

Till A' the Seas Gang Dry

by Squibstress

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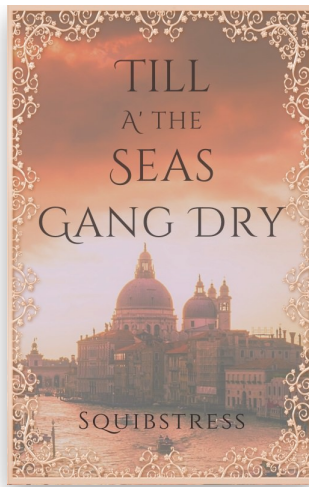
1. Caithness: After the Wedding

Chapter 1 of 5

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Author's Notes: This is for Fishy, to mitigate her sadness at the ending of *Epithalamium*. None of my usual angst here; just a little fluff and good old-fashioned lemons. I hope you enjoy it, my dear!

The title is, of course, from Robert Burns's 1794 song, "My Luv is Like a Red, Red Rose."



EPIGRAPH

*O my Luve is like a red, red rose
That's newly sprung in June;
O my Luve is like the melody
That's sweetly played in tune.
So fair art thou, my bonnie lass,
So deep in luve am I;
And I will luve thee still, my dear,
Till a' the seas gang dry.
Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun;
I will luve thee still, my dear,
While the sands o' life shall run.
And fare thee weel, my only luve!
And fare thee weel awhile!
And I will come again, my luve,
Though it were ten thousand mile.*

~ Robert Burns

PLAYLIST

"My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose" - John McDermott
"Comin' Thro' the Rye" - Marie McLaughlin
"How Long Has This Been Going On?" - Ella Fitzgerald
"When I Fall in Love" - Nat King Cole
"Love Letters in the Sand" - Pat Boone
"All the Way" - Frank Sinatra
"Tu pur lo sai che giudice" - from Giuseppe Verdi's *due Foscari* - Leyla Gencer
"Stardust" - Billy Ward & the Dominoes
"Great Balls of Fire" - Jerry Lee Lewis
"That'll Be the Day" - The Crickets
"Love Me Tender" - Elvis Presley

"That wasn't so bad, was it?"

Albus shut the door behind him as Minerva sat on the edge of the bed and pushed off her shoes with a sigh.

"No," she said. "It was quite nice, actually. Well, other than Filius's singing ... that I could have done without."

"You can hardly blame him, after all that wine. He normally has quite a fine tenor."

"I hope he gets back to Hogwarts safely."

"I asked Amelia to take him via Side-Along," said Albus. "She'll make certain he reaches the castle in one piece. And Horace is holding the wards in my absence. He can hold them for another few hours until Filius gets his hands on a Hangover Potion."

Minerva stood, her eyes drawn to the face of the man who was now her husband.

She'd loved him for thirteen years...longer, if she counted the love of a child for a favourite adult...sometimes with great joy, sometimes despairing, and, until recently, secretly.

This evening, they'd publicly...well, semi-publicly...declared their feelings for one another as if they were a matter of importance to anyone else. He'd even kissed her in front of everyone ... and she'd sung to him!

He'd been surprised by that, she thought, smiling to herself. The McGonagalls were a musical family, and song was a regular part of their private celebrations, but she'd never sung a note in front of anyone but family. But after her brother's rather maudlin rendition of "My Luv is Like a Red, Red Rose" had made her father weep, she'd thought the atmosphere needed lifting. So she'd made Einar accompany her on the piano while she sang "Comin' Thro' the Rye". An odd choice for a wedding, perhaps, but it was jaunty and suited her voice well, and it was fitting somehow, with its verse about the anonymous swain.

Not so anonymous now, she thought as she regarded him.

He was just standing there looking back at her, making no move to get ready for bed.

She began to take the pins from her hair by hand instead of by magic, saying, "There's room in the wardrobe if you'd like to hang up your robes."

She shook her hair loose, unwove the flowers from it, and set them on the dressing table. Sitting back on the bed, she bent to rub her feet for a moment. When she looked up, he was still standing there, looking at her.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I just want to remember how you looked on our wedding day."

She smiled. "Edgar took some photos."

"That was good of him."

He knelt in front of her, resting his hands on her knees.

"Thank you," he said.

"What for?"

"For wanting to be with me."

She stroked his cheek and leant down to kiss him.

"I still can't believe it," she said.

"What?"

"That this is happening ... that we're together and nothing's going to stop it. It's like a dream."

He reached up to brush a strand of hair from her face and said,

"My love is now awake out of her dreames,

And her fayre eyes like stars that dimmed were

With darksome cloud, now shew theyr goodly beames

More bright then Hesperus his head doth rere."

"Spenser," Minerva said.

"You know it?" he asked, surprised.

"My father was very fond of Elizabethan verse. I had to memorise large parts of *The Faerie Queene* and *Epithalamion*."

Albus chuckled. "So did I. Aberforth and I were made to memorise a poem a week. I'm afraid I was a bit of a show-off and did all o*Epithalamion* one week and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* the next. I was going to be quite shocking the following week with *Don Juan*, but Aberforth made it clear that there was to be no more epic poetry."

"And how did he do that?"

"A creative variation on the Tongue-Tying Jinx. Every time I opened my mouth, I came out with the most embarrassing confessions. Some of them were even true."

Minerva laughed. "Fifty points to Aberforth. Was he a Ravenclaw?"

"Hufflepuff."

Minerva's brows rose. She'd never have guessed that that gentle House could have produced such an unpleasant character.

Albus seemed to know what she was thinking, because he said, "He was an extremely loving, devoted child. I sometimes think if he'd been less so, what happened later wouldn't have affected him as deeply."

He removed the sash from his outer robe and laid it over the back of a chair. "I was surprised to see him today."

"I gave him a Portkey," said Minerva. "I hope you don't mind. I thought your brother should be here."

"Of course I don't mind. I had asked him myself, but you can imagine how that conversation went. You are obviously far more persuasive."

She snorted her scepticism on that point.

"You interest him, I think," said Albus. "He enjoys a good argument with a worthy opponent."

"I've barely ever spoken with him."

"Well, it was kind of you to ask him."

"I hope he wasn't too uncomfortable."

"I don't think so, but he's never been at ease in company. He's used to keeping to himself, even in the bar. But that's enough about my brother for the moment."

Perhaps it was the unaccustomed dress or the fact that they were finally alone after hours of being the centre of attention, but she suddenly felt self-conscious under his gaze.

"Aren't you going to get ready for bed?" she asked.

He shook his head, as if clearing it, and looked around to locate his bag, from which he took a nightshirt and a small toiletry kit. "I'll just be a few moments," he said and disappeared into the tiny bathroom.

Minerva changed into her nightdress, casting gentle cleansing and smoothing charms on the wedding dress before hanging it in the wardrobe. She'd ask her house-elf, Glynnie, to pack it away tomorrow. Minerva knew she would never have a daughter to pass it on to, but maybe her niece would want to use it one day.

Albus came out of the bathroom in his dressing gown, and Minerva went in to clean her teeth and wash her face. He was already under the duvet when she emerged.

She got in beside him and put out the candles.

"Good night, my love," he said, kissing her lips quickly.

Odd.

Here they were in the same bed ... and it was their wedding night ...

Minerva had an idea of what the trouble might be. Perhaps the best approach was not to mention it.

Snuggling closer, she slipped a hand up under his nightshirt and ran it across his chest, moving lower to stroke his soft belly.

"I love you very much," she said.

He kissed the top of her head. "And I you."

Still, he made no move to touch her, so she let her hand wander, and she was pleased when her arm grazed the tip of his cock, firm and straining upward in response to what she was doing.

She brushed against it several times as she caressed his lower belly and along the sides of his hips. Still, he didn't move, so she ran a finger up the length of his penis, making it twitch.

"Oh, Minerva ..." he said with a sigh. "We should get some sleep."

"Are you too tired?" she asked, although she knew the answer. No matter how busy he was, he was never too tired to make love to her. They rarely had enough time together to waste it sleeping.

"Aren't you?" he asked.

"Not too tired for this," she said, grasping his erection and running it through her palm. "After all, don't I deserve some compensation for enduring a wedding?"

"We have a busy day tomorrow," he said.

"Yes, but you said we don't have to be at Dover until after noon. We can have a lovely lie-in. I don't imagine anyone will come bursting in to wake us up the morning after our wedding."

She emphasised her point by pressing herself against him and adding a second hand to her work.

Still, he didn't move.

She released him and lay back against the pillow. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's been more than a week, and I want you so much."

"I'm very glad," he said. "And I want you too. But don't you think we should wait until we're somewhere else?"

"Why?"

"Your father is right down the hall."

"Surely you're familiar with Silencing Charms?"

"Yes, but it feels odd to be doing this right under his nose."

"We're hardly 'right under his nose'."

"Yes, but I don't want him thinking I'm ... well ... abusing his daughter under his roof."

She was glad he couldn't see her amused smile. "You don't plan to abuse me, do you, Albus? Besides, I have a bit of news for you: it's our wedding night. He's going to assume we're doing it whether or not we actually make love."

"That isn't exactly a comforting thought. I do have to be able to look the man in the eye at breakfast in the morning."

A short bark of laughter escaped her.

"What is it?" he asked, sounding slightly annoyed.

"Oh, I'm not laughing at you, my darling, honestly. I just couldn't help thinking about my ancestors."

"What about them?"

"Legend has it that members of the wedding party were required to witness the consummation of the marriage. Or at least to stand outside the door as it happened."

Albus snorted a laugh of his own.

"I must say, I'm glad that tradition has died out. I'm certain I would be unable to perform with an audience."

"I would have to do something to help you along, then," she said, taking hold of his cock once again, teasing and stroking.

She heard him sigh, but he didn't stop her. After a minute, he Summoned his wand and cast a Silencing Charm.

He sent his wand back to sit on the dresser and turned to her, putting a hand behind her head and bringing his lips down on hers. His tongue began to play along the inside of her lower lip, and she moaned in encouragement.

His hands found her breasts, kneading them and dancing his fingers over her taut nipples through the silk of her gown. She pulled his head down to hers and buried her face in his neck, moving his beard out of the way. Her lips moved over his skin, kissing, sucking, and nipping, as she stroked him below.

"If you don't stop, we won't have the chance to consummate this marriage," he whispered. "I'm going to come right in your hands."

"That wouldn't be the end of the world."

"No, but I want to be inside you," he said, rolling on top of her with one swift motion, supporting his weight on his elbows. She Banished their clothes and opened her legs to him. His eyes never left hers as he pushed himself into her and began to rock his hips against hers.

Her legs came up to wrap around him, and her hands travelled over his back, her nails playing lightly over his skin, then to his arse, which she kneaded and pressed, urging him deeper.

He moaned and let his upper body sink down on hers, and she relished the firmness of his broad, hard chest against breasts. Her eyes closed as she concentrated on the feeling of him filling her and pressing into her centre with each thrust.

She came suddenly and powerfully a minute later, a single cry escaping her as she was flung into the blissful oblivion of her orgasm, her fingers digging into the pliant flesh of his buttocks.

When she recovered her breath, she opened her eyes and tried to look up at him, but his head was thrown back and his beard fell across her face. She moved it aside and ran her hands through his hair, pulling him down, and his mouth met her eyelids in whisper-soft kisses. She tilted her head upwards, and their lips met, barely touching, barely moving.

"My love ... my love ... my love ... my love ..." His words were hardly more than puffs of air in her mouth, and it was as if he were attempting to breathe his life into her as he pumped and rocked against her, his hands coming up to cup her cheeks.

The murmurs hardened into a kiss, lips parted, all teeth and tongue, and eventually Minerva had to tear her mouth from his, gasping as another wave of pleasure built in the pit of her belly.

Her lips met his hard shoulder, and she kissed and sucked at it, letting her tongue play over his salty skin. When she grazed it with her teeth and bit down gently, he pumped into her harder and faster, moving his right hand to her thigh, pulling it up and opening her wider as her second orgasm took her.

His rhythm broke, his thrusts becoming wild and erratic, and she tightened around him, knowing it would tip him into ecstasy. He came shouting her name, as he almost always did, and when he stilled, breathing hard, she stroked the slick skin of his back and nestled her face into the crook of his neck, kissing and humming against it, "Albus, my love, my darling."

When his breath evened out again, he pushed up on his elbows and looked at her.

She smiled up at him, and he pecked her lips three times.

"Thank Merlin for Silencing Charms," he said, and she laughed.

He moved off her, and she slid over closer to him, resting her head on his shoulder.

"I'd say this marriage has been well and truly consummated," he said, his hand coming to rest at her hip.

"Indeed it has. No annulment for you, I'm afraid, so I hope you're not having any second thoughts."

"None at all."

"Of course," said Minerva, "You could always complain to my father that I didn't come to our marriage bed a virgin. That was grounds for annulment according to clan law."

"That would be most hypocritical of me," Albus replied, "seeing as I was the man responsible for first leading you astray."

"I don't think it was you doing the leading. If you'll recall, Professor Dumbledore, it was I who seduced you. But I've made an honest wizard of you now, so I'll have no complaints."

"No complaints, Professor McGonagall. Certainly not," he said. "I have adored you since I met you, you know."

"When did you first fall in love with me?"

"Oh ... when you were about seventeen, I suppose. It was very wicked of me."

"I fell in love with you at my first Transfiguration lesson."

"You were only eleven."

"I was precocious," she said, moving her hand over his chest. "I didn't start having impure thoughts about you until I was sixteen, though."

"I'd like to hear those thoughts someday," he said, the last word partially eclipsed by his yawn.

"Someday." She kissed his cheek and moved over to her side of the bed. "Sleep now, my darling."

"Good night, my love."

~oOo~

When Minerva awoke, Albus was breathing heavily and steadily next to her. She shifted onto her side and propped her head on her hand to look at his face. His hair was tangled around his head in an auburn halo. There were streaks of grey at his temples and in his beard, just under his lower lip. Fine lines radiated out from the corners of his eyes, with deeper ones etched across his forehead, but he didn't look his age, she thought, even for a wizard. Her father was only two years older than Albus, but he

looked older. Of course, that might have been because Thorfinn McGonagall had gone a little thick in the middle, while Albus's belly was still flat...if soft...thanks to the many staircases at Hogwarts and walks about the grounds and into Hogsmeade, she supposed.

She saw his eyes moving under his lids and wondered what his dream was about. She hoped it was pleasant, whatever it was. The first time she'd heard him groan in his sleep, she'd been torn between waking him and letting him sleep through, eventually deciding not to wake him. When she'd asked him about it the next day, he said he didn't remember any nightmare, so she'd said no more about it, although it had happened occasionally since.

Now, however, he seemed peaceful in his dreams. His lips were parted and very inviting. She couldn't resist leaning over and kissing them gently. She repeated the action with a little more pressure and fluttered her tongue inside his upper lip. When she opened her eyes, his sea-blue ones were looking at her.

"Good morning," she said.

His answer was to reach an arm up around her neck and pull her down again for a lengthier kiss.

She reached under the covers and found his erection. "Is this my Christmas present?" she said, grinning at him.

"It's a start," he replied. "Would you like to test it out?"

"Indeed I would," she said, straddling him.

As she slid down on him, he Summoned his wand and cast a Silencing Charm.

"In case last night's have worn off. Minerva ..." he gasped as she began to move up and down.

"Happy Christmas, Albus," she said as she rode him slowly and thoroughly.

~oOo~

By the time they had washed and dressed, it was after nine o'clock, and they found the dining room empty. The breakfast buffet was still laid out, however, and Minerva helped herself to haggis and a scoop of porridge, while Albus selected a tatie scone, a fried egg, mushrooms, two sausages, and buttered toast slathered with the orange-and-Scotch-whisky marmalade that the McGonagall kitchen elves had been making for nearly two hundred years.

He merely smiled back at her raised eyebrows, asking, "May I fetch you a cuppa, my dear?"

"Yes, thank you."

Minerva's brother came in just as Albus popped the last bit of sausage into his mouth.

"We're gathering in the library for presies, if you're finished," said Einar.

"We'll be there in a tick," Minerva said.

The library was Minerva's favourite room in the house. The McGonagall home was a large stone edifice...technically a castle, in fact...somewhat worse for wear on the outside, but comfortable, if draughty, on the inside. Much of the house was closed off, and the library had long been the centre of family life. Bookshelves lined the walls, and the room was well lit by three iron candelabras and warmed by a fireplace that the house-elves kept blazing on all but the warmest summer days. The stone floors had been overlaid with wood and were strewn with worn wool carpets. Two heavy oak tables stood at either side of the room, one of which was now covered with gaily wrapped packages. In the middle of the room, near the hearth, sat a collection of club chairs, the cognac-coloured leather faded and discoloured with wear in many spots.

When Minerva and Albus entered, the chairs nearest the fire were occupied, so Minerva used her wand to Summon one from the table. She gestured for Albus to sit, and when he did, she sat down on the floor by his legs.

"Happy Christmas," Albus said to the group, which included Minerva's father, Thorfinn, her grandmother, Morna MacLaughlin, her brother, Einar, and Einar's wife, Katherine. Einar and Katherine's baby, Morrigan, sat on her father's lap, struggling to get down.

"Oh, you want to see your Auntie Minerva, do you? All right, then, off you go," said Einar, and set his daughter on her feet. The child teetered on her chubby legs for a moment, then found her courage and let go of her father's knees to toddle over to where Minerva was sitting.

"Well done, my lamb!" Minerva said. To Katherine, she said, "She's ever so much steadier on her feet."

"Yes, she is," said Katherine. "Thank goodness for Llyndie or I'd lose track of her every five minutes."

Morrigan let herself plop down on Minerva's legs, took up her aunt's skirt, and started to gnaw on it.

"Let's see if we can get you something better to play with," said Morna. She Summoned one of the presents and set it in front of her great-granddaughter, who dropped Minerva's skirt and patted the box, squealing.

Twenty minutes later, Morrigan was sitting by the hearth, having abandoned the new toys strewn around her in favour of putting one of the empty boxes on her head and playing peek-a-boo with her grandfather.

The adults took longer to open their gifts, despite their being fewer in number than Morrigan's, and there was soon an impressive pile of books sitting next to each person.

"I hope you like books, Albus," said Thorfinn, indicating the stack at his feet, "because that's what you're like to get every Christmas and birthday around here."

"I'm delighted," Albus said, laughing.

He'd given Minerva a rare copy of a 16th-century translation of Falco Aeslon's treatise on human-to-animal Transfiguration, and she'd given him a curious pair of green-covered paperback books entitled *Lolita, Volume One* and *Lolita, Volume Two*. She'd smirked at his obvious confusion and his struggle to find something to say about the gift, of which he could obviously make neither heads nor tails.

"Well, I have something that's *not* a book," said Katherine, dropping a square package in Minerva's lap. "It's really for both of you," she said to Albus, "but I think Minerva should open it."

Minerva looked at Albus, who nodded, and undid the ribbon and opened the box. When she withdrew the contents, her face heated up.

"What is it?" asked her father, leaning over to see.

"I don't think you want to know, Da." She glanced over at Albus, whose eyebrows had shot up at least two inches.

"Come on, what is it?" asked Einar.

Minerva sighed and held up the item for his inspection. It was a sheer, black negligée with a deep slit on one side.

"It's for your honeymoon," said Katherine. "Einar and I enjoyed something like it on ours, so I thought I'd give you one."

Despite her embarrassment, Minerva laughed when she saw her brother's face fall into his hands. When she looked around the room, she saw that her father was shifting uncomfortably in his seat and Albus's face had taken on a distinctly pink hue. Her grandmother, however, got up and marched over, taking the item from Minerva.

"There isn't much to it," said Morna, holding up the negligée, "but it looks a wee bit more comfortable than what I wore on my wedding night. My nightdress had a million tiny buttons. It took poor Jamie half an hour to get me out of the thing."

Minerva took the negligée from her grandmother and put it back in the box. "Thank you," she said to Katherine, who winked at her and said, "I certainly hope it will get more use on your honeymoon than those books."

"Well," said Thorfinn, a little too loudly, "what time is your ferry?"

2. Paris: On the Orient Express

Chapter 2 of 5

In this follow-up to *Epithalamium*, Minerva and Albus venture into the Muggle world to enjoy a romantic winter interlude in Venice. Join them as they board the Orient Express, enjoy some good food, fine art, and, of course, a bit of romance. It opens just after the end of Chapter 54 of *Epithalamium*, but you don't have to have read that story to enjoy this tale.

"Vos passeports, s'il vous plaît?"

Albus handed the Muggle documents to the agent, who glanced up briefly at each of their faces before waving them through.

As they passed through the Calais ferry terminus, Minerva leant in to whisper to Albus, "I'm awfully glad he didn't ask us anything. I forgot to check what names you put on the passports."

Albus whispered back, "For the duration of our trip, we are Albert and Victoria White, Mr and Mrs."

"Oh, you *never* ..."

"Look at your passport, my dear."

She took a quick glance, snapped the passport shut, and put it in her handbag. "You know, Albu...*Albert*, I think it's a very good job you didn't end up with the Aurors. You'd make a dreadful spy."

"You mean the MI-6."

"Hmm?"

"The Muggle spies. Although Her Majesty's government wouldn't admit to it."

"Well, whatever the Muggles call them, you wouldn't get in."

"Lots of people are called Victoria and Albert."

Minerva shook her head. "At least I shan't have any difficulty remembering it."

"We have a few hours before our train departs. What would you say to a bit of lunch in Paris, Mrs White?"

They found a quiet spot from which to Apparate, and Albus took them to a tiny alleyway in what turned out to be Les Halles. They came out into a street opposite Saint-Eustache and walked along the edge of the bustling marketplace until they arrived at the restaurant Albus had selected.

"You enjoy pork, don't you?" he asked as he took hold of one of the brass pig's trotters that served as the knobs and pulled the door open for Minerva.

After their meal...onion soup *gratinée* and grilled pig's trotter with chips, followed by the best chocolate mousse she'd ever had...Minerva declared herself full to bursting and suggested a walk before heading to the train station.

They retraced the route they'd followed earlier, making a detour into the marketplace and stopping at various stalls. It was less crowded than before, and many vendors had packed up their wares, but the air was still thick with the pungent odours of spices and fish. Albus had a conversation with one fishmonger, who seemed delighted to explain to him the differences between the *pied de cheval* and the *huître spéciale d'Isygnny* and allowed them to sample several of his briny delights right from the shell.

Coming out of the marketplace, they wandered into Saint-Eustache. Minerva had never been in it before, and they strolled around, looking at the stained glass and Rubens's "The Pilgrims of Emmaüs".

They stopped to admire the church's enormous organ, and to Albus's delight, the young man who had been lovingly wiping the ivory keys with a cloth turned out to be the organist. Albus exchanged a few words with him, and the organist sat down and began to play short passages from what Minerva thought might be Bach. The sound was magnificent, deep and resonant; Minerva could feel it in her body, and it gave her the shivers.

When the organist finished, he handed Albus a bill advertising a concert of Bach's *Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor* to be held that evening at the church.

Albus handed it back with a rueful smile, saying, *"Désolé, monsieur, main nous partons ce soir."*

"Damage. Au retour, alors," said the man.

"Sans faute," said Albus.

When they came out, the sun was hanging low in the sky, and there was a light rain falling, so Minerva surreptitiously conjured an umbrella for them as Albus attempted to hail a taxi for the trip to the train station so they would appear to be as any Muggles arriving for a voyage. When they arrived at the Gare de l'Est, the driver was confused when Albus asked him to open the boot.

"*Nos baggages*," Albus explained.

The driver remonstrated, but Albus just shrugged and said, "*Veillez ouvrir le coffre, monsieur*."

The man got out and went around to the back of the taxi, muttering under his breath.

Minerva raised her eyebrows when the very surprised driver withdrew two battered-looking suitcases from the taxi's boot.

Albus paid him, and from the change in the driver's expression, Minerva suspected he had added a generous gratuity to make up for the "misunderstanding" about the bags.

After the taxi had pulled away, Albus leant down and said in her ear, "It would look odd if we were to board the overnight train with only our small bags, so I did a little conjuring as we were getting into the taxi." He picked up the decoy bags, and they made their way to the platform, where crisply uniformed porters in duckbilled caps were wheeling trolleys piled with suitcases and trunks to the luggage car. A porter helped them aboard with their bags and showed them to their compartment.

A few minutes later, they heard the whistle sound, and the train began to chug slowly out of the station. Minerva watched the lights of Paris go by, faster and faster, until they had got out of the city and into the surrounding countryside, which passed by in an amber blur that faded to black as the sun slipped down beyond the horizon.

A steward knocked on the compartment door and slid it open, requesting their passports. When Albus surrendered them, the steward flipped one open and looked at it quickly, then switched from French to lightly accented English.

"With your permission, Mr White, I will hold these overnight. This way, you will not be disturbed at the border crossings. They will be returned before we arrive in Venice. I assure you that they will be quite safe."

"I'm certain of it," said Albus. "Thank you."

"Would sir and madam care for some tea?"

"That would be very nice, thank you," said Minerva.

The young man returned shortly with some good Ceylon and a plate of small cakes.

"This is lovely," Minerva said, as Albus nibbled on a pastry. "I hardly expected such luxury." She refrained from mentioning what it must have cost, but she thought it must have been quite dear to book a private sleeper compartment.

"We'll only have one honeymoon," he said.

"I didn't even expect one, so this is truly a wonderful treat. Thank you."

"Yes, it was fortuitous that we had to wait until Christmas to be married. Otherwise, we mightn't have managed to get away until the summer holidays."

"Filius didn't mind staying over?"

"No. He had no plans, he said."

"No family to visit?"

"Filius is a widower," said Albus. "And his sister died back in the 'thirties, I think. He has a couple of nephews, but they aren't especially close."

"Oh," said Minerva. She'd never enquired about Filius's family situation, but now she was curious. "He was married, then?"

"Yes. I never met his wife. She and their daughter died of dragon pox before he came to Oxford."

"How terrible!"

"Yes, it was. He doesn't speak of them much, but from what little he's said, I think he blames himself. They'd been in Eastern Europe, where he was doing research, and got caught in the epidemic."

Minerva felt a wave of crushing sadness for the calm, kind man she'd got to know and like over the past year. "I'd never have guessed. He always seems so cheerful."

"Yes, well ... despite everything, he's a happy soul, basically, I think. And quite resilient. He's had to be."

She couldn't resist asking, "Is it true that he has Goblin blood?"

"Oh, yes. His grandmother was a Goblin. His grandfather never married her, of course. He couldn't, with the laws as they are. So his father was considered illegitimate, and, as Filius tells it, was nearly barred from attending Hogwarts."

"Awfully unfair."

"Isn't it?"

"You knew him at school, didn't you?"

"Yes. He was three years behind me, but we struck up a friendship."

That didn't surprise Minerva in the least. Filius Flitwick was one of the brightest people she knew, and she could only imagine that young Albus would have gravitated to one of his few fellow students who could keep up with him intellectually.

Albus said, "We met up again at Oxford in the 'twenties. He was doing some advanced Charms research with Master Gamp when Griselda and I were starting up the Transfiguration lab."

"That must have been a very exciting time." Minerva could only imagine how it must have been to be at Mallory College then, with Griselda Marchbanks and Albus Dumbledore spurring one another to greater and greater discoveries. Merlin knew she'd heard enough stories from Griselda during her own studies at Oxford.

"Indeed," said Albus. "I was most fortunate. As you know, Griselda is...aside from being a brilliant scholar...something of a character."

Yes, thought Minerva, *that's one way to put it*.

Albus seemed to know what she was thinking. "I understand she became somewhat ... rigid ... later on."

"A bit," said Minerva. "She was good to me, but it did get a little frustrating."

"Ah, well," said Albus, taking her hand. "I look at it as a lucky thing. Had you been completely happy at Oxford, you might never have come to Hogwarts, and I would still be pining hopelessly away for you."

"Oh, do stop. You never pined."

"I did," he said. "It thought of you all the time. Every day."

"Did you?" she asked, her throat suddenly tight.

"Yes. I tried not to, but I wasn't successful."

"Do you think it was providence?" she asked. She didn't believe in fate, not exactly, but she couldn't help feeling that somehow she and Albus were meant to be together. She'd told herself often enough that it was foolish, but she wanted to know if he felt the same way.

"Something like that," he said. "But whatever it was, providence or accident, I am deeply grateful for it." He put his arm around her shoulder, and she kissed him.

They broke apart at the sound of the compartment door sliding open. The steward informed them that dinner would begin seating in the dining car at seven-thirty and that he would prepare their compartment for the night while they were away.

"If sir and madam would care to leave their breakfast orders on the table, I will ensure it is served promptly tomorrow at eight," he said, leaving two menu cards for them to fill out.

When he'd left, Minerva said, "Breakfast in our private compartment? How posh!"

"It is rather nice, isn't it?" said Albus. "I must admit, the prospect of a breakfast not surrounded by hundreds of people is quite appealing."

"It must be. But you could stay for breakfast at the cottage on Mondays," she reminded him. "I wouldn't mind getting up an hour earlier."

"I know, my dear. It isn't that I don't want to stay all night with you. But I feel that as Headmaster, I should make an effort to be at as many meals as possible."

"I understand," she said, smiling reassuringly at him.

"It would be lovely to have you at the castle."

"What pretext could you possibly use?"

"I don't know. I shall have to come up with one. Unless you want to tell the governors about our marriage now."

"Oh, let's think about that some other time," she said.

She dreaded the uproar...small though it would likely be...that would ensue should the divided Board of Governors get wind of her relationship with Albus. Although there was no rule prohibiting relationships between staff...or so Albus had said...the fact that she'd only been hired a year ago and was so much younger than he was would doubtless give the governors who disliked Albus ammunition to use against him. They would accuse him of ulterior motives in hiring her, no doubt, and a few would probably cast aspersions on her own character. She didn't think he had enough enemies in the group to get the sack, but anything was possible. And if the issue became public, there would doubtless be a story or two in the *Daily Prophet*, an idea that made her ill whenever she thought about it.

Among other things she preferred not to think about was the chance that Tom Riddle would turn up again, like the proverbial bad penny, and spread the tale of her earlier affair with Albus, which would be believed in light of their current relationship. That would almost certainly cause a very public scandal, even if it couldn't be proven, and she didn't want to imagine how her father might react. He had taken her marriage to a man only two years his junior apparently in stride, but Minerva didn't think his equanimity would extend to knowing that Albus had been her lover when she was eighteen and still in school.

"You look pensive," Albus said. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"No, you didn't. I'd just rather not think about anything practical right now. I'm too happy."

"I'm very glad."

They perused the breakfast cards and made their selections.

"We need to get changed for dinner," said Minerva. "Although I'm not sure how we'll manage it in this small space," she said, looking around.

"I'll just sit here while you change, then I'll take my turn," he said.

Minerva withdrew a small box from her handbag, then Summoned her wand from its hidden pocket inside her Muggle suit jacket and used it to return her trunk to its normal size. She barely had room to open it but eventually managed to withdraw her evening dress and shoes. After removing a pair of onyx hair combs from a small drawer in the trunk, she re-Shrunk it and put it back in her handbag.

She felt Albus's eyes on her as she removed her blouse, so she turned away from him with a smile, saying, "A gentleman would avert his eyes while a lady is dressing."

"The gentleman in question is simply appreciating his wife's charms."

"Well, you can appreciate them more later. We don't want to be late for dinner. It's the last seating."

He cleared his throat and stood, saying, "Perhaps I should avail myself of the water closet while you get dressed." He went to the door and opened it just enough to stick his head out. "All clear," he said and opened it enough to slip out.

When he returned, she was dressed, and it gratified her to see his smile when he saw her.

"You look lovely, my dear," he said. "A new dress?"

"Yes. When you suggested the trip, I thought I'd get a few Muggle things. Amelia knows a good shop in Dovehouse Street. I thought I'd just Transfigure anything else I might need, but I didn't think I could do justice to a smart suit or an evening dress, so I got them there."

"Beautiful," said Albus. "I don't think I've seen you in that colour before. It suits you."

"Thank you." She was afraid she'd sound terribly sentimental and foolish if she told him she'd selected that particular shade of blue because it reminded her of his eyes, so she didn't.

He put his hands on her waist and drew her closer, planting soft kisses on each bare shoulder. "I shall have a hard time keeping myself from doing this during dinner. Your shoulders are very, very enticing."

"Fortunately, the table will be between us, so you shan't have the opportunity."

"I will just content myself with looking at you, then." As he turned, he added, "For now."

He reached into his pocket and withdrew a small zippered pouch, from which he took a tiny scrap of cloth and what looked very much like two blackcurrants. He used his wand to enlarge them into a tuxedo and shirt, and the currants turned out to be a pair of black patent-leather shoes.

"I should have thought of that," said Minerva. "It would have made much more sense to put my things into a small bag instead of the trunk."

"My years roaming the Continent taught me to travel very light," Albus said. "Although I expect that's more difficult for a witch. Shrinking gowns and the like is a trickier business, and you have so many things to keep track of."

"Yes, the trunk does help keep things organised," said Minerva.

She used the tiny mirror over the fold-out sink to fix her hair while he changed. When she finished, he was struggling with his bow tie. "Ah," he said, giving up in frustration. "Would you mind, my dear? I never have quite got the hang of this."

She took up her wand and thought for a second, then pointed it at the tie, saying, *Ligate!*

Stepping back to look at him, she said, "That doesn't look right. I'm afraid I've never done a Muggle tie before. Let me have another go."

It took three tries before she was satisfied. Albus looked in the small mirror and declared the effort "A for Acceptable".

The long walk to the dining car whetted Minerva's appetite, and she was delighted to find *moûles marinière* on the menu. She loved mussels but rarely got them at home, and the light wine broth would be perfect after the heavy lunch they had consumed. Albus ordered a fillet of pickled beef, so they compromised on the wine, selecting a light Bourgueil that would clash with neither dish. As they waited for their meal, they chatted with a middle-aged couple seated at the next table.

When the man, who introduced himself as "Drummond, Drum for short," mentioned that they were American, Minerva said, "I spent a few months in America several years ago. I found it quite enchanting."

"Really? Where?" asked Drum.

"Outside Boston."

"For business or pleasure?"

"Both, I suppose. I was teaching and doing a bit of research."

"Let me guess," said Drum. "Radcliffe?"

"Er ..."

"Drum was a Harvard man," said Drum's wife, who was called Mary.

Drum chuckled. "Long before your time, of course," he said to Minerva. "So, was I correct? Are you a Radcliffe girl?"

"No," said Minerva, getting a bit nervous. She couldn't very well tell them she'd been at the Salem Witches' Institute, but she knew very little about Radcliffe, and certainly not enough to lie convincingly to someone who knew his way around Cambridge and its colleges.

"Wellesley, then? I hear it's lovely. Never been there, myself," Drum said.

Minerva relaxed a little. "Yes. But I was only there for one term."

"What was your subject?" asked Mary.

"Biology," Minerva said. Thanks to her advanced studies in cellular and molecular Transfiguration, she could hold her own in almost any discussion of mammalian biology, magical or Muggle.

"Goodness!" said Mary. "I'm afraid science quite escapes me. I only did a year of it at Vassar. Art History was my subject."

"Oh?" said Albus. "How interesting! Italy is certainly a good place to see art."

"Yes," said Drum. "Mary's been wanting to go for ages now, so we decided to make a tour of it: Paris, Venice, and Florence."

"Drum surprised me," said Mary, beaming. "For our thirtieth wedding anniversary."

"How marvellous! Congratulations!" said Albus.

"Thank you," said Drum.

Mary said, "And now I'm going to be nosy and ask you, what brings you to Italy?" Minerva suspected that she'd been trying to work out whether Albus and Minerva were a couple, or perhaps father and daughter travelling together.

"We're on our honeymoon," she said.

"Really?" said Mary, obviously delighted to have her answer at last. "Congratulations!"

"Yes, congratulations," said Drum, reaching across the table to pump Albus's hand. "I hope you'll be as happy as we've been."

"Thank you," said Albus.

"If you don't mind my saying so, you're a very lucky man."

"Yes, I am. Victoria is as brilliant as she is beautiful."

Mary asked Minerva, "So, are you a teacher?"

"I am. So is Albert, actually."

"How nice! Do you work at the same school?"

"Yes," said Albus, "at a small secondary school in Scotland. Victoria teaches science, and I am fortunate enough to be Headmaster."

"And that's how you met, am I right?" asked Drum.

"Yes," said Albus.

"I taught art to the fifth grade for a year," said Mary. "That is, until I married Drum. Do you plan to keep working, Victoria?"

"Yes, I do."

"That'll change when the babies start to come," said Drum with a wink at Albus.

The heat rose in Minerva's face, and she had to stop herself from saying something rude at the man's presumption.

With a glance at her, Albus said, "Oh, I don't think so. Victoria is quite gifted and committed to her work."

"I think that's wonderful," said Mary "You should be able to have a career and a family." To her husband, she said, "Girls sometimes do that now, Drum."

"I don't hold with it, if you don't mind my saying so," said Drum.

Minerva minded very much but took a sip of wine to prevent herself from telling the man exactly what she thought of his opinion.

Drum continued, "A woman should be with her children. We've got four, and Mary was perfectly happy at home taking care of them, weren't you, honey?"

"Yes, Drum, but not everyone feels the same way," said Mary, and Minerva had the impression she was trying to make him stop talking.

But Drum chuckled and said to Albus, "Just you wait: give her a baby, and you'll be in the market for a new science teacher."

Minerva's hand twitched at her side, where she usually kept her wand, and she said, "It's lucky I brought my pessary, then."

She was gratified when Drum started choking on the martini he had just brought to his lips. She thought she caught a fleeting smile cross Mary's face as she thumped her husband on the back.

Albus gave Minerva a look that plainly said he thought she'd crossed the line, but she stared back at him, raising her eyebrow, and he smiled.

"Ah," he said, "and here's our dinner."

The waiter had arrived just in time, and there was no more talk between the couples until Mary and Drum rose after dessert.

"Good evening, Victoria, Albert," said Mary. "It was a pleasure to have met you."

"Yes," said Drum, not looking at Minerva, his eyes scanning the dining car, intent on escape.

"The pleasure was ours," said Albus, rising to kiss Mary's hand.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, blushing and turning to her husband. "I just love Englishmen. So gentlemanly." To Minerva she said, "Enjoy your honeymoon."

"Thank you. And I hope you enjoy your trip as well," Minerva said.

As the couple retreated, Albus leant across the table and said quietly, "I'm surprised at you, Minerva."

"As far as I'm concerned, that dreadful man was asking for it. He's lucky I didn't hex him."

"Perhaps, but your tongue can be just as dangerous as your wand, you know."

"Why, thank you."

When they got back to their compartment, the banquette had been converted into two narrow beds, one just above the other.

"This will never do," said Albus, removing his wand from its pocket in the interior of his jacket. He used it to enlarge the upper bunk...there was no room to make the lower any bigger...and added a few strengthening spells for good measure.

"Your bed, milady," he said, bowing.

Minerva soon found that while the lurching and rocking of the train lent a titillating element of unpredictability to sex, it wasn't nearly as conducive to satisfying sleep.

Albus, who seemed to have the enviable ability to sleep anytime, anywhere, had dropped off within five minutes of rolling off her, one arm thrown across her chest, his face pressed against her hair.

After nearly two hours of dozing and being jerked awake by the movement of the train or the metallic whine of its wheels, Minerva transformed into her feline form and curled up in the crook of Albus's arm, hoping he wouldn't roll over in the night and crush her. Sleep came more easily to her as a cat, and within a few minutes, she was dreaming, ears still alert and twitching in the direction of each unfamiliar sound.

3. Tintoretto & Tiziano

Chapter 3 of 5

In this follow-up to *Epithalamium*, Minerva and Albus venture into the Muggle world to enjoy a romantic winter interlude in Venice. Join them as they board the Orient Express, enjoy some good food, fine art, and, of course, a bit of romance.

It opens just after the end of Chapter 54 of *Epithalamium*, but you don't have to have read that story to enjoy this tale.

They arrived in Venice the next afternoon, having enjoyed a private breakfast eaten while they were stopped in Innsbruck, and then the view as the train wound its way through the Brenner Pass and into northern Italy. When they disembarked at the Santa Lucia station after lunch, they joined the throngs disgorged from the recently arrived trains and took the *vaporetto* to the Rialto. Thank Merlin they'd been able to discreetly Shrink their bags in the station, as they had to walk several blocks to reach the small *pensione* Albus had selected for their stay.

Minerva was tired after the restless night she'd passed, but by the time they got to their room, she was eager to explore the city, so they set out in the crisp December air, first to the Rialto Bridge and through the fruit and vegetable market, then along the Grand Canal, eventually turning to wind through the tiny side streets to the Campo San Polo and on to the Scuola Grande di San Rocco.

The Tintoretts that crowded the walls and ceiling of the upper salon were beautiful, but oppressive, she thought, in their ubiquity. She spent some time looking at the details of each one, glad for her father's long-ago insistence that she study the Christian Bible and its stories. She shuddered as she looked at the Raising of Lazarus; it reminded her of Inferi and other Dark magic she'd read about during her training as an Auror.

They came out and doubled back to Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari. In contrast with the intricate Renaissance façade of its neighbour, this building's spare Gothic exterior didn't prepare her for what was inside.

As they proceeded up the wide nave toward the apse, Minerva stopped, momentarily stunned by the view.

"This is ..."

She had no words.

Titian's spectacular *Assumption of the Virgin* dominated the chancel, rising thirty feet above the altar, the uplifted arms of the apostles and the Virgin directing the eye upwards to the heavens and their God. The light that shone in, even on this grey day, from the slender, ogival pairs of stained-glass windows beside and above the painting gave it the appearance of being illuminated from within.

They stood in captivated silence for a few minutes.

She hadn't been in this church when she'd visited Venice with her father many years before. That trip had been largely for his research, and they'd spent most of their time in the libraries of the Marciana and the Accademia, or around the Venetian Ghetto, where the city's wizarding population had settled alongside its Jews when both were relegated to the Cannaregio *sestiere* during the early sixteenth century.

Albus took her hand and squeezed it.

"Titian was always one of my favourites," he whispered as they continued to gaze at the painting.

She could see why.

Finally, they tore themselves away from it to look at the other marvels the church held...the beautifully carved choir stalls, Antonio's Canova's oddly modern-looking, pyramidal funerary monument, and another Titian, as well as the nineteenth-century tomb of the painter himself.

Albus was especially interested in the burial place of composer Claudio Monteverdi...a simple plaque carved into the pink-and-white marble floor.

"I shall have to tell Nicolas I've seen it. He was at the first performance of *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* and became a great admirer of Monteverdi's. He often complains that his operas aren't performed anymore."

When they came out, it was dark, and there was a light rain falling.

"What would you say to an early dinner and then bed?" Albus asked.

"I'd say lead on, man."

They walked back to their hotel and got a recommendation from the desk clerk, whose girth, Albus later declared, was a hint that she knew where the neighbourhood's best food was to be had.

The restaurant was homey and small, but they were early, and the waiter gave them a prime seat near the blazing fireplace. Minerva was hungry, so they had a hearty *risotto* of Borlotti beans to start, and a bottle of Amarone. That was followed by a rabbit stew in rich broth for Minerva and *aritti mista* for Albus. They polished off the red wine with dinner, so he ordered two glasses of sweet Torcolato to go with their pudding, warm chocolate cake drizzled with hazelnut cream.

As they stepped out onto the cobblestones of the tiny street, Minerva put a hand to her head.

"I think I've had too much wine," she said.

"Minerva McGonagall? Pissed? Impossible," said Albus, and she batted him on the elbow he offered to steady her.

"There was a lot of wine in that *risotto*. And I think there was some in the broth with my rabbit. Then you ordered wine with the pudding."

"All part of my dastardly plan to get you tight and have my wicked way with you."

"You brute," she said, smiling, and he pulled her into his arms.

She was just tipsy enough to feel no shame as they kissed in the middle of the street with evening strollers looking at them as they passed. His lips were warm and sweet, and she felt positively wanton as she pressed her tongue into his mouth.

A group of youths came by, hooting and whistling. When one young man called out, *Bravo, Nonno!* Albus broke the kiss, but she held him close, their breath making warm puffs of mist that mingled in the frigid air.

"Keep that up, and you'll have to carry me back to the hotel," she said.

He grinned at her like a schoolboy and grasped her hand.

Their second-floor room was small, but it had its own bath and a window that opened onto a tiny courtyard rather than the noisy street.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Albus cast a Warming Charm. Minerva took off her coat and gloves, tossing them on the straight-backed chair that sat in the corner of the room, and began tugging at the buttons to her dress, her fingers maddeningly unobliging, thanks to the chilly walk. Frustrated, she grabbed her wand from its hidden pocket, intending to Banish her clothes, but he grasped her wrist.

"Slow down, my love," he said, nuzzling her forehead. "We have all night and nowhere we have to be in the morning." The fingers of his other hand ghosted over her

breasts as he reached for her buttons. "I want to undress you myself."

A shiver went through her as she remembered him saying something similar the first time they'd made love, when the newly discovered desire that had stirred in her for months finally clicked into place, like a key in a lock.

She sent her wand to rest on the small bedside table.

He removed his heavy overcoat and laid it on the chair along with his Homburg. His hands were steadier than hers as he began to undo the buttons that went from the neck of her wool dress to the calf-level hem. She undid the maroon-and-gold tie at his throat and pulled it out from under his collar-stiffeners, then stuffed it in his jacket pocket. After pushing the jacket from his shoulders, she tugged his shirt out from his trousers and got to work unbuttoning it.

When Albus's hands reached her waist, the front of her dress fell open, and he bent to kiss the skin he'd bared, running his tongue over her clavicles and into the soft divot that lay between them. He kissed her neck, his lips sucking gently at the place where her carotid artery pulsed with life.

Her hands carded through his hair, short and slicked back in the Muggle way. Distracted as she was, it took her two tries before her *Finite Incantatem* released the charm and his long hair and beard shimmered back into being to flow in auburn-and-silver waves over his back and chest.

"Better," she whispered, letting her mouth touch his, her lips light and elusive as the brush of a butterfly's wings.

His fingertips danced over the sides of her breasts and down her belly as she pulled her arms from the sleeves of her dress and pushed it past her hips to step out of it, leaving her in a brassiere, knickers, and stockings.

He removed his shirt and vest, then his belt and trousers, the buckle making a dull, metallic *thunk* when he dropped the garments in a messy heap on the floor. They both bent to remove their uncomfortable Muggle shoes, and when they straightened up, he turned her around so that her bottom pressed up against his thighs. He unhooked her bra and helped her push it off, his hands coming around her to knead her bare breasts. His mouth tickled across her shoulders as she rubbed herself against him through the frustrating cloth that separated her from his skin.

Maybe it was the wine, but she wanted him with a desperation she hadn't felt since they'd resumed their affair that cold March day nine months ago, wanted to drown in his flesh and the sensations he evoked in her.

She tried to pull away and move him towards the bed, but he held her fast. Her nipples were hard peaks of electric sensation as he pinched and rolled them between his fingers, and she moaned. He broke off his work to Summon his wand and cast a Silencing spell, then tossed the scarred Elder stick onto the chair with their coats.

One hand returned to her breast, while the other travelled south to her sex, fingers pushing the thin silk into her most intimate parts.

"So wet," he murmured, "I can feel it right through your knickers."

She could only gasp in response, because at the same moment, one of his insistent fingers found her clitoris, and words fled her. He held her still, his hard cock pressing almost uncomfortably into the small of her back.

When she moved one leg back to rub against the side of his calf, the hand that was teasing her stopped, and he released her, only to grasp the waistband of her knickers and yank them down around her thighs so that her legs were restrained. His arm came back around her, pressing her back against his bare chest.

"Don't move," he breathed into her ear.

He reached down to cup her mound, holding her there for what seemed an eternity before he allowed a finger to move into her cleft and over the button of flesh that made her release the breath she'd been holding with a soft, "Oh!"

Her legs threatened to give out as he touched her, the tension coiling up from her centre forcing breathy cries from her mouth. As one finger caressed, another worked its way into her, probing and pressing, until her orgasm broke over her. He had to hold her up as she shook, pulsing around the finger that was still sheathed within her.

When she could stand on her own again, he let her go and knelt to pull her knickers all the way off. She returned the favour, letting her tongue tease the erection she had uncovered.

"No," he said when she put her mouth on him in earnest. He pulled her to her feet and steered her to the bed. She turned down the coverlet and lay, legs spread and arms outstretched to receive him. He joined her, covering her body with his, but he didn't take her; instead, he stroked her skin, letting his cock slide teasingly against her sex.

Minerva's legs, still encased in stockings, came up to wrap around him. His weight on top of her and his familiar scent made her hum with pleasure as he whispered endearments between kisses that covered her face, ending with her mouth.

They kissed and frothed against one another, and just when she thought she'd scream with the need for him to fill her, he did.

"Minerva ... my beautiful Minerva ..." he said as he slid home.

He moved slowly, and she arched upward to meet him so that he rubbed against her in the right spot.

"Love you," he breathed over her, "want you always ... always ..."

He slowed his movements even more, then stilled, trembling above her.

"Please, Albus," she said, pulling on his buttocks.

"Not yet ... not yet ..."

She tried to shift her hips up, but he let his weight pin her to the mattress. He took her left hand from his arse and held it to the pillow above her head, whispering, "*Adhaere*," and repeated it with her right hand. She was stuck.

"Albus..."

He put a finger to her lips and traced it gently across them.

"I want to take my time tonight, and if you move too much, I won't be able to."

He sank deep into her then, and pushed her legs together so that she was entirely trapped beneath him. She thanked whatever god was in charge of such things for the size of his cock. It felt huge, lodged between her closed legs, and that was exactly how she wanted it.

His pace was agonisingly slow, and her second climax hovered just out of reach as he pushed in, one maddening inch at a time, then withdrew the same way, leaving only the tip of his cock inside, repeating the motion over and over until she was almost senseless with need.

She groaned when he pulled out completely and brought his hands up to cup her cheeks. The way he looked at her nearly made her come; his eyes bored into hers as if he were looking into her soul. She wondered for a moment if he was using Legilimency...but no, she'd experienced that before, and this was nothing like it. She almost

invited him to look, to see how much she loved him, but then he kissed her mouth again, and the idea dissolved. He moved to her breasts, teasing her nipples with lips and tongue, and she couldn't hold back a scream when he grazed one with his teeth, the sharp sensation on her taut flesh sending zings of pleasure to her centre. Kissing and suckling, he etched a meandering path down her body, leaving a trail of quivering desire in his wake.

He pressed her thighs wide, opening her most secret place to his gaze.

"Yes, please ... oh, please ..." she said, anticipating the touch of his tongue on her nub. Instead, he murmured, "Need to taste you," and pressed his mouth to her sex, plunging his tongue into her opening. She tried to buck her hips up, but he pressed her more firmly to the bed with his strong hands, tongue darting and probing. She moaned as it teased her, moving in and out as his cock had been doing minutes before.

When he finally licked her clitoris, she howled. Her upper body arched off the bed, her arms pulling against the charm that held her wrists. She wanted to wrap her legs around his shoulders, but he held her by the hips while the long-delayed orgasm ripped through her. He slid his tongue deep into her again as wave after wave of ecstasy enveloped her.

After a minute during which she could barely think or breathe, her body relaxed back against the mattress, and he came up to lie on top of her again.

She came down from her euphoria and felt him pressing his erection rhythmically against her belly. Now that he'd driven her nearly mad with pleasure, she wanted to do the same for him, to feel him lose himself as utterly as she had lost herself.

"Come up here," she whispered. "Put your cock in my mouth."

A small puff of breath escaped him. "Shall I release your arms?" he asked.

"No."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't."

He hesitated, then moved carefully up until his knees were straddling her head. Taking his penis in one hand, he guided it to her mouth.

She wrapped her lips around the head. As she moved her tongue around it, he gave a cry, and she began to suck him, her head bobbing back and forth.

He leant forward, putting his palms to the wall for support, and as he began to pump gently in and out, she heard him moaning, "Ah ... ah ... ah ..." softly. His cock pushed farther into her mouth...she had no choice but to take it in, and that excited her. All she could do was swallow around him, which she knew he loved. He stilled, and his shuddering breaths told her he was close to climax. Suddenly, he withdrew and moved down, pushing her thighs apart. He thrust into her hard and fast, and she cried out, the heat and pressure beginning to build again in her core as he moved, grasping her legs and pushing them up against her body. She felt him deep inside her, and he moved a hand between them to stroke her. Her breath stopped and her arms pulled at the invisible restraints as she fell over the edge again, silent this time.

Albus's cries were still soft, and she knew he was holding back, trying not to be too rough. She was having none of it. "Harder," she said. He obeyed, but not with the enthusiasm she'd hoped for, so she made things clearer: "Fuck me hard, Albus Dumbledore. Hard as you can."

That did the trick.

He propped himself up on his elbows for more leverage and slammed into her. It felt glorious, the pain transmuted into intense pleasure at the moment of total surrender, and it left her gasping, tears leaking from her eyes.

The punishing rhythm he took up was matched by her cries, and his voice joined hers, uttering nonsense as he pumped and thrust. The bed banged against the wall in joyful chorus, its wrought-iron frame shrieking and complaining.

"Yes! Yes! Gods!"

"My... Ah! You..."

The bed frame crashed to the floor, the jolt sending Albus sprawling on top of her.

It nearly knocked the breath from her, but she managed to gasp, "Don't stop," so he pushed himself back up and went back to his task as if nothing unusual had happened.

The Sticking Charm released when he came, shouting, and she wrapped her arms and legs around him, pulling him down, wanting them to be as close as the laws of physics would allow while he pumped his climax into her.

After his spasms stopped, he sighed, and she buried her nose in his neck, planting kisses against the soft skin there.

His heart was thudding hard enough that she felt it in her own chest, and for a moment, she was concerned. But he lifted his head and smiled.

She did too, and then they both began to laugh.

4. Venice: San Marco & Il Racconto del Calamaro Gigante

Chapter 4 of 5

In this follow-up to *Epithalamium*, Minerva and Albus venture into the Muggle world to enjoy a romantic winter interlude in Venice. Join them as they board the Orient Express, enjoy some good food, fine art, and, of course, a bit of romance.

It opens just after the end of Chapter 54 of *Epithalamium*, but you don't have to have read that story to enjoy this tale.

"You look a bit peely wally."

Minerva smoothed Albus's tangled hair out of his face.

He had just awakened with a groan and put a hand to his head.

"We did have a lot of wine last night," he said, sitting up and rubbing his eyes with a fist. He blinked several times before her face came into focus. "How do you look so bright this morning? You had almost as much as I did."

"I'm younger than you. Also, I took a bit of Hangover Potion earlier this morning."

"I need to get my hands on some of that." He stretched his legs, grunting as his knees cracked. "Also something for the aches and pains. We were a bit ... unrestrained last night, and, as you so kindly pointed out, I'm not as young as I used to be."

She kissed his cheek and patted his knee. "I'll get it." She got up and found his bag, rummaging through it for the potions.

Albus watched her. "I didn't ... I didn't hurt you? Last night?"

She turned to look at him. His brows were knitted in concern. "No," she said. "It was fun." She found what she was looking for and brought him the phials and a spoon she had Conjured when she'd arisen earlier that morning with a thumping hangover and a deep ache between her legs.

It occurred to her that she had perhaps asked too much of him the previous evening. They *had* broken the bed, after all. She suppressed a smile at the memory

"Did you enjoy it?" she asked.

He grasped her by the wrist and pulled her down to sit on the bed they had hastily repaired before sleeping. "I think I made my feelings on the matter quite plain at the time," he murmured, kissing her neck.

She gently disengaged herself from his embrace. "Your potions," she said, holding out the phials and the spoon.

He dutifully poured a dose of each and swallowed them, grimacing at the taste.

After a moment, his brows relaxed, and he let out a sigh.

"Better?" she asked.

"Much."

After bathing and dressing, they had a light breakfast of bread, jam, and coffee at the *pensione* and set out to explore the Rialto market. It was cold, and the last of the morning mist dampened their faces as they walked. Minerva pulled her soft woollen muffler up over her chin and mouth.

Albus leant down and whispered in her ear, "I could do a wandless Warming Charm if you like."

She glanced around at the crowded street and shook her head.

"Suit yourself," he said, and she took the arm he offered her.

Once over the Rialto Bridge, they found stall after stall of delights both familiar and foreign, offered in a lilting cacophony of Italian carried on great puffs of steamy breath from the vendors crying their wares.

The bins of the *Erberia* were a riot of colours and textures. Pale green stalks of cardoon and bunches of dark *cavolo nero* competed with purple-headed cauliflower, bright, fragrant clementines and mandarins, and a bewildering array of radicchios for the attention of the shoppers.

Stout, black-clad and veiled old women stalked the stands, and despite her lack of Italian, Minerva could hear from their tone that they were questioning the vendors on the freshness of their wares just as rigorously as she'd ever quizzed a class of reluctant N.E.W.T. students on Gamp's Third Law of Transfiguration.

The clean scent of the sea drew Minerva and Albus into the fish market, where they strolled among the stalls, jostled aside by Venetian shoppers engaged in the serious business of vying for the best of the city's famous *frutti di mare*. It was almost overwhelming, the variety of items offered...tiny cuttlefish from the Lagoon, scallops, eel, blue sardines, glistening clams ...

Albus stopped to examine a crate of tiny squid dotted with black ink and nestled into a bed of crushed ice.

"Amazing," he said, picking one up between his fingers and turning it this way and that to examine it. "It's like a miniature replica of our giant squid."

Minerva laughed. "I doubt our squid would appreciate the comparison."

He put the little cephalopod back beside its brothers.

"You know, I've always wondered about the giant squid," said Minerva as they continued their tour of the *thepescaria*.

"What have you wondered, my love?"

"Where it came from. How it survives in a freshwater loch. It isn't in *Hogwarts: A History* or any other book I've been able to find."

"Of course, you've researched it thoroughly. In your first year, no doubt."

"My third, actually. That was the first time I saw it in the flesh. Rupert Davies had fallen off his broom and into the loch. The squid pulled him out and set him on the shore, which was lucky, as he apparently couldn't swim."

"Yes, the squid can be quite helpful that way," Albus said.

"But there's nothing about it in any of the books. It's as if it's always been there in the loch."

"Mmm."

Minerva gave him a wary sidelong glance.

"What exactly do you know about it, Headmaster?"

"Not much, but I have a few ideas."

He walked on ahead of her, stooping to examine a bin of what looked like tiny, grey lobsters. Minerva caught him up and tugged on his sleeve.

"And?"

"They're called *canoce*, apparently," Albus said, gesturing to a sign, "and they look delicious."

"Don't be obtuse, Albus. I mean, tell me about the giant squid."

He leant down and kissed her nose, which was red and numb from the cold.

"It's Albert, my dear Victoria. And I'll tell you about it over lunch. All this seafood is making me hungry."

"It can't even have gone eleven yet."

"Surely there's a nearby restaurant that's open a bit early."

"Oh, no. Not until we've done St Mark's."

Albus pretended to pout. "But you've seen that before."

"Not with my husband."

He sighed dramatically. "Very well. Lead on, my dear."

Under the grey, overcast skies, the Piazza San Marco was far less crowded than the last time she'd been in it in high summer before her sixth year at Hogwarts. There seemed to be more pigeons than people, although a small crowd of hardy souls, their breath visible in the chill air, stood in front of the Basilica.

Minerva and Albus joined them, looking up at the famous gabled and gilded façade. The quartet of enormous bronze horses dominated the area above the church's portal, their power and naturalism contrasting with the delicate, stylised mosaic of *The Last Judgement* below.

Albus pointed to the golden winged lion under the statue of St Mark.

"It appears the builders were Gryffindors," he said.

Minerva's answer was forestalled by a voice from behind them.

"Oh, thank goodness!"

They turned to find a middle-aged man in a grey mac scanning them, a look of hopeful appeal on his face.

"I've had a devil of a time finding anyone who spoke English. Would you mind terribly?" he asked, holding out a large, squarish camera towards Albus. "We'd like to have a snap of the two of us together."

A younger man stepped up next to him, giving Albus and Minerva a sheepish tip of his felt hat.

"I'd be happy to," said Albus, "but I'm afraid I don't quite know how to, *er* ..."

"Albert is hopeless with a camera," Minerva said. "I'll give it a go, if you like, although I can't claim to be much of a photographer."

"Much obliged," said the older man, handing her the camera. "It's dead simple, really. You just point and click that button there."

He took his place next to the other man, their shoulders touching. Both smiled, the younger showing off an array of impressively crooked teeth.

Minerva aimed the camera at them, trying to get as much of the church's façade into the shot as possible, and clicked the shutter button.

"Thanks ever so," said the older man, still blinking from the light of the flash

"It's no trouble," said Minerva. She handed back the camera.

"Where are you visiting from, if I may ask," the fellow said as he wound the camera.

"Near Inverness."

"I thought Scotland, judging by the accent. No points for guessing where we're from," he said with a grin.

"Somewhere in Yorkshire, I should think," Minerva said.

"Can't imagine what gave me away," said the grinning man. "Anyway, thanks for the photograph. If you've got a camera, I'd be happy to return the favour."

"We haven't, but thank you for the offer."

"Well, ta, then. Enjoy the sights."

She looked back at the men as they ambled away. She wondered if they were brothers, friends travelling together, or perhaps a couple. Something about them...how closely they had stood together, the younger man's shyness...suggested the latter. Her thoughts moved to her friend Amelia and Amelia's beloved, Marlene. While Minerva didn't mind having to keep her relationship with Albus discreet, Amelia, she knew, minded very much that she and Marlene had to pretend to be nothing more than "good friends".

Minerva wondered if she, Minerva, would tire of the secrecy eventually. At least here, they could be a little freer. She took Albus's arm as they entered the basilica's narthex.

The mosaics depicting scenes from the Old Testament were beautiful and impressive, but they were inadequate preparation for what awaited the couple as they passed through the bronze door into the basilica itself.

Although she'd seen it before, the interior of St Mark's drew a gasp from Minerva.

The gilded mosaics that lined the walls, ceiling, and domes made her feel as if she were swimming in an ocean of golden light.

When the mosaics finally released her gaze, she looked down at the floor. The inlaid marble, with its geometric designs, peppered with depictions of plants and animals, made beautifully clear the inviolable connection between the heavenly realm above and the earthly plane below.

They walked the transepts, eyes raised to the magnificent domes above, each golden orb seemingly borne aloft on the shafts of winter light that came through the windows which necklaced the domes at their bases. The chapels in each arm held more treasures...Gothic sculptures, Byzantine icons, and still more mosaics depicting the life of Christ.

A small group of camera-wielding tourists had gathered in front of the altar, so Minerva and Albus waited until they dispersed before approaching it. The famous altarpiece, the "Pala d'Oro", was an intricate maze of delicate colour, emeralds, amethysts, topazes, rubies, and other precious stones vying with the enamelled figures of Christ and the saints for the observer's attention.

"Impressive," Albus said.

"Too much," said Minerva.

"You don't like all those jewels?"

"Gran always said, 'Enough is as good as a feast.'"

Albus chuckled. "The Byzantines didn't agree with her."

"Clearly."

They spent another hour exploring the wonders of the basilica, which was filling with crowds of tourists, despite the chill weather.

When they emerged, blinking, into the bright winter light of the early afternoon, Albus said, "How about a spot of lunch before we tackle the Doge's Palace?"

Minerva's belly gave an answering rumble.

"Yes. Where?" she said.

"I'm sure we'll find somewhere suitable."

They left the piazza and ventured down a series of narrow, crowded side streets.

After a few turns, Albus stopped in front of a small restaurant. A battered wooden sign, featuring a bright red crustacean with enormous claws, hung above the doorway.

"This looks promising," Albus said.

The proprietor was able to seat them immediately at a corner table. They lunched on linguini with *canoce* and squid ink. Minerva demurred when Albus suggested ordering a bottle of wine with their meal.

"If we start drinking now, I'll be out by five," she said.

Albus settled for an Italian beer, and Minerva had sparkling water.

The meal reminded her of their earlier topic of conversation.

"So, tell me about the giant squid."

"I... damn!"

A morsel of food had slipped from Albus's fork to splatter his silk tie with oil and ink.

As he blotted at it with his napkin, Minerva looked around the room. The other tables were close, but no one seemed to be paying the couple any attention.

She didn't dare risk drawing her wand from its secret pocket in the bodice of her Muggle suit, but she thought she might be able to manage the spell without.

"*Tergeo*," she whispered, her eyes and magic focussed on the spot where his fingers were worrying the stain.

He looked up at her, surprised.

"Did it work?"

Minerva smiled, delighted with herself. "It did."

"Thank you."

"You were about to tell me about the squid."

"Yes." He smoothed his tie and put his napkin back in his lap. "This is just a theory, mind ..."

"Of course."

"I believe he is an Animagus."

Minerva blinked several times.

She said, "But as far as we know, an Animagus is physiologically like the animal he or she becomes. Even if he were an Animagus, he couldn't survive in fresh water in his squid form."

Albus slurped up a long noodle before answering.

"True. If he were an ordinary squid. But the merpeople tell me he is not at all ordinary."

"You can talk to the merpeople?"

"Yes. Well, more or less. Several years ago, when it seemed I was in danger of becoming Headmaster after Armando, I studied Mermish. I thought it would be a good idea to forge some closer ties with Black Lake's colony, given that there had been several unfortunate incidents in the past where students had been threatened if they wandered too close to their part of the lake."

"And what did the merpeople tell you about the squid?"

"That he disappears from the loch from time to time."

"Where does he go?"

"I don't know."

A pair of lines creased Minerva's forehead as she thought.

"I don't see how that changes things," she said. "He still shouldn't be able to survive in his squid form in the loch."

"He shouldn't, but clearly, he does." Albus finished the last of his linguini and sat back, a satisfied smile on his face. "That hits the spot."

"Now that your belly is full, maybe you'll actually answer my question."

"And what was that, my love?"

"How does our squid...Animagus or not...live in the loch?"

"I believe he has been able to Transfigure his Animagus form further to adapt to life in a freshwater lake."

Minerva sat back in surprise.

"That would be an *astonishing* feat of Transfiguration."

"It would."

"How did you come to this conclusion?"

"It's more of a hypothesis, but the fact that he is apparently able to come and go from the lake is suggestive that he has intelligence, will, and magic that are absent even from magical beasts."

"So he transforms and travels about in his human form?"

"No. At least, I don't believe he does. He uses the magical portal in the Black Lake to go to other lakes."

The afternoon was becoming full of surprises.

"A portal? You mean like a ... like a Floo connection?"

"A bit, yes. In fact, the magic used to create the Floo Network harnesses another natural portal that lies under the Ministry of Magic, which is primarily why the Ministry was located where it was. Some very clever wizards found that they could extend a weak arm of the portal across the island of Great Britain using the Gault clay that makes up the portal's physical environment. Fireplaces that connect to the Floo Network must be lined with this clay and Charmed to create the connection between the two points."

He stopped to take a few more bites of his lunch. The remainder of Minerva's lunch, however, sat cooling on her plate. She was much too interested in their conversation to think of eating any more.

"Floo Powder is made from the same clay," Albus continued. "Much like a wand in the hands of a person imbued with innate magic, the clay in the powder channels the portal's magic strongly enough that the magical intention of the user allows him to access the connection to move between Network points."

"And what of the Black Lake?" Minerva asked, eager to get the story of the squid back on track.

"It contains the same sort of portal, only it is much more concentrated, and therefore, its magic is harder to control. Unlike the Floo portal, the wizard who wishes to use it must be very powerful and skilled in order to channel it to travel to another point. The strength of the portal under the lake allows for travel across longer distances than the Floo Network, and across large bodies of water. It is the only portal yet identified in the British Isles that allows one to travel to and from the Continent.

"I can see why it's a secret," said Minerva. "People would be clamouring to use it, since cross-Channel Apparition is so difficult and expensive."

"I doubt whether anyone who couldn't manage a cross-Channel Apparition could effectively use the Black Lake portal," said Albus. "But it is kept quiet for a number of other reasons. One is that it is powerful enough to allow the transportation of very large objects, which one can't do with Apparition, and the Ministry would like to keep that quiet. Another is simply for the safety of the creatures living in and around the lake. The Merchieftaness uses it on occasion, apparently, and she will permit the Head of Hogwarts to access it if needed."

"Have you ever used it?"

"I tried it out shortly after becoming Headmaster. I was able to travel to Lake Sfânta Ana in the Carpathian Mountains."

"So you believe the squid to be an Animagus because he can use this portal?"

"Among other reasons."

"Such as?"

Albus glanced around.

"This is something I probably shouldn't reveal. It's a bit of a Headmaster's secret."

"If you'd rather not tell me..."

"It isn't that. I'm supposed to be the only one at Hogwarts who knows. Well, along with the Deputy Headmaster. It's a security measure."

"Oh."

Minerva supposed she shouldn't feel slighted. She was only a teacher, after all, not his Deputy, or even a Head of House, but she couldn't help being disappointed that he was reluctant to share something with her.

Albus leant across the table to whisper, "But seeing as you're my wife, I suppose I may be permitted to reveal a few of the school's secrets to you."

"You really needn't tell me," she said. But she hoped he would.

He said, "A number of years ago, I took part in the renewal of the foundational wards of Hogwarts, the complex enchantments that protect the school from all but the strongest Dark magic and keep it hidden from Muggles."

She knew about the foundational wards, of course. There was a section about them in *Hogwarts: A History*, although it was vague on what the wards actually did.

"I wasn't aware they needed renewing," she said. "I thought they were expected to last for several thousand years."

"They are. But after the Muggle war ended, there were concerns that they wouldn't withstand some of the weapons Muggles were concocting. Apparently, the founders hadn't ever anticipated things like the atom bombs the Americans dropped on Japan, or the H-bomb they are supposedly working on. Like many wizards, the founders underestimated Muggle ingenuity."

"Armando and I thought it best to try to add new protections to the wards. The work took place in the lake. The squid was ... involved."

"In it? With the *squid*?"

He chuckled at her incredulity.

"Yes, that was my initial reaction too, but Armando assured me it was necessary. It's in the Headmaster's Book, you see. The instructions were written by Rowena Ravenclaw herself...she wrote that any changes to the wards set down by the founders had to be done with the aid of what she called the 'kraken' that inhabited the Black Lake, as he was the only creature whose blood could alter the wards."

Minerva shook her head in confusion.

"I don't understand."

"Neither did I, when I found out about it, but Armando and I did some research. I don't know with any certainty, but I suspect the squid was instrumental in creating the original wards."

Minerva contemplated this titbit of information, and Albus took the opportunity to down the remainder of his beer.

"That makes him more than a thousand years old," Minerva said.

"Yes."

"Even if he is an Animagus, wizards don't live that long. Even the most powerful don't live more than about 200 years," she said.

"No. But I believe that this wizard was very unusual. I believe he may have been Merlin himself."

Sound wasn't possible. Minerva's mouth hung open, astonished at what Albus was telling her.

"Shall we order dessert, my dear?" Albus asked, as if he had said nothing out of the ordinary.

She had so many questions, they all tried to tumble from her mouth at the same time.

"How... where why did he..."

Albus smiled at her inability to formulate a coherent sentence.

"As you know, there are many legends about the wizard we've come to call Merlin. One of them is that he lives backwards in time. I don't know if there's any truth to that, but I'm almost positive he made many experiments with temporal magic.

"Also, we know that he was enchanted by Nimue, who was a very powerful sorceress herself. She may have ... meddled with his lifespan.

"It is said that Nimue...or Vivienne, or whatever one wishes to call the witch that so enchanted Merlin...cursed him after persuading him to teach her the magic he had discovered. I believe that, rather than a rock or a tree, as the story has it, she trapped him in his Animagus form and imprisoned him in the Black Lake. She had a special affinity for lakes...she was known as The Lady of the Lake, after all."

"And he's still there? After all this time?" Minerva asked.

"Either he has been unable to break her enchantment, or, as I rather suspect, he prefers to live as a squid."

She digested this as Albus picked the last of the tiny *canoe* from his plate and popped it in his mouth.

"Why on earth would he do that?" Minerva asked.

Albus patted his lips with his napkin. "He was rather henpecked by Nimue. And he was relentlessly pursued by wizards, witches, kings, villains...everyone wanted him, thanks to his extraordinary talents. I doubt he ever got a moment to be his own man."

Minerva thought Albus could probably empathise with that.

He continued, "He seems to live quite contentedly in the Black Lake, among the merpeople and the other aquatic beings. As you've seen, he helps watch over the school and its inhabitants. I suspect he is a significant part of the reason we have so few serious magical accidents at Hogwarts, at least compared with other schools of magic. His power helps keep the school and her inhabitants safe from all but the Darkest magic."

"And the founders knew about this?" Minerva asked.

"I think so. I believe that's why they sited Hogwarts where they did. Godric Gryffindor was a scholar of Merlin studies. Rowena Ravenclaw spoke Mermish. Between them, they may have been able to communicate with the squid...whoever he actually is...and convinced him to help lend his magic to the school's protection.

"It has been clear to me for some time that the location's exceptional concentration of magical energy must be due to both the portal and to the presence of an extremely powerful being."

"You are an extremely powerful being," she reminded him.

"I am powerful, yes. But not *that* powerful. The force of the foundational wards was beyond anything I had imagined. My blood would not have sufficed to create them. I doubt even all the founders' blood together would have been."

Minerva was about to ask more, but the waiter came by their table just then, inquiring if the signor and signora would be having dessert.

Albus looked at Minerva questioningly.

"Not for me," she said. She'd planned on having a bit of something sweet after her meal, but the afternoon's surprises had quite chased away her appetite.

Albus said to the waiter, "*No, grazie. Il conto, per favore.*"

After the waiter has whisked their plates away, he said, "I really shouldn't have said so much. My thoughts are only hypotheses, after all, and it's probably best that no one else know. I've never spoken of it to anyone."

"I won't tell anyone," Minerva said.

"I know you won't, my love."

She thought back to the night he'd confessed his relationship with Gellert Grindelwald. She'd never mentioned it to anyone, even Amelia, and never would. Now, he'd told

her something else he'd never told anyone else. Something utterly astonishing. The fact that he trusted her with his deepest secrets warmed her to her core.

Albus paid the bill, and they made their way back to the Piazza San Marco, intent on seeing the Doge's Palace.

They took in the courtyard, surrounded by the renaissance façades, and the marble staircase, flanked by the "giants", the statues of Mars and Neptune that signified to all who entered the palace Venice's might by both land and sea. Another winged lion stood in the alcove above, guarding the entryway to the Porta della Carta.

Minerva enjoyed their tour of the Doge's apartments, although Albus remarked that he might have trouble sleeping in a room as ornately decorated as the Scarlet Chamber, with its intricately carved ceiling. He was especially fascinated by the maps and giant globes in the Shield Room, while the red and gold of the Grimani Room reminded Minerva of the Gryffindor common room.

They moved through room after extravagantly decorated room...so many that they began to blend together in Minerva's mind. She found she was tiring and began to be eager to finish their tour.

Albus convinced a reluctant Minerva to visit the prisons, where the Doges had kept their enemies. From a narrow door in the courtyard, they entered the terrible damp cells known as the *Pozzi*. Albus was uncharacteristically silent as they viewed them, then passed through a series of administrative rooms to the newer cells of the *Piombi*...luxurious by comparison to their older counterparts, but still forbidding. He didn't even make any remarks when they were shown the cells that had held Casanova.

When they re-emerged, the daylight had faded, the sun glowing low above the hills beyond the city.

"Are you all right?" Minerva asked him.

"Fine, why?"

"You've been very quiet."

"Just thinking, my dear."

"Did the cells upset you?"

He gave her a sad smile. "They just reminded me how terrible prisons are anywhere."

"You're thinking of Azkaban."

"Yes, among others. It is a truly awful place, Minerva. Although the cells are larger and drier than these, the prisoners are just as wretched as I imagine the Doge's must have been."

"Because of the dementors."

"Yes. I have tried to persuade the Wizengamot to take up the notion of doing away with them, but so far no luck."

Minerva wondered if Albus was thinking of his father, who had died in Azkaban.

She took his hand and squeezed it.

"Let's get a drink," she said.

"That, my dear, is an excellent idea."

The city lamps were just coming on, reflected off the wet stone, giving the piazza a shimmering, almost watercolour-like quality, so they decided to have their cocktail at one of the outdoor cafés that lined the square.

The waning day had warmed up a bit, but the air was still brisk. Despite that, the place was beginning to fill with tourists and locals out for a drink before returning home from work. There was a large crowd at the bar, and most of the tables were taken.

"Why don't I get us our drinks while you scout us out a seat," Albus said.

"All right," she said. "I'll have a whiskey. Any kind, straight up."

He went off to join the throng at the bar, and Minerva looked around for an open table.

"Fancy meeting you here!"

Minerva turned and was surprised to see Mary from the train.

"Hello," she said.

Mary pulled her coat closer around herself. "We've just been to the Doge's Palace, have you seen it?"

"Yes, this afternoon."

"Spectacular, isn't it?"

"Indeed."

Mary put a hand on Minerva's arm. "I'm glad we ran into one another. I wanted to apologise for Drum on the train the other evening. He can be ... outspoken."

"That's quite all right."

"He means no harm. It's just that he puts his foot in his mouth sometimes."

This was said with such affection that Minerva had to smile.

"Really, it is all right," she said.

Mary laughed heartily. "You managed to shut him up, though, and that's hard to do."

Minerva felt herself flush. "I'm sorry. I've been known to overreact upon occasion."

"Nonsense. It's good for him to get a taste of his own medicine for a change. Especially when it's from a woman."

Minerva decided she liked this American.

A couple left one of the nearby tables, and Mary gestured to it. "Would you like to sit? Drum's just gone to get our drinks."

"Albert too. It looks as if they'll be awhile," Minerva said, with a glance at the crowd at the bar.

They sat, and Mary said, "I take it you're enjoying your honeymoon?" Her eyes darted to Minerva's neck, and Minerva had to stop her hand from moving to cover the mark she knew was there from the previous evening's activities.

"Yes. Venice is enchanting."

"Anywhere is enchanting when you're in love," Mary said dreamily. "I must admit, Venice has had the most wonderful effect on Drum. We didn't have a honeymoon, what with the Depression on. And after we married, he was trying so hard to get ahead in his firm, there just wasn't time for travel. This has been a dream come true, really."

"So you're having a good time."

"A very good time. It's been a long time since we've had a real vacation. Our youngest just went off to Harvard this fall."

"Congratulations."

Minerva hoped that was the right thing to say.

"Thank you," said Mary. Her expression clouded over a little. "We have an empty nest now. It's been an adjustment, having just the two of us in the house. I feel like we're getting to know one another all over again on this trip."

"That can be fun."

"It can be," Mary said. She looked over at the shadow of St Mark's in the distance for a moment, and when she turned back to Minerva, she said, "It's none of my business, I know, but Albert is quite a bit older than you, isn't he?"

Minerva was surprised by the remark, but she reminded herself again that Americans tended to be more forward than what she was used to.

"Yes," she said. She hoped her crisp tone would call an end to this line of conversation.

"In a way, I envy you. You knew who your husband was when you married him."

Minerva didn't say anything for a moment, and Mary said, "Oh, dear. I hope I haven't spoken out of turn."

"Not at all."

"It's just that when I married Drum, we were both so young. I was only a year out of college, and Drum had just started at his firm. I had a very romanticised view of marriage."

Minerva found herself interested despite herself. "In what way?"

"Oh, I suppose I thought it would be like going steady, only he wouldn't leave me at my door with just a good-night kiss, if you know what I mean."

She laughed, and Minerva couldn't help laughing too.

"I take it the reality was somewhat different," Minerva said.

"Yes. It's different being with someone all the time, in private."

It surprised Minerva, a little, to hear Mary express the same misgivings she, Minerva, had had.

"I suppose it is," she said.

"It was like being thrown in with a stranger. For Drum, too, I think. And then Johnny came along a year later, and, well, suddenly it seemed like I was juggling four little children, and between the diapers and the feedings and the doctor visits, I barely remembered I even had a name other than 'Mama.' I feel as if Drum and I didn't really get to know one another until a few years ago, when our youngest went to high school."

"It sounds difficult."

"Oh, don't get me wrong. I wouldn't trade it for anything. I just wish it had all happened a little later."

She laughed suddenly. "Golly, what you must think of me! I guess this trip just has me thinking about the past and all the might-have-beens."

"Might-have-beens?"

"Oh, nothing, really," said Mary. "Just me being silly. I've been so lucky to be married to a man like Drum."

Minerva looked over to the bar where Drum was still waiting for drinks. Albus was standing near him.

Mary followed her gaze. "Your Albert seems like a nice fellow."

Minerva smiled. "Yes, he is."

"Have you been courting long?"

Before she could think, Minerva said, "He was my teacher."

Mary's thinly plucked eyebrows rose. "He was?"

"He taught Tr... he taught the same subject I teach now."

"And you fell in love with him when you were a girl?"

Minerva supposed she should have been uncomfortable with the conversation, but oddly, she felt like talking with this stranger who'd spoken so candidly. Minerva had never discussed her history with Albus with anyone else, even Amelia. But this woman didn't know Minerva McGonagall at all...didn't even know her real name...and that made it feel safer.

Minerva said, "He was my first love. My first lover. Is that shocking?"

"No," said Mary. "Not unless ... well ... naturally, it wasn't as if ..."

Minerva just looked at her, trying to keep the smile from her lips.

Mary's eyes widened in surprise, and she leant forward.

"Really?"

Minerva gave a small nod.

Mary sat back, a satisfied grin on her face. "Well, isn't *that* interesting! And you've only just gotten married now?"

"We were apart for some years. Then I came back to work at his school."

"Because you were in love with him?"

"No." But that wasn't entirely true, Minerva had to admit to herself. "Well ... yes, but I wanted to teach."

"And you got married."

"Yes."

"And is it everything you hoped for?"

"I'm not sure I hoped for anything in particular. I just wanted to be with him," she said. "*want* to be with him."

"I see."

Minerva stiffened. She was somehow disappointed to think that this matronly, middle-aged American might make assumptions about her.

"What?"

"Oh, I meant no offence," said Mary. "It's just that I sometimes wonder if marriage is the end-all-be-all that it's cracked up to be. You meet someone when you're young, you fall in love, you get married, and that's supposed to be it, forever." She looked over at Minerva. "For some people, it is, of course."

Minerva watched Mary watch the pigeons picking at the crumbs just outside the wrought-iron bars that edged the café's seating area.

"I hope my daughter doesn't marry too young," Mary said wistfully. "Better she should have some love affairs first."

Minerva said nothing, and Mary said, "Now *I've* shocked *you*."

"Not at all. I wish I could give my students the same advice."

"That would get you some interesting telephone calls from parents, I'll bet."

"I shudder to think."

"And did you? Have other love affairs?" Mary asked.

"A few."

There was a moment of silence, then Mary gave a barking laugh.

"And I thought the Scots were supposed to be so straight-laced!"

"We have to do *something* to keep warm on all those cold, northern evenings."

"Boston gets pretty cold too. Sometimes I have to remind Drum that there are ways to keep warm other than long johns."

They both laughed.

A voice interrupted them. "*There* you are."

Drum and Albus had come up to the table, each carrying two drinks.

"I ran into Albert here at the bar, and I was going to surprise you, but I see you two found each other," Drum said, setting his drinks down.

"Yes. We found a table, so we took it," said Mary.

"Your whiskey," Albus said, handing Minerva her drink. He took a seat next to her, and Drum followed suit.

"And what were you two hens talking about that had you in stitches?" Drum asked.

"Boys," said Mary.

"Mary just dotes on our boys," Drum said. "We have three. Of course, Katie is the apple of my eye. My one and only daughter. She's in nursing school up in Vermont. I was pushing for U Mass or Northeastern, of course, but she wanted to go farther away."

"You must be very proud," said Albus.

"I am. All our kids have flown the coop, so Mary's been a little down in the dumps lately, haven't you, honey?"

"Oh, Drum ..."

"That's only natural. Or shouldn't I be talking about kids? Is it a sore subject?" he asked Minerva with a wink.

"Not at all," said Minerva. "Albert and I like children very much. We do live at a school, after all."

"Bet you're glad to get away, though."

"I'm glad to be anywhere with Albert," Minerva said, and put her hand on Albus's.

He masked his look of surprise and drew her hand up to kiss it. She thought she saw the glint of moisture in his eyes.

"I'll say it again, you're a lucky man," said Drum. "'Course, I am too." He put an arm around Mary's shoulder and squeezed, almost making his wife spill her wine. "Yes, here we are: two lucky fellas, enjoying this beautiful city with a couple of beautiful girls. It doesn't get much better than this."

"It certainly doesn't," agreed Albus.

The quartet enjoyed their drinks and chatted about what they'd seen that day and about their sightseeing plans for the next. They parted with well wishes all around, which Minerva found she meant.

Minerva and Albus returned to the *pensione* for a wash before dinner.

They decided to eat at a restaurant in the Dorsoduro that Albus said Horace had once raved about. The meal was indeed excellent, but they both resisted the temptation to have more than a glass of wine each.

When they finished, they made their way slowly through the Campo Santa Margherita, which was filled with young people standing in groups, smoking, talking and laughing in the clear, cold night. As Minerva and Albus passed into the Calle de la Chiesa, Minerva noticed a sign proclaiming, "*Danza!*" in bright blue lights.

On impulse, she tugged on Albus's arm.

He looked at her questioningly, and she said, "Dancing."

"You want to go dancing?"

"Why not?"

"I'm not much of a dancer."

"Nonsense. I've seen you dance."

"When?"

"At the Ministry Ball after the war. And in my fourth year. The Yule Ball. You danced with Professor Merrythought and Professor Fancourt *And* the Head Girl. Whose name escapes me at the moment."

"I cannot believe you remember that."

"Of course I remember. You were the handsomest wizard on the floor, and I wanted desperately to be dancing with you rather than Nigel Ackerley. You danced perfectly well."

"Those were traditional dances. I suspect this will be somewhat different."

"Maybe, but I'll show you," said Minerva.

"You know how to do the modern dances?"

"Oh, yes. Amelia and I used to go out in Muggle London sometimes. We even sneaked into a NAAFI canteen in Piccadilly once."

"NAAFI?"

"Navy, Army, and Air Force Institutes. They ran canteens and things for the armed forces during and after the Muggle war. The soldiers and sailors were ever so accommodating."

A chuckle rumbled through his body. "I imagine they were."

"A Royal Canadian airman even taught me to Lindy Hop."

"You are full of surprises."

She pulled him towards the door of the club.

"Come on. It will be fun."

"If you insist."

The club was tiny, dark, and very smoky, and they made their way to a small table near the band, which comprised a female singer, a pianist, a bass player, and a saxophone. It was loud, and she could barely hear Albus when he leant over the table to say, "I think I'm too old for this place."

Minerva just smiled. They ordered a pair of Americanos, and as they sipped, they watched the couples on the dance floor.

Minerva leant over the table and said, "See? It isn't too complicated. I'm sure you could manage."

"I'm willing to try for you, my dear, but don't be surprised if I tread on your toes."

"I'll cast a *Duro* on them, then. I learned to do it wandlessly after a few nights out with those servicemen."

She waited until the band launched into a medium-tempo Italian tune, then stood, holding out her hand to him. "Come."

They took to the floor, and Albus put an uncertain palm on her waist.

"Closer." She pulled on him until their upper bodies were pressed together.

He was tense at first, barely shuffling his feet, then he relaxed into the rhythm of the music and moved with it.

"You see?" Minerva said. "It's not so difficult."

"Yes, but I'm not entirely sure you aren't leading," he said, and she laughed.

She felt him relax further as the Italian song gave way to the slower rhythm of a song Minerva recognised as "How Long Has This Been Going On?"

Closing her eyes, she rested her cheek against his shoulder and felt his lips brush the top of her head.

The singer's voice purred, her heavy Italian accent somehow making the American song sound even more sensual:

"There were chills up my spine

And some thrills I can't define

Listen sweet, I repeat

How long has this been going on?"

Their knees hit, and he said, "I warned you I wasn't very good at this."

"You're doing perfectly well."

"But not as well as your Canadian airman."

"Perhaps not. But much better than Nigel Ackley."

"Poor Nigel."

"Don't feel too sorry for him. He got his kiss goodnight."

"Did he?" She felt his lips at her ear. "And will I?" he whispered, the sensation of his breath raising goosebumps on her skin.

"That remains to be seen, Mr White," she said.

She hummed along with the song's chorus:

"Kiss me once, then once more

What a dunce I was before

What a break, for heaven's sake

How long has this been going on?"

Albus's hand slid a little lower on her waist, and they danced on.

5. Venice: Gallerie dell'Accademia

Chapter 5 of 5

In this follow-up to *Epithalamium*, Minerva and Albus venture into the Muggle world to enjoy a romantic winter interlude in Venice. Join them as they board the Orient Express, enjoy some good food, fine art, and, of course, a bit of romance. It opens just after the end of Chapter 54 of *Epithalamium*, but you don't have to have read that story to enjoy this tale.

The next morning found La Serenissima's skies churning with storm clouds. When Albus got up to use the lavatory, Minerva rose and peeked out the window. The rain that had soaked them on their way back to the hotel the previous evening had turned to sleet sometime in the night.

She hurried back to bed and burrowed under the bedclothes. Albus returned from the bathroom and retrieved his wand from the nightstand to cast a Warming Charm on the chilly room.

"We'd best get moving if we don't want to miss breakfast," he said.

"But it's so nice right here," Minerva protested. "And the weather is dreadful."

"Why don't I go downstairs and get us something to eat? You can stay snug in bed."

"You don't mind?"

"Not at all."

Albus dressed quickly and went to the hotel's breakfast room. He returned with a tray bearing a plate with toast, a small pot of coffee, and a jar of jam.

He kicked off his shoes, and they had their breakfast in bed. When they'd finished, Minerva Banished the crumbs with her wand and Albus moved the empty tray to the nightstand.

"You've got a bit of jam here," Minerva said, touching a finger to his moustache. Before he could wipe it off, she kissed him, licking away the jam with a dart of her tongue.

As she had hoped, he deepened the kiss and pulled her down, rolling on top of her.

"Again?" she said when he released her mouth.

"Always."

~oOo~

They stayed in bed most of the morning, making a lazy sort of love, dozing, and talking, and ventured out of the room only when Albus's belly began to gurgle with hunger. Bundled in their warmest clothes, they huddled under a large umbrella that Albus had Conjured, and hurried down several small streets and through the fish market until they found the restaurant the concierge had recommended for their lunch.

The Antica Trattoria Poste Vecie, she had told them, was the oldest restaurant in Venice, housed in a former post office from the 16th century. A small bridge led directly to the entryway, and, despite the awful weather, the restaurant's main salon bustled with diners and crisp-jacketed waiters ferrying plates to tables full of both tourists and locals.

After a twenty-minute wait, a table became available, and Minerva and Albus took the time to enjoy a leisurely lunch, sharing an appetizer *ofsarde in saor*...fried sardines in a sweet-and-sour sauce of pickled onions, raisins, and pinenuts. Albus followed with a dish of sliced veal in cream sauce served with polenta, while Minerva ordered the eel in a tuna-and-lemon sauce and a side of braised fennel. A bottle of mild, floral Soave complemented their meals and kept the conversation animated.

"Have you given any more thought to that research project you told me about?" Albus asked as he broke a piece of bread from the hunk the waiter had provided for the table.

"Which one?"

"The... I've forgotten the name ... the something-or-other cycle and the differences between Transfigured beings and natural beings?"

"The Krebs cycle?" she asked, amused.

"That's it."

"As a matter of fact, I was going to talk to you about it when term started again. I'd like to use an empty classroom to conduct the experiments, if you approve."

"That would be fine. Do you need any special materials or equipment? I might be able to massage the budget if it's something we could use in the curriculum."

She speared a bit of eel on her fork and brought it to her mouth. The flavour was rich and pungently marine, the hint of lemon pleasantly tart on her tongue.

"I don't suppose the governors could see their way clear to funding an electron microscope?" she said.

"I rather doubt it, but I could try."

"No, I'm only teasing. I'll make do with my phase contrast microscope. I'm still trying to decide what type of bacteria I want to use. Nothing pathogenic, of course, I wouldn't feel comfortable with that at the school."

He sopped up some of his cream sauce with the bread. "I'm sure we could put adequate precautions in place."

"No need. I'm leaning towards cyanobacteria, and they aren't dangerous unless you put them in the drinking water. I like them for this project because they produce oxygen, but the problem is that they don't have a complete TCA cycle. I have to think about how that might affect the experimental design."

"I'm afraid you've lost me, my dear."

The rare feeling of knowing something Albus didn't washed comfortably over Minerva. She'd always been interested in basic bench science, while his academic reputation had been built on high-profile discoveries and spell development. He liked to know what magic *did*, while she strove to understand what it *was* at its core.

"I want to look at how Transfiguration affects metabolism, and that will be easiest to sort out in single-celled organisms," she told him. "The oxygen production is a benefit because there are probably more practical applications for Transfiguration in oxygen-producing organisms. But the incomplete Krebs cycle could be an issue if we later want to apply any findings to other organisms."

He said nothing, cutting a slice of veal and popping it into his mouth, and she wondered if she was boring him.

"I'd be grateful for your advice in putting together the experiments," she said.

He chewed his meat, a pensive look on his face, then swallowed.

"Cellular Transfiguration was never my field, and I'm afraid I've fallen behind the latest theories and discoveries," he said. "This Krebs cycle business is new to me."

"The science was only established about 20 years ago by Muggles, so it didn't bubble up into the magical sciences until the mid-forties."

Neither of them mentioned the reason Albus's scientific studies had waned during that time. While the subject of Gellert Grindelwald wasn't precisely taboo, Minerva knew Albus didn't like to talk about it, so she avoided bringing it up, even obliquely.

After the end of the war, Albus had done some academic work, but less than he'd done in the past. Minerva had been surprised...and a little disappointed...not to run into him at one or another of the conferences she'd attended during her years at Oxford, but he'd told her later that, after his return from Germany, his long-neglected duties to the school had taken most of his time. She wondered if he missed research.

"I'd like your help," she said, surprising herself. She normally preferred to work alone.

He was brilliant, of course, and his observations could only improve the research, even if he was less familiar with some of the elements than she was. Besides, it would be fun to work together.

"I would be honoured to work with you," he said, and she thought how odd it was for him to say such a thing. She was certainly well known and respected in the small world of academic Transfiguration, but he was the great Albus Dumbledore, polymath and co-discoverer of alkahest, developer of 12 uses for dragon's blood, inventor of many important spells, and famous the wizarding world over as the defeater of Grindelwald.

It crossed her mind fleetingly that involving him in her research could backfire...his contributions, even if small, could overshadow hers, given his celebrity, but she pushed the thought away.

She said, "I'd like to get to work on it soon, at least before spring, what with N.E.W.T.s coming up in June."

"Why don't you use the old Alchemy classroom?" Albus said. "Once you've sketched out the parameters for the experiment, I'll be glad to have a look."

"Thank you."

Minerva sipped her wine, happy to have found something academic they could do together.

"And how are your N.E.W.T. classes coming along?" he asked. "Anyone interesting?"

"It depends on what you mean by interesting," Minerva said. "I don't think there are any budding scientists in the lot, but there are some talented spellcasters. The Prewett brothers could be good recruits for the Auror programme in another year."

"Ah, yes. They both did very well on their O.W.L.s, if I recall."

"Gideon is a little more level-headed than Fabian, I think, but Professor Baumert says Fabian has better duelling instincts."

"Well, they have another year and a half to polish things up a bit. I'm sure you'll have them ready for Amelia by the time they take their exams," Albus said.

"I hope so."

"By the way, would you mind refereeing this year's Inter-House Duelling Championship? We need a Gryffindor representative, and Diophantus isn't really interested in duelling. Filius is the Ravenclaw, rep, of course, and Perpetua and Horace for Hufflepuff and Slytherin."

"I'd love to, thank you for asking me."

"Filius says there's a Ravenclaw who might end up breaking your record for wins."

She nodded as she swallowed a bit of fennel. "Kingsley Shacklebolt. Filius told me about him."

She didn't think second-years should be allowed in the Duelling Club...too immature, too inexperienced for safety, she thought...but the decision was down to the Defence teacher, and the new hire, Terence Baumert, was keen on taking all interested students.

She had to admit that young Mr Shacklebolt was unlikely to have any difficulties in the club. He was easily her best student in second year, and Filius had apparently given him some private coaching. Another thing Minerva wasn't entirely comfortable with, but she knew the boy had no father, and she supposed it was just as well that Filius had taken him under his comforting wing.

It must be difficult for a boy to be fatherless, Minerva thought. Like herself, Kingsley had lost one of his parents at a young age, but she had had her grandmother to fill the hole left by her mother's death. Her gran had provided a motherly sort of love and, Minerva thought, had served as a good complement to her father, each providing the young McGonagall children with different sorts of affection, attention, and, when necessary, discipline.

Could she herself, Minerva mused, provide a motherly influence should any of her students need it? She'd never felt especially maternal, but she did care about the children she taught, and a few of them seemed quite lost.

The thin, sallow face of Walden Macnair flitted through her mind. He was not very bright, nor did he possess much magical skill; those facts, she had to admit, would likely have biased her against him even if he had not fallen in with the awful Rabastan Lestrange and his crowd.

Walden's Head of House, Horace Slughorn, for all his finer points, was not the sort of man to provide the help a boy like Macnair could use.

Minerva resolved to be more patient with him and to do what she could to help him at least improve his Transfiguration skills, which, at his current rate, were certainly not going to earn him a passing O.W.L.

She finished the last of her fennel.

"Shall we have pudding?" Albus asked hopefully.

"If you like."

They had a dense, sweet cake flavoured with blood-orange-and-Campari syrup. A pair of creamy, bitter espressos rounded out the meal nicely.

When they stepped outside, the sleet had stopped, but it was still bitter cold. Despite the crowd in the street, Albus insisted on casting a Warming Charm, and they decided to visit the Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice's great collection of pre-19th-century painting.

They took the *vaporetto* along the Grand Canal to the museum. Inside, they encountered wall after wall of huge canvasses depicting Venetian life in the Renaissance which could have been painted that very afternoon. The big cities of her regular life, London, Edinburgh, and Inverness, had less in common with Venice than Hogsmeade did, Minerva thought. The tiny wizarding village near Hogwarts had the same preserved-in-time feeling that pervaded Venice, albeit without the crowds and the pre-Carnival atmosphere.

Like most galleries of European art, the Accademia housed many paintings of religious subjects, from Bosch's morbidly colourful *Crucifixion of St Julia* to Pittone's dreamlike *Penitent Magdalene*, not to mention a seemingly endless parade of Madonnas and Christs. Minerva marvelled at how different artists could give the same few subjects such varied feeling.

A group of students were crowded around Veronese's *Annunciation*, sketchbooks in hand, charcoal sticks quivering busily as they drew. Minerva noticed an angelic-looking boy with a dark smudge on his otherwise perfect cheek and had to check the impulse to Conjure a handkerchief and wipe it off.

One of the students finished his sketch and moved away, allowing Albus and Minerva a better view of the painting.

As they looked at the Virgin accosted by a manic-looking angel Gabriel and a Holy Spirit in the form of a positively detonative dove, Albus whispered, "She looks rather startled, doesn't she?"

"I should think so. And I doubt very much whether the flowers will make up for the news she's about to get."

The low rumble of his chuckle made one of the students look up, frowning, from his drawing, and Minerva and Albus decided to move on.

They stopped in front of a painting depicting a young man with his face pressed against an almost-nude woman, their noses nearly touching and his eyes peering insistently into hers, which were focused elsewhere.

"*Armida e Rinaldo*," Albus read.

"Armida the sorceress?"

"I believe so. You're familiar with the story, I take it?"

"The one from the Muggle poem, or the actual historical one?" she asked quietly.

"I should have known you'd know both."

"My father showed me the painting when we were here before. He told me Armida's story, and I read the poem afterwards."

"And what do you make of it?"

"That it's a cautionary tale about the dangers of love potions," Minerva said. "She tried to enchant a Muggle, and she ended up the enslaved one."

"She was in love."

"Perhaps. But history is entirely too full of powerful witches who did foolish things because they fell for the wrong people."

"*Mmm*" he said. After a few moments of silence, he added, "And do you think you've avoided that fate?"

She glanced at him, worried that her remark had hurt him somehow, but his eyes held their familiar twinkle and his mouth curved in a half-smile.

"I know I have." She took his arm and squeezed it, keeping hold of it as they strolled through the galleries, stopping to take in some of the works at greater length.

Minerva found herself strangely disquieted by Tintoretto's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* While the body of Jesus deposed from the cross occupied the centre of the frame, what drew Minerva's eye was the swooning Madonna, her face half in shadow, half in light.

She cocked her head as she studied it.

The Madonna's face appeared dead and hollow, her eyes empty. The other figures' faces were emotive and lively, and even the deceased Christ's countenance seemed to have greater animation, as if he were simply in a deep slumber. It struck Minerva that his face resembled Albus's as he slept.

She shivered.

Was there anything worse than having one's child die before one? she wondered. She thought back to her discussion with Albus on the subject of children and his worry that they made one too vulnerable.

Here was the stark truth of it, in oils, hanging in front of her.

Albus's voice pulled her from her thoughts.

"What are you thinking, my love?"

"Just how macabre a subject this is for a painting," she said.

"Indeed. Although this one is less so than the *Ten Thousand Martyrs* we saw earlier."

"True." The Carpaccio painting of the condemned Roman converts had seemed to her to have a luxuriant, almost sexual quality. The bodies of the martyrs had appeared as if they were lounging in a seraglio rather than engaging in any actual suffering.

In the next gallery, Albus and Minerva took in the museum's collection of drawings, including some of Da Vinci's anatomical works, and when they finished their tour, rain was coming down in frigid sheets. They decided to call it a day and head back to the refuge of the hotel.

After a freezing *vaparetto* ride and a quick dash to the hotel, they went directly to their room. Minerva cast Drying Charms on their dripping clothes, while Albus warmed the air with his wand.

"I think I'm finished with sightseeing for the day," Minerva said, pulling off her gloves and rubbing her frozen hands together.

"Agreed."

He took her hands in his, brought them to his lips, and blew over them, heating her fingers with the Warming Charm on his breath.

"You still haven't taught me how to do that," she said.

"That would deprive me of the pleasure of doing it for you," he said, kissing her knuckles.

They decided to spend what remained of the day reading and got under the duvet on the bed, each with a book in hand, a pair of half-moon glasses perched on Albus's nose. Minerva made a mental note to see a Healer once she got home to have her own eyes checked; the print in her book seemed suspiciously tiny, and she had to squint to keep the words in focus.

Nevertheless, she was soon lost in her novel, and as they read, the only sounds in the room were the constant patter of the rain and the occasional echo of a door closing somewhere down the hall.

After about an hour, Albus rested his book on his chest, stretched, removed his spectacles, and pinched the bridge of his nose.

Minerva looked up from her reading and gave him a small smile.

He cocked his neck to read the cover of her book. *The Comforters*. What is that?"

"It's the Muggle novel Einar gave me. He said it was one of the best things he's read in ages. Of course, his opinion is coloured by the fact that the writer is a Scot."

"And how is it?"

"Very good, I think. But I can't decide whether the author is mad, brilliant, or both."

"Oh?"

"The narrative is a bit strange. One of the protagonists believes herself to be a character in the book she's meant to be writing, only she isn't writing it. She hears a typewriter that isn't there and disembodied voices dictating things she's only just thought."

"How odd."

"Einar is convinced the author is a witch. The story has a good deal of magic that's depicted quite matter-of-factly."

"Do you think she's a witch?"

"Unlikely. I think she's simply a very observant Muggle who doesn't dismiss the possibility of magic in the world."

"Clever of her."

Minerva nodded at the plain, green-covered book he'd put down. "And how is *Lolita*?"

"Excellent, as it happens. You may have meant it as a joke, but it's really an extraordinary bit of writing."

"You told me you try to read everything that's been banned," she said with a smirk.

"So I do. But giving me a novel about a middle-aged professor trying to seduce a young girl...that was very naughty of you, Minerva."

The playful smile that she might have expected was absent. His gaze on her was steady, and the blue of his eyes seemed to have deepened to from their normal sea-blue to azure. She couldn't quite read his mood. Perhaps he had been more shocked by her Christmas present than she had anticipated. It would be an amusing gift, she'd thought, but she wondered now if it had been a mistake.

She'd believed he'd got mostly past his guilt over their first affair, that it was a secret they could privately share and even joke about. The events of her seventh year were shocking, yes, when viewed through the lens of her current position as a teacher, but to her, their bond seemed closer for the knowledge of a shared transgression.

He was still looking at her, his face unreadable.

Instead of answering, she put her book on the nightstand and moved closer to him. Her hand slipped beneath the duvet and rested on his belly for a moment before moving downwards.

"I suppose I'm just a naughty witch," she said, tracing the outline of his penis with one finger. It twitched enticingly under his trousers.

She glanced up at him and was relieved to find that his expression had softened. His eyes no longer seemed so unfathomable, and his lips were parted.

He leant in to her neck, murmuring, "Very naughty."

She let him kiss and nip at her as she teased him to stiffness, then she rose from the bed and pulled the curtains closed.

"We don't want any peeping Toms," she said. She took her wand from the nightstand and cast a *Colloportus* for good measure.

She perched a foot on the chair that sat in the corner and rolled off her stocking.

Albus's eyes never left her as he stood and pulled off his socks and she removed the second stocking.

When he started to unbutton his shirt, she went to him and put her hand on his, shaking her head.

"Sit in the chair," she instructed.

He abandoned his buttons and did as he was told, and she was relieved to see a smile playing about the corners of his mouth.

She knelt in front of him, running her hands up his legs to his thighs, kneading the muscles there. She unbuckled his belt and slid it from the loops, discarding it on the floor. Her fingers worked at the buttons to his fly, and when she'd undone them, she reached into his shorts to withdraw his cock.

She took it in her hand and looked up at him. He was watching her, his face flushed with arousal, and the sight made her pulse gallop. Leaning down, she took him in her mouth.

The sounds he made and the little jerks of his hips as she licked and sucked sent a moist heat to her centre, and when his knees began to tremble and shake, she released him and stood. His eyes were dark and intense as he watched her reach under her skirt to remove her knickers. She gathered up her skirt and straddled his legs. She grasped him in one hand, and his eyes squeezed closed as she sank down slowly, impaling herself on him.

With her hands on his shoulders, she began to move up and down on the balls of her feet, delight tickling its way up her spine at the sensation of him sliding deep within her.

His hands came to rest at her hips, and he opened his eyes.

She traced his lower lip with her thumb and leant down to kiss him.

He tried to buck up into her, but she stilled him with her weight, relishing the feeling of having him in her control. She ground her hips in a circle, clockwise then anticlockwise, and he panted his approval.

She looked down. Her skirt covered them, but she felt the dampness between her legs, and the thought of the mess they were making of his pants stoked her heat.

She kissed his ear, nipping at his earlobe. "Do you like this? Having a secret fuck under my skirts?" she whispered.

He clutched at her hips, trying to force her down on him, and she knew his fingers pressing into her flesh would leave marks, but she resisted his unspoken command.

"Do you?" she asked.

"Yes," he hissed. "I like it."

She rewarded him by lowering herself and continuing her up-and-down motion.

His legs were shaking again, and he was clearly on the brink of orgasm, but she wasn't ready for their coupling to be over quite yet. She decided a distraction was in order.

She paused her movements, and he released a frustrated groan.

"Tell me what you like, Professor Dumbledore, and maybe I'll finish you off."

His breath caught. "I like fucking you. I like it when I have my cock in your mouth and you're sucking me, and when I have it in your quim like this."

She lifted herself off him, and he emitted a small whine of disappointment.

"You think about it all the time, don't you?" she said, letting herself slide down just far enough to tease him. "Fucking me?"

"All the time," he agreed hoarsely.

"When do you think about it?"

"When I see you in the corridors or in the Great Hall."

"When else?" she said, enveloping him very slowly, inch by inch.

"I think about it when we're in a staff meeting. It's all I can do not to ravish you on the table in front of everyone," he said.

"And how would you do that?"

"Like this."

He slid his hands under her buttocks and stood, lifting her with him. His pants and shorts dropped to his ankles, and he stepped out of them. Still inside her, he carried her to the bed, and she tightened her legs around him so he wouldn't slip out.

He whispered a spell, and she heard a creaking behind her.

Without pulling out of her, he set her on the edge of the bed, which was now higher than it had been. He took a moment to catch his breath, then said, "I'd put you on the table like this and take you until you came screaming. And everyone would know how much you love it when I fuck you."

"You think you could make me scream right there in the staff room, do you?"

"Oh, yes."

"I don't think so."

"I know so."

He grasped her legs under the knees and began to thrust. Without meaning to, she cried out. He smiled in satisfaction and leant over, positioning himself to rub against her as he moved, varying his pace, watching her as she bit her lips, refusing to let any sound escape. But it felt very good, so she closed her eyes and thought about cyanobacteria to keep from climaxing.

After a few minutes, his gasps grew louder and his rhythm more erratic. She heard him murmur the spell he'd used on a few occasions when he didn't want to finish too fast, and it sent a frisson of pleasure through her to know that his normally good control was in danger of slipping. The spell had apparently done its job, because his breath became more even and his thrusts less wild.

We'll see about that.

She unbuttoned her blouse. The final two buttons were stubborn, so she simply tore it open and pushed her bra up to bare her breasts. His eyes widened as she began to stroke and fondle them, and he groaned when she ran her thumbs across her nipples.

"Gods, Minerva! You ... you ..."

He gave up trying to speak, and sped up, intent upon making good on his threat to draw a scream from her.

For his benefit, she pinched her nipples and moaned, and his gaze alternated between the place where they were joined and what her hands were doing.

After a few moments, he squeezed his eyes shut, his face taking on an almost-pained expression, and she knew he was once again trying to hold off his orgasm.

Her concentration had switched from chasing her own pleasure to the challenge of making him climax before he intended, spell be damned.

"I want you to come for me, Professor," she said.

"Not yet ... want to ... want to ... you first ..."

She tightened around him, and his eyes snapped open.

"I sucked your cock, and now I'm letting you fuck me, and I want you to come ... come now *now*, Professor."

He gave a whimper that sounded half of pleasure, half despair as he lost the battle, stiffened, and spilled into her. He collapsed forwards, dropping her legs to support himself on the bed as his knees buckled and his breath heaved.

She let her legs hang down off the bed and waited for him to come back to himself, enjoying her victory.

When he did, she propped herself up on her elbows and grinned at him.

"Well done, Professor."

He reached out to tweak one of her nipples. "You are *avery* naughty witch, Minerva McGonagall," he said. He gave a gentle tug to one of the many strands of hair that had escaped from her chignon and were hanging about her face.

She sat up, removed her blouse and bra, and deposited them in a heap next to the bed.

"And you are a very randy wizard," she said. "So ready again after all the fun we had this morning."

"I'm just a dirty old man trying to keep up with his young wife."

"And you're doing admirably."

She scooted up the bed and got under the covers. He joined her after removing his shirt and vest, tossing them carelessly to the floor.

She settled into his arms.

"This is lovely," she sighed.

"Are you satisfied?"

"Perfectly."

"But you didn't come."

Sometimes, she told herself, he overthought things.

"No, but it isn't always about that," she said. "Hush, now, and let's enjoy this time."

He said no more, and she could feel his heart slowing under her warm palm. His breathing soon became deep and regular.

Her eyes fluttered closed.

I am perfectly happy, she thought just before sleep claimed her.