

To Ride the Rising Sun

by shefa

The first one announces itself with a screech and a thud.

Written for Lord Hellebore for the 2010 Snuna Exchange.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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In and of itself, this would be only mildly alarming were it not accompanied by a roar far more reminiscent of Erumpent horn than the Albanian Fluxweed and Runspoor eggs that are (at last count) five weeks, three days, and seventeen hours late.

It goes without saying that he has not in recent memory ordered anything that roars.

So when Severus flings open the door to establish what in the name of Hades is making all that racket (and to subsequently eviscerate it), he's more than a little taken aback by what he finds there.

Occupying the entire entry and a fair portion of the cobblestones on either side sits an enormous metal cage.

Tied to one of the bars with a slender ribbon is an hexagonal card fashioned of ivory parchment, its embossed logo *The Magical Menagerie*, mostly legible despite copious charring around the edges. The parchment flutters in a breeze of flapping wings and cantankerous huffs that shoot billows of steam from the maw of the captive beast directly into Severus's face.

Bloody hell.

Some idiot has sent him a dragon.

Either that or postal incompetence has reached unprecedented heights.

Another plume of steam hits him right between the eyes, and he sighs.

It's clearly still a baby, Severus thinks, but it's a dragon all the same. A dragon, by the looks of it, determined to express the scope of his displeasure using every bit of heat at his disposal. Which, Severus notes, sucking on a singed finger, is considerable.

It's going to have to go. Just as soon as he can figure out how to get it off his front stoop.

The cage is awkward to move, and the dragon spits his vitriol when Severus finally levitates it through the front door. He conjures an ice pack, wondering if the beast would

consider employing a method of self-expression that does not require combustion.

Settled in the sitting room at last, wings no longer beating a war rhythm against the cage, the dragon stops spewing long enough to look around the room with bulging eyes. When not attempting to burn its way through the bars and dine on wizard for supper, he's a rather handsome beast, Severus thinks, all brilliantly coloured scales and sharply honed features.

Even the mushroom-shaped blast of fire issuing from its mouth is beautiful in an abstract sort of way.

All of which does make it rather hard to remember he is still just a baby.

A baby Chinese Fireball brimming with crimson glory and, at the moment, burning a hole straight through his floorboards.

Bugger.

~**~

The Magical Menagerie, in Severus's oft-expressed opinion, looks less like a business and more like a motley assortment of ecosystems after an apocalyptic collision.

According to its former proprietor, the Menagerie and Ollivander's had been established in tandem back in the days before Hogwarts' foundation had even been laid. She'd inferred none too subtly that the Hogwarts four had benefited from their combined expertise, and Severus couldn't help but wonder whether the Forbidden Forest had been supplier or beneficiary of the original Menagerie's largess.

Severus may still harbour serious doubts about the old witch's assertions, but he's certain the shop's founders...whenever they actually lived...would be apoplectic if they could see it now.

Enlarged magically into the ether and literally into the storefront next door, the interior of the cavernous shop teems with life. He cuts through the tropical rain forest tucked into the western corner only to be caught in a downpour that seems aimed directly at him. Ducking out of the tropics and into the desert, he gnashes his teeth and makes his way towards a flash of bright hair across the way.

A pungent waft from the Kappas occupying the water chases him along the rocky shoreline abutting the store's northern wall. He curses the fickle hand of fate that teases him with gifts he doesn't want and necessitates errands that leave him drenched and undoubtedly with the lingering scent of fish in his hair.

"Didn't Flitwick teach you deodorising charms third-year, Lovegood?" he grumbles to the back of the blonde woman feeding a baby Crup, which is eyeing her slender arm as if it were a far better treat.

"Of course he did, Severus," she says. "Do you need a refresher? I'm sure Filius would be more than happy to..."

He grunts his denial even as she turns away from the Crup, eyes sparkling. She never flinches under his glare, not even the one that could always be counted on to paralyse students at a hundred paces.

"What's got you in a snit?" She raises her eyebrows when she takes in his appearance. "Oh, my. Severus. Your robes are steaming. Did you know?"

"The rainforest got me," he mutters.

"Did it? It's never made anybody steam before. How exciting!"

"If you would kindly look *over here*," he says, gesturing to the dragon scrabbling to free himself from the cage that has already grown too small. "The source of the steam..."

She gasps with pleasure.

"What a lovely Chinese Fireball, Severus! Why didn't you tell me you were getting a dragon? I would have helped you set everything..."

"Would you cease your babbling, Lovegood?" he interrupts. "I most certainly did not *get* a dragon. If you must know, this one was deposited at my door a fortnight ago. Uninvited."

"He *found* you?" she whispers, breathless.

"The incessant chatter of deafening..." He shudders. "...*smelly* beasts has obviously done you more damage than I realised. I repeat. He didn't *find* me. Someone with abysmal taste in gifts *sent* him to me."

But she's already stopped listening. She's cooing to the dragon, telling it how terribly brave it is (presumably retired Death Eaters are fiercer and more frightening than fire-breathing, fang-bearing, armoured creatures with no moral compass whatsoever) and what an absolutely excellent job it has done finding him.

When she finally looks at Severus again, the edges of her hair are singed, but she scarcely notices.

"The Familiar Chooses the Wizard, Severus, don't you remember?" She is exasperated, but her voice is kind, and he bites back the snarl rising reflexively to his lips.

"No, Lovegood, that's wands. Wands choose the wizard. Familiars are *pets*."

She shakes her head and smiles. It's an old argument, but until today, only theoretical. Before the arrival of the Chinese Fireball, discussions about the sentience of magical pets and the role they might play in the lives of their witches and wizards have been an abstraction, and for Severus, a welcome distraction from the mundane duties of day-to-day potions manufacturing.

He considers it akin to their perpetual argument over the best uses for Hellebore, and his assertion that she really shouldn't be dosing the Acromantula pack with Calming Draught no matter how much they're frightening the Manticores.

Really, though, they're only words. Ideas he can bat around when the afternoons grow long and the thought of spending another one alone in the lab chokes him. She's convenient, he tells himself. Always available just down the road from his apothecary...so long as he's willing to endure the post-apocalyptic décor, of course.

Besides, she depends on him for the potions she needs to care for the assortment of magical creatures that trample around the place.

She owes him one.

But now he has a living creature in his care, and he can't say why he's kept it as long as he has. He should have carted it back the same day the flapping, flaming thing arrived.

And yet...

He hadn't been able to help himself.

It would be only for the day, he'd told himself. Just overnight, for observational purposes, and then back to the shop where the crimson ball of teeth, scales, and flame could

roast the other infernal beasts to his heart's content. He'd even encourage it.

But day had run into day as they tend to do, and instead of wrestling him back into confinement and carting him to the Menagerie, he'd let the dragon roam free. Not in the lab, of course, but in his private chambers, where the brilliant red plumes and bursts of heat brought an odd sort of comfort. For a while.

He hadn't really minded when a dispute over how many piglets constitute an acceptable dinner resulted in a blast incinerating the wardrobe holding his old Death Eater robes. He'd been meaning to get rid of those for ages and simply hadn't got around to it yet.

It hadn't even distressed him when, with one extravagant sweep of a wing, the dragon...Fred, he'd taken to calling him with just the smallest trace of a smirk...had destroyed an entire bookcase lined with the specimen jars he'd used to terrify students at Hogwarts. Truly, they'd outlived their purpose long ago. He just hadn't set aside the time to clear them away.

But when, at the end of his second week of residence, Fred-the-dragon had shed his skin...moulting in a flurry of crimson and flame...and had looked Severus straight in the eye as if expecting him to follow suit, he'd decided the beast had to go.

Today.

So he stands back and watches Lovegood fuss over the creature, realising with a jolt he'll likely no longer be called Fred.

But even with a less-suitable moniker, he should be happier here, at least until he's mature enough to send to Romania. There's plenty of room to stretch his wings, and he'll have other dragons to moult alongside him instead of being stuck with Severus, trying in vain to explain that humans...even wizards...cannot shed their skin.

~**~

The mouse appears with far less fuss than Fred-the-dragon.

She just turns up one day, perched on the back of his sofa, black eyes watching him as he reads. The card tied around her neck with a narrow ribbon reveals her provenance if not his benefactor.

"You are not welcome here," he says, turning his attention back to his book. The mouse doesn't reply, only digs her evidently sharp claws more firmly into the fabric of the couch.

Severus looks her over again. She's mostly white with scattered splotches of black as if she'd briefly considered masquerading as a leopard and then thought better of it.

"There are no such things as magical mice," he informs the creature. "Go back to wherever you came from. Go on."

But the mouse squeaks as if the very suggestion is amusing and scampers off the couch and onto the bookshelf.

Severus is positive she's not actually *reading* the titles of his books, no matter how much the twitching of that small pink nose suggests otherwise. He just wishes she'd show some respect for his space. After all, she is here uninvited.

But when he gets up to remove her furry body from the shelf, he sees it's not the books that have captured her attention. Instead, in the space formerly occupied by *The Potion Master's Companion*, there is a gap, revealing a crack in the wall where a tiny sprig of ivy has threaded its way through the masonry. Triumphant, it has grown long enough to rest its brilliantly green leaves in the narrow space between the volumes.

He sees that row of books every day, but couldn't possibly say whether or not the shoot had been there yesterday. It must have been; it had to have been working its way inside for weeks.

Severus pauses to marvel that any living thing would exert so much effort to make its way into his home. Prior experience suggests that most would do everything in their power to get out.

The mouse squeals again and scampers off.

He pauses for just a moment before he follows.

After all, one never knows what manner of trouble she might stumble upon.

~**~

"She doesn't need much, Severus," Lovegood tells him when he comes to her for food, and bedding, and all the accoutrements he is certain a tiny mouse must have in order to be comfortable.

"How can you be sure?" he snaps but stops himself mid-rant.

She's got eyebrows raised, smiling that half-smile of hers. He thinks she might have also done a quick sweep of the Menagerie with her eyes as if to say, 'Of course I know'... but he wouldn't swear to it.

They're sitting on a blanket of soft grass at the edge of the copse of oak trees that appeared after she'd rescued the Thestrals near the Forbidden Forest from poachers. He'd hardly call it quiet over here, but it's a far sight better than the epicentre of the place, which invariably leaves him with clenched teeth and a pounding headache.

The mouse, Harriet, he's calling her, frolics in the long grass, squealing with what Severus can only assume is mousey joy.

"All she needs is a little food and water, a soft place to sleep, and you, Severus."

He nods, watching his newly minted familiar attempt to climb a particularly tall strand of grass. She approaches it with a tentative paw and inquisitive sniff, her eyes bright and hopeful. There's a warmth in his chest that feels just the slightest bit uncomfortable, and he tries not to squirm. It's unseemly.

"She's not magical," he says a bit defensively.

"Yes she is," Lovegood says in a voice almost too soft for him to hear. "She chose you, didn't she?"

Startled, he lifts his head. Her gaze isn't on the mouse, who has made no progress scaling tall grasses, but on him. That warmth in his chest intensifies, and this time he does squirm. The witch beside him doesn't seem to mind. Her eyes are soft, and she's looking at him as if he might at any moment do something marvellous.

Trouble is, he's pretty sure he's got about as much chance of doing something marvellous as Harriet has of reaching the top of that blade of grass. And taking flight.

~**~

They fall into a routine of sorts. The wizard, the mouse, and the witch who comes by to consult whenever he has a question. And he has many, far more than he would have predicted for so tiny an animal.

Thankfully, Lovegood makes house calls, though she seems bemused by the request. But after his first, frenzied trip to the Menagerie, Severus hesitates to take Harriet

out. The world is so big, after all, and she so small.

"You can't keep her inside forever, Severus," Lovegood tells him this morning.

She's come by unexpectedly. 'Just to check up,' as she puts it. She doesn't specify that it's the mouse she's checking up on, but Severus can't think why else she's come.

It's a warm day, but the hearth is blazing, and Harriet has just woken from a nap curled on the bed of soft rags she favours.

"I most certainly can," he says. Lovegood has been trying to persuade him to take Harriet out...to go out himself, for that matter. But he sees no purpose to excursions for excursions' sake and tells her so.

The mouse has climbed to the arm of his chair, her nose twitching with interest. He takes a long finger and strokes her from the crown of her head to the base of her tail. If she were a cat, he thinks, she would purr. Instead, she runs up his arm to perch on his shoulder, her favourite spot when she's not exploring. Her whiskers brush against his cheek and he sighs.

"What are you so afraid of?"

"I don't recall saying I am afraid of anything, Lovegood," he snaps. Harriet runs down his arm and leaps from the chair.

"Nonetheless," she murmurs.

Her silence wraps around him until all he can hear is his own heartbeat.

"If I am to care for her, I must shield her from danger..." He sweeps his arm out, towards the window, towards a world he knows takes no prisoners.

"You've appointed yourself her protector, then?"

"That is my job."

"I wonder what she would have to say about that," she muses.

"She is a mouse, Lovegood. She has no opinions."

The creature in question sniffs at a bit of fish in her platter by the kitchen door, turns up her nose, and walks away.

"So I see."

He scowls at her, though he knows it makes no difference.

And indeed it does not. Instead, with sleight of hand he cannot see, she calls for Harriet, who climbs obediently into her palm.

"Here you go," she says, tipping the mouse back onto his shoulder. "Be good and stay close," she murmurs, her face nearly touching his.

He's almost positive she's talking to the mouse, and yet he can barely breathe. He tells himself it's because he's angry, that she has no right to force him outside...not alone and not with his tiny familiar.

But he can't help himself. He closes his eyes, savouring the sensation of her breath, warm and sweet against his skin.

"We're going for a walk."

She hasn't pulled away, and her voice flows like honey. All he can manage to do is nod and attempt to remember to breathe.

As they cross the threshold into the mild spring afternoon, he assures himself it's simply easier to comply with her directives than to argue. But years of quiet living have made him rusty at self-deception, and he isn't half as convincing as he used to be.

She's wound her arm around his, and he waits for stares from the others on the street to incinerate him as surely as Fred-the-dragon could have...probably would have if given the opportunity. But passers-by seem preoccupied today and spare them barely a glance.

"Hmm. No Beni Adar out today," Lovegood says when they complete their second full circuit.

He glares at her, brow furrowed.

"Well, given how concerned you were about going out, I assumed you must be worried about them," she explains. "They do tend to gravitate to people who are anxious."

"I am not anxious," he says.

"Well, obviously not," she agrees. "Otherwise, they'd be swarming, wouldn't they?"

He stops short right in the middle of the cobblestone street and looks at her. She's guileless, he thinks. And absurdly pleased that she's managed to drag him...them...out whilst successfully avoiding an unpleasant swarm of creatures only she can see.

Harriet leaps from his shoulder onto Lovegood's with a squeal, and the witch closes her eyes, nuzzling her furry body. Long eyelashes and mousy whiskers alike brush against her skin. The mouse's white fur only highlights the woman's milky complexion, and he has the sudden urge to shield her from the sun.

She belongs to starry nights where she is more luminous than the moon.

~**~

The moon is bright the icy winter night he Floo-calls her in a panic.

"How is she?" Luna whispers, crouching next to him by the hearth. Harriet is restless even in sleep.

"Uncomfortable, I think. She's not eaten a thing all day. I can barely get her to swallow the potion."

Luna nods and strokes Harriet's fur. She's breathing rapidly, and Severus imagines he can see her tiny heart pounding in her chest.

"Do something," he hisses. "You have to *do* something."

"I am doing something, Severus. So are you, for that matter," she says, scooping Harriet from her nest of rags and laying her in his hands. "Let's take her outside. She should be in the fresh air."

"She can frolic in the fresh air tomorrow when she feels better," he insists.

But Luna's eyes are sad, and she just shakes her head.

"I think... now would be better, Severus," she whispers.

Harriet stirs just a little when he rises and a bit more when they step outside into the cold night air.

They sit together on the stoop, lit only by the moon.

Harriet's breathing slows a little, but he doesn't like the limpness of her limbs or how glassy her eyes look when she finally opens them.

"Hang on, sweet girl." His words ride on a puff of air, a breath he wishes he could give her instead...she is struggling so to draw in her own.

Harriet closes her eyes again, calm as he rubs her tiny back with soft strokes. Luna coos nonsense over them both and traces symbols he cannot decipher into the air above her.

"Animals don't need a coin to pay Charon," she murmurs at his quizzical look. "They take our love for them, and he gives them free passage."

His chest tightens.

"I don't consent," he chokes out. "I don't consent that she use my love for her to pass away from this life."

"Your consent comes along with your love, Severus," Luna explains. "It's a gift, you see. When it's freely given."

She's looking at him with those shimmering eyes that see too much, and he knows she's not referring only to the mouse who lies dying in the palm of his hand. For a blazing moment, he wants to touch her, to run his hands along the long line of her neck and cradle her head in his hands while he finds out whether she tastes as sweet as she smells.

But his hands are full, and his heart is broken.

And so he takes only what is freely given in the still of the night. Luna's voice, wrapping around him more surely than the cold air. The moonlight bathing them in its soft light from so impossibly far away. And the soft warmth of this creature he'd never planned to love.

There are no words left to say. So he wraps trembling hands around Harriet's fragile body, rocking her in time with his whispered lullaby as she slowly, inexorably grows still.

~**~

He's having a particularly bad dream, which is really saying something.

It's been a month of tortured sleep punctuated by nightmares of predators who carry Harriet away over and over again. When he is awake, he knows better. Knows she died peacefully, calm and loved, cradled in his hands.

Luna says it is he who has been ravaged, and he knows she's right. It's his heart that has been ripped out and carried off. He only wishes the bleeding would stop so he could die in peace.

Also, the dog barking into his ear in this bloody dream can cease and desist at any time.

He breathes a sigh of relief as the noise stops short. He must remember to direct his dreams this way in future. Very useful, that.

There's a snuffling sound, and a thick wet tongue slobbers a path across his face. He shudders, and his eyes fly open.

As unpleasant as waking is, it has got to be preferable...

To the reality of the tawny puppy with his enormous paws planted on his bed, practically leaping and yipping with the ecstasy of Severus, awake.

The dog has so much hair, wildly curly and bouncing with every shrill bark, Severus might have missed the card tied to his collar had he not been looking for it.

"Luna!" he shouts in the general direction of the bedroom Floo.

She ought to be pleased. He's avoided her calls for weeks. He can't stop her from coming to the door, but he hasn't been getting out of bed except for necessities, so he's been burying his head beneath the covers and pretending to be asleep.

"Stop shouting, Severus," says a voice from just beyond the doorway. "I can hear you perfectly well."

"How did you get in here?" He clutches at the blankets, glancing down to make sure he's covered.

"I Apparated," she says with a shrug. "You were screaming, and I was worried. It's nearly noon. What are you still doing in bed?"

"Sleeping," he snaps. "Or I was before this... this... this abomination started barking in my ear."

"This," Luna says, "is a dog, Severus." She scratches the creature behind the ears, and he yowls and leans into her touch. "You may have seen similar specimens outside. You know, the place you see when you leave your bed. You still remember leaving your bed, don't you?"

She ignores his glare and continues to stroke the puppy, who has taken to rolling on the floor in paroxysms of pleasure.

"I get out of bed when I have need to." He knows he sounds petulant and wishes he didn't care. "I didn't ask for this... dog. Take it back."

"He's not mine." She gestures to the adoring gaze the beast has turned in his direction. "Seems to be yours," she says, though by the way he's rolling around under her hand, the dog would follow her anywhere.

"It has your store emblem attached to it. Obviously it came from you. Along with that infernal dragon and..." He chokes on the name.

"Harriet." She stops scratching and rests her hand on the dog's belly, ignoring his whine of complaint.

Severus nods.

"I didn't send them. None of them."

"Of course you did. Who else would send...?" He reaches for words to describe the creatures that have appeared on his doorstep, in his home, in his dreams.

Her eyes bore through him, and he shivers at the remoteness in her gaze.

"If you get up, I'll show you proof." She pauses, looking him up and down. He pulls his blankets higher, flushing. "You might want to get dressed first, but that's up to you."

She turns to leave. The dog, a hundredweight of hair and drool, whines as he watches Luna close the door behind her. Still, he sits...staunch...at Severus's bedside.

His, indeed.

~**~

The ledger is enormous. Bound in the spiny indigo hide of a beast he'd hate to meet alone in the forest, its parchment pages are inscribed with lists of names, dates, and all manner of creature. Magical and otherwise.

"Every requisition made and fulfilled gets recorded here," she explains. "It's a fairly straightforward system. All orders are automatically logged by the ledger...that function is keyed into the enchantments of the shop. Those go back centuries. I think they're connected to the ones that adapt the ecosystem to suit the animals living here at any given time. But in any event, only I can enter the fulfillments."

He nods. Standard so far.

"When I took over the store and you started supplying me with potions, I asked you if you wanted a familiar. Remember?"

He does indeed.

"I told you that I'd already been responsible for more than my share of living beings and reminded you my track record was far from impressive." His chest constricts. No change there, he thinks.

She looks as if she's about to say something, but purses her lips instead, flipping the pages back.

"Apparently that discussion registered with the ledger. See, here." She points to an entry six years back, right around the time she took over the Menagerie. "Just your name." She traces across to the columns for fulfillment date and animal.

Blank.

"I never sent you one. You said you didn't want a familiar, and despite the fact I believed it would do you good, I respected your wishes."

Her cheeks are flushed, and he feels a twisting in his belly.

She's right. She has always respected his wishes, never inserting herself where she's not wanted.

Standing with her here in this cramped office, her hair in disarray and her eyes rimmed with red, he can't remember why he'd ever given her the idea that she's not wanted.

The tightness in his chest chokes him and then releases, flooding him with air. All he can do is look at her looking at him.

But he's been silent too long. Her eyes are brimming with tears, and he can't find his voice to save his life. Still, he can't tear himself away.

So he does what he'd longed to do that frozen night, the night he thought his heart broke. Awash in those silver-blue eyes, he lowers his mouth to hers.

He hesitates just for an instant.

"Please," she whispers.

She tastes like honey and moonlight, and he can't drink deeply enough.

He loses himself to the sensation of her lips kissing his mouth, his jaw, his eyes, and then an open-mouthed kiss at the base of his neck draws a long moan.

They slide to the floor, a tangle of limbs and tousled hair. She runs her hands along his skin, and he shivers at her touch. Her breath is sweet and hot, and he closes his eyes, savouring it. Savouring her.

Her breathing grows heavy, and he reaches another hand to stroke her.

Curly.

Damp.

"Luna!"

She jerks her head up. Her eyes are glazed.

"What is it? Are there Nargles?"

"What? No! No Nargles. Just..." He glares at the dog, who has begun bouncing again.

"The puppy?"

"Licked me."

"Oh." She's trying not to laugh but fails. "Maybe he thought he was supposed to."

"The dog is a menace. Fluffy." He narrows his eyes at the dog. "Your name is Fluffy." He turns to Luna. "He's a menace." He glares at the intrusive pooch, but this has absolutely no impact on his hyperactive bounce.

"Fluffy?" She's giggling now. "Didn't Fluffy have three heads?"

"*He* may as well have three heads. Look at him!"

Indeed, the dog might well have had three heads what with all the barking and slurping and overall shoving of his face into their hands to be petted.

Severus considers throwing the pup right out the door and slamming it behind him, the sooner to turn his attention back to Luna's mouth and block out the memory of the doggie one. But Luna is giggling, and he loves the sound of her laughter. So instead, he pulls her to standing, grabs the dog by the scruff of his neck, and heads out the door.

"I'm taking you home," he says, brooking no argument.

"Well, yes," she agrees.

"But *he* stays downstairs."

Fluffy whinges in protest. But Luna crouches down to look him directly in the eye.

"There will be no dog biscuits upstairs," she says. The dog whimpers again. "And if you whine at the door, we will send you outside to chase rabbits for your supper."

Fluffy tilts his head as if considering the offer.

The dog looks longingly at Severus. Severus glares at the dog.

There's no contest.

~**~

The late afternoon sunlight streams through the bedroom window. Shadow and light dance on the walls like nature's version of a moving portrait. Severus carries Luna to his bed, still ruffled from restless sleep, and lays her down like a balm for a weary soul.

She reaches for him with both arms and smiles. The light plays on her skin, skipping through strands of white-gold hair, and for a moment, he wonders if she is real or if she will melt into the dreamscape when he touches her.

He tries to speak, to put words to the magic she weaves, but there is only feeling. Instead, he peels the layers of clothing from her body, piece by piece, anointing each revealed bit of her with worshipful breath wrapped in ravenous kisses.

And she?

She has merely to touch him with needful hands, and he sheds his skin.

~**~

The half-moon rises outside the window, and Severus draws Luna close.

He rubs the gooseflesh from the skin of her shoulder; the night breeze is cool through the open window.

She hums, her eyes closed.

He shuts his eyes, too. Focusing on the sounds of Fluffy downstairs, taking it in turns bouncing himself and then a ball off the wall, the chirping of crickets outside, and Luna's steady breathing alongside him in bed.

Such bounty.

All for him.

He flings his free arm wide in an exuberant stretch and feels a ripple of magic wash over his skin.

"Did you feel that?"

"Course I did, Severus. You were splendid."

He blushes, absurdly grateful for the dark.

"Not, erm... thank you..." He pauses to collect himself. "That wave of magic a moment ago. Did you feel *that*?"

"Umhm," she mumbles. "Menagerie."

"What about the Menagerie?"

"Pleased," she says and drifts off to sleep.

The Menagerie?

He pauses to consider the sprawling shop with its collection of magical creatures that should, by all rights, be killing one another. Dragons roam the desert corner and Unicorns the lush forest to the south. Forests and caves and lakes each emerging to meet the needs of the animals in its care.

The Menagerie.

He traces the nerve endings in his skin, magical tingles lingering, and follows them.

Out, out, out until he finds it.

Sentient.

Benevolent.

Love freely given to the magical creatures it cares for and who care for it in turn.

And Luna. Her joyous spirit intertwined with the concatenation of collided, messy, magnificent ecosystems that has developed, over centuries, a mind...and a heart...of its own.

He whispers a request into the wind.

The response, wrapped in the sweet scent of Alyssium, comes to him just as he slips into sleep, her heartbeat against his ear, a lullaby.

And in the morning, riding the rising sun, a vibrant, emerald-hued hummingbird...its wings tipped with gold... sweeps through the open window, hovers over the sleeping pair...

And sings.

Disclaimer: Not mine, just playing in JKR's sandbox.

Endless thanks to Annie Talbot, JunoMagic, and DickGloucester for beta reading. *smooches