

Minerva's Watch

by pyjamapants

Minerva lurks through the castle in her Animagus form, spying and waiting for Severus's return.

She Watches

Chapter 1 of 4

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A/N: This chapter was originally written for Annie Talbot's birthday 2009. Remaining chapters are a Yule present and thank you for our most awesome Head of Slytherin House.

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Minerva trotted to the front doors of the castle, her paws carrying her silently through the halls. The portraits, her usual sentries, had failed her, and it was only by sheer luck that she'd been looking out of her window. She kept her mouth clamped firmly shut. It was best to save the string of hisses and growls for her more articulate human form. Tomorrow though, the portraits would be receiving a dressing down that would make even the hardest of seventh-years wish for their beds back home. And it was damned hard to incite fear in a seventh-year Gryffindor boy.

She let the thought of her instincts distract her as she scampered through the halls. Hissing, especially when accompanied by a fur-bristled arch of the back, was her favourite stress relief. Sometimes she transformed in her quarters just for the pleasure of a few minutes of hissing. This year, such interludes stretched to a quarter-hour. A half-hour if the Carrows had been present at dinner. With a chorus of piteous yowling if she had glanced at her charges over her meal. Tonight, or rather tomorrow, given the hour, it seemed she'd be pulling out all the stops: hissing, yowling, spitting, and probably a ten-minute battle with the edge of the carpet.

But now was not the time for hissing or any other feline shenanigans. Stealth took precedence over indulging in the ridiculous habits of her form. Minerva skidded to a halt inside the doors of the castle and ducked into a shadow off to the side. Where was he? He should be here by now. Her tail smacked the ground as her anxiety mounted. She glanced around. Her cover of shadow was good, but it still wouldn't do if someone were to see a cat staring at the front doors as if willing them to open.

Sighing, she picked up her paw and gave it a delicate swipe with her tongue. She rubbed her paw over her face and ear as she waited, tension growing. Her nose was nestled in between her back toes when the doors finally thundered open. The Carrows stumbled in first, tripping over one another as they walked. Drunken Carrows were even more dangerous than sober ones, and she thanked the four Founders that the students would all be tucked away at such a late hour. Even Longbottom should have retired from his late night excursions.

Minerva continued to groom, hoping to project an air of feline indifference in the event she was discovered. After all, a student's familiar who was brave enough to wander the castle at night wouldn't *know* to be terrified of those despicable excuses for teachers. A puff of air escaped her nose in relief as the duo passed her without notice. She wrapped a paw around her back leg and pulled it closer to her mouth. Finally, the Headmaster entered, looking as if he were carrying the weight of the school's wards on his shoulders.

"Good night, Professors," he mumbled to the retreating backs of the Carrows.

Minerva could hear his exhausted sigh as he turned to climb the stairs to the Headmaster's office. She glanced around to ensure the Carrows were out of sight and that no one else was present to see her slink from the shadows. Severus was walking slowly this evening, and it was no great feat for her feline form to keep up with him. If anything, it made it harder; the coiled tension made her want to tear through the corridors. She padded up the stairs behind him, wondering if forcing the issue was the wisest of ideas. But Severus had looked so haggard lately. She'd hoped he might get some rest over the holidays, but as usual, things were not working out well for Severus Snape. And now that she knew why, she could no longer ignore his condition.

Severus muttered the password to the gargoyle, and she slipped in behind him. She watched from the doorway as Severus trudged to the hook on the wall and hung up his robes. He sank into the desk chair and Summoned a bottle of Firewhisky. He had taken two deliberate and generous sips before he froze, glass halfway between his desk and his mouth, his wand levelled in her direction.

"Professor McGonagall, I find it difficult to believe you might have school business to attend to at this time of night... particularly in your current form. Spit out whatever you have to say to me, and then leave me in peace." Severus lowered his glass, but his wand remained steady.

With a swirl of fur and black robes, Minerva transformed into her human form. She cleared her throat, opened her mouth, and out stumbled the truth, "Severus, I know."

Impossibly, Severus's posture grew more rigid. His eyes narrowed as he ground out, "You know what, Minerva? That this year's crop of First Years are more imbecilic than ever? That the price of shrivelfigs has escalated due to supply problems in the Middle East? That you are in my office well past my office hours, and I couldn't give a Hippogriff's arse about whatever complaint you have?"

She ignored his attempts to bait her. "I know what the circumstances were on the Astronomy Tower last year. I know you've been shielding the students to the very best of your abilities, and I know you've been passing information to the Order through various, circuitous channels. What I don't know is why, after all we've been through, you couldn't trust me."

For a moment, Severus looked as if he were going to deny the accusation. Then his resolve crumbled. Albus's chair cradled Severus's limp form as he slumped back into it, his wand trailing the floor when his arm dropped. "Because Albus didn't trust that I would be able to maintain my cover if you knew. He thought your compassion would overpower your acting abilities. And, I suspect, he wanted to live out his final days in peace rather than have his ankles shredded every time he exited his office." He reached for the glass of whisky and downed a fair bit of it.

Minerva settled into the chair opposite the desk, trying not to think about the last time she'd sat there. "Yes, I'd have given him hell for putting you in such a situation, Severus." She cast a caustic glance at a now empty portrait. "The coward."

The two stared at each other for a moment, not really knowing what to say now that the truth of the situation lay before them. Severus broke the eye contact first and shuffled a pile of parchment that lurked on the corner of his desk. "How did you know, Minerva?"

"I'd suspected something all along, Severus. Albus was behaving... oddly, even for him, during those weeks before his death, and you were a nervous wreck. And... I could hardly think you capable of such a deed out of malice." Minerva paused, gesturing towards the place where she knew all Headmasters kept their alcohol. Severus nodded his approval, and she Summoned the familiar decanter of single malt. After pouring herself a generous measure, she finished, "Albus visited the portrait in my room last week and confirmed my suspicions."

The corner of Severus's mouth twitched. "I had wondered how he acquired such a raging case of boils. Yet how very odd that he would choose to reveal something so critical to the war effort...especially when he made me swear not to share the truth with you." He glanced at the empty portrait frame then motioned for her to continue.

"Albus did not share the truth directly. He just tried to steer the conversation elsewhere, as always. It's confirmation enough." Minerva was a bit misty-eyed as she sipped her drink. "I suspect he's worried about you, Severus. As am I."

At this, Severus's posture stiffened. He leaned forward in the chair and began protesting, "Minerva, I am perfectly capable..."

"Of driving yourself to exhaustion? Of endangering the idiotic plans that Albus forced you to execute?"

He flinched at her choice of words.

"You're not sleeping, you barely even pushed your food around on your plate at dinner tonight, you've lost weight when you didn't have any to spare, and you look as though the next stiff wind might make you fall over! You're stretched far too thin between He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, running Hogwarts, shielding its students from the Carrows, trying to maintain the illusion that you're an evil, insufferable Death Eater, and in all likelihood continuing to plot with Albus because Merlin knows the man can't resist meddling, even after death!" Out of breath from her tirade, she relaxed now that she had finally vented her concerns. The sneer on Severus's face gave her forewarning that his reaction would not be pleasant.

"Thanks, Mum, but don't you have a house of ickle Gryffindors to watch over? From the Carrows' bragging, your flock needs far more tending than me," he said snidely, knocking back the rest of his drink.

Minerva gritted her teeth. Verbal sparring had always been the keystone of their relationship, but this had all the signs of turning very ugly if she didn't head things off. She softened her voice and continued, "I'm worried about you, Severus. Is it so very difficult to believe that I might be concerned for you?"

Severus's eyes did not waver as he answered, "Yes. Yes, it is."

Such a simple phrase, and yet it knocked the wind out of her. "Severus, I..."

"Believed what Albus wanted you to, and I shouldn't hold that against you." Severus refilled his whisky and avoided looking in her direction.

She really had not thought through this part of the discussion. When she'd set out tonight, her only concern had been to make sure that Severus had returned safely from his summons. Her feline curiosity had clearly not served her well. "I'm not sure what I can possibly say. An apology falls well short of what is required, and it's certainly not enough to say that I had hoped you weren't capable of such an action."

"Minerva, there's nothing you can say," he said bitterly, seeming to regret his harsh words when he looked up at her. "I mean to say that I understand... to an extent. Please, just go. I'm holding up tolerably well considering the circumstances."

A lump formed in Minerva's throat. Surely he wouldn't push her away. "Severus, there must be something I could do to ease your burden."

"Keeping your damn cubs in their dormitories after curfew would be a start," Severus replied, exhaustion creeping back into his voice.

"Severus, please!"

"Do not say that!" Severus roared, leaping from his chair and slamming his hands upon his desk.

"Severus! What? I..." Her gaze darted about the room. In all their years together, he had never once raised his voice. Well, not to her.

With a resigned sigh, Severus leaned upon his desk, closing his eyes. "Those... Those were the last words Albus said to me."

Minerva choked back a quiet sob. Albus had asked far, far too much of this man, her Severus. She could no longer tolerate sitting idly. Moving with all the deliberateness of

her feline form, she stood from her chair, walked behind the desk, and laid her hand upon Severus's shoulder.

She had expected he might wrench himself away from her touch and was startled when he turned to pull her into a desperate embrace. She pursed her lips and blinked back tears. It would not do to allow her emotions to spill over.

"Yes, Minerva, I've been stretched so thin you could punch holes in me." He clung to her, nearly crushing her, as if she were the only thing anchoring him to earth. "That's hardly new."

She relished the feel of his cloak under her fingertips as she traced them along his back. "Severus, surely there's something I can do to help."

"You shouldn't know at all. I won't have you in danger."

At that, Minerva snorted. "Then you'd best find a placement for me to teach abroad. I'm hardly in more danger now than I was last week."

Severus pulled back from her embrace, his face so close she could feel his breath and smell the alcohol upon it. "Minerva..."

The booming voice of the gargoyle cut off his response. "Professors Carrow to see the Headmaster."

Their breaths stilled, and for the briefest of seconds, they stared at one another, wide-eyed. Severus flung his wand towards the west wall, and a door suddenly appeared. "Hide in the bedroom." He let go of her. "And transform, just to be safe."

She transformed and streaked towards the bedroom, hiding under the bed until she heard the door close.

She Transforms

Chapter 2 of 4

Minerva hides while Severus meets with the Carrows.

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Minerva paced in circles around Severus's bedchamber, once again forcing herself to keep her feline mouth shut. Her stomach was a tight ball of knots. She quietly growled at her foolishness. It was ridiculous to be so worried. Severus had met with the Carrows a hundred times before. His stony exterior had fooled them for months and would continue to do so. Her stomach twisted. He'd fooled her, after all, and she was quite certain no one on earth knew him so well.

Willing herself to stop pacing, she walked to the edge of the rug between the fireplace and the bed. She was relatively certain no one but Severus would be entering that door, but it wouldn't hurt to have the bed blocking her form. Yes, she could dart under the bed at the mere suggestion of the sound of footsteps approaching the door, but the cover would buy her precious seconds in case the single malt forced a catnap. She curled her front paws underneath her body as she lay down. Taking several deep breaths to calm her skittish nerves, she relaxed into the position.

Her yellow eyes surveyed the room. Even with the fire, it seemed colder than Severus's dungeon quarters had ever been. And as sparse as a monk's. Not that Severus had ever been a collector of knick-knacks, but there was hardly any evidence that any one lived here. Well, at least from the floor level. Her whiskers twitched. Perhaps she'd be able to see better from the bed.

Tensing her back legs as she prepared for the jump, she performed a last minute check of all the parameters necessary for her short vertical flight. Destination looked stable. No wind to speak of. Path clear of obstacles. She flattened her tail against the floor and jumped, soaring through the air and landing soundly on the duvet.

Severus's scent overwhelmed her immediately, and a stuttered purr involuntarily chugged to life in her throat. She could barely restrain herself from burrowing under the covers, letting the warmth and the scent envelop her. She could curl up here for hours, reminiscing about happier days and completely forgetting about the turmoil affecting the world outside this room. Shaking such indulgent thoughts from her fuzzy little head, she reminded herself that she had adopted the risky location for reconnaissance and set herself to the task of snooping. It wasn't wise to accommodate her other feline instincts at the moment, but caving in to her curiosity would serve her well.

The top of Severus's dresser was bare. No piles of books. No clutter of potions phials standing ready for a Summoning Charm. She looked towards the mantel. Still too high up. She walked to the foot of the bed and stood on her hind legs, balancing with her forepaws on the bedpost. The mantel was empty as well. No Floo powder. The set of delicate gold measuring devices that Albus had given Severus upon the end of his first year of teaching were absent. What else had been on his mantel when he lived in the dungeons? She idly rubbed her cheek against the bedpost as she tried to recall. It seemed a lifetime ago.

Giving up on surveying that end of the room, she let her forepaws drop back to the duvet. She supposed she would have to look at the bedside table now. Surely it was empty as well. It wasn't as if he could display their photo. After all, he'd secreted it away in the drawer of the little table two years before. Perhaps she should just return to the floor. Unable to deny the impulse though, she turned her head to look at the little table and let out a soft mew of disappointment. The bedside table was empty.

Yes, it was time to return to her spot by the fireplace. Walking to the edge of the bed, she assessed the height differential. While the jump up had been easy, these days she had to be a bit more careful in her landings. She wasn't a kitten any longer, and jarring impacts were to be avoided. She looked at the bedside table. It stood a good half metre lower than the top of the mattress. Enough to take the sting out of the landing.

She hopped onto the bedside table and took a step back in alarm. Her whiskers informed her that she'd nearly landed on top of something. Nose and whiskers twitching, she sniffed the air in front of her. Severus and metal. Surely it couldn't be too dangerous if it smelled like him. Ignoring her human instincts, which informed her that rubbing against Disillusioned objects might not be wise, Minerva crept towards it. *Surely it isn't...* She tamped down the hope beginning to bloom in her heart. *Well, if it were, the top would be...* Her whiskers confirmed the suspicion even before her face nudged against the corner of the frame. Trilling quietly, she rubbed her chin against the other side as well.

The floor greeted her with only the slightest twinge in her right back leg. She trotted over to the spot between the hearth and bed and purred excitedly. She'd felt the wards

on the frame. Anyone else fumbling at Severus's bedside would have felt nothing. The frame would have moved out of place. Her clever wizard with the impenetrable exterior had kept their photo by his bed. As much as Albus's hideous task had divided them, it would seem Severus's heart had never strayed.

At the thought of Albus, her purr faltered. Perhaps the deed had needed doing, but so many lives were in the balance. So many unknowns had been left to chance. And Severus, one of the better strategists, was isolated in Voldemort's camp. She supposed that at this point there was no sense in belabouring the issue. What was done was done. But she knew for certain that before tomorrow's hissing and howling session, she would be transfiguring a catnip-filled effigy of Albus. Yes, both her human and cat forms would get significant pleasure from clutching it between her front paws while biting its head and kicking furiously with her back paws.

But enough of Albus Dumbledore and his machinations—at least she'd finally seen puzzled out his conspiracy. A conspiracy that she would be sharing with Severus, regardless of whatever protestations he made about endangering her. He'd shouldered the burden long enough. Not that Minerva imagined for a moment that Severus would so easily accept her help or presence. But she would find a way to assist him, even if she had to maintain her Animagus form to do so. Whatever it took.

With thoughts of tending her wizard filling her head, she settled down for a catnap, knowing that her ears would awaken her when the time came.

Minerva awoke to the sound of the handle turning and darted under the bed. She watched as a familiar pair of dragonhide boots entered the room. The door closed, and she heard him cast a series of wards.

She trotted out from underneath the bed and wound her way around his ankles, chirruping and yapping. After the fourth revolution, she tilted her head up to look at him.

From this height and angle, his gaunt features were even more exaggerated, but she could see the smile lurking beneath the scowl.

"I see you found our photograph." His voice held the faintest glimmer of mirth. She responded by falling at his feet, ensuring that his boots would smell of no other creatures. At least in this form, she could get away with lavishing him with affection.

"I suppose I should have expected that, left alone for ten minutes, you'd manage to ferret out all my secrets."

She made another revolution around his ankles, purring so loudly she was certain he could hear her.

"Oh, good grief, Minerva, you must transform. I refuse to converse with a cat."

She leapt to the rug by the hearth again and reverted to her human form.

He returns.

Chapter 3 of 4

Severus tries to push Minerva away. Her claws come out.

They stared at one another for a long moment, out of sorts now that they stood eye to eye.

"I should Obliviate you now," Severus grumbled as he shrugged off his outer cloak and hung it in a wardrobe with its flock of companions.

Minerva's face hardened. "Severus!"

"You caught me off guard earlier, otherwise I wouldn't have indulged you with a romp in my quarters, *ireither* of your forms." He hurried on before she could interject, "It is simply too dangerous for you to be here. Too dangerous for both of us. I cannot believe that you would risk not only our lives but the entire war effort on an unfounded, foolish theory."

He continued his pathetic excuse for hissing and spitting, shooting holes in her logic, demeaning her house, weakly defending his own, and trying harder with every phrase to send her scrambling for the door. Minerva clenched her jaw to keep a string of regrettable words from tumbling out.

Yes, she had forgotten how harsh and tedious Severus's self-defence mechanisms could be. But Severus had forgotten that she could weather his staunchest opposition. This was nothing compared to the curse-laden diatribes whenever he tried to escape chaperone duties. She held her ground. "Are you quite done, Severus?"

Severus's familiar scowl nearly made her smile. Nearly.

"I am not a fool, nor have I ever been one. Yes, I may have been believed your ruse with Albus, much as it utterly nauseated me to do so. And I may not be as quick as I ought to be in sussing out your Slytherin schemes, but I do know how to read between the lines with you. Your treatment of the students, if one looks closely enough, reveals your true loyalties. If you're going to continue this charade, at the very least, you could use a critic to tell you when your performance is off."

Propped against the fireplace mantle, Severus sighed and glared at his shoes. "We shouldn't even be talking about this. I should bellow at you and send you on your way with your tail swishing madly. I shouldn't put you in danger like this." He seemed to recover his temper. "I won't risk you getting caught on the way to my quarters just so I can indulge in some stress relief."

Minerva clutched her fists in her cloak, trying to keep an even tone. "If Neville Longbottom can manage to sneak through this castle at night—and he does remain undetected on the vast majority of his outings—then I'm quite certain you and I could succeed in meeting at least once a week, if not twice. I can always slink around in my Animagus form."

"Yes, well, Sprinkles is rather inconspicuous, isn't she?"

Minerva huffed in annoyance. "As if Albus had not caused enough trouble in his life, that *isn't* my n—Severus Snape, you will not distract me from this!"

The mischief that had momentarily danced behind Severus's eyes ignited into something harsher. "I've always known you to be so stubborn it was near impossible to dissuade you from anything. The only solution is to get you so riled that you forget your concerns in your anger. Now, what was it you were so very upset about, Minerva?"

The spark of hope, which had ignited at finding the photo frame, sputtered out of existence in a rush of anger and disappointment. She understood full well that Severus was stretched thin and perhaps tetchier than even his normal surly self. But she would not tilt at windmills nor sift through his speech to find the kernels of truth within. "I will not get caught sneaking about in a castle I've lived in for more years than you've been alive. However, you needn't worry about me looking sympathetic and breaking your

cover. I dare say I'll be able to summon the inspiration to be sufficiently angry when we next meet!"

Minerva stalked past Severus, heading towards the door with fury radiating from every stomp. Granted, her human form wasn't quite so effective at conveying it. Pursed lips, pinched brow, and a scowl were nothing compared to a ridge of spiked fur, flattened ears, fluffed tail, and fangs.

"Minerva, wait," Severus called, resignation leaking through his words. "This cannot be a distraction. I'll allow that in normal times we could, and did, conduct an affair with the rest of the school hardly the wiser. But... there are spies throughout the castle, Minerva. Not just spies for the Dark Lord, but children with parents in the Order. News of an affair between us would be disastrous in either camp."

She turned to face him, shoulders squared. This hardly sounded like something worth waiting to hear.

"But, if we can work out a plan that's safe enough, and if you swear to follow it, no matter what happens to me, then we can... proceed."

Minerva bristled at nearly every word, but was wise enough to recognize the offer for what it was. Well, what it might be. "Proceed with what, Severus?"

Severus's eyes narrowed. "I shall choose to ignore that in favour of discussing how this arrangement shall function. If we are interrupted," he grunted as he toed off his boots and slumped on the end of the bed, "come back on Tuesday evening at nine."

Minerva glanced around the room again. There was nowhere to sit but the bed. Severus looked at her, not expectantly, not hopefully, but with weariness lurking in every inch of his frame. She sat down and placed her hand over his as she stared at the empty fireplace. "So, what safeguards do we need to put in place?"

Their fingers intertwined.

Together, they crafted the framework for their affair. Severus would cast Detection Wards on all of the professors' corridors. Minerva's would give advanced warning of anyone approaching her quarters. The others would serve as cover.

Severus's thumb rubbed the palm of her hand.

A Portkey would ferry Minerva between their quarters and was to be carried with her at all times to prohibit tampering. Irregular meeting schedules would be followed. An array of inconspicuous methods of communication was devised to cancel and rearrange their schedule. House points had never been so ill-used.

Minerva's hand moved to Severus's thigh, tracing the crease of his trousers.

A story for Voldemort should something go awry. A twist on her tale that caused a momentary, corresponding twist in her gut. Scenes to play-act to masquerade as memories. Excruciating scenes of manipulation and betrayal. But necessary all the same.

Her hand gradually stilled, and Severus covered it with his own. "I'm sorry, Minerva, but you know we must have a story. Should someone spot and report us, I must be able to keep both of us safe."

"Yes, I just won't relish making those particular scenes come to life. It's difficult enough imagining them." She clutched his hand between hers, his long, spidery fingers trapped between fingers just showing the first signs of age. "I have accepted the realities of this war, but I still don't have to approve of them."

"I know." He sighed. "I should insist on enacting one of the scenes tonight, but I'm exhausted. We'll have to do so first thing on Tuesday."

"Exhausted, Severus?" Her hands left his, one stroking his back, its counterpart returning to his thigh. She turned to look at him, holding her breath in anticipation.

He is not exhausted.

Chapter 4 of 4

Severus and Minerva create an oasis in troubled times.

"Well, 'exhausted' might have been a bit of an overstatement." Severus's lips twitched in amusement. He lowered his head and brushed his lips across hers. Their lips met again, and her eyes fluttered shut. They had negotiated their terms. For the moment, at least, this was real. And Merlin, how she had missed Severus.

Months. It had been months since she'd kissed him. Want and need that she'd repressed and denied came bubbling to the surface. She really had just come here to... well, not look after Severus, nothing so mothering. Despite their age difference that had *never* been a facet of their relationship. Besides, she wasn't the kind who was warm enough to be called 'motherly', and he certainly never would have accepted that, least of all from a lover. But she had been genuinely concerned about him. Of course she had. Once upon a time, not so very long ago, she had professed feelings for him. And while her practical nature didn't leave her susceptible to flights of fancy, she certainly had the capacity to love.

Severus's hand snaked around her waist, drawing her onto his lap. She pushed against his shoulders. She ~~had~~ to catch her breath, savour the moment. Sitting back on her knees—perhaps not the most comfortable of moves—she looked at Severus. He wasn't smiling, no, but his face had lost the pinched, hard look that had plagued his features these past few years, particularly the last few months. Her eyes met his, and she gasped for breath again. It wasn't want or need that she saw in them. No, it was desire, hunger.

His fingers threaded under her stern chignon and pulled her back towards him. Their kisses became more desperate, more frantic until, finally, Severus lifted her from his lap and eased her back onto the bed.

Severus unclasped her cloak and shoved it off her shoulders. He flicked open the buttons on her dress. He parted the fabric, his lips never leaving hers. She reached for his buttons, but he batted her hands away as he kissed and sucked her earlobe, her neck, her shoulder until he had opened enough dress to reach her breasts. They both moaned as his lips wrapped around her nipple. His hands continued unfastening her dress, occasionally pausing to caress some uncovered bit of skin.

"Please," she found herself begging as one hand traced the inside of her thigh.

"Please, what?" he asked, the corners of his mouth finally lifting into an actual smile.

She nearly growled. Pushing him onto his back, she yanked at her dress and crawled over him. Her hair spilled over her naked shoulders onto his waistcoat, distinguishable only by the occasional strands of silver. She set to work on his cloak. Three buttons in, she kissed him again, and her fingers were soon trapped between

them as he pulled her close. She freed another four buttons before Severus began fishing for his wand and cast a spell to banish his clothing elsewhere.

Minerva willed herself not to think about how long it had been, how much thinner Severus felt beneath her, or how this could very well be their last time together. No, this was an occasion to celebrate, to rejoice in whatever moments they could seize during these unbelievably stressful and hectic times.

Wriggling her body into position, her lips never leaving his, she slid against him, thrilling when he moaned and pushed up against her. She raised her hips and settled down onto him, ignoring all the reminders that it had been far too long since they had done this. Holding him close, relishing his skin against hers, feeling him move inside her, showing her affection in a way that even Severus would accept, all this was worth whatever hoops they would have to jump through to meet again.

Her hips rocked against his, and Severus slid his hand between them, bringing her closer with every arc of movement. Soon enough, her hip movements became erratic. This was *not* a position to which she was accustomed, and it was clear her sex kitten days were long over. Before her knees could protest too loudly, Severus manoeuvred her onto her back and settled on his elbows above her. Their lips joined again, and she found it increasingly difficult to maintain the tight hold she kept on her emotions.

Her hands curled around his head and his shoulder, and finally—finally—she came. A short burst of sensation and it was over. Not the most earthshaking climax of their relationship, but enjoyable all the same. It was a treasure: she was fully cognizant of her lover's rough pants, the way he grunted her name as his hips ground faster and faster against her, and the throaty cries as he threw his head back and lost control. All the while she clutched him as tightly as possible.

Severus lay gasping above her, the bulk of his weight still resting on his arms. The reality of what they'd nearly lost—what they'd already lost—hit her full force, and tears leaked from her eyes. A tiny sob escaped her, and she felt Severus tense against her. She swallowed and blinked, shepherding her emotions again. Becoming a blubbling fool wouldn't change the situation, and Severus didn't need, or deserve, an emotional outburst.

She steadied her breath and kissed his shoulder as she stroked the curve of his back. He kissed her as he withdrew then nestled beside her, his arm wrapping around her. He stroked her hair, which was assuredly more tangled than a Bowtruckle's nest. She smiled at him. "So... do you think we can arrange to do this again sometime?"

Chuckling, Severus replied, "Yes, even if I have to respell the wards in the entire castle myself."

Minerva's grin widened. "Flatterer." She stretched and turned to curl up against him. "I fully understand the need for security, but I really don't want to return to my rooms, I really would much rather sleep for days in this bed. I'd forgotten how much more comfortable your mattress is. I've missed it."

"I'm so glad it's the mattress and not my presence in it," Severus said dryly, grunting as he shoved himself from the bed.

She flipped over and bolted upright. "Severus! I was teasing!"

At this, Severus's lips upturned in an unmistakable grin. "Relax, Minerva, I'm only going out to stalk the halls and set those wards we discussed. Give me your necklace." At her quizzical look, he prompted, "For the Portkey."

She unclasped the necklace and passed it to him. He closed his eyes in concentration, his lips barely moving as he directed his wand over the pendant. *Portus Minerva* or *Portus Severus*." He handed it back, grasping her hand for a moment. Several spells later, he was cleaned and dressed. The linens were freshened and her clothes stacked within easy reach on the bedside table. The worry lines and tension were back in place on Severus's face. Her lover was erased by the stern Headmaster. Then, with a parting nod, he was out of the door.

Shoving the bedspread and sheets back, she burrowed underneath the covers, summoning her wand and casting a Warming Charm for good measure. She thought about Severus, wandering the halls, casting the spells that would keep their secrets, and she struggled to keep her heart from racing. To distract herself, she recalled the tenderness and hunger of their coupling, and the way that sex had, as always, broken down the walls between them.

At least within these walls, with the security measures they'd devised, they could find comfort and escape. She was safe. Yes, she might be called away at any moment, but here, now, she was safe. And when Severus returned, perhaps they would reach for one another once again.