

The Lies You Tell Yourself

by Shanastay

There are places you can never return to... and lies you tell yourself. Snape's work still isn't done and how is this newcomer connected to unfolding events?

Chapter 1: Things Left Behind

Chapter 1 of 18

There are places you can never return to... and lies you tell yourself. Snape's work still isn't done and how is this newcomer connected to unfolding events?

A/N: Before you get started I have to provide you, the reader with a bit of clarification, due to the responses I've received. The OFC in this fic is NOT a Mary-Sue. She is NOT a supermodel, perfect, infallible, or unbeatable. She IS highly intelligent and incredibly stubborn. She is based off a real-life person with very real talents (minus the magic stuff). Initially she may seem too-good-to-be-true, but there is much more to what is going on than what I touch on in the first couple chapters. Please keep in mind that what you read initially is an ACT that she is putting on, and she is hiding a great deal. More is revealed as the story progresses. With that in mind, please enjoy my writing efforts.

Disclaimer: (In the spirit of Crimson Starlight)

Shana: OW! Stop poking me in the back with that damn wand!

Snape: *prods woman with wand again* WRITE!

Shana: Maybe if you asked reeeeeally nicely...

Snape: *glowers* I could simply employ the Imperius Curse...

Shana: Ok OK! I get the point! *goes back to typing* I own nothing of JKRowling's. Any characters you don't recognize obviously belong to me. I make no monies, American or otherwise, from this.

Snape: WRITE!!

Shana: *types, muttering to herself*

Chapter 1: Things Left Behind

Shaluinn Callaway stood outside the gates of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry trying to talk her reluctant feet into taking those several steps that would bring her onto the school grounds. *I can't believe I'm actually here. All the years of running, of living as a Muggle, of trying to hide my true nature and here I am returning to a world I turned my back on long ago.*

A burst of wind blew past the 5'7" woman, whipping her waist-length flaming red hair out behind her, the ankle-length black leather duster she wore billowing around her legs. The air carried with it the scent of incoming rain, and the woman narrowed her deep emerald eyes behind the lenses of her wraparound Ray-Bans, her bowstring lips

drawing together in a mild frown.

Natural ivory skin had tanned to a warm chestnut hue from the long hours she had spent outdoors training. Her face was oval with distinct cheekbones and a high forehead. Wispy bangs fell to just above her eyebrows, softening the lines of her face that tended toward harsh with the intense concentration she devoted to everything in her life.

A black, long-sleeved, scoop-necked lycra bodysuit clung to the curves of her DD-cup breasts, the damned things being the bane of her competitive athlete's life. It didn't matter how hard she trained, that her chest arched down to a 28 inch waist and back out to 34 inch hips clad in black leather boot-cut pants in an almost perfect hourglass, no matter how much weight she lost the heavy breasts remained. Staunchly refusing the option of breast-reduction surgery, she used the assets for what they were, an advantage that often disrupted her opponents' attention.

Her feet were shod in chunky, high-heeled knee-high black leather boots, the added height bringing her to a solid 5'10". Small, long-fingered and dexterous hands clutched the handles of the two bags she carried with her, containing all her worldly possessions.

Releasing a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, Shaluinn took those two steps onto the grounds and towards the destiny she knew she could no longer turn away from. As she trudged up the hill to the front portal of the castle, she let her mind drop to the letter safely tucked into the inside pocket of her coat.

My Dearest Miss Callaway,

With regret I find I can no longer forestall the request I spoke to you about in our last meeting. Your unique assistance is needed in the aid of our cause. I am aware of your reservations, but as I have previously expressed, this conflict does not merely involve the wizarding community of Europe but has the potential to encompass the whole of the planet including America and your beloved United States. It is only after serious and prolonged consideration that I have come to this conclusion.

Please make your way to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in Scotland as quickly as you are able where I will install you in the position we have discussed. I understand you have loose ends you must tie up, but remember time is of the essence and make haste.

Thank you and I look forward to seeing you at the school soon.

Your friend,

Albus Dumbledore

The redhead couldn't help shaking her head as she thought over the words of Albus' missive. *Friend? Uh huh. Manipulative bastard. Though I really shouldn't be surprised,* the woman chided herself. She had seen more of Albus Dumbledore in the past year than she had in the preceding twenty. In fact she had almost entirely forgotten the aged wizard in the years intervening their last encounter.

That long-ago encounter had set her upon an unlikely path that had led her across the world and finally to this castle, an ocean and a continent separating her from her last home in Pacific Northwest.

Born to an unwed mother in Southern California, she had been adopted by an older staunchly Roman Catholic Muggle couple. Overprotective to a fault, her formative years were spent closely monitored by the man that, to this day, was the only one she called "Father." A high-ranking member of the Intelligence community and chief of the West Coast region of the CIA and a Permanent Deacon in the Catholic Church, Aloysius Callaway kept Shaluinn on a very short leash, especially when strange occurrences began manifesting around the passionate child.

Despite the limitations he put on his adopted daughter, Aloysius encouraged and instilled in her an addiction for learning. Forbidden to partake in the mind-numbing activities of TV watching and video games, Shaluinn's growing intellect was directed toward books. These she devoured in copious amounts to the delight of her father, his daughter exhibiting the intelligence of a college student before even entering her teens.

That was, until that spotted owl arrived with that fateful letter.

Miss Callaway,

Congratulations on being accepted into the Pacific Branch of the American Institute of Magic and Mysteries! I'm sure you have many questions that we will hopefully be able to answer in the coming years of your study. Enclosed is the book list for the upcoming semester as well as information on travel arrangements. We look forward to seeing you this fall.

Sincerely,

Maria Janevosa, Principal

Pacific Branch

American Institute of Magic and Mysteries

Shaluinn had read and reread the letter at least a dozen times by the time her father returned home from work, so many things in her life suddenly making sense and so many new questions swirling through her head. Buoyed by this newfound knowledge, she rushed her father as soon as he walked through the door, jabbering excitedly and brandishing the letter.

Aloysius' reaction was undeniably *not* what she expected.

The silver-haired man became visibly agitated, a red flush creeping up his neck from his chest as his blood pressure rose with his anger and he uncharacteristically cursed. Shaluinn's face fell as he muttered about practical jokes and the utter rubbish of the letter. He cut off every attempt the redheaded girl made at proving the validity of the missive. It quickly became clear to the girl that she most certainly would *not* be attending the school come fall.

And that was when things *really* went south...

Not a week later Shaluinn was approached by a petite woman with a shock of red hair the exact shade of her own while waiting to be picked up from gymnastics practice.

With a start the girl recognized the woman standing over her as the "adopted older sister" her parents had shown her pictures of over the years, but whom she had never actually met.

The woman smiled as recognition shown on the girl's face and bent down to sit on the curb next to her. "Hey, Shaluinn. I can see from your expression you know who I am, but as courtesy dictates," she stuck out her hand, "I'm Jolena Anhel, your 'sister.'"

Shaluinn simply gaped, shocked into silence before finally shaking the woman's hand.

"Close your mouth, dear, before you swallow a fly."

The girl's mouth snapped shut with an audible click, her eyes still wide with surprise.

Never breaking eye contact, Jolena spoke quickly and carefully. "You got the letter, correct?"

Shaluinn didn't have to ask what she meant and simply nodded.

"I'm sure 'Dad' took it as well as he took mine years ago."

The girl's eyes narrowed in confusion.

Clarifying, Jolena continued, "He pitched an absolute fit and swore I wasn't going anywhere near some bullshit 'Magic School' and how he'd find the bastards who sent their sick idea of a joke, etc etc..."

The girl blushed at the use of profanity but nodded again in confirmation.

Remembering just how small her window of opportunity was, the older redhead plunged onward. "Here's the deal. Dad's not gonna let you go to that school. No way, no how. But from what I've been told, you're already exhibiting more than a few indicators of high latent powers. As high as the ratings seem to be, you simply can't NOT be trained. And if you're even half as smart as I was at your age you'll be able to handle a double course of study."

Proving she was every bit as astute as advertised, Shaluinn leapt to the correct conclusion. "I'm going to be studying regular subjects AND magic? But how..."

Jolena waved a hand, cutting her off. "Let me worry about the logistics. I'll be contacting you again soon." She stood quickly. "It goes without saying..."

"...Don't tell Dad," Shaluinn finished for her. "I get it." She spotted her parents' car making the turn into the parking lot. "You probably should go..." she started to say as she looked back to find her "sister" gone. Just... gone. The girl spun in a circle, thinking she had missed the woman walking away, only to realize Jolena had vanished into thin air. *Curiouser and curiouser...*

And so Shaluinn began her secret, double life that fall. Due to the extraordinary circumstances and situation, Jolena had been granted the use of a Time-Turner. So Shaluinn found herself living two days for everyone else's one as well as having to be careful what she said or did around her parents.

Over the course of the following seven years, the young witch pulled off and excelled at a double course of Muggle and Magical study that would have made Hermione Granger envious. She would have been unique had her "sister" not already done the same thing years prior.

Jolena kept a low profile and interacted with Shaluinn on a limited basis only to the extent necessary to restart the girl's days and deliver her to the Institute for classes. The younger redhead could not help but wonder at the snatches of overheard conversation she picked up over the years that gave her the impression that far from being the failure their parents had indicated Jolena was a smashing success as an Unspeakable in the American Magical world. But then again, to their parents, that *would* be a failure.

It was not long before her graduations from high school and the Institute that she met a younger Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, who was visiting the American school. The meeting would have been filed away and long forgotten had it not been for the events that immediately followed that meeting and caused the young woman to turn her back on the Magical world entirely for what she intended to be forever.

The redhead mounted the steps into the castle proper, deciding to meet her fate head-on, eyes wide open.

TBC...

Please. Please review! I know it's short, but the next 3 chapters are already written and I will be posting them shortly...

Where oh Where Has My Little Dog Gone?

Chapter 2 of 18

Shaluinn Callaway meets Headmistress McGonagall.

Disclaimer: (In the spirit of Crimson Starlight)

Shana: *rubbing black and blue mark on lower back*

Snape: *prods* Enough rest. Get back to work.

Shana: Oh, come on! That's two chapters in three hours!

Snape: *sneers* NOW!

Shana: *throws hands up in air* Alright! Alright!

Dobby: *sticks head around corner* Mistress Shanastay owns only her characters, nothing else. Dobby go now.

Chapter 2: Where Oh Where Has My Little Dog Gone?

Shaluinn entered the ancient edifice and could literally feel the weight of its history bearing down upon her. She shrugged off the strange sensation and looked about her, searching for a warm body that could direct her to the Headmaster's office. The woman jumped back several paces as a short, wrinkled figure appeared before her, clad in socks of various garish shades.

It had what appeared to be toe socks on each arm and a toga of sorts made from a number of clashing materials. Having not seen one in some twenty years, it took the woman several beats to realize she was staring at a House Elf just as it stared back. It chose that moment to speak.

"Dobby is not recognizing you, Miss. Miss looks like Professor Snape, but your hair is on fire."

The elf took a step back as the woman's brows knitted together, her lips twisting into a frown.

Professor Snape? Shaluinn rifled through her conversations with Dumbledore. *Snape. The Potions master and current DADA instructor.* The woman took a moment to consider the Headmaster's description of the Professor versus her current attire. *I guess I would remind someone of him, dressed head to toe in black as I am.*

Realizing she was scowling, the woman quickly smoothed her features and asked, "Dobby, is that your name?"

"Yes, Miss. Me is Dobby."

Shaluinn bent at the knees to drop her bags to the floor and stood up straight. She brought her hands together, palms flat, fingertips beneath her chin and bent from the waist until she was almost at eye level with the elf. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Dobby. I am Shaluinn Callaway."

The elf seemed taken aback at the redhead's strange manner of greeting and rushed forward, stopping just short of touching her. "Do not bow to Dobby, Miss."

The woman straightened up and smiled gently at the earnest elf. "I'm sorry, Dobby. I've spent many years in Japan, and bowing is a traditional manner of greeting. I didn't mean to upset you."

Obviously relieved that she'd righted herself, Dobby stepped back. "Do not apologize to Dobby, Miss."

Shaluinn pushed her Ray-Bans up on her head before bending to retrieve her bags and asked, "Dobby, could you direct me to the Headmaster's office? I'm expected."

"Headmistress McGongall? Dobby show you, Miss!" All excited, the elf turned and headed into the castle, trailed by the again frowning woman.

Headmistress McGongall? I thought she was the Transfigurations Professor? Deciding her questions could wait, she sped up to keep pace with the quick little elf.

The redhead soon found herself standing before a stone gargoyle as Dobby murmured something she could not hear, and the statue jumped aside to reveal what looked like an escalator. The diminutive figure stepped aside and motioned for the woman to proceed.

"Headmistress' office up here, Miss."

She flashed the elf a smile as she stepped onto the spiraling staircase. "Thank you Dobby," she called back as she rose out of sight.

Tightly controlled confusion whirled through Shaluinn's mind as she stood before the door that she assumed led into the Headmaster's ~~Headmistress'~~ office, she corrected herself, office. The redhead took a deep breath before bringing her right hand up to rap solidly on the door.

"Come in," a distinctly female voice with a light Scottish accent and a hint of impatience called.

Now or never and never isn't an option. Shaluinn opened the door and stepped through to the fate she had put off years ago.

A thin woman wearing a pointed hat looked up from the scroll she had lain out over her desk, taking in the strange appearance of the redhead entering her office. "Can I help you?"

Shaluinn dropped her bags for the second time and bent in the traditional Asian greeting. "Mistress McGongall, I am Shaluinn..."

"Miss Callaway!" a familiar voice called from behind the Headmistress.

Carefully controlling her expression, Shaluinn raised her down-turned eyes to the portrait hanging behind the Transfigurations Mistress. "Master Dumbledore?" She could not keep the question out of her voice.

"Albus?" the Headmistress questioned, turning from the woman before her to look at the former Headmaster's painting, "What is going on?"

"Bastard!" Shaluinn muttered under her breath as she realized the ramifications of that portrait's existence and dropped her gaze again, still bent at the waist.

Eyes widening at the sound of the explicative, the Headmistress practically shouted, "What is going on here? *Someone* had better start explaining right now!"

"Now, now, Minerva," Dumbledore's painting admonished. "No need to get all riled up." Looking past the Headmistress, he spoke to the other occupant of the room. "Do stand up, young lady. There is no reason to prostrate yourself before either of us."

Shaluinn silently gritted her teeth, reminding herself that Asian mannerisms were very seldom understood by Western cultures. *When in Rome...* The woman did as she was bade, rising to her full height and interlacing her fingers in front of her, eyes looking past McGongall to the talking painting. "So it is done."

Minerva's eyes narrowed again, suspicion clouding her face. "What, exactly, is done?" she asked, her question directed at the redhead.

The black-clad woman stood unmoving before the elder woman's direct stare, her eyes locked on the twinkling blue gaze of Hogwarts's last Headmaster. She did not, could not, answer the question.

"Minerva?"

The Headmistress whirled on the portrait of her predecessor.

"Could you please give us a few minutes? And take the others with you?" he asked, motioning toward the other portraits who had been listening in rapt attention.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Albus!"

"Please, Minerva. I'm only asking for twenty minutes," the former Headmaster calmly requested.

Annoyance evident in her every movement, the elder woman looked from the statue-still redhead to the utterly serious wizard and back before throwing her hands up in defeat and standing. Addressing the paintings of the former Headmasters and mistresses of the famed wizarding school, she spoke carefully, "Ladies and gentlemen, if you would please...?"

Various grumbling voices rose in the chamber as one by one the frames emptied of their occupants until only Shaluinn, Dumbledore and McGongall remained.

Standing and striding past the redhead to the entrance of her office, Minerva turned back and raised her finger to point at Albus. "We *will* have a chat about this later..." she warned before making her own exit.

Alone before the former Headmaster, Shaluinn's demeanor remained every bit as impassive as before. A million questions swirled through her mind, not that one could tell from her outward appearance.

"Miss Callaway, Shaluinn," Dumbledore began and stopped, a bone-weary sigh escaping his painted lips.

The redhead decided to break the silence. "So the bastard actually did it, rather than dropping dead."

TBC...

A Rock and a Hard Place

Chapter 3 of 18

So why IS Miss Callaway at Hogwarts?

Disclaimer: (In the spirit of Crimson Starlight)

Shana: *slumped over keyboard, drooling*

Snape: *prod* Enough sleep!

Shana: Wha...?

Snape: *harder prod* Write now!

Shana: *winces, rubs eyes* Huh?

Snape: *sneer* Keep writing!

Shana: *whirls on annoying wizard* Fuck you!

Snape: What did you say?

Shana: Fuck. You.

Snape: *eyebrow* Really, now.

Shana: *narrows eyes*

Snape: *prods* WRITE!

Shana: *tackles wizard*

Snape: Get off...!

Dobby: *spots Shana kissing Snape, runs away* Dobby is blind! Dobby is blind!

Painting of Dumbledore: Ahh... youth. Shanastay owns nothing other than her own original character. Everyone else belongs to JKRowling.

Chapter 3: A Rock and a Hard Place

The redhead decided to break the silence. "So the bastard actually did it, rather than dropping dead."

The twinkle left the old man's eyes, his face taking on a hardened look. "Enough!" he admonished. "This topic has already been exhausted between us."

Annoyance washed over the woman's face, as she broke her stance. "Since you are dead, you clearly no longer require my services." Shaluinn turned to retrieve her bags and leave.

"Stop!" the command in the silver-haired wizard's voice brooked no argument. "Face me, young lady."

Tension clearly visible in her back, the redhead twisted, to look over her shoulder, fixing the painting with a baleful glare. A silent war of wills went on for several beats before Shaluinn gave in and turned to face the former Headmaster.

His expression softening, Dumbledore looked down on the angry woman with compassion. "If anything, your help is needed now, more than ever." He paused for emphasis, "And you have nothing, and no one, to return to in America."

Shaluinn's eyes closed, her face taking on a pained, pinched look, as she dropped her chin to her chest, silently acknowledging the truth in the wizard's words. She had spent the last twenty-plus years living as a Muggle, forsaking magic, only to be thwarted, again and again, in her efforts to be successful. She knew Dumbledore had been all too aware that this time, when things had collapsed around her ears, she would finally be willing to embrace the world, and the life, she had left behind so long ago.

She wasn't a Squib. No, it wasn't a lack of ability or talent that had turned her from the path of Magic. Quite to the contrary, she had proven herself able in every subject, every aspect of magic, she chose to pursue. She had been described by classmates as, "one of those extremely annoying people who could do anything they put their mind to." Some subjects she took to, more than others, Arithmancy being her most difficult subject, with Potions as her best. On the Muggle side, she had struggled with Calculus and excelled at Chemistry. The parallels had proven interesting.

It was as she was preparing to graduate that she had met Headmaster Albus Dumbledore. It was he, who told her he looked forward to following her career as she had *such* a bright future ahead of her, that she had a specific purpose to fulfill in the course of things.

The compliment had been cryptic, at best, and she still did not believe or understand it.

It was mere days later that events unfolded to turn her away from the magic world and firmly on the course of a Muggle life. She hadn't even bothered to take the American equivalent of the NEWTs, attempting to put all thoughts, and memories, of anything magical out of her mind.

And so, she had followed her father's dreams for her, entering the United States Air Force Academy and serving her country. It took only two and a half years for that to fall apart. The following two years spent repaying the "debts" she'd incurred at the Academy, as an enlisted Airman, had been nothing short of pure misery. Those two years had their start marked by the violent death of her beloved father, and the revelation that Jolena, her sister, was in fact her biological mother. As much sense as that made, in the context of everything else, Shaluinn chose simply to not deal with any of it.

Her military commitment completed, she'd run to her best friend in Japan, immersing herself in the culture, seeking to learn everything she could, in the way of martial arts, becoming the second Western woman, behind her friend, to be accepted to the famed schools. Like everything she put her mind to, she excelled until she was, quite literally, the best in the world, at her disciplines. It was the longest she was able to maintain a Muggle life, lasting over a decade. Then a car wreck robbed her of her abilities. So she ran again.

Back to Southern California, to attend a Muggle University and complete a Bachelor's degree. Two and a half years later, everything fell apart again. She received the degree, but was forced to flee California, for Washington State, and the wilds of the Pacific Northwest, where her real mother, Jolena, lived.

Yet again, she tried to build a stable, Muggle life for herself under the watchful eye of her mother, who she was finally getting to know. It only took two years, this time, for that carefully crafted world to dissolve. It was toward the end of this last phase that she received an unexpected visit from the last person she ever expected to see again. Albus Dumbledore.

The wizard had aged considerably since the last time they had met, and one of his hands was visibly withered. Over the course of the ensuing months, the Headmaster had come to visit her, over and over, appraising her in detail, of what was going on in the world of magic, specifically in England and Europe.

It was at his behest that she had acquired new wands, the first she had wielded since *before*. It was at his urging that she took back all the texts her mother had saved for her, years before, and began brushing up on her old skills. His request came on the heels of her mother's untimely demise at the hands of an errant Death Eater and her unwarranted dismissal from her Muggle job.

The former Headmaster, curse him to hell and back, was right. She had nothing left there, nothing left to lose, or return to. There was nothing left to tie her to the Muggle world, and so upon receiving the letter, she had settled her affairs in the States, and headed out on one, final journey. It was a journey, and a destiny, she fully expected never to return from.

Her spirit and mind held together by copious amounts of Duct tape, the fiery, reluctant witch stood before her new master, her last remaining hope that she could accomplish in death, what she believed she had failed to in life... to make a difference.

Her resolve solidified, Shaluinn lifted her head to meet the portrait's direct gaze. "So the plan will continue as previously decided?"

Relief was more than evident on the painting's face. For just the barest moment, the former Headmaster had been afraid he had lost her. In answer, he nodded silently.

"How much does Mistress McGonagall know?"

"Nothing, though we will be remedying that shortly, I do believe," the mischievous twinkle had returned to the painted blue eyes.

"Bastard," she muttered harshly, again, disgust written clearly on her face.

"Do not be so hasty to judge, Miss Callaway," he admonished, slipping into his professorial persona.

"I would have chosen death," the redhead spat back.

"Be that as it may, the choice was not yours to make," the painting gently reminded her.

The woman carefully schooled her features back to neutrality, as she caught sight of movement in one of the many empty frames. The other former Headmasters and Headmistresses were returning, and Shaluinn could hear the approaching sounds of footfalls.

"Let me handle Minerva," Dumbledore advised as the Headmistress entered her office.

Barely sparing the redhead a glance, Minerva McGonagall strode past her to stand before her predecessor, arms crossed over her chest, aggravation easily readable on her face. "Yes, Albus, *please* 'handle' me."

Shaluinn closed her eyes for a bare second as Minerva's unintended double entendre slapped her upside the head. Her mirth contained, she turned her gaze to the visibly agitated Headmistress.

Albus' eyes danced as he caught the joke, but kept silent on it, instead diving right into the subject at hand. "Minerva, I would like to introduce Shaluinn Callaway, the new Unwanded Defense Professor."

"The new *what*?" McGonagall's right hand came to rest on her forehead, pressing gently, before dropping to her side, left fist braced against her hip, exasperation clear in her movements. "I feel another migraine brewing..."

"Unarmed combat, Mistress McGonagall," Shaluinn supplied, now standing in a modified "parade rest" position, hands still clasped before her.

"Please, stop with the 'Mistress' nonsense, dear," the Headmistress turned back to the redhead and waved vaguely toward a chair before her desk. "If we are to be colleagues, it's 'Minerva.' Please, sit down." The elder woman proceeded to drop into her chair with a soft "plop."

"Thank you, Ma'am, but I prefer to stand," Shaluinn answered, face impassive.

The disciplinarian in her shining through as she pointed at the chair in question, the elder woman ordered, "It's *Minerva*. Now *sit!*"

Wincing inwardly, the redhead answered, "Yes... Minerva," as she complied, looking stiff, and a bit out of place, in the soft wing-back chair.

The elder witch turned her chair so she could address both the young woman before her and her predecessor. Motioning with one hand and in that same tone of voice, "Well, Albus, out with it!"

For just the smallest fraction of a second, Shaluinn actually felt sorry for the old wizard until she remembered he was dead and beyond the reach of the woman before her.

Dumbledore cleared his throat, obviously enjoying the discomfort the newest addition to the faculty was experiencing, at the hands of his successor. At Minerva's pointed look, he decided to finally "put out," as it was. He turned his attention to the youngest member of the group. "Professor Callaway, if you would please, give us a general overview of your relevant credentials?"

If he hadn't already been dead, the redhead would have happily strangled the daft, old man. Instead, she answered the question. "I hold fourth degree black-belts in ten martial arts disciplines, including both armed and unarmed variants."

At the look of clear confusion plastered on the Headmistress' face, and amusement on Albus', Shaluinn rephrased her statement, in layman's terms. "I have achieved the highest levels of expertise in ten different combat disciplines. Both unarmed, or hand to hand, if you prefer, and with katanas and shuriken, for example. I mean swords and throwing stars."

"Oh, my..." Minerva murmured, one hand fluttering towards her throat.

The look Dumbledore was giving the redhead was as effective as him elbowing her in the ribs.

The woman sighed audibly before adding, "I learned the hard way, a long time ago, about the necessity of being able to defend yourself without your wand."

The former Headmaster took up the conversation again, McGonagall turning toward him, her hand still at her throat. "Shaluinn will be teaching every year level, come fall, but right now, Harry, Ron and Hermione are in most need of her tutelage. They are the most vulnerable of all. Harry can't face Voldemort with his wand without 'Priori Incantatem' occurring. He needs another way of getting rid of the Dark Lord. Not to mention, the simple value of being able to defend oneself when unarmed."

Minerva couldn't help but wonder at the darkness shifting in the younger woman's eyes as Albus spoke. But that was a question for another time. The elder woman turned her attention back to the painting. "So if I am to understand you correctly, you wish me to have Shaluinn settled into new quarters, as soon as possible, and then take her to the Burrow to train my trio of Gryffindors?"

Albus considered her question for a moment before nodding. "Yes, that's about right. I believe you know the perfect place to put her," he winked.

Minerva released a long-suffering sigh, as she returned her attention to the young witch seated before her. "Well, my dear, there's no time like the present, and frankly," she waved a hand over the scrolls stacked on her desk, "I find myself no longer in the right frame of mind to deal with these."

Shaluinn raised one brow in a look that mirrored one of Snape's trademark expressions a little too closely for the Headmistress' comfort. It was like the former Potions and DADA professor was mocking her from a distance by proxy. Minerva repressed a shudder as a chill ghosted through her.

"Well," the elder witch stood from her chair and moved to lead the way out of her office, the younger redhead quickly moving to follow. Just as she reached the office door, Minerva turned back. Shaking her finger once again, she stated firmly, "We *will* have that discussion when I return, Albus!" before turning on her heel and stalking out.

"As you wish, Minerva."

Shaluinn kept silent, but couldn't keep her shoulders from shaking in mirth, at the way the Headmistress took Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore to task.

"That's quite enough from you, Miss Callaway," the painting admonished, taking on an expression of mock horror as the redhead, unabashedly, flipped him "the bird" and left.

Severus Snape wanted to die. If suicide had been a real and viable option, he would have happily transfigured his wand into a sword and fallen upon it. Not that anyone would rue *his* passing.

With his murder of Albus Dumbledore, arguably the greatest wizard to have ever lived, besides Merlin himself, Snape found himself first among He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's followers. With that one curse, the Potions master had dispelled all of the Dark Lord's suspicions about his allegiances. *There is a reason why they call it "Unforgivable."*

He was untouchable and had been granted broad latitude, including the punishment of Draco Malfoy, for the boy's inability to complete his assigned task. The raven-haired man took no joy in administering the Cruciatus Curse, repeatedly, to the boy. He only did it to the minimum necessary to satisfy the Basilisk-Snogger's sensibilities.

Severus snorted. *Like he actually has any sensibilities.*

Despite this new position of power the Dark Lord had placed him in, the Potions master found his figurative leash had been severely shortened. Being held in such esteem, Voldemort wanted to keep him close and consulted him on his opinion about the most absurd and mundane of topics.

One conversation in particular came to mind, the worst part of it, being the fact that Moldimort had been *serious*.

"...do these robes make me look fat?..."

Severus was losing his mind. No ands, ifs, or buts about it.

He was in an unprecedented position to be privy to the details of every major move the Dark Lord made, yet had no way to convey, even a small portion of, that knowledge to the Order. And of what use was he really, if only *he* knew what was going on?

There was one option open to him, assuming he could somehow extricate himself from the Slit-Nosed-Bastard's side. But that option also hinged on Albus having been successful in *his* mission. The question was how would Severus find out if that most unlikely of missions had succeeded?

TBC...

Base Jumping, Dark Lord Teasing and Other Dangerous Sports

Chapter 4 of 18

Shaluinn is shown to her rooms.

Disclaimer: (In the spirit of Crimson Starlight)

Shana: *trussed up to chair in magical ropes*

Snape: *gargling with Listerine* Gah!

Shana: You know, there is a small problem with this situation...

Snape: *spitting* And what is that?

Shana: *shifts in chair, attempts to wiggle fingers* Kinda hard to type trussed up like this.

Snape: Hmm... *waves wand*

Shana: *ropes shift so hands can reach keyboard* Well, damn.

Snake: *prods* Back to work!

Shana: *mutters* Alright, alright! I own only Shaluinn. Everything else belongs to Rowling. And a special thank you goes out to my dear friend Kim whose assistance has been invaluable in making sure my terminology and timelines are accurate as well as helping me keep canon characters *in* character, though her spell-checking leaves something to be desired.

Chapter 4: Base Jumping, Dark Lord Teasing and Other Dangerous Sports

Shaluinn hurried to catch up with the deceptively fast-moving Minerva. Falling into step with the elder woman, the redhead asked the question that had been nagging at the back of her mind since the house-elf Dobby had told her McGonagall was Headmistress. "How long ago...?"

Minerva looked up at the somewhat taller, heavier woman beside her for a moment, before turning her attention forward again. "Just over a week ago now."

The redhead nodded silently. *I received Albus' letter after he was already dead. He may very well have sent it the day he was killed. Damn wizarding post takes forever to go cross-continent, let alone overseas.*

Sooner than anticipated, Minerva stopped before a large, arched mahogany door. Pulling her wand from her sleeve, the Headmistress waved it as she murmured, "Lemon drops," so Shaluinn could hear. "You may set your own wards and password now."

Turning in a circle in the hallway, the redhead voiced the obvious question. "At the risk of sounding seriously stupid Mist...Minerva," she caught herself, "where, exactly, are we?"

"The Sixth Floor." Returning the wand to her sleeve, the elder woman preceded Shaluinn into the room beyond.

The younger woman followed quickly, entering a medium-sized room that was clearly meant to be her office. There were little in the way of furnishings other than a simple desk, several chairs, a couch and the requisite fireplace; the particulars of decorating clearly being left to her. Shaluinn dropped her bags as she gave the room the once-over.

Her gaze veiled, Minerva silently observed the younger witch taking in her surroundings. The question that had been prodding her since meeting the redhead rose to her lips as she watched Shaluinn turn her attention, apparently, toward the fireplace. The words died on her lips, eyes widening as the redhead strode straight toward the wall to the right of the hearth, the black-clad figure's right hand sweeping up before she smoothly walked straight through the solid stone.

A frown marring her features, the Headmistress stepped up to the span of stones, tapping five in succession with her wand, pulling back as the wall opened up into an archway. She proceeded through the portal, the way automatically closing behind her. Eyes narrowed, she swept the room beyond with her gaze, finding the figure she sought, kneeling, legs folded beneath her, before a bank of floor to ceiling windows. She frowned again in confusion as she caught Shaluinn's whispered words.

"I am so going base jumping!"

"Merlin's beard! How did you do that? And *what* is 'base jumping?'"

Shaluinn turned her head sideways to acknowledge the Headmistress, before turning her attention back to the incredible view. The redhead's new quarters overlooked the cliff and displayed a commanding view of the surrounding area. She had every intention of taking a flying leap out one of those windows, at some point, with a parachute strapped to her back. *Gods, I am such an adrenaline junkie.*

Tearing herself away from the view, the redhead rose to her feet with a grace and fluidity that her frame belied. She noted the various pains and protestations of muscles with the movement, but staunchly refused to acknowledge them. Turning her back to the windows, Shaluinn addressed her new employer.

"Do you know what parachuting is?"

"Of course. Muggles jumping out of planes with tents of fabric billowing above them to retard their fall," Minerva snapped impatiently, wanting her other question answered more.

"Base jumping is the same thing, except instead of jumping out of a plane, they jump off a cliff, or a tall building, or," she hooked a thumb over her shoulder, "out one of those windows."

"Oh, dear." That hand fluttered up toward McGonagall's throat again.

"Don't worry, Minerva. I have a bit of reconnaissance to do before I throw myself out any windows," she soothed the woman. "As to your other question, how did I do what?"

The Headmistress blinked several times as she collected her thoughts, having been effectively derailed by the other woman. She crossed her arms in front of her, hands tucked up her sleeves, before responding.

"How did you know where the portal to these rooms was, and more importantly, how did you enter without tapping out the stone sequence? I have yet to see you wield a wand," she spoke carefully, a hint of suspicion coloring her tone.

Instantly realizing her mistake, Shaluinn reacted instinctively, as she would had she offended one of her Masters, years of living within the Japanese martial arts culture, and the resultant conditioning, taking over. Without preamble, the redhead fell to her knees, folding her body down on itself, prostrating herself before the Headmistress. As she dropped, her back remained straight as a board, her hands, pressed together, slid forward on the floor, the touching index and thumbs forming a circle where her forehead pressed to the floor, fingers together but splayed flat against the hard wood.

"I cry your pardon, Mistress. I did not mean to bring shame or dishonor upon your House." It was something that she hastily remembered not to make the statements in Japanese.

Utterly unprepared for this response, McGonagall's mouth dropped open in an "O" of shock. Quickly regaining her wits, Minerva closed her mouth with an audible click, eyes fixed on the still-prostrate form before her. "Oh, for Merlin's sake, girl!" She strode forward to bend at the waist and tug on the younger witch's shoulder.

Responding to the touch more than the voice, Shaluinn lifted her head and turned her face to look up at the elder witch, concern etched across her features. "Mistress?"

McGonagall tugged again, visibly keeping her irritation at bay. "Enough!" she snapped a bit more harshly than intended, stepping back as the redhead slowly rose to her feet. "You are my colleague, not my servant, Shaluinn," Minerva chided gently. "You have neither shamed nor dishonored my House or this school. I am simply curious how you found the portal and gained entrance."

"I apologize. The mistake was mine," the redhead responded as she bowed deeply to the elder witch. Anticipating the forthcoming protest, Shaluinn cut it off. "Bowing is the traditional manner of greeting and showing respect in Japan. The deeper the bow, the greater the other's position and the respect due. There are only so many of my mannerisms I can change in a short time. I tend to fall back on old habits when thrust into new, and somewhat alien, surroundings. I did not intend to upset you."

"It's alright, my dear. You took me by surprise is all," Minerva admitted.

Righting herself, the redhead looked past the Headmistress to the solid-appearing wall beyond. "You are wondering about my use of wandless magic." Shaluinn turned her attention to the elder witch as Minerva nodded. "The full explanation would be a bit long and drawn out, so I will give you the short and sweet version."

Turning to face Minerva fully, the redhead continued, "For the past twenty-plus years I have been living as a Muggle. Up until six months ago I did not even own a wand. Over the years of being without, I've acquired some ability for wandless magic." At the elder witch's quirked eyebrow, she elaborated.

"Apparently, even if you try to deny magical heritage, if you have enough latent power, it will manifest unless you learn to control it, as I did, minus the focal point of a wand." Shaluinn snapped her hands down at her sides, fingers spread, as identical ebony wands dropped from her sleeves into her waiting hands. Heading off the next question, she smiled ruefully, "I'm ambidextrous, at least with a wand."

The redhead brought her hands around, palms up, and opened them, offering the wands for Minerva's perusal. Again sensing the next query, as the Headmistress lifted the one from her left palm, she continued. "They are identical, 13-inch ebony shafts made from a single branch with a core of 'Yamata no Orochi' heartstring. I suspect Albus gave them to the wandmaker with me in mind and already paid for, as they are simply priceless and I could never have afforded them otherwise."

The Headmistress spared the redhead a sideways glance as she turned the deceptively simple, undecorated shaft in her hands before returning it to its owner.

Shaluinn brought her arms down parallel to her sides, palms facing in. With a flex of her wrists outward, and fingers spread, the wands snapped back into her sleeves. "The best part, is that you can't 'Accio' these wands without knowing their names."

"Indeed," the elder witch agreed. "That is a handy trait."

"Minerva..." the redhead started and faltered, suddenly fumbling with her words, her cheeks growing pink with repressed embarrassment.

"Oh, stop pussy-footing around and have out with it!"

The taller woman let out a light chuckle at the Headmistress' tone. "Would you tutor me in Transfigurations?"

McGonagall was visibly taken aback by the question. "Whatever for? I don't understand."

Shaluinn ducked her head as she answered, looking a bit sheepish, the expression strangely out of place on the younger witch's face.

"Like I said, I've only had these wands for about six months now and, frankly, that's not enough time to become proficient again, even with Albus Dumbledore as your tutor. The wandless stuff I've been doing without really thinking for a long time, but this," she gestured like she was waving a wand, "no longer comes naturally to me."

Minerva reached out to place a comforting hand on the redhead's arm. "Of course, my dear. I would be delighted. I'm sure you will prove a quick study."

Shaluinn just barely reigned in the flinch that came in response to the unwanted and unexpected touch, covering the slight movement by smiling brightly back at Minerva. "Thank you."

With the younger woman's admission, the question that had been nagging at McGonagall came back to the forefront. When she spoke, it came out as more of a statement. "Albus' 'trips' this past year... He was visiting you!"

Shaluinn simply nodded in answer, not correcting the woman, who was only partially right.

"Well! That does explain quite a bit." The elder witch let that revelation settle over her for a moment before literally shaking herself. "Oh, dear me, I'm forgetting myself. These are your quarters," she made a sweeping gesture to take in the suite of rooms, "and your classroom is right next door. There are also both boys' and girls' bathrooms on this floor."

"Would it be possible to add changing rooms to those facilities?" the redhead asked, already thinking ahead to the coming school year.

"Of course! We will make that one of your Transfigurations projects," Minerva answered with a firm nod.

Shaluinn couldn't help but smile as the elder witch's enthusiasm was infectious. "Now that that's settled, where is this 'Burrow'?"

"Ah, yes, that." Minerva considered the taller woman for a moment. "I'm still not so sure about this, but if Albus believes the skills you can impart are necessary..." She did not finish the thought, her tacit approval evident. "We should go, as the day is drawing on."

The elder witch let Shaluinn lead, again slightly unsettled at the way the redhead simply made a gesture and walked through the wall. She tapped out the opening sequence and followed.

They paused outside the newest professor's office, long enough for Shaluinn to drop a wand into her left hand and silently weave several layers of wards, as well as changing the password.

"You don't seem to have lost your skill at that," Minerva observed, as she began to move away.

"The past six months I've spent primarily on relearning that," Shaluinn answered. "I thought they were the most relevant aspect of my education that needed work."

Minerva did not answer, merely nodding as she led the way back to the Headmistress' office, allowing the younger witch a chance to take in her surroundings. When they reached the stone gargoyle, she spoke, "Panthera Leo," loud enough for the new professor to hear.

Once back in her office, McGonagall shot Dumbledore's portrait her own variant of the "evil eye," before stepping up to the fireplace.

"Oh, good."

Minerva turned back, "What was that?"

Shaluinn spread her hands out toward her sides. "I'm glad we're obviously taking the Floo Network. My Apparating and Disapparating skills are, shall we say, a bit rusty?"

"We shall have to work on that as well, then."

As Minerva reached up to the jar on the mantle, threw a pinch of Floo Powder into the flames, called, "The Burrow!" and stepped into the green flames to spin out of sight, Shaluinn turned to stick her now visibly pierced tongue out at Albus Dumbledore's painting. The redhead laughed at his answering rude gesture and threw her own pinch of powder in, shouting clearly, "The Burrow," stepped in and spun away.

A/N: Yamata no Orochi (; often called Orochi in English) is a monster in Japanese mythology. Orochi is alternately described as an eight-headed snake, dragon, or even a Japanese version of the Lernaean Hydra. It is one of the most well-known monsters in Japanese myth. It was slain by the god Susanoo after he was cast out of Heaven.

A Titanic Endeavor

Chapter 5 of 18

Off to the Burrow...

Disclaimer: (In the spirit of Crimson Starlight)

Shana: *screaming* HELP!

Kim: *walks in, fingers in ears* Chica, you need to chill!

Shana: You haven't seen Snape have you?

Kim: Severus? No. Why?

Shana: *rocking back and forth in chair* Get me out of these, quick!

Kim: *frowning* Why're you tied up?

Shana: Stop asking questions and untie me!

Snape: *struts in, brandishes wand at Kim* I strongly suggest you stand aside.

Shana: Awww, shit!

Snape: *prods* That's enough from you. Keep writing.

Kim: *wide-eyed*

Shana: *hissing* Bite me.

Snape: Really. *prods*

Shana: Bite. Me.

Snape: Very well. *bends over and bites woman on neck*

Shana: *whimpers*

Kim: *waves hand in air* Can I get in on this?

Snape: Did I not indicate it would be in your best interests to leave or suffer the consequences?

Kim: If "consequences" involve me getting trussed up naked to a bed and ravished by you I say, BRING IT ON!

Snape: Oh my.

Shana: *typing furiously* Hey you brought it on yourself dude. I'm kinda "tied up" at the moment, so you're on your own.

Kim: *leers*

Snape: Perhaps a strategic retreat is in order.

Shana: Better run.

Snape: *Disapparates*

Kim: Damn. Shanastay is solely responsible for the mayhem caused by Shaluinn. Everyone else belongs to Rowling.

Chapter 5: A "Titanic" Endeavor

Shaluinn fought down the wave of nausea that threatened to overwhelm her as she spun round and round and finally popped out of the fireplace, into the living room of the Weasley clan's humble abode, the Burrow.

Professor McGonagall sidestepped, just in time for the hearth to disgorge the taller woman, the redhead dropping to her hands and knees, her eyes squeezed shut and twisted in a painful, ugly expression, soot flying all around her.

Molly walked into the room, wiping her hands on a towel, a tight smile gracing her lips as she caught sight of the Headmistress. "Minerva, to what do we owe..." She froze, eyes locked on the crumpled form on her living room floor.

Disheveled and motion-sick from her trip through the Floo, Shaluinn was quite the sight. Her unbound hair had flown every which way and, bent over as she was, and staving off dry-heaves, formed a flaming curtain that hid her green-cast features.

"Professor Callaway..." Minerva started to say, only to be cut off by the redhead lifting one arm and making a sweeping, violent gesture that clearly meant *Leave me be!*

The two women waited in silence as the figure on the floor shook twice in succession and stilled. With an audible intake of breath, Shaluinn rose from her prone position, flipping her hair back behind her as she attempted to draw her fingers through the now snarled length and only succeeded in making herself grimace in pain. She quickly took in the two women watching her before turning to the one on her left. "Minerva...?"

McGonagall already had her wand out and ready.

Callaway snapped her right wrist and that wand dropped into her waiting hand.

With one eyebrow carefully arched, the Headmistress precisely performed the Cleansing Charm on the redhead. Once done, the new UD Professor performed it on her employer, mimicking her exactly.

"Thank you, Minerva."

"You're quite welcome, my dear. You are indeed, a quick study." The elder witch turned her attention to the now impatiently waiting matriarch of the Weasley clan. "I apologize for the sudden intrusion. Molly Weasley, may I present you with Shaluinn Callaway, Hogwarts' new Unwanded Defense Professor."

Shaluinn snapped her wrist, returning her wand to her sleeve, placed her hands together beneath her chin and bowed to the other redhead. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Madam."

Molly's smile was strained, at best, taking in the new arrival's strange appearance and manner. "A pleasure, I'm sure." The mother turned her attention back to the Headmistress. "Minerva?"

"I'll try to explain everything, Molly," McGonagall said, as she moved to usher the woman back into her kitchen. The Transfigurations Mistress spared Shaluinn a glance, nodding her head towards a door off to the side. "Harry and the others are most likely outside," she advised, as she disappeared into the other room.

Finding herself suddenly alone, Shaluinn decided to follow Minerva's advice and went out the indicated door, gathering her hair at the back of her head and beginning to plait it into a single, thick braid as she went.

The American stepped out into the waning late afternoon sunlight, nudging her Ray-Bans back down onto her face with a forearm as she surveyed the area. Finding no one in sight, she took the time to finish the braid, fishing a hair-tie out of a pocket to hold it together. That accomplished, she made her way around the side of the house to find an open area with several picnic tables in it.

Sitting huddled over a book at one of the tables, the woman spotted three distinctive bent heads, one sporting a tangle of unruly black hair, the second having a mane of long, curly chestnut hue and the last sprouting a shock of red that matched that of the woman she had briefly met inside. Almost as one, the trio lifted their heads and turned to look at her with open mistrust and suspicion.

Something that should have occurred to her before that moment flashed through the American witch's mind. *Exactly how am I supposed to convince these three I'm here to help them?*

An impromptu staring contest, of sorts, ensued as neither party wanted to be the one to make the first move.

Shaluinn was once again forced to consider the potential ramifications of her choice in attire. *I must look like a fucking wanna-be Death Eater in all this black, but there was no way I'd show up in pastels.* Steeling herself against the potential confrontation ahead, the woman decided to show her hand first. *When in doubt, the direct approach is usually best. Gods, I hope Hermione is even half as smart and level-headed as Albus has led me to believe.*

Striding forward, the newest addition to the Hogwarts teaching staff made it a point of pulling off her sunglasses, so the trio before her could see her eyes and, hopefully, the truth in her words. Just like in Jump school, she wasted no time and flung herself headfirst into the ether.

"Hi, I'm Shaluinn Callaway. You three must be Harry, Hermione and Ron. Dumbledore sent me. I understand you have some Horcruxes to find and destroy, and a Dark Lord to depose. I'm here to help you."

TBC...

(Revamped) Open Mouth, Insert Foot Here

Chapter 6 of 18

Aren't you just a bit curious about Shaluinn's "skills"? Rewritten 3/17/06 to fix discrepancies.

Disclaimer: (In the Spirit of Crimson Starlight)

Shana: *screaming again*

Snape: Why do you insist on making such an infernal racket?

Shana: Actually, I was kinda hoping you'd bite me again.

Snape: Really.

Shana: Or you could kiss me. I think that would have better results than biting or prodding. *smiles innocently*

Snape: Hmm...

Shana: Oh, come ON, you ruddy bastard! You know it's been a while since you got to snog a willing woman.

Snape: Hmm...

Shana: Okay, fine. Do it the hard way. *opens mouth to start screaming again*

Snape: *shuts her up*

Kim: *walks in on Snape snogging Shana* Goddamnit! She has ALL the luck! Shanastay claims ownership of Miss Callaway. All others belong to Rowling. She makes no compensation from this. Unless you count *that!* *points at lip-locked pair*

Chapter 6: Open Mouth, Insert Foot Here

Dead silence greeted the UD professor's bald declaration. The three youths before her sat slack-jawed, blinking up at her initially smiling, and now grimacing countenance.

"That's not quite how I envisioned that coming out," she declared, throwing up her hands in defeat. "Well, fuck!"

The trio before her seemed surprised and somewhat shocked at the sudden, unexpected profanity. Apparently they weren't used to "adults" cursing around them. *I'm gonna hafta start watching my language, especially come fall. Fuckin-A!*

Jamming her Ray-Bans back on her head, Shaluinn spread her now empty hands in entreaty. "Look, Dumbledore dragged me here all the way from the Pacific Northwest of the USA to *help* you. If you like, you can ask him, well, his portrait anyway, yourselves."

Dubious looks met her latest outburst.

"Crap. How 'bout I leave you alone to decide for yourselves, and you let me know, eh?" She pointed toward the other end of the yard. "I'll be over there whenever you're ready, or whatever." The visibly agitated American stalked away, muttering to herself, "Brilliant. Just fucking brilliant. Way to go, Shaluinn. That was a *great* way to gain their confidence..."

As soon as she made it to the other end of the yard, the woman looked back to see the youths conversing, at least one of them throwing a glance her way at any given time. Letting out a pent-up breath, she shook her head at herself. *Diplomacy never was your strong suit.*

What to do while I wait? Might as well get some form practice in. Shaluinn proceeded to fish around in her pockets before coming up with the items she needed. Marking off a spot ten paces away and parallel to the trio, she placed one of the items in the grass and stepped back.

Shifting everything over to her left hand, she flexed her right wrist, catching her wand as it dropped out of her sleeve. Concentrating carefully, she practiced the necessary wand movements several times as she recalled the appropriate incantation. Satisfied she was doing it right, Shaluinn focused her mind and performed the spell that would return the piece of shrunken equipment to its original size.

The witch couldn't repress the small smirk that graced her lips as a full-size archery target round, resting on its stand, grew up out of the grass. From the corner of her eye, she saw she had a rapt audience. Stepping back the ten paces she'd mentally marked off, she placed the rest of the items from her left hand in the grass.

Flexing her right wrist and then left, alternately, she switched wands, now performing the enlarging spell with her left hand. A full-size black compound bow with red cams and a hip-quiver filled with red-fletched arrows, that matched the fire-engine shade of the owner's hair, rose out of the grass. If there had been any doubt about having the attention of the group on the other end of the yard, it was wiped away as the trio now stared openly.

Positive she would have a little while before they came to a definitive decision Shaluinn returned her wand to her sleeve before shrugging out of her ankle-length, black leather coat and casting it to the side. The doffing of her coat revealed the skin-hugging nature of the attire beneath. The matte black color of the stretchy black top and curve-gripping leather pants went a long way toward hiding the details of her figure, but nothing could disguise its hourglass shape.

The reluctant witch reached up to drop the Ray-Bans back over her eyes before bending to first retrieve the black quiver, with a small red, white and blue banner attached to it, and fasten it about her hips. The red-fletched arrows sat in the forward-facing sleeve, resting against her right side. She removed a black canvas visor with an American flag emblazoned across the brim from the belt, situating it on her head with her bangs settled over the top.

Only then did she pick up the bow, removing and tucking the oversized clothes-pin-looking stand into the back of her belt, and wrapping the red and black braided retaining strap around her left wrist. Eyes on the blank bale before her, she retrieved her release aid from a zippered pocket on the side of the quiver by touch alone. Slipping her right hand through the loop attached to the release, she pulled an arrow and nocked it between the points of the D-loop, the body of the arrow set against the rest. With a flip of her wrist, her release was in hand, the back end of the D-loop caught in its hook.

Taking a stance perpendicular to the target, left side out, focusing totally on form and not worrying about aiming, Shaluinn brought the bow up. Left arm and elbow locked-out, she pulled the string back in one smooth motion, right hand twisting at the end of the draw, so the backs of her knuckles rested against the side of her jaw. With a minute flex of her right shoulder and press of the thumb-button on the release, she let the string and arrow go, left hand relaxing its grip, as the bow dropped forward several degrees in a smooth follow-through.

Without conscious thought, the American dropped her hand to retrieve arrow after arrow, repeating the shot, feeling her way through it. The woman had been shooting for so many long years that the motions no longer required conscious effort on her part. Even aiming, unless it was a live and moving target, took only a minimum of thought. That was why this had become her favorite, and preferred method of relaxation, even as it won her a gold medal at the World Championships, years prior.

The witch hadn't been sure what to think of the reaction she garnered from the then Headmaster Dumbledore after he had spent an hour watching her shoot. He told her that the entire time, the only thoughts he could read off her were, "Nock. Clip. Pull. Snap," or some variant of those. He claimed he'd never encountered a more effective block against Legilimency, not even in those individuals highly skilled in Occlumency.

He even tested his theory further, having her merely sit and think about shooting archery, with the same, supposedly, impressive results. Even with various distractions, her focus was so total that the shell she had created around her mind never broke. Shaluinn knew that, to a certain extent, she lost awareness of the outside world, and frankly, she wasn't sure that was a good thing.

But right here and now, in the Weasleys' backyard, Shaluinn allowed that totality of focus to fall around her until the entirety of the world consisted of her, her bow and arrows, and the blank bale. It wasn't until she'd emptied her quiver of target arrows that she registered the fact that someone was calling her name, and probably had been for some time.

The UD professor turned to her right to see that Molly and Minerva had joined the three youths, and it was the Headmistress who had been calling her. Deciding to have a spot of fun at the lot's expense, Shaluinn retrieved a broadhead arrow from the quiver and nocked it. Looking past the group, she zoomed in on her intended target, reaching over to adjust her sight with a twist of a knob. She snapped the release onto the D-loop and drew, aiming (or so it looked) right at the openly staring group, tracking her quarry for a half-second before popping the release.

Molly Weasley didn't even have time to gasp, as the broadhead arrow neatly skewered one of her forever annoying garden gnomes, dropping it to the ground.

Minerva, on the other hand, looked rather irritated at her newest employee's blatantly inflammatory antics.

Harry, Ron and Hermione were once again staring at her open-mouthed, though with Molly present that didn't last long, and they quickly schooled their features.

Shaluinn pulled the bow stand from the back of her belt and clipped it to the bottom limb of her bow before settling the weapon on the ground. She then strode to stand before McGonagall, quiver slapping against her thigh as she walked. The woman brought her hands up before her chest, palms together, and waited.

Staunchly refusing to appear surprised, or unnerved, by the strange woman before her, Minerva McGonagall mustered up every bit of dignity she had as she spoke. "I'm returning to Hogwarts now. When you are through here, Floo back to my office and apprise me of your status. I will also have some 'homework' waiting for you." Her eyes twinkled, and the corners of her mouth turned up at that last. "Now, do behave yourself."

She then turned her attention to the three sitting at the picnic table. "Harry, Ron, Hermione, do take care of yourselves." She turned. "Molly, always lovely to see you." With that, the Headmistress turned on her heel and marched back toward the house.

Shaluinn turned her attention to a slowly simmering Molly.

"Please, put those things away. I don't need dangerous things like that lying around."

"But Mom..." a male voice whined off to Shaluinn's right.

The much taller redhead decided to break in, "Of course, Madam," and made a small bow before maneuvering past to collect the broadhead arrow.

On her way back, Shaluinn paused as she passed Molly, reading a question written on the other woman's face.

"How old *are* you, dear?"

The American smiled, "Thirty-eight," she turned her gaze to the three at the table and winked, "though I'm regularly accused of being much younger."

That set off a series of whispers and elbows nudged into ribs, as the tall redhead carefully retrieved and shrank her equipment while Molly returned to the house and preparing dinner. As Callaway replaced the last item in her pockets, she caught sight of Harry approaching, a determined look fixed on his face.

"*Accio wands!*"

Shaluinn's head snapped up and around at the sharply verbalized command, her eyes narrowing at the young man, now standing several feet away from her, wand drawn. She left her coat on the ground and rose to her feet, her heeled boots giving her an inch or so over the young man with the lightning scar.

Confusion and disbelief warred on Harry's face, as Ron and Hermione simultaneously cried, "*Accio wands!*" from behind him.

Again, nothing happened.

The American witch paled as she realized what was probably coming next, dismayed that she'd fucked things up bad enough for the three youths to come at her like this.

"*Expelliarmus!*" all three cried together. Three dazzling flashes of light flew at the UD professor, the American diving and rolling on the ground, just narrowly missed by the spells.

Rolling to her knees, she raised both hands and snapped her wrists, wands dropping. "*Accio wands!*" The trio's wands flew out of their hands and into hers. She swiftly tucked the wooden shafts into the back of her waistband. The woman concentrated, lifted both wands and waved them silently in the air, Hermione and Harry both locking up and falling over in Full Body Bind Curses, followed by Ron.

Callaway walked to stand over Harry so she could meet his very torqued gaze. "Might as well calm yourself, Mr. Potter. *You* chose to approach me in such a manner, so you only have yourself to blame." She let him search her gaze, to see for himself that she was totally calm, and deadly serious.

So all three could hear her, she continued, "Lesson the First: I *amnot* your enemy, nor should you make one of me. I picked up a great deal during the decade I lived in Japan, which, by the way, is where my wands are from. Lesson the Second: You have *got* to shut your mouths when spell-casting in combat. The split-second advantage it gives you literally means the difference between life and death. I can't teach you that. It will come only with concentration and *practice*."

The American moved away from Harry and over toward Hermione, bending her wrists to re-seat her wands out of the way. As she neared the younger witch, she waved her hands, ending the incantation and purposely turning her back on the most dangerous side of the triangle. Callaway was impressed that the brunette did not immediately rush her, considering first. The end result was the same, either way.

Predictably, Hermione went for their wands. Anticipating this, the American spun to the right as she sidestepped, using the centrifugal force, plus the younger witch's forward momentum, against her. Callaway caught Hermione's right wrist in her right hand, her left hand coming up to push against the brunette's right shoulder, taking her to the ground, arm twisted and bent up at an awkward angle, the professor's left knee in the small of Hermione's back.

Ron tried to swoop in to the rescue, only to be tripped by Callaway's right leg, the American's right foot swinging back to pin his prone form painfully, by the neck, partially cutting off his airway. Thankfully, Harry stood back, actually paying attention.

"Lesson the Third: And this is the most important one. You may at some point find yourself *wandless* that does *NOT* mean you are *defenseless!*" With that, she released her two captives. Standing swiftly, she offered a hand up each to Ron and Hermione.

Ron eyed it for a second before waving it off.

Hermione had her left knee up and reached for the proffered hand with her left across her body. Recognizing what was about to happen, Callaway resisted only enough to make it "real" and let the younger witch pull her left arm across her body as she stood, left hand pinned to the brunette's left hip, Hermione's right hand sliding around and over the American's upper arm until the blade of the younger witch's hand pressed in painfully, forcing Callaway to bend at the waist.

Already knowing what came next, the American was able to cushion her descent, as Hermione then took a step to the left and pivoted with her hips, falling to her right knee, dropping the professor to the ground in a textbook, balance-disruption and take-down technique.

Callaway twisted her head to look up at the brunette as she felt the wands tucked in her waistband being removed. "Excellent, Miss Granger! This is *exactly* what I'm talking about!" She then easily twisted out of Hermione's grip, rolling back to her feet. "You perceived weak positioning and sought to use it to your advantage. Flawless arm-bar take-down by the way. Of the three of you, I had hoped you had received some self-defense training. This will make my job that much easier."

Harry was the one who blurted out what was evidently on all three youths' minds.

"Who the ruddy hell *are* you?"

TBC...

A/N: A HUGE thank you to everyone who has reviewed! I adore feedback and the more encouragement I get, the more I tend to write. I already have a total of 11 chapters written! Please, continue to feed the authoress!

A *compound bow* is a modern bow that has pulleys or cams at the end of each limb through which the bow string passes. As the bow is pulled back (drawn) the pulleys or cams turn which, in turn, reduce the amount of force needed to completely draw the bow. The archer usually uses a *release aid* to hold the string steadily and release it precisely. This attaches to the bowstring at a point and permits the archer to release the string with a pull of a trigger. With less force required to hold a compound bow at draw, the muscles take longer to fatigue, thus giving a compound archer more time to aim.

An *arrow* consists of a long and thin shaft made from aluminum or carbon fiber composite. It is pointed or armed with an arrowhead at one end and with *fletchings* or notch in the other. Arrowheads (specifically multi-blade *broadheads*) fit hunting and military purpose better than a mere point, which is mostly useful for target-shooting. Near the notch end are vanes, which keep the arrow pointed in the direction of travel by strongly damping down any tendency to pitch or yaw. There are often three vanes, but many fletchings have four or even more. They are now often made of plastic bound to the arrow's shaft.

Check out this link if you have any other questions: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archery>

Fatal Attraction

Chapter 7 of 18

The Golden Trio and Callaway have a chat.

Disclaimer: (In the spirit of Crimson Starlight)

Shana: *sitting in chair, staring off into space, a goofy look on her face*

Kim: *poke* Hon?

Shana: *heavy sigh*

Kim: *blink* What the hell? *notices wizard lurking in dark corner*

Snape: *innocently inspecting fingernails*

Kim: YOU!

Snape: *looks up* Are you addressing me, madam?

Kim: You're damn straight I'm talkin' to you!

Snape: *eyebrow*

Kim: Oh, no you don't! That look will *not* work on me!

Snape: *drops first brow, lifts opposite one* Really?

Kim: *melts* Okay, I give!

Snape: *smirks*

Kim: Shanastay owns only Shaluin. All others belong to the genius of JK Rowling. No monies are made on this. But *points* can I keep him?

Shana: *still in a daze* No.

Kim: Damn.

Chapter 7: Fatal Attraction

It had been just over a week since Dumbledore's death, and Severus found himself pacing back and forth like a caged animal. He could take about half a dozen steps before hitting a wall. The Potions master was quickly wearing a rut in the carpet.

Voldemort had appropriated an abandoned Muggle estate in the countryside as the Death Eaters' base of operations. The manor house was a sprawling conglomeration of old architecture and modern additions. The last owner had gone bankrupt with all the work done on the house, and the bank had repossessed it several years prior. The estate had lain empty until the wizards had moved in. The realtor and bank handling the property had subsequently, and rather conveniently, "forgotten" about it.

Snape's suite was second in size only to the Dark Lord's, befitting the man who had taken out one of the greatest wizards in history.

Disgust, shame, and self-loathing warred for supremacy within the tightly-controlled former professor. It was all making him ill. More than half the food he managed to choke down came back up later. If possible, his skin had become even more sallow and his hair greasier. He couldn't feel, not really, not where he currently stood.

In the middle of Death Eater Ground Zero he could not afford to show even the tiniest bit of emotion contrary to the cause. He could not drop his guard for a moment. He could not get drunk. He could not let himself go. He could not *grieve*. He couldn't even place adequate wards on his rooms to keep others out without arousing suspicion.

The tall, thin man ceased his pacing before one of the two wing-back chairs, the only furniture that occupied the sitting room. Turning slightly, Severus lifted both hands to run his fingers through his hair as he dropped into the chair behind him. Snape let his left hand fall to the arm of the chair, his right elbow against the armrest. His right index and thumb came up to pinch the bridge of his nose, his brow furrowed against the now-constant migraine he was nursing.

He had no other options. He *had* to get out of there. The question was, how?

Lost in thought and concentration, Severus somehow missed the presence that invaded his rooms. That is, until two slender, pale arms slid up and over the back of the chair he was seated in, to grasp his tensed shoulders.

Snape's reaction was immediate. He flew up, out of the chair, spinning to face the unwelcome visitor, wand drawn, robes flaring out around him. His eyes narrowed further as he perceived the long, wavy, black hair and the black eyes lit by insanity peering at him over the back of the chair.

"Bellatrix."

"Ssssseverussss..." the unquestionably loyal Death Eater hissed back.

Wand still at the ready, Snape let his irritation show through in his voice. "I do not have time for your games, Bellatrix. What do you want? Does our Lord require my presence?" he snapped.

The woman cocked her head to the side, seeming to consider the questions. She slid around the chair toward the Potions master as she answered. "Noooo... Ssssseverussss... I came to sssseeeeeee how you were doing," she drawled in a manner that was meant to be seductive.

Snape narrowed his eyes, his suspicions aroused. *Voldemort is sure of my loyalties now. She must be here on her own. I shouldn't be surprised. Even after being the Bonder at my taking of the Unbreakable Vow, and its subsequent fulfillment, she does not trust me. Sadly, she is right.* "I am fine, as you can see," he sneered, tucking his wand away and crossing his arms over his chest as he glared down his prominent nose at the woman.

He smoothly sidestepped as she approached, carefully keeping the dangerous woman in front of him and himself from being cornered. Had there been music playing, they almost would have looked like they were dancing with the way they circled each other.

Snape knew better than to trust Bellatrix Lestrange. Beyond the obvious fact that she was nuttier than a bag of mixed nuts, the witch was entirely too perceptive. Trying to put an end to this game, the dark wizard asked again, "What do you want?"

The woman again tried to approach the Potions master, who dodged her advances. Bellatrix tried on a pouting expression, purring, "Severus, why do you keep avoiding me? I know you haven't really *celebrated* your triumph over that old fool. I thought I might *help* you..." she offered.

It was hard for Snape to keep his face impassive at Lestrange's denigration of Dumbledore. Voice smooth as silk, he sneered, "You are only partially right, *Mrs. Lestrange*. I have not, and have no desire to *celebrate* with *you*."

Bellatrix's eyes flashed as she struck, wand out. "How dare you! *Crucio!*"

Snape deflected the curse with a wave of his hand. "Really, Bella, I expected more from you," he sniped nastily, clearly baiting the woman.

Predictably, the insane Death Eater rose to the insult. Face twisted horribly, the black-haired witch screamed, "*Avad...*"

Severus already had his wand out and countered, "*Petrificus Totalus!*" He allowed the sneer that threatened to rise to his lips as he strode to stand over the woman where she had fallen. Snape stared into the baleful eyes glaring up at him. "Bella, Bella, Bella. What shall I do with you?"

Snape swiftly turned away, not wanting Lestrange to see anything that his expression might let slip. *Could this be it? Could it be this simple? Bellatrix Lestrange has unintentionally handed me my way out of this quasi-house arrest.* Carefully wiping any traces of the sudden elation he was feeling from his face, Severus turned back to the witch on the floor. "I do believe I have found a solution to the impasse we are in."

Severus waved a hand as he muttered, "*Finite Incantatum.*" As soon as Lestrange started to move he waved his wand and cried, "*Imperio!*" The Potions master nodded as Bellatrix took on the compliant, lethargic look of one under the Imperius curse. "Now, Mrs. Lestrange, we are going to have a little chat with our Dark Lord about your recent behavior. Follow me." He swept out of the room, followed by the now obedient woman.

"Who the ruddy hell *are* you?"

"Yeah! Start talking, lady!" Ron demanded, crossing his arms over his chest.

Like his words were some sort of strange cue, white fire lanced up Shaluinn's right thigh to settle in her right hip. *Oh, fuckin' A! Perfect timing!* Valiantly trying to suppress a reactionary grimace, every muscle in her face tensed and her lips pursed, a vein throbbing visibly at her left temple. The woman unobtrusively shifted her weight to her left leg, her right hand rising, palm flat, to press firmly against her afflicted hip.

Realizing how her stance must look, she chose to let them think it was arrogance, confidence, whatever, consciously subverting the throbbing pain to the back of her mind. *And so I pay the price for actually pulling off those moves. Gods, I wish being out of practice was all there was to this.* For just a moment, she let doubt creep in. *Did Albus even try to take into account how far along I would be? Will I actually be able to complete the tasks he set before me?*

Brows furrowed in what she hoped would pass for concern or seriousness, Callaway looked from Harry, to Ron, to Hermione's face. Miss Granger was the only one clearly considering events up to that point. Shaluinn focused on the young brunette, knowing she was the key to the new UD professor's success at this point. "I do believe Miss Granger has something to add."

Hermione met the redhead's gaze. Shaluinn could practically hear the gears working in the young woman's head. *Please GOD make a decision so I can either leave or sit down. As it is, I don't know if I'll be able to even take a step without collapsing.*

The brunette looked between her two best friends before looking back to the American. "It's okay, guys. I think we can trust her, for now."

Callaway released the breath she'd been holding, her chin dropping to her chest. Taking a deep breath to steady her, the redhead looked back up, smiling. "Thank you, Miss Granger. Professor Dumbledore advised me to look to you when a matter involved logical reasoning."

The new UD professor made to walk past the trio to stand by the picnic table they had vacated. Despite her best efforts, her right leg nearly crumpled as she put weight on it, an audible breath forced from her chest. She just managed to catch herself, teeth clenched, and moving stiffly. Luckily her back was to them so they couldn't see her expression. Still trying to salvage the situation, she offered, "Just a cramp. I wasn't anticipating that sort of physical activity." *You bloody wish it was just a cramp.* She waved them over. "Perhaps we should sit down to discuss this."

"Mione?" Ron asked his friend incredulously.

Her impatience showing through, Hermione watched the American's stilted movements very carefully before snapping, "Ron, shut up and sit down. It can't hurt for us to hear what she has to say." The brunette then took a seat on the side opposite the woman, closing the book that had lain open on the tabletop.

Ron made a sound of disgust but relented, moving to sit beside his friend, his hand coming to rest against the small of her back.

Callaway didn't fail to notice the gesture, filing it away for further consideration.

Harry waited until the redheads both took seats before joining the group.

Ron decided to pipe up again. "You know we're going to check this out with Dumbledore's portrait, right?"

"Of course. By all means. But I believe I may have something with me that will help convince you." The woman flexed her left wrist to drop her wand and murmured, "*Accio coat!*" Garment in hand, she pulled Dumbledore's letter from an inside pocket and dropped the folded piece of parchment on top of the thick book sitting in the center of the table.

Hermione immediately snatched up the parchment, unfolding and laying it out for all three to see.

Twisting his head so he could read it better, Harry's brows furrowed as he looked from the parchment to the woman sitting beside him and back again. Finished, he turned his full attention to the American.

"So, what does your 'unique assistance' involve, and what is this 'position' Professor Dumbledore was going to give you?" Potter questioned, suspicion still coloring his tone, arms crossed over his chest, eyes narrowed.

"Both perfectly reasonable and valid questions, Mr. Potter. I will answer the second one first," Callaway replied. "The 'position' I have been given at Hogwarts is that of 'Unwanded Defense Professor.' Basically, I will be teaching the wizarding equivalent of self-defense/unarmed combat."

"Martial arts," Hermione murmured, understanding crossing her face. "You'll be teaching hand-to-hand tactics."

The woman nodded. "Exactly, Miss Granger."

Ron piped up then. "So what about this 'unique assistance' you're supposed to provide?"

"Professor Dumbledore charged me with teaching you, all of you, any and all skills I thought you would need or find useful in your 'quest.'" The American turned toward Harry. "Speaking of which, I know you destroyed the diary and Dumbledore, the ring. Before he was killed, were you and he able to retrieve and destroy a third Horcrux?"

Ron interjected, "What do you know of Horcruxes?" as both Harry and Hermione nodded in agreement.

Callaway kept her attention on Harry, instinctively knowing he was the one she really had to convince now. "There are, were, at least seven pieces of the Snake-Snogger's soul contained in various objects. Riddle's diary was one. Marvolo's ring was two. Slytherin's locket would be three. Hufflepuff's cup makes four. Nagini, the snake, is perhaps number five, which leaves something of Gryffindor's and Ravenclaw's as numbers six and seven. Have I sufficiently covered all of them?"

The three youths were staring at the woman with dazed expressions, apparently shocked that someone other than their trio had been privy to this tremendous secret.

Taking advantage of the silence, the American added, "I am entirely at your disposal. Anything within my power that I can do for you, I will. The only information I have is that which Dumbledore chose to share with me. And being as I am not from around here - yes, I realize that may be the understatement of the year - I can only help you so much with the search for the Horcruxes. I can cover your backs and assist you, but other than giving you a complete outsider's perspective, in that area I will probably be of little help."

Again, Ron was the one to open his mouth. "So of what use are you to us, then?"

"The Restricted Section!"

"What?"

"Huh?"

Callaway and Ron both responded to Hermione's words with confusion.

The brunette looked pleadingly at both Ron and Harry before returning her excited gaze to the American. "The Restricted Section. As a professor at Hogwarts you can grant us access to the library's Restricted Books Section!" The young witch's caramel colored eyes were alight with eagerness.

"Only you would be thinking about getting at those books at a time like this, Hermione," Ron huffed in annoyance.

The redhead received an elbow to the ribs for his trouble as the witch admonished, "Do you have any better ideas about where to start tracking down the Horcruxes?"

"No," he admitted, rubbing his offended side.

Bemused, but more than willing to go along, the professor offered, "Whatever you need. Do I write you some kind of pass?"

"Yes!" The brunette conjured a quill and parchment, sliding them across the tabletop to Callaway who, one manicured eyebrow arched, began writing. Practically bouncing in her seat, Hermione looked across at her messy-haired best friend. "Harry, this makes our research so much easier! We don't have to explain anything to Professor McGonagall to get into the Restricted Section. This is what Professor Dumbledore must have intended."

The American nodded as she slid the parchment and quill back. "I'll do whatever I can, no questions asked." The woman decided to be blunt. "Frankly, I don't feel qualified to teach you anything magical, as I'm two decades worth of rusty on some of the simplest of spells and charms. I guarantee you know more than I've managed to forget over twenty years of living as a Muggle. That's the reason for Professor McGonagall's mention of 'homework' waiting for me when I return. I've spent the past six months refreshing my memory, as it were, in areas I deemed of most import, mainly warding and shields, with a few hexes thrown in for good measure. The Headmistress has kindly agreed to continue the private tutoring Professor Dumbledore started so that I might get up to speed as quickly as possible."

Callaway smiled wryly at the confusion and annoyance visibly warring on the other redhead's face. "Professor Dumbledore believed that the skills I can impart to you will help you. Remember, not all of my skills are magically-based. Or have you already forgotten how I skewered that gnome a little while ago?"

"Of course!" Hermione exclaimed. At her compatriots' confused looks she elaborated, "We're in the middle of a *magical* war. The last thing He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named would expect would be for us to employ Muggle tactics."

"I can see why Dumbledore referred to you as 'The brightest witch of our time,'" the American acknowledged.

"Thank you." The brunette blushed lightly at the unexpected compliment.

"Soooo..." The Professor looked back at Harry.

In answer, Harry drew out of his pocket the locket he and Dumbledore had retrieved that fateful night and set it on the tabletop.

Callaway drew in an audible breath, her eyes widening. "Is that...?"

"No," Harry cut her off. "It's a fake." He pulled out the fragment of parchment that had been inside, handing it to the redhead.

Shaluin looked from the fragment, to Harry's very serious face and back to the parchment, before unfolding and reading it.

"To the Dark Lord

I know I will be dead long before you read this

but I want you to know it was I who discovered your secret.

I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can.

I face death in the hope that when you meet your match,

you will be mortal once more.

R.A.B." ¹

"Shit!" A grim expression grew on the woman's face as she read. Folding the parchment back up, she handed it to Harry before lifting the decoy locket off the table and examining it with disgust. "Lovely, someone else is out there playing hero. Unfortunately, we cannot assume the real Horcrux has actually been destroyed." She dropped the piece of cheap jewelry into Harry's outstretched hand. "Any leads on who this, 'R.A.B.' is?"

"None that fit," Hermione admitted. "It has to be someone the Dark Lord knew and would recognize by their initials."

"I'm sure you're right," Callaway acknowledged. "Now, am I correct in my summation that you three will not be returning to Hogwarts come fall?"

Shock, once again, was written all over the trio's faces.

"How could you possibly..." Ron started.

"...know?" Callaway finished for him.

"We haven't told anyone yet," Harry protested.

"Look, it only makes sense, to me anyway, what with my convoluted 'American logic' and all. It's what *I* would do," the woman explained. "No one is safe, and this war will not end until that bastard is killed. For *that* to happen, all the fragmented pieces of Voldemort's sick soul must be neutralized. From what I've been told about you, Mr. Potter, I assumed you'd make it your first priority to find these Horcruxes and take out Whats-His-Face. And wherever *you* go, it's my understanding Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley are sure to follow." The redhead smiled ruefully. "In America, you'd probably be referred to as 'The Dream Team.'"

"How could you possibly know all this?" Hermione asked, still somewhat incredulous.

"I know a lot more than I can say, and before you ask, don't ask. I will share with you all that I am able." Callaway tried for a reassuring expression. "What I know either Dumbledore told me, or I surmised it from what he told me. Oh, and I do know about the 'Prophecy.'"

Looking at the three silent, serious youths before her, Shaluinn threw out her final question. "So, do I pass your little 'interrogation'?"

"I still want to talk to Dumbledore's portrait, but for the time being, you're in," Harry answered for the group.

"Excellent!" Callaway exclaimed, clapping her hands together and standing, albeit stiffly. "Please advise me of when and where you would like to start your training and what you actually want to learn. I was a master of kata - sorry, swordplay - as well as hand-to-hand tactics. I am now residing at Hogwarts. If I am not there, Headmistress McGonagall will know where to find me. It has been a pleasure meeting you."

After bowing respectfully, the woman gathered her coat and strode back toward the house. Grimacing and gritting her teeth against the renewed pain, she forced her stride to remain smooth, followed by the bemused stares of the trio at the table. *At least my glamour is still solidly in place. Had that dropped, I would have lost everything.*

"I'm not sure what to make of that woman, but for some reason I feel we can trust her," Hermione admitted amid concurring nods from Ron and Harry.

"Did you get a look at the size of her...?" Ron started to blurt out, only to be cut off by Hermione smacking him on the back of the head.

Harry laughed out loud, his head thrown back, as Ron proceeded to rub his head and pout, while Hermione glared openly at the youngest male Weasley.

Callaway allowed herself to smile as she heard the WHAP! followed by Harry laughing. *Doesn't matter how young or old they are, guys just seem to fixate on my breasts. Good thing too as I'm not exactly supermodel material in the looks department.* Turning the corner of the house and out of the group's line of sight, Shaluinn let out the breath she was holding. Desperate to take pressure off her screaming right hip, she slumped against the side of the edifice for support, breathing shallowly until the pain receded to a tolerable level. Again centered, she pushed away from the wall.

Hoping to avoid a confrontation, the redheaded archer snuck into the house proper and silently made her way to the fireplace. Taking a pinch of powder from the jar beside it, she murmured, "Hogwarts Headmistress' office, Panthera Leo," as she stepped into the green flames and spun away.

The American missed the openly suspicious gaze of Molly Weasley from around the corner. *Something about this just isn't right, and I'm going to get to the bottom of it.*

TBC...

¹ Excerpt from *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* p. 609

A/N: Some major alterations have been made to Chapter 6 in response to some discrepancies pointed out by a reviewer (to whom I issue a heart-felt thank you). You may wish to re-read that chapter as it does change things. In response to a comment about the OFC's looks here is a basic explanation. Shaluinn is based on a very real-life person. Callaway is 5'7" with ass-length flaming red hair, emerald green eyes, and an hourglass figure with hips balancing out her sizeable chest. Her facial features, other than her eyes, are pretty much average and unremarkable. Her high level of physical fitness has allowed her to pass for someone much younger than her age, but she is sporting a glamour that adds to this illusion. The exact nature and purpose of this glamour (which isn't to draw attention or make herself more attractive) will be revealed in an upcoming chapter. Perhaps the fact that I have withheld certain pertinent particulars has added to the "unreality" of the character. For this I apologize. I hope you will bear with me and continue to read. A great deal will be revealed in the next several chapters as things pick up. Callaway is not invincible or infallible. Her wands are special and unique, which will be explained later as well. I'd like to keep up some pretense of mystery.

Thank you to everyone who has read and/or reviewed. Your feedback and support mean more to me than I can express.

Shadows of the Past

Chapter 8 of 18

Shaluinn returns to Hogwarts and Severus finds a way to escape Voldemort's estate.

Disclaimer: (In the spirit of Crimson Starlight)

Snape: *prod*

Shana: *whips around, snags wand* ENOUGH with the prodding!

Snape: *smirking*

Shana: *waving wrong end of wand* What are you smirking at? I have your wand!

Snape: *still smirking*

Shana: *stops waving wand* This can't be good.

Snape: *grinning evilly*

Shana: Ok, this *really* can't be good. *turns toward computer*

Snape: *snaps authoress' bra strap*

Shana: YIPE! *flies out of seat, dropping wand*

Snape: *retrieves wand, points it threateningly*

Shana: Ow! *rubs back* Good lord, man!

Snape: Wizard.

Shana: *throws up hands* Whatever. Didn't anyone ever tell you, "You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar?"

Snape: Yes, and you do not own me or any character other than Shaluinn and those related to her. We are the intellectual property of JK Rowling.

Shana: We *will* have a chat about this later.

Snape: I'm sure. *prod*

Chapter 8: Shadows of the Past

Bellatrix Lestrange was a very strong-willed witch. Snape had to reapply the Imperius Curse multiple times before they reached Voldemort's suite. Standing outside the heavy oak door, Severus lifted his hand to knock, only to be preempted by a hissed, "Enter!"

The Potions master opened the door, followed by Bellatrix. He strode purposely forward to where the Dark Lord was seated, dropping to one knee as he bent to kiss the hem of Voldemort's robe. He remained bent, waiting for the serpent's acknowledgement.

"Rise, Severus. I'm sure you have a good reason for coming to see me, as well as to why you have put my dear Bella under the Imperius," the slit-nosed bastard hissed.

Snape stood, meeting Voldemort's gaze squarely. Purposefully placing the altercation with Bellatrix at the forefront of his mind, he answered carefully. "My liege, Mrs. Lestrange entered my rooms without leave and attempted to assault me."

The Dark Lord's nonexistent eyebrows rose. "Really, now."

Snape turned his head slightly toward his captive. "Bellatrix, tell our Lord what you were doing in my rooms."

Lestrange's face screwed up as she visibly fought the Imperius.

"NOW!" Severus snarled.

"I... I... I'M GOING TO KILL YOU, YOU TRAITOR!" the witch screamed as she broke free of the curse and flung herself at Snape, eyes wild and hands curled into claws.

Severus jerked back and away as he drew his wand, lips forming a curse as he heard a calmly hissed, "*Crucio!*" and watched the witch drop to the ground, writhing in pain.

"Severus, it would seem you have a problem," Voldemort spoke over the sounds of his follower's cries.

Understatement! Snape dropped back to one knee, his head bent. "Milord, what do I need to do to prove my loyalty to you?"

"Severus, please, as much as I appreciate your eagerness to serve me, it is unnecessary."

Snape lifted his head as he felt the tap on his shoulder. He stood slowly, keeping his eyes on Voldemort's, wondering in the back of his mind if this was a trap. Behind him, Bellatrix's cries dropped to moans as the Dark Lord lifted the curse.

"My Lord?"

"Severus, I have no issue with you. You have proven your worth to me beyond my greatest expectations. But it would seem you have a bit of a problem with my dear Bella here. How do you propose I handle this? Hmmm?" Voldemort asked as he sat back in his plush "throne."

"Milord, Mrs. Lestrange is quite adamant in her belief that I am a traitor. I wonder if, perhaps, removing the source of her ire might alleviate some of her frustration," Snape offered.

"Leave us!" Voldemort ordered the witch who had begun to rise behind the Potions master.

Bellatrix quickly complied, but not before throwing a look filled with utter contempt and vile promise at Snape's back, a look that Voldemort did not fail to notice.

"Severus, as much as I'm sure Bellatrix loved hearing the suggestion that killing you is the answer, I find that I'm more than a bit fond of you and enjoy your continued existence."

Snape dipped his head in deference, "Thank you, Milord."

"I believe I have a better alternative you may consider," the serpent teased his servant.

"What do you suggest?" Severus rose to the bait, hoping the Dark Lord had arrived at the conclusion he had been pointed toward.

"I believe I have been unduly monopolizing your time, my dear boy. I know this estate is more than a little lacking in the way of reading materials, and I do remember how voraciously you devour books. I'm surprised you haven't succumbed to 'cabin fever' already." He winked at the Potions master.

Now that was disturbing. "My Lord, I live to serve you!" Snape protested.

Voldemort made a dismissive gesture. "Yes, yes, and you've done a more than admirable job of indulging my whims. I was very impressed at how you maintained your composure during our discussion of my choice in robes." Red eyes gleamed with mirth.

"I... do not understand," Snape admitted.

Voldemort laughed harshly, his head thrown back as the Potions master allowed confusion to show on his face.

"Bellatrix won't leave my side, and I can't have you both here without a potential conflagration. Severus, I believe the best course in handling her is, 'Out of sight, out of mind.' Wouldn't you agree?"

"As always, Milord is most wise," Snape demurred.

The Dark Lord made shooing motions with both hands. "Go, Severus. I realize how much like a barren cage this place is for someone like you. I'm sure you will take all necessary precautions not to be caught since you are now the second most notorious wizard in the world." The disfigured Lord shook one finger at Snape. "But mind me should I summon you."

The Potions master could not believe his good fortune and bent to kiss the Dark Lord's hem again. "Of course, my Master. I live by your whim."

"That you do, Severus. That you do," Voldemort agreed, nodding. "Oh, send Bella in, would you?"

Not wanting to chance of Moldibutt changing his mind, Snape quickly left, pausing outside the suite's door to sneer openly at Bellatrix and hold the portal open as the visibly enraged witch swept past him and inside.

It was with a very satisfied smirk that Snape made his way out of the manor and to the edge of the property. Like Hogwarts, anti-Apparition wards had been placed around the estate, besides it being under the Fidelius Charm. Severus allowed a rare smile to grace his face as he Apparated directly into his study at Spinner's End.

Once there, he waved a hand at the hearth, lighting a fire, before sinking down into his favorite chair. He still had to figure out if Albus' mission had succeeded. But for the moment, he finally had the time and the privacy to grieve.

Slumping forward in his chair, elbows on his knees, hands covering his face, he did something he would never allow anyone, other than Albus on that one occasion, to witness. He broke down. The dam that had been holding back all his pent-up emotions burst, and they came pouring forth. The tall, thin man's frame shook as it was wracked by great, shuddering sobs.

Knowing the Silencing Spells and wards would easily hold, with fists clenched so tight his short-trimmed nails drew blood, Severus lifted his tear-streaked face to the invisible heavens, howling his rage and frustration until his throat was so raw, no sound emerged. Overwrought and utterly drained, he dropped back into the chair and passed out, exhaustion finally overtaking him.

The only light in the windowless room was that of the dying fire. The flames revealed the planes and angles of the face of a man prematurely aged by violent circumstances. At least in sleep, for the moment, he found some peace.

Shaluinn staggered out of the hearth in Minerva's office, this time catching her balance after several steps, instead of falling down on all fours. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply for several beats, waiting for the nausea and pain to pass and then turned her attention to the expectant Headmistress.

"Well?" McGonagall peered over her reading glasses at Callaway.

"Well, I think that went better than I expected. They will be coming to speak to you," she directed her statement at Dumbledore's portrait, "probably in the next few days." Shaluinn looked back to Minerva. "In the meantime, I do believe I shall get settled in and get a feel for my new home."

"That's fine, dear. Your 'homework' will be to get as much accomplished on your suite as possible. I will come by tomorrow then, and see what we can do in the way of transfiguring anything you are unable to today. We'll see then what aspects you need remediation in."

"Thank you, Minerva," Shaluinn answered, bowing before turning to go.

Just as she reached the door, McGonagall called out, "I almost forgot. The day after tomorrow is Bill and Fleur's wedding at the Burrow. So, if you notice there is virtually no one around, that is where we will be. I do hope that won't be a problem."

The redhead smiled back at the elder witch. "Minerva, if there's one thing I've gotten very good at over the years, it's being able to find ways to entertain myself. Don't worry about me."

"Of course not, my dear. Run along, now," the Headmistress made a shooing gesture.

Shaluinn just barely repressed the urge to stick her tongue out as she turned away and exited the office. Once out of the room, her good humor faded as she was reminded of the persistent bolts shooting through her hip and thigh. Carefully making her way to the bottom of the staircase, she stepped out into the corridor and fell back against the nearest wall, sliding down it until she was sitting.

The woman remained in this prone position, her head resting against the wall, eyes idly scanning the cracks and crevices in the ceiling. *God damnit. I'm going to need either a Healing or Pain Relief Potion before I'll be able to make it back to my rooms. Where are the ultra-strength analgesic liquid-gels when you need them?* She found herself suddenly at a loss.

With a sudden flash of insight, she called out, "Dobby? Could you help me?"

The house-elf in question appeared before her with a light pop! "How can Dobby help, Miss?" Taking in her crumpled form, the house-elf became wide-eyed and pulled on his ears, visibly distraught. "Miss is hurt! Dobby must get Madam Pomfrey!"

Shit! The American snaked out a hand to catch the edge of Dobby's "toga." "NO! No, Dobby, I'm alright." She waited while the creature relented. "I seem to have a cramp in my hip that doesn't want to go away. I wonder if you might retrieve a Pain Relief Potion from the Infirmary for me?"

"Yes, Miss!" he nodded vehemently, snapped his fingers and was gone.

Several minutes later he returned with a familiar-looking sapphire blue bottle. "Here, Miss."

Shaluinn welcomed the phial, removing the stopper and downing the bitter fluid in one practiced swallow. She handed it back and slowly stood, relief flowing through her as the pain receded. "Thank you, Dobby. Do you know where my rooms are?"

"Yes, Miss!"

The redhead smiled at his eagerness. "Would you show me how to get there, from here, and, perhaps point out some reference markers so I'll be able to find my own way next time?"

"Of course, Miss! Follow Dobby!" he grinned as he turned to lead her away, pointing out various things and adding his own observations in a rather random, rambling way.

Shaluinn couldn't help but smile at the creature's exuberance. When Dobby stopped and turned to face her, she realized they had reached the entrance to her office. She squatted down to his level. "Thank you again, Dobby. If it's alright, there's one more thing I'd ask of you." She waited as he nodded and then continued. "Could you bring some food up? Something for me to snack on while I get settled in."

"Of course, Miss! Dobby will go right away!" He snapped his fingers and vanished.

The redhead just shook her head, having forgotten what it was like to deal with house-elves. She stood and spoke her new password as she turned the doorknob, "Glorfindel of Gondolin."

Entering her office, she decided to leave that room for another day. Retrieving her bags from where she had dropped them, she shifted both to her left side. Like before, she strode straight at the seemingly solid wall, waving her right hand before she hit it and instead passing straight through to the rooms beyond.

Once inside, she dropped her bags again and made her way to the bank of floor to ceiling windows. She stepped up to the transparent glass, absentmindedly patting her coat pockets until she found what she was looking for.

She dropped the three thumbnail-sized black squares on the floor. Flexing her right wrist, she caught her wand as it fell. Waving it over the squares, she watched them return to their original size. Shaluinn picked up the first of the three CD books and began flipping through it.

The first thing she'd done when she'd made the decision to come to Hogwarts was to figure out how to charm her Muggle Discman to play in an area where Muggle electronics notoriously didn't work. She found it was a common problem that the American magical community, who embraced modern technology a bit more readily than the European community, had already solved. With a deceptively simple incantation, her compact Discman played CDs without speakers and with the kind of encompassing sound quality that you'd expect in a concert hall.

Here was one thing the American simply refused to do without: her Muggle music. Retrieving the charmed player from the front flap pocket of the book she'd been leafing through, she laid it on the floor in front of the window, taking the disc she'd chosen and snapping it into the Discman. She closed the lid and tapped it twice, flicking her wand until the disc got to the song she wanted. Making a circle in the air with the wand tip, she set the song on repeat.

Flexing her wrist, Shaluinn put the wand away, crossing her arms over her chest. She leaned her left shoulder against the pane as the sound of Madonna's *I'll Remember* filled the room and wrapped around her. The music was one of the few things she knew she'd be able to keep in this new place, this new, old world she'd been thrust back into.

Mmmm, mmmm

The redhead lifted her head to look out. The view was breathtaking, the sun setting over the lake and the mountains. It reminded her of her last home.

Say good-bye

To not knowing when

The truth in my whole life begin

She caught sight of her reflection in the glass, reaching up with her right hand to pull the elastic from the end of her braid, her fingers sliding through the length to release the plait, her hair falling around her in red cascades.

Say good-bye

To not knowing how

To cry

You taught me that

Shaluinn looked at herself, taking in her appearance. The long, screaming red hair and solid black attire were nothing new. At 14, with make-up and the right hairstyle, she had been able to pass for 28. Now at 38, without make-up and sporting attire indicative of a much younger generation, she was often mistaken for being 22. At least up until about six months ago. Her mother had been the same way, the pair being often taken for sisters. It was almost like she had been aging backwards.

It had been then that her advancing condition had been diagnosed, terminal with no cure in sight, and no hope for recovery. Around that same time had been when Albus Dumbledore had become more insistent that she embrace her heritage, taking her to be re-outfitted for the magical world and pulling her old textbooks out of mothballs.

And I'll remember

The strength that you gave me

Now that I'm standing

On my own

Even with the disheartening news, Jolena had encouraged her to do everything, work and archery, as well as the additional refreshers in magic. Shaluinn couldn't understand why her mother had been so adamant, so determined about pushing her. Looking back, it was all so clear and obvious. *I should have known*. Her mother certainly had.

It was the only explanation that made any sense. Jolena's strongest talent had always been Divination. The elder witch had known what was coming and had taken what steps she could to prepare her daughter for what was ahead. When everything had fallen apart, all at once, Shaluinn had *known*, as surely as if the woman had spoken herself, that her mother had known about most of what came to pass. The specifics had been lost with the woman herself.

I'll remember

The way that you saved me

I'll remember

Along with wards and shields and various hexes, Callaway had invested a good portion of time into perfecting both simple and elaborate glamours. The now former Headmaster had initially protested the effort, insisting that appearances did not matter. He had brandished his withered hand like a badge of honor.

But Shaluinn had persisted, arguing that for him to display something that might be perceived as a sign of weakness in front of his charges was an entirely different matter from hers. The "Golden Trio" had known him for years and trusted him no matter what. She, on the flip side, was a total stranger, an unknown variable, expected to be trusted based on his word alone. She protested that it wasn't enough. If he wanted her to be able to accomplish what he'd set out for her, she would have to look the part, as well as act it.

Inside

I was a child

That could not mend a broken wing

She was supposed to be an asset to the cause, not another liability. She couldn't very well teach martial arts looking haggard and worn, as if she'd been put through the proverbial meat grinder. No, the Golden Trio needed to see a strong, healthy, confident individual, not a sick, deteriorating witch held together by potions and sheer force of

will. Simply put, she refused to be a liability, perceptually or actually, hence the decision to hide it.

The reflection that stared back at her now was no longer real. Passing a hand over her face, she removed the carefully crafted glamour she'd placed. She wasn't surprised by the progressively more pronounced signs of the advancing illness. It was the haunted look in her eyes that gave her pause.

She'd known violence most of her life. It always had a way of finding her, despite her best efforts. But recently, she'd come to know violent death, witness to the murders of her biological mother and best friend at the hands of a random Death Eater.

Outside

I looked for a way

To teach my heart to sing

Apparently he had been sent out on a broad and vague mission to take out the most powerful witches he could find across the globe. Jolena Anhel had been, undeniably, the most talented active witch in the Pacific Northwest.

Shaluinn blinked repeatedly, heedless of the tracks of tears making their way down her face. *It should have been me. Everyone swore that if I hadn't turned my back on magic I would have surpassed her abilities years ago. He would have come for me.*

Callaway had been walking back from her daily round of archery practice in the field behind her parents' property when the attack occurred. Taken by surprise, her mother and Cathy had no chance of defense, bolts of green light snaking through the twilight air to strike each in rapid succession. Having never seen the Killing Curse before, Shaluinn didn't recognize it. She didn't need to, her mother's and friend's crumpled, unmoving bodies telling her all she needed to know.

Reacting instinctively, overtaken by the need to fight back, and without her wands, she struck out in the only manner available to her. Stopping in her tracks, she instantly gauged the distance to her target, spinning the dial on her scope. She whipped a multi-blade compression broadhead arrow out of her quiver, nocked it and lifted her compound bow, ignoring the pain that lanced through her pinched fingers and drawing bare, releasing with the speed that had earned her a gold medal.

No sooner had the first broadhead left the string than Shaluinn had another out and nocked. She missed, the first arrow impacting the upper left quadrant of the attacker's chest as she brought the second to full draw. Howling to shame a Banshee, she adjusted and released the second one to nail the murderer square between where the eyes would be on his mask. Still not finished, she'd nocked a third arrow and sent it flying, to lodge through his neck as he dropped in a pile to the ground.

And I'll remember

The love that you gave me

Now that I'm standing

On my own

A fourth arrow nocked and drawn, she held it, striding forward to the pin-cushioned body. After kicking it twice with her steel-toed boots and receiving no reaction, she let up on the bowstring, leaving the arrow nocked, and bent down to check for a pulse at his wrist. There was nothing.

Snatching up his wand from where it had dropped, she tucked it into a back pocket as she stood. Moving mechanically, she removed the arrow from the string and returned it to her quiver as she strode toward the porch. Pulling the clothespin-looking stand from the back of her belt, she clipped it to the bottom limb of her bow and set her bow by the gate.

She ran forward, leaping the two steps to the porch. She dropped to her knees between the crumpled women, reaching out with the index and middle fingers of both hands to press against the sides of their throats at the carotid artery. There was nothing. There were no marks on the bodies. They were simply... lifeless.

I'll remember

The way that you changed me

I'll remember

Fighting down her rising panic, she turned to her mother, centering herself as she started CPR, somehow knowing the futility of her actions, but unable to sit there and do nothing. "Come on, Mom. Come on, Mom," she chanted with every set of chest compressions, oblivious to the tears now streaming down her face.

She was so involved in trying to bring Jolena back that she failed to notice the huge, black, 4x4, pickup truck that came sliding sideways into the driveway in a shower of loose gravel. A tall, thin, long-brown-haired, half Blackfoot Indian man, clad in faded, stained Levis and a black, custom-made "Government Authorized Marijuana Dealer" t-shirt flew out of the cab. He sprinted toward her crying, "Shaluinn! Shaluinn! What happened?"

I learned

To let go

Of the illusion

That we can possess

Rich's arrival drove home the reality that her efforts were having no effect. With a choked sob, she stopped and dropped back onto her heels, managing to gasp, "Death...-Eater." The war, a world away, had come home to her doorstep.

Utterly impotent, Shaluinn rocked back and rose to her feet, getting out of the way. Her stepfather cradled his wife's body in his arms, wailing openly as he realized she was gone. The younger redhead leapt off the porch and strode to where the felled Death Eater lay. A howl so loud it echoed down the street rose from her chest as she again kicked the corpse.

Staring down at the red-fledged stalks that stood out from the body, the woman's mind suddenly comprehended just what it was she had done. She had taken a human life. Regardless of the justification or reasoning behind her actions, he was dead by her hand. He had taken two lives, and she had taken his in turn. No matter how worthless, how base, how sub-human he had been, it did not change the fact. *She had taken a human life.*

Shaluinn dropped to her hands and knees and spewed the contents of her stomach across the blood-stained ground. She coughed until there was nothing but dry-heaves left. Eyes screwed shut, she very nearly lashed out at the arms that wrapped around her and pulled her up. Turning in his embrace, she buried her face against her stepfather's chest, shaking uncontrollably.

I learned

To let go

I travel in stillness

And I'll remember

Rich died from a broken heart three days later. He had been a Squib, but her mother hadn't cared. They had loved each other so much. Without Jolena, he had nothing to live for. The witch had been his entire world.

Already having lost her job and now her last friend to the Death Eater, Shaluinn had nothing left when she buried her parents. Dumbledore put in an appearance at the double funeral, along with more witches and wizards than the redhead had ever seen in one place. She couldn't help but feel that the aged wizard's presence was a visual "I told you so." And so, once again, her life had gone straight to shit.

Anticipating Dumbledore's coming request, she began setting her affairs in order, clearing out her home and the house her parents' had bought across the street, holding tightly only to cherished memories.

Happiness

I'll remember

(I'll remember)

And I'll remember

The love that you gave me

Now that I'm standing

On my own

I'll remember

The way that you changed me

I'll remember

(I'll remember)

She sold the houses, the furniture, everything but those items she could not bear to part with and planned to take with her. She left nothing to return to, as this was a journey she somehow knew she would not be coming back from.

No I've never been afraid to cry

Now I finally have a reason why

Did I make the right decision coming here? How did I get here? In the last two decades, how did my decisions go so wrong, to lead me to the point where I had nothing left? I was willing to walk away from my home, my country, my entire life.

I'll remember

(I'll remember)

Is it all circumstance, coincidence?

No I've never been afraid to cry

Now I finally have a reason why

Or was Albus right, and I have some "destiny" to fulfill, and all roads, inevitably, led to here?

I'll remember

(I'll remember)

First Daddy was taken from me. Then my friends and finally the last of my family are gone. Then I arrive here to find my Master, Albus, slain by his servant. I am finally, truly, ronin.

No I've never been afraid to cry

And I finally have a reason why

I am without a master, adrift in the world. And now, somehow, I am expected to become another's master, their guiding force. Set aside for the moment the fact that I totally despise his actions that brought us here. How the hell am I to accomplish that, when I have proven so thoroughly that I am a failure at being my own master?

I'll remember

(I'll remember)

How do I prove my mastery over one who has lived their entire life in this world that I have only recently reentered? This is one who apparently is just as much, if not more willful than I, and will not give over easily, not without seeing I am worthy. Again with the acting, the dancing, the subterfuge.

No I've never been afraid to cry

And I finally have a reason why

Albus has set me to an impossible task. Yet, he had to know I would not give this any less than all my effort. Shaluinn brought her hands up to her face, wiping away the moisture and rubbing her eyes, before running her fingers through her hair. What have I gotten myself into?

Remember

(I'll remember)

TBC...

A/N: In archery, "drawing bare" on a compound bow means using your fingers instead of a mechanical release aid. A "bare bow" is the common term given any bow

(compound, recurve or longbow) that has no sights, or only very simple low-tech sights.

A *ronin* (Japanese: literally, *wave man* - one who is tossed about, like a wave in the sea) was a masterless samurai during the feudal period of Japan that lasted from 1185 to 1868. A samurai became masterless from the ruin or fall of his master, or after the loss of his master's favor or privilege.

A *multi-blade compression broadhead* is a nasty piece of work. It is an arrowhead composed of multiple, triangular blades set around the point. What makes these particularly nasty is they are spring-loaded and compress upon impact, spreading the cutting blades out further to increase the penetration and area of damage. Trust me when I say you do NOT want to get hit by one of these.

No, I'm not coughing up the name of the Death Eater who killed Jolena. This is on purpose. I mean for him to remain nameless and faceless, one among many.

Hey, Mr. Sandman

Chapter 9 of 18

Shaluinn explores her new quarters and we peek in on Severus to see how he's holding up.

Disclaimer: (In the spirit of Crimson Starlight)

Shana: *fuming, arms crossed over chest*

Snape: Why are you not typing?

Shana: Time for that chat.

Snape: *innocently* Oh?

Shana: Oh, yeah.

Snape: *eyebrow, waiting*

Shana: You know that was mean, not to mention exceedingly juvenile.

Snape: To what are you referring, madam?

Shana: *incredulous look* Duh? The bra snapping?

Snape: Oh, that.

Shana: Well?

Snape: Well, what?

Shana: *throws up hands* You do realize that was a stunt worthy of Ron Weasley?

Snape: *narrows eyes*

Shana: Sexy looks are not getting you out of this. *crosses arms over chest again*

Kim: Insert standard disclaimer here.

Snape: *annoyed* Well, there went that idea.

Shana: You're still on the hook.

Chapter 9: Hey, Mr. Sandman

Shaluinn lost track of time as she stared out the window, while the world turned dark beyond the glass. She repressed a shiver as a chill ran through her, the cold seeping through her clothes from the pane. She turned her gaze back to her darkened rooms, absentmindedly wiping the wet trails off her face.

She finally noticed the hearth on the opposite wall, only because someone had lit a fire there. In the flickering light, she saw a small table set with various snacks and several bottles and a chair set beside it, all next to the fireplace. *Dobby, bless your heart.*

Bending down, she made a swirling gesture with her index finger over the Discman, setting it to random play. She stood back up and didn't move for several beats, trying to remember the light spell. It came back to her, and she lifted both hands, waving them as she called out, "*Incendio!*" Several sconces holding candles on each wall burst to life, driving back the encroaching darkness.

The redhead finally, really took a look at her rooms for the first time. The main entrance was opposite the bank of windows. The hearth was to the right of the entrance from where she stood, its mate in the office obviously right on the other side of the wall. The room itself was rather large and rectangular, the windows and entrance forming the short sides. The ceiling was vaulted, going up at least ten meters.

The woman noticed doors opposite each other, about two meters in from the windows. *Wonder where those go?* Making a snap decision to do reconnaissance first, eat second, she executed a "right-face" and walked to that door.

Opening the portal, she murmured "*Incendio!*" again, lighting the sconces in this room. Unlike the main room, this one was furnished and obviously meant to be the bedroom. Directly opposite her was yet another door that, she assumed, led to a bathroom.

Standing in the doorway, taking in the positively opulent room, Shaluinn was awed. To the left of the bathroom door was another, smaller hearth with an already banked fire going, the room warm, but not overpoweringly so. To her right were more floor-to-ceiling windows, these covered by heavy, velvet curtains to keep both light and cold out.

To her left, along the wall next to her was a massive wardrobe and two long, matching dressers made of a rich mahogany.

But the most stand-out feature was the positively huge four-poster canopy bed that dominated the room. It was centered with the head along the wall opposite the curtained windows. Heavy velvet drapes were tied back from the sides and foot of the bed. The entire décor of the room was in shades of deep, dark blue and black, accented with silver.

Albus, you presumptuous bastard, this smacks of your meddling. What the hell do I need such sumptuous furnishings for? And of what use can I make of a bed that big? I can probably lay totally spread-eagle on it and not come near the edges. This is too much!

The American stepped forward to go toward the bathroom, for the first time registering the way her boots were sinking into the carpet. *Good lord! What next?* This also reminded her of something she should have remembered before. Turning around, she returned to the bedroom entrance.

Balancing on first one foot and then the other, she pulled up her pant legs, pulling down the zippers set against the insides of her calves on her knee-high boots. She left the matching set of 13-inch blade ebony-handled long knives where they were, inside sheaths strapped to the outsides of her calves. Her boots she set next to the doorway. This was her home now, and she would not forget again.

Padding back into the bedroom in her thick socks, she could feel the thick, soft carpet sinking with her every step. The feeling was both delightful and unnerving. She had never lived in such luxurious surroundings. Her own house back in the Pacific Northwest had been furnished modestly, items chosen for high functionality, not necessarily looks. Everything had been quality, well-made and durable, but very simple.

The only area where that had not held true had been her study. She had spared no expense with the tall, rich with scrollwork, dark cherry bookcases. She took a deep pride in her library and its display. The same held true of her sword "collection." Every sword and dagger had its place, whether in the locked glass wall case or set on table-top racks. The running joke among family and friends had been that her study was a cross between a library and an armory. It was an apt description.

Walking quickly through the bedroom that was becoming increasingly unnerving, she entered the room beyond, correct in her assumption that it was a bathroom. She was once again thunderstruck as she took the sight in. There was the usual toilet and sink, with more than enough counter space.

But what had caught her attention was the large, glass-encased shower with two steps leading up to it. The door was closed and she had a sneaking suspicion she knew what lay behind it. *Goddess, Albus has set me up like I'm royalty or something. I can't believe that every professor's suite looks like this.* Needing to satisfy her curiosity, Shaluinn stepped up to the shower and pulled the door open, her mouth dropping open in shock.

She'd been close with her guess. It was a shower/bath combination. It was a dual-head shower, and the bathtub itself was sunken and large enough to easily hold three people! Looking closer, she noticed holes at regular intervals along the sides and bottom. *Oh. My. God. It's a whirlpool tub! Oh, gods! This alone is too much!*

Shaluinn stopped herself. *I am so NOT changing this. Considering how sore and in pain I'm gonna be from teaching unarmed combat again, this baby's gonna get a LOT of use. I have always wanted one of these! Albus, for this alone, I could kiss you.* She wrinkled her nose at that thought. *OK, I take that back. Suffice to say, I'm more than a little appreciative of the amount of effort and thought put into these rooms.*

Mother Nature chose that moment to remind the American that it had been more than a few hours since she'd last used the facilities. Taking care of necessary business, she gave the bathtub another longing look and left, heading through the bedroom and across the main parlor to the other door that still bore investigating.

Casting "*Incendio!*" again she found a moderate-sized room, cabinets and visibly stocked shelves lining three of the walls, the fourth holding the expected floor-to-ceiling windows. The center was dominated by several large work benches with cauldrons stacked beneath and piles of boxes scattered haphazardly everywhere. Stepping inside, she realized the floor was made of unmarked, bare stone.

Shaluinn was confused. Glancing into the boxes, she found a mishmash of texts, jars, and odds and ends. Brows furrowed, she made a circuit of the room, returning back to the entrance. It was obvious that this room was meant to be a very well-stocked Potions lab.

The room clearly had not been completed. *Ooooookay. I wonder what Albus was thinking when he set up this room.* Then it hit her, why the room wasn't done. *He didn't get to finish before he died.* That sobering thought in mind, with a flick of her hand and a call of "*Exstinguio!*" she put out the lights, closing the door.

Back in the main room, she once again caught sight of the food Dobby had set out for her. She stepped around her bags, still lying where she'd dropped them, and made her way to the fireplace. She looked down at the food assortment on the table, selecting a thick slice of herb-crust-ed salami, a slice of cheddar cheese, and putting them together, took a big bite. As she chewed, she considered the chair and decided to try her hand at a bit of Transfiguring.

Switching her food to her left hand, she licked her fingers before flexing her wrist to retrieve her wand. She thought for several moments about what she wanted, trying various wand movements before she was reasonably sure she had it right. The American finished off her morsel and turned her full attention to the chair.

Concentrating carefully, she made her first really serious attempt at Transfiguration in two decades. The simple, straight-backed wooden chair vanished, only to be replaced by a pile of "Firewood?" The redhead stomped her foot and cursed. "That is NOT what I was going for!"

She caught up one of the bottles from the table and, pulling the cork out with her teeth, spit it into the fireplace. She then took a long swallow, delighted it was some kind of mango-flavored beverage. *Gods, what I wouldn't give for a diet pop right now. Me and my stupid cravings.*

OK, let's try this again. At least I don't have to worry about setting up my sleeping quarters, so if I can't get this right, not that big a deal. Concentrating again, Shaluinn waved her wand, trying a different series of movements. The pile of firewood morphed into a large, gaudily-upholstered, wing-backed chair. *Closer, but still not quite.*

Heartened by having made some progress in the right direction, Shaluinn decided to try one final time. This time, the chair morphed into a micro-suede-upholstered rocking recliner. "YES!" The American clenched her fists and lifted them in the air over her head. *Now if I can just remember how I did that.*

Turning, she dropped down into the cushy chair. Drawing her feet up to her side, she ignored the mild discomfort caused by the knife sheaths pressing against her shins. Surveying the room and mentally debating what she would put where, she ate and drank her fill from the spread Dobby had left her. Satisfied, the redhead leaned back in the chair, closing her eyes as it rocked gently.

In less than a minute, her overtaxed mind and body made the decision for her, and she dropped into a sound sleep. Her face relaxed, and the soft candlelight took years off her damaged countenance, her posture adding to the appearance that she was in her teens. Unlike others, the hard years didn't show specifically on her face. The last six months had left their mark though. Instead, the American bore scars and pain that were not nearly as visible or as tangible.

Dobby returned a short while later to check on the food he'd left. Finding Miss Callaway asleep, the house-elf conjured a light blanket and placed it over the woman. Seeing that less than half of what he'd brought had been eaten, he decided to leave it, placing a preservative charm on the tray along with a sapphire blue phial. Dobby then went from room to room, extinguishing the lights and setting more wood on the fires before whispering, "Good-night, Miss Callaway," and leaving.

Severus woke several hours later to his muscles protesting the crick in his neck. Wincing, he rubbed his neck as he stood and exited his study into the parlor. Comfortable in the familiar surroundings, he didn't need a light to find his way to the bookcase and release the latch. The panel swung forward, and he stepped through, closing it behind him before mounting the stairs to the bathroom and his bedroom.

He made swift use of the facilities to the right of the landing, erasing all evidence of his "breakdown," and then crossed over to the simple bedroom. It contained very little: a small dresser, a closet, and a straight-backed wooden chair set next to a full-size bed. It would have been a single, but those were too small for his tall frame. By sleeping at an angle on the bed, he just fit.

Ever meticulous, the Potions master neatly folded his clothes and placed them on the chair as he disrobed. He stripped down to his boxer shorts and, after a second's thought, doffed those as well. Contrary to popular belief, they were not silk, but rather an ultra-soft sueded cotton. Severus hated wearing silk boxers. The damn things had a way of creeping up your ass and getting wedged there. Cotton was a much more comfortable, as well as forgiving fabric.

Finally having the opportunity to sleep in a "safe" location, he wasted no time taking advantage of it, climbing under the covers and stretching out on his stomach. Once settled, it was less than a minute before soft snores began emanating from the prone man.

Several hours later, Shaluinn woke with a start, nearly overturning her chair as she untangled herself from the blanket someone had placed over her. The room was silent, other than the crackling emanating from the hearth, the CD player having whirred to a stop after playing all the songs on the disc. Blinking several times to get used to the firelight, she realized Dobby must have come back at some point, covering her and putting out the lights.

The woman took several deep, calming breaths, willing her heart rate down. That accomplished, she unfolded her legs and stood, gritting her teeth against the pain that shot up from her shins through her hips. Now her shoulders and back ached too. Catching sight of the familiar phial, she immediately downed the Pain Relief potion, again silently blessing a certain attentive house-elf. She took several more breaths while the pain subsided to a manageable level. She padded to the bedroom, only to trip and stumble over one of her bags.

Muttering curses, she made her way to the bathroom, making use of the facilities before stopping in front of the shower, debating if she had enough energy left to hop in before retiring for the night. Remembering just how "yucky" she'd feel come morning without a shower, she peeled her leather pants off, tossing them into an untidy pile in the corner. She next removed the knives strapped to her calves, laying them on the counter.

Her socks joined her pants in the pile while she reached between her legs to unsnap the bottom of her bodysuit. That was quickly pulled off, and along with her molded-cup bra and low-rise cotton panties, joined the growing pile. With the removal of her bra, she could feel the weight of her heavy breasts pulling on the muscles of her shoulders and back. She refused to slump her posture in response to the discomfort. Catching sight of her reflection and resolutely ignoring the expanses of bruised skin revealed, she stood still. She was mildly surprised that Albus had put Muggle mirrors in her bathroom, the image only changing when *she* moved.

She was just about to reach in to turn the knobs for the shower when she realized something. *Dobby must have left the candles burning in here, because I did not relight them when I came in. Or are they automatic? That's an interesting thought.*

Deciding to test her theory, she backed out of the room, leaving the door open. She was three steps away before the illumination winked out. *Very interesting indeed.* Stepping forward again, the candles burst to life as she broke the plane of the doorway. *That is a damn handy trick. I need to learn that.*

Satisfied with the results of her little "test," Shaluinn leaned into the shower, turning the handle for the hot water. Putting her hand under the faucet, she pulled it back fast, hissing. She'd forgotten the perks of magic, not having to wait for hot water to travel from a heater being one. Turning the other knob with one hand and sticking one finger into the stream, she adjusted the temperature to her liking.

Climbing into the tub, she closed the stall door and yanked on the knob atop the faucet, switching on the showerheads. Her hands immediately flew to the wall, bracing her body as pulsing spray hit her from two directions, the sensation intense and not entirely expected. The redhead let her head droop, her hair hanging in wet curtains around her face as the water poured over her form. *Gods, who knew two showerheads could feel this good? OK, duh. That was obvious.*

The American tilted her head back, the spray pushing her red locks off her face. She opened her eyes to look at her arms, watching the rivulets of water running off her, distorting the designs etched under the skin of the insides of her forearms. Still braced against the shower wall, she rotated her arms so the undersides were fully visible.

The cascading liquid made the winding green, red and blue tribal tattoos appear to writhe on her arms. Removing her right hand from the wall, she traced the central, thick, black coiling line as it rose from her wrist to the inside of her left elbow. Letting her head drop again, she let her right arm hang down, droplets gathering and dripping from her lashes as she twisted her arm back and forth, playing with the rushing water.

As suddenly as she started, she stilled, watching her right forearm carefully as she flexed her wrist and observed the black line instantly detach from her skin, her hand catching her wand as it dropped. She repeated the move, noticing how the wand seamlessly reintegrated with the rest of the tattoo. Risky as she knew it was, the choice to undergo the still-experimental procedure had been a "no-brainer" for the American. She fully didn't expect to outlive the current conflict, which had made the decision moot in her mind.

Switching bracing arms, she repeated her actions with her left arm, her expression every bit as impassive as before. Having had enough of the little exercise, the redhead pushed away from the wall, standing free beneath the pounding dual sprays. She cast her gaze down to a small recessed ledge in the wall, spotting what she was looking for.

Reaching down, she caught the first bottle, upending it to pour a generous amount into her opposite hand and taking a deep breath. *Mmmm... Vanilla.* She returned the bottle and stepped slightly out of the spray, using her free hand to pull her hair up, now using both hands to massage the shampoo into the length. She stepped back under, rinsing the lather from her locks.

Retrieving a second bottle she grimaced, realizing she didn't have her usual metal clip to hold her hair on her head while the conditioner set. Swiftly applying the crème, she twisted and looped her red locks onto the top of her head. Holding the sodden mass with one hand, she managed to maneuver around the sprays to find the final bottle.

Pouring a small amount onto the sponge next to it, she lifted it and attempted to wash one-handed. With every movement, she could feel the twinge of muscles and old injuries that had never, truly, healed, her body mottled with bruises that never seemed to go away. But they were familiar pains that she had learned to ignore for the most part and live with. She finally had to switch hands to get everything before releasing her hair, soaping up her face, and finishing rinsing.

She bent to turn off the taps and caught herself on the lip of the tub, white-heat again flaring through her right hip and into her thigh before subsiding. Teeth gritted, she panted for several beats, lifting herself and completing the task she'd started. Standing, she squeezed the excess water from the length of her hair and climbed out of the stall, reaching to her left to retrieve a medium towel from the rack on the wall. Drying her locks, she wrapped them up and twisted the mass onto her head, then reached for a large towel to dry her body off.

Pulling open various drawers beneath the counters, she came up with what she needed: a hair-tie and a comb. Padding out into the bedroom, she made her way over to the bed, sitting on the bench she had noticed by the foot. Releasing her hair from the towel, she carefully separated it into sections, combing out the tangles. That accomplished, she swiftly twined it into a loose plait, tying it off so it wouldn't become snarled while she slept.

Tossing the long braid over her shoulder, she walked around the side of the bed and sat on the edge, sinking deeply into the mattress. Her suspicion had been correct. The damn thing was so big it easily dwarfed her. Exhaustion looming to claim her, the redhead thought hazily, *I can't sleep on this thing. I... just can't. I know I won't be able to.* Something else also struck the woman. *I don't have anything to sleep in. I am so NOT hunting for anything in my bags at this point. Fuck it!*

Standing, her feet sinking into the thick carpet pile, the American came to a fast decision. Striding over to the bathroom, she doffed the towel she wore, adding it and its mate to the growing pile in the corner. She retrieved her sheathed knives, returning to the bedroom. Passing by the hearth, she set the weapons on the floor, continuing on

to the bed.

Grabbing two pillows, she threw them over by the hearth. Using both hands, she grabbed hold of the thick comforter on the bed, and putting her weight behind it, pulled. After several jerks, she managed to dislodge the coverlet, dragging it over in front of the fireplace. Folding the comforter in half, Shaluinn swiftly made up a makeshift kind of sleeping bag. She placed one knife under her pillow, the other on the edge of the hearth's stone drape within easy reach.

Enfolding her nude form in the voluminous folds, she laid on her left side, left leg straight, right bent up at an angle so her foot rested against the other knee. Her arms were wrapped around the second pillow, embracing it. She stared hazily into the fire as sleep rose up to claim her again, strangely comfortable on the thickly carpeted floor.

TBC...

A/N: A HUGE thank you to everyone who has kept reading and to those who have reviewed. The feedback has been both encouraging and productive.

In Japan, shoes are not worn indoors in homes. They are removed at the entrance and soft slippers or stocking feet are acceptable inside.

Spell origins:

Extinguio This is the "put out the lights spell." "Extinguo" is Latin for "to extinguish." (*Nox* goes with *Lumos* in only applying to wand tips, so it is inapplicable.)

Thanks go to my impromptu beta Kim for double-checking me and making sure I stick to canon as well as making spell suggestions. Thanks to NotSoSaintly for correcting both of us on a mistake about lamp-lighting spells and being one of my favorite comma-fairies.

Nocturnal Visitations

Chapter 10 of 18

A dream is a dream is a dream is a dream, right?

Disclaimer: (In the spirit of Crimson Starlight)

Snape: *prod*

Shana: *grabs wand, snaps it*

Snape: *fumes*

Shana: How's it feel?

Snape: *barely controlled* What is that?

Shana: You break something of mine, I break something of yours.

Snape: *not getting it* What have I broken of yours?

Shana: The bra strap?

Snape: *confused*

Shana: *exasperated* You snapped my bra so damn hard you broke the elastic and gave me a big welt on my back!

Snape: Oh.

Shana: *nasty smirk* Yeah.

Snape: *to reader* Shanastay owns neither myself nor any characters created by Rowling. The plot, Shaluinn and those related characters belong to her. *leaves quickly*

Kim: Damn. Don't see that every day.

Shana: I think that's the closest to an apology I'm gonna get from him. *gestures dismissively* He's probably off to get himself another wand.

Kim: *still staring off in direction wizard went*

Shana: *waves hand in front of Kim's face* Helloooooooooo?

Chapter 10: Nocturnal Visitations

Shrouded in the unbroken pitch-black of the room, Severus tightened his hold on the body whose back he was spooned against with the arm he had wrapped around her waist. She wriggled a bit in response, the curves of her buttocks pressing back to rub enticingly against his burgeoning arousal. He barely suppressed a moan as his hips reflexively rocked forward, increasing the skin-on-skin contact. The arm around her waist slid upward, one long-fingered hand cupping and hefting a heavy mound.

Severus twisted her erect nipple between two fingers, as he ground his swiftly hardening length against her backside. She arched into his touch, encouraging more, a soft moan escaping her lips. Growling softly, he dipped his head forward, teeth and lips nipping lightly at the curve of her neck, exposed as she arched back into him. Her free hand came up to tangle in his locks, the tensing of her fingers and increasing gasps encouraging his ministrations.

He alternately caressed her heavy breasts, tweaking her nipples somewhat roughly, reveling in the way she writhed wantonly against him. He brought his lips to the juncture of her neck and shoulder, latching onto the spot and sucking hard to raise a distinctive mark on her skin. He couldn't see it in the unwavering, unbroken darkness, but that fact didn't change his reaction. *MINE!* His semi-coherent thoughts were of a definitely possessive nature.

Releasing her breasts, he slid his hands down over the slight curve of her abdomen to dip between her legs, delving into the damp warmth at the apex of her thighs. One hand twisting in the sheets, the other clutching at the back of his head, she opened her legs to him. He accepted the invitation, long, dexterous fingers trailing lightly over her inner thighs, before drifting to trace the contours of her soft, clean-shaven folds.

Feeling the woman trembling in his arms, Severus granted her a reprieve. Sliding the palm of his hand firmly over her mound, he slipped first one, then two digits into her sodden depths. Pumping slowly, the heel of his hand rubbing her sensitive nub, he added a third finger, *God, so tight!* twisting them side to side, as a small tremor shuddered through her body, radiating outward from her abdomen. He continued to circle her clit gently, extending her pleasure. The wizard then removed his hand, bringing it to his mouth, as he lifted his head from her shoulder.

In the complete darkness, his other senses had kicked into overdrive, magnifying every sound, every sensation, every *smell*. He took a deep, audible breath as he brought his slick fingers to his lips. He took in the heady, musky aroma of her obvious arousal. *All for me*. He then slipped the digits into his mouth, making a production of licking and sucking them clean, his enjoyment very evident. *Can you hear how much I enjoy your flavor?* She held herself incredibly still, clearly absorbing every sound, every movement he made.

Having licked his palm clean, he brought his hand down to her upper thigh. Exerting subtle pressure, he directed her to lift her leg up and back, to curl around his thigh. Shifting back and down, his length sprang free to prod at her wet entrance, eliciting a loud gasp from her. With a subtle rocking of his hips, he drew the head of his arousal through her sodden folds, coating it thoroughly.

He gripped her hip firmly, his control tightly reined in as he flexed his hips forward, burying just the first couple of inches of his length inside her. He withdrew and returned with agonizing slowness. The woman twisted in his arms, turning her head to capture his lips. A feral growl resonating between them, he snapped his hips forward, burying himself to the hilt. Her gasp at his size and girth was caught by his devouring mouth.

So tight, so ruddy, bloody, fucking tight! He held still for a moment, ravishing her mouth as he reasserted control over his need. Assured that release was not imminent, he continued delving the recesses of her mouth as he began slowly thrusting into her depths. After several beats, he released her lips, focusing his attention lower.

With every upstroke, he rotated his hips, grinding into her, stimulating her cervix. She writhed in his embrace, reaching back to clutch at his arse, fingers digging into his skin, urging him to increase his maddening pace. He stalwartly refused to be egged on, keeping his movements slow and languid. He had every intention of drawing this out.

About the time she had cum under the ministrations of his deft fingers, he had belatedly realized that this was a dream. It was a blessedly erotic, stimulating dream, wholly unlike the ragged and broken nightmares he'd fallen into every time he made any attempt to sleep since *that night*. He was determined to draw *this* dream out, to make it last, perhaps even the entire night, if possible. So he focused his energies totally on pleasuring the unknown woman in his arms. He would find his release later.

Her unseen body was soft and generous, curved and rounded in all the right places. Yet he could feel taut steel under the smooth skin encasing her thigh. His wandering hand had felt the ripple of muscles beneath the layers of softness forming her figure. The pressure where her fingers dug into his hip and buttock made him wonder idly, if this were real, would he have had bruises in the shape of handprints there come morning.

She clearly had the physical strength to hold her own against an opponent, yet still retained her femininity. And she was letting him ravish her. If anything, the idea that she could potentially fight him off and *wasn't*, was actually *encouraging* him, was a greater turn-on. *Ah, but this is my dream, so how could it be any less? If only this were real*, he silently wished before immersing himself once more in the sensations washing over him.

Severus took his time, bringing the faceless, nameless woman cresting through several more tremblers, before maneuvering her onto her stomach. He rolled to his knees behind her, pulling her up onto all fours. Aiming by touch, he slammed home into her hot, clutching depths. He angled his strokes so with every thrust, he hit her g-spot, the sounds of her increasingly loud cries melding with the meaty slaps of flesh on flesh.

It was the antithesis of their previous position. That had been all about slow, sensual and intimate. This was straight-up, animalistic fucking. It didn't take long for the woman to come completely undone, the long tail of her hair swishing over her back to flick at his abdomen. He ignored the tickle, the rhythmic convulsions of her slick, tight passage proving Severus' undoing. The squeezing pressure pulled him over the precipice after her.

A howl and several thrusts later, he collapsed across her back. The added weight caused her trembling limbs to give way, the pair falling to the mattress in a crumpled tangle. The wizard twisted off her, onto his side, pulling her back against the curve of his body. Arms securely enfolding her torso, one hand cupping a breast, the other hovering near the apex of her thighs, he buried his face in the curve of her neck. Breathing deeply of her vanilla-tinged scent, and thoroughly satiated, Severus allowed his dream-self to drop into the abyss of true unconsciousness.

Shaluinn lay awake in the unbroken darkness, encased in the embrace of a man she could not identify, who had just very soundly fucked her. The slow, deep breaths ghosting across the bare skin of her shoulder told her that he was asleep.

This is a dream. It has to be a dream. But if this is a dream, and I know it's a dream, why couldn't I really control any aspect of it? I mean, this can't possibly be real. I am asleep on the floor of my new bedroom, in front of the hearth, wrapped in a very thick comforter right now. Aren't I? The American closed her dream-eyes and went back over the happenings of the last couple of hours. At least it *seemed* to have lasted a couple of hours. Time dilation was such a bitch.

Shaluinn had "awoken" to an utterly black room, not a sliver of light visible anywhere, and the sensation of being pulled back against a long, lean, hard, and definitely male body. She'd wriggled against the restraining arm, immediately realizing this had to be a dream, and that a certain *something* was growing at her back. The faint masculine moan, and the feeling of a swiftly filling erection being rubbed between her cheeks, dispelled any doubts that might have remained in her mind.

The long-fingered hand that wrapped itself around her breast, lifting, kneading, and then twisting her nipple sent a bolt of electricity straight to her core. She couldn't help but arch into the stimulating touch, moaning softly. She cried out as she felt teeth and lips attacking her neck, her hand sliding back over the side of his face to tangle in his apparently shoulder-length locks. From the fleeting touch and sensations against her neck, she could tell he had a prominent nose, bordering on a beak even. He was lean, just this side of skinny, but the way he held her belied the strength in his limbs.

She bit her lip against the howl that threatened to emerge as he latched onto her neck. The blatant marking and groping of her breasts had more than a hint of possessiveness embedded in the actions and caused a flood of warmth between her thighs. *Why do I feel like I should belong to him? This is wrong, all wrong.* Her left hand twisted in the sheets, the right tugging insistently at his scalp.

Wanting more of the exquisite sensations he was eliciting, and utterly unable to deny her impulses, she opened her legs to him as she felt his fingers delving lower. She shuddered at the feather-light caresses he trailed across her heated flesh. He played her form like an expert; like he was a master harpist and her body his instrument.

Before she knew it, she found her body humming with barely restrained tension, releasing in a rolling tremor through her limbs, under the deft motions of the undeniably talented man's fingers. She could barely refrain from flinching, as he kept her on the edge of the crest, not allowing her to truly crash from that small pinnacle of pleasure.

What caught her by surprise was when he'd lifted his musk-coated fingers to his mouth and began sucking on them, clearly making a show of relishing the taste. She lay as still as humanly possible, overwhelmed by her disbelief. *He can't like that. There's no way. I taste disgusting. Well, truthfully, not to myself, but enough have told me how nauseating that, and I, am. He's acting. He has to be, but for all the dark chocolate in the world, I can't fathom why.*

Shamed and distracted, she offered him no resistance when he urged her leg back, settling it to wrap back around his thigh, exposing her to his attentions. He shifted

behind her, eliciting a sharp gasp from her mouth as she felt the head of his turgid length questing between her sodden nether-lips. Each brush of that swollen head against her sensitized nub sent jolts through her, shiver after shiver eating away at her coherent thoughts.

She barely had time to think, *Oh God!* when he caught her hip and began to press into her. For the barest moment, she dared to think she'd been granted a reprieve when he withdrew, only to delve again to that maddeningly shallow depth. All thought fled her mind as he teased and taunted her so gloriously, so deliciously.

All restraint left her as Shaluinn twisted in his embrace, turning her head to capture his mouth in a passionate, demanding kiss. She tasted herself on his lips, and it drove her quite literally insane with need. Without words, she was begging for release, for completion, for him to just get on with it!

Wait! No! Oh, God, it's been too long...! Her sudden mental protests were silenced, as he sheathed himself inside her, all the way to his balls. *Oh, it burns! I'm too tight! He's too large!* It wasn't that he was exceedingly large either. It had just been *that long* since she'd done this with another, and comparatively speaking, *he* was a bit better than average size-wise.

He caught her cries with his mouth, keeping his hips still while he ground his mouth against hers, lips, teeth and tongues tangling almost violently. Whether he was searching for control, or giving her narrowed passage a chance to adjust to his invasion, she couldn't tell.

Finally, blessedly, he began to move, but slowly. As he released her lips and made no effort to increase his pace, it dawned on her that he intended to draw this out as long as he could. Frustrated, being driven wild with need, Shaluinn writhed in his embrace, trying to get him to move faster. But he staunchly refused to be goaded, even as her hand groped back to dig her fingers into his hip and butt. He had her half-sprawled over him, his thrusts slow and controlled. His other hand had insinuated its way around to the juncture of their joined bodies, where he massaged her most sensitive spot.

She lost it, again and again, as he insistently coaxed her body into climax after climax. She no longer cared whether it was all a dream, or something else. Her out-of-practice body was protesting all the stimulation, and she wasn't sure she could handle much more without passing out. To be sure, this mystery man was a generous lover, but good lord!

Just as Shaluinn was about to go utterly limp in his arms, he withdrew. Gently pushed onto her stomach, she could feel him moving behind her, repositioning himself between her spread knees. She barely had time to register what was about to happen when she was pulled by the hips up to her hands and knees. Bare seconds later, he drove into her from behind. A scream tore loose from her chest as he hit that *spot* inside her with his very first thrust.

He had clearly relinquished his incredible control, as he slammed into her with reckless abandon. She could barely hear the harsh sounds of his loins slapping her buttocks over the noise of her own cries. She felt like an animal, primal, getting fucked thoroughly and mercilessly.

Shaluinn came hard, tossing her head and long braid as he continued to pound into her, finally following her with his own howling release. The additional weight of his limp body was more than her taxed limbs could take, and they crumpled to the bed, tangled haphazardly together.

Neither one moved for several moments. He was first, rolling off her, to the side, immediately pulling her to him. He was apparently unwilling to relinquish his hold on her, wrapping his body around hers in a protective, possessive cocoon. It was both endearing and disturbing.

Which brought her right back to where she'd started this reflection session. Where had it gotten her? Nowhere. Nowhere, but where she'd been before. The thing is she had never been one to have dreams of this nature. Granted, this was *much* better than the vague and disturbing ones that had been plaguing her of late.

Resigned to the fact that she clearly wasn't going anywhere, Shaluinn tried to settle her overactive mind, closing her eyes and willing her dream-self into the blessed nothingness of sleep. She would deal with all the questions and concerns this raised later. For now, she let herself enjoy the feeling of being safe and protected.

TBC...

A/N: I just couldn't wait to put in some naughty stuff. The actual relationship between Shaluinn and Severus will have a slower progression than this dream encounter. What can I say? I like some plot with my smut. I know the dream sharing thing has been done before, but I'm hoping to put my own twist on it.

Thank you to everyone who has read, reviewed, and stuck with me through all the bumps and hiccups this story has endured. Sticking to canon is a LOT harder than I realized.

Additional thank-you goes to Kim, for stepping up as my primary beta. I couldn't have gotten this far without you!

First Impressions

Chapter 11 of 18

Shaluinn meets some of Hogwarts' staff over breakfast.

Disclaimer: (In the spirit of Crimson Starlight)

Shana: *still waving hand in front of Kim's face* Helloooooo? *Snaps fingers*

Kim: *jerks, snapping out of it* Wha...?

Shana: Snape Shock.

Kim: *frowning* What?

Shana: You were in "Snape Shock."

Kim: You made that up.

Shana: *grinning* Damn straight.

Snape: Do I *want* to know what the two of you are discussing?

Kim: *smirk* Why, *you*, of course.

Snape: *glares*

Shana: Better knock it off. You're still in trouble mister.

Kim: *evil smirk* Can I punish him?

Shana: *points* See that? He has a new wand. Do you *really* want to try?

Kim: *nodding enthusiastically*

Shana: Oh, dear. That might have been an error on my part.

Snape: *shudders, Disapparates*

Kim: *sulks* Shanastay owns only the plot and her original characters. All else belongs to the genius of JK Rowling.

Chapter 11: First Impressions

Shaluinn was rudely awakened by a shrill, piercing, pulsing, screech echoing through her rooms. The American immediately recognized that the sound had been triggered by someone attempting to enter her rooms. Most likely it was McGonagall, as the Headmistress was the only person (other than Dobby) she had met so far.

Throwing off the heavy comforter, the redhead scrambled to the bathroom, grabbing one of the large bath towels and wrapping it around her nude form. She swiftly cast a rudimentary version of her customary glamour and rushed into the main salon, almost blinded by the bright sunlight streaming through the windows. Throwing up a hand to shield her eyes, the other clutching the towel so it wouldn't fall, she went toward the entrance, just barely missing tripping over her bags.

Belatedly remembering to silence the alarm, the American waved a hand at the wall and stuck just her head through.

Minerva jumped back, barely containing a shriek as the new UD professor's head and neck appeared through the wall, the unexpected sight more than a little unnerving.

Confused, Shaluinn took in the elder witch's defensive posture, wand at the ready, her left hand fluttering near her throat. "Mist-Minerva?" the redhead asked.

"Sweet Merlin! You startled me!" McGonagall cried, breathing heavily from the fright she'd just received.

"Sorry about that," the redhead looked sheepish. "What's up?"

Visibly calming, the Transfigurations mistress tilted her head back, looking around at the ceiling. As the elder witch opened her mouth to answer, Callaway cut her off.

"Sorry again," she apologized. "I keep forgetting I'm not in America anymore, and the slang is different here." The younger woman grimaced. "What I meant was, what can I do for you, Headmistress?"

Minerva returned Shaluinn's gaze, one eyebrow raised sardonically over her glasses. "I was coming to see if you would accompany me to breakfast. The rest of the staff is anxious to meet the newest addition, especially since you didn't join us at dinner last night."

"Oh, shit. I didn't even think..."

McGonagall waved a dismissive hand. "Don't worry yourself. I made your apologies, explaining you had come a long way and needed to recover from your trip."

Callaway smiled wryly. "Thank you. If you don't mind waiting a couple minutes, as I'm a bit underdressed at the moment..." At Minerva's narrowed, questioning gaze she added, "I'm only wearing a towel," and blushed, the deep red showing through the glamour as a slight pink tinge.

The Headmistress made a shooing motion, scoffing. "Go on, dear. I'll be right here." The elder witch turned as the younger woman's head vanished, pointing her wand at a hard, wooden chair, transfiguring it into something a bit more comfortable to sit in.

Relieved, Shaluinn murmured a thank you as she pulled back. She paused, inhaling several deep breaths and dropping the hastily constructed glamour. Her head spun a bit from the concentration necessary to poke just her head through the portal. A good night's sleep had left her rested and relatively pain-free. Only the dull, constant ache of her condition registered in the back of her mind. Not the barest whisper of the decidedly erotic dream she'd had during the night crossed her mind. The world now steady, she padded over to her bags.

Riffling through one, she pulled out several items and carried them back into the bedroom with her. Lining the items up in a row, carefully spaced apart, she retrieved her right-hand wand and waved it, returning the trio of boxes to their normal size. Carefully dropping to her knees, she flipped the lids off, grabbing a bra and panties from one box, a long-sleeve, v-neck, black bodysuit from the second, and a pair of black, stretchy, hip-hugger jeans from the third. Returning to the first box, she snagged a pair of thick, black, combat-boot socks.

Retrieving her knives and carrying everything into the bathroom, she set all but the socks and knives on the counter, donning those while she used the facilities. She quickly put everything else on, unable to hold back a sigh of relief as she adjusted her bra, the garment instantly easing the tension in her back, her shoulders now bearing the load.

She double-checked her appearance in the mirror, turning a critical eye to any exposed expanses of skin, as she habitually murmured the incantation for her customary glamour. The new, dark purple mark at the juncture of her neck and shoulder went unnoticed amidst the other bruises.

Satisfied, she stepped out to the main room, and alternately balanced on each foot, putting her boots on. Striding through the room she snagged her long, leather coat as she passed her bags. Donning the coat, she waved a hand as she walked through the wall into her office.

Minerva stood from her seat as the UD Professor reappeared, fully clothed this time. "Shall we?" she asked, inclining her head toward the door.

"Yes, let's," Shaluinn answered, as she buttoned up her coat, following the elder witch out. Matching pace with McGonagall, the American flipped her damp braid to the front. She undid the plait and let her long red hair fall free to finish drying, the length settling into soft waves. She listened carefully as Minerva caught her up on recent happenings, as well as pointing out things that would help the younger witch find her way around the unfamiliar castle.

"...Watch the staircases. They like to change quite often..."

Shaluinn smiled at that, believing it after her convoluted escorted trip to the Headmistress' office upon her arrival.

The American wasn't surprised by the news that it was Snape who had brought Albus to his end, Minerva's voice hitching as she passed that along. As soon as Shaluinn had seen the portrait, she'd known what had transpired. The White Tomb was a nice touch. She'd have to pay her respects later.

The students had been sent home, now three days ago. She had just missed the maelstrom of activity. The redhead was a bit surprised when Minerva mentioned that she had yet to decide if she would advise the governors to keep the school closed this coming term.

Shaluinn frowned, her gaze on the elder witch as she spoke, "From what Albus, and now you have told me, it seems like the students would be about as safe here as at

home. A hard lesson about war has been driven home, that there is no truly safe haven."

The redhead raised a hand to forestall the argument she saw coming. "Hear me out. I have some experience serving in the Muggle military. We learned the hard way that anyone can be a combatant. There are no truly innocent bystanders. The enemy used children as shields and as suicide bombers, among other things."

McGonagall had a deer-caught-in-headlights look on her face, so Shaluinn decided to cut short her little dissertation, the details not all that important. "I'll sum it up, paraphrasing one of my favorite British authors. "The people of this country learned long ago, those without swords can still die upon them."

"Who said that?"

"Tolkein. J.R.R. Tolkein," the redhead answered.

Minerva seemed thoughtful. "That name sounds familiar. Was he a wizard, dear?"

"You know, I honestly don't know. From all the biographies I've read about him, I always assumed he was a Muggle. But then again, you could be right," Shaluinn admitted. By now the two women had arrived at the Great Hall. Standing outside the tall oak doors, Shaluinn paused for a moment, gathering her wits and courage.

Minerva caught the momentary look of apprehension that crossed the American's face before the redhead hid it well, head held high, back straight. *This one would have been a Gryffindor, I'm sure of it. But I wonder...* "Shaluinn?"

The woman turned suddenly cold, shuttered eyes toward the Headmistress. "Yes, Madam?"

Oh, dear heavens! Recovering quickly, the elder witch covered her surprise by clearing her throat. "I was wondering if you might indulge me sometime in the near future by trying on the Sorting Hat."

Callaway blinked in confusion, her expression otherwise unaltered. "The what?"

"The Sorting Hat. It's the way students are assigned to their respective Houses. If Hogwarts reopens come September, you will see it in action during the Sorting Ceremony for the first years. I am merely curious to see what House the hat would put you in." As she uttered that final explanation Minerva pushed the hall door open, preceding the American.

"Certainly, Madam," Callaway assented, inclining her head before following McGonagall inside.

The American had no idea just how much she resembled Hogwarts last DADA professor as she strode after the Headmistress. She was clad from head to toe in solid black, minus the billowing teaching robes Snape had favored, garnering his "great black bat" description. The woman held herself stiffly straight; hands clasped behind her back, head high, expression carefully neutral and closed. The bottom of her coat flared slightly as she walked, exposing the length of her legs, made to look longer by the added height of her boots. Her long red hair flowed freely behind her, like a stream of molten fire. Her emerald eyes darted about, taking in everything around her.

Silence descended over the professors gathered in the Great Hall as they caught their first glimpse of the newest addition to the teaching staff. Two of the women present leaned into each other, whispering quietly while throwing openly suspicious, yet furtive glances at the American. They broke off as Callaway's gaze fell on them, her expression neither hostile, nor welcoming. It was simply... cold, making her otherwise plain features somewhat sinister, the redhead inadvertently cutting quite the imposing figure.

Since the students had been sent home, the four long tables that customarily dominated the hall had been replaced by a single table, large enough to hold the staff left. Only seven individuals were seated along its length. Minerva stepped up to the head of the table, motioning for Callaway to stand beside her.

"Since I already have your attention, I would like to introduce you to Shaluinn Callaway. She will be teaching a new elective class, Unwanded Defense." She waited while the redhead made a small bow before motioning to an open seat further down the table. "Perhaps we can go around and each of you introduce yourself," McGonagall suggested, as Shaluinn made her way over to the open spot next to the two grey-haired witches who had been conversing quietly since the redhead entered.

As soon as both Shaluinn and Minerva were seated, food immediately appeared on large platters arranged down the center of the table. As everyone began to serve themselves, the witch to the Callaway's immediate left turned bright yellow, hawk-like eyes on the newcomer. The redhead tried not to appear at a loss over the, unusual for her, breakfast selection. Grey, short-cut hair stuck out from the other witch's head at every angle, causing Shaluinn to wonder if it did that naturally, was charmed into place, or if Muggle gel was utilized to create the effect. While at USAFA, the redhead had sported a similar style and had enjoyed the rather punky look.

"I'm Rolanda Hooch, Quidditch coach and referee, and flying instructor here at Hogwarts." Her gaze still very intent, the witch seemed about to say something else, but instead turned to the woman on her left.

Shaluinn couldn't exactly gauge heights as everyone at the table was seated, but she guesstimated that Professor Hooch was likely a good head taller than her, the witch's build strong and muscular, like Shaluinn's, but not as curvaceous. "Professor Hooch," Callaway greeted in reply.

"Madam Hooch," the hawk-eyed woman corrected.

"My apologies, *Madam Hooch*," Shaluinn acknowledged, inclining her head.

"I'm Professor Pomona Sprout," chirped the definitely shorter, much rounder witch with grey, flyaway hair, topped by a patched hat seated to Hooch's left. "I teach Herbology and am Head of Hufflepuff House. Welcome to Hogwarts." She finished with a strained smile, clearly trying to ignore Hooch, who was openly frowning, still studying the American.

Even from down the table, it was clear to Shaluinn that the woman spent a great deal of time in her greenhouses, the deeply embedded dirt under her fingernails visible from a distance. "Professor Sprout," Callaway acknowledged with another dip of her head.

As introductions were being made, the redhead settled on some scrambled eggs and toast, and a bowl of what looked something like oatmeal. British food was definitely different from American food. The woman was careful to take small bites, in case someone decided to ask her a question.

Across the table from the pair of grey-haired witches sat a thin, rather vulture-like woman. Realizing it was her turn, she spoke with a shrill voice, her irritation more than evident. "I'm Madam Irma Pince, Hogwarts librarian. I will not tolerate any shenanigans in my library!" the woman admonished sternly, eyes flashing before turning back to her breakfast.

Oh good grief! "Madam Pince, I feel obligated to inform you that you may be receiving visits from Miss Hermione Granger and Misters Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley. They are to have unfettered access to the Restricted Section," Shaluinn concluded, the corners of her mouth twitching as she restrained the smirk that wanted to emerge.

Pince went into an immediate fit, muttering and then hurling accusations at the newest professor. All eyes were on the two women as the librarian pointed one long, bony finger at the American. "You have no right..."

"Irma!" McGonagall admonished from the other end of the table. "As a professor, Miss Callaway is well within her rights to grant students access to the Restricted Section. Although informing you over breakfast might not have been the best of times." Minerva threw a warning look at the redhead. *What is this girl playing at?*

The whole exchange had everyone's attention. Professor Sprout lost her air of forced cheerfulness as the American seemed to be openly baiting the librarian. The move was entirely too much like Snape for anyone's comfort. The redhead was not winning herself any friends with her behavior.

Shaluinn met Minerva's confused gaze and dipped her eyes, acknowledging the admonishment. She then looked across the table and up at the enormous man sitting there. He had to be at least twice as tall as the average man and five times as wide. A curling black beard and long, wild, tangled hair hid his face, eyes like black beetles staring down at her. His hands were so huge they made the utensils he held appear nothing more than doll accessories. *He could snap me in half without a second thought.*

An impromptu staring contest started as the American looked calmly and evenly up at the giant, the large man clearly taking in the measure of the redhead. She made sure to open her gaze to him, silently telling him her intentions were honorable, despite the baiting of a moment before. She had no idea why, but she felt it imperative that *this* individual have a good impression of her, that somehow his opinion would mean a great deal.

Silence reigned for several more beats before Callaway broke it, speaking matter-of-factly, with a touch of awe in her voice. "You're half-giant. I've never met one before. It's an honor."

And with that, the man across from her burst into reverberating chuckles, a grin spreading across his face. The tension that had been hovering in the air was effectively broken. "Aye, lass. That I am. Rubeus Hagrid, but everyone calls me Hagrid, Gamekeeper and Keeper of the Keys here at Hogwarts, as well as Professor of Care of Magical Creatures," he announced with pride.

Shaluinn decided that now was the time to let her carefully crafted mask slip a bit. "Care of Magical Creatures you say?" Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper, eyes widening with excitement. "Have you any dragons?" The redhead had no way of knowing she had unintentionally lit upon Hagrid's favorite subject. Dumbledore had spoken highly of this man, but had not gone into great depth.

The half-giant's whole face lit up with the question. "They're illegal to keep round here, but we did have four brought in two years ago for the Triwizard Tournament..." He trailed off as a throat clearing was heard from the head of the table. "Sorry, Headmistress."

"Hagrid, I'd like to continue this conversation at a later time. If that's alright?" Shaluinn asked.

"Of course! I live in the cottage down by the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Come down for a cuppa sometime," he offered before turning his attention back to his meal.

A cuppa? For the first time since entering the Great Hall, Shaluinn smiled. "I'd like that. Thank you, Hagrid." With any luck, she'd thrown pretty much everyone off balance by now. For Dumbledore's plotting to work, she had to establish herself as a loner from the start. It wouldn't do to have people constantly visiting her, especially since she had no idea when Snape would try to make contact with her. The only thing she was sure of was that it would be in person.

The woman to Hagrid's left spoke up. "I'm Madam Poppy Pomfrey. I'm the mediwitch here." She appeared middle-aged and was wearing what looked like a white habit taken from *The Flying Nun*.

Shaluinn's gaze swept past McGonagall to the man--no, men--who sat to the redhead's right. She had almost missed the diminutive older man, seated on a large cushion to raise him up to the table. He considerably stood on his chair, so she could get a good look at him, as he introduced himself. He had a shock of white hair and a somewhat squeaky voice.

"Filius Flitwick, madam. Professor of Charms and Head of Ravenclaw House." The little man performed quite the elegant bow, one arm across his waist, the other held at an angle from his body, and his right heel extended in front of him. It was quite cute, actually. "Welcome to Hogwarts." He then sat back down, offering the stage, so to speak, to the not quite as short, portly man to Shaluinn's immediate right.

"Professor Horace Slughorn, Potions, and Head of Slytherin House, at your service. You wouldn't happen to be the daughter of Jolena Anhel, would you?" He smiled widely, his prominent eyes seeming to bug out for a moment. He was definitely shorter than Shaluinn, his shiny, bald head likely to be a glare hazard. He sported a large belly and an enormous, silvery, walrus-like moustache was the only hair on his head. He wore a waistcoat dotted with many shiny gold buttons.

The first word that came to mind as she gazed coldly down at him was "sycophant." *How the hell would this guy know my mother? More importantly, how the hell did he find out...? Oh. Death announcements. They include "survived bys." Still...* "I am, sir," she answered truthfully, tone flat and emotionless.

"Oh, excellent! Excellent!" He hastily wiped his hands on his napkin and extended the right one. "I'm sure we can expect great things from you, my dear, great things indeed! Your mother was an incredible, powerful witch."

Shaluinn looked down at the proffered hand with a sneer that would have made Snape proud, refusing to take it. Gratified, she watched Slughorn's bravado falter in the face of her obvious disdain. "Yes, she was," the redhead acknowledged, turning back to her now cold breakfast.

Remembering the tray still in her room, she debated saying fuck it to breakfast and going back. *Unless I want Minerva on my ass, I need to make some pretense of eating.* Nibbling on the corner of a piece of toast, her thoughts were interrupted by Madam Hooch.

Her voice cold, the witch seemed to be daring the redhead to back down. "Perhaps you could tell us about yourself, now."

It's a reasonable question, but the way she said it tells me she's trying to bait me. Well, two can play this game. Deciding swiftly on the best course of action, she focused on the half-giant across from her, speaking as if they were the only two in the room, a hint of warmth entering her voice.

"Well, you already know my name and have surely surmised I'm an American from my accent. As Professor Slughorn felt necessary to point out, I am the daughter of Jolena Anhel, an American Unspeakable." She definitely had a rapt audience.

Hagrid smiled encouragingly at her as she continued. "My mother was killed several weeks ago by one of Voldemort's Death Eaters." Shaluinn held back a smirk as everyone at the table, including Hagrid, shuddered at the mention of that name.

She decided to give them a general overview of her life that, hopefully, would garner few questions. "I was born July 5, 1958, adopted and raised by my adopted Muggle grandparents. I attended the Pacific Branch of the American Institute of Magic and Mysteries from 1969 to 1976. I subsequently turned my back on the magical world, entering the United States Air Force Academy on June 28, 1976, part of the first class to include women. I left the Academy in March of 1979.

"I bounced around a bit, serving in the Muggle Air Force until May of 1981. I left the Air Force and moved to Japan with a friend to study martial arts, which is what I'll be teaching here at Hogwarts. I achieved fifth-degree black belts in five different disciplines, as well as winning an international swordsmanship competition. I left Japan in December of 1992, returning to my birthplace in Southern California and my adopted mother.

"I completed studies for a Muggle Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice, as well as taking up competitive archery. In May of 1995, I moved to Washington State in the Pacific Northwest to be near my real mother, Jolena Anhel. I spent time getting to know her, finally, until about three weeks ago, when she was murdered. Up until six months ago, I had spent my entire adult life living as a Muggle. Six months ago Professor Dumbledore approached me about teaching Unwanded Defense here and began reacquainting me with the magical world."

Madam Pomfrey took the lull in Shaluinn's speech to ask what normally would have been an obvious question. "So you're 38, soon to be 39?"

"Technically, actually temporally, I'm 45, soon to be 46."

A chorus of cries rose up along the table, varying from comments about the impossibility of the American's statement, to speculation on how that could possibly be.

"QUIET!" the redhead cried out, effectively silencing the debates. "My adopted parents refused to allow me to attend the Institute, and as my mother, Jolena, had been

through the same fiasco years prior, she obtained permission for the use of a Time-Turner. For seven years I attended both Muggle and magical classes. *That* is how I can be seven years older than my birth date indicates."

Callaway cast her gaze about, taking in the patently stunned expressions around her. "Any other questions?" Stated rhetorically, she didn't wait for an answer. "No? Then I believe I shall return to settling in." The redhead gracefully stood from the table.

Hands again clasped behind her back in that unknowing impersonation of Snape, she stalked past the head of the table, pausing for just a moment. "Minerva, I shall see you this afternoon then." She pivoted to face the group and inclined her head. "Good-day, all." Turning sharply, the American strode directly out of the hall, her footfalls echoing slightly in the resounding silence.

TBC...

A/N: A few of you may recognize the *Lord of the Rings* quote as actually being from the movie. Both versions are spoken by Eowyn to Aragorn. In the movie *The Two Towers*, it takes place as the group is readying to leave for Helm's Deep and is as follows: "The women of this country learned long ago, those without swords can still die upon them. I do not fear either pain or death."

The original, or book version, takes place in *The Return of the King*, in the chapter titled, *The Passing of the Grey Company*, and is as follows: "All your words are but to say: you are a woman, and your part is in the house. But when the men have died in battle and honour, you have leave to be burned in the house, for the men will need it no more. But I am of the House of Eorl and not a serving-woman. I can ride and wield blade, and I do not fear either pain or death."

Yes, I *know* the LotR movie trilogy hadn't been released by 1997, but it is a valid point and good paraphrasing of the original book lines. So sue me. It's called artistic license for a reason. A HUGE thank you to everyone who has stuck with me up to this point. I hope I haven't mangled the canon characters too badly.

III Portents

Chapter 12 of 18

Shaluinn encounters Firenze. Severus wakes up and reveals a carefully guarded secret.

Disclaimer: (In the spirit of Crimson Starlight)

Kim: *speaking and gesturing animatedly at hardcopy of latest fic* ...you see here? I fixed this plot hole with this... *trails off as a tall, stunning, ebony-haired, pointy-eared male enters*

Shana: *looks up from pages at pause* Huh? Oh, hi, 'Ro.

Elrohir: *performs sweeping bow* Ladies.

Kim: *gaping*

Identical voice from around corner, getting closer: Hey, Shan! Are you aware you're out of... *enters room* Well, hello there.

Shana: 'Dan. Where one goes, the other is sure to shortly follow.

Kim: *bug-eyed and gaping*

Elladan: *snort*

Elrohir: *chuckle*

Shana: *snicker*

Shana: Kim, meet Elrohir and Elladan, the bane of my friend Serenity's existence. Guys, this is Kim.

'Ro and 'Dan: *beaming smiles. (Can we say "highbeams"?)*

Kim: They're... Can't be... No fucking way...

Shana: *rolls eyes* They *are*, it *can* be and yes, *way*. Say hello to two of Tolkien's elves.

Kim: abwahbwah...

Shana: *smirking* I own the plot and original characters. All else belongs to JK Rowling. Dang, girl. What is it with you and "tall, dark and ugly males"?

'Ro: We are...

'Dan: ...most certainly...

'Ro & 'Dan: ...*not* ugly!

Snape: *That* would be a matter of opinion.

'Ro: Dude! Where'd you...

'Dan: ...come from?

Snape: *eyebrow* And you have the audacity to call yourselves "warriors."

'Dan: Dude! He can do...

'Ro: ...the "Haldir brow"!

Chapter 12: Ill Portents

Shaluinn waited until she was a good distance down the corridor from the Great Hall before dropping her stiff, haughty posture. *Goddess, I hope I didn't overplay that. They would have questions no matter what I said or did. But hopefully now the lot of them will use Minerva as a go-between, rather than approaching me themselves.* The redhead halted and took several steps to the side, before turning to press her back against the cold wall. She brought her hands up, rubbing her face reflexively.

Oh, God, please tell me I did not just hamstring myself. Her ass was beginning to numb from the cold stone at her back. Head bowed, she pushed off, distractedly paying little attention to her surroundings, instead berating herself silently. You better not have made enemies of them. McGonagall was definitely confused by that behavior. But it was more than that.

Did you see the way they looked at me when I walked in? It was like they had seen a ghost. No, that's not right. This castle is full of ghosts. No, it was like they were seeing someone else in me, someone they definitely don't like or trust. Someone... The American literally stopped dead in her tracks.

Could it be? Could that possibly be? She shook her head at herself, moving on. *No, no, that's simply not possible. I've yet to meet that man. How could I possibly imitate someone I've never come into contact with? Yes, Albus told me a great deal about him, but to reach the level of mimicry necessary to be convincing, I would have to observe him myself. I know I'm an excellent mimic, but without a baseline to draw from, there's nothing to copy.*

The witch continued walking, hurling denials and accusations at herself, unwittingly moving deeper into the castle, away from her intended destination.

Several beats passed back in the Great Hall before everyone began talking at the same time. The obvious topic of conversation was the witch who had just exited. Only two of the individuals at the long table remained silent, lost in thought, or simply trying to ignore the ruckus around them.

Minerva had propped her right elbow on the table top, supporting her head in her open right hand. She was trying by sheer strength of will alone to banish the headache that was battering at her temples. The Headmistress didn't know what to make of her new UD professor's behavior.

One moment the American seemed like a "normal" person, with a pleasant, albeit somewhat odd personality, the next she had become a cold, cynical, well,*bitch*. The resemblance to Severus Snape had been uncanny and more than a little disturbing. Minerva had no way of knowing if the redhead had done that on purpose or if the resemblance was simply accidental. The one thing she knew for sure was that it had thrown the rest of her staff into an uproar. That, and the American's "short-version" of her life story.

The elder witch suddenly realized she should have been more wary and less blindly accepting of Albus and the redhead's admissions and explanations. She was simply under too much pressure. She had anticipated eventually taking over the Headmaster's position, but not under these circumstances. It was too much, all at once. The Scot wondered idly if she had somehow been bewitched.

I should have at least asked for references or something. And how do I know the rooms I assigned her were actually meant for her? She dismissed that last question as silly, for Albus had only been working on that one set of rooms. They were obviously what he'd meant when he said she knew which ones to take the American to.

Her left hand joined her right, coming up to cover her face, an aggravated sigh escaping her lips. *If I'm lucky, this newcomer will keep to herself and not give me any reason to sack her. Now if--* She stopped her mental ramblings short, both hands dropping to the table top as she suddenly realized what the redhead must have intended. *She's pushing everyone away.* The witch turned her gaze on Hagrid. *Everyone but myself and Hagrid.* It brought up more questions than it answered. *She must have some reason for this, though what it is, I cannot fathom.*

For his part, Hagrid was happily humming to himself, trying to decide which species of dragon to talk to Professor Callaway about first, if he should tell her about Norbert, if he should make some rock-cakes for her anticipated visit or something else. He was so caught up in his excitement over getting to know the intriguing woman--*She used a Time-Turner for seven years!*--he tuned out the hubbub around him.

The rest of the seated group was in a veritable uproar, passing comments and observations back and forth, up and down the table.

"...strange woman..."

"...seven years using a Time-Turner..."

"...What're 'marital arts'?"

"...mother was a very powerful witch..."

"...what's with all the black?"

"...was baiting Irma!..."

"...moved just like Snape..."

"...sounded just like Snape..."

"What if that was a Polyjuiced Snape?"

The last was uttered as a near-hysterical shriek.

"Enough!" Minerva cut off the wildly flying speculations. She waited until she had everyone's attention before speaking. "I can assure all of you that Shaluinn Callaway is NOT Severus Snape in disguise." At the dubious looks she received, she elaborated. "I have spent some time with this American witch and have seen her do things Snape could not and would not ever do. *And she has Albus' confidence.*"

"You're taking the word of a *portrait*?" Hooch asked incredulously.

"Her mother was Jolena Anhel. It only makes sense she'd be a very powerful witch," Slughorn offered.

"Stop it!" the Headmistress remonstrated loudly. "Would you just listen to yourselves? You sound like a bunch of bickering first-years! Did you not consider, for just a moment that she noticed your suspicion and hostility? I would have been as defensive as she, had I received such a welcome!" Minerva threw down her napkin in disgust. "Bah, this has put me off my breakfast." The witch rose from her seat at the head of the table. She couldn't resist taking a final shot before stalking out. "Shame on you, all of you."

Once again, Shaluinn had managed to get herself lost. She was veritably storming through the corridors when she suddenly felt that prickling on the back of her neck that meant someone was watching her, and very intently. The woman halted in her tracks, weight balanced on the balls of her feet as she pivoted in place, searching the shadows around her. A flicker of light-colored movement had her twisting to the right, wrists flexing as she brought her hands up, wands at the ready.

She had dropped back into a modified kata stance. Left foot was forward, right foot back, weight balanced between and body angled to the side to present the smallest target possible. Had she been wielding a katana, both hands would have been over her head, gripping the hilt of the weapon, blade and point angled at the enemy. As it was, her right hand was held high, at an angle over her head, her left extended in front of her, wands held firmly in each. Mustering a false bravado, she called out, "Who's there? Show yourself!"

She proceeded to let her mouth drop open in shock as a tan man with the body of a horse moved into view, hooves clicking on the stone floor. He was simply... breathtaking. Long, white-blond hair framed a tan face set with vivid blue eyes. His firmly muscled torso melded into a palomino body, the effect both exotic and intriguing. He was obviously a centaur, and given his presence within the castle, he could only be one specific centaur. "Firenze."

His name came out as a whisper, but one that he must have picked up, as he proceeded to perform a rather courtly-looking bow, reminiscent of circus horses she had seen growing up. "I am," he acknowledged, straightening up. "And you are Shaluinn Callaway, the new professor," he stated as he clopped toward her, taking in the redhead's gaping mouth and relaxing posture, clearly relieved she had lowered her wands. The barest hint of a frown crossed his face as she flexed her wrists, reseating her wands.

Realizing how stupid she must look, the American closed her mouth with a click before answering. "I am." She still held herself tense, knowing she shouldn't feel threatened by this creature. Dumbledore had passed on an abbreviated version of how the centaur had been cast out of his herd and come to be the Advanced Divinations professor. If anything, she identified with him, understanding what it was like to be shunned, cast off by your own. She hadn't left the Air Force Academy willingly, after all. But she was unwilling to drop her guard around anyone here.

"It would seem I have gotten myself lost, wandering about, yet again," the woman admitted.

"*Not all who wander are lost,*" the blonde centaur answered.

"Ah, Tolkien. I love his work." The redhead smiled slightly.

"I have enjoyed reading his many books. He was very talented."

"Indeed."

Firenze swept his arm toward a doorway on his right, before disappearing through it.

Her curiosity piqued, Shaluinn followed the centaur into the darkened room beyond. Looking around, the redhead let her mouth fall open again. The room was an auditorium, deceptively enormous, and very much like the planetarium she had visited years prior. The woman was distracted from the light show by a voice behind her.

"I have been waiting for you."

Whirling about, she fixed her gaze on the centaur, whose eyes were upon the enchanted ceiling above them. "What? Waiting to meet me? I've only been here a couple of days. You would have come across me eventually," Shaluinn countered as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"Your coming was foretold."

The redhead snorted, her disbelief more than evident.

The centaur's gaze never wavered from the twinkling stars and swirling galaxies. "It is written in the stars."

Well he's certainly being cryptic. Must have taken a page from dear old Gandalf, talking in riddles. Muttering to herself, she made to leave.

"The woman of molten fire and emerald will come for the dark one, the man in black."

Callaway stopped short in the doorway, turning back with a narrowed gaze. Several long strides brought her nose-to-chest with Firenze. She looked up at the centaur, suddenly realizing she had little going for her in the way of intimidation. *Well, fuck.* "What do you know?"

"*Theirs not to make reply,*

Theirs not to reason why,

Theirs but to do and die," was the answer.

Shaluinn made no attempt to hide her confusion, stepping back from the taller male. "So I am to die."

"You have a destiny to fulfill, child," the creature countered, his voice soft and soothing, despite its ill portent.

The redhead was swiftly losing any illusion of control she had over the situation. Gathering the scattered shreds of her thoughts, she snapped. "What do you know of destiny? I am but one soldier among many. My role in this war is miniscule, at best. Harry Potter is at the center of this maelstrom, not I."

Firenze dipped his chin, shaking his head in negation. "You misunderstand."

"What is there to misunderstand?" She spread her arms wide, a look of incredulity fixed on her face and a trace of hysteria entering her voice. "I came here with the knowledge that I will never leave. I *know* I am to die, I already am! There's no mystery there. And now you speak of destiny? What is so complicated about the concept that I am destined to die in this conflict? And what the Sam-hell does some 'man in black' have to do with any of it?"

A voice in the back of her mind began violently rattling its cage and screaming **Snake, you stupid bitch! Dumbledore told you...** The American pushed the thought away, staying focused on the centaur.

He was shaking his head more vehemently, his arms moving to slice through the air, reinforcing the negation. "I do not mean you are the key to this war. As you have said, Harry Potter has that distinction. But you do indeed have a role of your own to play, that bears no relation to that." The Advanced Divinations professor entreated the witch, his hands extended.

Callaway dropped her arms against her sides with an audible slap. Desperately wanting to turn and leave, something held her there in the doorway. She lifted her arms across her chest defensively, almost daring Firenze to continue.

Taking advantage of her silence, he did just that. "*What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?*"

What the hell is he talking about? If he means Snake, then well, too late for that. Shaluinn snorted, but kept her commentary to herself. When the centaur had nothing further forthcoming, the woman decided to take her leave. Remembering her manners, she put her hands together and bowed. "I am pleased to have met you, Firenze."

Good-day to you."

The centaur bent his head. "And to you, Shaluinn Callaway." As the redhead turned to go, he murmured one final thought, not sure why or from whence it came.

"Out of the strain of the doing,

Into the peace of the done."

The barest hitch in the witch's stride indicated she had heard as she departed without a backward glance.

Severus awoke with a long groan. Flashes of the erotic dream he had enjoyed during the night sped through his waking mind, as he became aware of his position on the bed. He lay on his left side, veritably curled around one of his pillows, both arms clutching the offending cushion to his chest. His right leg was thrown out at an angle, and had he actually been holding the woman from his dream, it would have lain across her calves.

That wasn't what had him growling again. No, the source of his growing annoyance was the sizeable wet spot he could feel beneath his left hip; that and the soreness that made itself known as he shifted away. His now flaccid length felt rather raw. *Oh sweet Merlin! Not only did I have a very wet dream, but I must have been humping the mattress too. Bloody hell!*

Gingerly, he rolled onto his back, lifting the sheets so they wouldn't brush against his sensitive flesh. The movement caused his head to fall off the side of the bed, his body now angled wrong on the mattress. He let it hang there, bringing his hands up to rub across his face. He admitted that he felt more rested and, well, *sated* than he had in a very long while.

Only then, as he gazed blearily out the window upside down, did he register the fact that it was still relatively early. From the angle of the grey light filtering through the simple white curtains, he guessed that it couldn't be much later than 9 o'clock. He shifted, wincing as fabric rubbed raw skin. *I'll have to take care of that, and soon.*

Resigned to the fact that he wouldn't be getting any further rest in his current state, and moving as little as possible, Severus reached one long arm out and swept the offending covers off his body. *Aaaaahhhh.* He lay there for several beats, relishing the sensation of cool air against his heated epidermis.

Closing his eyes against the discomfort he knew was about to ensue, he flexed his abdominal muscles, launching himself into a seated position. He hissed as lightning shot up from his groin. *Best to get this over with quickly.* Several shallow breaths later, he shoved off the bed, making his way bowleggedly to the loo.

Any outside observer watching the scene play out would have been rolling on the floor, laughing their ass off. The figure the dreaded Potions master cut, taking short, mincing steps across the bedroom and to the lavatory, was so totally and utterly unlike the intimidating, striding persona he normally nurtured that it was undeniably hilarious. The worst part about it was he was totally aware of just how pathetic he looked. Vulnerability was not something the wizard bore well.

Finally making it to the room across the landing, he caught himself on the sink, resting there for several steadying breaths. Once he was assured his legs wouldn't give way beneath him, he let go of the porcelain and opened the mirrored medicine cabinet above. Picking through the assorted phials, he found the one he was looking for and swiftly downed it, grimacing slightly at the bitter taste.

He set the small bottle aside, again bracing himself against the sink, head hanging down, greasy black locks forming a curtain around his face as he waited for the Healing Draught to complete its job. He reflexively clutched the sides of the porcelain fixture as tremors ran up and down his limbs, his bent over posture and locked-out elbows the only things that kept him upright as the potion worked its magic.

Several shuddering breaths later, he pushed away from the sink. Moving tentatively, he tested out his muscles, gratified when he noticed no residual soreness or pain. *Much better. Now, on to other things.* The wizard pivoted around and moved to the shower, manipulating the knobs until hot spray rained down from the steel head. He stepped inside, pulling the curtain shut behind him.

Ducking his tall frame beneath the water, he soaked his hair before reaching out to a ledge to retrieve a bar of sandalwood-scented lye soap. He worked the bar over his head and body, swiftly completing his ablutions. He couldn't linger in the shower as, unlike Hogwarts, the heated water was not never-ending. Turning off the water, he stepped out and retrieved a towel from the metal shelf attached to the wall. He ran the coarse cotton over himself and then hung it over the shower rod to dry.

Totally naked, he strode confidently back across the landing to the bedroom. One thing Severus Snape had no illusions about was his own appearance. He knew he was not a handsome man; his beak of a nose, lank hair and crooked, yellowed teeth were nothing to be envied or appreciated. But if you put a paper bag over his head, what was left was not totally unattractive, if you could look beyond the numerous scars marring the surface of his skin, as well as the hideous Dark Mark on his left forearm.

He was not heavily muscled, but rather lean, bordering on skinny. The stress of the last two-plus years had melted off what little fat had settled on his frame over the preceding years, leaving his sinewy muscles well-defined. He had a six-pack that would have been the envy of many a fitness-club attendee. Whipcord tendons wrapped around his limbs, their slender nature belying the strength contained within. Like everything else about him, his appearance was deceptive, lending itself to inaccurate assumptions, just the way he liked it.

Simply put, Severus Snape was comfortable in his own skin. He had no compunction about wandering naked through his home. Nudity was one of the few things he was self-conscious about. Smirking slightly to himself as he recalled the events of last night's dream, he strode toward the bed. Halting before it, he closed his eyes and tilted his head back, immersing himself in the vivid recollection.

Finally having the time and privacy to indulge himself in this manner, he determinedly chased down the sensations evoked by the vision. He lifted his right hand up to glide over the planes of his sparsely haired chest, then down the thickening trail that led to the thatch surrounding his groin. As he wrapped his long fingers around his burgeoning arousal, he was once again gratified that, at least in this, he was better than average. His length and girth were substantial, but not overwhelmingly so. As the few women he'd chosen to lay with had told him, he was just right, and definitely knew just what to do with what he had.

Oh, yes... His face contorted in a grimace as he began stroking himself firmly, his left hand rising to tweak and twist one nipple. Lost in the recollection, he rocked on the balls of his feet, a low moan reverberating through his chest. Every several strokes he would circle the head of his arousal with his thumb, spreading droplets of pre-cum, teasing himself closer to the edge. In his mind, he conjured the vanilla-tinged scent of the mystery woman, her musky flavor lingering on his tongue.

She had been so responsive, so enthusiastic about his ministrations, it was no wonder he had been dry-humping his bed in his sleep. Even now, the vision was so strong, he could feel her body against his, rounded and full, yet unquestionably strong beneath the softness. Snape didn't like his women painfully thin, as was the current fashion. He didn't go for overweight females either. He had heard his preference referred to as "athletic."

He liked curves that hid strong, lean muscles; decidedly feminine in appearance, but deceptively powerful and able to handle the rough play he enjoyed. He had no use for a woman who felt like she would break apart under his hands. Being so picky, it was hard to find females who fit the bill, making his encounters few and far between, even when venturing into the Muggle world. Now if he could find one who had a brain to go with her body, and was a witch as well, he would have uncovered his own, personal Holy Grail.

Resolutely turning his mind away from that line of thinking, he focused again on the feeling of being sheathed in his dream-girl's hot, tight hole. The pace of his right hand quickened, his left hand twisting one nipple almost painfully, as a growl tore loose from his chest. With a grunt, he came forcefully, milky fluid jetting from his pulsing length to coat his hand and abdomen, some falling upon the already soiled bed sheets. Languidly, he worked his length, until he'd wrung every drop from it.

Now undeniably and thoroughly satiated, Snape bent over the bed, reaching beneath the other pillow to retrieve his wand with his clean left hand. He swiftly cast

"*Evanesco!*" on himself and the bed, removing all evidence of his recent and previous enjoyments. Switching his wand to his right hand, he snapped his wrist, the bed immediately making itself up. He twisted around and seated himself on the edge of the bed, next to the chair holding his doffed clothes.

He considered the folded pile for a moment, before reaching in to retrieve his frock coat. He turned and laid the garment out on the bed next to him. Dipping his hand into an inside pocket, he removed a small phial containing approximately two swallows of a violently red-colored, viscous liquid. He silently held the bottle before him, contemplating the task it represented. Ephemeral pain tightened his chest as he considered the meeting where Albus had given him this.

If Albus had been successful in luring the American witch to Hogwarts, Snape would now have a new "handler." She was to be the conduit through which he passed any and all relevant information he gleaned from the enemy's camp. After his apparent betrayal, he would no longer be viewed as a reliable, viable source. To keep the flow of valuable intelligence going after his death, Dumbledore had decided that placing a neutral buffer between Snape and the Order was their best option.

That the Headmaster had recruited an American and a woman for this dangerous and precarious position had not set well with Severus. Unfortunately, he could not argue with Albus' logic that only an outsider would have the indifference and lack of personal entanglements necessary to work effectively with the Potions master. The entire English wizarding community and most of the European community would be up in arms over Dumbledore's apparent murder. Even those who hadn't known Albus personally would never be willing to work with his killer. Enter one redheaded American witch.

The phial Snape held contained two doses of Polyjuice Potion, prepared to turn him into *her*. The Headmaster had decided that the best way for the turncoat Death Eater to infiltrate the castle and make contact with his handler was by being disguised as her. It was an outrageous enough plan that it actually had the potential to work. Never mind that it required Severus to take a gender-bending dose of Polyjuice, turning himself into a woman whose appearance he had few clues about, other than she was 5'7" with red hair, green eyes and was young.

Damn American standards of measure, he cursed as he tried to convert her height into Metric units, his mind still decidedly dream-addled, finally deciding that she would be significantly shorter than he. If he was going to do this, he would wait until after the transformation to Transfigure suitable attire. In that regard he was fortunate, as this woman apparently shared his penchant for all-black clothing. Albus' eyes had twinkled quite merrily when he related that tidbit of information. All Snape really would have to do was magically tailor his regular clothes.

So there he sat, turning the phial back and forth in the murky mid-morning light, debating his options. He sighed audibly, closing his fist around the small bottle. *This is just Albus' final beyond-the-grave attempt at humor. He couldn't have just differentiated Polyjuice using some anonymous male Muggle. No, he insists on turning me into a woman, the ruddy bastard.*

Severus blinked back the tears that unwittingly gathered in the corners of his eyes as he thought about the very last time he had looked into his mentor's eyes. Shining there, so different from the familiar twinkle, had been resignation and acceptance. Of all the people he had been forced to kill over the years, this death had been the hardest. The old man, as much as he had bedeviled and annoyed the ever-living daylights out of Snape, had been so much more than just an employer.

Albus had proven the positive father-figure Snape had sorely lacked in his childhood. He had been both friend and confessor, quietly absolving the Potions master of every transgression committed in the name of maintaining his post as a double agent. The Headmaster had never once lost faith in the dark, brooding man, quietly supporting him against all naysayers. And where had that loyalty gotten him? Murdered, by the very wand of the man he had unwaveringly supported. Never mind that Albus had ordered Snape to do it.

Snape growled at himself, disgusted at his own lack of control, moisture falling from his jaw to form wet puddles on his thighs. He hastily wiped the offending tracks from his face, drying his hand off on the blanket beneath him. As good as it felt to release his pent-up emotions, he couldn't afford to make a habit of this. He took in several shuddering breaths, carefully rebuilding the walls and shell that composed his evil, black git persona.

What the Headmaster had never known was that Severus had undertaken a specific tract of study during the course of the year, an alternative to disguise via Polyjuice. He had made the decision shortly after his fateful meeting with Narcissa. It had taken him the better part of the year before he was ready to make his first attempt, done so behind layer after layer of protective wards. And he had succeeded, beyond his every hope and expectation. He had an eminently more useful method of moving about and avoiding detection than any potion or charm could provide.

Severus Snape had become an Animagus.

Determined to keep his new form utterly and totally secret from all, including the Headmaster, he had found few opportunities to sort out maneuvering as an animal. *This* was how he intended to approach his contact. But before he could consider meeting up with her, he had to make sure that he was sufficiently proficient at handling his altered body. And that meant practicing.

His emotions under control, and a smirk firmly ensconced on his lips, he stood and turned, depositing the phial on top of the covers. He retrieved his wand from where he'd dropped it on the bed and performed a Cleansing Charm on his garments before quickly getting dressed, nimble fingers moving swiftly over the multitude of buttons. Finally, he retrieved an old, worn, teaching robe from his closet and then swept out of the room and down the stairs.

Casting a Disillusionment Charm on himself, he slipped out of the edifice and around the back. A wry smirk twisted his lips as he considered the strange figure he cast. Since *that night* he had ceased wearing teaching robes, as there was no real point anymore. He wore one now because the billowing fabric helped put him in the right frame of mind to achieve transformation.

Actually looking forward to this exercise, Severus took several deep, calming breaths, centering himself. Firmly focused, he took several running steps before pitching forward and lifting off, his body morphing from that of a human, to a great ebony bird taking to flight. The Potions master's Animagus form was a large, solid-black raven.

Wings beating furiously, he lifted high into the air, rising with an unexpected thermal. He swiftly left behind the somber view of his decrepit childhood home, gliding effortlessly along the air currents, unconsciously heading in the direction of Hogwarts.

TBC...

A/N: Quote acknowledgements:

"Not all who wander are lost." -JRR Tolkien *The Fellowship of the Ring*

"Theirs not to make reply,

Theirs not to reason why,

Theirs but to do and die," -Tennyson *Charge of the Light Brigade*

"What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"

-Gospel of Matthew XVI 26

"Out of the strain of the doing,

Into the peace of the done." -Julia Woodruff *Gone*

Practice Practice Practice

Chapter 13 of 18

Severus does something naughty. Shaluinn blows off some steam, and someone is spying on her.

Disclaimer: (In the spirit of Crimson Starlight)

Kim: *completely out of it, drooling over elves and wizard*

Elladan & Elrohir: *gaping at wizard*

Snape: *glaring at elves* Madam?

Shana: *looks up from scattered paperwork* Huh? You talkin' to me?

Snape: Yes.

Shana: So, what do you want?

Snape: Why are they *points* here?

Shana: Well, you Disapparated, and I needed some raven-haired hotness for the disclaimer. That and they totally destroyed Serenity's kitchen... again.

Snape: I see.

Shana: *suspicious* Do you?

Snape: *glaring*

'Dan: Should we...

'Ro: ...just go?

Kim: Bwahbwahbwah...

Shana: *eye roll* Oh, good Lord! The plot, Shaluinn and all associated with her belong to me. All else belong to the genius of JK Rowling and JRR Tolkien. *to elves and Snape* Why can't you all just *get along*???

Chapter 13: Practice, Practice, Practice

The feeling was incredible, indescribable. Severus soared high into the clouds, dipping and turning and gliding, following the air currents where they took him. Occasionally he would flap his wings, keeping his altered form aloft. The world below seemed but a surreal dream, everything so far away.

He felt... free.

Flying as a bird was wholly unlike broom flying. Severus had been a Chaser for Slytherin while he was a student at Hogwarts. He had never lost his love of soaring through the ether. But his position as a spy gave him little opportunity to indulge in such things. He had been afforded precious few chances to move about in his Animagus form once he'd achieved the transformation.

Banishing all conscious thought from his mind, he allowed his latent animal instincts to rise to the fore, guiding his actions. Not a care in the world, he performed feats of flight only a bird could achieve or appreciate. Gliding low over a Muggle neighborhood, he suddenly spotted something that had him giving in to an impulse born of his understated, sadistic sense of humor.

He turned, dropping toward the ground in a tight spiral. He very nearly overshot the perch he had been aiming for, beating his wings wildly to brake his forward momentum. Even then, he had to dance about the branch he'd meant to land on so he wouldn't flip over it. Finally righting himself, he sat on his perch in a tree overlooking a Muggle backyard.

A malicious glint shined in the ebony avian's eyes as he took in the sight of a man cleaning a set of tall, clear, sliding-glass doors leading out to a large yard. Near the doors in question was a chaise lounge with a paperback book resting on it. As he watched, the man completed his labors and stepped outside.

I can't believe I'm doing this...

Snape saw his chance and leapt off his branch, gliding around to the front of the edifice. There he found exactly what he'd been looking for: a push-button doorbell. Bursting with malevolent intent, he swooped to the door, and while beating his wings wildly, managed to hit the button in question. He swiftly turned and flew to the back, waiting while the unknowing Muggle man made his way back into the house and towards the front.

Angling his descent so he landed on the sliding-glass door handle at a certain angle and with enough force to send it gliding shut, the disguised Potions master closed the crystal-clear door. With a squawk, he beat a retreat back to his previous perch, so he might observe the fruits of his labors unimpeded. It didn't take long for the visibly irritated man to reappear, striding straight for the now closed portal to his backyard. Having been distracted just enough, the man walked right into the clear glass door, knocking himself to the ground, utterly senseless.

Snape just about fell off his branch, he was laughing so hard, his raven body emitting sounds very much akin to human laughter. Yes, it was a dirty trick. Yes, it was undeniably juvenile. Yes, the last time he'd done something like that had been over thirty years prior in his childhood. Yes, such behavior should have been totally beneath him. But *damn* had that been fun!

It was utterly exhilarating, being able to move about with total freedom. He could go virtually anywhere undetected. Hence his reasoning for going to all the trouble he had. His spying abilities had increased a hundredfold with this new skill. But spying was the last thing on Severus' mind at the moment. Instead he relished, he reveled in the alien, revitalizing feeling of letting go.

Taking flight again, he let wind and whim lead him on.

If Shaluinn had been annoyed before, she was livid now. *What the hell was all that about?* Gooseflesh had risen on her skin along with a strange and eerie sense of déjà vu. The redhead attempted to quell her rising unease with anger. *Man in black? Molten fire and emeralds? Firenze must be smoking some damn fine crack to bust out that shit.*

The woman had an overwhelming desire to destroy something, to do some serious damage. *Destiny my lily-white ass.* The anger and frustration she was feeling began feeding back into itself, and with no outlet immediately available, amplifying.

Slamming her fist into a wall crossed her mind for a split second before being discarded. *I have enough problems without doing serious damage to myself.* The sconces she passed as she strode down the corridor flashed momentarily, the flames leaping high, before subsiding.

Still every bit as lost as she'd been before encountering Firenze, the American kept walking, trying to move in as much of a straight line as possible. Finally, luckily, she found what she had been searching for: an exit. A tentative plan had formed in her mind as she realized she had not emptied her pockets the previous day.

Stepping outside through what she discovered was a side entrance, the woman found herself on a slope leading down toward the lake and the meadow bordering it. The bright sunlight that had nearly blinded her earlier had given way to a rather gloomy, murky overcast. The dismal cloud cover that was indicative of Scottish weather did nothing to help her mood, merely reinforcing it. Shaluinn could see a grey haze off in the distance, heralding the imminent arrival of a drizzling rain.

Fuck inclement weather!

Knowing how much it would make her back and knees ache, the redhead fought back the urge to release her pent-up anger by running. She wasn't attired in appropriate footwear or a properly supportive bra to prevent bounce.

Long strides brought her to the grassy, flattened out area bordering the lake. Decision made, she moved to one end of the meadow, rifling through her pockets. Finding a level spot, she stopped and stooped, placing a familiar object in the grass. A flex of her right wrist to retrieve her wand, a swish and flick and softly murmured incantation, and the familiar form of her target bale mounted on its stand rose out of the grass. Callaway walked around the back of the bale to get at the oversized, vinyl pouch and cylindrical tube that hung from the frame.

From the tube, she retrieved a large target sheet. Concentric circles emanated out from the center, changing from gold, to red, to blue, and finally to black around the outside. Reaching up, she pulled four large, spiral-topped stick-pins out of the sides of the bale. She centered the target sheet on the synthetic round, wrapping the edges around the sides and securing them with the pins. Stepping back, she made sure it looked right and moved behind the frame again, this time retrieving a huge, round, measuring-tape reel and a small metal hook.

Shaluinn returned to the front of the target, bending down to embed the hook in the ground. She pulled on the measuring reel, securing the metal loop on the end through the hook in the ground. Righting herself, she walked backwards in a straight line, mentally ticking them off as she passed 30 meters, 50 meters, 60 meters, and finally 70 meters. She took one more half-step back, before sliding a button on the reel forward, holding it at that mark. Setting the reel on the ground, she dragged the heel of her left foot along the soft ground next to the 70-meter mark, making an improvised shooting line.

The American found her ire slowly receding in the wake of the very familiar routine of setting up for practice. It was still there, but at a more manageable level. At least now, she wasn't likely to snap a roundhouse kick into the face of the next person to talk to her. She still had roiling emotions to quench, but those feelings had found an outlet. She dropped several more items into the grass, this time using her left hand to return them to normal size.

Retrieving her hair elastic from a pocket, she doffed her coat, pulling her hair back into a ponytail and then a loose loop. Visor and quiver on, she turned the scope lying on its side. Righting the piece of equipment, she extended the tripod's legs and swiveled the scope to face the target. She put her face to the eyepiece, adjusting the lens until she could see the target clearly, the circle filling the scope's field of view. She adjusted a couple of knobs to keep it in place and stooped to retrieve her bow.

Bow-stand unhooked and secured on the back of her belt, she stepped up to the left side of the scope. She took a second to untangle the bright strings hanging from the bow's stabilizer, knowing she would need her "wind indicators" and the small flag topping her target to gauge the direction and strength of the Scottish breeze. Situating herself so all she'd need to do was lean forward between shots to check each arrow's location, the redhead pulled a target arrow from her quiver and nocked it.

Remembering the scope wasn't dialed-in, and needing to factor in the light breeze, she stooped slightly, resting the bow's lower limb against her thigh as she reached across with her right hand to turn the knob that adjusted the bow-scope's height. She'd put a clean piece of tape along the height markings so it would be ready for her to make new sight markings. Satisfied she had the sight adjusted as best she could without having taken a shot, she retrieved her release aid, clipped it to the D-loop, and lifted the bow, drawing smoothly.

Right eye to the magnifying "peep" set into the bow string, she focused through it to the bow-sight and beyond to the gold rings of the target, her peripheral vision gauging the "wind indicators." The dot on the sight circled the center of the gold as she took a deep breath and let it out. At the bottom of her exhale, the dot settled into the center of the gold. With a sharp flex of her shoulder, she popped the release.

With a light *thunk*, the arrow impacted the bale. Shaluinn bent and looked through her scope, locating the protruding fletches on the target, to the right and below center, in the blue ring. *DAMN!* She fiddled with the sight knobs, adjusting for the arrow's apparent path. Drawing again, she focused on the center gold, controlling her breathing. At the bottom of her breathing cycle, she popped another shot.

Looking through the scope again, she found the arrow had gone high and left of center this time, still in the blue ring. Again adjusting the sight, she took another shot. This one was low, but centered, on the edge of the red.

Callaway paused for a moment, closing her eyes as she centered herself, trying to channel her returning ire into productive energy. The last thing she needed to do was lose it and set the school grounds afire. She concentrated on regulating her breathing, taking long, slow, even breaths. Every bit as important as weather factors, her breathing was key to getting off a clean shot.

Adjusting the vertical on the sight, she let off another arrow and was gratified to find it dead center on the X. Pulling a pencil from her quiver pocket, she marked the spot on her sight tape, before proceeding to empty her quiver of target arrows.

Just as she was preparing to release her last arrow, the wind suddenly kicked up from the left. In a split-second attempt to save the shot, she yanked hard as she popped the release, her bow-arm pulling sharply up and to the left. She overbalanced with the forced release, her left foot leaving the ground as she balanced on the right.

There was no other way to describe the shot, but ugly. *VERY* ugly. It had been too late to either hold or let down on the string, so she'd overcompensated on the release, trying to force the arrow back into the gold. Looking through her scope, she found the fletches right on the line between the red and gold, high and right. She hadn't yanked hard enough.

Again annoyed, she pulled out the bow-stand and set the bow in the grass, before walking down to the target to retrieve her arrows. They were embedded deeply in the round, requiring her to use a rubber arrow-puller to get them out. The woman put one booted foot against the bale to brace it as she yanked. All the projectiles removed, Shaluinn began cleaning the white residue left on the shafts by the bale, as she returned to the 70-meter mark.

Before picking her bow up again, she made sure to lube up the arrow tips, so she would have less difficulty pulling them. Arrows stowed, she lifted her bow and repeated the process of nocking, shooting and checking the arrows, now having to contend with steadily increasing light, but changeable winds.

The American found her anger and frustration abating as she immersed herself in the familiar exercise, losing awareness of everything around her, other than the weather conditions. She shot quiver-full after quiver-full of arrows at 70 meters, 60 meters, 50 meters, and finally 30 meters. At 30 meters, she had to change the target sheet to one bearing three smaller, ringed targets, more appropriate for the closer distance.

All her energy and concentration focused on her shooting, she didn't register the various spectators who stopped and watched her for a time before continuing on to their respective destinations.

Hagrid watched the redhead for a spell, wondering idly if she had ever shot a crossbow.

Professor Sprout stood with Madam Hooch for a while, exchanging comments about the American's obvious skill, and the fact that their presence had gone completely unnoticed. When it became clear that the new professor would continue her exercise for some indeterminate time, the two witches parted company; Sprout heading to her greenhouses, and Hooch mounting the broom she had brought with her, kicking off into the air.

The spiky-haired witch continued to observe the American, unanswered question after unanswered question rolling through her mind. Taking in the approach of a tall, grizzled, gangly male with lamp-like eyes, she decided to continue her perusal from a less conspicuous vantage point. She swept up and away through the beginnings of a light drizzle. From the shadow of a castle turret, the hawk-eyed woman watched the approach of Filch from the direction of the Forbidden Forest. She shuddered involuntarily as the man threw an unmistakable sneer toward the redhead before continuing on to the castle.

Hooch cast an Impervious Charm on herself as the rain steadily increased, wondering why the American didn't cease her practice and go in out of the weather, or at least cast her own Impervious. Her vantage point obscuring her view, and her attention otherwise occupied, the Flying instructor missed the tall, black-clad, hook-nosed figure that stood in the shadows, studying the redhead intently.

Shaluinn was so completely focused on her exercise she failed to register the ominous black figure scrutinizing her like a predator assessing its prey. She was getting steadily more sodden, her clothing adhering to her skin with the weight of the rain. Any masking effect her attire had held was lost, as the clinging fabric revealed the curved lines of her ribs and her jutting hips, her recent weight-loss obvious to a knowledgeable eye.

It was by sheer force of will that she had been able to continue shooting her bow like normal. Realistically, the draw-weight should have exceeded her body's ability at this point, the disease eating at her diminishing her physical ability. This one thing, she refused to give up. She'd stop shooting her bow when she was dead, not before. Obsession did not begin to cover the passion she felt for the sport and her weapon of choice.

The idea of casting an Impervious Charm did not even cross the American's mind. She had become so accustomed to doing everything like a Muggle that the concept of staying warm and dry via magic didn't enter into consideration. So it was with dripping hair, shaking limbs, soaked to the skin and chilled to the core, that she finally decided she'd had enough for the day. The wind and rain had quenched whatever fire remained of her irrational anger, and she realized she still had a lot to do in her rooms before the Headmistress arrived.

When it became clear Callaway intended to return inside, Hooch turned her broom and soared off toward the Quidditch pitch, and the errand that had originally brought her outside.

The ominous black figure remained hidden in his vantage point, watching the strange woman collect and shrink her equipment. He silently made good his escape before she began making her way toward the castle proper.

TBC...

A/N: Anyone who's seen the recent Windex commercial involving the ravens, a sliding glass door, a doorbell and the typical stupid human will recognize where I got the idea for Severus' "prank." I hope I made it at least half as funny as the commercial.

Competitive archers will paste a piece of scotch tape over the vertical sight scale on their bow. Before a competition, there is a practice day when the archers will take practice shots, making marks on this "sight tape" for each distance they will be shooting. So when the competition starts, they twist the sight dial to the appropriate mark for the distance and (weather notwithstanding) they can be reasonably sure the arrow will go where, or close to where they want it. Minor adjustments are often made each round after the first arrow of the group is shot to compensate for any wind, rain, etc that may affect the arrow's flight.

The heavier the draw-weight on a bow, the flatter the arrow's trajectory, the lesser the arc angle the archer has to compensate for. I shoot a 59/60lb compound bow (which is the maximum allowable for target archery) so my trajectory angle is relatively flat.

Mind-Warping

Chapter 14 of 18

Shaluinn runs into the person who was spying on her. Snape has a gender-bending solo experience. Shaluinn finally reveals the nature of the disease ravaging her body.

Disclaimer: (In the spirit of Crimson Starlight)

Kim: *blink* Where did everyone go?

Snape: *Smirking*

Shana: *glaring at Snape*

Snape: *acting all innocent*

Shana: What did you do with them?

Snape: Hmmm?

Shana: 'Dan and 'Ro. What did you do with them?

Kim: Yeah!

Snape: *eyebrow* I returned them to their owner.

Shana: *wide-eyed. Flips cell phone open and hits speed dial* I don't trust you.

Snape: *smirking evilly*

Shana: *on phone* Yeah, did you get the boys back in one piece?

sounds of screaming from phone

Kim: That can't be good.

Shana: *glaring, face turning red*

Snape: I belong to JK Rowling. Those insufferable elves belong to JRR Tolkien. Shaluinn, the plot, and all related to her, belong to Shanastay. She makes no monies from this work, whether real or virtual. Please, sue her. I, at least, would find that eminently amusing.

Kim: *hurls copy of Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince at Snape* You bastard!

Snape: *Disapparates before book gets to him*

Shana: *snaps phone shut* He's in deep shit whenever he decides to come back.

Kim: Indeed.

WARNING: Polyjuiced, gender-bending solo action contained within this chapter. Or as LadyoftheMasque likes to call it: a baby crack-plot-bunny.

Chapter 14: Mind-Warping

Shaluinn trudged up the slope and made her way to the Entrance Hall. She was chilled and soaked to the skin, tremors beginning to move through her extremities. She paused for a moment, one hand against the wall to hold her up as a particularly strong shiver ran through her.

Blast and damnation. I should've known better. I can't handle inclement weather like I used to. I keep forgetting the limitations of this damn, disease-ridden body. Sheer strength of will only goes so far with a compromised immune system. Damn it, damn it, damn it! Gads! Feels like the cold is working its way out from the inside. Chilled to the bone indeed. Stupid, stupid, stupid!

Through berating herself for the moment, she shoved off the wall, making her way forward. *I better not get lost again.* She fought to keep her attention on making her way to her rooms and off the increasingly severe tremors rippling through her.

The staircases seemed to be cooperating, even shifting to send her on a more direct path to her rooms. Or so it seemed.

She made it to the third floor before she stumbled, her right shoulder contacting painfully with a stone wall. Her teeth were chattering audibly by now, her arms wrapped around her torso in a futile attempt to stay warm. It still didn't occur to her to cast a Drying Charm, or even a Warming Charm, on her person; not that she could recall those long-ago lessons at the moment. She was focused solely on one thing: *Hot shower. Hot shower. Must take hot shower.*

She stepped off the staircase at the fourth floor just as it disengaged, shifting to another portal. Callaway managed two dragging steps and tripped over her own feet, tumbling to the ground. *Damn it! At this rate I'll be dead before I get to my rooms. Clearly, my coordination is lacking right now. Must've used it all up shooting. Wonderful. Great, just great. Come on now, girl. Up with you!*

Gritting her teeth against her pain-laced, damp-stiffened muscles protestations, she shoved to her feet. She closed her eyes as she swayed for a moment. Equilibrium restored, she opened her eyes as she put one foot forward and walked right into Isaac Newton's immovable object.

"Ow! Shit. Sorry," she muttered, moving back from the person she'd run into, rubbing her smashed nose, and looked up into bottomless dark eyes set beneath thick black eyebrows. A large, curved nose protruded from a sallow-skinned face, framed by layered black hair, feathered around his features in an attempt to soften the look of him. As she stepped back, she saw that he was clad entirely in black, thin and round-shouldered, a twist of a smirk set upon his lips.

She bit back a scream of startled fear, eyes wide in shock, as all the air in her lungs rushed out with a single, strangled word. "Snape." And put her foot behind her where a staircase had been moments before, pitching backwards into empty air.

Conscious of the relentless passage of time, Severus took stock of his surroundings, wondering just where he'd ended up. Drifting below him was a medium-sized village, bustling with activity. With a sigh, he realized he'd most likely have to land, transform, and Apparate back to Spinner's End, as he had no idea where the wind had taken him.

With that in mind, he began a leisurely descent, moving in a wide, tightening spiral. He swept his head side to side, looking for a quiet, unobserved place to land. Spotting a dense copse of trees off to his left, he banked, adjusting his trajectory to take him to the location.

He dropped through the dense canopy carefully. Severus flapped his wings hard, trying to brake but only half-succeeding, his landing hard, very nearly embedding his beak in the grass as he overbalanced. He shook his animal self, looking around cautiously before closing his eyes and concentrating.

Had a Muggle happened upon him in that moment, they would have thought themselves mad, watching a large black bird morph into a larger, black-clad man.

Severus righted himself and checked his surroundings a final time before turning on the spot and Apparating away.

Shaluinn didn't make a sound as she fell, her breath already expended with that startled exclamation. In that split second of weightlessness, she berated herself for acting like a frightened schoolgirl in the face of the man she'd been recruited to aid. *Idiot!*

Suddenly, her descent was arrested, strong hands gripping her forearms and pulling her back, twisting so she landed flat on her back in the corridor, a heavy weight settling on top of her. She laid there, dazed, breath knocked out of her yet again. It had all happened so fast. She'd walked into him, recognized him, and like an utter ignoramus, had freaked, stepping back onto a staircase she knew was no longer there.

Only to have him apparently leap forward to arrest her impending fall, overbalancing and sending them to the ground, where they now lay in a tangled heap, chests heaving with the sudden exertion. Her eyes shut, she tried to regain her composure, hoping she hadn't managed to flummox everything up. *Yeah, real impressive display there, Shaluinn. Way to gain his confidence.*

When he made no effort to get off of her, the redhead opened her eyes to find Snape practically leering at her, a grin that just seemed *wrong* gracing his lips. *What the fuck?* He was quite clearly taking stock of her assets, not only having a view down her shirt, but able to feel her curves beneath him. She gritted her teeth and forced air

into her lungs, quite the endeavor with his weight pinning her down.

"Get. Off. Me."

He smirked. "No." A slight accent, not British, was hinted at in the one word.

"Get. Off. Me. NOW!" She bucked her hips, trying to urge him to move. *I'm sopping wet head to toe, he saved me (whoop-dee-doo), and now he won't climb off. What the Sam-hell is going on? And what is... Oh, SHIT!* Shaluinn felt something hard pressing against her thigh that she most definitely didn't want to deal with.

"Why did you call me Snape?"

The accent was unmistakable now. *Okay, wrong guy. He's not Snape. But damn, he fits Albus' description. Why the hell didn't Albus just give me a fucking picture? Stupid old man and his stupid games.* Enough was enough. The fright-induced adrenaline rush she'd been riding was waning, and, with its departure, the chilled state of her body was again making itself known.

Callaway barely repressed a shudder as she glared up at the man, still awaiting an answer. Assessing their position, she realized she didn't have the physical capability to flip him off her, which left... her wands! She bucked again, moving him just enough to free her right arm. A flex of her wrist and her wand was out, the tip pressed painfully against the wizard's neck. "I said, get off! Or so help me, I will happily hex you into the next millennium!"

Finally heeding the threat, the man withdrew. Jaw clenched against the shudders that threatened to overwhelm her, Shaluinn followed him up, regaining her feet carefully, her wand-point never wavering. "Who the hell are you?"

"This is a strange way of thanking your savior." He looked pointedly down his nose at her still-brandished wand, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Shaluinn Callaway." She made a flamboyant bow, carefully keeping her wand leveled. "And you are...?"

"Viktor Krum." He said it like it was an explanation unto itself, looking at her expectantly. With no flicker of recognition forthcoming, he added, "I was the Seeker for the Bulgarian National Quidditch Team."

"Yippadee-fucking-doo-dah." A shudder ran through her as she fought to maintain her feet. Deciding he wasn't an imminent threat any longer, she dropped her hand, moving it behind her back so he wouldn't see her reseat her wand.

Eyes narrowed, confusion creased Krum's brow. "You don't recognize me?" He watched her curiously as her frame shook with repressed tremors, wondering what was wrong with her, other than the fact that she was dripping wet from the weather outside. Surreptitiously, he silently cast a Drying Charm over her, hiding the move with an impatient gesture. He was confounded when she didn't appear to notice.

"No," she admitted. "I'm American. We don't follow Quidditch like the rest of the world. Why would I?" Her gaze narrowed. "You must be quite the 'big deal' to expect me to know you by name, if not sight. And you used the past tense when referring to your team. What are you doing here at Hogwarts?" Some part of the redhead's mind had registered her now dry state, but--still chilled to the bone--it didn't qualify as a high priority.

He seemed mildly impressed that she had caught that, still curious that she continued to shiver, her teeth even chattering for a second before she got them under control. "Ah could ask the same of you."

"Hi. Thank you for pulling me back from that edge." She waved her hand over her head in a rather strange gesture, like a student with a correct answer trying to get the teacher's attention. "I'm the new Unwanded Defense professor."

That definitely threw him. Apparently unwilling to voice his ignorance and puzzling over her odd behavior, he responded, "I am interviewing for the DADA position."

"Yay for you. Can I go now?"

He seemed visibly perplexed, unable to make sense of the redhead's bizarre manner of speech. "Why did you call me Snape?" he asked again.

Shaluinn blew a stray bit of hair out of her face and answered like it was self-evident. "I've never met the man, never seen a picture. You match the description I was given of him, so I jumped to the wrong conclusion. Satisfied?"

A smirk again twisted the wizard's lips. "Not nearly," he murmured softly to himself. To Shaluinn he said, "Ah can understand your confusion."

"Great. Well, good luck, break a leg, whatever it is you people say, at your interview. Now, if you'll excuse me..." She turned to stalk off as best she could while shivering uncontrollably.

Krum watched her go, wondering at the difference between the woman as he saw her now and when he'd observed her outside, shooting that odd-looking bow. Something was off about her. "Strange, strange vitch..." he murmured aloud to himself, reaching down to adjust his trousers beneath his robes. He was... intrigued. He wasn't used to being dismissed like that.

The acoustics of the corridor were such that Callaway caught his comment and threw back one of her own, not bothering to turn around. "I've *never* claimed to be normal, Mr. Krum, never." With that parting shot, she turned the corner, leaving his line of sight.

Severus appeared at the far edge of the back of his property on Spinner's End with a muted crack! He strode up to the house, lowering and resetting his wards as he went. He felt assured that he could move about in his animal form adequately enough to suit his immediate needs. Entering the edifice, his mind turned to something he had been considering during his lengthy flight.

He made for the loo, leaving his sweaty, dusty clothes in an untidy pile on the landing between the rooms. He eyed the shower, debating washing up before he indulged his curiosity. Remembering how taxing the experience had been on his body the last time he'd done it, he opted to wait.

He faced the bedroom and called, "*Accio Polyjuice!*" The phial in question came flying through the air, smacking into his waiting palm. He almost felt guilty for what he was considering, *almost*. It wasn't like he had a whole lot else to entertain him at the moment, having already read every book contained within his family home.

You wanted to impose your obtuse sense of humor on me from beyond the grave, old man, but I believe I have one-upped you on that. Now, let's just see exactly who it is you were planning on having me parade around as. Decision firmly made, he spared a moment only to Transfigure the bathroom door into a full-length mirror before popping the phial open and swallowing a mouthful.

He stoppered the bottle and placed it on the sink before the potion began to take effect. His eyes squeezed shut, and jaw clenched, he dropped to his hands and knees, his body convulsing and contorting as it reformed itself. He held back the urge to vomit, knowing from past experience that it was a side effect of the transformation process. Deep breaths kept his gorge down and his mind calm.

He could feel his body changing, muscles shifting and adapting, hair growing exponentially. And most disturbingly, he felt the loss of the familiar weight of his penis and bollocks. He knew this Polyjuice transformation brought with it a gender-swap, something he'd never experienced before. But to not be able to actively feel his reproductive organs was unsettling, to say the least. Instead, he felt two heavy weights hanging from the prone plane of his chest, swaying slightly with every breath.

Wanting to take in the full effect of the change all at once, he kept his eyes closed, reaching up with one hand to grasp the edge of the sink. The other hand followed and he lurched upright, his center of balance off due to the new shape of his body. As he righted himself and turned to face the full-length mirror, he could feel the muscles in his shoulders and back protesting from the unfamiliar weight of the heavy breasts he'd acquired. He realized he'd lost half a meter in height as he rotated, bracing himself on the fixture before finally opening his eyes.

Emerald-green eyes stared back at him from a tanned face that was otherwise plain, oval with relatively clear skin, carefully manicured, arched brows, and a somewhat angular nose with a slight bump at its midpoint. Waist-length hair, a shocking shade of deep, screaming red, framed the face, falling in haphazard locks over his surprisingly wide, well-developed shoulders. The striking color had to be real as Polyjuice imitated a person's natural state. It didn't mimic artificial coloring.

His eyes were drawn downward, to the heavy pair of breasts hanging from his chest. Still braced against the sink, he brought his small hands up, hefting them in his palms, the skin pale in comparison. He felt the pressure in his shoulders and back lift immediately, gaining sudden insight into the practical purpose of brassieres. He estimated that each one weighed approximately 1.5 kilos. *Sweet Merlin! How does the woman deal with this constant strain? I imagine she is seldom without a bra.*

Unable to resist, he gave the globes an experimental squeeze, liking the way that felt, a slight tingling beginning in his chest. He gently released them, his eyes moving from the mirror to his actual flesh as he teased both nipples between thumbs and forefingers. *Oh, yes.* He applied a bit more pressure, twisting the peaked nubs, burning bolts shooting down to pool within his lower abdomen. *Just like that...*

He snatched his hands away suddenly, cheeks beginning to flame as he registered what he had been about. *Calm down. The purpose of this exercise is to learn something about this mystery woman Albus has seen fit to saddle you with, not play with yourself,* he staunchly reminded himself. *Plenty of time for that later.* Inhaling a deep breath, he went back to examining the female's form.

Around her right areola, he noticed a curved scar. Tracing it lightly, he wondered about it. It resembled a Muggle surgical scar. Looking between his breasts, he noticed something beneath them. Again hefting the globes, he looked to the mirror, taking in the reflected image of a tattoo. The overall shape was an inverted, curved "V," the point nestling between the breasts, the arms of the design arcing beneath. The center contained two green swirls that he recognized. *It's the zodiac symbol for Cancer. The rest of it is merely embellishment.*

The chest arched down to a nice, smallish waist before curving out to rounded hips, balancing out the torso in an hourglass shape. Sliding his hands down his body, he could feel hard, toned muscle beneath a nice layer of insulation. Her body wasn't fat, nor was it thin. She clearly led an active lifestyle and took care of herself.

He pushed off from the sink, staring into the mirror at a two-centimeter long, crescent-shaped mark above the navel, which was an "innie." *I wonder what caused that.* His gaze dropped further, to her/his utterly denuded genitals. If he looked close, he could see a faint, red, triangular-shaped shadowing beneath the surface. Tearing his eyes away, he flexed the heavily-muscled thighs, impressed at the defined lines that emerged. The calves were as well defined, but tapered nicely down to thin ankles and smallish feet.

He turned on the balls of his feet, almost toppling due to his altered center of balance, to present his/her backside to the mirror. *Nice arse.* Reaching up, he swept her hair over one shoulder, head turned to look over the other. So situated, he discovered more designs etched into the skin. A leaping dolphin was on the far side of the left shoulder. A stylized archer with a drawn bow was set on the opposite shoulder. He caught his breath as he took in the final image.

In the center, at the base of the neck, spread across the tops of her shoulders, was a silhouette of a large bird that could have been a raven, done in shades of black and grey, wings extended, with ghostly, human eyes set into the wings. The apparent coincidence disturbed him more than a little bit. Around the beak, done in dark red, were three characters that looked to be Asian. *What are the odds?* A shiver passed through him. He shook it off, annoyed by his sudden superstitiousness. He let his/her hair drop back, again covering the image, and pivoted around, less awkwardly this time.

Taking in the whole of his/her appearance, he found the overall effect to his liking. Her body was well-maintained and at the peak of health. *Albus, Albus, Albus. Why do I have the nagging feeling you planned for this woman to be more than just an information conduit?* His/her hands smoothed over the curves and planes of his/her skin, appreciating how the tan hid her flaws from all but the most scrutinizing of gazes, the unmistakable areas of lighter skin betraying her choice of sun-bathing attire: a competition-cut two-piece swimsuit.

Severus had no way of knowing he was looking at Shaluinn Callaway as she had been five years prior.

As soon as she turned the corner, away from Krum, the redhead slumped against the nearest wall, sliding down to her knees, the tremors shaking her making it impossible to walk. The fastest way to her rooms was back down the corridor she'd just exited. She needed to get back to the stairwell and wait for a staircase leading up to the next floor to shift into place. It was that or attempt a roundabout circuit. With her current state as it was, that simply was not feasible.

Steeling herself, Shaluinn rose to her feet, keeping in contact with the wall. The cold stone supporting her, she silently made her way back, peeking carefully around the corner. She released a held breath with a whoosh as she saw that it was empty, the Bulgarian having vacated the area.

She staggered down the corridor, halting at the stairwell, waiting for an upward leading staircase to slide over. Luck finally seemed to be on her side as it wasn't long before one ground into place. Fortune had really smiled on her in that moment as this set of stairs led up not one, but two levels, an almost direct path to her rooms.

Elated, Callaway hurried up the stone steps, making it to her office in record time. Well, fast for someone who couldn't stop shaking. She moved through the wards around her office, feeling them reset as she passed. She actually walked into the wall hiding the entrance to her private rooms on her first attempt, she was trembling so badly.

Gaining control of herself long enough to utter aloud the incantation that would allow her to pass through the portal without actually opening it, she fell rather than walked through, crumpling to the floor in a tangle of limbs. Her body convulsed violently, the redhead unable to regain control. Finally, mercifully, she blacked out, her frame still twitching in its unconsciousness.

That was how McGonagall found her, some time later.

Severus' excellent time-sense told him he had approximately half an hour left in his altered, female form. It was wrong, so wrong, but he had every intention of *exploring* his metamorphed flesh. *She will never know what I was about. If I understood correctly, Albus never told her who I was to approach her Polyjuiced as.* He smirked at his feminine reflection, liking the way the expression looked on her/his face. Her features were definitely suited to their own variant of his trademark expressions.

He dipped her/his chin, gazing at the mirror image looking back from under pale lashes that were longer than they appeared. The resultant effect of the twist of her lips was an expression both smoldering and sultry, the flashing of her green eyes only adding to the effect. He felt an odd tingling in his abdomen that radiated outward, a flash of warmth surging through him. *Hmmm...* Her tongue flicked out to enticingly trace his upper lip. *Oh, yes. I do believe I shall thoroughly enjoy this.*

Male arousal is largely based on visual stimulation. And Severus, more in tune with his own triggers and proclivities than the average man, knew just how to excite himself. He teased his very male mind with the vision of his currently very female form. In a perverse, roundabout way, he was indulging in mutual masturbation, *his* mind, *her* body.

But this experience was somewhat different. It was a form of masturbation, but wasn't. He was touching himself, but wasn't. He was touching him *as* her; it was totally and utterly alien, as well as enlightening. *Why did I never think to try something like this before? Oh, Albus, I do believe you were the more perverse of the two of us. Why else*

would you give me enough Polyjuice for more than one hour?

He slid her hands over the curves and planes of his/her body, caressing, sensitizing, and inflaming his nerves. His eyes fell half-closed, a low moan escaping her lips. His left hand slid up from her abdomen to cup her left breast, kneading the heavy globe. His thumb crept up to flick roughly at the dusky nipple, bringing it swiftly to attention.

Yesssssss... Another moan whispered from his mouth, dredged from the depths of his abdomen. He spread her feet, his right hand delving between her thighs to trace the contours of her denuded folds with short-nailed fingertips.

A detached part of his mind observed how his female body was much slower to arouse than its male counterpart. It was something he had always been aware of when pleasing a woman, but experiencing pleasure from the other side firsthand was quite another thing entirely. A part of his brain catalogued and sorted the sensations and experience, carefully shelving them for later examination.

A slight tremor ran through him as he grazed her clit lightly with a fingernail, the sensation exquisite. A feeling of imminent muscle failure in her legs caught his attention as he increased the pressure on that point, moisture coating his fingertips. *Suddenly, I understand the concept of "going weak in the knees." I think I should continue this exploration on the bed before my legs give way.*

He retrieved his wand and strode, alright, *attempted* to stride, to his bed. An uncharacteristic giddiness enveloped him, urging him to jump onto the mattress, giggling as he bounced for a moment. He shivered suddenly and calmed, confusion painted across her features. *What the hell was THAT?* In an expression that would have been utterly ridiculous on his own features, his mouth dropped open as he experienced an odd epiphany of sorts.

Clinically, I've always known that female mood swings were hormonally based, resulting in an emotion manifestation. But I never, ever thought they could ebb and rise so quickly! Nor that they could be so utterly, virtually impossible to resist! With instant, crystal clarity, he comprehended an incredible gamut of impulsive behavior he'd witnessed over the intervening years. *It all suddenly makes a very twisted kind of sense.*

Something else struck him, every bit as astounding as his last revelation. *Sweet Merlin, the kind of emotional fortitude a woman must have to be able to actually control these impulses... Suddenly, I have so much more respect for the restraint I have witnessed Minerva wielding on numerous occasions. I have no doubt these impulses run the entire gamut of one's emotional range and is not limited to giddy fits. No wonder teenaged girls tend to burst into tears or laugh inappropriately with no provocation whatsoever.*

With a shake of his red-haired head, Snape came back to himself, aware that the time he had left in this altered form was swiftly running away from him. Recognizing the limitations of his current situation, yet still being of a male mind, desiring visual stimulation, he dropped onto his back on the mattress and flicked his wand at the ceiling, conjuring a mirror there.

Impatiently flinging the length of ebony away from him, he brought his knowledge of the female form to bear on his altered body. He caressed her curves roughly, further excited by the way her/his body reacted to the attention. He watched himself in the mirror, writhing on the mattress, desire swiftly kindling to a feverish pitch.

Left hand alternating caresses between breasts, his right hand slid between his wet folds, moving front to back, coating his nether lips. His gaze hooded, he watched his reflection pleasing her, pleasing him. He slipped her middle finger into his sodden passage, thumb circling his clit. A louder moan erupting from his chest, he added a second, and then third digit, pumping hard as he sought out that spongy mass at the front of her channel.

He arched up from the bed, his cries rising to a shrieking level as he found that *spot* and pressed against it in small circles, applying the same motions to his clit. At first, it felt like he needed to urinate, but swiftly changed. He was close... so close... A heat, almost a burning feeling, was building in his abdomen. It closely resembled the sensation of riding the crest of a wave, as he'd done on one rare trip to the beach in his childhood. That swelling, rising sensation was as near as he could come to describing what he was feeling.

He pushed her form higher, and higher still, tiny beads of perspiration forming along his/her hairline with the exertion. The need to reach the top of that ocean swell was nearly unbearable, her entire body as taut and arched as a bowstring. A keening cry burst forth from between his clenched teeth as that swell broke, her body cumming in great convulsing shudders. Her channel clamped down on his still-circling digits, stilling the ones inside, hot fluid coating his hand, his thumb still moving on her clit, albeit with less coordination.

His body fell back to the bed, chest heaving, thighs twitching uncontrollably as he withdrew her fingers, gentling the movements of his thumb, drawing out the sensations. Suddenly his frame was wracked by convulsions of a sort that he was more familiar with. Hands twisting in the linens, he rose out the discomfort. *Just in time.* His sheets were once again soiled with fluids as *she* once again became a *he*.

Snape lifted his musk-dampened fingers to his lips, tongue darting out for a taste. *Oh, sweet Nimue. There is nothing like the flavor of a woman's juices. But the question remains: Am I tasting myself as a woman, or how she actually tastes? This bears further research. If I can get her to agree. Hmmm. This could make our interactions a bit... interesting.*

Unbelievably satiated from a Polyjuiced orgasm and worn out from his Animagus exercises, the wizard let his body go limp against the mattress, and not bothering to realign his form, feet hanging off the end of the bed. His eyes drifted shut, and several deep breaths later, he fell asleep.

Minerva dismissed Viktor Krum with a promise to owl him by the end of the week with her decision. The former Triwizard Tournament Champion for Durmstrang was the front-runner for the Defense Against the Dark Arts position Snape had left vacant. Ironically, the former Potions professor had fallen victim to the same curse that had plagued the DADA post for almost twenty years, only keeping the position for a year.

That irony did nothing to alleviate the Headmistress' anxiety. Krum was definitely qualified for the post, having graduated from Durmstrang, an institution notorious for a curriculum that leaned heavily toward the Dark Arts. In fact, it was the only subject the former Seeker had earned an "O" in when he took his N.E.W.T.s. The young man was familiar with Hogwarts from his time there during the Tournament, and she was tempted to just give him the position and be done with it.

But McGonagall refused to make another hasty decision, like she had with Callaway. Never mind that Albus had already completed and filed all the requisite paperwork to create the new position and had even been granted the Board of Governors' approval of his choice in instructors. *She* was responsible for the school now and should have been a bit more discerning and a little less accepting. Albus' judgment was suspect; his murder at the wand of a man the former Headmaster had trusted totally was more than ample proof of that.

She had only one other applicant left to interview, that meeting scheduled for the day after Fleur and Bill's wedding. Kathleen Frejne, a witch of American birth, was arriving all the way from the Forbidden University, located somewhere near the capitol of the Republic of China. The woman's references were impeccable, including time spent as an American Auror. She was definitely a contender, at least on parchment.

Elbow resting against the top of her desk, Minerva pinched the bridge of her nose in a gesture reminiscent of Snape, willing back an impending headache. She lifted her head as a flash of green by the hearth caught the edge of her peripheral vision. As she watched, three bodies tumbled out of the fireplace.

Harry, Hermione and Ron lined up in front of her desk, the black-haired young man speaking for the group, his voice utterly serious. "Professor, we're here to speak with Professor Dumbledore's portrait."

Minerva merely nodded.

"Alone."

A long-suffering sigh escaped her lips as she stood. She had no intention of refusing them such a request. After all, the fate of the wizarding world rested squarely on the shoulders of the lightning-scarred young man before her. "I suppose now is as good a time as any for me to visit with Professor Callaway and see how she is settling in." The trio parted as she swept past them, pausing and turning back, only when she reached the entrance.

"Take as much time as you need. I find I'm becoming rather accustomed to being expelled from my office." She let a hint of annoyance enter her voice. She resolutely ignored Granger and Weasley's gobsnacked expressions, her comment directed at a grim-faced Potter. "You may wish to dismiss the other Headmasters and mistresses as well. I shall be on the sixth floor when you are through." With that, she turned and left the Trio to their task.

Minerva made her way to Callaway's rooms, letting herself in when the redhead failed to answer her knocks. The redhead's wards had apparently been set to allow her unrestricted access to the office. She balked for several moments as she took in the wide array of spells blocking the entrance to the UD professor's private rooms.

When the American did not appear after several minutes that seemed to stretch into hours, Minerva whipped out her wand and began systematically dismantling the wards, a growing sense of unease impelling her on. Her hand was a veritable blur as she breached the last layer of protections and tapped out the opening sequence on the stone wall. She stepped through the portal and stumbled over the prone form lying just inside.

"Oh, dear heavens!" The elder witch knelt by Shaluinn's side and paused, taking in the redhead's disturbing appearance.

Deep, dark circles swept beneath the younger witch's closed eyes, her skin positively ashen and mottled with bruises, cheekbones prominently displayed in her gaunt face. Most disturbing were the unhealed, blackened handprints that wrapped around her throat. The departure from her previous appearance was decidedly unnerving.

Shaking herself, Minerva pointed her wand at the redhead. "*Ennervate!*"

The American's eyes flew open at the same time as a massive cramp wrapped itself around her midsection, curling her body in around itself, a moan tearing loose from her chest. Her entire body shook for several long moments before going deathly still.

"Shaluinn! Oh, child, what happened?" The Transfiguration mistress put her hand lightly to the side of the redhead's face, drawing the younger witch's eyes to hers. "Who did this?"

Callaway opened her mouth to speak, only to snap it shut as another series of tremors passed through her.

"I'm taking you to Poppy." Minerva moved to stand, only to have her ascent halted by a hand snaking out to grasp her wand-wrist.

"NO! No doctors!" Shaluinn gasped out hoarsely.

McGonagall dropped back to the redhead's side, taken aback. "But, why not?"

"Cold. Need. Hot. Bath," the redhead ground out between shudders.

"But..."

"Please..." the American whispered, tears rising visibly in her eyes.

"Alright." It was the please that did it. "*Mobilicorpus!*" Against her better judgment, Minerva levitated the woman, directing her back through the bedroom and into the loo.

With an outward calmness she did not feel, McGonagall drew a deep, steaming bath. She charmed the clothes off the redhead's body and let out a strangled sound, viewing for the first time the totality of the damage wrought upon the younger witch's body. She just barely maintained her concentration, as her eyes ran over the gaunt, battered, nude form of her Unwanded Defense professor.

Wand-hand shaking, she directed Shaluinn's body into the waiting water, canceling the spell with a voice-quivering, "*Finite Incantatem!*"

Released from the spells, Callaway's hands flew up to clutch reflexively at the sides of the bathtub, her watering eyes locking onto the Headmistress', another tremor shaking her body as the heat of the water seeped into her chilled body. She let out a held breath as the quaking subsided, tearing her gaze from McGonagall's. *How the fuck am I gonna explain this?*

The hot water was helping, Shaluinn's body quickly relaxing into the curves of the tub, her hands sliding down to rest against her thighs. A weary sigh escaped her lips before she lifted her eyes to find the elder witch had perched herself on the edge of the tub and was clearly awaiting an explanation.

"Start talking."

Immersed up to her shoulders, Callaway drew her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them protectively. "What do you want to know?"

Minerva merely arched one thin brow and looked pointedly at the redhead's neck.

Shaluinn sighed again. "Okay, duh. Obviously my glamour failed when I blacked out." She looked up at the Headmistress. *Okay, that clearly isn't going to be enough of an explanation for her. Fuck. Way to go, Shaluinn. I probably should confide in someone. Granted, it's not like I have a whole lot of choice in the matter now.*

She didn't want to do this, didn't want to discuss this. She'd been so careful, so thorough in hiding her illness, never confiding in anyone other than the Muggle and wizard doctors who'd attempted to cure her. It had already been too late. *And like an utter idiot I let my anger get the best of me and I did something stupid. I should have thought to cast an Impervious Charm on myself at the very least. This could have been avoided had I not let myself get so thoroughly distracted. Some spy I turned out to be.* Mustering what little was left of her dignity, she decided to go with utter honesty.

"I have leukemia."

TBC...

A/N: A HUGE thank you to everyone who has reviewed so far. Thank you for sticking with me and putting up with my "odd" whims.

Kim's "That can't be good" comment in the disclaimer is dedicated to my dear friend Cathy, who takes every opportunity to taunt and ridicule me for fancying Snape. That and the fact I killed her namesake character off.

One of the fundamental riddles of modern Newtonian Physics is that of the immovable object meeting the irresistible force, and what the potential result might be. Sorry, I am a science nut and just had to throw in some science-based humor.

The idea for Shaluinn's central back tattoo is taken from a graphic created for the movie *The Crow*. If you want to see what it looks like, follow this link: <http://h1.ripway.com/Shanastay/crow2.jpg>

The character of Kathleen Frejne (pronounced Fray-nyah) appears with the permission of her creator, LadyoftheMasque from her fic *For Someone Special*. Thank you to Lotm for allowing me to borrow her for a short time.

Unwanted Attention

Chapter 15 of 18

Callaway and McGonagall talk. The American is still hiding things. Severus passes out.

Disclaimer: (In the spirit of Crimson Starlight)

Shana: *on cell phone again, this time on speaker*

Snape: *around the corner eavesdropping*

Serenity: *from speaker-cell phone* What The Fuck did Snape do with my twins??? He better not leave any lasting effects, mentally or physically, or he will have ME to deal with! You just tell him I said that!

Shana: Well, whenever he reappears I will warn him that you're out for his scalp.

Serenity: Tell him I'll first freeze his ass, then lock him in a transparent gilded cage with an Anti-Apparition Spell firmly attached and put him on display in only a thong in the middle of rush hour traffic down here.

Snape: *still hiding, winces*

Shana: *shudders* Damn, girl.

Serenity: *incoherent screaming*

Kim: *shiver* I really don't want to know what ol' Sevvy-kins did to those elves.

Shana: Must be bad if she's tweaking like this.

POP!

Kim: I think we can take that to mean our boy is aware he fucked with the wrong witch.

Shana: And I thought my mom was vicious.

Kim: One word: Chaps.

Shana: Chaps?

Kim: Chaps.

Serenity: *stops screaming* Chaps?

Shana: *glares* You *would* think about that at a time like this.

Kim: *grinning like a fool*

Serenity: Oy! Somebody gonna clue me in here?

Chapter 15: Unwanted Attention

McGonagall's expression was disconcertingly blank. The enlightenment Shaluinn was expecting wasn't there. *This just gets better and better.*

"Obviously cancer is not a well known disease in the wizarding world," she muttered.

"Cancer... I've heard of this, but I confess I don't know much about it," Minerva admitted. "You've been wearing a glamour." It was a statement, not a question.

Shaluinn nodded. "Cancer is caused by the cells within a body mutating and replicating abnormally. The particular type of cancer I have, leukemia, is in my blood."

Minerva inhaled an audible gasp, her eyes wide.

Callaway's voice was a flat monotone, like she was lecturing on some utterly boring topic. "My blood itself is mutating, the diseased cells replicating. My immune system is compromised. I don't recover from injuries and illness as I would normally. I'm dying."

"I don't pretend to understand what you just told me, other than you're dying. Is there no treatment, no cure for this disease, child? Not even potions?"

"Not at the stage I'm at. The disease was too far advanced by the time I was diagnosed for any treatment to have an effect. I'm taking several potions that have slowed down the disease, giving me maybe another year to live. But there's nothing that will stop it. I only found out six months ago, and by then it had metastasized."

The Headmistress gestured inarticulately at the marks on Shaluinn's neck.

"One of the symptoms of leukemia is bruising of the skin and injuries that don't heal properly. The marks you see are quite old," she responded evasively, not referring to the bruises on her neck.

McGonagall looked like she wanted to ask more, but held her tongue.

"Minerva..." Shaluinn started and stopped, her hesitance evident in her voice and slumped posture. "I don't want anyone to know about this. That's why I've hidden it, why I wear a glamour, why I don't want to be seen by Madam Pomfrey. I don't want anyone to know," she reiterated. "I'm here to help. And everyone knowing about this..." She gestured at herself. "...will not help anyone. Please, I'm asking you to keep my secret. Please."

What happened to you, child, that has you so spooked you clearly cannot, dare not, trust others? I've only observed this level of paranoia in one other... Best not to think on that. She needs to trust someone, and I seem to be that someone. McGonagall sighed loudly and deftly avoided the issue for the moment. "What happened today? Why did I find you like that?"

Shaluinn looked away, shame flushing her face. "I was stupid. I was upset and went outside to shoot my bow for a while and hopefully calm down. That worked, but I idiotically neglected to cast an Impervious Charm on myself. In my compromised state, getting soaked to the skin made me susceptible to a debilitating chill that sent me into convulsions. I'm as stubborn as ever, but my body just can't keep up. I know I should be more careful. I'm sorry you found me like you did. But thank you for helping me and not taking me to the Infirmary."

"Are you feeling better? You don't appear to be shaking anymore."

"Much. I can't maintain homeostasis as easily as I used to."

Minerva looked confused again.

"Homeostasis is the body's ability to regulate a constant internal temperature. With a compromised immune system, my body has difficulties fighting off illness and regulating normal functions. Don't worry. The likelihood of me dropping dead on you in the near future is slim to none, barring someone killing me."

"That's a comforting thought," McGonagall groused lightly.

Shaluinn had turned herself, knees still drawn up to her chest, so that she faced the Headmistress, one hand reflexively clutching the side of the tub. Desperately needing reassurance, she steered the conversation back to her deception. "Minerva, please, I need to know that you will not speak of this to anyone. Albus, and now you, are the only two people who know, and I wish to keep it that way. Please."

The elder witch studied the younger woman for a moment, taking in the open look of desperation on Callaway's face. *I still have reservations about this, but I have to have faith that Albus knew what he was about.* She sighed, resigned to a decision she was not very comfortable with. "Yes, I will keep your secret. But I don't have to like it."

Callaway smiled, only one corner of her mouth turning up slightly. "No, you don't have to like it. But I thank you."

"Oh, child. It'll be alright." Minerva reached out to pat the hand Shaluinn clasped the side of the bathtub with. She startled when the younger witch snatched the hand away before McGonagall could touch it. *She is still hiding things from me. No matter. We have made a start. I shall pry the rest of it from her later.*

The Headmistress' suspicions were well founded. Callaway was hiding other things from the elder witch, and they did not include the whole "Snape thing."

Why are people always trying to touch me? Do they not understand...? Shaluinn took a long, calming breath. Of course they don't. Not unless I tell them. Why the hell did I have to inherit the single most recessive trait on my biological father's side? Mom had to have had it somewhere down the line on her side too, waaaaay back. Some gift. It's more like a curse. At least I can thank the gods that mine requires skin-to-skin contact for it to work. I can't imagine how horrible it would be to have to deal with this from a distance. And everyone always wondered why I preferred to wear long-sleeves all the time.

The redhead lifted her left hand and spoke clearly, so McGonagall wouldn't be startled. "*Accio green leukemia potion.*" A clear phial filled with bright green fluid soared into the room and smacked into her hand. The American downed the liquid in one swallow, grimacing at the taste.

"I will give you a bit of privacy, my dear. I'll be waiting out in the main room for you. I do believe we still have yet to set your rooms to rights." Minerva stood and swept out of the room.

Shaluinn let her head fall back against the wall of the enclosure with a soft thump. She closed her eyes and released the breath she'd inadvertently been holding. *Great. Just great. Well, there's nothing for it, so I might as well get dressed and get my ass out there.* The redhead moved carefully, drying herself off and moving to the bedroom where she swiftly dressed in fresh clothes. Glamour back in place, and skin thoroughly covered, she padded into the salon on stocking feet.

The Headmistress frowned slightly when she saw that Callaway had re-erected her concealing glamour, but let it go. Instead, she cast a drying charm on the younger witch's long hair, garnering a rueful smile.

"Now, where would you like to begin?"

On the other side of the country Snape slept on, blissfully unaware of anything other than the thoroughly lurid, gender-bending dreams his unconscious mind was conjuring.

TBC...

A/N: Yes, Shaluinn's got *another* secret. I have to keep you guessing, now don't I? Thank you to everyone who has reviewed, and to all those who like to lurk. I know I've been guilty of that in my own time. I apologize for how short this chapter is, and the fact that it's late, but I'm hoping that by posting two chapters I can make up for it. I am in the middle of packing up to move cross-country so my updates may be a bit irregular. Be reassured that I actually have the next 4 chapters (after these 2) almost completely done. I have no intention of giving up on this fic.

You Again?

Chapter 16 of 18

Snape pulls another gender-bender... with a twist! Callaway has a "run-in" with the Trio.

Disclaimer: (In the spirit of Crimson Starlight)

Kim: I don't know about this.

Shana: Oh, come on!

Kim: No, really.

Shana: I can't try something new?

Kim: Lots of other people do it.

Shana: So?

Kim: I thought you wanted to be unique.

roaring laughter heard from next room

Shana: *frowning*

Kim: I think ol' Sevvv agrees with me.

Shana: *glares*

Snape: *laughing his ass off in the next room over the latest issue of *Potions Monthly*, utterly oblivious of the conversation he has inadvertently become a part of*

Kim: I solemnly swear that Shanastay is up to no good. Anything recognizable is Rowling's. The rest of it is Shana's. She doesn't get compensated in any meaningful way for any of this.

Shana: Hey! Reviews are a meaningful form of compensation!

Kim: So says you.

Shana: *glares*

Formula

Poetry should treat

Of lofty things

Soaring thoughts

And birds with wings.

The Muse of Poetry

Should not know

That roses

In manure grow.

The Muse of Poetry

Should not care

That earthly pain

Is everywhere.

Poetry!

Treats of lofty things:

Soaring thoughts

And birds with wings.

-Langston Hughes 1926

Chapter 16: You Again?

Severus was covered in perspiration, muscles tensing alternately in sympathy to the dream he was caught up in. If the sounds emerging from his slightly parted lips, the rapid movement of his eyes behind closed lids, and the turgid erection jutting up from his hips were any indication, it was a highly explicit dream.

Snape found himself slammed up against his bedroom wall next to the open doorway, a tall, lean form trapping him there as it dropped its head to capture his lips in a demanding kiss. His breasts crushed between them, the Potions master realized with a start that he was again wearing the redhead's body. Long, thin-fingered hands seemed to be everywhere, touching, mapping the curves of his altered body. That metamorphosed form literally hummed underneath the aggressor's palms, and with a moan, he realized he was responding with gusto.

Eyes wide, Severus tried to examine the face of his dominator at close range, receiving yet another shock. A very prominent nose hindered his view. The Polyjuiced Severus Snape was being ravished by a very male Severus Snape. *Dream. It has to be a dream. But oh, MERLIN, what a dream!* Secure in that realization, he gave himself over to the reactions his doppelganger was evincing in him.

Severus would have melted into a puddle on the floor, had his double not been holding him up. Snape, as he decided he would think of his double, had relinquished his mouth and moved down over the curve of his/herthroat and latched onto his/her skin at the juncture of neck and shoulder, marking him/her. It was *exactly* what Severus would have done, and thus all the more erotic. This being a dream, this doppelganger very much *was* him.

Snape insinuated a hand between Severus' legs, circling his sensitive nub with practiced movements. Severus *did* lose the ability to stand at that, Snape deftly catching him about the backs of the thighs and lifting him up, still pressing him/her back against the wall, lips resuming their attack on his/her mouth. Severus responded by wrapping his legs tightly around his waist, Snape answering with a reverberating growl into their joined mouths.

The redhead's body was responding to Snape's ministrations, his/her thighs already slick with wetness. Severus was unaccustomed to being dominated, but found that, in this body, he was most definitely enjoying it. By circling Snape's waist with his/her legs, he discovered the head of his doppelganger's arousal teasing at his/her entrance. Moved by a momentary need to reassert his dominance, Severus caught Snape's bottom lip between his teeth and bit down just hard enough to cause a momentary flash of pain, knowing full well how his duplicate would react.

Snape acted just as Severus anticipated, responding with a feral snarl and shift of his hips that slammed his swollen length home in his/her sodden depths. He wasted no time and began thrusting in earnest, pounding Severus into the wall.

Severus keened loudly as his body was invaded, his/her fingernails excising grooves in Snape's back. *OH, SWEET NIMUE!!! I had no idea it could feel like this! Oh, MERLIN!* All semblance of coherence fled as Snape sank his teeth into his/her shoulder and soundly fucked Severus against the wall. The doppelganger was harsh and demanding, holding nothing back. Severus writhed in his arms, increasing the friction between them, screaming with every invasion, egging the duplicate on with cries of "HARDER!"

Snape responded with alacrity, shouting as his hips impacted her thighs. "CUM. FOR. ME. NOW!"

Severus did exactly as he was ordered, coming undone with a howl that shook the rafters, and saw stars, nearly knocking himself out as he threw his head back against the wall in ecstasy. His/her entire body was wracked by convulsions as an extremely powerful orgasm washed over him/her.

Snape screamed in counterpoint as the sensations of her body contracting around him brought on his own climax. He spent himself in her depths, cumming in hot, spurting jets that triggered a secondary orgasm in Severus.

Just as the first wave began to recede, Severus was caught unawares for a second as Snape reached his own culmination. Severus wasn't capable of even the most simple of coherent thoughts as stars exploded behind his eyelids, his very skin seeming to catch fire as nerve endings fired simultaneously. He had no basis of comparison for the utterly unfamiliar sensations overwhelming him and was lost in the feelings.

Maintaining their connection, Snape slid down until he was kneeling, his backside resting against his heels, the redhead held carefully in his arms. The doppelganger began showering feather-light kisses over Severus' face before capturing his/her lips in a sweet kiss suffused with emotion. Snape released his/her mouth to bury his face in the tangled mass of his/her hair, breathing deeply of their mingled scents.

"I love you."

The whispered declaration brought Severus out of his lust-fogged state. He stiffened in his duplicate's arms as he realized what those three words actually meant. Something about the way doppel-Snape said them made him think that this wasn't a simple dream-induced declaration of narcissistic self-love. No, his male self was apparently whispering to the woman whose form he currently inhabited.

What the...

"...hell?" Severus sat bolt upright on his bed, mutely taking in his surroundings, wondering that it had indeed been a dream. *What the bloody, ruddy hell is going on here? That is the second... Oh, Merlin. That was the second dream I've had involving her. That pitch-black dream from last night... That had to be her too. But how? Today was the first time I saw what she looked like. How could I have been dreaming about fucking someone I'd never even seen, let alone met? Shite. Shite. Shite!*

Dropping back onto the bed with a thump, the Potions master suddenly became aware of the fact that he had, yet again, made a mess of himself. He wearily murmured, "*Evanescor!*" and closed his eyes. *Sweet Nimue, I haven't been this randy since I was a teenager. This is a very strange way for stress to affect me.*

That was the last thought to pass his conscious mind before he dropped off into a--thankfully--dreamless sleep.

Shaluinn and Minerva passed a relatively quiet afternoon, organizing and decorating the redhead's rooms. Every time the American encountered difficulties, McGonagall would demonstrate the proper spell and then immediately reverse it so her student could practice. The younger witch proved to be a quick study, remembering much from her long-ago school years. Only a couple times did she need more than two attempts to achieve the desired result.

After a couple of hours had passed, the Headmistress suggested that they take a break for afternoon tea. Minerva Floop'd the kitchens and Dobby himself arrived shortly, bearing a fully complimented tea service. The house-elf removed the remains of the platter he had brought Shaluinn the previous night, the tea tray replacing it on the table. He grinned up at the redhead, who had managed to almost clean the platter during the course of decorating, before snapping his fingers and disappearing.

No sooner had the duo sat down before the hearth than a piercing shriek began sounding in the room. Minerva shot to her feet, wand at the ready, pivoting in a circle to find the threat. She frowned as Shaluinn waved a hand and the noise ceased. Before she had a chance to ask, the redhead preempted her question.

"That was my early-warning alert. Someone is trying to gain unauthorized access to my office." The American again anticipated the Headmistress' question, speaking matter-of-factly as she rose and strode to the portal separating the rooms. "I set my wards to allow you unrestricted access to that room. An alarm only sounds if you try to get into my private suite. You didn't set it off when you found me earlier as I had not the opportunity to reset the wards after passing through." With that, Shaluinn waved her right hand and stepped through the wall.

McGonagall followed quickly to find a rather disturbing tableau unfolding before her. It was the last thing she had expected to see.

"... did you do to Hermione!?" Harry was yelling at the UD professor.

The American was on her knees in the doorway to the corridor, facing down the business end of Potter's wand. As the elder witch darted forward with a speed that belied her age, she saw that Callaway's right arm was cradled against her stomach, streaks of red visible where the redhead's sleeve had been sliced open. The redhead's state already delicate, Minerva knew that beneath the concealing glamour Shaluinn had to be turning a sickly shade of white. To the younger witch's credit, she had her left wand out and had apparently managed to throw up a shield.

"Mr. Potter! What is the meaning of this? Explain yourself!" the Headmistress hissed. Beyond the messy-haired Boy-Who-Lived, she could now make out the prone form of Hermione Granger being shaken by a very distraught Ron Weasley.

His eyes and wand still pointed at Callaway, Harry answered. "She did something to Hermione! We can't wake her up!"

Minerva's lips tightened down into a thin line as she noticed Shaluinn's remaining good arm beginning to shake and drop, the American's eyes taking on a slightly glazed look.

"Did you try *Enervate* several times?" The harsh whisper came from the witch on the floor, just as the male redhead in the corridor performed that very spell, for what must have been the third time. The prone brunette immediately popped up to a sitting position.

Potter glanced over his shoulder and, spotting his friend climbing to her feet apparently unharmed, dropped his wand. "Oh," was all that came out of his mouth.

McGonagall glared. "Since when do you hex first and ask questions later? Professor Dumbledore recruited Miss Callaway to *help* you!" The elder witch knelt by the redhead's side, the younger witch now slumped against the doorframe.

Granger and Weasley now bracketed Harry in the doorway. The Self-Centered-Brat-Who-Managed-To-Survive-Everything-So-Far had firmed his jaw, a slightly irrational light gleaming in his eyes. "Since Snape killed Professor Dumbledore."

"Point," Shaluinn conceded in a ragged whisper.

"Point or not, you can't just go around randomly hexing your allies!" Minerva scolded the young man, her brogue manifesting itself, as she healed the long cut the boy had inflicted on the redhead in his agitated state. Looking back up at him, she asked, "Were you not satisfied with whatever Professor Dumbledore's portrait had to say?"

Granger answered, her response deliberately evasive. "No, Professor McGonagall. Professor Dumbledore was actually rather... informative. We were just coming to let you know we were leaving and to set up a time to meet with Professor Callaway."

The American let her head fall back against the doorframe and cut loose with the string of expletives she'd been holding back. "Idiotas! Vete a la mierda you fugly speds." She followed that with a thoroughly creative curse in Japanese.

"Huh?" Weasley interjected. The entire group looked confused.

"That first part sounded like Spanish," Granger observed, frowning. "I think the rest was some Asian language."

"Just be glad I opted not to say that in English. Granted, you probably wouldn't understand American cursing anyway," Shaluinn grouched. Spotting the look on Hermione's face, she added, "If you don't get it, I'm not explaining it. Not today anyway."

McGonagall tried to help Callaway to her feet, only to be waved off. The younger professor stood shakily. The redhead then faced off with Granger, arms crossed over her chest, ignoring the other two. "Ever heard of knocking, honey? Even in the wizarding world, it's common courtesy. Evidently you decided to try dismantling my wards first and knocking second. Or maybe you didn't even consider knocking. And to think, I've been accused of having bad manners."

Weasley had the grace to look abashed, averting his gaze from the irritated American. Potter, unsurprisingly, was glaring defiantly. The female third of the Trio seemed to be doing her best impression of a fish, her mouth gaping before she closed it with an audible click.

"But I do have to thank you for proving my theory correct. As for meeting with me, anytime the day after tomorrow should be fine. I'm sure you all will be attending the wedding the Headmistress mentioned to me. We can discuss whatever you wish then. Just be sure to knock this time."

The UD professor was clearly dismissing them, but Hermione had latched onto the word "theory" and just couldn't hold back her question. "What theory did I prove?"

"I have a feeling you won't let this go without some kind of answer, so I'll give you the short version. I've been experimenting with embedding modified incapacitating hexes in my wards. Be glad you didn't set off one of the nastier spells. You must have attempted an advanced-level textbook Dismantling Charm to have triggered the *Stupefy* that hit you," Shaluinn explained.

"I did. Your wards seemed so simple, I thought I could break them," Granger admitted, only slightly chagrined.

"In your rush to see if you could, you neglected to ask yourself if you should. Such has been the source of much agonizing in both the Muggle and Wizarding worlds. Doing something just to see if you can, without considering the potential ramifications if you succeed, is a folly of the highest order." Callaway seemed about to add something else, but instead asked a question.

"Are any of you three Muggle-born?"

"I am," Hermione admitted.

"I was raised by Muggles," Harry added.

"Sorry. I'm a Pureblood," Ron said, eyes still averted.

"Ah. Then for you two, I have two words: nuclear weapons."

Both Granger and Potter's eyes widened, the American's point obviously hitting the mark.

"If there's nothing else?" Shaluinn paused. "Then I shall bid you all adieu. Minerva?" The redhead witch deferred to her superior.

McGonagall leveled a stern gaze at the Trio, her eyes resting primarily on Harry. "I have nothing to add... For now. I suggest you run along before I change my mind."

As soon as Minerva stepped back, Shaluinn slammed the door in the youths' startled faces. At McGonagall's raised brow the younger witch admitted, "Yeah, that was childish. But can you really blame me?"

The Headmistress shook her head, a rueful smile emerging. The elder witch turned, waiting for Callaway to precede her back to the redhead's rooms.

Shaluinn wore a chagrined expression as she waved her hand toward the wall. "Do you mind, Minerva? I find I haven't the energy after that altercation."

"Of course, my dear." McGonagall tapped out the sequence and led the way back in.

Once on the other side of the wall, Callaway immediately dropped into her previously vacated chair and called out, "Dobby?"

The elf appeared within seconds of being summoned. He cast his gaze about the room and immediately began wringing his hands. "Yes, Professor? Is the tea not to your liking? Dobby can bring something else..."

Shaluinn cut him off before he could work himself up into a full-blown fit. "The tea is wonderful, Dobby. I summoned you to ask if you would run an errand for me."

The skinny creature nodded his head emphatically. "Dobby can do that, Professor!"

"Would you please retrieve a Blood Replenishing Potion from the Infirmary for me? And don't let Madam Pomfrey catch you," the American added as an afterthought.

"Yes, Professor!" He snapped his fingers and vanished.

"*Accio Rapid Healing Potion!*" Callaway let the phial smack into her chest and drop into her lap, her last bit of energy spent in summoning the bottle. She smiled weakly at the concern etched on Minerva's face. "I'll be alright. I've been through worse and lived to tell the tale. Although, do remind me *not* to piss that particular young man off."

"Why would you want to get him drunk?"

"Crap. I used another 'Americanism' didn't I? I meant that I shouldn't try to anger him. Sorry. I forgot that 'pissed' for you means inebriated, not enraged," Shaluinn apologized.

"Ah."

Dobby reappeared then, forestalling further conversation for the moment, offering her a deep red phial.

"You weren't seen?"

"No, Professor. Dobby was very careful!"

Callaway offered the elf her brightest smile. "Thank you, Dobby. Well done! I will call you when we are done with the tea."

The garishly clad creature grinned back. "Yes, Professor!" With the faintest of pops, he was gone.

The redhead considered the two bottles, deciding to take the Healing Potion first. Her face twisted in a grimace, as neither one had a remotely pleasant taste. Almost immediately feeling much better, she turned her attention back to her guest. "Now, where were we?"

McGonagall couldn't help but shake her head at the way the American seemed to just shake off Potter's assault like it was nothing unusual. Then again, these were uncertain and unusual times they were all living in. Deciding it was best to leave that subject alone, she steered the conversation to other more mundane topics.

The rest of the afternoon was spent in relative quiet. Minerva didn't push Shaluinn with her exercises, but between them, they managed to finish setting the redhead's rooms to rights. The Headmistress finally left for the evening meal with a promise to have something sent up.

Callaway was grateful to finally be left alone, her exhaustion catching up with her. She managed to stay awake long enough to eat--it was more like she just picked at the food--and shower before retreating to the thick duvet she'd insisted be left on the floor of the bedroom. Clad in boxer shorts, a sports bra and a light tank top, she took her bow with her this time. Its limbs matched up perfectly with the black stripes bruised into her skin, the weapon serving as an odd equivalent of a teddy bear.

Through the afternoon and into the night Snape slept on, blissfully unaware of anyone or anything.

TBC...

A/N: I have to lay blame on LadyoftheMasque for conjuring the (maybe) disturbing gender-bending scenes. I had the idea some time ago, and I don't intentionally mean to mimic her ideas, but I must acknowledge her efforts as she *did* do it first. I can only hope that my crack-induced efforts (that's a joke!) are worthy of comparison with hers.

Translation: "*Idiotas! Vete a la mierda you fugly speds.*" "Idiots! Fuck off, you fucking ugly special eds." *Fugly sped* is a term I heard used frequently at the prison I used to work at. It is meant derogatorily. However, I harbor no prejudices against those individuals who suffer from retardation and such. Special education programs are necessary and appropriate for those needing extra help. No offense is intended toward these individuals, and hopefully none is taken.

A HUMONGOUS thank you goes out to my beta, Kim, who was ever so obliging in the fast turnaround on this chapter.

Two Roads Diverged...

Chapter 17 of 18

Shaluinn Callaway, meet Raven-Snape, your new familiar.

A/N: Yes, I know it's been a while, but I hope these two chapters will appease you (for now).

Disclaimer: (Shamelessly stolen from JK Rowling) "I solemnly swear I am up to no good!" (But I don't own the characters of places you recognize, and I don't get paid for any of my efforts. What a damn, crying shame.)

Kim: *huffing* About time!

Shana: *hangs head* I KNOW! I've been kinda busy putting my life back together.

Kim: Yea, that's a valid excuse.

Shana: *indignant* It IS!

Snape: *rolls eyes* Will the drama never cease?

Kim & Shana: *glare at wizard*

Chapter 17: Two Roads Diverged...

"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference."

- Robert Frost 1916

Shaluinn woke up feeling every bit of her progressing illness. It was by sheer force of will that she forced herself to rise from her nest on the floor. She could feel every ache, every pain, and every little bruise throughout her body. *This is shaping up to be a wonderful day, and I haven't even gotten up yet.*

The redhead slowly went stiffly about her morning routine, waiting for the various potions she had imbibed to take effect. As her disease progressed, she had discovered that the efficacy of the healing potions decreased. She was developing a resistance to the medications. The final result had her feeling drained and exhausted, yet still mobile.

Appetite nonexistent, she chose to forego breakfast. Lacking the energy to lift her bow, let alone shoot it, Callaway opted to take a walk around the lake. Letting her mind wander where it willed, she let her feet do the same. She didn't make it very far.

Settling down against a tree, the American cast her gaze out across the large body of water. All too soon, and predictably so, the murky Scottish morning sky opened up, expelling a softly pattering drizzle. This time Shaluinn had the presence of mind to cast an Impervious Charm on herself before she became soaked to the skin. She allowed her eyes to droop shut, lulled by the gentle sounds of raindrops striking the leaves above her and the mere before her.

Severus awoke thoroughly refreshed, feeling as if he had slept for ages. The sensation was... odd.

The Potions master had become accustomed to his insomnia, having taken to patrolling the hallways of Hogwarts in an effort to keep his mind and body occupied. It had been an exercise in futility as the silent halls had only infrequently yielded up the odd, rule-breaking student. The literal miles he had walked over the course of the average night had kept his prematurely aging body in shape but, lamentably, had left his mind all too free to wander where it willed, and where it went was seldom warm and cheery.

Severus sat up on the bed, shaking his head, and with it shaking away the line of thought his mind was heading down. Squinting, he turned his gaze toward the window, taking in the angle of the light. His best estimate was that it was about mid-morning, somewhere between eight and nine o'clock. If he wished to put his plan for the day into motion, he would need to get up and moving.

He allowed himself a moment more to dally, reflecting back on the previous day's events. *Not since I was a teenager have I felt so bloody randy. It had to be stress that brought that on. Irregardless, I've spent enough time musing. Now, I must see about making contact with this mystery woman.* With that, he levered himself out of the bed, a small portion of his mind registering the acute *lack* of aches and pains.

The tall wizard went about his morning routine with haste. As he performed his ablutions, he considered the various options he had for making his way to Hogwarts. Flying the distance in his Animagus form wasn't really a viable option. He needed to be fresh and rested for any confrontation that might result from this meeting. Using an unregistered, unauthorized Portkey was not really an option as he well knew that such mode of transportation was being monitored very closely. No, he would have to arrive at the school by other means.

Apparation it would be then. That left choosing a place that was close to the school, yet concealing enough that his arrival would not be noticed. There was a point well within the confines of the Forbidden Forest that he had used for Apparating while still employed at the school. It would serve its purpose yet again.

Carefully choosing a set of robes that were in the best repair, he dressed. As much as he disliked taking the time to care for his appearance catering to his vanity was not something he had ever been comfortable with he recognized the need to make a good first impression on his contact. Her cooperation was imperative. The unknown witch would quite literally hold his life in the balance. *Damn Albus and his bloody scheming.*

With every button he did up on his customary frock coat, he mentally recited various hexes, curses and protective spells. The ritual was both comforting and reassuring as well as being practical in the sense that it helped him remember an enormous number of spells. He surely hadn't survived as long as he had without being both cautious and proactive.

Standing before the transfigured bathroom door-come-full-length-mirror, he assessed his appearance. The robes were black, and starting to take on a somewhat grayish cast from repeated washing, but they were clean and in good repair. *I am no prize, but this will have to do. Besides, it's not like I'm looking to court this woman.* Nodding to his dubious reflection, somewhat satisfied by what he saw, Snape flicked out his wand and turned the mirror back into its solid wood self.

Having taken quick stock of his appearance, he considered the contents of his bare kitchen. *Damn. Nothing in the house worth eating. Strike that nothing in the house I want to eat. I'll have to catch something "on the fly."* He chuckled lightly to himself at the intended pun.

Snape swiftly exited the house, robes billowing, and with three quick steps was outside his Anti-Apparation wards. He was startled to realize that for the first time in a long time he was actually feeling hopeful. With a crisp turn and a POP! he was gone.

Shaluinn remained beneath the large tree's canopy. What precipitation managed to filter through the foliage and drip onto the redhead was diverted by her carefully cast Impervious Charm. To the outside observer it would appear that the water stopped about a centimeter from her and then went around, like a form-fitting bubble surrounded her.

She observed the world through half-lidded eyes, physically dozing, but very much aware of her surroundings. The gentle sounds of the softly falling rain succeeded in relaxing her, where her night of unrest had failed. The American consciously set aside any insecurities, any doubts that rose in her mind, utilizing meditation techniques she had learned years prior.

Her muscles limbering with her relaxed state, Shaluinn drew her legs up to her chest. She wrapped her right arm around her knees, her legs angled to the left, her left thigh resting against the upper part of her left arm. Her left hand was braced against the ground, and her chin rested against the side of her right knee. While the position sounded painful in theory, for someone who regularly practiced yoga it was actually quite comfortable.

It was in that position that Severus found her some time later.

Snape appeared in the center of the small clearing located well within the curtilage of the forest. A swift pivot on his heels confirmed that he was indeed alone. The next thing he registered was the light rain that was peppering him. *Typical weather. As if I should expect any less.*

The sudden ominous, and highly audible, growling of his stomach, all too similar to the distant thunder, reminded him that he had not had anything really resembling a meal in days. His Animagus form expended a great deal of energy, meaning he needed a substantial caloric intake in the very near future. And that was how he happened upon the way he would approach his new contact.

Taking several running steps, Severus leapt into the air, transforming into his raven-self. He whirled in the mist, beating his wings hard as he made his way toward Hogwarts proper. As he flew, he let his avian instincts guide him in catching a snack on the wing. Had he allowed himself to consider it, the thought of eating live insects of any size would have disgusted him. By taking that time to allow his mind to rest, he was able to maintain his altered form's metabolic needs, for the time being.

Breaking from the verge of the forest, he swooped along the edge of the lake, his keen eye catching a distinctive flash of bright red beneath a weeping willow. Altering his course, he gave himself no chance for second thoughts, diving straight for the woman curled up into herself against the tree trunk.

Movement at the edge of her vision caught Shaluinn's attention. Without turning her head, the witch cast her gaze toward the increasingly large black silhouette that was dropping at an alarming rate of speed in her direction. The shape dissembled itself into an enormous ebony bird as it spread its wings to brake, coming in for a landing.

Callaway bit back a bark of laughter as the avian that she now realized was a raven very nearly planted its prodigious beak in the ground with its overbalanced landing. The initial impression the witch got was that the animal appeared to be quite... drunk. She actually did snicker as the bird, upon righting itself, immediately began preening, settling its ruffled feathers down and doing an all-around thorough job of putting its appearance to rights.

If she hadn't known better, she would have sworn it was making itself presentable for her. Casting that ridiculous thought aside, the redhead tipped her head, turning it so the strange animal was fully in her field of view. Under the weight of her gaze, it broke off its fussing and drew itself up, settling its wings tightly against its body.

The American cast about in her memory for what little she knew about this particular species. *Incredibly intelligent; in fact the most intelligent bird in the Crow family. They have the rudimentary ability to make use of tools. Capable of basic problem-solving and, if I remember correctly, they mate for life.*

She felt vaguely unnerved as she realized that, as she was appraising the bird, it was, in turn, taking the measure of her. *No, can't be. Could it?* The notion was decidedly unsettling, no matter how ludicrous.

Severus could have transfigured his wand into a sword and fallen upon it for all the grace he displayed in landing at the witch's feet. In his mortification he immediately began preening, making sure his appearance would pass muster. The witch's badly concealed snicker didn't help matters. Huffing audibly, he broke off his efforts, turning his dark gaze on the woman Albus Dumbledore had chosen to be his contact.

She was staring rather pointedly at him. So, he stared back. After several long, unblinking moments, he realized they'd settled into an impromptu staring contest of sorts. He was the one to break it off first, shaking his feathers out with a squawk. The redhead was blinking irregularly, like she'd just left a trance. He was left feeling... unsettled.

He started when she spoke suddenly, her voice pitched low and soft so as not to startle him not that it worked.

"You appear to be waiting for something. Is it, perhaps, something I'm supposed to do?"

Surprised at her apparent astuteness, he bobbed his head and called out.

Shaluinn's eyes widened as the raven cried out what sounded suspiciously like a "yes." *Damn. Forgot that these birds are capable of human-like vocalizations. That was kinda creepy.*

"Are you hungry?"

Impressed now, Severus spread his wings and shook them, calling out, "Yes! Yes!" He settled down and watched as the curvaceous woman stood.

Unfolding from her prone position, Callaway rose to her full height, shaking her coat out. Looking expectantly down at the avian that just about reached the height of her knee, she gestured at him. "Well? What are you waiting for?"

Chagrined, Snape shuffled his talons in a close approximation of a sheepish gesture.

"Ah. I think I know what's wrong. Don't wish to embarrass yourself by attempting to fly up to my shoulder, eh?"

Merlin, I feel idiotic. But, yes, I have no desire to make a fool of myself again. As if she can actually hear me.

As if she *could* hear him, Shaluinn bent at the waist and stretched her arm out to him, giving Snape a rather nice view of her décolleté in the process. The Animagus took a long second to take in the vista before stepping lightly onto the redhead's forearm and climbing up to perch on her shoulder.

Damn, this bird is heavy. Then again, he is pretty big. And am I so sure he is a he? Not like I can tell just by looking at the critter. Been a while since I last had a familiar. Where the hell did that come from? ... What is he doing?

Severus was oblivious to the American's inner musings, having settled on her shoulder. In making himself comfortable, his Animagus instincts took hold, and he started preening the redhead's hair, carefully pushing the locks on his side behind her ear. Snape trilled softly when the woman turned her head far enough to look at him from the corner of her eye. He danced foot-to-foot before hunkering down for the impending long walk he knew was coming.

Shaluinn twisted her head around as she felt the large avian playing with her hair and tucking it behind her ear. *Strange, strange animal. Just when I thought life couldn't get any stranger.*

"Ready to go?"

A softly called, "Yes," was her answer.

"Alright then." Without further preamble, the witch set out on the trek back up to the castle. Unconsciously, she began humming *It Can't Rain All the Time* from *The Crow*, under her breath, leaving the transformed wizard on her shoulder to his thoughts.

Now that I've found my way into the castle, what now? How, exactly, am I to approach this witch without somehow placing myself in jeopardy? Brilliant planning, Severus. "Play it by ear" is NOT an actual plan. What is she humming? I don't recognize it. From the way she's doing it, I can almost hear the words.

The dark wizard let the melodic vibrato wash over him, his eyes slipping closed as he lost himself in the impromptu concerto.

Callaway, for her part, was wracking her brain for everything she could remember about Raven biology and mythology.

Ravens are the largest member of the Crow family. Heh. I find it more than a little ironic that my favorite movie is The Crow, and here a member of that family is perched on my shoulder. Damn, but he's heavy. At least I'm not carrying him like a falconer would. I really don't have the stamina for that. Now, what else do I remember?

Larger, heavier beak than a Crow she looked to her right check. Deeper and more varied vocal range double-check. Shaggy throat feathers and wedge-shaped tail check and check. Ornithologists believe them to be the smartest of the familia. This one, at least, seems pretty intelligent. He seems to have understood everything I've said to him so far. He must have been around humans before. That's the only plausible explanation I can conjure.

Shaluinn glanced to her right again, taking in his relaxed posture, and realized with a start that she'd been humming her favorite song from *The Crow*. *How's that for irony?*

Well, that's what I can recall of the biology, how about mythology? Native American stories tell of Raven as being the one to bring fire to humankind... This is abysmal! I should remember more of that legend. Now, with European mythology I recall that two Ravens sat on the god Odin's shoulders and told him news of the world, but I can't recollect their names.

I know there are more stories, but damned if they elude me. There is of course the well-known legend that England would never fall to a foreign invader as long as there are ravens at the Tower of London. That's it. That's all I can come up with right now. I'll just have to do some research to fill in the gaps in my memory.

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Coming out of her reverie, Shaluinn looked up to find they were passing through the main courtyard and back into the castle proper. Severus also noticed the momentary change in her stride, a small shudder passing through him as they crossed the threshold into the edifice.

Callaway made it back to her rooms with only a couple of wrong turns. Snape watched with interest as she stood before her office door, resetting her multi-layered wards to recognize and admit his presence. It was ingenious how she incorporated his unique magical signature (for every living thing had one) into the very fabric of her defenses. It was also a very dangerous, yet trusting move on her part. Considering what little Albus had told him of her recent years spent living as a Muggle, the inadvertent mistake made sense.

Alert now, the transformed Potions master took in the surroundings with interest, dismissing the office space as standard for any new professor. It had taken years for him to transform his into the mad-scientist's lair that Potter had known. What caught his attention was how she entered the adjacent living quarters.

The witch had put her wand away and merely waved a hand at the wall, walking straight for the obstruction. Severus let out a warning squawk and began to spread his wings, prepared to leap from her shoulder, when they passed through the barrier unhindered. All he felt was a vague tingling sensation as they made the transition.

The sight he was presented with on the other side had his beak dropping open in astonishment. These were most certainly not the standard living quarters of a new professor. The size of the main room made him wonder what the American's bedchamber looked like.

Directly opposite him on the far side of the room were floor-to-ceiling windows flanked at the edges by tied-back heavy velvet drapes in a deep blue-black shade. The vista beyond was grey with the shifting curtains of rain. But it wasn't the view that commanded his attention.

What had him veritably drooling at the beak were the huge, library-style bookcases lining both walls on either side of them. The shelves were, at most, only half-full, the remainder of their contents scattered before them in numerous carefully packed crates. The ranks were broken at regular intervals where sconces extruded from the walls. Beneath these were shorter bookcases, topped by graduated racks that held, what Severus realized, were sheathed, curved swords of varying length.

His inspection of the weapons was diverted by the redhead walking further into the room. She had paused at the entryway, almost as if she was giving him a chance to take in his new surroundings.

In reality, Shaluinn had paused on the threshold to fight back a wave of dizziness and nausea that rose up as she passed through the wall. She had expended more energy than she'd realized, adjusting the wards to allow her new familiar (as she'd hastily decided) entrance. The fact that she had yet to eat anything that day only compounded the problem. The potions she was taking to hold the disease at bay usually destroyed what little was left of her appetite. So it was with barely steady steps that she made her way over to her Transfigured recliner. She bumped her shoulder up in a silent indication that the Raven should get off.

Severus let out an irritated, "Harrumph," and leapt off, spreading his wings to glide to the far end of the room, landing on the back of her couch. The spacious, black, micro suede piece of furniture was set to allow comfortable observation of the striking vista out the windows. Snape turned his back on the view, his gaze again passing over the contents of the room, watching as the American doffed her coat and sank into a clearly comfortable chair with an audible sigh of relief.

With a critical eye, he observed the witch as she rubbed her face with both hands, using the heels of her palms to press circles over her eyes. She dropped her hands to her legs with a slap, turning a weary look his way.

"I don't know about you, but I think it's about time we had something to eat." Shaluinn took his answering cry as a sign of agreement and called out in a clear, firm voice, "Dobby, I need you!"

With a soft pop, the House-elf in question appeared before her, floppy ears perked up and a grin on his face. "Yes, Miss?"

"Dobby, do you think you could rustle up something substantial for me and" she gestured toward the raven "my feathered friend there to eat?"

The elf followed her motion and turned to look at the avian, his gaze lingering just a hair too long as a shadow passed over his face. Spinning back to the redhead, he answered with an enthusiastic, "Yes, Miss! Dobby can do that!" and popped out of sight with a snap of his fingers.

Shaluinn let her head fall back, her eyes drifting shut as they waited.

Severus took the opportunity to glide from the couch to perch atop a stack of crates. He took a closer look at the array of weaponry the witch had displayed. He noticed that some of the swords were very simple, for all intents and purposes appearing to be long, curved walking sticks. The fact that the other, much more ornate and intricate pieces were clearly swords, katanas, told him there was more concealed beneath the deceptive exteriors. Whether simple or ornate, each and every weapon was displayed with obvious care, their age evident in their appearance.

What an incredible, fabulous collection. I wonder how she acquired them all.

Above one low bookcase, topped by a lone, short obi, was a Japanese longbow, mounted with two arrows. Had he been able to ask, Callaway could have told him that the pieces of leather of varying widths that were wrapped around the limbs of the bow denoted the level of the owner's training and expertise. What she likely wouldn't add was that it was her own, and only one other living master had achieved a ranking higher than hers. Like the swords, it was clearly very old.

Snape then turned his attention to the books in the crate he was perched upon. Tilting his head, he began reading the spines with interest. The Prince and the Pauper and A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens, The Definitive Collected Works of T.S. Eliot, The Canterbury Tales by Chaucer, Dracula by Bram Stoker, Frankenstein by Mary Shelley, and an enormous worn leather-bound volume, The Complete William Shakespeare. A large number in that particular box were written in what appeared to be an Asian script. Some of the tomes were very old, their bindings worn, but each and every one was well cared for.

She clearly has both a love of and respect for the written word. That's something we share in common.

A soft popping heralded Dobby's return.

Turning to face the elf, Severus observed that Dobby had brought two platters with him. One was piled high with various sliced meats and cheeses and several crusty rolls. The other had what appeared to be shredded roast beef and chunks of the same crusty bread. The miscellaneous plate was set on the table by the woman's elbow, while the other dish was set on the floor, only after the elf conjured a cloth to place under it to catch any crumbs.

Already salivating at the sight of the tasty-looking repast, Snape literally dove for the dish, nearly falling talons-over-beak in his haste. He pointedly ignored the snickers coming from the redhead as he began gobbling the morsels with gusto. Tossing the occasional glare in the witch's direction, he polished off half of the contents of the platter in no time.

Taking a break, lest he make himself sick, Severus again turned his attention to the American. Despite what he knew to be an excellent assortment before her, the woman was not tucking in like he expected. Instead she was picking half-heartedly at the meal, seemingly forcing herself to eat anything.

Oblivious to his scrutiny, Shaluinn was quite literally willing what she had managed to choke down, to stay down. The potions she was taking not only stole her appetite, but coupled with the advancing disease, deadened her ability to taste, so often only the strongest and spiciest of flavors came through.

I'm going to have to see if there's a Hooters in London, or somewhere near a Floo connection. I need to get my hands on something with some kick to it. What I can taste of this is good, but other than texture, I may as well be eating cardboard.

She looked for her new familiar, finding him gazing pointedly at her. "It looks like you enjoyed your meal. I wish I could say the same. For someone who's always enjoyed both eating and cooking, this side-effect is particularly irritating. Well, nothing for it. Accio Shaluinn's potions."

Severus turned as several phials came whizzing through the air toward the seated woman. He counted them as the redhead did a "swish and flick" with her right index finger, causing the bottles to hover before her. He watched as she downed the five different potions, the empty containers relegated with glassy clinks to a pile by the side of her chair.

Side-effects? Why is she taking so many potions at all? Who the hell had Albus gotten me involved with? More than a little confused, Snape watched the redhead rise to her feet. That confusion was sidetracked as the American gingerly crossed the room to where she had left her CD player and CD books. Bending at the waist, she presented the transformed wizard with an unavoidable view of her *derrière*. *She does indeed have a shapely arse.*

Oblivious to the fixed attention her backside was receiving, Callaway flipped through the loaded pages until she found the set she was looking for. Leaving the book open to that page, she swapped out discs, flexing her right wrist to retrieve her wand and activate the player. Snape watched the witch rise to her feet and move carefully toward one of the still unpacked crates of books as the sounds of *Enigma: MCMXC a.D.* filled the room.

Shaluinn lovingly ran her fingers down the spines of the volumes in the box. That particular crate contained all the works of JRR Tolkien. The *Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* were both leather-bound and boxed limited-edition printings. Along with those prized pieces were *The Silmarillion* and hard-bound collections of all of Tolkien's writings, both complete and incomplete. Long before the onset of her illness, the redhead had often escaped into Middle Earth. It was one of her favorite forms of retreat from a life that never seemed to go the way she hoped or wanted.

Moving slowly and precisely, Callaway began meticulously shelving the tomes, making sure they were aligned just so. Hips swaying with the hypnotic beat, Shaluinn hummed along as she completed what others might consider a tedious task, especially done manually. She was methodical and precise, moving with an economy of motion that the Potions master could easily appreciate. While she worked, Snape took up a position perched on the back of the leather couch.

Some time passed and the American nearly forgot about her companion. The redhead spun as the large avian let out a dry-sounding cough. *Good job, Shaluinn. You got him food but neglected to make sure he had water.* A flex of her wrist and a twirl of her left wand later, one of the now empty bottles Dobby had brought her was a good-sized bowl. *"Aguamenti!"* The bowl filled with fresh, clear water.

Severus let out a deep, "Chirrup!" and glided, somewhat gracefully this time, to partake his fill.

Considering another sure to be emergent need, Callaway moved over to the far right window. Closing her eyes and concentrating for several moments, she retrieved her right wand and began a complex incantation that she hoped to the heavens was the right one. Another several beats later and a horizontally louvered pane had been incorporated into the top portion of the window.

The avian lifted its head when she addressed it. "I hope you understand me. If you need to go outside, just tap on that panel and it will swing open. At least, I hope it will."

The disguised Potions master cocked his head at the witch, trying not to be distressed with the apparently scatterbrained manner that she went about things. *Perhaps she's just a bit disoriented, what with having to cross "the pond" and all.* He hoped to Merlin that was all it was.

The morning passed uneventfully into the afternoon, the redhead emptying several more crates and switching out the silvery discs for other holding music clearly composed by the same group. The music itself was odd, but somehow soothing, the beat wending its way into Snape's mind until it seemed to wrap around him.

He made use of the Transfigured window several times, mildly impressed that it actually worked, and polished off the remainder of the meat on his platter. He found himself somewhat worried that the American barely touched hers, only occasionally retrieving a small morsel to chew on.

Suspicion and apprehension were added to that when Dobby reappeared to retrieve the platters. The concern-laced look of worry the house-elf threw toward the witch's back when he believed he was unobserved was disturbing. Dobby left the woman's plate and replaced Snape's with one containing shredded chicken this time.

With a jerk and a muttered curse, Shaluinn ceased her shelving. She spun on her heel and made straight for the door to the bedroom. Pausing only to remove her boots, she continued in, undoing her pants as she went. Standing before the bureau, she reached down and undid the snaps on the bodysuit, pulling it up over her head. She muttered again as her bra was revealed, a slim, silver piece of metal protruding from one side.

"Goddamnworthlesspieceofshitunderwirewouldgiveoutonme."

With practiced ease, she reached back and unhooked it one-handed, pulling the offending garment off and throwing it away from her. Pulling open a drawer, she withdrew a replacement, donning it quickly. Deciding to use the opportunity to answer nature's call, she took her bodysuit in hand and strode to the bathroom.

Unable to contain his curiosity, Snape stood just inside the doorway, his beak hanging open in astonishment. *Sweet Nimue. Albus, you really went all-out.* Tearing his gaze away from the undeniably opulent room, he watched the American partially disrobe, drinking in the sight of her exposed skin. He beat a hasty retreat as she turned toward the lavatory, hoping she hadn't spotted him snooping.

While in the bathroom, Callaway considered her new "friend." As she had put up her library, she had been unobtrusively observing him watching her. The way he'd taken off just now only reinforced the sneaking suspicion that had been growing in her mind all day.

He behaves too much like a human for my tastes. But why wouldn't Dumbledore tell me Snape is an Animagus? Why would he tell me Snape would use Polyjuice to approach me instead? I know you can't use that potion for non-human transformations. Hell, I'm not even sure you can use Polyjuice to cross genders.

While Raven-Snape made himself scarce, Shaluinn finished up, swapping her customary jeans for soft, stretchy cotton-knit pants. She went barefoot, relishing the sensation of sinking into the thick carpet with every step. Returning to the main room, she noted the avian's absence as she moved her boots over by the coat rack at the entrance. Callaway passed by the CD player and put Enya's *Watermark* in. The soft, ethereal music served to help keep her calm as she finished up her self-appointed task.

By the time Severus returned, Shaluinn was comfortably ensconced on one end of the couch, a colorful book open in her lap, another hardcover tome on the floor beside her. He swooped through the room before settling on a spot on the same piece of furniture. The redhead turned another page and looked up to regard him with a pointed gaze. After several beats, she began speaking a well-remembered quote.

"People once believed that when someone dies, a crow carries their soul to the land of the dead. But sometimes, something so bad happens that a terrible sadness is carried with it, and the soul can't rest. Then sometimes, just sometimes, the crow can bring that soul back, to put the wrong things right."

The bird turned and tilted its head to look at her with one black eye, staring at her from his position on the arm of the couch opposite her.

"I'd almost wonder if you were the harbinger of Albus Dumbledore, but I know better. He went willingly, the only great sadness he might carry being from his inability to accomplish more before he went. As loath as I am to admit it, Severus Snape did the right thing."

The enormous raven spread his wings, beating them quickly, before folding them again. It shook itself thoroughly, like it would upon emerging from a puddle of water, before settling back down. The only thing missing from the picture were water droplets flying off its feathers.

Strange. "I wonder how much of what I'm saying you actually understand." She studied the surprisingly expressive avian. "Anyway... I know that the right thing is very seldom also the easy thing. Snape chose the harder path. And I can't say for sure that, had our positions been reversed, I would have made the same choice." Shaluinn

stopped, looking down at her nervously twitching hands, where they lay in her lap. She took several deep breaths before continuing. "But it's all moot now. Even with the use of a Time-Turner, I doubt an event like that could be undone."

The American snorted, stifling a laugh as she smirked to herself. "There I go again, venturing off into the land of the theoretical. Most of my ideas and theories give people headaches, when they try to wrap their minds around them. But past-tense 'what ifs' have no real bearing on life. They only serve to distract us from present possibilities, diverting our attention to stale events of the past." She laughed outright at that. "Damn. I should take my own advice."

Unexpectedly, the witch lunged forward, catching the raven about the body with both hands, preventing it from spreading its wings and escaping. She settled back into her previous position, legs stretched out in the couch, the bird ensconced on her lap. "So, what about you, hmmm?"

The midnight avian was struggling in earnest, emitting cries that startlingly, sounded much like growls. It twisted and bobbed and weaved under her hands, but stopped short of pecking at her with its enormous beak; which for an actual wild bird was highly unusual.

Shaluinn shifted her grip, moving her left hand over its back, the fingers of her right hand stroking its ebony breast. "Shhhh... I'm not going to hurt you. You've been hanging around all day. I think I should give you a name."

The raven finally settled down, and she took her hand off its back, still stroking its feathered chest. She smiled when the avian gave her an undeniably curious look.

"I think I'll name you Sev."

The bird narrowed its eyes at her.

"As in 'Seven of Nine'? Star Trek: Voyager? Borg chick that showed up in this past season cliffhanger?"

The bird shook its head.

"Of course *you* wouldn't know anything about that... *Severus*."

TBC...

The "Crow Quote" is from the Brandon Lee movie *The Crow* and is the voice-over heard at the beginning of the film. Ravens are a member of the Crow family, so the quote is appropriate. *The Crow* was released in 1994, so it is a valid canon timeline Muggle reference.

The character "Seven of Nine" was introduced in the *Star Trek: Voyager* Season 3 cliffhanger episode *Scorpion: Part 1* that aired 5/21/1997. This would be right before Shaluinn left the USA to come to the UK and Hogwarts. So I am sticking to the canon timeline with that reference as well.

A huge thank you to my reviewers and especially my beta Kim, who played "Comma-Fairy" with aplomb.

Conflagration

Chapter 18 of 18

Ahhh first meetings... You can never underestimate the importance of first impressions.

Disclaimer:

Shana: Do I really have to keep doing this?

Kim: For legal purposes, yes.

Shana: Damn.

Kim: *rolls eyes* Any recognizable characters contained herein belong to JK Rowling. Only the plot and original characters belong to Shanastay. No copyright infringement is intended and no monies of any form are made from this.

Shana: Thank you.

Kim: No problem. Now, WRITE!

Shana: *mutters* Demanding bitch.

Chapter 18: Conflagration

The ebony raven went utterly still in her lap, its black gaze locked on hers. It didn't so much as twitch, the whites of its eyes showing in its wild eyes.

A self-satisfied smirk grew on the witch's face. "It would seem that Albus left out a rather important piece of information when he was briefing me about you."

The bird broke from its statue-like stillness, shaking its head violently.

"Oh, yes, I know that's you, Severus Snape. I must say this is a rather ingenious way of gaining access to the school and my rooms. Why Albus told me you would be using Polyjuice to approach me, if you could do this, makes no sense."

Again, the raven shook its head.

Shaluinn narrowed her gaze at the bird, mind working quickly. "He didn't know, did he?" She took her hand from the avian's back, still stroking his downy breast, wondering idly why he didn't leap at the opportunity to escape her grasp.

He let out a crow that sounded suspiciously like a "yes" and hooded his eyes, leaning into her touch ever so slightly.

He's actually enjoying this attention. If I actually, truly knew this man, I would probably be mortified by the idea that I'm touching him in a rather intimate manner, even if he is a bird at the moment. She moved her hand slightly, scratching lightly up under his throat.

His eyes closed completely at that, beak opening slightly to emit a rumbling purr.

Oh, he definitely likes that. Curiouser and curiouser. "So correct me if I'm wrong..." She waited until he was looking at her again. "...but Albus didn't know you were an Animagus."

Shaluinn dropped her hand to her lap, only to have it immediately pecked at. She lifted her hands out of range defensively, meeting his obsidian gaze. "Okay, okay! You don't want me to stop. I get it!" The witch brought both hands down to brush along either side of his body, by his wings.

He responded by unfurling his wings, draping them across each of her thighs. This granted her access to his sensitive sides, where wings met body.

She trailed her fingertips up and down the receptive spots, watching as his eyes once again drifted shut, head thrown back, a purr again emitting from his breast. It was all she could do to contain the laughter bubbling up into her chest. *Gods, this is so absurd and utterly wrong. I'm either playing with a highly intelligent bird, or molesting the man I'm supposed to be helping, even if he is currently a raven.*

"Goddess, I really hope I'm not making an utter fool of myself here. I'm going to feel very foolish if you turn out to be just a bird. Then again, if you are just a bird, what harm could possibly come of me waxing philosophical?"

Like her words were some kind of trigger, the raven leapt out of her lap, circling the room once, before diving toward the bank of windows.

Shaluinn was on her feet and striding forward.

In a flutter of feathers, the large bird came in for a landing, the transformation beginning before he touched the ground. Before her eyes, the avian became a large, black-clad man, crouched in front of her. As he brought himself to his full height, she struck.

Her right hand flew out, sliding over the side of his face and past his ear, into his lank hair, her fingers tightly grasping a handful of hair painfully, by the roots. She had stepped forward with her right foot as her right hand shot up. Right arm straight and locked out, she didn't hesitate, pivoting to her left, so her hips were squared, as she brought her arm down in front of her, forcing the startled man to bend at the waist.

Her left hand shot up to grasp the hair on the other side of his head, and she began backpedaling, feet shoulder-width apart, screaming, "DOWN ON THE GROUND! DOWN ON THE GROUND!" as she yanked forcefully on his hair, making him move with her to fall sprawled on the carpet. She moved so quickly and fluidly, it took her just over three seconds to put him on the floor.

She had bent at the hips, her arms and body angled down so that he couldn't reach out and grab her. She continued to tug on his hair, calling out orders that, in Snape's surprised state, he followed. "HANDS BEHIND YOUR BACK! CROSS YOUR ANKLES!"

He did, his features twisted in pain and rage at how completely the damned witch had turned the tables on him. One moment she had been stroking him in a manner he found decidedly erotic, and now she had attacked him! The redhead had pulled a complete 180.

Still yanking harshly on his scalp, Shaluinn lifted his head and twisted his face toward her right, putting the right side of his face against the carpet. Her right hand remained on his head, her body balanced forward, so her weight was primarily on that hand. She drew her right foot around past his head and dropped to her left knee. Her right foot pressed against his right shoulder and the side of his neck, left knee tucked against his upper arm. Her left hand caught the fingers of his right, mashing them together painfully, as she sat back on her heel, flexing his hand, wrist and arm in an excruciating position.

Snape hissed and attempted to struggle. The redhead's only response was to wrench on his trapped primary wand arm. She was only degrees off of breaking his wrist, and he couldn't afford the injury at the moment. And so he subsided, mentally cursing at the predicament he found himself in. The sound of clinking metal caught his attention before he felt cold steel encasing his wrists, along with the clicks of ratcheting gears.

Shaluinn silently summoned the hinged handcuffs she'd used while employed as a prison guard. She caught them in her right hand, rotating them in her palm so she gripped them over the center hinge, palm down. She slapped the first circle against his right wrist, the cuff ratcheting up and around to enclose his joint. She used a finger from her left hand to firmly secure it, before repeating the process on his left wrist.

The cuffs bit into his skin painfully, closed too tightly. But Callaway didn't plan on keeping him in them long. She merely needed to make a point, and was silently thanking the gods that she had paid attention when her coworker, Wheeler, had given lessons in speed-cuffing.

Snape was cursing audibly now, the handcuffs fastened so tight he was losing feeling in his hands.

Callaway pivoted and grabbed his right forearm, urging him to his feet as she stood. Just as he regained his legs, she snapped a short kick into the back of his right knee, causing him to stumble. She pressed her advantage, slamming him up against the tall, thick window. Only then did she give voice to the rage coiling in her gut.

"Severus Snape, I presume. You match the description Dumbledore gave me. And who else would seek me out in such a manner?"

Severus' mind was whirling in confusion. *What the ruddy hell is going on here? Who the hell does she think she is, treating me in such a manner? And what reason does she have to be angry? I'm the one being attacked!* Inexplicably, he soon found he had the answer to that question.

"Was that fun? Did you enjoy watching me? Playing the voyeur? Oh, I saw your raven-self flitting out of the room when I turned around." *Damn good thing my concealing glamour is set to extend to any exposed skin, or you really would have seen some interesting things.* "Did you enjoy ogling me behind my back? Did you enjoy all the attention I gave your bird-form? All that touching and stroking. Did you..."

She cut off as the enraged wizard shoved her off and turned on her, the air literally crackling with energy around his seething form. The soft music playing in the background was an odd, ironic counterpoint to the proceedings.

Shaluinn fell to the ground as he pushed her off, rolling over her shoulder and back to her feet. She flexed both of her wrists and had her wands out in an instant, falling back in the same stance Firenze had witnessed, her wands pointed directly at the advancing, bound wizard.

Enraged didn't begin to describe the Potions master's agitated state. Any self-control he retained vanished in the wake of his cresting anger. A wordless howl emanated from his chest as he stalked toward the retreating redhead. He looked positively demonic, face red and expression twisted, hair flying out in all directions. When she darted behind it, he upended her couch with a well-placed kick, still screaming incoherently.

ShitfuckshitfuckshitfuckSHITFUCK!!!

Shaluinn was duly intimidated, having so grievously misjudged her opponent. True, he couldn't even utilize wandless magic, with his hands cuffed behind his back as they were, but he could most certainly physically assault her, as she had already done him. *Not the brightest idea you ever had, girl. How to get out of this? How to get out of this? FUCK!*

Snape roared at her again, this time screaming actual words. "RELEASE ME NOW!" His blazing eyes still on her, he twisted to present his side, his bound hands visible. It was more than obvious what he wanted her to do.

I already know I'm going to regret this. SHIT! Working as swiftly as she could, she cast "*Alohomora!*" at his wrists with both wands. She immediately followed this with two Shield Charms, casting a different one simultaneously with each wand. *Thank God I can carry on two simultaneous trains of thought.* Anticipating an imminent magical attack, she kept moving, alternating the Shield Charms she cast, trying to preempt whatever he threw at her. She wasn't prepared for the Curse he hurled at her.

The hinge-cuffs released from Snape's wrists with a satisfying pair of clicks, dropping to the carpet with a *thunk!* He glowered at the American, as he brought his hands around and began massaging his wrists, coaxing the blood back into his extremities. He was gratified by the frightened display she put on, darting around the room in an attempt to evade whatever hex he threw her way. *You wish this were merely a hex.*

In one fluid movement, he withdrew his wand from his sleeve and pointed it at the redhead, intoning clearly, with confidence, "*Crucio!*"

Shaluinn barely had time to register his choice of attacks, her wands reintegrating with her forearms, her eyes wide, as she crumpled to the floor, having not thought to put up a shield against *that*, not that there even was one. Her body twitched and writhed, moving with the muscle spasms induced by the Cruciatus Curse. The pain was, surprisingly, bearable. She couldn't stop her body's involuntary movements, but she could handle the mental stress.

After a year of enduring increasingly intense pain from her advancing illness, the Torture Curse was only somewhat worse than what she dealt with daily. It was bad, but not as bad as she'd expected. She kept her lips firmly pressed together, resolutely refusing to cry out, and give the bastard the pleasure of hearing her scream. *Fuck you, Snape!*

To say Severus was surprised by her reaction (or lack thereof) was an understatement. Gobsnacked was a better description. He stood over her writhing form, as not a single cry came from her. It was disturbing, the way she suffered in total silence. *Everyone* screamed. Everyone cried out in some manner, even he, who had endured it innumerable times. *Who the hell is this witch?*

"*Finite Incantatem.*"

Shaluinn let out a sigh, curling into a ball on her side, arms wrapped around her midsection, facing him. She dared not turn away and expose her back. At least facing him, if he chose to kick at her, she had a shot at catching his foot and unbalancing him. Faced away, he could aim hits at her kidneys and spine, and she'd be unable to prevent them.

Snape stared down at her, his expression unreadable. *This is not how this was supposed to play out.*

"I suppose I kinda deserved that."

Her softly spoken words completely threw the wizard for a loop. Confusion was etched firmly across his features, as the first thing that came to his mind popped out of his mouth. "What?"

The American slowly, stiffly rolled to her hands and knees. She took several steadying breaths before repeating herself. "I suppose I deserved that," she murmured and lifted her head to meet his impenetrable gaze.

There wasn't even a hint of accusation in her voice. There was no anger present either. She said it like it was an incontrovertible fact, requiring no further analysis or discussion. Then, she smiled slightly. With that simple, honestly spoken, matter-of-fact statement, and subsequent smile, Callaway utterly disarmed the indomitable Potions master.

Severus returned his wand to his sleeve and offered the woman a hand.

Shaluinn took it, letting the wizard draw her to her feet, chuckling lightly. "Anyone ever tell you, you have an impulse control problem?"

Snape snorted, barely withholding a laugh. "And *you* are one to complain about such?"

Callaway arched one carefully manicured brow. "I believe that constitutes the pot calling the kettle black." She proceeded to look him up and down, giving him a frank appraisal.

Severus lifted one of his own brows in counterpoint. "Indeed."

Snape stood there, attired in his normal Professorial clothes, black from head to toe, right down to the billowing robes. He whipped these around himself, letting them swish and billow behind him as he strode over to the bank of windows and pivoted back to face the redheaded witch, gathering the fabric like a protective mantle. He glared openly as the American stifled a snicker.

Fuck it. I'm going to live up to the brash, ugly American stereotype as I just can't leave this bad "vampire impersonation" alone. "Uhm is all that robe-flapping supposed to be impressive and intimidating?" she asked, sarcasm lacing her tone.

The tall, raven-haired wizard sneered at the witch, his eyes narrowed to slits, but did not dignify her comment with a response.

She shook her head at him, arms crossed over her chest in a mockery of his posture. "Sorry, buddy, not even remotely scary."

He wasn't about to just stand there and take this. "The students seem to think it is," he sniffed, prominent nose in the air. *Is she actually baiting me?*

Shaluinn dropped her stance, arms spreading out in front of her as she spoke, still mocking, "There ya go! That *must* be it! I'm not a student. Therefore it doesn't work on me."

He sneered again. "Miss Callaway..."

"Who you callin' 'Miss'? That's *Professor* Callaway, as you should well know, Professor. No, *Mister* Snape, since you're no longer a teacher here," she tossed back.

"Clearly, you never learned to respect your elders. This is a waste of my time." He huffed dismissively and strode straight for the entrance.

"Elders?" Both her red eyebrows shot toward her hairline. "Hey, Fuckernut, I'm OLDER than you! Okay, granted it's only like six months, no, make that seven Time-Turner years and six months older, but... you're right."

That got his attention. *Seven Time-Turner years?* Wondering what the hell she was playing at, he turned back just shy of the entrance, one black brow rising, inviting her to elaborate, his posture still closed and defensive.

Like a switch had been flicked, Shaluinn felt herself losing her grasp on the situation and her emotions and knew she really couldn't afford to let this wizard just walk away. It was like watching a car wreck happen. You had no control and couldn't help but watch it happen. So, she just let it play out, praying her instincts were kicking her in the right direction.

"This *is* a waste of your time. And mine." She watched his brow drop and eyes narrow.

"Go ahead and leave. Then everything you and Albus have done will have been for nothing. His *death* will have been *meaningless*." Snape was still there.

She made shooing motions with her hands. "No, seriously, go! Walk on out of here like you are now, wearing your true face. I'll lay odds you don't make it out of the castle. Go on!" She was getting good and worked up, gesturing wildly when her hands weren't set on her hips. Caught by the same car wreck, he couldn't help but watch. "Why the fuck should I care? This is YOUR damn war, not mine.

"Yeah, my family was killed by a Death Eater, but I got more than a piece of him. I already took my 'eye for an eye.' Come on, Snape! Walk away from me. Walk out that door!" She pointed for effect. Shaluin was into a full-blown rant. "I'll be right behind you because I'll no longer have ANY reason to be here. IT DOESN'T MATTER TO ME! If this whole fucking thing draws out long enough, I won't even live to see the end! So, what the fuck do I care?"

"Make up your mind, Snape! You coming or going? Leaving or staying? Are you with me, with Albus, or are you so fucking selfish and bent on suicide, you'll throw away our last, best hope of ending this war sooner, rather than later: *you*. DECIDE NOW, BECAUSE I DON'T FUCKING CARE!!!" As she finished, a violent explosion was heard, as all the candles in the room, and the fireplace, suddenly burst into violent flame.

Snape took a half-step back from the visibly seething witch, his eyes widening slightly. He knew full well that the explosions had been caused by a powerful backwash of magic emanating from her. *Pyromancer*. The wards ingrained in the very stones of Hogwarts had taken the unfocused, unharnessed magic she had produced and channeled it into the least destructive outlet available.

I'm beginning to understand why Albus paired me with this... American. She must be a powerful witch indeed to gather and release that kind of magic with no exterior source. Her magic is clearly driven by her emotions. This could be very... interesting.

Shaluin watched the raven-haired wizard considering her words. It hadn't been the most articulate outburst she'd ever produced, laced with profanity as it was, but she hoped she'd been able to get her point across. The magical backwash she'd let off had definitely captured his attention.

She'd done that unintentionally, forgetting as she got herself worked up what the inevitable result of her losing her temper would be. Her Pyromancy had ever been just barely under control, the power ebbing and rising with her emotional state. She was beyond grateful that the magic had been channeled as it had. Previous instances of her losing it like that had resulted in houses, and even an entire city block, going up in flames. As it was, she was pretty sure that a good quarter of the hearths in the castle had suddenly burst into flame.

He didn't have to like her, but he was going to have to work with her. Assuming he didn't just leave right now. Apparently coming to a decision, and making a concession to her earlier comments, the redhead was relieved to watch him shed his robe and hang it on the coat tree she'd placed by the entrance.

"Now, I believe I have something to show you."

"You believe?" The eyebrow went up again.

Shaluin ignored the comment and moved down the length of the room, followed by the Potions master. Turning her back to the windows, she pointed to her left. "What do you see?"

"A door, why?"

"That fuckernut!"

"Pardon?" Two black brows soared toward his hairline.

"Not you. Albus." She shook her head. "Thank you! Up until this moment I thought I was the only one who could see it!" she said with obvious relief. "I was starting to think I was nuts."

"Indeed."

"Bite me. Every time McGonagall has been in here, she has behaved like it wasn't there. When I asked her the question I just asked you, she looked at me like I'd gone crazy and told me it was a blank wall."

"Ah."

Shaluin glared openly at the Potions master who coolly returned her gaze, blinking innocently. A glint in her eye, a malevolent smile began to grow on her face. With a sweep of her arm, she offered, "After you, sir."

Snape narrowed his gaze at her again, before crossing his left arm over his chest and lifting his right hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. He was swiftly becoming aggravated with her extreme hot-and-cold mood swings.

Dropping his hand, he found she was still in the same position as before, that malicious smile plastered on her face. *Sweet Merlin, Albus! What have you gotten me involved in?* Relenting, he swept past her and into the room in question, lighting the braziers with a flick of his hand.

He froze on the threshold, eyes darting around the room, recognizing an extensive Potions lab in the process of being completed. He turned to the first shelf and began perusing its contents, reaching out with lithe fingers to lovingly caress a jar containing a particularly rare ingredient. His gaze snapped sharply back to the doorway as the American witch spoke to him, her expression one of suppressed delight.

"I had a sneaking suspicion you'd know just what to do with this room." She winked at him. "I'll leave you to it. If you get hungry, I'm having Dobby bring a late dinner up. The bathroom, water closet, whatever you Brits call it..." She jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "...is straight through there. And if I catch you going through my underwear drawer, I'll put a broadhead arrow in your ass."

She smiled then, a grin that lit up her eyes, and vanished out the open door, leaving an out-of-sorts Potions master in her wake. *Is she normally this volatile, emotions swinging back and forth like a pendulum? Or is she putting on some kind of performance for my benefit? This American witch is a confusing contradiction of a mystery, wrapped in an enigma. But she is my only credible link to the Order.* Turning his attention back to exploring the room, he relegated his misgivings about the redhead to the back of his mind.

TBC...

A/N: The move Shaluin uses to take down Snape is an actual defensive tactic taught to Corrections Officers (prison guards) in Washington State. It's called a "two-hand hair-hold take-down." It employs speed, balance disruption, and pain compliance. It's designed to be effectively used by a smaller, weaker person (read female) against a much larger opponent. So it's realistic for this move to be successful against the larger-than-Shaluin Snape. With the element of surprise, it is VERY effective.

Shaluin being able to "handle" the Cruciatus Curse is also plausible in that everyone has different pain tolerance levels. Someone who has lived for an extended period of time in a constant state of pain would have a corresponding increase in their tolerance to other forms of pain. Physiologically what has happened is that it takes a greater/higher stimulus to cause the requisite nerves and neurons to fire and elicit a "normal" response. So she isn't in any less pain, her brain simply does not recognize and acknowledge the electrical pulses as a healthy, normal human's would. I work in a hospital Emergency Room and have seen this fact first-hand.

Thank you to everyone who has stuck with me through the ups and downs and most importantly my beta, Kim, who is always there when I (finally) have an update.

