

The Sempra Deck

by *TeddyRadiator*

When Mimi Manderly received a mysterious gift from a secret admirer, she had no idea she would be embarking on the journey of a lifetime...

Written for Mimimanderly at LJ when a SS/MM prompt was mistaken for a Severus/Mimi prompt, and the rest is history.

One - Gathering The Pieces

Chapter 1 of 9

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Please note that while our dear Potions master does not make an appearance in this chapter, he will be arriving shortly, never fear!

The Sempra Deck is dedicated to the real mystic goddess Mimi Manderly; to her beloved SeverusMuse, and to my precious Dahlra.

All characters with the exception of Mimi Manderley, Peter and Dahlra belong to JK Rowling. I make no money from this publication.

It was a lovely installation, Mimi thought, as she looked around the museum. Although small by typical standards, The Salem Institute had a wealth of artifacts. The curators had really gone all out this year to make The Magick Touch an incredible exhibit, showcasing magick in all of its myriad forms, from Mayan rituals to Druidic Magic to Wicca to Aleister Crowley to Voodoo.

The visitor was moved from room to room, reading about not only the history of magic as a historical-medical part of medieval village life, but as a socio-religious movement, leading to the development of the huge Mayan/Incan cultures and the creation of witch-hunting cults like the Inquisitors. Huge glass cases showed various mages and magicians plying their art, from a shaman practicing Native American Sun Magic to old crones stirring cauldrons in true 'bubble, bubble, toil and trouble' fashion.

It was informative and executed with fondness for the subject, albeit in a lowest-common-denominator sort of way. The more obvious archetypes seemed to be placed near the beginning of the installation, and only the most intrepid and serious practitioners who braved the exhibit to the end would find accurate, more true-to-life elements of natural magick. Mimi Manderly was about halfway through the entire exhibit, standing before a dark tableau, watching a mannequin warlock enlisting the power of the four elements to do his bidding.

While the subject matter was tastefully done and the mannequin amazingly lifelike, Mimi looked down her nose at some of the props with a smirk. They may have made the displays accurate and very true to life, but she could see the barcodes on the bottoms of the Potions bottles from ten paces.

"The devil's in the details, folks," she murmured, shaking her head, her black hair shimmering in the overhead spotlights, making her ebony tresses gleam almost bluish in the glow. Even with these small details somewhat awry, Mimi felt absurdly at home here, surrounded by the implements of magick. She had ever been a practitioner of the art, and she'd come to the Salem Institute as a birthday gift to herself, to revel in the known and the unknown. Perhaps, she thought, she might gain more insight into the

art. She allowed herself a private smile. Perhaps she might gain more insight into herself.

The lovely, diminutive woman could easily have been mistaken as part of the exhibition, with her dramatic dark hair and black painted nails. Striking cerulean blue eyes rimmed in kohl shone with intelligence and wit. Her black frock-style coat and slim trousers were relieved only by the grey silk blouse peeking at the neck and wrists.

Many who saw her walking around the exhibit that day thought she was an actress, walking around as a living, breathing part of the installation. They fondly remembered the remarkable looking woman, who would have looked at home as a New Orleans Creole voodoo priestess, an Egyptian Queen, or a Greek Oracle.

More than one man gave her an appraising glance as she wandered from station to station at the exhibition, and although she was peripherally aware of their attentions, she managed to miss the rather severe-looking man standing off to one side in the shadows, carefully watching her graceful promenade throughout the room.

Mimi stopped at a display of antique apothecary boxes, and idly looked at the different ones on show. The large glass case held several of these dark-wood boxes, sitting on different eye levels, lit from above with a single spot.

These boxes, the legend explained, were an essential item for 'wise women', and they would have contained everything from divining implements to runes and crystals, potions and unguents, talismans and voodoo dolls. These boxes, while providing a place to store the tools of the trade, had also been used as evidence to the allegations of a witch being in league with 'Satan' or worse. In other words, the 'witch box' was both tool and smoking gun.

Mimi had often admired old or unusual boxes; she had several at home. There was something about a box that had always intrigued her. The sheer wonder of what it contained was sometimes enough for her to buy one at a yard sale or antique store. More often than not, she was disappointed at the contents, but that hardly seemed the point. It was the anticipation, the wonder of what might lie within, that was often as important as the box itself.

As she passed by the museum's gift shop, she noticed that there was a display of 'witch boxes' for sale, and several looked like the ones in the exhibit. The jaded cynic in Mimi scoffed. These were obviously cheaply made and mass produced; the carvings were clumsily done and the patterns held none of the even texture prevalent in a piece that had been handmade with skill. Typical. Sucker people in by showing them the real goods, then get them to buy cheap copies. Even as she snorted silently, her eyes were drawn time and time again to one particular box near the back.

This box was different from the cookie-cutter copies. For one thing, it was much less ornate, more simply carved, but the carvings were precise and even. The wood was darker, smoother; it reminded Mimi of something that had been worn down with the lanolin of a person's own hands, rather than by modern sanding methods.

It had a lovely silver clasp, and was a little smaller than the others. It was only about six inches long by four inches wide, and only about four inches tall. A leather handle on top was held in place with what appeared to be handmade brass studs. Something about it called to Mimi. Hell, everything about it called to her.

Without thinking, she lifted the box and took it to the cash register. For such a small item, it was surprisingly heavy; there was obviously something inside. She turned the box over to check the price, and finding none, she looked around for another, but this was the only box of its kind left.

"Must be popular," she muttered to herself, and before knew it, Mimi was taking the box up to the checkout.

The young girl at the cash register was about eighteen and looked for all the world like part of the exhibit as well, if the exhibit had included a section on the 'bad goth teenager look'. Acne scored her puffy cheeks, and the little ring in her nose was already tarnished. Black lipstick threw into relief her less than white teeth. Her hair, dyed a dull black, was stringy with obvious hair extensions. Sheesh.

She looked at the wooden box with a small frown, turning it over with pudgy hands tipped with chipped green-polished nails.

"Funny, I don't remember seeing these. We must have just gotten them in." She gave Mimi a smile. "I'll just ask the manager about it. Won't be a sec."

She was, in fact, gone three minutes. Mimi gazed around the museum's rather tacky gift shop. It was strange that she had honed in on one of the few really classy-looking items on offer. Most of the stuff looked like something out of a joke shop or beach town souvenir stand. The Witch Box stood out in Mimi's mind, and she was beginning to wonder if the box was going to cost her much more than the rest of this dime-store tat put together. She decided she didn't care; it had called to her.

The young cashier finally returned, a frown of slight puzzlement on her round face. "Excuse me, ma'am, is your name Mimi?"

With a start, Mimi answered, "Well, yes it is, but "

The young girl relaxed visibly. "Thank goodness! I was afraid I had the wrong person!" Confidentially, she added, "You don't look like a Mimi, you know."

"Really?" It was Mimi's turn to frown. She gave a little shrug.

"Sooo, what do I "

"The Manager wanted me to tell you that a friend of yours knew you were coming today and wanted you to have this as a gift."

Mimi was stunned. "What do you mean, a gift?"

The girl looked uncertain for a moment. "Well, a gift is something you give to someone, you know, like a surprise "

"I know what a gift is!" Mimi said, a little waspishly. At the girl's rather alarmed expression, Mimi softened her tone. "Sorry, I'm just a little confused. You say someone bought this especially for me to pick up here? Today?"

Somewhat mollified, the cashier nodded with a little shrug. "Well, that's what my manager said. Thank goodness you saw it! It was accidentally put on display. It was supposed to be waiting for you at the Help Desk."

Baffled, Mimi finally replied, "I'm sorry, I'm just amazed one of my friends did this. I can't imagine who would have done it." She frowned. "Did they leave a note or any identification?" A shake of the medusa-like hair extensions was her only reply. Mimi huffed, bewildered. "Are you sure it was meant for me?"

The girl shrugged. "You're Mimi, aren't you? That's sort of an unusual name around these parts. I don't know, ma'am, I'm just telling you what the manager said. Anyway," she smiled, and placed the box in a paper bag and recited her closing speech, "here you go. I hope you enjoy it, and thank you for shopping with the Museum!"

As if in a trance, Mimi took the bag, and with a murmured 'thanks', walked out of the building. It was only after she was standing on the sidewalk outside the museum that she remembered that she'd only seen half the exhibit before she spotted the box and left. It also occurred to her to wonder why she hadn't had a word with the manager to inquire more about the person who had gifted the box to her.

Shaking her head at her own impulsiveness and susceptibility, Mimi continued walking to the hotel. From the second floor of the museum, the sheer curtains at the window were separated by a large, slender hand, and its owner watched the dark-haired woman stroll away, holding the bag carefully.

Back in her hotel room, Mimi grabbed a bottle of spring water from the mini-bar and sat down on the bed, thinking back to the strange incident at the museum. Who on earth would have sent her this box? She tried to remember everyone she'd told about coming to Salem, but she dismissed each of them one by one, knowing none of them were the type to do something so - so unpredictable.

Her eye kept drifting back to the paper bag on the bed beside her. She could feel the pleasant anticipation of waiting to open the box to discover its contents. Usually, she could content herself with imagining the treasure within, the hidden discoveries yet to find.

This box was different. The beauty and simplicity of it had seduced her before she even gave a thought to what lay inside. It had heretofore been its own reward. Suddenly, she wanted find out what was inside more than anything else in the world.

Mimi took the box out of the paper bag and studied the clasp. It had an ornate little silver lock. She had no key to it.

"Shit," she said, under her breath, and dialed the museum's phone number, handily provided on the paper bag. No answer. Mimi looked at her watch. Five forty-seven. The museum closed at five-thirty on Saturdays. It would not open again until the following Tuesday.

And she was due to return home tomorrow.

She sighed. She would just have to call the museum on Tuesday, and hope they still had the key.

The following morning, her last in Salem, was to begin with a huge breakfast. Never one to enjoy a crowded restaurant, Mimi opted once again to have her meal brought to her room, and she smiled as Room Service knocked on the door.

"Come in, Peter," Mimi said, and her assigned waiter, who had basked in the glow of Mimi's exotic good looks and generous tips for the last two days, bounded into the room, pushing the food trolley. He was young and rather handsome, and only too eager to ingratiate himself further.

"Good morning, Miss Manderly. Did you sleep well?"

"Fine, Peter, thanks. Just put the tray on the desk." Mimi waved her hand in the general direction of the hotel desk and finished applying her makeup. "I thought I'd go all out since it's my last day here with the full continental. I love big breakfasts."

"Yes, Miss Manderly. Oh, by the way, there was a note for you this morning. I've left it on your tray."

Concentrating on counting her money, Mimi barely registered the statement. Handing the boy his tip, she smiled. "Thank you, sweetie, for being such a great help this weekend." The young man smiled his thanks as he pocketed the money. He had white, even teeth and a swarthy complexion. Mimi thought he might have a little crush on her.

"It's been my pleasure, Miss Manderly. Please call on me again when you visit the hotel again."

"Thank you, Peter."

The young man grew serious. "No, really. Please call on me." He handed her a small slip of paper.

"What's this?"

Peter ducked his head, suddenly shy. "It's my phone number. Maybe we could, you know, get together for a drink or something?"

Mimi smiled, her eyes narrowing slightly. "How old are you, Peter?"

He blushed. "Twenty-two."

Mimi laughed. "I'm very flattered. Sure, I'll give you a call sometime." *When you're around thirty-five, maybe, and grown into those looks a little.*

His eyes lit up. "Great! That's... great!" He ducked his head again. He actually was a sexy little thing. "I'll see you around, then."

Mimi held open the door. "Have a nice afternoon, Peter."

Once Peter made sure the coffee was poured and the small bud vase's daisy looked fresh, he finally departed, leaving Mimi with her sumptuous repast. She was not normally one to indulge in huge breakfasts, but the hotel here was noted for their food, and Mimi had become quite spoiled with their morning meals.

Grabbing a bit of toast and the Sunday paper, Mimi settled into a comfortable chair, when something caught the corner of her eye. Dimly, she remembered Peter mentioning something about a note. A small envelope was tucked beneath her plate, and Mimi gingerly lifted the china to retrieve it.

It was made of heavy, creamy vellum; the type of paper hardly anyone used anymore. It was as thick as parchment and the color of old linen. On the front were two words, her name: Mimi Manderly, spelled out in an elegant, spidery handwriting. It looked as if it had been written with a quill pen, or some sort of nib. The ink was dark green, almost black, and something about the handwriting looked familiar, but Mimi was certain she'd never received anything like this before she would have surely remembered it.

Cursing herself for not paying enough attention to Peter and not inquiring who'd sent the note, Mimi turned over the envelope and saw that it was sealed with a blob of dark green wax. It was stamped with an ornate seal, and Mimi peered at it carefully. It looked either like two 'S's entwined, or two snakes; she wasn't sure which. Grinning, Mimi carefully broke the seal and opened the heavy envelope. A key fell into her open palm.

Her heart beating fast, Mimi looked further inside the envelope to see if it contained any clues as to the sender, and her search was rewarded when she withdrew a small, frail piece of paper from the envelope. It was as tissue-thin as the envelope was heavy and thick.

It looked positively ancient, almost transparent and crumbling at the edges. Mimi gingerly turned the paper over, and saw the same, spidery handwriting as on the envelope. It read simply: *Sempre*.

Mimi looked at it for a long time. *Sempre. That means 'always'. Always what?* She thought. She looked down at the little key in her hand. It was silver, and had the same minute, ornate engravings as the box's lock.

Breakfast now forgotten, Mimi sat the box on the table and slid the key into the lock. It fit. She gently turned it. The tumblers clicked. Slightly breathless, she opened the box.

A heavenly aroma drifted up from its depths. It was intoxicating; a blend of sandalwood and cedar and something indefinable and undeniably masculine, mixed with her favourite scent, patchouli. It went straight to her head like a wine, and for several moments she sat, entranced, eyes closed, enthralled at the scent that seemed to come from the very grain of the wood itself.

After a few moments, her head cleared, and she opened her eyes.

Inside was a deck of tarot cards. Mimi didn't know whether to be elated or disappointed.

They were somber and sepia toned, and something about them appealed to Mimi's dark, Gothic sensibilities. They hinted at a benevolent darkness which appealed to her, and there was sensuality in the various figures that echoed an erotic gloom that stirred her soul. All around the edges of the cards, the word *Sempre* was written over and over in an unbroken, joined pattern. It was written in the same spidery writing as on the envelope and the slip of paper within.

Mimi studied the lovely box and the cards for several minutes. One of the many 'tools of the trade' at a witch's disposal was the Tarot, those beautiful precursors to modern playing cards. They had been used for hundreds of years as a method of divination and meditation, and Mimi already owned several different decks. She had never seen or heard of this deck, and she realized with a jolt that this must be a totally unique deck.

She was holding the one set of Sempra cards in existence.

Once again, Mimi wondered who had decided to gift her with this mysterious box and its equally baffling contents.

Even as she thought this, the cards all but called out to her. They were warm in her hand, and she could feel an energy emanating from them. It was a masculine energy, deep, restless, sexual, and it called to her with the excitement and anticipation of a first-time lover.

Dreamily, she removed the rest of the deck from the box, and began to shuffle the cards, allowing them to slide between her fingers, until she was almost in a hypnotic state.

As she concentrated, Mimi thought of this strange 'gift'. She had many friends who loved her company and her wit. Only a select few really understood her completely, but she was okay with that; she didn't always understand them, either, but that didn't stop her from loving them, and they her.

As happy and contented as Mimi's solitary life was to her, she knew something, or someone was missing. She had ever been vigilant, but he was not forthcoming. Sometimes Mimi thought it might be a 'she', but the voice inside told her that 'he' was out there somewhere, if she would only look and be patient.

She decided that this would be her question to the unique, mysterious cards, as she continued to shuffle. Where are you? she asked *Are you really there? Are you real, period?* And then the question came from nowhere a comet zooming over her conscious thought: *Are you the one who gave me this box?*

Mimi looked at the cards carefully, noting their backs were the same dark parchment colour as the vellum envelope, with the word Sempra written twice on the back, so the reader could not tell which was up or down, and therefore gave nothing away.

Mimi closed her lovely eyes and felt the thrumming energy between her fingers. The lovely scent of the box permeated the cards, and soon her fingers were scented with the aroma as well. It was like stroking a lover, touching him, readying him. *Tell me your secrets*, her mind whispered. From far away, a soft voice answered, *I'm here. I'm ready.*

Her long fingers grasped the edge of the first card and slid it slowly from the deck. It whispered away from its mates like a silk scarf sliding across sweat-dampened skin; reluctantly, slowly. Two more cards were pulled from the top of the deck, and they, too, felt as if they were being pulled away, as if separated from a fellow magnet.

Each card felt heavy, as if it possessed a soul.

As she had done many times with many decks, she allowed her mind to drift, to reach out into the infinite, and as she turned the first card face up, she had a vision. A dark-haired man, in black, reaching out to her...

Mimi's hands were a little unsteady as she turned the three cards over. She gasped as each card revealed itself. They all belonged to the Major Arcana; the set of twenty-one cards that made up a set of specific face cards in Tarot. Throughout history, these would eventually drop from the modern playing deck, but in the Tarot deck, they were cards of importance; having them show up in a reading always carried great weight and significance to the questions they were asked.

Mimi stared at them: The Magus, the Hermit, and The Hanged Man. All three cards were rich in detail and all of them looked like posed photographs of the same man, in three different poses, each in correlation to the card they represented.

Each card showed the same dark-haired, dark-eyed man she'd envisioned reaching out to her, beckoning her to him *I'm here. I'm ready.*

Mimi stared at them until her eyes watered. Her heart was pounding, and as her vision swam, she felt a strange, flooding dizziness. On the bed, the cards trembled, and she heard a small, ripping sound as the first card, the Magus, split open. A blinding beam of light burst forth from the Magus card first, then the Hermit and the Hanged Man, until Mimi was bathed in pure radiance streaming from the cards. Behind her, she heard a deep, musical voice croon, "Mimi...I'm here.... I'm ready..."

She tried to turn toward the source of the voice, but when she turned from the bright light, all she could see was dark spots swimming before her eyes.

Suddenly, she was falling, falling over, falling down, falling through. The cards scattered over the bed and cascaded down onto the floor...

If you'd like to see the cards Mimimanderly drew for this fic, they can be found starting here: <http://mimimanderly.livejournal.com/100663.html>

Two - Compiling The Tools

Chapter 2 of 9

Mimi meets the best Snape - it's almost as if he's actually real...

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"...I think she's coming round, sir."

"Good. If he's still waiting "

"I'll look and see..."

Mimi opened one eye, and instinctively put her hands in front of her face to block out the harsh light that threatened to pierce her eyeballs. She had a splitting headache and felt sick in the bargain. *Oh God*, she thought. *I must have had waaay too much to drink last night*

Memories flooded into her mind, of the museum and the witch box, and the Sempra Tarot deck, and Mimi sat bolt upright. Then she wished she hadn't. Nausea overcame her and she turned over and vomited on the floor. Her mind must be playing tricks, she surmised, as the mess seemed to disappear from the floor almost immediately.

"Oh dear, we've had a nasty time of it, haven't we?" The voice, a female's, was brisk, but not unkind. It was also unmistakably British. Still retching, Mimi looked up to see a woman in her late fifties looking down on her intently. She was holding a little blue bottle out to Mimi. "This should take care of that upset stomach, dear."

Mimi blinked. The woman was dressed like Florence Nightingale, with a white wimple and long grey gown. A white apron with a large red cross completed the look, along with lace-up brogues. She gestured with the bottle. "Bottoms up! The sooner down, the sooner you'll feel normal again."

"Where am I?" Mimi was shocked to hear how weak she sounded. She looked around at her surroundings, and gasped. She was in a huge infirmary that looked like it was already old when Queen Victoria was on the throne. "More to the point, what am I doing here?"

The woman frowned. "Well, I think the best person to answer that is the Headmaster." The bottle was shoved under Mimi's nose again. "Now, Miss, I don't like to resort to using brute force, but you need "

"Okay! Okay," Mimi said, and took the proffered bottle and studied the label carefully. "If I start to shrink, I'm blaming you."

The nurse gave her a puzzled frown. "Why on earth would I give you a Shrinking Potion? This is an Anti-Nausea Potion."

Mimi looked at her blankly, trying to digest the gestalt of what Florence had just said. "Anti-Nausea Potion. Of course it is," Mimi replied, her voice almost feverishly cheerful. She saluted the nurse with the little bottle. "Down the hatch." She gulped the bottle's contents, swallowing hard over and over to keep them down. "Christ, I hope it works, because it tastes like sh-

"Ah, I see our guest is awake now. Thank you for alerting me, Madam Pomfrey."

Mimi turned around to see a tall, elderly man in a floor-length, lavender robe, looking down at her. He had a long, white beard, and looked for all the world like an aging hippy. Bright blue eyes smiled merrily at her, and Mimi gasped.

"Jesus jumped up Christ on a pogo stick!" she blasphemed. "Are you supposed to be Albus Dumbledore?" She grinned, shaking her head. "You are, aren't you? Okay, I'll give you ten out of ten for costume and makeup." Mimi looked up at the benevolent, grandfatherly figure. "What on earth is going on?"

The Dumbledore look-alike glanced at Madam Pomfrey with raised eyebrows. She returned his look with a shrug, adding confidentially, "I think she must be delirious, Headmaster."

Dumbledore-alike nodded sagely. "Perhaps she is. Strange, is it not, that she thinks she recognizes me?"

"Um, why are you two talking about her like she's not in the room?" Mimi said, deliberately. "I'm not delirious, as far as I can tell, and I'm not dreaming, unless this is the most vivid damn dream I've ever had, so would you kindly stop acting like I'm not here and tell me what is going on?"

Dumbledore-ish smiled down on her. "I would be happy to explain, my dear, but I'm afraid I am at a loss myself." He extended his left hand. "I am also at a disadvantage, as you already know my name, but I don't know yours, Miss."

"Manderly. Mimi Manderly." Mimi took the outstretched hand in an awkward greeting, and it was then that she noticed the blackened marks on his right hand.

"Miss Manderly. Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, at your service."

Mimi was thunderstruck. She looked around the Infirmary again. "I'm at Hogwarts?" She began to laugh. She looked from Madam Pomfrey to Professor Dumbledore and burst into peel after peel of hysterical laughter. "I have got to say, that this is the best practical joke I have ever had pulled on me! You two are perfect!"

Her dizziness forgotten, Mimi jumped out of bed and rushed to Dumbledore. "Is that a real beard?" She gave it a tentative yank, and when the old man looked down at her with mild offence, she laughed again. "That is amazing! What are you - some sort of touring group for hire?"

"I told you she was delirious!" Madam Pomfrey declared, and grabbed Mimi by the shoulders. "Please get back in bed, Miss Manderly. You're obviously unwell!"

"Unwell?" Mimi's laughter sounded slightly deranged to her own ears. "I'm transported! Did one of my friends put you up to this?" She laughed, shaking her head. "I can't wait to see the rest of the cast." She gasped. "Oh, please tell me you have a Snape. I love Snape! He's my favourite!"

"Excuse me? Headmaster, you wanted to see me?"

Mimi looked beyond the Dumbledore-alike and squealed. A tall man stood in the doorway, looking at the tableau with thinly veiled confusion and consternation. Long, blue-black hair hung oiliily about his face, throwing into sharp relief his almost-black eyes, pale, sallow complexion and large nose. His lips were pressed into a thin, disapproving line, and his large hands were tensely clenched by his side.

He was dressed head to toe in deep, unrelieved black. Buttons marched elegantly on his robe: from neck to floor, from elbow to wrist, and from calf to ankle. His slim waist was belted with a long sash, also of black. He looked like a fallen angel dressed as a monsignor.

It was Snape. And he was a good one. She clapped her hands in delight.

"Wow! You are amazing! I had no idea there was a call for this sort of thing!" Mimi's eyes roamed warmly over the figure of the man playing Severus Snape and said with a smile and a sigh, "You are the perfect Severus Snape." She didn't add out loud, *and I could eat you up, you sexy beast. I think I'll keep mouth shut, but if you're single and straight, I'm definitely giving you my cell number.*

The Snape could not have looked more alarmed if Mimi had suddenly jumped up on the table and started removing her clothes. His dark brows shot up almost to his hair line, then rushed together angrily. He turned to the Dumbledore.

"Sir, I received word that you wished to see me." He risked a glance at Mimi, but his dark eyes darted away quickly when Mimi grinned and wiggled her fingers in greeting to him. "Is there something you needed?"

"Oh. My. God. Even your voice is perfect!" Mimi gasped. "Pure Alan Rickman!" She closed her eyes and grinned. "You are the perfect Snape!"

The Perfect Snape turned back to the Dumbledore with a look that could have peeled paint from the walls. "Headmaster, could you please explain what " he gestured toward Mimi with a baffled expression on his face "- this person is talking about?"

"I'm not sure, Professor Snape, but since our guest seems to know you already, allow me to finish the introductions." He turned back to Mimi. "Professor Severus Snape, this is Miss Mimi Manderly."

The Snape nodded stiffly, his eyes meeting hers for an uncomfortable moment, then looking away quickly. "I'm quite busy, Headmaster. What is it that you require?"

The Dumbledore looked carefully at the Snape, then back to Mimi. "I think we require your skills in ascertaining how Miss Manderly found herself unconscious on the steps of the school. Have you heard anything about this?"

"I haven't heard anything about this!" Mimi declared, confused. She looked at the three people carefully. "Look, I think this great fun, but I really want to know exactly what's going on. I mean, you all look wonderful, and it's obvious that someone's gone to a lot of trouble to do this for me, but, really, I think the jig is up." The trio of costumed players remained silent. Mimi felt the first vestiges of uncertainty. "What are you doing here?"

"I think the more appropriate question, Miss Manderly," replied Snape, in a haughty, unfriendly voice, each syllable struck like a piano hammer, "is what are you doing here?" He walked swiftly to her, bearing down on her. "Who sent you? You're obviously American what emissary sent you here? It is imperative that we discover whether

or not there is Dark Magic being used here."

Mimi felt her indignation rising. "Now look here, mister," she said, her voice quiet. "I wasn't sent by anyone. And I don't appreciate your rude tone. I'll have you know that I like the Goth look and I don't have a Dark persona!" She allowed herself a little indignant huff. "I know you have to stay in character, but enough is enough."

"You are hardly in any position to make demands, Miss Manderly," Snape hissed menacingly. He turned to Dumbledore. "Sir, I propose we encourage Miss Manderly to tell us the truth. A little Veritaserum should persuade her adequately."

"Hey, you," Mimi shot back. "I'm not the enemy here! Besides, I can't tell you something I don't know, even with Veritaserum, and further besides, does it actually work on Muggles?" She looked down. "And why am I playing along with this like it's real?" she said to herself.

Both men looked surprised. "Miss Manderly," Dumbledore said quietly. "Are you honestly telling us that you are a Muggle that has somehow landed in our world?"

Mimi made a little sound of desperation. "No, I'm telling you that I am not really feeling up to playing this game anymore! I mean, guys, really, this was great, but my head is killing me and I want to go home!"

"Quite right, Miss Manderly. I cannot blame you in the least." Dumbledore held out a hand to quell Snape's impending protest. "There is obviously something going on that is beyond our understanding. I believe Miss Manderly needs to see for herself exactly where she is."

As they escorted Mimi down the hall, she marveled at the sheer amount of huge, elaborate portraits marching down the corridor. Any museum would have given their eye-teeth to possess a tenth of what she'd seen on this hall alone. As they neared the end of the passageway, she glanced at a life-sized portrait of a wizard defeating a hag. Mimi stopped and looked at for a moment.

Suddenly, the hag stood up and walked to the front of the portrait. She drew herself up to full height and said, "D-yew mind? I am a little busy, you know." She had a broad Lancashire accent, and the wizard in the picture turned to see Mimi gaping at them.

He grinned toothily and winked. "Well, helloooo." He gave her a come-hither look. "Where have you been all my life, gorgeous?"

"Shut it," The Snape snapped at the painted wizard, whose features creased in surprise. He pursed his lips disapprovingly.

"Well, you don't have act so jealous, Professor. I am, after all, just a painting." With great dignity, he turned away from the trio in the hall and returned to subduing the hag, who had been picking her teeth with a chicken bone.

Mimi watched the whole incident in stunned silence. The two wizards looked at one another, and Dumbledore's eyes twinkled mischievously. "I think Miss Manderly is starting to understand our world a little better, Severus." With that, the Dumbledore withdrew a long wooden wand and conjured a gorgeous bouquet from the air. Mimi looked from the Dumbledore to the Snape. Both looked solemn, and worried. Mimi realized that they were frightened, and she was somehow the cause of it.

Two hours later, Mimi was more frightened than the lot of them together.

"As you can see, Miss Manderly "

"Please, call me Mimi," she replied, her face ashen, her voice shaky. "I think, considering the circumstances, formalities seem a bit redundant."

Snape, who'd been standing off to one side, leaning on the fireplace mantle with his arms crossed, snorted. "Formalities? You, a Muggle, have blundered into our world at the most unstable time in our history." He pushed himself from the mantle and walked over to her.

"We are threatened by the worst monster since Hitler and you blithely open some sort of magical portal no one has ever heard of and fall at our feet - and you question formalities? Miss Manderly, you don't know what you've gotten yourself into! Do you have any idea what a dangerous weapon you could be, in the wrong hands?"

"That is quite enough, Severus," Dumbledore chided gently. "I think from what Mimi has revealed, she is quite aware of how dangerous she could be in the hands of the enemy."

Mimi watched as the younger wizard turned away angrily. She was absolutely stunned at what had happened to her. She was now a living, breathing part of a fictional story known to millions in her universe a story that had already played itself out and was already finished.

She had told the two wizards all about the witch box and the Tarot deck it had contained, and how the Sempra deck had somehow transported her here. At this news, both wizards looked grave and began to pace.

It did Mimi no good to tell herself this was a dream or hallucination. She was trapped in it, and, from what the two men were telling her, it was permanent. They had no idea how to return her to her own reality. Mimi looked at Snape and Dumbledore, the two most important characters in the story, next to Harry Potter, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. These two powerful wizards were the lynchpins in the fight against the Dark Lord Voldemort.

Her eyes followed the restlessly pacing Severus Snape. How many times had she read the stories and envisioned him, her secret favourite character? It had never mattered to Mimi that his creator had painted him as an unattractive, petulant, mean-spirited man. That same creator had also bestowed upon him a deep undying love, a sense of unwavering duty, and stalwart courage. Mimi had developed a crush on him reading book one.

As Mimi watched him, she also thought of his love for Harry's mother, and his betrayal and subsequent enslavement by Dumbledore to spy for the Order of the Phoenix. As the endgame played out, Snape would meet with his destiny at the top of the Tower

"Oh, shit!" Mimi whispered, causing the two wizards to turn and look at her. Her lovely eyes were enormous with barely controlled panic. "What is the date?"

"It's the twenty-seventh of February, 1997. Why, Miss Manderly?" It was Snape who answered.

Mimi looked from one man to the other. She felt tears pricking her eyes. "It's 2011, in my time."

Both wizards looked at her in dawning horror. Finally, Professor Dumbledore spoke. "In other words, Mimi, you know what will happen to us. You already know our future, and the future of the Wizarding world." He glanced at Snape. "And that means you know the parts we will play in the war, and its outcome."

Mimi slowly nodded, and looked from one to the other. "I think I'm going to be sick." She stood, and felt herself falling forward, just as Snape rushed to catch her before she hit the ground.

When Mimi awoke, she was not in the infirmary, nor was she in Dumbledore's study. She was in a bed in a brightly-lit room, and she stretched and relaxed. Her eyes flew open and she sat upright. She was in a huge bed, draped with green velvet curtains and a matching duvet. The room was large and dark, and the walls were made of stone worn smooth by time and the friction of human energy. It had rubbed up against the stones, just as it rubbed against Mimi's skin.

She could literally feel the residual energy of those who had lived and breathed and died within the walls. She was still at Hogwarts. Mimi hugged her knees to her chest and tried, for the millionth time, to reconcile what had happened to her, but every time she thought she might be close to an answer, it skidded away from her consciousness like a cloud of gnats.

She had revived quickly from her sudden faint in the Headmaster's office, and, after meekly submitting to another examination by Madam Pomfrey, Mimi sat in the study

quietly, as Dumbledore and Snape spoke amongst themselves. They stole occasional glances her way, and each time, Mimi found she could not meet their eyes. Finally, the Headmaster addressed her again.

"Miss-" He made a little courtly bow. "Forgive me, Mimi, I have arranged lodgings for you down in the dungeons, while we endeavour to discover how you got here, and more importantly, how to get you home again."

Mimi was shocked. "You mean, you can't send me back?" She looked beseechingly from one man to the other. Dumbledore looked sympathetic; Snape defiant.

Mimi felt her heart contract. Tears filled her eyes. "Are you telling me that there is a possibility that that I might never leave?"

Dumbledore sat down beside her and patted her hand reassuringly. "I promise we will do everything we can to get you home. Rending the fabric of space and time is an aberration, and must be righted for you to find your place in the universe.

"But, I'm afraid my colleague was right, Mimi. You have literally dropped into our midst during a very dark and troubled time, as you well know. Resources are quite limited and compromised at this point. It may be awhile before we can truly help you."

This was why, several minutes later, Mimi found herself trotting down the hall, trying valiantly to keep up with the long strides of Hogwarts' most feared and loathed professor, Severus Snape. He had barked, "This way, Miss Manderly," and had taken off so quickly Mimi literally had to run to catch up with him.

"Do you think we could slow down a little?" Mimi panted, as she galloped beside him, her shorter legs having to take three steps to his one. If Snape had heard her, he paid her no attention. Mimi's temper, already on a short fuse, began to smoke.

"Hey!" She grabbed his arm, and he whirled on her as if ready to hex her. She took an uncertain step backward. "Would you look at me? I'm practically cantering here, Severus!"

The dark man looked down at her with undisguised contempt. His onyx eyes flashed with suspicion and mistrust. "I do not recall giving you permission to call me by my christian name, Miss Manderly!"

Mimi fumed, and her eyes narrowed. She stepped closer. "And I don't recall meriting your rudeness, Professor Snape! Now, slow down!"

Equally furious, Snape turned and resumed walking. Mimi followed in his wake. She did not thank him for slowing down, to allow her to keep up with him. She merely smiled and trotted more easily by his side.

As he showed her the room that Dumbledore had prepared for her, Mimi was struck again by Snape's very presence. He was sullen and brooding, but underneath, Mimi sensed something else.

"I trust everything is in order, Miss Manderly," Snape said, his cold formality back in place. He gestured to a bell on the nearby table. "If you require anything, just ring this bell. It will summon one of the house-elves for you."

"Thank you, Professor Snape," Mimi replied. He regarded her for a moment, then turned to go.

Impulsively, Mimi called out, "If you ever need someone to talk to, Professor, I'm a good listener."

He turned and looked at her suspiciously. "Why would I wish to discuss anything with you, Miss Manderly?" Again, that look of contempt, and something more inwardly directed. "You don't even know me, nor I you. Nor do I wish to."

Mimi grimaced. Now she understood it; that indefinable something hidden behind his dark eyes. It was fear. Self-basting, testicle-shriveling fear. "Ouch. I should have suspected that."

Snape's eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

Mimi shrugged, and took a deep breath. "I mean, I should have known you would react this way!" She tried to smile. As gently as possible, she added, "I know you. I've watched you grow up from a boy."

She flinched inwardly at the sudden, naked fear she saw flash in his eyes, but she pressed on. "I know all about you, Severus Tobias Snape. I know every sad moment, every humiliation, every dirty deed you've felt or experienced or done."

She hesitated, and only because he seemed frozen to the spot, was she able to continue. "I know everything that has happened or will ever happen to you, and I want to be your friend. I care about what happens to you," she said, with a sad smile, "And let's face it, Severus, friends are a little thin on the ground for both of us right now."

For a moment, she thought he was going to tear into her with all the vitriol he was capable of conjuring, but he did not.

Instead, he looked deeply into her eyes, and in that voice that literally made Mimi shiver, he said quietly, "If I asked you to tell me what will happen in the future, would you?"

Mimi closed her eyes. The unguarded, unmistakable silent cry for help nearly drove her to her knees. A tremor passed through her, and she had to turn away. "Ask me anything, but please not that, Severus."

She looked at the severe, lonely man, and her heart broke for him. "Aside from the possibility that knowing the future will change it, do you really, really want to know?"

He merely looked at her for a long moment, then nodded quietly. "I understand. Goodnight, Miss Manderly." With bleak certainty in his eyes, he turned and left, quietly shutting the door.

Mimi, exhausted and upset, slowly crossed to the bed and sat down. It occurred to her that Severus had not rejected her outright. It also occurred to her that she'd just talked to one of her favourite characters, ever, and tried to make friends with him. Following close on the heels of this thought was the awful, final realization that, in her time, this quietly brave, often misunderstood man was dead, and nothing she could do or say would change that.

Mimi then did something very rare for her. She lay down on the bed and cried herself to sleep.

Back in the Headmaster's study, Severus was facing the wrath of Albus Dumbledore.

"You assured me you had destroyed the deck, Severus!"

The younger wizard held his ground. "I put it away, Albus! When she sent it back to me I hid it -"

"You sent it to "

"Lily!" Severus sank to his knees. "I sent it to my Lily, stupidly hoping it would bring her back to me. But she rejected it, just as she rejected me." He lowered his head and closed his eyes, as if half-expecting to be physically chastised.

Dumbledore stood over the younger man like an avenging patriarch of old. "The fabric of time and space has been torn, Severus. An innocent has been sucked into this

feeble attempt of yours to re-create that which never belonged to you. You will have to repair it, and make amends to that lovely woman."

Severus bowed his head. "I will make things right. With Miss Manderly, with you." Snape swallowed, and put his past behind him. "With Lily."

To see the lovely cards that Mimimanderly has drawn based on the story, you can find them starting here: <http://mimimanderly.livejournal.com/100663.html>

Three - Applying The Stain

Chapter 3 of 9

As Mimi tries to adjust to life at Hogwarts, she and the Potions master learn a little about one another..

Written for Mimimanderly at LJ when a SS/MM prompt was mistaken for a Severus/Mimi prompt, and the rest is history.

The Sempra Deck is dedicated to the real mystic goddess Mimi Manderly; to her beloved SeverusMuse, and to my precious Dahlra. All characters with the exception of Mimi Manderley, Peter and Dahlra belong to JK Rowling. I make no money from this publication.

As strange as Mimi's first day had been in the Hogwarts world, it was nothing compared to the following week. She had been dutifully informed that the Headmaster wished her to join him and the other professors at the Head Table, and she was introduced to the student body as "Miss Manderly, from the Salem Institute". While it was not exactly the truth, it was close enough for Mimi not to get caught in a lie.

It both thrilled and excited her to see all of the characters she had come to know and love; Professor McGonagall, who was kind and warm, in spite of her flinty exterior; Professor Flitwick, who chortled that it was refreshing to meet an American that was not that much taller than himself, and Professor Sprout, a merry, boisterous sort of woman who gave Mimi a hug that felt like a rock crusher and an appraising look that caused Mimi to question the woman's sexual preferences.

And there was the "Golden Trio" themselves, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, and Harry Potter. Mimi was astonished at how they interacted with one another; they were like different sides of a triptych; each standing alone, yet the whole being greater than the sum of their parts. Mimi studied Hermione especially; the girl practically crackled with intelligence.

She had been very effusive when speaking to Mimi, asking her all about America and the Salem Institute and how Muggles were treated there. Mimi had cried off with a very weak excuse that she had to see Professor Dumbledore, but promised the young girl a long talk soon. Mimi couldn't get away from the curious Gryffindor quickly enough.

She had been largely left to her own devices for a couple of days, and assigned a very nice portrait to show her around the castle. The young lady, who informed Mimi her name was Guinevere, had startling green eyes and a warm smile that made Mimi feel as if she had made a friend. Gwen, as she preferred to be called, took her task seriously, and after the first two hours, Mimi was begging the portrait for a rest.

"At this rate, I'll either be in great shape or I'll drop dead by the time I get my bearings!" Mimi gasped, grimacing at the stitch in her side. "At least I don't have to worry about working off my meals. Have you seen the food they pile onto the plates here?"

Gwen, a plump young girl with a round face, giggled wistfully. "If only I could enjoy them! You wouldn't believe how hard it is to keep up this figure! There are only so many portraits with food in them, you know!"

Mimi looked at her painted companion and laughed. "I suppose you have to really gorge yourself when you find something good to eat!"

"Oh, the kitchens have some lovely still lifes," Gwen said. "I like to have a wander down there in the evening. Always good for a spotted dick or two."

Mimi, who had never heard of spotted dick and didn't like to ask, merely shrugged. "I tell you what, Gwen. Come and find me tomorrow night, and we'll sneak down in the kitchens for a midnight snack together!"

"I hardly think the Headmaster would appreciate you taking advantage of his hospitality by risking your health stumbling around the castle in the dark, Miss Manderly."

Mimi whirled around to see Professor Snape standing nearby, his arms folded across his chest. He was looking at her with a little disapproving frown that she found almost endearing. Really, he was the most uptight man she'd ever seen! Even though he spoke in a languid, rather sexy drawl, he was like a coiled spring; nervy and jittery, like a teenager with a chip on his shoulder.

Instead of taking offense, she smiled, and replied innocently, "Heaven forbid, Professor. I would never do anything to abuse the hospitality of the residents of Hogwarts."

As he relaxed, somewhat mollified, she added mischievously, "Perhaps you'd be so kind as to accompany Miss Guinevere and myself for our midnight raid? You could vouch for us." She tried to keep her voice hopeful, but Severus wasn't fooled. He simply sneered at her, spun on his heel, and walked away, his dark robes flying behind him, leaving a trail of terrified Second-years in his wake.

"Oh, dear," Gwen said, with a soft sigh of regret. "Young Mr. Snape is on the warpath again." She shook her head sadly. "Poor thing. He's not had a happy life. To be so young and full of anger and fear..."

Mimi could hear the unmistakable sound of a soft heart from twenty paces, even a painted one. She nodded. "It's too bad, Gwen, because I think under that darkness is a decent person. He just doesn't know it."

Guinevere looked at Mimi carefully. "Perhaps he just needs the right woman to show him." She gave Mimi a little approving nod. "Ever since he was a boy here, I've told anyone who'd listen that he merely needs the love of a good woman." A hint of devilment glinted in her painted eye. "Or a bad one, depending on how you look at it!"

Mimi gasped in pretended shock. "Miss Guinevere! Listening to you, one might suspect you have a sneaking desire to get a hold of Mr. Snape's buttons!"

Gwen's merry peal of laughter echoed down the hall. "Why, Miss Manderly, I can assure you nothing would give me greater pleasure than to get a little paint smeared on his... buttons!"

The younger students smiled as they heard the ringing laughter of the portrait and the new guest from America following them down the hall. It had been a tense year;

laughter sounded like music at Hogwarts rarefied and clean.

As the days passed, and Gwen had shown Mimi all of the unrestricted areas in which she could move freely, Mimi's interest and enthusiasm waned. She missed home. She missed her routine. She would look around the crowded Great Hall at mealtimes, amidst the chattering students and gossiping staff, and feel so alone and isolated she was sometimes hard pressed not to cry.

Being alone when you were alone was one thing; being alone surrounded by a sea of people was starting to feel like punishment.

There were times when she would simply stop eating and look down at her food, and feel his eyes watching her. Whenever she looked up, Snape would be regarding her thoughtfully. Their eyes would meet for the briefest of moments, and then he would return to his meal, or turn his attention to another professor. It was strange.

Mimi knew the man was lonely, but when she tried to seek him out or engage him in conversation, he ignored, insulted or dismissed her. There were times when he looked positively exhausted; he would appear at the Great Hall for breakfast, looking like he'd spent the night pacing his chambers, thinking too many dark thoughts. On one occasion, he looked deathly ill; when Mimi tried to inquire about his health, he brushed her aside with a terseness that bordered on rudeness. The other professors were well-meaning, but they, too, kept their distance.

Because she had one change of clothing, Dumbledore had generously provided her with several long robes and dresses, all black, at her request. "I've never worn orange in my life and I'm not about to start now," she muttered, eyeing the Headmaster's ensemble. With her dark hair, her dark clothes and pale skin, she was perceived as someone associated with darkness. The students left her alone.

The nights were the hardest. Mimi, in spite of Severus' admonitions, found herself often wandering around at night. High up in the Astronomy Tower, she would look down at the Black Lake and feel so lonesome. She was a solitary person by nature, but this imposed exile from friends and routine was starting to grind her down.

Dumbledore was no closer in finding a way to send her back to her own place or time than he had been the first day, and Mimi was starting to suffer from ennui, depression, and despair. The knowledge that Mimi knew the future weighed on Dumbledore, and Severus, no doubt, and they kept their distance to avoid the temptation of asking her what the future held.

She would sometimes look at the two men, Dumbledore and Severus, and have to turn away. She alone knew that the two of them were facing precious little time ahead. Mimi had often speculated on how it would feel to have 'second sight', or be able to see the future. She had once foolishly thought of it as a gift. Now, knowing what she knew, Mimi realized that being able to know the future was a burden, and it weighed on her heavily.

One night, sitting on the windowsill in the Astronomy Tower, Mimi heard a soft sound behind her and whirled around to see Severus watching her closely from the doorway. It had been a bad day for both of them. Mimi had spent hours with the Headmaster, trying to find a way to send her home, to no avail. Severus had been summoned by Voldemort earlier that day, and his information regarding Hogwarts and Dumbledore's precious Order of the Phoenix was deemed unsatisfactory.

He had been given a round of the Cruciatus Curse for his troubles, and he'd stumbled back to Hogwarts feeling sick and defeated and aching all over. He had come to the Tower to get away from prying eyes and to tend to his wounds. Finding the Manderly woman here had been the last straw, and he snapped, "What the hell are you doing here? You have no purpose here!"

Mimi, stunned at the vitriol in his words, drew herself up to her full height and retorted, "I have just as much right to be here as you, Severus Snape!"

He sneered at her with withering contempt. "Just because the Headmaster has allowed you to stay here doesn't mean you can just fanny about the place anytime you fancy it. Merlin, I can't even get away from you in the sodding middle of the night!"

She shook her head in disbelief. "Jesus why do you have to be an utter prick twenty-four seven?"

She forced herself to maintain eye contact; she was ashamed of her own outburst, but still smarting from his stinging words. Almost to herself, she continued, softly, "Why on earth did I ever think you would be anything other than a complete arse?"

They stood glaring at one another for almost a minute. It was finally Severus who looked away. Gradually, his shoulders slumped in defeat, and Mimi's heart reluctantly went out to him.

He looked back at her for a long moment, and saw the same helpless, hopeless feeling reflected in her eyes that he himself felt. "Miss Manderly, I apologise." He ran a trembling hand through his stringy hair. "I am very tired, and I didn't expect to find company here."

Mimi stared at him. Quietly, she said, "It's alright. I accept your apology. I was very rude as well. I'm sorry. I'm just feeling so blue, and..." She finished her sentence with a little shrug, which he seemed to understand.

He nodded. "Apology accepted. I'll leave you to your thoughts." He turned to go, and wrenched his injured side. He could not stifle the grunt of pain.

Mimi ran to him, concern on her lovely face. "Severus! You're hurt! What happened?"

His eyes widened. "Nothing of importance, Miss "

"Severus, what has happened?" Mimi gently put a hand on his shoulder. "You've been holding yourself strangely since you arrived, and you're obviously in pain. Please let me help."

Severus, who had indeed been slightly hunched to ease the ache of his spasming muscles, barked back, "This is none of your business, Miss Manderly." He added stonily, "I have merely come here to relax at the end of a trying day, and if you will not do me the courtesy of leaving me to my thoughts "

"Well, I'm not going to." Mimi reached for him, and he flinched as she touched his shoulder. She looked into his eyes. "Severus, please. I'm a friend. If you believe nothing else about me, believe this."

She placed her hand on his chest, and he stood stock still. "I told you I knew you. I'm not trying to hold anything over your head, or blackmail you or take advantage of you, sweetie. I just want to help you."

He shook his head. "You say you know me. You cannot. No one knows me." He looked down at his feet. "I'm not worth knowing."

He felt her hand on his face, and he turned to her with a start. No one ever touched him like that; gently, with care. It frightened him. So did the look of compassion in her lovely eyes. They were a startling colour...

She smiled at him, and there was affection in the smile, but also a terrible sadness that he didn't understand. She said, "Severus, you know I come from a future time. I've had a long time to learn all about you. I know all the horrible things you've been through that you're still going through.

"I can't tell you the future, but I can tell you now. And I can tell you now, nothing you could ever do or say could shock me, or scare me away, or make me lose my respect and admiration for you, and believe me, I know you at your worst. But," she smiled gently, "I also know you at your best, and it's about the best a person can get."

He looked deeply within her eyes, and looked away. "I don't have much..." He slumped. "I'm so tired."

Mimi gently guided him over to a sofa that sat in the corner. He grimaced in pain, and when Mimi reached to loosen his cravat, he made a soft sound of protest. She huffed in frustration. "Severus, please! I am not here to hurt or humiliate or cause you discomfort."

He looked at her and scowled. "This is highly inappropriate."

Mimi ignored him and loosened his clothing, and he seemed to relax. "I promise I won't take advantage of you." She tried to sound flippant and playful, but to her ears it came out very suggestive. Judging from Severus' face, he had the same thoughts.

As she helped him to divest himself of his heavy over-robe, he gingerly reached into one of the pockets and pulled out a jar of Bruise paste. Mimi opened it, and then unbuttoned his waistcoat vest and shirt.

"You don't plan on anyone getting to you easily, I'll give you that," she muttered, finally loosening the last shirt button. As she had applied herself to her task, Severus watched her, an inscrutable look on his face. She pushed open his shirt and gasped in horror. Tears came to her eyes, and when she looked up at him, he turned away.

"Oh, sweetie, what have they done to you?" she whispered. His chest was a mass of bruises, cuts and contusions. He looked as if he'd been beaten, cut and scratched, all at once. "Oh, baby," she crooned, helplessly.

Something in her tone angered and embarrassed Severus, and he tried to pull away. "I don't need your pity, Miss Manderly." He rose to leave. "I am perfectly capable of taking care "

"Oh, hush, Severus, hush!" Mimi said, sniffing, and all but forced him back on the sofa. His eyes grew wide as she pinned him in place. "Of course I feel pity for you! How could I not hurt for you?"

Mimi shook her head. "I know what you've had to go through for years now. I've followed your path, and the path you chose. I've just never seen the proof of it until now." Mimi looked at the pale wizard, and her heart ached for him. She took the jar of salve in her hand. "Please, let me at least do this one thing to show you that I genuinely care about what happens to you."

He watched as she gently rubbed the paste onto the worst of the bruises, marveling aloud how quickly it worked. Her hands were gentle, her touch soft and respectful. Every once in awhile he would hiss when she found at a particularly painful area, and she would make little soothing noises of comfort, which genuinely seemed to help him.

Gradually, he relaxed as she continued her tender ministrations, and as the events of the day caught up with him, he felt his body unwind under her care. Mimi had finished his chest and was about to ask him to remove his shirt so she could check his back, when she looked up and found him fast asleep.

He was sitting with his head back against the sofa, his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm. His large hands rested on the tops of his thighs, and to Mimi, they looked like sculpture; pale, fine-boned, with long fingers and smooth knuckles. There were several minute scars around the sides of his index fingers, from countless small cuts from chopping ingredients for potions, no doubt.

Mimi stole a glance at his sleeping face; in the depths of slumber, he looked younger, less careworn and unhappy. His skin was so white; he must never get out in the sun. Contrasted against that was his black, black hair, which was greasy, but she imagined it would be naturally shiny when clean.

His large nose was his calling card; it was unmistakable, but not unpleasant to her. It was part and parcel of him, and she liked what she saw. The biggest revelation, though, was his mouth; soft, finely sculpted lips which, when relaxed in sleep, were fuller than Mimi expected; they had a lovely shape, and she could well imagine how soft and mobile they could be when kissing

He snorted a bit and woke himself, causing Mimi to jump and say, much too quickly and loudly, "You fell asleep! I didn't want to wake you."

He looked at her for a moment, then sat up and stretched his back. Looking a little sheepish, he said, "Yes, well. I really must return to the dungeons. I thank you for your assistance, Miss Manderly. I will escort you back to your rooms."

He stood to go, and offered his hand for her. Mimi placed her smaller hand in his and rose with him. It seemed to her that he held onto her hand a heartbeat longer than necessary, and finally let go to retrieve the jar of bruise paste.

Even standing, Mimi felt small and child-like next to him; he still towered over her by over a foot; she found herself looking at his bare chest and the small little line of black hair that slid underneath his trousers...

She looked up into his face, and noticed a little smirk on his lips. Ass, she thought. He's acting like he knows what I'm thinking

"Oh shit!" she said, and put her hand over her mouth. Severus was a skilled Legilimens for all she knew, he had been reading her thoughts.

"Is there a problem, Miss Manderly?" he said, his discomfort returning, as he tucked his shirt into his trousers and began to button his waistcoat. Mimi gulped and smiled weakly.

"I, uh, was just, uh, remembering that you are a Legilimens, you know." She decided to try for flirtatious. "I thought for a moment there you might be reading my mind!" Okay, flirtatious it wasn't. It ended up sounding desperate.

For the first time since he'd arrived, he looked a little amused. He tilted his head to one side and narrowed his eyes. "You're a most unusual woman, Miss Manderly."

"It's Mimi, and you have no idea," she replied, through gritted teeth. *What the fuck was that supposed to mean?* She sighed. "Okay, I'll bite. In what way?"

Severus managed to look offended and smug at the same time. "Actually, I have tried to Legilimise you tonight. Several times, in fact." He looked deeply into her eyes, and shook his head. "I cannot. I simply cannot enter your mind."

Mimi was surprised. She shrugged. "Well, maybe it's because you're tired."

He made a moue of acquiescence. "Perhaps. And perhaps, also," he said, with a faint smirk, "there is nothing there to enter."

Mimi's eyes grew huge. "Stick around, honey, and you'll see there's lots in there, because you're about to get a rather hefty piece of it." She tried to sound stern, but she couldn't help but smile. It was hard to be angry at him, especially after the pain he'd been through; especially after looking at his soft mouth as he slept...

Severus gave her a rueful look. "I've no doubt, Miss Manderly, it would be weighty indeed." He sighed, and his weariness showed again. "It is quite unusual, though. I cannot Legilimise you at all." His gaze met hers. "That has quite simply never happened to me before."

Mimi helped him with his heavy robe, and buttoned the top button of his waistcoat. "Perhaps you can try again tomorrow. Tonight," she said, smiling, "I think you need to sleep."

He nodded, and the two of them walked slowly down to the dungeons. As they reached Mimi's rooms, Severus turned to her. "I will leave you here, Miss Manderly. I trust you will be able to sleep now. Goodnight."

Mimi looked up into Severus' face. Beneath the mistrustful exterior, she saw a tired man/boy, arrested in development, angry and frightened and resigned. Her heart broke a little for him, and before she could stop herself, she reached for his hand, and gave his large knuckles a quick kiss. He looked at her in surprise, but did not snatch his hand away, and for that, she was grateful.

"Just a kiss to make things better, Severus. Goodnight." She released his hand and turned toward her door.

"Miss Manderly?"

Mimi turned back to him. He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing nervously. He risked a glance at her. "Thank you for tonight." He looked uncomfortable, and it was a moment before he continued. "The simple act of kindness, during these times... I... it doesn't happen often." He looked down into her eyes again. "Thank you, Mimi."

He turned and left her standing at her door, gaping after him. After a moment, Mimi sighed and opened her door.

Snape was running down the hall, in the general direction of the commotion. He had heard an angry shout, recognized it as one of his own Slytherins, and sprinted the last few steps down to the dungeons.

"You saw her, Draco!" Pansy Parkinson was saying, "It passed right through her!" A small crowd of Slytherins had gathered around, and he pushed through them to get to the heart of the disruption.

"What is going on, Miss Parkinson-" Snape stuttered to a halt as he saw the recipient of Miss Parkinson's wrath. "Miss Manderly, may I ask what is going on?"

Mimi looked at the Head of Slytherin, and sighed. He could tell she was upset, but in a strange, exhilarated sort of way. "Professor Snape, might I have a word in private?"

"Something's not right with her!" Pansy said, and she turned to Draco. "Tell him what happened, Draco!"

"I am fully capable of explaining what happened to your Head of House," Mimi said firmly, looking at Severus in a way that left no doubt in his mind that something strange had indeed happened. "If you will be so kind "

"Certainly." Severus turned back to the small knot of his Slytherins gathered in the dungeon hallway. He nodded at Draco. "Mr. Malfoy, as Prefect, I suggest you remind your fellow Housemates that discretion is always an admirable trait, in light of any circumstance."

"Yes, sir," Draco said, and turned to his Housemates. "You heard the Professor. Scram. Shoo." Draco's cool grey eyes flicked back to his Head of House, and Severus felt his stomach clench at the troubled look in the boy's eyes. Draco was already walking on a tightrope, having been charged by the Dark Lord to murder Dumbledore and thus turn the tide of the war.

He had stopped confiding in Severus, and this told him that he was no longer trusted within the Dark Lord's circle; further, Draco was desperate to restore the Dark Lord's trust in his family, and did not want Snape to take any credit for it.

Thinking of this, Severus turned to the tiny American woman. "Perhaps we can discuss this in my study, Miss Manderly?"

She nodded tersely. "After you, Professor."

Once again, Mimi found herself running after Severus like an overly-enthusiastic puppy, as his long legs strode away from her. "Severus, short person here," she hissed through gritted teeth, and he slowed down infinitesimally to allow her to catch up with him.

Finally, when they arrived at his study, Mimi ducked under his arm as he held open the door for her. "I think you'd better ward your door, Severus. This isn't for all and sundry to see or hear."

Frowning, Severus obeyed her nevertheless. Silently casting ward after ward over his study, Severus turned and faced Mimi, his arms crossed over his chest defiantly. "And what, Miss Manderly, have you done now to get my House in such an uproar?"

Mimi stepped away from Severus, and said, with barely concealed excitement, "Hex me."

Severus looked at her blankly. "Excuse me?"

Mimi grinned, nodding her head. "Go ahead, Severus hex me. Go on!"

"What reason on earth could you possibly have to "

"Severus!" Mimi said, exasperated, "I wouldn't ask you to do something this radical without good reason, would I? Now, go ahead, big, bad, wizard," she taunted, challengingly. "Hex me, if you're man enough - "

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" Severus' aim was perfect, but nothing happened. He looked at the tiny woman, who was smiling back at him.

She winked. "Try again."

"*Rictusempra!*" Mimi merely stood, smiling at him, her hands on her hips. Baffled, Severus said, "I don't understand. You should be laughing uncontrollably."

Mimi looked genuinely interested. "Why, was that a spell to tickle me?"

"No, it was it doesn't matter. *Accio Mimi!*" Nothing. "*Stupefy!*" Mimi shrugged. Severus threw a Jelly-legs Jinx; he attempted to bind her in magical ropes; they fell away from her. He tried several other small spells and minor jinxes; nothing affected Mimi. Finally, out of desperation, he cried, "*Imperio!*"

Nothing, Mimi covered her mouth in an exaggerated, pretend yawn. "You'll have to do a lot more than that if you want me to do your bidding, Professor Snape." She laughed at his stunned expression. "Do you see? I can't be touched here!"

Stunned at the implications of what he'd witnessed, Severus finally said, "Was this what happened with Mr. Malfoy and Miss Parkinson?" When Mimi nodded, Severus frowned again. "Why did she attempt to hex you in the first place?"

For the first time since she had asked him to hex her, Mimi looked uncomfortable. "I was walking to my room, and I passed Draco and Pansy in the hall. As I walked by, Pansy said something " Mimi hesitated, and bit the inside of her cheek. "She said something a tad inappropriate, and I called her on it."

Frowning, Severus looked at Mimi with a fierce scowl. "What did Miss Parkinson say, Miss Manderly?"

For a moment, he thought she wasn't going to answer. Finally, her face colouring, Mimi said, "She said something rather disrespectful, and I told her that unless she truly knew what she was talking about, she should keep her prissy little mouth shut."

Snape's mouth was pressed into a thin, impatient line. "What. Did. She. Say, Miss Manderly?"

Mimi sighed. "She said, in a rather loud voice, that " she felt her face grow warm, "Professor Snape must be pretty damn desperate indeed to be fucking a Mudblood American."

Severus' eyes snapped in fury. "Why, that little jumped up she had no I'm sorry, Miss Manderly." He looked profoundly embarrassed. "She had no right to say something like that."

Mimi dismissed it with a wave of her hand. "I wasn't offended, really! Sticks and stones. But the thing was that I turned around and confronted her, and she got very angry

and tried to hex me and the hex went right through me "

"Miss Manderly, are you telling me that one of my House actually tried to hex you?"

Mimi continued, "Yes, but when it went through me, I thought she was going to have kittens!" She grinned at the memory of the snotty little girl looking at the tip of her own wand like she half expected flowers to shoot out of it.

Severus stared at her in shock. Tumbling through his head were the warring ideas of the audacity of the Parkinson chit, coupled with the stupefying realization that, in this universe, Mimi was impervious to magic. That, and the dreams he'd had since the night they'd come together in the Astronomy Tower...

The dream started out the same way as the actual event. He had stumbled, hurting and humiliated, up to the tower to be alone and lick his wounds, and found her there. After bullying him into allowing her to help him, she had unbuttoned his shirt and gently applied the bruise paste to the worst of his injuries.

Then the dream and reality went their separate ways. In the dream, she had stopped rubbing the salve onto his chest and simply rested her palms flat against his skin. He could feel his heart pounding against her hand and he held his breath when she looked deeply into his eyes.

She had lovely, unusual eyes; not the bright blue of, say, Madam Rosmerta's, or the deep emerald green of his own Lily's eyes, but a startling combination of both. Eyes the colour of the sea. Remarkable eyes, remarkable woman...

The dream Mimi then leaned forward and touched his lips with hers, and they felt as warm and soft as he knew they would be, and tasted as sweet as wine. She made a soft little sound of surrender, and then he was pulling her into his lap and kissing her madly, doing all the things he always dreamed of doing with a woman; feeling her pressing against an erection so hard and needy he -

Mimi, watching his face, misread his emotions entirely, and for a moment, felt her hackles rising. "Look, if I did wrong here, I'm sorry, but this little Madam of yours started it. I was just minding my own business "

Startled from his reverie, Severus flushed, then felt humiliation stir. "Hush, Mimi!" he said, holding up his hand, grimacing. "I'm trying to think this through!"

She returned his grimace. "What's to think through? I can't be touched here! Do you know what this means, Severus?"

"I have a feeling you're going to tell me," he replied, rather sourly. Looking at her blazing eyes, feverish with excitement, meant something to him that he fancied would not be the answer she was preparing to give him.

She shot him an exasperated look. "Well, you could have taken one lousy guess." She gave him a 'pay attention' stare. "Severus, I can protect you. The next time you are summoned, take me with you, and I can prevent him from hurting you!"

She was pretty sure he was going to faint. The blood drained from his face and he stared at her, stunned at her pronouncement. It would have been comical had she not been so deadly serious.

Finally, in a voice so deathly quiet it sounded like it was being channeled through an exorcist, he said, "Have you lost your mind, woman? Have you any idea how ludicrous this sounds?" He shook his head. "How could you possibly protect me from the Dark Lord?"

She smiled, refusing to allow him to quench her excitement. Her voice was also soft, but trembled with expectation. "Any minute now, Draco Malfoy's family will be receiving an owl telling them what he saw, a strange, mysterious woman, a woman Professor Snape is sleeping with, having the living shit hexed out of her to no effect.

"I'll wager by the end of the day, Bella LeStrange will have already told your Dark Lord that Hogwarts, and you in particular, are hosting a very special individual. One that cannot be touched by even the darkest magic.

"I'll bet further that he'll be summoning you very soon to ask you about it, perhaps to arrange a meeting. And when he does, you'll take me there, and I'll make a bargain with him. My beneficence to his cause, in exchange for leaving my newly favourite pet alone. You." She ended her explanation with a little flourish in his direction. At his gobsmacked expression, she laughed.

"I have come to watch this tawdry little conflict between so-called good and evil because I am bored and I'm up for a bit of sport, but I've decided to amuse myself with you while I'm here, and I won't take it kindly to have my new toy returned to me beaten all to fuck just because your Master is having a little temper tantrum. I will sit back and watch, and favour the winning side." She paused to deliver the coup de grace.

"Because that's what goddesses do." She stepped back and crossed her arms over her chest in an eerie imitation of Severus, smirking at her own cleverness.

Severus could literally feel his blood pressure rising. The stupidity of the woman! And he'd thought her intelligent, caring, and compassionate. She was making a sport of this! He was going to rip her to pieces. He was going to wipe the floor with her and when he was through, future or no future, impervious to magic or not, she would crawl from here with her tail tucked between her legs and he'd never have to suffer her presence again. She would rue the day she tried to ridicule him.

He opened his mouth, readying to launch into his tirade, when he cried out in pain, and clutched his arm *Merlin's hairy ballbag!* He was being summoned.

To see the beautiful tarot deck that took its inspiration from this story, please go to: <http://mimimanderly.livejournal.com/100663.html>

Four - Dovetailing

Chapter 4 of 9

A visit with the Dark Lord seals Mimi's fate, and more about the Sempra Deck is revealed...

The Sempra Deck is dedicated to the real mystic goddess Mimi Manderly; to her beloved Severus Muse, and to my precious Dahlra. All characters with the exception of Mimi Manderly, Peter and Dahlra belong to JK Rowling. I make no money from this publication.

Severus Apparated to the Dark Lord's hiding place, composing his thoughts and disciplining his mind against the Legilimential assault that was sure to come.

As he knelt before the Dark Lord, he noticed that the Lestranges were there, along with Yaxley, Macnair, Dolohov and several others, and he prepared himself. If there was an audience, there would surely be torture, and as sure as he was a Muggle boy from the wrong side of the tracks, he'd be the recipient.

"Welcome, Severus," Voldemort hissed, smiling down at the dark head bowed before him. "I have heard the most astonishing news from our dear Bellatrix about a guest at Hogwarts."

Severus rose, flicking a stray lock of hair from his eyes. He shot a quick glance at the female Death Eater, who was preening and giving him a look of such smug satisfaction he experienced an intense but transient urge to hex her into oblivion.

Voldemort continued, "A guest that, rumour has it, has been warming your bed as well as your blood, Severus." He leaned forward in an eerie imitation of his familiar, Nagini. His eyes were alight with vicarious interest. "Are these things true?"

Severus answered smoothly, "Yes, my Lord. Dumbledore is hosting a visitor from the States. She appeared unexpectedly a few weeks back. She has been refreshingly... entertaining." He took a deep breath and waited. He found that deceiving with the truth was often the best way to proceed with the Dark Lord, who could not discern truth from half truth when Legilimising him.

Sure enough, Severus felt Voldemort slither into his mind. It was a ghastly feeling, to be violated like this. He always felt as if he were being physically fondled and lewdly caressed against his will; it gave him a queer, sick feeling of arousal that shamed and emasculated him. Every time he walked away from this experience, he imagined this would be what it felt like to be a victim of pedophilia; helpless and soiled.

The Dark Lord saw Mimi, walking with him; he saw her react to his thinly veiled insults in the tower; Severus interjected the dream into his memories, showing him drawing her onto his lap, impaling her; he then moved onward to her standing with Draco and Pansy.

Then Voldemort was out of Severus' mind with a pulling, almost sucking feeling. The Dark Lord was always reluctant to release a living mind; it reminded him all too much of how little humanity was left in his own. To Severus, it felt like coming up for air after being kissed by a corpse.

"Such a diminutive woman to be causing such a fuss, my dear Severus. I would think our Bella would find her little more than a midnight snack."

Then you'd be biting off more than you can chew, Bella Severus thought. He replied, "Indeed, My Lord. She is of moderate interest. I myself never bothered to mention her as such."

Voldemort looked from Bella to Severus. "And yet, Bella's dear nephew Draco has sent her an owl earlier today with the most fanciful tale. I summoned you here to verify it."

"A tale, my Lord?" Severus thought frantically. Should he validate Draco, or discredit him? What would be the safest alternative for Draco, and more importantly, what would keep Mimi safe?

"Why, yes, Severus." The Dark Lord smiled, as patient as a spider. "Aunt Bella was told today that this woman, Miss Manderly, was hexed several times at point blank range, and yet no magic affected her.

"Now, is Draco telling the truth, or has my faithful lieutenant, Lucius Malfoy's son, proven that, like his father, he is incapable of fulfilling his obligations to my service by giving me false and misleading information?"

Severus felt his heart rate increase. If he accused Draco of lying, his mother, his father in Azkaban, and the boy himself would be punished; their suffering would be unspeakable, the damage perhaps permanent.

He thought of Mimi, her sea-blue eyes blazing with keen intelligence, saying, "I can protect you. That's what goddesses do!"

Without a shred of certainty that he was doing the right thing, Severus bowed his head in acquiescence. "The boy spoke the truth, my Lord. I myself witnessed it just moments before you summoned me. The woman has powers I can scarcely comprehend. Whatever she is, she is not of our world."

"Ah! So you knew about this, Severus, and you kept it from our Lord!" Bella screeched.

"I knew about it five minutes before I arrived, Bella," Severus drawled, in his most world-weary voice. "If you had been listening instead of scheming how to discredit me, you would have heard the explanation I have given to our Lord. He has seen it himself in my mind!"

"Children, please." The voice was faintly chiding in a fatherly way, but both Bellatrix and Severus heard the warning tone underneath. "I want answers, not petulant bickering. Bella, if Severus did indeed find this out moments ago, then of course he would have notified me at his first opportunity."

"I would, indeed, my Lord." Severus bowed, frantically trying to decide what direction to take. He knew he had seconds to make up his mind.

Sadly, he was not given even that much. Voldemort said, "Severus, what say you? Who or what is she?"

Severus, swallowing, cast his fate with the Muggle at Hogwarts, patiently worrying about him and awaiting his return. "She she told me she was a goddess, my Lord. At first, I thought it was the insane prattling of a madwoman." He allowed a trace of fear to creep into his face. It was not hard to do. "After what I have seen, I am truly at a loss as to what or who she truly is."

"Does Dumbledore know?"

"Again, my Lord, I cannot say. He has said nothing to me if he does. I would think, though, that if he knows Miss Manderly's true origin, he would have mentioned it to me."

"I agree." Voldemort sat back in his chair, steepling his long hands together. "Do you think she is a goddess, Severus?"

Again, Severus wished for seconds to think, but had none. Carelessly promising gods he no longer believed in all manner of things, he said, "I cannot say, my Lord. I can only say what I saw."

"And that was?"

Severus cast another glance at the Death Eaters, hanging onto his every word. In his most sonorous, mellifluous voice, he intoned, "I saw hex after hex pass through her like water. I saw her predict the future, and have it come to pass. I saw her heal wounds with only her touch."

It was almost worth watching the assembled witch and wizards blanch at his words. He only hoped he wouldn't have to eat them. He had a feeling they would be bitter and sharp, and taste like ash and ground glass in his mouth.

Voldemort did not react. He did not even blink. He studied Severus carefully for a few moments, then leaned forward. "If she truly is a creature from another world, I would like to meet with her, Severus." He smiled his awful smile. "Please ask your esteemed guest if she would accompany you to a visit with me."

With a heavy heart, Severus bowed. "I will endeavour to convince her, my Lord."

"I am sure you will, dear Severus. Use your legendary powers of persuasion; I'm sure she will be unable to resist." Severus looked up into the Dark Lord's eyes and saw his pain readying to be unleashed, and he swallowed. "In the meantime, I do hope this will serve as a reminder to inform me of any change in the fabric of our daily lives, Severus. *Crucio!*"

Severus returned to his room, shaking, sickened. He wanted to die. He had done much in the noble cause of saving his own hide, but he had reached a new low. To send an innocent Muggle woman into the belly of the beast, to serve her up to the Dark Lord like a sweetmeat to be devoured... how could he face her? She had been kindness itself to him; she had shown compassion, and he had repaid it by sending her to her certain death.

Warring with this was the conflict of whether to not to inform Dumbledore. There was a time when he would willingly tell Dumbledore every secret, every dream, every thought he entertained. Lately, with the knowledge that he would be called upon any day to end the man's life, and thus secure his and Draco's allegiance with the Dark Lord for all to see, he grew continually reticent to reveal all of his secrets.

There was a shimmer to his wards, and in his mind he could see her tiny outline against his door. Severus rubbed his face with his hands. Dumbledore or not, there was one to whom he would have to confess, and she now stood on the other side of his door.

Mimi knocked again, stifling the urge to shout, "I know you're in there!" Severus was a law unto himself within his own chambers; if he chose not to answer the door, she'd have to stand here until he was ready. For the past hour she'd paced up and down the corridor, waiting for him to return.

She had heard Mr. Filch and Mrs. Norris making the rounds, and rather than risk being asked questions she'd as soon as not answer, she had ducked into her own rooms until they'd passed. She was just emerging when she saw Severus' unmistakable black-clad figure disappearing through his doors.

Cursing at Filch's timing, she dashed to Severus' door, but it was too late. He had locked and warded it - automatically, if she knew anything about him. Mimi saw him in her mind's eye. More than once, she'd dreamed about the night in the tower, touching him, bringing him some relief, some comfort. He had a way of looking in a person's eyes... *Oh shit*, Mimi thought. She was forced to admit to herself; she was infatuated with him.

She sighed. The heavy knowledge of who he was and what would happen in the next few months pressed down on her again, and she felt, not for the first time, that she was in way over her head here. After the heady moments in his study, looking into his fierce eyes as he threw spell after hex after jinx at her, his frown and confusion growing with each passing failure, Mimi was left with a shivering feeling of desire.

It had been a thrilling moment almost an erotic one. She could sense the magic flowing from him; she could see it in his eyes, in his body language as it released itself from his being.

How thrilling it must be to feel that kind of power flowing out of you! It saddened her a little that she would never know how it felt. But to touch him, physically, as she had that night in the tower, gave her the faintest sense of what it must feel like. She could sense something, a faint thrumming beneath his skin, and it excited and stirred her more than she realized. To feel a man like that, touching her intimately, slowly lowering himself to her...

Shaking her head to dispel her less-than-pure thoughts, Mimi raised her hand to knock again when the door swung open. Severus was at the other side of the room, and when their eyes met, Mimi knew that something important had happened. He was bent over the desk, his palms flat on the surface. He looked ashen and waxy in the light; and Mimi hurried to his side.

"Severus! Are you alright?" She placed a gentle hand on his arm, and he looked down at her, his eyes bleak and tired. "Have you been... *Crucio'd* again?"

He looked at her for a moment, then slowly nodded, that strange, blank expression on his face. Mimi put a tentative arm around his waist, and grasped his arm and flung it over her shoulder. "Come on. I'm putting you to bed."

In spite of his flushed face, he offered no protest; instead, he allowed her to lead him through to his bed chamber, and sat heavily down on the bed, his face paling again with pain and exhaustion.

As Mimi bent low to remove his boots, he watched her unbutton the cloth at his ankles and remove his boots and socks. "Miss Manderly "

She looked up at him with an almost-angry expression on her face. "I think we've already been through this once, Severus. You don't call a woman who is undressing you by her surname unless you're in a brothel."

He regarded her for a shocked moment, then something like dark humour flashed in his eyes. "Are you implying that I frequent brothels, Mimi?" Something about the husky edge to his glossy voice made Mimi's stomach flutter. She rewarded him with a cheeky little grin.

"I wouldn't presume, Professor Snape." She bent back to her task, and as she removed the remaining shoe, she started as a large hand lit upon her shoulder.

She looked back up at him, and to her astonishment, he looked embarrassed. "I don't, you know. Go to brothels." He looked away, a faint blush staining his pale face. "It doesn't seem... appropriate. It is... demeaning."

His hand was warm on her shoulder, and Mimi felt a sudden urge to rub her cheek against it. Instead, she patted it, and placed her own hand over it for a moment. "I don't judge, Severus. You work in a boarding school in the middle of Scotland under more pressure than any man has a right to carry. If you need to let off some steam, who am I to say nay?"

He looked away from her again, his face suffused with embarrassment. In that moment, in that instant, Mimi knew. She knew as sure as if he'd confessed it; as sure as if he'd shouted it from the Astronomy Tower.

Severus Snape was a virgin.

Mimi slowly sat down beside him on the bed, and began to unbutton his coat. He sat, slumped, like a child, defeated. He knew. He knew she knew, and it shamed him.

"Severus "

"Miss Man Mimi," he interrupted, breathing fast. "I'm very tired, and I would like you to go. Your presence gives me no comfort or consolation. It only..." He turned away. "Please leave me."

Mimi looked at him for a moment, then shook her head. "No. Just because you can't take comfort in my company doesn't mean I don't take comfort in yours. You're hurt, and you've got something on your mind that has to do with me, and I'm not going."

His mouth compressed into its familiar, thin line. "So you can now add clairvoyance to your list of abilities, Mimi?" He raised his chin defiantly. Something like the old silkiness returned to his tone. "What makes you so certain you know what is on my mind?"

Mimi sighed. "Let's not play games, Severus. That's a Slytherin thing, and I'm not in the mood for it." She began to unbutton his coat, and pushed him down on the bed. His eyes widened in surprise. "I'm here because you need me; well, you need someone to talk to. Dumbledore will only make sympathetic noises and tell you it's all for the Greater Good; you can't talk to anyone else because they won't understand or sympathise."

Severus watched her face carefully, as if looking for signs of insincerity. "Perhaps I don't deserve sympathy. If you know my story as much as you claim to, you know why I believe this to be true."

Mimi stopped undressing him. She placed her hand over his heart. "I know this was broken by a young, very immature girl that you loved. I don't pretend to know her; I only know her through your eyes and your thoughts, but I can tell you that you are not the reason she is dead. That prophecy would have been found out regardless, and perhaps she wouldn't have had the chance to put herself between Voldemort and Harry."

Severus was breathing hard again, and he closed his eyes tightly; whether from grief or anger, Mimi wasn't sure. She pressed on, "I know that Dumbledore has held this heart for ransom ever since. He has used you in every way, and even now, you are trying to prepare yourself to kill him, to take Draco's place as the sacrificial lamb."

Severus grabbed her forearms in a painful grip and shook her soundly. "Who. Are. You? Really? Tell me!"

Mimi forced herself to remain calm. "I've told you "

He rose from the bed so quickly Mimi yelped in surprise. Fuck, she had no idea he could move so fast! He was gripping her arms so tightly they hurt, and for the first time in his presence, she was a little afraid of him.

"You know too much," he hissed, his eyes blazing wildly. "What are you truly? You can't be human!"

"Severus, you're hurting me," she whispered, her voice shaking. "I'm just as human as you. I'm a Muggle from another lifetime. I don't know how I got here, but you must believe me. It doesn't matter that spells can't affect me," she said, looking into his eyes, willing him to believe. "But you can kill me. All you have to do, Severus, is break my heart."

He released her and slumped back against the bed. Lying there, his hair scattered across his pillow, his shirt opened at the waist, barefooted, bathed in sweat and fear; Mimi had never seen anyone so beautiful.

For a moment, they merely gazed at one another. Severus licked his lips, and Mimi felt her stomach twist again. Finally, he said, "Mimi, the Dark Lord... he wants me to bring you to him."

Mimi felt excited and terrified at once. "Fine. I'll go with you. I'm going to make him leave you alone."

Severus shook his head. "I won't be able to help you. If you are harmed, I don't think I could bear it."

Mimi drew near to him. She smiled as she reached for the healing salve. "Now you know how I feel every time you return from him, tortured like this."

As she gently applied the salve, he relaxed under her healing touch. "You have... kind hands," he ground out, feeling like a fool and wishing he hadn't said anything. She smiled down at him.

"I'm glad you feel that way, Severus. I promise you that I would never do anything to hurt you."

"Even to the point of keeping this from the Headmaster?"

She screwed the jar lid down with a hard twist of her wrist and grimaced. "I have no allegiance to Dumbledore, Severus. I despise how he's used you all these years. I know what you must do in this time, and I will not stop you, but I see no reason to give him any more ammunition to use against you."

As Mimi set the salve on the table, she noticed that this particular jar had writing on it. "Did you make this salve as well, Severus?"

"Yes, why?" His speech was slow and a little sleepy; he was already starting to drift off.

Mimi picked up the jar and studied it, her eyes growing wide and troubled. "Is this your handwriting?"

He made a rather charming little rumbling sound. He replied, "Whose else would it be?" Almost the moment the words were out of his mouth, he tried to grab the jar from her hands, but Mimi was already jumping from the bed, staring at the container.

Her hand started shaking, and the jar slipped from her fingers and fell onto the stone floor with a smash. She turned to the man lying on the bed. "It was your handwriting. On the cards, on the envelope; on the piece of paper. *Sempre*."

She was gasping, almost hyperventilating. "It was you all the time," she whimpered, shaking her head. "You created the *Sempre* deck. You brought me here from the future!"

It was Severus' turn to placate her. "Mimi, I swear to you "

"Oh, you swear, do you? You knew all along, and you didn't tell me! How dare you pretend you knew nothing about the *Sempre* Deck?" Mimi's eyes were like an icy pool; he could see and hear the frost and anger.

"I never said "

Mimi held up her hand. "I know you didn't. You never volunteered information, but that's no excuse! Just because you don't tell someone something doesn't mean you shouldn't!"

She turned away, breathing hard. "I'm not going to lose my temper and start shouting. I'm not to walk away and let you stew. I'm not going to go to Dumbledore either, because he knew as well, didn't he?" Severus nodded slowly, looking like he'd rather be anywhere else but there with her. Mimi returned his nod.

"What I am going to do, however, is sit here and let you sleep, because it's plain that you are exhausted. And in the morning, you will explain yourself." She held out her hand. "Do we have a deal, Severus?"

Severus looked at the tiny hand held out to him. She was telling him, with that small gesture, that she still trusted him enough to keep his word. Grimly, he took her hand, and it disappeared within his own large one. Rather grimly, he answered, "We have an accord, Mimi."

Impulsively, he took her hand and brought it to his lips. Mimi stared at him, shocked, and he blessed the gods that he had been inspired to do it; it certainly put her off her guard.

"Thank you, Mimi, for giving me a chance to rest. The tale is, I'm afraid, one I will need all my strength to relate."

As Severus lay on his bed, pretending to sleep, he stole a quick glance at Mimi. She sat in his most comfortable chair, idly thumbing through a recommended book, her dark hair fanning across her shoulders. Her legs were tucked up beneath her, and she looked as tiny as a woodland sprite, except no sprite had ever looked so dramatically dark and interesting. *A goddess*, he thought. *My pocket goddess*, he amended, with a mixture of longing and a certain frustration.

Severus had never been one who enjoyed indulging in self-pity, but these last years were the worst of his life, and sometimes he wondered how he continued to put one foot in front of the other.

Ever since Lily's son had arrived at Hogwarts, his life had gone downhill. He was just a tool, used by all and sundry, to do their dirty work. He had been used, ridiculed, humiliated and thwarted for the past six years.

And that was nothing, compared to the night Albus called him into his study and shown him his blackened hand. It was rotting from Horcrux backlash so quickly it had

almost drained Severus' magic trying to slow it down. That had been bad enough, until Albus told him, almost gleefully, of his master plan for his gods damned Greater Good. Oh, and the coup de grace? Severus got to murder him.

It was too much. Dumbledore had ruthlessly used and abused him for a good one-third of Severus' life, but this was a blow so bitter, he reeled from it even at this late date. It held too many factors for Severus to deal with; horror that he would be asked to take the life of an innocent, relief that at least one Master would no longer be around to lead him around by the nose, and a good, unhealthy measure of anger and hatred and regret and shame swilling around in the cauldron as well.

And there was the final, irrevocable knowledge that, once the deed was done, Severus was himself an outcast, a dead man. The Wizarding world would never, never forgive him for killing Dumbledore, no matter who defended him or how ardently his cause was pleaded.

He had returned to his rooms that night, and had given up. Only fear had prevented him from taking his own life. His love for Lily had withered and faded with the knowledge he was to become a cold-blooded killer at the time of his victim's own choosing. It was too much. His sense of duty to keep Potter alive only to fulfill his destiny no longer mattered in the grim, bleak reality of Severus' own destiny. Dumbledore had finally broken the tool.

Severus had lived a hopeless life, and would come to a pointless end, and would be forever hated. The name Severus Snape would be a blight on the face of Wizarding Britain. Parents would use his name as a warning to their errant children on the pitfalls of being naughty. *Be a good boy, sonny, or you'll end up like Severus Snape.* As if any child on earth would be as gods forsaken as he.

Now, looking at Mimi, he realized how starved he was for simple understanding. How long had it been since anyone had given a shit enough to care about how he felt? He knew he pushed everyone away with his acerbic tongue and his prideful demeanor who in his life had ever deemed him worthy of pushing back?

He felt a reluctant affection for her, and an unbidden desire that made him shuffle uncomfortably under the covers so that it would not make its presence known. What would it be like to lie with her? Would her sea-blue eyes glow with passion? Would she call his name as he moved in her?

There was a dormant part of him that now rose with the hunger of years-long hibernation, and he knew it would not be silenced with his own ministrations. He had told the truth when he confessed he'd never resorted to prostitutes, but he was starting to wonder if he should. Just to feel, to breathe, to feel flesh upon flesh once before he was sent to his own death.

No. He didn't want sex with a stranger. He didn't want a quick shag, a pity fuck. He wanted to make love to a woman whom he desired, and who desired him. Was that so much to ask? It was, it seemed, if you were Severus Snape.

He did not want to be a martyr, but that was his destiny. He looked at Mimi again, and surreptitiously adjusted his erection. He turned his back to her, and willed himself to calm by reciting the contents of the Potions cupboard. It was a handy way to discourage this sort of thing.

He mentally sighed. He had always tried to be honest with himself, even when he lied about everything else. In his secret heart, he wanted to see those sea-blue eyes glow beneath him. He wanted to kiss her mouth, which he imagined would taste of cinnamon and exotic spiced wine. He wanted to bury himself in her body and hear her throaty voice as he tore his name from her lips in the passion he had given her. He wanted Mimi. It did not, in light of recent circumstances, seem too much to ask.

Five - Matching Wood

Chapter 5 of 9

The lines are becoming more clearly drawn...

"I know the story of you and Lily, Severus. You don't have to tell me if it's too painful for you."

Severus looked up at Mimi searchingly. They were sitting in his chambers, pushing their breakfasts around on their plates, not really eating, as Severus tried to marshal his thoughts and explain how Mimi had come into possession of a deck of tarot cards he had created before Harry Potter was born.

Part of him, that knee-jerk part that automatically scoffed at anyone claiming to know 'the whole story' of him and Lily Evans, wanted to tell Mimi to fuck off, that she couldn't possibly. In light of recent events, however, Severus was inclined to believe that this time, someone might actually be telling him the truth.

And it was painful; how else could he describe it? He had taken a young girl's friendship and repaid it with cruelty and his own blackened self-loathing. By the time he had got up the courage and maturity to beg for her forgiveness, she and James Potter, his arch enemy, were married and Lily was carrying Potter's child.

Severus remembered the last time he actually saw Lily alive. It was in Diagon Alley, and she was heavily pregnant with Harry. She was lush and ripe and glowing, and her very presence shamed him; set him apart, taunted him with her impropriety with that lecherous pig, Potter.

Her flouted pregnancy tossed his enforced virginity back into his face; he, Severus, had chosen to remain celibate, refusing to give into his baser desires, reasoning that they showed him at his most unfaithful worst.

He could forgive Lily her sexual trespasses; he simply could not condone his own. By the time it no longer mattered, self-denial had become a way of life for Severus, and he despaired of ever knowing a woman's touch before he departed this earth.

So, on that last, worst day, Severus stood next to Olivander's and watched her pass by, not even registering him; chatting and laughing with Potter and the werewolf, Lupin, looking like the goddess of bounty she was. Severus ached so badly he could barely clutch his wand.

It was not just physically wanting her; he wanted to *be* hers. Oh, for Lily to be ripe and big-bellied with his own child! Immobile and expressionless, he watched her, then returned to Spinner's End and drank himself almost into St. Mungo's for the better part of a week.

When he could force himself to think about her again, it was too late. And the last time he saw Lily, she was dead, a stiffening corpse - his eternal, denied lover. He felt at that moment that he was destined to never know that kind of love, to never see a woman look up into his face with desire and longing. He told himself he did not deserve it, after what he'd done.

At times, he found it easy to accept a life without sex, especially now that life was surely forfeit. But there were times, especially in the last month or so, when the thought of never knowing *love* almost carved his heart right out of his chest, and he found it hard to find a reason to get out of bed every morning.

Severus caught Mimi's eye, and for a moment he could almost Legilimise into her mind. It was nonsense, of course. More like imprinting his thoughts and feelings onto her.

Still, she looked at him with so much sadness and empathy, and he thanked Merlin that he truly did not have to explain Lily to her.

"Yes, well, the Sempra Deck." Severus took a big breath. How to explain it? He took a sip of scalding hot tea, and licked his lips. "After Lily and I... parted company, I became obsessed with winning her back. I was too young and foolish to realise she had never been mine to lose, but I was arrogant and desperate enough to believe that, if I could do something, anything to make her forgive me, I could at least make her see me in a kinder light.

"I sought to use any talent at my disposal to get her to at least speak to me again, and I hit on the idea of making her a gift that would convey my esteem for her. I envisioned a deck of Tarot, with each card a work of art, each unique, and dedicated to her.

"I created each card to tell a story about us, together. Each card of the Major Arcana was a picture of moments we'd shared, or experienced, or told one another about. And then I infused the cards with my purified essences."

Mimi looked at first confused, then startled. "Essences?" She squeaked. "As in... essences? Plural?"

For the first time since the conversation started, Mimi looked as embarrassed as Severus felt. He grimly nodded, but pressed on, convinced that the telling of the story would somehow vindicate his actions.

"Essences, yes. Blood, tears, semen, sweat, urine. Those are powerful ingredients; when freely given, doubly potent, if a Potioneer understands how to use them. All of them went into the making of the deck."

"I see," Mimi said, hoping she sounded completely comfortable about it. In reality, she was a little shocked. To put that much of one's self into a talisman as powerful as a Tarot deck could be as potentially dangerous as it was useful.

Severus haltingly continued. "I sent her the deck. Around the edges, I wrote the word, *Sempra*, 'always'. I wanted her to know I would always love her, that the gift was unique and hers alone to use."

He shook his head, as if remembering those times. "I didn't expect to hear from her. The Deck was a gift, merely to show her how sorry I was, and how I wanted her forgiveness."

A look of bitter sadness passed over his face. "Within a week, the cards were returned to me with a note. A very kind, bloodless little note." His voice darkened with barely concealed hurt. "It's a lovely gift, Severus, but one too precious to be in the house where a young child might run the risk of damaging it."

His face was a thundercloud. "She honestly thought the deck was infused with Dark Magic! As if I, of all people, would give her anything to cause her harm!" He shook his head, and Mimi placed a gentle hand on his arm to calm him. His eyes were alight with anger. "Oh, I saw through her pretty words she wasn't afraid her child would damage the cards she thought the cards were there to damage her child!"

He dashed away a tear that had formed in the corner of his eye and turned away from Mimi. "I put the deck away. I never touched it again." His voice grew soft and heartbreakingly winsome. "And then Lily was killed because of the prophecy I'd overheard. And I started to wonder: had it brought harm to her?"

He looked helplessly at Mimi, as if begging her to contradict him. "I was a practitioner of Dark Magic; had it leached its way into the essences of my very being, and thus into what I'd created with them? Was the Sempra Deck a tool for causing harm? I don't know. I'm not even sure why it behaved as it did with you." He looked at her, his dark eyes shuttered and unreadable. "I will tell you, and it is the truth: I do not know how it came to be in your possession."

The two of them were silent for awhile. Finally, Mimi spoke, weighing her words carefully. "Perhaps, Severus, you put so much of yourself into them, they somehow tried to seek out and find those that are somehow connected to you in some visceral way. Maybe they instinctively know who is there for you when you need them the most." She ventured to touch him again, and he looked into her face a little obliquely, as if afraid of what she would say.

Mimi smiled. "I will tell you, and this is truth, that I have always admired you, Severus."

He swallowed nervously. Mimi smiled to herself. At times he was still as awkward as a gawky seventeen-year-old. He shrugged. "All I know about the deck is ever since it was created, it has brought me nothing but pain and trouble."

Before she could stop herself, Mimi huffed, "Well, thanks a lot."

Severus looked at her in alarm, and shook his head. "Am I wrong, Mimi? Has it not uprooted you here, disrupted your life, and placed you in the middle of the most turbulent time in our history? Has it not sent you to the Dark Lord, perhaps to die?"

Mimi smiled. "I'm not going to die, Severus. Whatever, or whoever sent me back here knows it. If you didn't bring me back here, and I believe with all my heart it wasn't you, then someone else brought me here for a purpose, and they knew I'd succeed, or else there would be no one to send the deck back to in the future."

Severus looked a bit irked. His voice was faintly chastising. "That is not how time travel works, Mimi."

Mimi smiled. "How do you know?"

He scoffed faintly, then gave her a calculating look. "Excuse me," he said, and walked through to his bedroom. Mimi waited quietly while he was gone. She had a faint idea what he was doing.

Shortly he returned, looking grim. He lowered himself into his chair heavily. "I went to where I had hidden the deck. It is gone." He managed to look indifferent as he shrugged. "I truly didn't expect for it to be there, but it just reinforces the idea they were used it for the express purpose of bringing you here. Why? I still cannot say."

Mimi stood, and crossed to the chair in which Severus was seated. She knelt down at his feet, and he looked into her lovely eyes. She reached out to stroke his pale, slender hand, and it twitched at her initial touch.

When he didn't pull away, Mimi threaded her fingers with his and squeezed very gently. He looked down at her in faint surprise. She slid her fingers away, and he released them almost reluctantly. She stroked the top of his hand, trying to soothe him with her touch.

"Severus, I don't know what the deck does, or how it works. I only know it brought me to you, and at a time when we both needed one another for support. I will always be grateful for it." She gave his hand a playful little shake. "That is amazingly powerful magic, Severus! You should be proud of what you created, instead of ashamed of it!" She patted his wool-clad knee. "You're good!"

He allowed himself a smirk. "Well, I am a wizard, you know. And a Potions master of some talent."

It touched her to hear the pleased note of pride in his voice. It was faint, to be sure; faint and laced with irony, but there, nevertheless. It broke her heart a little to know just how little praise he'd probably received in his lifetime, and how much he deserved. *Well, my dear wizard, get used to it, because you're going to get an earful of it from now on.*

Mimi tilted her head and looked up at him. "A Magic Man. Look at you. Big, bad, Potions master. A dark, beautiful sorcerer, that's what you are, Severus."

Severus snorted, and looked away, uncomfortable as always when his looks were mentioned. "Beautiful? I hardly think the word applies to me, Miss Manderly."

Mimi insisted, "There's a wonderful book in the Muggle world about the Merlin legend, and when the author describes him, she might as well have been talking about you."

Tall, black hair, black eyes, pale skin." Mimi felt his hand grow warm beneath hers. "He is called beautiful, because he has power that no one understands."

"Except Nimue. She understood it; she coveted it. She ended up stealing it."

Mimi nodded. "She was very cruel to Merlin, and tricked him, enticing him with her virgin body. She traded her virginity for answers."

"Is that what you expect me to do?" The moment the words were out of his mouth, Severus leapt from his chair and walked away from Mimi, mortified at all but confessing his lack of sexual experience. What a fool she must think him!

Mimi didn't move for a moment. Instead, she watched him carefully, trying to gauge his reaction. She honestly had no idea how to answer him.

Finally, she sighed, and rose to her feet. She walked over to where Severus stood, staring moodily into the fire, pretending that he'd said nothing more inflammatory than 'pass the eggs'. Mimi put a steadying hand on his shoulder, but he moved away from her, clearly embarrassed.

Mimi shook her head. Quietly, she asked, "Severus, do you think I care whether or not you've had sex? Do you honestly think that makes any difference with me?"

"I don't want or need a pity fuck," he spat, shrugging off the hand that once again tried to comfort him. "And I won't be a curiosity fuck, either."

Mimi grabbed his over-robe and spun him to face her. She looked up into his flushed face, petulant and sullen, and in her eyes he saw an anger that dwarfed his insecurity. "Who said anything about 'fucking'?"

Her eyes snapped. "Honestly, Severus, what do you take me for? I said I wanted to be your friend! If you've got any cherry popping in mind, you might want to discuss it with me first!"

She spun around to leave, and he reached for her, his long arm shooting out to hold her and prevent her from leaving. "Don't go!" His fingers bit into her shoulder, and he pulled away suddenly, as if he'd burned her. He looked ashamed and sorrowful. "I'm sorry, Mimi. I'm just " He sighed, and Mimi's heart began to pound.

He closed his eyes, and his voice shook. "I no longer feel I have control over any aspect of my life anymore. I'm just used by one and all, and I allowed my resentment to cloud my judgment, and my manners."

Mimi relaxed somewhat. She stepped closer, and once again risked placing her hand against his chest, over his heart. "I'm not here to use you, Severus. I may not know the true reason I've been brought here, but I swear all I want to do is to be your friend. To make sure you're not alone." She touched his face gently, and he closed his eyes.

He began to breathe heavily, and Mimi understood; he was so starved for human touch, even this gesture was enough to overwhelm him. She fervently wished to introduce whoever had mistreated this man to a fine, lingering hell.

Without really knowing what she was doing, or even if it would do more harm than good, she took his hand and tugged gently. "Come and sit on the sofa with me, Severus. I'm a little too short to do this standing up."

His eyebrows flew almost up to his hairline, but he allowed himself to be led. He sat down on the end of the sofa, his posture stiff and wary. Mimi sat on the opposite end, and patted her lap. "Come, Severus. Lay your head down here."

For a moment, she was sure he would not. Everything in his body language said refusal. He looked into her eyes searchingly. Slowly, he shifted over, his eyes never leaving hers, and reclined until his head rested in her lap.

Mimi waited a few long seconds while he made himself comfortable, then she closed her eyes. *Please help me do the right thing*, she said silently out into the universe. Her hands, moving of their own accord, began to stroke his hair. It was not exactly clean, but it was not filthy either.

She suspected he was just one of those men who thought themselves so unattractive they didn't take care of the details, but he was not unclean. In fact, he smelled wonderful; spicy, woody and familiar.

He was warm and alive in her lap, like a wild animal, ready for flight at the first sign of danger. She continued to stroke him, and her hands kneaded the heavy fabric of his over-robe.

"I wish I'd told you to take this off," she murmured, almost to herself. He muttered an incantation, and the robe was gone, leaving him in his waistcoat and shirt. "You must show me how to do that sometime," she smiled, gently rubbing his shoulders.

He said nothing, only looked up at her, as she stroked his face with the backs of her fingers. His rapid breathing gradually slowed, even as she unbuttoned the top of his shirt and stroked his neck and his breastbone. His eyes fluttered closed, and as her fingers ghosted over his cheeks, his ears, his nose, he made a soft, sweet sound that made Mimi's heart threaten to burst from her chest.

She placed her hands under his shoulders, and with a little pull, she whispered, "Sit up." He shifted higher, until his back was resting against her chest, and she put her arms around him, and placed a gentle, tentative kiss against his temple. She felt his breath hitch, but he said nothing.

Mimi lost track of how long they sat together, but gradually his body relaxed against her, and when she rested her hand against his chest, his hand came up to clasp hers. His fingers stroked the back of her hand, hesitantly at first, then freely, with the concentrating air of a student learning, memorizing how to do something.

He shifted a little higher, until he could lean his head back on her shoulder. Mimi touched him without reserve now, holding him closely, as he drank in her caresses like a man so used to being thirsty that water is almost painful to drink. He opened his mouth several times, as if preparing to speak, but soon closed it again, simply allowing her to press him against her, to experience her heat and touch.

His hands entwined with hers, and suddenly he brought her hand to his lips and kissed it gently. He held it against his mouth furtively, as if afraid of rebuke, and when none was forthcoming, he kissed it again, his lips pressing against the soft skin on the back of her hand. Mimi risked a gentle kiss against his temple, and he turned her hand in his and burned a brand of his lips into her palm.

Oh, shit, Mimi moaned to herself, feeling the saddle between her thighs grow hot and wet *And you haven't even kissed me yet. I'm in more trouble with you, Severus Snape, than I ever thought to be with your Lord Voldemort.*

Her lips parted slightly, and she lowered her head a little to place her second kiss on his cheek. It was warm and smooth, the pale skin surprisingly soft, and at her touch she felt his tongue flick against her palm. This time, the sweet sound of longing escaped her own lips.

Severus' heart was pounding so hard he was sure she could hear it. Perhaps she was enjoying a laugh at his expense. That insecure, mistrustful part of him urged him to push her away, but the soft skin of her wrist was so enticing, and he told that part of himself that he felt safe and cocooned here in her arms.

Her lips against his cheek were warm and her breath was soft and fragrant. He could feel his erection awakening, calling to him, and he knew soon he would not be able to conceal it. His lips moved to her inner wrist, and he realized her heart was beating a tattoo in time with his. He felt a cautious sort of elation. He was not the only one affected here.

He captured her hand between his, and drew one of her fingers into his mouth, not truly understanding why he did this, only that he knew he must. He felt her breath hitch against his back, and he closed his eyes, feeling almost delirious with the sensation of touching and being touched after so long. It felt forbidden and any moment she

might push him away, chastise him for his boldness, but he didn't care. He sucked her finger hard inside his mouth.

The soft, spongy feel of his tongue cradling her finger, inflamed her senses, and Mimi made a sweet little mewling sound in her throat. *Oh, fuck, what is he doing?* she thought. Her opposite hand clutched at his shoulder, and she placed a little nipping kiss against the side of his throat with her lips and teeth, and felt as well as heard him moan low and sensuously in his throat.

Suddenly, he shifted, and spinning around, grasped the back of her neck and kissed her; a hard, demanding, desperate kiss, forcing her mouth open, thrusting his tongue inside. Mimi felt as if she were a flame, burning hard and fierce against him, and she threw her arms around his neck. He broke away from her, panting hard, their eyes burning into one another. Somehow, he whipped around and took her in his arms. He swooped down upon her, kissing her with hungry, ravenous kisses that she returned with a feral yearning all her own.

There was a sweet buzzing in his head, and he knew he was being aggressive, his kisses lacking in sophistication and finesse, but she felt like heaven in his arms, and he drew her onto his lap, pulling her against him until he could actually feel the heat between her thighs as it warmed his lap. For a moment, he thought he might come in his pants.

Mimi had never felt anything like the sensations going through her body and mind. She was kissing Severus Snape, and his hungry, needful mouth was intoxicating. Never had any man kissed her like this; grasping, fraught, selfish and greedy. No man had ever made her feel this way as if he would die without her. Severus kissed her as if she were his only link to the world, and to pull away from her would mean the loss of his very being.

His hands threaded through her dark hair, and she cupped his face in her hands as his kisses moved from her mouth down her neck. He searched blindly for those places to touch, to draw those moans and shivers from his goddess. Each sound he wrenched from her throat sent a lightning bolt to his cock, and he knew he wouldn't last long if she continued to writhe against his crotch. He placed a strong hand on her thigh to still her; he was dangerously close to making a fool of himself.

Slowly, they gentled their assault on one another, and Mimi was astonished at how he educated himself with each kiss. He soon learned the soft sweep of his tongue over her bottom lip caused her to sigh; that the gentle sucking, pulling caress of his lips away from hers awarded him a tender moan. He learned that her mouth was a warm, enticing haven, and their lips fit against one another perfectly.

Mimi was also learning. Severus loved to feel her hands rake through his hair. When she suckled on his lower lip, he made a low noise against his will. When her mouth slid to his throat, he shivered and whimpered. And through it all, he held her so close that she felt like the most cherished, coveted possession on earth. *Lily had been a fool*, she thought, without regret. *This man is a treasure.*

This man will be dead in a year's time...

Mimi pulled back from him, alarmed at her thoughts, and she looked up into his severe, stern face, and was struck by the thought that she knew his future. Here, with his lips swollen and reddened by her kisses, his eyes fiery and his pale skin with a delicate flush on his cheeks, he was so beautiful, and Mimi cried out her longing for him, "Oh, Severus, I love you with all my heart."

His answering cry was not happy, nor was it sad. It was a cry of pain.

"Gods, he's summoning me again!" he hissed, holding onto his arm. He looked up at Mimi, and a well-trained wall came down, shuttering his emotions, tamping down his passions to dust. "You must come with me now, Mimi."

Stunned, she rose from his lap, alarmed at how her legs were trembling. In spite of Severus' bland, unreadable expression, she could see the concern for her unsteadiness. "It's the shock," she said, laughing shakily. "I've never given a declaration of love before, and I'd sort of hoped for a different reaction."

If Severus heard her, he gave no indication. *"Accio robe and mask!"* he intoned, and from his room flew a heavy, wool robe and a silver mask. He drew on the robe, and buttoned it quickly. Muttering under his breath, Severus narrowed his eyes at Mimi, and drew a symbol in the air.

Mimi felt as if unseen hands were lifting her arms and her hair, and a midnight black robe, trimmed in velvet and sable fur, slid over her clothes and wrapped itself around her as if it had been made for her. Those same unseen hands grasped her right foot, and finely made over-the-knee boots of black leather were drawn first onto her right foot, then the left.

The hood of the robe rose and attached itself magically to the front of her hair, and Severus stepped back to admire his handiwork. "That will do, I think."

Severus strode over to the fireplace, and grabbed a handful of Floo Powder and stated very clearly, "The Headmaster's Study." He threw the powder onto the hearth, and bright green flames engulfed him.

From where she stood, Mimi heard him say, "I have been summoned again, Albus. I will inform you of my return." He stood for a few moments, presumably listening to Dumbledore's reply, then spoke, "Understood."

He stepped out of the flames, shook off a few specks of dust, then looked at her. Now that the initial shock was over, she felt a calmness steeling over her. She thought about Severus, and how she could save him. How she had to save him, and she'd have to keep her wits about her.

He looked down at her, his unreadable mask in place. "A declaration of love? I am not sure I can believe in love now."

Mimi looked up at him, willing him to trust her. "It's okay, Severus. That doesn't matter. Love believes in you."

For a moment, the mask slipped and his look in his eyes nearly crushed her with his hope and fear, and the yearning to trust, to believe. Then the look was gone, and the imperious Severus Snape, disdainful of all things save his Slytherin hide, was safely in place. He stepped back, and nodded sagely.

"You make a fine goddess, Mimi Manderly."

Together they walked out to the Apparation point just beyond the boundaries of the school, and they once again kissed before they Apparated away, perhaps to die.

Six - Sizing Up The Pieces

Chapter 6 of 9

When the Goddess met Tom Riddle...and the Virgin met the Goddess...

The world flashed by Mimi in a series of swirls, eddies and buffeting winds, making her deaf, dumb and blind. It was like being on the worst, most nausea-inducing thrill ride at an amusement park, and she wondered how Wizarding folk ever got used to Apparation. She was terrified of being sick.

Just as she thought she would lose control and start screaming, or throwing up, or both, they stopped, and Mimi clutched at Severus' Death Eater robes like a drowning woman to a life preserver. He allowed her perhaps five seconds before he asked, "Can you stand?"

"Of course," she mumbled, and took a shaking step away from him. Strangely, she continued to move backward, against her will. "Guess not," she marveled, and Severus caught her before she landed on the ground.

"If future, think before you speak," he hissed, his voice rough with anxiety. She looked up at him unblinkingly, and he softened. "Apparation can sometimes cause dizziness; I should have warned you."

Mimi shrugged resignedly. "Spilled milk." She stepped back, and her knees decided to hold her up, at least on a trial basis. Her initial disorientation gone, Mimi looked around curiously. "Where exactly are we?"

Severus, too, looked around cautiously. "We are just outside the wards of the Dark Lord's abode. It is secret-kept and untraceable, as well as unplotable. One can only enter and exit when summoned." He donned his mask, and held out a gloved hand to her.

Mimi looked up at the imposing figure, standing impassively before her, his outstretched hand large and ominous in its black leather glove. In his robes and mask, Severus looked frightening, dreadful and capable of things Mimi was afraid to imagine. She thinly understood that he was preparing her. All of the Death Eaters would be dressed thus; she would be surrounded by these frightful figures. Severus did not want her to blow her story by recoiling in horror every time one of his 'brothers' loomed before her.

It was then that her courage threatened to leave her. Mimi was, after all, a mere mortal woman, a Muggle, who was from a different space and time. She might never leave this place tonight. Impervious to magic she may be, but Bellatrix was fond of her dagger, and that, you could be sure, would not bounce off Mimi's skin like magic.

Incredibly, the words to a song popped into her mind. *I love you in a place where there's no space or time... I love you, for in my life you are a friend of mine... and when my life is over, remember when we were together... we were alone, and I was singing this song for you...*

She didn't know then and would never really discover why those words chose to come to her at that particular time, but the sentiment behind them stiffened her spine, and she held out her hand to Severus. In her deep, melodious voice, dripping with imperious disdain, Mimi commanded, "Come, acolyte; take me to this Lord of yours."

She could not see his expression, of course, but she later swore the eyes blazing out from the mask shone with admiration and affection. He drew her hand into the crook of his arm, and replied in his smoothest, most silken voice, "It shall be done as you command, my goddess." He lowered his head to hers, and said more quietly, "But be warned, there is revel tonight, and it will be like walking into hell."

They entered the double doors at the entrance of the impressive manor house, and it took every ounce of Mimi's courage to step through. They had indeed entered the demon's lair.

The room was nothing more than a long corridor with a walkway in the middle. On either side of the path, an assortment of long tables was lined end to end, and upon them were images straight from Dante's Inferno. The room was bathed in an eerie, orange/red light that made the sights and smells lurid and terrifying. Severus walked her past women, partially clothed and naked, bound to tables while robed figures did unspeakable things to them. Some of the tables held men, and other men in robes brutalized them with tools that would sicken a Dominatrix.

As they stalked down the middle of this long hall of demons, Mimi forced herself to keep a casual, almost bored expression on her face. It was so hard, and she knew her nightmares had just been given some brand new material to chew over. The screams were often blood-curdling; sometimes they were screams of passion. Sometimes Mimi could not tell the difference.

There was a strange smell in the air. It was coppery and organic, and reminded Mimi of cornfields and slaughterhouses. She swallowed, and kept her stride with Severus, who had solicitously slowed his pace to enable her to walk majestically beside him. She felt his hand close over hers, and she forced herself to relax her grip on his arm. She had been digging her nails into his elbow.

As they neared the end of the long, narrow room, she heard a cry. "Please, please don't hurt me anymore!" Before she could stop herself, Mimi whirled to see a young girl, possibly seventeen, strapped to a table. Two Death Eaters were viciously raping her; one held her down, pulling at her raw and wounded nipples, while the other drove into her body with a cock encased in what appeared to be a leather condom, studded with large ridges. Mimi could see the blood-soaked sheath as he pulled from the girl, laughing.

His eye caught Mimi's, and he looked her up and down. "What are you looking at, witch?"

Before she could heed Severus' vice-grip on her hand, she replied, "A dirty old man in a clown suit."

His companion laughed, but the rapist withdrew from the prone body of the young, weeping girl. His bloodlust was heady; he was high on power. He took a step toward Mimi and Severus. "For a little witch, you have a big mouth."

Mimi sneered, looking pointedly at his crotch. "And for a big talker, you've got a tiny dick."

His wand was in her face in the blink of an eye. "One more word out of you and you'll get firsthand knowledge of just how impressive my dick truly is. I'll bet a dirty little witch like you would love it, wouldn't you?"

Mimi looked at him for about three seconds, and then the wand was in her hand. She had snatched it from his fingers before he could react, and to everyone's stunned disbelief, she snapped into three pieces as if it were no more than a twig, and threw it on the ground. The dragon heart-string core was the only thing holding the separate pieces together.

The room was instantly silent. Mimi looked down at the wand, and back at the Death Eater. "Typical. The more a man waves his wand, the less he knows what to do with it." She turned to Severus. "Come, pet," she said, deliberately turning away from the now limp Death Eater, who was still looking at his broken wand in silent incredulity. Mimi carefully trod on the broken pieces as she and Severus walked away from the grisly tableau.

Severus had watched the incident with mild amusement, coupled with nut-shriveling fear. He had warned her to keep her distance, and when Yaxley approached her, Severus had withdrawn a small wand he sometimes brought when summoned. It had belonged to another wizard, long dead, and although it did not have the power of his own, it worked well enough for him, and was untraceable.

He was about to silently cast a repelling charm, when Mimi snatched Yaxley's wand from his fingers and snapped it like it was nothing stronger than a piece of Blackpool rock.

Severus had never seen anyone break a wand with their bare hands. True, when a wizard was convicted of a heinous crime, they lost their rights and their wand was broken. It was, however, a symbolic gesture only. Once a master wand maker the likes of Olivander imbued a wand with its magic, it took a powerful spell, often invoked by several strong wizards at once, to weaken a wand enough to break it. And Mimi had made it look like the most brittle stick on earth.

He stroked her hand, and led her through the door to her private audience with the Dark Lord.

Voldemort sat on what could only be called a throne of skulls. It was placed in the middle of a dais on the far side of this room, and his entourage fanned out in a semi-circle from him.

Mimi had prepared herself to feel afraid in his presence, but when she saw him, she merely felt relief. He was exactly as she had always imagined him to be; of average build, of average height. At one time, he must have been handsome. Now he was a caricature of a man. His face was a ghastly greenish colour, and exhibited no feature that could be considered remotely human. He truly now was more snake than man.

Snake.

Shit, thought Mimi. *I forgot about the fucking snake! I might be able to fool these morons, but that snake could eat me in one gulp!*

Just as the thought crossed her mind, the snake Nagini appeared, and wound its way languidly around her and Severus, as if gliding along, looking for a snack. It raised its head and looked into her eyes challengingly. Mimi could see intelligence in its slitted eyes, and she forced herself to look disdainful.

"Tom, would mind asking your worm to seek its entertainment elsewhere? I find its breath revolting." The words flew from her without conscious thought, and Mimi felt almost as if someone else were speaking through her, telling her exactly what to say. She felt Severus stiffen beside her, but she refused to back down. She merely met Voldemort's gaze, and waited.

For a moment, they looked at one another, and Mimi held his gaze, refusing to be the first to back down. Finally, incredibly, Voldemort smiled. "Nagini, come here, you naughty girl! You're being rude to our guest." The huge snake slithered away reluctantly, but not before casting a knowing, reproachful glance Mimi's way.

Mimi stepped forward, and crossed her arms imperiously. She thought it best to wait and see what Voldemort would say, but she would be damned if she was going to give this tin god any respectful bows.

Severus, on the other hand, was under no such illusions. He knelt before the Dark Lord and kissed the hem of his robe. Voldemort accepted his accolade, but kept his attention on Mimi.

They were engulfed in preternatural silence, and Mimi took the opportunity to cast a contemptuous glance around the perimeter of the room. There were seven Death Eaters in attendance, besides Severus. Bellatrix LeStrange stood at Voldemort's right side. The others could have been stone for all the movement they exhibited.

Finally, when it seemed that the silence had reached the breaking point, and only needed the smallest vibration to crack it into a million pieces, Voldemort said, "Welcome to our little evening of entertainment, goddess." He spoke the last word with a slight emphasis, and Mimi could not discern if the word was spoken in jest or tribute. She decided to go with the latter, as a goddess would.

"Is that what this is, Tom? Feeding them bread and circuses, because that is all you can summon to nourish your troops?"

If her statement was taken as an insult, Voldemort gave no indication of such. He merely made a little bow of ascent. "A war is sometimes a series of thrilling moments marred by long stretches of boredom and ennui. I like to reward my Death Eaters, and to remind them of the pleasures to come, once our victory is complete."

He stood suddenly, and walked from his throne down to her. She looked up at him levelly. "So kind of you to ascend from on high to walk with me, Tom." Where were these words coming from? "I had hoped to speak with you in private, but what I have to say can just as easily be said here, with your minions about."

Voldemort looked at her carefully, and he closed the distance between them. Quietly, he hissed, "Who or what are you? Is it true that you cannot be harmed by magic?"

Mimi smiled at him with narrowed eyes. "Are you going to believe rumours, or are you going to seek out the truth yourself, Tom?"

"*Crucio!*" he shouted, and Mimi's smile widened. As predicted. Now there were sounds coming from the Death Eaters.

Mimi risked a look around at the other men in the room. Bellatrix was looking at her like she was an ogre. Without warning, she raised her wand to Severus, and sent the same curse toward him.

Severus fell to the ground in agony, and his screams turned Mimi's blood to ice. She looked in fury from Bella's lustful smile, to the wand in her hand, to the ray of light streaming from its tip into Severus' contorting frame.

Calmly, Mimi stepped in front of the beam of magic, and it dissipated instantly. Severus collapsed with a grunt of pain. Bella was no longer smiling.

"What manner of creature are you?" she hissed. She turned to Voldemort. "My Lord, how can this be? No mortal on earth can withstand my *Crucio!*"

Mimi walked up to the witch, a chilling smile on her face. "And therein lays the rub, Bellatrix. No mere mortal can withstand your mighty power. Put two and two together, witch!"

As if led by an unseen conductor, every Death Eater in the room aimed their favourite hex or curse at Mimi, and every hex and curse rolled through her and dispersed.

She turned to Voldemort. "Are you quite finished? I didn't come here to play parlour tricks with your dogs, Tom!"

She knelt by Severus', and picked up the Death Eater mask which had fallen from his face as he writhed under the *Cruciatus* curse. Grasping his arms, Mimi helped him from the floor. Her heart was twisted; it was truly awful to watch him being tortured. "Be healed, my lovely pet," she said in a soothing voice. Severus, who was still reeling from the *Crucio*, forced his face into calm lines.

Voldemort watched her carefully. "And how did you come to adopt our dear Severus as your pet... goddess?"

Now that's more like it, Mimi thought. *He's not sure what I am, but he's pretty sure I'm not a mortal.* She shrugged. "Why do you need to know? Where were you when I made the world, Tom Riddle?" She turned to Bellatrix, who still watched her with the unnerved eye of a madwoman.

"Enjoy your life well, Bellatrix Black. You will torture one Mudblood too many, and her mother will strike you down in the shadow of the castle."

"Prophecies?" Voldemort hissed. "Are you here to tell me of my future, goddess?"

Mimi drew herself up to her full height. *Here we go*, she thought. "Your future is already prophesied, Tom. I am merely here to watch and favour whom I will. I have observed the boy Potter."

She shrugged indifferently. "He has powers that you do not fully understand. But you are the great Lord Voldemort, after all, and your powers are formidable, when, of course, you're not indulging these leeches you call Death Eaters."

Bellatrix cried, "How dare you "

"I DARE," Mimi shot back, "because I can. I have seen the future, and it will be."

"Will. Be. What?" Voldemort said, his patience waning. "You speak in riddles. No wizard can harm you. Are you an oracle, or are you immortal?"

Mimi smiled. "I am who I am. I have powers beyond your rational thought. I know the future. But I have returned to this earth for one simple reason. I, like your precious

Death Eaters, suffer from the occasional ennui." She pushed her lip out in a charming little parody of a pout.

"I am bored, Tom. I am ready to be entertained. Not with your petty depravity and twisted pleasures. I will leave your minions to those lofty pursuits."

Mimi laughed, and reached up to Severus' cheek and stroked it proprietorially. "I can entertain myself quite pleasurably in that manner. Can I not, my dark lover?"

Severus, playing his part well, kissed her hand worshipfully. "Yes, my goddess," he said, his voice still breathy and unsteady, as if remembering the 'entertainment' he'd provided for her. His delivery was due more in part from the cursework, but he was and had ever been a good actor in the Dark Lord's presence.

Voldemort's eyes snapped with fire. "And I am your entertainment as well?" he said, anger crackling from him.

Mimi removed her hand from Severus' and crossed to Voldemort. "Tom, I could tell you how the end game plays. But do you really wish to know? Wouldn't you like to make your own history, your own destiny? I will tell you this: I will sit back, and watch, and wait. I will assist the one who is worthy and deserving of my assistance. If you and your Death Eaters prove worthy, I will smite the boy myself, in your name."

Voldemort watched her, entranced. Mimi nodded, and leaned in closer, wrinkling her nose at the corpulent smell of him. Her voice was seductively enticing. "Think of it, Tom. You will reign forever over the world, as the living embodiment of the goddess' favour. I will grant you these things."

Voldemort stepped back. "For what price, goddess? You are giving me nothing more than I can already achieve."

Mimi laughed. "Can you, Tom? Can you really? Can you withstand the Avada Kedavra Curse?"

Voldemort looked at her for almost thirty seconds. Suddenly, he raised his wand. "Can you?"

Several things happened at once. As if in slow motion, Mimi saw Voldemort shift his aim, and his wand pointed toward Severus' chest.

At that second, Mimi jumped in front of Severus and held open her arms like a shield, as Voldemort bellowed, *Avada Kedavra!*"

The blazing green light shot from his wand, and Mimi stood her ground as the Killing Curse hit her squarely in the chest.

The room was as still as death, as Mimi walked up to Voldemort. Her eyes were snapping with fury. She did not dare look at Severus. She knew she would cry. Instead, she focused all her attention on the Dark Lord.

It gave her some satisfaction that every Death Eater in the room looked frightened, including Bellatrix. Even Voldemort was stunned. With a voice as cold as death, Mimi said, "Is this your idea of 'getting on my good side', Tom?"

While she had Voldemort distracted, Mimi turned in fury to Bellatrix, and with a passing glance to Severus, Mimi thrust her hand in the air toward the dark-haired woman, and Bella was thrown across the room. Thanking her lucky stars that Severus had anticipated what she was going to do, and wondering how on earth she'd known he would make it happen, Mimi turned to Voldemort.

"My payment? You wound me, Tom. Here I thought you understood the gift I'd bestowed upon you, and you repay me by trying to kill my favourite toy."

She walked toward Severus, who stood regally straight. His expression could not have been calmer. He looked as if he were attending a small, rather dull garden party. She stroked his chest.

"Here is my payment, Tom. I will leave you to posture and preen on the battlefield. I will wait until you are ready for my intervention. I will grant you victory. In the meantime," she continued, and stood with her back to Severus. "You will leave this one alone."

"Why?" This time, it was one of the male Death Eaters. Bella was still out cold behind the dais, where Severus had thrown her with his silent Protego.

Mimi turned away from him and faced Tom. "You will leave this one alone. If you do not, perhaps I will be forced to give the Potter boy further consideration."

Voldemort's inhuman eyes bored into hers. "Why Severus Snape?"

Mimi shrugged with a smug little smile. "He amuses me, but I will not be amused when I come to play and find him injured, as when I first came to this place." A brainwave hit Mimi, and she went with it, having no idea if she was about to drive a huge truck through the hole in her story.

"It was his pain and his devotion to you that summoned me here."

Tom was surprised. "Severus summoned you from the air?" He turned to the dark wizard. "How did you do this, Severus?"

To his credit, Severus was as cool as Mimi had ever seen him. Lying with the truth, she said, "He was distressed that he had given you cause to punish him. On that night, he called out to me in his sorrow, and I answered him. It's been very enjoyable pretending to be the mortal right under Albus' crooked old nose." Severus bowed to Mimi, and knelt between her and the Dark Lord.

"I gratefully serve you, My Lord, and my goddess has rewarded my devotion to you. I do not know why, but I am favoured because I am yours, My Lord." Severus looked up at the Dark Lord with his heart and soul shining in his luminous, black eyes.

They were as beautiful and fervent as a martyr, and glistened like black ink. Even Mimi believed him for a moment. She rewarded him with a slow, sensual caress of his cheek.

"And it will remain so, Tom," Mimi said. "I will have no more torture for this one. It does not please me. Surely you have bigger game to hunt than to weaken your own troops."

Voldemort gave her a sly look. "Troops must have discipline, goddess. Sometimes they must be reminded of their true purpose."

"As I am reminding you of yours! If you wish to assume the ranks of the everlasting, you will do as I say, Tom Riddle! Clean the muck from your ears! I am giving you the keys to deification, and you waste your time in pointless, petty evils!"

Mimi turned to Severus. "Come, pet. I have grown weary of trying to make this one understand. You gave me reason to believe him worthy of my time."

"Only I am worthy to join the gods!" Voldemort bellowed, enraged. "I am the one you seek!"

Mimi turned back. She gave him a look of cool appraisal. "Then do we have an accord? I will not make my offer again, Tom Riddle."

Voldemort raised his wand. "By my wand, I swear it." He looked at Severus, then back to Mimi. "While you favour me, no harm will come to your chosen one."

It was an oath with a lot of wiggle room, but there was nothing Mimi could do about it. It would have to do for now, and by the time the battle was engaged, hopefully she could keep Severus out of harm's way until it was all over. Now they could plan for the future. It suddenly occurred to Mimi that she'd very likely just changed the course of history. Did it mean that she could change Severus' destiny as well?

"Very well," she said, arrogance pouring from her in waves. "Watch. Wait. At the appropriate time, I will come for you." Mimi turned on her heel and stalked out of the room.

She knew that Severus was right behind her. She could feel every eye on them. She held her hands out toward the door, and like water, they parted to let them through. The anti-chamber was quiet now and Death Eater and victim alike watched Mimi leave the Dark Lord's presence, her consort by her side.

The two of them were silent until they reached the Apparation point, and Severus put his arms around her and they spun away. Arriving back at Hogwarts' grounds, Severus held her for a moment past what was strictly necessary. Numb with relief, Mimi held onto him, and gradually, he pulled her up into his arms, until her feet were barely touching the ground.

"You're mad, woman! You're insane!" He was kissing her feverishly, his kisses raining down on her lips, her cheeks, her nose, her eyes, her forehead. Each kiss was frantic and wild with relief and fear. "What on earth possessed you to say those things?" he moaned, between kisses.

Laughing, Mimi returned his ardor, and held his face in her hands. "I don't know, Severus! It was as if someone was telling me what to say! It was as if there was a voice in my head, directing what to say!"

They ran to the dungeons, their feet swift and feather light. Both were exhilarated and giddy. Severus had never returned from an audience with the Dark Lord with such a feeling of hope that the Light might actually win. It gave him wings, and as he looked at the diminutive woman who'd orchestrated it, he skidded to a halt.

"What's wrong, Severus?" she said, breathless and elated. She sobered as she looked into his face. "What is it?"

He looked down at her, breathing hard, and swallowed. "You... the Dark Lord cast the Killing Curse. If not for you, I would be dead." He looked at her in wonder. "I would be dead tonight, if not for you."

Mimi shook her head, and stroked his hair. "No, love. I was the reason he cast the curse in the first place. I was the one who almost got you killed tonight." She looked away. "I'm sorry."

His large hand cupped her chin, and raised her face to his. "Don't be. I was saved. You saved me, goddess." He allowed himself a smirk. "You were simply magnificent."

He leaned down to her and kissed her. It was a kiss of such devastating sweetness it made Mimi's knees feel weak, and she whimpered softly as his lips, gentle and tender, moved against hers, coaxing them apart, sliding a long, sensuous tongue into her mouth. When Mimi slid her fingers through his hair and plied her own tongue against his, he moaned softly, and pushed her against the wall, enveloping her, kissing her hard.

He slanted his mouth against hers and grasped her head, pulling her closer, forcing her open to him, plunging his tongue into her mouth to battle with his. She could feel his erection against her stomach, hard and needy and hot, and it matched her own aching passion for him.

Finally they broke away, panting, and Severus backed away from Mimi. Even as his eyes blazed with desire, he was shaking his head. "I don't... I I don't think I can "

Mimi awarded him a hot little smile as she approached him, and her fingers quickly unbuttoned his Death Eater robe and pushed it from his shoulders. "You don't have to do anything you don't want, Severus. But I think you want the same thing I do."

His face was flushed, and he looked defiant, almost angry. "You know what I am, Mimi. I don't know if I can last."

Mimi smiled. She took him by the hand and led him over to his chair. When she knelt between his legs, he exhaled harshly, and she could hear hope and despair in that desolate sigh. "It doesn't matter, Severus," she said, softly, and unbuttoned his trousers. "Let me do this for you. I want to, so much."

He sat as still as a stone as she eased his trousers down his hips. She unbuttoned the last few buttons of his shirt, and pushed the sides away from his body. He was pale and slender, with a smattering of black hair, trailing from his navel to his crotch. He smelled delicious, like patchouli and cedar and spices.

He whimpered as she touched his cock for the first time. It was large, and uncut, and Mimi smiled at him as she gave it a firm stroke. He gripped the arms of his chair; the room was silent except for his harsh breathing. She leaned forward, and placed a soft, loving kiss on the tip, and licked the fluid that had seeped from it.

Severus hissed, and exhaled a quivering breath as he grasped her hand. Mimi looked up into his face, and was stunned at the level of desire in his gaze. His eyes were fire, and she felt as if her body burned from his gaze. No man had ever looked at her with such desperate, erotic intensity.

"I won't last long," he whispered, shamed. He closed his eyes, and his face was alight with helpless arousal.

"Severus, look at me," she replied, and reluctantly he opened his eyes to meet hers. She smiled.

"Watch me. Take as little or as long as you like, because I'm just getting started here." She slid his erect member between her soft hands, and he moaned longingly. "We have all the time in the world, my love."

Mimi had always considered herself a good lover, and she enjoyed oral sex, but no oral sex she'd ever performed was as sweet and pleasurable as the first time she slid Severus Snape's cock into her mouth, and heard him cry out, "Oh gods, that's so good! Oh fuck..." His head fell back, and she pulled away from his cock, sucking hard, and he grasped the back of her head.

"Please don't stop! Oh, gods, Mimi, please..." he moaned, and Mimi purred, a low, vibrating sound in her throat, and he whimpered helplessly as she took him as deeply as possible, reveling in the taste and the smell of him.

Severus felt as if he had never known what it was to be a man, a real man, until this moment. He had heard the lusty boasts of schoolmates, of friends, of his fellow Death Eaters, but until that moment he'd never had a woman's mouth on him.

It was indescribable; hot and dark and wet and tight; he could feel her slippery tongue sliding over his shaft even as she pulled away from him. It was as if every single nerve ending in his groin had been ignited, causing his toes to curl and his nipples to crinkle painfully into little hard buds on his chest.

Mimi had met the Dark Lord on his terms, and Voldemort had called her a goddess. Now, she was on her knees before Severus, worshiping his cock, making him feel like a god. He felt as if he could live forever.

The crippling pleasure of it overwhelmed his senses; the combination of the wild meeting with the Dark Lord, and this incredible woman stepping between him and death was coupled with the intoxicating feel of Mimi, on her knees, sucking him, stroking him expertly, painting his rigid cock with her talented lips. She ran her tongue up the underside of his erection, gently scraping the ridge under the head of his prick with her teeth, and he almost swooned.

He was making embarrassing noises, but he could not stop himself. At this moment, Dumbledore could walk into his chambers with the entire Gryffindor Quidditch team and Severus would not care. The so-called Golden Trio could appear and engage in a menage a trois and Severus would cheerfully ignore them. Nothing, short of death, could hold back his orgasm. A dozen dark passion-filled fantasies swam into his mind, and he vowed he would experience them all with Mimi if she would but allow it.

He could feel his balls tighten, and just as he thought he might be able to hold onto this exquisite pleasure for a few more precious moments, Mimi slid her long fingers over his sac, and began to massage it, as she swirled her tongue over the head of his straining cock. He threaded his long fingers through her dark hair, and he began to ride against her, his hips bucking to meet her beckoning mouth.

He tried manfully to hold on. He tried every trick he'd ever heard from every man who'd spoken of these things, and none worked, because in reality he didn't want to stop it, as much as he wanted it to never stop.

A gentle finger slid up past his perineum and tenderly circled his anus, and panicking, Severus whispered, "No...don't... oh Merlin..." He gave into her as Mimi's slender

finger pressed against the puckered hole. She made a low growling sound in her throat, and it vibrated throughout his groin in the space between her blistering hot mouth and her insistent finger sliding into the unfurling bud of his rectum.

Pure bliss rushed down his spine into his crotch; slowly at first, then with lightning speed, and Severus cried out, "No! Not yet! I'm not ready!" It was too late, and as Mimi buried him balls deep in her luscious mouth, his orgasm burst from him, and melted his groin into molten lava.

Every spitting, surging, pumping thrust of his cock wrenched a cry of release from him, his voice sweet and innocently boyish. His back arched in a rictus of pleasure and his thighs clamped against her shoulders. He whimpered as ecstasy almost tipped into agony, and finally he was able to ride the sensation like a wave to its final, sense-stealing conclusion.

His grip on her hair was almost painful, but Mimi was unmindful of any discomfort. Watching this darkly beautiful man, transported, outside himself in his unspeakable rapture, almost made Mimi climax herself. It was beyond anything she'd seen, heard or experienced. Severus Snape was the embodiment of pagan, mystical eroticism.

He lay sprawled in his chair, boneless, panting as if he'd run from the dungeon to the Astronomy Tower. Mimi sat back, swallowing the last of his rather impressive issue. It tasted bitter and sharp, and she realized he'd probably not allowed himself to orgasm in a very long time. What a bleak life this man had led.

He sat with his head leaning against the back of the chair, a faint line between his silky brows, as if concentrating, even as he came down from his endorphin-saturated high. His mouth was parted, and a smile played over lips. They were full and sensuously wet and swollen from biting on them in a herculean effort not to climax too quickly. His eyes were lidded and heavy with satisfaction, and glowed like embers.

"Gods, woman," he rasped, and then cleared his throat, "you have sucked the life out of me."

Mimi merely grinned, then chuckled. She sat back on her heels. "I wish you could see yourself. You are stunningly beautiful."

He opened a skeptical eye, and raised a delicate brow. In a more characteristic tone, he replied, "I think your mind is addled from your performance earlier this evening. I have never been, nor will I ever be, beautiful, much less stunningly so."

Mimi cocked her head to one side. "Well I say you are beautiful, and since I am She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed, you have to agree with me, whether you like it or not, Severus Snape."

He laughed, a silent hitch of his chest. "Yes, my goddess. After what you've just done to me, I think it would be foolhardy to disagree with you." He looked down at her, and his expression softened. "That's a hard floor, Mimi." He held out his hands. "Come and sit on my lap," he whispered, and Mimi shivered as she grasped his hands and allowed him to pull her into his waiting lap.

He kissed her, his lips slow and sensuous, as his hands moved over her body. "I want to make love to you," he murmured, between kisses. "Teach me, goddess. Teach me how to give you pleasure."

She smiled into his dark eyes. "I'll tell you anything you want to know."

That almost-smile flitted over his lips again. Almost flirtatiously, he said in his silkiest voice, "Then, goddess, teach me how to make you scream."

A/N: Mimi's words of inspiration were from *A Song For You*, words and music by Leon Russell

Seven - Fitting The Lid

Chapter 7 of 9

From ecstasy to agony in sixty seconds...

A/N: Thought I'd pop in halfway through to remind any litigious soul out there that I make no money from this story, and all characters, with the exception of Mimimanderly herself, belong to JK Rowling, who let my reason for reading her books bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, or the Boathouse, or wherever Hollywood put him. He still died...or did he?

Please note this chapter contains explicit sexual conduct.

They say you always remember your first time. For Mimi, it had been tragically unmemorable, and so she thought it only fitting that she do whatever she had in her power to make this one count for Severus. She would certainly never forget the sight of him, lying on his back, his black hair spread like angels wings over his pillow. She vowed to memorise every sigh, every sweet moan of pleasure, every look of blissful abandon she drew from him.

For several moments after his first climax, they sat on his chair together, gently touching, caressing one another. "Teach me how to make you scream," he'd said, a soft light of wonder gentling his stern features. He slowly undressed her, savouring this first time, wanting to remember it as much as Mimi.

She allowed him to unbutton the heavy robe he'd conjured for her. She looked so fragile against the large hands that slid the heavy garment from her shoulders, allowing it to pool at her waist. Severus leaned forward and kissed the satiny skin of her throat, warmed by her soft sighs of contentment.

Her hands stroked him continuously; he had never been touched like this by anyone, and he was already wondering how he would be able to live without it. For this was surely a dream, and he would never know this kind of rapture again.

The black silk blouse underneath the robe whispered its invitation, and Severus unbuttoned it with hands that felt oddly clumsy and unworthy. Mimi was ever patient, and when he could bring himself to look up at her face, she smiled her encouragement. He concentrated on his task, and soon the blouse parted, revealing smooth, flawless skin as pale and wholesome as fresh cream. He smiled at her red satin bra; it seemed completely fitting that she would wear such an inflammatory garment. He smirked at her. "Why am I not surprised at you wearing red?" He stroked the sides of her breast tentatively, and when she nodded, his hands moved to her breasts, and he inhaled sharply as her nipples hardened beneath the fabric.

He could feel them against the palms of his hands, and it moved him unbearably. He squeezed her small breasts gently, then a little more roughly, as his own passion increased. She moaned softly at his touch, and reached around her back and released the garment. With less than steady hands, Severus peeled the red bra from her

shoulders and could not prevent a gasp of longing as her lovely breasts were uncapped. He looked up, his eyes full of entreaty, and she cupped his face in her hands.

She closed her eyes as she guided him to her waiting nipple, and mewled softly as his mouth closed over it eagerly. Mimi could not stop herself from moaning helplessly as his warm tongue slid over her taut, rucked flesh. It was all the invitation he needed, and he surged against her, sucking and tugging. From her vantage point, Mimi watched his emotions play across his face; uncertainty, bliss, contentment. His beautifully shaped mouth was red and lovely as it pouted around her taut nipple.

She gave him all the time he wanted to explore her, to explore his own needs and desires, and he gratefully experimented. A nip of his teeth elicited a soft cry from her; sucking hard while flicking his tongue over the rigid little bud made her moan and shudder and undulate against him. He found that changing the pressure and being unpredictable made her wriggle charmingly in his lap, and when he had discovered all the ways to make her keen and pull him closer against her fragrant body, he moved to the opposite breast and began again.

He became more assertive, and his grip on her back tightened, until she pulled him away from her. He made a sound of uncertain protest, until he looked into her eyes and saw the raw lust in them. With a growl, he ground his mouth against hers, sucking her tongue into his mouth, and he found her nipples and rolled them between his long fingers as his tongue battled with her, plundering her sweet mouth. She broke away from him again, and for long moments they looked at one another, mastering their passions. His fingers still pinched and tugged at her nipples. He wasn't even aware he was doing it.

"I think you'd better take me to bed now, Severus," Mimi said, smiling, her voice husky and breathless. He nodded, and cupped his hands under her bottom, lifting her as if she weighed no more than a baby. She put her head against his shoulder as he carried her into his bed chamber.

It was a modest but comfortable room, with a large bed. Four posts rose to the ceiling, and a dark duvet covered the mattress. It looked inviting, but he froze for a moment, as if suddenly aware of what was about to happen, and his old insecurities threatened to surface again.

"Steady, love," she whispered into his ear. "Everything up until now has been incredible. I won't let the side down."

He looked at her in faint surprise. "How could you? I'm afraid of disappointing you." He was dismayed at her laughter, but then realized that it was not directed at him.

"Oh, Severus," she laughed gently, then placed a soft kiss on his lips. "You have a big, delicious cock, you're a fantastic kisser and you've set my nipples on fire with your mouth. I highly doubt you're going to do anything disappointing. Your provenance is very promising."

He lowered her until her feet once again touched the ground, and she stepped away from him. She let the robe drop to the floor, leaving her clad only in a black skirt and the boots he'd given her to wear. He stood very still, his eyes locked to hers. She smiled. "Undress for me, Severus. The old-fashioned way. No magic." She felt her heart pounding. "I want to watch you."

Rather self-consciously, Severus moved a few steps away from her and unbuttoned his waistcoat, then his shirt. After toeing off his boots and removing his socks, he slid his trousers down his slim hips and removed them as well. Mimi watched in smiling appreciation as his long, slender thighs came into view, and his lovely cock returned to life as he removed first his waist coat and then his shirt.

He was a tall, thin man, but years of stalking the halls of Hogwarts and lifting heavy cauldrons had given his legs and chest power and definition. His pale skin was opalescent in the firelight, and there were numerous scars over his body which made Mimi's loving heart ache for him. He flicked his long hair from his eyes with an impatient gesture, and looked down at her, his expression smoothly unreadable. Mimi saw a man, lovely in shape and grace, and what's more, he had no idea how lovely he truly was.

"God, oh, god," she whispered, and closed her eyes, shaking her head, her heart and body aching for him.

For a moment, he was silent. Then in a voice so vulnerable it sounded like that of a boy, he whispered, "Why did you say that? Am I so repulsive to look at?"

She looked up into his eyes. Her heart was drumming in her chest. Incredulously, she replied, "I said it because you're so beautiful to look at."

He could have been a statue, so still he became. Mimi stepped up to him, and placed a warm, open mouthed kiss on his left nipple, and it stiffened beneath her lips. He hissed, and his hands floated up to caress her. She murmured against his chest, "I can see I'm going to have to spend a lot of time with you naked, Severus Snape. Someone's got to prove to you what a stunning man you are."

She could feel his mouth against her hair. "And yet, you are still wearing far too many clothes. Mimi Manderly," he purred silkily, and knelt down to remove her long boots. She leaned on him for balance as he removed first the right, then the left. His large hands slid up the outside of her thighs, and he smiled. "Am I to assume you are wearing matching undergarments, goddess?" He looked up at her with a slight glint in his eye.

She smiled down at him mischievously. "I suppose you would." Unable to stop herself, she added, "That is, if I owned any."

He made a rather uncaring gesture of query. "Any matching knickers?"

She gave him a slow grin. "Any knickers, full stop." It was worth it to feel his fingers twitch against her thighs, then move more rapidly up to her hips, where they met no undergarments on the way. She laughed at his expression. "I don't own a single pair, Severus."

"Merlin," he whispered under his breath, and removed his hands so that he could locate the buttons of her skirt. He rapidly pulled it down around her feet, and sat back on his heels, looking at his goddess for the first time. No, she did not wear any knickers. And she was shaved completely hairless.

He clenched his fingers, and Mimi realized it was because he wanted to touch her, and was afraid that, in his own eagerness, he would possibly hurt her. She put her arms around his shoulders, and drew him against her, and he made a soft sound as flesh met flesh.

As he rested his head against her flat stomach, she ran her fingers through his raven hair. "All I want is to give you pleasure, Severus. To make you understand the depth of my emotions for you. My pleasure is in seeing you enjoying yourself." She braided her fingers through his long hair, and he unconsciously leaned into her embrace. "I want you to know you are loved."

To her surprise, he looked up at her with eyes that were shining conspicuously. "I do know, Mimi. I know that now."

He rose to his feet, and lifting her effortlessly into his arms, Severus carried her over to his bed, and laid her down on the duvet. Looking down at her with eyes that shone like obsidian, he crooned, "Teach me, goddess. Teach me how to give you pleasure."

Mimi felt his hands sliding up the inside of her legs, pushing them apart, and she smiled as he gazed at the apex of her thighs. He looked as if all his Christmas wishes had just come true. Mimi could not prevent a moan of yearning from leaving her lips at his first, tentative touch, and she sighed, "Don't be afraid to play, Severus. Please touch me. Do whatever you like, and then I'll show you what I like."

Seeing the hungry permission in her eyes, Severus lowered his face to her mons, and placed the softest, sweetest kiss on her bare mound. "Oh, god," Mimi laughed breathlessly. "I'm a dead woman."

The smile he gave her at that candid statement nearly brought her over the edge again. She knew she was already embarrassingly wet from sucking him, and her core felt as if it were on fire. She wanted to close her eyes and enjoy herself, but nothing was going to be as enjoyable as watching Severus.

He approached this, as always, like a man who loved research and learning. He had read about sex, of course. Several potions required the use of semen, of virginal blood, and female secretions, and he knew that certain biological reactions took place when certain parts of a female anatomy were stimulated.

He was off the map now.

No book had ever really prepared him for the enticing scent of her, or how her labia, glistening with her juices, looked so incredibly erotic. Nothing had prepared him for how wonderful it felt to slide his fingers down the seam of her slit, and feel them yield to him. The soft flesh blushed with arousal, and he could literally see it swell and part, beckoning him closer.

He caressed the skin of her thigh, which felt softer than the silken blouse she had worn, and she spread her thighs wider to accept him. Finally, when he could no longer resist, he laved his long tongue from perineum to clitoris, and she cried out and shivered.

Gods, no one had told him how sweet a woman would taste.

Mimi had told him to explore, to play, to learn. She had not realized how much she had set herself up to be slowly driven mad. It was the most arousing form of foreplay, allowing him to simply learn her body, to experiment.

Severus parted her labia with his thumbs, and made a little soft sound of delight, which puffed his breath across her sensitized flesh. He could see the little clitoris, peeking from its throne of furred flesh like a little flower. He touched it gently, and Mimi twitched. He flicked it with his tongue, and she cried out. He drew it into his mouth with a gentle sucking pull, and she screamed.

His moan of bliss sent vibrations throughout her body, and he swirled his tongue over the little bud, as she had done over the head of his cock. "Severus!" she cried, and clutched the bedclothes. "Oh... oh shit! I'm going to..."

Mimi's world dissolved into a wail of pure pleasure as her orgasm flung her over the precipice. She clamped her thighs against her shoulders, begging him not to stop, crying out to gods she no longer believed in because she was now seared into heaven by his wicked mouth and tongue.

Severus pressed her abdomen against the bed, and felt her clit drumming against his tongue like the frantic heartbeat of a wild animal. She bathed his mouth and chin with a gush of warmth and wetness, and he lapped at it like it was nourishment. Instinct and understanding led his fingers against her opening, and he nearly came with her as his finger slid into the tight, sopping channel that quivered and undulated around it, and he dimly wondered what it would feel like around his cock.

In that moment, he resolved to find out. Making Mimi come was going to be his crusade.

He could feel her coming back down from the climax he had given her (*he had given her!*), and she lay panting, one arm flung over her head, the other hand braided into his hair, holding him to his task. He had not even been aware of it until now.

Slowly, she raised her head, and looked at him with eyes dazed with pleasure. With a breathless laugh, she said, "Are you sure you've never done that before?"

His voice was smooth, but faintly chiding. "I'm almost sure I would have remembered." He shook his head, and licked his lips appreciatively. "Sometimes I think you really are a goddess, come to earth. I think more likely this is a wonderful dream, and I pray I never awaken."

"I'll be in your dream if you'll be in mine, love," she smiled, and sat up. "Come here, you."

She drew him down to her, kissing him deeply, reveling in the feel of his perfect mouth. She could taste herself on his tongue, and it mingled with his own juices from moments before. He was a warm and welcome weight on her, and she wanted him inside her so badly she could taste it.

She felt his cock, long and ready, at her thigh, and she could feel his growing trepidation. She laughed inwardly. Why was it that every man in the world, even one so unique and powerful as Severus Snape, had performance anxiety? Mimi decided that, for his first time, she'd take charge, and make it count.

"Lie down," she whispered, and he rolled on his back, looking up at her expectantly. Mimi stroked his lean torso, placing warm, whispering kisses over his belly, her hands ghosting over his skin like butterfly wings. His cock, which had remained rock hard, jutted proudly upward, and Severus felt agonizingly vulnerable. Even at this time, he would not have been surprised for her to suddenly jump up and run from the room, laughing at his exposed state.

Something in his body must have told Mimi this, because she looked up into his face, and stroked his cheek with the back of her hand. "Relax, love," she whispered, and rose to straddle his belly. "I want you to enjoy this as much as I know I will. All you have to do is hold me, touch me."

Looking up into her lovely face, Severus felt almost outside himself with desire. He could feel her nether lips, silky soft and dripping, leaving little wet kisses down his belly, as she slithered down toward his raging erection. It felt painfully hard, even after his blistering orgasm before, and he wondered if he would still be so sensitive he wouldn't last long enough to please her. Suddenly making her come on his cock was the only thing he wanted.

"Take yourself in hand," she murmured, "And guide yourself. I'll show you."

Severus' hand was trembling as he grasped his cock, and Mimi lowered her body until she was poised over him. He gasped as he felt her wet, tight opening yield to him, encasing the head of his swollen member. Mimi's hand closed over his, and she pulled it away.

She slid sweetly home.

"Oh Merlin, Merlin," he moaned, his eyes wide, as his cock was enveloped in her impossibly hot, tight cunt. Mimi's head fell back as she, too, gasped at the sensation of their first joining.

"So... big," she whimpered, and sat back, allowing him to impale her completely. They both moaned at the exquisite sensation of being locked together, feeling as if their souls were as fused as their bodies.

Severus wanted desperately to thrust upward, but the effort of not coming was almost impossible. He moved tentatively, and Mimi looked down at him and grinned. "Oh, Severus. You've been hiding your light under a bushel." And with that, she rose and ground down onto his waiting cock, just to hear him bellow.

They moved together, finding their rhythm, and Severus grasped her waist. "Oh, goddess, don't stop, I beg you..." He looked like a porn star, his hair fanned out on the pillow, his pale, angular face lightly sheened with sweat. Mimi pressed against him, covering his face with kisses, and he wrapped his arms around her waist and began to drive up into her body, hard.

Her cry of ecstasy echoed through the room, and in spite of the unbearable pleasure of her riding his cock, he held on, wanting to return the bliss she'd given him, the acceptance, and the love.

She was close, he could tell. Her eyes were glassy and unfocused, and he could feel her growing even tighter, if such a thing were possible. Her lovely breasts were rosy with arousal, her nipples rock hard. She was moaning his name as if in a delirium, and he pressed her close to his chest, driving so hard into her body that he could feel his cock battering against her womb.

"Sing to me, goddess," he moaned, barely aware of what he was saying. "Cry your pleasure to me. Come on my cock, Mimi... Merlin, woman, come with me!"

He felt that melting, sizzling fire bursting within, and just as he thought he had failed, he felt her cunt clench around him like a vice, rippling around his cock like a sucking mouth, and she screamed his name over and over with each clenching pulse, and Severus felt her drag his orgasm from him and he slammed into her, crying out to her with each shuddering thrust, until he was left a shaking, moaning limp doll, holding on to the woman who lay against his chest, trembling, and kissing his sweat-soaked chest as if he were the most treasured of possessions.

The sheer release of their lovemaking exhausted him, and he realized that he had just made love to a woman, and she had made him come twice, and he had given her two breathtaking orgasms as well. She was kissing his face, thanking him with her little mewling cries, and he felt as if he would never be physically able to rise from the bed again.

He looked up into her face, and saw such trust and affection glowing in her eyes, and she was smiling down at him with such joy on her face that it unmanned him completely, and he rose to kiss her swollen lips as tears filled his eyes.

"Oh, sweetie, don't cry!" she said, and proceeded to kiss the tears that mingled with the sweat on his temples. "It was so beautiful, but I don't want you to cry."

"I cry when I am most moved," he said, simply; he stared straight up at the ceiling, unable to meet her gaze. He was afraid he would break down completely; this way he could at least master his emotions.

Mimi continued to kiss each tear as it fell, her heart so full she was almost in tears herself. Making love with Severus Snape had been the single most beautiful act she'd ever performed, and all she could think of was wanting him again. She realized that Severus was an addiction; and she wanted him more now than she had before they made love.

Watching his face, so open with abandon, so full of passion that she'd given him, was the most arousing sight she'd ever witnessed. And when he'd begged her to come with him, her body had simply obeyed its master's voice. She could have no more stopped her orgasm than Knute had stopped the incoming tide.

Gradually, their hearts slowed from the galloping pace of their lovemaking, and their breathing quieted, and Mimi was acutely aware of Severus caressing her body, stroking her skin with his large, warm hands. Now and again he would kiss her shoulder, or her forehead, and Mimi could hear his heartbeat grow steady and calm again.

She raised up and looked deeply into his liquid black eyes, and felt tears threaten again. "You are the most amazing lover, Severus." He lowered his eyes at her words of praise, and a smile flitted across his lips. She kissed it, capturing it forever in her mouth. "Do you know how special you are? Do you have any idea how privileged I feel, being your first lover?"

He cupped her face in his large hand, and touched his lips to hers in the sweetest of kisses. "And the last. I will have no other lover."

She felt her heart stutter in her chest. "You can't know that." He gave her a rare smile, and she took her weight from his body, feeling his spent cock slide from her. He pulled her tightly to his side, and she nestled within his arms, resting her head on his shoulder. For several moments, neither moved nor spoke, and Mimi thought he might have drifted off to sleep.

He surprised her by suddenly raising her hand to his lips, and kissing each finger. When he spoke, his lovely velvet voice washed over her, and reverberated in his chest. "I swear to you, Mimi. I'm not a man who seeks out sex, obviously. I would have never initiated this; I know what I look like, in spite of your declarations of my beauty."

He sighed. "Women do not look at me that way. They never have. So I pushed them away, before I was pushed. When I lost Lily, I no longer felt worthy to even entertain the thought of another woman. I was unwanted, and ugly, and I accepted it."

She raised herself from his shoulder and looked him squarely in the eyes. "Severus Snape, you are none of those things."

He smiled at her. "To you, I am not. And I do not feel that way about myself, when you look at me. From the moment you literally dropped out of the sky and we found you here, something rang inside me, like the chiming of a bell. I didn't want to accept it, but I soon realized I could not ignore it."

He looked into her eyes. "You told me that it didn't matter whether or not I believed in love, that love believed in me." He stroked her cheek, and planted another sweet kiss on her lips. He drew her back down to lie against his shoulder. "I am still not sure I believe in love, but by all the gods, Mimi, I do believe in you. And as long as you walk this earth, I will have no other lover."

Tears spilled from her eyes. "Neither will I, Severus." He tightened his arm around her, and shushed her, wiping the tears from her lovely sea-blue eyes, until she had calmed. Gradually, they drifted into the sweet sleep that comes after love.

Much later, Mimi awoke to hear Severus speaking to Dumbledore. They were discussing Severus and Mimi's meeting with Voldemort, and Dumbledore seemed rather pleased that Mimi had somehow convinced him of her otherworldly status. He concluded, as did Severus, that this might be a distraction from Harry himself. Perhaps the Dark Lord, in his arrogance, would drop his guard, thinking he no longer needed to worry about The Boy Who Lived.

"So Miss Manderly is now the Roman Queen giving the thumbs up or down to her chosen gladiator?" Dumbledore was saying.

Severus shrugged. "He believed her. They threw every hex and curse they could think of at her, and she just stood there smiling at them. No one was more unnerved than Bella." Mimi could hear the grim satisfaction in Severus' voice.

Dumbledore's head went up. "They cursed her? Did he actually perform the Killing Curse?"

With the slightest of hesitations, Severus replied. "He did. Her body seemed to simply absorb it."

"Most interesting. Most interesting, indeed, wouldn't you say, Severus?"

"I have never seen anything like it, nor shall I expect to again, Albus."

Dumbledore rose to leave. "Perhaps I should speak with her."

"I would suggest leaving it for tomorrow, Albus. When I left her at her door, she seemed quite overwhelmed by the experience, and complained of being tired. I suggested she have a lie down, so she is probably sleeping."

Dumbledore looked searchingly at his DADA instructor, then smiled. "Perhaps that is what we should all be doing. Good night, Severus. Well done."

"Goodnight, Headmaster."

Severus stood still, until Dumbledore closed the door behind him, then Severus carefully warded the room with every silencing and alarm spell he could think of. With that, he sighed, and turned back toward the bedroom, stopping as he spied Mimi leaning in the doorway, wearing his dressing robe. It pooled on the floor, and the sleeves were miles too long. She looked delicious. He felt his cock twitch lewdly.

"You heard?"

"Most of it." She stood still as Severus approached her, untying the robe and slipping his hands around her waist, reveling in her bare flesh. She smiled as she reciprocated, and soon they were embracing, kissing, their hunger for one another rising in tandem with Severus' eager cock.

He moaned as her hand closed over his turgid member, and she playfully held onto it as she drew him back into the bedroom. "Is this what is known as being led around by the dick, Mimi?" He gave her a lecherous little sneer that set off an army of butterflies dancing in her stomach, and she giggled.

"I like to think of it as taking the bull by the horns," she replied, cheekily, and gave a little squeal of delight when he grasped her bottom and lifted her into his arms. He looked up into her face.

"I've always wondered what it would feel like to fuck standing up," he purred, and hissed as she slid down his large pole in one slow movement.

"So have I," she moaned.

Luckily for her, he was a natural.

The summons had come on a Friday, and the two of them stayed within Severus' chambers for the remainder of the weekend. House-elves brought them food, and Mimi cried off dining in the Great Hall, saying she didn't feel well. Severus used his summons as an excuse; he had told Dumbledore about Bella's Crucio, and needed the weekend to recover.

During the weekend, they made love, ate, talked, made love, slept, discussed the present situation, made love, talked about the Sempra deck, and made love. Severus was convinced that this would be his only chance to try all of the things he'd thought about during the long Scotland nights with only his hand for company, and he found in Mimi a willing partner.

He approached her shyly, at first, afraid she would think him degenerate, but he found, to his profound relief that he was more or less like every other man; he wanted to have sex with his woman, and he wanted to try every position he had ever read about.

Some were amazingly erotic; some were nice but not earth-shattering. Some were initiated by Mimi, and they were the most enjoyable. And some intimidated him, but when performed on him, like being rimmed, made him think his orgasm was never going to end.

And it wasn't just the pleasure of acting out his fantasies; he truly enjoyed watching Mimi come undone beneath his ministrations. He found bringing her to screaming orgasm after screaming orgasm more fulfilling than his own. He had always suspected this to be true, but until Mimi, he never had the chance to test his theory.

His eyes followed her everywhere; he could touch her openly without fear that the Dark Lord would use her against him. He could and did follow her around; even into the bath, where he bathed and caressed her with soapy, eager hands. He loved making her body sing, and she was his instrument, and he was hers.

Mimi herself had never felt so conflicted. She was heart-stoppingly in love with this man, and yet she worried about his future. She had changed the timeline of this universe the moment she arrived, but what if it wasn't enough? What if she had to watch him die at the Battle of Hogwarts, some eighteen months hence? She wasn't sure she could live without him now.

In the end, she decided that she would heed her own advice: watch, wait, and be ready.

Late into the night, as they lay entwined, their sweat from their bodies cooling, their hearts slowing from their lovemaking, Severus turned to her and kissed her softly. "Mimi, I " He stopped, and licked his lips, as if unsure to continue.

Puzzled, she sat up. "What is it, sweetie? You know you can tell me anything."

He swallowed. "You know that I have to to kill Dumbledore. He's dying."

She nodded sadly. "I know. I wish it didn't have to be so, but I know exactly why you have to do it. It is wrong, and I hate him for putting you through this."

"I will have to flee Hogwarts when the deed is done." He turned to her. "Will you come with me?"

Mimi took him in her arms, and pulled him against her breast. "I will go with you to the ends of the earth. I will defend you to anyone who speaks out in ignorance. I will never leave your side until you have no more use for me."

"Then you will never leave my side, Mimi Manderly."

That evening, as Severus reached inside his desk for a quill, he jerked his hand from the desk, cursing under his breath.

"What's wrong?"

He grimaced. "Oh, nothing, really. I'd forgotten about a small potions knife there. I've sliced my finger."

Mimi tutted. "Oh, no. Here, let me have a look."

"It's nothing. A simple healing charm "

But Mimi already held the injured hand in hers and frowned at the thin, smile-shaped line on the side of his index finger. Blood beaded from the cut, and without thinking, Mimi lifted the wound to her lips and kissed it. "Not a charm, but kisses always make things better."

He muttered a healing charm, and Mimi, as always, marveled to see something so 'simple' do something as miraculous as healing wounded flesh. "Amazing," she said, smiling at him.

He looked at her with what she called his 'professor's look'. "You have blood on your lips."

"Do I?" Mimi instinctively licked the tiny smear of blood. She could taste it faintly. "Yuck," she said, her eyes twinkling.

"My little vampire," he purred, and leaned to kiss her, when she jerked back, and cried out in pain.

Severus watched with alarm as several small, short slashes suddenly appeared on her arms. She looked up at him incredulously. "What's happening, Severus?"

"I don't know," he said, and even as he reached for his wand, the wounds faded, and she slumped in her chair, gasping. Finally, she laughed shakily.

"No more blood for me," she quipped, as Severus knelt by her chair. She was pale with pain and fright, and something triggered his memory, but he couldn't bring it to the surface.

"Mimi, I don't like this. You could " He looked at her, and suddenly, he felt the disorientating feeling of seeing himself outside his own mind. With a start, he realized he was looking at himself through her eyes.

He had Legilimised into her mind.

Reeling with the implications of this, he hastily withdrew, but not before she realized what had happened, and clutched her head in pain.

"Severus! I thought you said you couldn't do that!"

"I couldn't!" He looked at her in growing alarm. "I shouldn't be able to." A sick realization dawned on him. "Mimi, you are experiencing magic. Magic that has been performed on you."

She didn't answer. She was rigid in her chair, as if she'd been turned to stone. "Mimi?" he said, shaking her. She might have been one of the stone gargoyles for all her response.

Suddenly, in his memory, Severus saw them together; Mimi, her eyes sparkling with excitement, he, looking on with nervous skepticism.

"Now, go ahead, big, bad, wizard," she had taunted. "Hex me, if you're man enough."

"Petrificus Totalus!" He had cast the spell at point blank range, but nothing happened, and the little minx had been cheeky enough to wink at him.

"Try again."

"Rictusempra!" Mimi merely stood, smiling at him, her hands on her hips. He had been flummoxed. "I don't understand. You should be laughing uncontrollably."

If he'd been a betting man, he would've wagered a month's salary the hex that Pansy Parkinson had originally cast on Mimi was a simple Slicing Hex. It was one of her specialties, and her go-to spell when anyone got on her bad side. Severus had chastised her more than once for sending a hapless Gryffindor or Hufflepuff to the Infirmary with that spell. He was almost sure it was the spell Miss Parkinson had flung at Mimi when she had insulted her.

And now Mimi was the victim of his own Petrificus Totalus spell. He pointed his wand at her. *Finite Incantatum.*

Instantly, Mimi relaxed, then looked at him in horror. "Severus, please tell me what is happening."

Breathing hard, Severus ground out, "I do not know how or why, but you have just experienced the first two spells that were cast against you. Miss Parkinson's Slicing Hex, and my own Petrificus Totalus spell."

Mimi was stunned. "How can this be?" Her eyes grew large with panic. "Does this mean I'll soon be affected by every... spell... thrown... at me?" She began to laugh hysterically, the Rictusempra spell manifesting itself. She threw back her head and laughed as if it were the funniest thing she'd ever heard.

"Sev- Severus! M-make it s-s-stop!" she screamed, as peal after peal of laughter burst from her. Severus cancelled the spell, then scooped her up into his arms.

"Where are you taking me?" Mimi said, the laughter finally dying in her throat. He looked down at her.

"To the Headmaster's office."

Mimi looked up at him, and meekly allowed him to carry her, as neither knew when the next spell would hit her. It was only as she heard Severus hoarsely call out the password (*Cadbury's flake!*) that she realized why fear had roughened his voice.

The last curse thrown at her was the Avada Kedavra, the Killing Curse. If the Headmaster could not stop this, Mimi would die.

Eight - The Box Closes

Chapter 8 of 9

And so begins the race against time...

Dumbledore greeted them in his study as if Severus showed up with a woman in his arms every day. He merely looked at them both, and held up his hand.

"I can see you are both quite distraught." He looked at Severus, who had sat Mimi down as if she were the most fragile of objects. "Severus, what is wrong?"

Haltingly, Severus told the Headmaster how suddenly the magic that Mimi had originally absorbed had begun to manifest itself.

"She has experienced the first three spells that I know of, but I fear more will be forthcoming," Severus said, looking down at Mimi. He turned back to Dumbledore, "Do you think "

Severus' words died in his mouth. Dumbledore was looking at him with barely concealed dismay. "Oh, Severus. So soon?"

Severus froze at the frightened tone of the Headmaster's voice. "What are you talking about, Albus?"

Dumbledore touched Severus' collar. "Your shirt is not buttoned properly, Severus, and it has been carelessly tucked into your trousers. You have bedded this woman, have you not?"

Alarmed, Severus replied coolly, "What business it that of yours, Albus?"

Mimi looked at the two men and was more frightened for Severus than herself. Dumbledore's face was suffused with a fear that was rapidly morphing into anger, and she rose to defend her lover.

"Excuse me, Headmaster "

"And you couldn't leave him alone long enough to let him do the deed, could you?" Dumbledore whirled to Mimi, and she visibly shrank back. "I should have waited to bring you here. I should have known the moment you arrived you would throw yourself at him like a love-struck fool!"

Mimi and Severus looked at each other, stunned. "Brought me here?" Mimi said. Her eyes narrowed. "It was you all along, wasn't it? You were the one who sent me the Sempra Deck in the first place!"

Dumbledore stood between the couple, anger and power radiating from him. Severus felt his stomach lurch. "Old man, what have you done? Why did you bring her here?" His anger rose to match Dumbledore's. "Why did you allow her to come, knowing she could be killed this way?"

The Headmaster turned to Severus. "She would have been perfectly fine if you two had been able to keep your hands off one another!" His eyes narrowed into icy blue chips. "How long have you been bedding her? How long did it take you, Severus, to pump her so full of your essences that you made her mortal here?"

Mimi cried out in anger, "What the fuck are you talking about, Dumbledore? How did Severus and I becoming lovers make this happen?" She hissed as another jinx took her legs out from under her, and Severus barely caught her before she crumpled to the floor. He hastily cancelled the spell.

Severus looked from Mimi to Dumbledore, and something like understanding dawned on his pale face. "My essences, Albus? The essences I placed in the Deck? They have something to do with this, don't they?"

Just then, Mimi doubled over as one of Severus' hexes hit her with the force of a punch in her stomach. She cried out in pain, and Severus held her, cancelling the spell, feeling helpless and terrified. Tears sprang to Mimi's eyes, and Severus gently brushed them away, holding her in an attempt to comfort and soothe her fears.

"Shh. It's alright, my brave girl. We'll find a way to stop this, I swear it." Unmindful of Dumbledore, Severus took her cold and nerveless fingers and warmed them with his kisses. "I will not lose you. I will not lose you because of my own fallibility."

He breathed harshly onto her white knuckles, "I cannot lose my only reason for living." Finally, Mimi fell back in the chair, weak and frightened.

Severus turned to Dumbledore, the fury in his eyes as great as the old man's. "Explain yourself, Albus, or by Merlin, I'll -"

"Stop, Severus." Dumbledore held his hand in a gesture of surrender. "This," he said, indicating Severus and Mimi, "was not a casual encounter, was it?"

Severus glowered at him. "I would think by now you know me better than that, Headmaster."

Dumbledore nodded. "Indeed. There is real depth of feeling here. I see it. And I owe you an explanation, if only for that." He sat down at his desk, looking tired and impossibly old.

He turned to Mimi, and made a complicated pattern in the air with his wand, chanting an incantation. Mimi relaxed somewhat, and her breathing calmed. Dumbledore finished the incantation, and turned to Severus.

"I have placed a temporary stasis spell over Miss Manderly. It will hold back the next series of spells for a short while." He looked defeated. "I believe I owe you both an apology, as well as an explanation."

Severus stood, and gently lifted Mimi into his arms. He turned and sat down on the chair, and drew her into his lap, where she lay against him like a weary child. Dumbledore watched them for a moment, then began.

"Severus, do you remember the night I summoned you, the night I was cursed with this?" Dumbledore held up his long, blackened hand. When Severus did not reply, Dumbledore pressed on. "I told you of my plan, that I must die, and that you must assist me. You were devastated, my boy, and when you left here, I knew I had destroyed your soul as much as the ring had destroyed mine."

"I watched you fade away with every passing day. I had killed you. Even Minerva remarked how wan and listless you'd become. You no longer spoke, you no longer listened, you no longer lived. I knew very soon you would no longer be of any use to me."

Mimi felt righteous anger flood her heart. That bastard! It didn't matter than he'd hurt Severus, or forced him into agreeing to take Dumbledore's life, or warped and twisted his heart until he could barely function! Oh, no, none of that was important, as long as the great Albus Dumbledore got his way. Mimi was so angry she could not speak, and Severus' grip on her waist tightened, and she felt in that gesture an entreaty to keep quiet.

Dumbledore went on speaking, almost to himself. "I knew I had caused this horrible, inconsolable resignation. I had taken away your will to live, dear boy, and I had to get it back. So I took your Sempra Deck, and I sent it out into the void, to your true, rightful mate. I thought..." The old man shook his head. "This illness... I am not sure exactly why I thought it would help you to carry on, but at the time, I truly was thinking only of your welfare."

Mimi and Severus looked at each other, astonished. Severus, confused, said, "How did the Deck know to go to Mimi? I made the Deck for Lily."

Something like the old warmth bled back into Dumbledore's blue eyes. "You created the Deck for your true love, Severus. Within that deck you placed your heart and soul, dear boy. Your very being was contained within the cards by your essence."

"The Deck was pure, because your virginal body was pure. And the deck knew. It knew your true mate."

"But why did it take so long for it to come to me?" Mimi asked. "Why didn't it find me as soon as you sent it, in this time frame?"

Dumbledore smiled. "Ah, because in 1997, you were not yet Severus' true mate. The Deck had to wait until it found what it sought. Until you were ready."

Severus' grip on Mimi's waist slackened. "So you just yanked her here, hoping she would keep me sweet long enough to kill you?" Severus' face twisted in disgust. "Merciful Nimue, Albus, you are cold-blooded bastard."

Dumbledore's eyes grew stormy again. "I brought her here, to see if she could give you back what I'd taken - your will to live. I will confess, I did not think you would become lovers so quickly. After all, Severus, you are almost forty, and were still a virgin man." He pretended not to see Severus' face flush with humiliation. Rather wryly, Dumbledore continued, "It seems Miss Manderly was more amorous and aggressive in her intentions than I originally expected."

"All this, and he has the nerve to call me promiscuous," Mimi said, through clenched teeth. "So what was your brilliant plan, Headmaster? I would keep Severus all shagged out and happy until you decided it was time to mark him as a murderer and send him out as the Greater Good's sacrificial lamb?"

"I had hoped for you to be his helpmate, to give him a reason to believe that there was life after all that would befall him." Dumbledore looked at the couple, his eyes filled with sadness. "I had not counted on you being impervious to our magic, Miss Manderly. It stood to reason, of course, but at the time, it seemed of little import."

"I should have known that, when you two became lovers, you would, in time, come in contact, shall we say, with the very essences that Severus infused into the Deck, to bind his soulmate to him. What I didn't realise is that the same essences that charged the cards would make you, in effect, on the same astral plane with the deck itself. Your very love for Severus ended your immortality here."

Severus said, "But this makes no sense! When did you ingest -" He stopped, a tint of pink flushing his pale cheeks. In a harsh whisper, so that the Headmaster could not hear him, he hissed, "You never ingested my urine, or my sweat."

Mimi was nodding sadly. "But I have, love."

Fighting tears, she looked into his eyes, and he whispered, *Legilimens*. As gently as he could, he looked into her memory, and saw her before him, on her knees, reveling in his pleasure as she sucked his cock to his first orgasm with a woman. He could sense the bitter, sharp tang of his semen in her throat. Of course, it would have been combined with the few drops of urine, which always resided in the male urethra.

He saw her bending over him, kissing him as he wept the first time they made love. He could taste the salt of his tears and the saltier flavour of the sweat on his temples. And, of course, she had ingested the smear of blood that she'd kissed from his injured finger; the final catalyst to this horrible conclusion. Severus felt sick at the realization that something so precious as her kisses had brought all the pigeons home to roost.

His beautiful lover would be subjected to increasingly painful and crippling curses, one by one, until the final Avada, which would kill her. He could not Finite Incantatum that, no matter how hard he tried. They were on a runaway freight train, heading for an open gorge, and there was nothing that could be done to stop it.

Quietly, he withdrew from her mind, and together they put their arms around each other.

"Oh, gods," he sobbed. "I have killed you!"

"No, Severus! I'm the one who told you to hex me and curse me! I'm the one that taunted the Death Eaters!" She cupped his face with her tiny hands. "Severus, look at me."

When he raised his misery-filled eyes to her, she tried to smile. "I'm glad I was able to protect you! Bellatrix was torturing you! Voldemort would have killed you, then and there!" She tried to kiss his tears away. It no longer mattered how many or how few she drank; she was going to die anyway. For a moment, they held each other, each trying to come to terms with what the next few hours would bring.

"I will be here. I will be with you," he wept. "I will do what I can to take the pain away. I will stay with you until..." Severus felt as if his heart was being torn from his chest; he had never felt such desolation. The loss of Lily had been horrible; it was child's play next to this. The woman who loved him was going to die. He would lose her, and he knew he would die himself.

"There is, I believe, another way." The two of them turned to Dumbledore. They had quite forgotten he was in the room.

Severus looked at him in shock. "Merlin's balls, Albus, if there is a way to save her, do it!"

Dumbledore looked at Severus levelly. "I will have to send her back. Back into her own time and space."

Mimi gasped. "You were always able to send me back? But why "

"On the day your arrived at Hogwarts, if I had told you I could return you to your rightful place, can you honestly tell me you would have stayed here?"

Mimi looked at Severus, and lowered her eyes. Dumbledore nodded. "I thought as much. I needed you here; I needed you to stay long enough to befriend Severus." He gave her a rueful glance. "Are you telling me that you would have rather gone back?"

Mimi was quiet for a long time. Finally, she looked at Severus. "No. I wouldn't have missed this for the world." Something like her old fighting spirit glinted in her sea-blue eyes. "I would have changed the rules a little, but "

"I can send you back now, Miss Manderly. You will remember your time here, but you will have no physical repercussions from what happened."

Mimi looked at Dumbledore with dawning realisation. "Could you send us both back?" She looked at Severus with painful hope. "Could Severus come back with me?"

Dumbledore looked at her for a long time. Finally, he said, "He could. But he will not."

Mimi looked at him incredulously. "Why?" She looked from Dumbledore to Severus, who looked resigned. A swift, killing anger pierced her heart, and she started toward the Headmaster. "You heartless, heartless bastard! Why won't you give him a chance for a decent life?"

Dumbledore's eyes were cold, his expression stony. "He is needed here. He has a destiny to fulfill. He promised me years ago. Severus, you made your pact "

"With the devil!" Mimi sobbed, and Severus took her in his arms.

"It is no use, Mimi." He looked like a man bleeding from an internal wound. "I have made my pact with the Headmaster." He lowered his head until their foreheads were touching. His voice was harsh and bitter. "You could beg him, but it would be of no use. I know. I have begged Albus for my soul since the night he told me I was to be his murderer."

He looked at Dumbledore, and the older wizard recoiled at the hatred he saw in Severus' face. It was the same look he would see three months later on the Astronomy Tower, and it was that same hatred that would allow Severus Snape to cast a curse he would utter once, and never again.

Severus felt as if a huge hole had opened at his feet, and he wanted more than anything to jump into it. No matter what, he would lose her. He straightened, and took a deep breath. "Albus, how long will the stasis charm stay in effect?" He was surprised at how steady his voice sounded to his own ears. He turned back to his lover. "I wish to say a proper goodbye. Alone."

Dumbledore nodded. "It will hold for perhaps three hours, but I must caution you that when it is lifted, I suspect that the respite between the spells will decrease exponentially. Time will be of the essence after the stasis charm is removed."

"Understood." He lifted Mimi into his arms, and Dumbledore himself administered the Floo Powder. "Severus Snape's chambers!"

Once they were alone, Mimi broke down completely, and Severus held her, feeling his own tears falling. He knew he would have to let her go, and he knew he would rather die himself than do it.

He kissed her lips and whispered against her mouth, "You must go back."

She was sobbing. "I don't want to leave without you, Severus." Her sweet eyes, the colour of a stormy sea, looked into his pleadingly. "I just found you. How I am supposed to live without you?" None of the hexes she'd experienced had hurt this much. "I love you. I can't live without you." If ever a woman's heart showed in her face, it was Mimi's. The pain of the impending Crucio could not, would not hurt this much. To find him, only to lose him again, was too much to bear.

Severus closed his eyes. When he spoke, he imbued all of his power and love into his beautiful voice, and prayed that Mimi could find some strength in it. It poured over her like honey, bittersweet and warm. "Mimi, I could not live knowing you had the chance to survive this, and did not because of me. I can carry on, knowing you are somewhere, out in the stars, living and breathing, and remembering me."

"I'll miss you too much," she sobbed, and he gathered his goddess in his arms, tears streaming from his eyes.

"I will find you," he whispered fiercely. "If Dumbledore could find a way to send the Sempra deck to you, I can find a way to return to you as well."

"Promise?" she said, her heart breaking, never to be mended again.

"I promise I'll try."

"Well," she sniffed, "that will have to do for now." She tried to smile. "But I'm holding you to that, Severus Snape!"

"Yes," he whispered, and touched his lips to hers. "Please hold me."

He carried her to his chambers, and laid her on his bed. "Oh, goddess." He smiled down at her. "Thank you for giving me the chance to touch heaven." He kissed her. "I do believe in love, now."

They wept, as they undressed one another, and bathed each other in their tears. They made love, first sweetly, then urgently, then desperately. Severus had never hoped to know the love he shared with Mimi. It had emboldened him, and given him strength. It had exhilarated him and freed him.

Knowing this was the last time he would hold his true mate, his soulmate, grieved him more than he could bear. It also comforted him, knowing that, even for the briefest of moments, he, Severus Snape, had held love in his grasping hand, and had been loved in return. And through their tears, their bodies memorized one another; drew patterns in the air, fashioned new constellations in the sky, and they told each other everything they wished the other to know. On this last night together, they were beautiful and perfect, and Mimi was his goddess, and Severus was her consort.

As they lay together, their bodies entwined, Severus sighed heavily. A muttered Tempus spell told him they had just over an hour before they were to return to the Headmaster's chambers. He tried to prepare himself to let her go, and thought of the long, agonising walk back to his chambers. Alone. Forever now, alone. Would Dumbledore offer some empty platitude, as he often did when Severus returned, broken and bloody from his audience with the darkness? Suddenly, he raised his head, then turned back to the door. "No."

Confused, Mimi looked up into his angular face. "What is it, Severus?"

He turned back to her. "It's too pat. This is Dumbledore we're talking about. Giving with one hand, taking away with the other. He won't just let you go." His face darkened. "He won't just let me go." Severus stood, and beckoned his lover to his side. "Come with me, love. We have one more thing we must do, before I have to return you to your time."

Severus' task had taken most of the last hour of their precious time together, but in the end, they were convinced it was the most important thing they had ever done.

They decided to walk from the Dungeons back to the Headmaster's study, to give themselves more time. It was a Hogsmeade weekend and Severus had thankfully not had to chaperone. The halls were almost deserted as he walked with his lover on this, their last journey together.

When they were in sight of Dumbledore's study, Mimi screamed in pain, and collapsed onto the floor. The stasis charm had failed, and Severus watched in sickened horror as spell after hex after jinx flared and disappeared over her body, quickly to be replaced with the next. As fast as he could cancel them, another stood in line ready to lance into her.

Severus swept her into his arms and was carrying her into the study when Bella's Crucio hit Mimi, and she fishtailed in Severus' arms, deaf, dumb and blind to everything but the stupefying pain of the Cruciatius Curse.

Together, Severus and Dumbledore managed to cancel the curse, leaving Mimi gasping and moaning in agony. Her pain-filled eyes mutely pleaded with Severus to help her, and he turned to Dumbledore, his eyes bleak with anguish.

"Do what you must, Albus! I cannot bear to see her in so much pain!"

"W-wait!" she cried, and held out her arms to him. Pulling him to her with surprising strength, Mimi whispered in his ear. "R-remember w-what you p-promised!" she stammered, shuddering with every breath. "Remember, Severus!"

"Yes, Mimi," he said, their eyes meeting. I will find you. I will be there. I will be ready. Severus kissed her passionately, then pulled her arms from around his neck and stepped away from her. "Do it, Albus," he said, gasping, holding his sides as if he, too, had been cursed. "Do it while I have the strength to let her go!"

Mimi saw the magic swirl from the tip of Dumbledore's wand, and the same blinding light that had split open the Sempra cards burst open behind her. "Go now, Miss Manderly," the Headmaster urged, pointing at the opening in time and space. "Go now, and the gods speed you home!"

She stepped through, and the opening between her world and theirs began to close. Mimi turned back to look at Severus one last time. Her heart felt as if it were shredding inside her chest. She could barely breathe.

Severus was crying. *I will find you*, he mouthed.

From behind him, Dumbledore swung his arm around, and pointed at Severus' back. "NO!" Mimi screamed, but it was too late, and just as Severus whirled around to face the Headmaster, the portal closed with a final SNAP! and the sound of Dumbledore's hoarse voice echoed in Mimi's mind, just as she felt herself falling down the rabbit hole again.

"*Obliviate!*"

Severus Snape strode back from the Headmaster's office, glowering at a set of second-years loitering in the hallway. "Get to your houses!" he barked, his robes billowing behind him as he stalked through the halls of Hogwarts.

He felt tired and muzzy; it had been a long, pointless day of chaperoning at Hogsmeade. It had certainly been unmemorable; he could not recall one damn thing about his day, other than it had been tedious and unfulfilling. Like most days, he morosely told himself. And to top it all off, he seemed to be coming down with a head cold; his eyes were red and his nose was full of snot. He'd take a Pepper-Up Potion in the morning.

He walked into his chambers, and poured himself a glass of Old Ogdens', relieved to be done with the dunderheads and brats for the day, and as he divested himself of his heavy over robe, he looked forward to a rare evening in peace. Merlin knows, he thought bitterly, you'll have few of those soon enough.

He threw his over-robe onto the back of his sofa with the careless air of one who knows they really should hang up a fine garment, but is too disgruntled to be arsed. He stared at it for a moment, then sighed and with a wave of his wand, sent it to carefully hang in his wardrobe.

He fell into his favourite chair with a grunt of resignation. He thought about getting pissed tonight, but decided against it. He had bloody Gryffindors for double DADA first thing in the morning; bad enough, but unbearable with a hangover and a head cold, even with Sober-Up Potion chasing the Pepper-Up.

He crossed his feet in front of him and took a long pull of his whiskey, grimacing as it made its fiery way down his throat. Something had been bothering him; he frowned as he tried to remember what it was. It was dancing just on the edge of his mind, and it disturbed him. It was as if... as if he'd had his memory altered.

He shrugged. More likely it was simply a case of his mind turning to mush after all these years of teaching and allowing himself to be royally fucked by Dumbledore and the Dark Lord. Ah, well, it would be over soon...

Severus sat up. No. Something was wrong. He could, in the immortal words of his Nan, feel it in his waters. Something was missing. He stood, and paced; sometimes this helped to jog his memory, if he was trying to remember some long-forgotten fact or potions recipe. He sighed; nothing was forthcoming.

He downed the contents of his glass, then went to the cupboard to pour another, and it was on his way to refill his glass that he noticed the quill on his writing desk. He had approached the drinks cupboard from a different direction when he first entered his chambers; it was only at this angle that he noticed his favourite quill, lying on the desk, as if carelessly left there in haste.

He never left this quill lying about. It was his favourite and best; he'd paid a lot of money for it and it wrote like a dream. Like many persons who could afford expensive items in their adult years after a childhood of abject poverty, Severus compulsively took care of his finer things, both material and magical. It was the same compulsion that made him hang up his over robe, when he would have liked to have been lazy and left it lying in a heap on his sofa.

His quill was just such an example of the meticulous care he took of his possessions. Wandlessly, he opened the secret drawer in his writing desk and retrieved the quill's slender wooden box. It reminded him of Ollivander's wand boxes. Severus had ever enjoyed the mysterious aspect of a box. It was one of many things he had in common with...

His head shot up. Now, that was a modified memory! Frantically, he looked around, wand out, to detect anyone in his chambers. Assuring himself that no interloper was in his room, Severus then decided to consult Madam Pomfrey. She had a bit of expertise in memory restoration; you didn't serve as Chief Mediwitch to a Wizarding School with a thriving Quidditch rivalry without learning how to counteract temporary amnesia. Bludgers played hell with short term memory.

He opened the quill's storage box to put it away for safekeeping, and froze. Inside the box were six small vials. Within swirled long, white wispy tendrils of what were

obviously memories. He smiled grimly - he had been right; some of his memories were missing!

Severus looked around once again, then scooped up the box and its contents, and walked into his bedchamber. Another wandless spell opened a secret door behind his wardrobe. The Headmaster himself was unaware of this room. It contained Severus' private library and potions laboratory and his Pensieve.

It was a small one and had cost a bloody fortune back when they were easy to find on the black market, but it was one of the best you could buy. Many was the night Severus had returned from a Dark Revel, and wishing he could dump his entire brain into it, to prevent him having to remember the things he'd witnessed.

He sat the tiny bottles on his Potions lab table, and peered at them with narrow eyes. Each was marked with a different letter: A, M, E, P, S, and R. Severus, ever a lover of puzzles, began to move the bottles like a conjurer switching balls and cups for an audience. It took very little time for him to put the bottles into the only logical order: *SEMPRA*. He felt a fierce little elation.

"Sempra. Always," he mused, aloud. With a dark little seductive chuckle, Severus purred, "Alright, Sempra, whoever you are. Reveal your secrets."

He opened the bottle marked with the "S" and poured its silvery contents into the bowl of the Pensieve, then lowered his face into the swirling mist.

Instantly, he was standing in this exact lab, and a woman was standing before him, a woman he had never seen before. She was diminutive, and lovely. Intelligence and wit shone from eyes the colour of the sea. Her black hair was as straight as his own, and she was smiling at him with such affection, it made his heart pound and his chest grow warm.

"Hello, Severus." There was sadness in her face, and he realized she had been crying. "You won't remember me right now, but that is why you are here. I hope this is the first of the bottles you've opened. You told me you'd figure out the labels spelled out "Sempra" too easily, but I didn't care."

She smiled again, and he could see she was fighting tears. "We set up this first memory to tell you what to do with the rest. If you are watching this, then Dumbledore has Obliviated you, or modified your memory, so that you will not recall the events of the past few weeks."

Severus saw himself in the memory walk to the woman and, to his shock, he kissed her passionately. Looking at the woman, he saw his memory-self wipe away her tears and he turned to look at Severus, as if he knew he would be standing there.

"Go through all these memories in the order of the word 'SEMPRA'. We knew he would probably try to erase my memories, so I put them in these vials for you to discover. Look at them here in the Pensieve first, then return them to me." He kissed the woman's forehead, and she closed her eyes. His memory-self said grimly, "I wasn't about to let Dumbledore wipe this out of my mind."

The woman looked up at the memory-Severus again, and love and sadness etched her face. She now turned to where Severus stood, watching the memory, and smiled at him.

"Let me reintroduce myself, Severus. I am Mimi Manderly." Her breath caught in a sob, and his memory-self brushed tears from her face, then from his own. "I'm your soulmate, and I love you more than life itself."

Epilogue - The Hinges and the Clasp

Chapter 9 of 9

So, what happens when you find yourself back to square one?

Written for Mimimanderly at LJ when a SS/MM prompt was mistaken for a Severus/Mimi prompt, and the rest is history.

Mimi awoke with a start. She was lying on her hotel room bed, in the same clothes she'd been wearing before... She sat up and looked around frantically. The Sempra Deck was scattered all over the floor next to the bed; the box sat open on the table beside her.

Had it been a dream? No, it was not possible! It was too real, too perfect! She rushed into the bathroom, pulling her blouse from her waistband as she unbuttoned her trousers. She was frantically checking her body; looking at the place Albus Dumbledore would have not dared examine.

Mimi froze. There it was, just above her pubic bone the Wizarding tattoo Severus had etched into her skin, using his wand as the needle. Tiny, green twin 'S's. It had been his idea; his way of marking her as his, matching the double "M" tattoo he had first drawn on his own hip. It was undeniable proof that she had not dreamed the entire journey.

She leaned unsteadily against the counter, weak with relief, but it soon turned to sorrow. Yes, it had all been real. And yes, she had left him in his time; a time where he would have to take another life before, if history continued on its destined path, his own life would be snuffed out.

Grief and loss pierced her like an arrow, shot from February 1997 to this very moment. She thought of him, holding her, fiercely making love to her, whispering, "I will find you. I believe in you."

Oh, he was hers, and he was gone! She could still feel his lips on hers, his body moving against hers as he pulled pleasure from her like honey siphoned from a hive. "Teach me, goddess," he'd purred, but in the end, he had been the true teacher; her professor, educating her in the art of belief in miracles. She had merely attempted to teach him the true measure of his soul, which she had only begun to convince him was unblemished and beautiful.

He had made her feel like his goddess, and he had worshiped her with his body, his lips, his hands; she had poured all the love she had for him back into this act, in hopes that he would one day accept the fact that he was worthy of the love she gave him.

Mimi picked up the box and cradled it to her, weeping as if she would never stop. Her heart ached; she kept seeing Severus' body fall to the floor, and hearing Dumbledore's cold voice as he Obliviated the younger wizard unconscious.

The box felt warm in her hand, and when she opened it, the scent penetrated her senses again. Memories flooded into her mind with the scent of the box, making her cry harder. Of course! Now she remembered why Severus had smelled so familiar, so enticing; it was the same scent as the box.

Suddenly, Mimi straightened, and wiped the tears from her face. She wanted answers more than she wanted her next breath. Still crying, she frantically gathered up all of the cards in the Sempra Deck, and hastily stuffed them in the box, along with the envelope and the fragile slip of paper with Severus' handwriting on it. The key and the envelope that had held it were added last, and she left the hotel.

She dashed out the front door, and hailed a cab. She would go to the one place that would hold some answers. "The Salem Institute Museum, please."

The cabbie looked at her with a puzzled expression. "I'm sorry, Miss, I'm not familiar with that museum. Got an address?"

"121 Garden Circle. It's not far," she insisted, with a frown. Honestly, he must be new. The museum was right in the heart of town.

Moments later, the cabbie was saying, "Miss, are you sure this is the right place?"

Mimi nodded grimly. "Yes, I'm sure."

They were parked outside of the building that housed the Salem Institute Museum. Or rather, had housed it. The building was now a derelict, empty shell. It looked like it had not been inhabited for years.

The cabbie said skeptically, "You sure you want to be let off here, Miss? This is a rough part of town. You want I should wait here for you?"

Fishing through her purse, Mimi paid him, shaking her head. "No, that's okay. If I need you, I'll call. Thanks."

"Yeah, okay. Thanks - you be careful now."

As the cabbie sped off to his next job, Mimi stood outside the building that she'd walked through less than two days previously, in this time period. The windows were boarded up; the paint was chipped and flaking. A 'No Trespassing' sign hung crookedly on one of the doors, and she could see where the locks had been jimmied.

Fuck knew what she hoped to find in there. In the afternoon sun, the old building looked ominous, foreboding. She managed to push open one of the double doors enough to squeeze through, took a deep breath, and walked inside, clutching the box to her chest. Sunlight filtered through the boards on the windows, casting long bars of light across the massive, empty floor. Inside, the building bore no resemblance whatsoever to the museum she'd visited. She felt a funny tingle at the nape of her neck.

In spite of her trepidation, Mimi felt a sudden knowing excitement. She was feeling magic here. She had been surrounded by it twenty-four seven at Hogwarts, and it was so prevalent there as to be subliminal; here, it was easier to recognise.

"Hello?" she called out, then stopped. Heavens, she had no idea who or what might answer!

"To hell with this," she muttered. She hoped someone or something did answer. It was what she'd come for, after all. "Hello! Hel-"

"Well, hello, Mimi. I was wondering when I'd see you again." Mimi whirled around, and her heart began to tap dance in her chest as a figure moved in the shadows. "I'm very happy that you have returned."

"Who are you?" she demanded, trying to calm her galloping pulse. The voice was unfamiliar, and although it had the same deep, rich, pear-shaped British tones of Severus', there was a difference. This voice was gentler; it had lightness to it, as if the owner of this voice had never been weighed down with the hardships her lover had experienced. "Show yourself," she said, and was dismayed at how her voice shook.

A man stepped out of the shadows, smiling at her. He was a handsome man with a shock of thick black, spiky hair. Warm green eyes shone from a pale, porcelain face, and his dark-rimmed glasses gave him a scholarly air. He would have been pretty, except that he, like Severus, had a rather prominent nose; like Severus, it suited him.

The softly sculptured lips, curved in a smile of welcome, were among his most attractive features, and he was dressed casually in black trousers with a classic white button-down shirt. The sleeves had been rolled up to just under the elbows, and black loafers completed the ensemble.

The most amazing thing about this man was his expression. He looked serene, and genuinely happy to see Mimi, and she could detect nothing about him to inspire fear or nervousness. It was merely his presence in this deserted building that unnerved the hell out of her.

As if he could read her mind, he laughed, a deep, silvery laugh that was at once comforting and sensual. "I can almost see the wheels turning, Mimi. A million questions - but where to start?"

"Who are you?" she blurted, happy at last to find her voice. "Were you the one who gave me the box?"

The man nodded, looking, if possible, even more pleased with her. "I did, indeed. My name isn't really important, but you may call me Dahlra." His voice was soothing, almost hypnotic. "I am a friend, and I was asked to make sure you received," he explained, pointing to the box she was holding, "that box as a gift."

Mimi nodded, unsure of her voice, and he seemed to understand that as well. He continued, "I suppose you may well wish to start with the explanation of what actually happened?"

"Was it all real?" she asked, holding her breath. "Was he real?"

Dahlra's smile faded a bit. "Yes, Mimi. It was all real." His eyes grew solemn. "And yes, he was real."

Her breath caught, and for a moment, she felt faint. "W-was?" The man who called himself Dahlra nodded soberly. Mimi began to gasp as tears pricked her eyes again. "Did he is he "

"Severus Snape was ambushed and attacked in the Shrieking Shack by Lord Voldemort's familiar, Nagini, on May the Second, 1998. He died of his injuries, Mimi."

She felt her knees buckle, and Dahlra rushed forward and caught her before she fell. He held her as she screamed her grief, her keening cries echoing around the empty building. Dahlra rocked and crooned comfort to her as she wept and called out for Severus again and again.

"That bastard Dumbledore killed him as much as that fucking snake! He did this!" She sobbed. Her grief turned to anger. "What was the fucking point of it all? Why was I sent there if he had to die? It was for nothing I did it for nothing!"

Dahlra patiently held and soothed Mimi, and gradually her anger faded, brittle and spent. He stroked her hair and produced a clean, white handkerchief, and Mimi blew her nose and stepped away from him, feeling exhausted and a little self-conscious.

"I'm sorry, I just " She looked into the handsome man's face beseechingly. "I thought that maybe my presence there changed things." She slumped. "I thought I made a difference."

Dahlra's compassionate eyes widened. "But you *did* make a difference, Mimi! You took a bitter, lonely man and showed him that love could transverse time and space for him alone. You gave him hope, pleasure, belief. You gave him the courage to stand up and fight again, and when the time came, the courage to meet death for a cause he had come to champion."

Mimi's eyes filled again. "And now I have to live without him. I miss him. It's like a piece of myself was left behind with him, and now it's gone." She closed her eyes. "I loved him."

"And he loved you. Enough to save a piece of himself for you."

Mimi looked up at Dahlra, startled. "What do you mean?"

Dahlra smiled again. "Has it never occurred to you, Mimi, that in all the discussion of how the Sempra Deck was created and used, there was never any mention of a certain item you now hold?"

Mimi looked down at the item that remained clutched to her chest, frowning. All that was in the box was the Sempra Deck itself, along with the slip of paper with the word, and the key to the box...

"The box itself!" She looked up at Dahlra. "The box was never part of the Deck in his time."

Again, the smile that told her she was on the right track. "Well done, Mimi. No, Dumbledore never mentioned the box, and neither did Severus, because Severus had not created it until after you returned here."

Mimi looked at the box, then opened it slowly. It was no different than it had been, but here, in this place where magic was allowed to rush through the air, she felt it: the box was heavy, warm, like a living thing.

"Can the box send me back to him again?"

Dahlra shook his head, but his eyes were tender with understanding. "No, Mimi. The box does not have the power to take you to Severus." He looked at her, as if he expected her to say something, to glean something from his pronouncement.

Her heart blossomed with the ghost of hope. "But it has the power to bring him to me?" Dahlra smiled like a handsome Buddha rewarding an acolyte for achieving enlightenment. Mimi was struck with another thought. She looked up at Dahlra with enormous eyes. "Is this box a Horcrux?"

Dahlra pursed his lips, considering her question. "Not... really," he replied slowly. His eyes narrowed, and he frowned as if in thought. "Perhaps for our purposes we will call it one, but it is more powerful than a mere Horcrux. Severus did not create the box for the same reason Tom Riddle created his Horcruxes. Severus had no plans for power or eternal life. He merely wanted the chance to create a miracle here, in your time, just as you created one in his."

Mimi shook her head. "I'm very confused! If Dumbledore sent the Sempra Deck to me, how did the box arrive with it if he didn't know anything about it?"

"Who said anything about them arriving at the same time? I only gave them to you at the same time." Dahlra grinned, and Mimi was forced to smile back. His kind demeanor and handsome face simply gave her no choice.

"So how did you know to give them to me?"

Dahlra shrugged. "Severus knew the date you received the Sempra Deck because you told him, so he asked me to make sure to put the Deck in the box and give it to you all at once." He held out his hands, palms up. "So that's what I did. He knew you had returned, and he sent this to wait for you."

Tears welled in Mimi's eyes again. So he had found their private stash of memories and restored them! Her elation was temporary. "But what am I supposed to do with it? I don't know anything about Horcruxes. Doesn't this contain a part of his soul?" She looked down at the box again, and clasped it even closer.

"Ah, well, this is something I cannot help you with, because I am not privy to that information, But," he interjected, seeing her shoulders slump in defeat, "I can tell you that I will help you to find out.

"Let us take the box in here." He indicated a room off to the left, gesturing with a wave of his hand. Mimi wordlessly followed Dahlra through a sagging door, grimacing as the dust of years smeared against her shirt as she walked through.

Inside the door was an ancient desk and two chairs, one on either side of the desk. Light streamed through a grimy skylight in the roof. "Please sit," he said, indicating one of the chairs. "Put the box on the table, and let us see if we can figure out the magic our friend has entrusted us to perform."

For a moment, they merely sat in silence, at opposite sides of the table, the box sitting between them. Dahlra opened it gingerly, respectfully. It looked as tiny as a matchbox between his large hands. He took the Deck from inside, and the fragile slip of paper, the key and the envelope. He placed all the items on the desk in a tidy row, and closed the lid of the box. Empty, the box almost vibrated on the table. Dahlra grinned.

"Well, he has had a long time to wait, and Severus wasn't the most patient man in the world."

Mimi looked up at Dahlra. "Did you know him?"

Dahlra nodded. "I knew him."

Mimi swallowed. "Are you a wizard as well?"

Dahlra looked a little down. "Alas, Mimi, no I'm not. I'm merely a friend, someone who was sent here to help you find the answers."

Mimi replied ruefully, "I'm not really all that sure about the questions."

Dahlra became solemn. He looked at her with unsmiling eyes. Their gaze remained locked together so long Mimi began to feel uncomfortable. Finally, in a voice filled with quiet power, Dahlra said, "Mimi Manderly, what do you want?"

Mimi could not tear her eyes from his. As if reading the words from a book, she replied, "I want Severus. Severus Snape. I lost him once. I don't want to ever lose him again." With the truth laid bare to the room, she was able to look away. "Help me find him, Dahlra."

Dahlra nodded, as if she had given him the answer he sought. He relaxed his stance. "Very good. You must be very sure of what you want. Now, Mimi; what do you notice when you look at the box? When you touch it, when you hold it?"

Mimi opened her mouth to answer, but decided to give it some thought. She touched the box tenderly, as she had touched Severus, and an overwhelming feeling of love and loss swept over her again. She held the box close to her face, and inhaled, taking in his fine, masculine scent.

"I feel him," she said, quietly, trying to keep her emotions in check. "I can smell his scent. I sense his soul." She closed her eyes in frustration. "I feel so close to knowing what to do."

Dahlra nodded absently, and picked up the first card off the top of the deck. He turned it over. It was the Judgment card.

Severus' interpretation of this particular card showed an avenging angel, pointing an accusatory wand at the wicked and the unjust figure at his feet. The Angel of Judgment was standing on a hill, dressed in black, and he was bearing down on a figure below him in white.

Mimi studied the card closely, then glanced up at Dahlra, a look of wonder lighting her face. "The figures on the cards move!"

Dahlra gave her a mildly chastising look, as if to say, Severus created them what did you expect?

She stared at it, watching the faint movements. "Have they always moved?"

"Of course. You didn't notice it before because you did not know how to notice it. You are looking at them with different eyes now."

Mimi looked back at the card. Different eyes. Why did that seem so important? Together, she and Dahlra studied the card, as the black-robed Angel of Judgment passed sentence on the old man, who repeatedly held out his hand as if to plead for mercy. Mimi could not help thinking that the Angel looked like Severus, and the old man the spitting image of Dumbledore. She told Dahlra this, and looked more closely at the card more.

He frowned, his handsome brow furrowed in thought. "Judgment. Judgment is all about atonement and repentance. It's not so much about meting out punishment and retribution, but of demanding an account of past actions and experiences. If the one being judged is truly repentant, his own shame is often punishment enough."

Mimi looked at the figures. The Angel's expression seem to indicate he took no real pleasure in meting out his judgment, but the old man's imploring face told of contrition and regret.

Mimi chewed on her lip thoughtfully. "A Horcrux is made when a witch or wizard takes a life, and their soul is torn. The only thing that can destroy the Horcrux is remorse; truly being sorry for what you have done." She looked up at Dahlra. "I can't imagine that Severus was terribly repentant for killing Dumbledore, after all he'd suffered because of him."

Dahlra shrugged. "Do you think not? I would argue that point with you. He knew he'd made his own mistakes; what was unforgivable was how Dumbledore used Severus' remorse for his own agenda. I think he lamented what he'd done almost the moment it happened, if I know Severus."

Mimi banged the table in frustration. "Then the Horcrux would have been destroyed yet here it is!"

Her outburst did not faze Dahlra in the least. "As I said, Mimi, this isn't a Horcrux. Only very much like one." He turned pensive again. "Perhaps it was not Severus who needed help in repenting his wrongs."

Mimi nodded. "Perhaps Severus was not the one who needed to ask forgiveness for what he'd done..." She felt her excitement stir again. "Perhaps it was Dumbledore!"

Dahlra looked at her approvingly. "You know, I think you are right!" He beamed at her again. "Well done, Mimi!"

Her elation was short-lived. "Well, that's all well and good, but the fact remains that we don't know what I'm supposed to do with the box." She looked at the box, then the card again. "Perhaps we have to do a reading."

Dahlra looked dubious. "A reading?"

Mimi nodded, her brow furrowed in thought. "In essence, a reading could be used to get a message to find out what he has to say."

Dahlra interrupted her. "Whoa! Back up, back up! What did you just say?"

Mimi repeated, "Maybe we should do a reading."

Dahlra became excited. "No, no, you said, 'in essence'." His face was ablaze with excitement. "Essence! Severus infused his essences into the cards, and they found you! He infused his essences into you, and they were the catalyst to send you back! I think his essences were used to create the box as well!"

Mimi stared at Dahlra, her mind frantically trying to solve the puzzle her lover had given them. He was trying to tell them that Dumbledore had asked him for forgiveness, to not be judged for what he'd done to Severus. But what did that have to do with anything?

Mimi picked up the card again and looked at the figure in white. There was no doubt about it; the figure looked like Dumbledore to her. He held out his hand, as if to ward off a retributory blow, and something about the hand caught Mimi's attention. She studied it; it was a long, elegant hand, as she remembered, and on the middle finger was a large signet ring of some kind.

Mimi peered closer to the card. There was something on the ring, but she couldn't quite make it out.

"Try this," a warm, rich voice murmured, and Mimi looked up to see Dahlra handing her a magnifying lens. She took it, with a puzzled smile.

"How did you-"

"While I was not told all the details, I was told to provide you with whatever you needed to solve the mystery." He tipped her a wink, and she found herself laughing. With a little shrug of incredulity, she bent down over the card, looking at it through the magnifying glass.

Mimi looked carefully at the ring, and dropped the magnifying lens. She looked up at Dahlra, breathing hard.

"I think I have it."

Dahlra gave her a look of dawning hope. "You do? Well, spit it out, Mimi!" She laughed with him, and stood. To Dahlra's surprise, she started unbuttoning her trousers.

The look on his face was priceless. "Um, Mimi, what are you "

"Relax, Splendor In the Grass!" She handed him the magnifying glass. "Here look for yourself at the ring on the Dumbledore's finger, and I'll show you why I'm stripping!"

Dahlra looked at it, then looked at Mimi, just as she revealed the small tattoo Severus had given her before she left. He looked at her hip, then back at the card.

Mimi's tattoo and the ring bore the same exact mark: The twin green 'S's. Mimi, her mind kicking in high gear, turned over the letter that had contained the key and the piece of paper, and cried, "Ah ha!"

The wax seal was the same. "I didn't think about that wax seal until just now, but I noticed it the day I got the key and the paper with the word 'Sempra' on it!"

They smiled at each other triumphantly. Dahlra said, "Okay, now we're getting somewhere! Where did you get the tattoo?"

Mimi replied, "Just before I returned from his time, Severus gave it to me, so that I'd have proof that it wasn't just a dream." They both regarded it for a moment, trying to decipher the meaning of it all.

Dahlra scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Proof. If we can just crack this puzzle, you'll no longer need that to have that as proof."

Mimi froze for a moment. "You mean, if we can somehow retrieve Severus to this time, I wouldn't need the tattoo, because he'd be here."

Dahlra nodded. "Exactly, but I just can't see "

Mimi grabbed his arm. "But I do see! Essences! Severus used his wand to give me this tattoo, but he gave one to himself first. He siphoned the 'ink' from his body to mine to..." Her eyes grew wide. "Make the...tattoo..."

She jumped to her feet, and instinctively grabbed the box's key. With blazing eyes that reminded Dahlra of his friend Severus, Mimi held up the long, skeletal key and cried, "The box isn't the fake Horcrux, Dahlra I AM!"

At her words, the key made a little clinking noise, began to vibrate and shapeshift before their eyes. Her heart pounding, Mimi quickly placed the key on the desk, where it jittered and flipped about as if possessed. Mimi was almost hyperventilating in excitement as the key grew, expanded, twisted and changed colour, then morphed into

Severus' wand.

Dahlra was looking at her with joy shining in his lovely eyes. He gave her a great bear hug. "Well done! I knew you could do it! Well done!"

Dahlra suddenly pulled away, picking up the wand. "Please don't be afraid, Mimi," he said.

He pointed the wand at her hip and whispered, "*Elementum suol*!"

Mimi felt a sharp pain in her hip, and made a startled sound of surprise as the ink began to bleed out of her body, and waft through the air as if carried by a current into the waiting wand. Dahlra held the wand expertly, and watched Mimi's body carefully as the dark green ink withdrew from her body like a stitch of thread unraveling from a garment.

It did not so much hurt as felt strange, as if she were tattooing the air from the ink which bled from her. Mimi could feel it sliding through her skin as it rose from her flesh toward Severus' wand, but she knew in her heart this was right. This minor discomfort was nothing, if they were correct.

There was a sharp, stinging pinch as the last drop of the ink was tugged from her body, and Mimi watched, fascinated, as the ink twirled in the air as if suspended in liquid, held aloft by Dahlra's incantation.

When he was sure it was stable, Dahlra pointed the wand at the box, and murmured the incantation, *Reverto delecto, Severus, revertu vita... Reverto delecto, Severus, revertu vita... Reverto delecto, Severus, revertu vita...*

The ink spiraled from the wand onto the box's surface, and was immediately absorbed as if the box were a sponge. It began to glow with an unearthly, dark radiance that was at once familiar and otherworldly.

Dahlra's voice was beautifully hypnotic and entrancing, and Mimi eyes began to droop. She shook her head to clear it; she knew she had to watch and wait... The box began to shudder... *Reverto delecto, Severus, revertu vita...* Mimi had to rest her eyes, they were burning with exhaustion...*Reverto delecto, Severus, revertu vita...*

Suddenly, the box split open, and blinding light shot from it, lighting every corner. A rushing wind flew from the box and blew through the room, scattering the cards and billowing Mimi's unbuttoned shirt. Through the incredible light and wind, Mimi saw Dahlra calmly lay the wand down beside the box.

Dahlra smiled at her, as serene and placid as ever, and even through the howling wind, she heard him.

"Well done, Mimi Manderly. I think my task is done." He gave her a mischievous look. "After all, I do have my own goddess to look after."

The room was so bright Mimi could barely keep her eyes open. Shielding her eyes with her hands, she could see him backing away, preparing to leave. She cried out, "Wait! What do I do now?"

"Oh, I shouldn't worry, goddess. You'll know." He gave her a little wave, and the fabric of space in front of him split open as well, and even more blinding light assaulted her eyes. This time it was a bright iridescent beam, and the wind rose to a deafening, screeching crescendo, until finally Mimi had to close her eyes and put her hands over her ears.

Then, as suddenly as it had arisen, the wind and light imploded on itself, rushing down into the box so quickly Mimi barely had time to register it, and with so much force the entire atmosphere of the room changed and it felt as if all the air was being sucked out of her lungs. Her eardrums bowed outward and Mimi felt her blood pressure drop. She fell unconscious onto the filthy floor, thoroughly blinded and deafened...

Waking up back in her hotel room felt like the worst sort of Groundhog Day nightmare. She was tucked up safely in bed, in a soft peach-coloured lace nightgown, and the sunlight was streaming in her eyes. Memories of the implosion flooded back into her memory, and she dropped her jaw to pop her ears, but it did not seem necessary.

She looked around for the box, and to her horror, she could not see it anywhere in the room. She leapt out of bed and searched the room frantically. She checked her luggage, her shopping bags, her purse; nothing.

She ran into the bathroom and pulled her up nightgown to view her hip. It was flawlessly smooth and unmarked. She leaned on the sink cupboard, feeling sick and helpless.

Returning to the room, she dashed to the phone and called the hotel lobby. "Yes, hello, could you tell me if you have a number for the Salem Institute Museum?"

The receptionist immediately answered, "Certainly! It's one of our most visited tourist attractions, Miss Manderly. It's 978-534-8564. We have a buy one, get one free pass on offer if you'd like to go there."

After gabbling a hasty thanks, Mimi dialed the number with shaking hands. The number was answered on the third ring. "Good Morning, Salem Institute Museum, may I help you?"

Mimi hung up, and sat down on the bed, trembling. "Tell me this has not been a dream," she whispered, and her heart began to beat harder and harder. "Tell me it wasn't a dream," she said aloud. She was gasping for breath. "TELL ME!" she screamed to the room.

A knock on the door startled her, causing her to cry out again. She covered her mouth with her hand, and looked around until she found her watch. It was 8:30am. It must be Peter with Room Service. The knock was a little louder, a little more insistent.

"Just a minute," she finally stammered, and threw on a dressing gown. Feeling heartsick and frightened for her own sanity, Mimi opened the door.

Severus Snape was standing in the doorway, scowling at her. "What took you so long, woman? And what in the name of Merlin's hairy teabags were you shouting about?"

Mimi fainted.

When she opened her eyes, Mimi bolted upright out of bed. She was alone. "Alone! Not again!" she wailed, and covered her head with her hands.

A deep, rich British voice broke the silence. "Alone? I'm hurt. Honestly woman, I can't keep waiting to catch you between fainting spells."

With a gasp, Mimi looked up at her lover. He looked no more or less like he had the last day she saw him at Hogwarts, except that he was handing her a small potions vial.

"For Circe's sake, take this Restorative Potion now while you're still conscious." He peered at her with narrowed eyes. "Hello? Can you hear me?"

Fighting tears, she whispered, "Are you real? Severus, are you really with me?"

His features softened with concern. "I would be if you would stop passing out on me."

Mimi flew into his arms, and covered him with kisses, which he greedily returned, holding her close to him. "Oh Severus, I don't believe it! You came back!" She sobbed with happiness, planting feverish kisses anywhere they would land. "Oh gods, you came back!"

He stilled her with his firm touch, and stroked her cheek gently. In his lovely mesmeric voice, he crooned, "Did I not tell you, goddess, I would find you?" He drew her to his chest in an embrace that turned Mimi to water with its boundless love and tenderness.

He sobered. "Dahlra told me all about how you figured it all out. I was so pleased. I was worried at first, because you were unconscious, but I brought you here and let you sleep."

He gave an apologetic little shrug. "I decided to go out and get us breakfast this morning. I had planned to be back long before you awoke, but I stopped by to thank Dahlra, and the telling of how you brought me back took longer than I anticipated and "

"And I woke up for the second time thinking it was all a dream, except this time I had no proof otherwise!"

He smirked. "I will admit, I didn't count on you passing out again. Which reminds me." He picked up the little vial of potion from where it had fallen on the floor, and thumbed open the lid. "This will help, I promise."

He watched her drink it down, then took the little bottle from her. "That should prevent anymore fainting spells, I think." He gave her a rather rapacious look, followed by a trace of almost shy tenderness. "I've been waiting thirteen years to get back in your knickers, and I'm not keen on doing it to the sound of your snoring."

Mimi gave him a playful swat. "For your information, Mr. Deviated Septum, I'm not the snorer in this family!" She gave his nose a playful tweak, and he narrowed his eyes in a parody of his former, imperious self, but it faded rapidly.

His expression softened as they gazed in one another's eyes. He cupped her face in his hands, and kissed her so sweetly on the lips she whimpered with longing. He broke from the kiss reluctantly, his fingers stroking her breast through the silken fabric. She could feel the heat from his piercing eyes.

He looked down at her with a mixture of relief, and love, and passion. "Oh, Mimi. I have missed you so. I think my heart is going to break free from my chest. When I saw you at the Museum, even passed out cold, lying on the floor, all I could think about was waking you up and making love to you again." He kissed her again, slowly, sweetly. "Thirteen years I've waited for this." He smiled. "Worth every minute."

"When I woke up and the tattoo was gone, I thought I had dreamed you."

Severus regarded her intensely. "Just desserts, then. I spent the last year of my life wondering if you had been a dream."

Mimi nodded. "When I saw Dumbledore Obliviate you, I wanted to kill him!"

Severus made a little moue of agreement. "When I found the memories we had stored, it made my task a little easier, I'll assure you." He grew solemn. "He left me mountains of letters, begging for my forgiveness. His portrait asked it of me daily, the last year I was at Hogwarts as Headmaster. I never said it to his face. I created the box, and placed my hopes and love for you into it, and planned, and waited."

His eyes grew moist. "After I died, I saw him. I walked into a room, and he was standing there. He told me that I was now free to do whatever I wished. I told him the only thing I wished for was to be with you again, and he told me that all things were possible with love." Severus shook his head. "Albus has been saying things like that for years, and I just ignored it as hoppity-go-kick bullshit. But at that moment, I knew he was right."

"It was then that I forgave him, and when I turned to say goodbye he was gone, and another man was standing in the room with me. That room turned out to be the Salem Institute Museum, and the man was Dahlra."

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it, then held it to his cheek. "I'm sorry you had to go through this. That's why I asked Dahlra to assist you."

Mimi thought of the handsome man in the deserted building, gently nudging her toward the answers, then facilitating the solution. He had wielded Severus' wand with precision, and had done what was necessary to bring Severus home to her. "And I never got a chance to thank him," she mused aloud.

"He knows, Mimi." Severus kissed her temple with lips that were warm and loving. "I have thanked him for the both of us. He was very impressed with you."

He pulled back and studied her intently. "It has been so long, goddess. I had forgotten how beautiful you are; how your eyes are the colour of the sea. I had forgotten what it felt like to be looked upon with so much acceptance and love. My last year, in my time, was not... pleasant." Mimi took him in her arms, murmuring soothing sounds, and he accepted her love, and it felt as if he finally let go of the pain he had carried with him even to her here.

Mimi buried her face against his neck, breathing in his scent. He was wearing a black cable jumper, and it was soft against her cheek. She kissed his throat, and he moaned softly, and stroked her hair.

Even as Mimi reveled in the simple joy of merely holding him, a small cloud of doubt crept over her. "This isn't temporary, is it? You don't have to go back or anything?"

"Questions. Always with the questions." He smirked, stroking her hair. He took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "I chose to die that night. I knew the only way I could return to you was the way you had come to me through time and space. And while we have a lifetime to discuss it, I will tell you now that I had to be careful, so that, when my belongings were looked through, nothing would be missing or out of place."

"That's the reason for the riddles and puzzles and Dahlra. When I told him about the box and the idea I had for joining you, he was somehow able to retrieve them, but he told me that you would have to figure it out for yourself. Cheeky bugger."

"Who or what is he? Some sort of guardian angel?"

Severus gave her a heavy-lidded look. "Do I look like a merit guardian angel?"

Mimi laughed, and embraced him again. "Yes. And that's my job, now."

He favoured her with a soft chuckle. "Well, you did a fairly credible job as my goddess. I'm sure your tenure as my guardian angel will be equally as successful."

She looked up at him, her hands stroking his. "But how did you do it?"

He smirked, and cocked an expressive eyebrow. He drawled, "Did I not tell you? I'm a wizard."

She looked at him in shock, then laughed, then smiled. "And you are a wizard with far too many clothes on, Severus Snape."

He looked contrite. "Is there any way I can possibly make amends, goddess?" His large hand brushed over her lace gown, and when his palm found her warm breast, the nipple hard in his palm, his eyes began to burn.

She closed her eyes as his fingers tugged at her nipple, and she moaned as his lips found the delicate path of her throat to her shoulder. "Oh, fuck it. I'll forgive you anything as long as you don't stop!"

She opened her eyes, and met his smouldering gaze. "Oh, Severus. I'm not still dreaming, am I?"

He smirked again. "A wise woman once said, 'If you'll be in my dream, I'll be in yours.'"

He sobered. "No, Mimi. This isn't a dream. You brought me back. You loved me and believed in me enough to bring me back, and here I am." His beautiful voice rolled

