

Gin a Body Meet a Body

by Squibstress

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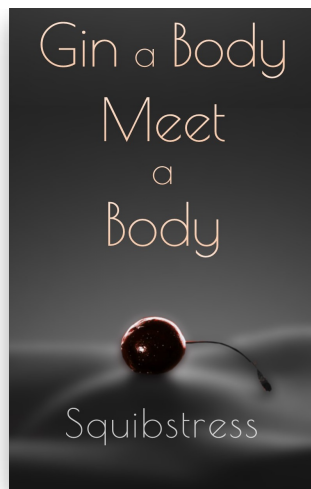
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Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's Note: Written for the 2012 Samhain Smut fest on LiveJournal.



It took precisely ten seconds for the spiral staircase to carry a body upwards to the inner door to the Headmaster's office. The Deputy Headmistress spent it breathing deeply. She employed a relaxation exercise that was one of a number of useful things she had taken from her brief tenure with the Auror corps along with a curse scar that ran from just under her left breast to the curve of her hip and pained her when it rained.

As she heard the deadbolt slide from the Headmaster's office door, she gathered her notebook to her chest like a Goblin-silver shield.

"Professor McGonagall," intoned the dark figure that stood behind the large claw-footed desk.

It had been more than a week since she had seen him at the brief gathering in the Great Hall to pass the castle's wards to the newly appointed Headmaster, and she was startled by how much deeper the shadows below his eyes had become in that short time. She knew he had ever been plagued by insomnia...she had met him in the hallways often enough during her own sleepless vigils...but she had never seen him look so tired. His skin appeared to be stretched like a too-thin canvas across the rails and plains of his face, and for a second she thought it was splitting when he opened his mouth to speak.

"You have information to impart. I have things to do. Please say what you must, and do it quickly."

His imperiousness steeled her nerves, and she strode toward the desk, letting the notebook fall onto its surface with a crack.

"I have here several items pertaining to the running of the castle which need your attention. The first," she said, flipping to the appropriate page in the notebook, "is the appointment of a house-elf to serve you."

"I do not need a house-elf."

"You're going to clean your own quarters, then, are you?"

The slight twitch of his shadowed upper lip gratified her, and she almost expected him to return with one of his bone-dry ripostes until she remembered that such pleasant games between them had been buried along with the former Headmaster.

Snape said, "Assign one to come in the morning to change the linens and clear up the private rooms after I have left. It should not take more than ten minutes. Under no circumstances is it to touch the office."

Minerva looked at him for second to see if he would look away first; when he only continued to stare at her, she took her quill from her breast pocket and made a quick notation in the notebook.

She continued, "There is the question of staff schedules. You have not yet told me which evenings the Professors Carrow plan to take off during the week, so I have been unable to schedule other staff for evenings off."

"Amycus and Alecto will come and go as they please."

"Then how am I to ensure we have adequate staff coverage at meals and for evening patrols?"

"I am certain you will think of something."

She refused to blink.

She said, "The third item concerns the wards."

"You have already given them to me, have you not, Minerva?"

"I have. However, they require renewing."

"Surely you and Filius are capable of casting the necessary charms."

"The supplementary ones against Apparition, yes, and those protections on specific, sensitive areas of the castle. But I'm speaking of the foundational wards."

"Foundational wards?" he asked, frowning, and she was pleased to see that he was perturbed to find that there was something he didn't know. She had to enjoy the small victories where she could; they were the only ones left to her of late.

"Yes," she said. "Those that provide the general protections that prevent *undesirable* creatures from gaining access to the grounds or castle." She couldn't help adding, "Unless, of course, they are invited in."

This time he was impassive.

She said, "Those wards must be renewed yearly, and the time to do so is coming up."

"Very well," he said, "Tell me what you require of me, and when."

"You need to perform a ritual sacrifice, and it is best done on Samhain."

"It is blood magic, then?" he asked.

"Originally, yes. The spell was created just after the time of the Founders, and it called for the ritual murder of a willing victim."

He betrayed no surprise, asking, "May I take it that the ritual no longer requires the death of the sacrificial victim?"

"It does not, fortunately."

"Very well. Provide me with the instructions for the spell, and I shall open my veins on Hogwarts' behalf on Samhain as required. Is that all?" he asked.

"Unfortunately, Headmaster, the mere spilling of your blood will not fulfil the requirements of the spell."

"Damn it, Minerva, just tell me what it is you require."

She was almost enjoying this.

"*The spell* requires a different sort of sacrifice from you and another participant," she informed him. "It requires an act of ritual intercourse."

What little colour Snape had in his face fled, but to his credit, his voice maintained its even, monotonous cadence.

"I see. So I must perform this act on Samhain. And does it dictate whether my partner must be willing?"

She was shocked at his implication. Severus Snape could be called many unpleasant things, including, now, murderer, but to the best of her knowledge, rapist wasn't among them. In fact, Albus had once mentioned that Severus's fellow Death Eaters liked to mock his reluctance to partake of some of the more usual amusements their Dark Lord apparently arranged for them.

"The instructions have nothing to say on the matter of consent," she said, willing herself to match his dispassionate tone. "The requirement is only that you complete an act of intercourse at the prescribed time with another party who has blood ties to the school."

Now he looked shocked.

"You mean..."

"Yes, Severus," she said, using his given name for the first time since his return to Hogwarts. "For practical purposes, it means one of the Heads, or possibly Poppy. Hagrid also has been introduced by blood, but the ritual requires a wizard and a witch, the idea being to invoke the procreative force."

"Why did I not know of this requirement before?" he enquired.

"Because we chose not to tell you."

"You and Dumbledore?"

"Yes."

She saw him glance at the former Headmaster's portrait. The painted Dumbledore snored gently in his frame, and as far as Minerva knew, had done since it had appeared magically on the wall to the right of the Headmaster's desk.

"And who assisted him with this task?" Snape asked.

"I did," she said.

He looked as if he were going to say something more, but he only said, "And what would you recommend I do, under the circumstances?"

"It is entirely up to you, Headmaster."

His lips twitched again, and he leant forward, placing his palms on either side of her notebook and bringing his face too close to hers. It was meant to intimidate her, but she had the fleeting impression that he needed the support of the desk.

"You are my Deputy, Minerva. Make a suggestion."

She was flustered in spite of herself and retorted, "You could, of course, introduce one of your . . . friends . . . to the castle by blood." She immediately regretted it. If he took her up on the suggestion, it would mean a Death Eater...*another* Death Eater...would have nearly unfettered access to Hogwarts.

"I have no friends whom I would wish to importune," he replied, his voice smooth and impassive once again, and she heaved an inward sigh of relief.

"So," he continued, "I must ask: Would you be willing to assist me as you assisted Albus?"

She kept her eyes level with his. "Yes."

~~oOo~~

When the door had shut behind his Deputy, Severus let his face fall into his hands.

He should have known. Just when he thought things couldn't get worse, they inevitably did. He had spent the past week since his official instalment as Headmaster of Hogwarts hiding in his quarters and working up the courage to face his former colleagues, every last man and woman of whom believed him a murderer. Which he was.

He had been drawn from his hidey-hole by the thought that his newly appointed Muggle Studies and Defence teachers now had free rein among the staff and students. In fact, he had expected the main subject of the meeting Minerva had requested to be just that.

Now he wished it had been.

Lifting his face from his palms, he used his wand to unlock the drawer in which the Headmaster's book was kept. He withdrew the monstrous old tome using a Levitation spell...it was too heavy to lift...and paged carefully through the leaves of aging parchment until he came to the section on the castle's protections.

The first several pages were written in a faded medieval script, rendering them almost impossible to read. After more than an hour, Severus thought he had managed to understand the gist of it.

As far as he could tell, the foundational wards had been put into place by Headmaster Spurius DeLacey in 1184 after an attack by a marauding band of...Severus thought it said giants...had destroyed much of the castle and killed more than two-thirds of its inhabitants. DeLacey had understandably employed the strongest magic known: a form of blood magic that required an annual full blood sacrifice to be made by the Head of the school at "a tyme moste holie". DeLacey had required each family of a child attending the school to send one member to stand for them at the lottery that was held each year at Samhain. The unlucky "winner" of the lottery then had his or her blood completely drained, and the last drop was put into a cup of wine, which the Headmaster would drink, sealing the protections for the year to come.

DeLacey had written that the protections seemed effective and that he would recommend to his successor to continue them.

There was no more about it until the entry of Headmistress Eoessa Sakndenberg from 1485, and then she noted only that she saw fit to record the names of the sacrificial victims, a tradition that the next twelve Heads had apparently continued.

Severus turned through the pages and pages of names, occasionally recognising one: Malfoy appeared once, as did Longbottom, Greengrass twice, and Prewett a horrifying four times in the next two hundred fifty years.

Finally, in 1741, Headmistress Dilys Derwent had thought to do away with the practice entirely. She evidently sought opinions from eminent charms masters and mistresses from all over Europe, and it was concluded that the blood sacrifice might be replaceable with another sort of symbolic sacrifice "to replicate in nearly equal measure, the sublime moment in which the carnal and the transcendent are as one."

Severus thought that was taking the metaphor a bit too far.

Ah, now he was at the meat of it. He read the requirements of the amended spell:

The Headmistress or Headmaster, being most intimately connected with Hogwarts by virtue of the blood pledge, must lie with another so connected by birth or by blood pledge, to the ultimate moment in which the essence of life is exchanged.

Snape snorted aloud. Essence of life indeed!

"Is something troubling you, Severus?"

Snape looked up to find the portrait of Dumbledore smiling down on him beatifically.

"How long have you been awake?" he asked, scowling.

"Long enough to know what you're searching for," replied Dumbledore. "There is no other way. Believe me."

"Why did you never tell me of this requirement?" Severus asked.

"The less that people know about the foundational wards, the better. Besides, my boy, there were so many other things for you to concern yourself with, I thought it best to let this one small thing keep until you needed to know."

"Small thing?" Severus asked, his voice higher than he would have liked.

"Of course. When compared with the other responsibilities you carry."

Severus thought about that for a few moments. Yes, he thought, for most men, it would probably seem "a small thing". But Severus was hardly most men.

"You slept with Minerva," he said.

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"For years."

"Yes."

Severus was suddenly angry, and he lashed out.

"How ever did you convince her? Or do you have some deep, dark secret you're holding over her head too?"

"That is beneath you, Severus," Dumbledore said. "I did not have to convince her. She volunteered."

Snape must have looked incredulous, because the portrait continued, "Yes, Severus. When Professor Goldstein retired, and I needed a new partner for the ritual, Minerva was very definite that it should be her."

It apparently didn't take Legilimency for the portrait to suss out what Severus was thinking.

"Oh . . ." Dumbledore chuckled, infuriating Snape. "I don't flatter myself that it was for any deep, hidden longing for my amorous attentions. No, Minerva was eminently practical about it, as she is in all things. Two of the other Heads were male, as was our groundsman, and thus would not have fulfilled the demands of the spell, and the other female Head was otherwise engaged, which would have added an extra complication. Our matron at the time was not the sort of person one would approach with such a request. Minerva was Deputy Head and unattached. It made sense to her to offer, and it made sense to me to accept."

Snape was quiet as he contemplated what Dumbledore's portrait had said. Minerva had, if not exactly volunteered, at least agreed to assist him as she had assisted Dumbledore. And really, what were the other options?

Flitwick and Slughorn were out, even if Severus had been inclined to ask either of them, and Pomona Sprout was a lesbian, and as far as Severus knew, still firmly partnered with Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank, both facts that would surely make such a task even more unpalatable to her than it might otherwise be.

The other option, as Minerva had said, would be to introduce someone new to the school using the blood-bonding spells that required all the Heads, and anyone else who needed unrestricted access to the castle and grounds, to swear to put the welfare of Hogwarts and her inhabitants ahead of all other considerations. That ritual required only a few drops of the subject's blood to be spilled by the Head on either side of the threshold to the castle's main entrance and again on the cover of the Great Book.

Severus recalled his blood-bonding and how he had watched with equal parts fascination and horror as the crimson droplets fell from his finger while he and Dumbledore intoned the oath, the blood beading and hovering for only a fraction of a second on the book's worn leather cover before being absorbed into it. The similarity between that ritual and the one he had undergone when he took the Dark Mark had been more than disturbing. He had been surprised when nothing had happened to him after he'd killed Dumbledore. He'd always heard that a Severing of the bond was excruciatingly painful, though not fatal.

Severus shook his head as if to rid it of foolish reminiscences. The past was, for the most part, dead and buried, and the only thing was to move inexorably forward on the path he had laid for himself.

Turning his attention to the problem at hand, Severus thought of his other female acquaintances. Other than Rosmerta, who probably hated him as much as Minerva did, they were all the wives or daughters of his fellow Death Eaters, none of whom would be anxious to volunteer for the odious task. Save for Bellatrix Lestrange, who, once Severus' star was firmly on the ascendant with the Dark Lord, had made it clear that she would be quite content to put another pair of horns on Rodolphus. The thought of lying down with her made Severus' belly clench in an attempt to unburden itself of what little breakfast he had eaten; the notion of introducing mad, bad, dangerous Bella to the school's blood wards clinched the deal, and he had just enough time to race to the toilet before the nausea overtook him.

When he was finished, he splashed his face with cold water and closed the toilet lid, sinking down to rest on its seat as he considered his predicament.

Did the Dark Lord know about the foundational wards?

Severus's best guess was that he did not. If he had, he surely would have instructed Severus either to allow the wards to lapse, or put forward one of the faithful Death Eaters for the task...most likely Bel...

But Severus cut the thought off at the legs. There was nothing left in his belly, and he didn't fancy spending the next ten minutes dry-heaving over the loo.

Pomona. Poppy. Minerva.

Not only did the idea of asking Pomona or Poppy fill Severus with the kind of unease that was almost like an itch under the skin, it would mean letting a new party in on the secret of the foundational wards, something Severus, like Dumbledore, thought it best to avoid.

No, Minerva McGonagall was the best...the only...choice.

Gods.

~~oOo~~

The Halloween feast was a sombre affair.

As Minerva looked out over the rows of faces in the Great Hall, she thought that no feast in her memory had ever been so orderly. There was only the low buzz of hushed talk, punctuated by the clank of silver. No baritone burst of masculine laughter, no shrill trilling of girlish glee, not even a single hard roll sliced its weaponised way through the air to pierce the collective misery that shrouded them all, children and adults alike. She found it unutterably depressing. It occurred to Minerva that the order within the castle was an inverse reflection of the chaos that reigned all around them.

Her thoughts were as unruly as the students were subdued. She refused to allow her eyes to shift to her left, where Snape sat in the Headmaster's chair, although his hands occasionally entered her peripheral vision as they rose and fell mechanically from his plate. Her mind's eye was not so obedient, and occasional visions of those slim, white fingers moving over her flesh flashed distractingly before her.

It had been many years since the annual Samhain ritual had troubled her. The first time she and Albus had done it, she had been nervous and awkward. Albus had set her as much at ease as he could, suggesting a chess game or two beforehand to help them both relax, accompanied by just enough wine to help chase away any lingering inhibitions for either of them. It had been surprisingly pleasant, that first time, and had gotten more so in the years that followed, once she had realised that the fact of a yearly act of physical intimacy would not harm their friendship. It helped, she supposed, that there was no danger of it developing into anything more; Minerva was not particularly attracted to older wizards, and Albus was not attracted to witches, full stop. She had wondered the first time if he would have to use a charm to fulfil the demands of the spell or if she would have to do anything beyond the basics to help him along, but things had progressed as naturally as they could have, given the highly unnatural circumstances, and in the end, they had each gotten a bit of pleasure from the act. As the years went on, Minerva found that she got more than a bit of pleasure; Albus was, unsurprisingly, a generous lover and a quick study, and once they had become comfortable being with one another in this new way, he had been happy to allow her to pleasure him as she wished.

She had never told any of the few and carefully selected lovers she had taken over the years about the ritual. None of her liaisons had ever become the kind of relationship in which that kind of full disclosure was desirable. If she were to tell the truth, over the past few years, the yearly assignation with her friend and colleague had become the only time she ever went to bed with a man, and she had found herself almost looking forward to it. Not that she would have told Albus that. As she thought of it now, she almost wished she had, and for a moment, she felt like weeping.

She took herself sternly in hand by telling herself that tonight would certainly be different, and she finally allowed herself a surreptitious glance at Severus. True to form, he betrayed no nervousness; he betrayed no emotion whatsoever, and she found herself wondering whether that impassive demeanour would finally crack when he climaxed.

When the feast had ended and she had shepherded her House into its common room, she returned to her quarters. She decided to keep to the little pre-ritual ritual she had developed in years previous: a bath, accompanied by just a finger of Scotch to fortify her, after which she slipped into a clean gown, then went to her wardrobe and...

She was brought up short.

She and Albus had, as years had gone on, looked at the evening as a tiny holiday from normal school cares and had spent All-Hallows' Eve together in the Room of Requirement, where the ritual had always taken place, through until the morning of All Saints'. She normally would have taken a clean dress and knickers for the morning, but surely Severus would not wish to spend the night with her.

Never mind, she thought, and collected her comb and dressing gown from the bathroom. She shrank them to fit in her robe pocket and went to find Pomona to ask her to look after Gryffindor for the evening.

~~oOo~~

Anyone who saw Severus standing in the seventh-floor corridor staring at the blank stone wall would likely have thought him as barmy as the subject of the tapestry that hung just opposite.

But he was not mad...at least, not any madder than he had been a week ago...he was employing a simple relaxation exercise that his putative partner for the evening might have recognised.

In his agitation, he had been utterly unable to make the door appear.

Ridiculous! he spat at himself. *You can stand in front of the Dark Lord and lie to his face, but you cannot face the prospect of having it off with a woman?*

Not just a woman, his near-conscious piped up. *Minerva McGonagall*. Severus told the imp in no uncertain terms to shut up. He had to concentrate on what he needed.

After seven minutes, the blasted door finally appeared in the wall.

Severus had never been in the Room of Requirement before, and he was unimpressed. He had come through the door into a very ordinary-looking bedroom with an ordinary-looking four-poster bed sporting ordinary-looking bedclothes and flanked by two ordinary-looking bedside tables bearing two ordinary-looking candles. There was an ordinary-looking wardrobe against the wall and a small and ordinary-looking table upon which sat one glass and a bottle of Firewhisky that Severus suspected would turn out to be very ordinary.

A small sigh escaped him. He had arrived nearly one half hour before the appointed time, thinking he might want to prepare himself, but now he realised that there was nothing to prepare. He would either achieve his aims this evening, or he wouldn't, and he had already read up on two spells to help him achieve an erection should his long-fallow equipment fail him at the crucial moment.

Waiting was agony. He felt as he had as a boy in Cokeworth when his dad had marched him down to the local clinic held for the millworkers and their families to get his inoculations, sitting and waiting with increasing dread for the sting of the needle, hoping he wouldn't cry and embarrass himself. This time, Severus was fairly certain he wouldn't cry, but he might very well come away embarrassed.

He heard the door and saw Minerva come in. She looked around the room for a moment, obviously as nonplussed as Severus had been. He wondered for a moment what the Room had provided for Albus and her.

"Good evening, Severus," she said.

"Good evening."

She went to the wardrobe, and for a horrifying moment, Severus thought she was going to undress then and there, but she simply took her dressing gown from her robe pocket and hung it up, then removed her outer robe, leaving her in the simple black dress he had seen her wear a thousand times before.

She hung up the robe, and casting a glance at the Firewhisky, asked, "Is that for you or for me?"

"I have no idea," he answered. "It was here when I came in."

"For you, probably, then."

"I do not want it."

"Suit yourself." She crossed to the table, opened the bottle, and poured a finger-worth into the glass. *Slàinte*," she said, and downed the whisky.

Looking around, she asked, "Where's the bathroom?"

"Bathroom?"

She gave him a withering look. "Didn't you ask the Room for a bathroom?"

"I am sorry. I didn't think," he replied, feeling very much like her student once again.

Perhaps she picked up on it, because her mien softened a bit then, just as it had often done when he had been her student and she turned her attention to helping him correct his error after she had finished chastising him for it.

"No matter. I'll do it," she said, closing her eyes momentarily. When she opened them, he saw that another door had magically appeared in the far wall. Minerva crossed to it, saying, "I'll just be a minute."

She disappeared behind the door, and Severus hoped she was not going to emerge in some kind of *négligée*, or worse, naked.

He decided to avail himself of the whisky. Just a drop might help soothe his ridiculous nerves. He picked up the glass and was about to Scourgify it when it came to him that he and Minerva were about to exchange fluids far more intimate than a bit of saliva, so he simply poured himself his drink and downed it without cleaning the glass. He felt momentarily rebellious and free, but whether it was the liquor or his reckless disregard of hygiene, he couldn't say.

Minerva re-emerged...still fully dressed, thank Merlin...and sat down on the bed.

When she began removing her boots, he said, "I'll just . . . use the bathroom, then."

After the door shut behind him, Severus noticed that the small bathroom Minerva had coaxed from the Room of Requirement was far cosier and more comfortable-looking than the spare, dull bedroom he had gotten. The candles gave a soft, amber glow, and there was a plush rug in front of the vanity that he thought would feel very good under his feet. There was a shower with two large showerheads at opposite sides of the glass-and-tile enclosure, and the rack was hung with fluffy-looking towels and flannels in Gryffindor crimson with gold piping. He had to admit that the colours gave a warmer feeling than Slytherin green and silver would have done.

Severus used the toilet...and it took him a good ten seconds to get any flow going...then conjured a toothbrush and cleaned his teeth, avoiding looking in the large mirror over the sink.

Now what?

He supposed he should undress, but he hardly intended to walk back into the room nude. He decided to strip down to his underpants, then he used his wand to Transfigure his frock coat into a black dressing gown. Inspecting his work, he thought it would pass muster, even with the Transfiguration mistress. He gathered up the remainder of his clothes, took a deep breath, and went back into the bedroom.

Minerva was already in the bed, and he avoided looking at her, crossing to the wardrobe and hanging his trousers and shirt up next to Minerva's dress.

He approached the bed with the kind of dread he lately associated only with summonses from the Dark Lord.

Minerva had doused the candle at her side, but the other was still burning brightly.

Oh gods, she's naked.

The bedclothes were pulled up over her chest, but her bare shoulders sat, white and accusatory, against the sheets, and her hair had been released from its prison to flow over them in soft waves, only a few strands of silver emphasising the ebony of their mates.

Severus felt the tiniest stirring of arousal as he turned and blew out the remaining candle. Maybe he wouldn't need a charm after all.

He shrugged off the dressing gown under the comforting cover of darkness and hooked his underpants up and over his semi-erect penis and slid them off. Using wandless magic, he sent the items to sit on the back of the chair.

Turning back the bedclothes carefully, so as not to expose any of Minerva's body, even in the dark, he got into the bed beside her.

He waited for her to say something or to move, but she was still and silent. He wondered what she was thinking.

Probably trying not to vomit, a little voice told him. He bit his tongue as if it had actually spoken the words, and it shut the voice up again. For the moment.

"You may proceed whenever you're ready, Severus," Minerva said.

He swallowed to moisten his suddenly dry throat, and it was a moment before he trusted himself to speak.

"Shall I . . . do you need . . ." he began, but the words failed him. He could not say them to her.

"I used a charm, so I am quite ready. But if you are not, you needn't rush. Would you like me to touch you?" she asked, turning toward him, and his cock gave an interested twitch.

He had been about to answer "no," but when her hand brushed against his hip, his steadfast little *solider* sprang to immediate attention, flattening itself almost painfully against his belly, and he was horribly afraid his "no" had turned into a moan.

He would not be needing a charm.

Her hand stroked against his side for a few moments, then she moved her leg up and around his hips, scooting closer to him.

Don't just lie here. Do something.

He put the palm of his hand on her thigh and slid it up and around to cup her right buttock.

She moved closer, and he could feel her sex pressing against him. She was warm and wet.

Now her hand was moving around between them, and he felt her fingers close around the base of his cock, stroking him as she began to rub herself against him.

Oh, gods . . . oh, gods . . . oh . . .

Somewhere in what was left of his functioning brain, he told himself to move, to do something . . . but the rest of him simply wanted to stay right where he was and enjoy the sensation of her cool fingers moving over his hot flesh and her softness sliding slickly over him.

Oh, oh, oh . . .

His hips began to buck against her, and he heard her give a little gasp. He realised with horror that it was coming, coming . . .

So he pushed her hand away and quickly shifted her onto her back, prying her legs open with his knees. He grasped his cock and tried desperately to find his target *get it in, make it count*...but it was too late . . . too late . . .

Euphoria seized him.

Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck . . . fuuuuuuck!

It was all he could do not to collapse on top of her as he pumped out a prodigious climax all over her thighs.

She lay very still as he hung over her, his arms supporting his torso, his head hanging limply down, face hidden by the lank curtain of his hair.

He managed to croak out an "I'm sorry" before rolling off her and turning his back.

He heard her Summon her wand and cast a quick and humiliating *Scourgify*.

He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. "I'm sorry," he said again.

"It's all right," she said. "I imagine it's been quite some time since you've..."

"Never."

"What? I don't under..."

"I've never."

~~oOo~~

"Never," he said.

She wasn't quite sure she had understood him correctly. Was he saying he'd never had sex before?

"What? I don't under..."

"I've never," he repeated tonelessly.

Great Merlin's ghost.

She had expected awkwardness . . . brusqueness . . . even a certain inexperience . . . but she had not expected a virgin.

How could this be? The man was thirty-six years old!

"But surely, the Dark Revels..."

"I am not a rapist, Minerva," he said.

"No. I know you aren't."

You aren't a murderer either. Whatever Albus would like us all to believe.

She said, "I merely meant . . . well, I'd heard that . . . never mind."

She moved to put a hand on his shoulder, but he threw it off and stood. He had interpreted the gesture as pity or condescension, either of which could be reliably counted upon to make him lash out.

The candles were still out, but the sliver of moonlight that shone through the window the Room had thoughtfully provided showed the outline of his body. Dreadfully thin and pale, in the shadows he resembled nothing as substantial as a Hogwarts ghost.

"So have your laugh, Minerva," he spat. "Tell your friends about the virgin Death Eater and how he couldn't last long enough to give you a proper fuck."

If they were going to achieve what they were there for with both of them relatively unscathed, she'd need to give him a direction for his anger...one that wasn't relentlessly targeted inward.

"Severus Tobias Snape, you can stop that right now," she said, standing up and whipping the sheet around herself to cover her nudity. "You'd jolly well better find a way to give over the self-pity so you can give me that proper fuck, because we have a job to do, and I'm not leaving here until it's finished." She waved her hand and both bedside candles flared.

She saw him struggle with the impulse to cover himself. "All right, Minerva," he said, his voice all silk and whisky, and she marvelled at how quickly he could change masks.

He turned to face her and said, "Get on the bed. Spread your legs. Lie back and think of Hogwarts." He advanced on her in a show of menace, but she stood her ground.

She said, "And you can drop the Death Eater act. I didn't believe it when you swept back here supposedly as Tom Riddle's puppet, and I'll not believe it now. And unless you really do plan to shag me right now, I suggest you put something on before you catch your death. I think we need to talk."

He glared at her for a moment, then stalked over to the chair, snatched up the dressing gown, and thrust his arms through the sleeves, tying the belt in a knot around his waist.

"Believe what you will, Minerva," he said, crossing back to where she was standing. "I am a Death Eater. Or did you not see this?" He yanked up his sleeve to reveal the

Dark Mark, black and seething slightly beneath his skin, and held it right under her nose. It made Minerva's own flesh crawl, as it was no doubt meant to.

She placed her hand gently on his arm and pushed it down. "That mark no more makes you a Death Eater than sherbet lemons made Albus a sweet old man."

"Albus Dumbledore? Your friend? The man I murdered?"

"Albus Dumbledore. My friend. Schemer extraordinaire and manipulator of frightened young men."

She was glad she had lit the candles, because she was able to see the shadow that crossed his already-grey features. It was gone as quickly as it had come.

He said, "That does not change the fact that I killed him."

"No. But you didn't murder him."

"You saw him dead. You heard what Potter said."

"Yes and yes."

"You don't believe it?"

"I believe Harry saw you kill Albus. I believe Albus intended Harry to see it."

"For what possible reason?" he enquired.

"Perhaps you'd like to tell me. I'd like to know."

"Dumbledore is dead because the Dark Lord wished it and because I am his to command."

"But you were Albus's first. Anything you did on that tower, you did because Albus commanded it. Not the Dark Lord *Albus*."

"Believe that if it comforts you, woman," Severus said, turning away from her again.

"You see? You cannot even look at me."

"You are a dreadful Legilimens, Minerva."

"I don't need Legilimency to tell me that I'd be dead if you were truly Tom Riddle's man. So would half the Order. Tell me, Severus, what excuses have you concocted for keeping us alive?"

"The Dark Lord wishes it. He believes you could be useful to him."

She gave a derisive snort. "You mean you've told him so."

"I've told him nothing of the kind," he said.

"I see. And why are you here with me now?"

"The wards..."

"Why not let them lapse?"

"I control the wards."

"Yes," she said, "but not even the Headmaster can dismantle the foundational wards quickly enough to allow us to be overrun. As it is, you and the Professors Carrow...and any students they've managed to recruit...will have to escort your Death Eater colleagues and their little pets onto the grounds a few at a time, giving us plenty of time to prepare our defences. My guess is that you've never even mentioned the foundational wards to Riddle. He believes that he and his godforsaken army of Dark creatures will be able to walk right in here when the time comes. Have you thought about what he will do to you when he finds out he's mistaken?"

"He will kill me. Slowly, I imagine." It was said as he said most everything else: without emotion.

She was appalled.

"Blast you, Severus! Can ye not even pretend to care? I could kill you myself. I..." She turned away so he wouldn't see the tears that had leaked from her eyes.

"You believe I'm still working for Dumbledore, and yet you're angry at me for following the path you believe he laid?"

"Yes, damn you, I am. I am furious. You didn't trust me, either of you. Albus...who taught me everything I know, who has known me since I was eleven years old, alongside whom I worked for forty years, who made love with me every year in this very room for the past twenty-odd to protect his bloody school . . . and you...my former student, my colleague and someone I counted as a friend, who I thought counted me as one of his very few friends."

This time, it was Severus who attempted to lay a calming hand on her arm, and she immediately understood his reaction to her earlier attempt at comforting him.

After she had shaken off the hand, he said, "Minerva. I'm sorry."

She nearly whipped back around to stare at him because he sounded truly remorseful . . . pained, almost.

"It wasn't because we didn't trust you," he said. "Please believe me."

"Then why?" she asked, keeping the knife-edge in her tone. It cost her some effort, but she had been suddenly appalled by the childish, petulant note her voice had taken on.

"Because you might give it away."

She was stunned.

"How could you think...?" she asked, nearly choking on the words. "How could you think I would betray you?"

"No! You still don't understand. It wasn't a matter of trust, it was a matter of practicality. Tell me honestly, Minerva: If the Dark Lord were to question you, could you keep what you know from him?"

"I know Occlumency. Albus taught me. I..."

"You are not a good enough Occlumens to keep the Dark Lord from your mind," he said. He took her hands and spoke gently now. "Truth, Minerva. You know it. And . . ."

He seemed to be struggling with himself for a moment. She was dismayed to see his eyes become hard again, almost as if he were willing himself to become less than human, as he spoke.

He dropped her hands. "If you were to be tortured, you could tell him nothing as long as you knew nothing."

She sat absorbing the ramifications of that. Albus and Severus had determined that it would be preferable for the Dark Lord to torture her to death...or to madness, like poor Frank and Alice...than to trust her with information she could barter for relief. Ugly as it was, she supposed she would have done the same.

"And now, Severus? Why are you telling me now?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps I'm lying. Perhaps I'm just trying to win your trust for my own...for the Dark Lord's purposes."

She smiled at him. "Perhaps you are."

Then began a short contest to see who would blink first.

Minerva cheated.

"Come to bed, Severus," she said. "We need to finish this."

~~oOo~~

He hung his head for a moment, unable to look at her.

"Come." When he looked up, she had her hand extended to him. He approached her warily and took it.

She led him to the bed and gestured for him to lie down.

He felt devoid of will. The conversation had sapped his energy almost as efficiently as a round of the Cruciatus from the Dark Lord. He did as he was told, taking off the dressing gown, thinking it would be impossible for him to complete the ritual without aid of one of his charms now.

But Minerva only sat on the edge of the bed and made no move to touch him. She seemed to have difficulty formulating what she wanted to say.

"I should like . . . I should like, Severus . . . I should like for this to be pleasurable for you."

"Minerva, that isn't..." he began, but she interrupted.

"No. Call me a sentimental old fool, but I do think your first time lying with a witch should be something more than just a 'proper fuck'."

"You shouldn't . . . I don't want you to . . ." he said.

"What?"

"I don't want you to . . . do anything that disgusts you."

He saw her stifle a laugh. "I assure you that I shall not do anything that disgusts me. I simply want you to enjoy this, if you can. Do you think you can?"

He had no answer, but his eyes grew wide as she stood and dropped the sheet from her body. He forced himself to keep his gaze on her.

"I am an old woman, Severus. And even in my youth, I was no man's fantasy. But perhaps you could imagine . . . if we put out the candles, you could imagine I was someone else. Someone you wanted . . ."

He was about to remonstrate when she waved her wrist, extinguishing the candles. He saw her shadowy form walk around to the other side of the bed and felt it sag as she sat down.

Then her body was pressing against his back, and her arms snaked around him, her hands rubbing warm circles on his chest, and for a moment, he felt like weeping.

No one had ever touched him with such tenderness, not even his mother when he was a child.

I don't deserve this, he thought.

But the movement of her hands was hypnotic, and then he felt her breath at his ear, and the feel of it gave him a shiver that began in his neck and ended in his groin.

She pulled at his shoulders to get him to lie down, moving down to hover over him, a shadow framed against the window, and he felt himself grow hard as her lips touched the shell of his ear then travelled the short distance to land at his neck, with soft kisses that made him moan despite himself.

Her hair smelt of hyssop and lemon verbena, readily identifiable by his Potions master's nose. It was a pleasant, unaggressive smell, and the scent, combined with the soothing motion of her hands on his skin, made him sigh.

His undeniable arousal was at war with his exhaustion. She moved to lie beside him, still rubbing his chest, and he slipped into a calm sleep.

When he woke, the room was dark again, and he had no idea how long he had slept. He sat up in a panic, wondering how much longer they had left to fulfil the demands of the spell.

Minerva put a calming hand on his shoulder, saying, "It's all right, Severus. You're in the Room of Requirement. We..."

"I know that, woman," he said, angry at having allowed himself to be lulled to sleep. "But how much more time do we have?"

"Don't worry," she said. "You only slept for about two hours. If you think you could sleep some more, you should. You could use it. I'll set *ātempus* charm."

"I never sleep for more than a few hours."

"I know," she said, reminding him of the times they had met during their separate late-night wanderings. "But if you lie down, maybe you'll be able to."

He allowed himself to settle back against the pillow. She still sat upright, and his eyes were drawn to her breasts, silhouetted in the moonlight that shone in from the window. He was suddenly and acutely aware of his own nakedness as he felt his cock begin to stiffen again under the sheet.

"Lie down with me," he said, and she complied.

It was like a dream, lying in the dark, naked, with a woman. It was certainly a fantasy he'd had in his youth, when his doomed love for Lily had led him to foolish daydreams that led to shamefaced fumbblings with his cock behind the bed curtains in his dormitory. Except Lily had not always been the focus of those first tentative wank sessions. Many of the prettier girls had made an appearance or two, as had most of the female staff of Hogwarts, and Minerva McGonagall had figured more prominently than most.

The nature of Transfiguration meant that she'd had to correct the students' wand work more often than any teacher except Flitwick, and more than once, teenaged Severus had become aware of the sensation of her breasts brushing against him as she guided his wand, and more than once, his cock had taken embarrassing notice.

Perhaps it was the combination of the dream-state he felt and the memory of his long-ago fantasies that led him to ask, almost without thinking, "May I touch you?"

"Yes, Severus. Please do."

He propped himself up on one elbow and gingerly placed his other hand on her shoulder. Her skin was cool and dry, and he ran his palm down her arm. When he reached her hand, her fingers closed briefly over his.

He next moved his hand to her neck, stroking the soft flesh there carefully with two fingers as she tilted her sharp chin upwards to give him more access. When he moved his hand over the coverlet to rest on her belly for a moment, she pulled it down to allow him to touch her bare skin, and he kept his hand still, feeling it move up and down with her breath.

He wanted to explore all of her then, so he pulled the coverlet down farther to expose her fully, and although he could only see her in shadow, he took her in greedily. From the neck up, she was all angles: nose, chin, cheekbones . . . but below she was surprisingly soft, with enticing curves and intriguing planes, and his next destination was one of these...the long slope of her shin, along which he ran his palm, scooting down the bed to reach it.

The order in which he touched her was random; he had no master plan, no intention to increase the intimacy of his touches; he only moved his hands as whim directed...hard knees to soft breasts, smooth thighs to furrowed forehead...but by the time he reached up to stroke her hair, she was breathing heavily, and he realised with some shock that she was aroused.

He was aroused too, although he had been too preoccupied with his explorations to notice. He was pressed loosely against her, his cock against her hip, and he felt it surge as he moved his hand downward toward her centre.

"May I, Minerva?" he asked as his hand came to rest over the thatch of hair that concealed her sex, and instead of answering him aloud, she moved her legs apart.

His index finger parted her cleft and found her opening, and she gave a low cry of pleasure when the finger made a tentative foray inside. Emboldened, he allowed his fingers and thumb to explore her then, inside and out, mentally mapping this unfamiliar terrain, with its crevices and prominences, its slick smoothness and its hot, spongy cavern.

So secret and complicated compared to the brash simplicity of a cock!

A moment later, she surprised him, putting her hand over his and guiding a finger up to move against the firm button of flesh that he knew must be her clitoris. Wordlessly, she showed him how to stroke it, her hand guiding his, moving his finger against her nub, softly, then more firmly and faster, and her breath matched the rhythm, eventually coming in great gasps, until he saw her back arch, and she gripped his hand tightly. She did not cry out, but collapsed back against the mattress with a breathy sigh, holding his hand still against her.

He wished now that the candles had been lit; he would have liked to watch her face as she climaxed. When she removed her hand from his, he began to stroke her again, but she pushed him away, saying, "No more for now, all right?"

"Yes."

She shifted onto her side, and he felt her hand on his chest. She said, "That was very nice, Severus. Thank you."

He didn't respond, as he didn't know what to say. For him, it had been . . . instructive. Not only that, of course, but as a man of scholarly bent, he had methodically filed away in his mental repository each minute twitch of his finger, the response it had generated, and the way her flesh had felt as he touched it...how her clitoris had swollen and hardened just as a penis would...and the surprising heat he had felt against his hand as her excitement had grown, and the way her thighs had trembled at the end, just before she came. Yes, he would have liked to have the candles lit.

The hand on his chest moved downward until her fingers met the tuft of hair just above his pubis. He was still granite-hard, and he jerked his hips a tiny bit...whether voluntarily or not, he didn't precisely know...to bring her fingers into contact with his rigid flesh. She ran two of them up his length and closed her fist around it, and his breath became audible. He could feel his pulse beating in his cock.

She said softly, "Now, Severus?" and he could only gasp his assent.

She stroked him a few times and brought her other hand down to cradle his balls, perhaps testing to see how close to orgasm he might be. He was sure she didn't want a repeat of the evening's earlier performance. He was about to roll over onto her when she rose up and swung a leg over his hips, straddling him. She leant down, placing one hand next to his shoulder, and kissed his mouth, her tongue fluttering softly against the insides of his lips.

"Yes?" she whispered.

"Yes," he managed to say. Unsure of where to put his hands, he settled for resting them at her hips. He felt her other hand on his cock once again, as she guided him toward her entrance. He felt the heat of her, then came indescribable sensation as she sank down slowly on him. When she had taken him fully inside her, she stopped moving for a moment. It was like being immersed in warm oil, he thought. Then, when she began to move up and down on him, the term that came to mind was "velvet vice."

How had he done without this for so long?

Merlin knew he'd masturbated enough in his youth, although seldom in the past few months...mere survival had taken all of his energies...but the touch of someone else's fingers, the weight of someone else's body, knowing that she had taken him inside of herself...was fucking herself on him!...pushed his arousal into a completely new plane.

He was dimly aware that he was moaning as she moved on top of him, sliding up and down on him . . . his cock moving in and out of her tight, wet heat, her thighs pressing him into the mattress . . . in, out . . . in, out . . . *so good . . . so tight . . . yes . . . yes . . .*

The pleasure flowed from his dick straight into his belly and up his spine and took control of his mouth until he didn't know what it was saying . . . he didn't know anything except that his cock felt so good . . . *so good . . . more . . . more . . .* His cock needed more of that incredible friction . . . more of her squeezing him . . . engulfing him . . . consuming him . . . *more, faster, harder . . . in, in, in . . . more, harder, yes . . . yes . . . it's coming . . . I'm in you . . . in you . . . yes . . . oh . . . oh . . . oh . . .*

He wasn't sure how long he had held her, his fingers clutching her hips so hard his hands ached, but when he recovered the power of conscious thought, he released her immediately, terribly afraid he had hurt her in his ardour.

She didn't move off him right away, and he shivered when he felt her squeeze his spent cock inside her.

After a moment, she carefully climbed off him but kept a warm hand on his chest.

Her voice broke the silence. "Are you all right?"

He snorted a laugh. "Quite. But I should be asking you that. I'm afraid I rather lost control of myself at the end."

"Well, that's the point. And you didn't hurt me, if that's what you're concerned about. I'm glad if you enjoyed it."

"I did. Very much." He hesitated a moment before asking, "Did I say anything offensive? If I did, I..."

"No, Severus. Nothing offensive. Not at all."

He relaxed slightly. He didn't know how much of what had gone through his head had come out his mouth, and it should have been an extremely disquieting thought. He couldn't have imagined saying any of those things to anyone, much less to Minerva McGonagall. Yet somehow, he felt that it was all right, whatever he had said. Much like Albus, Minerva had an uncanny way of making him feel both more uncomfortable and more at ease than anyone else.

Ugh. Why the fuck would he think about Albus now?

Because the last time she did this was with him.

The thought made him shudder. He was fairly certain it was true. It had been at least a few years since he'd been aware of Minerva's having a . . . whatever she called the men that would appear beside her from time to time during school holidays, when only she, Albus, Severus, and the occasional other staff straggler would take the odd meal together in the staff room. Of course, who knew what she did when away from the school? Not that *that* happened often. Albus had kept her toiling away at his cause, locked up as efficiently as Rapunzel in her tower. And once a year, he had fucked her in this very room.

Stop it.

Minerva broke through his thoughts.

"Severus?"

"Mmm?"

"We need to complete the ritual."

"Oh. Right. How do you want to proceed?"

"Well, I could just use my finger to get what we need, if you're amenable?"

"Yes. Fine."

He felt her shift and tried not to look as she reached down between her legs.

She brought her fingers to his lips and he forced himself to take it in his mouth without thinking about it.

It smelled musky but tasted sweet and slightly tangy as he sucked her finger clean, and he wasn't sure which flavour was his, which hers. He'd never tasted either before.

She withdrew her finger and said, "That ought to take care of it, then. Would you like some water?"

"No, thank you." As he said it, he felt a wave of power surging through him, starting with his groin and radiating outward until he felt like a bow stretched by an archer at the point of releasing an arrow. He knew he must look ridiculous...his mouth open as if to cry out, his eyes wide...but he couldn't move. He didn't know how long it lasted, but when it finally waned, and he came back to himself, the candles were lit and Minerva was looking at him.

"It worked then, I take it?" she asked.

"I believe so, yes." He looked down and was embarrassed to see that his cock was standing at rigid attention, as if it hadn't spent itself in her less than five minutes ago.

Minerva followed his eyes down and said, "That used to happen to Albus too."

"Is that supposed to reassure me?" he asked. After a moment, he added, "May I assume it's a normal erection...that it will subside on its own?"

"I imagine so."

"You imagine?"

"Well, without wanting to offend your sensibilities by referring to your predecessor again, I will tell you that we never tested the theory."

He frowned for a moment. "Oh."

"Yes."

~~oOo~~

Minerva sat up to pull the coverlet up over them, and they lay still, not speaking. She felt Severus shift, and when he shifted again a minute or two later, she moved deliberately against him. Yes, he was still hard, and possibly uncomfortable.

She asked herself if she wanted to fuck him again...she wouldn't think of it as "making love"...and decided that she wouldn't mind. Not at all, in fact. The first coupling had been heated, but it was over quickly, and though he had brought her to orgasm first, she still felt vaguely unsatisfied. She'd been spoiled, she supposed, both by her last real lover...a man with the stamina of a Jarvey and the cock of an Abraxan...and, it must be said, by Albus, with whom she had spent several fairly hedonistic Samhains in the decade before his death. Truth be told, she had learnt quite a bit about sex from him over the years. As wonderful as it could be with someone with whom one was in love...a thing she had really experienced only once in her sixty-two years...there was something to be said for sex without love, but with great affection and with a wizard of tremendous magical talent and vast imagination.

When she looked over at Severus, she was flooded with the memory of Alastor lying next to her on the blanket in the damp field after making love to her for the first time...the first time for both of them, as a matter of fact. It had been fast then too; Alastor had only stroked in her a few times before he climaxed, the tears leaking from his eyes and a look of bewildered wonder on his face that Minerva would never forget. He too had been quiet afterwards, and sprawled out on his back, unashamed and golden-beautiful in the mid-day sun. His had been a contented, peaceful silence, whereas the man next to her now was doubtless quiet out of wariness and self-recrimination.

And yet Severus had surprised her. As he had touched her, his elegant fingers, sometimes ghosting lightly, sometimes pressing firmly from here to there over her skin, had been full of curiosity, which she might have expected from him, and tenderness, which she certainly hadn't. And it had excited her. By the time those long fingers had reached between her legs, she'd been near to begging him to fuck her, something that had never happened, either with her lovers or with Albus. She wondered for a moment if she should tell him.

Instead, she said, "Severus?"

He turned his head toward her, and on impulse, she moved toward him and kissed his mouth. She was not surprised when he reached for her, rolling on top of her and

thrusting his tongue into her mouth. It was not an especially pleasant kiss, but she tolerated it and moved her legs apart to cradle him between them.

He was moaning and trembling, and she reached between them and guided him into her again. She was surprised when he took up a slow, rolling rhythm this time rather than the wild thrusting from before. Ah, well. He'd always been a quick study.

She manoeuvred her hips into the position that felt best, and almost immediately, an orgasm started to blossom deep within her. When he began to move faster, it broke over her, and she cried out.

~~oOo~~

He was no longer in control of his actions. He hadn't meant to, but when she kissed him, he found himself clutching at her and pressing her body under his. It was as if his entire existence now depended upon being inside her again, and as his cock searched for that welcoming warmth, his mouth met hers and his tongue pushed its desperate way into it. The sweetness of her mouth around his questing tongue soothed him enough to stop his hips' grinding. He moaned, but the sound was cut off along with his breath when he felt her hand close over his penis, and with her guidance, he sheathed himself in her once again.

The desperation he had felt was immediately quelled, and he was curiously calm. He looked at her face. Her eyes were closed and her lips slightly parted, and he felt a sudden wave of affection for her that he was certain had nothing to do with the fact that his most sensitive organ was buried inside her body.

She hadn't believed him a murderer.

She'd been angry and disappointed to discover the deception he and Albus had perpetrated, and yet she'd been kinder to him this night than anyone ever had...and not just because she'd let him have sex with her. She could have lain there and tolerated it for the sake of the school, but instead she'd let him touch her, let him practically . . . well . . . make love to her, as if he were someone she actually desired.

He'd been too quick the first time, he knew that. This time, he wanted her to feel pleasure, and not just that...he wanted her to feel beloved, as he had.

He began to move slowly, changing the rhythm and angle of his thrusts, watching her face to see what she liked. When she began to moan, he knew he'd found the right moves, and he bent down to kiss her forehead and her eyes and inhale the scent of her hair as he moved on top of her.

Her breath became gasps and her eyes squeezed shut even more tightly, and as he felt her clench around him, she shouted out his name.

The sound of it sent an electric shock through him. He'd always secretly loved the way his name sounded in her mouth. When she said it, "Severus" sounded musical and rolling, rather than severe and sibilant, as it did with everyone else, and it had given him no little pain that she'd stopped using it...quite understandably...when he'd returned to Hogwarts. But the sound of it spilling off her tongue while she was squeezing his cock as it moved in and out of her body was a miracle. It was a triumph, and in response, the tightness in his balls and lower abdomen exploded into an orgasm that swept the breath from him, leaving him able only to buck his hips and clutch her shoulders until he fell back to earth.

When he opened his eyes, she was smiling up at him. She reached up and stroked his hair, moving a wet tendril from where it was plastered to his face by perspiration.

"I...you..." he began, but he couldn't find anything to say.

"*Shhh*," she said. She stroked his damp back with her cool palms, grazing her nails gently across it.

When his spent cock slipped out of her, he rolled off and lay staring at the ceiling.

"Rest now," she said, and so he did.

~~oOo~~

Minerva was bone tired.

The rebuilding of the castle was proving more complicated than anyone had imagined, and she, Filius, Horace, and Pomona had all but exhausted their magical reserves in shoring up the complex charms that protected the school. Some days, it felt as if Hogwarts herself were fighting them; they'd complete one set of enchantments only to find that the ones they'd finished just a week before had spurred some unforeseen and stropy reaction from the castle. It had taken Minerva nearly three weeks to get the animated stone knights to stop challenging all passers-by and settle back on their plinths. And the portraits! They simply refused to go back into their rightful frames and were getting up to all sorts with one another in full view of anyone who cared to look. She was inclined to pitch the whole lot of them into the fire, and would have done, had Filius not interrupted her tantrum to urge a bit of temperance.

"It's *joie de vivre*," he'd said to Minerva, who only replied that portraits, as such, had *novivre* to speak of, before stalking off to leave him to deal with the Fat Lady and Brutus Scrimgeour, who had ignored the Headmistress's pleas to move their activities to a less public frame than the one on the door to the Gryffindor common room.

Her eyes began to flutter shut over her parchment, and her chin dropped toward her chest. She started, and at first she thought it was the sound of the quill hitting the desk that had woken her. But when she looked up, she saw a tall, dark figure standing in front of her desk.

"Oh! Severus. I'm sorry, I must have fallen asleep; I didn't hear you come in."

"I am sorry to have startled you," he said.

"Is everything all right? Your new quarters are satisfactory?"

"Very."

He went silent again, and she wondered if she had forgotten a meeting.

"Well . . . forgive me, but was there something you wanted?"

He swallowed and said, "Just to enquire as to whether you've given any thought to the foundational wards?"

She was taken aback. "No. That is, not yet. I..."

"Because Hagrid tells me he's seen several Acromantulas near the chicken coops. He was able to deal with them, but it is worrisome."

"Indeed."

"Have you considered that the foundational wards might have been compromised during the battle? There was a much greater expenditure of magic than Hogwarts has ever likely experienced before; I doubt that those who devised the spells ever foresaw that they would need to withstand such a concentrated challenge."

She frowned. If the foundational wards indeed needed shoring up immediately . . .

"So I wondered . . ." he said.

"What?"

"I wondered, Minerva, if you would consider renewing them early?"

She looked at his face, which, miracle of miracles, was not his usual inscrutable mask but wore something that could almost be considered a smile, and she felt a flutter in her belly that she hadn't had for thirty years.

"Have you seen Poppy?" she asked.

"No. I thought it best to see a private Healer about certain matters. He assured me that I am . . . fit for duty."

She stood and came out from around the desk to stand close to him. "Such a dedicated Deputy I have," she said, reaching out to caress his cheek, "coming directly out of convalescence to serve the Headmistress."

"Anything for Hogwarts," he said, and she saw him glance at the portrait wall behind her before bending down to kiss her.

When they broke, she said, "You're sure?"

"Yes. There's been no trace of toxin for six weeks, and Horace's Strengthening Solution is, I must admit, more effective than mine. I was a fool for resisting it for so long."

"Remind me to thank him," said Minerva, taking his hands. "Your quarters or mine?"

"I thought the Room of Requirement. For old times' sake," he said.

"Assuming we can find it. Quite a few of our rooms seem to have gone missing."

"As a matter of fact, I visited it today after I saw Healer Smethwyk."

"Did you? And?"

"And I think you'll find it somewhat changed from last time," he said with a smirk that intrigued her.

"Just so long as you remembered the bathroom this time."

"My dear Minerva, I intend to *begin* in the bathroom this time."

When the door had closed behind them, the portrait of Albus Dumbledore opened its eyes and smiled.

All in all, it was a most satisfactory outcome. Most satisfactory indeed.

~FIN~