her assessment.

But how could she feel otherwise? Even Muggle-born witches and wizards are normally introduced to our world by the age of eleven. She is in her mid-twenties and has only lived in our world a few
“months.

“Good! So you’re up for a bit of self-examination and even honest about it. You’re going to need it, honey.”

“So all of us?”

“Yep. You’re at the center of all this,” the demon said pointing at her, “and you heard the prophecy,” he continued, pointing at the vampire, “but I need all the pieces of the puzzle.”

Her eyebrows shot up again.

“I may be the Slayer-in-charge, but I’m so far from actually calling any of the shots it’s ridiculous, Lorne. How could I be at the center of anything?”

“All in good time.” The demon’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t believe you have what it takes for this one, do you?”

She shrugged. “Usually magic’s my advantage. Now I’m on the other side of the looking glass or possibly down some rabbit hole, and not only is it just another tool, but everyone’s got it.”

“Huh,” Potter said. “I never thought of it that way.”

The one-eyed Watcher looked him over measuringly. “Yeah, I guess you wouldn’t. Kind of like knowing about electricity and cars probably gives you an edge in the wizarding world, but spend ten minutes in the Muggle world and you’ll see how much of an advantage that isn’t.”

“That’s only part of it,” the demon argued, ignoring the two men. “You think you’re going to have to retake a test you believe you’ve already failed once.”

Celia’s expression became so cold that the temperature of the room itself seemed to have dropped several degrees. Severus wondered what this test was to which the demon referred.

“Half the reason we’re here,” she said, “is to get answers that will prevent things ever getting that far.”

“Well,” the demon said briskly, “let’s see what we can do about that. Now, let’s leave all the hardware out here.”

“If this place is so super-anti-violenced, why do you need our weapons?” Kennedy asked.

Well she might, not having any magical powers to rely upon.

“Part of creating sanctuary, my dear,” the demon replied, holding out his hands to receive a rather impressive arsenal from Kennedy, Mr. Xander, and Celia. Oddly, he did not ask for and thus was not given any of their wands. He opened a safe in the wall and tucked the weapons inside. Celia looked at the safe strangely as it became once again part of the wall.

“Now, about your performances,” the demon said as he gestured them into the dark and hazy club.

This demon will either find a way to accomplish this reading without compelling me to sing in front of a bar full of demons or else he will discover his Anti-Aggression Charms are … insufficient.

~ ~ ~

When she returned to the table and took her seat next to Severus, Celia thought she had never felt so
relieved. *Waiting to go last doesn’t exactly make it easier.* She looked to Severus warily, wondering how he’d respond to the rather bizarre song she’d just sung. *If you could call that singing. Since when does Lorne go changing things like that?*

He merely lifted an eyebrow at her. On his other side, Harry and Xander were talking animatedly about something, and past them, Spike was staring at her unnervingly until Kennedy elbowed him.

“May I remind you whose idea this was?” she replied to Severus’ unspoken comment, inwardly relieved that he didn’t look offended, angry, or otherwise negatively affected by it all. *Well, Lorne did let him get away with humming about two bars of whatever that was. Guess he’s too busy being relieved.*

When Lorne joined them, sitting between Willow and her, she cast a quick *Muffliato et Labbroscuro* with a boundary set just outside their table, followed by what had become the standard series of anti-eavesdropping charms, then said, “I really, really hope that Cassandra Charm is as good as you say it is for keeping people out of each other’s readings, Lorne. Never mind the actual reading, the songs themselves were pretty damned revealing.” Not to mention that the Notice Me Not Spell they’d cast earlier had been shattered once they’d started going up onto the stage to take their turns singing.

“You picked up on that, did you?” he asked.

“Oh, gee,” she replied, voice dripping with sarcasm. “Let’s see. We started off with some songs by American female artists and moved on to a bunch of British male vocalists, never mind the content of some of the songs themselves. Which, hey, makes sense up to a point, considering we’re mostly American women and British men, except then there’s Xander. And I don’t know if everybody else got to sing what they picked, but I sure as hell didn’t pick *Madonna.*”

She also certainly hadn’t picked that song. *Okay, the song itself was all well and good, but the video was notorious because it was about the Klan, for Goddess’ sake. Let’s see, a bunch of violent bigots who run around in robes, hoods, and masks, and leave an unmistakable calling card. Obvious, much?*


“You’re imagining things, Slayer. Nobody made me sing The Police. I just wanted to,” Spike said with a shrug. “If the machine didn’t play what you wanted, you must’ve just hit the wrong button.”

“You did catch the reason I switched you to Madonna, didn’t you?” Lorne asked, somehow managing to both ignore Spike and contradict him all at the same time.

“You mean Madonna herself and not just that song?” *Oh, he has got to be kidding me!* “That’s so far off track and into the future – the potential and by no means certain future – that I’m not even thinking about thinking about it,” she snapped. *Not that that isn’t an encouraging idea, because it sounds like he’s suggesting I’ll be sticking around here awhile. Maybe even ... but it is way too soon to think about that possibility. I’ve got enough to do trying to keep the living alive and the dead dead. Assuming that’s even what this all is about. Which is the whole reason we’re here: to find out what’s really going on. We didn’t come here for a reading on my love life! “Please tell me you got what you needed from all that.”*

“Oh, absolutely, sugar. But you’re going to need something stronger for this.” He waved to the bartender.

“What’s wrong with it?” she asked, picking up her glass of stout. She watched Lorne mouth
“Firewhisky” and added, “He can’t see your mouth.”

“What?”

“One of the spells I used makes it so if anyone hears us, it just sounds like indistinct buzzing, and if they try to lip-read, our mouths are too blurry.”

Severus looked interested in this modification. Had she forgotten to tell him about it? Well, she’d only come up with it this afternoon.

“You realize you don’t actually need to do all that,” Lorne protested.

“Obviously you’ve forgotten just how intense Slayer paranoia can get,” Xander said. “It’s generally best to just go with it. Otherwise they get testy.”

“Can’t say as I disagree,” Harry put in. “Constant vigilance and all that.”

“I’ll drop it so we can order another round or whatever,” she said, shooting Xander a quick glare and catching a subtle eye roll from Severus, “but can we get on with it then?”

She released the spell, and Lorne had another round brought for them all, including a full bottle of Firewhisky. Once the bartender left again, she reinstated all of the spells.

“Now, spill,” she said.

“First, I have a few questions for you,” he replied, as he poured her a glass of the Firewhisky and set it down next to her pint. She passed it to Severus, who actually liked the stuff. As he had barely sipped his own, she figured it would be awhile before he got to a second glass. He nodded at her encouragingly, and she returned her attention to Lorne, who suddenly sang, “Why-y-y-y-y don’t you use it?”

She glared at him. “I’m guessing you won’t accept a nice simple answer like ‘I don’t want to end up in Azkaban or any other magical prison’?”

“Of course not.” He laughed and then looked at her seriously. “If you were really worried about the legal aspect, you wouldn’t go around casting Unforgivables on unsuspecting Muggles.”

She slammed her glass down, sloshing some of the beer onto the table. “That is a gross misrepresentation!” Why is he baiting me? This has nothing to do with anything!

“You mean you didn’t stick a half dozen Muggles under the Imperius Curse?”

She could almost feel Severus and Harry staring. Willow, Xander, and Kennedy just winced. Spike laughed and tossed a piece of popcorn up into the air and caught it in his mouth.

“Of course I did,” she snapped, “and I defy anyone to take an objective look at that situation and call what I did ‘unforgivable’ by any meaningful definition of the word.”

“You took away their free will,” he insisted.

“They didn’t have access to their higher brain functions, much less their free will! I couldn’t shield them indefinitely, I needed them gone so I could kill the thing, and they wouldn’t run, so I made them. If I hadn’t, they’d’ve all been eaten.” She forced herself to take a deep breath.

“I don’t see how that was any worse than just shoving them out of there,” Kennedy piped up. “Magical or not, that’s what any of us do. Rule number one: get the humans out of danger.”
The others nodded. Celia shot Kennedy a little smile of thanks, and Kennedy just shrugged.

“So there are situations where you’ll justify the use of Dark magic,” he pressed, sounding way too much like a lawyer making a case.

“Obviously.” *You know, he says he wants to forget Wolfram & Hart ever happened, but he sure managed to pick up a few things.*

“It’s still just a tool,” Willow said. “Okay, a slightly more dangerous tool that you frequently don’t want to let go of when you’re done with it, but when that’s what’ll do the job, that’s what you use. And she knows how to let go, Lorne. You know I taught her that.”

“And a good thing, too,” Lorne replied. “After all, the Killing Curse is her weapon of choice, isn’t it?”

Celia rolled her eyes then. “Well, yeah. Same as it is for every Slayer-witch. It’s quick and clean for the demons it does work on. Hostile demons,” she added, holding her hands up in mock surrender before he could take offense. “Anyway, that’s better all around than hacking them to bits, when it’s an option.”

“But you’re the only one who routinely uses it on demons that you don’t already know whether it works on.”

“You what?” Severus asked softly, his expression dark.

She shrugged. “I have a good track record for not killing myself in the process. Obviously.”

“Why?” Lorne asked, taking another sip of his sea breeze.

“Why is it obvious?” Spike asked. “Um, besides the fact that she’s sitting here, talking to you? You’re losing your touch, you can’t figure that out, Mr. Psychic.”

“No,” Lorne replied to Celia rather than Spike. “Why do you have such a good track record?” He gestured with his glass to the two wizards. “For those here who don’t already know.”

She shrugged again. “Lucky, I guess. I mean, the ones that just absorb it are no big deal. It doesn’t work, you move on to your next option. The ones that it ricochets off are tough because it’s hard to be sure where it’ll bounce, but at least you can see it. Plus that tends to happen to the ones with armor plating, so we mostly don’t even bother trying it with them. It’s the ones that rebound that are really risky.”

“What’s different about them?”

She wondered where this was leading but decided to humor him. It wasn’t as though there was any point to not humoring him, after all, stubborn demon that he was.

“Well, first, there’s no way to predict which ones will do that. And when it does happen, it comes back exactly along the trajectory of the original curse, but it’s weird looking and hard to see. It’s sort of a clear vortex-looking thing. And it’s fast. I doubt anyone without Slayer reflexes could get out of its way fast enough.”

“Even some Slayers.”

“Yeah.” *And thanks so much for the reminder that half the Slayer-witches we’ve lost basically killed themselves. Is that what he’s getting at somehow?*
Beside her, she felt Severus stiffen.

*And isn’t that going to be a fun conversation later.*

“How did you know that was what it was, the first time?” Lorne asked.

“I didn’t,” she said. “But considering it was traveling back along the same line where I’d just sent a lethal curse, getting the hell out of the way seemed like a good idea at the time. When the wall behind me exploded, that kind of confirmed it.” She took a gulp of her beer. “Is there a point to all this?”

“So it’s not that you’re afraid of using Dark magic at all, and it’s not that you’re afraid of taking risks. So, sugar, why is it that the Redheaded Wiccan Wonder had to twist your arm to get you to test out your best weapon on someone besides her?”

She seethed for a minute before replying. “Do you have any idea how dangerous that was? Do you? And do you know what it took for her to get me to undo it? You must have read all that, too.”

“Yeah, I do,” Lorne replied. He crossed his arms on the table and leaned forward. “I also know that you didn’t have to go along with her. The only reason she can put an Imperius on you at all is that mental link you two have, and you can still throw it off. But you chose not to.”

Celia darted a look at Harry, who had been oddly quiet through all this. He was giving her the Big Bad look again.

Lorne pushed back into his chair. “If you don’t start trusting that you can do whatever it takes to get the job done and still come back from it, you’re not going to get the job done, Celi-kins. Not this time.”

“Have I not been saying that?” Kennedy asked. “Have I not been telling you you’re tying one hand behind your back?”

“Sweetie,” Willow said.

“No,” Kennedy interrupted. “Okay, yeah, you pushed her into it once. But has she practiced any more since then? You can’t have an awesome weapon like that lying around and not make sure you’ll be ready to use it when you need it.”

“Actually,” Harry said, “she has.”

Kennedy looked dumbfounded. Celia winced.

Great. One more thing she’ll get pissy about being left out of.

“Well, not exactly,” Harry continued. “But she’s been teaching Snape and me how to do it and how to defend against it.”

Kennedy scowled. “That isn’t the same thing at all.”

“But it’s what I have her doing,” Willow said firmly.

“And it’s not enough,” Lorne countered.

Celia took a deep breath and let it out slowly, exchanging a look with Willow and then Kennedy before looking back at Lorne. “Does that mean you’re finally going to tell me what we’re dealing with? Since you apparently know what we’ll need to use to handle it?”
"You already know what that is," he said. "Spiky-boy might be crazy, more often than not really, even on a good day, but you can trust what he told you. And what he showed you."

She crossed her arms and sat further back in her chair, hoping that would keep her from visibly shivering at that confirmation. "So, step one, sever the links," she said in a calm voice as she noticed that Lorne was looking at Severus. Why? I mean, why not both of them? Why would he focus on . . . ?

"And you’re staring at him because . . . ," Xander said, holding a hand out palm up as if to invite Lorne to finish the sentence.

"If a potion was the answer, I’m thinking that would have been solved before now," Celia said, taking a wild guess. "Also, not so much having to do with everything you’ve just been quizzing me about."

Lorne reached over and took her left wrist, turned it so that the faint scar from yesterday was visible, and said, "Not without the key ingredient."

She snatched her arm back, a chill stealing over her.

"What’s that supposed to mean?" Willow demanded.

"Why do you think Spike’s mark disappeared? Why do you think he could only recognize you as real?"

"I don’t know, but I’m thinking you’d better tell me if you do. Because a dose of Slayer blood doesn’t explain that. At all." Something suddenly felt very wrong. She wanted nothing more than to get as far away as she could and forget they’d ever tried coming here.

"Yeah. I mean, he drank some of mine, too, but he didn’t get all weird then," Kennedy said.

"No, it has nothing to do with you being a Slayer, but it does have something to do with who you are." Lorne released her hand and set his own on the table next to his now-empty glass.

She narrowed her eyes. "You said I didn’t need to know."

"You didn’t," he agreed. "Not then. But you do now."

"Why? Why is it relevant now?" The urge to get up and leave was getting worse by the second. Somewhere in a corner of her mind, a small door rattled ominously.

"Because you’re here, and because they’re looking for you. You hold the key to what they want."

The rest of the room seemed to have dropped away along with the bottom of her stomach.

"I’m ‘the girl’ from some ‘ancient line’?"

"Didn’t I say that just yesterday?" Kennedy asked.

"Actually, I think that was Willow," Spike replied. "Anyway, I could’ve told you that. Bloody obvious, really."

"The fact that you got all psychotic and fixated on a Slayer would never make anything obvious," Xander muttered.

"Once you found out you weren’t Muggle-born," Lorne continued, ignoring the others, "didn’t it ever occur to you, what with the timing, that your powers were bound when you were left with
“Family Services?”

“Obviously. I mean, it was either that or they gave me up because I was a Squib, and you’re not supposed to be able to tell that early. Why else didn’t I have powers until Willow’s spell? Though how someone who had magic could think Cleveland was a bright place to leave a kid without any, I’ll never know.”

“It was the perfect place,” Lorne argued. “With the amount of magic and demonic activity surrounding the Hellmouth, really, the only better place to hide you would have been Sunnydale.”

She blinked several times trying to assimilate this. A swig of beer didn’t help.

“That’s … okay, I can buy that one or both of my parents decided their kid would be safer as an anonymous Muggle, either because they were just freaked by everything that was going on at the time or because they were personally in danger. But you’re saying that like anyone would have actually come looking for me.”

“Oh, they would have, if they’d known you existed.” Lorne picked up his glass and waved it at the bartender, who brought him another.

Willow crinkled her nose and asked, “Why? I mean, really, she wasn’t the baby being targeted that year. We might not know her exact birthday, and it’s almost certainly not really September 15th, but unless the doctor who examined her was completely incompetent, there’s no way she was ‘born as the seventh month dies.’ So why would anyone have gone looking for her specifically?”

Celia nodded.

“Not because of that prophecy, you’re right.” Lorne took a sip of his drink. “Celia, your mother was a half-blood witch by the name of Selena Hunt.”

She took in that bit of information and almost missed Severus’ reaction. It was slight, but he tensed at the sound of her name. She glanced at him questioningly, but all she could see was that he was disturbed. Harry didn’t look any different, so apparently the name didn’t mean anything to him.

“She was captured by Death Eaters,” Lorne continued.

“And raped,” Celia supplied, suddenly feeling hollow somehow. “That … that’s always a strong possibility when you’re given up like that. I’d hoped it wasn’t true.”

She interlaced her fingers and rested her elbows on the table, leaning her head against her hands.

*I came up with so many other reasons why someone would leave their kid in a locked office in a fancy baby carrier with pretty clothes and toys. Everybody always mentioned the clothes and the toys, so I’d know that it wasn’t that she didn’t care about me. They didn’t understand that made me afraid she’d come take me away from Mom and Dad someday. If I’d known that was why she gave me up, maybe I wouldn’t have been so afraid. Obviously she couldn’t stand to look at me because I must take after him. Except that wasn’t the whole reason, was it? Lorne said she was hiding me.*

Her thoughts were going in circles, she knew. She felt a reassuring presence brush against her mind and looked up at Willow gratefully, giving her a weak smile.

Lorne continued, “She wasn’t supposed to survive. She wouldn’t have without the help of the man sitting beside you.”

She whipped around to look at Severus, who looked as though he needed to be reminded to breathe.
“Is that true?” she asked.

He swallowed the whisky he had just sipped and looked at her steadily.

_How can he be so calm about this?_

“It is. I was ordered to dispose of her. That was … not long after I had gone to Dumbledore to renounce my prior actions.” He drained the rest of his Firewhisky in one swallow and set it aside.

_Or possibly calm is the wrong word. Maybe this is what he’s like when he’s shocked. Maybe I look calm, too, instead of frozen like a deer in headlights._

“I hid her for several days, gave her potions to heal her, and then brought her to a member of the Order. I had no idea she was pregnant,” he finished.

She all but gulped. Obviously he hadn’t even known she’d been raped, or he would almost certainly have given her an abortive brew just in case. Hadn’t she told him? Were the rest of her injuries too severe to put her through that? _Whatever the reason, I’m glad he didn’t know. This … is weird._

“How could you possibly get away with that?” she asked, deciding to focus on something a little safer. “Didn’t they know when she didn’t turn up dead?”

“She was not a high profile victim, and at the time, I was not a high profile Death Eater. It went unnoticed.” There was a forced evenness to his voice.

She took a moment to digest this, looking at the man she loved, the man who had saved her life before she’d even been born. No wonder she’d never been able to distrust him.

“Thank you,” she said finally. “For both of us.”

He nodded stiffly. She waited to see if he would tell her who it was that had raped her mother, but he didn’t. Did he even know? When it was clear he had no more to say, she turned her attention back to Lorne.

“How is that … is that what this weird magical energy thing is?” she asked. “My life debt to Severus? Debts.” _I must owe him two. One for each of us. Or does it work that way?_

“Not exactly,” Lorne replied.

“What magical energy thing?” Willow asked. “You never mentioned a weird magical energy thing.”

“And here I thought girls … I mean, women … told each other everything,” Xander said with a smirk.

“Because if there’s a weird magical energy thing going on with you, you should’ve said something, Celia.”

*You, of all people, should understand the need to have something that’s just mine.*

“I guess we can talk about that later,” Willow said with an understanding – but stern – look.

Kennedy looked smug.

_Probably glad to see that Willow and I really don’t share every damned thing. Well, good._

“Maybe.” Celia turned back to Lorne. “So, was the ‘ancient line’ my mother’s then?”
“No,” Lorne replied, not meeting her eyes. “No, that comes from your father’s side.”

She let out an exasperated huff. “You planning to drag this out much longer, Lorne? Because I’ve got loads more questions, and my patience is already shredded.”

“You really ought to try some of this whisky …” He picked up the bottle and gestured to her with it.

“Lorne! How bad could it be, really? I mean, okay, I wouldn’t be thrilled to find out I’m a Malfoy or a LeStrange or whatever other psychotic it could have been, but whoever it is, and why-ever it’s so important, I need to know if that’s what’s going to help us figure this out.”

“Oh, it is. Until you know the source, you won’t be able to use the key yourself, much less control how anyone else might try.” He set down the whisky bottle and swirled his own drink around, looking at it as if it were the most fascinating thing he’d ever seen. He sounded like he was trying to convince himself that she needed to know.

*Why doesn’t he want to tell me? What the hell is his problem?*

“Then tell me already, Lorne. Enough with the riddles – just spit it out!”

“Funny you should put it like that,” he said, still not looking up from his drink.

“Put it like what?” she demanded, slamming her hand down on the table, utterly exasperated. “All I said was enough with the …” And the penny dropped. “… riddles?”

Lorne finally looked at her and nodded sadly.

“Oh.”
Celia looked at Severus, who still looked deeply disturbed. Willow and Kennedy appeared sympathetic. Harry looked as though he were going to run from her again, and Xander and Spike … well, they just seemed mystified.

“I’m sorry,” Spike said, “but for those of us who have no idea what the bloody hell you’re talking about, what’s the big deal with riddles?”

“No riddles,” Willow answered, “Riddle. Tom Riddle. As in He-Who- Shall-Not-Be-Named?”

“Oh, Voldemort,” Xander said.

Severus hissed as pain flared in his Mark.

Willow kicked her lifelong friend under the table.

“Sorry,” Xander said, adding a muttered, “ow.”

Spike snickered. “So the uppity Slayer’s Daddy was the Big Bad dark wizard of England?” He chuckled again as he lit a cigarette. “That’s just perfect.”

Celia’s head was swimming, or was that the room?

“It doesn’t matter,” Kennedy said firmly.

Celia shot her an incredulous look.

“No, really. How is it different than having your Slayer powers come from that whole demonic infusion thing the Shadow Men did?”

“I shouldn’t be here,” Celia snapped. Then the impact of what she’d just said hit her. “Oh, Goddess, I shouldn’t be anywhere near here! Those dreams, they were a trap all along, weren’t they?”

“No,” Lorne said. “No trap.”
“Then why can’t I know who this child is I’m supposed to protect? Why did I have to spend all this time thinking I was looking out for a Potential Slayer? Why can’t I describe this woman to anyone from Hogwarts?”

“You know I never get all the answers, Celie-kins,” he said. “All I know is you’ll find out when it’s time for you to find out. The main thing is that you need to be here.”

“Why?” Willow asked. “Lorne, if she’s his daughter, then she’s all they really need!”

“But not if they don’t know that.”

That brought Celia – and everyone, apparently – up short.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked. “Isn’t that why they came after her? Looking for ‘the girl from an ancient line’?”

“They don’t know what ‘ancient line’ she’s from,” Lorne pointed out. “They don’t know she’s the current Heir of …”

“But I can’t be,” she interrupted. Severus, Harry, and Willow looked at her like she’d lost it. Maybe she had. “No, seriously, Slytherin’s Heir is a Parselmouth, and I’m not. So there’s got to be someone else. A sibling or a cousin or something. You can’t tell me my mother’s the only one he raped. Guy like him, anything bad he did, he did lots.”

The demon shook his head. “You’re it, babe. There might have been potential others, but your aura’s coming up only child. But you’re right that you should have inherited that. There’s a very good reason for that little quirk.”

“Which I’m sure you’re going to explain in nice little words for the rest of us any time now, right?” Xander asked.

“It seems it’s time for you to remember a few things,” Lorne said, not exactly answering. He placed his hand on her shoulder, steadying her as a shock rippled through her, snapping her head backward. In a corner of her mind, a very small door flew open, and images, sounds, and smells flooded her.

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When the demon put his hand on her, Celia’s eyes widened and her head snapped back. Severus tensed to respond, but Willow motioned him to wait. Reluctantly, he did. He could already tell that any action he might have taken would have been blocked by the thick blanket of magic that had formed around him, apparently having sensed his aggression towards the demon. When he subsided, it did as well.

Then she began to speak, uttering little fragments of what she seemed to be seeing. “That’s who the snake-man was … why is there ink? … wait … who’s … no!” At this she flung up her right arm as if to block something.

Severus considered holding her still, then thought better of it and simply moved his chair back a few inches.

She continued speaking. “No, you don’t understand … you didn’t see … you can’t hurt him … please, you have to help him …” She reached over and grabbed Severus’ left shoulder.

That pulse of energy that had flowed between them since that first night had become so familiar he barely noticed it any longer, but now it flared to a painful intensity.
“What’s … I don’t understand … a cup? … and that’s … is that him? … ink, everywhere … how can you have two faces?” She released her grip on his shoulder slightly, then let her hand fall back to the table. Suddenly, her face twisted into an expression of utter disgust and horror. Leaning forward and standing slightly, she reached out as if to grab something in front of her, yelling, “No, you can’t! That’s just a …” She sat back hard into her chair and closed her eyes, a sickly green light briefly illuminating her face. “… baby.”

For a long few seconds, she breathed shallowly, her eyes still closed. Then she pushed back from the table, leaned over, and vomited into a bucket that hadn’t been there before. The demon was holding her hair back from her face, and Severus had the vague feeling that was something he ought to be doing, if he could have moved at all. Much of what she’d said made little sense, but that last … that called up memories he had long hoped were put to rest. Memories he did not want to associate with her at all.

He took his eyes off her briefly and saw that the others were staring at her with varying degrees of horror and concern written plainly on their faces. Willow and Potter in particular looked dumbstruck. Potter made sense. Willow? He turned his attention back to Celia, his lover, the Dark Lord’s daughter, for Merlin’s sake, and had no idea what to do for her.

The demon jerked his chin at the glass of Firewhisky she had tried to decline earlier, and Severus passed it to him. Celia straightened, accepted the glass, and swirled a bit of the liquid around in her mouth before spitting it into the bucket as well, then took a proper swallow. She Vanished the bucket and turned back toward the table, setting the glass down carefully. Placing both hands on the flat surface, she spread her fingers wide and pressed them into the tabletop, as though steadying them would still her mind.

“What … the fuck was that, Lorne?” she demanded, her eyes not leaving her hands on the table, her mouth a grim line.

“That, my dear, was every time the spell binding your powers flickered and finally broke.”

Understanding dawned across her features. This did not lighten her expression in the least.

“So it was keyed to his death. Those were all the times he – or some part of him – died. That … that explains all the objects.”

Her color was returning. Her expression shifted subtly to one he knew well. She was focusing on the problem to be solved. Good.

“So Willow’s spell didn’t have anything to do with it then?” Xander asked. “It was some cosmic coincidence that her magic showed up at the same time as she got all Slayer-fied?”

“You believe in coincidence now?” The demon’s tone was chiding.

“Well, sometimes,” Willow said. “But … that would seem to be kind of pushing it. Considering, you know, nobody really thinks it was a coincidence that the big ol’ Collapse of Sunnydale happened on the same day as the Battle of Hogwarts. Just … if it wasn’t coincidence, we don’t really know what it was.”

Celia finally looked up, taking in the expressions of everyone around the table. When her eyes at last met Severus’, his breath caught. That way she had of searching his face was so very like the Dark Lord – how could he not have seen it before? – and yet so completely opposite. Even when he had enraged her at Christmas, she had stopped short of attempting to invade his mind. He couldn’t tell what she made of him now, for her expression remained unchanged until she turned to face the
demon once again.

“Flickered?” she asked. “Remember? I’ve seen all that before?”

It was Willow who answered first. “You were saying a lot of those same things when we found you, Celia.”

“Yeah, um, that was kind of spooky,” Kennedy added with a shudder.

“Nice to not be the only one creeped-out for a change,” Harris muttered.

“You saw each of those events as they happened,” Lorne said. “Every time the spell blinked, you saw it.”

“You mean …” The color drained from her face again. “Lorne, that last … I was barely a year old. And that one … was like I was in his head.” She shook her own head violently, then shifted in her seat, bringing her feet up onto the chair so that she could hug her knees. “I can’t think about that right now.”

“Look at the other end of the timeline then,” the demon suggested.

Severus shared the relief he saw on her face. The implications of what she’d just said were staggering. She experienced the mind of the Dark Lord while he was attempting to kill Potter? When she was an infant herself? She was … there somehow?

“That one’s different, too,” she said. “Maybe because that’s when the spell broke completely? It starts out like most of the others, like I’m watching a movie or something. But then after the first couple of seconds, Harry kills him, and then it’s like I’m there, right in the middle of it all.”

“What happens?” the demon asked, motioning to the others to be quiet.

“There’s this shadow. It shoots over the battlefield, and it kind of stops over the lake, then plunges down through the water into a silver room. It lands in a large puddle of ink and stops.”

Severus shuddered. No one had reported anything like that, but then, most were otherwise occupied, including Potter, who had quickly come under attack by enraged Death Eaters no longer constrained by the Dark Lord’s orders that only he would kill the Boy Who Lived.

“Anything about that seem familiar?” the demon asked.

“That’s what I’ve been sensing under the lake,” she replied, absolute certainty steadying her voice. “So, something, some part of him is in there. In the Chamber of Secrets.”

“Drawn to what was left of the diary,” Potter spoke up. “He still has that Horcrux, then? All this time, and he hasn’t really been dead?”

Severus had not seen fear like that on Potter’s face in years. Nor had he felt such himself in that time.

“No, he’s good and dead,” the demon answered. “If any part of him were still alive, Celia here wouldn’t have any magic at all. That wasn’t a piece of his soul in that pool of ink. The shadow wasn’t either. More like an echo.”

“But it’s more than that, now, isn’t it?” Celia asked.

“When one door closes, another opens,” the demon said, looking at her intently. “Anything about that spot feel familiar?”
Severus watched as she considered it and saw the moment she came to a conclusion. She looked intently at Willow and then at Harris.

“Another Hellmouth.”

The demon nodded, then added, “It’s not active yet, not really mature. But they can sense it, and they plan to use it. If they succeed, not only will your Daddy be back, there’ll be a fully functioning Hellmouth at Hogwarts.”

Her eyes flashed fire and she snapped, “My Dad was Nathan Reese. What’s-his-face was just … just … an unintentional sperm donor.”

“Isn’t that more or less what I tried to tell you when you came asking about your birth parents before?”

She visibly deflated.

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“A Hellmouth at Hogwarts?” Harris interjected. “Wouldn’t that kind of make Sunnydale look like Nice and Normal Regional High? Will, can you even imagine if everyone at Sunnydale had been doing magic? All the time?”

Willow looked bleak.

As well she might. Severus did not want to contemplate the effects of such a nexus of Dark power, drawing on the magic of the school itself, the creatures of the Forbidden Forest, the teachers, and the students. It would feed on those energies, warp them, and radiate that Dark distortion, infecting everyone and everything.

“How do we defuse that?” Celia asked sharply. “I mean, hello, ticking time bomb, no matter what else these whack-jobs have in mind!”

“It’s all of a piece, Reesie-cup. The same key that can open it can lock it for good.”

Her eyes narrowed, and she visibly pulled her knees in more tightly, causing Severus to wonder what she was considering. “Just me, or all three?”

“That I don’t know.”

These limits on the demon’s foreknowledge were rather frustrating, but what was she asking? A chill ran down his spine.

“So, what, I’m some sort of Wizarding Princess Leia? Great.”

“Actually,” Harris said, “that doesn’t quite fit. I mean, Harry here isn’t your twin brother, and the Emperor would be You Know Who, not Vader. Actually, a better parallel for Vader would be …”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence,” she said, pointing a warning finger at him and stemming the tide of incomprehensible babble, then turned back to the demon, splaying her hands in supplication. “Can you at least give me a time frame? Are they constrained to a certain date, or do they have a deadline, anything?”

“When would you do a spell like that?”

Willow answered. “She wouldn’t do a spell like that. Nobody worth bringing back deserves to be
put through that, and anyone who isn’t worth it … well … obviously. But, um, since we’re well past the six-month deadline, I’d have to say I’d go with the anniversary.”

“Got it in one,” the demon said with a nod.

As the thought formed in Severus’ mind, Celia spoke it. “They tipped their hand awfully early, then, don’t you think?”

“Well, I don’t think they were planning on you finding their little spy device, silly!”

“No me,” she snorted, “a house-elf found it. I friggin’ wore it around for weeks.” She grew thoughtful again. “So we have a little under two months to figure out how to de-link these two, defuse a Hellmouth-to-be, and deal with whatever else they’re going to try in the mean time, all the while keeping them in the dark about exactly what I am. That about right?”

“I’d say that about sums it up.”

“Lovely.”

Severus found himself already looking beyond the fairly challenging set of objectives she’d just outlined. She clearly hadn’t thought of it yet, but it would be equally important to keep the Ministry ignorant of her parentage. Those with lingering Death Eater sympathies would look at a Vampire Slayer who was descended from the Dark Lord as some sort of cosmic proof that their agenda had not been inherently evil. The rest would want her in Azkaban merely for existing. That she’d just admitted not fifteen minutes ago to casting at least one Unforgivable on Muggles would simply provide a convenient excuse to do so, not that he believed anyone at this table would divulge that.

He shot a look at Potter, whose expression was caught between horror and the sort of look he used to get just prior to haring off and trying to get himself killed in his school days. A quick look into his mind showed a maelstrom of ideas as to how they might entrap the new Death Eaters, but fortunately nothing of betraying Celia to the Ministry.

Potter scowled as he realized what Severus had done.

Severus turned his attention back to his lover, satisfied for the moment that Potter was not immediately planning to pose a problem.

“So, back to your little trip down Repressed Memory Lane,” Harris asked her. “Did you see anything else? Maybe anything that would tell us something we could, oh, I don’t know, use, as opposed to just adding more funtabulously impossible problems?”

“I … that’s … I mean, it’s important to me, but I don’t think it has anything to do with the rest of it.”

“Why don’t you let me be the judge of that,” the demon suggested firmly. “Someone thought you ought to see all that right now, and in case you hadn’t noticed, there’s still a few blanks to fill in.”

Severus caught the quick, almost apologetic glance she threw in his direction, and he rubbed his shoulder absently. She closed her eyes and began to describe what she had seen.

“It’s like I’m really there,” she said, “because there’s someone behind me. I can’t see him, but I know he’s one of the ones wearing a mask and black robes. I don’t know how I know it, but he’s going to do something to the boy, to Harry. Some sort of revenge. I think maybe he has a gun because I don’t understand wands yet.”

“What do you do?” Willow asked intently.
Warming to her tale, Celia continued, “Nothing yet. Before I can do anything, there’s another one in a mask and robes. But he’s turning. He’s unarmed, and he’s putting himself in the line of fire. I don’t understand what’s going on, but I know he’s not like the others, and he shouldn’t die.”

Severus closed his eyes, remembering with her, now adding the rest of what had happened that day. He could smell the ozone from crackling spells and the coppery tang of blood. So much blood.

“I do the only thing I can think of, and I try to knock the weapon away as it reaches over my shoulder. I can’t turn, but I grab at it and shove it up, away.” She drew a ragged breath. “It was so hard to move, even a little, and the light … the spell … still hit, just on the shoulder instead of the chest. Then the one behind me is gone, I don’t know where, and the one who was hit falls to the ground. I try to move him, to look at the wound, but my hand goes right through him, and I wonder how that could happen.

“Then a woman comes. She has her wand out, and I still don’t understand, but I get that she means to hurt the man on the ground. She’s furious. Her face is almost as red as her hair. She’s calling him a traitor, and she’s right, but she has it backwards because she didn’t see. I try to tell her over and over, ‘Don’t hurt him. You don’t understand – he’s good. You have to help him.’ I can tell she doesn’t hear me, and I don’t know what else to do, so I yell it louder and louder. And then she looks like maybe she does hear, maybe even sees me. She reaches toward me, through me … and then it all fades.” She drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Whoever she was, whatever she did, obviously it worked out.”

She nodded hesitantly and squeezed his hand. The innocent gesture left him feeling oddly torn between being reassured and further disturbed.

Despite his years of experience assimilating new and frequently disturbing knowledge about people, it seemed strange to him that Celia could look the same as she had when they had arrived, if a bit overwhelmed. How could the Dark Lord’s daughter be the same woman who littered his sitting room with half-drunk cups of over-brewed coffee? How could the woman who chewed on her quill whilst marking, trying to find the right way to explain why a student’s idiotic answer was wrong, have come from that sociopathic megalomaniac?

“How?” she asked, turning back to the demon. “I mean, I get how I could see it, I guess, but how was I actually there? It’s not like I can do astral projection, Lorne, ’cause seriously, I’ve tried it, and I can’t.”

“Your life debt,” the demon answered. “The death of your father summoned your awareness as the spell binding your powers ended, just like it did all those other times. Only this time, it was stronger. So when Mr. I-Play-For-the-Good-Guys-But-Nobody-Knows-That was in danger, that pinged your life debt. You were already halfway there, and your spirit was able to manifest just strongly enough to act.”

“That must be when you passed out at school,” Willow said. “When they sent you to the hospital.”

Celia shook her head. He wondered whether she was rejecting the explanation specifically or everything that had been revealed thus far.
“And the last?” she asked. “Which was really the first, I guess. ‘Cause the stuff in the middle didn’t seem as important.”

The demon looked sympathetic. “Like you said, you were just a baby, same as Harry-kins, here. You were a bit more than a year old, but the binding spell was about a month less than a year.”

“So I saw it through his eyes. No,” she corrected herself, “more than that. I felt it. I’ve never felt such fear and loathing and hatred.” She shuddered, and Severus squeezed the hand that still held his, unsure what else to do. “That means I felt it then, doesn’t it?”

The demon nodded.

“And I could feel his intent. That’s why I’ve always been able to cast it, right from the first time, isn’t it? I didn’t feel emotions anything like that,” she said weakly, “but I tapped straight into the exact degree of intent because I learned from the fucking master.”

Her expression was so completely filled with despair that Severus would have sworn he could actually feel it. He could certainly understand it. He had stolen only the rarest of glimpses of the Dark Lord’s mind. Any more would have been suicidal. Even from those few, however, he well knew what a twisted and sickening landscape it presented.

She buried her face in her knees, still not releasing his hand.

“That’s why you asked her about it,” Willow said. “How she knew what the Killing Curse looks like when it rebounds.”

“She’d already seen what it looks like when it rebounds off a living being,” Kennedy added in a far quieter tone than Severus had ever heard her use. “Yeah, it was for a totally different reason, but she already knew what to look for.”

“That’s also why you’re not a Parselmouth and Harry here is,” the demon said, lifting her chin to look at her. “Your father didn’t transfer some of his own power to him. Part of you was there, and what got transferred was yours.”

She swallowed some more Firewhisky, then looked around Severus to Potter and said, “Um, you can keep it, ‘kay?”

“Er, yeah,” Potter said, quickly taking a large gulp of whatever he was drinking.

Celia turned back and stared at the table in front of her. Was she replaying the visions she had just seen? Or simply too overwhelmed to think or speak any further? The demon touched her shoulder, and she flinched.

“You’re not him,” the demon said. “Don’t make his mistake and start hating half of what you are.”

“How can I not?” she asked bitterly.

“Hate the things he did,” Willow supplied. “That’s not the same as hating him.”

“I don’t think I can make that distinction right now,” Celia muttered.

“Well, I think it’s just fine if you hate him,” the vampire said. “What’s not to hate? You’re certainly good at it. Oh, hey, I wonder if that’s where you got it from!” He held his hand to his face in an obviously exaggerated expression of surprise.
“You do realize that hating you doesn’t actually require being evil, right?” Harris asked. “Pretty much it just requires breathing. Or not, in some cases.”

“Cut it out, you two,” Willow snapped with a look that suggested the two of them might find themselves painfully hexed once they left the boundaries of the Anti-Aggression Charms.

“There’s one more thing you need to hear, Celie-cakes, and then you’d better get some rest while I get to the specifics of everyone else’s readings,” the demon said. “You’ll find the rest of what you need on the island that isn’t an island.”

“Is it a requirement for all Seers to leave people floundering to discern what you actually mean?” Severus demanded, restraining himself from actually baring his teeth and snarling.

“I can only tell her what I tell her, Mr. Tall, Dark, and Dangerous,” the demon replied. “The rest she’ll figure out when the time comes.”

“Then I believe it is time to go,” he said. She was in no shape to Apparate on her own. “Potter, will you assist Mr. Harris in his return to Hogsmeade?”

“Of course.”

Kennedy, he noticed, was already pulling out her wallet to settle the bar bill, even as the demon began speaking to the vampire. That would be one less thing for Celia to concern herself with.

He stood and, using the hand she still held, gently pulled her up as well. “Are you ready to leave?”

“I don’t think I can ...”

“I know,” he murmured. “I’ll take care of it.” As he turned her empty glass into a Portkey, he noticed Potter looking at them. Unlike earlier, this look was one of sympathy, though Severus could not be sure its exact object.

Celia said no more but meekly followed as he led her back to the doorway. That was almost more disturbing to him than everything they had heard tonight. Once they were in the entryway, he guided her to stop and put her arms around him. At least her physical strength seemed intact.

“We will not be going by way of Hogsmeade,” he said to Willow, who had followed them out.

“No, of course not,” she replied, holding up her hands. “Just ... this is the stuff that shut her down the first time. Keep an eye on her? You know how to reach us if you need to.”

He nodded brusquely and promptly activated the Portkey that would bring them directly to his rooms.

~ ~ ~

The spinning sensation took a bit longer to subside than usual. Probably because of the Firewhisky. That was okay. It was a welcome distraction. The Potion Severus gave her once they arrived slowed her racing thoughts, but as this just made them easier to see, she wasn’t sure this was an improvement. That they were standing in his sitting room still wearing Muggle clothing added a level of surrealism that she thought might cause her to start laughing hysterically and never stop if she paid it enough attention.

Instead, she focused on the fact he was still holding her. That was nice. Comforting. He still wasn’t scared of her. Of course, that might just be because of this bizarre link between them. Thoughts of
Spike answering only to her flashed through her mind, and she pulled away.

“I … um … I need a bath,” she said, knowing that sounded lame.

Severus nodded and turned to the fireplace, reaching for the Floo powder.

*Right. Got to tell Minerva something, I guess.*

She thought of asking him not to. Wondered if he would comply, just because she said so. She fled to the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

There’s a Hellmouth-wannabe on the school grounds that we still don’t know how to shut down, and I actually considered asking Severus not to report in? Maybe there really is evil in me.

It took her a long time to actually get into the tub. First she desperately needed to brush her teeth. The taste of vomit was gone, but Firewhisky didn’t taste all that much better. Then she brushed out her hair, wondering as she did which side she got it from. It certainly snarled up enough to be evil. She tamped down the hysterical laughter that tried to follow that thought.

Her eyes and nose seemed normal enough. Then again, *he* had looked pretty normal when *he’d* come out of that book. Horcrux. Whatever.

“You don’t look any different than you did this morning or any other time,” the mirror said with a sniff. “I can’t imagine why you’re bothering to look so closely now. You don’t even have your Cosmetic Potions out.”

With a huff, she turned away, stripped, and climbed into the tub, automatically turning on the taps. Once in, she didn’t feel like actually bathing. She watched patterns in the bubbles, then found herself staring at the scar on her wrist that would soon disappear. It struck her as oddly ironic that if Spike had bitten her, the scar would remain. One of the few things that would permanently scar a Slayer. She wondered if her blood would have that fixating effect on all vampires or if it was because he’d been Marked. Wondered what effect the rest of her had on anyone else who was Marked.

Poor judgment. He said the first time was poor judgment, like he didn’t even know why he’d done it. Like maybe he wasn’t under his own control maybe?

But that couldn’t be it, could it? He’d pushed her away after that first time. He couldn’t have done that if something about her was forcing him to want to be with her, could he? Except he had years of experience resisting … *his* control. Maybe that’s what that had been all about. Suddenly, every kiss, every caress, every backhanded compliment seemed tainted.

Still staring at her wrist, she wondered what it would take to remove all of *his* genes. Magic should be able to do that, shouldn’t it? Just remove all the ones that came from him and replace them with duplicates of the ones she had from her mother. There had to be a spell that could do that. Except, if it were that easy to play around with genes, she wouldn’t have to wait three generations for her hybrids to show the magical traits she was breeding them for.

Besides, she needed those genes. They had to have something to do with why Lorne thought she could use her blood to fix this. Well, fix Severus and Harry. He hadn’t said whether it had anything to do with the Hellmouth part.

“Do not even think it,” Severus said from the doorway.

She looked up at him wearily. His face was the stony mask it had been this morning, but his voice carried an emotion she didn’t associate with him. Fear.
“What? Oh. I’m not,” she said, belatedly realizing how it looked to him as she sat in the tub contemplating her wrist. She let her hand sink back into the water and gazed back at the bubbles.

The next thing she knew, he was sliding into the tub beside her.

“You have been in here for almost a half hour and have not even washed your hair yet,” he said.

“I was thinking,” she said. “Just not about what I guess it looked like.”

She gave him a sad smile as he poured some of her shampoo into his hand and motioned for her to wet her hair. Normally she found it amusing that he so enjoyed washing her hair. Now she wondered why he did. Could anything be more out of character for this man? His fingertips massaging her scalp should be soothing, but instead they seemed to wind her nerves tighter with every stroke. Was this something he’d done with other women? It wasn’t as if she could ask. She’d sound jealous or something. It wasn’t as if she could ask.

But it suddenly seemed critically important to know whether it was something he already liked doing or just something he did because something about her made him like it. Or think he liked it. Or something.

It was going to be a very short trip to crazy-land if she kept thinking like this.

“What were you thinking, then?” he asked.

“It’s all so insane,” she said. “And ironic. If I really had been Muggle-born, he and others like him would have called me Mudblood. But this … this is what it really means to have tainted blood in your veins.”

His hands stilled and slipped from her hair into the water. “You are not tainted,” he said, a strained note to his voice. “And do not ever use that word in my presence again.”

She looked over her shoulder at him, but his face predictably told her very little. His eyes, however, were alight with anger and something else she couldn’t identify.

Ducking under the water to rinse the suds from her hair, she wondered briefly what that was about. When she surfaced, he was just stepping back out of the tub and picking up his wand to Summon towels, his nightshirt, and her nightgown.

She swallowed. How am I supposed to sleep? With him? Or at all? And did I just piss him off? Why?

She sat under the plain water tap for a minute to get the last bits of shampoo out of her hair and buy a little time to think. It didn’t do her much good. Finally she drained the tub and got out, stepping straight into the sneakers she’d worn earlier and casting a Drying Charm on herself before shrugging into her nightgown.

“You know, dearie, your hair will be like straw if you …”

“Shut up,” she snapped at the mirror, gathering the rest of her clothes, heading into the bedroom, and closing the bathroom door as firmly behind her as she could without actually slamming it.

Once she’d put her clothes on the chair where she had been leaving laundry for the house-elves, she walked over to where Severus stood fussing with something in his wardrobe. At least there was one thing she could fix tonight.

“Severus, I’m sorry,” she said. “I … I guess I thought it would be okay to use that word in that context. I didn’t mean to offend you.”
He shot her a look from the corner of his eye and resumed straightening one of his robes where it hung.

“For most wizards it most likely would be,” he replied. “My aversion to that word is … stronger than most.” He closed the wardrobe and turned to face her. “Your apology is unnecessary.”

*Well, I thought I knew how to fix at least this one thing. Now what?*

“What is it you want to ask?” His tone didn’t actually invite any questions.

“Do you think this is real?” she blurted, instantly wishing she could take it back and say something … subtler. Smarter. Or just anything else at all.

“You have seen that your life debt to me was fulfilled,” he bit out, crossing his arms over his chest. “If you wish to recant your little *declaration*, kindly do not try to evade responsibility for it.”

“Wait … what?” It took her a few seconds to process what he’d said. “No, I mean … you. Not me. Or because of me. Or something.” She took a steadying breath. “You saw what happened to Spike. And now we know why. How can we know for sure you’re not under some sort of weird interaction between me and your Mark?”

He appeared startled, an expression she rarely caught on his face. Obviously he hadn’t thought of that possibility, though it was just as obvious he’d considered the reverse.

*Could we be more pathetic? Both jumping for the first possible reason to believe the other doesn’t really feel what they say they do? Or not so much say, but … yeah.*

“Whilst I have no doubt your demon friend left out many things he could have told us,” he replied after a long moment, “some of which I sincerely hope he discussed with the others after our departure, do you truly believe he would have omitted something that important?” Severus asked, sounding only slightly less angry than before.

“What, like not telling me three years ago who my biological parents are? Yeah, if he thought the timing wasn’t right, he definitely wouldn’t.” Of course, then there were the other hints he’d made about their relationship. Would he have dropped those if there wasn’t anything real between them in the first place? She didn’t know Lorne well enough to know. But … it hadn’t *sounded* like a warning.

“I suppose we will know for certain if and when the Mark is successfully removed.”

She supposed he had a point. “And in the meantime? Do we just … act like nothing’s changed?”

“Nothing has changed,” he pointed out, “except what we know. The facts are as they always were.”

She rolled her eyes. “So you’re still okay with climbing into bed with me, now that you know my … biological father is … was … *him*?”

His eyes narrowed. “I was rather expecting to do so, but it appears you disagree.”

“Well, no.” It *was* getting a little chilly just standing there, and the idea of snuggling up next to him … even if she’d never ever use the word snuggling anywhere near his hearing … was very comforting. If there was just some way to leave all this other crap to deal with later. Not erase it exactly. Just stick it somewhere else until she needed to handle it.

“Then what do you suggest?” he asked, exasperated. “Do you plan to sleep on the sofa? Because
Minerva will have both our heads to decorate the main gates if you return to your cottage, especially tonight!"

“That’s … thanks so much for that image, Severus. I wasn’t going to have enough nightmares tonight,” she snapped. “No, I don’t want to sleep on the sofa, and before you get any huffier, I don’t want you to either!” Looking back to the bed, something caught her eye and an idea struck. “What if … could we maybe close the curtains around the bed?”

“What in Merlin’s name for? The Warming Charm is functioning adequately.”

She wasn’t so sure about that, though it might just be her own nerves, but that wasn’t the point. “Just … I don’t know, to leave all this other stuff out here. I know it wouldn’t really do anything, but … it’d feel like kind of a … a boundary.” Biting her lip, she added, “That sounded a lot less stupid in my head.”

Severus looked at her, probably trying to decide whether she’d completely lost it. Slowly, he uncrossed his arms and picked up his wand, releasing all the curtains from where they were fastened to the bedposts at once.

A knot of tension at the base of her neck eased.

“Thank you.”

He didn’t reply but simply parted the curtains on his side of the bed and sat to remove his slippers.

Walking around to her side, she scuffled out of her sneakers and climbed in as well. It was definitely different, having the curtains closed. Darker, for one thing. The light from the candles on the walls barely peeped through the lines where the curtains met. Sliding under the covers carefully, she reached out to find him, not sure if she should be surprised when she found his shoulder and realized he was facing her. She scooted closer, and he put his arms around her.

“Thank you,” she said again. “I know it’s silly, but now I feel like we can be just us in here.”

He still didn’t say anything, but unless she was imagining things, his grip on her tightened slightly. As she drifted to sleep, she decided that was a good thing.

A/N 1: The lyrics Celia sings at the beginning are from "I Disappear" by Metallica.
A/N 2: The lyrics Lorne sings are from "The Reflex" by Duran Duran.
A/N 3: The Madonna song referenced is "Like a Prayer." Sorry, I couldn't resist the Klan/DE comparison, which relates to the controversial video, not the song itself. As to the significance Celia thinks she sees in the artist herself, well ... I'll leave that to your imagination for the moment.
A/N 4: My thoughts on how life-debts work in the Potterverse have been heavily influenced by a couple of particular fics: Of Debts and Debt Collection by ttfs and A Walking Shadow by ariadne1. I've seen similar ideas elsewhere since, but I know these are the first two places I encountered them, so I wanted to make sure to give credit for the inspiration. (Come to think of it, the stairway destruction in chapter 5 probably owes something to Of Debts as well!)
When he woke, it took Severus a moment to remember why it was so dark. Carefully extricating himself from a sleeping Celia, he parted the curtains and slipped out of bed and into the loo. After he washed his face, he took a long look in the mirror, sliding his dressing gown aside to uncover the scar on his shoulder. Strange to think she had been the one to make Lucius’ curse shoot wild. He had always thought that it had been Moody’s doing, but the paranoid ex-Auror had apparently been a fraction of a second later.

*As that assumption bothers Moody quite a lot, I don’t think I will disabuse him of it.*

He smirked, though he became more serious as one of Alastor’s favorite expressions echoed through his mind.

*“Some spots don’t come out.”*

He hadn’t quite come to see his Dark Mark as “just another scar,” but it was strange to think of it being taken away. Freeing, surely, but also strange. He wasn’t quite sure he deserved to have this last reminder of his worst, most unforgivable mistakes simply erased. Of course, depending upon how long the woman sleeping in his bed remained in his life, it might not be the last reminder after all.

After the initial shock, he had, he realized, fallen into a very old mental habit. He’d largely ignored his own reactions to the unfolding revelations in favor of focusing on the tactical situation. It was an approach that had long served him well, and it had done so again last night. It was rather different, however, attempting to continue to do so while still sharing his quarters and bed with another person, particularly the person around whom said revelations centered.

She was nothing like the megalomaniac who’d controlled his life for so long. Her attempt to trick herself into believing all those revelations could be left outside the bed curtains showed that she certainly took no pleasure from the news. And her fear that he’d somehow been compelled to attach himself to her, while somewhat mystifying, affirmed that she’d inherited nothing of the Dark Lord’s desire to hold others under thrall. The question now was whether he could ever return to seeing her
without seeing a link back to the worst years of his life. He supposed it was rather optimistic to assume she would remain with him long enough for that question to be answered.

Forcibly abandoning that train of thought, he finished his toilet and returned to his bedroom to find the bed hangings once again tied back and the room empty. A hastily scrawled note reiterated the patently obvious: she’d returned to her cottage to dress and would go from there to Minerva’s office. He wondered if she merely assumed he’d told Minerva they would brief her over breakfast or had Flooed the Headmistress herself.

The clock indicated that he had ample time before said meeting to collect his thoughts, so he decided to walk rather than Floo.

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Feeling more rushed than nervous – or so she told herself – Celia had a little trouble enlarging her trunk to fish out a change of clothes. She sort of overshot it and had to reduce everything back to normal. Then her hair turned out to be the worst nest of tangles she could ever remember. And then she had to go to the bathroom for the third time since she’d woken up.

No, not nervous at all.

She really did have a few minutes to spare, so she went out into her greenhouse for a minute. Sometimes just being around her plants calmed her.

The hybrids were doing well. Was it just yesterday she’d thought she was going to have to abandon them? In a few more weeks, they’d be ready to test. There might not be a Potential here, but there would be others, so whatever else happened, her research needed to continue.

The somewhat-less-little-than-it-used-to-be smooth snake poked its head out from behind a pot and then slithered over to her automatically outstretched hand, quickly wrapping around her wrist.

“You know, suddenly, you’re kinda creepy,” she said softly. “It’s not your fault, but … yeah.”

It flicked its tongue out silently.

“Also? It’s been spring for a couple of days. I’m thinking it’s time for you to head out. It’s kind of amazing you’re not sick from missing your winter sleep.”

She walked over to the door and opened it, stooping over so that the snake could feel the new blades of grass coming up. It uncoiled itself from her wrist and seemed ready to explore but then darted back past her and into the greenhouse again, faster than she thought it had any business moving.

“Fine, be that way! I swear, Parseltongue or no, sometimes I think you do understand me, and now you’re just being obstinate. You can’t live in here forever, you know!” she called after it, as it slithered under a bench and out of sight.

With a huff, she went back into her cottage just in time to hear the Floo activate.

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As he rounded a corner, Severus came upon a group of Slytherins, mostly first and second years, just in time to see one of them go flying backwards towards the wall.

“Arresto momentum!” he cast sharply, adding a nonverbal Cushioning Charm for good measure as the boy fell to the floor rather than smashing into the wall.
“What in Merlin’s name is going on here?” he demanded.

The students darted looks at each other silently.

“Answer me or you shall all have detention for the duration of your holidays!”

Lightfeather scrambled to his feet. “We were just...”

“You were just what, Mister Lightfeather? Demonstrating the effectiveness of stone when it collides with the human skull? I trust the resulting mess would have been fairly minor, as clearly yours has little inside it but air. Still, Mister Filch has enough work without your adding to it.”

The boy looked at the floor.

Severus’ eyes narrowed. “Give me your wand, Mister Lightfeather.”

“Wh-what?”

“I do not care to repeat myself,” he snapped, holding his hand out for the wand that was reluctantly produced.

Holding it before him, Severus cast Prior Incantato and was dismayed by the sequence of spells that appeared. All of them beyond the first year curriculum. All from the boy’s Defense tutoring. Clearly the boy had more Slytherin in him than had been apparent thus far. However, such behavior could not be countenanced.

“Mister Lightfeather, you will serve detention with me tonight at eight o’clock.” Severus fixed the boy in a steely glare. “And if you ever attempt to play teacher again, you will spend every Saturday for the remainder of the term in detention. Do I make myself clear?”

“Perfectly, sir.” The boy shakily accepted his wand back.

“Get to breakfast, the lot of you,” Severus snarled, and they fled.

Walking rather faster, he started once again for Minerva’s office, any thoughts of having a bit of calm to sift through his thoughts now abandoned.

~ ~ ~

“Giles?”

“May I come through?”

She narrowed her eyes. “If you are Giles, you don’t need an invite, and if you’re not, you won’t get one.”

Seconds later, he stepped out of the green flames, brushing soot off his jacket. Celia cast a quick Cleansing Charm to get rid of the rest of it.

“Thank you,” he said evenly.

She crossed her arms. “So, what brings you here this fine morning? The lovely weather? Nowhere else to spend a sunny spring Saturday?”
“Don’t play stupid. It doesn’t suit you.” He gestured to the couch.

“I’m supposed to be in Minerva’s office in a few minutes,” she replied, still standing. “Just tell me. Why are you here?”

“You seem to be taking all this rather well.” He looked over the rims of his glasses at her. “Surprisingly well.”

“No, Giles, I’m not taking this well.” She ran her fingers through her hair. “I’m just … we need to deal with this Hellmouth-wannabe, we still don’t have all the info we need to do that, and the rest is just going to have to wait!”

“I’m afraid it can’t. Would you sit down, please?”

“It’s my sitting room,” she muttered as she complied. “And I’m all for the waiting. What’s the sudden hurry? I mean, okay, yes, we just found out last night that my biological father was evil. Doesn’t mean it hasn’t been true for twenty-four years. Besides, like Kennedy said, it’s not that much different than our Slayer powers coming from demons. Doesn’t mean we’re evil. And while, okay, plants are more my area of expertise, I’m pretty sure people don’t have actual genes for evil.”

There went the eyebrow.

“I was not going to suggest that you were,” he said. “However, it seems you’ve given the matter some thought.”

She squirmed.

“Celia, nearly seven years ago, you suddenly discovered that you were both a Slayer and a witch. Last night you learned something rather disturbing about your parentage. It’s entirely understandable that you would fear the possibility of some further new revelation about yourself.” He straightened his glasses. “I’d be rather more concerned if you really were as cavalier about the matter as you’ve been trying to act for the last five minutes.”

A wave of relief washed over her, and she could feel the tension leaving her shoulders and neck.

“However, I need to assess the likelihood that said fear might impair your judgment in this mission. When is Minerva expecting you?”

The knot at the base of her neck started tying itself back up again.

~ ~ ~

When he arrived at Minerva’s office at last, Celia was already there, as was her Watcher, surprisingly, as well as a very red-faced Potter.

“How kind of you to join us, Severus,” Minerva said, waving him to his seat. “While everything we have discussed so far is information you already possess, I hardly expected you to be so tardy.”

“My apologies, Headmistress,” he replied. “I had to deal with a gaggle of miscreants on my way here.”

She gave an impatient sniff, which he took to mean that she assumed the miscreants had been Gryffindors. A reasonable guess, though incorrect in this case. He chose not to belabor the issue.

“Have you, then, been updated on all that the demon revealed?” he asked instead.
“Yes.” She drew her spectacles to the end of her nose and looked over them. “And I might add that your … synopsis of last evening was rather condensed, even for you.”

Potter glared at him. Apparently, whatever sympathy he’d held last night had worn off.

Severus tilted his head slightly as he replied, “We were given a timetable that allots nearly two months to solving and rectifying the problem. If this morning, with all of us having slept, is not soon enough to begin tackling the problem, surely a few additional hours would have made little difference.”

“Minerva,” Celia interrupted, oddly enough not looking at the Headmistress at all, “if you’re going to be mad at anyone for not telling you anything sooner, I’m thinking maybe up there would be a better place to start.”

All eyes went to the portrait that hung above and behind the Headmistress’ desk, pretending, as usual, to be sleeping.

“The painting snorted and opened its eyes, its expression suggesting the befuddlement of the just-awakened. Severus did not believe it for a minute and found the act typically infuriating.

“Whatever do you mean?” Minerva asked. “Albus? Were you aware of any of this? Albus!”

The portrait replied. “He is the one who brought her there? Yes, of course. How many wizards or witches could bind someone’s powers with a spell linked to the death of a paranoid wizard in pursuit of immortality?”

Anger began to simmer as Severus wondered what the answer to Celia’s question would be. It would be just like him to have known all this time and said nothing, so long as that suited the portrait’s understanding of what Dumbledore would have done. So long as it served some bizarre notion of who did or did not need to know.

“I suspected during your interview,” the portrait replied. “The timing with which your magical powers awoke was, of course, highly suggestive, though the matter of the Slayer activation spell rather confused matters.”

Celia snorted and muttered, “Among other things.”

“Quite.”

“What?” Minerva all but screeched. “Albus, you are tasked to serve whomever rightfully sits in this office, as are the rest of the portraits of past Heads of Hogwarts. Why did you say nothing of this to me?”

“It was but a suspicion,” the painting replied.

“You knew!” Potter said darkly, fiddling not quite aimlessly with the wand in his hand. “You enjoy your secrets just as much as the real Dumbledore.”

“There was no reason –” the painting began.

“When you were so diligently convincing me that we should keep Professor Reese here, you might
have mentioned that the reason you wanted her here had nothing to do with being a Slayer and rather more to do with being a descendant of one of the Founders!” Minerva was fast turning a shade of red that did not suit her at all. In fact, given her age and some of the strains put on her heart over the years, Severus thought it might be wise to calm her quickly, even if he shared her outrage for entirely different reasons.

“Potential descendant, Minerva,” he said. “And surely you have noticed by now that he is hardly less manipulative in this form than the true Dumbledore was in life?”

“Now see here!” the Watcher interjected. “Just how do you, of all people, think you can say –”

“That will do, Rupert,” Minerva cut in, her color returning to less dangerous levels. “I will not have my office turned into a battleground.”

The Watcher subsided, still shooting periodic glares at Severus.

“And the real Dumbledore was the one who did this?” Potter demanded. “Pretty arrogant, aren’t you?”

Celia narrowed her eyes at him. “You know, it doesn’t take anything away from you that you weren’t the only baby he had to find a place for! Anyway, when you consider the fact Severus had brought my mother to an Order member, it kind of falls together.”

“I’m sorry,” Minerva said, “but what did you have to do with this, Severus?”

Apparently Celia had also edited her tale.

“I was ordered to dispose of her mother,” he replied. “The rest is as Celia described.” He was unsure what he thought of the approving gleam he saw in his superior’s eyes at that information.

“What Order member was it, Albus?” she asked.

“Marlene McKinnon,” the portrait replied. “A good choice, really. Selena was in very good hands with her.”

Celia’s expression had grown both sad and intrigued as Dumbledore’s portrait mentioned her mother, but she said nothing, though it was clear she wanted to ask something. Severus found himself wishing he’d known her mother better. As she had been in a different year and House, he’d barely known her name. While his own family had been something of a disaster, he couldn’t quite fathom not knowing one’s parents at all, and it was a shame that Celia was likely to learn far more about the Dark Lord than her mother. Darting a glance at the still-furious Potter, he realized with a twinge of conscience that it was something he should have considered some time ago.

“The one flaw in your plan,” Celia said at last, “was that you didn’t, couldn’t foresee just how many times he would have to die. Your binding spell wavered, blinked sort of, each time he or one of his soul-fragments died.”

The portrait appeared shaken. Severus took a bit of guilty satisfaction from the fact that clearly this was not something that had been considered.

“And what was the effect of this ‘blinking’?” it asked.

As she explained, Severus watched the painted features traverse a range of expressions rarely seen. It was something of a bitter pleasure to see the man, or at least his image, flummoxed by his own lack of omniscience.
“That’s why I can speak Parseltongue and she can’t,” Potter interjected after some time. He turned to look at her. “It wasn’t part of his power, it was hers. So, you going to want it back? Just suck it right out of me, maybe? Bet you’re wishing now you hadn’t taught me how to fight back against that!”

She rolled her eyes, though she still appeared angry. “Yeah, Harry. Sure. Do you not get that I’m completely creeped out that I even like snakes now? What’s it going to take to convince you I’m not the Big Bad here? Because I thought we got past that weeks ago!”

“If I may,” Dumbledore’s portrait put in. “Harry, has your scar bothered you at all while you have been in Professor Reese’s presence?”

Potter shifted in his chair.

“Even when you were using magic against each other?” the painting continued.

“Well, no,” Potter grudgingly admitted. “But that just means she’s not actually him, and I knew that.”

“Could we please,” Minerva said firmly, “return to the matter of how to proceed with this information?”

Celia looked abashed. Potter appeared sullenly unrepentant.

“Do let’s,” the Watcher agreed. “If Celia is to travel to Avalon, the sooner she starts, the more likely she will return before the Easter holidays end, an outcome I am sure you would prefer. They do begin next week, yes?”

*Avalon? Apparently I was later to this meeting than I had realized. Bloody students. What in Merlin’s name is he on about?*

Surprisingly, Celia did not seem to follow him either.


“Don’t be ridiculous,” the Watcher replied. “Atlantis is under at least a mile of water.”

Celia just stared at him for a minute, then continued, “Or, really, I was thinking Australia, because maybe an island isn’t an island when it’s a continent. And we could maybe even move on to the B’s.”

“‘The island that is not an island.’ I have not heard it referred to in those terms in years,” Severus murmured, giving the Watcher a sharp glance, “and never outside discussion of books that are at least several centuries old. Are you certain?”

“The Watcher’s Council has, on occasion, studied the portal on Glastonbury Tor. It does seem to lead to another dimension, though why that should be required for seeking this information, I do not know.” He removed his glasses and polished them briefly. “As it seems there is some time before we can expect the Death Eaters to act, the priority should be for Celia to obtain this information.” He turned to her. “You’re certain he addressed that solely to you?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head. “I was kind of overwhelmed by that point.”

“It did appear so,” Severus put in almost unwillingly. He didn’t like the sound of this venture and would prefer someone else to make it.

Minerva tapped her fingertips on her desk, the noise deafening in the otherwise silent office.
“As we still do not have all the relevant information,” she said at last, “it would seem that is the logical course of action. Celia, please proceed with all due haste. Whatever the Death Eaters’ timeline may be, I would like this resolved sooner rather than later. Harry?”

The prat obviously had some hair-brained scheme in mind from the glint in his eyes.

“I guess I have some ideas how to help Xander sort out this ‘previously untapped talent’ he’s supposed to have. It sounded like that was going to be important.” Potter shrugged with clearly forced nonchalance. “I can get started on that in the meantime.”

“In case you have forgotten, Seers have a proclivity for making everything sound important,” Severus pointed out. “While I am willing to accept the assurances we have received as to this demon’s credibility, that tendency should not be discounted.”

Potter merely shrugged again.

“Also, Minerva,” Severus said, “I believe you are overlooking a matter of security. If I may –”

“I’ll take Willow,” Celia interrupted. She held up a hand to forestall any argument. “There’s no point taking two targets outside Hogwarts’ protections, even if they did get in once already.”

“It is traditional for a Watcher to accompany a Slayer on a quest –”

“Anybody imbued you with their powers lately?” Celia interrupted again. “Because otherwise, if those Death Eaters show up, you’re toast. Tradition, shmadition.”

“If you would have allowed me to finish, I was about to agree with you on those grounds.”

Severus found himself in unaccustomed sympathy with the man’s apparent frustration. As the last time they had interacted, he appreciated that, for all the man’s apparent faults, he did have Celia’s safety in mind.

“Oh.” She deflated a bit, then shook herself. “Well, you can tell me more when we go trade you for Willow. A lot more. Like everything you even think you know about this Avalon thing more.” She stood, and Severus, Potter, and the Watcher rose as well. “If I may?”

“All due haste would tend to suggest that you ought to have left several minutes ago,” Minerva replied dryly.

For a moment, Severus feared Celia would insist upon kissing him for good-bye in front of this … audience. Then he found himself annoyed that she might not do so due solely to her Watcher’s presence. He scowled at his own inconsistency.

“Walk us back to my cottage?” Celia asked.

He smirked as Minerva dismissed the three of them and asked Potter to remain.

~ ~ ~

“It looks like the New Age exploded,” Celia said.

“Yeah, and it took out that monastery back there,” Willow agreed.

“Abbey,” Celia corrected. “It says it was Glastonbury Abbey.”

The two witches had Flooed into a natural foods store owned by a friend of Giles and were making
their way to the site where Celia was supposed to make her quest or whatever it was going to be. As they turned onto the High Street, Celia noticed a small internet café next to a place called The George & Pilgrim. She sighed.


“Yeah, there’re some things not to miss out here,” Willow agreed, wrinkling her nose. Celia noticed, however, that she looked at the internet café a little wistfully.

“I think I’m going to have to throttle Giles. He could have mentioned we were heading into a tourist trap. Though the change of scenery is a relief.” She looked around, taking it all in, reveling in the Muggleness of it all. “Still culture-shocky though. I mean, there are cars, but they’re driving on the wrong side of the street. Plus, they look like no one’s in the driver’s seat, because, hey, that’s moved, too.”

“It’s not *that* bad of a tourist trap,” Willow said, then looked at the store they were passing on their right that had a window full of postcards, incense, and tie-dyed shirts. “Mostly.”

“Still, not quite what you expect when someone tells you they’re shipping you off to some mythological place with a gateway to … somewhere or other.”

“Well, maybe that part will be different.”

“It kind of has to be.”

*Are you really ok?* Willow asked.

*More or less.*

*Because you looked kind of destroyed last night, and now you’re kinda normal.*

*And this is a problem because …*  

*Because I know you, and you don’t pull out of things that fast.*

*I had my freakout, and I’m over it.*

Willow looked at her sharply, and Celia knew that she wasn’t buying a word of it.

*Fine! I’m not over it. But I’ve got work to do, and if I keep falling apart, I can’t do it. Not to mention the whole thing with convincing people I don’t need to be sheltered or locked in protective custody or whatever.*

*So you’re still freaked.*

They rounded a corner.

*Of course I’m still freaked! I’ve just found out I’m the ill-gotten spawn of a lunatic Dark wizard. Never mind the part where there’re nutjobs out there wanting to resurrect him into my body or some such thing, oh and kill the man I’ve gone and fallen in love with while they’re at it or make it seem like I have to. How could I not be freaked?*  

Celia looked up at the street sign in front of them. “We’re supposed to take Silver Street, right?” Willow nodded.
“Feels like we’re making a u-turn, almost. There should have been a shorter way.”

“Wishing we had a car?”

Celia snorted. “Yeah, you want to try driving on the wrong side of the street? Not me, thanks. I’m pretty out of practice as it is.”

“It’s not that bad, really. The wrong side of the car part is actually harder.”

*So, in love?*

Celia sighed. She hadn’t meant to say that. Or think it that loudly.

*Can we deal with that part later? As in after we finish questing to some fairy-tale place that I didn’t know existed an hour ago and find out more about whatever the hell is going on?*

Willow gave her another one of those sharp looks of hers, shrugged, and didn’t say anything else.

They continued in silence for a bit. Not long after they took the next turn, Celia stopped in her tracks. Willow continued on for a couple of steps before she noticed.

“What is it?”

Celia just pointed at the sign she had spotted across the street, unable to find her voice. After a moment, she remembered she didn’t need it. *Chalice Well? Chalice Well? Is there actually some sort of sacred well here?*

*I don’t know.* *Willow’s thought felt as full of consternation as Celia’s own. *I mean, the Grail was some sort of chalice, right? And I think there might have been some kind of spring in Mists of Avalon, but that’s not exactly a historical reference.*

*Didn’t Giles even consider … he could have mentioned … it couldn’t be that simple, could it?*

*Probably not, but let's go look anyway.*

With that, the two witches crossed the street.

~ ~ ~

Students on brooms zipped this way and that. A Bludger nearly missed the Hufflepuff Seeker, distracting their Keeper at a key moment and allowing a goal for Slytherin. Severus made a note to speak with the Beater who’d hit that Bludger. That was exactly the sort of cunning he wanted to encourage in this crop of Slytherins, far more subtle and effective than Miss Kassar’s elder brother’s tactics had been in his day.

Still, the game held a bare fraction of his attention, and not only because it had no bearing on the Quidditch Cup. Part of him could not help trying to reach out towards the lake and attempting to discern the energy signature Celia had found there, the nascent Hellmouth. How was it that he had been unable to sense it? Still was unable, truly. Was it something that required a blood relationship? She had not, after all, discovered it until she had added her protective spell to the grounds, a spell that had required the use of her blood.

He twisted his lips, remembering her concern that the existing enchantments cast by Salazar Slytherin might react poorly with a spell using her blood. How little had she – or any of them – known.

A speck of gold darted past, followed shortly by both Seekers in hot pursuit. Instinctively, Severus
drew back, even though they passed at least two yards away. As he watched, the two players collided and veered apart, both apparently losing sight of the Snitch.

He restrained the urge to sigh. It had only been an hour so far, hardly time enough to be growing impatient already. Still, with their respective records, these teams had hardly been expected to put on such a competitive game, which was currently tied at one hundred and twenty points each.

One hundred and thirty now, with Hufflepuff temporarily in the lead.

It irked him to be stuck here watching a “friendly” holiday Quidditch game as though nothing in the world were different than it had been yesterday. From the students’ perspective, of course, nothing was. Yes, there were still rumors floating around about the rather dramatically misfired spell, but none that came anywhere near the truth. The closest were those who suggested that the spell had been to determine who had invited the first – and the mythical second – vampire onto the grounds, though no rationale for limiting it to the female students had been offered.

There was, however, quite a bit that was different, and it chafed to be left in the position of sitting and waiting. Assuming she learned and possibly gathered the remaining ingredients needed for the potion to remove his and Potter’s ties to the Dark Lord, there would undoubtedly be plenty for him to do once she returned.

He refused to consider the myriad possibilities that might result in her failure to return, though he itched to get back to his quarters and peruse some of the texts that discussed the uses and dangers of the “Avalon” portal.

When Minerva arrived, it was almost a relief to rise and let her take a seat next to him on the uncomfortable bench.

“What have I missed? And good grief, why have you not cast a Cushioning Charm before now?”

“Nothing at all,” he replied. “They are tied at one hundred and forty. Perhaps next time, they should not bother playing the Keepers at all. And I suppose I was hoping for a game short enough to render such measures pointless.”

She snorted. “It’s good to see that some things never change.”

He didn’t bother to dignify that with a response.

After several more goals had been scored, including a penalty shot for something that would require him to speak to the other Slytherin Beater, she added, “After you left, Headmaster Dumbledore’s portrait said something about finding your current situation somewhat poetic.”

Lifting an eyebrow but not taking his eyes off the game, he replied, “I’m sure I don’t know what that means. But then, what can one expect a painting to know of poetry?”

“Don’t be daft,” she retorted.

Of course, he knew exactly what that meant. The old codger would find it “poetic” that Severus had become … romantically involved with the Dark Lord’s daughter. Minerva would perceive this as a typically benign and sentimental observation. Severus could only wonder what sort of poetic justice the portrait anticipated.

A cry went up from the crowd. The Slytherin Seeker was holding the Golden Snitch.

“It seems you have impeccable timing, Headmistress,” he said, rising to leave. “If you will excuse
me, I must see to my House’s team.”

“Of course.” As he began to descend the stairs, she added, “Professor Snape, do come see me if you find you have need to speak of any of this.”

He stopped but did not turn, saying, “Thank you, but I do not believe that will be necessary, Headmistress,” before continuing downward.

~ ~ ~

The energy in this place was definitely charged, and not just in the sense of it costing six pounds to get through the gate. Some of the myths the guy at the ticket booth had described sounded pretty far-fetched, but there was definitely something special here.

The first spot they reached was a large pool constructed in the same double-circled symbol as they’d just seen decorating the gate. Apparently it was something of a theme. As Willow looked through the guidebook, Celia tried to determine whether there was anything special about this water, other than the calming sound of it traveling through the flowforms that spilled into the pool. There was still that residual hum of energy. It was nothing like she had grown accustomed to at Hogwarts, but noticeable nonetheless. More natural perhaps.

Her eyes dropped to the underbrush as she prepared to step back, and she noticed a largish hole banked with piles of dirt and old leaves. Her first thought was that she was glad she had not stepped into it before. Her next thought was that something was looking at her out of it. Something with black fur, white stripes, and beady eyes. She forced herself not to jump back.

*That's just a little too big to be a skunk!*

“What’s wrong?” Willow asked.

“I think I woke something up,” she replied cautiously. She didn’t have tons of experience in dealing with hostile animals without killing them, and it wasn’t the poor badger’s fault she’d almost stepped in his hole. She kept her eyes on it and backed away slowly, prepared to immobilize it magically if it charged. When it didn’t, and she had arrived back on the pathway, she breathed a sigh of relief.

“You good? Shall we keep going?” Willow asked.

“Yeah, sure,” Celia agreed. She looked at the doorway to the next part of the garden. “Will, what does it say about that sword?”

The redhead flipped to the next page in the guidebook. “It’s Excalibur because this next part is called King Arthur’s Courtyard.”

Celia furrowed her brow. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

They walked through the gate and found their way to the Pilgrims’ Bath. There were no “pilgrims” there this morning, but a couple of very large ravens appeared to be enjoying the water. They watched the birds bathing for a couple of minutes, but nothing felt particularly significant here. Celia wanted to get closer to the top of the spring before testing the water’s properties. She supposed it wasn’t damaged by all these constructs that had been put in its path, but going to the source seemed like a better idea.

As they continued uphill, their progress was interrupted briefly by a brown snake, remarkably similar
to the one still residing in Celia’s greenhouse. It had decided this would be a lovely time to take a leisurely slither across the pathway. Celia watched it bemusedly, wondering why she didn’t just step over it, then shook her head to clear it. It didn’t really take that long to make its short trip over the path and into the ferns on the other side.

The next stop drew her up short. Her knees became weak, and Celia knelt on the cool ground, dumbstruck. Everything that had happened thus far in this garden flashed past her mind’s eye for review, and she knew for a certainty this was, if not the answer, a very large part of it.


“What’s wrong?” Willow asked, concern evident in her voice and expression.

“I think … I think we need to take as much of this water as we can.”

“Oh, sure. But, um, what’s with the dramatics?”

Celia looked up at her weakly. “Cosmic clue-by-four, I think? I mean, I was hoping for less cryptic, but this is a little unmistakable.”

“Huh?”

“Badger. Ravens. Snake,” she said. “And now this?” She pointed to the Lion’s Head fountain. Willow still just looked confused.

*Of course she doesn’t get it. She hasn’t been looking at these things on students’ robes and banners around the Great Hall for months.*

*They’re the symbols of the four Houses of Hogwarts, Will. I’m kinda thinking that means something.*

*Oh. Oh!*  

“Exactly. I still want to test it though.” She rose from the ground and brought one of the bottles over to the fountain, filling it halfway with the reddish water. She took an experimental sip and grimaced a little at the metallic taste.

“Is it bad?”

“No, just unusual. Keep a lookout?”

Willow nodded, and Celia passed her hand over the bottle, hoping the plastic wouldn’t interfere with her spell. All it showed, however, was mineral-laden water, heavy on the iron. Exactly what it was supposed to be.

“Anything?”

“Not really. Maybe I should try pouring some on Spike to see if it’s really holy?”

Willow smiled, but the moment the words left her mouth, Celia felt as though she had committed some horrible act of sacrilege.

“Yeah, I take that back. There’s definitely something special about it.”

Willow looked speculative as she leaned in with another bottle, took some of the water, and stood to taste it. As Celia watched, Willow swallowed the water, and her hair very briefly flashed pure white.
“You’re right, there is something special about it,” the once again redhead said, then added, “What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Your hair,” Celia whispered.

Looking a little panicked, Willow examined a lock of her hair. When she saw that it was its normal color, she asked, “What about it?”

“It flashed white when you drank the water.”

Willow’s eyes opened wide, and she looked at the water in her little plastic bottle with something between fear and awe. “So, pretty special then.”

“I’m thinking yeah.” She paused. “It might be part of it, but I don’t think it’s all of it. Might need time, might need special handling, might need other ingredients, but it needs something. I don’t know how I know, but I know.”

Willow nodded. “Well, let’s fill these anyway. The folks behind us will catch up soon.”

~ ~ ~

Severus poked at the steak and kidney pie on his plate with little interest. The research he had done after returning to his quarters had been unhelpful, to say the least. It was unclear whether there was, in fact, any sort of portal on the Glastonbury Tor, and if there was, where it went. The Watcher had seemed to know more, and Severus hoped he had at least warned the two witches of the apparent temporal dangers that showed up repeatedly in the scant literature.

It was infuriating to be so at a loose end. There was precious little marking to do, as the students had all been assigned large essays to do over the Easter holidays. Not for the first time, he wondered why they bothered, as few if any students went home to attend services with their families. While it was useful not to have to worry about coverage for Herbology classes for at least the next two weeks, and it was to be hoped she would return sooner than that, Severus would have preferred to have more to focus on besides waiting.

There was, at least, tonight’s detention.

*What am I going to do with that boy? I suppose I have my answer to what I would have been like had someone decided to teach me how to deal with bullies, though I’d hope I’d have had more sense than to set myself up as a junior instructor of some kind.*

No, that was unfair. He most certainly had shown off the more advanced spellwork he’d learned prior to coming to school. Unfortunately, that had endeared him to the wrong people and had galvanized the bullying Marauders.

“What’s botherin’ ye?” Hagrid asked. “’S not like ye t’pass on a good steak and kidney pie, Professor.”

Severus grimaced.

“’M sure she’ll be back soon,” the half-giant added in what was no doubt supposed to be a conspiratorial whisper.

*Why does Minerva continue to confide in him? While his heart is certainly in the right place, the man has never been able to keep a secret.*
Although, upon further reflection, Severus had to admit that he had managed to guard the secret of Celia’s identity, at least the one she knew at the time.

“Actually, Hagrid, I was debating what to do regarding a detention I must oversee tonight,” he admitted.

“No’ Jarvis again!” Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair. “I’m fresh out o’ ideas what t’d o with tha’ one.”

Severus contemplated the other man for a moment. He had never had any patience for bullies, had even rescued Severus himself a time or two in his school days. But he’d never had much success actually dissuading said bullies from their ways. Apparently, their skulls were too thick for even so literally heavy-handed a message to penetrate.

Mr. Lightfeather, on the other hand, looked up to Hagrid, to go by various things Celia had said, and apparently helped him with various areas of creature care from time to time.

“Not at all,” Severus said at last. “However, perhaps you could assist me with this student. Lightfeather. He fancies himself smart enough to teach his peers to do things for which few of them are ready and which will almost certainly result in someone being gravely hurt.”

Hagrid grunted.

“Perhaps there is something he could assist you with this evening that would teach him rather more than scrubbing out cauldrons would do?”

Another grunt. “I’ve go’ just th’thing. Hippogriff’s due t’foal t’night. Noth’n’ll take ye down a peg like tha’.”

Severus pondered that. “I do not want it to seem a reward, Hagrid.”

Hagrid snorted. “Ye’ve obviously never played midwife t’a Hippogriff.”

“Very well.” Severus nodded. “Thank you.”

“Any time, Professor. Ye know tha’.”

Though he still held some misgivings, Severus felt nearly certain he’d made the right choice. Perhaps he would check in on their detention while making his rounds. In the meantime, now he would have the opportunity to dig out some of those ancient books about the Avalon portal. Perhaps they would give some clue as to the sort of information she would report upon her return, possibly even some suggestion as to things she might bring back to utilize in this mysterious Potion to which the demon had referred.

Appetite renewed, he cast a Warming Charm on his dinner and began to eat.

~ ~ ~

Carefully, Celia moved brush away from the egg-shaped stone. She looked around and saw that miraculously they appeared to be alone.

“You sure that’s it?” Willow asked, glancing down at the sketch Giles had given them. “I mean, it looks like it, but so did the last two.”

“Won’t know until we try.” Celia pressed her hand gently against the warm stone surface, and it
phased gently through it. She pulled her hand back quickly. “I’m thinking yeah.” She looked back at Willow. “You ready for this?”

“Heh, I’m not the one walking through a rock into …”

“Avalon. Right. Whatever that actually means.” Celia closed her eyes for a moment. This spot was just rippling with power on a scale rivaled by Hogwarts, though of a completely different quality. Of course, the whole hill was, and that hadn’t exactly helped with finding this portal. “Will, there’s so much magic here. How can anyone not feel it?”

“I know.” The redhead was unwinding the end of a roll of silk thread. “Kinda scary, huh?”

“You could say that.” Celia accepted the end of the thread and tied it around the little finger of her right hand. “I really hope this works, Will. If I end up coming back in a century or two, then it’s all kind of pointless.”

“It’ll work.” Willow set her mouth into a firm line. “Giles was positive this would anchor you to our timeline. Besides, we don’t even know that time really runs differently there. Could just be a legend.”

Like walking into a hillside into “Avalon” isn’t?

“You going to be okay out here?” Celia asked aloud.

Willow looked around. “Yeah, I think so. There’s probably too much magic here for them to find you, even if they’ve even realized you left the school. And if they do? Well, then, they’ll just be sorry they came looking.”

Well, yeah, they probably would be. Reason number eight hundred and sixty-two why I’m positive it’s no coincidence the First wanted her off this island when she left, and not just to cut short her training.

“Here goes then,” Willow said, extending her hand over the thread that now ran from a loop around her own little finger to Celia’s. “Rectus alio, rectus locus, rectus vicis.”

The silk thread glowed golden for a moment, then returned to its natural hue.

“See you soon. If I’m gone more than thirty-six hours, send a Patronus like we talked about.”

Willow nodded. Celia squared her shoulders, turned to face the egg-stone, and stepped resolutely through.

Looking around her carefully, Celia saw much the same scene as she had just left: a grassy, terraced hill. Below her, however, there were far fewer houses and no paved roads. She checked the silk thread, which was still securely attached to her finger. When she pulled on it, she could feel the tension that told her it was still attached to Willow on the other end, but it stretched so that she could move freely.

Where was she supposed to go? To the top of the hill, she supposed, but the path ended at this point. With a shrug, she started up the incline and scrambled the rest of the way to the top, where there was no lone tower, nor the rest of the church to which it had once been attached. Had she gone back in time, then? Was that the real story behind the tales of people coming back decades later than then entered?

She turned in a complete circle. The view was spectacular, but she felt no pull to leave the spot where she stood, and that was one thing that Giles had been absolutely clear about: if she needed to
go somewhere, either she’d be drawn to do so or some sort of guide would show up to lead her. So she stayed where she was and looked in various different directions, hoping for inspiration of some kind.

After awhile, she decided maybe sitting down was a reasonable option. Nothing could really sneak up behind her here, considering the complete lack of cover.

_Aren’t there supposed to be fairies? Or possibly priestesses of some kind?_

She wondered if she ought to give up on the guidance or inspiration thing and just go see what that Red Spring looked like from here. Perhaps that was the whole answer, after all?

_Plus, water? A very good idea right about now._

“Do you have any idea what happens when you destroy most of a person’s soul?”

Celia jumped to her feet and spun, searching for the source of the voice. No one. Nothing.

“Who’s there?” she demanded.

A ray of light seemed to shimmer right in front of her, and she took a step back from it as it resolved slowly into a surprisingly familiar shape. Celia gasped, her surprise rapidly turning to anger.

“You? You’re the one I’ve been dreaming about all this time?”

The woman nodded.

Celia put her hands on her hips and glared at the apparition.

“You’ve got some serious explaining to do, Mrs. Potter!”

Chapter End Notes

If you’re curious about Chalice Well and Glastonbury Tor, which are real places with various myths and legends associated with them, check out http://www.chalicewell.org.uk/home.html and http://www.glastonburytor.org.uk/mysterytor.html.
Severus looked at the elaborate chocolate egg next to his teacup with disdain. While she was not nearly as insufferable as Dumbledore, Minerva did still insist upon giving the staff some sort of remembrance for the various holidays. He briefly considered appropriating a catnip plant from the greenhouses to give her in return. He was almost certain Celia would find it as amusing as he would.

Almost.

The attendance at Easter breakfast was not markedly different than that on any other Sunday, with the exception of the proliferation of owl-delivered sweets and resultant squeals and other noises that ought not to be made by children until a much more decent hour, if at all. And of course, this had Peeves more riled up than usual, and he was swooping down over the students, tweaking their noses and occasionally stealing their Easter eggs.

Severus was mildly startled when a familiar owl landed in front of him with a parchment tied to its leg. He untied the letter and gave the owl a bit of toast, then watched thoughtfully as it flew back outside. Tucking the parchment into a pocket of his robes for later, he returned his attention to those present – and absent – in the Great Hall.

It was surprising that Hagrid had not yet arrived, and Severus wondered whether the Hippogriff birth had not yet occurred. Mr. Lightfeather was not present either, though he often came late for breakfast on Sundays. When Hagrid did arrive, nearly halfway through the meal, he had the boy in tow, and both appeared rather the worse for their night’s work.

“Mornin’,” Hagrid grumbled as he took his seat.

Severus nodded in reply and waited until the other man had gulped down his tea before asking how the night had gone.

“It was a near thing. Almost lost ‘em both.”

Severus felt his eyes widen.

“Mother ‘n’ foal,” the gamekeeper added. “Was a right good thing t’have an extra set o’ hands.”
“I am glad Mr. Lightfeather was able to make himself useful.”

Privately, Severus worried whether the experience might not have reinforced the boy’s inflated self-confidence even more. A glance at the Slytherin table, however, showed no sign of the cocky bearing he’d held the previous day. Of course, he also looked about to fall asleep in his porridge.

“Think the kid’s got a little better idea how much he doesn’t know,” Hagrid said with a nod and a wink. ‘He’s a good ‘un, Professor. Jus’ a bit high-spirited is all.”

“Thank you, Hagrid,” Severus replied. “I sincerely hope that is so.”

The demon had spoken of an echo of his past that would appear. If he had anything to say about it, Severus would make certain that echo was not any of his Slytherins following in his own footsteps, his first interpretation of those words. Unconsciously patting his pocket, he wondered if the demon, Lorne, might have meant something else entirely.

~ ~ ~

“Are you kidding me?” Celia demanded. “All this time, and it’s been you? And your ‘baby’ is the freaking Savior of the Wizarding World?”

The red-headed and slightly transparent woman looked taken aback.

“What? I’ve seen your picture on your son’s desk, even though I didn’t recognize you. Nice bit of magic there.”

“Then why are you so angry?”

“Why am I …? Oh, I don’t know.” Celia crossed her arms over her chest, then lifted one hand to her chin. “Could be, maybe, that I spent the last bunch of months gearing up to help a new Slayer because, hey, that was the most logical reason to think some kid needed me here. Could be, maybe, that I’m a little ticked you obviously know exactly what kind of help Harry needs, which has nothing to do with me being a Slayer and everything to do with stuff I only found out because Severus happened to suggest asking this demon for help.”

“A demon?”

“And before you get all snippy about that, he’s a neutral demon, and if you have a problem with my methods, you could maybe have tried getting me some more information just a little bit earlier!” Celia had her hands back on her hips, mostly so she wouldn’t be tempted to find out if she could throttle this woman or if her hands would go right through her.

Even as she said it, Celia thought the level of rage she was feeling was maybe just a little … high for simply having not enough info. Something else about this situation just felt very offensive to her, and she wasn’t sure why. There was also this insistent pull she kept sensing that might have something to do with the silk thread tethering her to Willow, but it wasn’t the redhead’s magical signature that it felt like. So maybe that was what had her all infuriated. Whatever it was, she really needed to get over it.

“There were limitations to what I could communicate through your dreams,” Lily explained.

Celia took a deep breath and counted to ten as she let it out. Calm. Calm is good.

“Right. Limitations. Whatever. You know what? It doesn’t matter. Here I am, and here you are, and I’m not seeing much in the way of limitations here, except this.” She lifted the hand with the silk
thread attached. “So before I get back to find out it’s next year or something, could we maybe get to
the part where you tell me what I need to know to help Harry and Severus and shut down this
potential Hellmouth while it’s still just a potential one?”

Lips pressed together in a tight line, Lily nodded before saying, “Yes. You have part of what you
need already, although you will need to visit the other spring as well.”

“More water?” Still staying calm. Not blowing up at the nice dead lady who dragged me here to tell
me to get more water.

Lily nodded.

“Right.” She clenched and unclenched her fists several times. “Blood and water. They’re going to
love drinking that.”

Lily gave her a withering look. “When you have finished, it will not be merely blood and water. Like
any potion, it will be more than the sum of its parts.”

Celia extended a hand in invitation. “So what am I doing to it?”

~ ~ ~

Safely ensconced in his office, Severus removed the parchment from his pocket.

Why now? After all these years, why write to me now?

Of course, he wasn’t going to learn the answer to that by staring at the seal, though the fact it was a
Department of Mysteries seal rather than a personal one was somehow reassuring. Breaking through
the wax, he opened and unrolled the letter.

Happy Easter Severus,

Surely she wasn’t writing to him now just to wish him that?

I know this is awkward, but, really, it’s been a few years, and we’ve both moved on. So
I hope we can manage a professional consultation when the situation warrants it, as I
feel this one does.

He sighed inwardly. Yes, they had both moved on, and he shuddered to think what mangled tales
Potter had been passing her on that front. However, perhaps it was time he learned how to cope with
a former lover who was still very much alive. While mutually ignoring one another’s existence had
been working fairly well, he had to admit that he did miss their rather … spirited arguments over
Potions theory. There were few who ever really challenged him in that area. Celia was one, but she
was no Potions Mistress, and her focus was quite narrow. Hermione was another.

I’ve been studying Muggle theory relevant to anaphylactic shock. Assuming they’ve
found a way to cause a person’s body to respond to Veritaserum in this fashion, the
easiest solution would be to procure Muggle-style epinephrine injection devices. I’m
currently trying to convince my superiors to pursue this.

I hardly think it safe, however, to make such an assumption, as we do not have sufficient
evidence as to precisely how Loxley died. There are obviously several otherwise
innocuous substances that become violently toxic when they interact with Veritaserum,
but I have yet to find any that could remain in the body long enough to produce this
effect at an unspecified future time. While not ruling out a delayed-delivery mechanism,
such as a hollowed tooth, I have tested the following ...

She had, of course, been very thorough. However, there were a few avenues she had not considered, and he began to write a response suggesting them. It was … strange to be writing her like this, but not unpleasant.

*Perhaps this is one of those elements of the past I should consider retaining after all.*

A knock at the door interrupted his musings.

“Enter,” he called out, setting the parchments aside.

In walked a very contrite and abashed-looking Colin Lightfeather.

“Professor Snape?”

“Yes.” He deliberately kept his voice stern. When had that begun to require an effort? No wonder the boy had become so complacent.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Lightfeather said. “I shouldn’t have been showing off like that.”

“No, you should not have.” Leaning forward slightly, Severus asked, “And have you managed to learn why that is so?”

“Because I don’t know enough yet,” the boy replied.

“You will never know enough,” Severus retorted. “There is always more to learn, always something you do not know. The problem at present is that you do not realize the limitations of your knowledge. Perhaps I have done you a disservice by teaching you defensive methods normally reserved for higher years.”

Lightfeather clearly had no idea how to respond to this.

“I do not plan to resume tutoring you and Miss Hollingberry after the holidays.” He held up a hand to forestall the boy’s imminent protest. “This is not a further punishment. I accept your apology. However, you have mastered sufficient skills to protect yourself from assaults by Mister Jarvis and his associates, and your friend no longer appears to be afraid of her own shadow. Our objectives have been met, and I believe it would be best if you both now returned your focus to your regular classes.”

“Yes, sir.”

Though obviously disappointed, at least the boy was not arguing.

*Apparenty I had not yet lost his respect entirely.*

“And, Mister Lightfeather, in the future, you would do well to remember that it is frequently *not* to your advantage to display the full range of your knowledge and skills to your peers.” He fixed the boy with a stare. “You are a Slytherin. I suggest you begin to act like one.”

“Yes, sir.” The boy nodded eagerly and turned to go.

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“So that’s it? That’s all the potion needs?” Celia found it amazing just how much calmer she could feel now that she had the instructions. She was still annoyed, but not nearly so much as before.
“Yes.” Lily nibbled her lip.

“But?” Celia asked, her voice trailing off to invite the other witch to fill in the blank.

“It will protect my son and Severus. Harry’s scar and Severus’ … Mark will be erased. It should also help to neutralize the soul-wound so that it cannot develop into what you call a Hellmouth.”

“So far so good,” Celia said impatiently. “What’s the problem?”

“It will do nothing to protect you. There is no way to erase your link to Voldemort.”

“Yeah, well.” Celia shrugged. “I didn’t think there would be.”

“After you neutralize the potential Hellmouth, you will still need to reunite the soul-wound with the remaining fragment of Voldemort’s soul.”

That … sounded tricky.

“It’s going to try to latch onto me, isn’t it?” Celia asked.

“Yes.”

“And if it does, it’s going to try to pull the rest of his soul into me while I’m trying to send it into the afterlife to join that soul, right?”

Lily nodded.

Well, it’s not like I thought it was going to be easy.

“I’m guessing you have a suggestion for that?” Celia asked aloud.

Lily nodded again.

“So, why do I have this feeling I’m not going to like it?”

~ ~ ~

Horror filled him as he watched, as if from outside himself, as the blast of green light shot from his wand to the frail, dying man before him.

His eyes shot open, and he reached out for the reassuring warmth that should have been beside him. Heart pounding, he grabbed his wand and cast a quick Lumos. It took him a moment to realize she wasn’t just in the loo, then to remember where she was.

Scrubbing his hand over his face, he was disgusted to find his cheeks wet. For years he’d coped with the nightmares without dissolving into the tears that had earned him the hated childhood nickname of “Snivellus.” He hadn’t even indulged in them during the time … his mind skirted away from the comparison. But after a mere few weeks, here he was, doing exactly that and reaching out for comfort like a child.

Damn her.

For the first time since she’d been released from the hospital wing, he felt the insistent tug of the magical bond between them, forged somehow by her life debt to him and her repayment of it. Or perhaps he simply missed her.
He rolled over, resolutely facing away from the side of the bed she normally occupied, and willed himself back to sleep.

~ ~ ~

“You are unusually quiet, Severus, even for you,” Minerva said.

“There does not appear to be much else to say,” he countered, idly picking a bit of lint from his sleeve.

“Come now.” She stood and walked over to her office window. “Surely you do not expect me to believe that you have spent the past three days marking essays and patiently waiting to find out what information Celia will bring back.”

“No,” he agreed. “However, I have not made any progress worthy of report in any of my lines of research.”

No progress at all would be more to the point. It is not as though I have not tried to find a way to remove the Mark before. Until we have more information, something new, it is unlikely that I will. Even the added knowledge that it will require a potion that utilizes human blood, a relative’s blood, has not opened any truly new avenues of research.

She turned to look at him rather like a cat contemplating a ball of string. “And have you any further insight into your portion of the demon-Seer’s revelations?”

“As I am entirely accustomed to ‘echoes of my past’ biting me in the arse, or whatever colorful phrase he used, I fail to see how that qualifies as any sort of revelation,” he said with a snort. “The rest was merely typical cryptic Seer ‘advice’ that will only ever make sense after the fact.”

Minerva hummed noncommittally.

“And what, pray tell, are you getting at, Headmistress?” he asked.

“I am not ‘getting at’ anything in particular, Severus, so much as I am surprised that you, of all people, would not be putting more effort into sorting out the meaning behind a prophecy that clearly involves you.”

He spread his hands before him. “What would you have of me? The fragment of the prophecy the vampire provided tells us only that these new Death Eaters will want access to Celia, Potter, and myself. I am far more interested in learning how we may prevent them from completing their ritual, and that will clearly require the information Celia is gathering. I am as stymied on that front as you appear to be on the matter of securing the grounds against them.”

“Yes.” Minerva returned her attention to the view beyond her window. “We have yet to find any sign of tampering. While it seems likely they somehow made use of the artifact that had been planted on Celia to enter, their escape is rather more problematic.”

“And the Ministry maintains that there was no sign of unauthorized Portkey use at that time?”

Minerva smirked. “The only unauthorized Portkey they have detected in the vicinity of Hogwarts was the one you created yourself.”

Severus tapped his fingers against his lips. This was old and much-worn territory. The simplest explanation would be that someone in the Portkey Authority was either involved with or in the pay of the new Death Eaters. Investigations thus far, however, had not uncovered any likely suspects.
It was already nearly seventy-two hours since she had left. Severus hoped Celia would soon return with something that would enable them to move forward.

~ ~ ~

“Have you been paying any attention to what’s actually been going on these past few months?” Celia demanded.

“Of course I have,” Lily replied. “Why do you think I’m suggesting this?”

Celia bristled. “If what I need is a link to either your son or Severus, I’ve got that already. And I’m sure as hell not going to suggest making that link any stronger!”

“You underestimate Severus,” Lily said. “He would do … much to protect someone he cares for.”

“No kidding,” Celia retorted. “What, you think I think he’d say no? He’d insist on it! That’d be why I’m not even telling him it’s an option. I’m kind of looking forward to breaking his link to him; I don’t want to turn around and bind him more tightly to me!”

“But you must! If you do not, and you fail, my son—”

“Will just take the bastard down again like he did before. He already knows his tricks, and I’ve taught him a good deal of mine.” Celia felt the rage bubbling back up inside her. “And you know, you’ve got a real nerve lecturing me on protecting myself for your son’s sake!”

“What?”

“You heard me,” Celia huffed. “It’s not like you didn’t have any warning. You’d been on the run for how long? Harry told me, though I admit I’m a little fuzzy on the exact timeline. But you knew you were being hunted. Okay, you Fideliused the house. But you knew there was a leak! So what’s with the total lack of a backup plan?”

This had been bothering her ever since she’d asked Harry for a bit more information about both times Voldemort had been defeated. Hands on her hips, Celia paced back and forth in front of the apparition, trying to keep her temper under control. After all, the woman was already dead.

“You knew your son had this massive destiny to live up to, and you didn’t make any plans that might have let him grow up with at least one parent to stand by him through that? It’s not like you had no idea what he’d be facing and just got yourselves killed in some random car crash. You threw yourself in front of a Killing Curse, and don’t tell me you knew that was going to buy him anything more than a few seconds! What is that? And you have the audacity to tell me to … to … because he needs me?” She stopped and faced Lily again. “The only thing Harry needs from me is the potion, and he’ll have that. The rest of it? Back off!”

Lily looked stunned and asked, “Are you even talking about me any longer?”

Celia crossed her arms over her chest again and contained a wince.

“Maybe not,” Celia replied. “Point is, I’m not using some sort of sex-magic ritual to bind Severus to me any more than he already is. Either what we’ve already got is enough to anchor me or it’s not.” She was already rifling through various corners of her mind and coming up with a few things to try if it things went … badly. “And I’ll have a contingency plan or two for backup.”
“It won’t be enough.”

Celia set her shoulders. “It’ll have to be. I’ve learned a thing or two about fighting evil over the past seven years, and number one is that you can’t win by using your enemy’s tactics. I have no intention of becoming him just to prevent … becoming him.”

Lily … smirked. It took Celia a minute to figure out why. She glared back at the other woman.

“Did I pass your little test?”

“With flying colors.”

A little annoyed at being played yet again by this woman, Celia just glared at her.

“You are willing to let your ends justify the means you choose,” Lily said.

“Within reason,” Celia admitted.

“I had to be sure what your limit was.”

Celia stopped just short of asking what she’d have done about it, suddenly very aware that she really didn’t know much about this place. At all. She didn’t even know if she still had Slayer powers or magic, never mind both.

“You’re ready to go back,” Lily said. “Take the path I showed you once you’ve returned to your world, and you’ll find the White Spring.”

“And you’re sure that just using distilled water with some iron and calcium added wouldn’t have worked?”

The look the other woman gave her spoke volumes.

“Right. Got it. Sacred springs, whatever that really means.” Celia bit her lip. “When you go back to wherever it is you were, will you see my parents?”

“Which ones?”

She hadn’t thought of that. “All of them. Well, three out of four, obviously.”

“Not normally. It’s hard to explain.”

“But you could?” Celia pressed. “Just … to bring a message?”

“What message would you send?”

She closed her eyes. “I want Mom and Dad to know I still love them and miss them. And Selena, my biological mother … I guess I’d just want to tell her I’m sorry my … he hurt her and that I would have liked to have known her.”

“They already know that,” Lily said with a smile. “Now, you need to go.”

Before Celia could say another word, she felt a huge tug on the silk thread tied to her finger and found herself being pulled backwards. She stumbled and landed on something soft as she looked around her, bewildered by just how far down the hill she had ended up.

“Ow, Celia, get off me!” Willow said, pushing her away.
Willow’s hawk Patronus had arrived moments ago. Celia was back, and the two witches would be returning to Hogwarts shortly.

Despite the intervening years of peace, old habit enabled Severus to wait calmly in Minerva’s office. Emotions attempted periodically to make themselves known, but he resisted their allure. She would be bringing information, hopefully critical information, and it would be counterproductive to allow himself to be distracted.

A corner of his mind registered the hope that there might be time for her to distract him later – a suggestion he steadfastly ignored.

Minerva was thankfully engaged with ordering tea from the house-elves and not plaguing him further about his own research. He noticed several volumes on her desk that were not normally present in her office at all.

_Apparently she has been doing research of her own._

Celia’s Watcher arrived shortly before she did. He must have been staying in Hogsmeade with Kennedy while the two witches were off on their “quest.”

The Watcher greeted Minerva cordially. Severus he barely granted a stiff nod, which Severus returned with equal coldness.

“I trust the holidays have been quiet, Minerva?” the Watcher asked, launching exactly the sort of petty conversation that most grated upon Severus’ nerves.

Severus let those emotions go too, also ignoring the fact that the magical tug he’d felt for the past several days was growing progressively less insistent.

Before it had all dragged on too long, a chime indicated that the gargoyle was permitting someone access to the stairwell leading to the Headmistress’ office, and shortly thereafter, Celia and Willow entered.

She looked … the same. A bit more tired, but apparently unharmed. Severus permitted himself a moment of relief, though he carefully did not allow it to show. When her eyes met his, she smiled, but then quickly shuttered her expression. That was so unlike her that it elicited a twinge of anxiety.

It is not as though I did not expect she would come to her senses once she was away from here and less isolated. Foolish of me to hope that it would take more than a few days.

He carefully let that go as well and composed himself to hear her report.

~ ~ ~

Hot water sluicing over her body, Celia spent her time in the shower recapping everything that had been said during the briefing.

Everyone had been surprised by the simplicity of the potion. Well, not so much Giles. Obviously he’d had at least some clue that the two springs were reputed to have special properties. Somehow, that knowledge seemed to have been confined to Muggle mythology, as Severus was utterly unaware of any such rumors and wanted to test the water of both springs extensively.

_Good thing I brought back way more than we’ll need._
Angling so the water would only be hitting her head, she turned off the hot water and let the cooler stream run through her hair and over her scalp for a minute before shutting the shower off altogether and wrapping her hair in a towel.

Harry … well, she couldn’t really blame him for his reaction, she thought as she used another towel to pat the rest of herself dry and dressed, reluctantly choosing robes rather than jeans. She knew she’d rather have had the chance to talk to her own mother, and it was no surprise he was upset she’d had the chance to talk to his.

If I’d told him about the yelling, he’d probably have hexed me.

At least they all seemed agreed on how things were going to go from here. She’d get the potion started tonight, it would mature in about a week, and both Severus and Harry would drink it. Step two would be to deal with the nascent Hellmouth. Then they’d worry about the Death Eaters.

If nothing else, I want them to know for sure that it’s gone, that they have no reason to come back onto the grounds. Catching them would also be good, but considering they thought they had them all before, I want the information-spread to be the first priority.

She removed the towel and shook out her hair to let it start drying.

On her way into the kitchen, she picked up the Scythe and looked at it carefully. The surge of rightness, of ownership that washed over her was intense. No wonder Kennedy hadn’t been happy to let her take it. Even leaving it here while she went to brief the others had been difficult, though once she was away from it, the sense of loss dissipated.

It also gave her a sense of certainty that she was doing this right. Lily hadn’t said any particular blade was needed to draw her blood, but somehow Celia had just known this was what she had to use.

The silver cauldron was already set up with the water she planned to use next to it. She set the Scythe back down for a moment while she poured the water from first the Red Spring and then the White Spring into the cauldron, then gave three careful stirs, first clockwise, then counterclockwise.

Taking up the Scythe once again, she pressed the pad of her thumb against it, then allowed three drops to fall into the cauldron. She quickly healed the cut and used a bit of cloth to wipe the blood from the blade. She’d clean it properly in a bit, but first she needed to stir the potion.

Once again, three stirs clockwise, three stirs counterclockwise.

Three ingredients. Three drops of blood. Three stirs in each direction. Repeat the blood and stirring daily for a week, and voila. Voldemort Mark/Scar Erasing Potion.

It still pretty much just looked like water. But Lily was right: potions were more than just the sum of their ingredients.

She polished the blade of the Scythe and set it back in the holder she’d Conjured for it on her bedroom wall.

It was hard to leave it again, but not hard enough to keep her here when she wanted to Floo to Severus’ quarters. He’d clearly been bothered by several things during the briefing, though he’d masked it well, and she wanted to deal with that before he got any more overprotective than he already was.

With one last glance back to her bedroom and the Scythe, she tossed a pinch of powder into the fire and said simply, “Severus’ quarters,” before stepping into the green flames.
I should have known it could not be so simple as all that. Nothing in my life ever is.

Of all the people for Celia to have encountered, Lily would never have entered Severus’ mind. He swirled the Firewhisky in his glass as he contemplated the matter.

But why not? Of course she would still consider Potter her ‘baby’ and do anything in her power to see him protected.

So this, clearly, was what the demon had meant, when he’d said, “Echoes of your past are going to turn up where you least expect them. What you’ve got to be clear about is which ones are worth hanging onto and which ones to drop like the flaming frittatas they are.”

This was one portion of his past he’d thought put to rest. Not that he would ever forget her, but after the war, guilt over her death had ceased to be his driving motivation. He had seen her son through to his destiny, even kept him alive despite the boy’s apparent efforts to get himself killed. The debt had been paid.

Something about Celia’s bearing, the things that she seemed to be leaving unsaid, told him that it was not yet fully repaid. He wondered what it would take to make it so.

Celia would be here any minute, and he wasn’t sure he wanted her to be. Whatever she might intend, she’d said as she left the meeting that she would come to his rooms after she had “freshened up.” Was that only because of Minerva’s insistence she remain in the castle? Or was it because she was planning to have a “talk” with him?

A few days ago, his concern had been whether he would be able to see past her parentage. Shortly thereafter, he had felt awkward about re-establishing contact with Hermione while in a relationship with another woman. Now he could not stop brooding over Lily and was certainly not ready to deal with whatever Celia’s imminent arrival would bring. It was all too much. These were simply not the sort of problems that occurred in his life.

When Celia stepped through the Floo into his sitting room, he quickly took in her expression. He supposed he ought to be more relieved at the lack of condemnation, pity, or other offensive sentiment in her eyes. Whatever she’d been holding back earlier, it was clearly not what he’d feared.

“Not you, too,” she said, an exasperated note in her voice.

“Pardon me?”

“You’re giving me the same kind of look Harry does. So you are freaked out after all.” She had her arms wrapped around her waist, and her eyes were accusing.

“I do not ‘freak out,’” he replied, vaguely insulted.

“Well, then, what is it?”

He studied her for a moment before asking, “Do you plan to tell me whatever it was you did not elect to disclose whilst briefing Minerva?”

“It’s nothing for you to worry about,” she said, squaring her shoulders.

He let that hang in the air for a moment, waiting for her to elaborate.
“Obviously you’re not feeling much like telling me what’s got you in such a mood,” she added. “So, stalemate?”

He stroked his whisky glass thoughtfully. She had a point; he had absolutely no desire to tell her what was bothering him. No matter her pretty words about not needing to know his past, about the only important thing being what he’d done to redeem himself, if she had any idea … No. He would not tell her. He nodded acquiescence. For now.

“Good.” An impish smile lit her face. “Then I move we table the discussion, plus anything to do with tactics or the potion – which I got started and won’t need to touch till tomorrow – or anything that passes for work, and just have a nice quiet afternoon. And evening.” Her smile turned into a grin. “And so on.”

He set down the glass. There was an edge to her voice that belied her carefree manner and expression. It was, however, pointless to dwell upon any of it. Choosing to take advantage of what leisure time they currently had was an entirely reasonable, even Slytherin thing to do.

She apparently took his silence for assent and seated herself on his lap. The last lingering sense of strain on the magical bond they shared vanished as her lips descended on his, and soon, he was too preoccupied to concern himself with anything but the immediate present.

~ ~ ~

She’d really only meant to kiss him. After all, she’d been wanting to ever since she’d seen him in Minerva’s office looking as cold and distant as she’d ever seen him. And then the look on his face just a minute ago … She still wasn’t convinced that he wasn’t freaked out. But if he was willing to kiss her like that? Obviously not that freaked out. She sighed into his mouth as he buried his hands in her hair.

But she was starving, and they had all the rest of the day ahead of them, so really, she’d meant for them to have lunch first. Her hands, however, obviously had other ideas, as they were already working on the buttons of his frock coat and shirt.

Her eagerness was utterly seductive. The way her tongue caressed his. The way her fingers scrambled to expose him to their sweet caresses. They could almost be two entirely ordinary lovers who had simply missed each other for a few days, anxious to make up for lost time.

As he rose and drew her into his bedroom, he flatly ignored any troublesome reminders of just how much that “almost” encompassed or, rather, excluded.

She wasn’t deliberately avoiding the scar on his shoulder, the Mark on his arm. That had only been Lily testing her after all, and it wasn’t like she could inadvertently cast that spell anyway. She was simply more interested in teasing at his nipples with her tongue and grazing them with her teeth. And if she moved a bit more quickly than usual down his belly to taste his salty pre-come, he didn’t seem to mind, and that was all to the good.

Impatiently, he pulled her back up, rolled her onto her back, and took her. Rational and irrational thought both fled as he surrendered to the primal rhythm that drove each snap of his hips.
She wrapped her legs around him as he sank into her, arching to meet him, pulling him deeper, deeper. *Who’d want to try to do magic at a moment like this?* She banished the question as he thrust into her again, angling her hips until – yes, there.

Reality narrowed to a single, focused point. Nothing else existed but the wet heat that caressed him, the blinding ecstasy that shattered him.

The only thing that mattered was the driving rhythm inside her, around her. It was her. And she climbed it higher, higher, until there was nowhere else to go, and she lost herself in the glorious free fall.

He rolled to the side, taking her with him, both of them too spent to try to maintain their connection. Brushing her hair from her face, he kissed her tenderly, almost … apologetically.

Tears stung the back of her eyes at his kiss. She willed them away as she caressed his cheek.

Between them, they managed to slide under the covers before slipping into an unrestful afternoon nap, clinging to each other but feeling strangely alone.
Severus woke, not with tears this time, but filled with despair nonetheless. It was a dream he hadn't had in a very long time, but he didn't require Sybil Trelawney or a Muggle psychologist to explain why he would dream it now. The entire wizarding world celebrating as he mourned. Dumbledore offering comforting lies.

Celia stirred beside him. He hoped she would return to sleep, but that hope was dashed when she turned and looked at him. She didn't say a word, just wriggled herself around and insinuated herself into his arms, as though she were the one seeking comfort. As always, he was not entirely sure whether she was aware of his nightmare or waking from one of her own.

“You said that one of the older Slayers had died,” he murmured, surprising himself by speaking. “More than once, in fact.”

“Yes.” She shifted slightly to look up at him, her eyes filled with questions that she thankfully did not voice, then settled back to rest her cheek against his chest.

“Did she ever tell anyone what she saw?” he asked. “What was there?”

“Not really,” Celia replied. “At least, not to me.” Pause. “There was one thing she said. Well, sang, but that's not important except that it was magic, and Willow was there, so ... But all she really said was that ... it was peaceful. Better than here. She was pretty upset at the time about getting brought back.”

That sounded reassuring, but it did not seem to fit with recent evidence. Surely sacrificing oneself for one's son was as worthy as dying whilst fighting demons.

“So she was not worried for the family and friends she had left behind?”

He felt Celia shrug. “I don't really know, Severus. If she ever said any more about it, it wasn't around me or around Willow while there was magic going on.” Another pause. “I'm sorry. I wish I knew more.”

There seemed nothing to say to that. It was not as though he could truly fault her for not knowing what lay beyond death. It was unusual to know that much. Nor did he have any right to resent that
she had been able to see and converse with Lily and had not thought to ask ... any number of questions he would like to have asked.

“I asked Lily to take a message to my parents,” she continued. “She said they already know how much I love them.”

He froze. He had deliberately asked about that Slayer rather than Lily herself.

“I don't know why I didn’t ask more. What it’s like where they are. Whether they're happy. But she seemed happy, even while she was being all concerned about Harry.” Her arms tightened around his waist. “I think it's a good place, wherever it is.”

The weight that had seemed to press on him ever since he'd awakened—really for the past twenty-four years—seemed to lighten ever so slightly.

“She … she said something else, too.” Celia's shoulders stiffened, and she did not continue right away.

He waited her out.

She pulled back a bit to look up at him again. “She said that you would ‘do much to protect someone you care about.’”

“Why would she say such a thing?” He swallowed around the lump that had formed in his throat.

*How much did Lily tell her? Is that what she would not speak of? I cannot believe she would continue to share my bed if she knew, but ...?*

“She sort of misunderstood something I'd said,” Celia replied. “Seemed to think I was doubting you. I wasn’t.” She took a breath. “But maybe that's not the only reason. Maybe she said it because you needed to hear it.”

“I see,” he said, though he did not.

Celia lifted her head and looked over his shoulder at the clock behind him, then returned to her earlier position, resting against him, head tucked under his chin.

“We still have awhile before breakfast,” she said. “Think you can get some more sleep?”

He had not thought so, but not long after her breaths had slowed and lengthened, he found himself drifting back into a much more peaceful slumber.

~ ~ ~

The Hogsmeade House training room was crowded this morning, but so far it seemed to be working out well enough. In one corner, Severus was helping Kennedy test the limits of the Shield Talisman Willow had made for her. So far, it seemed to be living up to the predicted flexibility in letting her choose how curses were deflected, given the damage she was managing to do to the wall with his hexes.

In another, Harry was helping Xander adapt to his new eye and work out additional ways to use it. Celia was still skeptical, but it did look, so far, like he could at least manage to activate the spells embedded in it. How he’d manage with it in the Muggle world was another problem, but it was his problem. And Giles’. And possibly the Ministry’s. Definitely not Celia’s.
She had her own problems, which at the moment included keeping Willow out of her mind without walling her out completely—or as completely as anyone could keep Willow out of anywhere—while carrying on a completely unrelated conversation. So far, the conversation was winning, with a bit of help from Xander and Harry’s distracting experiments.

*I don’t know, Will. I’m not sure I want to know. And I’m not going into any more detail than that, because it’s his stuff, not my stuff.*

Celia watched as the magical eye levitated with ease and scanned the room a bit shakily, making it rather obvious who was controlling which functions.

“Hey, I can see myself! Cool!” Xander grinned. “And not at all like a creepy out-of-body experience.”

*But obviously it’s worrying you, or you wouldn’t have brought it up.*

The eye turned to where Celia and Willow stood and looked them up and down. Very slowly. Celia found herself wondering how a disembodied eye managed to leer.

“Remember that thing?” Willow asked, hands on her hips and finally breaking eye contact with Celia.

He looked sheepish. “The thing where I’m only supposed to use my powers for good and not to look through women’s clothes?”

“That’s the one.”

“Well, really, I was—ow!”

Celia whipped around to see where that Stinging Hex had come from just in time to see Severus turning back to throw another round of jinxes at Kennedy. She bit her lip and stifled a giggle.

*Worried might not be the right word, Will. At least, not about that.*

The eye fell and rolled along the floor until it hit Harry's shoe, and Xander bent to pick it up.

“No.” Harry grabbed Xander's arm, stopping him. “Try Summoning it.”

“Right.” Xander brandished his new wand like a sword. “Accio eyeball!”

The eye turned a bit, presumably in response to one of the built-in spells that let Xander choose where it would look, but it didn’t actually move towards him at all.

“So maybe the wand isn’t that much help after all,” Harry said with a sigh.

“Hey, I’m happy with the stereo vision. If turning up with a wand is what it took for St. Mongoose to be good with making it for me, then that’s Galleons well-spent. Just … never, ever tell me what it works out to in dollars, okay?”

“That’s, um, good,” Celia said, wondering how he’d even managed to get fitted for a wand in the first place but not about to ask. “Except, are we sure this is a good idea?” She waved her hands at the incredulous looks both men and Willow gave her. “Not the eye itself, ’cause I’m all for you not having to make do with just the one. The using it like something out of Star Wars to check out the Chamber part.”
She was seriously uncomfortable with the idea of either Kennedy or Xander going into the Chamber of Secrets. While the Shield Talisman was proving to be far more useful than a static Shield Charm embedded in a piece of clothing, it was strictly defensive. Reactive. There was no way Kennedy could cast anything, and whatever they found was probably going to need magic more than swords and crossbows to deal with it. And Xander ... his idea pretty much sounded like using himself for cannon fodder. Or basilisk fodder.

“It's not the same thing at all,” Xander argued. “That was a training device that shot lasers. Besides —”

“If you make another Leia comment, I'm going to have to hurt you,” Celia cut in. “Which would be kind of ironic, considering my point is I don't think it's safe for you to be in this squad anyway with the only magic you've got in your eye.”

“Hey! I'll have you remember that I've been dealing with the monsters and magic since long before you got Slayified.”

“It's just a precaution anyway,” Willow cut in. “There probably aren't any more basilisks. As far as we know, they don't reproduce.”

“But if we're going to have someone play canary in the coal mine, I vote for Spike.” Celia spread her hands in front of her. “I'm perfectly fine with him getting Petrified. And Harry said that's all that happens to dead people, same as anyone else seeing it through some medium or other. Vampires might even be immune for all we know.”

“Well, Spike's not here anymore, and since when would you rather work with the evil undead?” Xander asked.


“Giles has Spike on another mission,” Willow interrupted. “One that actually requires a vampire.”

Celia felt her resolve deflate.

“How...? Right, you just asked,” Xander said.

“No, I asked as soon as we got back, and I heard your little plan,” Willow replied. “I'm not crazy about it either, but it's not like you haven't been in equally bad situations plenty of times.”

*What, are we going to bring a wrecking ball down with us?*

Willow shot Celia a look and continued, “And we should have a Watcher along. Would you really rather have Giles right now?”


“Are you surprised?” Xander asked. “And before you answer, let me remind you of where this conversation started.”

With Spike. Right. Who Xander also didn't exactly trust, but that wasn't the point.

“You're kind of right, though, Celia. I mean, not that a Watcher's really supposed to do anything but observe, but we all know that's not happening with either of them. And Giles'd need to get juiced up somehow. But there's no reason I can't make more Shield Talismans. Talismen. Whatever.” Willow
looked thoughtful. “I might even be able to add something that would … hmmm.”

Celia had a sinking feeling that she was losing what little control she’d ever had over this mission. And she couldn't really argue this particular point, considering that Willow was actually agreeing with her. Sort of.

“And suddenly I'm hoping that Giles has urgent business to keep him in Hamburg,” Celia said with a sigh. “Why don't we get back to—”

“Getting your Occlumency less Slayerish? Definitely,” Willow agreed. “But if you think that's going to distract me from suggesting this to Giles later, you don't know me as well as you really should.”

Celia shrugged. Yes, she knew better. Couldn't blame a girl for trying though.

*So, if worried isn’t the word, what is?*

It was going to be a long afternoon.

~ ~ ~

Severus was certain this day would never end. While he was grateful for the little time he’d had available to contemplate the things that had weighed on him so heavily this morning, spending the day hurling hexes at Kennedy, inspecting the Slytherin dormitories after complaints of Dark Artifacts being smuggled in (of which he had found two), and now assisting Celia in her pursuit of an impossible potion were not the ways he would have preferred to spend this day. The long hours of solitude that he’d once enjoyed seemed a distant memory.

They both stared into the cauldron. Celia was biting her lip, clearly incensed. Severus was very deliberately not comparing the fluorescent blue substance to the disaster one of his fourth-year students had turned in last week. At least this mess had the advantage of being a complex experiment, which was far more able to be excused for going seriously wrong.

“So, too much silverweed, maybe?” she asked.

“I do not believe so, no,” he replied, stirring the mixture cautiously as he examined the irregularities in the color and consistency. “From all the projections we made, this was the formula most likely to succeed. Unless you deviated from the proportions we discussed?”

“But likely!” she huffed and crossed her arms. “Well, I’m out of ideas. Maybe the next generation of plants will cooperate.”

“It’s not as though you are trying to bring out a recessive trait,” he pointed out.

“No, but it took a lot of magic to make the cross take at all. Maybe this generation can interbreed without so much help, and the qualities I’m looking for will harmonize better in the next batch.”

“I believe I did tell you that this was unlikely to work,” he could not resist saying.

She glared at him. “Not this time. But it will. There may not be a Potential here to need it, but there will be others.”

“If you say so,” he replied, obscurely pleased by her determination as she began reassembling her kitchen, save one well-warded corner that housed the far more important potion. “You realize you could leave that for the house-elves.”
“I need to take out my frustration on something,” she snarled.

“Well, really,” he said silkily and smirked when she rolled her eyes at him.

“Yes, really,” she replied. “And get your mind out of the gutter.” As she wiped the counter clean, she added under her breath just barely loud enough for him to hear, “For now.”

Just then, the Floo whooshed to life in the sitting room, and Celia tossed down her cleaning rag to see who it was. Severus remained in the kitchen, Cleansing the various implements and Banishing them to their appropriate locations. Whilst he would have instinctively listened in any case, he hardly needed to strain himself to do so, as Celia was very soon raising her voice at what sounded like her Head Watcher.

“You know what? Fine!” she snapped. “But I’m still the Slayer in charge of this mission, and if you’re going to be part of it, there’s something you need to deal with first.”

A pair of dull thuds announced the man’s arrival into the sitting room, rather as though he had been yanked through the Floo instead of stepping through properly.

“I can’t imagine what you mean,” the man said. “And while you are the Slayer in charge, you might recall that—”

“That what? That the rules you made mean I have some say here? Nope, I recall that just fine.”

The two entered the kitchen, Celia leading the Watcher by his sleeve. The Watcher shot Severus a look of sheer loathing.

“What the devil are you doing here?” he demanded.

“Like you, I am here by Celia’s invitation.” Severus regarded him coldly. “Unlike you, I was providing assistance.”

“Now listen here—”

“Oh, my Goddess, will you both shut up?” Celia looked back and forth between them. “Severus, thank you for your help. I’ll see you at dinner. Giles, you’re coming with me.”

“Should Minerva ask, where shall I tell her you’ve gone?” Severus asked.

She shot him a pained look. “On the grounds. Just … out.”

And with that, she pulled the Watcher out the kitchen door.

Mystified, Severus secured the door and Flooed back to his quarters to answer some correspondence before dinner.

~ ~ ~

For the first bit of the walk, Giles said nothing, nor did he resist. When their destination began to come into view, however, he balked.

“Celia, I have chosen not to come here. You have no right to force this.”

“It’s been eight years, Giles. Eight years and you’re still stuck there.”

“I am not stuck anywhere.”
She tightened her grip on his arm as they approached the white tomb. He didn’t say anything more as she led him to the marble structure, released his arm, and moved away to offer him at least the illusion of privacy while not risking some staff member or student disturbing him. She added a nonverbal Muffliato so at least she wouldn’t hear whatever he might end up saying. For a long while, he stood utterly still, and she started second-guessing herself, wondering if this really was what he needed.

Then he began to pace and gesture. The buzzing in her ears waxed and waned as his voice rose and fell. She winced when he struck out at the stone structure and found herself shedding sympathetic tears. An hour later, when his rage and tears seemed to have subsided, she approached him carefully where he knelt, setting a gentle hand on his shoulder and lifting the Muffling Spell.

“He should have told me,” he muttered. “There might have been something in the Watchers’ Libraries. He knew I was researching resurrection magics and soul magics because of what Willow had done. I might have been able to help.”

A cool breeze swept by, drying the tears she had shed as she’d witnessed his grief. He stood slowly, awkwardly, reminding her of every one of his more than fifty years. His hands were badly bruised where he had pummeled the marble, and she thought he might have actually broken a knuckle. Celia briefly wished she had some healing potions on her since he’d never go see Poppy. At least Willow should be able to fix him up.

“I wish I could have met him,” she said softly. “And I’m glad he was there when you needed him.”

“I needed him when I brought Willow here.”

“You needed him more when you were Ripper. If someone hadn’t helped you then, who knows what would have happened to Buffy or any of us.” She swallowed. “I’m not sure I want to imagine that.”

“Come here,” he said softly and enfolded her in a brief, avuncular hug.

“Okay,” she said, once he released her. “So, are we good, then? Can we go plot without all the remarks and maybe even pull this off without any commercial breaks for insults?”

The moment broken, they both turned and began the walk back to the cottage. Celia thought that, all things considered, he seemed more at peace than she had seen him since February or possibly ever outside Willow’s memories. It was a start.

~ ~ ~

Scanning his notes, Severus compared the two seemingly unrelated sets of formulae. There was something at the very edge of his awareness that he could not quite verbalize. He was uncertain whether it would solve the problems with either potion, but he did feel that it was significant. Trying to capture it was like trying to bottle the steam wafting from a potion, the merest motion in its direction causing it to dissipate.

He glanced at the clock. Nearly another hour until dinner. He picked up his quill and wrote a brief response to Hermione’s latest missive. He considered and rejected the idea of suggesting she take into account any parallel properties between Veritaserum and Dreamless Sleep. There were none. They shared no ingredients, uses, or side effects. Whatever might be lurking about the corners of his mind, it surely wasn’t that.

A few lines later, he ruthlessly made the suggestion nonetheless, adding but not explaining the
possibility of a variant of Dreamless Sleep that would block only divinatory dreams. Hermione would most likely think him mad, but she would also set about systematically dismantling the idea, something he did not feel he had the luxury of time to do. She might even turn something up in the process. It had happened before.

As he sealed the parchment, he felt an odd twinge. There was no reason at all that he should not write to a colleague, particularly in aid of furthering research relevant to pursuing the new Death Eaters. He had not asked the details of Celia’s past affairs—and from what little she’d said, it seemed they had been numerous—and she had no need to know about his own.

Annoyed with himself and, inexplicably, both witches, he set off for the owlery.

~ ~ ~

“You’re pretty confident that he can manage it then?” Celia asked. Despite having seen Xander training with Harry for three days running now, she still had her doubts about including him in their venture into the Chamber of Secrets.

“I was a second-year the last time I went down there,” Harry pointed out. “And I lost my wand. So far as we know, all we’re going to find down there is a basilisk corpse and a puddle of ink.”

“So far as we know, we could find a bunch of basilisk spawnlings and an army of Turok Hans.” Not that she’d dreamed of them lately, but it was still weird that she ever had.

“At least he’s seen a Turok Han before.”

Celia slumped back into her chair and looked around Harry’s office.

“You’re right. I just … I don’t usually get the magic-heavy missions, and my team is usually mostly Slayers. It doesn’t feel right to have someone along with no magic, no Slayer powers, nothing but a magical eye that you’re going to have to help control for it to be any use as an advance scouting device.”

Her eyes settled on the photo of Harry’s mother. She looked almost exactly as she had in that place, wherever it really was.

Not like having magic is any guarantee.

“Did … did my mum say anything to you about me?” he asked.

Celia looked up at him. “No. She was kind of focused on what she wanted me to do for you.” She forced a smile. “That kind of says it all, don’t you think?”

“Yeah.”

They were both quiet for a minute.

“Anyway,” Harry went on, “yeah, I do think he can handle it. I mean, considering some of the things he’s managed without magic, I think I’m just as glad to have him there, wand or not.”

Celia extended a hand, palm up in surrender. “I guess. There’s just something I don’t like about the whole situation.”

“Well, if you think I’m looking forward to going back down there and deal with this … this soul-wound-thing, you’re off your nut.” He visibly suppressed a shudder. “Thought I was done with
anything to do with Voldemort years ago."

“There’s that.” She rested her chin in her hand. “Something about it all just seems too easy. Too pat. So you know something’s going to go ridiculously wrong.”

“True. But it won’t be any of the things you dream up, so you might as well stop trying.”

She had to admit, he had a point.

“I mean, look at my parents! They thought they’d taken every precaution, and it was the person they least suspected who sold them out.”

Celia nodded carefully, keeping her opinion of their idea of “every precaution” to herself.

“I mean, that rat was supposed to be their friend! Bad as it was that Snape told Voldemort about the prophecy, at least he didn’t know it was them. And when he did find out—”

Everything seemed to come to a screeching halt.

“Wait, what?”

“Pettigrew was a rat. Literally. Wasn’t that in …?” Sudden comprehension dawned across Harry’s face. “That’s not what you’re asking, is it?”

“The books never said who,” Celia replied, feeling like she was fighting for every breath. She tried to frame a question and couldn’t.

“Look, I still really don’t like him, but what I was trying to say was once he found out who the prophecy was about, Snape went to Dumbledore.”

“Oh, so that’s all right then.” She’d gone as cold as the stone beneath her feet. “It was perfectly fine so long as he didn’t know who it was that was having a baby. Just some anonymous kid going to get killed is no big deal.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

A couple of puzzle pieces slotted into place in her mind. She’d been trying to tell herself all day that it was Dumbledore that Severus had been thinking of this morning.

No, this is a whole different kind of guilt.

The stone seemed to press up against her feet, and the walls felt like they were closing in. She stood up.

“I have to go. I … I need to think.”

Whatever Harry said to that, she didn’t hear it because she was already halfway down the hall. She wasn’t sure where she was going, except away. Out.

Out, out, down the stairs so fast it was a wonder the few students she saw got out of her way in time. She lost track of how many flights she’d traveled, didn’t care that it shouldn’t have taken this long to get away from Harry’s office, so long as she kept moving.

She ran out of stairs and darted across the Entrance Hall for the main doors, when she finally ran into someone who didn’t get out of her way. Someone who, instead, grabbed onto her arms.
“What in Merlin’s name is wrong?” Severus demanded.

She just stared at him. It took her a moment to realize why he looked so blurry, so watery.

“I can’t . . . I can’t look at you right now.”

She wrenched herself out of his grasp and ran out the doors and into the fresh evening air.

~ ~ ~

Severus stormed into his quarters.

*Potter. It has to have been Potter. Always and only a Potter.*

That look of revulsion in her eyes could only have come from one source, and he knew she’d planned to meet with Potter after dinner.

Picking up a jar of ink, he hurled it at the cold fireplace. As it shattered, it spattered not only the stone but also Celia’s favorite jumper that she’d left folded over the edge of a nearby chair, leaving a long red splash like a gaping wound across it. The tinkling of glass shards seemed to go on much longer than it took for all the pieces to fall to the floor.

*So much for her pretty words about the past not being important to her. By now, she is probably telling her Watcher how right he was.*

It was only a matter of time. He should never have let himself grow accustomed to her presence. Had it not been this, she would certainly have left at the end of term. There had never been any chance their liaison would have been more than temporary, bizarre magical connection notwithstanding.

That was hardly a comforting thought. He paced his sitting room like a caged Quintaped.

Briefly, he wondered if she might calm down, given a bit of time. He shoved the thought aside.

*Hardly likely, and better that she should not.*

Whipping out his wand, he Summoned all her belongings into a single pile, the ink-stained jumper draped across the top. It was a rather larger pile than he’d expected.

“Dobby!”

CRACK!

“Yes? What is Professor Snape be wanting?”

“Would you please return these items to Professor Reese’s cottage?” he asked evenly.

“Yes, Professor Snape, sir.” The house-elf snapped, and the pile of Celia’s belongings vanished. “Is there be anything else?”

“No.” He quickly reconsidered. “Yes. Please do not tell Minerva or any other staff of this.”

The elf’s face grew worried. “But, Professer Snape, sir, Dobby is a good free house-elf. Dobby has to answer any questions the Headmistress—”

“Fine!” he spat. “But if she does not ask, you will kindly not volunteer the information.”
Eyes even wider than normal, Dobby nodded before disappearing with another CRACK.

Severus winced inwardly. He’d always prided himself on treating the elves well. It was one of the ways he’d held himself apart from the other Death Eaters. Proof that he was neither as arrogant nor as cruel as the rest, and something he’d held to long after the need to even pretend to be one of them had passed. An arrogant conceit itself, or so it now seemed.

He had more than two hours until his scheduled patrol. Perhaps another surprise inspection of the Slytherin dormitories would be advisable in the meantime. No doubt they were making ill use of this last night of their holiday and could do with a reminder of the sort of discipline he expected of them.

He refrained from slamming the door on the way out.

~ ~ ~

“Celia, that was pathetic! Are you even trying?” Willow demanded.

“Yes. No. I don’t know.” She slumped back into her chair. “Not like you can’t get by my Occlumency anyway.”

“A point which has absolutely nothing to do with you learning to misdirect instead of walling yourself off in concrete.” Willow shrugged. “You’re the one who wants to go play Trojan Horse.”

“‘Wants’ is overstating it a bit. And nobody else has come up with a better idea to find their hideout.” Celia made a frustrated gesture. It wasn’t like she was looking forward to getting herself captured and probably Crucioed again. Then again, right now it didn’t seem possible that she could feel much worse. “Besides, can’t we just get through the Chamber part first? We have a few weeks to make the other happen once that’s done.”

“If you can’t concentrate better than this, I’m not sure you’re up for that!”

It was Celia’s turn to shrug. Sure, the potion would be done tonight, and Harry and Severus should probably take it right away, but they weren’t planning to open the Chamber until Saturday, when most of the students would be out of the castle watching Quidditch.

I can get my act together by then. Can’t I?

Willow crossed her arms and gave her a hard stare. “It’s been two days. If you’re not going to make up, don’t, but you need to get your head back in the game.”

“It’s not a matter of making up.” At least not on her end. She wasn’t sure about Severus, what with the avoiding and the not talking.

“No, it’s a matter of you getting over this double standard of yours.”

Celia didn’t bother to argue, just sank a bit further into her chair.

“I mean, hello? Tried to end the world here, and you manage to deal with that.” Willow shuddered. “Not to mention the flaying.”

“You think I don’t see that?”

“I think it sure doesn’t look like it.” Willow uncrossed her arms and reached across the kitchen table to touch Celia’s hand. “And I think it looks like you still care about him. Or else you wouldn’t still, you know, care.”
“How can I still love him?” she asked in a small voice.

“Probably the same way you did before,” Willow replied. “Just with a little more reality and a little less fairy tale.”

Celia snorted. “It’s never been a fairy tale.”

Willow raised her eyebrows in disbelief. “He swept you off your feet and into a magical castle.”

“Into the dungeons,” Celia retorted. “And there was mutual sweeping. So not the only one getting swept here! But … point taken.”

She still wasn’t sure she could get past this, and even if she did, there was no guarantee Severus would want her back. He certainly hadn’t wasted time getting every trace of her out of his rooms, and she was about to say so when Willow’s eyes widened in horror and she jumped to her feet.

“Well, what the hell are you doing down there? I don’t care what Harry thought. This was so not the plan!”

“Um, Will?”

“No, no, this is bad. Very, very bad.” Willow held her hands to her temples.

“Will!”

She snapped her attention to Celia. “It’s Xander. He and Harry are down in the Chamber and—”

“What? Wait … how did he—?”

“Recriminations and explanations later.” Willow grabbed her wrist and yanked her towards the fireplace. “We have to get down there. With the potion. Now!”
Launching out of the fireplace in her cottage, Celia Summoned the Scythe as she ran to the kitchen.

“Not time, not time, not time,” she muttered as she uncovered the potion, which still looked pretty much like water. “If this doesn’t work because I had to rush it, Harry, I’m going to kill you.”

She sliced her finger on the Scythe’s blade and quickly squeezed three drops into the potion, trying very hard not to think about whether that might be literally true.

Willow rushed into the room, Kennedy right behind her.

“Is it done?”

“Why can’t we get a head start?”

“Because we don’t know where we’re going. Is it done?”

“Shhh.”

Celia squeezed the cut closed with her thumb, unwilling to waste time or magic on healing it, and began to stir with her other hand, forcing herself to go as slowly as she dared. Three stirs clockwise, three stirs counterclockwise.

On the last stir, the liquid took on a silvery sheen.

“Goddess, I hope that’s right.” She decanted it into a flask and stoppered it. “Let’s go.”

She ran for the school, not bothering to look behind her. It wasn’t like Kennedy wasn’t just as fast, and Willow had other ways of keeping up. She was so completely focused on getting to the second floor gateway to the Chamber that it took her a minute to process the stares of the students once she was inside the castle.

Oh shit! They need to not be here!

“Prefects!” She looked around wildly, spotting at least two of them. “Get the rest of the students into
your common rooms!”

They weren’t moving. Still staring.

She looked down at herself and finally realized she was still wearing jeans and holding the Scythe in one hand and the flask of potion in the other.

Spreading her arms, she demanded, “What? Do I look like I’m joking? Move it!”

The students scattered.

Celia headed for one of the staircases and prepared to cast a Controlling Charm on it.

“Which way?” Willow asked.

Celia nodded towards the second floor landing on the far side of the Entrance Hall and reflexively put an arm across Willow’s shoulders as Kennedy did the same so that Willow could fly them up to it.

“Now where?” Kennedy asked when they landed.

Celia was already running down the hallway, hoping Willow had alerted the others.

*Did you tell—*?

*They’re on their way.*

Into the bathroom. There it was: the passageway to the Chamber of Secrets. Wide open.

“Good thing that doesn’t have an auto-shut function,” Kennedy observed.

“Should we wait for—”

“No.” Celia cast an Unbreakable Charm on the flask and shoved it roughly into her pocket, still holding the Scythe in her other hand and concocting every scenario she could imagine of what was going on down there. “There’s no time.”

She paused at the edge of the gaping hole and turned to look back at the others.

*If this goes south, Will, don’t let him have to do it.*

The other witch nodded, and Celia turned to face the hole in the floor again. “Here goes nothing.” And jumped.

~ ~ ~

The stack of essays to be marked was not shrinking as fast as it ought.

Which was strange, considering that his quarters were blessedly quiet and free of distraction. Of course, he had wasted a moment or two looking up to share a choice bit of dunderheadedness, only to have to remind himself that there was no one else there to share it with. An annoying habit for which he’d castigated himself, but hardly as time-consuming as actually reading the offending sections aloud would have been, never mind the conversation that would likely have ensued.

Why, then, did it seem to be taking so very much longer to get through it all?
He glanced at the clock. Nearly time for dinner. He winced, recalling Minerva’s insistence that he make an appearance. Was she similarly berating Celia? Had she ordered her to move into quarters of her own in the castle? Surely he would have heard, were that so. Although it was not as if it were any particular concern of his.

Saturday could not come soon enough. Once the soul-hole, the potential Hellmouth, was eradicated, his part in all this would be done. Tracking down the rest of the nouveau Death Eaters would be a job for the Aurors, not Hogwarts professors or Slayers, and he could simply ignore her existence until she left at end of term.

A sharp hunger pang prompted him to set the rest of the essays aside and prepare to go up to the Great Hall for dinner.

*Severus! Come quick!* Willow’s voice echoed in his mind.

“Merlin! Can’t you give a warning—?” he answered aloud.

*There’s no time! Get to the Chamber of Secrets. It’s happening now!* He quickly left his quarters and almost immediately ran into a mass of his Slytherins, headed by their prefects, who were already motioning them to press to one side and let him pass.

“Get into the common room and do not leave unless I or another staff member tells you otherwise.” They nodded, expressions variously frightened and excited.

“Sir?”

He turned to see who had spoken. Lightfeather.

“Good luck.”

He nodded acknowledgement and ran.

~ ~ ~

“Seriously, why does it always have to be sewers?” Celia muttered as she jumped over a loop of basilisk skin, landing in yet another midden of rodent bones.

The doors ahead were open, and she slowed just a bit, trying to see if there was anything lying in wait.

“Xander?” she yelled.

“Hurry!”

She darted through the doors, barely taking in the huge stone pillars covered with carved serpents or the gargantuan statue that dominated the room. Because there they were: Harry, standing in front of a puddle of black goo that was reaching amoeboid limbs towards him, and Xander, kneeling between the puddle and the very large skeleton of a basilisk, both eyeballs focused on the scene in front of him and holding what looked like a very large fang.

Well, the good news seems to be that it doesn’t look like it’s too hellmouthy yet. Or feel it, not that a Hogwarts hellmouth would feel like Cleveland’s.
One tentacle-like extension grabbed at Harry’s ankle, and he didn’t move.

Xander batted at the thing with the fang, scraping the tendril away from Harry, and it retracted back into the pulsating goo that could only be the soul-hole. Celia shuddered.

“Harry! What are you doing? Get away from there!” she yelled.

“Gee, why didn’t I think of yelling at him?” Xander retorted with a frustrated wave of his free hand. “This was just supposed to be recon.”

“Unscheduled recon.”

“But recon, nonetheless. And then he got all zombified.”

“Hence the not scheduling of recon involving people at high risk for being vulnerable to … that.”

“Good work keeping it contained, Xander,” Willow said, landing softly with Kennedy right behind her. Extending a hand, she added, “Cover.”

The only way Celia could see what she’d done was when the soul-hole extended another tendril. And another. And another. Each stopped short, blocked by an invisible dome.

“Hurry,” Willow said. “Not too surprisingly, that thing’s kind of an energy suck.”

“Great!” Kennedy said. “Just what we need. A Willow-charged evil-wizard soul-hole.”

“On it.” Celia pulled the flask out of her pocket, setting the Scythe carefully on the floor as far from the black goop as she could get it while keeping it within reach.

“Harry, I don’t know if you can hear me, but I need to pour about half of this into you. You know what it’s for and why it should help.” Well, he did. And there was no point telling the soul-hole thing, assuming it was sentient enough to understand.

It seemed that it did anyway, because its movements became frantic, furiously battering against Willow’s shield.

“Hurry! I can’t hold it much longer and still do the rest!”

Celia pinched Harry’s nose shut, pulled the stopper out of the flask with her teeth, and, when he opened his mouth for air, poured the silvery liquid in. Behind her, she heard more feet arriving, and she felt rather than saw that the new arrival was Severus.

When she thought she had about half the potion in Harry’s mouth, Celia plugged the flask and awkwardly forced his jaw shut.

“Swallow, dammit.” He had to, didn’t he?

He did, and as if someone had flicked a light switch, the dull, glazed look on his face was replaced with a look of horror, his eyes widening. Above them, the lightning bolt-shaped scar faded and vanished.

“You back?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

She nodded, released him, and turned to find Severus right beside her. His face and eyes were
nowhere near as blank as Harry’s had been, but he was clearly transfixed by the writhing black goo.

“Can you take yours on your own?” she asked warily. If he ended up in some kind of thrall, she was less sure she could manage him the way she had Harry.

“Of course.” With a withering glare, he grabbed the flask and downed its contents.

“Um, guys?” Willow called.

“I’ll take over the shield,” Celia said. “Get that portal open so we can get this thing out of here.”

Severus, she saw, had pulled up his sleeve. Where the Dark Mark had been before, faded but still distinct, there was nothing but skin. She grinned as she reached out towards the bubble-like shield and extended her magic towards it.

It’s working!

“Osiris, keeper of the gate, master of all fate, hear us.”

Willow released her shield and the soul-hole sent out more tendrils, this time in Celia’s direction. Celia quickly snapped her own shield around it.

“Before time, and after. Before knowing and nothing.”

Celia felt the semi-sentient goo try first to break through her containment, then start drawing on the energy she was putting into the shield. “Faster would be good, Will.”

“Accept our offer. Allow our aid.”

“Witch! You dare to invoke Osiris again?”

Celia glanced away from the amorphous blob to see a startlingly familiar cloud swirling in front of Willow. Kennedy, she could tell, was trying to hide her shock but clearly ready to fight. Severus appeared merely on his guard. Harry still looked a bit out of it and was leaning on Xander for support.

“Yes, I dare. We’re not asking a favor this time. We’re offering to help Osiris be rid of someone who has been stuck in his realm between lives.”

The drain on Celia’s containment shield suddenly became much greater, and she turned her attention back to it, tightening the shield until the puddle was compressed into a sphere. It was tempting to try and take the energy right back, but she had a feeling that would be a really, really bad idea. Instead, she held it just above her hand like a slightly oversized softball, if softballs were black, evil goo that had to be contained in a magical shield.

When she dared turn her attention back to Willow, the cloud-demon was gone and there was a portal in its place. Celia walked over to it as Willow stepped aside but not quite away from the portal.

At first, there was nothing. Then a wavering outline that finally took the form of a snake-faced man. Despite the fact she’d been expecting as much, she shuddered.

“You forgot something,” she said, pretending to heft the soul-hole.

He didn’t reply.

Well, that’s no fair. Demons usually at least have something to say, even if it’s just a roar.
With a shrug, she prepared to throw the shielded soul-hole through the portal, planning to drop the shield just before it went through to avoid getting sucked in with it herself.

And then she saw a glint in his red eyes. She stopped, suddenly wary of what she’d been about to do.

“What’s the matter, Daughter?” he asked.

“Yeah, um, what’s up, Celia?” Willow echoed. “Get rid of that thing so I can close the portal!”

“No.”

All the rest of them yelled at her at once, save one.

*Severus must have seen it too.*

“Something’s not right about this,” she said.

*He wants me to!* Willow’s reply was wordless but unmistakable alarm.

Celia stared at him.

“What are you waiting for?” he asked, a sneer in his voice. “Having a bit of trouble?”

She didn’t answer, trying furiously to think what advantage he could possibly gain when she threw the soul-hole in. He should be forced to move on, right? That was the theory, but that’s all it really was. Theory. Hypothesis, really. The more she thought about it, the more she began to think it ought to be downgraded to “wild-assed guess.”

She cast a glance at it. It was no longer siphoning energy off the shield. Quiescent. Dormant. Docile. No longer a threat? Or waiting?

*Shit.*

“It’s because I’m human, isn’t it? You always did have trouble finishing off humans, even if they were already as good as dead.”

“You are dead,” she snapped, wondering if she dared try Legilimency. Would it even work across a portal boundary? And if it did, could it work both ways?

Behind her, some new noise started, but she didn’t dare look. The others would have to deal with it.

“Then what is holding you back?” He spread his arms, fingers splayed. “Send me the space my soul requires so that I can move on from the torturous boredom of this place.”

She glanced at the black ball again.

*Lorne called it an echo. We’ve been calling it a soul-hole. The emptiness that was left when the other pieces of his soul were torn away. But it’s been here for years, soaking up the magic of this chamber. What is it now? What can it really do?*

Behind her, she could now hear definite sounds of hexes being cast and repelled. Everything in her screamed at her to join the fight, whatever it was, but she forced herself to stay focused on the portal and on him. They could deal with it. This was her fight.
Except it wasn’t clear anymore what it was she was supposed to be doing. How could she follow through with the original plan if it seemed to be exactly what he wanted? By all accounts, he should have been threatening her, demanding she let him back into their world. So would trying to send the soul-hole through the portal instead let him through? Would they trade places? Would it form a bridge? And if it was what he wanted, why was he making that so obvious?

“The longer you wait, the more likely your friends will die,” he sneered. “Your friends and your lover.”

“Do people in the afterlife have nothing better to do than play Peeping Tom?”

“Don’t call me that!”

It took her a second to remember that his original name had been Tom. Seemed he hated it.

“Why not, Tom?” she asked sweetly. “Surely you don’t expect me to start calling you Daddy.”

“Is that why you can’t do it?” he asked. “You have some sentimental attachment to your father after all?”

“Not likely.”

“So instead, you’ll just stand there trying to figure out what to do until it’s too late, won’t you?”

“Define ‘too late,’ Tom. You’re already dead, and I’ve already eliminated two-thirds of the help you’d need to come back.” She tried not to think about the fact that she was the remaining one-third.

“I said don’t call me that!”

Reassuring as it was to hear the defensive tone in his voice, she had a sinking feeling that he was right. She didn’t know what else to do other than send the soul-hole through the portal. If there was any way to destroy it, they hadn’t discovered it, and as pissed off as he was getting, he still wasn’t letting anything slip.

Something fell with a crash loud enough to make the floor shake. She still didn’t dare take her eyes off him, and she could feel her control over her shield waverimg in the face of her doubts.

“If you cannot bring yourself to finish me off,” he said, “perhaps you really want to bring me back yourself. Perhaps you believe you could change me. Redeem me.”

“Your chance for that is long over,” she said, hating the shaky sound of her voice.

“Then do it,” he whispered. “Send it through. Finish the kill.”

Why? Is that what it takes for him to be able to come back? For me to give him the last piece of his ripped-up soul? But if it stays here, Lorne said it’ll create a hellmouth. Or is it that finishing him off makes me a killer? Makes me enough like him that he can take over my body?

What the hell does he want, and how do I not give it to him?

“Harry already did that, Tom,” she pointed out. “You just don’t seem to realize it yet.”

A flare of light just to her left reminded her that there was more going on than this little standoff. She forced herself not to look, not to see how the others were doing, not to abandon this battle for what sounded like a much more straightforward one, one much more to her style of fighting.
And then she realized what he wanted.

“Clever girl,” he said. “But just a bit … late!”

Furious, she hurled the black sphere at the portal, releasing the shield around it and quickly casting another just behind it. On the other side of the portal, her father raised his pale hand, palm out in a warding gesture.

The now uncontained puddle splattered against the portal and dripped down its boundary.

She pressed her shield against it harder, trying to force it through.

He pushed back.

She needed more. The drain on her magic was enormous, and even her Slayer reserves weren’t keeping up. No wonder he’d been so bent on stalling her.

*Time to find out if this Slytherin’s heir stuff is good for anything.*

She reached out to the magic embedded in the Chamber, called it to her.

For a second, it didn’t seem to recognize her. It felt cold. Distant.

And then it didn’t.

Energy arced up to her from the floor, and she poured it into the shield, pressing the dripping black puddle into the portal.

Voldemort pushed back.

She Summoned more magic from the Chamber. It coursed through her. It was her. She prepared to channel it into the shield, to make one final push. It was intoxicating.

Seriously intoxicating.

*I need an anchor.*

“Sheverus!”

She felt rather than saw him next to her. Reached out with her free hand and held onto his arm. Covered though it was, she could feel the absence of the Dark Mark. Could feel the scar on the shoulder. Felt him add his strength, his rejection of her father. Felt her body’s reaction to him, and the temptation to get lost in the magic dimmed. She wasn’t the magic, and she wasn’t going anywhere.

She pushed.

The magic was gone. The portal was gone. She let go of Severus’ arm and fell to her knees an instant before everything went black.

~ ~ ~

“Is it because I’m human?” the Dark Lord demanded. “You always did have trouble finishing off humans, even if they were already as good as dead.”

“You are dead,” Celia snapped.
Sudden movement pulled Severus’ attention away from the Dark Lord, Celia, and the portal that stood between the two. His heart sank as he recognized the approaching swarm. Quickly, he took up a position opposite to Willow’s and began firing off curses at the black-robed figures.

There can’t be this many. Even if the vampire only found one cell, there cannot be this many of them!

“Kennedy!” he heard Willow yell, “get Xander out of here! Tell Minerva what’s happened!”

Potter, he saw, was holding his own.

Holding them back, however, was all they seemed to be able to do. The four of them were positioned in a diamond-shaped formation with Celia and the portal in one corner. None of the Death Eaters, he noticed, approached that area. Fortunate, as it appeared she was still trying to figure out what the Dark Lord was trying to do and was completely oblivious to the sudden chaos. Still, they were essentially surrounded and severely outnumbered.

How in Merlin’s name did they get between us and the door?

He hoped Kennedy and Mr. Harris had been able to alert Minerva. She would not be able to seal the Chamber, but she could block off the laboratory with heavy shielding and see to evacuating the students.

For every Death Eater they managed to Petrify or Stupefy, a Slicing Hex came through. Even using their own curses against them was a purely defensive measure. If Celia didn’t hurry up and get rid of that soul residue and close the portal, this standoff would quickly become a rout.

She’s right that he’s up to something, but if she does not stop bloody talking to him about it, it won’t matter what she does, as we’ll all be dead!

He was momentarily distracted by a crash that reverberated through the floor. Darting a glance over his shoulder, he saw that Willow had used one of the arms from Salazar Slytherin’s statue to pin and possibly crush several Death Eaters. With a feral grin, he shot more curses at the ones before him.

“Severus!”

He hated her just a little for calling out to him for help. She’d made it plain she despised him, but apparently now she had a use for him.

Still firing off hexes and deflecting as many as possible, he sidled towards her, the line of Death Eaters pressing closer as he did so. Magic crackled around her but did not seem to be coming from her. He didn’t dare take his eyes off the Death Eaters to look at it directly.

Before he could ask what she wanted, she grabbed his arm painfully hard, right where the Dark Mark had been until moments ago, and yet somehow she felt insubstantial. Before he could give that paradox any thought, a current of magic both familiar and foreign surged along his skin and up to his shoulder, nearly startling him into dropping his wand.

The scar on his shoulder throbbed, but somehow not with pain.

Looking into the portal, he saw the Dark Lord reaching out to her, and fury boiled up inside him.

Not again. Not this time. I may have lost her, but that does not mean I’ll let you take her!

He felt a shift in Celia, as if she were becoming more solid once again. His own magic resonated
with the current running along his arm, and he felt the two somehow both merge and not, like two streams running in opposite directions with only the thinnest strip of land separating them.

Then, as quickly as it had come, the surge of foreign magic was gone. His own magic still seemed to hum in echo of it but no longer flowed out from him.

She released his arm and fell to her knees.

The portal was gone. So, apparently, was the soul-hole.

The Death Eaters abruptly broke off their attack, staring at her. Stunned, Severus cast the strongest Shield Charm he knew around them both as she fell to lie flat on the floor.

Willow and Potter backed towards them until their Shields brushed against his. Willow, he noted, had extended her own Shield Charm around the Scythe that still lay on the floor, but did not pick it up.

*What are they waiting for?* Willow’s voice echoed in his mind.

*I don’t know,* he thought back at her. He crouched, keeping his eyes on the Death Eaters, and felt for Celia’s neck. Her pulse throbbed reassuringly against his fingers. A chill ran down his spine as he wondered whether he really ought to be reassured by that. *Can you reach her?*

After a disturbing pause, Willow replied, *No.*

That didn’t mean anything more than that she was unconscious, but it was still troublesome.

And still the Death Eaters watched in silence.

She stirred, and he stood back to give her room to rise, angling so that he could keep an eye on her as well as the Death Eaters.

She looked around warily.

“My Lord?”

Her eyes locked on the Death Eater who had spoken, and his heart sank even as he insisted to himself that it was not possible. She tilted her head as if she heard something that he could not.

“Yes.”

She took a step away from him, her wand suddenly out and trained on himself, Potter, and Willow.

He searched her face for the malevolence that ought to be there, had the Dark Lord possessed her. Her eyes were hard, her jaw set, but there was no sign of the old, familiar malice.

*Or is that merely what I want to believe?*

There was a barely audible whisper from amongst the Death Eaters.

“Because I have not yet decided what it is I want to do with them,” she said, as if answering a question. “Clearly they think they can get her back and will not harm this … vessel.” She paused and shot a glance in the direction of one who had spoken. “I believe I will enjoy some of the … enhancements that come with it.”

*She’s not answering me! But don’t do anything yet, okay?* Willow spoke into his mind, confirming
Reflexively, he tried to swallow, but his mouth had gone dry. His hand convulsed around his wand. Potter hadn’t spoken, but he would no doubt share Willow’s reluctance to act. It would be up to Severus to stop this now, before the Dark Lord had the opportunity to acclimate to the strength, speed, and reflexes to which he now had access.

*I’m sorry.*

“**My Lord?**”

“**You dare question me?**” she snarled, her eyes and wand never wavering. “**Silence!**”

They should be dead by now. Surely the Dark Lord would not have waited this long. If nothing else, he’d have disarmed them all. But if this was Celia, what was she playing at?

“But your prophecy said that you would make clear your return, so that none could question it,” another voice called out.

A scuffling noise came from the doorway through which they’d arrived.

“You know,” she said, “I’m really getting to hate prophecies.”

She began to turn towards the Death Eaters, and Severus raised his wand, once again unsure.

A bolt of yellow light shot from her wand, shattering one of the serpents decorating the stone pillars with a deafening noise, debris raining down onto the Death Eaters surrounding it. Red light followed, Stunning one, two, three of them before they realized she was not possessed by the Dark Lord after all.

Finally certain as well, Severus flicked his wand away from her and Stunned and Bound several of the front line of robed figures before they had their wands up and were firing back. The odds were little better than they had been before, but somehow, it seemed more of the Death Eaters were falling.

As the sea of robes thinned, or at least fell mostly to the floor, he began to see why. Minerva, Tonks, and several other Aurors had come in from behind.

He shot off another series of Stunners and Binding Hexes and deflected several rather nastier curses, methodically working through the Death Eaters before him.

Fewer and fewer Death Eaters were left standing. Then none.

He remained in a defensive posture, eyes and wand scanning the Chamber. There were too many pillars, too many shadowed corners to trust that they’d got them all.

“That went just a little too smoothly,” Willow said from behind him. “At least, in a dictionary that lists breaking thousand year-old statues under ‘smoothly.’”

Loathe to give voice to such a sentiment, Severus found that he had to agree.

From the corner of one eye, he could see Potter stepping over the bound bodies and checking for movement. To his other side, he saw Celia Summon the Scythe from where it had lain on the floor and begin to follow suit, though in a less structured pattern. At the periphery, Minerva and the Aurors were taking similar steps, and so he began to do the same.

Ever cautious, he cast a rudimentary diagnostic spell on each form he approached, ensuring that they
were, in fact, unconscious. Those few who were merely Bound, he Stunned. He’d nearly met up with the Auror who’d been checking this section from the opposite direction, when he heard a gravelly, mad voice he’d never thought to hear again.

“Traitor!”

He turned to see Bellatrix push the unconscious form of another Death Eater off of her and stand, wand drawn and leveled at him.

“No!” he heard Celia shout.

There was a burst of green light shot through with red and silver, and then everything went black.
Celia’s eyes shot open. She took in the cot-like bed, the white curtain surrounding it, and shook her head to dispel the overwhelming sense of déjà vu.

_Hogwarts. Hospital wing. Right. What the hell happened this time?_

It took her a few minutes. Her head felt like it was stuffed with cotton balls. Used ones with all kinds of goopy stuff gluing them together. Eventually, they started to unstick.

They had been rounding up the remaining Death Eaters to be brought in to the Ministry. And then one got up. She’d gotten off a Killing Curse before Celia could disarm her, and it had been heading straight for –

“Severus!” she cried, sitting bolt upright.

There hadn’t been time. She couldn’t reach him to push him out of the way. The only thing she could try to do was use the scythe to deflect it, and she hadn’t even known if that would work. Had it worked? Had she even intercepted the curse at all, or had she been too slow? She whipped off the covers and swung her feet onto the cold stone floor. Before she could get up and get the curtain out of her way, someone else opened it.

“Poppy, where’s Severus?” she demanded.

“You need to lie back down, Celia.”

“No, I’m fine,” she argued. “Where is he? How is he?” Her heart made several fitful attempts to work properly. She took a deep breath and willed it to cooperate.

“You are not well enough to get up.”

“I’m getting there, and I’m well enough to move you out of my way if you don’t tell me what’s happened.”

Poppy pressed her lips together in a thin line.
“Very well.”

Poppy extended her hand, which Celia reluctantly accepted. She did still feel kind of woozy, not that she was about to admit it.

When they entered the next set of curtains, Celia’s heart stopped completely for a moment. He looked so still, so pale.

“Is he?”

“He’s alive,” Poppy assured her. “Barely.”

Her heart resumed beating as she finally saw his chest rise and fall ever so slightly, ever so shakily. She dropped the matron’s hand and walked over to his bedside, gently seating herself on the edge of the cot. She reached over and touched his shoulder, where she knew that silvered starburst scar lay under his clothing. A familiar hum of magic responded faintly.

“What happened?” Celia asked instead.

“According to Harry and Madams Rosenberg, one of the Death Eaters aimed a Killing Curse at him, and you intercepted it with that fancy axe of yours.”

She blinked at Poppy stupidly.

“Well, if that worked, why is he unconscious?”

“While it is possible to block the curse with an inanimate object,” Poppy said, sounding like she was scolding a first-year, “you are not supposed to be in contact with the object at the time.”

Celia shook her head. “Okay, so that explains why I was knocked out, but why was he hurt?”

Poppy shook her head as well, her mouth pressed into a thin line. “We don’t know. Usually the Killing Curse will destroy any object that gets in its way.”

“Well, it wasn’t going to destroy the scythe,” Celia mused. At least, she didn’t think it could have. Her hands itched to hold it and make sure it still felt right, just to be sure. She glanced around quickly but didn’t see it. Not the priority. She focused back on the matron. “It didn’t just ricochet, then?”

“No.” Poppy sighed. “Whatever it did, Severus has suffered severe damage to his heart.”

Celia swallowed hard.

“But I didn’t?”

“No, you were merely unconscious.”

That made no sense. She’d been the one actually holding the scythe when it was hit.

And I’m the one with the hyped-up healing. Right.

“Can you fix it?”

“I’m not sure.” Poppy could no longer meet her eyes.

“Would they be able to at St. Mungo’s?” She hated to ask it. Didn’t want him in some strange hospital. But if they could do more for him, it’d be worth it.
“We have already had two Healers out to look at him. They are as puzzled as I am and equally reluctant to move him.”

Celia eased one of his hands out from under the sheet and pressed it between both of hers. His fingers curled reflexively around hers, and her breath caught. He didn’t wake up. She lifted their joined hands and kissed each of his fingers, not caring that Poppy was still there.

“I have a good bit of hawthorne growing in Greenhouse Five,” she said at last.

“I know. He has been receiving infusions of it since shortly after you both arrived.”

“How long?”

“Two days.”

Two days. She was no Healer, but any Slayer knew the basics, and unconscious for days was bad, especially for non-Slayers.

“Was anyone else hurt?”

“No.”

Celia freed one of her hands to trace his cheekbone and jaw. She barely heard Poppy leave.

~ ~ ~

There was a small dark-haired boy crying in a corner. The room and the house no longer existed, therefore clearly this was not real. He turned to look at what the boy was hiding from and saw his father towering over his mother and shouting at her.

Children often deluded themselves that adults’ disagreements were centered on them, but in his case it had been mostly true. This fight was indistinguishable from all the others. He had done something magical and probably unintentional, and his father could not cope with that. Of course, his father blamed his mother for producing such a freak. He sneered and looked back at the boy. Himself.

He was almost old enough to go to Hogwarts now. Tobias would be relieved to be shot of him for most of the year.

Suddenly he was on the train, meeting other wizard and witch children for the first time. Like most first-years, they were trying to impress each other with what they already knew of magic, most of which was either useless or just wrong.

“Let’s see what you can do then,” challenged one of the black-haired boys he had just met, the one without the glasses.

“Locomotor Mortis!” cast the young Severus in a squeaky voice he hardly recognized as his own.

The other boys were horrified once they realized that Black’s legs were frozen in place.

“What’re you doing throwing hexes like that around?”

“Take that off him this instant!”

“I’m gonna go find a Prefect! Or a teacher!”

His younger self was obviously mystified by their reactions. It was not as though he’d chosen
something that would actually hurt anyone.

“Finite Incantatem,” the boy cast, freeing his new acquaintance. He had said the spell with assurance in his voice, but now his lip wavered. He could remember wondering what had been so wrong when the whole point had been to show off their magic.

“Oh, what, is he going to cry now?” Black taunted, clearly recovered from his terror now that he was free of the spell.

“You think you’re tough?” Potter demanded. “You’re just a sniveling coward. Your mother should’ve named you Snivellus!”

“What’s wrong with you boys?” demanded a red-haired young witch no one had noticed before. “You ask someone to show you what they’ve got, and when they do, you go all mental?”

He saw his younger self try to smile at her and then frown instead. Lily shouldn’t have said that. He felt that with as much certainty now as he had felt on that day. It wasn’t just his pride, but no one could ever understand the rest of it.

There was an ache deep in his chest at seeing her again like this, an ache so profound he felt he could barely breathe.

~ ~ ~

“Hey,” Willow said from behind her.

Celia turned and saw both Willow and Kennedy standing where Poppy had left them at the break in the curtain.

“Hey,” she replied softly, gently setting Severus’ hand down and rising to hug them both. “I’d invite you to sit, but …”

“No problem,” Willow replied as she waved a hand and conjured two chairs.

Celia sank back into her spot on the side of Severus’ bed. “Yeah.”

“We came as soon as we heard you were awake,” Kennedy offered.

“I was kind of surprised you didn’t … you know,” Willow added, tapping her forehead.

Celia took up his hand again. “Poppy said no one else was hurt, so I kind of tunnel-visioned.”

Willow nodded. “I can understand that.”

Celia wasn’t sure she did. There was a world of difference between losing someone irrevocably all at once and watching as they slipped away. Neither was exactly easy, but she’d done both, and she didn’t think she could watch like that again, though at least he didn’t appear to be in any pain.

“How are you feeling?” Kennedy asked.

Celia thought about that for a minute. Tired, heartbroken, terrified, take your pick.

“Guilty,” she said at last.

Willow immediately started to argue, “You didn’t do anything—”
“I get that,” Kennedy cut in.

Celia looked at her and saw that she truly did. She swallowed.

“No matter how much magic they have—”

“—they’re still too damned fragile.”

“Oh,” Willow said.

Celia stroked her thumb across Severus’ knuckles. Fragile was not a word she would ever have thought to use to describe him before now. But she was awake and he wasn’t, and she’d been the one holding onto the metal thing hit by the Killing Curse, not that it really worked like electricity exactly.

“Where’s the scythe?” she asked absently.

“Back at the house,” Kennedy answered. “Do you think it would help?”

Celia shrugged. “It was involved. Maybe. Maybe not.” She thought for a minute. “What did it look like?”

Willow looked thoughtful. “When the curse hit the blade it sort of just … diffused.”

“Diffused?”

“It pretty much went from a laser beam to a great big glowy ball,” Kennedy said.

“Oh.” Celia thought a moment. “So, then … what? Severus got caught in the backsplash?”

“Something like that, I think,” Willow replied.

Silence.

“You should come have something to eat,” Willow said.

Celia shook her head. “I can’t leave. I keep hoping …”

“That he’ll wake up enough to tap into your Slayer healing?” Kennedy asked.

“Pretty much.” She’d been begging him for about the last hour to do exactly that. “Kind of useless if you have to be already recovering before you can do it.”

She barely registered when the two women hugged her and said they’d be back later. When a house-elf, not Dobby, brought her a sandwich a little while later, she only gave him a nod of acknowledgement. She kept stroking her thumb across Severus’ knuckles and wishing he would wake up.

~ ~ ~

Lightfeather, Longbottom, and Lupin. Perfect.

He could not fathom why the three of them were together sitting under that tree. Nor could he understand how they could all be approximately fifteen years old at the same time. There was something … deeply wrong with that, as someone would say. He was not sure who would say that since it sounded very odd.
That bothered him even more than the tableau before him.

The three teens were conversing about something, completely indifferent to the other fifteen year old who was hanging upside down, graying pants on display, not ten yards from them. He stalked over to confront them.

“What is wrong with you? Why are you just sitting here?” he demanded.

“I didn’t do it,” Lupin replied, looking down at his knees.

“I’m afraid I’ll drop him if I try and get him down,” Longbottom said with that earnest but frightened expression Severus knew all too well.

“He should have blocked the spell,” Lightfeather answered. “Now he’s just got to act bored until they go away. Only way to handle bullies really.”

Disgusted, Severus turned to his younger self and tried to draw his own wand to reverse the *Levicorpus* spell. He tried but discovered he did not, in fact, have his wand. At least Potter and Black were nowhere to be seen.

“Leave him alone!” a familiar voice rang out. Both Severuses turned to see a Lily approaching, wand drawn. She quickly countered the *Levicorpus* spell, adding a Cushioning Charm so that he would not be hurt falling, then rounded on the three boys under the tree. “What’s wrong with you lot? What’s he ever done to you?”

“We didn’t do it, Evans,” Lupin muttered, still looking at his knees.

“Oh, well that makes it all right, then. You didn’t do it, so you don’t have to fix it. Is that what you think, you arrogant prats?”

“Lily,” the adult Severus breathed.

She turned and looked at him strangely. Somehow she appeared both older and younger than she should be. Behind her, his younger self ungracefully disentangled his robes and stood to watch them, mouth agape.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” she said softly.

“This isn’t right,” he said. “This isn’t how it happened.”

“You shouldn’t be here,” she repeated.

“I don’t need you defending me,” he snarled, “and I don’t need you telling me what to do!” He wanted to turn and leave, wanted it desperately, but somehow he simply could not tear his eyes from her.

“You think you know,” she said as though he had not spoken.

Tears pricked the backs of his eyes, and he willed them to remain there. There was a place he could let them out, but it wasn’t here. He was not sure where it was.

She stepped closer and raised a hand to touch his cheek. He didn’t feel it.

“I don’t think Harry’s the only one who needed protecting,” she said softly.

He tried to lean into her hand, thought for a moment he felt the barest hint of fingers against his skin,
and closed his eyes to focus on the ghostly sensation.

A growl sounded, and his eyes snapped open. Next to Lily, Lupin had transformed in broad daylight, and the werewolf was about to bite her. Behind him, Lightfeather had his wand out, and a Stunner streaked towards the ravening beast.

Severus tried to pull her away, to warn her, anything, but suddenly it was completely dark, and he was standing in front of an all-too-familiar house just as the sickening green light in the upstairs windows faded and a baby began to cry.

\[\text{~ ~ ~}\]

Celia woke with a start when she heard her name being called. In an instant, she dropped Severus’ hand and whirled to stand in a fighting crouch, facing the source of the voice.

Minerva smiled at her sadly.

Celia allowed herself to relax and sink gently back onto the edge of the bed.

“I thought it might be wise not to get too close,” the Headmistress said. Her eyes shifted to Severus’ pallid form. “Poppy says there has been no change.”

“No,” Celia agreed, taking his hand back between hers again. “She doesn’t know why he won’t wake up. The diagnostic spells show only damage to his heart, not his brain. He should wake up.”

Minerva came closer and looked down at him with an almost maternal concern. Celia was forcibly reminded that this woman had been his teacher as well as his colleague, had in fact known him for well over thirty years. That didn’t seem fair compared with just the few months Celia’d had.

“What will you do if he doesn’t wake?” the older woman asked gently.

“It’s only been a couple of days,” Celia replied. “I can’t think about that yet.”

In the silence that followed, she found herself thinking about it.

“For now, maybe it would be better for him to be in his quarters. Not that I’m sure he knows where he is, but familiar would have to be better, wouldn’t it?”

“You may be right,” Minerva replied. “I’ll ask Poppy about that before I go. But Celia, in the long term …”

“Willow and Kennedy are coming back later this morning, and they’re bringing my … they’re bringing the scythe.”

“What are you planning to do?”

“I’m not sure,” she admitted. “But it was part of what happened to him, and it’s part of what unlocked my Slayer powers. I’m hoping it can help … somehow. I need to try that before I can even think about anything ‘long term.’”

What does “long term” even mean? I’m not sure there’s even still a we to be thinking “long term” about.

“Celia?”
“Hm?” She turned to look at Minerva again. “Oh, sorry. Got lost in thought for a sec.”

“Very understandable. I was asking if you thought you would be able to return to class on Monday.”

She sighed. It was bad enough they’d missed two days, and it probably wasn’t fair to drag Pomona back out of retirement when Celia was actually able to teach. But leaving him alone in order to do it didn’t feel right. “Wait, what do the students think happened? What’s the Prophet been printing?”

Minerva nodded. “I believe it would do the students good to have something of a return to normalcy. They know you were both injured helping to capture a cell of Death Eaters.”

“That’s it?” She found that a little hard to believe. “How did you manage to keep the rest of it hidden?”

“Nymphadora and Kingsley were very selective in the Aurors they brought to assist us. And the Ministry has never been fond of panic, which would surely ensue if it were known that this rogue band of Death Eaters had gained access to Hogwarts.” Minerva smirked. “Something which I took great care to remind them of.”

Celia let out a sigh of relief. “So that’s all the students know. Good. I guess it would help if they had one less teacher to worry about.”

“Yes.”

She didn’t want to leave him alone. But if using the scythe didn’t wake him, she’d have to at some point.

“I’ll be back to class on Monday,” she said. “Who’s going to cover Potions though? I mean, Thursday and Friday were obviously a wash, but we never had anyone lined up for Potions. We thought if anyone went down …” It’d be me. And that we had at least some kind of plan for.

“I contacted Severus’ most recent apprentice. She has been given leave from her job at the Ministry and will arrive later this evening.” Minerva took a deep breath and released it. “I have already arranged for her to have access to Severus’ office, but if he has notes or essays in your … his quarters, I will ask you to retrieve them.”

Celia blinked slowly, trying to process this. And trying to figure out how to answer. Severus had most likely changed his passwords and alarm spells already.

“I realize this is probably uncomfortable,” Minerva said. “I don’t know what Severus has or has not told you …”

Celia shrugged. She didn't even know where she stood with Severus, assuming he ever woke up. She couldn't worry about old flames and said as much. She'd deal with getting into his quarters when it became a problem.

Minerva nodded uncertainly. She rested a hand on Celia’s shoulder and squeezed it gently before turning to leave.

~ ~ ~

He was back at Spinner’s End once again. It was a different day, but he could only be sure of that because his younger self was substantially younger. In all other respects, it seemed the same: his father shouting at his mother whilst he huddled in a corner. The smashed toy train suggested today it wasn’t about his magic but was still about him. Why did she not simply agree to discipline him? Did
she not realize that witnessing this was far worse than any punishment she could ever have devised?

Setting his jaw, he strode over to tell them both what he thought of their fights, to tell them what their son had become, to say all the things he had wished he could say at the time. By the time he reached them, they were gone. Wormtail was sitting on the sofa instead, wearing that insipid smile of his.

Stomach churning, Severus turned and left the small house, storming down the street, not caring that he was wearing robes in a Muggle town. None of this was real, obviously, so what could it matter? Before he knew it, he found himself at the mill. Music was playing inside. A door opened.

“Well, come on in, Mr. Too Serious for His Own Good,” a green demon said. “What, you think you’re too good to need a sanctuary every once in awhile?”

Severus narrowed his eyes at the demon, carefully keeping his breathing even so as not to betray how much that short walk had cost him.

“I am not currently in need of divination services,” he replied, turning to leave.

“Who said anything about reading you?” the demon … Lorne replied. How did he …? “How do I know your name?” Severus demanded.

Now the demon looked puzzled. “Don’t you remember?”

Severus merely stared at him.

“Well get inside before the rest of ’em get here, ya big amnesiac.”

Severus turned to look behind him, and a swarm of people in black hooded cloaks were visible some distance away.

“And why should I hide inside an abandoned mill?” he demanded.

“Sanctuary? Anti-violence enchantments? Any of this ringing a bell?”

There was some vague sense of familiarity to what the demon was saying. Also, for some reason he could not name, he had not once felt the need to defend himself from this demon. Pressing his lips tightly together, he nodded and entered.

Loud music and the scent of far too many different types of liquor assaulted him. Perhaps he would do better to take his chances against those Death Eaters. Why were they after him, anyway? They should all be either in Azkaban or dead. Yet despite his desire to distance himself from the music and the clientele, he selected a seat at an empty table.

“Aren’t you going to have anything to drink?” Lorne asked.

“No. Thank you,” he replied.

“Suit yourself,” the demon said with a shrug as he sat next to him. “Doesn’t have to be booze, y’know. We’ve got everything from Gillywater to pumpkin juice to …”

Severus regarded the demon intently.

“Why?” he asked.

“Why what?”
“Why do you have pumpkin juice? You have an American accent, and Americans are not fond of it.”

“I don’t know about that, Surly-cakes. You’ve met one American who doesn’t like it, who’s never been any part of the wizarding world on that side of the big, salty pond, and now you know that all of them don’t drink it?”

“She said … Who …? Why am I here?”

“Killing curse, mystical scythe, woman who loves you, got any bells jangling yet?”

“I do not believe I am the one missing bells or other metaphors for taking leave of one’s senses,” he snapped. Again, it did sound vaguely familiar, but caused him to feel very uncomfortable. The rather bizarre clientele of this odd establishment inside the mill was certainly contributing to that sensation, but not the primary cause of it. That itself was disquieting.

“No, but you’re missing part of the picture,” the demon replied. “Considering this is just a dream, you have to know you’ve been here before. I mean, really, do you think you’d make up something like me all by your lonesome?”

His eyes traveled from the demon’s horns, red eyes, and green skin, which he most certainly could have imagined without assistance, to the red jacket and pale orange shirt, which were a bit of a stretch, to the dainty glass of alcohol it was clutching. That was certainly not something he would have expected his own mind to produce.

“It is not unheard of,” he said, “for a person to combine disparate images in strange ways while dreaming.”

The demon rolled his eyes. “Fine. So somehow you’ve managed to pull together a demon karaoke bar in the old mill by your childhood home, and none of this has any basis in reality?”

“No doubt you represent some of the metaphorical demons of my childhood.”

“Hey, you want to see a demonic childhood, let me take you on a little tour of Pylea. Second thought, you go, I’ll stay. Even with Death Eaters crawling around, this dimension’s a big improvement.”

There were banging noises at the door.

“Don’t worry. They can’t get in. The anti-violence spells on this place are to die for. Or, actually, not to die for.” Lorne grinned. “That’s kind of the point. Anyway, they can’t get in, but you’re not trapped here. You need to know that. Not that you’d get very far with that ticker of yours.”

Something about that also sounded familiar. Familiar and important.

“I am entirely capable of defending myself,” he said at last.

“Cranky-pants, nobody is entirely capable of defending themselves. Not all the time. Not demons, not wizards, not even Slayers.”

“Slayers?”

“They do better in teams,” the demon said. “And not necessarily just their little Slayer squads. Not that anyone in their right mind would call them little, at least not to their faces. A lot of them are pretty short, though.”
Severus found himself fighting the urge to smile at that. Why? Why would a comment on the height of a quasi-mythological girl make me want to smile?

“Looks like something’s starting to jingle around in there,” Lorne said, downing the last of his drink.

Severus folded his arms and began trying to sort out why he would dream about an alcohol-swilling demon in a suit talking to him about the Slayer.

~ ~ ~

Celia caressed the handle of the scythe, its blade, its stake. A little thrill ran through her as her fingertips traced the grain of the ancient wood.

“You know, yew used to be the wood of choice for spears,” she said softly.

“Considering the number of vamps that thing’s dusted without getting dull? If that’s what it’s made from, I can see why,” Kennedy said.

“You don’t think …” Willow began.

“I don’t know,” Celia replied. “I just know this feels different to me now than it did before I came here.”

“But you can still feel it, right?” Kennedy asked. “You can still feel that it’s yours. Even though it’s mine. I mean all of ours.”

“Yeah, I can feel that,” Celia said softly. “And I can feel the mojo Will tapped into when she activated us, and I can feel whatever this other thing is, too. This resonance with my wand.” The same resonance she’d felt between her wand and that tree in Glastonbury. Not the same as the energy that resonated between her and Severus, but similar somehow.

“Does it feel different than before you used it to block that curse?” Kennedy pressed, her voice slightly worried.

“I don’t think so. Did it feel different to you?”

“No,” Kennedy admitted.

Well, then, what are you worried about?

Celia closed her eyes and let her fingers continue to explore the weapon, hoping for inspiration. A sense of calm descended over her. She opened her eyes.

“Where’s his … oh, right there.” She Summoned his wand from the bedside table, then pulled her own from her sleeve.

Same end or opposite?

She placed the two wands next to the stake and felt a resistance, as if she were trying to press two magnets together. When she brought them near the blade, they felt like puzzle pieces locking into place and stayed there when she removed her hand.

Right. Good. So it seems like maybe I’m onto something. You’re not a Slayer, Severus, but whatever this energetic-connection-life-debt-tag-game thing is has to be good for something. And I’m liking that it’s taking to your wand. That’s got to be good.
She sat down on the bed and rested the scythe across him and guided his hands to rest on its handle, then covered them with her own. It was awkward trying to grip both the handle and his hands from this angle, but she managed it. Her eyes slid shut and she focused on the magics she could feel thrumming through the scythe.

She’d thought of several possible incantations, but they all fled her mind. Instead, something new fell from her lips. “What’s yours is mine. What’s mine is yours. Take what you need. What’s yours is mine. What’s mine is yours. Take what you need.”

The metal began to feel warm, but she couldn’t be sure that wasn’t just from having two sets of hands on it.

“What’s yours is mine. What’s mine is yours. Take what you need.”

Now there was no mistaking it. The air fairly crackled with magic.

“What’s yours is mine. What’s mine is yours. Take what you need.”

Instinctively, she moved her right hand to rest on his left shoulder, just over his silvered starburst scar. A rush of magic ran through her. No, that’s backwards! I’m not the one who needs help this time you stubborn idiot!

“What’s yours is mine. What’s mine is yours. Take what you freaking need!”

Slowly, she felt the barest trickle of energy begin to flow from her. She’d only ever experienced the reverse of this: Willow’s memories of tapping into Buffy’s Slayer healing to regrow her skin and of tapping into Kennedy’s to fix a sprained ankle during a desperate pit stop while they were on the run. The trickle became a stream.

“There’s more where that came from, Severus, and I’ll make more if it runs out. What’s yours is mine. What’s mine is yours. Take what you freaking need.”

The stream became a river. The river swelled, and the current grew stronger. She planted herself firmly in the riverbed so she wouldn’t get swept away.

~ ~ ~

“You know, I’ve gotta give you this much,” Lorne said, wagging his finger. “Some men, when a woman tries to help him out, they get this wounded pride thing. Not you. Oh, you get upset about it, make a lot of the same noises. But you’ve got it stuck in your head that any woman who does something to help you, or worse yet to protect you, is going to come to a bad end.”

Severus looked up from his Firewhisky. He had decided that if it was all a nonsensical dream anyway, he might as well have a drink. He was no longer sure this had been a good idea, as his head was spinning far more than a single drink should be able to accomplish, though the warmth that washed through him with each swallow was more than worth it.

“History would seem to bear that out,” he replied slowly, carefully enunciating his words, “ridiculous as it sounds.”

“So is that why you went for a Slayer?” the demon challenged him. “You figure she should be more indestructible, or maybe she’s pretty much going to die a grisly death no matter what?”

“You’ve read her, is she?” What did that even mean? What would possess him to ask such a thing?
Clearly the demon was deluded, though perhaps it would be safest to humor him.

“What? Indestructible or doomed? I’m just a construct in your dream, Sevvie-kins,” Lorne replied. “I don’t know what the real me read except what you heard him say. Heard me say. Something like that.” He shrugged and took another large swallow of his drink. “I’ll tell you this, though: Slayers or not, their destinies are their destinies. You’re part of them, you affect them, but you don’t make them. You’ve got enough stuff you actually did to feel guilty about. No need to go stealing credit for things that you didn’t do. And the fact that I’m telling you this means it should be obvious you already know it.”

Severus really did feel far too warm for mere Firewhisky to explain. No, this was magic.

“What was in this?” he demanded.

“Nothing!” Lorne replied, offended. “And I do mean nothing. As in this is a dream, you big doofus. But what you’re feeling, that’s coming from outside someplace.”

“The Death Eaters outside?”

“What? No! They’re long gone. No, outside the dream, silly. It’s doing things to your ticker, for starters.”

He did feel less out of breath than he had in quite awhile.

“Also, it’s time.”

“Time for what?”

“Time to wake up.” The demon snapped his fingers so close to Severus’ face that he flinched and closed his eyes reflexively.

When he opened them, Celia was leaning over him. She looked utterly exhausted, and he could not for the life of him work out why. Nor could he understand why he was apparently holding her scythe, nor why his wand had just slid off its blade.

She opened her eyes. “Severus?”

He licked his lips, trying futilely to moisten them, and croaked, “Yes?”

Before he could try to say anything else, her lips were pressed firmly against his, and his questions would just have to wait.

~ ~ ~

Celia paced outside the curtained-off area, steaming at Poppy for tossing her out. What was taking so long?

“You’re going to wear a hole in the floor,” Willow murmured.

Celia shot her a look. “If a thousand years of magical kids haven’t managed it, what makes you think I will?”

Willow held her hands up in mock surrender as Kennedy laid a hand on her shoulder.

The curtain opened and Poppy stepped out.
“Well?” Celia demanded.

“He’ll need to rest. His heart is nearly healed, but not entirely.”

“Should I …?”

“His body will need to do the rest on its own,” Poppy replied. “Magic cannot do it all for him.”

Celia bit back her opinion of that in favor of, “Can I see him?”

Poppy was about to say no. Celia could just tell. Then she obviously thought better of it, saying, “For a few minutes. But only a few minutes, and if you upset him, your time is up.”

Celia was opening the curtain and stepping inside before Poppy had half finished, though the last bit made her smile. *If I upset him, I’ll know he’s back to himself.*

His glare wiped every trace of that smile off her face.

~ ~ ~

Why the devil is she just standing there? She looks nearly as horrified as she did that night Potter ruined everything.

“If you regret your actions, perhaps it would be best if you simply left.”

“Huh?” She furrowed her brows. “So, if I’m *not* sorry for how I reacted I get to stay?”

“Of course it was merely a reaction.” He turned his head away. “One could hardly expect you to do otherwise.”

_Slayers save people. That is simply what they do. It would have made no difference had it been someone else standing beside her._

“I’m glad you understand that,” she replied, “and I’m sorry I pushed you away.”

A chill ran through him at that confirmation. It seemed she truly did regret having saved him. “And you have the gall to actually say it? Perhaps there is more of your father in you than I thought.”

Without looking back at her, he could almost feel her flinch. It was far less satisfying than it ought to be.

“You know,” she said, “I get that you want to hurt me back. A hundred points to Slytherin for a direct hit. But I’d think you could come up with something that’d at least make sense.”

Silence.

“If you ever decide to accept my apology, you know where to find me.”

Accept …? Why would he …? He turned his head just in time to watch the curtain fall shut behind her.

~ ~ ~

Celia didn’t look up when she heard the greenhouse door open. Minerva’s footsteps were easy enough to recognize, and taking her eyes off the Venomous Tentacula while she was repotting it would be a Very Bad Idea. Besides, she had a pretty good idea what Minerva wanted, and she
wasn’t in any hurry to hear it.

Still, there was only so long she could spend repotting a single plant—even one that fought her every step of the way, never mind that it desperately needed a bigger pot and fresher soil—and finally, she had to call it done, stepping back and trying to wipe the sweat off her face. A look at Minerva’s expression told her that all she’d done was turn the sweat to mud with the dirt on her hands, but she couldn’t be bothered to spell herself clean.

“I find it amazing,” Minerva said, “that after spending the past two days in near-constant vigil by Severus while he was unconscious, this—” she waved at the writhing plant, “—became urgent the moment he woke.”

“I’d let things slide long enough.” Celia glanced around the greenhouse, cataloguing the things she ought to do next and absolutely not in any way avoiding Minerva’s eyes.

“I see.”

She probably did.

“Was there something you needed?” Celia asked.

“There was.” Minerva nodded, her eyes growing severe. “However, I am no longer certain you can assist me.”

“If it’s about getting Severus’ class plans and his students’ essays, either you or”—she tried not to wince—“his former apprentice should ask him what he’s changed his password to.”

Minerva nodded and turned to leave, then turned and said, “I’ve known Severus since he was eleven years old. He is a rather difficult man.”

Celia suppressed a snort. And I thought Giles was a master of British understatement!

“However, he is a dear friend.” Minerva’s tone was laden with warning.

“He didn’t want my apology.” Not that he was making much sense. “I’ll try again in a few days, when he’s feeling better,” she added hurriedly, ignoring the nauseating tug she felt in her belly even thinking of him. “Meanwhile, I think he’d rather I stayed out of his way.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not.” Minerva’s eyes narrowed.

While Celia watched the Headmistress leave, the Tentacula took advantage of her distraction to sting her, raising a large welt on her arm.

“Stupid plant.” She swatted it away and stalked out of the greenhouse to get some salve from her cottage. I wonder if Kennedy’s up for a workout.

~ ~ ~

Hours later, Severus woke to the sound of Poppy’s scolding. For a change, it was not directed at him. That was something of a relief, but it was annoying to be subjected to it nonetheless.

I realize I was unconscious for the past several days, but that is hardly an excuse for becoming so lax in her use of Privacy Spells.

“Honestly,” he heard her say, “were you under the impression that I was so bored you needed to go and get into a brawl so that I could patch you up?”
The reply was so indistinct he could not even tell which student was involved.

“Distracted? Distracted?” Severus could picture the exact scowl that accompanied those words and allowed himself a small smile. “You had no business doing anything of the kind.” A cabinet slammed. “I’d have thought you’d keep Skele-Gro to hand, in any case.”

“I do!”

Well, that was audible enough. No longer interested as the miscreant was not one of his Slytherins—though arguably a Slytherin of sorts—Severus closed his eyes and attempted to go back to sleep.

“Have you ever tried setting your own bone?” A sharp hiss. “Bones?”

Severus winced in spite of himself.

“I didn’t even realize she’d snapped that one too.”

“I’m not surprised.” After a few rustling noises, Poppy added, “And neither of them could set these? I find that hard to believe.”

“Oh, they could have.” Celia huffed. “I’m not sure if this is supposed to be punishment for letting my guard down or some misguided idea of my own good. Maybe both.”

The conversation grew less distinct as Severus finally felt sleep creeping along the edges of his mind, a blessed relief from the tightness in his stomach and ache in his shoulder. So when he heard the curtain around his bed rustle, he was not inclined to open his eyes.

“It’s been pointed out rather forcefully that there may have been some … miscommunicating going on earlier.” He heard her shift in her seat as if trying to get comfortable. “What with the complete lack of sense and all.” She sighed. “You being mad at me? Total sensibility there. I told you I didn’t care about your past, and then when I learned some of the details anyway, I couldn’t handle it. I’m not sure I could have reacted any differently, but that doesn’t make it okay.”

Something inside him seemed to loosen at that.

“What lacks sense is the part where apologizing makes it worse. I mean, I don’t expect you to just say, ‘Oh no, that’s fine,’ and we go back to how things were. I don’t. But I don’t think I deserve to be compared to that evil son of a bitch for trying to make things right.”

He finally let his eyes open, and he searched her face for any sign of dissembling. He found none. Bracing his hands on the bed, he sat up, the pain in both stomach and shoulder slipping away as he did so.

“That is what you were apologizing for?”
“Of course,” she tilted her head. “Why? What did you think?”

“Then I accept your apology.” He kept his eyes locked on hers.

“And?”

“And I apologize for comparing you to your father.” The words came more readily than he had expected.

She nodded acceptance but repeated, “And?”

Of course she would not let it go.

“I believed,” he ground out, “that you were expressing regret for rather more recent actions.”

“More recent?” She furrowed her brow at him. “What, for using some of your energy? No …” She broke off, clearly puzzled. Then realization—followed quickly by incredulity—swept over her features. “You thought I was sorry I saved you?”

There was not, he realized, any appropriate way to respond to that.

“Are you insane?”

Nor that.

“No, seriously. Poppy needs to re-check you for brain damage.” Celia slid over to sit on the bed, bracing her uninjured hand on the wall behind him, her eyes inches from his. “Did you miss the part where the first thing I did when you woke up was this?”

Fortunately, her demonstration saved him the trouble of replying for rather a long while.

~ ~ ~

While she’d never complain about spending an afternoon in bed together, it was much less fun when the bed was in the hospital wing. Not that he’d have been up for anything more energetic than some serious kissing once he’d gotten with the program. And then the talking. With occasional bouts of more kissing. Definitely not complaining.

He was still an idiot.

Apparently, however, he was back to being her idiot, and wasn’t that a surprise. Less of a surprise, once she got over that anyway, was that he was already using his not inconsiderable wiles on her.

“You do,” he said, “appear to actually enjoy teaching.”

“You don’t have to sound so amazed. You can’t actually hate it yourself. Not all the time,” she added. “Besides, either way, I’ll still be mostly teaching. It’s just a matter of teaching what to whom. And where.”

Where, of course, was kind of a big deal. The big deal. Nice as the past couple of hours had been, she wasn’t remotely ready to move back into Severus’ rooms, and she wasn’t even sure staying here at all was a great idea, though it had its appeal. She snuggled a bit closer to him.

“Whilst I assure you that invasions by bands of nouveau Death Eaters are hardly the norm, surely you could manage to satiate your Slayer impulses by expanding your off-grounds patrols.”
“Which you would conveniently rearrange my on-grounds patrol schedule to fit? Not sure I’m big on the favoritism, even when it’s in my favor.” She also had a feeling he was going to try to tag along, which was so not happening. “And then I could bring myself to the Ministry’s attention for a third time when I actually find anything that needs slaying. More than ever, I really don’t want them to know who I am. Plus with the visa situation on the Muggle side? And it’s not like I can’t just come visit any time. Or you could even get away once in awhile.”

Also? Much less awkward to deal with the post-argument sulks if I can be not here for a bit. Because obviously that’s not going to stop happening.

“If you are so determined to leave at the end of term—”

“I didn’t say that.” She turned to glare at him. It totally didn’t work from the angle she was sitting at. “Try listening to the actual words coming out of my mouth, okay? There are still a few weeks of school left. I’m just weighing my options.”

A sharp burst of tearful wailing filled the air so suddenly that it was obvious it had been contained by a Privacy Spell before.

“That’s odd,” Severus murmured. “Poppy’s spells are usually more reliable.”

Celia couldn’t decide if he looked shifty as he said that or just annoyed.

“I’ve told you, Miss Hollingberry, that I cannot prescribe potions to Muggles, especially without seeing them.”

“But she can’t get any sleep! And she’s not a Muggle. She got her letter months ago. Why does she have to wait until September? The Muggle doctors have tried everything, but she still has all these horrible dreams!” the girl cried.

“No way.” Celia sat up a bit straighter. “That would just be … no way.”

“And my parents can’t afford to keep fixing doors every time she gets so scared she breaks them!”

Severus’ eyebrow rose, and silence descended again, making it abundantly clear Poppy’s spell hadn’t failed at all.

“Or I might have my work cut out for me here after all,” Celia said. And Giles and Minerva might have to get back to fixing my magical and Muggle papers for the next seven years. Or so.

“It seems you may,” Severus agreed.

That smirk was just begging to be wiped off his face. So she did exactly that.

Fin

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