

By Any Other Name

by duniazade

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This story was written for Dream_Labyrinth during the SSHG Exchange on LiveJournal.

Original prompt: Having survived the war and been declared a war hero isn't enough for Severus. He also wants some fun. Unfortunately, wherever he goes, an annoying Gryffindor know-it-all shows up. Can that be coincidence?

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Chapter 1 of 1

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The room was almost monastic in its stark, cold simplicity.

Stone floor. A single window to the north. A massive cupboard at the far end on her left.

Behind her, the heavy door, closed and carefully warded.

She was standing in front of the table, facing the blank wall.

"Are you ready?" he asked quietly.

She nodded.

She closed her eyes.

She felt the black silk fall over her eyelids, light and soft like forgiveness. It was extremely thin, but as he wound it repeatedly around her head, varying the angles and crossing the layers, it moulded to her face as closely as a mask.

At last he tied, slowly and carefully, the final knot behind her head. With perfect precision. Without catching any of her unruly hair.

She felt him move away from her, then heard him rummaging in the cupboard. There was the clink of metal on glass, the dull drag of wood on wood, then the slow hiss of a blade on a whetstone. He was preparing his instruments.

He came back and laid on the table three light objects in a row in front of her, three heavier ones a little farther away and, judging by the sound, a metallic one at their right. She couldn't help tensing.

"*Mademoiselle Lagrange*," he began softly, "you have had the audacity to follow me these last six months."

He paused for a moment, as if waiting for a protest, but she kept silent.

"You were aware that I had been cleared of all charges, declared a war hero, granted a comfortable pension and set free to live my life as and where it pleased me.

"Still, you kept stalking me. In every place I chose to go, you appeared in my tracks.

"You were present at the Chapitre de Diane in Chinon and at the ceremonies of the Jurade in Saint-Emilion and in Orange as in Beaujeu, in Ampuis as in Nuits Saint-Georges."

His voice dropped to a whisper.

"You have followed me even under the earth...in the deep caves beneath Aÿ where you tried to uncover the secrets of riddling."

He was circling the table now, at leisure, and every time he passed her, she could hear the subtle rubbing of wool on wool, feel the displacement of air, and it made her shiver.

"In the hope of getting rid of you, I left France and travelled the world. I thought I could find some peace on the black sands of Santorin where the Assyrtikos grows...the last prephyloxeric vine in Europe...but you followed me even there, as you did to Cape Town in South Africa, and to Marlborough in New Zealand and to Penfolds Grange in Australia."

He stopped just behind her and leaned in. She could feel the heat emanating from him.

"I have decided to end this and settle our quarrel where it began, in France.

"I won the first contest in Chinon, but you had the upper hand in Orange. I defeated you in Saint-Emilion, but you bested me in Ampuis. We got even in Nuits Saint-Georges, and the less said about the disaster in Beaujeu, the better."

He paused in bitter recollection before resuming.

"The moment has come for a final decision. For the last time, are you ready?"

She nodded again, and he moved to the other side of the table.

She heard the soft splash of liquid poured into the first recipient, filling it to a third of its capacity. It would be quite sufficient; if she made a mistake...

A tense silence followed in which, guided only by the memory of the sound, she found the stem of the glass.

As her fingers closed around it, the dark man audibly held his breath.

Slowly, deliberately, she raised the glass to her nose, sniffed, swirled and sniffed again.

"On first impression, the nose is sharp and well-defined with mineral notes of ink, pencil shavings and iodine tightly wrapped around a core of rose petals and blackcurrants, underlined by notes of violets, wet moss and freshly mown grass."

She sipped along with a thin trickle of air and kept the liquid in her mouth, sifting through the sensations.

At last she swallowed, waited until the last reverberation of the bouquet had disappeared and resumed.

"A honed edge in mouth with a precise focus and penetrating grip. The confirmed minerality suggests a gravel topsoil while the freshness and aromatic elegance originates in a limestone or limestone and clay subsoil...probably a Calcaire de Plassac.

"The structure is slender and supple with biting acidity and a subtle bitterness completing the mouthful of elegant black fruits. This feline grace is typical of a Margaux First Growth.

"The darker, complex aromatic notes characteristic of Cabernet Sauvignon dominate at 75% while a smaller percentage of Merlot brings the fruit...20%...and the Petit Verdot, 5%, accounts for the violets and roses.

"The finish evolves in a complex blend of cedar wood, spices and the dry leather of well-loved books before it lashes back on a sarcastic hint of liquorice drops.

"Overall, a brilliant, clever, supremely intelligent wine with a touch of dark wit. Château Margaux, 1986."

She put her glass back down on the table and, without waiting, grasped the second glass.

It took, however, a much longer period of sniffing and swirling before she spoke again.

"This wine is very closed despite its manifest potential. It is quite reserved and unyielding on the nose, revealing a little cassis and blackberry fruit in time and also some tobacco character.

"In the mouth, it has such a dense minerality that it feels at first like licking a wet stone. The tannins are firm, almost harsh, but the concentration and intensity are amazing, and there is the promise of great fruit with layers of complex aromas of roasted berries, liquorice, chocolate, caramel, dark cherry... if only this powerful wine would consent to open. As it is, its heart is guarded under seven locks of iron.

"The topsoil must be gūnzian quaternary gravel. At least three to four feet of it. Only a strong vine can grow on such a poor, pebble soil. These natural conditions force the roots to make their way down to find their vital nutrition, deep into the dark marl and clay subsoil. Such alternate marl and clay layers are essentially found on the left bank near the Gironde. Consequently, this vineyard is probably very close to the water.

"Despite its forbidding character, the wine has a melancholic elegance. I would place it at the south-eastern point of Pauillac, at the limit with Saint-Julien. That would make it a Château Latour...from a relatively recent year where due to climatic conditions, they had to use more Cabernet Sauvignon than the usual proportion of 75%...probably up to 90%, the rest being Merlot...so it's a 1990."

She put down her second glass gingerly, as if afraid it could shatter, and took the third. As she was sniffing, the corners of her mouth, pink and sharp, lifted in the tiniest smirk.

"I'm so pleased you considered this wine a challenge, *Monsieur Leprince*... Let's see, what could it be?

"It has a complex nose of thick black cherry, blackberry and cocoa...shall we say a Merlot? Maybe with a shot of 5% Cabernet Franc to account for the touch of

raspberry...with vanilla and a whiff of smoke over crisp notes of new parchment and freshly mown grass.

"And now, on the palate..." She paused as she sipped, and it was quite a moment before she spoke again, but she seemed lost in bliss rather than in scrutiny. "...perfectly ripe black fruit, mellow tobacco leaf and green olive herbaceousness, sandalwood and roasted coffee, intertwining in complex layers that almost defy description before they melt into the fullness of dark, deliciously bitter chocolate. There's just a hint of iron hidden under unfathomable depths of velvet. The long, long, silky finish seems to linger forever. A powerful wine of infinite, yet firmly reined, sensuality."

"Shall we then say... a Merlot grown on dark clay shot through with iron nuggets? A very particular type of soil indeed, unique in the world...just eleven hectares of it on the right bank of the Gironde. From the perfect balance and interlinking between the primary, secondary and tertiary aromas, this wine has already reached plenitude. From the firm structure, it could defy an indefinite number of years, maybe even stopper death. Assuredly an exceptional vintage. So... Pétrus 1989."

There was something definitive about the way she emptied her glass and put it back on the table, but she seemed unaware of the drop of black wine that lingered on her lower lip. He looked on in fascination. The tip of her tongue sneaked out and licked it.

In the silence that followed, she tore the silken blindfold from her eyes.

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"And now, Severus," she said, circling to his side of the table, "I think it's your turn."

Taking a red scarf from her pocket, she wrapped it slowly, carefully, around his head. She had to stand on her toes in order to securely tie the knot over the lank black hair, and as she did so, he heard the imperceptible hitch in her breath.

She took a step back and surveyed her handiwork.

"Do you remember what you told me in the caves beneath Aÿ? Forty kilometres of darkness where sleeps the hidden gold, and you had to happen upon me. You accused me of following you. I was seeking knowledge."

He kept his resigned silence.

"Do you remember what our wager was?"

No hint of a response from the stoical man. His shoulders were stubbornly straight, and he might have been made from stone for all the reaction he showed.

She put the tip of a finger on the black sleeve.

"I know you would never beg for mercy."

It was infinitesimal, the minutest grain of sand in the ocean of time, but he flinched.

Her smile unfolded slowly with the secret, lazy widening of a ripple on a quiet lake, luxuriating in the knowledge he couldn't see her.

He heard her steps going away to where she had left the enchanted handbag in the corner of the room.

He could imagine her crouching to rummage through the bag, her bare arm plunged almost to the shoulder in the hidden depths of that limitless cache. In his mind's eye, he envisioned the tight skirt straining against her thighs...

When she came back to the table, her steps were slower and cautious as if she bore something heavy. Her weapons.

Surreptitiously, he moved slightly forward. His thighs were now touching the edge of the table, and he was able to feel the slight vibration as she carefully put her load down. Definitely something unusually heavy. Three of them.

She was now arranging the three glasses in front of him, but he waited in vain for the minute squeak of the corkscrew...was she holding it in her hand?

When she spoke again, her tone was deceptively soft.

"But I am more merciful than you.

"It is thus a mark of my goodwill that I'll let you touch the bottles, feel their heft, even open them and pour the wine yourself. As it might be a little difficult, in your present state, to aim a corkscrew with any degree of accuracy, I have even provided items that won't need that implement. You will do it with your bare hands.

"As you were so concerned with my wanting to penetrate the secrets of the cellars under Aÿ, I thought you'd appreciate that I chose Champagne.

"And, just in case some essential subtlety has escaped me, I'm going to revise what I have learned about the arcane knowledge of that esoteric and golden brew. I won't speak in riddles, though it would suit you very well."

She began circling around the table, her heels clicking softly on the flagstones.

"Three months before the liquid gold begins its ascension to light, the cellar man, also known as the riddler, gives each bottle a quick shake back and forth, allowing the sediment to slide towards the bottleneck.

"Then, each day, holding the bottle by its base, he gives a brief and sharp twist of one-eighth of a turn, once to the left and once to the right, so as to loosen the sediment along the walls of the glass and encourage it to move towards the exit. Little by little, the riddler nudges the bottles upwards, taking them to a vertical position, so that each bottleneck is wedged in the punt of the bottle beneath and ready for disgorgement."

She stopped for a moment, then resumed pacing in a soft whisper of fabric.

"Disgorgement itself, the expulsion of the deposit from the bottle through internal pressure, is traditionally operated 'à la volée'. That is, a 'flying disgorgement'. The operator holds the bottle delicately inclined on his left forearm...with the base of the bottle in the crook of the arm...and removes the fastening around the cork."

She was much closer, now. She wasn't wearing any perfume, of course.

"He pulls the cork out with a quick, jerking movement towards the small tilted barrel, into which spurts the four or five centilitres of foaming wine that contain the deposit. The worker passes his finger through the foaming wine to expel any of the impurities that might remain, then stoppers the bottleneck with his left thumb, waiting for the effervescence to calm down before the last touch, the elixir known as 'liqueur d'expédition', is added to the wine.

"Then, and only then, would he finally seal the bottle with a cork...held in place with a wire cage...and send it towards its sacrifice."

She paused for a moment.

"Am I right?"

No answer. He was standing as still as a statue, his arms alongside his body, in fatalistic relaxation, though his spine was straight and taut as a vibrant steel blade.

But... was it possible? She leaned closer to peer into his face.

Had that impassive, stern marble blushed? It was hard to tell against the dark red of the blindfold that contrasted so strikingly with the white skin and raven locks.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'.

"But I am not asking you to perform that complex alchemy...not now. All I'm asking is that you open the three bottles, pour them into the flutes...without spilling a single drop, of course. I'm sure you'll agree that the proper manipulation and service of wine is vital to its enjoyment. Then you'll have to taste and identify them, which I don't doubt you will. But, professor, no guesses. As you are a master of those mysteries, I want to know each step that led to your conclusion: what proportion of each of the allowed varieties, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier, on which terroir they were cultivated, under what aspect to the sun and exposition to the wind, the peculiar quirks of their processing, in what kind of vats they were fermented, for how long? What was the dosage of the expedition liquor, and under what configuration of the stars were they finally sealed? Be convincing.

"You may now proceed."

She leaned slightly forward. Her lips were close to his ear. In the cold atmosphere of the room, the warmth of her breath almost made him shudder.

"And... remember, Severus. Not a single drop spilled."

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He didn't answer.

Slowly, but without hesitation, his hands glided over the coarse wood of the table.

The long fingers brushed against the stem of the first flute and curled around the elongated bowl, ascertaining height and volume.

Then he reached for the bottle at the left end of the row.

His right hand felt gently around the furled lip, finding and untwisting the eyelet. In one single movement, using his fingers as a hook, he extricated the wire muzzle and pressed his thumb on the cork.

The left hand, which was firmly gripping the body of the inclined bottle, began to turn it with steady force.

There were barely a sigh and a drift of silvery mist as the cork came undone.

Carefully, without spilling any of it, he poured the golden liquid to one third of the glass.

The young woman bit her lip.

He sniffed, tilted the flute, and sipped.

"The aromas are still delicate and close-knit with a faint herbaceous character...lemongrass and melissa...followed by aerial white flowers, hawthorn and honeysuckle, mingled with a subtle note of orange blossom and crisp citrus fruit.

"On the palate, brisk acidity and a tingling, peppery mousse with gossamer strings of very tiny, bright crystalline beads at the core. The structure is lithe and clearly defined with clean, vivid lines and a graceful surge of eagerness. It has a limpid style with a nice bite on the finish.

"The fine aromas and the freshness are typical of a wine dominated by Chardonnay grown on a chalky subsoil. The precision of the flavours indicate a first growth, on top of the Côte des Blancs, at Cramant. It is a vintage first pressing that has rested for five years on the lees and has been disgorged less than two months ago. Minimal dosage at 1%.

"This is plainly very youthful and simple at present but with a precise, finely-edged balance that indicates great potential and presumably a bright future."

He put down the first glass and was preparing to repeat the procedure when she spoke.

"Wait," she said coldly. "You haven't identified the wine."

He seemed to consider her demand carefully.

"Indeed, *Mademoiselle Lagrange*. I'm certain you chose these wines with utmost care and a special attention to gradation and eventually, misleading nuances. Therefore, I should find advantage in comparing the three of them before venturing a formal identification or the specific details pertaining directly to that identification."

"This is against the rules," she hissed.

"Is it? I was under the impression the rules state no precise moment for delivery of the identification, other than having to be effected before the end of the contest."

She subsided in seething silence, and soon he lifted the second flute.

"A very open and expressive nose: the whiff of bold musk rose being quickly followed by delightful notes of ripe white fruits, mulberry, peach and honeydew with a twist of beeswax and fresh cashew nuts.

"On the palate, it feels brightly confident with a dry, firm grip of acidity and yet a full, almost buttery, body. The mousse is incredibly fine and persistent with a mouthfilling, rich texture, punctuated by streams of minuscule, light beads. There are elements of roasted pears over complex layers of marzipan, lemon meringue and nut-toasted brioche, balanced with a sharp, unexpected tinge of ginger.

The full body indicates a good proportion of Pinot Noir...50%...from a marl terroir at Sillery, completed with Pinot Meunier...25%...for the smoothness and Chardonnay...25%...for the white fruit and freshness. The wine is mature yet youthful...seven years on the lees, disgorged four months ago.

"A brilliant, well-rounded yet incisive wine with a creamy, seductive finish."

This time, when he put his glass down, she didn't say anything and contented herself with observing his manoeuvres.

He took a long time sniffing the third flute, and she couldn't help noticing how the narrow aperture framed the centre of his upper lip, the double bow of the philtrum.

When he spoke again, it was with a thoughtful tone.

"This is a very unusual wine.

"The first enticing aromas are of warm, baked Bramley apples with a sprinkle of cinnamon. They quickly give way to a captivating bouquet of a very complex, mature

character, polished in style, with notes of mushroom, coffee, caramel and roasted Brazil nuts over oiled oak."

"On the palate, it has a beautifully textured, elegant and composed nature over a fabulous acidic backbone. The body is full and supple, almost mellow, with a butter cream richness wrapped around a firm, perfectly integrated structure. There is a finely tuned balance of mousse, elegant and yet slightly creamy weight, and broad, rich flavours of mushrooms, praline and melted, mouth-coating toffee, intertwining with deep layers of smoky fruit and dark heather honey.

This is a Blanc de Noirs wine...75% Pinot Noir and 25% Pinot Meunier...from an exceptional vintage, grown on the Kimmeridgean marls of the Côte des Bar and fermented in wood tuns. The quality of the juice has allowed the winemaker to forego malolactic fermentation and to let the wine mature for an unusually long time...twelve years on the lees before disgorgement eight months ago.

"A powerful, singular, yet supremely elegant and complete wine with a long, silky, unexpectedly...ah..*tender* finish."

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Three steps took her around the end of the table.

"I asked for technical details and identifications," she said.

"I believe you didn't set a time limit."

"Snape..." she warned between clenched teeth.

"That clause must have escaped me."

She huffed in exasperation. "We don't have all the time in the world."

"Indeed."

She advanced menacingly, making her heels click each step with more force than necessary.

He stepped back. Encouraged, she took two more swift strides.

And found herself flush against his unremarkable black jumper.

He hadn't retreated, after all.

Mortified, she looked up.

His face had the vacant expression of the blind.

She stood on tiptoe to peer better.

That serpentine mouth was now in reach, stubbornly closed.

She was still not high enough to catch the arched upper lip, so she settled for nestling in the quiet valley between.

At first he didn't respond. His lips were warm, flushed from the wine, silky and slightly wet, and cradled hers line for line. They fitted so exactly that she could feel the sharp angles begin to flutter before he tilted his head, and that maddening upper bow ghosted between her own lips.

His mouth was still bright from the champagne, hers dark from the claret. He tasted like peaches warmed in the sun, brioche and honey; she tasted of blackberries, leather and moss. As the flavours flowed and swirled, darkness and light mingled, ascending and descending, until they melted into a black sea of chocolate oblivion, pierced with golden sparks of prickling, exquisite, sharp, almost painful sensation.

Aeons later, she realised his arms were around her, but she didn't know when it had happened. It was most convenient as her knees had turned to water. Her fingers were tangled in the crumpled blindfold on his temples, but he didn't seem to mind, though he was breathing a little hard.

With a supreme effort, she tore herself from the kiss and asked, "Identifications, Snape?"

His voice was ragged. "Miss...Granger...Hermione!"

"That will do," she sighed.

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