The Knight Errant Chronicles

by Guernica

For centuries, the Faery people have been a mysterious, sometimes persecuted minority in the Wizard world. But now Albus Dumbledore has persuaded them to send an officer of their military to teach the Fae canon of magic at Hogwarts. Meanwhile, Severus Snape spends a memorable evening with a stranger in King's Cross... Set during the *Goblet of Fire/Order of the Phoenix* timeframe. **WINNER of the Multifaceted Fanfic Awards for "Best Snape Fic" and "Identity ~ The Original Character Award."**

Lexicon

Chapter 1 of 55

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LEXICON:

Excerpted from:

"*A Wizard's Illustrated Encyclopaedia of the Faerielands*"

by Buckminster Swain

Changeling: *Noun.* A member of one of the shape-changing tribes of Faeries, such as ***Dryads, Fauns, Naiads,*** and ***Satyrs***. All Changelings are Faeries, but not all Faeries are Changelings. (For overview of non-changing tribes of Faeries, see ***Boggans, Brownies, Halflings, Ogres, Orcs, Nixies, Nymphs, Pixies, Pookas, Sidhe, Sluagh, Trolls,*** and ***Undine***.) Changelings whose other forms include animal or plant characteristics often retain certain of those characteristics in their more human-looking forms, such as heightened agility, strength, senses of smell or hearing, greenish tinge to the skin, and/or willowy stature.

Faerie: *Noun.* A person of Faery parentage that physically manifests Faery characteristics. ***Synonym:*** *Fae.* ***Plural: Faeries, the Fae, the Fair Folk, the Shining Host*** (mostly used in reference to the Fae military class – see ***Fianna.***) "Satyrs, fauns, pooka, and sidhe are four different tribes of Faeries." "She is the Queen of the Faeries."

According to Muggle sources, Faeries are a "host of supernatural beings and spirits who occupy a limbo between earth and heaven" (Guiley 1989 117). Creatures resembling Faeries figure prominently in the folklore of many Muggle cultures, although tales of the Fae most often offer wildly conflicting accounts of Faery characteristics, habits, and activities. Even the Wizard community, the only human culture that regularly interacts with other supernatural beings, often have only limited research resources on the true nature of the Fae, and rely mostly on second-hand accounts, hearsay, and conjecture. Given the Faery penchant for mystery and privacy, this tendency may be cultivated by the Fae themselves, in order to protect what they see as the purity of their environment, their culture, and their magic.

Biological Note: The most biologically human-like tribes of Faeries, such as ***Boggans, Fauns, Halflings, Satyrs, Sidhe,*** and ***Sluagh***, can interbreed with both non-magical human beings (See Wizard sources on ***Muggle Studies***) and magical human beings (See Muggle folklore sources on***Wizards*** and ***Witches***).

Interestingly, some Fae tribes cannot interbreed with each other – for example, a faun cannot impregnate a satyr, and vice versa. Within the pooka tribe, reproduction only occurs with pooka of the same species – i.e. a spider pooka cannot impregnate a tiger pooka, and the reverse. In reproductive pairings, the Faery gene is dominant – part-Faery offspring will manifest Faery characteristics often to the third – or rarely, the fourth – generation.

Very occasionally two Muggle or Wizard human beings with recessive Faery genes will produce Faery offspring. This tendency is likely the source of the human "changeling exchange" mythos, in which Faeries are alleged to exchange one of their own offspring for a human babe. No evidence exists to suggest that the Fae do now or have ever actually engaged in this practice, however, and given the great worth that the Fae place on their infrequent offspring, is highly unlikely.

Faery: *Adjective.* Of or pertaining to Faeries. "Faery sword, Faery ritual, Faery Queen, Faery revel." **Synonym:** *Fae.*

The Nine Kingdoms: *Geographical Place.* These lands, made up of nine hereditary monarchies, located on a dimensional plane somewhere near Earth but not Earth, are the dwelling places of the Faerie peoples. Food and fresh water resources are plentiful, and the climate and weather are famously mild, year-round. The Nine Kingdoms are accessible from Earth only by certain portals, which are open at certain irregular times of the year. **Synonyms:** *Arcadia, the Arcadian Kingdoms, the Faerielands, Land of Eternal Summer, the Summerlands.*

Right of Passion: *Proper Noun, Legal.* 1. A complete defence for certain acts of vigilantism, such as the avenging of the murder of a loved one, or the maiming or rape of oneself or a loved one. Allowable loved ones include spouse, betrothed, lover of more than one year, all immediate family, kin to cousinship, sworn companion (Fianna military class only).

1a. Also a complete defence for the use of deadly force to protect a loved one from certain death or grievous bodily injury. (Same criteria for loved one as Right of Passion 1, above.)

2. An incomplete defence for criminal acts such as unprovoked assault, murder, kidnapping, etc. if the accused can prove that his/her actions were motivated by passionate true love.

Compare to Muggle "Heat of Passion Defence," "Use of Deadly Force in Defence of Oneself," and ***"Use of Deadly Force in Defence of Another."***

The Tithe: *Proper Noun.* An annual ritual practice in which seven of the best and brightest young men and women from non-Faery tribes, such as Muggles or Wizards (or very rarely giants, merfolk, and goblins) are sent to live in the Court of one of the Nine Kingdoms, as servitors, or pages, of the monarch. This service lasts one year and one day, during which the non-Fae pages participate in all seasonal festivals and perform other ceremonial duties. Due to the low Faery birth rate, dalliance and intermarriage with the visiting pages is encouraged, in order to bring renewed vigour to Faerie bloodlines.

Historical Note: During the Muggle Inquisition of the fifteenth century, during the height of the Christian Church's hostility and persecution of Faeries, rumours circulated to the effect that this practice consisted of the Fae dispatching seven of their own young people, or seven young Muggle men and women, to the fires of Hell in order to insure their continued immortality.

All of these rumours were patently false.

Part First: The Hart Assurgent: Prologue

Chapter 2 of 55

Professor Emily Swain came to Hogwarts from the Arcadian Kingdoms to teach the Faery magic of her people. She rapidly becomes embroiled in a bitter game of professional rivalry with another professor -- and then a very old friend makes her an enticing offer she doesn't want to refuse...

Prologue: Often Unusual Notions of Time

"Professor McGonagall?"

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, rushed excitedly into the office of Minerva McGonagall, Transfigurations professor and Head of Gryffindor House.

"Yes, Headmaster? What is it?"

"I've had a message from King Gwydion." Dumbledore was glowing with triumph. "The Nine Sovereigns have finally agreed, after all this time, to my proposal. He will send our teacher to us by month's end."

"You mean… the Faery professor?"

"Yes, yes, Minerva," Dumbledore answered. "I wrote to him, if you recall, shortly after the affair with the basilisk, asking if he could spare her for a short while."

"I remember you felt that, after Mr. Potter pulled Godric Gryffindor's sword from the Sorting Hat in the Chamber, perhaps a grounding in weapons training would be beneficial to Mr. Potter and the other students," McGonagall recalled.

"The candidate for such a position occurred to me immediately. Buckminster Swain's youngest daughter," said Dumbledore.

"Didn't you say she had only taught at Muggle university before?"

"Yes, Professor. You must have heard of my long acquaintance with Gwydion and Buckminster. If anyone, other than Alastor Moody, can help our students protect themselves from the Unforgivable Curses, it is Lady Tumnus." Dumbledore was fairly dancing with anticipation.

"Headmaster… are you sure she is quite*safe*? After the matter with the satyr… they say she… " McGonagall drew her hand across her throat with a dire slicing motion.

“Again, Professor, the reports are true. Both for the good, and the bad.”

McGonagall’s hand clutched her throat protectively.

“And such a person is coming to Hogwarts, Albus?”

“Yes, Minerva. I am afraid her class may have to be offered as an elective after the start of the term. As you know, Arcadian notions of time are often... unusual. When he says month's end… ”

“He may mean about the time we dispense with using the “month” as a unit of time?”

“That may be so, Professor.”

Part First: The Hart Assurgent: Chapter 1

Chapter 3 of 55

Professor Emily Swain came to Hogwarts from the Arcadian Kingdoms to teach the Faery magic of her people. She rapidly becomes embroiled in a bitter game of professional rivalry with another professor -- and then a very old friend makes her an enticing offer she doesn't want to refuse...

PART FIRST: THE HART ASSURGENT

"She seemed at once some penanced lady elf,

Some demon's mistress, or the demon's self."

John Keats, "Lamia"

Chapter 1:

The dark man was looking at Emily Swain.

She kept glancing up casually from her book to check the King's Cross map, or to glance at the great clock above his head and it occurred to her, after she had been sitting there for about an hour, that she could catch him eyeing her about five out of every seven times she looked up. Every time she did catch him looking at her, it was for about one second longer than he could go back to reading his book (some crumbling and unbelievably thick leather-bound tome.)

Seeing as how Emily was quite pretty, and had red-gold hair, she was not unused to men looking at her, even when she looked (for her) something of a mess. As a result, Emily had become the sort of person who could rather assume that people would be more inclined to look at her in train stations than not.

Over the last few years of her life, however, Emily had felt little desire to flirt with anyone, or have anyone flirt with her, and found much of the attention that her red-goldness attracted to be rather annoying. However, this particular fellow in King's Cross was not playing the game of Surreptitiously Ogling Emily Swain the way she was used to playing it. Usually, when Emily observed men playing this game, they would show proper form and properly blush and squirm, and become properly flustered. The next step of the game was usually where they invented some asinine question to ask her in a properly stammering voice, and then properly retreated into cowed silence when she indicated that the game was over and they were to properly go away now.

This fellow's manner was entirely different. He did not blush, squirm, or fluster. He showed no sign of stammering or asking asinine questions in fact, he had not tried to speak to her at all. He actually seemed quite composed, sitting there, reading his crumbly tome and sneaking glances at her with an almost insolently relaxed air, as if she were merely a part of the décor created by British Rail to prettify his train station experience.

Well then. She would retaliate by surreptitiously observing him. When he stood up, he would be quite tall, with longish black hair, and an olive complexion. He would have an austere, hawkish profile when he turned to look at the passing trains again. His clothes were a trifle unusual for King's Cross, for over his far from simple black suit, he wore a long black woollen cloak that reached the tops of his black boots. The bag beside him suggested a large physician's bag of the last century, the sort that would be full of arcane remedies and strange instruments.

On some men, this sort of garb would have been the ostentatiously theatrical badge of a professional actor, or at least an affinity with some sort of macabre subculture group. This man, however, wore his unusual clothes with such a disaffected air that they seemed utterly normal, even mundane. In short, he was nothing like the sort of man who usually stared after her at all. Thus, Emily Swain became intrigued.

She decided to test him, keeping her head bent down over her book for quite a long time, allowing him to think that she was absorbed in her work. She let ten pages go by, then fifteen.

Then she looked up at the clock again, unexpectedly, and his eyes dived down into his crumbly tome again. She smiled to herself.

She waited for him to try to speak to her, waited for a sarcastic "Pray excuse me, Miss, do you have the time, by any chance?" or "Miss, might I beg the loan of a pencil for a moment?" or "Pardon me, Miss, have you two fifty-pence for a pound?" that would dare her to strike up a conversation with him. But he didn't speak, to her now increasing impatience. He looked rather interesting, and she was now hoping, rather, to get to speak to him.

Then he got up to leave.

Emily felt a sting of irritation at this. He *should* try to speak to her, this fellow with the insolent eyes and the stubbornly unflustered and unblushing face. She glanced down at his bag, and spoke a word very softly, under her breath.

As she intended, he walked right past his big black physician's bag, completely forgetting that it was there, despite its presence right in front of him. In a moment, he had disappeared into the crowd.

She counted off five minutes by the big clock above her head, then got up, speaking the same word in the direction of her own luggage trolley, wheeling it against a wall and out of the way. When she got up to leave herself, she knew that her luggage could sit unattended for a year in plain sight in the middle of King's Cross station and not

be noticed by even the most desperate of thieves.

Then she crossed to his left-behind black valise and picked it up. There was a sound from within like the chinking together of many glass bottles. She bent toward it... a miasma of scents adhering to old leather scent: herbs, insect carapaces, dried flower petals. Some kind of botanist or scientist, perhaps? Embossed on the worn leather in slightly peeling letters were the initials "S. S."

Emily headed for the Lost Items office.

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The dark fellow was arguing with the harassed-looking woman behind the counter when she arrived. She could smell his frustration from the moment she opened the door.

"It *must* be here," he was saying. "Check for a large black case, with a number of bottles inside it."

Emily walked up behind him. "Sir?"

S. S. half-turned in irritation. "Yes, can I *help* you?" he asked, as if helping this stranger behind him sounded only slightly more attractive than being suspended in a vat of famished piranha. No doubt he took her for a particularly thick train station employee of some sort.

"Did you say you were missing your bag, sir?"

"Yes, I am *indeed* missing my bag, thank you." He turned back to snarling at the bewildered clerk again.

Emily raised her voice and interrupted him. "Sir? Seeing as how I've only seen you get up and leave one bag behind about five minutes ago, I can only assume that perhaps this one is yours?"

At that, he looked up and saw that the someone addressing him was helpfully offering him his lost bag, and then noticed that the person doing so was the same person he had been eyeing for about an hour. Then he had the decency to look a trifle sheepish. He exuded surprise, and a touch of nervousness.

"Oh why yes, that one is mine, Miss. I must have left it behind when, um, earlier." She handed it back to him with a little nod. "Thank you."

"Certainly. Think nothing of it. I simply thought it was odd when you got up like that and left it behind." Behind his back, the Lost Items clerk rolled her eyes and shook her head, grimacing direly.

"Yes, Miss... I don't know what made me so careless." He acted as though he didn't quite believe in the notion that he could have been so careless.

"Quite all right. All the bustle in King's Cross never made anyone feel more organized than before." She stood, not moving away, in a calm and expectant manner, as if they had been talking for a long time and it was now his turn to speak.

"Er, indeed not." He paused, no doubt wondering what she wanted with him, and not about to ask her what, exactly, she wanted with him. Which was a stroke of good fortune, because she probably couldn't have told him what exactly she wanted with him even if he had asked her.

"I do hope this hasn't made you miss your train," she said.

"Oh, no, no," he replied, grimacing. "My train won't be leaving until half past midnight, I'm afraid."

"Oh. Mine is leaving at the same time. We're both here early." She checked her watch. "Still two hours to go. Do let's go sit down somewhere and get tea then."

He stared at her. Could have been pure horror, or nothing at all.

"Do you have a favourite spot for tea in King's Cross? I know of a rather pleasant place, if you don't."

He stared harder. Facial muscles seemingly immobilised. Yet, his scent was tantalising... full of agitation. Perhaps this fellow did not receive many invites to tea by reasonably attractive women he didn't know, she reasoned to herself, and had no idea how to react when tea was proposed.

Or perhaps he was married, or a Catholic priest, or gay, or desperately in love with someone else, or... something, and she had just offended him terribly, right after causing him a great deal of worry first.

She wilted. "I'm sorry. You must dislike tea really very much. Sorry to trouble you." She started to leave, feeling extremely foolish.

"Ah... no." He reached out and verbally plucked her back. "I actually quite like tea."

"Brilliant. So do I."

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Despite his earlier hard stares, having late-night tea with S. S. had been very pleasant. She had ordered jasmine tea, no cream or sugar, and after perusing his menu for a moment with a rather abstracted look, he had closed it with a snap and asked for one of what she was having. He then inquired politely, if very formally, about where she hailed from.

He didn't seem especially interested when she said that her family hailed from the Lake District, but when she said that she was a teacher at university, his eyebrows went up with interest, and the talk began to pick up. He was a teacher himself he taught at a school for young people, a boarding school, though he didn't mention which one it was. What did he teach? Oh, yes, he taught, er, chemistry.

After that, they had a fine old time talking about teaching. Professor S. S. had a fine sarcastic wit, especially when he was telling stories about unruly students though he wasn't used to being thought amusing. The first time she had laughed at one of his comments, he looked almost startled. He had a lot of questions about teaching at university. When she answered, briefly, he kept asking questions and seemed genuinely interested, as though she were telling him about teaching in an exotic place very far away from where he lived, and not at commonplace old Cambridge University.

The most amusing part was that he had forgotten to ask her her name until they were an hour into talking over their tea. She watched him agonise over this omission, prompting her in several small ways to elaborate on the topic of what she was called. "How did you spell your name, again...?"

"Oh, the usual way, with a Y. My parents didn't go for artistic furbelows when it came to the spelling of baby names." She could catch a whiff of acute embarrassment under the formality.

When the bill came, he looked apprehensively at it and then set it down, fumbling in his pocket. "Now three pounds... that's... "

She put an end to that quite effectively by dropping a twenty-pound note onto the bill tray and handing it to a passing waitress, and then waving away his attempts to reimburse her. "Men are always buying women tea. Let's even things up a bit, shall we?"

Again, he stared at her for a moment, but then smiled faintly.

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His arm didn't move from her waist. "Do you really want to leave?"

"No."

S. S. bent to her again. The call box door fell heavily shut.

Emily was suddenly not in a prohibitive mood. When S. S., who did not know her name, kissed her with increasing intensity for some time, then lifted her off the ground and somehow perched her on the booth ledge, the better to press his body more fully against hers, the idea of doing anything other than thoroughly enjoying herself never occurred to her. S. S. roused quickly no, the man was a veritable Tesla coil of concentrated, electric need, soaking up the touch of her hands, skin, and mouth like water through the skin of a frog.

His lust perfumed the close air of the tiny booth, disquieting her with its urgency. He forbade nothing and encouraged her to greater perversity with remarkable quickness. When he bent down from her lips to the place where her neck became her breasts, she let her head fall back, offering him as much skin as he wanted. Somehow he was leaning between her thighs, one hand beneath her skirt and cupping the rise of muscle where her thigh became her buttock, finding the slice of skin above where her stocking was clasped by her garter, and she was only the more aroused for it. She helped him open the front of her dress, blood pounding in her ears and throat, mouth open under his.

She tried to unbutton his jacket, the better to touch his skin... but this jacket was constructed like nothing she had ever seen before. It didn't simply unbutton like other men's clothes; instead, one button unfastened to reveal another in the most disconcerting place possible his tailor must have been a bona fide lunatic to make anything so complicated.

Luckily the trousers weren't so difficult to access. He had left himself so completely open to her that she felt no shame about slipping her hand between his legs, tugging his belt open, and into his clothes. He gasped sensuously as her hand closed on his sex and she exhaled in delectation at its luscious size and painful readiness.

But she was first going to secure some privacy for the two of them. She soundlessly muttered a word into his neck. Now, entire phalanxes of people could have trooped past the callbox and never noticed a fair woman and a dark man steaming the interior. This was risky but, it simply had been too damn long since she had touched a man she found desirable.

Polite pretence was gone. His body was cleaving to hers with the unselfconscious lust of an alpha male covering his mate during her oestrus. Clothes were hurriedly pushed or torn aside she heard stitches ripping and didn't care. Then he was silkily naked in her hands, and she was dragging him down over her, shifting on the tiny ledge, cold metal under her thighs, moving to fit herself more closely to him. In a second he had filled her to the hilt, wet and snug.

She locked her arms around his neck, letting out a strangled outcry that, where she came from, would have had every male mammalian creature within earshot pricking up his ears with excitement. As she reached her orgasm, her hips jerked nearly off the freezing callbox ledge as she convulsed against him. She fell, satiated, against the cold, steamed-over glass wall, with the sounds of trains accelerating and decelerating, and S. S.'s harsh breathing, in her ears.

S. S. followed her into satiety a moment later, slumping down onto her so that she nearly had to hold him upright, heat draining from his body into hers. They clutched each other for a long, long time.

"I'm sorry you couldn't call your friend," she said, apropos of nothing, feeling her humid breath condensing on the side of his face.

He ran his lips over her cheek. "It wasn't a matter of life and death."

She slid down off him and off of the ledge, shakily, and put her skirt to rights. But a second later, she grabbed him by his damnably complicated lapels and kissed him again. He returned it with the same intensity, his fist clenched in her hair. Fuck it. This man was hotter than she would have believed. She wanted to take him back to her flat and keep him there for a month, preferably without clothes on.

But she didn't have months alone in her flat. She didn't even have the flat anymore. She didn't even have another quarter of an hour. She had a new position to show up for. What time was it? She glanced at that great clock again.

One twenty-eight.

Oh bloody hell.

"I think I've missed my train," she said inanely. Her cheek was sealed to his neck with sweat.

"I think I've missed mine as well."

"Don't you have to teach class on Monday... "

"Yes, I do. But I haven't used a sick day in thirteen years I think I can take one now. Now stop being so damnably coy and tell me what your name is."

"I really have to go. I'm late."

"I have to go, and I'm late too." His lips caressed her neck, making her every muscle shiver. This was really just too damned good. A man like this should be had somewhere other than standing up in a *callbox,* for pity's sake.

But she couldn't, wouldn't, stay. Panic was suddenly gripping her. She extricated herself from his thrilling, clinging weight, staggering a little as she stepped out of the steamy callbox confines onto the chill train platform.

S. S. had composed himself as well, and was calling to her. "Wait a moment, please. No need to rush off... "

She turned toward him, dilated dark eyes riveted on his face. In another moment she slid out of his sight, and for the fourth time that night, spoke a word under her breath.

When S. S. turned to her again, she was gone. The platform was entirely deserted.

He stared round, obviously startled. "Hello? Miss?"

No answer.

"Miss Spelled-With-a-Y?"

No sound, other than leaves and discarded papers rustling in the breeze, and the dull roar of passing trains.

Part First: The Hart Assurgent: Chapter 2

Chapter 4 of 55

Professor Emily Swain came to Hogwarts from the Arcadian Kingdoms to teach the Faery magic of her people. She rapidly becomes embroiled in a bitter game of professional rivalry with another professor -- and then a very old friend makes her an enticing offer she doesn't want to refuse...

Chapter 2:

Breakfast at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was a luscious affair.

The school's house-elves seemed to outdo themselves with every dawn. Great pots and platters of substantial fare would melt upwards from the kitchens: Irish porridge, dripping maple sugar and thick yellowy cream; bright berries with clotted cream, brown and white toast, yellow curds of scrambled eggs fragrant with pepper and salt, platters of kippers and flaky whitefish, bowls of dewy fresh fruit, sizzling plates of bacon, sausage, ham and tomatoes; cold, bright pitchers of pumpkin and orange juice, silver pots of steaming hot tea, coffee, and chocolate. Some of the professors would often joke that the turnover in the teaching staff at Hogwarts was so low not only because of Albus Dumbledore.

Gryffindor House's Harry Potter and his two best friends, Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley, had, by virtue of Hogwarts breakfasts, become early risers.

"Did the thunder wake you lot up last night?" Hermione asked them both, setting down her goblet of pumpkin juice.

"A lot of times. I think it rained all night, mostly." Harry was red-eyed and yawning, still tired after an unrestful night's sleep.

"The lightning was flashing right over the lake. Did you see it? The sky was *purple*." Ron Weasley sounded more excited by the prospect of nearby lightning storms than not.

They were up very early that Sunday morning, working on plates of kippers and eggs, when they turned toward the sound of the doors of the dining hall opening midway through the meal. A figure muffled in a dripping black cloak slipped through them. The newcomer threw back her hood, revealing a short cap of wet, pale hair, which she combed back with both hands. Harry watched with more interest in his experience, people with extremely blonde hair were usually named Malfoy, and people named Malfoy were usually up to no good. He had never seen this particular woman before, though she was not Draco Malfoy's mother, Narcissa, whom he had first seen some weeks ago at the Quidditch World Cup; despite the similarity of fair colouring, the newcomer seemed a few years too young to have a son of fourteen or so.

The woman set down her black valise against the wall and shed her wet cloak, revealing a damp black dress underneath. Her rained-upon clothes and general dishevelment did nothing to conceal the fact that she looked extremely athletic, in the manner of a gymnast or ballet dancer, and had a very pretty face.

"Who's that?" Harry asked the others, nodding toward the blonde woman.

Ron and Hermione left off their talk about the previous night's storm to glance in the newcomer's direction. Ron was riveted instantly.

" 'Nother veela. Has to be."

"Honestly!" Hermione scolded. "You see veela everywhere now. Just because a woman is blonde doesn't necessarily mean that she's a veela." Hermione was remembering the Bulgarian mascots at the Quidditch World Cup who had greatly impressed both Ron and Harry. The three friends watched the unfamiliar woman make her way up the far right aisle toward the back of the hall, where the teachers were having their breakfasts.

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Emily was embarrassed to be late. She had wanted to arrive early enough to be nicely dressed and composed when she met the other professors. She thought it would make a good impression (especially for an Arcadian) to be very punctual, but missing the train had thrown her schedule into hopeless disarray. She had flagged the Knight Bus down and gotten as far as Hogsmeade by the time the sun was up, but finally she had checked most of her luggage at the station and run the remaining distance in the rain with one small bag, intending to return for the rest of her things the next day. Which meant, of course, that she had to wash the mud off her filthy feet in the chill waters of the lake before putting her boots back on. Plus, her underthings and stockings had gotten somewhat torn in the callbox, so much so that she had finally taken them all off in the bus restroom and stuffed them into her luggage. She was now absolutely frozen through.

Blast the prohibition against Apparating on school grounds. Blast the fact that she had to travel with wardrobes for three radically different social circles. Blast the fact that she was an impossible clotheshorse who overpacked for everything. Blast the fact that she hadn't been able to find a Holding Trunk in any of the shops in Diagon Alley and had to use her Muggle luggage.

And blast that dark-haired stranger. He was hardly what she needed that night, that night of all nights. She could hardly tell the Hogwarts headmaster that she missed the train because she had stayed up unconscionably late with that tall, dark, uptight fellow who proved to be hotter than a smith's crucible under the myriad exasperating buttons of his coat. Taking a new lover had been the last thing on her mind; yet now, when she should have been concentrating on her new position, she had to of course come across the first person she had actually found interesting in years.

And because of him, damn his glorious brooding black eyes, she was going to have to meet the Hogwarts Headmaster without knickers on.

Blast and damnation. Flaming Christian *hell.*

It was really a shame she would never see him again.

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"Professor Snape is awfully late," Hermione observed. Breakfast was now half over, and Snape had just then made his way to the High Table and taken his usual seat at its far end. He reached for the steaming teapot, poured himself a cup, and held the cup in between both hands, as if soaking up its warmth.

"His hair is soaking wet," Ron said. "Must have gotten stuck out in the rain."

"That's odd," Harry muttered. "He usually seems like he's been here forever."

"I thought he lived here year-round," Hermione said.

"Probably. Who'd want to live with him?" Ron asked. "If he has a family, they would probably all be scared of him."

The blonde woman arrived at the front of the hall. Dumbledore spotted her immediately and waved her forward to an empty seat at the right-hand end of the professors' table, between Madame Pince, the librarian, and Professor Sprout, the Herbology Professor and head of Hufflepuff House. Then he passed a plate of small wheat cakes dusted with fresh flower petals down toward her.

After she had had time to have some breakfast, Dumbledore tapped his glass for everyone's attention, and addressed the assemblage of students.

"If I may have everyone's attention, please, for an announcement.

"This year, we have decided to add a second session of our Defence Against the Dark Arts class to our curriculum.

"I am aware of the fact that we are some weeks into our new term. While our first session, emphasizing the magical means of defending oneself against the Dark Arts, continues to be capably taught by Professor Alastor Moody... " Dumbledore nodded toward Moody, who stared impassively back. "Our elective session shall emphasise means of defending oneself against the Dark Arts without the use of one's wand. These methods shall include various methods of combat and concealment, and the enchanting of talismans of protection. Any Hogwarts student in his fourth year or older may sign up for this new class.

"Now, may I introduce our second Defence Against the Dark Arts professor Miss Emily Beauregard Swain, lately of London, Cambridge, and the Arcadian Kingdoms.

"Professor Swain."

The students greeted their unexpected new teacher with polite applause. The fair woman stood, smiling, and waved greetings to the room.

"Various methods of *combat*?" Ron said in an excited whisper. "What does that mean? Fighting monsters?"

"What do they mean by concealment?" Hermione asked. "I'm going to sign up. How to protect oneself without using a wand that sounds really fascinating."

"Professor Snape must really be on about not getting a Defence Against the Dark Arts position, now that they've added another session of it," Harry said, in an undertone.

"Looks like it," Ron replied. Indeed, Snape scowled into his cup of tea as the new professor was introduced, refusing to so much as look at her or acknowledge her.

Harry turned to Hermione. "Where are the Arcadian Kingdoms? I've never heard of them before."

"The Arcadian Kingdoms... I've only read about them. Hardly anyone has ever been there who isn't a member of one of the tribes."

"The tribes?"

"Of Faeries," Hermione replied. "The Fair Folk. According to ***Non-Wizard Magical Traditions Across, and on Parallel Planes of Existence Relatively Close to, the Globe***, that's who lives in the Arcadian Kingdoms."

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After breakfast, when the students had left the dining hall, the professors retired to the armchairs in front of a great fire in the teachers' lounge, for spot more of tea and conversation.

With an excellent meal and hot tea warming her through, her hair and clothes finally dry, Emily relaxed and began to enjoy herself.

Academic conversation was always interesting to her, and Headmaster Dumbledore did not seem displeased by her late arrival. Indeed, he related some very funny anecdotes about times when he had been delayed by travel including a time when, during his early attempts at long-distance Apparition, a faulty attempt had landed him in Rome, and his clothes and all of his luggage somewhere near Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Later, Dumbledore took Emily's elbow and began to propel her gently around, making introductions to the other professors, who stood clustered in small groups around the firelit room.

"Professor McGonagall, it's a pleasure. Your book on Transfiguration is a classic.

"Professor Flitwick I'm so glad to finally meet you. My father remembers his Head of House very fondly.

"Professor Sinistra, I'm a great fan of your work on left-handed spell casting. Do let's have tea and talk about inverse cursing.

"And Professor Snape, I've just read your paper on bezoars. I'd love to have a chat with you about "

With Dumbledore making the introduction, Snape could no longer ignore the second Defence Against the Dark Arts professor. He grudgingly turned to finally look at her.

Their eyes met.

He turned dark red, and she marble-white.

They both looked away.

But, at the same moment, they both saw Dumbledore watching them curiously, and recovered their composure.

Emily Swain held out her hand.

So did Severus Snape.

"Professor."

"Professor."

"I'm... a great admirer of your work," she said, with an almost entirely straight face.

Evidently Professor Snape could keep a straight face much better than she could. He shook her hand impassively.

"Thank you." Snape retreated a step and crossed his arms. "I think I may have glanced over some of yours somewhere. Your opinions on swordplay and duelling are interesting, if a bit... *naïve.* Do you really believe that conflict resolution through fencing is a constructive way to vent competitive energy in young people?"

Well. Hello to you too.

"Yes... in my experience, Professor, duelling, in a very controlled environment, had a positive effect on young competitors, much in the same way as sporting matches did. Like the Quidditch matches played at Hogwarts," she said.

"But Quidditch is not purported to be a form of conflict resolution."

"Neither is competitive fencing in Muggle schools. Yet, sporting matches often become so, do they not?"

He was silent, watching her. Her return gaze was reserved, but showed no hint of moral embarrassment.

The scent of him, however, was maddening. To her kind, the scent and proximity of someone one found intensely desirable had a mildly intoxicating effect and the fact that she could still smell him all over her own skin was not helping matters at all.

"Professor Swain? Are you quite all right?" Madam Pomfrey had pressed a hand to her elbow. "I can give you a dose of my Pepper-Up Potion if you've taken a chill out there "

"No, I'm simply... " She pressed a hand to her temple. "I'm just exhausted. Really, it feels as though I've been awake for days. I'd like to settle in before my classes begin tomorrow."

The Headmaster smiled understandingly at her. "Of course, Professor. With the coming events anticipated for this year, we teachers will need to be at our best. Once you have had time to sleep and unpack, do come see me in my office, for I have much to tell you about this coming year."

Dumbledore leaned closer to her, eyes sparkling. "And I would also very much like to know how my old friends Buckminster and Elaine are faring, and catch up on the latest gossip from Court."

He winked at her. She grinned at him.

"Of course, sir. I shall visit you tonight after supper, if that is convenient for you."

"Yes, it is, Professor. I will await your arrival." Dumbledore turned to Madam Pince. "May I trouble you to point our new professor toward her quarters? Thank you. Oh, and your key, of course."

Dumbledore produced an ornate metal key from somewhere within one of his voluminous sleeves. She hesitated a moment before accepting it, then asked, in a very low, polite voice: "Sir, the key is... ?"

"Copper, of course," the headmaster said pleasantly. "As is the lock. You'll find that all the other metal fixtures in your quarters and your classroom are made of copper or bronze as well. I do find the warmth of their colour to be quite beautiful, don't you?"

"Absolutely, sir." She accepted it with a smile of thanks.

"I have also arranged with the house-elves for only the usual gold and china services to be used at the teacher's table at meals as well you need not worry about any surprises there."

Dumbledore had thought of everything. What a truly considerate man. She thanked him warmly.

As Professor Swain left with Madam Pince, Professor Snape returned to conversation with Professor Flitwick. His eyes followed his new colleague as she made her exit, although anyone looking at his face would have thought him completely indifferent on the subject of Defence Against the Dark Arts professors, late of London, Cambridgeshire, and the Arcadian Kingdoms.

Part First: The Hart Assurgent: Chapter 3

Chapter 5 of 55

Professor Emily Swain came to Hogwarts from the Arcadian Kingdoms to teach the Faery magic of her people. She rapidly becomes embroiled in a bitter game of professional rivalry with another professor -- and then a very old friend makes her an enticing offer she doesn't want to refuse...

Chapter 3:

Madam Pince showed Emily down the lower gallery of a vast hall, through doorways, and along labyrinthine stone corridors lined with oil paintings, up and occasionally down staircases that veered off in all directions like the Escher drawings she had seen in Muggle bookstores. Weak grey daylight slanted in through windows still plashing with rain. Hogwarts castle was vast and magnificent, but chilly, and on such a dull day, rather gloomy to her, used as she was to the sunshine and balmy climes of home. She was glad of the occasional stone brazier of flaming coals standing in the halls.

"Your rooms are in the second to the top floor of Ravenclaw Tower. My rooms are in the second floor, just above the staff library in the ground floor. Professor Flitwick has the floor above mine and just beneath yours, but he's a heavy sleeper and nothing disturbs him. He's an old dear, Filius is. Professor Sinistra lives in the top of the tower just above you. She likes the topmost floor so she can keep her telescopes on the roof. She just loves it up there, though I think I wouldn't like climbing all those stairs."

"Stairs are all right. I won't mind them so much, Madam Pince."

"Yes, I suppose our fencing teacher wouldn't balk at a bit of exercise. And do call me Irma," Madam Pince said with a comfortable smile. "My guess is you've only been in a Wizarding school as a student before?"

"Yes, that's it."

Madam Pince's laugh was as comfortable as her smile. "Severus Snape was the same way about calling us by our first names when he started teaching here. You'll soon get used to it."

Down one corridor, through another gallery. "You won't need to worry about affiliations with any of the Houses we've already got Heads of House for all of them. Dumbledore will explain to you about giving and taking away points for the Inter-House competition, though I doubt if it'll get the same sort of effort from students this year, what with the Tournament and all. Ah, here we are."

Madam Pince stopped in front of a large oil painting set on a vast, curved stone wall no doubt the base of a round tower. The canvas depicted a middle-aged wizard with a roguish expression on his face, dressed in sixteenth-century garb and sitting in a carved chair, with a goblet in one hand and a book in the other.

Emily had leaned close to the painting, trying to read some of the lettering in the book he was holding when the subject of the painting winked at her. "Greetings, my lady. I've not seen thee traversing these halls before. If thou comest any closer, do give old Alberic a kiss."

She gasped and sprang back, blinking.

"Mind your manners, Alberic," Madam Pince said tartly. She turned back to Emily. "That one's a flirt, he is."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Madam Irma," she said. "It used to give me a turn when paintings spoke to me even when I was in school."

"Give us the password, then, ladies," Alberic said.

"*Dementis venustas*," said Madam Pince. Alberic's frame swung open, revealing a doorway.

"*Dementis venustas* 'beautiful madness,'" Emily said, as they headed through the doorway and into the tower.

"It's totally appropriate for what goes on in this tower," Madam Pince replied.

Madam Pince showed Emily around the small staff library and exquisitely appointed study rooms in the first floor of Ravenclaw Tower. The walls were lined floor to ceiling with books Emily was enraptured with this embarrassment of riches. Coming from Arcadia, a country without modern printing capabilities, and where books were most often still lettered, illustrated, and bound by hand, such a roomful of finished bound books on varying subjects was like a roomful of gold. The library and study alcoves were furnished with carved ebony tables, fat armchairs and sofas of dark blue leather, and oil lamps with globes of deep robin's-egg-blue glass. Madam Pince merely smiled approvingly when Emily lingered in the library, exclaiming over its every detail no doubt she, the school librarian, could understand the younger woman's honest delight with having access to lots of books.

"Come along now, let's show you to your rooms." She led Emily out of the library to the spiral staircase of carved stone just outside the Ravenclaw library entrance and opposite the back of Alberic's canvas. Irma Pince was puffing a bit by the time they reached Emily's rooms on the fourth floor of the tower, but Emily was so excited that she all but bounded up the stairs a flight at a time. She unlocked her door a charming thing of ebony wood, with a Gothic arched doorframe and a tiny, inset window depicting an eagle in grey and blue stained glass with the copper key Dumbledore had given her.

It was the prettiest apartment imaginable, even more comfortable than her old London flat. There were three rooms in all; the door opened on a large sitting room, with bedroom and bath through a door on her left. There was a massive stone hearth to the north end of the living room, and a second open hearth set in the wall between bedroom and bathroom, so that she might warm both with a single blaze.

The walls were of grey stone, with a carved, arched ceiling. Vast diamond-paned windows lined the west-facing walls of both her living room and bedroom, with window seat benches cushioned in blue velvet just below them. The southwest windows looked out upon the tumultuous, storm-grey lake; to the northwest lay the emerald-green Hogwarts Quidditch pitch.

"This is beautiful," she told Madam Pince, kneeling on the living-room window seat with her chin on her hands on the windowsill. "Just lovely. I shall adore living here."

Madam Pince laughed aloud. "There now, you don't like it one bit, do you? Shall we send Hagrid to help you with your luggage?"

"Oh no, most of my things are still at the Three Broomsticks in town. I'll just pick it all up tomorrow."

"All right then. I'll leave you to settle in." Irma Pince turned to go, but paused on the threshold. "And welcome to Hogwarts, Emily."

"Thank you, Irma."

Before the elderly librarian had made her way down the four flights of stairs, Emily had lain down fully clothed on her new four-poster bed, and was fast asleep.

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Emily arrived for her visit with Dumbledore just after supper. After several hours' sleep, a hot bath, and a fresh pair of knickers, she was feeling much more confident than she had upon her first meeting with him.

Professor McGonagall had directed her to a second floor corridor that had appeared to hold nothing but a large stone gargoyle, but after McGonagall stood before the gargoyle and intoned, "Apricot toffee!" in a terribly imposing voice, the gargoyle had stood aside, revealing a spiral staircase. The staircase began to rise slowly upward, depositing her at the entrance to Dumbledore's office. It was a great round room with a lofty domed ceiling a gallery ledge lined the upper half of the walls, which were full of even more books.

She could hardly imagine what it must be like to have so many books at her disposal. How lucky these Wizarding folk were.

Everywhere she looked in this room, there was something curious to look at quaint mechanical instruments made of some silvery metal, a carved, claw-footed desk as big as her parents' great dining table, and a thick silk rug depicting the Hogwarts four-quadrant crest underfoot. Something made a hoarse croak at her as she crossed the office threshold and she turned to see a large bird with gorgeous, iridescent red plumage regarding her from a perch behind the door. The bird tilted its head to the side, and croaked a curious, interrogatory, *Auuuuk?* at her.

"Ah, Professor Swain. Good evening." Dumbledore's pleasant voice sounded above her head. She looked up to one of the gallery ledges to see Dumbledore close a book and re-shelve it, then start down a slender, twisted golden staircase toward the ground level.

"Good evening, Headmaster."

"Come in, come in." He descended the steps slowly and deliberately she was reminded that he was nearly twice her own father's age. "May I offer you a cup of tea? Or perhaps something stronger?"

"Only if you'll let me pour one for you too."

Dumbledore threw her a mischievous smile, lacing both hands behind his back in a boyish gesture. "Truthfully, I was thinking of tapping the cask of apple brandy your parents sent me for my last birthday. Your arrival here seems like a wholly appropriate special occasion for it."

"You have Third Kingdom calvados here?"

"By happy coincidence, so I do." Dumbledore opened a cupboard behind his desk, where a low shelf held a tiny barrel propped on its side on sturdy wooden legs. With a wave of his wand, he conjured a tiny golden spigot and filled two crystal glasses with a pale amber liquor. He pressed one into her hand and waved her to one of the two inviting leather armchairs flanking his majestic hearth, then took the other one himself. He sat down with a sigh, propping his feet up on a soft leather ottoman and taking a long sip from his glass. The brandy was delicious, with smoky apple and caramel flavours that filled the mouth like warm honey.

"Ah, that's lovely. So tell me, are you finding Ravenclaw Tower to your liking?"

"I'm finding Ravenclaw Tower quite magnificent, sir. I'm amazed at just the sheer size of Hogwarts and the number of libraries you have here."

"Yes Irma Pince was so pleased to find in you a fellow bibliophile. I think you've made a friend there." He took another sip from his glass, looking as contented as a cat purring. "Do tell me, how have your parents been?"

"They're very well, thanks. Mother's latest news is that she's finally retired from active combat duty in favour of a strategic command position. Father's practically standing on his head with happiness."

Dumbledore smiled gently. "And how is your father? Still working?"

"He took up his study of barding traditions again about two years ago, and now he's on the verge of completing it."

"Really? That's wonderful. It's always such an event when we receive another of his works for our library. What subject will he take up next?"

"He's had an idea for some years about writing a volume on each of the Faery tribes."

"He would be undertaking a very large task, indeed, then," Dumbledore said. "I do hope I live to see its completion."

"I hope I do too, sir," she said bemusedly, taking a sip of brandy.

Dumbledore slanted a long look at her. "And how is Gwydion faring? Health still good, I hope?"

"He seems well. Though to be honest, I hope he lives to read my father's latest work. His great age is becoming more obvious in recent years. His mind has never failed him, but he seems frail to me."

"He has always had such a zest for life that sometimes I forget that he was in his fifties when I was at Court."

"You know, they still tell stories about your year as a Tithesman," she said. "Is it true that you and Gwydion persuaded a naiad to let you Transfigure the waters of her well into wine one evening?"

"Oh, yes. Those were the days, my dear," he said with a nostalgic grin. "And what has kept you busy lately, Emily?"

"Not much to report," she said. "Just the usual. Training squires, peacekeeping manoeuvres with my unit. And I'm spending a good bit of time with Mother and Father."

"I see." Dumbledore nodded.

"It's good to have work to do," she said with a rather humourless swig from her glass. Dumbledore frowned.

"Of course. I think after your classes start Tuesday, you'll soon have plenty of work to occupy you here."

"I can't wait to visit all the libraries, and you do have such a lot of brilliant scholars on the staff. It's almost intimidating."

"Oh, don't worry. Believe me, they'll be just as curious to talk to you as you are to talk to them."

"I hope so. I can't have made a very good impression today, staggering in out of the rain like that "

Dumbledore waved away her worries. "Again, don't worry. Everyone on the staff has grown up hearing legends of the Fae so now that you've made such a dramatic entrance out of a rainstorm, think of it as just adding to your general air of romance."

She laughed heartily. "I certainly hope that a general air of romance will be enough to distract everyone from the fact that I looked as though someone had been emptying buckets on my head."

"You were considerably drier than little Dennis Creevey, one of this year's crop of Gryffindor first-years," Dumbledore said. "Poor little chap actually fell *in* the lake on his first day here."

"The poor child. What an anticlimactic beginning to the term."

"Oh, I could tell you some amazing stories about anticlimactic beginnings to term," Dumbledore told her. "Just two years ago, we had two Gryffindor second-years crash an enchanted flying Ford Anglia into a tree on campus. And that flying car ended up on the front page of the *Daily Prophet,* no less "

"No! You can't be serious!"

"Oh, wait until you hear about the year after that, my dear... "

Dumbledore really did have some amazing stories about beginnings of term. He had some equally fascinating stories about the middle of term, and the end of term. He also had a wonderful store of anecdotes about his students, as they both triumphed and got themselves into dreadful scrapes. Then he told her all about the upcoming Triwizard Tournament, his spring-blue eyes alight with excitement. Then he filled her in on the House Cup, and her duties in giving and subtracting points from students. Later, he told her a little gentle staff gossip about her new colleagues their strengths, their eccentricities, something of their histories. As they continued to drink apple brandy and bask in the firelight until it was very late and they both felt very mellow indeed, he reminisced about her father's years as a student at Hogwarts.

"I'm so thrilled to see Professor Flitwick is still teaching here," she said. "He was just starting as Head of Ravenclaw House when my father was a second-year. Father greatly admires him. And to think, now my father's favourite professor has got the apartments below mine in Ravenclaw Tower."

"Yes, Filius, Minerva, Poppy Pomfrey they're all part of the old crowd, bless them," Dumbledore said. "We truly do have a marvellous lot of teachers here. My only worry about the staff is that younger professors, like Remus Lupin, who taught Defence Against the Dark Arts last year, Severus Snape, and now you, will find yourselves feeling rather at loose ends, when so much of the rest of the staff are the same ages as your parents or grandparents."

"I doubt that'll bother me. Over the last few years I've only really sought the company of my parents, Gwydion, and Dahlia," she replied. "They're the people who know me best."

"I understand." Dumbledore took a reflective sip from his glass. "Tell me, have you and Severus ever met before?"

"Who Professor Snape and I?" She felt her heart rate pick up rapidly as she fumbled for a truthful reply. "I've never met him before this weekend."

"He reacted so oddly when I introduced the two of you today. I thought he seemed rather flustered, which is very unlike him."

"Did he seem flustered to you? I didn't notice." Which was, again, the whole truth of course she couldn't have been expected to notice if Snape was flustered; she had been far too preoccupied with her own state of knickerless flusteredness.

"He's a brilliant scholar, Severus Snape. Though I must warn you, there are those who find him a bit... difficult to get along with."

"He seemed all right to me today," she said noncommittally.

"Good, good, all for the best," Dumbledore said, setting his empty glass down on a small table beside his chair. "I'll want him to take... special note of... what you teach this year. There's a good reason for that, you know... "

As she waited for Dumbledore to tell her what the good reason was for his desire to see Professor Snape take special note of what she taught this year, her mind was racing, trying to figure out plausible half-truths for any question that he might ask her about the Potions professor. When he asked her whether she had known Snape before her arrival at Hogwarts, and told her that he had seemed flustered upon being introduced to her, she had very nearly panicked.

But the questions, and the explanation, never came, because Dumbledore, from the depths of his chair, suddenly gave a soft snore.

She glanced at him in surprise, to see his white head pillowed on the cushioned back of his seat, delicately veined lavender eyelids fluttering gently. Yes, of course she was looking at the predictable effect of the combination of the late hour, the warmth of the fire, the comfortable chair, and much liquor on an elderly man who worked very long hours.

Emily finished her brandy and stood up, then collected his glass and hers, and set them on a small tray in the cupboard behind his desk. Then she crossed to the lamp that burned on his desk and silently turned the wick down until it went out. As she made her silent way toward the door, she paused in front of the red bird's perch and whispered, "You'll watch over him, won't you?"

The bird cocked its head at her again and gave a quiet, affirmative, *Auuukkkk.*

"Thank you. Good night."

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"Good afternoon, class."

"Good afternoon, Professor," said many young voices. It was Tuesday morning, and Emily's first class session had just begun.

The new elective Defence Against the Dark Arts professor surveyed her class in a businesslike manner. She had worn simple black robes and had tied some of her hair back. She waited until the class quieted down, then launched into an introductory lecture.

"Welcome to your supplemental Defence Against the Dark Arts class."

"My philosophy of defending oneself against the Dark Arts begins with three principles.

"Avoidance of confrontation, and misdirection, are the first. If you aren't a clear target, you won't be attacked. We'll be covering several means of making yourself scarce against attack in this course.

"Second Repellents and Protections. With some preparation, you can forearm yourself with that which makes you repellent to your attacker, that which makes you inoffensive to your attacker, or that which neutralizes his power.

"Third the Wizarding magical tradition is wand-centred. Without a wand, most wizards and witches find themselves in a tight spot. Wizard magic can fail you, especially when your wand is taken from you, or is broken." Both Harry and Ron glanced at each other and laughed ruefully.

"Also, if your opponent is magically so powerful that you have no prayer against defending yourself from him or her that way, you then must turn to an alternate means of protecting yourself."

With that, she lifted her right arm, and in another second had thrown a dagger at the far wall, where it struck a cork target mounted there. The class let out a collective gasp, then turned back to where Professor Swain had been standing a moment earlier.

She wasn't there.

They all gasped again. It was impossible that she could have hidden behind her desk, or pulled on an Invisibility Cloak, or Apparated away she had simply vanished, without making a sound, in the time it had taken them to watch the thrown dagger hit the back wall. They looked around uncertainly at each other for a few moments. Seamus Finnigan even got up and peeked behind her desk and into the broom cupboard.

"She's really not here," he said.

"I guess that means we've got the rest of the class off, then," Draco Malfoy snickered. He stretched and kicked his feet up on his desk, lacing his fingers behind his head.

"Don't put your feet on the furniture, please," came Professor Swain's voice. From right beside Malfoy's desk. Where she suddenly was, solid as life, her arms folded over her chest, her posture totally relaxed as if she had been standing there the entire time. The class gasped again, staring. Professor Swain smiled.

"Now," she asked, surveying the entire class, "can someone tell me how I did that?"

No one was surprised that Hermione Granger's hand was the only one in the air. "Miss Brown Curls Front Row there. I'm terribly sorry if I don't have all your names right yet."

"If I'm not mistaken, you used a form of the Faery art of *Obscurantis*, or, the art of hiding in plain sight. A practitioner of this art can walk through a crowd and be certain that no one will remember having seen him. An object treated with Obscurantis is effectively invisible, though it may be sitting in plain sight."

"Excellent. And how did I undo my Obscurantis effect?"

"You spoke to us, and drew attention to yourself."

"Exactly." She paused by Hermione's desk, looking admiringly at her. "You know, that was a rhetorical question I wasn't really expecting anyone here to actually be able to answer it. How, on Earth, did you know that?"

"Well, when Professor Dumbledore said that you were from the Arcadian Kingdoms, and your class was about doing magic without using a wand I thought that sounded interesting, so went to the library and found some books about the history of the Arcadian Kingdoms and their magical traditions. It's a tiny section, there's lots of conflicting information, and all the maps look different, but... "

A smile had spread across Professor Swain's face. "And you've done all that reading in the time since I was introduced Sunday morning."

Hermione nodded.

"You must be Hermione Granger, of Gryffindor House, if I'm not mistaken."

Hermione nodded again, smiling.

"Great work, Miss Granger. Thirty points for Gryffindor for your extremely diligent preparation."

The other Gryffindors grinned at her. Hermione pinkened with pleasure.

Draco Malfoy's hand went up immediately. "So will we learn that, this year? How to throw knives?" He sounded like he couldn't wait to get started.

"You'll find that throwing knives, Mister... " She stopped, taking a long look at him. "Mister... um... "

"Malfoy. Draco Malfoy."

"Malfoy." Professor Swain paused. "Any relation to Lucius Malfoy?"

"He's my father." Draco smiled with satisfaction, no doubt figuring that if the new professor knew his father, he would soon have her as firmly in his hip pocket as he did Professor Snape. A few of the Gryffindors exchanged worried looks.

"I can see the resemblance. At any rate, getting back to your question, throwing daggers actually isn't the most effective means of countering an attack in many situations. The reason why I threw that dagger was to get you all to look away from me, just for a moment. You cannot use an Obscurantis effect to vanish when someone is looking directly at you. You can only use it when you are out of sight.

"If you are trying to flee from an attacker, you will need to divert his attention in order to Obscure yourself and hide. Also, while you are running away, be careful not to disturb anything or make any loud noises, because that will alert him to your presence."

Harry put up his hand, a little nervously, no doubt wondering if he could expect the same sort of dislike from the new professor that he always received from Professor Snape, a former Slytherin and a friend of Draco's father. But she called on him with the same pleasant manner she had used toward everyone in the class: "Yes, Mr. Second Row with the Black Hair and Spectacles."

"Please, Professor, how is Obscurantis different from using, say, an Invisibility Cloak?"

"That's a good question. An Invisibility Cloak needs to be put on, whereas Obscurantis effects are created using *Mots de Puissance.* Can anyone tell me what *Mot de Puissance* means?"

"Word of Power." Some heads turned toward the sound it was Draco Malfoy who had spoken.

"Excellent, Mr. Malfoy. Ten points for Slytherin. I see someone else has been doing some reading."

Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "How did you know I was in Slytherin?"

"Oh someone told me once that the Malfoys have all been in Slytherin since roughly the beginning of time. Anyway, to elaborate on your question about Invisibility Cloaks, Mister... "

"Harry Potter "

She glanced sharply back at him as he spoke his name, her eyes seeking the scar on his forehead, but there was nothing in her manner of the usual extreme deference or animosity his name conjured in some other people. "Mr. Potter, an Invisibility Cloak is an *Objet de Puissance*, an Object of Power. A witch or wizard using an Object of Power does not invoke an abstract magic the way he or she does by using a Word of Power the magic is contained within the item itself. Later on in this course, we'll be making protective amulets, which are simple but very effective *Objets de Puissance.*

"The drawback with carrying a magical object, such as a wand, or an Invisibility Cloak, however, is that it can be taken from you by force, or accidentally pulled off, whereas once you have learned how to use an Obscurantis effect, it's yours for good, so long as you can use your Word of Power.

"An Invisibility Cloak reflects your surroundings on itself, making you vanish from sight. An Obscurantis effect makes you so unmemorable that you cannot be seen. It works by compelling people to totally ignore you."

Ron stuck his hand up. "So you were really here the whole time? We were all just ignoring you?"

"Indeed, Mr. Redheaded Second Row " She motioned for him to give his name.

"Ron Weasley."

"Mr. Weasley. Yes, it was very funny. When Mr. Front Row with All the Freckles looked behind my desk for me, he brushed right past me. And Miss Back Corner with the Butterfly Clip In Your Hair, you'll want to close that copy of *Witch Weekly* that you pulled out once you thought I had left the room, and that you now have hidden under your Divination book." She smiled broadly as she said it, and even Parvati laughed.

"So we won't be learning anything about fighting, then?" Malfoy sounded like he was about to cry with disappointment.

"Yes, we most certainly will, Mr. Malfoy. You'll receive some training with the dagger, but it won't be the focus of my martial arts curriculum. My weapon of choice is the sword. In addition to two sessions of lecture each week on Tuesdays and Wednesdays in this class, you will be required to attend a two-hour session of instruction in fencing and self-defence techniques, Thursday mornings. We'll be practicing in the courtyard."

Everyone's eyebrows shot up, some people reacting with surprise, some with excitement, and some with apprehension. Hermione put her hand up. "So we'll all have to learn how to use a sword?"

"Yes, Miss Granger. Just enough to keep yourselves from being slaughtered if someone comes at you with a weapon, or if something big and frightening comes at you while you're holding a weapon." Hermione and Ron both glanced at Harry at that remark.

Their Professor surveyed all the apprehensive faces around her and laughed. "No need to look so alarmed, you lot. No one's going to expect you to go to the Olympics by fifth year."

Ron Weasley's hand went up. "Professor? Pardon me, what are the Owlimthicks?"

"Something like amateur Quidditch for Muggles."

Draco Malfoy put up his hand again. "Yes, Mr. Malfoy."

"How can I use a Word of Power?"

She smiled at the class.

"It's simple. Everyone creates his or her own."

"How?" asked several voices at once. Hermione, leaning forward in her seat, hadn't even bothered to raise her hand.

The bell rang. "We'll take that up in our next session."

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"Did you notice?" Hermione excitedly asked Ron and Harry as they hurried down the hall to Potions class. "Her hair was pulled back and she's got pointed ears. Not like a house-elf's, but if you look closely... "

"That professor was all right!" Ron said. "Throwing knives around and vanishing like that... 'My weapon of choice is the sword... ' Like she's got a whole armoury in her pocket and has a favourite one of them. That was cool."

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After the class had left, Professor Swain crossed to where the dagger was protruding from the target in the back wall. She tugged it free from the cork board, then drew a roll of suede leather from a pocket of her robes. A neat row of highly detailed miniature swords and daggers pierced the leather, like nothing so much as a tailor's paper of needles. She held the dagger before her.

"*Reducio*." Then she silently spoke a word.

In a moment, the dagger had shrunk to needle size.

She replaced the weapon into the bit of leather, and then returned the tiny armoury to her pocket.

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When Professor Swain arrived at her Wednesday class session, she was not prepared for what greeted her in the classroom.

It looked as though fifteen or twenty new students had enrolled in her class. There weren't enough seats for all the students crammed into the room some of them had seated themselves on the windowsill, and a few had even sprawled on the floor in the front of the room. She noticed, with a bit of a start, that occupying five of the seats in the back row were Headmaster Dumbledore, and Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, Moody, and Sprout.

"Professors. Is there anything I can I help you with?" she asked, approaching the last row.

"Professor Swain. Good afternoon," Dumbledore called. "We are here to sit in on your lecture on the creation of a *Mot de Puissance*. I have reason to believe that it should be quite enlightening."

"Headmaster are you not... quite acquainted with... Faery magics?" she asked Dumbledore in a lowered tone.

"Yes, Professor. But word of your lecture on Tuesday has piqued the interest of others besides your students."

She paled to the tips of her pointed ears. "I am flattered, sir." She glanced at the small crowd in the classroom. "But I was not expecting this, sir." She met the eyes of all the other professors, looking at her expectantly. Mad-Eye Moody's rolling, unblinking blue eye was fixed on her face.

Dumbledore was smiling at her, very gently. "The opportunity to learn a non-Wizarding tradition of magic is a rare thing at Hogwarts," he observed. "You, one whose culture understands so well the thirst for knowledge, cannot blame anyone for taking a scholarly interest in this lecture, can you?"

"Of course not, sir. I simply was not expecting this sort of... this large of... an audience, sir."

"Please proceed with the lecture you had planned to give, Professor. It will not lose meaning if a large number of ears are here to listen to it."

"Of course not, Headmaster."

She was still in agonies of nerves while she was returning to the podium at the front of her class until the door to the classroom opened again, and she walked headlong into Severus Snape, who had just arrived. The side of her face impacted with his neck and chest where she took a deep, involuntary, enticing breath of the scent of his body the first time she had been in his presence since the morning of her first day here.

As if she wasn't rattled enough already.

She sprang back immediately. "I beg your pardon, Professor. I didn't see you come into the room."

She thought he unhanded her as though she was red-hot, and exceedingly stinky besides. "Of course, Professor," he said, extremely stiffly. "Do excuse my clumsiness."

"No matter. My fault entirely," she said.

They stood exhaling at each other for the briefest of moments, then turned their faces resolutely aside and passed each other with elaborate casualness. Professor Snape moved up to the teachers in the back row, and took a seat Dumbledore had been saving for him. Professor Swain went to the podium at the head of the class and quickly organized her lecture notes.

"Good afternoon, class," she said, her voice rising in volume to fill the room. "Our group seems to have grown in size from last session. My greetings to everyone who is joining us for the first time. And welcome to our distinguished professors, who are visiting us today."

She meant to take them all in with her smile of welcome, but her gaze was lingering on the dark, etched silhouette of Severus Snape. He was suddenly minutely absorbed in dipping a quill.

Well then fine. Her eyes searched the room for a more attentive audience.

Hermione Granger was sitting in the front row, as usual. Leaning forward in her seat, dark eyes alight with interest, several freshly sharpened quills laid out beside her notebook, brown curls all but springing from her head with absorption.

Yes, this young girl, she was the sympathetic audience Emily craved. She would tell what she knew to Miss Granger. Miss Granger, and Dumbledore. The rest of them could make of it what they would.

"To review, briefly, last session we had an introduction to the Faery art of Obscurantis. As Miss Granger of Gryffindor very competently pointed out " at which Hermione looked down and smiled "Obscurantis is the art of hiding both oneself and objects in plain sight."

She could not look up in the direction of Severus Snape during that portion of her lecture. *Why* did he have to be in the room during this speech?

"Obscurantis is a very ancient art. Fae historians estimate that it came into use in the Faery magical canon as many as three thousand years ago. Both Wizarding and Muggle sources allude to its use. The great Muggle playwright, William Shakespeare, describes its use in his play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which he describes Puck, a Faery character, using Obscurantis, and another Faery art, the casting of Glamours, in order to hide himself from Queen Titania and the rude mechanicals as he carried out the bidding of his liege, King Oberon.

"On a related historical note, the character of King Oberon was actually based on King Auberon, a historical High King of the Sixth Kingdom. He ruled some four hundred years ago and was a great patron of the arts. He was known to have visited the Second World that's what they call your Earth here in Arcadia many times."

Hermione Granger was leaning forward in her seat, chin on her hands, enraptured. Her fascinated interest was so heartening that Emily could have hugged her in gratitude.

"But getting back to the source of the Faeries' magical power. As many of you know already, the Fae do not use wands, as wizards do. Yet, nonetheless, Fae spells and charms require a source of power, exactly the same as Wizarding magic does. Without a source of supernatural power, no spell is truly effective. Wizards use wands, which are powered as the will of the wizard is channelled through a core of primeval magical substance the hair of a unicorn or a veela, a phoenix feather, dragon's heartstring, et cetera.

"Like all of you, I sometimes do magic with a wand. Yet, I find the source of my most effective magic remains my *Mot de Puissance,* or, as the younger Mr. Malfoy also very competently translated for us, my Word of Power." Draco Malfoy smirked triumphantly at Crabbe and Goyle.

"I am well acquainted with why you have all decided to attend my class today. You're all here to learn how to create your own personal Word of Power, which will allow you to work magic without your wand. Such a source of power does exist, and has been in use in the Faerielands for millennia."

A low murmur broke out amongst her listeners.

"Now, let me explain something about Arcadia's culture. The Fae... tend to be secretive. We like to know things about other people, but not for them to know us. The cultivation of mystery around ourselves is practically the hallmark of our kind. Much of the Fae magical tradition is about pretending to be other than you are, and how to keep others from looking at you or knowing your true thoughts. Knowing and keeping a great secret is the source of all of our magical power, and it colours our national character. However, once I have explained to you how our magic works, you will better understand why this is the way we are."

Of all the assembled group watching her, she could most acutely feel the heat of Severus Snape's black eyes on her face as she faced them.

"I can tell you that I have been commanded by my liege, King Gwydion, and been given permission by all the Sovereigns of the Nine Kingdoms of Arcadia, to teach part of our magical tradition to you, the professors and students of Hogwarts. Suffice to say, the red tape that has had to be negotiated in this situation has been somewhat difficult. As your Headmaster and I have both observed, Faery government makes the Ministry of Magic look as efficient as a Swiss watch." Her listeners let out a soft murmur of laughter.

"But King Gwydion has been a dear friend of your Headmaster's for over a century. So, here I am."

The entire room had fallen silent now. She could feel their interest leaning close to her.

"You are all now curious as to how one creates one's own Word of Power, of course.

"Now such a word is, always and inevitably, what you would call a *Hapax Legomenon.* Does anyone know what that is?"

No one did. If Dumbledore did, he did not raise his hand.

"A *Hapax Legomenon* is a word or form of language that has only one use, in print or otherwise. They are created by one person, and used by that one person, never anyone else. A Word of Power is unique to the person who creates it.

"It is within this absolutely secret and totally individual creation that lies the power of Faery magic."

Silence.

"Of course you are all going to next ask me, please, Professor, how can we create a word no one else knows? And the answer is, you do it the same way everyone else does it. You work at it. You commit all your thought to it. You read extensively, you pore over poetry and dictionaries of all languages. You pay close attention to the nonsense declaimed by the local drunkard. You take notes from religious mystics speaking in tongues. You do all this until you find a combination of sounds, letters, and syllables that feels absolutely right to you. Some of the Fae swear that their Words came to them whole in dreams, while others agonize over the origins of every letter."

Hermione Granger's hand was in the air. "Miss Granger."

"Please, Professor, how long should one's word be? Several syllables, or only one or two?"

"An excellent question, Miss Granger. But not one you are likely to ever get an answer for, because no one has any way of knowing. Perhaps mine is one syllable long, and everyone else's run fifteen or twenty as I said, no one ever knows the specifics of another person's active *Mot de Puissance.* Once you have your own, you don't share it with anyone and I mean with *anyone.* Not your best friend, not your sworn companion, not your brother or sister, not your parents, not even your lover, husband, or wife. Without absolute secrecy, such a word loses some, or even all, of its power."

Hermione Granger's hand had gone up again. "Please, Professor, I read in ***Identity and Illusion: A Wizard's Overview of Faery Magic,*** here Professor Swain hid a broad smile under her hand when Hermione recited the title of the book "that very occasionally some *Mots de Puissance* have been shared between two Faeries. Is that true?"

"Yes, Miss Granger, but that practice is very rare. Like I said I cannot emphasise this enough the power comes from the secrecy.

"There are stories of Words of Power being passed from parent to child, or from teacher to disciple, on the elder's deathbed. If your Word is the creation of another person who has since died, it is still only known to one person, and loses none of its power.

"In other stories, they are shared between two living people. This is only done as a desperate measure, and only between people extremely close to one another. One famous story of a shared *Mot de Puissance* was the story of two twin brothers, who served as knights during the First Age." Hogwarts' only set of twin brothers, Fred and George Weasley, exchanged a conspiratorial smile between them.

"When one brother's Word was stolen by an evil sorcerer, his twin brother shared his with him. In order to preserve the Word's power, one brother would only use it during the night while his twin was asleep, and the other would only use it during the day when his twin was asleep. While each brother was sleeping, it could be said that only one person knew the Word in question. While both brothers were awake, the Word was still usable, but only half as powerful as before."

Harry put up his hand. "Yes, Mr. Potter."

Harry nodded. "The two brothers were their names Castor and Pollux?"

Professor Swain grinned at him. "Those were indeed their names. Five points for Gryffindor for being such a well-read lot."

The other Gryffindors grinned at Harry. "I'll bet it's nice to earn some points for Gryffindor without having to risk your life for a change," Hermione whispered close to his ear. Harry chuckled.

Pansy Parkinson of Slytherin put her hand up. "Yes, Miss Black Pageboy Haircut in the Third Row. I'm terribly sorry, all of you I swear I will get your names right by term's end, or sooner."

Pansy giggled. "So what would happen if someone found out another person's Word of Power, and put it on the front page of the *Daily Prophet* or something?"

A fleeting expression of terror crossed Professor Swain's face. "That would be a very great tragedy for whomsoever had created that Word, because every single time someone opened that paper and read it, it would lose more of its power, until it ceased to mean anything at all."

Lavender Brown put her hand up. "So it wouldn't be a magic word anymore if lots of people knew it? Not at all?"

"Not at all, miss. Like I said, the magic lies in the Word's complete originality, and in its secrecy. If everyone knows it, it means nothing at all."

Draco Malfoy put up his hand. "Yes, Mr. Malfoy."

"Is it true that some people can't create Words of Power at all, no matter how hard they try? That the magic just won't work for some?" A note of challenge rang in his voice.

Professor Swain looked pensively at him for a moment before continuing. "Yes, that's true, Mr. Malfoy. Some people, through no fault whatever of their own, cannot wield Faery magics. This is extremely uncommon amongst the Fae, to be certain. It is much more common amongst people with no Fae blood, who try to learn the Faery tradition of magic. For these unfortunate few, asking them to create a *Mot de Puissance* is like asking a person with severe dyslexia to write a great novel, or asking someone with severe dyscalculia to prove the Theory of Relativity."

Some of her listeners frowned at the references to Muggle concepts of learning disabilities and Muggle science others nodded understanding.

"For some, it simply cannot be done. Some part of the brain, or spirit, or whatever is just not there. This does not mean that such a person is somehow lacking in talent or intelligence by any means, Mr. Malfoy."

She turned to the rest of the class. "Let me emphasise that now because, you see, as far as I know, this is the very first time that a Faerie has taught Faery magic to a class composed exclusively of non-Faery students. We have no way of knowing how any of you will do in this class there is no precedent. Your Headmaster, and my King, are undertaking a experiment here. Let's hope that it turns out well."

Malfoy continued. "What if one of us can't do it can't come up with a Word of Power? Will that person fail your class?"

"No, not at all," she replied. "Such a person will be given other assignments, such as papers on the history of armoury or sword combat we'll come up with related subjects to study, no worry. Remember, Mr. Malfoy, a portion of the grade in my class comes from the martial arts and fencing class much of that is about athletics. If one of my students cannot use a Word of Power but works hard at fencing, he or she can still get a good mark in my class, and vice versa."

Professor Sprout put up her hand. "Is there any precedent anywhere of persons without Faery blood who have learned to use Faery magics proficiently?"

"An excellent question, Professor Sprout. Yes, there are some very distinguished non-Faery practitioners of Faery magic most of them native-born Muggles or wizards who live in, or have visited, Arcadia. The first one who comes to mind is the author of the book Miss Granger mentioned, ***Identity and Illusion: A Wizard's Overview of Faery Magic.*** He is a very distinguished practitioner of Fae magics, although he comes from an old Wizarding family. No Faery blood at all."

"What was that gentleman's name?" asked Professor Sprout.

"Swain," Professor Swain said, after a pause. "Buckminster Swain."

In the back of the classroom, Dumbledore and Professor Flitwick smiled warmly.

"Any relation?" Professor Sprout asked, interested.

"Yes," she replied, smiling a bit. "He's my father."

Low chatter broke out in the room at that admission. A few Gryffindors leaned toward Hermione Granger, murmuring semi-audible questions in her direction.

A hand went up near the back of the room. "Yes, Professor McGonagall."

"Is it true, Professor, that Fae magics can alternatively be used with a wizard wand? If one cannot create an original *Mot de Puissance,* that one can create the same effect with a traditional wand?"

"Yes, that is true, although it's trickier, and more limited in application, than a *Mot de Puissance.* Say, for example, say one wants to Obscure oneself and walk unseen through a crowd. It's a bit counterintuitive to have to take out a wand and wave it dramatically about saying *'Obscurant!'* when you're trying to cast a spell to make everyone look *away* from you.

"However, it's also true that one can power traditional Wizarding Charms, Transfigurations, etc. with a Word of Power instead of a wand. So long as the source of magic is there, the spell can be accomplished, whether you're using the word, or the wand." Excited whispers filled the room, so much so that Professor Swain had to let them die down a moment before she continued.

Another hand went up in the back of the room. "Yes... Professor Snape. Can I help you, sir?"

"I'd like to hear a bit more about *Obscurantis,* if you please," he said, so tartly that some people shot curious looks at him. "Is it true that you *vanished completely* during yesterday's lesson?" From the tone of his voice, it was obvious, to her, that he was taking her ability to vanish completely very, *very* personally.

Emily bent over her notes, discreetly shaking her loose hair down to cover her ears, which were burning so with embarrassment that she thought they would glow whitely in the dark. *Why* did he have to ask this question, in front of all these people?

"Yes, sir, I did very briefly, in order to demonstrate to my students how it is done," she said, trying for a bright, informative tone. "I assure you I maintained order in the classroom, and that no one's safety was endangered."

"Very considerate of you," he said, with icy coolness. "And tell me, Professor, can this art be used to make *objects* vanish as well?"

Oh no. He guessed. Or if he hadn't guessed, he suspected. Did he think she had been trying to make a fool of him maliciously... Oh, she wished she could melt through the floor and hide.

"Yes, sir, it can," she said quickly, so that it came out more like *Yessiritcan*, muffling her own voice with one hand. Another hand went up in the back she gratefully turned her attention to that person. "Yes, Headmaster Dumbledore, sir!"

"In your experience, Professor, how long should the formation of an active *Mot de Puissance* take? Weeks, months, years... ?"

"Weeks, months, years yes, yes, and yes. Some very young children form them at an alarming rate. Others are still trying to form them well into adulthood. Some, as we discussed earlier, try to form one throughout their whole lives and never accomplish it. Like most other intellectual achievements, it seems to be a matter of talent, aptitude, and hard work."

Another hand went up. "Yes Mr. Malfoy."

"How long did it take you?" he asked.

"I think I was... oh, seven or so." There was a faint murmur of commentary at that remark as well. "But I was born and raised in Arcadia, you know. Think of it this way if you start studying a language at, say, fourteen, would you expect to speak it as well as someone for whom it's the first language he or she learned? Please don't compare yourselves to me and judge yourselves lacking, by any means."

The bell rang. "That concludes today's lecture. Thank you all very much for coming. If anyone has an add slip that needs to be signed, please bring it up to me now."

She sat down at her desk and was quickly surrounded by students. It was easy to stay amongst the crowd of excited students, like one hiding behind an animated, robed

duck blind, until she was quite sure Severus Snape had left the room.

Part First: The Hart Assurgent: Chapter 4

Chapter 6 of 55

Professor Emily Swain came to Hogwarts from the Arcadian Kingdoms to teach the Faery magic of her people. She rapidly becomes embroiled in a bitter game of professional rivalry with another professor -- and then a very old friend makes her an enticing offer she doesn't want to refuse...

Chapter 4:

The next day, the morning Emily was to teach her first fencing classes, dawned clear and bright the first day the sun had shone that week. When she met her Gryffindor and Slytherin fourth-years in the courtyard closest to the Quidditch pitch, she was dressed for fencing, in a hooded sweatshirt, baggy fencer's knickers of dark grey canvas, and heavy, laced boots. Her students were dressed for strenuous exercise as well, in baggy gym shorts, grey fleece sweatshirts with the Hogwarts crest embroidered on the front breast pocket, and trainers.

She made them line up and do warm-up callisthenics, then led them in a brisk run, once around the Quidditch pitch, and back. When she was sure that they were warmed up, she started them on basic footwork drills.

Some of her students, like Harry Potter, Draco Malfoy, Dean Thomas, Parvati Patil, and Lavender Brown, were naturally agile and took to the footwork drills right away; some, like Hermione Granger, Ron Weasley, Blaise Zabini, and Pansy Parkinson, were merely too self-conscious to fully concentrate yet; some, like Neville Longbottom and Seamus Finnigan, suffered from some adolescent clumsiness, and others, like Gregory Goyle, Vincent Crabbe, and Millicent Bulstrode, had years of inactivity to overcome. In all though, they were just like any other class of young squires she had trained.

After an hour of advances and retreats, lunges and recoils, lateral and horizontal attacks and dodges, she led them through some cool-down stretches. Then she allowed them the last ten minutes to rest, mop their faces with towels, and guzzle bottles of water before lunch.

"Oh, come on," Draco Malfoy called to her, when they were all sprawled on the grass after the session's workout. "When do we get to use a sword?"

"Be patient, Mr. Malfoy. You have to learn how to fletch arrows and string your bow before you can become an archer. It's no different with fencing."

"And when do we get to use knives?"

"After you get reasonably proficient with a sword."

Draco was making disappointed noises, demanding to know why that was. She had to turn away to hide a knowing laugh. How exactly like his father.

"Once I've taught you how to use a rapier, your dagger training will build on what you already know. Using a dagger is actually more difficult than using a sword, believe it or not, and it's a less effective weapon. Daggers are only really good for close in-fighting and situations when you need something easily concealable. A sword is better for hand-to-hand combat, and if you want a really powerful distance weapon, a bow is best."

"So we're going to learn some archery, then?" Draco asked.

"No your Headmaster didn't think it was necessary."

"There's no mention of archery in the syllabus," Hermione said. "It's all sword combat first term, then we do some dagger training the next term, but it's mostly all about unarmed self-defence."

"Don't recall asking *you* anything, Granger," Draco retorted.

"Oh really? Well, I've got a question for you, then a lot of us were trying to recall what sound a ferret makes. Some of us thought that they hissed, like snakes, and some of us thought that they squeaked, like mice. Care to clear things up for us?" Hermione asked, with a saucy grin.

Emily thought that was simply the most extraordinary *non sequitur* of a question to ask anyone, but for some reason, it made Draco Malfoy turn pink, and leave off arguing with Hermione.

How very odd.

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As frequently happens with groups of teachers, the conversation at lunchtime centred around odd pronouncements made by students during their classes.

"Oh yes. One of my students asked this question during my last class about ferrets," she remarked to the other teachers on her end of the table Moody on her right, McGonagall on her left, and Snape just beyond Moody during lunch. "She asked one of the boys if he could clarify for her what sound a ferret makes. It was the strangest thing."

She thought there was a noticeable lull in the conversation.

"Really." Moody's face lit up with what she thought was a wicked smile. "What did she ask, now?"

"Well... we had been talking about what they were going to learn this year in my fencing class, and one of the other students said something rather snarky, and then she asked him if he could tell her for certain whether ferrets hissed, or squeaked. Just out of the total blue, this question about *ferrets,* apropos of nothing."

"And what did he say?" Moody asked, with the air of one egging her on in some mischief. Snape glowered dangerously at the two of them for some reason.

"He didn't say anything," she said, now feeling very self-conscious, wishing she had never opened her mouth to begin with. "Seemed very embarrassed about the whole thing."

"Did he?" Moody seemed delighted. He reached for a flask that he carried in his pocket, and took a long swig from it, chortling. "Well, lassie, in case you were curious, ferrets squeak like anything. Yes, that's it, they *squeak like anything!* Isn't that right, Professor Snape?"

Moody threw Snape a truly demonic look of hilarity and gave him a rather violent clap on the back. She thought Professor Snape looked angry enough to swallow his tongue along with his roast beef and peas.

These Hogwarts professors made even odder conversation than their students did.

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That Friday night found Emily sitting on her window seat bench alone, before the open window, with a glass in her hand. The inch of wine in her glass was the last of the last bottle she had brought from home. She was still dressed in a sweatshirt and fencing knickers from her final class that day: an instructional session with her Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw seventh-years.

Supper had only been over for an hour it was still early in the evening. The session with the seventh-years had not been terribly strenuous she had taught far more demanding groups than that one yet she still felt drained and bone-weary.

The strain of being so very civilised this first week, of fitting in with these proper wizard professors, learning the rituals of behaviour established at this thousand-year-old school, finding her place in their pecking order, all the while pretending to be fully human, was as exhausting to her now as perpetually balancing a china plate on her head.

Now breathing the cool outside air, the freshness left after the hard rain, she wanted the smells of night, of growth and greenness, of musty piles of rotting leaves, of running water. She wanted drums in the dark, pipes in the distance, and to breathe the scent of a strong male in rut.

In short, she was having a great self-indulgent wallow in homesickness. And it was, as she reminded herself, only the end of the first week of classes.

It had been so much easier to ignore these dormant impulses during her long period of self-imposed celibacy in the last three years. But after she had impulsively had that dark stranger almost a week ago no, now she had a name to put to the black eyes, the mouth and the body, *Severus* a return to long celibacy looked bleak to her.

She had thought that she would never see him again after that first night. Now she felt foolish for not realizing that he was a wizard, and had of course been waiting for exactly the same train to Hogsmeade that she was, but had had to wait on Platform Nine instead of Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, because Platform Nine and Three-Quarters was open to the sky, and it had been storming that night. All the clues had been there she didn't see now how she could have missed them.

Yet when she had been introduced to Severus Snape in the teacher's lounge, with the scent of his lust still saturating her body, and had been greeted so coldly, the civilised part of her had felt snubbed and powerless. Her more primal side, however, had wanted to throw him on the nearest table and force him to act again on the impulses that she knew he had, beneath his ever so controlled exterior.

Certainly, she could have understood if he found matters a bit awkward she found the situation awkward too. But now, he was giving every indication of not being able to so much as stand being near her. The pointed questions during her lecture had been startling and what possible reason could he have had to glower at her so violently because she said something about ferrets? What was so bloody offensive to the man about *ferrets?* She thought ferrets were rather cute, herself. Lots of people she knew had them as pets.

Ultimately, the only reason she could come up with for his behaviour was (face it) that he was undeniably no longer interested in her, and didn't want anything embarrassing to get back to his colleagues.

Well then. If that's what he wanted, she would leave him alone, and the peace of the Lady go with him.

But right now, this moment she really had to get out of this castle.

She downed the last of her wine, and stood up, padding out on bare feet toward the side exit door near the base of Ravenclaw Tower, that spiralled down a curved flight of stone steps that ended on the northwest lawn of Hogwarts Castle. She turned toward the north, and east around the Astronomy Tower, past another tower that carried the strong scent of owls' feathers and owls' droppings, and finally in the direction of the Forbidden Forest.

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The feel of the cool grass under her bare feet was wonderful. Underneath the dew and damp, she could feel warmth radiating upward from the earth. The sensation of a thick green canopy of trees closing over her head felt both comforting and familiar, yet alien and exciting.

Her first impression was that this forest was ancient. Primeval oaks stood shoulder to shoulder with giant conifers that covered the ground with raised root systems as complex as mosaics. All around her the branches formed graceful, black arches, like the doorways of some forgotten cathedral.

She scented the air nothing threatening and was off. Tearing through the woods with thoughtless exuberance, trees silhouetted before her in silvery light. After she was some leagues into the forest, she noticed that her shirt was ripped probably beyond repair, and she was covered with mud, but those were human cares, and she was lost in the feel of her own swiftness, the thrill of ground rushing by under her feet and small branches breaking against her skin, and the companionable scents of other creatures around her in the trees.

There was a sudden sound of more hooves just behind her.

It was something big, judging from the weight of its steps and something fast, for it was keeping pace with her easily. The sound of the footsteps had a quadrupedal cadence, four hoofbeats a horse, a unicorn or perhaps something else.

She slowed her pace as she reached a clearing, an indication to whomever it was that she was willing to be approached. A murky four-legged silhouette appeared behind a stand of trees.

As he came into the clearing, she saw that her companion that evening was a centaur. He stood as tall as the tallest man and would have looked the huge Hogwarts groundskeeper Rubeus Hagrid in the eyes. His skin and flanks were coal-black and heavily muscled, and his scent indicated maturity, virility. He was magnificent.

"You are far from home, Arcadian," he said, in a vibrant baritone. "Do you flee from me?"

"I run in the woods because the woods are good to run in. I miss the woodlands of my home," she said. "Will you share yours with me?"

"How do you come?"

"In peace, and in friendship." She lowered herself to one haunch, bending her head in the submissive posture of hoofed creatures. It was an acknowledgement that he was the strong one here, and this was his territory. She asked merely for permission to pass.

"Rise, Mistress Faun. And tell Bane, steward of these woods, what you are called here."

He offered her a new name, and then gave her his name before he asked for hers. It was extreme graciousness on his part, and it put her at ease.

"Lady Swain, also called Lady Tumnus, of King Gwydion's Fianna. At his command, I serve the Wizard Dumbledore in this world for a year and a day."

"Hail to thee, warrior. The names of both thy good masters are known to us. Walk with me, if you will."

She fell companionably into step beside him, the sound of hooves sounding dully in the still night. "Pluto is bright tonight," she said, by means of a conversation opener.

"Aye. The Underworld's planet will grow brighter as Samhain draws near."

As he mentioned the autumnal holiday festival that both her people and his celebrated, she hoped for a second that an invitation to participate in his observance would be forthcoming. She realized a moment later, though, how unlikely that was. He had, after all, just made her acquaintance two minutes ago, and a centaur's tendency toward privacy made most Faeries look like exhibitionists by comparison.

"What does that bode for the future?"

"Extremes, my Lady. Death, carnality, regeneration. Matters of great import, and great consequence. Dark, dormant powers growing stronger. As Pluto draws apace with the Scorpion, the Hierophant will diminish, and hide his true face away to brood jealously on the rise of Mars. Summer should not succumb to Winter, my Lady. It is against the way of things."

She was heartened to discover that the conversation of Second-World centaurs was just as impenetrable as the conversation of Arcadian centaurs. He could have been telling her that it would be an unusually long winter, or he could have been telling her that Albus Dumbledore would have a big sulk in his office over an increase in the price of Mars bars come Hallowe'en. Best thing to do with centaurs was just look thoughtful and nod a lot.

As the lights of Hogwarts Castle appeared in the distance, Bane turned to her again. "My Lady Swain, I must return. Mark me well now run not in your rambles more than five leagues northeast, for there lives an acromantula and his mate, and their many children, all hungry."

She nodded. Now that was useful advice. "My thanks for your counsel and hospitality, Bane."

"I bid you good night." He disappeared back amongst the trees.

A moment later she bounded up the front steps of Hogwarts, her steps first clacking and then softly padding on the carved stone. The flagstones were cold under her sore feet. She felt euphoric, and very worn out.

If she had a forest like that close by, then perhaps she could like it here.

At first she thought the great front hall was empty, and she could slip upstairs unseen without magic, but then she heard a sharp voice to her left.

"Messy girl, incorrigible girl! What are you thinking, tracking mud all over my hall floor!" Argus Filch stalked over to the muddy, dishevelled person in torn clothes entering the hall late at night. "I'll see you in detention for a week for being out late at night, you'll be cleaning hospital chamber pots without magic if I "

Then he looked at her face.

"Oh... Hello, Professor... I, erm, didn't know it was you."

Snape had hurried up beside Filch, no doubt eager to see an unruly student get detention. He pulled up short when he saw who had come in.

"Good evening, Mr. Filch, Professor Snape." She greeted them distantly, her senses still full of the Forbidden Forest. "Lovely night, isn't it."

Filch and Snape both glanced out the open door at the nearly impenetrable black dark outside, lit only by a waning moon, fog hanging thick on the banks of the lake. Filch smiled at her as if humouring a dangerous lunatic. "Yes, jest *beauteeful*," he growled.

She glanced bemusedly down at her bare, muddy feet, and the muddy footprints she had tracked onto the stone floor.

"*Waskan*." Then her lips moved again, soundlessly.

The floor was spotless.

"Sorry to trouble you, sir." She turned toward the great stone steps.

Filch and Snape were still staring at the mud on her feet, calves, and arms: at the scratches on her exposed skin, the torn clothes, the tangled and dishevelled hair. She even had fine sprays of mud droplets on her face and neck.

"You, eh, run into somethin' nasty out there, Professor?" Filch asked finally. "Should we be callin' Hagrid out to, erm, check on things?

"Oh no." She addressed him casually over her shoulder, starting up the front steps. "Just taking a walk. Good night." Filch and Snape watched silently as she turned past the Great Hall, and was gone.

Filch turned toward Professor Snape in disbelief. "Oh, jest taking a walk, was she. Jest getting some fresh air, taking her evening *cons-teetutional,* by herself, in the ruddy Forbidden Forest, was she. I tell ye, Professor, I don't know what the man was thinking, hiring one of those Faery types. We got some odd birds teaching here, but that one wins the prize for Odd Birdery hands down, she does." Filch moved off, muttering.

Severus Snape glanced in the direction of his colleague's exit. His black brows knit together in thought, but he said nothing. If he had a particular favourite contender for the staff prize for Odd Birdery, he kept it to himself.

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As September turned into October, the novelty of learning a foreign system of magic was supplanted by excitement over the upcoming arrival of the delegations from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, and speculation over who would be selected as Hogwarts champion. Emily found her class size shrinking to a more manageable level as the merely curious, and those frustrated by a lack of easy success at creating a *Mot de Puissance,* dropped her class.

She also suspected that some of her students dropped once she disabused them of the glamorous notion that achieving proficiency at sword combat was an effortless thing that would happen the moment a sword was put into their hands. Many of them, she noticed, were dismayed to discover how much bludgeoning physical work was really involved in sword fighting and combat. For the first month, she had not even brought any swords out, concentrating on teaching them an increasingly difficult series of training drills designed to teach them footwork and build agility. There was really no point in giving any of them a weapon until they could move as though their feet were not cased in cement, and could duel an opponent for more than five minutes without getting hopelessly winded. When they complained of exhaustion and sore muscles, she would shift into her best Fianna commander voice and tell them that she didn't know any magic that could substitute for physical conditioning, and pass out pots of Madam Pomfrey's muscle liniment.

Nonetheless, she was still slightly unnerved by the number of students, and the idea that part of her duties would be to discipline those who were uninterested in what she had to say. In her previous teaching situations, her students had had to prove themselves time and again to arrive in her classes, and that hard competition produced students who paid close attention to everything she said. The strain of dealing with uninterested teenagers was nearly a new phenomenon to her.

A few of her students, however, were such a joy to her that they more than made up for that inattention. Hermione Granger seemed to have read the entire library section on Faeries within a week of Emily's arrival at Hogwarts, and her increasingly knowledgeable questions always led to some lively class discussions. Fred and George

Weasley seemed to hold her in unusually high regard, perhaps because she could unerringly tell them apart, even when they tried to fool her into mistaking their identities. (Fred, who was less fastidious about washing, and who enjoyed his Stilton, sausage rolls, and curry, smelled much different than George, who had an incurable sweet tooth and used sandalwood shaving lotion.)

In her fencing class, she had Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy. Both had the perfect build for the rapier slender and wiry, with proportionally long arms and legs. Of all of her fourth-year students, those two seemed the most naturally agile, due in part, no doubt, to training with their House Quidditch teams. They had also both realized early on that they were the two best students at fencing, and had pitted themselves against each other competitively from practically the first session. But then, she would have had to be blind, deaf, and anosmic to miss the intense rivalry between the two of them which, she suspected, had been going on for years before she had ever arrived at Hogwarts.

While she had struck up cordial acquaintances with some of her fellow staff members, most notably Dumbledore, Irma Pince, Pomona Sprout, and Filius Flitwick, she found it very easy in the following weeks to miss ever seeing Professor Snape indeed, her impression was that he had been avoiding her. He wasn't much of a social animal, apparently, rarely visiting the teacher's lounge, preferring to spend his free time in his own dungeon office, or his private quarters. The only time she ever saw him was at meals, and then he didn't talk much. When he did, she thought he seemed to almost make a point of talking to anyone but her.

Well, except perhaps Professor Moody. He definitely seemed to prefer her company to that of Professor Moody, but not by much.

One unseasonably cold afternoon in mid-October, she had curled up on the window seat in the teacher's lounge with a copy of ***The King of Elfland's Daughter*** by Lord Dunsany. (The Muggle treatment of the Fae in their literature never ceased to surprise and amuse her.) A dark shape appeared in her periphery someone was approaching her with purposeful intent.

"Professor Swain?"

She glanced up. "Yes...Professor Snape?"

"I have, madam, *a bone to pick with you*." He stopped dead in front of her, dark eyes flashing, arms folded tightly over his chest.

She glanced around the other Professors in the teachers' lounge, McGonagall, Sprout, Vector, and Sinistra, had drawn close together in a tight, wide-eyed knot, but she could smell curiosity all over them. They wouldn't be much help, and Dumbledore wasn't there.

Oh, bloody flaming Christian hell.

"Whatever about, sir?" she asked, in what she hoped was her most neutral voice.

"Your curriculum. Now that you've taught the students in your class " here he sniffed a contemptuous sniff " how to create their own *Mots de Puissance*, some of them have already accomplished it to some minor degree "

She smiled excitedly at him. "I know. Isn't it wonderful? I'm astonished at their progress. I awarded George Weasley forty points for being the first student at Hogwarts to be able to use one. He made an Obscured nosegay of daisies materialise on my desk by way of demonstration "

He was not interested in the progress of her students. "I assure you they have been using this ability to Obscure various sundry items that are not of such a pleasant nature as *nosegays of daisies* as well, Professor.

"The Obscuring of inanimate objects that's *a neat little trick*," he said, glaring at her. "Funny how all of a sudden I've got students tossing Obscured Dungbombs into each other's cauldrons in Potions class, that no one else notices *until they go off*. Someone else and I'm certain it was your precious Weasley twins thought it was amusing to set a pan of treacle mixed with soot outside the Slytherin common room door, which no one noticed until a large group of students trod in it. I've demanded to see contraband items in my class on five separate occasions, all of which disappeared completely a moment later. I can only assume that you gave them the idea as to how to use this trick.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but I fail to see how the use of this effect is going to protect any of our students from a Dark Wizard attack. Obscuring themselves from view no doubt has its uses, but the ability to hide objects from view merely makes them even more diabolically efficient at mischief-making than they were before.

"Which leads me to another thing, madam." He lowered his voice a bit, but lost none of his indignation.

Oh oh. She could see where this was going. She bent her head and grimaced.

"I also suspect that this trick had something to do with the... temporary disappearance of a rather important item of baggage of mine, earlier this year. I suspect that... someone found it amusing to play a prank on me by hiding such baggage from my sight."

Shite he knew. She felt her entire body suffuse with blushing.

"Whomsoever the culprit was, I do hope to tell such persons that I am *most displeased* by such actions. Is that clear?"

"Crystal, sir," she said in a tiny voice, her face burning bone-white, focusing on something located very far over his right shoulder.

She glanced over at where the other professors were staring, open-mouthed, at her and at Professor Snape. They turned back to each other, resuming their conversation with an elaborate air of *not listening.*

"I...I do beg your pardon, sir. I first taught my students the simplest version of Obscurantis, that is, the Obscuring of small objects, because that is a far easier task to accomplish initially than the Obscuring of oneself, and I thought a gradual number of increasing successes would encourage them in pursuing this art more fully. I certainly did not intend to encourage them in making mischief of any kind in your classes."

"You mean to tell me that it never occurred to you " that *you* lumped her in with every miscreant and blackguard that had ever tossed a Dungbomb into a gently simmering cauldron " that they would use this art to Obscure items like Dungbombs and their ilk?"

"No, sir, it did not. My next question would be to ask you what exactly a Dungbomb is, sir."

"I find it difficult to believe that you have taught at this school for all the weeks that you have and still have no notion of the pranks that our students constantly play upon their teachers," he snapped.

"Well, I have no practical experience with such pranks. I have never had a student let off a Dungbomb in any of my classes."

"Excuse me?"

"I have no experience with pranks, sir, because students don't play pranks in my classes, involving bombs full of dung, or of any other substance," she replied truthfully.

"You mean to tell me, that no Hogwarts student, not even the Weasley twins, has ever played a prank in one of your classes?"

All right, this was getting out of hand. At first, she had been apologetic. Now she was getting angry. She folded her own arms in front of her, in an unconscious imitation of

his hostile posture. "If what you mean by *prank* is, some sort of action intended to disrupt the class by means of either alarm or hilarity, sir, then no*I have never had a prank played in any of my classes.* If that explanation is not quite clear, I will do my best to rephrase my statement in a manner more readily apparent to you."

Snape's black eyes shone with scarcely concealed rage. He threw a irate look over his shoulder at the other teachers, who again elaborately resumed their inane conversation.

"So you mean to tell me that you have *never* had a student set off a Dungbomb in your class?"

"No, I have *never* had a student set off a Dungbomb in any of my classes."

"And you have never had your lectures interrupted with spates of Whizzing Worms?"

"No."

"And you have never had your usual teacup replaced with a Nose-Biting Teacup?"

"No."

"And you have never had your wand mysteriously replaced with one that became a parrot upon being waved?"

"No."

"And you have never had any encounters with Stink Pellets?"

"No."

"Belch Powder?"

"No."

"Filibuster Fireworks?"

"No."

"Ever-Bashing Boomerangs?"

"No."

"Screaming Yo-Yos?"

"No."

"Frog Spawn Soap?"

"No." She was almost sorry that she hadn't had any pranks played in her classes, so as to simply make the man feel a bit better.

"You are certain there has not been *one single prank,* madam?" He was gripping his own arms with white-knuckled rage at this point.

"There has not been, sir. The impression that I have received from my students is that they rather enjoy my classes, and were thus disinclined to disrupt them, sir."

There was an audible *Huhhhh* from Professors McGonagall and Sprout at her retort. If possible, Snape's fine black brows reached even greater heights of altitude.

"As for Fred and George Weasley, like I said, they were the first of my fifth-years to develop *Mots de Puissance* of any magnitude they were Obscuring very small items by the end of the fourth week. Fred Weasley can already become difficult to spot amongst obstacles. Hermione Granger, of my fourth year class, quickly became even more advanced. She's done a great deal of independent research and is "

Snape interrupted with "So you tell me you keep perfect order in your classroom, madam?"

"Well... I do not *require* perfect order in my classroom, sir. I believe that in order to keep a student riveted on his lesson, one should present him with a riveting lesson. I strive to provide those.

"However, I do not doubt that the fact that they know their professor can be anywhere, at any time, observing their behaviour while unseen by them, does have some effect in making them feel reluctant to set off Dungbombs during one of my lectures."

Snape had fallen silent, though she could tell that he was furious at her response, his eyes flashing dangerously. She realized, with a pang of guilt, that she had been far from offering him any aid with what was probably a real problem; but his means of approaching her regarding it had been so off-putting that her first reaction had been to attack him right back. She stood up and laid a conciliatory hand on his arm.

"But regardless of how they behave in my class, the point is that they're Dungbombing the cauldrons during your class. Will you let me see if I can help?" she asked, in a gentler tone.

Severus Snape was not appeased. He was furious with her, and he was not the sort of man to let perfectly good fury go to waste. He turned away, disengaging his arm from her touch with stiff formality, and firing a parting question over his shoulder. "And what, Professor, do you propose to do about it?"

"I shall tell them that they are not to use the arts I teach them to make it difficult for other professors to teach class. I did not make the journey all the way to the wizarding world in order to disrupt anyone else's classes, and I shall remind them of such. I shall attempt to present a unified front with my fellow professors, and make it clear to the students that they are not to imagine that they have my support in such pranks as you describe. If need be, I will give detentions and subtract points from their houses," she said simply.

He paused. The eyebrows relaxed a little. "That would be an excellent start."

"I shall address them all today, right now, during my lectures." She picked up her book and began to gather up her notes.

As she passed him to leave the room, she paused at his shoulder, seriously addressing the air next to his left ear in a lowered tone.

"Lastly, regarding the matter of the piece of baggage that briefly went missing, I have it on good authority that the individual responsible feels *well and truly chastised*, and *extremely* apologetic, for such actions. This person regrets that such means were employed for what she believed to be the harmless goal of attempting to attract the attention of a certain person. She now *fervently* wishes that some means that the second party would... better respect... had been employed towards that end. For any upset her actions caused you, I am certain that she would like to *apologize very humbly, and sincerely beg your pardon*."

He regarded her profile coldly. "Were she here, such a person would become well acquainted with how *distressing* her actions were to the other party involved. That gentleman had spent many *long and exhausting* hours in London searching for potion ingredients, and was very upset at the thought of having misplaced all of them."

"I am certain that he was, sir, and rightly so. I do not mean to make light of the difficulty that gentleman no doubt experienced."

"Please do tell her to consider her actions, *if she is capable of such*, Professor," he said, in tones of the most dulcet scorn imaginable. Then he stalked out of the teacher's lounge and shut the door with a bang. She watched him go, crestfallen.

This had gone far beyond simply taking the gentleman's way out of an unwanted association. His manner, his voice everything about him dripped purest vitriol. It wasn't simply that he didn't especially like her. He *hated* her.

"He does unfortunately treat everyone like that, Professor," Professor McGonagall said with a gentle smile. "But don't worry, you'll become quite immune to it by terms' end. Before long, you'll be able to listen to a Severus Snape rant without having to even put your book aside."

"He's most of the reason why we value an ability to work in a volatile environment," Professor Sprout said, leaning over to pat Emily's hand.

"Yes, he's a pill, but he is the best Potions master in Britain. Well, the best Potions master in Britain who's willing to work for a public school teacher's salary," Professor Sinistra offered helpfully.

"In short, my dear, just ignore him when he's like that. We all do it," Professor Vector said, shrugging.

"Thank you for your advice," said Emily.

Thought Emily, *I wish I could ignore him.*

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What a truly foul day this was turning out to be.

Emily's mood never recovered after her dressing-down from Professor Snape. So, after her last class, she had wrapped herself in her black cloak and a pale blue silk Beauxbatons scarf left over from her school days, and set off from the Hogwarts campus toward town. She had been intending to do a bit of window shopping, but the air, which had been only brisk a few nights earlier, was now bitterly cold. At first she only wished that she had brought gloves with her. By the time she was halfway to town, she was vowing to buy a heavier cloak. But by the time she got into Hogsmeade, her hands were numb and she was shivering, cold seeping into her very bones. Then she had made for the Three Broomsticks and gone gratefully into the warm, firelit room, taking a seat at the bar.

"Good afternoon, miss. What can I get you?" The landlady, Madam Rosmerta, was a pretty blonde witch in a low-cut purple robe. She met Emily at the bar, wiping down martini glasses.

"Do you, by any chance, have any Arcadian dandelion wine? Or anything like it?"

"Faery wine, eh? I think I may have a bottle or two, but it won't come cheap. The transportation fees, you see."

"I understand." The blonde witch disappeared into a back room.

"Why, Emily, my dear."

That silky, drawling voice it could only be one person in this world.

She turned to see Lucius Malfoy slide into the seat beside her with effortless grace.

Her first impression was that the years had been very kind. Still the same tall, gorgeous, conspicuously well-dressed and well-groomed picture of pure-blooded wealth and good breeding that he had always been. The long white-blond hair was, as always, perfectly in place, tied back at the nape of his neck with a black velvet ribbon. He wore what looked like something bespoke of obscenely fine black wool, with a black cashmere over-robe.

He smiled at her. "Still looking lovely. You haven't aged a day." He squeezed her hand and pressed an airy kiss on her cold cheek.

"Lucius! Why, hello. What a surprise. It's lovely to see you."

He suddenly seemed the first really familiar person she had encountered since leaving Arcadia. She gratefully clasped his hand, still resting warmly on hers, in both of her own. His leather glove felt as soft as baby's skin.

"Draco mentioned in his letters home that he had a new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor named Emily Swain. I was simply delighted to hear that you had returned to Britain. I had been meaning to send you an owl asking you to visit, now that you live so nearby."

"I really should have sent you an owl at home. I'm just so preoccupied with my classes... "

He waved the apology away with an expansive gesture of his hand. "Completely understandable. But then I had the good fortune to see you through the window of course I had to come in and say hello."

"Thank you. I'm glad you did. How is Narcissa?"

"Lovely, thank you. And you've already met my son."

"You know," she said confidentially, "I could tell Draco was your son from the moment he raised his hand in my first class. Such a handsome boy. He's very like you."

The corners of Lucius Malfoy's mouth turned up. "Thank you."

They were silent for a long moment, as her eyes lingered on his pale face. The years had been not only been kind they had been amazingly generous. He had to be forty or so now, and his etched profile had only become more distinguished. If anything, he was better looking now than he had been when she had first met him, seventeen years ago.

Madam Rosmerta returned with a bottle and a glass. "We've a few bottles of this vintage, miss oh hello there, Mr. Malfoy," she added anxiously.

Malfoy took the bottle from her with an authoritative air, glancing over the ornately drawn, hand-lettered calligraphy label. "Fifth Kingdom dandelion, Third Age... five years old. A good year." He nodded cool approval at Madam Rosmerta.

"Madam Rosmerta, a second glass perhaps?" Emily looked an invitation at Malfoy.

He smiled again. "Please."

Madam Rosmerta busied herself pulling the cork, and pouring a splash into a glass for Emily to taste. The scent and taste were so redolent of the Summerlands that it made

her throat tighten and her eyes mist.

"It's lovely. Thank you." The landlady poured two glasses and courteously excused herself. Emily turned to Malfoy with a rueful grin. "Thanks for coming in to say hello. I'm rather in the mood for a quiet drink with an old friend, if you'll forgive me."

"As always, I can refuse you nothing. Cheers." He clinked his glass against hers. "So, how are you enjoying your position at Hogwarts?" He turned expectantly to her. The warmth and interest of his expression broke her heart.

"The truth?"

"Certainly, dear."

"With the day I've had, I can't wait until the year is over and I can go home," she said, in a rueful undertone.

He laid his hand over hers again, looking closely at her face. "Why? What on Earth is wrong, dear?"

"It's... it's a lot of things. The sun doesn't come up until late, and goes down too early, and since about the first week of October, there isn't anything green here anymore, and I'm just bloody *cold* all of the time."

"Scotland's hardly the Land of Eternal Summer, love," Malfoy murmured.

"Yes, you're right, I should have expected it, but this is the coldest place I have ever lived in. And the food is Dumbledore's been very kind about my preferences at meals, but away from Hogwarts, you can't get a decent slice of toast without having to order organic nine-grain bread or whatever. And I freely admit that this is probably only noticeable because I've lived in Arcadia these last few years, but the vegetables are like *mush*."

"Welcome to the United Kingdom, my dear." Malfoy smirked at her over the rim of his glass. Emily laughed in spite of herself.

"I know, I know... I sound provincial, and probably terribly petulant in the bargain. I'm sorry. But then... Dumbledore has gotten owls from parents complaining about a part-human teaching non-Wizarding magic at Hogwarts he didn't tell me, but I overheard Professor McGonagall and Sprout talking about it. The staff members can be some tough nuts to crack well, all right, not all of them. Irma Pince, Professor Flitwick, Professor Sprout, Madam Hooch they're all very nice, but McGonagall is always looking at me like she thinks I'm dangerous. Some busybody must have told her about Robinett." She tossed off half a glass of wine with a deep scowl at that. "Professor Moody means to be kind but he's just enough to give anyone the willies. Honestly, have you seen him?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Malfoy said, with a flicker of apprehension in his eyes. "Looks like a thousand miles of bad road, doesn't he?"

"Absolutely. And Hagrid is the sweetest man imaginable, but he has this absolute fascination with supernatural creatures so naturally, I'm the latest interesting specimen. Every time I'm with him, he simply *cannot* stop staring at my ears. I know he doesn't mean anything by it, but if I've had a bad day it makes me feel like a freak in the circus. And Professor Snape? Just forget about him."

He was leaning on one elbow, listening to her long litany of woes with the most charming expression of concern. "Oh? How is old Snape troubling you?"

"Oh... it's really nothing, but... " She took another deep swallow of wine. "He's just taken a huge dislike to me from... *practically* the moment he met me. I can't take a step without it offending him somehow. He never says a single civil word to me he gave me a huge scolding in front of a lot of other faculty today."

Malfoy laughed, also charmingly. "I'm certain that's not personal. Let me give you a bit of advice. I've known Severus Snape for a very long time longer than I've known you. We were both in Slytherin together. He's never been known for his personal magnetism. Believe me, he treats just about everyone like that."

"That's what the other professors said. But he seemed... I thought... " She fell silent, brooding into her glass of wine.

The concerned look was back. "This *is* troubling you, isn't it. Do you want me to have a word with him? I flatter myself that have a small amount of influence with the man "

"No, no, please don't. You're kind to offer, but I'm afraid it'll look like I'm sending my big brother after him because he teased me in the schoolyard."

Malfoy's eyes narrowed when he heard himself described as a 'big brother,' but a second later he had resumed a flawless mantle of smooth camaraderie.

They passed an hour in such chatter, until the wine was gone. It had seemed a tragically short time to her.

"Madam Rosmerta? Is there another bottle of that?" Emily turned back to Malfoy. "You don't have to rush off, do you?"

"For you, my dear, I have all the time in the world."

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By the time she said it was getting late and Emily had to get back to Hogwarts, several hours and as many bottles of wine later, the chill had picked up considerably, so much so that she made a half-facetious comment about asking Madam Rosmerta if she could camp in the Three Broomsticks overnight. Malfoy then took out his wand, and touched it to her cloak.

"*Calidus*." Suddenly her cloak slowly seemed to warm itself from within. "It's a Warming Charm one of those spells you've no use for in the south of France or Arcadia, but one of the first things we learn up here in the Arctic Circle. But do let's get you back its effects are only temporary. Now give me your hands." He pulled off his own black leather gloves and fitted them over her fingers. They were too big for her, but the lining felt wonderful almost as good as his warm, uncallused hands felt as he put them on her.

"That's lovely, Lucius, thank you. And Arctic Circle is right I don't know if I'll ever get used to it."

"Now you're beginning to sound a little petulant, love," Malfoy said. "I brave the freezing wind for you, and you're still complaining? You never did properly appreciate me. Shocking, just shocking."

His tone convulsed her with laughter. "I always could count on you to tell me these things, couldn't I? I know I shouldn't go on so much about things like food and the weather. 'When in Rome,' and all that. But you know how it is when you're homesick."

"Indeed I do. For the first few months in Arcadia, I would have walked half a day for a plate of Yorkshire puddings."

"Oh yes, I seem to remember this adorable fair-haired young man who kept trying to get anyone back home to send him some Honeydukes chocolates "

"That was different!" he mock-protested. "I wasn't feeling well. What you lot call bread was sitting on my stomach like holiday fruitcake."

"Oh yes. I'm certain it was for purely medicinal purposes."

"I had stomach-ache!"

"*Of course* you did," she crooned indulgently. "Poor sickly Lucius it's not as though he went out carousing with us every night *anyway* "

"Well, I couldn't let my aching stomach keep me from performing my ceremonial duties as a page of the King, now, could I?"

She giggled like a young girl. "You seemed pretty healthy to *me*... "

"Did I. Well." Glancing back, she found him slanting a brazen grey gaze directly at her. "And you seemed rather blooming yourself, now that I remember it."

She paused for a second, as coy and uncertain as a fawn. Then she giggled again, turning away from him. "Do you remember the day Father introduced us?"

"Oh yes... my first day at Court. I was just twenty-three, and you were what, seventeen... and you were fencing that silly little duel against that ridiculous fop Traltivere... "

She laughed hugely at the memory. "Wasn't he just the most self-satisfied prig you ever saw?"

"Absolutely certain he was going to beat you from the first was he in for a rude awakening when you trounced him like that."

"Oh, I wouldn't call it a trouncing... "

"What do you call it when a fencer goes for three bouts without her opponent scoring a single point, my dear?"

"All right, it was a trouncing. But he deserved it after all the bragging he'd done about how he knew he was irresistible to me, and what he was going to do to me at Beltane... "

Malfoy sighed. "Beltane. I know I'll never forget it. I had never been to a Rite of Spring before..."

"Neither had I, you have to be of age to take part in the bonfire celebration, to go out into the fields... " Her voice quivered with the memory of long-ago excitement. "It was the first time that I had been there for the ritual, heard the music... " But she seemed to remember who she was talking to, and suddenly became very interested in the leaves of the dead hedge.

"Everyone else had run off over the grass towards the river, but you looked at me, and ran towards the wood... "

"You didn't *have* to run after me like that, you know."

Malfoy laughed, low and richly. "After the way you looked at me, I most certainly *did* have to run after you like that."

Sudden faint perfume of desire from him. After the wine, and the warmth, and the comfortable talk, it felt only right to her.

"I could hear you following me, crashing through the grass like that... no grace at all."

"I was hardly in a mood to think of being *graceful* at that moment..."

"Then of course that shed had to have such a convenient haymow full of fresh clover. I can't smell clover these days without thinking of it... "

"Neither can I... "

"And then it started raining... "

"I have never forgotten what it was like... the fresh mown hay, with the rain pattering on the roof above us... It's one of my favourite memories." Malfoy turned to her fully. "You know, you never did tell me why, of everyone at Court, you chose me that night."

She laughed mischievously. "It was your hair, of course."

"My hair?"

"You have always had this long, blond, perfectly-in-place hair." She stroked a long lock of his hair, where it lay over the shoulder of his black over robe. "That night, I was possessed with this mad desire to see it all messed up."

"All messed up... " Malfoy glanced lazily down at where her fingers were lingering on his shoulder, then back at her face.

"With bits of hay in it."

"Was the picture all that you hoped it would be?"

"Oh yes. You were quite adorable with some of that icy reserve melted."

"And you were quite adorable with bits of hay in your hair, without any reserve, as well... " He fingered a pale lock of her hair, one of the curly ones at her temple, then let the hand curve around her cheek, gently turning her face to his.

Their eyes locked. It appeared, for one long moment, that Beltane was not quite over.

A shrill flurry of excited children's voices sounded, quite close. She started, then headed down the path again. "But I should probably get back it's gotten late. Thanks for these I'll have to get down to the shops and get myself a pair soon." She took off his gloves and pressed them back into his hand.

"Of course." Malfoy had smoothly reassumed the mantle of a concerned friend again.

"Lucius? Thanks so very much. You've been very kind."

"You're very welcome, my dear. Now I'll expect you to send me and Narcissa a fat letter with all the news from Court, or else."

"Or else what?"

"I'll pelt you with... *mushy vegetables*."

"Oh no! Anything but that!" She pressed a chaste kiss to his cheek, still giggling. Then, she turned and began to make her way up the steps toward the side entrance to the great castle, but paused after a few steps and turned back to him.

"It really is lovely to see you, Lucius. Good night."

"Good night, Emily."

Part First: The Hart Assurgent: Chapter 5

Chapter 7 of 55

Professor Emily Swain came to Hogwarts from the Arcadian Kingdoms to teach the Faery magic of her people. She rapidly becomes embroiled in a bitter game of professional rivalry with another professor -- and then a very old friend makes her an enticing offer she doesn't want to refuse...

Chapter 5:

Emily seemed to end up sitting next to Professor Snape at meals far too often to suit her, impishly enough he inevitably chose the place at the extreme right end of the table, and no one ever seemed to fight for the privilege of sitting next to him. As she was usually the last person to arrive for meals (she wasn't doing anything for the stereotype that the Fae were all hopelessly late to everything), it was usually the last seat available.

The daily schedule at Hogwarts was her routine now breakfast at seven, first classes at eight, dinner at noon, supper at six. Owl post arrived with breakfast every morning. Emily rarely received anything in the mail, as her family would have found it difficult to get messages to her by owl, and the old pure-blooded branch of the Swains were not given to writing chummy letters to their Arcadian half-sister. Since arriving at Hogwarts, she had received only a few letters and postcards from old schoolmates in France, and the Apparition-licence renewal forms she had requested from the Department of Magical Transportation.

So when she received that mysterious package by owl post the day after she drank dandelion wine in the Three Broomsticks with Lucius Malfoy, she was as delighted as a first-year girl getting a letter from a secret admirer.

A large black eagle owl swooped low over the high table and dropped a large envelope wrapped in heavy parchment toward her. It was addressed in a wonderfully elegant, calligraphic hand. There was no return address, but the parchment carried an imposing, beribboned wax seal embossed with a stylised ***M.***

Inside, encased in a velvet envelope that was a beautiful thing in itself, she found a pair of black gloves the sort of helplessly expensive silk-lined kidskin that made the silhouettes of a woman's hands into art. She slipped them on, and felt the lining ignite with a soft warmth that penetrated to the bones of her fingers.

There was a parchment card enclosed as well

Dear Emily,

I simply can't abide the idea of you being bloody cold all of the time.

Yours,

Lucius

She let the card fall back into the box, terribly flattered.

"What, is it your birthday?" Snape's inflectionless voice said.

"No. I just have a very considerate old friend," she said with a small smile.

"Oh. Lucius Malfoy?"

She turned hard in his direction then noticed the wax seal sitting in plain sight on the table.

"His father knew my father," she said, perhaps a shade too defensively.

They finished breakfast in silence. She didn't exchange another word with Professor Snape that day, but that evening, she wrote a long fat letter to Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy with all the news at Court, and thanking Lucius for his thoughtful gift.

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The following day, she met her fencing class in the full practice dress of a Fae fencing master: the full hauberk with a torso of scale armour and chain mail sleeves, over a kidskin leather tunic, breeches and boots. Over the armour, she put a plastron of quilted, padded grey suede leather, secured in place with a leather belt. She left off the chain mail cowl and hood she would have worn into a true battle; to practice the light rapier with these teenage children, a Muggle epee fencer's mask would do. Heavy padded suede gauntlets that covered her wrists to mid-forearm completed the protective gear that would allow her to run through endless practice drills, getting jabbed and thwacked by dozens of sometimes clumsy, sometimes aggressive, and often overenthusiastic beginners without injury.

Her students took the first few minutes of the class to properly dress themselves padded, long-sleeved fencing jackets of heavy canvas, suede kneepads, heavy gauntlets like her own, and fencing masks. She had laid out a row of slender silver practice swords on the grass at the front of the class.

"Now, you're all probably wondering why you have to wear all this heavy stuff, including that funny mesh helmet on your head. That's because this " at which point she displayed her favourite duelling rapier to them " is a deadly weapon. While the practice swords that you will be using in this class have no edge and a rubber-tipped point, they can still cause injuries. With that in mind and I'm going to tell you this *once* anyone who threatens someone else with a sword will instantly be dismissed from this class and will not be returning, and will receive a failing mark. I've heard some stories about fisticuffs and hexing in the hallways of this school, and that will *not* happen in this class. If I see anyone getting needlessly aggressive here, good old Professor Snape is going to seem infinitely reasonable and forgiving by comparison. Does everyone understand me?"

There was a quiet chorus of, "Yes, Professor."

"Good. Now the stern safety lecture is out of the way " she grinned hugely at them, as if it were Christmas morning, and she had just awakened to a giant stack of presents " here comes the fun bit. Everyone grab a sword, and fall back into line. Make sure you carry them points down!"

She took that class period to teach them how to hold a sword, and to teach them the concepts behind attack and defence thrust, lunge, beat, parry, riposte, feint, counter-parry, counter-riposte, disarm.

"So what makes a sword a deadly weapon?" Draco Malfoy asked, as they finished putting their gear away in preparation to go in for lunch. "Does that mean that people kill each other with swords still, then?"

"Certainly, Mr. Malfoy. Believe me, people can and do still dispatch each other quite efficiently with swords."

Draco smiled, his grey eyes glinting anarchistically and again she was struck by his resemblance to his father. "Have *you* ever killed someone, then?"

She paused, looking at him with such seriousness that even he lost some of his punkish excitement and looked slightly abashed. "All I have to say on that subject is this while it's peacetime at home now, it has not always been so during my lifetime.

"Now all of you go get your lunches. I'll see you next week."

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"Oh my, look at you. You've stepped off a Pre-Raphaelite's canvas today," Professor Flitwick said when she arrived at lunch. Even at one hundred twenty-three, Filius Flitwick was still a great gallant and never lost an opportunity to compliment a woman. As usual, the only seat left was to the immediate left of Professor Snape.

"Thank you, Professor. Though I think you'll find the Pre-Raphaelites left out the unflattering sweat and mud, like all great artists. Could someone please pass that pitcher of water? Thanks so much."

"I'm so pleased that women allow themselves to sweat these days," Minerva McGonagall observed, passing the ice water down the table. "When I was your age, we had to be content to 'glow' when we became exerted."

"Glowing like a plough horse down here, I'm afraid I gave my fourth-years their first lessons with actual swords today, and they kept me running round and round. I'll go right out and do the same with my fifth-years after lunch but I promise I'll look a bit less warlike at dinner."

"I've seen something similar in a Burne-Jones painting," came Professor Snape's voice.

She turned to him in surprise. "Yes, exactly... Edward Burne-Jones. He was at Court in the mid-1800s... we're still producing things from his designs."

Professor Flitwick had left his seat and come down the high table to get a closer look at her chain shirt. "Do pardon my curiosity, Professor, I've never seen real Faery mail before. My, my, that's lovely. So cunningly made the plates overlap like feathers. And the chain links! I've seen jeweller's work less fine. How it does shine!"

"You should see after it's properly polished up for official occasions. When a lot of us get together for parades and the like, I'm told we're absolutely blinding."

"The Shining Host, indeed," Flitwick said. "However does one produce steel of this lustre? Is there silver in the composition?"

"Actually, we don't produce steel, I'm afraid. We call this metal *mithreal*, but you would call it a titanium alloy."

"Ah, I see. An alloy of titanium and what? Or are you allowed to say?" Professor Flitwick asked.

"Well, I don't rightly know, actually that's a big secret. All I know is that it stops all pierce attacks, and I'm pathetically grateful for that."

"Hear, hear," Dumbledore said, raising his glass of pumpkin juice.

"Hear, hear indeed. Wonderfully convenient, that," Professor Flitwick said, giving her arm a little squeeze of thanks and traipsing back to his seat.

Snape's voice came again from her right. "If you have armour that stops all pierce attacks, how do your opponents manage to fight you, then?"

She thought there was another noticeable lull in the conversation.

"Well, Professor... while we can produce impenetrable armour, we can't produce armour that completely dissipates *force.* So... the Orcs primarily use blunt-force bash attacks against us. Great heavy maces and morning stars, that sort of thing," she said. "But do let's talk about something else before everyone loses their appetites, shall we?"

Professor McGonagall turned to her in alarm. "How do you defend yourself against such weapons?"

"I always find that getting the bloody hell out of their way is wonderfully effective, myself," she said emphatically. "Do excuse my language, but this is one of those topics I feel somewhat strongly about... " Some of the other professors laughed; it had the desired effect of breaking the tension created by Snape's question.

"Ah yes *dodging.* A most useful skill indeed," Professor Flitwick said merrily.

"And a skill that we will be covering most extensively in my fencing class, I assure you all," she said brightly, making the others chuckle again.

There were no more uncomfortable questions from her right, but she thought Professor Snape's eyes lingered for quite a long time on the side of her face. She would not, however, turn to meet them.

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Monday of the next week, she received another unexpected piece of mail. Owl post arrived at breakfast, as usual Emily looked up in surprise to see a great eagle owl drop two green envelopes one toward her, one toward someone else at the table.

She turned the envelope over in her hand it was of heavy, finest quality parchment, embossed with the Malfoy family coat of arms and an address:

Malfoy

Malfeasant

Londinium

Britannia

She glanced up from her invitation to see a second, identical green envelope in the hands of Severus Snape.

"What on Earth is a *Malfeasant*?"

"The name of their manor," he said, still stiff, but affecting some semblance of civility in front of the other professors. "The Malfoys haven't changed their return address since William the Conqueror was here." He slit his envelope open with a clean butter knife and drew out a black parchment card, embossed in silver.

"Oh. An invitation to their All Hallows Eve Ball. Perhaps I'll bother to go this year." He dropped it desultorily beside his plate and went back to his eggs.

"How lovely... let me see the Masquerade Ball is Saturday night, tea on Saturday afternoon, hunt on Sunday afternoon...oh, but they're having it the weekend after Hallowe'en proper. Must be because Draco and everyone will want to stay at school and see whose name comes out of the Goblet that weekend. Have you any idea who the favourite is today?"

"No," Snape replied, with a caustic little smile. "Yes, I think perhaps I will go to the Malfoys' solely because I'll get to talk about something *other* than the Tournament there."

Oh, was she to infer that she was *boring* him, then? She continued to chatter merrily on at him, making him raise an eyebrow in irritation. "I've got something called the Green Room, and apparently my ladies' maid is named Cecile. Do let's hear what your ladies' maid's name is, shall we? Or have they given you a valet instead?"

"I'm afraid I don't rate a valet, and never have."

"Oh." She decided to change the subject. "A real country weekend party, then. I didn't know anyone still had them. This will probably require an entire trunkful of costume changes. No idea what I am going to find to wear." She dropped the invitation next to her plate.

"Here's an idea try the black frock," Snape said dryly, taking a sip of tea.

She glanced at him, dressed in black from head to toe, and sniffed derisively.

"As the pot said to the kettle."

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There were no more uncomfortable conversations about what pots said to kettles as October drew to a close. The Monday before Samhain no, here it was called Hallowe'en a notice appeared in the entrance hall announcing the arrival of the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang delegations that Friday, October 30th, at six p.m. Everything in the castle seemed to be getting cleaned within an inch of its life; she heard Alberic, the Ravenclaw Professors' Tower guardian painting, complaining of detergent hands by Wednesday.

Argus Filch seemed on a rampage of sorts on more than one occasion she Obscured herself and hid to escape his notice, as the closer the arrival date got, the less he seemed to be able to distinguish between teachers and students in his scoldings. All the Heads of House seemed terribly tense, so much so that Emily asked all of them if there was any small task she could take on for them to make that week easier. Professors Flitwick and McGonagall had both gratefully given her piles of essays to mark, and she had taken Thursday evening to help Professor Sprout catch and subdue a shipment of Bouncing Bulbs in preparation for that good lady's lesson on Monday. Kind grey-haired Professor Sprout had been so glad of the help that she had loaded Emily down with jars of her spearmint tea. Professor Snape had (of course) icily declined. But then, she had only offered at all in order to not to give him the luxury of being irritated that he had been the only one not asked.

By Friday at 6:00 p.m., with a not-inconsiderable amount of professorial tension, and a tremendous amount of hasty spit 'n polishing later, the entire staff and student body of Hogwarts had assembled in front of the castle to greet the delegations from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons. Emily had fallen in with Professors Vector and Sinistra, Madam Hooch, and Madam Pince in the back row on the steps, and was feeling rather guiltily glad that she wasn't a Head of House as she watched Professors Flitwick, McGonagall, Sprout, and Snape making their students line up in an orderly fashion. The students were so excited they were wiggling especially the younger Creevey boy. The Professors were nearly as wound up as the students little Professor Flitwick was practically dancing on his perch on a stone bench.

By Friday at 6:01 p.m., however, Emily was ready to turn around, go back inside, and take a hot bath. In the sunny climes of her home, the idea that she was moving to a place where the depth of snow was measured in feet had been as far beyond her imagination as Dante's Lake of Ice from the *Inferno*, and if one can't even imagine the Ninth Circle of Hell, it is nearly impossible to dress properly for it. She had made good on her resolution to get warmer clothes, and bought a heavy cashmere outer robe and cloak at Gladrags, but even that wasn't really warm enough; small diabolical breezes and puffs of arctic air were still finding their way next to her skin. She wrapped her arms around herself and searched the horizon and skies, hoping that the two delegations would not be late.

From somewhere to her left, she heard the Headmaster's voice say "*Calidus*" and suddenly her new cloak was suffused with warmth.

"Thank you," she called to him. She was really going to have to persuade someone to teach her that spell.

"Certainly, Professor. Aha!" Dumbledore was suddenly distracted by something in the sky. "Unless I am very much mistaken, the delegation from Beauxbatons approaches!"

Beauxbatons was first then she turned in the direction in which everyone else was pointing oh, yes, there was the blue Beauxbatons carriage. It looked as though they had retired the old brougham in favour of a more commodious model, but it was still drawn by the usual winged palominos the size of elephants. The carriage landed with a great THUMP she well remembered how many industrial-strength Cushioning and Shock-Absorbing Charms had to be cast on Beauxbatons carriages so the passengers could fly in them without their teeth being shaken loose. Everyone looked on with interest as a male student in blue robes handed down a stately, tremendously tall, black-haired woman from the interior. Emily smiled broadly to see her former Charms professor Madame Maxime had finally been made Headmistress after Madame St. Germaine retired. She recalled something about it in the alumni magazine, but that had been over six years ago. The student robes were still that fine blue silk but rather thin for the weather, evidently, as all the students were shivering. Poor dears. She knew exactly how they felt.

Her attention was then caught by a shout from the Gryffindors close to the lake and the Durmstrang ship rose from its depths. The ship was a picturesque wreck of a thing, sailing in out of the fog on the still black lake like a ghost ship out of legend. Soon the Durmstrang Institute group of seventh-years were disembarking. They were almost all tall and dark, unless they were tall, square-jawed, and dazzlingly fair, with a Eastern European look to their faces, wearing dark red robes with what looked like dark brown bearskin cloaks. The effect was quite impressive like a group of young Russian nobility, rulers of the vast snowy steppes. Their Headmaster was silver all over short silver-white hair and beard, silver fox cloak with an oily, mellifluous voice.

After greeting the newcomers, everyone filed into the Great Hall for the welcome feast first students, then professors and school Heads. Emily greeted her former Professor Olympe Maxime at the doorway to the Hall *"Bienvenue, Madame Maxime!" "Why, it is mon petite Emelie Swayin!"* as they filed toward the front of the Hall. The Beauxbatons students all stood until their Headmistress was seated, of course Emily was pleased to note that they still taught Continental manners at her alma mater. Madame Maxime took a seat on Dumbledore's left, after promising to have a chat with her later. And there were *oeufs de caviare* and bouillabaisse on the table. Too bad they couldn't have some Veuve Cliquot in front of the students. There were, she noticed, two empty places remaining at the High Table. She wondered briefly as to who was expected to arrive for the feast.

As the dinner platters were being cleared away and the dessert course was being served, two new guests arrived at the High Table. One was a chubby, jovial-looking sort Emily didn't know.

Bartemious Crouch, however, she had met.

The Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation made his entrance and took the empty seat beside Madame Maxime. He looked the same as she remembered him, his dark hair slicked down so hard that it looked like patent leather, and his small moustache barbered so severely that it looked mathematically correct. She had made his acquaintance while she was being issued her work papers at the Ministry, just before she had headed for King's Cross and (after a memorable delay) Hogwarts. Bartemious Crouch was probably the closest thing she had to any sort of representation within the Ministry of Magic there had never been a Department of Interdimensional Magical Cooperation. Technically, she was at Hogwarts under his permission, although she doubted that he had more say over her situation than Albus Dumbledore.

After dessert, Dumbledore officially opened the Triwizard Tournament.

He first introduced the Tournament organizers Bartemious Crouch and the chubby wizard, one Ludo Bagman, the Head of Magical Games and Sports at the Ministry then explained that they, with the other two school heads, would be joining him on the panel of judges. Then Argus Filch set an ancient wooden casket covered with jewels in front of Dumbledore as the Headmaster told the students that three champions, one from each school, would compete in three tasks. The students were enthralled. Then Dumbledore tapped the lid of the casket thrice and drew out the fabled magical talisman she had only heard tell of from her father's stories about his exotic homeland the

Goblet of Fire.

It was one thing to hear stories of a magical talisman it was quite another to see it for oneself. Silvery-blue flames licked within its crudely fashioned wooden bowl as Dumbledore set it atop the wooden casket. It burned brightly, casting everything else in the Great Hall quite into the shade. Lastly, he explained the age requirement, and the means of entering each student would enter by dropping a slip bearing his or her name into the Goblet, which would then select the three champions through its own impartial criteria. Any entries were a binding magical contract, he explained to enter was to participate, if a student was selected school champion. The names of the three champions would be announced the following night, Hallowe'en.

The students filed from the hall toward their dormitories, whispering very excitedly amongst themselves; and once they had left, Dumbledore invited both Ministry officials, both Heads of House, and all the staff members back into the staff room for some brandy and chat. Karkaroff declined, preferring to head back to the Durmstrang ship with his students, but Madame Maxime, both Bagman and Crouch, and most of the teachers accepted. While Dumbledore shared glasses of his Faery calvados around, Emily had an animated chat with the Beauxbatons headmistress, thanking the Mother that her French was still up to the task.

She heard all about the student Madame believed would be selected as school champion a talented seventh-year named Fleur Delacour. Madame could not stop singing Fleur's praises, remarking on her leadership qualities, her intelligence, and her devotion to her family. "And she is a veela's granddaughter, you know," she said confidentially. Emily smiled Madame, for some private reasons of her own, always seemed especially inclined to mentor the part-human students of Beauxbatons. She herself had had many occasions to feel grateful for Madame's special attentions, when she had arrived at school as a naïve eleven-year-old who had ever only seen Arcadia and the Muggle countryside. Too soon, though, Madame wished everyone a *Bonne Nuit* and went back to the Beauxbatons carriage to tend to her students, and Emily found herself turning to face Bartemious Crouch.

"Good evening, Mr. Crouch," she said politely.

"Good evening, Commander Tumnus." He called her by her military rank and her former surname not strictly proper under the circumstances, but she didn't want to alienate the man by correcting him. Just beyond Crouch, she peripherally saw Professor Snape turn in her direction when Crouch addressed her.

"And how are your classes progressing here at Hogwarts?"

"Just splendidly, thanks. Some of my students have actually already created functional *Mots de Puissance,* and I think they're really enjoying the fencing classes."

"And no one has been injured in the fencing classes?" He completely ignored the triumph of discovering human students who were prodigiously talented in Faery magic, and went right to the potential problems.

"Not other than the usual small bruises and sore muscles, but that's to be expected. As you know, Madam Pomfrey can heal those in seconds," she said with a reassuring smile.

"And you have reviewed the documents I gave you?"

"Yes, I have, sir." Her smile faltered for a second. "I found the opportunity to refresh my knowledge of legal history very interesting. Thank you."

"And may we review the notable legal decisions mentioned in those documents, if I may ask you to recall them, Commander?"

She was taken aback by the question. "Sir. While I appreciate the chance for review, I was already aware that most historical sources agree that the *Magna Carta* outlawed trial by combat for both the Muggle and Wizarding communities of Britain. I had also heard that duelling, whether with the rapier or the pistol, was made illegal by an act of Parliament in the 1840s."

"I thought some of the differences between Arcadia's laws and those of the Wizarding community should be... *emphasized*... to you, Commander. We are relying on you to teach our children, after all, and children are easily led astray," he said, unexpectedly harshly. To her left, she saw Professor Moody's attention turn in her direction as well. Severus Snape was leaning on the arm of a chair with a brandy glass in his hand, looking absolutely riveted.

"Mr. Crouch. If the first binding document I signed, promising that I will abide by all the laws of the United Kingdom and of the Ministry of Magic whilst residing on British soil, was not far-reaching enough to suit you, I will be happy to sign another that is, sir," she said very neutrally.

"Just so long as you keep that in mind," Crouch said, his face unreadable.

She looked at him with some shock. "Am I being reprimanded for something... sir?" she asked in an undertone. "I was not aware that you thought my conduct here had been in any way unbecoming... " Then she met Professor Snape's eyes across Crouch and glanced quickly away.

"Is there a problem, Crouch? I hope our fencing mistress isn't in any trouble." She felt Professor Moody's rough hand descend warmly onto her shoulder and felt a rush of gratitude.

"No, Moody. No trouble at all," Crouch replied, though he gave her a severe sidelong look before starting to talk to some of the other professors about Age Lines and ways to keep students from defeating them through the use of Aging Potions and their ilk. As Crouch moved off, Emily watched his retreating back with no small amount of apprehension if he chose to make her life hard, he was in an excellent position to do so.

Her eyes fell on a dark figure nearby Professor Snape was still looking at her. His black eyes were slightly narrowed in concentration as he studied her face and somehow that was worse than not quite being reprimanded by Bartemious Crouch. She turned away from him with a faint scowl, and joined Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick's conversation about the gory deaths of former Triwizard Tournament competitors some years hence.

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It was very late when Emily finally returned to her own apartments that evening, to discover that despite the blazes roaring in both her hearths, the room was still so cold that she kept her heavy cloak on over her nightdress. She pulled a copy of ***Anna Karenina*** from the shelf for some bedtime reading the great Russian epics always occupied her mind so completely that there was no room for worry or doubt while she read them.

Tolstoy's descriptions set her to remembering the Durmstrang students and their furry cloaks. That gave her an idea pulling out her biggest trunk (the vintage steamer that her grandmother had taken on her transatlantic crossings on the *Mauritania*) she rummaged about until she found, tucked away underneath a pile of her grandfather's old bespoke satin dressing gowns, two pelts of weir panther hide. The dense fur was a deep blue-black, but for a misting of silver guard hairs. Each pelt was some yards wide the big cats had been taller than the tallest Faerie when they stood up on their hind legs and brought their slashing front paws down to attack. Against such predators, even she and Dorien had been pushed nearly beyond their abilities.

She threw both pelts on her bed, over the blue velvet duvet, and threaded her fingers through the soft fur. Here in Scotland, the only time she ever felt really warm was either in a hot bath or when she was between the featherbed and the deep eiderdown comforter, but at home in Arcadia, the weather was such that fur was something one slept on top of, with a light coverlet. It must have been years since she had lain on these pelts... camped out of doors in that great silk-draped pavilion Gwydion had put up before Beltane. She had been curled against Dorien's side with his shoulder under her head, both wrapped in light velvet coverlets.

Which was the female skin... there was the hole that Dorien's first arrow had made, in the crease where chest met her right foreleg. And here was the long slash where her sword had severed the beast's jugular and spinal cord, killing her before she hit the ground. *Well fought, my lady panther,* she thought with grudging admiration and hoped that there was a tailor somewhere in Diagon Alley who could manage to work on fur with the usual Tailoring Charms.

There was, she knew, no leftover trace of Dorien's odour on this fur any longer... afterward, she had lain on them every night, breathing the scent of his body, until she could smell no one's scent in them except her own.

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The entire school was up early for breakfast the next day.

It wasn't her accustomed feast of Samhain, but it was still festive. The Great Hall had been decorated for the Second World holiday of Hallowe'en she was wandering from place to place in the hall with a cup of raspberry tea in her hand, looking at the banks of carved jack o' lanterns and live bats flittering about in clouds, chittering and diving. Students were wandering in and out of the Hall and around the Goblet of Fire, bits of breakfast and cups of tea in their hands. Now and then a Hogwarts student would drop a slip of paper into the Goblet, and clapping and cheers would rise from the students clustered nearby.

Angelina Johnson, a tall pretty Gryffindor, the most talented student from one of Emily's Friday fencing class sessions, received a loud round of applause when she entered a slip of parchment, early that morning. Emily joined in the applause and clapped her on the back as she passed into the Great Hall.

"Good luck, Miss Johnson."

"Thanks, Professor."

She also applauded Fawcett and Davies, two Ravenclaw seventh-years, as they added their names to the Goblet. Shortly afterward, Madame Maxime appeared with her small contingent of Beauxbatons students. She was walking beside the favourite Fleur Delacour, who, Emily noticed, definitely had the marks of her veela blood fair hair, blue eyes, lithe physical presence, feverishly extreme aura of oestrogen production. The hormonal haze surrounding the girl was obviously having its effect on the boys in the foyer Ron Weasley, and to a lesser extent Harry Potter, seemed ready to faint as she passed them. The French students entered their names ceremoniously, then headed back out toward the powder-blue carriage outside on the Hogwarts green.

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There was a palpable aura of mad excitement at dinner the night of Hallowe'en feast.

The food was again marvellous there were escargots in garlic butter, beefsteak *au poivre*, and thick fish steaks of breathlessly fresh Russian sturgeon but the students were so eager to find out who the school champions were going to be that there was barely time to enjoy dinner. The entire room fell dead silent as Albus Dumbledore finished his meal and got to his feet. With one sweep of his wand, he plunged the hall into a state of dramatic semi-darkness.

"When the champions' names are called, I would ask them please to come up to the top of the Hall and go through into the next chamber, where they will be receiving their first instructions."

The blue-white flames of the Goblet of Fire were so incandescently bright that Emily was nearly blinded by them. She leaned back in her seat, surveying the dark forms of the students before her. Who would be chosen? Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Slytherin, Ravenclaw?

A tendril of red flame lobbed a piece of charred parchment into Dumbledore's hands.

"The champion for Durmstrang," Dumbledore read in his strong tenor, "will be Viktor Krum." Loud cheers and applause filled the hall as the Durmstrang champion approached the front of the hall. Of all the Durmstrang students, Emily thought Viktor Krum was one of the least impressive: sullen, physically ungainly and slouching; but she applauded him enthusiastically as he approached the front of the hall. But the Goblet had turned red again.

"The champion for Beauxbatons," Dumbledore read, "will be Fleur Delacour." Ah it was Madame Maxime's favourite, the veela part-human, Emily observed with satisfaction. If Viktor Krum had been something of a disappointment, Fleur Delacour rose elegantly to the occasion. She threw back her silver-gold hair, and swept to the front of the room with all appropriate dignity. Emily heard some of the other Beauxbatons girls collapse into theatrical tears as Fleur approached the front of the room. Really she would have thought that they would show a bit more Gallic dignity. Emily herself was definitely supporting Hogwarts, as was only right and proper, but nonetheless, if a part-human champion won, she would still take more than a little satisfaction in such a victory.

The Goblet had turned red again, and another tendril of red flame delivered a third scrap of parchment to Dumbledore's hand.

"The champion for Hogwarts," he read, "will be Cedric Diggory."

And the Hufflepuff table went perfectly delirious. Every single member of Hufflepuff House leapt to his or her feet, cheering and clapping, including Professor Sprout. Emily applauded enthusiastically as well. Diggory, a tall handsome youth with chiselled features, jumped to his feet, shaking hands with his closest neighbours, with a truly charming smile of delight on his face.

Dumbledore shook Diggory's hand and clapped him jovially on the shoulder as he passed. "Excellent! Well, now we have our three champions... "

Dumbledore was continuing to speak, but Emily was not paying attention.

Behind the Headmaster, the Goblet continued to burn against the darkness of the hall. Impossibly, though, the flames turned coruscatingly red again, and a fourth vermilion tendril of fire rose from the Goblet's bowl, raising a fourth slip of parchment.

Emily gasped. This was impossible. The three champions had been chosen. Dumbledore reached automatically to catch the fourth slip, looking as perplexed as everyone else in the Great Hall. She thought he stared at the slip in his hand for a long time.

Then everyone in the hall heard the Headmaster's incredulous voice say: "*Harry Potter*."

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"But that's impossible," Emily said to no one in particular, rising to her feet. "Cedric is the Hogwarts champion. How could Harry be chosen as well... ?"

She turned in the direction of the Gryffindor table. Harry Potter looked as shocked and surprised as it was possible for anyone to look.

Professor McGonagall had gotten up and was hissing ferociously in Dumbledore's ear. Dumbledore called Harry to the front of the Hall, and he disappeared behind the doors where Cedric Diggory had most recently vanished.

"Well, well. Mr. Potter bends the rules yet again," said a soft voice behind her. A moment later, Professor Snape and Minerva McGonagall stood up and walked quickly toward the doorway through which Harry had just disappeared. Mad-Eye Moody followed a few minutes later. Most of the other teachers looked at each other in helpless shock.

Emily's attention was caught by an outburst between two of the students' tables evidently someone at the Gryffindor table had gotten into a verbal altercation with someone at the Hufflepuff table. Hermione Granger and the four Weasleys, Ron, Ginny, Fred and George, were furiously arguing with a clump of indignant Hufflepuffs. Emily sprang up from her seat and hurried toward the fray. It looked like nothing but harsh language so far but she knew that with teenagers it could be only a matter of seconds before matters escalated to blows, hexes and jinxes.

"Stebbins! Finch-Fletchley! Summers! McMillan! Granger! Weasleys! All of you stop it and sit down this instant!" she ordered, sounding more like a Fury than a Faerie. "So much for international relations if we can't even keep from squabbling amongst ourselves, honestly! And if you whip that out, sir, you'll finish the year with a nice pair of ass's

ears, I promise you." This last was directed at Justin Finch-Fletchley, whose hand had gone to the hilt of his wand. Ever since he had been Petrified in his second year, Justin had been somewhat irrationally sensitive to anything he perceived as a threat. The Hufflepuffs subsided into a tight little knot, pulling their shoulders together and throwing resentful looks at the Gryffindor table.

Hermione Granger was still so angry she was almost crying. "They said Harry cheated to get his name into the Goblet. Harry didn't do anything of the sort, Professor," Hermione declared passionately, her face flushing. "He wouldn't *he can't have.* He's an honourable person really. He's the best friend I've ever had I don't believe this of him for a second."

Beside Hermione, as she declared Harry Potter to be the best friend she had ever had, Emily suddenly detected an acrid tang of truly potent agitation from Ron Weasley. Oh, by the Mother surely they were too young to feel sexual jealousy *yet.*

"You just don't know him yet." Hermione looked to Ron for support. "Harry didn't do it, did he, Ron? Tell her."

Ron said nothing. He looked at Hermione, then at the door to the anteroom, where Harry had recently disappeared, then down at his hands.

"Ron!" Hermione cried. "Didn't you see the way he looked when they called his name? He was surprised as anything!"

"He said he might try to put his name in the Goblet anyway," Ron said finally. "We talked about trying to get past the Age Line."

"I can't believe that you... you of all... *Ron*!" This defection was more than Hermione could take her face turned bright pink, and the tears began flowing in good earnest. Ron looked extremely uncomfortable. Emily put her arm around the girl's shoulders and led her a short ways away from the other Gryffindors, then handed her her own handkerchief.

"Thanks," Hermione said, dabbing at her face. "Can you believe that Ron Weasley? How can he not defend Harry we've all been best friends since first year you wouldn't *believe me* if I told you everything we've run into together. After our first year, and *second* year, and then *third* year, what with Buckbeak and the Dementors and everything, then *this* happens to poor Harry and... we've always taken each other's side, we've always stood up for each other, ever since Quirrell let that troll in and... I can't believe Ron! That Ronald Weasley is just... " This brought a fresh flood of tears. Emily comfortingly patted her shoulder.

"Hermione... but you believe he didn't cheat, don't you?"

"I *know* he didn't," Hermione said stalwartly. "It's got to be someone trying to get him again, someone trying to kill him again. It's just got to be. I know it."

"Why would someone at Hogwarts try to kill Harry?" Emily asked blankly. "Harry's a national hero he's already in the history books "

"Oh, Professor. You *really* aren't from here, are you?" Hermione looked up at Emily like the veteran of a thousand wars. "Someone's always trying to kill Harry. Someone tried first year and second year. And we thought someone was trying third year, but that's a really long story."

Worrying as this news was, Emily thought the young lady before her needed some serious reassurance first. "Hermione, if anyone is stupid enough to try to kill Harry Potter while he's at Hogwarts they'll have to get past Albus Dumbledore first. And for what it's worth, I'll make certain that no one kills him on my watch either."

"Thanks," Hermione said, with a big sniffle. "What do you think will happen to Harry?"

"Well, you heard what Dumbledore said about an entry being a binding magical contract... my guess is that Harry will probably end up competing in the tournament. I just don't see any way around it."

Professors Sprout and Flitwick had been quietly conferring between themselves; they decided at that moment to send all the students back to their dormitories with their prefects. There were small outbreaks of arguing and name-calling between the Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors as they trooped towards the doors. This was highly unusual, as most of the time it seemed that the Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors got along without much conflict.

Professor Sprout called across the Hall in a harassed voice "Professor Swain, might you "

"Right there, Professor." She excused herself from Hermione with another comforting little pat, then moved between the two groups, separating groups of small hostile mortals from each other. "Knock it off, you lot, right now. The purpose of this whole tournament is to foster international relations, not tweak national ones I'd thank you all to remember that. Fred Weasley put that thing away before I make you eat it. I'm not joking!"

Fred had been stealthily trying to slip a small missile a Dungbomb by the look of it down the back of Justin Finch-Fletchley's robes.

"Yeah, Fred, knock it off," George Weasley said. "Though with his breath being what it is, that might be an improvement, Professor."

"Just brilliant now we've got inter-familial relations getting tweaked too," she said.

As she herded the squabbling Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs up the stairs toward their dormitories, she found herself wishing that whomever had thought of such a thing as a Triwizard Tournament in the first place would find themselves meeting a violent, painful, prolonged, torturous, and otherwise thoroughly unpleasant death.

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Saturday morning dawned bright, clear, and even more bitingly cold than the day before. The stone walls of her bathroom were so chilly that she didn't even untie her robe until she had conjured a roaring fire on the hearth and filled the tub with steaming water. She had wrapped herself in her cloak before she had even had a chance to dry her hair. At breakfast in the Great Hall, she heaped her plate with warming foods eggs, baked apples with hot cream and drank a pot of orange allspice tea. (There were always pots of unsweetened herb tea on the High Table no doubt the result of Albus Dumbledore's infinite kindness and consideration.)

"Professor Swain?"

She turned toward the sound of Severus Snape's voice in surprise on weekends, he rarely appeared for breakfast, or for any meal, for that matter. He was standing behind her chair, dressed in travelling robes, and sipping from a mug of black coffee.

The coffee was an unfortunate choice as the coffee bean was unknown in Arcadia, and the Fae did not import coffee, Emily appreciated it about as much as a Spanish Conquistador would have appreciated a cup of bitter unsweetened Aztec coca. The oily, burnt smell of it filled her nostrils unpleasantly. She covered her mouth and nose with a napkin and exhaled hard.

"Yes, Professor Snape." She was desperately trying not to wrinkle her nose in distaste.

"Might I inquire as to how you plan to travel to the Malfoys' this afternoon?"

"I was planning to Apparate, now that I've had the chance to renew my licence. Yourself?"

"Unfortunately my Apparition licence expired this summer and I've not had a chance to renew it what with all the... " he gestured in the vague direction of the students eating breakfast in front of them "distractions going on this term."

"I understand, sir," she said mildly.

"At any rate, Lucius sent me a Portkey by owl post, and I was wondering if perhaps you would like to share it, seeing as how we are both leaving from the same point and arriving at the same point."

"Oh. That does indeed seem like a good idea, sir," she said.

She had wondered actually, hoped that perhaps he would find some excuse during this weekend to smooth over the personality conflict that seemed to have sprung up between them at the beginning of term. Seeing as how Lucius had not sent her a Portkey, this was actually a rather thoughtful gesture on his part.

"All right then. I was planning to leave by one o'clock prompt and I expect that you will have taken the time out of your busy schedule to also be ready by that hour?"

Her mouth twitched. His offer had impressed her as considerate up until that moment, when he assumed that he had to lay down the law about what time they should leave. As if she couldn't possibly be expected to be punctual without being nagged. Oh, yes. Because the stereotype said the Fae were always late, you see.

"Come to think of it, though I think I might go ahead and take my chances with Apparition, sir," she replied. "I dislike Portkeys they leave me with an uncomfortable sense of vertigo for some odd reason."

"Of course," Snape replied smoothly. "Mind that you dress for a bit of a hike then Malfeasant has more wards in place against Apparition than Hogwarts itself. You may not be able to approach as closely as you might like."

"Thank you for your advice, sir."

"I've also heard they've had half a metre of snow fall recently in the vicinity of Malfeasant, but certainly a relatively long walk in that will be nothing compared to the agony that is... an uncomfortable sense of vertigo."

"I shall definitely take that into consideration."

"Well, good morning, then, Professor," he said curtly, and moved off without another word.

"Good morning, sir."

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Emily was ready to go by one o'clock actually, she was ready to go an hour before one o'clock. Nonetheless, she refused to go in search of Professor Snape and accept his offer. It was now a matter of pride.

She waited until one-ten or so, then walked down toward Hogsmeade with her new trunk in hand, and Apparated once she passed the gate that marked the end of the Hogwarts anti-Apparition wards, appearing as close as she could to Malfeasant.

Which, as it turned out, meant that she found herself materializing about quarter of a mile away from anything. The only building in sight looked about the size of a large doll's house.

Well, not thorough about security one bit, were they.

And it was still bloody *cold.*

Now, matter of pride or no, she felt extremely foolish for not having travelled with Professor Snape.

She pulled up the hood of her cloak and wrapped her scarf more closely around her throat. The black gloves Lucius had sent her seemed to sense the temperature and turn up their gentle heat the rest of her might have been chilly, but her hands weren't even stiff. She rubbed them over her face, ears, and upper arms appreciatively. No doubt about it she really had to thank Lucius in person for them. He had really been tremendously thoughtful in his choice of unbirthday presents. With that thought, she gamely set off across the white field toward the house.

As she drew closer, Malfeasant grew from the size of a doll's house into a Tudor hunting lodge really a small castle set on endless acres of rolling green field and forest. Or what would have been acres of green field and forest, had the entire area not been carpeted in some inches of snow and ice. The castle itself was a majestic edifice of greenish-grey stone, with endless towers and spires, and countless diamond-paned windows set in carved, recessed gothic arches.

She noticed, as she approached the threshold, that a massive portcullis had been locked in its upright position just above the entrance to a great stone courtyard that led from the lawn to the front entrance.

A great portcullis which meant probably some tonnage of iron.

Snowy, cold... *iron.*

She could feel it from a few steps away and quickened her steps to a fast run, glancing up in fear and apprehension, as she passed under it. She hoped that it was kept in good working order she would hate to be trapped behind that.

The front door was of some nearly black wood, bolted and bound with long, heavy spears of metal ending in ornamental fleur-de-lis. The great door handle and lock were made of the same metal, which she recognized as... more iron. She hung back on the stone front steps, looking around for anyone else, someone human, who could open the door, and that she could follow inside.

Bloody hell now she could have kicked herself for not having travelled with Professor Snape.

There was, she also noticed, no doorbell, but there was a massive door knocker, also forged from (of course) more iron. She felt a momentary surge of panic, feeling trapped between the iron door handle and the menacing iron portcullis.

"Good afternoon, Miss," said a businesslike voice from somewhere behind her, and from somewhere rather lower than she would have expected. A stocky goblin dressed in black and silver livery and a heavy woollen over-robe, had appeared at her side. "Invitation, please."

She handed it over, and he scrutinised it, then handed it back with a crisp little flourish. "Thank you, Professor Emily Swain. The master and mistress are expecting you."

He opened the door, to her immense relief, and handed her in with a deep bow.

The foyer was dark and somewhat gloomy, lit only with torches and weak, grey sunlight from the narrow, arched windows. Immediately, however, two house-elves were at her side, attired in what must have been their formal servant's garb black towels with a silver embroidered "M" monogram.

"May I take your things, Miss?" squeaked the first elf. He took her trunk and wraps with a polite little bow, then briefly conferred with the butler-goblin in a muted squeak of a voice, and vanished in a puff of grey smoke. The second elf made a low bow and squeaked, "This way, please, Miss," in a tremulous voice so high it made her ears ring slightly. They worked so fast and efficiently that only a minute or two passed before she was escorted into Malfeasant's reception hall.

The reception hall was built on the grand scale, with diamond-paned windows that reached to the carved and painted ceiling two storeys high, and a fireplace at the far end that could have roasted a whole ox. A wilderness of carved desks and tables, Persian rugs, and luxuriously upholstered sofas and armchairs stretched between her and the fire, where the dark silhouettes of two or perhaps three people were reclining on seats close to the fire. The weak light from the windows was a pale grey-green, giving her a sense of being underwater, but at least it was much warmer here than in the foyer.

Emily didn't recognise anyone immediately as she started across the room, her eyes quickly adjusting to the dim light. After the cold white glare off of the snow outside, she had to concentrate a bit on not bumping into the furniture. She peered ahead, looking for platinum hair and grey eyes.

"Professor. Welcome, and good afternoon. I hope your journey was uneventful." Her gaze fell on someone who fit that description, but not the particular Malfoy she had been looking for. Draco Malfoy had disengaged himself from the gloom and come to meet her, looking every bit the young lordling in impeccably cut, bottle-green robes, his silver-blonde hair slicked back. He sounded self-conscious, this teenage boy, wrapping his tongue around the pleasantries of an adult aristocrat.

"Indeed it was, Draco, other than the weather. This snow and cold are just unrelenting."

"Would you care for some refreshment to warm you? Brandy, or mulled wine, perhaps?"

"Mulled wine would be lovely, thank you."

It seemed as though she had barely voiced her acceptance before a house-elf appeared at her elbow bearing a tall china mug of mulled wine on a silver tray. "Thank you."

The house-elf bobbed a desperate curtsey, squeaking, "You're welcome, Miss Professor, ma'am," and disappeared. The steaming hot wine, a fruity red burgundy infused with just the right amount of orange peel, clove, and allspice, was almost sinfully fragrant and delicious.

"You're home for the weekend, then, Draco?"

"Yes, Professor. I'm glad to be home I find the to-do at school over the Triwizard Tournament distracts me from my studies. I'm rather disappointed to not be able to play Quidditch this year."

"I can see how you would be," she replied, holding the warmth of her cup gratefully between both hands. "I hope you're enjoying the fencing classes, though, if you miss playing sports."

He smiled genuinely at that. "Yes, I am. Your class is the only reason why I don't think this year is turning out to be a total waste of time."

She laughed. "I'm sorry to hear you're so disappointed. I'll have to teach you all my good attacks and defences, to console you for all this time away from Quidditch."

His face lit up. "Would you?"

"Sure. On this coming Thursday, I was planning on introducing everyone to some head parries "

Draco had leaned an elbow against the left-hand gallery rail and gave every indication of wanting to prolong their chat, but another silky, drawling voice sounded at her right side.

"Draco. You haven't introduced me to your friend."

Not Lucius's voice, but similar. Her impression was of long, thick ash-blond hair, heavy dark-blond brows, cheekbones as high and chiseled as spearheads, and a sensuous, petulant mouth.

"Hullo, Uncle." Draco turned toward the newcomer, his scent radiating irritation at the interruption. "Professor, I'd like you to meet my uncle, Menzentius Black. Uncle, may I introduce Professor Emily Swain. She's teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts this year."

"Professor." He shook her hand, inclining his handsome head in a half-insolent nod of greeting.

"Mr. Black." Lucius had told her that he had no siblings this must be Narcissa's brother, then. Narcissa's several-years' younger brother, from the look of him. He carried with him a strong scent of earlier indulgence in mulled wine and cigars, and an even stronger scent of twentysomething testosterone, which spiked upward in intensity when he approached her.

Menzentius Black struck up a conversation with her as though his nephew had ceased to exist. "So you teach Defence Against the Dark Arts, eh?"

"Yes, at Hogwarts."

"You like it, then?"

"Yes, very much."

"Draco's in your class, then?"

"Yes, he is."

"He a good student?"

"He's a fine student indeed." This Menzentius fellow's tone had a way of making the simplest question into a smutty *double-entendre* one that she was evidently not quite mentally acute enough to understand. It didn't take more than a few minutes of this sort of thing before she was desperately plotting how to get rid of him, through violence if necessary. She tried to turn back to Draco, but he had moved off back toward the fire.

A moment later, she heard Draco's voice say distinctly: "She certainly still fancies you, doesn't she, Professor Snape?"

Emily darted a hard stare in the boy's direction but then spotted Severus Snape sitting comfortably in the depths of one of the big armchairs, a mug of something steaming in his hand. What she first took in the dim light to be a heavy fur lap robe draped over one of his knees resolved into a giant black Newfoundland crouched beside him with her head in his lap, gazing up at him with adoring brown eyes. Snape was stroking her head with a languid gesture. Menzentius Black's attention turned briefly toward Professor Snape, and Emily used the opportunity to sidle away from him and take a seat on a little sofa on the opposite side of the fire.

Draco turned to her with the most boyish smile she had so far seen on his face. "Lady just loves Professor Snape. Whenever he's here, she wants to follow him around everywhere." Despite her wariness of the man, she had to admit that it was a very picturesque tableau he made, in that great old hall next to the blazing fire, with the head of that great fawning beast under his hand.

"Professor." Snape greeted her with cool formality. "I hope your journey was a pleasant one."

"Yes, it was fine," she answered in the same tone. "Yours?"

"Fine." He fell silent again, sipping from his cup.

Well, splendid then everything was *fine.* She turned back to Draco. "Are we the first ones here, then?"

"Yes, but we're expecting the others to arrive any moment. Mother and Grandmother will be down shortly, and Father will be here any minute as well," the boy replied. She nodded. The undaunted Menzentius seated himself with insouciant grace on the arm of the sofa where she was sitting, and again began to try to engage her in conversation; again his idea of small talk consisted of leering at her while asking rapid-fire yes-or-no questions. She glanced in Snape's direction again, only to see him glance away from her, turning his gaze down to the dog. He drew the fingers of one hand down the silky top of her skull, and the creature closed her eyes and fairly trembled with adoration.

"Well, hello, everyone," called a familiar voice. "I'm so glad to see you all."

Their host had arrived.

He seemed to materialize from midair, sweeping down a spiral staircase in the far left corner of the room and in the gloomy hall, Emily had barely noticed the staircase's existence until he made it real by descending it. Pale hair loose around his shoulders, dressed in grey velvet robes over a soft black silk shirt and black trousers. She had to stop herself from staring seventeen years had gone by, but nothing could diminish his beauty. Embarrassingly, her heart gave a little splash in her chest as he sauntered across the hall toward the fireplace. She set her cup on a little side table and came forward to meet him. He took her hands between both of his again and bent to kiss her cheek.

She was accustomed to the typical pure-blooded polite kiss of greeting, that consisted of planting a kiss on the air beside her cheek but not so from Lucius Malfoy. He pressed the hot imprint of his lips to her cheek rather closer to her lips than her cheekbone. Scent of clean hair, clean skin, freshly pressed clothes, and the most fleeting breath of male arousal but a second later he withdrew and had again become the perfect host.

"Welcome, Madam Professor." He made her title into an endearment. "So glad that we could finally entertain you at home."

"Thank you. I'm glad to be here." The elder Malfoy then turned toward Snape somehow still managing to include Emily in his expansive sight.

"Severus, old man. I see we've managed to pry you out of your beloved dungeons, only to then pin you under a hundred-fifty pounds of dog. Lady, come here. She'll monopolise his and Draco's attentions all night if she's allowed," he said in an aside to Emily. The great beast stood and obediently put her muzzle into Lucius's hand. He absently patted her head.

Snape got lazily to his feet and shook his host's hand. "Lucius."

"It's good to see you, cousin."

Emily's gaze darted from Malfoy's face to Snape's. *Cousin?*

"Likewise. The Tournament has made things rather unbearable at Hogwarts in recent days. I'm glad of the time off."

"Well, then I'm so pleased to give you the chance for a bit of a holiday. Incredible about the Potter boy being somehow chosen as fourth champion, isn't it? Who would have imagined."

Snape scowled deeply. "Nothing that boy does surprises me any longer. And Dumbledore is actually allowing him to compete, even though he's well underage."

"Yes, Draco wrote me the day it happened. Quite the scandal, isn't it?"

From behind them, a high, cultured feminine voice called to their host. "Lucius? Darling. Who's here?"

Everyone turned toward the voice. Emily immediately recognized Lucius's wife, the dazzlingly fair Narcissa Malfoy, approaching the group from the hallway beyond the foyer. With her was a slight, elderly woman, who walked in short steps, leaning heavily on Narcissa's arm.

Her initial impression, when Narcissa drew closer to the group assembled before the fireplace, was that the years had been as kind to her as they had been to her husband. Narcissa was as beautiful as ever, with a thick skein of burnished gold hair dressed in an elaborate upsweep. The patrician lines of her face and body were unchanged, and her blue, blue eyes were set off by her elegant day robes of a cornflower-blue velvet that swept the marble floor. Also unchanged was her habitual expression that sour, sulky look that had always made Emily feel obligated to try to find what was bothering her and remedy it somehow. It was obvious that the stunning, aristocratic Narcissa Malfoy, with her wealthy, powerful, handsome husband, her perfect son, her magnificent estate, and her position in society, did not need any such attention or help from an infrequent visitor who lived very far in the periphery of her life but that never stopped her from feeling that way anyway.

The woman on Narcissa's arm was tiny; clearly she had never been tall, and her advanced age and a pronounced dowager's hump had apparently continued the process. She wore complicated robes of black silk and lace, and her pure white hair was braided back in a little coronet on top of her head. Her eyes were the same cornflower blue as her daughter's, in a face very much wrinkled and made up. Her hands shook slightly as they rested on the head of a black cane with a silver handle. Narcissa helped her into one of the large armchairs in front of the fire, then turned to her guests.

"Severus, hello, darling, I'm so glad you could make it this year. It's shameful the way you neglect us you owe me at least a dozen visits now," she said, but her scolding tone was belied by the warmth of her greeting she put both hands on his shoulders and kissed him on both cheeks.

Snape gave her a thin, indulgent smile and kissed her cheek. "With the chaos going on at Hogwarts this year, I may take you up on that. Soon you won't be able to get rid of me."

"I should never want to be rid of you." Narcissa then turned her attention to Emily, graciously clasping her hand. "Why hello, my dear. Good to see you again."

"Hello, Narcissa. It's lovely to see you." It bothered her that she had never known Narcissa terribly well; of the two, Lucius had always been her friend, and Narcissa her friend's wife, and the mother of her friend's son. Narcissa had become pregnant with Draco almost immediately after her marriage to Lucius, and from then on, Emily found that she rarely seemed to talk about anything but Draco unless she was talking about what Draco was studying in school, or the latest thing she had bought for Draco.

"You look like you're holding up very well," Narcissa said, leaning forward and speaking in a reassuring undertone.

"Thank you very much."

"So, teaching at Hogwarts now. Draco tells me he's enjoying your class."

"I'm glad to hear it. He's very talented." Small talk never got any less inane for her, but of course the way to get along with any mother was to compliment her child.

"Wonderful." Narcissa glowed with pride. "Do excuse me now, I've got to see about the tea."

"Certainly. See you in a moment."

Professor Snape, she noticed, had gone down on one knee beside the woman in the armchair, and was speaking to her in a low voice, patting her hand. Unexpectedly, Emily felt a flicker of jealousy. So there were people to whom he occasionally bothered to be kind relatives, and their dogs.

Lucius appeared at her elbow. "Oh, come here, Emily, there's someone I'd like you to meet." He bent down and kissed the old woman's cheek. "Hello, Druella. May I introduce Professor "

The elderly Mrs. Black looked straight at Emily. Her brows clenched.

"Who are you?" she demanded, point-blank, interrupting in the middle of Lucius's polite introduction.

It was simply the petulant bluntness of the mildly infirm elderly, of course, nothing to be offended by but Emily felt herself blush anyway. "I'm Emily, madam," she said gently, stepping forward to greet the woman. "And you must be Draco's grandmother. I'm one of his teachers, at Hogwarts. Good afternoon."

The wet, quivering mouth was pressed into tight, lipsticked creases as Mrs. Black studied her face. "Big eyes you've got," she said. Her tone was challenging account for those offending orbs right now, young lady.

Emily frowned for a second *big eyes*?

Oh, yes, her eyes.

In the Muggle world, she cast a mild Glamour a visual illusion, another form of Fae magic on her face to give her eyes and ears an entirely human appearance. In the British Wizarding world, she didn't bother to maintain that kind of thing it was far too much fuss for her taste, and she had thought that in a place where Madam Hooch's hawk-yellow eyes and Mad-Eye Moody's magical prosthetic eye went entirely unremarked, her own eyes would be seen as unremarkable enough as well. As in the manner of most Fae changelings, her pupils and dark brown irises were capable of opening very wide by human standards. In the dim light of the Malfoys' hall, she realized, they were probably very dilated, to make use of the weak available light.

"The sunlight isn't strong today," she replied which obviously wasn't enough of a response to suit Mrs. Black. She looked at Emily for a long moment, then turned back to her conversation with Professor Snape.

Well. That was abrupt.

Both Mrs. Black's first remark, and reaction to her answer, mystified Emily entirely it would never have occurred to her to remark 'What blue eyes you've got' to Mrs. Black, and then act as though she required an explanation as to how her eyes came to be that way. In all, the introduction to Lucius's mother-in-law had been thoroughly disconcerting. To make matters worse, Professor Snape was looking at her again, but of course his face was entirely unreadable.

Lucius put a hand on her arm. "Come, dear, you haven't seen the sun room yet. Let's see if Narcissa needs help with anything, shall we?"

Part First: The Hart Assurgent: Chapter 6

Chapter 8 of 55

Professor Emily Swain came to Hogwarts from the Arcadian Kingdoms to teach the Faery magic of her people. She rapidly becomes embroiled in a bitter game of professional rivalry with another professor -- and then a very old friend makes her an enticing offer she doesn't want to refuse...

Chapter 6:

"So what did you think of my mother-in-law?" Lucius asked. He had tucked Emily's hand under his arm and was leading her down one of the corridors toward where, presumably, the sun room was; yet he seemed in no special hurry to get there.

"She seems very pleasant." *May the Goddess forgive me for that lie.*

"Very pleasant. Really. Well, I'm glad you liked her, because *I* think she's a half-dotty old idiot."

She stared at him for a long, shocked moment then fell against his shoulder laughing.

"Now that you mention it, there is a certain half-dotty-idiot aspect to her general air of pleasantry, I suppose... "

He squeezed her hand where it rested on his arm. "Dear, dear Druella. She's the sort who, after you've spent weeks doing up a suite to her standard, will still keep the entire house up in a great hue and cry over a too-cold hot water bottle. And she refuses to walk anywhere by herself or simply get a wheelchair everyone has to walk her from place to place and take tiny, tiny steps just like she does. Whenever it's me that's doing it, I have to fight off the urge to throw her over my shoulder like an armful of

washing so we can get to wherever she wants to go a bit faster."

He hadn't changed a bit still as maliciously clever as ever. He always made her laugh, even if she felt half horrified at herself while she was doing it.

"Oh yes, the foibles of querulous relatives. My Aunt Charlotte remember her? would complain constantly that no one remembered her birthday, so for her sixtieth one, you remember my father threw that grand cotillion in her honour. Then of course you remember she spent the whole party wailing about how all the to-do made her feel so small and insignificant."

"It sounds as though Charlotte and Druella are reading the same books on how one becomes dreadfully popular with one's relatives. In Druella's case, she can't simply tell you what she does want, but can only list endless conditions that she can't possibly be expected to put up with. She drives the house-elves to drink. And after she's put us through all that, she's still entirely convinced that she's being used by everyone else like a perfect martyr." Lucius turned to her confidentially, his accustomed drawl turning wickedly satiric. "Don't let the old troglodyte fool you she's a great deal sharper than she lets on. She simply likes to make a great show of impending senility so she can get away with things like making Narcissa wait on her hand and foot, and making unpleasant comments to pretty young women she doesn't know."

"Good to know I'll keep that in mind." They were both still laughing when Narcissa glided up through a doorway on their left, and took her husband's arm.

"Darling, do share the joke."

"Hello, my love." Lucius put a comfortable arm around his wife's shoulders and gave her a quick kiss.

"Narcissa how are the preparations coming?" Emily had let her hand slip out from under Lucius's arm and taken a demure step away from the couple.

"Splendidly, Mrs. Tumnus." Narcissa's eyes raked over Emily's face, her hand coming up to adjust and toy with the many strands of antique gold pearls that circled the majestic ivory column of her throat.

"Oh, good. Your kind husband was commiserating with me over the latest gossip from my Wizarding family."

"Apparently Emily's Aunt Charlotte is up to her old tricks, poor old dear. And did your Great-Aunt Mehitable's orchids sweep the awards at the show again this year?"

"Of course. That's inevitable now, like rain in autumn."

When they were younger, this had been a trick they developed whispering the most caustic comments to each other about the people around them, and then segueing into the dullest topics imaginable if anyone else approached. It was amazing how quickly she and Lucius seemed to fall back into their old prankish, insular habits, alternately flirting shamelessly and satirising everyone around them mercilessly, as if he had only left the Third Kingdom a week ago.

"Darling, Goliath tells me that the Goyles, the Crabbes, and Felina Rosier have just arrived. Shall we show them to the sunroom, or let everyone wait in the main hall till everyone has arrived?"

"Let's let everyone assemble in the main hall that great blaze there is so pleasant on a dull day like this. I was going to show Emily the sunroom, as she's never been to the house before. We'll meet everyone in the hall in a moment, love."

"Of course, dear. Do make certain the elves have set out the biscuits Draco likes for his tea."

"Certainly, love." Narcissa smiled and swept down the hall in a cloud of wafting blue velvet.

Emily turned to Lucius again with a conspiratorial smirk. "Throwing your mother-in-law over your shoulder like an armful of washing. The only problem is, I don't believe you've ever carried so much as a sock of your own washing for any significant distance."

He smirked back. "Given the choice of carrying either Druella or the washing, I'll take the washing it smells better and passes gas less often. Now come see the sunroom. There's no sun today, but if there was, this is where we'd come to observe it."

What the Malfoys called the sunroom was a very large porch, with walls and a partial ceiling made of glass panes. The black marble floor was dotted with round, white-draped tables, on which impeccably polished silver tea services and antique china plates were laid out in anticipation of the guests soon to arrive. In warmer months, it would have been bright and sunny; but today, most of the light came from a giant hearth and several silver candelabra.

"You're right. This sunroom is most distinctly sunless." She moved close to one of the windows, gazing out on the unbroken white of wintry landscape outside. Lucius had come up close beside her. She glanced sidelong at him, and her gaze lingered admiringly; even the harshness of that light could not mar his beauty. With his ivory skin, platinum hair and grey eyes, and the pewter-coloured velvet of his robes, he made colour seem irrelevant.

"I'll have to have you back in summertime so you can see it in its full glory." He laid his hand over hers, turning to her confidingly. "And I should thoroughly enjoy having someone interesting around to talk to for a change."

She had always loved when he talked to her like this as if she was the only other intelligent person in the world, the only one capable of understanding him. As if he was delighted to have her as his partner in mischief. "I wouldn't miss it," she replied.

One of the towel-clad house-elves wavered hesitantly toward Lucius. "Master... Master sir, Mistress is wanting you in the hall, please?"

Her host glanced toward the creature with a flicker of irritation in his eyes. "Yes, Tully, tell your Mistress we are on our way."

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The group had grown substantially by the time they returned to the hall.

Lucius took Emily's elbow and made introductions Mr. and Mrs. Galen Goyle, a tall, heavyset man with pepper and salt hair, and his short, heavyset wife; Mr. and Mrs. Nestor Crabbe, who looked like the figures of Mr. and Mrs. Goyle drawn by a different artist; and then Mrs. Felina Rosier (who wore extremely Victorian robes of mourning crape, with skirts that swept the floor, buttoned sleeves, and buttons well up her throat). A recent widow, then. She had Emily's sympathies.

Mr. Theodore Nott was rather older than the rest of the group his smile, when he greeted Emily, was so tight that she wondered if the poor man suffered from some arthritis of the jaw; Mr. and Mrs. Walden Macnair, one of those couples in which the husband was still dark-haired, virile, and fit, and the wife was fully grey and shaped like a pudding; and the portly, middle-aged, very blonde and very tweedy Miss Elvia Wilkes.

Shortly afterward she met Mr. and Mrs. Emmitt Parkinson, the husband tall, autocratic and aquiline, with an extremely pretty young brunette wife; both Mr. and Mrs. Marcus Flint, Sr. the father and son had identical teeth and crew cuts as well as identical names and Mr. and Mrs. Malcolm Bulstrode (he was one of the tallest men she had ever met, but his wife was a good physical match for him, being no pixie.)

Emily found it easiest to make the acquaintance of the Crabbes, the Goyles, the Parkinsons, the Flints, and the Bulstrodes, as they all had children in her classes, and they, like most parents, readily warmed on the subject of their children. The young, lively Mrs. Beatrice Parkinson had already heard accounts of Emily's class from her daughter Pansy's letters home, and had apparently done some sport fencing with her father and brothers as a young girl she and Emily had gotten into a very pleasant chat in front of the fireplace until a look from her husband made her excuse herself and move back to his side.

The group moved from the fireplace in the front hall to the tea tables after visiting for some time. Professor Snape, Emily noticed, had taken on the duty of walking Druella Black to the sunroom; she leaned heavily on his arm, and his ear was inclined toward what she was saying. Ladies were seated at two tables closest to the window,

gentlemen at two others. Mrs. Crabbe and Mrs. Goyle took seats on either side of Emily, and Professor Snape and Narcissa gently handed Druella into a seat just beyond Mrs. Goyle. As he made to withdraw, Mrs. Black stopped him with a clawlike hand on his wrist. He paused for a moment as she said something in his ear, which she punctuated by darting a resentful glance at Lucius across the room. Snape murmured something that sounded sympathetic, and patted her hand before withdrawing to his own seat between Draco and Macnair.

Well, Emily reflected to herself, perhaps by the time she had a dowager's hump, he might find a little sympathy within himself for her too.

House-elves circulated, serving steaming tea, and Emily noted with relief that someone had kindly provided a choice of mint-tarragon herb tea in addition to the usual Earl Grey with milk and sugar.

Conversation proceeded apace. The ladies discussed their children, children's schooling, what the husbands said about their work, anniversary and birthday gifts from the husbands, things shopped for, rooms decorated and redecorated, what they were going to have their house-elves put out in their gardens in the spring, and people they knew who were pregnant. Mrs. Crabbe volunteered something about a horse her husband was thinking of buying, and Miss Wilkes talked about knitting sweaters for her Corgis. Emily tried not to yawn out loud.

"What lovely robes, Professor," Mrs. Rosier said, as the house-elves put trays of delicate sandwiches, scones, cream and preserves on the table. "Is that what the Fae are wearing this winter?"

From most other people, it would have been a compliment on one's clothes, and an invitation to talk about the current fashion of a foreign visitor's native land. It could have made her feel warmly towards the speaker, and led to an interesting chat.

But from Felina Rosier... it drew attention to the fact that she was not in fact wearing trailing witches' robes at all, but an Arcadian frock and coat; it underlined the fact that she was of a foreign nationality, and implied that that foreign nationality was madly impractical when it came to dressing properly for the weather. And a people so impractical as to wear such clothing in winter of course had to be possessed of an overwhelmingly lascivious temperament to do such a ridiculous thing.

Such was the power of Felina Rosier.

Emily had thought, when she dressed that morning, that the outfit she had chosen had been quite appropriate: a very simple black velvet dress with a skirt that swirled to just below her knees, with a matching frock coat of Edwardian cut, with sleeves that fastened with long rows of tiny silver buttons. She had then added her favourite necklace, a piece she wore habitually a double strand of black Arcadian pearls that sat just below her collarbones. She loved the necklace because it had been a gift from Gwydion, and also because of the way the pearls reflected dark iridescent colours in the slightest light: blue, purple, green, gold, silver. In the mirror back at Hogwarts, she had thought the outfit looked simple and classic, and thought the hem and long sleeves quite modest and becoming, and the single piece of jewellery very tasteful. The mirror had agreed too, declaring "You're a picture, dearie, just a picture," when she had given her hair a final smoothing before leaving her rooms.

But at Narcissa Malfoy's tea table, after a single comment from Felina Rosier, she was all of a sudden terribly aware that that her clothes were entirely wrong, and that the glances of some of the men had been in covert appreciation, and that the looks from most of the women had been of tightly veiled disapproval. Black velvet may have appropriate had she chosen proper long witches' robes of that material as it was woven in the Second World, but the Faery spidersilk velvet was entirely too lustrous, too supple, and poured too fluidly over her body to be proper here. The pearls were too scintillant, too ostentatious, too *much* they threw the dull gold of Mrs. Malfoy's many antique strings of pearls quite into the shade. She could feel eyes on the expanse of black-stockinged calf and white throat and collarbone revealed by her dress. And to go up and change now, or to use a Glamour to make herself look more human, would be to admit that her first choice had been inappropriate.

Emily paused. "Thank you very much, Mrs. Rosier. Indeed, dark velvet is very much the rage at Court this year. All of the weavers are being deluged with new orders for it."

"Oh yes, of course. And how fares your father, Buckminster Swain, in his position at Court?" Mrs. Rosier asked, with a demure sip from her teacup.

There was another of those marked lulls in the conversation. Emily was growing to dread them with a passion.

"Swain. I know the Swains. *You're* a Swain?" asked old Mrs. Black, peering malevolently at her. Emily could feel heat climbing her face to the pointed frills of her ears.

"Yes, madam. Buckminster Swain, the historian and anthropologist, is my father."

"I see. You are of the Lake District Swains, then?" Mrs. Crabbe asked.

"My father was born in the Lake District, yes, but I myself am of the Third Kingdom Swains," she replied pleasantly.

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Crabbe said, with a brittle smile. "Buckminster's *second* wife is your mother, then." Something about her inflection made it sound as though being the child of a second wife was very disreputable indeed.

"Yes, she is the former Lady Greenbarrow. She serves in the Fianna."

Mrs. Crabbe stared at her uncomprehendingly.

"The Fianna being the Faery military," Emily volunteered gently.

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Crabbe said, nodding vaguely. "Your father is in the military there?"

"No, actually my father is a scholar and historian to the King. My mother is in the military."

"Oh." Mrs. Crabbe obviously considered female military service even less reputable than the children of second families. "Do you think that a suitable occupation for a woman?"

"Certainly," she replied with a laugh. "So much so that I've taken it as my own occupation as well, madam."

Several heads turned in her direction at that. Most of the ladies, including Mrs. Goyle, Mrs. Bulstrode, and Narcissa Malfoy, wore expressions of delicate disturbance.

"I thought you were a *teacher* now," Narcissa said, with an air of one much deceived, but too genteel and forgiving to call the offender out for the transgression.

Emily addressed her hostess in her most neutral, pleasant voice. "Indeed yes, I am currently teaching at Hogwarts. But you see, I was sent here in the capacity of a representative of my liege, not as an independent employee. I'm not so much working here as I am stationed here, really."

"The Lake District Swains are a pure-blooded family," old Mrs. Black rasped, apropos of nothing, glaring at Emily.

"Indeed they are a fine old bloodline," Narcissa agreed. There was much genteel susurration of agreement at that statement.

"One that gets purer all the time," Emily agreed, demurely raising her teacup to her lips. There was some murmur of agreement at her comment at first. Then Mrs. Crabbe and Mrs. Black darted malicious looks in her direction, and Narcissa looked down at her plate even more sourly and sulkily than usual.

Emily looked innocently off into the middle distance where, unexpectedly, she caught Severus Snape's eye. For one brief, tremendously gratifying second, she thought she saw the corner of his mouth twist and his jaw tighten to suppress what might have been a laugh at her rejoinder to the ladies at her table but then Macnair addressed a comment to him, and his attention was lost.

"It's a shame that the old traditions, and old virtues, are so often neglected these days. I remember a time when everyone was content with the comforts of home and the old ways, and the old loyalties, were so well respected," Mrs. Crabbe said, in a tone that was not exactly scolding, and not exactly sanctimonious.

Yes, that made the boundaries clear. She was a Faerie and therefore an outsider, sitting amongst a group of women whose families had known the pure-blooded branch of the Swains for centuries. Her father's foreign marriage had been chewed over in the gossip mill probably for decades, no doubt since before she was born. They were probably more familiar with her family tree than she was.

In short, they knew all about her, and she didn't know much about any of them a situation to set any Faerie's teeth on edge. She was starting to feel like a butterfly on a pin.

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"Well, I did say something rather snarky myself. I'm terribly sorry, Lucius... I truly don't mean to disrespect your, or your wife's, hospitality... "

"I know you don't." He said that as though that was the most obvious thing in the world. "Oh, my dear, don't mind all those old cats. They're all still angry that your father's money I'm sorry, your father didn't marry one of their set after Gwenhwyfar died, as they thought only right and proper."

"As if Father would ever marry someone for economic reasons. If he had ever cared about money, why would he go move somewhere where they don't even mint money? I think one of the happiest days of his life was when he transferred title of everything he owned in this world to all of us."

"As my father would have said, that's just old Buck Swain for you." He smiled ruefully at her. "I'm sorry about all those old biddies most of them are just duty invites anyway. I shall tell Draco and Menzentius not to allow any of them to corner you this weekend."

"Oh, don't worry, you don't have to. I'll be all right." She was doing her best to discourage that plan while she liked Draco well enough, sending Menzentius Black to rescue her from the likes of Felina Rosier would be like sending a great, sharp-toothed wolf to save her from a bad-tempered housecat. She turned back to examining the hothouse blooms, and Lucius bent over them with her. Peripherally, she could feel his eyes on her face.

"Emily... can I ask you something?"

She turned toward him, brows tightening a bit in concern. "Of course you can what is it?"

One of his slender white hands was stroking the velvety petals of a lavender crocus. "Tell me... why was there never any repeat of Beltane night?"

Oh. Perhaps she shouldn't have been so quick to invite him to ask his question. She averted her eyes, blushing madly.

"Well... there were a lot of reasons." She gazed into the heart of a deep blue iris, as if for moral support. "I was only seventeen, you know. And you were always on about how you had to have an heir to carry on the Malfoy name, and I don't want to have children. I have a knight for a mother I won't make some poor child live with the constant wondering whether Mummy is going to come home alive or dead from the latest action against the Orcs. Those seem to me pretty major obstacles to any kind of serious relationship, don't you think?"

"I can see how that would be why one would shy away from getting engaged, certainly. But I always thought there was something else. One night you were tearing my shirt off in a haymow, and a few days later everything was over, without so much as a nice speech ending in, 'Do let's be friends.'"

She laughed, desperately trying to hide her embarrassment. "You are on a dogged search for the truth tonight, aren't you? It wasn't you, darling. It was me. I have been labelled a feckless git more than once." She turned to the foxglove on the opposite table, with an elaborate show of gaiety.

His low, deliberate drawl came again, close by her ear. "Having seen you with Dorien, my dear... forgive me, but I have a difficult time believing that. Please dispense with all the verbal Obscurantis and just tell me what got in the way, Emily."

She sighed. "It was... because when I got to know you better, I began to find your political views rather... morally repulsive, Lucius," she said truthfully. He had pursued her with a straightforward question, and she had given him a straightforward answer. Therefore any pain its truth caused him superseded any ingratitude for hospitality. "I find your dislike of non-magic people disagreeable. I myself have a Muggle grandmother, and I went to Muggle university. Hell, I bloody taught at Muggle university, for some years. I haven't burnt any bridges there I may still go back."

"I see." He stood beside her, deeply absorbed in peering into the heart of a sepia-coloured rose.

"And well... I thought that if you were so convinced of the inferiority of Muggles... then what would stop you from looking down on anyone who wasn't a pure-blooded witch? I could foresee a time when you rejected me because I was a part-human and that cooled things for me."

"I see," he said again, surveying the rose from all angles. "And yes, the Muggle family is not the most attractive thing about you, no. But the connection is distant enough, and your other... *attractions* are such... that I could try to put that out of mind, if you could... refrain from mentioning it?" Same mocking drawl he always used, that silky voice that both irritated and aroused her.

"Lucius... we've been friends for a very long time. To be honest, I'd thought you had half forgotten about that Beltane night. I don't mean to offend you. But when you ask someone, why did you end your involvement with me, you might hear something you don't want to hear. I'm sorry."

But he only smiled in response. "Do forgive me for this, but if I agonised over everyone who found me morally lacking, I'd have to resign my post at the Ministry. But tell me... you've never found me physically repulsive, have you?"

She didn't know how to lie to him about that. "Far from it."

"Good, because coming from you, that would upset me." He moved to the door, then paused.

"But let me say this when we hand out judgments on each other's morality... " He gave her a long, tragic look over his elegant shoulder "... let us remember who amongst us has had their morality called into question more recently. And let us remember how I supported you in your decision to act as you did. When those who thought you acted more out of a desire for revenge than for justice criticised you, I believed you to be entirely justified, and I said so. At whatever cost to my own reputation there was."

It was true. She turned away and hung her head, feeling ungrateful, hideously cruel to someone who cared for her.

"Lucius " She called apologetically.

He was gone.

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It was seven o'clock by the great antique ormolu clock in the spacious ballroom of Malfeasant.

For some hours, the manor's mob of house-elves had been busy. There were cases of wine and champagne, some to be chilled, some to be decanted, some to be properly aerated before serving, and wine meant glasses of many types to polish and set out properly. Their Master had given them an unusual menu for the dinner, and locating all of the ingredients had kept them busy. The great dining table had to be set, which meant that the vast expanses of antique tablecloths and napkins had to be washed, starched, and pressed. They had polished the silver to a mirrorlike sheen, as was the dark hardwood of the expansive dance floor. When the musicians had arrived, the elves had shown them to their seats and helped them set up their instruments they probably would have re-strung all the violins themselves if necessary. Now they stood ready with little trays of wineglasses and hors d'oeuvres, dressed in brightly coloured harlequin-stitched guest towels.

At seven precisely, our host and hostess, Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy, attired in costume as Charles II and his Queen, Catherine of Braganza, made their appearance. Although Charles himself and the Portuguese Catherine were both known to have been dark, the monarchs presiding over this small Court were both stunningly fair. Madame Malfoy was fabulously beautiful in her low-necked, corseted, ruffle-sleeved Restoration ball gown of chameleonic silver silk, with emeralds shimmering at her magnificent white throat a worthy match for her ineffably elegant husband, who looked so majestic and dashing in the wardrobe of that rakish era that even the monarch who made it famous could not have looked so distinguished.

Our hostess's brother, who already smelled of claret, was next to appear, dressed in an English knight's plate mail and clanking sword, but like Byron's King Sardanapalus, was apparently too vain to allow a helm to impair the full glory of his flowing hair. On his arm was our hostess's mother, who wore a beautifully detailed, queenly black silk and lace mourning gown and slender crown on her elaborately dressed white head, in the guise of Queen Victoria after her loss of Prince Albert. Seeing as how Mrs. Black

was not often seen in gowns more modern or less elaborate than the one she wore that evening, it looked for all the world as though she had simply added a crown to her usual ensemble and called it a costume. Her son escorted her to a large overstuffed velvet armchair and, having deposited her there with painstaking slowness, made his way back for another glass of claret.

A cry of "Father, when can I get a Firebolt?" heralded the arrival of our host and hostess's teenage son, whose moonlight-fair juvenile beauty, so like that of his father, was attired for that evening in the authentic robes of the British National Quidditch Team, with his Nimbus 2001 over his shoulder. But the boy's father turned away from his heir with disinterest, sipping from the glass of claret in his hand, his grey eyes watching the grand curving staircase for the arrival of his guests. The boy turned his plaints to his mother instead, and she duly petted him and fussed over him.

One unfashionably early guest made his appearance first a tall, thin, dark man. The black hair and eyes and strong profile that figured in the nightmares of many a callow first-year student at Hogwarts looked unrecognisably distinguished that evening; from his smoothly shaven cheek and the tidy, nicely barbered state of his long raven hair, it appeared that perhaps this was the year the Malfoys had enough valets to go around to even absentee distant cousins. He wore the garb of a Danish Renaissance prince in hues of the most sombre black, and was unaccompanied by anyone other than the grinning human skull he carried.

Lucius went to meet his cousin. "Ah, good evening, Severus. What have you got there? The head of a pesky Gryffindor who misbehaved in your class?"

"Would that it was."

By that time, more guests were arriving, masked and in costume; Walden Macnair and his wife appeared as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, the only wizard and witch to ever sit on a throne in the British Isles rather an unoriginal choice, but a patriotic one. The Crabbes appeared in decadent Italianate costume as Rodrigo and Lucretia Borgia. Malcolm Bulstrode appeared in the costume of a French Musketeer, escorting Mrs. Bulstrode in an elegant French court gown, blonde wig, cloak, and dagger, and sporting the likeness of a *fleur-de-lis* brand on one shoulder D'Artagnan accompanied by the treacherous beauty Milady de Winter. Elvia Wilkes, in the costume of a European peasant woman, with heatless scarlet flames shooting up from around her skirts, was in character as Wendelin the Weird.

Felina Rosier appeared next, in an elaborately Victorian mourning gown of black lace and embroidered silk, with a tiara on her head. She smiled magnanimously at the assembled company with a suitably tragic air until she caught sight of Druella Black and scowled. Druella, catching sight of Felina, scowled back just as vociferously. Clearly, that evening's duelling Victorias were not amused. They proceeded to stare daggers at each other for most of the evening.

Most of the guests had assembled in the grand ballroom by quarter past the hour, with one notable absence but that lady made her appearance by half past seven. Professor Emily Swain arrived, with a swish of silk on the marble steps. A trifle late but then, it wasn't as though the culture in which she had been raised put much store by strict punctuality, or as though reliable clocks had yet been invented in her homeland.

Her costume turned some heads as she made her way across the ballroom floor and prettily greeted the Malfoys and their guests. The bare-armed black silk gown and matching sleeveless over-robe, traced with an impossibly intricate spider web pattern in crystalline blue beadwork, seemed light enough to float away on the slightest breeze. For good measure, she had added an elaborate spider web pattern, drawn in what looked like some kind of dark blue body paint, upon the flesh of her right shoulder and arm. At any Faery Court, she would have simply been a very well-dressed woman; but this was the Second World, the Wizarding part of the Second World, and the Malfoy family manor at that. In this crowd, the effect was rich, strange, and otherworldly.

She accepted a glass of champagne from a tray carried by a passing house-elf, and turned to Mrs. Parkinson to inquire about her costume. While Emmitt Parkinson had appeared as a stolid, and somewhat unoriginal, Merlin, the lively young Beatrice Parkinson had appeared in the gown of a nineteenth-century Italian woman, with her black hair flowing down her back and her arms full of flowers that gave off a stuporous perfume. After a few moments of laughing chatter and guessing, Emily named her as Beatrice Rappaccini, the beautiful and poisonous heroine of Nathaniel Hawthorne's story *Rappaccini's Daughter.* Beatrice was explaining that she had always found her name a bit dull until she came across that story and had fallen in love with it, gesturing animatedly with her wineglass. Lucius, she said, had helped her select fresh flowers and herbs from the greenhouse for their intoxicating effect she had poppies, foxglove, oleander, bittersweet nightshade, fragrant hemlock, henbane, and belladonna in her bouquet.

During the cocktail hour before dinner, Severus Snape had withdrawn from the merry company a little ways, onto the long gallery that overlooked the dance floor below, and like his famously melancholy alter ego, seemed more content to brood and observe than join in the others' frolic. To Emily, it seemed an ideal time to try to speak to him privately. She excused herself from Mrs. Parkinson and made her way up the steps to the gallery.

"Hello, Professor," she said. Her palms were so damp that she hoped she wouldn't lose her grip on the flute of champagne in her hand.

"Good evening, Professor," he said, with absent courtesy, his eyes never leaving the group below.

"At first I wondered what you were doing in your regular clothes with that skull. But you're Prince Hamlet. I love it."

"Thank you." He sounded as though he would thank her more to leave him alone.

"Honestly, Professor, you do look absolutely marvellous tonight. It suits you perfectly. I couldn't imagine a better costume for you."

He looked sidelong at her, almost shyly and his mouth twisted in a guarded smile. Again, she was struck by his eyes they were a true black, reflecting a fathomless brown-red in strong light. His hair was the same colour, not a cool blue-black, but a warm red-black, lightening toward dark auburn in the occasional tendril around his face.

"You look... rather nice yourself," he said, slightly less gruffly than usual. "However if you're now coming to the part where you declaim, "To be or not to be," in a dramatic fashion, and then reveal yourself to be utterly ignorant of the rest of the play, then don't bother. About ten people have already done that in the last half hour."

She grinned at him. "Oh, let me see if I remember.

'To be, or not to be: that is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,

And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;

No more; and by a sleep to say we end

The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks

That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation

Devoutly to be wish'd.' "

"All right, all right, I am duly impressed," Snape broke in, but this time, he smiled in genuine amusement. "You have diligently studied your Shakespeare."

"At Cambridge I actually got asked to choreograph the fight scenes for a production of *Hamlet.* I must have heard the actor playing him rehearse that speech a hundred

times."

"Really. And whose identity have you assumed this evening?" It was a relief to discover that he wasn't a total stranger to the concept of small talk.

"Coincidentally that of another of Shakespeare's characters. Can you guess who?"

"Let me see." He turned to face her completely, then gave her a quick look up and down. "Not Ariel, or Titania?"

"Ariel's cold, but Titania's getting warmer. They're in the same plays."

"Not Cobweb, from *Midsummer Night's Dream*?"

"The very same well done, sir. Though I prefer her in *Theseus and Hippolyta*, as she's got more to say in that one."

"*Theseus and Hippolyta*?" He looked perplexed. "I don't think... I've heard of that one."

"Cobweb is one of the funny ingénues in it she and Peaseblossom, Moth, and Mustardseed decide that the Amazons shouldn't neglect love so much in favour of war, and play all these pranks on them with love potions. Theseus and Hippolyta get engaged in the end, as it's a comedy. Then you know in the beginning of *Midsummer* they're planning their wedding and all."

"Are you, er, *quite sure* that's one of Shakespeare's plays?" Snape asked, looking suspicious.

"Absolutely. King Auberon commissioned it from him personally."

Professor Snape's eyes widened. "You mean to tell me that... Shakespeare himself went to Arcadia, and wrote a play while he was there?"

"Oh yes. Back in the Second Age I mean, the sixteenth century. And it was three plays, actually he wrote everything very fast. *Theseus and Hippolyta, Fortinbras*, and *Fleance*."

"And they're all completely unknown to scholars here?"

"Well, not to *all* scholars here," she replied with a downcast smile.

Something in his voice and the way his scent changed said that his interest was very much piqued by that admission, but before she could continue, Lucius had swept up toward them with an expansive smile.

"Emily, dear. I've been telling Draco a bit about his fencing mistress and now he's simply dying to get a chance to talk to you about your battlefield exploits. Do indulge the boy and spend a bit of time with him, would you?"

"Of course," she said, honouring the request of her host, her host whom she may have recently rather offended though she turned away from Professor Snape with reluctance. "Where has he gotten to?"

"Down talking to his uncle and grandmother by the dance floor."

Well, didn't that sound like more fun than should be allowed and just when she had finally been making some headway in having a civil conversation with Severus Snape. *Damn.*

She nodded politely to Snape as she made her exit hoping that he would catch the regret in her expression as she moved away from him. Lucius turned to his cousin with a very jovial air. "Severus, old man. I was hoping to catch you sometime tonight to talk about that mutual friend of ours. Are you busy?"

Lucius's drawling voice floated back to her as he moved off with Snape *Sorry to interrupt, but surely the two of you see enough of each other every day at work...*

Yes, no doubt he had seen enough of her for one night, and was simply ecstatic to have an excuse to get away.

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The youth's lip curled. "Lucius has been there. He lived there for a year as one of the Tithesmen, just before he and Narcissa were married. He says that during their spring religious holidays, they celebrate by running riot in the fields. Lucius tells me that they "

"My boy, do hold your foolish tongue for a moment," Snape interrupted again, his eyes flashing dangerously. "No matter what Lucius says, the lady is a Hogwarts teacher, and I won't have her spoken of in such a manner in my presence, sir. Either speak of her civilly, as becomes a gentleman, or do not speak of her at all. Do you understand me?"

Menzentius smiled balefully at Snape. "As you wish, sir." He nodded to Macnair, eyes still fixed maliciously on Snape's glowering face. "I think I'll go see if Professor Snape's *lady* would like an escort to dinner. Good evening, sir."

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metal wrought in a decorative pattern around a glass cylinder.

"Perhaps you'll meet some of them, if anyone sees fit to ask you to become a Tithesman like your old father and grandfather," Lucius said indulgently. "It'll only happen if this peace holds up, however. They don't practice the old custom in times of war. It's considered too dangerous for the visitors."

Emily paused for a moment to ask a hovering house-elf for mint tea before turning to Draco herself. "But I'm pretty certain it'll be a fair number of years before the Orcs decide to try to take us again we gave them a good beating the last time they tried us. And the Tithe committee does seem to like asking family members of previous pages. In some families, it's a tradition from generation to "

She stopped in the middle of her sentence because as she accepted the cup of tea from the serving elf, she had felt her flesh suddenly sizzle and burn.

Everyone looked up in surprise and alarm as Emily let out a sharp scream and flung the cup back onto the table, spilling the tea onto the tablecloth. She grasped her wrist and flexed her hand, white-faced and grimacing.

"I'm sorry," she said, "that must be made of iron... "

Lucius was instantly beside her, reaching for her wrist and delicately opening her injured hand.

"Lucius... really, it's nothing... "

Lucius glanced down at her hand, on which patches of angry blue blisters were rising on her palm, first and second fingers, and thumb.

"That doesn't look like nothing," he said.

"Looks like a bad burn," came Severus Snape's quiet voice, from close to her ear, startling her she hadn't heard him so much as get up. "Happened from simply touching a cup, you say?"

Whispers broke out all around the table. Emily couldn't tell if they were concerned, or scandalised, or neither.

"It's to be expected," she replied, through gritted teeth. "I react horribly to iron... can't touch it... shouldn't even get near it... "

Lucius turned a look of terrible cold fury at the little retinue of house-elves waiting on the table and all conversation in the room fell dead silent.

"Who put the wrought-iron cups out tonight?" he asked, in a quiet, but inexorable, voice.

The acrid smell of abject terror suddenly rose in waves all around her. One or two tiny, fearful squeaks were audible. "Not me, Master!" "Master, I was only setting down the plates!"

"Lucius, please. If they've never had a Faery guest before, they probably didn't know any better," Emily said quickly.

"You're right, dear, they haven't had a Faery guest before," Lucius answered. "Which is why I specifically told them to put all the ironware in the house securely away." The look in his grey eyes was frightening.

Emily put her good hand gently on his arm. "I'm certain it was just an honest mistake."

Lucius's furious gaze moved to her and his expression softened a bit. Then he looked past her to Snape. "Severus, old man. Do you by any chance have some of that healing potion of yours with you?"

"Always." Snape addressed the cringing house-elves. "Please bring me the large black physician's satchel in my room it should be on my dressing table "

"Yes, sir, Professor, sir "

"Right away, sir " Two elves vanished in puffs of grey smoke.

Lucius addressed the rest of them. "Clear those cups away *this instant*, and put out the china cups instead."

"Yes, Master, sorry, Master... "

"Right away, Master... "

"We're so sorry, Miss Professor, ma'am... "

"We're all sorriest, Miss Professor!"

"Professor Swain does not want me to reprimand you, and I'll defer to her wishes. But you're all very lucky that she is in a forgiving mood this evening," Lucius said imperiously.

The elves went to work with lightning speed, whisking the wrought-iron cups away and replacing them with delicate china ones. The spilled tea vanished. Three elves were nearly instantaneously at Emily's elbow with bandages and a tiny basin of cool water with some kind of disinfectant salts and the two who had gone for Snape's healing potion rematerialized almost instantly with his large black physician's bag. Snape took it from them, brusquely waving away their offers of help. He took from it a stoppered bottle of clear, robin's-egg-blue liquid and an eyedropper.

For such a habitually tense and contentious person, Professor Snape had an oddly reassuring bedside manner. Something about the air of unassailable confidence and competence he assumed when he was administering the potion was tremendously calming to her. Perhaps it was because he was in his element as a Potions master. Perhaps it was due to some other reason known only to him. Whatever the reason, she was grateful for it.

He dispensed several drops of the blue fluid into Emily's goblet of water. "Drink that."

She wrinkled her nose at the odd, astringent-floral smell of it, but gamely took a deep swallow. "You'll want to drink all of it. Now... " He sank to one knee beside her, then lifted her hand from the water and dried it with her linen napkin.

"This may sting a bit." He dispensed some drops of the blue potion directly onto the burned skin.

She flinched. "It doesn't hurt it just itches like mad."

"That's the tissues regenerating and tightening."

Within moments, much of the angry, scalded blue skin had cooled to a tough-looking grey. "Thank you, Professor, that's much better."

His brow tensed as he examined her hand. "That's strange a simple burn like this should only take a moment to heal completely."

"It's an iron burn," she said. "Even with the strongest healing potion, it will take some time to heal completely."

His brow creased deeply, but he gave only a terse nod, then neatly wrapped a bandage from the middle of her fingers to her wrist. After he had finished, his gaze fell on the white linen napkin he had used to dry her wound something about it caught his attention. He opened the cloth and stared down at the stain, like dark blue ink, on its surface. He raised it to his eye level and examined it minutely.

He turned back to Emily looking as if he would like to ask her a question, but she was staring straight ahead with such a look of tight-jawed tension that he remained silent.

"Thank you very much for your help, Professor Snape," she said, her voice sounding as stiff and dismissive as his usual tone toward her.

He nodded to her and his host, and moved back toward the other end of the table, to his seat at Druella Black's right hand.

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go, like other people? Why must you be so damned *difficult* all the time? I've since concluded that I must have hallucinated the impression that you liked me the first time we met."

The sinister eyebrow was back, and the red-black eyes were gleaming with suppressed rage. "There did indeed seem to be some hallucinating going on that evening after all, you did take me for a Muggle "

"I hadn't been in this world for eight years! How was I to know there hadn't been some huge fashion for wearing *cloaks* since then? And besides you took *me* for a Muggle! "

"You were wearing Muggle clothes," Snape said matter-of-factly.

"Oh," she said. "Now that I think of it, yes I was, wasn't I. No, wait I had one of my old witch's cloaks from school with me. I remember it got terribly rained on."

"You weren't wearing it at the time." Nothing provoked a show of emotion from the man. He was cool as a dozen bushels of cucumbers.

"I wasn't?"

"I remember quite distinctly what you were wearing," he said. "Thoroughly and completely Muggle."

"All right, I concede your point, I looked like a Muggle. But you you *wanted* me to take you for a Muggle, Mister Professor 'I Teach Chemistry,' didn't you?"

"I do teach chemistry after a fashion," he said, sighing elaborately, as if frustrated on her insistence on being so thick. "However, if in the future I ever become involved with, oh, perhaps a Muggle university professor, I don't believe that my Wizarding background is the sort of revelation I would make to her *on the first date*. Though seeing as how that lady told me, over jasmine tea, that she teaches *folklore and mythology* at Cambridge, I thought perhaps revealing it to her at a later date might be possible. I also don't recall you telling me that your father is a wizard. Nor do I recall you mentioning that you were born somewhere other than *Earth* Miss 'My Family Hails From The Lake District'?"

"Well *they* do. They're a fine old bloody pure-blooded family, as I'm sure you heard today," she said, with an impatient nod in the direction of Druella Black, who was again glowering at Felina Rosier from the armchair below. "And come on when you tell someone, even a wizard 'Hello, I was born in a different plane of existence,' they tend to look at you all *funny*. Wizards are all right with being apart from the Muggle world, but being entirely removed from the Earth in general is just weird for even some of your kind. Don't try to deny it I've had a tremendous amount of experience on that topic, as recently as today." And much of today's unpleasant experience came from the elderly great-aunt to whom he was so very sympathetic, and his apparently long-time friends, she thought, but did not say out loud.

"All perfectly valid points, of course. You make me wonder, however, what you're working so hard to justify to yourself, Professor," Snape said in the most delicately insinuating tones imaginable. The lady doth protest too much. She was struck

momentarily speechless.

When he spoke again, his voice was so soft that she had to lean close to him to hear it.

"If you can't fathom why I seem disinclined to simply say, 'Oh, it's all right,' where you're concerned... do try to understand one thing, if you are capable of it.

"If I had done to you what you did to me, morality would have called me a rake, a cad, and much worse. Yet when you, a woman, played the amoral rake in your treatment of a man you seem to think that that sort of thing is just perfectly acceptable behaviour. It doesn't appear to me as though you've wasted one moment's worry as to how it made me feel to be so used for your own *gratification* "

he drew the word out thrillingly, stroking the fingertips of one hand down over the back of her hand, and then jerking it away a moment later

"then discarded afterward like some greasy chip shop wrapping. I am unimpressed by your expectation that I should simply indulge you in your callousness and get back to the more serious business of amusing you in ballrooms as though nothing had happened. Which leads me to believe that perhaps you are used to spending time with men who are satisfied with such treatment. But, I assure you, madam, I am not of that type. And perhaps your regard for yourself is so inflated that you believe some brief hours of your company are reward enough for any indignity you choose to inflict on someone else, but I was not flattered by being so seduced and then so unceremoniously *abandoned*."

She had been expecting him to make some accusation that she would find as insulting as it was unjustified the ballroom-intrigue equivalent of implying that she had somehow given her students the idea of Dungbombing his cauldrons. But instead, after he finished speaking his mind, she found herself coming to a most unforeseen conclusion.

He was right.

Leaving the way she did had indeed been insulting exquisitely so. She felt smaller and more petty and ridiculous with every word he said. It was true that most men would have been satisfied merely by the carnal rewards offered by a quick anonymous encounter. But Severus Snape wasn't most men. Now he was defending his bruised self-worth with an intensity, she realized, that probably came from numerous other bruises in the past. His dark head and shoulders were thrown back with great dignity, and he spoke with controlled righteous indignation.

"I didn't think I'd ever see you again," she stammered.

"*You could have tried to*," he snarled back.

Oh, the hurt on his face. At that moment, she wanted nothing more than a long flight of stairs that she could kick herself down.

She wanted very badly to put her arms around him and say... *what*? Something that would make his accusing attitude toward her soften something that would make him forget, some apology that he would be satisfied with... just something. Anything.

But was there any kind of apology he would accept? He had already told her what he thought of her attempts at mollifying him and this was not the kind of man to whom one whined, 'Oh but I didn't mean it like that,' like some disrespectful schoolgirl. It was entirely possible that she had established herself forever as low and heartless in his eyes, but at that moment, she had no idea how to go about changing his mind, and was terrified of offending him even more in the attempt.

"But don't let me keep you," he muttered. "I'm sure one of your various Malfoys will soon be missing you. Good evening, Professor." He turned on his heel and stalked away. If he had looked behind him, he would have seen her watching his retreat with smouldering disappointment.

But he didn't look behind him.

"Emily? Are you all right?" Lucius's voice, from behind her. In a moment, he had moved up to her side and had put a supportive hand on her shoulder. "I thought that looked a bit heated. Severus being the epitome of graciousness and tact, as always?"

She turned gratefully toward him the warmth of his hand on her bare shoulder felt furtively pleasant. "I just... it's nothing. Just a stupid workplace personality conflict is all."

"Said Emily, drooping rather tremendously. He really has offended you, hasn't he. I think I really should have that talk with him if he's huffing about insulting women so. It's

really just unbecoming to a gentleman."

I'm afraid it was I who much offended him, actually.

"No, he didn't insult me, he just brought up an... earlier point of contention at an inopportune time, is all. I just didn't feel up to a round of his, you know debating tactics." All of which was true enough, but she knew that Lucius would assume that the *point of contention* was some academic trifle, rather than a disagreement about their mutual sexual history.

Lucius put a companionable arm around her shoulders. "Well, love, let that serve as your latest introduction to the famous Snape family charm, then. I hate to speak ill of my own cousin, but he's already such a grumpy old man, it's hard to believe he's not even thirty-five.

"But as I recall, you haven't danced with me yet this evening." He took her unbandaged hand. "Come on."

Part First: The Hart Assurgent: Chapter 7

Chapter 9 of 55

Professor Emily Swain came to Hogwarts from the Arcadian Kingdoms to teach the Faery magic of her people. She rapidly becomes embroiled in a bitter game of professional rivalry with another professor -- and then a very old friend makes her an enticing offer she doesn't want to refuse...

Chapter 7:

It would have been easy, after that conversation with Professor Snape, for Emily to allow herself to become a second melancholy person in black palely loitering alone on a gallery, drinking a ridiculous amount of brandy and not to speaking to anyone, but Lucius didn't seem about to let that happen. Instead he escorted her out to the dance floor and insisted on spinning her around in a lively Viennese waltz.

"Really, my dear, if that miserable crustacean of a Snape doesn't leave you alone, I'm going to have a dreadful revenge on him. I'll arrange to have him locked up in a small closet with Felina Rosier."

"You introduced me to Felina Rosier. I wouldn't wish that even on Professor Snape."

"I'm just dying to see which of them would kill and eat the other first."

"As opposed to who would kill and eat the other second? That is vile and disgusting, sir," she said, between giggles.

"Yes, it is," he drawled back. "But you're laughing... aren't you?"

The third waltz began, and Emily's host showed no signs of wanting to leave the floor with her. "You know, Mr. Malfoy, I've been told that here in the ballrooms of the Second World, it used to be that if a gentleman danced three waltzes with a lady, it was tantamount to a proposal of marriage," she teased.

"Yes, I've heard that too. Splendid then. I shall get you a ring in the morning."

"Wouldn't Narcissa rather object?"

"I'll lend you to her sometimes," he said generously.

"Oh, so Church of England okayed polygamy while I was away? All right then but I want my own wing of the house."

"Then I shall call on the contractors right after I finish at the jeweller's."

Her sides were starting to hurt from laughing. "I am *not* having this conversation with you you're*terrible*!" But her tone rather said that he was terrible in a way that was dreadfully clever and appealing.

The grey eyes smirked down at her; then he sighed and shook his head. "Spoilsport."

Lucius called to his brother-in-law, who was standing close by the dance floor with Mr. Goyle. "Menzentius the Professor is an energetic dancer. Come cut in before I collapse with a fit of the vapours."

He turned back to her. "You don't mind, do you? You know how the old cats do love to meow."

"I'll just count one-two-three, and think of England."

Then Menzentius very obligingly cut in, and Lucius merged back into the crowd, after placing a very quick and very chaste kiss on the back of her hand.

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"Ah, Severus, old man." Malfoy approached Snape in the ballroom, pressing a fresh snifter of warmed brandy into his hand.

Narcissa had finally prevailed upon Snape to come down from the gallery and sit beside her in the ballroom, but then Draco had loudly complained of wanting to dance, and Narcissa had taken the floor with her son. The other guests were swirling by, to a stately foxtrot. Emily had not yet been relinquished by Menzentius.

Lucius Malfoy took Narcissa's vacated seat next to Snape. "I wanted to thank you for bringing that healing potion with you. Emily would have been in a terrible state without it."

"How is she?" Snape said, in the manner of a physician inquiring perfunctorily after a patient.

"I don't think she'll be giving any hands-on demonstrations in her classes for awhile, but she'll be fine in a week or two."

"Lucius how is it that ordinary iron burned her like that? I don't think a hot poker could have done more damage."

"The same is true of all the Fae. Iron doesn't occur naturally in their world, you see. For some reason, their flesh reacts violently to any contact with it."

"Did you know that her blood, once shed, looks quite blue? Does the iron cause some kind of cyanosis, or "

Lucius shrugged. "Faery blood is naturally blue I don't pretend to know why. If you please, Severus *don't* draw so much attention to that which makes her different from us. That always makes her uncomfortable, and from what she's told me in confidence, I think she's feeling rather under scrutiny this weekend."

Snape looked slightly abashed. "Of course."

A flash of a murderous scowl showed momentarily behind the gracious façade of his host's face. "I can't believe the carelessness of those damned elves putting iron on the table when there was a Faerie present. That would be about like someone inviting you or me to supper, and serving us off of radioactive plutonium. Be assured, someone will be well and truly punished for this."

"I thought she didn't want you to punish the elves," Snape said.

"Of course she didn't the Fianna are such a stoic lot that she'd probably say it was nothing if they gave her an iron bedstead by mistake. If it had been anyone other than Buckminster Swain's daughter who was handed an iron-framed teacup at my table, I should never be able to show my face in Arcadia again. Thank heaven for the generosity of old friends." He pressed a hand to his temple in relief.

"I hadn't realized the two of you knew each other so well," Snape said distantly. Both of them briefly turned toward the Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, now in conversation with Menzentius and the Parkinsons across the room. Narcissa Malfoy's brother seemed to be making quite a fuss of trying to look after her.

"Oh yes, I've know Emily quite awhile. Her father was one of my father's great school cronies."

"I didn't realize he went to Hogwarts. He was in Slytherin?"

"No, Ravenclaw but a very good pure-blood family," Lucius said, so the Swains were redeemed despite their lack of Slytherin-ness. "I met Emily the year before Narcissa and I were married, though it's been at least five years since I saw her last. You know, I really think it must have been at her wedding, back in the Third Kingdom."

Snape froze. "She's married?"

"Widowed, now, poor dear. Fairly recently," Malfoy said, heaving a heavy sigh and taking a covert sideways glance at his companion. "It's so awful things ended the way they did for her poor husband."

Snape took a deep swallow of brandy before replying. "Seems a bit young for a widow."

"He didn't exactly live a normal lifetime. Especially not for a Faerie."

"What on Earth happened?" Snape asked with some consternation.

"It didn't happen on Earth, actually, but in the Kingdoms. It was *quite* the scandal about three years back. You hadn't heard?" Lucius's tone implied that any half-decent friend or colleague would have kept up with such important events in Professor Swain's life.

"No," Snape said, a touch defensively. "To be perfectly honest, until September of this year, Faeries were only a few pages in my old History of Magic text to me. I hadn't imagined I'd ever be teaching alongside one of them."

"I see. Since you're curious, I suppose I must needs tell you the story," his cousin said with that sly smile Snape knew so very well the one that said he was about to be regaled with a rich dish of gossip and scandal. He knew from long experience that Lucius did simply love to talk, especially when the topic was someone else's darkest secrets.

"The Swains, you see, are a very old, *very* pure-blood family. Older than the Malfoys, believe it or not nearly as old as the venerable Princes, actually," Malfoy said with a slightly malicious laugh.

"Bully for them," Snape retorted.

"They're one of those families that are so old, and so rich, that they've gotten quite bored with politics and spend all their time at things like writing books in dead languages and breeding tiger striped orchids."

"Professor Swain breeds tiger striped orchids?"

"No, her Great-Aunt Mehitable does that. Emily's father's passion, on the other hand, was anything to do with Faeries. Originally, he was an historian, but then he was selected for the Tithe after he left Hogwarts and became obsessed with them: their magic, their culture. He's a real anthropologist, though not like that absurd Arthur Weasley and his obsession with Muggles."

"I'm curious. So you object to an interest in Muggles, but not in the Fae? Why?" Snape asked.

"Well, we can't all be pure-blood wizards of course," Malfoy observed, with only a slight sneer. "But the Faeries are all right at least they use magic. What's really delightful about them is that everyone uses magic quite openly in their world there's no need to hide oneself and one's culture from an encroaching infestation of Muggles and their torch-carrying church leaders. The only ones who don't use magic there are the Orcs, and they are a despised enemy tribe who are kept properly in their place when they attempt to take over the Faeries' rightful territory "

"Lucius... not again with the torch-bearing Muggles, please?" Snape said, with an air of pained infinite patience. "How long ago was that?"

"Sorry. I'd forgotten I was talking to an academic, for whom patriotic feeling is... simply intellectual," Malfoy said with a thin smile, taking a deep swallow of his own brandy. "At any rate even if the Arcadian level of civilization is of course some centuries behind the Wizarding world their food and wine are wonderful, the scenery is magnificent, and the climate is superb. Narcissa and I have often considered the possibility of building a vacation home there. And of course they're an extremely handsome people." He nodded very graciously to Professor Swain across the ballroom. She smiled prettily back at him.

"My father's old schoolmate Buckminster certainly thought highly of them. After his first wife died, he went to live in the Third Kingdom and married again in his middle age to one of King Gwydion's knights. Lady Elaine was *quite* the beauty in her youth, I'll give her that. There's still a pure-blood branch who live in a grand old manor out in the Lake District, half-brothers and sisters.

"Emily's mother's line would have been infinitely respectable her mother was a Greenbarrow, no less but then her grandfather married some sort of " his lip curled " *Muggle*. But the Fae have always been known for taking... *peculiar* sorts of lovers now and then. There's some story about how, back in the Renaissance, a Faery Queen fell in love with a Muggle weaver due to some messing around with love potions, and made a perfect fool of herself over him. No accounting for taste in these temporary romantic liaisons of theirs. Ah well, it's never long before the lady wakes up saying, "'Methinks I loved an ass.'"

He gave a knowing sort of laugh. Professor Snape gripped his brandy glass much harder than was necessary, staring fixedly at some point far across the room. Malfoy took

another sideways glance at his cousin and smiled covertly before continuing.

"Buckminster's first family were at Hogwarts all Ravenclaws but then he fell prey to a notion of an overseas education for his youngest-born and sent her to Beauxbatons. Afterward the mother unaccountably sent her to some Muggle university... Oxbridge, I think... but who can remember these absurd Muggle names. Then the Muggles offered her a teaching job. A few years later though, war broke out at home and she went back to serve in the Fianna. Shortly after the peace was declared, we heard that she was getting married, to one of King Armus's knights. King Armus, you know, rules the Sixth Kingdom."

Snape rolled his eyes. Same old penchant for name-dropping as always.

"So we went off to Arcadia for the wedding. Sir Dorien Tumnus turned out to be this tall dark fellow. He was thought quite good-looking at Court, though personally, I thought him a bit dull. One of those people who's *always* got his nose in a book. No title other than knight of the realm, either. Not who I would have expected her to marry in such a headlong fashion. But they seemed happy enough together." Malfoy shrugged. "Her parents liked him."

"How did he die?" Snape asked quietly.

Malfoy lowered his voice confidingly. "Well, unfortunately for him, a few people were rather disappointed when Miss Swain got married no virgin bride, that one but there was one fellow who took it very hard. Apparently he stalked Dorien down during a hunt, and killed him. Arrow in the back. Said it was an accident. But when Emily confronted him directly, though, he confessed but tried to defend it by telling her he loved her." Malfoy had a grand laugh at that. "What men will say to justify themselves before women. It's simply pathetic.

"But that's an actual legal defence to them falls under an ancient Faery legal doctrine, the Right of Passion. There's a primitive sort of legal system there, you see. If this fellow could convince the King that he had killed Dorien because he was out of his head with love for her, he could soften what was coming to him.

"Emily wasn't content to allow the King to dispense justice on Robinett, however. She publicly threw down a gauntlet, and challenged him to a formal trial by combat under the same Right of Passion that he had invoked. That sort of thing is legal there, and since he was the admitted murderer of her husband, she had the right to his blood or even his life, if she could part him from it. It was either face the angry widow in single combat, or face the King's justice. He opted for the duel.

"And he died."

Snape's face was composed, but his eyes were wide. "She killed him?"

"Oh yes," Malfoy drawled, with gleeful satisfaction. "Rather bloodily, I'm afraid. They say it was very elegantly played out I dearly wish I could have been there to see it. Apparently, she completely severed one of his femoral arteries in her second forward lunge."

"The fellow can't have... done much moving around after that, then," Snape said faintly, leaning forward and putting a hand on the inside of his own thigh in an unconscious protective gesture.

"From what I've heard, that didn't stop the poor bastard from trying," Malfoy said, noticing his cousin's discomfort with a silvery laugh. "Left alone, he would have bled to death soon enough. But she moved in for the kill in her third action and severed his spinal cord and jugular vein which is a classic Fianna killing blow, by the way. Robinett was long dead by the time he hit the ground. The whole thing took less than a minute.

"Are you all right, there, cousin? You're looking a bit green," Malfoy's pleasant voice said.

"I'm fine," Snape said, grimacing. "Quite a story, that. It sounds more like a dissection than a combat."

"Oh, yes, the Fianna are extremely precise with those rapiers of theirs. They believe that it's more... *merciful* to kill an opponent as fast and painlessly as possible. They school their squires in attacking vulnerable points of an opponent's body, so that they can dispatch them in the most efficient manner possible. They believe you should kill an enemy with two strokes maximum anything more is just sloppy work. It's all sublimely practical. Their approach is rather cerebral and utilitarian to my mind, not much scope for aesthetics or personal style, but they do keep those Orcs at bay.

"I've never seen her actually kill anyone, more's the pity but since she joined the Fianna she's become known as being *very* good at it. She didn't join up for proper combat duty until about eight years ago, when the Third Kingdom declared open war against an especially unpleasant invading Orc tribe. But when I was there, she was only seventeen and already considered one of the best swords at Court. Well, except for her mother, but that goes without saying where the great Lady Elaine is concerned."

Snape was staring off into the middle distance. "What happened after she killed him?"

"You mean, did her government exact some punishment on her for it? Not at all. She challenged him under the Right of Passion, and heaven knows she had cause. Thus, her actions were seen as wholly justified at least by the Fae. Her wizard friends are less willing to get behind her on it, but even they agree that her actions were better justified than his were, as far as invoking the same defence."

Malfoy turned confidingly to Snape. "You see, as far as the Faeries were all concerned that was the end of it. He murdered her husband, and she avenged him. Justice was served. Case closed. Now it's back to our dandelion wine and dancing by moonlight. That's how the Fair Folk are, Severus. They play by the old rules. They bloody *invented* the old rules."

Snape's eyes drifted across the room Professor Swain was waltzing with Emmitt Parkinson, and she seemed a graceful dancer indeed. Her sparkling black gown wafted around her ankles with every step. Even Parkinson, that old tyrant, seemed to be enjoying himself more than usual.

"She doesn't seem the sort to just... slash someone open like that," Snape said, grimacing.

"No, at first glance, I agree with you, it's hard to believe. But don't let the pretty robes fool you the woman is a Knight Protector of her realm, Severus. She's killed Orcs by the cartload on the battlefields there have been land wars going on between the Orcs and the Fae for thousands of years. Though I daresay she never would have killed Jayson Robinett, if those particular circumstances hadn't arisen.

"Do you know what the Fianna call her? *'Our Lady of the Blade.'*" Malfoy's eyes raked over the slender, fair-haired figure on the dance floor with a long, slow look of admiration. "Picturesque, isn't it?"

"Terribly," Snape replied.

Malfoy turned back to Snape with a breath of tenor laughter. "Ah, Severus. You're not alone in being a bit dismayed to hear it there are others who have taken the position that what she did was barbaric, and that she should have let the king handle it. But I've always admired her actions in the matter, even though it's not the most popular stance to take in certain pure-blood circles. I can't describe what I would do to anyone who took someone I loved from me.

"I think she showed remarkable restraint, personally if someone had killed Draco or Narcissa, and I was given the opportunity to mete out justice on the killer, it wouldn't be over in less than a minute, *believe me.* I think there's a tremendous kind of poetic justice in allowing a murdered man's wife to deliver the *coup de grace* herself, rather than having the authorities step in and take over." His tone chided his companion slightly for being so gauche.

Snape looked morosely down at his empty brandy glass. "I may have said something rather unfortunate earlier, then," he muttered.

"Really? What was that?" Malfoy prompted, interested.

"Oh, not much when we received our invitations, she made some comment about whatever was she going to wear, and I told her to try wearing a black frock, because she wears them every day, you know. I thought it was some sort of colour preference."

"You mean like your preference for wearing black every day?"

"There is a long established tradition of professors appearing before their classes in scholarly black, you know, even if Hogwarts allows its teachers a bit more leeway in their appearance," Snape said with a flash of slightly guilty irritation. "In her case now it seems more like... mourning."

"Mourning. How very quaint and Victorian," Malfoy said, with an amused glance at Felina Rosier and Druella Black, still staring at each other in annoyance across the ballroom. "More brandy?"

Snape's eyes followed his colleague as she waltzed with Marcus Flint, Sr. She seemed to be getting prevailed upon to dance with nearly everyone.

He held out his glass.

"Please."

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By midnight, the musicians had gone, and Druella Black and most of the wives had gone off to bed (and Menzentius Black, now very unsteady on his feet, had been helped upstairs by four house-elves and Goliath, the goblin major-domo.)

Narcissa proposed a few games of whist in the main hall before the fire, and everyone else had agreed that this was a capital idea. Lucius had a word with one of the house-elves, and by the time everyone had moved to the hall, there were several four-person tables with comfortable chairs set up in front of the cavernous fire.

Emily took a place at the far right-hand table, and soon Mrs. Rosier, and Mr. Macnair had joined her. A moment later, after she confessed that she had never played before, Lucius took the seat on her right in order to coach her along. Draco had taken a seat at the table just beyond his father.

Outside, snow had begun falling again, and a freezing wind was whistling around the vast panes of the windows. Without the exercise of dancing to keep warm, and in the seat closest to the windows, Emily soon began to shiver. Faery silk, while beautiful, was not the warmest fabric in this world. She stoically took another swallow from her wineglass, refusing to ask any of the servants for her cloak and thereby acknowledge that Felina Rosier had been right about the impracticality of her gown. A second later, however, Lucius called two house-elves to him and whispered to them and a moment later they draped Emily's fur-lined cloak around her shoulders.

"Thank you," she said, ostensibly to the elves, but more in the direction of her host. He smiled covertly at her, swirling the brandy in his glass.

"Tully, Skerry do build up the fire," he called to two more elves. "It's gotten chilly in here. I'm simply freezing."

The elves immediately rushed to throw more wood on the fire, and to puff up its brightness with a bellows. Mr. Macnair was shuffling the cards, readying them for the first hand of whist. Felina Rosier wrinkled her nose it would have been, of course, beyond rude to comment disparagingly on a guest's lack of preparation for the chill of the weather when one's host had already noted how cold it was in the hall. Lucius glanced at Mrs. Rosier and smirked, then leaned close to Emily and drew a fold of her cloak more securely across her bare shoulder.

"Still chilly, love?"

Emily smiled. "Much better now, thank you. And you?"

"Much better too, thanks," he said, returning her smile, and picking up his cards.

But even a clear demonstration of their host's favour was not enough to distract Mrs. Rosier from her favourite game of subjecting other women to a verbal Death of a Thousand Cuts. "I do admire your boldness, Lady Swain, in wrapping yourself in head-to-toe sable, what with the economy being what it is."

Emily looked uncomprehendingly at her. "I'm sorry? Bold how?"

"Well, last I heard, dear, fur was quite expensive," Mrs. Rosier explained patiently. Evidently the logic of taking another woman to task for wearing an extravagant fur whilst she herself was wearing a diamond tiara was totally lost on good Mistress Rosier.

"Oh, well, I only really had to pay the tailor I already had the fur."

"I daresay you didn't pay for it, dearie," Mrs. Rosier replied with a thin smile. "So we've got ourselves an admirer, do we? I think you might, you're young and pretty still." Her tone said that any woman who did not doff her youth and beauty when she herself was in mourning was guilty of a tremendous *faux pas* of etiquette.

"My late husband gave it to me, actually. It's not sable, but weir panther," Emily said, taking a deep breath and controlling her temper with an effort.

"I see. Your husband must have been very fond of you *indeed*, then." Only Felina Rosier could make a deceased husband's great affection for his wife sound somehow suspect.

"Well, he was fond of me, of course, but there was rather more to it than that. Where I come from, it's customary to give any trophies that result from a hunt to the hunter who takes the killing blow on the quarry," Emily explained. "Unless of course you're a guest on someone else's land, the way we will be tomorrow, and then the landowner is entitled to parcel out the kill as he or she sees fit." She nodded in the direction of their host.

Mrs. Rosier smiled at her disbelievingly. "You're not actually trying to tell me that you killed that beast yourself, are you?"

"They were a mated pair that went renegade. It really was a necessity." Emily shrugged, feeling extremely self-conscious. "And I had a very great knight indeed assisting me." She turned back to her cards.

"They went renegade? You mean they went *man-eater*?" Draco Malfoy sounded as though that was the most thrilling thing he had ever heard.

Emily glanced nervously around the room. It felt as though everyone was staring at her.

"Child-eater, actually," she said in a quiet voice. "A six-year-old girl. The mother was quite devastated."

There was a tinkling noise Narcissa's glass had slipped from her stunned fingers and fallen to the rug before the fire, where it didn't break, but scattered whiskey droplets and ice. Instantly three house-elves were after the spill with tiny dishtowels.

Macnair raised his glass to her. "Well! Good show then! That's how dangerous beasts who harm children *should* be treated, to my mind."

Lucius smiled approvingly at him. "Well said, Walden. Hear hear."

He leaned forward and clinked his brandy glass against Emily's. "You might be surprised to hear, Felina, that hunting down the occasional renegade panther is the least of Commander Swain's accomplishments. She's been decorated twice for valour on the battlefield in her homeland. While some of us were sitting comfortably in our gardens, Emily was keeping her world safe from marauding monsters."

There was another little lull in the conversation. Emily stared at her hand of whist.

"Lucius, please... everyone's looking at me now," she muttered aside to him.

"Let them look," he whispered, covering her hand with his again. Then he turned to Felina Rosier, not withdrawing his hand from Emily's, and with one glacial, eloquent look and an infinitesimal raise of an eyebrow warned her off of criticising his friend any further, if she valued his goodwill. Mrs. Rosier subsided, with a little droop of her shoulders. Then a moment later, Lucius smiled jovially at that rather deflated lady, as if to thank her for being such a good sport, picked up his own cards, and began whimsically wondering aloud what he should play next. Mrs. Rosier was only too happy to helpfully offer him her advice.

Emily, watching his handsome profile, suddenly thought that perhaps she had underestimated Lucius Malfoy. Fifteen years of marriage seemed to have wrought a real change in him she couldn't recall him ever having been so gallant, so kind, and so considerate.

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instinctively going to where her sword would have lain, had she been camped with her unit near disputed border territory. Instead, her hand touched velvet cushions, a luxurious hearth rug. She both listened and watched closely, straining forward in the dark.

Men's hushed voices, at least two of them, outside in the corridor. At least two sets of footsteps and the cadence of one person's gait was stumbling. There was a sound of someone lurching against the wall beside her door. She threw back the covers and stood up, moving silently away from her makeshift pallet, sliding into the deeper shadows to the left of the hearth.

As she watched, the doorknob began to turn, and then the door began to open into her room.

Emily quickly spoke a word, Obscuring herself and flattening against the wall.

The door only opened a few inches she heard a man's slurring voice saying "... *wherezafeery? zisseroom*?... " Two other voices hissed what seemed like interjections of prohibition she caught *No! stay out of there!* in a voice she didn't recognize immediately and someone dragged the slurring-voiced person away from the door. A second later, it was quietly eased almost shut again, but the tab of the doorknob mechanism had not slid all the way into the doorjamb socket, and a strong draught blew it ajar again a minute later. She heard the voices retreating down the corridor.

There was no doubt in her mind what had happened that idiot Menzentius had woken up out of his drunken stupor and decided that perhaps she would welcome his attentions in her bedroom. Luckily, someone had caught him just before he made good on that plan and dragged him away from her door. She felt shaken and angry so much for thinking she could sleep unmolested in a friend's home with that moron staggering about. Only her people's stern customs of respect for hospitality kept her from going out and giving him a practical hands-on demonstration of what '... *zafeery*' thought of having her sleep so disturbed.

The voices continued down the corridor. She heard a laugh, then... *get to her soon enough.*

The back of her neck prickled. Suddenly, she wanted very much to know who was on the other side of that door.

She reached for the robe on the floor beside her and pulled it on, then slid through the blowing door and out into the corridor, pulling it silently closed behind her. To an ordinary observer, it would have appeared that the draught had finally blown the door securely shut. In the ornamental gloom just outside, she leaned against a wall for a moment, letting her eyes adjust to the darkness, and strengthening her self-Obscuring effect with another recitation of her *Mot de Puissance*. Then she swiftly followed the voices down the corridor.

She caught up to within twenty paces of three men and as she suspected, she recognized Menzentius Black, being supported by Walden Macnair on one side, and Marcus Flint, Sr. on the other. They seemed to be heading for the hall just inside the foyer, where the guests had assembled that morning.

Emily moved silently onto the balcony gallery overlooking the hall as Mr. Flint and Mr. Macnair began negotiating Menzentius down the stairway to the ground level. She paused, leaning on the gallery railing, still Obscured, looking down at the tableau below her.

The male members of Lucius's family (all but Draco), and all of their male guests were clustered in a tight little knot in front of the great fireplace, which was still crackling brightly. They had all gotten out of their fancy dress and resumed their normal dark robes, and seemed deep in some very intense, and very absorbing, conversation. Lucius seemed to be holding forth in a long speech, to an audience composed of Mr. Crabbe, Mr. Goyle, and Mr. Bulstrode, while Macnair, Mr. Flint, and the groggy-looking Menzentius joined a debate between Mr. Nott and Mr. Parkinson. Professor Snape was hunched silently in a great armchair, listening very attentively to everyone. At first she thought the group was comprised only of the men, but then she spotted Druella Black, resplendent in another large armchair, her rheumy eyes glittering, like some dread dowager queen.

But she couldn't have said later why that scene just people in front of a fire talking struck her as so very sinister.

Perhaps it was because there was no light in that vast dark room other than the giant fire in the hearth which backlit everyone to lurid, Faustian effect. Maybe it was because all of the company below looked so deadly serious, so fixed on matters of grave import. Maybe it was because of the way they were all conversing in such hushed voices, inaudible even to ears as sensitive as her own.

Or maybe it struck her as sinister because the idea of going down and chummily saying hello to them all, asking if they had all popped down for a nightcap, and if she could join them, filled her with a mysterious, but heart-pounding and immediate, terror. Even the ones she knew quite well Lucius, and to a lesser extent Professor Snape seemed profoundly forbidding at that moment. All she knew was that she didn't want them to discover her watching them at any cost.

She thought for a moment how easy it would be to go back up to her room, pack up, bundle herself up, and climb out the window while still Obscured, and then Apparate lickety-split back to Hogwarts as soon as she passed the Malfeasant wards... but that would betray a lack of confidence in the Malfoys' hospitality that would probably mean that Lucius would never speak to her again.

They didn't seem to be really *doing* anything, she thought, calming down with the help of a few deep breaths. Just talking. Just doing a lot of talking. And given the amount of money and political influence for which members of this group were responsible, it was entirely possible that whatever topic they had decided to discuss in their late-night caucus was very pressing and important indeed.

With those thoughts in mind, she turned and silently went back to her room. Once arriving there, however, she placed a Faery Ward of Impassability on every entrance to the room laying her hands on the doors and windows and whispering *Stoppian*, backed by her word so that while the ward was in place, it would have been easier to chop through the solid wood rather than open any of them without her specific invitation. Then she took her favourite duelling rapier out of her trunk and slid it, sheathed, under the cushions before the fire before lying down again.

Only with these precautions in place did she finally drop off to sleep.

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Emily awoke that morning to the sound of light but persistent knocking at her bedroom door. A high tremulous voice was squeaking, "Miss Professor, please? Miss Professor... please? Good morning, please? Breakfast... please?" She sat up and quickly put on her robe, then pulled the rapier out from under the cushions and laid it on a bench near her trunk. Next she moved to the door and, laying a hand on it, muttered *Ende Stoppian* and her word. Turning back toward the hearth, she called, "Come in!"

A towel-clad house-elf her ladies' maid, Cecile, who had helped her dress for the ball the previous night backed into the room carrying a delicate porcelain breakfast tray, which she put on a little table near the fire. She first poured Emily a cup of tea which smelled deliciously like lemon peel and honey then scurried to build up the fire again, after which she moved back to Emily's side and dropped a wretched little curtsy. "Please, Miss Professor, be you wanting anything?"

Emily indicated the cushions and coverlets on the floor, a little guiltily. "Um, if you could put all those things back on the bed, dear?"

"Right away, Miss Professor, ma'am... " Cecile made up the bed with lightning speed. Then she came back toward the breakfast table, where Emily was buttering a wheat scone, and poured more tea with another curtsy.

There was something different about those hands... after the elf had set down the teapot, Emily gently took hold of her arm. "Wait, Cecile let me see your hands."

The thin, long-fingered hands not totally unlike Emily's own were wrapped inexpertly in bandages, under which red blistered skin was visible. She certainly had not had such injuries the previous night before the ball, when she had laid out Emily's gown, coiffed her hair, and manicured her nails.

"What happened to your hands?" she asked.

"Cecile... had to iron them," the little creature said, hanging her head abjectly.

"Why?" Emily asked incredulously, gently taking her by the shoulders.

"I, um... well... we all had to iron our hands last night, miss." Emily looked past the elf's face to her own bandaged hand, resting lightly on Cecile's elbow.

"Who made you iron your hands? I thought Lucius said that he wasn't going to punish you," Emily said, looking pleadingly into the little elf's face, wanting him to be innocent of such disregard toward her and such a horrible act toward his servants.

"Master didn't make us do it," Cecile replied, and Emily breathed a sigh of relief.

"Then who did? What happened?"

"Mistress said... Mistress told us... Mistress was angry," Cecile stammered. Then she pressed her lips together and just trembled, imploring with huge liquid brown eyes.

Emily leaned back in her chair, staring grimly at her own bandaged hand. *Well. Lucius told me he wouldn't punish the elves, but Narcissa didn't, did she.* She could scarcely believe the sheer cruelty of Narcissa's punishment over an accident, a simple mistake. Perhaps, she reflected grimly, Narcissa had forgotten about the Faery reaction to iron and absentmindedly told the elves to put out the wrought iron cups herself, and was now covering for her own carelessness. How someone like Lucius could stand being married to such a hideous creature, she had no idea.

Then she turned her attention back to her breakfast, releasing Cecile from her scrutiny. "Oh, that's all right, you don't have to tell me any more. But Cecile... I... I need you to run an errand for me. Do you know where Professor Snape's room is?"

"Yes, miss," the elf quavered.

"Run up there and tell him I'm in *dreadful* pain from my burned hand, and... you want to bring me a bit more of his Healing Potion, if he can spare it. Come right back with it, and bring me some fresh gauze bandages, tape, and a scissors. Go right now. Quickly." There, that wasn't too dishonest she was in pain from her burnt hand, and Cecile probably would have wanted to bring her some of the Healing Potion, if she had been previously aware that it existed.

"Yes, miss " Cecile was gone from the room in an instant. Emily barely had time to finish the scone and tea by the time Cecile returned, carrying bandages and the stoppered bottle of blue Healing Potion and an eyedropper very carefully in front of her. She set them down on the table next to Emily's breakfast tray and waited silently.

Emily picked up the bottle the same one Snape had taken from his bag the night before with some surprise. She had been expecting Professor Snape to have sent a tiny vial of this potion, and to have taken a considerably longer time to part with it. Healing Potion was a precious substance, worth its weight in gold in her world. It was difficult, time-consuming, and expensive to make it was really a testament to Snape's skill as a Potions master that he was able to make it at all.

For him to have sent his entire bottle of it to her was either an extremely generous and trusting gesture or, an extremely arrogant one, a show of despising profligacy tossed to that caddish and amoral, not to mention clumsy, acquaintance of his. And as always, with him, she couldn't tell which.

"Cecile, what did the Professor say when you asked him for this?"

"Mr. Professor, sir, he says, 'All right, take this to her,' and he gives me the bottle from his bag, Miss Professor, ma'am," Cecile said.

"What else did he say?"

"Well, I says you were in *dreadful* pain from your hand, Miss Professor, likes you told me, and that I wanted to be bringing you a bits more of his Healing Potion, if he could spare it, likes you told me. Then he says, 'All right, take this to her,' and gives me this blue bottle, this one here, that he gets from his black doctor bag, ma'am," Cecile answered. "And he gives me this little dropper too."

"That was all he said?"

"Well, as I am leaving his room, he says, 'Bring it back when she is done with it,' Mr. Professor, sir, he says."

"All right... well, how did he say it? Did he sound angry, or... did he sound, um... "

Cecile looked up at her uncomprehendingly, her slender little bandaged hands clasped in front of her. Emily stopped herself in mid-sentence with pang of guilt she had sent for the potion to help Cecile, not in order to pump her for information about Professor Snape. *Some fecking Knight Protector of the helpless and downtrodden I am today. Bloody hell.*

"Oh never mind, dear. But we can't have you helping me with your hands like that, can we?"

"Cecile has had to help with ironed hands before, Miss Professor. It be not stopping me from doing my work," the elf interjected pathetically.

"Well, regardless, I, um... I... I don't like the idea of my ladies' maid touching my hair and my clothes with oozing burns on her hands." There, that was an absolutely airtight reason, and she was sticking to it. "So you just *have* to do as I say. Understood?"

A direct order was definitely something Cecile understood. She dropped another little curtsy. "Yes, Miss Professor."

"Let's get those bandages off your hands." The blood-crusted gauze was off in a second. Emily opened the healing potion and eyedropper, and dispensed a few drops onto the backs of Cecile's hands. "This might itch a bit."

Professor Snape had been right about the potion's efficacy on simple burns wherever she dropped the potion, the burned skin healed itself almost instantaneously. In a moment, Cecile's pale grey skin was whole and unblemished over the backs of her hands. Emily wrapped her hands back up in the blood-soaked bandages again, and strictly cautioned her not to take them off for at least a week or two.

"Cecile... how many elves live in this house?" she asked.

"Um, there be fifteen others of us, Miss Professor," came the reply.

"All right... " Emily went into her bathroom and rummaged around in her cosmetics bag until she came up with a miniature bottle of mouthwash left over from a long-ago hotel stay. She emptied the bottle into the sink, and then washed it out thoroughly. Bringing it back to the table, she dispensed sixty drops of the blue potion into the bottle, and gave it to Cecile with the eyedropper. "Now, I want you to give four drops of this potion to each of the elves in the house. It won't heal them up completely, but it will help with the worst of it. Tell them all to keep their hands bandaged for at least the next ten days or so. Can you hide this somewhere in your uniform?"

"Yes, miss," Cecile said, faintly, huge brown eyes fixed on her face.

"Good. Now take this bottle back to Professor Snape. If he asks about the eyedropper, tell him I dropped it and broke it. Do you understand?"

"Yes... yes, miss," Cecile answered.

Emily looked closely at the bottle of healing potion before handing it back to Cecile the level of the blue liquid seemed noticeably diminished to her. Ah well, she would

replenish his stock from the apothecary's in Diagon Alley after she got back to Hogwarts.

When Emily came out of the bath wrapped in a robe, Cecile had returned from her errand and her navy tweed riding habit was laid out on her bed, pressed immaculately, her black riding boots had been polished to a mirrorlike shine; on the breakfast table, there were a fresh pot of hot herb tea and more scones with honey, a bunch of fresh grapes and quinces, and a vase of fresh flowers, no doubt from the hothouse downstairs. Cecile was warming Emily's slippers by the fire and ran up and curtsied deeply when the bathroom door opened.

"Can I be helping you with your hair, miss? Be you wanting anything?"

Emily smiled. *You're welcome.*

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The group of hunters was to begin assembling in the great front hall by noon, and Emily joined them at about ten past the hour, after carefully removing the wards from all the doors and windows of her room.

All of the men and some of the women Narcissa, Mrs. Rosier, Miss Wilkes, Mrs. Crabbe, and Mrs. Goyle were dressed for the hunt, in boots and riding habits. Lucius was of course the first one to greet her when she came down to the hall Count Vronsky could not have looked more handsome in his black riding habit and astrakhan over-robe. There was no trace of the foreboding figure he had seemed in front of the fire the night before when he put his usual kiss of greeting on her cheek, and smiled at her with his usual slightly conspiratorial joviality, he seemed only the usual Lucius, the one that was comforting and familiar to her.

Narcissa was immediately at his side with an elaborately tolerant sidelong smile looking like an exquisite czarina in charcoal grey, with a matching capelet lined with white mink over her shoulders, and a white mink hat over her braided hair. Yes, Narcissa was a very beautiful woman indeed, Emily thought when her hostess wished her a good morning. She was just lovely for someone who made her servants iron their hands. Because of that morning's episode with Cecile, Emily's manner toward Narcissa was far less cordial than usual.

At the front of the hall, Professor Snape was talking to Draco on one of the sofas beside the great fireplace, and Lady had again sprawled her dignified furry bulk beside him and draped her head over his knee. He was looking very well that day, with his hair freshly combed and slightly damp from the bath, and looking very slim and elegant in his black riding costume and boots, but she wasn't about to stare too admiringly at him, as he might take that as further proof of her supposed rakishness and amorality.

A few house elves were circulating silently, offering tall china mugs of steaming tea on little silver trays, and Emily noticed that while their hands were still wrapped in crusty bandages, there was very little burned skin visible. She accepted a cup of orange spice tea from one of them and the little creature almost wiggled with gratitude when she thanked him.

The goblin major-domo appeared at Lucius's side and muttered something to him with a crisp little bow and Lucius dismissed him, then addressed the assembled company.

"Well then, everyone Goliath tells me that the horses are all saddled up and ready, so let's be making our way out to the stables. And our quarry has been spotted near Narcissa's croquet green, ripping the rosebushes to bits, so do let's go put him out of my misery."

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Out in the courtyard by the stables, several goblins dressed as grooms in diminutive riding boots and horsemen's dusters were lining up a row of some of the most beautiful horses Emily had ever seen clearly the Malfoys' good taste extended to horseflesh. Lucius was holding the reins of a giant bay stallion with a black mane and tail, and Narcissa was already mounted on a pure white Andalusian. The air was freezing, and it looked as though even more snow had fallen during the night.

"Emily, there you are," Lucius called. "They're saddling up the sweetest little mare for you in the stables, if you'd like to run in and collect her. Walden will fit you up with a bow as well. Severus, show her where the weapons room is, would you?"

"This way, Professor," Snape said with a curt nod.

Snape led her to the weapons room, just off the stables.

And from the look of the weapons room, someone in the Malfoy house expected to fight off an invading army of marauding Turks sometime soon.

Swords of all kinds, from French court swords to great heavy two-handed English bastard swords lined the walls, giving way to ancient Briton and Gallic morning stars and battle maces. Briton longbows and crossbows were well represented in the tremendous array of armaments in that arsenal and arrows and crossbow bolts hung plentifully against the walls. Walden Macnair was looking over them with a practised eye, while she watched him warily, still worried by the cryptic remark about *getting to her soon enough* made the previous night.

"Here we are, milady I've found a nice little bow just the right size for a lady's hand. There you go " Macnair had plucked one of the crossbows from the walls and was handing it to Emily

"Sir, I " She sprang back, allowing it to clatter to the stable floor. "I can't take a crossbow out with me today, I'm sorry."

"Why not?" Macnair asked, mystified, picking the bow up off the ground and checking its mechanism for damage.

"Because the trigger and metal fittings are made of iron, sir," she said quietly. "If I try to use one of those, I'll end up with burnt hands again."

"Oh, of course," Macnair said, putting the bow back in its place on the wall.

Professor Snape looked at her gravely. "Then really, Professor, perhaps you had best go back up to the house and pass on hunting today."

"I'll be all right, sir. Thank you for your concern." She turned back toward the door.

"No, really, Professor, I don't think you should go out there unarmed," Snape said sternly, stopping her with a not-ungentle hand on her shoulder. "No matter how many dangerous beasts you've fought in your native country, Lucius says this is a very big and destructive boar we'll be after today, and "

"I am armed, sir," she interjected calmly.

She plucked something from her right lapel, and silently spoke a word and suddenly there was a large hunting dagger in her hand, three inches wide and a foot long. It was the sort of thing a hunter would have used to filet a salmon, or skin an elk. She indicated her lapel "There are others in reserve, as well."

Snape leaned in for a closer look and noted what would have looked like stickpins in the shape of tiny, perfectly detailed miniature daggers and swords to the ordinary observer, piercing the blue wool of her lapel in a neat row. "All functional, I take it?"

"Yes, sir. *Reducio* is extremely convenient for this sort of thing. After all, I can't exactly walk around Hogwarts, Hogsmeade, Diagon Alley, et cetera, with a three-foot duelling rapier hanging off my belt, with the weapons laws being what they are." She spoke a word again and then slotted the miniature dagger back into her lapel.

"I suppose not," Snape said briefly, stepping back and gesturing for her to precede him out of the room.

"So we're not hunting foxes or pheasants but boar today?" Emily asked, walking back out in the main stables with Snape and Macnair following.

Macnair paused before mounting his horse, a heavy mottled black with ruffled fetlocks. "Yes, miss a great big'un, Lucius says. It's tearing up the fences and landscaping like anything, and they don't dare let the dog out while it's out there. Menzentius has a dreadful mad-on to go after it for weeks."

Emily glanced at Narcissa's brother, who looked so dull and headachy that he had to be helped onto his horse by Mr. Goyle. "No doubt he's a mighty hunter indeed," she observed dryly. Behind her, Professor Snape turned a snort of laughter into a cough.

"Yeah, I think he took the worst of it last night with the claret, poor chap. But don't you worry there, miss, I won't let the bugger near you." He patted something strapped to his saddle and Emily recognised a boar-hunting lance, with vicious-looking pointed head, and a bar some feet down the staff to keep a boar speared through the mouth from biting off a hunter's arm after the killing blow.

"Thank you, sir," she said. "Might I ask how big this great big'un really is?"

"Ruddy damned big and you're certainly welcome, miss," he said, winking at her so familiarly that she felt rather repulsed. He mounted his horse, then nodded to Snape "See you out there, Severus." and was off.

Well, that was vague. Emily was beginning to feel uneasy about going off to hunt a quarry about which she knew virtually nothing.

Another surly goblin in a groom's uniform and riding boots led out a tall bay gelding and handed the reins to Professor Snape. He paused for a moment, stroking the horse's beautiful arched neck with a black-gloved hand. The groom then brought out a pretty, fleet-looking dappled-grey mare for Emily, and then offered her his hand while steadying the near stirrup for her.

"That's all right I can do it, thank you," she said to the groom, then took hold of the saddle and leapt up onto the mare's back as lightly as a bit of blown thistledown. The groom stepped back, his eyes widening, and muttered something that sounded like *Nimble little thing, aintcha* under his breath, then headed toward the back of the stables.

"Do a bit of riding at home, then, I take it?" came Professor Snape's voice, in a tone of stating the extremely obvious.

"Well, our travelling options are limited to either riding one's horse somewhere, or walking there," she replied, in the same tone.

"I see. Tell me did the potion help at all the second time?" Snape asked. The bay gelding was rubbing the side of his face against his arm.

"Uh... yes, it helped a great deal. Thank you, very much. I feel much better now." She glanced down at her bandaged hand, gingerly holding the leather reins, and cursed inwardly that she had not yet put on her riding gloves. A second later, she hid her hand in the pocket of her coat with what she hoped was an entirely casual air.

"Took a rather heavy dose of it, I thought," he continued acidly. "I would have thought you'd be more recovered by now. I do hope breaking the eyedropper didn't make too much of a mess."

"No, not at all. My maid's the sort who can have that cleaned up in a minute."

"Evidently they didn't teach *Reparo* when you were in school?"

"Didn't think to use it, sorry. Perhaps I was just appalled at myself for being so clumsy." What was it with all these questions the man was like a Scotland Yard detective after a criminal.

"Ah, yes, of course. You are just the *clumsiest* person that I, or the Malfoys' groom, ever saw." Snape chuckled pityingly and shook his head, with the kind of look he might have given a Gryffindor claiming a dog ate her homework. "You are truly a *terrible* liar, Professor. Any one of the Slytherin girls is a seasoned con artist by comparison. Neville bloody Longbottom can lie more convincingly than you."

"All right, fine, it was for Cecile and the elves. They were hurt worse than I was," she replied in an angry whisper. "Are you going to tell anyone? Shall I wait here while you go tell Narcissa and make her boiling mad at me for interfering?"

He only looked at her a look that said he was disappointed in her for even asking him such a question, and even more disappointed in her for being so very thick, yet again. Then he deftly swung up onto his horse's back, and in another second had urged him forward and out of the stable at a brisk trot.

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The boar had uprooted a small tree and was chewing on its tender roots with his great jaws at the sound of horses' hooves, he looked up with a mildly startled expression, momentarily uncertain as to whether he should flee or stand his ground but when his small brown eyes sized them up, he perceived no threat. Then he lowered his head, and pawed the ground. Attitude of aggression and readiness. He wasn't afraid.

"Lucius we should go," she cried desperately to him. "You can't hunt an animal like this under these "

Unmindful of her warning, Malfoy aimed his crossbow at the creature and got off his first shot and the bolt from his crossbow hit the creature dead in the shoulder. The sharp metal head hit the boar with a dull, meaty sound, not stopping until it chunked against solid bone. The boar reacted in agony, falling backward against his off foreleg, and howling in torment.

But then he recovered himself, turned his gleaming, maddened red eyes in Lucius's direction, and charged.

The horse, quite sensibly and independent of its rider, gathered itself and dodged to one side, wheeling away from the boar's forward motion. Lucius managed to reload the crossbow with remarkable quickness, and fired off a second shot, which struck the boar hard in its right haunch with a second sickening chunk. The animal's hind leg crumpled, and he bayed with pain. Then again, he lowered his lethal, magnificent tusks, and bolted forward.

But now Lucius's horse was terrified, stumbling over itself and the boar had infinitely more resolute, pain-maddened strength. He charged forward and struck the magnificent stallion in the chest, nearly knocking it over, and as he pulled away raked its tusks sideways along the horse's belly, ripping muscle and viscera from its body. The majestic bay gave a shrill equine scream and crumpled beneath its rider. The smells of bile and the metal stench of much blood rolled over Emily like a wave of heat and she knew from those smells that the boar had disembowelled the horse with its tusks.

Which meant the horse was done for it would never get up again which left Lucius unmounted.

He managed to recover, getting free of the weight of the falling horse she could see him attempting to draw his wand as he hit the ground. The boar lunged for the fallen horse, now the only barrier between Lucius and himself, and sank his tusks into the supine animal's flesh. The horse screamed again as more of its entrails fell, steaming, from its body onto the snow. In its dying agony, Lucius's horse kicked outward in all directions, flailing in a futile attempt to defend itself. One of its forelegs impacted with Lucius's wand hand

snap

 and his wand splintered and was knocked aside. Realization then fear broke across Malfoy's face; he was facing a maddened enemy, unmounted and unarmed. The boar put down his giant head, grunting animal curses of pain and rage, small brown eyes watching the frantic human now crouching beside the steaming corpse of the once-magnificent horse.

"*Father*!" The scream broke from Draco Malfoy. He desperately aimed his crossbow at the boar's side but in turning his already-spooked horse around, he dragged too hard at the creature's mouth, causing it to wheel around in fear and pain. Distracted for a moment by the boy's shout, the boar watched the younger Malfoy's terror-stricken horse lurch away, then turned back to the boy's father, still crouched, wide-eyed and shaking, behind the body of his fallen mount. The small porcine eyes fixed on Lucius, and the great head with its murderous tusks lowered with obvious intent.

But abruptly, a heavy hunting dagger had pierced the beast's heavy hide, somewhere behind his right ribs. The boar bellowed, spinning hard to the right.

Emily had dropped off her horse's back, running barefoot in the direction of the fallen Malfoy. She plucked at her lapel and a second dagger gleamed in her hand.

She was calculating desperately on her list of allies, Lucius was the only hunter who could have taken it quickly with a crossbow. The rest were milling around uselessly, apparently too frightened or shocked to take any action though in theory, any of them could have drawn their wands and used an *Avada Kedavra* curse on the creature.

It seemed, however, that none of them had thought of that.

The boar, she knew, was not going to be given to rising on his hind legs to strike with his forelegs, thereby exposing his vulnerable belly, and his anatomy was such that her best killing strike the throat slash would not be feasible unless she could get directly above or below him. This opponent was strong and agile enough to corner fast if she tried to take him from the side. That left the viscera but she already had a dagger lodged probably six inches into his abdomen, and that was barely slowing him down.

Lucius had done enough damage with crossbow strikes that he would have probably would bled out eventually he was gouting blood from three major wounds but now, he was fighting for his life, and he was intelligent enough of a creature to know that. That would make him reckless.

A frontal attack through the mouth meant that his continuing momentum down the sword would potentially leave her arm between his jaws as he died

A lateral attack at the eyes was her best chance.

In the time it took her to decide on a course of action, the boar spun toward the new threat that she represented, away from the man on the ground. His great head turned from Malfoy, to the woman across the clearing, back to Malfoy, undecided as to where to attack next.

Lucius was watching both of them intently clearly he was trying to keep a cool head, but his eyes rolled white with fear. She had the animal off balance but now more distraction was necessary. Darting forward at a run, the second dagger struck home in the meat of the beast's chest, just above his foreleg. He howled.

She had been trying for the pulmonary artery or the heart but the burnt hand was making her clumsy, and it looked as though she had gotten deep muscle instead. *Damn.*

But the knife in the chest had the desired effect of making the boar abandon Lucius and turn its full efforts to her new, and more immediate, threat. Lowering its great head, the boar charged her head on, surging forward at a blinding rate of speed, despite the fact that it was gouting blood from four different wounds. Some of the other hunters let out a shout of panic clearly the seemingly unarmed woman on the ground would be killed by such a charge. Draco Malfoy shrieked and threw his forearm over his eyes.

The boar's tusks never connected. Emily changed direction and took a sideways leap that made the onlookers gasp in amazement no human woman should have been able to move like that.

But what landed, with a clatter of cloven hooves, several feet away from the charging boar's shoulder, was not entirely human and the sword that she seemed to draw from nowhere, was also nothing of human or even wizard make. Her voice was still recognisable though "*Draco! Get Lucius*!"

The boar wheeled toward her, and she toward him, now pitted against only each other, committed to each other. This was the way the boar's tribe and the woman's tribe had been fighting each other in her world since two-legged warriors had begun hunting with weapons. The boar rushed her again, lowering its great head to slash at her legs but she again dodged clear.

Draco Malfoy had collected his wits. Throwing his unwieldy crossbow aside, he urged his horse toward his father, dealing the beast a savage blow with his crop when it shied away from the disembowelled horse still bleeding on the ground. He braced himself in the saddle and extended his hand. "Father! Here, climb on!"

Lucius ran towards his son, but terror made him clumsy. He slipped to one knee in the snow, but quickly righted himself and scrambled back to his feet. The sound of a falling body, however, again attracted the attention of the boar, now frustrated with lunging at a foe he couldn't reach. His reddened eyes fixed on the elder Malfoy, who was now running toward his son, one hand out to grasp the boy's proffered arm. With a piercing roar, the beast charged him, tusks lowered. Shouts of warning and a high feminine scream probably Narcissa's rent the air.

But Emily took advantage of the boar's distraction to lunge forward and drove the point of her sword through the beast's eye socket and into its brain. Propelled by the forward momentum, she fell over the body of her adversary, her left arm circling his neck, her chest pressed to his shoulder. The boar turned his near tusk in her direction, attempting to gouge at her with it, with the gory result that he turned into her attack. A second later he spasmed on her blade, misfiring muscles jerking grotesquely.

Then his great body crashed to the ground, and was still. Lucius Malfoy clutched his son's arm, looking very much shaken.

Emily had fallen against the boar's body, uncontrollable waves of emotion crashing over her. Blood, huge gouts of blood, senses full of it, metallic reek of adrenalin rage and aggression... *nothing she could do for him... he convulsed in her arms, coughing blood, and died...*

The wind was cold on her wet face.

Awareness returned. Narcissa had dismounted from her horse and had thrown her arms around her husband's neck, weeping hysterically. Draco had dismounted, and he and Lucius were both trying to calm her. Macnair had also dismounted, and had stabbed the boar's chest with the lance he carried rather redundantly, for he was already dead. Someone had an arm around her waist, and was trying to prise free her grip on the sword and stranglehold on the boar's neck.

"Emily it's dead. Let go."

She threw herself backward at the person holding her, hard, spilling Severus Snape backward onto the snow. It would be another few moments before she could stand to be touched by anyone. Her eyes darted over the others around her, as fey and hostile as an animal surprised in the woods.

At that moment, they all got a good look at her. Narcissa screamed again.

The skirt of her riding habit had rucked up around her knees knees which no longer looked or bent like a human woman's knees. In place of her human legs and feet, she now had cloven hooves, and the long slender legs and haunches of a deer. Her eyes were now pure dark, iris and pupil so large that they seemed without whites. And her ears always more than normally pointed were suddenly longer, covered over with a down of pale russet hair, whisking suspiciously toward them.

Narcissa Malfoy clutched her husband even harder to her, and threw a protective arm backward to shield her son. Draco could only stare, fascinated, but not afraid. Mrs. Rosier gasped, dragging back on her horse's reins so hard that the animal half-reared in protest.

Laying her hand, and then her cheek, again on the boar's hide, Emily said something in a language that none of them knew. Attitude of prayer. Then she had again taken the humanlike form they knew again, crouched shivering in soft bare feet in the snow.

Lucius Malfoy had started forward toward her, only to turn with annoyance to the still clinging Narcissa, who had her arms locked around his neck. "What is it, darling? I'm fine, thank you... "

But she continued to cling, not wanting to allow him to approach the woman who had had hooves for feet a moment ago. "Honestly, dear! It's all right, it's over. It's quite safe. Draco son, tend to your mother."

He turned to the assembled company, most still staring apprehensively. "Oh come, all of you! Haven't you *ever* seen a changeling before? The reason they call them *changelings* is because they can change their shapes... ?"

A murmur of, *Oh, yes, changelings, change their shapes, of course, quite right, as it should be, I knew that*, came from the assemblage.

Lucius quietly approached the carcass of the boar, which in death still retained some of his fearsome dignity. He dropped to one knee, one hand pressed over his heart, and bowed to him. "You were a brave and worthy quarry," he murmured. "We thank you, and your gods, for your sacrifice."

Then he grasped the hilt of the Faery sword and dragged it out from the boar's skull. A steaming gout of blood and brain matter gushed forth from the wound, staining his white hand dark, dark red.

He turned to Emily, and presented her with the bloody sword. "*Gloria Addo Victrix*," he said, and then, in the most delicate gesture imaginable, raised his bloody hand to her face, and drew four lines of scarlet across her cheek.

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There was a long silence.

"Well that wouldn't have been very sporting, now, would it?" Menzentius said finally, shrugging and taking a nonchalant swig from his whiskey glass.

Emily very nearly hit him, and very hard at that.

"You looked as though you were capable of handling it. And we'd all heard the story last night about how you killed two great panthers all by yourself," Felina Rosier said, in a voice sweet as razor wire.

Emily wanted very badly to hit her too.

"I said I had some help with them, madam," she pointed out, barely bothering to keep her voice down. "I'm so glad I looked capable then because in actuality, I was scared out of my bloody mind. As you would know if you had actually ever hunted one before, fully grown boar are hard to kill even when there's a group of us, and by *us,* I mean people with as much training as I have. And that, madam, was one very big, *very strong damn boar.* We're really profoundly lucky that the only ones who died out there today were him and that poor horse."

There was another long silence. Then Narcissa said, "Um, language please," in a very high, pained voice, putting an arm around Draco.

Well. That's fifteen years of truly profound love for one's husband there, all right, Emily thought, staring down at her plate.

"Professor... in my experience, *Avada Kedavra*... cannot be aimed with perfect accuracy. It creates a field of luminous negative energy that rushes forward in a focused cloud of sorts, destroying all life that it encounters. In my opinion, there would have been one safe opportunity to use it today during the hunt... and I apologise for not having a clear enough head to think to use it when it might have been possible. It did occur to me after you had rushed into the fray, but by then you were between me and the boar, and I was afraid of accidentally killing you instead of it... and it did seem to me as though you had the situation quite well in hand. I doubt if the time between the moment you jumped off your horse and the moment you killed it was any more than a minute, though I can certainly see how it might have seemed longer to you."

Professor Snape's quiet voice. Saying the only reasoned, intelligent words anyone had said so far. She fell silent, gripping the arm of her chair.

"Thank you for that clarification, sir," she said finally.

"Just a thought, but... you might have tried using a Killing Curse yourself, seeing as how you were the closest to the creature," Mrs. Rosier said, her teaspoon tinkling in her china cup as she stirred her tea.

Emily turned on her, her eyes glinting. "Two problems with that they don't teach that sort of thing at Beauxbatons, and being a Faerie, I don't carry a wand, madam," she snapped back.

"Isn't there a Faery killing curse of some sort, perhaps?" Mrs. Rosier asked, in a pleasant, hateful voice.

"No, actually, there isn't. If we could say a couple of words to someone and make them drop dead, don't you think we would use that in combat instead of engaging the enemy directly with things like swords and bows?"

"Ladies, please. There are children present," came Narcissa's obsequious voice.

Silence.

"I'm sorry, Narcissa I'm just a bit overwrought from what happened today," Emily said finally.

"Of course, Mrs. Tumnus, I understand," Narcissa said, in a voice that did not understand at all. Felina Rosier sniffed contemptuously, but remained mercifully silent.

It was a tremendous relief when the afternoon drew to a close and everyone began to say their good-byes and go upstairs to pack for the trip home.

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A shadow of dismay? worry? revulsion? crossed his face. "Professor "

She cut him off with a harsh exhalation of laughter. "It's funny, really. I know Lucius is a big gossip at times I expect it from him. But I rather thought that you weren't the type, somehow I'm not sure why. So I suppose you've heard the whole lovely story by now."

He stared at her impassively. "It's true, then."

"Well, I'm not sure what was embellished to it, but if you heard that Robinett confessed to killing Dorien, and then I challenged him and killed him yes, that's true. Don't expect me to ever deny it I'm not sorry." She hated the sound of her own voice at that moment; it had bypassed brittleness into barely controlled hysteria. She willed herself to maintain some composure.

He watched her silently, his eyes betraying some shock.

"And you needn't worry about your ethical duty in making sure Dumbledore and McGonagall are aware of any of that, because they both already know. Dumbledore knew before he ever asked me to come to Hogwarts. Just so you know " she leaned closer to him " it was never my idea to come here and do you out of a job. Truthfully, I never wanted to come here at all. But in my world if the King commands you to do something, you do it. That's where it ends.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to finish packing, so I can go back to Hogwarts and teach some more *neat little tricks to your students* Good afternoon, Professor."

She retreated into her room and shut the door refusing to be so vindictive as to actually slam it in his face, that would have been the sort of thing he would have done but closing it with the clear message that this conversation was now over.

After a moment, she heard Snape's footsteps storm off down the hall.

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"All packed and ready to go, then, cousin?" Lucius's voice was saying.

"Yes, thank you. I was wondering if Professor Swain was ready as well?"

"I think she is Emily, dear, is that trunk closing properly now?" He turned back to Snape. "Oh, do come in, she's ready."

Snape's expression was all bristly brows and prickles when he did come in and he only did so after peering inside suspiciously, as if he thought he might have to dodge projectiles thrown at his head if he crossed the threshold. Lucius leaned against the doorjamb, in an attitude of casual and irreproachable cordiality.

"Emily, dear, I hope you don't think me presumptuous Severus told me that Portkeys don't agree with you but I think you really should travel back with him. You've already taken a bit of a chill today, and I don't want you going out for another walk in the snow. Really, I insist."

They were both looking intently at her grey eyes and black on her face and she was in no mood to argue. "All right, then. I'm coming."

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The Portkey deposited them just outside the gate that marked the boundaries of the Hogwarts wards against Apparition, to Emily's annoyance she was not looking forward to a considerable walk alone with Severus Snape. She briefly considered pretending to have some errand in Hogsmeade and bidding him good-bye at the gate, but it was late enough on Sunday that all the shops would be already closed. *It won't take long*, she reminded herself, turning toward the lights of the castle just ahead. Luckily, though, Professor Snape seemed to feel about as talkative on that walk as she did.

"Professor?" he asked, finally, while they were crossing the entrance hall on the way to the great main staircase.

"Yes, sir?"

He paused and seemed to take a deep breath. "I'm... I... regret that I was not of more help to you today," he said, in a voice so gentle that most of his students would not have believed it possible from him.

"It's quite all right, Professor. I'm growing less and less fond of hunting myself. Today I was trying to prevail upon Lucius to choose a less dangerous type of quarry in his later hunts."

"That seems like good advice, madam."

She had arrived at the top of the Great Hall's stone staircase the way to Ravenclaw Tower was to her left, Snape's path to the Slytherin dungeons lay to the right. She took her leave of him with a very formal little nod. "Good evening, sir."

"Good evening," he said, in the direction of her departing back.

Part First: The Hart Assurgent: Chapter 9

Chapter 11 of 55

Professor Emily Swain came to Hogwarts from the Arcadian Kingdoms to teach the Faery magic of her people. She rapidly becomes embroiled in a bitter game of professional rivalry with another professor -- and then a very old friend makes her an enticing offer she doesn't want to refuse...

Chapter 9:

Later that evening, Severus Snape could not sleep at all.

He had gone back to his own subterranean quarters after returning to Hogwarts and exchanging cool good-nights with his colleague. Then he had methodically unpacked. Some time later, he had undressed and gotten into bed, but midnight found him still awake, lying with furrowed brows against his pillow.

This was not an altogether uncommon state for him. Snape would not infrequently find himself in bed of an evening with his thoughts still clicking along at a rapid pace quite independent of his physical fatigue, demanding his alert attention, when everyone else at Hogwarts (or as it seemed to him) was blissfully slumbering.

Occasional insomnia had affected him since boyhood, and as a result, he had come up with many ways of occupying the extra waking hours sometimes imposed upon him. As a student, he had spent his wakeful time studying or reading a habit which had partially accounted for his excellent marks. Now, as an adult, he still read, or conducted research in his laboratory office; or in milder seasons, he would often go for walks around the castle.

But occasionally, he would pick up his quill and fill the pages of a series of leather-bound notebooks with his impressions of memorable events or would seek to analyse a particularly thorny dilemma from all angles, on parchment.

Journal-keeping was a somewhat archaic practice, but it did the job for him, serving as confidante and sounding board for an extremely private man. Many other wizards he knew, including Albus Dumbledore, preferred the ease and full-sensory accessibility of a Pensieve but Snape not infrequently found himself in possession of memories that he didn't want to revisit with such detail, or didn't want to record in such a permanent medium. After he had written himself out, scratching his thoughts into the pages of a notebook, he would come away with a sense of closure, of completion, or at least felt better armed with hindsight. Now and then he would go back and re-examine his entries, revisiting his notes to himself for more clarity of thought or to marvel at his own folly.

After tossing in bed for a few unrestful hours, Snape got up, put on a robe, and moved to his deep leather desk chair.

There was a particular entry that he had been going back and examining in the last six weeks.

He opened his journal, and began to read.

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22-Sept-94

On the strangest night of my life, a year-old child managed to destroy the corporeal form of the Dark Lord. This, I think, qualifies as the second strangest.

Didn't start and didn't end as a good day. My Apparition licence expired in August and forgot to renew the fecking thing barely use it other than in summer anyway. Had to take the train to Diagon Alley almost didn't go, but no Billywig stings and Murtlap growths left at all, and only a fistful of gillyweed, so rather had to.

While I was leaving, Dumbledore asked me to telephone an old crony of his, a Mrs. Figg, and make certain she was doing all right. Gave me a little slip with numbers on it, and a silver and green card. Asked him how exactly I'm to use this to make a phone call (what, do I Transfigure it into a telephone once I reach London, is that it?) Just find a telephone, put the card in the slot, and put in the number, he said. Then Flitwick had to talk to him about something urgent. (It's always urgent with Flitwick he's like a first-year who needs to use the bathroom sometimes.)

Rotten time in London. Nothing but rain and milling crowds. Flourish & Blotts packed with squealing children and their unfortunate handlers. NO gillyweed to be found in London anywhere. Got to King's Cross late and totally exhausted. Would rather have taken my chances on getting ticketed for Apparating with an expired licence if hadn't been storming fit to drown someone on Platform 9 & 3/4. Found a bench on Platform 9 and was glad I brought Celsus's *De Medicina* along for a bit of light reading. But at some point my eyes moved up from the page to completely unexpectedly someone's very pretty black-stockinged legs.

I looked, I admit it. Though no one here may believe it, am in fact male and not asexual. They belonged to a blonde woman on the bench opposite me, reading a book. She was wearing a long black frock coat over a pleasantly short black dress. Face and body to match the legs. There was a wiry spareness to her that made me wonder if she was a marathon runner or some such, but didn't seem too remarkable at the time, as I am not yet schooled at picking incognito Faery fencing masters out of crowds. There was a trolley next to her with a mountain of luggage on it steamer trunks, train cases, hatboxes same sort of thing my grandmother would have taken on a long Continental holiday.

Really deep into her book, too, her dark eyes moving over the page full of that abstracted, thoughtful concentration I see in students with pitiful infrequency. Hermione Granger looks like that sometimes but Granger is 14 years old and a Gryffindor to boot. On a pretty woman (of about 28? 30?) sitting across from me in King's Cross, not wearing a wedding ring, that expression was rather attractive. Her book was *The Fenian Cycle* some sort of Celtic mythology I'd heard of but not read. Her copy looked like it'd been read to rags. Little bits of yellow paper with scrawled handwritten notes stuck in it in very academic fashion, as well.

(Yes, her reading Celtic mythology. More like, the bloody wench IS Celtic mythology. All seems absurd to me now I was terribly self-conscious about my Wizarding background, having had truism of "Never expose our world to Muggles!" drummed into my head from the time I was old enough to understand it. There she was, in pretty little Muggle dress and coat, hiding in plain sight the way her people insist on doing, from everyone, whether it's necessary or not.)

At the time, though, thought it was kind of charming she wasn't that intent on a tabloid or some mindless trash. Had to seem intelligent as well as nubile, potentially available, all by herself in King's Cross, just happened to choose the seat directly across from me, on a lonesome rainy night. How the Bitch-Goddess Fate does love to mock me.

Just seemed another example of my wonderful sort of cosmological determinism grabbing me by the scruff to show me yet something else I'll never have. Get a good look at what you'd like to have waiting for you of an evening, Snape, after the witlessness of your students drives you to thoughts of homicide. She'll never look at you the first time, let alone twice.

However just then, she glanced up at the clock above my head, but then paused, and looked at me for a long moment, then looked back down. Glanced up and looked at me again a second later.

Ah, what fools we mortals be.

Kept reading, watching trains rattle by I flatly refuse to go to pieces over a pretty woman like some callow first-year. Little minx opposite wasn't satisfied with disturbing the universe only twice, either. (No, she had not yet *begun* to disturb my universe.) I could feel her studying my profile. Back at her book a second later. I had only just begun to enjoy the game we were playing when she lost interest, became absorbed in her book again, but I knew was only temporary to begin with. (Famous last words. I'm now impressed with my own prescience at recognizing the transitory nature of that female so early on.)

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Stood there like a little girl who thinks she's too adorable to be punished, perfectly at ease. Her hair wasn't actually blonde, I noticed, but actually a pale red, like the back of a fawn, with the damp from the rain condensing on it in tiny drops of silver. All of which seemed sweet and piquant to me then. She said she hoped I hadn't missed my train (certainly would have been just heartbroken if I had, no doubt) but I said I wasn't leaving for two hours.

"It's early," she said, smiling. "Let's go get tea then."

Now she asks me. Couldn't have just gotten her pert arse up off her bloody bench and suggested that when I was right in front of her and would have been glad to hear it. As it was took me a moment to comprehend that she was suggesting I go off somewhere, sit down, and take a cup of tea, with her. Actually felt a bit floored. Hoped that she would speak again and clarify exactly what she was asking of me. Then asked me if I had a favourite spot for tea near King's Cross. So I had heard her correctly. Well. Most unexpected, this. No precedent for it in my experience.

Was still mulling over exactly how one responded to this sort of thing when a crestfallen expression came over her apparently I had not answered fast enough, and she had taken that as a refusal, and was starting to turn away. Protested that I did indeed like tea. Ended up in a little teashop, rain plashing mightily against the windows. Almost the only people there, in the blessedly quiet late-night dimness. I wasn't sure what to order to me tea is what the house-elves bring pots of to my office. This place had so many exotic choices I needed my Potions education just to understand them all. Finally just asked for what she was having.

All right, we had ordered, now we had to talk to each other. All very awkward for me. Hit on asking her where she was from.

Her family came from the Lake District, she said. (Maybe there is a lake somewhere in the vicinity of her birthplace, but I wouldn't count on it.) At the time, it put me in mind of Wordsworth, country manors, people who took pastoral walking tours for excitement. But she hadn't been back there in awhile because she was lecturing at Cambridge University. Ah that explained the academic-looking book with yellow notes in it. Another professor that was a talking point.

But I thought that for someone who said she was from the Lake District, she sounded awfully Irish. (Should have been my first clue.) Or maybe Australian, or New Zealander? Distinct lilt to her voice, nearly a brogue, but with soft English r's, and full th's when she said she taught folklore and mythology, it was *myth-ol-o-gy*, not a Dubliner's *mi-tol-o-gy*. Closest thing ever heard to it was when I met a herbologist visiting Professor Sprout from the Appalachians in America. If that lady spoke with professorial diction, she might have sounded very much like the stranger sitting across from me. (Of course now I know why I couldn't place her accent never having spoken to a native Arcadian before. She could have put me out of my misery of linguistic analysis at any time, but didn't.)

Got distracted because she was leaning her chin on the heel of her hand, fingers making a little curved half-frame for her face, waiting for me to speak again. Always annoyed by people who just wait until I stop speaking so they can talk again (a habit I shall call Gryffindor Syndrome.) Not so with her. She looked at me as if what I was saying was utterly fascinating. Making the most of the fact that she of course knows she's no strain on the eyes, but at the time I was rather stupidly eating it up.

Was enjoying being listened to so fetchingly (it's sort of a*novelty* to me) that had half forgot she had just asked me what I teach. What do Muggles call Potions... chemistry. Asked where I taught I said a boarding school for young people, taking my cue from stupid Lost Items clerk and answering a question other than the one asked. (Well, I thought at the time that if I announced that I taught Potions at a School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, this hapless *Muggle* would think I was a dangerous lunatic.)

Under such encouragement I held forth on the topic of my misadventures for awhile she laughed at some of the antics of students in my classroom, a topic which, between teachers, apparently transcends wizard/Muggle differences. Was sort of impressed by that there are people here who have known me for decades who have yet to notice that I have a sense of humour, whereas she picked up on it in about two minutes. Starting to curse inwardly as to how little I could really tell her. Actually was starting to think Muggle university sounded quite interesting as well, but when I asked her about it, one would think I was trying to extract her pretty teeth from her gums. The woman really is about as forthcoming as a block of cheese.

In all though, the situation was quite the opposite of what I'm used to. Most people fall all over themselves to interrupt me with dull information about themselves. Instead, she was coaxing me to tell her everything about me, which didn't take long. (Born in Scotland. Went to school in Scotland. Now teach, ah, *chemistry* at the same school I attended. In Scotland. That's all for me yourself?) Was becoming increasingly curious about her. Recalled with embarrassment that I hadn't asked her name tried to pry it out of her indirectly. No luck at all, of course knew only that it had a Y in it. In all though, at the time I would have been willing to play this particular little game for hours. (Can imagine it getting awfully annoying though. If I wanted nothing more than a rapt audience to twinklingly watch me go on about myself, I've certainly chosen the right line of work, haven't I. But no doubt there are narcissistic dolts out there who would adore that sort of thing.)

Teashop proprietress said that it was midnight and they were closing. Still had to make Dumbledore's phone call and get to my train. Also wanted to contact my new companion for a reciprocal taking-out-to-tea (not realising at the time the likelihood of that ever happening.) Also still had to get away unseen to the platform. Then figured if I had to use a Muggle phone card, perhaps I should ask a Muggle, and Miss Has-a-Y-In-It certainly was handiest. She led me to a red call box a little booth with a phone and explained it to me. (Either they have phone boxes in the Faerielands, or she is the most assimilated supernatural creature alive.)

I was expecting Mrs. Figg to say "Hello" on the other end and was readying an apology for calling her so late but instead got a woman's voice saying the number had been disconnected. Spelled-With-a-Y offered to try it for me number really didn't work. Well, supposed I must needs tell Dumbledore, and hoped it wasn't too desperately important.

She was still bending over the phone and I glanced down at her face probably my first big mistake. The line of her cheek struck me as quite lovely, as did her profile. This proximity was making a long inventory of unused hormones demand to be accounted for suddenly envisioned her turning round and brazenly insinuating herself into my arms (which seemed just *so bloody unlikely* at the time). Then she hung up, turned round, and said quite casually "You've wanted to kiss me for at least the last hour and a half, and haven't done it yet."

Utterly shocked. Because well, I had. But I'm not used to people just saying that sort of thing out loud like that though.

Still made it quite clear that kissing her was an entirely acceptable possibility. Can't say I minded that. Indeed, all of a sudden seemed imperative to remedy that unfortunate omission straightaway.

Tried to be very gentle about it wasn't sure whether I was expected to*embrace* her as well compromised on lifting her face up. Thought I'd forgotten what female lips feel like but actually, no, I hadn't. Afterward, she looked up at me with the most mischievous smile no, mischief wasn't the proper word. More like hormonal anarchy. (Shall call that her "Puck surveying a sleeping Athenian youth" look from here on in.) Then she kissed me. Not some polite, tentative thing instead put her arms around my neck and kissed me like a sixth-year behind a greenhouse.

Well then. All right, madam, if that's how you want me to kiss you, I suppose I must needs oblige.

After that had been going on awhile she said something about going out on the platform. (Leaving me a way out if I wanted one, I suppose. Or just being insufferably coy yet again.) Asked her quite directly if she really wanted to leave, and she gave me another one of those brazen smiles and said no. All right then, glad to have that squared away.

After that we really did just fall on each other like randy teenagers. It was shameless. It occurs to me now that my conduct last evening was very unbecoming to a Hogwarts professor, but I'm not made of fecking *stone*, damn it. I probably should have known better, but I plead duress. The Faeries made me do it, your Honour.

No idea how I'm to now be expected to share meals at the same table with her. Am I now expected to just *forget* what we did to each other that night? Is that sort of thing such a wholly commonplace occurrence to her? I'm finding it excruciating that I'm now going to have to discuss lesson plans with McGonagall over dinner with *her* there, and just choose not to remember how she kissed me, how she eased my face down onto her cleavage absolutely shamelessly. She smelled green, tonic like freshly gathered herbs. Woodsorrel, or lemon verbena. I had my hand on her thigh, not entirely sure how it got there, discovered a stocking top giving way to a drift of warm thigh flesh. I didn't think anyone wore suspendered stockings for everyday anymore, but certainly didn't mind. She certainly didn't seem to mind anything either. More like positively encouraging.

Started unbuttoning the bodice of her dress but my hands were shaking so that she did it for me. Very complicated black lace brassiere underneath, but found the cleavage far more interesting. Remember thinking it couldn't really be happening, *this is not my life, this can't be my life* as she opened my fly and her warm hand closed around the base of my cock and stroked forward. I've seen cats and Kneazles get so ecstatic with being stroked that they practically try to wrap their bodies around the hand doing the stroking. She was like that. Natural, unselfconscious, even joyous. No listlessness of *Imperio* in those eyes, no desperate mental calculation of "If I go down on him, he'll do what the Dark Lord wants him to do" going on. No, she just wanted me, right then, seemed perfectly willing to have a nice little gladhearted fuck right in the middle of King's Cross. By now was half-convinced that I must have fallen asleep on the bench and was having some utterly surreal and improbable erotic dream.

What the hell. Come here, you there was no one around. (Amazing what some people will do with a bloke when they have no intention of ever asking him what his bloody name is, isn't it.)

I ripped some of her clothes but she didn't seem to care, so I didn't either. And then her thighs were around my hips and I was clutching her against me like probably the most radioactively needy bastard alive. Oh God yes, the narcotic slickness of female lubrication, and she was pulling me into position just shamelessly, her eyes locked on mine and her arms around me... never had any woman make it so very clear that she wanted me inside her, never even imagined something like this before. Little catches of soprano breath in my ear. It felt... oh hell, I'm not a poet, I've never been able to find the words to properly describe the way it feels to penetrate a woman. Barely even bother remembering or imagining it too much.

Still there is no doubt in my mind that she enjoyed it as much as I did can't even begin to conceive of a sound more soaked in oestrogen than her gasps while we were at it. I had my arm around her hips and was simply crushing her against me, no conscious sense of establishing a rhythm, just clutching the unbelievable fluid warmth of her onto my cock with all the strength I had but I've never exactly gotten to subtly hone my powers of control with long practice. God help any security guard or policeman who had knocked on that bloody callbox door then I would have Stunned the bastard into a puddle on the pavement.

A second later I'm listening to that woman-seized-by-orgasm cry, her muscles clamping down on me if that wasn't climatic for her, she's world-class at faking it. My first act of coitus since the eighties, probably lasted less than three minutes, but I still managed to finish a gentleman's second. Rather elated by that.

No, I'm not a bit embarrassed at how *I treated her.*

Felt like I'd been picked up and thrown over the edge like... oh, like I have students who aren't as old as the memory of the last time I had sex, and she was exciting to me, and that's hyperbole enough for a journal only I will ever read. Fecking hell, who cares now.

Really might have almost fainted afterward. Evidently there isn't quite enough blood in me to allow me to have an orgasm like that and remain standing. She caught me as my knees nearly buckled really was rather stronger than I expected a woman of her size to be, but was feeling too much like a besotted teenager to notice. Fell forward onto her shoulder she put her arm around my head and held me quite tenderly. Shaking horribly, could hardly breathe. At that moment, the most perverse thing in the world to me seemed ever wanting to move from exactly where I was.

I'm embarrassed about how I felt immediately following. Infatuation and desire seemed too pallid of words. I wanted only to take her somewhere where I could spend the proper number of years making love with my coy mistress. Without her real name, I imagined all sorts of names and identities for her, each more far-fetched and romantic than the next. There simply had to be world enough and time for me to find some way to see her again, Muggle or no. Fuck what Lucius would think I'd just shagged a Muggle, and bloody well liked it, and liked her. He didn't need to know about her. I imagined meeting her in Cambridge on weekends, seeing her in lecture hall in professorial robes, having dinner at her flat, and then having more of this insanely intense sex all over the living room afterward. Given the number of students at Hogwarts who claim mixed parentage, evidently it could be possible to maintain some kind of affectionate relationship between a wizard and a Muggle, the example of my own parents notwithstanding.

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Sitting at his desk, Snape's expression twisted something about the above paragraph suddenly irritated him beyond measure. He reached for his quill again and methodically slashed it out completely.

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She said something about being sorry I couldn't make my phone call. Bother the fecking phone call. I'll make Dumbledore's telephone calls for him when he's got an accurate call number. I was far too interested in kissing her cheek, the side of her neck the bits I had been coveting when I thought there was no chance I would ever get to touch her. She pulled away felt a stupid pang of loss at having to withdraw and let go. She got down off the callbox ledge, pulled her skirt down almost modestly. Then grabbed me by the coat collar and it was starting again with the sweaty behind-the-greenhouse kissing.

Seemed a bit put out about missing her train, but fuck the trains, they're gone, we missed them. I would stay in London for the night, if she would stay with me. Enough of this cold uncomfortable standing-up business I wanted her in bed with me all night, with a hot shower and breakfast afterward. Dumbledore would understand if I missed one entire day out of my teaching career. If the twinkly-eyed old goat knew what was going on, he'd probably have told me to have a good time and covered my classes himself. He's always prevailing upon me to get out more often.

Now stop being so damn coy and tell me what your name is, I said. After what we'd just done, it really seemed like very little to ask of her. But she seemed troubled now pulled away from me, walked out of the booth. I started to follow, but had to address certain sartorial concerns first. I called to her to wait.

When I got onto the platform, she wasn't there.

No one there. Vanished. Without a word, without a sound, even.

I tried to call her name, but didn't know it.

It was impossible that she could have walked away that fast nothing to hide behind the platform was wide, deserted, and featureless. Could she be some kind of incognito witch and have Apparated? I hadn't heard any telltale popping noise. Definitely not carrying a wand, from what I had felt of her, and I had felt most of her, really. No room in her pocket for an Invisibility Cloak, I don't think.

But even if I couldn't figure out how she had done it, WHY would she choose to vanish, right then? Had I offended her somehow? Hadn't she enjoyed it? I thought she had I'm sure she had. Was she perhaps some sort of wildly impulsive adulteress?

Worse could she be in some sort of desperate trouble? Even worse had becoming even briefly involved with me somehow made her a target for *him*? Was he back, watching me? Did he know what I've done? Was I now going to start receiving gift-wrapped pieces of her by owl post every morning? There were a few moments where I was genuinely terrified for her, idiotic as that may sound now. (The way Dumbledore is going on about her, I think it's more likely that that young lady could take care of herself as well as I in that situation.)

I debated for one second if perhaps she was some kind of ghost an especially pleasant ghost who haunted sexually frustrated people waiting in King's Cross on rainy nights. May have thought, rather stupidly, that if I waited long enough, that she would come back.

Another half-hour went by. Then I bloodied my knuckles punching the brick train station wall.

In the end I did simply Apparate, figuring I would just pay the ticket if I got caught, but don't think anyone noticed. Had to hurry up to Hogwarts in a downpour. Got into dry clothes and made it to breakfast very late, my hair fairly stinking of wet wool. Then Dumbledore made an unexpected announcement there's *another* DADA session being added, weeks after the beginning of term. Something about distraction tactics, to be used without a wand, and how to fight and use weapons. Well. That'll be a lot of safety waivers for the parents to sign, won't it.

And he went ahead with it without telling any of us. Barely noticed this new professor appearing out of nowhere at the far end of the table. (Late arriving DADA professors usually being such pleasant, attractive, well-groomed sorts this year, after all.) Only noticed she had a feminine name. Struck me as a bit odd that a woman would be teaching Crabbe & Goyle, et al., how to fight, but I'm old-fashioned that way a bit.

After breakfast, we moved to Dumbledore's anteroom. They all chattered I had some more tea. Took it as brief respite before going off to correct some more atrociously spelled papers on remedies and antidotes. (I've never seen such resistance to the idea that perhaps being poisoned might be unpleasant, and perhaps precautions should be taken against it, but that's the Hogwarts student body for you. Maybe if I threaten to actually poison one of them, it would make them pay attention. Can't help but think that if any of them had actually seen someone die of ingesting poison, might make them take this lesson seriously for once.)

Dumbledore began making the rounds of introductions with his new protégée. She seemed to be intent on listing every academic publication any of us have ever made as though we've commissioned an inventory of such from her and everyone else was eating it up like Honeydukes' best chocolate. Knows the name of my last piece, the one about bezoars for *Alchymia Et Potio Diurnalis.* Well little Miss Granger has definitely done her homework. Overcompensate intellectually for your blondeness much? Or are you really just that much of a shameless kiss-arse?

Dumbledore was benevolently insisting on introducing me to her, so finally had to face the obsequious git.

Whereupon I "met" my stranger from King's Cross.

Same fair hair, now wet and dishevelled, same clothes, now damp. Her face looked different, somehow. But unmistakably her. A few hours earlier I had had that same dress half unbuttoned and her black lace breast under my hand and my tongue in that mouth, and now she's shaking hands with McGonagall like they're best friends and addressing me as "Professor."

After she had gone, Albus told us that she's not a Muggle. Oh no.

She's a *Faerie.*

To think I was horribly self-conscious about the idea of telling her I was a wizard when she's not even from *EARTH* !

She's the first Faerie I have ever met they're an elusive lot, from what that transparent bore Binns said. (*Imagine that.*) They would no doubt qualify as "beings" to the Ministry, but as I recall, the representatives Burdock Muldoon sent to invite them to his meeting of bipedal beings in the fourteenth century came back with no useful information (not to mention drunk as lords, crowned with daisies, and sporting asses' ears). No Faerie ever showed up to Muldoon's summit of beings, and like Centaurs and Merfolk, they maintain their own government entirely separate from ours. They mostly live in a different dimension or some such. If there is a Faerie Liaison Office in the Ministry it's probably as much of a joke as the Centaur Office. (I wonder which unfortunate MoM official was responsible for getting work papers for *that* little expat.) It's supposed to be rather pleasant in the Faeries' world, I've heard Lucius was making a big fuss about going there awhile ago, but then he'd always been on about the exotic holidays his father was sending him on.

Now, with her as my one Faerie acquaintance, I can't say that my impressions so far have been entirely favourable. She's not done anything for stereotype of Faeries being *charming liars with their own tricksy notions of morality.*

Evidently they have Faeries teaching at Cambridge if that part was even true. Twenty Galleons says she majored in Women's Studies and thinks treating males like dirt, the same way the worst of men treat women, is somehow going to free women from the crushing yoke of the effing Patriarchy.

I had barely caught her name earlier Miss Emily Beauregard Swain. How repulsively middle-aged Sloane-Rangerish. Sounds like an old Mayfair housewife with collections of little spoons on her shelves and tatty lace doilies on the arms of chairs. Emily spelled with a fecking Y, thanks. I think I'll spell it *Emilie* on faculty memorandums just to annoy her.

So I did manage to find out your precious name after all, madam. She left me without so much as a sperm to accompany me home, but someone else had to finally tell me her name.

Of course she never even asked me for mine. Yes, it's pretentiously Latinate like every other damned Slytherin in my year, and my surname gives rise to far too many ssssssssstupid jokes, but she might have fecking expressed some interest, seeing as how she availed herself to most other parts of me.

Still managed to be contentious about some trifling point of academic minutiae within a minute of "meeting" me. Likely she hasn't read my bezoar paper at all.

Seemed surprised to see me, but remained cool as anything when Dumbledore "introduced" us. (Whereas I blushed so much I've now got Dumbledore asking me morning and noon "if there's anything I would like to tell him, anything at all" I *hate* it when he does that!)

Also seemed rather pale, exhausted, and shivering.

So she left, and Dumbledore regales us with the tale of how she's Ye Mightie Fencing Master and beatifically noble and wonderfully clever and can probably walk on water and give sight to the blind besides, and how he's been trying to get his old boyhood chum the King of Faerie, her great-uncle, to send her to him as a Defence Against the Dark Arts professor for going on two years. He's just off his head that she's finally here. How really ripping for him.

(Now that I know all that, what does Dumbledore think I would say to him even if I did want to talk about it? "All right, Albus, since you asked me, persisted in asking me, how's this for a good cry on that soft, comfortable shoulder that everyone here so loves to abuse. What happened is, your lovely new DADA professor, whom you had been begging the loan of for years, of whom you and your old friend the King both think so very highly, used me quite shamelessly in the forests of King's Cross, then vanished. Now she's pretending she doesn't know me, and frantically well-laid or not I'd rather remain a confirmed bachelor than be toyed with by the likes of her. I dearly wish you would send her back from whence she came, because the prospect of seeing her every day looks miserable to me.")

What good will that do me, or him, or anyone?

Truthfully, there isn't any way to seek his counsel here, not without all the particulars coming out, which will of course mean sacrificing any shred of reputation and dignity I've regained with him since 1981.

Is there a positive side? I've dealt with infinitely worse, certainly. She can't be as dangerous as Quirrell or even The Lupine (and nobody could be as big a fool as Lockphart). Also thankfully doesn't have same wood-chipper-accident countenance as Moody, nor appears to be as psychotically paranoid either. But even if what she did is unprecedented in my experience of DADA professors, it still bloody well *stings*.

Dumbledore is prevailing upon me to attend her lecture on Wednesday. Something about Faery magic he wants me to learn. Another theory of wandless magic. (As if I can keep track of all the theories of wandless magic floating around !) I can't describe my joy at the idea of getting to sit supplicant as a first-year before *her.* Don't mind me, madam, I'll just obediently accept that I'm disposable, and so find an ashcan to throw myself into now that you're *finished with me*.

I used a Healing Draught on my knuckles, but they still hurt.

Ye gods. I dearly hope Lucius never makes her acquaintance, because he'd be in love.

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His black eyes, gone harsh and impenetrable, lingered over the last line for some time.

Then he ripped the entire September 22nd entry out of his journal and threw the pages on the fire.

Once he was sure the parchment was consumed, he went back to bed.

Part First: The Hart Assurgent: Chapter 10

Chapter 12 of 55

Professor Emily Swain came to Hogwarts from the Arcadian Kingdoms to teach the Faery magic of her people. She rapidly becomes embroiled in a bitter game of professional rivalry with another professor -- and then a very old friend makes her an enticing offer she doesn't want to refuse...

Chapter 10:

Since the Monday morning after returning from the Malfoys' weekend party, Emily had invariably been early enough to breakfast to grab a seat on the extreme right of the High Table.

She was making a point of sitting next to Madam Pince and engaging her in conversation about the libraries. That way, if anyone noticed her shift from the left to the right side, she wanted it chalked up to a desire to further cultivate her acquaintance with the librarian and certainly not attributed to any desire to stay out of Professor Snape's orbit. To her immense relief, both Madam Pince and Professor Sprout seemed glad of her company at meals, and by the end of the first week, she had a standing invitation to work with Professor Sprout in the greenhouses, and Madam Pince had made her a very interesting offer to come up and help catalogue a new acquisition of illuminated manuscripts. She was now sorry that she hadn't done more to seek their friendship before, rather than doing all of that rather ridiculous obsessing over the inner workings of Severus Snape in the weeks leading up to the weekend of November 8th.

Judging from the spectacular indifference of his non-reaction to anything regarding her since their return from Malfeasant, he seemed just fine with that.

Regardless, she had bought a replacement bottle of Healing Potion at the Hogsmeade apothecary's a day after their return, which she had left in his administrative mailbox with a note reading: *"Thank you. E.S."* The bottle vanished from his box after a day or two, but he never mentioned the matter to her. Nor did he seem at all interested in discussing any part of the Malfeasant weekend with her.

After the hunt, however, she couldn't have said she was surprised by this. On top of everything else, of course the man had to be part of a gang of bloody xenophobes, afraid of anything different from themselves. Her memory of how startled and put off he and all of his old school friends had been at the sight of her hoofed form was to continue to set off deep pangs of insecurity for some months afterward. He really could take a cue from his friend Lucius if the mere sight of a changeling frightened him so much.

Ah, well. If he was content to fear her kind, she didn't feel personally obligated to enlighten him.

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The week following their return proved to be a trying one.

The Slytherins and Hufflepuffs had targeted reluctant champion Harry Potter for a merciless barrage of scorn and ridicule, and Emily could see that even his staunch friend Ron Weasley didn't seem to be taking his side. In Harry's Thursday fencing class, she divided the Slytherins and Gryffindors into separate groups on opposite sides of the courtyard in order to practice their thrust/parry drills, so as to prevent unfortunate pairings from erupting into real trouble. She paired Harry with Hermione in all practice bouts the girl wasn't up to his level athletically, so their sessions together took on a teacher-student aspect, with Harry drilling Hermione in parries and counter-parries that he himself had mastered easily. He didn't seem to be benefiting too much, but at least it kept him out of harm's way, and he seemed happy to be able to tutor Hermione in some subject. (Emily suspected that the reverse was true in most of their other classes.) It was truly a shame that she didn't dare put Draco Malfoy and Harry up against each other in a few bouts, because the two of them were the only ones who could have truly challenged the other.

During that Friday afternoon's fencing class, her group of Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff seventh years, she noticed that some genius had come up with the brilliant idea of passing out badges reading "Support Cedric Diggory The REAL Hogwarts champion!" that alternated to "POTTER STINKS" the wearing of which Emily prohibited in her classes the minute after she spotted the slogan. Cedric Diggory himself, however, was being hounded by the members of his House to join in the Potter baiting, and stalwartly refused every time. One of the other Hufflepuffs kept trying to palm him a POTTER STINKS badge, which he wouldn't accept. After class, she pulled Diggory aside for a minute and told him how much she appreciated his efforts. He thanked her with becoming modesty and some surprise it was clear that he hadn't expected praise from a teacher for his actions.

Well, she thought as he headed back up to campus,*Cedric Diggory might make a good candidate for the Tithe. Gwydion would like him.*

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The Saturday morning of the following weekend, Emily made her appearance at breakfast in narrow black jeans tucked into her riding boots, a black t-shirt, and a black leather peacoat, with sunglasses in her hand. She had also painted her fingernails dark purple and slicked her hair back with Muggle shine gel. The reactions at the High Table varied from brow-knitted disapproval from McGonagall, a stare from Snape, amused chuckles from Madam Pince, and an indulgent smile from Dumbledore.

The Headmaster had just been leaving his place at the table, chatting with Professor Flitwick. "Ah, good morning, Emily. How stylish you're looking today. Are you going out?"

"Thanks! Good morning to you, sir. Yes, I'll be running down to Cambridgeshire to see some old friends in the CU folklore department. We're going to hook all of our laptops together and play a bunch of computer games and then rent some videos and have a lot of pizza and beer and crisps. After last weekend with the *purebloods* " she drew the word out satirically, with an instant's glance at Professor Snape, " I'm having this intense desire to go have a mad wallow in all things Muggle. I'll be back by Sunday supper unless you want me back sooner."

"No, go, go, enjoy yourself. Sounds like a smashing good time," Dumbledore replied with a cheery smile. "Do bring me back a few Mint Crisp bars, will you? I find them rather in short supply in Hogsmeade."

"You got it, Chief." She grinned at him. He winked at her.

Dumbledore moved off, still talking to Professor Flitwick, and Emily sat down beside Professor Sprout and poured herself some vanilla jasmine tea, falling easily into a chat

with Irma Pince and Pomona Sprout. Madam Pince had just taken a school subscription to a new herbology journal at Professor Sprout's recommendation, and they were both quite impressed with it.

Madam Pince turned to Emily, then reached for a napkin. "Oh, Emily, dear, you've got a chalk smear on the back of your coat. Here you are "

"Oh, I must have leaned against the chalkboard in my classroom." She accepted the cloth with a smile of thanks, pulled off her coat, and began wiping at a white powdery line on the black leather.

"I didn't know you had a tattoo," came Professor McGonagall's stiffly polite voice. Just beyond, Professor Snape turned toward her and glanced at her arm with a look of such scrutiny that she half expected her skin to burn under it.

"Oh." Emily looked matter-of-factly down at her arm. The short sleeves of her shirt didn't quite cover the intricately inked armband that encircled several inches of sinewy upper arm. "I'm sorry I've had it so long I never thought to especially point it out to anyone."

"Does the Headmaster know about that?" the Deputy Headmistress asked, again in the same tone.

"Yes, Dumbledore has known for years that all of the Fianna have them," Emily replied, answering McGonagall, but looking at Snape. He suddenly noticed that she was watching him watching her and turned his attention back to his coffee cup but not before getting off another of those sneers of disapproval for which he was rightfully famous.

"I suppose there is a long military tradition of tattooing oneself," Professor McGonagall said, with a pinch of disapprobation at such.

"Well, yes, but there's a bit more to it than that. This pattern is my name and those of my next of kin, the kingdom I hail from, and my rank in our native runes. Certainly we've cultivated an aesthetic quality in them, but its real purpose is to allow my body to be identified if I die in action. It's a very old custom," Emily explained.

"*Oh.* I see," McGonagall replied, looking much appeased. Professor Snape, however, appeared totally unimpressed.

"Really? Which part is your name?" Professor Sprout leaned over for a better look.

"These characters to these characters, here," she said, pointing to a band of graceful black calligraphy full of long up- and down-strokes curving over her bicep. "And this is my mother's name, and that's my father's name. This band in this pattern just above it means that I was a page, then when I got to be a squire, they added this band and then that one, and then they added this one when I was knighted, and so on. The colours violet, red, and black are on the Third Kingdom's banner, so if I walked into an Eighth Kingdom beer pub or whatever with my arms bare, everyone would know I was a knight in Gwydion's service in about one second."

"Really rather prettily done," Madam Pince said. "Like an illuminated manuscript I've seen similar border designs in the *Book of Kells*."

"The original influence for both came from the same artists. But don't go out and get one yourself now, Irma," she mock-cautioned the librarian. "Professor Snape might disapprove and heaven knows you don't want that."

The other teachers laughed even McGonagall chuckled a little into her morning chocolate. All but Professor Snape, who scowled down at his breakfast. Emily realized a moment later that her remark hadn't been absolutely fair, as Professor McGonagall had expressed more open disapproval to the idea of a tattooed Hogwarts professor than Snape had, truth be told. But it was just so easy to assume that he would disapprove of anything, and to accept his ill-temper as a given, that he had to expect everyone else to joke about it a little, she thought. They were his colleagues, his peers, and except for her, his elders most of them were at least twice his age. Were they all supposed to cower under his petty tyrannies like a bunch of first-years?

"Absolutely, dear. The next time I have one too many gillywaters, I'll be sure to stay out of any tattoo parlours, lest Severus take a round fifty points from my House," Madam Pince said, smiling merrily over at Professor Snape. Everyone laughed again, louder probably more at the idea of the sedate librarian getting in her cups and turning up sporting a tattoo than the idea of Snape disapproving of it but he nonetheless shot a dirty look at Emily and again scowled deeply at his plate.

Emily quickly finished wiping the last of the chalk from the back of her coat and put it back on. "That actually sounds like a nice evening out, Irma. Do let's go out some evening and drink too many gillywaters and *not* get tattoos together. Next Saturday, perhaps?"

"That sounds lovely, dear. Minerva, Pomona, Poppy anyone else care to get a drink and not get tattooed? I think perhaps we could all stand a bit of fun before the First Task is upon us." The others agreed even McGonagall, much to Emily's surprise. Professor Snape looked sublimely disinterested.

"Splendid we'll have ourselves a great big chick-fest then," Emily said, making Madam Pince and Professor Sprout giggle again. "I'm off, then till next weekend, ladies."

"Quite brightens the place up, doesn't she," Madam Pince remarked to Professor Sprout as Emily waved good-bye and made her exit.

Professor Snape said nothing but from the look on his face, perhaps he would have preferred Hogwarts a trifle less brightened up.

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"There are other Fae teaching at Cambridge?" Orla Quirke asked, from her seat near the window.

"Yes, there are. I'll tell you a little secret there more than a few Faeries out there occasionally passing for human in the Muggle and wizard worlds. I know one ogre who does some prize-fighting in Muggle Oxfordshire. Rather an unusual-looking chap, but you won't find a kinder heart anywhere."

"Why do they say that church bells bother Faeries so much?" George Weasley asked, his mouth full of wheat cake. "You've got bells going off round here all the time and it doesn't bother you. Can you go into a church if you like?"

"Certainly. At Cambridge I went to Evensong service quite often to hear the singing. That whole bit about the Fae being anathema to the Christian church got started in the Dark Ages. If you lot don't mind a bit of a history lesson I can tell you a thing or two about it. Don't worry, you won't get tested on this."

"All right then." Cho Chang got comfortable on a green velvet tuffet near the fire.

"Well, back in the Dark Ages the portals opened more often, and there were fewer humans about, and, there were rather more Faeries running about Europe then. A few had come to the Second World, and immediately noticed, well what do you know there are no Orcs here! They liked that, so some groups chose to emigrate, and they were a somewhat noticeable presence, what with their ears, Words of Power, using Glamours, turning invisible, and dallying with shepherds and all that. Now, the Christian Church of that time never especially liked us because Faeries don't see asceticism, or the denial of one's impulses, as being necessary in order to be judged worthy of salvation. For us, anywhere outdoors is a place of worship, you don't need clergy to intercede with the deity for you, and the things that make us happy are sacred, whether that's drink, dancing, making love, or playing the nose flute. So needless to say, that's one big set-up for a clash with the early Christian Church there.

"Faeries also don't baptise infants or any such, because there's no pressure on anyone to keep to the same name their parents give them most of the time. So, to some, we were seen as very sinful and demonic. Plus, we travelled between here and a parallel world, which some assumed must be the Biblical limbo where unredeemed souls were sent.

"So, suffice to say, Faeries ended up becoming very unpopular with church officials in the Dark Ages and early Middle Ages. And after enough people got burnt at the stake, the early Christian church officials became rather unpopular with Faeries as well."

"Faeries used to get burnt at the stake? What about using a Flame Freezing Charm like Wendelin the Weird?" Padma Patil queried, sounding concerned.

"Well, you see, that was a Wizarding spell. We didn't have its equivalent in the Faery magical canon at the time. So mostly Faeries just got burnt, which as you can imagine, they didn't enjoy as much as Wendelin did. And there being a whole lot more humans than there were Faeries, fighting them wasn't exactly an option. So, mostly, the Fae just packed up and went back to Arcadia. The ones that stayed, and the ones who ventured back, got very fond of hiding. And with arts like *Obscurantis, Glamours*, and *Deceivre*, they got so good at it that a lot of folklorists still refer to us as the Hidden People."

"What's *Deceivre*?" Fred and George asked together.

"I'll never tell," Professor Swain said earnestly. Then she turned to Hermione, who had been getting ready to answer. "Miss Granger, before you say anything, imagine what those two would be like if they knew how to use it."

Hermione considered that for about one second. Then she turned her attention back to her teacup and refused to say another word.

"Now the early Christian church is not to be confused with the current versions of Christianity, whose clergy would never burn anyone at the stake most of them don't even support capital punishment these days. Hardly any of them even acknowledge that Faeries exist any more a notion which we ourselves reaffirm at every opportunity. But the early versions of the Church hated the Fae to such an extent that they made up a lot of untrue rumours about us that are still floating around, in the guise of old wives' tales and childrens' stories. There are a whole host of tales about the practice of the Tithe in particular. Rumour had it that we didn't just give very talented and willing people a nice sabbatical at Court no, we stole them away unwillingly, or we sent them to Hell, or we put them back on Earth after decades had passed and everyone they loved was dead, or we stole them away and drank their blood to ensure our continuing immortality or some such. All of it was complete rubbish, of course."

"What about immortality? I've read some Muggle authors who thought Faeries were immortal is that true?" Hermione asked.

"No, it isn't. We live a long time by even Wizarding standards, but we do get old and die. To your average person who lived in the Dark Ages and Middle Ages, though, who thought that a person was an aged crone by the time they hit fifty, we must have seemed immortal.

"Also, one of our tribes, the sluagh, were said to be dark angels or fallen souls by the early Christians. I suppose there are those impressionable few who think they're sinister looking they all have black hair and eyes and pale skins, with very low voices. But I assure you, they aren't any kind of angel."

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No, Lucius Malfoy was a devotee of another kind of this establishment's attractions.

He found someone who interested him at the bar. The girl's night-black hair, the entirely black voids of her eyes, and blue-white skin marked her as a Faery sluagh; the look of her tribe was unmistakable. To Lucius Malfoy who was something of an aficionado of the type the characteristic look of the Fae was equally obvious in the high arch of her black brows, the upward tilt of her almond-shaped eyes, the elongated point of her ears, and her willowy, hyperattenuated physical beauty. She was dressed in a short wisp of a white silk frock, black stockings, and patent-leather schoolgirl shoes, casting doe-eyed looks over the crowd, with a mug of chamomile tea clasped between hands that were almost transparent in their delicacy.

Whomever she was, she was new to this particular establishment. Faeries were as rare here as vampiresses were common, and he would have remembered this girl if he had seen her before.

If the vampiresses were the happiest of the lot, however the few Faery women who ended up here were the most melancholy. Their stories, Malfoy knew, were invariably the same love of a human lured them to the Second World, and addiction to substances unavailable in Arcadia kept them there. Had they been abandoned or abused by their human lovers, or given birth to little fatherless Fae, it still would have been the most advantageous choice to return home to the Faerielands, where the weather was warm, fresh food and clean water were there for the taking in every forest, and a healthy infant was treasured, regardless of parentage. Faeries were not the sort of people who would persecute their unfortunate prodigal daughters even those who returned with little half-human merrybegots in their arms.

Ah well. He didn't patronise their services to hear a lot of talk, and these women were not given to reciting their life stories.

Also invariably, the Faeries that turned up at Pasiphäe's accepted two forms of currency: Galleons, and their drug of choice. Given the physical beauty that was the norm amongst most Fae, and the fact that their blue-blooded non-human physiology was incapable of becoming infected with, or transmitting, human diseases, they inevitably became very popular when they did. He was lucky no one else had claimed her attention yet this evening.

Malfoy sat down at the bar beside the girl. She looked sidelong at him and her gaze lingered.

"Hi," she said, in a surprisingly gravelly whisper of a voice.

"Hello. What's your name, my dear?"

"Call me Lisa." She cocked her head to one side, fathomless black eyes studying his face. "Well, you're certainly prettier than most."

He smiled with catlike satisfaction. "Thank you."

"Are you nicer, too? I hope you are."

Malfoy put a hand on the girl's slender thigh.

"Come along and find out, love."

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Moody shrugged with perfect, hilarious mock-innocence. "Me? An instigator? I don't know what you mean."

"You're doing it right now!"

"What, this?" Moody shrugged again. "No idea what you're on about."

"Words fail to describe my immense pleasure at providing so much fodder for your entertainment," Snape growled silkily, directing evil glares at both of them.

"Actually, in all seriousness, you might be a good choice of teachers for this subject, Emily," Professor McGonagall interjected quickly before Moody could get off a retort to Snape. "Many of the students find you quite approachable, and therefore might be more inclined to ask you questions on the subject."

"All right when do I have to give the lecture?" she asked.

"Well, seeing as how the First Task will be upon us this coming Tuesday I was rather hoping you could give it Monday," McGonagall said.

Which meant she now had the weekend to catch up on how humans reproduced and prevented themselves from reproducing, and the diseases they sometimes caught in the process, and how to get treated for such. Just brilliant.

"All right, I'll do my best," she said.

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"Professor Snape?" She caught up to him as they were all leaving the faculty lounge after the meeting.

"Yes, Professor?" he answered, the sinister eyebrow quirking in inquisitive irritation.

"It looks as though I'll now have to give myself a thorough briefing on human venereal diseases and pregnancy and the like before I sally forth teaching people about how to prevent them, with all of tremendous amount of notice I've gotten for this undertaking. Since you taught the class last year, could you perhaps recommend something from the library on the subject?" she asked.

"What, they don't teach you about such things as human sexuality in school at home?" Snape asked with a patronising smile.

"No," she said, shrugging. "There's no need for it most of the time."

He stopped dead. "No need for it? Do I mistake your meaning, madam?"

"There's no need to brief Faery children on human sexuality, sir. When the topic comes up, we brief children on the whys and wherefores of our own sexual health and reproduction, which differs a bit," she said, as though that were the most obvious thing in the world. "Most matters of human sexuality are somewhat outside the usual body of knowledge for us."

"How... is that?" Snape asked. He didn't bother to hide his incredulity.

"Well I can only imagine that's probably because Faeries don't get human diseases, and humans don't get Faery diseases. If any of the faculty or students here gets some communicable disease a cold, chicken pox they can't transmit it to me because my physiology is too different for the usual bacterium or virus to affect me," she explained. "The inverse is true as well if I come down with the white fever or wasting cough this winter, none of you will get it."

"I see," Snape replied, nodding evidently that made sense to him because he left off implying that she was too unsophisticated to know that things like sexually transmitted diseases existed. "And... what about matters of birth control... ?" he inquired of the air next to her ear, in a much lowered tone. While he remained perfectly composed outwardly, he was now giving off an acrid odour of embarrassment and mounting anxiety.

She averted her eyes, blushing horribly. "That's... um, that's actually very simple by comparison."

"If you could... elaborate on that, madam?"

"If a Faery woman wants to get pregnant, she has sex during her oestrus period. If she doesn't want to get pregnant, she doesn't. Oestrus occurs about once a year."

"And for the rest of the year?"

"The individual isn't fertile then."

His brow creased. "For an entire year at a time?"

She nodded. "Think of it this way you've got a creature who lives for about a hundred and seventy years. From about seventeen to about a hundred, they can produce one offspring every fourteen or fifteen months. If Faery women had a chance to get pregnant every month, think how fast we'd get overpopulated... "

"I see. How can you tell when oestrus is going on?" He addressed his question to the far wall.

"It's... unmistakable."

"How?"

She blushed. "Well, there's some bleeding involved. There can be cramps, mood swings... you've seen a cat or dog in heat, maybe?"

"Yes," he replied, the sinister eyebrow arching alarmingly.

"It's not quite that bad, but... it's unmistakable."

"So... if it's like feline oestrus... then... every male in the vicinity looks desirable to an ovulating female... ?" There was such sudden alarm in the man's voice and scent that even she pitied him.

"Professor?" She emphatically shook her head no.

"I'll... have some recommended reading for you by dinnertime," he said very stiffly. Then he turned and swept down the hall, scattering awed students in his wake.

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Professor Snape was as good as his word, if stand-offish about keeping it. There was a piece of parchment propped between her plate and water glass at her now-accustomed seat beside Madam Pince at Friday's dinner, folded into thirds with martinet's precision. Listed on it in a highly legible, elegantly stark hand was a long list of titles, mostly of scholarly medical texts. There was no greeting, closing, or personal note of any kind, not even his initials at the bottom of the page.

In all, however, his recommendations made her work very easy. Once she had obtained five or six of the titles he had recommended, spent an evening studying them, and made up an outline, she felt very well prepared on the topic of human sexuality. On Monday, her two classes of fifth-years, the Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff session and the Slytherin-Gryffindor session, went as smoothly as any other classes she had taught that year.

Classes let out early on Tuesday to allow everyone enough time to get down to the arena erected for the First Task. The teaching staff assembled in their lounge to gather their cloaks and wraps in preparation for heading out to the stands of the First Task's enclosure.

"So, Emily, your Sex Ed lectures were yesterday, weren't they? How bad was it?" Moody asked, with a gruff smile.

"Oh no, it was fine. They were curious, as you can imagine, and they giggled a good bit, but in all it was about what I expected," Emily said, wrapping herself in her outer robe and reaching for her cloak.

"I'm glad to hear it went well. No really awful questions, then?" Professor McGonagall asked, tying on her pointed, plaid woollen hat.

"No, not at all," she said. "Lots of blushing and a few giggle fits, but overall, I think they were glad to hear it."

"Well, then, Professor," Snape uncoiled his full lithe height from his chair by the fire, and reached for his cloak, "I'm glad *you thought* it went so very smoothly. However, again I find my entire House falling over themselves to regale me with tidbits about your...thought-provoking... lecture material. Really, I think everyone in Slytherin is almost as impressed by your Sex Ed lecture as they were by the time you hurled daggers at the far wall during the first week."

"Actually, it was only the one dagger, sir, and that was to demonstrate the necessity of diversionary tactics in "

"So tell me," Snape continued smoothly, cutting her off. "Did you actually tell all of Hogwarts' fifth-years that anal penetration is very stimulating to the male prostate?"

She had to hand it to the man he definitely knew how to bring all conversation in a room to a screaming halt, and without ever raising his voice. The Deputy Headmistress and Professor Moody both looked at her as though they would both very much like to hear it answered ay or nay as to whether she had in fact discoursed on means of stimulating the male prostate. McGonagall looked shocked into abject speechlessness, while Moody's wide grin was openly admiring.

"Someone asked me a question about gay sex," Emily replied, shrugging. "What should I have said instead?"

"You didn't need to go into such *explicit detail* as has been described to me, perhaps," he replied acidly, winding his black scarf around his neck. "If they ever choose to investigate that practice for themselves, perhaps there could be some element of *surprise* to the proceedings, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes, of course," she said, glaring at him dead in the eye. "I suppose instead of telling them what I knew about homosexual penetration, I should have singled out some poor embarrassed virgin of a schoolboy and grilled him mercilessly, as I've had described to *me.* And did you actually tell them that PMS was a form of temporary lycanthropy?"

"It isn't?" Snape asked with elaborate mock-innocence.

She fixed him with an annoyed look. "All right I was told, sir, that I was to give a practical lecture on human sexuality. I gave one. I did this even though, I want it noted, that I am not even of the same biological species as the human children I was teaching. If what you actually wanted was for me to lecture on sexuality and be tremendously coy and uninformative about it, you really should have sent me a memorandum to that effect. Furthermore "

"Would you look at the time!" Professor Flitwick suddenly interjected, mashing his little tweed cap down on his grey head and whisking up his tiny cloak. "We should all really hurry down for the First Task, don't you all think?"

"Absolutely, Filius, couldn't agree more," Madam Pince said. She hurried Emily into her wraps and drew her inexorably toward the door. "Come along, dear Pomona's saving some seats for us. Isn't this just terribly exciting?"

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From the number of people milling about on the lawns beyond the lake, it appeared that the entire school had turned out for the First Task. Actually, it appeared that the entire school, the entire village, numerous alumni, a healthy number of vacationers, and the entire population of a local retirement community had turned out for the First Task. The stands were full, and an overflow of people were sitting on folding chairs and blankets. Emily followed Irma up to the top of one of the stands, where some benches had been reserved for the Hogwarts staff. They joined Professor Sprout, who was so wound up with nerves that her flyaway grey hair was sticking out from her head like a large grey dandelion. The other professors joined them shortly afterward in twos and threes.

A tent had been erected next to an enclosure made of high fence walls, in front of which were tall stands of long benches. The enclosure held a silvery-blue dragon that Emily recognised as a Swedish Short-Snout, hunching protectively over a clutch of large, speckled eggs, amongst which was a single, gleaming, golden egg. The objective was apparently to retrieve the golden egg, without harming any of the other eggs, and without being clawed, bitten, incinerated, or otherwise killed by the mother dragon.

And this was only the First Task. No wonder so many champions had ended up dead in the past. "I cannot believe they're letting teenagers do this," Emily said, worried.

"There's Cedric," Irma said, nudging her and pointing. "Looks like he's first."

The crowd fell silent as Cedric Diggory, the Hogwarts seventh-year champion, entered the enclosure alone. For a lone seventeen-year-old wizard facing some tonnes of hostile broody dragon, he seemed remarkably composed. He looked very young, and very brave.

Cedric stepped forward very slowly, his eyes fixed on the Short-Snout, and extended his wand toward one of the rocks on the ground in a very measured and non-threatening gesture. *"Caninus."*

The rock was instantly Transfigured into a very large, yappy, and aggressive brown mongrel dog "He always was good in my class," Professor McGonagall said with satisfaction that advanced on the Swedish Short-Snout, growling and barking. The mother dragon was not at all happy about the presence of either Cedric or the dog, which ran around her snapping and barking and hunched protectively over her eggs. The dog made to bite the dragon's tail and she lunged out at it irritably. Finally, as it continued to worry her, she seemed to forget about Cedric, and momentarily left the nest in order to lumber after the dog, apparently intending to either incinerate it, or catch it and make a snack of it Emily couldn't tell which.

Cedric took advantage of the Short-Snout's distraction to dart forward and snatch the golden egg from the nest but attracted her attention again in doing so. Alarmed, she forgot the dog and breathed a long flume of blue fire toward the boy, which he dodged, but not fast enough. He had the egg, but had to slap out his burning hair as he ran back toward the gate. The crowd gasped in nearly a single voice, then jumped to their feet with wild applause as Cedric made it out of the enclosure, the golden egg clutched in his arms.

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After Cedric Diggory had been immediately pounced on by Madam Pomfrey and taken to the medical tent, the Swedish Short-Snout was replaced by a common Welsh Green dragon for the next champion, Fleur Delacour. The insouciant blonde part-veela was naturally pale; but when she entered the enclosure, clutching her wand, she looked almost waxen, doll-like, fragile. But the set of her shoulders was resolute.

The crowd fell absolutely silent as she pointed her wand at the beast, and whispered, *"Torpere."* The incantation, in Fleur's soft French-accented intonations, was infinitely soothing, a lullaby. The Welsh Green shook its head, blinking; its harsh, protective attitude softened, and its movements slowed. Emily wished for a moment that she could paint, so as to preserve the tableau in the enclosure below: the sleek, reptilian beast hypnotised by the fair, formidable sylph of a girl. The crowd was now dead silent.

"Torpere," Fleur breathed again, in the same soft tone, her voice resonating with subtle power, so that Emily felt her own eyelids droop gently under its suggestion. The

dragon curled up wearily around her clutch of brown eggs, and went to sleep.

Now that was really a good idea. Leave it to a veela's granddaughter to lull a dragon into submission. The crowd remained silent as Fleur waited a long moment, then picked up her robes and stealthily made her way over to the dozing creature, then began to gently ease the golden egg out from under the green-scaled foreleg.

Her touch must have tickled the beast and while she managed to wrest the golden egg from under the dragon's very breast, the young part-veela learned the hard way that one should never tickle a sleeping dragon. The Welsh Green fidgeted in its sleep, letting out a soft snore and with the snore came a thin, fitful jet of flame. Fleur turned, quick as a cat, and started running silently across the enclosure with the golden egg tucked under her arm like an American football quarterback. But the exhalation of flame caught the skirts of her robe and ignited them as she took off the crowd let out a collective gasp but Fleur whipped out her wand and quenched the flames with an incantation that sent a gush of water over her burning clothes with barely a missed step.

Fleur made it through the gate with her prize under her arm a second later, and was instantly whisked up by Madame Maxime and a concerned Madam Pomfrey.

The crowd applauded the Beauxbatons champion mightily. Emily was well satisfied with the performance of the female part-human contingent of this Tournament.

She was less satisfied with the marks Fleur received. She thought the girl should have received better she could have been snored on even if she hadn't disturbed the beast, and had recovered from being set afire with remarkable aplomb. Ah well, the judges must think they had their reasons, and she had no desire to do their job herself.

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After the First Task was over, Emily, Irma, and Pomona Sprout went down to the front of the enclosure for a closer look at the Hungarian Horntail, who was being prepared for transport by a group of energetic young wizards in dragonskin gloves. Irma and Pomona suggested an outing down to the Three Broomsticks for a gillywater to celebrate the fact that all four of the champions had made it through the First Task alive. Emily who was still looking at the dragons, who had been moved to various holding pens told them that she would catch up to them at the pub in a few minutes. Hopefully, someone would find a way to console the grieving Fireball.

She had a few minutes' pleasant conversation with a young, robust, redheaded fellow, whom she correctly guessed must be a Weasley, who was the lead dragonkeeper. He was also none too pleased about the loss of the Fireball's eggs.

"Bloody Krum wasn't supposed to destroy the eggs, and he knew it. I hope they took a right lot of points off for that. But don't worry, miss, she'll be all right. She'll pine some, but when we get her back to the colony and the alpha male starts courting her again, she'll get to another round of egg-laying and forget about it. It happens in the wild, when their eggs get stolen by predators and the like."

After saying good-bye to Charlie Weasley, Emily made her way through the crowd toward the path to Hogsmeade. She passed a group of very well-dressed wizards sitting around a well-appointed picnic area, sipping from liqueur glasses and nibbling on delicacies from picnic hampers. While they all looked as though they were having a marvellous time, there was just something callous, in Emily's opinion, about treating this event in which four young people had risked their lives and three of them had been injured, not to mention the Chinese Fireball's clutch of eggs that had been destroyed like some sort of tailgate party or country picnic.

Then Emily recognised Mr. and Mrs. Parkinson among the group, chatting with their daughter Pansy and Draco Malfoy. Just beyond them, she noticed Felina Rosier, wrapped in lugubrious black tweed robes over her mourning crape, and turned away, intending to slip away unseen into the crowd. It would have been nice to see Beatrice Parkinson again, but she would have to do so when that Rosier harpy wasn't amongst her party.

She was so intent on making her escape through the crowd that she literally ran into Lucius Malfoy, who had been approaching her from behind.

"Why, Emily hello, there." He caught her and put a steadying arm around her waist, then peered earnestly behind her. "Is someone chasing you?"

She laughed. "No, I'm all right. Hello what a surprise." He was wearing another of those obscenely expensive black bespoke outfits, and smelled deliciously of English lime water. He hadn't yet withdrawn his arm from around her waist.

Emily had, of course, sent the proper note of thanks to her host and hostess following the Malfeasant weekend, but this was the first time she had met up with either of them afterward and, of course, there was no way she could have forgotten what had gone on between them just before she left Malfeasant. Now, face to face with Lucius again, she found herself at loss for words and blushing furiously. What was she to infer from... that moment in her room? Had he been overcome with relief following the hunt, and allowed decorum to lapse for a second... ?

What *did* he want?

"Lovely to see you again, dear," he said, then raised her hand to his lips and put a very brazen and deliberate kiss on her ungloved palm, a gesture which would go unnoticed in this teeming crowd, but that held infinite meaning to her. Emily was so transfixed with staring into those cool, still grey eyes that she forgot to breathe for a few seconds.

*Draco, have you seen your father?*wafted from somewhere in the crowd. Narcissa's voice.

Lucius glanced in the direction of his wife's voice with a faint look of irritation, then stepped back, composing his gloved hands on the head of his walking stick. "Narcissa, darling look, who's here. I've found Emily, and Severus, old man! There you are."

She turned in the same direction Lucius was facing, and spotted the black silhouette of the Potions master some paces to her left. Apparently Professor Snape had been behind her in the crowd, and Lucius had just spotted him. She could tell by the set of his shoulders that he had been trying to slink away unseen by the Malfeasant set as well, but he stopped and turned around when he heard his name called, dutifully rearranging his features in a slightly more pleasant expression. "Lucius. Good afternoon."

"Quite the event today, wasn't it? I can scarcely believe they let the Potter boy compete," Lucius said jovially. "I thought the little fellow was done for until the broomstick appeared."

"Yes, it did look that way," Snape said shortly.

"The Beauxbatons girl was amazing, don't you think? Rather surprised her marks weren't higher." Then he turned back to Emily as though he had just remembered something. "Oh, I've been meaning to ask you what are you doing for New Year's Eve?"

"Nothing, as of yet. Why?"

"How would you like to go to a charity ball at the Ministry? Narcissa and some of the other wives in the Daughters of Wendelin are on the organisation committee. It's black-tie and very exclusive all the really important Ministry folk will be there. I could arrange an invitation for you, if you like."

"I should love to go," she said, her eyes still riveted on him, and remembering, with a shiver in the pit of her stomach, how it had felt to bask in his attentions at Malfeasant. He slanted a humid look down at her, one corner of his mouth rising in a slight, fond smile.

"Wonderful," he purred. "I'll have to get a suitable escort for you, of course." Then, to her horror, he turned in Professor Snape's direction and called out, "So, Severus what are you doing New Year's Eve? Can I possibly persuade you to escort Emily to the Ministry Ball?"

Emily thought Snape looked as though he would rather have drunk a cocktail of dragon's bile, but he muttered: "I suppose I could make it. Anything would be preferable to the godawful racket the students make at New Year's."

"Splendid. I'll make certain to have Narcissa stock the bar with that Orcadian Scotch you're so fond of."

"Thank you most kind," Snape muttered. Then Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson wandered up, and began complaining to their Head of House about the unfairness of Harry Potter being allowed to compete, and he turned to them with characteristic good humour.

"Ah duty calls for poor old Snape," Lucius chuckled. He turned back to Emily with one of those understanding, conspiratorial, smiles. "So I'll see you New Year's?" He sounded a bit wistful, as though he couldn't wait for the time to pass until then.

"I wouldn't miss it," she replied, smiling back at him. "Thanks very much for the invite, you're very kind to me."

"And long to be kinder," he whispered or so she thought; he spoke so softly that she wasn't sure she had heard him exactly. Just then Narcissa wafted up, in a swirl of veiled hat and blue velvet robes, took her husband's arm, and nodded a cool greeting to Emily.

When the Malfoys and Professor Swain made their good-byes sometime later, it was with only the most impeccable decorum on both sides.

Author's Note: This chapter contains an homage to Grindylowe's hilarious fic, "The Lecture."

I've taken some liberties with Grindylowe's timeline in order to make it fit with KEC's chronology. GS

Part First: The Hart Assurgent: Chapter 11

Chapter 13 of 55

Professor Emily Swain came to Hogwarts from the Arcadian Kingdoms to teach the Faery magic of her people. She rapidly becomes embroiled in a bitter game of professional rivalry with another professor -- and then a very old friend makes her an enticing offer she doesn't want to refuse...

Chapter 11:

Administering December's end-of-term exams turned out to be surprisingly enjoyable. Emily's students had to turn in a single-scroll essay on anything that interested them about the Faerielands or Faery magic and complete a written test on the parts of the sword and various fencing terminology. Then, they had to Obscure objects of gradually increasing sizes, hopefully culminating in Obscuring themselves, using either their wands or Words of Power. (Those who had actually created *Mots de Puissance* received extra credit points, and feats performed using one were weighted accordingly.)

Lastly, she picked up her practice rapier and mask and engaged in one-on-one bouts with each of them. To keep them motivated, she made them all a standing offer anyone who could score two touches against her in any given bout would get a perfect mark on both parts of the exam.

Emily had saved Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy for last during her Gryffindor-Slytherin fourth-year class, more by means of a treat for herself than anything else. There was no one at Hogwarts who could have been a truly challenging sparring partner for her, which meant that she had to keep in practice by means of solitary drills and exercises in the long storage room just under the Owlery, which had been cleared for her use as a practice studio. Those, however, were deadly dull compared to the challenge and pure physical exhilaration of duelling a real opponent. During her solitary evening practice sessions, she would miss the other members of her unit especially Bill and Victoria with a wistful intensity.

So the bouts with Harry and Draco were a real pleasure for her. Harry, as she expected, did very well. The boy was as slippery as a trout when it came to dodging attacks, hence his performance against the Horntail. He was so quick and agile it was really a delight to spar with him he had nearly picked up the Fianna trick of moving just the distance sufficient to evade an opponent's attack while keeping the point of one's own sword solidly in place. Her only critique for him was that he could have been more aggressive while he was excellent at defence, it did him no good to hang back and defend, defend, defend he had to try to score some points, too. In all, however, she gave him a very solid mark in the practical part of the exam. The Gryffindors applauded him as he saluted her after their bout and went to rejoin Hermione and Ron, grinning madly. Harry and Ron seemed to have made up their feud following the First Task Ron gave Harry a hearty pat on the back following his bout.

But while Harry Potter was the first opponent to challenge her that day, Draco Malfoy was the only opponent all year who managed to get in a successful attack against her.

There were several factors that went into Draco Malfoy landing a point on a vastly more skilled opponent that day. Emily was tired she had been bouting against students since her first class session of the day and in every session from then on, and he was the last opponent in her last class of the day. She was perpetually cold in this Scottish weather, especially in metal armour, and the chill stiffened her joints and slightly slowed her reaction time. The previous succession of easy victories had made her complacent as well and Draco, sly little fox that he was, had been watching his classmates batter unsuccessfully at her shoulders, chest, and torso for the last hour, and when it came time for his bout against her, he had made a few feints to her upper torso, but then disengaged, dropping the point of his sword down, and almost *almost* landed a solid low-line attack on her right hipbone. She noticed it at the last second, and instinctually turned away from it, so his point brushed against her armour and past her, instead of finding purchase and bending in a solid attack. Had an Orc warrior landed the same kind of attack the boy had, she would have been continuing the battle with a nasty abrasion on her right hip.

But it was the first time any Hogwarts student had ever managed to get past her guard and land a touch on her. She held up a hand and stopped the action.

"Nicely done, Mr. Malfoy. It was *passé* your point brushed me and went past but nonetheless, that counts as a point. Also take thirty points for Slytherin, for being the first student at this school to score a point from me." Draco held a triumphant fist aloft as the Slytherins cheered him loud and lustily.

When he turned back to his opponent, her stance had altered subtly the opportunity of duelling a skilled opponent was invigorating. She stood *en garde* more alertly than she had in months.

"Oh great, now I've just made you mad," Draco said anxiously, retreating from her.

"Don't worry," she said, smiling. "Remember, if you can score a second point from me, you get a perfect mark on the term's-end final. I need to score five points from you, you need one from me. Not too poor of odds, I think. Ready?"

Draco assumed *en garde* position, and lowered his blade. "Yes."

He put up an excellent fight, a valiant fight. As with all advanced fencers, he had begun to analyse his opponent for areas of vulnerability and had picked up on the fact that she was not accustomed to low-line attacks, used as she was to doing battle with opponents much taller and more heavily muscled than herself. Draco was two inches shorter than Emily was, and dropped to a crouching position to take attacks at her lower body with great dexterity, so that she found herself having to employ little-used downward parries to block. At one point he aimed such a quick lunge at one of her knees that would have hit solidly if he had been duelling anyone less nimble than an Arcadian deer changeling he only missed because she sprang three feet backwards so fast that it elicited gasps from the class.

She beat him in the end, but he made her work harder for it than anyone had all year. They both pulled off their masks and saluted each other, each raking sweaty fair hair off their faces. "Well done, Mr. Malfoy. Take another ten points for Slytherin, as well."

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Christmas break came as a welcome respite from December 18th to Christmas morning, there was absolutely nothing to do but lie around and read, run into Hogsmeade for mulled mead, and make short trips into London, Cambridge, and the Continent. Emily went with Irma and a few of the other staff members into London for Christmas shopping expeditions. (Presenting one's friends with gifts on Christmas Day was customary here in the predominantly Anglican part of the Second World, as she recalled from her Beauxbatons schooldays.)

But on Christmas morning, Emily woke up with a mild fever and low-level headache, feeling a bit achy around the middle. She had left a cup of half-drunk tea on her night table the night before, and suddenly the smell of the honey was overpoweringly, nauseously sweet to her.

She groaned, sinking back into her pillows.

Oestrus. Today of all days.

It was about the right time for it, she supposed a bit late, but then she had never had regular yearly cycles, and occasionally would miss oestrus entirely if she had been doing a great deal of training or was under considerable stress. It was her least favourite time of the year, bringing on headaches, night sweats, extreme sensitivity to smells and sounds, crazed emotional extremes and, of course, overpowering lust for anything in the shape of a desirable male, and some men that could not exactly be called desirable in the usual sense of the word as well. Her body, quite oblivious to the fact that its inhabitant had no maternal inclinations, was going about its business preparing itself to become pregnant, as was its biological wont.

A long-time friend of hers, a doctor, had come up with a potion that helped tremendously with the annoying symptoms of this state it served as a potent painkiller and also diminished the mood swings and sometimes overpowering sexual urges that accompanied it. She rummaged around until she found the bottle Catherine had given her and drank a dose of it, then went back to bed and waited for it to take effect. It simply would not do for a Hogwarts professor to fly into a rage or have a crying jag at the slightest provocation. Nor would it do for her to be flirting outrageously with any of her colleagues, or any of the flocks of teenage boys running around... the crowds of... *healthy, young, lusty...*

NO. She was not going to let herself have these thoughts. No no no. She was going to think of things that could not be construed as sensual in any way. Glacier fields in Antarctica. Dragons with scale rot. Orcish cookery. Orcish table manners. Her mother telling her, at nine, that she was such a rotten archer that she couldn't hit the broad side of a barn. Professor Snape telling her she was an amoral rake. The way her burned hand had itched when it was just about healed. Professor Snape telling her she was a truly terrible liar. That stinky swamp just outside of Ardensea. Professor Snape glowering at her tattooed arm. Cleaning other people's crusty blood off her chainmail. Professor Snape looking unbelievably put out because she asked him to tea. Professor Snape looking shocked because she had just called him on his desire to kiss her.

Now that thought was a bad mistake.

She hadn't gone back and revisited that scene in her memory very much in the last weeks once he had made it so clear how angry she had made him on that particular evening in September, it felt rather like a violation of his privacy to dwell on it too much. Better that she simply follow his lead and ignore it. But now, goaded by a tremendous upsurge in hormone production, the whole scene recurred to her in painfully vivid sensory detail. That endlessly cool demeanour of his melting in an agony of raw heat after she twined her arms around his neck and kissed him. The way he shivered with receptivity when she touched him, as if he couldn't have gotten enough if she'd kept him there all month. The air had been cold, but his skin was deliciously hot. And then the way he unabashedly whisked her up and ravished her like some hero out of a bard's epic romance... compulsively buttoned-up academic or not, the man had been like a satyr at the top of his form... *yes, glower as he might, scowl as he might, the sonuvabitch was a fantastic lover, she'd give him that...*

No, dammit, she corrected herself, she was not giving him that, she was not giving him *anything.* She clamped a pillow over her face and groaned. Then she dragged herself out of bed and into the coldest shower she could stand. As she was drying off, she noticed that it was 8:47 a.m., and the sun was just now rising. She glanced out the bathroom window and noticed that snow was falling again and the sight of that bleak landscape suddenly engulfed her with a wave of despairing claustrophobia so strong that she put her head down on her hands and had a good cry over it.

Thank the Mother this hadn't started while classes were going on, she thought, patting her face with a towel.

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Her sense of smell always highly acute was now so strong that she was constantly blitzed with a welter of extra sensory information. She knew exactly which girls were menstruating and who had neglected to brush their teeth thoroughly as she made her way down the hall toward the library. There was such an odour of decay on the breath of a Slytherin second-year, a boy she had never spoken to before that she stopped him and told him to go see Madam Pomfrey immediately for a dental check up. "That's going to hurt a whole lot, very soon. Go right now, it's only going to get worse."

"Uh... yes, Professor." The child nodded his head, puzzled, but skittered up the steps toward the hospital wing.

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Emily received more unexpected Christmas gifts from some of the staff in the teacher's lounge that afternoon. Madam Pince had given her an absolutely beautiful illuminated volume of William Butler Yeats' complete poetical works the gesture struck her as so thoughtful, such a previously unlooked-for kindness, that she became positively teary as she unwrapped it. Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout had evidently noted her fondness for herb tea and had loaded her down with enough deliciously fragrant exotic varieties of it to stock her office all year, while Dumbledore had presented her with a bottle of excellent French Armagnac, apologising because it wasn't Faery calvados, which made her eyes tear up again. Emily herself had had very little idea what to give anyone on staff, and so had presented each of her colleagues with a bottle of her favourite French burgundy. Now, she was sorry that she hadn't put more effort into choosing more personal gifts for them, as they obviously had done for her.

In all, she was extremely fond of everyone by the time everyone headed back up to their rooms to dress for the Yule Ball.

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The hospitality Hogwarts offered its guests at the Yule Ball would have been a credit to any house. The Great Hall was decked out in silver frost, garlands of greenery, and bright lanterns. The dinner was wonderful clearly the school house-elves were outdoing themselves. The entertainment had been exceedingly well chosen. The champions had led the dancing without a hitch, even poor self-conscious Harry Potter. The students seemed to be behaving themselves very well, a marked improvement from weeks prior.

Yet Professor Snape didn't seem to be enjoying the Ball one bit.

There could have been any number of reasons for this. Perhaps it was because he felt constricted and overformal in his dress robes which seemed remarkably similar to his ordinary robes, except they were cut of soot-black velvet rather than soot-black woollen. Perhaps his idea of a good party was not one in which he had to monitor the behaviour of hundreds of students. Perhaps he wasn't a fan of the Weird Sisters. Perhaps he was annoyed by the fact that Professor McGonagall was wearing thistles on her hat, and he had not thought to wear a thistly hat. Perhaps he disliked the lavender silk gown that adorned the impressive person of Madame Olympe Maxime, preferring her usual black satin, or perhaps he was annoyed that that good lady danced with Headmaster Dumbledore and not him. Perhaps he was annoyed that Professor Moody, with his wooden leg, evidently knew at least how to do the two-step, while Professor Snape, judging from the number of his appearances on the dance floor, did not seem to know any dances at all. Perhaps he took as a personal affront the fact that his Faery colleague, Professor Swain, was wearing sleeveless robes of ink-green silk with an uneven hem that fluttered around her ankles like the petals of a flower. After all, it was entirely possible that he had wanted to wear the same colour of green but had had to fall back on his black robes so as not to be seen as unoriginal.

Or, perhaps, Professor Swain surmised, he just still hated everything in general, or her in particular. Well, let him. She hated him right back.

Nonetheless, she had been meaning to ask him if his classes had gotten any more orderly since she had delivered those stern lectures to her classes about using Faery magic responsibly. (Which had made her feel a little bit ridiculous, given what your average Arcadian's opinion would have been of Professor Snape's ideas of responsible use of magic. If he thought his students were prankish, he'd obviously never met a wood pixie of the Puck clan.)

But she had told Professor Snape that she would help him restore order in his classroom, and she was a woman of her word.

She had meant to ask him after the Christmas feast had ended and the dancing had begun, casting about in the crowd for him in time to see Snape slink off into the rose garden outside. Well, this was as a good time as any to take the subject up if he decided to snub her again, at least only she would be there to hear him for a change. She wrapped herself in her fur cloak against the chill and followed him out onto the terrace.

She ran into the three Gryffindor Chaser girls coming in, just as she was going out and one whiff of the exhalations of their collective breath told her what they had been up to in an instant. "Spinnet, Bell, Johnson come here for a second, ladies." They turned toward her with very guilty looks, but followed her as she took them aside.

"Now... much as I can understand the desire to have a nip of something in this cold weather, you know the rules about students drinking on campus. You've all only got a year or two to wait until you're of age to go hit every watering hole in the U.K. whenever you like, so please, just don't do it at Hogwarts because I hate giving detention. Besides, Ogden's Firewhiskey is such swill if you like whiskey, get yourselves a nice single-malt on your eighteenth birthdays. That's the real stuff."

"Are we in trouble?" Alicia Spinnet asked sheepishly.

"Not this time, but just be glad it wasn't Professor Snape or McGonagall who noticed because they'd come down on you like something out of the Old Testament. Don't do it again until you're old enough, and especially not while you're at school, all right?"

"Yes, Professor."

"Sorry, Professor."

"Thanks, Professor "

"Sure. Now run along and go... " she waved her hand in front of her face "... gargle with something, would you?"

The three Chasers stood not on the order of going, but went, exchanging confused looks between them. Emily continued out into the rose garden, immediately spotting Snape's black, etched silhouette by the way it blotted out the low lights of the garden outside. She was momentarily struck by the incongruity of the setting a rose garden in full bloom, in late December, in Scotland? This must be one of Dumbledore's magics, then.

"Professor Snape?"

He turned toward her voice, his face registering surprise. "Yes, madam, how can I help you?" He sounded as though he would have preferred to help her onto a non-stop flight to Albania for an extended holiday, she thought, with suddenly waspish temper.

"I was thinking about the pranks that you mentioned were being played in your classroom. I was wondering if they had died down at all. I've told all my classes on several occasions, quite sternly, that if I hear any more reports of acting up in other professors' classes using Obscurantis that I will have to become a much stricter disciplinarian," she said.

"I'm so happy to hear that," he said, scowling faintly. "Thank you for your kind, if rather tardy, attempts at remedying this situation. You might be pleased to hear that my students seem to have heeded your admonishments and have stopped playing tricks using Obscured items in my classes. Either that, or they have become so skilled in its use that they are able to now pull off their pranks beneath my notice."

So it was still war between them and her never-admirable temper now flared dangerously. She laughed a laughter tinged with an arch, malicious note that implied she found the idea of students fooling him more amusing than not.

"Well then. I'm so pleased to hear things are going so very well for you. Good evening, Professor." She turned to leave, with as much dignity as she could muster under the

circumstances.

There was a long pause, and then she heard: "One moment, Professor?"

She slowly turned around. "Yes?"

His intense black gaze was fixed on the walkway in front of her. "I have been doing some research in the library... and have a question for you."

"You have a question for me, sir? Whatever about?"

"I find the third form of Obscurantis to be... intriguing. Could you perhaps find time to recommend some further reading on the subject?"

"The third form of Obscurantis you mean the power to see that which is invisible?"

"Yes, madam."

"Well, first, it would help if you would create a Word of Power for yourself, you know. Without at least a rudimentary one, you might have a difficult time managing it. Many of the more advanced forms of our arts can be temperamental if one attempts them with a wand."

His eyes turned toward the sky really, he seemed to prefer looking at anything other than her. "I have actually... been attempting to create one, and may have had some limited success in the endeavour."

"Really." For a moment she was speechless with surprise Professor Snape, actually applying himself to learning Faery magic? This was... it was unbelievable. When had he done it? He must have worked morning and night at it and to have already had some measure of success was a tremendous accomplishment. She clasped her hands in front of her and grinned at him almost girlishly. "You have? That's wonderful! But... I thought you weren't interested in learning my kind of magic, sir."

"A proven method of wandless magic... seems to me to be a worthy field of study," he said finally.

"Even if I'm teaching it," she said, turning away from him with a careless laugh.

Snape coloured slightly and his scent coloured with embarrassment. "If anyone is teaching such a discipline... it seems worth learning."

"I'm happy to hear it. So you think you had some success with it how so?"

"Well... " Snape half-turned away from her for a moment, folding his arms over his chest in a characteristic thoughtful posture, one hand plucking abstractedly at his lapel. Then abruptly, he turned back to her, holding out his hand in which suddenly materialised a red rose, which he had apparently plucked from his lapel buttonhole.

She laughed, in real amusement this time. "Brilliant I had no idea you were such a sleight-of-hand artist."

He actually smiled faintly not his previous thin, sardonic half-smirks, but surprised into real expression of pleasure at her compliments. "Dumbledore made us wear these absurd things for the ball might as well do something useful with them. At any rate, I've... been doing a bit of work on it. But as you said in your class, the Faery arts are not my first language when it comes to magic."

"First language or not, you've been working successfully at it, I'd say. Well done, Professor." The rose was in full, dark red bloom she impulsively put her hand around his wrist and brought it to her nose, taking a deep breath of its green, powdery fragrance.

He stared at her that guarded, almost blank expression that she remembered from the first day she met him. "Thank you," he replied quietly.

Impossibly... under the irritation that always seemed to hang around him like a metallic-smelling cloud, she detected a salt tang of embarrassment and the most sudden breath of desire. And in her current state of hormonal disturbance it smelled delectable. It felt as though her every tissue and cell was straining closer to him.

That telltale sign of receptivity, from this usually repellent man, was like finding a spring of pure water in the midst of miles of arid desert. It occurred to her that she could very easily have taken about two steps forward, put her arms around his neck, and brought his lips down to hers. What with the scent he was starting to exude right now, there was the mad possibility that he might actually like that. It also occurred to her that dragging him into the shadow of one of those rosebushes and having another brief interlude with him might greatly improve both of their respective moods. Tides of oestrogen were telling her that this was a very, very good idea indeed, one that should be acted upon immediately.

She scarcely noticed her fingers slithering up onto his wrist, savouring the warmth of his skin. Nor did she much notice the effect surprise, followed by suddenly riveted attention such a caress had on Professor Snape.

But close on the heels of her sudden desire for him came, perversely, a rush of revulsion. No, this was just the hormones talking to act on such feelings right now would be disastrous neither one of them wanted what would come of that. In the incendiary nature of her current state, lust became revulsion, then frustration, then anger, in a split second. Why should she want him? He had been hostile to her from the first, making it difficult for her to feel welcome or even comfortable at Hogwarts, and then took her to task for finding companionship with anyone, even her old friend Lucius Malfoy. If she had thoughtlessly offended him before, he had certainly gotten his own back in everything he had said to her since, especially what he had said to her at the Malfoys' Hallowe'en Ball. She was still smarting from that little speech of his, in which he had called her an amoral rake. Besides she was a Fianna knight, not some bloody camp follower to be trifled with was he expecting her to dangle after him now, gratefully responding to anything less than complete incivility?

"That's a neat little trick," she said gaily, mockingly. She let go of his hand as though it was red-hot and smelled bad besides. "Though hopefully it won't make you an even more diabolically efficient mischief-maker than you were before. After all, it's not part of a magical tradition thousands of years old it's just something we made up this year solely to annoy you."

Snape stepped back, glaring at her in shock and then outrage. "It wouldn't have annoyed me so much if you'd taken that thousands-of-years-old magical tradition and employed it in a less deceitful way," he snarled back, crossing his hands in front of him under his cloak, as if they had been much offended.

Oh, so this bloody great Second-Worlder dared lecture her on what her people thought proper behaviour, did he? She faced him with killing coolness.

"Sir, if you think that most of us would find the use of a harmless magical prank of five minutes' duration to get the attention of an attractive member of the opposite sex anything less than completely understandable, then your experience of us must be very limited indeed."

He still seemed to be in a state of shock perhaps immobilised with fury? Perhaps stunned that he had been referred to as "an attractive member of the opposite sex"? He stared at her, silent and unmoving. That lack of response infuriated her more than anything else he could have done.

"I bid you good evening, sir."

Then she turned on her heel and stalked away.

Behind her, Professor Snape let the rose in his hand fall to the paved walkway, treading on it as he turned his back in Professor Swain's direction. He glared at a nearby red rosebush with intense dislike. A second later, his attention was caught by a soft giggle issuing from another rosebush, some metres to his left. He whipped out his wand with a crisp swish, in the manner of an Old West sharpshooter unholstering his six-gun. The look on his face was such to make the very dust motes skitter out of his way.

Emily passed Headmaster Karkaroff hurrying in the direction she was hurrying away from Snape-ward on her way down the shadowy paths of the rose garden back to

the ball. Wherever he was going, Karkaroff seemed very anxious to get there. He barely paused to nod a greeting to her in passing. "Good evahning, Professor Svay-hin."

"Good evening to you, Headmaster Karkaroff."

She could hear him hissing urgently to Snape as she was leaving the garden *Severus, I need to talk to you NOW I have nothing further to say on the matter, Igor*not realising that a faun's earshot was somewhat longer than that of one's average wizard. She wondered what they were arguing about so heatedly she had had no idea that they even knew each other but she had no desire to stay and eavesdrop. The elemental scent of teenage lust was growing thick in this garden, and she had no wish to lose her head around Snape any more than she already had.

And by the Mother what was THAT? If the scent of barely hatched young desire wasn't heady enough, by the fountain she caught a great lungful of something so potent it practically knocked her backward over the low garden border and rolled her down the hill. Glancing around, she noticed the dark silhouettes of two towering shapes by the fountain Hagrid and Madame Maxime. What with the size of them, it couldn't be anyone else. They were not touching, but their postures were practically sighing into one another. She exhaled hard against the storms of emotion contained in the scent of courting half-giants. And she had thought satyrs were intense... !

She hurried quickly back up the entrance hall, passing Harry Potter and Ron Weasley on their way out, no doubt in search of a breath of air. "Good evening, gentlemen," she said, and they pleasantly, and shyly, returned her greetings.

Behind her, she heard a blast, and then the sound of desperate squeals and scampering. Professor Snape had apparently caught some students kissing in the shadow of a rosebush and had blown the bush half-apart in a shower of falling leaves and petals.

Really, she thought, the man was just utterly impossible. What did some innocent rosebush ever do to him?

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fancied her before that night, she would have laughed. But now... the idea that a man who looked like Moody did, with all the physical limitations Moody had, could radiate the kind of intense sexual energy that he had was slightly disconcerting. It was just that... he was Professor Moody, not some young buck half his age.

The ball was winding down as the clock inched closer to eleven o'clock. The Weird Sisters segued into a slower, more romantic final set of waltzes and ballads, and she had a riotous good time teaching Professor Flitwick and some of the boys from Durmstrang how to do the box step waltz. Draco Malfoy had begun hovering around her periphery sometime late that evening, looking very sleek and handsome and very like his father in black velvet dress robes. He delicately plucked at her elbow at a break between songs and asked for the next dance.

"Good evening, Draco. So you'd like to learn the waltz too?"

He laughed arrogantly. "Everyone knows the waltz. My mother taught me that one when I was ten."

"All right, then, how about the foxtrot?" Draco picked up new dances the same way he took to fencing, and it was just as much fun to dance with him as it was to bout with him. It probably hadn't been too difficult to teach him the waltz when he was ten.

Yes, Lucius's son was soon to be a highly eligible young man, wasn't he... for a long moment, she was lost in contemplating the boy's profile, the freshness of his pale, rosy skin, his thick blond eyelashes... all so very like his father's. Draco noticed her looking at him and stole a shy, but provocative, look back... whereupon she decided it was high time that she take a break from dancing and get a drink of water.

Close to the end of the ball, she felt a hand on her elbow. "Might I have the next dance?" Albus Dumbledore asked.

"Of course, sir."

She had thought she would pull in her usual energy level to dance with an elderly man, whose white beard reached his waist but Dumbledore turned out to be a spry and more than competent partner, who led flawlessly.

"You're an excellent dancer, sir," she said.

"Thank you, Emily. To be so praised by one of the Fair Folk is flattering indeed," he said, smiling. His eyes, she noticed, were the colour of the daylight sky. Unlike Alastor Moody, though, his scent and demeanour were entirely neutral. She was pleasantly reminded of King Gwydion, and her father.

When the music ended, Dumbledore turned to her again and motioned her aside to a corner of great ballroom. "I confess that I have other reasons for wishing to speak to you, Professor. Have you by any chance spoken to Professor Snape tonight?"

"Only very briefly," she said, very briefly.

"He told me that he had some success in creating a *Mot de Puissance*."

"Yes, he has. He Obscured a rose outside in the garden."

"He seems very proud of that achievement," Dumbledore observed, with another smile.

"To some limited degree, perhaps," she replied cynically. "I admit that I'm surprised that he so applied himself."

"Why so?" Dumbledore asked.

"Well, I thought Professor Snape scorned my arts he seemed to think Obscurantis's only use to a wizard would be in smuggling Whizzing Nose Spawning Teacups into his cauldron or some such."

Dumbledore laughed heartily. "While I have never heard of such a device as a Whizzing Nose Spawning Teacup, I have no doubt that the Weasley twins will invent one ere long. But no, I do not believe that Professor Snape holds your people's magic in contempt. I daresay, he has simply had one too many Dungbombs dropped into cauldrons during his lectures."

She nodded. "I see your point, sir. I've tried to help Professor Snape after he complained to me about student pranks "

Dumbledore held up his hand to stop her. "I understand that you have done your best to help Professor Snape keep order. There is, sadly, another reason for some of your colleague's less than charming moods, Emily. He has reason to believe that an old antagonist of our world may be seeking to return."

"Could you, sir, be referring to a certain wizard whom people hesitate to name, of my father's generation?"

Dumbledore nodded. "The same."

Several measures of music went by; she was lost in thought.

"I'm aware of... his history, sir. I was there, you know, when you and Father addressed the issue of what to do about him before the Ministry."

"I remember," Dumbledore said reflectively. "It was the first time I had seen you since you were a child. How old were you at the time?"

"Eighteen."

"There has never been any ill will between me and Buckminster over our difference of opinion in that matter, my dear," the Headmaster said gently. "No one would have been more pleased than I if his approach could have been successful. I was sorry to see him go when he left our world for good."

"I know, sir," she said disconsolately. "Father always thinks everyone is reasonable at heart, you know... "

"Yes, my dear. I know."

"But... that just wasn't the case. You know the Death Eaters tried to recruit him, after that, and threatened him and the family when he refused. Father severed most of his ties to the Wizarding world just after his faction began to gain power."

"Indeed your father preferred to devote himself to your family and his adopted culture than fight Voldemort."

Emily's jaw tightened. "He's a scholar, not a soldier, Dumbledore *but he's not a coward*. People will be reading his works when no one can remember anything my mother or I ever did on a battlefield. How could he have devoted himself to the fight here, when his wife's people were already fighting such a bloody war against the Orcs? That was when he sent me away to school in the Muggle world "

"Emily, Emily," the Headmaster interjected kindly, "your love for your father does you credit. Indeed, Buckminster had your welfare to think of, knowing as he did that his wife could fall against the Orc tribes at any time. I thank the Lady of the Worlds that your mother survived the Orc wars of the last decades."

She paused and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, sir. It's simply that I grow tired of hearing some people criticise my father." And many of those people most cruelly critical of her father's decampment to Arcadia were his own sons and daughters, she thought, but did not say.

"Of course, dear girl. But while your people were menaced by the Orc threat, the Wizarding world here in Britain was threatened as well. And I tell you this in the strictest confidence one of the most valiant and self-sacrificing of those who opposed Voldemort was your colleague, Severus Snape."

"Really." Her expression sobered, and her brow creased deeply. "I had no idea. If that was going on fifteen years ago... he must have been only a few years out of school when... "

"Yes. He was very young at the time, but no less heroic for it."

"Again, I apologize, sir. I've... I've underestimated him."

"I grow concerned with Professor Snape's safety, the same as I worry for Harry Potter's safety," Dumbledore said seriously. "Which is why I must ask you for another favour, Emily."

"Of course, sir. You have only to ask."

"I would like you to privately instruct Professor Snape in the same defensive arts you are teaching to your classes. It would be very beneficial for him to learn your ways of defending oneself."

"I'm willing to do that, sir. But I have to tell you that I fear that he'll resist learning anything from me. He and I have... many differences of opinion," she said, glancing over Dumbledore's shoulder at nothing in particular. She wished, for one very long moment, that she could confide the real circumstances of her... *association* with the Potions master to him, to someone who knew him and might offer useful advice as to how to win him over, or at least better deal with him. But she couldn't not without compromising both his integrity and her own and she refused to even allow for the possibility of embarrassing him.

"My impressions are that he thinks you to be changeable, proud, obstinate, and uncommunicative," Dumbledore said. "And that you think him to be rude, humourless, exacting, and oversensitive. Am I wrong?"

"I'd say you were right on all counts," she replied ruefully.

"Yet... I have never heard either of you fail to acknowledge the other's intelligence and competency," he said reflectively. "And in the face of a threat like Voldemort, can the two of you not put your differences aside and work together toward a common cause?"

"Of course, sir. I do apologize, sir... I'm being petty. I'd be happy to teach Professor Snape anything that I can."

The Headmaster smiled at her, with fatherly gratitude over his half-spectacles.

"Thank you, my dear."

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On the day after the wizards' feast of Christmas another holiday they called Boxing Day Emily left a parcel in Professor Snape's administrative mailbox, containing her Christmas present for him (there had really not been any way to present him with such face to face), a Muggle book and a folio of handwritten and illustrated papers in a leather folder secured with a leather thong. Enclosed was a short note:

"As per Headmaster's request for personal combat instruction:

Please read before scheduling first practical session. Weekday evenings are best for my schedule.

Folio is an uncopied original. Please handle carefully.

Regards,

E.S."

There. Now the ball was in his court, and he could come to her whenever he was ready.

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Later that evening, Severus Snape remembered to check his staff mail after neglecting it for several days. There were the usual duty Christmas cards from staff members (the Professor never bothered to send them himself), a year's end pay stub, and a parcel, accompanied by a note. He carried everything back to his quarters and sorted through it.

The parcel was from that tiresome Swain woman. Dumbledore had asked her to serve as combat instructor to him as well as to the students, despite Snape's own protestations that he needed no such instruction, and now it appeared that she had assigned him some reading beforehand. Wonderful.

With the two books, she had included a bottle of wine with a handwritten Christmas card tied to its neck with ribbon Snape knew that she had given one to everyone on staff, including Hagrid and Argus Filch, so had not been terribly impressed until he glanced at the label. Chateau Latour 1986 red burgundy well, someone had Galleons to burn, didn't she. Snape's taste usually ran toward spirits, but he wasn't averse to a fine wine now and then. And this, he had to admit, after uncorking the bottle and allowing it to aerate was a very drinkable little bottle of swill. Ah well if that presumptuous female was going to deign to give him reading assignments like some first-year student, it was halfway decent of her to at least present him with something pleasant to drink while he did it.

The first book was a small, glossy hardcover definitely not acquired at Flourish and Blotts. *The Art of the Foil* by someone named Luigi Barbasetti. Translated from the Italian, translation copyright 1932 by E.P. Dutton and Co. Written and published by Muggles, then.

The second volume was a thick, untitled folio of handwritten parchment. He set it aside and opened the Muggle hardcover with a grudging sigh.

But Luigi Barbasetti's book an instructional manual for the Italian style of sport fencing actually proved to be somewhat interesting.

The opening postures were exactly the same as the Wizarding style of wand duelling one saluted one's opponent in exactly the same way, started from duellist's first position in exactly the same way, and attacked with exactly the same posture, only a fencer used a sword instead of a blast fired from a wand. Snape realised that they had both had probably been derived from the same teachers. A fencer began his action from the *position of the guard*, or *en garde* position. One attacked by extending one's sword in a *straight thrust*, accompanied by a lunge. Barbasetti's system broke the target area to be protected into five spatial fields, *prime, seconde, tierce, quatre*, and *quinte*, which were each defended with a corresponding stroke called a *parry*. Once a thrust was parried, the fencer countered with a movement called a *riposte*; from there one had beats, grazes, feints, and any number of exotic defensive and offensive movements to learn.

It was an absorbing, but short, book he had finished it in two hours, by which time he had gone through about half of the burgundy. (As far as duty gifts went, he had to admit, he'd received worse.)

The first through fifth sections of the Faery manuscript described a combat system similar to Luigi Barbasetti's, except where the Italian system was entirely linear, the folio's system covered both linear and lateral movements. Whereas Barbasetti demonstrated five spatial areas defended by five parries, the folio's system broke it down further, into thirty-two spatial areas, each with corresponding defensive parries and even more involved defensive movements, covering the entire body. Each movement

was mapped out exhaustively in beautifully detailed pen-and-ink diagrams, which offered the same movement from several different vantage points.

The next section, at first glance, resembled a page out of a medical anatomical textbook. The major muscle groups, major veins and arteries, and three areas of spinal cord mapped out in painstaking detail. Descriptions of how this muscle supports that movement, this artery or vein feeds this necessary organ.

And the next section... gave instructions and diagrams on how to disrupt the body's functions with a bladed weapon, in the most economical of movements, again depicted in the same exquisite pen-and-ink drawings. Sever the spinal cord at the base of the skull, and your opponent will die without pain. Sever the jugular vein, and brain function will cease almost immediately as the brain is deprived of oxygen.

Two strokes were all that were required, the author's argument stated. The first blow, which debilitated an actively aggressive opponent, was called *Healt*, the blow that halts, or the stop shot. The second blow was called *Misericorde,* or *Mercit* mercy the blow that killed. No blow was ever struck without a purpose, and infliction of prolonged pain was absolute anathema. The taking of prisoners and especially torture were blasphemy against the Mother Goddess. You either released an enemy unharmed, or you killed him fast and without pain. There was no in-between state.

It was the coldest, and most intellectually elegant, system for dispatching attacking hordes imaginable. Combat as euthanasia. Yet there was a tremendous amount of restraint involved in it as well. None of its aggressive movements started until an opposing aggressive movement was offered, and then the life of the aggressor was ended as quickly as possible, usually before that aggressor could even finish his first attack.

He wondered who had written it and on a sudden hunch, he compared the handwriting of Professor Swain's note and Christmas card to the handwriting of the folio.

No wonder she wants it treated with kid gloves, he thought, carefully moving his wineglass out of harm's way from the pages.

She was the author.

Part First: The Hart Assurgent: Chapter 12

Chapter 14 of 55

Professor Emily Swain came to Hogwarts from the Arcadian Kingdoms to teach the Faery magic of her people. She rapidly becomes embroiled in a bitter game of professional rivalry with another professor -- and then a very old friend makes her an enticing offer she doesn't want to refuse...

Chapter 12:

Emily had started daydreaming about seeing Lucius Malfoy at the Ministry Ball in the days between Christmas and New Year's Eve the sort of absurd wish-fulfilment fantasy that has no bearing on reality whatsoever, fuelled by the continuing storms of oestrus hormones that continued all that week. She imagined greeting Lucius on the steps of Malfeasant, which had begun more and more to resemble something like a Muggle "fairy tale" castle, like the Bavarian Neuschwanstein. He was always absolutely thrilled to see her, and no family or wedding ring was ever anywhere in sight. Then she would catch herself and give herself a thorough scolding. *Don't be stupid, you're just a family friend.*

But a family friend who he kissed fit to curl your toes, said a more devious internal voice. And if Lucius had wanted to kiss her, it was because anyone would be miserable who had to carry the burden of being married to that tyrant Narcissa. Who knew what she was doing to her house-elves at just that moment.

But whatever the basis for feeling the way she did, and whatever the reason he felt the way he did he was *married*. She had been married once, and while it lasted, it had been the most precious bond in the world to her. The idea of dallying outside her own marriage had been beyond the realm of possibility; it had simply never occurred to her.

And besides Lucius had a son, and that son was her student.

And she had taken an oath to protect the meek and defenceless, and look after the welfare of the people.

The situation was *impossible*.

Yet, fully aware of the circumstances or no, there was no mistaking her own affection and desire for him. He had also made it quite clear that he reciprocated.

On the morning of December 31st, Emily had become so agitated and guilt stricken about the whole situation that she had concluded it would be only the most self-indulgent folly to go to the Ministry Ball at all. The temptation to pursue him further would be far too close to the surface, especially in her current hormonally agitated physical state.

She had taken refuge in the library window seat that afternoon beside a stack of books on Transfiguration and Charms, glad of the peaceful quiet. Irma had taken a short holiday after the Yule Ball to spend some time with her family, but she had left her library key with Emily. It was an unutterable luxury to be able to lock herself away in solitude with the vast collection of books in that room.

After she had been reading for a few hours, wrapped in her black fur cloak and sprawled on her stomach with her heels in the air on one of the cushioned window seats, watching the snow coming down outside the window, she was startled by the sound of someone else's key turning in the lock. Professor Snape let himself in, wearing rather dusty robes, and his sleeves rolled up to mid-forearm. A working day for him, then, it seemed. She thought for a moment about Obscuring herself and allowing him to go about his work whilst thinking himself comfortably alone, but then decided against it. Besides, if he thought he was alone, he would be more inclined to linger than he would if he realised she was already in the library.

She glanced up at him at the same time he noticed her; they acknowledged each other's presence with the barest of nods. His attention immediately turned to the stacks in the Restricted Section, and she turned back to her book, content to allow him to do his research undisturbed.

"Professor?" he asked.

"Yes, sir?" She turned toward the sound of his voice, surprised that he had spoken to her at all.

"Regarding the Ministry Ball tonight. What time can you be ready?" he asked desultorily, scanning the titles for something.

"I'm having second thoughts about going, actually," she said. "I was halfway tempted to go up to the hospital wing and let one of the children cough on me, so that I'd be too ill to go. Then I remembered that this is the Second World, and none of them can give me anything." She disconsolately turned a page.

Snape stared at her as if that was the most preposterous thing he had ever heard. "How... tragically inconvenient," he replied, paging through the latest of his crumbly parchment tomes. "And why would you want to do that, may I ask?"

"Well, the last time I was with Lucius's set, I was rather at the end of my patience with them by Sunday," she said.

Snape shrugged. "So was I they're always like that. I'm confounded by why you were expecting anything else." He reached for another book, a heavy volume titled *Moste Potente Potions*, and began rapidly turning pages. "At any rate, I do hope that all this hemming and hawing doesn't mean that you're now expecting me to spend a great deal of time cajoling you into going, because it's nothing to me either way. Please do have the decency to let me know if you really have decided not to go tonight so I can find something else to occupy my time if you decide to spend the evening sulking instead."

Well. There really was no graceful way out after a remark like *that*, now, was there and oestrus was, of course, never conducive to helping one better control one's temper.

"All right, I suppose I will go." She closed her book with a vicious little snap and got up from her seat. "And you get to escort me. If I know you, you must be simply a-quiver with delicious anticipation at the thought of that," she said sarcastically.

Snape arched the sinister eyebrow at her. "For my own part, don't think I'm not aware that you would rather chew ground glass than be escorted anywhere by me."

"Well then till tonight, *old chum*," she said, folding her arms across her chest and glowering up at him. He had about five or six inches of height on her, so, annoyingly, she had to look upward at him. "Meet you in the entrance hall at six?"

"All right. I know you'll have to move the Earth and stars for this, but could we make it six *prompt*, as some of us do set some store by punctuality?"

"Be happy to, sir. Do you think you could manage to dress as though you're going to a ball, and not a funeral, as some *others of us* do set some store by personal appearance?"

"I'll try," he said in tones of purest acid. "You might allow me to recommend that if you plan on wearing something as substantial as what you wore to the Malfoys', and to the Yule Ball, you might want to see Madam Pomfrey for a dose of Pepper-Up Potion now, so as to pre-empt a case of pneumonia." He punctuated that with the most unconcerned little flick of the parchment pages carefully calibrated for maximum annoying effect, no doubt.

"I can't describe how much I'm looking forward to this," she said through gritted teeth.

"I sympathise entirely, madam," he replied in his silkiest voice.

There was nothing to do in response to that but take her leave of him with a flinty little nod and head back to her own rooms.

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Emily took another very long, very cold shower that afternoon. Afterward, wrapped in a thick, swallowing, Scottish-weather bathrobe, combing her wet hair in front of the mirror, she fell to contemplating her own face and its effect on the crowd of Second-World witches and wizards she would meet that evening at the Ministry of Magic.

Big eyes you've got.

No wizard in her at all, is there?

Same sort of disconcertingly feral look as the mother had. Those ears and those eyes really are uncanny, poor thing.

Looking into the mirror, she silently spoke a word in another moment, the face looking back at her was entirely human. This was the face her students had seen while she lectured at University, and that Severus Snape had seen in King's Cross Station.

Still her own face, but subtly different altered with a visual Glamour. Rounded ears, normal-sized pupils and irises. The most finely stylised, otherworldly elements of her real face diminished into comfortable human normalcy. A pretty face, but not startlingly beautiful or disturbingly alien. A face that might provoke goodwill or even desire, but not fear or instant lust.

And she knew that her escort for the Ministry Ball that evening had however briefly liked this face.

Then, just as quickly as the pensive mood had come upon her, it was replaced with a surge of defiance. She dispelled the Glamour with a word so that her true face reappeared: point-eared, wide-pupiled, arch-browed, fine-boned, *normal*. Reaching for her comb and tube of Muggle shine gel, she slicked her hair sleekly down, combing it well back from her ears. Then she opened a drawer and went for the makeup she rarely used, and powdered her usually pale skin to an even more startling pallor, then darkened her blonde brows and eyelashes to set off those *disconcertingly feral* eyes all the more.

And after a moment's rummaging, she found a jar carved from abalone shell. Inside was a silvery powder finely ground from certain iridescent and luminescent minerals, which had been the favourite cosmetic of the Faery Court for centuries. Mixed with sweet almond oil, it gave her skin a very subtle sparkle and shine. She rubbed a bit onto her shoulders and chest, and just the smallest film on her eyelids.

There. And as far as choosing dress robes she was suddenly tired of her usual black. Something else was in order this evening. When she was finished dressing, she took a quick look in the mirror, and knew that if she had gone to a Court event looking like this, she would have been swamped with enough attention to salve anyone's bruised ego.

"Well, look at you, all dressed up and sparkly this evening," her mirror remarked approvingly. "Have a good time, dear."

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At precisely 5:51 p.m. that evening (she arrived early out of sheer obstinacy), Emily was waiting on the steps of the great entrance hall, coiffed, gloved, scarved, and cloaked. And at precisely 5:53 p.m., her escort met her there.

At first glance, she thought he had gotten turned out rather well. Then, she thought, as he drew closer and her eyes were drawn back to him admiringly he actually looked rather wonderful. His habitual distinction of bearing made even slightly shabby black scholar's robes look distinguished, she had to admit, but in well-cut evening robes of blue-black velvet his black hair smooth and glossy, with that classical profile, and the haughty lift to his chin no, she would not be in the slightest embarrassed to have this man on her arm.

"Does this scrutiny mean that I've not passed inspection, then?" he asked contentiously.

"You're fine. No worries."

"Thank you so very much," he growled. "Shall we?"

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Albus Dumbledore had been talking with Filius Flitwick and Minerva McGonagall on the steps of the Great Hall about that evening's New Year's Eve festivities planned for the students. He watched Hogwarts' Potions master and Defence Against the Dark Arts mistress make their way down the hall steps and out the great front doors with a gleam of approval in his eyes.

"They do make a rather handsome couple, don't they," he remarked. "Hades and Persephone."

"Oh, yes, what with her so fair and him so dark. Severus was looking awfully well this evening I haven't seen him get so nicely turned out in years," Professor McGonagall replied.

"It's a shame they don't get along," Professor Flitwick said. "Did you hear them on the day of the First Task?" He shook his head and chuckled.

"Yes, that is a shame," the Headmaster agreed.

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handed it back to him. Next he turned to Emily.

"Your wand, please... miss?" His gaze had gotten as far as her ears, and then stopped.

"Um... I don't generally carry one," she said in what she hoped was a pleasant and helpful tone.

The security wizard cocked his head at her as if he hadn't quite heard her correctly. "Sorry?"

"She didn't bring hers," Snape supplied quickly.

The security wizard nodded, then picked up a clipboard on his desk. He glanced at Professor Snape's silver badge, then Emily's, and then paged through his guest list to the S's "Ah, I've got Professor Severus Snape... and Lady Emily Swain-Tumnus. Would that be you, miss?"

"Um... yes, it would be, thank you." Peripherally, Emily could feel Professor Snape looking very intently at the side of her face.

The security wizard motioned them through a doorway flanked by tall golden gates at the far end of the Atrium. They followed another group of people in evening clothes into one of about two dozen elevators with old-fashioned grille doors. Emily could feel people turning to look at her in the elevator, while attempting not to appear as though they were actually doing so.

It seemed to take a very long time to reach the ballroom level.

"Level Ten, Diplomatic Reception Hall, Conference Rooms, Grand Ballroom, Hanging Gardens," said the same female voice from the callbox lift, in what now seemed like very smarmy and self-satisfied tones.

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Just outside the entrance to the ballroom, a small group of house-elves in peacock-blue tea towel uniforms were standing at the entrance to a cloakroom, very politely all but mugging people with offering to take their coats. Emily handed her wraps to a hovering elf, revealing bare-armed robes of intricate silver lace over a long gown of lustrous dove-grey, both made of gossamer spidersilk. Her only ornaments were the proudly displayed colours of her Fianna armlet, and a corsage of Lucius's blue horn lilies.

Turning back to Professor Snape, she discovered his attention focused on her already. "What? Still afraid I'll catch pneumonia, then?"

"I suppose you're now going to tell me that pneumonia is a human's disease and you're not susceptible to it," Snape replied caustically.

"Yes, I probably would have pointed that out eventually," she said, shrugging. "Shall we head inside?"

He dutifully offered her his arm.

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The huge Grand Ballroom was just as impressive as the Atrium it comfortably held the five-hundred-some guests attending the New Year's Eve Ball and could have held more with space to spare. Its walls were panelled with vast expanses of mottled grey and silver marble into which huge bronze torches were set, and the vast domed ceiling reflected a gently swirling night sky filled with stars, planets, and every sort of celestial body imaginable seen from dramatically close up. Emily craned her head back to watch the play of a particularly exciting asteroid field approaching a florescent red nebula, until Professor Snape gave her a brusque nudge to keep her from walking into a heavyset grey-haired wizard with an extravagant moustache.

The organisation committee of the Daughters of Wendelin had outdone themselves. Fifty round white-draped tables, set with fine china and silver and lit by floating silver tapers, were set up around an expansive dance floor that seemed to be made of glass lit from beneath with soft blue light. A small orchestra was playing Mozart concertos as ambient music for the cocktail hour preceding dinner. Hundreds of witches and wizards dressed in their evening best were standing around chatting animatedly as house-elves in peacock-blue towels embroidered with the silver Ministry seal circulated with trays of champagne.

Emily spotted Narcissa Malfoy in the crowd almost immediately. Mrs. Malfoy wore magnificent robes of translucent black silk that framed her white shoulders in a flattering portrait neckline, rustling over full, lace-trimmed petticoats of the same silk. The gold of her elaborately upswept hair nearly eclipsed the sparkle of a diamond necklace and bracelets that would have looked right at home on Marie Antoinette. She carried herself like a tyrannical queen, too, haughtily and imperiously as if everyone she looked upon was her subject, whose heads she could have lopped off with a word of command. Narcissa was undeniably a very beautiful woman, and her formal costume was splendid, but her expression again somewhat spoiled the effect of her beauty. Sometime during the year, Emily had overheard one of the Gryffindors describing Draco's mother as always looking as though she was smelling something bad a description which now struck her as wholly descriptive and appropriate, if impertinent. Tonight, Narcissa's look was so sour that the merely bad smell must have ripened into something truly horrid.

Lucius Malfoy appeared a moment later at his wife's side, but seemed oblivious to her sulk as he mingled with the assembled company, many of whom seemed to be waiting for a word with him. He looked ineffably elegant in black velvet dress robes, his white-blonde hair swept back and tied with a black velvet ribbon at the nape of his neck. Emily felt her heart give another embarrassing little splash inside her chest at the sight of him.

The genteel not-quite-staring and murmuring behind hands followed Emily as Professor Snape led her through the group, nodding the occasional terse greeting to people he apparently knew. She knew her face must be flaming whitely with blushing, but held her chin up and carried herself as befitted one of Gwydion's knights. After a few long glances around the room, she thought she could guess the reason for all the looks and whispers it indeed appeared as though she was the only Faerie present. *Yes, I'm at your Ministry ball, and you can all just get used to me, thanks*, she thought, smiling pleasantly at no one in particular.

"Well, Severus!" Lucius Malfoy approached them through the crowd. "Quite the dashing rogue tonight, old man. Maybe this is the decade we'll finally see you take a turn on the dance floor?"

"Not bloody likely," Snape replied. "Good evening, Lucius."

Malfoy laughed, and cordially shook his cousin's hand, then turned to Emily.

"My dear. You look absolutely stunning as always." He greeted her affectionately, laying a gentle hand on her bare shoulder and putting a lingering kiss on her cheek. Scent of clean hair, some wildly expensive shaving lotion, and a very long whiff of testosterone. His eyes lingered on her pale, downcast face, then moved down to the blue lilies on the bodice of her gown.

"Did you like those?" he asked softly, caressing the petals of a velvety blossom with a sensitive fingertip; a gesture which felt as though he had touched her bare skin.

"To tell you the truth on Christmas morning, I looked out my window and all that darkness and snow made me feel like crying," she said, downplaying her more histrionic, hormone-sodden real reaction. "And then you sent me these gorgeous lilies and made my whole day. Thank you so much."

"My pleasure, dear, really," Lucius said, with an indulgent smile. "Did they put you two at our table, by any chance? The Minister of Magic is sitting with us, you know, and you really should meet him."

"I haven't heard. Professor, do you know where " She turned back in the direction of her escort to ask him, but sometime during Lucius's greeting, Snape had vanished into the crowd and was nowhere in sight.

"Well, obviously he was needed elsewhere." She turned back to Malfoy, addressing him in an undertone. "Lucius *why* did you have to arrange for me to be escorted by Professor Snape? You have to have noticed he can't stand me." But she was not anywhere near distressed enough to not shiver the touch of his hand lingering on her arm.

"Because he sets me off so nicely by contrast, of course," he said, aside to her, with lazy smile. "I couldn't possibly let you come with a young, handsome, charming man you might actually find someone like that interesting, and I wanted you looking at me tonight. I'm terribly vain that way, you know."

"Yes, come to think of it, you are, aren't you," she said with a teasing laugh that said she found his vanity absolutely adorable.

"You've found me out, I'm afraid." He lightly drew his fingertips down the inside of her arm as he released her from his friendly greeting just the subtlest small caress, certain to go unnoticed by any casual observer, but in her easily excitable state, it made her skin prickle deliciously. Even on the last day of oestrus, at this proximity to a man she found this desirable, who was so openly attracted to her it was impossible not to respond to him.

Lucius took two flutes of champagne from a passing house-elf's tray and put one in her hand. "You know, I've just realised something, darling I do think you're the only one of the Fae at this event. I'm sorry, I should have mentioned that to you... "

"It's all right I didn't realise that myself until today. But if you could pull off being one of so few wizards at Court the way you did, I think I can manage this," she said, smiling.

"And if anyone could epitomise all that which is most splendid about Faekind, it's you, love," Lucius said with disarming sincerity, clinking his champagne glass against hers and making her blush furiously again.

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"Which is *not*... wand-based? Then how does it *work*?" Miss Umbridge asked sweetly, as if she was talking to a very small, dim child.

"Well, the Faery magical canon was created for use with Words of Power, and my students are attempting to create those for themselves."

Minister Fudge turned back to her with bright, interested eyes. "Tell me, Professor, is a Word of Power anything like a Faerie's True Name?"

"They are two different names for the same thing, sir."

The Minister looked very boyish and nostalgic for a moment. "I read so many Faery stories when I was a boy... so True Names are real, then... ?"

"Yes, sir. Some of those old stories are true," Emily said, smiling warmly.

Just then, Dolores Umbridge suddenly discovered that she had an urgent question to ask Fudge, and Lucius Malfoy, regarding Lucius's department at the Ministry an urgent *private* question, as she told Emily with a sweet, girlish little giggle.

"Oh, pardon me, madam." Emily excused herself with a polite nod.

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Department of Magical Law Enforcement

Ministry of Magic

London

United Kingdom

"We have to go get a coffee or something, all right, Emily?"

"Or maybe hit a club?" she asked, grinning.

"I love it. Let's." Tonks chugged the remainder of her Guinness in one long pull, then set the empty glass down on the bar. "Cheers, mate."

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"Well... that's the *very* literal English translation. The original Old Arcadian dialect is more nuanced than that. It comes out more like *Defend With Thy Last Breath the Just and Righteous Fury of the Mother of Us All*, in our native tongue," Emily replied. The Minister nodded understandingly.

"And the Morrigan is your people's Goddess of War?" Narcissa asked brightly.

"Not exactly, madam. She is one aspect of the Mother Goddess, the one who dispenses wisdom, justice, and... vengeance, when it is warranted. Are you familiar with the ancient Greek goddesses Athena and Nemesis and the god Ares? The Morrigan occupies a similar place in our religion."

"Oh, yes, of course," Narcissa said, nodding, and taking a delicate sip of her elderflower wine. It was entirely probable that Narcissa would have voiced the same agreement if Professor Swain had announced that Athena, Nemesis, and Ares were the patron deities of sculling, dirigibles, and runcible spoons.

"I must say, Lady Swain, I'm still amazed to find that Faeries allow their women into active combat. What a very... liberal and egalitarian society it must be," Mrs. Rosier said. Of course, being Felina Rosier, she made it sound as though liberalism and egalitarianism were synonymous with nihilism and terrorism.

"Well, you're rather failing to take all the relevant factors into account in that opinion, madam," Emily replied, trying to keep her voice very neutral. "Amongst humans, the males of the species are generally stronger than the females, so it's thought that men are better physically qualified for combat. Amongst Faeries, the difference in the amount of dense muscle that a female can put on as opposed to the males of her tribe is negligible, so there isn't a significant difference in strength between the genders."

"But wouldn't you call it a tragedy if a child's mother is killed in a battle?" Narcissa interjected plaintively.

"Of course it is," Emily agreed readily. "But then I would call it a tragedy if *anyone* is killed in battle whether it's someone's parent, or spouse, sister, brother, or someone with no kin at all. No one under my command is readily expendable to me when we engage the enemy in any sort of action, it's my job to keep them all alive."

There was another of those horrible, judgmental lulls in the conversation only this time, the focus of the group's disapproval was Narcissa, not herself. Lucius regarded his wife with a look of faint disapproval, and she wilted instantly.

"How... very admirable," Narcissa said stiffly, her cream-white cheeks mottling pink.

"Well, you see, Narcissa... all service is entirely voluntary. If a woman decides to leave and have a baby, or even decides to leave entirely because she wants to care for her children there's no stigma in that," Emily said in a conciliatory tone. "That's not uncommon my first lieutenant's wife did that, actually. You remember Bill and Mary Blake from my wedding both very tall, with black and orange fur "

"Oh, yes," Narcissa said, as if she would much prefer if the topic was allowed to drop.

Lucius continued to look annoyed, and Narcissa was looking apologetically at him, while Mrs. Rosier seemed put out to have lost her ally against the ideological enemy across the table. Emily was suddenly very, very tired of this conversation. So she looked down at her plate and silently spoke a word under her breath.

As she intended, the talk continued but gradually, she faded out of it. When she spoke, every other person at the table heard her making only totally unobjectionable, neutral comments and reacted as such, seeming to lose the ability to fully focus on her. She would have had to actively seek the others' attention to make them notice her again. When she was sure that her *Deceivre* effect was firmly in place, she closed her eyes, let out a long breath of relief, and took a healthy gulp of wine.

Then she glanced across the table into the fathomless, and very aware, black eyes of Severus Snape, regarding her with keen scrutiny across the table.

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"Yes, I know as a matter of fact, I sent a letter to Priscilla Swain the other day, and mentioned that her sister Emily was teaching at Hogwarts," Mrs. Rosier said. "I received the most extraordinary answer back." She looked provocatively at Snape evidently now he was supposed to ask what that extraordinary answer was.

She seemed to be aggressively waiting for him to prompt her to elaborate, so he gamely asked, "Oh, yes, what was that?"

"She wrote '*That creature may have the same father as I do but she'll never be my sister!*' Isn't that just awful?" Her tone sounded as though one half-sister's disowning of another half-sister was the most deliciously entertaining thing she had ever heard.

"Yes, awful," Snape replied shortly. He glanced sideways at Mrs. Rosier, as if he found her choice of conversational sallies distasteful.

"*My Lady Swain* can play up to the Minister all she wants, but Narcissa tells me that the pure-blooded Swains barely acknowledge her as a member of their family. When Buckminster married her mother, there wasn't even a proper marriage certificate issued. At least, they *say* he married her mother but I know for certain that it wasn't in a church," Mrs. Rosier said, with a contemptuous laugh. "I've also heard that when he transferred all of his assets, he left an embarrassing amount of the money to her. His pure-blooded children contested that, of course. They wanted her to produce a birth certificate and a marriage licence something that established that she was in fact Buckminster Swain's legitimate daughter. She didn't have either one apparently Faeries don't even regularly issue them! It was just the saddest thing "

"*Thank you*, Felina, but I really could have lived without hearing that," Snape interrupted curtly. "I can't imagine why everyone keeps thinking that simply because I work with someone that I must be interested in hearing every last sordid detail of her biography. I didn't realise I was so well known for gossiping about my colleagues." He glanced in Emily's direction with a flicker of anxiety in his eyes. She was now talking animatedly with Gilbert Whimple and not paying any attention to him at all.

"Oh. I'm terribly sorry," Mrs. Rosier said, her eyes going soft and obsequious. "Anyway, I was wondering if I could possibly tempt you out for a dance, then... "

"No, Felina, for what feels like the millionth time, you *cannot* tempt me out for a dance," he said, rounding on her, his black eyes glinting. "For the last twenty years I have had to tell you at every bloody event I attend that I loathe dancing, always have, and always will, so if you would please do me the kindness of not pestering me to dance for once, I would truly appreciate it." He never raised his voice above his usual soft tones but something in his look made her back away from him.

"I'm... terribly sorry," she said, then turned and fled.

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"You'd be a natural for head of that department, what with your background, Malfoy," Mockridge said, nodding thoughtfully at Lucius.

"I am a sworn servitor of Gwydion the Fifth of the Third Kingdom," Lucius offered helpfully.

"Well then you would be the man for the job, then, with your connections," Mr. Mockridge said, nodding.

"If you think so," Lucius said, sounding every bit the modest, diligent civil servant. "If the Ministry wanted to appoint me to such, I would do my best to organise such an office."

"I'm still not convinced the Department of International Magical Cooperation can't address such a need, if there ever is one," Percy Weasley was quick to interject. "Wizard officials have been extending friendly diplomatic invitations to the Arcadian sovereigns and their subjects as far back as the fourteenth century and never received any really committed response, as I recall. The Fae have always maintained a firmly separatist attitude toward us. Meaning no offence, of course, Professor," Weasley said, inclining his head toward Emily.

"None taken," she replied, very coolly. "However, you're offering us a slightly revisionist history of the interaction between wizards and Faekind in the fourteenth century, wouldn't you say, Mr. Weasley? Particularly during the Plague years?"

Weasley's look faltered briefly. "Perhaps it was an... incomplete version, Professor. But wouldn't you agree that it profits none of us to harbour animosity towards each other due to unfortunate incidents in the distant past?"

"I assure you, I feel no animosity toward wizardkind over past historical events, which I think is evidenced by the fact that I am, as you said, the first Arcadian to apply for a Ministry work permit in your memory. And you can be certain that my King doesn't either, given that he was the one who persuaded the other eight sovereigns to declassify information on certain of our magical arts and allow them to be taught outside our world. I'm merely offering you a reason as to *why* the Fae have maintained, as you called it, a firmly separatist political stance especially in the fourteenth century," she replied. Her tone had now gone past coolness into the absolutely arctic.

"Perhaps when my superior, Mr. Bartemious Crouch, recovers from his illness, he will be able to better... address this issue," Percy Weasley said after a long pause, his pale face flaming.

"Perhaps he will," Emily replied.

Percy politely took his leave of Gilbert Whimple and Cuthbert Mockridge, and then nodded perfunctorily to Emily and Lucius Malfoy. She was not sorry to see him go.

"Oh, don't mind him, dear. Poor Weasley feels so much that he has to be the perfect company man," Lucius muttered aside to her as Whimple and Mockridge watched young Weasley's exit, muttering between themselves. "He has to struggle so hard to make a name for himself, what with the parents he has."

"What do you mean?" Emily asked in a low tone.

"Well, the Weasleys have seven children," Lucius said, very quietly, next to her ear. "The children are all hardworking young people I know you've met some of the younger Weasley boys in your classes. Arthur and Molly, however... well, I hate to say this about a colleague, but perhaps putting discretion ahead of self-indulgence really might have been a good idea so that all the children wouldn't need to scramble so hard to make a living later on. Sometimes I wanted to tell him really, Arthur, are you a wizard or an Orc? They're *children* there's no need to breed them like cannon fodder, you know. The two eldest boys have taken terribly dangerous jobs one's a curse breaker, and the other works with dragons but I suppose when one's family has so little, you have to take whatever work is available." He shook his head as though that was a terribly sad shame.

Lucius glanced up into the crowd. "Oh, don't look now, but there they are see, the two redheads. Really, one would think that they wouldn't waste what resources they have on an evening's amusement when they have four children still in school." He again shook his head concernedly.

A dozen paces to Emily's right, Molly Weasley glanced up, caught sight of Emily, and turned to her husband. Her excited whispers carried readily in Emily's earshot. "Look, Arthur remember Fred and George telling us about the Faery magic professor? That's got to be her, or I'll eat my new hat. Do let's introduce ourselves."

Lucius turned briefly toward the Weasleys and then back to Emily. "Well, then, love. Save a few dances for me?"

"Of course. I'll look forward to it."

As Molly Weasley bustled up, a bright smile on her pleasant face, Lucius put an ardent kiss on the back of Emily's hand, which gave Mrs. Weasley pause. He straightened up, and moved off into the crowd, nodding coolly to the Weasleys as he went. "Molly. Arthur."

Mrs. Weasley turned to Emily, her smile somewhat diminished. "Hello, miss. Are you perhaps one of the new Defence Against the Dark Arts professors at Hogwarts?"

"Yes, madam, I am."

"Splendid. I'm Molly Weasley, and this is my husband, Arthur. Three of our sons, Fred, George, and Ron, are in your class."

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parties involved come away feeling a tremendous bond with one another. Emily excused herself as soon as was polite, and after she had gone, Mrs. Weasley sadly wondered aloud to her husband as to why their sons were so impressed with the new professor, as she seemed rather a snippy little thing in her opinion. Mr. Weasley reluctantly agreed.

Such was the power of Lucius Malfoy, that social engineer par excellence. Any reader who has not yet noticed Mr. Malfoy's talent for arranging the alliances of others to suit himself is advised to be wary.

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The glowing blue dance floor was full of waltzing couples as the hour drew toward eleven o'clock. With a talented live orchestra like this and such a beautiful setting, Emily was now itching to dance with someone. Unlike at home, where there was no stigma attached to women asking men to dance or people simply dancing by themselves, here in this place, at this sort of very formal event, a proper lady had to wait until a suitable gentleman asked her to dance. Thus, she was finding herself rather at loose ends.

Of course she had never so much as entertained the idea of persuading her titular *escort* to dance with her Professor Snape simply didn't strike her as the dancing type. Not to mention she hadn't seen him anywhere in at least the last two hours. Menzentius Black no doubt would have danced with her if she had asked, but she would rather have sat the entire evening out than endure that thin-blooded Neanderthal breathing whiskey in her face. Now, she would just as soon have danced with Percy Weasley as with Bartemious Crouch himself, and Lucius was nowhere in sight.

There was also no denying that situations like this made her miss Dorien intensely. As she lingered on the sidelines, watching other couples swirl past, she could feel his absence like a barbed hook twisting in her stomach.

Just then, however, that nice Mr. Cuthbert Mockridge took her elbow and asked for the next dance. She accepted, smiling at him so brilliantly that that genial, balding civil servant seemed a little bowled over. After two waltzes, Mr. Mockridge (now a bit red-faced and out of breath) led her to the sidelines and procured more champagne from a passing house-elf. As he continued to regale her with tales about goblin financial prowess, they were joined again by Mr. Whimple, then Walden Macnair, and Mr. Sturgis Podmore, a tall, well-built, square-jawed blond fellow who she thought quite easy on the eyes. Mr. Podmore asked her to dance a few minutes later, which invitation she was all too glad to accept. He was a good dancer, too it was easy to while away the remaining time counting down until midnight on the floor with him. A few minutes before midnight, he led her aside and procured another flute of champagne for her, then toasted the New Year with her, clinking his glass against hers and kissing her hand quite charmingly.

Walden Macnair asked for the next dance shortly after midnight, however, and she didn't really see how she could refuse him without being rude he was, after all, a good friend of Lucius's. She reluctantly nodded a farewell to the decorative Mr. Podmore and took the floor with Macnair, who, unfortunately, seemed to have downed his share of Scotch that evening. He held her uncomfortably close during the waltz, and she could feel his hand at her waist sweating through the thin silk of her gown. She fell prey to a sudden spell of fatigue that could only be alleviated by stopping all dancing at once and drinking more champagne. Macnair asked for another dance, with an air of thinking himself a very debonair fellow indeed, when suddenly she remembered a vague something that she absolutely had to speak to Lucius about and asked Macnair if he knew where he had gotten to.

"He said something about taking the air in the Gardens just after midnight. Hurry back, all right, love?" he said, winking. She smiled at him and hurried away.

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The Hanging Gardens were easy to find, what with the sign marked "THIS WAY TO THE HANGING GARDENS ====> " mounted next to the entrance to the Grand Ballroom.

The Gardens were another vast chamber with a domed ceiling, this one reflecting a serene, starry sky. Tall latticework trellises covered with every kind of flowering and ornamental vine imaginable roses, wisteria, lilac, and many others formed a deliciously fragrant, airy maze around an elaborate marble fountain carved with alchemical symbols at the garden's centre. Here and there were dotted low stone benches and bits of statuary.

Emily had not wandered very far when she picked up the sound of Lucius's distinctive voice, coming from behind one of the vine-covered trellises, and started over to greet him, then stopped short once she made out the substance of his conversation.

"... really, my love, you're making a fuss over nothing," he was saying, in a soothing tone. "I've known her since she was a child we danced at her wedding. Am I to now totally abandon her socially because her husband died? How would that look, may I ask?"

"Your little pointy-eared friend certainly could try to make herself a bit less conspicuous," Narcissa Malfoy said in reply. "She was dancing with everyone just like she did at the Masquerade Ball. Does she *ever* wear anything on her arms?" Then, she made a sound very like a contemptuous sniff.

Emily turned in her direction in shocked surprise. *Your little pointy-eared friend?* Narcissa knew her name perfectly well, even if she did persist in calling her by her former surname.

Then Lucius's velvety voice cut in "You forget, darling, that dancing and revelry have religious significance to her people. And if Lady Swain is a popular dance partner, I'd say it's most likely because she's an excellent dancer."

Narcissa's reply was sharp. "Say what you will, I don't believe there's anything holy about the way that woman dances. The whole room was looking at her."

"Oh yes why should anyone look at an attractive and well-dressed woman who also dances very well? Have you not noticed, my dear, that you attract exactly the same sort of attention when you take the floor?"

Emily thought this was overstating the case a bit. That soft-footed, fretful arm ornament was more like an unwieldy silk-draped barge one steered rather than led the comparison was impossible.

"That's different," Narcissa raged. "I'm a respectable married woman, not some part-*animal*. Where she gets the nerve to act so superior to me, after what *she's* done, I've no idea."

At that point, Emily might have confronted Narcissa Malfoy in anger and forever forsaken her hospitality. But Lucius interrupted with: "Darling, no matter what you may think, please don't *talk* about the widowed status of a lady whose husband died by violence as if it were an inconvenient imposition upon your sensibilities, especially with that Skeeter woman hanging about. Such remarks might be seen as callous, and might be repeated, at cost to your impeccable reputation."

Emily choked back a harsh laugh. *Nicely done, Lucius.*

"I don't know why you're so fond of that woman. It's not as if her father can do us any good socially he's never returned from his beloved Arcadia. The rest of the Swain family are all as apolitical as they are half-cracked," Narcissa hissed indignantly.

"Why am I so fond of that woman my dear, have you forgotten that *that woman* was, a few months ago, the person who prevented *your* early widowing? For all of your brother's frantic desire to hunt that boar, he never even came close to wounding the thing Lady Swain and I had to take care of it ourselves. And besides, darling," he added, taking on an insinuating tone, "a wealthy and attractive young widow like that might make a very good second marriage. Wouldn't it be worth keeping up the connection for that reason, my dear? Especially because one of her most ardent admirers seems to be a member of our own family?"

Emily had to stop herself from laughing again. Menzentius Black? *That idiot?*

"Menzentius can do much better than that... that long-eared provincial," Narcissa spat. "She's at least a decade older than he is."

"Closer to half a decade and she'll never look any older than he is. They'd have very attractive children," Lucius Malfoy said blandly.

Oh, please, Lucius knew that she didn't want to have children he threw that last remark out just to taunt Narcissa. But still, the spluttering fits into which that idea was sending her were hilarious.

"Perhaps you're fond of that woman, but I certainly don't want her in the family. Can you imagine a bunch of little goat-footed children calling *me* Aunt?"

"Well, strictly speaking, your nieces and nephews would be deer-footed. Emily is a faun, not a satyr."

Emily slipped silently away from the quarrelling Malfoys, having no desire to listen to any more of Narcissa's pronouncements "*... long-eared provincial*" indeed. It would serve Narcissa right if she did marry into their family. Or better yet, if she seduced Menzentius and then discarded him in favour of some rude mechanical. But no... pleasant as that vengeance would be, in order to carry it out, she would have to let the man touch her, and the idea of that made her skin positively crawl.

She quickly made her way back to the Grand Ballroom. The very affable Gilbert Whimple shortly asked for the next dance, and she was happy to accept.

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on a great deal longer before we were so rudely interrupted."

"And I suppose... the proper thing to do would be to tell you that I'm dreadfully shocked and forbid you to ever do that again."

"One should always strive to do what is proper, of course," he said, sighing with resignation, but longingly tracing the line of her cheek with one hand.

"But if being proper means that I have to put you off, then I'm... not feeling very proper." She guiltily averted her eyes.

"Emily, I could be... very, *very* improper with you, if given the proper improper encouragement. It actually frightens me a bit to think of what heights of impropriety I could attain with you, if properly inspired." He put another heated kiss on her palm.

"Let's properly inspire you, then," she whispered. Then leaned in, fingers curving around that perfect jaw line, and kissed him knowing that he would respond with the same unabashed lust that she felt for him. She was not disappointed he returned her provocation in such a manner as to make every famously corrupt libertine in his long line of ancestors weep with envy.

Someone giggled behind them a grey-haired wizard had started up the garden path with a young witch on his arm, the young woman clearly high on too much champagne. But this time, Emily did not want to relinquish Lucius. She turned toward the other two briefly, and whispered a word under her breath. "Don't worry no one will see us."

"Clever girl," he purred, then bent to her lips again.

This was not the greedy, rushed kiss they had shared in her bedroom at Malfeasant this was far slower and more sensual, a prelude to what they both now knew would be coming next, not a grasp for one bite of forbidden fruit that might never be available again. When he let his lips move from her mouth down to the hollow of her neck, conjuring heat in her every nerve ending as he did when he pressed her body close against his, letting her feel the effect she was having on him under the impeccable velvet robes he was a dominant male confidently laying claim to the most desirable female in his territory. And the part of her that could be driven to distraction by the scent of a man's lust understood him completely.

"Your hair is just far too tidy," she whispered, brushing her lips over his ear. "Too bad there isn't a convenient haymow in this garden."

"Why don't we leave the old haymow behind. This time, I'd rather try somewhere different," he said, his arms tightening possessively around her. "Do you remember when I asked you, the night after Beltane, to come to my room and go to bed with me... ?"

"Yes... " If he had said, *What I would really like would be to take you right now, on the ground, like a couple of wild animals*, most likely that would have been her answer as well. But Lucius remained firmly, infuriatingly, in control of himself.

"The offer still stands... and I'm still waiting for an answer," he said.

"All right," she said, scarcely louder than breathing, running supplicant hands over his back. She felt paralysed by his cool, deliberate grey gaze, the unbearable tension in his body beneath the velvet robes. "When can I see you?"

"Soon," he said.

"When?" she asked again, almost despondently.

"*Wait*," he whispered.

Part First: The Hart Assurgent: Chapter 13

Chapter 15 of 55

Professor Emily Swain came to Hogwarts from the Arcadian Kingdoms to teach the Faery magic of her people. She rapidly becomes embroiled in a bitter game of professional rivalry with another professor -- and then a very old friend makes her an enticing offer she doesn't want to refuse...

Chapter 13:

Soon, he said.

Wait, he said.

The hormonal fever that accompanied oestrus had broken by the time the second term started, and Emily was glad of the ability to think clearly and behave completely rationally again. But by the time she had been back at Hogwarts for a week, *waiting,* and Lucius Malfoy had still not contacted her in any way not even a note by owl post she was in agonies of impatience. The time until she could see him again seemed like the bleakest stretch of frustration and ennui she had ever faced. It was so easy to be distracted by thoughts of cool grey eyes and platinum hair, that provocative drawl of a voice, the warmth of his hands on her skin, the lust that perfumed his every motion, the thrill of stealing kisses and conspiring to be alone with him, how it would feel to undress him, peel off that aristocratic armour of bespoke black that the presence of her students and colleagues occasionally seemed like an unwelcome imposition on time that could have been better spent dreaming of Lucius Malfoy.

Very little could rouse her from the cloud of infatuated lust that had enveloped her since New Year's and it was only the article about the Care of Magical Creatures teacher, Rubeus Hagrid, in the *Daily Prophet,* that appeared on the first day of term, that finally did.

She had been having a cup of tea in the teachers' lounge and glancing through the paper when she came across it and by the time she finished reading the article, she was furious. So that's how one sold papers these days by fostering intolerance for part-humans. She threw down the paper, pulled her notebook and a quill toward her, and began to scrawl down an angry letter to the editor. She offered first a character defence for Hagrid, and although she didn't know him that well personally, truth be told, the students here loved him so much that she could certainly attest to that as proof of his essential decency. Then she called Skeeter to task for muck-raking and for the *very* thinly veiled racism in her article in plain terms.

After her classes were over that day, she went up to the Owlery and sent her letter off to the *Daily Prophet* office, post haste.

"For what it's worth it's not like they'll print it anyway," she said to the brown barn owl as she tied her letter to his leg.

"And to think, some of these people still don't know why we're reluctant to integrate," she ranted to the owls in the Owlery as her owl flew off. "Percy Fecking Weasley has the nerve to throw that *firmly separatist* shite at me like we're supposed to woo*them* for the privilege of having water spouting from our ears in their bloody*fountain*."

What the owls made of such talk is anybody's guess.

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"I have had to help you with this time and again, and I tell you, sir, I am *done* with disciplining your classes for you second-hand. Surely you had *some* method of making them behave before I arrived here, so I suggest that you go back to using that and stop troubling your colleagues "

"I assure you, madam, that if you don't think *I'm* a strict enough disciplinarian, then I can only conclude that you *indeed* must have spent the last eight years living somewhere *other than Earth.* I had no trouble disciplining unruly students for some years before you were so much as a student lecturer in the wilds of *Cambridgeshire.* Simply because another teacher cannot restrain herself from becoming disruptive does not reflect badly on me, and furthermore "

"Oh please I knew it was only a matter of time before you tried to play the seniority card. That's always the last refuge of a professor who can't come up with any real defence or justification for his criticisms it all boils down to 'I've been here longer than you have, so I must be right, QED.' Now as I was saying "

"I suppose you think your disruptiveness is terribly clever. You would probably call it unorthodoxy and spontaneity, like every other fuzzy-headed intellectual who thinks to reinvent the entire institution of teaching in one's *first year at a new school.* We are here to make them learn things, not to try to be their best friends "

"Oh? Well, my kudos for definitely practicing what you preach, because I've never heard anyone accuse you of being any student's *best friend* "

"Some of us remain loyal to slightly more elevated notions of scholarship than some populist idea of being universally adored by one's students. I make no apologies for being more interested in matters of science than in having my ego massaged by a bunch of "

"Oh, *do* go get martyred somewhere else, you ruddy great misunderstood genius, you "

"*Silence*!" Albus Dumbledore appeared in the doorway of the teacher's lounge, his blue eyes flashing and his purple cloak wafting impressively around him. Both Professors quailed, broke off in mid-sentence, and turned away from each other.

Emily cleared her throat. "I'm terribly sorry, Professor Snape. I shouldn't have lost my temper like that."

"You're absolutely right, Professor Swain. You *shouldn't* have lost your temper like that."

She spun around. "Why you "

Dumbledore interjected again. "Severus it is unbecoming to be so ungracious when you receive an apology. And Emily if you believed your own words when you said that you should not have lost your temper, perhaps you should not be so quick to lose it again."

There was a long pause.

"Sorry, sir."

"My apologies, Headmaster."

"Now perhaps the two of you should take some time after your classes this afternoon and try to calm down, because I think it's high time you got on with the instructional sessions I asked you to schedule over three weeks ago," Dumbledore said, very gently, but with a reproachful look over the tops of his spectacles. "And I won't have you skewering each other over some disagreement about teaching methods. I think this evening, in Professor Swain's practice studio from seven to nine p.m., will suit the both of you admirably."

"Perhaps that meeting should be put off for some time to allow my colleague to simmer down, Headmaster," Snape offered, in his most patronisingly mellifluous voice.

"Now, now, Severus. I do not think that putting off your first instructional session any further would be the best course of action. Actually, I am beginning to think that taking each other on for a few rousing bouts of fencing would be positively therapeutic."

"Capital idea, sir. I've always believed that duelling had its uses in conflict resolution," Emily offered helpfully. Snape glowered demonically at her. She threw him a twinkly smile in reply.

"Well then, what a lovely evening this promises to be. Do try to be *on time* for our session, would you, so I can get back to a more profitable and entertaining use of my energies? I have some toads to disembowel in my office," Snape said, in tones of dulcet loathing.

"I shall be almost as punctual to arrive as I will be to leave, sir," Emily replied, with equal malicious politeness.

"Until tonight, then, madam," Snape said, with a satirical little bow.

Emily kissed her fingers to him with a theatrical *mmwhaa.* "Endlessly looking forward to it."

Then they stormed out of the room in opposite directions. When the doors had banged shut behind both of them, Dumbledore looked at McGonagall and they both laughed till their eyes teared.

"Ah, Minerva. It's really shameless the way those two flirt."

"Now, now, Albus," Professor McGonagall said, dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief.

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The Headmaster set their appointment for seven o'clock, so of course Snape arrived at 6:53. Really, the man's fetish for extreme punctuality was just *annoying.*

"All right, I'm here," he called dourly, banging the door. At least he had dressed properly who would have thought that he actually owned something to work out in. All black, of course.

"Good evening, oh inexorably cheerful one," she replied. She was already dressed in her usual swordwork instructor's outfit down to the chainmail, but was sitting at a table covered with parchment scrolls. Since grading end-of-term exams had interfered rather a lot with fantasising about Lucius Malfoy, she was woefully behind on them.

"Now let's get this over with," he said, planting himself in front of her.

"The Headmaster said seven, sir. So I'll be with you in " she glanced at the clock "seven minutes. Right now, I've got a bit of work to finish."

"I don't like to wait," he snapped.

"And I don't like to be rushed," she replied tartly. "If certain people would arrive when they're supposed to arrive, waiting wouldn't be necessary."

She bent back over her essays, but Snape decided to sit down in the only other chair in the room, directly across from her, and steadily stare at her while he waited, so she was becoming quite distracted.

"I just can't believe some of these," she said. "I asked them for one scroll's worth of essay on whatever topic interested them, and from both Crabbe and Goyle, I get back one gigantic *paragraph.*" She held up a parchment scroll, which was covered with black scrawl unbroken by any kind of indentations whatsoever. "They're both in *your*

House, aren't they?"

"Yes, they are. So you aren't finished with grading your end-of-term essays... *yet*?" Snape asked delicately. "And I see the honeymoon is finally over."

She threw him a hard look. "What are you talking about?"

"I see the same thing happen every year with you newcomers. You spend the first term larking about acting as though your students are the most adorable creatures on Earth and I should be locked up for ever losing my temper with them. Then after awhile, the more intelligent of you have wised up... *somewhat*."

"Why thanks," she replied with an acidic smile.

"By the middle of the second term, the more noxious of them have invariably started to wear on you," he said. "Take Longbottom for example. The first time you have to correct him, he'll give you that deer-in-front-of-a-train look. By the thousandth time he's given you that look, after apparently forgetting everything you've told him just ten seconds ago, you just want to hold his head under the unclassifiable mess in his cauldron and call it euthanasia."

Emily laughed before she could stop herself. "You really are a profoundly disturbed individual, Professor," she said, shaking her head.

"And *you* just haven't been teaching long enough," he retorted.

She laughed again at his reply the bastard did have just about the best sarcastic delivery of anyone she had ever met, she had to give him that. But then... she remembered that there had been a similar bit of repartee between them on the first night she met him he had gone off on a hilarious rant about some inept student who had managed to melt a *beaker* during an *experiment* in *chemistry* class, and how the *substance* that had spilled had reacted with the floor and made a godawful mess. When she mock-protested that surely it couldn't have been that bad, he had replied with almost exactly the same retort, and she had laughed till her eyes teared and she had to dab them with her napkin.

But that was before they discovered that they hated each other.

"Well. On that happy note," she said, getting up from the table, "why don't you find a fencing jacket and mask that fit, and grab one of those practice swords over there, and let's get started."

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During the second drill he had corrected the mistake. Perfectly. No trace of forming a bad habit he had simply corrected himself and was done with it. She wished for a second that every squire she trained could do that. After half an hour, she was certain that he had a solid grasp on the basics of parrying, so she moved on to disengages.

"All right you're making the disengages too big of a motion... you only need to go around my blade." She caught hold of the point of his sword in her gloved left hand and demonstrated spatially. "Why do this " she drew an exaggerated *U* around his sword with her own point "when you can do this." She dropped her own point in a tight *v* that only just cleared his blade before going past in a straight thrust. "See the difference?"

"Yes it's more precise."

"Try it yourself take a thrust at me." He did, and she took a leisurely parry at his aggressive movement in *tierce* whereupon he took a tight disengage around her blade and continued the thrust. "Beautiful you've got it. Keep doing that and you'll be fine. Remember, you don't want to waste effort. In a combat situation, it's all about who gets there first and the most economical movement is the fastest."

Again, he listened to what she said and had completely internalised it, and then applied it to what she taught him, almost immediately. The man was just a sponge for new information by nine p.m., she had gone far beyond what she had initially planned on teaching him, into feints, binds, and beat attacks. If he was tired, he didn't show it. He also seemed so absorbed in the subject at hand that he forgot to add the usual sarcastic inflections and dire expressions to his every interaction with her although he looked a bit surprised every time she expressed approval or complimented his efforts.

"All right then you've covered a lot of ground tonight. Shall we try a practical demonstration next?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'd like to see how well you've absorbed everything." She saluted him with her sword and assumed *en garde* stance.

"Come on, Professor." She slanted a challenging look down her blade. "Fight me."

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"*Pre "*

"Allez "

And they had at each other.

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As she expected, it was over in seconds.

She had advanced on him, coming on with a swift lunge but to her surprise, he managed to solidly parry her thrust in *seconde*, much faster than she would have expected. Broke off the confrontation without taking the riposte, however she would need to talk to him about that and retreated laterally, aiming a thrust at her left hip, which she parried easily. Then she riposted, binding his blade at a useless angle with hers, before disengaging and landing a direct fleché attack on his sternum, knocking the wind out of him and making him fall back again the wall.

He straightened up after a second, breathing hard, and threw his mask disgustedly aside. "Not one bit of a sadistic streak to you, is there?"

"If you think you'll get a better deal from a real adversary, you're mad."

"Now that you've had your fun and thoroughly humiliated me, shall we call this session finished?" he rasped, gingerly rubbing at his breastbone.

She pulled off her own mask, raking damp fair hair off her forehead, and regarded him with an attitude of cool respect, even a touch of admiration. "You shouldn't be so hard on yourself, Professor that was hardly humiliating. You did very well."

He stared at her. "*What?*"

"Think of it this way I once defeated a knight with twenty years' training in less than one minute." She said it unemotionally a simple statement of fact. "So for you to have lasted about ten seconds against me after two hours' training... that's actually something you can be proud of.

"You have the potential to be very good with a sword, sir. You learn frighteningly quickly, almost to the point of never making the same mistake twice. You've got good instincts, and the beginnings of some talent. With years of practice your sword arm could be almost as lethal as your tongue. Now you'll want to take a hot bath and a couple of aspirin before you go to bed, or you'll be sore in the morning."

She lobbed a workout towel at him. "Good work, Professor. I am duly impressed."

"Don't flatter me," he snapped, deftly catching the towel. "I neither need it nor want it from you."

"I'm just being honest," she replied. "In my line of work, we can't afford to waste talent. But believe me, if you had humiliated yourself, I would have told you all about it in minute detail and enjoyed doing it."

He scrubbed the back of his neck with the towel and she thought she detected just the smallest flicker of satisfaction on his face. "Same time Monday, then?"

"All right."

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By the Thursday evening of the third week since the New Year's Eve Ball, without so much as a postcard from Lucius, Emily was in a deeply foul mood, lying alone in her bedroom. She had taken down one of her favourite volumes from her final year at Beauxbatons, Charles Baudelaire's ***Les Fleurs du Mal***, and was trying to get absorbed in it again. Turning a page, her eyes stopped at a stanza:

"My sobs to smother, muffle, or compose,

There's nothing like the chasm of your bed.

Oblivion battens in your lips of red,

And Lethe's river in your kisses flows."

All right, that was enough of that poem. She paged through the book. Another passage leapt out at her:

"I worship you like midnight's vaulted sky,

My bowl of grief, my Delphian deity;

And most of all, fair one, when you take flight

From me, and seem, adornment of my night,

So mockingly the leagues to multiply

Between my arms and blue immensity."

Okay that was just about enough poetry for the night. ***Les Fleurs du Mal*** was now lying tented on a pillow beside her on the bed. Usually she found this bed, with its feather mattress, down blankets, and deep blue velvet draperies, to be very comfortable, but now, it may as well have been a board of hammered nails.

Damn him. Where was he? Likely he was only playing with her, as punishment for her fickleness seventeen years ago. He didn't really want anything more from her, not now, with the crows' feet springing up around her eyes and the freshness taken from her face by cares and weariness he just wanted to revenge himself on her for rejecting him so many years ago. He was the sort who would remember a slight like that, and if anyone would patiently wait for years in order to get his revenge, it was him, the bastard.

However, that didn't change the fact that she would have given just about anything to have him there in her bed with her. She turned over on her side with a miserable little groan and punched her pillow.

A faint sound penetrated through her black funk. She sat up.

Taptap... rustleflitterflitter... taptaptap...

She went to the window, and pulled the blue velvet drapery aside, to see an owl rapping softly at her chamber window a large barn owl by the look of it, not one that she recognized as belonging to anyone she knew. When she opened the window, it lighted for a moment on the sill and dropped a package into her hands and then took off again in a moment.

Well that was abrupt. Why would someone be sending her a package this late at night? Why not through the usual morning owl post?

The box was a simple, anonymous thing wrapped in plain brown paper. Her name was block-printed on the wrapping:

Emily Swain

Ravenclaw Tower

Fourth Floor Window

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft & Wizardry

Scotland

FOR IMMEDIATE DELIVERY

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL TO BE OPENED BY ADDRESSEE ONLY

There was no return address.

She tore open the package. Inside was an unsigned, handwritten note in Lucius's now-familiar archaic, calligraphic hand.

Darling,

If you still think my hair wants tousling, I can arrange that.

Tomorrow evening, go somewhere private and unbound by Apparition Protections.

Put on what you find in this casket.

Then Summon me, and I will come to you.

She let the note fall back into the box, her heart slamming painfully against the back of her ribcage.

There was a casket inside that box as well, made of smooth wood lacquered a fathomless black. She opened the lid, and gasped involuntarily.

A bracelet lay on a cushion of black velvet a bracelet in the shape of a slender, coiled snake. The creature's body, made to coil around a woman's arm, was fashioned of what looked like platinum, with diamond eyes. Its body was set with what must have been thousands of tiny emeralds, varying in colour from pale to dark green, and set so close together that they appeared to blend into shimmering scales. Its pale underbelly was smooth metal, engraved with such realistic renderings of a serpent's scales that she half expected it to twine muscularly around her arm.

She slipped it onto her left arm and was able to slide it up over her elbow and onto her bicep. She moved to the mirror and admired its green lustre on her skin, twisting and preening. Never had she been given such a rich gift, and her vain, mercurial Faerie's heart was deeply flattered.

But would she accept it?

There were obligations to be considered. To the Fae, if a woman accepted such an expensive and personal gift from a man who made it clear that he desired her then such a gift bound her to him, at least temporarily. To accept such a token was to bestow her favour upon him in some way and she knew what kind of favour that he wanted... that they wanted.

This was the kind of gift a man gave his wife no, not a wife; here in the Second World, the snake was symbolic of temptation, of reptile desires for gratification.

It was the kind of gift a man like him gave to his mistress.

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By morning, a surge of horrified conscience had returned, and she had decided she was not going to meet him. Malfoy was married, even if the marriage did seem to be mostly one of passionless convenience, and she was now widowed. She would stay in her rooms that evening, safe from his designs on her. She would send the emerald serpent back, and that would be that.

At lunch, Professor Snape was especially cross about something and spent the entire meal berating her, no, not her, he was talking to Dumbledore, but it seemed as though he was railing at just the world in general for the cheekiness and inattention of his students. At supper, there was just more of the same. Monotonous waves of

irritation were radiating off of him, making him smell repellent to her. After half an hour of such at supper, she was on the verge of shouting at him. Why did he teach if he hated teaching so much? Why did he not open an apothecary's shop somewhere and hire other people to deal with the Stupid Great Unwashed that evidently irked him so much?

He was obviously very angry about something to do with Professor Moody her defection to the opposite end of the high table meant that Professor Moody became the one who most often took the last seat next to Snape and obviously, something had recently happened between those two gentlemen that had been truly toxic. The looks they exchanged were of purest, baleful hatred. She didn't even want to ask anyone what had happened.

Her mind wandered.

Beltane Night, seventeen years ago. She could hear him chasing after her, no match for her speed, but his lust led him to great exertions. She slowed, let him see her, in front of the hay shed, sweating and coy, before darting inside. She could have taken the stairs to the loft in one bound, but instead she dawdled, made him follow her. Up in the loft, he caught her from behind, pressed his lips to her neck, and dragged her down into the fragrant hay. They threw off each other's clothes, and he forced her onto her back and covered her overheated body with his. Roused by the drums, the singing, and the wine, she was in agonies to be rid of her virginity, every muscle straining up to receive him. During their frantic coupling she tore off the band that restrained his long flaxen hair and lost her hands in it...

Lucius Malfoy, now a sedate husband and father, turned confidentially to her behind the hedges. "I can't lie to you...I have never forgotten what it was like... It's one of my favourite memories."

Lucius in the lush greenhouse at Malfeasant looking regretfully at her over his shoulder. "Though when we hand out judgments on each other's morality, let us remember who amongst us has had their morality called into question more recently. And let us remember how I supported you in your decision to act as you did... "

Lucius turning to her after her blow killed the rampaging boar...tracing his bloody fingertips across her cheek, paying her tribute in the way of her people...the long, tender kiss in her bedroom at Malfeasant... his hand caressing the small of her back as they waltzed... "If anyone is an incorrigible flirt, Mr. Malfoy, it's you." The note he passed into her hand... "Meet me... "

And then their meeting in the gardens at the Ministry, which she couldn't recall without feeling a long shiver in the pit of her stomach. And the priceless emerald serpent, now in her room in Ravenclaw Tower.

Then Summon me, and I will come to you.

"Emily? Might I have a word with you?"

"Yes, of course, Minerva. How can I help you?"

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She smothered a giggle.

"Let's see, where could she be? Or is she right here, having a capital joke at my expense, using one of those coy little Faery magics she's so fond of..."

She did laugh at that, and he immediately turned in her direction.

"Yes, actually I am having a coy little joke at your expense, Lucius."

He threw her his most deliciously depraved smile. "Typical."

Then he had crossed to her and grasping her wrists, pulled her up and hard against his body. Her arms coiled around his neck as he crushed a heated kiss on her lips; overpowering, unembarrassed lust perfumed the air around him. Her muscles turned to water.

The grey eyes lit on the emerald serpent on her right arm. "Emeralds look just as perfect against your skin as I thought they would."

"As always, you have gorgeous taste and are far too kind to me. But, don't think plying me with jewels is going to excuse you for making me wait this long," she teased, brushing her lips over his neck.

"I'm sorry for the delay, love it couldn't be helped. But now I hope to convince you that the wait was worth it... " His hand stroked down her spine to grasp the curve of her rump.

"I'm hoping you will too." She shivered. "This robe is freezing. Take it off."

His answer was to shrug the robe off and let it fall to the floor, revealing an impeccable black shirt and tie underneath, never letting go of her. She loosed the ribbon that restrained his hair and let that fall to the floor as well.

"You're still wearing far too many clothes," she said, drawing the perfect Windsor knot of his tie loose.

"I could not agree more, darling," he purred. "Where exactly is this?"

"The new hotel in Hogsmeade."

"A hotel. How delightfully tawdry."

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As he built the tension in her body toward inevitability for a second time, he pulled back on a fistful of her hair, pulling her throat taut, his open mouth moving over its length, then sank his teeth into the muscle between her neck and shoulder. A red flash of savoury pain accompanied the shuddering sweetness of orgasm like spice on honey.

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After some hours of the same kind of treatment, she was nearly fainting with satiety and adoration.

His shoulder was under her cheek skin like silk velvet, comforting hardness of muscle beneath and the warmth of his arms gently holding her. His lips delicately brushed her forehead. *Shhhh*, he whispered.

Then she drifted off to sleep clasped in Lucius's arms, and it was very, very good.

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It was still dark when she awoke.

Lucius was gone but so recently that the other side of the bed still held the warmth of his body, and the pillow held the imprint from where his head had been.

There was a note on the nightstand beside the bed.

Darling

You're lovely asleep. Dearly wish I could stay.

Next weekend? Don't make me wait another seventeen years.

Get some time off, and send me an owl at work.

Next weekend? Of course she would see him next weekend. And preferably, the one after that, and the one after that, too.

She stretched languorously against the velvet pillows, delightfully worn out, feeling pleasantly sore in all the right places, drenched in the scent of him, and still wearing nothing but the platinum serpent. Even in the early-morning darkness, the emeralds caught the light with a dim, green sparkle.

She couldn't wait to see him again.

End of Part First -

To Be Continued in

The Knight Errant Chronicles

Part Second: The Hart Rampant

Part Second: The Hart Rampant: Prologue

Chapter 16 of 55

In which 23-year-old Lucius Malfoy spends his Tithe year in the Third Kingdom...

Prologue: The Garden and the Serpent

3011 (1978 by human reckoning) ~ The Third Kingdom of Arcadia.

The year he was summoned as a Tithe page, Lucius Malfoy hadn't especially wanted to leave home, truth be told.

He was engaged to the luminous, luscious Narcissa Black, the most perfect patrician beauty Slytherin House had seen in decades. Her blue eyes, velvety white skin, and blonde hair, which fell, unbound, nearly to her knees, were keeping him awake at night with lustful imaginings. His parents were insisting on at least a year-long engagement for decorum's sake, but if Lucius had had his way, he would have married Narcissa that hour and bedded her the hour after that. He was also working as the assistant of a powerful senior Wizengamot official, which gave him access to some very interesting spheres of influence.

The Office of Magical Law Enforcement had other plans, however Alastor Moody and his Aurors raided the Lestranges' manor in late January of that year, on a warrant issued after an investigation into a suspicious poisoning turned up some threatening letters from Rodolphus Lestrange to the recently deceased. Lucius and Rodolphus Lestrange ran in the same circles both socially and politically, so the Malfoy family had reason to believe that any evidence disclosed by the Lestranges concerning certain of their sons' mutual interests could prove... *embarrassing*... to the family. Abraxas Malfoy, Lucius's father, did not by any means object to any of his son's political convictions, having inculcated most of them into him by example but he disapproved very highly of evidence coming to light, and even more highly of being summoned to testify in court.

It was then that Lucius's father had a flurried exchange of correspondence with a very old friend of his, a man named Buckminster Swain. Swain was a wizard scholar who lived in Arcadia, the home of some mysterious beings called Faeries. Lucius's only previous experience with beings called *fairies* had been as the phosphorescent, humanoid insects that served as Christmas decorations at Hogwarts. No, Lucius's father assured him, he was talking about *Faeries*, the Fae, the Hidden People, the Fair Folk, who, in a myriad of alluring, and terrifying, guises, had figured in the magical folklore of Europe, the United Kingdom, and especially Ireland for the last millennium.

And their world the Faerielands, the Land of Eternal Summer, the pastoral, fabled *Arcadia* was also quite real. Lucius's father had been there as a Tithesman himself, as had his grandfather and great-grandfather before him.

"All I recall about them from school is that Professor Binns talked about them for maybe three days, Father," Lucius said over the breakfast table, after his father first proposed the idea. "He said that they used to emigrate here sometimes, but had disappeared off the map by the fifteenth century. They're supposed to be horribly

secretive, and don't like outsiders. Some people don't even think they have souls. Will I come back from being their page and find that a hundred years have passed here and Narcissa and all the family are grey and dead?"

His father laughed. "Of course not, stupid boy you won't find real Faeries in the pages of children's schoolbooks like ***Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*** to begin with, they're far from beasts, and second, you'll never find them if they don't want you to. The Fair Folk are an ancient people a thousand years ago, when more of them lived here on Earth, they were considered Europe's natural aristocracy. If you ever see a Faerie bleed, you'll see where our term *blueblood* comes from. Being chosen as a page of one of their Kings is a great honour traditionally only the best and brightest and most talented are chosen."

The elder Malfoy's words appealed to his son as with his father, the way to engage Lucius's interest was to appeal to his taste for that which was elite and exclusive. "All right then, Father. When do I have to go?"

"The Glastonbury Tor portal will be open next week," his father replied, and it was settled.

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On the side of the arch where he was standing it was a chilly grey February morning, with a thick fog on the ground and a stiff breeze blowing the dead leaves in spirals. On the other side where, presumably, one would expect to see the spent fields of the farm beyond the hedge in the chill morning light was a view into the dark of night, the arches of trees in deep forest, lit by a bonfire some two hundred feet distant. Lucius gasped involuntarily.

"Bless me, Mother, your sons return," muttered Euan Doggins in a prayerful voice. He called something to the horse in a language Lucius didn't know and the horse whickered back something that sounded remarkably like an answer and started forward so that Lucius saw the wagon travel from the sunlit field into the dark, firelit forest.

"Come along, lads and lassies! First one to the End of the World buys me an ale!" shouted Ciaran Puck from behind them.

One by one, the seven young wizards and witches filed forward and through the arch, with the tiny Puck bringing up the rear, comically shooing them along like chickens. When Lucius passed through, from daylight into night in two paces, he felt woozy for a moment, as if the air had thinned, or the ground had shifted beneath him. He moved across the clearing to lean heavily against a slender birch tree but then that tree turned and looked at him, and he saw that what he thought had been a birch tree was actually a slender girl with nearly parchment-white skin and long grey hair tangled with leaves. She put her hand protectively in front of her face and peered at him startled green eyes, through long fingers with knotty knuckles. He recoiled and in his momentary distraction, she was gone.

Doggins, seeing this, laughed uproariously. "You and that dryad gave each other a start, and that's for certain! Careful of the trees, my boy, some of them are women, and like all women, they respond best to courtesy."

Close beside Lucius, Puck shook his dark head again and cried, "Damn human Glamours are too much trouble for an honest Puck to bother hisself I'll wear my own face at home, thanks."

Lucius turned toward him and suddenly it seemed as though the Puck somehow shrank... his hair lengthened, and his eyes darkened until he had changed from a very small and unkempt, but human-looking, man into a tiny imp of a man, perhaps four and a half feet tall, with huge, leathery feet and hands, woolly, high-arched brows, and hairy ears that came to an exaggerated point. Lucius gasped before he could stop himself.

The Puck turned toward him and leered with demonic amusement. "What say you, my tall Master is this not a visage to sour the milk and scare all the children? But no matter my mother loves me." He winked.

"Aye, but can you scare all the milk and sour the children, goodfellow?" asked Eithne, the Irish witch, in a playful voice. Lucius glanced in her direction it was the first time she had spoken.

"If such as you wishest to see it done, lass, I surely will, and strive to curdle the sheep besides," Puck told her with a bow.

Then an authoritative voice called: "Travellers through our portals... Halt, make yourselves and your business known to us." A group of people emerged from the gloom beyond the bonfire. Firelight glinted off bright silver armour. Lucius stared.

There were six of them, men and women both, cloaked and in glittering chain-and-scale mail, with slender swords strapped over their backs. There were two women, three men and one fellow easily seven feet tall and hulking in the shoulders. His face, from a distance and backlit by the fire, looked more than usually whiskered.

"Sir Euan Doggins and Lord Ciaran Puck, Your Honours, carrying seven more Tithe pages for his Majesty's service. Shumwe, Floriano, Brennan, Dhayalan, Skúlason, Collier, and Malfoy reads the inventory, and in the order collected," Doggins said with a theatrical tip of his cap. "These here be the wand-wavers. So who's on portal duty tonight?"

The portal guard evidently recognised the King's agents, for they called cordial greetings to them. Then the tallest warrior drew close enough for Lucius to see his face clearly which was that of a great, stripe-furred, whisker-jowled tiger, walking on his hind legs like a man, and with a very intelligent expression on his face. One of the women warriors, who looked about forty, with dark red hair, was walking on what looked like a deer's hind legs beneath her chain hauberk and had very mobile, fuzzy ears, like some strange half-version of a centauress. Each of them wore a hooded plastron of grey leather, embroidered around the cowl neck with a stylised device of a goblet wound around with grapevines.

Lucius looked desperately behind him at the light of the February morning beyond the arch, but the arch was gone, and he was alone in this strange, strange land with these even stranger people. His knees shook, and he felt light-headed. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the Brazilian girl looking terrified and being comforted by the Irish girl. The South African fellow looked a bit scared, but the Frenchman, the Icelandic fellow, and the African girl were peering around with expressions of wonder, like little children who have found their way into their favourite storybooks.

Then someone's massive arm was under his, helping him to sit on a fallen tree trunk. "There, there, Master Page, the portals unsettle the knees and sometimes the stomachs of many," said someone's rumbling, vibrant bass voice. "Are you sick?"

"No," he said, shaking his head till it cleared. "Thank you, sir."

He looked into the face of the great tiger, who was peering into his face with concerned yellow eyes, and then, spoke to him again. "All right then, I'll be seeing you at Gwydion's banquet then, tomorrow eve." He held out a great paw, claws sheathed, like a man inviting a handshake which Lucius realised a moment later was exactly what he was doing. Lucius remembered himself and threw back his shoulders certainly the Malfoys were no cowards. He shook the tiger's paw with dignity.

"Lucius Malfoy," he said.

"William Blake just Bill to my friends," the great tiger replied. "Be welcome to the Mother's land of Arcadia, Lucius."

Then Doggins slapped the reins down on the grey mare's back again, and she and the luggage wagon started forward down a clear path that seemed to open up amidst the trees. "Come, my young wand-wavers, the End of the World is close at hand. Trot lively now, there's a pint with my name on it waiting."

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The group of Tithe pages left the portal guard to their vigil in the forest and followed after the cart on foot, stumbling a little in the dark until Doggins and Puck pointed their hands at the cart and both muttered "*Lioht*" followed by a sibilant whisper that Lucius couldn't make out. Suddenly the cart and the path just behind it were outlined with a pale, greenish light that made it easy to make their way along the path of hard-packed dirt.

After they had walked perhaps a quarter-mile, the dirt path widened into a gravel road, and a large, half-timbered grey-brick building, with dim firelight dancing in its many mullioned windows, appeared around a bend. A carved and brightly painted wooden sign near the great front door read: *The Inn at the End of the World.*

Doggins and Puck climbed into the back of the cart and helped the pages with their luggage. "Take only what you need for a short stay, my lads and lassies, we're only here for the one night." Then Doggins opened the great wooden door and motioned them inside.

The inn's dim interior was entirely panelled in dark wood and furnished with long, weathered wooden tables and benches. What looked like a whole roast side of lamb and a large covered cauldron were hung above a crackling blaze in a great hearth. A pretty, buxom, middle-aged woman was wiping down mugs behind the carved wood bar. In all, it would have looked like any old, prosperous pub in the backwoods of Britain in about the year 1600.

Except, perhaps, for the patrons.

A handsome young man with long auburn hair approached them as they entered. He was wearing a fine linen shirt like Doggins's and soft trousers that gathered just below his knees and as he drew closer, Lucius noticed that from those knees down, he was sporting the same kind of anatomy as the deer-legged woman soldier guarding the portal outside. The short, deerlike antlers on his forehead and his fuzzy, mobile ears drew the eyes of every Tithe page in the group, but he acted as though his

appearance was entirely normal and mundane. "Oi, the lads return! Be you on your way to Court, then, Doggins? My honest Puck?"

"Aye, Corvus, with a cargo of Tithe pages for his Majesty," the Puck replied, clapping the young man on the arm in passing. He made a beeline for the bar, where he effortlessly hopped up onto a stool about three-quarters as tall as he was.

Doggins turned to the seven witches and wizards. "My young masters and mistresses, meet Corvus Greenwood, squire of his Majesty's Fianna. Corvus, I'll let you meet them severally, as I'm too parched for more introductions. Come, young ones, sit and have your dinners and ale." He motioned them to take seats at the tables and then caught the eye of the woman behind the bar. "Goodmistress Glorvinda, Glory of my heart, it's nine trenchers for seven Pages and two stewards I require, and some cheer." He swept off his cap and pressed it to his heart.

The other patrons in the pub all looked up as the seven pages found seats at one of the long tables. Lucius noticed that when Dhayalan, the blond South African, found himself next to the dark-skinned African witch in the crush, his expression hardened and he came around the table to take a seat next to Lucius instead. "Hello again," he said, holding out his hand. "Jak Dhayalan. Malfoy, was it?"

"Yes, Lucius Malfoy," Lucius said, shaking his hand.

"Strange, strange place they've got here, isn't it?" Dhayalan said, grimacing. Behind the other wizard's close-cropped blond head, Lucius saw a figure in a blue cloak sitting on the bench opposite turn toward them at his remark. High-arched dark brows pulled down over violet eyes, directing a disapproving look at the back of Dhayalan's head.

"Strange, exotic, and wonderful," Lucius said, ostensibly to Dhayalan, but more toward the woman near them. She turned toward him and smiled and he smiled back.

Goodmistress Glorvinda, with her pointed ears visible through her luxuriant hair, was now setting down platters of fresh bread before them, and pots of butter and honey. A diminutive kitchen boy with outsized feet and hands, and hairy ears like the Puck slung everyone a pint of cold, reddish ale from a tray and then helped the landlady ladle out and serve handled, wooden bowls of something from the covered cauldron hanging in the hearth. Lucius waited until everyone else was served, then reluctantly dipped a polished wooden spoon into the dinner before him, not expecting anything but some sort of rough, plain, barely edible peasant's fare and was pleasantly shocked at his first taste. It was a simple lamb stew, with herbs, vegetables and potatoes but the meat was so tender it nearly melted on his tongue, and the broth was so rich and well seasoned it made his mouth water for more immediately. When he tore off and buttered a chunk of brown bread, and tasted the ale they were just as delicious as the stew. Well, this was turning out to be a bit more pleasant than he thought.

He looked curiously around at the other patrons as he ate, and they looked back at him just as curiously. The antlered, hoofed Corvus Greenwood, who was talking to Doggins over stew and beer at the end of their table, was hardly the oddest-looking inhabitant of this place. There were two people at the bar chatting with Ciaran Puck who looked exactly like very large grey foxes in elegant silk shirts and trousers, sitting up on their hind legs and drinking from mugs clasped between their outsized forepaws. In a corner by the window, there was a couple, a man and a woman, both with almost chalk-white faces, and hair and eyes as black as obsidian, who also had the same strange extra pointed frill of skin and cartilage at the tips of their ears. The woman had a blanket-wrapped bundle in her arms that, from the way she was holding it, could only be a sleeping baby. With another surreptitious glance at the pretty woman behind him, he saw the long, tawny body of a pet ferret lolling comfortably in her lap, being fed on tidbits from her plate.

And all of these extraordinary personages acted as though they themselves were mundane as could be, and he and his companions were the extraordinary ones.

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"Only pictures in books," she replied.

"Miss Shumwe, Malfoy! There you are," someone called. He looked up to see Laurent Collier approaching them. Like Dakarai, he had swapped his robes for lightweight Arcadian clothes: a green spidersilk shirt and soft linen trousers tucked into boots. "Doggins sent me to find you. Come we'll soon be leaving for Court."

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Outside the End of the World, the King's men had procured another horse-drawn conveyance for the journey, but this one a large open brougham carriage with a gilded body and wheels, and smooth leather seats, was much more to Lucius's taste. Puck was outside hitching a pair of fine horses into leather harness.

Doggins and a few of the other Tithe pages were in the tavern having breakfast when they came in: eggs, rashers of bacon, and pints of ale. "There you are, my wand'ring wand-wavers," he said. "Ready yourselves for leaving we want to be off by half-past or thereabouts."

"Is he angry? Are we late?" Lucius asked Laurent as they went back to their shared room above the tavern.

"Oh no, the Fae aren't big on late and early," Laurent laughed as they went upstairs. "Few minutes here or there, it's all the same to them. None of our sort of clocks here, you know."

"Why are we taking a carriage up to the castle? Wouldn't it be faster if we all just Apparated?"

"Apparition doesn't work here," Laurent said, splashing cool water on his face. "It just doesn't no one's really sure why."

Lucius took a few minutes to tidy himself for his appearance at the Court of a Faery King, putting on a clean, starched white shirt and tie, and fresh robes, then brushing the dust off his black boots and combing his hair before packing up and readying himself for the journey.

"Robes? You're going to perish in the heat, Malfoy," Doggins said when he arrived in the courtyard. "Oh well, get in."

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Doggins was right the weather was warm that day. When their group set off the road from the Inn at the End of the World, with Doggins driving the carriage and Puck following behind in the luggage cart, Lucius had broken a light sweat before they had gone a mile. Before long, he had abandoned his robes altogether, then loosened his tie. Then he unbuttoned his collar and rolled the cuffs of his shirt up to mid-forearm, and was wishing he had worn linen trousers rather than wool. Then he looked at Dakarai and Laurent, who looked comfortable in their light Faery clothes, and vowed to get some for himself at the first opportunity. In the seat just ahead of him, Jak Dhayalan had refused to relinquish his wizard robes, and his face was red and shiny with sweat. Aliane Floriano, who had chosen sleeveless robes of lacy white batiste for the trip, stole an approving glance at Lucius as his robes came off and his shirt came unbuttoned, as if in her opinion, his appearance improved the less he wore. But Doggins and Puck were driving the horses at a crisp pace, and there was a cool breeze blowing.

The landscape that rolled gently by them during that journey was enough to distract anyone from being mildly overheated, though the fields nearly glowed with greenness, as if nothing he had ever seen had been truly green before. In the distance, there were gentle rolling hills, and every mile or so there was another stone or wooden bridge over a creek or little river. Here and there they would pass farmland, with clusters of half-timbered cottages or occasionally a large manor, with sloping roofs and mullioned windows like the End of the World. There were orchards, too, and more and more frequently, acres of vineyards, with orderly rows of grapes of all hues, pale green and gold, and purples varying from bright red to nearly black, tied to T-shaped stakes up off the grassy ground. The flowers were growing just as riotously here as they did in the little town they had just left now and then they would pass fields or thickets carpeted brightly with wildflowers, and the fences and the sides of houses were often overgrown with trailing, flowering vines here too.

Aside from the rustic Tudor style of the architecture, Lucius was beginning to be reminded of parts of Italy and the south of France. Euan Doggins had started singing some silly little travelling ditty as they reached deep countryside:

Do you seek the road to Fairyland?

I'll tell; it's easy, quite.

Wait till a yellow moon gets up

O'er purple seas by night,

And gilds a shining pathway

That is sparkling diamond bright...

His song then gave way to a chorus of tenor humming and tra-la-las that sounded improvised on the spot. The terrain became more hilly and heavily forested now, with the occasional pinnacles of lichened rock protruding from the Earth no, not the Earth, the land. Soon they drove under a cool, shifting canopy of old-growth forest, which provided a comfortable shade from the sun as morning became noon. Doggins clucked to the mare and resumed his song:

Then if no evil power be nigh

To thwart you, out of spite,

And if you know the very words

To cast a spell of might,

You get upon a thistledown,

And if the breeze is right,

You sail away to Fairyland

Along this track of light...

Then he turned back to the Tithesmen and -women behind him and called: "Oi, look to your left, my young ones, there's the castle, where you'll live this day and twelvemonth. I tell you, there's nothing more beautiful than your first glimpse of home after one has been a-wand'ring, eh?" He slapped the reins down on the mare's back and quickened her pace.

The seven pages turned left toward the view just above them and even from a mile or so away, the castle looked like the home of a King whose people had inspired endless stories for centuries. Lucius's family home had been a Tudor hunting lodge; he had attended school at Hogwarts but even he was impressed at his first glimpse of Greenbarrow Castle.

It was a vast structure, built from grey stone, massive wooden beams, and shimmering windows often set with ornamental stained glass, with battlements, spires, courtyards, arches, and winding staircases innumerable a small town in itself, and home to over a thousand people. It had been built on a vast flat rock face next to a river

that rushed down a gently sloping hill, so that the westernmost windows looked out on a magnificent graduation of large and small waterfalls. This cool, clear river, he was to later learn, supplied the entire castle with water in addition to providing an incredible view. To the north, east, and south lay cultivated fields and orchards, beehives and greenhouses, and lush rows of vineyards that continued for miles around.

The closest thing Lucius had ever seen to it on Earth was Neuschwanstein, a castle in Germany that had been built at unimaginable expense by a Bavarian king often considered to be a romantic madman. If Mad King Ludwig had had vast resources of wood, marble, and stone nearby, could have hired preternaturally skilled troll stonemasons capable of magically-aided feats of architecture, employed flying nixie craft folk capable of carving and painting ornamentation into inaccessible places and setting stained glass windows hundreds of feet above the ground, and had centuries in which to build he might have come up with something like the home of Gwydion the Fifth.

They drove up a long, winding road cut into the forested hill, through an archway under a turreted guardhouse. "Welcome back, Sir Doggins, Lord Puck! Welcome to you, young Tithesmen!" called more soldiers in glinting armour from the battlements, waving down from their posts. The Tithe pages waved back. Lucius noticed that the archway was hung with bright banners, depicting stylised red and violet grapevines around a black goblet. Then they drove up another stone roadway to a courtyard bordered with smaller halls, and then up to a great central courtyard just before the main building. Doggins and the Puck slowed the horses to a stop, and both leapt nimbly down.

"Come disembark, young ones, we'll have some castle stewards bring your things in a moment," Puck said. "Follow me." And he led the way up the broad marble steps, through a vast foyer and along a covered gallery, into a magnificent, high-ceilinged hall, with a frescoed ceiling and silk banners draped over the white marble walls. The great windows looked south, over a bank of forest and down to the river below.

A small group of well-dressed people, both humans and Faeries, were already waiting in the hall. When the Tithe pages entered the room, they were each individually greeted by someone or someones who, Lucius realised, must have been the person responsible for their inclusion into the Tithe. Eithne Brennan had been immediately embraced by a willowy blonde woman upon her entrance. "No, dear heart, call me Morgaine here, I'm not your teacher now, but glad to call you my friend." An entire family, with a Faery father, a human mother, and who looked like a little flaxen-haired Faery half-brother had been waiting for Laurent Collier, and now he was embracing the woman and calling her *Maman.*

A human man with long brown hair and a neat beard, dressed in a dark blue silk shirt and black linen trousers, came up to Lucius and greeted him with a jovial handshake. Lucius noticed that he had dried inkstains on his fingers. "No need to tell me that you're Abraxas Malfoy's son, young sir you're the very image of your father."

"Thank you, sir. I'm Lucius Malfoy."

"Buckminster Swain," the dark man said. "Come on, let's show you your room."

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As he followed Buckminster Swain through the castle, answering the older man's questions about how his parents and family were, and what was going on in his part of the world, Lucius racked his memory for everything his father had told him about Swain before his departure. Lucius's Tithe sponsor came from a very rich pure-blooded family that had also been politically influential about seventy years ago; he had written several well-regarded books on the history of Wizarding magic and been a popular member of the Wizengamot. ("A political moderate, though," Lucius's father had said, pressing his lips together in genteel disapproval.) Swain had been a Tithe page in the same year as Lucius's father, and had been a great favourite with the King and Queen during his time at Court. ("He went totally native practically the moment he got there," Abraxas Malfoy had said. "In the end, he had read more Faery history than some of them had.")

Upon Swain's return to the Wizarding world, he had married a pure-blooded witch of impeccable family, an aunt of Lucius's friend Mulciber, but she had died of a sudden stroke, after twenty years of marriage and four pure-blooded children. Some time after his first wife's death, Swain had gone back to the Third Kingdom for what he said was a year's sabbatical. At the end of that sabbatical, Swain declared his intention to divide his time between Britain and Arcadia on an indefinite basis. A year or two later, he married a woman who Lucius's father somewhat grudgingly said was extraordinarily beautiful, even for a Faerie. As he followed Mr. Swain through those bright, airy marble halls and up gorgeously carved staircases, Lucius was desperately trying to remember the Faery wife's name, or if there had been any children. He wanted to make an excellent impression on Mr. Swain, whom his father had said was very influential at Court. ("All I have to say about old Buck Swain, my boy, is that while he may seem just a gentle eccentric *don't* make him angry.")

"Here we are." Swain unlocked a carved wooden door that led into a large, comfortable corner room, with cool stone walls and a sloped roof with great exposed beams. Much ornamental carving had been lavished on those beams, ceilings, and walls. There were several large, arched windows, which looked over the river to the west, while the north view looked out on miles of vineyards and small farms. The west-facing windowsills were grown over with vines bearing trumpet-shaped blue flowers. There was a knock at the door a moment later, and two men in livery piled Lucius's trunks at the foot of the bed, then nodded to Swain and Lucius and left the room.

"Well then, Lucius why don't I give you about an hour or so to settle in, and then I'll show you the library and my office. And don't forget, the welcome banquet is tonight, after sundown. You'll want to dress up a bit for that Gwydion is a gracious host, and his courtiers tend to be very fashionable." He handed the copper bedroom door key to Lucius.

"Yes, sir. Thank you very much, sir."

After Swain had gone, Lucius flopped down on the wide, fragrant, delightfully springy bed. The linens were of a cotton so fine it felt almost like silk. He was to later learn that the velvet coverlet was spun spidersilk, and that the sheets were scented with heather. But now, it just felt deliciously comfortable. The mid-afternoon sun was slanting in from the west, and the play of sunlight through the waving leaves of the vines that framed his window was lovely. The blue flowers were filling his room with a delicious scent, sort of like roses, and violets, and something else entirely.

He sighed. Let the Aurors try and send him a witness subpoena here.

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By the time Mr. Swain appeared to collect Lucius, he was already unpacked, having given a pair of passing housemaids a silver bead each to attend to it for him, and to fetch him some hot wash water. "All settled in then, Lucius? Come on, I'll show you the nice comfortable cave where Gwydion lets me keep my books and papers."

Swain led him down many flights of stairs, down past the ground level and out of the reach of the golden, late afternoon sun, into a long, sloping stone corridor lit by torches. "Here we are. Remember this, lad count twelve torches from the left after the last turn, and do you have your wand about you? The door is here, but I keep it Obscured and warded against intruders. Like so " Swain waved a hand over a seemingly blank area of the wall "The incantation you'll need is *Ende Obscurant.*" and then he silently spoke a word, under the threshold of Lucius's hearing. A stout wooden door with many locks appeared, and Swain unlocked each one with a different key and incantation. He opened the door and motioned for Lucius to precede him inside.

Mr. Swain had been absolutely correct when he described his library as a cave it was indeed located in a stone underground chamber, albeit a cool, dry, well-ventilated one, with ornamental arches and borders carved into the stone walls. There were long rows of wooden shelves full of every kind of book imaginable, many of which looked hand-bound. There were great dictionaries on wooden stands and ancient, fragile folios kept under glass in cases. "I know it's a bit gloomy, but parchment and vellum like cool, dry places, and it's more secure than any place above ground with windows."

Swain showed him around the library, with what Lucius thought was a very strange demeanour he seemed to look on those dusty stacks with the enthusiasm of a small boy showing off his favourite toy at Christmas. But then, his father had warned him that he might find Swain a bit odd and eccentric. "Now remember, Lucius, the existence of this library is the subject of controversy in some parts of the Kingdoms. There are those who would like to see all of its works destroyed, so we keep it well guarded. Only a few people are allowed unlimited access to these stacks. There's me, of course, the Royal Family, my wife, my daughter, and now you, my assistant for this year. Euan Doggins, the King's steward, has his own keys and passwords, and so does Morgaine Flaxseed, who is the King's Bard. Everyone else has to submit a request and make

an appointment no exceptions."

"I understand, sir. I'll look after your library as best I can," Lucius said stalwartly.

Swain smiled at him, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "I believe you will, my boy. Now, shall we go up and introduce you to the King's Court?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

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Lucius followed Mr. Swain back up staircases and through corridors to the same entrance hall he had seen earlier, and then up another flight of steps that led into a second grand marble hall in the castle's southwestern corner, closest to the river. This hall, also hung with silk banners, could only be a King's audience chamber, judging from the two magnificent thrones set side by side on a raised dais. The westernmost-facing wall was a stained-glass archway that opened onto a great stone balcony that directly overlooked the river outside. A small crowd had gathered on the balcony Lucius recognised Laurent Collier and his family, Eithne Brennan and her Tithe sponsor, and both Puck and Doggins in the people milling about, talking excitedly amongst themselves.

"Ah, what's going on, what's going on?" Ciaran Puck pushed forward, ducking nimbly amongst the sea of taller people. He was back in a moment, grinning merrily. "Now I've seen the cause of it."

"What's happening, goodfellow?" asked Doggins.

"Elaine's girl, my Lady Emily," the Puck told Doggins with a wink. "She's back from school as of yesterday, and this morning she quarrelled with his Lordship Traltivere. He's challenged her to a bout in the circle, and half the Court is here for the show."

Hearing this report, Swain shook his head with fond resignation. "She's always in trouble," he said to Lucius, heaving a deep sigh.

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The crowd spread out to seek better vantage points for the competition, and Lucius followed Swain through the crush onto the balcony. There was a large circle about twenty feet across traced on the stone balcony floor in chalk, and two competitors were preparing themselves for the combat on opposite sides.

Both competitors were dressed for fencing, in canvas jackets, breeches and boots, with masks made of leather and wire mesh in their hands. The man, who the Puck had called his Lordship Traltivere, was a tall, pretty young fellow, with a great deal of long, curly black hair of which he appeared very vain. His manner, as he chose a duelling foil from a case offered by an attendant, seemed haughty and much aggrieved.

His opponent was a slender girl in her late teens, with waist-length red-gold hair and wide brown eyes. She appeared ridiculously fawnlike and insolent as she took playful practice lunges at the air beside the chalk circle. From her outward demeanour, she wasn't taking this seriously at all and seemed to think the whole challenge was the best joke she had ever heard.

"Anyone care to lay a wager on the outcome?" asked a courtier near Lucius, a haughty dark-haired man dressed in a tunic and trousers of peacock-hued silk. "Say, a cask of brandy on the winner? I say Traltivere bests her, three touches to her every one."

"I'll take that bet. A cask of your best brandy," Lucius said, not exactly loudly, but in a tone nicely calculated to carry across the stone floor. "On the girl to win."

Hearing this, the strawberry blonde girl turned toward him and grinned at him an irreverent sort of grin, one that recognised him as an innate co-conspirator in her favourite kind of mischief. He gave her his most charming smile in return.

"You'll lose that bet Traltivere is the finest swordsman at court, and the girl is completely untried, or so my little brother says," the fellow in peacock said with a knowing laugh. "But I'll be happy to take your liquor from you. Send it to Steifan Robinett, care of the King's Court."

"She's Elaine's daughter, though, Stef," said another courtier, a man with long auburn hair.

"But too young to have ever seen a Beltane fire, Corvus," the fellow in peacock scoffed, then turned toward Lucius again. "But then, you didn't bet on her thinking she'd win, did you, stranger? You're trying to win her favour."

Lucius merely smirked at Robinett. Then he did a double take at the fellow Robinett had called Corvus suddenly he recognised the auburn-haired man as Corvus Greenwood, to whom he had been introduced in the End of the World. But today he was without his antlers, was wearing shiny brown boots instead of capering on cloven hooves. He also had much shorter and less hairy ears, somehow. Was this sort of thing normal here? Did people wear their antlers one day, and then leave them off the next? Lucius would have sworn the night before that Corvus's antlers had been an organic part of him, growing out of his forehead. It was all profoundly odd.

"But I wonder... will she choose you come Beltane, my friend?" the fellow in peacock asked Lucius, in a delicately insinuating voice.

"We'll see," he said airily, briefly wishing he could remember what Beltane was.

A tall, grey-haired man, who was apparently serving as bout director, motioned to both combatants to get into position both the blonde girl and the curly-haired man saluted each other and assumed *en garde* position on opposite sides of the circle. The director held out his hand between the two of them and called, *Fencers ready*? Both combatants said *Yes.*

The director dropped his hand. *Fence.*

Lucius almost didn't want to watch although he had bet on her, he didn't believe that the girl had much of a chance of winning this competition. Certainly she would be humiliated, and he hated to watch a pretty woman upset like that. The tall, curly-haired man loped easily down the floor in the girl's direction. He raised his sword toward her and

Halt, the director called, stopping the action.

Somehow, the girl had her sword arm up, fully extended, and her point was pressed into the curly-haired man's shoulder. She was leaning into her sword's tip, so that the slender blade bent fully in an arc.

Attack into preparation. Point left. Fencers ready? the director asked. The girl immediately answered, *Yes.* The curly-haired man shook his head and rubbed his shoulder, grimacing.

Fencers ready? the director prompted.

Yes, the curly-haired man said finally.

Fence.

The curly-haired man advanced across the circle and took a quick thrust at the girl who wasn't there. She turned her shoulder away from his attack at the last second, so that his point travelled past her, and with her shorter reach, had her sword arm extended in just the right place for her opponent's forward momentum to slam his right hip

against her sword point as he continued forward.

Attack into preparation. Point left.

Fencers ready? the director asked. The girl immediately answered, *Yes.*

The curly-locked man directed a baleful look at the girl, who smiled sweetly at him. Finally he answered, *Yes.*

In the next action, the girl again attempted an attack into her opponent's preparation to attack but he parried her, then attempted a riposte, but her blade slithered past his to take him solidly in the shoulder.

Halt, the director called. *Thrust left, incomplete parry right in second, attack continuation left. Point left.*

In what seemed like no time at all, the girl had five points, and the tall man had none. Furiously, he demanded another bout and the girl was only too happy to accept.

They went on like that for another two bouts. The girl was slippery as a slender blonde fish, and just as impossible to pin down. Yet she seemed to land solid thrusts on her opponent with disturbing regularity. After the third bout was over, the Faery courtiers applauded both of them as they saluted each other and shook hands. The curly-haired man looked very annoyed and irate, and the girl was smiling politely at him, but with such a sense of smug satisfaction oozing around the edges that Lucius wanted to spank her bratty little arse himself.

"It seems I know a good fencer when I see one," Lucius said to the fellow in the peacock coat. "So when can you deliver my brandy? Send it to Lucius Malfoy, care of the King's Court."

"Tomorrow," the peacock fellow said grudgingly. "My compliments, sir apparently you have excellent luck, enough means to waste, and know a pretty girl when you see one." He made a sarcastic bow and disappeared into the crowd.

Doggins, Greenwood, and the Puck came forward to congratulate the victor, who was pulling off her mask and raking back her long, sweat-damp hair; Buckminster Swain and Lucius followed a few paces behind. Ciaran Puck held out his leathery hands to the girl "So, my little villain! She's back from the big bad Second World to slay all fops and varlets too sophisticated for us now, and for certain, after making the acquaintance of the mass media and flush toilets. Come, lassie, give your old playmate a kiss."

"Hello, my honest Puck." She stooped, took both his hands in hers, and kissed his comical imp's face. "So they say you're an old married man now, tied to Nell's skirts?"

"If I be tied to my wife's skirts, then I know of no fairer bondage," Puck said, winking at her. "Let all men know a newlywed bridegroom's toils and travails, eh, lads?" He comically put his hand to his forehead. Greenwood and Doggins laughed and clapped him on the back, then came up to greet Lady Emily themselves. She called Greenwood "my pretty coz," and called Doggins "dear old friend," and teased and kissed them too.

Lucius shook his head in genteel disapproval. This blonde was the silliest little thing he had ever seen, making up to common men like that, even if she had won a bet for him.

"So, Emily, when will we be seeing you with a husband to warm your heart?" Doggins asked her. "While we're on the subject my nephew Colin is a fine fellow, a new made journeyman squire, no less."

"Oh, come, Euan, she's naught but seventeen. I'm sure the boys will wait," Buckminster Swain said, approaching the group with a smile. Lucius watched as Swain warmly embraced the fair girl, and then she kissed him, too. "Emily well done, dear. Your mother would be proud of your form and technique, if not your manners. Can you perhaps try to wait a few months to get into silly arguments with noble Lords, rather than on your first day back from school?"

The fair girl was Buckminster's own daughter. It was too perfect.

"Sorry, Da," she said, looking at him with contrite, appealing expression. He relented and kissed the side of her forehead.

"Now there's someone I want you to meet. The son of an old friend." Swain turned toward Lucius. "Lucius, this is my daughter, Emily. Emily, may I present Lucius Malfoy? He's serving as Tithe page to Gwydion at my recommendation."

"Mr. Malfoy." She put out her hand, still warm and damp from the bout, in greeting.

"Miss Swain." He didn't shake her hand, but put a very quick and chaste kiss on the back of it nothing overtly sexual, as her father was standing over them, but a definite acknowledgment that she was a beautiful woman, an ornament of the court. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise, thank you." She paled, her eyes downcast for a moment, and seemed more than usually breathless, which was the usual female reaction to being introduced to Lucius. Her eyes, he noticed, were very dark and dramatic in her pale, elfin face. "So I'll see you at the welcome banquet tonight, then?"

"I shall look forward to it," he said.

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He noticed then that she too had one of those red, violet, and black tattoos on her right upper arm. When the King and Queen greeted her, she embraced and kissed them like they were her best friends. Queen Dahlia smoothed her windblown hair and scolded her for letting it go with a grandmotherly air.

"That dress is far too old for you," the Queen was saying. "A young girl should be wearing a nice violet, or green."

"But I *like* black! Everyone in *Paris* wears black," Emily said, laughing, and emphasising nearly every other word in the manner of teenage girls. "I brought back a bunch of silk stockings and Chanel No. 5 and mascara, too. You have to come with me to the Louvre sometime you'd *love* it, it's *beautiful*."

Then the Queen nudged her great-niece and nodded toward the front doorway at someone who had just arrived a tall, striped, whiskered fellow, now in an elegant topaz silk shirt and trousers, who Lucius recognised as a member of the portal guard from the night day? on which he first came here, now out of his armour and into civilian dress clothes. Lady Emily smiled hugely, then raced up to him with a long shrill cry of *Biiii

"Well, we know where we are then, don't we," Jak Dhayalan said disgustedly, aside to Lucius. "Rubbing shoulders with kaffirs and Muggles."

"Not to mention sanctimonious Irish," Lucius muttered.

"Lucius, there you are." Buckminster Swain had arrived, in handsome dress clothes of black silk and sapphire blue velvet and with a gold goblet-and-grapevine engraved medallion around his neck, like the one Euan Doggins was wearing. Emily immediately appeared at his side, tidying his rumpled collar. "Good evening, you two I beg your pardon, Lucius, it's hard to tell what time it is in the library sometimes. Have you met the King and Queen yet? Emily, you didn't introduce him?"

"Bill just got back from portal duty, Da," she said.

"I see, if Bill's just got back," Swain said, laughing. "She and Bill Blake have been absolutely inseparable best friends since they were babies, you see when we sent her to school, I think she cried more at parting from him than she did from Elaine and me."

"I did not!" Emily protested.

Swain and his daughter then escorted Lucius around the assemblage, introducing him to everyone; Lucius put on his most winning smile until his face ached with it. The King and Queen seemed impressed with him, as did Samiel Cobweb, the Royal Apothecary, and Morgaine Flaxseed, the Royal Bard. (Both Bard and Apothecary, Lucius noticed, wore engraved gold medallions like Swain and Doggins he figured it must be a badge of office for the King's highest-ranking servants.) Swain and Flaxseed then got into a long, involved conversation regarding some epic historical poem or another, and Emily took Lucius's arm and drew him off into the crowd.

"Now come meet my friends," she said. He was reintroduced to William Blake (who tactfully did not mention how unsettled Lucius had been upon first arriving), and Corvus Greenwood, who turned out to be Emily's cousin on her mother's side. She then presented Victoria Priquette, whose tall statuesque redheadedness won Lucius's extreme deference immediately, and Jayson Robinett, a handsome, wiry youth with Euan Doggins's kind of thick, cowlicky brown hair, who made his acquaintance with a decided sulkiness. Emily introduced Bill, Corvus, Victoria, and Jayson as her "sworn companions," whatever that meant. Lucius also noticed that Lady Victoria sported a red, violet, and black armband tattoo, identical to Emily's, on a sinewy right arm left bare by her indigo cut-velvet frock.

Swain's daughter's status at Court was becoming obvious to Lucius she was a favourite with the King and Queen, who had no daughters of their own; considered something of a prodigy with the sword, especially after roundly defeating Lord Traltivere; and now she fancied herself very clever and sophisticated after going to Wizarding school in the "Second World." He knew the type: young, exuberant, innocently full of herself, and just selfish enough to be interesting. That sulky dark fellow Jayson, most likely the little brother Steifan Robinett spoke of seemed acutely aware of her every move, and she seemed to assume that his attentions were only her due. Lucius loved knowing that there was some other fellow out there who adored the woman paying court to him, some fellow that couldn't hope to compete with him for her favour and knew it.

Emily led him all through the grand dining hall, all set up for the banquet with embroidered damask, china, rows of wineglasses, and calligraphy place cards; pointed out some of the paintings of previous sovereigns on the walls. (None of the paintings moved or spoke, somewhat to Lucius's surprise.) Then she prevailed upon him to come out on the balcony to look at the view. The sun had set over the river valley, leaving the sky so richly blue it was nearly purple. Unfamiliar constellations were becoming visible in the moonless sky. Lucius realised that the girl was angling to be alone with him, in her unsubtle, disingenuous way. She was staring at him as unselfconsciously as a cat on a fence.

"So, tell me, my Lady, what did you and Lord Traltivere quarrel about that he challenged you to a duel?" Lucius asked.

"It's a long story," she said, with a disparaging shake of her head. "Let's just say he found occasion to call one of my friends an unsavoury, addle-witted animal cur, and in the disagreement that followed I may have sent a swarm of bees after him at some point. He was somewhat piqued at me after."

"What a fearsome creature you must be," he said, in a tone that said she was fearsome in a very charming and precocious way. "And it looks like I'm sitting by you at dinner."

"I know I came down early and switched the place cards so that you would be," she said pertly.

"And why did you do that, my Lady?" He knew, but he wanted to hear her say it.

"To keep you from cracking your head on the floor when you fall out of your chair, of course," she said not exactly the answer he had been expecting. "Tithe pages always get piss drunk at the welcome banquet. It's as much of a tradition as the flaming stuffed peacock. Six courses and they're all out cold on the floor."

"Really, why do you think that is?"

"Silly wizard this is the Third Kingdom," she said, as if that explained everything.

"Which means?"

"Which means we make wine. You know, miles and miles of grapevines, all around?" she said, with a gesture that encompassed everything around them. "We've been doing it for thousands of years that's why our banner has vines and a cup on it... ? You get different kinds of wine with every course at dinner, and it's a nine-course dinner. And we have never had a Tithe page make it through all nine courses. I think the record was one big husky fellow who got to eight before he passed out."

"Thank you for the warning, my Lady," he drawled, laughing. "I'm sure I'll be fine."

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Lucius was not the first Tithe page to make it through the entire nine-course dinner.

He tried all of the tricks his father had taught him about staving off drunkenness drank four cups of water before taking another drink, didn't drink too fast on an empty stomach, nursed only the one small glass of sherry (at least it tasted like sherry, someone told him later it was made from melons) during the cocktail hour preceding. He made it through the appetisers, then the soup course, the vegetable course, the cheese-leek-potato soufflé, and then huge whole baked fish rubbed with spice and herbs, each accompanied by a different white wine, ranging from an extremely light and tart vintage of a transparent grass-green, to a tangy, buttery, deep gold something with the fish. By the time the second entree was served, the roast stuffed peacock flaming in raspberry spirits, accompanied by a peppery, plummy pale red something (wine varietals all had different names here, he couldn't remember them right now) he was starting to feel glorious indeed. He was asked to carve at his end of the table and was at first entirely at sea until Lady Emily took the carving fork and knife and showed him how, cutting the first slice with almost surgical precision. He remembered eating some of the peacock, some of the grouse, some of the squab, and after that, he didn't remember much of anything.

Sometime later he sat up from where he had apparently been drowsing beside the table. Someone had pulled off his robes and had balled them up under his head. His shirt was half unbuttoned, his waistcoat was entirely unbuttoned, and he had no idea as to where his tie had gotten to. He found himself beside Emily Swain's chair, so he sat up, and sleepily laid his fair head on her knees. She bent down, smoothed his hair away from his forehead, and kissed his damp forehead. He reciprocated by putting a little kiss on her thigh, making her quiver.

"What course is it?" he asked her.

"Dessert," she whispered.

"Oh, I missed dessert?"

"Here, try this." Emily put a morsel of honey cake to his lips, which melted on his tongue most delectably. She followed that with a spoonful of what tasted like Devonshire

cream laced with apple brandy. He was thoroughly enjoying himself lying in a woman's lap, being fed delicacies like a great, sleepy pet cat. Then she hunkered down on the floor next to him, and he was leaning cosily on her shoulder. She offered him a sip of some amber after-dinner liquor from a glass in her hand, which tasted like whiskey, but was as close to the whiskey you got at home as sandpaper was to silk. Bloody delicious.

Sometime later he noticed that Emily Swain was manoeuvring him up the stairs to his room quite capably like Euan Doggins, this slender young lady seemed stronger than she had any right to be. After he tried to fit the key in the door two or three times without success, she took it away from him and unlocked his door, juggling both him and the key quite dexterously.

Then he was alone in his darkened bedroom... with this girl under his arm. Sound of the river outside his open window, and soft feminine giggles in the dark. He gently lifted her face to his and kissed her, and then her arms were around his neck and she was kissing him back. Then her silk dress felt frictionlessly soft under his hands, the curve of her waist down onto the swell of her little arse was even softer, and nothing could have hoped to be as soft as the silky backs of her thighs... *OhGodyesyesyes...*

But then she had dropped him on his bed and spun away toward the door.

"See you at breakfast, silly wizard," she said, and was gone.

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Lucius appeared at breakfast in wool trousers and another Saville Row dress shirt the next morning, and Lady Emily immediately waved him over to join her. Over their quinces and melons, wheat cakes with honey, orange juice and champagne (at least it looked, behaved, and tasted like champagne, apparently it was called something else here), Lady Emily decided his wardrobe simply would not do at all. She was willing to keep him from hurting himself when he passed out drunk at the welcome banquet all right, she said, but if he insisted on giving himself heat exhaustion every day, he was on his own. Or he could always go into Rivendale with her and let her help him pick out some proper clothes.

He chose the second condition, as he really was getting uncomfortably hot in the clothes he had brought, and he had nothing better to do that day. He went back to his rooms and got dressed for riding, putting several handfuls of gold and titanium and vials of Healing Potion into pouches in lieu of Galleons and Sickles. Then he met Lady Emily ("Really, it's just Emily, I hate all that stuffiness") in the stable courtyard a half-hour later. She wore close-fitting black riding breeches, knee-high riding boots, and a man's black silk shirt, her hair in a long ponytail down her back. The groom (traipsing about on goaty hooves of his own) brought out a bay gelding for Lucius and held the stirrup for him to mount. Emily needed no such niceties after spending a few minutes talking to her grey mare, who whickered and whinnied back in a very intelligent manner, she hooked a forearm under the front of her saddle and was up into it in a trice. Then she set off at a quick pace, calling back for Lucius to follow.

The city of Rivendale looked small to Lucius, used as he was to London and Paris, but he had to admit it was exquisitely beautiful. The residential streets ranged from elegant grey stone mansions with mullioned windows, to brick-and-mortar one-room structures without window glass at all, entirely grown over with flowering vines. Arcadians liked big gardens, he noticed some people's homes looked as though they preferred more garden than house. The streets progressed from packed dirt to gravel to cobblestone as Emily led him down what looked like the most well-to-do of all the shopping streets. A painted sign adorned with a large spider read, *Silkspinner's Quarter ====>*.

Emily halted her mare in front of a neat whitewashed shop, then picked up a pail beside a water barrel standing outside, and watered both of their horses. Lucius noticed that the shop's front window was bordered with stained glass in a spiderweb motif actually, the motif of spiders and their webs seemed prevalent here. The entire street of extremely well-kept storefronts seemed ornamented with it, either on the signs or in the windows or painted trim of the buildings.

Lucius discovered the cause for this spidery influence the moment he set foot inside Goodmistress Peshka's shop and that honest lady came forward to greet him. Unfortunately, he took one look at the dignified, grey-furred, hundred-pound spider, with her intricately woven and beaded shawl thrown over her back and the gold armlets on her front legs, let out a terrified gasp, and flattened himself against the door. The pooka froze, then took several nervous steps backward.

"Oh no, I should have mentioned... " Emily knelt down so she could look Mistress Peshka in all eight of her eyes. "I'm really sorry, Arachne. Lucius is from the Second World, and they only have the unintelligent sort of poisonous biting spider there."

"Ah, of course, I see." The spider pooka seemed put out, but she was extremely gracious about Lucius's *faux pas.* "I assure you, kind sir, I don't bite," she said with a graceful bow.

"I I do beg your pardon, madam," Lucius said, controlling himself, and politely returning the pooka's bow. Mistress Peskha seemed much appeased.

"We've come to get some clothes for Lucius that won't make him keel over in the heat," Emily announced gaily.

"Let's see... I've just run up a nice lot of men's things over on that wall " Mistress Peskha indicated a rack with her left front leg, remaining a reassuring distance away from Lucius, who was still regarding her a bit apprehensively. In short order, Emily had put several shirts in Lucius's arms and shooed him into a changing room. Lucius thought the cut of the garments was awfully old-fashioned, like something out of the Renaissance or Jacobean times, but once he had his own shirt off and had pulled a pewter-grey silk shirt on over his head, he had to admit that the fabric felt wonderfully light and cool and that he looked very well in it. He had pulled the grey shirt off and was fingering another in sapphire blue when Emily breezed back into his dressing room with an armful of sleeveless doublets.

She didn't seem the slightest bit embarrassed, or apologetic, at having caught him with his shirt off. Instead, she set her armful down on a stool, fearlessly put her hand on his bare shoulder, and threaded her fingers through his blond floss of hair. "Well, aren't you pretty, Master Maidenhair."

"So are you," he said, bending over her with his most enticing smile.

"You really do have some gorgeous hair on you. You should wear it loose," she said decisively. His response was to untie the ribbon that restrained his hair and lazily shake it down over his bare shoulders making her stare at him again.

"You have gorgeous skin. You really should wear as little clothing as possible," he replied, bending down to kiss her neck. She shivered, then ducked back out of the changing room with a giggle. He watched her go her almost boyishly athletic thighs and arse were nicely outlined by the tight black trousers and high boots, which made watching her walk away almost as arousing as watching her approach him. He could die that Steifan Robinett said she was probably still a virgin.

Emily took him around to those clothiers who specialised in more casual linen, cotton, and wool gauze clothing as well, to the leatherworkers' and cobbler's rows, and then through the jeweller's and perfumer's rows, the Armourer's Quarter, the fish and produce markets, the Dionysian Vintner's Quarter, and the theatre district that day as well. The women were just as beautiful here as they had been down in the little village where the Inn at the End of the World had been, and they dressed with more opulence and sophistication in the city. In his new casual Arcadian clothes of grey silk and black linen, with his platinum hair loose around his shoulders, Lucius was getting much more than his share of admiring stares as well.

He could tell that Emily loved this city and was proud to show it off to a visitor.

By the time they ended up in a vine-covered riverside café, tearing into fresh bread, cheese, and apples while quaffing cool, crisp white wine, watching the diverse people strolling by, Lucius thought he could definitely allow himself to be distracted this year.

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Jak Dhayalan woke Lucius up a day or two later by pounding on his bedroom door. "You have got to see something. Get dressed."

"What is it?" Lucius asked, annoyed, as he answered the door in a robe.

"I went down to the barracks yesterday and watched the Fianna training. Fucking incredible. There's men and girls in the military here and the girls are just wicked! You have to see them."

"All right but you want to tell me what the Fianna are first?"

"Come on, Malfoy who do you think keeps enemies out of these lands, flying monkeys? The Fianna are the King's armies. When you see someone with that red, purple, and black tattoo on their arm that means they're in the Fianna."

"Wait... Emily Swain has one of those tattoos. She's in the army?"

"Fuck yeah, she's in the army her mother's in charge of the whole bloody army. Where have you been?"

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Part Second: The Hart Rampant: Prologue, Part 2

Chapter 17 of 55

In which we see what happened between Lucius and Emily on Beltane night... and what went wrong afterwards...

Prologue: The Garden and the Serpent, Continued

In all, though, the year Lucius spent as a page at Court was among the laziest, easiest, most pleasant years of his life. There were beautiful women everywhere he looked. The scenery was magnificent, the castle was dreamingly lovely, and the weather could not have been more pleasant. He could perform magic wherever he wanted and would never have to hide it. Not only that, but he could ride as far as he wanted in any direction and still not have to hide it. The meals were so exotic, varied, and delicious, with wine served with every course including breakfast, that he had to exert some self-discipline to maintain his usual trimness and not be drunk by lunchtime.

In the mornings, he would go to Buckminster Swain's library and perform whatever research or clerical duties Swain required of him. As Swain was an absentminded, unexacting taskmaster, whom Lucius sensed probably would have been just as happy to work alone, his job was easy enough. Most of the time, he could just read whatever appealed to him. For the first few months, this was anything to do with the creation of a True Name.

In the afternoon, your average courtier sought some kind of physical activity. Any of the Tithe pages could have undertaken some sword or bow training with the Fianna, but Lucius was put off by how accomplished all of the Faery native-borns already seemed to be, and he didn't want to join a beginning class with thirteen- and fourteen-year-old pages. Lucius preferred pursuits in which his natural superiority would effortlessly assert itself, and he would have had to work far too hard for far too long to rival any of the Fianna. Thus, he preferred to stick to athletic pursuits favoured by noble courtiers in the afternoons, he could go swimming in any one of several nearby ponds and small lakes, or hiking in the woods and fields, or ride out on one of the horses in the King's stables, or join Corvus Greenwood for the occasional round of falconry.

But the sport that became his favourite were the mounted hunts.

Occasionally, Gwydion would call for hunters to rid his lands of a fierce beast that was making a pest of itself among the crops or threatening the peasantry. This was an ancient practice; there were tapestries depicting hunters after boar, bear, lion, elephant, even a dragon all throughout the castle. One morning in early April, Gwydion announced that a family of black bears had taken up residence on the castle grounds, and had been plundering the beehives, orchards, and vineyards, then called for a hunt to get rid of the pests. This sounded exciting Lucius volunteered immediately.

Emily, Jak, Corvus, Bill, Victoria, Traltivere, the Robinetts, and both courtiers and Fianna assembled in the courtyard, armed with crossbows and swords, and mounted on fast horses. The scene was everything he could have imagined Faery knights in shining mail, with swords strapped over their backs and carved bows in their hands, silver horns blowing. He was armed with a lethal little crossbow from the King's armoury and twenty wickedly sharp bolts.

That hunt was one of the most exhilarating experiences of his young life. There were three bears, a mother and her twin yearling cubs, and they had turned out to be monsters, larger even than Bill Blake. Bill swiftly wounded the largest of them, the mother, with an arrow to the chest but she had staggered forward and knocked him off his horse with a blow from her giant paw. Bill recovered, quick as the cat he was, drew his sword, and took her with one efficient slash to the throat. He was hurt, though the mother bear's punch had broken one of his lower ribs, and slaying her had taken all the energy he had. He fell to one knee, clutching at his side, and seemed to be having a great deal of difficulty drawing breath.

The larger yearling bayed with indignation as his mother went down and charged the injured pooka. Emily screamed a warning to Bill and got off a shot at the creature's chest, but not a lethal one archery would never be her strong suit. But she slowed him long enough for Corvus to pull his mount alongside and, extending his sword, spear the beast's heart with a hard downward blow. The yearling fell dead almost silently.

Most thrilling of all the smallest of them had charged Lucius, rising up to swat at his mount with its paws. He abandoned the sport crossbow in favour of the surety of his wand "*Avada Kedavra!*" The bear fell heavily forward he had killed it instantly.

What was almost as satisfying as his success in the hunt was the ritual that followed. The hunters dismounted, knelt beside their fallen prey, and said what sounded like prayers in a language Lucius didn't know. Buckminster Swain would later tell him that it was customary to thank the gods sacred to one's quarry for the sacrifice of one of their children, and that the language spoken was Old Arcadian, the ancient native tongue of the Faerielands. After the prayer, one by one, the hunters who had gotten in the killing blows were "blooded" in tribute anointed with the blue, blue blood of their slain quarry. All of these traditions were sacred Bill stopped to observe the rite and receive his due tribute even through the pain of his injury.

When it came to Lucius's turn, Emily Swain approached him, looking like some young pagan goddess of the hunt in her mail and sword, soaked her fingers in blood, and lightly drew them across his fair, fair cheek. Perhaps it was the scent of the blood, or the adrenalin still running through his veins, or something about the girl touching his face but that moment, that touch, was more sexually charged than the overt advances he had received from many another woman.

The hunting party was fêted with a grand feast that evening, after their return. An hour's treatment from one of the castle physicians had healed Bill Blake to good as new he joined Lucius and Corvus in downing much robust red wine and congratulating each other. Bear steak, much tenderised and marinated, also proved to be surprisingly tasty. Later that month, he found the tanned skin of the bear he had killed draped over his bed a trophy of the hunt, given to him by the King.

Lucius brought that bearskin home with him and still had it in front of the fire in his bedroom some decades later.

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Much as he loved hunting, and enjoyed sampling all the best drink, cuisine, and sport the Faerielands had to offer, during his first months at Court, the goal that became most pressing to Lucius Malfoy, even more important than creating his own True Name was to be the first man to bed Buckminster Swain's daughter.

She had interested him on his first day at Court, after she won her duel against that foppish courtier; the brazen way she flirted with him and had instantly annexed him into her social circle was also attractive. But now, after the hunt, there was enough sexual tension between them to keep him restless and awake at night.

Lucius knew that this attraction was mutual; the amount of time she spent seeking out his company, either alone or by inviting him to join her friends in some activity, was clear indication of that. Now, he was openly pursuing her. He would invariably happen to be half-dressed when she arrived to ask him down to breakfast or to go out with her friends of an evening, just to see her staring at him. He also never lost the opportunity to flirt with her, using the most enticing and provocative banter he was capable of. She flirted back shamelessly apparently no one had drilled a tremendous amount of upper-class British modesty into this young lady. She met his compliments and invitations with provocations of her own, sometimes couched in language so allusive and cloaked in metaphor than it only occurred to him some minutes later that, when she had been speaking of bumbling bears on their ceaseless search for honeycombs, she had been not only totally aware of his flirtations, but teasing him about them in the most ribald way.

Very often, after an evening spent carousing in the Vintner's Quarter, or listening to a bard or musician perform in a tavern, or some other evening's sport, they would end up in some dark corner together, and she would end up in his lap, kissing him until he could feel his hair prickle. The sensation of her, sprawled over his thighs, her breast

against his under the slippery warmth of her silk dress aroused him until he could have laid her on the wooden table and had her then and there. But persuading her to let him take their mutual desire to the next step the one where he artfully removed both her clothes and his own, laid her on his bed, and then plied all of his well-honed amatory skills to their mutual satisfaction was proving to be more difficult than he thought.

But Milady Emily, it appeared, was a very self-willed young woman, and Lucius Malfoy was not the only man at Court with an eye to become her lover. Bill and Victoria both found occasion to warn him to be careful of Jayson Robinett, who was rumoured to have a quite a temper. (Lucius only smirked at such warnings, as being Abraxas Malfoy's son left him somewhat jaded regarding the potential fury of some eighteen-year-old boy.) The satyr obviously believed himself to have a prior claim on her, but Emily herself only tolerated Robinett like she might a petulant younger brother.

While she only put up with Robinett, she was paying innumerable small attentions to Lucius. She went out one Saturday and gathered wild rose blossoms until she had two heavy baskets full and took them down to the perfumer's row, where she traded the raw materials to a friend of her mother's for finished goods sachets for her drawers, and vials of essences, including some amber oil for Lucius. "I thought this smelled like you," she said, putting a dab on his wrist.

Lucius thanked her for her present, which was extremely well-chosen when warmed on his skin, it was like a honeyed version of his own scent. Then he chided her, softened with many small caresses, for spending half a day working to earn something for herself that he could have easily bought for her. She wouldn't be scolded though, because she didn't see the logic of what he was saying.

"Where's the fun in just buying things?" she asked. "If I had done that, then where would the Peaseblossoms get their flowers for the enfleurage trays? And what would I have to do on Saturday morning?"

"Oh, I don't know... you could always come to my room and talk to me."

"You could always come picking roses with me we could talk while doing that."

The luxurious, overwrought hothouse atmosphere of romance that pervaded the lives of the young people at Court that spring only intensified as the nights grew warmer and spring gave way to summer. As April drew to a close, Lucius Malfoy's lust for Emily Swain was only one of many amorous complications playing out in the castle; the entire Court seemed afire with secret intrigues and passionate glances.

All of it was leading up to May First, which the Faeries regarded as their highest holy day a feast they called by a variety of reverently pronounced names. *May Day, May's Eve, Beltene, Bealltainn.* They also called it by a phrase he knew, that set off pangs of deep recognition in him *Walpurgis Night*.

But mostly, they called it Beltane.

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The Court observed May Day with a grand feast and ball that began early in the afternoon. The courtiers had gone all out in their evening dress all around him swirled otherworldly, rapturously beautiful creatures of perfumed silk and glitter. Lucius himself looked classically handsome in white silk and black velvet with high black boots, and knew it.

Gwydion's chefs produced another luxuriant meal cockles in garlicky butter to start, sinfully rich asparagus-cream soup, tender spring vegetables in herbs and wine, wild mushroom soufflé, oysters in champagne cream sauce, melting *foie gras* paired with a delicate honey mead, pears baked with brandy for dessert. Lucius had to limit himself to only a taste of each vintage so as not to pass out by the sixth course again.

During the feast, many of the artistically inclined at Court put on performances. Aliane Floriano sang arias from the Italian Second-World opera canon, and Faerie ballads. Varick Skúlason played his violin, both Faery airs and music from home. Lucius was no musical authority, but he would not deny the other two pages were extremely talented and put on virtuoso performances. Then one of the Muggle pages got up, the freckled man Lucius had noticed at the welcome banquet, and performed a monologue, some endless thing about Queen Mab bringing dreams in a chariot with traces of spider's web. Lucius assumed it was Shakespeare in his experience, whenever someone performed a long, impenetrably complex dramatic speech in a very animated fashion, it was usually Shakespeare but apparently everyone here was enjoying it. He smiled in the right places, as was proper, but privately, he was still furious that there were Muggles at Court at all. They infested every part of his world, and he didn't see why they had to come here as well. If he had had his way, he would have banished every Muggle from Court make that the whole of the Faerielands permanently. He did not applaud when the Muggle actor finished his performance.

After the feast, musicians began to play, and the courtiers swirled out onto the marble floor. Lucius soon found himself much sought after as a dance partner by the women of the Court as he was used to being the one who sought them out at dances, it was a not unpleasant surprise. Then, at sundown, the sound of drums and faraway music was heard in the forest. The young courtiers strained over the balconies overlooking the trees and cheered amongst themselves when bonfires began to appear among the trees in the distance. The sight of the yellow dots of firelight winking in the distance seemed to fill everyone with giggling excitement.

The dancing didn't continue for very much longer after evening fell. Gwydion, who had been on the floor with his Queen almost all night, seemed to be spending more and more time gazing at his wife until Lucius was amazed to see those two elderly sovereigns embroiled in a very long, passionate kiss as they danced. Shortly after that song had ended, the King and Queen bid their Court a fond farewell and retired early, their arms around each other's waists. Not long after that, most of the older people followed suit, turning soft eyes on their spouses. Lucius had never seen elderly and middle-aged people grin so much and so amorously.

Buckminster Swain turned to Emily as the ball was winding down, put both hands on her shoulders and kissed her forehead. "So we won't see you back till late?"

Emily grinned. "Probably."

"Have a good time." His dark head fell onto his daughter's shoulder with a miserable little groan. "Oh, sweetheart, I wish your mother was here."

"I know she misses you too, Da," Emily said, patting him. "She'll be back soon, Da... "

Swain laughed. "I know. May the Goddess bless and keep you this night." He pronounced the words reverentially and embraced her.

The younger courtiers then scattered to their rooms with the promise to meet in front of the castle in a half-hour's time. Emily stopped long enough to tell Lucius the time for the meet. "Gatehouse courtyard at half past the hour. Bring something to drink. And wear something you don't mind getting dirty!" Then she disappeared down the long hall with a group of giggling female friends.

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There was a small crowd assembled in the dark courtyard when Lucius arrived with Jak Dhayalan, both of them dressed in plain, rustic clothing and boots, both carrying bottles of wine. All fourteen Tithe pages were there, and many of the Fianna squires. Everyone was milling about laughing, arms around each other, with lanterns, bottles, and earthenware goblets in their hands.

Emily Swain and William Blake were talking intensely off to one side as they approached "You think she likes me? What did she say?"

"Come on, Bill, Mary's always staring at you. She thinks you're a hero, after that hunt. Just ask her to dance when we get there... Oh, there you are, Lucius." Emily came up to him, smiling broadly, and towing the anxious tiger pooka, who kept darting glances at the female pooka from their squire training class. Emily wore an insubstantial black dress that left a long drift of leg, arm, and bosom bare, with a short, dark red cloak thrown over her shoulders. Unbound, careless blonde hair to her waist, eyes deeply dilated with the wine and darkness. She put an arm around Lucius's shoulders and kissed his cheek in greeting, like she usually did, but he thought she lingered over it tonight.

"Well then, are we all ready?" Corvus Greenwood's voice called. "Then on, to the fires!"

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Lucius had grown up hearing of how his ancestors had styled themselves the Knights of Walpurgis, hierophants whose power waxed most potent on the feast of *Walpurgisnacht.* A kind of recognition thrummed in his head at the scene before him, racial memory perhaps, of drums and torches in the dark, warm-limbed, wanton girls. A warrior armed with a long knife besting a stag in single combat, then being crowned with its bloody skin and antlers in tribute.

But this was Arcadia, and no one would be hunting deer this evening; no, the fauns would celebrating tonight. His hunter's blood was roused, but by a very different quarry.

High, silvery girl's laughter just ahead of him. She crossed a clearing, hurdled a fence. Then there was a little half-timbered building in front of him, someone's hay shed, covered with blue lilies in bloom. His fair prey disappeared through a doorway, up a flight of stairs. He raced up the steps to the loft, saw the girl's silhouette against the starry window.

Then he was clutching her back hard against his chest, devouring the nape of her neck. He had her undressed in a second, finally revealing the body that had been making him restless in bed, the pale, long-leggedness of her, half-illuminated in silvery light. And she, shameless little wanton that she was, tore his clothes off with the same abandon. He pushed her onto her back on the hay, covered her body with his own, her thighs falling open around his hips. He had to remind himself *she's a virgin, try to be gentle* but the way she seized a handful of his loose hair and kissed him was hardly virginal, and the way she clutched him, muscular thighs squeezing his hips like... oh God... he was trying to hold himself back from just forcing himself on her without preamble. But then her body was arching up to his... little gasping cries in his ear... there was no way he could have stopped now, now that she finally wanted him.

He moaned and thrust full length inside her, encountering no resistance, no fear, no pain she was ready for him, welcoming, wet and smooth. For one long endless moment, her hands stroked down over his shoulders, over his arms, over the long muscles of his back. Then their bodies began to move together in the timeless rhythms of human lust... or rather, the timeless lust of human and Faerie. He was expecting her to be very wild dragging her nails down his back, yowling fit to shake the rafters but was instead surprised by the tenderness of the way she held him and touched him. *Ohhhhh yes*, this was good, this was wonderful pure, unselfconscious physical bliss. She surged beneath him and up onto him as buoyantly as a dolphin playing in the waves.

He could have stayed there forever, just on the edge of orgasm. It was easy to lose track of time and coast on the sustained arousal of their young, strong bodies, listening to her soft cries beneath him. After an endless, but breathlessly short time... she let out a hoarse little gasp, arms locking around him... he was whispering, *Come on, love... come for me...* he tried to hold back, but the sensation of her orgasm, that rippling grip on him, was pushing him over the edge too, and he couldn't stop himself from flooding her foreign, other, delectable belly with his own climax.

When he was spent and gasping afterward, something in him was shocked, endlessly titillated, that this virgin girl could simply choose her first lover and run off into the woods with him like this. The fact that it had happened without shame or fear, without elaborate ceremonies of marriage, without toilettes with white lingerie that took an endless coy time to prepare in locked bathrooms, amazed him. There would be no furtive gossip about her previous sexual experience by in-laws later, no fetishistic importance attached to the first piercing of her hymen, no sense of something lost... here, it was all about experience gained. She had now joined the ranks of the initiated sexual pleasure was another accomplishment that she had mastered. *I'll be your practice sword*, my Lady, he thought, threading his fingers through her damp hair and smiling wickedly into the fragrant hay.

Perhaps now they would tattoo another scarlet band on her arm, above her squire's insignia.

And yet this night, what they were doing... in this utterly strange land, this was a religious ritual. He knew from his reading in Buckminster Swain's library that his role tonight was the part of their Goddess's consort. When he lay with this girl, it was sacred to her and to her people. Perhaps the couples that came together tonight were already married or in love; or perhaps they would fall in love, get married, have children after the revel tonight. But what was sacred was the pleasure, the lust, the joy that came from having one's desires fulfilled. Now he understood the joking going on in the castle about how everyone was always in a good mood after Beltane. He knew he would be.

Yes, Lucius thought, gathering the pliant body of the girl beneath him closer into his arms, he liked it here. What an excellent place to lie low while he waited for the Aurors' investigations to die down again. He knew his parents and the Blacks would carry on the wedding preparations while he whiled away the time in this delightful exile. Narcissa Black would wait he was already impressed with her patience.

But this Faery girl was as different from his beautiful fiancée as it was possible for a woman to be while Narcissa reminded him of a porcelain sculpture of a rose, delicate and perfectly shaded, a precious thing kept behind glass, Emily was more like a fresh rose, whose petals and fragrance he could crush into his face. Even her sweat smelled sweet he buried his face in her damp neck, breathing a scent like the verbena water on his mother's vanity.

He appreciated both *objets d'art* and rare blooms. He could see himself collecting both when he was patriarch at Malfeasant.

But now he was distracted by her tiny nipple hardening under his fingers, so he bent down and wrapped his lips around it. She moaned softly, both arms cradling his blond head. He slid gently out of her, substituted his hand for his cock, one expert fingertip finding her clitoris and delicately thrumming on it, keeping her primed for him. When he was hard again, he sank luxuriously between those slender thighs, into the tight heat between them.

No, he wasn't going to give her up. The arousal was building, the base of his cock tensing, his testicles clenching. He was going to own this fickle little dance-away slut, make her crawl to him begging to be used at his whim. He had pursued her and won her, and the possessive instinct of a Malfoy, once roused, was powerful. After he was married, he was going to keep her somewhere for himself, like his father did with his London mistresses, and make her love it.

Then all rational thought fled from his consciousness as he lost himself entirely in the sensations of sex. When he fell asleep later, with her arms around him, his rest was entirely untroubled.

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Emily's mercurial mood had passed by the time she met Lucius for tea that afternoon she seemed much restored after bathing and sleep. Her greeting consisted only of a demure kiss on the cheek, but under the table, her hand was lingering possessively on his knee. Now she was telling him something about the players down at the New Moon Theatre in a bubbly, excited voice.

"Kevin's rehearsing in *Theseus and Hippolyta* down at the New Moon that's one of Shakespeare's three plays that the Muggles and wizards don't know about until they come here, so he's terrifically excited. Want to come down and watch the rehearsals with us today?" Her fingers were entwining with his under the table.

Lucius could not imagine being terribly excited over the plays authored by Shakespeare that were readily available in the Wizarding world, so he was unmoved by the idea of there suddenly being three more of them to wade through. "I can't imagine why I would want to watch some Muggle rehearse for a play. It's bad enough that they're allowed to share meals with us," he said as a joking aside to her.

Emily froze for a moment, then blinked several times down at her plate. "He's really very good," she said quietly.

Lucius laughed. "What's very good for a Muggle? Not forgetting his lines at every entrance?"

"Actually, now that he's created his own True Name and can use Glamours and Obscurantis, he's as good as any other apprentice in the company. Better than some, actually," Emily said, very casually. Of course she knew that Lucius himself was still unable to create his own True Name, even with both Swain and Emily tutoring him and any number of quiet hours available in the library. The fact that he still could not do magic without his wand, while three of the Muggle pages had already created True Names, suddenly seemed to hang like an unspoken reproach between them.

"Bully for him," Lucius said with a slight sneer, pouring himself another glass of champagne. "Why don't you forget about these rehearsals and spent the day with me instead?" Under the table, he ran a caressing hand down her thigh.

"I promised I'd go," she said shortly.

When Lucius turned back to Emily a second later, he realised... something was different. She wasn't meeting his eyes, she wasn't touching him, and she wasn't smiling at him. She finished breakfast without another word, then left somewhat abruptly. Lucius followed her down the hall and wrapped his arm around her waist, bending down to stare into her eyes. She glanced up at him, for a second then kissed him gently on the cheek.

"Fine, go ahead and watch the rehearsal if you want to," he whispered, with the air of making a great concession. "But come to my room tonight and sleep with me."

"I have to meet my mother tomorrow she'll be back here in the morning," she said. "Sorry."

By that evening, Lucius was absolutely aware that after that single idyllic night, he had somehow fallen out of Emily's favour as a lover. It seemed to him that in the elemental, lightning-quick way of very young women, her affection for him had flashed white-hot for a moment, and then was gone.

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Emily had even less time to spend with him after her mother returned from an extended advisory session in the Sixth Kingdom with King Armus. Armus was a young, inexperienced monarch, whose father had died when he was only nineteen years old, and he ruled the largest and most populous Kingdom in the whole of Arcadia. Thus, he and his First Knight spent a great deal of time asking Lady Elaine's advice, and that of the other eight sovereigns, regarding matters of his nation's security.

On the day Lady Elaine was due to arrive, Lucius waited in the main courtyard with the Royal Family, Buckminster, and Emily, curious to meet the woman credited with keeping the Third Kingdom safe time and again, and who even his own father grudgingly admitted was stunning. When Lady Elaine rode into the courtyard, in armour, with a sword strapped over her back and riding a loose-limbed black charger, accompanied by a retinue of six knights Lucius took a very long look, and suddenly had an excellent idea of why Buckminster Swain had left his homeland behind.

Gwydion threw another grand welcome banquet to honour his First Knight's return, which was attended by the entire Court. Elaine appeared on her husband's arm in a long, utterly plain gown of parchment-coloured silk, and Buckminster could not have looked happier if he had been King himself. Elaine trailed elegantly up to Emily and Lucius during the cocktail hour before dinner.

"So," she said sternly, as her gaze lit on her daughter, "what's this I hear about some frivolous little duel with Traltivere on your first day back from school, before the whole Court?"

"Well, I... I won," Emily said, looking abashed.

"Of course you won do you have any idea who your mother is?" Lady Elaine said with mock severity. Emily looked up at her, and they both laughed.

"But don't think you're not in disgrace, young lady you know how I feel about duelling over trifles. You're a journeyman squire and he doesn't even hold rank, so you could have declined his challenge and just made an apology, and you know it. But no, you thought it was more fun to embarrass Traltivere, didn't you?"

Emily looked abashed again. "He deserved it!"

"I'm sure he did, but what are you going to do if there's a real matter of honour at stake sometime? Treat it like a big joke? Duelling is a serious matter if you ever want to be a knight, you have to treat it as such."

"I'm sorry, Mum," Emily said very quietly and seriously. "I won't do it again, promise."

"And I'm told you've been neglecting your archery practice, as always," Lady Elaine said with an impatient raise of her perfect brows.

"All right, I'll put in some extra practice," Emily said.

Elaine's expression softened. "Good. Let's get in a few bouts together, say, tomorrow night? I want you to show me how you defeated Traltivere."

Lucius and much of Emily's squire class turned out to watch the training session between Lady Elaine and her daughter the next evening. Lucius had been impressed while watching Emily take on her cousin Corvus, but the calibre of bladework between Elaine and Emily was truly glorious, heart-shaking, heroic. What he saw that evening was to leave a lasting impression on him for years.

He could see Elaine visibly pushing her daughter to a higher level of skill and discipline as they progressed. While Elaine was an affectionate parent, she was clearly not inclined to be indulgent the bratty, narcissistic side of Emily, which Buckminster Swain tended to turn a fond, blind eye toward, disappeared around her mother. Now, the gambolling girl was outgrown, and someone else emerged and that someone else, with her air of cold competence and lethal efficiency made Lucius Malfoy breathe shallowly and sweat testosterone until he felt light-headed.

What he would give to have that at his command.

Lucius watched those two combatants for hours, feeling every heartbeat pounding thrillingly in his temples. He thought about what it would be like to be a young king, like the ruler of the Sixth Kingdom, who was exactly his age and have armies of his own, with warriors like the ones before him to do his bidding. He wouldn't need to call anyone else *Master* then.

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Spring gave way to Midsummer, which was celebrated with more feasting and revelry. The bonfires that accompanied Beltane were replaced by a spate of weddings, and there seemed to be a sudden craze amongst unmarried people for having their tarot cards read and scrying in water for glimpses of their true loves. Lucius never saw Emily peering into any silver bowls of water, however. She still treated him like her very good friend, but had much less time to spend with him now that her mother was insisting on extra archery practice.

Buckminster Swain's behaviour toward him changed not a bit after Beltane either he didn't know that his Tithe candidate had spent that night with his daughter, or he just wasn't concerned about it, which Lucius found astonishing. Most of the parents of daughters he knew back in England would have demanded that he immediately marry the girl under similar circumstances, had they known about them. Lucius concluded that she probably hadn't told either of her parents what had happened.

As for Emily herself, she was now spending her free evenings sitting up late drinking wine with that blonde, green-eyed Muggle Titheswoman, Catherine Orson, and listening to her talk about her pre-med University classes and her studies with Fianna medical officers. She was also spending quite a lot of time with Kevin Patrick, that freckled Muggle actor. Lucius took note of him at dinner one evening he was a blue-eyed, dark-haired fellow, not tall, but reasonably handsome. He very casually asked a few people some questions about Kevin, and heard that he was an American from New Mexico and that he also spent a great deal of time in sword combat training sessions with the Fianna pages, who apparently held him in some regard.

Later that month, the King and Queen, the Swain family, and many courtiers went to the gala opening of the Muggle's play at the New Moon Theatre, where the King kept a lavish royal box. Emily went to opening night in another helplessly gossamer black frock, bringing armfuls of fresh-gathered roses for the players. Lucius declined to attend, preferring to spend the evening carousing in the Vintner's Quarter with Jak Dhayalan.

"So is he your new best friend, that Muggle?" Lucius asked Emily over breakfast the next morning.

Emily looked at him and laughed. "Silly wizard don't you notice anything? He's mad for that other Muggle page, that blonde girl from California, who writes. They've been together since they met in front of the Avesbury portal they've hardly been out of each other's laps since Beltane." And that reminded her, she said after breakfast she was going up to the Californian Muggle girl's room to look at the next chapter of her book. Lucius glanced back down at his own plate with a deep scowl.

It wasn't as though he didn't have opportunities to console himself, however. That same evening, he rode down to the Vintner's Quarter alone and had a glorious drunk of orangeflower brandy during which he struck up a flirtation with a travelling tradeswoman, a bosomy brunette satyress of about forty, who was more than happy to avail herself of his attentions in her hotel bedroom. That satyress was not the only female Faerie who appreciated his blond good looks and randy inclinations in the months that followed, he found himself the recipient of a great deal of attention from women in the castle, and without. He was entertained not only in the beds of Court ladies, but in the fields, in the forests, now and then in inn bedrooms, and had a series of extremely memorable encounters with a naiad, or water nymph, who was the guardian of a volcanic hot spring in the hills above the castle.

But when he saw Emily Swain training with the other Fianna squires, or flitting about playing the beloved bratling at Court, making up to everyone and anyone on whom her fancy lighted Faerie, wizard, and Muggle alike he still relished his memory of forcing her onto the hay and satiating himself.

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Midsummer gave way to August and the harvest festival of Lughnasadh. Suddenly, Lucius's year was half over, and he had still not created his own True Name. He had given up his hopes of another night with Emily, and as such their friendship had cooled somewhat, although he enjoyed making casual mention of his other amours to her in social conversation.

Some of the other Tithe pages were not having such an unproductive time of it Eithne Brennan showed everyone a draft of her latest project, a dramatic poem, one afternoon after lunch. Her subject matter was a battle that had taken place some sixty years before: the First Defence of Rivendale, considered the first great military triumph of Lady Elaine Greenbarrow Swain, Emily's mother. The narrative verse read like a ripping adventure yarn it was thrilling to read, and would be even better spoken by a skilled bard. After she had polished her work, Morgaine had promised to perform it, Eithne told everyone, sounding terribly excited at the prospect.

After lunch, everyone had scattered to their various pursuits. Lucius elected to take a walk around the castle grounds and shortly came upon Emily, sitting cross-legged on a sunny bench with a book.

"Quite a story, that one about your mother," he said by means of striking up a conversation, sitting next to her on the stone bench. "Is it true that she wiped out the entire invading force of Baalorites?"

"Well, she didn't do it single-handedly," Emily laughed, looking up from her reading and marking her place. "But she assumed command that day after Lithwick Greenwood was killed he was First Knight before her. And she was the one who killed the Baalorites' prince during the battle."

"Good work," he said. "Do you think I could persuade her to do the same with all the Muggles in Wiltshire? There's just too damn many of them these days."

"I think that's pretty unlikely," Emily said sarcastically. "Especially since Mum is half Muggle herself."

Lucius stared at her in hard disbelief. "Your mother the great Lady Elaine is half Muggle?" he asked, almost spluttering.

"Yes, my grandmother was a Muggle Titheswoman. She was at Court in 1910, your time," Emily said matter-of-factly. "And she created her own True Name after she'd been here for four months, and she married Prince Tristan, Gwydion's youngest brother, after she'd been here for ten. So really, when you think about it, her pedigree is maybe... almost as good as yours, Lucius."

Lucius turned a very flinty look at her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, in my opinion you do take this anti-Muggle stance a bit far," Emily said in what Lucius thought was a very airy and superior tone. "What has your average Muggle ever done to you?"

"Obviously, you didn't pay too much attention in your History of Magic classes," Lucius said. "Muggles have oppressed the Wizarding community to such an extent that they've driven us entirely underground. Do you have any idea what they did to us in the fifteenth century?"

"Lucius... if you had read any history other than the history of magic, you'd know that if you go back far enough, everyone has fought everyone else just about everywhere. Look at your people the English have fought with the Scots, the French, the Irish, the Spanish, the Americans, the Germans, the Italians, the Japanese and now, just about all of that is over, and everyone's trading with each other. Here pookas and trolls used to fight each other, nixies used to fight everybody, and trolls, pixies, pookas, changelings, and sluagh all at one point used to be persecuted underclasses. But now, we're all allied against the Orcs, and they haven't taken any of our territory in five hundred years. There are fauns, satyrs, pixies, pooka, sluagh, and trolls sitting on thrones now. So what's the point of carrying a grudge?"

"Muggles used to burn my people at the stake, you know," Lucius snapped. "Just because we did magic and they can't."

Emily looked at him as though he was being thick, and she was too patient and polite to call him on it. "First of all, wizardkind is *our people* my father is a wizard. Second, some Muggles can do Faery magic. And third, in the Inquisition, Muggles were killing Faeries, and wizards, and other Muggles, so their hostility wasn't directed entirely at wizards. Besides, after wizards came up with the Flame-Freezing Charm, getting burned at the stake became an amusing pastime, as I recall Wendelin the Weird, and all that. And fourth, wizards were burning and torturing Faeries during the Plague years, before the Inquisition ever even started, you know." She was counting off all her points on her fingers as she made her argument, like a schoolgirl in class.

"Wizards used to burn Faeries at the stake during the Plague?" Lucius asked the question as if that were the most improbable thing he had ever heard.

Emily crossed her arms in front of her chest. "That's not all they did. Iron torture devices were at one point awfully popular, too."

"Funny I didn't hear anything about that in History of Magic class," Lucius said contentiously. If Professor Binns hadn't said it, of course it was suspect.

Emily again looked at him as though he was being thick, and her patience and politeness were wearing thin. "Let me introduce you to a little truism about history I heard from my father the winner of any conflict gets to write down what happened. So of course Wizarding textbooks are going to gloss over it. You see, wizards and witches are red-blooded humans too, you know, and they got bubonic plague same as the Muggles did. But Faeries didn't get it, because we don't get human diseases. So in the thirteen-hundreds, plague was the leading cause of death for wizards while the leading cause of death for Faeries at the same time, however, was angry mobs of wizards demanding the cure."

"Did they have the cure?" he asked, unconvinced.

"No, they didn't," she snapped. "They just didn't have the kind of physiology that could get infected with plague. Lots of other creatures horses, cows, dragons, Puffskeins, Kneazles can't get it either. Torturing a Faerie for the cure for plague makes about as much sense as torturing a cat for it. Just because you can't get it doesn't mean that you know how to cure it."

"I still don't believe you're not exaggerating this," Lucius said, turning stiffly away from her. "One or two isolated incidents in some little village somewhere doesn't mean there was ever some kind of war between wizards and Faeries."

"There was never a war because there wasn't a big enough European Faery population to fight one we don't increase our numbers very fast, and there's a lot of time between generations. And I'm not talking about an isolated incident persecution by wizards was so widespread that there was a sudden mass exodus of Faeries back to the Kingdoms, because people decided they'd rather deal with fighting Orcs than wizards. Orcs didn't have Iron Maidens and Unforgivable Curses, so they looked a whole lot better by comparison. The Fae who stayed behind went underground and hid, same as wizards do from Muggles now."

"How could Faeries go underground from wizards? We do magic too, you know," he reminded her in a waspish tone.

"Don't underestimate a Faerie's ability to hide when she wants to," she told him warningly. "We have tons of spells for misdirecting enemies before we started getting attacked by all these Orcs and wizards and Muggles, most of our magic was all about curing disease and talking to animals and plants and such. Then the pixie tribes created Obscurantis and Deceivre back during the very first Orc wars in the beginning of the First Age. That's also when the *Descorder* and *A Rebours* curses came into use too. We picked up Glamours from some witches and wizards in Wales back in the thirteenth century your people didn't really trust Glamours, but they caught on like wildfire amongst us, to such an extent that most people still call it *Faery Glamour*."

"Well, that's all very interesting," Lucius said, very coldly and sarcastically. "Though I'm still wondering why I've never heard any of it before?"

"Oh, by the Mother, Lucius it's common knowledge, at least here. Ask my father. Ask any Druid. Ask any Bard. And while you're at it, go ask any Wizarding History of Magic professor about Faeries in the fourteenth century and see if he doesn't blush and get all evasive about it."

"I don't see how my History of Magic teacher could blush, as he was a *ghost*," Lucius snapped.

"Bully for him then," Emily retorted. "And what kind of mark did you get in his class, may I ask?"

"Oh, all right!" Lucius shouted at her. "What the bloody hell is your point then, if you have one? That all wizards are all a lot of murdering, Imperialist scum? That Muggles are better than we are, and Faeries are all perfect?"

"No, I didn't say that," Emily said, but in a gentler tone. "You just always act as though all Muggles are beneath you, and I just wanted to remind you that it's not just Muggles who are afraid of what's different than they are. Just about every people has been both oppressed and oppressor at some point in their history. It's just never a good idea to hate some whole group on general principles!"

"You just haven't lived in the Second World long enough," he said, in a bitter rage. "Do you think it's easy, knowing that there's a huge population of people who are utterly ignorant and violent, and afraid of my kind, and used to hunt us and kill us? And that they're right outside my door, getting closer and more populous all the time? Don't you think it feels oppressive to only be able to do magic in certain places, because if I do anything where a Muggle might see it, I'll get fined and maybe arrested, and the Obliviators will come out and interfere with us? Don't you think I hate having to sneak around like a criminal and live in a hidden house, work in an underground building, go to an Unplottable school just because I was born a wizard? Don't you think I'm afraid that someday some mob is going to find us and burn me and my family, and destroy everything we have?"

She was regarding him with a cool, unconvinced expression, arms folded over her chest and one eyebrow raised in a questioning arch for about one second, Lucius was reminded of his sour little cousin Severus, from one of the poorer branches of the family. He wanted to hit the girl in front of him, wanted to slap her until he saw blood and tears but he didn't dare, as he knew this young soldier would probably break his arm if he tried it, and because she had powerful family here, and he did not. Instead, he turned away from her, let his shoulders droop, and his voice break and as he intended, Emily dropped her challenging stance, sat down next to him, and tried to comfort him.

"I'm sorry," she said softly, putting her arm around his shoulders. "I was being too harsh. It was hard for me too, when I was at Beauxbatons. I was so used to doing magic out in the open, and suddenly I couldn't do that anymore. During my first year, you wouldn't believe how often I got detention for near misses with Muggles."

"I don't really hate anyone... I'm just scared," he said, in a small, vulnerable voice, because he knew that was exactly what she wanted to hear. He was rewarded with being enfolded in her arms and the feeling of her head on his shoulder. He very gently twined his own arms around her waist.

"I figured that was what was really going on," she said, very softly and understandingly. "I don't think you're murdering scum. Would I have dragged you away from that Beltane fire if I thought that of you?"

"No... I guess not," he said, his arms tightening around her waist. He was about to let his lips sink softly into hers when a satirical voice cut through his deliciously intimate moment.

"Aww, what is it, Tink? Is Pan in trouble?" came Jayson Robinett's voice from behind them. The sulky young satyr crouched between an arch of trees a few paces away, leering at them. His loose linen shirt was open over his muscled whipcord of a chest, and his feet were bare and flecked with mud beneath his linen trousers.

Emily pulled away from Lucius and was up in a second, her dark eyes flashing dangerously. "Fuck directly off, Jayson. Go find some she-ass who thinks you have more wit than a shite dropping, and follow her around, all right?"

"That's our Emily just love those wizards and their long hard *wands*, don't you?" snarled the dark boy. "No doubt my Lady Electra looks upon you from Tartarus and is proud."

"Oh, that's rich seeing as how you're not half the Faerie my father is with a True Name," Emily retorted.

The satyr's handsome face crumpled. "Oh, take your wand-waver, and be hanged to you, if the merit of a True-Born son is so lost on you. And on your dam, now that I think of it. And on her sire, now that I think further." In another second, he had gone to his goat-footed form and bounded away into the trees.

Emily said, turning back to Lucius with a sarcastic smile. "There you go, Luce all the proof you need that not all Faeries are perfect. He's had it in for me ever since Beltane, the ruddy great arse." She hunkered down beside him and nudged him with her shoulder. "Are you hungry? All this argument gives me an empty stomach. So, let's hit together and make peace, and be off for tea straight after, all right?"

They shared a comfortable laugh as they started back up toward the castle, but she skipped away when Lucius tried to put his arm around her.

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The King threw another grand banquet for the Tithe pages on their last day at Court. Again, the meal, wine, and entertainment were marvellous, and there was a great deal of crying and hugging going on between some people. The Muggle actor performed again but unlike his first monologue, he had learned to enhance this piece with Faery Glamour, so that when Prospero calmed the raging storm he had conjured to wreck the ship, one actually heard the thunder, and felt the winds die down, and smelled the salt air. Aliane sang some haunting ballads she had been taught by bards at Court, and through the use of auditory Glamour, was now able to harmonise with herself. Varick's rendition of several Arcadian folk songs rounded out the evening's entertainment. Since Beltane, Varick had become something of a celebrity at Court for his spirited violin, and he did not disappoint his public that evening.

Despite the festive send-off, Lucius was feeling quite dispirited the next morning as he finished packing his trunks. There was a soft knock on his door late in the morning, and Emily peeked into his room. " 'Morning, Lucius. All done packing?"

"Yes, just about. Is it time to go?"

"Nearly." She flopped down on his stripped bed. "It'll only be the four of you going back today. Dakarai, Laurent, and Eithne are all staying here."

"Really, why's that?" Lucius asked, fitting one of his silver razors back into its case.

"Dakarai's marrying Colin next summer she thinks she'll have been admitted to the Apothecaries' Guild by then. Laurent wants to stay with his family and learn some Faery medicine. Eithne wants to keep working with Morgaine for another year or so, but I think Corvus might have asked her to stay, too. Kevin's staying on for another season at the New Moon, though, and then he's moving to California to live with Nica. But some people need to get home right away Catherine needs to get back so she can start applying to medical schools. Varick wants to go home, too he really misses Hildigunnur. And Aliane is going to audition for the *Theatro Municipal* in Rio, this March."

It was really absurd the way she talked about the Muggle pages in the same breath with the wizard pages, as if the two were somehow equals. "Won't Dakarai's and Eithne's families have something to say about that?" Lucius asked.

"Well, Dakarai's won't, as she's an orphan. She loves it here though, and she and Colin love each other. And Eithne's family are old, old Celts-Irish they would probably be happier to have a Fae nobleman for a son-in-law than a Windsor prince," Emily said a little sharply. There was an admiring tone in her voice when she spoke of Eithne's old, old Celts-Irish family, which was the first time he had heard her express admiration for a human bloodline, now that he thought of it. Certainly she had never said anything of the sort regarding the Malfoys, or her own pure-blooded ancestry.

Despite his annoyance, he sat down next to her on his bed. Then very deliberately lifted her face to his and kissed her. She didn't push him away, but there was no answering passion in her response. She turned away from him and laid her head on his shoulder.

"Why won't you kiss me?" he whispered. "You'll probably never see me again."

"I'll miss you," she said softly, putting her arms around his neck in another of those warm, silky, maddening embraces, which, like the others she had given him since Beltane, were always over before he wanted them to be.

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Both Emily and Buckminster Swain saw Lucius down to the carriage in the courtyard to say their farewells. Emily said a fond enough good-bye and hugged him, which was again over too soon, then ran off to gush over Aliane and Varick.

Lucius very politely offered Swain his hand, but he just laughed, and gave him a very fatherly hug. He lingered for a moment at Lucius's side after letting him go, then whispered, in the kindest, most tactful voice possible: "She's just... very young, son. I'm sorry," and rested his hand for a extra moment on the younger man's shoulder. "Good-bye for now come visit as often as you like. Give our fondest regards to your family." Finally he stepped back, and Lucius got into the carriage. Euan Doggins slapped the reins down on the mare's back, and they started the journey back to the End of the World.

Lucius was infuriated by Swain's parting words to him he had no idea that anyone knew about his brief liaison with Emily and now realised that Swain thought to console him for his daughter's fleeting interest. So... he had known all along what happened between them at Beltane, and now he was assuming that he, Lucius Malfoy, was the injured party... ? How dare that bastard assume such about him he wanted to go back and inform Swain that he had been conspiring to deflower his precious daughter from his first day at Court, that he had an exquisite fiancée at home just waiting for him to come back and marry her, and next to Narcissa Black, his skinny, arrogant, Muggle-loving, one-quarter-Mudblood tomboy of a daughter was a very poor second choice indeed. He also had any number of hot, eager amusements panting for him besides, both here and in the bloody Second World.

But then Lucius remembered that the English common law he read in Theopilius Solon's office, that treated a young woman like the property of her father or husband, had absolutely no sway in the Faerielands and never had. As such, he had committed no transgression against his host by spending Beltane night with his daughter because there was no taboo against it the girl had freely chosen him, and he had accepted. There was not even any social stigma in what they had done such affairs had nigh on sacramental status here. She had not been in oestrus that night, so there could be no negative consequences to come from it other than hurt feelings. Miss Swain had merely romanced him, had him once, and declined a repeat performance. Her father, seeing his continued interest in her unreciprocated afterward, had thought to assuage a bruise to his ego as he embarked for home.

Lucius thought that he should be relieved that he had had his pleasure with so little repercussion resulting from it but it was surprising how unfulfilling that was to him. At home, had the same occurred, the end result would have been far messier and potentially expensive, yet at the same time, ultimately more satisfying.

As he rode back to the Inn at the End of the World to await the opening of the portal the next day, he was eager to get back to his world. He wanted to see what the other of... his followers had been doing in his absence. The Dark Lord had expressed an interest in Lucius's cousin Severus, the Potions prodigy, once the little brat finished at Hogwarts... in Lucius's absence, Bellatrix had undertaken to start bringing him into the fold. Lucius was eager to see what she had made of that task, although he knew the boy to be so fascinated by the Dark Arts that he would probably beg to be initiated once they were through with him. Also, the others had been gathering information on the Boneses, the Potters, the Longbottoms, the Preweetts, the McKinnons, Dorcas Meadowes, Alastor Moody, and of course that thorn of an Albus Dumbledore... Felina should be married to Evan now, which hopefully would put a temporary end to her complaints.

During the ride east, he studied young Varick Skúlason, who was quivering with eagerness at the thought of seeing his beloved Hildigunnur so very soon. He observed the young man keenly, remembering his attitude for when he had to greet Narcissa.

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When Emily Swain attended Lucius Malfoy's wedding, in October of 1979, eight months after his return, she had none of the sulky, half-insulting congratulations that some of his previous amusements, like Felina Rosier and Bellatrix Black, did. She wafted up to him and Narcissa in the receiving line at the reception, in a silvery green spidersilk frock, and kissed him with the unconcerned warmth of a sunbeam. "Lucius! Love and blessings upon both of you! Your wife is gorgeous!" Then she turned to Narcissa, resplendent in her wedding robes of silver tissue and lace, and kissed her too. "Hello! You're gorgeous!"

"Thank you," Narcissa said with a becoming blush.

Emily turned back to Lucius. "You two look beautiful together. I hope we all get to dance at the reception." And then she passed, oh tra la la la la, and Lucius introduced his new bride to her parents, the noted anthropologist Buckminster Swain and his wife, Lady Elaine Greenbarrow Swain.

Emily still had her habit of giving everyone hugs and kisses the way other people gave tips then the sort of habit only pretty, sweet-faced things in their teen years can get away with; she had given it up somewhat by her twenties. At the reception, she spent nearly the entire time dancing, with anyone who wanted to dance so naturally, she

was never introduced to Lucius's cousin Severus, just shy of his nineteenth birthday, who sat on the sidelines or the terrace drinking brandy, occasionally talking to Evan Rosier, and looking horribly bored by everything.

That night, Lucius took his fair, fair bride up to their lavishly appointed suite of rooms at Malfeasant, and she took two hours to prepare an elaborate toilette involving much perfume and maquillage, white lingerie, and a trailing white silk robe. When Narcissa emerged from the bathroom, looking pale and nervous, he kissed her and made much of her until she relaxed, then seated her in front of her mirrored vanity and unbound her long blonde hair until it hung loose, silhouetting her perfect body like Danäe in her shower of gold. Then, he hung his wedding gift, a necklace of blue-white diamonds, around her throat, which made her shiver with pleasure.

Finally he made love to his new wife on the priceless antique bedstead, on white silk sheets strewn with red rose petals. He was very gentle, and used every sensitive technique in his extensive repertoire to rouse desire in her inexperienced body, but he still hurt her when he consummated the marriage. Afterward, she shrank against him, crying softly, and he had to take the better part of an hour in soothing and comforting her. Perhaps Narcissa's body, like that of the True Princess from the story, was just so delicate that even the loving touch of a new husband was enough to injure it, like the presence of a pea through innumerable featherbeds. Or perhaps Narcissa believed that the loss of a lady's virginity should be accompanied by pain and sorrow and felt it for that reason.

Just before she slept, Narcissa hoped aloud that they would have a son soon. Lucius kissed her and said that he hoped so too.

When his new bride was dozing at his side, he picked up some of the bruised red rose petals that lay strewn all over their bed sheets, and crushed a fragrant handful of them to his lips.

Author's Note: The song Euan Doggins sings on the way to Greenbarrow Castle is the poem "The Road to Fairyland" by Ernest Thomas Seton. ~ GS

Part Second: The Hart Rampant: Chapter 14

Chapter 18 of 55

In which Professor Swain discovers the delights of a dual life as both a Hogwarts professor and Lucius Malfoy's mistress, until a chance encounter with a desperate Faery prostitute in Knockturn Alley sends her to the most unlikely person for aid. Meanwhile, Severus Snape finds himself alone and adrift in the Mushroom Circle, a Faery nightclub...

Part Second: The Hart Rampant

"Why do your locks and rumpled clothes show

that more than usual sleep has made them so?

Why are the kisses that he gave betrayed

by the impression that his teeth have made?"

Ovid, *"Metamorphoses"*

Chapter 14:

Emily had a long, luxurious lie-in at the Hogsmeade hotel that Saturday morning, not wanting to get out of bed or shower, as the scent of Lucius was still fresh on her skin. At long last, late that morning, she got up to return the room to its usual state of china-candelabra-ed, rose-and-scroll quilted homey-ness, and retrieve the vacation photographs of Brisbane from under the bed. Wrapping herself in a robe, she then phoned down to the landlady to have some lunch sent up from the Three Broomsticks next door. Finally, she retrieved a black leather briefcase from her Holding Trunk, took out a laptop computer, and dialled up access to the Internet. Emily had told Dumbledore that she was staying in the village in order to use her computer, so now she was going to do it.

She went to the Barclays Bank website and moved some funds between her treasury deposit account and her cheque account. Point, click, yawn. Then:

You have 1 new messages, said her free mail account.

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To: emilyswain@yahoo.co.uk

From: root@netwraith.com

Subject: REVEL

Date: 11/27/94 1:37 AM GMT

Hello Emily,

It was great to see you at Smaug's LAN party last weekend! CUSFS and Tolkien Society haven't been the same since you left. Drop by whenever you can, if they let you have time off from "Hogwarts, Hogwarts, Hoggy Warty Hogwarts... " (I always used to sing the school song to "Ode to Joy" it really goes pretty well.)

Regarding the next revel Megan the Red let me know 'tother day that the official word is that it'll be June 22nd. Details/location on the website you can still use the old URL. I've been changing the Unspiderable spells on it every few weeks, so the Muggle search bots haven't managed to find it. Ain't I clever ;-D

As for Beltane nothing organised that I know of yet, but you can probably ask around and find something. I'm not too motivated to find out because when you've been single long enough, those love 'n fertility holidays just look pretty grim.

I ran into Alain Collier at Slimelight awhile ago and he told me that most of the dandelion-wine contingent from Beauxbatons that's still around will be at the 6/22 bash. I'm hoping to make it if work permits, but I'll probably be shackled to my pager.

Send my respects to the royals, Buckminster & Elaine, Corvus & Eithne, Bill & Mary & the cublets too. And tell Catherine I said hi if you see her before the 22nd :-D

Regards,

Raith

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To: root@netwraith.com

From: emilyswain@yahoo.co.uk

Subject: Re: REVEL

Date: 1/23/95 11:37 AM GMT

Dear Aelfraith,

So, how's things down at Shady Cellar Server Farm?

Sorry for the late reply the only Net access I have currently is dialup down in the village :-(What do you think my chances are of getting Albus Dumbledore to put in a computer lab and T-1 line sometime soon?

Thanks for letting me know about the Circle I will definitely be there 6/22. Looking forward to it!

I'm thinking I might observe Beltane alone, however. You're right it's pretty grim when there's no one to share it with.

I'll also definitely try to make some more CU Societies' meets as well. What you said about how the social whirl around Hogwarts only really whirling for the crowd that goes out for butterbeer and chocolate frogs is proving disturbingly true.

"Ode to Joy," eh? I'll have to try that ;-D

Cheers,

Emily

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Emily was back at Hogwarts by Sunday afternoon, but got up very early the following Monday morning, to jot down a short note:

Darling

I don't want another seventeen minutes to go by until I can see you again.

So, what's on your To Do list for this weekend, and how can I get on it?

Like Lucius, she neither used his name, nor signed her own to this *billet-doux*, and instead of going to the Hogwarts Owlery for a school owl, she walked down to the Hogsmeade post office early that morning, before breakfast, and posted her letter to Lucius Malfoy's office address:

Mr. Lucius Malfoy

C/O Ministry of Magic

London

Personal and Confidential

To Be Delivered to Addressee Only

As she hurried back up to the castle, she could feel her palms sweating and stomach shivering with unbearable, furtive excitement.

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Emily's classes had gone especially well that Monday, the satisfaction of which (combined with the satisfaction of remembering her night with Lucius) left her in a giddy mood by the time she arrived for her training session with Professor Snape that evening at seven p.m. She dawdled a bit getting ready, and resultantly, he arrived at the practice studio well before she did.

"You're late it's seven-oh-nine," he growled when she came in, not looking up from where he had been practicing straight lunges against a cork target mounted on the wall. No doubt he had been waiting since 6:52 or so and was now terribly put out about it. She smiled sarcastically at him *Oh, look, the sunshine in my life has returned.*

"Hello, Professor. It's good to see you too," she said, breezing past him as though his greeting had been a perfectly civil one.

"What are you so bloody happy about?" he asked, taking another lunge at the target.

"Orla Quirke successfully Obscured one of her earrings today, without her wand... She's my nineteenth student to create a functional *Mot de Puissance* now. I am *so* good. Yes!" She triumphantly threw her arms up in the air.

"Modest, too," Snape observed, taking a particularly vicious hit against the target.

She smiled sweetly at him. "Could this possibly have something to do with the fact that only two of them are in your House?"

Snape glanced at her work table, still partially covered with parchment essay scrolls. "So tell me how is that grading coming along?" he asked in his silkiest tones.

Emily scowled. "Are you about warmed up?"

"Yes, so can we actually get started?"

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Emily could immediately tell that Snape had been practicing both lunges and parries over the weekend his bladework was already more authoritative. She spent the first twenty minutes going over lunges and parries and then moved on to riposte and counter-riposte sequences, and binds. He seemed to be very well versed in the spatial

aspect of combat for each aggressive movement, there was a defensive movement to counter, and for each time one's blade was stopped, there were ways to disengage and mount another attack. The interplay of angles and force seemed fascinating to him.

In all, he seemed to have the abstract part down; he was asking her about very involved aggressive and defensive movements, like the *balestra* and *piccata soto,* by the end of that session, proving that he had absorbed Barbasetti's book right down to the esoterica in the final chapters. Now, it seemed mostly a matter of conditioning and training his muscles to find the movements natural, almost second nature, and that just took endless practice and repetition. He certainly had far more stamina and endurance than she would have expected of a thirty-five-year-old academic he could make it through a two-hour lesson without asking for a rest break or so much as complaining of soreness or fatigue. Emily wished once or twice that she had gotten a hold of him as a thirteen-year-old page and trained him from then on he would have been positively lethal by this age.

Still too damned *rigid*, though that was his biggest fault. The man's intellect embraced new information with unbelievable fluidity, but his shoulders were like stiff clay. Once, when she had to demonstrate a bind manoeuvre for him, a motion in which a fencer applies pressure to his opponent's blade in order to force it off target, by taking his forearm in her hand and showing him the proper motions, it had been something of a chore to convince him to relax into it. Whenever she had to touch him and she was making a point of doing so in the most businesslike and chaste manner the scent of healthy exertion around him would take on such a sharp tang of agitation that she would move away as fast as was polite.

In the last three-quarters of an hour, she had simply taken him on for a series of bouts, pulling back from her full-out top form to a half-speed training mode, exaggerating her defensive and aggressive movements so that he could recognise them and counter appropriately. The impossible man showed signs of eventually being fast, too he already had rather quick parries *seconde* and *quatre* that would eventually deflect a whole lot of attackers. Had he been anyone other than Professor Snape, she would have complimented him on it, but she remembered his opinion of being *flattered* by her, and kept her approval to herself.

"Well then you're picking up the European systems awfully fast," Emily said at nine p.m. "I can tell that you've been practicing."

"It's something to do," he said with a desultory shrug.

"I think we'll finish up with European foil fencing by the end of this week and go on to the Arcadian system by the beginning of next week, if that's all right with you. Can you perhaps go over the thirty-two attacks and parries this coming weekend?"

"I'll find some time," he replied, wiping his face and neck with a towel.

"Good. So shall we say same time Wednesday?"

"That would be fine." He poured himself a cup of water from the silver jug by the window, and turned back to her. "So. How long have you been working on your book?"

Emily turned toward him in mild shock at the question she had not signed her manuscript in any way and had not intended to identify herself as its author to him. The confidence with which he credited it to her surprised her into a wholly non-evasive answer. "Six years, when I have time."

"It's a very complex system, the one you're recording," the low baritone said. Entirely conversationally.

"I didn't create it it's actually very ancient. I'm just trying to document it in detail. There was supposed to be an archery section as well, but that didn't end up happening."

"Not happy with the other training manuals, then?"

"There aren't any that's the problem. And we could really use one," she said, sinking into a chair, still mopping at her face with the towel. "Some of the pages we get from the hinterlands of the Kingdom have only been trained by some old farmer who maybe served a thousand years ago and whose memory is going, so when they show up for training, they have to unlearn all sorts of bad habits. I'd rather deal with someone who was starting completely fresh than someone who's going to argue every point with me because his first teacher showed him everything all wrong. What some of these kids think is parry first is just *appalling*. Plus there's just the historical value of recording the purest form of the art, so I think we need a standardised system, even if " Then she remembered who she was talking to and fell silent; turning her attention to the parchment scrolls on her work table. "I realise it probably seems pretty gruesome to you don't worry, I won't be showing that text to any of the students here."

"I'm curious why the complete ban on taking prisoners of war?" Amazingly he did sound curious, not sarcastic or judgmental.

"We don't do that," she said firmly.

"But why? Some sort of religious commandment against it, perhaps?" he prompted.

"Yes, there is a religious prohibition against it. Also if we keep prisoners, what can they potentially learn about us?" she said, shuddering.

"I see," he said quietly. "On a related topic, Professor, someone at the Ministry Ball was talking about... Faery True Names. I read something as a boy I can't remember where now to the effect that a Faerie's magical power is lost if everyone knows his or her True Name, which made me think they might be something like Words of Power. Then I heard some employee of Minister Fudge's, this rather dumpy woman in pink, talking about how you said they were two different names for the same thing at the Ministry Ball."

"Oh, yes, the charming Miss Umbridge." She glanced warily at him. "You really don't miss a thing, do you?"

No answer but a noncommittal shrug.

"Yes, a True Name is another name for a Word of Power. It's the term we use most often at home, actually, though I won't be using it in class."

"Why not?" he asked.

Really, what was it with all the *questions*? He was like a tall dark glowering little boy asking why the sky was blue.

"Well, that term carries non-Christian religious connotations with it, and I'd rather avoid that sort of thing in my classroom, seeing as how I'm living in a predominantly Christian community right now," she said, very matter-of-factly, turning her attentions to the scrolls on the table.

"Much as I can understand why you wouldn't want to discuss these things with your students, madam, I do imagine I'm a sufficiently educated adult to be able to discuss comparative religion without making an ass of myself," he said. "I do teach school and all, you know."

Emily looked back at him in surprise. "Well... of course you are," she said the idea that Severus Snape might be sensitive to thinking his intelligence was being underestimated had never previously occurred to her. "All right. It's believed, by many... that every time you come up with a new combination of letters and sounds in such a manner that you can do magic with it by doing that, you've given the Mother Goddess another Name. A True Name. As such, you've made her identity, her creation, that much richer, so she favours you by giving that Name power thus allowing you to do magic with it."

"So... your people believe that your ability to use magic is a direct manifestation of the power of a divinity," he said thoughtfully.

"Most of us do believe that, yes," she replied. "But magic is considered a secular phenomenon here, and most British witches and wizards consider themselves Anglican or Catholic, and celebrate religious holidays like Christmas and Easter. So I decided to teach Faery magic from a secular point of view as well."

"Why then... do you think that people who aren't adherents to this particular faith, can still create and use True Names?" he asked.

"That's a very good question, sir a whole lot of people have been wondering about that one for centuries now. But you're not likely to ever get a real answer. A lot of people like to say 'You don't have to believe in the Mother for her to believe in you.' Of course there are those who think the whole thing might just be us anthropomorphising a force that we can't comprehend in terms of ourselves. At any rate that's the theology behind it in a nutshell." She turned back to her scrolls and started to dip a quill, but then turned back to him. "I can't remember now did we say same time Tuesday or Wednesday?"

"Wednesday," Snape said.

"Good evening, Professor." She picked up her quill.

"Good evening, Professor," he said and left the room.

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After she had finally finished grading her end-of-term essays, Emily went back to her room and lay on her bed, thinking. Who would have thought it... a reasonably civil conversation with Professor Snape, about warfare and religion of all things, in which he seemed genuinely interested in what she had to say. In which he had mistaken a Faerie's natural reticence on the very personal matter of her religion for an underestimation of his intellectual powers imagine Snape thinking his intelligence was being doubted. It simply wasn't something she would have believed he ever worried about. Outwardly, the man was the epitome of the brilliant scholar, the pure scientist; whose confidence in his own abilities was seemingly unassailable. Had she not personally experienced unmistakable proof that he had some extremely passionate sensual urges hidden under his almost priestly black robes, she would have thought he voluntarily led a life of total asceticism.

In short, she simply would never have thought of him as being prey to the same pangs of insecurity as... oh, everyone else she knew, and it was interesting? telling? oddly reassuring? that he was.

She was distracted from her Snape-related musings a moment later by a tapping at her window. Pulling the curtains aside, she saw a tiny spotted owl hovering outside, which delivered its message and immediately took off. She recognised Lucius's now familiar handwriting

Darling

I shall pencil you in between "Arrive" and "Collapse in Complete Exhaustion."

I'm staying over in London this week end on business, in the club suite (northwestern-most corner, top floor) at the Hotel Hulot in Diagon Alley. I'll be there after eight in the evening Friday. Can you plan to stay until Sunday?

The place is free of Apparition Protections, and the room service is first rate.

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Emily's Gryffindor-Slytherin fourth-year class that Tuesday were still at odds with each other regarding the article about Hagrid in the *Daily Prophet*, as apparently Hagrid was beloved by the Gryffindors, and held in contempt by the many of the Slytherins. The result was that she had a much worse time of it than usual getting them to settle down for the lecture portion of their curriculum. After trying unsuccessfully to quiet them down and start her lecture two or three times, she finally vaulted up on her desk and then stepped onto the topmost slat of the back of her chair, balancing on the balls of her feet, and began whistling her favourite Weird Sisters tune. The class fell silent, except for a faint *Whoa* from the back row.

"How did you do that?" Blaise Zabini asked.

"Pure talent," she replied, dropping lightly to the floor in a swirl of professorial robes. "All right, now that I've finally got your attention " she directed a long, hairy-eyeballed, and probably very Snape-ish look of reproach at all of them "today, we begin a new topic. Those of you who haven't created *Mots de Puissance* yet, don't worry you can do all of this with a wand as well."

She wrote a phrase on the blackboard *Objets de Puissance* then turned back to the class.

"*Objets de Puissance.* Objects of Power. Talismans. Amulets. All manner of magical objects. We all use them every day. What's the most common magical object here? You all have one."

Pansy Parkinson put up her hand. "Our wands?"

"Exactly, Miss Parkinson." She wrote the word WANDS on the blackboard. "What are some other magical objects? Anyone?"

"Remembralls?" quavered Neville Longbottom.

"Very good, Mr. Longbottom," she said, provoking a shy smile from Neville. "Can anyone think of any others?"

She wrote the names of magical objects on the board as the students called them out.

"Talking mirrors," Draco Malfoy drawled.

"Invisibility Cloaks," Hermione Granger said, her hand straining up in the air.

"Sneakoscopes!" Ron Weasley called.

"Broomsticks," Harry Potter volunteered.

"Omnioculars," said Seamus Finnigan.

"Good, good, excellent," Professor Swain said, listing *OMNIOCULARS* on the board before turning to face them again.

"Most of the magical objects that you've listed are fairly mundane and not too wildly powerful talking mirrors, Omnioculars, Remembralls, Sneakoscopes, and broomsticks. Those are relatively simple to create, which is why wizard artisans can mass-produce them to a degree where they can offer them for sale in stores. The single exception there is wands, which are as powerful as the wizard who wields them, as you all know.

"Invisibility Cloaks, now those are far more difficult to create and exert a much more powerful magical effect on those who use them, which means that they are very rare and hard to come by."

Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger exchanged what she thought was a very deliberate and conspiratorial smile at that remark. She momentarily wondered what it meant before continuing.

"Now I'm going to give you an example of a rare and potent Arcadian Object of Power."

Originally she had planned on showing them her *Wazzarflaske*, which poured a never-ending stream of pure water, to demonstrate a powerful Object of Power. Instead, she decided that while they were contentious and distracted like this, something more dramatic was in order. Extracting the bit of suede leather from her pocket, she

unrolled that "paper of swords" on her desk and then very carefully removed one tiny needlelike weapon from the bunch. As they watched, her lips moved soundlessly and the tiny needle expanded in her hand to a shining sword some three feet long, scabbarded in an intricately engraved metal sheath. The hilt, wrapped in some kind of intricately woven pale leather, was long enough to accommodate a two-handed grip.

"If one of you could tear a sheet of parchment from your notebook and hand it to me?"

Hermione Granger was of course the first to respond to the request, holding out a leaf torn from her notebook. "Thank you."

"*Petrificulus*." Then Professor Swain silently spoke a word, holding the parchment sheet in front of her and the class saw that she had Transfigured the parchment into a heavy square of white marble of the same size as the parchment. Then she unsheathed the sword, automatically adjusting its grip in her hand, and assumed the *en garde* opening stance she had taught them in fencing class. It was clear that this was something she had done thousands of times before.

The sword was about three and a half feet long and very functional: a small round bell guard, no swept hilt or ostentatious ornamentation. If it had a Second-World counterpart, the samurai kitanas used in ancient Japan would have been closest. The centre of the straight blade was worked with runes characters from some mysterious and potent language. Those runes teased the eye, seeming to shift and oscillate, as if viewed underwater. Whispers erupted from the students.

"Now. Watch closely."

Professor Swain tossed the marble tile up in the air with her left hand and then neatly cut it in half with a single economical upward motion of the sword. Both halves fell to the wood floor with a *chunking* sound. The class gasped in unison. Ron Weasley picked up one of the pieces, which had landed near his feet, and ran his forefinger along the edges, which were so clean that no dust or splintering was visible. "Bloody hell," he whispered to Harry Potter, handing the tile to him.

Then, before the class could fully register what was about to happen, their professor brought the blade down on her left arm, provoking frightened screeches from several students. Given the blade's just-demonstrated preternaturally sharp edge the logical outcome would be that Professor Swain would strike off her own left hand.

But no such thing happened.

They could all see her leaning onto the sword's grip, pressing down on the shining blade where it rested on her forearm but it simply stayed put against her arm, not severing her wrist by some unbelievable force. Squeals of horror and gasps of amazement filled the room.

Dean Thomas finally gave voice to the collective sentiment of the room. "How in the bloody *hell* did you do that?" Hermione Granger let out an excited gasp and put up her hand so energetically it seemed to strain toward the ceiling.

Their professor laughed, too amused at the astonishment in his voice to bother taking points from his House for cursing, and lowered the sword. "Well, you see by means of rituals said over it, and runes inscribed into its blade during its forging, this sword will refuse to harm me, or any other Faerie. Can anyone tell me the benefit of that?"

Gregory Goyle put up his hand. "If you're fighting someone, you know, they, uh, can't take it away and chop you up with it? Or any of your friends?"

"Exactly, Mr. Goyle. A vorpal blade, you see, is a very powerful *Objet de Puissance*. They're made by only the most skilled of swordmakers, as it takes weeks of extremely precise magical ritual, accompanying each step of the blacksmithing process, to create each one."

"Where do you get one? Do they cost a lot?" Draco Malfoy asked.

"You can't buy one, Mr. Malfoy. They have to be awarded," she replied, sheathing the glimmering blade back into its metal scabbard, and then miniaturising it again with the *Reducio* incantation and an inaudible word.

"When do you use something like that?" Harry Potter asked in a quiet, thoughtful voice. "I mean... against who would you use a sword like that?"

Emily knelt down next to Harry's seat and smiled at him. "Don't worry, Mr. Potter. If the Third Kingdom or its allies haven't declared open war against you, you're quite safe," she replied, and Harry averted his eyes and laughed. Emily turned toward Hermione Granger, whose hand was still straining up in the air.

"I read about vorpal blades in Buckminster Swain's *Encyclopaedia*," Hermione said. "That's an *Orcleofian*, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," their professor said, looking at Hermione with an admiring smile. "Ten points for Gryffindor. My word, Miss Granger, I'm really starting to think you've read the entire *Encyclopaedia*."

"*Orcleofian?* What does that mean?" Harry Potter asked, glancing from Hermione to Professor Swain.

"*Orc cleaver*, in Old English," Hermione said authoritatively, then turned back to their teacher. "Does yours have a name?"

Professor Swain paused, regarding Hermione silently for a moment, then moved down the aisle, resting her hand momentarily on Hermione's shoulder with a small smile. "Now, about protective amulets. The ritual involved is relatively simple, and the effects are very beneficial. Any item can be enchanted with protective magics, though you'll probably want to choose something that you can easily wear or carry in a pocket. Amulets are often made from pieces of jewellery or coins for this reason "

Hermione looked as though she would have liked to ask more questions, but clearly, a named *Orcleofian's* significance to Faery knight was not something to be shared with the class. The students were by now used to their professor tactfully dodging questions she apparently either wasn't allowed to, or didn't want to, answer, and once she indicated a topic was closed, they knew it was absolutely impossible to coax her into telling them any more. None of them were used to this kind of teaching style they were far more used to strict professors making tremendous bodies of knowledge available to them and then demanding that they absorbed it, than a teacher who seemed to know far more than she was allowed to teach, due to political reasons.

Frustrated, Hermione Granger's brown eyes narrowed in vivid concentration, the way they always did when she was trying to puzzle something out. Then she quietly dipped a quill and began to take notes on the process of creating an Amulet of Protection.

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The first time Lucius had asked Emily to meet him, she had been filled with ambivalence guilt vying closely with excitement and had nearly talked herself out of it at least twice.

Now... she felt different. Very different.

After Friday evening's dinner, she went immediately up to her room, without lingering to joke and chat with Irma, Pomona, and Minerva over tea afterward, and took a hot shower. Afterward, she took a ludicrously long time oiling down her skin with violet-scented almond oil, as unmindfully sensual as a cat. Then, she experimented with different ways of doing her hair, powdered her face, and put on brown-red lipstick with a brush.

Next she riffled through her closet for something it would please her to wear and something she would like for him to see her in. Forget the swallowing, asexual black scholar's robes, the thick black stockings, the demure collars, and skirts to below her knees. Tonight called for something entirely different.

In Emily's teen years, her very fashionable Greenbarrow grandmother had impressed upon her that tights were hopelessly frumpy and that a real woman wore gartered stockings and powdered her knees and she did not dispense with tradition that evening. Over the complicated black lace underthings, she then put a short, diaphanous

black spidersilk frock, whose soft neckline could be counted on to slip off her shoulders at opportune moments, and her favourite black pearl necklace.

Lastly, she opened her Holding Trunk and threw in a toothbrush, a powder compact, a bottle of violet oil, and the jewel box containing the emerald serpent. Costume changes of black lingerie and spidersilk frocks were next, then a highly impractical pair of satin boudoir slippers, and finally a decadent little lounging robe of embroidered silk velvet that Mabel Greenbarrow had worn during her jazz baby days in 1920's London. Lucius being Lucius, he would like anything reminiscent of opulent days gone by and there was no need to tell him that he was admiring a Muggle's taste.

She paused for a moment in front of the mirror, briefly infatuated again with her own beauty, before concealing her seductive dress under her outer robe and fur cloak and pulling on the black gloves Lucius had given her.

"Well well well, look at you," her mirror said with a sly, approving little chuckle. "*Someone's* getting lucky tonight."

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Emily ran into Dumbledore having an impromptu Head of House meeting on the steps of the great entrance hall with Professors McGonagall and (of course) Snape on her way out of the castle.

"So, Emily, are you off to visit friends again this weekend?" Dumbledore asked pleasantly, glancing down at her travelling clothes and the trunk in her hand.

"Yes, be back by Sunday supper again unless you need me back sooner for any reason, sir "

"No, no, have a good time," Dumbledore said, smiling benignly. "There's no rule against professors leaving the grounds on weekends, you know we're running a school here, not a cloister."

Emily laughed. "Of course, sir. Well then, I'll see you on Sunday. Have a lovely weekend, everyone."

"I'm glad to see her in better spirits," Dumbledore remarked as Emily made her way down the steps and out the great front doors. "I worried she was finding Hogwarts a bit gloomy in winter."

"Didn't she take all of last weekend off as well?" Snape muttered disapprovingly. "Well, I'm glad some of us stay around to make sure the students don't set fire to the castle while she's off paying social calls."

"Oh, come, Severus, you know how young people are," McGonagall said, as though the fact of Professor Swain's youth explained everything.

Perhaps Minerva McGonagall did not recall at that moment that the man she was talking to was himself only a few months older than Emily. Or perhaps, since Snape's manner had always been so grave and serious, even when he was a boy in her class, it had never occurred to her to think of him as young.

For his own part, if Professor Snape noticed this inconsistency, he kept it to himself.

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The Hotel Hulot was easy to find its imposing grey stone facade, decorated with weathered gargoyles, stood in a venerable business district street a block north of Gringotts Bank and the small shopping court where Flourish and Blotts, Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions, and Ollivander's stood. Emily ducked into a deserted alley for a moment, dodging puddles and patches of dingy snow, Obscured herself, and then Apparated into the northwestern-most corner of the top floor.

The club suite was exactly the sort of thing that would appeal to Lucius tall, paned-glass windows draped in heavy, richly coloured velvet, the most classical and picturesque kind of dark antique furniture, silver candelabra, vast Oriental rugs before a roaring fire in the hearth, and vases of hothouse flowers even in the depths of winter. It was exactly the sort of apartment a captain of industry at the height of the British Empire might have kept for his private amusements.

Lucius was reclining on the silk-covered bed paging through the *Daily Prophet* when she appeared. Platinum hair loose around his shoulders, wearing a foulard silk dressing gown under which he appeared otherwise naked. He looked up placidly when she arrived with the usual *crack* of Apparition.

"There you are," he said, his usual drawl full of anticipation. "Now get undressed and come directly to bed." He patted the space on the luxurious duvet next to him. Emily set her trunk down with a little intake of breath he was, simply, too beautiful.

"Dear Lucius you certainly aren't one of those men who finds it difficult to articulate his own wants and needs, are you?" She paused for a moment, very deliberately pulling off her gloves and cloak, and dropping them on a nearby armchair.

"You mean to tell me that there are men out there who have difficulty articulating what they want and need to do to you? Idiots. Fools." He put the paper aside. "Come here and I'll articulate some wants and needs, all right."

"Well, who could resist an invitation like that." Emily let her robe fall to the floor as she crossed to the bed as soon as she was within reach, Lucius had hooked an arm around her waist and had pinned her on her back on the bed, making her gasp with startled excitement. Then he bent down and put another of those absolutely toe-curling kisses on her lips again.

"Did you miss me?" he asked, moving his lips a fraction away from hers.

"Horribly," she whispered.

Lucius glanced down and ran a hand over her silk-covered breast. "It's criminal to cover up a body like yours. From now on I forbid you to wear any clothes when you're with me." He insinuated a hand under her skirts and drew it up the inside of her thigh and his dark blonde brows went up in pleasant surprise when he discovered her lace stocking top. "Well, except black lingerie that I'll allow. But nothing else, mind."

"Might that make mingling at the next Ministry ball a bit difficult?" She was lifting her face up to him for another kiss.

"If I had my way, I'd put your naked body up on a marble pedestal in my drawing room for everyone to admire. Properly lit, of course." He was teasing the scrap of black lace knickers down over her thighs and off "And no knickers. Black lingerie is splendid, but knickers are out of the question." Having removed the offending knickers, he slid that hand back under her skirt and those clever fingers were soon driving her to absolute distraction.

"All right," she managed to gasp.

In another second he had whisked her up, twitched his robe and her skirts aside... and very slowly lowered her onto his lap, penetrating her to his silky length. She wanted to wrap her arms around him, kiss him, and grind greedily down on him but he held her inexorably in place, one arm around her waist, one fist tight on a handful of her hair. "*Just come,*" he whispered, those cool, unshockable grey eyes fixed on her face. "*I want to watch you.*"

Her entire skin flushed with embarrassment but perversely, that only added to the arousal she felt. Something about being observed so intently at in this most intimate of moments was terrifying yet, at the same time, immensely gratifying. Most recently, she preferred to pull a comfortable veil of misdirection over herself and retreat from situations that made her feel too intimately exposed but now her heart raced, vision blurred; she could feel every bead of sweat on her brow standing out in stark relief. Then the orgasm welled up within her, and she could only cling to him, trying desperately to catch her breath.

"*You're beautiful*," he whispered. "*The most perfect beast I've ever seen*." His grip hardened around her waist in another second he had forced her onto her back on the bed, taking her hard and selfishly but she felt herself going liquid under his rough thrusts. Only after he had wrung another racking orgasm from her did he take his own climax, with a savage tenor groan into her neck.

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Somehow, even as she was lying in bed with him, it seemed as absolutely natural to conceal her training sessions with Snape and everything else she knew about him from Lucius, as it did to conceal her new affair with Lucius from Snape. Some people may have found this situation awkward, but Emily was not the sort of person who found it difficult to keep a secret.

Part Second: The Hart Rampant: Chapter 15

Chapter 19 of 55

In which Professor Swain discovers the delights of a dual life as both a Hogwarts professor and Lucius Malfoy?s mistress, until a chance encounter with a desperate Faery prostitute in Knockturn Alley sends her to the most unlikely person for aid. Meanwhile, Severus Snape finds himself alone and adrift in the Mushroom Circle, a Faery nightclub...

Chapter 15:

January gave way to February, and more snow and sleet but somehow the bitter weather didn't seem as cold and depressing to Emily in the week following her weekend with Lucius. And there was always the promise of seeing him again, very soon.

The fervour following Rita Skeeter's unflattering article about Rubeus Hagrid had died down considerably, and he had resumed his duties in Care of Magical Creatures class and was again taking meals with the other teachers. Everyone was very kind to him in the weeks following his return even Professor Snape was more polite to him than usual. Of course, "more polite than usual" for Professor Snape would have translated to "extremely stiff and formal" for anyone else, but at least he was visibly making an effort, Emily thought.

The Arcadian spring festival of Imbolc fell on Tuesday, February 2nd. At home, everyone would have been gathering offerings of spring wildflowers for the Mother and carousing with mead and metheglin, and come evening, groups of young girls would have been performing dances together in the fields to the sound of merry fiddles, whistles, and drums. Here in Scotland, there were no dancing maidens, and if there had been, the bitterly cold blankets of snow would have probably kept them inside next to the fire. Emily observed the holiday alone, sharing a traditional mead toast with the Lady of the Worlds by setting an offertory glass for Her in the west-facing window. There were absolutely no wildflowers to be found amidst all that snow and ice, so she had resigned herself to doing without that tradition.

But then, a screech owl scratched at Emily's bedroom window at about nine p.m. and delivered a small box addressed in Lucius's familiar handwriting. Inside was a ribbon-tied bouquet of fragrant, artfully arranged spring wildflowers lily of the valley, clematis, primrose, bleedingheart, narcissus, and half a dozen others kept from withering by some cunning Warming Charm. He must have looked everywhere, again... and to remember that this was a holy day to her... there was really no end to his regard and consideration. She laid the little bouquet next to the mead goblet, with a bow to the western and northern skies.

A letter was also enclosed. She opened it with eager anticipation, which rapidly turned to disappointment as she read

Darling

Happy Imbolc, my love.

Tragically, I'm obliged to stay in the country this coming weekend Queen Mum Troglodyte is having some sort of landmark birthday, and I have been informed that my presence is required.

Believe me, I would rather be with you. I shall miss you dreadfully. Please see me next weekend?

"Oh, bloody hell," she snapped. She made as if to tear the letter up, then stopped.

Leave it to that decrepit old fossil of a Druella Black to have been born on an inopportune day. Of course Lucius was going to have obligations to his family now and then, she knew that, but... But. None of that stopped her from craving all of his attentions for herself.

She composed a reply, to be taken to the post office the next afternoon, in which she carefully kept her annoyance to herself:

Darling

That's disappointing news I shall miss you dreadfully as well.

Be sure NOT to tell them what you gave up to be there.

Next weekend should be lovely.

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In Emily's class on Wednesday, it was time to test the Amulets of Protection they had been working on all week. She arrived in the classroom a moment after the bell had rung, carrying a large cardboard box, and plunked it down on her desk.

"All right, class, you know what today is. We're going to put your amulets to the test and see how well your enchantments have taken hold."

Opening the box, she pulled out something made of bright orange plastic. It had a gun barrel and a trigger, and sloshed when she picked it up. She assumed a desperado's stance in front of them, crossing her arms over her chest with the little pistol in hand. "Does anyone know what this is?"

"It's a squirt gun!" Hermione Granger cried, giggling.

"Absolutely, Miss Granger. Now, for everyone who's never used one before, here's how it's done. You put your finger on the trigger, and " Then she sauntered down the aisle and playfully squirted the stone floor in front of Dean Thomas's feet, making him jump back in his chair. The class laughed.

"Now here's how we're going test your amulets. If you've done your amulet up correctly and followed the ritual exactly, the water should jump right past you. Miss Granger, come on up here and help demonstrate, would you?" Emily reached into her desk and came out with an Amulet of Protection she had made for herself shortly before the last Orc conflict a large round silver locket on a long chain and looped it around her neck.

Emily pointed into the box. "All right, my girl choose your weapon. And then tell us what you chose to enchant with the Protection ritual."

Hermione came to the front of the classroom and picked out a lime green squirt gun. "It's my favourite necklace." She held up a dainty bit of gold filigree and seed pearl on a ribbon around her neck.

"Excellent something you're likely to be wearing most of the time. Now take one of these." She took a hooded plastic rain poncho out of the box, one of those flimsy, disposable macs available in any dime shop in the United Kingdom, and threw it over the girl's head and shoulders, and then threw one over herself as well.

"All right now, face me " They faced off in front of the class. "And let's do this properly." Emily assumed fencer's first position and saluted Hermione with her squirt gun. Hermione did the same and the class laughed harder.

"Okay... squirters ready?"

"Yes," Hermione said, assuming *en garde* position with her little green water gun in front of her, grinning at Harry and Ron over her shoulder.

"Squirt!" Then they emptied their pistols on each other, for all the world like a couple of little girls playing Cops and Robbers.

The water flumed out from the guns until it came within an inch of both Professor Swain and Hermione whereupon the streams abruptly bent at crazy angles and leapt around both of them to fall on the stone floor behind them. A few cries of *Cool!* erupted from the students. "What's even better, class, is when the water jumps around you and soaks the other fellow behind you." Emily told them with a wicked little grin.

Then she took off her plastic-film mac and handed it to Neville Longbottom. "Tell me, how wet is that, Mr. Longbottom?"

Neville shook the mac over the floor, and ran his hands over the hood. "It's dry," he said. "Totally dry."

"How about this one?" She took off Hermione's mac and handed it to Harry Potter. Actually, since Potter had been unusually distractible and prone to whispering with Ron Weasley lately, she more dropped it on his head than handed it to him.

"Just a bit damp," the boy reported, turning an impressed look at Hermione. "Some water drops only."

"Well then, great job, Miss Granger! Thanks for helping out," Emily said, applauding the girl as she went back to her seat. "All right, everyone up, and push your seats back against the wall, let's make some room in the middle. Slytherins on my left, Gryffindors on my right, pick a partner and get into pairs of two... " She passed out macs and squirt guns to everyone and had them stand facing each other.

"Now the more powerfully you've enchanted your amulet, the more fearsome of missiles it can repel," she told them, slowly pacing between them. "Right now, your amulets can hopefully repel not only squirt gun water, but rain, cold winds, that hot tea you accidentally spilled in your lap at breakfast. If you repeat the ritual, and work hard at collecting energies into your amulets, they will get more and more powerful, and the more they will be able to protect you. I've seen protective amulets strong enough to deflect short-bow darts on their own, but those are really rare, as you can imagine. All right, everyone, face your partners... "

By the end of that class session, as she suspected some students were soaked, two or three were nearly dry, but most were some level of damp. Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle both ended up wet to the roots of their eyelashes, whereas Harry Potter, Draco Malfoy, Pansy Parkinson, and surprisingly, Neville Longbottom, were barely dripping.

"All right, everyone, remember we're starting an important new topic next week," she called as they piled squirt guns and drippy macs back into the box on her desk. "Everyone take one of the new syllabi before you go and be ready to take lots of notes on Tuesday."

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DEFENCE AGAINST THE DARK ARTS, Elective Session

Third Unit Syllabus

III. FAERY GLAMOUR, in Theory and Application

A) Visual Glamours

~ To Be Seen As You Are Not

B) Auditory Glamours

~ To Be Heard As You Are Not

~ To Be Heard Where You Are Not

C) Tactile Glamours

~ To Feel What Is Not

D) Olfactory Glamours

~ To Smell What Is Not

E) Taste Glamours

~ To Taste What Is Not

F) SYNTHESIA

~ Any Combination or All of the Above, At Once

"It's just the new Defence Against the Dark Arts syllabus, sir... We just got it this week," Potter protested in a low voice.

Of course that Swain woman couldn't possibly begin her curriculum at term's beginning like everyone else that would just be too *conventional* for her. Snape thrust the syllabus back to Potter with a scowl.

"Five points from Gryffindor for your inattention," he growled. "Fascinating as your other classes may be, Mr. Potter, might I remind you that in this class, the subject is Potions, and I do expect you to listen. Now you have about thirty more seconds to add the ambergris to this mixture before it becomes completely useless, so I suggest you do it at once."

"Sorry, Professor," Harry said, grabbing for the phial of ambergris crystals. His hand was so unsteady he nearly knocked the damn thing over.

Snape glanced at the clock as he made his way back to the front of the classroom one more hour until the weekend started. It was bad enough that he was going to lose most of Sunday to the latest bloody overdone soirée at Malfeasant but at least he had Saturday to himself.

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Mercifully, the last class hour progressed uneventfully, and Pansy Parkinson had stopped her goddamned giggling. As the bell rang, and the students began to file out of the classroom, Snape called to Hermione Granger before she left the room. "Miss Granger. I need to speak to you."

Granger paused to exchange suspicious glances with Potter and Weasley, who looked back at her as though they thought they would have to identify her body later. (With Gryffindors, one couldn't simply speak to one of them privately without the rest of them assuming one had a nefarious ulterior motive for requiring such conversation. There was no such thing as trivial interaction with a Gryffindor every damn thing was a Holy fecking Crusade.) "Today, please, Miss Granger?"

So Granger then dismissed Tweedledee and Tweedledum with a heroically beleaguered gesture of her head, and approached his desk. The bag slung over her back was so heavily burdened with books that Snape briefly wondered if her spine would end up permanently bent by seventh year. "Yes, sir?"

"I have been checking periodically at the library for Buckminster Swain's *Encyclopaedia*, and every time I inquire, I am informed that it is still checked out in your name. Tell me do you intend to monopolise that book for the duration of your career at Hogwarts, or only just this year?" he asked impatiently.

Granger at least had the decency to blush and apologise, unlike most of her House cronies. "I'm sorry, sir, I didn't know that anyone else wanted it. I'll take it back to the library today "

Snape stopped her with an impatient gesture of his hand. "That won't be necessary. Do you have the book about you now?"

"Yes, sir, I do "

"I would like to borrow it from you until next Friday. Do realise that you are not the only person at this school studying Arcadian magic, and it would show some consideration on your part if you were not to completely monopolise one of the few resources on campus for this kind of study."

"I... I'm sorry, sir." Two apologies from a Gryffindor in one day well, that had to be some kind of record. Hermione disengaged a heavy bound volume from the twenty or so books in her bag, and set it on Professor Snape's desk. "Also, sir, Professor Swain has all of Buckminster Swain's books for reference in her office if any of the Slytherins go to her office hours, they can read any of them there "

"Thank you, Miss Granger, that will be all," he interrupted, dismissing her with another impatient gesture.

Once Snape was alone in his classroom, he flipped through the book until he arrived at the page he wanted a word that headed a long, long entry full of subsections and historical notes

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"***GLAMOUR***. Proper noun. *The Faery magical discipline concerned with the creation of sensory illusions.*

Glamouring originally entered the Fae magical canon in approximately the eleventh century. It is thought that this art originated amongst a group of small rural wizard peasant communities of then-predominantly Celtic Wales, although distrust of this art kept Glamouring from gaining widespread popularity amongst wizards.

The growing population of Fae who assimilated into these Welsh communities, however, readily embraced the practice of Glamouring to such an extent that many witches and wizards do not realise that the Fae did not in fact create this discipline themselves. The abstract, diffuse nature of Glamours does not seem to take well to use with a wand; the use of a Faery Mot de Puissance *to invoke Glamoured effects seems to suit this art more readily...*"

Snape skimmed through the historical notes he would go through all of that later until he came to the section he had been looking for:

"***Practical Glamouring.***

The key to producing believable Glamours is through the use of effective visualisation and sense memory. By confidently seeing, feeling, smelling, etc. the effect one wishes to project affecting the world around oneself is the illusion thereby projected "

Snape pulled the book closer to him.

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"He told me you had cause to believe that... He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was seeking to return to power, and that he wanted me to teach you as many means of self-defence as I could," Emily said. "He also said that you were among the most valiant and self-sacrificing of the wizards who opposed... him, but that your involvement had to be kept secret. That was all."

He finally seemed satisfied with that the threatening eyebrows relaxed a little.

"So, shall we say same time Monday?" she asked.

"All right."

She expected him to take his leave of her then, but he paused, his arms folded in front of him. "Why do your people call you their Lady of the Blade?" he asked.

They regarded each other silently for a long moment.

"My unit gave me that name after my first battle. You can probably imagine the sort of thing I did to earn it," she replied, meeting his eyes unapologetically. "Why did Dumbledore commend you for valour and self-sacrifice?"

"It's safer for everyone involved if you don't know, Professor," he said.

Then he nodded farewell to her very respectfully, she later remembered and left the room without another word.

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At breakfast that Saturday morning, the prospect of an entire weekend without Lucius looked very long and very dull.

Hermione Granger approached Emily after she had finished eating. "Professor Swain? Sorry to bother you, but could I have a look at your copy of Swain's *Encyclopaedia* some time this weekend? I want to read the entry on Glamours and make an outline for next week."

"You want to look at my copy? I thought you practically slept with the library copy under your pillow," she said jokingly.

"Professor Snape borrowed it for this week," Hermione said. "He said there's only two copies on campus, yours and the one I had, and someone else needed it."

"Oh, there is? I didn't realise there are so few... " she turned back to Hermione. "Well, come with me to my office, then, and I'll temporarily loan you my reference copy. I know it's not supposed to come out of my office, but I'll make an exception. After all, you are Hermione Granger," she said, winking at the girl, who grinned back. "Just make sure to give it back at Sunday supper so I have it for my Monday office hours, all right?"

"All right. Thanks!"

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That evening, Emily made a trip into Diagon Alley to Flourish and Blotts, and placed a special order for six copies of *A Wizard's Illustrated Encyclopaedia of the Faerielands* to her father's publishing house, Obscurus Books. (She was pleasantly surprised to discover that something called a teacher's discount was apparently given to academics here.) If there was a shortage of reference works on Faery magic and culture at Hogwarts, she figured someone ought to do something about that.

She wasn't sure of the Second-World manner of presenting a gift of reference books to an academic institution, so she had a browse through the bookstore's Etiquette section for some pointers. (At home, if she had wanted to give books to a library, it would have been a matter of *"Here you are, Da," "Thanks, dear,"* but here, perhaps there was some sort of tradition to observe.)

She wasn't turning much up. Wizarding etiquette writers seemed to only be concerned with the really antiquated kind of upper-class British social custom. According to *The Witch's Guide to Painstakingly Correct Behaviour* "A Countess is properly addressed as "Lady [Surname], or "Your Grace," "Referring to a serviette as a "napkin" is hopelessly bourgeois," and "A gentleman should always memorise the knots of his mistress's corset." (She debated passing that last gem on to Lucius for the space of about one second.) Alternatively, they seemed quite anxious to get along with, or at least avoid being eaten by, fantastic beasts. *How To Be Totally Inoffensive To Hippogriffs* and *How to Appear Exceedingly Unappetising to Dragons* both seemed popular choices these days.

"Ah, Mrs. Tumnus. I'm so pleased to see you've discovered this section," someone's archly amused voice said. Emily looked up to discover Felina Rosier paging through the Magical Interior Decoration section a few feet to her right.

"Good evening, Mrs. Rosier," Emily said with as much dignity as she could muster. "Yes, I'm looking for the usual manner of presenting a gift to a school." No need to tell Felina Rosier that she was just giving them some reference books let her think it was thousands of Galleons to the scholarship fund or some such. She turned back to her book with an air of not wishing to be disturbed.

"How lovely," Mrs. Rosier said in a thin, pleasant voice. "I'm sure Elsie and Priscilla will be delighted to hear that you've taken an interest in our etiquette. From what Priscilla's told me, it sounds as though they used to have a time of it curbing your antics when you were little. Always pulling you out of trees and finding tadpoles in teacups when you were at Swaincroft, they say."

Emily flushed hotly so apparently Mrs. Rosier knew her father's first family, then. Miss Elspeth and Miss Priscilla Swain were her half-sisters, now both in their early fifties and living in the family manor in the Cotswolds.

"Well, Elsie and Pris weren't the tree-climbing sort, as I'm sure you can imagine," said Emily, not lifting her eyes from the book. *Thought* Emily: As far as I can tell, Elsie and Pris weren't the sort for much of anything except extolling the achievements of male relatives, throwing fussy little tea parties, complaining about how expensive everything was getting, harrying their house-elves half to death, and mortally insulting my parents.

"Yes, *they* both always struck me as exceedingly well-bred," Mrs. Rosier said, with poisonous agreeability, in a tone that implied she was not so impressed with the breeding of the other branches of the Swain family.

"I'm sure they would," Emily said, with an affable little nod.

As before at the Malfeasant tea it took Felina Rosier several seconds to realise that Emily's reply had not been entirely approving. Then her dark brows drew together and her eyes flashed fire. "Of course you must be an excellent judge of breeding," she said cuttingly. "No doubt the example of your *Muggle* family was absolutely... enlightening."

"Oh, you must be referring to my grandmother, the late Mabel Greenbarrow," Emily said, closing the book with a decisive little snap.

"Was that her name?" Mrs. Rosier said, with an air of elaborate disinterest.

"Yes, it was," Emily said, ruthlessly tamping down the desire to send every stinging and biting insect in a mile's radius swarming after the bitch in front of her. "You know, I continue to be endlessly amused by how a well-bred lady like you can refer to her as 'my Muggle family,' when your own etiquette authorities state that you should properly refer to her as 'Princess Mabel' or 'Her Highness.'"

That seemed to give Mrs. Rosier pause. "Your Muggle grandmother... was a Princess?" she asked but now her voice seemed to be lacking some of her usual belief in her own absolute irreproachability in taking the upstart foreigner down a peg or two.

"Yes, last I checked, that was the title given to a Prince's wife, both here and in the Faerielands," Emily said, as though she was addressing a particularly dim student. "If you weren't aware of that, then here perhaps you ought to read this book."

She swept out of Flourish and Blotts, leaving *The Witch's Guide to Painstakingly Correct Behaviour*in the shocked hands of that good lady.

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That Monday, as promised, Emily began her final, and most challenging, topic of that school year on the one sort of magic that most humans thought of as synonymous with the Faery people the art of illusory Glamour.

"All right so far this year we've learned how to hide from attackers through Obscurantis, and we've learned how to protect ourselves through the use of magical amulets. We've also learned how to defend ourselves with swords, and we're beginning to learn the dagger as well.

"However. There is another very important art that we'll be studying until the end of this year the art of Faery Glamour. Glamour has two extremely important defensive uses "

Quills poised over parchment as they waited for her to continue... but then went skittering across many desks in surprise as a loud, jarring sound like a long string of firecrackers suddenly going off came from the back of the room. The class collectively and instinctively flinched and turned in the direction of that sound, no doubt expecting to see flying sparks but there was nothing.

When they turned back to their professor she wasn't there. A collective susurration of wondering whispers came up from the students.

"That, class, is called an auditory Glamour," Professor Swain said and everyone turned hard in the direction of her voice, to where she was now standing in the middle of the room. "It was meant to demonstrate the first defensive use of Glamour which is?"

Harry Potter's hand was the first to fly up. "It's distraction," he said. "Diversionary tactics. So that you can make your opponent look away from you, so you can Obscure yourself and hide."

"Exactly, Mr. Potter. The combination of a Glamoured distraction and the Obscuring of oneself is used so commonly in combat situations in Arcadia, that it's known in some circles as 'the old one-two,' or 'the old bang'n'dash.'

"However," she continued, "you can also distract your foes by assuming another appearance. In this manner, you can project a temporary illusion of how you wish yourself to be seen. Who wants to assist me?"

As usual, Hermione's hand was the first to fly up, but Professor Swain only smiled at her. "Give someone else a try today, Miss Granger. Mister... let's see, Mr. Weasley. Come up here." Ron joined her at the front of the classroom.

She put a piece of wood in his hand in place of his wand, just a foot-long section of wooden doweling that could be gotten from any hardware store. "All right, pretend this is your wand. Now imagine you're a robber in a dark alley for a moment. You're going try to use a Stunning spell on me and steal all my Galleons. Ready go."

Ron struck a threatening pose with the dowel wand, glowering at Professor Swain. "Your Galleons or your life!" he bellowed.

Professor Swain took a step toward him. Her expression changed... her hair had suddenly grown longer... blonder... she had gotten taller, more statuesque... more veela-ish... no, she was a veela, how silly they had all been to think that she was anything but a veela. She laid her hand on Ron's arm and crooned, "Actually, my sweet, I think you need to give me all of your Galleons."

Ron had his hand in his pockets and was emptying them into the Professor's hand before he suddenly looked up to a roar of laughter from all of the female students. Many of the other male students had been starting toward her as well, digging in their pockets for change.

But then the veela had gone, and Professor Swain was grinning at all of them again.

"That, class, is called a visual Glamour. Let's thank Mr. Weasley for being such a good sport." She applauded Ron as he went back to his seat, red-faced. He and Harry exchanged sheepish looks, while Hermione looked at them both and shook her head.

"So, now, can anyone tell me what the second defensive use of Glamour is?" Their professor asked, surveying them all with a challenging look. Hermione's hand strained toward the ceiling immediately, but otherwise, her question was greeted with a long silence, as students exchanged questioning looks, but no other hands went up. "Anyone have any idea? Mr. Finnigan? Mr. Goyle? Miss Patil?" Hermione leaned forward with a little gasp; but Professor Swain quieted her with a look.

"Really? No one but the redoubtable Miss Granger can think of any other way to use Glamour to deter an attacker... ?" As she spoke, the grey February light in the classroom seemed to dim... the shadows to lengthen... her long black robes were suddenly trailing like funeral wrappings... her hair and complexion lost their gleam of health and became ashen... her lips peeled back over her long canine teeth until their teacher appeared before them as a vampiress, fangs glinting, and accompanied by a sharp stench of graveyard moss and freshly turned earth. The class let out a collective gasp; many cringed backward in their seats.

Hermione couldn't keep quiet any longer. "*Intimidation*," she called out. "You make yourself or the situation look scary."

"Exactly, Miss Granger. If you can look so terrifying that you send your attacker running off into the night with his tail between his legs, you can certainly keep him from attacking you." Then she was just Professor Swain again, with her usual teeth and ruddy blonde hair, all appearances back to normal. There was a long exhalation of breath as the class relaxed.

"All right then, everyone, take this down. The way to successfully project a Glamour is to first be able to experience it yourself with perfect recall... "

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Emily's order from Obscurus Books arrived by owl post that Wednesday.

She had decided to go the simple route and just present them to the appropriate people with as little ceremony as possible. So that afternoon, as the teachers were having tea after classes in the teacher's lounge, she handed copies to five of her colleagues, inscribed with *Best Wishes from Professor E. B. Swain-Tumnus, School Year 1994-'95.* A second library copy went to Madam Pince (*To the Hogwarts Library*), to Professor McGonagall (*To the Gryffindor House Library*), to Professor Flitwick (*Ravenclaw House Library*), Professor Sprout (*Hufflepuff House Library*), and finally Professor Snape (*Slytherin House Library*). She kept the last for a second reference in her own office.

Minerva McGonagall put on her glasses and read the inscription on the flyleaf. "Why, thank you, Emily, that was very kind of you. I'm sure Hermione Granger especially will be pleased to see this in our House library."

"You're welcome, Minerva. One of the students brought to my attention that there were only two copies on campus. I didn't assign any required textbooks in my classes because the most comprehensive works in the field for a Wizarding audience were all written by my father, and at the time it struck me as a bit crass to require everyone to buy one of his books," she explained.

"Oh, believe me, compared to some of the other Defence Against the Dark Arts professors we've had here, that wouldn't have seemed crass at all," Professor Sprout told her with an irreverent grin.

"Yes, I think the high-water mark for professorial crassness has already been well and truly established," Professor Snape said unexpectedly, from his usually silent seat by the fire. There were chuckles from some other professors and an heartfelt *A-men* from Professor McGonagall.

"Oh, is this yet another story from before my time?" Emily asked Madam Pince.

Irma patted her hand. "Tell you later, dear."

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Emily was lying restlessly on her bed that night, trying to read, and trying to pretend she wasn't listening avidly for the scratch of a furtive little urgent-post owl at her window. When she finally did hear it at about ten-thirty p.m., she couldn't fling the window open fast enough.

Darling

I'm supposed to spend Valentine's weekend at home, but I can't stand the idea of another week without seeing you.

I can get away Friday night. Meet me at the Hulot after seven?

She penned a quick, breathless reply:

Darling

Friday at seven it is. I can't wait to see you.

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Friday night finally arrived now Emily couldn't be packed and away fast enough. At 7:00 exactly she was Disapparating from just beyond the Hogwarts boundary gate.

After only two weeks separation, she was as eager to see Lucius as some randy schoolgirl with a crush. After Apparating into the middle of the room, to find him sitting in one of the armchairs before the fire in another of those luscious silk robes, brandy snifter in hand she dropped her things on the nearest chair and kissed him adoringly. "I missed you so much."

"I missed you too, love," he said, setting down the brandy glass and drawing her onto his knee.

"How was the party? Not too excruciating?"

"Yes, too excruciating," he said, raising a sardonic eyebrow. "Why can't the bloody harpy give up the ghost already? The house-elves have to change that tough old troglodyte's *undergarments* for her. I simply can't wait till she dies." This was an awful thing to say about his mother-in-law, but when she remembered Druella Black's petulant expression, she couldn't help laughing.

"About one hour before the guests were to arrive I thought about sending you an invitation by urgent owl post." He caressed her black-stockinged thigh in what was fast becoming a favourite gesture. "But then I had to decide against it, because you would have hated the company of all those judgmental old biddies. And of course I would have pulled you into some little out-of-the-way guest bedroom and molested you repeatedly before the first round of appetisers was passed."

"Can't molest the willing, love," she said, leaning in to kiss him heatedly; an obvious incitement to riot.

Sudden anarchistic gleam in those cool grey eyes. "Well then it would seem to me then that someone is wearing far too many clothes."

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Something work frustrations? the enforced separation? some family conflict? was giving an extra incitement to Lucius's already intense appetites that night. When he scooped her up and tossed her amidst the silk and velvet bedclothes, it was with the air of some triumphant conqueror with a highly prized concubine. Whatever it was, it had him worked into a fine frenzy of excitement already, even before she had arrived. The scent of lust was already heavy on his skin and hair.

He undressed her quickly, sprawled her on her back; his usual artfulness impelled with a nearly teenage urgency. Lifted her ankle to his lips, traced the sensitive inside of her knee with his tongue; then his brandy-warmed breath moved languorously over the inside of her thigh, and upward before long she had to crush one of the silk pillows against her mouth to stifle her cries.

She was still shuddering with the convulsive aftershocks of her first orgasm when he abruptly turned her onto her belly and covered her from behind, the soft weight of her breasts falling into his hands. Then he was lifting her hips with one arm, and slipping inside her, already painfully hard with little foreplay or preamble. What hands he had, cleverer than any thief's... coaxing her nipples into raw little peaks, then slipping between her thighs, flicking in a delicate rhythm against her sex until she was gasping, straining back onto the muscular heat of him until the second climax took her. His arms locked around her hips as he came; pulsing spasms of heat and a long, delicious tenor groan.

"My word, love you are absolutely on fire tonight," she breathed afterward, when he fell away from her, panting, and laid his fair head on the space between her shoulder blades.

"It's been a long couple of weeks." He slanted another of those catlike, satisfied smiles at her. "A lot has been happening."

"I hope they're not working you too hard at the Ministry... "

He only smirked all the more. "The Ministry is the least of my concerns. Let's just say I've been planning something for a very long time, and now all my hard work looks to be paying off, very soon."

"Really? What is it, a business deal?"

"I can't tell you right now," he said, raising himself on one elbow to kiss her shoulder.

Emily was intrigued. "Come on tell me," she entreated.

"I promise I'll tell you later... if you're still really interested." Lucius reached for her hand, led it down she could feel him already semi-erect again.

"Are you... always like this when business... goes well?" He was swiftly getting even harder under a series of ever-lengthening caresses and then he was lowering her onto her back beneath him. "Must be the deal of a lifetime."

Sssssssh, he whispered, turning his lips just a fraction from hers. *Fuck me.*

She was in no mood to argue with an invitation like that.

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Lucius had an early breakfast sent up the next morning, as he had to return to Malfeasant early for Valentine's weekend with his wife. He told his Faery mistress all about it while sharing a breakfast of champagne and exotic hothouse fruit.

"Do be sure to do something nice for her," Emily said roguishly, clinking her glass against his.

"Oh, it'll be the usual. Dinner, the opera, something from the family jeweller's. She'll take two hours to get ready for one hour in my bed, and if she's had enough to drink, maybe... I'll even get to see the mother of my son naked." He punctuated that with a slap on the brazenly naked arse of the woman next to him in bed.

"Aren't you lucky," Emily said. "Family obligations two weekends in a row I shall never let it be said that you aren't a devoted husband and father."

"My dear I am a pillar of the community in general," Lucius said, with an all-encompassing wave of his hand. "Ask *anyone*."

"Especially Queen Mum Troglodyte," she teased him.

"*Especially* Queen Mum Troglodyte. I gave up a weekend of shagging the most fetching woman imaginable in order to celebrate something like her six hundredth birthday she ought to be *eternally* grateful to me. Oh, and that reminds me." He turned another of those wicked smirks toward her. "Felina cornered me at the party told me all about how she ran into you in Flourish and Blotts. She was just terribly indignant about the whole thing, poor dear."

Emily looked down and blushed. "Of course there was no chance that someone hadn't already told you about that. I'm sorry, I know she's your widowed family friend, but she never fails to treat me like dirt every time she sees me."

"Did you really throw a book of etiquette at her head?" He sounded endlessly amused. "I wish I could have seen that."

"No, I didn't! I just put it in her hand and walked off kind of huffily... " She blushed even more hotly. "She's just being insufferable "

"Oh, there there," Lucius said in a very soothing voice, gathering her into his arms. It felt ridiculously self-indulgent and incredibly good to be stroked, patted, and comforted by him after the bruising Mrs. Rosier had given her ego.

"Let me tell you a little secret about darling Felina for the next time she gets insufferable," Lucius said confidingly. "That dear lady lives off the proceedings of a very large settlement from the Ministry of Magic, awarded after the alleged wrongful death of her husband, Evan, at the hands of some *allegedly* overzealous Aurors, who attempted to take him in for questioning due to some yet again *allegedly* faulty information regarding the criminal activities of said Evan Rosier."

"You're kidding," she said, sitting up and staring at him with raised eyebrows. "Am I to now assume that dear Mr. Rosier was actually guilty of said criminal activities?"

"*As sin*," Lucius said with another smirk. "And the star witness in this melodrama, who gave the evidence that cleared the departed Mr. Rosier of all wrongdoing, is the same dear chap who made you have those nice pillow-chewing orgasms last night and this morning. So, you see, if I tell Mrs. Rosier that it's in her best interest to kneel and kiss your ring every time she comes within a hundred feet of you, believe me she will."

"You gave evidence that her husband was innocent, when you knew he was guilty? *Lucius*!" she said, in a tone that would have been scandalised if she was not at that moment basking in the afterglow of the aforementioned pillow-chewing orgasms while lying naked in a rumpled hotel bed, next to her married lover, with a glass of champagne in hand at 8:30 in the morning.

"I didn't lie I just didn't volunteer everything I knew, and the solicitor didn't ask the right questions. Really, it was for reasons of charitable utility the man was already dead, and his widow would have been left destitute. Don't think I don't agonise over it to this very day, love," he said. Had an allegorical painter been looking for a model to personify all the splendid trials of Tortured Integrity, he would have needed to look no further than Lucius Malfoy's countenance in that moment.

"And let me guess she would have been coming crying to you for help every bloody day otherwise," Emily said.

"Well... there was that to be considered as well," Lucius said drolly. She laughed again before she could stop herself.

This was, more or less, a few shades on the safe side of admitting that he had committed intentional perjury... but he made doing so sound so pragmatic and sensible, somehow. Emily herself was certainly no wide-eyed naïf with no idea as to how criminal law worked. After all, there was practical policy to be considered in applying the law. He was leaving it for her to decide but wasn't it more sensible for an institution like the Ministry of Magic to provide for the widow of a man killed by their Aurors, rather than the family and friends of that widow? As a witness, he wouldn't have had to volunteer proof of Rosier's guilt if he wasn't very specifically asked for it, and why volunteer that proof of his own accord when it would most likely mean a lifetime of being asked to provide for the profoundly disagreeable Mrs. Rosier... and Emily had to admit that she understood absolutely why he wouldn't want to do *that.*

"Well... I suppose you couldn't let a friend's wife be turned out of her home, even if he was a criminal," Emily said, laying her head on his shoulder. "The man was already dead."

"Exactly, dear. It was just a bad situation all round," Lucius said, contentedly brushing his lips over her forehead. "Evan wasn't an evil man, just a weak fool. But I'm quite serious, love, I do think it's an absolute crime that she can't treat one of my dearest and oldest friends at least civilly, after everything I've done for her. You've done nothing wrong other than show up at a few parties in a prettier frock than hers, perhaps. So really, I'll just have a chat with her and point out that she's being ill-mannered."

"Well... that would be all right, if you promise to be tactful," she said.

"I promise, darling. I'll be the soul of tact and consideration," he assured her, with another kiss.

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After breakfast, Lucius unfortunately had to quickly ready himself for departure. He left only after kissing her lusciously in farewell and promising to see her the following weekend.

Once he had gone, Emily felt, strangely, rather like a trespasser in his hotel room. She hurriedly bathed and readied herself to go out as well. It was still early in the morning, and certainly she could find any number of ways to spend the day in London.

As she was dressing, she found a white parchment card sitting on top of her trunk, on which Lucius had written:

Happy Valentine's, darling.

Beneath it, was a tiny black velvet jeweller's box.

Emily briefly and perversely wondered if it had come from the same "family jeweller" as Narcissa's Valentine something but then she opened the box, and could only think of how prettily diamonds caught the light for a very long moment. If the Malfoy family jeweller had made Lucius's present to her a large pair of perfectly matched emerald-cut diamonds set in earrings of antique platinum filigree then the Malfoys' jeweller was one very talented fellow indeed.

She wore her hair up that day.

Part Second: The Hart Rampant: Chapter 16

Chapter 20 of 55

In which Professor Swain discovers the delights of a dual life as both a Hogwarts professor and Lucius Malfoy's mistress, until a chance encounter with a desperate Faery prostitute in Knockturn Alley sends her to the most unlikely person for aid. Meanwhile, Severus Snape finds himself alone and adrift in the Mushroom Circle, a Faery nightclub...

Chapter 16:

Severus Snape performed his first successful bit of magic with a Faery True Name a simple *Nox* spell in December of 1994.

To create his True Name, he had pored over lexicons and grammars of eldritch languages whose native speakers had been dust for centuries. Aramaic. Syriac. Akkadian. Biblical Hebrew. Etruscan. Gaulish. Not Latin it was too common to suit his purposes. He wanted the proto-tongues of Latin, the oldest languages he could find. He studied the origins of each letter, their corresponding sounds or rather the theories of various linguists as to what each letter had sounded like, for there was no one left alive who knew for certain. He had worked at this task until his eyes burned and his hands went numb, and he had fallen asleep in his desk chair on weekends.

A little over two months after he had first been told, by a woman that he distrusted, that Words of Power existed, he had created one and his only seemed to grow more powerful the more he used it. At first, he had discovered he could put out his bedside lamp without his wand. A month later, he could put out every lamp in his personal quarters simultaneously, and had to be careful not to douse the torches outside in the hall as well.

Then he had turned his attention to the Faery magical arts.

In the weeks before the Yule Ball, he had asked Draco Malfoy for copies of his class notes on Obscurantis, saying he wanted them for another student who was having difficulty. (For some reason, the younger Malfoy was devoting himself to the study of Fae magic with uncharacteristic diligence.) In truth, he wanted the notes for himself, and spent the entire second week of December poring over them.

The first form of Obscurantis the ability to make objects impossible to focus upon, and thus render them invisible proved surprisingly easy, once he got the hang of it. He would gaze at an object, imagine it fading from sight, visualise the setting behind it through its solid mass, speak his Word of Power under his breath and suddenly only he would be able to see its transparent image, while it was entirely invisible to anyone else. Or, at least he *thought* it must be invisible to everyone else; he really wasn't sure just yet as to how to test this new ability in a quantifiable manner. After all, one couldn't very well go about asking people: "So, does that thing I just Obscured look invisible to you? You know, that thing *there*, can you not see it?"

Then inspiration struck just before the end of term, in his double Potions session with the Gryffindor and Slytherin fifth-years. He took out two large glass jars of live beetles the big slow stinky ones, one jar of red carapaces and one of black, and put them, opened, on the usual worktable inhabited by Fred and George Weasley (or as he thought of them, *Fredngeorge,* since they were as much of a unit as *Crabbengoyle*.) He positioned them right where the twins would need to reach past them in order to get at their components for the latest practical session. Then he Obscured both jars and sat back to watch the fun.

Either the Weasleys would reach around the jars and ask him why they were there or, even more satisfyingly, they would ignore the jars entirely until they had knocked them to the floor, scattering beetles in all directions. As the fifth-years headed toward their worktables, Snape had to make himself stay turned toward the blackboard, lest his smirk give him away.

As he had hoped there was a crash of glass breaking and two identical howls of *Shite*! He turned furiously on the twins.

"Weasley, Weasley what fresh disaster are you responsible for now? Can I not turn my back on you for one *instant* without the two of you finding some new and ingenious way to bring the entire school down around our ears?" he demanded, wafting down the classroom aisle to where the twins were dithering over the spreading mess of spilled beetles. "I cannot believe anyone could be capable of such carelessness. Repair the jars and pick those up immediately," he snapped at the twins, who were looking at him in bewilderment. "Make sure you sort the red ones from the black ones. Don't stand gawking they're getting *away*."

"Professor I didn't we didn't " said the first head of Fredngeorge, shaking itself in confusion.

"We weren't being careless I didn't even see them!" the other one protested. "They just came out of nowhere "

"Came out of nowhere?" Snape intoned. "Two huge jars of live beetles? You didn't see them?"

So. It worked.

"Well then when you finish picking them up, do be certain to head down to the hospital wing and have your eyes checked, both of you. I shall take ten points each from Gryffindor if Madam Pomfrey tells me tomorrow that you haven't been to see her."

Snape turned and swept back up toward the front of the classroom, coughing a bit into his hand to cover the jubilant laugh that wanted to rise up out of him. Admittedly, this wasn't fair but the twins owed him for all the Obscured Dungbombs in cauldrons that year and for all the pranks they had played on him in the years previous. After all, he hadn't deducted any points from their House. "One of the red ones is fleeing under the bookshelf, Mr. Weasley. I suggest that you capture the little fugitive immediately. And remember these are paussine beetles, and they will squirt you with stinking venom if you make them feel threatened, so I do advise caution in picking them up."

As he watched the glorious aftermath of a Weasley-twins type of prank successfully perpetrated against the Weasley twins, who were still scrambling frantically after a lot of stinky bugs he had to admit that against all propriety, against every bit of better judgment he had... Obscurantis was *fun*.

Later that week, Snape had been sitting in the main library copying a potion ingredient list out of a book, when that annoying Swain woman breezed in and spent the better part of a half hour arduously hunting up a stack of seven or eight books from a list in her hand. Then she left the stack unattended on a table while she had a cosy girl chat with that dear chum of hers, Irma Pince. For one very, very long moment, Snape thought about Obscuring her stack of books and letting her look for them for awhile, so that *she* could see what it was like to worry that all of one's labours had been wasted just for his own personal amusement. Maybe he would even hand them back to her with a look of angelic innocence on his face, after she'd had a little while to get frustrated and upset about losing them.

But he decided against it. He would be damned if he was going to stoop to her level.

Besides, most likely she was able to use the third form of Obscurantis and could see though it, so it wouldn't have worked anyway.

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By the second week of February of 1995, Snape became aware that his perceptions were subtly different.

He had been walking on the edge of the Forbidden Forest one afternoon, just for a breath of crisp cold air, and to get away from the noise and clamour of Hogwarts for awhile before the hellish commotion of the upcoming Second Task. Then suddenly, he had seen a shadowy figure off to his right, tearing off a small branch of a tree and nibbling at the tender green shoots within. Snape had come closer for a better look and discovered a slender, graceful apelike creature, like an orangutan, but built more on the minimalist, silvery lines of a greyhound. As he drew near to it, it spooked at the sound of his approach and ran off into the trees.

When Snape reached the spot where he had seen the silver beast, he noticed several tufts of some silky, iridescent material hanging from the bark of the tree it had been foraging. Snape picked up one of these tufts, discovering it to be soft, silky hair. Shed fur, apparently and so reflective that he would have sworn that he could see the slushy snow on the ground through his own palm.

He knew there were creatures in the forest that he could see, but that were invisible to others the thestrals, for example but this creature was something he had never seen before. Only one sort of magical creature shed fur like this a Demiguise, the type of creature whose fur was woven into Invisibility Cloaks. Now, he had seen one in the Forbidden Forest. This was extremely odd, for when he had studied fantastic beasts, he had thought that Demiguises only lived in Asia. But, of course, the Forbidden Forest was a country unto itself.

But it wasn't just the Demiguise in the forest, as he discovered that weekend.

He made another trip into Diagon Alley another fruitless attempt to locate some more gillyweed in this distinctly gillyweed-less season. On the corner of Diagon Alley and Sartor Alley, a pair of black-clad teenage girls were busking for spare change one playing the guitar, and the other singing in a sweet, lonely soprano. He had stopped to listen for a moment, when suddenly he had blinked, hard, for their appearance had subtly changed to his eyes. He noticed that the rusty black lace dress on the singer was actually lustrous, diaphanous silk, the kind of thing that he had often seen Professor Swain wear, and that the guitarist was not wearing an oversized black t-shirt and well-worn leather jacket, but an elegant black silk Renaissance-style shirt and what looked like a handcrafted leather doublet. The black dyed hair on both girls was far from some cheap dye job it was lustrous and alive, the variable blue-black of natural hair. The pale, pale skin was not due to powdering, but natural. Both of them had eyes like vast orbs of stark, deep black.

Then he suddenly noticed the pointed ears on both of them.

Faeries. Glamoured to pass for human but suddenly the Glamour had fallen away to his eyes, and he was able to see them as they were. Now, he wondered, how many times had he passed Glamoured Faeries on the street and taken them for ordinary Muggles or wizards? He had no way of knowing. In September of last year, he had kissed a woman, partially undressed her, made love to her without ever knowing what she really looked like until the following morning. But now one good look at her in King's Cross, and he would have seen her true face, known what she really was.

Now I am *schooled in picking incognito Faeries out of crowds,* he thought, dropping a Sickle into the guitar case on the sidewalk. Both performers smiled thanks to him as he moved away into the crowd.

It had to be the third form of Obscurantis. He had gone to bed one day without the ability, and the next day, he had it. He hadn't worked at it, hadn't practiced it the ability seemed to have simply clicked on somehow.

He wanted rather badly, truth be told to ask Emily Swain if this sort of thing was normal. However, he doubted if she would tell him, and in his experience, asking that irritating female a direct question tended about as rewarding as trying to dig through cement with nothing but one's fingernails.

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Of course they had said seven p.m. last time, so of course the Potions master arrived right at 6:53 for their Wednesday evening session. When one was meeting Professor Snape for any reason, it really was advisable to just count on getting started ten minutes before one actually agreed to get started, Emily reflected sourly.

They had been going over the Arcadian style of sword combat for some time now. It was a more involved system than the entirely linear French and Italian systems of sport fencing, but Snape had of course memorised all thirty-two attacks, sixteen parries, and any number of evasive movements with all the thoroughness and cerebral élan she had come to count on from him.

Unfortunately, she had finally hit a snag in the staggering rate of his progress, and the existence of that snag was not doing either of their never-admirable tempers much good.

Emily had been drilling him on the same defensive parries and evasive movements all evening, and he had been doing well for the most part. But there were a few types of attacks that he failed to evade with disturbing regularity if she targeted either of his shoulders, high chest, or upper arms, and he couldn't parry immediately, he would take the hit every time. Bladework was most definitely his strong suit, but his tendency to put all of that emerging agility into his sword arm and none into the rest of his body was proving to be his greatest weakness and Emily was swiftly becoming impatient with this failing. Snape picked up everything else at such a blinding speed that a halt in their progress chafed at the perfectionism that came out in her where martial disciplines were concerned. He was, quite simply, too impressive of a student to get hung up on something like this.

"No you're doing it again, don't you see? If my point is already that close to you, and your point is all the way over here, there's no way you have time to parry it, you have to dodge. Just get out of its way. You know the proper form you can recite the names of the evasive movements back to me like they were your ABC's. Try it again." But again, the evasive movement was beyond him, and her point hit him solidly in the shoulder

"So this is what all those hedgehogs we used to Transfigure into pincushions felt like," Snape observed pointedly, rubbing at his shoulder.

"This is not as hard as you're making it out to be," Emily chided him. "I'll demonstrate. Come *en garde*, and come at me in sixteenth." He took the attack and as usual his form was nearly classically beautiful but as his point approached her left shoulder, she turned, dropping her shoulder backwards and out of the way of his sword's point. She extended her right arm in response, and landed a solid attack on his left side. "There, that's what you should be doing. You have several different muscles in your shoulders and back, and I guarantee you they are not all fused together the way you seem to think they are."

"Some of us aren't quite the boneless wonders our instructors are, madam," he snapped in reply.

"Be that as it may *someone* has a big glaring weak point in his defences for an enemy to exploit, sir," she retorted. "Look I know you're going to dismiss this as flattery, but you're very talented. Your form is exceptionally good, and spatially, you're a bloody genius. But "

"I knew there was going to be a *but* in there somewhere," Snape muttered.

"Your range of motion is nonexistent. No offence, sir, but your back is so tight that if I stuck a lump of coal between your shoulder blades, by tomorrow, you'd have a bloody diamond. So I see extreme measures are being called for." Emily went for one of the chairs beside the work table and set it down in front of him. "Here. Sit in that backwards, and lean your arms on the chair back and just sort of let everything fall forward. Take the jacket off."

He groused and complained, but finally she got his jacket off and had him settled into the chair. Once he was sitting in front of her in only his thin cotton jersey, she began to gently knead the space between his shoulder blades.

"What are you doing?" he asked, recoiling.

"Don't worry, sir, I'm not going to mug you," she said, in mild reproach. "You've held your shoulders rigid for so long you've shortened the muscles they're used to sitting still in one position. Now we have to lengthen them a bit and accustom them to a broader range of motion."

"Is this really necessary?" he growled into the chair back.

She paused. "If you continue this kind of training in your current state, sir, you're just asking to get injured," she said, with a severe look at the side of his face. "You do realise that you're not going to fight a lot of attackers off with a sprained shoulder or a torn rotator cuff. So, yes, it is necessary. Now breathe deeply and try to relax. Let me know if anything hurts."

Emily resumed her work on his shoulders, leaning into him with slightly more force, using her thumbs to gently rake across the stiffness between his shoulders. Snape gave a little involuntary gasp as she started on his right shoulder.

She paused. "I'm sorry, does that hurt?"

"No, it doesn't hurt," he admitted grudgingly, exhaling hard.

She found a massive knot of tension just below his neck, and started on it with slightly stiffened fingers, trying to gradually knead out the spent muscle toxins he had accumulated there no doubt the result of years of being irritated at the antics of students in the classroom. Snape let out another of those involuntary small gasps as she did.

"That's been aching for awhile, hasn't it?"

He exhaled hard again. "Somewhat."

The knot began to break up, and she applied more pressure to it, dragging her thumbs across it until his shoulder released the tension and hung more freely. Then she moved over to his left shoulder for the same treatment gradually his muscle tone was starting to feel more like supple human tissue than stiff modelling clay. As Snape was facing away from her, she wasn't certain if he was absolutely hating this or allowing himself to enjoy it, but at least he had stopped complaining and let himself relax. For several minutes, the room was silent, other than for the sound of his slow breathing.

After about twenty minutes, she had moved from his shoulders up to the back of his neck, prompting another of those small catches of breath from him. "You must get a lot of tension headaches," she remarked.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because the muscles in the back of your neck are like rocks. Go ahead and let your head hang down on the chair back. Try and relax your neck." She gently began to work on the muscles at the base of his spine, and felt him leaning slightly into her fingers, probably unconsciously. His skin felt pleasantly warm to her perpetually chilly hands, just like it had the first night but she pushed that memory away with a guilty *frisson* of conscience.

Gazing down at the bent, dark head of the man in front of her, Emily felt the smallest, strangest rush of compassion for him from the burden of tension in him, and from the silent sense of relief now expressed in his posture, it felt as though he must have been run ragged for a very, very long time. What could be going on that would make him feel so much strain? Teaching? The intelligence duties he had taken on for Dumbledore? Or something else entirely?

Suddenly she noticed it seemed very quiet in the room.

"Er... Professor?" Emily said.

"Yes?"

"You're going to need to remember to breathe, sir."

"Right," he said shortly, and exhaled hard and lustily.

She resumed working on his neck now the two ancient knots of tension at the base of his skull felt more like damp putty than rock as they began to uncoil and break up beneath her gentle, but persistent, hands. They weren't going to get as much work done that evening as she had hoped, but why stop now from his physical reactions at least, Snape seemed to be enjoying himself, and the Mother knew he seemed to need a bit of tension relief. Parry drills could wait.

"All right," Emily said some time later, getting up from behind him and moving her chair back to under the table. "Is that better?"

"A bit," he admitted grudgingly, slowly stretching and then standing up. "You've done this before, if I'm not mistaken."

"It's part of our medical training. Someone gets a leg cramp or whatever, and everyone knows how to help him, that sort of thing."

"All right, should we get back to work, then?" he asked, shaking his dark head hard for a moment.

"The session is over, sir it's nine-ten." She had been working on his back for over an hour.

"Is it?" He glanced a bit guiltily at the clock.

"Don't worry about it. Shall we say same time tomorrow?"

"Yes, that's fine. Thank you, madam."

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When Emily got back to her rooms from Snape's instructional session that evening, she heard the familiar *rustleflitterflitter... taptap...* of one of Lucius's urgent-post messenger owls at her window, and rushed to open it.

Darling

9 PM Friday at the Porpentine top floor Minister's suite. Plan to stay till Sunday noon.

Her reply was equally terse:

Darling

I can't wait especially if you have another important business deal pending.

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Professor Snape hadn't even bothered to put the new copy of Swain's *Encyclopaedia* into the Slytherin Common Room library. It had gone straight into his personal quarters and onto his desk. Now, it was full of tiny bits of paper with handwritten notes scrawled on them.

Luckily, if the man's daughter was about as forthcoming as a block of cheese, at least her father was capable of communicating information effectively. Snape had to admit Buckminster Swain's scholarship was impeccable. For one man to have written such an exhaustively comprehensive encyclopaedia of a magical culture that possessed so little by means of mass media or written records was really quite an accomplishment.

He had been referring to the book for several days before he noticed a couple of sentences in the foreword *Most sincere and affectionate thanks to my wife Elaine and my daughter Emily for their invaluable assistance in compiling many of these entries. Without their tireless assistance, this book would never have been completed.*

Unfortunately, however, he had still not found any reference to or precedent for spontaneously occurring mastery of the third form of Obscuratis, search as he might. Under the ***OBSCURANTIS*** entry, Swain's description of the means of acquiring the third form detailed a long, involved process of thinking of nothingness as a diffuse substance that could be brushed or fanned away, like smoke, and training one's mind to somehow detect solid fact from a fleeting nuance of information Snape didn't recall ever having trained himself in this art. His own new ability was still a mystery to him.

That Thursday night, Snape was sitting at his desk with a cup of steaming Earl Grey tea. He opened his copy of the *Encyclopaedia* to an entry he had marked the night before:

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"FIANNA. *Proper Noun, Military. Syn.* Champions of the Red Branch, Fenians, the Shining Host. *See also* ***Finn mac Cumhail, the Nine Knightly Orders of the Royal Banner.***

Founded in the First Age by Finn mac Cumhail, the Fianna are responsible for domestic peace-keeping, and for defence of the Faery territories and common people from the hostile Orc tribes. (See ***Orcs, Orc Princes, History of the Orcish Tribes, Fomorians, Baalorites, Fir Bolg, Ogres****)*

As of this writing, each of the Nine Kingdoms keeps a standing army of Masters-At-Arms, knights, and journeyman squires, or squires who have been deemed battle-worthy. How large and how well-equipped that army is has generally depended on the economic prosperity of the Kingdom backing it and the Kingdom's need for protection against hostile action... '

According to Swain to attain the rank of knight, a journeyman squire must have completed three criteria. First, he or she had to have demonstrated great skill with the bow and the sword. Second, he or she had to have great facility with the Faery magical arts as well. Last, he or she had to be commended for this rank by a knighted commanding officer who was familiar with that squire's ability in active combat.

Upon being named a Knight Protector of the Realm, the master armourers of the knight's kingdom forged a vorpal blade, or *Orcleofian* (See ***Armaments, Historical and Modern***), which was then conferred upon him or her in a private ceremony attended by his or her commending officer and the reigning monarch. Armed with these blades, so sharp that they could slice through the trunks of trees with one blow, Fianna knights were the front line among ground troops the first ones into battle after the opening arrow volleys from the archers' corps. It was commonly believed that a single Faery knight, clad in mithreal armour and armed with a vorpal blade, wielding the chimerical arts of Glamour and Obscurantis, was a match for some times his or her number of rampaging Orc warriors. Platoons made up of journeyman squires followed the knights into battle, largely to wipe up whatever they didn't finish off completely.

After the account of the hierarchy of Fianna warriors, and a summary of training methods (Snape skimmed over that section, as he was already comparatively well-versed in Fianna martial disciplines and the philosophy behind them), the author proceeded into an account of the knightly Orders of the Nine Kingdoms. Each Order seemed to be named after a goddess, or goddess *aspect*, of some sort the First Kingdom gathered its knights under the banner of Our Lady Cerridwen, who presided over wisdom and agriculture; the Seventh Kingdom gathered under a sea goddess called Fand, the Pearl of Beauty; the Second Kingdom under a mare goddess called Mother Epona. As for the Third Kingdom

'The Order of the Morrigan.

Founded by Queen Andraste Greenbarrow in 2068 (approximately the eleventh century by human reckoning), the Third Kingdom's military Order takes its name from the aspect of the Mother Goddess thought to preside over justice, the prophetic arts, righteous fury, and vengeance. In her darkest and most extreme forms, the Morrigan (or Morrigu) is thought of as the Arcadian Goddess of War, Lust, Fate, Death, and Revenge. The Morrigan is often associated with the most unsettling, unpredictable, and terrifying aspects of feminine energy; it is said that this Order waxes most powerful under female leadership. Legend has it that the Mother Goddess, in this aspect, lived in a house built from the bones of war casualties next to a river of blood. The Morrigan is said to watch over battlefields in the form of a crow or raven; as such, the Knights of this Order do not harm or kill these birds. (See ***Morrigan, Triune Goddess, Badb, Nemain, Dagda, Brigid, Tuatha de Danaan****)*'

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Snape paused in his reading, taking a long swallow from the cup of tea on his desk.

"The Morrigan is often associated with the most unsettling, unpredictable, and terrifying aspects of feminine energy." Well, somehow that wasn't too surprising.

Rivers of blood. Houses built from bones. War, Lust, Fate, Death, and Revenge. And Professor Swain and her countrypeople evidently considered the Morrigan to be a... *beneficial* deity.

He bent over the book again.

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'A comparatively late arrival in the Arcadian wartime theatre, the Third Kingdom had long been known as a leader in artistic and cultural standards, more inclined toward perfecting the art of winemaking, singing ballads, and creating new dances than taking up arms. Given its relatively remote location from the borders previously disputed with the Orc Princes, the Third Kingdom enjoyed several centuries of peace and prosperity until the turn of the Third Age, when a Baalorite army estimated at some five thousand moved on the Third Kingdom's capital city of Rivendale in 2970, or 1937 by human reckoning

The First Defence of Rivendale

... the Third Kingdom forces took heavy casualties in the first and second engagements of the battle that came to be known as the First Defence of Rivendale. At the end of the second day's fighting, First Knight Lithwick Greenwood, nephew and sworn companion to the King, had been slain in heroic action... Prince Tristan Greenbarrow, Gwydion's younger brother, was also killed on the field of battle during that confrontation.

On the morning of the third day, the Third Kingdom's forces were leaderless, discouraged, and unorganised. It was then that the slain Prince Tristan's daughter, Lady Elaine Greenbarrow, then twenty-four, assumed command, mustering a second charge from a force composed largely of journeyman squires. Elaine herself engaged and killed the enemy's leader, the Orc Prince Cthroghokkk, in single combat on Rivendale Down, turning the tide of the seemingly hopeless confrontation. Despite being severely outnumbered, her force beat back the Baalorites long enough for Sixth Kingdom reinforcements to arrive. (See ***Tristan's Daughter, Song of Elaine,*** *and* ***Requiem for a Poet Warrior*** *by Lady Morgaine Flaxseed, and* ***Morning on Rivendale Down*** *by Lady Eithne Brennan Greenwood, and other notable narrative works under* ***BARDIC BALLADRY, Contemporary.****) Following the victory, King Gwydion named Lady Elaine to the position of First Knight Protector of the King's Realm. As of this writing, she remains the youngest person in history to ever to hold this rank.*

Under Lady Elaine's direction, the Order of the Morrigan has enjoyed a tremendous upsurge in military power... '

After the First Defence of Rivendale, Lady Elaine Greenbarrow went on to emerge as the greatest military leader of her generation. There was a long account of her accomplishments, battles won, attacks beaten down, treaties negotiated, advances made in the fields of armoury and combat training, people signing up for service in record numbers. (Snape could definitely feel something of a husband's adoration of his wife in the author's lovingly detailed accounts of her achievements and his high-flown language in describing her charisma as a leader.)

Snape turned a page and came across a pen-and-ink portrait of Lady Elaine Greenbarrow, done around the time of her victory at Rivendale and for a single long moment, he just stared. Lucius Malfoy had told him that Professor Swain's mother was quite beautiful, and admittedly her daughter was no mountain troll, but... well, he hadn't expected her to look like *that.*

He turned another page. As the history of the Third Kingdom's recent military actions continued, soon the next generation of knights trained with Lady Elaine began to contribute notably to the security of their nation people with names like Greenwood, Mustardseed, Priquette, Doggins, Rymer, Peshka, Robinett (*Robinett?*), and several Greenbarrow cousins. Gwydion's eldest son and crown Prince, a fellow named Corryn Greenbarrow, also seemed no stranger to armaments, though he seemed more of a diplomat and negotiator. Backed by the might of his cousin Elaine's military, it had been this Prince who had authored the latest non-aggression treaty that had been accepted by the Orc tribes in (1989, by human reckoning.)

Another familiar name was mentioned amidst several other accounts of notable second-generation knights trained under Lady Elaine

***'SWAIN**, Lady Emily Beauregard (2994). Also known as* Lady Snickersnee, Lady Whispersnickt, Our Lady of the Blade. *Platoon Commander, His Majesty's Seventh Ground Infantry...*

Lady Emily, only child of Elaine Greenbarrow Swain, was knighted at Lady Elaine's commendation for exceptional valour in the Second Defence of Rivendale, a joint effort with the Sixth Kingdom's Order of the Lady Cliodhna... '

The Second Defence of Rivendale had apparently occurred in (*1987 by human reckoning*), and by 1988, Professor Swain had apparently seen active combat at least a second time

'... Lady Emily was awarded the King's Arms for exceptional valour after her platoon successfully defended the portal town of Ardensea against surprise attack by a superior force of Baalorite warriors. Her lieutenants, Sir William Blake, Lord Corvus Greenwood, Lady Victoria Priquette, Sir Colin Doggins, and Lord Jayson Robinett (Lord Jayson Robinett?), *were all knighted at her commendation...*

Lady Emily is one of only seventeen living Third Kingdom knights to receive the title of Master-At-Arms, for skill in swordsmanship. Following the acceptance of the 3022 Peace, she now serves as a bladework instructor to the next generation of Third Kingdom squires.'

Well. There was no fatherly pride in that description either, now, was there.

In a moment of curiosity, he turned next to the index and looked up a second name. Listed amongst the notable Knights-Commander of King Armus's Order of the Lady Cliodhna was

***'TUMNUS,** Sir Dorien Aeros (2999). Also known as* Sir Nevermiss, Sir Surety. *Platoon Commander, King's Fourteenth Archer's Corps.*

... Sir Dorien Tumnus has the interesting distinction of being the only Fianna knight ever to have been court-martialed for insubordination on the day of his Orcleofian Knighting ceremony.'

All right, that was something one didn't hear of every day. Snape would have written, *"... the dubious distinction of... "* but then, he hadn't been the man's father-in-law.

Snape skimmed through the biographical account Tumnus had been knighted at twenty-two, under rather unusual circumstances. An area of shared border between the Third and Sixth Kingdoms was apparently hotly contested by the Baalorite Orc tribe, leading to numerous joint military efforts between the two knightly Orders. During an early conflict in the hostilities that would lead to both Gwydion and Armus declaring war on the Baalorites in (1986, by human reckoning), members of Dorien Tumnus's archers' corps unit, including his commanding officer, had been captured by the enemy. Tumnus had proposed an exceedingly risky rescue mission to retrieve them. His plan had been rejected by the Fianna authorities so he mustered the rest of his unit and went anyway. The mission was a resounding success, and the commanding officer Tumnus rescued had knighted him on the spot.

Sir Tumnus was also mentioned as having been decorated with Gwydion's Arms for exceptional valour at the Second Defence of Rivendale the same honour accorded to his wife.

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Snape checked the publication date of the *Encyclopaedia* copyright by author 1990, Obscurus Books. Just one year after the peace was signed. Most likely, Dorien Tumnus would have had less than a year left to live when this book was published. This entry being a military history, of course there was no mention of the author's own marriage to Lady Elaine, the birth of their daughter, and that daughter's marriage to a Sixth Kingdom knight who had aided in the Second Defence of Rivendale. And it was unlikely that anyone could have foreseen the end of that marriage.

Snape leaned back in his chair, eyes narrowing, and spent a single long moment coldly despising Jayson Robinett. To have fought in a war under someone's command, to have been commended to the rank of knight by that commander surely one could expect that to create at least gratitude and respect. To then repay that commander by shooting her husband, a decorated hero in his own right, in the back less than two years after their marriage... while he personally felt that the character of Robinett's commanding officer left much to be desired, it still seemed a piss-poor way to treat anyone else. For a moment Snape wondered if the Robinetts were somehow related to the Malfoys.

His gaze fell on the tiny clock on a shelf of his desk he would have to hurry to be on time for his seven p.m. instructional session with Professor Swain.

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Well well well good Professor Snape was late, Emily thought. He hadn't shown up till 6:57 that night.

"Good evening, sir," she said. She had been going over both of their accustomed practice swords with the whetstone and oil that night, and was still finishing that work when he arrived.

He met her greeting with a formal inclination of his head. "Madam."

"How are you feeling?" she asked, with a moment's upward glance from her work.

"Er, fine, I suppose," Snape replied, after a short pause. From the tone of his voice, Emily was briefly left with the impression that he was not often asked that question.

"I mean, how's your back?" she clarified. "Any soreness?"

"It's all right," he said. "Nothing to complain about."

Well, Severus Snape with nothing to complain about this evening was off to a good start, wasn't it. She put the oiling brush aside and slid out from behind her worktable. "I thought I'd show you a couple of upper back stretches tonight before we got started, so you can warm up with them later. Your habitual posture is very dignified, but it isn't going to do wonders for your flexibility." She thought *dignified* was a more neutral word to describe him than the slightly more obvious*intimidating.*

"Part of a Professor's job is to set a model of deportment for the students here, madam," he said, a touch defensively. "I can't always be slouching about like some common "

"I understand, sir. That was an observation, not a criticism," she interjected. "Of course you have to maintain a certain professorial demeanour, or the students would eat you alive I know that. I do teach school and all, you know," she said, echoing his comment of a few weeks earlier. He glanced sidelong at her quoting Snape back to himself provoked the thinnest of amused grins from him.

Again she pulled out one of the chairs, put him in it in front of her with his back to her, then took about ten minutes in showing him how to stretch and warm up the muscles of his back and shoulders. His agitation and discomfort with her physical nearness seemed to have subsided a great deal even when she planted one hand in between his shoulder blades and pressed forward, while pulling back on each shoulder in turn, it was far more comfortable and businesslike. His expression remained impassive, though his physical reaction betrayed some release of tension. Even if the man himself wouldn't acknowledge that this kind of physical activity felt good, his body was a great deal more sensible.

"There you go try grabbing something immoveable, like a railing, and using it for a counterweight for stretches. You'll want to do that regularly or you'll end up with the same sort of strange physique I have."

"'Strange physique'? How is that?" Snape glanced quizzically back at her.

"Oh if you continue this sort of training for any length of time, you'll definitely notice that people who use a sword a lot invariably end up with a much more developed set of muscles on the side of their sword arm, unless they take the time to diligently work out their opposite arm as well. I'm horribly lazy about that sort of thing, so as a result I end up looking a bit lopsided in my swimsuit in summer." This provoked no response from the good Professor but then, Emily reflected, who knew if the man owned a swimsuit, or if he did, if he cared one bit as to what he looked like in it.

Emily stood up, stretched a bit herself, and then handed Snape his accustomed practice sword. "All right, let's get started. Let's take it from where we left off the other day parry drills eight through sixteen, and the first ten evasive dodges."

"*Again...* ?" Snape said impatiently.

"Again," she said, with a little raise of her own sinister eyebrow.

Not surprisingly the drills went noticeably better this time, and by the session's end, Emily was impressed with her student's progress and told him so. "There much better. Nice work, Professor."

Just before the clock reached nine o'clock, Emily turned her attention back to her work table, on which her miniature leather-roll armoury was now lying open. "Before you go we're going to start on dagger training the week after next, so let's get you a new accessory to go with that amazing array of black cloaks. This one's nice." With a silent recitation of her True Name, she returned a wicked-looking eight-inch dagger to its usual size, then handed it to him, grip first.

Snape crossed to her, and accepted it very carefully. Emily came around the table and corrected his grip on the blade not overhand, but underhand, blade pointing up in parrying stance. This time there was no moment of resistance before he accepted the idea of following her lead.

"See, a dagger grip is almost the same as a sword grip it's an extension of your forearm, only now your reach is eight inches longer, not thirty-six inches longer. The wrist should be rigid," she said. "That one's very well balanced. It has a nice feel to it and flies true. But don't mistake this for a strong distance weapon like a bow it's far harder to throw a blade with enough force to penetrate a target than it looks. It took me years to get even remotely competent at it."

He glanced sideways at her. "You seemed to know what you were doing on the day of the hunt."

She grimaced at the memory. "Thanks for saying so, but I thought my work was awfully sloppy on the day of the hunt. There's no reason to take five blows to kill a quarry like that."

"Perhaps you weren't in your best form," Snape said. "You did burn your hand rather badly the night before."

Well, that was highly unusual both for him to make an allowance for something she had done less than perfectly, and to say so in such a simple, sincere tone. Emily wondered briefly if this had been the day he demonstrated Calming Draughts to his classes, or some such. It wasn't that she disliked this civility and politeness on his part in months past, she would have welcomed it but now, she wasn't sure what to make of it.

"I'll look forward to the week after next then," Snape said, and made to hand the dagger back to her, but Emily held up a hand and stopped him.

"Actually, that's for you you'll need something to practice with. You'll want to go over dagger parries this weekend those are in the last section of the folio I lent you." Emily picked up a leather sheath from her tiny armoury and handed it to him as well. "You'll want to keep it in this. That's a folded mithreal blade it ought to last you forever. And when you're not fighting off enemies, it'll make a phenomenal letter opener."

Again, that provoked the thinnest of amused grins from him. "Are you sure you don't need it?" Snape asked.

"I have any number of that kind of dagger, sir, and that's not my favourite," she replied offhandedly. "Same time this coming Monday?"

"All right. And... thank you," he said. He tucked the Faery dagger under his arm and left the room.

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Professor Snape had gone into London that week, both to hunt for Potions ingredients and to indulge himself with several hours in the great Main Library of Magic near Gringotts. Whenever his students had been particularly obnoxious, or his work had been proceeding thanklessly, he liked to take refuge in the vasty stacks, breathing the smells of old parchment and ink and poring over a stack of whatever he felt like studying that day. He knew any number of hiding spots in that Library that were probably only known to him and the caretakers, where he most likely could have sat and read without seeing another soul for days on end. He spent most of that evening holed up in one of them researching antidotes for the new class of exotic poisons, based on the defensin-like proteins in platypus venom, that had been turning up recently. (Whatever Professor Swain had done on Wednesday, he had to admit, it allowed him to sit bent over books for rather longer than before without his neck aching.)

There had been an old beggar inhabiting the steps to the Library for most of the year Snape couldn't remember exactly when the man had appeared, but he was now so much of a fixture there as to be nearly invisible. Just a spindly old man, clad in many layers of dirt-crusted, indeterminate rags, rattling a cup of change at passers-by, with the occasional plaintive chant of *Spacumchange?* Some destitute Squib with untreated schizophrenia, no doubt Snape usually cut his eyes away from the man's indignity when he passed, but if the weather was especially bad, he would drop a few Knuts into his cup.

As he passed the old vagrant on his way down the Library steps, the grime and shabbiness of the man's appearance fell away like a mist dispersed by a keen wind. Snape suddenly looked at a wizened imp of a man, maybe four and a half feet tall, with luxuriant grey hair and long, pointed, tufted ears. Quite clean, full-fed, and healthy-looking, actually, with bright, crinkly eyes, and wearing a shaggy patchwork coat pieced from what looked like the pelts of many creatures. He noticed he was being closely observed and turned in Snape's direction with a broad grin.

"Fine evening to you, sir," he said, tipping his cap. "Spare some change?" Even his diction had changed from the wavering, querulous tones of the beggar to a sprightly, distinct voice. His accent was much like a provincial version of Professor Swain's more cultured tones.

Snape moved closer to the man, curious. "Of all the Glamours a Faerie can put on, I don't know if that's the most glamorous," he observed.

The old man's eyes widened with a warm smile of recognition and interest. "So, thou sees the Sentry of Diagon Alley, then hail and well met, my fine Monsieur Lenuit."

Snape was momentarily startled it was rare than anyone greeted him so cordially, especially someone he had never met before. "Er... hail to you, sir."

The old man was studying Snape's face curiously, still smiling. "Perhaps he's a Tithesman, page to a king. Perhaps I'll see him in the Circle. Perhaps he has news for me from my Lord. Only he knows if he'll tell." He waited, face alight and expectant.

Snape found this reply perplexing. "I was never a page to a king. What do you mean, see me in the Circle? What circle?"

The old man's expectant expression closed as if he had greeted someone he thought was a friend, but then found himself facing a stranger whose identity he had mistaken. "Spare some change?"

"Oh, all right," he said, annoyed at this sudden rejection. He stooped and dropped a Sickle into the fellow's cup, wishing to sustain this conversation for some irrational reason. The old man had been so friendly, inviting dialogue now he was acting as though Snape was just another indifferent stranger. Evidently there was some password he hadn't given, some shibboleth he hadn't recognised, and now he was the outsider again. "You're a sentry. What are you watching for?"

"Change, of course," the shaggy fellow said, rattling the cup in his hand. Something in his tone did not sound as though he was talking exclusively of Sickles and Knuts.

"What do you mean?" Snape demanded. But then his attention was distracted by a loud screech off to the right some child having a tantrum, being carted off by its harried mother. When he turned back to the old man, he was gone.

Snape breathed an indrawn hiss of irritation. *Well, that was typical.*

He mused over what had the old man called him as he continued back toward Hogwarts. *My fine Monsieur Lenuit* he searched his memory for the meaning of that particular phrase. His French, admittedly, was rusty. *Nuit* meant "night"... *le* was a grammatical article... *Monsieur* was a masculine honorific, of course... so the old fellow had addressed him as... *Mister Night?*

What an odd thing to call someone. And, of course the fellow had not bothered to tell him his own name.

Why Faeries were all so bloody neurotic about their names and their business, he would really never know, Snape reflected with a dire shake of his head.

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As she packed a small overnight bag for her latest tryst with Lucius, Emily wondered what the Headmaster or anyone else on the staff thought of the rate at which she was spending weekends away from Hogwarts. As her weekends had become more frequent, a few of her colleagues had gotten around to casually asking where she was spending her time. Luckily, Emily did have a small circle of friends around the U.K., concentrated in Cambridgeshire, and one long-time friend, a Muggle-born witch named Aelfraith Reilly, in Dublin, so it was easy to imply that she was spending the weekend at the home of some friend or another if anyone asked. Irma Pince had been very gently teasing her now and then about whether or not some nice man was in the picture, but Emily doubted if the librarian actually believed there was.

When she appeared in Lucius's latest luxurious hotel room in London, she briefly wondered what Irma would say if she knew that there was in fact a man in the picture, and who that man was.

As always, he looked absolutely gorgeous, sitting at a desk with some documents and a quill in front of him, in shirtsleeves, loosened tie, unbuttoned waistcoat, and a black ribbon starting to give up its grasp on his silver-gilt locks. He had the kind of directionless, helplessly silky hair that no ribbons or restraints ever managed to keep hold of for long.

"Good evening, my dear." He beckoned her forward with a languid gesture.

"Did you have a nice Valentine's?" She dropped her cloak and robes onto a carved armchair and slithered around the desk to kiss him.

"Oh yes. A better time could not have been had. Oh joy, oh bliss, oh rapture," he said ironically.

"Any sightings of that elusive bird, the nude Malfoy female?" Emily reached for the buttons of her spidersilk frock. Very likely the number of nude females recently sighted by Mr. Lucius Malfoy was about to go up by one.

"Alas, no, but at least the exterior of this year's negligee was a rather pleasant silk instead of scratchy lace like the last one." Lucius watched the buttons of her frock coming open with interest.

"Am I to understand from all this that perhaps the marital bliss is just a bit... infrequent at home?"

"Whatever gave you that idea?" he asked.

"Well... you did seem to be trying awfully hard to get me into bed with you awhile ago." That frock lightly wafted down into a soft puddle around her feet.

"You were what one calls a 'high-risk, high-yield investment', my love. Now come fuck me."

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Lucius was in one of his quieter moods that evening. Once in bed, he took a long, slow time about completely undressing her, caressing each part of her as though he was later going to sculpt her from memory. He wanted to take a long slow time in making love as well, prolonging the act until every stroke was a moment of breathless suspense. By the time he finally took his own pleasure of her, she was wrung out with orgasms, sweating and exhausted.

Afterward, he only wanted to recline against the cushions with Emily's tousled head pillowed on his chest. He kept gazing off into the distance with an intensely satisfied look on his face, as though he and only he knew a glorious secret that everyone else in the world would kill to hear. Now and then he would look down at the woman lying in his arms, and fairly glow with smug contentment.

"Mmmm look at that face. Feeling a bit like the King of the Second World tonight, love?" Emily asked.

"Who wouldn't, after a day like this. I'm very nearly in danger of having everything I've ever wanted," came the purring drawl. "So tell me, is there anything that you want, my love?"

"Nothing, really," she said, shrugging. "I'm quite contented with how happy you always are to see me. The occasional smashing pair of diamond earrings are icing on the cake."

"Oh, come, surely there's something you would let me do for you?" he asked. Emily knew it was not unusual for Lucius to be taken by extravagantly generous moods now and then, when everything seemed to be going especially well for him.

"Well... I'm always cold here, unless I'm in bed with you," she confessed. "How about persuading one of those mineral hot springs above Rivendale to move to Hogwarts? Just until I go home in September?"

"Please, love, you're resisting me," Lucius purred. "Are you sure you wouldn't like something? Some grand indulgence, some enemy brought low? How about a nice bit of revenge on good old Snape, perhaps?"

"No need. I can scarcely believe it myself, but he's actually being rather decent lately," Emily said.

"Is he," Lucius said. "Well, isn't there at least some absolutely perverted sexual fantasy you want me to fulfil?" He stroked a shivery fingertip down her spine.

"Oh so your real motivation comes out," she said, laughing. She searched her memory for some idle desire he could satisfy, just to make him happy. One had to be careful with him though if she said she wanted the Hope Diamond, she suspected he would have somehow have gotten it for her. "Oh, I know. I'd love for you to give me the grand tour of Malfeasant sometime, when we don't have to deal with Druella's dirty looks or your brother-in-law breathing whiskey down my neck. I just love these grand old English country houses, with all the art and gardens, and I never get to visit them anymore."

"Ah, yes... I'd imagine Elsie and Priscilla aren't exactly showering you with invitations to visit Swaincroft," Lucius said, very, very delicately.

She looked away. "Well... let's just say that getting snubbed by Elspeth and Priscilla and the rest of that lot is something like getting kicked out of a coma ward," she said, with a scornful laugh. "And a very tweedy and frumpy one, at that."

"With lots of small, yappy dogs underfoot," he said. "But really, just the garden tour of the house? I can probably manage that."

Emily knew that he would try to fulfil her idle wish for her, and whatever it was that he did in the end would be splendid. Lucius always took such wonderfully good care of her. Now she was coming to expect it, look forward to it.

This was always the greatest danger with him; she could look into those sublimely self-assured grey eyes and see herself reflected ten feet tall, invulnerable, and utterly beyond reproach; as capricious and unaccountable as some Greek goddess. All that beauty, power, and endless confidence, greedily satisfying his own lusts without a trace of shame or self-consciousness.

It was so very easy to forget about everything and everyone else when she was with him.

Part Second: The Hart Rampant: Chapter 17, Part 1

Chapter 21 of 55

In which Professor Swain discovers the delights of a dual life as both a Hogwarts professor and Lucius Malfoy's mistress, until a chance encounter with a desperate Faery prostitute in Knockturn Alley sends her to the most unlikely person for aid. Meanwhile, Severus Snape finds himself alone and adrift in the Mushroom Circle, a Faery nightclub...

Chapter 17, Part 1:

Severus Snape was having a rather worse day than usual in his Gryffindor-Slytherin fourth-year class.

The students were acting up even more that usual and he couldn't for the life of him remember what potion they were all working on, other than the fact that not a single solitary one of them had managed to get it right. Every cauldron in the classroom was doing something wildly dangerous, or foul-smelling, or at least just plain bizarre. The Gryffindor Triumvirate of Potter, Granger, and Weasley had cooked up a reaction rather like Vesuvius on a particularly peevish day. Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown (*Parvatinlavender*) were being chased all around by what looked like balls of green fire shooting out of their concoction. The Slytherins seemed to be wrestling with a cauldron that was fighting them back just as hard, belching sulphurically noxious ooze all the while.

The Gryffindor Three were sitting around bemusedly contemplating their molten mess when he approached them. Harry Potter was of course tremendously blasé about the whole thing when Snape ordered him to do something to defuse the situation.

"Why would I bother with that, Professor?" Potter asked, looking up at him with his usual irritating green-eyed smirk. "That would require me to apply myself to learning something of subtle science and exact artistry, and I have all the intellectual curiosity and ambition of your average garden slug. I think I'll spend my entire life coasting along on the glory of something that happened when I was a drooling, pre-conscious, year-old infant. Of course I'm not so much The Boy Who Lived as I *really* am The Sprat Who Was Saved By the Heroic Sacrifice of Lily Potter, but try telling that to the history book writers. My mother was the only brave and decent Gryffindor in years, but I'm still willing to shuck everything she did for me in order to go shopping for trifles in Hogsmeade. But I'll still get all the glory no matter how often you risk your life for the common good, despite the fact that my larval one-year-old self could do little more than cry, eat, and shite at the time of my alleged heroism. Cheers, mate!"

Snape gritted his teeth and barely suppressed the desire to strangle the crapulous little ingrate for the thousandth time. Then he turned to Hermione Granger and told her to tend to the cauldron. She very cheerily said: "Oh, yes, sir, of course you're making a great deal of sense and it would be an excellent idea to take your advice, but I think I'll do better by second-guessing you. Thanks!"

When he turned to Ron Weasley and told him to contain the reaction, Ron chirpily answered, "Of course I can't do that, Professor, as neither Potter nor Granger told me to do it. You see, my function in life is to trail 'round after the clearly intellectually superior Miss Granger and the famous Potter whelp, and I can't be arsed to do anything that my two friends haven't thought of first. But anyway, thanks for trying! A for effort!"

Someone came up and tugged on Snape's arm he saw Neville Longbottom looking up at him with an unusually thoughtful expression. "You know, Professor, I've concluded that perhaps I'm little more than a useless waste of skin who invariably slows down the entire class with my ineptitude. I think I'll go to Albus immediately and ask to audit your class, because I'm entirely hopeless."

"That was the most sensible thing I have ever heard you say, Mr. Longbottom, and with perfectly understandable non-stammering diction, too," Snape replied. "Why don't you run along to the Headmaster's office and do that right now. We'll wait."

Then Longbottom scurried off, ostensibly to get an exemption from Potions classes on the grounds of being an inept waste of skin, and Snape turned his attention to the Slytherins.

His gaze lit first on Draco Malfoy, but as he was opening his mouth to speak, the boy airily held up his hand and stopped him. "Don't even bother, Professor. You're stuck

kissing my arse no matter what happens, because if my father cared enough to notice what you're really up to, he would have your flayed hide mounted above the mantelpiece in our overdecorated drawing room in no time flat, and you know it," the younger Malfoy said pleasantly. "Nonetheless, I'm rather fond of you, with the same kind of affection that I feel for that nice, long-suffering dog of mine. And for all that, you really should be grateful."

"Ah, yes, I suppose *that's* true," Snape said resignedly, breathing a heavy sigh.

One of the halves of Crabbengoyle this was the taller one, so it had to be Gregory Goyle looked up from where he was wrestling with the belching cauldron. "Don't mind me, sir, it's my job to just support anything Malfoy says. You already of course know that I will never realise that I am essentially wasting my youth by acting like a thug. But then I'm too thick to read *Mother Goose*, let alone introspectively examine my own actions," Goyle said earnestly.

Crabbe thoughtfully listened to his counterpart's statement. "Yeah," he agreed, nodding.

Then the classroom door opened, and Professor Swain traipsed in. She was wearing that black frock from the other day the smart one with the skirt above her knees and the tiny silver buttons, that black velvet professorial robe that looked quite handsome with her fair hair, and those laced kid boots that outlined the sinewy modelling of ankle and calf.

"Good afternoon, Professor Snape, how are you?" Same lilting voice, same insouciant ice-maidenly demeanour she always affected, as if her feet didn't quite touch the ground and her breath didn't smell when she woke up in the morning, and no one else's opinion of her meant anything.

"As well as can be expected in a session of double Potions with this lot of dunderheads, thank you, madam," he informed her. "To what do I owe this visit?"

"I was just doing some thinking, and it's just come to me Lucius Malfoy is just a ruddy great *idiot*, isn't he? I can't for the life of me fathom how I manage to stand *still* whilst he oozes all over me the way he does. It's just disgusting the way I've been acting, isn't it?" She laughed, sounding hugely amused at this discovery. "I mean, look at him sometime, he is so *obviously* unworthy of the devotion of someone like me. Honestly, what has he ever done, other than pick his parents well? I don't think he ever reads *anything* other than Ministry memorandums and his own income statements, and everyone knows he's never held a political conviction that wasn't directly parroted from his father. Wouldn't you agree, sir?"

"Absolutely," he replied. "I've thought that of him for years."

Now her hands were inching up his lapels while she gazed appealingly up into his eyes. "And it's just *appalling* the way I treat you, Severus. You're deserving of so much more than just a cup of tea and a quick shag. I'm so desperately sorry that I've been such a proud, obtuse little brat, and I promise I will immediately endeavour to grow a longer attention span. After all, I was by all accounts happily married for some time, so I should be capable of that, I think. Please come out somewhere with me for dinner I promise I will ask you how your day was at the very least. Then I shall not only listen to all that you say in that very fetching manner I did earlier, but readily hold forth on any topic that you want me to tell you about. Then, after a respectable interval, but not too long, we'll end up in bed, because I still haven't stopped fantasising about that time we had sex last September. We really need to do that again."

"I couldn't agree more," he said. "That all sounds like a capital idea."

Now they were alone in his classroom, and she had brazenly insinuated herself into his arms. "You know, Severus, I've wanted you to take me again for the longest time and you haven't *done it yet*." She sounded tremendously dismayed and put out by that omission.

So of course he bent her back over his desk and kissed her, lustily, confidently. The silver buttons of her dress sighed open without effort, revealing a very complicated bit of black lace lingerie underneath. Of course she was wearing suspendered black stockings again. Her fair head fell swooning backward and he devoured that neck, felt her quivering at his touch, just as she had the first night he met her.

Now they were in his dimly lit bedroom, and their clothes were gone, and she was lying under him with her arms locked around his shoulders the way she had the first time, again kissing him like a randy schoolgirl. Her breath tasted like Chateau Latour burgundy, and her sweat smelled like hot perfume.

He was achingly hard by now, and she wrapped her thighs around him, lifted her tousled fair head from his pillow to gaze into his eyes in just the most inviting manner, making it absolutely clear that she wanted him, that moment, *now*. The piercing, unsatisfied desire that he had been burdened with ever since he met this damned woman relaxed its grip as he finally, finally sank inside her again. He found her just as hot, ready, and eager for him as she had been that first night same innocence and sensuality, same inexplicable but completely unabashed lust for him. Now, instead of furtively hurrying through the act while standing up on a cold night, they had time and privacy.

He took her hand she had such elegant hands, whether she was holding a book or a quill or a sword and brought it to his lips, kissed it fervently. She was rapturously enjoying herself, responding to him shamelessly, like she had before... her hot, flushed skin on his, that impossible fluid heat encompassing him, those ecstatic, soaked-in-oestrogen gasps again... her body rising to meet his thrusts without inhibition, just like that night... He felt himself hardening even more, but wanted to prolong this, wanted to soak in her arousal and excitement

Oh, Severus...

She was *his*; she wanted to be here, and she would stay as long as he wanted

Then somewhere in his peripheral earshot something began to drone in an irritating manner, some flat dissonant note that did not go away, but only got louder

Oh, Severus... Oh, please... Yes, love...

The drone grew inexorably louder

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Would that every god in every plane of existence anywhere lend their fury to damning the invention of that infernal device, the alarm clock. Just as he was actually having a *pleasant* dream for once, too.

It was ten to seven in the morning, and today, of course, was the day of the bloody Second Task.

Snape slapped off the clock, rolled over, and allowed himself the luxury of a few minutes' further drowsing.

Like most adults who spend a significant amount of time celibate for whatever reason, Snape was prey to the occasional unbidden erotic dream or imagining. For many years now, his usual fantasy scenario (*admit it*) had been of a great deal of uninhibited, anonymous sex with some nameless beauty, who then conveniently disappeared once he was satisfied. But when he had unexpectedly fulfilled that very fantasy last September found himself having sex with an exciting, nameless beauty who had vanished afterward the vanishing afterward had been the last thing he had wanted her to do.

It was so much easier to imagine someone who was more or less an animated doll disappearing after his desire was spent in some idle dream than it was to actually let a warm, receptive, real woman out of his arms, especially when she was still sweating gently from the pleasure he had just given her. Particularly especially when she appeared to empathise so well with the demands of his work, and at least on *first* impression had seemed literate, clever, and a wonderful listener.

He had imagined all kinds of farfetched romance about her in the afterglow of an extremely intense orgasm but the truth of her certainly was stranger than anything he

could have dreamed up last September. A Faerie who went about seducing inconsequential mortals under a Glamour, he thought, scowling deeply into his pillow. Probably with sprigs of *Love-in-Idleness* in her pocket for the next victims. Perhaps he should consider himself lucky to have escaped without making any more of an ass of himself that he had. Snape rolled onto his back and crushed a pillow over his face.

Now, she wasn't proving to be any more exhilarating to have as a colleague. The warm, charming lady he had met in King's Cross seemed to have evaporated, replaced by a cool, insolent creature who scowled or cracked wise every time he asked her a question. She always seemed so happy every time someone at Hogwarts showed promise in the Faery arts that is, every time someone at Hogwarts *other than him* showed promise in the Faery arts. Orla Fecking Quirke Obscured one of her fecking earrings, and that trivial achievement was enough to make the woman bounce around in absurd jubilation. But when *he* demonstrated Obscurantis to her, she had gone into a huff about it. Yes, so she only appreciated independent study on the Faery arts if her precious favourite Hermione Granger or her little gang of adoring Ravenclaws were doing it.

Then of course the woman was about as dignified as a first-year. The other day during the break between classes, he had spotted her chasing two of the Slytherin Chasers, Pucey and Montague, up and down the hall outside her classroom, all of them engaged in a spirited water pistol fight, to which the boys finally offered a draw. "Professors shouldn't have legs like that, mate," Snape overheard one of them mutter to the other while they watched Professor Swain go back to her classroom. "It's just not *right*."

Then she had to turn out to be so bloody *chummy* with Lucius. During the New Year's Eve Ball dinner, the two of them had been practically finishing each other's sentences like some old married couple. Narcissa had been so furious at such obvious intimacy between her husband and another woman that he thought she was going to crush the crystal wineglass in her hand.

Yes, one could be for damned certain that if he was to imagine his ideal woman, she wouldn't be some capricious, inconsistent, sharp-tongued, foul-tempered, self-satisfied, Malfoy-toadying little blonde git, who thought she was entitled to unconditional forgiveness from everyone merely because she was *pretty.*

A dream, nothing more.

It was 6:57 a.m. now, so Snape reluctantly threw back his bedclothes (this February being as unreasonably cold as last September had been), reached for his bathrobe, and made his way into the shower.

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Beatrice had very cordially invited her over to join their party among whom, she had noticed Lucius's wife and Mrs. Rosier for a cup of tea. Emily had been about to invent a reason to politely decline, but Lucius caught her eye and gave her such an eloquent, brazen, what-the-hell sort of look, one in which she could almost hear him drawling, *Oh why not, love, what do they know?*that she smiled and accepted. Thus she found herself joining their group, demurely greeting Narcissa with a handshake and a warm smile and joining the chatter between Beatrice and Pansy Parkinson about how very unexciting the Second Task was by comparison to the first. Lucius brought her a china mug of steaming orange spice tea, which she accepted gratefully.

Emily had been expecting Felina Rosier to eventually take a seat nearby and start in on her and Mrs. Parkinson with the usual sort of pleasantries that any woman other than Narcissa Malfoy or the very old, very rich, and very frumpy invariably provoked from that kind lady. Instead, Mrs. Rosier took one look at Emily, and turned around, as if she was afraid to even look at her. It was so pronounced of a response that Emily began experimenting with it, casually putting herself in Mrs. Rosier's field of vision to see if she would turn away again which she then did, with a look of creeping discomfort. This temptation was too much to bear soon Emily was casually putting herself in Mrs. Rosier's view every so often, all the while chatting demurely with everyone, just to watch her former antagonist discreetly turn away with the inevitability of a plant turning toward the sun.

But then Emily was distracted from her Rosier-baiting by something Draco Malfoy was saying, something about Montague and Pucey, two of her sixth-years. She turned toward the boy with a laugh. "You heard about that? That was just about the silliest moment of an incredibly silly day. Something about handing a lot of water pistols to teenagers just makes them get rambunctious, I guess. Argus Filch is still furious with me about the wet floors."

"Whatever did you do?" Narcissa asked, in a decidedly sniffy voice but Draco was standing next to his mother with such an impish grin on his face that she couldn't help but smile back.

"What happened was two of my Slytherin sixth-years got a bit mettlesome during my Protection Amulet practical. I had them testing the amulets' effectiveness with squirt pistols, and two of the boys were getting overly competitive with each other. So I came over to tell them to settle down, and as I was walking away, both of them decided to quite brazenly squirt me right on the back of the head."

"So how many years of detention did you give them?" Draco asked.

"Oh, come on, who wants to be the professor who gives the most detention, Mr. Malfoy?" Emily asked him. "There was only one way to react to such obvious provocation. I picked up my own pistol, gave chase, and battled the miscreants to a draw out in the hallway."

The usual people laughed, and the usual people looked at her as though she had just grown five extra heads but Emily was now resigned to this reaction amongst Lucius's friends and family.

Beatrice and Lucius wanted to hear all about Protection Amulets and the water pistol testing session, which Draco and Pansy helped her describe with their own anecdotes and lots of giggling. While Emily was telling the story, she noticed that apparently all this joviality had gotten too much for good Mistress Rosier she had gone over to greet Professor Snape, who was standing by the side of the lake, helping oversee the Second Task. Now that wasp-tongued harpy was cosily chatting to the black-cloaked Potions master, who looked about as thrilled to be involved in this conversation as can be imagined. He also had his cloak wrapped tightly around him and seemed to be shivering.

For some reason, the sight of the two of them together filled her with a fine, hot wave of irritation, as intense as it was completely irrational.

Emily had always been a terrible prey to impulse in another second, she excused herself from the Malfoys and the Parkinsons, picked up one of the clean china mugs on the picnic table, poured out a cup of steaming Earl Grey from one of the teapots, and took it over to Professor Snape.

Lucius Malfoy watched her go, one blond eyebrow quirked with interest.

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"Good morning, Professor. You look cold. Have some tea." Emily knew Snape liked Earl Grey, or at least drank it she had smelled it on his breath on numerous occasions. Snape turned in her direction when she addressed him Emily didn't wait for a reaction, but handed the steaming mug to him. He accepted it automatically.

"Er... thank you," he said. Same look of faint shock and surprise she remembered from the King's Cross Lost Items office.

"Good morning, Mrs. Rosier, how are you?" Emily asked, turning toward that good lady with a bright smile. Mrs. Rosier nodded her greeting with a rather sickly smile of her own. A few seconds later, she remembered something desperately important she needed to talk to Narcissa about and excused herself.

Emily leaned toward Snape's ear. "I've discovered this morning that I now seem to have a ten-foot Mrs. Rosier-repelling field around me. So I thought I'd come over and extend the radius of protection to you, since you looked like you were enjoying her company so very much."

For another of those rare and tremendously gratifying seconds, Snape looked sideways at her and seemed to suppress what might have been a laugh. "'For this relief, much thanks,' " he murmured, taking a grateful sip from his mug.

Emily grinned at him for some inexplicable reason, hearing him quoting *Hamlet* was disarming to her. "Well, 'Tis bitter cold,' and such a Rosier could make anyone 'sick at heart.'"

Snape gazed out over the lake, again with the smallest of amused grins lingering on his face Emily was beginning to thoroughly enjoy that ironic little grin. "A ten-foot Felina-repelling field about you, eh?" he muttered. "You'll have to teach me that trick."

"To be honest, I'm not sure why I suddenly have one. I *did* bathe this morning. Really."

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Lucius Malfoy was watching his lover chat with his cousin very attentively.

Cousin Severus had just said something to Emily Lucius had known Severus Snape long enough to well know the little eyebrow raise and infinitesimal smirk that signalled he was about to launch a shaft of barbed wit and that irresponsible damsel was shaking with laughter at whatever he had just said. And wasn't Cousin Severus looking pleased with himself.

Then Emily glanced back at him with a blackly humorous grin of her own and answered him, eyes twinkling and Severus actually chuckled as he replied. To Lucius Malfoy, this was absolutely *extraordinary.*

To an outside observer, the two of them would not have seemed extraordinary at all just a lively woman having a pleasant chat with a dark, reserved man. But Lucius Malfoy had known Snape since he was a sombre, serious little boy and in all of that time, Malfoy could have counted the number of people he had ever seen his cousin pleasantly chat with on the fingers of one hand.

Lucius listened with half an ear to his son's chatter, nodding and making the appropriate sounds of acknowledgement at the appropriate times, his gaze turned in the direction of the lake.

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"In all, I think I'm rather disappointed with the Second Task, as compared to the First. What do you think, sir?"

"Oh, so you thought seeing teenagers risking their lives with dragons was more exciting than standing around watching a completely still lake, did you?" Snape asked.

"Yes, it was," Emily said, nodding.

"I have to admit I agree with you there. In my opinion, if one is going to make a bunch of schoolchildren risk their lives for a relatively paltry sum of money, I would hope that it could at least be staged in a manner more entertaining than watching paint dry."

Again with the flawless sarcastic delivery Emily laughed until her eyes teared. "So the revival of the Tournament wasn't your idea, I take it?" she asked, dabbing her eyes with the edge of her sleeve.

"Not a bit. Take the First Task, for example. If I had been running it, they wouldn't have only had to take eggs away from dragons. I would have made them do it while dodging flaming arrows and simultaneously translating Joyce's *Ulysses* into ancient Urdu."

She had only finished drying her eyes before his next remark made her collapse laughing again. "Ooh, now that would have been *really* fun to watch."

"I know *I* would have enjoyed it," Snape muttered.

"Plus, think of what that translation would mean to the ancient Urdu-speaking community everyone knows how crazy *they* are about modern Irish experimental prose," Emily said, nodding her total understanding and approval.

Then, to her absolute delight, Snape laughed a natural baritone laugh. He caught himself a second later, coughing into his gloved hand. "Yes... no doubt," he replied, turning the sinister eyebrow on her, as if to say how dare she distract him with this frivolity, when there was glowering to be done.

"Don't look at me like I'm crazy it was your idea," she retorted merrily.

Just then, there was a disturbance in the lake's surface as the figure of a tall teenage boy, Cedric Diggory, rose from the water, his head encased in a large round bubble, which burst a moment after he emerged. He was carrying a slender teenage girl, who Emily recognised as Cho Chang, one of her Ravenclaw office-hours regulars.

"Ah, a sign of life it appears I must be off." Snape finished the mug of tea and handed it back to her. "Thank you, madam."

"Is Miss Chang all right?" Emily craned her head for a better look at the two students, concerned.

Snape nodded, again the unassailably confident Potions master. "All the captives are fine, don't worry."

He took his leave of her with a respectful nod and hurried down the lake shore toward Diggory and Miss Chang. Madam Pomfrey, Dumbledore, and Professor Sprout were converging on the dripping pair as well.

I made Severus Snape laugh, Emily thought as she turned back toward the Malfoys' picnic.

It was really absurd how proud she was of that.

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A moment after Cedric emerged from the lake, Viktor Krum appeared as well, his head still Transfigured into that of a shark, and carrying an unconscious Hermione Granger looking to Emily like nothing so much as a Muggle B-movie monster carrying a swooning female victim. It would have been funny if she hadn't been so concerned about Miss Granger's welfare. Madam Pomfrey and several others converged on them a moment later, wrapping them in blankets and dosing them liberally with Pepper-Up Potion.

Emily had rejoined the Malfeasant picnic a moment after Snape had left, and Lucius had positioned himself on her right, and was now keeping up an airy commentary on all that was happening. Fleur Delacour emerged from the lake a few minutes after Krum and Hermione, drenched, alone, and hysterical. She desperately tried to enlist her Headmistress's aid against the grindylows in the lake, which had apparently kept her from finding someone named Gabrielle. Madame Maxime refused, saying that the time limit was up, and told Fleur that she would not be allowed to go back after Gabrielle at which news, Fleur bolted away from her Headmistress back toward the water. She was in the middle of speaking the incantation for the Bubble-Head Charm when Madame Maxime stopped her. Fleur struggled to return to the water and Madame stopped her again, the part-giantess restraining the girl as gently and inexorably as a mother with a rebellious two-year-old. Now Fleur's efforts to shake off her Headmistress and go after Gabrielle were growing more and more desperate, which Lucius seemed to think was just the most hilarious thing he had ever seen in his life.

Lucius might have found the Beauxbatons champion's situation amusing, but Emily's chest clenched with pity at Miss Delacour's distress. Whoever Gabrielle was, she was clearly very precious to Fleur, so much so that the girl was willing to defy anyone in order to save her a sentiment with which Emily heartily sympathised.

But just then, Harry Potter emerged from the lake, dragging both Ron Weasley and a little girl-waif of about primary school age, with clouds of soaked fair hair plastered over her face and shoulders, and accompanied by a small crowd of singing merfolk, who filled the air with ululating, melodic cries. Dumbledore, Percy Weasley, Ludo Bagman, and Madam Pomfrey converged on them, young Weasley even walking out into the freezing lake in his fussy little business robes.

Fleur shrieked out, "*Gabrielle, Gabrielle! Is she alive? Is she hurt?*" then engulfed the little girl in her arms, weeping with relief. The family resemblance between the two was so pronounced that the child could only have been her younger sister.

"Oh, how touching," Lucius drawled.

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Harry's return caused quite a commotion. Poppy Pomfrey all but mugged him with blankets and Pepper-up Potion, dragging him off to join the other soaked captives and champions. Hermione Granger seemed all right, because she ran up to Harry and began bubbling to him immediately, Victor Krum trailing behind her.

Meanwhile Dumbledore had a long conversation with one of the merwomen who had arrived on the lakeshore just after Harry, after which he called a conference with his fellow judges before the marks were handed out. Finally Ludo Bagman's hugely magnified voice recited the points awarded. Twenty-five for Miss Delacour, unfortunately. Emily was none too happy about the girl's misfortune amongst the grindylows, but Fleur just seemed ecstatic to have Gabrielle back. Forty-seven for Cedric Diggory apparently the judges had shaved three points off for returning one minute too late. Viktor Krum was likewise penalised for going over the time limit, and received forty points. But Harry Potter, over the time limit though he was, received high marks from the judges for refusing to leave Gabrielle Delacour behind to whatever uncertain fate lay ahead of her on the lake floor forty-five points in all.

The crowd began to break up after the points were awarded. Lucius turned to Emily in the milling crush, as baskets were packed up and chairs folded.

"Well, it's been lovely to see you, dear," he said, aside to her. "It's been especially lovely watching you torturing dear Felina all morning."

Emily blushed, feeling like a little girl caught in some mischief. "I'm sorry. I know I'm being a bit evil, but I just couldn't resist."

"No worries I think I like you a bit evil," he said, the usual smirk playing on the corner of his lips. He pressed her hand between both of his and leaned closer to her, as if to say good-bye, but instead of the usual *Good to see you*or *We must get together again soon*, he said, "Seven p.m. Friday. Cockatrice Inn, top floor."

"I can hardly wait," she replied. Her hand went to her earlobe, and toyed nonchalantly with the brilliant diamond earring dangling there. Lucius smiled.

They nodded to each other, outwardly the picture of platonic cordiality. Lucius went back to his wife's side, and Emily rejoined her colleagues in the stands.

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The Malfoys lingered after most of the other spectators had gone, for a short visit with Professor Snape. "Severus, hello, cousin. I wanted to say thank you for coming all the way out for Druella's birthday. She does so enjoy your company," Lucius said.

"Yes, really Mother's so fond of you, it does just brighten her day when you can visit," Narcissa said, pressing Snape's hand and warmly kissing his cheek.

"Thank you, it was kind of you to invite me," Snape replied, smiling at her as mildly and gently as he ever did at anyone.

"It was so lovely to have company," Narcissa said. "We've been so lonely in the country lately mostly it's been just me and Mother. Lucius and my brother are so busy lately with their work, they're hardly ever home." She looked from cousin to husband, long-suffering patience quivering prettily on her alabaster features.

"There there, love, you knew it was going to be a busy year," Lucius said in a very low voice.

Just then Draco stalked up, complaining yet again about how unfair it was that Harry Potter had been allowed to compete in the Tournament, and Narcissa of course had to excuse herself to tend to her son. Lucius turned to Snape with a look of commiseration.

"Sorry for that, she's a bit peevish lately because I've had to spend so much time in London," Lucius said.

"I suppose you must be distracted, what with the events of this year," Snape replied, in a low, leading tone, that subtly encouraged the speaker to continue on this topic at length if he so desired.

"Yes, I've indeed been rather... *distracted* lately," Lucius purred and at that moment, his gaze lit on Emily, who was chatting with Irma Pince and Professor Sinistra by the stands. Lucius allowed himself one long, heavy-lidded look before turning back to Snape with a conspiratorial little smirk. "Can you meet me for a drink later, old man? Do some catching up?"

"Yes, I think we should," Snape answered. His expression, as he made plans to meet with Lucius, then said his good-byes to the Malfoys and their company, was inscrutable as always, if perhaps a bit more remote than usual.

Perhaps Severus Snape was not as unschooled at detecting solid fact from a nuance of information as he had previously imagined himself to be. Or perhaps Lucius Malfoy disliked seeing his bachelor cousin and his mistress beginning to patch up their months'-long enmity, and saw the opportunity to cultivate it again, to serve his own purposes. Whatever the reason, if Professor Snape had harboured any suspicions that perhaps the friendship between Lucius and Professor Swain was not entirely platonic, that fleeting, gloating glance confirmed every one of them.

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The day after the Second Task, Emily met with Professor Snape for their now accustomed Wednesday practice session. As usual, he arrived right at 6:53. But Emily immediately noticed there was something different about his manner this evening.

There had been a kind of truce between them for some time as if they both had recognised they had a job to do together and realised that being reasonably civilised and businesslike about the whole thing had been the most efficient way to get through it. Last week, he had come close to being decent company. On the morning of the Second Task, in the few brief moments they had stood aside together and discussed the various foibles of Mrs. Rosier, and Snape had envisioned his ideal Triwizard Tournament she thought that she had finally seen the return of the blackly humorous, endlessly intriguing man she had met in King's Cross, at least for a moment.

But the evening after the Tournament, he had stalked in too early, as was his wont. Completely ignored her greeting, and then proceeded to snap at her all evening over every triviality imaginable. All of his extreme irascibility from earlier in the year seemed to have reasserted itself with a vengeance for some reason which Emily now found painfully disappointing. She had to bite down very hard on a plaintive query of: *What's wrong? What's the matter? What happened?*

There was no point in asking him what was upsetting him, though it wasn't as though there was any relationship to be put right, after all. He wasn't her friend, and certainly wasn't her lover. There could only be said to be the barest of polite working relationships between them most of the time, but... But. She had thought the last week's nearly cordial relations had indicated that he had put some of his indignation at her (admittedly) less than stellar initial treatment of him aside. For the space of about one week, she had felt him becoming more approachable and had thought that this was the beginning of... well, of something.

Evidently, she had been wrong.

By quarter past eight, she was so irritated by his snide little darts of criticism and complaint that she halted the bout, yanking off her mask and raking an impatient hand through her sweaty hair. "Professor. I swear by whatever deity you require that I will not forget to respect you if you dispense with the operatic bastard persona for the remaining forty-five minutes that you have to spend in my company today. I've not had a good day, and we'll both get through this far better if you stop bloody sniping at me. I can't take it right now."

He seemed to consider that, watching her with glacial calm. "Would you prefer to meet Friday evening instead?" he asked. "Or perhaps Saturday?"

"I'm busy this weekend, I'm afraid."

"Oh, yes, weekends do seem a busy time for you," he said blandly. "Visiting friends in Cambridge again?"

"Visiting friends, yes," she replied shortly.

"Do have a lovely time," he said, very coolly. At least his tone was cool his scent was inexplicably laden with so much adrenaline fury that it sent her own pulse rate spiking up.

Emily felt her face flame. "Sir. You do realise that I am an entire dimensional plane away from my home," she snapped. "I don't deny that I find some comfort in spending time with my friends. Do you so begrudge me the occasional day off? Do things really go all to hell here when I'm not around?"

"Why you would waste one moment's concern on my opinion of your actions is entirely beyond me, madam," he said, his eyes all but sparking with repellence, even through a fencing mask.

"Fine, I won't then," she said, yanking her mask back on and assuming *en garde* position. "Ready?"

Snape threw his shoulders arrogantly back as he faced her. "Yes."

A casual observer might have thought their remaining bouts of the night were much more ferocious than usual and now he was spending the rest of the evening punishing her with stony silence. Before long, she thought she could have endured his cruel verbal slings and arrows better than that icy emptiness.

"Think of it this way, sir it's now February twenty-fifth," she said as the session was breaking up.

"And what does *that* mean?" Snape asked flintily.

"It means that there are exactly six months and twenty-seven days before I can go home," she said, with a poisonously sweet smile. "Do have a pleasant evening."

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March blew in with much overcast grey sky and torrents of freezing rain and more storms of bad temper from Professor Snape, who seemed to bristle every time she so much as passed him in the halls. His endless sarcastic barbs perturbed Emily so much that at one point she flopped down into a chair in front of the fire in the teacher's lounge without noticing that it was already occupied by the History of Magic teacher, Professor Binns. The mild-mannered Binns had been a pleasant, helpful, and in all ways irreproachable colleague all year, and his only real sensitivity was in having a fuss made about the fact that he was a ghost. Having a colleague abruptly sit in him put him rather in a huff, despite the fact that Emily sprang up immediately and apologised. *Wonderful, now everyone's angry at me today,* she thought, huddling miserably on the window seat.

At meals and in the teacher's lounge, Emily was profoundly glad of the comforting presence of her friend Irma Pince. While the slight, grey-haired librarian was much like a cosy, indulgent aunt in her relaxed moments, Irma could also be as strict and domineering as a Seventh Kingdom queen, especially when she was chivvying students for eating or talking in her book-lined library fiefdom. The icy remarks from Snape stopped when Irma was around there were many, many times during the second term in which Emily had cause to feel grateful to her.

"I wonder what happened to him sometimes," Irma said aside to Emily one afternoon, after Professor Snape had gathered his notes and left for class. "Severus Snape was the quietest, cleverest, least troublesome lad imaginable when he was in school here. I never had to scold him or so much as give him an overdue notice. But he went off to his mother's funeral in his sixth year, and he's never been the same. He fell in with a rather nasty Slytherin crowd, and he's the only one of them who's made anything of himself since. Lord knows he's not one to confide in anyone except perhaps Albus, but I always thought there had to be some reason why he's gotten so sour and bitter."

Irma shook her head ruefully and Emily looked down into her teacup, remembering her own role in a blow to the Professor's ego, and felt very small indeed.

But apparently Emily herself wasn't the only target for his rotten mood this term an article titled "Harry Potter's Secret Heartache" appeared in a rather fluffy women's magazine called *Witch Weekly* that Friday, again by Rita Skeeter, whose name was becoming synonymous with sensationalistic tabloid hackery in Emily's mind. The article painted Hermione Granger as some kind of love-potion-brewing temptress who had ensorcelled the affections of both Viktor Krum and Harry Potter by treachery and from the reports of various students, it seemed that Professor Snape had read the article out loud in its entirety in Potions class. Emily was certain the entire article was utter shite from beginning to end everyone knew that Harry and Hermione were the best of friends, and that Hermione had more than enough admirable qualities to prompt the seemingly honest affection that Viktor Krum felt for her.

However, given the contempt Snape evidently felt for other people's "tangled love lives" Emily shuddered to think what his opinion would be if he ever found out about certain temporary entanglements in her own love life.

Six months and seventeen days until I can go home, she reminded herself.

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Lucius hadn't been able to bring an Arcadian volcanic hot spring to her but he had managed to find a hotel stateroom with a private Roman-style bath by the first weekend of March. To Emily, that bathing chamber seemed absolutely the height of decadence, all done in deep jade-green marble and dimly lit by a giant fireplace and bronze candelabra. Logs of fragrant herbal incense were stacked beside the firewood, which filled the room with a piney, woody scent when tossed on the flames. There was probably a collective acre of dark blue bath sheet warming on heated racks, and the walls were hung with risqué etchings of Roman ladies and lords engaged in various illicit activities at a sumptuous public bath.

The round central bath seemed itself the size of a pond Emily could easily have swum laps from one side to the other. Dozens of elegant silver filigree taps poured steaming water mixed with different sorts of bath suds and bath oil. One tap poured pale green suds scented with eucalyptus, one poured long-lasting icy-white suds so thickly that they seemed to cover the top of the tub like a glacier's frost. She became particularly fond of several taps that poured water and bath oils of an especially silky and lubricious texture, scented with balsam, sandalwood, cedar, and wild mint.

After a delightful time investigating the various taps, Emily dropped her clothes on a carved fruitwood bench, knotted her hair up on top of her head, and slid into the delectably hot, scented water. "Come on in, love, the water's fine," she called, submerging herself up to her collarbones and tilting her head back onto the side of the pool, as unselfconscious as an otter in its favourite kelp bed.. He wasted not a second in throwing off his clothes, tying his own hair back, and slipping in after her.

For months now, Emily had been used to her fingers and toes feeling perpetually icy, of hunching under heaps of blankets and eiderdowns, of the agonised chill in the moment between emerging from the bath or the shower and wrapping herself in a robe. The steamy warmth was paradisiacal to her, like bathing in her favourite hot spring back home, but in such different, luxurious, surroundings. This pool might not have been surrounded by spreading trees or riots of flowers, or inhabited by singing water nymphs but the heat, the deliciously fragrant oils and unguents, and this randy blond Adonis of a companion were hardly a poor alternative.

It was an eventful evening indeed. Something about being kissed endlessly while steam billowed all around, and the deliciously slippery qualities the oil lent to the skin made several hours' splash in that pool extremely memorable. The buoyant support of the water was such that Lucius could lift her off of her feet almost effortlessly and then she was lowering herself onto him, slipping down to take him to the hilt with unabashed eagerness, her legs tight around his waist.

Some time afterward, as he reclined on the side of the bath, she slid down in that hot, fragrant water, coiled her arms around his hips and repaid him in kind for being the deliciously oral creature that he was. It was intensely satisfying to make him lose that chilly composure, throw his fair head back, and groan with pleasure like any other man as she drained the orgasm from him. He sank onto the green marble afterward, breathing hard.

"Your year here can't... *possibly* be half over already, can it?" he asked, looking terribly dismayed.

"Yes, just about half over." She very deliberately drew her tongue over her upper lip, shamelessly gazing into his eyes which made him half-swoon again.

"You could always move here permanently," he suggested helpfully.

Emily shook her head. "I don't think so, love."

"Perhaps I could get you a nice flat near Diagon Alley," he said, sliding into the bath again.

"I'm sure you could, dear," she said, with an indulgent smile.

"No, really," he said, seeming to warm to the idea as he imagined it. "You could have all the art and books you wanted, and flowers even in the winter, and house elves doing everything for you. You could write, go to the theatre and the museums with me, have all the peace and leisure you wanted." He pulled her into another steam-wreathed embrace, let his lips come to rest against her temple. "Just think of it, darling. No Dumbledore ordering you about, no Snape spoiling your appetite, no one coming to you wailing *Help, help, a panther ate my baby* ever again. You wouldn't have to worry about a thing, except what to wear to greet me in the evening."

"And there you would keep me very well." She raised her head from his shoulder to look him in the eye. "I have my own money, you know."

"With the surname of Swain, you'd have to." He took her hand in one of his, trailing her fingertips up his neck, then placing a heated kiss on her palm. "I just adore the idea of having you entirely to myself."

"Staying exactly where you put me."

"Yes. Staying exactly where I can have you when I want you," he said, his grip tightening around her waist. "Don't expect me to deny that I want you to come to me when I want it, not when Albus Dumbledore allows it. It's tiresome to only be able to see you when you have time off from work."

She stretched, laying her head on his shoulder again. "So you'd have your wife at the country estate for social and breeding purposes, but spend all your real passions with your mistress, who you keep in the city," she said in an arch, facetious tone.

"Exactly." He seemed terribly pleased that she understood his meaning so well. "Perhaps you're joking when you say that, but I'm not. I can't think of any arrangement I'd like more."

Her expression turned serious. "I'm going home in September, Lucius. I'm a knight commander, remember?"

"And service in the Fianna is entirely voluntary, remember?"

"Oh yes. What am I supposed to tell Gwydion?" She pantomimed writing a letter, using her forefinger for a pen and his bicep for paper " 'Good my liege, I am leaving your service to become the kept tart of a married Second-World wizard. Happy Beltane, love to Aunt Dahlia and the family.' "

"I'll get my quill."

"*Lucius*."

He glanced down at her, unconvinced. "My dear, we are talking about the same man who came to Britain, had a snowball fight with some Liverpudlian children, then turned around and went right back home?"

"He wanted to see what snow was like. And then he found it to be... rather cold for his taste," she said, shrugging.

"Don't you think that a man like that would understand absolutely your desire to prolong a torrid affair with someone? As I recall, he's never exactly been moderate in his affections for his Queen. I saw them on the dance floor at Beltane. And at your mother's return banquet... *and* at your wedding... "

"He would probably understand if I told him I was staying here because I was madly in love with someone, or getting married or something "

"Then simply omit all the details." A slight scowl crept onto his face evidently her intractability in this matter was starting to annoy him.

"Lucius, you know that I can't." She drew his face down to hers and kissed him delectably but he was not distracted for long.

"What if the school governors prevailed upon Dumbledore to ask you to stay for another year?" he asked, turning his lips a fraction from hers. "Would you do it?"

"Maybe, but first I'd have to ask Mother what the situation with the Orcs was like. You know how they are about breaking non-aggression treaties," she reminded him. "Although, wouldn't that do your cousin Severus out of the Defence Against the Dark Arts position for another year? Everyone keeps telling me how badly he wants to get it."

Lucius laughed. "Darling, if you think I'd put crusty old Snape's career aspirations ahead of keeping you here, you've got a rather exalted opinion of my altruistic tendencies."

"*What* altruistic tendencies?" she asked, smirking up at him, as though his self-interested streak was a very loveable quirk indeed.

"Dear lady, I'll have you know I made a sizeable contribution to St. Mungo's Hospital this summer."

"And what did you get out of that, darling?"

"A tremendous amount of personal satisfaction in knowing that people suffering from magical maladies and injuries were being cared for, my dear! And... choice seats in the VIP box at the Quidditch World Cup for the entire family, and quite a few brownie points with the Minister of Magic, but that was nothing compared to my great pleasure in helping the less fortunate "

At that point, he had to shield himself from a spirited splashing with bath suds.

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The following Monday dawned cold and grey, again bringing torrents of freezing rain. Emily sat at breakfast feeling rather sleepy and bemused, not quite fully returned from her sybaritic weekend with Lucius until a small crowd of owls descended on the Gryffindor table, surrounding Hermione Granger. Emily glanced up from her breakfast as Hermione opened a series of letters, seeming to grow more and more disgusted with each one. Seconds later, a sharp cry of, *"Owww!"* came up from the Gryffindor table, and Hermione rushed from the great hall, eyes tearing, with her hands held painfully in front of her from amidst the Slytherins, Viktor Krum watched her leave with a very concerned look on his face.

Emily was up from her seat and over to the Gryffindor table in a moment. "Potter, Weasley, what happened?" she asked, bending down to whisper to them privately.

Ron Weasley silently handed her one of the letters that Hermione had left behind, a sinister little missive contrived from letters cut from newsprint and pasted onto a sheet of paper

You are a wicked girl. Harry Potter deserves

better. Go back from where you came from Muggle.

"Oh, *really*," Emily hissed, throwing the letter down onto the table. "Where did Miss Granger rush off to?"

"The hospital wing there was bubotuber pus in one of them, and it got all over her hands," Ron Weasley said.

"Bloody hell," she snapped, and stalked off muttering a torrent of eloquent Arcadian profanity under her breath.

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Rubeus Hagrid mentioned at lunch that Hermione had not turned up in his Care of Magical Creatures class so Emily quickly finished her own lunch and headed off to the hospital wing to check on the girl's condition. She found Hermione hunched miserably on a cot, her hands covered with foul-smelling anti-inflammation salve and doing her best to drink some soup from a mug. Her poor hands were so swollen that she could barely bend her fingers.

"Hello, Professor," Hermione said as Emily came in, offering a little, resigned smile.

Emily sat down on the edge of the cot and patted Hermione's knee comfortingly. "Harry and Ron told me what happened. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone."

"And of course it had to happen on a day when I wasn't wearing my Amulet of Protection," the girl said sourly.

Over the course of the school year, Emily had grown very fond of the brainy young Gryffindor. She now often joined Minerva McGonagall in singing Hermione's praises, noting her grace in the face of provocation, her loyalty to her friends, her endless intellectual curiosity. Seeing Hermione in this condition made a surge of outrage well up again but she hesitated to vent it in front of her student. Instead, she took off a silver pendant from around her neck her own Amulet of Protection and as Hermione watched, she spoke a long incantation under her breath, in some complicated, melodic language, followed by a silent invocation of her Word of Power. When she opened

her hand again, the amulet glowed with a faint green light for a few seconds and then she looped the long silver chain around Hermione's neck.

"There that'll keep bubotuber pus off you. Now, I want you to keep that until all of this dies down. Promise me you'll wear it every day, without fail, all right?"

Hermione nodded, looking up at her gratefully. "I will, promise. Thanks, Professor."

"Anytime. Now, is there anything you need up here? Can I bring you something to read?"

"If you could ask Ron and Harry to get me copies of their notes for the classes I've missed today," Hermione said. "I've missed Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures. I've got Arithmancy this afternoon Seamus Finnigan should have notes for that class. And... I'd kind of like Buckminster Swain's *Encyclopaedia,* too."

"Consider it done."

Emily left Hermione a bit more cheerful, settled back amongst her pillows and examining the Faery amulet with interested brown eyes. Before lunch was over, Emily had asked Potter, Weasley, and Finnigan to keep Hermione current on the day's classwork, and dispatched a house-elf up to the hospital wing with the *Encyclopaedia.*

Then she went into the teacher's lounge, picked up a quill, and fired off an absolutely excoriating letter to the editor of *Witch Weekly.*

Part Second: The Hart Rampant: Chapter 17, Part 2

Chapter 22 of 55

In which Professor Swain discovers the delights of a dual life as both a Hogwarts professor and Lucius Malfoy's mistress, until a chance encounter with a desperate Faery prostitute in Knockturn Alley sends her to the most unlikely person for aid. Meanwhile, Severus Snape finds himself alone and adrift in the Mushroom Circle, a Faery nightclub...

Chapter 17, Part 2:

Hermione Granger received no more hate mail after that second week of March, but Emily told her to hang on to the Amulet of Protection till the end of April, just in case. As March gave way to April, Miss Granger was not the only one at Hogwarts having an eventful spring.

Spring. That first week of April, Emily had walked down to Hogsmeade on an errand and noticed the first shoots of new grass poking up from the wet ground and the first tiny green buds of leaves on the trees. That long, dismal, claustrophobic Scottish winter was finally over, which filled her with mad exhilaration. At home, everyone would have been having new finery made for Gwydion's Beltane celebration, and dreaming of some likely romantic interest to pursue around the bonfires, but here, it was enough to no longer be hemmed in by that endless ice and snow.

Emily's second term at Hogwarts had fallen into an extremely interesting pattern by the time spring finally came, even without the possibility of dancing around the ritual fires. She wouldn't have called this pattern entirely fulfilling or absolutely pleasant, but it certainly was *interesting.*

On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, she would meet with Professor Snape, and he would try to stick her with various pointy objects while being insufferably sarcastic, prickly, and uncooperative about the whole thing. Additionally, Snape's attempts to stick her were growing more and more disturbingly expert all the time he had taken to dagger fighting with even more facility than he did to fencing, again absorbing all she taught him with an almost frightening quickness. Dagger combat was similar to sword combat, once one adjusted to the faster reactions required of a closer, more intimate style of fighting; and Snape was clearly practising on his own. As she continued to train him, there were an increasing number of moments in which she genuinely would not have wanted to encounter this sedate school don in a dark alley.

But despite Snape's perennial funk, it actually was pleasant to have a real sparring partner at Hogwarts, and she would have been enjoying their sessions if someone could have cast a *Silencio* spell on that good gentleman in addition to covering his scowl with a fencing mask. Emily still had no idea what was prompting Snape's extreme moodiness. She imagined that he must have been feeling the pressure after the Second Task perhaps he had been given some extra duties to do with the Third Task or some such, because now he was just a bleeding edge of raw nerves. During their training sessions, Emily would try to keep their personal interaction to an absolute bare minimum of communication necessary for the task at hand, but somehow Snape always managed to slip some sly barb or insinuation into their talk anyway. By the time he left her in the evenings, she was never sorry to see him go.

Then after Snape spent the week winding her patience up to the furious boiling point, most weekends she would meet Lucius at some luxurious hotel for another illicit wallow in sex and self-indulgence. The more she acted like a spoiled, selfish, irreverent little brat, the more Lucius seemed to enjoy it. The more Snape annoyed her with his sarcasm and his criticisms, his dire, endlessly dissatisfied looks, the hard, cold, immovable fact of his distrust and dislike the more she longed to get away from him and let Lucius shag her into blessed oblivion.

And Lucius, it seemed, was always happy to oblige, as often as possible. The man either had the drives of a satyr, or a sexless marriage. It was not unusual for him to want to make love right after he woke up in the morning, then to want a leisurely second session in the satiated languor that followed a luxurious midday meal, then to drift off to sleep after a final performance in the evening, like some long symphony with multiple, climactic endings.

Lucius also seemed disturbingly well-practiced at this business of keeping his wife, whose material greed seemed to know no bounds, happy, while enjoying Emily's attentions in various hotel rooms. When he had arranged a tryst with her at Hogwarts, just after the Second Task, beneath the very noses of his wife and other *respectable* peers, she had marvelled at his brazen subtlety. It made her wonder, now and then, how many times he had done this sort of thing before, and with whom but this proof of his jaded libertine's ways was strangely reassuring to her. Certainly she would not leave a man like Lucius Malfoy bleeding when she said her good-byes for home. No doubt the send-off would be memorable, but she also had no doubt he would be amusing himself with someone else within a month.

No doubt about it, Second-World men were some damned complicated bastards.

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Sometime in the second week of April, Draco Malfoy came to see Professor Swain during her office hours.

Since the beginning of her involvement with his father, Emily had begun avoiding the boy in small ways, cutting her eyes away when she saw him with his friends in the halls, answering his questions briefly when he raised his hand in class. She could see some measure of disappointment in his eyes, as he seemed to be working hard in her class, actively seeking her approval. Every time Draco talked to her, he always had questions about everything how did a swordmaker know how to balance a blade, how were daggers weighted, how long had the Fianna been using vorpal blades, did they make them so sharp through magic, or smithcraft, or a combination of both? If

Faeries couldn't forge iron to make steel, what were her armaments made of? She was teaching a more complex system of fencing than the European models, why was that? Where did her style of blade combat come from? Was it uniquely Arcadian? Were there books on the subject?

It seemed that Draco was genuinely interested in melee combat and armoury for their own sake, not just as a way to impress girls or slay his enemies. He turned in an extra credit essay on the use of magic in folded-metal blade forging, with a bibliography and footnotes, into which he had very obviously put a great deal of independent research really a fourth cousin to literature. In short order, the younger Malfoy had become her low-technology combat expert in much the same way Hermione Granger was her Arcadian magic and culture expert.

Emily felt guilty about giving short shrift to such a diligent pupil. But seeing a young, tender version of Lucius looking at her so trustingly, and with some admiration, when she was currently embroiled in a highly improper but exceedingly rewarding relationship with his father, was like a fishhook twisting in her conscience. So when Draco turned up in her office that day, looking across her desk with those sullen, appealing grey eyes, more than a little of her melted.

"Could I talk to you?" he asked.

"Of course, Mr. Malfoy, what about?"

"Privately?" Draco added, with a curt nod toward the other inhabitants of her office. Hermione Granger, Viktor Krum, George Weasley, and her usual gang of Ravenclaws were sprawled around the room drinking tea and poring over various books.

"All right let's go into the classroom."

Once inside, Draco leaned against one of the front row desks and faced her grimly, folding his arms across his chest.

"I don't think I can do it," he said. "Make up a Word of Power."

"Just keep trying," she said reassuringly. "It hasn't even been two terms."

"But my father said that most people who can do it, do it in a few months." Draco's expression was clearly worried. "Can't you tell me what I'm doing wrong, or something?"

"All right, I'll try to give you some more pointers," Emily said, smiling. "Are you trying to create your Word in English?"

"Yeah, I was," Draco said, nodding.

"Don't, then. Like I said in class, it's harder to create a Word using the rules of a living language. The diphthongs and customary letter arrangement of your native language get so ingrained into you that creating a totally new word from it can be very difficult. Can you speak any other languages besides English?"

"I know some French, and some Latin. Before I turned eleven, my parents hired tutors for me. My parents speak French, and my father wanted me to learn it because the Malfoys descended from Norman wizard lords who came here from France," Draco said proudly. "And I learned Latin because Father says it's the traditional language of magicians and scholars."

"He's right," Emily said, nodding. "So you probably shouldn't try to create your Word from Latin either. It's widely studied by Muggle scholars and clergy, and among wizards, it really is practically a living language. So that leaves French... hmmm."

"I should try to create my Word from French, then?" Draco asked.

"Not modern French, as it's also a living language with millions of speakers. In your case, I would be looking into the old French dialects that no one speaks anymore. You already knew modern French is derived from ancient Latin, right?"

"Yes, that's why they call it a Romance language," Draco asserted.

"Exactly. But in between modern French and ancient Latin, there were a lot of other languages. Gaulish came out of roughly the same area. There are also lots of old regional French dialects, like Francien, Picard, and Norman. Then in the south of France, you had the Provençal dialects, like Languedocien and Auvergnat. With your background, since you already know French and Latin, I'd say you should try studying some Old French."

"But then I have to wait until I've learned a whole different language before I can start using a Word of Power," Draco complained. "My father told me that your father was using one by his second month in the Faerielands, while my grandfather couldn't manage it at all."

"Well, my father wasn't exactly typical by anyone's standard," Emily said. "Judging yourself by his example is kind of like getting upset because you're not as good at Transfiguration as Professor McGonagall."

"But my father told me that if it takes any longer than about six months, you probably can't do it. Not ever."

Emily sighed. "All right... there is some truth to what your father told you, I'm afraid. But a lot of humans can't do it, Draco some of the top students at this school haven't managed it. In the meantime, you'll just learn to perform the Faery arts with your wand, like any other sort of magic."

"But... I have to. My father... no one in our family has ever managed it, and we've been Tithesmen going back four generations. My father really wants me to do it." The boy's serious eyes met hers. "You're his friend, you know how he is. He always wants me to be the best at everything."

"For what it's worth you're the best fencer at this school," Emily confided and was rewarded with the sight of the boy's face lighting up in a rare, genuinely happy grin. "You can tell your father I said that, too, but don't be repeating it to anyone here at school or I'll deny it completely."

"Better than Potter?" he asked with a flash of his father's smirk.

"Harry could give you a good run for your money, but you practice more and enjoy it more. I think Harry will probably drop fencing the second he can play Quidditch again fifth year."

"His loss," Draco said scornfully.

Emily laughed. "It sounds like you've got your work cut out for you, then. Perhaps you can drop by the library today and ask Madam Pince to help you pick out some ancient language texts so you can get started."

Draco rolled his eyes in anticipation of all the work ahead, but he didn't complain aloud. Then he stopped, just as he was turning to leave. "Professor?"

"Yes?"

"I heard Mrs. Rosier talking to my parents at my Grandmother's birthday party. Did you really whack her with an etiquette book at Flourish and Blotts?"

The boy really *did* have his father's smirk, didn't he Emily blushed intensely.

"I didn't *whack* her with it," she said. "Mrs. Rosier was just being a bit obtuse about a matter of etiquette, so I... recommended a book to her, is all."

"Oh, come on. What really happened? I won't tell anyone," Draco promised.

"I'll have no impertinence out of you, young man that's my story and I'm sticking to it," she said, with an ironic warning look.

"Mrs. Rosier is such a bloody cow Pansy's mum hates her too," the boy said. "I wish I could have seen you do that."

"Draco... !" But she couldn't help laughing, against all teacherly propriety, which only made Draco Malfoy smirk all the worse. He quickly made his exit, grinning wickedly.

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Toward the end of April, Emily received another little urgent post owl from Lucius a parchment envelope affixed to a tiny box. His letter read:

Darling,

So, what are you doing for Beltane this year?

It so happens that everyone is going to be in Paris that week for one of their orgies of Galleon spending. That leaves me all alone in the country this weekend, longing to chase you down all these dark corridors.

Enclosed please find a small token of my esteem which will also act as a Portkey. Friday night at half-seven p.m. go somewhere private, and put it on. Don't bother packing anything but a toothbrush.

I simply can't wait to give you the grand tour. The grounds are all in bloom.

Emily fell back into the cushioned window seat, that letter pressed to her heart. She imagined Lucius, all alone at Malfeasant. Just the two of them, with that grand manor as a setting for their mutual indulgences. He had promised her the grand tour, and now he had found the opportunity, just like he said he would. "*It so happens*" nothing more than likely he had contrived this for weeks, so that he could spend Beltane with her again.

Then she remembered the tiny box that had accompanied the letter and began unwrapping it very carefully. Lucius had said that this item, whatever it was, would act as a Portkey, and she didn't want to touch it and be transported too soon by its magic.

Inside that box was a ring... in the shape of a serpent. It was fashioned of platinum, the same as her emerald serpent bracelet, its body crusted with black diamonds, with white diamond eyes.

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The Friday before Beltane dawned bright, warm, and positively glorious.

Emily awoke early, with the sunrise, and spent a wonderfully long time just sitting, leaning on her windowsill with her head pillowed on her arms, feeling the warm skirling wind lifting her hair off her neck, breathing the scents of flower pollen and grass, and watching the sunlight sparkle in the shifting waters of the lake. It felt wonderful to leave off all those heavy, unwieldy clothes and just sit in the sun in a sheer cotton chemise without feeling cold and miserable.

Her classes slipped by very easily that day. She had most of her students off in little groups practicing Glamours, which left her free to sit on the window seat, enjoying the beautiful weather, and to think about what she would wear to greet Lucius. At dinner she took only a ladle of soup, knowing that she would be well entertained that evening. On her way out, she casually mentioned to Dumbledore that she would be away again that weekend he was by now so used to hearing this sort of report that he very casually smiled and nodded his acknowledgement before segueing right back into conversation with Madame Maxime.

At last, she was alone in her apartments after supper, freshly bathed and coiffed, oiled and powdered, wearing a lacy chemise and clasping sheer black stockings to her garters. Sometime during her last class of the day, she had decided to wear an especially racy little black spidersilk frock that covered her stocking tops by a bare two inches as per Lucius's preferences, she had dispensed with knickers altogether.

"Well well *well*," Emily's mirror said, as she was giving herself a final glance-over in preparation to leave. "Nobody would deny that you've got the legs for that dress, my dear, but you'd best resign yourself to standing all night."

She smiled insolently at her own reflection. "No worries. It's not as though I'll be wearing it long."

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As was now her custom, Emily covered her seductive dress with a long cloak before leaving but tonight she had chosen a trailing opera cloak of such fine silk that she didn't think walking through the great front foyer in only that cloak, and this frock, and without knickers on, would be quite proper. So, she did what any amorous Faerie would have done and made the walk down to the gate that marked the end of the Apparition wards completely Obscured.

Just beyond the gate, she brought out the black diamond ring, and made to slip it on her finger but then paused, stopping herself in mid-gesture. For a moment, she had been about to slip the black serpent ring onto her third finger, left hand. It had seemed natural, because the only ring she had ever worn before had been a slender platinum wedding band, for what now seemed like a very short time.

Then she shifted the black serpent into her left hand, and slid it onto the third finger of her right hand and immediately, the familiar hooking tug of a Portkey slid into her stomach and jerked her forward, toward Malfeasant, and Lucius.

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The Portkey transported her to a terrace just off the main hall on the east side of the house a terrace bordered about by full-blooming roses lit to nearly glowing crimson by the light of the waning sunset. Lucius was waiting for her on a low stone bench, dressed in the casual *déshabillé* of a black silk shirt and robes, his loose hair blowing gently in the breeze. He greeted her with a kiss. "Happy Beltane, love. Now, I believe you wanted to see the gardens?"

Someone in the Malfoy family was fond of roses the grounds were ablaze with them. Red hybrid teas surrounded the house in classic Tudor rose beds; as the grounds extended toward the orchards and woods, they gave way to a multitude of other colours and sizes, from tiny silver blossoms, to cream-yellow blooms, edged with pink, that were nearly the size of cabbages. Farther along were copses of rambling rose, lilac, and wisteria vines, climbing on the trunks of trees and over loggias and arches. At the edge of the vast gardens was the splendid old-growth forest she remembered from the day of the hunt, a thick growth of majestic oaks and conifers, here and there with beds of wildflowers and mushrooms sprung up around their roots. The lawns were so carefully kept they were like lush velvet carpet.

Lucius led her down the paths, seeming to greatly enjoy her honest delight at the garden's prolific beauty. "Come now," he said, after an hour's walk around the grounds. "Let's go have some supper."

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He led her into the grand dining hall she remembered from the Hallowe'en weekend. The massive supper table, built to hold platters of whole roast pig at medieval banquets, looked much more cosy and inviting set with only two place settings of fine bone china and antique silver. Lucius took his place at the head of the table, with Emily at his right hand.

A moment after they took their seats, any number of covered silver platters and tureens appeared on the table. There was a profusion of luxuriant dishes, prepared with the kind of august simplicity Arcadians loved. Sevruga caviar to start, then a rich green turtle soup, and a salad of wild mixed greens that tasted as though they had been

gathered that day; followed by black truffle soufflé, lobster tail poached in butter, velvety slices of seared venison all paired with a perfect wine. The flavours and textures piled on each other like some Rabelaisian orgy of sensual bliss, until she was inhaling the aromas of an after-dessert snifter of Armagnac, and feeling very tipsy and coquettish. "I was trying to approximate one of Gwydion's nine course banquet menus, but unfortunately without Gwydion's cooking staff or his wine cellar," Lucius said apologetically.

"No need to apologise, this is *wonderful*, darling. Really." She reclined carelessly in her seat, crossing one knee over the other. Lucius's gaze was frankly drawn to the glimpse of lacy black stocking top and white thigh revealed just beneath that weightless little skirt she laughed softly and preened under his gaze.

During dinner, Lucius had been confiding any number of delicious, sensitive secrets about Ministry business to her it was endlessly titillating to know that she was privy to information any number of journalists, like that vile Rita Skeeter, would give their eye-teeth for. "Word's out that Bartemious Crouch has just about worked himself into an emotional breakdown of some sort he's left the International Magical Cooperation in the care of that simpering yes-man Percy Weasley, and Weasley's such an inexperienced little dullard that the whole department's gone to hell. Everyone's noticed it," Lucius laughed. "The best part is, I'm now on the verge of convincing Cornelius to give me leave to create a Department of Interdimensional Magical Cooperation now. Once I get the order to do so, I would get to choose my own staff."

He turned to her with the air of offering something delectable to her, tracing his fingers down her knee. "So I was thinking... rather than labour at Hogwarts, trying to hammer your arts into the heads of dullards like the Longbottom boy, you could come and work for me. You would be improving the lot of the Faery community every day and, you could be certain that the next person to take an Arcadian work visa wouldn't need to go through the same absurd rigmarole International Magical Cooperation put you though. Imagine the next Faeries to apply for work papers walking into that office and encountering you, not that narrow-minded Barty Crouch and his lapdog Weasley."

"So would I actually have a job in this new department, or would my duties be performed largely on my knees under your desk?" she asked not sure what exactly was making her feel so bold and what was making her skin flush like this. He was still stroking her knee, and she was possessed with the sudden, overpowering desire to raise his hand to her lips and suck his forefinger into her mouth.

"If you wanted to spend some time on your knees under my desk, I should do my best to accommodate you. And I do hope you would let me spend some time under your desk as well I know my work performance can only improve the more I have your thighs around my ears," he said smoothly. "As my second in command, we would get to see so very much of each other. And there would be no way for Narcissa to object, because it would all be work-related, you see."

Narcissa. Emily had half forgotten she existed. She was having a difficult time remembering that he actually was married these days, even when she came face to face with Lucius's wife. Narcissa had started to seem more like a prudish older sister who didn't want disreputable creatures like Faeries in the house, not unlike Elsie and Priscilla. Lucius never wore his wedding ring in her presence he wasn't wearing it now.

"What are you feeling right now, love?" His voice was a soft, insinuating whisper.

"It's... " Her skin was hectically flushed; even under the tissue-light silk of her dress, she could feel the faintest film of sweat beginning on her neck, between her shoulder blades. "It's *hot* in here."

The unshockable grey gaze raked over her with undisguised appetite. "It certainly is."

"Lucius... what did you do?" She reached into the caviar bowl for a fragment of ice, and held it against the hollow of her throat.

He laughed. "Oh? Is it so impossible that you might be excited by my mere presence, love?"

"Of course not but... " The icy water droplets slithering down between her breasts were setting her every nerve ending alight. "This has to be some kind of magic. Don't tell me it isn't."

"Well... I might possibly have put a drop or two of... timed-release multi-stage aphrodisiac potion in the wine," he said, smiling especially charmingly at her. "You'll only become more aroused as its effect builds."

"*Lucius!*" Emily stared at him, shocked. "You might have at least asked me "

He chuckled wickedly, swirling the brandy in his glass. "I wanted to surprise you."

She pressed the ice to one overheated temple. "I can't imagine why someone with your looks and your charm needs to slip aphrodisiacs to women."

"Please. It's the only way to get Narcissa to take off her bloody corset." He set down the brandy glass, took her hand and brought her up out of her chair in another second she had glued herself to him. A long draught of kiss from his lips filled her with the most heavenly relief for just a moment, and then he was drawing her along one of the corridors. "Come on, there's something I want to show you."

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Lucius chuckled deliciously. "Of course they are. They were men who enjoyed their pleasures, and being Malfoys, there was no lack of it offered to them. I have to admit, our family has turned out its share of notorious rakes and cads."

"Imagine that," she said, with a knowing look back at him.

"I'll have to tell you all of their stories sometime it's a tale to put the most lurid Gothic novel to shame. And I've been absolutely wooden with the desire to fuck you in front of all of them for the last month or so." His hand slid down onto her breast as he spoke, but his tone was so casual that he might have been commenting on the brushstroke technique used on the canvas in front of them.

"What... you mean here? In front of "

"Yes, in front of all of them. Let the sons of bitches watch it's not as though they didn't do the same every chance they got when they were alive."

"Wait, but... " But it was far too easy to completely suspend her own will when she was with him. Lucius was so sure of everything, at every moment, even when he gently eased her down onto the velvet divan, leaned between her thighs, and deftly unfastened his trousers in one lithe movement. She slid a hand down into his clothes to discover that "wooden with desire" had been an apt description indeed for his current state. He thrust luxuriously into her, hands strong on her hips.

"*There you are, little slut...*" She could feel the weight of dozens of pairs of eyes on her as intensely as the hot press of her lover's body above her, his lips on her neck.

All those Malfoy ancestors, forever watchful, forever mute, now staring as their sun-god heir ravished a Faerie in the heart of their ancestral home. They had to know Lucius had a wife, the fairest Pure-Blood ever seen... but now he was spending his passions with a ferally beautiful creature so alien that her blood ran blue as rivers, whose biology was such that to win her favours promised hundreds of nights of indulgence without consequence. No wonder her kind was both so coveted and despised here. Emily hid her face in Lucius's shoulder, her skin burning with humiliation, even as her treacherous body strained up to him for more, clamouring to be used harder.

Some of the blond, patrician ancestor lords were scandalised, disgusted, while others looked on them with lecherous nostalgia or open covetousness. Gilles de Malfoi looked as though he thought he could have done it ever so much better, if given the chance; Saturnius Malfoy frankly stared, looking as though he would have taken Lucius's place in an instant.

Perhaps one day Lucius himself would be a watchful, silent painted image on these walls, but for now he had flesh and blood, and he made the most of it in such form as to make his most depraved ancestor proud. Emily had begun to feel the potency of the potion he had slipped to her unawares even more intensely now she couldn't recall feeling like this since adolescence, when her body suddenly began to crave the touch of a healthy male more than anything else. Overpowering arousal thrummed in her temples, between her thighs then the orgasm surged up inexorably, and she didn't care who was watching.

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a chore that I started wishing that I was a bit *less* materially satisfied."

Lucius didn't look entirely thrilled with this answer. He was silent for a long moment, pensively watching the fire and sipping from his glass, her arm loosely draped over his shoulder. Emily looked at his averted profile, at the black diamond serpent glinting on her right hand and remembered with some embarrassment that she had not yet thanked him for his gift.

How used he must be to expressing his affection by giving people things, she mused. Nimbus 2001s for his son's entire Quidditch team in Draco's second year of course she had heard about that bit of extravagant generosity through the Hogwarts gossip grapevine. Then two years later, the boy was complaining that he didn't have a Firebolt. Narcissa apparently required *dinner, the opera, and something from the family jeweller's*to entice her into bed with her husband, and even then, it seemed she only acquiesced reluctantly. It would seem that real gratitude was in short supply in this man's life, she reflected.

"What could I possibly ask you for after you've just given me this gorgeous diamond ring," she said, caressing his arm. "Thank you so much, love. You're kinder to me than I deserve."

He turned an adorable look of reproach at her. "You're making me feel a bit useless here, darling. If you could have anything at all, what would it be? Tell me."

"I'd settle for peace in our time."

"I'm serious," he protested mildly.

"So am I," she replied. "If the Mother Goddess told me that she would grant me one boon, I know exactly what I'd ask. 'Please, oh Lady of the Worlds, make sure that no Arcadian Orc ever attacks another Faerie. I want for you to end the conflicts between us once and for all, make them happy with the lands that they have, and make them leave us alone forever. Could you please arrange for the 3022 war to have been the last one, and make my profession completely obsolete, so I can settle down and write treatises on pre-Christian Celtic mythology for the rest of my life. Thank you.'"

Lucius laughed softly. "I'll see what I can do." Then he set his wineglass aside and become very absorbed in kissing her neck, his fingers trailing up her thigh again, hooking under her garter.

"Thank you, my love, you're most kind... " Her skin was igniting under the touch of his lips, breaking into goosebumps under the heat of his breath. The scent of purest male lust filled her breath, and she clutched his shoulders, delicately curled her nails against his back.

*I've thought of something I'd like,*she whispered into his ear. *I want your cock.*

She needed to ask no more of him than that. A second later, he had forcibly bent her over the chaise, velvet under her belly, brocade cushions under her cheek. He forced her thighs apart with one knee, and poised himself above her, letting her feel just the hard silk of his tip. *Is this what you want?*

Yes, she breathed. *Yes, please...*

*Then beg for it, slut,*came the drawling whisper and she did, with melting, desperate eloquence, straining back to take him, all but ripping the upholstery from the chaise beneath her. Her lover was pleased with this supplication in return, his full weight sank onto her back, his full length into the slick warmth inside her. He worked her hard, cruelly; all the while murmuring adoring filth into her ear, the back of her neck. *That day in the pub, I never saw anyone who needed a man in her as badly as you did yes you gorgeous whore oh God, the way you back onto it harder yessss*

If Malfeasant had a voice, if those walls of carved stone and polished wood could talk, they could have described the ravishing of any number of young women over the centuries village maidens corrupted by noble lords, teenage brides brought to the altar, then deflowered. But tonight, this *Walpurgisnacht*, it was no virginal servant girl or petulant aristocratic bride that the Malfoy patriarch was embracing, but the daughter of a Goddess worshipped with wine, revelry, and unrestrained licentiousness on this her highest of holy days. They drew this frenzy out for a long, sweaty, sore, blissful time, until he built the tension within her to shrieking inevitability, spilling his own lust into her shuddering body a moment later.

Afterward, they collapsed on the Oriental rug before the fire, spent and exhausted, and lay in each other's arms for some measureless amount of time. Emily distantly remembered that it was here, before this very hearth, that she had seen Lucius and all those grim, serious men engrossed in that deadly earnest conversation at the house party in November. She thought about indulging her curiosity and asking him what they were all talking about, but then realised that she couldn't ask that question without admitting that she had been sneaking around his house Obscured, spying on him and his guests.

She decided to keep her curiosity to herself.

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pronounced tonight. Now she needed him too much, he had rendered her too vulnerable. She craved him, and she hated him. "So you think I'm a whore and a slut, do you?"

"Yes," he said, absolutely unperturbed. "But I adore sluts, they're absolutely my favourite sort of woman. You can be as much of a selfish whore as you like with me."

"You really like corrupting people, don't you," she growled. It was not a question.

In another second, he had broken her hold with surprising deftness, and skilfully wrestled her beneath him. Perhaps under this kind of duress, she wasn't fighting him as much as she might have or perhaps Lucius had become more experienced at this sort of thing since his youth.

"Come off it, Miss Knight of the Realm you're just as corrupt as I am." He pushed her onto her back, pinning her supine beneath his greater weight. "I brought you here because this is where I spent my wedding night... this is where I deflowered my wife and sired my son. And now I'm going to lay you on this same bed, *my Lady*, and fuck you until you can't walk straight."

She half-resisted as he roughly covered her again, but when he did, she wondered how she had ever felt complete without him inside her. He liked this sense of corruption, seemed to revel in profaning his marriage bed. The flawless mantle of perfect composure was slipping now there was a sense of atavistic *freedom* to him that she had never seen before. He was glorious and he frightened her. The Greek prince Paris, consummating his illicit seduction of Helen of Troy, might have looked like this.

More lewd endearment, and his tongue, delved into her ear. *I was in bed with my new wife, and all I wanted was to have you on the hay again. I'm supposed to devote every drop of sperm I have to carrying on the family name, but I'd rather spend it in your belly,* came the brutal, urgent whisper. *You like hearing that, don't you...*

Yes...

Yes, she did it was the purest, worst kind of hubris to imagine Lucius on his wedding night, making love to his perfect new bride, but lusting for *her.* Now she could only strain against him, as inarticulate as an animal. She now understood what motivated cats to hoarsely yowl their receptivity into the night, hoping for some relief. This arousal was unbearable, painful; she was pleading with him so fervently for release from this insane tension that she was actually crying with it. Lucius kissed the tears from her face.

Tell me you love me, he whispered.

Oh by the Mother, was *that* all he wanted. At this rate, she had been half convinced that he was going to demand that she carry his children, make her sign some unholy contract in blood.

I love you... She couldn't repeat it too often, or impassionedly enough. Later, recalled in a more tranquil state of mind, the words would seem impersonal, more the plaints of a maenad priestess to the god Dionysus than a heartfelt endearment from Emily Swain to her lover, Lucius Malfoy. At the time, however, there was no denying that she felt every syllable of it.

She saw him throw his head back in triumph, his lips curling back over his teeth in snarling bliss and then he couldn't hold himself back any longer either. A torrent of words coming from him, words she barely registered *littlefuckingbitchthinkyoucanignoremedoyouyou'remineyouneedme* and the sensation of bared teeth against her neck. He pinioned her wrists against the pillow above her head, making her gasp, the cruel strength of him making her shudder, fingers biting into her wrists, teeth biting into her neck, rising and falling like a savage, exultant animal above her.

Then her entire body was racked with orgasm, and rational thought was impossible.

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Emily was unappeased. "Do you always keep Healing Potion in a drawer of your bedside table?" she asked, with a raised eyebrow.

"Well, yes, actually. During the drier months I'll sometimes get nosebleeds during the night," he said mildly. His response was so plausible and immediate that it had to be the truth she was embarrassed for her moment of suspicion.

Lucius had her favourite breakfast sent up on the dot of nine a.m. *oeufs de caviare,* whole-wheat baguette, and Veuve Cliquot, plus a large pitcher of ice water, as both of them needed to do a bit of rehydrating after the previous night. Lucius put on another of those luxurious bespoke silk robes and wrapped another one around her. They ate on the balcony overlooking the rose garden; upon returning to the bedroom, the bed was made up with fresh, clean linens, as though the dark blue bloodstain had never existed at all.

Sometime later, he drew her bath for her, towelled her dry. He was in such a sweet, boyish, glowing mood that morning, almost like a young bridegroom on his honeymoon.

"You know, if you had just told me there was an aphrodisiac potion you liked, I would have tried it at least once," Emily said, as he combed her hair out afterward.

"I'm sorry, dear, I really thought you would enjoy it," he protested mildly. "You certainly seemed as though you liked it at dinner. And in the gallery, and in the hall, and in bed "

"Well yes, I did enjoy it, but that's not the point. The point is, there was no need to be so underhanded about it. I can't help but feel manipulated when I'm given something unawares, is all."

"Manipulated? Please this, from the woman who's had me wrapped around her finger from the moment I met her," he said, with fond, mocking reproach. "What do we have to manipulate each other over? I've always been completely open about my desire to shag you into unconsciousness from the first, if you'll remember. Really, my love, I'm not going to demand that you remain loyal to me unto death now I merely wanted to hear you say you loved me at that moment. It was a very highly charged moment, if you recall."

"How could I forget." She felt a surge of gratitude to him for making it all so easy. To hear him say it, grandiose promises of love had simply been another way of adding intensity to their coupling, like the potion, like the feeling of all those judgmental, libidinous oil portraits watching them.

Lucius brushed a soft kiss over her cheek. "Some moments are simply so intense that one wants to feel every part of you is accessible whether it's your mouth, that luscious quim of yours, or your heart. Come now, it's not like we're engaged or anything that wouldn't suit you, or me."

Emily laughed. "You're right the reason why this suits me so well is that there isn't any chance of it ever being serious."

"Oh?" She had apparently agreed with him too emphatically, because now he looked sulky. "There, now you've reduced me to saying that you don't have to love me so long as you keep using me in bed. Are you satisfied now, or do I have to lick your boots as well... ?"

The sight of this gorgeous, endlessly self-assured man pouting because she didn't care enough for him was adorable of course she then had to twine her arms around his neck and kiss his pouting mouth, and reassure him with protestations of her love and adoration, until he was happy again.

Late that afternoon, Lucius walked her to the end of the Malfeasant Apparition wards. He only let her Apparate back to Hogwarts after making plans for their next weekend together, and after several of those luscious good-bye kisses; the kind that let her know what an agony it was to let her out of his arms.

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would bid her farewell at the year's end Leaving Feast and call her obligation to him discharged. So why shouldn't she take a bit more time off? Just a temporary arrangement, nothing permanent anything too long-term wouldn't have suited her or Lucius.

The evening after her return from Malfeasant, Emily noticed the fingerprints bruised into her forearms, no doubt from when Lucius had held her down on the bed. She could have gotten rid of the bruises with a few drops of Healing Potion but instead she bore these marks with a strange pride and kept worrying at them sentimentally so they wouldn't heal.

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"Let's see... how about someone we haven't had up here before. Mr. Longbottom." Emily motioned the boy up to the front of the classroom, smiling encouragingly at him, but Neville was visibly nervous as he made his way down the aisle. She noticed Professor Snape impatiently rolling his eyes at the ceiling as though he expected Neville to flub this demonstration in a spectacularly catastrophic manner.

The hapless little Gryffindor turned toward the class, closed his eyes, and seemed to concentrate almost pathetically hard, and then silently spoke a word. At first, nothing happened. Pansy Parkinson let out one of those grating little titters.

Neville closed his eyes again, composed himself, and concentrated so hard that the freckles stood out in stark relief on his pale face.

Suddenly, the boy's short, chubby figure shot spectacularly upward his silhouette grew taller, and thinner. His hair whitened and elongated... then his nose was suddenly much longer, and had been broken multiple times... his black school robes lengthened into flowing dark purple velvet, edged with gold embroidery... until Headmaster Dumbledore was standing before her. The illusion was marvellously, convincingly detailed, down the Headmaster's half-spectacles, his veined, age-spotted hands, and the springtime blue of his eyes.

"I'm... I'm Albus Dumbledore," this vision said, in the oddest voice, as if Dumbledore was doing a flawless imitation of Neville Longbottom's piping, insecure intonations. "I'm the most powerful wizard alive! Even You-Know-Who fears me! You leave me alone, or I'll... I'll make you leave me alone! I'll hex you! I'll jinx you... I'll... I'll... "

The boy was using an auditory Glamour, calling on his memory of the Headmaster's voice to project its sound, and again, the illusion was flawless. Neville had Dumbledore's slightly weary, low tenor tones down cold.

Emily stepped back, amazed. "Well done, Mr. Longbottom, that's an awfully impressive Glamour. That's a very clever choice of identities to assume while Headmaster Dumbledore's appearance will provoke fear in a common thief or a Dark wizard, it won't cause a widespread panic if other people are nearby."

Dumbledore's Neville's jaw dropped. No one except the kindly Professor Sprout ever praised Neville's schoolwork, and no one, as far as anyone knew, had ever called Neville clever. And now Professor Swain had done both in front of everyone in the classroom, including all the Slytherins and Gryffindors of his year, and Professor Snape in the bargain. The shock of this was enough to break Neville's concentration completely, and he reappeared as his usual self, blinking in amazement.

"And take twenty points for Gryffindor as well for being the first student at this school to successfully create both an auditory and a visual Glamour at the same time. Well done." Applause and cheers went up from the Gryffindors. Minerva McGonagall looked extremely happy, as well. As Neville went back to his seat, his two nearest House-mates, Ron Weasley and Dean Thomas, clapped him on the back and shook his hand. Neville looked like fainting was a very real possibility.

The bell rang at that moment, and Emily dismissed her class to lunch.

"Perhaps you're impressed with that, but I'd say borrowing the Headmaster's voice and appearance in that manner is bordering on disrespectful," came Professor Snape's silky undertone, aside to her he had somehow materialised at her elbow as she cleared her desk in preparation to leave. "And isn't twenty points just a bit extravagant of you?" The last students were filing out of the classroom toward the Great Hall.

"You saw what he did," she replied, also in an undertone. "And I didn't hear you complaining when I gave Draco Malfoy all those points during his end-of-term practical."

Snape scowled, shaking his head. "Neville Longbottom, of all people. Wonders really do never cease."

"That's not as surprising as you might think, actually," Emily replied. "We have a saying at home 'The Lady loves poets and children, geniuses and fools.' It's always the wisest and the most foolish people who seem to create the most powerful Words of Power. So in that way it doesn't surprise me that you, Hermione Granger, the Weasley twins, and Neville Longbottom have all demonstrated some facility with it."

"You think I've demonstrated proficiency, then?" Again, he looked pleased by that, but not inclined to say that he was pleased by that.

"Well, as far as I know, you created your *Mot de Puissance* entirely through self-study that takes some doing. And you certainly seemed to have a handle on Obscurantis at the Yule Ball," Emily said matter-of-factly, gathering up some papers on her desk. She slanted a curious look at him. "Dumbledore didn't help you create your Word at all? You did it entirely on your own?"

"No, he didn't assist me," Snape said. "Dumbledore has created a Word of Power?"

"Oh, yes, most definitely," Emily chuckled. "I've been told he picked up Fae magic as easily as breathing."

"So *that's* why I don't see him sometimes until he starts talking to me," Snape muttered. "I'm not surprised that he was good at it, if the Lady is supposed to love the wisest and the most foolish."

"Gwydion was the one who taught him, back when he was Prince Gwydion. Dumbledore was a Tithe page over a century ago, and he's been back during his summer holidays now and then. Gwydion likes to tell stories about how the two of them used to dress up as rustic woodsmen and then gallivant all around the countryside having adventures. But I shouldn't stand here gossiping about him if he's not told you, probably he prefers to keep it private."

She finished gathering her notes into a portfolio and headed to lunch herself. Snape preceded her to the door, opened it, and motioned her through it first with a curt, but courteous, gesture. Dislike her as he might, Severus Snape would no more have dispensed with an English gentleman's *politesse* toward women than he would have awarded an even thousand points to Gryffindor. "Thank you," she said.

Draco Malfoy sauntered up to her outside in the corridor. "I've got a question, Professor Swain how did you become a knight?"

"For the most part by being my mother's daughter," she replied.

"Seriously. Do you have to be born to it, or can you sign up, or what?" Draco asked.

"Anyone in the kingdom can sign up after their twelfth birthday, provided they can pass the physical screening tests. You start out as a page and then work your way up. Military pages have a time of it, because they have to do all sorts of menial tasks like mucking out stalls and waiting on officers' mess and the like."

"But, you know, the well-born sorts of pages can get out of that kind of thing, right?" Draco asked in a conspiratorial undertone.

"Er, no, they can't," Emily said. "I did plenty of serving at mess. The Crown Prince did as well. If you're well-born, that just means they expect you to handle more responsibility."

Draco looked taken aback by that, but his enthusiasm didn't wane. "All right. So anyone can sign up? Could I sign up if I wanted to?"

Professor Snape, who was standing next to Emily and listening to this conversation, suddenly had a brief but violent fit of coughing.

"Well, no, you couldn't you have to be a native-born Arcadian subject to get in. Really, I'm just here to teach a self-defence class, not on a recruiting drive," she said, ostensibly to Draco, but more in the direction of Professor Snape.

"What if I was a Tithe page?" Draco asked.

"Tithe pages are a rule unto themselves, to some extent. We had a former Tithe page, a Muggle emergency doctor named Catherine Orson, working at one of the field hospitals during the 3022 conflict, but that was very unusual. But Tithesmen aren't allowed to join the Fianna, even as medics. That's why Cat didn't hold any official rank,

even though she performed all the same duties as a field surgeon. Truth be told, she was training field surgeons."

"Oh, they didn't let her in because she was a Muggle?" Draco asked, looking as though if that were the case, he understood completely.

"No. They didn't let her in because she's human."

The boy's smug look faded. Draco Malfoy was used to being on the privileged side of most standards of exclusivity, and the idea that he could be excluded from a certain elite group solely due to his racial heritage was a new one to him. "Well... that doesn't seem fair," he said. "Why don't they take humans?"

"Tradition," Emily replied. "Worry over conflicting loyalties, that sort of thing."

"Oh," the boy said, disappointed. Then he took his leave of her, and Professor Snape, with a polite nod, and headed to lunch with Crabbe and Goyle, who had been hovering in attendance on him in the corridor.

Professor Snape watched him go, again with that look of faint shock and surprise on his face. Neville Longbottom had actually displayed talent in front of him, and now Draco Malfoy wanted to become a knight the Head of Slytherin was having quite a day.

"I wouldn't take that too seriously, sir," Emily said aside to Snape, seeing his look. "He wouldn't be the first teenager I've known who liked swaggering about in an impressive uniform." She nodded politely to him. "I'll see you tonight."

He nodded back with all the warmth of a polar ice cap. "Madam."

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"Now, if you're concerned about someone getting hurt, we'll go very slowly until you feel more at ease," she said in what she thought was a very reasonable tone.

"Fine," he replied after a moment.

He still seemed profoundly uncomfortable, but he went through the first drill competently enough. More than competently, truth be told, but then she had come to expect no small degree of natural ability from this particular student. The way he moved, and his personal scent, however, betrayed a great deal of nervousness, as if he was being forced to endure something he ordinarily would have avoided with all his might.

"There, that wasn't so hard, you can do it," she said, as though she had expected such from him from the beginning. "Now let's try it with you blocking me. How about in first through third. Ready?"

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Emily never knew, until a great deal of time later, why Professor Snape reacted the way he did to her first punch to her, this was just another simple drill in the spatial fields covering the head and face. All she knew was that a second after she threw her first blow at his right cheek, she was shaking her head hard, ears ringing, and gingerly rubbing her jaw, while he stared at her.

"Well, you sure didn't like that, now, did you," she said, then crossed to her workout towel and spat blue-tinged saliva into it.

"I'm... I'm terribly sorry, Professor," Snape said with a touch of an uncharacteristic stammer.

"No, no good work. That's the first time you've landed an attack on me all year, you know if you were a student, I'd give you twenty points for Slytherin. Your right hook's even faster than your parry *seconde*." She crossed back to him, and reassumed the combatant's stance. "Ready?"

"You're bleeding," he said, quietly horrified.

"Oh my lip's a bit cut." Emily drew a fingertip over the inside of her lower lip. "It's nothing."

Apparently to Snape, it was not nothing. He immediately came forward, caught her jaw in one hand, and peeled back the corner of her lower lip with the other to inspect the extent of the damage.

"*Really*, sir, it's not serious," she said, shaking him off. "I've gotten my eyes blacked, my teeth loosened, and my fingers broken in sparring sessions before. This is trivial. I'll see Poppy for a drop of Healing Potion tonight, and it'll be gone. Come on, it's not even half-past seven yet."

But despite her assurances, Snape seemed so unnerved and disquieted by the accidental injury that he never really regained his concentration for the rest of that evening. He excused himself early, at eight-fifteen, claiming he had an excess of work to do.

Emily watched the door close behind him. *I do not hit women*, he had said, every word full of bitter resolve.

She remembered Lucius Malfoy's mocking drawl *I'm sure that he hit her, and often. I'm positive he did the same to Severus. From what I can tell, all the man ever did was sit about brooding over his business losses, nurse old grudges, and terrorise his wife and son.*

She traced the fading finger mark bruises on her own forearm.

That evening, when she visited Poppy Pomfrey's office to get some Healing Potion for her cut lip, she took a slightly larger dose of it than she had originally planned, enough that her arms healed completely, to their usual unblemished state.

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When Emily returned to her apartments from the medical wing that night, there was another of those urgent little post owls scratching at her window with a note from Lucius:

Darling

Saturday night at ten p.m. Bathsheba Hotel penthouse.

Don't be late.

She was a bit annoyed at being scheduled so late on a Saturday, instead of a Friday night or Saturday morning. He had never asked her to meet him so late before. This was the least amount of time he had ever allotted to her visit, other than the abbreviated tryst they had enjoyed on Valentine's weekend but the circumstances of that Friday hadn't bothered her in the slightest. Really, it had been flattering that he would make time to see her during a holiday weekend.

Still... Lucius had occasionally cautioned her that this would be a very, very busy year for him. Not the least of his concerns was the projected Department of Interdimensional Cooperation, which was his pet project at the moment. Probably he had some meetings to attend or some social function at his club. If the Minister of Magic had asked him to some event, of course he had to make that a priority now. Or perhaps he had some family obligation to attend it might have occurred to Narcissa to feel neglected of late.

Or... there was always the possibility that he just didn't want to spend that much time with her.

Emily re-read his note with a touch of anxiety. It didn't seem altogether different from various other of his notes to her he told her the day, the time, and the place. Addressed her as *Darling*, like usual. But the note seemed curt, almost testy. He hadn't wasted a syllable on endearments of any kind or an explanation for cutting short their time together. And why did he have to tack on that curt little admonition of 'Don't be late?' Had she ever been excessively late in meeting him? She didn't think so. It seemed to her that she was unusually punctual in meeting him, actually lust had proven to be a strong motivating factor in that respect.

But perhaps he was finding his attentions turning elsewhere, his fancy lighting on some new interest. Lucius was a very desirable man, that much was obvious. Extremely handsome and charismatic, able to make a woman all but swoon with pleasure in bed, obscenely rich, extravagantly generous and indulgent; even, at times, affectionate and sympathetic. Even tender, on occasion. Ensnaring his attentions would be quite a *coup* for many women, if one didn't mind the presence of the wife back at Malfeasant. No doubt there were more than a few ambitious little adventuresses out there who would kill to take her place in his affections.

What if... someone else already had taken her place in his affections? On the day after their first Beltane together, when she had taken offence at his comments about Muggles and decided that perhaps they were better off as friends, he hadn't wasted much time questioning that decision. Hadn't even asked her why until seventeen years had passed. It now seemed to her that he had gone on a tear through every seductive beauty at Court practically the second she walked away from him the morning afterward.

Emily lay in bed that night with a new, cold, insecure place in the pit of her stomach.

Tell me you love me, he said and she had. Now, searching her memory, she didn't think he had ever said he loved her.

It seemed very important to her now to hear that he did.

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Saturday dawned warm and muggy, with slightly overcast skies. Emily had a long, pensive lie-in that morning, listening to the students larking about on the green in front of the castle.

In the late afternoon and early evening, she drew a hot bath, and took a long, luxurious time of washing and combing out her hair, smoothing fragrant oil over her skin, making up her face, and choosing her clothes for that evening. She dressed to attract, or reclaim, a man's attention, in scandalous bits of black lace lingerie, sheer stockings, and a lacy, delicious little black cocktail dress that left a great deal of arm, thigh, and soft white cleavage exposed.

"Goodness, my pretty, let's hope he deserves all of that," Emily's mirror said as she checked her lipstick just before leaving her apartments.

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Emily arrived in Diagon Alley at least an hour earlier than Lucius had asked her to meet him. She was in an eager, excited mood, and didn't want to hang about at Hogwarts for another moment.

This late in the evening, at about nine p.m., most of the shops in Diagon Alley were closed for the night. She thought about going into the Leaky Cauldron for a drink, but changed her mind at the last minute on a Saturday night, there was too much of a risk of running into someone she knew, maybe even one of the other Hogwarts professors. Instead, she decided to go for a walk and explore a bit. Perhaps there was another, more out-of-the-way sort of pub to be found, or an obscure little late-night bookshop where she could while away the time until she could meet Lucius.

A ways beyond Gringotts Bank, she noticed a corridor leading off into a winding street of small shops, most of which still appeared to be open. *Knockturn Alley,* the sign read. It looked run down, but picturesque in a sinister, gothic sort of way.

It seemed as good a place for a brief stroll as any.

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Emily spent an amusing quarter of an hour poking around a shop called Borgin & Burkes, which looked like some kind of museum of the macabre. There was definitely a good chill to be had out of looking at the cases of shrunken heads, blood-stained playing cards, elaborate jewelled rings with chambers for poison, gallows rope even what purported to be a genuine Hand of Glory. The owner, who introduced himself as Mr. Borgin, tried to interest her in a cursed opal necklace that supposedly had claimed the lives of nineteen Muggle owners to date. "It would make a wonderful gift... for a rival, perhaps?" Mr. Borgin insinuated. Emily pictured it around Felina Rosier's or perhaps Druella Black's neck for a second, but then decided against it.

Her attention was caught by a glass case full of elaborately crafted small bottles, most of them fashioned of bright faceted glass in jewel colours, with engraved and bejewelled stoppers. "Ah, yes, the finest poisons entirely tasteless, and nearly undetectable," Borgin said. "Someone you would like to be rid of, perhaps? Like... a lover who doesn't treat you with the respect you so *obviously* deserve, dear lady?"

Finally, Borgin's oversolicitious behaviour began to get unnerving he followed her around so closely that she could smell the boiled cabbage he had had for dinner as intimately as if she had prepared it for him so she nodded farewell to him and moved on down the street. A moment later, her attention was caught by the stacks outside of a bookseller's shop, and she spent a few minutes poring over titles: *De spectris et apparationibus, Summa diabolica, De Consummatione saeculi,*a verse play called *The King in Yellow.*

"Well hello there." A fortyish wizard in a dandyish velvet robe and silk waistcoat, his hair slicked back with what smelled like an inordinate amount of Sleekeazy's, had appeared at her elbow while she riffled through the pages. "Haven't seen *you* around this part of the Alley before."

"Just doing a bit of window shopping," she said with a quick, meaningless smile. From the look of him, just another idiot labouring under the stereotype that *Faeries are all easy,* apparently. She turned back to perusing the rack of books, clearly indicating that this conversation would go no further. This was the game of Surreptitiously Ogling Emily Swain the way she was used to playing it before she met Severus Snape or re-encountered Lucius Malfoy. The next step of the game would be the one where he properly went away now.

The dandyish wizard, however, didn't seem to be playing properly. He moved up close to her elbow the scent of agitation and testosterone almost overpowered the smell of hair tonic. "So tell me, what, er, *sort* of girl are you? Which is it?" the fellow asked in a conspiratorial whisper.

She looked at him uncomprehendingly. "I'm sorry? Which is what?"

"Your poison of choice," he said, smirking. "I could get either for you, if you want to come along and talk about it."

"My poison of choice," she repeated, thinking of jewel-coloured glass bottles with ornate stoppers in Borgin & Burkes. Evidently this fellow was expecting her to be conversant with some sort of street lingo, but she had no idea what he was talking about.

"You know, darling are you a speed or a smack sort of girl? We've all got our pleasant little habits." The fellow stepped closer to her then, to her utter disgust, he slipped his arm around her waist. A second later, however, he drew it back, gasping with pain and surprise.

"I'm the kind of girl who's going to hand you that arm on a platter if you try that again," she said evenly. "You'll be going now."

The dandyish fellow took her advice and stood not on the order of going. As Emily watched him hurry off, she thought that this particular fellow would not be making assumptions about a woman's easy virtue based on the shape of her ears in the future.

He darted into one of the windowless, well-kept private clubs lining this end of Knockturn Alley, the sort of establishment that had a burly doorman out front, and that only well-heeled male patrons seemed to frequent. Emily glanced at the discreet sign above the door

Pasiphäe's.

Either the owner was Greek or someone was making a heavy-handedly ribald folklore reference. Probably what some pretentious owner thought was a classy name for his strip club. Emily checked her watch fifteen minutes to ten p.m., almost time to meet Lucius. She had best be off.

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Emily was turning back toward Diagon Alley. In another ten or fifteen seconds, she would have been gone, and entirely missed seeing the two people who emerged from Pasiphäe's at that moment. As events fell out, however, she was standing just outside that establishment at just the right time to see a very slender, very young girl emerge from the darkness within, closely followed by a very fat middle-aged wizard, dressed in fine silk business robes, a brilliantly coloured waistcoat straining over the bulk of his middle, and a white Saville Row dress shirt with a starched, rumpled collar.

The girl had the look of a Faery sluagh, instantly recognisable to anyone of Arcadian birth. There could have been no mistaking her huge black eyes, the transparent white complexion, the blue-black sheen of her hair. She was wearing a little blue Arcadian dress not unlike the one Emily was wearing at that moment, that revealed a great deal of black-stockinged leg and pale bosom, and a short blue velvet jacket. Her hair was done up in a stylish little upsweep, the almond shape of her black eyes exaggerated by cosmetics. She looked exotic and sensual, a sexy little nymphet out for a very good time or so the Glamour she had conjured would have had the observer think.

But it was not an ordinary human observer watching her from across the narrow street, but one of her countrywomen, and one who had been trained to see through Glamour at will. And what Emily saw through that Glamour commanded her attention at once.

Clearly, this child was *sick*. Under the illusion of pleasing slenderness, her face and legs were positively gaunt; there were deep shadows under her eyes and cheekbones. She looked like one of the Faery refugees whom the King's Seventh had helped relocate, after their farms were destroyed in the last conflict. Emily hoped that wherever this girl was going with that fat wizard, there was going to be a good dinner at the end of it.

It seemed, however, that wherever this fellow was taking her, she wasn't in any hurry to get there. She was shrinking away from the heavyset wizard, who had her by the upper arm and who was rather violently nuzzling his lips against her neck. The bloke had clearly had too much to drink; he was punctuating every remark with overly emphatic gestures, fists in all directions. He looked belligerent, accidentally violent, as though the slightest provocation would send him into actual abuse.

"Miss? Are you all right?" Emily called to the girl.

"Yeah, yeah, fine," the girl said offhandedly, her eyes never leaving the bellicose wizard in front of her.

"Who's that? Get rid of her, Lisa," the fat fellow said, pulling the sluagh girl against his bulk in a rather violent caress. He dragged her close, slopped a wet, explicit kiss on her lips. Then he wrapped an arm tightly around her waist, and was off down the street, pulling her along with him.

The young woman didn't go along entirely compliantly, however she stopped, drew away from him, muttered what was probably an entreaty not to be handled so roughly. The fat wizard was having none of it, as he shook his head and grabbed her around the waist again but now the girl extricated herself with some vehemence, seemed about to turn around and walk back into the club they had just left, leaving her drunken escort alone on the street.

"Fine, Lisa," he said. His hand went into his pocket, came out with a small white packet. "Shall I see if someone else would like a bit of this, then?"

Whatever he was dangling in front of her, it did the trick of securing her compliance. She turned back to the wizard with a little, apologetic smile, and took his arm again, her head hung down on the fragile white stem of her neck.

What on Earth was going on? But no matter what the situation, the girl was her countrywoman, and Knight Commander Swain-Tumnus didn't like the way she was being treated.

Emily put down the book in her hand, and followed them down the street.

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She caught up to the little sluagh girl, still being brought along by the fat, aggressive wizard. Then reached out and grasped the girl's insubstantial wrist. "Miss? I need to talk to you."

"Oh bloody hell, I said I was fine! Get your fecking hands off me! Who the hell do you think you are, anyway?" the girl demanded.

Emily wordlessly pushed her cloak back to reveal her bare right arm and the brilliant colours of the Fianna armband. The girl's black eyes took it in and, as she suspected, *knew who the hell she thought she was*immediately. "My Lady Fianna," she said in a stunned whisper. "I didn't know... I'm sorry."

The fat wizard had turned hard around when the girl in his grasp had been stopped. At first he seemed annoyed, but his expression changed when he saw Emily clearly in the gas lamp-light. "Well, hullo there, Pretty. Who's your friend, Lisa? Are you two ladies working together this evening?" He leered frankly down at the cleavage revealed by Emily's skimpy black dress. She realised a second later what he took her for, and her skin burned with humiliation. The sluagh girl cringed.

Are you a speed or a smack sort of girl? We've all got our pleasant little habits. Are you ladies working together this evening? And the white packet the fat man had dangled in front of the sluagh girl, when she seemed briefly recalcitrant.

Suddenly, everything was extremely clear to her.

Emily stared at the fat wizard in glacial disgust. "Leave. *Now*," she ordered, keeping a firm grip on the Faery girl's wrist.

"Well now! No need to be so hostile. I'm sure I can meet your price," he said cajolingly, then slipped a hand under her cloak, and ran it down over the bare skin of her upper arm. She caught a long whiff of undisguised, unwelcome masculine lust.

She furiously shook him off. "I don't have a price, and neither does she. I told you to *leave.*" Her tone would have had students, or squires, scattering like leaves in the wind.

The fat wizard's red face flushed even redder as he gave her a very unpleasant look. "Well, you may think yourself out of my league, girlie, but I know durned well what Lisa's going rate is. Now if you're not working tonight, perhaps you'd best be flitting your little pixie arse along so I can continue chatting with my friend here."

"I'm *not* a pixie. And I'm going to tell you once more, that it is very much in your best interest to walk away right now. *And I'm not going to tell you again*," Emily said in a very measured, deliberate, and warning tone that few people other than Orcish military, Faery criminals, and Jayson Robinett had ever heard from her.

"Listen, you little pointy-eared cunt, I don't give a toss about who you are or what you want me to do," the man snapped back at her. "Lisa, tell this bint to get bent and come on."

Lisa's terrified gaze darted between her angry customer and the steely-eyed Morrigan knight confronting him, neither of whom seemed willing to back down for a second in this contest. But unlike her customer, Lisa knew what the Fianna were and what they were capable of. "Mr. Boswell... er, you really might want to go, sir. I'll... I'll talk to you later, all right?"

"Why, you stupid little Faery cow who the bleedin' hell do you think you're talking to?" the man snapped then cuffed the girl despisingly across the cheek, making her gasp. He turned back to Emily with an impatient, warning look. "And there's more where that came from if you don't get a move on, slut."

For one very long, vivid moment, Emily pictured how this son of a bitch would look after an elbow smash to the hinge of the jaw but instead, she threw back her head and silently spoke one word.

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The heavyset wizard who believed that he had purchased Lisa's favours for that evening was a wealthy man, the possessor of much property and thousands of Galleons. He was accustomed to ordering his wife, his children, and his employees about, and seeing them cringe when he raised his voice. As such, he expected the blonde Faerie in the black dress and cloak to back down once he threatened her. After all, she was a woman, he outweighed her by at least a hundred pounds, and she had just seen a lordly demonstration of the way he treated women who crossed him.

He never expected for that blonde Faerie to stand her ground in front of him, for all the world completely uncowed and unafraid and the last thing on Earth he had ever expected was what she did next. Suddenly he was blinded by a white light the shadows of Knockturn Alley were illuminated as if by a floodlight the blonde Faerie was no longer wearing a short black dress but something metallic, brighter than chased silver

Then that light was reflecting off a tall, magnificent figure clad in brilliant chain mail, with a slender sword strapped over her back and a wicked-looking dagger at her hip. Her face was painted with sinister symbols in blue, her hair woven with black feathers. Storytellers in this world and others had long told tales of the terrible glory of the

Shining Host burning like the light of a star, and Commander Swain-Tumnus took some of that mythic Glamour for herself that evening. Draco Malfoy may have borrowed this appearance for a classroom demonstration, but he was a boy in a fancy-dress costume compared to what confronted the Honourable Edmund Boswell, Esquire, that night.

The fat wizard turned from her pitiless gaze with a sob and ran away as fast as he'd ever moved in his life.

Then the Fianna warrior turned back to the Faery girl, and held out her hands, said something in a language that none of the human denizens of Knockturn Alley could have understood. But there was no mistaking the entreating tone of her voice, the way she beckoned to the girl *Come away with me.*

A second later, both Faeries had vanished completely.

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Five minutes later, while the startled inhabitants of Knockturn Alley tried to figure out what had just happened, two women unobtrusively made their way toward Diagon Alley, and the entrance to the Muggle world, unnoticed by anyone. The fair woman held the tearful dark one to her side like a long-lost younger sister.

They paused in the alleyway just outside the Leaky Cauldron to give the girl a chance to compose herself. She took a few deep breaths, calmed her crying, wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. She looked about twelve, hunched there against the brick wall in her thin jacket, short dress, schoolgirl tights and shoes with her eyes watering and her nose running. Emily dug in her purse for a handkerchief and handed it to her. "Thanks," she said.

"Anytime," Emily replied, gently tucking the samite-black hair behind her ear, so she could get a good look at the slapped cheek. There was no bruising.

The sluagh blew her nose, noisily. "That was a really cool Glamour back there."

"Don't mention it." Emily glanced down at the Fianna armlet. "You sound like you might be from the Third Kingdom yourself, if you know what this means."

"Yes," the girl whispered. "Oakhaven Valley, north of Rivendale, originally."

"I'd like to know your name," Emily said gently.

"They call me Lisa here," came the spiritless voice.

"Lisa. I've not met many Lisas in Gwydion's lands."

The girl kept her eyes downcast, snuffling into the borrowed handkerchief.

"Tell me, if you will, child, what name your mother gave you I'll not betray it."

"*Liria*," the girl said, almost inaudibly.

"Liria. That sounds more like one of us." She had relinquished her hard grip on the girl's wrist and was now gently holding her by the shoulder. "I've no idea how you came to be here, but I'll not leave you here, in this place, if it's within my power to get you out."

"I *can't* leave, I'm... " Liria said miserably.

"Why not? I'm sorry to ask so baldly, but what holds you here? A husband, a child? Some debt or obligation?"

"I don't have any family anywhere," Liria said. "My mother died when I was little... My father died in the last war."

"I understand," Emily said. They were both silent for a long moment, bound by sympathy and mutual loss.

Finally Liria looked up. "Well, where to?" Her expression so meek and dispirited that Emily's heart broke for her.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

"I'm never hungry anymore," Liria murmured.

Emily's hand curved gently around Liria's cheek as she examined the girl's face. It was impossible to tell if a sluagh's eyes were more than usually dilated, but there was no mistaking the listlessness, the shivering, the light film of sweat on her face, and the mild, unmistakable tang of something foreign, and toxic, in her sweat.

"Liria, forgive me for this, but I need you to tell me... what drug have you been taking?" she asked.

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Emily had found another red call box, gently held Liria against her side as she called a telephone number out of her personal address book. *Oh please, Sacred Mother of Us All please let Cat be home.*

"Hullo?" a sleepy voice said on the other end of the line.

"Hello? It's Emily Swain calling for Dr. Catherine Orson, please, and it's urgent."

"Em? It's me. What's up?"

"Catherine, thank the Mother you're home. How soon can you meet me at the hospital?"

"What's going on?" Catherine asked, her voice taking on a sharp, aware edge.

"Who is that?" Liria asked, stirring peevishly against Emily's shoulder.

"It's all right. She was a Tithe page," Emily said to Liria, then addressed Catherine. "We've got an addiction case, Cat. Can you meet me at your work?"

"Give me fifteen minutes," Catherine said. "I'm there."

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Dr. Catherine Orson, a Muggle Tithe page of the class of 1978, had for some years worked in the Emergency ward of St. George's Hospital in Summerstown, London. To this day, that highly respected member of the medical community explains the gaps in her *Curriculum Vitae*, from 1978 and 1979, and from 1987 to 1989, as "sabbaticals abroad with my family."

During her Tithe service, Catherine had wholeheartedly devoted herself to learning as much about Faery physiology and Faery medicine as she could. When she returned to Arcadia during the most recent war, she had been among the most valiant of the field medics treating wounded soldiers and civilians.

As a result of these studies, Catherine Orson was one of a very small number of British physicians capable of treating the various ailments unique to the expatriate Faery community in the United Kingdom, which she did from a small clinic hidden within St. George's Hospital itself. It is entirely probable that she was then, and is now, the foremost human expert on Faery addiction medicine, but it is unlikely that that achievement will ever be commemorated by any medical association or scholarly journal.

Catherine met Emily and Liria in the parking lot of St. George's, at quarter-past eleven that night. She was a tall, statuesque woman with pale skin and striking, sardonic green eyes, dressed in jeans, black boots, and a black turtleneck, her light red hair hastily combed back into a ponytail. Emily hurriedly made introductions.

"All right, you'll both want to Obscure yourselves, and follow me," Catherine said. "This way." She led them through the hospital back entrance.

"Good evening, Dr. Orson," the admitting receptionist said as Catherine strolled by her desk.

"Good evening, Sally," Catherine said, giving no indication that she was being followed by an Arcadian faun and sluagh. But then Sally Haverforth was a hard-bitten realist of a woman who had worked in the medical field for over twenty-five years, who probably didn't believe in either of them anyway.

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The clinic was located on the hospital's sixth floor inside a long-unused two-room storage facility. Catherine led them down a long hall, then halted by a seemingly blank section of wall, and passed her hand over it "*Ende Obscurant*" and silently spoke a word. A scuffed, institutional-green door appeared.

Catherine unlocked the door and led them in, illuminating the interior with a whispered "*Lioht*" and another inaudible invocation. Immediately inside was a small anteroom with a desk and chair. Through a doorway just beyond was a larger room with two hospital beds, a rack of clean patients' gowns, an IV stand, and a neat stack of boxes of medical supplies stacked on a table and against the wall. Beyond it, another storage room had been converted into a makeshift medical laboratory.

Cat took an anxious look up and down the hall, then turned back to Emily. "All right, bring her in."

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Catherine went right to work examining her patient with the characteristic cool efficiency Emily had come to expect from her friend. She performed a thorough examination, then talked to Liria for a long time, making notes of some of her replies. Then she took a vial of blood and dispatched the girl into the tiny w.c. for a urine sample. Emily remained out in the anteroom during the examination, in order to give doctor and patient their privacy.

"Can you tell me anything?" Emily asked after Catherine had gotten Liria into a clean hospital gown and into bed.

"Yes, she's said it's all right for you to know. It looks as though you've been deemed *In Loco Parentis* in this case, my Lady Fianna. But I need to run some more tests before I make a diagnosis," Catherine said. "Stay here with her I'll be back in just a bit."

After Catherine had gone, Emily glanced at the wall clock at the front of the room quarter till midnight.

Don't be late, Lucius had written her.

Well, it looked as though she was going to be.

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Catherine carried a whiff of strong agitation upon her return, riffling through some papers attached to a clipboard. "Come here, Em. I need to talk to you privately." She turned to Liria. "Pardon us, honey."

Outside in the anteroom, Catherine turned to her with a worried expression, speaking in an urgent undertone. "Apparently, she came here to live with a human boyfriend she met at her first Beltane about a year ago. The guy used to drink a lot, and when he was really drunk, he hit her. So she left him, but he broke her arm on the way out. And of course they put her on a morphine drip for the pain when she was in hospital," she said.

"So when she got out, she had to have more of it," Emily replied, also in an undertone.

"So the story goes she tested positive for opiates all over the place," Catherine said grimly. "The veins in her arms are so ruined I could barely get a blood sample."

"Bloody *idiots*," Emily snapped.

"Em, it's because they don't know any better, and your kind isn't going to tell them. That poor kid probably didn't have any idea what was going on," she said, nodding in Liria's direction. "Now if I had *my* way, there'd be giant bloody warning signs in every hospital in the Wizarding world 'Do not administer opiates to Faery patients under any circumstances, addiction danger.' You bloody know that."

"Yes, Cat, I know." She stared down at the floor. "What can we do about it?"

"Well, she tested low on everything I'd say she's borderline malnourished right now, but she says she has no appetite. I'm going to have to put her on a glucose IV. But from all the test results, the physical symptoms... it's a classic case of heroin addiction, Em. What we really need is some of my opiate inhibitor Potion. Unfortunately, she's the second heroin-addict patient I've seen this week, and it's not easy for me to get all the components in the first place which means I'm now clean out."

Emily stared into Catherine's face, stricken.

"*Yeah*," Catherine said, nodding grimly. "It looks as though we're going to have to wait until the apothecaries in Diagon Alley open. Then you'll have to get the ingredients for me so I can make up the detox potion."

"Isn't there anything else we can do?" Emily glanced at Liria, lying in bed. Her face was bathed in a light sheen of sweat, and her breathing was coming huskily. The skin seemed stretched painfully tight over the knuckles of her hands. Liria looked up, offered her a cheery, pathetic, little smile.

"I can try to keep her sedated till then... or maybe give her some methadone to cut the worst of the withdrawal, but neither one of those will really help anything. What she needs, desperately needs, is to get detoxed. I'm halfway tempted to figure out where some apothecary lives and drag his arse out of bed, myself."

"And of course, seeing as how it's past eleven on a Saturday night, none of the apothecaries are going to be open until Monday morning." Emily's head tilted down onto her clenched hands. "Shite."

"Okay, let's go to Plan B," Catherine said. "You work at that Wizarding school they've got to have a Potions department, don't they? Don't you know anyone who could help?"

Emily thought of Professor Snape, bristling every time he passed her in the halls. "They do teach Potions, but unfortunately the Potions master there cordially despises me."

Catherine gave her a look of hard incredulity, her green eyes flashing yellow with annoyance. "Good God, Swain how did you manage *that*?"

"Anyone with a pulse could probably *manage that*," Emily protested, though in a tone that lacked complete conviction even to her own ears. "If you knew Professor Snape

at all... he's known to everybody who's ever met him as one extremely tough bastard."

Catherine was unfazed. "But this tough bastard presumably has his own key to his own stores for Potions? And you know where to get a hold of him right away?"

"Well, it's late, so he's probably asleep in his quarters, but... "

"Then I suggest, as your doctor, that you go wake this tough bastard up, plead your case to him, and ask him for help and just suck it up if he's in a bad mood about it, Em. Liria's *not* doing well she was going through withdrawal when you found her, and it's getting worse. I'm still afraid she'll go into convulsions before morning," Catherine said severely. "He's the only plan either of us have right now. What's the worst he's going to do if you ask him? Say no? Maybe get angry and yell at you for disturbing him?"

Severus Snape the only plan anyone had right now.

"Catherine, you don't know what he's like. My chances of actually getting *him* to help are pretty much nil. And appeals to his higher instincts are probably wasted on him most of the time, I can't tell if he's got any."

"Well, he's a man, right? Maybe try flirting with him a little? You're wearing the right clothes for it."

Emily glanced down at the black cocktail dress she had completely forgotten what she was wearing. "I don't think he'd respond to flirtation, quite frankly."

Catherine stared at her in disbelief. "Swain? *Hello*, you're a fucking *Faerie* you gals have been driving humans to doing all sorts of crazy shite for centuries. No mortal man is immune to your Fair Folky wiles, remember?"

Emily grimaced. "This one is. Very much so. He scoffs at my Fair Folk-iness."

"Is he gay?"

"No, I'm pretty sure he likes women he just doesn't like *me*."

Catherine threw up her hands in annoyance. "Then I don't know, do *something*, because if he's got the potion components readily available, we need him. Ask him if he's got a consulting fee, for Chrissake you forget, we don't use the barter system here. Everybody here likes money."

Silence. They both listened to Liria's laboured breathing. Emily felt a bead of sweat break free from her hairline, and drop down her neck.

Catherine was having none of her friend's indecision she stalked to the desk, whipped out a few sheets of hospital letterhead stationery and a prescription pad. "Okay, he's a teacher, right? I'm going to give you something guaranteed to instantly command the attention of any teacher a doctor's note. And as a Potions master, he'll no doubt immediately recognise an apothecary's compounding prescription. Just ask him to fill it, and promise him whatever the bloody hell he wants in return. If he says no... all right, fine, we're no worse off than we were before."

"There might be an apothecary's open in Australia right now," Emily offered desperately. "I could Apparate over there and "

If looks could kill, the glare Catherine gave her would have splattered her broken corpse all over the wall behind them. "I'm sorry I was under the impression I was talking to a sword-swinging, Orc-hacking *knight*?"

That sword-swinging, Orc-hacking knight took the note and prescription from Cat's hand, now very abashed. "Sorry," she said meekly, and a second later was gone from there with a *crack* of Apparition.

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Emily reappeared at the gate outside of Hogwarts a moment after leaving the hidden clinic at the hospital. She Obscured herself the second she arrived at the gate, then ran back up toward the dimly lit castle looming above her. Cursing a blue streak to herself the entire time.

Why, oh why, couldn't this have been a library science emergency? Damn it all, why not a Charms emergency, an injured Magical Creature who needed Hagrid's sort of Care, or an urgent need for a Transfiguration specialist? She knew people who not only would have helped with such crises, and but who would have been bloody well reasonable and pleasant about it as well. Flaming Christian hell, why did it have to be a potion that Liria desperately needed to keep from going into convulsions? Or alternatively why couldn't Hagrid, or Moody, or Flitwick, or anyone other than Severus Snape, have been the fellow staff member who she had to accidentally mortally offend through an injudicious bestowing of sexual favours?

Holy Chaucerian *phuque*, why did he always have to be so bloody difficult? Were social skills, the ability to forgive, an ordinary person's sense of not behaving like a fecking bleeding raw nerve all the time, so utterly *beyond him*?

And where, oh *where* the hell was Slytherin dungeon again?

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Professor Snape did not like being disturbed while he was reading. Especially not when he was reading Cornelius Agrippa's *De Occulta Philosophia,* a volume which had long been one of his favourites. Particularly especially when he was lying comfortably in his bed with a half-drunk glass of twenty-year-old Oban whiskey on his night table, at half-past midnight on a pleasantly balmy May night, wearing nothing but the bottom half of his favourite grey flannel pyjamas.

But the knock at his door came again, much more insistently this time. He reluctantly threw back the bedclothes, put on a robe, and went to answer the door, with the intention of giving whomever was disturbing him a good dose of *what for.*

"This had *better* be a matter of life and death," he snarled at whomever was knocking on his door then discovered, somewhat to his mystification, that he seemed to have thrown the door open on a completely empty corridor.

But then someone said, "It is, Professor," and suddenly Professor Swain was standing in the hall, materialising solid as life, her face burning whitely with high anxiety.

Snape took one look at her and accepted the gravity of the situation, whatever it was, immediately. "What is it? Has another mountain troll got in?"

"No. Can you mix a potion?" she asked, in an urgent whisper.

He stared at her, both sinister eyebrows reaching an alarming altitude. "You got me out of bed... to ask *if I can mix a potion*? Yes, I can. Quite a few of them, actually. Now that we've established that good night, Professor."

Snape nodded to her, barely perfunctorily, and started to turn away and close the door.

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Emily threw a shoulder against the door, and stopped him. "*Wait* it's a specific medicinal potion. Someone I know is extremely sick and needs a dose of it immediately."

"Who is the someone?" Snape demanded. "A student?"

"No. You don't know her."

"Her." He looked at her in hard disbelief. "Oh good Lord, if you tell me it's some student who's fallen pregnant, I'll "

"*No*, nothing like that," she interjected quickly. "But she's very ill. I know you're not happy to see me, especially this late, but *please* believe I wouldn't have bothered you if it wasn't a dire emergency "

"Professor. Since you've already gotten me up, perhaps you could please be so kind as to spare me the meaningless protestations, as I already know exactly how valuable my time is to you. Tell me is there any reason at all why you can't simply take whomever this is to St. Mungo's?"

Emily shook her head emphatically. "Most wizard Healers wouldn't have the first bloody idea how to treat this sort of ailment."

"*Really,*" he said, in an arch, unconcerned tone. "And exactly which potion it is that you supposedly need?"

Emily handed him Catherine's note and prescription, hastily handwritten on hospital letterhead stationery, from out of her pocket. He accepted it grudgingly and turned away to scan over it.

"Well, this Dr. Catherine Orson certainly seems to know what she's about, doesn't she?" he snapped, tossing Catherine's note aside, then glanced at the compounding prescription and began ticking off ingredients to himself. "All right, I've either got all of this or can get it easily enough from the greenhouses... but, inactivated sap of Tibetan poppy? You've got... not one but *three* controlled substances in this potion. Do you have any *idea* what kind of hell I could catch from the Ministry if this is improperly administered?"

"I realise that, sir. It won't be improperly administered, I promise."

"And this Dr. Catherine Orson, who works at some establishment with the very Muggle name of St. George's Hospital, somehow knows how to administer a Wizarding medicinal potion?" He stared at her in hard, accusing disbelief.

"Yes, she does. Sir, she was a Tithe page, she "

"Tithe page you and the Malfoys keep using this phrase, and I still don't know what it means. Care to perhaps tell me?"

"Sir... I haven't time to go into all of Cat's various credentials, but she's familiar with Wizarding, Muggle, and Faery medicine. I can't take our patient to an ordinary wizard hospital because it was going to a doctor that got her into the situation she's in in the first place."

Snape glared at her, his brow creasing. "What happened? What sort of ailment is it?"

Like many, many others at Hogwarts, Emily had come to dread Severus Snape's penetrating black gaze, demanding whys and wherefores. She been quite serious when she suggested to Catherine that perhaps she Apparate to Australia to find an apothecary's that was open for business. She felt wildly edgy under that stare of his, and when a Faerie is under duress, her natural tendency is to divulge absolutely nothing. "I can't tell you that," she said.

Snape almost threw the prescription sheet at her. "*Why not?*"

"I *can't*," she implored.

Snape had reached the end of his never-exemplary patience. "Professor *listen to me*." He slammed the prescription face down on the low bookshelf nearest the door, making it tremble. "If you get these concentrations wrong, and give this potion to this girl, woman, whomever she is she could end up sedated into fecking cardiac arrest and *die*, do you understand me? Why can't you tell me what in the bloody hell is wrong with her?"

"Look." She was beyond polite entreaty. The tendons in her jaw and throat peeled back as she bit off the words. "If I could have made it myself, I would have but I haven't the skill with Potions that you do, and I don't have access to these components right now. I cannot ask you entreat you more humbly, to help me.

"But please tell me, will you do this, or not? Because if you won't, I'm going to have to find somebody else, and I don't have much time. Actually I don't have *any* time. Every second that I don't bring this to her, she's in pain you didn't see how sick she was when I left and *I can't stand knowing that.* If you won't help, can't you at least just out of ordinary decency give me the name of someone who can "

"Dammit, woman!" Snape spun around and stalked a few steps back into his quarters. He made as if to punch one of the bookshelves, but did not. "I bloody well will *not* make it unless you tell me what it's for and generally prove to me that this woman, who you claim you're so concerned about, won't be *dead* by this time tomorrow. I do have some passing familiarity with pharmacological *ethics*, thank you very much."

"Professor, please I would tell you if it was for me, but this is a countrywoman of mine, and she has the same sort of feelings about personal matters being widely known that I do "

"I have no interest in knowing her name or her bloody mailing address, and I'm not going to demand her bloody True Name in return, all right?" he snapped back at her. "You say you haven't time to explain everything to me well, perhaps I haven't the time to even have this bloody conversation, did you ever think of that? If a lady is going to bang on her colleague's door in the middle of the night and ask for his help with some difficult and arduous task because believe me, preparing this potion is not going to be any picnic then perhaps she should realise that she's in no position to dictate terms to him? Do you really think it's such a great honour for me to help *you*?"

She froze, staring at him in shock, realising that this hope had been a vain one. He wasn't moved at all by her entreaties and didn't care what was going on. He wouldn't help her, but he was willing to take this opportunity to elaborate on her seemingly endless array of personal shortcomings. Now she had no plan at all, and had come all this way, and made Liria suffer just that much longer, so she could become the target for another scolding, yet again.

Humiliatingly, she felt her chin trembling. She muttered a half-audible apology for disturbing him, and in another second, would have slunk miserably away.

But then, astoundingly Snape paused, seemed to take a few deep breaths, and addressed her in a lowered tone. "All right. You're telling me someone's health is at stake... and contrary to popular opinion, I don't *want* anyone to suffer horribly if it can be avoided. And none of the apothecaries are going to be open until Monday morning."

She nodded silently.

He regarded her with a chilly, unreadable black gaze. "Professor I have to be absolutely certain that this extremely powerful potion, which you're asking *me*, the Potions master at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, to make up for you, would be used properly. So perhaps, for just one moment, just out of ordinary decency, you can just forget you've got a bloody secretive national character, and for the very first time since I have known you, *tell me what is going on,* or I don't see any reason why I shouldn't put you out into the hall and shut the door on you exactly the same way you did at the Malfoys." His tone that let her know very clearly that he had been quite irked about that little display of temper since the day it had happened.

"Oh, all *right*." She turned back to him, head lowered; admission of defeat. "If I tell you, will you do it?"

"I *might*," he growled. "Now and I'm going to ask this *once* more what's ailing her?"

She took a deep breath and exhaled very slowly. "She's going through heroin withdrawal."

He paused for a long moment, then indicated the apothecary's prescription. "This is a cure for opiate addiction?"

"It's an opiate inhibitor. It has the same effect as a Muggle drug called Naltrexone."

"But this version is based on Faery physiology?"

"Yes."

"How is it administered?"

"Initially, the patient receives it intravenously while under anaesthesia for about a day, so as to get through the withdrawal. Then she takes a small oral dose every day for about six months."

Snape sighed. "All right, if I'm to consent to this... this late-night mission of mercy, I'll need to work with this Muggle doctor or whomever she is to make sure that this woman is treated properly. If I can't personally oversee this treatment, I won't do it, and that's *final.*"

Emily's heart leapt into her throat and her hands jittered. She was afraid to speak lest she say something wrong, and somehow offend him into refusing at the last second. She fought off the wild desire to hug him. "All right. Yes, of course. If you insist."

"I do insist." He glanced down at his bathrobe-clad chest. "Now would you terribly mind leaving, so I can get changed?"

"Oh pardon me." She turned to leave, but when she reached the doorway, she remembered something and turned back around. "I'm sorry Muggle clothes are best if you own any, sir... ?"

But he had already started taking off his dressing gown flash of pale olive skin and bare, sinewy shoulder, arm, and back. While she had always found his looks intriguing not exactly handsome, but somehow she would rather look at him than at many another man considered more attractive she had never quite realised that he was such a specimen with his shirt off. Certainly several months of six hours of combat practice a week would have left anyone in fairly decent shape, but... for just a moment, she forgot herself and took a much longer look than she really should have under the circumstances. Snape half-turned and raised a questioning eyebrow in her direction and she all but fled back into the hallway, emphatically closing the door behind her.

Minutes later, he emerged from his quarters dressed in plain black trousers, a white dress shirt, and a long black raincoat, clothes that would not have attracted too much notice anywhere, with his black satchel in his hand. He locked and warded his bedroom door behind him.

"By the way, how did you get down here?" he asked, turning back to her. "How did you get the passwords?"

"I don't know the passwords. But... your painting heard them correctly. Professor, *please,* I promise I'll explain later," she said, seeing his look. "Now we probably shouldn't be seen leaving the campus this late at night, or Filch will question us. Here, I'll Obscure both of us and " She held out her hand.

"Why don't I just do it myself," he said coolly.

She stared at him, amazed. "You've gotten that advanced already?"

"The Lady loves children and fools," he said wryly. "Now I have to make a trip to my office and down to the greenhouses, but then I'll meet you in front of the gate, and we'll Apparate together from there."

"All right. Now you'll want to turn your back to me."

He turned his back on her, and she turned hers on him. Both silently whispered words under their breath.

A second later, anyone looking down that hall would have thought it was completely deserted.

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While Snape was down in the greenhouses, Emily made a dash up to the Hogwarts Owlery and dispatched a swift barn owl into London in the direction of the Bathsheba Hotel. Affixed to its leg was a hastily scrawled note:

Darling

Delayed unavoidably. Matter of honour, must see it through.

Please see me next weekend?

And please don't be angry I'll make this all up to you.

But when that note was received, a minute or two after half-past one a.m. that morning, her imploring *"Please don't be angry"* went entirely unheeded. Lucius Malfoy wadded up her note and threw it aside with a furious scowl, muttering several quite profane descriptions of Lady Swain-Tumnus which would not look at all nice in print, and thus are not recorded here and then hurled the crystal hock glass beside him into the fireplace.

Then, he wrapped himself in a hooded black cloak and headed toward Knockturn Alley in search of other entertainment.

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When Malfoy arrived at Pasiphäe's, however, the place was buzzing with scandalised gossip. The vampiresses at the bar were muttering fearfully amongst themselves, and no one appeared to be working. The proprietor, a short, burly, round-faced man known only as Pandarus to the clientele, was wiping down glasses behind the bar, keeping an anxious eye on the door.

"Pandarus, old man." Malfoy took a seat at the bar.

"Evening, sir, haven't seen you in awhile. Strange night, ain't it?"

"If you say so," Malfoy said dismissively. "Is Lisa about, perhaps? Do tell her someone would like to see her, if she's free."

"That's the strange thing about it," Pandarus said, with another anxious look at the door. "Lisa's gone. Vanished."

"Vanished? Do you mean she's run off?" Malfoy's expression betrayed his opinion of being inconvenienced by the unaccommodating behaviour of yet another Faerie that evening.

"No more like some crazy bint with a sword carried her off."

Malfoy froze. "'Some crazy bint with a sword carried her off?' What happened?"

"One of Lisa's regular visitors showed up to see her tonight. So as she was leavin' with this good benefactor, some blonde bint came up to her. This blonde bint came in from Diagon Alley and starts trouble right away, folks are saying. She'd just lit into a fine gentleman outside, just for saying hello to her, he said. So this very troublesome little blonde didn't want to let Lisa go with the feller. So, rightfully, he tells her to shove off. Then they say she rises up like she's about ten feet tall and made of fire, and threatened to cut his twig and berries off with a sword. Nearly frightens the poor man into a heart attack. Then she grabs Lisa just *kidnaps* her, I'm told and vanishes with her like a bleedin' ghost. No one's seen Lisa since."

"She wasn't a ghost," Malfoy said, turning his bemused gaze toward something very far away. "She was another Faerie. And I see she's still an *insufferable* do-gooder, at that."

Then he turned back to the pimp behind the bar. "Your best brandy, please. A double."

Pandarus poured the brandy into a snifter, his eyebrows knitting together. "You know her, sir?"

"Yes, I know her," Malfoy said, taking a deep drink to calm himself. "And if I know her at all, Lisa, if that ever was her real name, is probably in hospital right now. By this time tomorrow, she'll be back through one of the portals with letters from a king's kinswoman in her pocket."

"Sir? How did you who is how did she ?" Pandarus was spluttering with rage. "Lisa owes me for that bitch has got a lot to answer for! Thinks she can waltz in and scare the customers making off with other folks' employees like that if I ever see her back in this part of the alley, she better "

Malfoy laughed despisingly. "You couldn't possibly hope to make her account for anything, you ridiculous little man. If you see her in this part of the alley again, you'd be best advised to stay away because if she had actually felt threatened enough by Lisa's customer to draw a sword on him, he would have died."

Pandarus was silent, staring at him.

Lucius Malfoy turned his back on the proprietor and downed the brandy in one long swallow. Then he tossed a Galleon behind him onto the bar and left.

Part Second: The Hart Rampant: Chapter 19

Chapter 24 of 55

In which Professor Swain discovers the delights of a dual life as both a Hogwarts professor and Lucius Malfoy's mistress, until a chance encounter with a desperate Faery prostitute in Knockturn Alley sends her to the most unlikely person for aid. Meanwhile, Severus Snape finds himself alone and adrift in the Mushroom Circle, a Faery nightclub...

Chapter 19:

At ten minutes to one a.m., Emily was waiting at the Hogsmeade gate. She was nervously pacing back and forth, half-convinced that Snape had changed his mind about this somewhere between his office and the greenhouses, and had gone back to bed and washed his hands of her.

But a moment later, Snape materialised a few paces away, to her intense relief. "Professor? Where are we going?" he asked impatiently.

"St. George's Hospital. It's in Summerstown. London."

"Well and good, but that description won't really help me get there, madam," he said. "Do you perhaps have a map, or directions?"

"Er, no, I thought I was going to go back alone, so... " Emily said apologetically. "Sorry about this, pardon me " Then she stepped up to him, and very gingerly put her arms around his neck.

A second later, they had both disappeared with a *crack* of Apparition.

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As Snape watched, his surroundings abruptly changed from the outskirts of the woods around Hogwarts to a small room containing a battered desk and chair. Professor Swain wasted no time in letting go of him and taking a few steps away, in what he thought was perhaps an overly elaborate show of respect for his personal space. He had to be rather hard on many of his students, granted, but he didn't think she had any reason to believe he was in the habit of savaging people with his teeth.

"Emily?" A thin, terrified voice cried out, clearly startled by the sound of Apparition. "Is that you?"

Snape looked up to see a young, dark-haired girl in a loose white gown lying on an institutional-looking metal-framed cot in the room just in front of them. There was a plastic bag half-full of clear liquid suspended from a metal stand next to her bed, which was dripping into a plastic tube at a steady pace. The other end of that tube was attached to the girl's hand with surgical tape. His colleague was at her side in a second, squeezing her untaped hand in reassurance. "Yes, Liria. You knew I'd come back."

"You were gone for a really long time," the girl wailed, fetching up with a long, dry sob and huddling onto Professor Swain's shoulder. Drawing close enough to get a good look at her, Snape noticed that she really was a girl, maybe eighteen or nineteen at most, barely older than his oldest students. She was clearly another Arcadian Faerie, with pointed ears visible through her lank black hair and eyes like huge orbs of unrelieved black. No Glamour that he could detect, so this must be her real appearance.

Snape had seen two healthy-seeming members of her race before, and thus was somewhat acquainted with the extreme pallor that seemed typical of their kind but this young lady seemed weaker and whiter than skim milk, leaning heavily on his colleague's shoulder, as though sitting up in bed had taken all the strength she had. Professor Swain had said, *Someone I know is extremely sick*, and her conviction had been such that it had never occurred to him to doubt her word. But that was before he had been able to gauge their patient's condition for himself.

Oh, good Lord.

The dark, pale girl looked like nothing so much as one of the malarial fever patients he had read descriptions of in nineteenth-century novels. She was shivering

uncontrollably, but her face and chest were covered with cold sweat, and her hands were trembling as if with a mild palsy. The signs of living with this addiction were also evident on her body she looked malnourished, famine-victim thin. Her elbows and knees looked sharp, there were deep wells of emptiness around her collarbones, and he could see every finely articulated bone in her hands, and at the back of her neck. Snape had previously thought Professor Swain was of an insubstantial build, but compared to this waif, she looked positively robust.

"Em? Well, that was a lot quicker than I thought." A tall, redheaded woman in Muggle clothes and a white coat approached them from another room off to the left.

"Catherine, Liria, may I present Professor Severus Snape, my colleague, and Potions master at Hogwarts School," Emily said, still holding the girl to her side. "Professor, this is Dr. Catherine Orson, a physician here at St. George's Hospital. And " she glanced down at the girl, " this is... Miss Liria." Their patient, whomever she was, did not seem to have a surname. She could have been the lost heir of Faerie or the daughter of illiterate rag pickers.

"Professor," Dr. Orson said, coming forward and shaking his hand in a calm, professional manner. If this woman, who seemed to be a Muggle by all appearances, was in the slightest unnerved by a Faerie and a wizard suddenly materialising in her hospital, she didn't show it in the least. "Thank you very much for coming yourself, sir, especially so late and on such short notice."

"Doctor," he said, returning her handshake with cool formality. He turned toward the girl on the bed. "Miss," he said, greeting her with as much dignity as he could under the circumstances.

"Thank you. I'm really sorry to bother you, sir," their patient quavered. This surprised him most people he knew would not have appreciated the value of someone else's time while in her condition. Lost princess or rag picker's brat, this child had grace.

They *were* bothering him, truth be told. Snape would have greatly preferred to still be lying in his bed at that moment, drinking whiskey and reading one of his favourite books, without ever having heard of a Muggle doctor and some little heroin-addicted Faerie in London. But somehow, at that moment, he couldn't find it within himself to take this miserable waif to account for exactly how much she had inconvenienced him. "Quite all right," he replied brusquely, then turned back to Dr. Orson. "Now, Doctor, I'll need a hearth, somewhere to set up a small cauldron... ?"

"This way." She motioned him toward the room from whence she had just come. "Will a large beaker and Bunsen burner do?"

His brows creased. "Pardon me, but what exactly is a Bunsen burner?"

"Come on, I'll show you."

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The sleeve of Liria's hospital gown had slid down to her elbow when the doctor lifted her hand to check the IV needle, and Snape caught a glimpse of the ugly aftermath of any number of injections. The lack of any comfortable padding of flesh on Liria's body made the ropy veins in the insides of her elbows stand sharply out from the muscle and bone, so that the inflamed, sometimes infected tracks of the needle were cruelly apparent. Someone had also been wrenching her around by the arm as well the imprints of someone's meaty fingers were bruised into her flesh. The sight set off a deep, unsettling pang of recognition within him.

"Stupid needle hurts," Liria said fretfully, looking down at the IV in her hand. She was spending a lot of time hunched onto Professor Swain's shoulder as though his colleague was the only person she trusted in this world or any other.

"Dr. Orson, I have a bit of Numbing Potion, if that will make the IV less uncomfortable," Snape said quietly. "I also couldn't help but notice that the young lady's arms are in rather bad shape, and I also happen to have some Healing Potion with me. I can bring both out, if you could use it."

"I can't *describe* how great that would be," Catherine whispered back, gratefully. "Could you please?"

Snape disappeared into the laboratory, was back a moment later with bottles of a clear solution and translucent blue Healing Potion. Dr. Orson soaked a cotton pad in the blue potion and applied it to the insides of Liria's arms, making her twitch "That *itches*." But thankfully, the flesh healed over, smoothly and cleanly, as though the injuries had never existed at all.

As Snape watched those bruises and lacerations wiped away, something that had been clenched in his chest for a very long time relaxed slightly and allowed itself to be comforted, if only for a moment.

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Liria's feverish trembling quickly began to subside, and she relaxed into heavy-eyed exhaustion on his colleague's shoulder as the potion began to take effect. Dr. Orson busied herself with preparing the general anaesthesia. "All right, honey, it's time to go to sleep," she said. "I'm going to need to put you under for about twelve hours, but when you wake up, you'll feel lots better right away."

"Cat before you do, Liria has some questions about the detox potion," Professor Swain said.

"I just want to know... " Liria indicated the IV bag above her. She looked sleepy, a touch defiant, like a little girl refusing to accept that it's bedtime. "What is that? I know what it does, but... why? I'm sorry to bother you... "

"No, don't apologise. That's a perfectly reasonable question," Catherine said.

"Absolutely," Snape agreed. "It's going into your veins, after all you should want to know what it is."

Catherine turned toward Snape. "I don't claim to be a teaching physician, so would you mind, sir?"

"All right, I suppose." He went back into the laboratory for the compounding prescription, then crossed to Liria and handed it to her. Then, he pulled up a chair beside her bed. Professor Swain detached herself from Liria's side with a comforting last hug, and left them alone to talk.

"This is a list of the ingredients that went into the potion, and their concentrations. The reason the first component, poppy resin, is present, is to... "

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He went on to explain it to her, component by component, and every step of the compounding process, in simple, succinct layman's terms. Not for nothing was this man known for the effortless way he could hold a class's attention without so much as raising his voice, Emily thought. Strict, harsh, and terrifying or not, there was no denying that Snape was an expert in his field and an extremely effective teacher.

Catherine started the general anaesthesia once Liria seemed satisfied with the explanation. It began to take effect as Snape finished his description of its effect on her body, and the girl began to nod, groggily apologising to Snape for her inattention. "No matter. You need your rest," he said. His tone was brusque, but it effectively excused her from worrying about perceived rudeness.

His supremely calm and confident manner could not have been more reassuring to anyone, let alone this sick young woman facing an extremely uncertain future. Which was, Emily recalled, exactly the way he had treated her on the night she had burned her hand at Malfeasant but at the time, she had been in too much pain and felt too embarrassed and self-conscious to notice. She remembered with a sharp pang of self-reproach that she had never thanked him for treating her and for his discretion regarding the elves that weekend.

Snape was not his usual haughty, buttoned-up, black-robed self at that moment; his shirtsleeves were rolled up and his collar unbuttoned. It was now very late at night, and his eyes were red-veined and his usual erect posture was drooping with fatigue. But at that moment, had he needed for her to take an egg away from the biggest, most aggressive Hungarian Horntail in existence while simultaneously dodging flaming arrows and translating Joyce's *Ulysses* into ancient Urdu, she would have whipped out a flameproof shield and an ancient Urdu lexicon and gotten right down to it.

Catherine stood next to her, also watching Snape explaining the potion to Liria. She turned to Emily with a quizzical expression. "I thought you said this guy was a mean bastard," she whispered.

"Maybe I was a little hasty," Emily replied.

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When Liria was deeply asleep and resting comfortably, Dr. Orson dimmed the lights in the clinic and the three of them withdrew to the laboratory to brew up another batch of the opiate inhibitor potion, the treatment prescription that Liria was to dose herself with for the next six months. They worked at a slower, more relaxed pace now that their patient had no immediate needs.

Dr. Orson handed the bottles of Healing and Numbing Potion back to Snape with some reluctance. "I'd give my eye-teeth to be able to use wizard Healing Potion at this hospital. That stuff is bloody miraculous," she told him. "I wish I could have the whole Wizarding pharmacy at my disposal here. Pepper-Up Potion, Skele-Gro, Healing Potion, Mandrake Restorative Draught, poison antidotes, Burn-Healing Paste, all of it."

"You've *never* given in to the temptation to use a few Wizarding potions here and there?" Snape asked, fitting the bottles back into his satchel.

"Well... okay, I may have dosed a few people with really horrific fractures with Skele-Gro once or twice, without their knowledge," she admitted. "And... maybe I've swabbed a bit of Healing Potion on anaesthetised patients on the operating table. And *maybe* I let my friend Laurent Collier keep me in Pepper-Up Potion for colds." She gave Snape a rueful look. "If I could claim the patent for Pepper-Up Potion, and then sell it on the Muggle market, do you have any *idea* how much money I would make?"

Professor Swain looked up from watching a simmering beaker. "If I can't present the three lost works of Shakespeare to the Cambridge literature faculty, you are just shite out of luck, darling," she said, also ruefully.

"Emily, we are talking about *the cure for the common cold* here, you don't understand what that would mean to us Muggles, my blue-blooded friend. My God, it exists, and I can't tell anybody about it."

"The law is the law, Doctor," Snape interjected, a note of severity in his voice. "I didn't write the bylaws against using magic in front of Muggles, but I'll suffer the penalties if

I break them, and so will your friend Collier." He turned toward Professor Swain. "Speaking of which, Professor earlier tonight, you said that Liria ended up in this condition because '*she went to a doctor in the first place*'. Now if some wizard Healer, or Muggle physician, is overprescribing opiate painkillers to such an extent that his patients are ending up addicted to them, so that they then turn to street drugs in order to satisfy that addiction, there really should be a disciplinary action of some sort brought against him. I'd like to know what the both of you intend to do about this apparently ongoing situation." He fixed his colleague with a steely look. "And I'm afraid '*I can't tell you that*' is not an acceptable answer, Professor."

"All right, all right," she said, chastened. "I guess we'll have to tell him, Cat."

"I understand how it must have sounded to you, sir, but the Faery addiction problem here isn't caused by physician or Healer malpractice," Dr. Orson said, with an air of stepping in between them. "The doctor who prescribed morphine to Liria most likely gave her what he thought was the safe dosage her injury warranted the problem was, he treated her in the same way he would have treated a human, without realising that you simply *cannot* do that with the Fae. This problem isn't being caused by human error this situation can occur whenever you introduce an organism into a new environment. Given a millennia, they'll build up a resistance and adapt, but for now, there are dangers. Faeries have to be careful in our world."

"Don't I know it," Professor Swain muttered ruefully. "Remind me to tell you about a little *accident* I had during a dinner party with a wrought-iron teacup, Cat." She flexed her right hand thoughtfully in front of her.

"I'll bet that hurt like a cast-iron bitch," Dr. Orson said.

"Quite literally. One second I'm having this nice conversation, and the next, I could smell my skin cooking," she said, with a grimace. Then, to Snape's great surprise, she turned toward him and said: "I'm... really grateful for your help that night, sir. I'm sorry I didn't make more of an effort to thank you that evening." Given that she was apologising for not making more of an effort to thank him on the same evening that he had let her know in no uncertain terms that he was furious with her, this was a bit of uncharacteristic humility on her part.

"You're welcome," he said, averting his eyes. Despite the fact that he often longed for thanks and recognition with every cell and sinew in him, the rare occasions on which he received it often embarrassed him. He glanced from Faerie to Muggle, his brows knitting. "But, I'm still a bit confused. How is that iron burn related to Liria's illness tonight?"

"You see, sir, there are substances that occur in your world that don't occur in ours, and when we encounter them here, they can be dangerous to us," Professor Swain explained. "You've already seen what happens with iron, of course. But then there are stimulants. And opiates."

"You would not believe how fast Faeries can get addicted to opiates. A single dose of prescription morphine will, in all likelihood, leave one of them physically addicted to it," Dr. Orson said grimly. "That's what happened to Liria."

"Why is that?" Snape asked her, in consternation.

"No inherited tolerance for it," she replied. "Opiates hit a Faerie like Agent Orange in the virgin rainforest. The effect is devastating." Snape had no idea what Agent Orange was, but from the tone of her voice, he inferred that it was something very toxic and horrible indeed.

"There are examples of the reverse as well," Professor Swain said. "Certain substances that I can shrug off would hit you like a ton of bricks."

"Such as?" he queried.

"Such as *never* try to drink all the wine these folks will serve you at their welcome banquets," Dr. Orson muttered, pressing her hand to her temple with an expressive grimace. "That was the best food, and worst hangover, of my *life.*"

Professor Swain smiled drolly at her, then turned back to Snape. "It's like the good doctor said I can drink alcohol all day every day," she said. "We drink liquor with every meal at home, including breakfast, and my liver can take it. A human who tried to drink like a Faerie would destroy his liver in a year or two. But if I was put on a morphine drip right after surgery or what have you, I would end up going through opiate withdrawal afterward, just like Liria was tonight."

"This isn't the first time you've met one of your countrymen in this situation, is it," Snape asked.

"No, it's not," she replied quietly. "And Catherine sees even more of them."

"So, I got together with a wizard healer friend to adapt a Muggle drug to treat it," Catherine replied. "The reason we had to bother you tonight, sir, was because I treated another heroin-addicted patient earlier this week and hadn't had a chance to get more potion ingredients."

"You worked with a wizard healer? How on Earth did you meet him?" Snape asked, curious.

"I didn't meet him on Earth, actually, I met him in Arcadia," Dr. Orson replied.

"Oh, this is probably a good time to explain to you what a Tithe page is, sir," Professor Swain said, turning back to him. Snape was again surprised by this he would have thought that she would conveniently forget his question of earlier in the evening. "Every seven years, during peacetime, the Third Kingdom asks seven of the most promising members of the intelligent races of the Second World to spend a year and a day at the royal Court. Catherine here was one of those Tithe pages back in 1978, and while she was there, she became great friends with a student mediwizard named Laurent Collier," she explained. "Now they're probably the two foremost human experts on Faery medicine."

"You are too kind," Dr. Orson muttered.

"Just giving credit where it's due," Professor Swain replied.

The detox potion was now mostly finished; Snape's eyes lingered on his colleague as she re-stoppered bottles and jars and began putting them next to his black satchel, sitting open on a corner of the laboratory counter.

"Actually... why don't you leave the components here, Professor," he said quietly. "I'm sure Dr. Orson can use them. I have more back at school, and none of them were too wildly expensive. I can certainly obtain more."

Dr. Orson looked at him in frank astonishment. "Thank you so much, sir, you've been a godsend tonight," she said, and shook his hand very warmly and respectfully.

"Think nothing of it," Snape replied shortly, both pleased and acutely embarrassed by all this unabashed gratitude. Peripherally, he could see Professor Swain watching him with a keen, searching expression on her face but she remained silent.

"But if you don't mind, Doctor, I'd like to know how you came up with this opiate inhibitor potion," Snape said, indicating the beakers and components in front of them. "How exactly did you do it?"

"After Laurent and I had seen enough cases of opiate addiction, we just both decided something had to be done," she told him. "The theory came from Muggle medicine there's an entire medical speciality devoted to treating substance addiction. Humans, as you know, also get addicted to opiates, just not anywhere near as fast as Faeries do. My friend Laurent and I studied various Muggle drugs and Wizard potions used to treat it, and we came up with a variant for Faeries through the usual trial and error and guesswork. Our first patient was one extremely brave satyr Laurent had been treating if anyone has the constitution to take physical extremes, it's one of them. He went on to make a full recovery, and Laurent and I put our potion into broader use.

"What was really difficult, though, was putting it through any kind of clinical trial," she continued. "Many of the Fae patients who could benefit from our help unfortunately have a real aversion to seeking out medical treatment from a human. And then it's hard to get measurable data even from patients who do present for treatment Faeries really don't like to be studied or quantified, you see."

"Yes, I've noticed," Snape said, only slightly in Professor Swain's direction, and with only the slightest tone of pointed sarcasm in his voice.

"It's hard to study their physiology, because of their social attitudes. Ask one of them for a blood sample and they'll say sure, sounds like a great idea and then you turn your back, and they'll have vanished."

"Not *all* of us," Professor Swain protested quietly more in his direction than Dr. Orson's, he thought. "How many gratuitous x-rays and blood samples have I let you take?"

"You're right, you're right present company excluded," Dr. Orson said in a conciliatory tone. "It's just happened often enough with other people to be frustrating, that's all."

Snape scowled eloquently, but said nothing. Professor Swain, however, darted a rather uncomfortable look at him, then got up and excused herself, saying she wanted to go check on Liria. He was now accustomed to the way she often made herself scarce the second she took a dislike to the tenor of a discussion, but he restrained any number of biting sarcastic comments in her direction as she left the room.

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There's less than a one percent difference genetically between a tiger pooka and an ordinary tiger, but somehow pooka can talk, walk upright, have political debates, use tools and weapons, create art, all that kind of stuff. I love animal pookas imagine knowing a huge fox, panther, eagle, or tiger who can talk, but who still likes to be scratched behind the ears. My surgical assistant in Arcadia was a gorilla pooka and she was the best nurse I'd ever met."

"What race is Liria considered a part of?" he asked. "I'd seen a couple of her sort in Diagon Alley some time ago. I'm curious they have a very distinctive sort of look to them."

"Liria's a sluagh," Catherine said. "They all have that kind of black and white colouring. You're right, it's a very distinctive look sluagh get a bad rap a lot of the time. It's not fair, but they do."

"Why is that?" Snape asked.

"Well, the royal family of the Ninth Kingdom is made up of sluagh, and the Ninth is the poorest one of them, and has the worst weather because it's farthest to the north, and the one that's been most beaten down by Orcs. There's all kinds of negative European folklore about them humans used to say sluagh were the ghosts of dead sinners and such. Also some people think they look sort of scary, what with the chalk-white skin, the black hair, the big black eyes and the low voices. So they're not the most cheerful lot at times.

"But knowing Emily, I'm not surprised that she has a mile-wide soft spot for sluagh." Catherine gave a bitter little laugh and glanced warily toward his colleague, as though she didn't want to offend her by being overheard talking about her.

"How so?"

"She was married to one," Catherine said softly, aside to him. "Her husband Dorien was of the same race as Liria."

"Really," Snape said. "I didn't know that."

"Yes, well... he died, awhile back. It was... " Catherine sighed. "It was hard on her."

"Yes... a mutual acquaintance of the Professor's and mine mentioned that. Probably rather callous of him, all told," Snape said stiffly. "Very tragic circumstances."

"You're telling me," Catherine said with an edge to her voice. She stared down at her hands, the corner of her mouth twisting with bitterness, then looked up. "You know, we're just about finished up here and I am absolutely dying for a cup of coffee, and I know Emily won't go for one with me. I have a coffeepot in my office downstairs. Want to walk down with me and get some?"

"Yes, actually I think I could use a cup about now," Snape said.

"Come on. I'll Obscure you on the way down."

"No need, I'll do it myself."

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He just looked at her, his black eyes keen with curiosity.

"Oh, you want to know how that works," Catherine said with a laugh. "Yes, humans can give birth to Faeries and Faeries can give birth to humans it's all a matter of which genes are dominant. My friend Laurent's mother is a human witch who married a sidhe Faerie now he has two Fae half-brothers. But my boggin great-grandfather married a Muggle Tithe page, and then their boggin daughter married another Muggle Tithe page, and then their boggin daughter married yet another Muggle Tithe page my mother and my father. So the Fae characteristics aren't dominant any more."

"So you can only volunteer as a field surgeon, and can't join the Arcadian military proper, and be awarded honours and such."

Catherine shrugged. "They made it clear that they appreciated me. I always felt like a fully accepted part of the group, not a member of a despised alien race or something. Hey, I don't like tattoos anyway," she said with a short laugh but Snape thought he detected just the smallest touch of bitterness. "But then, I was in the Third Kingdom like I said, they're about as open-minded regarding non-Fae as they come. If I'd been in the Seventh Kingdom, I probably would have gotten treated like monkey shite, if they didn't refuse my help outright. They've never practiced the Tithe in the Seventh Kingdom, put it that way."

"Your time in the war... what was it like?" Snape asked. "I have to admit I'm terribly curious."

"Oh dear Mother, I've got a million stories. I could talk your ear off," Catherine said, with a warning smile.

"Well... we do have three quarters of a pot of excellent coffee left," Snape said, in a leading tone that encouraged his companion to discourse on this subject as long as she wanted.

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By the time they went through that pot of coffee, he was enthralled.

"Emily goes about command completely differently than her mother," Catherine was saying. "Their leadership styles are like night and day. Before a battle, Elaine will be making the grand St. Crispin's Day kind of speeches until you feel like you could slaughter every Orc in the Kingdoms yourself. She's *gorgeous*, Elaine is, like a marble statue of a goddess or something. Before she's done, you're convinced the sun shines out of her arse. You'd do anything for her.

"Emily, now, she doesn't say anything. No speeches, nothing. She just waits. Nonchalantly polishing her sword the whole time, like there's anything in this world or any other that could make that thing any sharper. Acts like the Orc army is inconveniencing her by picking on her town. Then she makes a single obeisance to the sky, to the Mother Goddess... and starts methodically killing Orcs. Makes it look easy. She doesn't even look to see if anyone's following her onto the battlefield, but they all do. Em's always more willing to do something dangerous herself than have any of her people do it. She takes it really personally if any of them get hurt it's like she thinks she should be able to protect all of them herself."

Catherine looked at Snape and shook her head wonderingly. "Both of them are really something to see."

"I can imagine," Snape said quietly.

"Ask anybody what they think of Elaine, and they'll rhapsodise about how she's the second coming of Finn Mac Cumhnail, what a great warrior she is, et cetera. Ask anyone what they think of Em, and they only ever have one thing to say."

"What's that?"

"*She's committed*," Catherine said. Then she roused herself, glancing at the clock on her desk. "Damn, it's past three a.m. I've got to be to work in four hours. I should head back up to the clinic and check on Liria."

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Snape followed her back upstairs to the hidden clinic, where Liria was still deeply asleep, curled up on her side. Professor Swain was sitting on the wide windowsill by Liria's bed. She looked up with an air of having been waiting for them.

"There's a spare bed, sir, did you want to take a nap?" Catherine asked him.

"No, why don't you go ahead," he replied, even though he was so tired his eyes were burning. "I'll just rest here for a bit." He sat down at the anteroom desk and let his head fall forward onto his arms. Catherine turned out the laboratory light, lay down on the second hospital bed and was asleep in an instant.

Snape's gaze was drawn back to where Professor Swain was perched on the windowsill. She was sitting bolt upright, a slender, alert figure keeping watch, silhouetted in the faint light from the streetlamps outside. Regardless of the skimpy evening clothes, there was no mistaking what she was at that moment a knight standing guard over the charges in her care.

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Snape woke up, some time later. It was still dark out, the faded black of an hour before dawn.

He sat up, raking his hands through his dishevelled hair, and rubbed his eyes. Liria and Catherine were both still sleeping. Professor Swain had not moved from her post if she was tired, nothing in her attitude or posture betrayed it. She glanced at him briefly as he sat back in his chair, the barest acknowledgment of his waking. He returned her glance just as coolly.

He opened the clinic door a fraction and peered down the hall, which was deserted so he took the opportunity to go back down to Catherine's office, Obscured, and brew up another pot of coffee. There were herbal mint tea bags too, he noticed he put one of those in a cup of hot water, then brought the tea, fresh coffee, and two mugs back up to the clinic. He poured himself a fresh cup, then crossed to Professor Swain and put the steeping tea in front of her.

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Severus Snape had gotten her a cup of tea. Emily glanced at him in faint shock and surprise before picking up the mug peppermint, spearmint, and a bit of tarragon. "Thanks," she said. "I hope you were able to sleep a bit."

"Perhaps a couple of hours," he replied, leaning on the windowsill next to her and gazing out at the street below.

"Where did you find coffee?" she asked, only wrinkling her nose slightly at the smell.

"Catherine had a coffeepot in her office two floors down I went down and brewed some," he said. He took another sip from the scalding cup, and grimaced.

"Did the security guards stop you?"

"No," he said. "I made sure no one saw me."

She smiled wryly. "That sounds familiar. It's restful, isn't it?"

He turned an incisive look in her direction. "What do you mean?"

"Knowing that no one can see you."

He frowned for a moment; she waited for some sharp rejoinder. But he only said, "Yes... it is rather restful."

"One of my favourite uses for it is when I want to go to the British Museum and just look at the Elgin Marbles, instead of fending off the advances of some earnestly intellectual university student."

"I am not often importuned by the advances of earnest university students, madam," he replied with only a slight lift to the eyebrow.

"But surely you know what I mean."

"I might, yes. It can be pleasant to go about your business without being disturbed by anyone else. I would worry about abusing the ability, however. I'm now hugely tempted to just disappear every time a situation gets uncomfortable or annoying."

There was a long, very uncomfortable silence, in which Emily contemplated abusing the second form of Obscurantis in exactly the manner Snape had just described.

"I would have thought that you would understand why people use it that way," she said, a touch defensively. "I've seen you at parties you hate being social."

"And I've seen you at parties you don't hate being social," he observed dryly.

"More like I don't hate dancing. Whether or not I hate a party depends on the company."

"Fair enough." He shrugged noncommittally, taking another sip of scalding coffee. "So, is that the sort of thing you usually wear to tend the sick?"

Emily glanced down at her black cocktail dress again, she had completely forgotten what she was wearing. "Ah... no. I was on my way to something else when I ran into Liria. That sort of precipitated a big change of plans."

"Rather a pity you had to miss this... event," he muttered, his eyes on the coffee cup.

"He'll understand," she said, too tired and distracted to judge her words carefully and a second later, she was desperately wishing that she could rewind time and unspeak that statement. Peripherally she could see Snape's eyes all but burning into the side of her face.

"How kind of him," he said, his voice emotionless.

"It was just a... bit of a date," she said, staring out the window and blushing furiously. "Someone I met at the Ministry Ball." Which was true enough she had met Lucius at the Ministry Ball, just not for the first time. She had also been introduced to and danced with any number of men at that Ball, so if there was any mercy in the world, he wouldn't try to ferret out with exactly which one of them she had this date.

"I see," Snape said, and luckily, seemed totally disinterested in pursuing this topic any further.

Catherine stirred and sat up a moment later, bleary-eyed, and raked her hair back from her eyes. She turned toward Snape, sniffing the air. "Where can I get some of that?" she whispered.

"On the counter in the lab," he replied. She came back from the laboratory a moment later, sipping from a coffee cup as though it was the only thing in the world keeping her on her feet. "Thanks for staying, Professor, but I think she'll be all right. You look exhausted, sir why don't you head home and get some sleep."

"All right. I'd say you have the situation well under control," he agreed, then crossed back into the laboratory.

"You might want to go with him and ask about the consulting fee," Catherine muttered aside to Emily. She nodded.

Snape emerged from the lab a second later, wearing his long coat and carrying his satchel. He then paused by Liria's bed, assessing her condition for himself one last time. Despite his exhaustion, Emily thought he seemed satisfied with his night's work. Finally he turned to Catherine to say his goodbyes.

"It's been a pleasure, Doctor," Snape said, shaking her hand one eminent colleague to another.

"Likewise, Professor," Catherine replied, in the same tone.

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The sky was paling in the east when Emily and Snape reappeared at the Hogwarts gate. A few birds were trilling their groggy morning songs in the trees bordering the path as they made their way up toward the castle.

Snape turned a weary sideways glance at her as they walked. "Is there something further we need to discuss?"

"Well, yes," she said, glad that he had broached the subject. "There's the matter of... the obligation I owe you."

Snape sighed, rubbing the corners of his eyes. "Professor... I'm not fond of either being beholden to people or having them beholden to me."

"I understand that. But you see, where I come from, there is a great deal of significance attached to obligations not just morally, but karmically and magically "

"I would appreciate if you would kindly allow *me* to decide if I require any sort of compensation for my efforts this evening, please."

He crossed the main foyer and headed up the stairs very quickly, so that she had to hurry to keep up with him.

"Well... perhaps you have a consulting fee? I'd imagine people are constantly trying to hire you for potions projects."

"Yes, on occasion I've done some independent consulting here and there," Snape said, very testily, as though the subject was a sore spot with him.

"Then... perhaps you could draw me up an invoice... ?" They had arrived at the entrance to the Slytherin dungeons; Snape paused to listen to her with only the most grudging and threadbare sort of attention.

"Yes, I'll draw you up an invoice, if you really insist," he said. "However, the fee will climb exponentially for every moment you do not immediately vacate these premises, so I can actually try to get some sleep." She suddenly noticed that his eyes really were looking extremely bloodshot and red-rimmed, and his hands were shaky with fatigue no wonder he was feeling on edge.

"Of course, pardon me," she said, and left him alone.

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Emily went back up to her own apartments after Snape took his leave of her, took a quick shower, and changed into some casual clothes. Then she returned to the clinic at St. George's, where Catherine was readying herself for her day's work.

"There you are," she said when Emily returned. "I hope the consulting didn't run you too much."

"Nothing yet," Emily said, shrugging. "He said he'd send me an invoice after he got a chance to rest."

"Okay. Lie down, Em, you look like you could use a nap yourself," Catherine admonished her.

"No, I'm all right. Liria needs someone to watch her, and when she wakes up, we're going to need to figure out what she should do next there's no way she can go back to her old job."

"What was her old job?"

"Nothing she won't be happy to leave behind," Emily said.

"Em, tell me," Catherine said. "I'm her doctor, remember? And whatever happened to her, you know it's entirely likely that someone else will end up in the same situation, sooner or later."

Emily glanced at Liria, still peacefully sleeping. She looked like the most fragile porcelain doll imaginable, with her black hair mussed against her pillow. "All right, but you can *never* let her know I told you."

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Liria woke up from her long sleep late Sunday afternoon, with Emily sitting beside her. Catherine arrived back at the clinic on her dinner break not long after, with a light breakfast of herbal tea, oatmeal, and fruit. Liria still seemed tired and weak, but she tore hungrily into an apple.

"You know what I've been really homesick for the whole time I've been away? Arcadian breakfasts," Liria told them, spooning up some oatmeal. "When I get back home, the first thing I'm going to do is have a huge breakfast at the Inn at the End of the World. Wheaten porridge with strawberries and cream, heaps of eggs and rashers of bacon, and about a hundred glasses of small beer."

"Ah, when you get home.. ?" Emily's tone encouraged her to elaborate on this plan as much as she wanted.

"Yeah," Liria said. "I thought I'd get to the next open portal, and go back to the Third Kingdom. I can do that, right? I mean, I'll stay if you need me to," she said, looking from Emily to Catherine.

"No, of course you can go home if you like," Emily said immediately.

Liria looked wistfully at Emily. "Can you come with me? Just for awhile?"

Oh... she hadn't considered that. "Well, I have to teach class tomorrow... though I can probably ask them to find a substitute, for an emergency, let me think for a second... "

"I've got an idea." Catherine picked up the phone on her desk and dialled. "Roddy? It's me. Can you come to the clinic at the hospital?"

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Roderick Sellars pulled up outside the hospital on his souped-up Triumph motorbike perhaps half an hour later. He was a tall, magnificently athletic man, with light *café au lait*-coloured skin, spiky bleached-blond hair, and striking light blue eyes upon meeting him, most people assumed his unusual looks must be due to interracial ancestry. But that was before the Glamour came off to reveal his real complexion, of a light brown freckled and mottled here and there with ash grey, the pronounced point of his ears, and the startling contrast of his ice-grey hair and eyes. In truth, Roderick was an Arcadian ogre, and his ancestry was half sidhe Faerie, half Fomorian Orc.

"Oi, Emily! Haven't seen you in forever." He hugged her in greeting.

"Nice to see you too, darling. You must be keeping up with your boxing you look great."

"As much as I'm allowed," he said, with a sidelong glance at Catherine. She muttered, *It's for your own good,* and punched him lightly on the arm.

"And this is Liria," Catherine said, turning toward the girl.

"Morning," Liria chirped, setting down her teacup. Emily gratefully noted that she seemed in much better health and spirits than she had the previous evening.

"Good morning, Liria, I'm Roderick, but most call me Roddy," he said, shaking her hand. He turned back to Catherine and Emily. "Now, ladies, how can I be of service?"

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After Catherine and Emily took Roderick aside into the laboratory and filled him in on Liria's predicament, he agreed to accompany her back to Arcadia and get her situated. Emily threw her arms around him and gave him a smacking kiss on the cheek. "You're a paladin hero this day, my friend. Let me know how I can repay you, whenever there's a need."

Emily took down the address of Liria's rented room off of Knockturn Alley, promising to gather all of her belongings post-haste and bring them to her at the hospital. Roderick volunteered to go with her, in case any agents of Liria's former employers decided to come looking for her. As far as luggage, some of the shops in Diagon Alley would just be opening for a Sunday's half-day of business, so she could get Liria a small Holding Satchel at the Taerdis Co. Luggage shop, one of their ready-made, non-custom models that would hold a large closet's worth of someone's belongings. Also, Liria would probably need letters of introduction she made a note to draft those as well and some tradeable commodity to use as discretionary cash.

"Thanks, both of you," Liria said as they readied themselves to leave.

"Don't worry, honey, your job now is to finish breakfast," Emily told her. "We'll take care of the rest."

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One of the first spells Catherine Orson had learned during her time in Arcadia was the*Giortaigh* charm, the Faery equivalent of the Wizard *Reducio* spell. Now, her favourite method of dealing with the problem of limited parking at the hospital was to drive to work, stop her silver Mini Cooper in some deserted part of the hospital parking structure, and miniaturise it to the size of a Hot Wheels toy. Then she would put it in her bag and be on her way.

Parking had been especially bad in the hospital personnel lot that day. When Emily met her at the coffeehouse across the street from the hospital that Sunday evening, Cat was running her little car in a long, noodling circuit around the café table, making *vroom vroom* sounds under her breath.

"I shouldn't play with it when it's tiny," Catherine said. "It's really easy to put dents in it. And when I bring it back up to normal size it's going to have fingerprints as tall as I am on the roof. But it's just so *cute* like this."

Emily laughed and took the seat opposite her at the table. She wore jeans, her leather peacoat, and her usual Glamoured human visage the waitress who appeared to refill

Catherine's coffee cup and take her order for a pot of decaf vanilla jasmine tea never batted an eyelash at her.

"So they're off," Emily said, with a weary, but joyful, smile. "They're staying at a Glastonbury Tor bed and breakfast until the portal opens Thursday night. She took on a *Geas* from me never to take any more heroin."

"Nothing like a magical karmic oath to keep people from relapsing," Catherine said, then grinned at Emily. "By the way *Hello*, how are you? Haven't seen you in a while."

"Yes, didn't have much time to talk last night, did we," Emily agreed, blowing on her tea. "I wanted to tell you, I like what you've done to your hair. You look pretty as a redhead."

"Thanks," Catherine said, regarding her across the table with a keen green gaze. "And the freshly shagged look is really agreeing with you. Does wonders for your complexion."

Emily stared down at her teacup, blushing furiously. "Is it that obvious?"

"In contrast to the last time I saw you, hell *yes*, it is," Catherine said. "And that was some dress you showed up in Saturday night. What's his name?"

"You don't know him," Emily said. This was more or less the truth given Lucius's distaste for Muggles, Catherine probably hadn't exchanged two words with him while they were both at Court.

"Which of course means, *None of your business, Cat*," her friend said, with a quirked eyebrow.

"It's not that it's none of your business, it's just that it's nothing especially *deep*, is all," she said, embarrassed. "It's by necessity temporary. I'm going home at either the end of the school year or in September."

"Does he know that?"

"Yes. I don't think he ever really counted on being introduced to my friends, put it that way."

"Well, I'm not going to say you shouldn't have a bit of a nice, cheap, superficial fling while you're here," Cat said, grinning. "I know I did plenty of flirting with some of the locals in Arcadia."

Emily grinned back. "Come off it, Dr. Orson, you cut a swathe through the Court swains like a scythe through a wheat field."

"Hey, that was *only* my ceremonial duty," Cat said, very virtuously indeed.

"Ceremonial duty, eh? You're still doing your *ceremonial duty* now, it seems," Emily said dryly. "I did notice that you called your own number to get hold of Roderick."

This time it was Catherine's turn to blush. "Well... he's not got a lot to do right now. I had to pretty much forbid him to do any fighting or even sparring until his eye heals completely. If his retina gets permanently detached, he'll end up half blind, and no boxing title is worth that. I told him flat out that if I have to refer him for one more cryopexy, I'm not his doctor anymore."

"You said you won't be his... *doctor* anymore? Is that how one spells *girlfriend* these days?" Emily demurely leaned her chin on her hand, looking at her friend as though she was telling the most fascinating tale in the world.

Catherine stared at the café ceiling for a long moment before replying. "Okay, he's not the most conventional-looking man in this world. But he's an athlete his body is like something carved in marble," she said with a low whistle. "Yes, I know he's an ogre. I know damned well that his father was an Orc raider. But Roddy himself is the most tender and caring man you can imagine there is no doubt in my mind that Liria is one hundred percent safe with him looking after her."

"I don't doubt it either," Emily said.

"Some men, you know, they have bad fathers, but that just makes them all the more conscientious when it comes to treating their own women well," Catherine said. "To him, the best revenge he can have for what his father did is to make his own woman feel cherished and cared for. I'm not kidding, Em, he gets up early every day to make breakfast for me before I go to work."

"I'm happy for you," Emily said quietly. "No, screw that I'm jealous."

Catherine put down her coffee cup and took Emily's hand in both of hers. "Stop it," she said. "You're going to be happy again."

"Thanks," Emily said, almost inaudibly. "So... what do you think we should do about the part-human brothel?" she asked a moment later, with an air of wanting to change the subject. "We'll need to have someone keeping a regular watch there, and in Knockturn Alley."

"Not to worry I already got in touch with Lord Puck," Catherine replied. "He and his vassals are taking care of that personally."

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Later that night, two extremely well-dressed men were admitted into the lavish front saloon at Pasiphäe's.

They were very nearly a study in opposites one huge, one tiny. The taller fellow, dressed in extremely sharp black dress robes over a finely tailored frock coat, had immense shoulders and brawny hands, with freckled, light brown skin, and a large, bullish head set on an equally brawny neck. The redhaired part-giantess on staff turned an appraising eye on him immediately.

His companion was under five feet tall, with merry, crinkly eyes, and luxuriant grey hair. He wore an elegant fur coat and a heavy, engraved medallion on a substantial chain around his neck, both made of what looked like burnished gold. Anyone observing them closely would have immediately noticed that the huge man was very deferential and polite to the smaller one; something about them suggested some very important personage with an associate, or perhaps an executive bodyguard.

Pandarus eagerly came forward to meet them at the bar, all but rubbing his hands together in anticipation of wealthy new customers with money to spend visiting his establishment. "Yes, my good sirs, what can I get for you?"

The smaller man hopped up on a barstool with amazing dexterity and twinkled pleasantly at the proprietor. "Have you any dandelion wine, good sir?"

"Dandelion wine, eh? You gentlemen have fine taste, but it'll cost ye. Transportation fees, ye know. Let me see what I can scare up for ye." He bent down to rummage under the bar.

But when he straightened up and turned back to the two patrons at the bar, a bottle of dandelion wine in hand, they had both vanished entirely.

Left in their place was a glittering, intricately made dagger, stabbed upright in the gleaming wood surface of the bar stabbed so firmly that it would later take two brawny men with carpentry pliers to remove it. That dagger pinned a letter to the bar a very official-looking letter, written in a flowing, calligraphic hand:

BE IT KNOWN

That the Fae WILL NOT TOLERATE Your Trafficking in the Miserie of Our People.

Any Destitute or Chemically-Dependent FAERIE

Who Enters This Establishment Seeking Employment

Shall From This Hour Forward Be Given This Call Number:

011-48-555-1212

For AID and ASSISTANCE.

We will be watching.

IGNORE THIS WARNING AT YOUR OWN RISK.

Part Second: The Hart Rampant: Chapter 20, Part 1

Chapter 25 of 55

In which Professor Swain discovers the delights of a dual life as both a Hogwarts professor and Lucius Malfoy's mistress, until a chance encounter with a desperate Faery prostitute in Knockturn Alley sends her to the most unlikely person for aid. Meanwhile, Severus Snape finds himself alone and adrift in the Mushroom Circle, a Faery nightclub…

Chapter 20:

Severus Snape never thought he would see the day when he had a Faerie sitting on his office worktable, asking him if there was anything he *really* wanted.

It was a scenario straight out of one of the books of fantastical adventure he had loved as a boy, in which the good Faerie arrived to offer the hero the means to save himself, if he only gave the right answers or asked the right questions. Or perhaps this was really the scenario in which the evil Faerie appeared to tempt the hero from his quest he wouldn't have put that role past her. As always, her real motivations and agendas were as mysterious as they were suspect. Tam Lin or True Thomas might have faced much the same predicament but somehow Snape doubted that Tam Lin or True Thomas ever met the kind of Faerie who sauntered into one's office wearing a short black frock under an open professorial robe, casually perched herself on one's workspace, crossed one black-stockinged knee over the other, and then leaned forward with that sort of smile.

If they had Merlin help them.

Professor Swain had apparently been quite serious when she said that she owed him an obligation for what he had done for Liria. It had now been over a week since the night he made up the opiate inhibitor potion at St. George's, and she showed no signs of letting up with the gratitude. She was now practically following him around like a slender blonde shadow, discreetly pestering him as to what she could do for him in return. Her attention was as frightfully embarrassing as it was obscurely gratifying.

Truthfully, if he could have had his own way in this matter, Snape would not have required anything further for his efforts. Catherine's heartfelt, "Thank you, you've been a godsend tonight," and seeing Liria's suffering alleviated had really been quite enough reward for him. (Well, that and the sight of Emily Swain swallowing her pride to *humbly entreat* him to grant her a favour had also been a rare, choice moment.) He hadn't gone to the hospital that evening with the notion that he was bravely sallying forth on some absurd Gryffindorean Quest to Help the Innocent and Oppressed; he had decided to lend his aid that night purely for reasons of utility. Someone else was suffering. It had been well within his power to put a permanent end to that suffering, at the cost of a few hours' work and some lost sleep. The opiate inhibitor potion was challenging to make, but had not taxed his ability to the limit it wasn't Wolfsbane, for pity's sake. The benefit to Liria had been immeasurable, and the cost to him comparatively minor, so to Snape, his logical and appropriate reaction to such a situation had been clear. He regularly worked far harder than that for far less appreciation and had been very much resigned to that state of affairs for most of his life.

But today, Professor Swain had turned up on the dot of 3:53 (his office hours were to start at 4:00 p.m. that afternoon, but somehow the little minx had figured out that he would be there early). Since students almost never showed up to his office hours, there now promised to be an unbroken two-hour stretch in which he had nothing to do but listen to her lay offers before him.

"I've never met the apothecary who didn't have some legendary grimoire he would give his eye-teeth for in the back of his mind," she was saying. "So if you'll tell me which one is your particular favourite, sir, I know people who are extremely good at locating that sort of thing."

"There really isn't much that I can't find in the main library here," Snape replied, despite the fact that he could have named three or four staggeringly rare and expensive tomes that he would have loved to own at that very moment.

"Well, all right," she said. "Then, not to be indelicate, but it seems that in this world, with the invention of things like banks and instalment loans, everyone has some kind of financial obligation he or she would love to see disappear forever."

"Possessing neither a mortgage nor a bank loan of any kind, I'm afraid I can't help you there, madam," he said, even though there was a certain estate tax payment looming ominously in his fiscal calendar.

They had been going on like this for awhile, and neither of them were about to surrender their respective positions.

He pictured himself crossing the dungeon floor and seizing her, taking another of those long, selfish, callbox-ish kisses of her. There had been a time when he could have done just that without consequence, albeit with a very different kind of woman. In the past, he had known women to whom he could have snapped, "There, I've done something for you, and you owe me. Now come into my bedroom and I'll describe all the various lascivious and generally obscene acts I want from you in return," and had that curt demand honoured but he had given all of that up a long time ago.

She was still sitting on his worktable, damn her. From all appearances totally unaware that seeing her looking at him like that felt like metal grating on the exposed root of a tooth.

Yes, you ridiculous, unobservant, catastrophically oblivious female I can think of something I wouldn't mind having. But for now, why don't you just sit there and woo me for another hour.

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What a reversal of fortune *this* was, Emily thought, as she sat in Snape's office.

Lucius apparently wasn't speaking to her. She had now sent him three apologetic, adoring letters, asking him to name a time, any time, when he could see her. Ten days had gone by, and there had been no reply.

And now, she owed Professor Snape a rather large debt of gratitude and he seemed bound and determined to *not* let her discharge it. Instead, he was playing the stiffly formal English gentleman to the hilt, acting as though helping reclaim the life of a Fae drug addict was just the sort of thing someone like him *did,* thank you very much. All in a day's work, you see, a brilliant Potions master's job is never done.

Lucius was being stand-offish and impossible, and Professor Snape was being gracious and generous in his own sullen, stoic sort of way.

It staggered the imagination.

She gripped the edge of the table and racked her brains for some bloody thing Severus Snape might want; obscure, hard-to-find information had been at the top of her list, some debt paid off had been second, as per Catherine's suggestion. From there, she really couldn't think of anything else that might appeal to him, other than perhaps early retirement.

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Finally, that Thursday evening there came the scratch of a secretive little post owl at Emily's window, bearing a letter in Lucius's familiar handwriting:

Madam,

So glad you could take the time out of your busy schedule to notice my existence again. For future reference I dislike being kept waiting, my dear. I have gone out of my way to make you a priority, and I'm a bit hurt to discover that I do not warrant the same consideration from you.

I suppose I could manage to make some time to see you this coming weekend, if you aren't distracted by another pressing matter of honour.

But don't think you can simply sashay in and expect a moment of your usual sort of feminine wiles to win me back, either. I shall expect rather more effort than that. Extra points if you expend said efforts in fetching black lingerie. This Friday night at the Cockatrice, I shall be amenable to receiving such efforts in the penthouse suite after half past eight or so, but unfortunately I shall be in a meeting with my dear brother-in-law that may run late that evening. Just wait for me in the hotel lounge until you see him leave, then come up.

Now if you will excuse me, I must need go indulge myself with another sulk because my treacherous lover so scandalously neglects me.

All right then, so he was playing coy, was he darling Lucius, the poor wounded lover with his hand nailed to his forehead. So he wanted her to win him back, woo him, play the supplicant in bed for him.

This could be managed, she thought, smiling roguishly to herself.

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Friday night arrived, and Emily took the usual long coquettish time after that evening's supper to slither into the right sort of evening wear to appease a sulking Malfoy. She then covered the low-necked, low-backed dress and explicit lingerie with a long velvet robe, and tucked a small volume of Christina Rossetti's poetry into her bag. If she was going to have to wait for Lucius in a hotel lounge, she was not going to give anyone the idea that she was particularly approachable, as the impression left by the fellows who had solicited both her and Liria in Knockturn Alley still left an unpleasant taste in her mouth.

The Cockatrice Inn was a small but very elegant hotel built in the 1920's in the Art Deco style, situated right where Diagon Alley intersected the bespoke shopping street of Sartor Alley, and Theatric Alley with all its cabarets and theatres. Emily had spent the night in its most lavish penthouse and club suites on more than one occasion, but she had never yet been in its lobby or cocktail lounge. When she arrived, at perhaps quarter past eight that evening, she thought the vivid Deco floors of black and silver marble, the lyrical metal railings, and etched glass mirrors behind the bar were quite beautiful. She ordered a snifter of French Armagnac in the lounge, and took a seat on one of the slender, velvet upholstered stools at a table that afforded her a clear view of the lobby. Then she opened her book and pretended to read all the while trying very much *not* to look like someone who was there for an illicit assignation with Lucius Malfoy.

Nine o'clock came and went, and Emily began to get impatient. What could Narcissa's brother possibly need to talk to Lucius about that took this much time, she wondered she wouldn't have thought Menzentius had enough raw brainpower to sustain an hours'-long conversation. She wondered for a long moment what they were meeting about in the first place some joint business interest? Or, more than likely, the dissolute Menzentius was begging Lucius to bail him out of some gambling debt or wheedling for a loan he would never pay back; that wouldn't have surprised her in the least.

At quarter past nine, Menzentius finally made his appearance, descending the sweeping staircase into the lobby. He looked every bit the profligate aristocrat, in expensive and slightly rumpled robes, his ash blond hair loose around his shoulders. Emily hid behind her book, waiting for him to cross the lobby and be gone.

But then *oh no* he was turning toward the lounge bar, he was making a beeline for the door of course he was the sort who couldn't walk past this sort of establishment without stopping in for a drink. Emily glanced desperately around, waiting for a moment in which she could Obscure herself, but the lounge was too crowded, there was no way she could manage it without creating a distraction, and there was no time for that, he had gotten to the door, and

He had seen her. *Shite.*

"Well, hey there. Fancy running into you, my fair lady," he called out immediately, all the way across the bar, in a raucous, carrying voice. Emily cringed.

Then to her absolute horror, he sauntered down the aisle to her table and slid onto the stool opposite her. "*Garçon*," he said, catching the bartender's eye, "I'll take a double Glenlivet, thanks." From the smell of him and the slight slur to his speech, this would not be his first whiskey of the evening. He turned toward her with his usual sort of overly familiar look. "So what brings you into London, my lady?"

Emily managed a weak smile. "Just getting out of Hogwarts for a bit it can be dull there at times unless you're about fourteen years old," she said, with false gaiety. She closed her book and put it back into her bag. "Just came from some book shopping." That was true enough she had peered into the Flourish and Blotts window on her way in.

The bartender put a cut crystal glass of whiskey at Menzentius's elbow, and he indifferently handed the man a Galleon. "Lucius is staying here tonight," Menzentius told her. "He's got some Wizengamot thing he's going to, at his club."

"Really," Emily replied neutrally. "How nice."

Menzentius picked up the whiskey glass and took a long swallow, then regarded her with keen grey eyes over the rim of the glass. "Let's see... when did I meet you," he mused aloud. "The masquerade ball, at home, wasn't it."

"Yes, I believe that was it," Emily said, with a bright, meaningless little smile.

"Prettiest little thing I'd ever seen in my life, I thought, when you got there. Crying shame I didn't get to dance with you at the Daughters of Wendelin thing at the Ministry, I thought. Under the weather that night, I was," he told her, gesturing earnestly with his glass. "And I don't care what Felina says, I think wearing negligées to formal occasions is dead sexy."

"Er, I didn't wear a negligée to the New Year's Ministry ball, sir. I wore Arcadian dress robes."

Menzentius grinned at her. "Negligées, Arcadian dress robes, what's the difference. Either way *dead* sexy."

Emily hid a disbelieving smirk in her brandy glass. "Thank you."

"Ever since then... I've been doing some thinking." He fixed her with a long, thoughtful look, toying with the glass in his hand then, to her surprise, laid his other hand over hers, where it rested on the lounge table. "I'll lay it all out on the table, love I've fancied the pants off you since the day I met you, but you seem like the kind of girl who doesn't put it out there unless the bloke is serious. I understand that, you've got your standards, that's fine. I know the Swains are a good lot, and Lucius tells me the rest of your family is sort of all right, for foreigners. I think I could get past the hooves and stuff if you don't come to bed like that. So what do you say?"

"What do I say to what?" Emily asked, not at all sure what he was getting at.

"Come on, darling, I'm not going to get down on my knees here. But my family'll get you the biggest, fanciest diamond ring you've ever seen."

Oh by the Mother he was *proposing* to her.

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Emily had had a man propose marriage to her once before.

It had been shortly after the treaty of 3022 had been signed. Emily, her lieutenants William Blake, Victoria Priquette, and Corvus Greenwood, had each been awarded the King's Arms for exceptional valour that day, along with several other members of both the Order of the Morrigan and the Sixth Kingdom's Order of the Lady Cliodhna. Sir Dorien Tumnus, Emily's lover, had been accorded his long due honours in that ceremony, alongside her, and their fellow Fianna. Although she had fought alongside Dorien for over two years, the two of them had only admitted to their intense mutual affection some three months before.

After the medals ceremony, after the feast, and the dancing, Dorien had asked her to take a walk with him, out onto the balcony overlooking the river. *Please marry me*, he had whispered, holding her hands, gazing into her eyes. *Yes*, she had answered instantly. So few words, but such limitless love and desire expressed within them. That had been a real marriage proposal.

This, on the other hand, was ridiculous.

Menzentius Black was still looking at her across the table, waiting expectantly for her answer. He took advantage of her moment of silence to down another deep swallow of whiskey.

"I... I was married once," she said quietly. "Just a bit less than four years ago. Truthfully, after the way it ended, I really have no desire to ever be married again. So, while I appreciate your... regard, I'm afraid that I have no choice but to politely decline."

Menzentius fixed her with a disbelieving stare. "Lucius isn't going to like that," he said flatly.

Something perverse and rebellious flared up in Emily. "Then Lucius can kiss my arse."

With that, she pushed her stool back, and walked out.

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Five minutes later, when Emily Disapparated into Lucius's sumptuous hotel suite, it looked as though Lucius expected to be the recipient of some arse-kissing more than he was inclined to mete it out.

He was sitting in an armchair near the hearth, in a white shirt and rich waistcoat, collar unfastened; and with a brandy glass in his hand. His sensuous mouth was petulant, his grey eyes flashing fire. Lord Byron himself could not have looked more 'mad, bad, and dangerous to know.' The whole effect was enough to cause a curious melting sensation in the pit of her stomach. He nodded a cool greeting to her. "Lady Swain."

"Darling, I haven't seen you in so long." She wasted no time in putting her robe and bag aside and rushing to his side.

"Yes, it certainly has been some time," he said, not-*quite*-glaring at her. An edge in his voice, as if he was too much a gentleman to castigate a lady, but only just.

"How have you been?" She twined her arms around his neck and leaned in to kiss him.

"As well as can be expected," he said, sulkily, turning his lips away from hers at the last second.

"Please, dearest, can't I at least kiss you?"

"Oh, I don't know," he drawled. "Is there another *matter of honour* you have to see through before I can have a moment of your time?"

"Come on, darling, you can't imagine how much I've missed you," she whispered, running her lips humidly over his cheek. "I would never have kept you waiting if it hadn't been a matter of life and death. What happened was... a friend of mine was extremely ill and there was no one but me to look after her. I simply couldn't leave her alone in such a state," she pleaded.

"And who exactly is so important that she takes priority over me?" he demanded, his scent spiking upward with annoyance and irritation.

"She was another Faerie no one you know," Emily said quickly. Her sketchy explanation, however, clearly annoyed Lucius a great deal he raised the brandy snifter to his lips and drank it off in one swallow, then stood up, and stalked away from her, turning his attention to some papers spread out on an expansive desk.

Emily followed him. "It's not that I don't value my time with you you know I do," she implored. His scowl said that he would be the judge of *that,* thank you very much.

She wrapped her arms around him from behind, laid her head supplicatingly on his shoulder. "Please, my love, don't be like this," she whispered, in a tone so meek and mild that many people would not have believed it of her.

His response was to spin her hard away from him, and push her down on her stomach over the desk. Her belly pressed against a land deed, her breasts against a transfer of real property title, her cheek against a business licence. Sound of a belt being unfastened, and then his hand parting her thighs. Emily held her breath as she waited for what would come next.

Lucius's idea of penance for a long wait apparently consisted of taking her, roughly and without preamble of any kind, as she lay over the desk but as always, he could

somehow conjure heat and pleasure in her no matter what the circumstances. She writhed back onto him, crumpling a great deal of important paperwork beneath her. As always, it never seemed to matter how he wanted her, how unsettling his demeanour, or who would disapprove of this; somehow her body wanted him, craved him. If this was punishment, the Mother knew she had no motivation to be especially *good.*

His arm was hard around her hips, forcing her back and onto him, and his teeth bared against the back of her neck. The orgasm churned up like a storm but then he pulled away from her at the last second, making her moan with disappointment. In another second, he had whisked her up and effortlessly thrown her over his shoulder, and the next, he had sprawled her on the bed.

"Now," he drawled, stretching himself out next to her, and looking like a cruel taskmaster indeed. "Let's see how persuasive you can be, shall we?"

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behind, kissed his shoulder, but he was not about to be pacified that easily.

"You know so very well how I feel about you, Emily, you always have. Even when I was a callow youth at Court, you've always just amused yourself with me. Every day I'm with you, I know you're going to leave." He heaved a long, heartfelt sigh, his face averted from her. "I've always loved you, even though I know you never really felt the same."

She buried her head in his shoulder, feeling every muscle melting with helpless affection. "Dearest, please. I can't say I've... never felt the same."

"Can you really blame me for wanting you to stay here with me?" His voice had lost some of its self-contained polish and became for a moment raw with emotion.

"Well... no, of course not."

"I'd spend every night at home if you were there," he whispered with boyish longing. "When I think of waking up every day to see you at the breakfast table... having you there at Christmas... I can't imagine anything more wonderful. Would it really be that bad?" He was looking at her like some dreaming child might look on a far-off star, and again, she couldn't help but melt to see it.

"No... it wouldn't be that bad," she said, averting her eyes, her arms tightening around him.

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That Sunday, Professor Snape had decided to treat himself to a day at the Main Library of Magic, being well caught up on his lesson plans, potions budget reports, and all of his grading duties. He arrived just after lunch (the elderly beggar was not at his usual post on the front steps, he noticed), and had soon holed up in one of his favourite haunts with a pile of interesting reading. Ever since the night he had spent at St. George's, he had become increasingly interested in opioid antagonist potions like the one Dr. Orson and her friend Collier had created and was now reading up on them to satisfy his personal curiosity on the subject. Truth be told, he had genuinely liked Catherine Orson, and by the end of that night, had very much respected her work. If he could somehow add to the body of knowledge she was now pioneering, it seemed to him a worthy goal.

After several hours of pleasant study, he took out a quill and a piece of parchment and had begun trying to draft a consulting invoice for Professor Swain. Both the idea of presenting her with a huge bill as a means of establishing that his time was in fact valuable, and presenting her with some small niggardly amount to show her how very little he needed anything from her, appealed to him. Admittedly, she had been rather more tolerable and respectful since that night at the hospital; but no matter how much she perched on that table and cajoled him, her aloof ice maidenly demeanour remained firmly intact. He wrote down a staggeringly large figure, but then frowned, and crossed it out.

Snape had noticed that Professor Swain hadn't been at breakfast that day, though it was far from the first Sunday breakfast that she had missed at Hogwarts. She had stayed at school the weekend after he had assisted her with the potion for Liria it had been a tiny, but real, relief to see her looking over some new books with Irma in the school library. But this weekend, she was away again, and for some reason her absence was especially irksome to him now. The thought came unbidden likely she had another *bit of a date* with whomever she had been going to see the weekend she ran into Liria. But then he reminded himself, *There is no commitment whatever between that woman and me. It was a shag, you idiot, not a fecking marriage proposal.*

He wondered, for a moment because he had always had a habit of tormenting himself with dwelling on grievances with exactly *whom* she had this date. Someone I met at the Ministry ball, she had said. Well, forgive him for noticing, but as far as he could tell, the group of men she had met at that particular function seemed to him to have been *a small crowd,* thank you very much. Podmore, Whimple, Shacklebolt, that Goblin Liaison bloke who was always toadying up to Lucius, even the Minister of Magic. No, the description she gave was so vague it could have been any man there well, except those she already knew. And thankfully, that excluded Lucius, Menzentius Black, and Walden Macnair.

But then she hadn't really excluded Lucius from that group by saying that she had a date with someone *she met at the Ball*, had she.

Snape had, through his continued research in Swain's *Encyclopaedia*, come across any number of references to the Faery tendency to tell the truth in an ambiguous manner, so that the listener could make whatever assumption he or she most wanted to hear. They considered oaths and promises magically binding and believed that their Mother Goddess meted out karmic punishment on oath breakers. As such, they misliked telling outright lies and went to great lengths to avoid them. But Faeries often reserved conditional loopholes within the meaning of what they did say Snape now mentally referred to this as *the Faery Dialectical.* For example, when he had asked Professor Swain where she was from, she had answered with, "My family hails from the Lake District," knowing full well that he would assume that she came from there too. She had told him nothing but the truth but in such a manner that he thought her just another English girl from the Cotswolds, and Arcadia's existence had been entirely and conveniently omitted. And she had, in fact, *met* Lucius at the Ball she hadn't travelled there with him.

Then the impulse had taken him perhaps Professor Swain should know more about her *date*, if he was in fact Lucius Malfoy. Snape gathered up his papers and books, quill and ink, and potions satchel, and headed off for another wing of the Library.

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Down in the Queen's Bench legal archive, Snape turned up a particular judicial decision, dated January 9th, 1982:

The Crown vs. Lucius Malfoy

It was the case brief chronicling Lucius's acquittal for criminal conspiracy and crimes against society, as an accomplice of one Tom Marvolo Riddle, styling himself Lord Voldemort. Snape had read this decision so many times that he had committed some parts of it to memory. Not guilty by reason of duress and coercion *duress and coercion* of course being the Imperius Curse, or so Lucius had made the Wizengamot judges believe. Any number of witnesses had come forward to testify on Malfoy's behalf Snape often wondered how much that had cost him. He himself had been served with a witness subpoena, but as it turned out, the defence had never needed to call him to the stand to testify under oath to Lucius's good character at least he had been spared that weight on his conscience.

Snape laid clean sheets of parchment over the pages containing the Malfoy verdict, and copied the text of the decision onto them with the *Copia* charm and an inaudible word.

Was there any way to see that this document somehow found its way into Professor Swain's hands?

And would it have any negative effect on her opinion of Lucius if it did?

It occurred to Snape then, with Lucius's acquittal before him, that he really had very little idea as to where Emily Swain personally stood on the politics of his own world.

In the matter of Arcadian politics, he had always assumed that his colleague was a monarchist, a supporter of the Greenbarrow crown, seeing as how she was related to the king, and served in his military. As to the matter of the trial by combat Catherine Orson had tried to explain her reasons for defying the King's wishes in the best possible light, but Snape had also noticed that Catherine was the Professor's devoted friend, and that no doubt biased her opinion. Whatever the black mark that situation had left on Professor Swain's reputation, it didn't seem to have interrupted her military career, as this assignment to Hogwarts proved. The king may have meant for this to be an unofficial disciplinary action a sort of shite detail, if you will or, he could have sent her here based his sincere belief that she was the best candidate for the job. He might have even fancied that a change of scenery would cheer his widowed young kinswoman up; certainly Hogwarts and the U.K. were no one's idea of purgatory.

All that aside it shed not one ray of light on how Emily Swain felt on the matter of Wizarding politics. And given what she knew about his own past, and his current situation, it occurred to Severus Snape that he would very, *very* much like to know.

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After an hour of searching, however, all he found under the name "Emily Beauregard Swain" in any of the archives of the Main Library of Magic was a birth announcement in the society section of the *Daily Prophet.* To Buckminster Ludwig Leonardo Swain, formerly of the Wizengamot, author of *Ars Alchymia: A Biography of Nicholas Flamel,* and his second wife, Elaine Andraste Greenbarrow Swain, a daughter. Born February 20th, 1960, at 5:37 a.m., somewhere in the Third Kingdom of Arcadia.

Other than that nothing.

It was as if she had never existed in the British Wizarding world until September of 1994, when she arrived to teach at Hogwarts. Given that the staff at Hogwarts ranged from those fanatically devoted to Albus Dumbledore, to the totally apolitical Chester Binns, to the likes of one Professor Quirinus Quirrell, there were no real clues as to any political leanings there. One bit of information caught his eye, however Buckminster Swain had been in the Wizengamot? Lucius had said that Swain was a historian and anthropologist he had never mentioned that he was a politician as well. And in Snape's experience, a father's political views very often had a tremendous influence on those of his children.

He next headed down to the Wizengamot archives, where the records on every aspect of the Wizarding government assembly were kept.

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Buckminster Swain appeared to have been the last in a long line of many scions of the Swain family to serve on the Wizengamot. His career had spanned nearly two decades, from 1939 to 1957. His voting record showed him to have been something of a moderate liberal, in favour of protections for Muggles, and of government grants for the maintenance of historical homes of pureblooded families. He was in favour of tax benefits for both labour and business interests. He wanted more public services, and to lower the rate of estate taxes on inherited wealth. He wanted to protect the environment, and at the same time was in favour of encouraging industry and business. (Really, it seemed to Snape as though the man had been in favour of just about everything.) He had also frequently participated in formal debates, both during his time in government and after his retirement.

Snape turned a page and came across a long list of issues Swain had debated before the Wizengamot assembly. Most of them seemed commonplace enough *Involuntary Memory Obliviation of Muggle Witnesses to Magic: Necessary Evil or Tyranny? Gringotts Bank: August Institution or Hostile Monopoly? Should House Elf Living Conditions Be Regulated?* But one particular debate heading stood out vividly amidst all of the other topics:

THE VOLDEMORT QUESTION. October 30th, 1979.

The name of the speaker opposing Swain in this issue had been one Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.

Snape made a note of the debate title and date, and then headed for another section of the Wizengamot archive, where the transcripts of every debate ever argued before them were kept.

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The Voldemort Question of 1979 had been one of the many debates argued before the Wizengamot in the early days of the Dark Lord's rise to power.

Albus had always been on to Voldemort's true motives and goals he had from the first seen through the former Tom Marvolo Riddle in a manner that Snape often envied. In this debate, he advocated open governmental opposition to the Dark Lord. Snape's look relaxed into a thoughtful, almost fond expression as he read over Albus's sometimes puckish and enigmatic, but always wise and sensible commentary, all backed solidly up with precedent from Voldemort's own stated goals, and recent and actual events. The wizard now styling himself Lord Voldemort, he argued, was a terrorist, a eugenicist, a would-be dictator; he was a real and immediate threat to all Muggles and everyone in the Wizarding world who disagreed with him. Albus advocated a full-scale investigation into his sect and his activities, and if necessary, Wizarding law enforcement should prosecute his crimes and see him imprisoned, as his lust for power was great and his scruples non-existent.

And then Swain had made his rebuttal in favour of extending friendly overtures to Voldemort, and making concessions to him in an effort to find common ground.

As he read Swain's argument, Snape's eyes widened in disbelief. What was the man *thinking?* He suggested that the Wizarding government try to *reason with Voldemort? Compromise* with Voldemort? *Pacify* Voldemort? Was the man *insane*? How could anyone be this much of a criminally naïve, ivory-tower intellectual? Snape had been impressed with Swain's scholarship in the *Encyclopaedia,* but now he saw all the same strengths that served the man so well elsewhere failing him miserably in this debate he had imagined and described a wonderful, bloodless solution in which Voldemort was pacified and made happy, and the greater good was served without conflict or loss of life. He had detailed his glorious vision so attractively that the reality of the Dark Lord's true goals were lost beneath all his beautiful visionary rhetoric, and high-flown and interesting, but totally irrelevant, historical precedent. Swain had been wonderfully eloquent and convincing, but he was so wrong *wrong WRONG* that just reading his side of the debate made Snape's teeth hurt, made him want to go find the man and shake him.

Snape had, of course, heard about the short-lived pacification movement that had found support in certain prominent pure-blood families and some members of the Wizengamot in the late seventies. They had faded away in disgrace in 1980, when the Dark Lord and his followers had begun to engage in more and more acts of overt violence, both toward Muggles and toward the wizards who opposed them. Or at least most of them had faded away in disgrace but Snape knew for a fact that members of the Rookwood and Nott families had begun as pacification sympathisers and ended as full-fledged Death Eaters.

And here was Emily Swain's father, at the forefront of that movement. Was *this* why the man had permanently decamped to his adopted homeland?

Just then, the archive staff made the announcement that the library would be closing in five minutes, and Snape started to ready himself to leave but not before he made a copy of the *Voldemort Question* debate transcript as well.

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Snape took a quiet half-hour with a glass of excellent whiskey in the Leaky Cauldron before heading back to Hogwarts to mull over what he had read that day. As always, a bit of twelve-year-old Dalwhinnie did much to soothe his nerves until a familiar cultured drawl sounded from over his shoulder.

"Severus, good evening, cousin." Lucius slid onto the seat opposite him. "Fancy meeting you here. What brings you into London?"

"Just some Potions research in the Library of Magic," Snape said, casually closing his satchel over the papers inside.

Lucius nodded to a passing waitress and ordered a glass of Napoleon brandy, with such a winning smile that the woman actually bobbed a little curtsy to him as she left their table. "Working on a weekend, then, old man?" Lucius asked, smiling commiseratingly at him across the table. "That old fool of a Dumbledore works you *far* too hard, as always."

Snape sighed, exaggerating the air of an overworked and underpaid academic for his cousin's benefit. "As always. So what brings you into London on a Sunday night?"

"Just come from a ridiculously decadent dinner with yet another potential appointee for the new department I'm trying to create at work," Lucius said, with a smug, airy smile. "I swear, nine-tenths of my real work goes on after the Ministry closes. It's a wonder one can find the time to sleep." He smirked slightly at his own words, as if he was in on a fine joke indeed.

"Still trying to steal Mockridge from Goblin Liaisons?"

"Yes, and I think we'll get him, too," Lucius said, with an expansive smile. "Really a good chap his attitude is just exemplary."

"Good, good. Hopefully Narcissa's stopped bending your ear about all the time in London?"

"No, tragically. I am, as always, expected to be all things to all people, and have it done in time to get home for supper. Don't let anyone tell you different, Severus women are bloody *exhausting*." He rolled his eyes heroically at the ceiling. "Really, sometimes I think all you confirmed bachelors have the right idea."

Snape smiled thinly. "It certainly does keep the number of birthdays and wedding anniversaries I have to remember down to a manageable level."

"Oh, you've reminded me I've got some splendid news," Lucius said, with another expansive smile. "Don't tell anyone yet, it's still in the planning stages, but it looks as though we'll soon be having another wedding in the family."

"Really," Snape said. "Menzentius?" Lucius had confided to Snape numerous times about his difficulties in finding a suitable bride for Menzentius. The fact that Narcissa's brother was now facing his late twenties as a bachelor with no prospects was something of an embarrassment to the family. Most of the women willing to marry him were too nouveau riche or genteelly penniless to suit Lucius, and Menzentius had too many alcohol abuse problems to suit the women Lucius would have approved of.

"Yes," Lucius told him. "At last. It's very early on as yet, nothing set in stone. But really a fine match for him, I couldn't be more pleased with the whole arrangement."

"And who is the lucky soon-to-be Mrs. Black?" Snape asked, although he personally considered Menzentius Black's future wife to be just about the unluckiest creature ever conceived. "Have I met her?"

Lucius smiled delightedly at him. "You certainly have."

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Another of Lucius's little fly-by-night post owls appeared at Emily's window late that Monday night and she was elated with this prompt contact, certain it meant that she was back in his best graces.

Darling,

The family will be away visiting some distant relations in the south of France this weekend, and I am again longing to debauch you repeatedly at home.

This coming Friday evening, put on the enclosed Portkey at nine you may as well get used to thinking of it as your home away from home.

Don't be late I can't wait to see you.

Enclosed with the note was a black velvet box oh no, not another of Lucius's criminally extravagant gifts, he really shouldn't have but then she opened the box, and decided, well, yes, maybe he *should* have.

It was a Queen Alexandra collar fashioned from platinum filigree set with diamonds, designed to fit close around the base of a woman's neck, with an ornate rectangular clasp to be worn at the hollow of one's throat. Emily wondered for a moment why people ever used Portkeys made from the customary bits of disposable rubbish, when such options as this were available.

She spent the next half hour selecting the perfect dress to frame her throat to best advantage in such a necklace. It occurred to her, as she teased her hair up into an upsweep on the top of her head, studying her reflection in the mirror, that she really did have the ideal sort of neck to be encircled with diamonds then blew a little kiss in the direction of Wiltshire.

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6:53 p.m. arrived that Thursday night, and Professor Snape arrived at the practice studio. "Good evening, Professor," Emily called.

"Good evening, Professor," came the desultory greeting. Snape sounded tired tonight, she thought. She had noticed some strain in his manner at their practice session on Monday of that week, and again on Wednesday. But tonight, his voice had an absolutely bone-weary tone to it.

She turned around and looked more closely at him. "Are you all right? Have you been under the weather this week?"

"I'm fine."

"We don't have to do this tonight if you don't feel up to it."

"I said I was *fine*," he growled.

"All right, have it your way. Anyway, we're going to do something different tonight. Grab your practice dagger," she said and motioned him onto the sparring mat.

Snape paused, looking at her suspiciously. "Aren't you going to take up your practice dagger?"

"No. We're starting another kind of training tonight how to defend yourself in an unevenly matched confrontation. I want you to be able to stop an armed attacker with only your bare hands."

The eyebrows went up alarmingly. "That's a rather tall order, madam."

"It can be done," she assured him, "and sometimes needs to be done. The people you'll potentially be facing won't care about whether the fight is fair or not, and don't think you'll always have a weapon about you at any given time. What if someone attacks you in your sleep, and you don't have time to do anything but react?"

Snape's eyes flashed fire at that question. "All right, I understand," he growled back. "So I'm to initiate a confrontation armed with a dagger, and you're going to show me how to win it unarmed, yes?"

"Hopefully. I think it would be a useful thing for you to know."

The corner of his mouth curled in a cynical grimace. "Yes, I can see how it would be," he said and joined her on the practice mat.

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"Now, the most important thing to remember is if he's got a bladed weapon and you're unarmed, chances are you're going to get cut," Emily told him bluntly. "What you have to do then is get the weapon away from him while keeping yourself from being seriously injured. You usually block by turning the inside of your forearms and palms toward your opponent " she threw up a forearm block in fourth, to demonstrate " but in this instance you can't do that, and I'll tell you why. Give me your hand for a second."

Snape transferred the dagger to his left hand, and grudgingly held out his right to her. She turned it over between them, palm up. "The reason why you never turn the inside of your arm toward a bladed weapon is all the most vital veins and arteries in your arm and wrist are located just under the skin, here." She pushed up the sleeve of his black cotton jersey, traced her fingertips along the faint tracery of blue veins in the pale underside of his wrist, and extending up his forearm. "You'll want to be careful of your palm, and the webbing between your thumb and forefinger as well. Your ulnar and radial arteries are here and here. If your opponent really lays your wrist open, here

" she covered the most vulnerable part of his wrist, just beneath his hand, with her palm " the blood loss could put you in grave danger. You must protect this area at all costs."

Then she turned his hand over. "But see what you've got here, on the back of your arm?" She pressed her fingers firmly against the back of his hand and forearm. "Mostly bone and muscle. Not so many major blood vessels. This is where you take the parries, if you absolutely have to."

Snape nodded. "I see, madam."

She released his hand and stepped back. He saluted her with the practice dagger, and she put her arm across her chest, and bowed to him. Then he assumed the dagger fighting opening stance, and she faced him in the sparring stance, and they had at each other.

"The first thing to remember if he's armed and you aren't is to always disarm the sonuvabitch first," she said, as he came on with a wickedly fast thrust to her chest in seventh. She dodged, turning aside so that his dagger hand passed within an inch of her chest, then stopped his blow, imprisoning his wrist with her right hand. "Never take the attack until the weapon's no longer a threat. If you don't, he can recover and hurt you," she continued, wrenching his hand forward at a vulnerable angle and pressing her stiffened fingers firmly into the inside of his wrist. He grunted in pain, and the dagger fell from his slack fingers. From there, it was a simple matter of subduing an opponent using the usual hand-to-hand techniques.

Then she held out her hand. "Your turn," she said. Snape glanced down at the weapon in his hand and reluctantly handed it over.

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"I think you should have told him that," Snape said bluntly. "Really, Professor, you'll soon want to make your absolute refusal known before one or the other of the Malfoys sets a date and starts announcing banns. You should also be prepared for a bit of, er, *displeasure* on Lucius's part when you do."

Emily thought he was taking himself just a tiny fraction too seriously. "I'm not worried. I know he thinks he's terribly impressive now, but so much of that is an act. You should have seen him the day I first introduced him to a spider pooka he almost climbed the fecking wall," Emily said, laughing. "Poor old Lucius has heard an emphatic *no* from me before, and somehow survived and got over it."

"*Really*." Snape studied her face for a long moment and that gaze could make even a Fianna knight feel a little unsure of herself.

"Please, Professor, I do thank you for your concern, but don't worry. I am not about to make a bad marriage, and I don't think I'll lose any friends over it. One thing you can be sure of with Lucius, he doesn't stay angry at me for very long," Emily told him, smiling. She was, truth be told, indulging in a bit of smugness, but the previous weekend, and the thousands of Galleons' worth of diamonds upstairs on her dressing table, made her feel quite confident of Lucius's abiding, forgiving affection for her. "He never can."

Despite her airy assurances, Snape looked unconvinced. "Well, inclined to forgive you or not, once he gets it into his head that two people should marry each other, Lucius doesn't tend to stop pressuring them in that direction, you see. He and Narcissa love to marry *suitable people* off to each other, they're both frightfully classical that way," he said, with a dire expression. He seemed to think that being *married off* by Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy was a fate slightly less desirable than death.

"Really." Emily raised her own inquisitive eyebrow in Snape's direction. "So tell me, who does he keep trying to pair you up with?"

Snape grimaced unusually expressively. "*Felina Rosier*," he said, through gritted teeth, as though he could barely stand to say her name.

Emily stared at him, again in horror. "That's *terrible.* You poor thing I'm so sorry."

His eyebrow took a turn for the sinister. "Oh? At one time, I remember you thought she and I were quite well suited to each other."

She recalled her unkind remark at the New Year's Eve Ball and blushed even more furiously. "I was annoyed then, that was... "

"That was before you got aggravated with her yourself and bludgeoned her about the head with an etiquette book?"

"Oh, bloody hell, not you too," she snapped. "I did not *bludgeon* her I just put the bloody thing in her hand and*walked away*... "

The sinister eyebrow didn't let up for a second.

"All right." She took a deep breath, and faced him as simply and humbly as she could. "Please do allow me to apologise, sir, I'm truly sorry about that," she said.

"Pardon me? Did Professor Swain actually admit that perhaps she did something unkind? Well, I suppose there really is a first time for everything," Snape said, in his most unendurably silky tones.

Emily turned away from him in acute embarrassment. "Fine, it was rude. You've got every right to not want to have Deceivre thrown at you at the dinner table, and believe me, I will *never* do it to you again. It was just that... I had no idea you already knew the second form of Deceivre somehow, and I was embarrassed at being caught out like that."

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"No, I'm not. But... I figured Dumbledore must have taught it to you... ?"

"No, he hasn't," Snape insisted. "If I used it, it must have occurred spontaneously, somehow. I have never studied Deceivre, or been instructed in it, in my life. I swear it. It just happened."

Emily stopped dead, staring at him. She must have been staring very hard, she realised later, because Snape actually looked away. When she found her voice, it was a tone of hesitant wonder.

"Sir... if you don't mind, I'll like to know something. Since you created your True Name, has anything else... like this... been happening? I know you studied Obscurantis on your own about how long did it take you to pick up the first form?"

"From the time I started studying it to successfully demonstrating it, I would say about ten days," he said. "It really is a relatively simple art, all told."

"Ten days," she repeated. "And it seemed relatively simple to you. *Really.* And I know you can manage the second form of Obscurantis now, from the night we went to the hospital. How did you pick that up?"

"The descriptions in Swain's *Encyclopaedia* made it seem.... very clear," he said, shrugging. "Picture yourself fading from view, having no effect on anyone around you, stepping out of and disconnecting from the rest of the world. It wasn't that difficult to imagine I do spend thirty hours a week in a room full of children doing their best not to listen to me, after all."

"Perhaps you've noticed other sorts of strange magic just *spontaneously* occurring... ?" Emily asked quietly.

Snape stared at the floor for a second, then turned back to face her. "Do you have a few minutes?" he asked.

"Of course I do," she answered. "Here, why don't you sit down."

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the dose of willow bark infusion he had taken was finally beginning to kick in.

Down at the other end of the table, Irma, Pomona, and Professor Swain were engaged in their usual girlish coffeeklatsch sort of chatter, my student said something funny, we got new books in, what are you doing this weekend, blah blah et cetera. Irma asked Professor Swain if she felt like getting high tea in Hogsmeade with her this weekend, and Professor Swain said she would love to, but she had already promised to spend the weekend with a friend which made Snape's headache return with a vengeance. He excused himself from the table with a few curt good-evenings to his colleagues, and headed down to the blissful solitude of his own rooms.

The question was now a constant low itch in the back of his mind Who was she going to see? What was going on? Was she, or wasn't she Lucius's lover? Just after Lucius's remark at the Second Task, and now after this talk of a marriage into his family, Snape had forced himself to bite down on a demand of: *What is it between you two? Are you spending all these weekends with him? Emily are you?*

He had thought it quite likely after the Second Task, but after the night at St. George's, and after their conversation the previous night, he was no longer sure. Lucius had said she was distracting him lately, but then Emily had said that poor old Lucius had heard an honest no from her before and somehow survived. Had Lucius tried to seduce her sometime after the Second Task, been certain of his success, and then suddenly discovered to his chagrin that this very self-willed Fae knight wanted none of what he had to offer? It did seem like a particularly Lucius-like mistake to make, really. She was certainly the type he went for, and he definitely paid court to her every chance he got. Could he now be so frustrated by that lack of success that he had offered her the security of marriage within his family in an effort to secure her compliance? Financial security in exchange for sex Snape knew for a fact that Lucius was no stranger to *that* kind of transaction.

But was Lucius the sort of lover *she* would favour? Lucius, after all, was... *Lucius.* (Snape shuddered when he thought of all that was the sum total of Lucius.) Truthfully, Snape had no idea what sort of man appealed to Professor Swain herself, other than a certain daring sluagh archer from the Sixth Kingdom of the Faerielands, now deceased. Well, there had been that night back in September, but who knew if that meant anything other than she had gotten spectacularly bored while waiting for a train.

One thing was certain she didn't act like your typical Malfoy mistress, and Snape had been introduced to quite a few of his cousin's past amusements, and those of his relatives and friends. Malfoy mistresses were grasping, aggressively seductive, managing creatures they didn't saunter around in Faery armour, looking like a figure out of a Spenserian epic romance. They certainly didn't smuggle Healing Potion to burned house-elves. He couldn't have pictured any of those women personally overseeing the medical treatment of sick little Fae from who knew where, with that kind of almost familial concern, either.

When he imagined Professor Swain teaching fencing class out on the green, or remembered the way she had treated Liria, the image of her with Lucius simply wouldn't come. Had Lucius tried to marry one of his past mistresses to his brother-in-law, tried to install them within his very home that would have been the pinnacle of achievement to which most of them could have aspired. But Professor Swain had, in his presence, unconcernedly laughed a refusal to the marriage offer as though the entire idea was the most appalling joke she had ever heard.

The idea of her in bed with Lucius Malfoy the image was too repulsive to contemplate. Snape pressed his hand to his throbbing temple and shuddered.

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to you, will it." He got to his feet, and held out his hand to her. "Come on, I know just where to take you."

"Of course, dear," Emily said, very agreeably. It had just occurred to her that perhaps drawing undue attention to odd smells under rugs in one's lover's drawing room was probably not the height of painstakingly correct behaviour, and she now wanted to get past this unmannerly little gaffe as soon as possible.

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Lucius led her upstairs to a very pretty, luxurious, immensely fussy bedroom, done in pale blue and snow white but what struck Emily immediately was the proliferation of mirrors, mirrors everywhere. The walls were of tall panes of gilded, etched mirror, reflecting a vast bed covered in pale blue silk with a large pile of lacy ornamental pillows, and partially covered with a throw of what looked like white mink. An elaborately carved and gilded dressing table with a large hinged mirror took up much of one wall, with an elegant row of crystal perfume bottles, silver brushes, combs, and hand mirrors on its marble top. One windowed corner was dominated by a vast chaise covered in powder blue velvet, behind which was a hinged screen made of panels of blush-tinted mirror, framed in silver filigree. An oval oil portrait of a slightly younger Draco Malfoy hung above an antique writing desk that held an ornate silver inkwell and ridiculously ostentatious ostrich feather quill.

Lucius wasted no time in sprawling Emily over the blue silk and white fur bedclothes. "Darling... whose room is this?" she asked, as his lips moved down her neck to the swell of her breasts.

"Narcissa's," he said blandly. He reached for her foot and began to knead it between both hands.

"She doesn't share a bedroom with you?" She lay back amongst the pile of silk cushions, disarranging their just-so perfection and completely abandoning herself to the sensation of those hands working every ache out of her feet.

"No." Lucius shrugged. "Come off it, love, no one in England over a certain net worth ever actually sleeps with their spouses. Even the Queen and the Prince Consort had separate bedrooms."

Emily remembered Narcissa's spiteful words on New Year's Eve *your little pointy-eared friend, Menzentius can do much better than that long-eared provincial, I certainly don't want her in the family* and smirked to herself. For a moment, she imagined the look on that ever-so-respectable married woman's face if she had seen all that her husband liked to do with the so-called part-*animal.* "You're going to think I'm horrible, but the idea of doing a lot of very lewd things to you on Narcissa's bed, in front of all her mirrors, fills me with a strange perverse thrill."

"You're endlessly amusing when you're horrible, my dear."

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Lucius could apparently think of lots of lewd things he wanted to do in front of the mirrors as well before long, his robe and Emily's dress were lying crumpled beside the bed, and his shirt was coming unbuttoned at an alarming rate. "But wait... there's something we need to talk about first," she said, firmly pulling away from him. "Professor Snape offered me his congratulations on *my engagement to Menzentius* last night."

"He did? How sporting of him," Lucius said pleasantly, running his lips over the swell of her breast. "Remind me to send him an invitation."

"Lucius... I never agreed to marry him," she said, even as his kisses brought goosebumps out on her skin. "I've no idea what you're doing telling my colleagues it's some sort of done deal, love."

"Oh, not *this* again," Lucius said with a pained look. "I thought this was settled."

"I'm *not* marrying him. I get the willies whenever he comes within ten feet of me the idea of having to share his bed and his table for the rest of my life makes me ill," she protested.

"You wouldn't have to share the bed on a regular basis, dear. I think you'll find the family quite understands the idea of separate bedrooms," he said, indicating the room around them.

"It would still seem extremely odd to me to have a husband and never have a shag with him, don't you think?"

Lucius shrugged. "Narcissa very nearly manages it."

"Well, that's Narcissa. But marriage and shagging are rather closely related in *my* mind."

"If you actually feel *that* strongly about doing your wifely duty in a marriage, a few drops of the*Carnalis* potion in your wine could make you enjoy doing just about anything with any man. I could certainly keep you well supplied with it."

"I'm not marrying him," she said again, with finality. "I can't possibly marry a man I don't care for, and who I'd have to drug myself to have sex with that's preposterous. Totally out of the question."

Lucius let out a fond, exasperated sigh, like a devoted lover much fatigued by the foibles of his capricious mistress. "I suppose you're probably right, he's wrong for you," he said, gathering her head onto his chest and stroking her hair. "So I've a much better idea. If you're willing to wait about six or seven years, Draco would probably be a much better choice."

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"*Draco?*" Emily gasped.

She recalled the last time she had spoken to Draco... he was tall and physically mature for almost fifteen. Thin, but not reedy and his slim height only meant that anything he wore looked smashingly elegant. Nearly every other boy at Hogwarts looked gawky and unfinished next to him. Not a breath of adolescent awkwardness to him at fencing practice, or when he danced, or when he lounged in his classroom seat like a young, golden greyhound. Such an aristocratic *hauteur* to him... with fresh boyish cheeks, clear grey eyes, and lips with that tender violet sheen to them... certainly an attractive young man, but could a boy like that ever grow up to be her *husband?*

"Perhaps I just wanted you to marry Menzentius so I could have you right away, but if you would prefer Draco, I'd be willing to be patient," Lucius said, very generously indeed.

"Lucius, he's all of what *fourteen*?"

"Fifteen this summer. And I thought you liked younger men," Lucius said delicately. "It didn't bother you with Dorien. He was what, ten years younger than you?"

"It was five and half years age difference, you know that. But Dorien wasn't... 'a younger man.' Dorien was... Dorien," she said quietly. Age had been irrelevant with him.

"Emily you *have* to have noticed that Draco's got a helpless crush on you already, dear. I daresay we would be able to train him up to your liking easily enough."

"If Draco has a crush on me, I think it has more to do with the fact that I'm the only woman on campus between the ages of eighteen and fifty."

"Really? I would think the boy just knows a beautiful, desirable woman when he sees one. I certainly did when I was his age."

"Lucius, really. You don't need to offer me your son," she said with a look of delicate reproach.

"My dear, you do realise that if I offered you to *him*, he would think Christmas had come early. It makes sense, really, for you to marry a human twenty years younger he'll most likely live as long as you will. You would never have to worry about him dying on you, and leaving you all alone." He trailed a delicate fingertip down her spine. "Don't you like him?"

Emily shivered. "Of course I like him, he's a very clever and handsome boy. Also one of my most diligent students."

"He's also turning out to have a mania for fencing and military history, just like you it's not as though you have nothing in common. Just think of what they would think of him at Court. You'd be the envy of every woman there, with your gorgeous young husband all of half your age. Who were the great social lionesses when I was there... can't you just imagine the look on Ruth Rymer's and Lady Emma's faces?"

"Oh, come off it, dear, Ruth and Emma used to eat young men for breakfast. If one of them had married a teenage virgin it would have been the fashionable thing to do for the next hundred years. However, I don't fancy myself some great social lioness, just a knight."

"Maybe you should," Lucius purred, close to her ear, in that provocative, insinuating drawl of his. "I don't see any reason why you shouldn't set your sights as high as you like. For example, once you start working for me, there's no doubt in my mind that you'll be a smashing diplomat. Nothing looks more becoming on you than power." He glanced up at their reflection in the mirrored wall, seemed to relish the sight of himself lying over her. "Other than me, of course."

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"Well... I suppose we could try it once."

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*But what if that could be satisfied...truly satisfied?*came his insinuating whisper from some dark little corner of her mind. *What if you had the safety, the security, the resources? Imagine this...* he showed her the delicious first year of her new marriage passing, and her oestrus beginning, bringing with it all of the usual stresses and anxiety, the longing for sex with a strong, virile mate. His suggestion was so vivid that she could feel it just as strongly as if she had been in heat, the distraction and restlessness, the feverish lust. Yes... this was what she has fantasised about every time her oestrus occurs, just giving in to her body's pressures for the pure physical enjoyment of it. If she dared have the experience, he could give that to her.

She rebelled, with an effort there was no maternal instinct in her, and she could not manufacture one, even for him. *Then don't, love,*came the dark whisper. *Just let yourself imagine it, humour me...* and at this point, she could deny him nothing.

Lucius showed her the scenario he makes their airtight excuses to his wife and her husband, some work-related event that allows him to spirit her away to a private retreat. He brings her to bed, commanding her acquiescence as he lays her down and sinks deep into her achingly fertile body and dimly, she is aware that her physical body is now lying under his, clutching him with the restless vulnerability of any female in season. The hormonal triggers clamour at her to accept this mating. Once she feels the first warm gushes of his potency inside her, it's all over the atavistic, purely biological part of her that craves this, to be filled with his seed, his will, takes over. He keeps her there for her entire oestrus period, copulating with her every day and night. Her blue hormonal blood stains the white linens.

And then he showed her the end result he wanted shortly afterward, she knows she is carrying his child.

*I have no desire to raise a child,*she resisted, half-pulling away from him. *Then you wouldn't have to raise one... just carry them,*he promised, soothing and caressing her. The reassurances came thick and fast he can afford enough doctors, medicines, and potions make the gestation and delivery painless, no detriment to her health, almost negligible. She is young, healthy, and her soldier's training has left her in phenomenal physical condition childbearing would be easy for her and the rewards beyond her imaginings. He could arrange for the demands of childrearing to be nonexistent, enough staff could be hired that she need only see her children at their most appealing: clean, well-rested, well-behaved, if she wanted to see them at all. Lucius would never allow for the time and energy of one of *his* women to be taken up with tiresome nursemaid duties.

Draco knows little of Faery biology... a little blood from a pricked finger on their bed sheets will be enough evidence of oestrus for him. Lucius conjured a scene of Draco adoringly caressing her belly in bed, believing his child to be growing inside her... and then she lies in Lucius's arms, as he gloats over his child inside her. The adoration and devotion of both her husband and her child's father, two powerful, wealthy men, would be hers what could be more secure than that.

Impossibly... Emily considered that offer. His reassurances and confidence were such that she could feel nearly every misgiving she had soothed away. Of course he would make it easy for her, she knew that. He would love to make everything easy for her.

And their children would be strong, healthy, powerful with both wizard and Faery magic, as beautiful and dazzlingly fair as both their mother and father. When Lucius had the brood he wanted, he then wanted her to bear his son's children, his grandchildren. He and Draco resembled each other so closely no one would ever be able to tell the difference. His sons, his grandsons, his immortality. She would have the satisfaction of seeing Narcissa grow wrinkled and menopausal while she would remain fertile into her nineties. The Malfoy family would grow prolific and strong again, with the infusion of her blood, her magic, her vitality, her offspring. When Druella Black died, and Narcissa aged, and with the natural order of things, she would become the family matriarch, the dominant female to Lucius's alpha male.

And even those aren't the only pleasures he can offer her. Once she is some weeks' securely pregnant, he can introduce her to another of his favourite pursuits the art of seduction. She sees herself in another lavish hotel suite, coiled in sex with the lovely, dissatisfied Beatrice Parkinson as Lucius savours the sight of their entwined bodies. He knows his turn will come and she can feel his anticipation, his covetousness, the pleasure in shameless, glorious self-indulgence and lechery. It felt good, obscenely good, washing through her senses with the potency of a rush of heroin.

There, she knew him now, knew his most intimate heart... if she denied him nothing, he would give her everything in return. *Just love me, stay with me... I've always been your slave, you know that...*

By the time she falls away from Beatrice, the other woman is gasping, glowing with post-orgasmic bliss... Lucius lay with his head pillowed on Beatrice's breasts while Emily slithered into his lap, impaled herself on him like the deliciously obedient slut she is... being this man's possession was so glorious that she pitied any other poor woman who didn't merit his attentions. *All I've ever wanted is for you to be willing to give me anything I wanted.*

Whatever he wanted. She would kill to bring him whatever he wanted... and what he wanted right now was to be exactly where he was, with her thighs tight around his hips, feeling the orgasm almost upon them, his consciousness so deep into hers that their minds felt like mingled waters. Every part of her being was sighing, *Yes, darling, I'm yours. Do what you like with me.*

*Oh, Emily... you'll never know how much I love you,*Lucius whispered.

Then he reached for her True Name.

Part Second: The Hart Rampant: Chapter 21

Chapter 27 of 55

In which Professor Swain discovers the delights of a dual life as both a Hogwarts professor and Lucius Malfoy's mistress, until a chance encounter with a desperate Faery prostitute in Knockturn Alley sends her to the most unlikely person for aid. Meanwhile, Severus Snape finds himself alone and adrift in the Mushroom Circle, a Faery nightclub…

Chapter 21:

"Except THAT."

When Emily came to herself, shaking her head and slapping her cheek to clear the fog left by the potion, she had dragged herself away from Lucius and off his bed. She grabbed up her dress from the chair and covered her naked chest with it, if only for the sensation of some barrier between them.

Lucius sat up in bed, the sheet barely covering his hips and looking about as annoyed as a man interrupted just before his desires are satisfied can be. "You said you would give me anything I wanted," he snarled, his nails curling against the mattress.

"Except that! *You should know better than to ask for that!* she shouted, yanking on the dress in her hands before furiously turning back to him. "You're not just imagining anything you're *negotiating terms* with me," she accused him. "You are absolutely serious. That's exactly what you want if I allowed it, all of that would happen."

"Yes, it would. You asked me what I wanted I warned you that you might find it shocking," he said, utterly unashamed, still lying supine in bed. "But think about it is anything I showed you really that bad? You liked it and you know it. You came all over me as you imagined it. I think you wanted it as much as I did you just can't admit it to yourself yet," he drawled, his eyes boring into hers.

"So I'd be your son's wife, but your whore. No, thanks." She fastened her cloak around her shoulders and threw everything else into her bag.

Then Lucius was off the bed, wrapped in a robe, and stopped her. "Yes, *my whore.* My cherished, my beloved whore the kind of political mistress who has the fear and respect of our entire fucking world. Throughout history they've wielded more power than queens." He grasped her arm and dragged her back to him, and she could feel rage and desperate possessiveness wash over her when he touched her. "I've wanted you since I was a boy, Emily there is *nothing* I can't do for you now. I know you want to help the Fae to a position of political power in this world, and I can help you. You've always wanted Wizarding society to finally accept you as you are I can give that to you."

She tore herself out of his grasp. At that moment, she could have hit him, bloodied those flawless cheeks with her fingernails or fallen into his arms and never left them.

"Oh yes, there's nothing you can't do for me, if I marry the man you choose and breed as you order me. I know you think I'm a ruddy great *slut,* but I don't think I'm up to the task of loving whomever it is you say," she snapped back. "No, I'll not be your Uncle Tom of a Faerie I'll not play *Tinkerbell* for you, thanks. Go into the kitchen for an *elf* if you want a servant."

"Yes, of course. You'll only serve a human's will if his name is Albus Dumbledore," Lucius drawled mockingly.

"You're wrong," she said, a flat, inalienable declaration. "What I'm doing now at Hogwarts that's a royal command, the honouring of an alliance. What I'd be for you that would be voluntary servitude. The most intimate sort of it at that."

"Stupid woman what do you think marriage is?"

"*Your* marriage, maybe," she flashed back, her eyes burning with resentment. "You couldn't even comprehend the idea of marrying for love you pure-bloods never can. Don't think for an instant that I didn't know that. You didn't meet, court and marry Narcissa in the eight months that passed between the day you arrived home and your wedding day, did you?"

"No, I didn't," he admitted baldfacedly, without a blush or hesitation. "But I had to watch you swear to forever love and cherish some peasant farmer's son, when you dismissed me without a word, so I'd say we're even."

"He wasn't just *some peasant farmer's son* he was a *knight*," she retorted furiously. "And he was proud to make me his wife you would never have caught Dorien expressing his great affection by trying to marry me off to his sot of a brother-in-law."

"Yes, Menzentius is a waste of good wine, I'll give you that. But *my son* would be the kind of husband any woman could be proud of "

"Yes, he would be which is why I can't possibly marry him with the intention of making him a cuckold, right from the off!"

"Do you have any idea how many women who would kill for what I just offered you?" he demanded. "Is what you have at home so very much better? Do you really love hacking Orcs to pieces do you really *enjoy* constantly risking your life as Gwydion's obedient little butcher's girl?"

"For all your talk about patriotism, honouring your people's traditions you tend to hold your nose an awful lot when you hear about me getting my hands dirty actually defending my country," she snapped. "You wouldn't know real patriotism if it bit your admirable arse, do you know that?"

She had hit a nerve the look of ice-cold anger in his eyes was frightening. "Yes, you love your country and your King. And your Uncle Gwydion loves you. Loves you so much that he sent you into exile here, for avenging your husband's murder."

Emily slapped him.

Hard enough to knock him off balance and he fell back against the bedpost. It was the sort of stunning blow she might have dealt to an Orc hooligan in an Arcadian tavern; her only concession to nicety was that she used her open hand instead of a closed fist.

He stood there a moment, breathing hard, a red welt starting up on his ivory-white cheek. Then he slapped her back, equally savagely.

In another second, she had sprung out of his reach. Emily saw his eyes narrow, saw him recognising the aggression in her stance if he had gone for her then, she would have defended herself as became a knight. But Lucius was either not that angry with her, or not that stupid.

"You're disgusting," she snarled. "And my answer is *no.*"

"You don't have to say anything right away, my love," he said softly. "The offer stands. I can wait until you're ready to come back and accept it."

Then he left the room, leaving the door thrown wide open.

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Emily never recalled later how she got out of Malfeasant unseen and into the outlying woods outside its grounds. When her thoughts cleared, she was kneeling beside a white birch tree, her arm around its trunk, her cheek pressed against its bark.

Someone almost found out my True Name, she thought, in profoundest horror, and the worst part was that she had been complicit in that violation herself. Lucius had lied those were no *surface impressions.* Whatever that potion was, it left the entire scope of her memory, imagination, and emotional life as open to him as any book.

She sat huddled against that tree for a long time, breathing the clean scents of wood and mud, water and grass, trying to clear her head of Lucius's drives, agendas and desires, allowing the fire of her own will to pulse in her veins again. Letting the cool rain wash the scent of him from her skin.

What struck her with a desperate, clammy terror was when she had seen his plans for her...

He was right. She *had* found it exciting.

I will not be his whore, she told herself, driving her nails into her upper arms. *I will not be his creature.*

Even if I'd like to be.

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With that, the grand Lucius Malfoy affair seemed to be over.

In the week following the scene with Lucius, Emily would sit in her apartments of an evening, reading or working on her endless professorial paperwork all the while half-listening for the scratch of a little urgent-post owl at her window, bearing a letter of sincerest apology, protestations of *I didn't mean it.* She longed to hear some plausible reason as to why he couldn't possibly have really tried to learn her True Name; she was waiting for some assurance that their horrible argument had been meaningless, as without substance and as easily explained away as a bad dream.

But nothing came.

Nothing at all.

On the eighth day, she left off sleeping in her bed and took to curling up on the window seat under a quilt, leaving the transom window wide open. She woke at every creak and every noise, hoping to find a letter from Lucius that set everything right again... but none came.

A week, then two, passed. Before she knew it, they were well into June. A new empty, unfulfilled place came to live in the pit of her stomach.

I will not marry as I'm told, have children I don't want, or share my True Name just to keep a man, and someone else's husband at that, she would tell herself, her expression hardening with the force of her resolve. But then another Friday night with nothing to look forward to approached, and the task of filling up all of these empty new hours without her lover seemed onerous, an unendurable imposition. And the idea of never touching him again, an absolute end to those hours of being held forever, all that dark, dreamlike sex simply being *over* was the worst part of it all it felt as though she had been forbidden to drink wine, or smell grass, or hear music ever again for the rest of her life. Her physical reaction to just the thought of Lucius carried on like some inconvenient, recurring malarial fever now and then she would come across the scent of his skin on some bit of clothing she had once worn in his presence and feel lust for him wash over her afresh.

To make matters worse, it was now difficult to even look at Draco Malfoy, because the sheen of his hair, the shape of his eyes, the inflection of his voice, and just everything about him reminded her so much of Lucius that just hearing the boy talking to his friends in the halls left her on edge. Plus, the memory of her physical reaction to the suggestion of sex with him was so vivid at times that even casual interaction with Draco made her feel guilty and a bit unclean.

And so that was the end, and she was left alone with her memories yet again.

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For everyone else at Hogwarts, however, life seemed to go on just as it had despite the demise of a visiting professor's formerly glorious love affair. The Third Task, the climax of the entire year, was to be held on June 24th, and the day was fast approaching. The entire school was constantly a-buzz with chatter over it. Hagrid had seeded a gigantic boxwood hedge maze in what was formerly the Quidditch pitch, and it got taller every day.

Something had also happened to upset the Durmstrang headmaster a great deal. By the first week of June, Headmaster Karkaroff couldn't seem to go from here to there without accusing someone of plotting against him and his Tournament champion, Viktor Krum. If Professor Snape, or Headmaster Dumbledore, or especially Hagrid was about, it took almost no provocation for him to launch into spit-flecked diatribes about corruption and international conspiracies. Emily bumped into him one day outside the teacher's lounge, and it took repeated apologies and protestations that she had nothing against Bulgaria, until that year she had never met anyone from Bulgaria, she didn't even follow Quidditch, and was from another dimension besides before he was convinced that she hadn't intended to assassinate him. More than once, Emily used her old trick of Obscuring herself and flattening against the wall when she saw him stalking toward her in the corridors.

Disappointed lovelorn pining and strange confrontations with visiting headmasters aside, Emily had, as per her decision, begun working with Professor Snape on every aspect of Faery martial art at the end of May, expanding their work from physical training into formal instruction in defensive Glamours and Obscurantis, the magical arts at which Emily herself was most adept. As with his earlier training, Snape was absorbing it all at an amazing rate. More than once, she mused on how difficult it would be to go back to teaching her regular squire's classes at home, after serving as private tutor to someone who picked it all up so damned easily.

Oddly enough, Professor Snape seemed to take a genuine pride in his prodigious talent in Faery magic and was definitely continuing to work at it on his own. His ability had grown so much by that June that with it, came an odd sense of familiarity. The more facility he showed with her people's magic and combat style, the more he had ceased being a foreign wizard professor and became just another journeyman squire and being no more a saint than the next Fianna combat instructor, Emily was sometimes guilty of taking her bad moods out on her squires. As such, the dynamic between them had reversed somewhat just after her painful falling-out with Lucius Snape had become the interested student doing his best to work with a sometimes sullen and recalcitrant teacher.

"Have you been under the weather these last weeks?" he asked her one evening, after she had been going through Lucius withdrawal for some time. His extreme punctuality had annoyed her so much that evening that she hadn't even bothered to respond to his duty greeting of *Good evening, Professor.*

"I'm *fine,*" she replied.

"We don't have to do this tonight if you don't feel up to it," Snape said archly.

"Oh, leave it alone, and come here," she snapped, motioning for him to join her on the mat.

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"We've been working on Glamoured distractions and Obscurantis combinations all week. Now we're going to start working them into combat situations, which I think you'll find is considerably more difficult than just escaping from a bore at a party by making everyone think the curtains have caught fire."

"All right," he said, nodding.

"Now, what you'll have to do is manage all the same sort of concentration and visualisation that goes into Glamour and Obscurantis while under the pressure of fighting an opponent. If you're not already experienced at thinking on your feet, this process will definitely teach you how. I'll demonstrate "

She had intended to conjure up a monstrous visual Glamour as he came at her that evening perhaps give the impression that she had morphed into a fanged harpy as he took his first attack. But instead, as she turned toward him, he looked at her, silently spoke a word and completely blinded her with a brilliant flash of white light. She recoiled and pressed her hand to her watering eyes.

By the time she recovered and tried to focus on him again he was gone. The room appeared completely empty.

"Oh, you tricksy little blighter," she said, half surprised, half grudgingly admiring. "So you think you've got it down, then, do you? All right "

Then the familiar scent of another person, a male sweating a great deal of healthy competitive aggression, became suddenly much stronger just behind her, and she turned hard in its direction. Snape had apparently intended to subdue her by seizing her around the shoulders from behind, but hadn't managed to take her entirely by surprise. Instead of being immobilised by his attack, she turned into it, half-averted it with the result that he knocked her to the mat, but she threw him over her right hip and onto his back on the way down.

"So you've already done some work on timing Glamour-Obscurantis combinations for combat, have you?" Emily got to her feet, then held out a hand and helped him up.

"Yes," he admitted, breathing hard. He took her hand and stood up, a bit stiffly. "Although it didn't go over quite the way I planned it."

"You shouldn't always expect yourself to be able to take me down the first time you try," she said, crossing to her workout towel and scrubbing at her forehead. "I've been

pulling the old bang'n'dash for years, thanks." A second later, she realised what she had just said, and to whom, and was acutely glad that she was facing away from him with a towel over her face.

"I don't doubt it," Snape said, with caustic agreeability.

Emily threw the towel aside and fixed him with a very *We are not amused* sort of look, but only for a moment one simply couldn't expect someone like him to be able to resist a straight line like that one, and she knew it.

"Oh, behave yourself or I'll tell everyone you cribbed an idea from Lavender Brown. Now let's try this shite again."

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Hermione grinned. "Yes, Professor."

"Does that frighten you?"

The brown eyes glinted. "No."

"All right then. Can you keep a secret?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, of course."

"I've already drafted your recommendation. And I'm going to get my mother and father to put one in too, and the three of us recommending you together pretty much makes you a shoo-in."

Hermione bounced up with a girlish squeal of *"Yes!"*, her face alight. "This is going to be *SO* brilliant!"

Emily found the girl's excitement so contagious that she squealed and bounced up and down too in another moment they were both bouncing up and down, squealing like little girls. Luckily no one else came into Emily's office at that moment, or whoever it was would have thought they had both gone barking mad.

"All right now, you can't tell anyone, and I mean *anyone* not even Ron and Harry," Emily cautioned the girl. "None of the pages are supposed to know about it until they're notified. That rule gets broken all the time because the recommendation and selection processes are unbelievably corrupt of course, but those are the rules and we should at least pretend to follow them."

Hermione nodded her total understanding with a very grave expression. No Faerie could have taken the safekeeping of her True Name more seriously than Miss Granger was sealing her lips over this advance notice of her shoo-in nomination for the Tithe. "All right then, I'm going to go tell... *no one!* And thanks so much," she said, wringing Emily's hand in hers. In another moment, she had gathered up her bookbag and scurried from the room.

Emily sat back down at her desk, her eyes still on the door where Hermione had just left. In the past, the Tithe had often been instrumental in encouraging brilliant young people to greater confidence in their abilities; it had been a transformative experience that left them with a new maturity and polish in their artistic or scientific pursuits. More than one former Tithe page had gone on to produce works of lasting importance and genius.

But traditional family connections carried much weight to the Tithe committee. Legacy candidates, whose parents or grandparents had been Tithesmen, often received priority, which meant that some not especially promising pages got in because a relative had been talented and spent the entire year and day doing little more than wooing Faeries and carousing. The institution didn't always select the most talented of a generation, and Emily knew it. Perhaps, however, she was only disillusioned with the custom because she had just ended a relationship with a former Tithesman who, in barest truth, hadn't done much but chase Faeries and carouse during his time at Court. Unfortunately, at the time, she had been too blinded by his charisma and good looks to notice. Ah well, Hermione didn't seem the wastrel type, not by a long shot perhaps the experience really would be good for her.

But meanwhile, a very happy young Gryffindor all but flew down the halls back to her common room, her eyes alight and bushy curls flying, all the while whispering *I'm going to the Faerielands, I'm going to the Faerielands* under her breath.

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The next day, Emily had noticed that she had only a day or two to finish her research for an important end-of-term lecture regarding physical methods of defending oneself from hostile curses. As work also interfered quite a lot with orgies of lovelorn self-pity because Lucius had so ill-used her, she had been quite surprised to look up from her depressed, mournful funk one day and discover that there were only a short time to go before term final exams on June 23rd and 24th, and the Third Task on the Thursday evening of the 24th.

Not only that, but the Midsummer Revel was scheduled for the Tuesday night of June 22nd, which meant that she would be staying out late, which of course meant that she would need to be ready for all of her term finals on Monday the 21st.

That meant that she spent much of that weekend in the library with a stack of Defence Against the Dark Arts texts and treatises in front of her, making notes. Unfortunately, however, she found very little concrete analysis of the three Unforgiveable Curses: the Imperius and Cruciatus Curses, and, of course, the dreaded *Avada Kedavra.* Most of the accounts she read were about the legal penalties for using such curses, or breathless true-crime sorts of accounts of how Dark Wizards like Grindelwald and the infamous Lord Voldemort had used such curses. There was no good source deconstructing the exact component steps involved in casting or countering these curses, which ultimately came as no great surprise. One really couldn't keep a how-to manual sort of book on Unforgiveable Curses around a school, after all, even if it was for the reference of Defence Against the Dark Arts professors.

So Emily figured she would go straight to the source. She had heard any number of students describe Moody's lectures on Unforgiveable Curses in awed whispers, so she noted down a list of questions, and resolved to speak to him on Monday.

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But when Emily spoke to Moody that Monday, it seemed like he just didn't want to be bothered.

She caught up to the retired Auror in the teacher's lounge during a free period between his classes on Monday afternoon. He and some of the other faculty were sitting around nursing cups of tea and poring over books. Chester Binns was in his accustomed seat before the hearth, and Professor Snape was sitting near the window, engrossed in another of his ubiquitous leather-bound tomes.

"Good afternoon, Alastor," Emily said pleasantly, pausing at Moody's elbow. "Do you have a minute?"

Moody's electric blue eye swivelled to fasten on her face; a moment later, his other eye did too. "How can I be of service, Professor Swain?" he asked, in a lazy, almost insolent tone.

"I'm shortly to be giving a lecture on pre-emptive physical methods of countering hostile spells, and I'm having a hard time finding anything on the specifics of the Unforgiveables. Can I ask you a couple of questions?" Peripherally, she saw Professor Snape turn slightly in her direction when he heard her question. Emily's gaze went past Moody to Snape for a second, then dropped back down to the page of questions in front of her.

"If I know the answers, sure," Moody said noncommittally. "Always glad to come to the aid of a lady."

"Wonderful, thanks. All right, as far as *Crucio, Imperio,* and *Avada Kedavra* go, in order to use one successfully, what are the practical components of the spell? Just the incantation, or is there a specific sort of wand gesture involved as well?"

To Emily, this was a simple conditional question, but Alastor Moody made it sound as though there were any number of mysterious conditions and mitigating factors to be taken into consideration; he answered her so non-specifically that she still had no real idea either way by the time he finished. She tried to rephrase the same question in a different manner, hoping to make it clearer and received the same response.

Then her eyes again went past Moody to Professor Snape, sitting a short distance behind him. Snape was looking at the back of Moody's head with a quizzical expression, as if puzzled that he couldn't give the answer to such a simple question. A second later, Snape noticed Emily looking at him and nodded affirmatively.

Emily acknowledged his answer with an infinitesimal quirk of her eyebrow and made a note in her notebook, then turned to Moody again. "All right then. And if there was,

er, both an incantation and a wand gesture involved, can these be performed concurrently, or does it have to go in any particular order? Incantation then gesture, or the reverse?"

Again, Moody said nothing illuminating, and he rattled on for a bit in order to do so. Emily casually glanced past him to Snape again he held up a forefinger for her attention, then pantomimed a flick of a wand followed by a hand gesture for a jabbering mouth. Then he directed a contemptuous look at Moody and rolled his eyes direly at the ceiling.

"All right," Emily said, now more in Professor Snape's direction than Moody's. "Let's say you have to perform the wand gesture first, then the incantation is the same true of all three Unforgiveable Curses, or is there a different order for each of them?"

Moody still had nothing specific to say about her question, but instead related an anecdote about some nasty Dark Wizard he brought in once who could get off all three and ten Stunning Spells in a minute flat. Snape directed a look of withering disgust in Moody's direction, caught her eye, and impatiently glanced toward the door with a curt, unmistakeable nod of *Talk to me outside.* Emily acknowledged this with a tiny, barely perceptible nod over Moody's head. A moment later, Snape got up, closed his book, and left the room with a swish of robes and a click of boot heels on the polished floor.

Emily waited until Moody had talked himself out, nodding and making the appropriate sounds of acknowledgment when he paused for breath. When he was finished, she smiled brightly at him. "All right then, Professor, thank you for all your help." She then gathered up her notebook and left the room as well.

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Snape was waiting for her in the corridor when she got outside. "Let's talk in my office," he said brusquely, once the door to the teacher's lounge closed behind her.

When they reached his dungeon office, Emily perched herself on the worktable again and opened her notebook. "All right so it's a wand gesture and then an incantation for all three Unforgiveables, then? One can't perform the wand movement simultaneously to save time it has to go in that order?"

"Yes, that's correct, it has to go in that order."

"All right." She scratched down a note. "And in order to cast one, the entire incantation has to be enunciated, right?"

"Yes, all of it. The curse is activated once the last syllable is uttered, if the wizard has managed it."

"Do you by any chance know the wand gestures used for all of them? Is there any distinction between the three? I was thinking that one could get some advance notice of which curse was about to be thrown at you if you knew what the three gestures looked like."

"Unfortunately, no. The usual wand-pointing indicative gesture is used with all three of them."

"Damn, there goes that theory." She regretfully inked out a paragraph. "In your opinion, is it at all worthwhile to try to dodge them physically? Stunning Spells produce a bolt of red luminescent energy that can be evaded how about Cruciatus, *Imperio,* or *Avada Kedavra*?"

"No, it isn't. One could perhaps Apparate away before the incantation is complete if one had the presence of mind to do so, but the field of influence created by the Cruciatus and Imperius Curses is invisible and far-ranging. One can see a Killing Curse coming in one's direction in the form of a bolt of green energy, but it moves so fast that attempting to outrun it or some such is probably futile. I've seen people knock flies off walls with it before." He was suddenly very interested in brushing dust off the surface of his desk.

"My word, how bored and punkish would you have to be to do *that*," Emily said, shaking her head. "All right, last question. So there's no magical way to counter the Killing Curse, right? Once an assailant gets one off, it's unstoppable."

"Yes."

"Got it." She scratched a final note, then closed her notebook and slid down off the table. "Well, thanks so much then, sir, I'm glad there was someone around who knew what he was talking about. This has been a tremendous help I do really appreciate it." He acknowledged her thanks with a cool inclination of his head.

Emily then took her leave of him with a polite nod and turned toward the door, imagining he would want to be left to himself but as she was turning away, he reached out and verbally plucked her back. "So, what exactly is involved in *pre-emptive physical methods* of countering hostile spells, Professor?"

She half-turned back to him. "It's... well, it's a defensive theory that the Headmaster came up with and that I've been working on. We both think that if there's no magical way to counter a Killing Curse, then perhaps a non-magical means of countering one could be effective."

He regarded her silently for a long moment. "When are you giving this lecture?"

"The first one is on Thursday just before lunch. My Slytherin-Gryffindor fourth year session." She glanced down at the floor, then back at him. "You're welcome to come listen to it, if you have time."

"I shall. Thank you."

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Later that night, Bartemious Crouch, Jr. and Lucius Malfoy shared a round of Napoleon brandies in the drawing room at Malfeasant.

"Your Faery princess isn't being a good girl," Crouch, Jr. said. "She was at me to help her with a lecture on ways of pre-empting the Unforgiveables today."

"Of course she's not a good girl, Barty, that's why we want her," Lucius said pleasantly.

"So, you want to tell me why the woman you said you had in your hip pocket still seems to think she's a real Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher or something?" Crouch asked.

"Well... I've had a setback as far as the Faerie alliance," his companion said with a delicate little scowl. "We've... had a bit of a falling out, and haven't been speaking to each other for a bit."

"Not speaking to each other? Malfoy you told me she'd be *begging* to take the Mark by the end of May. And I notice you're still using your wand, so what of this mysterious source of airy-Faery magical power she was going to share with you?"

"That's why we had the bit of the falling-out." This admission was accompanied with an eloquent curl of his lip. "She was coming along beautifully until I tried to access that then she got upset and bolted."

"You should have given her a dose of *Mens Appugnare*, that could make anybody tell you anything "

"I *did*," Lucius snarled. "And it *still* didn't work. She's not what one would call the most tractable creature alive, you know, none of her kind are. It hasn't been at all easy bringing her along according to schedule once she gets distracted by something, she's off."

"Oh, *poor* beleaguered Lucius," Crouch sneered. "Had to spend all this time shagging a Faerie I'm sure that must have been a trial. You've got the cushiest job of any of us, and you *still* couldn't manage it. Imagine if you had to spend all your time clomping about looking like *this* clown. You'll get no sympathy from me, thanks."

"She has a great deal of promise still," Lucius protested. "I misjudged the situation before, but I can bring her back into the fold, properly this time. And once I do, we'll have a more valuable ally than even the giants you bloody well know that, Crouch."

"You always had a soft spot for anything in the shape of a pretty woman, Malfoy, and she already knows far too much," Crouch said, shaking his borrowed, grizzled head. "All right, one more chance for her, and I won't tell about your little falling-out. But if she doesn't join us this time I'm sorry, you'll have to find another pointy-eared charmer to replace her, because that one won't see the light of another day."

"All right, you're being more than reasonable. Thank you." That *thank you* was delivered in a decidedly sulky tone, with a liberal swallow of brandy.

"Oh, cheer up, mate, it wouldn't be the end of the world. Women are like trains, old friend, you miss one, there'll be another along in half an hour. Tell me, is Pasiphäe's still open?"

"Buzzing, last time I was there," Lucius replied dryly.

"Well, why don't we head down and distract ourselves? Maybe we'll find you another little friend to play with, get your mind off your Faery princess for a bit."

"Knight Protector of the Realm, actually, but she considers title-dropping to be unutterably gauche."

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With her research for her final lectures finished that Wednesday evening, Emily turned her attention to something much more diverting the Midsummer revel that coming Tuesday night.

It had been over a year since she had been to such a revel, since she had been amongst her own kind, free to dance on her own hooves in the open, instead of hiding from the xenophobic herd. It depressed her not a little to think that even here, amongst people who Apparated from place to place, flew on broomsticks, and made up shrinking potions in cauldrons, that people could be so uptight about something as mundane as the occasional shapechange. Look at Felina Rosier and Narcissa Malfoy she knew entire herds of Muggles who were less threatened by that which was different from themselves than those two.

She spent a bit of time in front of her closet choosing something to wear that dress with the skirt made of silk panels was fun to dance in, and she hadn't worn that little corselet in awhile. Definitely shoes for dancing, and hopefully she had some silver body powder left.

Now, was there any companion she could bring along?

Dumbledore would probably enjoy it, but he had far too many demands on his time at the moment, what with the Third Task approaching and the visiting Headmasters so restless. Irma? Well, Emily thought a Midsummer revel might be a bit much for Irma, and she knew that a sometimes prim and easily titillated lady like her would be an irresistible target to a certain, prankish contingent of her countryfolk. The same was probably true of Pomona and Minerva as well.

But, wait, she knew someone who would probably love to go, and who seemed like she would be wonderful company anywhere. She reached for parchment and quill and penned a quick letter:

Dear Tonks,

I'm hoping you remember me from the Ministry Ball at New Year's!

Anyway, do you still want to hit a club? I know a fantastic spot, and I guarantee you've never heard of it.

It's a Faery place, having their yearly Midsummer revel. I can even swear you to secrecy and take you there blindfolded if you want the full living-history sensory experience. I hope you like to dance.

Tuesday night at nine-ish p.m. Let me know if you can go & I'll pick you up.

Cheers,

Emily Swain

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But unfortunately, the post owl returned with a cheerful letter with some disappointing news from Tonks:

Dear Swain,

Of course I remember you, and I would LOVE, el oh vee ee, to get stolen by the Faeries and carried off to one of their super-secret nightclub establishments. I TOTALLY love to dance, you kidding?!

But oh phuckety phuque fuk I have to work Tuesday night!! Very secret Auror stuff. I'd tell you about it, but then I'd have to kill you.

Next time? Please let me know about next time?

Have fun & be sure to attract lots of attention!!

Cheers,

Tonks

Damn, that was disappointing. It looked as though she would just have to go to the revel alone and try to meet up with Catherine and Roddy, and perhaps Raith if she didn't have to work that night. Or maybe she might run into someone she knew anything could happen.

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Thursday of the following week, Emily took her Slytherin-Gryffindor Defence Against the Dark Arts classes on a brief excursion to the green field just outside the gate that marked the end of the Hogwarts wards. Professor Snape had turned up for the lecture, as promised, and surprisingly, so had Professor Moody. The two of them stood at either side of the milling crowd of fourth-years, now and then darting ferocious looks at each other.

Emily had brought out some equipment with her: a couple of fencing masks and a handful of wooden-dowelling prop wands. She wore her usual fencing-class costume of chain armour, plastron, breeches and boots.

"Now, all of you, listen closely," she began, "for this may be one of the most important ideas I teach you all year.

"A favourite author of mine, a fellow named J.R.R. Tolkien, once wrote, 'Do not meddle in the affairs of wizards, for they are subtle and quick to anger.'" She tried not to let her gaze linger on Professor Snape as she spoke.

Moody smiled thinly at her. "Good advice, that," he growled.

Emily grinned at him before continuing. "Indeed it is. However, some decades later, another author, Steven Brust, countered with, 'No matter how subtle the wizard, a knife between the shoulder blades will seriously cramp his style.' We're proceeding in the spirit of Mr. Brust's statement with today's lesson." There was a faint susurration of laughter from her students.

"The reason I brought all of you out here today, past the Hogwarts anti-electronics wards, was so we could use one of these during this demonstration." And she held up a small, metal device on a lanyard. "Does anyone know what this is?"

Hermione Granger's hand went up immediately. "It's a Muggle stopwatch."

"Exactly. Do you know how to use one of these, Miss Granger? Yes? Then come on up here and assist me, if you please." Hermione made her way to the front of the class, and Emily handed the stopwatch to her, then turned back to her class.

"Today we will be discussing and demonstrating methods of physically pre-empting hostile curses, focusing especially on the three Unforgiveable Curses," she said. "Until now you've all focused on magical methods of defending yourselves against the Dark Arts counter-curses and counter-hexes, Disarming Charms, special mental exercises and such. But now I want you to put all that temporarily aside. At the moment, we're concerned with those situations in which the only approach that can really protect you is physical force."

There was a faint murmur of commentary at that remark, but then Professor Snape directed a glare at the class and they instantly fell silent as mice. Really, the way the man could keep a class under control was amazing.

"Professor Moody has given you the particulars on the Unforgiveable Curses already in his class session, but let me expand a bit on his description from another perspective. Unfortunately for all those Dark Wizards out there, all of the Unforgiveable Curses are invoked by a relatively slow and particular sort of process, with long, unwieldy incantations. In order to get off a Cruciatus Curse, you have to gesture, and then enunciate three syllables. For *Imperio,* it's four. For *Avada Kedavra* itself, it's an excruciatingly long, drawn-out six syllables. I've sparred with every single student here, and am quite familiar with all of your levels of physical ability, and believe me, there isn't a student in this class who couldn't get off one, or two, or perhaps even three fencer's actions in the time it takes to point a wand and pronounce a six-syllable phrase."

Emily picked up one of the prop wands, just a foot-long section of plain wooden doweling, and nodded to Hermione. "If you would time this please, Miss Granger " She pointed the wand off to one side, and said, "Avada Kedavra," then turned to Hermione again. "How long did that take?"

"Two point one seconds," Hermione reported.

"All right, now let's try it more quickly, the way it might be said in the heat of a battle. Ready?" She pointed the wand swiftly, then cried "*Avada Kedavra!*" very fast.

"One point seven six seconds," Hermione said, with an apprehensive little quaver to her voice. There was a concerned murmur from the class.

Emily turned to face her audience again. "Now what are you going to do when you see this gesture, and hear the first syllable of *Avada Kedavra*?" she asked, pointing with the prop wand again. "Are you going to stand there blinking as he comes on and just give up? What can you do in the approximately one and three-quarters seconds of life you potentially have left?"

This question was greeted by such a dead silence that Emily could suddenly hear the wind stirring the leaves on the ground behind her with vivid clarity. A wave of agitation and fear poured toward her from the group in front of her. She saw a momentary apprehension in even Professor Snape's eyes. Moody alone looked impassive.

"Pray the *Our Father*?" Seamus Finnigan offered finally.

"More like kiss your arse good-bye," Ron Weasley's voice murmured from the back of the group. There was a grim little laugh from a few students.

"Oh, *come on*! Listen to yourselves, you're all defeated before you've even begun!" Emily cried. She grabbed up the prop wand and assumed *en garde* position in front of them. "What's this " she made another indicative pointing gesture with the dowel " but a straight thrust? How is it any different from a fencer's first aggressive movement? And what do you do when someone offers you a straight thrust? Anyone?"

"Parry it," Draco Malfoy said instantly.

"Yes, of course, Mr. Malfoy, you counter it with an equal and opposing motion. But tell us what's an even better move strategically than just a parry?"

Draco's blond brows creased. "Er... a parry and then a riposte?"

"Mr. Malfoy think of the French foil rules, and Arcadian court duel rules. What's even better than letting the other bloke take the straight thrust and establish right of way, and *then* parrying him? I know you know the answer."

"Er... don't let him get a straight thrust on you in the first place, take the straight thrust yourself before he can "

"*Yes,* that's it," Emily said excitedly. "And what's that called?"

"It's... oh Merlin, what is it... " He shook his blond head, thinking hard. "Attack into preparation."

"Yes, *exactly* five points for Slytherin." Emily turned to the rest of the class. "Now, everyone take what he said down *attack into preparation.* When you see your adversary getting ready to let fly with an attack what you then have to do is *land your attack first.* There's no magical way to block a Killing Curse? Then screw magic, it's failed you, try something else. If you're going to die anyway, it can't hurt to try to fight him with everything you've got before you go down, can it?"

More dead silence. Someone who sounded like Neville Longbottom whimpered. From somewhere in the back of the group came titters of nervous laughter.

"Your professor said for all of you to *take that down,*" came Professor Snape's low, warning voice and everyone fell to with parchment and quills propped on books and knees.

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"Now, would anyone care to see a demonstration?" Emily asked. "Professor Moody, would you assist me, please?"

She picked up one of the fencing masks and a dowelling prop wand and handed them to Moody, then put on a mask herself. "Face me, please, sir, you're to be my duelling opponent. Let's assume wand duelling first position, if you please." Moody nodded, assuming a duellist's stance very similar to fencer's first position, the prop wand held out in front of him.

Emily turned back to her students. "Now, imagine for a second that this gentleman before me isn't really our own dear Professor Moody, but a terrifying Dark Wizard who's

Glamoured himself up into the image of Professor Moody, and who's now coming to kill me." She turned back to Moody. "Now, sir, come on with the attack. If you would time this please, Miss Granger, from the moment I begin my attack "

Moody came toward her... and she paused, sniffing the air. Something about her last remark had caused Moody's personal scent to intensify exponentially, indicating a very rapid increase in his heart rate and the rate at which he was perspiring and now, he was sweating anger, upset, and aggression at a frightening rate. Her eyes sought his under the wire mesh of the fencing mask as he raised the prop wand toward her, his eyes were blazing, and his teeth bared in a snarl of rage.

They both moved at exactly the same instant Moody raised the prop wand, pointing it at her, and Emily's hand extracted something from the edge of her hood, her lips moving silently as she did so and then her arm swung back in Moody's direction as a sword flashed out from nowhere as her attack approached him in fourth

Then her sword's edge connected with the dowel wand, and shattered it in half splinters went flying past Moody's mask. Had it been a real wizard's wand, her attacker would have been rendered powerless.

"How long did that take?" Emily asked.

Hermione glanced up. "Point eight six seconds. A little less than a second."

Moody glanced at the shattered stub of wooden dowel in his hand. "*Clever, aren't you, lassie*," he rasped, his eyes fixed malevolently on her face.

Emily stepped back, her own heart now hammering. The aggression in Moody's scent was overpowering, washing over her like sick fear there was enough hatred and murderous anger there to intimidate a troll. She stepped back from Professor Moody, eyes riveted on his face, watching for signs of aggression or attack. Had a Dark Wizard been coming toward her with a proper wand, looking and smelling like that, she would have indeed known that she had perhaps a second to save her own life.

The last time she had breathed this kind of scent had been during the Defence of Ardensea, when she had crashed into an alley and found three very large and murderous Baalorite Orcs bearing down on her, muscles rippling under their grey-green mottled skin, lower tusks gleaming. Her hand was instinctively ready on her sword, as it was then.

Moody's eyes were fixed on hers something like recognition flashed between the two of them. For one long moment, the two of them gazed on a committed enemy, and knew it.

A moment later, Moody smiled. "Quite a fighter, lassie," he said and threw the stump of the prop wand despisingly aside. "But it's time for lunch, isn't it?"

Emily checked her watch. "Ah, yes," she replied. "Can't hear the bells out here, but it looks as though class is just about done."

Her students turned back toward with castle with no small sense of relief. They moved off toward the Great Hall for lunch, chattering amongst themselves in subdued voices.

Emily waited until Moody had moved out of sight, then caught up to Snape and put a hand on his elbow. "Professor, can I talk to you privately for a second? It's rather important."

Snape glanced down at her in surprise. "All right," he said, and waved her into an empty classroom.

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"Why should I? As with many other distinctive traits of ours, most humans tend to find that sort of thing disconcerting," she said, perhaps more snappishly than she intended. "I still have some deer characteristics in this form, same as I retain a partly human form when I'm... anyway. Strong emotions fear, anxiety, lust, aggression all of them produce a distinct odour that triggers a certain emotional response in me. I can't describe it any more scientifically than that.

"Anyway the reason why I'm bringing this up to you at all was because of how Professor Moody smelled to me during the demonstration we put on today. That was a great deal more than just a fit of bad temper."

"How so?" he asked, crossing his arms in front of him warily.

"It wasn't just ordinary anger or upset in his scent. Moody wanted to kill me out there today he positively *reeked* of it. When I face any enemy who smells of that much aggression and I am not saying this just to shock you, sir it's usually during a mortal confrontation. If you added the smell of blood and metal and fear to that... to me, that's the stench of battlefields."

Snape took a deep breath, exhaled slowly. "You're absolutely certain of this. You would swear to this under oath, on your word of honour."

"Absolutely," she said, without hesitation.

He turned away from her, his brow deeply creased with thought. "Professor... let's try to look at this rationally," he said, after a long moment. "Alastor Moody is a retired Auror, and his experiences in the field have left him extremely paranoid, as I'm sure you've noticed. During the course of your demonstration, you were acting in an aggressive manner toward him. Can you be sure that you didn't all unintentionally set off some kind of panic response in him, perhaps? Just an irrational reaction to the appearance of an attack?"

Emily paced a few steps, mulling that over. "All right, that's plausible... but I don't think so, somehow. He didn't seem panicked to me, not at all. Seemed to very much have his wits about him. Did he seem panicked to you?"

"No, he didn't," Snape said thoughtfully. "He just seemed to be looking at you very angrily. At the time, I thought it was because he was feeling a bit overly competitive."

"Do you think I should say something to Dumbledore?"

Snape deliberated that. "To be absolutely honest, madam, I would hesitate to trouble the Headmaster with most anything at this time, what with the Third Task almost upon us. He has any number of extremely pressing worries at present."

He turned back to her, coolly folding his arms in front of him. "Madam, you're obviously convinced that Moody is somehow dangerous to you, and I believe that *you* sincerely believe that, at least. He may be I think everyone on staff would agree that he's not the most mentally balanced individual in this world. But really, are you prepared to go to the Headmaster and tell him that we should suspect an old friend and ally of his of harbouring murderous intent, all because *he smelled bad for a moment?*"

Emily started to protest, but Snape wasn't finished; he held up his hand for silence. "I'm not saying that you're wrong, Professor. You do sound as though you're experienced in these matters. And I'm certainly willing to believe that Moody's mental state has taken a turn for the even *more* psychotic," he said, with an eloquent scowl. "But consider this if you were to go to the Headmaster and make such a charge, I think you would make a more effective case if you backed it up with more evidence than a bad smell, even if that smell was detected by someone with a nose subtle enough to detect, er, human pheromones." He looked at her rather suspiciously, as if wondering what else she could discern about him at that moment.

"All right... that makes sense," Emily said finally. "But I'm not going to feel safe until I'm a dimensional plane away from him, I tell you. I'm now tempted to put a Ward of Impassability on every door between him and me until the end of the year."

"I'm certainly not going to tell you that you shouldn't. Confidentially... " he lowered his voice with another eloquent scowl "I'll be glad to be away from him at the end of the year as well believe me, he's no friend of mine."

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thread, and it'll tell you whereabouts she's gotten to. And " Crouch fixed his companion with a stern look " time is important. I want to be rid of her right away, before she gets too much said. Understand?"

The grey man picked up the dagger with a disturbingly deft gesture the coordination and grace of his movements were the only really remarkable things about him. In another second, the weapon disappeared into his grey tweed overcoat. Then he picked up the coin and street atlas and pocketed them too. "All right then," he said. He held out his hand to Crouch, and a pouch of clinking coins changed hands.

"Half now, the rest when I get word that she's dead," Crouch said.

"Yeh've got yerself a deal."

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The scene in the drawing room of Malfeasant was one of happy domesticity that Friday evening. Lucius had been spending a great deal more time at home since the end of May, and his wife's mood had greatly improved as a result.

The two of them sat side by side in their accustomed armchairs in the drawing room. Lucius was absorbed in the day's *Daily Prophet* (he had been following the reports on the International Magical Cooperation audit very closely), now and then sipping from a snifter of excellent brandy. Narcissa was engrossed in a leather-bound Ann Radcliffe novel, with a glass of elderflower wine at her elbow.

The scratch of a post-office hire owl at the drawing room exterior doors caught Lucius's attention at about ten o'clock. He got up, and retrieved the message, scratched in a stark hand on plain parchment:

She knows.

I don't know how, but she does. Damn Faeries.

I'm taking care of it.

Sorry to do this to you, but I'm certain you'll manage to find entertainment elsewhere, old friend.

Next trip out to Pasiphäe's is on me?

~ Regards,

B.

"Oh, damn it all to hell." Lucius's tone was a soft hiss of angry disappointment as he crumpled the letter in his hand.

"Darling, is something wrong? What was it?" Narcissa looked briefly up from her reading.

"Nothing, dear," Lucius said. He crossed to the wastepaper basket by the side of an antique writing desk, dropped Crouch's note into it, and reduced the paper to ash with a quick Reductor Curse before returning to his armchair, newspaper, and brandy glass.

Narcissa Malfoy said nothing further on the matter, and looked only mildly interested. More than likely she had seen her husband casually dismiss and then disintegrate many a previous communication and was quite accustomed to this habit.

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It was a very quiet, endless weekend.

The mood in the castle was like the prolonged pause before a storm hits; some great pressure seemed to be gathering soundlessly in the air. Even the students seemed unusually subdued their excited chatter and bright voices seemed muted in the halls and as they played games, studied, and gossiped out on the green. The library was unusually full, as students got in extra review for the upcoming exams.

There was, of course, no communication from Lucius.

Emily took advantage of the time to finish composing her final examinations and devise practical tests for her last sessions. On Monday, her students began to turn in their final compositions. She had assigned a scroll's worth of essay overviewing the Faery magic they had learned that year, and for the second, she had asked them to devise their own instruction manual for either fencing, dagger fighting, or hand-to-hand combat. Both were free-form assignments, for which they could use outside sources, pictures, both Muggle and Wizarding media, whatever they liked, and she was looking forward to reading the efforts of some of the more creative of her students.

On Tuesday, she collected the last of their compositions, and then let them have a quiet study period in which they could review whatever they liked. To them, the highlight of their school year was coming up on Thursday night, but to their professor, the social event of the year was coming up that evening. Nothing about that day, classes or meals, could be over soon enough, so she could get out to London.

After supper, Emily headed up to her apartments, showered quickly, and hurried through dressing with the glee of a very young woman going to her first real party after months of drudgery. It was great fun to powder her shoulders, slick back her hair, put on a bit more eye makeup and redder lipstick than usual, and have an occasion to use the *good* perfume. She all but capered down the path toward the gate on her way out at about 8:00 p.m. that evening.

A moment later, she Apparated onto the street in Diagon Alley. As she crossed the street and headed toward the Leaky Cauldron, Emily never noticed a man in a grey tweed overcoat step out of the tunnel leading to Knockturn Alley. His colourless eyes fastened on the fair-haired figure in black as she made her way through the crowds of late shoppers and commuters on her way up the street.

A moment later, he had merged with the random home-goers behind her and followed her through the crowd, unremembered by anyone.

Part Second: The Hart Rampant: Chapter 22

In which Professor Swain discovers the delights of a dual life as both a Hogwarts professor and Lucius Malfoy's mistress, until a chance encounter with a desperate Faery prostitute in Knockturn Alley sends her to the most unlikely person for aid. Meanwhile, Severus Snape finds himself alone and adrift in the Mushroom Circle, a Faery nightclub...

Chapter 22:

The revel was not set to begin until nine p.m. or thereabouts, so Emily went into the Leaky Cauldron to kill the time with a glass of dandelion wine and a copy of the *Daily Prophet.* She leafed through the special pull-out section covering the Triwizard Tournament before turning her attention to the rest of the paper. The headline story in the business and government section stated that an executive reports and accounts audit was in the works for Bartemious Crouch's Department of International Magical Cooperation due to reports of mismanagement Emily couldn't say she sympathised too much with the man. She briefly skimmed over the article and turned the page.

Just then, a dark shadow suddenly loomed over her, blotting out the light of her candle on the newspaper.

She glanced up to find Professor Snape standing beside her stool. From his tense, arms-crossed posture, she could tell something had already been annoying him that day, and that he was expecting to be annoyed still further. Despite this, his greeting of "Good evening, Professor," was relatively civil.

"Hello, sir. I wasn't expecting to see you this evening. Dropped by the pub for a drink?"

"Yes. It appears as though I'm going to finish out the school year without finding a new source of gillyweed, so I figure I deserve a Scotch for my trouble," he replied curtly.

"Tom? Your best Scotch for Professor Snape, please," Emily said. Snape was reaching into his pocket, but she was too quick, flipping Tom a Galleon across the bar. He caught it neatly.

"You don't have to do that, you know," he growled, but didn't refuse.

"Best get used to it till you've got my *invoice* drawn up," she said, in a tone of mild reproach.

"I'll get to it before the end of the year I'm extremely busy at the moment," he said offhandedly. "Speaking of which, have you any news regarding our patient? Did Liria have any adverse reactions to the potion?" Tom set a glass in front of him, and Snape thanked him briefly before turning back to Emily.

"I don't know yet I'll tell you when I've had a chance to ask Catherine tonight. I'm going to meet up with her in about a quarter hour."

"You're going to meet her right now?"

"As soon as I'm done looking at today's *Prophet* and finish this drink, yes."

"Mightn't I simply talk to her myself, then?" Snape asked.

She looked up at him, pondered a second, then shook her head. "Oh, no. That would be a *very* bad idea."

Snape's brow creased. "Why?"

Emily laughed to herself. "Trust me, you will hate the place where I'm going to meet her with a passion as yet unequalled in this or any other plane of existence."

Snape looked disdainful. "Where are you planning to meet her, then? An abattoir?"

"Sort of," she said vaguely. "It's a nightclub off of Endustree Alley."

"There's a nightclub off of Endustree Alley?" he asked. "I've never heard of one."

"Exactly. It's underground."

"When you say 'underground', do you mean it's not publicised, or am I to understand that it is located below the surface of the Earth somehow?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"What is so secret about the place that it has to be kept underground in Endustree Alley, which is already a hidden place itself?"

Emily turned her attention to her glass of dandelion wine. "Really, sir... don't worry about it."

He glowered in helpless annoyance. "You're certain that Catherine will be there?"

"She'll be there. No one misses it," she said with absolute certainty.

He was wearing that face that said if she were one of his students, she would have had detention until the end of time. "Then what is the problem?"

Emily set down her glass. "Professor, this place caters to a rather specialised clientele. Tell me, have you ever been to a regular Wizarding nightclub?"

"I've been to the Leaky Cauldron, obviously," he said, indicating their surroundings.

"How about when we're at school? Do you ever just nip down to the Three Broomsticks for a pint with the other professors?"

"Yes, actually I have done that on occasion."

"Have you done that *this* year? And does Dumbledore have to force you to go when you do?"

Something in his expression said that she was right on both counts, but he wasn't about to admit that to her. "I don't recall I haven't the time to go gadding about every weekend like *some* professors evidently do," he said, raising the sinister eyebrow at her. "There is work to be done occasionally, when one is a teacher and Head of House, and term finals are starting tomorrow."

"Of course there is, sir." She studied his contentious face for a moment. "Well, I suppose you might as well come along and meet her with me, then, but don't be surprised if you find the venue a bit... odd, is all I'll say about it."

"Thank you, you're too kind. I must say, Professor, words fail me in describing how enjoyable it is to talk to someone so frank, open, and winsomely candid as yourself."

"Anytime, sir," Emily said, downing the last of her wine and standing up. "Shall we?"

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The man in the grey tweed overcoat had gone into the Leaky Cauldron perhaps five or six minutes after his target had, gotten a pint, and then settled himself at a table across the room from her. As usual, it had been a few minutes before the pub keeper noticed him waiting there for a drink, even though there was no one else at his end of the bar.

His contract bought a newspaper and ordered some poncy sort of wine in a fancy bottle, then spent a long boring time reading. (He could never understand how some people could spend all that time bent over books or papers or whatever. He would've been bored off his gourd, himself.) But then some pasty bloke in black, looked like a bleedin' undertaker or something, went over and started talking to her. Looked like she knew the fellow, though they didn't much like each other. He seemed to be pissing and moaning at her, but she bought him a drink anyway.

Then inconveniently enough they seemed to be leaving together. Walking off into the who knows where in the direction of Endustree Alley. Ah well, with the rate the fellow seemed to be making himself charming, the contract would soon tell him to piss off and go on without him, and then he could finish business.

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Of course, Emily knew that had she just suggested from the first that he come along with her to the revel to meet with Catherine, he would have refused such an offer with withering scorn. But her instant rejection of his request to speak to Catherine himself, her immediate refusal to so much as consider taking him along with her had apparently engaged his contentious side, gotten his back up; now he would be satisfied with nothing other than speaking to her himself, no matter how unlikely the setting. She should have known better than to tell this man that something was inaccessible, because now he would stop at nothing to attain it. Ah well, Midsummer revels being what they were, more than likely he would be appalled by the goings-on after fifteen minutes and beat a hasty retreat anyway.

The silence was deafening as they reached the end of Diagon Alley and turned toward Endustree Alley, of course. "Oh, I wanted to ask you have you heard any of the Malfoys refer to my ever-so-illustrious *engagement* lately?" she asked, making satire of the word. She had wanted to ask him that question for awhile, and might as well get it out of the way now.

"No, I've not heard any more reports about your *upcoming nuptials.*" Snape's tone was just as rude and sarcastic as hers. "So I'll assume that you've unequivocally let Lucius know where you stand on the matter?"

"Yes, I did and quite tactfully, I thought. But now, it seems he's not speaking to me," Emily said, shrugging. "So it does seem you were right about how he would be, er, *displeased* once I made it absolutely clear that I wasn't going to be marrying into the family." All of which was entirely true, and no doubt Snape had absolutely no desire to hear any of the bloody particulars of her falling-out with Lucius.

Snape looked at her, but said nothing. Given that he was in fact Severus Snape, and no doubt could have said *I told you so* in a manner that would have smarted forever, his discretion was really admirable.

"Can't say I miss Lucius too much, to be honest," Emily continued, believing the words more as she said them. "He can be a very nice man when he wants to be, but he really is a bit limited as far as company goes. It's now suddenly dawning on me that you only really get two topics of conversation around Lucius the first of course being how marvellously great *he* is."

"You mean he's acquired a topic of conversation beyond that one? Really?" Snape gave her a quizzical look. "When did that happen?"

As always, his sarcastic delivery was perfect Emily laughed so hard that she had to take a moment to compose herself. It really did feel wonderfully cathartic to have a good laugh at Lucius's expense. "Well, the second one I was thinking of was how much everyone else suffers by comparison to his marvellous greatness, but I suppose the two really are closely related."

They had come up to the edge of a darkened industrial complex: a metalworks on their left, a carpenter's shop to their right, and the Nimbus Broomstick manufacturing plant just beyond. "Oh here we are, it's not far now."

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Emily led Snape through the maze of industrial alleyways with surety, confident of the way. Before long, they were walking along a high wall entirely covered with lush green strands of ivy. A pinpoint of light appeared in the near distance as they grew closer, it resolved into an arc of candlelight shining out of a doorway cut into the expanse of ivy.

Someone had been sitting on a stool in the shadows just beyond that ivy-covered doorway he was tall sitting on the stool, taller still when he came forward to meet them. *Really* damn tall when his head cleared the top of the ivy archway and he could stand straight up. He was an Arcadian troll of the minotaur tribe, with freckled, light brown skin and bull's horns curling down from his temples, with biceps as big around as Emily's waist; he probably would have wrestled in Rubeus Hagrid's weight class. He wore a gigantic pair of black Doc Martens, black jeans, and a black Muggle t-shirt stretched over his massive chest. Giant white letters on his shirt read: **SECURITY.**

The troll took one look at Emily's armband tattoo and made her a courteous bow. "Hail and well met, my Lady Master-At-Arms," the doorman said, in *basso profundo* tones of effortless authority.

"Hail to thee, Master Security," she said, returning his bow.

The door troll glanced desultorily at Professor Snape, then turned back to her. "You vouch for the human?" he asked.

"Yes. 'Pon my troth, he's to be trusted," she answered.

"I'd see your hands, if you wish the privilege of departing and returning." Emily held up her hand, and received a little ink stamp on the back of it, then motioned for Snape to do the same. He accepted it rather reluctantly, his wary eyes never leaving the doorman for a second. "It'll be a one-Galleon cover tonight," the door troll told her.

Emily nodded, then withdrew a short distance and opened her bag. "Well, that's disappointing, the doorman isn't Fianna. I can sometimes get out of paying the cover if he is," she said, aside to Professor Snape. "Just one second then."

She was sorting out some coins when the bouncer took a closer look at Snape's face and gasped. Then the gigantic fellow went down on one knee and made him a courtly bow.

"My good Lord Trent," he said, "We are truly honoured you have seen fit to visit us again. I see that as before, with characteristic humility, you scorn the pressing of your rank. Please accept our gratitude for your most kind patronage. Enter and be welcome and your lady as well. This house is proud to offer you cheer and rest this Midsummer's Eve." The muscled titan straightened up and motioned Snape and Emily through the ivy curtain with another bow. There was no mention of a cover charge.

Snape was as close to floored as Emily had ever seen him. He stared blankly at the bouncer for a long moment.

"Just go with it my Lord," she whispered in his ear. "Unless you want to pay the cover on general principles."

A second later, he threw back his dark head with elaborate ceremony and offered her his arm. "A thousand thanks, good sir," he said to the bouncer, in that arrogant, silky voice she knew so well, and swept through with enough pomp and circumstance to make Lucius Malfoy jealous. The bouncer looked as tearfully grateful as though a king had stooped to him.

Just beyond the ivy archway was a wide, arched wooden door with a copper handle, which Snape pulled open, then motioned her inside. Once the door closed behind

them, she fell against his shoulder, almost crying with laughter. "Brilliant, Professor, just brilliant. Pure dead genius. Really, you ought to consider a career on the stage."

"I doubt if I can count upon audiences being so easily amused as you are, Professor," Snape said but was his own mouth twisting with just a hint of amusement? "Who is this Lord Trent, and why was that fellow outside so ecstatic to see him?"

"Lord Trent was a Muggle Tithesman invited to the Court of the Sixth Kingdom some years back, and made such a hit of himself there as a bard that King Armus knighted him and conferred some lands on him. Now he's a famous Muggle world musician, though he does spend part of the year in Arcadia. Come on, this way." She led him down a candlelit corridor, down a narrow flight of stairs.

"What do the Muggles think of the fact that he disappears for part of the year?"

"They just think he's reclusive."

"I see." He turned to her curiously. "Do I really resemble him so very much?"

"Yes, quite a bit, now that I think of it. And he is considered by many to be quite good-looking, in a dark and brooding kind of way."

"Is he." She thought she saw some satisfaction lurking in the corners of his mouth.

"If you really wanted to play along with it, you could probably convince everyone that you are indeed Milord Trent, paying an incognito visit. You could probably get people to buy you drinks all night." Another corridor, another flight of stairs.

"Endlessly hilarious as that idea is, what would I then do if someone asked me to sing one of my songs, may I ask?"

"Just get very angry and say, 'I don't play *Pretty Hate Machine* anymore,' and then refuse to say another word. That would be very in character for him, from what I hear."

She thought this was a capital idea, and was earnestly trying to talk him into it until he gave her the Professor Snape Look and said, *"I don't think so,"* in such tones of dulcet warning that she thought it better to let the idea drop.

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The grey man watched in disappointment as his contract ducked behind some doorway in the ivy wall, then was gone. He thought about trying to get into this pub or whatever it was and following her there, as he had sometimes had great success with fulfilling contracts in dark, crowded music halls before.

But then he decided against it. Security looked pretty tight here, probably some kind of private place and he hadn't much liked the looks of that big fellow with the horns.

He settled down to watch for his contract at a discreet distance away and lit another cigarette.

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In the corridor, Professor Snape paused in the well of light just below a wall brazier, and glanced down at the circular ink stamp on the back of his hand:

The Mushroom Circle

It was quite possibly the oddest name for a cocktail lounge he had ever heard of. The phrase sounded familiar somehow perhaps he had read something about mushroom circles or Faery rings in a long-ago story book, but he couldn't remember any particulars at the moment.

His colleague had led him down at least three flights of steps now they had to be in a sub-basement of the building above, yet the air was fresh and scented with greenery. From somewhere below and ahead of them came the echo of music.

At the end of another corridor was a large room with many clothing racks and hooks on the walls, and the coats and cloaks of what looked like very many other people were already hanging there. Professor Swain turned to him and offered to take his cloak as it was also very comfortably warm, he found himself unfastening his cloak and handing it to her to be hung up. He then unfastened the myriad buttons of his jacket and let it hang loose in front, momentarily glad that he had put on a rather nice shirt of fine starched white cambric beneath. Then, his companion shrugged off her black velvet robe and hung it on one of the racks, somewhat to Snape's surprise he had thought she was already rather lightly dressed.

After the Hallowe'en Ball, the Yule Ball, and New Year's Eve Ball, Snape had gotten somewhat used to the alarmingly diaphanous dress robes that his colleague wore for formal occasions. But nothing had prepared him for the frock that was revealed when she took off her black velvet outer robe. Make that nothing had prepared him for *the lack of the frock* that was revealed. He was sure that his grandmother's old bathing costume was more modest.

It was made of some sort of black silk with a silvery sheen to it, woven with a spider web pattern, rather like her dress for the Malfoys' costume ball. The bodice was little more than a curved frame for throat, collarbones and bosom, and the back was so low that she indeed gave the world assurance of vertebrae. The varied hemline was composed of irregular petals of silk, and was so short that it sometimes revealed the tops of her stockings when the petals rustled. There was a little satin buckled corset around her waist that made it look about two handspans around. Snape was soon intimately familiar with the shape of her shoulders and arms and was sure that everyone else in the room would be as well. The intricate armband tattoo around her right upper arm was readily apparent.

In his opinion, it looked as though she had put on her stockings, chemise, and corset, and then neglected to put her party frock over it, and absentmindedly gone out that way. She was, of course, as cool as anything about her state of half-nudity in the time he had known her, Snape doubted that anything could make that Swain woman blush.

After leaving their wraps in the cloakroom, she motioned to him and pulled open a curtain, behind which he could hear lively music. Pipes, tin whistles, drums, guitars, violins.

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As Severus Snape passed from the foyer into the club, he had to conclude, probably for the first time, that his tiresome Fae colleague was absolutely right about something.

He really was going to hate this place with a passion unequalled in this or any other plane of existence, and perhaps coming here had been a very bad idea.

Not that it was such an unpleasant space a group of musicians were playing on a raised stage adjacent to a giant dance floor of dark, polished wood, off of which several comfortable, dimly lit areas were furnished with deep sofas and easy chairs upholstered in dark velvet. The massive, carved wood bar next to the dance floor was an architectural marvel, probably a century old. The decor was largely made up of slender trees with lush foliage of a nearly impossibly saturated green wherever there was room for such. Tiny white lights like bright snowflakes outlined the trees' branches, the carved beams of the ceiling and doorways. Scattered throughout were tall white tapers dripping waxen white beards to rival Albus Dumbledore's, in spiralling silver candelabra.

No, he was certain he would hate it because now he knew what she had meant by "specialised clientele" and it appeared that he was the only wizard in the place. Nothing but Faeries as far as the eye could see; there had to be well over two hundred of them, of all ages and descriptions. A couple of young men brushed past him, laughing, totally unselfconscious capering along on goatlike hooves, with tiny horns on their foreheads. He immediately felt as out of place as a Muggle labour union organiser at a Malfoy tea party. Conversations hushed and curious, uncanny eyes peered at him, at the outsider, as he passed.

He then noticed that the women seemed to all be wearing dresses as weightless as Professor Swain's. While the older women favoured sensible longer skirts and sleeves, there were any number of dewy young things flitting about in alarmingly short, bare-armed and low-backed gowns as well and the cut of many of those dresses rather obviously precluded the wearing of any sort of brassiere underneath. Most of the men were wearing knee trousers and tall boots, with long-sleeved, open-necked shirts of the same soft silk material, of a style that was popular perhaps in the Renaissance. Really, there was an appalling amount of feminine skin on display in this in place. At least it seemed to belong to women with rather... less than appalling bodies. They were of variable heights, but most were of similar build both male and female seemed very slender, with long thin legs and arms. Apparently there was a definite prevailing physical type amongst them, with the exception of a few hulking trolls like the fellow watching the door, and now and then some people with the stature of human dwarves.

Everyone, he soon noticed, had ears with that pointed extra frill of skin and cartilage other than of course himself. And some of them had Professor Swain's same sort of eyes, that dilated to an alarming state of all-over darkness in the dim light. Additionally, they all seemed somehow immune to spots, jowls, and facial hair. Even the least attractive of them had the advantage of looking, to his eyes, very fit and healthy.

Perhaps there really was a reason his people called them *the Fair Folk* their shared racial characteristics closely fit the ideals of human beauty.

As interesting as this was from an anthropological standpoint, though, his presence amongst this group of slender, attractive, smooth-skinned people in the ethereal traditional clothing of their summery homeland was making him feel older, fleshier, jowlier, and more heavily earthbound with every moment he spent there Caliban amongst a tribe of Ariels.

He noticed suddenly that perhaps he wasn't the only human in the place there were a few others dotted here and there, usually paired up with Faeries and wearing Arcadian clothing. Most conspicuous among them was one very young wizard he didn't recognise, rather too old to be a Hogwarts student. He was wearing a Faery silk shirt with a leather Muggle motorcyclist's jacket and the kind of round spectacles made fashionable by the everlasting Boy Who Lived, and was using the *Orchideous* charm to make flowers burst out of his wand, which he was then presenting to some young Fae women. He seemed right at home. *Show-offy bastard*.

Snape was wondering if he would have any more strange encounters with Fae mistaking him for "Lord Trent," the Muggle world musician, but instead, when they approached the bar, the bartender also took one look at the armband tattoo around Professor Swain's right arm and immediately came forward to greet her.

"Good morrow, my Lady Fianna. You honour us." She pressed his colleague's hand in both of hers and made her a small respectful bow.

"You honour me with your hospitality," Emily replied, warmly returning the greeting and clapping the woman cordially on the shoulder.

"Bide you here on your liege's command?"

"Aye. I serve the King's ally, the great wizard Albus Dumbledore, this day and twelvemonth." Then Emily turned back in Snape's direction. "My Lady Barkeep, might I trouble you for a trifling request? My companion here is to be my guest tonight anything he wishes, upon my honour and my credit. Can you take good care of him for me?"

The bartender who was as tiresomely attractive as all these other Fae, with long straight red hair, wide green eyes, and the usual pointed ears and dewy porcelain complexion, wearing a bare-armed, low-cut black lace gown winked and nodded. "Like I was his own mother."

"My thanks, good mistress."

Emily had barely begun to turn away from the bar when someone on the dance floor, a young man in rich green silk and velvet and high black boots, cried out her name, then ran up and seized her in an embrace so exuberant that he swept her up off the floor. Evidently she recognised the fellow, because she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him back. They giggled together like a couple of first-years. The woman really needed to remember how old she was sometimes.

"Alain! I can't believe it! How have you been?"

"How fare thee, my Lady of the Blade? What brings our fairest Snickersnee into this Second World house of swill and revelry?" he inquired, in what was unmistakably a Parisian accent.

"Hey," called the bartender, wiping glasses behind the bar. "Best swill and revelry in England, you swot."

Alain grabbed up someone's drink from the bar and held it aloft. Snape noticed he never withdrew his other arm from around Professor Swain's shoulders. "To swill and revelry!"

Then of course all these ridiculously excitable Faeries shouted, "To swill and revelry!" and drank to that erstwhile sentiment. From what snatches of their conversation he could make out, Professor Swain seemed to have gone to Beauxbatons with this French bloke Alain, who was tall and lanky with waist-length blond hair. Snape knew any number of teenage girls who weren't as pretty as this fellow.

"Oh, what's this, then?" Alain approached Snape, brazen as you please. "What have we here, sulking at our Emily? A wizard?"

"So it would seem," Snape replied, his hackles rising.

"Aren't you a tough audience," Alain said, laughing. He circled Snape, scrutinising him. "Let's see, then 'No claws, no tail to whisk about, To fright us at our revel; Yet like the gods of Greece, no doubt, He too's a genuine devil.'"

Snape could think of no reply to that he didn't know many people who taunted one in verse so he settled for glaring at the man in decided unamusement. Alain frowned back. "Oh, you're no fun. Come on, my Lady Swain, lots to do, people to see."

Alain then had to drag Emily off to meet some other people at a table nearby: a very young, lively woman with long, straight dark hair in a pale blue spidersilk dress, who was hanging on the arm of a young man who so closely resembled her that he could only be her brother. Alain seemed to be introducing them to Emily, and then all four of them began talking in rapid-fire French. Snape occasionally picked up the words "Fleur" and "Beauxbatons" and "Madame Maxime" and "Tournament" here and there because of course, it was asking too much of Fate to get away from talk about the everlasting Triwizard Tournament anywhere, even in this exotic haunt of the Fae. Then someone else came up, another pretty young woman with long toffee-coloured ringlets and little wire-rimmed spectacles, also wearing one of those indecently gossamer Arcadian dresses, made of white silk with silvery beading. She fell on Emily's neck with exclamations of mad happiness.

This sort of thing went on for some time. Before long, Severus Snape thought that if he had to see one more person throw his or her arms around "Lady Emily", exclaiming over her like a lover come back from the wars, he was going to be ill. There was of course no sign of someone sensible like Catherine Orson.

He turned to the redheaded bartender.

"Yes, sir, what can I get you?" she said, with a smile.

"Black coffee, please."

"Ah, there's no coffee to be found here, beggin' your pardon," came the reply. "We've got tea, if you fancy something hot."

"All right. Earl Grey, then."

"Ah, no Earl Grey, neither. Again, beggin' your pardon."

"Darjeeling, then." Snape was starting to get impatient.

"Any sort of black tea, I'm afraid isn't to be found on the premises, me luv. If you want something with caffeine or Second World sugar in it you've come to the wrong place," the barkeep told him with an apologetic little shrug, then leaned over the bar for an aside to just him. "Jest so ye know, guv, you won't find that sort of thing in any haunt of the Fae. That stuff affects us like a shot of crystal meth we've got no more tolerance for it than Native Americans used to have for the white man's firewater. This satyr I know once drank a can of Coke on a dare, and he was just a twitching *mess.*"

Oh yes, he'd heard about the effects of stimulants on the Fae, and caffeine, of course, was a stimulant. He blushed slightly at his own gaffe. "All right," he said shortly. "How about Scotch whiskey, then?"

"I've got a First Kingdom *usquebaugh*, will that do?"

Snape briefly recalled something Professor Swain had said at the New Year's Eve Ball about an excellent Seventh Kingdom *usquebaugh,* and shrugged. "Why not."

She set a glass down on the bar in front of him, then moved over to the mirrored back bar for a bottle. "Sorry about that. I'm not tryin' to be inhospitable it's just not often we can run a place like we're used to, all the way out here in the Second World, so we... you know... " Her attention was then absorbed by pouring a generous shot of amber liquor.

"So you cater exclusively to the tastes of your own culture." Of course they did. This was probably the only place in the Wizarding world or perhaps all of Britain where they could indulge their tastes and play their music. No wonder none of them ever missed one of these gatherings. Snape realised with a twinge of embarrassment that his behaviour so far had been perhaps less than cosmopolitan conduct unbecoming an educated Hogwarts professor.

"I... do apologise, miss. I'm afraid I've been a bit boorish," he said very quietly.

"It's all right, mate actually I'm pleased I get to be the one to properly introduce you to the wonders of Arcadian libations," the bartender said, with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. "As the saying goes, once you've had Faerie, you spend the rest of your life dreaming of more. How's the drink?"

He gamely took a sip, and was pleasantly shocked. The finest whiskies he had ever drunk would have been green with envy of the glass in his hand. At first impression, it tasted of honey, then caramel, then ended with peat and ash, orange peel and woodsmoke. It was both smooth and bracing; more subtle and complex than anything he had ever tasted.

"It's quite good. Thank you."

The barkeep dimpled at him. "I knew we'd find something you liked. Jest give a holler if you'd like more."

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"Actually, I was just thinking this was the best whiskey I've ever drunk. And while the music is a bit loud for my taste, I'll not deny the musicians are quite spirited."

"I'm sorry you don't like it "

"I never said I didn't like it, just the volume isn't to my taste." He was suddenly very conscious of her bare arm, where it was resting on the bar, her hand loosely clasped around the stem of her wineglass. He had merely thought of her as thin and insubstantial before, but suddenly he noticed the strength in her arms and hands, the wiry cords of muscle under her skin, the outsized veins that had expanded to feed those muscles. How many years had she spent with a sword, or a bow, in her hand? He had a brief recollection of feeling her arms clasp around his shoulders, her fingers threading through his hair but then chased it away with a deep swallow of whiskey.

"What kind of music is to your taste, then, sir?"

He shrugged. "Something quieter."

"All... right then." She smiled rather sourly and seemed about to say something else, but then the young fawnlike woman with the long brown hair ran up, followed by the woman in the white dress, and said something in fast, giggly French. Emily smiled and drained her wineglass. "Demoiselles JoAnna and Mackenzie are prevailing upon me to dance with them, so I'll be off. If you spot them, let me know."

Then she disappeared into the crowd, leaving Snape with a sense of having been somehow rebuffed. Before he had time to become too indignant, however, the young, bespectacled wizard who had earlier been conjuring flowers appeared at Snape's elbow with an armful of white sweet pea blossoms. He laid them on the bar and addressed the redheaded hostess. "Megan Redqueen, my lady with the face of a cherub and the body of a siren, fairest nymph in the Second World, in whose scarlet locks a thousand knights have been ensnared, if thou wilt still not marry me, wilt thou at least pour me a drink?"

"Live and die a maid, if you're the jade askin' for me hand!" she replied merrily. But she gathered up the flowers and held them rapturously to her face.

"Well now, lady, now that thou hast broken my heart for the thousandth time, canst thou give me the tiniest consolation of pouring me a blue nectar of the Goddess, which is nearly as sweet as my dream of thy lips?"

"The blue Goddess-nectar, I can give you." The bartender set down her bouquet, then reached for a squat, wide-mouthed glass and filled it half-full of cold water, then set a tiny mesh sieve on the lip of that glass, suspending it over the water with hooked wire legs. As Snape watched, she reached for a pot on the counter, from which she poured a golden rivulet of honey into the sieve's bowl.

Then, she brought the most exquisite bottle out from somewhere: a thing of milky blue glass, with what looked like a hand-illuminated, hand-lettered parchment label. In the Muggle world, such an item would have brought a decent price as an ornamental decanter or vase. Even if Severus Snape did not appreciate what he saw as the Fae's only passing acquaintance with forthright English honesty, even he had to admire their sense of the aesthetic.

The bartender opened that bottle, and began, very slowly, to drip a deep-blue liqueur over the honey, so that the water was suffused with milk-blue fluid curlicues... and releasing the most heavenly scent imaginable as she did so. It was as if all the most delectable flowers, fruits, and herbs had lent their perfumes to one concoction.

"Mmmm, when didst thou get a new supply in, thou breaker of my heart?" the fellow asked.

"We managed to get a crate one whole crate in from the Seventh Kingdom this morning. I tell you, I love this stuff better than mother's milk myself, but it is one cast-iron bitch to find."

"Hast thou ever ensorcelled the management into selling thee some for thy... personal consumption?"

"Hey, employee's privilege, mate. And I'm not telling you where I keep it."

"I'm available for a nightcap after closing, my adored one... "

"Are you." The bartender smiled coyly. "With such a honeyed tongue as that, there's not some other lass who would fain entertain you, my sweet William?"

"No need, when the maid my tongue would win stands before me."

The Faery bartender leaned across the bar and caressed the young wizard's cheek he seemed to purr under her touch. "'That man that hath a tongue, I say, is no man, If with his tongue he cannot win a woman.'" She leaned over the bar and kissed his cheek he seemed about ready to faint under that chaste little kiss and then sent him on his way, after promising to talk to him later, after closing.

After the flirt in leather had paid for his drink and moved off, Snape nodded to the bartender. "Ahem, Miss Redqueen?"

That lady laughed merrily. "'Miss Redqueen' you slay me. It's Megan Brun, really, but a lot of folks call me Megan Redqueen because of my hair. What do ye lack, guv'nor?"

"What was the blue drink he just ordered?"

"That, my friend, is called a Blue Faerie. Speciality of the house, when we can get it."

"Do they taste like they smell?"

"Better. *Much* better."

Snape raised a sceptical eyebrow. "Why do you love them better than mother's milk?"

"Only one way to find out, my friend. They're not cheap though the transportation fees, you know."

"How much?"

"Two Galleons Wizarding, ten pounds Muggle."

"Good Lord, madam, I'm a Potions professor. I could probably brew my own for less than that."

The barkeep laughed even more merrily. "I doubt that very highly, mate. Try one or don't, but either way, we'll still sell out of it faster than you can say Robin Goodfellow. But you're drinking on my Lady Fianna's tab tonight, aren't you? Don't worry then I'm sure she'll be good for it."

"Seeing as how she hasn't given any indication that she's even remembered I'm here in the last half hour, I think that would serve her right," Snape replied tartly, and perhaps with a touch of liquor-fuelled maudlin. "I'm willing to bet that if she had come with Malfoy, she would have talked to *him* for more than five minutes."

"If who was here? My word, does she have a paramour, then? Who is he? Is he dreadfully good-looking?" The bartender propped both elbows on the bar and her chin on her hands, looking bright-eyed and fascinated, like a child who has just heard that Story Time is beginning.

Snape shook his head. *Bloody Faeries.*

"Oh, never mind. I'll try one."

As a rule, Snape was not a prey to impulse, but perhaps something about the ritual with the honey and the water, the delicious scent, and the glamour of an arcane elixir appealed to him. Perhaps the idea of recklessly indulging himself on his tiresomely feckless and conspicuously absent colleague's tab had something to do with it as well.

"Trust me. You won't regret it." She went through the same water, honey, and bottle ritual and slid the glass across the bar to him. At the first sip, it started subtly on his tongue, then suddenly came into delectable focus, like the scent of a violet. He set down the glass, astonished.

"Good stuff, ain't it." The hostess leaned on the bar, folding her arms in front of her and silhouetting an ample expanse of lush white cleavage in her black lace bodice in the process. She had also tucked a nosegay of the white sweet pea blossoms into her bosom as well. Snape resolutely forced himself to keep his eyes on her face.

"Yes, that's... " He took another drink. "That's rather nice." Another. "That's *exquisite*, actually. What on Earth is in it?"

"Some things found on Earth, and some not. Lot of flowers and herbs and such the proper recipe is a big secret."

Snape set down his empty glass. "I'll have another, if you don't mind. Just so I can properly analyse the components."

The bartender just looked at him.

"I teach Potion-making, you see."

"Of course you do," she nodded understandingly. "He goes from rank greenhorn to imbibing the secret tastes of the natives in two rounds I *like* you, sir. May your sleep be pillowed on the thighs of your one true love."

"Thank you," Snape replied, with a tight-lipped smile. "That's... sweet."

The barkeep set another glass full of milky blueness in front of him. "There you are. All in the interest of science, you know."

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"Professor? What is it that you've been drinking?" she asked in a very gentle tone. "Alain, what's he been drinking?"

Alain had apparently come up to the bar sometime recently as well. "You're the one with the nose on you, Deer Changeling Girl. Whiff him yourself."

"The Red Queen behind the bar called them the Blue Faerie," Snape interjected, with the air of breaking up a squabble between first-years. "If you want my educated opinion, my bloody highly educated *Potions master* sort of opinion, it's honey wine infused with a variety of herbs, roots and flowers. I'm trying to catalogue them. There's a strong top note of violet, vanilla, and lemon verbena, but there's also gillyflower, lavender, liquorice root, neroli, woodsorrel, wormwood... and a few things I cannot identify at all, though I strongly suspect them to be organic in origin. I can make an educated guess from analysis of their properties, however. Their properties would seem to include... "

He could have gone on like this for awhile, but suddenly his attention was caught by the other wizard, who was on the dance floor, spinning his wand about as he danced he had apparently enchanted it so that it glowed bright purple. Snape's attention shifted over to the light show, suddenly as distractible as a child at Christmas. "Oh my, look at that."

That tiresome Swain woman was still talking to him. "Professor? Has anyone told you about the effects of the Blue Faerie?" She turned to the hostess behind the bar. "Goodmistress I thought you were going to look after him like you were his own mother, not pour a lot of absinthe down him... ?"

"Hey, I would think that pouring Seventh Kingdom absinthe down someone was the height of familial affection, meself," Megan Redqueen protested. "I was pouring absinthe down my own mother earlier tonight. You can go ask her she's dancing."

The glowing, spinning purple wand was giving off the oddest trailing spirals of light, which seemed to flow from it in circles. It was quite striking. Snape wondered what magical effect the fellow was using to make it do that.

"Oh, he's been in the arms of the Blue Faerie, has he?" Alain stepped up and waggled his fingers in front of Snape's face. "How many fingers am I holding up, Herr Professor?"

Snape clapped both hands over his eyes. "By all that's holy, man don't *DO* that!"

"All right... have you ever been had by the Blue Faerie before, Professor?" Alain asked very gently.

"If what you mean by that decidedly clumsy double entendre is, have I ever tried that blue liqueur before, then *no*, sir, I have never been *had by the Blue Faerie before*, thank you," Snape snapped. "I'll have you know that this lascivious Blue Faerie would find me a difficult conquest indeed."

"I believe you," Alain said agreeably. "There is no doubt in my mind that a lascivious Faerie of any hue would find your Puritan-black wizard's drawers nigh on invulnerable against molestation, sir. I have utmost faith in the virtue of a fellow as formidable as yourself continuing inviolate for a very *very* long time."

Now *that* was just uncalled for. Snape was about to get off a retort to make this poncy upstart of a lanky blond Faery git cry like Neville Longbottom in his first year class, but that tiresomely attractive Swain woman had insinuated herself between the two of them and was trying to talk to him again.

"Professor? Professor. Here I am. Right here, see?"

Oh yes. There she was. He hadn't noticed that the fabric of her dress glimmered like that until now. He touched it, right over her collarbone and suddenly the texture of that indecent wisp of a frock was the most impossibly silky thing he had ever experienced every tactile nerve ending in his hand was shivering at contact with it.

"Why don't you wear green anymore?" Snape asked her, musing on some memory. "Didn't you wear green to Lucius's wedding?"

"I... don't know," she replied, as if given pause by the question. "It's been almost sixteen years, I don't remember."

That Alain wanker was still sticking irritatingly close to his colleague's side. "Oh, that's clever, Emily. I think your bosoms would distract me from even the most heated argument as well."

"Don't tease him, I don't want anything to upset him in this state. You know how suggestible he's going to be for awhile."

"I know. That's when people are the most fun to play with."

"Alain!" She gave the poncy blond git a light slap on the arm that looked far too affectionate if you were asking Severus Snape. The poncy git stuck his tongue out at her in a way that was far too lascivious, also in the opinion of Severus Snape.

"Well, if you won't let me play with him, I think we'll have to seek other amusement. Come dance with us again, my Lady of the Blade you know you want to. Just deposit Herr Professor somewhere on a sofa and let him dream happy dreams." Alain turned to Snape. "Hello, my friend. We're going to find you a comfy place to sit down. Emily is going to go dance now. And her bosoms are going to need to come with, all right?"

"I remember you dancing at the Yule Ball," Snape said. "You taught Professor Flitwick how to waltz. Didn't think he had it in him. Looked far too full of himself, the old fool."

"Oh come on, you're too hard on him. I think he enjoyed himself."

"Of course he enjoyed himself, being taught how to dance by a witch of about one quarter of his age."

"Why don't you let me teach you how to waltz then?"

"You're going try to teach this snarking crow how to dance? I'll bet that'll be more fun than one's first Beltane," Alain muttered.

She raised a mocking eyebrow at him. "I'll risk it. You go ahead, we'll catch up. Kiss Mac for me."

Alain gave her a saucy sort of nod. "I shall often, well, and thoroughly." He bowed and then disappeared into the dancing crowd.

Snape glanced from the ineffable softness of her dress and focused on the people dancing out on the floor the leather-clad wizard was still dancing with the glowing wand, which was trailing light at an alarming rate. A woman in a long silvery frock was dancing sinuously at the edge of the floor, her body flowing through fabulous S-curves that no person with a normal spine should be able to do. Some of her exposed skin seemed covered with green snake's scales another of those Naga changelings, then. A man with a goat's legs, cloven hooves, and short horns, his open shirt flying around his thin, muscled chest, was cutting acrobatic capers on a raised pedestal in the middle of the floor, leaping and spinning like some primeval ballet dancer.

Snape blinked, staring. "If you think I'm going out *there*, with *those* people, you've got to be bloody *mad*."

He suddenly felt very far away from what he knew, abducted and carried away to some strange place only half-glimpsed in dreams. People who entered the mushroom circle were stolen away by the Faeries, everyone knew that. Then they had their way with you in a red callbox, in such a manner that made you feel like a teenager again that was better than anything you had as a teenager and then they vanished. Once you've had Faerie, you spend the rest of your life dreaming of more, because all else has become sawdust and ashes in your mouth.

Bloody unreliable, all of them. Fifty points from all their Houses.

Elusive lights flickered all around him, and he seemed to hear wild music from very far away. His throat tightened, and there was urgent pressure building behind his eyes. Words read long ago recurred to him... *weave a circle round him thrice And close your eyes with holy dread... Have you tasted For my sake, the fruit forbidden? Must your light like mine be hidden?... Come away, O human child... You warned me not to stray Out where the soulless Faerie Folk Could steal my heart away...*

For a long, vertiginous moment, he had no idea where he was.

"Professor? Come on. Let's go somewhere quieter. You aren't feeling well." Someone had put her arms around him and was cradling his head on her shoulder.

After a few moments, though, the dizziness cleared somewhat. In the past, men had been terrified, overwhelmed, driven half-mad by listening to the Faeries' music, partaking of their intoxicants; but Snape wasn't that susceptible. There was someone in the crook of his arm. Oh yes, it was that conspicuous Swain woman. It was really tiresome the way she kept making assumptions about how he was feeling. If she'd actually *listen* for a moment, he'd tell this proud, self-Obscuring, hair-trigger-tempered, cloven-hoofed tart how he was feeling and what he felt like doing, thanks.

"Actually," he said, stopping short, "I thought you said you'd teach me how to waltz."

"Oh, you'd like to try that now?"

"Why not? Does one have to be half your age like George Weasley or Draco Malfoy, or four or five times your age like Flitwick and Dumbledore, or a drunken idiot like that Malfoy brother-in-law to get to dance with you, then?"

A slow, infuriating smile spread across her face. "No, one doesn't."

Then, to his utter, utter surprise, she bowed to him and offered him her hand. "Professor Snape, may I have this dance?"

"It took you long enough to ask," he growled, but took the proffered hand.

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his hand, and kiss her mocking, half-smiling mouth.

He wanted this. And he knew that she wanted this too.

It was all very simple.

Sometime later his hallucination had changed, and he was half-lying luxuriously back on the chaise with that luscious Swain woman Emily draped over him like some impossibly rich and sinuous piece of silk, with her arms around his neck, one hand threaded in his hair. He was massaging the nape of her neck with one hand, and had the other around her waist, and he felt as though he had been kissing her like this for several slow and languorous hours. Her skin and hair and tongue and lips were the softest things he had ever touched, and he was so hard it felt like a dull, almost painful throbbing. At that moment, the most perverse thing he could imagine doing would be to ever move from exactly where he was.

He had never felt so laid bare, so ravished.

If this was what the Faeries did with you when they stole you away, then he wanted to be stolen away with all his heart.

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"Of course I can... mmm, that's nice. I can never reach that spot. Oh yes... do it harder, darling, please." The winged girl leaned back into his hand with sinuous twist of her shoulder, and an arch of her muscled back. She then slanted a coquettish look back at him, over her shoulder. "A fine evening to you, my Lord Trent. What a joy and a pleasure to see you here again."

In addition to brilliant red hair and velvety black wings, this young lady had a cream-white complexion, trailing white hands, and eyes of a peculiar bluish grey flecked with green. Wearing a backless wisp of a halter-necked black frock that left her arms and shoulders bare. The Professor gulped.

This lady also seemed about as shy, modest, and retiring as every other Faery female he had heretofore met one of those slender hands was now stroking the lapel of his frock coat. "Now that's just lovely what beautiful tailoring. Really, my Lord, would that all Second-World bards knew how to dress so well as you. It does so well to see a really *handsome* man on a stage, one whose style harkens to the Byronic mode, rather than these garage-band slovens with their flannel shirts and dirty hair."

As far as flannel-shirted garage band slovens went, she may as well have been speaking Greek for all he understood what she was getting at but that part about being a really *handsome* man whose style harkened to the Byronic mode... well, were he to later write a journal entry about this evening, he might have accused himself of rather stupidly eating *that* up. "Why... thank you," he said.

Then he noticed that Emily Swain had appeared beside him sometime recently; she seemed to have been waiting for him to notice her again. "*There* you are," he said, suddenly feeling as though she had been missing for a long time, and he was glad to have found her again. "Where have you been?" He put his arm around her waist and drew her against his side.

"Oh... you might have told me you brought a date, my Lord," the redheaded nixie said aside to Snape, her eyes taking in Emily's tattooed armband. "Happy Midsummer to you, my Lady Knight of the Morrigan."

"And to you, my Lady *Acherontia*," Emily replied, shaking her hand. "My regards to your family, and your liege."

"Likewise," the winged girl said graciously, then nodded to Snape as if to say, *Alas, love, what a time it would have been.*"And a fine evening to you, my Lord." He was still too surprised and amazed to manage much of anything beyond, "Er... good night."

A moment later, that aerial beauty had melted away into the crowd.

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The party had spilled into the alley just in front of the ivy wall by half past two a.m., as lingering revellers stood about talking, nursing drinks, singing, and smoking fragrant tobacco in long clay pipes. As per Fae custom, the after parties would go on all night, and a few people would still be carousing at breakfasts the next morning. Emily had received an invitation to an after party with the Beauxbatons set ("Of course you're welcome to bring your lover, if you like") but she regretfully declined, saying that getting him home to his own bed was probably a better idea. She collected Snape, who was still looking at everyone like some wide-eyed holy innocent, took his arm and coaxed him into going along with her back to Diagon Alley.

"Now that did my heart good to see," the white-gowned Mackenzie said as she watched Emily lead Snape down the alley. "She's finally coming out of mourning and noticing that there are lusty men about again." She wrapped her slim arms around Alain's waist and laid her cheek against his, as if to indicate that she definitely considered him a member of the fraternity of lusty men about.

"My word, then what's she doing with *him*?" Alain asked, caressing her curly hair. "I've met corpses who were better company and more cheerful."

"Looked like she was getting massively snogged on, from where I was sitting," the pert brunette Joanna said, in perfect English. "It made me smile."

"He wasn't so bad," Megan Redqueen said. "You just have to be very sweet to him is all, and then pour three glasses of absinthe down him. That and sweetness of manner could make any man enjoy himself."

"*Three* glasses of absinthe?" William looked at their fair hostess with wide eyes. "I'll bet that poor bastard saw a lot of pretty lights tonight. You might have told him what would happen, you know."

"Oh, *why*?" She grinned saucily at him. "Then he wouldn't have had any fun *atall.* Didn't you see him? He waltzed like a princeling, he was kissed for weeks. He arrived out of sorts with his lady, and he left in her arms. Mark my words, I did him a favour," she averred.

William grinned back. "You're terrible," he warbled, in a voice that said she was terrible in the most adorable way imaginable.

"Perhaps one day I'll show you *terrible,* sweet William," she whispered caressingly. Severus Snape might have described the look on her face as one of hormonal anarchy, had he been there to see it.

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Across the alley from the club's entrance, a cigarette coal glowed red as a nondescript man in a tatty grey tweed overcoat took a last drag, and then dropped the butt on the sidewalk and ground it out. He was far from extraordinary or memorable, and thus, no one noticed him.

He followed his fair-haired Faery contract at a discreet distance as she led that dark, distracted-looking undertaker sort of bloke down the street.

Author's Note: This chapter contains quotes from Goethe's *The Tragedy of Faust, Kubla Khan* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Two Gentlemen of Verona* by Shakespeare, *The Stolen Child* by Yeats, *Goblin Market* by Christina Rossetti, and an untitled original poem by Snape Ophelia. See Chapter 13 of her *"Inscribed in Air and Fire"* for the complete text. ~GS

Part Second: The Hart Rampant: Chapter 23, Part 1

Chapter 29 of 55

In which Professor Swain discovers the delights of a dual life as both a Hogwarts professor and Lucius Malfoy's mistress, until a chance encounter with a desperate Faery prostitute in Knockturn Alley sends her to the most unlikely person for aid. Meanwhile, Severus Snape finds himself alone and adrift in the Mushroom Circle, a Faery nightclub...

Chapter 23, Part 1:

Emily led Professor Snape along the wall of ivy and then through the maze of industrial alleyways leading back toward Diagon Alley. To him, it must have been almost pitch dark, but her night vision was up to the task of navigating by starlight and wide-spaced streetlamps. Now she had to get him back to Hogwarts and his bed. She could have put her arms around him and tried to Apparate them both, but in his current frame of mind, who knew if he would cooperate with it. If he decided to resist going along at the last second, it was entirely possible that they could both end up splinched.

So, she did what any sensible Second World witch would have done she borrowed Snape's wand for a moment ("I'll give it right back, darling, not to worry. Yes, I know the gargoyles up there look dodgy, but I'll keep it ever so safe from them, I promise"), put out her wand hand, and hailed the Knight Bus.

The triple-decker purple bus instantly came roaring out of the night at breakneck speed, and a very young, pimply-faced conductor came down the steps to help them aboard. "Stan Shunpike, at yer service, miss. Help you with your bags?"

"No baggage, thank you," Emily told him. "Just two passengers, to go to Hogsmeade, Scotland."

"All right then. Twelve Sickles apiece, and you get hot chocolate for fifteen."

"Ah, no hot chocolate, thank you," Emily replied, then opened her bag and counted out the fares. She made a mental note to get to Gringotts and make a withdrawal sometime soon between the unexpected bus fare and the bar tab, she'd spent a bit more than she had planned that night.

She turned to Professor Snape to help him aboard. He had his head craned backward, staring intently at the sky. "Tell me, Professor when *exactly* did the stars start changing colour?" he asked her, very seriously. "And why was I not *previously informed* of it?"

"I'm sorry, I forgot to mention that they've only just started doing that tonight as sort of a trial thing. I really should have told you," Emily said apologetically, holding her hand out to him. "Please, dear, let me take you home."

Snape gave her a moment's suspicious look, but then took her hand, and allowed himself to be led onto the bus.

"Hey, there, feller. How's he doing, there, miss?" Shunpike the conductor said, glancing at Professor Snape.

"He's not feeling well," Emily said quickly.

"I feel *fine*, Professor. I'm actually wondering when the bloody walls will learn some consideration for others and stop *breathing* so loudly," Snape said tartly.

"Well, then," Shunpike said.

"Oh, darling, you're so funny." Emily twinkled at Snape as though he had just said something very cute indeed, then turned to the conductor. "Such a wit, this one. I'll just take him upstairs to lie down."

"Go right ahead, miss," the conductor said.

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As the bus closed its doors and sped away, an ordinary-looking man in a grey tweed overcoat watched it go with a look of cold fury and disappointment on his face.

He paused long enough to light another cigarette and then walked away in the opposite direction.

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The Knight Bus was nearly deserted that night. Emily got Snape up the stairs, occasionally bracing against the railings when the bus took a particularly violent jump, and onto a second level where several neatly made beds were ranged against the wall. A curtain had been lowered in front of one of the beds soft, regular snores were coming from behind it.

She eased him down onto the bed nearest the doorway. "Why don't you try to go back to sleep, it's very late. I'll let you know when we've gotten to Hogsmeade, all right?" He nodded, one hand over his eyes and massaging his temples.

Emily paused for a long moment, sitting beside him on the bed, just gazing down at the black, etched silhouette of him against the white pillow.

If someone had told her previously that she would finish out a night at the Mushroom Circle like this, with him, she would not have previously believed it for a second. But now... her lips felt slightly bruised, and she could still smell his scent all over her own skin.

Bloody hell.

There was no denying that she found him damned difficult, if not impossible, to get along with most of the time, but she had long since accepted that some part of his distrust had been earned. But there were other times when she remembered what had happened between them last September, and *(admit it)* lusted after him like nobody's business. There had never been any sense of parting, of an end, to whatever had begun that evening it had just *stopped.* Seeing him every day at school did nothing to make her sense of having lost him because of her own foolishness feel any less fresh, even though she knew she had no reason to believe he had ever truly been hers in the first place.

But he couldn't just consistently play the vindictive bastard, either, and let her feel prudent and smug about not getting involved with him. He had to keep coming out with moments of great intelligence and insight, and very occasionally proved capable of dark humour, even compassion. He had surprised her into absolute speechlessness when he consented to help Liria, and to give proper credit, he had done more to help Liria, and Catherine, than she had ever imagined he would. When she had suddenly been obligated to repay the obligation she now owed to him, in barest truth, it had been a furtive pleasure to have a reason, ironclad in moral decency, to seek him out and desire his attention. During her visits to his office in the weeks before, the thought had come to her unbidden, once or twice *What if he put his arms around me and whispered, "Yes, I can think of something I'd like very much. Would you sleep with me tonight?"*

There was no denying had never been any denying, damn it that she dearly wished for him to talk to her the way he had that first night and longed for a repeat of what happened on that icy callbox ledge. If she only knew somehow that he wouldn't ridicule her again... if only she had ever seen any indication that he still wanted her. Now, it seemed, he did... but who knew if that was anything other than three glasses of absinthe and her proximity.

She couldn't say she understood him, not for a second; he was a riddle wrapped in a mystery, an enigma kept Obscured beneath an Invisibility Cloak but at least he looked like he was comfortable. She would just let him sleep until they arrived at Hogsmeade, then help him up to his own quarters. Emily turned and started to get up, intending to lie down on the bed next to him but then he sat up behind her and slid an arm around her waist.

"Where are you going?" he whispered, and put a velvety little kiss on the back of her neck.

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Oh, blast and damnation.

There went her knees turning to jelly and her stomach quivering again. Not only that, but this time she had acquired a little flutter as well, like a goldfish wriggling between her shoulder blades. His arm tightened around her waist; she leaned back into him as another soft kiss brushed the nape of her neck.

This was crazy barking *mad.* He was a creature made of thorns and prickles, he had told her in no uncertain terms that he thought her to be nothing more than an amoral rake, he was her colleague, he was three sheets to the wind on Seventh Kingdom absinthe, and he was *Severus Snape* for pity's sake. Kissing him had never gotten her anything but the cold shoulder at best or bawled out within an inch of her life at worst. She was going to get up, get up now, and not get drawn back into contemplating the glory of those brooding black eyes, because that way madness lay. He had said, *Don't let me keep you,* and she had never questioned from that moment on that she had been unequivocally dismissed.

She sank a hand into that thick curtain of black hair and kissed him right back. Now he tasted not of jasmine tea but of exotic liqueurs, and his scent was again unashamedly drenched in lust. As before, the first kiss tantalised and all those that followed were absolutely ravenous. Then she was clinging tightly to him, and he was clutching her back just as intensely, his fist clenched in her hair.

Emily never expected to respond to him the way she did not on the first night she met him, nor this evening. Lucius Malfoy might have plied her with jewels, indulged her every whim, used every charm, wile, and deceit in this world to engage her attentions, but one artless kiss from Severus Snape and she couldn't fall into his arms fast enough. There was just *something* about this man that left her palms damp and her knees watery perhaps it was his eyes, or his scent, or the sight of all that chilly composure giving way to all that unbelievable intensity. Perhaps now it was the fact that the bastard had challenged her to her very wits' end, and she had won him nonetheless. Whatever the source of his allure, it had a mind-bendingly erotic effect on her. To now be holding him again, after all that freezing scorn and stubborn refusal to forgive, was more thrilling than even the anonymity of the callbox.

Somehow her head was now on the pillow and he was lying over her, and his idea of a kiss was still as arrogant as it was endlessly tantalising. Somewhere along the line her outer robe had gotten unfastened and come off, and now she was pushing his frock coat off his shoulders. Thank the Mother she didn't have to contend with all those bloody *buttons* this time. As before, this very buttoned-up academic was quite the earthy sensualist when no one was looking, and tonight, he wasn't in a prohibitive mood. The sense of agonising hunger in his body was contagious; as before, a moment or two of embracing him made the space between her thighs felt very warm, and very empty. Now he was devouring her neck, the swell of her breasts ye gods but he was an absolute fiend for necks and her back arched off the mattress with pressing herself against him.

The situation was suddenly more exciting and illicit than any hotel room tryst alone with him again, late at night, with the clean scent of a freshly made bed beneath them, their only company being that bloke snoring behind the curtain, probably dead tired, poor chap. Hours until they reached Hogsmeade. The snogging in the club had been almost innocent they had been far from the only couple enjoying a dark, private corner but this was an unmistakable invitation to *something else,* and she was accepting it. S. S. was back, and the Mother knew she had missed him.

His hand was on the warm slice of thigh just above her stocking top, was continuing to slide up her thigh, fingers curving delicately around the soft swell of arseflesh just under the lace of her knickers. She buried her lips in the cusp between his jaw and throat, indulged herself with a long greedy breath of the incense smoke scent of his skin then unfastened the top buttons of his shirt, ran her lips over his neck. Not long after she had his shirt completely unbuttoned, her hands all over the naked flesh of his back, buried her lips in the taut skin over his collarbone.

She was rewarded with the softest baritone sigh of *Do that harder* and sank her teeth into his flesh with renewed gusto, felt his back contract under her hands as she did, his nipple hardening under the pad of her thumb. Lucius had been so vain of his milk-white skin and self-conscious about taking home any telltale marks to Narcissa but she didn't want to think of Malfoy ever again, certainly not now. By the Mother, he *felt* even better than he had looked with his shirt off.

She was trembling horribly dear Mother, he *had* to be able to feel it and could hardly breathe. Then she noticed, with a rush of aching tenderness, that he was trembling just as horribly as she was, and felt unable to hold him close enough.

Just clothes between them, just a few layers of wool and silk and lace... rip that irritation away and she could feel his warmth and weight covering her with the same surety he had the first night, here in the luxury of a comfortable bed, with plenty of time. One utterance of her True Name would Obscure them, to where they could have gone through every position in the *Kama Sutra* without being noticed, provided they managed to do it quietly. Emily could already feel all of it: his slim, naked body melded to hers, taking a long, luxurious time to make love this time, another of those convulsive, yowling orgasms with him deep inside her. She thought of all the ways they had not yet had each other, all that still could be done. She could vividly remember the cathartic release orgasm had been for him, and now she wanted him to have more of that, all he could stand. *Yes*... she wanted to see him really *satisfied,* indulged to weariness, not momentarily satiated as he had been before.

Then he was lying over her, between her recklessly spread thighs, his teeth gently biting into the flesh of her shoulder, one long deft hand clasping the tender cusp of her knee. There was an extremely fine erection pressing against the inside of her thigh, beneath his trousers. She remembered that moment of unfastening his fly and caressing him so very intimately in that damned callbox... the ragged gasp when she touched him, that silky, tumescent flesh straining into her hand. Her hand slid onto his belt, then paused.

At this rate, in about two more minutes, she would have another set of ripped knickers and there would be a repeat of the raw, fumbling, but unutterably intense encounter that had happened on the first night they met, so long ago in September.

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Then Emily pulled away from him, hard, with a desperate effort. "No, not now. I can't," she gasped.

"Why not?" He sounded like a small boy who had just been told Christmas had been cancelled.

"Because I do not take advantage of men in the arms of the Blue Faerie. That wouldn't be fair to you," she said, still panting.

"I'm *not* in the arms of any Blue Faerie," he protested. "Everyone keeps insisting that I've shagged this Blue Faerie person, and I don't even know the bloody slut."

Emily laughed despite herself. "You're probably still seeing trailing lights and hallucinating harp music."

"Yes, and once you've gotten used to trailing lights and the occasional hallucination, it's not altogether *that bad,*" he quite sensibly replied. "The heightened tactile sense is even rather pleasant. I'd imagine it's fairly common to have some absinthe before making love in Arcadia, is it not?"

"Yes, people do that sometimes, especially at Beltane and Midsummer. It is rather nice."

He bent close over her again, his lips brushing hers as he whispered *And tonight is Midsummer, yes?* So very nearly persuasively enough. He wasn't going to make this easy, was he.

"I *can't,* Professor. I want to, but I can't not while you're impaired like this. Not unless I know you'll feel all right about it tomorrow, sir," she said softly. She knew that he was in this state because he had no idea what the absinthe would do to him, and that this man, who had such tight control over himself at almost every given moment, would probably have never drunk it if he had known. Plus she had already made him feel profoundly ill-used once before.

He gave a long, frustrated sigh, then raised himself on one elbow. "Emily? At the very least, then, would you please indulge me by using my given name *for once*? You know what it is."

"All right... *Severus.*" She whispered it into his ear, caressing each syllable with her tongue.

"Yes, that's about how I've imagined it." He ran his lips over her cheek, which felt just as shiveringly good as she remembered.

"You've imagined me whispering your name in your ear before?"

"Oh yes. In the dream, it was while I was making you come fit to collapse the bed."

At this point, just hearing him say such a thing left her trembling almost fit to collapse the bed. "Sounds like a rather vivid dream."

"It was." His voice was a tender growl in her ear.

"Then... then you can ask me to sleep with you tomorrow, when you're sober. I'll only do this if you properly consent to it, and I know you'll remember it the next day."

"Would you?" Even in that dimness, his eyes seemed bright, and his voice was softer than darkness. "Tomorrow night, if I was to say, 'Emily, come to my quarters and spend the night with me'... you would do that?"

Oh bloody hell. Secretive national character be damned.

"*Yes,*" she said. "*Please.* Gladly. I would love to. I would have that first night at Hogwarts, if you'd asked."

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He stared at her. Then put his head down onto her shoulder, let out a harsh breath of laughter. "You *cannot* be serious. The very next night?"

"After what happened in that callbox? *Absolutely,*" she replied. "You have to be joking if you don't think I'd want that again. Come on, you were there how often does something like *that* happen to you? I certainly thought it was memorable."

She felt, rather than saw, how much he blushed when he heard that. "I... I had been trying to do my best imitation of... reasonably gracious behaviour that night," he said, with the most endearing touch of uncharacteristic flusteredness. "I honestly did think you had enjoyed yourself. I didn't think I'd offended you in any way."

"No, you didn't do anything wrong at all," she whispered, caressing his cheek. "You were lovely. Just... witty and clever and damned fine company. And then later... you were *incredible.* Afterward, I remember thinking how much I wanted to take you back to my London place and keep you there for about a month, without all those blasted millions-of-buttons clothes on."

"Then... why did you leave?" he asked, in the most melancholy voice imaginable.

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The words came in an impassioned rush, her arms tightening around his shoulders.

"I didn't mean to I hurt you when I left. I know I did, but *please* believe I didn't mean to," she said. "Ask yourself this *what else could I have done?*How could I have hoped to ever see you again? I didn't have a contact number I could give you, or an address where you could have sent me a postcard or something all I could have said was, yes, I'd love to meet up with you again, but I won't have any contact information for the coming year, so there's really no way you can reach me. Plus, I had to get to school and start my new job as fast as I could. The teaching job isn't something I applied for and interviewed for, like everyone else I'm here because the King gave me an order. It wasn't my time to do with as I liked anymore.

"And then there was... "

"There was what?" He was listening just listening, not scowling, not cutting her off with sarcastic remarks. Still lying over her, his forehead touching hers.

"There was... the fact of what I am. I'm not human, I'm not *from here.* I thought you were a Muggle how could I have told you the truth about myself? Even if I had known you were a wizard, how would it have gone over if I'd told you, over our tea, 'What do I do for a living? Oh yes, I'm a Faery knight commander in the service of a kingdom on another dimensional plane. Not only that I have a whole other body I can switch to when I feel like it. With hooves, even. Yourself?' Would have brought *that* conversation to a big fat screeching halt, wouldn't it?"

"All right, I can see how it might have," he said. Or actually, he chuckled, truth be told.

"So, as it were, I simply couldn't think of anything else to do but just... get out of there," she finished, in what she thought was a very lame voice indeed. "It was... it was just that I didn't know you then, and I got horribly nervous, and I swear it was no more complicated than that."

"So, in not so many words you panicked, and the 'Obscure yourself and vanish' bit was what first occurred to you to do."

"Exactly. And then when Dumbledore introduced us and I realised you were a wizard... I was stunned for about one second, and then my first thought was something like, well, *hello* my dear, isn't this just bloody convenient, what are you doing tonight? And then I thought you were looking a bit cranky and then the next second you had sort of let me have it. Which was... oh all right, I don't deny I deserved it, you were right to feel unceremoniously abandoned, every damn bit of that scolding you gave me at Malfeasant was completely justified, but afterward... afterward I was so damned ashamed of myself I could barely face you again. And then I could tell in November that you were still hurt from it, but I've absolutely no way to tell you that I regret it and that *I'm sorry* and that I'd love to try to make it up to you, because you don't want anything more to do with me."

He was still just listening. No scowls, no sarcasm. She was now trembling so badly that she wondered how she would ever be able to compose her hands enough to handle a sword again. "And you're right, the prank with your bag was pretty fecking silly. Like something a teenage wood pixie would think was funny. I should be able to do better than that, at my age."

"Oh, bother the prank. If you had only *not instantly run off* afterward, that would have just been one of those absurd stories people tell about their first dates later," he whispered reproachfully.

"It was just because I wanted you to talk to me. Really, that was all of it."

"Emily if you had gotten up and said, 'Hello, do let's stop this ridiculous business of you staring at me and me staring at you and get acquainted over some tea,' it really would have had the same effect."

She laughed, buried her head in his shoulder, now feeling unbelievably silly indeed. "You were *leaving.*"

"I would have stopped to listen how bloody often do you think women I don't know ask me out to tea?"

Oh, such men deserve to be hugged, and she did, at length. "You poor, dear, lovely, long-suffering, *frightfully* ill-used man. I want you to have such fun letting me make this up to you." She punctuated that with a very long and impassioned kiss, as if demonstrating her determination to begin the making it up to him right now.

"Yes, you're damned right I was *frightfully* ill-used," he growled, but kissed her back fervently. "And then, you insufferably brazen creature, you had the nerve to turn up at my very place of work and shamelessly cozen up to all my colleagues and you were so calm and collected about the introduction. I thought you had already put the entire episode behind you."

"Calm and collected?" She laughed. "Oh no, *you* were the one who was calm and collected, my dear I blushed so much I thought the fire dimmed by comparison."

"*You* blushed? Come off it, the very idea is ridiculous. I have never seen you blush a day in your life."

Emily looked at him as though he was missing something very obvious. "Oh no, I blush. Around you, I blush *frequently.*"

"Please, no matter what happens, no matter how scanty your clothing, you remain as cool, pale, and composed as an untrodden snowbank."

"Well, you know why that is, don't you?"

His brow creased. "Er, no. Why is that?"

"I can't turn red when I blush my blood isn't red. When I'm embarrassed, I get *paler.*"

He thought about that for a long moment. "*Oh,*" he said finally. "I suppose that does make sense, doesn't it."

"Oh, and here's another thing I've been wanting to say to you all year I can't do anything about looking fetching when I apologise. We're called the *Fair* Folk, dear, not the Presentable-Enough Folk, not the They-Look-All-Right-When-They're-Dressed-Up Folk that's not my *fault.* There were lots of more fetching women than me at that club tonight, you saw them. You should see my mother sometime, if a nice face is an absolute bar to being able to apologise properly, then she's the insincerest woman you've ever seen "

"All right, *all right,*" he said, with a little snort of laughter into her shoulder. "I forgive you for looking fetching when you apologise. Now do be quiet and kiss me again, would you?"

She sighed. "It took you long enough to ask."

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Emily thought she'd forgotten how mindbogglingly good this man was at kissing, but no, she hadn't.

The agreement had been reached, the date had been made, and now they both knew that all that had begun and been left unresolved in September would finally receive its due attention the next evening. It was a longish drive from London to Hogsmeade, and both of them had by mutual telepathy decided that the best way to spend that time was by lying in each other's arms engaged in a lengthy session of their earlier sort of behind-the-greenhouse kissing. The knowledge that this mutual desire was soon to be satisfied lent the most delicious languor to the current proceedings. His kisses were as deft as his hands; the way his tongue feelingly caressed hers made her shiver, left her more intoxicated than any wine she had consumed that night. She felt dizzy, feverish, nearly exhausted with lust.

But there was one condition left to be considered and Emily was no stranger to the joys of Seventh Kingdom absinthe herself. "Severus, I have to warn you, Faery absinthe does strange things to people's memories. It leaves you incredibly suggestible, and it tends to amplify your moods. Put it this way, in the morning, I could probably tell you we played backgammon with cigar-smoking pink flamingos all the way back, and you'd remember in great detail how many hard-fought games you won. Oh please, *please* promise me you'll remember all this tomorrow. I simply can't go back to ripping each other's heads off at the slightest thing after this."

He laughed very softly and sighed a sound of delicious gloating. "Not bloody likely, after tonight. My ice-maidenly colleague just promised me her favours for tomorrow night, and not only that, I've received the most moving apology of my life. I don't see how I could possibly forget this."

Emily laughed with him. "Don't get too sure of yourself, my dear I think I'll insist on being taken to dinner first, just so you don't get it into your head that I'm easy. Even if you know damned well that I am, where you're concerned."

"Professor... Emily... yes, I would be happy to take you to dinner, and I would... *thoroughly* enjoy having you in my bed tomorrow night. If anything could make the Third Task tolerable on Thursday, believe me, that would be it. But now I have to warn you in the morning I'm going to want you still there for breakfast. And after breakfast I want at least the possibility of having you there again the next night if we haven't come to hate each other in the interval in between. I'm thirty-five fecking years old and I know damned well that no one will ever call me the most charming, handsome, or wealthy bloke on Earth or any other plane of existence, but I want more from a woman I'm involved with than a nice cup of tea and some three-minute swive in a bloody *callbox.* I don't think that's an unreasonable request to make."

"It isn't," she whispered.

"And... " He averted his eyes for a moment, as though gathering his courage. "And I don't ever want to see you with Lucius again. I don't know what's gone on with the two of you, and I don't care to know. I only want him *gone.*"

"Don't worry," she said, with certainty. "There's nothing between me and Lucius." Which was true, now and she saw no reason to burden him with what had happened previously. As far as she was concerned, the truth about her wretched affair with Lucius could go to her grave with her. She was a bit surprised as to why he would even bring Lucius up at a time like this quite frankly, with S. S., Professor Snape, no, *Severus* lying quite contentedly in bed with her, she was more than happy to forget about Malfoy forever.

Then it occurred to her... oh no, had he perhaps noticed the attentions Lucius used to pay to her at balls and such and been made to feel a bit insecure by them? Certainly he hadn't seen her with him in months and it was Menzentius who proposed to her, not Lucius. Ah well Emily figured that after they had spent some time together, and he had not seen Lucius anywhere near her, or heard any mention of him, that little insecurity would be laid to rest.

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Apparently they both fell asleep at some point, wrapped in each other's arms, because Stan Shunpike came barging up the stairs to the second floor of the bus calling "Sir, Missus, we've arrived " He then took one look at the dishevelled dark man lying fast asleep with his shirt half off one shoulder and a rather skimpily clad fair-haired woman dozing on the other, and made a swift pivot back to the stairs, calling, *Er, stopping at Hogsmeade* behind him.

"Thanks!" Emily called back, then nudged Snape. "Wake up, love, we're here." She reached for her velvet robe and Snape's coat, and helped him back into it, and then had rather a time of it helping him button his shirt up again.

He was exhausted, really almost asleep on his feet as she led him back up to the castle after Obscuring them both against inquisitive eyes. Emily got him past the Slytherin security paintings with a bit of judicious *Deceivre*, and then back to his quarters, and eased him down onto his bed. Seeing him lying there made her want nothing more than to curl up next to him, put her head back on his shoulder, and go back to sleep but instead she picked up his cloak and coat and hung them up in the wardrobe. He roused long enough to grasp her hand again when she came back to help him off with his boots.

"Remember, you're to see me tomorrow... tonight," he said. "You promised. You will come, won't you?"

"Of course I will, dear heart," she replied, bending down to tenderly kiss him again. "I'm very much looking forward to it."

With those reassurances, he looked, just for a moment, so uncomplicatedly happy. There went her stomach quivering again. By the sweet Mother, what a dear, lonesome, sensitive, complicated man he was. She was going to have to treat him gently, and that you could be certain of.

The last thing she did before leaving him to his rest was to prop the tiny envelope of Catherine's hangover-cure powder on a book on his night table where he would be sure to see it in the morning. After enough time spent at wine-soaked Fae parties, Catherine had developed a phenomenally potent hangover remedy that had become extremely popular with the clubgoing set at the Mushroom Circle. Catherine and Roderick had arrived at the club while the Professor was out cold asleep on her shoulder, and when she had told them that Snape was in such a state because he had drunk too much absinthe, Catherine had given her a bit of the hangover cure for him. She had written *Put in tea marvellous for hangover* on the tiny envelope so there would be no question of what it was.

That done, she doused the lights, kissed his forehead, and left him sleeping safe and sound in his bed.

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The morning after the Midsummer's Revel, Severus Snape woke from an unrestful sleep full of feverish, disconcerting dreams, of dark labyrinthine caves lit with dancing purple fire, vaguely threatening antlered men and winged women, people turning into snakes, forests full of watchful, sentient trees and hostile, uncanny eyes watching him from around every corner.

He also awoke with the single most excruciating hangover he had ever experienced in all of his thirty-five years.

His head felt three feet across and full of sharp wet concrete it took him five minutes of concerted effort before he could get it off of his pillow. Even blinking and swallowing hurt, and his mouth felt like the bottom of the Owlery.

Snape glanced blearily at the clock on his night table oh bloody hell, it was already eleven minutes into breakfast. He was going to have to hurry just to make it to his first class. The Professor was very much a creature of punctual routine and habit and despised having circumstances interrupt his usual sort of day. To say that this unexpected lateness, coupled with an agonising headache, did nothing to sweeten his never-admirable temper is an understatement along the lines of perhaps Judas Iscariot wasn't a very good mate to have. Many a British sailor would have been impressed with the level of profanity muttered by the famously dignified Professor as he made his way into the bathroom.

The light of the candles that ignited in the bathroom's wall sconces sent a red-hot needle of pain through his eye sockets. Snape opened his medicine cabinet, took out his bottle of willow bark tincture headache potion, tried to read the dosage instructions on the back, but ended by simply uncapping the bottle and drinking the remainder of it down. Then he closed the mirrored cabinet door and had a look at himself.

The Professor didn't think he was the handsomest bloke on Earth on his best days, but what faced him in the mirror that morning seemed like the wreck of the *Hesperus.* His face was puffy and his eyes were incredibly bloodshot, and his hair was a perfect nest. And he stared at his reflection in astonishment he was still nearly fully dressed, in his shirt, trousers, belt, watch and fob, and socks. The oddest part was, while his cuffs were still neatly buttoned, his shirttails were entirely untucked, and *wotthebloodyhell* the front of his shirt was misbuttoned all the way down. Somehow his second button had gotten into the third buttonhole, and that had apparently led to his third button into his fourth buttonhole, and so that merry state of askew-ness continued all the way down his front.

What disturbed him even more than the odd state of sleeping in his clothes was the idea that in order to get misbuttoned, he must have had his shirt *unbuttoned* at some point in time. Would someone please mind telling him what *that* was all about?

The agonising headache abated slightly in the shower, between the headache potion and a great deal of hot water pouring down on his head, and the Professor tried to collect his thoughts. The previous night, he had gone to meet Catherine Orson with Professor Swain... but then Catherine had turned into a tiny grey-haired man in front of a library. No, he had gone to the bar for a whiskey, and a Blue Faerie with white sweet pea flowers in her cleavage had told him he was no man, if with his tongue he could not win a woman. Some highly obnoxious French bloke had taunted him in verse, he had met a seductive winged redhead with an extreme passion for frock coats, and he had lain in Professor Swain's arms and been kissed all evening.

No. Snape thumped his palm against his forehead. No, that *couldn't* be right.

He pressed his cheek against the warm shower tiles and tried to reconstruct the events of the previous evening with as much clarity as he could.

All right he had gone into Diagon Alley after supper the previous night to look for some gillyweed. He had Anti-Drowning Potion on his fourth-year syllabus and had pushed it back to the day before finals due to the year-long lack of gillyweed, and Snape hated to leave a syllabus incomplete. The search had turned up no actual gillyweed, so he had gone into the Leaky Cauldron to drown his annoyance in a decent Scotch before heading back to school. Professor Swain had been sitting at the bar reading the *Daily Prophet.* He asked her how Liria was, just taking a professional interest in how well his medicinal potion had worked, and she had said she was going to ask Dr. Orson that very night. Rather than trust such an unreliable source as his *esteemed* colleague, he had suggested that he speak to Catherine himself. Professor Swain had disagreed vehemently at first, but finally she had agreed to bring him along to the meeting with all the good grace of a mountain troll at the ballet.

Then she led him through a labyrinth of alleys, they had encountered a gigantic fellow with horns who mistook him for some Muggle musician whom a Faery King had knighted, and he had followed Professor Swain down a rabbit hole of hallways and staircases until they emerged into that nigh on orgiastic party the Faeries were throwing for their Midsummer festival. He'd felt like a freak from the first, and no one there had seemed very friendly either. Professor Swain left him alone to talk to her friends, all of whom spoke foreign languages except for that annoying versifying blond wanker. The bartender had been a saucy redheaded thing in a blue lace dress with flowers in her bosom, and she made someone else a blue drink and he ended up ordering one as well. And then Professor Swain came up to him and made a speech about how dryads plant their children, and from there...

From there it was a hopeless jumble, part high fantasy, part Carrollian nightmare. He was trapped in a roomful of hostile, ever-changing creatures. Men with antlers and boys with horns and randy women with wings, girls morphing into trees and strange half-human, half-snakes. All of them talked in riddles or foreign tongues, and none of them would tell him where he was. Supposedly he had been there to speak to Dr. Orson, but of course she had never appeared; more than likely she hadn't ever been expected in the first place. He couldn't imagine an intelligent person like her in a zoo like that.

Snape's eyes focused on something he had not noticed before, a circular black ink stamp on the back of his hand, which read:

The Mushroom Circle

Well, so *that's* what they called the place. How *picturesque.*

The headache had abated somewhat when he got out of the shower, wrapped a towel around his waist and shrugged into his bathrobe, then moved over to the sink for a quick shave. His hands felt numb and somewhat stiff as he lathered his cheeks and reached for the straight razor on the countertop. He was just about finished when he noticed a spot of discoloration, a reddish mark on his chest just below his left collarbone. Setting down the razor, he pulled down the neck of his robe for a better look. It wasn't a bruise, wasn't a slash, it was...

To his utter, jaw-dropping surprise, Snape realised that someone or some bloody thing had *bitten* him, not hard enough to break the skin, but enough to leave a rosy little mark. Snape had been a teenager once, he wasn't a sodding virgin, he knew what it looked like when someone had been taking a nibble of someone else. It wasn't that he objected to the idea of being bitten under the proper circumstances and state of arousal, he actually quite liked it but now, all he could think of was *how* the flaming hell did it get there, and who was it that had *had her teeth on him?*

Then, as he crossed his bedroom to the wardrobe to get dressed, he noticed the crowning indignity there was a tiny envelope on his night table, propped up against the

spine of his volume of *De Medicina,* on which was written:

Put in tea marvellous for hangover

Oh, that was rich so she had *expected* him to be in a state when he got back, obviously; she had known what was going to happen. How *considerate* of her. She hadn't wanted to bring him with her, so no doubt she had thought it would serve him right to have a bit of sport with the foolish mortal. Hallucinations, love bites, misbuttoned shirts, and now patronising little hangover remedies. She had told the bartender to "take care of him" and that little vixen of a Redqueen had inferred her real meaning and *taken care of him*indeed, hadn't she. Now she thought she could give him a bit of something for the after-effects, and that would be that. Tee hee, no harm done.

Of course, that that (here the Professor had to force himself not to use some of the fouler invective of his vocabulary, a gentleman *couldn't* abuse a lady, no matter how much she deserved it) that *woman* was going to get a piece of his mind later, and that was certain.

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The morning after the Midsummer's Revel, Emily Swain awoke feeling like a giddy teenage girl who now knows that her secret crush has long since been admiring her from afar as well. Despite her meagre night's sleep, she felt light and exhilarated.

She sang in the shower, hummed while drying off and combing her hair. Then she took a bit of time choosing the most becoming of her frocks and professorial robes, and hooking up the buttons of her favourite pair of Victorian boots. She usually didn't wear any sort of maquillage for class, but perhaps some powder and mascara was in order today. And perhaps a bit of rose petal lipstain. And maybe a drop of her favourite violet oil behind her ears. She threw her windows open to the morning with an elated smile it was an absolutely beautiful day in June, and she couldn't wait to see him.

But Severus didn't show up to breakfast, much to Emily's disappointment. She had her own meal of wheat cakes and tea, chatting with Professor Sprout about the exams they would both be administering that day, all the while watching the left-hand entrance to the Great Hall for his arrival but he never came. Ah well, he hadn't been absolutely coherent once she got him home, perhaps he was having a bit of a lie-in to give the hangover powder some time to kick in. She wasn't worried that he would miss his classes, as it was probably more likely that the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall would fall in before Severus Snape would fail to show up seven minutes early for class.

Professor Moody, however, did arrive shortly after Emily did. Although he nodded to her as pleasantly as he ever did to anyone as he passed, something in his scent, the set of his shoulders, and the steely glint in his eyes when he saw her made Emily run down a mental list of all the hand-to-hand methods she knew of incapacitating an opponent as he came toward her. She was unwilling to turn her back on him even after he took a seat at the far end of the table and poured himself a cup of coffee with what she thought was an elaborately casual attitude.

Emily quickly finished her tea, wished her colleagues a good day, and headed off to her first class session.

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Professor Snape found administering practical final exams to be somewhat exhausting even when he felt especially healthy and well-rested and wasn't at all hungry. On a day when he had slept badly, missed breakfast, and had the kind of splitting headache that made loud noises and bright lights absolutely agonising, a day of administering practical exams seemed like a torture the Dark Lord might have devised in a particularly grumpy mood. Nonetheless, he made it to his first class in his usual impeccable black robes on the dot of 8:53 that morning.

If his sarcasm and bad temper were not already the stuff of Hogwarts legend, they certainly would have been after that day he hadn't taken this many points off since Sirius Black eluded the Dementors. Even his first two classes, sixth and seventh-year N.E.W.T. preps, which were usually his easiest and most pleasant, were an ordeal. He reduced one absolutely inoffensive flaxen-haired Ravenclaw sixth-year, who had perfectly concocted her exam potions, nearly to tears with sarcasm simply because of a slight and hitherto unnoticed resemblance to Professor Swain, and nearly frightened the eyelashes off of a Hufflepuff boy in his seventh-year session for glancing over his elective Defence Against the Dark Arts paper for a moment just before class was dismissed for lunch.

After his class had left, Snape sat silently in his classroom long after they had gone, before deciding the hell with it and heading down to his own quarters. It wasn't that he didn't want to see *that woman* at lunch, he just bloody well didn't feel like enduring the noise and bustle of the Great Hall with this headache. Once in his rooms, he Flooed a note down to the kitchen for some lunch and a pot of tea to be sent up.

As he was finishing the pot of tea, his gaze fell again on that tiny envelope propped on his night table. Well, he had tea in front of him, conveniently enough, and it certainly couldn't make matters any worse, now, could it. He picked up the packet and poured its contents into the cup of Earl Grey in front of him. The pale green powder seemed to dissolve the second it hit the hot liquid. There was only the faintest herbal, medicinal tang to the mixture as he drank it.

It was really only the prospect of several more hours of pain ahead of him that day that made him resort to such desperate measures as actually taking the headache powder she had left for him he trusted that little packet about as much as any sensible person would have trusted a bottle labelled *Drink Me* or cakes marked *Eat Me* left in a corridor at the bottom of a rabbit hole. At this point, he would have to be dying of thirst before he would ever again accept so much as a drink of water from a Faerie.

He was so preoccupied with this line of thinking that he was surprised to notice some minutes later that his headache had entirely evaporated, as unobtrusively as dew off a leaf. One moment his head was aching, and then he looked up and realised that it wasn't. Well, that was... interesting. Now he was just bone tired, instead of bone tired and headachy.

Snape stood up and stretched, refusing to allow himself to nod at the table. He gathered some compositions that still needed grading, and headed for the teachers' lounge, intending to finish his work while everyone else was at lunch.

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Severus didn't show up to lunch, either, and by now Emily was starting to get a bit worried. It wasn't at all like him to not appear at meals on weekdays. Hopefully the hangover hadn't been so bad that he couldn't get himself out of bed the next morning. She'd never heard of anyone having a bad reaction to Catherine's hangover powder, but there was a first time for anything.

Well, it wouldn't hurt to drop by his classroom for a bit, she thought. It was the first day of finals, after all, and more than likely he just had a lot to do that day, but perhaps she could just pop by and say hello but unfortunately, the Potions classroom and Snape's office were entirely deserted when she arrived there.

He could have taken the lunch break to go back to his apartments for an hour's nap, she reasoned to herself, he really hadn't gotten much sleep the night before. Or he could be in the teacher's lounge, or the library...

Her heart lifted when she opened the door to the teacher's lounge and saw a familiar dark, etched silhouette bent over some composition scrolls at one of the tables, his back to her, his quill furiously scratching away. There he was, at last. Hello, darling.

"*There* you are," she said. "I hope you're feeling all right?" Such was her exuberance at finally seeing him again that she even dared put her arm around his shoulders and put the lightest little kiss on his temple why not, there was no one else around.

Then he turned and looked at her and her affectionate smile faded. She withdrew that infinitely offensive hand from his shoulder and backed away from him, lest she be singed by the depth of cold fury she saw radiating from his eyes.

She got out of that room and well down the hall, cloaked in blissfully restful Obscurity, now wondering why she had ever been such an idiot as to expect him to have been

sincere the night before.

Whatever she should have expected, she had not previously thought it was possible to feel as crushed as she did, at that moment.

Part Second: The Hart Rampant: Chapter 23, Part 2

Chapter 30 of 55

In which Professor Swain discovers the delights of a dual life as both a Hogwarts professor and Lucius Malfoy's mistress, until a chance encounter with a desperate Faery prostitute in Knockturn Alley sends her to the most unlikely person for aid. Meanwhile, Severus Snape finds himself alone and adrift in the Mushroom Circle, a Faery nightclub...

Chapter 23, Part 2:

Severus Snape was acutely aware of the fact that he had not been a saint all of his life. He knew that he had done things in the past that many would consider cruel, vicious, even evil. But he had no fecking *idea* what he had ever done to this damned woman to deserve to be*ridiculed* like this.

He had expected subtle mockery, poisonously smiling malice, and evasive responses to his questions as to what the bloody hell had gone on the previous night but instead, she had come up behind him while he was alone in the teacher's lounge, put her arm around him, actually kissed him, and said, *There you are*, as though she had been eagerly awaiting him all day. Mockery, malice, and evasion he could take, but this... she had been hostile previously, but even at her worst, there had been a line she wouldn't cross. In her own strange way, she always observed the proper rules of engagement, had always fought fair.

Now... she knew how he had felt in September. This was just exquisitely *cruel.* She had waited all year to get in this *Mercit* shot, to go for the kill where she knew he was vulnerable and at that moment, he hated her, and hated his own weakness over her even more. He felt his face flaming, felt a tiny muscle contracting uncontrollably at the corner of his eye. When he finally turned to face her, he was unable to keep his hurt pride off his face, try as he might to contain himself.

He waited for some polite, poisonous remark, a knowing little smile but instead, her eyes widened, and the smile fell from her face like a dropped stone. Then, to his great surprise, she didn't look even remotely triumphant; no, she looked like she'd received a slap when she expected a kiss. Then the light weight of her hand was gone from his shoulder, and all sense of her physical presence was silently gone from behind him.

Snape stood up and spun around, demanding, "Would you mind please explaining what that was all about?" but the question fell on a completely empty room. The door was half ajar, and she was gone.

Miss Spelled-With-a-Y had, once again, vanished.

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Later that day, Barty Crouch Jr. held a meeting with an associate in the back room of a seedy little Hogsmeade pub called the Boar's Head.

"You're making me wonder what I paid you for, when your contract keeps flouncing around looking fresh as a daisy," Crouch demanded. "Why didn't you make an end of her last night, when she was in London?"

"Couldn't manage it. She had some bloke with her," the man in grey protested in a decidedly surly voice. "Bastard was draped all over her. Would have had to do him first to get to her, and you didn't pay for a two-fer."

"I told you that time was important," Crouch snarled. "It's been days and a woman can get an awful lot of *talking* done in just one hour, you understand."

"I know that," his companion protested. "I'm doin' me best here, all right?"

Crouch flung back in his chair, glowering down at the table top for a moment before turning back to his companion. "The fellow draped all over her... did he have long blond hair? Rich clothes?"

"Nah, nothing like that. Dark hair, worn clothes. Just some bloke. But takin' two is a ruddy lot harder than takin' one, and that you can be sure of. What if this bloke had gotten it into his head to try and play Sir Galahad or sumthin? Then your contract could have run off and been to the police now, and then no one'd be able to get to her."

"Sounds like a bloody lot of excuses to me," Crouch growled.

"I'll get it done, all right?" the grey man snapped. "Just leave the little tart to me. She'll ne'er trouble anyone more, once I'm through with her."

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Emily went back to her own classroom after Snape's snub? rebuff? cut direct? whatever it was. One thing had been well and truly established he hadn't been anywhere *near* as happy to see her as she had been to see him.

She didn't have long to think it over, however, because her Gryffindor-Slytherin fourth year session was beginning to trickle into the room and take their seats, some of them greeting her politely as they went.

For the practical part of their exam, she took them in groups of five into the bathroom and stood them under a light shower wearing their Protective Amulets for exactly thirty seconds. She then graded them on the amount of water they dripped on the bath mats after emerging. Not surprisingly, Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy emerged from their showers barely damp, and Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle both looked as though they had taken a dip in the lake with their school robes on.

After that was done, all she had to do this session was collect the last of their end-of-term compositions and give them their final in-class assignment, their choice of five out of ten possible essay questions written on the blackboard. The work should take up their entire class period, which meant that all she had to do was work on grading their compositions while they all sat silently and wrote. Thankfully, her students settled down quickly and got right to work, and soon the only sound in the room was that of rustling parchment, scratching quills, their faintly anxious breathing, and the occasional drip from an incompletely dried robe.

None of her students seemed to have noticed how rattled she was they were probably rattled enough themselves by final exams. Emily took refuge at her desk behind a large stack of parchment scroll compositions and forced herself to work on grading, trying not to think of what exactly could have happened to make Severus no, they

seemed to be quite distinctly back on a Professor Snape-Professor Swain basis again so furious with her in the ten hours that had passed since she had put him to bed.

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Finally the class period was over, and her students stopped writing and brought their compositions up to her desk. "Thank you all very much, ladies and gentlemen, it's been my pleasure to work with such a bunch of bright young people this year. I'll be glad to see all of you at the Third Task tomorrow and at the Leaving Feast."

The class began to break up and leave the room, some of the students stopping by her desk to shake her hand and say good-byes. Hermione Granger came up with a particularly starry little grin on her face, tailed by Potter and Weasley, and they thanked her for an interesting class in turn. "You're welcome, you lot, it's been lovely to know you. Miss Granger, maybe you'll teach Faery magic someday yourself. No hard feelings about the veela Glamour, I hope, Weasley? And good luck tomorrow, Potter."

Some of the Slytherins stopped by to say goodbyes as well. "I liked this class are you coming back next year?" Pansy Parkinson asked.

"Yeah, are you?" Draco Malfoy asked. "If you are, maybe we could have inter-House fencing teams or something."

"No, I'm not, sorry," Emily told them. "My assignment was for one year, and I have classes to teach at home. Though inter-House fencing teams sounds like a great idea, Mr. Malfoy. Maybe some of you lot can start that up fifth year."

Draco looked a bit crestfallen when she said she wasn't going to be staying on staff at Hogwarts. He lingered until almost everyone else had gone, then asked another question, one that clearly had a great deal of import for him. "Professor? I wanted to ask you how do you get to be a Tithe page? My father told me that you have to be recommended by courtiers, or sentries, or something, but I can't get him to tell me anything more about it now."

Emily had a very good idea as to why Lucius might be discouraging his son's interest in the Tithe recently, but she kept that to herself. "Maybe your father doesn't want to continue with the custom, Draco," she told him. "Or maybe your mother's told him she doesn't want you to go away for so long."

"But after I'm seventeen, it would be my decision, and I want to go," the boy persisted quietly. "Would you recommend me?"

She hesitated for a long moment, looking at his sullen, hopeful face. Of course she had already begun campaigning for Hermione's inclusion, and inviting Draco to Court would be complicated now, even if his parents had been absolutely willing. He might be just another Lucius, there solely because of family legacy, and interested in nothing but Fae women and revelry... but then, Draco wasn't Lucius. She had seen ample proof of Draco's superior talent and genuine intellectual curiosity all that year, and of course it wasn't fair to let her estrangement from his father colour her opinion of Draco's true worth.

However, she still absolutely wanted Hermione as her Tithe candidate, and if she wrote recommendations for both Hermione and Draco, the fact that Draco's family had produced some generations of previous Tithe pages might be seen as greater qualification than Hermione's glowing recommendations from Emily and both of her parents. There were other courtiers who might be persuaded to recommend Draco, but then she ran the risk of potentially excluding Hermione from the running. The situation would be difficult.

"I'll see what I can do," she said finally.

"*Brilliant,*" Draco said, grinning hugely. He gave her hand a good wringing, and then, to her surprise, leaned forward and put a very teenage-boyish sort of peck on her cheek. "Thanks so much. You won't regret it."

As she watched him gather up his bag and leave for lunch, smiling like that... Emily sent a fervent wish up to the Lady of the Worlds that Draco wouldn't turn out to resemble his father in temperament as he did in appearance. And then she wished just as fervently that her own father was here, so that she could have a good long talk with him about this Tithe page situation.

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The Slytherin-Gryffindor session had been Emily's last class of the day, leaving her with two hours free before supper. She could have taken her grading to the library or the teachers' lounge, but what with the way both Professor Snape and Professor Moody were acting, she didn't feel like leaving her own classroom at that moment. She settled down at her desk with a pile of end-of-term composition scrolls, a quill, and a bottle of red ink.

Perhaps a quarter of an hour later, there came such a curt, definite knock on her classroom door that she glanced up, startled. A moment later, Professor Snape silently glided into the room, scowling like to make the stoutest-hearted Gryffindor run the other way. Emily gulped.

"Er... good afternoon, sir," she said, surveying him apprehensively. "Can I help you with something?"

"Yes, I'm hoping you can," he spat back, coming to a stop directly in front of her desk. "Would you perhaps like to explain to me exactly what I am to make of the events of last night?"

Emily stared at him in disbelief. "Don't you remember anything *at all* from last night?"

Snape glowered at her, but not quite as energetically as usual. "I remember going with you to that... *establishment,* supposedly to get a progress report on Liria's condition. You went off to talk to some people you knew, and I drank some blue liqueur at the bar that proved to be... rather more potent than I thought."

"It's quite potent, yes." She kept grading papers, eyes on her desk. "It's also a euphoric hallucinogen."

"Ah, yes," Snape said, worlds of withering contempt contained within his tone. "*I noticed that.* Rather too late to keep from making a fool of myself, unfortunately."

Earlier that day, facing his cold greeting in the teacher's lounge, Emily didn't think it was possible to feel any more crushed then she had then... well, evidently there were even more levels to which her spirit could be trampled. She thought he had been wonderful the night before and he thought he had *made a fool of himself.*

Emily didn't glance up from her scrolls of parchment. "Well, if your hangover is much improved now, Professor, I'd say there was no harm done."

"I do hope I didn't make too much of a spectacle of myself," he said, still very stiffly.

"No, you weren't any worse than anyone else there. I think you may have the only one declaiming curiously paraphrased Shakespeare, but no one else was paying any attention. Then I took you back on the Knight Bus I didn't think you were in any condition to Apparate and we came back here, and I dropped you off at your quarters. I made sure no one saw us."

"I would... appreciate... if you wouldn't tell anyone the story of my, ahem, *adventures* with Faery liqueurs that act as euphoric hallucinogens, madam," Snape said. His manner was now so stiff that she was afraid any movement would break him.

"I wouldn't even imagine doing such a thing," she replied faintly.

"Well... " He seemed as though he had expected rather more of an argument from her and was a bit unnerved when she simply and readily agreed to his request. "Thank you for showing a bit of discretion."

A bit of discretion. Oh, please the previous evening he faulted her for being uncommunicative, and now, he was faulting her for being indiscreet who knew what this man *wanted* any more. "Of course, sir. Think nothing of it," she said tightly.

She was expecting him to excuse himself and leave her alone at that point, but he did not. He hovered, a dark blot in her peripheral vision. His eyes were like a chill weight on the side of her face. "Emily?"

"Yes, Professor?"

"Are you *quite sure* that's all that happened?" he asked. His persistent questioning felt rather like a fly settling again and again on an exposed wound.

"That's the most of it," she said inanely.

"Weren't we going to meet with Dr. Orson? I thought that was the whole purpose of going... ?"

"I did meet with Roderick and Catherine. I talked to them for about an hour. They turned up just after eleven."

"They did? Where was I?"

"You were asleep," she said, dipping her quill again.

"*Oh.*" He nodded, looking discomfited. "I thought I dozed for a rather shorter time than that. How is Liria?"

"Roddy said that he left her in the care of a friend's mother outside of Rivendale they had struck a deal that she would help with the harvest in exchange for her room and board. He said that she was eating well, though she had to discipline herself not to sleep too much. She was being very good about dosing herself with small amounts of the detox potion every day. Roddy was impressed with how determined she was to get well. No allergic reactions to the potion though she did have her clammy and weak spells, but Catherine said that's to be expected. Anyway, after their harvest is done, she intended to make her way to Greenbarrow Castle. I gave her letters of introduction to the King's head steward, and to my parents as well. One of them will find her a job."

"All right then, it sounds as though she's quite safe then. Did Catherine ask why I was so... *tired*?"

"I told them you drank some absinthe without knowing its properties, and they understood you're hardly the first person to end up in that situation. Unfortunately there's no such thing as an Arcadian warning label. Cat gave me the hangover remedy for you."

By the Lady he really *didn't* remember a thing. Or was pretending he didn't remember. And if he didn't mention what had happened on the way back, then she was going to just let him not remember, to pretend not to remember. Her cheeks were burning, and she wanted him out of her classroom, rather badly, if only he would stop looking at her.

"All right then. Good afternoon, Professor," she said, dipping her quill again, with every indication that she wanted to get back to work.

"Now, Professor, I'm not quite sure that that's all that happened," he said, folding his arms over his chest in the adversarial posture she was so used to seeing from him.

"Why is that?"

"Because I have a rather interesting *bite mark* on my... " He traced a finger over his

"Collarbone?"

"Yes," he said, tightly. His tone implied that she was quite a cruel thing indeed to be chewing on him unawares like that.

"Oh," she said calmly, not raising her eyes from the parchment in front of her. "Really. Does it look anything like this?"

She pushed the neckline of her velvet robe off her right shoulder where an oval blue bite mark adorned the pale flesh.

Snape stared at it in frozen horror. Emily readjusted her robe and went back to grading her papers.

"Good afternoon, Professor," she said again, in a tone that knew he was now going to walk away from her without a backwards glance, and that gave him her unconditional permission to do so.

"Good afternoon, Professor," he replied, then turned and moved toward the door.

She waited to hear it slam, but it didn't instead, a black-robed arm swept the entire pile of essay papers, her cup of quills, and everything else on her desk into an untidy mess on the floor.

"*Excuse me!* People *working* here, dammit!" she cried in a fury.

Snape perched insolently on the side of her now-empty desk. "Oh, what are you worried about? I'll save you the trouble now and just tell you that no one in your fourth-year class can write anything as interesting as a bloody grocery list. I know from long and painful experience."

She looked at the quill in her hand, the only item left within arm's reach, and threw it at him. He put up an arm and deflected it easily.

"Now tell me the truth about something, if you're capable of it. Can I actually assume from these rather unmistakable tooth marks that you assumed that I had wanted to kiss you for the last hour and a half again, or some such?"

Oh, that was nice so he'd reverted back to the level of a small boy who thought girls were yucky, evidently. "*Actually,* you started that kissing nonsense by kissing *me.* You kissed me quite a lot, *actually*." She wanted to add that he had *actually* enjoyed kissing her so much that he had gotten harder than a block of granite and then asked, nay, pleaded for, a repeat of their activities in the King's Cross callbox, but didn't.

"I think I may have *some* memory of that." He had averted his eyes, made the admission absolutely matter-of-factly. Did he genuinely not remember much of the night before, or was he mocking her? She simply couldn't tell which with him everything he did seemed calculated to be impossible.

"Well, good, because it happened," she said, as if daring him to deny it. That's all right, sir, go ahead and forget me, I'm not *terribly memorable.* "You started while I was sitting with you at the club, and then you hadn't stopped on the Knight Bus all the way back to Hogsmeade. Some people saw us in the club, but it's unlikely that you'll ever run into any of them again. On the bus, I made sure no one saw us."

"I can't imagine that was terribly *pleasant* for you," he snarled, in an even more flinty tone than he usually used with her.

Emily's face flushed, and suddenly there was an embarrassing tightness in her throat, pressure building behind her eyes. "I've endured much worse," she snarled back. "Good *afternoon,* Professor."

"You simply will *not* talk about this at all, will you? As always, you're just bound and determined to be as uncommunicative as possible." He was scrutinising her again that pitiless, deliberate black gaze that wanted to ferret out her every secret and mystery until there was nothing left of her at all. She wondered why he bothered with him, there would never be any talking about anything, there would only be listening to him berating her, since things were apparently all very much back to normal. She wished

very badly for him to go away and leave her alone.

"I asked you a question, madam," he said, very softly.

She pushed her chair back with a bang and began picking up the parchment scrolls from the floor, hurling them back onto her desk. "And if we do talk about this, what will come of it? You say you can't remember much of what happened last night, but you're absolutely willing to just *assume* that whatever it was, it had to involve me doing something offensive, or humiliating, or generally hideous to you. You wake up with a missing block of time, and that's the first thing that comes to mind. So you just go ahead and believe that I did, and we'll leave it at that, all right? Now if you would please *leave me the bloody hell alone*."

"Dammit *why* do you always have to be so difficult!" he rasped.

Emily laughed, harshly and cruelly. "You have got some *indescribable* nerve saying that about anyone else, do you know that? I don't even know why you're even bothering to come ask me anything about last night it's clear that you've already made up your mind as to what happened. I've really no idea why I was expecting anything else from you." She banged the last scroll down on her desk with a vicious little thump.

"I've no idea as to what *else* I'm supposed to think," Snape snapped back. "Is there something I'm forgetting? If so, then please *do* enlighten me."

They both paused, regarding each other over her desk for a single long, blistering moment and even if she could possibly have explained all that had been tender and exhilarating about the previous night to anyone, the last person she would have wanted to tell was the bristling, scowling man before her.

"Oh, fuck it why even try." She turned hard away from him with a despising air. "I already know what you'll think of it, so I'll not bother. You've already made it quite clear that if you did have a favourable opinion of me once, for about three hours, you sure as flaming Christian hell don't have one now, and you are nothing if not eloquent about your dislikes. You told me that I was an amoral rake, and that you wanted no part of me. When you indicated that whatever there was going on with us was over, it didn't occur to me to disbelieve you in any way "

"*I didn't say that,*" he snarled. "And I didn't call you an amoral rake "

"*Oh, close enough!* From where I'm standing, you first tell me off completely *twice* and then you spend the rest of the year insulting my teaching, my morals, and generally everything about me, and then you decide to get pissed as a newt at a nightclub and practically devour me as though you were entitled to first devouring rights, and then you have the colossal *gall* to storm into my classroom the next day and snap at me as though you were some holy innocent that *I've* offended, when all I did was not slap you away when you decided to... you know, if I had done to you what you're trying to do to me now, there would be nothing left of me but a smoking crater. Because we both know damned well that *you* wouldn't put up with this sort of shite for a second."

He didn't move from her desk, arms still crossed over his chest. His eyes shone with immobile rage.

"You know, if you had only said, that night at the Malfoys 'I am not especially pleased about the way you treated me when we first met, I think I deserve better than that, and you had best not imagine that I can be had that easily, thank you very much. I now expect you to knock yourself out trying to win me over because I am absolutely worth such attention,' I would have... "

"Would have *what*?" Every word sounded bitten off and spat.

"Would have..." She could feel her heart booming against her ribs. "Would have knocked myself out trying to win you over, you great bloody *idiot.*"

They stood, both breathing laboriously and looking as though they would have liked to tear the other limb from limb.

"Now, my dear colleague, do allow me to suggest that you go find someone else on whom to inflict your insincerity, your trifling, and your games," she said, in a tone of crushing scorn. "I am tired to death of being endlessly punished because I had the nerve to actually find you attractive once or twice."

The red-black eyes glinted savagely. "*As the pot said to the kettle*," he whispered.

She felt, at that moment, quite capable of throttling the man to death.

"Well, sir, if you have taken it upon yourself to personally show me what it is to be *seduced and unceremoniously abandoned* you indeed have your revenge. Bravo really well done." She crossed to the door, and was gone.

He made no attempt to stop her.

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After Professor Swain ended their conversation, Snape went back to his office, busied himself with a variety of small, menial tasks, and tried to will his hands to stop shaking.

Really, he didn't know what Albus was thinking, asking for *her* to be sent here. *Not* one of his better hiring decisions, truly. It seemed to him as though any of the previous Defence Against the Dark Arts professors would have been a better choice even the bloody Lupine was capable of upholding his end of a conversation. Even that ridiculous fraud *Lockphart* managed to answer a plain, simple question when one was posed to him. Why would she not tell him what happened the night before? How bloody difficult could *that* be? Really, if being kissed had been so dreadfully unpleasant for her, there was always the option of saying, "Stop that," before it got to the point of *love bites,* wasn't there?

Why had she acted like that when he had gone to speak to her? The second she heard his voice, she had spun round and stared at him like... oh hell, the woman was a faun, there was something profoundly trite and unoriginal in describing her as such, but when he had gone to her classroom, she had looked at him like a startled deer before a very large clawed and fanged predator.

The very last reaction he had expected from her when he confronted her over the previous night was *hurt.* Evasion, antagonism, more of her general smarminess, certainly, but not that drooping, averted-eyed sort of broken-spiritedness. And he had no bloody idea what she was so damned hurt *about.* It was one thing to discipline a student, one thing to face a hostile enemy but to antagonise a vulnerable woman made him feel like the most contemptible bastard alive.

Good lord, previously, he wouldn't have flattered himself to think that he had the power to hurt her. He hadn't fancied he had any influence over her at all she was serving as his combat instructor out of duty. She was teaching them all out of *duty.* If she enjoyed the work, if she liked and was liked by some of her students and colleagues, that was just a fringe benefit.

For a moment he felt wildly nostalgic for the previous year, before he had ever known she existed. Sirius Black had escaped from Azkaban, yes, but suddenly that didn't seem so bad by comparison. He *hadn't* been unhappy before she arrived, not really. He hadn't been madly *happy,* either, but neither had he been abjectly miserable.

Teaching at Hogwarts, with all its attendant privilege and influence, was much more palatable than being a bullied, powerless student here. His father's death meant that he could live the remainder of his life without any more contact with that malevolent, hateful old man. When his mother died, he had been miserable, as was proper and expected but the last thing he would have admitted to anyone was that all he felt upon the death of his father was blessed relief.

Now. He had a job, a decent income, a place to live, people he interacted with every day, some measure of respectability in society. The work was interesting, even if the students were almost without exception a lot of blithering dunderheads. The reliable predictability of his life had been comforting school year at Hogwarts, summers watching the old pile of a Snape Hall deteriorate. Albus at least was good company, in the moments he had to spare. Try to win the Quidditch Cup, try to win the House Cup. Try not to worry about where the Dark Lord might be.

But then in 1991, Harry Potter had started at Hogwarts, and all hell broke loose. Quirrell suddenly became a threat that first year. Then the Chamber was opened the next. Snape had been steeling himself to go down and face the basilisk himself, probably stepping over the corpse of that idiot Lockhart on the way down. Then Black had escaped in 1993, and the ingrate Potter had the nerve to start hero-worshipping the bastard instead of seeking the proper punishment for him. Then in early 1994, the Mark had reappeared, had been getting clearer ever since, which filled his belly with cold, creeping horror. Suddenly Lucius was inviting him to social events again, taking him aside for special confidences, the way he used to. That had been enough to make the last vestige of his sense of security and contentment fall into a cureless ruin.

And then, to crown it all, that goddamned *woman* arrived. Not since the Sorting Hat had been clapped on the scarred head of the younger Potter had someone's presence made him feel so unnerved.

Every bloody day, there she was, going about her business in his sanctuary. The castle that was his safe haven she seemed to think it was a prison. She spent most of the first term moping around, huddled under thick robes and cloaks. Always seemed to be shivering. She sat on the window seat in the teacher's lounge, gazing out of windows at the snowy fields, the autumn rain, head bent like a stone caryatid with the weight of a building on her shoulders. Yes, no doubt she felt far from home, but that was no reason to sit about pining like some bloody heroine out of a Gothic novel.

Then they had both gone to that damned house party in November he now wished that he had just sent his regrets and avoided all of the *sturm und drang* that had gone on that weekend. Yes, perhaps he'd been a bit hard on her, but she had taken so bloody long to try to talk to him about their first meeting that it had amplified the hurt and disappointment he already felt. Merlin knew a man had the right to express his opinion when he felt ill-used, and he *had been,* dammit. Later that evening... all he had done was sit there and listen when Lucius told him about the tragedy three years previous and it seemed to him that she had taken him more to task for listening than she had Lucius for telling him. *I didn't want to come here,*she snapped at him, eyes flashing with hostility, making it so very clear that he was the enemy. Certainly Lucius's set were hardly known for their inclusivity, and he'd heard that her half-siblings were less than thrilled to have a Faery sister but hadn't she *ever* noticed that she couldn't judge all humans by that standard? Yes, Narcissa had had that ridiculous crying fit and screamed at the sight of her other form, but he had dismounted and tried to help her up, *thanks.* He'd gotten knocked down for his trouble, but you didn't hear him screeching at her about *that.* Perhaps next time he should just leave her crying in the snow, how about that.

He crossed to the ashcan and emptied the dustpan into it but his hands were still a bit shaky, and he got ash all over the floor. He swore eloquently to himself as he swept it up again.

Then the second term started. By the end of January, she had that new bloom to her face, that new animation in her manner, and he knew something had changed. He couldn't stand the woman, but her absence on weekends annoyed him to no end. Then Lucius let him know she was his latest plaything after the Second Task, and after that, he had come to hate everything about her her laugh, her manner, her hideous beauty. The way she sauntered down the halls chattering with people, never noticing him at all. The way she could be playful even with some of the most hard-bitten little punks of Slytherins. Around every bloody corner she might be smiling at someone else, but all smiling stopped the second she saw him. The discontent spread in him like gangrene, poison in the blood.

I had a date, she had said. Well, that was fecking *quick,* wasn't it. Just use us and throw us away, my Lady, we're all disposable enough.

But now he couldn't just despise her, couldn't simply put her on the same shelf with all his other antagonists and betrayers, because despite a year spent freezing and stinging each other, in which she'd gotten up to heaven knows what with heaven knows who and how many, they'd apparently gotten back around to feeling like they had in that fecking callbox. The idea of that left Snape's hands damp enough to make his grip on the phials he was replacing into a standing rack feel a bit iffy. The question of *How does she really feel about me*is a difficult one for any man to face, much less a man who can hardly imagine a woman having any sort of tender feelings for him at all.

Snape had been putting some stoppered glass specimen jars away in a cabinet but he set one of the things rather precariously on the edge of the counter, and it had skittered off the side and shattered on the stone floor. Somehow it did him good just to hear the goddamn thing smash.

He had gone on with this kind of frantic tidying and furious ruminating for some time. Only when he noticed that supper would be starting in ten minutes, and he was absolutely starving, having missed breakfast and taken only a light lunch that day, did he finally button up the collar of his robes, wash his hands, and head down to the Great Hall.

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Emily had gone into her office after her colleague had practically *chased* her out of her sodding classroom. Really, between the psychotic Professor Moody and the amoral rakishness of one Professor Severus Snape, there was nowhere one could count oneself safe in this castle, was there. She sat at her desk until the sun went down, but did not get up and light a lamp when the daylight faded. She was in a rather lucid, fatalistically-staring-into-the-dark sort of mood, actually.

Yes, she should have known that it had been asking too much of Fate to think that he could possibly have meant all he said last night and felt the same about it the next day. He was *good* at being amazingly passionate when he was alone with her late at night with clothes coming off, and then not being able to stand the sight of her in the cold light of morning with his colleagues around him, wasn't he.

Yes, of course everyone knew that *Faeries were only good for one thing.*

She felt frantically homesick for a very long moment in the Court of the Third Kingdom, people either wanted to have sex with you, or they didn't, and either hated you, or didn't. None of this Severus Snape kind of *I hate you except for when I want to have sex with you*ever went on there.

Someone knocked on her door and she heard Irma's voice out in the hallway calling her name. "Emily? Emily, are you in there?"

She got up, half-heartedly smoothed her hair before opening the door. "Yes, Irma what is it?"

"Someone's here to see you in the foyer downstairs," Irma said. Her eyes narrowed faintly with concern as she surveyed the younger woman's face. "Are you all right, dear?"

"Yes, fine, just having a frustrating day, is all. Who's here to see me?"

"He didn't give his name, just asked for someone to fetch Lady Swain-Tumnus," Irma said. "Rather nice-looking dark fellow in a brown cloak. And I do believe he was another Faerie."

Emily's brow creased. "Ah, thank you, Irma."

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A crush of students were milling about in the Great Hall when Emily arrived there, having just come from their last classes of the day before supper. Through the sea of black school robes, she spotted someone in rustic Arcadian clothing with thick, cowlicky brown hair and a tweed cap in the foyer of the Grand Hall, talking to Argus Filch in a familiar accent. Then, a voice she knew was calling to her. "Emily? Emily! There you are, my girl, thank the Mother I've found you."

"Euan?"

Sir Euan Doggins, Steward of Greenbarrow Castle, had apparently dropped by for a visit.

Emily immediately rushed forward and embraced her old friend with the ardour of one who has missed home for a very long time. He hugged her back just as robustly, kissed her hair with a rough-voiced, *Dear girl, you've been missed.*

"You can't *imagine* how much I've missed all of you," she said, aside to him, unable to keep her voice from quavering. "I can't even tell you how ready I am to go home."

Doggins looked troubled by her words. "I can't tell you how ready we are to welcome you, child. But please, when you've heard the tidings I bear, remember to look kindly on the messenger."

Then he reached into the breast pocket of his brown linen doublet for a letter, written on fine handmade parchment and bearing a red wax seal with the device of the cup and grapevines, and ribbons of black and violet, and handed it to her. Emily recognised that seal immediately the letter could only have been written by the King himself. She took it from him, broke the seal, and stepped aside for a moment to read it.

Gwydion wrote to her in Old Arcadian, as was traditional for such kingly missives, but a simultaneous translation has been provided for the readers of these chronicles:

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To Lady Emily Swain-Tumnus, Master-at-Arms of His Majestie's Fianna, Greetings.

My dear kinswoman,

I have long missed thee, dear one, long wished to see the return of thy sweet face and devoted heart to under my roof again. Often have I reflected, during these long months of thy absence, that thy noble mother and thy fair self have been far more to us than niece and great-niece, far more than guardians of our realm. Thou hast long been to me as my own childe, my daughter, one whose loyalty has been tested in battle and always proven steadfast and true.

It had been my fond hope to pen this missive with greetings, an expression of my joy at soon being reunited with thee. As it is, however, I can only send my regrets that I write thee not with tidings of joy, but of sorrow. It is as we feared, my childe, the truth has proved an unbearable burthen for the Lady Grainné Robinett. She died early this morning, long heartsore and unhinged in mind by the death and disgrace of her son.

As you know, the Robinett family has long served the Crown as courtiers and servitors, though I fear the best days of this noble line have passed. The sons of this generation personify little of the fine qualities we once loved in their fathers and grandfathers. Tales have come to our ears of how the Robinett scions have become best known not for loyalty and courage but for enmities and guiles, grudges and deceits; and these tales were given hard proof with the most foul murder of thy dearest lord Tumnus, by their youngest son, Jayson. I have seen the filial grief of the brothers surviving, Lord Steifan and Lord Richert, and have heard tell of their dark whispers of who is to blame for the breakdown of their mother's health. I fear that in such grief, murderous intent could be kindled were your return to be celebrated at this time. From this, my dear one, comes my fear for thy safety if thou return to us too soon.

I have known thee since the day thou wast born, and I know immediately what thou wouldst do upon these tidings. Thou wilt return home regardless, and thou wouldst make these antagonists back their fighting words with their swords. But as thou art my daughter at heart, I find that I must in this matter let our Sovereign prudence and caution overrule my fatherly desire to embrace thee once again.

That said, I give you this ORDER and COMMAND, as your Liege, your Lord, and One who loves you with all his heart: Do not yet return to Arcadia. Stay in the Second World until I summon ye home again.

This is not punishment; I bear thee no ill will. May my True Name witness I give this order solely for thy protection. I love thy brashness of spirit, Emily, but I love to see thee living even more. Always remember that, even if thou grievest and lament to see these words.

I give you no charge and no mission for this time apart other than to make thyself as happy as thou can, and find some place where thou canst cultivate thy many talents. I do not see this as a long separation, perhaps a year entire at longest. But know that in the end, when I have deemed the danger past, thou wilt always be welcomed back home with joy and abiding love by

~ Your loving kinsman

His Majestie Gwydion Greenbarrow V

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No, she said, in a faint, despondent voice, glancing over the King's letter again.*No. This can't be true.*

She turned a tragic face back to Doggins "So Grainné died and the Robinetts are on about how it's *my fault?* By what logic does *that* make any sense?"

"I don't think any would claim that *logic* informs the actions of Grainné's sons in their grief, dear hart," Doggins told her, compassion in his voice.

"Tell me the truth am I being punished? Is that it?" she whispered.

"You know better than that," he said, a very gentle note of chiding in his voice. "It's not forever think of it not as an enforced sabbatical, but an extended vacation. There's all the Second World to receive you, and thou may go wherever thou wishest! What I would give sometimes for such freedom and leisure."

"But it's not *home,*" she said disconsolately. "All year, I've been looking forward to the day when I can go back and see all of you again "

"I know, Emily, I know," Doggins said, in a voice that understood her sorrow all too well. "Now I cry your pardon, Lady, but I must go. But I will welcome you home with all my heart when Gwydion calls you back again."

"Euan, do you have to go right away? Can't you at least stay for supper?" Emily asked, her voice breaking.

"I wish I could, but you are not the only of the King's subjects needing his attention this day," he said, his voice gravelly with emotion. "If it were possible I would stay until you were comforted, but I must needs tend to other business. I am so very sorry." He embraced her again and kissed her forehead. "May our Mother bless you and keep you."

"And you as well, wherever your journey may lie." It was hard to let go of Euan, after the day she had if Emily could have had her way, she would have taken him for a quiet supper in some dark corner of the Three Broomsticks, poured out her troubles to him, and begged him for all the news from home. But she knew all too well what sort of *other business* the King entrusted to Sir Doggins and knew that he would not have left her so soon had matters not been urgent. It was like Gwydion to send an old friend to deliver this news rather than have it sent to her by owl, but she almost wished he had, rather than feel the grief of this parting.

With that, Doggins reluctantly made her a small bow and was gone out the great front doors. Emily watched him go, feeling more abandoned than she could have ever imagined. She turned toward the Great Hall, only to meet the impenetrable black gaze of none other than her colleague, onetime lover, and now despised antagonist,

Severus Snape, watching her from the landing. Who knew how long he had been standing there and of course she couldn't have gotten bad news from home without him being right there to see it.

In a less emotional frame of mind, she might have noticed the expression on his face was not one of satisfaction, or suspicion, but truly something closer to concern. At that moment, however, she couldn't endure having his eyes on her for even one second longer. She turned and rushed from the foyer, crumpling Gwydion's letter in her hand.

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*What a bloody rotten day this has been,*Snape thought, mechanically forking into supper. Usually he could rant, scold, and rage all day as part of his usual teaching routine, but the scene with his colleague had left him exhausted.

Then on top of it of all, he of course *had* to come into the foyer just as she got that message and seen the expression on her face when she read it. Professor Swain left the foyer looking distraught, and then she never showed up to supper. Her accustomed chair beside Madam Pince and Professor Sprout sat empty.

She was an immovably supercilious, self-satisfied little thing she wasn't supposed to look like her entire world had just crashed around her ears and was spectacularly burning. She wasn't supposed to embrace some messenger like he was the only friend she had in the world, and then seem utterly bereft when he took his leave of her. The last thing he had ever expected to feel for Lucius's insufferable little princess was *sympathy.*

He was still in an agony of worry over what had happened the previous night, and now he was painfully curious about the message she had received had someone in her family died? Had another conflict broken out? Was she going to have to leave that evening and resume her command? It must be difficult for a military officer to be sent on this mission an entire dimensional plane away, where she knew virtually no one, when she was so obviously concerned about the safety of her home country.

What the hell was going on?

All right this was getting abjectly ridiculous. Their discussion was not over; something more had to be said. And if she didn't have the sense to say it, he *would.*

Snape finished his supper very early and excused himself with only a brusque nod to Dumbledore, and resolutely went in search of his colleague.

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Emily had completely forgotten supper, forgotten where she was going, and headed toward her office only by force of habit. All that she could remember at that moment was *I can't go home again.*

Yes, it was true, it was what she had feared. Her sense of cold triumph and righteousness following the trial by combat three years ago had soon faded, leaving only the consequences to those surviving to be considered. Gwydion hadn't forbidden her to challenge Jayson, had said publicly that he stood behind his kinswoman absolutely, although his opinion of her chosen method of justice remained unchanged. Their relations had been strained for some time following, but she had not realised how much the anger must have lingered in him.

She had defied his wishes, and in doing so, had alienated the King completely. Gwydion despised her.

It hadn't been a diplomatic-outreach mission it had been his way of getting someone he loathed out of his sight... and now she couldn't see her parents, or cousins, or Bill or Victoria or anyone else she loved for another whole year. *Stay in the Second World until I summon ye home again...*oh, please, she knew what that meant. Go away and stay there. Fucking Lucius had been right this was *exile.* Polite, unofficial exile, but it certainly had the same fecking effect as a bloody Geas of Royal Anathema, didn't it.

She couldn't have prevented the reaction that followed when she was finally alone in her office. Perhaps she could have taken this latest royal command more in her stride if she hadn't been horribly betrayed by Lucius less than a month earlier. Perhaps she could have even taken both the command and Lucius's betrayal more easily if she hadn't had her last secret hopes regarding Severus completely dashed one hour earlier. Whatever it was that finally broke through a knight's stoicism, the message or Snape's latest rejection, she couldn't have said, but it did.

Once Emily's office door closed behind her, she sank down to the floor, wrapped her arms around her knees, and let the tears that had been pricking uncontrollably behind her eyes for so long today come, at last. The rest of the castle's inhabitants may have been at dinner, entirely wrapped up in anticipation of the Third Task tomorrow, but one person spent that time in her darkened office, weeping bitterly.

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Professor Swain wasn't in her classroom, nor in the teachers' lounge, nor in the library, so Snape headed to his colleague's office. He had been raising his hand to knock on her office door, when he heard something and stopped, silently pressing the tips of his fingers to it instead. He paused for a moment to listen.

It was a sound he recognised immediately. Coming from somewhere below the door handle, the rasp of ragged sobbing. As if she had gone into her office, sank onto the floor just beyond the closed door, and started to cry. He had heard this before this kind of ugly, trapped, hopeless weeping; the sort of thing his mother sometimes did, taking such pains never to let him see it or hear it, but that he knew about anyway.

He knew, then, that whatever news had been contained in that message, it was something poisonous. This wasn't the sort of woman who was given to self-indulgent sentimentality or histrionics even when he panicked for a moment and struck out blindly, she had quite literally taken it on the jaw, with casual good grace. For her to cry like this... something horrible must have happened.

No... this wasn't the time. She wouldn't want to be disturbed when she felt like this, and even if he had tried to comfort her... Merlin knew if he was any good at comforting other people. Only rarely did the Head of Slytherin ever have to extend solace to another person the only time he ever really bothered with it was when Slytherin students had deaths in their families. Even then, his means of caring for them would be to let up on them in class for a week or two, perhaps gruffly inquire as to how they were holding up once or twice in the month following, maybe three times if the student was female, or very young.

But this was entirely different. Professor Swain was a grown woman, and she had, if only for one evening (two evenings?) been his lover. For now, he would let her have her privacy, her solitude, and her dignity. She wouldn't want to be caught crying, by anyone.

He straightened up, soundlessly, and moved away down the hall, so quietly that the woman on the other side of the door would never know that she had been overheard.

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Quarter of an hour later, Snape was alone in his classroom again.

So perhaps she hadn't tried to make a fool of him. Whichever way he had gotten pissed as a newt on some unfamiliar intoxicant, it now seemed as though it had been through his own honest mistake. And, somehow during this... *adventure,* he had ended up losing enough inhibition to actually give in to his desire to kiss his colleague again. Apparently the nibbling had been mutual. The very idea that he was capable of such brazen effrontery made his mouth go dry.

If he could infer anything at all from their shouting match in her classroom, it seemed somehow that she hadn't minded the kissing so much as she minded being confronted in anger over it the next day. And it also appeared that he might have gotten unwarrantedly angry at her just in time for her to go down to supper and receive bad news from home.

Oh, by Merlin *why was this happening?* Why like this, and all at once? How was it that they could be sniping at each other in the Leaky Cauldron earlier that evening, and then impassionedly kissing each other a few hours later?

Was there no sense, nor reason, to *anything* women did?!

Bloody hell, perhaps... perhaps he just couldn't expect her to be the sort of woman he knew, because she *wasn't* what he knew, pointed ears, shapechanging, and all. Perhaps he should have known that from the first night he met her, when she took all precedent for the way other people treated him and stood it on its ear. His view of himself had been simple I am Severus Snape, the Potions master. I am feared by hundreds of schoolchildren, alumni beyond reckoning, and almost all of my colleagues. No one has loved me since I lost my mother, but I could give you ten feet of scroll on those who hate me. I was insufficiently evil to be a Death Eater, and am now insufficiently decent or good to be a member of normal society. You aren't supposed to smile at me like that and ask me to tea, madam, it's simply *not done.* Take your pretty eyes and fetching way of listening and *sod off,* you. Just leave me alone.

But there was something delightful about the way she had approached him so fearlessly, something about that moment in the King's Cross Lost Items office that made him endlessly replay it in his mind as though searching for the secret of its charm. The Fae were a secretive people, yes, an elusive lot but somehow that didn't make them cold or unexpressive. No, even when they found ways to distract you from seeking the real answer to your questions, they never lost that warmth, that sympathy. Such beautiful, animated, fascinating enigmas for you to project your own desires upon.

The truth was (face it) he didn't want her to leave him alone. He hadn't wanted her to leave that night in September, and he didn't want to be alone now. He wanted to talk to her and wanted to hear her honest answers to his questions. Especially if the answers to those questions led to more impassioned snogging and mutual nibbling.

Without truly realising it, Snape was perhaps for the first time trying to puzzle out how to best communicate with a woman he cared about. He was certainly not the first man to ever face this daunting and enigmatic task, and he was working from a position of little experience, much negative example, and much fear, so perhaps he can be forgiven for not coming up with exactly the right approach on his first attempt.

After some time, he decided on a new course of action. He was going to see her that night at seven p.m., and would ask her how she was then. Just ask her. If she felt like talking about the message she had received, he would encourage her to elaborate on what had happened. Perhaps if that went well, and she seemed amenable to talking, he would confess to his great curiosity about all that had happened the previous night. Then he would just... *ask* her for more details and do his best to listen without judgment. He didn't claim that he understood women, not an iota... but clearly, his earlier method of questioning had not been an effective one, and perhaps it was time to try a different tactic.

But when Snape arrived at the practice studio at his accustomed time of 6:53, he found it entirely deserted, all the lights out.

He waited about for perhaps a quarter hour, then half an hour, getting more frustrated and annoyed by the minute. She had now and then been five or ten minutes late, but there had never been a night that she failed to show up at all, especially for this bloody long.

Then he realised she wasn't coming.

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Emily had finally cried herself out in her office. She lifted her head from her hands, and leaned back against the door, feeling numb, resigned, and exhausted. Her watch read 7:27 p.m., and her stomach was rumbling she had missed supper entirely.

Then she remembered oh, bloody hell, it was Wednesday, she had an instructional session with Professor Snape tonight, and she was already late, and that was only going to give him even more reason to berate and belittle her. She stood up, started to try to think of what she was going to teach him tonight, which would dictate what exactly she should wear, be it the chainmail or just some sweatpants and a t-shirt or

And then the decision was made *Dammit, no.*

She had worked quite long enough at trying to teach him anything. All she had been trying to do during their training sessions was to give him methods of preserving his own mean, craven little existence, and he had resisted her every step of the way. Resisted her at best, and openly insulted her at worst. Screw it. He would get no more of her time.

Dumbledore had asked her to instruct him in her means of self-defence, to impart to him the best of her knowledge and she had. She'd taught him more than anyone else at this school. The Headmaster hadn't specified how long she would have to train the thankless bastard, or when she could stop doing so. It was the second to last week of the school year, and the Third Task was tomorrow, and she now thought she had devoted quite enough energy to Professor Severus Snape, thanks.

Fuck him, she thought. *I give up.*

No, tonight, she damned well didn't feel like having yet *another* argument with that crusty, unendurable botch of wretched human nature. Tonight, what she really needed was to get out of this castle.

She paused for a moment to wipe her eyes and smooth her dishevelled hair in the mirror. Then she threw on her cloak and picked up her pocketbook. A minute later, she locked her office and was heading for the main entrance, the one that let out onto the front green, the lake, and the path toward Hogsmeade.

What cares I for human hearts, she muttered to herself, sniffling. *Soft and spiritless as porridge. A Faerie's heart beats fierce and free, dammit.*

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Just before Emily crossed the great front foyer to the front doors, someone stopped her with a firm, gnarled hand on her wrist.

"Something wrong, lassie?" Professor Moody was looking curiously down at her exactly the last person she wanted to see at that moment.

Emily's stomach contracted with apprehension. "Nothing's wrong," she said.

They regarded each other for a long moment her eyes riveted on his face, nostrils quivering ever so slightly as she waited for more signs of aggression; both his brown eye and his electric blue one were regarding her as he might have a particularly exotic and interesting, and dangerous, animal in a zoo.

"I just need to get out of here for awhile," she said, pulling against his grip with the clear indication that she would very much like for him to let go of her now.

Moody relinquished her with an elaborate politeness, and she left Hogwarts through the great main entrance.

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How very fecking *polite* of Professor Swain not to at least let him know she wasn't going to show up that evening, Snape thought to himself as he stalked back down toward the Slytherin dungeons. Somehow he had lost any desire to seek the woman out to give her a piece of his mind, however, and now planned to head back to his own apartments, drink a double whiskey, and just go to bed and let this thoroughly unpleasant day finally end.

But then, as he started down a staircase toward the landing of the great front entrance, he spied a familiar fair-haired, black-cloaked figure walking very fast toward the front doors, apparently on her way out. He stared at her in dismay, very nearly called out to her *Emily, where are you going?*

She was hurrying across the foyer so quickly and seemed so distracted that she nearly bumped into Moody, who had apparently just come in from a trip down to Hogsmeade. Moody reached out and caught her wrist, stopping her. Snape couldn't hear what was said, but it looked as though he was asking her a question, and she was making some kind of denial.

It also looked as though she didn't want to be anywhere near Moody at that moment she looked down at his hand on her arm as though some large, noxious insect had lit there. The two of them watched each other closely, hands clasped around the other's forearms as if checking for hidden blades. They looked like the most polite and civilised pair of sworn enemies imaginable.

Then she turned and walked away from him and out the front doors, not exactly fleeing, but wasting no time in putting distance between herself and Moody. Although her spine remained stiffly straight and her chin up, and her attitude betrayed no fear, Snape knew a strategic retreat when he saw one.

Part Second: The Hart Rampant: Chapter 24, Part 1

Chapter 31 of 55

In which Professor Swain discovers the delights of a dual life as both a Hogwarts professor and Lucius Malfoy's mistress, until a chance encounter with a desperate Faery prostitute in Knockturn Alley sends her to the most unlikely person for aid. Meanwhile, Severus Snape finds himself alone and adrift in the Mushroom Circle, a Faery nightclub...

Chapter 24, Part 1:

Emily Apparated into Diagon Alley after she left Hogwarts and wandered through Flourish and Blotts for about for an hour or so before rather arbitrarily deciding to sit down somewhere and have some supper and a cup of tea. She decided to avoid the usual spots the Leaky Cauldron and the restaurant bars of any of the hotels where she had used to meet Lucius. Instead, she chose a tiny, fragrant restaurant with water-spotted rugs and the scent of spices in the air, well off the high street. A young witch in a sari appeared to take her order for a plate of chicken curry and a pot of orange spice tea, no sugar.

A moment after her waitress had walked away, she briefly considered cancelling her order and Apparating over the Channel to Dublin to pay an unannounced visit to her friend Aelfraith Reilly. Raith was a Muggle-born witch, a semi-reclusive software engineer who lived alone, in the basements and bottom floor of a converted warehouse. She worked at home, surrounded by banks of computer equipment and magical grimoires, and kept rather unstructured hours. More than likely she was still awake and wouldn't mind an old friend's company... but after a moment's consideration, Emily decided against it. Despite her intentions to spend some time with Raith during her year in Scotland, she really hadn't made much time to see her other than at the Tolkien Society's first LAN party, and had missed her at the Midsummer Revel. Emily thought it would be rather inconsiderate to now show up unannounced on Raith's doorstep, wailing to be comforted after being disappointed by two different men one of whom was married after neglecting her all year.

The waitress reappeared with a plate of savoury meat, vegetables, and brown basmati rice, and a steaming white china teapot and mug, and poured out the tea. Emily picked up the cup, inhaled its steamy fragrance, and forced her heart rate to slow. After a moment, she began to take stock of her situation, as dispassionately as she could.

The school year was almost over after the Third Task tomorrow, there was only one more week left, during which she would be busy grading her end of term tests and essays. In theory, she would only have to see Professor Snape one more time, at the annual Leaving Feast, July 2nd, and then they would be out of each other's hair forever. Under the terms set down by the King, Dumbledore could have commanded her to carry out his bidding until September 23rd but nonetheless she doubted that the Headmaster would have any use for her after the end of the school year. In all likelihood, he would just tell her that her obligation to him was over sometime during that last week, or at the Leaving Feast, and send her on her way.

Emily picked up her fork and dug into her supper, some appetite finally returning. All that year, she had assumed that she would find the nearest open portal back to the Faerielands and return home as soon as Dumbledore gave her leave to go. She knew exactly which portal and what day and time she would have taken for the journey back, whether he dismissed her at the end of the school year or in the unlikely possibility that he required her to stay till September. Now and then during the last few weeks, she had been imagining those first reunions with her father, her mother, Gwydion and Dahlia and Corryn, Bill, Victoria, Corvus and all the other members of her unit. She had previously thought that Gwydion would have thrown the usual sort of cosy dinner with all of her favourite people to welcome her back. Victoria would then probably prevail upon her to spend a few days at the Priquettes' agricultural estate out in the north, and Corvus and Eithne, and Bill and Mary, would ask her over for dinner. Bill and Mary's two little girl-cubs, Catrine and Eireann, would no doubt have shot up in height during her year's absence and be in that gangly, huge-paws phase. She had been thinking of all the times they had rushed up and engulfed her in furry, wiggly hugs, squeaking, "Aunt Emily, Aunt Emily!" after her return from some absence, and had been greatly looking forward to a repeat performance.

But now she couldn't rejoin her loved ones, potentially for an entire year more, because Grainné Robinett had died, and Gwydion didn't trust her two surviving sons. (Or at least, so the King said, had pledged his very word that this wasn't punishment... she was going to try to be calm and take that at face value.)

Yes, dear Lady Grainné. Emily thought of Jayson's mother, with her large, mournful, ever-tearful eyes, her whiny, obsequious voice, her endless capacity for adoring and spoiling her three sons, especially Jayson, the youngest, who was the image of her late husband. Lady Grainné with her complete inability to instil any sense of honour or responsibility in Jayson, Steifan, or Richert, and who had raised all three of them to inalienably believe that the indulgence of their whims was the highest calling of any female creature to ever draw breath. How Lady Grainné had wept and fainted and carried on when Emily challenged Jayson, the day after Dorien's funeral. As she had faced her husband's murderer in that grassy clearing, it had been with the sound of Grainné Robinett's wailing in her ears. After Jayson had lost the combat, there had been no end to her tearing of hair and rending of garments. Emily couldn't help but think that if the woman had told her sons *No* once in a while, had raised them to realise that there were some things, some people, that one simply *could not have* no matter how much one wanted them, then perhaps she would have spared herself this grief.

No, Lady Grainné's passing did not provoke much sorrow in Sir Dorien Tumnus's widow, and that was certain.

At any rate, there was no way she could stay at Hogwarts. Most likely no one stayed at the school over the summer besides Hagrid and Filch, anyway. Perhaps Raith would rent her the top floor of her warehouse for the summer after her friend had inherited the building, she had the top floors converted into lofts with the intention of renting them out someday, but as far as Emily knew, had never gotten around to it. Summer in Ireland sounded all right Raith was excellent, if eccentric, company, and knowing her, the building probably had top of the line Net access. Emily thought about going back to Cambridge and asking Professor Atreus if he had any professorial openings in his department... but suddenly Cambridgeshire seemed entirely too close to Wiltshire, and Malfeasant, for her taste. It would have been far too easy to run into a prominent personage like Lucius, or maybe even Professor Snape, if she spent any more time in the small, insular world of the British Wizarding community.

But there was the whole of Europe to be considered. The south of France was a possibility there were very few wounds to the heart that couldn't be solaced by enough time in the French countryside. The French wine country was probably the closest she would get to home, here in the Second World. Perhaps Beauxbatons was hiring? Or maybe Alain or Mackenzie knew a pleasant Muggle lycée out in the middle of pastoral nowhere that needed an English teacher or a fencing coach...

Emily finished her meal and wearily poured another cup of tea. Going back to Arcadia was out of the question if she did, there were magics that would allow the Robinetts to find her almost anywhere, and it would be embarrassing to beg Gwydion to ask one of the other sovereigns to extend sanctuary to her. She didn't want to stay in England. But, she could pack up everything she owned in one small case and be anywhere on Earth in a matter of hours. There had to be somewhere on this globe where she could spend a year, in some pleasant and preferably *uneventful* manner.

But no matter where she ended up, there would be *NO* more impulsive sex with intriguing dark strangers in public phone boxes, nor affairs with other women's indecently Machiavellian husbands, and that you could be certain of.

There was one week left of this academic year, during which Emily would be completely distracted with grading tests and essays anyway. The entire school would be too preoccupied with the end of the Triwizard Tournament to pay much attention to her at all.

After that week was over, she would never have to clap eyes on either Lucius Malfoy or Severus Snape ever again.

I can do this, she told herself, taking a deep breath and pressing the palm of her hand against her eyelid. *It's not as though thousands of heavily armed Orcs are advancing on Rivendale. Irma and Albus will visit, and Hermione will be a Tithe page in a few years.*

Emily raised her head and nodded to the waitress. "If I could have my check, please, miss."

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Outside, a nondescript middle-aged man in a grey tweed overcoat stood up and ground out his cigarette as the blonde woman in the black velvet cloak emerged from the little wog place on the corner. His eyes followed her as she started rather listlessly down the street, but she paid him about as much heed as she would have one of the alley lampposts.

Didn't seem to much care where she was going, either, just wandering sort of aimlessly oh yeah, that was good. *Whatsa matter, why the long face, did poor ickle Tinkerbell have a bad day?* Well, whatever misery she was in, she would be out of it soon. He indulged himself with a dark little chuckle, his fingers ready on the hilt of the iron dagger under his coat.

Ah yeah, that's it, yeh troublesome little dandelion-eating slut, just keep walking that way.

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Emily spent awhile wandering about Diagon Alley after finishing her tea. (She didn't even consider another stroll down Knockturn Alley.) It was late, past ten p.m. by her watch, and the only establishment still open was the Leaky Cauldron pub. She could have stopped in and drowned her sorrows in a bottle of dandelion wine, but she didn't like the idea of drinking alone because of the vagaries of some man, and in her opinion, that bastard Snape had done quite enough already. Later, she might be able to look dispassionately at the scene in her classroom with Professor Snape, and recognise that perhaps he had reacted the way he did because he had been painfully afraid of having been humiliated, but for now, she still felt miserably ill-treated.

As such, the footsteps, stealthily following her along the walk where Diagon Alley bordered on Endustree Alley, never really registered.

Emily felt safe in Wizarding London, even here in this relatively isolated part of it, and was confident of her ability to protect herself in almost any situation. Her mind was still full of the ugly scene in her classroom as such, she was not paying as much attention to her surroundings as she might have under different circumstances. Also, as she thought of herself as a protector of the persecuted, rather than as a likely target for persecution, the idea that she was making herself vulnerable by taking a walk in a deserted area had not occurred to her.

As it happened, she never realised that she was in danger until her attacker was within half a dozen steps behind her on that deserted side street. Suddenly she noticed the sound of running footsteps behind her, a sudden lunge forward an upsurge in someone's breathing the scent of rage and murderous intent

She was turning hard around when she saw the knife in his hand.

The force of his downward blow staggered her on her feet for a moment, and then the pain registered blinding, a thick ribbon of searing heat driven into the meat of her shoulder

Emily faced the man Bartemious Crouch, Jr. had paid to kill her, and silently spoke one word.

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As the man in the grey overcoat watched his commissioned prey, the air around her shimmered, warped, effervesced she was staring at him with lucid eyes, more real than reality. Then he noticed the street elongating around him, as if the alley had grown unutterably longer, the buildings taller and more forbidding, around the focal point that was this skinny, brown-eyed woman. She now seemed very far away from him.

This was magic he had never seen before he knew magic, that which people other than himself could do with wands or incantations but this was different. The very air crackled around him, as if with the portent of lightning soon to flash.

He clutched the handle of the knife and blundered forward, swinging it in front of him in a wide arc. Where was she? She shimmered, half-corporeal, in front of him, out of his reach.

But then something very strong stopped his swing, and seized his knife hand in a vicelike grip. No, wait, that couldn't be her she wasn't that close to him, she was several yards away

She was directly in front of him, her pitiless eyes fixed on his face, her hand clasped around his own and then she forced the blade of his knife back in his direction, and unerringly drove it into his throat. A second later, she had severed his carotid artery, then slid the point down until she found purchase between two neck vertebrae and cut through his spine, her arm tensing and teeth gritting with the effort of severing cartilage. All feeling and muscular control below his neck was lost in less than a second, and all blood flow to his brain in slightly more than a second.

He fell forward, and was dead before his cheek came to rest against the cobblestones of the street.

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The knife clattered to the street beside her attacker's body, its blade enpurpled with a combined welter of human and Faery blood, but it never occurred to Emily to pick it up or examine it. She knew by the ominous crackling heat that blade exuded when it entered her shoulder, and when her hand closed around that of her assailant, what it was made of pure, forged iron. As she staggered away from her attacker, it also never occurred to her to check on his condition, or investigate the body in any way. She knew the feel of a killing blow when she dealt one.

She pressed her hand to the wound on the back of her shoulder it felt like a gaping hole in her flesh, as though her entire back had been laid open. Her hand came away richly covered with ink-blue blood. She paused for a long, numb moment, watching her blood collect into heavy droplets on the heel of her hand, to fall and slowly plash on the street.

The wound was high on her back, out of her sight; she had no way of examining it and discerning the extent of the damage. Her entire shoulder throbbed with anguish she couldn't tell how deep the blade had gone, didn't know what had been severed or punctured; her lungs might be filling up with her own blood right now...

Dorien, is this how it felt?

She stood for a long moment; just breathing hard, shaking, and bleeding.

After a moment, she coughed hard into her palm, but found no blood in her saliva. All right, that was a good sign, and she didn't appear to be dying, at least she didn't think she was... she could still move her left hand and arm, although it hurt horribly to move much at all... what should she do now... she had heard of St. Mungo's, the Wizarding hospital, but had no idea as to where it was, which made Apparating directly there impossible. She thought about Apparating directly into Catherine Orson's clinic, or Catherine's flat in London... but she didn't know if Catherine would be there without calling her first, and this being Diagon Alley, there were no phones...

The blood was now pouring in a heavy curtain of wet heat down her back, and she was starting to feel very tired, light-headed, and disoriented. Emily picked up a fold of her cloak and packed it hard back into her slashed shoulder, attempting to stop the bleeding, but the angle was so awkward it didn't seem to be helping much.

Please, oh Lady of the Worlds, I know I've been awful all year, but please let someone help me.

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Emily finally staggered back to the little Indian restaurant where she had had supper and knocked on the door, then reached for the doorknob with her blood-soaked right hand. The door was locked.

A rotund, brown-skinned, middle-aged woman came out from the back kitchen area, and came toward the door. "Closed!" she called.

Emily rattled the doorknob with increasing desperation. "Madam, no, please, this is an emergency, I don't want supper, please "

"Supper over! Closed!" the woman called. The incomprehension on her face and the intonation of her voice indicated that English was not her native tongue. "Closed!" she repeated.

"Oh, bloody hell." Emily glanced down at the doorknob "*Alohomora*" and then silently spoke a word, and the doorknob turned and the door opened. "Please, madam, just let me explain "

The dark woman let out a cry of outrage, then started toward her with a torrent of fluent Hindi. Emily tried to compose her thoughts, concentrating on exactly what she wanted to tell this woman, and trying to muster up a *Deceivre* charm so as to properly communicate with her, but then the young waitress who had waited on her at supper came out of the back room, her black brows knitting with concern.

"Miss miss, *please*... call the police, call a doctor," Emily called desperately.

"What happened?" the waitress cried, starting forward in alarm. The older woman was still shouting, her voice high-pitched and anxious.

"In the alley... he had a knife, he stabbed me in the back. Please, miss, I didn't mean to frighten anyone, if you could just call for help... "

The waitress looked worriedly down at Emily's bloodstained hand, but didn't seem to recognise the ink-blue substance as blood, didn't realise it was a sign of injury. Emily could feel a thick rivulet of blood oozing down her back, heard it dripping on the floor behind her feet. The back of her dress seemed to be saturated with it.

The older woman was frightened now, histrionically gesticulating to the waitress, and the girl was trying to calm her and explain the situation to her. Emily gritted her teeth, jammed the fold of her cloak back into her shoulder as best she could, and cursed her own luck.

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Oh, flaming Christian hell getting stabbed with an iron blade *hurt.*

Hurt worse than anything Emily could have imagined, worse than any wound she had ever received in battle. The pain was so bad that just moving her left arm or turning her head to the left was enough to make her nauseous, but she refused anything but tincture of willow bark for the pain. Morphine or anything opiate-derived in short, any of this world's most effective painkillers were absolutely out of the question.

Back at the restaurant, the young waitress had finally managed to communicate to the older woman, her mother, that their after-hours visitor had forced her way into their dining room because she had been stabbed and was seeking aid, not trying to rob them. Then Daireen, the waitress (may all the blessings of the Lady of the Worlds be upon her and hers forever), had immediately Flooed the emergency medics at St. Mungo's, who then came to collect Emily. The triage mediwizards examined her wound and told her that she had gotten very lucky she had turned away from her attacker's knife thrust in such a manner that the only damage had been a long but relatively superficial slash in the muscle just below and to the left of her neck. No arteries or major veins had been severed; the wound wasn't life-threatening, just painful and bloody.

She was then taken to the hospital, where a nurse helped her to partially disrobe and then lie on her stomach on an operating table. A skilled surgi-witch then arrived, put Sterile Anaesthesia Field Spells in place with her wand. She then cleaned the wound, reattached the slashed muscle tissues with dissolving staples, and neatly glued the wound shut with a tube of Dermal-Stik Paste. Then she took some alcohol pads and began to clean up Emily's back and neck, which were stained with a copious amount of her own blood.

"That's the worst of it let's see if there's anything else I should worry about. No, looks like he only got the one swipe at you." Emily thought she was lingering rather a long time on her shoulder, and looked back to find the surgi-witch peering closely at her left ear. "I'm sorry just curious. I've never treated a Faerie before. I'll take it that your blood is normally this colour?"

"Yes, it is." She hadn't been able to feel any pain, only some slight pressure as the reparation surgery went on, as though someone was rearranging the inside of her shoulder. The alcohol cleanup felt pleasantly cool, and made her skin prickle.

"It's strange this wound is partially cauterised. It's like the knife he used was red-hot or something."

"It was an iron weapon," Emily said dully. "Iron is toxic to Faeries. It burns us."

"Very interesting," the surgi-witch said, laving the closed wound with Healing Potion, then antiseptic, and then a healthy amount of Numbing Potion, before dispelling the surgical field. "This should heal quickly. Change your bandages twice a day, keep the shoulder bound for the first week, don't lift anything at all with your left hand, or lean on your left arm, for at least a week, and no strenuous exercise for at least three. If you take the antibiotic potions regularly and apply Healing Potion to it twice a day, it should heal completely without infection or scarring.

"For someone who's been stabbed in the back, you're actually in quite decent shape. This is just a bad slash, not a deep puncture. Consider yourself lucky," the surgi-witch said, patting her good shoulder.

Emily was then escorted to a Spartan little hospital room, where she finally fell into a fitful sleep at about two a.m. only to be awakened shortly after five a.m. by a pair of Magical Law Enforcement detectives, come to take her statement as to what had happened in the alley. Afterward, they told her that corpse of her attacker had been collected, identified, and investigated. He had apparently been a Squib, with a long history of unemployment, and an even longer criminal record.

The two investigators seemed to have concluded that he had thought a slight, well-dressed woman would be an easy and lucrative mark, and seemed to find it very peculiar that she had evaded the worst of his attack and turned his own weapon on him. The investigators also seemed to think that being a Faerie was a very suspicious thing indeed, and to be a combat-trained Faery knight was downright sinister. As with so many other wizards, their gazes got as far as her eyes, which were widely dilated

in the dimness of her room, and her ears, then stopped. They informed her that she would have to appear at a special inquest in the very near future and warned her not to "get any fancy notions about finding one of you people's dimensional portals and leaving town."

By the time Emily finished the interview, the sun was coming up outside her window. She pulled the thin pillow over her head and tried again to sleep.

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The sun rose bright and clear over Hogwarts Castle on the morning of the Third Task.

Breakfast was accompanied by a cacophony of excited student voices to Severus Snape, the Great Hall seemed a veritable echo chamber of high-pitched squealing young voices. As he sat at breakfast, nursing cup after cup of black coffee and pushing breakfast disinterestedly around on his plate, he idly wished that he hadn't taken all of that headache powder from yesterday, as he could use another dose of it right about now.

The Gryffindors in particular seemed to be outdoing themselves as far as creating a head-exploding racket, especially after the morning's owl post was delivered and they all opened that morning's *Daily Prophet.* The hall was soon alive with scandalised whispers probably another ridiculous puff piece had appeared about how Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, noble Hogwarts champion, had stubbed his toe or some such idiocy, and now he could look forward to another day full of Draco Malfoy braying about the injustice of living in a world with such a Potter in it. Oh, *joy.*

Professor Swain hadn't shown up to breakfast this morning, and her continued absence was now becoming a bit worrisome. Perhaps she was busy with her finals, or perhaps she was still on edge over Moody's recent fit of contentiousness toward her, or... perhaps she was still in a snit over their argument in her classroom, Snape thought, with a second's downcast grimace.

He was turning away from Professor Swain's conspicuously empty chair when he noticed that Professor Moody, who was seated to his immediate left, was glancing at her vacant place at the table as well and just for an instant, something about Moody's expression gave him pause. Moody just looked entirely too *satisfied* to see her chair empty, for some reason. It was just odd.

*Moody wanted to kill me out there today he positively reeked of it,*she had said. *I'm not going to feel safe until I'm a dimensional plane away from him.*

It was just... *odd.*

Snape finished his own breakfast quickly, then left the high table and approached Argus Filch, who was feeding Mrs. Norris her morning bowl of tuna at the back of the Great Hall.

"Mr. Filch? I had hoped to speak to Professor Swain this morning. She left the castle rather late last evening did you see her come in?"

Filch shook his head. "Never saw her come in." He turned toward Mrs. Norris "You spy a towheaded Faerie flitting in evening last, my sweet?"

Mrs. Norris cocked her head and chirruped *Wrowrrrr* in a distinctly negative tone.

"I see." Snape curtly took his leave of the two of them, then turned back toward the high table. He caught up to the Headmaster as Dumbledore headed toward the anteroom adjacent to the Great Hall, where the four champions were soon to be greeting their families, friends, sycophants, and well-wishers. "Albus?"

Dumbledore stopped and turned back toward him. "Yes, Severus?"

"I had a question for Professor Swain regarding our, er, tutorial curriculum this morning. She missed supper and our instructional session last night, and I couldn't help but notice that her usual seat is again empty this morning. I also know that a messenger delivered a letter to her yesterday evening with what appeared to be some rather distressing news, and then I saw her leaving school quite late last evening. Mr. Filch has just told me that he didn't see her come back last night. Has she told you where she was going, or when she would be returning?"

"No, she has not," Dumbledore said. "Have you any idea what news she received in the message?"

"No, sir."

The Headmaster paused thoughtfully. "I shall pay a visit to her first class session, this morning, and see if she appears. Given the nature of Professor Swain's vocation, it is possible that she had pressing business to attend to last night, but if she had been unavoidably delayed, I am certain she would have sent word in time for me to obtain a substitute."

"Of course, sir," Snape said. "If you see her in class, please tell her that... I would like to reschedule our last night's meeting at a time more convenient to her, if that is... acceptable to her."

Dumbledore's eyebrows went up in faint surprise perhaps he was unused to hearing such consideration from the Head of Slytherin. "I will be certain to tell her, then, Severus."

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Emily finally fell asleep perhaps an hour after the investigators left. She usually slept on her left shoulder and kept shifting her weight in that direction, only to wake herself up with the pain of pressure on her wound. There seemed no way to get comfortable, as though she were trying to sleep on the precarious edge of a razor, but more potent painkillers were out of the question. This necessity of lying on her right side and the position of the bed also meant that she had to lie with her back facing the door, a set-up to make any soldier feel ill at ease. It was only sheer exhaustion that finally allowed her to fall into a light doze well after dawn.

Sometime later, she gradually became aware of the warmth of a calm presence beside her, someone's gentle hand stroking her hair. Ah, that was nice. So soft, so affectionate, like the times her father had sat up with her when she was sick with the white fever as a child.

But then she remembered she was in hospital in the Second World, not at home in her childhood bed. She opened her eyes and turned toward the person beside her, expecting to see a mediwitch or nurse or Healer come to check on her condition and gasped.

Lucius Malfoy was sitting beside her bed.

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Emily immediately sat up and flinched away from him then crumpled backward with a little sob of pain, arrested in mid-flinch as the violent motion pulled hard on the laceration in her shoulder.

"Careful, dear! You don't want to reopen that slash, whatever you do." Lucius steadied her with both hands, his blond brows drawn together in concern.

"What are *you* doing here?" she hissed, pulling away from him.

He released her immediately and leaned back in the chair, putting a discreet distance between them, his expression registering some genteel shock at her vehemence. "Why, I came to see how you were, of course. First thing this morning, I got an owl from Draco saying that you quite unexpectedly hadn't turned up for classes this morning and Dumbledore had to substitute for you. He wanted to know if I knew what had happened poor boy was dreadfully concerned about you. I immediately Flooed Magical

Law Enforcement and St. Mungo's to see if anything amiss had befallen you, and a Healer friend of mine checked the records and told me you had been admitted to the hospital late last night. I promised Draco I would visit you immediately and make sure you were all right."

She remained silent, breathing hard, staring at him accusingly.

"I'm sorry if I startled you you were asleep when I came in. I've only been here for perhaps five minutes," he said mildly.

"Oh, bloody hell my classes already started?" Emily asked, raking a hand through her tousled hair, and half-heartedly smoothing her worn hospital gown. "What time is it?"

Lucius consulted a heavy gold pocket watch "A bit after half-past eleven."

"Oh no, they're into my second session already. Damn it, I need to get back to school." Back to school, and well away from Mr. Lucius Malfoy, thank you very bloody much. She looked around for her clothes, which were sitting in a slashed, bloodstained heap on the cheap institutional nightstand beside her bed. Her black frock and velvet cloak looked crumpled and badly in need of some industrial-strength *Textilis Reparo* and *Waskan* cleaning spells before she could have even hoped to look presentable.

"Er, confidentially, dear, I think you might have a bit of trouble going back to school at this time," Lucius said, in an even milder tone.

"Why is that?" she demanded suspiciously.

"You're welcome to try, of course, but the two fellows from Magical Law Enforcement sitting outside your room might have something to say about it," Lucius said. "I think they're under orders not to let you leave, and to see that you get to the inquest this afternoon."

"What?" Emily gasped.

"It's standard procedure after there's been a violent death, dear, nothing to worry about necessarily. They just want to make sure that you get to the hearing," Lucius said helpfully.

"After there's been a violent death... ?"

Then it hit her this was the Second World, and she had signed a legally binding agreement promising that she would abide by British law and Wizarding law while she lived on British soil, thereby granting them the power to try her, sentence her, and imprison her for offences committed against the Crown as they saw fit

and the previous evening, she had *killed* a man. A man native to this country.

"Yes, whenever a man turns up in an alley with his throat cut, you of course know it has to be investigated," Lucius said. "Due process of law, and all that."

No... no, this *couldn't* be happening.

"But I didn't murder the man I defended myself. He tried to murder *me*," Emily interjected, her voice cracking. "Without provocation he sneaked up behind me and tried to put a knife in my back "

"And you managed to take the knife from him, and take his head half off with it. Good work, my dear," Lucius said, with genuine admiration. "He should have thought twice before trying to steal some Galleons from *you*, eh?"

"Lucius... " She turned toward him, white-eyed with terror. In her desperation, even Lucius seemed sympathetic at that moment. "I don't think it was just some desperate fellow out to steal some Galleons. I think someone hired him someone arranged this specifically."

He stared at her, shocked and then his grey eyes gleamed with that icy rage that had so unnerved her the last time she had seen him. But now, seeing him flare up furiously on her behalf, she found it oddly comforting. "Why so? Emily why would someone do that?"

"He used an iron knife. Not steel *iron.* He would have had to look awfully hard to find a low-tech weapon like that even in Wizarding shops, you find tempered steel. Or he would have had to use a really difficult Transfiguration spell to transmute it from steel into a less refined metal... no, this bloke was hunting *Faerie.* Most definitely."

"Could one of the Robinetts have sent an assassin after you?" He could not have looked more deeply concerned about her. "Tried to make it look like some random attack from some Faerie-hating Second-worlder?"

"I don't think so, but... " But could they have? Could Richert and Steifan, as they saw their mother's health failing, have come here and commissioned someone? Could the Robinetts have actually sunk to the level of condoning the use of cold iron against a countrywoman? It was unthinkable, it was blasphemous... but how else could the assassin have known to use an iron knife against a Fae target?

Emily turned back to Lucius. "We both know what they're like... I just don't know. But even if it was them, they're going to have hidden their tracks and how could I explain to Magical Law Enforcement that enemies from *another dimensional plane* set me up for this? The investigators who were here earlier seemed to think my account of what happened sounded suspicious... there are guards outside my door... oh, sweet Mother... "

Her heart gave a wild lurch inside her chest, and suddenly it seemed very close and airless in her hospital room.

Lucius put a supportive hand on her arm. "Did you get the investigators' names, by any chance?" he asked gently. "I do flatter myself that I have a bit of influence with that department "

"It doesn't matter you know what's going to happen," Emily cried. "The judge at the inquest is going to take one look at me, see some pointy-eared foreigner, and he's going to instantly assume that *I cold-bloodedly murdered a British subject.*There are guards outside my door they already think there's cause to suspect me "

"Calm down, dear! You're working yourself into a state "

"I'll never get a fair hearing here I already know that. All some solicitor will have to do is find out what happened with Robinett, and they're going to try to paint me as some sociopathic impulse killer "

"*Emily.* You'll get your fair hearing," Lucius said, but she wasn't listening to him.

"Of course I won't have you *looked at me* recently?" she snapped. "There is no way some British wizard judge is going to have any sympathy for me, and there weren't any witnesses."

"I have looked at you, love," he said. "Intimately. And only ever with the greatest of affection."

"Oh by the Mother *I'm going to end up in Azkaban.*I know it." She covered her face with her hands in despair.

"No, no." Lucius reassuringly took her hands in his. "You're not going to Azkaban, love, believe me. If I have anything to say about it "

"If you have anything to say about it?" She shook him off furiously. "If *you* have anything to say about it, I'll probably get life in prison. What are you *really* here for? What

deal am I going to have to make to get out of this? My True Name in exchange for my freedom, is that it?"

Lucius stared at her, shocked. "Emily, really! I'm amazed that you would even *think* that I would... " He averted his eyes, his face crumpling; he seemed to swallow hard. "Well then. I can see that I'm not welcome here. I'll... leave you to your rest."

He picked up his briefcase and walking cane and turned to leave but somehow Emily's heart lurched when he turned away from her. This was Lucius, slipped her a telepathic potion and tried to learn her True Name bloody *Lucius*, and she hated him. But... seeing him make for the door suddenly made her feel that her only advantage in this situation, her only lifeline to the world outside that door, was about to leave her behind.

"Lucius, wait," she called lamely. "What do you mean, if you have anything to say about it?"

He paused, turned back to her. "Well... you've probably already done this for yourself, but I was wondering if I could do anything to help," he said hesitantly. "If I could notify your solicitor, or your work, or some such, seeing as how I doubt that the blokes outside are going to fetch owl and parchment for you, I'd be happy to do it."

What he was suggesting made a great deal of sense in the aftermath of the attack, the shock, pain, and exhaustion had been such that she hadn't really thought of contacting anyone until now. "Well, all right, I should probably send a letter to Dumbledore and to my family solicitor... if I have to go to an inquest today, I'll need Dumbledore, if he can come, and my solicitor, and some fresh clothes, I guess... if you could just bring me some parchment, run something to the post office... "

"Yes, of course I will." He took a seat beside her bed again, opened his briefcase, and handed her a monogrammed leather folder with a sheaf of Ministry letterhead stationery, and a self-inking pheasant feather quill.

"I'll just be a minute... " she said with a sidelong glance, opening the folder on her knee.

"Take as much time as you need," he replied graciously.

Emily hastily composed two letters, one to her family solicitor at the firm of Barak & Cicero, and one to Albus Dumbledore, with an account of what had happened, and explaining that she appeared to be very much under suspicion of wrongdoing, and was scheduled to appear at a court inquest that afternoon and that she would appreciate some *immediate* assistance.

When she was finished, she sealed the letters and turned back to Lucius. "If you could just get to the post office, then... ?"

"Of course, I'd be happy to." He paused, looking at her with a haggard, miserable expression. "Emily... I know I offended you very much, and you're absolutely right to be so angry. I was... back in May, I just so bloody swept away by everything that was happening... and you know I've always sort of wished that I had my own True Name, so... well... I tried to take something I shouldn't have, and I can't *describe* how much I regret that now."

"Lucius, it was... it was just that you know what a True Name means to one of us. It's not like you wanted to borrow my wand for a moment, it's "

"Yes, I know what it is to you. It was... my behaviour was just inexcusable and I know it. I don't expect you to forgive me or take me back, but... " The polished drawl broke and became for a moment falteringly human. "I really do miss you desperately, and I can't stand seeing you like this. I keep thinking of how you looked the first day I met you, flirting with me in your little black dress, without a care in the world that's how you should be, not lying all pale and lonesome in a hospital bed. Can't we... oh bloody hell, can't you at least let me try to do something for you when you're in hospital at least? Isn't there anything more you would let me do to help?"

"Well... " He seemed so sincere, so penitent, and eager to be given some task to carry out so as to prove his worth to her again. In her present situation, that was not unwelcome, even from him. All that mattered was that she was terrified, wounded, alone, and very far from home, and he seemed the only person who could protect her, or who seemed to care about what happened to her at all. Some part of her had hoped that Dumbledore would have somehow gotten wind of her misfortune in his own mysterious sort of way, and have already come to her aid, but he seemed to have other things to do at that moment. "If you could just get these out. For what it's worth there's probably no way I'll stay out of prison at this rate, but... I don't know. If you thought there was anything besides asking Dumbledore and my attorney for their help that can be done, I don't know that I'd say no at this point."

"All right then, just leave it to me." Lucius took her hand again, pressed it to his lips. "You'll get a fair hearing, and you'll be free as air by tonight. I would never let anything hurt you, my love you know that."

He hadn't let go of her hand, and she let him hold it. She glanced down at herself, noticed that she didn't look anything like she had usually gotten herself up before him her hair had to be a mess, her breath was probably rank, and she was wearing a shapeless hospital gown but that didn't seem to dim his ardour one bit. Lucius looked very handsome today, in extremely sharp business robes of what looked like black raw silk, an intricate serpent brooch on his lapel the sight of all that power, wealth, and influence holding her hand and pledging never to let anything hurt her was suddenly a very welcome sight. She let her fingers curve affectionately around his cheek, and he closed his eyes and seemed to sigh into her touch. It looked as though he truly was sorry and really had missed her desperately.

After a long moment, Emily reluctantly disengaged herself from him and handed him the letters to her solicitor's office and to Dumbledore. "Here... please, could you post these as fast as possible?"

"I shall, dear," Lucius promised, tucking the two letters into his pocket. He gazed very seriously at her face for a moment, then pressed a soft, tender kiss to her cheek. "Don't worry, love. Everything will be all right."

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When Lucius Malfoy left St. Mungo's, he did not immediately go to the post office, as he had told Emily. Instead, he made his leisurely way down to League Alley and paid a call to the Law Office of Leach & Rapyne. Shortly thereafter, he had a pleasant lunch with an associate of that well-regarded firm. Then, he took a walk down to Sartor Alley and made stops into a few high-end shops. It was two o'clock p.m. when he returned to his office at the Ministry of Magic.

His new secretary, Miss Ginger Leigh, was standing on a stool shelving some books when he came into the office and Lucius paused a moment to appreciate the view afforded of that young lady's commendable legs by the high perch and her pleasantly short navy flannel business robes before greeting her. Upon the retirement of his long-time former secretary, Ministry veteran Mrs. Mehitable Wattles, Lucius had personally hand-picked Miss Leigh, whose qualifications were impeccable, whose education was exemplary, and whose stunning brunette looks made her very easy to look upon. "Good afternoon, Ginger."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Malfoy, sir. The files you asked for are on your desk, sir."

"Thank you. Oh, and when you get a chance, be a dear and post these for me." He put Emily's letters on Miss Leigh's desk.

"Any rush, sir?"

"No rush," he said pleasantly. "They can go out with the usual evening's mail. Thank you *very* much, Ginger." He then went into his office, but not before he smiled at his secretary like to make that pretty young lady feel warm all over.

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Any number of Hogwarts alumni and some of the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang parents had shown up at Hogwarts to watch the Third Task, and Professor Snape had (very much against his will) been conscripted by the Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress to play host that afternoon. This consisted of loitering around the Great Hall anteroom making inane small talk (yes, I am *still* teaching Potions, thank you) and answering the same two questions as to when exactly the Third Task was to begin (that evening at dusk), and who was leading as far as points went (Diggory and Potter tied at eighty-five points each, followed by Viktor Krum with eighty points, and Fleur

Delacour with fifty-nine points.) He was asked these questions with such regularity that he began to debate writing this information down on little index cards and simply handing them to anyone who approached him.

His mood was especially tetchy at that moment, because Professor Swain hadn't shown up to lunch, either and although Snape would never have admitted it to anyone, he was starting to worry, and starting to feel just a touch guilty. This feeling intensified exponentially after lunch, when Dumbledore took him aside and told him that Professor Swain had not appeared for her morning's classes, and that there had been no word from her explaining why.

"So, you have no idea as to why she left the castle so suddenly, Severus? Do you have any inkling as to what news she received, any at all?" Dumbledore asked, his white brows knitting together.

For a single long moment, Snape wished that he could tell Dumbledore the whole truth What really happened, Albus, is that she and I had a very bitter personal argument perhaps three hours before she left the castle and effectively vanished. I don't think she's the sort to do something rash or self-destructive out of anger, but you have known her much longer than I, what do you think?

"No, sir, I don't know what news she received," Snape replied. "Although I do recall that the message was delivered by someone who appeared to be another Faerie, not by owl. And Professor Swain appeared to know the fellow quite well she embraced him before he left."

Dumbledore nodded. "I see. If a Fae messenger delivered the letter to her personally, then most likely, it was from either Emily's mother, or King Gwydion himself, and concerned a matter of some importance. If she said a warm farewell to the fellow, he was probably a close friend from Court, or a member of her platoon. I have not heard of any escalation of conflict in the Third Kingdom of late, but the Orc tribes can be highly unpredictable." Dumbledore considered that thoughtfully for a moment. "If you will excuse me, Severus, I would like to see if Emily said anything to Irma last night before she left."

The Headmaster then nodded and left the anteroom, leaving Snape to his own speculations and he always had a pessimistic habit of assuming the worst. He envisioned everything from out-and-out desertion of her job, to sudden freak accidents, to life-and-death crises in the Fae community, to assassination by anti-Faerie hooligans; all of which had absolutely nothing to do with any shouting matches with him. The idea that she might have stormed off and disappeared following what could loosely be defined as a lovers' quarrel with him (although he resisted thinking of their *confrontation* in her classroom as such with every cell in him), was a very new one for poor Professor Snape, and one that he did not like at all.

He was so deep into this dire sort of reverie that he barely noticed someone approaching him "You've been to the Mushroom Circle, Professor Snape?"

It was the eldest Weasley boy, Wallace, or William, or something, one of the Weasleys who had turned up to support Harry Potter that day. He was one of those alumni who went Bohemian after graduation, growing his dark red hair long, and getting an ear piercing. Snape had nothing against him, really he had been the best of the Weasley lot by far, well-behaved in class, a fine student. Too bad the younger brothers didn't all take after him. But now he was glaring at the lad, wondering if Weasley had perhaps seen his embarrassing behaviour at that establishment and was now going to start the rumour that destroyed his tenuous respectability that very day. From the look of him, it was entirely probable that he frequented places like Faery nightclubs.

"How did you hear about that?" Snape demanded.

Bill pointed to the faded remains of the ink stamp on the back of Snape's hand where the calligraphy logo with the club's name was clearly recognisable. The management of that establishment apparently used some rather potent indelible ink for such stamps.

Snape crossed his arms over his chest, tucking the offending ink stamp out of sight. "Yes, I was there the night before last. I was aiding another professor with, er, a social work case she undertook, and she chose that rather improbable venue to meet with some colleagues."

"She does social work? Good for her, then. How's the club I hear that place is bloody *amazing*."

"Rather loud and crowded for my taste, but I'll not deny the music is quite well-done, and it seems inhabited by some rather enthusiastic dancers, if you like that sort of thing," Snape said stiffly.

Bill Weasley didn't seem at all fazed by the fact that it hadn't been to Professor Snape's taste. "It's really hard to get in though, you have to either be a Faerie or be married to one or something. How did you pull it off?"

"Professor Swain is a Faerie herself I went as her guest."

"Oh, that's right, Ron and George said something about her. Is she here today? Mind pointing her out?"

"She doesn't seem to have decided to grace us with her presence today," Snape replied tightly. "However, Professor Swain does often adhere to the usual Arcadian notions of punctuality and time management."

"Oh, I wouldn't mind that so much," Weasley said, with a little sidelong grin at Snape. "Sure, they show up late to everything, but you'll never see a plain Faerie. They just grow them beautiful out there or something."

Snape realised to his irritation that Weasley was trying to share a man-to-man sort of moment with him it was really shocking how some students simply dispensed with all respect for their professors once they graduated from school.

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The two Magical Law Enforcement officials outside Emily's hospital room told her to be ready to be escorted to her inquest at five o'clock p.m. that evening.

In her letter to Dumbledore, Emily had asked the Headmaster to have the house elves send her some clothes appropriate for a court appearance. Instead, several boxes arrived at half-past three p.m., from three of the most exclusive boutiques in Sartor Alley. Inside one was a full outfit of fresh, professional clothing, in another were several bottles and jars from a *Purveyors of Fine Toiletries Since 1671* sort of shop, and the last held a small travel valise of glove-soft black leather. The robes weren't what she would have picked out for herself, but they were exactly what Lucius would choose if he was trying to approximate her taste.

When she emerged from her hospital room, ready for her court appearance in the (she had to admit, wonderfully tasteful and elegant) new black silk dress robes, she was immediately greeted by an extremely well-dressed, balding wizard with a briefcase, who shook her hand and introduced himself as Cratchit Thimblewick.

Cratchit Thimblewick, Esquire her solicitor.

"You're my solicitor?" Emily asked, blankly. "But I have a solicitor, Deborah Barak. Why was she not contacted?"

"Mrs. Barak didn't appear to be in the office today, Miss Swain."

"Then you should have sent her an owl at home, Mr. Thimblewick," she replied, an edge in her voice.

Thimblewick's calm smile never wavered. "I do apologise, but my employer thought it would be a better idea to begin analysing your case with all dispatch, madam, given the time-sensitive nature of this proceeding. My firm, the Law Office of Leach and Rapyne, has long been retained by the Malfoy family, and Mr. Lucius Malfoy has sent me along to oversee your inquest."

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Snape's final class let out for the day at four o'clock p.m. as was the habit of most Hogwarts professors, he usually scheduled his classes to leave a long break just before supper. After class, he joined most of his colleagues in the teachers' lounge, where they had congregated to gossip about the Third Task. Hagrid, Flitwick, McGonagall and Moody, Task referees, were clustered in an animated little caucus near the front of the room. Professor Snape, however, didn't much feel like joining any of their conversations. He positioned himself at a table in the back with a pile of compositions to grade, and tried not to look like he was watching the door for his missing colleague's arrival. The door opened some time after five p.m. but it was only Madam Pince. A rather worried-looking Madam Pince, at that. The librarian went over to Professor Sprout and began talking to her in a low voice.

Not long before supper, he heard the door opening again and Snape quickly looked up as the Headmaster came into the room, with an extremely grave look on his face. Dumbledore took a position at the front of the room, and Snape noticed that there was a letter in his hand, on the distinctive letterhead of the Ministry of Magic, London.

"Everyone if I may have your attention for a moment, please." Dumbledore's face was sombre as he addressed the roomful of his colleagues. "Unfortunately, I must play the bearer of bad news this afternoon. It seems that Professor Swain has been unavoidably prevented from returning to school today, and may not be attending the Third Task. She was injured last night while in London, and was admitted to St. Mungo's at approximately ten-thirty p.m. last night."

Instantly, Madam Pince, Hagrid, Flitwick, and McGonagall came out with some variation on *Is she all right?* almost in unison.

"Yes, she is in good health, given the circumstances," the Headmaster said. "They will be discharging her this afternoon."

"What on Earth happened, sir?" Madam Pince gasped.

Dumbledore's eyes gleamed with icy anger, but his voice remained calm. "Apparently, someone had the poor judgment to attempt to kill her last night."

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In the back of the room, unseen by anyone but Dumbledore Professor Snape suddenly paled so far beyond his usual pallor that he looked almost green, and gripped the table in front of him with a stricken look. Madam Pince's face crumpled, and then she turned to Pomona Sprout and wilted onto her shoulder. Minerva McGonagall gasped audibly, her hand pressed to her lips, and tender-hearted little Filius Flitwick burst into tears. Rubeus Hagrid was furious "Kill her? *Kill her?* Poor little sprite I'd like to tear the bastard apart meself."

Snape silently glided up to the Headmaster's elbow in the uproar. "Where is the assailant now?" he asked, in the quietest, coldest voice imaginable.

"He's quite dead," Dumbledore answered levelly.

"Did she kill him?" Snape asked, in the same deadly undertone.

"I'm afraid she did, Severus."

"*Good,*" the Potions master said softly. Then Snape's gaze went briefly past the Headmaster to Alastor Moody, who had not stirred from his seat next to Professor Binns. Among the staff who had just heard the news about the attack, Professor Moody alone seemed entirely stoic and unmoved, expressionlessly gazing into the empty hearth. Even the ghostly Professor Binns, who had long since shuffled off this mortal coil and would never have any more reason to fear death, was jittering with shock and amazement.

"The Professor's letter seems to have been delayed in getting to us," Dumbledore said grimly. "There was to be a inquest hearing this afternoon at half-past five p.m., which means that it would have started " They both glanced at the teacher's lounge clock "ten minutes ago. Which of course means that I was not able to attend it." The Headmaster looked very concerned and distressed at this turn of events.

"I need to talk to you privately, sir," Snape said, aside to Dumbledore, and left the room.

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Minutes later, Snape and Dumbledore were facing each other with deadly seriousness in the Headmaster's office.

"So, you say she came to you with these suspicions immediately following her demonstration on physical methods of pre-empting Unforgiveable Curses?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes, sir. I assisted Professor Swain with some questions regarding Unforgiveable Curses last Monday, and then attended her demonstration that Thursday afternoon, as you know. Immediately after her class was over, she asked to speak to me privately, and seemed very agitated," Snape said. "At the time I didn't think there was real cause to suspect Moody of any kind of murderous intent, sir, though Professor Swain seemed completely convinced herself. Now, however...I think that perhaps she might have had real cause to suspect him."

"Your colleague confided to you that she believed Moody wanted to kill her and then an attempt was made on her life six days later," Dumbledore said thoughtfully. "It does indeed look suspicious. But Alastor was here at the time of the attack."

"Of course he was," Snape said. "We're both familiar with the tactic of hiring someone else to carry out one's dirty work while the real perpetrator is amongst any number of witnesses. It's the most foolproof approach imaginable it's ingenuity worthy of any Death Eater. Could it be that Alastor Moody, in pursuing the evildoers he hates, has become more like them than any of us could have imagined?"

Dumbledore considered that for a long moment, his white brows creasing, then breathed a heavy sigh. "I wish that I found your explanation more implausible. Severus...I must ask you to keep yet another secret for me," he said gravely, turning toward Snape. "I have, this year, had my doubts about Alastor Moody's mental state. He simply does not seem to me to be the same man I have known, for so many years, though I cannot say exactly why. If his paranoia has escalated to a point where he seeks to harm others, based on some false assumption that they mean him harm...then he must be compelled to seek psychiatric treatment, against his will if necessary. I beg of you, my friend keep a close, close eye on Professor Moody. I will ask Minerva, Filius, and Pomona to do so as well."

"I shall, sir," Snape said gravely. "One more thing when Professor Swain was trying to convince me of her credibility last week, she said: "Professor Moody practically subsists off that herbal tonic he keeps in his hip flask, but occasionally he'll go out in the evening and come back smelling like fine aged brandy." And you and I both know very well that Moody has always professed to be a rabid teetotaller. Alcohol impairs one's judgment and interferes with constant vigilance; therefore it's unacceptable. If he's indulging in private, could that be a sign of increased strain?"

"It could be," the Headmaster said, shaking his white head thoughtfully. "At any rate, if the inquest goes well, Emily should be back at Hogwarts late this evening. If the inquest does *not* go well, however, I shall need to pass on our celebration of this evening, and lend her all the support I can. There is so little precedent regarding the Fae in our judicial system...I dearly wish that she finds herself before a sympathetic magistrate. My only hope now is that she is somehow making the best of this situation on her own." He glanced down at his desktop, his jaw tensing under the wealth of white beard.

"Of course, sir," Snape said, nodding.

"When she returns...if Alastor was somehow behind the attack, Emily will need to be on her guard as well. While there is no doubt in my mind that she can take care of herself in most situations, taking a knife to the back could put a damper on anyone's spirits. I know you and she have had your differences this year, but please, Severus promise me you'll help me make certain she comes to no more harm."

"I will, sir," Snape promised, with a solemn nod.

Dumbledore pulled his pocket watch from his robes and mused over the tiny planets dancing around the watch face. "Ah, the Third Task is almost upon us, my friend. We should get down to the Great Hall for supper."

Part Second: The Hart Rampant: Chapter 24, Part 2

Chapter 32 of 55

In which Professor Swain discovers the delights of a dual life as both a Hogwarts professor and Lucius Malfoy's mistress, until a chance encounter with a desperate Faery prostitute in Knockturn Alley sends her to the most unlikely person for aid. Meanwhile, Severus Snape finds himself alone and adrift in the Mushroom Circle, a Faery nightclub...

Chapter 24, Part 2:

It was a very short inquest.

The Honourable Tibernius Solon reviewed the facts in evidence and heard the testimony of the two investigators Emily had spoken to that morning, the mediwitch who had sutured her shoulder and the young Indian waitress who aided her just after the attack.

The mediwitch, Mrs. Dayna V. Egurl, Lic. Hea., stated that Emily's wound could not possibly have been self-inflicted and that in her expert opinion, it appeared as though it had been caused by a stab from behind. Miss Daireen Dayananda said that Emily had appeared at her family's restaurant, bleeding and in a state of great shock, saying that someone had sneaked up on her with a knife and tactfully leaving out the part about how she had forced the door. Their stories corroborated what Emily had said in her statement by the time they were done giving testimony, she wanted to hug them both.

"The coroner said the method of death was some *exceedingly* neat work on your part, miss," one of the investigators said while he was being questioned. "The fellow probably still doesn't know he's dead. You've had some experience... at this sort of thing, perhaps?"

"The Fae have conferred the title of Master-At-Arms on my client she holds the rank of platoon commander in the Arcadian military, Your Honour. Anyone who has engaged her in combat before had formally been declared an enemy of the people and of the Crown by Gwydion the Fifth, Sovereign of the Third Kingdom, or his allies, in a royal declaration of war, sir," Cratchit Thimblewick answered. Emily maintained an erect posture as best she could on a poor night's sleep, and with a badly lacerated shoulder.

The magistrate's eyes widened, and one eyebrow arched. "I... *see*. And your business here in Britain is... ?"

"My client is a Defence Against the Dark Arts professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. She is teaching there by special request of Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, Your Honour. If you will contact the Department of International Magical Cooperation at the Ministry of Magic, you will find her work papers in order there, as evidenced by this exhibit." Lucius's solicitor had already taken copies of her work papers from his briefcase and was handing them to the judge.

"Yes, indeed, everything appears to be in order here." The magistrate riffled through Emily's papers. "Well, then. This fellow probably got the biggest surprise of his life when you turned out to be a Faery knight in civilian clothes, didn't he, Professor?"

"No doubt, sir," Emily replied.

"Not to mention the *last* surprise of his life," the judge quipped. The court tittered.

The magistrate then addressed the court and told them that he readily concluded that Professor Emily Swain had had cause to believe that her own life had been in danger after an assailant made an unprovoked attack on her and injured her with a deadly weapon, and was justified in the use of deadly force to protect herself.

"Gentlemen, ladies, the Queen's Bench believes that it is obvious what happened here. Commander, I dearly hope never to startle you in a dark alley. Court is adjourned."

Cratchit Thimblewick turned to Emily and shook her hand, a satisfied smile on his face. Emily did everything in her power not to faint with relief.

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Lucius was waiting outside the courtroom when the inquest let out. "Emily, dear. You're not being led off in leg irons should I take that as a good sign?"

"Self-defence as a complete justification for the use of deadly force open and shut," Cratchit Thimblewick said, approaching Lucius with a triumphant smile.

"Fine work, as always, Cratchit," Lucius said, shaking the solicitor's hand.

The magistrate nodded to Lucius as he passed him in the hall. "See you on the green on Friday, Lucius?"

"As always, Tibernius," he replied, with a pleasant nod.

After the magistrate and Emily's solicitor had passed down the corridor, Emily turned back to Lucius "You play *golf* with the judge at my inquest?" she asked.

"Oh yes, every Friday, weather permitting. I know most of the judicial magistrates in Wizarding London. They all belong to my club," Lucius said, with an engaging smile. "I even used to clerk for Tibernius's father, Theophilus Solon, when I was fresh out of Hogwarts and working at my first Ministry job. So you see, my dear, there was no need to worry about going to Azkaban, simply for defending yourself. Free as air, just like I told you." He surveyed her with an approving eye "Oh good, the robes do fit nicely, don't they?"

"Yes, they're lovely. Thank you."

"I had to make a guess at your size, but it seems I did all right." The approving eye had turned to another of his slow, appreciative glances. "Have I ever told you how becoming black is to you? I don't care what anyone else says with fair hair and dark eyes like yours, it's positively striking."

She flushed slightly under this praise, still hardly able to believe that she had just gone from a situation where her personal freedom was at stake to being complimented on her becoming new robes. Just like that, the looming threat of rough justice in a hostile foreign court, followed by prison, the horror of Dementors, was simply *over*. She was free and the credit for that seemed to belong to the man before her. She had to admit, at that moment, life was indeed much more pleasant under Lucius Malfoy's

expansive wing.

"Lucius, I... I'm really surprised that you went to all this trouble for me," she said softly.

"Why, dear?" he asked, looking mildly curious as to why she would even ask such a question.

Emily blushed. "Well, the last time we spoke to each other, back in May, you have to admit, we didn't part on very friendly terms," she replied.

"Like I said earlier, much of the fault there was mine." He reached for her hand, clasped it between both of his. "I do wish more than anything that you hadn't been attacked, my dear, but truthfully, I'm glad to have the opportunity to at least *try* to earn your trust again, after what happened in May," he said, in a private aside to her. "I've felt terrible since the moment you left that day, but I'd been afraid to try to contact you with an apology. After that horrid, presumptuous gaffe of mine, I really wouldn't have blamed you if you never wanted to see me again. I'm really honoured that you accepted my help."

He smiled at her, an invisible weight seeming to fall from his shoulders. Despite herself, Emily felt that little splash in her chest that only Lucius ever seemed to provoke in her.

"I'm... I'm very grateful," Emily said. "You know how the Fae feel about Dementors... Truthfully, I'd rather get the death penalty than a life sentence in Azkaban."

"You have nothing to worry about. I would never let that happen to you." He said it very softly, but with such a note of gallantry in his voice as though he would fight off crowds of Dementors rather than let them take her. He also stroked his fingertips over the back of her hand as he let it go, making her breath quicken for a moment.

"Thank you," she said again, very softly.

"Do you know what I most like to do after a successful day in court?" he asked. "Why don't you let me take you out for a grand dinner and oceans of wine to celebrate there's a marvellous little place quite near here with just about the best chef and wine cellar imaginable. Really, I insist."

"Well... I suppose I should be getting back to school... " Back to school, to where a huge, noisy crowd would be gathering to watch a lot of hair-raising exploits, which was exactly what she didn't need in this fatigued, achy, emotionally-wrung-out state. Back to a callous and disappointing onetime lover, an insanely paranoid colleague who gave her the willies, and the service of a Headmaster who had let her deal with a critical legal inquest all on her own. Truthfully, the idea of spending some time lingering over one of Lucius's favourite decadent suppers and lots of wine in some quiet restaurant sounded much better at that moment than going back to school, and she had eaten nothing all day but a meagre hospital breakfast. "Oh... why not. I really don't think I could deal with a lot of crowds and excitement right now."

"*Splendid*," he whispered. Again, he regarded her with such gratitude, such tenderness. Oh, those eyes, that smile of his... it was as if the sun had risen.

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The Hogwarts cooking staff had outdone themselves yet again for the supper preceding the Third Task. A plethora of varied and delectable dishes were sent up, including French frogs' legs, Romanian pork tochitura with polenta, Bulgarian moussaka, and a tender, perfectly done roast of venison with sauerkraut and cranberry sauce in the Russian style. Usually Professor Snape would have enjoyed sampling some of these new dishes, but today food had ceased to interest him. The sight of the roasted flesh of a deer sitting on the table in front of him now seemed to bode very ill.

He found himself continually checking his watch and felt the hairs on the back of his neck pricking up with worry. Professor Swain had been attacked, was now at this moment in an inquest, and the final Task was about to begin. Her freedom was at stake, and the greatest prophesied adversary of the Dark Lord Lily's son was about to be sent into a maze full of obstacles to daunt many grown wizards.

And it appeared, there was nothing he could do to help either of them.

If there was one thing Severus Snape loathed, it was the feeling of helplessness.

As the sky above darkened into dusk and the sun sank beneath the horizon, the Headmaster stood up and addressed the assemblage "Ladies and gentlemen, in five minutes' time, I will be asking you to make your way down to the Quidditch field for the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament. Will the champions please follow Mr. Bagman down to the stadium now."

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Spectators began to fill the Quidditch field's stands, and Snape took the seat beside Dumbledore in the staff box. He had not been asked to contribute any of his own sort of expertise to this Task, unlike Hagrid, Flitwick, and McGonagall, and thus had thought himself excused from any sort of extra work in connection with it. Dumbledore had needed a fourth referee earlier that week, however, and Snape knew he had been the most likely candidate for such until Moody had rather unexpectedly volunteered for the job.

Moody had been remarkably helpful regarding this event, really, now that he thought of it. Snape's black eyes flicked toward the Auror, who was stationed on the east side of the maze. As he watched, Moody took his ubiquitous hip flask from his pocket and took a long drink from it.

The usual townsfolk and nearby pensioners were filling the stands and overflowing a ways around the maze, but Snape immediately noticed the conspicuous absence of his usual social circle Lucius and Narcissa, Mrs. Rosier, the Crabbes, the Goyles, the Bulstrodes, Mr. Nott, the Parkinsons, the Flints from this event. None of them had turned out to set up a fussy little picnic and offer their usual blasé sort of applause and wry arch-snob's opinions on the goings-on. This struck Snape as very odd, as the chance to watch Harry Potter being painfully killed, while sipping a Napoleon brandy and with a stunning woman on his arm, was probably Lucius's idea of a very good time indeed. Something very important must have come up to make his cousin deprive himself of such an opportunity.

Snape turned back to Dumbledore. Although the Headmaster always gave the impression of perfect calm and unflappable Zen-like serenity, Snape had known Albus for over twenty years, and he knew better than probably anyone how very anxious Albus had been over Harry Potter's safety this year. Dumbledore was worried now, extremely worried Snape could feel it.

"Harry ought to be all right, don't you think?" Dumbledore asked, turning toward Snape. "He's done so well in the other Tasks, even if he is only fourteen."

"If at any point he *isn't* all right, there is no doubt in my mind that Minerva would reduce the entire field to smoking ash before she would let him come to harm," Snape said dryly, by means of reassurance.

It had the intended effect of making Dumbledore smile. "That she would, and Hagrid would waste no time in helping her." His shoulders relaxed slightly. "Such a resourceful lad, Harry is. Rather reminds me of you, in that respect." He turned toward Snape with a faint, fond smile.

Snape made no answer, but his look betrayed what he thought of being compared to James Potter's messianic little whelp. To his credit, though, his respect for Albus Dumbledore was such that his look was not as withering as it could have been.

Ludo Bagman gave the first blast on his whistle, and the Third Task began.

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There is not a child in Britain's Wizarding world now who does not know the story of the last Task of the 1994-1995 Triwizard Tournament. There are now any number of published accounts of what happened how Potter and Diggory entered the maze first, then quickly separated at the first fork in the maze; how Viktor Krum and then Fleur Delacour followed. The obstacles within the maze have been described in heart stopping detail fully mature Blast-Ended Skrewts, acromantulas, a particularly wily

boggart. All Harry Potter's feats of bravery, cunning, and sheer nerve are well known how he sent the boggart packing, overcame a Downside-Up Barrier, did battle with the Skrewts and a giant acromantula, solved the Sphynx's riddle, and subdued Viktor Krum after Krum Stunned Fleur Delacour and used a Cruciatus Curse on Cedric Diggory. (The tale of how the nefarious, dark-eyed Bulgarian athlete knocked the lovely part-veela unconscious took on menacing erotic overtones in the *Quibbler's* account, with the girl depicted as swooning in graceful helplessness to the ground, at the mercy of her attacker although most of the spectators agree that Fleur tumbled down with all the grace of a pile of washing, and Krum paid her about as much mind once she was out of the running.)

But the scene that is always chronicled in the most breathless detail and the most dramatic prose, whether by the serious staff journalists at the *Daily Prophet* or the sensationalists of the *Quibbler*, is the moment when Potter and Diggory paused just as they arrived at the centre of the maze, and saw the Triwizard Cup before them. How they talked for some time, how they both seemed to be offering each other the victory. Then, how they seemed to come to an agreement, and finally approached the Cup together. As all the spectators watched, they both reached for a handle of the Cup at the same time

and then, just as abruptly, both students and the Cup vanished entirely. The crowd gave a collective gasp of pure shock.

"What the " Dumbledore leaned forward, gripping the rail before him.

Snape stood up. "Potter and Diggory have disappeared," he said. He knew instantly *this has something to do with Voldemort* His left forearm twinged slightly, as though a bit of ice had trickled down his arm.

"*Disappeared?*" Professor Sinistra repeated in disbelief.

"How could they have disappeared?" Professor Sprout cried, rising to her feet. "Where's Cedric? What's going on?"

Snape and Dumbledore turned and looked at each other for perhaps an instant then hurried down toward the maze.

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"No, nothing's wrong. But... I have to admit I've been distracted by work matters these days." He picked up his own cognac snifter and took a deep swallow. "Confidentially... there's a late meeting going on tonight, with some of the fellows from the Ministry."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realise I was taking you away from work," Emily said. Her gratitude sharpened only all the more.

"Well, it's just that there are some rather sensitive issues being decided, and I'm perhaps a bit preoccupied, truthfully. Though I never would have let anything keep me from coming to help you out of any difficulty," he said, turning back to her reassuringly.

"It's all right. Do you have to go?" Emily asked politely.

"Well... " He considered, then turned back to her with an apologetic little smile "Yes, actually, I do. I don't mean to cut this short "

"No, really, I understand." The least she could do now was to let him make a gracious exit, after all he had done for her that day.

"I should have known you'd be a good sport one of your most endearing qualities." Lucius downed his cognac, got up, and readied himself to leave. "We'll be in touch, very soon. But now, I really must be off."

With that, he feelingly kissed her hand, and was gone.

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The Mark burned on Snape's arm for what seemed an endless amount of time. As he stood among his colleagues in the centre of the maze with the Dark Mark alive, it felt as though he must go about his usual business, all while pretending there was not a red-hot poker lying against his skin. If he could only leave this place, could only go back to his quarters, open a box shoved very far back into his wardrobe, which contained a black robe and a mask... if only he could return to his Master, it would stop. He had learned much this year, was gifted in a new, wild magic even the Dark Lord didn't know, surely he could impress him with his newfound power so much he could offer now that he knew he was a natural adept

He glanced across the clearing to where Moody was standing, a bit apart from the others. There was sweat standing out on Moody's brow, and he seemed to be breathing shallowly, seemed to be concentrating on keeping his composure

exactly the same way Snape himself was at that moment.

Then, as he watched, the Auror reached into his pocket for that bloody hip flask and drank from it and at that moment, Snape found it almost irrationally annoying that even in the midst of this sort of panic and consternation, Moody remembered to take his tonic or whatever Professor Swain had smelled in the damned thing.

Then, his black brows creased in thought. Moody remembered to take his herbal tonic. There was a regularity to it. *Why?*

An instant later, Snape began scanning his encyclopaedic knowledge of Potions for an herbal tonic that had to be taken at regular intervals... medicines, soporifics, antidotes, psychiatric pharmacologicals... *goddamn you, what are you hiding?*.. He focused, his teeth gritting with the effort of thinking hard while in pain. Cutting his arm off at the elbow seemed a viable option at that moment

But then he was distracted as the Triwizard Cup reappeared in their midst, bringing with it a bespectacled fourteen-year-old boy, nearly fainting with shock and fear. Harry Potter held the Cup's handle in one bloodstained hand and in the other arm, he held Cedric Diggory's lifeless body.

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If Potter's and Diggory's disappearance had shocked the entire crowd, their reappearance, with one injured and one dead, almost started a panicked riot. People screamed and wailed in the stands all around them. Pomona Sprout started forward, screaming Cedric's name, then fell into Madam Pince's arms, sobbing. Potter seemed half-conscious, but refused to relinquish his hold on Diggory's body. Dumbledore, Hagrid, and McGonagall eventually had to pry him away from Cedric.

Madam Pomfrey had her ear to Cedric's chest. "He's not breathing, his heart isn't beating... Stand clear!" She put her wand to Cedric's chest "*Electricus*!" Cedric's chest jumped, but did not quicken with breath.

"They'll have used a Killing Curse, Poppy," Snape said, moving to the mediwitch's shoulder. "He's beyond help."

Madam Pomfrey turned away from him with a snarl, but continued with resuscitation efforts anyway. No one seemed about to tell her to stop.

Moody had taken charge of looking after Potter, Snape noticed he had the boy's arm over his shoulders and his own arm around the boy's waist and was helping him off the green, up toward the castle. Taking him off alone, it seemed everyone else was watching the distraught Madam Pomfrey trying to breathe life back into Cedric, somehow.

Snape hurried to Dumbledore's side. "You saw the means of their return the Cup was a Portkey," he whispered. "Whomsoever enchanted it, must have been the person who touched it last, or its magic would have been triggered. Tell me, Albus, *who was it who last had the Triwizard Cup in his possession?*"

"Professor Moody volunteered to get it to the centre of the maze," Dumbledore said, turning toward Snape. "And it seems to me that the Alastor Moody I know would not have taken the boy off like that, just after his return."

"It's also just come to me that I would very much like to know exactly what herbal tonic is in that hip flask," Snape replied.

Snape and Dumbledore turned toward each other springtime blue eyes stared into black with deadly purpose. Then by some familiar telepathy, they both started after Professor Moody.

"Minerva? If you would come with us, please," Dumbledore said as he passed Professor McGonagall. The Head of Gryffindor immediately hurried to his side, one capable hand checking for her wand in a pocket of her robes.

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Later that evening, a very subdued Emily Swain finally returned, alone, to Hogwarts and from the moment she crossed the great front foyer, she realised something was wrong. Despite the balmy June evening and the dull, hot throbbing in her wounded shoulder, Hogwarts seemed steeped in foreboding cold, like icy fingers on her spine.

Perhaps she felt uneasy because she knew the two Hogwarts champions, Harry Potter and Cedric Diggory, had been the favourites to win the Tournament, and had expected to return to the sounds of celebration. But the front foyer and the Great Hall were deserted, and silent. Perhaps she had grown used to the usual constant hum of a school full of hundreds of students and dozens of staff members, and found the dead quiet now surrounding her on all sides unnerving.

Perhaps some more otherworldly reason existed for her disquiet the Fae have been known to very occasionally experience moments of uncanny insight and prescience, which they consider revelations, or warnings, from their Mother Goddess. On the morning of the Baalorites' surprise attack on Ardensea, Emily had briefly seen a long blue shadow seem to cover the town in dark portent. Now, the deep gloom and mutedness around her seemed as though all the castle had been muffled in mourning crape. *I weep for Adonais he is dead.*

But regardless of the reason why, when Emily returned to Hogwarts after the Third Task, she knew that she entered a house upon which tragedy had fallen. Whatever that

tragedy was, somehow she knew that it made her own misfortune of the last twenty-four hours seem insignificant by comparison.

She shivered and hurried to where she thought other people may have gathered, suddenly afraid to be alone.

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Emily immediately headed up to the teachers' lounge, hoping that some of her colleagues would be lingering there discussing the outcome of the Tournament. Sure enough, Professors Sprout, Sinistra, Vector, and Madam Pince were sitting in a tight little clump around a table. Pomona Sprout had what looked and smelled like a healthy-sized glass of Ogden's Firewhiskey in front of her, which was highly unusual for the Herbology professor. "Hello," Emily called to them.

"Ah, Emily, you're back." Irma got up and squeezed her hand with a concerned and rather motherly air. "How are you, dear?" she asked.

"Some bastard with an iron knife took a swipe at me, but I'll be all right," Emily said, as casually and matter-of-factly as she could; but Irma's kind greeting made her throat tighten with gratitude. "What's happened while I was away?"

"All right, Emily?" Professor Vector called cheerlessly, from the clump at the table.

She smiled wryly "I've been better. Yourselves?"

Professor Sprout suddenly turned a bitter look into her whiskey glass. "I think we've all been better," she muttered, in a miserable voice.

"So, I've been dying to know what happened with the Tournament all evening," Emily said, as she and Irma approached the group of their colleagues at the table. "If someone could let me know what happened, and who won? My, er, mishap kept me from attending."

"Potter and Diggory got through the maze first, and took the Cup together," Professor Sinistra said slowly. "Though I think they've ruled that Harry was the official winner... at this time."

"They took the Cup together, but Harry Potter won?" Emily asked. "Weren't they tied at the end of the Second Task? What happened to Diggory? Did the judges penalise him for something?"

She knew something horrible had happened to Cedric before anyone told her, by the dead silence and the miserable looks that greeted her question, and wished that she had not opened her mouth in the first place. Professor Sprout pressed a hand over her own lips, and the lamplight glinted off tearwater in her eyes.

Finally, Irma began to speak and Emily noticed how red-rimmed the librarian's eyes were, and how pinched and strained was her expression. "I suppose someone has to tell you, dear. Cedric was killed, just after the end of the Third Task."

Emily stared at her friend's mournful face. "Cedric died?" she said, in a voice that denied her own words. "But he was *fine* only yesterday I still haven't graded his final exams how could he have *died*?"

"It was... " came Professor Sprout's strangled voice. "He was murdered. The Third Task was sabotaged by... someone."

Emily gasped. "No... that dear, kind, decent young man... "

Professor Sprout let out an audible sob. Professor Sinistra put a comforting arm around her colleague's shoulders.

Emily turned back to Irma. "Who killed him?" she whispered.

Irma paled. "It's... too early to say. Albus, Severus, Minerva, Moody and Harry Potter have been gone a long time now. The Minister of Magic is waiting to speak to them when they return."

"I had to tell Cedric's parents what happened," Pomona Sprout said, with another soft, rasping sob. Her wild grey head inclined miserably into her hands.

The small group of professors kept a long, weary vigil in the teacher's lounge that night, but as the evening grew late and no further information was forthcoming, they all straggled upstairs to their respective apartments and to bed. Emily applied more Healing Potion to her wounded shoulder, then drank a large dose of willow bark pain reliever potion. She then fell into a bone-weary sleep a moment after her head touched her pillow.

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The time just after the Third Task passed in a white haze of uncertainty and apprehension.

Emily kept to her own rooms, unwilling to venture outside. For the first day after her return, she barely got out of bed, preferring to huddle behind the blue velvet draperies of her bed, silent and alone. Sometime around noon, and then again at about five p.m., there was a soft knock on the door, and she discovered a meal tray left for her, probably by one or another of the school house-elves.

Then at approximately eight p.m. that evening, there was a gentle puff of green fire from her fireplace, and a letter on Hogwarts crest stationery skittered out onto the hearth rug:

Emily ~

Please come to see me in my office at your earliest convenience tomorrow.

Thank you,

Albus Dumbledore

Late the next afternoon, Emily finally got herself out of bed and showered, then applied Healing Potion to her shoulder and awkwardly re-bandaged her wound, glancing over her shoulder at her naked back in the mirror. The blade had entered perhaps a half-inch from her spine and continued on to nearly the back of her collarbone. *Sonuvabitch tried to skin me like a shot rabbit*, she thought. Now that she had gotten a chance to look at it, the slash seemed less serious than it had on the night she had received it, when she had thought her entire back had been hacked open, but it still hurt enough to give her a perpetual low-level headache throughout the day.

Her inability to use her left arm without pain made bathing and combing out her wet hair a more awkward proposition than before, but she managed eventually. She then paused, regarding her own face in the mirror, and silently spoke a word. A moment later, the face looking back at her in the glass appeared entirely human, round-eared, with human-sized pupils, the fine, stylised lines of her features softened, and the almond shape of her eyes and high arch of her brows rounded into human normalcy. She took a long moment to anxiously examine her handiwork, as if to reassure herself that all was in place, and all was in order.

Only then did she get dressed and head for the Headmaster's office, after locking and warding her door behind her.

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Upon Emily's arrival, Dumbledore asked her to take a seat in one of the big armchairs and then took the seat opposite her.

The Headmaster cocked his white head to one side and took a few seconds to examine her face when she arrived, but if he noticed the human Glamour, he never mentioned it. He immediately inquired as to the state of her health, and she assured him that she would be back to normal in a few weeks. He then apologised for being unable to attend her inquest, and she told him in a much cooler tone that it was no matter, it had gone all right anyway.

"I'd wanted to ask you, sir will there be a funeral service for Cedric? Would it be appropriate if I was to attend?"

"Cedric's remains are to be interred in his family's crypt tomorrow," Dumbledore said softly. "But his parents wish for it to be kept a private, family service... "

Emily nodded. "I understand, sir."

Dumbledore took a long pause, stroking his long white beard, and then asked if she would please repeat for him what she had said to Professor Snape regarding her worries about Professor Moody on the day of her class demonstration. Emily did so, as simply and clearly as she could.

Then he told her all that had happened at Hogwarts while she had been away. He told her that it had been revealed after the Third Task that the man everyone had believed to be Alastor Moody had in truth been one Bartemious Crouch, Jr., a convicted Death Eater who had escaped from Azkaban with the help of his late parents. The younger Crouch had escaped from the custody of his father, and then had abducted the real Moody from his home and taken his place at Hogwarts. The Death Eaters had placed Crouch at Hogwarts in order to kill or capture Harry Potter, so that his blood could be used as the final component in a potion meant to restore Lord Voldemort to his full physical form and full power. This plot had come to fruition at the end of the Third Task, when Harry and Cedric Diggory were both kidnapped via a cunningly placed Portkey, which then transported them directly into the hands of the enemy. Cedric had been killed upon arrival, but Harry had narrowly managed to escape with his life. Harry was now in hospital wing, being treated for shock and injuries.

"So... you're telling me that... You-Know-Who has been resurrected, restored, somehow," Emily said quietly. "He, and his faction, have returned."

"Yes, I'm afraid they have," Dumbledore said. Emily sat silent for a long moment, simply trying to internalise that, accept it as fact. Although she knew it was true, had just heard it from Albus Dumbledore himself, somehow she was having a difficult time making herself believe it.

Dumbledore then told her that Crouch had been able to assume Moody's form by continually drinking Polyjuice Potion made with Moody's hair, out of Moody's well-known hip flask "Which would explain the herbal tonic smell you noticed," Dumbledore said.

"I am... not really familiar with Polyjuice Potion, sir, I was never taught to make it, I didn't recognise its scent... I'm so very sorry." *And of course we realise all of this now that it's too late to save Cedric*, Emily thought, her throat tightening.

"The comment Severus related to me, in which you told the class to imagine he was not in fact Alastor Moody but a Dark Wizard come to kill you... must have been rather a shock to him, Emily," Dumbledore said.

"No doubt it was, sir," she replied. After another long moment, Emily haltingly apologised for not having been able to discern the real threat to the school in time to offer any real aid in the situation. "There were clues... that I should have noticed," she said. "I regret that I didn't act upon them in a timely manner."

"You are the latest in a long line of your colleagues who have offered me their apologies for not coming forward with their suspicions sooner," Dumbledore said quietly. "The first of whom was Severus Snape."

Emily fell silent, staring down at her hands. "I trust that this Bartemious Crouch, Jr. is now in the custody of the appropriate authorities?" she asked finally.

Dumbledore's jaw clenched, and his blue eyes gleamed with the first display of anger she could recall ever having seen from him. "He has been... dealt with," he answered. "Not in the way that I would have wanted, but he has been punished. No one will ever have to worry about being threatened by him, ever again."

Emily nodded. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

The Headmaster had some other, housekeeping sort of issues to speak to her about as well, reminding her that she would need to complete her grading by this time next week and handing her a final pay cheque. She then brought up the subject of her obligation to him, and reminded him that it lasted for the duration of a year and a day unless he altered its terms. Dumbledore then told her that he did not expect her to remain his employee or in any way in his service following the completion of her usual academic duties for that year.

Then, lastly he offered her the Defence Against the Dark Arts position for the following school year at Hogwarts, if she was at liberty to take it.

Emily thanked him for the offer, and very politely declined.

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The 1995 Leaving Feast was one of the least festive such occasions ever hosted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Professor Snape disliked social gatherings on general principle, and only rarely ever came across a party or feast that he actually enjoyed, but Leaving Feasts had traditionally been his favourite sort of Hogwarts function. Just knowing that his year's labours were soon to be over, and that all the students would be out of his hair for another blissful three months, was enough to leave him more relaxed than usual. That first breakfast on the day *after* the Leaving Feast was usually his favourite meal of the entire year.

Today, however, the end-of-year celebration seemed more like a reception following a funeral than the last party before summer holidays began. Everyone, from Dumbledore to the youngest student, seemed quiet and cheerless; the usual dull roar of chattering and squealing was deeply muted. Even Harry Potter, who had won the Triwizard Tournament and who probably had more reason to be happy than anyone else in the Great Hall that day, looked glum and depressed but then the boy never looked as glad to leave school as the other students did, come to think of it.

Potter always looked happy to arrive at school and unhappy to leave, really but Snape didn't dwell on the little ingrate Gryffindor's moods for long. He still felt exhausted and sick from the ordeals he had endured while away from Hogwarts that week, and what he had learned during that week left him deeply preoccupied with his own mounting concerns. The Lupine and... (Snape had a difficult time even thinking the man's name without wanting to spit) *Black* were now on campus somewhere, and he was dreading the moment when he had to deal with the two of them. There were the usual shifts of Privet Drive watch duty to be organised now, responsibilities to delegate, sources of information to be contacted; and now that Black was involved, these tasks would of course take twice as long to accomplish while everyone dealt with his tremendous Gryffindor *ego*.

Never mind the fact that the colossal ass couldn't so much as go out in public due to the warrants out for his capture already they all had to devote as much time to pacifying that murderous bastard as they would have to delegating tasks to any ten *useful* members of the Order. Yes, still just as much of a narcissist as he had always been, evidently. Snape still chafed when he thought about being made to shake hands with him. Just the touch of Black's hand on his had made him want to go scrub his hands with lye soap and scalding water.

(Really, sometimes Snape thought Lucius Malfoy had more of a moral compass than Sirius Black did Lucius at least *realised* that he was a selfish, amoral, murderous parasite, and made no apologies for it. Sirius Black was a selfish, amoral, murderous parasite who thought he was Richard the Fecking Lionhearted all because he had the gumption to run away and live with the Potters once, and Snape was more willing to believe that had had more to do with the fact that the Potters had a Quidditch pitch out back than any *conscientious objections* to his family's Death Eater involvement. As if Sirius Black had a leg to stand on regarding moral outrage over senseless violence and murderous backstabbing just because no one had the stomach to mete out the proper punishment on him in their seventh year didn't make what he did any less *wrong*. Really, if Black had been anyone other than a Gryffindor under a famously indulgent Gryffindor headmaster when he'd pulled his little *prank*, Snape was certain the

bastard would have been expelled and had his wand snapped in half. Good old Phineas Nigellus probably would have handed him his head on a platter.)

The real Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody had joined them for supper, out of hospital wing after being treated for the months of captivity he had suffered at the hands of Bartemious Crouch, Jr. The retired Auror now looked so twitchy that Snape had barely dared look at him, lest he provoke a barrage of defensive spells flying in his direction. The rest of the staff, predictably, looked about as smiling and happy as a row of Azkaban inmates. Poor Pomona really looked as though she had been through the wringer her eyes had been red and her voice hoarse ever since last Thursday night. Diggory had been a very decent and fair-minded young man, even in Professor Snape's opinion despite Diggory's popularity and his status as a Quidditch player, there had never been even a breath of the bully in him, which Snape appreciated. He knew that Pomona had been fond of the boy, and proud to have him in her House.

And Professor Swain was in her usual seat beside Madam Pince when he arrived.

Thank Merlin, she looked all right, though he instantly noticed that she was very much favouring her left shoulder. Upon his return to Hogwarts, Dumbledore had not been long in telling him that she was back at school, that her injury had not been life threatening, and that her condition was improving, but he had not actually set eyes on her since she had left the castle on the night before the Third Task.

She was leaning toward the librarian, who was muttering something in a low voice near her ear. She kept her eyes on her plate as he passed and did not turn to look at him or acknowledge his arrival in any way. Well, welcome back, Professor Swain, how lovely to see the averted side of your face again. So glad you're all right.

But as he passed her place at the High Table, he thought he noticed something different about her face. Something familiar, yet different. It was still unmistakably *her* face, but altered subtly it took him a long moment to realise what it was. The ears, the eyes... she now looked like a human woman with elfin features, rather than a Faerie. He had seen this face once before, in King's Cross station, but had not seen it since.

He wondered for a moment as to why she was now using a human Glamour, after spending the entire school year going about in what he was quite sure must be her real face, unenhanced by magic of any kind. But then it occurred to him if looking like a Faerie gets one an iron knife in the back, why wouldn't one's confidence in presenting one's real face to this world be shattered? If one could use Faery Glamour a foolproof magical means of disguising oneself, available at all times why bother with the difficulties of integrating into a hostile society?

Why not just hide in plain sight among the majority population, without friction, without persecution, and without fearing for one's life... ?

She also looked rather pale and pinched, downcast and dejected but so did most people in the Great Hall that day.

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Emily usually enjoyed meals in the Great Hall, and looked forward to the forays into fine cuisine the house-elves sent up on special occasions. Today, however, she had had to force herself to dress and leave her rooms. Even a week after the attack, she was still feeling as sensitive and vulnerable as some sea creature whose protective shell has been crushed. The presence of so many other people and the sound of their voices felt like a continued assault on her frayed nerves.

She glanced at Harry Potter, the winner of the Triwizard Tournament and was struck by how miserable the young man looked. His face wore a look of brooding, stoic resignation that Emily would have more expected to see on a veteran of a thousand combats, rather than a fourteen-year-old boy who had just won a thousand gold Galleons at the start of summer holidays. Irma had told Emily that Madam Pomfrey kept Harry in hospital wing for some time, and when he emerged, he looked pale and haunted, and seemed to avoid contact with everyone other than Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, Hagrid, and Dumbledore. Emily could easily understand how he felt at that moment.

Her homesickness had only gotten sharper in the last week, and with it had come a new and profound sense of alienation. Her colleagues were being very kind Irma especially was compassionate and lovely but the attack had only underlined to her how different she was from all the people around her. There is little in this world or any other that a Faerie is more afraid of than being hunted with cold iron, and the humans around her simply could not have known the pure, visceral terror the murder attempt had conjured in her. It was as if the man had tried to obliterate her entirely, crush every molecule of her and her kind until there was nothing left. He had diminished her, denied her very existence. She had killed the man, had ended his life very decisively; but somehow she was still frightened to death of him.

She was even more frightened that there might be more of him.

As she looked around at her colleagues, all the students before her, it now seemed to her that humans had something grotesque about them, a nagging edge of something monstrous and not quite right. What with the red veins in their eyes, the red flush of their skin, they looked hot, feverish; burning from the inside. Even the kindest human she knew here now seemed very *other,* just a touch malevolent.

Yes, of course they meant to be kind, but they couldn't possibly have understood her, these Second World wizard folk, with their fire and their iron.

Peripherally, she saw Professor Snape's black silhouette pass behind the High Table and kept her eyes averted, studiously ignoring him. In her current emotional state, she simply didn't have the strength to deal with him any further.

Just get through supper, she told herself. *If I can just get through the next few hours, it will all be over.*

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But then the Headmaster rose to his feet, his goblet in hand, his benign blue gaze taking in everyone in the Hall; staff members, foreign visitors, and students alike. His expression was grave, but kind, and he looked as though he had something very important to say.

"The end of another year," he mused. He then turned toward the Hufflepuff table, offering a look of compassion to the cheerless young faces there. Cedric had had many friends, it seemed there were red-rimmed eyes and handkerchiefs in hands all down the Hufflepuff table. "There is much I would like to say to you all tonight, but first I must acknowledge the loss of a very fine person, who should be sitting here enjoying our feast with us. I would like you all, please, to stand, and raise your glasses to Cedric Diggory."

Everyone in the hall got to their feet, and solemnly toasted Diggory. Professor Sprout's face crumpled tremendously as everyone murmured Cedric's name, and Minerva McGonagall patted her comfortingly as she sat down again.

"Cedric was a person who exemplified many of the qualities that distinguish Hufflepuff House. He was a good and loyal friend, a hard worker, he valued fair play. His death has affected you all, whether you knew him well or not. I think that you have the right, therefore, to know how it came about."

There was a long moment of silence, as though the entire Hall collectively held its breath "Cedric Diggory was murdered by Lord Voldemort," Dumbledore said.

The Hall was suddenly alive with frightened murmuring, and someone who sounded very much like Neville Longbottom whimpered; the air filled with the smell of panic and fear. Emily was almost amazed that the simple utterance of this man's name could provoke so much fear in the people around her.

"The Ministry of Magic does not wish me to tell you this. It is possible that some of your parents will be horrified that I have done so, either because they will not believe Lord Voldemort has returned, or because they think I should not tell you, young as you are."

What? Emily silently asked her plate. There was a major conflict going on, and there were parents in this world who would keep this knowledge from their children? Were these people *mad?* She knew from bitter personal experience that even children too young to comprehend what death *is* are in no way immune to the ravages of wartime. Did these parents think keeping their children ignorant was somehow going to keep them *safe?* If a child has never seen a sword, will that somehow keep that child from being slaughtered by one? The illogic was painful to even contemplate.

She glanced down at Harry Potter, who had lost both parents to Voldemort's Killing Curses in a single night the boy was silent, watching the Headmaster with cold righteous indignation lighting his green eyes. Emily herself had no real experience of life under Voldemort's menace; she had lived on the Continent and in the Muggle world during his first reign of terror. Her painful associations with his name had more to do with seeing her father devastated after his theories were exploded and his friends and family turned on him. But now a Death Eater spy had tried to have her killed. And she realised that there had to be more people in this Hall, young and old, who had feared, suffered, and lost everything to this menace. They were survivors of wartime, and she understood them well.

But Dumbledore was continuing to speak. "It is my belief, however, that the truth is generally preferable to lies, and that any attempt to pretend that Cedric died as the result of an accident, or some blunder of his own, is an insult to his memory." He then turned toward the Gryffindors' table "There is somebody else who must be mentioned in connection with Cedric's death. I am talking, of course, about Harry Potter. Harry Potter managed to escape Lord Voldemort. He risked his own life to return Cedric's body to Hogwarts. He showed, in every respect, the kind of bravery that few wizards have ever shown in facing Lord Voldemort, and for this, I honour him." And led them all in a solemn toast to Harry.

After everyone had taken their seats again, the Headmaster spoke again. "The Triwizard Tournament's aim was to further and promote magical understanding. In the light of what has happened, of Voldemort's return, such ties are more important than ever before. Every guest in this Hall will be welcomed back here at any time, should they wish to come."

Dumbledore's gaze lingered on Madame Maxime and her students, and then the students from Durmstrang as he extended this invitation. But for just one moment, he turned and looked directly at Emily herself. She returned this affirmation with a wan smile of gratitude but her mask of protective Glamour remained firmly in place.

Dumbledore addressed them all again "I say to you all, once again in the light of Lord Voldemort's return, we are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. Lord Voldemort's gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust. Differences of habit " and again, he glanced back at Emily "and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open."

Again, she smiled at him, but was truthfully, with the wound throbbing in her shoulder, and with a man's dark silhouette lurking in the corner of her eye, she could not have said she was feeling too openhearted at that moment.

"It is my belief and never have I so hoped that I am mistaken that we are all facing dark and dangerous times. Some of you in this Hall have already suffered directly at the hands of Lord Voldemort. Many of your families have been torn asunder. A week ago, a student was taken from our midst."

There was a soft but audible sob from someone near the front of the Ravenclaw table Emily turned to see a young girl cover her face with a handkerchief. It was Cho Chang, one of Emily's fifth-years. Now that she thought of it, she had often seen Miss Chang with Diggory they had gone to the Yule Ball together. Some of the other girls were patting her quivering shoulders sympathetically. Oh, to be so young, and to have already seen a man one cared for killed without cause. There truly was no justice in this world, or any other.

"Remember Cedric," Dumbledore was saying. "Remember, if the time should come when you have to make a choice between what is right, and what is easy, remember what happened to a boy who was good, and kind, and brave, because he strayed across the path of Lord Voldemort. Remember Cedric Diggory."

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After the Leaving Feast was over, some students and faculty alike remained in the Great Hall, huddled together talking in serious little knots. Cho Chang was surrounded by a concerned group of her Ravenclaw friends. Madame Maxime, Hagrid, Dumbledore, and the real Alastor Moody were off to one side having what looked like a very serious conversation indeed. Most of the Durmstrang students were having some kind of debate in what Emily thought must be Bulgarian, huddled together in a red-robed bunch at one end of the Slytherin table. Professors Swain, Sprout, Flitwick, McGonagall, Sinistra, Vector, and Madam Pince and Madam Hooch were assembled in a downcast little cluster of commiseration at the High Table, as the staff mourned for Cedric, and offered Emily their sympathy after the attack.

Emily kept looking at Alastor Moody and trying to make herself recall that this was a different person than the one who in all likelihood had commissioned an assassin to put an end to her. She kept reminding herself that the danger was past, and it hadn't been Moody himself who had been a threat to her, but the man pretending to be Moody but nonetheless, the man's presence still gave her the willies.

She had withdrawn from everyone else a short ways, without really noticing, and by some happenstance Emily found herself standing a few feet from Professor Snape in the crowd. He looked up and saw her at the same moment she noticed him, and he greeted her with the usual cool inclination of his head.

"Professor."

"Professor."

She acknowledged his presence with a meaningless little smile and nod and began to move away, intending to leave him well alone. Then, much to her surprise, he spoke to her as she was turning away from him, addressing her back. "I heard about what happened while you were in Diagon Alley, madam. I'm glad to see that you seem to have pulled through all right," he said, very politely and formally. "I do hope you're feeling better."

Someone who knew Snape extraordinarily well might have heard the emotion vibrating under the formality of his tone, might have noticed how closely he was examining his colleague's averted face, as though to reassure himself that she was all right. But Emily would not have imagined that she knew Snape's heart at all, nor would she have imagined he was doing anything other than going through the proper and expected motions following a colleague's misfortune.

"Back to normal in a month or so, the mediwitch said. I'm not setting a very good example for the people I've been teaching, am I ideally, when you're in a fight, you aren't supposed to parry with your back," she said, with laboured casualness, half-turning back to him. "So really, you should do as I said, and not do as I do. All right?"

"Of course," Snape said softly.

Peripherally, Emily could see those eyes all but burning into the side of her face, and the effect that gaze now had on her had gone from the merely unsettling to the profoundly unnerving. She may have been decorated for valour some years earlier, but in that moment she could not have turned to face him if her life depended on it.

"It was a magnificent address that Albus gave he's quite an orator." Her face, if not her eyes, turned in his direction. "I do hope that whatever conflict lies ahead for your people, sir, that you may always have such fine leaders to guide you."

She meant every word she said, quite sincerely, but the differences established were clear. The Voldemort question concerned Wizardkind, *his* people and she did not consider herself among their number. And it was also established equally clearly that she would not be staying to see the outcome of whatever conflict lay ahead.

Snape's jaw tensed. "Thank you, madam," he said, with bitter politeness.

With that, Emily wordlessly took her leave of him with a subdued nod, and made her way back to Ravenclaw Tower, both to finish her grading duties for the year and to begin packing her things for departure. She never saw the look on Snape's face as he watched her leave the Great Hall after what she thought was her final great feast at Hogwarts and the last time she would ever see him, or speak to him.

But perhaps someone else did.

Albus Dumbledore's spring-blue eyes lit on Professor Snape as Emily walked away from him, and for just a moment, surveyed the Head of Slytherin with keen, curious eyes. Then he turned back to his staff and his students and the crisis at hand.

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And so, she was gone, Severus Snape thought after that excruciating Leaving Feast was finally over and he was alone in his apartments. Anything that had been, or that could have been, was now over.

The last time he would ever speak to her, and all he had managed to say was, *I hope you're feeling better.* Merlin's teeth, what scintillating words of comfort and commiseration *those* had been. She hadn't even looked at him.

If you are prepared, Albus said, and he had replied, *I am.*

At the time, he had meant it absolutely, but now (some hours of desperate prevarication before the Dark Lord on bended knee, and several *Crucios* later) it all felt like pure bravado. As if anyone could possibly have been prepared for what he had to face now, and all that had been revealed to him during his audience with Voldemort. The situation was even worse than he could have possibly imagined, and the ranks of the Order of the Phoenix had dwindled to a pathetic few. Who wouldn't feel mighty indeed with the likes of Sirius "Because He Exists" Black, a sodding *werewolf,* the even *more* paranoid post-kidnapping Mad-Eye Moody, and one Mundungus "Dung" Fletcher standing between him and an oppressive, dictatorial regime bent on taking over the only world he has ever known.

And now, after all that he had done and failed to do since the Dark Lord's re-emergence in 1991... of course that oppressive and dictatorial regime would now be turning its inquisitorial eye toward him. He dampened another bit of cotton wool with Healing Potion and wiped it over the faint tracery of bruising that remained around his nostrils, trying to stave off yet another of the spontaneous nosebleeds that had been plaguing him all that week. It had been all he could do to stagger back to Hogwarts after his *interview* with the Dark Lord; and it had been another two days before he could sit up again afterwards. One thing was certain, he wasn't twenty years old anymore.

Now, his enemies were powerful and organised, and his allies were a ragtag lot of bullies, loose cannons, and fools.

The Dark Lord had returned, and he would never see her again.

Snape lay sleepless in his bed that night, wondering what sort of deal he would have to make with what sort of dark infernal powers to get that situation reversed.

Part Second: The Hart Rampant, Chapter 25, Part 1

Chapter 33 of 55

In which Professor Swain discovers the delights of a dual life as both a Hogwarts professor, and Lucius Malfoy's mistress, until a chance encounter with a desperate Faery prostitute in Knockturn Alley sends her to the most unlikely person for aid. Meanwhile, Severus Snape finds himself alone and adrift in the Mushroom Circle, a Faery nightclub…

Chapter 25, Part 1:

What with Harry Potter's abduction, Cedric Diggory's death, the attempted murder of a faculty member, the discovery of a Death Eater spy in their midst, and the return of Voldemort, the week following the end of the 1994-1995 school year at Hogwarts was not an especially festive one. On the Monday morning after that year's Leaving Feast, Hogwarts seemed even vaster and more cavernous without the sounds of students in the halls.

Professor Snape glanced at a line of lugubrious faces when he arrived for breakfast. Professor Sprout and Madam Pince were in the middle of an intense discussion; he overheard part of it as he made his way past them to his usual seat at the High Table

"... barely come out since the Leaving Feast," Madam Pince was saying.

"She's still hiding in her room?" Pomona Sprout muttered.

"Yes," the librarian answered sourly. "I went up to see her last night. She was very pleasant, like always, but I haven't seen anyone pack that fast since someone said *Basilisk* within Gilderoy Lockhart's hearing." Madam Pince shook her head sadly.

Snape scowled and made his way to his usual seat at the far end of the table. Someone's discarded *Daily Prophet* was lying on the table beside his plate, open to a headline that read: ***"KNOCKTURN ALLEY PLAGUED WITH PESTS."***

The accompanying front-page photograph showed villainous-looking wizards running around the dodgy, disreputable shopping street, being harried by wasps, bees, and hornets, and pecked at by crows and pigeons. Inside was a small photograph of the owner of a nightclub called Pasiphäe's, standing helplessly on a chair as massive waves of cockroaches seethed about his feet. Snape pulled the paper closer and skimmed the front-page article apparently this was happening all over Knockturn Alley, especially in the smaller, less affluent pubs. A place called the Cask of Malmsey had been hit with a nigh on Biblical plague of rats that an employee described as all but dancing the Tarantella on tables.

"Odd, isn't it," Minerva McGonagall remarked in Snape's direction, glancing at the paper in front of him.

"Extremely," Snape muttered, pouring himself a cup of coffee.

"There is also an article about a pair of juniper bushes that went berserk outside of an iron forging works near London. They apparently attacked anyone trying to enter the building," came Dumbledore's voice, from Snape's left. The Headmaster had another copy of the *Prophet* open in his hands.

Snape turned toward him. "Do you think these incidents are related, Albus?"

"Of course." The Headmaster nodded his white head emphatically. "This is clearly the work of the Faery people, who have always wielded great power over the natural world."

"Why do you think they feel so hostile, at this time, Albus?" McGonagall asked.

"Word will have gotten out amongst the Fae community that one of the Fianna, carrying out her King's mission of diplomatic outreach, was attacked by a member of the Wizarding community wielding an iron knife," Dumbledore said, his eyes fixed on the front page of the paper. "They see that as a hate crime, a political crime, perpetrated against Emily because she is one of them. The Fianna military class is highly regarded amongst them, and this incident is far too reminiscent of the Plague pogroms of the fourteenth century, in which the Fae were often tortured with iron weapons. Many Fianna soldiers died during that conflict, as they tried to help their people flee Europe.

"In short, this attack has made the Faeries very angry." Dumbledore folded the paper and set it on the table in front of him, shaking his head. "I fear we have not heard the last from them in this matter."

"Severus?" Madam Pince turned toward Snape. "Emily wanted you to give me the manuscript of her book she said you would know what that meant... "

"I'll bring it to you as soon as I can," Snape said shortly.

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Snape lingered over the newspaper, picking at the plate of breakfast gone cold in front of him, until all of his colleagues had gone. He glanced up in surprise at the sound of wing beats above him just as he was finishing his coffee it was late for owl post, breakfast being over.

He immediately recognised the Malfoy family's black eagle owl, which swooped down toward him and dropped a letter into his hands, sealed with the elaborate embossed ***M.*** Snape knew before he opened the letter that it would be from Lucius and that Lucius would have a burning question for him

Severus, old man

Missed you at the meet-up last Thursday. Where were you? Everyone was asking about you.

Really, cousin, I'm concerned. Your absence that night is not sending the right message at all. I've been putting in a good word for you every chance I get, but an explanation would sound much better coming from you personally. You're putting me rather on the spot here.

You and I need to talk, as soon as possible. How about Wednesday night at eight p.m.? It'll have to be somewhere very out of the way, where none of our usual set will run into us. I'd ask you to visit at the house, but we're entertaining a very important guest at the moment, so no doubt you see my dilemma.

I know this frightful little place called the Fusilier Public House in London. The address is 118 Wilton Row, London, SW1X 7NR, UK. Yes, it's a Muggle place I do apologise in advance for the stench of unwashed non-magical humanity, but I can guarantee you that no one we know will ever go there, so it's perfect for our purposes. Dress inconspicuously something you don't mind the barbarians spilling their swill upon.

Try not to worry too much, old man we'll get this taken care of. If you're in some kind of trouble at work, you know I can help you.

Regards,

Lucius

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Despite Madam Pince's earlier commentary, Emily was not packing quite as fast as Guilderoy Lockhart had upon hearing that he was expected to fight a basilisk. However, she was packing at a very rapid rate indeed, as fast as her injury allowed, and seeing as how she possessed much less by way of hair care products and bales of fan mail than the former Professor Lockhart, she was having a much more productive time of it. Thank the Mother she could just put everything in one small trunk now, rather than using her cumbersome Muggle luggage again. But as she hurried up and down the staircase of her Holding Trunk, stowing clothes, books, and various armaments away in closets and compartments, she might have preferred a straight-out fight against a fearsome monster to this kind of creeping uncertainty and dread.

Emily had known since the moment she set foot on Second-World soil that her race, her religion, her sort of magic, her very species, were very much in the minority here, and the run-around she had received at the Department of International Magical Cooperation when she had arrived to obtain her work papers only hammered that point home the more. The encounter with Professor Snape, in which she had withdrawn completely from him rather than take a chance on being rejected for her *otherness,* had also underlined this point to her, as had the way he had continually rejected her ever since.

Whether Professor Snape ever would or had rejected her based on her difference from him never really entered her mind at that moment, lost as she was in feelings of persecution. In her defence, however, Emily had in the last five weeks been very intimately betrayed by a long-time friend, believed herself to have been crushingly rejected by a man for whom she cherished genuine tender feelings, been stabbed with an iron blade, seen one student she was fond of senselessly killed and another tortured, and seen the return of a powerful antagonist whose agents had threatened her father when she was but a girl of nineteen. Perhaps self-pity, an intense sense of vulnerability, and the fervent desire to be gone from that place were understandable at that moment.

She had thought, most of that year, that perhaps the British Wizarding society had grown more accepting of Faeries and part-humans the way that her students and... most of her colleagues had reacted to her had been a pleasant surprise. There had even been bright spots among the Malfeasant set, like Beatrice and Pansy Parkinson, and Draco Malfoy. Even the way she and Liria had been treated in Knockturn Alley had been outweighed by Professor Snape's totally unexpected gallantry that same night.

But to have been attacked by a wizard armed with cold iron, and then to have faced hostile law enforcement officials after she had defended herself, and *then* for the only person to have come to her aid to be Lucius Malfoy, who a month earlier had tried to learn her True Name... could there have been *any* worse situation to be in, anywhere? Oh yes, there could be her father's old antagonists the Death Eaters, and their dread Lord Voldemort, had returned. And let's not forget those dear, murderous Robinett lads back home.

Bloody hell, and she had thought Orc invasions were troublesome.

All of this together had made her mind up very quickly the only choice she had was to get the ever-loving Christian hell *out* of Wizarding Britain, post-haste. She should never have identified herself as a Faerie outside of school in the first place, should never have gone about with her real face brazenly undisguised by any sort of Glamour what had she been thinking? She had just been asking for trouble.

Emily now considered herself quite *finished* here. Gwydion and Dumbledore had asked her to teach a class, not help integrate a society; and now, she had taught that class and was nearly done with grading her final exams and essays. It was high time to leave, to pull the mantle of her people's protective magics over herself and just fade from the sight and the minds of those around her. Forget about obtaining any sort of official paperwork for the next country she arrived in with the right sort of Glamour, she could have handed an immigration official a Chocolate Frog card and made him believe it was a valid passport from just about anywhere. The sooner she could get off to where no one knew her, or knew what she was, the better.

Such was the lot of the Hidden People in this world, but at that moment, it seemed much more comforting and familiar than any other alternative. Emily had had a world atlas open on her desk for days now, and had been paging through it for likely places where she could vanish. So far, the wine countries of the south of France, northern California in the United States, or the New South Wales coast of Australia were all front-runners as far as a year's stand-in for the Third Kingdom. She was now planning on making a large withdrawal from her Muggle bank account and then finding an out-of-the-way hotel where she could spend a few weeks alone to recuperate from all the physical and emotional wounds she had been dealt this school year. All she wanted was to be completely alone somewhere with no demands being made upon her, where she could stay until she felt like facing the world again.

In short, there are times when even the strongest women look themselves in the mirror and say, *This is fucked I'm leaving,* and Emily was having one of those moments.

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This frantic packing and escapist sorts of musings were interrupted at perhaps eight p.m. that Monday evening by the scratch of a little post owl at her sitting room window. Emily took the letter and opened it, immediately recognising Lucius's familiar handwriting:

Darling

I've heard about the tragedy after the Third Task.

Please, my love, tell me you're all right you can't imagine how worried I've been.

Can you perhaps see me at home this Wednesday? Everyone will be away at some garden party at Felina's, but I've begged off citing work commitments.

At eleven a.m., touch the enclosed Portkey, and I'll meet you. No one is expected back till early tomorrow morning, and I've the entire afternoon free until half-past seven or so. We can have a nice bit of time together.

I've missed you horribly, darling. Please don't be late I can't wait to see you.

The Portkey was a pretty little white lawn handkerchief tucked into a parchment envelope a small, tactful token, as his previous gifts of precious jewels would not have been proper at this time.

Lucius was, as always, the master of the appropriate gesture.

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So Lucius wanted to see him.

It was now Wednesday, the day of Lucius's invitation, and Severus Snape awoke very early.

He had been sleeping poorly ever since Midsummer, falling asleep very late and waking very early and in a state of great anxiety. His eyes fell on his bedside clock six a.m., but his pulse was pounding, his thoughts were racing, and there was no way he was going to be able to get any more rest. He turned over onto his back in bed, too tired to get up, but too agitated to sleep.

Snape had spent the last two days feverishly speculating and plotting as to the best way to approach this meeting with Lucius, both with Dumbledore and alone. The return of their leader had brought all his old cronies back together, to resume their old ways and further their old agendas. Lucius and the others still thought he had not heeded the Dark Lord's call on the day of the Third Task. Bloody hell, was there any more complicated position to be in than to be Dumbledore's man, and be at the same time the Dark Lord's man among the Death Eaters.

After the affair of the Philosopher's Stone in 1991, after what Peter Pettigrew had seen in the Shrieking Shack in 1993, when Snape had believed Sirius Black to have betrayed the Potters to Voldemort, and Snape had then tried to apprehend Black... Snape could hardly believe that he had gotten away with that. Nonetheless, he knew that his position with the Dark Lord was on the most precarious sort of footing, and if he valued his life, he had better come up with proof of his diligence, and soon.

Snape put his hand over his eyes, massaging his aching temples.

Damn that weak-willed imbecile of a Quirenius Quirrell, traipsing blithely into forests where horrors lay. May all the deities of this world and every other, from the many-named Arcadian Mother Goddess to the Sumero-Akkadian thunder god Zu cast the dust of Quirrell's disintegrated hide into pits of unending torment for allowing Voldemort's spirit to return to this plane. How in the bloody hell was Snape to have known that the Dark Lord himself had taken up residence in Quirrell's body, that *he* was hiding beneath that smelly purple turban, listening to every word he said? Thank whatever force responsible that he had dealt in ambiguities for so long that nearly every word he said could be interpreted in myriad different ways, depending on his listener's agendas.

And never mind the fact that even Quirrell and the Dark Lord together had *still* added up to a single absolutely abysmal Defence Against the Dark Arts professor. Really, one would think that perhaps sharing a body and mind with the single most powerful Dark Wizard in existence might have broadened the man's body of knowledge at least *somewhat*. How could anyone lecture on vampires without discoursing on their different supernatural races, and the division of their society into rogues, servitors, and nobility? What a fecking *idiot.* Snape shook his head direly, grimacing at the carved oak canopy of his four-poster bed.

He lay back and tried to think of plausible lies.

I didn't know you were occupying Quirrell's body, Master, I thought Quirrell coveted the Stone for himself, while I was watching for my opportunity to steal it for you, if you ever returned, which is of course why I offered my services in keeping the Stone safe... I always knew that Black was never your servant, Master, when he escaped from prison I thought myself free to seize the opportunity to destroy my enemy, in the manner which you taught me... I could not leave the Hogwarts grounds when I was called after the Third Task, as my absence would be noted and my cover at Hogwarts jeopardised...

He could still scarcely understand how he had been believed, but then he had always had a gift for telling the Dark Lord what he most wanted to hear. More than likely it was because the Dark Lord had been desperate for reassurance and needed his vantage point within Hogwarts too much. But nonetheless, he was going to have to account for a great deal to a great many people, starting with his own family. He was going to have to explain why he had remained at Hogwarts after Voldemort's first defeat, why he had done no work in developing new poisons since the Dark Lord's fall and had in fact devoted most of his time to developing antidotes, why he had volunteered to protect the Philosopher's Stone... Lucius and Bellatrix especially were going to be curious, very curious indeed.

It was now half-past six a.m. He had thirteen and a half hours to make up another believable cover story about what he had done to advance the Malfoys' excuse me, *the Dark Lord's* interests since 1980. He would need to placate Lucius, and through him, the entire organisation while reporting back any suspicious behaviour on Lucius's part to the Dark Lord. And he was going to have to do it today.

Or if he couldn't get back into his cousin's confidences... after tonight, maybe he wouldn't need to worry too much about *anything*, ever again.

It hadn't been long since he had last felt the agony of the Dark Lord's punishment, since his former master had pointed his wand at him, and intoned *Crucio* and Snape was not looking forward to a repeat performance. A tiny muscle in the corner of his eye jumped when he remembered the times he had endured such *punishment* before.

Perhaps, mercifully, the next time someone pointed a wand at him, it might even be *Avada Kedavra* that he heard.

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After some time spent in this sort of sleep-deprived, fatalistic musing, Snape sat up and got out of bed.

His gaze fell on Professor Swain's combat instruction manual on his desk, lying open to the dagger-training section. Yes, he had best get it back to her, and the sooner, the better given the rate at which she was readying herself to leave, who knew if she would be gone by tonight, and who knew if he would be in any shape to hand it back to her after his meeting with Lucius.

He skimmed over the pages quickly he had treated this manuscript with great care, with an academic respect for the amount of work she had so obviously put into it. There were no dog-ears, coffee cup circles, or even worn edges on these pages, and that she could be certain of. She should realise that *he* at least valued *her* work. He straightened the pages, then closed the leather folder and got up, and dressed in a plain white shirt and black trousers and his usual boots. He then took a moment to run a comb through his hair and hunt up Luigi Barbasetti's *The Art of the Foil* from the stacks on his desk, and then headed down to the library.

Madam Pince was supervising a group of house-elves in giving the main library its end-of-the-school-year going-over when he arrived, books in hand. "Irma?" he called. "I've brought Professor Swain's books, as she requested."

Irma glanced up from where she had been painstakingly lessoning a young house-elf as to how one removed chocolate stains from two-hundred-year-old vellum pages, muttering dire imprecations under her breath about students who snacked in the library all the while. "All right. Just put them there, and I'll make sure she gets them," the librarian said, absently indicating the front check-out counter.

He had set down the books and was turning away when Madam Pince called to him "Wait a second, Severus, I forgot Emily asked me to give you this letter."

She crossed to her desk and produced a parchment envelope from her top drawer, sealed with the initials ***EBS.*** It was addressed, in Professor Swain's handwriting, to:

Professor Severus Snape

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Hogsmeade

Scotland

How strange that just the sight of that envelope made his pulse jump, just for a second.

Despite this anxiety, however, he appeared absolutely composed as he pocketed that envelope, nodded curt thanks to Madam Pince, and left the library.

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Back in the privacy of his own rooms, Snape took a deep breath and opened her letter.

What he expected to find within that envelope an apology? an explanation? some admission of her less than total indifference to his existence? he couldn't have said. But what he did find took him completely by surprise a very official-looking bit of parchment headed ***SERVICE INVOICE.***

She had not mentioned her previous desire to compensate him for his efforts on that night at St. George's since the middle of June, so he had thought she had forgotten, but apparently she had not. He had never gotten around to drawing up an invoice for her so now it appeared that she had itemised one up for him. On this document, she had listed eight hours of Potions consulting services and expert labour at an exorbitant price per service hour, the same sort of rate one of the leading commercial Potions experts in the field today would have charged. She had figured the wage at time and a half for the rush nature of the job and the late hours worked, and had also compensated him for the fair market value of the potions ingredients he had left with Catherine.

Enclosed with that document was a cheque drawn on a Gringotts Bank account, signed by Emily B. Swain drawn up for an amount even higher than the vindictively exaggerated amount he had first scrawled down in the Main Library of Magic, that day when he had taken a stab at drawing her up an invoice for his late-night consulting expertise. It amounted to more than two weeks' pay at Hogwarts.

Perhaps this meant that Professor Swain thought his time and ability were valuable after all *extremely* valuable, judging from the figure she had come up with or perhaps she now thought herself free and clear over using him and leaving him behind, having tidily paid him off. Dismissed with an appropriate gift, like one of Lucius's cast-off mistresses. As always, one couldn't tell with her.

One simply couldn't be sure of anything with her.

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Snape spent the better part of a quarter hour poring over that invoice and cheque at his desk, studying them as if trying to sleuth out their composer's real intentions somewhere in the strokes of her pen. Finally, he folded them both up, stuffed them back into their envelope, and unceremoniously shoved them into a drawer of his desk. Then he made his way into his bathroom, took a very hot shower, and took a long, meditative time about shaving.

As he stood bare-chested in front of the mirror, splashing hot water on his face, he noticed that the love bite above his collarbone had completely faded away. He scratched lightly at the spot where it had been, frowning. Yes, it had healed, it was gone. As though nothing had ever happened.

He wrapped himself in his dressing gown and went back into his bedroom, intending to lie down and continue thinking of lies to tell Lucius and perhaps get a bit of a nap. As he passed from the bathroom to the bed, he noticed a pile of crumpled clothing at the foot of the bed: a well-tailored white shirt that he had owned for so long that the cuffs were fraying slightly, and a pair of boots. The boots needed polishing. There was a pair of greying socks stuffed inside one of them.

It occurred to him then that he might never return to this room, after tonight. What would it look like to someone who entered it to clear away the late Professor Snape's effects? How would it seem to someone who came upon his greying socks, left behind after his death? What if old *socks* were all that someone remembered of him?

He had long since drawn up a will and had it notarised Snape Hall to his mother's favourite Orcadian historical society; his books, personal potions stores, and all financial assets to be donated to Hogwarts, and a few rare grimoires, talismans, and bits of valuable antiquity were to go to Albus. He had left directions for all of his personal journals and papers to be destroyed unread. His affairs were in order.

Nonetheless, there was no sense that his business on Earth was at all concluded. Somehow, this date to get drinks with Lucius Malfoy was prompting him to think long and hard about all that he had not yet done in what now seemed like his painfully short and uneventful young life.

No, he had things he could be proud of. He had been named Head of Slytherin House while still in his twenties, the youngest person to be appointed to such a position in centuries. He had a highly distinguished record of Potions N.E.W.T. and O.W.L. scores, even if he had to fight tooth and nail to make his students pay attention. He had published a wide variety of academic articles on Potions. He was the possessor of a centuries-old citadel, Snape Hall. He was a respected and trusted colleague and friend to the greatest wizard of the modern age, Albus Dumbledore.

But... perhaps all he would leave behind him were one sometime friend, a dilapidated pile of a house, some pedantic academic articles, a lot of disgruntled students, some greying socks, and a melancholy woman who thought he had ill-used her.

He closed his eyes, calling on an Occlumens's discipline to clear his mind, to focus; but thoughts of all that he had left unfinished in his life continued to plague him.

Most troubling among these concerns was the idea that Emily Swain was going to leave Hogwarts under the mistaken belief that he had maliciously intended to make her feel seduced and abandoned.

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Snape had spent much of that year believing that his colleague had wronged him, wronged him very personally and intimately, and within the first hours of meeting him, no less. But sometime recently, doubts had begun to creep in. He was no longer so sure that he could claim the moral high ground here, after all that had happened in the last weeks of the school year.

In whatever crisis situation she was now facing, and especially in the matter of the murder attempt, one thing was certain he hadn't helped.

And oh bloody hell the worst part was that she had all but accused him of seducing and abandoning *her*, the day after that ill-fated Midsummer's revel. She said, *"Now, my dear colleague, do allow me to suggest that you go find someone else on whom to inflict your insincerity, your trifling, and your games. If you have taken it upon yourself to show me what it is to be seduced and unceremoniously abandoned, you indeed have your revenge. Bravo, really well done."* Those words, with their implications of cruel and ungentlemanly abuse of a woman's affections, stung afresh every time he remembered them.

She was wrong, she was damned bloody *wrong.* She was mistaken; she had to be exaggerating. That's all there was to it *he* didn't do things like that to women; he wasn't *Lucius* for pity's sake. Perhaps the more arrogant and disobedient of his students cordially despised him, perhaps the more fragile-flower types of them were afraid of him, but Severus Snape could say with certainty that there were no women out there weeping their hearts out because *he* had played them false, thank you *very* fecking much. Even the first and only woman with whom he had ever had anything even approaching a romantic relationship, some seventeen years before he had ever met Emily Swain, couldn't have said that he had treated her less than honourably. Indeed, there had been one particular instance when he had gotten his face resoundingly *slapped* for insisting on treating his first love in a decent manner. He wasn't the seduce-and-abandon sort, never had been. (Truthfully, it seemed to him as though he could usually count on this sort of thing happening *the other way around,* thanks.) The tawdry melodrama of your average self-proclaimed Don Juan was beneath him.

But then the worry would reassert itself. When Professor Swain left her classroom after their argument, she had the attitude of a woman who believed herself scorned, which was so very out of character for her.

And he could remember so *little* of Midsummer's night.

It had been a week since their argument, on the same day (he gritted his teeth) she had been stabbed, but what she had said still rankled. He was certain that what she had accused him of was entirely beyond any behaviour he would have allowed himself but this sense of *not knowing* was nonetheless disquieting to him. The facts remained thus: He had confronted her over the previous evening, she had upbraided him for using her ill, and then left the castle. And while she was away, someone had tried to kill her. Not only that, but she had had some inkling that the murderous intent was there beforehand, and he had dissuaded her from mentioning her worries to Dumbledore.

No matter what spin one tried to put on those circumstances, they simply did not add up to a flawless picture of perfect integrity for him. Snape couldn't help but wonder now if he had not confronted her so angrily, perhaps she would not have been prompted to leave the castle... if he hadn't talked her out of telling the Headmaster about *"Moody's"* odd behaviour, perhaps they would have caught Barty Crouch before the Third Task, and she would never have been attacked.

Now, not only was he unsure of his own actions, he felt guilty as well, and this particular loose end of his life now looked as though it might never be wrapped up.

*Had he truly wronged her somehow?*Directly, indirectly, through what he had done, or what he had failed to do? The question would not leave him alone. He again absently scratched at the place where his faded love bite had been.

Should he perhaps investigate exactly what had gone on? Snape paused, considering. Well, it might be nice to be sure of *something* on a day like this, now, mightn't it?

He could think of one method that would reveal the events of Midsummer's night to him in perfect, lucid detail. It was a means that Snape disliked, for he loathed seeing himself in humiliating situations. His hatred of being ridiculed, of having his dignity and control stripped away, bordered on the phobic. It was an issue to which he had been much sensitised by a great deal of traumatic prior experience.

But he had to know what had happened, had to know if he had done anything dishonourable. Merlin knew he could never ask *her* for more details now. From the way she had sequestered herself in her apartments, and from the rate at which she was reported to be packing up to leave, apparently she had more pressing concerns than listing off the full account of his adventures with Faery nightlife, and how he came to have a love bite on his collarbone, and how she had come round to thinking *she* was the injured party, after all that she had done to him.

All right this had to be settled. He had to know, and he knew exactly one way to put an end to these worries. If she wasn't saying, then he would have to find out for himself. Snape made a silent resolution, got up from his bed, got dressed, and then headed down to the Headmaster's office.

"Albus? May I borrow your Pensieve for the day, if you don't need it?"

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So Lucius wanted to see her.

At some time after nine a.m. that Wednesday morning, Emily had taken a break from her packing. Her shoulder was healing fast, but that unfortunately meant that it savagely itched all day and all night. She had been taking Muggle Advil washed down with willow bark infusion, but that wasn't helping much. Now, her injured shoulder was protesting her morning's strenuous activity, and she took the opportunity to bind it more tightly.

For what felt like the twentieth time in the last two days, she glanced over Lucius's letter, lying open on her desk. Today was the day he wanted to her to visit, but her enthusiasm for this meeting had waned considerably.

Damn it, she never should have accepted that dinner invitation with him on the day of her inquest. She never should have told him she would see him again, that it wasn't crucial that she rush right back to the Faerielands. All of the recent circumstances more or less indicated that she was now required to honour his wishes, after all that he had done for her. When one is in trouble, and has been abandoned by every person one believes to be a part of one's support structure, and a man not only gets you an attorney and clothes for your inquest but by all appearances puts in a good word for you with his close personal friend the presiding judge, and then afterward only wants you to allow him the privilege of feeding you a fifty-Galleon supper... well, such a man had some claim to one's gratitude. Not only that, but he had barely so much as laid a hand on her afterward, even though she could still smell the desire on him when he looked at her.

No, in truth, Lucius had been a perfect gentleman about the whole inquest situation. He had been the only person to show up to offer his support bloody hell, he had been at her bedside when she woke up in the morning. And regarding the episode with the telepathic potion and her True Name... well, his explanation had a shred of plausibility to it, and his apology seemed sincere. The sense of indescribable intimacy imparted by that telepathic bond, the profane thrill created by breaking down all barriers between them had been so intoxicating she had never felt such lust, such a desire to belong to a man. Perhaps she had led him to believe that she might share her True Name; she had certainly been willing to share enough else with him. He had confided so many of his secret, taboo desires to her, and she had found that so impossibly exciting. Perhaps part of what happened really *had* been her fault.

The clock on her desk now said ten a.m., and Lucius had asked her to meet him at eleven.

Emily got up and made her way into a hot shower, in preparation to go out.

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Back in his own rooms, Snape set Dumbledore's Pensieve down on his desk.

He hesitated a very long time before taking up his wand, distracting himself with several small tasks. There were books and papers disarranged on his night table. His inkstand needed refilling; his quill was dull. His boots pinched, his collar was oppressive. He needed a cup of tea.

The Pensieve sat on his desk, gently misting and swirling; completely innocent, and terrifying.

Finally, he put the tip of his wand to his temple, concentrated on exactly which memory he wanted *Midsummer's Night revel, the Mushroom Circle nightclub, from the time she and I arrived to the time I went to sleep in my own bedroom* and peripherally saw the silver-white strand of the stuff of his memory forming on the wand's end. When the transubstantiation of thought was done, he dropped the strand into the whirling surface of the Pensieve.

He sat for a long moment, his heart accelerating slightly with dread, but then took a few deep breaths and touched his hand to the surface of his memory.

An instant later, he was drawn down into his own recent past.

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Emily took a long time readying herself to leave the castle, as her injury made her usual sort of preparations for a meeting with Lucius much more work than before. Previously, she had had nothing more to worry about than which lipstick to put on and whether to wear the silk or lace lingerie this evening. She had never before had to take the time to apply Healing Potion and then an elaborate bandage to her left shoulder as part of her toilette routine, and found that it quite slowed matters down.

Her usual coquettish affectation of stockings and garters now seemed too labour-intensive to be endured, so instead she put on a skirt, petticoat, and camisole of soft black spidersilk, and a demure little jacket of bottle-green velvet. No perfume, no jewellery, just black leather ballet flats over her bare feet. This was, she had decided, a purely social thank-you sort of call to an old friend who had done her a very good turn before she left England, and there was no need to dress as though she was going to a torrid assignation with a lover. As far as Emily was concerned, the carnal part of their relationship was well and truly over, and it wasn't as if she would be physically capable of their usual sort of *athleticism* in this condition anyway.

Yes, she was just going to drop by for an hour or so and thank him for all that he had done for her in the matter of the attack and the inquest, apologise for her part in their falling-out, and make her goodbyes to him before she left. They might even be able to remain friends, after enough time had gone by to dull her indignation over the way he had treated her and to let her forget her sexual passion for him. Maybe ten or fifteen years from now, she might run into him and Narcissa somewhere, at one of the usual spots in Paris or London, and be able to cordially greet them both. Now might even be a good time to keep her promise to Draco, and attempt to persuade Lucius to let her at least try to find the boy a sponsor for the next round of Tithe page selections.

At perhaps five minutes past eleven a.m., Emily left her apartments at Hogwarts for the first time in almost a week, then took the white lawn handkerchief out of its envelope. A moment later, the Portkey deposited her in the rose garden just outside Malfeasant.

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Professor Snape had never been able to accustom himself to the transition between real-time and entering the environment of a Pensieve; the initial sense of cold, sucking blackness always made him feel a bit woozy. When he got his equilibrium back, he found himself standing in a long alleyway, bordered on one side by a very long wall covered with ivy and dimly lit by gas lamps and starlight.

He was standing about ten paces behind his own memory-self, dressed in his usual black robes, and Professor Swain, wearing that trailing black silk opera cloak over sleeveless black velvet robes. The giant fellow with the horns emerged from the ivy doorway, and again mistook him for this Lord Trent fellow. He still had not the remotest idea as to who this Lord Trent was, and it was a bit unsettling to think that by some fluke of coincidence, he had a virtual twin somewhere in the Muggle world. Ah well, he supposed this charade had been momentarily amusing and gotten the two of them out of paying the cover charge.

Professor Swain had tried to put a positive spin on the situation "Really, you ought to consider a career on the stage," said she. Oh yes, he could just imagine his *stage career.* More than likely he would want to play *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* or *Iago,* and instead be seen as pantomime villains like *Don John* and earnest buffoons like *Malvolio,* that did seem to be the way of things in his life. She hadn't needed to throw out that absurd reassurance about how his Muggle double was "considered quite good-looking, in a dark and brooding sort of way", but she probably did intend for it to be flattering.

He followed himself and his colleague down candlelit corridors and stairways and into the cloakroom, and his colleague took off her cloak and then her robe, revealing that scandalous bit of evening dress. Well... he had to admit that it wasn't entirely unpleasant to get another look at her in that ensemble, especially without having to worry that she might take offence with him for staring. He knew that Arcadians came from a warm climate, and their traditional evening dress reflected what textiles were commonly available in their land, and that which was comfortable for the usual weather, but... But. Snape was a heterosexual man, and the sight of a (blonde, athletic, well-proportioned) woman in what amounted to black lingerie and a silky chemise was not exactly *repulsive.*

The first hour went by just as he remembered it Professor Swain had greeted Megan Redqueen, the bartender, and let her know that he was to be her guest that evening; a moment later, that annoying blond wanker Alain had run up, apparently with the intention of commandeering his colleague's attentions for the evening. Professor Swain had started talking to her friends, he had rather embarrassingly ordered a cup of coffee in a Faery tavern, which he now knew was about like ordering one's Japanese sushi with a side of Hollandaise sauce. Instead the bartender had gotten him some fine *usquebaugh,* the memory of which made him idly wonder what the chances were of ordering a bottle of it from somewhere.

Then, right on cue, he had looked up from the bar to see Professor Swain disappear onto the dance floor with her friends in her usual quest to have a lovely time with everyone in any given room other than him. He had then watched the musicians playing and the crowd dancing, impatiently scanning the crowd for Catherine Orson's appearance, but she was of course nowhere to be found. Ah, here was Professor Swain again, breathing hard and looking dishevelled and hoydenish. She lingered at the bar long enough to have a drink, tell him she hadn't seen Catherine either, and tell him he looked miserable. A moment later, she was distracted again. Both Snape and Snape's memory-self watched her go, and the expressions on their respective faces said that they were both just a bit too much of a gentleman to tell the woman that there were times when she had the attention span of a gnat.

And here came that bloke William, with his Boy Who Lived glasses and his Muggle jacket and his sweet pea bouquet, who warbled familiar *thees* and *thous* at their hostess and started this whole debacle by ordering "a blue nectar of the Goddess" in front of him. Really, Megan Redqueen and her so-called *sweet William* were just shameless about their romantic bantering, weren't they if the man addressed one more word of honeyed hyperbole at the poor girl, Snape thought he was going to be ill. "After seeing the ridiculous lengths you had to go to convince our hostess to spend a bit of time with you, let's hope that she didn't abandon *you* in a train station," Snape muttered tartly.

Then, of course he had had to become intrigued by this ritual and the fetching way the stuff smelled, and ask about it, and then of course Miss Redqueen had to dangle them in front of him with all her (saucy, dimpled, buxom) might, and then came the fatal moment, when he lifted the glass to his lips "Don't do it, you idiot," Snape moaned.

But wait he hadn't before noticed that little vixen of a Megan Redqueen was watching him with such mischievous, avid eyes as he took the first sip, or that she had to stifle a tiny giggle as he put the empty glass down. She was all too glad to pour him another as well. After his third glass, she was grinning ear to ear at him.

"Oh, you little *wench*," Snape said witheringly to the bartender, even though he knew he was addressing his memory of her, and not the real woman. "You knew what effect it would have on me, and didn't say anything. You think this is funny, don't you you think this is just *hilarious*."

The bartender stifled another giggle apparently, yes, she *did* think this was hilarious. Even as she continued to wait on other people at the bar, that... that... *Redqueen woman* was keeping an avid eye on him, with the attitude of one waiting for the payoff of an exquisitely funny practical joke. Snape had once thought that the look on Emily Swain's face, just as she convinced him to doff all of his inhibitions about kissing a complete stranger in King's Cross, was a thing of merry lawlessness, but this redheaded *minx* made her seem positively mannered by comparison.

Then, Snape saw his memory-self lean back on his seat and shake his head, hard, his thumb and forefinger scratching at the corners of his eyes. He blinked several times, harder; a look of mild befuddlement gradually coming over him. He leaned down and studied the fresh white sweet pea blossoms lying before him on the bar as though he had never seen flowers before. He stared in almost childish astonishment at a passing dryad, who twinkled back at him in amusement. One of those snaky Naga changelings came up to the bar next to him and ordered a mug of ale, and Snape turned and stared at him as well. The snake changeling also peered back, smiling gently,

and waved at him, as a grown-up might to a particularly bold and precocious small boy.

Just down the bar, he noticed Megan Redqueen watching his memory-self with her hands pressed over her lips, doing her best to suppress a paroxysm of wild giggling the look Snape gave her would have made the stoutest Gryffindors wet themselves. "If you weren't a lady, and I weren't a gentleman, Miss Redqueen, I would hex you into *oblivion,*" he snarled.

And, of course, his luck being what it was, Professor Swain wafted off the dance floor and into the seat beside him at just that moment. His memory-self paid absolutely no attention to her whatsoever, intent as he was on watching the Naga changeling, who had taken his ale and gone off to the other end of the bar and greeted that young wizard in the leather jacket and glasses. She stood there next to him for a few minutes, chin propped on her hand, waiting for him to notice her, while he stared around him with an expression on his face not unlike the one *Alice* must have registered at her first glimpse of Wonderland. And like Megan Redqueen, the dryad, and the Naga changeling, she seemed to think this wondering attitude was rather sweet and amusing.

Then his memory-self had noticed his colleague standing beside him and started showering her with a barrage of questions. He wanted to know what manner of creature the Naga changeling was, he wanted to know if the dryad was a girl or a tree, asked her about everything and nothing. Alain had appeared and was again smarmy and irritating, but once Professor Swain had discerned he had been drinking Seventh Kingdom absinthe, she seemed concerned about him. He and that sod of an Alain had gone a few rounds of sarcastic repartee after Alain tried made a truly pathetic and obvious attempt at baiting him, but Professor Swain didn't seem about to just deposit him somewhere and head off to amuse herself. She seemed to have met people in this state before, and she appeared to have decided to keep a close eye on him while he was in this condition.

And she made this decision none too soon Snape's memory-self turned away from her and stared out at the exuberant mass of Faeries dancing again. In his highly suggestible state, he was finding this situation overwhelming. Snape always felt most secure behind a carefully maintained self-control, but now that control was gone, lost to some strange force he didn't quite understand. He stared around him, like some innocent who had accidentally wandered into unfamiliar, dangerous, territory.

Professor Swain had then immediately gone to his side, drawing him into a private corner where his distress would not be much observed. He had wrapped his arms around her, shaking, and she was holding his head on her shoulder and was whispering soothingly into his ear. *There, you're all right. I won't let anything hurt you, and I'm not going to leave you alone.*

Yes, you will, Snape heard himself whisper. He clung to her more tightly, but she had let him, her cheek resting against his.

"Professor? Come on. Let's go somewhere quieter. You aren't feeling well," she whispered back but thankfully, Snape's memory-self now seemed to be regaining some of his composure. He lifted his head from her shoulder and stared down into her eyes.

"Actually, I thought you said you'd teach me how to waltz," he said, with the air of one issuing a daring challenge indeed.

I wanted to learn how to dance? Snape thought to himself. *What is in that absinthe?*

Professor Swain seemed as surprised as he was "Oh, you'd like to try that now?" Well, really, she didn't need to act as blown away as all *that* it wasn't as though he didn't think he could dance, he just didn't *like* dancing, for a wide variety of reasons.

She offered him her hand with a polite bow, and asked: "Professor Snape, may I have this dance?"

And, apparently, he had accepted.

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He glanced at his colleague, expecting to see one of her mocking little smiles, private amusement at her colleague making such an ass of himself but no, she wasn't reacting that way at all. She seemed to know he was being silly and self-indulgent, but was letting him have his say anyway. She was listening to all of these peevish, illogical pronouncements coming out of him with what could only be described as close, sympathetic attention.

"Maybe you should tell this to Albus," she said, when he paused for breath. His hair had gotten into his eyes, and she brushed it off his face with a delicate gesture of her hand.

"And what would be the point of that?" he huffed. "One can never get anywhere with direct appeals, you see."

Finally, mercifully, he had just subsided into unconsciousness onto her shoulder mid-sentence. She had smiled, put her arm around his shoulders, and stayed there with him as a kind of combination nursemaid and pillow. He remembered this was a holy day for her, a religious festival. She could have been out dancing and carousing with her friends, but no, she was taking care of him, but strangely enough, she didn't seem to mind that in the least.

Now, that was... rather kind of her.

Someone passed by them, a slender woman with leaves in her hair, and glanced down at him for a moment. "Someone's paying his first visit to the Blue Faerie?" the dryad asked his colleague.

"I'm afraid so," she replied, with a rueful grin.

"Poor dear." The dryad chuckled and shook her head. "Ah well, at least he's got you to look after him," she said, smiling, and headed back toward the bar.

Then Catherine Orson appeared out of the crowd. Catherine looked very different than the tired, haphazardly dressed woman he had first met; her short red hair was sleekly coiffed, her lips were rouged and her lashes darkened, and she wore a curvaceous, low-necked black dress and black stockings. A tall, well-built, freckled fellow with silvery hair and eyes, dressed in a Faery silk shirt and black Muggle jeans, was escorting her. The three of them greeted each other warmly "Cat! Roddy!" Professor Swain ordered a bottle of Third Kingdom wine from a passing waitress.

Catherine bent over Snape, peacefully sleeping on Professor Swain's shoulder. "Professor? Sir?" When he didn't respond, she turned back to his colleague. "Well, someone's really *out,* isn't he. Didn't he get any sleep since the night we detoxed Miss Liria?"

The Professor's arm tightened around him. "*Someone* drank at least two glasses of Seventh Kingdom absinthe, without the faintest idea as to what it would do to him," she said, stroking his cheek. That gesture, and the way she was holding him... truthfully, could only be described as careful. Even gentle.

"Ah, got it," Catherine said, as though she was well familiar with this situation. "Let me give you some of my ever-so-famous hangover cure for him before I go. He'll need it."

"The reason why you have never, and will never, pay a cover to get into this place," Roddy said, laughing.

So the hangover powder was Dr. Orson's creation, then. Snape felt a pang of embarrassment about his initial distrust of the little packet of medicine on his night table he knew Dr. Orson to be an accomplished compounding apothecary, and her headache medicine had been truly efficacious. Given his own tendency toward tension headaches, he would have been interested in knowing exactly what went into that powder and how it was compounded, if she didn't mind telling him.

The three of them sat about drinking wine and discussing Liria's condition, and her return to the Faerielands, in depth and at length Snape was glad to hear all the details. This Roddy fellow had apparently escorted Liria home and gotten her a job with a friend's parents, and he described how the girl had cried with happiness and hugged the nearest tree when she had gotten there, and how much she had enjoyed her first meal at home, a great big breakfast at some place called the Inn at the End of the World. When Professor Swain said that she would have liked to see Liria take third helpings of porridge and small beer, Snape had to admit that he wouldn't have minded seeing that either.

Some time later Catherine and Roddy had gotten up and taken their leave of Professor Swain, and moved off toward the dance floor, but she stayed behind with him, as he continued to sleep on her shoulder. At some point he moved a bit and slid into her lap... and she had just gotten him situated comfortably and let him rest. Alain came by to tease her once or twice, suggested they play a capital joke by Transfiguring up a pair of ass's ears for Snape while he slept, but she wouldn't let him.

After awhile, Snape saw himself wake up, pouting and rubbing his eyes and looking embarrassingly like a sulky little boy who had just roused from a nap. Professor Swain again stroked his hair out of his eyes and smiled at him. They started talking again another of those nonsensical conversations in which he talked in peevish non-sequiturs, and she soothed him by listening sympathetically and unconditionally giving him his way in everything. (Bloody hell, she really *had* met a few people in this condition before, hadn't she.)

Only this time, he had kissed her. Just reached up and pulled her down into a rather long and explicit snog, as though it were the easiest and most natural thing in the world, as though he had every right to expect that this woman wouldn't mind it in the least.

And she hadn't objected. No, actually she looked as though she was quite enjoying it.

Snape was aghast. Absolutely, jaw-droppingly, pulse-stillingly aghast.

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Lucius was waiting on one of the rose garden benches when Emily arrived at Malfeasant. He was dressed in an elegant charcoal-grey silk shirt and matching at-home robes, his pale hair loose around his shoulders. He immediately came forward to meet Emily when she arrived, taking her hands in his, and putting only the softest, most brotherly sort of kiss on her cheek.

He then studied her face for a long moment, grey eyes narrowing. "You're using a human Glamour," he said. "Get rid of it. You shouldn't have to hide yourself from anyone, ever."

"I really do prefer this now," she said shortly.

"There's no one here but me," he gently reminded her. "And your real face is so much more beautiful." He leaned down and put another very soft kiss on her cheek, as if to illustrate that point.

"Let's just say some bastard with an iron knife has made me a bit self-conscious about my face at present," she replied.

"All right, if you insist," he said mildly. "I'm so glad to see you, darling. You can't imagine how I've been worrying ever since I saw you in hospital the last thing you needed was to go home to that terrible tragedy at work. How have you been? Healing all right?" he asked, his brows drawing together in concern. "It was your left shoulder, if I recall correctly?"

"Yes, the back of it, here." She held her hand just over the bandage for a moment.

"I'll be careful not to jostle you, then." He took both her hands in his again, looking down at her face with fond commiseration. "You look lovely, by the way. Perhaps a bit more fragile than usual, but very lovely."

Emily blushed she would have said she had looked peaky ever since the attack, but she rather liked the sound of *fragile*, especially spoken in such tender tones, and when

soft grey eyes and silver-blond hair looked so fetching in the late morning sunlight. He had not yet let go of her hands, seemed to have all the time in the world to just stay there with her and suddenly all this kindness was making her throat feel tight and her eyes misty.

"Thank you," she said, her voice not quite quavering, and averting her eyes shyly. "It's lovely to see you too."

"Thank you for agreeing to see me," he said. Then, he seemed to intuit that her emotional state was just as fragile as her appearance at that moment and wordlessly enfolded her in his arms, taking care not to jar the injured shoulder. It was very much the sort of embrace a father might give his injured child and it would have taken a much stronger woman than Emily Swain to resist him at that moment.

After the attack, after all that had happened at the end of the school year, truthfully, Emily would have given a great deal for someone to give her a long, comforting hug, and he seemed happy to do just that. Given the choice, she would have preferred to be comforted by any one of many other people she loved more, and she couldn't have said that she would ever be able to trust Lucius again, but he was at that moment warm, gentle, and kind, and for now, that was enough.

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children, I tell you, I'd have given the school governors no rest until Albus Dumbledore was in the dole line. Really, one can scarcely feel safe with some of the undesirables Dumbledore keeps trying to *help*, at the expense of our children."

"What happened to the werewolf?" Emily asked, concerned.

"When the fellow came to himself, he resigned from his position probably the best thing he could do, all told," Lucius said, grimacing. "I feel for the man, truly, he didn't *ask* to get lycanthropy, of course. But when one has that sort of handicap, one has to make allowances for it in one's life. One simply can't expect to be able to live like someone who doesn't, and anyone who thinks otherwise is criminally naïve, no two ways about it.

"So you see... in light of all the unpleasantness that came out of Dumbledore's... *social work project* sort of employees last year, it's probably for the best that he didn't turn up to support you, and we were able to take care of you ourselves." He reached across the table and gently caressed her hand. "If a stolid old lad like Tibernius Solon had gotten the idea that you were one of Dumbledore's pet *projects*, it might not have gone so well for you, if you know what I mean."

"You really think so?" Emily couldn't believe it; she would have thought so much more of Albus Dumbledore. One of her heroes was being revealed as not only a frail human being, but something of a mountebank, and it hurt her to hear it.

"Well... they did rule against his friend Hagrid in the matter of the hippogriff, last year," Lucius said mildly. "It's disappointing no matter how much we all admire the man, he just seems intent on destroying his own reputation, and I've not the foggiest idea why. Maybe he's just getting on in years, and doesn't want to admit it to himself my father had a few irrational spells of that sort, in the years before he passed on."

"I see," Emily said quietly, her eyes downcast. The mention of a leader's judgment failing as he reached advanced age was setting off pangs of unnamed worry in her ever since the 3022 Peace had been signed, she had seen the strain of that conflict taking its toll on King Gwydion's already tenuous health. It frightened her to see her world's foremost authority figure faltering, and these reports of Dumbledore's well-meaning folly were filling her with the same sort of anxiety.

"By the Mother, what a sad mess *this* year has turned out to be," she said, downing a healthy swallow of wine. "Ah well, I suppose there's a bright side I'll never get bawled out by Professor Snape ever again, that's a comfort. He really outdid himself at the end of the year, is all I'll say about it, but words cannot describe how pleased I'll be to never, ever see *him* again."

She turned toward Lucius, expecting a bit of sympathy regarding "that miserable crustacean" as per his usual wont but instead, he slanted a heavy-lidded little smile down at his wineglass. He glanced off into the distance as though reflecting on some very satisfying secret indeed; then leaned forward and gently laid his hand over hers again.

"Well, if it's any comfort to you now, darling I can assure you that you'll never have to worry about him again," Lucius said, squeezing her hand reassuringly. "I know you didn't want me to say anything to him about the way he treats you, but now I really insist. It just so happens that around eight o'clock tonight, I'm going to be meeting up with my *extremely* ungentlemanly cousin Severus, and I'll make my feelings clear on the matter around that time."

"Really? I didn't realise you were meeting with Professor Snape tonight," Emily said.

"Yes, I'm just meeting him for a drink tonight at some beastly little Muggle place in London called the Fusilier Pub," Lucius said, with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"A Muggle pub?" Emily asked, now very curious indeed. "You mean to tell me that there's some force on Earth that has actually induced *you* to set foot inside a Muggle drinking establishment?"

Lucius rolled his eyes. "It's nothing, dear, just some family business dealings that have to be kept very hush-hush for decorum's sake, I'll not embarrass you by airing our dirty laundry. Suffice to say you're not the only one he's irked of late, and he needs to account for himself a bit. But tonight I'll make it a point to let him know exactly what I think of how he treats my dear friend Emily. I promise you, after my *ever* so tactful and considerate way of dealing with him, you'll never have to worry about him hurting your feelings again, my love. It's the least I can do for you."

Emily almost laughed it sounded as though Snape had not seen eye-to-eye with him in some financial dealing, and the way Lucius could be so brazen about sex and so coy and prudish about money sometimes amused her. Ever since he had *talked* to Mrs. Rosier for her, Emily had well realised that Lucius's *tactful, considerate* way of dealing with people probably amounted to veiled threats and heavy-handed bullying, but somehow she couldn't find it within herself to defend Snape too passionately.

"Lucius, you don't have to," she said. "I wish you wouldn't. It's not like we'll ever run into each other again."

"I know, but it's the principle of the thing, you see," Lucius averred, very stoutly indeed. "There's a certain sort of behaviour one expects of a gentleman, especially in the way he treats women and family, and Severus has not been a shining example of either this year. I want to let him know exactly what I think of his behaviour this year and I want to do something for you. You've had enough go wrong for you of late without him adding his usual sort of *charm* to it, and I want to see you happy again."

Part Second: The Hart Rampant, Chapter 25, Part 2

Chapter 34 of 55

In which Professor Swain discovers the delights of a dual life as both a Hogwarts professor, and Lucius Malfoy's mistress, until a chance encounter with a desperate Faery prostitute in Knockturn Alley sends her to the most unlikely person for aid. Meanwhile, Severus Snape finds himself alone and adrift in the Mushroom Circle, a Faery nightclub…

Chapter 25, Part 2:

Back at Hogwarts, in the borrowed Pensieve, it took Severus Snape the better part of a minute to stop staring, speechless and immobile with shock, at himself and his colleague.

No. No, it couldn't have been that easy.

Nothing, *nothing,* in Snape's experience was that easy, especially *her.* She was an icy, unapproachable creature with a bitchy wit and a flashing rapier she certainly wasn't his to nibble on like a Honeydukes truffle; he wouldn't have imagined that she was for an instant. It couldn't just have been a matter of... drawing her lips down to his and planting a lazy, sensual kiss on her. Had he tried such at any time during the school year, he would have expected a cold, mocking rejection at best and a well-aimed slap at worst... but, on Midsummer's Night in an Arcadian nightclub, he had apparently done just that.

When he did, he had not been coldly mocked or rejected, and had certainly not been slapped. No, she had then kissed him back, quite sensually and impassionedly.

And from there, it had continued.

And continued, and continued.

By all appearances, his memory-self had forgotten there was anyone in the world at that moment other than the woman in his arms, looked as though he had completely lost himself in her. This was nothing like the sort of awkward groping some teenagers did no, she knew how a man liked to be kissed and touched, and how to wordlessly let him know that she wants nothing more than to be exactly where she is, with him. And although it had been some time for him just one day short of nine months, at the time of this memory it looked as though he hadn't forgotten how to kiss a woman, either... and from the way her arms had twined around his neck and her fingers trailed down his spine, he seemed to have been in rather good form that night.

Oh bloody hell, from the response he was provoking, he looked to have been in a form that Casanova would have envied that night. Snape's chin went up and his shoulders went back just a bit with satisfaction.

This kissing and embracing went on for so long that the amazement of it wore off a bit after about half an hour, and he wandered off a ways to watch the dancing, the musicians, the exotic varieties of Faeries running about. It was really interesting the way the Fae all seemed totally familiar with and accepting of even the most unusual types of people women who were also trees, men with antlers and horns, girls with hooves, people with slit-pupilled eyes and snakes' skin. The Naga changelings still gave Snape the willies; but then, he had known exactly one person with slit-pupilled eyes before in his life, and that person was a legendary Dark Wizard who got them by means of some rather frowned-upon and highly unnatural Dark-Magical transformations, so perhaps this reaction was understandable. Your average Naga changeling didn't have abnormally large, violently red eyes, however their eyes all seemed to have gold or green or brown irises, and to be of a size proportionally normal for their faces.

And by Merlin, they were a people who just loved to dance and play music. He hadn't really noticed this before, but they seemed to have quite a rich folk-music tradition. Some of the slower tunes, played at less deafening volume, were actually quite listenable. Additionally he didn't seem to have been the only person, or even the only human, who had spent part of that evening "*in the arms of the Blue Faerie*." Quite a few Faeries were meandering around with looks of childlike wonderment on their faces, entranced by all the dancing lights and giggling at everything and nothing. He passed that young wizard again, William or whatever his name was, still talking to the first Naga changeling Snape had noticed and the brunette Beauxbatons girl, JoAnna Something. Miss JoAnna had conjured up a Glamoured school of tiny luminescent goldfish who were now merrily swimming all around William, and the lad was looking hugely amused by these antics. Snape remembered that the young wizard had drunk a glass of absinthe voluntarily, from all appearances knowing full well what it would do to him.

So there were people who drank the stuff because they actually *liked* its effects. How *extraordinarily* odd.

When he came back to his memory-self and Professor Swain about half an hour later they were still kissing. Good lord, they were acting like a young couple at a local pub. Like they could have been dallying in the shadow of a rosebush. Snape thought about all the rosebushes he had blasted at the Yule Ball, with a twinge of embarrassment. That saucy dark Miss JoAnna Something sauntered by, still trailing Glamoured goldfish, and stage-whispered *Get a room* at them which they didn't seem to notice at all.

Another half hour went by still kissing. That Alain bloke and the woman with the toffee-coloured ringlets, Mackenzie, walked past them, exchanged a look, laughed, and went back to dancing.

He checked his watch again the two of them had apparently contentedly embraced and kissed each other for at least an hour and a half. Snape began to get impatient. From the look of it, this must have been very absorbing and a great deal of fun for the two participants, but now that he was sitting outside of that clinch, watching it go on, he was rather perversely starting to feel a little excluded.

Another Faerie walked past him and Professor Swain as they *enjoyed* their dark corner, a very small man with long grey hair. He casually glanced at the two of them then seemed to recognise them. At that, he stopped dead, a huge grin breaking over his face. He actually bounced up and down in jubilation for the space of a second, shaking with soundless laughter. No doubt about it, he seemed happy to see them together for some reason.

Then suddenly, Snape recognised the fellow it was the old man from in front of the library, looking quite the Arcadian swell indeed, all tarted up in a wine-coloured spidersilk shirt and velvet breeches, and a handsomely tooled brown leather doublet, with a heavy medallion of what looked like burnished gold around his neck. As he made his way past them and toward the bar, people were greeting him with bows, calling him "My Lord." The huge SECURITY fellow with the horns, who had been watching the door earlier in the evening, was constantly at his side. Who exactly *was* this elderly beggar?

But now the music had stopped, and the club was closing. What time was it in this memory? He glanced at the wristwatch on the Naga changeling at the bar had to search a bit before he found a watch on anyone in *this* crowd and found it was now half-past two a.m. He made his way back to himself and Professor Swain.

The Beauxbatons lot were quite cordially making their good-byes to the two of them, embracing his colleague and shaking his hand, even that annoying Alain bloke. They all seemed to have accepted that he was his colleague's date for the evening, and for some unknown reason, they acted as though they quite approved of this development. The curly-locked Mesdame Mackenzie extended an invitation to the two of them to join a local after party ("You're welcome to bring your lover, if you like," she told Professor Swain) but Emily had said they both had to work tomorrow, and promised to make the next one.

Professor Swain then disengaged herself from him with many small caresses, said she was going to say some good-byes, and promised she wouldn't be long. He followed her a short distance into the crowd and saw her hug both Catherine and Roddy, who were on their way out. Catherine gave her a packet of something, which she tucked into her pocketbook.

Then he noticed that the old beggar or noble Lord, whichever he was, was sitting at the bar and had just caught sight of Snape sitting on the sofa alone. His merry, wizened face lit up again, and he bounced down off his seat and traipsed over to him.

The two of them began talking, and suddenly Snape understood the man's cryptic remarks in front of the library about "the Circle" Snape now realised he was at that moment within "*the Circle.*" And then the two of them made introductions to each other, and Snape discovered that he was talking to none other than Lord Robin "Goodfellow" Puck's own great-nephew. "Well, I'll be damned who would have thought Shakespeare's Faeries were historical personages," Snape muttered to himself.

Now the two of them were chatting away in a totally opposite manner from their enigmatic first meeting. How strange that when he had met the old man for the first time, he had seemed so closed off, so unwilling to be questioned but he seemed to open right up in this situation, especially after Snape introduced himself. He pondered for a moment on his first meetings with Faeries, they had taken the first opportunity to disappear from him when he tried to ask them any sort of question. ("That 'I'm getting pressure from a human, time to disappear!' thing is practically reflexive with them," Dr. Orson had said.) When he had pressed Emily for her name during their tea and again right after their impulsive *escapade* in the callbox, she not only hadn't given it, but had vanished. When he had met Lord Puck and asked him about "the Circle" the old man had also taken the first opportunity to disappear.

But once he introduced himself on Midsummer's Night, Malabar Puck had offered his own name a second later. ("Tell us your name and be known to us before you ask your questions, we'll tell when we're ready," the Puck said.) *Interesting.* All right, perhaps next time he made a Faerie's acquaintance, he would try introducing himself first, and see if that made conversation any easier.

And like the Beauxbatons lot, Malabar Puck seemed pleased indeed at seeing his colleague with a new romantic interest. From the amount of time they had spent in each other's arms that evening, he seemed to have inferred that there was some relationship between the two of them. When Snape admitted that he made no assumptions about his claim on the lady's affections, the Puck seemed to think he was selling himself short for some reason. "By my troth, Professor Night, the woman dotes upon you" what was that all about? No one *doted* upon him, and certainly not one Professor Emily Beauregard Swain, and it would take more than the many delectable, melting kisses lavished upon him that evening to make him believe that. Kisses and frantically good sex were easy it was knowing that she would be there to kiss on a day-to-day basis

that most interested him, at this stage in his life. The first and only woman who could have been said to faithfully dote on me, sir, he thought, is almost twenty years in her untimely grave, thank you.

A moment later, the Puck seemed to think Snape's reluctance to presume on his colleague's regard meant that he was only amusing himself with her. The Puck fixed Snape with a look and hinted that Professor Swain was not an ideal candidate for trifling, and that he might do well to simply let her down easy. Apparently he knew his colleague quite well, was familiar with the tragedy of her recent past, but he only touched on it very discreetly.

This got Snape's hackles up he didn't see why he should be chided for a lack of honourable intention toward a woman who had abandoned him fifteen minutes post-coitus. "Not that it's any of *your* business, sir, but on the first night I met the lady, I was willing to take my first day of leave in my entire teaching career to spend more time with her the reason our association had come to such an abrupt end was not *my* doing," Snape tartly informed the fellow.

But the unfairness of these assumptions didn't seem to register with his absinthe-adulterated memory-self instead, he paused, his brows creasing thoughtfully. "No, it's not that I don't... reciprocate, it's... "

The Puck smiled, very warmly indeed, in the manner of a wise and venerable grandfather who knows exactly what it is to be a skittish, infatuated youth. "It's what, laddie? Jill's fond of Jack, and Jack's fond of Jill it seems a simple enough equation, to me."

Snape's memory-self seemed first amazed by that suggestion, then seemed to go through any number of silent internal denials as to why it could not possibly be that simple. Truly, Snape was sure that if the old man knew about all that had happened, the first night they had met, the introduction, the Dungbombed cauldrons, the Malfeasant weekend, the pyrotechnical arguing, Lucius hanging about making insinuations he would have realised how bloody *complicated* the matter really was.

But now, Snape's memory-self was desperately and probably wisely changing the subject. He asked the old man what he was sentry of, why Diagon Alley needed a sentry yes, he would like to know more about that, come to think of it. He turned to Malabar Puck for his answer, but the Puck evaded the question or rather, he evaded it and then dropped a tantalising hint that there was far more to this sentry business than he had previously imagined. Damn so bloody *typical!*

And what was this about *the sentry of Christchurch College*? He knew there was a sentry of Diagon Alley so there were more Fae sentries out there, and Professor Swain had at one point been one of them? He might have to find some way to ask her exactly what was going on there.

But Professor Swain had just returned to collect him and now she was looking at Malabar Puck half-accusingly, as though she just knew that this earnest heart-to-heart he was having with the man who had lately been thoroughly kissing her meant he had to be up to something. The two of them turned to her like nothing so much as a couple of small boys caught in some mischief. Snape was expecting a sharp exchange between them, but instead Malabar Puck played off her displeasure with debonair ease. The Professor had to stifle a laugh at that he was quite familiar with my lady Swain's ability to shrug off all criticisms with a killingly twinkly smile, but she was an earnest amateur compared to this old charlatan. It was quite satisfying to see someone use her own tricks on her for a change.

The two of them withdrew for a serious sort of chat perhaps she was catching up on the latest news regarding her parents, as she knew this Lord Puck had seen them more recently than she had and Snape's memory-self was left alone for another few minutes. He had turned toward someone standing nearby in the crowd, stared fascinated at her for a long moment. Then Snape himself glanced around for whatever he was looking at so wide-eyed, and the two of them gaped and stared in unison as he realised that yes he was standing in the same room as a person who looked as though she had genuine, honest-to-goodness, fully functional *wings* attached to her body.

Snape would have been intrigued by such a person even cold sober, but his absinthe-adulterated self had gone right up to the woman and touched one of her black and silver wings. Apparently Seventh Kingdom absinthe not only improved your dancing ability and caused you to assume Casanova-like qualities with previously unattainable women, it also brought the act of going up and petting strange Faeries into the realm of socially acceptable behaviour. With his luck, he had probably just mortally offended the woman and was now about to get ticked off royally.

But no such thing happened *It doesn't hurt to look at you, either, pet?*Well well *well.* Now he was scratching her wing, and she was having a catlike stretch under these attentions, looking at him sidelong with her own take on that Puck-surveying-a-sleeping-Athenian-youth expression. (From what he had seen that night, Fae women all seemed to have something of the hormonal anarchist in them.)

Oh my, who *was* this he was petting? Huge almond eyes ringed with copper lashes, luxuriant red hair, some kind of gold sheen on her lips and eyelids. Dressed in a short black silk frock of a classical, vaguely Roman cut, with an impossibly intricate band of what looked like jewel-encrusted gold filigree around her left bicep. One certainly didn't see the likes of her every day. She would have been impressive even without the wings and she was... *oh my*... she had just paid him a high-flown compliment about his Byronic mode of dress, her shameless little hand stroking his lapel. Snape felt his jaw drop for the hundredth time today unless he was labouring under some absinthe-flashback delusion at present, she had just made an unmistakable *pass* at him.

Snape gulped. This Lord Trent bloke must be quite the famous celebrity indeed, if he had women like that after him.

Then he noticed Professor Swain was observing the two of them, off to his right, talking to that obnoxious Alain bloke. He came closer, so he could hear what they were saying: "Well, how do you like *that*," Professor Swain said, extremely tartly. "I leave him alone for five minutes, and some nixie's on him like brown on rice. Maybe I should leave the two of them alone, do you think?"

Alain laughed. "Anyone could get a bit distracted by a nixie like that. I should know, because she's distracting the ever-loving Christian hell out of *me,* too." Emily had given him a swat on the arm, only half playfully.

Oh, that was priceless she was *jealous.* The sight of another beautiful woman flirting with him made her *insecure*. She was exhibiting all the classic signs of jealousy, as evidenced by a first-year, no less. Her eyes were flashing, her lips were pouting, her complexion was practically a delicate shade of green Snape was tempted to leave the Pensieve and return to this memory just to watch his insouciant ice-maidenly colleague get hot and bothered like that again.

Finally, she had gone up to him and stood at his elbow, as if waiting for him to notice her again and the second he saw she had come back, he pulled her into his arms as though he had been waiting anxiously for her return. "There, you see? Even when not in my right mind, and faced with this kind of... redheaded *provocation,* I have my priorities in order, thank you very much," Snape pointed out, feeling very put upon indeed to ever have been doubted.

Luckily, this warm welcome seemed to have appeased Professor Swain's fit of jealousy entirely; she had nestled against his side with seeming contentment. At this, the redhead was now looking a bit annoyed a moment later, she made her good-byes and melted away into the crowd. Why, Snape wondered, had she and his colleague greeted each other the way they had *my Lady Acherontia?* A moment ago she had referred to the woman as *some nixie* how did she now know the redhead's name, and where she hailed from? He was definitely going to have to ask her about that, too.

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But now, the revel had ended. Professor Swain was trying to get him home. She led him along the alley, hailed the Knight Bus, and coaxed him on board. (Another volley of peevish non-sequiturs fell out of his mouth as she managed this Homeric task, which made him cringe again.) Finally, she had gotten him up to the nearly deserted second level, where she had manoeuvred him onto a bed. She had taken a moment to get him comfortably situated... and then seemed to take another long, thoughtful moment just to look at him in the darkness, dwelling on some private musings of her own. But then the reverie passed, and she got up and started to head toward the bed next to him but then his memory-self sat up, wrapped himself around her from behind, and put an impassioned kiss on the back of her neck.

Snape's eyes widened. *Damn, that was forward of me.*But apparently this little bit of provocation had been quite effective, because after a second's hesitation, she turned around and kissed him like to singe his eyebrows. The kissing progressed. Then his jacket came off, and she was unbuttoning his shirt and stroking his naked back, and

then she was cradling his head in her arms as he imprinted humid kisses along the swell of her cleavage and then he was devouring her lips again, while her body arched hungrily up to his and her fingers raked down his back. Apparently that nibbling of collarbones and shoulders was entirely consensual and oh my, there was nothing even remotely reserved about this, they were entwined together like a mated pair of anacondas, just *consuming* each other.

Bloody hell, wasn't I a bit randy that evening, Snape thought, the sinister eyebrow going up until it nearly met his hairline. *And wasn't she a bit randy as well. Oh MY* now his memory-self's hand was curving around the back of her stockinged knee, and *holy Merlin's teeth* his hand was under her skirt, gently squeezing her lacy-knickered little arse, and then her filmy silk skirt was slipping down to reveal a slender black-gartered thigh pressed tight around his hip. What they had been doing in the club had been flirtation but this... this was *foreplay.* Extremely heated foreplay at that just the sight of them together, of her responding to him like that, made his heart rate spike up slightly and brought a light sweat out on his palms.

Snape was barely aware of the existence of Muggle pornographic films, and he was not the sort of man who would have sought them out if he had been. Even though he knew the man on the bed was himself, he had to avert his eyes once the two of them *really* got going. Snape turned around, facing away from them, feeling his face alight with horrible blushing and feeling them knocking up against his back as this primal wallow in Dionysian lust continued. Now all he could hear were kisses and sighs, gasping and panting, both baritone and soprano. He had previously been worried about making a fool of himself in public when the truth of the matter was, perhaps he had given rather *too good* of an account of himself in private.

Then a deeply alarming thought occurred to him how far *had* this progressed? Had he made love to her again? Swept her completely off her feet somehow, made grandiose promises to her... in the heat of the moment, had he done something *really* horrible like propose marriage or some such afterward?

Good lord, had she *accepted*?

But then someone took a deep breath behind him, and he heard Professor Swain's voice say, "No, not now, I can't."

"*Why not?*" he heard his own voice gasp, with comical disappointment. Snape slapped a hand over his face in an agony of embarrassment.

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that their earlier subterfuges were no longer necessary, he had (*admit it, you fool*) run her off, and then avoided her like the plague.

It was really amazing how similar their impressions of the introduction had been he had believed her to be so self-contained and standoffish, whereas she had believed the same of him. They had both been afraid to approach each other again afterward and had believed the other's aloofness to be the result of disinterest, not uncertainty.

Oh... and that bit about her inability to turn red when she blushed, well, come to think of it, that explained a lot.

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But the Pensieve memory was still continuing on... he had asked her to kiss him again, and they had apparently lain entwined together for another half-hour or so doing just that. His companion seemed to grow more and more aroused under his... *attentions*, until she was kissing him as though his lips buried in hers were enough to send her halfway to orgasm, that lithe gartered thigh under his hand... he could practically feel the heat radiating from that clinch like the sun shimmering off hot pavement. Their exploration had been more explicit before, but this kind of focused slow burn brought sweat out on his brow (and began to stir another, distinctly *male* sort of response as well). It was agonising to know that mutual desire like that had gone unconsummated.

"Oh, *why* couldn't I remember that," Snape muttered, dabbing at his forehead with his handkerchief. "That looked like it was bloody *memorable*, it does."

Now she was whispering to him again, pleading with him to remember that talk when he woke up the next morning. "Oh, please, *please* promise me you'll remember all this tomorrow. I simply can't go back to ripping each other's heads off at the slightest thing after this," she had implored, her eyes big and brown and soft, her lips millimetres from his.

"I would have *liked* to remember it, truly," Snape protested miserably. "It's all the Blue Faerie's fault, that vindictive little slut."

"I don't see how I could possibly forget this," he heard his own voice say. And how happy his colleague had been with these reassurances she had embraced him and kissed him adoringly, like he was the one person she most doted upon in this world or any other. Until an hour ago, he hadn't consciously been aware that she even had these feelings for him, but now he felt the loss of her affections as keenly as a fishhook turning in his stomach.

For a few hours, the impossible ice maiden had been his, absolutely his. She had hovered protectively over him, kissed and made much of him, let him know that she wanted him in no uncertain terms. He couldn't quite recall exactly why he had ever thought her to be such a treacherous creature; she seemed like such a warm and charmingly straightforward sort of woman, once you got to know her a bit better. His recklessly tender little nymphet from the callbox, who he had never forgotten and who he had lusted for ever since, was back, and the Merlin knew how much he had missed her.

Yes, he really didn't see how he could have forgotten all of this... but then by all accounts, he had gotten back to his own bed, fallen asleep for a few hours, and awakened the next morning having done *exactly that.*

No wonder she was hurt.

He lowered his head into his hands again, in a wash of self-castigation.

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But now Professor Swain seemed to be getting a trifle insecure about how much she had revealed to him she had just had an eleventh-hour fit of playing hard to get, of all things. "I think I'll insist on being taken to dinner first, just so you don't get it into your head that I'm easy. Even if you know damned well that I am, where you're concerned," she said.

Snape smiled satirically at her *Oh, come off it, madam,*he thought, *there's no point in playing coy with the same bloke who's ripped the knickers off you and made you bloody well like it.* But if she wanted him to take her to dinner first just so she could be reassured that he respected her, he could humour her in that.

His memory-self had accepted her conditions quite readily, but he also had a few conditions of his own that he wanted taken into consideration. He decided to wax a bit maudlin in naming those conditions, embarrassingly enough "After breakfast I want at least the possibility of having you there again the next night if we haven't come to hate each other in the interval in between. I'm thirty-five fecking years old and I know damned well that no one will ever call me the most charming, handsome, or wealthy bloke on Earth or any other plane of existence, but I want more from a woman I'm involved with than a nice cup of tea and some three-minute swive in a bloody *callbox*."

"Oh, shut *up* with the self-pity," he said, glaring at himself. "I know intimately what you're talking about because we're the same sodding *person*, and even *I* don't want to hear it what makes you think *she* does?" Really, he kept giving her these horrible straight lines, wonderful opportunities to get dear little jabs in at him... but she just kept not *taking* any of them now. When he had made his speech about how he wanted her still there for breakfast the next morning and didn't think that was an unreasonable request, she not only agreed with him, but punctuated that with another of those melting kisses. By this point, Snape wasn't at all sure that the woman lying in his memory-self's arms was the same one he had worked with all year. No one, *no one*, ever acted as though anything he said was reasonable.

But now his memory-self seemed to be gearing up for another revelatory speech... Snape grimaced, waiting for the next horribly embarrassing declaration to fall out of his mouth

"I don't ever want to see you with Lucius again," he told her. "I don't know what's gone on with the two of you, and I don't care to know. I only want him *gone*."

"Don't worry," she had assured him, her voice ringing with truth. "There is nothing between me and Lucius."

Snape was, for the second time that night, jaw-droppingly, pulse-stillingly aghast.

"There *isn't?*" he gasped.

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Snape waited for the two of them to expand on this topic of the nothing between her and Lucius, to quantify the extent of the nothingness that existed between her and Lucius. Someone wants to know more about this *nothing*, madam, speak again. Do you mean, there is nothing now, or that there never *was* anything? Did she mean there is nothing romantic, or nothing even remotely friendly, because she had finally realised that his cousin was an honourless criminal and a general all-round son of a bitch? "Pray continue about this nothing, madam," he entreated.

But no more was forthcoming about the extent of that nothing not long after that, they had both nodded off at practically the same moment, just past four a.m., according to the clock on the wall of the Knight Bus. They looked sublimely comfortable together, her fair head on his shoulder and his dark head inclined to hers. It was just that unutterably luxurious and contented sort of lovers' embrace, guaranteed to provoke longing in anyone observing it from the outside. Severus Snape has himself noted that he is not made of stone, and perhaps the sight of himself and his colleague sleeping in each other's arms moved even him. Suffice to say, he forgot to scowl as he watched the two of them together, and waited to see if there was more to this memory that he should know about.

In barest truth, he was starting to think that the two of them made quite a handsome couple, what with himself so dark and her so fair.

The Knight Bus arrived at Hogsmeade, perhaps an hour or so before dawn. Snape's memory-self looked exhausted at that point, and Emily had gently coaxed him up from the bed and off the bus, then Obscured both of them as they crossed the green up to Hogwarts, so that they both faded from his sight. She had said that she took him to his

room and put him to bed at that point, so he hurried up ahead and into his own quarters, to wait for them.

Sure enough, not a few minutes after he arrived, the door opened again, and there she was, leading him in and gently lowering him onto his bed. She helped him out of his cloak, coat, and boots.

"Remember, you're to see me tomorrow... tonight," he said, not letting go of her hand. "You promised. You will come, won't you?"

"Of course I will, dear heart," she had replied, bending down to tenderly kiss him again. "I'm very much looking forward to it."

Then she had hung his cloak and coat up in his wardrobe and put his boots neatly beside it. Then she had taken a tiny envelope from her handbag, crossed to his desk, and written something on it with his quill. Then she had propped it up against a book on his bedside table. *Put in tea marvellous for hangover.*Catherine's hangover cure.

Then she had kissed his forehead, doused the lamps, and silently let herself out.

Snape watched her go and then made his way out of the Pensieve and back into his real-time life.

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Once back at his desk, Snape got up and stretched, and then went into his bathroom for a glass of water. He had been in the Pensieve memory for some hours, and all that ranting at various memory-people had left his throat uncomfortably dry.

All right, it really had fallen out as she had told him, except for a few *glaring* omissions.

Yes, when he had gone to see her in her classroom, Professor Swain had decorously omitted the fact that he had quite openly propositioned her after the Midsummer's revel from her account of that evening. She had also refrained from mentioning that she had accepted such proposition and quite *enthusiastically*, at that but playfully demanded to be taken on a real date first, to which he had readily agreed. She had also forgotten to tell him that the euphoric hallucinogenic liquid courage in his veins had also prompted him to finally ask her why she had left him behind that first night, and her reasons, he had to admit, were *somewhat* understandable. Thoughtless and ill-considered, certainly she was not off the hook with him yet but understandable. She also hadn't said anything about how they had both admitted to secretly still harbouring an attraction to the other, and she had said there was nothing between her and Lucius.

*There was nothing between her and Lucius.*She had said it. He had spent months suspecting her unfairly oh bloody hell, he'd spent months freezing and sniping and clawing at her over his suspicions and none of it was true. He downed another glass of water, then wet his hands and raked them across his forehead.

And the next morning, he couldn't remember a bit of it, and had gotten angry and offended with her. He made a date for dinner and... whatever followed dinner with her, had even gone so far as to promise her he wouldn't forget what had happened and then he had. Of course she had gotten upset. Had the situation been reversed, he would have felt profoundly ill-used himself. Snape lowered his forehead into his hands, grimacing.

Oh, by the Merlin, he thought, *what an idiot I've been. And what an idiot she's been. We've both been so proud and ridiculous, all year. What a lot of time wasted.*

Oh hell, all of this speculation was just stupid, he thought, dabbing at his face with a towel. Where was she, right now? The two of them needed to talk. Really *talk.*

Hogwarts professors typically remained on school grounds long enough to grade all their final exams and turn them in to the Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress the deadline was one week after the students left school for the year. And the last day of that deadline was Snape went back into his bedroom and consulted the calendar on his desk

Tomorrow.

He had exactly one day before she left England, and his life, forever and that was only if she hadn't been uncharacteristically prompt with her grading.

Something had to be done.

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There were many situations at which Severus Snape excelled.

Danger, he could handle. Political dissembling was a topic he could have written authoritative works upon. Sarcastic repartee taxed him not one iota. Had circumstances required that he defend a stated position in yet another round of verbal sparring with Professor Swain, he could have comported himself admirably, with very little self-consciousness.

But to seek the woman out and apologise to her, confess to having been needlessly suspicious of her, ask for her forgiveness, and then ask her to re-consider accepting an offer to some bloody *social engagement* that was the stuff of sweaty palms and hours of strategic analysis.

After some time, he decided to do something really risky and decisive, like write her a letter.

He sat down at his desk with parchment and quill and began:

Professor Swain,

Due to your continued recalcitrance on the subject, I have been compelled to recreate the events of June 22nd via a Pensieve.

No, too accusatory. He didn't want to put her on the defensive and start yet another argument with her. He crumpled that sheet up and threw it toward the wastebasket.

Madam,

Certain recent events have prompted me to seek your opinion regarding a potential social engagement in the near future.

No, too vague, completely unspecific, and... just generally god-awful. He crumpled that sheet up and threw it after the first. Then he paused, black brows tensing, and furiously scrawled down

Emily

I've just now watched the events of Midsummer's night in a Pensieve, and truly, any idiot could see that you want me and I, you. The antagonism between us is obviously the result of frustration, unfulfilment, a denial of the inevitable. This constant warfare is pointless let's put an end to it, tonight, this instant. If you make any denial now, madam, I shall take you to the secret vault beneath the school where the Mirror of Erised is kept and stand you before it your reflection will betray you. And my reflection will probably shock you.

Let's both of us stop being so damnably coy and just name our terms of surrender. Or if you prefer, once you are with me, there need be no words spoken at all.

Why are you still reading this ridiculous letter? Get down here. You'll find what you desire.

He stopped writing, a tremor in his hand as he lifted it from the page. He noticed that he had been holding his breath while scrawling these words on paper, and exhaled deeply.

But a moment later, he crumpled that sheet up and hurled it after the first two. Oh forget it, that was just *horrible.* Too curt, too melodramatic, and too fecking desperate there was such a thing as being *too* direct.

He picked up the quill again. *Bloody hell, you idiot, just write something and finish it.*

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7 July 1995

Dear Miss Swain,

Curiosity got the better of me this morning regarding the night of June 22nd. As such, I borrowed Albus's Pensieve and observed my memory of that evening again, this time without the dubious benefit of three glasses of euphoric hallucinogenic Seventh Kingdom absinthe.

Having seen and heard all that actually transpired that night, I must confess myself to be quite surprised.

I must now conclude that any suspicions I had regarding that night were unfounded, and I regret having forgotten a promise made to a lady who seems to have done her best to look after me in those extremely unusual and highly uncharacteristic circumstances. In my defence, you said yourself that Seventh Kingdom absinthe does strange things to people's memories, and it appears that despite my sincere best intentions, I have not proved to be the exception to that rule. Please do accept my apologies, madam, regardless of your response to this letter.

In conclusion it is not my habit to leave my promises unfulfilled. Please let me know if you are still amenable to allowing me to make good on my dinner invitation before you embark for home. I shall remain at Hogwarts for the next week, finishing various duties, and will await any reply you send.

Sincerely,

Severus Snape

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All right. That was quite good. Even if she never responded to it, it went a ways toward clearing his conscience.

Now, there was the matter of making sure Emily got it.

Snape was very tempted to simply toss it onto the hearth with a pinch of Floo powder and just send it up to her apartments now. But he had a critically important meeting with Lucius that evening, and he knew that had to take precedent over something as trifling as his own personal life.

However, for one very long, blissfully escapist moment, desire and emotion were winning out over duty and valour. How long had it really been since he had anything even resembling a personal life? Given Albus's blandishments about how he should get out more often, and attend more social events where he actually *didn't* have to keep his political mole's agenda in mind, perhaps he might understand in this instance. Maybe he could send his regrets to Lucius at the last moment and put off this meeting for one whole day, and instead go on with the much more enjoyable business of wining and dining his ice-maidenly colleague and then sweeping her off her feet and into bed and devouring her like a Honeydukes truffle, in the manner she had given every indication that she wanted him to do. Well, perhaps not just yet, she probably wasn't entirely healed of her stab wound, but he could be patient. Poppy had left campus for her summer holidays and perhaps Emily would like someone to look after her for a bit, and it couldn't hurt if that fellow knew how to make Healing Potion from scratch...

For another very long moment, he imagined her beside him at that very moment... that face and those lips and that body beside him in bed, wearing one of those weightless little silk chemises and those black suspendered stockings... even before the night at the Mushroom Circle, she had once or twice given him an inadvertent glimpse of lace stocking top when an errant breeze billowed her light frock, or as she retrieved a book from a high shelf in the library, which meant that he became constantly aware that she was wearing them, became acutely conscious that if he slipped his hand under her skirts he would find warm, downy thigh flesh under his fingers. Felina Rosier had once sniffed to him that "Lucius's pet Faerie" always looked as though her hair had been put up with a broom, but he rather liked the effect of all those little blonde wisps around her face, especially in sunlight... he imagined that hair mussed on his pillow, her arms holding him desperately close, like she had in the callbox, that neck under his lips... the woman truly did have a beautiful neck, she was a vampire's wet dream between the chin and shoulders...

The Professor had not indulged in such delectable erotic imaginings in some time, and the object of his desires seemed very close and attainable at that moment, so perhaps it is understandable if his hand lingered on the box of Floo powder on his mantelpiece for the space of a great many heartbeats.

But then the clock chimed six p.m., and duty won out. Yes, it had been far too long, and she was still exciting to him, painfully so but his world was being menaced, and that outweighed what he himself wanted at that moment. Snape got up and dressed for this rare occasion when he had to enter the Muggle world: a white dress shirt and black trousers, and a plain vest and day coat of summer-weight black linen. He then left his quarters and headed down toward the front doors, only to turn around once he was halfway down the corridor and go back into his bedroom to retrieve his forgotten wand. Given his initial resistance to the idea of learning Faery magic, he was now almost embarrassed at how much he had come to rely upon the use of his True Name since December. On several occasions during the second term of the last school year, he had returned to his quarters after supper to find his wand still in its case on his desk, which meant that he had spent entire working days without it, and not missed it.

He slid his wand into the interior pocket of his coat, and again headed down the corridor toward the front foyer of Hogwarts.

Somehow, he now felt as though whatever questions Lucius asked him, however he found himself on the spot he could turn the situation round to his own advantage. Yes, his confidence level had improved considerably, now. Besides, unlike poor old *Lucius*, he also now had the advantage of being able to perform magic without so much as drawing his wand, which levelled the playing field somewhat.

Lucius had asked to meet in a public place, so Snape felt as though he would have some control over the situation. A Muggle pub seemed like an entirely secret and neutral location indeed, it seemed as though Lucius was purposefully giving up the home court advantage so as to put the two of them on equal footing. Snape would have been leery of an invitation to meet at Malfeasant; had he been invited there, he would have suspected that he was walking into an ambush.

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With one thing and another, it was very easy to linger at Malfeasant until well into the afternoon, loitering over lunch and in the garden, and then spend another pleasant hour in the great front hall polishing off the last bottle of champagne and talking about favourite travel destinations on the Continent. Sitting upright had gotten uncomfortable sometime in the mid-afternoon, so Lucius had gotten her situated on the green velvet chaise, reclining on a pile of silk cushions. Somehow she had managed to find a way to lay back without putting any pressure on her wound, and between the lazy warmth of the July afternoon, the champagne, and finally being really comfortable, she was feeling relaxed and a bit sleepy.

She had told him that she was planning to spend part of the summer in either France, California, or coastal Australia, and now he was trying to convince her that France was by far the best choice. He wasn't fond of the United States in general ("Too many Muggles, everything looks like it was built last week, and even the wealthiest American wizards still dress like Muggle field labourers.") and was similarly unimpressed with Australia ("More sheep than people, and their wizard community is a

singularly uncouth lot with no respect for anything."). He also thought the distances involved in either of those two destinations would have been too fatiguing for someone recovering from an injury.

"If you want to recuperate in the French countryside, darling, I could send out one owl, and have everything arranged for you by tomorrow. I know the most charming lady with an out-of-the-way little *maison* in Grasse that she lets out now and then, and we could get you set up there in a day." He refilled her champagne glass, then crossed to a carved and gilded side table, poured himself a snifter of brandy from one of the many crystal decanters there. "If you like, I could even send a couple of house-elves to look after you until that shoulder heals properly. You shouldn't have to cook and keep house for yourself in this state."

"Well... I don't know, maybe." Emily took another deep drink of wine and leaned back on the pillows again. She didn't want to accept any more help from him, and this did feel somewhat like his earlier offer to set her up in an apartment in London for his own personal use, but she was still wavering. Emily was much more used to having to look after other people, be it as a teacher or military commander. As a result, she had a weakness for those who wanted to take care of her for a change, and Lucius was extremely good at taking care of her. It would save her so much trouble to let him find a place for her to spend the rest of the summer, and of course if Lucius knew an out-of-the-way little *maison* for let in Grasse, it had to be exquisitely beautiful and luxuriously appointed. She had also enjoyed having house-elves about to take care of the housework while she lived at Hogwarts it was easy to get used to coming home to immaculately organised quarters and clean, freshly pressed clothes every day without having to lift a finger. "I do remember what a fine job my little ladies' maid from the weekend party did. It wouldn't be too bad to have her around again," she said.

"Oh, yes, what was her name?" Lucius asked. He sprawled himself beside her on the chaise, one hand covering hers, the brandy glass clasped lazily in the other. Spoiled, self-centred, and arrogant though he was, one had to admit that he was beautiful. Painfully so.

"Ah... Cecile, I think." His fingers were lightly entwining with hers.

"I'm sure we could spare her for a bit, until that shoulder was healed at least," he offered graciously. "You know how house-elves are. They adore having someone to take care of."

Yes, house-elves certainly did seem to thrive when they had work to do and it might be a welcome respite for the elf as well, to get out from under a cruel taskmistress like one Mrs. Narcissa Malfoy. "Well, all right, but I'd only let you make the reservation and loan me Miss Cecile for a bit, if she wants to come. You are by no means to pay any bills for me, I'll get those myself."

"Of course," Lucius said smoothly.

"I mean it," she insisted.

He fixed her with a very understanding look indeed. "I know you do. Relax, my dear, I've always known you were a woman of independent means, who could go anywhere and take up with anyone she chose. That's why I've always been so thrilled whenever your fancy lighted upon me."

Emily blushed and smiled. "You are so transparent, oh thou silver-tongued flatterer," she said, but when that silver-tongued flatterer leaned forward and put a soft kiss on her lips, she didn't turn away. Instead, she thrust a hand into that silvery mane and kissed him back, caressing that tongue with her own.

*Oh, my love, I missed you,*he sighed, drawing her into his arms very tenderly and gingerly, as though she was made of spun glass and might break. His desire to hold her, to kiss her again was achingly apparent, as was his desire not to hurt her. This combination of ardour and protectiveness was irresistible, and before long the kisses had progressed considerably. In times past, Lucius would have now been inviting her up to bed, or if he was in a more urgent mood, starting to remove any clothing preventing him from taking her then and there.

The lust hung thickly in his scent now, as his hand traced the outline of her silk-covered breast. But then he embraced her too hard, squeezed her just a fraction too tightly, and Emily recoiled with a gasp of pain at the pressure on her shoulder.

"Oh, no, I'm sorry," he whispered, releasing her immediately. "Forgive me, love, I was... I forgot."

"It's all right, it's healing, it's just a bit tender." He picked up his brandy glass, set aside on a low table, and offered her a sip, but she declined with a smile and a little wave of her hand. He then took a long drink, as though to calm himself. His breath was still coming fast, his scent still coloured with arousal as he set the empty glass down.

"How unforgivably clumsy of me, I hope I haven't made it worse." He very gently pushed her jacket off her shoulders, then drew the ribbon drawstring of her camisole blouse open, and uncovered her shoulder. "Bloody hell, what did that bastard do to you. Oh, you poor dear," he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. He bent down to kiss her neck, just above her half-healed shoulder. It felt like the times her father used to kiss her forehead and make her frequent scrapes and skinned knees all better when she was little, when she had a child's perfect confidence that she could just go to Da for help, and then everything would be all right.

She slipped her hand under his chin, was raising his lips to hers for another kiss

then paused. The scent and taste of brandy on his lips was suddenly cloying, nauseatingly familiar, and set off a pang of sharp recognition within her

occasionally Professor Moody will go out in the evening and come back smelling like expensive brandy

this brandy. The false Moody would come back smelling like Lucius's favourite rare and incredibly expensive Napoleon brandy, which he had more than once told her that he had imported from a small-production winery in France for his own consumption. Not something one could find anywhere else in Britain, most likely.

As his lips delicately brushed the cusp of her throat, his silken hair rustling against her cheek, it now occurred to Emily that she would very much like to know what Lucius her Lucius had been doing having drinks with one Bartemious Crouch, Jr.

He must have felt her body stiffening, because he pulled back and gazed down at her face. "What is it, my love?" he drawled. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm fine," she said, smiling at him but something *was* wrong, very wrong, because her soldier's instinct didn't usually kick in while in a lover's embrace, and Emily was now mentally reviewing ways of escaping from an opponent who has one in a two-armed hold. She was also suddenly very aware that his right arm was resting on the back of the chaise behind her and that his left was curved over her thighs

His left arm as she focused on it, she noticed that there was something on his left forearm, something black, that she had never quite noticed before. Perhaps he had consciously concealed such a mark from her before, and now he simply didn't care if she saw it

Or perhaps he had never tried to hide it from her, and she had just never thought to look for it.

He didn't resist as she took his left wrist in her hand, and pushed up the sleeve of his robe for a better look.

A detailed skull, with a greenish serpent protruding from its mouth. It was unlike any sort of tattoo she had ever seen this appeared less inked onto his skin as much as seared into it, like an acid burn, or a brand.

As she stared at that bizarre brand, its colours and curves seemed to shimmer, to undulate under her gaze... the eye sockets of the skull seemed to gleam with awareness, to look at her

and the snake coiling from the skull's mouth wavered as well, seemed to lift its head from Lucius's arm and face her with a flick of its forked tongue and a sinister hiss

"Emily?" Lucius was saying. He raised that marked left arm to caress her face but she recoiled from him as though he had offered to strike her.

"*What is that?*" she gasped.

"As you bear the mark of your Lord, I bear the mark of mine," he said, smirking. He glanced down at that mark with such avidity in his eyes the same sort of look he had often given her, when she was lying naked under him.

"What?" she asked. His Lord? Since when was Lucius the vassal of a noble Lord? "What are you talking about?"

But Lucius didn't seem interested in answering her questions now. His hand curved insistently around her cheek, then down her neck and onto her breast. Then he drew her in for a long, greedy kiss, in which the elaborate consideration of his earlier embraces gave way to unrestrained ardour and lust.

Just then, a furious voice came from the doorway behind them. *"What's all this, then?"*

Emily spun hard around toward the direction of the voice, her hands frantically jerking at the ribbons of her blouse, and grimacing as the sudden movement twinged her injured shoulder.

To her utter, utter horror, she turned to face a very surprised and outraged Menzentius Black, who had apparently just come in through the front foyer.

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"You," he spat, his eyes fixed balefully on Emily's face. Then he turned toward Lucius with a look of purest loathing on his face. "And my sister's *husband."*

Lucius only shrugged, brazen as you please.

The usual cliché protestations of *It's not what you think* and *I can explain* immediately sprang to mind, but she remained silent, because it *was* what he thought, and she really couldn't explain what she had been doing in Lucius's arms, her blouse half off and engaged in a highly explicit embrace with him, in any terms this man would have found acceptable.

Menzentius stalked toward them, his face contorted with anger. "So I'm not good enough for you but *he* is," he hissed, with a curt nod in his brother-in-law's direction. Lucius smirked and said nothing, not a word of explanation or excuse.

Emily got up from the sofa, scrabbling to put her clothes to rights, and backed away from both of them, looking from one man to the other. She knew herself to be caught, her secret found out; and was now unable to think of a word to say in her own defence.

"Narcissa was right your kind really are just a bunch of whores," Menzentius snarled and then, to her utter horror, he drew back a fist and threw a punch at her face.

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Emily's instinctual reaction was to throw up a block with her right arm, and stop his swing cold.

"*I'm sorry,*" she said. "This can end here. Just stand aside, and I'll leave. Then I promise that you and your family will never see me again."

If she had her way, this confrontation would have ended there, if it ever started at all. But Menzentius recoiled, shaking his head hard, and struck at her again, teeth bared. Emily blocked his second punch with her left arm, wincing as her injured shoulder protested absorbing the momentum and knocked him back, crumpled over and gasping, with a stiff-arm blow across the windpipe with her right.

But he recovered again, and from there, the fight was on.

Menzentius was a better fighter than she would have imagined, with a nasty sort of eye-clawing scrapper's ability that no doubt came from any number of belligerent, no-holds-barred barroom brawls. Nonetheless, he had drunk enough that day to throw off his balance and coordination, and he was also attacking a soldier positively jaded with experience on stronger, better-trained, and more motivated opponents than he.

Emily's injury was not appreciating this exertion every left-arm block and strenuous movement brought her painfully closer to tearing the staples in her shoulder. He annoyed her with his dumb, mule-headed persistence, and he was breaking an awful lot of furniture and fragile ornaments in bouncing off of her. Peripherally, Emily noticed that Lucius was still reclining luxuriously on the chaise, watching this fight go on with a look of avid interest, as though it was some kind of polo match or Quidditch game.

After attacking unsuccessfully some number of times, Menzentius seemed to have noticed that she was favouring her left shoulder. He lowered his head, eyes narrowing with animalistic cunning, and aimed a swing at her left collarbone. But Emily seized his wrist as she saw the attack coming, turned the back of his elbow in her direction, and smashed it out with a single hard blow, breaking his right arm and rendering it useless. Menzentius sank to his knees with a wild cry.

"Any mediwizard with a bottle of Skele-Gro can heal that cleanly in a day," she told her fallen opponent, her breath heaving with exertion. "But if you come at me again, it'll be your knee next, and I'll do it in such a manner that you'll limp for the rest of your life. So *stay down*."

Menzentius seemed to be finally taking her advice. He sank into a crumpled heap on the hearth rug next to the ruins of a potted lily and its porcelain stand, clutching his elbow and groaning.

Emily turned furiously back toward Lucius, intending to say exactly what she thought of his behaviour at that moment but to her total surprise, he smiled pleasantly and gave her a languid little golf-tournament round of applause. "Beautiful, darling. Good show, *splendid* show, I couldn't have asked for better," he drawled in an admiring tone, then turned toward the back corner of the room. "I do hope my Lord is pleased?"

"What are you *talking about?*" she gasped. What was all this about his Lord? Why had he let his brother-in-law try to beat the snot out of her without so much as a word of intervention, without even attempting to talk him out of it or apologise to him somehow? This situation only got curiouser and curiouser, weirder and weirder. Lucius and his family were just bizarre, no two ways about it. She was going to leave, now, leave the Wizarding world and whatever damage this situation did to her already tarnished reputation and never be seen in this part of the world again.

She was turning to go when she noticed Lucius had stopped clapping, had stood up, and was coming toward her, but the sound of polite applause was still going on. It was coming from behind her, but it couldn't be Menzentius clapping, he wouldn't be in any condition to applaud anyone until that elbow was healed, and why would he be applauding her after she had just broken his arm... *What the* ?

Emily spun around, and stared in the direction of that applause, which seemed to be coming from a tall mirror framed in gilded mahogany, mounted near the entrance to the room.

A black silhouette was stirring within the frame of that mirror, as though someone very far away was drawing closer. But then she took a step closer, and saw there was nothing casting that reflection there was someone behind the mirror. The surface of the glass shimmered, became liquid then rippled as a tall dark figure stepped out from the mirror's frame, his long, tapering hands still clapping.

My Lady, that black-robed figure said, in a high, cold, sibilant voice. *I thought it was high time we were properly introduced.*

Despite her exertion over the fight, despite the warmth of the early July evening, Emily felt cold at the sound of that voice.

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The newcomer was tall, a head taller than Emily was, and rail-thin, with hands even thinner and more elongated than any Faerie's. His face, whiter than bleached bone, was dominated by enormous, slit-pupilled eyes of a livid scarlet, striated with gold. His features were formed on sleek, reptilian, and profoundly alien lines gaunt cheekbones, a flattened nose with twin slits for respiration, a thin, nearly lipless mouth. The creature before her had by now gone through any number of forbidden and unnatural transformations intended both to instil fear into his enemies and imbue his body with greater physical power, but as Emily herself could physically manifest what human beings would call bestial characteristics, some of that impact was lost to her eyes. To her, he looked like an extremely odd variety of snake changeling, one that she had never before been aware of. She took a step closer to it, to him, both unnerved and fascinated.

"Are you of the Naga tribe?" she asked the creature before her, in a wondering voice.

No, came the sibilant whisper. *I am my own tribe.*

She stood for a moment, her head cocked to one side, just looking at the newcomer with equal parts wonder and curiosity, suspicion and fear; for all accounts like a deer encountering some strange new fellow creature in its forest for the first time. Her nostrils flared, investigating his scent, which was not that of a snake changeling, nor even the musty, leathery, mossy smell of a healthy reptile this creature smelled of powdery rot, graveyard dirt, and adrenalin-laden human blood, the odours of decay, death, and fear.

The dark man... being... before her held out his hand, silently, palm up, in greeting, and she approached him hesitantly. He offered her no threatening gesture or movement, as though he realised she might spook and bolt at the slightest sign of aggression. Finally she covered his hand with hers and allowed him to clasp it. The temperature of his skin was cool, chilly; her impression was of metabolism as still and slow as the pulses of a deep underground cave.

It was not the way he looked, but rather his voice, scent, and ice-cold hands that set her pulse pounding in her throat, and brought the cold sweat out on her palms as she greeted him.

Emily looked into the abyss of his eyes, and he into hers.

Good evening, he said. *I am Lord Voldemort.*

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"Good evening, sir," Emily replied, with all the self-contained politeness she could muster. Her voice seemed about three octaves higher than usual.

This is the same person who sought to corrupt my father to his cause, and threatened Da's life when he refused. He is responsible for Cedric's death, and he tortured Harry, she thought yet nonetheless, she was fighting off the urge to bow or curtsy, as she might have to a member of another Kingdom's royalty at Gwydion's Court.

This creature had the indomitable air of a born leader, one whose will was backed by an armed, aggressive power. Emily had on several occasions met Queen Mab, the ruler of the Seventh Kingdom, who was known to have killed six people in honour duels before she was even thirty, who regularly had convicted murderers publicly executed, and whose people thought a trial by combat was a good afternoon's entertainment. Lord Voldemort had all of Mab's magnificent cruelty and conviction, but none of the fierce, proud love for her people and her land that Mab carried always before her. None could have doubted that the Queen would have sacrificed, killed, and died for her country and the least of her subjects but Emily's first impression of Lord Voldemort was that if countless armies poured their blood out for him, he would have believed that sacrifice to be only his due. It was terrifying, yet at the same time, strangely alluring. She wanted to listen to this man, hear what he had to say.

Lucius was standing beside her. "My Lord, may I present Lady Emily Swain-Tumnus, Master-at-Arms of King Gwydion's Fianna," Lucius said proudly. "Is she not all I told you she would be?"

Indeed she is, the Dark Lord purred. *Forgive me, my Lady. When Lucius showed me, in a Pensieve, the kill you made at the boar hunt, I found it hard to believe that such warriors could exist but you are indeed all he promised. I am well pleased.* He finally relinquished her hand, pressing it in his in a conspiratorial, understanding manner before letting go.

"Thank you," Emily said faintly and not without just the smallest thrill of pride in his words. Lord Voldemort the great and terrible Lord Voldemort, whose name people scarcely dared to speak was pleased with her. She had impressed him. Her chin went up a inch with a fine, perverse little surge of self-satisfaction as she glanced from the hypnotic eyes of the creature before her, back to Lucius.

"This *introduction* has the air of having been rather carefully staged," she said. She turned toward Menzentius, still groaning and whimpering on the floor, annoyance registering on her face.

Lord Voldemort followed the direction of her gaze, then motioned to Lucius. *Remove him,* he ordered. *I would speak to our guest privately.*His voice never rose above a soft hiss, but Lucius scrambled to obey, raising Menzentius to his feet and helping him out of the room.

"Thank you," she said, her attention riveted on the Dark Lord.

He nodded graciously.

"So, is this a purely social visit?" she asked finally. "Or do you have something to say to me?"

*Yes, there are many things I would discuss with you, my Lady*the husking voice said. *It makes me wonder, after seeing what a Morrigan knight is capable of... why your people are content to hide their unique beauty beneath such magics.*

His thin, tapering hand made a delicate pass in front of her and Emily gasped as a chill wafted over her face, like the touch of icy silk. She turned toward the tall mirror, and one glance confirmed what she already suspected he had removed her human Glamour, leaving that face that the Fae called *pretty and normal*, and humans called *exotic and uncanny,* uncovered again, for the first time in over a week. To the Fae magical canon, the ability to see through Glamour was an advanced art, but the ability to dispel another's Glamour entirely was difficult magic indeed. She turned back to face him, amazed, and not a little impressed.

There, Voldemort said. *Judging from your father's works, the Fae seem to me a proud, magnificent race and yet, you hide your presence among humans. I see no reason why you should not let your real selves be seen in this world.*

"Probably because it can be dangerous to show our real selves in this world," she said. "Even the strongest Faerie may fear an iron knife in the night. You have, sir " her hand went to her left shoulder, for just an instant "some rather *zealous* servants."

*Overzealous, in the case of the younger Bartemious Crouch,*Voldemort said, shaking his head with the air of a wise old teacher speaking of a ne'er-do-well student. *You lead soldiers... surely you have now and then met the kind of rash foot soldier who hastens to commit unnecessary atrocities in the name of your cause?*

"Well... " She glanced down at the shattered lily amidst the wreckage of its painted pot. "Perhaps I have."

Bartemious acted on his own, without my directions. Had he sought my counsel in this situation, I would have... dissuaded him from the course he chose.

"Really," she said. "Do you give me your sacred word of honour that you had no knowledge Bartemious Crouch, Jr. had hired an assassin to seek my life?"

I do, he replied. *Bartemious Crouch's soul was drawn forth in a Dementor's Kiss... had he been my trusted, valued servant, I would never have allowed him to suffer such a fate. But he was a fool and an embarrassment, and as such, I allowed my enemies to mete out their justice upon him.*

"I see." She nodded. "You say you see no reason why the Fae should hide our presence among humans. Can I infer from that statement that you have some plan to make our subterfuges in this world unnecessary? How is your way superior to our current method of going about this?"

Your people are content to wait until humankind matures enough to accept you without fear, Voldemort said. *But it has always been my opinion... that no one is more tolerant than those who fear you.*

Emily thought of the way the elder Bartemious Crouch had treated her, when she came into his Department office back in September... the way he had treated her before he ever knew she was the same Lady Emily Swain-Tumnus who had killed an enemy in a notorious trial by combat, years earlier. She thought of the Ministry employees and Department of Magical Law Enforcement officials who thought her very existence was suspicious. She recalled several long hours of pain and dread, as she lay wounded in a hospital bed, with Law Enforcement guards outside her door, waiting for Albus Dumbledore to come and help her. Waiting for a friend's support, that never came.

She turned back to the creature in front of her. "I'm listening," she said.

Good, he purred. *I am sure, that in time, we may be able to find... areas of mutual agreement. Perhaps you and I can discuss... any wishes that you may have, which I may help you accomplish, as a demonstration of my goodwill.*

Beneath the elegant rhetoric, he was offering her a bribe, and they both knew it. What can I do for you, you personally, to secure your compliance as my envoy to your people. What do I want, she thought.

Any number of fevered, corrupt desires occurred to her, in the heat of Lord Voldemort's unflinching gaze, with both lust and bone-breaking aggression still coursing through her veins. *I want every Orc in Arcadia dead, down to the last ugly, squalling child. I want to mount Richert and Steifan Robinett's heads on pikes. I want my mother and my king to forgive and respect me, no matter what I've done. I want Albus to care if I'm free or in a foreign prison. I want Severus on his knees before me begging for one look, one kiss...*

"We can discuss that later," she said.

Voldemort smiled or rather, the corners of his lipless mouth turned upward in satisfaction.

Come, he said, motioning to the French doors. *Walk with me. We have much to discuss, you and I.*

She followed him into the garden.

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So selflessly that he must have betrayed his own family in order to do so. Lucius was in league with Voldemort which meant that Snape had to have been spying on none other than his own cousin, in order to bring intelligence of Voldemort's actions to Dumbledore.

And now Voldemort had been resurrected, Lucius had again pledged fealty to his Dark Lord and somehow, Snape's secret had been found out. Her hand went to her shoulder as she recalled the way that Death Eaters *dealt with* those who inconvenienced them even inadvertently.

There's a certain sort of behaviour one expects of a gentleman, especially in the way he treats women and family, and Severus has not been a shining example of either this year. I want to let him know exactly what I think of his behaviour and I want to do something for you.

Emily glanced at her watch 7:03 p.m. and suddenly, everything coalesced into perfect, hard clarity.

"They're going to kill him," she said to the empty air.

Part Second: The Hart Rampant, Chapter 26

Chapter 35 of 55

In which Professor Swain discovers the delights of a dual life as both a Hogwarts professor, and Lucius Malfoy's mistress, until a chance encounter with a desperate Faery prostitute in Knockturn Alley sends her to the most unlikely person for aid. Meanwhile, Severus Snape finds himself alone and adrift in the Mushroom Circle, a Faery nightclub…

Chapter 26:

It was entirely possible that Lucius Malfoy had meant for his comments to Emily Swain to be taken as flattery.

Indeed, another sort of woman may have been pleased with this show of regard. It was quite probable that he had done this sort of thing before had men who had incurred the wrath of one or another of his women murdered, when it suited his own purposes, and then presented that murder to the woman in question as a sign of his affection. Perhaps such women had, in the past, spent a quiet evening pretending to read, but really watching the drawing room clock, then smugly smiling to themselves as that clock struck a certain hour. Perhaps Lucius had received fervent thanks from some of them before, amidst rumpled bedclothes in some hotel room, or in his master's suite at Malfeasant.

It has, however, been noted that Emily Swain is not Lucius Malfoy's usual sort of amusement and it never entered her mind that she might simply do nothing, wait until eight o'clock, and be forever rid of a man who she believed had cruelly used her and unfeelingly trodden on her affections.

The fact remained, however, that despite her estrangement from her King, and despite her less than honourable conduct regarding another woman's husband that year, Emily still thought of herself first and foremost as a knight, and a knight's job, for better or for worse, was to defend and protect. No matter what the King personally thought of her, and no matter what she personally thought of Albus Dumbledore, the inalienable fact was that her liege had ordered her to serve his ally, and she was going to fulfil that command. Both she and Snape were loyal to Dumbledore against all enemies, and that trumped any personal dislike she may have felt for the Professor absolutely and utterly.

Also had she had time to really consider her feelings at that moment, it might have come to her that the intensity that always coloured her every interaction with Severus Snape was founded on something unnamed, and perpetually thwarted, but still quite vital strong enough to leave her course of action absolutely clear, and instantly resolved

Find him, and save him.

She took off towards the Slytherin dungeons, hurtling up the green toward the castle.

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But Snape was not in his classroom, his office, the library, or the teacher's lounge so finally she headed down to his apartments, getting past the Slytherin guard painting with a bit of judicious Deceivre. She pounded on his door for most of a minute, and then finally just opened it with a powerful unlocking charm used by the Fianna to force the doors of enemy citadels, one that was quite frowned upon in most respectable quarters when not used for strictly defensive purposes

Not there. The room was deserted.

He was not in his apartments, although his scent was very fresh here he had left probably less than an hour ago.

There was a Pensieve sitting on his desk she gave that a very wide berth, not wishing to violate his private thoughts even accidentally. There was a strong scent of fresh ink coming from the vicinity of the desk and the wastepaper basket, so apparently he had been working on something just before he left. Emily paused before her colleague's desk, clamping down on the urge to rifle through his things for some memory, some bit of paper than might reveal where he had gone.

Then something occurred to her both the Wizarding and Faery magic canons contain rituals by which anyone who is not actively trying to hide can be located and Emily knew she must invoke one of them that night. But in order to do so, she first needed part of Snape. His blood would have been best; his hair, skin cells, or fingernails would work, his saliva or tears would do in a pinch. She headed toward his bathroom, hoping to find a used comb or hairbrush, a bit of tissue used to staunch a shaving cut, or perhaps beard scrapings left behind in the sink.

When she arrived there, the bathroom was immaculate. There was not a hair, whisker, fingernail paring, or speck of dandruff anywhere to be found. For a single long moment she cursed house-elves and their anal-retentive ways with every word in the earthiest recesses of her soldier's vocabulary.

But then she remembered something and left his rooms, racing back up to her own chambers in Ravenclaw Tower.

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Back in her own rooms, Emily ran down into her Holding Trunk and found two items of clothing that she had long ago tossed into a drawer, intending to send them to be cleaned someday, but really stowed out of sight until they ceased having guilty associations for her

A pleasantly short black dress with a row of jet buttons down the front and a long black coat, both of Muggle style and cut the clothes she had worn on that long-ago night

in King's Cross. On the bodice of the dress, and on the coat's lapel and collar, a lint brush picked up five strands of raven-black hair. And as this was not a time to be hedging one's bets she then opened a side pocket of a satchel she had not used since the evening of September 22nd of the previous year and drew out a torn pair of black lace knickers, finding, as she had hoped, long-dried white stains on the lace.

Now she needed some sort of container suspended on a chain or string and the silver locket she had ensorcelled into an Amulet of Protection, lying on her desk, was handiest. She hurried back into her bedroom, picked the amulet up and coiled the strands of Snape's hair into the empty compartment inside it. Then, using the tip of a freshly sharpened quill, she scraped some of the white substance into the interior of the locket.

There if one needed part of a man in order to locate him by magic, one could scarcely hope to have better than strands of his hair and particles of his dried semen.

She went to the world atlas on her desk and hastily threw the book open to the map of the U.K., then dangled the locket over it, muttering a sentence in Old Arcadian and then her True Name. As the phrase she spoke is at once an incantation, a command, a philosophical query, and a prayer, all of its nuances do not translate precisely into English. But the gist of it was this: *If you are of this world and can be found in this world, show me where, if the Mother wills it.*

The locket instantly jumped to a point on the map

LONDON. And at this moment, she didn't have a more specific map than the atlas on her desk.

Emily glanced at her watch it was now 7:14 p.m.

Which gave her exactly forty-six minutes to find him and avert whatever means of termination Lucius had planned for him.

She quickly looped the amulet around her neck; glanced down at the black leather flats she wore over bare feet, and stepped out of them. Then she snatched up the suede leather paper of swords lying open on her desk, rolled it up, and stuffed it into her jacket pocket.

A moment later, she had Obscured herself with a word and was heading for the Ravenclaw Tower exit, which let out on the north lawn below the Quidditch pitch. In an instant, she was racing toward the gate that marked the end of the Hogwarts Anti-Apparition wards, fast enough to tear up chunks of turf beneath her cloven hooves.

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Leave it to Lucius to pick somewhere so deucedly hard to fecking *find*.

Snape had never been to this particular part of Muggle London before and was having rather a time of it trying to get there. He had a city atlas and Lucius's letter in his hand and was now trying to find the road he wanted. All right, he had now found Wilton Row number 2379 Wilton Row.

Only a rather long distance due south, then. Snape supposed he could have tried Apparating there, but as he had never been to the Fusilier before, he wasn't exactly sure how far to project himself southerly, and it was possible that he might have entirely overshot the place. Also, he had no Invisibility Cloak about him, and wasn't experienced enough with Obscurantis yet to be sure if the resounding popping and cracking sound that accompanied Apparition would be enough to break an Obscurantis effect. The last thing he wanted to do was Apparate solid as life into the middle of a crowd of gaping Muggles.

He checked his watch 7:16 p.m. which seemed like enough time to get there if he went at a good clip. Ah well, at least it was a nice night for a long walk, in a reasonably pleasant part of town, and the Merlin knew he had some nervous energy to get rid of. He turned the corner and made his way south.

As he went, he slid a hand into his right coat pocket and felt the crisp parchment of his sealed letter to Professor Swain to Emily. After Midsummer's night, it was probably fair to say that they were now on rather more familiar terms than *Professor Swain* and *Professor Snape*.

Yes, as soon as he got back from this meeting with Lucius, he would Floo the letter to her through her fireplace... and see whatever arose out of that. Most likely she would turn him down, or even more likely, just ignore it... but (*You have to be joking if you don't think I'd want that again*) what if she didn't refuse?

What if (*You were lovely. Just witty and clever and damned fine company. And then later, you were incredible*) she accepted his explanation and his apologies and replied in kind? What if (*Well, hello my dear, isn't this just bloody convenient, what are you doing tonight?*) she fervently hoped to just get past any previous misunderstandings and get on with their original plans for the evening after Midsummer?

You poor, dear, lovely, long-suffering, frightfully ill-used man. I want you to have such fun letting me make this up to you. Yes, he quite liked the sound of that. Knowing her, her ways of making things up to a bloke might be rather enjoyable.

I think I'll insist on being taken to dinner first, just so you don't get it into your head that I'm easy. Even if you know damned well that I am, where you're concerned. Such a blunt sort of woman at times, wasn't she. Well, he didn't feel like playing too hard to get himself, now, after hearing that...

Of course I will come, dear heart. I'm very much looking forward to it... And now he was looking forward to it as well.

He had now come up to a small commercial district, shops and coffeehouses, a wine bar and restaurants of various ethnicities. He glanced in the large picture windows of one of those establishments in passing people sitting at elegant linen-draped tables with china plates in front of them, the occasional bottle of wine in silver buckets of ice. Yes, that sort of thing, especially when shared with a witty female companion, really looked rather pleasant.

Regarding their potential dinner date, it now occurred to the Professor that perhaps it would make a better impression to take her to dinner in London, rather than one of the restaurants near Hogwarts. Hogsmeade was such a rustic suburban hamlet of a place; the best they could do as far as fine dining there was probably some sort of teashop or meat-and-potatoes pub supper. A place like the one he had just passed, with white tablecloths and silver candlesticks and something besides shepherd's pie on the menu, might make a more cosmopolitan impression she seemed the sort who could appreciate something a cut above the Three Broomsticks. According to Swain's *Encyclopaedia*, the Court of the Third Kingdom was famous for its wine and cuisine and stylish hospitality. Was there perhaps a fine Arcadian-cuisine restaurant in London? More than likely there was, but he probably wouldn't be able to find it unless he knew the right people or some such... maybe he could ask that Lord Puck fellow, if he ever managed to catch him on the library steps again...

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Emily reached the gate, Apparated in mid-stride as soon as she cleared it

to reappear with a clatter on the London walk just in front of the Muggle-world entrance to the Leaky Cauldron, half by force of habit, and half imagining that it would be a good central location from which to start. She glanced frantically around and spied a red callbox perhaps a block up ahead.

Her hoofed form could cover a city block with nearly supernal alacrity, and a moment later she was riffling through the phone directory, muttering *Fusilier Pub Fusilier Pub* under her breath. She found the *Taverns* section of the business listings and frantically paged through it

only to discover that some unobliging soul had torn the pages between Fuhrmann's Biergarten and the Gable House Inn clean out of the phone directory.

She slammed the book shut with an eloquent curse, checking her watch again.

7:23 p.m.

Oh, fuck the bloody phone directory. What she needed was a fecking *computer*, hooked to the goddamn *Internet*, that could get her an address and directions in about five seconds. But then she glanced down at her own hoofed feet she could hardly saunter into someone's house or office, especially looking like this, and say, "Oh, don't mind me, I just need to use your computer. Won't be a minute."

All right, calm down. This was a business district. Somewhere in this area, there had to be an empty office with a computer hooked to a modem or T1 line. She had to find a law office, a library, a realtor's, anything.

Ah, there, a sign up ahead *Pacoli & Pacoli, Accountants* perfect. In another second, she had Apparated into the dusty little dark-wood front lobby. There was a computer on what must have been an assistant's or receptionist's desk facing the front door she lit the area around the desk with a quick *Lioht* spell, and switched it on.

Why had she never bloody noticed just how bloody *long* it took Muggle computers to boot up.

Entire eons seemed to tick by as she stood, all but drawing blood from her own palms with her fingernails as the screen lit up, displayed the Windows 95 logo, and finally *finally* went to a graphics-user interface desktop screen. She scanned for a browser Netscape Navigator. Brilliant.

May the Goddess bless whomever was responsible for a miraculous little thing called the Yahoo!UK directory, which told her that there was one Fusilier Public House in London, located at 118 Wilton Row, London, SW1X 7NR, UK. And the Mother's blessings be upon the makers of a site called *Mapquest*. Once she entered her current location, which she found on a business card in a little holder on the receptionist's desk, it told her that she was currently 10.6 kilometres from the Fusilier, and that it would have taken her twenty minutes to drive there. Luckily, it would only take her half a second to Apparate there.

She picked up the phone from the receptionist's desk, called the Fusilier's phone number. A man's voice replied with a cheery, interrogative "Thank you for calling the Fusilier Pub?"

"Hello, just wanted to confirm that you're still at 118 Wilton Row, in London?"

"Sure are, love, have been for the last twenty-five years. Come on down, we've got the game on." The dull roar of a television, and the murmur of many chattering voices in the background.

"Thank you very much." She hung up.

She opened up another menu selected *Print Screen* and was rewarded with the instantaneous sound of a printer whirring to life. As she snatched up her printout, a digital clock glowing red on the receptionist's desk moved from 7:35 p.m. to 7:36 p.m. but now, she knew exactly where she was going.

For good measure as Yahoo!UK themselves warned to use one's own best judgment as far as directions went she neatly pilfered a road map of London from an all-night newsstand just across the road, making a mental note to come back, buy something, and give the owner a seemingly-impulsive huge tip.

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Could it have been any easier than 6.4 kilometres in this direction, turn right, 3.9 kilometres in that direction, bear right 0.3 kilometres in this direction, arrive at 118 Wilton Row, London. Really, Emily had no idea why wizards didn't use the Internet more often.

She Apparated in front of a large, prosperous-looking pub on the corner of a pleasant little middle-class commercial district, appearing completely Obscured on the paved walk, perhaps a dozen steps from the front door. A carved and painted sign out front read: *The Fusilier Publick House*, straightforward white block letters around a picture of a soldier in an old-fashioned British uniform, with a flintlock musket in one hand and a mug of ale in the other.

She had found it, and it was only 7:37 p.m. Twenty-three minutes to go.

Emily pulled her purloined atlas from her pocket, opened it, and again dangled the silver locket over it, hurriedly muttering the incantation and the locket leaped to a point on the map *WILTON ROW*, near the crossings of Penhallow, Harrington, and Grenadiers' Walk. Emily loped a few yards to her right, glancing at the corner signs the Fusilier was on Wilton and Grenadiers' Walk.

Unfortunately, though, the locket was too large and the map was on too small of a scale to be able to say exactly where on Wilton Row Snape was at that moment, but he had to be either inside the pub, or nearby.

Emily went back toward the Fusilier's entrance, folding her map but then she paused, staring up at the Fusilier's sign. Her eyes narrowed in thought why would Lucius send Professor Snape to his death in a Muggle pub? Who in the flaming Christian hell had ever heard of *Death By Pub?* Could there be an assassin waiting inside? But why would the Death Eaters choose a public place to kill him, where there might be witnesses, or even someone who would try to summon help? What would be the logical method of his death, and how would it escape detection by the Muggle authorities?

Could she have been entirely wrong about the assassination? Could it just be that Lucius had an innocent date to talk to Snape over drinks and she was reading entirely too much into what he had said? Had he exaggerated for her benefit? She clenched the amulet in her hand, pondering.

A knot of bluff, laughing men with thick South London accents came up from behind Emily totally oblivious to the sweating, shaking Arcadian faun making a threat analysis of the facility. They made for the front door and Emily slipped into the pub behind them.

Once her eyes adjusted to the darkened interior, suddenly the situation became a great deal more obvious.

Neither Lucius nor Professor Snape was anywhere to be found, but the Fusilier, judging from the flags, banners, framed photographs of military units and men in uniforms, and any number of other bits of memorabilia on the walls, and, now that she took a closer look, the number of men in various types of military-issue casual clothing, was a hangout of off-duty members of the British Army. There had to be training facilities, or a military base nearby. Of course with such a military-sounding name, she wondered why she had not thought of that before.

Additionally while the inhabitants of this pub seemed to be completely and entirely Muggle, there was magic, powerful magic, somewhere in this room. She could feel it the moment she walked in, prickling the hairs on the back of her neck like faraway heat lightning. The atmosphere felt faintly electric, like the moment of low pressure before a cyclone hit. Some sort of *puissance* was at work here, and make no mistake about it.

Lucius had sent Snape to a military hangout in the Muggle world, a place where soldiers congregated; and there was live magic within that pub.

Why?

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The Third Kingdom had its own share of military taverns watering holes near the barracks with names like *The Valiant Crow, Finn's Inn,* and *Sir Toby Belch's* and in times of war, they were not much frequented by civilians, as everyone knew a certain kind of glory-seeking Orc soldier liked to try to burn down such establishments. Emily had also spent seven years living in Cambridge, three of them as a student lecturer teaching at university even after an eight-year absence from the Second World, she was somewhat acquainted with British Muggle politics in June of 1995.

If anyone was going to attack a British army pub in London, the likeliest perpetrator would be some Irish Republican extremist group, if historical precedent was anything to

go by. And in such attacks, the Irish Republican Army tended to use explosives. She could still vividly remember reading about an IRA incident in October of 1981; a newspaper account of a bomb that had gone off in the Wimpy Bar on Oxford Street, killing one innocent bystander.

So in all likelihood, it was to some kind of magical spontaneous combustion which to the Muggle authorities would look totally identical to a pub bombing.

A canny choice, really such an attack would naturally be blamed on a Muggle political group, which would probably lead to retaliation against the Irish somehow. No doubt Lucius would find it utterly amusing that he had first killed a pub full of Muggles, thereby prompting another group of Muggles to murder even more Muggles. Yes, her father had told her that the Death Eaters had used to enjoy the recreational slaughter of Muggles. She could practically hear Lucius telling the story now, in that archly amused, conspiratorial drawl of his.

She had to avert the explosion somehow could she?

After a long moment's hard thought, she abandoned that idea. More than likely, Lucius or one of his confederates had left a timed-release, large-scale *Incendio* spell on the building, set to go off at the meeting time. Even if she could have located the source of the spell in the time she had left, she had only sketchy ideas as to how to magically negate such a thing. Which left one option at 7:44 p.m.

Originally, her singular objective had been to save Professor Snape.

Now she had sixteen minutes to somehow evacuate this pub.

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How to convince over a hundred British soldiers, and a pub staff, to abandon the place completely.

Emily knew very intimately what soldiers were like frightening them would be difficult. If she created a distraction terrifying enough to cause a crowd of stalwart English fighting men to panic and run out into the road, people would no doubt be injured and left behind in the crush. Not to mention an overt use of magic in front of all these people would bring the wrath of the entire British Wizarding community down on her head and probably get her permanently deported.

Who did these people worship could she conjure up a Glamoured angelic visitation, an appearance of the Virgin Mary? That might have worked in centuries past, but not now, and would do nothing to account for the explosion. A Glamoured fire, perhaps that would appear to have spread to the furnaces, the boilers, the kitchen gas main, thereby causing an explosion

Wait, no she had a better idea a reason for all the inhabitants to quickly leave this place, and a completely non-political reason for the explosion that would inevitably follow, that would not result any deaths in retaliation

She raced for the kitchen, carefully avoiding any Muggles in her path.

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The kitchen staff was made up of a couple of cooks in stained white chef's tunics, one tall and thin and energetic, and one thoughtful and bespectacled, submerging chips and battered fish and onion in a deep fryer and assembling pub suppers on plates freshly scrubbed by a dishwasher with a bald head and a luxuriant beard in a smeary white t-shirt. They chattered and joked amongst themselves as they worked, cracking wise in thick working-class accents, talking about sports scores and teams they supported, and occasionally singing along with a radio playing some classic-rock station. Just a trio of regular guys working the night shift.

They looked like a pleasant bunch, like they had known each other for years and Emily was not going to let them be torn apart by explosion debris, or have their skins cooked off by waves of flame this night.

She closed her eyes, scanned her memories for the telltale scent of an unlit pilot light in her London flat and silently spoke a word.

The dishwasher paused in his work, stopped humming along to a Beatles tune, and frowned. Then he raised his head and sniffed the air. "Oi, lads, do you smell that?" he suddenly called out, in a voice of mild alarm.

Yes. She concentrated hard, sending another cloud of false sense impression out in the direction of the cooks.

Now both of the cooks were sniffing the air as well. "Holy shite, Wil, that's a lot of gas," the one nearest to Emily said.

"Is pilot light out?" the dishwasher called in alarm.

"Smells like a mother of a lot of gas, Ev, stand over here," the first cook said.

"Bleedin' hell, Charlie, turn off the burners!" The second cook said, nostrils flaring. "Goddamn old stoves "

The dishwasher snapped off the flame under the deep fryer, now very alarmed. "It's only gettin' stronger, lads. We've gotta go tell Jack."

"We gotta get the hell out of here, at any rate go on, you lot," Charlie, the first cook, furiously motioned the other two men out of the kitchen. The three of them hurried through the crowd toward the front rooms. Emily followed close at their heels, filling the air with the Glamoured scent of natural gas as she went. Some of the men she passed recoiled, coughing.

"Oi, Jack, lads, everyone it seems we've got a big old gas leak started in the kitchen," Wil, the dishwasher, called. People were paying attention now. A dozen people were hastily stubbing out their cigarettes.

A young girl at the bar, who had been just about to light a cigarette, flicked her Zippo closed with a stricken look. "Holy shite, Jack, I can smell that from here," she said to a fortyish, goateed man in a tweed cap, who was pulling pints behind the bar. "We're going to need to call the gas company and get someone out here "

"We're going to need to get everyone out, is what we're going to need to do, Miss Rachel," Jack said, setting down the pint glass in his hand. "You get your pretty face somewhere safe."

"Maybe I could try to close the valve, Jack " the first cook began.

"Don't risk it, Charlie, the place could blow with you in it. I've got enough insurance to cover the British Isles if someone misplaces them." He called to all of his customers "Listen, lads, we've got an emergency, we're going to need to get everyone out of here, there's a big old gas leak started in the kitchen! Nobody light a cigarette! No one strike a match! Gather yourselves up and get out!"

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The bartender opened the cash register and emptied the till into his cap, and then clambered across the bar and hurriedly began to corral everyone out of the pub with a crisp, drill-sergeant's sort of efficiency. Clearly the pub owner had some military experience in the past and knew how to lead an evacuation. This lot of military personnel were a sensible, level-headed group, and they were reacting to the emergency admirably, without panic or trampling.

Or, at least most of them were, but a very intoxicated and somewhat dotty white-haired man and a young couple enmeshed in a heated embrace far back in the shadows were not quite so eager to vacate the premises. The old man was finally removed by a couple of hale, thick-necked fellows who each took an arm and all but carried him

out, but Emily had to go up to within a foot of the young couple and just blast them with enough natural-gas Glamour to smother kittens. Thankfully, this threat gave the young man the opportunity to further enflame his love with a demonstration of his gallantry in leading her to safety at last, the two crossed the threshold and were safely away.

Emily lingered unseen at the pub entrance as the young couple retreated out the front door, glancing down at her watch as they made their exits. Mother be blessed, they had completely emptied the pub of every living soul within it and it was 7:51 p.m.

Yes. She sagged against the doorframe in an ecstasy of relief.

She stood just outside the Fusilier's front door, scanning the crowd for a tall thin figure in soberest black, and found no one. No signs of Professor Snape yet, but given his reliably punctual habits, he had to be nearby all she would have to do would be to keep him out of the building when he did arrive, which seemed easy enough compared to all that she had done earlier. Someone else might even stop him and warn him about the danger when he arrived someone might have already done just that. Worst case scenario, she would simply Stun him and drag him back to Hogwarts and explain everything later. Or just leave him on his bed, make her escape, and explain nothing.

Across the road, the owner had borrowed a cell phone from one of the patrons no doubt he was now trying to place an emergency call to his utility company. Apparently many of them were familiar with flammable gases and explosions and knew to keep the others a good safe distance away from the pub.

Now, all she had to do was wait for Severus to arrive.

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It had taken longer for Snape to cover the twenty-two blocks than he originally estimated. By now, he was hurrying along at a good rate, checking his pocket watch every few seconds and scowling to himself.

Snape hated to be late with every bone and sinew in him, and by now, he had concocted what he thought were some really bloody ingenious justifications for his behaviour since 1991 and was eager to present them to Lucius. He had just remembered that Quirrell had always been a hypochondriac, shying away from other peoples' sneezes and handshakes, and was going to present this as proof of an ingrained fear of death and disease that made him, the ever-vigilant Severus Snape, think Quirrell was trying to steal the Philosopher's Stone for himself... The poison antidotes were merely a means of playing up to Dumbledore, and a means of carrying on his research on poisons undetected... He had in fact improved on the composition of *Veritaserum,* more to amuse himself than anything else, but that was a handy thing to point to... He had been careful to create medicinal potions that only he himself was subtle enough to actually brew and put into practical use, like, for example, Wolfsbane... Yes, he could win Lucius's confidence again, he was sure of it.

Ah the sign up ahead indicated that he had just reached the 100 block of Wilton Row. He continued on, spotting a round wooden sign. White letters read *The Fusilier Publick House*, framing a picture of a soldier brandishing a mug of ale and a Muggle firearm of some sort.

But oddly enough, there was a crowd of Muggles lingering across the road from the pub for some reason, all talking in high, nervous, shrill voices, and looking very agitated indeed. Some of them were talking into lozenges of illuminated plastic held to their ears. They all seemed to be watching the pub's front door with expressions of fear on their faces. What was going on? No one was going in or out of the pub that he could tell actually, from what he could see through the front windows, there didn't seem to be anyone inside the Fusilier at all.

He paused, apprehensive shivers crinkling between his shoulders. Then he ducked into a narrow alleyway on his right, and silently spoke a word to Obscure himself, wishing to investigate whatever circumstances had arisen untroubled by either Lucius or that crowd of panicky Muggles. Then he checked his watch 7:52 p.m. He would have to hurry if he didn't want to be late.

Then he started toward the Fusilier's front door.

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7:52 p.m., and still no sign of Severus *why isn't he here yet, he's fucking anal about being early, where is he*

Emily was scanning the road impatiently from the Fusilier's doorway, her heart hammering in her throat and temples. Still no Snape anywhere to be found

no, wait

there was something on her left, some yards up the road, a glimpse of a black figure, like a silhouette barely seen through mist. She concentrated, invoked the third form of Obscurantis with an utterance of her True Name

There he was. The unhelpful son of a bitch had Obscured himself to make his approach. Probably wary of some sort of ambush, and rightly so. Professor Snape was hurrying past the crowd across the road, looking quite annoyed by the proximity of all of these edgy, crowding, shouting people.

Ah well, at least with characteristic fetishic punctuality, he had arrived far too early and given her plenty of time to dissuade him from entering the building, she had eight or nine minutes, it was 7:52 or so

As she gazed down at her watch, the second hand ticked to the tenth second before 7:53 and she realised, she didn't have seven minutes

she had ten seconds.

Because Lucius Malfoy had known Severus Snape since he was a child, and if there was anything one could be certain of with him, it was that he would be seven minutes early to everything. And what a perfect excuse for Lucius he had been delayed, and his cousin had been characteristically early, which was why Snape had tragically died and Lucius had been spared by circumstances.

Tick.

No now she had nine seconds.

He had just cleared the edge of the crowd and was still coming toward her

Stay back! Severus, what the fuck are you doing!

He started toward the front door, and she started toward him.

She half-instinctively realised that if she physically touched him, her Obscurantis effect would be negated and they would all see her, so she gathered herself for a long lunge in his direction on her hooves, and arrived beside him on bare feet. Her time sense was gone; she had no idea how long she had before the explosion

In another second, she had torn the protective amulet from around her own neck and thrown it over his, tackled him around the midsection, and was dragging him toward the ground. The elderly, drunk, and dotty fellow screeched in fear and cowered at the sight of a tussling man and woman appearing from nowhere

"What the... Let go of me this instant!" Snape shouted indignantly.

She wrapped both arms around his head and shoulders, and hugged them hard against her chest, ignoring the tearing pain in her shoulder

There was a long silent moment as air was drawn in and

Waves of flame and concussed air ripped outward from the pub front, the door and front windows exploding out in a blast of broken glass. Emily could feel hot debris impacting with her back and arms, and rushing past them both. At the sound and then the impact of the blast, Snape had stopped fighting her, and was now clinging to her.

Then, extreme quiet. The sound of car alarms going off in the distance.

Emily sat up.

Her ears rang numbly, and her senses were full of fire and fear. Then she became aware of a burning sensation in her left hand that intensified as she focused on it a cold fire that seemed drawn with inexorable weight through her flesh to

cold iron

she shook off a bit of window debris like someone else might have shook off a hot coal. A dark blue blister was rising from the back of her left hand.

A second later a wave of frightened voices shattered that unnatural quiet completely. Jack, the pub owner, let out a howl "*Jesus, Mary, and Joseph me pub!*" The young woman, Rachel, was very sensibly calling the fire squad on her mobile phone, shouting to be heard by the dispatcher over the racket of the crowd's reactions.

Behind Emily, Snape sat up too, looking half shell-shocked, half angry. "What in Merlin's name are *you* doing here?" he burst out, staring at her in amazement. He then turned and took a long, disbelieving look at the burning storefront before him, then back at her. "You could have gotten *hurt*!"

Emily shook her head hard, raking dust-covered hair off her face. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"What *happened*?" he demanded, brushing stray bits of shattered wood and powdered glass off his sleeves. He sounded like he couldn't quite believe in the truth of what had just happened.

"Well then," Emily said inanely. "You seem all right to me."

She got up and started to hurry away, but then stopped. Her feet were bare, and the area around her was covered with glass shards and bits of the iron-framed front windows. And with the number of people milling around, it would be impossible to Obscure herself and go back to her hoofed form. She looked around as helplessly and despairingly as any soldier facing a napalmed field.

But Severus Snape had finally reached the absolute end of his patience with her less than forthrightness. He was up and beside her in an instant, seizing hold of her arm. Around them, terrified Muggles continued to race about panicking and shouting, and their own private conflict went unnoticed in the chaos of the scene.

"Goddammit, Emily, I'll have no more of this. Start talking, *now*." His fingers bit into her elbow.

She stepped back, anxiously pulling away from him "Professor, we both have to go. There are bits of iron all around here. The Muggle authorities are going to want to question both of us if we don't leave right away, and Lucius might be along any second "

Snape savagely yanked her back around to face him. "How did you know that I was going to be here? *Who told you?*"

Then he seized her left wrist, turned her arm over, and forcibly pushed up her sleeve, almost ripping it open, and uncovered her left forearm. He stared at her unblemished skin for a long moment, his face white, and his expression unreadable.

Emily wasn't sure just what he thought he would find hidden beneath her sleeve, but didn't want to stay to find out. She glanced over his shoulder, trying to divert his attention, if only for a second "Why, Minister Fudge, sir!"

But instead, he grabbed both her wrists cruelly, snarling, "Oh yes, I'll turn away, and you'll vanish. *I know how you are*."

He either hadn't noticed, or wasn't concerned about, the fresh iron burn on the back of her left hand. "I got burnt, and you're hurting me," she snapped, wincing.

"I regret that," he said sincerely but his grip never slackened on her wrists. "But you're *not* leaving until you explain all of this to me."

Lucius Malfoy just tried to kill you. And he said he was doing it for me.

"I don't have to tell you anything," she spat. She tried to break his grasp, but he hung on with fierce tenacity.

"Well, maybe you won't be so recalcitrant if I bring you before Dumbledore. Why don't you come have a nice chat with him *so you can figure out where your loyalties lie,* Professor. And if you try to get away from me again " his hands clenched bruisingly hard on her wrists, refusing to be shook off "so help me, I'll break your bloody arm."

"I could break your arm before you could break mine, and you know it," she said evenly. She had already broken one man's arm that day and at that moment would not have scrupled to break another's.

He did know it but he never wavered.

"*You don't want me as your enemy,* Professor," he said quietly, warningly. The look on his face gave her pause she had been as physically intimate as it was possible to be with this man, seen him sleeping, seen him hallucinating and dreaming but in that moment, she saw what he was capable of and feared it.

But she was a soldier, and she had seen worse sights than Severus Snape's eyes when he was angry.

"You're right I don't," she flashed back. "But I've had to endure you as an enemy all year, so pardon me if I find that threat rather meaningless. What remains to be seen is whether or not you want me as *your* enemy, which is what I'll become if you don't let go of me, right now."

The red-black eyes glinted. Then he opened his hands and relinquished her.

"I'm glad you can be reasonable, Professor," she said, backing away from him. As soon as he looked away, she could get away from here, find some sheltered area where she could Obscure herself, and be gone, in blissfully restful anonymity.

But then Snape stretched a hand toward her *"Stupefy"* and silently spoke a word.

There was the smallest flash of red light and then her eyes closed, and she crumpled, Stunned, toward the ground but Snape deftly caught her up before she could fall. He paused, pressing his fingers to her wrist to check her pulse, and found it strong and regular.

"Pardon me, please my wife's fainted," he said brusquely, pushing through the frightened crowd.

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Albus Dumbledore's office, over the course of his tenure as Hogwarts Headmaster, had seen a great deal.

From the vantage point of his expansive desk, Dumbledore had seen young Harry Potter come into his office carrying the sword of Godric Gryffindor, all scarlet with basilisk blood. He had seen Lucius Malfoy stalking across the threshold in high operatic fits of temper on more than one occasion. He had seen Fawkes the Phoenix spontaneously combust and be reborn any number of times. His visitor of that very evening had arrived in the form of a very large and shaggy black dog, who had then transformed into a tall, wild-haired and gaunt-cheeked man who looked older than his mid-thirties. The two of them had now been closeted together discussing the future of a certain green-eyed, bespectacled Gryffindor student for some hours.

Nonetheless, when Albus Dumbledore saw Severus Snape stalk into his office carrying Emily Swain's unconscious body carrying her with a great deal of care, he would later recall his heart lurched. *Gwydion's kinswoman, Buckminster's daughter... at Hogwarts under his protection, already been assaulted this year, and he hadn't been able to help her afterward*

Dumbledore stood up, alarmed. "Severus what on Earth "

"What did you do now, Snape!" Black shouted.

"She's alive," Snape said. "She's not hurt. Just Stunned." He laid her on one of the overstuffed armchairs in front of Dumbledore's desk.

"Who Stunned her?" Dumbledore went to Emily's side.

"I'm afraid I did, sir," Snape said coolly, composing her hands in her lap.

"*Severus!*" Dumbledore started toward Snape, horrified.

"What the hell, Snape!" Black cried, scandalised. "Terrorising children isn't enough for you anymore, you've got to start Stunning women "

"If I might be allowed to *explain*?" Snape thundered back at him.

Silence. "Do tell us," Dumbledore said.

Snape took a deep breath. "I told you, Headmaster, that Lucius Malfoy wanted to meet with me tonight. He wanted to meet me at a Muggle pub, where no one would see us or recognise us."

"Yes. I recall."

"When I arrived at the pub, there were a lot of Muggles milling about across the road. I got past them, and was heading for the front door, when someone wrapped something around my neck, and forced me down onto the pavement. At that moment something inside the pub exploded, completely demolishing the building's front facade. When I sat up, I found the person who had knocked me down was Professor Swain. Needless to say, I was shocked. Then I asked her for an explanation, and she got up and started to leave. I pressed her, and she refused to answer me. So I demanded that she come here and tell you what had happened, and she refused again, and seemed about to disappear, as per her usual *habit*.

"So... regrettably, I Stunned her and brought her here. I know you don't like it, sir, but I felt I had to. There is something important that she's not telling me about what happened tonight, and I feel you should know."

"Were any Muggles injured in the explosion?" Dumbledore asked, his white brows heavily creased with worry.

"I don't believe so, sir. From what I could see through the front windows, I thought the pub seemed empty when I arrived. I was coming towards the door for a closer look when the explosion occurred."

"But Professor Swain prevented you from coming any closer."

"She knocked me to the ground at least," Snape said sourly. "I can only guess as to what her intentions were. She wouldn't tell me."

"Could she have been acting under the Imperius Curse, Severus?"

"I somehow don't think so. She seemed uncommunicative and very eager to get away in short, very much *herself* just panicky and agitated."

"You said she wrapped something around your neck do you know what exactly that was?"

"Oh... yes," Snape said, "I'd... forgotten about that. It's still here " He rummaged through the lapels of his black frock coat, and found a round silver medallion on a long chain, which he handed to the Headmaster.

Dumbledore took a piece of unmarked parchment from a stack in one of his desk drawers, then laid it flat on his desk, and laid the medallion in the centre of it. "*Monstra Incantatem,*" he intoned softly, passing his hand over the amulet.

All three men bent over the Headmaster's desk as the silver medallion glowed with a bright, silvery-green light, and runes and diagrams began to appear on the parchment page. Dumbledore nodded understanding as he looked them over.

"This is a Faery Amulet of Protection," he said, turning to Professor Snape. "The Professor taught her classes how to create them second term. I recall Hermione Granger showing me a Faery amulet that Professor Swain loaned to her, just after Miss Granger received a letter filled with bubotuber pus. This is, I believe, that very amulet." The Headmaster continued to face Snape, his eyebrows raising slightly. "And you said she threw this around your neck just before the storefront exploded?"

Snape glanced back down at the amulet on the desktop and the hard expression on his face softened slightly. "She did, sir."

"Tell me, are you in any way injured, Severus? Any cuts, any abrasions? If there was an explosion, certainly there would have been some flying debris."

Snape paused, reddening. "I haven't... gotten the chance to really examine myself for injury, sir. I came straight here after "

"But surely, if you were in pain from a laceration, or bleeding profusely, you would have noticed?" Dumbledore persisted.

Snape looked down at his hands, which were unblemished, and his clothes, which were remarkably clean for a man who had very recently been in frighteningly close proximity to an exploding building.

"I... don't believe I sustained any injuries, sir," he said slowly.

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Dumbledore knelt down at the side of the unconscious woman in the armchair, brushing her dusty hair back from her smudged face with one careful, seamed hand. Then

he lifted her hand off of her lap and pulled back the sleeve of her jacket to reveal a spot of livid, blistered iron burn on the back of her hand and wrist.

"It appears there was some iron amidst the flying debris," he observed quietly. He put her hand down on the arm of the chair, then gently lifted one of her bare feet, which was so abraded from skidding on asphalt that blue blood welled in a dozen small scrapes.

"She's been associating closely with Malfoy all year, Albus," Snape said, turning an accusing look at Emily. "Who knows what he's told her. Who can imagine what the two of them have gotten up to."

"Your colleague is injured, Severus. It would seem that some of your Healing Potion is needed, if you please," the Headmaster said. He took a clean lavender handkerchief from one of his voluminous purple sleeves and began dabbing at Emily's bleeding foot.

"When I asked her what had happened, she said, '*I don't have to tell you anything,*" Snape said, through gritted teeth. "How much can you, can we, really say that we know about her? What if she's working for them what if she's betrayed us?" No man could have described a lover's betrayal with more anguish in his voice.

"Albus? *Who* is this again?" Black looked from Snape to Dumbledore, at loss.

"Professor Swain is a native Arcadian, a knight of the Fae military. Her great-uncle is one of my oldest friends, my sworn brother of over a hundred years. He sent her to us to teach an elective session of Defence Against the Dark Arts this year. As such, she is a colleague of Severus's, and of mine," Dumbledore explained. He fixed Snape with an unwavering blue eye "And we have no substantive reason as yet to assume that she is in league with Voldemort, and a great deal of reason to believe that she would find his political views unsavoury in the extreme, just as her father did. Now please, Severus, if you could fetch some Healing Potion, and your laboratory First Aid kit."

Snape paused, seemed to concentrate on containing himself. "I'll... I'll be back in a moment," he said, and left the room.

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Snape returned momentarily with the First Aid kit and a bottle of blue Healing Potion. Dumbledore dipped his handkerchief in the bottle and busied himself with wiping away the bleeding abrasions on Emily's bare feet and hands. The iron burn would not heal completely, however, as was usual with such wounds, so Dumbledore thoroughly cleaned the burn, and then taped a surgical gauze bandage over it.

"Well then, hopefully she won't be in too much pain. Now, it appears that the only way to find out what happened this evening, then, is to ask the Professor herself and see if we can perhaps persuade her to be a bit more communicative." Dumbledore reached for his wand, but Snape held up his hand to stop him and put a bottle of clear liquid onto Dumbledore's desk.

"Sir, might I suggest... seeing as how she vehemently refused to be questioned, perhaps we should give her a dose of *Veritaserum* while she's still unconscious," Snape said. "If we want to hear the real truth of the matter "

"Severus, a word to the wise administering Veritaserum to a Faerie unawares sounds like an excellent way to get oneself direly cursed for a lifetime," Dumbledore interjected. "I don't see how her actions warrant such a violation of privacy." He raised his wand and began to point it at Emily

Snape put his hand on Dumbledore's arm and stopped him. "But if it is Imperius and earlier, when we interrogated Barty Crouch "

Dumbledore turned to Snape very patiently. "I do not intend to *interrogate* your colleague she is not being held for questioning. I intend merely to ask her to tell me what happened tonight." He began to point his wand again.

"But sir "

"*Severus,"* Dumbledore said, a note of frustration finally creeping into his voice, "do you know your colleague to be a convicted Death Eater, the way you did Barty Crouch? Do we have evidence that she, by her overt actions, has abducted an Auror, held him captive, and assumed his identity? Is there any proof that she set a trap at the end of the Third Task, that resulted in the death of one of our students? Do we suspect her of patricide of the murder of her own father?"

"Well, no, of course not," Snape said quietly.

"I find it difficult to believe that a Fianna knight, one who was raised by Elaine and Buckminster Swain, no less, will ever find her true calling as a Death Eater, no matter how often she is flattered by Lucius Malfoy. I also cannot find it within myself to be too suspicious of someone who, by your own account, first put an Amulet of Protection on you and then prevented you from approaching a building just before it exploded. Some might think such actions bespoke a desire to preserve you, rather than harm you, my friend."

Dumbledore leaned forward and gave Snape a searching look over the tops of his half-spectacles. "So you might consider giving your colleague the benefit of a doubt."

Snape stared at the floor, his cheeks reddening slightly. "But sir... if she was not under Imperius at the time, it is entirely possible that she will be very angry to have been Stunned when she is awakened," he ventured.

Dumbledore's expression was not entirely sympathetic. "Yes, I expect she might be. Would you prefer to leave while I speak to her?"

Snape frowned uncomfortably, but shook his head. "No."

The Headmaster pointed his wand at the unconscious woman in the chair. *"Ennervate."*

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Emily came to herself, shaking her head and rubbing at her temples. She glanced up in surprise, startled to discover herself in totally different surroundings, when a moment earlier, she had been amidst the explosion-aftermath scene in front of the Fusilier. She was in Dumbledore's office, sitting in one of the chairs in front of his desk. Dumbledore was sitting in front of her, looking at her with concern; there were at least two other people in the room.

Professor Snape was leaning on the side of Dumbledore's desk, his arms grimly folded in front of him *Perhaps you won't be so recalcitrant if I bring you before Dumbledore,* he had said. Next second she was up from the chair and confronting him.

"You Stunned me, didn't you?" she blazed at him.

He smiled poisonously at her, unrepentant. "Yes, I did. You didn't seem in the mood to accept a polite invitation."

"Why, you *indescribable* bastard you should consider yourself lucky I can't issue a real challenge in your world "

"If you weren't so bloody pigheaded and impossible, it wouldn't have been necessary," he snapped back. "Your unwillingness to your *inability* to answer even the *simplest* question "

"Stop this bickering immediately, both of you," Dumbledore said, in a voice like quiet thunder. Both Professors immediately fell silent and turned hard away from each other. Both were visibly breathing hard; Emily clenched her fists at her sides and Snape crossed his arms over his chest, both, presumably, in an attempt to hide how much their respective hands were shaking.

Emily caught sight of Sirius Black, leaning against the edge of Dumbledore's desk and watching the proceedings very curiously. She looked at Black for a long moment, her head cocked to one side. "I don't think I know you."

Black held out his hand. "Sirius Black. Pleased to meet you."

She shook his hand with a rather discomfited expression. "Emily Swain. Likewise."

"Now, Emily, I do apologise for the manner in which you came to see me tonight," Dumbledore said pleasantly, with a moment's glance at Snape "But after the events that your colleague has related to me tonight, he and I are left with a great many questions we would like to ask you. You are not being detained, and you are under no suspicion of unlawful conduct but you have to understand that we three have quite an interest in hearing anything you have to tell us about what occurred this evening." He motioned to the chair in which she had been sitting when she awakened. "Please, have a seat. Can I get you anything? Water, tea? A large brandy, perhaps?"

Emily gave Dumbledore a long look, her eyes narrowing warily but after a long moment, she took the proffered chair. "No, thank you," she said.

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"No need," Dumbledore said softly. "She belongs to no one but herself, my friend."

"If I had ever been told that my friend had become a Death Eater, sir, I would never have spoken to him, or accepted his hospitality, from that moment on," she said, her eyes fixed on Dumbledore's. "You know what they did to my father. I would never count someone I knew to be a Death Eater amongst my friends."

Behind her, Professor Snape's eyes fixed on the side of her face with an indescribable look, his jaw tensing painfully.

Dumbledore kept his eyes on Emily's face, then asked: "Am I correct in assuming, Professor... that he, the confidante you speak of, is Lucius Malfoy?"

"I... you see... " She took a long pause, breathing hard. "My confidante comes from a family that has long had my father's friendship, sir. I cannot name him... without... Sir, my father respects and admires the Malfoy family. Now, you know as I do that my father is often called a brilliant scholar, and a kind man, but never a shrewd judge of character. He will give others the benefit of a doubt up until the moment they bury a blade in his back."

Dumbledore nodded, smiling ruefully. "When your father was at Hogwarts, there were those who loved him because he was a true friend, kind and generous to a fault. And there were also those who sought his company because he was the son of an ancient pureblooded family with vast piles of gold. Unfortunately, at times, Buckminster treats those two the same."

Emily clasped her hands in front of her with a pained expression. "Sir, you know him well. But he is my *father*, and he and I can be more fond than wise when it comes to each other. My habit is to support him even in his folly. I fear that in that tendency to blind himself to the most unattractive qualities in people he is fond of that I appear to be very much my father's daughter. But to name the... without feeling as though I was being disloyal, sir, I "

Dumbledore held up his hand to stop her. "I understand. But can you say with absolute truth that your confidante is *not* Lucius Malfoy?"

Emily looked at him and said nothing.

Dumbledore nodded. "I see. And am I correct in assuming, Professor, that perhaps your confidante, whom we need not name here, holds you in such a position of trust not... only because of the longstanding friendship between your two families?"

She remained silent. From behind her, the scent of blistering rage and upset boiled over her shoulder. *I'm sorry,* she thought. *I didn't want you to have to know this.*

"Professor?" Dumbledore prompted gently.

"I don't want to answer that question," she said distantly.

"I hesitate to ask you that question," the Headmaster said. "I would not have, if circumstances had allowed. But Professor... an attempt on the life of one of your colleagues occurred this evening. We cannot ignore that. You cannot ignore that."

"I didn't ignore that!" she cried shrilly. "I stopped it I didn't let them kill anyone, not Severus, not the Muggles "

Again Dumbledore held up his hand to stop her. "Yes, you stopped anyone from being hurt. But if we are to know what we are dealing with Emily, you must be completely honest with me. There is no other way."

Emily was silent again for a long time, then finally said: "Send *them* out then. I'll only talk to you." She gestured behind her, presumably at both Snape and Black, but in Snape's direction.

She then heard Professor Snape turn and leave the room, quietly shutting the door behind him.

He hadn't even cared enough to slam it. He *really* hated her.

"Sirius... if we might have a moment alone?" Dumbledore said, to the other man behind her.

"Yes, sir," Black said, striding out of the room and closing the door behind him.

Dumbledore turned back to Emily, and waited, just listening.

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"He didn't tell me solely because of the longstanding friendship between our two families," she said, after a long pause. "He holds me in such a position of trust because he's... he seems to be quite fond of me personally, and has been since we first met, the same year I finished at Beauxbatons. There was... back before he was married and I was just out of school, there was... we had a very brief romantic sort of involvement, when he was twenty-three and I was seventeen.

"When he and I renewed our acquaintance after I came here... there was something left of our old regard for each other. So he and I have been... seeing each other since shortly after the New Year."

"I take it that when you say 'seeing each other,' you do not mean that you met for tea," Dumbledore said delicately.

"No. The truth is... " She averted her eyes. "I've made the same error in judgment as so many other foolish women, and allowed myself to become infatuated with another woman's husband." Her head drooped, her fingers punishing the roots of her hair.

"I do not doubt that... your friend... was no innocent party in encouraging your affection for him." His words could not have been more gentle, but she still could not meet his eyes.

"That doesn't excuse me," she said quietly. "If Narcissa sent an agent to call me out, I'd deserve it. I'm at fault."

"And with the tragedy of your recent past, you may have been more than usually vulnerable to such persuasions," he said. His voice was understanding, as though he knew much of loneliness and frailty.

"You're too generous, Albus. It's distasteful and sordid, and I have no excuse for it other than it felt good at the time. Their marriage always seemed to me to be one of convenience, with no real love there to dishonour. Somehow I didn't think it would really matter. I didn't think it would hurt anything." Her hands clenched in her lap. "Bloody hell and to think I used to be considered a hero."

She shook her head, with a bitter, mirthless little laugh. "It's no wonder that creature was so sure I would become his supporter, after the way I've behaved this year."

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Dumbledore glanced up, electrified. "You have spoken, personally, with Voldemort?"

"Yes. I spoke to him earlier today, a few hours ago. My friend took it upon himself to arrange a personal introduction."

The Headmaster's eyes were like blue ice. "What were your impressions?"

"That he wanted very badly to bring me round to his side. He wanted to meet my mother and Gwydion and discuss ways to better the status of the Second-World Faery community with them."

"So Voldemort seeks an alliance with the Fae." Dumbledore's voice was graver than she had ever heard it. "He has the giants, perhaps the goblins... now he wishes to stir your people against us. Tell me, what does he promise you in return for your loyalty?"

"If we support his rule, he promises to severely punish those who persecute us for our differences from Wizardkind... he promised to restrict iron manufacture and make attacking a Faerie with cold iron a capital offence, the same as it is as home. He promised to punish the families of the wizards responsible for the Faery massacres during the Plague years, and he promises that under his rule, the Fae would be free to go about without Glamour and without persecution. He pledges his aid in destroying the Orc tribes he swears that he can win our freedom from their aggressions."

"Does any of this tempt you? Be honest."

She stared past Dumbledore. "If I could trust a leader to keep us safe from those who would hunt us with iron... if I knew that the Fae could finally move freely in this world without fear, if I knew we could get work papers at the Ministry, and get a fair trial if we come under suspicion of wrongdoing... " Her eyes narrowed with grim resolution. "And if I could say that I had seen the last Orc genocide... if I knew with certainty that we had defeated them, once and for all... that seems a worthy thing to me."

"But there are other ways to go about achieving those goals than allying yourselves with Dark Wizards," he said. "Your desire to help your people is laudable, but believe me, you will not accomplish that by working with Voldemort. He seeks only to serve his own hateful agenda against his enemies and will not hesitate to exploit your people to further it. You cannot trust him, Emily no one can."

Emily got up from her chair and began pacing, her hands working before her. "He said something to me today *The Fae seem to me a proud, magnificent race... I see no reason why you should not let your real selves be seen in this world.* And I agree with that, Albus, even if it was Voldemort who said it. But we can't let ourselves be seen as we are in this world, not without running into prejudicial treatment. When I walked into the Department of International Magical Cooperation the day I got here, Bartemius Crouch seemed to hold me personally responsible because he didn't have paperwork for me. He looked at me like I was instantly suspect in some way. And I constantly see that attitude reflected in other people in positions of authority in your world in Ministry employees, in Law Enforcement officials."

Dumbledore's white brows creased with concern. "Certainly no one at Hogwarts has made you feel that way, I hope ?"

"No, no, you've all been wonderful, but I don't imagine that the teachers at Hogwarts are typical of the Wizarding community. You're all highly educated intellectuals, which makes you statistical outliers in your society. Your average wizard on the street, however, is a lot less tolerant. Did you know what happened to me when I went for a walk in Knockturn Alley this year? Some bastard of a wizard thought I was a prostitute and bloody *solicited* me and I won't even go *into* what happened to a young friend of mine who " She seemed about to go into an indignant diatribe on another topic, but then stopped herself.

"Anyway. The stereotype is that we're all shiftless, untrustworthy, oversexed, bestial freaks who have no morals. I know I'm not exactly speaking from a position of strength, given my own behaviour this year, but I was running into those kind of attitudes when I was eighteen years old and before any of this had ever happened, too." She stopped in front of Dumbledore's desk, her eyes flashing and breath labouring.

"If the time has come for the Fae to stop hiding, there are those of us who would be willing to support you, my friend," Dumbledore said, his voice full of quiet resolve. "But if you allied yourselves with Voldemort, you will not be helping your people to become full citizens of our community you will only stigmatise them further, I promise you."

Emily was still pacing before his desk, her face set in a deep, thoughtful scowl. "But what if we took a very hard-line stance with him what if we refused to allow ourselves to be exploited. Yes, he's ruthless, but he's also very proactive, much more so than any other wizard leader. He wants things to change rapidly, whereas everyone else seems content to muddle along in the same way it's always been, even if the way it's always been is accomplishing nothing."

"I agree with you that change is needed but the kind of change Voldemort seeks will benefit no one but himself. I can promise you, though if you look for wizard allies to help support your people in becoming full-fledged members of our society, you need to look no further than within this school. And of that, you can be certain, and could always have been certain, Professor."

Emily turned a withering look on him. "Begging your pardon, sir, but I'll make up my own mind in this matter, thank you. It wasn't too long ago that the greatest threats to the Second-World Fae in general *were* wizards so do excuse us if we don't see too much difference between Wizarding factions. The Fae have taken care of ourselves for a great many years or rather, millennia without *any* help from our wand-waving friends, after all," she said, not without some disdain. "Indeed, it seems to me that if we waited for our *wizard friends at Hogwarts* to aid us in our hour of need, we would be waiting *a very long time*, for help that *never arrived*, if recent *precedent* is anything to go by." She paused in front of his desk, eyes blazing with fury.

"Have I done something to make you angry, Professor?" Dumbledore asked, his eyes never leaving hers. "If so, then I would like to know about it."

"I don't see how you can offer your support to my whole community, when I can't even count on you to support me when I'm sent before a *judge*, Albus!" Emily snapped at him. "Yes, I know my family has a little money in the bank, but that doesn't make me any less of an outsider here, with all the political clout *that* entails. I still can't *believe* you let me face all of that alone!"

"Emily, please, slow down," Dumbledore said, holding up a hand. "Are you referring to the inquest that went on after you were attacked?"

"Yes, the inquest where they hauled me up in front of a judge because I defended myself from a murder attempt. Did you know that they posted armed guards outside my hospital room? They didn't even ask me if I wanted legal representation, did you know that?"

"No, no, I didn't, the authorities should have " he began

"I don't know how you expect me to believe all these declarations you've just made, after you ignored the letter I sent you that morning, Albus and the only way I got it out at all was because a friend came to visit me in hospital. They never even asked me if there was anyone *I wanted to contact*! If you're as supportive as you say, why didn't you send anyone to testify as to my good character, any sort of help at all do you have any *idea* how terrified I was? I'm here because you asked for me how in the hell could you just *abandon me like that*?" Her voice rose furiously, and she slammed both hands down on his desk.

Dumbledore stood up and faced her head on, but his voice remained calm and level. "Emily. I swear upon my sacred honour that *I did not receive your letter until after the inquest had already begun.* Had I received it even one hour earlier, I would have been there. Had I received it even five minutes earlier, I would have either gone myself if at all possible, or sent the Deputy Headmistress to support you."

"But that's not possible," she snapped. "It was barely noon when I asked for the letter to be posted. I asked Lucius to take it straight to the "

And then she realised what she had just said.

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Emily and Dumbledore were both silent, staring at each other. "You gave the letter to Lucius Malfoy to post?" he asked, after a long pause.

"Yes... he was at my bedside in the hospital when I woke up there were guards outside my door he asked if there was anything he could do to help. I didn't know that he was a Death Eater at the time "

"Emily " Dumbledore's hands clenched on the edge of his desk. "Emily, do you not see what he's done?"

"He tried to make me think you abandoned me... that you looked down on me. He tried to turn me against you," Emily whispered. Her eyes sought his "He very nearly *did it*."

"Voldemort, and his servants, have a gift for sowing distrust and dissension... it is their greatest weapon," Dumbledore told her.

Emily went to Dumbledore's side and took both of his hands in hers. "Albus... Albus, I'm so sorry, I never should have thought you would abandon me like that. It didn't seem like something you would do for a moment. That's why I was so upset about it. I should have realised... "

"There is no need for you to heap blame on yourself, my dear," Dumbledore said. "He is a consummate deceiver, and you were in an hour of great need. He wanted to make you beholden to him he knows the Fae, knows how seriously your people regard your obligations. When you were attacked, he seized the opportunity to ingratiate himself with you, make you feel dependent upon him."

The Headmaster then faced her very simply and humbly. "Emily... I know now that I should have been more concerned when you didn't turn up for your classes that morning. But I was confident that you would soon return, with some excellent reason for your absence. I have no excuse but complacency, my dear... it just never occurred to me that a Fianna Master-At-Arms might be in peril. I am well aware that you came to this world because I asked Gwydion to send you and never intended to shirk my responsibilities toward you. I am also well aware that your people are a minority here and that the courts may have been biased against you in the matter of the attack. But I would *never* have abandoned you to that situation, not so long as there was breath in my body or any friend still loyal to me. You have my true and original word on that."

His voice was full of urgent sincerity and the desire to prove his friendship and loyalty to her. She believed him.

"I'm sorry to have doubted you," she whispered.

"I'm sorry, too," Dumbledore said, gently pressing her hands in his. "Now... if you'll excuse me for a moment Severus is all but frantic to get to the bottom of the circumstances of this evening, and we really should let him know exactly what happened." He excused himself with a polite smile and nod and started for the door.

"Sir, must we... say anything? He's alive and well does he have to know exactly why?" Emily asked, her voice breaking. She was grasping at a last, feeble hope that Snape might never know what she had done that year, and she knew it.

"Emily... while I can understand your embarrassment, Severus was very nearly murdered tonight," he said. "Surely you won't deny him the whole truth behind it?"

She stared down at the floor. "I... suppose I can't, sir," she said, in a very small voice.

"Also, both your colleague and Sirius Black, the other fellow you met tonight, are deeply involved in the effort against Voldemort and should be kept apprised of any new intelligence we receive of the Death Eaters' plans. If you prefer, you don't have to be present while I tell them. I promise that I will be as discreet as I can regarding the details of your, er, involvement."

"Yes, I... I think I'd rather not be there," she said faintly. "Thank you."

"I also hesitate to leave your colleague alone with Mr. Black for too long. Unfortunately there is a long and very unpleasant history between the two of them, and I don't want to have to scrape one or both off the corridor steps with Mrs. Skower's Magical Mess Remover."

"I see." She breathed a heavy sigh. "You know... I think I will take a large brandy after all, sir... if it's not too much trouble."

The Headmaster crossed to the cabinet behind his desk, poured a glass from the small cask of Faery calvados, and handed it to her. Then he ushered her up the gallery steps and through a round, gilded door, into a spacious chamber full of overstuffed armchairs and lined with more books than she would have thought possible. This was, it appeared, the sitting room of Dumbledore's own living quarters both his office and his apartments faced out onto a high tower walk overlooking the serenely glimmering lake below.

"Now make yourself at home. I'll be back in a moment." Dumbledore still managed a subdued twinkle at her as he left the room.

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"So... this person is, or was, Malfoy's... girlfriend, mistress, bit on the side, whatever you want to call it. She was living here, working for you, and having *an affair with him* at the same time, and no one had any idea what was going on. I can't... I don't... I'm... I don't believe it, sir." Black flexed his hands in front of him. "Really... you've made some interesting hiring decisions in the past, but I must say, *this* "

"The... relationship does not seem to be of long standing," Dumbledore interjected gently. "I doubt that Professor Swain herself had any idea of what would happen during her year at Hogwarts."

"That may be so, but to take up with *Lucius Malfoy*, of all people? I know these Scottish winters are long and cold, but there are better ways to comfort oneself than to nurse a viper at her very "

"I would thank you not to be so bloody *crude* when referring to our colleague, Black," Snape snapped, straightening up.

Black turned on him. "What can you really say in support of a woman who is... *seeing* a married man a man who is also the ringleader of You-Know-Who's supporters, then, Snape? Not exactly a shining example of female virtue, is she? I say, if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck "

"The only name that I will be using to refer to Emily Swain is her own name, as I have been doing since she was first introduced to me, and I would advise you to do the same," Snape said evenly. "I've worked with her all year, and believe me, she isn't going to *appreciate* hearing you pass judgment on her character or her personal life. She wasn't even going to hang about and explain herself to me after the pub was destroyed. She's here because I made her come here. I bloody threatened her and Stunned her to make her come here."

"Well, Snape, if that's the way you like to treat women, no wonder no one ever wanted to go to the Yule Ball with you," Black sneered. Snape's hand went for his wand, but Dumbledore threw back his head and simply radiated so much disapproval at both of them that they fell silent and turned away from each other.

Black paced for a moment, his brows knitted. "All right, have it your way. Suppose for a moment that her motives in protecting Snape were entirely pure and altruistic and she's still loyal to you, Dumbledore, even if she has been *sleeping with Lucius Malfoy* for Merlin knows how long." He seemed to have picked up on Snape's sensitivity to hearing such words said, and pronounced them with relish, watching his former classmate as if eager to see him squirm. "So then, why did she not immediately come to Dumbledore when she heard what Malfoy was planning? Why did she try to take care of it herself, and not tell anyone?"

"Is it so unbelievable that she might have been embarrassed about the affair, and didn't want to admit to anyone exactly *how* she heard I was to be killed tonight?" Snape demanded. "Surely you know what that's like? Are you trying to tell me you have *never* done anything that you were ashamed of, and didn't want anyone else to know about, in all your life?"

They stared at each other for a long, tense, hateful moment until Black turned away and leaned hard against the side of Dumbledore's desk.

Dumbledore coughed gently. "Now that the unvarnished facts are out in the open... there is the issue of what is to be done."

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the continual presence of Dementors would do to one of them. *Imagine a Faerie in Azkaban, Albus.*Behind iron bars, unable to escape from the Dementors."

Snape raked a hand through his hair, his eyes flashing, and continued. "Also, if you send her into this conflict, and she dies in it how will that go over in the Third Kingdom? Will Gwydion the Fifth really respect your decision to allow his kinswoman, who I might add, is a knight commander in his active service, to go risk her life in some foreign war? As I recall, she was sent here to teach Faery magic, not to square off against the most dangerous wizard alive. Will the Faery community who are already angry over the attempted assassination in June, mind become even more upset once they hear that the Hogwarts Headmaster sent an oathbound Fianna knight to her death, all to serve his own purposes?"

One long finger jabbed into the surface of the Headmaster's desk. "This is *folly*, Albus. Nothing good can come of it."

"Your consideration for your colleague does you credit, Severus," Dumbledore said, very gently. "But I do believe Professor Swain herself is the only person who can make this decision. Emily is quite capable of forming her own opinions and making up her own mind, as you and I are well aware. She may also have her own personal reasons for wishing to lend her aid "

"Why can't we ask anything of... this... of this *Professor*?" Black interrupted, with a hard stare at Snape. He turned to face Dumbledore head on. "You've both let Harry face all the dangers he has, including You-Know-Who himself, on more than one occasion. When my own life was in danger last year, Dumbledore, you relied on Harry and another thirteen-year-old child, Hermione Granger, as your agents in rescuing me. Harry regularly faces challenges more difficult than this.

"From what you've both told me tonight, this woman is not some fourth-year student like Harry, Ron, and Hermione. She's not barely out of school like Sniv like Snape was when he was gathering intelligence for us. She's taught at Hogwarts, so she has to be a fully qualified witch and Snape just said she's a Faery knight commander besides, so she seems pretty damn well suited to the job to me. That's more qualification that Dung or Molly or even Hagrid has to be a part of this fight, when you think about it. I don't see why we don't simply ask her to join the Order and to use Malfoy's confidence in her toward our ends. It can be her decision if she doesn't want to be a part of it, she can say no."

"*You're wrong*!" Snape protested hotly. "It won't be her decision, not really if Dumbledore asks this of her, she'll do it, no matter how stupid, foolish, or suicidal it is. You don't understand how the Fianna work, Black. The only authority they recognise is their King. Her loyalty to him is absolute and he ordered her to come here and serve Dumbledore, which means that that absolute loyalty now transfers to him.

"Now unlike a thick-headed Philistine like you, I've actually spent some time *studying* Faery military history, with what wildly conflicting accounts we have in the library. These are not the kind of people who are cut out for complex intelligence work, Dumbledore and you know that.

"We've all read the stories those of us who read, at least " he glowered at Black "and we all know that no one can beat the Fae in a straight-out fight. They're considered legendary heroes in some quarters. I've personally seen Professor Swain slaughter a wild boar armed with only a sword. It's obvious that they have the military might to destroy the Orcs but where the Orcs always, *always* defeat them, is through treachery. What always happens is the Fianna beat them to the point of extinction in battle, the Orcs offer a non-aggression treaty, and the Fae accept it, and believe it's their sacred duty to uphold it to the letter. Then the Orcs replenish their numbers and massacre some Faeries in a little village somewhere, and the whole thing starts over again.

"Emily is the sort of person who would die upholding that meaningless non-aggression treaty, Black. She's the person you call when you need someone to help you raise an army. She's the person you call to rescue someone from your enemy. She's *not* who you call when you need someone to spy on your enemy."

"And *you* are?" Black said witheringly.

"*Yes, I am,*" Snape replied with blistering certainty. He turned back to Dumbledore. "If we ask this of her it will end horribly. I just know it, Albus. You've been her father's friend for more than half a century. You know what kind of people Buckminster Swain, and his daughter, are. Don't ask this of her she should not be involved here."

Dumbledore slowly clenched his hands in front of him, regarding Snape with a terrible awareness and compassion in his eyes.

"You know, gentlemen, the more I listen to Mr. Black here, the more his plan makes perfect sense to me," came Emily's voice.

All three men turned hard toward the sound.

She was sitting on one of Dumbledore's low bookshelves, near one of the windows open to the turret walk. "Do forgive me for eavesdropping, but when you took such a long *moment* away, I fear that my curiosity got the better of me." She addressed them all without looking at them, her burningly white face fixed straight ahead.

"What have you heard, Emily?" Dumbledore asked.

"You don't have to ask me for anything, Headmaster. I would prefer to volunteer." She turned to face them fully. "When can I start?"

Severus Snape threw up his hands in frustration. "Oh, spare us your noble gestures you're impressing no one," he snapped. "You have no place in this conflict. Just *accept* it."

"That is not your decision to make," Emily said, regarding him with flinty calm. "Under the terms Gwydion laid down, I was to serve Albus Dumbledore, in whatever capacity he required, for a year and day, not for the duration of the British school year. If he wishes it, he can command me to carry out his orders until the twenty-third of September, and I am under oath to comply."

Snape's hands were trembling with fury; at that moment he looked quite capable of seizing hold of the woman in front of him and shaking her. Emily remained entirely unmoved, her eyes fixed on his. Dumbledore and Black were both silent it would have been obvious to anyone looking at Emily Swain and Severus Snape at that moment that they had ceased to be aware of anyone else in the world at that moment, that their argument was between the two of them alone.

"By all that's holy *think what you are doing*" Snape's hand slammed down on the corner of Dumbledore's desk in a fury. "Why do you think all of us are involved in this? Because we have to be it's our world and we don't want a violent dictator in power over it. You have a choice as to whether you involve yourself or not and if you have even the remotest shred of sense in that head of yours, you'll take yourself as far away from here as you possibly can, and never return."

"No, for once you listen to *me*, dammit," she snapped back. "I'm tired of skulking around afraid of something I can't name it's my job to protect people, and I would rather do that than flee like some bloody coward. I'd thank you to remember that you do *not* own this fight, and that you are not the only person alive who has a reason to hate Voldemort!"

*"Oh, you vain little fool,"*Snape rasped and turned away from her in disgust.

Emily stared, white and shaken, at his stubbornly averted back then turned toward Dumbledore. "Sir. If you wish my service for the duration of my original order, it is yours."

Albus, came Snape's piercing whisper. *Albus, tell her she has to go.*

Dumbledore looked from Emily to Snape, a look of gravest deliberation on his face. He seemed to consider his reply for a long, long time. Finally, he appeared to come to a decision.

"I wish it," Dumbledore said. He turned to Emily and made her a very formal small bow, one veteran soldier to another.

"Commander, if you will accept the invitation, we welcome you into the Order of the Phoenix."

End of Part Second

To Be Concluded in

The Knight Errant Chronicles

Part Third: The Hart Subvertant

Part Third: The Hart Subvertant: Prologue Part 1

Chapter 36 of 55

In which we meet Severus Snape, aged nine, and his family...

Prologue: Like a Plant Kept in the Dark

"No one becomes depraved all at once."

Juvenal, *The Satires*

"I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think they will sing to me."

T. S. Eliot, *"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"*

"You dark one, Arch-mother of all lust,

That I flew, that I cursed so often,

Who despite all has always searched for me,

Finally I throw myself to your bosom!

Take me in you, terrible Mother Night,

Lust for death it is to embrace you,

Secretly out of hot abyss there laughs

Presentiment of salvation, of mercy.

Deep in your black eyes there burns

Your dismal love's glimm so painfully,

Your love's, that wholly recognizes me,

Whose cry of death I wholly understand.

Willing, I follow you through blood and fear,

Feeling how you want me back again,

To name me once again your child,

To burn me in a kiss."

Hermann Hesse, *"Devotion"*

One of Severus Snape's earliest memories was of the first time he had ever seen his father strike his mother. He had been perhaps three years old at the time, but Severus had always been one of those people with uncanny recall, who could remember events even from early childhood with vivid clarity and detail.

His mother had been reading the paper at the breakfast table. She read aloud a snippet about how Mr. and Mrs. Abraxas Malfoy had won a prize for their roses. His father then raised his hand and dealt her a heavy blow across the face that sent her thudding to the kitchen floor.

Severus had no way of knowing at that age that his father had learned that morning that he had sustained a great investment loss and had taken his wife's innocent comment as some sort of reproach to his own abilities as a provider. All he knew was that his mother had been hurt and was crying, and that made him cry too. He added his thin, terrified cries to his mother's sobs and his father's shouts. His crying so incensed his father that he picked up the cup of hot tea before him and flung it at the child, who shrieked and covered his face with his arms. *Idiot boy! Ill-answering whalp!*

The teacup hit the tray of his toddler's high chair and shattered, spraying him with china shards and tea. His mother picked herself up, tears and a livid handprint still on her face, and got the boy out of his chair. She ran from the room with her son as her husband turned his irate attentions to the house-elves, who had long since learned to dread the sound of breaking china at the table. She carried him into the nursery, where she changed his clothes, bathed his face with a cool cloth, and hugged him and

soothed his frightened wailing.

*Ssssh, Sevy, sssssh, my sweet boy, mustn't disturb Father,*she crooned, sniffling. He made himself very small, his thin arms clinging tightly around her neck.

He learned very early to keep himself quiet and to move very cautiously and gingerly around his father, lest he provoke one of his unpredictable rages. The years would often find mother and son huddled together for solace, like refugees in a war zone.

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The Orkney Islands, where Severus was born, are an archipelago of about two hundred small islands off the northernmost coast of Caithness, Scotland, where the North Sea meets the Atlantic Ocean. Many of the islands are little more than tiny skerries, inhabited only by the native flora and fauna; no one has ever bothered to catalogue all of them. Perhaps twenty of the largest islands are inhabited, though very sparsely by London standards.

Before Eileen Prince Snape's marriage, Snape Hall had been called Prince Hall, named for her venerable family, who had resided here since before even Salazar Slytherin's and Godric Gryffindor's time. It is an imposing, centuries-old citadel located almost on the western tip of the island of Wyre, just south of Rousay. The Prince patriarchs were once very much the lords of central Orkney, who owned most of the local farmland and fishing docks, and rented land and dock space out to tenant farmers and fishermen. The wild isle of Wyre was their home, and the eldritch Wizarding village of Nornsay grew up from the descendants of their tenant families.

The Orcadian poet George Mackay Brown once wrote, *"The Orkney imagination is haunted by time,"* and some would have contended that the land had been forgotten by time. It is a wild, isolated place, always prey to the vagaries of the sea; to perpetual storms in winter, treacherous currents, and fogs that sometimes cover entire islands and make navigation impossible without magic. The main industries are fishing, shellfish trapping, sheep ranching, flax farming, and landowning, and have been since time immemorial. The latitude is far enough north that the sun sometimes does not set until eleven p.m. or midnight in summer, and on winter days there are sometimes only a few hours of sunlight, or no sun at all.

The long, bitterly cold winter nights drive Orcadians indoors together around fires, to pass the long dark in singing and telling tales; this tradition has given rise to a rich local folklore. A skilled storyteller can still hold a pub full of listeners spellbound with a ghost story or supernatural romance. Some storytellers take as their subject the lives of the Finmen, black-clad sorcerers who lived beneath the sea, or the Selkies, the seal people. Every year, crowds of Selkies still summer on the craggy rock beaches of Wyre, Rousay, and any number of other islands, and now and then they fill the night with haunting, keening songs.

On other nights, one can hear tales of the Fair Folk, like Mansie o' Kierfa and his Faery bride, who bore him three daughters and brought him great prosperity. Not so fortunate was Davie o' Kirkwaa, who cursed his Faery bride as Satan's own because she couldn't get the words of the *Our Father* right; the reviled wife vanished from him forever, and famine fell upon his house. The Fae once were common in the deep wood, the wild places; they were said to live on green, fertile islands that now and then briefly appeared out of the leaden Orcadian mists, always to fade into obscurity again. As late as 1701, the Reverend John Brand wrote in a description of Orkney: "Evil spirits also called Fairies are frequently seen in several of the isles, dancing and making merry, and sometimes seen in Armour."

The Selkies still come every summer, but there are no Faeries in Orkney now. They started to leave centuries ago, when the Plague came.

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Even when Severus was a very small child, everyone remarked on his quiet, serious demeanour, his inquisitiveness, and his startlingly black eyes he was the sort of child superstitious village women called an old soul, an elderly changeling in the shape of a boy, left behind by the Faeries after they stole the real child away. He didn't mean to scowl so much, but when something interested him, he couldn't help but scrutinise it with all of his attention, his black brows drawing together, his eyes glinting.

And the things he noticed were sometimes startling. Once while Eileen Snape was doing her shopping in Nornsay Village, holding her five-year-old son by the hand, she turned back to him to notice that he was holding an absolutely enormous iridescent beetle very lightly in his other hand. Another child might have accidentally crushed such a creature or been repulsed by it, but Severus was studying it closely, fascinated.

While Mrs. Snape found her son's quirks charming, indicative of healthy curiosity and a precocious intellect, her husband found them annoying in the extreme. *Surly, sullen, who are you frowning at!* his father would bark at him. These criticisms always surprised Severus he hadn't meant to be impolite; he had simply been so deep into his thoughts that he was barely aware that anyone else was in the room. He was just *thinking.*

He had inherited his mother's tall, thin, insubstantial build, her transparent white complexion, her long-fingered, elegant hands, and her almost preternaturally expressive black eyes, combined with his father's bristling black brows and prominent hooked Roman nose. By the time he was six, he had something of his father's permanent scowl as well.

The other families in their social strata usually hired tutors to educate their children Severus's cousin Lucius had had the best tutors available since he was four years old. The Snapes' budget for their son's education was not quite as vast as the Malfoys', unfortunately, so the task of Severus's primary-school education fell to his mother. Luckily, Eileen Snape had a knack for teaching, and her son was an extremely bright child. Starting when he was five, she would bring him into her cosy little book-lined sitting room, which now also doubled as a schoolroom. There she taught him the English alphabet in a day, the French alphabet the next, and the Latin alphabet the next. Severus would later be surprised to learn that other children considered this sort of thing to be work to him, their school sessions were the most fascinating sort of play.

By the time he learned to read, he had long been wondering what was contained within the books that held his mother so enthralled and was impatient to begin exploring them for himself. Reading itself was quickly mastered, just a stepping stone to a previously unknowable world. He also liked having the undivided attention of his pretty, smiling mother all day, hearing her exclamations of surprise and delight when he quickly and flawlessly managed some academic assignment she had devised. She was proud of his cleverness, and he glowed under her approval.

Once he learned how to read, the riches of his mother's library seemed vast. He read everything he could get his hands on, with an enthusiasm that delighted his mother. Eileen Snape was a passionate bibliophile, who could probably have spent most of her life happily curled up in an armchair or in her garden with a good novel, poetry collection, or volume of history, and she was elated to see the same tendency emerging in her son. The two of them would spend many happy hours ensconced on the sitting room sofa together, quietly turning pages.

Occasionally she read aloud to him, or he read to her. She had a special love for a poet named John Keats, who she told him had tragically died in his twenties, but had left behind the most beautiful poetry ever. Now and then he would pick up Keats's *Collected Poems* and read aloud to her, stumbling less and less over the complicated verses as he got older, *Lamia* and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and *Ode to a Nightingale* all just to watch her eyes shining and dreaming. "I love those poems even more, after hearing the way you read them," she would say. "You have such a lovely voice."

She never put any restrictions on what he could read, never hid away any volumes for fear they would frighten or disturb him. He had by the time he was eleven spent a month enthralled with Greek mythology, with all its battles and heroes and magical seductresses and infidelities and flesh-ripping maenads. He disliked Zeus intensely, especially over the way he treated the faithful Alcmene; but the protean Dionysus's adventures fascinated him. He wasn't at all impressed with Hercules or Jason, but he liked Perseus, Odysseus, and Theseus tremendously. He thought Cassandra, Ariadne, Orestes, Orpheus and especially Daedalus had all gotten rather raw deals, felt an oblique sympathy for both the abducted Persephone, and for Hades for wanting to steal her away for himself. He even had an unformed, childish sort of crush on Atalanta and later Circe, but thought Helen of Troy to be quite overrated. Medea and Clytemnestra, however, just flat-out scared him.

And then he read that the Vikings and Northmen had been as much an influence in settling Orkney as the Scots themselves and became fascinated with Norse mythology, reading all he could find Odin, Loki, and the World Tree Yggrasil. His next passion was for the Wizarding world's chronicles of the sacred Merlin, the greatest ward ever born in Britain and the first teacher of magic.

During one of the endless Orcadian winter nights, he found volumes entitled *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Fall of the House of Usher,* and *The Complete Tales of Edgar Allan*

Poe which kept him up for any number of nights, first with reading, and then because he couldn't bring himself to put out the lamp. Like so many imaginative children, he was always scaring himself with his own fancies while alone in the endless dark.

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objective was not to get as many of one's pieces into spectacular confrontations as possible, but to win the game in as few mathematically streamlined moves as possible. These were serious scholars of the game; they studied published theories and treatises of chess, and they could have debated you on the pros and cons of game openings, mid-game and endgame strategies forever.

There were other children his own age living in the village, who he often saw in the streets when he and his mother did their shopping, but he had no friends among them. In his father's opinion, the villagers were all riffraff, and some of them were Mudbloods or even Squibs, and he wasn't going to have his son making friends with his tenants' children and the whalps of common labourers and fishermen. But his father didn't object to his son's interest in chess, or didn't care enough to stop him playing, and Severus enjoyed the intricacies of the game and the company of these wise, thoughtful adults more than he longed to wrestle and throw a ball with the boys his own age anyway. They would often sit in companionable silence together, which he liked, and now and then they would tell him about their work, and their families, and ask him what he was studying. Everyone knew *the beuy* was a tremendous bookworm and often asked about what he was reading. Now and then they asked after his mother and how she was getting along.

But they never asked about his father. The master of Prince, ahem, *Snape* Hall was already known all too well to the denizens of Nornsay Village.

Severus joined Margaret at one of the small pub tables, set with a utilitarian chess set of carved wood, she behind the dark oak pieces, and he behind the blond pine. He played his favourite opening, the queen's gambit decline, moving his queen's pawn two spaces out. She countered with the identical move, stopping his queen's pawn's forward progress and initiating the Tarrasch Defence. And from there, the game was on.

He lost to Margaret as usual, but this time he went down fighting, till they both had only their castles and a knight each. She managed to pin down his king and checkmate him at last, but only with an effort. "Hard fought, me beuy, good game," she said, shaking his hand. He moved on to a game with Erlendsson, who as usual had him in checkmate in eight moves, but who took the better part of an hour to instruct him in all the finer points of the Benoni Defence.

Around noontime his stomach rumbled, and the other players began to order ploughman's lunches and kidney pies. Severus had, as usual, no pocket money for such, so he finished his game with Erlendsson, nodded a few silent goodbyes, and headed back up the hill for lunch.

As he made his way toward the back door, he passed the drawing room window and heard the sound of shouting, of a chair going over. His mother's voice raised in shrill pleading; a man's voice making thunderous accusations. Then, the sound of a hand glancing off flesh, a terrified gasp, and then crying.

Father was home from London.

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His parents' disagreement went on for some time or rather, his father's long list of his mother's various shortcomings went on for some time. There seemed to be nowhere in the house where Severus could not hear his father's angry voice booming.

"I left you plenty, *plenty* of money to run this house, and feed yourself and that boy and those good-for-nothing house-elves. And now, I return to *bills* from a carpenter? What did you think you were doing? Did I *tell you* to get all the windows in the dining room re-caulked?"

Then she would make some protest, very softly, and he would roar her down again.

"Don't give me any nonsense about water leaking those floors aren't damaged! There were no leaks when I left! Your extravagance will bring us all to ruin, you worthless baggage! A bloody ape would manage better than you do! I spend all my time trying to provide for you and that coddled sissy you call your son, and this is how I'm *repaid*?"

Finally, she would say nothing more, but his voice would rage long after hers had given up.

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The dining room windows had begun leaking dreadfully in a torrential late spring rainstorm a month after Severus's father had departed for another of his business trips to London; for days his mother had paced back and forth helping the house-elves to sop up the water before finally calling the carpenters. The situation became a choice between spending the money on getting the windows re-sealed, or spending the money to get the windows re-sealed and to get the water-damaged floors replaced, so after a great deal of hand-wringing, she had opted for the repairs to the windows. She had only had the ready money to pay for part of the repairs, so she had stoically accepted her husband's anger at receiving the bill, and waited him out, bending under his onslaught like a rose tree in a hurricane.

There had been a time when Severus was younger, when he had tried to defend his mother from his father's violent outbursts that attempt had gotten him thrown down the front staircase to a nasty concussion, and left her with a swollen jaw and chipped teeth. She had long since begged him not to interfere, saying it only made matters worse. "Some of it is my fault, darling, truly it is. I know he's got a temper, I shouldn't provoke him. You just let Mother and Father talk. It isn't your problem." Now, thwarted, all he could do was listen and clench his fists with impotent rage.

Finally, when her husband grew tired and took himself off to his bedroom to berate the house-elves for their shoddy housekeeping, Severus crept into the drawing room, where Eileen was slumped in an armchair.

"You weren't extravagant," he said, putting his arm around her thin shoulders. "We've lived on soup and grown our own vegetables all summer. You had to get the windows fixed, they were all leaking. The floor was getting wet."

"No, no, I spent too much," his mother said. "I should have gotten a better price on the repairs. I went to an expensive carpenter; he overcharged. But we can't haggle. It's just... we can't." *It's beneath us, because we're supposed to be rich*, was the unspoken subtext.

"He just didn't give you enough money. It's not your fault the house is old," Severus told her quietly. "He's never here. He doesn't know how things are."

"Oh, don't frown so much, silly," his mother said, hugging him. "He'll calm down. Everything will be all right."

But that night, as he passed her bedroom door, he heard her crying, and knew that nothing was all right.

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Tobias Snape did not calm down, as his wife had predicted.

He had come home with the news that they were to have guests, important guests, relatives from Wiltshire; Severus intuited that his father was in business with them somehow. These important guests would be coming in two weeks, and now nothing about the house, his wife, or his son was good enough for Master Tobias. He would without warning go into tirades about how the rugs were shabby, the wainscoting dingy, and the upholstery on the sofas old, as though his wife, son, and house-elves were somehow responsible for the way that material things deteriorated. Eileen's dresses weren't smart enough, and a she-otter would probably preside at his table with more grace. The food was not fit for pigs, and her son was a sullen little half-witted sissy, misbegotten from the first. The house-elves were busy all day and all night, and seemed resigned to repairing a lot of broken china.

Then after two weeks of frantic tidying, scrubbing, mending, and shopping on Eileen's, Severus's, and the house-elves' part (Snape Senior of course being too busy berating and finding fault to help himself) the day finally came when their guests, the Malfoys, would arrive for their fortnight's visit. The whole Snape family had gotten up early that day and put on their best at-home clothes. Severus's mother came into his room as he was standing in front of the mirror working on his shoulder-length black hair, and like usual, she had watched him scowl and tug with the comb for a second, then very gently had taken it from him and combed his hair out for him. His hair was very thick and unruly, and only she could gently coax all the tangles out without yanking.

Mr. and Mrs. Abraxas Malfoy arrived in grand style. With them they brought their almost-fifteen-year-old son, Lucius, who would soon be starting his fifth year at Hogwarts, five house-elves in black pillowcase uniforms, and a mountain of trunks, hampers, and boxes.

Besides his own mother, Severus thought he had never seen anyone as beautiful as Abraxas and Tamora Malfoy and their son Lucius. Each of them would have been impressive alone, but as a group, they were dazzling. Abraxas Malfoy was stunningly blond, with a face and profile like a classical Greek sculpture. His wife Tamora was a pale blonde as well, with a face like a petulant, pink-cheeked china doll, and wore extremely smart travelling robes of maroon velvet. Young Lucius was a blond, grey-eyed Botticelli angel in a black brocade vest and frock coat.

The Snapes and Malfoys took afternoon high tea on the balcony overlooking the cliffs while the house-elves took the trunks upstairs to the guest rooms. Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Snape talked about business, and their wives tried to look raptly interested. Severus didn't mind sitting still for a bit he always had something to think about, and under no circumstances would he ever have failed to appreciate Earl Grey tea, sandwiches on home-baked bread, and a poached egg on toast. Lucius Malfoy, however, looked bored out of his mind.

After the meal, their fathers went off to the great drawing room to talk, the ladies sat in Eileen's garden, politely playing cards, and the two boys were told to go off and quietly amuse themselves.

"Er... want to go down to the beach?" Severus asked shyly. "There's Selkies, and tidepools." Lucius Malfoy nodded his assent languidly, as though the beach should know how honoured it was to host such a personage as himself.

"What do you *do* around here?" the blond boy asked after they had walked on the beach for half an hour. Severus had tried to entertain his cousin by pointing out all the animals in the tidepools, sea urchins and starfish and anemones and the occasional seahorse, but hadn't been able to interest him for long. "There's nothing for miles but that fusty little village, and it's dull as tombs."

"There's tons to do," Severus scoffed. "There's books in the library, and there's the beach and the woods. I play chess down in the village. And Mother and I work in the garden."

"You don't have house-elves to do that?" Lucius drawled.

"And there's storytelling at the village library and at the pub," Severus persisted, feeling suddenly as though the worth of all the world he knew was being questioned. "And the Selkies all come to the beaches in the summer, and they sing, all day and night. I haven't figured out what they're singing yet, but it sounds like words, and I'm reading all I can about them. Mother says they don't really shapechange into people like the stories say, but they have their own sort of magic. Mother says they even have their own seal gods."

Lucius sneered. "Mother says this, Mother says that. Don't you ever talk to anyone besides your mother?"

"Well, I live with her," Severus said, quite sensibly. "Who else is there to talk to, the house-elves?"

"Mama's pet," Lucius said, with a derisive laugh. "You're a little Mudblood pouf."

Severus scowled. "Am not."

"You talk funny. Everyone here talks funny. I'm bored." Lucius, he would later learn, could be bored anywhere, in even the most breathtaking and exotic of locales.

Lucius's and later his classmates' derision at his Orcadian accent got far under Severus's skin, and he would from that year on embark upon a determined self-study campaign to completely eliminate his Orcadian burr from his voice. By his seventh year at Hogwarts, his diction was more classically English than Lucius's or any of the Malfoys'; by the time he began addressing his classes, his flawless pronunciation and resonant speaking voice would have done any Cambridge don proud. But for now, he was a nine-year-old boy who felt shabby and provincial next to his smooth, privileged cousin. He fell sullenly silent, tagging along at Lucius's shoulder as the older boy sulked dramatically about the seashore, throwing rocks in pools and clearly fancying himself as much an exile as any prisoner in the Chateau d'If.

"Want to see something?" Lucius called to him after a few minutes. He reached into his coat, and came out with a wand of some polished, very dark wood. "Come here, I'll show you a bit of magic I just learned."

"Can I see your wand?" Severus asked, holding out his hand. He was fascinated by the way his mother did magic with her wand, but was a few years short of being able to own one himself. As such, the infrequent chances he got to try out someone else's wand were extremely interesting to him.

"Ebony with a core of dragon's heartstring, ten and a half inches," Lucius said proudly, holding it up in front of him. "The wood was really rare it cost a whole handful of Galleons."

After Severus had duly admired his wand, Lucius turned toward one of the rock pools. "Come on, look at this." He reached into the pool and picked up a spiny sea urchin, which he then put on a rock. "See, look " he pointed his wand at the urchin, and intoned *"Crucio!"*

Sea urchins are not very expressive creatures, having no eyes or faces or articulated limbs with which to show anguish when they feel it, but something about the way the urchin trembled and waved its spines spastically in the air looked painful. "What are you doing?" Severus asked sharply.

Lucius chuckled. "Look at it twitch, stupid thing... "

Severus scowled. "Come on, stop it," he said, nudging his cousin's elbow.

Lucius lowered his wand, looking annoyed that his cousin had not properly appreciated the show he had put on. "It's too small, so you can't really see what's going on." He pointed his wand at the urchin again, and intoned *"Engorgio!"* blowing the urchin up to the size of a round, spiny pillow. Then he intoned *"Crucio!"* again and watched the creature's agony, smiling obliquely to himself.

"What are you doing to it?" Severus craned over his cousin's shoulder. "That looks like it really *hurts*."

"It's supposed to," Lucius chuckled. "The worst pain you can imagine... " It certainly looked like it was the worst pain imaginable; the urchin was writhing in voiceless, eyeless agony.

"This is weird stop it," Severus said uncomfortably. He jostled his cousin's elbow, moving his wand point away from the urchin, and the creature's spastic shaking stopped.

Lucius looked witheringly at him. "You're no fun," he groused.

"*You're* the one who's no fun the only magic you know is how to torture*sea urchins*," Severus snapped back. "Put it back to its right size, and put it back in the water."

"Fine," Lucius snarled, out of the corner of his mouth. He pointed his wand at the urchin "*Reducio*," and it shrank back to its original size. It lay there on the rock, spines waving feebly, seemingly stunned.

Then Lucius threw Severus a challenging look, smirking "Want to see something brilliant?" he asked.

"All right, what?"

Lucius pointed his wand at the urchin again *"Incendio!"* he cried and a gush of flame spewed from his wand and engulfed it. Severus ran forward, but by the time he got up to it, the urchin was little more than a blasted ball of ooze.

"*Uhhhhh,*" he said, holding his nose. "That's not brilliant, that's just *grotty.* You're the grottiest wizard I ever saw."

Lucius just laughed and shrugged.

"Yeah, all right. Do your parents know you like to torture things and set them on fire?" Severus asked scornfully.

"You're not going to tell them, are you?" Lucius asked, with a confidential little smile. "Come on, I'll let you use my wand for a little bit."

Severus thought about it, then held out his hand. "All right."

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Despite his father's discontented rages before the visit, his meetings with Mr. Malfoy appeared to have gone well, because Abraxas Malfoy invited the Snapes down for a reciprocal fortnight at Malfeasant, his family seat in Wiltshire. He extended this invitation during a sumptuous dinner in the grand ballroom on the last evening the Malfoys spent at Snape Hall. Severus's father ushered their guests into the ballroom with an unconcerned, genial air, as though he had any number of grand ballrooms in his waistcoat pocket that he could whip out for his guests' amusement at any time; meanwhile, his wife, son, and house-elves, who had been up much of the night dusting the chandeliers and using *Scourgify* spells on the floor and mouldings, were so tired they were pinching themselves under the table to stay politely alert during dinner.

"So what do you say, Eileen? And Master Severus? It's so pleasant to have company," Mr. Malfoy said to his host's family.

"Yes, do come. It's so nice for Lucius to have other children to play with, and the boys seem to get on so well," Mrs. Malfoy said.

"I should *love* to have a holiday," Eileen said brightly.

"All right," Severus said, shrugging. His father pinched him, hard, under the table, and Severus amended his response to, "*YES*, thank you *very* much."

Mrs. Malfoy had no doubt gotten the impression that the boys got on well from the way they talked and went about together. Not only that, but most other children Lucius knew almost invariably came back from spending time with him complaining about how he had teased, bullied, or frightened them, and young Severus never did. To Mrs. Malfoy, this meant that Severus wasn't a mollycoddled sissy like so many other children, just further proof of his good breeding.

That first meeting with Lucius had set a strange precedent Severus couldn't have said he liked his cousin; in truth, he thought he was pretty bloody horrid, always practicing violent magics and boasting of elaborately sadistic pranks he'd played at school. But nonetheless, Lucius had a weird sort of fascination and glamour about him. The way his cousin confided all sorts of dark and titillating secrets to him, and the way this very rich and poised young heir always seemed to want him around was gratifying. Additionally, Lucius wasn't at all the sort to go carrying tales to the adults when Severus got into mischief; more than likely, Lucius had already done something so much worse that he had no reason to care whatsoever about his cousin's small lapses of character. His parents' blandishments to the contrary, he never had to be on his best behaviour around Lucius indeed, Lucius liked to egg Severus on in worse and worse exploits; the more Severus misbehaved, the better his cousin seemed to like him. Severus didn't like Lucius at all, but by the end of that first visit, somehow they had become close confidantes and co-conspirators.

Yes, truthfully, by the time the Malfoys said good-bye the next morning, he was a little afraid of his cousin, but he wouldn't have dreamed of trying to find some way out of visiting him. To him, the decision was clear; the Malfoys were offering him and his mother their first chance to visit somewhere other than Orkney, and she desperately wanted to go. No matter how horribly Lucius had tortured and killed the sea urchin, it was an animal, barely more than a plant, really and she was his mother. There was no comparing the two disgust and indignation over the one had to be overruled by the other's passionate desire to finally be able to enjoy herself.

And after all, Lucius hadn't done anything to him.

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It seemed that no sooner than the door had closed behind their guests that Tobias Snape had found a new round of complaints to rant about. They were going for a visit in late August how could his wife and son possibly expect to look respectable in Wiltshire, in those *clothes*? Their wardrobes might be all right for Orkney, but in *Wiltshire*, one had to look smart. Why did they look so countrified and uncouth? Did they want to disgrace him? What was his wife spending the money he gave her on? Then there was more shouting, and more furniture going over, more accusations of extravagance and disrespect, and more slaps when she tried to speak in her own defence.

Severus knew that when his mother had a bit of money for herself, she bought books, not dresses and jewels. She was more than happy to spend her days in demure little house gowns and robes, her wealth of thick, shining black hair loose to down past her waist, and barefoot but she *had* to have something to read. Now that they were going to Wiltshire, the elder Snape seemed to have visions of a social lioness, a poised, fashionable beauty in opulent gowns and heirloom jewels on his arm, but where she was supposed to get such gowns and jewels was undefined. He only told her she was shabby and dowdy and not fit to be seen, but offered her no solution to this shortcoming, which led to more muffled sobbing behind her sitting room door.

But in the middle of July, a few days after Eileen began appearing at breakfast in long buttoned sleeves in the height of the summer's heat, a stately great horned owl delivered a letter on heavy parchment, sealed with an elaborate black wax seal. The sight of that letter seemed to fill her with fear and apprehension, even before she had so much as opened it.

She broke the seal and read the letter with grave deliberation, then turned to her son. "Severus... on Wednesday morning I want you to get up early, take a bath, and put on your best clothes," she said quietly. "We're going to visit your Grandmother Prince in London."

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Severus's mother had told him once or twice that his maternal grandmother, Octavia Prince, was still living, but she and his father had many differences of opinion and were not close. As it was, Severus had never met her. He knew that she was a widow, and was dimly aware that she substantially inconvenienced his father by tending to her own business affairs with what Tobias Snape called "an iron fist," and had forever incurred his father's wrath by refusing his generous offer to manage her finances for her. His father could occasionally be heard to describe Grandmother Prince in even less flattering terms, but he usually remembered not to refer to her as a *selfish, tightfisted, suspicious old battle-axe* in front of his son.

Ever since the invitation had arrived, Severus could see that his mother was dreading this afternoon tea for some reason. On the morning of the visit itself, she reminded him to wash behind his ears and clean his nails much more brusquely than usual, and when he tried to get the comb through his hair, she had taken the comb away and smoothed his hair in the back less gently than usual. He had no way of knowing, at nine years old, that Eileen had always been a painfully shy young girl, who often saw her worldly, clever mother as everything that she herself was not. He couldn't have known that Octavia had expressed misgivings to Eileen following his father's proposal to her, worried about Eileen's extreme youth and the sincerity of Tobias Snape's affections, but her daughter had come away from this believing her mother really objected to her beloved because he was a Muggle. No one had ever told Severus that his mother had been a sheltered child bride of eighteen, who had rather impetuously married his father while imagining herself to be the heroine of a *Romeo and Juliet* sort of love affair. He also had no way of knowing that his father had begun their star-cross'd life together by frequently belittling his new wife, and comparing her unfavourably with his mother-in-law's style and self-assurance, so that Octavia's mere existence had become a reproach to her, a reminder that she would forever be judged lacking.

But he was only a boy, and he only knew that his mother was facing something that frightened her. When she took him down to the end of the path to past the secure area around Snape Hall, and gathered him against her side so as to Apparate the two of them together, he could feel her heart beating fast.

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His mother retreated behind the painted screen in the corner, and they heard her opening the box. "Oh my," she gasped. "Mother... this just goes on over my head, right?"

"Yes, dear."

There was some rustling and slithering of fabrics, and a moment later his mother appeared from behind the screen, dressed in a gown of pleated green silk like the robe of a Greek sea goddess, over which was thrown a fluid mantle of black cut velvet almost as lustrous as her long black hair.

Severus's eyes widened. "You look *nice*, Mother," he said probably the most gallant compliment in his nine-year-old repertoire.

"Thank you, dear," his mother said gratefully and made her way over to one of the looking glasses. While Eileen was fluent in English, French, and Latin, and knew the poetry and fiction of the previous century with the fervour of a thwarted Classics scholar, she knew little of fashion. As such, she had no way of knowing that the Delphos gown and silk velvet mantle Octavia had brought out were the original creations of a fabled couturier of the early twentieth century named Mariano Fortuny, and that the timelessly elegant Art Nouveau ensemble she now wore would have fetched tens of thousands of Muggle pounds at auction in London.

"Oh, Eileen, you're *stunning*. Just a picture." Octavia gathered her hands to her breast and sighed.

Eileen smiled faintly. "You know I don't dress up much... this is overwhelming."

"Believe me, my dear, at Malfeasant you'll be glad to have a few nice gowns. Tamora Malfoy is an excellent hostess, but believe me, she'll think that your best dress is none too good to appear at her table."

Now, Octavia said, all Eileen needed were a few jewels. She took the three long strands of cream-white pearls from her own bosom and put them around her daughter's neck.

"There you are you can wear those every day and they'll look rich with anything. And perhaps a chain, for the evening parties." She opened the strongbox safe and brought out a velvet jewel case. Severus craned over his grandmother's shoulder, curious. Inside the box was a long, diamond-studded chain that would hang nearly to the wearer's waist, made up of large, architectural links of engraved platinum.

"I look rather like a little girl playing dress-up, don't I. You always want to do me up like a peacock." Eileen was looking at herself in the mirror as though at an exotic, frightening stranger.

"Nonsense, my dear, with all that beautiful hair and that complexion and those hands, you'll be a beauty at a hundred. Isn't your mother lovely, Severus?"

He just nodded, looking at his mother with eyes full of boyish admiration. He went to her side, stroked the velvet of her mantle with reverent fingers, and gave her a little, encouraging smile.

"Oh my, such a pair a princess and her young heir apparent," his grandmother sighed. "If I could, I'd commission Gainsborough himself to make a mother-and-son canvas of the two of you."

Then Octavia offered her daughter the loan of a few more things, robes of taffeta and satin, frocks and coats with labels reading Worth and Molyneux and Vionnet and Balenciaga; and a summer cloak of impossibly supple velvet with delicate silver embroidery on the inside of the hood, which she said was the work of Faery weavers, a rare thing in their world. "Yes, I know it's all just old frippery, but I'd imagine it would all like to go for one last huzzah, don't you think? And you would look so well in all of it, Eileen. Ah, what I'd give to be young and slim again."

Eileen was, in her own passive sort of way, far too proud to accept an outright gift, but with the pressure her husband was exerting upon her before this visit, she couldn't resist accepting such a propitiously timed loan. "Well... if you don't mind, Mother. I promise I won't let anything get dirty or torn... "

"Of course you won't. I wouldn't expect anything less of you."

Severus followed his mother and grandmother around the dressing room as these rich, fetching creations were packed up and stowed into trunks he had never seen anything like these sort of clothes before. The pleated silk gown his mother was wearing even had its own box where it was rolled up and stored for travel when they arrived at Malfeasant, it would be ready to shake out and put on, with no pressing necessary. This was part of why Fortuny gowns were once so popular with fashionable ladies who travelled often, his grandmother explained.

He ran curious fingertips over the sleeve of the green gown his mother wore. The fabric was so soft and slippery that it felt almost like liquid under his fingertips, and he liked the way it set off her long-fingered, tapering hand Severus always thought his mother had the prettiest hands of any lady in the world. But in doing so, he inadvertently uncovered something the imprint of five fingers bruised into her wrist. The marks were a fresh purple, as richly hued as the silk of her gown. She glanced at him, and saw him staring.

"Severus... why don't you go sit down over there, where we won't be stepping on you," she said, quickly twitching her sleeve back down.

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As it were, with Octavia's generosity, the Snapes arrived for their fortnight at the Malfoys' with a respectable pile of luggage and their two house-elves. The usual bluff brusqueness of his father's manner didn't quite hide his nervousness, and his mother, always a pale woman, was so much paler than usual that she looked as though she might faint. Severus stuck close to his mother's side, quiet and self-contained, his eyes taking in everything.

Malfeasant was very big and very impressive to him. While not quite as large as Snape Hall, the Malfoy family citadel was lavishly furnished and very well maintained there were no ruined bits of this castle, no holes worn in its stone walls from a thousand years of rain. The elaborate diamond-paned windows looked to him like the windows of a cathedral, and the huge oil paintings in the grand front corridor and everywhere in the grand hall made it seem like a museum. Severus looked curiously around at everything until his father pinched him and told him to stop goggling like a codfish.

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Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy received them in a giant front hall with lots of impressive-looking grown-ups Severus didn't know. The men were standing around talking in very important voices, and the wives were sitting around talking in little, demure voices. Lucius was there too, in very new black robes and a silk foulard waistcoat, talking to a very blonde and prissy girl of about his own age.

After greeting their hosts, Eileen went up to a tiny, prematurely white-haired woman in sumptuous black silk mourning robes, who was sitting in a large armchair with the air of a queen surveying her subjects. She bent down to kiss this lady's cheek and press her hand in greeting, then motioned for her son to join them.

"This is your Aunt Druella Black, dear," his mother said, with an anxious little smile. "Auntie, this is my son, Severus."

"How do you do," Aunt Druella said, and languidly deigned to return his shy handshake. She turned back to Eileen and nodded in the direction of Lucius and the prim blonde girl "Abraxas's boy just won't leave my Narcissa alone." Severus couldn't tell whether she disapproved of his cousin's attention to her daughter, or not.

"Yes, he seems very fond of her," Eileen said mildly.

"So much that she can't get a word in edgewise," the lady muttered. She turned toward Severus with an approving smile "Not like your boy here at all, is he. He seems an obedient young one, one who knows his place."

"Yes, he's a very good boy," Eileen said warmly, her arm tightening around her son's shoulders. "Run along now, darling, let Mother talk to your auntie," she said, smiling at him and tenderly tucking a wayward strand of black hair behind his ear. He smiled back at her.

Then his mother took the seat beside Aunt Druella, and his father joined the men, talking in his own important tones, and Severus was left to his own devices. He found a big, high-backed armchair off to one side and climbed into it. The house-elves immediately brought him a cup of tea, and he sipped it quietly, looking around at everyone and everything as the conversations went on all around him. After spending most of his nine years trying not to draw his father's direly critical eye in his direction, Severus had by then cultivated an instinctive knack for being invisible to others, for letting them talk around him as though he wasn't there. The grown-ups around him certainly acted as though the silent, serious young boy wasn't there; they walked around him talking about business and politics quite freely. Had Severus been old enough to make sense of what was being discussed, he might have picked up on some very important information indeed, about a certain hostile acquisition of the Cleansweep Broomstick company being planned, but he was too young as yet to understand.

He surveyed the room around him and the assembled company. The grand entrance hall at Malfeasant was beautiful and impressive, but Severus decided he didn't like it quite as much as Grandmother Prince's London penthouse unlike her massive, overstuffed oak armchairs, the furniture here seemed to have been chosen to look impressive, rather than be comfortable to sit in. The leather-bound books here were all one size and all had the same monogrammed binding, and looked as though they had been ordered in a decorative set from the publisher's, unlike Grandmother Prince's varying sizes and shapes that looked as though they had been collected one by one during trips to bookshops in Diagon Alley and Charing Cross. There was a massive curio cabinet that held crystal vases of varying sizes and shapes none of which had flowers in them. His mother looked nervous and her eyes kept going to the bookshelf Severus could tell she would rather be browsing through the books than talking to people. And Lucius really fancied that blonde girl. Severus thought his cousin looked even more puffed-up and full of himself, so obvious was it that Lucius wanted to show off for her.

Dinner was a very formal occasion that night, at a long table lined with those same impressive-looking grown-ups in even more impressive clothes. Severus thought his mother was the prettiest lady there by far, in the green frock and velvet mantle she had gotten at Grandmother Prince's; with her slim figure and pale, fresh, translucent skin, she made all the other ladies with their corseted waists and rouged cheeks look stiff and overdone. Again, he and his mother stuck very close to each other's sides for moral support; it would have been hard to say which of the two was more demure and quiet. Severus was glad to have roast goose on his plate, which he had never tasted before, and even more glad to be seated out of his father's pinching distance.

Severus's upbringing under the iron eye of Tobias, who believed that children should be seen and not heard at table, and who was liable to throw china when provoked, made for a silent, watchful, infinitely deferential manner in the company of adults. As he, his cousin Lucius, and that pretty blonde girl were the only young people present, his impeccable deportment could not help but starkly contrast with the sometimes petulance of his cousin, now still trying to show off for the pretty girl across the table from him.

"Eileen, where on Earth did you manage to find an original Delphos robe?" Tamora Malfoy asked during the entree, sounding impressed. "I've never seen one outside of a museum."

"Oh... it's been in the family for a long time," Eileen murmured, and Tamora nodded approvingly. While new clothes from the best bespoke Wizarding shops in London would have been ideal, finely made old things were still respectable, given this group's reverence for history and assets that lasted a long time. His grandmother's couture hand-me-downs were looking to have been a considerate gesture indeed there were those who would have said that Lucius Malfoy with his Fauntleroy blond hair and silk waistcoats looked dandyish next to the lean, black-and-white austerity of his young cousin.

"So, my young Master Snape, your father tells me you've been studying Latin," one of the gentlemen said. *"Ave, quomodo tibi est?"*

Severus answered immediately returning the man's greeting, and inquiring after his health in turn *"Mihi bene est, et tibi?"*

The man paused a moment, then replied in kind *"Mihi optime est."*

Oh, good, this fellow seemed a kindred spirit Severus was perfectly content to sit there and speak Latin for awhile, like he sometimes did with his mother at home. He asked the man if he ate goose often at home, though it took him a moment to remember the word for "goose" *anser*, not *anas*, that was duck. "*Nonne bona cena? Numquam anserem assatum cenavi, cenavistine tu?"*

This classical conversation went on for a few minutes, until the fellow's attention began to drift, and he put Severus off with a distracted, "Yes, a clever lad indeed," and then began talking to someone else.

It seemed to Severus that he had been too forward and the fellow had lost interest in their chat it never occurred to him that his questions had exceeded the other fellow's somewhat rudimentary mastery of that ancient tongue. At any rate, he fell silent again, and remained silent for the rest of the meal.

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That self-protecting silence became Severus's characteristic behaviour as their fortnight's visit continued. Most other children would have become bored and begun acting sulky, but Severus was just glad to have a nice room with no holes in the screens and no flies landing on him as he tried to sleep, a comfortable bed, good meals, and lots of things to look at and think about. His father had fewer opportunities to pinch him or clout him, or seize him by the ear or collar, or throw things at him here, and he was grateful for that, too. Boredom was a small price to pay for increased safety, and he endured it willingly.

In all, he was exceedingly quiet and demure, he imposed on no one, he was impressed by everything and grateful for everything in short, Severus made a very good impression indeed, when people remembered to think of him; and his Aunt Tamora and Aunt Druella especially were holding him up as an example of a well-brought-up son by the end of the visit.

But as they praised his behaviour, no one seemed to notice that Severus had barely spoken a word to anyone since he arrived. This was curious indeed to him it seemed that the less he talked, the better his father and his parents' friends liked him.

Part Third: The Hart Subvertant: Prologue Part 2

Chapter 37 of 55

In which Severus Snape, aged not-quite-eleven, receives his Hogwarts letter, and what came of it…he makes the acquaintance of his cousins Lucius Malfoy and Narcissa Black, and four fellow first-years who will one day call themselves the Marauders, and develops a crush on a Slytherin girl named Bellatrix Black…

Prologue: Like a Plant Kept in the Dark, Part 2

The evening the Snape family returned from their summer visit at Malfeasant was one of Tobias Snape's bad nights. His son knew without being told that something had not gone the way he had wanted in his business dealings with Abraxas Malfoy.

Perhaps he might have been a happier man, under different circumstances. Perhaps if he hadn't lost so much money, perhaps if he hadn't been a Muggle trying to establish himself financially among wizards, perhaps if the nights in Orkney weren't so long and gloomy, if Snape Hall hadn't required so much maintenance, if he could have accepted that he was merely a small businessman and not a great business tycoon of national importance, like his wife's cousin Abraxas Malfoy, he would have felt more contented with his own lot in life. Perhaps if he had a wife who wasn't a tremulous, overbred beauty, if his son had been more like Abraxas Malfoy's son Lucius and not an introverted lad who didn't know how to pretend he wasn't leagues ahead of his father in native intelligence and intellectual curiosity perhaps then, his father would have been satisfied with his family.

But as it was, he curried favour and plotted new schemes to get ahead, and then brooded and nursed his grudges when those schemes fell through, for nothing he attempted ever seemed to live up to his expectations. His son could hear him pacing the corridors late into that night, pausing before drips in the roof and cracks in the masonry and holes in the screens, as though taking an inventory of grievances against the house. Now and then the footsteps would approach his bedroom door, and he would hold his breath until the footsteps passed, watching to see if the knob of his door would turn, and bracing himself for whatever would come next.

Ever since Severus was a very young boy, his father would now and then get angry at him for something during the night and would come into his room to confront him about it; he was now almost used to being woken up out of a sound sleep by a slap or a blow and having to defend himself from his father's latest charge of wrongdoing while still half asleep. The night after the Malfoys had departed from their fortnight's visit to Snape Hall earlier that summer, his father decided that Severus had adopted too many of his cousin's uppity, superior airs and went into his room to take this point of contention up with him. He initiated this discussion and woke his son up by punching him hard enough to bruise his eye socket.

By the time he was ten years old, Severus had developed some facility at defending himself from unknown charges and appeasing the wrath of a completely irrational authority figure. He had also begun to find it difficult to sleep.

As such, he was still awake on the night a little post owl scratched at his bedroom window, in July of 1971, the summer before he turned eleven. He went to the window and collected a letter on what felt like thick parchment. Lighting a candle, he saw that it was addressed in emerald green ink to:

Mr. Severus Snape

Seventh Gable Window, Third Floor

Snape Hall

The Western Cliff Above Nornsay Village

Isle of Wyre

Orkney

It was sealed with purple wax in the shape of a four-part coat of arms: a lion, an eagle, a badger and a snake occupying four quadrants around an elaborate letter ***H.*** Severus looked nervously around him, then furtively opened the envelope it was addressed to him, after all, and his father hadn't told him not to. It was rare that he ever received anything in the mail, other than a yearly birthday letter and new book from his Grandmother Prince, or an embossed birthday card from Aunt Druella Black with a Sickle coin in it.

The letter inside read:

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Headmaster: Albus Dumbledore

(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chf. Warlock,

Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)

Dear Mr. Snape,

We are pleased to inform you that you have a place at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Term begins on 1 September. We await your owl by no later than 31 July.

Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

His Hogwarts letter. Severus breathed a long sigh of relief now and then his father would berate him by implying that his son would probably amount to no more than a sissy, a half-wit, or a Squib, and he was hugely relieved to see that at least one of these was absolutely not the case.

He went back to bed and finally managed to drop off to sleep with his letter under his pillow, secure in the knowledge that at last, he was going somewhere he would be absolutely out of his father's reach.

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Severus brought the letter downstairs to his mother the next morning she was as delighted as he was to see it. "You've gotten your Hogwarts letter! My great and powerful wizard you're going to be brilliant," she cried excitedly, clasping her hands in front of her like a little girl. Then she bent over the list of things to buy with a look of concern. "It's a year earlier than I expected though usually they wait until the new students are eleven, and your birthday isn't until January. You'll be one of the youngest students in your year, Severus, will that be all right?"

"I don't mind," he said. "But we have to buy all these things. Robes and books and a wand."

"Well... I'll write some letters," she said, putting her arm around him and letting her cheek fall onto the top of his head. "It'll be all right."

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Severus would later learn that the letters she wrote were to her Aunt Druella Black, asking for her help in readying Severus for school.

Druella Black was a rather distant relation by marriage, but one who had often taken an interest in Eileen and referred to her as her great-niece and Severus as her young

great-great-nephew. Severus remembered Aunt Druella from the fortnight he had spent at Malfeasant, a diminutive, prematurely white-haired woman in sumptuous mourning, whose tiny, birdlike stature was nonetheless belied by a presence befitting a Chinese empress.

When Severus and his mother came to visit her the weekend before his first year at Hogwarts was to begin, she held court like an empress, too; she received them and accepted their greetings from the depths of a large, sumptuous armchair when they were ushered into her glittering parlour. They all sat and made small talk for some time. Aunt Druella was talking to his mother, but she was looking at Severus, her shrewd blue eyes taking him in from the tips of his much-polished boots to the fine, decades-old black frock coat that his grandfather had worn as a boy, missing nothing.

Then Aunt Druella dispatched him to the garden for half an hour while she talked to his mother alone. "Go on, now, dear. I'll call you in for tea," his mother told him, her hands fluttering distractedly. He wandered the garden, which was very neat and laid out in precise rows, hands deep in his pockets, wondering for the thousandth time what the grown-ups were talking about, what everyone was talking about that had to be kept so secret from him.

Then a meek little house-elf came out to collect him, and he went in to tea.

Tea at Aunt Druella's was a less cosy affair than at his Grandmother Prince's; instead of sitting around a tea table laden with delicacies, they all sat at little tables beside their armchairs, sipping sweet, weak tea from priceless antique china cups and nibbling daintily on tiny tea sandwiches and *petit fours.* Aunt Druella made conversation by asking the two of them what Severus had been studying. "I hear you're quite a Latin scholar, my lad."

"Yes, Aunt. I've been studying it with Mother for years." As before with the guests at Malfeasant, Aunt Druella began to quiz him in basic Latin, then stopped with a tiny scowl when it became obvious that he was more conversant with that ancient tongue than she herself was.

"Don't show off, darling," his mother said, in a soft, nervous whisper.

Severus blushed, then switched back to English. For the remainder of their visit, he answered all of her questions very politely and obediently, only venturing to speak when a question was posed to him.

On their way out, his mother stopped beside Druella's elegant armchair and kissed her cheek. "Thank you, Auntie, you're so kind to us," Eileen said, fairly quivering with gratitude, then turned to her son. "Come, Severus, say good-bye to your Aunt."

Severus imitated his mother's behaviour, bending down to kiss Druella's soft, powdered cheek. "Thank you, Aunt Druella," he said, although he wasn't exactly sure what he was thanking her for. It seemed the right thing to do.

Druella stopped him with a surprisingly strong grip on his wrist and beckoned him to her again. "You're a good boy, my young Master Severus," she said, aside to him, and deigned to put a little kiss on his cheek. "And a good son, who honours his mother. Be sure to write me, and let me know all about what they teach you at school."

"I shall, Aunt," he said, nodding.

"Good, good. Oh, and you might want a little something for sweeties on the train, if I remember my old school days." She reached into her pocket and pressed something into his hand. He thanked her again, and put his hand in his pocket without looking at what she had put in it, but knowing from its weight and feel that it was a gold Galleon more money than he had ever possessed in his life.

As his education progressed, he would grow used to the pattern of going to see Aunt Druella every year before school started, and then making the rounds of the shops. She always told him he was a good son, and always made sure he started the year with a small amount of pocket money.

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Severus and his mother made their way to Diagon Alley after the visit with Aunt Druella. They acquired his school robes and uniforms, all of which of course didn't quite fit him. Severus would often find that his tall but slight build meant anything long enough in the sleeves was invariably too big in the chest, which always made him look even taller and thinner than he was, but there was no time to make new ones to order. Then it was into another shop for his student cauldron, and then into the bookshop. His mother's indecisive fluttering about with his booklist in her hand soon attracted the attention of a Flourish and Blotts clerk shopping with Eileen Snape always took longer than with other people as she checked and re-checked everything and was reassured by the shop staff that she did indeed need the things that she had come in to the shop to buy so Severus took the opportunity to go off and wander through the stacks.

One title caught his attention immediately ***Defensive Magical Theory*** by Wilbert Slinkhard and he pulled it down from the shelf. In another moment, he was completely lost in it.

"When attack is offered, any number of spells, charms, hexes and curses can be offered to parry or negate such attack. The following is a comprehensive list of magical responses to aggressive action... "

It was exactly like opening moves and defences in chess an aggressive action was offered, and was countered with defensive action.

Banishing Charm, Bat-Bogey Hex, Blasting Curse... Confundus Charm, Conjunctivitis Curse, Densaugeo Curse, Diffindo Charm... Disarming Spell oh, now that looked interesting

Disarming Spell: Used to knock an aggressive opponent's wand out of reach. Invoked with straight wand indication at wand hand, incantation EXPELLIARMUS, said with resolve...

Severus looked up, gestured with an imaginary wand *Expelliarmus,* he muttered under his breath. He bent back over the book

Extinguishing Spell: Used to counter flame attacks. SEE: Incendio...

Finite Incantatum... Incarcerous, or Binding Charm... Jelly-Legs Jinx...

Reductor Curse: Disintegration spell, manifested as a blast of golden energy. Invoked with straight wand indication at object to be affected, incantation REDUCTO, said with authority

"Mother, can I have this book too?" he asked when she came to collect him after her shopping was done.

"What are you reading?" She turned the book over and looked at its cover. "Severus, that's a Defence Against the Dark Arts reference book, that's for people studying for their O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s, are you sure you want that one? I don't think you need it yet, maybe in a few years."

But he was extremely interested now, which meant that he *wanted* the book, badly. "Aunt Druella gave me a Galleon, is it all right if I buy it for myself?" he asked.

"Well, all right, if you want to," she told him, distracted. "Hurry along into the queue now, and then we'll get some lunch."

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"Come along, Severus, we're going to get your wand," his mother told him after they had finished lunch at the Leaky Cauldron. Severus closed his new Defence Against the Dark Arts book with reluctance he would always be the kind of person who could be drawn out of an interesting book only resentfully and readied himself to leave.

"Mightn't we get an owl?" he asked as he followed her down the street, peering in the window of Eeylops Owl Emporium. "The list said I could bring one to school."

"Owls are expensive, I'm sorry," she told him, her thin little hands working in front of her. "Hogwarts has a whole Owlery full of school owls, for when you want to send letters. Can't you just use one of them?"

"All right, sorry," he said instantly. "I don't want to have to take care of one anyway."

"Come along, darling." She led him to another shop. The sign outside read: *Ollivander's Makers of Fine Wands since 382 B.C.*

"Ah, Mrs. Eileen Snape. Nine inches, willow, supple and pliable, with a core of Selkie skin, I remember like it was yesterday. And here is young Master Severus," Mr. Ollivander said when they arrived. People only rarely referred to him as a lad, or a boy, as something in his manner had always suggested a young man. Ollivander came forward, peering at Severus, already tall and thin for his almost-eleven years, with an expression far too grave for a child's face.

"Something serious, with a great deal of power in reserve, and with a long history, I would think," Ollivander muttered. He brought down wands of mahogany, hawthorn, ebony, alder, rowanwood, hornbeam, and fir, but when Severus picked each one up, none of them felt more than totally inert, just a long stick of wood in his hand. Before long, the countertop was stacked high with wand boxes, his mother was looking distracted again, and Severus was almost ready to claim some kind of wild affinity with whatever stick of bloody kindling was put into his hand next, just so he could get out of there.

"Not an easy sort of fellow, are you, young man. I wonder... " Ollivander climbed nearly to the top of a towering stack, his hand fishing into the back of a shelf "This particular wand I've had for over twenty years. I've never made another like it."

He opened a dusty box and set it on the counter in front of Severus. The wand inside was long and slender, carved of a satiny brown-red wood so dark it was nearly black, with an octagonal handle slightly raised at the top and bottom like the bell guard of a sword. It was otherwise devoid of any kind of ornamentation, but this total simplicity nonetheless had its own sort of elegance. Severus came forward and raked an approving eye over it.

"Black Scottish oak ten and a half inches, quite rigid, with a core of salamander tendon. The salamander, you see, is a fantastic reptile that lives in the hearts of volcanoes it swims in fire and darkness and incredible pressure, and comes out unscathed. Their bodies are even more resilient than those of dragons, but due to the habitat they prefer, they can't be hunted. I've only come upon one once, just as it emerged from its fiery home to die... I only managed to dress the one forelimb before the entire body fell to ash. Oh, I wonder." He pushed the box across the counter to the boy. "Give it a try, just to satisfy an old man's curiosity."

Then he picked up the wand, and it knew him, and he it, instantly. No celestial choirs sang, no prophecies were fulfilled, no cosmic alignments of the stars were suddenly bearing down on him; he just felt a mysterious bone-deep certainty that this one and no other was to be his. This wand felt absolutely familiar from the moment he touched it, like a very old friend and ally who had at last been reunited with him. It felt like a weapon that had seen him through countless struggles, like a sword used so often that it had become an extension of his hand.

He looked back at Mr. Ollivander.

"This one," he said.

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"No, no, I want you to go to school. You're far too clever to be kept home with your old mother. Just promise me you'll write me, lots and lots of fat letters, so I can know all about the wonderful things you're learning." She looked away from him, and he saw her blinking hard.

"I will, Mother, I promise."

Many of the other parents were comforting their children, trying to soothe their fears at leaving home for the first time; an arm around a child's shoulders here, a hug there. But Severus Snape was the only child on the platform comforting his mother, who was on the verge of tears because she had to be parted from him.

"You'll love school," she said, striving for a gaiety he knew she didn't feel. "You're so clever, the cleverest boy anywhere." She bent down and put her arms around him, held him very close to her heart for a long time, and he hugged her back sombrely and unashamedly.

Good-bye. I love you, he whispered. He thought of her up at Snape Hall alone with his father, and a tightness grew in his chest.

"I love you, too," she said, with a last embrace and a pensive little kiss on his forehead; she then turned away and dabbed discreetly at her eyes with her flimsy lawn handkerchief. "Go get on the train, now."

He boarded the bright red train, found an empty compartment, stowed his luggage, and went immediately to the window. His mother was lingering on the platform, looking disconsolately up at the train. Their eyes locked the instant he appeared at the window, and they waved good-bye to each other one last time.

The last thing he saw before the Hogwarts Express pulled out of the station was her slender, frail silhouette, hand lifted in farewell, her black eyes looking wistfully after him.

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"Awwww, how sweet. Bobbins got a big hug from Mumsy, and now he's all misty," came a sneering voice from behind him.

Severus turned away from the window to find himself facing three pairs of eyes, one grey and resentful, one bespectacled and archly amused, and one colourless, obediently mirroring the attitudes of the other two. He recognised the boy who had spoken to him as the one who had been taking a fearful scolding from his mother when they arrived his eyes were red, his face was still smudged, and he was tossing the cricket ball from one hand to the other. The other two, a skinny fellow with unruly black hair and glasses, and a little, lumpen, unmemorable sort of boy, were totally unfamiliar.

"Can't a bloke say good-bye to his *mother*, when he's not going to see her for months?" Severus shot back instantly, his eyes flashing, throwing his shoulders back he would always be roused to instantaneous fury by even the appearance of an affront offered to his mother. "What business is it of yours?"

The three of them closed ranks between him and the compartment doorway. He had violated their code, refused to assume the cowering stance of a lone outsider against greater numbers. There are inalienable social codes of dominance and submission ingrained into all living creatures; in a wolfpack, a weaker male must assume a submissive posture in the presence of the alpha male, or be attacked. Perhaps the codes of the wolfpack were not that far off from those of young boys away from home for the first time, and at almost-eleven years old, Severus had not yet learned not to counterattack with all of his defences at once when offered opposition. He studied the tall, dark, grey-eyed boy's sulky face for a moment, remembered the scene with his mother on the platform, and then zeroed in on the chink in his armour with the same vicious and unerring precision that would later make him the most feared teacher at Hogwarts

"You're jealous," he said, disgusted. "Because your Mum doesn't love you, and mine does."

A hush fell; the kind of hush that follows when something is said that is so pure, so true, and so hurtful that everyone who hears it is momentarily stunned.

"You are *so* dead," the dark-haired, grey-eyed boy snarled in outrage evidently he had believed he had the perfect right to mock another boy's mother, but when that fellow offered the same in return, he became furious. His fist closed tight around the cricket ball in his hand.

Just then, a thin, pallid, ill-rested looking fellow with light brown hair appeared in the doorway, looked in and seemed to size up the situation immediately, as though he had seen the other three get into this kind of scrape numerous times before. "Come on, Sirius, James, let's *not* get into a row on the way to school," the peaky fellow implored with a pained expression. "Let's *go*, before all the other compartments fill up."

"No, wait, Remus, this little prat's been *really* disrespectful," the fellow with the glasses, James, said. "He needs a lesson." He sounded thrilled at the idea of administering such, his eyes glinting diabolically.

Then the grey-eyed boy's arm came forward, aiming the cricket ball at Severus's face at the same moment Severus's wand snapped forward, and he was pointing it at the cricket ball *Reductor Curse: Wand indication at object to be affected, incantation REDUCTO, said with authority*

"*Reducto,*" Severus whispered resolutely through gritted teeth

The cricket ball never reached its target; it instead floated to the floor of the compartment as ash. It would have been difficult to say who was more surprised, Severus or the four boys before him.

"Now will you sod off?" Severus snarled at them. "Try that again and I'll hex you all into the next world."

"I don't think you can do it," the grey-eyed boy, Sirius, sneered. "How do I know you didn't just get lucky, ponce?"

"How do you know that for sure?" Severus asked, his eyes and wand tip locked on Sirius and James. "How do you know my parents aren't the worst Dark Wizards in the world, who've taught me more curses and hexes than any seventh year at school? Do you want to risk it?"

As an adult, Severus Snape with his wand at *en garde* was a sight to make most people feel like running the other way and there was something of that in his manner at that moment. He held his new wand in front of him like a young Borgia assassin might have held his dagger, and the look in his eyes gleamed with anarchistic purpose. His moment of beginner's luck with his first Reductor Curse made him feel tough, invincible, and oddly righteous; he hadn't started this fight, but now that his blood was up, he was more than willing to finish it, once and for all.

But a girl's high giggle came from outside the compartment before any of them could respond "Well, what have we here," someone's familiar drawling voice said, from out in the corridor, and then three people appeared in the doorway a tall young man with a pale, pointed face and striking silver-blond hair, followed by two girls, one blonde and one dark. Severus recognised his cousins Lucius Malfoy and Narcissa Black, both much grown up from the previous summer, and another girl with long dark hair who he didn't know. All three of them wore school robes and ties striped in silver and green.

Lucius's blasé grey eyes took in Severus's aggressive, wand-out stance with amusement. "Now now, boys, you'll want to play nicely with my cousin Snape. He's the worst character you can imagine." Lucius swept into the compartment, shouldering rather aggressively between the much shorter and slighter Sirius and James. Lucius greeted Severus with a handshake, grinning down at him. *Nice work*, he murmured. Severus smirked back.

"Oh yes, absolutely right," the dark girl said, exchanging a smile with Lucius. "He knows more Dark magic than anyone, Snape does. He's *terrifying*," she sighed, as though she admired *terrifying* men more than any other kind.

Lucius put his hand on Severus's shoulder. "Young Snape here stayed at our house for part of last summer and I'm now in awe of his cursing abilities. Believe me, you don't want to get on his bad side."

Sirius, James, and their lumpen friend were now looking at Severus apprehensively. Their attitudes tried for scepticism, but their eyes were round. "He shouldn't be reading Dark magic it's against the law," Sirius said, but with much less conviction than before. The dark girl giggled at him.

"Someone should call the Aurors on him," the one called James ventured.

"Don't be a prat if you call the Aurors on him, everyone'll hate you. Nobody at school *ever* likes a squealer," sniffed the dark girl, slipping past the other first-years into the compartment, and seemingly accidentally knocking into Sirius Black as she went. She turned to Severus, indicating the seat across from him. "Is this seat taken?" she asked.

"No, none of them are," Severus said quickly. "Please, sit down. Narcissa, come have a seat," he called to his other cousin, who wafted disdainfully past Sirius, James, Remus, and the little, lumpen boy, and took the seat beside the dark-haired girl. She gave Sirius a long look of reproach as she passed him.

Lucius took the seat beside Snape, then looked up at the boys in the doorway. "Oh look, it so happens that this compartment's all full up now," he drawled lazily. "You four will want to go find somewhere before they're all taken." It was an overt dismissal, and the four of them exchanged looks and filed away, but not without several glowering backwards glances from Sirius and James at Severus, who glared back at them impassively.

"We'll talk later, Sirius," the dark girl called after them. Severus watched Sirius as he retreated clearly, he was in disgrace with his three companions for some reason. Interesting... he resolved to find out more about this Sirius character.

Once the others were gone, Lucius sprawled contentedly in his seat and looked at each of his companions, as though well satisfied with the small court he had assembled around himself. He had only gotten taller and more good-looking in the year since Severus had last seen him, and had grown his platinum hair to past his shoulders. On some sixteen-year-old boys this might have looked foppish and affected, but on Lucius it looked classical, timeless, princely. His uniform was brand-new and perfectly pressed, and instead of the standard white uniform dress shirt, he wore a probably custom-fitted shirt with a starched collar and French cuffs clasped with gold cufflinks monogrammed with a stylised ***M***, as was the gold signet ring on the first finger of his right hand. Most of the boys at Hogwarts would be wearing ties for the first time, and their attempts to tie them properly would lead to some amusing gaffes of dress but Lucius Malfoy's tie was done in a crisp Windsor knot, fastened with a little tie pin in the shape of a gold serpent. Some boys his age might have suffered from adolescent acne, but not Lucius Malfoy he had a complexion any girl would envy. As always, his cousin's presence made Severus feel uglier, shabbier, and less sure of himself than before, but at the same time it was safe and reassuring.

Lucius indicated the two girls with him. "You've already met Narcissa Black, of course, and this is her older sister Bellatrix. Bella, this is my cousin, Severus Snape."

"Your cousin on which side?" Bella asked, interested.

"His grandmother Octavia Prince is my father's aunt, or cousin, or something," Lucius said offhandedly. "His mother was one of the Princes, you know, from Orkney."

They chitchatted about families and school for awhile. Lucius was going into his sixth year, Bellatrix was going into her seventh, and Narcissa was about to become a fourth-year. Severus glanced at Narcissa, noted rather objectively that she looked very pretty and nicely turned out, had gotten taller since he had seen her last, and that her hair had grown down to her waist; and then his eyes stole back to Bellatrix. Then he couldn't stop stealing little glances at Bellatrix. Her face was a pale, perfect oval, her hair was a long straight sheet of brown silk, and her eyes were dark, insinuating, and intense. As he watched, she reached into her pocketbook and came out with a little gilt compact and lipstick, and rouged her lips a dark, satiny red.

"Bella, you know Mum said we couldn't use paint while we're in school," Narcissa said primly.

"Well, Mum's not here, is she?" Bella replied, powdering her patrician nose. She noticed Severus looking at her and gave him a diabolical little smile, pursing her red lips at him. He blushed and stared down at the toes of his boots.

"So I see you've met my annoying cousin Sirius," Bellatrix said. "I'm not surprised he got into a fight practically before the train left he can't do anything right. Totally incorrigible. He and that Potter are like a couple of wild savages when they get together. My aunt says Potter's a bad influence. She won't even let him in their house."

"Something off the trolley, dears?" A pleasant grey-haired witch pushing a little cart laden with refreshments paused in the doorway of their compartment.

The other three bought snacks and drinks for themselves, cakes and pasties and pumpkin juice and sweets Severus tried not to look at a red lollipop disappearing between Bellatrix Black's rouged lips but he declined when the trolley witch got around to him. He had only a few Knuts left, after having spent the Galleon Aunt Druella had given him in Flourish and Blotts. "No, thank you."

"Oh no, Snape, we can't all have lunch in front of you. Get some Chocolate Frogs at least," Lucius urged.

"Well... " Severus leaned toward his cousin's ear, embarrassed. "I had some pocket money, but I bought a book with it. I'll just wait till we get to school."

"Nonsense, that's more than four hours off." Lucius turned toward the trolley witch "My dear lady, I'm celebrating my reunion with my young cousin here, who I haven't seen in a year, so I'll be treating him to lunch." He nodded at Severus. "He'll have whatever he likes."

Half an hour later, with a hearty lunch sitting warm in his stomach, listening to the other three gossiping about school, to Bella teasing Narcissa and Lucius teasing Bella, Severus finally relaxed and let himself feel comfortable. Perhaps if he stuck close to his cousins, school wouldn't be as bad as all that.

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The train finally arrived at the Hogsmeade station, and was met by an extremely tall, wide, simply gigantic fellow with wild dark hair and whiskers calling, "Firs' years, follow me, firs' years, over here." Severus reluctantly said good-bye to his cousins and fell in with the other first-year students following the huge fellow down a darkened path. The huge whiskery fellow introduced himself as "Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts" as the first-years struggled to keep pace with his giant strides.

Then they all reached the end of that path, and Hogwarts Castle appeared, suddenly looming into view on the horizon on the opposite side of a great, dark lake. *Wow*, Severus murmured.

It was vast, sprawling, grandiose, with myriad towers and turrets, and thousands of twinkling, arched windows. Severus was used to ancient castles; he had grown up in one, as the original foundation for Snape Hall had been built before the time of William the Conqueror. Hogwarts in all likelihood was not quite as old as his ancestral home, but Snape Hall had long passed the time when anything further would ever be built on to it; long passed the limit of what could even be properly maintained of it. As an adult, Hogwarts would become precious to him because it was the object of such veneration, because generations upon generations of wizards had devoted all of their imaginations and magic to its upkeep and its expansion. In time, the sight of this castle would become to him both magnificent and reassuring, indicative as it was that somewhere in the world, history was respected in a more than superficial sense, and care and attention were being paid to an object of beauty. But for now, he was a boy lost in a rare moment of pure, ten-year-old wonder.

He was distracted from this reverie by Hagrid's bluff voice calling to the first-years again "Firs' years, follow me, mind yer step now into the boats."

The little group of first-years stepped down into a fleet of tiny rowboats, each with a bright lantern set astern. Severus waited until Sirius, James, Remus, and their lumpen little friend crowded together into a boat, and made certain to board a boat other than that one. As the boats glided across the still, mirrorlike waters of the lake toward the castle, he turned away from the whispered, giggling speculation of the other students around him, wishing to be alone with his amazement at the scene before him: the black waters, the tiny pool of light from the lantern, the mountains before them and the great castle dominating the horizon. It was like a tableau from one of the stories he had read in his mother's library, and he didn't want anything to ruin it, especially not some sullen boy with a shrewish mother and a dirty face.

They arrived through the ivy curtain and to the stone stairwell on the opposite shore almost too soon to suit him, and Hagrid knocked three times on the castle door. The door was opened by a tall, slim witch with black hair, wearing smartly tailored emerald-green robes. She looked to be perhaps in her late forties, and carried herself like someone in authority.

"I've brought the firs' years, Professor McGonagall," Hagrid told her. Ah, so this was the Deputy Headmistress then, the one who had written his Hogwarts letter.

"Thank you, Hagrid. Children, if you would follow me from here." Professor McGonagall had a crisp, resonant voice with a slight Scottish burr to it, much like his Grandmother Snape's, which made Severus warm to her a little.

She threw open the heavy wooden door, and the group of students followed Professor McGonagall into a torchlit entrance hall and up a sweeping marble staircase to a grand foyer. The stone-flagged floor seemed vast, the ceiling was ornamented with heavily carved stone arches, and a grand tapestry depicting the school crest Severus remembered from the purple wax seal of his Hogwarts letter hung from an upper balcony.

"*Draco dormiens nunquam titillandus,*" someone near Severus carefully read aloud from the scroll on the tapestry he turned toward the speaker, and saw that it was the little redheaded girl who had been crying on the platform. "Does anyone know what that means?"

"*Never tickle a sleeping dragon,*" Severus said instantly. "Or you might be able to read it as *Let sleeping dragons lie*, I suppose."

Several heads turned to look at him, and the little redhaired girl grinned at him. "How did you know?" she asked.

Severus shrugged. "It's Latin."

"You speak Latin?" she asked, sounding impressed.

"Yeah, a bit. But no one really speaks it anymore. People mostly just read it and write it," Severus told her.

"You learned it in school?" She was looking up at him with the greenest eyes he had ever seen.

"My mother taught me at home," he said, blushing faintly.

"*Neat*," the redheaded girl said, falling in step beside him as they passed under the tapestry and followed Professor McGonagall through the foyer toward a great stone landing. "All the Hogwarts textbooks are full of Latin, so you're lucky. I only got taught some French in grammar school. I'm going to have to get a Latin lexicon for all the spells or something."

Severus turned toward her with a shy smile perhaps some of the strangers at school were friendly. "They taught you French in school? *Bonjour, comment t'appelles-tu?*"

The little redheaded girl giggled. "*Je m'appelle Lily Evans*."

"*Je m'appelle Severus Snape. Comment trouves-tu Hogwarts?"*

"C'est pas mal, mais le château est très grand et sombre, n'est-ce pas?"

This short, happy, French-primer exchange was interrupted by someone jostling him from behind. *Fecking show-off*, Sirius Black's voice hissed from behind them.

Bloody Neanderthal, Severus hissed back, his hand going for his wand.

Matters might have escalated from there, but then Professor McGonagall shot them both a look like to burn a hole in the wall behind them, and they both quieted down.

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Professor McGonagall led all the first-years through the foyer, and lined them up just before a huge pair of elaborately carved double doors at least two storeys tall. "I will come back for you once we're ready to begin the Sorting," she informed them all. "Wait here, and no pushing or shouting. You may want to tidy yourselves up a bit," she said, casting a disapproving eye over James's dishevelled hair and Sirius's dirty face. A moment later, she had disappeared into the Great Hall.

A moment later, several of the castle ghosts made their appearances through the back wall on their way into the first day gathering, provoking screams from many of the first-years. A shrill squeak came from Lily Evans, and she turned and tried to burrow straight into Severus and the girl next to him.

"Don't worry, don't worry, they won't hurt you," Severus said, detaching her from him with a little, awkward pat. "They're not the dangerous sort of ghosts. They live here, er, haunt here. My mother told me that each House has its own ghost who sort of runs the place. It's tradition. See " he pointed "that fellow is the Bloody Baron, the Slytherin House ghost, and the one with the ruff is Nearly Headless Nick from Gryffindor House, and that must be the Grey Lady. She's from Ravenclaw. And I don't see the Hufflepuff House ghost yet, but he's supposed to be a monk or something."

"They're friendly ghosts, then?" she asked, looking nervously up at him. "Like Casper?"

"Who?"

"You know, Casper the Friendly Ghost. He has a cartoon show on telly," Lily told him.

Severus's brows creased. "What's telly?"

Lily stared at him, distracted from her terror of ghosts that walked in daytime by the shocking discovery that there were boys of her own age who had never heard of television. A second later she was distracted again by Professor McGonagall returning to collect them.

The group of first-years followed Professor McGonagall into the vast, candlelit Great Hall. Severus was impressed but not totally floored by the vastness of the hall, the mullioned windows, the hundreds of floating tapers, and the enchanted ceiling that showed a dark, starlit sky, as he had seen similar niceties of décor in the homes of wealthy relatives. Lily Evans, however, goggled at everything in a manner that made him chuckle to himself.

"Not been away from home much, have we?" he asked, aside to her.

"Hey, I'm not the one asking "*What's telly,*" now, am I, mate?" she retorted merrily. "Where do you live, a desert island?"

"Er, yeah, sort of," he said, nodding. "Where do you live?"

"Little Whinging, Surrey," Lily replied.

"What the bloody heck sort of a name is *Little Whinging*?" he queried, giving her full benefit of the infant version of his dreaded sinister eyebrow. "It rather sounds like someone whining at low volume, doesn't it?"

Lily giggled. "Evidently, silly boy, Little Whinging is that place where people don't have ghosts, and do have *tellys*," she shot back.

"Bully for all you *Little Whingingians*, then," he sneered, but that only made this absurd Lily girl laugh even harder.

They probably could have continued this amusing sort of repartee for some time, but the first-years had now arrived at the front of the Great Hall. Professor McGonagall brought out a three-legged stool and a tall, pointed, patched and generally disreputable-looking wizard's hat. This hat seemed in all ways shabby and unremarkable until a rip in its brim opened, and it began to sing:

Oh, hats, we have so many names

Bowler, trilby, boater, cloche,

While I may not be a tall sombrero

Of all hats, I know the most.

I'm the smartest headgear in the world

The wisest millinery,

For I can look inside your mind

And see where you should be.

I'm the one, the only Sorting Hat

You'll put me on just so,

We'll have a chat, a good confab

And see where you should go.

Perhaps you'll go to Gryffindor,

'Mongst Godric's noble children,

He loved the bravest, truest hearts

The strongest were his brethren.

Perhaps you'll join House Hufflepuff

Of gentle Helga's favoured,

She loved the hardest working souls

Who in her classes laboured.

Or you could be destined Ravenclaw

Of Rowena's brilliant minds,

She loved the curious and clever

More than any other kind.

Or perhaps you'll go to Slytherin

And join Salazar's disciples,

He loved all wise, resourceful folk

With ambition none could stifle.

So all you boys and girls, come on

I promise I won't bite

Come have your little chat with me

On this September night.

I've sorted students all these years

I've picked up this and that

So now let's have a heart to heart

On where you'll hang your hat!

Everyone applauded as the hat finished its song. It took a bow to students and teachers alike, and fell silent again. Professor McGonagall turned to the first-years again "Now, as I call your names, you will come forward, sit on the stool, and put on the hat to be Sorted."

She bent over a long roll of parchment and *Abington, Cassandra,* a plump little girl with long flaxen braids was the first person to take a seat on the three-legged stool and put on the hat. After a few seconds

"HUFFLEPUFF!" the hat shouted. The Hufflepuff table applauded loudly as Miss Abington went to join her House-mates.

Black, Sirius was next, and Severus watched as the dark-haired, grey-eyed boy who had accosted him on the train went to take Cassandra Abington's vacated place on

the stool. He glanced over at the Slytherin table, where Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix and Narcissa Black were giving Sirius a blasé round of applause as he came forward. Sirius rather sulkily clapped that hat onto his head and then for perhaps half a minute sat having what looked like an intense silent debate with someone, or perhaps with himself. Then the rip in the hat's brim opened -

"GRYFFINDOR!" bellowed the hat.

This, for some reason, caused a commotion at the Slytherin table. Lucius and Narcissa looked scandalised, and Bellatrix Black stood up with an outraged gasp of *What?* The three of them and several other Slytherin students hissed and shot filthy looks at Sirius Black, but the Gryffindors applauded and cheered enthusiastically as he hopped off the stool and scooted over to their table.

The Sorting continued. Severus watched, disappointed, as the Sorting Hat shouted "GRYFFINDOR!" a second after being put on Lily Evans's head. That was annoying he had rather hoped that she would be a Slytherin, so he could have an excuse to talk to her again. He didn't *like* her, not like some ridiculous boys *liked* girls, but she was fun to talk to, and he liked it tremendously when people seemed impressed by his cleverness.

The peaky-looking fellow who had urged his friends not to pick a fight with Severus came up to the stool after the name *Lupin, Remus* was called disappointingly, he was Sorted into "GRYFFINDOR!" as well. Lupin had seemed a decent sort, someone a bloke could be friends with, and it was a shame to see him claimed by that lot of Gryffindor blowhards. However, when the lumpen sycophant called *Pettigrew, Peter* and the bespectacled instigator who answered to *Potter, James* were Sorted into Gryffindor as well, Severus had to conclude that was no great loss.

Then finally the list of first-years had got nearly to the last of the group, to *Snape, Severus,* and he took his place on the vacated stool. He anxiously approached the Sorting Hat, then put it down on his head.

A second after the hat slid down around his ears, Severus became aware of a little voice speaking to him. "Difficult... very difficult *indeed,*" that voice said, in his ear, in his head. "A keen mind, a fine, shrewd, and *curious* mind, cynical and wise beyond its years. You've loved books from the start, you've never met a challenge of the intellect you didn't like, did you, young Master Snape? You'd be a natural for *Ravenclaw*, my lad, with your intellectual peers "

NO, Severus thought, *no, my mother wants me to be in Slytherin.*

"Are you sure?" the hat asked. "Plenty of bravery here as well, a powerful desire to help someone in trouble, someone very precious to you, though you've been thwarted at every turn. In Gryffindor, you might find encouragement, my boy "

Severus looked at Lily Evans at the Gryffindor table then at Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, Peter Pettigrew, and James Potter, who had all one after the other already been sorted into Gryffindor, and thought about sharing a dormitory bedroom with their little gang for seven years *NO!* he thought, *NOT Gryffindor, anything but Gryffindor! If you put me in Gryffindor, I shall find where you're kept the rest of the year and bloody disintegrate you while you're sleeping. I mean it, I know Reducto.*

"All right, all right." Severus thought the Sorting Hat chuckled, which annoyed him even further. "Are you sure?"

YES, Severus thought. *My cousins will never let me hear the end of it if I end up in anything but Slytherin.*

"Hmm...but what was your mother's house?" the hat asked.

She was a Ravenclaw, but she'll understand, Severus thought. *Please, my grandmother was in Slytherin, my cousins and everyone I know is in that House.*

"But are your cousins your friends, as well? What was your mother's name?"

Eileen Mircalla Prince Snape, he thought in reply.

"Ah, I remember her the brightest girl of her year, and the gentlest. You've not got her mild temperament, but you're far more like your mother than you know, young Master Snape she means more to you than anyone else alive, it's all here, in your head, in your heart. I've never been wrong yet," the Hat averred. "Mightn't you consider her House?"

Will you just put me in Slytherin, you stupid old hat? Are you trying to make trouble for me? What is it going to take to make my wishes any clearer? he bellowed mentally.

"Well, if you're sure... "

I am bloody well sure, Severus thought insistently. His face was burning, he had now sat on the stool longer than any other first year.

"All right... better be... " The rip in the brim opened "SLYTHERIN!"

Severus exhaled a long sigh of relief, and went to join his cheering cousins at the Slytherin table.

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At the table, Bellatrix was fuming to Lucius. "Can you believe that Sirius? The Blacks have always been in Slytherin, both his parents were Slytherins. He just asked the Hat to put him in Gryffindor to tick off his mother for giving him a clout on the platform today, I just know it. Our aunt is going to kill him when she hears this, if I don't kill the little prat first." She looked daggers across the Great Hall at her cousin, now tucking into the feast at the Gryffindor table.

"The Sorting Hat took an awfully long time with you," Lucius observed, looking curiously at Severus. "What did it say?"

Severus shrugged. "Wanted to put me in Ravenclaw," he said, forking up some grilled fish. "Seemed to think it was the right thing to do, because Mother was a Ravenclaw."

Lucius frowned delicately. "She was? I thought she was a proper Slytherin like everyone else excuse me, like everyone other than Sirius Black. Ah well, no matter." He leaned across the table and shook Severus's hand. "Welcome to Slytherin House, Coz home of the unacknowledged legislators of the world."

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Despite the presence of various Gryffindor bullies, Severus was completely enamoured of Hogwarts from his very first glimpse of the castle.

First, there was just the castle itself. During those first few months, Severus had many a long, meandering ramble through every area within limits for students, just looking at all of it the paintings, the braziers, the elaborate windows, the view from the high turret walk. Then there was the library he had lived for so long in a house where the budget for books could not keep up with his voracious reading habits, so to suddenly have access to a vast room filled to the ceiling with books was a luxury unimaginable. Meals were another delight like most growing eleven-year-olds, he was always hungry, and was used to rather plain fare at home. To sit down to a table laden with golden platters of eggs and bacon and beefsteak and roast turkey and lamb chops and fresh fruit and vegetables three times a day was heavenly almost daily he wondered if it was possible to send some of it home to his mother.

The dormitory where he lived with the other Slytherin boys of his age was almost shockingly comfortable. At home, he slept on a narrow Scotch oak child's bedstead that had probably been put together in the seventeenth century and a mattress that felt at least that old, and he never had enough firewood in winter but here he had his own

four-poster bed so wide that he couldn't touch the edges of the mattress with both arms spread, a sinfully comfortable featherbed, and a wonderful fat squashy down comforter that went *pfffffuhhhh* when he flopped down on it. With the heavy green velvet draperies drawn, his four-poster felt like having a room of his own; and the velvet was so thick that he could read half the night in bed by the light of a *Lumos* spell and never disturb the other boys in the room. Not only that, but the fires never went out, and there was always enough firewood to spare.

The Slytherin common room was also impressive a long, pleasantly dim stone underground chamber hung with rich green tapestries, and with green lanterns dangling from the ceiling. The light was wonderfully soothing, like being underwater. There was always a great blaze going in the vast, intricately carved stone hearth, which faced any number of deep, high-backed leather chairs and sofas and little cushioned footstools, and tables with chessboards and decks of Exploding Snap and Self-Shuffling Playing Cards the sort of room where he imagined a wizard king like Macbeth entertained noble lords. Severus decided that when he grew up and became famous and rich, he was going to do the big hall at home up just like his common room.

Then there were the other Slytherins. They were to him an incredibly impressive lot, raffish and self-assured. Their school uniforms were always accented with bits of subtle luxury: monogrammed cufflinks and signet rings and heavy antique pocket watches. They always remembered to put out their boots for the Slytherin house-elves to polish, and they all knew how to tie a perfect Windsor knot and what fork to use at supper. The two prettiest girls in school, the sisters Bellatrix and Narcissa Black, were both Slytherins, and they queened it over the other girls with effortless *hauteur*. The undisputed lord of all the Slytherins was his cousin Lucius, who liked to hold court in the common room next to the fire; Severus immediately noticed that you could tell who was important in the social pecking order by who was sitting in the armchairs closest to Lucius. Now and then his cousin would remember his existence and deign to notice him "Snape, old man, what's going on with you?" which guaranteed him at least some measure of status.

And then there were his classes.

Severus had spent almost eleven years longingly watching his mother and the adults he knew performing magic all the time and had long been impatient to get started learning it himself. Now, the entire Wizarding magical canon was being thrown open to him and he set about systematically and voraciously absorbing everything he could.

Very early on, Severus found that any worries he might have had about being underprepared for school because his mother, rather than hired tutors, had been responsible for his primary education were totally unfounded. On the contrary his mother's homeschooling left him more advanced than most students of his age, far more advanced than some. His early education in the meanings and pronunciation of Latin gave him a tremendous advantage, as most spells in the Wizarding canon were based on this ancient tongue. When faced with a worksheet of incantations to be matched with their specific spell, he could have matched them up flawlessly even without studying.

As often happens with very bright and talented students with more of an affinity for the company of older people than those their own age, Severus quickly earned the favour of all of his professors at Hogwarts. Defence Against the Dark Arts was at that time taught by Edgar Bones, who had taken up teaching after a long and distinguished career in Magical Law Enforcement. He was a tall and imposing figure with long black hair liberally threaded with white, an eyepatch, and a swagger, who liked to pepper his lectures with hair-raising anecdotes about his experiences in the field that were just as exciting as something Edgar Allan Poe would have written, if he had been writing about wizards. To Severus, the classes were enthralling, and there seemed no job more fascinating than that of an Auror.

His other classes were equally rewarding. Severus's work in Transfiguration and polite classroom demeanour appeased even Minerva McGonagall, Head of Gryffindor House, Slytherin's archrival. He showed such effortless facility with Potions that their Potions master, Horace Slughorn, the Head of Slytherin House, made an unabashed pet of him practically from the first. Potions was his next favourite subject after Defence Against the Dark Arts, but it was the one in which he was undeniably the most talented. Potions were just so *easy*, almost intuitive, for him. It was usually his last class of the day, and invariably the most relaxing when he was working alone. Indeed, the only annoyance he encountered in Potions class was the inevitable presence of some dolt who couldn't brew his or her way out of a paper bag, and who was nominally supposed to be his lab partner.

He got along all right with those dolts as long as they listened closely and followed his directions by his fourth year, he was beginning to suspect that Professor Slughorn paired him with the slow learners on purpose, so they could benefit from his example. He supposed he should have been flattered, but truthfully, he would far rather have worked alone. He loathed compensating for someone else's incompetence with a passion, and the spectacle of a lab partner blithely making mistakes or failing to comprehend directions oftentimes made him entertain ideas of drowning such blithering idiocy in the cauldron and seeing what effect that had on the day's potion assignment.

Professor Flitwick once said, after a week of Charms classes in which Snape's hand was almost always the only one in the air when questions were asked: "I'll make a deal with you, Mr. Snape why don't we just assume you already know the answers to all the questions I ask in class, and if no one else can answer, I'll just call on you."

"But sir, I wanted to try and win some points for my House," Severus pointed out.

"All right, all right, if no one else can answer correctly and you do, I'll give you an automatic point for Slytherin. Does that meet with your approval?"

"Yes, sir, thank you."

No one was surprised when he took points for Slytherin every class session. By the end of his first year, it had become a given that if Slytherin House had lost points somewhere throughout the day, Snape was one of those stalwarts who could be relied upon to make them up, and who could be counted on to bring glory to Slytherin House by appearing in the Honours List in most subjects at the end of term. In all, he was well on his way to becoming one of those quiet, studious, well-behaved and ambitious students who could be found in any school, anywhere; a member of that small underclass that most often goes unnoticed by classmates until years later, when one reads about their unsurprisingly impressive achievements in the *Daily Prophet* or the alumni magazine.

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But, as could also be expected in any school, anywhere, Severus's sort of self-absorbed pedantry made him the object of much derision from some of his fellow students, and the four Gryffindors he had met on the train were the worst of the lot.

Sirius Black's defection into Gryffindor when everyone knew the Blacks of Grimmauld Place had always been in Slytherin appeared to have brought the wrath of all Slytherin House down on his head, especially that of his cousin Bellatrix. Sirius retaliated by tormenting all the Slytherin first-years on general principles, and Severus in particular after the scene on the train, he was now Black's very favourite target. As Severus was slight and not much of a fighter, and often took himself off somewhere to study or read, Black not infrequently found his opportunity.

Black, Potter, and Pettigrew fell in step behind Severus as he left Defence Against the Dark Arts class one morning in October, on a day he had answered a question about countercurses that had earned five points for Slytherin. Black and Potter had been so rambunctious during the practical part of the session that Professor Bones had ended by subtracting five points each from Gryffindor, and they were clearly smarting under their loss.

"What did you do, Snivellus, eat the bloody textbook?" sneered Black.

"Yah, Snape, smartypants, whyn't you just teach the class for him?" Pettigrew taunted.

"Is it my fault that you're all a lot of blithering idiots who can't be arsed to do your homework?" he snapped back instantly.

The group of them cornered him in the hall, descending on him *en masse*, like a swarm. Potter got in front of him, stuck out an ankle, and sent him sprawling; Pettigrew ever-so-accidentally sent his books into every corner of the hallway, and Sirius Black was just in the right place to ever-so-inevitably tread upon the middle of his back, heavily knocking the wind out of him.

Snape was reaching for his wand when two older boys in Slytherin ties and scarves appeared at the end of the corridor when they saw what was going on, they hurried over to break the scuffle up. Snape recognised the two new arrivals as Evan Rosier and Cassius Mulciber, two fourth-years he knew by sight from the common room.

The burly blond Evan Rosier collared Black immediately, dragging him away from Snape. "Knock it *off*," he snapped, pointing an imposing finger down into Black's face. "I'm sick of you and your punk friends always ganging up on him, he's not done anything to you except show you up in all your classes maybe get off that fecking broomstick and read a book once in awhile yourself, damn you."

"You leave him be, yah bastard, he's just a kid," Mulciber said, shaking Potter viciously. "And while we're at it, if I see any of you three doing the same to any of the other first-years in my House again, I'll crack your heads together for you, understand?"

Someone rather shamefacedly offered Snape one of his books he looked up at Remus Lupin, who had held himself aloof from the other three when they knocked him down, but hadn't done anything to dissuade them, either. "I wouldn't've thought you'd pick such hooligans for friends, Lupin," Snape said, sitting up and snatching back his book.

Lupin cut his eyes away in embarrassment "Come on, all of you," he peevishly called to the other Gryffindors. "This whole thing is stupid. Don't we all have something better to do?"

"Yeah, good idea all of you Gryffs have something better to do. Go do it. Now," Mulciber ordered, chivvying the Gryffindors down the hall.

Evan Rosier stayed behind, helping Snape collect his books. "Don't you worry, kid, we Slytherins look after our own," he said. "The way that little prat Black keeps trying us, he has it coming, I tell you. You all right?"

Severus nodded. "Yeah, thanks."

"All right then." Evan extended a hand and easily raised Snape to his feet. "Come on, let's get some supper."

Evan Rosier would, in short order, become Severus's best friend. Rosier was three years older, had turned fourteen that August to his eleven in January, but Severus was tall and intellectually mature for his age, and the two boys had so much in common that the age difference ultimately didn't matter much. They treated each other much like a bluff, easygoing older brother looking after a wise-cracking, precocious younger one.

They were both only children, who had grown up in isolated rural areas, who had often been left to themselves growing up. They also both had tough fathers who hit them and mothers they both loved and pitied; all of which led to an intense kinship between them. They were both afraid of heights and didn't like flying lessons, and they were both good at Defence Against the Dark Arts, Potions, and Arithmancy. They were also both very much of the opinion that Lucius Malfoy was rather full of himself, and preferred playing chess or studying together or scheming to obtain the really creepy books from the Restricted Section to paying court around the fire. Plus, Severus was the only person who knew about Evan's unrequited love for Felina Nott, a girl in his year who was always paying breathless court to Lucius Malfoy, and likewise only Evan knew that Severus had an intense and totally hopeless crush on Bellatrix Black, six years his senior, but never teased him about it.

Evan made Severus feel safe and understood, and Severus amused and interested Evan and made him laugh. And as there is little that can guarantee a boy's contentment with his schooldays more than one really good friend at school, his first four years at Hogwarts passed like no time at all.

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have done the gene pool some good if I'd let him."

Lily laughed till her shoulders shook. "All right then, I guess you do have at least two brain cells to rub together, yah stinking *Slytherin*," she teased, grinning and wrinkling her sunburned nose at him. "Want to partner tomorrow?"

"Yeah, you just know I'm your best hope for getting an exceptional O.W.L., yah bloody *Gryffindor*," he shot back satirically.

Lily shrugged and blew another bubble. "Yeah, so, what of it?" she asked, as though that was the most obvious thing in the world.

Severus grinned faintly. "At least you're honest. See you tomorrow."

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"Hey, Snape," Lily greeted him the next day. She tossed him a chew of Droobles, and he caught it deftly.

"Hey, Evans. We're doing Invigoration Draughts today. Ought to be a breeze," he told her.

"Cool." Lily had put down her bag and was taking her seat next to Severus when James Potter elbowed his way in between them.

"What are you doing talking to this wanker, anyway, Lily?" Potter said, looking very self-righteous indeed.

"Er, hello, trying to get a good mark in *Potions*," Lily said, as though that was the most obvious thing in the world. "Remember all those times I partnered with you fourth year and you kept setting things on fire?"

"Come on, Lil, that was a *joke*," Potter implored.

"Well, it *wasn't* funny. Bugger off," Lily snapped.

Potter turned toward Severus, finger pointing at his chest. "If I hear you're giving Evans a hard time, you'll have me and Black to answer to," he declared.

"Here I sit, quaking in my boots," Severus replied insolently and that familiar diabolical spark flared in Potter's eyes. Matters might have escalated from there, but then Professor Slughorn swept into the classroom and told them all to take their seats and start getting their ingredients ready for the practical session.

"Sorry about that. Some of the lads in my House can be a trifle overprotective," Lily said, absolutely deadpan.

"*If I hear you're giving Evans a hard time* what, does he think I'm going to poison you with Droobles, or something?" Severus muttered to her.

"*Are* you?" Lily asked, with a bright, facetious grin, blowing a huge bubble.

"Let me see " Severus officiously rifled through his notebook with the air of a bored bureaucrat going through paperwork. "No, you're not on my *To Be Poisoned* list for today. Actually " he rifled some more "Yes, I need you *alive* for the nefarious plot I have in mind for your downfall," he very affably replied, which made Lily dissolve into giggles.

"I know this is where I'm supposed to come back with the expected cheap shot at your House, but somehow I just don't feel like it today," she said, with the air of one confessing to a great weakness indeed. "So I hope you won't feel neglected if I don't persecute your snaky arse for a few hours, all right?"

"All right, but you have to tell everyone in your common room that I *was* a tremendous arse to you later. I have a reputation to protect, you know." He blew a huge, thoughtful bubble at her, which only made her giggle again.

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By the time O.W.L.s arrived, Severus and Lily had gone through a lot of class sessions with excellent marks, a lot of Droobles, and a tremendous amount of sarcastic banter. If one or the other had had a bad day or was feeling anxious about tests, they both could be relied upon to tease the other into better spirits. What he liked most about Lily was that she never called him things like *egghead* or *smartypants*. She always seemed impressed and interested when he volunteered some obscure bit of magical arcana. She would say something like, "Bloody hell, Snape, where do you get this stuff?" with a big grin and an admiring *pop* of her Droobles. And wonder of wonders she had his same sort of arch, bone-dry sense of humour, which none of his friends had appreciated since Evan finished his seventh year. Sometimes he could convulse Lily over with giggles without even trying, which made him feel clever indeed.

Yes, Lil was a great girl and a fantastically good sport, and he liked her. He wouldn't have said he fancied her, not like that idiot Potter with his tongue hanging out every time she passed, but... he *liked* her, more than he liked any other girl he knew. She just had a *tang* to her that no one else could even approach. She was clever, probably the cleverest girl he'd ever met besides his mother, and she was a lot of fun. And she wasn't hard on the eyes, either, but he wasn't going to spoil their easy camaraderie by telling her so.

On the morning of fifth-year O.W.L.s, he had woken up with a low-level stomach-ache, and his hands were shaking when he arrived for his first test of the day. Lily, sly little minx that she was, noticed his anxiety and all but mugged him with a Cheering Charm, then tossed him another chew of Droobles.

"Cheer up, Snape, you're going to do fecking brilliant. Stop upsetting yourself."

"Thanks," he said, with genuine gratitude. "You're pretty brilliant yourself."

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Lily turned out to be absolutely right he did a brilliant job on the O.W.L.s. After a year of preparation, and once his anxiety cleared, everything seemed to fall seamlessly into place from then on. Transfiguration was a snap. Charms was a breeze. Arithmancy was so easy that he finished his equations, checked and double-checked them, and had enough time to snatch a twenty-minute catnap at the end of the test session, which made him feel much refreshed, just in time to go in and absolutely *clobber* the Potions O.W.L.

"Hey, Snape, how'd you do, how'd you do?" Lily asked as they filed out of the hall, bouncing up to him.

"My dear Lil I didn't just *take* the Potions O.W.L. No, I took it by the throat, I slapped it around, and I made it cry for its mummy," Severus said airily. "Easier than pie. Yourself?"

"My experience was *quite* similar," Lily said, equally airily, shoulders going back and chin going into the air.

"Of course it was. I taught you well," Severus said, nodding smugly.

Lily giggled. "Of *course* you did," she said. "Without you, I wouldn't know the difference between shrivelfigs and my toes. I would have *tasted* the wormwood."

Severus was laughing by this point as well. "What have you got next?" he asked.

"Defence Against the Dark Arts."

"Ah, me too."

"You ought to make that one cry for mummy as well, Mr. Auror Academy Class of Nineteen-Eighty-Two," she teased, giving him a light swat on the arm. Lily had by this point known about his ambition to become an Auror like Professor Bones for some time.

"Thank you for the vote of confidence. If I ever have to bring you into custody, I promise I'll be very, very polite about it and only rough you up slightly," he assured her, playfully tossing one of her messy red plaits over her shoulder which only made her dissolve into giggles again.

The two of them spent the break in this sort of silly, innocent chatter, never noticing a bespectacled Gryffindor some ways down the hall, watching them with potent envy in his eyes. While it would never have occurred to Severus that he had something Quidditch hero Potter wanted very badly, it is entirely likely that Potter would have given a great deal to engage in the same sort of easy banter with the pretty Miss Lily Evans. It is also very likely that perhaps Severus had, all unawares, earned Potter's enmity because Lily Evans liked to talk to him and not to Potter just as surely as he had all unawares earned Sirius Black's hatred because his mother had given him a hug and kiss instead of a slap on the platform their first year.

The proctors called the fifth-years in for their Defence Against the Dark Arts O.W.L., and Lily and Severus nodded to each other and wished each other good luck. They both took seats on opposite sides of the room and readied their quills.

Defence Against the Dark Arts was his very favourite subject and always had been, and he had set himself the task of getting a perfect score on this test. He concentrated almost comically hard on the test paper in front of him, his nose almost touching the page.

His eyes ran down the list oh yeah, he knew all of these. This was going to be a snap. Practically from the moment the test began, his quill was racing across the page yeah, how about a few extra details on that one, maybe a quote with citation there why not an alternate theory from Slinkhard, as well. He noticed that he was reaching the bottom of the page and began to write smaller... miniscule by the time he got to the bottom of the page... he raked his hair back from where it was flopping on the table, glanced around at everyone else for a moment no one had written half as much as he had. Yes, he was going to *ace* this.

After the test was over and he handed in his scroll, he took the test questions paper and wandered blithe and unseeing across campus still totally absorbed in it, trying to calculate his grade by assigning himself points for each question *Give Five Signs That Identify a Werewolf* hah, he'd given all *ten*, thank you very much. He sat down in the cool shade of some bushes by the lake, still musing over the questions for anything that he hadn't received full marks on... no, it really looked as though he'd actually done more work in this subject than the Ministry had ever expected him to do. He spent a moment musing happily over the idea of being called *Officer Snape,* of bringing in hardened criminals, of solving crimes by brilliant deductions like C. Auguste Dupin in Poe's *The Purloined Letter.*

Finally, satisfied with his work, he took a deep breath and let himself finally relax. His O.W.L.s were over, it was a beautiful day, and he was well pleased with himself. He tucked the Defence Against the Dark Arts paper into his book bag, and started back toward the castle.

But then James Potter's airy, malicious voice bawled, "All right, Snivellus?" from behind him and something in Potter's tone made Severus go instantly for his wand.

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reasons why he hated James Potter and everything about him, hated his smirking eyes, his stupid round glasses, his messy black hair, his insolent, arrogant manner, his ease on a broomstick, the fact that he was willing to use torture to get a bloody *date* not even Lucius Malfoy was low enough to do that. He hated the way the Gryffindor faculty bent rules for him because it suited them, turned a blind eye to what he did because he was a good Quidditch player; he hated every damned thing about Potter and everything that would ever come from Potter. He hated Potter's entire family tree back to the time of the Conqueror and every descendant that would ever spring from Potter.

But instead of telling Dumbledore how he really felt, he kept his demeanour very quiet and polite and listened to every word Dumbledore said, his expression completely unreadable and his black eyes impenetrable and shored up more fury and hatred in his heart with every pulsing second. Now, not only did he despise all four of his classmates, but he knew for certain that Albus Dumbledore was not to be trusted.

"No, sir, I'm fine," he said.

When the Headmaster was finished making his nice speech, he told Severus that he wished that every student at Hogwarts could shrug off incidents like this with his grace.

"Thank you, sir," he replied, with cool, baleful politeness, and left the room.

Part Third: The Hart Subvertant: Prologue Part 3

Chapter 38 of 55

In which Severus loses someone infinitely precious far too young, and becomes re-acquainted with one Miss Bellatrix Black...

Prologue: Like a Plant Kept in the Dark, Part 3:

The self-styled Marauders ended up spending the rest of the school year assisting Mr. Filch in various menial tasks around the school: scrubbing floors, polishing things in trophy cases, and wiping down windows and such. But this was not at all satisfying to Severus there wasn't much by way of a school year left in which to keep them at such labours, and Potter, Black, and Pettigrew whined and complained so loudly and vociferously to all those who would listen about being so punished that Severus endured any number of other slights and taunts and dirty looks from the other Gryffindors in retaliation. Yes, they had exposed his grotty worn-out knickers to the bloody world, and somehow he ended up being the bastard because the popular boys actually got in trouble for it.

And of course nothing much would happen to them because the Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress were both Gryffindor alums and Potter was on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, so he would only get detention instead of the expulsion that he so richly deserved. There was simply no justice in the world, and no end to other people's self-interest and villainy.

Severus was stalking down a corridor one evening with his hands sunk indignantly into his pockets when he came upon the lone James Potter, polishing Quidditch trophies before an open glass case. Potter was going about this task with a decidedly sulky look, as though he fancied himself some sort of saint in exile.

"Hey, Potter." He indicated one of the trophies on the floor beside the case. "You missed a spot."

"Bugger off, Snape," Potter snapped, then pointedly turned his back on him.

Severus planted himself behind Potter, eyes boring into the back of his head. "I've got news for you, you worthless waste of spit I exist," he said, in a low, deliberate voice. "I take up space in this world and I breathe the same air you do, and that isn't going to change."

"Oh, Merlin's beard he's making a speech," Potter laughed, rolling his eyes at the ceiling. "Hath not a Slytherin hands? *'Tickle him, does he not laugh?'* Hex him, does he not bleed?" he declaimed.

"No hex me, and *you'll* bleed," Severus whispered in his silkiest tones, glancing at the cut on Potter's cheek, which was still unhealed. "How did you like my special hex, Potter? The Healing Potion didn't get rid of it, did it? Did you know that if you combine that hex with a medical Anti-Congealing Charm, they won't heal by the usual means?"

Potter turned sharply toward him, an instant's fear flickering behind his eyes. "You're *sick,*" he declared.

"No, just creative," Severus hissed back.

"Oh, yeah, typical Snape thinks he's so much smarter than everyone else," Potter sneered, his hand going to his cheek. "And then he takes his big brain and makes up sick-freak special hexes with it."

"And I hope they really hurt, you little *fuck*," he spat. "And if you ever do that to me again, I'll put your fucking gimpy eyes out, and I'll use an *Incendio* Curse to cauterise the sockets so no mediwitch can grow them back, too."

"You can't, that's Dark Magic," Potter retorted.

Oh yes, the classic Gryffindor arrogance the great heroes could torture others and it was just an afternoon's amusement, boys will be boys but if anyone else got mad and attacked back, he was a Dark Wizard. Fucking *hypocrites. "Try me,"* Severus whispered.

"You think you're so damn tough, but you're nothing but a little punk, Snape Evans spent hours crying after you called her a filthy Mudblood, you know that?"

That got to him. Severus finally winced internally.

He'd spoken before he thought when he shouted at Lily, and the Mudblood insult, which he had heard from other Slytherins any number of times, was just the first thing that came to mind. He would never have gone out of his way to antagonise Lily, but at that moment he was desperately trying to induce her to just *leave*, both so she wouldn't be a witness to what was going on, and so his humiliation wouldn't be compounded by the ignominy of having her stand up for him. Lily was a decent sort even for a Gryffindor and he knew it. He'd liked her since first year, but she was a girl. It was one thing to have a popular Slytherin boy like Lucius Malfoy or Evan Rosier stand up for him, but not a little redheaded *girl*, even one like Lil. Not to mention Potter fancied her like anything and everyone knew it, and the little terrorist was bad enough already

without jealousy coming into it. But he wasn't about to show weakness over a girl in front of *Potter.*

"If you and your hooligan friends hadn't decided to turn me upside down, no one would have called anyone anything, did you ever think of that? You haven't got a fecking leg to stand on with your self-righteous nonsense, Potter. You and that sodding *Black* are such textbook cases of people who can dish it out, but can't be arsed to take it themselves."

"At least I'm not a *Slytherin*," Potter snapped back.

"Of course you aren't because if you *were* a Slytherin, you wouldn't need to blackmail women to get them to go out with you," Severus hissed. "What are you going to do if she *does* go out with you and won't put out? Put a puppy on a spit and keep turning until her knees open? What are you going to do if she marries you and spends a little too much money *hit her*?" His lips peeled back over his teeth in a rictus of pure savagery.

Potter stepped back, his eyes widening. "You're bloody *barking* mad," he said flatly. He put the last polished trophy back in the case, and walked away.

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At the Leaving Feast that year, Severus didn't feel much like socialising with anyone. The social currency of being the cleverest lad in your year is tenuous, when one doesn't bother to work at putting tremendous amounts of personal charm behind it, and he thought that the other Slytherins were cutting their eyes away from him, as though his existence was an embarrassment. Slytherins weren't supposed to get pantsed, you see, Slytherins were supposed to lay waste to their enemies and hear the lamentations of their women. Not only had he been embarrassed personally, he had embarrassed his entire House.

It was a very, very long meal, and not even the fact that Slytherin won the House Cup was much of a consolation. It was a tremendous relief when they were dismissed back to their dormitories to finish their packing.

But as he was heading back to the Slytherin dorms, Severus noticed a mild commotion out of the corner of his eye. Potter had gone up to Lily in the crush, appeared to be trying to make some kind of teary apology to her. She was having none of it, looking at him with freezing scorn. Potter's theatrical openheartedness grew more and more half-hearted as she remained unconvinced, until he finally got fed up and said something that made Lily throw up her hands and storm off in the opposite direction.

"Your loss!" Potter shouted after her, then vanished into the crowd.

A second later, Severus was off after Lily down the corridor, calling "Lily, Lily, wait."

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Lily looked up, but then her eyes narrowed when she saw who was calling to her. "Stay away from me, you bastard," she snapped.

"Lily, come on, slow down."

His face was flaming, he hated apologising, he hated being on the defensive, and he hated asking anyone for anything. "Look... I shouldn't have yelled that at you, the other day. It was just that "

"It was just that you're a mean little prat who doesn't like me, or anyone?" she said coldly.

"Dammit, no listen to me, all right? It was just that I was *embarrassed.* I had my robes around my head, remember? I know what you were trying to do, and it wasn't going to help, because those bastards in your House were just going to use it against me later, you know?"

"Well, think about this, Snape," she said, whirling on him and jabbing a forefinger into his chest "that wasn't the first time I've told those prats to stop picking on you, you know that?"

His face only flamed the worse it looked as though Lily had been championing him for some time without his knowledge, even outside of Potions class, which only made his cruel insult to her all the worse.

"We'd been friends all year, and friends stand up for friends," Lily snapped.

"Lily you weren't my lab partner just because I like you. That was because you had the sense to ask me, and because you're clever," he said, shrugging helplessly which to him was a far more sincere compliment that just some tepid assertion that she was *liked.* "You don't act like the typical self-important bastard Gryffindor. You're actually tolerable."

"Yeah, I know a lot of the Gryffindors are self-important bastards, especially that Potter. But to some of us, being a Gryffindor isn't about all that *Look At Me I'm a Hero* shite, but about standing up for what you think is right, *every time*, even if it's hopeless, even if the people you're talking to are too mean or too thick to get it. Can't you see that?"

Severus thought about that for a moment and then thought about crawling after his wand, spitting soapsuds.

"No," he said truthfully. "If the situation is hopeless, I'd rather not waste my time, and probably make myself into the next target in the bargain."

"No, you *can't* understand it, can you. I guess you really are just like all those other Slytherins," she retorted, and this time, there was no facetious note of joking in her voice. That was the unkindest cut of all.

She turned away from him, and before she had gone two steps she put her face into her hand with a ragged breath that sounded like was fighting off tears, which made him feel like the biggest arse in the world. "Lily, come *on*," he called after her.

"Bugger off, Snape," she shot back over her shoulder, and hurried off down the corridor.

He let her go.

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Severus got his O.W.L. results back that summer.

He took an Outstanding in every O.W.L., and his scores in Arithmancy, Herbology, Defence Against the Dark Arts, and especially Potions were so high that by the time sixth year started, he had already gotten letters from two of the leading potions manufacturing companies in Britain's Wizarding world, inviting him to apply for a trainee position in their organic chemistry division after his seventh year. But what made him feel most triumphant and accomplished was that all of his marks were high enough to enter the Auror training program.

During the first term of his sixth year, his desire to become an Auror warred with his desire to go to work immediately after he left school and begin earning a pay check the most highly regarded Potions-makers and especially Potions-creators made very handsome salaries, and if he could claim a patent on a potion that became popular, like Sacharissa Tugwood or Glover Hipworth, he could possibly have a good source of income for his lifetime.

He still cherished hopes of becoming an Auror like Professor Bones, but the training was the sticking point. The glamour and importance of Magical Law Enforcement appealed to him, as did the idea of meting out justice on people who *deserved* it. But the sooner he had a job and made some money, he could then somehow help his mother, who had lain pale and tired on the sofa all summer, and was now complaining of her health in nearly every letter. Perhaps he might be able to rent a little house in London and convince her to move out of Snape Hall, to where she would finally be out from under his father's rages. Then, after she had been long enough away to regain some confidence, she might even go through with her rarely expressed wish to obtain a divorce. Divorces were nearly unheard of in their family's pure-blooded strata, only sought in cases of total abandonment or physical cruelty, but Severus believed absolutely that his father's behaviour warranted such extreme measures.

But that winter, after Severus turned sixteen, something happened to send all of his plans to better his mother's life into cureless ruin. An adversary much more insidious than a financially inept and socially ambitious husband with a terrible temper emerged; an adversary against which he was totally helpless. In early December of 1976, shortly before the Christmas holidays, he received a letter, in Eileen Snape's delicate copperplate handwriting:

Dearest Severus,

I've finally gotten to the Mediwizards about my chest pains.

Oh, my Son, I'm so afraid. I have Cancer.

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It was breast cancer and the biopsy results said it was malignant.

By the time it was discovered, it had already sent tendrils into her lungs and heart in a manner that made its surgical removal potentially fatal. The Healers at St. Mungo's put her on an intravenous course of medical potions designed to halt its growth, and the treatments left her so weak that she spent the final four months of her life in hospital. Severus took the train to London every weekend to visit, and spent every day of his Christmas holiday sitting beside her bed.

Grandmother Prince would often drop in on the two of them with delicacies like stewed pheasant, fresh-baked madeleines, and fresh berries with clotted cream in the middle of winter, so as to tempt their invalid's failing appetite, and stayed to cheer them up with news from everywhere. Druella Black and sometimes her daughter Narcissa came by on Sunday afternoons, bringing books and sweets. Tamora Malfoy even dropped by once or twice, bringing ostentatious bouquets from her hothouse. But Severus never once ran into his father during visiting hours.

The treatments made Eileen's once luxuriant black hair fall out, and she wore a soft blue velvet bonnet to cover her balding scalp. Severus would sit next to her, kiss her cheek and hold her hand.

"I just wish I wasn't losing my hair," she fretted. "It was my only beauty."

"You still look beautiful," he told her, looking fondly into her sunken black eyes. "You've always been beautiful."

During his visits, he would tell her about school, coax her to eat, and tell her she was going to be all right. He spent hours reading her favourite books to her, high romances like *Wuthering Heights* and *Mysteries of Oranto* and *Pride and Prejudice* and *Manfred*, and Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and Keats's *Collected Poems*, because reading on her own gave her headaches, and her arms were too weak to hold the heavy bound volumes any longer.

"You've always had such a lovely voice," she would whisper gratefully to him. "I'm sorry to be such a bother."

"No, no, I've always liked reading to you," he replied. "Do you remember when I used to read Keats to you when I was little? In the library at home?"

"Yes, of course. You've always been my comfort," she said, her fleshless little hand creeping into his. "My dearest son."

He picked up Keats's *Collected Poems* "What would you like to hear?" he asked, holding her hand gently in his.

"Let's have *Endymion,* please?"

"Of course." He opened the book, and read:

"A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:

Its loveliness increases; it will never

Pass into nothingness; but still will keep

A bower quiet for us, and a sleep

Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing... "

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The cancer at least proved to be relatively quick and kind. She died that March, less than four months after the diagnosis, and Severus was given a week's leave from school to arrange her funeral. His father had nothing like the ready money to bury his wife in the family crypt and refused to even meet with his son to talk about the matter. So Severus swallowed his pride and paid another visit to Aunt Druella, who made it clear that she was doing him a very great favour indeed by lending him enough to bury his mother, and deigning to allow him to pay her interest in the double digits for such consideration. Now he would be in a substantial amount of debt the moment he came of age, but it seemed the least he could do for her.

Severus signed the promissory note she drew up with a sense of having signed his life away, but the transparently delicate, waxen form of Eileen Mircalla Prince Snape was buried in austere, dignified style, surrounded by her favourite white roses. By the time of her death, she had wasted to only a hundred pounds.

After leaving his son to comfort his dying wife during her final illness and take on the financial responsibility for her burial, Tobias Snape deigned to appear at her funeral service and reception afterward, and accepted the condolences of their family and friends with decorous, red-eyed stoicism. Severus watched his father being consoled and talking shares and trading with Abraxas Malfoy next to his mother's coffin, and not for the first time, it occurred to him how very much the witless, irresponsible, self-serving old son of a bitch might benefit from the addition of a dose of cyanide into his Scotch and water.

The one saving grace of the day was that Evan Rosier had gotten word of the funeral through his father and had unexpectedly turned up early that morning asking to help out. Between Evan and Grandmother Prince's gracious and supportive presence, it looked as though he might be able to get through his mother's funeral without poisoning his father, or poisoning himself, or just starting to throw random Killing Curses amidst gales of maniacal laughter.

But the last straw came when his father dragged him into the kitchen to tell him they had run out of Scotch at the bar, and what a complete mental defective he was for allowing this to happen. When events were held at Snape Hall, *he* liked to do them right.

Suddenly, everything was just too much. His father had not even visited his mother in the hospital, had contributed nothing to her funeral expenses or arrangements and now he had the nerve to criticise him because the bar was not stocked to his liking. Severus clenched his hands at his sides and laughed wildly, then sobbed, and then sixteen years of loathing burst out of him in a tirade *You stupid worthless old fraud, you didn't even care about her, you hit her and insulted her and let her die all alone*

fuck YOU! He drew back his closed fist and lurched toward his father, and in another second would have struck him a fearsome blow to the face, but Evan had heard the shouting going on, run into the kitchen and somehow gotten between the two of them, and was pulling him away. Evan was by then a stocky nineteen to Severus's reedy sixteen, and he got between father and son and seized Severus in a bear hug, then dragged him bodily into the corridor.

Severus struggled against Evan, his face crimson, snarling *IhatehimIhatehimI'mgoingtokillhim* into Evan's lapels. But Evan pinned him against the wall until he relaxed.

"Yeah, mate, I know what you mean, he's hateable," Evan said grimly. "He's *really* fucking hateable, and he had no cause to criticise you, you're doing the best you can. All of this shouldn't have fallen on your shoulders, it's not fair. But you're *burying your Mum today,* mate, and she wouldn't have wanted you to get into a fight with your father, would she?"

"No," Severus said, breathing hard. "No, she hated fighting."

"Think of it this way after today, you're going to go back to school, and you're going to do brilliant on your N.E.W.T.s, and then you'll get a job, and you'll never have to see the old bastard ever again, hear me? Just get through the day, Snaples, just *get through the day.* I'll be here with you."

His bravado failed him at this kindness, and he crumpled against Evan; became just a sixteen-year-old boy weeping on his best friend's shoulder for the ruin of his mother's life, and Evan held him like a brother, and told him it would be all right.

Severus returned to school the next Monday, looking as though he had aged a year in the time he had been away. He never told any of his classmates at school what had happened.

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After his mother's death, Severus's outlook only grew increasingly bitter and nihilistic during the remainder of his time at school. Without his mother's influence, without a friend like Evan at school with him any longer, his never-admirable temper came to the fore, as did his great talent for insult and sarcasm. The people around him had ceased to be potential friends, or in any way worthy of consideration; they were all co-conspirators at best, and potential targets at worst. He only related to other people as means to further his own wishes, and with his mother's death, there wasn't much he wished for any longer. Everything precious to him was now gone, and everything gentle, kind, or even courteous about him went with her.

He had no further contact with his father following his mother's funeral as his father had never written him or sent him any Christmas gifts or even a Knut of pocket money in all his time at school, Severus assumed that he was now left to his own devices as far as covering expenses for the remainder of his time at school. He thought about writing to his grandmother and asking for a living expenses allowance, but somehow he hesitated to even ask that of a woman he had seen a grand total of twice in his life. Also, it was entirely possible that she had been told something of the scene in the kitchen during his mother's funeral reception, and didn't want anything to do with him at all.

He then found that there were a surprising lot of ways for the cleverest Slytherin in his year to make some extra Galleons for himself, if he was willing to overlook certain ethical considerations. The whole of Slytherin House and even the occasional Ravenclaw were soon after him for private tutoring in Potions and Defence Against the Dark Arts as seventh-year N.E.W.T.s approached and it was a well-kept secret amongst a certain Slytherin inner circle that Snape could be persuaded to write one's Defence Against the Dark Arts or Potions compositions, or to do one's Arithmancy exercises, for a steep fee. Snape didn't mind carrying some of the academic load for half of the lads in his year at that point, he would have welcomed anything to distract him from his own situation, while at the same time allowing him to pay for new books and quills and boots.

As his sixth year drew to a close, Severus had a new worry weighing upon his mind; as to where exactly he would spend his summer holidays. Somehow he didn't think he would be welcome at Snape Hall any longer, and didn't want to risk humiliation by asking his grandmother to take him in and being refused she might not want a grandson who had tried to punch his father living in her home. He gave some very serious consideration to trying to get a job and let a room in Hogsmeade, but he was still only sixteen, which made his situation more complicated than if he was a legal adult.

But then, two weeks before term ended, he received one of the most welcome letters he had ever received in his life:

Hey Snaples,

Gee, think perhaps we can tempt you to stay with us this summer instead of going home? Somehow I think your old Daddums won't mind. Lucius and Felina and Mulciber are going to be around a lot as well.

What do you say? My Mum and Dad send their regards.

Cheers,

Evan

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It felt so odd to get off the Hogwarts Express in King's Cross at the end of the year, and not see his mother waiting for him there. She would always have been nervous at the proximity of so many other people, and would be straining forward to catch a glimpse of him in the crowd of disembarking students but once she caught sight of him, her pale, pretty face always lit up like a *Lumos* spell had animated it, and she would make haste to welcome him back. The fact that she would never again meet him in King's Cross at the end of the school year made his throat close tightly, and he swallowed hard against it.

But even if it wasn't his mother waiting for him, the sight of six-foot-three Evan, with windblown blond hair and his hands sunk deep in his pockets, was a very welcome one, and the way Evan's face also lit up when he saw his best friend was incredibly heartening.

Evan came forward to greet him with a warm handshake. "Snaples! Put her there, mate! How was sixth year?"

"Not as bad as fifth year, at least," he said, returning the handshake.

"Ready to finish up and get out, then?"

"Am I ever. I tell you, Ev, as soon as N.E.W.T.s are over, I am *never* going back to that place."

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The Rosiers' estate, located in the country outside of Cambridgeshire, was just as Severus remembered it from the three or four occasions he had visited in the past spacious, homey, and pleasant, surrounded on all sides with forest and green fields. The manor had been built in the early nineteenth century and thus was brand new by comparison to Snape Hall or Malfeasant indeed, Severus had once or twice heard Lucius Malfoy sneer that the paint was barely dry on the Rosiers' family crest. Nonetheless, Severus had always liked visiting here. Evan and Mrs. Rosier always gave him a comfortable guest room and treated him like a cousin even though he was no relation; the roof didn't leak, there were no holes in the screens, and meals were always good. During the day Severus and Evan would go for rambles in the woods, or go swimming or fishing in the small lake on the grounds, or just sit around talking or reading or playing chess. Evan's father worked in London and wasn't around much, but Evan's mother often joined them, and seemed glad of their company.

As Evan had mentioned in his letter, Felina Nott was often about, accompanied by her mother, or her cousin, Cassius Mulciber, who had been in Evan's year at school.

Before long, Severus had figured out another reason why Evan had wanted a few friends around that summer to give him the opportunity to court Felina with the proper decorum. It would have been improper for Evan to go for long walks alone with Felina, but to go for long rambles with both Felina and Severus was just a pastoral afternoon's excursion. Severus knew without being told that while Evan wanted to spend the summer with him, he also wanted to steal some alone time with Felina, whom he had fancied for years. So Severus would tactfully make himself scarce for a few hours during walks and picnics, claiming he wanted to look for magical plants in the woods, and he got very adroit at distracting Felina's mother and Mulciber into long, involved conversations as well. He also made sure to tell all of his best stories about what a great bloke Evan had always been in school seeing as how Evan was the reason why he hadn't had to pitch a tent somewhere that summer, the least he could do was put in a good word for him with the girl he most admired.

And everything seemed to be coming along swimmingly as summer progressed Evan adored Felina wholeheartedly, and a certain coquettish gleam was seen to shine in Miss Nott's dark eyes when they alighted on Evan. By the end of August, Severus and Mulciber had privately bet a Galleon as to whether the wedding would happen in spring or summer of next year.

But then at the end of August, another guest arrived for his promised week's visit. Evan, Felina, and Severus arrived back into the main hall to find Lucius Malfoy sharing a round of brandy with Mr. and Mrs. Rosier. He greeted the three of them with the most genial smile imaginable; Evan smiled back, Severus looked at him warily, and Felina simpered adoringly.

"Evan, you old dog, how have you been? Felina, you're as lovely as ever. And Severus, old man, haven't seen you in forever, what's going on with you?" Lucius greeted him with a handshake and his usual expansive smile.

"Not much," Severus replied shortly. "N.E.W.T.s coming up next year and all."

"Of course. And I was sorry to hear about your mother," Lucius said, with a very brotherly pat on the arm. "I know you were fond of her."

"Thanks."

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Severus had always been naturally sharp-eyed and observant, and unlike the easygoing Evan, he had a habitual suspicion of everything and everyone around him that kept him restlessly alert at all times. As such, Lucius had not been at the Rosiers' for two days before he knew that while Felina may have been staying there under the pretence of visiting Evan, she was far more interested in Lucius's company than she was in Evan's. She laughed louder at Lucius's jokes than at Evan's, she was always finding small ways to wait on Lucius and court his attentions, and while her arm was continually linked with Evan's, her eyes spent a lot of time rapaciously devouring Lucius Malfoy.

Evan may have been aware of this as well, because suddenly he put a lot more effort into being an entertaining host, in an effort to reclaim Felina's attentions for himself. One afternoon, he took Severus, Lucius, and Felina on a tour of the creepier nooks and corners of the Rosier manor the secret passageway from the library to one of the upstairs bedrooms; the weird painting of a pale, peaky-looking great-great-uncle who had been a poet and who committed suicide in his twenties, that still whispered haunting verses now and then; the cold spot in the bedroom where his grandfather died of a seizure. Lucius surveyed everything with a jaded air of been-there, done-that, as though amused that Evan found these funny, homey little quirks at all interesting, and worse still, Felina was starting to join him.

"I know let's go see if the spiders have taken over that cellar with the trapdoor yet," Severus said, by way of helping his friend out. "You should see the spiderwebs they've put up they're practically constructing spider cathedrals and aqueducts down there."

The others agreed to this plan, so they all headed down a stone corridor to the very bottom foundations of the manor. At the lowest part was a heavy trapdoor, really just a block of stone wrapped in iron brackets, and so heavy that Severus could barely move it himself at that age. It was only accessible by a wooden ladder kept propped against the wall for this purpose.

Once they had the trapdoor open and descended the ladder, they found themselves in a room the size of a small bedchamber, with walls of untreated stone, and inhabited by no one but some really impressive spiders, who ruled over the dank space like Mongol chieftains over the Asian plains, building floor-to-ceiling webs. Evan was mildly claustrophobic and loathed spiders, and thus regarded this chamber with a mixture of fear and fascination.

"Oh, yes, you know what this really is," Lucius said, in a spooky ghost-story sort of voice, after the four of them had poked around for awhile, marvelling at the absolutely huge spiderwebs. "It's an oubliette. And you know what people used to do with these there's no way to get out of one without outside help, so the old Wizarding lords used to drop people down here when they *really* wanted to forget about them." Right on cue, Felina gave a wide-eyed, girlish squeal and shiver.

"Actually, I think this was going to be a storeroom or a root cellar, but they never got around to building stairs for it," Evan pointed out.

Then Severus saw Felina and Lucius exchange a look a very conspiratorial sort of look and then Felina gave a shudder and made for the ladder out. "It's absolutely revolting in here. I'm leaving."

She climbed up the ladder, followed by Lucius. But just as Severus was reaching for the ladder, it was abruptly jerked up and out of his hand. "Hey!" he yelled. He strained up for the ladder, but Lucius held it just out of his reach.

Lucius laughed down at him and Evan "Would you like to get back up?"

"Come on, Malfoy, this isn't fecking funny. Drop the ladder," Evan snapped in agitation. He made a jump for the bottom rung, but Lucius again pulled it out of reach at the last second.

"Hah, too bad!" Lucius taunted gaily, to the accompaniment of Felina's shrill, admiring giggles.

"Lucius, give it here," Severus shouted crossly.

But then the trapdoor *chunked* closed, sealing the two of them in pitch black darkness.

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In reality it was probably forty-five minutes to an hour before Lucius and Felina came back for them, but it felt much, much longer.

It took a few minutes to dawn on Severus and Evan that they were trapped and Lucius and Felina weren't coming back. Then Evan's voice began to sound panicky, and Severus got out his wand and invoked a *Lumos* spell only to discover that one of the great spiders from the webs all around them was strolling up Evan's robes. He brushed it off with a shudder and cry of disgust.

Evan then got out his own wand and vented his annoyance on some of the spiderwebs all around them but then the close air of the oubliette was suffused with the smell of burning dust and sticky, invisible strands, which was even more disgusting. The two of them paced in a tight circle, grumbling and cursing like sailors.

At last, the trapdoor opened, and Lucius and Felina lowered the ladder down to them, chortling and grinning as though they had played a light-hearted joke indeed, but the first thing Evan did upon getting back up was give Lucius an extremely hard *thump* on the shoulder. "You bastard, you think that's funny? It's pitch dark and full of bugs down there, you sod!"

Lucius just gave another airy laugh so Evan and Severus exchanged one look, and then they both grabbed Lucius and stuffed him down into the hole, *sans* ladder, and sat on the trapdoor, sulking. But Lucius had only put up a token struggle, laughing as though he knew they had a right to be annoyed and sportingly didn't begrudge them a

spot of revenge, so their vindication was rather spoiled. Felina paced and whined the entire time Lucius was a prisoner, so in the end, they only kept him down there for perhaps ten minutes. Lucius came up remarkably clean and composed, and just laughed when Evan made a production of brushing him off and ever-so-accidentally transferring dirt, ash, and cobwebs from his own clothes onto Lucius in the process.

While Evan seemed to think that Lucius had left them down in the oubliette just for a sadistic practical joke, Severus had his own suspicions as to why his cousin might have wanted the two of them out of his way for awhile and a long, raking glance at Felina confirmed every one of them. She had a purple bite mark on the side of her neck, the edge of which was just visible above her demure white lace collar, and her thick dark hair was slightly mussed, with tendrils escaping from her prissy braided upsweep. Severus inclined his nose slightly in her direction and detected just the faintest whiff of Lucius's limewater shaving lotion coming off her clothes.

"You'll want to put a drop of Healing Potion on that thing on your neck," he muttered to her and she spun around and stared at him, her eyes dilating wide with surprise.

Felina remained on her best behaviour and tiptoed around Severus for the remainder of the summer, but he never said a word to Evan about what he had seen. Evan had fancied Felina like anything for years, and Evan had always treated him like a brother, and he wasn't about to spoil his friend's happiness.

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In no time at all, his summer's respite at Evan's was over, and seventh year started. This time, Severus made the rounds of the bookshops and Madam Malkin's alone, to have the sleeves and hems of his previous year's school robes let down, as he couldn't afford new ones.

School life went on around him in all of its oblivious, boisterous dullness Quidditch, House Cup competition, N.E.W.T. prep, more career counselling but very little made it through Severus's detachment. He was there to get the best possible marks on his N.E.W.T.s, and nothing else mattered. Even the conflict with his old enemies Sirius Black and James Potter was now too tiresome to be endured. Potter seemed to have buckled down and started really studying, which was a surprise, but Black was his same old, same old self, and his self-important dramatics were petty and exhausting. Always with the *my family doesn't love me, I'm a rebel, a loner, I walk alone against the wind* theatrics, which were invariably carried on in the presence of potential romantic conquests. (One thing you could be sure of with Sirius Black, he never had emotional epiphanies when no one else was looking.) To Snape, who would not look for consolation from anyone even after his beloved mother died and his father disowned him, Black's pleas for attention could not have been more obvious or irritating. He was just so *common*, so tiresome, so publicly undignified he talked about his family problems like a costermonger crying the price of his cabbages in a market square. Severus knew any number of Orcadian fishwives with more decorum.

But the worst part of it was that Lily Evans seemed so *sympathetic* to the big crybaby. And she was actually spending time with Potter, as well no accounting for taste. Severus thought she deserved better, but some women just seemed to find complete slimeballs attractive, and it was just their fate to find some bloke to treat them like monkey shite, it seemed. Ah well, it wasn't his job to save her from herself and she had cut her eyes warily away from him every time their paths crossed since fifth year.

Perhaps it was this new sort of cold, uncaring dismissal on Severus's part that incensed Black to the boiling point during their seventh year. During the first five years of school, Severus had at least recognised him as a real and immediate threat, reacting with the proper shame and humiliation during incidents like the infamous robes-around-his-head matter fifth year. From sixth year on, as Black went about with his prodigal son's heart bleeding on his sleeve and Snape failed to in any way care about or even notice any of it, the Gryffindor's hatred sharpened to a perverse fever pitch.

By Severus's seventh year, he was to learn that Hell hath no fury like Gryffindor grandstanding denied the audience to which it felt entitled.

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Slytherin House being Slytherin House, when the vile blows and buffets of the world have so incensed a seventeen-year-old boy that he becomes reckless as to what he does to spite the world, he can find a host of similarly alienated aiders and abettors to his discontent no further away than his own common room. Severus had once thought some of the other boys in his year, like Malcolm Bulstrode, Elias Wilkes, Galen Goyle, and Nestor Crabbe, who only seemed to want to do things like jinx the Gryffindor Quidditch team's broomsticks and set small fires in classrooms, were complete wastes of spit, but during his seventh year, he found he had a surprising lot in common with them besides, of course, the fact that they were all paying him to write their compositions for them. In the halls and during his infrequent trips down to Hogsmeade, he had fallen in with their notorious little clique like a haughty, superior mascot, finding his niche as the undisputed brains of the group.

Wilkes, Bulstrode, Crabbe, and Goyle were all on the Quidditch team (and doing nothing for the stereotype of the lunk-headed athlete with no academic talent, either), and all came from well-heeled families, so Severus earned a substantial amount of his pocket money from the lot of them. One afternoon well into the second term of seventh year, Severus had made a trip down to the Quidditch pitch to transact a bit of illicit business with one of the athletes.

He met a group of the Slytherin players, among them Wilkes, Crabbe, Goyle, and Bulstrode, getting ready to head back up the castle from the field, broomsticks and gym bags in hand. One of them, Elias Wilkes, curtly nodded to Severus to join him off to one side of the stands, where he covertly slipped him a handful of clinking gold.

"Oh come off it, Wilkes we agreed ten Galleons for your end-of-term essay don't hand me nine and hope I won't notice. Seeing as how I'm the best academic whore in the business, don't expect me to be an inexpensive one," Severus said archly, holding the scroll just out of Wilkes's reach.

Wilkes smiled sourly. "All right, all right, you drive a hard bargain, Snape," he said. Another Galleon crossed his palm, and Snape handed over the parchment.

"Well well well what have we here," came a suspicious voice from around the stands. Sirius Black appeared around the corner, followed by Peter Pettigrew and Remus Lupin. The three of them often came down to the pitch to watch the flying wonderboy Potter practice and cheer him on, in what Severus deemed a disgusting display of rah-rah asskissery. "Snape gives Wilkes a scroll, and receives a handful of Galleons for it do I smell a bit of Slytherish wrongdoing going on?"

"No, you saw me giving Wilkes copies of my notes for a class he missed, and the repayment of a debt owed from the last Hogsmeade weekend, you suspicious sack of dung," Severus said instantly he had always been talented at thinking on his feet. "Just doing my part to help one of our players out."

"Really? Why don't I believe your virtuous act, Snape?" He turned toward Lupin "You're a prefect, Remus maybe you should go look at that parchment Snape gave Wilkes, there."

"Sirius, it's just a piece of parchment. If I got all worried every time someone handed someone else a piece of paper at this school, I'd have no time to do anything else," Lupin scoffed. "Come on, let's go. I've got homework to do."

But Black wasn't satisfied. "What class did you miss, that you need notes for, Wilkes?" he asked, aggressively approaching the Slytherins. "I don't recall missing you in any classes lately."

"What, we have to account to you for every class we miss and every bit of paper we hand each other?" Severus flared up angrily. He was now growing a bit nervous at Black's persistence if he got caught writing essays for pay, he would get in a great deal of trouble, and he was proud of his impeccable academic record and wanted very much to keep it impeccable. "Who the hell do you think you are, the Headmaster?"

"You know, Snivvy, me lad, it's late enough in the year that I won't have to polish trophies long if we get another look at your grotty underpants," Black said, his hand going for his wand and suddenly found himself facing Severus's wand and those of most of the Slytherin Quidditch team.

"Knock it off, Black," Wilkes snarled back. He would have been failing Potions had it not been for Severus's essays, and he was far too practical of a fellow to see his greatest academic asset damaged. "If you do anything to him, you'll answer to us."

"Sirius, stop it," Lupin said impatiently. "Quit pestering these prats and let's go, I haven't got time for this!"

But Black still wasn't finished. "Awww, how sweet. If I've heard it once, I've heard it a million times *Slytherins look after their own*," Black sneered at Wilkes. Thwarted in his quest to get the Slytherins in trouble, he fell back on his old favourite pastime of hurling insults and invective. "And they breed their own too, don't they?"

"I've always thought Slytherin House was full of fine examples of what happens when cousins marry," Pettigrew sniggered, clearly thinking himself very brave and witty indeed. Lupin looked pained and said nothing.

"Your friend Sirius would know more about that than any of us would, Pet-It," Severus snapped back, instantly, lazily aiming his wand point at first Black, then Pettigrew, then Lupin. "I don't know where you get off insulting our families, when everyone knows that your best mate's is so *always-pure* it's a wonder those pretty eyes aren't on his nipples." He raised his voice and addressed his group of cronies "I've got a joke for you, lads what does a Black say to his cousin?"

"Tell us!" the other Slytherins called.

*"Oh yes, Mrs. Black, do it again, harder, please... '*Severus sighed, in a high, breathless voice, and the others just about fell over themselves laughing.

Sirius Black, however, made no retort, and his face erupted with blushing none of which escaped Severus's attention. "Oh, by the great Merlin look at him blush! You *do* fancy your cousins, don't you," he hissed, his black eyes glinting malevolently. "So which one of them do you want to shag, Bella or Narcissa? Or maybe both at once? You really are *your mother's boy,* aren't you?"

Severus's derision at the Blacks came just as much out of his creeping anxiety over the illicit essay now tucked barely out of sight in Wilkes's bag, and the promissory note he was going to owe Druella Black for his mother's funeral expenses when he came of age, as his years of hatred for Sirius Black himself. It all added a subtle extra malice to his voice that seemed to thrill and inspire his cluster of co-conspirators.

"Oh, good Lord, that's pathetic," Bulstrode laughed.

"If your family tree hasn't forked since a Tudor was on the throne, your surname is probably Black," sniggered Wilkes. Black glared murderously at Severus only the proximity of a group of other foes kept him from attacking outright, and Severus knew it.

"Yah, Snape the way you cosy up to Aunt Druella, she's going to be trying to marry both of them off to you," Black sneered. " *'Whyn't you try to be a young gentleman, like Eileen Snape's son. He was always so good to his poor mother.' "* To Snape's great surprise, he realised that the Gryffindor was unmistakeably mimicking his own mother's shrill tones, which he half-remembered from the train station platform.

Snape's gaze deepened with malice as he surveyed the Gryffindor's face so Black and his mother got on even worse than he suspected, and Aunt Druella had been boasting about her great-nephew to her sister-in-law, Mrs. Black. One or both of them were now apparently throwing his own example into Black's face. Oh, this was brilliant. He could *use* this.

"Oh, cheer up, old chap," Snape said, in his softest, silkiest tones. "Compared to your mad desire to shag your best friend's girl, a few incestuous impulses aren't too bad, now, are they ?"

He had been guessing about Black's crush on Lily but even he was not prepared for the reaction that followed. Black's face turned purple and his teeth clenched and then he had launched himself on Snape, his fist impacting with the other boy's jaw with a resounding *crack.* Then everyone had jumped at the two of them, including Pettigrew and Lupin, and it took nearly all of their combined efforts to drag Black off of him.

"You'll get yours, you little shite, Snape," Black snarled, his eyes fairly sparking with hatred. *"You'll get yours."*

He gave a harsh, barklike laugh, then let Lupin and Pettigrew pull him away across the grass.

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Oh, bloody hell. Oh, how really fecking *wonderful.*

It was one thing to end up in the Headmaster's office after being pantsed fifth year.

It was quite another thing to end up in the Headmaster's office because one of one's classmates had attempted to kill you seventh year and the faculty refused to take the incident seriously or fucking do anything about it other than subject the perpetrator to some really savage *counselling.*

Black's curiosity over the way Severus collected Galleons for scrolls had made him quite uncomfortable in the last half of their seventh year, so much so that Severus had retaliated by launching his own campaign to gather some information on Black's various bits of wrongdoing and, as usual, Severus managed to unearth far more about Black and his friends than they had ever managed to gather on him. One thing you could be sure of with Slytherins was that they knew how to cover their tracks, and Severus was no different.

But then the so-called Marauders, it had seemed, had gotten even more sloppy than before, and had accidentally leaked a crucial bit of information about some unhanded happening going on in the Shrieking Shack, and Severus had pounced on the chance to implicate them in something, hoping to get them in trouble, or even better, expelled. However, the real circumstances of the situation had gone so far beyond anything Severus could have previously imagined that he was still half in shock about it. Now, as he waited for Dumbledore to join him, he was pouring all of his considerable will into forcing his hands to stop shaking.

The Sorting Hat was again blathering to itself in one corner when he came in. "Ah, Mr. Snape," it said when it saw him. "You've got a right bee in your bonnet today, a right *big* bee in your bonnet."

"Don't even start with me, you lackwitted piece of antic millinery," Severus said, in a low, warning tone.

"Oh yes, you were going to disintegrate me in my sleep when you were ten years old, how well I remember that. You were one of the most memorable first-years I'd ever Sorted, my boy, truly," the Hat chortled.

Severus might have made good on the threat of disintegration then and there, but the Headmaster chose that moment to make his entrance. He waved Severus into one of the armchairs before his desk and launched into another achingly nice speech but this time, Severus didn't bother to pretend that he was shrugging off this incident with good grace. It was all he could do to pretend he was listening.

Finally, the Headmaster paused, seemed to be waiting for a response and this time Severus didn't bother to restrain what he really thought.

"Yes, you keep sawing on about how James Potter saved my life, and how grateful I should be for it," he said, his eyes fixed on Dumbledore's. "Potter saved my life, all hail the good and noble Potter but somehow you won't admit that Sirius Black tried to kill me. Nor will you admit to your own lapse in judgment in allowing a known werewolf to enter this school."

"No, I do not believe that Sirius Black attempted to kill you," Dumbledore said gently.

"Yet you continually aver that James Potter saved my life, for which I am now indebted to him. Somehow, I simply can't make the leap of logic required to accept that my life was in danger if no one intentionally endangered it. Which is it, Headmaster? Make up your mind, because I'll not let you have it both ways."

"There is no doubt in my mind that you could have been killed because of Mr. Black's actions in sending you into the Shrieking Shack while it held Mr. Lupin in his... changed state, yes," Dumbledore replied. "And there is no doubt in my mind that James acted out of a desire to save your life, my boy. I know he has wronged you in the past, but he has not done so in this instance. I believe James's conscience reasserted itself, and he did what he could to protect you."

"Forgive me if I'm not as *impressed* by Potter's actions as you seem to be," Severus retorted, unmoved. "Since when is it in any way *heroic* to refuse to conspire to commit murder? I beg your pardon, but I was under the impression that that's what anyone who wants to live amongst civilised people *should* do. You don't hex other people for fun, and you don't let your friends send them into a werewolf's holding cell. That's just what a decent person *does*." His forefinger jabbed into the surface of the Headmaster's desk.

"And I agree with you," Dumbledore said. "I agree absolutely, James showed indescribably poor judgment in going along with Mr. Black's plans for as long as he did. But the fact remains that a life debt is old magic, magic from before even Merlin's time, and you know as well as I do what that means."

"I'll be appropriately grateful to Potter the day you *appropriately discipline* Sirius Black," Severus said furiously. His arms were folded argumentatively over his thin chest in a manner that would become characteristic in later life, and his black eyes blazed through his dishevelled curtain of black hair. "I think expulsion would be wholly appropriate in this case, for both of them."

"Mr. Snape... I'll level with you." The Headmaster leaned forward and regarded Severus with profound gravity over the tops of his spectacles. "I do not believe that it would do any good whatsoever to expel Sirius Black and send him back to his parents. No, I think the worst thing I could ever do would be to send Sirius back to his parents. There are many differences of opinion within that family, and I believe that Sirius's parents' expectations may result in a worse fate for him than you could possibly imagine. I cannot send him back to them, any more than I can condone his actions in sending you in to confront Remus."

"With all due respect, sir, I don't give a toss about Sirius Black's unhappy childhood my own was hardly an endless round of innocent good times either," Severus snapped back. "Yes, I see your real reasoning. Black is a brave, noble Gryffindor, so therefore his murder attempt is obviously a cry for help. Lupin didn't ask to be bitten by a werewolf, so we all have to help him, even if it means putting innocent people at risk. But I'll bet you a hundred Galleons against a Knut that if Black had been a Slytherin, he'd have been expelled, and would be waiting to be booked for attempted murder right now. Wouldn't he." His eyes glittered with fury, and perhaps even righteous indignation.

"No, he would not," Dumbledore said firmly. "There has never been an expulsion at this school while I've been Headmaster, Mr. Snape, and I'm proud of that record. I firmly believe that expulsion is never the best solution to any problem. I've been a teacher for a very long time, longer than you have been alive, and I can count on my big left toe the number of truly incorrigible students I have met in all that time. I sincerely believe that there is good in Sirius Black, just as I've always believed that there was good in you, and in all of my students. I believe that Sirius Black put you in a situation in which your life was in danger, but I do not believe that he did so with the intention of killing you. Frightening you, yes but killing you, no."

"Why don't I believe that?" Severus asked coldly. "And while you're at it, why don't you explain to me why I don't believe *anything* you say anymore?"

The Headmaster took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "My boy... you have always been an exemplary student, and I am well aware that your discipline record here is very good "

"*Spotless*," Severus interjected. "My discipline record here is *nonexistent*."

"Yes, I know. I agree that you have been treated poorly *monumentally* poorly by your two classmates. But at this moment, I would thank you to remember that I am Headmaster of this school, and well over a hundred years your senior, and to ask you to mind the way you address me," Dumbledore said, a warning glint in his blue eyes.

"I do beg your pardon, sir," Severus said frostily. "Yes, I should be happy to *mind the way I address you*." And with that, he got up, spun around, and headed for the door.

"I didn't dismiss you, Mr. Snape," Dumbledore called after him.

Severus paused for a moment at the doorway. "Again, I beg your pardon, sir, but I do seem to have dismissed *you*. And I am quite confident that leaving this room without your dismissal will not result in my expulsion from this school. Because to me, it seems as though there isn't anything one *can* do, to get oneself expelled from this school."

With that, he made his exit, firmly convinced that he had spoken to Albus Dumbledore for the last time.

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N.E.W.T.s were as easy as Severus had expected them to be. He went through the motions almost resentfully, as though disgusted by the material's inability to challenge or even interest him.

But the week after his N.E.W.T.s unexpectedly brought a letter from Abraxas Malfoy, sorrowfully informing him that the night before, Tobias Snape had been in his club for his usual supper and evening drinks. He had ordered a Scotch and soda, and by the time the waiter returned with the glass, the elder Snape was dead in his chair. The hypertension that his father had ignored for so many years had finally asserted itself in a manner that could not be disregarded.

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There was a ceremony and reception for the seventh years leaving Hogwarts every year, but Severus was not able to attend them. It is entirely possible that he would not have attended them even if he had been able, but his father's funeral made it unnecessary to even decide.

He had nothing to do with any funeral arrangements for his father while he may have been willing to go into debt to the tune of over two thousand Galleons at double-digit interest to finance his mother's funeral, he paid no visits to Aunt Druella on account of Tobias Snape. His father could be cremated at government expense and interred in a pauper's grave for all he cared. As it turned out, however, his grandmother stepped in as next of kin, and took care of the funeral herself. His father was interred next to his wife in the family crypt in Orkney, and Severus deigned to appear in black dress robes to listen to the service, and share a meal with the other mourners at the reception that followed. While he had been heartbroken beyond that which a sixteen-year-old should ever have to suffer when his mother died, he hadn't even brought a handkerchief to his father's funeral.

As all the other mourners were his father's friends and business associates, and seemed content to talk shares and trading and hostile acquisitions around his father's coffin with the requisite cocktails in their hands, Severus found it easy to make himself invisible off in a corner, sipping now and then from a coffee mug full of Scotch sneaked from the bar.

When that mug was almost gone, someone sat down next to him and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Hello, my boy," his grandmother said. "Where have you been? You never visit."

He looked blearily up at her. "Did you want me to?"

"All your *life*," Octavia replied, with a hint of reproach in her voice. "All the proof I have of my grandson's existence is a photograph of a newborn baby and a pile of little thank-you notes, did you know that?"

"Sorry," he whispered. "I didn't know."

She leaned forward and sniffed then raised her own sinister black eyebrow at him. "What are you drinking?"

"Scotch," he admitted, with a careless little shrug he was in too low of a mood to care what anyone had to say about underage drinking at that moment.

Octavia just smiled understandingly at him. "When all these pompous stuffed shirts have gone, what do you say about sharing a round with your old grandma?" she asked.

He regarded her with a faint, grateful smile. "Yes... that would be all right."

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"Snaples? Severus?" Evan bent over his bed. "Hey, you all right, there, mate?"

"No." He sat up, pressed his hand despondently to his forehead.

The bed creaked as his friend sat down next to him. "Hey, come on, man. What's wrong?"

"Bloody hell, Evan... everything's wrong," he said, raking his greasy, uncombed hair off his face. "School's over and my mother died and there's never enough money and I don't know what to fucking do with myself."

"I know, I know. We've all got to lose our parents sometime, but it shouldn't've happened like that to you, one right after the other."

"You should have let me hit him," Severus said grimly, after a moment. "I would have liked to be able to remember just one good crack at him."

"Yeah, you're right, kid. I should've let you. Just once." Evan looked ruefully at him and finally, miraculously, they both laughed.

"All right, then, you don't know what to do with yourself? Then I'll tell you what to do," Evan said, giving him a good-natured swat on the arm. "Get your arse out of bed and have a shower and brush your teeth, because I tell you, mate, your breath smells like the bottom of a birdcage."

"Thanks. You're looking disgustingly good yourself, Lothario."

"There's the sarcastic bastard we all know and love." Evan grinned at him. "And after you've washed off this odoriferous patina of gothic melodrama, you're going to come down to the village with me and let me buy you some supper and a pint. And this might cheer you up I'm getting married. Felina finally said she'd marry me. You'll be my best man, won't you?"

"Well, sure I will."

"You know what once you've properly cleaned, de-loused, and fumigated yourself, why don't you throw some things in a bag and come down to our place for a visit, help me out with some of this wedding fol-de-rol. All by yourself up here, no wonder you get depressed. A lot of the old crowd from school's been about, come on. There's lots going on, and I don't want you to be by yourself right now."

"Yeah... I could do that."

Evan gathered him in for a rough, boyish, comforting hug, gently thumping his back. "'S all right, mate. You'll be all right."

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fortune, which despite the dearth of generations in which to be amassed, was rumoured to be approaching the Malfoy-Nott-Rookwood-Fudge-Potter-Swain-Tugwood-Hipworth-Ollivander level, and his unmarried status made him a catch as far as husband material went. Severus hadn't previously heard about Parkinson's romance with Bellatrix Black, but he wasn't surprised by the news.

"At any rate," Lucius continued, "Narcissa told me that Bella had decided it was time for him to propose to her sometime around Christmas, but when she let Emmitt know this was expected, he promptly showed her the door. I could have told her he would never marry her, he's the sort who'd never marry any woman who wasn't a virgin, and everyone knows that Bella's had more lovers than Genghis Khan had wives. She'd probably have a masculine harem if she was let, bless her." He laughed knowingly into his brandy glass.

"So," Lucius continued, "Emmitt's mother and sisters have prevailed upon him to go to all of the Wiltshire cotillions with them this season, and everyone knows it's because he's looking for some sweet, innocent young thing to despoil ahem, to marry. Bella's frantic to keep him herself, so much that Narcissa's actually a bit worried that she'll make a spectacle of herself, and none of the Blacks have ever had any influence over her whatsoever. Before all this Tithe page nonsense, I'd promised Narcissa that I would keep an eye on Bella for her and make sure she didn't do anything unseemly, but I can hardly do that from the Faerielands," Lucius said, with a jovial, hopeless, shrug.

"Of course," Severus muttered.

"What do you say, then, old man? Think you could spend the summer at Malfeasant and play host a bit while I'm gone? You know, keep my fiancée entertained and her sister out of trouble? If you can, I'll make certain that a nice something shows up in your Gringotts vault, for expenses. And why don't you make a trip down to our tailors' in Sartor Alley, for some new things, dress robes and the like, you'll need them this summer. We've an account there, and I'm not worried, I know you're not the profligate sort. I'll tell them to expect you."

"I don't know. When would I have to show up?" Severus asked.

"I'm leaving in February, and the Blacks are showing up in early June. Just get there as soon as you can after the wedding I'll have the house-elves get a room ready and a key made for you. Come on, cousin, it'll be fun. My parents miss you." Lucius leaned forward with a grateful, brotherly smile "And you know there's no one other than you who I would really *trust* with Narcissa."

Yes, there was no one else Lucius would trust with Narcissa, because he knew that Narcissa liked him, but found him about as physically attractive as maggoty bread. Plus, Cousin Severus could be trusted to watch over Narcissa's continuing virtue with a zeal born out of what Lucius thought was his own thwarted adoration for her. Lucius's narcissism was so fecking predictable. But he could use some money, and it would be nice to have some new dress robes in time for the wedding.

"Well, I suppose I could do it," Severus said. "Do you need my Gringotts vault number?"

"Wonderful." Lucius smirked conspiratorially across the table at him. "I knew you'd never let me down, old man."

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The day of Evan's May wedding dawned rosy and glorious.

All was in order the garden at the Rosier manor was set up with flower-bedecked, white draped tables set with fine china, crystal, and silver, the champagne was chilling, and an army of house-elves was putting the finishing touches on a sumptuous wedding feast. The guests were assembling in the village chapel for the ceremony, done up in their best spring dress robes, white tie on the men, hats and gloves and heirloom pearls on the ladies.

Severus met Evan in the anteroom at the front of the chapel, resplendent in the new robes the Malfoys' bespoke tailor had made up for him. While he often thought the practice of buying all one's clothes made to measure was the height of unnecessary self-indulgence, he had to admit they looked awfully smart, the smartest robes he had ever owned, and it was nice to have something to wear that actually fit him properly for a change.

"Hey, mate. Yes, definitely picked myself a prime best man when you put on black dress robes, you make everyone else look frumpy, Snaples. I'm glad you're here, really am." Evan greeted him with a brilliant smile and a warm handshake. "By the Merlin, I can't believe this, it seems like yesterday we were kids at school."

The music started out in the chapel, and the two of them headed for the door. "This is the best day ever I get to marry my girl with my best friend standing beside me. Just let me do the same for you sometime, eh?"

"Pah there's no girl in this world good enough for me, you know that."

Evan beamed with smiles throughout the ceremony, looking happier than Severus had ever seen him. It did his heart good to see that someone in this big corrupt world was happy with his lot in life. Too bad the bride was such a materialistic and untrustworthy little shrew, but at least with Lucius in the Faerielands, she wouldn't be sneaking off with him at the reception.

In all, the wedding went off without a hitch the groom was raptly happy and passionately in love, the bride deigned to look momentarily pleased and contented, and the best man bemusedly thought: *I just hope the fucking you're getting is worth the fucking you're getting, my friend.*

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Then Evan and Felina were pronounced husband and wife, and Evan escorted his bride down the aisle to the cheers and applause of all the guests. The guests filed out of the chapel on their way out to the Rosiers' for the wedding feast and cotillion to follow.

Severus was to be Narcissa Black's escort for the reception, so after the wedding, he headed into the chapel foyer to find her

and there, he re-encountered Bellatrix Black.

Tall, sloe-eyed, curvaceous, queenly... Bellatrix Black. She was still rouging her lips deep red, and now she was wearing dark red velvet robes to match.

In contrast to the tight updos or intricately braided coiffures of the other women, Bella's long straight dark hair was unfettered, blowing in the wind from the chapel door. Same cream-white skin and delicately chiselled features, with deep-set dark eyes still capable of swallowing one completely. Severus knew the blonde, porcelain-pretty Narcissa Black was often considered to be the lovelier of the two sisters, but even at ten years old, Severus had found Narcissa haughty and sexless by comparison to the gypsyish sensuality of Bella.

Now, at eighteen, he still couldn't stop stealing glances at her, even as he offered Lucius's fiancée his arm to escort her to the wedding supper.

"Why, my little Severus Snape, how you've grown," Bellatrix said, when he appeared at Narcissa's elbow. Her dark eyes raked appraisingly over him from head to toes, and then she smiled, as though she approved of what she saw. And somehow she put an inflection into those words that left his cock half erect just hearing it.

"Hello, Miss Black," he said.

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Severus was not fond of parties in general and disliked the prosaic and unimaginative traditionalism of wedding receptions in particular had it not been Evan's wedding, nothing in the world could have persuaded him to dance a waltz with the maid of honour or even stand up for the garter toss. (It had also been irksome to have to deliver the best man's toast to the new couple, knowing full well that Evan had been Felina's second choice of husband, but he pulled it off by truthfully praising Evan's virtues as a

friend, and expressing his hopes that the years would find their happiness together increasing.) Then, after his duties were done, he withdrew to a vantage point at the side of the festivities with a drink, as per his usual custom.

This wedding, however, proved to have something more interesting to look at than he had ever imagined because by the Merlin's hoary testicles, Bellatrix Black had grown into a bona fide *stunner.*

He had found her incredibly pretty when he was a boy at school, when he had been eleven to her seventeen, but six years had passed since his last glimpse of her, and now she seemed a creature of impossible beauty. Bella had to be somewhere in her twenties now, gotten a bit taller and a good bit shapelier since she left school, and the fluid cut and deep neckline of the sleeveless scarlet robes she wore showed that slender yet voluptuous figure off to perfection. She also wore long black satin opera gloves that set off her pale shoulders and slim arms, and had a ruby pendant tied around her neck on a black ribbon so that the ruby nestled in that tender hollow of her throat most fetchingly.

Bella had taken a seat near him after the champagne toast, sipping from her fluted glass. As she took her seat, she gathered up her long skirts to reveal even longer legs in sheer black stockings, and dainty feet in cunning little kitten-heeled black slippers... and then she crossed one oval knee over the other, revealing just a second's flash of embroidered lace stocking top before rearranging her skirts...

And then Severus suddenly noticed that he had gotten hard enough to make his teeth hurt, and had to shift position in his chair and resettle his robes so as to maintain his composure and then he looked up and noticed Bellatrix looking right at him.

Then, he felt all colour drain from his face as he realised that she had caught him staring at her, seen his dull-eyed fascination, probably seen him crossing his legs and readjusting his robes against the sudden hardness between his thighs. Then his whole body was aflame with incredible embarrassment.

But to his complete surprise, her look held nothing of the brittle outrage he expected... no, she was gazing shamelessly into his eyes, with the tiniest, wickedest little smile on her face, as if to say, *Yes, I know what you want, my dear, I'm on to you.*And rather than angry... she seemed pleased. Watching him with her pink tongue hovering between her pearly teeth, those knowing, unshockable brown eyes alight with avidity.

He got up, nodded curtly to her then turned and fled.

Part Third: The Hart Subvertant: Prologue Part 4

Chapter 39 of 55

In which we see what happened back in the Wizarding world while Lucius was in Arcadia for his Tithe year…

Prologue: Like a Plant Kept in the Dark, Part 4:

Then Evan and Felina made their grand exit off to their honeymoon, and Severus left the Rosiers' manor and went back up to Snape Hall to make his preparations for an extended holiday at Malfeasant.

Lucius had, as he promised before his departure, sent an owl with various keys and instructions regarding wards and security at Malfeasant, so Severus was able to let himself in when he arrived on June 1st, just before the Blacks were to arrive. A small group of house-elves arrived to greet him and take his new cloak (also acquired at the Malfoys' bespoke tailors, a week before) and take his trunks, the same ones Octavia had given him when he was ten. The elves ushered him up to his accustomed little garret guest room and helped him to unpack.

Aunt Tamora and Uncle Abraxas greeted him at a small but sumptuous family supper in the sunroom on the day of his arrival. The three of them discussed the upcoming Wiltshire social season and events planned for the summer, as well as plans for Lucius's wedding in October of the next year. Severus nodded understandingly as Aunt Tamora bent his ear about how disappointing it was to have to push the wedding back six months, and nodded understandingly again as Uncle Abraxas described the necessity of sending Lucius away for the year and remarked that there was nothing like a year in the Third Kingdom to bring colour into a young man's cheeks.

"There's those that send their children to Italy for a fresh and robust character, but I say, I'd take a year with the Fae any day," his uncle averred. "And hopefully he'll pick up some of the Faeries' magic, like old Buck Swain did. Have you ever been introduced to the Swains, nephew? No? Pity, they're a fine old lot, salt of the earth, really. Well " Uncle Abraxas exchanged a look with his wife " except for the new branch on the family tree, but the native wife and daughter seem harmless enough, both easy on the eyes, and no hankering to move here, thank Merlin. But Faery magic, that's the thing, tricksy stuff it is, never could quite get my head 'round but a few charms of it, but let's hope Lucius fares better than his old dad, shall we?"

"Of course, Uncle," Severus replied.

"Buck Swain's a fine fellow to learn it from. He's practically a Faerie himself these days, except without the long ears, of course," Abraxas Malfoy said with another swallow of brandy, and Severus chuckled dutifully.

After supper, Aunt Tamora took Severus into the garden for a walk. After he had duly admired this year's crop of roses, she gave him the rundown of upcoming events, and a list of things it would be absolutely wonderful of him to help her with and by the end of that talk he had sent for a scroll of parchment and quill and had a To-Do list longer than his arm, but Aunt Tamora was beaming at him, saying that she'd always thought Eileen Snape had brought her son up to be a young gentleman with the best of them.

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Lucius's fiancée arrived two days later, in demure, high-necked robes of lacy pink silk, a straw picture hat, and white gloves, accompanied by her mother Druella, in her usual elaborate mourning, and younger brother Menzentius, slouching in an expensive tweed jacket. Severus and Aunt Tamora were on hand to greet them. A small troop of house-elves arrived to take their mountain of luggage as Aunt Tamora invited their guests in to high tea, and Severus had to step up and cough forbiddingly at the teenage Menzentius, who was dangling a little valise just out of reach of a pair of frustrated elves.

"I had a visit from your grandmother," Druella Black said, apropos of nothing, as Severus took her arm to escort her to the dining room.

"Really," Severus said.

"Is she still living in the Ollivander penthouse in Mayfair?" Druella rasped, a petulant expression puckering her wrinkled countenance even further.

"Yes, she's still living in Mayfair, Aunt Druella."

"You've been visiting her, haven't you."

"Yes, now and then."

"She's still a trustee of the wandmaking firm?" Druella barked.

Severus looked up, at a loss. "Er... I don't know," he said truthfully.

"You're with us for the summer?"

"Yes, Lucius asked me to help his parents this summer," he said politely. "I'm glad to see you all."

Druella fell silent as he handed her into her chair at the table, her eyes raking over his new day robes and new boots, and sulked at him. Perhaps she was offended that her great-nephew had found less high-interest patronage elsewhere, or perhaps she was just much fatigued from her journey, and that put her out of sorts. Severus poured her out a cup of tea and handed a silver basket of hot scones across the table to her.

Aunt Druella barely spoke to him at lunch, somewhat to Severus's consternation. But he had no way of knowing at that time that Druella Rosier Black and Octavia Ollivander Prince had once been rival belles of Slytherin House, and while his grandmother's late husband's family had solidly maintained their fortunes throughout the years, the Blacks had not, and while Octavia's Grosvenor Square home was appreciating in value every year, the Blacks' London properties were depreciating every year. Severus was also only sketchily aware of the history of the Ollivander family, who had cornered the market on British wandmaking well over two thousand years ago and had held it ever since, despite the efforts of numerous other companies to carve out even a niche in the lucrative wand market. Due to the matter of the promissory notes, Severus had, all unawares, become a bone of contention between two wealthy and powerful society matriarchs without even realising what had happened, but at that moment, all he knew was that his great-aunt was not altogether pleased with him about something. It is of course never pleasant to be put in the position of having to console someone else for being thwarted in her attempt to take advantage of you, so he remained silent throughout most of tea.

Druella's eyes raked impatiently around the table. "Has anyone heard from Bellatrix yet?"

"No, she said she'd be here today though," Narcissa replied, demurely replacing her teacup in its saucer.

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The Malfoys' duck shooting party was held the Sunday after the Blacks arrived at Malfeasant.

The participants began to arrive just before sunrise Cassius Mulciber and his father arrived first, bringing with them a large, high-strung black Labrador retriever. They were followed by both the Nott cousins and their golden retriever, and not long after, by the dark, haughty Emmitt Parkinson, with his craggy cheekbones and disdainful manner, an obedient black and white English spaniel trotting beside him. The men all appeared in tweed coats and caps and high leather boots suitable for trampling through high grass and bushes after their lake-dwelling prey. Severus and his Uncle Abraxas were on hand to greet them, and the group stood about talking of wigeons and pintail and Gadwalls and shovelers, and throwing sticks for the dogs to chase, while here and there a house-elf stood about offering mugs of steaming tea.

Narcissa arrived a few minutes later, in a pearl-grey tweed hunting costume and high grey boots, her long blonde hair clubbed up in a thick braided knot, and took a seat on one of the benches near Severus. She sat primly, glancing from him to the elves with their trays of hot tea until he brought her a cup.

The men amused themselves with a bit of clay pigeon target practice out in the field beside the house before they set out. A group of house-elves scrambled frantically about to load the trap with targets and launch them into the air when one of the gentlemen shouted, "Pull!"

"Ever done this before, nephew?" Uncle Abraxas called to Severus, then waved him over when he shook his head *No.* "Come on, give it a try then. When the target flies up, you'll sight down your wand just a fraction ahead of it, and track into the way it's flying as you speak your incantation, like so yes, there's a lad. All right, have a turn then. Shout, 'Pull!' when you're ready that's right."

A clay disc skittered up into the air, and Severus's keen black eyes sighted down his wand *"Reducto"* and the bolt of golden energy fired from his wand clipped the edge of the target, shattering it into fragments.

"Nice shot, my boy!" his uncle crowed, clapping him on the shoulder. "You take to target shooting like one of the Black sisters, really, it's amazing who turns out to have a talent for marksmanship." He nodded politely toward Narcissa, still sitting primly with her teacup. "I'll never forget when little Miss Narcissa Black stepped up the other summer, pointed her pretty little white cherry wand at the sky and blew away all those targets one right after the other. And Bella you remember that Bella, there was no stopping her."

"Here the lady is now come on, Bella, show these blighters how it's done!" Cassius Mulciber called, beckoning to her from across the grass.

Bella had just arrived on the lawn, dressed for hunting in a full black tweed split skirt with matching short jacket, and high black boots. She threw back her dark head and sauntered across the lawn to join them, and once Bella's wand came out, she blew every single target away with an ease that provoked admiring glances from some of the men, and envious looks from others. She smiled triumphantly at Emmitt Parkinson, but he seemed more interested in throwing a stick for his dog than he did in congratulating her on her shooting prowess.

As the summer's visit progressed, Bella would outshoot every other guest at target practice with such regularity that the game was no longer as much fun when she participated. There was no competing for first place, but for who would be the first loser after Bella stomped them all.

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Soon the duck hunters were all assembled on the green, and Uncle Abraxas, Nott, Mulciber, and Parkinson let the dogs off their leashes. They quickly caught the scent and were off across the lawn in the direction of the woods and the lake just beyond, and then the party tramped into the brushy woods after them, wands at the ready.

As it was Severus's job to make certain Narcissa had an escort to all events that season and to prevent Bella from doing anything unseemly before guests, he tried to stick close to both sisters under the pretence of making sure they traversed the muddy bogs safely. But then Narcissa dropped her wand in some brush, and he had to retrieve it for her with a quick, *"Accio wand,"* and when he looked up, both Bella and Emmitt Parkinson had disappeared. *Oh, bloody hell.*

He veered off from Narcissa's side, looking fervently for Bella and glimpsed her talking to Parkinson just beyond a dense stand of oaks, saw her come very close to him and look meltingly up into his eyes, then try to put her arms around his neck. But then Parkinson turned disdainfully away, holding up his hand to fend her off, his posture stiff as a ramrod. Bella crooned something to him, and Parkinson made some kind of vehement denial but then Narcissa was calling rather peevishly to Severus not to fall behind, and he had to turn away and catch up to her.

He emerged from the trees to the edge of the lake, where the other hunters were assembled. The retrievers were loping up and down stands of trees and bushes, sniffing out ducks and flushing them into the air Narcissa sighted down her wand with cool, insouciant competence, and downed a sleek female with her first shot. An excited retriever dove into the water after the bird as it dropped from the sky.

A moment later, Bella stalked out of the trees to her sister's side, alone and clearly furious, just as the dogs sent another cluster of startled birds flapping into the air from some bushes. Her dark, angry eyes tracked into the ducks' path as they frantically made their escape, and then her wand was in her hand, pointing *"Avada Kedavra!"* she hissed through gritted teeth.

Her Killing Curse caught a large, proud drake dead on, and it spiralled lifeless into the lake, pursued by the dogs.

"Nice work, ladies, good show," Uncle Abraxas said, clapping Narcissa and then Bellatrix on the shoulder. "That'll be fine eating tonight at supper."

"Thank you," both sisters murmured. Just then, Emmitt Parkinson emerged from the trees, his eyes stubbornly averted, and Bella glowered murderously in his direction.

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Early that afternoon, the hunting party brought their bags of freshly shot duck back to Malfeasant, and the house-elves busied themselves with plucking, gutting, and roasting them for dinner while the hunters cleaned themselves up and dressed for dinner. The hunters rejoined the Malfoys and all their guests for a before-dinner cocktail on the rose garden veranda outside the drawing room; women in light summer at-home evening robes, and the men in dark robes and smoking jackets.

Emmitt Parkinson arrived rather late, in the company of his silver-haired and very much bejewelled and overdressed mother and a younger sister, who somehow managed to look dowdy in expensively hand-tailored robes. Mrs. and Miss Parkinson formed an airily chattering barrier between Parkinson and the sulky Bellatrix Black, who wore a red velvet smoking jacket over smart black satin robes. Perhaps for revenge, she sat amidst a group of admiring men with a brandy snifter in one hand and one of her spicy Egyptian cigarettes in the other as Uncle Abraxas told the story of how she and Narcissa hadn't missed a shot that day "I tell you, lads, these young ladies could keep us all in roast duck, all summer. Bloody good show, girls, bloody good show."

While Emmitt Parkinson's affection for Bellatrix seemed to have definitely cooled, she was the object of a tremendous amount of overheated admiration from another quarter. The Malfoys' visiting nephew found many occasions to make himself invisible on the periphery of the group, and to steal more admiring glances at Miss Bellatrix Black. He continued to do so for many, many evenings following.

Before she had been at Malfeasant for a week, Severus's lust for Bellatrix had become the fodder for all of his solitary nocturnal gratifications; as he caressed his own hardening sex, he would imagine her hands and mouth doing it for him, imagine her slim thighs parting for him, that slender white neck bared under his lips. He would come upon her in some secluded spot in the woods, and she would be glad to see him... they would begin with a single hesitant kiss and end up naked, sweatily clutching each other, her pale body lying brazenly supine on his black cloak amidst the shifting, dappled sunlight... it would only take a minute or two of these sort of fervent imaginings before he came, spasms of hot wetness spurting into his hands.

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As long as Severus could remember, the Malfoy greenhouses had had a splendid display of every kind of flower imaginable, but upon his arrival after leaving school, it had become obvious to him that many of those plants had pharmacological value beyond their mere beauty foxglove, oleander, henbane, belladonna, rare opium poppies, bittersweet nightshade, fragrant hemlock, mugwort, woodsorrel, and a dizzying number of others. Tamora Malfoy had another greenhouse set aside for her herb garden and the cultivation of magical plants, to be used in the kitchen and in domestic potion-making, and it seemed to Severus that she had *everything.* Fluxweed, ginger, nettle, mint, sneezewort, asphodel, hellebore, scurvy-grass, lovage, gillyweed, shrivelfig, knotgrass, even mandrake, and much-prized Arcadian amaranth, which produced an oil that rendered any oil-based potion exponentially more potent.

Severus's indispensability as in-house apothecary began innocently enough the house-elves ran out of Magical Mess Remover on a Saturday evening, and Severus pointed out that all of the necessary ingredients were within easy reach in the greenhouses, so he could mix up a batch with minimal effort. More and more of these situations began to occur in the weeks that followed, until a small greenhouse chamber had become his personal laboratory, complete with braziers and cauldrons, phials and specimen jars, drying racks, alembics and distilling apparatus, and he had been given free rein with the Malfoys' account at the local apothecary's in the village. As the weeks went by, it became increasingly obvious to him that no one was paying much attention to what he ordered from the apothecary or how much he spent; so as long as he produced the hair tonic or sedative tea or headache remedy or beautifying potion his aunt and uncle or their guests occasionally requested, he was free to research whatever interested him, and he was interested in a great deal. It was more or less like having the world's biggest and fanciest chemistry set and access to whatever ingredients took his fancy, and he was having quite a good time pursuing whatever caught his interest.

That is, until his solitary study was disturbed by one Miss Bellatrix Black, who sashayed into his laboratory on a balmy afternoon not long after the duck hunt and wearing short violet silk summer robes that showed off rather a lot of long, slender neck, creamy white bosom, and shapely leg.

"Severus?"

"Afternoon, Bella," he muttered.

"What are you always doing down here?" she asked, approaching him with a brazen, playful smile.

"Just... doing some work is all," he said, looking up from the linden complexion tonic he was formulating for Tamora's and Narcissa's use. "Entertaining myself more than anything else, really. Uncle Abraxas said I might have a bit of a workspace, just to keep busy."

"I see." She wandered around for awhile, her hands clasped behind her back, looking at everything. Severus had been doing some rather fine mincing for the linden extract, and now he was finding it very difficult to get his concentration back, what with Bella's lips and bosoms and arse er, with Bella right in front of him like that.

"So... can you make *any* potion?" she asked, after making a slow circuit of the room and coming back to talk to him.

"I'm acquainted with quite a few of them," he said. She was standing disturbingly close to him now; when he turned and moved away toward the opposite table, she followed at the same proximity.

"Could you make one for me, if I wanted one?" she teased, looking boldly into his eyes.

"I... probably could, depending on what you wanted," he said. "What would you like? A complexion tonic? Something for headaches?"

She fixed him with another of those tiny, wicked little smiles. "Could you make me... an aphrodisiac, if I wanted one?"

Severus swallowed hard, feeling his neck suffuse with heat under his collar. "Er... I've never tried that, but... I don't know."

"Would you try it, if I asked you to?" She was standing close to him, too close for politeness, approaching intimacy, her unshockable eyes seeking his.

"Well... I suppose, but testing it might be... difficult," he finally replied which sent Bella into peals of smoky laughter.

"Oh? You don't have someone you could try it out with?" she asked, the corner of her red, red lips curling up in amusement.

"Well... er, no," he replied. His self-possession failed him at her nearness, her receptivity, and he turned away from her with a touch of an uncharacteristic stammer.

"Aww, what's wrong, baby?" she whispered, close to his ear. "Don't you like me anymore? I thought you did, back when we were in school... you used to look at me all the time. I hoped you thought I was pretty. Now you don't even want to talk to me." Fingertips delicately stroked downward from the top of his spine, down to the small of his back.

Instantly, his heart rate lurched, and sweat came out on his brow, arousal that swiftly turned to frustration, then anger. All right enough with the cheap, obvious provocation. He knew she was only doing this because Emmitt wouldn't give her the time of day, and she was probably just bored, seeking amusement with the nearest callow youth, and he'd be damned if that unfortunate bloke was going to be him.

He pulled away from her caressing hand. "Oh, don't fucking *play* with me, Bella," he snapped. "You always knew what I thought of you. I know you're angry at Emmitt, but that's not my fault. So why don't you go torture someone who has a chance, all right?"

She surprised him by just laughing at his stern ultimatum, another of those smoky, avid laughs. And then her arms were around his neck, and her breasts rising against his chest, and she kissed him once, lightly. He recoiled, staring at her, his hands flexing convulsively on her shoulders and then he had wrapped one hand around her waist and thrust the other into her hair, bent her over the table and kissed her, more than once, not lightly.

"*Wait,* darling," she crooned, pulling away from him with a tender giggle. "Not so fast and furious, hold still... " And then her lips were sinking into his again, melting sensuality like nothing he'd ever felt before, her tongue insinuating itself between his lips to softly caress his in a way that sent scrotum-tightening chills all through his highly flammable young body. "Yes, love, that's it... "

It was just too good, too exciting to be borne. His skin felt hot and tight, he was already hard as a dozen rocks, he just wanted to fling her onto the table amidst all the flowers and leaves and tear off her clothes and consume her, mouth and neck and breasts and that infinitely enticing quim between her thighs; but he held back, held all of that frantic lust in reserve, lest he offend her or scare her off. No, for now, he would just let her kiss him and hope that she wanted more than that, and miracle of miracles, it seemed that she did... her shameless little hands were exploring the taut spareness of his back, slithering downward that was Bella, she'd kiss him like an angel the first time, but the next minute she'd grabbed his arse and wasn't he glad she had wanted to do it.

"Poor little thing, you're shaking like a leaf," she whispered, her tongue coiling in his ear. "What are you doing tonight, baby?"

Whatever you want, he gasped, and then was lost in another kiss.

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while her fingertips administered a series of ever-lengthening caresses to the inside of his thigh. He was almost entirely silent throughout the meal, but as this was characteristic for him, and all anyone generally required of him as far as conversation went were quiet affirmations of what they themselves had just said, no one even noticed.

At last supper was over, and Severus excused himself from the usual games of whist or bridge in the drawing room, claiming he had a headache and wanted to retire early. He lay in bed for a long time, reading the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, one of his mother's old favourite volumes from the library back home, for a bit of light reading*Lastly, the goddess endows him with a trembling fear: Actaeon that heroic son of Autonoe flees, surprised to find himself so swift a runner...*

Much later that evening, he awoke with a start from a dream that someone, a woman with a voice like smoke, was calling his name.

His book lay tented on his chest, and the candle beside his bed had burned down into a pool of wax in the candlestick, and was now giving off only a wan, guttering flame. He blinked hard, trying to clear the fog of sleep from his mind, but it seemed that the dream continued a woman, or many women, were calling his name, and laughing softly, just out of his sight. His body felt unutterably heavy, leaden, as though a voluptuous weight was pressing him deep into the bed.

Finally, he raised himself on his elbows with an effort, set his book aside. He pulled the green velvet comforter up around his bare chest, shivering, and the faraway laughter and susurration of soft feminine voices continued in his ears.

Severus... That smoky voice again...

"Bella?" he whispered. He was suddenly, embarrassingly, so hard that it made the roots of his teeth hurt.

"Severus... "

Bellatrix Black's voice, whispering his name. And then she appeared at the foot of his bed, subtly wafting into existence, as though a shadow covering her with darkness had suddenly lifted and he saw a silvery cloak drop to the floor. She was sitting at the foot of his four-poster bed, half-obscured in the velvet draperies, her bright, heavy-lidded eyes raised expectantly to him. Wearing a little black silk robe and, it appeared, nothing beneath it.

Nothing more was spoken. He fell back against the pillows as she slithered up the sea of green velvet to drape her body over his. He lifted his face supplicant to hers as she bent down and kissed his trembling lips. Somehow he felt that something should be said, some invitation extended, some permission given, but there was no need. It seemed that she knew what he wanted without words, and all he had to do was let her do as she liked with him. He was nervous, shaking, passive, but her confidence was absolute. Whatever a woman like this wanted to do with him, however she wanted to orchestrate this experience... there was no doubt in his mind that he couldn't help but enjoy it.

Then she had slid beneath the bedclothes beside him, her lips leaving his to gently nibble down the length of his throat, then draw a line of kisses down his collarbone... and then her sharp little teeth bit hard into his shoulder, just a second's pain that made him gasp and shiver, and then her lips were warmth and softness again. Her hands were stroking down his bare chest, meeting nothing but complete, breathless yielding from him. She found the grey flannel pyjama trousers he had worn to bed and had him out of them in a moment, her silk-clad body lying over him, naked, warm slipperiness flowing over his bare skin, and then her fingers were tracing their way down over his quivering stomach to warmly close around the base of his cock, and he threw his head back on the pillow with a heartfelt groan. He'd wanted her to do this to him forever, imagined her kissing him and touching him for so long... he couldn't believe it was actually happening.

Finally some strength returned to him, and he tugged at the little silk belt of her robe... it seemed to sigh open under his fingers, leaving her warm skin naked under his timid hands. Gods, she was beautiful, infinitely enticing, his erotic ideal made flesh... pale, perfect breasts, not too large or too small, such red, red nipples, a tiny supple waist, soft, plump thighs... yes... he had seen pictures of naked women before, but had never undressed one himself. Never touched a lovely, eager, nude woman; certainly never had one in his bed before.

It was simply too good. His head sank back onto the pillow with an involuntary moan as her pliant thighs straddled his hips and he felt her hand poising his cock beneath her, trembling with the instinctual drive of every male who ever lusted for woman. Then he groaned aloud again, falling down, as he felt her tight, slick sex suck him in like an eager mouth. An instant after that deep inner warmth had encompassed him, it felt like every cell in him was clamouring upward for more*... yes, ohhellyes...*

"No, not yet," she whispered, her movements pausing. "Wait, baby... don't move... "

She stretched her tigerish full length over him, her breasts pressing against his chest, her fingers interlacing with his and pinning them down on the pillow above his head as she rode him slowly and shamelessly; indescribably hot liquid warmth sealing down on the helplessly sensitive length of his cock, kissing him until he was light-headed, till his breath felt completely sucked away*... yes, oh yes...* it was all he'd imagined, it was even better than he'd imagined, his toes were curling against the sheet, his every muscle straining up into the impossible sweetness inside her; the effort of keeping himself still for her was nearly taking the top of his head off, but all he could do was shudder and writhe against her grip, a victim of the most delectable torture imaginable.

Then she was moving faster, sealing down on him even tighter, grinding herself down on him... she took his hands from the pillow and drew them around her breasts, little erect nipples in his palms like bits of stiff taffy... and then she groaned feelingly, her eyes closing... then ground down on him harder and groaned again, louder... then her head had lolled back and he could see sweat standing out between her breasts, and then she gave a wild cry, and just convulsed down around him. His heart lurched it was too much, he couldn't believe it, Bella slipped into his room and into bed with him and now he was *having her* and he had just made her come, come so hard that she threw her dark head back and cried out with maenad pleasure.

She collapsed onto his chest, sweating and gasping, and he seized a handful of that silky hair and kissed her with everything he had, still hard and eager, his body straining up into hers... but then she had gotten up off of him, making him almost yelp in dismay. But no, she wasn't leaving, she was reclining on her back, pulling him over her... her silky thighs around his hips again. *Come on, baby,* she was gasping in his ear. *Fuck me, fuck me hard...*

She didn't need to tell him twice. A second later he was on her like the hopelessly randy teenager that he was, hard strokes, groaning, and she was urging him on, whispering in his ear, *Give to me, love, do it hard, be rough, I like that...*

But then the orgasm washed over him, mounting pleasure and exaltation unimaginable and after he had come, he felt anything but rough, felt nothing but boneless exhaustion and the most delicious glow of euphoric contentment. All he wanted to do was lie in her arms, holding and being held; to stay here with his dark head pillowed on her breasts, his entire body wrapped adoringly around hers. And all he could think of as he lay there was simply she was wonderful, beautiful, the most perfect being in all the world... and this was all just *so, so good.*

"Was that nice, baby?" Bella cooed to him, stroking his hair, and he responded with something like *Mmmmmmmmmmmf,* and a little sigh.

Perhaps five seconds later, he was asleep.

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Severus was, much to his chagrin, alone when he awoke the next morning.

He would have very much liked to wake up with Bella, would have liked to see her lying on the next pillow with her dark hair all tousled and her dark eyes all sleepy and perhaps awakened her with a kiss, and perhaps suggested giving *that* another go that morning... but she wasn't there. *Damn.*

He looked around the room, at the nightstand he'd heard from the other boys in his House that it was customary to leave one's lover a note, perhaps attached to a rose, if one had to leave while he or she was still asleep, but she had left no such tokens for him. His room was entirely undisturbed, and everything looked very much as though

nothing had happened.

Bella wasn't in the bathroom, or anywhere to be found.

An hour later, he was half-convinced it couldn't have really happened, even as he washed the scent of her off his own skin in the shower. Or it must have just been a fluke. She was going into someone else's room and she ended up in his by mistake. She was sleepwalking. She needed a really efficacious cure for insomnia. The previous night's idyll was just too much like one of his sexual fantasies about her to be real. Anything was more likely than the notion that Bellatrix had come into his bedroom and seduced him shamelessly, that he was no longer a virgin and Bella was his lover, because that sort of thing just *didn't happen to him.* This was not his life, it *couldn't* be his life his hands were jittering as he lathered his hair, stood under the spray to rinse it.

"Well, would you look at that who would have thought little baby Snape would turn out to be hung like a stallion... that's very pretty," someone's smoky voice crooned from perhaps a foot away. Severus nearly jumped out of his skin.

Bellatrix was leaning outside his shower door, all tall, sloe-eyed, full-breasted, long-legged of her. Wrapped in nothing but a towel. Looking him up and down and licking her lips.

"'Morning, lover," she drawled. "Can I join you?"

Severus raked his soaked hair out of his eyes, staring at her. His heart had instantly accelerated within his chest at the sound of her voice; now it was pounding fast enough to make him light-headed but he controlled himself with an effort, refusing to be a shrinking virgin in front of her.

"Sure," he said. "The water's fine."

The door opened, closed then his arms were full of warm womanflesh and her slick breasts were pressing against his chest, and she was tilting her head back, letting the water drench her long dark hair, stretching her pale throat taut. Gods, what a *neck,* he just wanted to devour it, bite her, bruise her, but he settled for covering it with famished kisses. There was no way to hide how hard he was getting, what with her naked body in his arms like this and the hot water raining over both of them, but she just sighed, trailing her fingers over his tip. "You were so good last night, pretty little boy... now I just want to keep you in my pocket."

He might have been nervous with any other woman, but Bella was so confident and unselfconscious about her nakedness that suddenly it didn't seem important that he hadn't liked for any of the other boys in his dormitory to see him changing clothes, that he didn't like his thin body with its bony joints and visible ribs if Bella wanted him, then he must have some undisputable claim to desirability. Then there was nothing but her flesh on his, her saucy arse under his hands, hot water running down between her breasts, dripping off her erect red nipples, heat and beauty and skin, tension pounding between his legs, and sometime later he was reclining on the hot marble floor and she was sliding onto his straining cock, her legs wrapping around his waist. One arm ground her hips against him, the other hand was lost in the wet silk of her hair. His lips were buried in hers, in that infinitely biteable drift of white neck flesh. Steam billowed all around them.

Soft, mocking laughter. Her tongue was caressing his as she rocked lusciously on him. "Sweet little baby Severus," she sing-songed, cradling his drenched dark head on her breasts. "You're adorable. I'm your first, aren't I?"

"Yes," he gasped. *"Oh, yes."*

"No one's ever used this cock before me?" She writhed sinuously on his lap, making him gasp aloud.

"No, never... "

"None of the boys has ever sucked you off in the shower? No little girl's nailed you against the greenhouse after the Yule Ball?"

"No... " The very idea was impossible.

He felt the urgency rising in his body again, felt swallowed in her arms. Her spasms began again, inner muscles clamping down on him, accompanied by soprano cries of ecstasy then his own orgasm rose from him and exploded in the tight depths of her in a rush of unendurable sweetness. His head slumped onto her shoulder, gasping, all composure lost, undone with bliss. He could still hardly believe that this was happening, that he had become Bella's lover, that he had spectacularly satisfied her the night before and again that morning, and she liked him so much that she wanted to keep him in her pocket. The world was upside down, and he clung very tightly to her, falling.

Bella was kissing him again, jealously gloating over him, and he was kissing her like it had just been invented and was the most astonishing new practice in the world. Was there anything more luscious than female lips, breasts, the divine pudendum... oh, brave new world, that has such delight in it. Severus would never have fancied himself the poetic sort, but upon his discovery of kisses, of sex, of mutual orgasm, every hymn of erotic praise he had ever read seemed absolutely true and profound... *Your eye contains the sunset and the dawn; You spread a stormy evening's fragrant smell; Your kisses, philtres from your mouth's flask drawn, Embolden children, and the hero quell...*

"Tell me... who was it that first kissed you? Was she as good as me?" Her fingers tugged sharply at his nipple, making him gasp in both pleasure and pain.

"You did... yesterday... in the greenhouse... "

"Mmmmmmmmm," she crooned. "My little untouched virgin. I wanted to rape you from the second I got here."

"Bloody hell, I would have let you," he sighed why even pretend.

"No one's ever kissed you before... " She bent down and gave him another of those slow, luscious, druggy kisses; he felt himself hardening again, even though it seemed like only a few heartbeats had gone by since he had last had her.

"No," he groaned. "Not until you... you're my first *everything.*"

"Oh, good. You're *mine* now," she said, in a fierce whisper. "I'm going to love corrupting you, you gorgeous little slut."

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It was perhaps a week before he loved her with his entire body and mind, with his whole being, reserving no quarter for himself, in the manner of lonely, overintense, introverted eighteen-year-old boys with their first lovers. He loved her so much that he thought he would explode with it. He also couldn't believe his own luck Bella was lovely, clever, and charismatic, and now she was dragging him into hidden nooks and corners to kiss him. Every man he knew (other than Evan the adoring new husband) wanted her, and now she was sneaking up into his bedroom every night. She was strong, capable, self-reliant, and got her own way in nearly everything, and now she seemed bent on having her way with him in every way physically possible, and it all felt so shockingly good that he couldn't have imagined wanting to say no to her.

One afternoon she had unexpectedly come upon him in the library, reading one of his aunt and uncle's many rare grimoires, and started by kissing him hungrily, and ended by easing him down on his back behind the sofa for a quick, luscious session of lovemaking while both remained almost fully dressed. Afterward he lay blissfully on her breast, her arms cradling his dark head, kissing him and making much of him.

"There we are, there it is," she said, tapping his lips with the tip of her finger.

"What?" He couldn't keep a tiny smile from creeping onto his face at her playfulness.

"There it is again," she said. "That little smile... do I make you smile, baby?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, turning away from her in mock ignorance but she was still grinning at him, and it was contagious.

"Come *on*," she crooned. "Smile for me, sweetheart, darling, my pretty little boy."

Her teasing was too much for him he let his head fall on her shoulder with a shy chuckle, grinning like a madman.

She laughed delightedly, and her arms tightened around him. "You have such a nice smile, and such a nice laugh. Why don't you ever use them?"

"I never have much to smile and laugh about, usually," he said, shrugging.

"You have me," she said, kissing his forehead.

"Do I?" he asked. Despite his best efforts, he was unable to keep what he felt for her from quivering in his voice.

"Of course, silly." She kissed him again, lingeringly.

"I just get worried. And I think every man we know would take you from me if he could."

"Oh, come on, baby," she said, nuzzling him reassuringly. "Lucius is too pretty and totally bent on making a row of little versions of himself, and Flint is too ugly, and Bulstrode's an ape. Macnair is too grabby and everyone knows Sirius is queer for that Potter bloke and that Remus is queer for him. Crabbe and Goyle have something like two brain cells between them, and Evan's too boring and too nice. Felina's welcome to him."

"What about Emmitt?" he asked anxiously.

"Emmitt is a dull old-fashioned prude who can't get it up half the time," she scoffed. "He's not got a patch on you, baby."

"Really?"

"You're the best, baby," she sighed. "Oh, yes... it's always the quiet ones." Her pale arms encircled his neck, and he thrust his hand into her mussed-up dark hair and kissed her with bruising intensity.

In the weeks following that first night together, they became conspirators, hiding their new love affair from everyone. They became expert at composing their faces blamelessly in an instant, at pretending they weren't flushed and out of breath. They would steal long, impassioned kisses while hidden in a bank of rose bushes ten feet from where Aunt Druella and Narcissa were making inane conversation about the croquet green Narcissa wanted to put out when she was lady of the manor, then emerge a moment later with flawless decorum on both sides.

Bella seemed to him indescribably daring. One evening, the Malfoys held an elaborate dinner party, the house full of people, and she pulled him into Uncle Abraxas's deserted study, just off the main front hall. A moment later she had slid down his body to her knees, unfastened his clothes, and took him in her mouth, even as he blushed horribly and worried that they might be interrupted at any second. Her clever mouth brought him quickly to orgasm while the guests went on talking in the hall not five feet away from them, complaining about how the wandmaking Ollivander family were still stubbornly refusing to go public or sell any trade secrets and somehow seemed impervious to monopoly lawsuits.

These sort of demands went against every ounce of decorum he had, ran directly counter to maintaining the fragile dignity that was so important to him, but somehow he couldn't refuse even his own body had betrayed him, was betraying him now; he didn't care that someone might come into the room and find them out, not while Bella's red, red lips were drawing on him like that and her lipstick was getting everywhere, and then he was biting into his own hand to keep from crying out as he came, the other hand clenching a fistful of her rich dark hair.

Then she was in his arms, licking his ear, crooning to him, telling him he tasted better than chocolate, and all he could do was cling to her in helpless, shivering adoration.

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"I don't know who wrote it, but we think this was all written during the last century."

"That male contraceptive potion is some interesting stuff all the orally taken contraception potions on the market right now are for women. I wonder, if I could complete that formula, that would be... " He thought for a moment about being the bloke who first produced a Contraceptus potion for men now *that* would make him some Galleons, and for certain. "Are you sure you don't know who wrote this book?"

"No idea, the author didn't sign her journal anywhere." She leaned over his shoulder and turned to the potion intended to prolong erection in a male. "What do you think of this one?"

"*Inflating Draught* oh, now that's clever," he said, with a dark little chuckle, then started to turn the page.

"No, wait, could you, you know, whip some of that up?" she asked.

"Er... I wasn't aware there was a need for it," he muttered, after a long pause. He hadn't been aware that she had any complaints about his stamina as far as he knew, he had always brought her to orgasm before he did himself, and being young, in good health, and terrifically eager, it didn't take him very long to gather his energies for another round, either. Truthfully, her wishes had not yet begun to tax his eighteen-year-old physical vigour he couldn't recall ever leaving her unsatisfied. (Indeed, he could recall one or two instances when she had declined a fourth round to the evening's, er, festivities, complaining of a bit of soreness.) If she had wanted to prolong the act, he would have been more than willing to find the natural limits of his staying power if she had so desired.

"Well, would you like to try some, just for fun?" she whispered enticingly, nuzzling the back of his neck.

Severus leaned back into her caresses for a moment, then pointed to another formulation "Actually, I would think this *More Blissful Marital Bliss* ointment sounds like it would be more, ahem, enjoyable for you," he said, delicately caressing her bare thigh. "Clove oil produces a sensation of heat when it comes in contact with the skin, and then with the ginger to enhance blood flow, and... well, that compound sounds like *a good time to be had by all,* if you know what I mean. Why don't I see about throwing that together in the greenhouse tomorrow afternoon, and then I'll bring it to bed tomorrow night?"

"Why not throw together a bit of both?" she suggested, leaning down to kiss his temple, his cheek, the corner of his lips. "Why not try... *everything*?"

"Yes," he muttered, taking her chin in his hand and drawing her lips down to his, "why not try everything."

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"Well... "

Her hot breath was making its way southerly, and he could deny her nothing.

"Yes," he sighed.

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the rapture that was belonging to Bella.

Her hand went again into the pocket of her robe, and then he felt something in her hand, cool metal... and then just the softest whisper of pain at the topmost curve of his upper arm "Bella? What's that... ?" he asked, his breath labouring.

Gods, you're so hot, baby, I just want to keep you on a leash. You're mine, no matter what happens...

"Oh, Bella... what are you doing... " A thin line of something warm and wet was slowly dripping down his arm, and then her lips lowered to it, murmuring some soft incantation. "Bella... "

Mmmm, I want to bind you to me, my pretty boy, sweet little slut... you'll let me, won't you...

He knew in the back of his mind what she was doing, having read the same *Lëof Cnotta* Spell that she had in the sex magic grimoire she had loaned to him. *Lëof Cnotta* was intended to create a passionate bond between the one casting it and the one it was cast upon; it was much like a milder form of the illegal Love Potion, that forced the drinker to love someone else wholeheartedly, no matter how he or she had previously felt about that person. But as with Love Potion, *Lëof Cnotta* had no effect whatever on someone who was already in love had Juliet worked it upon her Romeo, it would have wrought no change in him. Now, as Severus was already completely devoted to the lady who laid it upon him, the spell had no extra effect at all.

"You don't have to try to bind me to you. You've never had to," he whispered brokenly. "I always wanted you."

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That night, like so many other nights they spent together, Bella kept him in a constant erotic whirl until he passed out asleep. Severus slept very well that night he discovered that summer that nothing eased his insomnia like a few profoundly satisfying rounds of lovemaking but as usual, he was alone when he awoke that morning. She was at breakfast when he arrived, however, sitting across the table from her mother in light, sleeveless summer robes of wine-coloured muslin, smiling with catlike satisfaction as she stirred her morning *café au lait.* The two of them exchanged sultry glances as Severus got a cup of coffee and a plate of breakfast from the covered silver dishes on the sideboard. Oblivious, Aunt Druella remained bent over the *Daily Prophet.*

Narcissa arrived for breakfast a moment later, a porcelain doll in pale pink silk, her long blonde hair in a soft braid down her back. "Bella, Severus, Mummy, today is the big ball at the Wilkeses'."

"I know, Cissy," Bella said patiently. Narcissa had been unable to talk about anything but the Wilkeses's ball for the two weeks previous.

"What time do we all want to go, then? I need to have time for the elves to do my hair and nails and lay out my dress "

"What time do you want to go?" Severus asked, before Narcissa could list off all the various details of her ball toilette. Bella smirked at him.

After much dithering, Narcissa finally hit on half-past six as an acceptable time for the group to make their way to the Wilkes's. Narcissa's preparations for the ball meant that she would spend the entire day on her toilette and wouldn't need his assistance with anything, so Severus took the opportunity to spend a few extra hours in his greenhouse lab working on the *Carnalis* potion. He took only a half-hour's break for lunch, and didn't leave off until half-past five p.m. or so, when he had to make his way back to his little garret bedroom and get ready for the ball.

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The ball at the Wilkeses's manor was a formal affair held in their grand ballroom, with an elaborate supper served at many white-draped tables and a dance to follow. Narcissa and Bellatrix looked like a study in contrasts when they appeared together: the blonde, porcelain-fair Narcissa in dress robes of pale pink silk chiffon, her fair hair done up in a fussy Psyche knot, and Bellatrix in a black velvet gown with a sleeveless over-robe of red Chinese silk embroidered with golden dragons, her dark hair blowing free to her waist.

Severus, the Malfoys, and the Blacks dined together at a single table. Afterward, Bella left Severus alone as usual, except for the occasional sultry glance or smile across the room, and he trailed Narcissa and her mother about like a tall, thin, black and white shadow. Before long, he had withdrawn alone to a small table on the gallery balcony, with a glass of Scotch in his hand. The Wilkeses had stocked the bar with a fine single malt, which he was glad of after weeks of the perpetual brandy one got at Malfeasant.

"Severus, hi!" Beatrice Rookwood, a former classmate and fellow Slytherin, came up to him and put a very airy and sixteen-year-old-girlish sort of kiss on his cheek before sprawling in the chair at his right. Beatrice was a year or two younger than Severus was, and had been studying for her O.W.L.s at the same time he had been studying for his N.E.W.T.s. She had gotten a little taller and a lot more curvaceous since he had seen her the previous year, and looked very pretty indeed that night, in white silk robes with a pink sash, her black hair done in a soft upsweep.

"Hello, Beatrice," he greeted her. "How have you been?"

"Oh, just finished my sixth year and doing the junior deb thing, getting ready to be a real deb the summer I leave school."

"And how exactly does one *'do the junior deb thing'*, in order to get promoted to a *'real'* deb?" he asked, in the manner of a wise old anthropologist investigating some superstitious custom of a primitive tribe.

Beatrice laughed, grinning at him. "Well, as far as I can tell, it consists of wearing robes with too many buttons, and sitting still for hours while they do my hair up like my grandmother's, and then going to a lot of parties where people sit around and talk about the dullest old shite you can imagine," she said pertly.

"My, don't you sound enthusiastic about making your illustrious debut into society," he replied.

Beatrice giggled again. "Oh, come on, you know how it is a girl's got to get married someday. So what have you been doing? Wait, let me guess " she quickly looked him over "new robes, good haircut you've done like everyone knew you would and gotten a fantastic job with some huge Potions firm, and now you're making pots of Galleons, aren't you, lucky thing," she said, perhaps a touch enviously.

He smiled faintly. "Still working on that, I'm afraid."

"You'll do it, it'll happen," she said, with all the naïve confidence of a teenage girl with a rich father.

"Snape, good evening," a man's voice said beside him, and Severus looked up to see Emmitt Parkinson standing beside the table. "I haven't seen you since the dance at the Mulcibers'. How are you?"

"Just fine, thanks," Severus replied, but although Parkinson had spoken to him, he was looking at Beatrice. Or rather, Parkinson was regarding Beatrice as though he might a particularly delectable bit of confectionery.

"Ooh, you went to that big dance at Cassius's house? I wanted to go to that, but couldn't take the time off from school," Beatrice said, turning to Severus with wide violet eyes.

"Yes, it's a shame you couldn't make it, it was lovely," Parkinson said. "I do beg your pardon, miss, I don't believe we've met... ?" He slanted a meaningful look at Severus.

"Oh, of course. Beatrice, may I present Mr. Emmitt Parkinson. He's a friend of my uncle Abraxas Malfoy. And Emmitt, this is Miss Beatrice Rookwood, who is, I believe, going into her seventh year at Hogwarts," Severus said politely.

"That's right, I've got N.E.W.T.s coming up this year," Beatrice said. She held out her hand to Parkinson with a sweet, disaffected smile. "Hi, nice to meet you."

"It's a pleasure," he said with a suave nod, warmly pressing the girl's slim little hand between both of his and at that moment, Severus discerned the pair's future with almost clairvoyant certainty. Parkinson was richer than Croesus and wanted a sweet young thing to marry, despoil, and father his heirs upon, and Beatrice was resigned to the fact that a girl had to get married someday, preferably within her own station or above. Both were, in their own way, perfect for the other.

"Well, hello, you lot," came Bellatrix's gay voice to Severus's left. She smiled brightly at all three of them, especially Parkinson.

"Hi, Bella! I wanted to tell you, I *love* your robes. You look beautiful." Beatrice beamed another brilliant, candid little smile. "It's so cool to get to meet you. I started school the year after you finished, and everyone in the Slytherin common room was *always* talking about you and your sisters, " the girl gushed happily.

"Thank you, dear," Bella said, smiling; but her smile was more than a little forced. Beatrice had innocently drawn attention to the fact that Bella was eight years older than she herself was, and in the pureblooded English Wizarding world, to be a beautiful woman well into her twenties and still unmarried was to be made aware that one's shelf life was rapidly expiring. Beatrice had also committed the cardinal sin of mentioning that Bellatrix had not one but two sisters... and the Blacks didn't *talk* about Andromeda, not *ever.* "You have me at a loss we've never been introduced."

Severus made haste to correct that omission, and the four of them made idle party chatter for awhile. Before long, it became apparent that it was a tangled web indeed that was unfolding before him Bellatrix somehow managed to smile and yet look at Beatrice like she was a loathsome little insect, and at Emmitt like a starving predator surveying a juicy side of beef, while all but ignoring Severus himself. Meanwhile Beatrice exchanged witticisms with her amusing old school friend Severus, honestly seemed to admire the stunning Bellatrix, and was both attracted to Parkinson and intimidated by him. And Emmitt Parkinson's eyes were devouring every inch of the lovely, virginal Beatrice and watching Bella like a poisonous snake, and had discounted Severus's existence entirely.

Meanwhile he sat amidst them all making inane conversation, pitying Beatrice her dull lot as a society debutante, wishing that he could pack Parkinson off to some especially distant region of outer Mongolia, and longing to have Bellatrix's attention all to himself again.

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Part Third: The Hart Subvertant: Prologue Part 5

Chapter 40 of 55

In which Bellatrix's real aims become apparent -- and what Severus did about them...

Prologue: Like a Plant Kept in the Dark, Part 5:

The summer continued. Severus ran errands and performed organisational tasks for the Malfoys, served as Narcissa's escort when she wanted to go out, then spent hours engrossed in the most complicated and precise sort of potion-making in his spare time, only to be rewarded for all the stresses of his day with a long wallow in Bella's highly addictive charms at night. The many genteel entertainments of the summer felt like an odious sort of duty, just a distraction from his real interests.

Well, except for Evan and Felina's big garden party, that had actually been a good time. It was the first chance he had gotten to see Evan since his return from his honeymoon, and Evan was in wonderful spirits, standing about smiling like anything, his arm around his wife's waist. But now, with a woman who he adored in his bed nearly every night, and who refused to acknowledge their relationship in public, Severus for the first time looked at the happily married Evan with envy. (Or at least Evan was happily married Felina seemed to deign to allow her husband to be happily married to her.)

But regardless of how lukewarm were the reciprocal feelings of Evan's object of affection, Evan was married to the woman he loved. He could stand about chatting with people and holding his wife's hand, both of them wearing matching wedding bands, and it was infinitely respectable to all concerned. Evan got to live with his wife, to sleep next to her every night, wake up with her, share breakfast with her, everyone expected him to be paired with her at all social events, in every part of his life; as far as the entire world was concerned, Evan's wife was his, inalienably *his.* To Severus, that married state now seemed like enviable bliss.

As he continued work on the *Carnalis* potion, he began to idly imagine doing up a batch of that granddaddy of all black market potions,*Potio Amatorius,* the famous, notorious True Love Potion, and adding a few drops to Bella's brandy of an evening. After all, if she really cared for him as much as she said she did, it wouldn't have any effect on her at all.

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"Be patient, baby, be patient," she said, then turned and kissed him deeply.

"All right, tomorrow then," he said, taking the phial back from her and replacing it in its hiding place. "Just remember, it's here in the second drawer from the bottom left. You only need perhaps two drops to get the full effect, any more than that and you could get overexerted, so be careful, all right? I wouldn't want anything to happen to you."

"You mean, you wouldn't want anything to happen to me other than you giving me the shagging of my life?" Bella crooned, drawing him back into her arms.

He let his head fall onto her shoulder with a little laugh. "Yes, my dear, I'm certain that can be arranged."

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The bridge club party was the usual sedate sort of event the Malfoys hosted twice monthly. Aunt Tamora, Aunt Druella, and a group of wealthy older ladies sat down to tea sandwiches, scones, and Earl Grey in the sunroom. Bellatrix, Narcissa, and Severus joined them, all trying to look interested in tales of ferocious victories won at the bridge table.

Bella was especially helpful that day, dressed in unusually demure lilac silk robes. She was offering little cakes and *petit fours* on a plate, pouring everyone tea, and listening to all the guests' little anecdotes and witticisms with a brilliant smile. Severus watched her from under hooded eyes it amused him to no end that Bella was putting on this perfect good-girl act when a few hours from now, he was going to be pounding her into the mattress like the randiest whore in the brothel. It was also fun to have her acting the courtesan for him, hovering attentively over him and making a sweet fuss of filling his teacup and bringing him pastries.

Sometime after his third cup of tea, however, he started to feel a bit feverish and light-headed. The room was shimmering slightly in his sight... Narcissa was talking to him, something about dancing and children who needed medicine for their wings... He shook his head hard and rubbed his temples.

"Severus, are you all right?" Narcissa asked, peering at him in concern. "You look flushed."

"I'm... no, I'm not feeling well," he admitted. His eyes raked over Narcissa from head to foot she had such fragile wrists and arms; the high-necked, cameo-pink silk robes she was wearing emphasised the contrast of her full breasts and her small ribcage, narrow waist and full hips. Such a little queen-bitch ice maiden, always whining and pouting and demanding that he pay attention to her; he knew she wanted it. He'd like to give her her first shag himself while her fiancé was a dimension away chasing Faeries yes, he'd mess up that just-so blonde hair, force that little cupid's bow mouth down where he wanted it, see tears on that kewpie doll's face

Where the hell are these thoughts coming from?

He turned away from her, reminding himself that he wasn't attracted to Narcissa, he'd never been attracted to Narcissa, she was spoiled and complained too much and she annoyed him. It was hot in this room, hotter than could be endured. His tight collar and waistcoat were chafing; his skin felt achy and so sensitive that even the fine lawn of his shirt was irritating. He picked up his cup of tea and downed it, poured himself another, but it didn't help even remotely.

"Severus? You look like you might be coming down with a fever," Narcissa said primly. "Maybe you should go lie down. Mother says influenza's going around in the village."

"Yes, yes, I think I should." Damn it all to bloody hell that it was influenza he seemed to have caught if it had just been a bad cold, he could have taken some Pepper-Up potion and been done with it, but the Wizarding world hadn't managed to cure influenza any more than the Muggles had. He pushed back his chair and stood up, mopping at his brow with his handkerchief. "I'll go lie down. Could you have the house-elves send up some ice water... lots of it... "

"Of course."

He nodded apologetically to Bellatrix as he left the room of all the times to get sick, he had to choose the night when he and Bella had an apocalyptically hot tryst planned for the evening. Ah well, it wasn't six p.m. yet, so she hadn't taken the potion, and they could always use it another night after he'd gotten better.

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Up in his bedroom, he shed all of his clothes in a long black and white trail that ended at the bed, and crawled between the sheets, pulling them up to his chin. A silver tray with a large glass pitcher of cold water, an ice bucket with silver tongs, a plate of citrus slices, and two glasses appeared on his night table. Someone had also kindly supplied little cut glass bottles of his own willow bark fever reducer potion and laudanum sleeping potion.

He put a drop of each potion in a glass of water, then kept downing ice water until it was gone. Then he lay down and drifted in and out of sleep for some time. Then it seemed he woke, from sweaty dreams of chasing a laughing girl through a forest... crashing to the grass with her in his arms... then they began to make love, as lusty and unselfconscious as wildcats at play...

Someone's cool hand was stroking his forehead Bella was sitting on the side of his bed, bending over him. "Awwww, are you sick, baby? They said downstairs you'd come down with flu... I came up to see how you were doing... "

Bella... oh, Bella, he whispered. His arms felt boneless, helpless, his skin burning. She stood up, and then a moment later slid into bed beside him, her naked body pressing against his. He engulfed her in his arms, and suddenly it seemed that his every muscle screamed with lust, that hunger exhaled from his skin in a cloud; he had to have her, he'd die if he couldn't have her.

"Bella... what's going on? Did you... " He noticed then that he was harder than a truncheon of wood beneath the bedclothes. "Did you decide to give me the potion instead? *Bella...* "

"Just relax, baby... " She slithered down his body with a little giggle, and her mouth encompassed him the pleasure was so acute it nearly hurt. It went on for a long, frenzied, voluptuous time; he had the fingers of one hand fanned through her hair, cradling the back of her skull and drawing her lips down onto him. He wanted her to do it faster, harder, every cell in his body straining to come, but she made him wait, drew the suspense out until he was nearly crying.

Then horror of horrors from out in the hallway came a knock on his bedroom door. "Severus, are you all right?" came Narcissa's prim little voice.

From somewhere down in his lap came the sound of Bella's wicked little moan, and she quickened her pace, fastening tighter on him... *Oh, you evil bitch...*

"Yes, I just need a rest," he called back, desperately trying to keep his voice composed, though internally he was shrieking *Go the fuck away, damn you, I haven't got time for this now.*

"Are you sure? Do you want me to have one of the house-elves draw a cool bath for you?" Narcissa called. Bella, evil instigator that she was, was now doing her best to milk the orgasm out of him while her prissy sister waited for his answer out in the hall.

"No, thanks. I think I'd rather stay in bed," he replied.

"All right. I hope you feel better." Mercifully, Narcissa's footsteps then retreated down the hall, and he threw his head back and crammed Bella's head down into his lap, finally letting himself come into her urgent mouth... After such a long, painful preliminary, the pleasure was devastating. She clung to him to the last spasm, the last drop, until his spent organ slipped from her hands and lips and they both gasped.

Afterward, Bella stretched herself out at his side, nuzzling him. "What are you feeling now, baby?"

"I feel like... like, damn it, if you wanted me to take it instead, why didn't you just say so?" he demanded. "Why couldn't you just tell me?"

She giggled. "I thought it would be more fun to surprise you."

He would have ordinarily been worn out for some time by such exertions, but now, even an intense orgasm like the one he had just had only temporarily sated the pressure building in his body. He felt more aggressive, too; while he had never been physically forceful with Bella before, had only touched her with sincere affection and the desire to give pleasure, now he wanted to overpower her, control her, make her feel his greater strength than hers. He wouldn't let her move even a foot away from him, keeping her body pressed close to his, hands everywhere. What felt like five minutes after the last act, just the brush of her silken arsecheeks against his cock was bringing it to full readiness again, and he could tell by the way she was drenching his fingers that she wanted it, the little slut... He started to lower her to the mattress, but then somehow she had him sprawled on his back and was sliding down onto him instead. His cock felt so hard it was almost painful, and the only ease for this condition was the tender warmth between a woman's legs.

"Tell me something," Bella whispered, grinding down on him so that he could barely breathe.

"What, what?" he asked, incoherently, barely able to collect his thoughts at all. He would have told her anything in that moment, his bank balance, the combination to his Gringotts vault, any damn thing she wanted, so long as she just *didn't stop...*

"Will you marry me?" she breathed.

Oh by the Merlin, was *that* all she wanted this was some ploy of hers to get him to*marry her?* She needn't have bothered. He'd been planning to ask her that in a year or so anyway, properly, as soon as he could afford a ring

But apparently he hadn't answered her fast enough, and she scowled deeply, then slapped his cheek, hard. *I said,* she snarled, *will you marry me?*

"Yes, you silly cow, anytime, anywhere. Name the day." He grabbed a fistful of her hair and forced her snarling mouth against his.

"Do you promise? On your word as a gentleman... ?"

"Oh, damn it all to hell, Bella, yes, a thousand times *yes*, whatever you want. *Fuck me.*"

She laughed, low in her throat, and didn't resist as he locked his hands around her hips and frantically ground up into her. The climax was enough to leave him light-headed; one of the most powerful orgasms he had ever experienced. Yet even that didn't satisfy him for long fifteen minutes later, his body was clamouring for another round.

"Please, baby, I'm getting tired," she said, starting to pull away from him but her eyes never left him, as though waiting for a reaction.

"*No*, you don't," he snapped, forcing her onto her back again. With the frantic arousal came heightened aggression; he wanted her so badly that he felt capable of taking her against her will if she refused him, like an addict driven to desperation by the threat of his drug withheld. "You did this to me, so now you're going to finish it, whether you like it or not."

"Severus... you're scaring me," she whispered, her eyes very big, and round. "Don't*... please...*"

But she was regarding him with hot, depraved eyes, and her body was arching up to his to be mounted... He could hear the token resistance in her voice, the obvious provocation in her girlish squeaks of protest. She had said now and then that she wanted him to be rougher, wanted him to be cruel and domineering... Yes, she wanted this game of being overpowered so much that she had manipulated him into playing this role for her.

Well then. A gentleman couldn't disappoint a lady.

He reached for his wand on the bedside table *"Incarcerous"* and in a moment, cords had fastened around her wrists, securing her to the wrought iron bedstead, and then he parted her half-closed thighs with one knee, and just let himself *have* her, cruelly and without tenderness, harder than he had ever taken her before. She was writhing beneath him, her skin burning hot, more aroused than he had ever seen her.

There, you bitch, is this what you wanted? You wanted it rougher, did you? he whispered, his fingers biting into her arms.

Yes, baby, oh yes... you're so good... Her hips snapped against the bed as he worked her punishingly beneath him.

"Get used to it, *Mrs. Snape*," he gloated. "After we're married I'm going to keep you tied to the bedpost for my own personal use, and you're going to fucking *love it.*"

Then he forgot gentleness, and just let the potion's unnatural appetite take him.

After what felt like hours, until he couldn't come anymore but kept rutting on her anyway, until she had practically fainted and was crying in earnest, desperately begging him to stop, saying that he was hurting her, and he was so tired and sore that he felt like he had been coming blood, he released her from the bonds and just held her tight until the tears subsided, all his rage and passion spent.

"I'd be happy to marry you," he whispered, stroking her hair in reassurance. "I love you, you know that. You didn't have to *do* any of this, ridiculous thing I was going to propose to you anyway."

He laid his head on her breast, again wrapped himself around her, and fell heavily asleep.

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A single dose of *Potio Carnalis* left Severus so exhausted that he slept for over sixteen hours. Bella was nowhere to be found when he awoke, to his intense disappointment. The bed sheets were stained with sweat, dried semen, and here and there a smudge of what had to be blood.

Someone, probably the elves, had left a pitcher of water at his bedside and left a meal of toast and chicken barley soup on his desk he consumed both in what felt like seconds. Later on he would step on the scale in his bathroom and discover that he had lost two pounds in the last twenty-four hours.

It was now three p.m. in the afternoon, and he felt all right, just a bit tired and weak. He got up, showered, shaved, and got dressed, and then went in search of Bella... went in search of his wife-to-be. Bloody hell, where she had ever gotten the idea that she needed to coerce a marriage proposal out of him, he had no idea she knew how he felt about her, he'd had a crush on her from the first day he met her and she had to know it, even when she was sixteen and he was ten.

Bella wasn't in her bedroom, nor was she in the library or the front hall, so Severus headed down toward the drawing room.

Merlin's teeth, he thought, she could have told him flat out that she wanted to be his wife while he was cold sober and he would have agreed to it then and there. He didn't give a damn that she was older than he was and had had lovers before him. Where in this world was he ever going to find a woman he wanted more than he wanted her? Both of them were so alike, unconventionally ambitious and self-willed, didn't really give a damn about appearances or proper behaviour or what was expected of them, both iconoclasts who loved everything dark and extreme and wanted nothing to do with children... She would probably even like the gothic gloom of Orkney.

His plans went from there they could hold the wedding at Snape Hall at high summer when the days were twenty-two hours long and everyone just stayed up and went for

walks and had picnics at midnight. They could exchange vows against the backdrop of the cliffs, the sky, the sea... it would be just a very small private affair for family and their closest friends, Evan would make a prince of a best man, and he would have gotten a job by then and finally put a new roof on the place. Once Bella was his wife and living with him, they'd have a grand old time together, and chase each other through those long dark corridors and make love in all the big staterooms he hadn't been allowed into as a child, and make a game of casting all his father's worthless old stocks and bonds into the fireplace. He could only imagine what his father would say about his son bringing this fearless, sharp-witted, self-reliant Amazon home to be mistress of the castle let the old bastard do cartwheels in his grave for all he cared, no one had better *ever* dare try to throw things at the wife of Severus Marcus Antonius Snape, thank you *very* fucking much. She'd probably whip out her wand and Stun anyone who tried it in no time flat. His soon-to-be Mrs. Snape was no shrinking violet, no; she was the kind of woman who could take care of herself in just about any situation. He loved that about her.

Oh, yes, this was going to be beautiful. He couldn't wait to bring her home to live with him. Fuck it, hang convention, when he went home at the end of this visit, he was going to ask her to go back with him, and to hell with what anyone thought of it.

Narcissa was sitting in the drawing room daintily working on a bit of embroidery when he came in. "Severus, there you are. Are you feeling better?" she asked.

"Yes, much better, thanks. It must have been one of those twenty-four-hour bugs," he said.

"Oh, good. It would have been a shame if you'd had to miss the Parkinsons' big dance tonight." Narcissa bent back over her embroidery hoop.

"The Parkinsons' big dance?" He looked at her blankly. "That's tonight?"

"Yes don't tell me you forgot. That's going to be the event of the season. Everyone's going to be there," she said, in a tone of mild chiding. "Do let's all be ready to go by six, all right?"

"Er, yes, that's fine. Have you seen Bella around anywhere? I wanted to talk to her about about something." It occurred to him with a brief pang of discomfiture that Narcissa and Lucius were going to be his sister- and brother-in-law now, but consoled himself with the knowledge that to both of them, a trip to Orkney may as well have been a trip to the moon, so no doubt he and Bella wouldn't have to devote much time to entertaining in-laws.

"Bella's not here. She promised Mrs. Parkinson that she'd help supervise the elves today before the ball," Narcissa said, placidly stitching.

"She did? When did she do that?"

"She was talking to Emmitt's sisters at the Wilkes's cotillion, asking if there was anything she could do to help. The Daughters of Wendelin are organising the event, you know. There's a raffle. It's all to benefit the St. Mungo's Children's Wing," Narcissa told him.

"Oh... I hadn't heard. Did she say when she would be back?"

"We're going to meet up with her at the ball tonight. She took her dress robes with her."

"Of course." He nodded to her and left the room and immediately made his way to his greenhouse laboratory, a sinking feeling in his stomach.

In the lab, he unlocked the apothecary cabinet door and felt into the space at the top of the drawer his hand closed on nothing.

Bella had gone to the Parkinsons' early and the philtre of *Potio Carnalis* was gone

Why not try everything? Won't you do this for me? Will you marry me? Do you give me your word of honour as a gentleman?

and then the realisation hit him, a sharp and vicious snap into lucidity like having his head forced through a pane of glass.

He wasn't her new fiancé he was her *test subject.* Tonight was the Parkinsons' summer cotillion, when she would put the *Carnalis* potion into its intended use on her real target, the man she had been after all along.

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Severus never went to the Parkinsons' grand ball. He returned to Malfeasant after his terse warning to Emmitt, then hunted Narcissa up and rather feebly told her that he had been optimistic about his recovery from his influenza and didn't feel up to going. He made the ruse of that phantom flu last for two or three days, spending the time alone in his room, having his meals sent up and occupying himself with sleeping or reading.

Narcissa and Aunt Tamora came up to check on him once or twice a day, and he took the opportunity to question Narcissa about how the Parkinsons' ball had gone. Narcissa said that it had been lovely, just sumptuous, and what a shame it was that he'd been too sick to make it. Everyone was now talking about how Emmitt had danced *four* waltzes with that little Beatrice Rookwood, and she wasn't even a proper debutante yet, how scandalous was that.

Bellatrix never came up to see him. Severus tried to convince himself that she was just busy, and that this was not a sign that his usefulness to her was at an end, but he was as always unable to fool himself with comforting lies.

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richer, and a powerful and influential wizard of their set owed him an obligation.

Unexpected decency, it seemed, could be its own weapon.

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Severus never got the chance to confront Bellatrix over what she had done before he left Malfeasant. Aunt Tamora informed him after dinner on the day of Parkinson's visit that Bella had packed up and gone back to London the morning after the Parkinsons' grand ball.

"She said something about planning a shower for a friend who's just found out she's expecting, but I think she may have been disappointed by a man she was fond of, poor dear," Aunt Tamora told him privately. "She was so sweet and brave about it too. Oh, what a tragedy that sort of thing is, to the young."

"Yes, what a tragedy," he repeated dully.

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Severus returned to Snape Hall alone at the end of September.

Parkinson had paid the ninety-nine Galleons into his Gringotts vault just as promised, so Severus put together a makeshift potions lab in an unused storeroom at home. He made up the aphrodisiac ointment and put it in a pretty enamelled jar, which he then had delivered to Emmitt Parkinson by owl, along with a bit of parchment with euphemistically worded instructions for its use. There, his end of the bargain had been fulfilled, at no risk to Beatrice.

Originally, Severus had thought that he would take the large infusion of liquid capital Lucius had left in his Gringotts vault for his summer's labours and the ninety-nine Galleons Parkinson had given him, and would invest in new roofing for part of the main house at Snape Hall but then not long after his return, one of his tenants came to see him at the beginning of the late fall rainy season and complained that the roof of her rented house was leaking something fierce. Severus paid her a visit one rainy Sunday and discovered that she was indeed telling the truth there were drips pooling in frypans and basins in three rooms of the house. Tobias Snape had been well known in the village as a tyrannical landlord who performed the very least maintenance he could on his rental properties in order to keep them liveable, and his son found this attitude both irresponsible and unconscionable, especially since his tenant was a widow who lived in the house with her elderly father and two small children. So Severus did his duty as a responsible landlord and hired a contractor to replace the roofing which of course consumed most of the small nest egg he had accumulated at the end of the summer.

Snape Hall was just as drafty and cold and the roof as leaky as always that autumn and winter. It was cold comfort to know that his tenant family was warm and comfortable in their snug little house in the village while he himself spent most of the winter's long dark huddled under rugs in an armchair in front of the fireplace, both for warmth and to save on oil for his reading lamp, trying to ignore the sound of rainwater dripping into basins.

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The high point of that year was a fortnight's visit to his grandmother's in Mayfair for the Christmas holidays. It was just the two of them at the Mayfair penthouse, which his grandmother had decorated like something out of a Dickensian storybook. Now and then she would have her friends and relatives in for mince pies and sherry, sedate grey-haired witches and wizards of her own age, but Severus enjoyed their company, especially that of an eighty-something second cousin named Coriolanus Ollivander, who had been a competitive chess player and, as it turned out, knew Will Erlendsson, the Orcadian grandmaster. Plus, on Christmas morning, she gave him a pile of presents despite the fact that he couldn't afford to reciprocate in kind; things he needed, like clothes and boots, and things he didn't need but loved, like new books. As always, she had a gift for picking fascinating titles that interested him immediately.

Although he enjoyed spending the holidays with Octavia, he was very quiet and subdued even for him, and as always, his grandmother ferreted out the cause of his upset in that dignified, nearly telepathic way of hers.

"Severus, my boy? Is something the matter?" she asked over a sumptuous Christmas dinner of roast goose with all the trimmings. "You seem upset, if you'll forgive me."

"I just... it's nothing," he said, keeping his eyes on his plate.

"I know you spent the summer with the Malfoys they weren't unkind to you, were they?" she asked, a hint of concern in her voice.

"No, no, they were fine. All those cotillions were sort of dull though, if you're not one for dancing."

"I can imagine." She cut herself another bit of goose from the roast on the table "Would you like another slice?"

"Yes, please, thank you." His grandmother cut him two slices instead she was generous that way.

"So, did you get to see a lot of your old school chums this summer?" she asked, sipping from her wineglass.

"Yes, quite a few of them. It was like Old Home Week or something."

Octavia laughed. "Good, good." She nibbled thoughtfully at supper for a moment, then asked: "And did you perhaps meet any nice young ladies?"

"I... " His grandmother's hospitality was of course the best English cuisine around, but suddenly supper had lost all its savour for him. "I met... someone."

She smiled. "Good, good." Then she studied his face for a long, thoughtful moment. "Anything come of it?"

He scowled down at his plate. "No, I don't think anything will. One of those summer things."

"I see." She rested her hand briefly on his. "I'm sorry, son. If any girl doesn't appreciate you, then she's the biggest fool in the world." She pressed his hand warmly, and then gently changed the subject, which only made him all the more grateful to her.

It was hard to return home at the end of their visit in January, but he had letters to write and the endless repairs to oversee.

Sometime in March, Uncle Abraxas mentioned in a letter that Rodolphus Lestrange had returned to Wiltshire from London, where he had been staying while his court proceedings were going on. The charges of blackmail, extortion, and conspiracy against Lestrange were dropped in early March of 1979 due to lack of evidence, and his first action as a free man had been to immediately head up to Malfeasant to welcome his good friend Lucius Malfoy back from his sabbatical in the Faerielands.

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Then it was summer of 1979, and Severus wasn't sure where the time had gone since he returned from Malfeasant. He still hadn't managed to get any but the most basic repairs done on the house, and he still had only made a half-hearted attempt at finding a job, or some way to earn money beyond the monthly stipend paid by his mother's inheritance. Somehow his desire to leave that which was comfortable, familiar, and unchallenging never turned into anything resembling real resolve, and even he thought his job-seeking efforts were less than decisive. The only thing he was glad about was that his father wasn't around, so he could go from here to there without the old bastard giving him hell over it. It was convenient not to have to account to that son of a bitch for his comings and goings any longer. For example, when he received the invitation to the wedding of Miss Bellatrix Natasha Black to Mr. Rodolphus Brutus Lestrange in September, he went into the kitchen and dropped it in the stove, burning the gilded parchment invitation and the pretty little response card and envelope to ash. There was no one left at Snape Hall to shout at him for his uncouth manners, and he didn't care.

Everything in him wanted to scream from the rooftops *No, she's my lover, mine...* but the more he thought about the circumstances, the less it seemed that Bella had really wanted him at all, and the more it seemed that he had only been a pawn taken up to further her own ambitions. Somehow it just didn't seem a coincidence that Bella had chosen to seduce a hopelessly randy, affection-starved teenage virgin who also just happened to have a prodigious talent for potion-making, then induced him to make up a coercive aphrodisiac potion that she had then tried to use to entice Emmitt Parkinson into a compromising situation, just after the most important ball of the season.

Years later, Severus would be able to reflect on the circumstances and realise that in their circle, it was perhaps inevitable that Bellatrix and Rodolphus should end up paired together. Bella had the taint of the virago about her, as a formidable woman with her own will to power, who used men for her own pleasure and who could compete in their world. And while Rodolphus Lestrange had done nothing that any number of the others hadn't also done, he had committed the cardinal sin of leaving evidence where the authorities could find it. He had been sloppy, and he had gotten caught.

Bellatrix was a notorious libertine, but also well-born, wealthy, beautiful, and charming; Rodolphus had been under suspicion, but was dashing, well-born, and rich. They were both tarnished and marginalised in exactly the same way, and no one else with their kind of social currency would have them.

As a grown man, with years of worldly cynicism hardened into place, these truths would be obvious to him but for now, he was a teenage boy who had lost the woman he loved, and who had been deprived of the illusion that she had ever loved him; who now could not ask for anyone's sympathy without humiliating himself.

He lay in bed alone that year, listening to the wind and sea howling in winter, to the Selkies' faraway songs in summer, and refused to let himself cry.

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Then October arrived, and the preparations for Lucius and Narcissa's wedding reached a fever pitch.

Severus hadn't wanted to come to the wedding at all. He intended to only make a brief appearance on the actual day, but then Evan had come up to Snape Hall a week before the wedding, and told him that Aunt Tamora and Aunt Druella were worried about him, and prevailed upon him to come down to Malfeasant with the usual combination of brotherly bullying and affectionate sarcasm. Finally, he had promised he would go, just to see Evan and help Aunt Druella and the Malfoys a bit, and to alleviate his own boredom.

When he arrived, however, the Malfoy and Black families expected him to fall right back into his usual role of confidante, errand boy, and general *cavalier servente* to everyone; he was, once again, as indispensable as he was totally unappreciated. He had spent that entire week assisting Aunt Druella with various last-minute arrangements and listening to Narcissa's unending barrage of peevish complaints. That seamstress had put the wrong kind of silver *pointe d'esprit* Valenciennes lace on the hem of her gown, the florist didn't know if they could get enough silver roses for all the wedding centrepieces. Her wedding shoes came from the shop with a scuff, which of course meant that no one cared about her. Bella was supposed to be her maid of honour, but she kept sneaking off with Rodolphus and wasn't any help at all, and Bella kept talking to people about her own wedding when it was Narcissa's special day on Saturday. Her brother Menzentius and her cousin Regulus kept stealing Lucius's father's liquor and getting into fights in the village. Her cousin Sirius hadn't even responded to the wedding invitation they sent him, hadn't even bothered to send his regrets.

Narcissa had also heard a rumour that Lucius had commissioned a diamond necklace for her wedding present, and kept pestering Severus with questions did he know which jeweller was making it? Was it platinum or gold, were there any important stones in it, and how many? There had also been some rumours about those wild, sluttish, promiscuous Faery girls chasing Lucius while he was in Arcadia, but Lucius's father had still invited some Faeries to the wedding. If Narcissa could have had her way, she would have refused to allow them to come at all, but the Faery woman was married to some long-time friend of Lucius's father's, and the Malfoys were paying for their honeymoon, so there was nothing Narcissa could do about it. Nonetheless, she took hours to bend Severus's ear about those and a thousand other grievances.

And then, of course, there was Bella, Narcissa's maid of honour, who kept looking at him.

It had been over a year since he had last spoken to her since the night she had tested *Carnalis* on him and they remained on each other's periphery now. She hadn't said anything, didn't make a move, but she just kept bloody *looking* at him, even as he made a point of not only refusing to speak to her or look at her, but avoiding her completely. If she entered a room, he would leave it as fast as was seemly. If circumstances required them to be in the same room, he invariably took a seat at the table as far away from her as was possible.

But even then, it was impossible to ignore her completely, as his treacherous body remembered her all too well and craved more of her. Just the breeze of her passing was enough to make his hair prickle, just the smoky inflections of her overheard voice were enough to make his skin feel hungry, and just the sound of her low, gloating laugh could still leave him half erect. He put more energy into ignoring her than he did in talking to anyone else, and while he shunned her with all his might, he was still hyperaware of her every move, of where she was at all times, and of her every interaction with everyone.

Everywhere he went, it seemed that he could feel the weight of those unshockable dark eyes burning into him, even when he tried his hardest to turn his back on her.

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He should have known that Bella would eventually refuse be ignored.

There had been some kind of closed-door arguing going on between Bella and Rodolphus since the weekend before the wedding. Severus had discerned from the whispers going around the castle that she was angry at her fiancé, something about how he'd gone out with Lucius and gotten into some kind of trouble. Some village girl was making accusations, and now a great deal of money was required.

She cornered him in his uncle's study Severus had been sitting at Uncle Abraxas's desk entering some wedding vendors' invoices in a ledger when Bella's voice sounded behind him.

"Little baby Severus," she said, caressing his back, and her touch sent all the same little thrills through him that it always had. "You're avoiding me. I know you're doing it, and I know why you are... maybe I deserve it. But... " she gave a weighty sigh... "you have no idea how much I miss you."

Severus had been about to gather his nerve and simply leave the room, walk out on her without a word, but that last remark rankled so much that he couldn't stop himself from calling her on it. He stood up and turned on her, eyes flashing dangerously. "You miss *me*? Really?" he sneered.

She didn't falter; he should have known better than to think he could ever intimidate her. "And I think you miss me, too, don't you, baby? You and those big, pretty eyes... " One slim hand reached up to stroke his cheek, but he flinched away from her.

"If you're actually finding my absence disturbing, perhaps you should have thought of that before you agreed to marry someone else." He turned and started to leave the room.

"Severus... " She called desperately out to him, and there was something in her voice now, an edge of sadness that went through him like a knife. "You don't understand. My mother wants me to marry him, and Mum is old she might not be around much longer, I can't just break her heart like that. It would *kill* her," she protested.

"Spare me, Bella, you were always on about how hate your mother. You've told me flat out that you wish she'd hurry up and die so that you can come into your inheritance, remember? If she dropped dead tomorrow, you'd probably throw a party," he snapped, disgusted. Bella told so many lies she probably didn't even know what the truth was any more.

But Bella just laughed... that soft sultry laugh that he had once loved so much. "Yes, you're right, you were always too clever for me. I won't lie to you, baby. It's because he's rich." Her shoulders drooped, and a blush lit her flawless cheeks. "There isn't much left to the Black fortune, it's true. That's why Cissy and I both have to marry well, you see... Mum is old, and Menz is just a kid, and they need us. There isn't anyone else, now that Daddy's gone." She raised her eyes pleadingly to him, lower lip quivering.

Oh, yes he knew her dutiful daughter act was complete shite, so now she was trying another tactic, casting herself as the self-sacrificing heroine of a gothic melodrama. Merlin preserve him from the lies, dissembling, and mendacities of *women. 'Frailty, thy name is woman'.* If, like Diogenes, he took lantern in hand and went through the world until he found an honest woman, he'd be wandering until the last star in the universe winked out.

"Yes, I can just see your mother limping up the hill to the poorhouse I wonder which of her diamond tiaras she'd wear to make *that* trek," he shot back. "Bella, just give it up. I know what you were doing you needed me to create *Carnalis* so you could try to keep Parkinson. Then Parkinson eluded you, but no fear, Lestrange will do just as well, money's money. I don't know what potion you think you're going to get out of me now, but I don't care. I'm finished with you."

"Severus, please, darling, I don't need a potion," she said, gazing up at him so softly, so knowingly; making him feel, as always, completely vulnerable and transparent before her. "I just... I really do just miss you."

"Oh, really, do you?" he asked insolently. "You went to bed with me so I would do you a favour, and once there, you found that you actually *liked* going to bed with me, and now you want to start that up again? Is that it?"

She smiled up at him, as though delighted that he understood her so well then her arms were around his neck, and she pressed a series of long, heated kisses to his numb, unresponsive lips. "Don't worry, darling, it can be like it was before. You know I love you, just you. We can be together anyway, it doesn't matter who we're married to. You're the best. You've always been the best... " Her fingers raked over his inner thigh, moving upward

Severus pushed her hard against the wall and away from him, an action that made him feel horrible even if he was defending himself. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

He had gone through a second growth spurt that year, and was now taller than Lucius and so could look down at Bella. His voice had also by then matured from his boyish tenor to his adult speaking voice, a true, rich baritone, and he used both now to full advantage.

"But... " She stared up at him, hurt and betrayed, her eyes lustrous with tears. "But you said you loved me," she said, sounding like a hurt little girl. Only Bella could be trying to make him feel guilty over refusing to sleep with her when she was going to marry another man, and only Bella could succeed so well at it.

He stared at her. *I do love you. Don't marry him. You know damned well you would rather marry me,* he thought but he knew such entreaties would be futile, and refused to humiliate himself with pleading.

"I don't love you anymore," Severus said with a dire coldness that surprised even him. "I loathe you. I can barely stand to look at you. I will never care about you again, or touch you again. I will certainly never sleep with you again. You had best get used to it, because that's how it's going to be from this day onward. Perhaps you know a lot of blokes who are content to let you use them and toss them away when you're through, but I'm not of that type, *thanks.* If you ever come near me again, I'll tell everyone who'll listen about what you tried to do to Parkinson and see what that makes your rich fiancé think of you, *you lying little bitch.*"

Her response was to wind up and backhand him across the face, hard enough to leave his jaw sore for hours afterward Bella could even strike a blow with more force than most men. She knew how he felt about hitting women, knew very well that to retaliate would make him break his personal vow never to treat women like his father had treated his mother. If he wouldn't disregard her betrothal promise, she would find some other way to force him to be untrue to himself. It was a particularly Bella-like sort of thing to do.

He stood motionless, his cheek reddening, drawing blood from his lower lip with the effort of keeping himself from dealing her the kind of tooth-rattling slap that would send her spinning across the room, from seizing her arm and forcing her to her knees; in the way he had seen so many times before, in the manner that his father had rehearsed him since he was a child.

Instead, he turned his back on her, gathered what shreds of dignity he had left, and silently left the room.

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"Yes, of course, who's to say you can't," Lucius said, in a tone very much like that of a grown-up humouring a child. "I know you've been sending out job letters where have you applied, if you don't mind me asking?"

Severus named a few of the firms where he had applied, and Lucius nodded.

"Good choices. They're successful firms, all of them. Have you gotten any response?"

"Well... they probably receive a lot of job letters," Severus said, just a touch defensively. "It's too early to say."

"Of course they do," Lucius agreed. "But you know, cousin, I don't know why you're bothering with asking people outside our set for work, not when there's so much you could be doing right here."

Severus looked up, surprised. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"There's a meeting going on, just after I get back from our honeymoon," Lucius said pleasantly. "A new group of us have been getting together of late, to discuss matters of mutual interest to our sort of lads, you know, and I'd been debating as to whether I should ask you to join or not. The fellow who's running the show is quite inspiring, and has some absolutely stupendous kinds of ideas about how to better the lot of everyone in our world while making a tidy profit for ourselves, of course. Would you be interested?"

"I might be," Severus replied. It sounded as though Lucius was getting involved in the formation of a new business concern of some sort or was it a political party? It certainly sounded as though whomever was organising it had political aspirations, wanted to come out as a candidate for the Wizengamot, perhaps. "What exactly are they looking for?"

"I'll send you an owl when I get back, and we'll talk about it then," Lucius said, smiling. "How's the jaw, there? Can I get you a fresh compress?"

"No," he said. "No, I'll be all right."

Just you wait, Mrs. Lestrange, Severus thought darkly. *So I'm 'not in the strata you want as far as a husband, and you'd never marry a half-blood bloke'? Just you bloody fucking wait.*

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But then, he thought, her father had a very intelligent expression on his face, so whatever he was saying to his daughter must be clever, and interesting. And from the way the girl was watching her father's face as he spoke, and how her smile deepened with amusement at whatever he said, he must be witty as well good to talk to and listen to, a good companion. She was putting in silly little extra flourishes into the dances, and her father seemed to be teasing her about it, but playing along with her anyway.

Why were they like that, he wondered.

The players in this scene were simple a man and his daughter, dancing together at a wedding. Why then, he thought, were they having such a good time, when so many other combinations of the same relationship Felina Rosier and her father, Beatrice Rookwood and her father, and by extension the fathers and sons in the same group seemed so incapable of enjoying each other's company like that? He was studying the girl and her father the way he studied lacewings, or fluxweed, or aconite, or a fine bezoar because he had always believed that if he contemplated something long enough, analysed it for its component parts, learned everything he could about it, then somehow the secret of its power, of its magic, would be revealed to him. But the more he watched them, the less he understood them, and the more he wanted to know who they were.

He wondered briefly if the girl's parents would like to adopt a son.

Or if she had a boyfriend.

"'Lo, Snaples. Who are you glowering at now?" Evan said, sitting down next to him and glancing in the same direction of his fixed attentions. "Oh, her. Well, it's definitely true about her sort liking to dance."

"Do you know her?" Severus asked.

Evan shook his head dismissively. "No nobody knows her, her father's not important anymore. She's definitely not from around here."

Part Third: The Hart Subvertant, Chapter 27, Part 1

Chapter 41 of 55

After Voldemort's return, Professor Swain has agreed to Sirius Black's suggestion that she use her influence with Lucius Malfoy to gather intelligence on the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters. As her horror of the Dark Lord grows, her old enemy Severus Snape proves to be the only one who understands the fear and doubt that plague a double agent…

Part Third: The Hart Subvertant

"I am invisible;

And I will overhear their conference."

William Shakespeare, *"A Midsummer Night's Dream"*

"Be strong, saith my heart;

I am a soldier, I have seen worse sights than this."

from the *Iliad* of Homer

"But the worm shall revive thee with kisses;

Thou shalt change and transmute as a god,

As the rod to a serpent that hisses,

And the serpent again to a rod.

Thy life shall not cease though thou doff it;

Thou shalt live until evil be slain,

And the good shall die first, said thy prophet,

Our Lady of Pain."

Algernon Charles Swinnerton, *"Dolores"*

Chapter 27, Part 1:

Dumbledore had not kept Emily long after accepting her offer to become an informant against the Death Eaters. It seemed to be his opinion that both she and Professor Snape had been through quite enough that evening, and he very gently and tactfully ordered them to go have a well-deserved rest.

They left his office by the spiralling staircase, in total silence. As she followed Snape down the stairs, her eyes fastened on the back of his dark head with a welter of emotions hammering under her chest anger at having been Stunned, at being made to confess to that wretched association with Malfoy, at being called vain and a fool, all warring with disappointment that her offer of aid against Voldemort her efforts to save his own rotten unfeeling *hide* had all gone unappreciated. She wanted to scream at him, hit him, shake him, anything that would finally provoke a reaction out of the man.

They reached the outside corridor and passed the statue of the gargoyle just outside.

"Well. So now you know the whole story," she said to the immovable back of his head, his rigidly set shoulders. "I do hope you're glad of it."

He finally turned and looked at her. He was silent, his face again completely unreadable then he turned and started down the corridor away from her. Nothing he hadn't done a hundred times before, but for some reason, this reaction now filled her with an unreasoning anger. In a second, she had caught up to him grabbed his black-cloaked shoulder almost threw him around to face her. "Don't you walk away from me *how dare you!*"

He didn't flinch; one long deft hand reached up and coolly smoothed down the lapel that she had disarranged. "How *dare* I do what? Stun you, or make you confess your various sins to Dumbledore?"

"Both. Either." She stepped back, her breath labouring. "You had really best watch your back from now on, if that's the sort of thing you like to do to people."

He laughed cruelly, taking a step toward her. "I have been watching my back, my Lady, since before your Word had power. And seeing as how you've recently confessed to being the latest in a long line of Lucius Malfoy's extramarital entertainments, kindly remember that you are in no position to be self-righteous tonight."

Everyone has a limit of endurance, and Emily had reached hers. She clenched her fist and aimed it at his jaw

but to her great surprise, Snape took a backward step and simultaneously threw up a block that deflected her punch completely, neatly imprisoning her wrist in his right hand.

Much of her anger dissipated when he stopped her so efficiently she glanced down at his hand on her wrist with a flicker of proprietary pride in her eyes. A teacher proud of producing a capable student. "If you'd been any slower, you'd be in a lot of pain."

"If I'd been any slower, I'd have deserved it. But you're not going to hurt me." He raised her captured wrist to his face and brazenly drew the back of her hand down his cheek. "Not after you've gone through so much trouble to keep me alive tonight, and you're not stupid enough to undo your own labours out of spite. You won't be doing the Dark Lord's work for him after the promise you made to Dumbledore. No, I think you'll actually be spending a great deal of time watching my back *for* me."

"I've kept a lot of people alive that's my job," she retorted. "Don't assume there's anything personal about it necessarily."

He made no reply, but turned on his heel and started down the hall toward the dungeons, not letting go of her wrist, so that she was drawn along with him.

"What are you doing?"

"I don't think knocking me to the ground was exactly therapeutic for that stab wound. Now be quiet for once, and come along."

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"No," he replied, black eyes glittering. "A mere acknowledgment that my opinion is correct does *not* make me happy. What you don't understand is that I am *very frequently right,* Professor. My judgment proves sound on a regular basis, on an astonishingly diverse array of topics and situations. Yet, no matter how many times it is shown, in hindsight and retrospect, that my prescribed advice or course of action was in fact the best one, or that my opinion on a certain matter was entirely justified, sensible, and well-reasoned, does anyone here *ever fucking listen to me.* I'm honestly beginning to think that the best way to see everyone around me safe is to start advising you all to do the exact opposite of what I truly think, so as to keep you out of danger and give you the satisfaction of thinking that you're disregarding me at the same time "

"I *don't* disregard you," she retorted. That he could say that, after the events of this evening, sent a hot, inexplicable pang through her. Oh, ye of little faith.

Snape's eyes narrowed. "Perhaps. But even if I had tried to warn you about Lucius and don't think I didn't *want to,* for most of the bloody second term " he threw the scissors back into a drawer hard enough to make them bounce "I had no doubt that hearing that kind of warning from me would probably only have made him look more attractive to you than he already did." He paused, arms folded across his chest, tapping one foot impatiently. "Wouldn't it. I probably should have spent all my time gushing to you about what a wonderful fellow he is then you wouldn't have wanted him at all."

Emily started to speak, and then thought the better of what she had been about to say and stopped herself. She did this two or three times.

"It must have been a very trying year for you," she said finally.

"Yes," Snape spat. "Yes, *it was.*"

He stared at her, his eyes glittering with fury, as though he could barely stand to look at her, then turned and stalked toward the door. But then he stopped, his hand on the doorknob, his back to her.

"You know... I've known Lucius almost all my life. I've seen him reduce proud, decent women to the level of rats in a laboratory pressing a bar for more cocaine," he said. "But I thought you a noble lady, a knight would be better than that."

If he had turned around at that moment, he would have seen her face crumpling with guilt and shame and tears starting in her eyes. But he did not turn around.

Snape let himself out, silently closing his office door behind him.

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Rachel Nym-Doran, 19, a local University student, was standing at the bar when the warning came. She recalled: "The lads came barrelling out of the kitchen as fast as they could, and I could smell all the gas even from where I was standing at the bar. Gods, I was so bloody scared. I'd been just about to light a cigarette, too."

Miss Nym-Doran phoned in the first call to Emergency seconds after the blast occurred; her quick response is being credited with the prevention of a larger neighbourhood fire. As it was, only the Fusilier was destroyed, and the adjacent buildings only suffered some smoke damage and mild scorching.

Tilia Gentle, an expatriate American working in London, had been at the Fusilier with friends on the night of the explosion. "Jack was just wonderful, got all of us out in no time. No one even panicked. I can't wait to see all those guys again when Jack re-opens the pub," she said.

Amazingly, none of the pub's patrons or staff were killed or seriously injured, although the building was reduced to what Fire Chief Dane Hansen described as "a smoking crater." There were no injuries beyond some minor scrapes and lacerations from flying debris amongst bystanders. One unnamed woman on the scene appeared to have fainted, but her unidentified husband told witnesses that she was merely overcome by the stress of the explosion, and was not injured in any way.

The explosion has led to a citywide safety campaign targeting old and potentially hazardous gas lines...

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The article went on to describe the safety campaign in detail, and list telltale signs of a potential gas leak and pointers on gas stove maintenance. So... something good really might have come of that evening.

Scratched at the bottom of the page, in Professor Snape's stark black handwriting, were two words:

Good work.

Only two words, but somehow, perversely... it was really absurd how proud they made her feel.

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Professor Snape could not sleep at all the night the Fusilier was destroyed, and nodded only fitfully for the remainder of that week. He had far too much to think about.

An image kept recurring to him Professor Swain letting her blouse fall back over her shoulder, revealing her bent neck and finely articulated athlete's back, and then the blue-stained bandage coming off, to reveal a livid, puckered gash longer than his hand hacked into her flesh. Perhaps she came from a culture where women regularly went into combat alongside men, but he did not; and the sight of that wound affected him more than he would have admitted to anyone. Just the memory was enough to make his stomach clench and the blood run acid in his veins. One would think that being on the receiving end of a Death Eater's commissioned knife in the back would have served as caution enough for her not to get involved here, romantic little idiot that she was.

So Barty had known enough to either give his assassin an iron blade, or tell him to use one. Lucius had spent a year living amongst the Fae themselves who knew what he had learned about them. Clearly, the enemy in this situation was well lessoned on the weaknesses of the Faery folk and if that bloody woman didn't have the brains to keep herself out of danger, then obviously someone had to take measures to preserve her from her own folly.

So the Friday afternoon following the explosion, and Professor Swain's decidedly ill-advised resolution to begin informing on Lucius, Snape sat down at his desk, took quill in hand, and composed a letter:

Dr. Catherine Orson, M.D.

Hidden Sixth-Floor Clinic Window

St. George's Hospital

Summerstown, London

UNITED KINGDOM

Dear Dr. Orson,

Recently, I have had reason to be concerned about the welfare of the Fae regarding the toxic effect of iron. As you may know, I consider myself to have acquired some mean skill in the art of medicinal Potions, and now wish to turn my efforts toward devising a more effective remedy for iron burns than those currently available.

I wish to research a variant on regenerative Healing Potion that will counteract the effects of iron burns on Faerie patients with the same efficiency that wizard Healing Potion affects simple burns. As you know, the Wizarding community has within its pharmacy a potion that can heal simple heat and electrical burns on contact, and chemical burns within minutes I seek to duplicate this effect.

Forgive me for troubling you, but you are the only person of my acquaintance familiar with Faery physiology and the chemical composition of their flesh, and their blood. I would greatly appreciate if you could assist me in understanding exactly why Faery tissues react so violently upon contact with forged iron...

He continued to write, warming to the topic and becoming more and more interested as the letter progressed, until he was rather surprised to discover that he had composed a three-page query to Catherine full of theories and speculation on the subject of Faeries and iron.

Finally he sealed this epistle with his habitual black wax and a monogram of an intertwined **§**, and took it to the Owlery.

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To Snape's surprise, his own post owl returned to his office window within two hours with Dr. Orson's almost immediate reply. Her handwriting was almost as stark and legible as his own:

Dear Professor Snape,

You're bloody brilliant that's an incredible idea. Let's go ahead with it.

I'll need a little more time to come up with a real response to all your questions and theories, but I wanted to drop you a note and tell you that I got your letter, and that I'm beginning work.

Also, if you don't mind, I'm going to make a copy of your letter and forward it to my friend Laurent Collier, Lic. Hea., at L'Institut de la médecine supernaturelle in Paris, and get his input on this as well. Laurent's spent a lot of time studying Faery medicinal potions with Samiel Cobweb, the Third Kingdom's Royal Apothecary, and he probably could add some interesting insights into this task as well.

Anyway enclosed please find Xeroxes of my notes on the chemical composition of Faery blood and tissue. I haven't found anything traditionally thought to produce an

extreme reaction when exposed to iron or ferrous compounds of any kind, but I'm certain that there's lots more to learn.

Regards,

Catherine

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Later that day, at perhaps eleven p.m. Friday evening, two days after the explosion, Professor Snape had gone for a walk around the highest turrets and towers of the castle. The brilliant light of the full moon lit his way.

He had been doing a great deal of thinking, and in the last day or so, the deep game his cousin was playing with Emily Swain had suddenly become obvious to him.

Voldemort was back. The Dark Lord's power was rising again, and he was calling his old allies to him, and cultivating new ones. What with the new, more open political stance the Fae had adopted recently, culminating in the arrival of one of their own military commanders at Hogwarts to teach their magic and their style of combat... what a triumph it would be for Lucius to be able to lay an alliance with the Faeries at Voldemort's feet.

Lucius and Dumbledore had both seen the Fae for what they were a vast, undiscovered country, without overt political affiliation or loyalties in the Wizarding world, and with powerful magics and military might behind them. Now, the opposing Wizarding factions would grasp for alliances with this power, both with their own cards to play. Dumbledore had his long ties of friendship and sworn brotherhood with Gwydion, ruler of the Third Kingdom; but Gwydion was an old, old man, one hundred and ninety-six according to Swain's *Encyclopaedia,* and his influence waned with his declining health. Lucius had his family's ties of long friendship with the Swains and through Buckminster Swain's marriage and Lucius's Tithe service, he had ties to the royal Greenbarrow family. Additionally, Lucius had, or thought he had, his own amorous hooks sunk deep in one Lady Emily Swain-Tumnus, an influential Fianna commander.

There was a sentry of Diagon Alley, and there had been a sentry of Christchurch College, watching for *change.* Under the entry about the Tithe in Swain's *Encyclopaedia*, there was an oblique mention of sentries being sent into the Second World to recruit the most talented, promising, and fair-minded young people for introduction to their society as Tithe pages and suddenly Gwydion's subtle, elegant strategy for peaceful outreach was apparent to him as well. Who knew how many other Fae *sentries*, a kind of benign intelligence-gathering agent, were watching Wizard- and Muggle-kind for signs of positive change, for the moment when peaceable, enlightened integration would be possible. Malabar Puck had made it sound as though Professor Swain had been one of many sentries of Cambridge University, and now, whether she or her King had intended it or not, she may have also become the *de facto* sentry of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Her assessment of the Wizarding world's political situation might be instrumental in determining whether the Third Kingdom entered this conflict and which side they supported.

The venerable King Gwydion might soon be gone, and Prince Corryn would ascend the throne like all new monarchs, he would be seeking allies, looking to solidify his power base. Lady Elaine Greenbarrow Swain had stepped down from active combat duty to plot defence strategies with sovereigns in the event of another war breaking out, she and the reigning monarch would appoint a successor to lead the troops into battle, as per Fianna tradition.

The most natural candidate for acting First Knight, now that Lady Elaine had retired from combat duty, was of course her daughter, Lady Emily, the Fianna's Lady of the Blade. And if the unchallenged leader of all those Morrigan knights was related to Lucius by marriage... if the Ministry appointed Lucius to create a Department of Interdimensional Magical Co-operation, putting him in charge of overseeing Faery diplomacy, and Faery immigration... if the carrot of political and social power in Wizarding society was dangled before enough disgruntled and downtrodden Faeries...

And then Lucius Malfoy could present Lord Voldemort with his very own personal army.

Yes, the Fae were a powerful ally, and their loyalty was now effectively up for grabs.

Snape scowled direly, and resumed his walk.

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Emily took the invitation to Draco's birthday weekend to Dumbledore's office that evening.

"Lucius has asked me to show up early to his son's party," she said. "I don't think he would have done that if he had any idea of what I did last Wednesday. Do you think he's figured out that the murder attempt on Professor Snape was unsuccessful?"

"Truthfully, I don't know," Dumbledore said, thoughtfully stroking his white beard. "I've been doing everything in my power to find out, however."

"It might be for the best if everyone does think Professor Snape was killed," Emily said. "He'd be beneath their notice, if they think they've already eliminated him."

"But they have access to all the same Muggle newspapers that we do, so in all likelihood they already know that the pub was evacuated before the explosion. To be honest, Emily, if you accept this invitation, I hope that you might be able to find out what the Death Eaters know about that evening, and whether or not they know Severus is still alive," he replied. "If they believe you to be a potential ally, you could perhaps learn a great deal. However, the one person best qualified to advise you in this matter is Severus himself. For the last fifteen years, he has been my eyes and ears regarding Lucius Malfoy and his cronies."

"Professor Snape was there when I received the invitation, but he didn't say anything to me at the time. But then, I can imagine how the last weeks must have been unsettling for him," Emily said. "I know they have been for me."

Her companion nodded grimly. "As you know, Emily, Severus was very much against accepting your help, for reasons of his own," Dumbledore said quietly. "As such, don't expect him to seek you out to discuss this event. One of my rules of thumb is when one wants Severus's counsel, one will most often have to make the effort to speak to him."

"I'll do that now, then. Do you know where he is?"

"Not exactly, but I can give you a very educated guess. Severus sometimes likes to go for walks in the evenings, and on a night with an exceptionally bright moon like this, he is probably on the tower walk, up amongst the turrets. He also unfortunately suffers from fairly severe insomnia, especially when he is under stress, so I warn you that he may be rather more than usually irritable at this time."

"Thank you, sir. I'll go speak to him now, then." She stood up and excused herself from the Headmaster's office with a polite nod.

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The moon was exceptionally bright that night, just as Dumbledore had said. When Emily emerged from the torch-lit dimness of the long, winding stone staircase to the turret walk, her eyes were very accustomed to the dark, so that the brilliant moon blinded her for a few seconds when she reached the top. She was now at one of the highest points of the castle; the walk was a stone arch that stretched from the great North Tower to a landing adjacent to the Astronomy Tower. The breeze was much stronger up here than at ground level; it lifted her hair off her shoulders and set it swirling around her face.

She became aware of a dark figure several yards ahead of her, wrapped in a blowing black cloak, walking away from her. She started after him, quickening her pace to catch up.

"Professor Snape?"

He didn't stop or turn to look at her, but his pace slowed slightly. "Madam."

She fell in step a pace behind him and off his left shoulder. "You can't avoid me forever, you know," she said. "You're the only other person here with the faintest idea how I should proceed from here. Without any counsel from you, you do realise I'll be walking into this little Death Eater company picnic next weekend completely blind."

"You'll have to forgive me if I'm not exactly *motivated* to come talk to you," Snape shot back. "I shudder to think of how much Lucius has heard about my activities of this past year already, with you on the next *pillow*."

"I didn't tell him anything about you," she said quietly. "Not about the fact that you used to inform on him and the Dark Lord to Dumbledore, not that I trained you, not that you've created a True Name, not about what's happened between you and me *nothing*. He honestly thought I'd be glad to see you dead and we led him to that conclusion ourselves. And the only reason you know about my relationship with him is because you put me in a situation where I had to confess it. If I had my way, no one else would ever have known about it."

He stopped, finally, crossed to the stone rail and gazed out over the glimmering silver lake and darkened expanse of the moonlit Quidditch pitch below them. "Well since we're being so *honest* with each other, then, I'm not going to make any secret of the fact that I was against bringing you on as an informant, and have been from the moment that the idea was proposed," he said coldly. "You are just about the last person on Earth I would want to work with in this matter."

"I really don't believe I'm as much of a potential liability as you think," she retorted. "I've always been good at assimilating just about anywhere, sir. As I recall, my Muggle disguise is pretty seamless." So seamless that it had even fooled him, she thought, but refrained from saying.

"Other than the fact that with your accent, you really should stop *implying* that you're from the Lake District," Snape said. "You sound more Irish or rural American, or perhaps Australian, than like a Cotswolds native."

"Good to know, thanks," she replied, with sarcastic brightness. "At any rate, I really don't think gathering information from Lucius should be too difficult it seems that I've already been doing it inadvertently. Lucius likes having someone around to confide all of his nastiness to the man just loves the sound of his own voice, and he adores having an audience."

Snape rolled his eyes. "I could have told you that when I was nine years old," he muttered.

"Exactly you've managed to keep tabs on him since you were hardly more than a boy."

"But, you see... being a treacherous bastard has always come naturally to me, and I have no religious objections to telling complete and utter lies," he replied in tones of silky insouciance. "You're used to charging in at the head of an army with the sun glinting off your armour, Professor. I'm used to biting the hand that holds my leash. I doubt, somehow, that you will become any better at my speciality than I am at yours."

She took a deep breath before continuing. "Flattered as I am to hear such... *respect* for my previous valour "

"Which makes me wonder at your current capacity for stupid romantic notions of bravery and valour "

" *I think your concerns are a bit unfounded*," she snapped, ignoring the interruption. "I've been more treacherous this year than I've ever been in my life."

His mouth kinked in amusement. "How is that?"

"Well... there is that whole secret mistress of a married Ministry official bit," she said, absolutely matter-of-factly.

"You're deceiving yourself if you think no one knows about *that*, my Lady," he remarked, glancing back out over the turrets.

She stared at him, feeling a sick pang in the pit of her stomach. "What do you mean?"

"Whatever he may have told you, Lucius Malfoy *is* the sort to flaunt his conquests. He's probably not come out and told anyone the exact particulars, but if he's following his usual precedent, he'll have made it quite clear that everyone in his inner circle is to think of you as belonging to him and only him, no matter to whom he chooses to marry you off."

She bristled. "I don't belong to anyone, thanks and I'm not a *conquest*."

"If you say so," he replied in his silkiest tones. Only he could agree with her in a manner that was worse than any insult.

"Well, if you must know, the only reason I haven't abandoned him completely, after what he tried to do at that pub, is because of this task I've undertaken for Dumbledore," she retorted. "The affair had already soured even before I knew Lucius was a Death Eater as far as I was concerned, it was over by the end of May. If you think I'd have ever stayed with him one minute after it no longer suited me, then you've been inhaling the fumes from too many Potions cauldrons."

"Really you had abandoned him already? What, the lavish flat in London didn't tempt you at all?"

She stepped back, stung, teeth clenching.

"Do you think you would have been the first woman he kept in London?" Snape asked blandly.

"I'll have you know I already own a place in Muggle London, thanks," she spat. "I have my own assets, and I'm no stranger to earning an honest pay cheque either. His money never meant anything to me."

Snape shrugged. "I don't doubt it. But some people always want to acquire more, even if they already have more than they could use in a lifetime. For some, one woman is all they'll ever want but Lucius Malfoy always wants to keep his pretty wife at Malfeasant and a succession of pretty mistresses as well. And if one of them is the Faery noblewoman who snubbed him in his youth, so much the better."

"He really *did* tell you all about me, didn't he." It was not a question.

"He's found occasion to mention quite a few details of your history to me, yes," he muttered. "He enjoys talking about you. And somehow, when he told me that you had dropped him without so much as an explanation when you were seventeen, it did seem rather *in character* for you, begging your pardon "

"I find it hard to believe that you're sympathising with him, sir. After all, he did try to kill you not too long ago," she interrupted in a flinty tone.

"I have no sympathy for him at all, my Lady." He turned from the railing and was pacing behind her, his silken voice focusing on one side of her face, then the next. "I'm looking forward to the day his master is dead, whether it's by Harry Potter's or Neville Longbottom's or anyone else's hand, and his lily-white carcass is either dead, or forever incarcerated in Azkaban. Do not mistake me I've hated Lucius Malfoy since I was a child. But you you've been his *lover*." He leaned close to her ear and snarled the word, making it into a particularly vile insult. "Are you ready to be the one who gives the testimony that sends him to prison? Do you really think that you can betray him?"

"Yes, I think I can," she replied, coldly, and truthfully. "At first it was all very pleasant, but then he tried to pressure me into an arranged marriage, drugged me and tried to learn my True Name, and then he introduced me to this hideous snakelike thing, which wanted to cosy up to my mother and my liege, and *then* he tried to kill one of my

colleagues and claimed it was meant to be a token of his goodwill toward me. Additionally, I'm still not convinced that he didn't set up that knife attack in Diagon Alley, so he could play white knight and make me feel like I needed him again."

Snape stared at her. "He drugged you and tried to learn your True Name?" he asked, eyes widening. "What drug did he give you, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Oh, I don't know, this black, sweet-tasting stuff that made us both sort of telepathic," she snapped, turning away from him. "Nothing I'd ever come across before."

"But he *didn't* pry it out of you, even after you'd both taken this...*black, sweet-tasting stuff?*" Snape pressed.

"No, he didn't if he had, I'd probably have beaten him into a coma just so it was *mine* again, believe you me," she retorted. "So would *you* feel any loyalty toward such a person?

Snape seemed to think about that for second. "Well... probably not," he admitted, his mouth twisting with a hint of black amusement.

"And then I saw... that day at Malfeasant, when he introduced me to You-Know-Who himself, Lucius had this horrible mark on his arm. I had never seen anything so hideous it seemed to writhe and hiss on his arm when I looked at it."

"He had a hideous mark on his arm," Snape said blandly.

His hand went to his left sleeve.

"Did it look anything like this?"

He turned his own left forearm toward her.

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Emily backed away from him, her eyes dilating in horror, breathing an indrawn hiss of aggression if she had had a sword or dagger somewhere about her, she would have drawn it.

"You're one of them... you're a Death Eater." she whispered. "By the Mother of Us All *I had sex with you*."

Snape's face twisted. "Professor "

"*You vile, disgusting, horrible* " She was speechless, unable to think of invective foul enough to describe him. When Lucius had revealed himself as a Death Eater, she had been shocked and repulsed, but this (*not you how could you*) this defied belief. She started to turn away from him, and in another moment would have stalked away in revulsion but was stopped by his hard grip on her wrist.

"*Shut up*, damn you, and listen to me for once. Yes, I *was* one of them, until the day I decided to start bringing Dumbledore information on them instead. Do you really think Albus would knowingly let an unrepentant Death Eater live at Hogwarts, teaching children? You may be many things, Professor, but you never struck me as stupid or obtuse before "

"You must think me stupid indeed, if you think I'm going to believe there's such any such fantastic beast as *an apostate Death Eater*," Emily retorted, tearing her arm out of his grasp. "My father told me that no one who left them ever survived. All those who tried were hunted down and killed."

"Oh, yes, they were. Which is why I never openly left him I just betrayed him. As to why I became involved with them in the first place... I wish I had the necessary eloquence to explain all of what makes an angry and orphaned teenage boy without fortune or prospects fall in with an extremist political group, especially when all the family and friends he has in the world are a part of it, Professor," he said, raw emotion rasping in his voice. "You'll also have personally and intimately experienced how persuasive Lucius's *recruiting tactics* are by now, haven't you and for me to have refused their offer would have been risky indeed. Unlike *some*, I didn't have the option of going home to my loving parents in the Faerielands."

She fell silent, stung, and averted her eyes in embarrassment. Of course she didn't have the option of going home to her loving parents in the Faerielands now but he didn't need to know about that.

"Yes, you've seen how they work by now, haven't you," Snape continued, in a low insinuating voice, taking a step toward her. "They like to target people who are vulnerable, who are at low points in their lives, who have suffered losses, or who feel powerless. They befriend you, take you under their wing, tell you how brilliant you are, how much potential you have. They figure out what you most want, and give it to you without even being asked. Soon you're entirely dependent on them because they're giving you what you need, or think you need. Before long they've become your entire world, you know nothing other than what they show you, and all you have to do in order to have everything you've ever wanted is ignore the inconvenient pangs of your conscience.

"Then they'll start to let you see what they're really doing the extortion, the intimidation, the blackmail, the bribes. The adultery and the corrupt business deals. If you're not careful, you'll end up implicated in some crime yourself, which makes it even harder to preserve any sense of conscience, because it goes against your own self-interest. Then, as they begin to trust you more and more, since you've seen so much and never protested, then they'll show you the very worst of it the assassins hired, the innocent bystanders being murdered, the *poisonings*."

She could only stare at his face, transfixed by the naked emotion contorting his pale, dark features.

"But I found that brewing up poisons for a would-be violent dictator somehow lost its charm after a year or so," he continued. "That was when I sought out my old Headmaster and turned myself in to him. But Albus had other plans for me."

It made sense. That was how he had become a spy, because he had been one of them until the day he decided that he wasn't.

"And don't *ever*, if you have any consideration at all, call me a Death Eater again." His lips peeled savagely back over his teeth "Even if it was true once, it isn't now, and I'll be damned if I'll let anyone say it."

"I won't provided you don't ever call me a *conquest*, or an *extramarital entertainment* again. True as it may be, I don't want to hear it," she retorted.

Then he did something completely surprising to her. She had expected him to find some way to indicate that he did in fact think her to be nothing but Malfoy's latest conquest, backed up by some airtight example of her conquered status he had observed in her behaviour and the Mother knew he would have had plenty of such examples to throw in her face if he did.

But instead, he held out his hand, and growled: "*Deal*."

They shook on it.

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"Tell me something, if you will," she said, after some time. "How did you manage it? Lucius and his cronies got off by pulling political and financial strings everyone else is in prison. How is it that you were never tried and are now teaching at Hogwarts?" It was both a bold question and a personal one, but somehow she dared to ask it.

"Dumbledore assisted me with striking a plea bargain agreement with the previous Minister of Magic under terms of absolute secrecy, in exchange for my services as an informant. I was twenty years old at the time."

She looked at him with grudging admiration. "Good work you may have been young, but naïve, you weren't. And you were probably well aware of what happens to those who betray him."

He shrugged. "I can be hard to get rid of. Rather like cockroaches."

"You've had a little help in that regard, my Lord *Roach,*" she said, with a sinister-eyebrowed look of her own.

"Yes, so I have," Snape said, regarding her with that infrequent, grudging little grin. "So you decided you didn't want my head on a charger, then?" His eyes gleamed.

Emily shook her head wearily. "Contrary to popular opinion, sir, I am not in the habit of collecting men's heads. The last couple of them were quite enough."

He turned away from her in a grim, silent little laugh and resumed his walk, motioning for her to join him. "All right, then. What do you want to know?"

"All of it. Let's have all the dirt and in spades."

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Emily arrived early to breakfast the next morning, hoping to meet up with Dumbledore, and found the Headmaster at the High Table, having a hearty breakfast of waffles with candied apple slices and honeyed lemon tea. It was heartening to see that even with the Wizarding world on high alert against a powerful enemy, some things, like Albus Dumbledore's sweet tooth, were eternal.

"Ah yes, Emily, do come have a seat. I've been meaning to talk to you," he called to her when she arrived.

She took a seat beside him, took some whole-wheat toast and poured a cup of tea. "What is it?"

"Severus has told me that you and he have spoken regarding the event at the Malfoys', and that he has briefed you as to what information we would like for you to gather. Do you feel quite confident about what you know?"

"Yes, I feel as prepared as I can be he didn't mince any words. Really, I'm amazed that he could endure those people long enough to listen to their confidences."

Dumbledore nodded grimly. "I've always been astonished at what Severus could find out for me. He has a capacity for dissembling, and a daring, that I still haven't even begun to fathom. I daily have cause to thank whatever powers that be that he decided to join our side." His mouth tightened; he gazed down at his teacup, momentarily troubled. "But before you leave, there are several people I would like you to meet, our friends and allies in the underground resistance society we call *The Order of the Phoenix.* We meet fairly regularly, at least once a week, and it so happens that our next meeting will be falling on the Wednesday before you leave. I would very much like for you to attend that meeting."

"I should be happy to, sir," she replied.

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That Wednesday, Emily met Dumbledore at the gate just below Hogwarts, as they had planned. "Ah, good, there you are, Professor. Ready to go?"

"Yes, I think so, sir." She had dressed very simply, black trousers and boots and a man's black silk shirt but Dumbledore was resplendent in one of his favourite purple velvet cloaks.

The Headmaster smiled. "We'll be going to London, but as the Headquarters is hidden, I'll need to show you how to get there. Now, repeat after me *Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place.*"

She repeated it, once, and then Dumbledore smiled again and held out his hand. "I'll Apparate the both of us the first time, so that you'll know the way."

"All right." And she put her hand in his seamed and age-spotted, but reassuringly strong one.

A second later, they had both vanished with a *CRACK* of Apparition.

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They arrived at a small square in a once-fashionable, but now very unprepossessing part of London graffiti and broken windows were very much in evidence amidst the once-sumptuous stone facings and ornate railings, as were neglected gardens growing a fine crop of beer bottles and old rubbish. Emily wanted to train a fire hose on the place for about a month, and then spend another month weeding and replanting. There was a neglected block of row houses in front of them and the Headmaster came to a stop just between numbers 11 and 13, Grimmauld Place. Dumbledore took a small device from his pocket and quickly put out the streetlights just in front.

"Now recall the address I told you," he whispered to Emily and as she did, the front of another row house simply sprang up into existence between number 11 and number 13. It was no better kept than the other houses on the street, with a long-dead front garden and filthy windows.

She followed Dumbledore up onto the porch, toward a door covered in blistered black paint, but then stopped him with a tactful hand on his elbow as he reached for his wand. "Sir... I was wondering, how much do the people I'm about to meet know of my... involvement, here? It's just, I'd prefer to know."

"Yes... I've been debating what to tell them for much of today, and confidentially " he paused for an aside to her "I have decided that the entire Order does not need to know your exact relationship with Mr. Malfoy, in the interest of preserving your dignity and credibility amongst the group."

Emily relaxed. "Thank you, sir, I *greatly* appreciate that."

Dumbledore smiled gently at her. "No, I think we'll simply tell them... *most* of the truth," he said, with a subdued twinkle. "I'll say that the Swains and Malfoys were long-time family friends, and that Lucius Malfoy is attempting to use his connection to you to ally the Death Eaters with the Fae. And I'll tell them that you, like your father, are very much against Voldemort and all he stands for, and that once you realised what Malfoy was after, you came to me and offered your services as an informant. All of which is entirely true and correct... if somewhat lacking in scandalous detail."

"Close enough," she said, grinning at him. He winked at her.

"And I've asked Severus and Sirius to reveal no more than that as well, and I trust both of them to do so." Dumbledore tapped the door with his wand, just below a tarnished door knocker in the shape of an ornate, twisted serpent many mechanical clicks and whirrs went on just behind it, and then the door creaked open.

He politely motioned her across the threshold. "Please, after you."

Part Third: The Hart Subvertant, Chapter 27, Part 2

Chapter 42 of 55

After Voldemort's return, Professor Swain has agreed to Sirius Black's suggestion that she use her influence with Lucius Malfoy to gather intelligence on the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters. As her horror of the Dark Lord grows, her old enemy Severus Snape proves to be the only one who understands the fear and doubt that plague a double agent…

Chapter 27, Part 2

An overpowering stench of mustiness and rot seemed to coat Emily's nostrils with dust the second she entered clearly, this house had been neglected for a long, *long* time. It would have smelled bad to any human with a functioning nose, but to a deer changeling, it was *vile.* She covered her mouth with her hand and coughed hard.

The first thing Emily saw upon entering the foyer of number twelve, Grimmauld Place was a very large wall frame covered with mouldering curtains but the curtains blew open in a gust of wind from the open door, and she found herself face to face with the subject of that painting, an elderly, demented-looking woman in a black dress and lace cap who bore some resemblance in dress and expression to Mrs. Druella Black, Draco Malfoy's grandmother. This stalwart lady took one look at Emily and Dumbledore and both her eyes and mouth widened into Os of outrage. Then she let out a blood-chilling banshee wail that would have made any human's ears ring but to Emily's hearing, it was positively agonising.

*"Who let you into our house?!"*the painted woman shrieked. *"First Mudbloods, Squibs, werewolves, giants, race traitors, thieves and reprobates, Muggle-lovers and now a degenerate, dandelion-eating FAERIE? Get out, you godless heathen, you shameless harlot, leave us in peace! Never darken this house's door again, daughter of filth, pagan swine! Out, OUT!"*

Emily clapped her hands over her ears, her face flaming, and in another second would have turned around and heeded the woman's command to leave, but then Sirius Black, the tall, dark, gaunt-cheeked fellow Emily remembered from the night the Fusilier exploded, appeared from a doorway. "SHUT UP, you hideous putrescence, shut UP!" he shouted at the portrait, then readjusted the curtains over the painting with a tremendous, grunting effort.

"Sorry for that," he said, with a pained look. "Sometimes the drapes blow a bit, and she's not one to bother with company manners."

Behind Black, the painting continued to shriek vile epithets at a muffled, but still ear-bleeding volume, but he had ceased to pay any attention. "Hello, Albus."

"Hello, Sirius." The Headmaster shook Black's hand, then turned toward Emily. "You of course have already met Sirius Black, Emily. He has generously offered to let us use this house, which has been in his family for over a century, as our headquarters."

"That's... very kind of you, sir," she said to Black, but he did not greet her with a handshake, as he had Dumbledore. Instead, he only nodded to her very curtly, one corner of his lip curling slightly. The message could not have been plainer while he would honour Dumbledore's request for discretion, he knew the real truth of her association with Lucius, and he put up with her only on sufferance. *I know what you really are,* his look seemed to say.

And it had been his idea that she become an informant.

Emily's return look was equally cold. *I pity anyone who adheres to such a rigid and simplistic moral code,*her expression said. Her spine remained straight and her chin up if he expected her to act like some penitent, self-loathing Magdalene, he was going to be disappointed.

Dumbledore glanced from one to the other, then took Emily's elbow, gently propelling her away from Black and, thankfully, away from the screeching painting. "Come along, everyone should be in the kitchen."

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"Thank you, glad to be here." She turned toward Mr. and Mrs. Weasley with a polite smile. "Sir, madam."

Both the Weasleys returned her greeting with equally polite civility. It seemed that Emily and Molly and Arthur hadn't quite made up their minds about each other yet, but were reserving judgment.

Off to Emily's left, she noticed a tall, silent figure in black leaning against the windowsill, his arms folded over his chest in his habitual posture. Professor Snape greeted her with a cool inclination of his head; she returned it in the same manner.

Three more people had just come into the kitchen, a young woman followed by two men. Emily recognised a familiar pink-haired woman with a Carnaby Street accent, who caught sight of Emily and Dumbledore and immediately came forward to meet them.

"Hey, Professor Dumbledore. Wotcher, Emily," the Auror said, grinning and holding out her hand. "I heard you were joining us. This is brilliant!"

"So *this* is why you couldn't come out with me, Tonks," Emily said, smiling. "*Very secret Auror stuff* indeed."

"Are we still on for next time?" Tonks said, over a jovial handshake.

"We'd better be," Emily replied.

"I see you two have met," Dumbledore said, glancing amusedly from Emily to Tonks.

"Oh yeah on New Year's Eve, I mistook her for a Metamorphmagus and she set me straight, and then she Glamoured herself up as me and I put her ears on, and we shot the shite. It was a famously good time," Tonks said, grinning. She glanced behind her "Hey, Kingsley, Moody, come here and say hi."

The first of Tonks's two companions came forward and held out his hand. "Kingsley Shacklebolt," he said. He was a tall, handsome black man with a bald head and a deep, rich voice.

"Hello, sir, good evening," she replied, shaking Shacklebolt's hand.

"Kingsley's my boss over at Auror Headquarters," Tonks said, then turned toward Moody. "And this is the famous Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody. This is Emily Swain, Moody. Don't worry, I think she's unarmed."

"Yeah, yeah, funny," Moody said to Tonks, then also held out his hand to Emily. " 'Evening, lassie. Thanks for coming out here tonight."

Emily glanced at Moody, her face closing. "I believe we've already met." She gave him a glacial nod and did not accept his offered hand. "Good evening, Professor."

Moody looked at her wary face, his grizzled brows quirking. "Professor Nothing I never ended up setting foot in a bloody classroom. What's the matter, lassie? I don't bite, you know."

"I'm sure," she replied.

"Oh... that's right, if you were at Hogwarts, you must have ended up working with that... *fake* Moody. From what I've heard, that bloke pissed everyone on staff off," Tonks said, with a disgusted look. She leaned forward and lowered her voice "At our first meeting, Professor Snape was still furious about having his office searched, even though Alastor here wasn't even the one who did it."

Moody leaned close to Emily's ear. "Still upset because that little rat bastard impersonating me tried to have you done in this year?" he asked, aside to her.

Both Tonks's and Shacklebolt's eyes widened to the size of hubcaps. "*Shite!* What happened?" Tonks whispered, turning to Emily.

"It's a long story, I'll tell you later. But yes, that's it exactly," she muttered back. She put her hand to her left shoulder "Still recuperating, actually."

Moody's mouth tightened. "Swear on my sainted mother's life, Professor, I'd never seen you before the Leaving Feast at Hogwarts, and I think I'd've remembered you if I had. Come on, put her there," he said irritably, again holding out his hand.

"Moody's a great bloke, really," Tonks said loyally.

Emily's hard look softened, and she shook Moody's hand. "I'm sorry, I know it's irrational, but it's just... "

"Yeah, having someone try to have you killed is a mite bit objectionable. Believe me, I know," Moody interjected. "But think of it this way it's also sort of unpleasant to have some bloke kidnap you, Stun you once a day, borrow your prosthetic bits, and then give you a phenomenally bad *haircut* on top of it all." He raked his hand through his close-cropped, grizzled locks. "I know I'm no beauty, but with the way I looked afterward, I still had a job of it making meself go to the barber. Plus, can you imagine waking up without having brushed your fecking *teeth* for an entire *school year*? I couldn't get my hands on a toothbrush fast enough, I tell you."

Despite herself, she laughed heartily at that. "I'll bet it was."

"Anyway, Albus has made it sound like the Fianna know what they're about, and if he says you're all right, I'll be glad to work with you."

She smiled at him, genuinely this time. "Thank you. Likewise."

Dumbledore turned to Emily again. "Unfortunately, all of our members are not with us this evening. Emmeline Vance and Hestia Jones are on Privet Drive duty, Sturgis Podmore had a late meeting at the Ministry, Charlie Weasley's work keeps him in Romania much of the time, and Mundungus Fletcher is in bed suffering from a surfeit of gherkins. You will have to make their acquaintance another time."

Then the Headmaster raised his voice slightly and addressed the whole group: "Now, everyone, if I could have your attention please, we can begin."

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Dumbledore opened the meeting with an account of what had happened regarding the explosion at the Fusilier the previous week or rather, he gave a discreetly abbreviated account of it. He described how Lucius Malfoy had set up a meeting with Professor Snape at the pub, then left a powerful *Incendio* spell or similar magic upon the establishment, timed to go off when Snape would have made his arrival.

The other Order members reacted to this news with consternation. Molly Weasley gasped in horror, turning toward Snape with her hand to her lips, and Tonks cried "*Damn*, Professor, that was close!"

"Yes, it was," Snape said, with a curt nod. Emily glanced in his direction, but his expression remained inscrutable.

The Headmaster continued, describing how the Swain family had been close friends of the Malfoys for generations, and how Lucius Malfoy had then given Professor Swain some hint as to these plans, knowing that she and Professor Snape had had a few, er, professional differences during the school year, and apparently imagining that she would find this news of his intended assassination to be welcome. Instead, Dumbledore said, Professor Swain went to the Fusilier herself, evacuated the pub through the use of a Glamoured magical ruse, and prevented Snape from entering. She and Professor Snape had then come to him with news of what had happened, and once she

realised the position in which she had found herself, Professor Swain had offered her services as an informant.

Shacklebolt, Fred, and George cheered, and Tonks jumped up from her chair and gave Emily a spontaneous round of applause. "Nice work, mate!"

"Thanks," she said, smiling. Professor Snape's face remained unreadable, his eyes on Dumbledore.

"So they know you're working for us, then, Snape," Moody muttered darkly.

"They know that I tried to prevent Quirrell from stealing the Philosopher's Stone, and they know that I didn't heed the summons to the graveyard after Potter was abducted," Snape said curtly. "They don't know for certain that I'm working for the Order, actively trying to undermine them. As far as they know, I might just be afraid to return or insufficiently motivated to return, not openly antagonistic."

"Do they know you lived through the bombing attempt?" Moody asked.

"We don't know that for certain, though if they've read the Muggle newspaper accounts of the incident, they can fairly assume that I did. Professor Swain has been invited to an event at the Malfoys' home this coming weekend, and Dumbledore and I are hoping that she will be able to find out exactly what they know about the attack," Snape said, nodding in Emily's direction.

"You're going to be staying at Malfeasant this weekend?" Tonks turned to Emily, shuddering. "*Yikes.* Good luck with that, mate."

"Yes, I'm going to go visit my old *chums* Lucius and Narcissa to celebrate their son's birthday. Ought to be a splendid time," Emily said with sarcastic brightness.

Dumbledore then reported some new developments he had heard from contacts in London as to the Death Eaters' plans and movements "They've begun a campaign of sabotaging Muggle public buildings and offices, although their agents seem to be doing a rather half-hearted job of it. So far we've only seen a few enchanted biting mailboxes and regurgitating lavatories, so we're not convinced that these aren't just pranks intended to distract us from their real movements. Sturgis Podmore has informed me that Lucius Malfoy has been holding an unusual number of closed-door meetings with people Severus assures us are confirmed Death Eaters, and he seems to be strongly advocating the creation of a Department of Interdimensional Magical Cooperation, organised with the aim of furthering relations with the Fae. What with Bartemious Crouch's death, unfortunately, his last real obstacle in creating such a department seems to have been removed."

"Lucius has been trying to enlist me as staff for that department for much of this year," Emily pointed out. "Though truly, if he thinks the way to win the Fae over is by offering us government jobs, he's pretty sadly mistaken." The group chuckled.

Sometime after the meeting's business was concluded, Moody approached Emily for more information about the proposed Department of Interdimensional Magical Cooperation. After they had been talking for some time, Professor Snape silently appeared at Emily's elbow. "Professor?"

Both turned in his direction. "Yes, sir?" Emily answered.

"Oh yes, Snape, you're thinking of that, er, concern we had," Moody said.

"Do you think now is a good time to broach the subject? Professor Swain will be leaving on Friday, after all," Snape said crisply.

Moody glanced at Dumbledore, who nodded, then turned back to Snape. "Yeah, I think it's as good a time as any." He then turned in Emily's direction. "Snape's got something he wants to discuss with you, lassie, regarding this Death Eater garden party you're heading out to this weekend."

"Yes, what is it, sir?" Emily asked, turning in Snape's direction.

"If I could speak to you privately, madam?" Snape stepped back, gestured for her to follow him, and led her out of the kitchen.

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Emily followed him down the musty-smelling hall to a large, high-ceilinged chamber that appeared to have been a parlour or sitting room, back before the dingy tapestries covering the olive-green walls had gotten ferociously damp and never dried properly, and probably a decade's worth of dust and mildew was allowed to collect on every surface. Professor Snape motioned her in and then closed the door behind them.

"Lovely place Mr. Black has got here," she remarked, wrinkling her nose and coughing against the pervasive odour of mildew.

"Nothing a bit of spit and polish and a catastrophic house fire couldn't improve," Snape replied.

She smiled thinly. "All right, care to tell me what this is about?"

"It hasn't escaped my notice that your people don't seem to have any equivalent art of Legilimency, so it was decided that perhaps I should attempt to give you a crash course in how to defend against it before you embarked for Malfeasant. Legilimency is "

"I know what Legilimency is, and no, we don't have an equivalent art," she interjected, with a look of high disdain. "Where I come from, Legilimency and its ilk is neither taught, or learned, nor even spoken of, most of the time."

"Why is that?" Snape demanded.

She looked at him as though he was missing something incredibly obvious. "Think about what you know of us, sir. What do you think the Arcadian majority opinion would be of arts like Legilimency?"

He considered carefully. "I would imagine that your people would hold any art that revealed someone else's secrets without his or her consent in great contempt," he said. "Its use or its study would probably be illegal."

"Right on both counts," she replied, nodding. "And it's not just held in contempt it's considered blasphemy."

"So if your people won't use Legilimency or Occlumency, aren't you forcing yourselves to go about with oh, how did you describe this *a great big weak point in your defences for your enemies to exploit?*" he asked witheringly. "So what's to stop any wizard or witch skilled in Legilimency from going to the Faerielands and collecting Words of Power at will? I didn't notice any reference to Occlumency in your father's *Encyclopaedia*," he challenged her.

"That's right. You won't," she replied, nodding.

"Nor is there any mention of Occlumency in ***Identity and Illusion: A Wizard's Overview of Faery Magic,***" Snape continued. "Rather a notably *slender* volume, that one."

"That it is. Perhaps a cut above a pamphlet," she said, with a polite and totally unconcerned smile. "Would you like to know *why* you haven't found anything?"

"Do enlighten me," he invited.

"That would be because we don't call our equivalent defensive art *Occlumency* we call it *Scyttantis*. And the reason there's no entry for it in any of my father's books is because Queen Mab strenuously objected to any mention of it being included in the final draft, and Gwydion thought the best diplomatic move was to humour her wishes."

"Of course the famous policy for openness and honesty at work yet again," Snape said, turning away from her.

"Her reasons were political she thought that allowing humans to study Scyttantis was tantamount to giving up an advantage to the enemy. We don't learn Legilimency itself, but we know damned well how to defend against it and its ilk, and that you can be certain of. When your magic depends on perpetually keeping a secret, mental defence is the very first art you learn. Before Obscurantis, before Glamour, before Deceivre, before *anything.* Didn't you listen to my first Word of Power lecture at all?" she asked, in the manner of a teacher lightly reproving a student who should know better.

Snape scowled. "But Legilimency is blasphemous and I thought the Fae were petrified of so much as appearing to ask another for a True Name. It's difficult enough to ask one of you for her own name," he testily reminded her.

"Then here's a bit of news for you, then, Professor *not all Faeries are good.* Remind me to tell you about hunting down Name ghouls at home sometime," she said. "And if you wanted to know my name so badly, maybe you should have tried telling me yours first."

His eyes glinted with challenge and he drew his wand from a pocket of his robes. "Then I'm sure you won't object if I ask for a demonstration of the noble art of *Scyttantis.*"

She threw back her head and folded her arms. Attitude of defiance. "I'm ready."

He pointed his wand at her. "*Legilimens.*"

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blue blood spurting from the stump of his neck as he fell.

Her thoughts spiralling through his mind cold, detached, clinical. The enemy reduced to only so much matter to be dispersed, vulnerable areas to be breached. Personality and emotion forced down entirely, physical needs forgotten, spatial and anatomical calculation occupying every iota of her attention, fuelled by the free reign of murderous aggressions from down in the most primitive, reptilian part of her mind. A form of controlled, temporary sociopathology, learned because there is no other possible way to cope with this situation.

But no matter how hideous her actions some part of her really *enjoys* this, revels in the way that she can inflict her will on these people, decide who will die and the manner of their deaths, and no one will stop her. Indeed, no matter how many of these people she butchers, later on she will be praised, honoured, and venerated for it. Our Lady of the Blade, the patron saint of mass slaughter. She knows there has to be something inherently evil in her no one who adapts to this kind of atrocity so readily could ever be said to be purely good or decent but this has never troubled her. It's not only patriotism, love of country, or love of her people that brings her out here to fight this is also a socially acceptable excuse to wield the most primal form of power and cruelty. Lady Elaine may lead out of love for others, but Elaine's daughter fights only to please herself.

She has never rebelled against this mindset or questioned its necessity. Instead, she feels oddly comfortable in this state, to the point of feeling nostalgia for the freedom of the battlefield once the conflict is over and she has to behave like a civilised person again.

All of which Severus Snape can understand completely.

He knows that she means to frighten him with these memories, scare him into abandoning his attempts at breaking her defences, sending him shivering back into his own consciousness, but instead, he finds it all strangely exhilarating. In barest truth he is positively envious.

*I'll show you slaughter and cruelty like you've never known,*came her wordless challenge.

His reply *Brava. I'm impressed.*

He watched through her eyes as she dodged beneath the swing of a spiked mace feels the edgy hyperamplitude of her nervous system, the incredible coordination of her movements; feels her gather her hooves beneath her, for she is, naturally, in her stronger and more agile form for battle feels her upward thrust as her sword pierces the mace swinger's viscera, bisects his heart, and severs his spinal cord on its way out.

She never takes more than two strokes to kill any of them. She takes most of them with one.

He watched, unafraid, as she waded through dozens of opponents, maybe over a hundred. Elaine has relentlessly taught her daughter everything she knows about sword combat for over twenty years, so that Emily now has Elaine's skill and a nearly fifty-years'-younger body; she is not only prepared for this battle, she is overprepared for it. The enemy can't land a blow on her she is too fast, too slippery, and too skilled with the sword. Other Faeries are killed around her as massive blunt-force blows pulp their organs and tissues inside their glittering armour, but all of the ink-blue blood that spatters over her belongs to other people. She can taste it splashing over her gritted teeth, feel it drying in her hair. But there is no time for grief on a battlefield.

The fighting ends. All of the invaders are dead, or driven back. There is blood soaking the ground, squelching under her hooves and fetlocks, but she comes out with nothing more than a scraped cheek, and knowing that no members of her unit were killed. She takes more satisfaction in that than she has in any of the decorations ever awarded her.

Someone behind her pulls her into a fierce embrace. She turns into the man holding her and buries her face in his neck, knowing from only the scent of his skin and the wood of his bow, exactly who this is. Oh, *him.* Alive. Unhurt. Her muscles go limp in an ecstasy of relief. He's filthy, rank with sweat, and covered with blood and worse, but he could not be more beautiful to her.

"Are you hurt?" he demands gruffly. "Let me see you are you bleeding?" Rough hands push the chain mail cowl off, rake back her sodden hair, examining her face for the extent of her injury and to convince himself that she is still alive.

Black voids of eyes in his burningly white face. Long straight black hair, tied back at the nape of his neck. A black tabard, embroidered with the blue, green, and gold Sixth Kingdom colours and the device of the horn lily, over chain and scale armour.

A second later, Snape felt her surprise that he withstood this memory for so long, and now feels her forcing him, the outsider, out of her mind this part is too precious for her to share with anyone else. But he doesn't go easily. He is fascinated rather than terrified by the battle scene before him, and curious about who Tumnus was, having only heard about him second-hand. She won't share any of it with him, but he expects that, and clamps down hard on the corners of her consciousness. This glimpse through the chink in her armour has lasted only a few minutes, but it feels much, much longer.

Then he came to himself, because someone had thrown his corporeal body hard against a wall and shoved a forearm against his windpipe.

"*Stop it,*" she snarled through bared teeth. A rivulet of ink-blue has leaked from her nose sometime recently did he do that? He gasped for breath; then prised her arm away from his throat with a hard grip.

"Why did you do that?" she demanded. "You wanted proof that I could keep my thoughts secure you have that."

"Yes," he said softly. "I have that."

It struck him as terribly odd that she would have sex with him so readily, yet all but physically attack him over a few brief glimpses into her mind but his curiosity had not yet been satisfied.

"So," he said. "If you can't keep someone out you go on the offensive. You bombard the enemy with your most terrifying and horrible memories until he can't stand it any more. How very effective."

"That's hardly all we can do." She looked very forbidding, cold, and proud. "That's only the beginning."

"What else is there?" he whispered.

"You don't want to know."

Snape almost laughed how little she knew him. To tell him that a branch of magical knowledge was dark, arcane, and terrifying was a guarantee that he would become fascinated with it and strive to learn all he could about it. Or perhaps she knew him all too well and was trying to intrigue him, to draw him closer to her. He watched her still, austere face, for a moment allowing himself to enjoy the second possibility.

"Tell me," he said.

"The *Descorder* Curse."

"*Descorder*... " He searched his memory for the meaning of the word "Discord. And "

"Insanity," she said, her eyes never leaving his. "You could enslave me, torture me, or kill me with a curse. But I could drive you mad completely and irreversibly. It wouldn't stop even after you had killed me."

"But your people aren't sadists why would they devise such a horrible curse?" he asked, eyes narrowing.

"The intent is that anyone so cursed would then go back to his own people, who would then all watch as the affliction slowly and inevitably took him," she replied. "It's meant to be a warning, a display of our power to those who would persecute us. It's only ever used as a last resort."

"Then you're absolutely right on one count, madam," he said, shuddering with horror. "I truly *don't* want you as my enemy."

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"Professors?" They both turned hard toward the door, to where Mad-Eye Moody was peering into the room through the half-open door. "Sorry, thought I heard a crash. Everything all right?" the Auror asked. His eyes widened as he took in the sight of Emily pinning Snape to a wall, with blood leaking from her nose, but he said nothing.

Emily and Snape turned hard away from each other she muttered, *We're fine*, and he, *Everything's all right*, almost in unison. Emily discreetly turned away and dabbed at her nose with her handkerchief.

"How are the Occlumency lessons going?" Moody asked, with an air of elaborately noticing nothing.

Emily turned back toward Moody, getting ready to defend herself from the onslaught of criticism she was certain Snape would then heap upon her but then to her utter surprise, he quite calmly replied: "Our Occlumency lesson went quite well more of a review session, actually. Apparently the Fae not only learn Occlumency, they seem to have made a few improvements on it." He slanted a wary glance in her direction. "There isn't much I could teach her."

"Good, good," Moody nodded, looking gruffly pleased. "Can I, er, get you something for that nose, there, Professor?"

"No, it's nothing," she said cheerfully.

"All right then," the Auror replied, nodding. If Moody was at all curious about this new, more physical variety of Occlumency the two Professors seemed to be practicing, he kept it to himself.

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The Thursday evening before Emily had to make her way to Malfeasant came entirely too soon.

Emily's trunk was packed, she had decided on a birthday gift for Draco, and had spent days mulling over the briefings Professor Snape and Dumbledore had given her. Yet she was terrifically antsy, with a huge amount of nervous, pent-up energy so she made her way up to her old combat practice studio, where she had not been since her final session with Professor Snape.

Fuck it, she needed to do something, to work at something, to *move.* Her shoulder was almost entirely healed, the three weeks she had been told to wait before undertaking strenuous exercise were past; there was no one around, no students for whom she had to tone it down, and no fellow professor she had to avoid discouraging. She untied her trainers, pulled off her socks, threw her jersey aside, and pulled her *Orcleofian* out of the tiny paper of swords unfurled on the work table. Then, in her bare feet, dressed only in black fencing breeches and a black sport bra she unsheathed the weapon of a Fianna knight, and began a traditional long training form.

Thrust first, parry first, parry second, dodge right, dodge and leap right hooves rang on the wooden floor as she landed *thrust second, parry third, parry fourth, dodge left, foot sweep left* they were just a bunch of witches and wizards, none of them had even managed to create a True Name except poor little Pansy Parkinson. Lucius was so addled with lust and self-love that he believed her to be completely on his side *thrust third, parry fifth, parry sixth, leap left* he was so eager to confide everything to her and to bask in what he thought was her admiration. His appetites, his vanity, and his hubris were his weak points *thrust fourth, parry seventh, parry eighth, dodge left, dodge right* she could use that. And this kind of stealth opposition was so much more satisfying than continually being his dupe, his pawn, the unknowing target of his intrigues *thrust fifth, parry ninth, parry tenth, leap, sweep right*

By the time she finished, all sixteen attacks, thirty-two parries, all forms of dodge and sweep, spring and leap, sweat was pooling between her breasts and shoulder blades and her hair was plastered to her forehead and neck, but her mind was clear and resolute.

It was time to pay that bastard Malfoy back for slandering Dumbledore, and for all that he had tried to do to her, to Professor Snape, to all those Muggles in the pub; to exact some vindication for Harry, and for poor lost Cedric.

From here on in, she wasn't going to stop until they either stopped her, or that son of a bitch got life in Azkaban.

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After her solo training session and a long hot shower, Emily felt much more settled but there was still one more thing left to do, one good-bye to be said. He probably wouldn't appreciate it, but she wanted to say it anyway.

She made the long trek up to the turret walk. As she suspected, Professor Snape was already there, leaning on the railing overlooking the lake and seemingly lost in thought.

"Professor."

"Professor."

Then she drew closer and saw him more clearly, and felt a sharp and totally unexpected pang of sympathy. She'd expected his usual glacial arrogance, but instead, his stance reminded her of the giant Atlas, with the weight of the world on his shoulders. His eyes were red-veined and his manner distracted, as though he hadn't been sleeping. But then, he had looked increasingly haggard ever since the Fusilier was destroyed.

Go to bed, stop doing this to yourself. Don't worry about the rest of us, just for one night, she wanted to say to him. "Good evening, sir," she said instead. "I thought you might be up here."

He didn't look at her. "Tomorrow is Friday, isn't it," he said flatly.

"Yes, it is. I just wanted to tell you that I'll immediately let you and the Headmaster know everything I've found out as soon as I return."

He snorted. "*If* you return. The Dark Lord is probably still at Malfeasant, you know, and he doesn't look kindly on those who refuse to cooperate with him."

"I'll deal with that if it comes up. For now, he seems content to try to negotiate with me."

"You assume that he's willing to negotiate honourably, and in that, you couldn't be more wrong. He'll never consider himself bound by the kind of codes of honour you were taught." He glanced down at his clenched hands with a fatalistic grimace.

"Professor... I'm committed to this now. So please, just once, could you let an opportunity to tell me yet again that I'm a ruddy great romantic fool pass? Would that really be so impossible?"

"You're worse than a romantic fool," he said, his voice hoarsening. "You're a naïve little girl who thinks that she's somehow going to redeem her father's poor judgment by getting herself killed."

That stung she would always be roused to instant fury by any criticism offered to her father. "What do *you* know about my father?" she demanded.

"I've done some reading," he replied. "Apparently he held some rather *interesting* political opinions back in the seventies. It's all a matter of public record, you know."

"Yes, I know. He advocated that Voldemort should be pacified, rather than openly opposed, in a debate before the Wizengamot in 1979," she told him, almost entirely calmly. "My mother and I watched it from the gallery."

"With all due respect, my Lady, it appears that as a defence strategist, your father is truly a marvellous anthropologist. I can see why the Sorting Hat put him in Ravenclaw and not Slytherin," Snape remarked acridly.

"He advocated pacification because oftentimes it *works* at home, believe it or not. The Orcs attack our villages because they're starving. We give them some food and clear them some farmland and they settle down. Our population grows slowly, and we have an excess of resources sometimes they have nothing. It's been going on for hundreds of years. He's written extensively about pacification measures in his history of the Third Kingdom."

"And that book is only available in Arcadia, if I recall correctly," Snape muttered.

Emily scowled. "Even so, his reasoning isn't that hard to follow. Father figured Voldemort wants power, authority, respect, he wants to be a leader fine. Give him a position within the Ministry and harness his energy for the good. If you'd ever been in the Wizengamot, if you'd ever commanded a military unit, you'd know that the most difficult thing any leader ever has to overcome is apathy and resistance to change. Father admires motivated people. He always thinks everyone can be reasoned with."

No answer but the softest, most derisive little laugh. Emily scowled again.

"But of course Dumbledore opposed him in that debate, saying that You-Know-Who should be opposed at all costs. Then... the Death Eaters tried to recruit my father and threatened to kill him and his family his other children, me, *my mother* when he refused. And then... "

"Then *what*?" Snape pressed.

"They made good on the threats they sent assassins to kill him," she said, through clenched teeth. "Though you probably already knew that, didn't you."

"No, I didn't," Snape shot back. "I was a minor foot soldier at best, madam no one ever felt the need to clear all the group's assassination plans with *me*, thank you. And given that your father is now alive and well and living in another dimension, can I assume the murder attempt was unsuccessful?"

"Let's just say that really nice bloke or not, my father isn't *anyone's* idea of an easy mark," she said, her chin lifting proudly. "He captured the two men who attacked him and delivered them to the authorities. By 1980, he had recanted and admitted Dumbledore was right, and threw his full support behind him. Then the Potters were killed, and Harry lived, in October of 1981."

"Ah yes, he threw his full support behind Dumbledore. And then later that very supportive fellow gave away everything he owned and left the Wizarding world forever," Snape said, turning a dire eye back over the lake.

"Yes, he did, and I'm sure it wasn't hard to do he always was more Faerie than wizard," she retorted scornfully. "Who was he here? *No one* just another dilettante pure-blood who scribbled some history and dabbled in politics. In Arcadia, he's our leading historian and social scientist. He's recorded more of our history than any of us have ever "

"How very nice for him. While he was cajoling Faeries to talk about themselves, some of us found ourselves rather busy back in the world he left behind," Snape snarled. "Although I see how you would think that was a task of Homeric proportions, *given the difficulty in compelling a Faerie to talk about anything* "

"At least he gave the right answer when the Death Eaters came to recruit *him*," she snapped, furious. "There's no Dark Mark on*his* arm, so I'd thank you to remember that you are in no position to be self-righteous on that score."

He glared at her, eyes burning with resentment. "How very easy it must be to be judgmental, *Commander*," he whispered. "Or should I say *Milady*?"

"Say whatever you want but the worst anyone can ever say about my father is that he was naïve. What's the worst anyone can say about you?"

"Be that as it may the worst anyone can say about me will never be, *He died stupidly and in vain*," Snape shot back. "I'm not looking forward to seeing that on your tombstone."

His words were harsh, but the way he said them suddenly gave her pause. He sounded absolutely sincere as though he would truly regret seeing her meet such an ignominious end. Emily glanced away from him, suddenly ashamed.

"Look don't worry. Please. I can take care of myself," she said, but her tone lost its accusing edge. "Although everyone here likes to gloss over the bloody particulars, the fact is I've spent a lot of time hacking people to death with a very sharp sword. I don't have that blade just so I can demonstrate magical objects to Second-World schoolchildren, you know."

"Yes, I quite recall what you've shown me of the way your kind engage marauding Orcs on fields of battle. How pleasant it must be, to fight in such a simple conflict the Shining Host of *us,* versus the hideous ravening hordes of *them*. No masks, no uncertain loyalties, no guesswork." He gave a deranged little laugh, his hand raking through his already dishevelled hair. "I truly envy that."

"Believe me, sir, it's hardly as pleasant or as easy as you seem to think. Simply because I went into combat by daylight and without a mask on does not somehow make me any less of a killer. I don't even know how many people I've killed there's no time to count when you're really in the thick of combat. Since they gave me my *Orcleofian,* I can't even measure by how long it takes for my sword to get blunted anymore."

Snape shrugged. "I couldn't tell you how many deaths I'm responsible for, either. Like I said, I wasn't kept apprised of everyone the Dark Lord had killed I just kept him supplied with the poisons." He watched the serenely glimmering lake below, his hands whiteknuckling his own upper arms.

Emily moved closer to his side, gazing at his averted face. "Is that why you're so adamant about the students paying attention during your poison antidote classes?" she asked quietly.

His eyes met hers for a single, anguished second, then he turned away from her again. "Oh yes, poison was my speciality," he said levelly. "That's what they recruited me for, you know my interest in the less than savoury sort of pharmaceuticals. They kept me so hard at work in that fecking lab that I barely saw daylight for a year."

She was silent, leaning on the turret rail, just listening to him.

"But even that wasn't the worst of it," he said, warming to the topic with the air of a man making a speech before being led to the gallows. "Pain-inducers were also a sideline. Now and then I also found the time to dabble in behaviour-modification pharmacologicals. I could brew an aphrodisiac potion that induces such intense arousal that anyone who ingested it became pitifully easy to manipulate. And my *piece de resistance* were the drugs used for interrogation I can make potions that make the

Muggles' sodium pentothal truth serum seem like infant soothing syrup. One dose of my *Veritaserum* would have even a Faerie spilling her innermost secrets for all the world to hear."

His dark gaze rested on her face avidly, and defiantly; no doubt anticipating the disgust and castigation his confession would prompt in her.

An aphrodisiac potion that could make anyone pitifully easy to manipulate oh yes. She was intimately familiar with that one. And if he wanted to shock and offend her with the idea of being forced to violate her own internal privacy, he had managed it.

She glanced at his left forearm, her eyes narrowing. "It continues to amaze me that someone of your intelligence, your talent, your skill, ever needed to be one of *them*. I simply cannot understand what would motivate someone like you a scientist, a magical prodigy to ally himself with someone like Voldemort."

His defiant expression soured; he had expected a fight, and had instead gotten both validation and a challenge. "Well. I sympathise I remain wholly mystified why someone like you would ever give the much-handled Mr. *Malfoy* the time of day," he retorted.

"Ah, there's the rub I don't have anything like a justification for it. I knew it was wrong, and I did it anyway," she replied. "Perhaps you can sympathise with that as well."

He only scowled and averted his eyes, gazing back out over the lake.

"Well, good evening, then, sir. I'll be sure to let you know everything I've discovered upon my return." She turned to leave him alone.

"If you don't come back, you had best hope I'm not called upon to give your eulogy. Because if I am, I guarantee you it will be neither sympathetic, nor flattering," he snarled at her departing back.

She paused, glancing at him over her shoulder. "Then for the sake of my posterity, I shall have to be certain to come back," she replied.

The sinister eyebrow quirked over an instant's grim smile apparently if she pledged to return just to preserve her own vanity and to spite him, that was a promise he could believe in but then he shook his head direly again. "If I didn't know you were a Beauxbatons alum, I'd swear you were another bloody *Gryffindor*."

"The Swains have all been Ravenclaws going back centuries."

"Yes, but *you* would have been a Gryffindor."

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Emily got up very early in the morning on the Friday she was expected at Malfeasant. She had packed her trunk the night before and left the castle before the sun was up, before even Argus Filch was awake.

In the early hours of that morning, Anil Manaktala, who sold maps, magazines, chocolate bars and cigarettes from a corner kiosk in London, would sell a street atlas to a well-dressed blonde woman in a long black cloak, with an ornately tooled suitcase in her hand *one of those goths,* he thought sleepily, as he made her change. Sometime after that lady had left, he would glance at his tip cup to discover it full of pound coins enough to pay the overdue utility bill that had lain heavily on his mind for the last two weeks.

While the sky was paling, she made several stops in London: first before an Indian restaurant in Diagon Alley, and then before a Muggle accountancy near the Leaky Cauldron pub. She next made a stop before a Summerstown row house where a former pub keeper was just sitting down to his breakfast and poring over a pile of business realtor's pamphlets and insurance claim forms, and then made final stops before the pleasant apartment complexes where a mediwitch and her husband, and a Muggle physician and her semi-pro boxer boyfriend, were still sleeping.

At each location, she spoke the following words, in Old Arcadian *May what you have given be returned to you threefold; may the Mother of Us All turn Her gentle face toward you in kindness and favour. May you know prosperity and hope, health and happiness, and the best of blessed luck* and invoked her True Name.

The next month, a waitress named Daireen Dayananda would impulsively buy a Witches' Aid Society raffle ticket and her winnings would allow her to pay her first year's tuition to chef's school. She would then apply her culinary and management training to her parents' restaurant, which would earn them enough to retire early and turn the entire establishment over to her. Alessandro Pacoli, half of the husband and wife team of Pacoli & Pacoli, Accountants, would that week suddenly find his long and painful battle with the gout gradually coming to an end, never to trouble him again. His temper and his work would very much improve as a result, and he would resume his usual habit of long evening walks with his wife Clarissa, which made them both very happy.

Jack Vintner's new pub, the puckishly named *Bombardier*, would enjoy even greater popularity than the Fusilier. His loyal patrons and all his former pub staff would return *en masse* to his new establishment, which Jack would tirelessly make certain remained top of the line as far as safety measures. Additionally, the new building he purchased would turn out to be smack-dab in the centre of an up-and-coming business district, which would appreciate considerably in value by the time that good entrepreneur turned fifty. The pub explosion would go down as simply another tale in the already long and varied tradition of London pub legends.

Licensed Healer Dayna Egurl would later be promoted to Head of Triage at St. Mungo's, just in time to be the surgiwitch open-minded enough to consent to the use of Muggle stitches in the treatment of one Arthur Weasley, the victim of a mauling by a large snake. Roderick Sellars would at his next check-up be pronounced entirely healed of the eye injury that kept him out of the ring for much of that year. And Catherine Orson, who had in her dreams all that night pondered the question of how to cure the Faery sensitivity to iron, would that morning cut her ankle slightly while shaving in the bath. The sight of her own blood prompted her to form a new hypothesis that sent her to her desk, still dripping, to pen a hurried note in her journal, and begin another letter to her correspondent at Hogwarts.

All this good fortune perhaps had nothing to do with the blessings Emily spoke that morning after all, none of them ever knew that she had offered such, and all of these occurrences might have happened to those worthy people anyway.

But nonetheless, in what are now the children's stories of many countries, there remain several centuries' worth of tales of good fortune befalling those who aid the Fae even by happenstance, and perhaps within those tales, there is some grain of truth.

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By the morning Emily left for Malfeasant, sleep had become a teasing mistress whom Severus Snape could very rarely visit.

After he parted from her on the turrets, he had barely closed his eyes at all that evening. Now, rather than lie fruitlessly in bed, he had stationed himself in front of his chessboard, ranged the black marble pieces against the white, and had been playing games against himself all night.

It helped him, now and then, to think of the wizard forces now ranged against each other as a problem in chess.

Voldemort stood in the black king's square, with Lucius Malfoy beside him as queen, the most powerful aggressive piece on the black side. The Lestranges flanked them as bishops. Walden Macnair and Druella Black took position as knights, with all their erratic destructiveness. Two stolid menaces named Crabbe and Goyle took the ends of the line as castles. In front of them stood a row of pawns named Rookwood, Parkinson, Nott, Mulciber, Draco Malfoy, Felina Rosier, Peter Pettigrew, and Bartemious Crouch, Junior. Pettigrew was, of course, the king's pawn, and Draco Malfoy the queen's. The pawn named Crouch, Jr. had been taken early the first sacrifice in this game.

On the white side, Cornelius Fudge, the Ministry figurehead for law and order if nothing else, stood in the white king's square, an ineffectual plodder at best, but the

overthrow of the Ministry would end the entire game forever. Albus Dumbledore, the real power behind the throne, took the white queen's square. He himself stood beside Dumbledore as the black-square bishop, while Minerva McGonagall played the white bishop. Rubeus Hagrid played queen's side castle, balanced by Alastor Moody on the king's side. Nymphadora Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt took the king's knight square. The pawns on this side were named Remus Lupin, Sirius Black, Arthur, Molly, Percy, and Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, and Harry Potter. Potter was the queen's pawn, of course.

It seemed that Emily Swain had now effectively stepped onto the board in the position of queen's side knight, and now, as she made her first move into this game, skipping over the protective pawn structure and sneaking unguarded into the ranks of the enemy, neither the queen, nor the queen's side bishop would be in any position to offer support.

May her Mother Goddess help her.

Part Third: The Hart Subvertant, Chapter 28, Part 1

Chapter 43 of 55

After Voldemort's return, Professor Swain has agreed to Sirius Black's suggestion that she use her influence with Lucius Malfoy to gather intelligence on the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters. As her horror of the Dark Lord grows, her old enemy Severus Snape proves to be the only one who understands the fear and doubt that plague a double agent…

Chapter 28, Part 1:

After pronouncing her benedictions upon those who had aided her that year, Emily spent some time wandering around London, her face veiled under her usual Muggle Glamour, revisiting a few of her old haunts from her days as a Cambridge student and lecturer. She thought about having tea in her favourite little teashop near King's Cross but then changed her mind, as that had been where she had taken Professor Snape for tea on the night she met him, and she already had enough to feel guilty about at this point. Instead she spent some time browsing through the cosy bookshops in Charing Cross, then treated herself to a lunch of lamb curry at one of London's many excellent Indian restaurants.

She lingered a long time over lunch, thinking about the reception she was likely to get at Malfeasant and how to react to it. They had invited her to this party as though she was still a long-time friend of the family, which had to mean that Lucius had found some way to ensure Menzentius's silence regarding their affair. How much did it cost to persuade a brother-in-law to tolerate infidelity going on in their family home, she wondered grimly.

But then there was Druella Black to consider as well, she thought, nibbling at the last of the savoury meat and vegetables and basmati saffron rice on her plate. Professor Snape had told her a great deal about Lucius's mother-in-law during their moonlit walk amongst the turrets *Don't let her fool you, her mind is still sharp as a tack. She's more or less the family loan shark, and her largesse always comes with strings attached. Both the Crabbes and the Goyles owe her money, so they'll repeat anything she wants them to as surely as if she had her hand up their backs working their mouths like some bloody ventriloquist with a dummy. But my advice to you is to steer far clear of her if she wants someone out of the way, she knows who to hire to see it done. That frail old woman has probably had more people killed or violently intimidated than anyone else in the group besides Lucius, and she loathes part-humans almost as much as she loathes Muggles and Muggle-borns. She's also intensely protective of all of her children well, all of her children but her daughter Andromeda, who married a Muggle-born fellow and who was then summarily disowned so don't let her find out about your, er, connection to Lucius, or you'll have another assassin after you before you have time to blink.* From that description, she decided that it was highly unlikely that the news that Lucius's dear old friend Emily was also his mistress had gone any farther than Menzentius.

If Narcissa was still allowing her in the house, then no doubt she still didn't know, and Draco had given every indication of being entirely oblivious to his father's womanising as well. She thought about Draco's plea for her sponsorship as a Tithe page at the end of the school year, and sighed given the circumstances, there was no way she could comfortably recommend him now, or ask anyone else to recommend him. In all likelihood, Draco would be expected to follow in his father's footsteps as a Death Eater and given the way the boy parroted everything his father said and emulated everything about him, Emily thought Draco would probably jump at the chance.

Ah well, she had only pledged to "see what she could do" regarding Draco's inclusion in the Tithe and now she *had* seen what she could and should do, which was of course to keep any members of a wizard extremist group who used organised crime tactics well *away* from her King's Court, thank you very much. There was no way she would be instrumental in bringing a known Death Eater to stay at Court; it was bad enough that they had harboured one unknowingly in the form of Mr. Lucius Malfoy back in 1978.

So on to her objective. She was to find out what she could about the Death Eaters' plans for Professor Snape whether they thought him dead or alive, if they knew his whereabouts, if any more assassination attempts would be forthcoming, and what exactly they knew about his involvement in the resistance organised against them. Also, if it were at all possible to get into Lord Voldemort's presence again, she wanted to find out what he knew about Snape's activities since his first fall, and gauge for herself whether or not it was possible for Snape to wheedle his way back into the Death Eater fold, as he hoped. However, Professor Snape himself had told her that he thought it was unrealistic to expect her to be able to ferret out that information.

"First and foremost, you are not to take any foolish chances with your safety or in any way risk exposure, do you hear me?" Snape had said, just before he took his leave of her during their walk on the turrets. "I absolutely forbid it. If word gets back to me that you've started to fancy yourself some sort of daring heroine of the resistance and have started behaving as such, don't think I won't use every means in my power to halt such a descent into idiocy. Just remember, these are all very vain, greedy, and corrupt men, and the wives and children are all desperate for a bit of sympathy for their real and imagined troubles. You'll do far better to smile prettily, keep your mouth shut, be blonde and female, and listen while they all get drunk and blab every damned thing that pops into their heads to you."

"Oh," she had replied sarcastically, "is *that* all I have to do."

Snape just gave her another one of his patented Professor Snape *Looks*, and said, "I'm sure you're more than up to the task."

Bastard. Emily scowled down at her curry.

All this effort, all this risk for a man who regarded her about as highly as a case of cholera.

But the clock was drawing inexorably toward three p.m. As Emily finished her meal and signalled for her check, she for a moment regretted that she hadn't been born into some boringly nice farm family somewhere out in the middle of Second Kingdom Bugfuck Nowhere two thousand leagues distant from any disputed border or portal into the Second World, where she could have had a lusty beer-guzzling husband and a nice garden and a lot of horses, dogs, and cats, and would never have heard of any such fantastic beast as a wizard Potions master from Scotland.

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Back at Hogwarts, the weekend of Draco Malfoy's fifteenth birthday party loomed long and empty for Professor Snape.

He and Argus Filch were the only two people staying at the school at that moment, what with Professor Swain at the Malfeasant party, Hagrid off negotiating with giants, and Albus off doing some reconnoitring with old cronies in London. There was a time when Snape would have found the prospect of three days alone at Hogwarts with no obligations to fulfil very pleasant and restful but now the extreme quiet and the absence of any other person was unnerving. It would have been an excellent opportunity for him to catch up on his sleep, but somehow morning found him restlessly prowling the corridors, as per his usual habit. He even struck up conversations with one or two of the castle ghosts while rambling around the castle, just out of pure ennui, and spent well over an hour of the Friday forenoon encouraging the Bloody Baron to elaborate at length on the lurid histories of various Slytherin Heads of House, even though he had heard most of them often enough over the last twenty-five years to be able to recite them in his sleep. But eventually the Bloody Baron had curtly taken his leave of Snape (as apparently even a centuries-dead bloke has more important things to do than chat with bored, worried apostate Death Eaters) and melted away into a dungeon wall.

Snape then went back to his apartments, took a seat in his favourite armchair, and opened a volume of Paracelsus, but he had only been reading for about quarter of an hour before his head inclined forward and he dozed briefly in his chair, falling into that strange sort of sleep that is half-unaware that the mind is not still alert. He proceeded almost straight into dreaming and his dreams were just as disconcerting as his waking thoughts, full of images of battle and warriors in armour.

The Death Eaters were all ranged on one side of a battlefield in black plate mail, all helmeted and visored save for Lucius Malfoy. He led the Dark Lord's forces on a heavy war horse, carrying a shield emblazoned with the Dark Mark all of them confronting Professor Swain in her feathery silver armour, *Orcleofian* in hand. The horns were blown and the enemy charged, and she waded into them alone, blade and hooves moving at blinding speed. But the enemy was just too many and too persistent, and in the end, they dragged her down like a pack of foaming dogs on a doomed doe. She was lying bloodied on the ground when Malfoy stalked up to her, betrayed and furious *"Don't lie to me!"* he snarled, raising a sword above her head

The blade descended and Snape jerked awake with a vertiginous jolt, his heart pounding.

He straightened up, shaking his head and rubbing his eyes. Bloody hell, this was getting ridiculous. If he was going to be cursed with so many extra hours of wakefulness, he might as well do something productive with them. He got up, put the Paracelsus aside, sat down at his desk, and started a letter:

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Dear Dr. Orson,

I've been examining your notes on the hypothetical chemical composition of Faery blood and tissue for some time now, and truthfully, I have to admit I'm as stumped as you are regarding a chemical reason for such an extreme toxic reaction upon contact with forged iron.

This has led me into a new line of thought could iron's toxicity for the Fae somehow not be chemical in nature, but supernatural, or metaphysical, instead? Could something in the very nature of a Faerie's existence be somehow magically incompatible with the existence of forged iron?

From what I've read, the Fae seem very elemental creatures, still very much a part of the natural world. They find, and sustain, the source of their magic within themselves. It has not escaped my notice that Trolls, whose race comprise the royal family and majority population of the Fifth Kingdom, whose economy depends upon mining and metallurgy and who are hence the most industrialised of the Nine Kingdoms, are known to have the greatest resistance to iron, according to the accounts in Swain's Encyclopaedia. I have also read that any sort of changeling, probably the most overtly supernatural beings among the Fae, are known to be highly sensitive to iron exposure. Additionally, pixies and nixies, whose people have traditionally been thought of as prodigious users and creators of magic, and who comprise the majority races of the Fourth and Seventh Kingdoms, that is, the two least industrialised of the Arcadian realms, seem to be notably sensitive to it as well.

It is on the above observations that I base the following theory. Could it be that cold iron with its unrefined stolidity, its drab, dull colour, its connotations of factory mass manufacture and faceless, joyless industry, and its complete lack of beauty, wonder, magic, or glamour of any kind is so antithetical to the existence of the Fae that they simply cannot exist in the same place where it does? Could it be that the flesh of a Faerie, of a creature deeply and inherently imbued with magic, reacts to iron as would matter to antimatter, cancelling out and negating each other?

I also note that there is no corresponding Faerie sensitivity to gold, or silver, platinum, or titanium, or any other of the metals considered "precious" for their rarity, beauty, and/or tensile strength. The reaction to steel, a highly refined iron alloy, is also markedly less than that of ordinary forged iron. Your friend Professor Swain regularly wears a wristwatch or jewellery of what appears to be platinum or gold, and takes her meals from gold table services here at Hogwarts, and seems to have no adverse reactions to either.

Please let me know what you think of this theory, and don't hesitate to tell me it's complete rubbish if you think so.

Regards,

Severus Snape

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The dream of Professor Swain falling in battle against the collective might of the Death Eaters was not, unfortunately, one of those dreams that mercifully fades from memory shortly after the sleeper awakens. That brief experience of sharing her memories of battle just days earlier had left more of an impression on Professor Snape than he cared to admit, and now he found his attention returning to those images and impressions over and over during the day. In a castle like Hogwarts, where he passed any number of suits of armour and paintings of mounted knights on his way up to the Owlery to post his letter to Dr. Orson, it would have been hard not to be reminded of the Wizarding world's violent past.

For some reason, he was dwelling most on the very last part of those shared memories more than any other; specifically the moment when Professor Swain and her husband found each other alive after the battle. Although it had been only a small, insignificant part of what she had hurled at him probably a slip-up on her part in letting it leak at all something about that scene snagged in him like the keen edge of a fishhook. They had just been so damned glad to see each other, so overcome with joy and relief as they fell all bloodied and world-weary and exhausted into each other's arms. To the two of them, no matter what had happened that day, all was right with the world because they were both alive and together again.

Dorien Tumnus may have been murdered when he was twenty-six, but there had been at least one moment of his brief life that Severus Snape genuinely envied.

Bloody hell Snape had now been so long without real sleep that this continuing wakefulness had gotten to the point of physical pain and maudlin emotionalism, neither of which he could tolerate. He finally locked and warded his door, undressed, got into bed, allowed himself the luxury of a dose of Dreamless Sleep potion, and let mindless exhaustion roll over him.

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When Emily arrived at Malfeasant, the family was sitting outside together at an impromptu picnic on the green plot amidst the rose garden. Of course to them, an impromptu picnic meant tables draped in white linen and set with china and priceless antique silver, with champagne and carafes of fresh orange juice icing in silver tubs, silver platters full of exotic fruit and cheese and baguettes set about in luxurious profusion, and a retinue of house-elves in white linen pillowcase togas hovering about to attend them. Draco was throwing a ball for Lady, his big Newfoundland, laughing and petting her when she brought it back to him "Good girl, Lady, that's a good girl, want

to fetch it again? All right then, go!"

Narcissa was presiding over the table in embroidered white linen robes, her blonde hair in a thick, soft plait down her back, cutting up a mango for her elderly mother, who sat beside her under a black lace parasol, a mimosa in hand. Lucius was sitting beside his wife having a jovial chat with his brother-in-law, both of them dressed in open-necked white linen shirts and summer-weight linen robes. The sun bathed everything in golden light: the roses, the manicured lawn, the glistening fruit and silver on the tables, and the various shades of the assembled company's silver and gold and platinum hair.

"Emily, there you are," Lucius called when she appeared in the garden. "Come join us, my dear."

Oh, fuck me, she thought. She said, "Hello, everyone! How have you all been?"

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The repast was of course delicious, and the mimosas free-flowing. The conversation, however, was perhaps less than scintillating, although Lucius was his usual effortlessly charming self, and Draco as usual jumped in with all sorts of questions about fencing the moment Emily sat down. She concentrated on keeping her manner pleasant and demure, even as Menzentius kept slanting knowing looks at her from beneath hooded eyes, Narcissa took every opportunity to get in precious little left-handed compliments, and Druella acted as though their guest was not there at all.

Perhaps an hour after she arrived, Draco asked Emily if she would like to get in a bit of fencing before supper, and she nodded graciously. "Of course, my boy, always a pleasure to bout with you." Draco grinned.

The two of them headed briefly back up to the house to change into white fencing knickers, heavy canvas fencing jackets, and trainers. Emily rejoined the group with a leather and metal mesh fencing mask under her arm, and carrying a long, narrow box of elaborately carved pale wood. "This seems like a good time to give you your birthday present," she said, holding out the box to Draco.

The boy's face lit up as he took the box from her and set it on the picnic table and then he grinned even more when he opened the hinged lid and lifted out a light, supple fencing foil, with a straight, thirty-six-inch blade and small round bell guard, both of a gleaming, silvery metal engraved with an intricate pattern of Faery knotwork. "Cool!" he cried. "This is *brilliant*!"

"It's a Third Kingdom duelling foil unhoned, and with a safety tip, of course," she said in the direction of Draco's parents. "If you were a young nobleman at Court, that's what you'd practice with for those all-important duels over pressing matters of honour."

"Like when some bratty teenage girl sends swarms of bees after you a fellow's got to have some recourse when that happens," Lucius remarked pleasantly. He caught Emily's eye and winked.

Draco turned to her, his eyes widening. "All right, what's that all about?" he asked, chuckling.

Emily blushed. "Tell you later."

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Draco was eager to try out his gleaming new foil immediately, so a group of house-elves hurried forward to lay out and stake down several panels of polished wood on a garden path, forming an impromptu fencing strip. Emily pulled on a gauntlet and, taking her paper of swords from a pocket of her breeches, took up a foil similar to the one she had just given Draco, but much more weathered and used.

They saluted each other from opposite sides of the strip, and both assumed fencer's first position as Lucius watched with interest, Narcissa leaned close to her husband in concern, and Druella Black seemed to ponder what tortures she would mete out on this Faery harlot if she harmed one white-blond hair of her grandson's head. Menzentius, however, was nowhere to be seen.

"Ready?" Emily called to Draco, and the boy nodded. "Fence."

As usual, Draco segued into action with a great deal of natural grace and growing expertise spoiled and overindulged though he was, the boy really did have talent. As usual, her sessions with him were a simultaneous duel and lesson, as she pushed him to a higher level of expertise and experience, throwing out new attacks for him to counter, and making him work to the utmost in order to try to score points from a wily opponent. She called encouragement and suggestions to him as they continued "Nice, that parry third of yours just comes out of nowhere. I can see you've been working on your footwork, that's great remember, about ninety percent of this is being fast on your feet. Watch for those low-line attacks, don't let them throw you. Good!"

They passed a pleasant hour in such exercise, as Lucius called encouragement to both combatants and Narcissa winced now and then when her son's opponent landed a point on him or gave him languid little rounds of applause when she could discern that he had done something right.

During a short break in between bouts, while the two of them downed ice water offered by the hovering elves and mopped their brows with clean white towels, Emily looked up to see Menzentius Black approaching her dressed in impeccable fencing whites; knickers and canvas jacket, his long ash-blond hair pulled back at the nape of his neck. He carried a practice foil in one gauntleted hand and a fencing mask under the other.

"Got time for a bout?" he asked, grey eyes blazing with challenge.

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Emily looked at him warily, then nodded. "Well, I suppose." She turned toward Draco "Let's have a round-robin tournament, then. Your uncle and I will have a bout, and then you take on the winner."

"Oh my, the Hogwarts fencing mistress is going up against my brother-in-law, how exciting," Lucius drawled. "Do let's put a little wager on the outcome. What do you say, Menz?"

"What do you have in mind?" Menzentius asked.

Lucius fixed Emily with a conspiratorial look and smiled. "A case of Armagnac on the girl to win," he drawled.

"Yeah, I'll take that bet." He gave Lucius a curt nod of acceptance.

Emily turned toward Draco. "Would you like to direct? It would be good practice for you."

Draco nodded and stepped between the two of them, holding his hand up between them. "Fencers ready?"

Emily and Menzentius both assumed fencer's first position on opposite sides of the strip.

"Yes," he said, leering at her.

"Yes," she said, scowling at him.

Peripherally, she half-glimpsed something moving in a high window of the house before them a curtain being brushed aside, to allow a dark figure to peer out. It leaned

closer to the glass, interested. Despite the warmth of the summer afternoon, she shivered.

Draco dropped his hand. "Fence."

And then they had at each other.

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"You're not bad for a civilian hobbyist," she said with a nonchalant, one-shouldered shrug. "You've got what, a B rating in foil?"

"B in foil and épée. A in sabre."

"All right, I believe it." She regarded him with an appraising look. "Although it doesn't surprise me that you're the sort who favours the sabre," she added with a delicate sniff.

He sneered at her down the strip. "Let me guess, you're one of those sanctimonious épéeists who's now going to come out with a long, pissy diatribe about how it's the only historically accurate sport weapon," he said witheringly.

"It *is,*" she shot back. "I should know."

"Ye gods, spare me," he said, rolling his eyes.

"So Menz, when can you deliver my brandy?" Lucius asked drolly.

"Tomorrow. Knock it off, Luce, that last point *hurt,* you sod," Menzentius retorted irritably.

But Draco had taken up a mask and the court foil Emily had given him for his birthday, and was asking for another turn against his teacher, so Menzentius grudgingly stepped between the two of them as bout director.

"Fencers ready? Fence."

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Menzentius's fit of bad temper persisted as Emily continued to bout with Draco. "Come on, Draco, try harder you're letting her win every time," he shouted irritably, then took a seat by his sister's side, and she patted and fussed over him and generally tried to soothe his ruffled feathers. He turned to Lucius, who was still smirking at him. "Oh, look, Lucius's gloat is all clogged with smug."

"Behave yourself, Menz, or I'll tell everyone at the club our champion athlete was soundly trounced by a slip of a girl," Lucius said drolly. Menzentius scowled, and Narcissa gave her husband a reproachful look and continued her fussing and patting.

"Don't feel too bad my mother started teaching me the sword practically the moment I was big enough to hold one," Emily told the group as she and Draco took a break between bouts. "Her idea of mother-daughter bonding is a good afternoon's bout, put it that way."

"How exhilarating," Narcissa said in that sniffy voice of hers. Druella Black grunted disdainfully.

Late that afternoon, Lucius glanced at his gold antique pocket watch, and said it was about time to head back up to the house and dress for dinner. The house-elves scrambled to pull out Mrs. Black's chair, and Draco took his grandmother's arm and helped her up, then began walking with her toward the house. Lucius offered his hand to his wife, and the two of them sailed off in a rustle of expensive tailoring.

Emily glanced at Menzentius as she gathered up her foil and mask. "You were holding back when you fought me that time, weren't you," she muttered, out of the others' earshot. "The whole thing was staged."

"I was there to show off what you could do er, *He* already knows what I can do," he replied. "Besides... " he ran an appraising eye over her body in the close-fitting white athletic jersey and fencing knickers "I'm not Barty Crouch. I think it would have been a shame to damage the goods... too much." He nodded toward her left shoulder "Can I get you a bit of ice or a drop of Healing Potion for that?"

Emily smiled sweetly at him. "Oh, fuck you," she said in a pleasant undertone. "If I was at one hundred percent, I could break you in half even in this form, and you know it."

Menzentius just smirked at her again. "But you're *not* at one hundred percent, are you, sweetling? Nasty old iron, that shite hurts you even in your *other form,* doesn't it? So I guess you people aren't as totally invulnerable as you make yourselves out to be, are you," he chuckled. "'*If you prick us, do we not bleed?'*"

She scowled. "Your average iron knife will prick a human too, my dear," she shot back. "And I don't recall ever telling anyone I was invulnerable."

"Oh, come, you two, still squabbling? Perhaps you'll have to give him a rematch later, Emily," Lucius called back to them.

"Anytime, anywhere," she muttered in Menzentius's direction.

He glanced at her, his grey eyes gleaming ferally. "I'm going to hold you to that," he said.

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Emily, Draco, and Menzentius had left off fencing just after six p.m. that afternoon, and shortly after seven, the group assembled again in the great main hall for a cocktail before supper.

Emily had chosen demure amethyst-coloured robes with elbow sleeves, and thrown a light shawl of black crocheted spidersilk over her shoulders, recalling Narcissa's complaints about *Does she ever wear anything on her arms?* Nonetheless, her hostess and hostess's mother, both resplendent in high-necked and very Victorian blue silk robes and sumptuous black mourning, respectively, darted discreetly disapproving looks at her when she appeared.

One of the house-elves approached and offered her a glass of wine, which Emily accepted with the tiniest of scowls. Oh, by the Mother, it was *summer* for pity's sake. At home, she'd be skipping about in a light frock, camibloomers, and perhaps a bodice, with just little flat slippers on her feet if she wore shoes at all. Really, she reflected, it would seem that nothing short of a boned collar up to her earlobes, buttoned sleeves to her knuckles, a cathedral-length train, opera gloves, and a full-face ski mask would be covered up enough for these women. It didn't seem to be her exposed skin they objected to so much as the fact of her existence.

Friday night's supper was held in the smaller dining room, seeing as how there were only Lucius and Narcissa, Menzentius, Draco, Druella Black, and Emily present. Lucius and Narcissa again presided at the head and foot of the table, with Emily at Lucius's left hand and Draco on his right. Menzentius was seated on her left side, and although he kept up a steady stream of garrulous conversation with his mother and sister at their end of the table, Emily felt the weight of his eyes on her face for most of that meal and during the quiet hour the group spent in the main hall before retiring. Lucius said his good-night to her with a tiny but infinitely suggestive little half-smile and eyebrow quirk that let her know that the evening's festivities were not quite over yet and a chill formed in her stomach despite the two after-dinner brandies she had drunk that night.

She caught Menzentius's eyes as they all headed up to bed he was still staring brazenly at her, both menacing and inviting.

Although she knew he probably couldn't have taken her in a real confrontation unless perhaps she was in some way incapacitated, it was still a tremendous relief when she was alone in her guest bedroom, with a three-foot sword within easy reach.

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Despite the day's physical exertions, it took a long time before Emily could relax enough to even think about sleeping. Lucius had implied that he might be paying a visit to

her room that night, so she washed her face, daubed violet oil on her neck and wrists, put on a helplessly gossamer little silk chemise, and generally made ready to welcome him like the proper little courtesan he expected.

The hour grew very late, and she got into bed and turned out the light, lying nervously in the dark. She wanted to get up and put the strongest Wards of Impassability she could on every entrance to that room, every door, every window, every ventilation shaft and heating duct, but she didn't dare. Somehow she finally managed to fall into a light doze, but even her sleeping mind remained listening, in the manner she had learned while camped near disputed borders waiting to be ambushed at any time.

As such, she was awakened back to full consciousness by the sound of a doorknob turning, and her bedroom door opening and closing. Flash of a man's white-blond hair in a shaft of moonlight, and the sound of stealthy footsteps approaching her bed. She made herself remain silent and motionless, feigning sleep.

There came the sound of a robe being untied and tossed aside and then a hand slowly drew the coverlet off of her motionless form. Fingertips outlined her lips, the curve of a breast, then lifted the hem of her silk chemise... a creak as someone slid into bed with her. She stirred gently; a woman roused from sleep by the carnal attentions of an incubus.

A hand caressed the inside of her right knee, gently drew her legs apart; breath on her inner thigh, moving upward... a long, gloating moan... then for one heart-stopping second it occurred to her that there was more than one blond man in this house who might like to slip into her bed, and she tensed, gasping. *Lucius?*

Lucius's voice whispered *Ssssh... lie back,* and she relaxed, nervous but compliant.

His hands curved around her hips, and then his tongue was bathing all her most sensitive pleasure centres with velvety warmth in that patient, expert, diabolically sensual way of his. She tried to remember everything horrible this man had done, what a monster he was, what he would do to her if he found her out but then she was arching up toward him, melting into that devious mouth, taking a handful of blond hair and crushing him down harder as her orgasm neared. The raw greed of the gesture only seemed to excite him the more.

He stretched himself out over her afterward, luxuriously thrusting into the body he had just rendered trembling with heat. *Yesssssss... I missed you... and you missed me, didn't you...*

She only sighed in answer.

Again, he knew her body too well, was a scholar of what she needed in bed she felt feverish, weak; as if she had been infected with some virulent disease from which she hadn't quite recovered. As always, it never seemed to matter how he wanted her, somehow her body still craved him he wasn't human, he was a drug. She felt the orgasm rising half against her will, but knew that if she suddenly ceased taking pleasure in sex with him, he would suspect something, realise that something was different. Closing her eyes, burying her face in his neck, she tried to let herself enjoy this act purely as a female mated to a sexually desirable male might enjoy his attentions, no more emotional involvement than physical response. But then that insinuating drawl was whispering luscious obscenity in her ears *This is how I wanted to fuck you the first time you were here... I was upstairs in my room, thinking about you lying in bed all alone* and the scent of illicit lust washed over her, and all she could do was writhe under him with the joy of an addict relapsing.

And of course he had to be in one of his tender, gentle moods afterward, when all he wanted to do was hold her, stroke her hair, and kiss her adoringly, like a lazy golden lion purring over his mate. He seemed very happy, just like he had after their first Beltane together.

Oh my love, he whispered. *I can hardly believe you're mine again.*

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It was, as could be imagined, difficult for Emily to sleep that night sharing a bed with a man she now acutely distrusted and even feared, was not entirely conducive to relaxation. She lay motionless beside him and drifted in and out of a light doze, returning to awareness every time her bed partner stirred or rolled over. Finally, as the sky began to pale outside, he got up and kissed her softly, then reached for the robe beside the bed and silently made his escape. After he was gone, she got up and warded the doors and windows, then went back to bed.

One thought came to the fore *I'm in. He thinks I've finally missed him enough, or gotten desperate enough, to come back into the fold for good... He doesn't suspect me of anything.*

With that knowledge, she finally crashed into a profound, exhausted sleep.

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Emily was awakened sometime later by a light but persistent knocking on her door a high tremulous voice was squeaking, "Miss Professor, please? Miss Professor... please? Good morning, please? Breakfast... please?"

It now appeared to be about mid-morning so of course a house-elf would be coming up with a breakfast tray, as per Malfeasant routine. Emily quickly put on her robe and raked a brush through her tousled hair, then went to the door, laid a hand on it, and muttered *Ende Stoppian* and her True Name. "Yes, come in," she called.

The door opened to admit a little house-elf in a white toga made from a lace-edged pillowcase, carrying a breakfast tray a house-elf Emily recognised, with huge, soulful brown eyes and a sharp, foxy little face. "Good morning, Cecile," she said after a moment desperately recalling the elf's name.

Cecile greeted her with an absolutely enormous smile. "Good morning, Miss Professor Emily Swain, miss! Cecile has brought breakfast!" The elf crossed to the round, velvet-draped table and cushioned chairs near the hearth, and set down a large silver salver absolutely laden with food a steaming teapot, a crystal carafe of fresh orange juice, a platter of exotic hothouse fruit, whole-wheat scones with butter, honey, and a variety of preserves. In a blink, she had set the table with napkin and silverware, a crystal stemmed glass, and monogrammed china teacup and plates. She poured out the tea, then produced a large vase of fragrant yellow roses and heliotrope from somewhere in her uniform and set it beside the breakfast tray, finishing up with a curtsy. "Good morning!"

Well, Emily thought, watching this performance with a growing smile,*it looks like someone remembers me.*

She crossed to the table and took the chair Cecile pulled out for her, then began buttering a scone and added a drop of honey to her tea. The simple pleasures of steaming tea, fresh fruit, and hot bread were a welcome distraction after the tensions of the previous day and night.

Cecile remained close by, smiling broadly and all but bouncing on the balls of her feet with the desire to be helpful. "Please, Miss Professor, can Cecile be helping? Be you wanting anything?"

"Yes, dear, can you tell me what the plans are for today, again? Narcissa mentioned them yesterday at dinner, but I was a bit distracted when are we meeting?"

"Yes, Miss Professor. It being quarter to ten now, we has the morning time for breakfast and getting ready, and the getting ready be for when at noon the young Master Malfoy is to be greeting his young-people-friends and the young-people-friends' parents in the big green hall." The elf illustrated all the points on her agenda with earnest, animated little gestures Emily had to hide a chuckle in her teacup. "When the guests is all here, there is lunch in the garden and games on the green, and then there is cocktail hour at six, dinner at seven, dancing at nine. On Sunday there is noontime family tea and then all is going home." Cecile followed up with a little curtsy, like a schoolgirl after a recitation.

"Ah, yes, of course, dear. Thank you for reminding me." Emily ran a covert eye over the elf no bandages on her hands, no signs of injury, so she appeared to be keeping herself out of trouble and hadn't been punished recently. A second later, Cecile spied the unmade bed, and began making it up again, after excusing herself with another

desperate little curtsy. Emily watched as the elf went to work with marvellous speed and efficiency in no time at all, Cecile had the bed made up to perfection, had gathered up the silk chemise from the previous night and yesterday's clothes from the chair beside the bed and hung them in the wardrobe.

When the work was finished, Cecile bounced up to Emily's side at the breakfast table again she was briefly reminded of Lady the dog running eagerly back up to Draco during their game of fetch the previous afternoon. "Please, Miss Professor, is there anything else I can be doing, a bath I can be drawing, clothes I can be pressing?"

"Certainly, dear... er, could you perhaps hang up the clothes in my trunk, if it's not too much trouble?" Emily asked almost guiltily it was one thing to come back to her rooms and find evidence of the elves' work, but it was quite another to actually watch one of them work and give her orders. "Not everything, just what you think I'll need for today and tomorrow, a couple of day frocks and some dress robes for the dinner tonight, maybe some outdoor things for the afternoon. I'm sorry, I didn't get back up here till late "

"Of course, Miss." In another instant, Cecile had her Holding Trunk open and was traipsing down the spiral staircase into it, then making trips back up with folded dresses and robes and stacks of shoeboxes in her arms, which she neatly arranged in the closet. A second later, Cecile's head popped up from the trunk's hatch, ears a-flop and her eyes wide "And Miss Professor, what should I be doing about the metal pullover and all the pointy knives?"

"Er, leave the metal pullover and the pointy knives alone you shouldn't touch those, they could hurt you. I'll look after them," Emily said quickly.

Cecile nodded, and her head disappeared back into the trunk's interior, then popped out again a second later. "Miss Professor? There be a basket here with buttons to be sewn on and things to be mended, can I be doing that for you, please?"

Emily looked at the elf, distracted. "Well yes, that's my mending basket, I was going to get around to all that with *Reparo* spells... er, don't you think that's a little above and beyond what you need to do, dear? I'm just a guest, dear heart, not your Mistress."

"I is not minding, I is wanting to help you," Cecile said, nodding so vigorously that her ears quivered.

Emily sighed, watching Cecile's face. There were any number of reasons why the elf might be trying to prolong her time *helping Miss Professor* the guest who had done her a good turn on her previous visit. Perhaps she felt safer here than she did anywhere else in the house; perhaps she was indulging in a few moments' escapist fantasy of having a nicer mistress, one who wouldn't make her iron her hands or perhaps she was just grateful. But at that moment it seemed cruel to refuse her offers of help and to send her away.

"Well... that would be all right, but only if it doesn't take you away from your other work," Emily said. "Don't spend more than a few minutes on it."

"Oh no, it is all right." Cecile was up and out of the trunk in an instant, with the mending basket in her hands, then sat herself cross-legged on the hearth rug beside it and, producing a little needle and thread from somewhere in her tunic, began reaffixing some loose buttons on a black lambswool cardigan. "Cecile has the whole morning to help, and the Miss Professor took barely no time at all for her hair and clothes last visit. Why, when Cecile was the Mrs. Rosier's maid before, it takes longer to do up the Mrs. Rosier's hair and pluck out all her silver hairs and pull *really* hard on her corset ropes than it does to help Miss Professor do*everything,*" the elf said earnestly, nodding.

Emily bent over her teacup, not quite stifling a spasm of irrepressible laughter at the image of Cecile tweezing Mrs. Rosier's grey hair and yanking heroically on her corset strings. "I see," she said.

"When I has been maid for the Missuses Crabbe and Goyle and Bulstrode and the Miss Wilkes, they is wanting more more *more* breakfast all the time, so I keeps running running *running* all morning, and the floor and tablecloth and bed sheets is all with crumbs yuck!" said Cecile, making a face as she continued stitching. "Mrs. Parkinson, it is not so bad to be her maid, but she is always wanting more sherry at night, and I is having to wake up when I hear her bell."

Now this was getting interesting and disturbing. It sounded as though some of the women were taking refuge in overeating and at least one in drink and it also looked as though the Malfoy house-elves could perhaps use a sympathetic ear as well, which she might be able to turn to her advantage. "Well, I hope that the Mistress Malfoy doesn't make you run up and down with breakfast trays and sherry bottles, and pull hard on her corset strings," Emily said pleasantly. Cecile started mending a torn black chemise and Emily remembered how it had gotten torn, during a particularly athletic tussle with Lucius in a hotel bedroom some months earlier, and blushed hotly.

The elf went on with her quick, precise little needle, oblivious but at the mention of Narcissa, her floppy ears drooped. "I is not really the Mistress Malfoy's maid, she says I is too young and clumsy and had to throw so many slippers at me that it made her arm tired. And I is not allowed to serve at meetings anymore because I was getting tired and fell asleep when I is supposed to mind the fire last time. But I is much better about that now," she said, looking up with a little, meek smile.

Emily's attention pricked forward intensely. "Why did you get so tired at the meeting, dear?" she asked.

"Well, the meetings, they is all *very* long, and late at night, when I is used to be sleeping," Cecile said, very apologetically indeed.

"Really?" Emily asked. "Why do they hold meetings so late at night?"

"Because they have important things going on, that not all the guests can know, it is... " But then she broke off, and her shoulders hunched and her eyes got wide "Oh... I is *not* supposed to tell about meetings, I... "

A second later, to Emily's utter horror, Cecile had jabbed the sewing needle into the back of her hand, whispering *Bad Cecile, bad Cecile! I is not to be telling, bad !* Emily darted up from the breakfast table in a clatter of china and caught the elf's hands, immobilising them, and slapped the needle out of her hand and away from her.

"Stop that, stop that *now*," she ordered, giving the elf a shake. "Don't you *ever* do that in front of me, do you hear me?"

Cecile looked up at her, ashamed and a little frightened. "But Master Malfoy said "

"Master Malfoy isn't here, and Master Malfoy told you to serve *me* while I'm here," Emily said sternly. "And I don't want you to hurt yourself, not now, not ever, do you understand?"

"Yes," the elf quavered in a tiny voice. "Cecile is not to be hurting herself... when she is serving the Miss Professor and when the Master Malfoy is not here."

"Good," Emily said, letting go of the elf's hands with a severe look. She then looked over the fat droplet of red blood welling up upon Cecile's pricked hand with a concerned eye. "Oh, bloody hell, you stabbed yourself pretty good there, didn't you. Now you stay put, I'll be back in a moment."

She went into the bathroom and found the small, incredibly expensive vial of Healing Potion she had bought some weeks earlier in Diagon Alley, then knelt down on the hearth rug and applied a bit to the back of Cecile's hand with a ball of cotton wool. The pinprick healed over instantly.

"There you go," Emily said, swabbing up the last of the blood. "You'll be fine."

Cecile sat very still while these ministrations went on. Afterward, she glanced up at Emily with big, scared eyes. "Is Miss Professor going to be... telling the Master Malfoy Cecile blabbed? I is not *meaning* to blab... I is just *talking* to the nice Miss Professor... "

"Cecile... I'll tell you the truth," Emily said, leaning down to look her in the eye. "I'm not going to tell him you said anything. I'm not going to try to get you in trouble with your Master and Mistress, not ever. Even if you did get into some mischief, I'd probably *still* not tell him. I'd rather that you weren't punished even if you did blab, because I think your Master and Mistress Malfoy discipline their elves too harshly, and it does not make me at all happy to see you suffer, do you understand?"

Cecile listened to this speech in frank, open-mouthed astonishment, as though she could barely comprehend one of the Master and Mistress Malfoy's guests saying such a thing. "I... is... thanking you," she finally said, then got to her feet and made a curtsy.

"You're very welcome," Emily said. "Now, promise me you won't tell anyone about what I just said, then? If your Master and Mistress thought I was undermining their authority, they'd probably not be very happy with me, either."

"No, no," Cecile cried. "I is not going to be getting *you* into trouble, not for nothing."

"Thank you, you're very kind to me," Emily said, smiling.

Cecile shyly smiled back. "Please, miss, can I be getting you anything else? Can I be drawing your bath for you?" she asked with another curtsy.

"No, I'll draw it myself. Just... " Emily glanced around for something for the elf to do, just to keep her in the sanctuary of her guest room for a few more untroubled minutes. "How about you finish the mending, and lay out my black voile day robes, then, would you?"

The elf nodded excitedly. "You can be considering it done, you can," she chirped.

"Thank you."

As Emily turned toward the bath, leaving Cecile to her mending, it occurred to her that she might have made a very important blunder in talking so candidly to Cecile, and more or less openly undermining Lucius's authority over his house-elves... but she might have made an important ally, as well. At any rate, coming to someone's aid the way she had now twice done for Cecile couldn't help but create some kind of bond between them. Now, when she left Malfeasant, she was going to have to leave someone she knew and liked behind, in a position of total dependence on people who forced her to injure herself if she failed to carry out their orders. Concerned as she was about Draco's welfare, Draco was the Malfoys' only heir, and thus valuable to them. Cecile was just one powerless little elf among many and was, as such, replaceable and expendable.

As she left Cecile contentedly mending clothes on the hearth rug, Emily wondered how much a young, clumsy house-elf cost, and how much cajoling it would take to convince Lucius to sell her.

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Later that day, Emily made her way down to the Malfoys' main hall, where Draco would shortly be greeting his friends and their parents at a few minutes past noon.

She looked particularly well-turned-out that day, as when she had emerged from the bath, combed, oiled, powdered, and dressed in stockings, chemise, and a robe, she found that Cecile had not only laid out the light, sleeveless robes of lacy black voile she had requested for the day, but apparently finished the mending, and now was in the process of cleaning and polishing every bit of jewellery and pair of shoes Emily owned. The elf had gone on to style Emily's hair into a sleek bob, then took perhaps five minutes to give her a flawless manicure as well before going back to her boot-polishing. Emily got the feeling that Cecile probably would have stayed in *Miss Professor's* guest room all day and cleaned and polished and pressed everything in sight if it was at all possible. (Had Emily not known how insulting your average house-elf found such consideration, she probably would have left Cecile a tip the size of Gringotts.)

Lucius, Narcissa, Druella, Menzentius, and Draco were all waiting in the main hall when she arrived, all of them posed about the room in various armchairs, chaises, and settees, dressed in expensively casual day robes and generally looking like a gracious country living pictorial spread from *Witch Weekly.* Lucius and Narcissa were cosily taking tea side by side in a pair of matching black leather armchairs when Emily arrived their host immediately got up and greeted her when she came in. "Good morning, my dear, I trust you slept well? How was breakfast?" Draco loped up and asked if she wanted to do a bit more fencing when the others got there, in addition to the badminton and croquet that was planned.

"Yes, breakfast was marvellous, thank you. And yes, if anyone wants to go a few bouts, I'd be happy to join in." She took a seat on the green velvet chaise before the great hearth, daintily arranging her skirts and trying not to remember all the various lewd and lascivious ways Lucius had taken her on this same chaise Beltane night. A house-elf in a starched black pillowcase uniform was immediately beside her, offering a delicate china cup of herbal tea. "Thank you."

Draco perched himself on the end of the chaise beside her, talking about how he still hoped to organise inter-House fencing teams at Hogwarts for the coming year, and Emily held her teacup demurely in her lap, smiling and making the appropriate sounds of acknowledgment at the appropriate times. Her eyes were drawn to the great antique mirror near the hall's entrance, a mirror larger than most doorways. It reflected the lot of them in the luxuriously decorated hall like the cast of some sweeping family drama: an elderly, white-haired matriarch in sumptuous black, holding court like an empress; three handsome blond gentlemen, the suave patriarch of forty, the hellraiser of an uncle, twenty-eight, and the golden son of fifteen. Rounding out the list of players were two lovely, tastefully dressed blonde women, both somewhere in their thirties, each primly holding a teacup in her elegant white hands.

It occurred to Emily with disturbing clarity just how well she herself seemed to fit into the tableau of the perfect Malfoy family... how much she already seemed one of them.

But then she made herself look away from the mirror, and just waited for whatever would come next.

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Draco's party guests began arriving at quarter past noon.

Emmitt and Beatrice Parkinson and their daughter Pansy arrived first. Emmitt proudly squired his lovely wife and pretty, petulant daughter into the main hall to greet the assembled company as the house-elves dealt with their mountain of luggage. The three of them made an impressive picture together: Mr. Parkinson looked craggily autocratic and disdainful as always, and Mrs. Parkinson and her daughter were both very handsomely dressed. Pansy looked charming in summer robes of blue organdie, white gloves, and a diamond locket, but Emily thought she looked downcast and even sulkier than usual.

None of the Parkinsons had been spared during the briefing Professor Snape had given Emily during their late-night walk on the turrets, and she recalled now what he had said regarding them: *To his credit, Parkinson is one of the few who still surprises me with something resembling a decent streak now and then he'd rather hand someone a bribe to secure his compliance than torture him for it, rather negate an enemy's threat through cleverness than just have him killed. His business practices are corrupt as all bloody hell, of course, but I've never seen him use an Unforgiveable. After his marriage, to my very great surprise, Parkinson also turned out to be the last word in faithful husbands to my knowledge, he's never made use of any of the, er, paid entertainment Lucius sometimes provides at parties, nor does he keep a mistress that anyone knows of. He's extremely possessive of his wife, granted, but he's not a hypocrite, at least when it comes to her. The way to his heart is to get into Beatrice's best graces, and flatter him as to what a devoted model wife she is he enjoys that. It wouldn't hurt to tell him what a brilliantly clever little angel his selfish brat of a daughter is, either.*

The Parkinsons were now making the rounds of the room, smiling and shaking hands and kissing cheeks. "Mr. Parkinson, what a pleasure to see you and your family again," Emily said when his attention lighted upon her. "Pansy was such a pleasure to have in class, and your wife is always so charming," Emily said, smiling.

Parkinson smiled back. "Hello, my dear, how lovely to see you too." He greeted her with a warm handshake. "Please, do call me Emmitt."

"Of course. And you must call me Emily as well."

Beatrice Parkinson sailed up a moment later and shook Emily's hand, looking very pretty as always in embroidered violet-blue robes, her wavy black hair blowing around her shoulders. "Why hello, Emily, how lovely to see you again. I must say, poor Pansy was so upset that you're not staying for another year and everyone knows it's so difficult to find a really qualified teacher for the Defence Against the Dark Arts job at Hogwarts. Are you sure there's no way we can tempt you to stay on?"

*Beatrice is without a doubt your best hope for an ally amongst the women,*Professor Snape had said. *She's terribly lonesome, you see. She's always been an outsider because she's the youngest and most attractive amongst them, and what's more, she married above her own station financially and is one of the great few with a faithful husband as well which of course means that all the women hate her with a passion. Mrs. Rosier and Druella especially are always trying to undermine her socially in some way; Druella because Emmitt preferred Beatrice to one of her daughters, and Felina because Felina does that to anything female.*

But you have to remember that Emmitt doesn't tell Beatrice anything whatsoever about his shadier pursuits doesn't want to bother the little woman's pretty head with boring business and politics, of course. But she's far cleverer and more observant than he realises, so as a result, she knows just enough to be dangerous, and it's easy to wheedle it out of her by lending a sympathetic ear. On the other hand, though, while Emmitt might spend some time in Azkaban for racketeering, blackmail, extortion, and conspiracy, Beatrice doesn't have a mark on her.

"Well, as it turns out, I don't need to rush right home," Emily said breezily. "Perhaps Dumbledore will be hiring, if I'm still in England at the end of the summer."

"Oh, good, good!" Beatrice said with a brilliant smile, then leaned close to Emily's ear for a little aside. "I must say, it's so pleasant to know someone who can talk about something other than shopping and redecorating. Do let's sit together at lunch."

"Of course." Emily smiled back, thinking: *Oh, you dear thing, I do hope I don't end up giving evidence against your husband.*

The Crabbe, Goyle, and Bulstrode families appeared soon afterward, accompanied by their respective children (*Dumb as bricks, tractable as sheep, and incapable of formulating an original thought don't count on a great deal of dissembling from any of them,* in Professor Snape's estimation), followed by Walden Macnair in khaki sportsmen's robes with his grey-haired, pudding-shaped wife on his arm (*Walden married Laeticia for her fortune, pure and simple; she adores him helplessly and is completely oblivious to the rate at which he spends her money chasing other women.*) Marcus Flint, Sr. and Jr. and Mrs. Flint arrived not long afterward (*Think of the Flints as being quite like the Crabbes, only with more cunning and a sadistic streak.*) Next, the group greeted Mr. Nott and his son, Theodore (*The Notts are very nearly as rich as the Malfoys, and their pedigree is centuries older. Their major point of contention with the Malfoys is that Theodore the Elder is as conservative as Lucius is... self-indulgent, and Theodore the Younger refuses to toady up to anyone, including Draco.*)

Last to arrive was Mrs. Felina Rosier, who again ignored Emily completely. Professor Snape had remained strangely reticent on the subject of Mrs. Rosier, despite the fact that Emily knew he disliked her as much as she herself did. *Felina is... troublesome,* he had said. *Think of her as an incorrigible antagonist, similar to Druella. If I were you, I would steer well clear of her.*

All of the guests had arrived by one o'clock. The adults lounged about in armchairs and settees, sipping tea and engaging in genteel, jovial conversation, while the young people, Pansy Parkinson, Vincent Crabbe, Gregory Goyle, and Millicent Bulstrode gathered in an admiring knot around Draco, hanging on his every word and laughing boisterously now and then. Theodore Nott and Marcus Flint stood a little ways off by themselves, animatedly discussing the Falmouth Falcons' chances in the next Quidditch World Cup.

A big, furry someone approached Emily's seat and lay down on the rug beside her Lady, Draco's Newfoundland dog, was still on her ceaseless quest to find someone willing to pet her. She leaned her big jowly head against the side of Emily's knee, looking up at her face with searching brown eyes. Emily stroked the dog's head, and Lady's eyes closed in contentment.

"What troubles you?" she murmured to Lady, then silently spoke a word.

Lady's eyes widened, and she looked anxiously into Emily's face, whining and through the first form of *Deceivre,* the whining formed a question. Not words, strictly speaking, but easily understood feelings and impressions unsatisfied wondering, unhappiness at the absence of a loved one, sense impressions of a human being: **Where BlackCoat-SoftVoice-KindHands?**

Emily sighed, knowing exactly who the dog meant. "He's safe," she replied quietly. "He couldn't come this time."

Lady whined again, leaning her head against Emily's knee. Attitude of disappointment.

"I'm sorry you're unhappy," she whispered, accompanying the words with a gentle ear-scratching. Lady draped her head over Emily's knee and closed her eyes.

"No, no, Lady, bad girl, you'll get dog hair all over the Professor's lovely robes." Lucius appeared beside her seat, gently chastising the dog. "Come here." Lady reluctantly got up from her cosy recline beside the chaise, and went to Lucius's side. "Good girl," he said, patting her head. "Now go on, go play in the garden."

Lady made her rather downcast exit, and Lucius held out his hand to Emily. "Come, dear, could I speak to you for a moment?"

She took his proffered hand and rose, brushing off her skirts. "What is it?"

"Have I shown you the sketches for the new family portrait I've commissioned, dear?" he asked pleasantly. "No? Well, you must see them then. Come along into the study... "

He led her up the gallery steps and into the study that had been his father's, and was now his own. But the moment they crossed the study's threshold, he had pinned her back against the wall just inside the door, kissing her ravenously and pressing himself against her, barely fifty feet from where his wife and son were holding court amidst all the guests in the main hall.

"You were *wonderful* last night," he purred in her ear. "You can't imagine how much I missed you." His fingers slid down her back, slithering down her hips to squeeze her rump with both hands. An instant later, he had a hand beneath her helplessly gossamer voile skirts, fingers caressing her inner thigh, tracing their way northerly.

"Lucius, come on," she whispered, glancing nervously toward the open door and trying to pull away from him. "Someone might come in "

But the testosterone haze around him only spiked upward at the suggestion apparently the idea of getting caught only excited him further. He pressed her back more firmly against the wall. "You remember what I showed you, what I told you, that night when we were so deep into each other's minds I could barely tell where I ended and you began... "

"*Yes,*" she said in a breathless whisper.

"And?" he prompted. Clever fingers slid beneath her knickers, drenched themselves in her fluids. One slick fingertip found the most sensitive kernel of flesh between her thighs and circled it. "Have you thought about it since? Given any more thought to what I offered you... ?"

"I can't *stop* thinking about it," she gasped. It was true, his offer of marriage to Draco had occupied much of her thoughts ever since the idea was proposed. She had mostly thought about how impossible it was to accept such an offer and how disgustingly corrupt he was to even suggest such a thing, but the words were true on their face. But his tongue was still on hers, every delicate caress echoed by the movements of his fingers... the tension hardening, rising...

"Let's talk more about this tonight in your room, shall we?" the insinuating drawl purred in her ear.

"All right," she gasped, writhing half-voluntarily against him but just as her excitement became undeniable, just as she had ceased caring who saw them, so long as he *just didn't stop*... he let go of her and stepped back, making her gasp with disappointment.

"Just wait until tonight after the ball," he whispered. "Then I can give you my... *undivided attention*."

He stepped back, gave her a gracious smile and nod of farewell, and was gone, back into the crowd of his guests.

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Lunch was another elaborate picnic at many white-draped tables out on the lawn, tables groaning with delicacies and iced tubs of wine. Emily sat beside the merry, vivacious Beatrice Parkinson, who was very pleasant company, and Mrs. Bulstrode, whose powers of conversation seemed limited to smiles, nods, and grunts of acknowledgment now and then. Emily noticed that the Malfeasant green was all set up with a badminton net, croquet hoops, a shooting trap with clay pigeons, and three of those impromptu fencing strips like the one they had used the day before.

In the mid-afternoon, many of the guests had changed into more casual outdoor clothes, and games were starting up on the lawn. Mrs. Macnair, Mrs. Rosier, and Mrs. Bulstrode had started up a ladylike game of croquet, as house-elves hovered about them with trays of iced tea. Both Flint *père* and Flint *fils* were practicing golf putts on a smooth carpet of green lawn with Lucius and Mr. Parkinson, and Millicent Bulstrode and Pansy Parkinson were energetically batting a badminton birdie between them. Draco had of course prevailed upon Emily to join the fencing, and Beatrice had surprised her by appearing in spotless fencing whites and trainers, saying that she hadn't crossed swords with anyone since she was a teenager, and that she would rather like to take it up again.

"Splendid," Emily said, smiling. "Which weapon do you favour, épée, sabre, or foil?"

"Oh, the foil, definitely," Beatrice replied. "Épée hits are just vicious, and the sabre goes so fast I'm quite afraid of it."

The two of them spent a quarter hour in a refresher course sort of lesson, as Beatrice got the feel of the sport again and Emily noticed that Lucius was getting so absorbed in watching the two of them that Mr. Flint had to nudge him when they came to his turn on the putting green.

Peripherally, Emily noticed a group of guests off to one side taking turns shooting at targets with their wands Messrs. Crabbe and Goyle and Menzentius Black were spiritedly egging each other on while Narcissa sat placidly nearby with her mother, sipping tea and watching them, now and then roused to blasé applause for a good shot. Menzentius seemed to be prevailing upon her to join them, and after several minutes of such blandishments, Narcissa acquiesced, got up, and drew her wand.

Pull, she ordered, and a clay disc went skittering up in the air, only to fall back to the grass as dust motes. This was not beginner's luck by any means every other target Narcissa set her sights upon fell to the grass in the same condition, even the really tiny ones that were scarcely bigger than an aspirin tablet.

Well well well, Emily thought, her eyes widening with surprise and admiration. She wouldn't have imagined it in a million years, but damned if Lucius's placid porcelain doll of a wife wasn't one hell of a shot. But now Pansy Parkinson had joined the fencers, and Beatrice extended a playful challenge to her daughter. "Emily, would you mind directing the bout?"

"No, I'd be happy to. Fencers ready?"

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The company whiled away the afternoon in such pastoral diversions until most of the adults had gotten tired and gone into the main hall to talk business and politics and things sold and things acquired over cups of tea. Emily wanted to go in and listen to the conversations, but the birthday boy was politely adamant about his wish to get in some more fencing with her, and she had little choice but to humour him. "You don't mind, do you? It's just, you're fun to bout with, and it might be the last time I get to see you before you go home, you know?" the boy said.

"No, I don't mind," she said, smiling.

But then the afternoon was over, and it was nearly time to go upstairs and dress for supper and the dance planned for that evening. The two combatants finished their last bout and scrubbed off their faces with towels. The house-elves made haste to offer them glasses of water.

Draco lingered by Emily's side, drying his damp forehead. "Hey, I wanted to ask you, Professor... do you know where Professor Snape has got off to, that he couldn't come this weekend?" he asked, looking troubled for a moment. "I mean, he's never missed one of my birthday parties before it's just not like him."

Emily paused, turning casually back toward the boy. "Oh, someone told you he couldn't come this weekend?" she asked, airily surprised.

"Yeah, Mother said he was really busy and couldn't make it," Draco said, shrugging. "Do you know if he's working on his place in Orkney again, or did he have Potions stuff to do, or something?"

Emily's brows creased. "Draco... I'll tell you the truth. Professor Snape and I may have worked together, but we aren't exactly what you could call best friends, and he's never really kept me apprised of his comings and goings. So really, I can't tell you," she said, shrugging. "It's odd to me too I thought before that your parents invited him to *everything*." Her tone invited the boy to elaborate on this topic if he so desired.

"They do that's why it's weird not to see him," Draco said, his pale face pinching slightly with concern. "He and Father have been thick as thieves since they were kids, everybody knows that. That's why I wasn't at all nervous about going to Hogwarts when I got my letter because my Head of House was one of my father's best friends, who I'd known since I was little, you know?"

"It must have been reassuring," she said, patting his shoulder.

"Yeah, it was," Draco said, nodding. "He's the only teacher at school who really looks out for me the Headmaster and McGonagall were both Gryffindors, and they favour their own House so much it's just disgusting. If it weren't for my father and Professor Snape, I think the Slytherins would get the shaft from the administration every time, they're all so bloody unfair."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Emily said gently.

"So if you see him, you know, tell him to write me or something, all right?" His grey eyes sought hers.

"If I see him, I will," she said, her tone indicating how very unpredictable was the likelihood that she would be able to deliver this message.

"Just, you know, if you get a chance," the boy persisted. "Just if you're ever in the same place, the Three Broomsticks or something."

"All right, I will," she replied. "If we ever happen to be in the same place."

Draco smiled. "Thanks, thanks a lot."

Just then, a meek little elf came out with the message that Narcissa wanted Draco to start getting ready for the dinner dance to be held that evening, and the two of them shook hands, congratulated each other on a bout well fought, and headed back into the house.

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As per Malfeasant custom, the guests assembled for a cocktail hour in their best evening finery before supper.

Emily had chosen deep green robes of beaded and embroidered spidersilk, selected more or less because they covered her arms to the wrist, and had mused over what

jewellery to wear for a good few minutes. Her very best jewellery would have been appropriate for an elaborate ball like this, but her favourite glimmering double strand of Arcadian pearls made Narcissa feel competitive and thus were right out, and she couldn't wear the diamond collar or diamond earrings Lucius had given her because they were made by the Malfoy family jeweller and Narcissa might recognise his work... bloody hell, but this business of spying on one's married lover and his family required a lot of forethought. Finally, she decided on a dainty little emerald and diamond pendant her father had given her upon finishing at Beauxbatons, and tied it around her neck on a narrow black satin ribbon.

When she came down to dinner, Emily was again seated at Lucius's left hand, across from Draco and with Walden Macnair on her left, although Felina Rosier seemed to have been relegated to a seat farther down the table this evening, and Pansy Parkinson took the seat beside Draco. The meal was the usual sort of sumptuous feast she had come to expect at a Malfoy party: salad of exotic spring greens and herbs, roast pheasant, *haricots verts,* a savoury mushroom tart, and all the usual sort of extravagant luxury Lucius liked to parade before guests. The adults were offered a different vintage with each course, while the young people watched enviously over glasses of tea and juice.

After the last course was finished, the house-elves bore in an enormous birthday cake full of strawberries and whipped cream, and everyone applauded as Draco blew out the candles. When the last morsels of cream, fruit, and angel food cake were consumed, the guests lingered at the table with snifters of brandy and cognac.

Unfortunately, to Emily's mounting impatience, the conversation at her end of the table was largely about work at the Ministry and the last days of term at Hogwarts nothing incriminating was said or even hinted at. But then she supposed she couldn't expect everyone to fall all over themselves telling her about their most illegal private pursuits and how best to get themselves thrown in jail.

She glanced discreetly at her watch it was nearly time for the cotillion to begin. Perhaps someone would get in his cups and spill something interesting to her on the dance floor. One could only hope.

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The sun was setting over Hogwarts when Professor Snape finally awoke from his much-needed nap early Saturday evening, to the sound of a bird's claws persistently scratching against the transom window of his dungeon bedroom. He sat up groggily, shaking his dishevelled dark head to clear it. It took him a few moments to remember that he had sent Catherine Orson a letter and was waiting for her reply.

He got up, put on a robe, then went to the window and collected her letter:

Dear Severus,

For heaven's sake, do please call me Catherine. When I get a letter addressed to "Dr. Orson," it's usually got "Please Remit" on it.

You know what after reading your last letter's hypothesis, I really think you might be on to something there. Perhaps by looking for a chemical or physiological explanation for the toxicity, I've been thinking too much inside the Muggle-doctor box, if you'll forgive me.

Your theory about supernatural toxicity is interesting I've got the day off today, so I've gone back to my old books of folklore and the Internet for more on Faeries and iron. As you might already know, iron cannot be enchanted by any kind of magic, either human or Faerie. It has little or no effect on human magic, but it actually weakens and repels Faery magic. It used to be widely known that carrying an iron nail, or cow bell, or some other bit of forged iron in one's pocket made a human being less susceptible to Fae enchantments. (Although all that stuff about Faeries not being able to stand church bells or holy water or not being able to take Communion is pure horseshite the Church's only threat to the Fae was the old-school witch-burning sort of clergy. Not only that, but the Fae are so universalistic about religion it's ridiculous.)

As to your questions about whether human blood is toxic to Faeries my research into the interaction of Faery blood and human blood has been extremely interesting. My experiments with Fae blood have indicated that it has an entirely neutral reaction to human blood I have so far found no proteins or antibodies within Fae blood that negatively interact with human blood at all. When Fae blood is injected into a human being, it serves almost all the same functions within the human body as human blood with no ill effects no clotting, no infection, nada. (Well, at least there aren't any negative effects in me, but I admit that I might be a special case, given that me Mum has pointed ears and all.)

The Fae have cells in their blood that bond with and carry oxygen the same as we do. I've theorised that I could literally replace your or my entire blood supply with Fae blood (supplemented with human white blood cells for immunological purposes), and we would carry on as before. (So imagine my chagrin at discovering that there is an entire race of potential universal blood donors out there, and I can't set up a blood drive to collect their blood or let anyone in the Muggle medical establishment know about them !!!)

We humans have no negative reaction whatever to iron unless we ingest poisonous amounts of it. Lack of iron in our diets gives us anaemia and weakens our immune systems. We require iron to produce red blood cells; we are chemically bonded to it. So if your theory is correct and the toxicity has a supernatural cause, I would postulate that iron and magic are just essentially incompatible iron is magic's Kryptonite, to quote an old Superman comic. Iron is anti-magic. Perhaps the presence of iron in human blood is the reason why Muggles are the dominant race on Earth, and magic-using humans are so rare. Perhaps if we explored a lot of other dimensions where magic-using civilisations are in existence, we'll find that the Fae reaction to iron is the typical one, and magic is common amongst life forms without iron-based blood. Magical humans would then be even more rarefied statistical outliers than we already know ourselves to be if this theory is correct, then we magic-using humans are a unique sort of hybrid creature, adapted to both the magic and anti-magic contained within us. To paraphrase Neal Stephenson, we're a right lot of evolutionary badasses, we are.

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Snape smirked Dr. Orson had a colourful writing style, and she often alluded to Muggle idiom, authors, or medical authorities he had never heard of. He had no idea who Neal Stephenson was, and had never seen a Superman comic, but the good doctor's points always came across.

Her letter continued:

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The Fae can also come in contact with human bodily fluids containing iron without ill effects if a Faerie comes in contact with human blood, or a human man ejaculates inside his Faerie partner's body, the concentration of iron within the blood or semen is too weak to cause a toxic reaction. I've just had a bit of a brainstorm on this the other morning, in the bathtub no less: What if we introduced non-toxic levels of red blood cells from magic-using humans into a Faerie for an extended period of time desensitised them with an inoculation of magical humanity, for lack of a better description could we perhaps allow that Faerie to lose much or all of the sensitivity to iron?

At any rate, regarding our iron burn healing potion, I got a letter from Laurent this morning. He suggested that if we perhaps added some human t-cells and white blood cells into the mix, and then added some more magical-potency activator sort of ingredients, we might be able to lend Fae tissues the same healing ability as human tissues. (Clever bloke, Laurent is you'd like him.)

With his idea in mind, here's an idea for chemical composition. It's a bit rough and rushed, but we can refine it later...

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Snape got dressed, then took Catherine's letter and notes down to his office and spent some time looking them over, and then experimenting with the new Healing Potion

variant she described, incorporating Collier's suggestion. As he worked, the creativity and sophistication of their ideas for the compound amazed him Muggle or no, help from a wizard healer friend or no, she had a truly admirable grasp of theoretical potions-making. He knew any number of witches and wizards who didn't have her intuition into the science. For a long moment, he wished he could send this work in to *Alchymia et Potio Diurnalis*, the Potions scholar's journal that published his academic articles, as an example of innovative new research in the field, then cursed the fact that he couldn't.

Instead, he took up a quill, and started another letter:

Dear Catherine,

Are you absolutely certain you're a Muggle? After reading the notes you sent on the potions formula, I'm now half-convinced that your Hogwarts letter somehow went missing.

I've spent much of this evening experimenting with the compound, as much as I can without having ready access to white blood cells and t-cells (could you perhaps send me some samples?) Your formulation has prompted me to have a bit of a brainstorm as well please let me know what you think of the following idea. If we added the human cells you suggested, plus some fluxweed, activated with stewed lacewing and knotgrass infusion (the basis for Polyjuice Potion, a flesh-transformation potion, if you aren't already familiar with it) I think it might be possible to briefly transmogrify a Faerie's flesh into a substance that reacts the way human skin and muscle does to regular Healing Potion. The extra magical-potency activator sort of ingredients you suggested might indeed work in a brute-force sort of way, but I'd worry about negative side effects such as extreme skin sensitivity and depressed immunological function following treatment...

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When his letter was finished and he could no longer lose himself in work, Snape glanced up at the tiny clock on his office desk it was now nearly nine p.m. on Saturday night.

Snape leaned back in his chair, imagining the situation at Malfeasant. The Dark Lord himself was probably upstairs in the velvet-curtained darkness of some sumptuous guest suite, sequestering himself in luxurious solitude to reflect on whatever thoughts occupied such a personage in his moments to himself, and now and then allowing private audiences to hear the petitions of the guests. Voldemort had a taste for the finest food, drink, and comforts the world could offer, having been deprived of so much while living in a Muggle charity orphanage as a boy, and his long incorporeal existence would have sharpened his already voracious appetites for the pleasures of the flesh all the more. He would be dining alone on the choicest delicacies Lucius's kitchen could offer, drinking the Malfoys' French brandy from a crystal glass and serpent venom from a silver goblet, with that grovelling idiot Pettigrew and a giant poisonous snake coiled at his side for company.

Lucius's cadre of Death Eaters and their wives and children were all now probably assembled at Malfeasant as well, no doubt just heading to the cotillion if Narcissa adhered to her usual rigid schedule. Druella, Narcissa, and Felina would again be looking at Professor Swain as though they would like to see her hanging from a meat hook, each with her own combination of bigotry and sexual jealousy, and Beatrice would be hovering about her, longing for just one real friend. Most of the men would be wondering how to get her into bed, a few would be actively trying to do so, and Lucius would be

His mind rejected the image he didn't even want to think about Lucius and Professor Swain at that moment. She had said to him, *So now you know the whole story I do hope you're glad of it,* and now, he had to admit, he wasn't, not at all. Everything in him resisted the image of Lucius touching her; he wished someone would Obliviate the fact that it had ever happened from his mind.

There had been times since the evening of the explosion that he wished he had taken his cue from Barty Crouch, Jr. while he had Professor Swain's Stunned body in his arms and simply kidnapped her, spirited her away, and arranged for her to wake up alone in some pastoral country inn in Arcadia with all her possessions beside her, with no way to get back to the Second World for months.

He folded his letter to Dr. Orson and then reached into his office desk for an envelope, seal, and wax and in doing so, his eyes fell on another letter in that drawer... a letter addressed to *Miss Emily Swain, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland*.. a letter that he had written on the night the Fusilier was destroyed, had carried in his pocket all that evening, and that had ended up going undelivered.

His hand hovered over that letter, now a bit crumpled and the worse for wear, and for a long moment he thought about re-addressing that letter to *Green Guest Bedroom Window, West Wing, Malfeasant, Wiltshire,* and sending it to her that evening, that instant and then he thought about lighting a fire and casting the bloody thing onto the hearth, where it could join his *22 September 1994* journal entry in the Hogwarts ashcans.

Instead, he took up a fresh envelope, wax and seal, and closed the drawer, leaving the letter untouched. Then he sealed his letter to Dr. Orson, and headed up to the Owlery.

Part Third: The Hart Subvertant, Chapter 28, Part 2

Chapter 44 of 55

After Voldemort’s return, Professor Swain has agreed to Sirius Black’s suggestion that she use her influence with Lucius Malfoy to gather intelligence on the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters. As her horror of the Dark Lord grows, her old enemy Severus Snape proves to be the only one who understands the fear and doubt that plague a double agent…

Chapter 28, Part 2:

At nine p.m., the guests at Malfeasant began to make their way toward the ballroom for the cotillion. Lucius offered his arm to his wife to escort her from dinner, as did the other husbands. Emily tried to make herself scarce behind a milling crowd of couples, hoping that Menzentius might just have forgotten her existence and not insist on escorting her to the ball, but then she looked up and found Draco Malfoy standing before her.

The lad looked very handsome indeed that night with his fair hair slicked back and in dress robes of a rich midnight blue. He was shooting up so fast that they were very nearly the same height now, his slim body acquiring some of the substance of adulthood. There was a faint sheen of golden down on his chin Emily could tell from the sudden appearance of expensive shaving lotion in Draco's habitual scent that he had begun shaving sometime that year. Like his father, Draco appeared to grow only a scant beard and chest hair, and as such, needed to shave only once or twice a week.

"May I see you into the ballroom, Professor?" he asked.

"Yes, I should be honoured, thank you," she said, taking his arm. Peripherally, she saw Menzentius scowl at the two of them, then help Druella out of her chair.

As the cotillion began, Emily found herself very much in demand as a partner, as there were more male guests present than female, and no one seemed to be lining up for the privilege of dancing with Mrs. Rosier. Draco immediately requested the first dance, and as before at the Yule Ball, he was a light-footed joy as a dance partner. The birthday boy seemed rather reluctant to relinquish his former teacher as the first few waltzes were played, and Emily had rather hoped to get the chance to talk to some of the male guests during the dancing. She also noticed Pansy Parkinson watching them from the sidelines, looking decidedly sulky.

"I appreciate the escort in, but Miss Parkinson looks as though she'd like a turn with her boyfriend," Emily said tactfully to Draco as the third waltz began. "I do hope the two of you haven't fallen out a bit."

"No, not really, but Pansy's just being kind of annoying today," Draco muttered back. "Her cat died, and she can't stop whining about it. I mean, I liked Frost, he was a really nice cat, but I don't know what to say other than, 'Gee, Pans, I'm really sorry about your cat,' you know? Father said he'd talk to her. I think he's going to try to find out what breed of cat he was and get her another one. Father's an old brick like that."

"Yes, he's very thoughtful," Emily said, smiling. Her eyes went to where Lucius was now having a sympathetic chat with Miss Parkinson and from the way the girl's eyes shone when they lighted on Lucius's face, Emily wondered briefly as to which Malfoy Pansy really wanted to be dancing with that night.

"And then we were in the village last weekend, and she wanted me to look at diamond rings with her," Draco complained. "Merlin's beard, what is *wrong* with girls? It's not even fifth year yet, and she's hinting about getting married."

"I can imagine getting married right out of school wouldn't be what you want right now," Emily said understandingly. "You might want to take some time to work and travel before you think about commitments like that."

"I wouldn't mind getting married right out of school, if it was... to the right person," Draco said. She felt his eyes on the side of her face... the same shy, but provocative look he had given her at the Yule Ball; the same overwhelmed, but still eager sort of look, like some yearling buck quivering to show off his new virility to an alpha doe. The healthy scent of his mild exertion was beginning to smell faintly of adolescent testosterone.

Oh no, this was a very disturbing development indeed and Emily wasn't about to have her fact-finding mission sidelined by a teenage boy with a crush, especially when that boy seemed entirely oblivious to his father's scheming. Clearly, desperate measures were called for. She glanced over Draco's shoulder and caught Lucius's eye, giving him an instant's smouldering, come-hither smile and sure enough, when the waltz ended, Lucius appeared at her side asking to cut in. The boy nodded a slightly wistful good-bye to Emily and went over to join the still-sulking Pansy.

"Good evening, my dear," Lucius said, slipping one hand into hers and the other around her waist, and sliding easily into the waltz. "I see you and the boy are still getting on famously."

Emily slanted a look at him. "What did you say to him, exactly?"

Lucius shrugged airily. "I just reminded him this afternoon that a man in his sort of social position has no need of committing to the first pretty girl who comes along in his year at school. I implied that he might be able to set his sights higher. Then later on at supper, I said it was a shame you weren't interested in his uncle, as it would have been such a delight to have you in the family." He chuckled, leaning close to her ear. "Trust me, love when he proposes to you, he'll think it was entirely his idea. Oh, that reminds me... did I show you the sketches for the new family portrait I've commissioned?"

"No, you didn't," Emily replied with a little chuckle. "You were going to today around noon, but somehow we ended up getting a trifle distracted."

"Oh yes, so we did," he said, smirking. "Well, if you can excuse yourself and meet me up in my study in perhaps twenty minutes, perhaps I'll actually manage to do so this time."

"You are insatiable," she murmured, leaning close to his ear.

"And you are addictive, my love," he drawled back.

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knight's victory. "I have to admit, I don't exactly mind it when someone manages to score a point on him. I'll bet you sent him off with a bee in his bonnet, all right."

"Oh, I did, believe me," Lucius told her in a frosty tone but then his manner softened, and he kissed her again. "I can't really give you a play by play description, as we ended up cutting that meeting rather short, but trust me, it'll be awhile before crusty old Cousin Severus shows his face again. Your troubles with him are over, I promise."

She smiled gratefully at him, and kissed him back, and said nothing more than *Oh, darling* or something similarly inane and non-specific in reply.

"Yes, I thought you'd like that," he chuckled. "When I come up to your room tonight, you can be sure to thank me appropriately. Now, if you'll excuse me, I really should go remind everyone of what a good host and devoted husband I am... you know how it is."

"Of course, darling," she said, smirking.

He kissed her lips once more, lingeringly, then put a long kiss on the swell of her breast, then another on her palm, and left the room.

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Emily emerged from Lucius's study a few minutes after he made his exit, and made her way back toward the grand ballroom, intending to unobtrusively rejoin the party by the gallery entrance. But when she arrived, Menzentius Black was standing by himself next to the doorway, leaning on one of the massive stone pillars that lined the gallery, a cut-crystal hock glass in his hand. His eyes fastened on her face with a knowing smirk.

"Running off with your hostess's husband in the middle of a kid's party," he murmured, shaking his head. "You're a bad, *bad* little Faerie, my Lady, and that's for certain."

Emily planted herself in front of him, brazen as you please. "So how much did he have to pay you to keep quiet?"

He surprised her by having a good laugh at that. "No, what he paid me to do was come home and find you two compromising each other on the sofa, and then get into a good fight with you so he could impress the Dark Lord with the kind of new followers he can enlist for him. But I did make him throw in a little extra danger pay for the broken arm that thing *hurt* like a right son of a bitch. You were right though little Skele-Gro, and I was good as new in a couple of days." He flexed his arm, then gave her a little leering smile.

"Somehow it did smell like a set-up," Emily replied, keeping her voice calm with an effort.

"As for the fact that you two are shagging each other that's old news to me, darling. I've known about the two of you since January," he said, grinning. "Lucius and I had a bet going as to which of us would end up in bed with you from the first weekend you came to the house. After he met you in that hotel room and shagged you silly, he rushed right off so he could collect his winnings and tell me all about it."

Emily's teeth clenched and her nostrils flared, but then she reminded herself that she was in the Malfoys' ballroom at a child's party and in the presence of any number of witnesses, and the smile stayed on her face with an effort.

Menzentius laughed again. "It was a great story, too," he said, leaning down to purr in her ear. "I especially liked the part about how he tied you up and went down on you he said you *yowled* when you came. Made me hard just hearing about it."

"So you knew all that, and you were willing to marry me anyway?" Emily snarled. "The list of prospective brides must be a short one *indeed*."

He threw his head back and had a grand chuckle at that. "Darling, you look good, you can fence, you've got heaps of money, and Lucius says you're a great lay that makes you my dream girl. Don't worry, you'd hardly be the first woman who'd been to bed with both me and Lucius bloody hell, you'd hardly be the first woman who'd been to bed with both me and Lucius *at the same time*." He smiled at her, his voice dripping compassion, and added: "Yes, you probably know a lot of blokes who are scared of you because you could kick their arses but you see, the men in *this* family tend to think that sort of thing is dead sexy."

His words were crude, but set off uncomfortable pangs within her (*He doesn't seem like he'd be unnerved by competent women, but might that be the reason why he)?* but she refused to let him see her discomfiture. "I said *No*, and I mean it. If you come near me again, I could always see about breaking your other arm," she snapped, then turned to walk away.

"And I could do... *everything* for you that Lucius does, and give you a good bout afterwards," the youth continued, undaunted. "Plus, I could actually hold your hand in public as well. If you ever get tired of him and *all his dependents*, my Lady, you've got a standing invitation to come see about me, eh?"

"I'd rather chew ground glass," she retorted sweetly, appropriating both Professor Snape's one-liner of months past and his habitual eyebrow gesture.

Menzentius smiled and shrugged. "Oh, I don't know... just look at him, would you?"

He nodded toward the ballroom dance floor below them and they both glanced toward Lucius, who was talking to Emmitt and Beatrice Parkinson with Draco and Narcissa, his arm thrown casually around his wife's waist. The three of them together looked like an idealised Christmas-card picture of a lovely, happy family.

"I could see how you'd get tired of all that respectable-husband nice-daddy bullshite he presents to the world I've been sick of him since I was a kid." He leaned down for another insinuating aside close to her ear "Unlike my Mummy and Cissy dearest, and your darling brothers and sisters up in the Lakes, *I'm* not scared to expand the family gene pool. Come on, love, wouldn't you like to tell all these stuck-up bastards to go screw themselves, and just run off somewhere with *your* lover? Some nice bloke who just wants you *only* you?" His fingers traced the curve of her shoulder with surprising delicacy.

She turned toward him, looking into his thick-lashed grey eyes, which for once were clear and unclouded by alcohol... breathed the lusty, testosterone-laden scent of him... and for the space of about one second, considered this man as her mate. But then the moment passed, and she was again disgusted by his lumpen, beef-witted mentality, and his dissolute ways, and the Dark Mark she knew he proudly bore on his left forearm.

"Yes, perhaps I would like that," she said. "But not with you."

Menzentius only gave her a knowing smile. "Never say never, love I can wait. And he'll never divorce Narcissa, you know Felina's been trying to land him for years, and everyone knows she's just wasting her time. Well, everyone but *her*." He gave her an insolent nod, then made his way past her and down the gallery steps.

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Back down in the ballroom, Emily was again beset with offers to dance, and spent much of the rest of the evening being squired about on the dance floor by various men, or rather, various teenage boys, as her former students seemed to be the ones doing most of the asking. The gentleman guests seemed rather inclined to be cliquish that night, spending much of their evening having private conversations in tight little knots and smiling and changing the subject whenever they were approached by one of their wives or children. Mrs. Rosier had taken up a seat between Lucius and Menzentius and seemed to have something very important to discuss with them.

As the dance's end grew nearer, Emily resigned herself to learning less than she had hoped and accepted yet another invitation to take the floor with Draco Malfoy. It might have been her imagination, but it was starting to seem as though the boy was already assuming a proprietary air toward her, as though he could expect to be her usual dance partner and expected to have his prior claim honoured above any of the other men present. She had also noticed about midway through the evening that there was a faint whiff of illicit brandy on his breath and that of Marcus Flint and Gregory Goyle, which they had tried to hide beneath some minty mouth cologne. It might have fooled their parents' noses, but not an Arcadian faun's.

"Sneaked off and had a birthday drink with your friends?" she murmured as the next dance began.

Draco's eyes widened. "Well, yeah," he admitted, averting his eyes. "How can you tell?"

"I can smell it. Don't worry, your parents probably can't."

"Don't tell them, come on," he said, his grey eyes entreating. "I'm really not some kind of alcoholic "

"I know, I know," she said. "You're just a fifteen-year-old who sneaked some of his father's brandy. I have to admit, this whole legal drinking age rule is a bit odd to me. In Arcadia, if you can see over the bar and you can afford it, you can get a drink."

"So I bet the kids are getting pissed as newts every night, aren't they?" Draco chuckled.

"No, actually they don't. Children don't learn to like wine until they get into their late teens, pretty much. Before that, they usually want cider or tea with honey, or maybe some ginger beer."

Draco laughed. "Father's told me, "Never cheat a goblin, never taunt a troll, and never try to out-drink a Faerie."

She grinned impishly at him. "Good advice and don't tell him I told you this, but the reason your father included that last bit of wisdom is because a bunch of Faeries drank him under the table the first night I met him."

He laughed again, momentarily forgetting his position as heir apparent to the castle and just guffawing like the teenager he was. "You're *joking.* Father never gets drunk. He thinks it's unseemly."

"Well, that was well before you were born, my boy, so perhaps he's more conscious of what is and isn't seemly at forty, with a wife and son, than he was at twenty-three," she replied, smiling. Or, she thought, perhaps he's just gotten better at hiding his unseemly behaviour from the likes of his teenage son.

The last dance of the evening ended, and both Draco and Emily applauded the musicians. The guests began to get up from their seats and collect wraps and evening bags and say their good-nights before bed.

"Well... good evening, Professor," Draco said, with a courteous little farewell bow, and holding out his hand. But instead of shaking her hand, as she expected, he raised it to his lips and kissed it and with that kiss, came the shyest, most potent whiff of fresh male lust imaginable.

She paused a moment, watching his young, handsome face. Just like his father... but young, fresh, adoring, unencumbered, and oh so malleable. His nascent sexuality now left him helplessly inflammable in the mere presence of a desirable woman. So eager for adult experience, so absolutely aching to be toyed with. It briefly occurred to her that this boy would probably like nothing better for his birthday than to be unburdened of his virginity by his father's favourite mistress, just as Lucius had once confided he had been when he was a teenager.

For a single long moment, Emily wished that Professor Snape was there to air his own acerbic opinion of seeing Draco Malfoy flirting with her, like a breath of ice-cold conscience in the midst of all this temptation, lust, and indulgence. She never thought she would see the day when she missed Snape, but just for a second, she did.

"Good night, Draco," she said, patting his cheek. "Happy birthday."

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Back up in her guest room, Emily had slipped out of her dress robes and dancing slippers, put on a short robe of embroidered velvet over her stockings and chemise, and was now scowling disconsolately in the mirror as she powdered her face and touched up her lips. She was far from tired, having eaten some of Draco's sweet strawberries-and-cream birthday cake, knowing that the refined sugar within the confection would keep her alert for much of the night.

It was now Saturday night, and all she had done was confirm that Lucius was harbouring You-Know-Who himself at Malfeasant. She hadn't discovered anything new other than the fact that neither Lucius nor Draco seemed to know where Professor Snape was currently keeping himself, and that Lucius was indeed just as much of a corrupt, lecherous braggart as Professor Snape had told her he was. (Fancy having a *ménage à trois* with one's brother-in-law now *that* was just twisted.)

This seemed like a rather poor amount of intelligence to have gathered in the well over twenty-four hours that she had now spent at Malfeasant. Truly, it seemed as though she was spending more time being sprawled over furniture in various states of undress than she was in convincing anyone to spill all their innermost secrets to her. Indeed, if she hadn't been briefed as to what was going on behind the scenes, she would have thought this event was truly nothing more than an innocent country weekend party. She had to hand it to the Malfoys their illusion of respectability was nigh on seamless.

So Mata Fecking Hari I'm not, she thought sourly, brushing powder off her nose. Yes, it seemed as though more direct measures were called for.

She made a trip down into her Holding Trunk, coming back up with a bundle of chain mail, suede leather, and a sheathed hunting dagger in one hand, and a pair of high-heeled satin boudoir slippers in the other. Kneeling beside the bed, she stowed the metal and leather bundle under the bed, making certain that the bed skirts covered it entirely, then stood, and stepped into the heels. Then, she arranged herself most fetchingly in a velvet armchair with a volume of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria,* to wait for Lucius *It's not fair for armed men to battle with naked girls: that would be shameful, men, even if you win...*

After perhaps an hour, there came a soft sound of ice shifting and crystal trembling and she glanced up from her book to see a bottle of champagne, on ice in a silver bucket, and two fluted glasses appearing on the round table near the hearth. She approached the table, found a tiny card hanging from the neck of the bottle *I'll be there in a moment, my love.*

Her eyes made a quick inventory of the bottle vintage Pommery Brut Royal which was still securely corked and looked untampered with. Both glasses smelled entirely clean, so it looked like there would be no more hidden aphrodisiac potions to worry about *that* evening. She opened the bottle and poured herself a glass, sipping it slowly in an attempt to calm her nerves.

She glanced up and set the glass aside a second later, as first her bedroom door silently opened, and then Lucius emerged from under a silvery cloak, dressed in a green silk robe, his blond hair loose and handsomely mussed. He wasted no time in tossing the Invisibility cloak aside and pulling her hungrily into his arms for a kiss. "Mmmmmm, you taste like champagne," he murmured.

"What's the occasion?" she asked, nodding toward the bottle and putting a glass in his hand.

"My reunion with someone I love and thought I had lost," he said, gazing into her eyes and caressing her cheek. "You and the birthday boy looked as though you were enjoying yourselves tremendously tonight. So... dare I hope you've finally decided that perhaps life as my daughter-in-law wouldn't exactly be a fate worse than death?"

She averted her eyes, embarrassed. "Well, I never thought it would be a fate worse than *death,*" she murmured. Yes, it would probably be more pleasant to be a Malfoy than to be painfully killed, she'd give him that. "I was just... I was just incredibly surprised when you presented the possibility, it was just... surprising."

"Yes, I can imagine," Lucius said, with a look that understood everything. "You wouldn't be the first woman I've known who was shocked at first, upon discovering that I wanted to fulfil all those corrupt, unacceptable, precious desires hidden away in her heart... but you'll always be the one of them most precious to me."

Thought Emily: I can't believe I used to fall for this drivel. *Said* Emily, "Oh, darling, kiss me."

He tossed off the last of his wine and put the glass aside, and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Yes, hugely enjoyable as it always is to talk with you, I think now I'd like to have lots and *lots* of sex. Who's with me?"

"What do you have in mind?" she asked with a provocative smile.

Lucius hooked a forefinger down into the loosely knotted strings of her silk kimono and slowly drew it open, brushing it off her shoulders to pool softly around her feet. A moment later, he had untied the satin ribbon drawstring of the chemise she wore beneath it and dropped it beside her robe, then unhooked her garters and brassiere and had her out of them. Then he brought her to face the dressing table mirror, looking at her nude and himself still clothed, one arm around her hips, the other around her breasts.

"Yes... damn it all, you're beautiful," he whispered, caressing her pale flank. "I won't lie to you I simply can't *wait* to see our children. Just imagine what effect it'll have on those decrepit old spinsters up at Swaincroft when they see you out with your young husband, leading our little fair-haired son or daughter by the hand. Do let's invite them to all the christenings, just so we can see the looks on their faces."

The naked covetousness in the way he looked at her took her breath away. No king could have surveyed freshly conquered worlds with such rapacious satisfaction. "Now... you'll have to promise me something, on your word of honour," he breathed, "whenever you go into oestrus next, keep yourself far, far away from me, and don't let me get you into bed no matter how much I beg and plead, because if I do, I won't be able to stop myself." One hand trailed possessively over her belly.

"I promise," she said.

"And after you've married Draco, let's start trying right away... the first time it happens after the wedding."

Mmmm, darling, she whispered in reply.

"Now... I think tonight, I'll show you the way I'm planning on having you right after the engagement party... "

He lifted her in a bridegroom's carry and brought her to bed.

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"I'm curious... if you wanted more children, why did you stop at one?" Emily asked, as he sprawled her over the silk and velvet cushions of her bed, raising her face to his to be kissed. "The wife decided it interfered too much with redecorating?"

"No... we tried to have another for some time after Draco was born," he confided, with a rueful look. "Narcissa ended up having a miscarriage two years later, and after that, nothing. She won't see an infertility specialist, either, says it would be too embarrassing."

"Well... not to be indelicate, my dear... " Emily began, in a very tactful tone indeed.

"Yes, I know it's not always the wife's fault. That occurred to me too. But... " Lucius looked at her as though he was enjoying a delicious private joke indeed "let's just say there's since been evidence that *I* am not the reason Draco is an only child... if you know what I mean."

Emily's eyebrows went up in surprise. "There has?"

"Well... yes," Lucius admitted, smirking. "One charming young lady I knew some years ago is now living in a lovely cottage in Dover with her adorable and *extremely* blonde seven-year-old daughter. And I count myself lucky that the wife of a certain tenant of mine down in the village gave birth to a cherubic little *extremely* blond son twelve years ago, because if he had been a girl and Draco ever took an interest in her, it would have been... *awkward* to have to explain to him exactly *why* the two of them were incompatible. "

"Awkward indeed," she said, wide-eyed.

"She and her husband had been trying for years, and no luck and we were both so drunk that night." He drew her head onto his chest with a dark little laugh. "She was very happy about the child, though, it was really quite touching. And yes, I've done the honourable thing and made certain that both of their situations were secure. One simply *has* to take care of one's own flesh and blood, you know," he said reassuringly.

"Of course," Emily said, nodding her total understanding.

"Don't worry about a thing, my dear," he drawled, kissing her. "When the time comes, I'll be both ready and able, and exceedingly happy to welcome my first...*grandchild.*"

"I'm sure you will be, darling," she said, smiling and pausing an instant before his lips touched hers. "But if you want me by your side you have to promise me something."

He seemed momentarily taken aback, then smiled. "Of course, my love. I wouldn't imagine you don't have your... conditions. Name them I am entirely at your disposal."

"Good," she said. "I want your solemn promise that neither you, nor Draco, nor any member of your family, will ever seek to learn my True Name."

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Emily's request seemed to take her lover by surprise; the cosy smile faded from his face, replaced by a calculating look. "Er...now, Emily "

"I'd have been much more impressed with an instantaneous 'Yes, of course I promise, dear.'" Her own sinister eyebrow quirked.

"Of course I promise, dear it's just I thought we'd already been over this before," he said with a disarming smile. "Remember, in your hospital room, I apologised, and I said... "

"Yes, I remember. I just wanted you to *promise* me. And now you've done it," she smiled, her attitude softening. Then her arms twined around his neck, and she kissed him long and sensually, drawing the robe off his shoulders distracting him, so that he wouldn't recall that while he had given her his promise, she had promised him nothing in return.

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Of course Lucius had to be feeling randy as a schoolboy tonight most likely his schemes and plans were going very well. He felt like taking his time that night not long after he had promised to respect the sanctity of her True Name, he had her sprawled on her belly over the many elegant cushions of her bed. He wanted to take a long, slow time about building to orgasm, his fingertips delicately thrumming between her thighs, his lips on her neck.

Yes, I know I shouldn't covet your True Name... but I wanted it because it's a part of you -

His teeth sank gently into the nape of her neck, but she could feel the coiled aggression behind it and remembered that this man had once bitten her hard enough to draw blood while in the throes of extreme passion. Nonetheless, the way he touched her felt sinfully good, she probably would have gotten excited with Voldemort himself working her and stroking her like that... *yes...*

and I want all of you.

There was no denying it her responsibilities had lain heavily on her for so long now that some dark, atavistic part of her wanted that too. Lucius was in top form that night no doubt the circumstances of getting his way with a previously impossible woman, and of ravishing his mistress in his own home, while his wife and mother-in-law slept upstairs, stoked his particular kind of perversity. For one dizzying, obscene moment, as this dominant, adoring, endlessly seductive man surged hard and irresistible inside her, she wondered if it would be so horrible to just give in to be made to bend to his will, if necessary, for the decision to be taken out of her hands. What if she was to just wake up some morning and find that years had passed and he still adored her, and everything was all right *It wasn't my fault, I had no choice* -

But then the orgasm crested and was over, leaving her gasping beneath him, and horrified at herself, while Lucius kissed her and whispered profane endearments in her ear. "You won't regret this, dear hart," came the whisper. "He will make you such a good husband. You know I wouldn't let anyone treat you like anything less than a princess."

Emily scowled in the dark. Yes, he truly did want to treat her like a princess like the kind of woman whose affections had political strings attached, whose love could be used to cement financial and military alliances. Clearly he thought himself on the level of a king, unbound by the laws governing the actions of mere mortals, and he was so willing and eager to elevate her to the same status that it made her fear to become completely lost in his worldview, even as she recognised the pure narcissism inherent in it. Perhaps she could play this game because she was so physically susceptible to him; a woman who couldn't feel weak with desire when he made love to her could never have gotten this far into his confidence.

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He only allowed himself his own climax after he had satisfied her a second time, after what could only be described as a long, highly athletic, very thorough shag, enough to leave her worn out and slightly sore the kind of lovemaking that previously would have had her wrapping herself adoringly around her lover and crooning over him for hours. But instead, she was wishing she could go take a very long, very hot shower.

Unfortunately, however, afterwards Lucius wanted to cuddle and talk why had she never noticed before that the man was such a *cuddler.*

"Don't worry, love, all this sneaking around will only be necessary while we're here at the house. In a few days I'll be back to London, and we can go back to spending nights together at hotels, and such. Would you like that?" he asked, delicately brushing his lips over her neck.

No, she wouldn't like that at all, but she would be happy to hear anything insanely incriminating he wanted to tell her "Just let me know when you want me, and I'll be there," she simpered, brushing her lips seductively over his.

"But you know, the hotels wouldn't be necessary, if you would let me find you somewhere to live that offer stands as well. Tell me, why are you still living at Hogwarts?" he asked, one hand languidly stroking her hair.

"Oh mostly because I can, and because packing was such a bother, especially while my shoulder was the way it was," she said, with another airy nuzzle. "I talked Dumbledore round into saying that I could stay at Hogwarts until the summer was over. It's all right, I've practically got the place to myself, and it doesn't cost anything."

"Oh, you've practically got the place to yourself? Who all is still living there?" he asked, very casually indeed.

"The only person I see around every day is Mr. Filch and his cat," she said which was entirely true, Dumbledore and Snape being too busy with their own business to visit with her every day. But Lucius nodded he seemed to infer from her answer that she and the caretaker were the only residents at Hogwarts at the moment, exactly the deduction she wanted him to make.

"You must get awfully lonesome in that great castle all by yourself," he murmured, smirking. "I'll have to make more time to keep you... *entertained.*" He drew his fingertips softly down the back of her neck, softly caressing her lips with his.

"I guess I'm just being lazy, but I've gotten completely spoiled by having that army of house-elves around to look after me. When the summer's over, perhaps I'll try to find myself a nice flat off of Diagon or Theatric Alley, some little bohemian loft or garden flat where I can keep you properly entertained," she said with a coquettish laugh.

"Don't worry about a thing, love, at the end of the summer I'll get you the prettiest little place you can imagine," he said indulgently. "And if you like having a house-elf around to do the housework, I'm sure I could arrange something. Every time we have a weekend party now, Cecile keeps asking Goliath if you'll be there and if she can be your maid seems quite devoted to you."

"My own house-elf... that's overwhelming," Emily said. Previously, when she had thought about buying Cecile, it had been with the intention of giving her to the school, not owning her herself. There had never been house-elves living in Arcadia, and slavery had never been practiced there. Given the independent nature of the Faery people and the near-universality of magical power among them, the enslavement of Faeries would have been a task akin to herding cats or juggling butter. But then she also considered it would get that innocent, beleaguered little creature away from the Malfoys' cruel punishments, and not only that, but Cecile had said that she had been present at past Death Eater meetings... who knew what she might be able to tell them about those meetings if she was safely out of the Malfoys' grasp? Plus, Emily thought, she could always still give Cecile to Dumbledore when she left the Second World it was well known that Dumbledore took excellent care of the school elves.

Emily decided on a course of action in an instant. "Truthfully... I'd love to have my own house-elf, and that Cecile is a phenomenal ladies' maid," she said with a beguiling, doe-eyed look at Lucius. "I'd wondered here and there if you'd be willing to... perhaps sell her to me?"

Lucius smiled. "If you want her, then something will be arranged. And never mind the expense, my love," he muttered, stroking her indulgently. "I only ever want you to have the best, it's no less than you deserve. You've no idea how long I've wanted to find some lovely little out-of-the-way place where I could keep you all to myself... I think I've wanted to put you in a pumpkin shell and keep you very, *very* well since our first night together."

Oh, Emily thought, *so I was in ecstasies at receiving the god, and you were thinking about what a nice kept tart I'd be isn't that just lovely.* She spared herself from having to say anything by drawing him in for a lusty kiss.

"You don't know what a trial it was to come back here and do what my family expected of me," he murmured, clearly fancying himself very noble and self-sacrificing indeed. "But now I've done my duty, the blooming fifteen-year-old heir apparent is fast asleep in his blue bedroom upstairs, and now, I don't see why we shouldn't finally be able to think of ourselves... don't you?"

She just kissed him again, even more heatedly. Let him read whatever he wanted into that.

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Not long afterward, Emily pretended to nod off to sleep on Lucius's shoulder, making sure to keep a little smile of beatific satisfaction on her face in case he happened to turn on one of the lamps. He relaxed beside her for some time, then gently eased her onto the pillow, and after a moment, kissed her forehead. She heard him put on his robe, reach for the Invisibility Cloak on a chair near the hearth, then quietly leave the room, carefully closing the door behind him.

As soon as Lucius had gone, Emily took a few seconds to don the garments she had left under the bed: black breeches, black tunic, and her chain mail shirt. (One of the advantages of the light, supple nature of Fae armour was that it was as easy to put on as a heavy pullover.) In anticipation of these kind of stealth movements throughout the Malfoy manor house, she had gotten some lampblack paint in Hogsmeade, and had painted her silver armour dark grey, for if her Obscurantis effect failed for any reason, she still had a better chance of being able to hide in the shadows if she wasn't wearing something that reflected every bit of available light. Lastly, she reached for a long rectangle of matte, opaque charcoal-coloured spidersilk lying on the chair beside the bed what would have looked like a scarf to the casual observer was in truth an Arcadian archer's night-camouflage sniper veil, which hid the wearer's identity and negated the reflective properties of his or her hair and eyes from outside observers,

while allowing an unimpeded view out. She covered her head and wound the ends loosely around her neck.

Thus veiled and armoured, a moment later she was standing behind her bedroom door, picturing the Glamoured appearance of a closed, undisturbed door, and then putting it in place with an utterance of her True Name for anyone lingering in the hallway. Then she slipped out, Obscured, buckling on a sword belt with a scabbarded eight-inch hunting dagger. She intended to keep carefully out of sight and didn't think she would run into any real trouble, but wanted to be prepared if she did. She set off down the hall, invoking the third form of Obscurantis with an invocation of her True Name, scanning the corridor for a male figure under an Invisibility Cloak.

A few moments at a swift, silent lope brought her to within five paces of Lucius as he made his way down the corridor. She stealthily followed him down the corridor, out of the west wing where most of the guest rooms and greenhouse were located, past the great main hall. He made his way toward and then up the stairs into his own master suite, then emerged back down perhaps ten minutes later, sans robe and Invisibility Cloak and dressed in sumptuous black business robes, his blond hair smoothly drawn back and secured with a black ribbon. He then consulted his pocket watch and set off down the corridor, strolling along at a leisurely pace, sighing to himself and stopping to inhale the fragrance of a vase of fresh red roses set on a little gilt side table and generally behaving like a fellow who had just been well entertained indeed. Emily fought off the urge to make him smell irresistible to every flea and hair louse within a mile's radius.

She stealthily followed him down the corridor, past the main dining room, drawing room, and sunroom, past the staircase that led up to his wife's bedroom, into an unfamiliar part of the castle. Emily began noting the number and direction of turns they were making, so as to be able to find her way back in a hurry if necessary.

A door opened as Lucius proceeded down one corridor, and Menzentius leaned almost steadily against the doorway of what looked like a man's den or retiring room done in rich green brocade, a glass of claret in hand. "Evening, Lucius. Where's your little blonde pixie?" he asked.

Emily rolled her eyes at that *I'm a faun, you idiot, pixies are all about four feet tall with huge feet. And no, the two terms are not interchangeable.*

Lucius paused for a confidential aside to his brother-in-law. "The dear angel is upstairs, sleeping the sleep of the well satisfied," came the purring drawl in reply. "I'll invite her to the next meeting, but for now, I'd like to separate business and pleasure for just a few more days. Let's let her cherish her innocence for just a little while longer, eh?" He glanced down at the glass of wine in Menzentius's hand "Watch yourself tonight, you'll want to stay sharp in *his* presence."

At that moment, Emily heard footfalls behind her, and spun around to see a scowling Felina Rosier stalking down the corridor toward them, a glass of wine in her hand as well and quickly flattened herself against the wall to let the irate woman pass. "And where have *you* been?" Mrs. Rosier snapped at Lucius.

Menzentius looked from Lucius to Mrs. Rosier, his eyes widening, then laughed. "I'll, er, let the two of you *talk*," he chuckled. "See you both down there." With that, he took himself away down the corridor.

Mrs. Rosier was glaring at Lucius and seemed very annoyed with him about something, but Lucius looked completely nonplussed. She also walked and smelled as though the glass of burgundy in her hand was not her first of the evening by any means.

"Felina... you know I don't like it when you drink to excess," Lucius said delicately. "And you know my mother-in-law will be at the meeting, so I sincerely suggest that you behave yourself in front of her, or I won't be *at all* happy with you."

"You went up to *her* room tonight, didn't you," Mrs. Rosier said hoarsely. She set her wineglass on an ornately gilded sideboard and approached him closely, in a manner that bespoke much prior intimacy between the two of them. One arm twined around his neck while she traced his lips with one fingertip. "You kissed *her* with that mouth... that lying mouth... "

"And you know I can't abide jealousy, my love. Monogamy is a luxury that people like us can't afford, dearest, not while there's a world that needs our guidance." His arms loosely encircled her waist, and his lips brushed her cheek. Emily forced herself not to groan aloud with disgust.

Mrs. Rosier shivered at the caress. "We used to have a lot of fun, didn't we... we've had such *hot* times, before. At that party in November, it was like the old days when you couldn't get enough of me."

"Yes, November was very beautiful, my dear," Lucius sighed in reply.

November? Emily thought. The only Malfeasant party she could recall from November had been the Hallowe'en Ball and boar hunt had there been another party in November? Had Lucius been pursuing her during the day, and then crept up to Mrs. Rosier's room at night that weekend? No, it couldn't be, not even he was that corrupt... *was he?*

"Felina, you have to understand something. Like I told you before, Lady Swain is an important ally, and she has a long-term role to play here that ought to benefit everyone. I told you before that it inconveniences me for you to antagonise her any further, especially in front of Ministry officials, and that you would do better to turn your *considerable* talents toward distracting Severus... don't you remember?"

"I *tried* to distract him it was like trying to flirt with a brick*wall.* If you hadn't told me about his affair with Bella, I would have thought he was a pouf," Mrs. Rosier complained.

Emily's brows instantly creased in hard dismay Professor Snape had an affair with someone named Bella? Who in the flaming Christian hell was this *Bella* person? When exactly had this affair gone on, pray tell? How long had he been seeing her?

Then another even more alarming thought occurred to her was Snape still seeing her? Was the affair going on *now*?

Had he been seeing this Bella *individual* last September? Or this June, for that matter?

"Well, you knew Bella. I think perhaps she left him a bit bitter afterwards; she has been known to do that to men sometimes. Once bitten, twice shy and all that, and believe me, Bella can *bite* quite hard. He's also probably still suffering from some misplaced loyalty to Evan just wait him out, and don't give up," Lucius said impatiently.

All right, so this affair seemed to be over, and more than likely this wretched Bella creature had hurt Professor Snape deeply in ending it. Was that why he seemed so guarded and distrustful when it came to women because some vampire of a female had callously cast him aside and broken his heart once?

Come to think of it, that would explain a lot.

But Lucius was still talking to Mrs. Rosier "You know, darling, perhaps you could pay him a visit up in Orkney and see if he needs a bit of sympathy, someone willing to listen to his side of the story," he said, gazing tenderly into her face and caressing her hair.

"You just want to know where he is and what he's up to, don't you. Your little *friend* would probably be the one to ask, she bloody lived with him at Hogwarts all year," Mrs. Rosier pointed out.

"I did ask her she said he's not at Hogwarts, so I suspect that he might have holed himself up in that old ruin in Orkney for the time being. But we can't really expect her to keep tabs on him for us she loathes the man, he's beneath her notice," Lucius scoffed. "She'll probably go carousing on the day of his funeral."

Mrs. Rosier pouted. "Oh, yes, the high and mighty Lady Swain can't be bothered, but I can be. I see how you are. You've never cared if I had to sleep with him to get *his side of the story*, have you," she said pettishly.

Emily gave an almighty shudder, grimacing. Oh yes, that sounded exactly like what Professor Snape needed a good, relaxing shag with everyone's favourite angel of mercy, Mrs. Felina Rosier, of all people.

"Well, you wouldn't have to do it very often just long enough to flush him out," Lucius cajoled. "Then once he was out of the way, I could distract you afterward, the way I used to... remember?"

"How could I forget," Mrs. Rosier breathed and then they kissed, long and sensually.

Oh, you *whore*, Emily thought. Both of you.

But then her attention was caught by something else the loose, flowing sleeves of Mrs. Rosier's black velvet robes had slid down her arms when she put them around Lucius's neck, and Emily could just discern the black outline of the Dark Mark, seared into the woman's left forearm.

Lucius disengaged himself from Mrs. Rosier after what Emily thought were several long, oozing, thoroughly revolting moments and then graciously offered her his arm. "Come along, dear, it's almost time."

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Emily followed Lucius and Mrs. Rosier silently down the corridor. They were heading toward the eastern wing of the house, where Emily had never been before. After a few minutes' leisurely walk, they came upon another foyer and richly decorated entrance hall, though smaller than the huge main hall at the south side of the castle. Most of the light was coming from an open doorway at the far end of the hall, through which Emily could see the end of a large table surrounded by chairs it seemed to be a conference room of some sort. A few of the Malfoys' male guests were lingering in the main hall, dressed in black robes, with glasses in their hands, talking in low, conspiratorial voices.

When Lucius and Mrs. Rosier arrived, the group began to make their way into the conference room. Emily followed on the heels of the final stragglers, intending to slip in behind them but then, among the muffled susurrations of their conversations, she picked out a high, cold, sibilant voice *Yes, Druella, my dear, it is indeed a pleasure to be with you again* and that stopped her in her tracks, ears pricking up just in front of the doorway.

The door was open; she could potentially slip through unnoticed and overhear all that they were saying... but Voldemort had been able to see through her human Glamour and remove it. Clearly, the extent of his power was great, and she had no idea if an Obscurantis effect was enough to keep him from noticing her. She wanted to be in on this meeting... but she couldn't risk detection. And as before during her first visit to Malfeasant, she didn't want them to discover her spying on them at any cost.

For a long moment, she hesitated in front of the open door, but then after a moment's fist-clenched, heart-pounding deliberation, she turned away and headed swiftly back into her own bedroom upstairs.

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Once back in her own room, Emily closed and warded the doors behind her, then opened a window and dropped over the windowsill to the lawn below. She exited the window on soft bare feet, and made the landing on her hooves. It was a fall of about seven or eight feet, but absorbing the shock of that landing was nothing to her hoofed form, and springing back up to the open window would be equally effortless.

It was a cool, damp night, with a sheen of mist in the air, and the ground below the window was damp but not muddy, and the grass thick and springy, so anyone looking for tracks would need a ranger's skill to notice her passage in its broken stalks, and would have had to know to look for bipedal deer tracks rather than human footprints. She hurried swiftly around the side of the darkened house until she saw yellow rectangles of light shining from a set of double French doors just ahead. The doors led onto a little stone terrace raised a few feet from the surrounding lawns, and enclosed by a low stone fence. There was a flight of steps leading from the raised terrace down onto the grass but this portal was closed by a small gate of what appeared to be ornamental wrought iron. She noted the gate as she approached and resolved to stay well clear of it.

Emily stealthily approached the windows, Obscured yes, there they were. The group of Death Eaters was inside, sitting around a massive carved table and having what appeared to be some kind of late-night caucus.

The stone fence surrounding the terrace was a simple thing of polished stone slabs set on plinths at convenient bench level, no doubt meant to be a place for guests to sit and set down their drinks rather than any sort of real obstacle to an intruder; so she silently slipped through it onto the terrace floor, shifting from her hoofed form to soft, silent toed feet. Crouching down, she carefully peered through the lowest pane of the far right French door into the room.

Lord Voldemort was sitting at the head of the table in a large armchair, his back to Emily's vantage point. All she could see of him was a brandy snifter dangling from his long white fingers, from which he sipped now and then. There was a fat, watery-eyed, mousy-looking fellow Emily had never seen before sitting at his left hand, a man who had not been at Draco's party that day, and to whom she had not been introduced. He and the other Death Eaters were all wearing sumptuous black robes, and each of them stood up and bowed slightly as they were recognised to speak. The scene was strangely formal, like a king meeting with his knights and royal advisors.

Somehow, even Obscured, she was instinctually keeping out of Voldemort's line of sight, as she suspected that he might somehow detect her presence despite her Obscurantis effect, and with those eyes upon her, she didn't trust herself not to accidentally draw his attention out of sheer nervousness. Druella Black, Emily noted, was sitting at Voldemort's right hand, across from the mousy fellow. Lucius had taken the seat at the foot of the table, opposite his Dark Lord now he stood up to make a long, impassioned, angry speech about something, looking both indignant and terribly righteous, and everyone was listening closely.

Emily pressed her ear to the glass but damn, the windows were well-sealed, and not much sound was escaping, their words inaudible. She slid back into the courtyard's shadows for a view of the entire room, and tried to discern what was going on by watching the group of them.

She scanned the reactions of the others present Macnair, Mrs. Rosier, Menzentius Black, and the mousy bloke were hanging on Lucius's every word, nodding in agreement, but Nott, Flint, and Parkinson were withdrawn, keeping their own counsel. Mssrs. Crabbe, Goyle, and Bulstrode looked dull and uncomprehending, their eyes now and then straying apprehensively over to Druella Black, who looked furious, murderously angry. Every so often she would interrupt Lucius with what looked like some sort of insult or vehement denial, and once or twice almost went for her wand after he said something she apparently found especially incendiary.

Lucius's speech went on for some time he paced at his end of the table, the picture of nobility and impassioned concern. Finally, people began to raise their hands and ask him questions, and Druella Black kept interrupting him with angry protestations. After he had spoken for perhaps half an hour and the group had debated intensely for perhaps another quarter hour, they seemed to call for a break, and the group rose, bowed to Voldemort, and began to mill about the room, talking and refreshing their drinks. Lucius picked up a crystal decanter and hurried to refill his Lord's glass.

Then some of them headed for the French doors onto the courtyard, bringing cigars out of their pockets as they came and Emily quickly scooted over the side of the fence, landing silently on the damp grass below.

The doors opened, and a group consisting of Parkinson, Nott, Macnair, Flint, Crabbe, and Goyle came out onto the courtyard. Lucius, Druella and Menzentius Black, Mrs. Rosier, and Voldemort remained inside. Through the open door, Emily saw Druella arguing vehemently with Lucius before Voldemort's chair "You don't know what you're talking about, you fool not *my* family, not *my* nephew. I trust Severus's loyalty more than I trust his, my Lord he's *always* only been out for himself," Mrs. Black was saying, rheumy eyes blazing, her bejewelled finger pointing into Lucius's face and then the door closed, and Emily couldn't hear anything further.

Damn, she thought, scowling. That exchange had sounded important.

Emmitt Parkinson had withdrawn to the far side of the courtyard, cigar in hand, close to where Emily was crouching just out of sight "To be honest, I don't know *what* to

think about what Lucius has been saying about Snape," he was saying so Lucius's impassioned speech had been about Snape, then. More than ever, Emily wished that she had been able to hear what had been said.

"Well, why do we have any reason to doubt him?" someone else's voice said, a cool, rasping tone like sandpaper lightly scratched over the skin. Emily glanced up and saw Mr. Nott joining Parkinson at the terrace rail.

"I've known the man since he was five years old, Nott, and one of my rules of thumb is to pay no attention to all the hands Lucius Malfoy is kissing in public, no, you've got to watch for who and what he's ogling when no one's looking," Parkinson continued. "He may be known to all for his spendthrift ways good lord, the man spreads himself around like a drunk whore, and always has. But when Lucius turns into a miser that's when you've got to be careful. And he hoards the attentions of that little Faery friend of his very carefully *indeed*." He held the tip of his wand to his cigar tip and muttered *Incendio* and a tongue of yellow flame sprang up to light it.

Mssrs. Crabbe, Goyle, Flint, and Macnair joined the group, availing themselves of Parkinson's flaming wand tip to light their own cigars. "Yeh, he's always got some fine bit of skirt on the side, that's how we know he's Lucius," Mr. Goyle chortled. "What's that got to do with Snape?"

"Our tow-headed pixie lives at Hogwarts," Parkinson said, again provoking an eye-roll from Emily (*I'm not a pixie, you dolt!*) "Has it escaped anyone's notice that Snape and Barty Crouch were the only men under sixty who lived at Hogwarts this year as well? And has anyone noticed how Snape treats her?" he asked his companions.

"Come off it, Emmitt, I'd sooner believe Sirius Black was shagging his cousin Bella," Walden Macnair chortled. "She and Snape get on like oil and water, everyone knows it. You should have seen him at New Year's, when he came in with her. I'd've thought he'd rather have escorted a gorgon."

Below them on the grass, Emily scowled in annoyance oh yes, that sounded about right. Given how Snape had instantly abandoned her the second they arrived and stayed away practically all evening, he certainly *had* acted as though the sight of her would turn him to stone.

Parkinson gave an arch, disparaging laugh. "Yes, he moaned and complained about what a trial it was to have a fine-looking woman on his arm doesn't it seem to any of you blokes that the gentleman doth protest a *bit* too much? Haven't any of you noticed the way he would bristle every time Menzentius made one of his usual sort of *remarks* about her?"

Emily sat up, her attention riveted closely indeed. Someone was curious about this Snapish *bristling*, sir, speak again.

"And did you notice the way he spoke to her after the hunt?" Parkinson pointed out. "Plus everyone's favourite black widow Felina did her best to make herself available all year, and he seemed about as interested as he would have been in shagging a manticore."

"Well, that's understandable I think I'd rather shag a manticore than Felina," Macnair pointed out. Emily added her own silent chuckle to the laughter that followed.

Emmitt Parkinson sniffed. "Get your heads out of your arses, boys, don't believe only what's obvious and in front of you. No, I think Snape's not immune, especially when our little Faerie was constantly under that nose of his at work, and Lucius knows it. Did you notice how Lucius fell out with Barty right after that bright idea of his, as well?"

Emily crept closer, listening. She was now crouching right beneath them on the grass below the terrace, both ears pricked in the direction of Parkinson's voice.

"You're saying that Lucius might want Snape out of the picture because he thinks Snape's shagging his mistress?" Macnair asked, clearly not believing a word of it. Emily whiteknuckled her hands on her elbows *Oh no, please don't let them stumble onto the truth by accident, that we don't get along because we did shag each other once and it's complicated things immeasurably no, Walden Fecking Macnair, shut up shut up shut up*

Instead, Emmitt Parkinson came out with just about the most extraordinary speech imaginable, which surprised Emily as much as it did any of the men listening to him "No, no, you unsubtle dolt, I didn't say that. What I believe is that Snape wouldn't have been at all *averse* to shagging Lucius's mistress, his churlish protests to the contrary aside, and Lucius knew it. Truthfully, I don't think Snape has a snowflake's chance in hell of actually getting his way with her with the personality he's got, he'll probably die a virgin. But just the fact that he would if given the chance is enough to get old Luce up in arms and that's probably why he got so suspicious of Snape all of a sudden."

Emily blinked several times, just letting those remarks sink in. *What?*

"Are you sure of that?" Nott's sandpapery voice said. "Sure you're not seeing jealousy where there is none?"

"Yes, I'm sure of it. Have any of you noticed that Lucius's suspicions about Snape all started this year, when my Lady Swain abruptly arrived?" Parkinson pointed out. "Before that, Lucius trusted him above anyone, couldn't stop singing his praises. In all honesty, I think with this pub-explosion business, he was trying to serve Snape the way he did Elias Wilkes, and I don't think we've got the numbers to be able to cull the herd every time Lucius gets nervous that someone's got a mad-on for his latest flame."

"If he's still one of ours, then why didn't he come meet us all at the graveyard when they snatched Potter?" Flint asked. "Why did he stay away?"

"Oh come if you were working for Albus Dumbledore, and everyone was milling about at some sporting event at school when the summons came, what choice would you have? What was he supposed to do, turn to Dumbledore and say, "Now if you'll excuse me, the Dark Lord is calling, I'll be back for supper right after we rid the world of that pesky Boy Who Lived?" " Parkinson retorted witheringly.

"Yeh know, he might have a point," Malcolm Bulstrode said. "I can't see what else might have gotten Lucius so angry with him to me, Snape's the same old snarky bastard he's always been. My Millicent and her friends are always talking about how they've got the best Head of House you could want, that he's always looking out for them, not letting the Gryffindors hog all the glory."

"He's not changed at all in that, not for all the time he's been at Hogwarts," Mr. Flint said. "Marcus Jr. has been saying for years that Snape's a Slytherin to the core, since even before that *Potter* started at Hogwarts and all this trouble began."

"My daughter says the same she's always saying that Hogwarts would be the best school in the world if only two things happened: if Snape became Headmaster, and they stopped accepting Muggle-borns," Parkinson agreed.

"I'll not pretend to any of you lot, I'd rather not lose him. He's already said he'll write recommendations for my boy, and what with Vincent's marks being what they are, he needs them," Mr. Crabbe remarked, to a muttered *Hear hear* from Mr. Goyle.

"Yes, Theodore thinks highly of him too," Nott said. "We've all thought for years that he was just biding his time at Hogwarts, maintaining his cover. Now, could it be that maybe his cover is so deep that everyone's forgotten it's a cover?"

"Precisely, well said," Parkinson assented. "Come on, lads the Head of Slytherin paying fealty to that sugar-coated old fool Dumbledore? I'll never buy it."

"Snape's hated Dumbledore since he was a boy, and all the lads in our year knew it," Mr. Goyle averred. "Don't you all remember how bloody *furious* he was after Dumbledore didn't expel Potter and Black that time seventh year? Snape's always been a skinny chap, I could probably deck him with my eyes shut, but even I was scared of him then. The man was like a spitting cobra or something."

Emily's brows creased deeply. *Snape's hated Dumbledore since he was a boy?*Where was *that* coming from? As far as she could tell, Dumbledore was Professor Snape's closest friend and only real confidante. Dumbledore was also the only person she knew who made no bones about the fact that he not only respected and trusted Snape, but actually liked him as well. Perhaps that was a more complex relationship than she had originally thought.

Nott chuckled. "I'd always figured Snape was just waiting for those old fools Dumbledore and McGonagall and Flitwick to die, so he could get appointed Headmaster and change things back the way they used to be at Hogwarts. He's young enough still that he might yet do it."

"And still young enough that he might entertain the notion of courting some likely candidate for the job of Headmaster's wife, as well," Mr. Parkinson hinted, with a dark little chuckle.

All right, now *that* was just absurd Emmitt Parkinson just couldn't get *anything* right he imagined Professor Snape, the virgin, was hiding his desire to marry her under a prickly exterior ? Pah, actually it was more like Professor Snape, he who could shag a lass like some Dionysian hierophant of sensuality, had had quite enough of her for one lifetime, thanks, but Parkinson was doing such a good job of deflecting blame off of the Professor by advocating this ridiculous theory that she let him carry on quite unhindered.

"Er, Emmitt, are you really trying to call some other bloke out for getting unsettled because someone fancies his lady?" Walden Macnair sneered. "Isn't that rather a case of the pot calling the kettle black?"

"I trust my wife implicitly," Parkinson said smoothly. "I just don't trust anyone *with* my wife. And at the rate you were sniffing around someone's airy spidersilk skirts at New Year's, Walden, you might want to watch your own back as well."

Macnair *harrumphed* and fell silent. A moment later, he began loudly talking about what a hoot it had been to turn all those Muggles arses over teakettles at the Quidditch World Cup, and withdrew off to the other end of the terrace, followed by the elder Crabbe, Goyle, Flint, and Bulstrode.

Parkinson and Nott remained at the other side of the terrace their voices lowering to conspiratorial whispers. "You're right, it was a shame about Elias he always seemed a decent sort to me," Nott murmured. "You know, I've never thought he had any designs on Narcissa either and even if he did, she's the last person in the world who'd be interested. We *knew* Evan was a traitor, but I think Lucius jumped to conclusions about Wilkes."

"What I'm concerned about now, though, is how Snape can possibly stay loyal to us after Lucius tried to have him taken out of the game," Parkinson replied.

"I know, honestly," Nott agreed. "How would you feel if you found out one day that the lot of us had turned against you due to a lot of circumstantial evidence and tried to have you done in? Even if he hadn't gone over to their side before, good old Lucius may have given him the impetus to *start* working for Dumbledore, just to save his own neck."

"No, no, I don't believe that," Parkinson scoffed. "Can you even imagine Snape joining with the likes of Albus Dumbledore? He may be a Mudblood on his father's side, but the Princes were wizard tribal chieftains back before Hogwarts was built, before the Malfoys had even come over from Normandy. Snape's not one to brag about his family tree, especially now that the money's gone, but he's got as much right to call himself a Slytherin than any of us, when it comes down to it." He took a long drag off his cigar, shaking his dark head thoughtfully. "What I'd give anything to know is exactly why Lucius turned against Snape, and exactly where the Dark Lord stands on this, before Lucius's skirt-chasing makes us lose our one reliable source at Hogwarts. It isn't worth losing our only Potions expert over his latest mistress Lucius's women come and go, but nobody's ever been able to even replicate some of Snape's potions. Come on, do the words *Potio Carnalis* ring any bells?"

Nott laughed dryly, as though embarrassed by the existence of such a concoction. "Could you believe what happened?" he said. "No matter what Lucius says, it sounds to me like Snape not only figured out their trap, but he evacuated all the Muggles somehow just to show off. Lucius says that's got to be proof that he's turned into a Muggle-lover, but I don't know I think that might have been old Snape's way of rubbing Lucius's nose in it, of saying that he's got the wherewithal to thwart Lucius's plans any time he wishes. He's a deep one, Severus is, he's seen more than any of us will ever know he's always got some new trick up his sleeve. And we all know how much he likes to serve someone up a nice cold dish of revenge."

"I do wish there was some way of getting his side of the story for myself," Parkinson muttered. "I didn't want to say anything before the Dark Lord himself, of course, didn't want to seem too sympathetic to either side but I'd be eager to know from Snape himself what really happened."

Just below the two of them, Emily was hanging on their every word *(Keep talking, you two, come on)* but Parkinson unfortunately chose that moment to flick the inch of thick ash off his cigar right down onto her head. The hot, reeking ashes tickled her nostrils with the uncontrollable urge to sneeze, but she buried her face tight in the crook of her arm and controlled it with a huge effort.

Thankfully, Menzentius Black came out to collect the group on the veranda a moment later "Gentlemen, we're starting again," he called and they stubbed out their cigars and headed back into the conference.

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and she was out under the courtyard, dressed for combat and with a dagger at her belt, with muddy feet and dusted with cigar ash.

Emily spun around, and a second later was rushing back to her room at a sprint.

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Lucius made his way back toward the west wing of the castle, moving at a quick, stealthy pace toward a cluster of guest bedrooms. He paused in front of a certain door, glancing up and down the corridor, then opened the door, and slipped inside.

"Emily? Darling?" he whispered.

No answer.

He approached the luxurious green velvet bed, but it was empty, the bedclothes thrown aside.

Then he noticed the glimmer of light under the bathroom door and, drawing closer, heard the rush of water in the bathroom, then quietly opened the door. "My dear? It's me. Where have you gotten off to?"

She was in a hot shower, naked amidst billows of steam, wet hair plastered to her head like a helmet of ruddy gold. "Mmmm, there you are," he said, leaning on the shower door. "I woke up and missed you."

She turned toward him and smiled sleepily. "'Evening, lover," she crooned, raking back her drenched hair. "Care to join me?"

"No, I'll just wait for you in bed," he drawled. "Don't be too long."

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After Lucius had left the bathroom, Emily finished her shower and towelled herself dry then let the Obscurantis effect she had put on her tunic and breeches, armour, veil, and dagger belt fall away, and fished them out from under the bathtub. She quickly stowed them in the bathroom linen cupboard, to be retrieved tomorrow morning when she was alone. Then she combed her hair and checked herself carefully in the mirror for any leftover trace of ash or mud or grass before rejoining Lucius in her bed.

"Come here," he murmured as she slid between the fine cotton sheets. He gathered her into his arms, her head on his shoulder, his lips lowering to lightly brush her forehead.

"What would you like, darling?" she asked, nuzzling him suggestively but he only sighed sleepily.

Sssssh... hold me, he said. Then he stretched comfortably, and fell asleep a moment later no doubt all of his speechmaking and pyrotechnical argumentation of that night had been exhausting. The moon had risen late that night, and by its light Emily could see his handsome face on the pillow, serenely relaxed in sleep. His breath and heartbeat were slow and regular, but his arms held her close to his side.

Oh, bloody hell... watching him like this was like a tiny, sharp little knife turning in her heart. Could there be any more exquisite torture than to be held so tenderly by the man one intended to bring to ruin.

She sighed. Perhaps he had loved her once, more deeply than she had ever realised in her feckless, self-absorbed youth; perhaps she had come to be some elusive reminder of his carefree young manhood. It now seemed that his passion for her was more intense than mere lust or infatuation; there was something obsessive about it, something desperate and grasping. *Love me,* it insisted, *love me no matter what I've become* and his need tugged at her so sharply that she almost wished she had it within her to fulfil his wishes.

Perhaps things might have been different for both of them, once; if he hadn't been so consumed by his fear and loathing of Muggles, if she hadn't always had so little parental feeling. If only he hadn't been engaged when he came to the Faerielands; if only she hadn't always been so absorbed in her academic pursuits and military career. Perhaps if he wasn't so much like his father, and she wasn't so much like her mother.

She lay awake for a long time, possessed with melancholy wondering as to what could have been different in both of them, that would have allowed them to truly love each other and be happy, instead of coming to this.

As it was, however, that night a corrupt bureaucrat slept with his arms jealously clasped around a woman who was now doing her best to see him sent to prison for the rest of his life.

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Lucius was gone when she awoke the next morning.

Cecile came in with her breakfast tray at about nine in the morning, but Emily was so tired from her previous night's meagre sleep that she barely roused enough to thank the elf, drink the pot of tea and nibble some fruit and a wheat scone before going back to bed and passing out for another few hours. She finally opened a bleary eye and noticed it was ten minutes past eleven and there was a good-bye tea that day at noon. Reluctantly, she made her way into the shower, and when she emerged, Cecile had cleared the breakfast tray and laid out her comb and toilette things and day robes of navy-blue silk and matching flat kidskin slippers.

The Malfoys and their guests were just leaving the main hall for the sunroom when she arrived for tea, at perhaps five minutes past noon. Thankfully, Beatrice Parkinson immediately caught Emily's eye and waved her into the seat beside her when she came in, and as Narcissa, Druella Black, and Mrs. Rosier were all already seated at the other ladies' table, she was spared another genteel vivisection at this Malfeasant tea. The food as usual was excellent, and someone had again thoughtfully provided mint-tarragon herbal tea and whole-wheat tea sandwiches in addition to those on crustless white bread, so Emily let herself relax and listen to the talk between Beatrice and Pansy Parkinson, which seemed mostly to consist of Beatrice consoling her daughter for the loss of her white Persian cat, Frost, earlier that week.

When tea was over, everyone watched as Draco unwrapped a stack of birthday presents, and afterward, Emily looked up to find both Lucius and Draco before her. "Just look at you, lad, I think you're almost as tall as your old father, now, aren't you?" Lucius said, smiling, his hand on his son's shoulder. "Emily, I wanted to ask you, have you seen the sketches I commissioned for the family oil portrait?"

"No, I haven't," she said, smiling brightly at both of them. "Draco, your family's sitting for a portrait? How marvellous!"

"Yeah, the artist came out here a bunch of weekends, and we all got dressed up and sat for her," the boy said, grinning back. "Come on, Father, let's show her the sketches. They're up in your study, right?"

Lucius looked slightly deflated apparently he hadn't expected his son to invite himself along on their latest errand up to his private study but a few minutes later, the three of them were in the study off the upstairs gallery, admiring a series of small oil-on-canvas studies of Lucius, Narcissa, and Draco in various poses, spread out on Lucius's expansive desk.

"I like this one the best," Draco was saying, leaning over a sketch where Narcissa was seated on a carved armchair with her husband beside her and Draco standing between them with his arm around her shoulders. "Mother looks really nice in it, don't you think?"

"Yes, she looks beautiful," Emily said, leaning over the sketch as well. "That's a lovely frock she has on. The three of you all look awfully handsome together."

Draco gave her a very boyish and rather sweet smile in return his usual response when anyone made an admiring comment about his mother. "She wanted to wear a green frock, but I always tell her I like her blue robes, so she wore this instead. That's what suits her best, I think she has *really* blue eyes, Mother does."

"She does indeed. How lucky that you were there to give her advice," Emily said, grinning at the boy, and he turned back to the sketch with a little laugh.

A moment later, Draco turned back to her with a shy, questioning look. "Professor, Father was telling me earlier that he wants to put in a new department at the Ministry, you know, to help the Faeries out," Draco said, nodding in his father's direction. "I think that's a really good idea. It's not fair that you have to go about with Glamours on and didn't used to be able to get work papers, and all that."

"Absolutely, well said, my boy," Lucius murmured approvingly, patting his son's shoulder. Emily smiled at him, nodding.

Encouraged by this agreement, Draco continued on "I could sort of understand if, you know, goblins went about with Glamours on so as to fit in, since they're sort of weird, but Faeries hiding, that's stupid. I mean, if you look like the Fae do, why should you have to *hide* it " and then he realised what he had just said and fell silent. He bent very studiously over the sketch again, his pale complexion slowly turning scarlet.

"Well... I daresay goblins have their own standards of beauty," Emily said gently. "Perhaps they consider their own kind to be really handsome and think humans and Fae are all 'sort of weird.' And there are more sorts of Faeries out there than just fauns like me perhaps you might find some of the other races kind of strange." She turned a satiric eye toward Lucius "Spider pookas, for example. Some humans think they're sort of unnerving."

Lucius hid a smirk under his hand, but Draco only blushed the worse. "Right. Sorry," the boy said quietly, his eyes glued to the tips of his boots. Emily bent over another sketch and asked a few inane questions about what he thought of the pose depicted in it, by means of changing the subject, but Draco was so embarrassed that he excused himself soon afterward, saying he wanted to get back downstairs and see what his friends were doing.

After the boy had gone, Lucius turned to Emily with a very I-told-you-so sort of smile. "I think you'll agree that the boy is fast warming up to the idea," Lucius said. "Once I put the possibility of you in his mind, I can tell he's really gotten excited about it. So I think you should start working with me once I've got the Department properly organised, which it ought to be by this spring." He wrapped his arms around her waist and put a lingering kiss on the back of her neck. "I think there should be some distance between you and Draco while he reaches adulthood, for decorum's sake. Then when he starts working at the Ministry after leaving school, you can be appropriately surprised and overwhelmed by what a handsome young man he's become and then he can finally confess to you that he's been smitten with you for heaven knows how long. Then of course after a year or two, we'll start planning the wedding."

"Lucius, stop it, you're exaggerating." This talk was making her extremely uncomfortable not in the least because the scenario he was planning was all too plausible to her.

"Oh come off it, love surely you've seen the way he's always making eyes at you now, it's not like we'd be coercing him into anything. He's old enough to know which woman he wants, for heaven's sake he's fifteen, he's a physical adult. In centuries past, he'd be considered a grown man and perhaps married by now." His voice was an insinuating whisper in her ear, in her head. "He's probably been having sexual fantasies for years I know I did when I was his age. When he's lying in bed alone at night, surely you don't think that sour-faced Pansy Parkinson is the woman he's dreaming of, do you?""

Emily thought of the shrill little Pansy Parkinson as a romantic rival and laughed before she could stop herself. "Maybe he does, you know, they do go everywhere together."

"I think I've instilled better taste in him than *that*," Lucius said, also laughing. "You do like him, don't you? You like having another handsome younger man looking at you like you were the only woman in the world, don't you."

Emily blushed. "I don't think there's any woman alive who wouldn't," she said, perhaps too defensively.

"It's all right, darling, I'm not jealous. I couldn't be more pleased, for both of you." Lucius caressed her cheek adoringly. "All I want is for the two of you to be happy. You know that."

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Part Third: The Hart Subvertant, Chapter 29, Part 1

Chapter 45 of 55

After Voldemort's return, Professor Swain has agreed to Sirius Black's suggestion that she use her influence with Lucius Malfoy to gather intelligence on the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters. As her horror of the Dark Lord grows, her old enemy Severus Snape proves to be the only one who understands the fear and doubt that plague a double agent…

Chapter 29, Part 1:

Hogwarts Castle had always been beautiful to Emily not the bright, aerie paradise of white stone and silk banners that was Greenbarrow Castle, but a darker, magnificently gothic counterpart to it. She had stopped many times to marvel afresh at the sight of Hogwarts towering above the glimmering lake as she made the trek from Hogsmeade back up to the school.

But never had the sight been so welcome as when she appeared back on the campus outskirts after Draco's birthday weekend was finally over.

She hurried back up the path and through the foyer and main hall, leaving her Holding Trunk for the elves to take up to her apartments, and headed straight down to the Slytherin dungeons and Professor Snape's office. Her curt knock on the door brought the sound of his voice *Enter.*

Ah, there he was, what a joy to come back to that (indifferent, glowering) face. The good Professor was sitting at his desk scratching away in a notebook when she arrived. He looked as though he'd been keeping himself busy with work while she was gone the round worktable in the centre of the room was absolutely covered with sample jars. He'd also let himself dress more casually while he had the castle to himself instead of professorial robes, he was wearing plain black trousers and a lightweight pullover of dark grey lambswool, the kind of rather nice hand-knitted thing you could get in Scottish village shops in the summer. Curiously, he had what looked like Muggle medical-lab sample vials on his desk but given the wide range of esoteric substances he had to use in his work, perhaps that was normal for him, who knew.

"Well, what do you know," she said, planting herself in front of his desk. "I'm not dead."

After a moment, Snape raised his eyes from the notebook in front of him. "My congratulations on your ability to go two entire days without doing something that resulted in your gory demise, madam," he said, with a thin, humourless smile. "Have you any news for me?"

"Do I *ever*," she said, with a triumphant smirk.

One black brow quirked. "Pray continue."

"*Ahem*." Emily fixed him with a look, crossing her arms testily in front of her, quirked her own brow back, and silently spoke a word "Welcome back, Professor, congratulations on a job well done. Please, have a seat. Would you like a cup of tea?" she said, in a Glamoured perfect imitation of Snape's dulcet baritone.

One corner of his mouth tugged upward. "The kudos will have to wait until I've heard what you have to say," he said. He blotted the page of his notebook, closed it, and stood up. Then he crossed to the hearth, threw a handful of green powder into it from a box on the mantel, and called: "If you please, we would like a spot of tea sent down to Professor Snape's office Earl Grey, and something decaffeinated," he said, presumably addressing the house-elves in the kitchen. "Thank you."

A moment later, he waved a hand at the large round worktable set in the centre of the room, silently speaking a word and the specimen jars on it leapt back onto the wall shelves, its surface appearing to polish itself to a hospitable gleam just in time for a gold tea service with two teapots, cream and sugar, and two china teacups to appear in its centre.

"Please, won't you sit down," he said, indicating a stool with arch politesse.

She smiled. "Thank you, don't mind if I do."

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and seeing as how I'm now back here safe and sound taking tea with you, I'd say it worked out *fine*."

Faced with this evidence, he subsided into grudging silence, and she continued. "At the meeting, it looked as though Lucius was making some kind of combination report and sales pitch to the group, and Druella was raking him over the coals at every opportunity. There were one or two instances when I really thought she was on the verge of just letting fly with a hex, she was that angry. Then they took a break and some of them came out on the terrace, and I heard Druella shouting, 'You don't know what you're talking about not my nephew!' at Lucius, right in front of You-Know-Who himself. She said she trusted your loyalty more than she did his, and accused him of only being out for himself."

"*Really,*" Snape said, his eyes glittering. "Did she say anything else?"

"They closed the door a second later, so that was all I heard. I'm sorry," she said, shaking her head. "But believe me, your Aunt Druella was practically apoplectic at the very idea that her great-nephew was under suspicion at all from what I could tell, she spent most of the evening vehemently opposing Lucius right in front of You-Know-Who himself, and he let her."

Snape nodded, smirking. "Good, I'm glad to hear that. Druella is one of the few who could safely intercede for me she was one of his first supporters, and she supplies a goodly amount of his payroll. She's been a great favourite with him from the first."

"Then some of them had a cigar outside and I was able to overhear their conversations, and they were all talking about you, so I infer from that that the substance of the meeting was a debate about the situation with you. My impression was that this was the first many of them had heard about the pub bombing, and that they didn't all approve of it."

Snape nodded. "Interesting. So it would appear that the murder attempt was entirely Lucius's idea, and not a group decision."

"That was the impression I got, yes. And there's more I sat in on a little chat between Walden Macnair and some of your students' fathers as well. To begin with, you've got staunch supporters not only in Druella Black, but in Emmitt Parkinson, and to a lesser extent the Messrs. Crabbe, Goyle, Flint, Nott, and Bulstrode," Emily told him. "Parkinson also doesn't believe you've changed sides he thinks that Lucius is exaggerating things. He just about had the others all believing that you're still on their side as well, when he got done speaking in your favour."

She omitted Emmitt Parkinson's theory as to the source of Lucius's suspicions, as she didn't believe for a second that Lucius wanted Snape out of the way because of sexual jealousy over *her*, of all people. More than likely, that preposterous notion came out of the notoriously jealous Mr. Parkinson projecting his own sort of motivations onto both Lucius and Snape, and certainly Professor Snape seemed to have plenty of his own ideas as to where Lucius's enmity was coming from.

Snape smiled thinly. "Parkinson's defending me? Well, that's surprising. Emmitt has a longer memory than I thought."

Emily looked at him curiously. "I'm sorry?"

"Nothing. Go on."

"Mr. Nott even confided to Parkinson that he thought the pub bombing was an extremely bad move on the group's part. He says that if you weren't on Dumbledore's side before, you've now certainly got plenty of incentive to change allegiances. And just before he and Mr. Nott went back inside as the meeting resumed, both of them admitted that they very much wanted to hear your side of things as well, and not just Lucius's."

"Did they really." Snape leaned his chin on his hand, still smirking.

"Mr. Flint and Mr. Bulstrode aren't entirely convinced that you've changed allegiances either, based on what their children have told them about your behaviour at school, and Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle don't seem to care if your loyalty to You-Know-Who has wobbled a bit so long as you make good on your promise to write recommendation letters for their sons."

"Yes, that sounds like them," Snape said, stirring his tea.

"Though I remain mystified as to why you'd recommend Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle for anything other than garbage collection jobs, truly. I'm sorry, I know they're both Slytherins and all, but surely it hasn't escaped your notice that those two are dumber than bricks? Why are you writing *recommendations* for them?"

Snape leaned back in his chair, gazing meditatively down at his cup. "Allow me to answer your question with a hypothetical, Professor," he said, after a moment. "Imagine that you can help overthrow the Baalorite dynasty that keeps trying to take over Rivendale by padding the grades and exaggerating the nonexistent academic achievements of a few Orcish children. Would you do it?"

Emily pondered that for a moment, one corner of her mouth tugging upward. "All right, point made," she admitted grudgingly.

"Thank you," Snape said smoothly. "Did anyone else have anything else to say?"

"Well, Mr. Goyle spent quite a bit of time convincing everyone that you hated Albus and would never support any cause he believed in. He said, 'Snape's hated Dumbledore since he was a boy.' I have to admit, my curiosity was piqued by that it's always been my impression that you and Dumbledore were quite close friends. It was just... odd."

Snape reached for one of the golden teapots on the table and refreshed his cup, his features set in a thoughtful frown. "Albus and I... have clashed rather loudly over issues in the past," he said. "There are those matters on which he and I have agreed to disagree, and called a moratorium on any further discussion, and that's all I'll say about the matter. However, many of my Death Eater *cronies* are very much aware of our past differences of opinion, and I often allude to them in order to keep up the ruse that Albus and I despise each other, and I am simply waiting for him to die so I can stake my claim for the Headmaster's position."

He held his cup a moment between both hands before turning back to her. "Now, if you would allow me to interject, madam you shouldn't have had to try to sneak into that meeting to hear what was said; you should have simply requested that Lucius include you in it. In my opinion, if you had to sneak about the way you described, you're letting them dictate the terms of your involvement too much. They consider you to be the representative of a military power, which means that you're dealing from a position of strength. More than likely, it would have impressed both Lucius and the Dark Lord if you had shown an interest in attending the next meeting."

Emily stared at him, surprised but then realised that what he said made perfect sense, and was embarrassed that she hadn't thought of the same tactic herself. "Do you really think so?"

"Absolutely," he replied, with a thoughtful sip of tea. "With a bit of persuasion, you could potentially become privy to even more than I could. I'm a poor relation with some useful skills and connections you're a major potential ally, with all the bargaining power that entails. Not even Lucius or Druella or Parkinson could make him an armed power, so if I were you, I would make sure the price for my cooperation was very, very high. Plus, there's also another advantage you don't seem to have noticed that you could exploit as well."

"Which is?"

"Don't think there aren't any number of men in that group who would like to take Lucius's place in your...*affections*, as well. Walden Macnair has said in my hearing that " He stopped, seeming to reconsider what he was about to say "Well, you no doubt knew about Walden Macnair's roving eye already. I've no doubt that Menzentius Black would probably still marry you if you weren't so averse to the idea "

"Er, I doubt that very highly," Emily interjected.

Snape's brows creased. "Why?"

"I sort of broke his arm on the afternoon Lucius introduced me to Voldemort," she said, very offhandedly indeed.

Snape stared at her. "You did *what?*"

She coughed. "Broke his arm. I think I may have blacked one of his eyes as well."

He stared harder. "You've never mentioned *that* before."

"Well, you know, it's not something I'd put on my résumé." She stared down at her teacup, embarrassed. "However, he admitted to me this weekend that he picked the fight on purpose so Lucius could show me off to You-Know-Who, and then fairly openly propositioned me afterward, so you may have a point."

Snape grimaced. "Believe me, Menzentius's prospects being what they are, he probably wouldn't be dissuaded from a match with a wealthy heiress just because she had broken a few of his limbs. Something you might consider, however, is if Lucius seems inclined to separate you from the real deal-making, you could always appeal to his brother-in-law or another one of your, er, admirers to include you. Lucius holds any number of secrets and financial interests over their heads, granted, but you have to remember, to these men, your people have something of a *femme fatale* mystique about them. You could use that. You're a widow, and thanks to a certain legal proceeding three years ago, you're a somewhat notorious one in this part of the world, mind. So everyone knows you're not a virgin debutante, if you'll forgive me."

She flushed hotly. "I trust there is a point to all this, and that you'll get to it *someday.*"

"The point is you would do better to insist on dictating the terms of your involvement yourself, to play on your notoriety, and to use the women's fear and the men's lechery to advance your own agenda," Snape said, quite sensibly. "I'm not saying that you should marry anyone or take on a passel of new lovers quite the opposite. Think of the first Queen Elizabeth, who remained single and then dangled the possibility of a marriage alliance in front of the Spanish and French royals and various English noblemen, and secured any number of special favours and concessions in the process."

Emily fell silent as she considered his words, then began to nod, recognising the soundness of his logic. "Or Queen Mab back home she didn't get married till she was eighty. She was just twenty-five when she took the throne, but to hear Gwydion tell it, she had every powerful nobleman and military officer in the Seventh Kingdom eating out of her hand for decades." Damn it all, why hadn't she thought of that herself!

"Exactly my point I don't think you should let Lucius tell you what to do. And don't be above using your advantages, and playing to your strengths. You shouldn't feel so obligated to put forth the demure, respectable act you do for Narcissa and the other women they're not the ones whose opinions you need to worry about here," he continued.

"What makes you so sure that respectability on my part is an *act*?" she asked, with an arch of her sinister eyebrow.

"Oh, let me see if I recall a certain exchange I heard last year correctly," Snape said, aiming his own eyebrows at the ceiling. "'You're a Swain? The Swains are a fine old pureblooded family.' Retorted Lady Swain-Tumnus, 'One that gets purer all the time,' and once they wrapped their brains around the notion that they were being mocked and not praised, of course the ire of the entire tea table waxed exceedingly wroth upon her."

He had a point, and Emily knew it, so she sulked at him. "Oh, quit acting so superior. Even you thought that was funny."

"Perhaps it was... refreshing to hear someone score a point on those harpies Druella and Felina, yes," he said, not quite hiding a smirk in his teacup.

"So refreshing that you almost laughed right at them," she shot back.

"I most certainly did not."

"I *saw* you!"

"At any rate, remarks like that do tend to be repeated in the Malfeasant set," Snape said, breezing past her annoyance completely. "So between that and the famous etiquette book *incident*, don't think you haven't already acquired something of a reputation. A word to the wise if you want some bit of information to get out immediately, be sure that you tell Lucius, Mrs. Rosier, Narcissa, or Elvia Wilkes, and swear them to secrecy. Believe me, that way it will be widely disseminated and accepted as absolute fact within a week."

"Good to know, thanks bunches," she said sarcastically.

"And also, you could certainly demand more concessions from Lucius than you do he's used to having women demanding things from him, so he would probably find it cosy and reassuring if you did. He's also quite enamoured of you, if he's willing to marry you to one of his own relatives in order to keep you " the corner of his mouth curled disdainfully "*accessible*. I've never seen him do something like try to marry a mistress to his brother-in-law before."

"His son, actually," Emily said, bending over her teacup.

"Excuse me?"

"When I said I wasn't interested in Menzentius, he presented Draco as an alternative candidate," she said, again keeping her eyes on her tea.

"Didn't Draco just turn *fifteen*?" Snape asked. "I've met a few child brides before, but is that even legal?"

"I didn't say I'd *accepted*," she sniped back. "It's just on the table, is all. I haven't committed to anything."

"But you haven't unequivocally said *No*, either, I take it?" he prodded.

She gave him a very *oh please* sort of look "Oh, don't even start I have*shoes* older than that kid," she retorted. "And besides, with Lucius being who he is, he'll probably either be incarcerated or well tired of me before Draco is old enough to marry anyone."

Snape looked sceptical. "If I had to bet on either possibility, I'd take incarceration."

"Oh, come on, I don't believe any of what he says is really sincere "

Again, he remained unconvinced. "Really? I was under the impression that he was doing his level best to contort himself as tightly as possible around your smallest finger," he snapped in a fine fettle of irritation. "If you told him that you were starving and nothing could satisfy your appetite but the livers of newborn Eskimo infants, he would probably find some way to serve them up for your lunch."

Emily shuddered. "You're exaggerating," she snapped, glaring at him.

"Madam, you don't know him like I do. I must warn you not to *ever* underestimate Lucius's controlling tendencies," Snape said, in a deadly serious tone. "It's obvious to me that he idealises you and there is no doubt in my mind that he is deriving a tremendous amount of satisfaction from the idea that he's seduced you into sharing his cesspool with him. Additionally, to my knowledge you are the only woman who has ever rejected him before he tired of her, which means that his emotional stake in

remaking you to his own liking will be very high."

Emily's scowl had grown deeper and deeper as he made this speech, and when he finished, she turned hard away from him, crossing her arms contentiously in front of her. "All right, all right, I get it."

"If you doubt me, I can only tell you "

"I *don't* doubt you," she interjected. "I just don't like hearing it."

He grimaced faintly. "As such, you can most likely ask him for whatever favours you like. If he was tired of you but still wanted to keep you as an ally, he would be pushing you to marry some wealthy fellow in our set with a remote estate, as happened with Felina Rosier. If he thought you were useful but a loose cannon mentally, he would push you toward another wealthy loose cannon, like he did with the Lestranges."

Emily scowled again something about hearing Professor Snape point to evidence of Lucius Malfoy's enduring regard? affection? unhealthy obsession? with her rankled tremendously. "Now you're really exaggerating," she snapped. "He's the sort who only values a wife for her breeding potential, and I've told him for years that I'm about as maternal as your teacup. I've allowed him to think that he might have changed my mind, but in truth, he hasn't. Not only that, but he's always been rather disgusted with me for being a Muggle's granddaughter even if my grandmother was hell on wheels with a True Name, and was a Faery prince's wife and a First Knight's mother to boot."

Snape glanced down at his teacup with a grim little chuckle. "No, the way to know when Lucius is really disgusted with a woman is when he tries to marry her off to me," he said, absolutely matter-of-factly. "I'm rock bottom, you see. He'd been trying to pair Felina up with me for most of this year, which lets me know how far Felina has sunk in his estimation, and how suspicious he's become of me. And Felina knows how far she's fallen with him, because she was actually somewhat amenable to the idea." He turned away from her and again calmly refreshed his own teacup from the pot on the table.

Oh, now that was just vile for some reason, the idea of that evil rancid whore of a Mrs. Rosier being amenable to the idea of marrying her colleague made her so angry she could taste acid in the back of her throat. "She's having an affair with Lucius, you know," she blurted out. "I saw the two of them together."

Snape looked at her as though she had just told him some old news indeed. "Lucius has been having an on-again, off-again affair with Felina since before either of them were married," he said coolly. "That's been going on for almost twenty years."

Emily couldn't keep herself from shuddering with disgust. "How did poor old Mr. Rosier die, just out of curiosity?" she asked. "Lucius said some Aurors tried to bring him in for questioning, and he was killed after he resisted arrest. Is that all there was to it?"

Snape froze for an instant and something poisonous flickered behind his black eyes before his composure reasserted itself again. So nearly imperceptible of a reaction, sure to be missed by someone who didn't know him well... but somehow, Emily was left with the impression that she had stumbled onto a very sensitive topic indeed.

"Those are... the facts of the matter, yes." He got up from the table, crossed to the shelves on one of the walls and began rearranging some of the sample jars there. "However, a week before his death, poor old Mr. Rosier Evan had confided to me that he was going to take Felina and as much of his fortune as he could liquidate, and leave England forever. So, I've always believed that Felina told Lucius what Evan was planning, and that Lucius then set the Aurors on him intentionally, knowing that Ministry Aurors have never exactly put a premium on taking suspected Death Eaters alive," he finished, his back to her.

Emily stared at him, speechless. "You're *joking*," she said at last.

Snape continued rearranging jars. "No, I'm not."

"Did Mr. Rosier know about Lucius and... his wife?"

"No," he said, moving a jar of rosemary leaves from beside a vial of dried rue blossom. "And I wasn't about to destroy him by telling him."

"Lucius was sleeping with that creature while she was married... and she betrayed her own husband to his death, and then profited off that betrayal in a wrongful-death lawsuit, all because she preferred Lucius Malfoy to him... " she said slowly, disbelieving her own words as she said them she could barely comprehend that anyone could do such a thing. "That is... that's *unbelievable*."

"But alas, quite true," Snape said grimly. "I could have told you when you received your invitation last October that Felina would hate you on sight, when you arrived that first weekend at Malfeasant Lucius's attentions to her no doubt fell off sharply after you arrived. Additionally, just about everyone in that group knows what you did to avenge your late husband, so given the circumstances of Evan's death, the simple fact of your existence must come as a reproach to her."

Emily's heart had accelerated with rage, her face burning whitely and her stomach contorting itself into a knot of acid. "I could see why you wouldn't have wanted any sort of involvement with her before, but now, I commend you on your excellent taste in not giving her the time of day, sir."

"Thank you," he said, his voice flat and expressionless.

Emily watched the motionless dark silhouette in front of her. "You and Evan Rosier must have been very close indeed, if he confided that kind of information to you. He must have been absolutely certain you wouldn't betray him."

"Yes, I knew him very well he was my best friend all throughout my schooldays. I was best man at his wedding." One pale hand flexed thoughtfully on the shelf. "The reason he told me what he was planning was because he wanted me to gather up what assets I had and make my escape with them."

"Were you going to do it?"

"Yes."

His tone was very deliberate, almost calm but there was something coiled under that tight control that made Emily realise that no matter how repulsed she was by Lucius Malfoy and Felina Rosier, her loathing was a pale thing compared to that of the man before her.

"He must have been a very good friend indeed," she murmured.

"He was. And his undoing was that he loved his wife better than she deserved," he said, with pure ice in his voice. "To be perfectly honest, I'd rather swallow poison than allow Lucius to pressure me into bed with that harpy, thank you."

"I don't blame you in the least," she said, with another emphatic shudder. "You know... I was completely wrong before. You really aren't anything at all like that woman, and I'll be happy to help you make certain that she gets what she deserves."

"I... do appreciate that," he whispered. A moment later he was all business again, and crossed back to his seat. Emily leaned over the table and refreshed his cup of tea. "Thank you. Was Druella at all troublesome?"

"No, not really, just a few of those nasty stares on Friday, but then I already knew she despised me from the moment I met her."

"Yes, she loathes part-humans on general principles, like most of the Blacks. She also won't have much use for you because she doesn't have anything to hold over you the same reason why she and Lucius have always butted heads. She mostly controls people through financial obligations, and the Malfoys are actually wealthier than the Blacks, and as such she distrusts anyone who doesn't need anything from her. Additionally, she's more aware of Lucius's extramarital intrigues than he knows, so be careful of her. Like I said, she's no stranger to having her own wishes carried out."

"I understand. And it wasn't just Lucius who asked about you Draco asked me if I knew why you couldn't come to the party. And Lady told me she missed you it was really rather sad."

"*Lady* told you? The dog?"

"Yes, the dog." She looked curiously at him "Did I never tell you *Deceivre* could be used to communicate with animals? I thought I had."

"Er... you may have mentioned it at some point, yes, but perhaps I didn't quite think of all of its various applications until now," he said, his eyes on his cup.

"So Lucius was rather obviously trying to track you down for his own purposes, but I think Draco and Lady just missed their friend and wanted to know how you were. Draco wanted me to ask you to write to him, but I made it sound thoroughly hopeless as to whether or not I'd ever be able to deliver his request."

"I assure you, what he *really* misses is having someone about to listen to him whine and complain about how all the Slytherins translated, himself are treated at school," Snape said, rolling his eyes.

They might have continued this discussion for some time longer, but then Argus Filch's face appeared in the hearth in a puff of green flame "Er, Professor Swain? Sorry to interrupt the two of yeh, but there's someone to see yeh down in the main lobby, there is."

"Who is it?" Emily asked, coming toward the fireplace.

"Little prissy house-elf, not one of ours. Keeps sayin' she's here to serve the Mistress Emily. And get this she says Lucius Malfoy's given her to you."

"Oh, *yes*," Emily said, throwing her hands up triumphantly. "He's done it, he's actually gone and done it. She's safe." She started down toward the main entrance at a quick trot.

"Done what? Who's safe?" Snape got up from his seat and followed her.

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When Emily reached the staircase landing overlooking the foyer just outside the great main hall, Cecile, her little Malfeasant ladies' maid, was sitting on the bottom step, her shoulders hunched and her hands demurely folded in her lap. The elf was dressed in a little starched black pillowcase, with a clean white crocheted doily draped over her shoulders like a shawl. Close beside her was a lumpy little pillowcase satchel of what had to be her belongings. She looked and acted like nothing so much as a meek little orphan who has found herself packed off to unfamiliar relatives.

"He gave you a *house-elf*?" Snape asked, appearing beside her in the landing doorway, out of Cecile's sight.

Emily stepped back into the doorway as well for an aside to him. "Yes, I tried to wheedle him into giving her to me this weekend. My word, he's even more predictable than I thought."

"Tried to wheedle him into it? You mean the army of house-elves we have here already weren't enough, you had to have one of your very own?" he chided.

She glared at him. "Don't even start she was being mistreated, I wanted to get her out of there."

"If she was a Malfoy house-elf, I've no doubt that she was. However "

"*And*, she let fall that she was an attendant at some*very* suspicious-sounding late night meetings," she interjected. "Seeing as how she's my elf now and not the Malfoys', perhaps she'll be willing to tell us all about those little get-togethers."

"Don't be too sure of that," Snape said, folding his arms suspiciously in front of him. "You do realise that she might be a spy?"

"Oh, come off it, you don't know her," Emily protested. "A more meek and mild little creature never existed she was so pathetically grateful for the least bit of kindness she practically refurbished my entire wardrobe to say *Thank you*."

Snape looked at her sceptically. "There are plenty of those house-elves who retain a loyalty to their former masters, even after being set free and finding other employment. If you doubt me, go down to the kitchens and speak to a young lady named Winky, who used to serve in Bartemius Crouch's household," he tartly informed her. "It could be that Lucius told her to come here and pretend to serve you, just so he can have a more reliable source within Hogwarts."

Emily looked at him as though that was the most preposterous thing she had ever heard. "They were making her *injure herself* in the Malfoys' house perhaps she was glad to leave there," she protested. "Maybe, like so many disgruntled employees, she might be glad to see a family who used her so cruelly brought down, and might want to help us? Perhaps they're just as individual as we are, did you ever think of that?"

Snape shrugged. "The decision as to whether or not she remains here ultimately falls to Albus and I'm going to recommend that she be questioned under a dose of *Veritaserum* before she's allowed to stay."

"Oh bloody hell you and that *Veritaserum* of yours," Emily shot back. "She's a three-foot, fifty-pound house-elf, for heaven's sake! Sometimes I wonder who's the more paranoid, you or Mad-Eye Moody."

"It's not paranoia when a fellow *does* have enemies out to kill him, madam I'm surprised you've forgotten about that, especially in light of what's happened to you?" he pointed out.

Emily turned away, blushing. Again, she knew he had a point, and she sulked by way of acknowledgment.

"So perhaps you'll forgive me if I've become a proponent of more caution rather than less, of late," he continued in a withering tone. "And if you don't mind me saying, your *gift* is looking rather forlorn down there. Perhaps she could use a kind word from her new *Mistress*, and a bite to eat before Albus gets back this evening, you make your report to him, and Albus and I interview her."

He took his leave of her with a curt nod, and headed back in the direction of his own office, and Emily went to meet Cecile.

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Cecile's foxy little face lit up in an enormous smile when Emily came down the steps to meet her. "Miss Professor!" she cried, getting up from the step and practically bouncing up and down like a puppy. "Is it true that Cecile is going to be your elf now? Master Malfoy said I is going to belong to you!"

"Yes, dear, it's true," Emily said.

Cecile ran forward happily. "Yes! I is going to be the most *helpful* elf for you!" she squeaked, with a desperate curtsy. "Oh, and I has a letter for you from the Master Malfoy " She reached into her pillowcase and handed Emily a letter:

Darling ~

She's yours. You said you liked her, and you know I'd do anything for you.

On that note, I do hope you'll do something for me. We'll be hosting a small get-together at the house late Thursday night, for the very important guest you met two weeks ago. He would like the opportunity to continue talking to you. Please plan to arrive at eleven p.m. I'll send a Portkey for you that night. Elegant business attire would be appropriate.

Then, this coming weekend, why don't we meet up at the Cockatrice, Friday at 9 p.m., for a bit of private time together?

I love you so much, dearest I can't describe how happy I was to be with you this weekend. I can't wait to see you again.

Emily pressed the letter to her heart with an eloquent scowl.

You bastard. By all that's holy, how I hate you.

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Emily took Cecile up to the sitting room of her own apartments, got her a cup of herbal tea and a plate of little wheat cakes, and sat her down for some time, talking to her about everything and nothing, until the elf seemed reassured. Cecile kept asking if there was anything she could do to clean up, but Emily told her to just rest from her journey for a bit.

Perhaps half an hour later, Dumbledore's face appeared in Emily's sitting-room fireplace in a puff of green flame. "Professor Swain? If you and our new arrival would please come to my office in five minutes' time, I would like to speak to both of you."

"We'll both be right down, Albus," Emily said.

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Dumbledore was sitting at his desk with Professor Snape leaning on its edge with his arms crossed contentiously over his chest when Emily and Cecile arrived *Merlin attended by Mordred*, Emily thought for a moment, watching the two of them together.

"Hello, Albus, welcome back from London." Emily greeted Dumbledore with a warm handshake. "I hope your visit went well."

"It did, thank you," Dumbledore said, smiling. "Welcome back from Wiltshire I hope your visit went well."

"Reasonably so, I think." She turned toward Cecile, who was following nervously behind her. "Albus, this is Cecile, formerly of Malfeasant. Lucius Malfoy gave her to me this afternoon. Cecile, this is Albus Dumbledore, the Hogwarts Headmaster."

"Sir." Cecile dropped a self-conscious little curtsy.

"Good afternoon, miss," Dumbledore said pleasantly. "Now, if you and Professor Snape will excuse me and Professor Swain for a spell, I would very much like to hear about your visit. In the meantime, Severus, why don't you talk to Miss Cecile, and explain to her what will be expected of her this evening. Emily, if you would please come with me?"

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When they were alone in Dumbledore's sitting room, Emily made a full report about her Malfeasant visit to him, including an account of Lucius's stealthy attempts to quiz her about Snape's whereabouts, and a description of what she had overheard at the meeting and glossing completely over the amount of time she had spent sprawled about in various states of undress. She then filled him in on the situation with Cecile, about how she had persuaded Lucius to make a gift of her, and about how Cecile had let slip that she had been an attendant at what appeared to be multiple Death Eater conferences in the last year. "My reasons for asking for her were twofold I wanted to get her out of there, and I thought she might have some useful information for us."

"Indeed, she might. Severus, however, is extremely suspicious of any new arrival from Malfeasant, as you can probably imagine, and he very much wishes to be allowed to question her under a dose of Veritaserum."

"If he must, he must, I suppose. Shall we get this over with?"

Dumbledore motioned toward the door. "After you."

They returned to Dumbledore's office, where Snape was measuring out three drops of clear fluid into a small cup of water. Cecile was sitting in the same armchair before Dumbledore's desk that Emily had occupied on the night they questioned her about the explosion at the Fusilier, her thin legs and bare feet dangling over the edge some distance from the floor, looking at everyone with large, meek brown eyes.

"Mistress?" the elf squeaked when she caught sight of Emily. "Mistress, can I please be talking to you?"

Emily knelt beside the armchair, Cecile leaned toward her for a nervous little aside "The Mr. Professor, sir, he just said to Cecile that I has to drink Truth Potion, that will make me tell the truth to all his questions," the elf said. "Cecile is not a liar, I has never lied to the Mr. Professor, or the Mr. Headmaster, I was not even *meeting* the Mr. Headmaster till today. So I was saying to the Mr. Professor that I is all right with answering his questions without lying even without Truth Potion, but he says I has to be taking it, just in case. Please, Mistress, is Cecile in trouble... ?" Her thin fingers fell on Emily's arm in a timid, butterfly-light touch. "I was *trying* not to do nothing wrong... I was just *getting* here...?"

"Well, you see, dear, Professor Snape's questions are very important, and we have to be certain you are telling the whole truth," Emily said, glancing at Snape. "We're not asking you because we think you might be a liar, but because it's imperative that what you tell us is true, do you see?"

"I... think I is seeing," the elf said. "If Mistress says it is *very* important... " Cecile turned big, uncertain eyes toward Emily, but when Snape handed her the cup, she drank it.

"Now, if you please, miss," Snape began, "I would like to know the exact circumstances of how Lucius Malfoy gave you to Professor Swain today especially if he gave you any sort of material item, or behaved in a suspicious manner, before he sent you here. Do you recall exactly what happened before you left? Was there anything that happened today that seemed at all strange, or unusual?"

Cecile cowered slightly as she faced Snape, but her manner remained polite and guileless. "Well, he is coming to see me while I is polishing the ballroom floor, after I says good-bye to the Mistress in her room today."

"About what time was that?" Snape asked.

"It was half-past five o'clock, I am thinking... he comes up and says to me, 'Elf, pack your things, you is leaving us.'"

"Is that all he did?" he pressed.

"Well, he was giving me a kick first, to get me to look up and pay my attention, when I is polishing," Cecile admitted, and Emily's hand tightened on the arm of Cecile's

chair. "And then... then I was asking, 'Should I be finishing the floor before I is packing?' and he says, 'Yes, finish the floor, then come and see me in my study.' So I finishes the floor, I do, and pack my pillowcase, and then I comes to see him... and he says, 'You is to take yourself and this letter, and then this Portkey will be taking you to Hogwarts Castle, because you is to belong to the Professor Miss Emily Swain now, I is giving you to her as a token of my esteem. Be certain you serves her well, because... '" Her little piping voice trailed off.

"Because... ?" Snape prompted.

"He says, 'Because if I hears she is not happy with your work, you will be wishing you had never been born,' he says," Cecile said, wilting at the memory. "So then I takes the letter and my bundle and the Portkey the Portkey, it is an old sock, I was throwing it away in a rubbish bin and I comes here, and I talks to the man with the cat and the push broom, and I waits for the Mistress, and when she comes, I gives her the Master Malfoy's letter, and then "

"I understand. And how did you feel, when you were told that you were to come to Hogwarts and serve Professor Swain as her elf? Were you angry? Would you have preferred to stay at Malfeasant?"

"Well... I wants not to speak ill of the Master and Mistress Malfoy, I is a good elf... but when Master Malfoy told Cecile that she was to belong to the Mistress Emily now, Cecile was happier than she has ever been before, because the Mistress " she turned a pleading look toward Emily "the Miss Professor, she is always being so kind to me, she was helping us when we had to be ironing our hands, and then at the party, she took the needle away, and she said, she is not liking to see me suffer, she said... " Her ears and shoulders drooped.

"Cecile did Lucius Malfoy in fact give you to Professor Swain, or did he tell you to come here and pretend to be her elf?" Snape asked, looking very stern and intimidating indeed.

"Master Malfoy is saying that Mistress Emily is Cecile's new mistress," the elf protested, "and she is until the Mistress gives Cecile clothes, and sends me away. But I is hoping the Mistress is not going to send Cecile away... I is good and loyal... I is not wanting to go back to Malfeasant... I didn't tell nothing about the Mistress Emily, not about the Healing Potion, not about the pointy knife and metal pullover in the bathroom cupboard this morning, not nothing... " Then she put her hands over her face and dissolved into quiet sobbing.

At the mention of the knife and armour in the linen cupboard, Emily straightened up, electrified. "I left my armour and a dagger belt in the bathroom linen cupboard, after I had to dash right back to my room last night she could have completely blown my cover, and she didn't, even while she was still the Malfoys' property," Emily said, turning toward Snape. "How much more proof do you need?"

Snape watched Cecile warily, but not as suspiciously as before. Dumbledore glanced between Emily and Snape, then back to the elf before him. "Cecile... I know that your ethics prevent you from comfortably speaking ill of your former masters, but you need to realise that serving Professor Swain is rather more complicated a matter than just mending her clothes," he said in an extremely serious tone. "The Malfoys aren't just cruel to their elves they are cruel to many other people too, and the three of us, Professor Swain, and Professor Snape, and I, we and a group of others are trying to stop them."

Cecile looked up at him, wide-eyed. "You is all three working to stop them? Stop them and... and... *HIM*, too?"

"*Him*?" Snape asked. "Who exactly do you mean by *him*?"

"He is... *him*," Cecile said, barely audibly. "The Dark Wizard... the *white* one... with the *red eyes*."

"Why are you afraid to speak of him, Cecile? What has he done to make you fear him so?" Dumbledore asked.

"You won't get in trouble for telling us and you won't have to hurt yourself, I promise," Emily assured her.

"Well, my... my sister, Nathalie," Cecile began, in a tiny voice, "I is calling her Natty, since we were little, and she is calling me Ceecee... She is serving with me at a meeting once too, the Master and Mistress Malfoy got us together, back when we is just old enough to be serving, this is years ago, back when young Master Malfoy is just a baby... and *he*, that wizard, is staying with us. There is a lady staying with us too, who is his special friend, with long black hair and spooky eyes... and she is asking him, *Teach me to use it, I want you to teach me..*always she is asking him this. So then, he says, *I has heard your petitions again and again and it is time for you to learn. We need a subject for your lessons,* and he calls Natty over to them. And then he says, *This is how it is done, watch closely,* and he points his... he points his wand at Natty, and he says *Crucio*... and Natty is... and the lady, she is laughing, and clapping her hands... " Her face crumpled, her big brown eyes filling with tears.

"He tortured her?" Emily whispered, putting her handkerchief into Cecile's hand.

The elf nodded miserably. "Then... the lady holds up her wand, and points it at Natty, and she says this same word... and... and then she is *doing this all the afternoon to her*, these are her lessons, this is what she wanted to be taught... and I is just supposed to tend the fire, like nothing is happening.*like nothing is happening*... "

The other three people in the room were frozen with speechless horror. Cecile cried softly.

"Yes... the lady in question is very proud that she learned the Cruciatus Curse at his knee," Professor Snape murmured finally. "She often boasted of that, when I knew her."

"So then... the lady says, 'Oh, I am tired now, we will have more lessons tomorrow.' And then she says to Natty, 'Be back here tomorrow at the same time, we will be needing you again.' And Natty gets up, and she *curtsies*, and says, 'Yes, Mrs. Lestrange,' and then they is dismissing us. I is helping Natty back to our cot so she can be lying down, and getting her water, and sponging her face, then... and then she goes to sleep, and I go to sleep beside her... and then when I is waking up the next morning... there is laudanum bottles from the Mistress Malfoy's medicine cabinets... lots and lots of them by our bed, and my sister is... my sister is... " The elf's whole body shook with sobs, and she buried her face in Emily's handkerchief.

"I think I might overdose on laudanum rather than face another day of such *lessons* as well," came Professor Snape's morose voice.

"All right, all right, *enough*, stop it, both of you." Emily put her arm around Cecile's trembling shoulders and drew her against her side, then turned angrily back to Snape and Dumbledore. "I'm keeping her and I don't care what either of you has to say about it. If you won't let me keep her at Hogwarts, I'll move somewhere else instead "

"No, no, that won't be necessary, Professor," Dumbledore interjected, holding up his hand to stop her. "It would be unconscionable to send any elf back to Malfeasant after being released by that family, and I am now convinced that she is no danger to us. After what she has described, I would think Cecile would have more than enough reason to help us see Voldemort brought to justice, rather than undermine us."

Cecile huddled against Emily, nodding so vigorously that her floppy ears wobbled. Emily bent over her murmuring *You're all right, I'm not going to send you away. Don't worry, you don't ever have to go back there,* and gradually, Cecile's sobs quieted.

When the elf had regained her composure, Dumbledore addressed her in a gentle, cordial tone "Well then, welcome to Hogwarts, Miss Cecile. We are happy to welcome you. You will soon find that this castle is home to over a hundred house-elves, and our benefits plan is extensive," he said, smiling. "You will have access to full health and dental care, social activities and educational opportunities. We like our elves to be literate and to keep accurate household accounts here, so when school starts again, you will attend classes with our usual elf schoolmistress, Professor Grubbly-Plank. You will also have full use of all the libraries after hours."

"But Cecile is not a Hogwarts elf," Cecile said, in a tiny voice, peeping out from under Emily's arm. "Cecile serves the Mistress Emily."

"Of course. So you can be responsible for your mistress's apartments and laundry while she lives here. Don't worry, Miss, your loyalties will be honoured. Minerva, Poppy, and Filius all have their own family elves who live at Hogwarts during the school year. Now, is that to your liking?"

Cecile gave another emphatic nod. "Yes yes *YES.*" She looked up at Emily "So I is really staying?"

"Yes, my dear," Emily said firmly. "You is really, *really* staying." She slanted a look back at Professor Snape, as if daring him to say anything about that. He gave her just a second's sidelong look, as though surprised she had ever thought there was any question.

Snape then straightened up from where he had been leaning against Dumbledore's desk, and addressed both Emily and Dumbledore in a lowered tone. "I think we are all in agreement that Cecile will be staying here at Hogwarts," he said, with a moment's look at Emily "But you may be aware, Professor, that there are magics by which a person can be forced to behave in a manner contrary to her true nature, and by which her thoughts and memories can be accessed against her will."

He sank down to one knee by the side of Cecile's chair, looking the elf gravely in the eyes. "Cecile, it is possible that some sort of coercive magic was placed upon you before you left the Malfoys' service. If there was, the memory of such could have been modified or removed, so even if you sincerely believe yourself to be acting under your own will, you may not be. Do you understand?"

Cecile nodded slowly, with a worried glance up at Emily.

"If you will permit me, miss," Snape continued, "I would like to temporarily remove your memory of this afternoon at Malfeasant from your mind, so we three can judge for ourselves whether or not any sort of coercive magics were placed upon you before you left the Malfoys' service. It is quite possible that if there was, the memory of such could have been changed, or removed from your conscious mind. Do you understand?"

Cecile nodded slowly, again glancing up at Emily. "Should I be doing this, Mistress?"

Emily looked at Snape over Cecile's head "You're thinking we should examine her memory of what went on today in a Pensieve, in case they've tried to edit anything suspicious out with an *Obliviate* Spell?"

"Exactly," he said. "They may be able to fool her conscious mind, but they can't fool a Pensieve. If there are gaps in the continuity of her memory, we should be able to detect them."

"Right, good idea," Emily replied, nodding. "Do either of you gentlemen have a Pensieve handy, then?"

Dumbledore then went into an office cupboard, and retrieved what looked like a large bowl full of swirling white mist, which he set on his desk. Snape drew his wand, then crouched down beside Cecile again.

"Now, I'm going to hold my wand against your temple, and then I want you to think back to the time when Lucius Malfoy came to speak to you, to the time you arrived here at Hogwarts "

Cecile glanced up at Emily again. "Should I, Mistress?"

"Yes, you should, dear," Emily said, patting Cecile's shoulder. "It won't hurt. The Professor knows what he's doing."

Snape then gently touched his wand to the elf's temple, talking to her in a low, soothing voice. "The time Malfoy came to see you, to the time you arrived here at the castle... " Cecile half-closed her eyes, remembering, and a pale, misty substance began to collect on the end of Snape's wand. A moment later, he dropped the strand of pure memory into the Pensieve.

"Now," Snape said, bending down to address Cecile again, "Professor Swain has told me that you mentioned to her that you had served at some meetings that had gone on at Malfeasant in the last year "

Cecile gasped, turning to Emily in dismay "It's all right, dear, you didn't blab about the meetings, I did. And seeing as how you're my elf now and not the Malfoys', you don't have to hurt yourself if you do blab anything accidentally, or even on purpose. As a matter of fact, my first official order as your Mistress will be to forbid you to ever intentionally hurt yourself again, period, paragraph, *ad infinitum*," Emily said, with a little, imperious arch of her own sinister eyebrow, then glanced back at Snape. "You were saying, sir."

"The Professor told me that you were in attendance at some secret meetings that went on this year," Snape continued. "The substance of what went on at those meetings is very important to all of us here, and as such, I would very much like to be able to examine those memories," the Professor said, holding up his wand again.

"Mistress?" Cecile asked.

"It's all right," Emily said, patting the elf reassuringly.

Snape put his wand tip to Cecile's temple again. "Now think back to the first secret meeting you attended this year... "

Fifteen or twenty minutes later, Cecile said that she had no more memories of meetings left to give, and asked if it might be getting on suppertime, and if she might be getting down to the kitchens to help with the cooking. The Pensieve was now very full, and Cecile seemed much calmer and more relaxed, her manner and ears perking up as she glanced up at Emily.

"Yes, why don't we take you down to the kitchen, and introduce you around, and you can help with the cooking, if you like. If you please, Professors, I would like the two of you to join me in the Great Hall for dinner in an hour's time," Dumbledore told Snape and Emily. "We have much to discuss."

"Of course, sir," Emily said, and Snape nodded silently.

"Mr. Professor?" Cecile called timidly, "Mr. Professor sir, when you is done with that bowl of memory-stuff, what is going to be done with it?"

"I will return your memories to you as soon as I'm finished with them," he said.

"If it is all right, Mr. Professor, you can be keeping those memories," Cecile said, shuddering. "I is not wanting them back."

"I understand," Snape replied, nodding.

Five minutes later, Emily and Dumbledore were leading Cecile down toward the kitchens, and Snape was heading back to his office, carrying the brimming Pensieve carefully before him.

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When they reached the kitchens, a male elf in mismatched socks, crazily patterned flannel boxer shorts and a short-sleeved Hogwarts school jersey came up to greet them. Cecile took one look at him, stopped dead, and squeaked, "*Dobby?*"

Dobby stared at her. "*Cecile?*"

A second later, the two elves rushed into each other's arms and hugged each other happily. "Cecile is come to Hogwarts!" Dobby cried, sounding thrilled.

"Oh, Dobby, you is all right!" Cecile sobbed. "When I is hearing you caught a sock and was free, I is *worrying* about you so!"

"They know each other?" Emily asked Dumbledore, over the elves' heads.

"Dobby is another former Malfeasant elf he was freed through a clever ruse of Harry Potter's two years ago, and came to work for us afterwards. He was similarly unhappy with his place there," he replied, and Emily nodded.

"Mister Malfoy is today giving me to the Mistress Emily I is her elf now," Cecile said, turning toward Emily with a bright smile. "Mistress, is I to start working right *now*?" She looked as excited at the prospect as a little girl with a pile of presents at Christmas.

"Er, yes, if you want to. First you can help with supper, and get used to the kitchens, and then tonight I want you to go with Dobby and let him find you a place to sleep and keep your things, and let him show you where the laundries and such are, and just generally do a bit of exploring. Hogwarts is a huge place, and I don't want you to get lost in it." She turned toward Dobby "Dobby, do you think you can find the time to make certain Cecile gets situated, and show her around?"

Dobby nodded cheerily. "It is being Dobby's pleasure, Miss Professor."

"Thank you," Emily said, with an appreciative smile. She knelt down at Cecile's side and took her elf's hands in hers "Now don't work yourself too hard tonight. You've had a long day, and I want you to get to bed early and let yourself wind down, all right? I'll Floo you tomorrow when I need you."

Cecile gave another emphatic, ear-shaking nod, watching Emily with shining eyes. "Thank you, Mistress. I is thanking you very, *very* much."

"You're welcome," Emily replied.

Part Third: The Hart Subvertant, Chapter 29, Part 2

Chapter 46 of 55

After Voldemort's return, Professor Swain has agreed to Sirius Black's suggestion that she use her influence with Lucius Malfoy to gather intelligence on the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters. As her horror of the Dark Lord grows, her old enemy Severus Snape proves to be the only one who understands the fear and doubt that plague a double agent…

Chapter 29, Part 2:

Later, perhaps at around eight o'clock that evening, Emily arrived in the Great Hall for a quiet three-person supper at the high table. Dumbledore and Professor Snape were already seated at the table, which was set with the usual golden dinnerware and covered with a small but princely feast: a tiny Chateaubriand, a whole roast squab on a bed of wild rice, wood ear and portabella mushrooms in a sauce of red wine, butter and herbs, fresh asparagus, potatoes *lyonnaise*, a tureen of rich duck and vegetable soup, a tiny wheel of ripe Camembert and hot, fresh-baked wheat baguette, and bottles of white Bordeaux in a golden bucket of ice. There was also a lush centrepiece of loosely arranged wildflowers and fragrant greenery, set about with bright little votive candles.

"Well, methinks I detect Miss Cecile's hand in tonight's supper," Emily said as she took the seat at the end of the table, beside Dumbledore. "She does like to show her gratitude by feeding a person well one of her many attractive qualities."

Dumbledore smiled. "House-elves do take exceedingly good care of those they are fond of, and she seems very grateful after the good turns you've done her." He poured a crystal glass of white wine and passed it to Emily.

"Thank you, sir." She helped herself to some soup, vegetables, and potatoes, several slices of squab breast, and bread and cheese.

Snape was carving the roast beef for himself and Dumbledore. "Perhaps two thick slices, Severus. No, make that three. Wonderful, my friend, thank you." The Headmaster spooned large helpings of mushrooms, potatoes, and asparagus onto his plate.

"Still, this is a very handsome gift," Snape observed, putting some of the tender roast beef on his own plate. "Won't this, on some level, make you beholden to Malfoy, Professor?"

"Well... " She sighed, looking troubled. "In theory it would, but there are other factors at work here. To my mind, the obligation imparted by the gift is somewhat negated by the fact that her former masters were abusing her so hideously Cecile's need to be out from under their oppressions trumps the obligations of hospitality, especially when the gift wasn't made out of charity or consideration, but as a bribe. As such, I would think that taking her on as my elf isn't so much the acceptance of a gift as it is the liberation of a captive. Granted, when I came here, it wasn't ever with the intention of adopting a very small person with a desperate need to serve someone to be perfectly honest, the majority opinion of house-elves at home is that they're a bit weird," she said, with a reflective sip of wine. "The Fae for the most part look down on subservience we've never kept slaves or bondservants, it's just not our style. However... I've wanted to get her out of there from the first day I met her, and I've no doubt she would have a better life with anyone other than the Malfoys. And *I'm* not in the habit of making people iron their hands, after all. And you both saw her today she seems to think that changing a bad master for a better one is the best thing that's ever happened to her."

Snape leaned back in his seat, sipping from his wineglass. "All very well reasoned justifications," he observed acidly.

"Well, you're the one who's accused me of quixoticism, so I'll get her a little donkey and she can be my Sancho Panza," Emily snapped back, her voice rising.

Dumbledore glanced from one to the other with a faintly disapproving look, and they both subsided immediately. "What have you discovered from Cecile's memories of the Death Eaters' meetings, Severus?"

"She's given us hours of information I'll probably need a week or so to go over it all," Snape said, forking into his supper.

"And, Emily, I wanted to ask you Cecile mentioned that she brought a letter to you, from Lucius Malfoy. Was there anything in that letter we should know about?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes. He invited me to the Death Eater meeting coming up this Thursday night at Malfeasant," she said.

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There was a long pause.

"Are you going to go?" Snape asked.

"I was thinking I might," Emily said, her eyes on her plate.

Snape turned to Dumbledore. "Do you think she ought to go?"

"I believe Emily can decide for herself as to what she wishes to do in this situation," the Headmaster replied.

"Professor, just so you know, I'm no stranger to diplomatic negotiations," Emily told Snape. "I have to represent my government every time I'm out in the field, in uniform or not. Not only that, but I was part of the honour guard who attended Gwydion and Prince Corryn and my mother while they eked out the agreement for the 3022 Peace stood there and heard every word of it. And this is who they were negotiating with "

She waved her hand at the end of the table, silently speaking a word and a hulking figure materialised from nothingness into the chair at the end of the table. Standing, he would have been immensely tall, close to seven feet, with massive shoulders and heavily muscled arms; three hundred fifty pounds would have been a fair guess at his weight. His skin was ash-grey, mottled about the shoulders and chest with large patches of dark green. His scalp was shaved clean, decorated here and there with raised tribal scarifications, and his ears came to a long, batlike point. One eye was large, deep-set, and calculating, of a pewter grey in colour and the other eye socket was sunken and empty, the lid stitched shut with thick scar tissue. His lips were drawn back in a grimace, revealing long, prominent upper and lower canine teeth. The hands emerging from the sleeves of his leather tunic were huge, with scarred knuckles, and looked crushingly strong.

"Meet the Baalorite Orc Prince Cthroghokkk the Younger not the most dangerous Dark Wizard alive, but still, quite a tough customer," Emily said matter-of-factly. "His father killed my grandfather in the first Defence of Rivendale, for which my mother rather spectacularly did his father in the next day. I'd... *made the acquaintance* of a few of his kinsmen on the battlefield, so you can no doubt imagine about how fond he was of the both of us."

"That green colour in his skin is that normal?" Snape asked, surveying their Glamoured visitor warily.

"Orcs have chlorophyll in their skin they can derive nutritional benefit from sunlight. Another reason why they're so damned tough, and hard to get rid of," she said. "So I had to stand guard as he and about twelve of his officers sat about telling us why we all deserved to be killed and eaten because we could do magic and weren't Orcs, and that all the compromises we offered were unacceptable. It went on for about three weeks until he finally deigned to be persuaded to stop trying to kill all of us, take his forces and a *tremendous* pacification offering and go home, which was all about as exhilarating as you're probably thinking right now."

She dispelled the Glamour with another wave of her hand, and turned back to Professor Snape. "So my point is, sir, perhaps I'm not going into this as completely unprepared as you seem to think I am."

"That enemy sounds only irrational and aggressive," he replied. "The Dark Lord is aggressive, treacherous, highly persuasive, completely unscrupulous, and much more rational than not. Not only that, but you would be negotiating with him alone, surrounded by a roomful of *his* allies, not surrounded by your family and fellow soldiers with an honour guard behind you."

"We had to talk the Orcs out of killing us, mind and You-Know-Who wants to secure my cooperation. He wants something from me, so like you said, I'd be negotiating from a position of strength," she pointed out.

"Well, if you're bent on doing this, I do very much hope you're right," he said. "For your own sake."

"So perhaps I will manage to pull this off as becomes a soldier, instead of like some *stupid little girl*," she snapped, her eyes flaring angrily.

"I *didn't* say that I said you were *naïve*, not stupid "

"Professors, I think we'll all agree that this has been a trying day, so could we please not bicker over supper?" Dumbledore said, with just a touch of weariness in his voice and they both subsided immediately.

"Sorry, sir."

"My apologies, Albus."

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The time until Thursday night was marked by a palpable sense of nervous anticipation from both Emily and Professor Snape. Only Dumbledore seemed as confident and serene as ever, although he met frequently with both Professors, so that both he and Emily could hear Snape's reports on the enemy plans recovered from Cecile's memories, and so that both men could coach Emily on the best strategies with which to approach her appearance at the meeting.

"The Death Eaters view the raids that Arthur Weasley's Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Department has been conducting as a very real threat," Snape told them. "As you can both imagine, what with the amount of Dark Arts contraband and illegal weaponry your average Death Eater keeps about his or her manor, the idea of a Ministry-ordered search makes all of them very nervous indeed. Lucius was on the short list for a surprise inspection just over two years ago, and when he got wind of it through a few corrupt informants, he was furious. I heard all about how much that upset him, until he managed to buy his way out of it. He retaliated by planting a Dark Magical artefact on the youngest of the Weasley children the damn thing nearly got the girl killed, back in 1993."

"He did this to a child?" Emily asked, horrified.

"Yes, to the Weasleys' daughter, who was all of eleven at the time," Professor Snape said grimly. "Arthur has many loyal friends at the Ministry, and his department has been gaining more wide-ranging powers of search and seizure in recent years, so I fear we haven't seen the last of Lucius's plots against Arthur's family. It's one of his favourite tactics to attack indirectly by killing, injuring, or corrupting an enemy's loved ones, and the Weasleys have so many children and close friends that there's a wide range of targets of opportunity." He turned toward Emily "You'll want to pay close attention to any mention of actions against the Weasleys, Professor I'm absolutely certain that feud isn't over."

"I shall be certain to keep an eye out then," she assured them both.

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When she wasn't in tense meetings with Snape and Dumbledore, Emily had the more pleasant task of overseeing Cecile's integration into daily life at Hogwarts. Dobby had found Cecile a place in a cosy little bedroom in the house-elves' dormitory wing, and she had two new roommates whom she liked very much. There had been a big sewing party in the elves' common room on that Tuesday night apparently a house-elf's idea of a rollicking good time consisted of singing elven folk songs, passing around homemade biscuits, cakes, and pies, and working on sewing projects and mending. Cecile thought it was all a great deal of fun, and she told Emily all about it in rapturous terms. She had also been given several tea towel uniforms bearing the Hogwarts crest, which she thought were just terribly elegant.

"But, Mistress, will you be giving me any special Swain family uniforms? Be it all right with you if I wear the Hogwarts crest?" the elf asked.

"Yes, dear, it's fine. I work at Hogwarts, so I'm... more associated with the school right now than I am with the Swain family, so don't trouble yourself about it. Wear whatever you like."

Even in the short time Emily had known Cecile, it was clear that the elf had not been given many opportunities to do what she herself liked before, and she found this newfound good fortune both exhilarating and a touch overwhelming. After being shown where Emily's apartments and office were, Cecile practically exhausted herself with keeping them clean and tidy. In those first few days, Cecile had unpacked nearly everything in her Mistress's Holding Trunk, which Emily herself had done only sporadically since her hasty session of packing up just before what she thought would be her final departure from Hogwarts. The towels and bed sheets were changed daily until Emily prevailed upon the elf that once a week would be often enough. Chide Cecile as she might, however, it really had been very pleasant to come back up to her apartments after a meeting with Snape and Dumbledore and find her closets neatly arranged with all her clothes and belongings again, and all of her books painstakingly organised on the bookshelves. Although Cecile had left all of her weapons and armaments alone, as per her Mistress's earlier orders, Emily had never seen all her belongings so well kept, or her quarters so lovingly tended.

But when all of her work was done, and any busywork that could have been invented was also done, Cecile still seemed nervous about proving her usefulness, to the point of trailing Emily around like a little towel-clad shadow practically waiting for her Mistress's skirts to gather lint or her shoes to get dusty. Now and then, it proved difficult to detach the elf long enough to get some private time to scheme with Snape and Dumbledore.

But one person in the castle could instantly make Cecile cease her hovering and turn tail for the kitchens in search of just about anything to scour or tidy. Professor Snape's temper had worsened as the Death Eaters' meeting approached, and the sight of him coming toward the two of them, scowling like a thundercloud, was usually enough to make the elf drop a desperate little curtsy and flee like a tiny mouse before a very big, angry wolf.

About the third or fourth time this happened, on Thursday afternoon, when the Professor approached the two of them as they strolled through the main foyer, Emily had had enough of it. "Would you stop scaring my elf, please?" she snapped, glaring at Snape.

"She does seem a timid little thing, doesn't she," he remarked. "Rather reminds me of Neville Longbottom."

"When she's with *me*, she's extremely cheerful but yes, I've noticed she's a little afraid of*you*," Emily said tartly. "You are about three feet taller than she is and always looming over her, after all."

Snape's eyes narrowed. "I do not *loom*."

"I'm sorry *you loom*. Deal with it."

He looked annoyed, but nothing further was said on the subject of *looming*. "Today is Thursday, isn't it."

"Yes. I'll be leaving at about half-past ten tonight."

"So... tonight you'll become the first Fae emissary to the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters," Snape said, pausing a moment to let the import of his words sink in. "And not only that, you'll be meeting with them with the intent of sinking their organisation. It's a tall order, madam do you still think you can do it?"

"I fully intend to try, at least," she replied.

"At any rate, the reason I wanted to talk to you today is because I've had an idea since Midsummer's Night, I've been aware that there is a not-insubstantial Faery community living in England, and you do seem to have close relationships with at least some of them. Have any of the other Fae ever expressed the desire to join the opposition effort against Vol against the Death Eaters?" he asked.

"If they've ever thought of it, they haven't mentioned it to me," she replied. "I don't think the threat he represents has quite registered with them. You may recall that during his first rise, in the seventies and eighties, the Fae remained neutral. The general attitude was that we weren't really a part of Wizarding society no matter who was in charge, so why not let the wand-wavers fight amongst themselves."

"Ah, so you were rather like centaurs, then, but with Glamours and underground nightclubs."

"Well, have you ever heard of any centaurs taking a Killing Curse from some masked bloke in a black robe?" she countered. "You-Know-Who met young Mr. Potter on Hallowe'en night before the fight got big enough to affect centaurs in their forests, or the Fae in our underground nightclubs. So no, we were more concerned with things like restrictive Ministry rules designed to limit non-human rights than we were with just about anything else."

"Ministry rules that limited non-human rights in what manner?" he asked.

"Are you familiar with the Code of Wand Use? Its third clause prohibits non-humans from using wands. I quite recall how annoyed you were with me when the lobby security guard gave me a funny look because I didn't have my wand when we went to the Ministry Ball but did it ever occur to you that if I had brought one, they might have confiscated it because I'm not human?"

Both his face and scent registered surprise clearly that legality had never occurred to him. "But your father is human the argument could be made that you're human enough for government purposes, couldn't it?"

"Sir, look at my eyes and ears sometime. You've seen the way I react to iron, you've seen me bleed, and you've seen my hooves," she retorted. "Do I seem *at all* human to you?"

"Well... " He crossed his arms in front of him in his usual contentious posture. "Ultimately, what difference does that make? You've told me you prefer using your True Name to do magic anyway."

"Yes, that's true but why is there legislation prohibiting me from using a wand if I choose to, and if I can do it? There aren't any such laws on the French or Irish law books, why is that?"

"If the point you're making is that the Code of Wand Use is overbroad, badly written and non-specific, madam, then I agree with you," Snape insisted. "However "

"Overbroad, badly written and non-specific or not it's still on the books, isn't it?" she retorted. "And no one's challenging it, not even Dumbledore."

"Have you ever mentioned to him, or to any Ministry officials, that you think it should be amended or overturned?" he challenged back. "I don't think any witch or wizard would deny that the Fae qualify as beings under the Ministry's criteria, or that your people are powerful users of magic if the Fae were to form their own activist groups or government lobby agency, wouldn't that be more effective than simply hiding yourselves under Glamours and skulking about pretending you don't exist?"

"That's a wonderful idea and I agree completely but you do realise you're talking to the *only* Faerie in the U.K. who's ever been granted a work visa by the Wizarding government, and that had everything to do with Albus Dumbledore's influence," she replied scathingly. "Look, I can see why you'd want to bring more Fae members into the Order of the Phoenix, sir, and again, it's a wonderful idea in theory. However, this isn't a matter of only Dumbledore against You-Know-Who there's a big, slow, crushingly stupid bureaucracy with powers of deportation that's at least nominally supposed to be in charge of your society *and it doesn't like people like me,* don't you understand? What if some other Faerie joins the Order and does something that comes under the Ministry's notice? They would be just as likely to deport such a person for not having work papers as they would be to hand her the Order of Merlin, First Class."

"Nothing will ever change if you don't undertake to change it," he snapped.

"Look, I'm already doing the best I can here, all right?" she flashed back, her voice rising. "I can only do so much, and I'm already neck-deep in this spy game that you keep telling me is so fecking dangerous and now you expect me to organise an Arcadian-rights lobby on top of it all?"

"No, of course not but if this conflict escalates into a point of crisis, wouldn't you agree that perhaps it would be in the best interest of all wizards, witches, and Faeries to oppose him together?" he demanded.

"This, from the man who thought *my father* was naïve," she said, with a cold little laugh. "Here's my final word on the matter, sir I'm willing to volunteer my own aid in this conflict, but that's where it stops. I'm doing this so I can help take down the man who first ruined my father's reputation, and then tried to have him killed. If any other Fae decide to commit to this cause, they'll have to do it of their own volition, because I can't in good conscience urge them to do so, knowing what could happen to them if I do, can't you see? If they don't get it from the Death Eaters, they'll get it from the Ministry, and I'm not about to ask anyone else to subject themselves to that."

"Well then, I suppose I have my answer," he said, and took his leave of her with an ironic bow. "Good evening, madam."

He turned and headed back in the direction of the Slytherin dungeons, and Emily headed back up to her own apartments to finish her preparations for what lay ahead that evening.

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Bloody hell. What to wear to a Death Eater meeting, of all things.

Emily thought about appearing in her formal dress uniform, complete with chain mail, sword, cloak and plastron embroidered with Third Kingdom colours but then thought the better of it. Military dress seemed too overt of a gesture; she neither wanted to appear hostile, an armed enemy stalking in to issue a challenge, nor did she want to appear like an obedient soldier reporting for duty.

Lucius had said elegant business attire, but mindful of this *first Fae emissary* business, she looked through her closet for something in the Arcadian style, not an Arcadian-made approximation of Wizarding dress robes. How about something in the Third Kingdom's colours, and that revealed her Fianna insignia, just to remind them all who she was and where she came from yes, that might work. She finally decided on a sleeveless black gown of finely pleated spidersilk embroidered with a delicate pattern of silver grapevines at the neck and hem, with a long flowing kirtle of deep violet; the sort of thing she might have worn to a diplomatic reception for visiting dignitaries at Court. Her Arcadian pearls, definitely; and then she added a Glamour to her Fianna tattoo an extremely subtle low-light effect that outlined its intricate pattern with glimmering silver, just to make it all the more eye-catching. Next, she slicked her hair back from her ears, and darkened her brows and lashes to play up those *uncanny* eyes. Finally, just because she trusted Lucius Malfoy and his Dark Lord about as far as she could have chewed and spit a brace of African elephants, she threaded a miniaturised rapier and twelve-inch hunting dagger under her lapel.

Well then, she thought, standing back and examining the effect in the mirror. Quite the drawing-room warrior indeed.

"My my my," her mirror said, as she surveyed herself before going out. "Who is it you're going to see tonight, dearie, the Queen, or the Minister of Magic?"

"Would that it were either," she sighed.

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No matter how impressive her mirror thought she looked, when Lucius's Portkey deposited her in the rose garden terrace just outside Malfeasant at just after half-past ten that night, Emily could only hope that she appeared more confident than she felt.

A wretched little house-elf in a black pillowcase uniform came to meet her in the garden, and then led her through the corridors to a familiar foyer and richly decorated entrance hall located in an east wing of the house... a receiving room just outside a conference hall that was now disturbingly familiar.

"Darling, so good to see you. You look lovely." Lucius appeared from a shadowy knot of men in black robes, and first pressed a fervent kiss to her cheek and then a glass of brandy into her hand. "We're all so pleased you could join us."

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At perhaps five minutes before eleven p.m., the assembled guests filed into the east wing conference room. Emily immediately recognised the interior of the room she had spied upon on the previous Saturday night glancing right, she espied the courtyard where she had observed the earlier meeting. Lucius motioned Emily to the foot of the table, and took the seat at her right hand. Walden Macnair took the seat to her left.

And of course Lord Voldemort himself was already seated at the head of the table, resplendent in flowing robes of elegant black velvet, a cut crystal glass of fine brandy dangling from his long white fingers. He reclined in his seat with perfect insouciance as everyone in the room greeted him with deep bows.

That is, everyone but Emily.

Druella Black turned a scandalised look at her as she remained upright, drawing the attention of their dread Lord, who regarded her with an indulgent look. *An obeisance is customary upon entering and leaving my presence,* Voldemort told Emily, just for her own information.

"I see," she said politely. "Then I do beg your pardon, sir, but thousands of years of Faery custom dictate that a Fianna knight pays homage to no one but Arcadian royalty, and her Goddess."

An instant silence fell and the ticking of the clock in that room suddenly seemed very, very loud. Several members of the company looked nervous, while Druella Black looked outraged, and Lucius glanced toward his Lord with anxiety in his eyes. Voldemort remained silent, looking penetratingly at Emily and her palms dampened as she wondered if perhaps this show of loyalty to Gwydion would be her last ever. Nonetheless, she held her head up and maintained a proud, at-attention stance. Finally, his posture relaxed, and he motioned her to the chair at the foot of the table. *Please, won't you join us,* he said, with icy cordiality.

"Thank you, sir," she said, and took her seat.

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*Despite your insistence on such separatist gestures, our organisation remains committed to that which we have promised to your people*Voldemort said, by means of an opening salvo. *As you recall, we fully intend to support the Fae in your ongoing quest for freedom from Orcish persecution*

"Yes, I recall your remarks at our first meeting, and the offer was indeed an extremely generous one," Emily said, with a warm smile. "Now, however, I would like to perhaps move into the more concrete and practical terms of that offer if I could ask you to be a bit more specific?" She may have been a newcomer to this conflict, but in mentioning aid against the Orcs, Voldemort was talking about *her* war, her field of expertise, and she was not about to let him soft-soap her there. She was calling his bluff, forcing him to commit himself.

Voldemort seemed to be given pause for just an instant. *I beg your pardon?*he asked.

"I'll level with you, sir. I can hear my mother's voice now 'Who is Lord Voldemort, and how many divisions does he have?'" Emily said, looking into the Dark Lord's eyes. "What shall I tell her, sir? Your average large-scale confrontation between Orcish forces and the Fianna is a matter of thousands against thousands. It seems to me as though your forces are comprised of about thirty or forty aristocrats with wands and you do realise that ours is a culture of wandless magic. Those who can only do magic with wands are considered... a bit limited," Emily said pleasantly, by means of a first forward action. At her right hand, Lucius's scent suddenly infused itself with a great deal of acid nervousness perhaps he hadn't expected his *little blonde pixie* to sashay prettily in and serve up a game of political hardball.

Voldemort's deliberate gaze met Emily's across the table. *Perhaps,* he said. *But as you already know, my Lady, our magics are formidable. It has come to my attention that the Fae magical canon has no analogue of the Killing Curse, after all.* Parry, riposte.

"Yes, you're right, of course. But somehow I can't see the sublimely dignified Mrs. Black there, or the redoubtable Mr. Malfoy here, dashing onto a battlefield, wand at the ready," she said, with a faint, challenging smile. "I'll not sugar-coat matters for you, sir the scope of the Faerie-Orc conflict is tremendous. This is a millennial land war it has been going on since before Gryffindor, Slytherin, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff were born, since before even the Merlin's time."

Voldemort paused did he actually look a bit defensive? *Perhaps we should discuss my ideas for domestic policies benefiting the Fae community before we touch on the subject of military aid to foreign lands.* Disengage, retreat.

"That sounds like a fine idea," Emily agreed, with a gracious smile, knowing that the first point of this engagement had gone to her.

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It was funny, when she asked the Death Eaters what they could do for her people, they always seemed to bring the conversation back around to what they expected the Fae to do for them. It was really becoming quite predictable.

Voldemort had just proposed that they should discuss his ideas for domestic policies benefiting the Fae community, yet somehow he seemed a great deal more interested in attempting to pick her brain as to how many Faeries were currently residing in Europe and the British Isles. "Perhaps a thousand in England and Scotland, perhaps three thousand in Ireland, and probably two thousand on the Continent, according to our estimation," Emily said.

And what percentage of those, would you say, have trained in the Fianna?

"I would say that ten to fifteen percent of those have some military training," she replied after a moment's thought. Those sovereigns who sent sentries out to observe the Wizarding and Muggle communities and recruit for the Tithe tended to send either highly capable royal servitors with political influence, like Lord Malabar Puck, or Fianna soldiers with Second World ancestry, like Emily herself and her friend Alain Collier.

Voldemort very briefly exchanged a look with Malfoy Lucius was giving his Lord a very *See what I mean?*sort of smile, and Voldemort was nodding sagely. Emily of course knew that the likelihood of even the most disgruntled Fae soldier actually paying homage to Voldemort was virtually nonexistent, but as the possibility of such was the cornerstone of all her bargaining power here, she was now concealing that with almost the same ardour as she would have safeguarded her True Name. Now, all she had to do was make the assembled company offer her as much information as they could about themselves, their aims, their goals, their assets, and their plans for the future, while revealing as little about herself and her own goals as possible, and given the megalomaniacal nature of both Voldemort and Lucius Malfoy, they would no doubt greatly enjoy an opportunity to expand on the topic of themselves before a fascinated audience.

All of which meant, of course, that she was in her element.

Emily leaned forward with a warm, sympathetic smile and said: "You mentioned in our earlier talk that you had quite a few ideas for change in the Wizarding community. Your vision sounds absolutely fascinating. Please, won't you elaborate on that?"

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Some hours later, Voldemort and Lucius had been talking in turns for so long that they called for a half-hour's break, and Emily was thinking that her next report to Dumbledore would be a juicy one indeed. She had just been given a thorough briefing as to who was funding their organisation, and had an excellent idea as to the structure of the Death Eaters' network of contacts throughout the Ministry. She also intended to bring their plans to exploit the power vacuum created by the death of Bartemius Crouch, Sr. to Dumbledore's attention the instant she returned to Hogwarts. It was also intensely heartening to know that in the Death Eaters' opinion, the students of Slytherin House were not proving to be the eager and tractable recruits as they had been in the seventies, a development for which she no doubt had to give credit to Dumbledore, Professor Snape, and the resultant notoriety from the incident with the Potters in 1981.

She stood with the others when Voldemort called a temporary adjournment to the meeting, nodding respectfully while the others all bowed to him, then followed as the guests moved onto the rose garden terrace, where uniformed house-elves immediately began taking drink requests.

"Emily, how lovely to see you." Emmitt Parkinson appeared at her left shoulder. "Please, can I get you a drink?"

"Good evening, Emmitt, always a pleasure. I'd adore a glass of champagne " It seemed that she had no sooner spoken the words than a house-elf had scurried up, bearing a cool fluted glass on a silver tray, which Parkinson handed to her. "Lovely, thank you."

"I must say, I'm so pleased to see our... *Women's Auxiliary* expanding, if you will," Parkinson said with a conspiratorial little smile. "Back in the eighties we had a wonderfully capable lady working with us, but alas, she's been out of commission for some time. For so many years now, it's just been Felina and Druella stalwart supporters, both of them, but it's nice to see some new blood joining the ranks."

"Yes, poor old Bellatrix, goodness, how I miss her." Walden Macnair approached the two of them from the right, and Emily turned and included him in her smile of greeting as well. "Never a dull moment when she was about, dear thing, quite the star of the show. And *capable* describes her almost as much as it does you, Lady Swain." Emily's nose twitched for an instant yes, that was Walden Macnair for you, tall, dark, strapping, and stinking of the rut from two feet away.

"Capable, and lovely," Parkinson put in, clinking his glass against Emily's.

"Oh, you two silver-tongued flatterers, I shall never stop blushing tonight, at this rate," she said, with a girlish laugh, smiling warmly at both Parkinson and Macnair. The two of them were clearly enjoying her attention, although Parkinson's scent remained neutral instead of suffusing with lust, like Macnair's it really did seem as though Professor Snape was absolutely right in thinking that Emmitt Parkinson only had eyes for his wife.

"Emily, my dear do you think I could have a word?" Lucius had appeared at her elbow. "Emmitt, Walden, might I borrow the Professor for a moment?"

"Of course, Lucius," Parkinson said, with a gracious nod.

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"Darling, was there really a need to be so contentious during the meeting?" Lucius asked, after he had taken her into a secluded rose-covered loggia for a private aside. His voice was the usual cultured drawl, but there was still an acid tang of nervousness under his ineffable demeanour. "I had rather thought you were more sympathetic to the cause than that."

"I was contentious?" Emily asked, the picture of innocence.

"Well, I had hoped you would be more agreeable, more open to new ideas, than you proved to be tonight," he said, a note of gentle reproving in his voice.

"I thought I was perfectly agreeable," she replied, smiling.

"Yes, you were charming but did you really need to start by bringing up his martial shortcomings, first off? That was a bit tactless, my love "

"Oh, Lucius... " She put her arms around his neck and drew him in for a long, explicit kiss and he rather reluctantly let himself be distracted. "I've let you have me in every

way possible, darling, you know that. *But,* you see, in matters of my homeland's politics you're just going to have to expect me to be a little *contentious*, as you put it. Surely you realise there's a great deal more at stake in that conference room than there is when I'm... lying beneath you in bed?" She smiled appealingly up at him, stroking his silvery hair.

"Well, yes, of course," he said. "However "

She laughed softly. "My dear, surely you realise you can't expect the King's entire army to be as eager to get into bed with you as I was? Rome wasn't built in a day, you know. I remember when you knew how to... *take your time* about matters... ?" She slanted a look of gentle reproach up at him.

"Ah... of course," he said, perhaps a touch sulkily. He had clearly expected her to be as sensual and tractable at this meeting as she had been in the past, and was finding this new combination of sensual and obdurate somewhat inconvenient.

"Anyway, why don't we talk about this later, at the Cockatrice that is, if you still want to meet up this weekend," she said, allowing a bit of sulkiness to creep into her own voice as well.

"Yes, I do want to meet up this weekend, the arrangements have all been made I'm looking forward to that," he said, his arms tightening around her. "Why on Earth would you think I didn't want to?"

"Well... I probably shouldn't even say, it's just... "

"Please, tell me, I insist, darling," he said, bringing her hand up to his lips and kissing it.

"Over the weekend, at Draco's party... well, I just felt rather elbowed out of the way by that... *Rosier* woman, is all. During the ball, she was all but hanging around your neck the entire night, while you let *me* be pestered by a lot of clumsy teenage boys. Would you mind telling me what, exactly, is going on between you two?" she asked, pouting at him.

Surprise registered on Lucius's face for the space of about one split-second, and then drew her close into his arms, oozing reassurances. "Nothing, *nothing*, my dear, really. I don't even like her, truly she's an old school friend of Narcissa's, and lost her husband so young, you see, and "

"Please, dear, you don't need to tell me about how fond you are of comforting widows," Emily said, with a harsh little laugh. "I'm not a little girl, Lucius, I know how the world works. If the two of you are finding that you can't live without each other these days, I can always step aside, get out of your way "

He hesitated for a long moment, and Emily hoped against hope that he was about to take her up on that offer, and not come out with a lot of protestations of his love and devotion but a second later, of course he had to do just that. "No, darling, no! *Please*, no I can't think of anything more awful don't you have any idea how desolate you'd leave me?"

"Lucius?" They both looked up to see Felina Rosier approaching them with a look of annoyance on her face. "There you are... you'd been away for so long that everyone was rather wondering where you'd gotten to." She looked at the two of them embracing, with clear annoyance and distaste.

Emily gave Lucius a long look of reproach, and then pulled away from him and stalked off into the rose garden, feigning a high dudgeon of jealousy and leaving Mrs. Rosier to deal with whatever Malfoy-ish bad temper resulted therefrom and privately feeling quite satisfied at the havoc she had wreaked so far that night.

My word, what fools these mortals be!

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"That is... very generous of you, sir," she replied.

I am pleased that you accepted our invitation tonight... and pleased that you have proved to be more than I was told you were, he said. *Perhaps later, there will be more time for us to talk privately ?*

"Perhaps there will be," she said faintly. Faced with all that incredible charisma and personal glamour bearing full-force down on her, she barely knew what she was saying to him. Her will seemed to be draining quietly away.

Good, he said, and then he had released her hand but not without giving it another conspiratorial little squeeze. A second later, he was silently moving away along the garden path.

Emily barely managed to make it to a low stone bench before her knees had completely turned to water.

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and Felina Rosier began to put forth leaves.

A moment later, bark was growing up to cover her hands and feet, growing up arms and legs toward her chest. She tried to run away, but roots broke through her shoes and were stabbing into the ground, anchoring her to the ground where she stood beside the rose garden. She then reached for her wand, but a moment later her fingers were too stiff to close around it, and it fell to the grass. And then the screaming started, and before long the pleading, and then the gibbering. Then the bark closed over her mouth and she could not be heard at all.

"*Fuck*... me," Menzentius Black whispered, sounding both horrified and fascinated.

"Emily, my dear, you really might want to stop that now," Lucius said, his voice half an octave higher than it usually was.

How intriguing, Voldemort's voice breathed from Emily's left. *Can you completely transform her? Permanently?*

Emily's only answer was a giddy, deranged little laugh clearly, she could, and was relishing the idea of doing so. Peripherally, she could see him watching the proceedings with detached, almost scholarly interest. In another moment, Felina Rosier's arms were branches six feet long, her fingers stretching grotesquely into twigs, her hair disappearing in a thick foliage of leaves. But her eyes were still recognisable, staring straight ahead in stark, nightmarish horror, and from the rictus-like jerking of her body, this transformation seemed a painful one indeed.

"*Stop it*," Lucius ordered, but his scent, like those of the men around him, was deeply coloured with rank fear. She ignored him, as though he had never spoken at all.

After a long moment, Voldemort seemed to have seen enough. *You should release her,* he said to Emily, almost conversationally, as though offering her a bit of neighbourly advice.

Emily waited for a few, excruciatingly long heartbeats, then muttered: "As you wish." She made a slashing motion with her arm, like a conductor silencing an orchestra and then Felina Rosier was herself again, her clothes tattered, and her face covered with sweat and tears. She stood for a moment, screaming all the screams that had been suppressed before, then tried to fling herself into Lucius's arms for comfort. He brushed her off onto Menzentius with a look of distaste.

Yes, Lucius, Voldemort remarked. *You were right. Lady Swain does rather remind one of Bellatrix.*

Emily turned and silently left the garden, heading back inside to the drawing room and everyone stood aside and let her pass.

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Voldemort turned toward a large, full-length antique cheval glass hanging on the wall, one of the ever-present large mirrors Narcissa favoured in her décor. From far away in that looking glass's horizon, a dark figure had appeared, was coming closer a tall, thin, pale man, black hair past his shoulders, in a sweeping black cloak

No, she thought, he can't know, he can't have heard, I never told anyone, I won't have him like that, I won't have him any way at all unless he wants it too

The black silhouette in the mirror drew closer, and she saw not the first tall, thin, pale, and black-haired man that came to mind, but another -

Dorien.

Her late but still so much beloved husband was facing her in the mirror.

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Emily put her hand up, palm flat on the mirror, and Dorien also put up his hand and sealed it to hers.

She wanted to reach through this glass and touch him, hold him, feel his heart beating again. If she could only have that moment back, four years ago, that moment before that cruel arrow had entered his back and torn open arteries, liver, lungs; when he was whole and healthy and she could still save him. Jayson was gone; she had killed him. He could never harm Dorien again.

Oh, his face, that imperfect, exquisite face, those endlessly intense black eyes... he had loved her from the first with a wild, non-judgmental, unswerving devotion; he had told her in his wedding vows that his only wish was to always live his life as her knight. Although he was never easily led, always insisted on making up his own mind and refused to subvert his own will to hers sight unseen had even defied her outright on one memorable occasion she had never worried for a moment that he was not listening to her, or that he didn't respect her wishes.

Dorien. I love you. I miss you so much. I had to remind myself to feel anything at all for so long after you died. Just come back, and I'll never let anyone hurt you, ever again.

Her fingers curled against the mirror, nails rasping against the glass as though to tear through it and feel him warm and alive again.

So, the high, cold voice said, *is this someone that you would like to have returned to you?* From behind her, a long-fingered hand descended delicately onto her shoulder.

"Yes," she whispered. "Oh, please, yes."

Part Third: The Hart Subvertant, Chapter 30, Part 1

Chapter 47 of 55

After Voldemort's return, Professor Swain has agreed to Sirius Black's suggestion that she use her influence with Lucius Malfoy to gather intelligence on the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters. As her horror of the Dark Lord grows, her old enemy Severus Snape proves to be the only one who understands the fear and doubt that plague a double agent…

Chapter 30, Part 1:

It couldn't be true.

It simply could not.

The Death Eaters' meeting continued around her, but Emily sat in her chair with her mind in a whirl. Lucius was making a report about his efforts in creating a Department of Interdimensional Magical Cooperation, and she barely heard a word of it. When it came to an end, she excused herself as quickly as she could and left without a private good-bye to Lucius. She never even noticed him scowling as he watched her leave.

She made her way back to Hogwarts, numb to everything except the possibility Voldemort had held out to her. Previously, she had always believed that nothing and no one could bring the dead back to life, it was impossible. Faery magic couldn't do it, European Wizarding magic couldn't do it, the ancient Babylonian mage lords couldn't do it, Native American shamans couldn't do it, the life adepts of ancient Egypt couldn't do it, Qabbalistic magicians couldn't do it, the Persian Ahrimanes couldn't do it, the dread *Mystai Ourobouros* of Greece couldn't do it; there was no magical tradition on any dimension anywhere that had ever managed to bring a long-dead person back to life, ever. It was hard, inalienable fact that such magic was impossible.

But since Dorien had died... the hope that he still existed somewhere had always clutched at her, and had never quite let go. And he had looked at her so longingly from inside the mirror... as though he had missed her for such a long time. He looked exactly the way he always did just before the two of them were separated his face would be stoic, but something in his eyes always let her know how much he hated to be parted from her.

Perhaps Dorien was out there, and he still loved her and wanted to get back to her. *Maybe she could have him back again.*

She had, after all, been made the offer by someone who by all rights should be dead, who managed to preserve himself in a spirit form for over eleven years after what was purported to have been his final demise... and that someone was certainly solid enough and alive enough, judging from the way he had spoken to her, and touched her, that evening. They had told her Voldemort was cruel, and evil, but no one had ever told her how compassionate he could be that he could look into someone's very heart and offer her what *she* really wanted, even if it ran counter to what some high muck-a-muck in his organisation like Lucius wanted. Oh yes, the fact that the Dark Lord was capable of kindness and understanding had been conveniently overlooked by those who didn't know him, *hadn't it.*

Emily suddenly noticed that she was back at Hogwarts, having found her way there by rote and Hogwarts, of course, had a huge collection of books on magic. If there was any possibility that what the Dark Lord had said was true, she was going to find out. It couldn't hurt to judge all the facts of what he had offered for herself, and see if there was any possibility... if there was a chance...

A moment later, she set off for the great Main Library at a run.

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The library section on magical biology and life magics yielded a few interesting tomes, as did the Magical Metaphysics section, and the Egyptology section and

parapsychology sections had some interesting volumes as well. Before long she had perhaps a dozen books open on one of the library tables, searching for documentation for the ritual that Voldemort had described to her.

The resurrection rite was both new and ancient, taken piecemeal from many sources, most of them forbidden and long discredited by those too short-sighted to seek real power, he had told her. And oddly enough when she researched his sources, she found that much of what he had said had quite a bit of foundation to it. The author of *Egyptian Resurrection Magic Fact or Fiction?* referred to an accursed but highly effective rite, the only known instructions for which had been inscribed on papyrus made from human skin and stored in a vault guarded by thirteen poisonous snakes, and as it turned out, there was an account of that rite contained in a volume by the same author in the Restricted Section. The book started to writhe and shriek in protest when she took it out of the Restricted stacks; she gave it a cuff and snapped, "Shut up, I'm a Professor," and the book fell silent with a little shiver.

She took that volume back to her little cache and pored over it, her eyes feverishly scanning its description of Dark magic thousands of years old. The stack of books on the table grew as the clock above her ticked from three a.m., to four, to six a.m., unnoticed.

Some time later she turned and reached for *Theories of Theosophical Self-Substantiation* again and ran headlong into Professor Snape, who had apparently come into the library and had been approaching her from the left.

She bounced off of him as fast as she could. "My word do you *ever* make any noise when you walk? Honestly!"

"I beg your pardon," he said stiffly, obviously taken aback by the vehemence in her tone. "I wasn't trying to be quiet. You seemed... distracted when I came in."

No answer. She rifled through the book and bent over it as though he had ceased to exist.

"Have you been to bed yet?" he asked, glancing at her rumpled clothes, the violet kirtle unceremoniously discarded near the door. She continued reading, as though he had never spoken at all.

Professor Snape moved closer to her, taking up a position perhaps six inches off her left ear. "Am I disturbing you?" he asked in a louder voice.

Emily never even looked at him. "Yes, you are. Go away." She riffled to the index, finger scanning down entries, then paged furiously.

He blinked, as if taken aback by this uncharacteristic rudeness. "That must be some *awfully* important research," he said archly.

"It is."

"So I see, if it takes precedent over briefing me on the *Death Eater meeting* you attended," he prodded.

She finally paused, her fists flexing at her sides. "Do I bother you when *you're* working?" she snapped. When he paused before answering her, she demanded "Well? *Do I?*" in an even harsher tone.

"No, you don't," he admitted.

"Then why the sudden interest in what I'm reading? You spent an entire school year acting like I didn't exist, so why don't you just go back to doing that, all right?"

He just looked at her silently, eyes narrowing in surprise and incredulity. "Again, I beg your pardon," he said, very stiffly indeed. "I merely wanted to know what went on tonight."

"It was fine," she said, distracted, bending over another book. The Dark Lord already having proved that it was possible to keep a spirit preserved even after the death of the physical body, it would be a matter of finding where Dorien's spirit had gone following his death and getting in contact with him

Behind her, Snape bent over the pile of titles littering the table. *Egyptian Resurrection Magic Fact or Fiction? Beyond the Veil. Conversations with Spectres. After Life. Summa diabolica.* Both eyebrows went up in alarm when he glanced over her selections from the Restricted Section.

"Who was there?" he asked.

"Macnair, Parkinson, Lucius, You-Know-Who. You know, the usual suspects," she said impatiently. They would need a host body for Dorien's spirit while he got strong enough, material enough, to be properly resurrected he could certainly share hers, willingly, the Mother knew she wouldn't mind that one bit, it might even be rather nice, she'd thought they were like one soul in two bodies half the time anyway

"The Dark Lord was there?" His eyes were fixed on the side of her face. "Did you speak to him?"

"Yes, yes, we talked." She put *Theories of Theosophical Self-Substantiation* aside, and reached for *Summa diabolica.* Yes, here it was, he was right, two different sources, even. It would be easy enough for her to obtain Dorien's father's bone, she knew where he was buried, and she wouldn't even need to disturb his grave to obtain it. No one would even need to know she'd been there anyway

"May I ask what you talked to him about?"

Bloody hell, what was with all these *questions!* Emily thought, harassed. He acted like he was going to write the event up for the gossip column of *The Quibbler* or some such nonsense. Why would he not just *leave her alone,* damn it... !

"No one you know." She paged frantically fuck, this book had been written before indexes were invented, one ended up having to scan for what one wanted, what a bother. But wait, here it was *Flesh of the servant or the slave, freely or voluntarily given* Cecile was such a dear, adoring little thing that she would probably part with a bit of skin if asked, perhaps a tiny bit of one of those big droopy ears of hers, the castle physicians could always grow it right back for her, and under some local anaesthesia the removal wouldn't hurt a bit

Then, from behind her, someone's hand firmly descended on her shoulder which surprised her enough to penetrate though her obsessive reverie for a second.

"Who was it that he offered to bring back from the dead for you?" Professor Snape asked in a very deliberate voice, close to her ear. "Your grandparents? Someone who died under your command?"

She stopped, her hand arrested in the middle of turning a page; took a laboured breath, and let it out very slowly.

"Or was it your husband?" he asked quietly.

"I said, *No one you know,*" she repeated.

"Professor "

"This is none of your business," she whispered and there was a dire warning edge in her voice that she had never used with him before.

"It can't be done," he said. "It can't. He claims that he can raise the dead, but there has never been any proof. It's just a lie that he uses to secure his followers'

compliance."

"What do you know about it?" she flashed back at him.

"*Professor.*" From behind her, she felt his hand press her shoulder, with what she would later recall was great gentleness. "I know you loved him. I know you still grieve for him. *But it can't be done,*" he said again, with finality. "He's lying to you."

She turned on him, eyes blazing and self-control breaking. It wasn't fair to vent one's frustrations on the bearer of bad news and she knew it, but at that moment, she hated Severus Snape in the way we only ever hate those who dash the deepest, most desperate desires of our hearts.

"And why should I listen to *you*, pray tell?" she snapped. "Are you an expert on resurrection and regeneration of living creatures? *Are you?*" Suddenly that imperturbable demeanour of his was loathsome to her; she wanted to rake her nails across his face, just to see the son of a bitch react to pain, show a flicker of emotion just *once*.

"No, I'm not. That's a job for the Department of Mysteries, if anyone "

"*Then why should I believe you?* she almost shrieked. "It's all very well for you to say it can't be done, since you don't actually *care* about anyone. Everyone you know could probably die tomorrow and it would barely register with you. But some others of us out there who aren't monks to academia require a little more than a new crop of dunderheads to terrorise in order to feel content with our lives. *Did that ever occur to you?*"

He stared at her, outraged, a hectic flush rising high on his cheekbones. "How dare you," he whispered. "I cannot believe that you would be so selfish and unfair "

"*Don't you dare lecture me about what's unfair!*Do you have any idea what it is to watch someone totally blameless die horribly? By all that's holy, have you ever felt anything, or loved *anyone*, in your whole life?" A tear slipped down her cheek, and she clawed it away. Not in front of him *never* in front of him.

"*Yes, I have,*" he said, and there was something in his voice when he said it; an unending pain that she recognised immediately. Then because we always remember such things the second after cruel words have irrevocably been said she remembered that Irma had told her that Professor Snape's mother had died while he was a boy at school, and how bitter he had become afterward.

For a moment, she just stared at him, stricken, hovering on the verge of any number of reactions *I'm sorry* and *Shut up* and *Please forgive me* and *I hate you* and *Leave me alone*, and underlying all of them was *I hurt, and it will never end.*

Then she couldn't have hoped to hide the tears. She threw down the book in her hand, and left him alone in the library.

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Emily fled back up to her room, then flung herself onto her bed and into a short, cathartic crying jag that quickly led to a dreamless, exhausted sleep.

She awoke early that evening, and spent a long hour lying in the dark, thinking about all that she had read, and all that Professor Snape had told her.

Faery theology had never contained any version of the Christian concept of *soul*, the immortal part of humankind, a separate body of luminous energy inhabiting the material flesh many centuries earlier, this difference in Arcadian and Christian spiritual philosophies had led to the accusation of *soullessness* being levelled at the Faery people by the early Christian church. The Arcadian religion did not separate flesh and soul Faeries believed that their physical selves and the spark of the divine animating them were indissoluble. Most Faeries believed that they would rejoin the Mother Goddess after death, their life force returning to the source from whence it came. The human concept of going on to a better life after death, and especially of earning the right to that paradisiacal afterlife through the practice of asceticism and self-sacrifice, was not popular in Arcadia; to a Faerie, the real sin was failing to celebrate and enjoy the life one had been given. Emily had once heard a visiting Seventh Kingdom Druid scoff to a Roman Catholic Tithe page, her Muggle friend Kevin Patrick "You human beings practice your religion we Arcadians *live* ours."

But even if Voldemort had been right, and she could bring him back... Dorien had been a devout follower of the Goddess, and if he had gone back to the bosom of the Mother after his death, it was possible that he wouldn't even remember that he had once been alive and had a wife who loved him, any more than sunlight can remember from whence it came, or fire is aware of itself. And if the human theologians were right and deserving souls went on to paradise, Dorien might not want to be taken out of his final rest and reward, even if it was to be reunited with the person he had loved most during his life. All of the sources she had read early that morning were very clear that the transcended departed never returned willingly and had to be violently wrested back by means of necromantic ritual magic. Yes, well, she probably wouldn't want to be dragged out of heaven either, come to think of it.

Plus... even if he did come back to her, what kind of life would await him here? How would he be received by those who had known him, seen him die, been to his funeral? How would she explain his sudden return to her family, their friends, the King? The Arcadian religion worshipped Nature what would they make of a man returned unnaturally to life? Would they revile him, drive him out, call him a lich, a vampire, or worse? Would the Mother accept him back, or would She see his existence as blasphemy? Would all of Her creation turn against him, the way it did against Name ghouls and the worst of oath breakers? Dorien had loved Arcadia so much that he had devoted his life to its protection how would he feel if he was rejected by the land he revered?

Even if they remained here in the Second World, what kind of future could they expect? She had read the account of the resurrection of Lazarus by Jesus Christ in the Christian Bible as part of her Classics education but that story ended after Lazarus came out of his tomb. She now wondered what happened to him afterward... what place a man returned from the dead could have among the still living. Would it be possible that by allowing all natural law to be defied in order to bring her husband back, that she might make the two of them outcasts in both the worlds they had known?

Even worse if she allowed Voldemort to grant her this boon... what would she owe him in return? This Dark Lord being who he was, the favours he would demand might make her wish that she had joined her husband in death, rather than ante up the reparation for his return. Worst of all, what if Dorien was required to become this man's creature after his resurrection? She imagined Dorien, who had always been so noble and pure-hearted, first drawn unwillingly out of his final rest, at the request of his beloved wife, no less, then forced to repay her debt to the darkest wizard of the modern era through servitude... the very idea was so horrific she could barely imagine it.

No, the choice was clear there was no way she could do that to him, or to herself.

She thought back to what Professor Snape had said in the library *(It can't be done he's lying to you, it's just a lie that he uses to secure his followers' compliance)* and realised, she had been about to give Voldemort substantial power over her due to that lie. If she let him extend such an offer, based all her hopes on such a possibility, what could he force her to do, in order to earn it? Did she want him to have that much power over her?

No. *Never.*

She sighed, holding a pillow tenderly to her chest, now grown more accustomed to the hollow within her that seemed to burn with emptiness. His loss was now so much a part of her that she was starting to be able to confront it without tears, only resignation.

Maybe... much as she missed him and would always love him, it was for the best if she declined Voldemort's offer, and let Dorien rest in peace.

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Some time later, Emily began formulating a proper apology for Professor Snape.

Now that she was better rested, with her fit of high emotionalism spent, she realised that she was guilty of the worst case of shooting the messenger she could have

dreamed of, and ordinary decency dictated that anyone who has borne the brunt of such a rage must be apologised to properly, and immediately.

She quickly showered, brushed her teeth and combed her hair, then threw on a plain black frock and shoes, and went in search of her offended colleague. The dread of what he would have to say about being so abused slowed her steps, but her sense of justice demanded that she could not let her cruelty go unaddressed.

Professor Snape wasn't in his office, or his classroom, or the library, and the Slytherin dungeon guard painting said that he wasn't in his apartments. "You might want to leave him be he's in rather a low mood today, madam," the painting warned her.

"Yes, I imagine he might be," she replied grimly. "Thank you."

Finally, on a hunch, she went up to the tower walk amidst the highest turrets of the castle, and spotted a thin figure in a black cloak hunched against the low stone wall, his head propped morosely on his hand as he gazed out over the lake. He looked like someone who felt very ill-used indeed.

Emily took a deep breath and went to join him, leaning against the wall of the turret walk a few feet away from him. " 'Evening," she said hesitantly. "I thought you might be up here."

No answer, not even an acknowledgment of her presence. If anything, he seemed to be trying to turn as much of his back in her direction as possible.

"Yes, I get that you're furious, and I know you deserve to be. Look... I'm really sorry about what I said earlier today," she said. "I shouldn't have shouted those things at you. I've no excuse other than I was having a *horrible* time of it. While I was at Malfeasant, Mrs. Rosier started in on me about started *taunting* me about what happened to my husband Dorien. That set me off like you wouldn't believe. I hadn't really come down from it yet when you came into the library, and after what You-Know-Who offered me I was... I was really in a state."

No answer. She might as well have never spoken to him at all.

"I know none of what happened was your fault, and I'm sorry I took it out on you. I know you didn't want me to get involved in this. But I'm really in the thick of it now, and you have to know better than anyone what it's like. It was just coming at me on all sides yesterday, like being on a battlefield with antique furniture and better catering, and I'm fighting on it with words, which are *not* my weapon of choice I think that by comparison to diplomatic negotiation, swinging a sword is bloody easy. You were right before when you know who's the monster and who's the knight, it's so simple. But evil can look and sound awfully kind and understanding... it's so bloody *confusing.* I couldn't tell last night if I was getting the better of them, or if they were getting ready to kill me next second. The uncertainty is like to drive you mad."

He remained silent. The wind was blowing his hair around his averted face, which lent an odd vulnerability to him that she had never seen before. The set of his shoulders seemed so tired and deflated.

"And it's just... I wasn't ready to lose him. And I miss him so much." Her voice broke, and she took several deep breaths before continuing. "When You-Know-Who said he could bring him back for me, I wanted it to be true."

Still no response. His hands tightened on the wall in front of him.

"You probably think I'm pretty horrible, don't you," she said, resigned. "And if you do, you're probably right."

She turned away, and started to leave him alone but then she heard his quiet, hoarse voice behind her.

"No, I don't," he said. "When he said he could bring my mother back, I wanted it to be true as well."

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Emily turned back to him. "You must have cared very much for her," she said softly.

"I did." He still wouldn't look at her.

"How old were you when you lost her?" she asked after a long, gentle pause.

"Sixteen." He shrugged. "It was inoperable cancer. She was only thirty-six at the time, so it came as a surprise. I'd... rather thought I'd have more time with her than that."

Thirty-six. Only one year older than Emily was at that moment.

"Yes, somehow we always do think that, don't we," she said, with a grim little chuckle. Then, before she thought, and just for a second, she laid her hand over his with infinite delicacy and deference.

I'm sorry, sir, she whispered, toward the side of his averted face.

"It couldn't be helped," he replied curtly. Then, to her great surprise, he half-turned toward her and said: "And I was sorry to hear about your husband. By all accounts, he appeared to have been a brave soldier."

"Yes, he... " She swallowed hard. "He really was."

"I do wish that when Lucius decided to tell me about his fate back in November, that I had the presence of mind to urge discretion, rather than allowing him to gossip on the way he did."

"Well, none of us have much influence over Lucius anyway, when he wants to say something. I shouldn't have blown up at you like that when you came to talk to me the next day, you weren't at fault."

"Thank you," he said quietly.

They were both silent for a long time, bound by the loss of the one person they had each loved most, and then by the betrayal of someone who had played on that grief in order to manipulate them. Oddly enough, Professor Snape could probably empathise with how she had felt that morning better than anyone, which was why she was so ashamed immediately after she had spoken cruelly to him. But perhaps that understanding was why he seemed able to forgive her, at this moment.

He was standing a pace away... and it occurred to her that all she really wanted was to let her head sink onto his shoulder and wrap her arms around him, to comfort him and be comforted herself. But she had already offended him enough today, and she didn't want to undo this fragile truce by clumsily importuning him with unwanted intimacy.

Then, the clock tower in the courtyard below struck once. Emily glanced down to discover that it was much, much later than she had thought, half past eight p.m. And then she remembered Lucius was expecting her that night at nine p.m.

"Oh no," she whispered.

"What is it?"

"I just remembered... I'm supposed to meet someone tonight. I have to go," she said, with a long, bone-weary sigh. "But, there's a lot I still need to tell you about the

meeting. Before I got, er, distracted, I'd heard all about their Ministry contacts and plans for the future. I promise I'll make the full report to you and the Headmaster as soon as I get back, but now I really have to be on my way."

"Of course," he said, and turned back toward the lake, as though to let her go to Lucius without the indignity of being observed doing so.

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It was perhaps nine-twenty p.m. when Emily appeared in Lucius's luxurious suite at the Cockatrice Inn, carrying an overnight bag and full of apologies for being so late. She hadn't had time to do herself up to the usual sleek, glossy style in which she usually greeted him. Instead she wore just a simple, loose black gown and kidskin slippers, her hair down and her face only very lightly made up. She had thought she looked a bit peaky, and had a story ready about how she had perhaps picked up a touch of the white fever from somewhere, and wasn't feeling her best.

Lucius didn't seem too inclined to rage at her for keeping him waiting, however. He was sitting in an armchair with the *Daily Prophet* when she arrived, dressed in dark trousers and a soft white linen shirt, and he got up and greeted her warmly and at length when she arrived.

"There you are, my love," he whispered, holding her very close, running his lips over her hair. "You had me so worried after last night, I was wondering if you would turn up at all."

"Of course I would, darling, don't be silly. I told you I'd come, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did, but after we had that ridiculous argument about Felina, and then she interrupted us right afterward, and then went on to have that screaming fit at you... I still can't believe how vulgar she was. Then afterwards, you barely spoke two words to me all night. During the second part of the meeting, I felt as though you were looking right *through* me," he complained, in an unusually peevish tone.

I was, Emily thought. "Oh, my dear, don't be silly," she said, patting him.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, stroking her cheek. "You're looking a bit fragile again. Couldn't you sleep after the meeting? Are you a bit tired?"

"I feel tired. Perhaps I'm a bit under the weather today."

"Have you eaten? Can I order you some supper from room service, perhaps?" he asked, elaborately solicitous. "Would you like a drink? I've a spot of brandy here, or I could have them send something up from the cellars."

"You know what, that's probably it, I haven't eaten anything today," she said truthfully. "I'd love a bit of supper, maybe just some soup and bread and a glass of cold wine. No brandy, though, I don't think I could take it on an empty stomach." Ever since the night she had been introduced to Voldemort, she had hated even the smell of Lucius's favourite rare French brandy. To her, its scent was now the scent of treachery.

"Of course, dear." Lucius Flooed a note down to the kitchens, and a few minutes later, they were sitting down to supper a covered tureen of rich partridge and mushroom bisque, hot wheat rolls, and bottles of chill, tart white wine in a silver bucket. He sat her down in the chair opposite him, ladled out a plateful of soup and poured a glass of wine for her with great care. After a few spoonfuls, her hunger awoke, and then she was polishing off a third helping and soaking her bread in the dregs in a manner that probably would have horrified Narcissa Malfoy, all amidst liberal quaffings of wine.

Lucius was still talking to her, his cultured drawl going on and on. He was not quite finished with voicing his misgivings about the way her first meeting had gone, and her uncharacteristic behaviour following. There was a dull acid tinge of self-consciousness to his personal scent, and perhaps his smooth, confident voice was not as assured as it usually was. Peripherally, she saw him watching her carefully.

"It was really so good of our Lord to go in and comfort you himself, after what Felina said," he was saying. "I was going to follow you, but then he said, *I will speak to Lady Swain alone*, and went in after you." He sipped from his wineglass, with a studied air of casual brightness. "What did the two of you talk about, if you don't mind me asking? I could see you two through the drawing room windows for a bit, and it looked like a very serious chat indeed."

"Oh... he just tried to comfort me, was all," she replied. "He had some truly inspiring things to say." What he had said inspired a great deal of anguish and false hope, but yes, it was entirely true that it had all been... inspiring.

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After supper was over, Lucius insisted on bringing her to bed so she could rest, cradling her against his side. After some time the candles began to dim, and he began to engage her attentions; subtly at first, then more insistently. Before long the room was entirely darkened, and she was embracing him, her lips open under his. Lying in bed, a man holding her tenderly in the darkness; but the comfort she had once felt in his arms was forever ruined. *I loathe you, why are you touching me?*

Then he was helping her out of her dress, practiced hands unfastening her brassiere, and delicately lifting the lacy straps off her shoulders. His fair hair brushed her shoulders as he put a long, tender kiss on her neck. He unbuttoned his shirt and drew her into his arms again, her bare back against his chest. "Are you still upset with me about the ball?" he asked softly.

"It was... the meeting was just tiring, that's all. I had so much to think about afterwards that I had a hard time getting to sleep."

"Yes, I know, love, the first few meetings can be unnerving, I felt that way when I first joined too," he said, in a voice that understood everything. "Plus it must be even more difficult for you, what with Druella giving you all those dirty looks."

"Not to mention Walden Macnair and your brother-in-law looking at me like I was a juicy side of beef," she complained. "And I won't even get started on that Rosier woman."

"No need, my angel, no need. You certainly made your displeasure known I don't think she'll dare even look at you from now on," he crooned, lowering his lips to the nape of her neck. "I am afraid I have a confession to make, though... you were right about how she may be a bit unwarrantedly attached to me. Back before I was married, before I ever met you, Felina and I had a very brief sort of summertime involvement back when I was very young, just a boy, really... she'd always been after me since we were in school, and it's terribly difficult for me to say *No* when a woman wants something from me. It started with my own mother all she had to do was look at me a certain way and I'd apologise for the sky being blue." He heaved a lengthy sigh, holding her close. "I know I shouldn't try to be all things to all women, but at times I do feel as though I *should*, and it's enough to leave a bloke tired at the end of the day. That's why you've always been such a revelation to me, my love you've never made any demands at all. At times it's a challenge to figure out what you would like for me to do for you, but I'm happy to make the effort, really."

Please, holy Mother, make him shut up, Emily thought.

Lucius was in an intensely passionate, almost grasping mood that night, as though he felt the need to reassert himself as her mate, to lay claim to her again. She barely needed to respond at all as he lowered her to the pillows and covered her body with his own.

"Gods," he gasped in her ear, drawing a line of greedy kisses down her throat "I want to eat you like chocolate, drink you like brandy. I want to keep you in a solid-gold cage on my desk... I want you lying naked in my lap with "Property of" on your collar... "

Despite her lover's intense arousal, Emily was starting to find herself unable to concentrate, unable to respond to him. He was waiting for her, waiting to feel her orgasm before he took his own and she knew it, but somehow, the excitement wouldn't come.

"Is something wrong, darling?" Lucius asked, lightly kissing the corner of her lips.

"I'm sorry, I'm just too tired. Too much wine, I think. But that's no reason for you to hold back," she encouraged.

"Oh, love, I understand completely," he crooned in her ear. "You're far too generous with me. But I can't stand the idea of just enjoying you without doing anything for you in return... would you permit me to try something that might make matters easier for you? It'll be lovely, I promise."

"I'm *not* drinking any aphrodisiac potions," she said instantly.

"Of course not," he said reassuringly. He then disengaged himself from her and got up, opened a drawer of the bedside table and retrieved something, then slid back into bed again.

Emily heard the sound of perhaps a container being opened, scent of clove and ginger and several other ingredients, both floral and herbal. Then his fingers slid gently between her legs, covered with some silky substance and the touch of that substance sent an instant wave of liquid warmth and heat spreading through her. "Oh *my*," she gasped, "what is that?"

"Just an old wives' remedy for when one has had... a *bit* too much wine, or needs some help relaxing," he replied with a little laugh. "The creator called it the *Marital Bliss* ointment quaint name, isn't it... I should rather call it the *Lover's Best Friend*, myself. Don't worry, it's nothing near as intense as *Carnalis*. This is only meant to be pleasant, not mind-altering."

Pleasant it was... *incredibly* pleasant. Whatever this ointment was, it made you feel like a teenager again, when the feel of a lusty boy was better than honey cake, everything between one's thighs turning to liquid, one's vaginal opening running wet and afire with longing *Ah yes,* he sighed as his body covered hers again,*there's the girl who seduced me at Beltane...*

Then they were just surging against each other, bodies in a sweaty tangle but hearts and minds uninvolved; as happens so often in the heated embraces of lovers, both were seeking solace for needs and appetites neither one was truly aware of. Dimly, Emily was aware that Lucius was whispering something under his breath, she couldn't quite make out the words, but then she wasn't listening very closely to him, either. He spent so much time talking, pontificating, holding forth that it was becoming very easy for her to ignore what he said when she was distracted, and that *Marital Bliss* ointment made it easy to get distracted *oh, yes* she hadn't felt like this in so long, not since

since that damned fecking callbox.

She blushed horribly, hiding her face in Lucius's shoulder.

Then she felt something cold against her shoulder, something metal, on the tip of his finger. A razor-sharp point resting against her skin, then parting it with a delicate exertion of pressure, a whisper of pain registering through the haze of arousal. Then his lips left her neck, and went to her shoulder... he was still murmuring something, words in Latin, as his body surged inside hers, reaching his climax a moment later.

Emily gasped with the rush of his satisfaction, a wave of intense heat teemed under her skin like the hottest fever she had ever endured; but then it broke an instant later when he collapsed gasping over her body, leaving her limp and weak beneath him. She felt oddly clearheaded afterward, like some virulent infection had finally been baked out of her after a long illness, and felt lucid again for the first time in days. A single thread of wet warmth slipped down her shoulder, not enough to even form a drop, and she smelled her own blood mingled with the strong scent of their post-coital sweat and satisfaction.

"I love you dearly, you know that, and I can't stand it when you ignore me," her lover was saying, holding her very close. "Don't let's ever keep secrets from each other, love."

"Oh darling, I've never meant to make you feel ignored," she said, kissing him sweetly.

He tensed for a long moment, his hand curving hers around his cheek. "Oh you you're an absolute brick, dearest, I knew I could count on you. Tell me, when you talked to him last night, did our Lord tell you he was upset with me in any way? Was he disappointed?"

"No, he didn't say anything of the sort," she said.

"Good, good," he purred, caressing her shoulder. "I've said it before and I'll say it again satiety is so becoming to you. Of course I couldn't just take you without satisfying you first, I wouldn't hear of it."

"Thank you, dear, you're very kind to me," she simpered.

"And long to be kinder, every minute that I know you. Which reminds me... "

He reached for his wand, lying on the bedside table, and lit a single candle on the table beside it. Then he reached again into the drawer, coming out with a tiny box covered in rich black velvet, which he put in her hands.

"Oh my word darling, you just gave me the best little ladies' maid in the world, you don't have to "

"I know I don't, but I like to give you things... indulge me, *please*." He caressed her shoulder again as she bent over his gift, and she felt him discreetly flick a moistened fingertip over a tiny soreness in her skin, catching a subtle whiff of the astringent-floral scent of Healing Potion. Apparently, he thought she hadn't noticed the subtle bit of carnal bloodletting during her physical transports that evening, and intended to keep it that way. She wondered briefly what his intentions had been in doing so doubtless he had worked some bit of magic upon her unawares, but she couldn't seem to detect any lasting after-effects. Probably some sort of aphrodisiac charm, a bit of sex magic intended to increase their enjoyment, but curiously though, it didn't seem to have had any effect on her, other than to raise her body temperature for a few seconds. Perhaps it felt wonderful to whomever happened to be making love to her once it was invoked? Either way, it didn't seem to have affected her very much at all.

But perhaps Lucius simply enjoyed the sense of power and intimacy it gave him to taste of her blood, as he had that year at Beltane. She had heard now and then of people who took a fetishistic delight in consuming the blood of their lovers, and having their own blood shed, and would not have put such depths of perversion past him for a second.

Then she opened the black velvet box and gasped. "Is this... is it a sapphire?" she asked.

"No, love. A diamond. A very rare, perfectly black diamond."

That very rare, perfectly black diamond was the largest gem she had ever touched, a jewel to rival those owned by Queen Dahlia. At least ten or twelve carats of pure, scintillant black, cut in the shape of a heart, and surrounded by a frame of tiny white diamonds no bigger than grains of sand, set on an intricate platinum chain. "It's... it's lovely," she whispered, holding up the box so she could watch the candlelight play amidst those velvet-black facets.

"Here " He slipped the gem out of its box and fastened it around her neck with a deft, practiced gesture. "Ah, I do dearly love hanging diamonds around that throat of yours, dearest. There, lovely." The necklace was a cool, surprisingly heavy weight as it rested in the hollow of her throat.

"What's the occasion?" she asked him, covering the black heart with her fingers.

"Your initiation into yet another incredibly important part of my life," he told her, bending to kiss the white cusp of throat just above where the diamond nestled. "I've thought

for most of this year that you were the only woman I've known who could share every part of my life no other woman I've ever met has known me like you do."

"Thank you," she said. "I'm terribly flattered, darling."

"And I wanted to give you just a small token of my affections, after you let me know that you had misgivings about my regard last night I can't tell you how much it disturbed me that you thought I might have allowed Felina to come between us. So I thought, after you left last night what better way could there be to show you once and for all who is first in my heart, and to stop that awful woman from baiting you, than to offer you another gift to go with this black, black heart... a very, *very* special gift."

"What's that?" Emily asked, not at all sure as to what he was getting at.

"Would you like to be rid of Felina... for good?" came the insinuating whisper. "I'll give you that, if you like...you can even be the one to pour the poison in her wine."

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"No," she said, firmly, instantly. But some treacherous little part of her wanted to ask *What kind of poison? Will it hurt very, very much? If not, can you find me one that will?*

"Or would you like something a bit more hands-on, my love? Would you like me to give her to you tied to a table, and give you a pretty dagger to open her veins, would that be more your style?" he asked, gently stroking her cheek.

"No, no." She tensed; attitude of denial. "I couldn't do something like that to a bound opponent, that's just not what a knight does. It's a fair fight or we can't even begin it."

"Of course, of course," Lucius said understandingly. "Then how about this... throw down a glove and challenge her. I'll make certain she gets to the proper place at the proper time and then you can take her throat out, neat as you please. All in strict adherence with Arcadian law, as is only right and proper."

All in strict adherence to Arcadian law but highly illegal in the Wizarding world, and she had given her pledge to abide by the laws of this world while she lived here. "No," she said again. "I'll... just... give me some time to decide."

"Of course, dearest," he whispered. "Just sleep on it tonight, and then you can tell me what you'd like in a day or two."

He stretched comfortably, drawing the counterpane up around her shoulder, then fell asleep a few moments later, his arms still clasped around her. As always, how he could be who he was, guilty of all he had done, and still fall asleep like some pure innocent with a spotless conscience was a complete mystery to the woman lying cold and nervous beside him, naked but for the precious jewel around her neck.

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Lucius was still in the same irritatingly snuggly mood the next morning, lying cosily beside Emily as they shared breakfast in bed, looking like an angel with his hair freshly washed and his skin delicately flushed from the bath. Nothing in his manner indicated that he had just given his mistress a queen's ransom in jewels, or offered to arrange the death of that mistress's rival the previous night as a special gift to her.

He didn't want to let her very far out of his sight that next day Emily only caught a moment of alone time when she went to the bathroom. She checked herself over with magic-detection charms, curious as to what magic had been worked on her when Lucius had shed her blood the previous night, but found nothing. As far as she could tell, she was under no enchantment of any kind. It was just... odd.

The two of them spent that Saturday talking about his plans for the Department of Interdimensional Magical Cooperation over more leisurely, decadent, wine-soaked meals. The more time she spent hanging on his every word, encouraging him to expound upon who was loyal to him, and who was obviously currying his favour by going along with his plans, the more he glowed with self-satisfaction and the less he seemed to notice that she hadn't committed herself to anything.

"I'm really delighted that you're taking such an interest, my love," he said, drawing her onto his knee. "Forgive me, but I thought you were resisting me a bit before... ?"

"Well, it took me awhile to get used to the idea, I admit it," she said. "I'd never really thought about having a job in the Second-World government before."

"I certainly imagined you working with us," Lucius averred. "When I thought, who would be the perfect face of the new department, you were the first and only candidate I even considered. What with your impeccable connections and your military service not to mention your *stunning* good looks, my darling if anyone could persuade the Fae community to become full-fledged members of our world, it's you. Can you imagine how liberating it will be for your country folk when they can easily acquire work permits and visas, and when they can enjoy protections from persecution if they decide to go for a stroll without hiding under Glamours some afternoon?" He sighed, pulling her close into his arms. "I can just imagine it, love, and what a beautiful thing it will be when it all comes to fruition."

Yes, she thought, what a beautiful dream it would be if anyone other than Lucius Malfoy was undertaking it. Emily thought about what such a Department of Interdimensional Magical Cooperation could be like, if it was headed up by Albus Dumbledore, or... or just about *anyone* other than Lucius Malfoy or one of his associates. But when she tried to think of anyone who could have headed up such a department, any Ministry employee who would have wanted such a job, she couldn't. Percy Weasley, Bartemius Crouch's successor, was clearly suspicious of all Fae in general, Fudge's undersecretary Dolores Umbridge liked Faeries even less than Weasley, and Lucius's friend the Honourable Tibernius Solon was so clearly in Lucius's pocket that there was no point in even asking. Nymphadora Tonks was a sympathetic Ministry employee, but she was so young and inexperienced, with a background in law enforcement, not international relations. No, it was a beautiful dream... but like most offers made by Lucius and his Dark Lord, it was as without substance as shadows and smoke.

As night came on, and after a luxurious, wine-soaked supper, her lover seemed satiated with the delights of hearing his own voice hold forth, and seeing himself reflected twice his size in the lovely eyes of his audience, and began coaxing her back into bed. As before, he seemed much inclined toward reasserting his claim to her, re-establishing himself as the dominant male entitled to her favours but again, she simply couldn't concentrate, couldn't become aroused. After a few long, self-conscious moments, she closed her eyes tightly, and let her mind wander

a cold ledge beneath her thighs, cold glass at her back, a painfully aroused black-eyed man kissing her and holding her like she was the source of the only pleasure or joy he'd ever felt, ragged baritone gasps of mythic ecstasy as he devoured her lips and neck and cleavage; his voice, hands, and just everything about him left her melting with lust, until she was so eager for him that it only took a few long strokes before she was clutching him just as tightly and coming like

An instant of that made her breathe shallowly, then a few moments more brought sweat out on her brow, and then the climax was upon her so strongly that it was both pleasure and agony. The disappointment came afterward, when she heard someone else's voice whispering to her.

"Oh my love, you are on *fire* tonight," he crooned in her ear, as they lay entwined afterward. "But I can see how perhaps you needed to vent some... *frustrations*."

"I'm... yes, I've been feeling rather frustrated lately. It's just that... some people I know have made me feel frustrated," she said glibly. She patted him gently and waited for him to get off of her.

"And you'll be rid of that frustration as soon as you give the word." He kissed her tenderly, one of those kisses she used to find so indescribably luscious. "Now... I need to talk to you about something rather serious. My Lord has a favour to ask of you."

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"What is it?" Emily asked.

"Well, the group is exclusive, you know that. Usually, a new member becomes familiar with all the usual sorts of customs... the ritual homages, the taking of the Mark." He

took her hand and brushed her fingertips over the Dark Mark branded into his own pale, elegantly modelled forearm. Emily did her level best to keep her hand relaxed and not to shrink away in revulsion.

"Milord doesn't require the obeisance of you, as you've made it so clear it goes against your own loyalties, and he seems to be holding off as to the matter of when you'll take the Mark. But... he isn't willing to waive another aspect of the initiation required of all newcomers. It's nothing to worry about just a custom, really. In order to prove one's worthiness, one's commitment to the cause, one has to perform a task for him. He devises each task with a careful eye toward what would be most advantageous for the group, and the most enlightening for the new recruit in question he's wonderfully clever that way."

"I see," Emily said, listening and observing closely. Lucius's scent had filled with both anxiety and excitement as he explained these conditions to her; clearly he was both worried as to how she would take this announcement, and thrilled at the prospect that she might obey it. "Go on," she whispered.

"There is a fellow employed by the Ministry who has been a real thorn in the organisation's side for some time now he seems intent on persecuting us in our own homes, and has no respect whatsoever for personal property and a man's right to decree what goes on within the borders of his own land. In centuries past, this sort of fellow would have been a poacher or looter, interfering with what wasn't his, and hanged but in this day and age, he's got powers of search and seizure for some absurd reason. He's really just a jumped-up newcomer who wants to make the established families bend to his will for some neurotic reasons of his own, and the group of us really thinks he needs to be taught a lesson."

Emily listened closely this speech was starting to sound as though it had something to do with Arthur Weasley, the director of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts department. Professor Snape had told her that Weasley's department had the legal power to conduct surprise inspections raids, really of those suspected of keeping Dark Magical items, illegal weapons, or controlled substances in their homes.

"What kind of *lesson* do you mean?" she asked warily.

"My Lord is starting to believe that direct action may be necessary to negate the fellow's threat to knock him off the board, if you will," Lucius said confidentially, threading his fingers through hers. "And, he's absolutely convinced that with your gifts for such that you're exactly the woman for the job."

"What do you mean?" She could feel herself beginning to sweat.

"Oh come, dear. You could Apparate in, Obscured, take the target down before anyone could blink, and then Apparate away faster than they could react. Don't tell me you've never done that before?"

"No, I haven't. You know Apparition isn't possible at home. It just doesn't work."

"But it does work here, conveniently enough. You don't realise just how effective you could be in this conflict, darling, what with the might and magic of your world and mine combined... before long you could have the fear and respect of our entire bloody world, and I'll applaud you every step of the way. Not only that, but the rewards would be beyond your imaginings, of course," he said, his voice a smooth, silken drawl.

"You expect me to simply go into this fellow's home, and *kill him*?" she whispered.

"No, no, not *kill* him. Killing him wouldn't teach him anything, now would it? And it certainly wouldn't stop those surprise inspections. But the removal of someone he cares for...well, let's just say *that* it would be a much more effective warning for him, you see." Lucius whispered soothingly.

"Oh," Emily whispered. "Oh... of course. It's just a warning. I see."

"And in return... I could give you whatever you want, my love," he breathed in her ear. "Do this one thing for my Lord, and you can name what you would have of me, whether it's Felina's head on a charger, or for us to restore the Fae to their deserved place as our natural aristocracy again. Or bloody hell, I'd give you all that and my son and heir's hand in marriage besides there's *nothing* I wouldn't do for you, you know that. You've always known that."

"Yes," she whispered dully. "I know."

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Emily fell heavily asleep after talking to Lucius that night, into such a deep, numbing slumber that she never heard him get up, bathe and dress, and leave her alone in their hotel room very early that morning. He kissed her and murmured good-bye on his way out, but she never remembered it.

When she finally awoke, she glanced around for him for a moment, then realised he had already gone but he had left a letter for her on the night table.

As she opened that letter, a bit of folded newsprint fell out. She opened the paper and found a picture of a family clipped from what had to be the *Daily Prophet*, a family she recognised. Six sons and a daughter, one boy with his pet rat looking up from his shoulder, and a father in shabby tweeds and pleasant, chubby mother, all waving happily and innocently from in front of one of the Great Pyramids in Egypt. Around one of those gaily smiling faces, a red circle and slash had been drawn.

The letter read:

Darling ~

Report to me at home this Monday at half-past seven p.m. for specifics. Be sure to dress appropriately and bring the proper equipment.

You'll recognise your objective from this photograph. With any luck, you'll be back to receive our congratulations before the clock strikes eight.

Words can't express how much faith I have in you, my love I can't wait to raise a glass to your success, you great Orc-cleaver, you.

Emily dropped the letter and photograph back on the night table, with shaking hands. She had read any number of descriptions of people's skin crawling when they experienced pure horror, and thought it to be a melodramatic exaggeration until now.

She threw on another plain black dress and shoes, without stopping to bathe or brush her teeth, only raking her fingers through her hair, and hastily throwing all her things back into her overnight bag. But she did remember to take off the black diamond around her neck at that moment, even such a gorgeous jewel as that diamond only felt like a fetter. She threw it into her bag amidst her toothbrush and crumpled clothes, and Apparated out of the hotel with sharp *crack.*

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Upon arriving back at Hogwarts, Emily discarding her overnight bag just inside the great front doors and immediately made her way toward Dumbledore's office at a run.

She passed Professor Snape on the way up, heading through the main foyer landing, and apparently on his way toward the dungeons "I need to meet with you and the Headmaster immediately."

He stopped dead at the urgent tone of her voice, glancing at her warily. "What's happened?" he asked, falling in step beside her.

"Just come on. *Hurry.*"

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Dumbledore was sitting at his desk reading when both professors hurried into his office and glanced up in alarm at both of them. "Severus? Emily? What's happened?"

Emily paused in front of his desk. "Lucius told me that in order to be a full-fledged member of the group, I have to carry out a mission for his Lord. In short I've been assigned a murder victim," she told him.

Peripherally, she saw Snape pale white as paper and grip the edge of the Headmaster's desk. Dumbledore dropped his book with a *thump*, staring at her in horror. "Who is it?" they both asked.

Emily fell heavily into one of the armchairs in front of his desk.

"*Molly Weasley,*" she said, and lowered her head into her hands.

Part Third: The Hart Subvertant, Chapter 30, Part 2

Chapter 48 of 55

After Voldemort's return, Professor Swain has agreed to Sirius Black's suggestion that she use her influence with Lucius Malfoy to gather intelligence on the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters. As her horror of the Dark Lord grows, her old enemy Severus Snape proves to be the only one who understands the fear and doubt that plague a double agent…

Chapter 30, Part 2:

Emily looked up as Dumbledore pressed a large glass of brandy into her hand. "Try to calm down, Professor," he said, patting her hand.

"Perhaps a drop of Calming Draught, Albus," Snape murmured.

"Excellent idea."

The Headmaster brought out a tiny phial from his right-hand desk drawer and added a single drop to Emily's glass. "Thank you," she murmured, with a long swallow from the glass.

"Now, please tell us, Professor, what happened at the Death Eater meeting you attended and what was said about the intended murder of Mrs. Weasley," Dumbledore asked in a gentle tone. "Begin at the beginning."

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She began at the beginning, with the Death Eater meeting on Thursday: how she had begun with a series of small challenges to Voldemort, all that had been said and all that had transpired at the meeting. She included a spare, diplomatically worded account of the curse on Mrs. Rosier and how Voldemort had offered to resurrect her late husband right afterward. That offer having been exposed for the sham it was by Professor Snape's timely intervention (she offered him a small, grateful nod of acknowledgment at that) she proceeded on with a very censored account of her meeting with Lucius that weekend and how he had told her that in order to properly join the organisation, she must complete a task of Voldemort's devising.

"Yes, they're proceeding according to their usual form when they induct a new member into the group," Professor Snape remarked grimly. "Once you've completed your initiation task, the next step would be the taking of the Mark." His left hand flexed thoughtfully.

"Did you have to do all this?" she asked him softly. He glanced at her, seemed about to speak but then turned silently away a second later.

"We must let our potential victims know about the danger," Dumbledore said. He moved to the great hearth and then threw a handful of green powder into it from a box on the mantelpiece. "Molly, Arthur," the Headmaster said, leaning into the fireplace, "I'm sorry to disturb you at home, but this is a matter of utmost importance. Would it be possible to speak to you privately?"

A woman's voice came through the fireplace "Why, Albus, I wasn't expecting to hear from you on a Sunday. Yes, it's just me here at the moment, Arthur's out de-gnoming the garden. Is something wrong?"

"Yes, Molly, something is, and it concerns your family. How soon can you and Arthur meet me at Grimmauld Place?"

"Something of utmost importance that concerns the family?" Mrs. Weasley's voice rose sharply with apprehension "Oh, dear me, what's happened? Is it one of the children? Has one of them gotten hurt? Been seen? *Died?*"

"No, no, the children should all be fine. Please, Molly, just fetch Arthur and then come directly to Grimmauld Place," the Headmaster told her.

Ten minutes later, the Headmaster, Professors Swain and Snape, and the Weasleys were ushered into the kitchen of number twelve, Grimmauld Place by Sirius Black, who greeted Dumbledore and the Weasleys with handshakes, Emily with a sniff, and Snape with a hateful glower. They had all just taken seats around the kitchen table when a crash from above brought Black back to his feet "'Scuse me, sounds like Buckbeak's pulling down the curtains again, back in a moment," and left the room.

"Now, what's this you need to tell us?" Arthur Weasley asked, holding his wife's hand, his red brows creasing with concern.

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Mr. and Mrs. Weasley took the news that Molly had been marked for death by the Death Eaters about as well as could be imagined.

Arthur paced about the kitchen looking as though he wanted to hit someone very hard, muttering: "Threaten my wife, *kill my Molly*! I'll drop the bastard with a Killing Curse myself, no one'd better harm a hair of her ginger head, they won't! First my daughter, now my wife the man's a blackguard through and through. What sort of a scoundrel attacks a man through his family! They ought to bring back the gallows, just to string him up!"

Mrs. Weasley took Emily's hand across the table and looked pleadingly at her, lower lip trembling "Professor, you wouldn't do something like that, I can't believe you would,

I know we didn't hit it off like gangbusters when we first met, but that's no reason to do away with someone "

Emily squeezed Molly's hand in reassurance. "Of course not, madam. I assure you I'd never willingly harm an innocent person, much less kill one. I've taken solemn oaths to *protect* the persecuted and defenceless, and I'm not breaking those just because Lucius Malfoy told me to, believe me. You have my true and original word as a Knight of the Order of the Morrigan, you will not, now or ever, die by my hand," she said earnestly.

Molly's face flushed, and she pressed Emily's hand in return. She got up, pacing for a moment, her voice rising in a nervous monologue "That's... that's good to know, dear, thank you, you don't really seem the type, what with coming to Albus and telling him and all, I should have... " Then she turned to her husband and burst out, "Oh, Arthur, whatever are we going to *do*!"

"Yes, that does seem to be the burning question of the evening," Professor Snape murmured, glancing at Emily. Mr. Weasley went to his distraught wife and hugged her close. Unperturbed, Dumbledore went to one of the kitchen cabinets and took out several shot glasses and a bottle.

"Albus, what do you think?" Snape asked, turning toward the Headmaster.

"I think we should all have a brandy and calm ourselves," Dumbledore said, turning a resolutely twinkly smile toward the assembled company. "Then, we'll need to figure out what is to be done."

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Nearly all of the assembled company downed their brandy shots with the enthusiasm of patients taking medicine, then resumed their seats at the table. Mrs. Weasley was jittering so much that Mr. Weasley made her swallow a second shot of brandy.

"In my opinion, Albus, the best thing to do is simply to send Professor Swain and Mrs. Weasley into hiding," Professor Snape said. "We'll find an out-of-the-way place where the two of them can conceal themselves until this blows over." He turned toward Emily "You are aware that there are magics that would make the two of you impossible to find unless your location was specifically mentioned by a Secret-Keeper "

"The *Fidelius* Charm, yes, I'm familiar with it," Emily replied. "But that way we'll lose my vantage point within the organisation."

"Better that than the loss of your life, or Mrs. Weasley's," Snape pointed out, and Arthur Weasley vigorously nodded agreement.

"No, no," Emily said, shaking her head. "There's no reason to compromise my cover with them if there's any other way around it."

"What on Earth *else* is there to do?" Snape demanded.

"I've had an idea." Emily stood up. "All right let's consider this realistically. I'm a professional soldier, and Mrs. Weasley is no offence, madam a somewhat heavyset housewife."

"Call a spade a spade, dear, I'm fat. I'm well aware that my sylphlike days are over," Molly said wryly.

"You're *beautiful*," Arthur said fiercely, hugging his wife again.

"And I assume you've had no combat experience outside of Hogwarts Defence Against the Dark Arts classes, correct?" Emily continued.

"Yes unless you count wrangling with seven headstrong children as combat practice," Molly told her.

"I understand. So if Mrs. Weasley and I got into a mortal confrontation in which I was armed, and she wasn't, the logical outcome is that I would kill her," Emily said brusquely. "So if tomorrow I go ahead with their orders and attack her, unforeseen circumstances would have to come up to negate my advantage of weaponry and training and allow her to somehow fight me off."

"So if I'm following you aright, Professor, you're thinking you'll actually go through with it but find a way to throw the fight, then?" Mr. Weasley asked. "You confront Molly, but you purposefully take a dive at the end?"

"My thoughts exactly," Emily said, nodding. "And if we're going to make it look as though I tried in earnest to kill Mrs. Weasley, and she successfully fought me off due to some total fluke of circumstances, I can think of exactly one way to do that."

"Please tell us," Dumbledore said grimly.

"The scenario I'm envisioning is I arrive armed with a twelve-inch dagger. I offer to attack Molly. Molly just so happens to have a weapon with a longer reach in her hand that, coincidentally, happens to be made of iron. I'm given pause by this, which gives Molly the necessary instant to counterattack. She hits me, injures me then, like any other Faerie faced with cold iron, I go into a blind panic and abort the mission. Then, I go back to the enemy and wail, there was nothing I could do, she had an iron weapon, and hope they believe it. Then Mr. Weasley moves Molly somewhere inaccessible. My cover is preserved, and Molly is safe and sound."

"But how would we do that?" Mrs. Weasley asked, glancing worriedly from Emily to Dumbledore.

Emily turned to Mrs. Weasley. "You perhaps have an iron fireplace poker somewhere in the house?"

"Yes, but " Mrs. Weasley stammered.

"Think you could give me a couple of good whacks with it?"

"Absolutely, she's wicked with that thing," Mr. Weasley said.

"*No*," Professor Snape interjected. "That's insane."

"As far as I see it, that's the only convincing weakness we have to exploit here," Emily said.

Snape turned to Emily, his face white with fury. "I need to talk to you," he barked. "Outside, now." He moved purposefully into the corridor, and there was nothing to do but to follow him.

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He lit into her the second the door closed behind them this time it was he who caught her shoulder and all but threw her around to face him. "You aren't going to do this," he said flatly. "This is not an acceptable risk."

"Last I checked, sir, you didn't have the authority to forbid me to do *anything*," she said, a warning gleam in her eyes. "Besides, everyone else seemed to think it could work."

"Mrs. Weasley doesn't have any idea of how dangerous this is she hasn't seen what iron does to your people "

"Exactly and you aren't going to tell her! That woman's life is at stake "

"*That woman* has absolutely no combat training and no idea what she'll be doing. If you allow her to attack you with an iron weapon, she could accidentally disable you or even kill you. At the very *least* you'll be severely injured "

"There has to be that risk in order for it to look convincing you *know* that "

"This is *idiotic*, it's the worst kind of stupid, ill-considered Gryffindor grandstanding "

"Do you have a better idea? Because if you do, I would dearly love to hear it "

Sirius Black came down the stairs at that moment and shot a baleful glance at Snape. "By the Merlin, Snape, do you ever *stop* "

Emily turned on him in a fury, her face paling. "My colleague was talking to me do you *mind*?" she snapped at Black. "Why can he never get a sentence *out* without you interrupting him?"

It would have been hard to say which of the two men facing her was more surprised at that moment Black, because someone had actually defended Snape in his presence, or Snape, because Professor Swain had actually spoken up in his defence.

"Well, pardon the fuck out of me," Black retorted, then went into the kitchen and left the two of them alone in the corridor.

"Professors?" The Headmaster's head poked out of the kitchen door. "If you can excuse Emily for a moment, Severus, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley would like to speak to her about her plan for tomorrow."

"Two minutes, Albus," Snape said. Dumbledore nodded and disappeared back into the kitchen.

Snape turned back to Emily, black eyes burning into hers. "I cannot say this strongly enough, madam not only do I think you would be absolutely mad to undertake this plan you're proposing, I think there's a very great chance that the consequences will be more dire than you can possibly imagine. As for this confrontation with the iron poker at worst, she could leave you debilitated for life, and at best, you'll still have to go back to the Death Eaters and make your report with a traumatic injury. The Dark Lord will *not* take your word for why you failed sight unseen, trust me. He is extremely skilled in Legilimency, and when he searches someone's mind for the information he wants, he is both thorough and decidedly less than gentle, and you will have to make him see what you want him to see while in tremendous pain, don't you realise that?"

"I think I can do it," Emily said quietly.

"For heaven's sake put that damnable pride of yours aside for just one blessed instant, and really *think about* what you're doing!" he insisted. "If he discovers that you threw the fight on purpose because you're working for the Order, *he will kill you on the spot*, don't you understand? And then even if you are successful in this hare-brained undertaking, it won't stop there. This will only be the first step they'll demand more and more of you, and the fact that you failed on your first assignment for the group will forever be used to undermine your credibility and put you at a disadvantage in any further negotiations. You'll only be getting yourself in deeper and deeper from here on in how long do you think you can stand it?"

Emily faced him without quailing, looking him respectfully in the eye as she listened to his arguments... and something about the sight of him so impassionedly trying to talk her out of endangering herself affected her more than she cared to admit. His attitude was far from just angry there was an edge of something desperate in his voice, an acid edge of pure fear in his scent. Perhaps he felt as though he was arguing with his younger self, trying to talk him out of the path he had chosen; or perhaps that stubborn streak of chivalry in him simply wouldn't allow for a woman to voluntarily expose herself to danger.

But unexpected and very welcome show of concern aside, he was talking to a Morrigan knight, and she was not about to shirk her duty in protecting an innocent, ever.

"Sir... I do truly appreciate what you're trying to say, and believe me, I'm not looking forward to meeting the blunt end of an iron poker. But what you keep forgetting is that I'm a *twice-decorated combat veteran*, not some student who's just taken her Defence Against the Dark Arts O.W.L. and now feels invincible. I have had to make crucial decisions while injured and under stress before what kind of field commander would I be if I couldn't? Do you really think I'll let myself turn tail and run at the first sign of danger?"

"Has no one ever told you that discretion is the better part of valour?" Snape retorted.

"There is a time and a place for discretion, and I think that time is past," she replied. "My mind is made up I'm going to do everything I can to maintain my cover, while keeping Mrs. Weasley from harm. As to what happens afterward, I'll deal with it as it comes up."

"Then again, I do hope you're right for your own sake," he said, then turned and left by the front door.

Emily watched him go she couldn't have said why, but somehow his departure made her feel less sure of herself. Perhaps she had not previously realised how much she had come to depend on him as an ally against all outside antagonists; while he would never have hesitated to go head to head with her on any point of conflict, somehow she couldn't imagine him standing by and doing nothing when she, or anyone else at Hogwarts for that matter, became embroiled in a mortal crisis. Cold, difficult, and disapproving as his manner was, she hadn't wanted him to go.

She took a deep breath, and rejoined the group in the kitchen.

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Everyone looked up as she returned "What did Professor Snape have to say, if I may ask?" Dumbledore said, white brows creasing.

"He let me know what will probably happen when I return to the Death Eaters and tell them I didn't complete the assignment," she replied. "He thought I should know what to expect."

The Headmaster nodded grimly, his face paling beneath his wealth of white beard. "Of course. Now, I believe you have some questions, Molly?"

"Yes. Professor Swain... my sons Fred, George, and Ron were all in your Defence Against the Dark Arts class last year, and they were saying you were a knight in the Fae army, and... does that mean you've actually... *killed people before?*" Mrs. Weasley asked, her voice rising shrilly.

"I'm afraid it does," Emily said, with a self-deprecating shrug. "I didn't mention the specifics of my own military service in class, but you know how curious children are about that sort of thing. But it was a *war*, you see, all the people I killed were enemy invaders," she added.

Molly Weasley sagged onto Mr. Weasley's shoulder. "Oh, Arthur... I'm bloody *doomed*, I am," she wailed.

Emily scowled in annoyance. "Stop it, you're *not* doomed. All right, it looks as though someone has to take charge of this." She threw her shoulders back and began issuing orders with a crisp, militaristic authority. "So Dumbledore, sir, you'll want to go about your business today and tomorrow as if nothing's going on. If you have any appointments or meetings going on today, make them and act as though you haven't heard a word from me. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, I want you to go home and grab a bite to eat, then meet me in the main foyer at Hogwarts in half an hour for an emergency strategy session. Mrs. Weasley, you'll need to wear something you can move around in if we're going to go a round together, I'm going to need to prepare you for it, so be ready for a crash course in self-defence."

"In self-defence?" Molly lifted her head off her husband's shoulder. "You really mean for me to get into a fight with you?"

"Yes and not only are you going to have to fight me, you're going to have to *win*." She glanced down at her watch "All right, it's now just after two p.m. we've got about twenty-nine hours before our meeting date in your living room tomorrow, so let's get started."

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Professor Snape arrived back in his own office in a high dudgeon of anger and irritation, cursing under his breath in a way that would have lost prodigious amounts of points had he heard a Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, or Ravenclaw student doing the same. *Of all the stupid, idiotic, self-flagellating things to do that colossal arse putting herself in harm's way I've heard of masochists enjoying a good beating, but they haven't a patch on that... that woman...*

He stalked past the worktable in the centre of the room, lighting the brazier under an alembic full of cloudy greenish-blue solution with an *Incendio* and an inaudible word as he went, then went to his desk and began to hastily dash off a letter:

Dear Catherine,

Due to circumstances unfortunately beyond my control, the odds are very likely that a mutual acquaintance of ours will soon find herself in a situation where serious injury is unavoidable. I have done everything in my power to dissuade her from the course of action she has chosen, but she remains stubbornly obdurate.

Circumstances unfortunately preclude me from being more specific at this moment, but please be ready to admit a Fae patient to your clinic at St. George's tomorrow evening, any time after eight p.m. In all likelihood, she will require treatment for moderate to serious iron burns to the lower body, and for shock. The shock will be caused by a highly unpleasant magical curse its common after-effects include extreme disorientation, memory loss, fatigue and loss of muscle tone, and mild haemorrhage in eyes, ears, and extremities...

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Emily had been right when she guessed that Mrs. Weasley's sole experience with self-defence of any kind had been limited to the Defence Against the Dark Arts classes she had taken as a student at Hogwarts, and unfortunately, the lessons she had learned wrangling small children didn't translate well into combat situations with Faery knights either. She took reasonably to the half-hour's lesson in short staff thrusts and parries Emily gave her but the first time Emily actually approached her with a practice dagger drawn, her first reaction was to cringe and throw her hands up in front of her face, rather than to counterattack.

"Mrs. Weasley, *please*," she admonished sharply. "You've *got* to make it look more convincing than that." Professor Snape's stern lecture about how she was taking her life in her hands by trying to lie to Voldemort made her temper much shorter than usual.

"Oh, Professor, I can't do this, I simply can't!" Mrs. Weasley cried, wringing her hands. "It's one thing to give one of the children a rap on the wrist or a smack on the rump but beyond that I've never struck anyone in my life. I don't know if I can "

"Look, how do you think *I* feel?" Emily snapped back, her patience breaking. "After you smack me about with an iron weapon, I have to go back to You-Know-Who himself and lie to him about what happened, and I tell you I am not *about* to take a Killing Curse because you were too squeamish to play your part with conviction, all right? By all that's holy, I can't even imagine the courage that goes into giving birth to seven babies, so I would think you would be able to find it within yourself to cosh someone who's just broken into your home and look like you mean it. So for heaven's sake, *buck up*, and let's make this look believable."

Molly glared back at her, eyes flashing and looking as though she wanted to say something very rude indeed but then she paused, took a deep breath, and picked up the short staff again. "*All right*, you've made your point," she said, her usually pleasant expression turning flinty and businesslike. "Let's get this shite done."

Emily gave her a grim nod of approval. "Now I see why they put you in Gryffindor."

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Once her opponent's blood was up, Emily could see why this woman's children held her in such awe heavyset fortyish housewife or no, Molly Weasley had quite a fighting instinct. "Remember, you'll have maybe a split-second to react," Emily reminded her, with merciless, bludgeoning repetition. "As far as you know, I'm a Death Eater assassin coming to slit your throat, and you have a second to save your own life."

She advanced again, goading Mrs. Weasley as she came on. "And I'll not lie to you, I'm known for being fast with a weapon and tomorrow, you have to be faster than I am. You *must* be."

Sweat was beading off Mrs. Weasley's forehead as she studied Emily's face and then she unexpectedly darted forward as Emily finished her last sentence, and gave her such a hard rap on the knee with the staff that she dropped her dagger and hopped away from her opponent with a yelp.

Molly dropped the staff and darted forward "Oh no, I'm so sorry, are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Emily leaned against a chair, bending down to rub at her leg with one gloved hand. "Don't apologise you're doing well. That's exactly what you're going to need to do tomorrow. But I'm going to need to stay mobile after I'm injured, so let's aim a few inches higher, all right?"

After they practiced the fight for several hours, Emily and the two Weasleys sat down at the studio worktable with quill and parchment, and Mr. Weasley sketched a rough map of the first floor of the family home. An hour later, after much intense strategising and the creation of a diagram that included a large rag rug and the fireplace hearth, they had eked out what Emily thought was a workable plan.

"All right, all of this is looking good, but I'm not sure about the distraction," Emily said, bending over the diagram. "The creaky floorboard is a good idea, but what if I miss stepping on it the first time? What if my weight is insufficient to set it off?"

"Oh no, that floorboard's utterly deafening," Mr. Weasley averred. "The reason we've never had it fixed is because that thing's our answer to those nightingale floors the Japanese shogun lords had in their castles. I don't know how many times we've caught the boys coming in at all hours because they've stepped on it. Why, even the cat stepping on it can "

Emily held up a hand to stop him "You have a cat?"

"Yes, Pyewacket, she's a big tortoiseshell Kneazle mix "

"Perfect," Emily said. "If one of you could pop on home and bring the cat here, I'd like to add her to our strategy meeting, if you don't mind."

The Weasleys exchanged a look. "My dear, you do realise she's a *cat*," Mrs. Weasley said gently.

"Yes, I know, but " Emily glanced from one Weasley to the other, shrugging. "For lack of a better description, I can speak Cat, using a certain sort of Faery magic."

The Weasleys exchanged another look "Well, she speaks Cat," Mrs. Weasley said. "What do you know."

"I'll go get her. You two keep working," Mr. Weasley said, and left the room.

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Arthur Weasley returned not too long afterward with a wicker animal carrier under his arm, then released a large, plump, and affectionate tortoiseshell cat with a bottle-brush tail onto the worktable. Emily invoked the first form of *Deceivre* with a silent utterance of her True Name and greeted Pyewacket in the usual polite feline manner, with a pleasant *Mrrrrrrrr* and mutual nuzzle, which put the cat instantly at ease. Then Faerie and feline had a long, involved discussion, both hovering over the floor plan of the Weasleys' house. Before long, Emily added a sketch labelled *Pyewacket* and a dotted line representing the actions the cat would take to the diagram. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley could only look on in amazement as this interspecies planning session went on.

Finally, Emily turned back to the Weasleys with a relieved smile. "Pyewacket says she'd be happy to help stage a distraction if it's to protect you, Mrs. Weasley. You are, after all, her pack alpha, the one who pets her most often, the possessor of her favourite lap, and the one who opens the food cans and liver snaps, so to her that makes you completely indispensable."

Mrs. Weasley laughed. "Er, Professor while we've got an English to Cat translator here, would you mind terribly telling Pyewacket that I'd prefer it if she didn't scratch the furniture, but used that nice scratching post we just bought for her?"

Emily relayed this message to Pyewacket, who chirruped back a reply. Emily turned back to Mrs. Weasley "Ah, she didn't realise the scratching post was for her because it doesn't smell like her other things. She asks for your forgiveness."

The odd foursome of Faerie, humans, and cat continued their planning until late in the evening, until Emily pronounced their plan as airtight as they could make it. The Weasleys collected Pyewacket and took their leave, shaking Emily's hand, and the three of them wished each other good luck tomorrow.

"Now remember, all day tomorrow, just go about your business like usual," Emily told the two of them. "Molly, you just take care to be in front of the hearth at the time we agreed upon, ready to fight, and I'll take care of the rest."

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She shivered, her hands clenching around her teacup. "I... I see. But if I do make it back with a grievous iron burn... as far as I can tell, you're the only person in the Order with any experience as a triage medic, and who has access to anaesthetics, antibiotics, and Healing Potion, and I can't exactly stagger into St. Mungo's in full armour gasping that my murder attempt didn't go right and You-Know-Who used a *Crucio* on me for it, can I," she said, her voice taking on a sharp, nervous edge. "I'm well aware that I'm hardly your favourite person in this world, but we are both on the same side in this."

One black eyebrow quirked. "If you're asking me what I'd do if I had a choice of administering first aid to you, or letting you go into shock on the front stoop, then yes, I would choose the former," he said. "I would do the same for any member of the Order."

"Can you make certain to be at Grimmauld Place tomorrow night after half-past seven and wait until I come back?"

"Yes, I can." He scowled down at his plate in annoyance. "And I'll bring the full complement of medical supplies available to me, because Merlin knows Sirius Black is useless when it comes to actually being prepared to offer practical help to anyone."

Emily looked meditatively down at her tea. "You and Sirius Black have hated each other for years, haven't you," she said.

"Yes," he replied curtly. "Since we were in school together."

"Why?" she asked. "What did he do to you?"

"Madam, if I were to attempt to list all of the various grievances I have against Sirius Black, I could keep you here until we both died of old age," Snape said grimly. "Suffice to say he's something of a bully and found a particular relish in tormenting the bookish Slytherins of his year."

"That's all of it? Just some tribal schoolboy rivalry? It just seems... I don't know, deeper than that somehow."

Snape regarded her silently across the table for a long moment. "Do you have a few minutes?" he asked.

"Of course I do."

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Five minutes later, Emily was staring at her colleague across the kitchen table, horrified.

"He tried to send you into a room with a werewolf?" Her voice rose in disbelief. "Are you *joking?*"

"No, actually I'm not," he said.

"But... but he could have *killed* you!" she cried, outraged. "Or you could have gotten mauled, or maimed, or infected with lycanthropy, or "

"Yes, I think that was the general idea," Snape said.

"He did this at *seventeen?* And the werewolf was purportedly *a friend of his?*"

"Allegedly, though how he can remain on friendly terms with someone who treated him so abominably has always been beyond my comprehension."

"Oh *flaming* Christian hell, that's just... that's horrible. I am... I am truly sorry, sir," she said, sincerely outraged. "How absolutely *hideous* that you had to deal with someone like that as a boy. My word, I can only imagine how the werewolf would have felt, if he came to himself and then found that his supposed *friend* had tried to feed a schoolmate to him while he was so vulnerable... that sounds like a set-up for suicide, in my opinion." She clasped her shaking hands in front of her. "Some people simply don't think about the consequences of their actions at all, do they?"

"You sound as though you've had some experience yourself with such people," Snape observed.

"Well, confidentially... " She turned a grim look down at the table. "The way he always behaves toward me, like I'm completely expendable and beneath his contempt, and then hearing this story from you... all I'll say about it is that Mr. Black just reminds me of someone I killed once."

"If Jayson Robinett was anything like Sirius Black, I'd say you should have been commended for laudable public service in exterminating him," Snape muttered.

Emily gave a short, humourless laugh, then looked off into the middle distance, remembering something. A gentle, mild-mannered Professor with an apologetic demeanour that belied his physical presence, an unusual robust muskiness to his scent "It's Remus Lupin, isn't it. The werewolf."

He looked up at her in surprise. "How did you guess?"

"Just a hunch... something about his manner, and the way he smells," she said.

"Yes, your instincts are correct in this case, but I can assure you he's not dangerous now," Snape told her. "To his credit, Lupin volunteered to be the first test subject for a Wolfsbane potion I'd been working on for some years, and the effort has had the desired effect of rendering him harmless while in his changed state. Now, if only I could come up with a potion that would actually keep him from *forgetting to take it* at certain crucial moments... " He shook his head direly.

"Well, I've less reason to fear him than most. He couldn't infect me with a cold virus, much less lycanthropy, even if he did bite me," Emily said, shrugging. "He'd be just like any other big ravening wolf to me."

"I see." Snape's brows creased clearly, an Arcadian's immunity to infection by werewolf had not previously occurred to him.

She regarded him across the table. "Well, what do you think of my plan for tomorrow?" she asked, unable to keep a note of nervousness out of her voice. She couldn't have said why she was seeking his approval, but it would have meant a great deal to her if he had given it.

Snape, as usual, remained unimpressed. "As plans go, it's completely idiotic. I still think you should give up this whole thankless undertaking and take yourself somewhere safe, but I do realise it's probably asking too much of Fate to expect you to see reason," he said and bent over his notebook again.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." She got up and left him to his supper.

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Emily found it very difficult to sleep that night.

Now and then she would nod off, but sleep felt like a direct fall into murky, disturbing dreams *she was fleeing through a forest, alone and unarmed, hiding from any number of pursuers. There was a man who wanted to enslave and destroy her, and one who she had to hide from forever, lest a single scornful glance reduce her to smoke... flame in the darkness, men in black robes carrying torches, the ring of iron blades drawn from scabbards. The air was full of soft, enticing, threatening whispers, but when she turned toward the voices, there was never anyone there. Red serpentine eyes peered out from under thick briars, glowing in the darkness*

For what felt like the hundredth time that night, she jerked awake, sweating.

As a result, she slept very, very late into the next morning and still felt exhausted when she finally awoke, but there was no shirking her duties for a long lie-in that day. Finally she got up, took a long shower, had a light breakfast, and did some listless preliminary stretches and dagger drills. It seemed that the clock on the mantelpiece kept moving perversely fast, taking fifteen- and twenty-minute leaps forward every time she looked away from it for even a moment.

Then her treacherous clock had ticked to five past seven, and Emily began to suit up for her stealth mission. Black tunic and close-fitting breeches of the most supple suede leather, high boots, then her blackened armour and dagger belt. Everything in her wanted to do something further to protect herself don a suit made of head-to-toe asbestos as protection against burning, perhaps but she didn't dare. She had to leave herself vulnerable to attack, or the charade would be over. The situation she faced today was so totally at odds with her previous combat experiences that her stomach was slowly filling with acid at the sheer strangeness of it when she had gone into battle in the past, her previous objective had always been to evade attack by any means necessary, not to let those blows connect. She had never had to face an opponent armed with iron, for it was impossible to come by in the Faerielands, and it would have only been the most sociopathic of Orcs who would wield such a weapon at all.

Next, she laid out her paper of swords and daggers on her desk and mused over the blades within it. She finally decided on a twelve-inch, double-edged mithreal dagger and attached the blade's scabbard to her belt.

Finally she went to the bathroom mirror, brushing back her hair and securing it away from her face with a rubber band. As she gazed at her own reflection in the mirror, an instant's stomach-wrenching panic washed over her *What am I doing? Why am I even here? He's going to kill me, I know it, I know it.* The person in the mirror was barely recognisable as herself, just some ghostly white individual with eyes full of staring horror.

But then she calmed herself and crossed to her desk again, draping the long soot-black sniper veil around her neck and picking up a pair of black gauntlets.

Twenty minutes past seven.

Holy Mother of Us All, Lady of the Sky, if I should meet my death tonight, please let me find myself in Your loving arms, and I beg You to forgive me for all I have done to offend You, now and ever.

Then she left the room, and made her way down to the front foyer.

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There was a second pale person in black already in the foyer when she arrived. Professor Snape was sitting on the bottom step, dressed as usual in black robes, and hunched forward with his hands loosely clasped in front of him. At his feet was the same large black physician's bag with the peeling gold initials she remembered from the first night she met him.

"So you're off then," he said as she passed, not looking at her.

"I am."

"Just so you know if this doesn't go exactly the way we want it to, I'm going to personally put you in the next portal back to Arcadia, and don't think I won't Stun you and bundle your unconscious carcass into a trunk to do it," he snarled at her as she passed but his face was as ghostly white as hers.

"Look, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not up to my usual level of repartee right now," she snapped back. She was trying for a tightly controlled tone, as would have become a soldier, but was unable to keep a rasping edge of fear out of her voice. "So if you have anything to say besides *Good luck*, I would thank you very much to keep it to yourself."

Peripherally, she felt his eyes burning into the side of her face, and something in him seemed to relent. "I'll be at Grimmauld Place when you return," he said quietly and she gave him just one instant's look, her eyes full of desperate gratitude.

"Thank you," she said, and left the school by the front doors.

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A small send-off party of Lucius Malfoy's closest friends and associates had been assembled in the Malfeasant conference room that evening.

Walden Macnair glanced at the ornate clock on the mantelpiece. "Seven thirty-five," he said, turning to Lucius. "She's late. Are you sure she's going to go through with this, Malfoy?"

"Just for your information, Walden, Arcadians don't really have our sort of clocks in their world, so as a result, they can be rather indifferent to the concept of late and early," Lucius said pleasantly. "She'll get here when she gets here, that's just how Faeries are."

The clock ticked to seven thirty-seven. Menzentius Black glanced up lazily from his carved armchair, a glass of port dangling from one elegant hand. "Five Galleons says she stands Lucius up again," he jeered.

Lucius was turning toward his brother-in-law in annoyance when Emily's voice sounded from within their very midst "*Gentlemen.*"

The assembled group all gave a start as a slender, veiled figure clad entirely in black armour, breeches, dagger belt, and boots suddenly appeared, solid as life, sitting cross-legged on the end of the conference table. She raised a gauntleted hand, and very deliberately uncoiled the length of diaphanous black veiling from around her head, revealing a familiar pale, elfin face and red-gold hair. "Good evening, everyone," she said, shaking out her hair.

The group surveyed her with various combinations of shock, apprehension, and admiration. "Well, one thing I'll say for the Faeries they certainly know how to make an entrance," Emmitt Parkinson said, raising his brandy glass to her. "Good evening, my dear."

"My Lady." Lucius went to her side and put a decidedly unchaste kiss on her black-gloved hand. "I shall tell my Lord you have arrived."

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Lucius took Emily's arm and led her down the ornate corridor into another room, a lavish bedroom suite as luxuriously appointed as Lucius's own master suite upstairs, carved stone walls richly draped in green velvet and antique tapestries. The draperies were tightly drawn, so that the only light in the room came from a vast black marble hearth blazing in an unbroken sheet of flame, and the very occasional candle. The air in this room was very close, and it was stifling hot.

There was a vast armchair set before the roaring fire, and Lucius paused behind it, calling out in an obsequious voice "My Lord? Our guest of honour has arrived."

A long, bleached-white hand extended from the depths of that chair, and stroked something beside it and then Emily's eyes adjusted to the gloom well enough to discern that what she had initially taken for a very large round ottoman beside the chair was in fact an absolutely immense snake coiled there. The beast lifted its head in Emily's direction, forked tongue flicking out.

The chair creaked, and Voldemort stood, uncoiling to his full, rail-slender height. *Leave us,* he told Lucius. *I would speak to Lady Swain alone.*

"Of course, my Lord," Lucius said smoothly. He bowed deeply, and left the two of them alone.

Voldemort's imperturbable red gaze lingered on Emily as she stood at attention before him, her right hand clenched around the hilt of her dagger. Finally he made a slow

circuit around her, surveying her from all angles. The expression on his face held even more cruel, bemused *hauteur* than that of a Seventh Kingdom queen inspecting her troops. The giant snake coiled at her feet watched her with opaque eyes, tongue now and then darting out to taste the air. Emily remained motionless, wishing there was a polite way to wipe away the film of sweat forming on her hairline and upper lip.

I wonder, Voldemort mused, from over her left shoulder,*if a Fianna knight is given a task that she must accomplish... and then returns to her commander and reports that she was not successful in that task, what consequences does she face?*

"She would be held accountable for her failure," Emily told him. "The case would be evaluated by a council of officers, and if it was decided that the knight was at fault, her commanders would bring a disciplinary action against her."

Yes, of course, Voldemort said, from behind her, close to her right ear. *We are leaders of men, both of us, my Lady. I must maintain the fear and respect of those who follow me, or I have nothing.*

"I quite understand, sir."

You do not pay me homage, as you do to another lord, and I permit this, for now. But should you not return with news of your success... there will be penalties. You do understand this.

"I do, sir," Emily said, her hand clenching on the hilt of her dagger.

You will accept responsibility then, if you fail?

"I will, sir. You may hold me personally responsible if I don't return with that fat woman's red scalp as my prize." It was bad enough that he was threatening her with reprisals if she failed; but on top of everything he had to make his actions seem entirely rational, even just. He couldn't just punish her he had to make her give her permission for such punishment. And when she thought of the penalties someone like Lord Voldemort would mete out on someone who had failed him in any way, her fear was so intense she could smell it in her own sweat.

The Dark Lord's red eyes half-closed with gloating satisfaction and then he took her hand and raised it to his lips. *Go then, my warrior,* he purred. *Show that upstart and his brood sow the meaning of pain and fear.* He lazily waved a hand, and a set of French doors draped in velvet opened onto the starlit lawn outside.

Emily gave him a predatory smile. "I shall do my best, sir."

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The Weasley family had long had an enchanted grandfather clock in their living room, with nine golden hands in the likeness of each member of the family, and a face around which were inscribed various activities and locations, among them "Home," "School," "Work," "Travelling," "Lost," "Hospital," "Prison," and "Mortal Peril."

At 7:47 p.m. that day, the clock's hands were nearly all pointing at *Work*, except for Ginny's and Ron's, which were pointing at *Travelling.* Molly Weasley's hand pointed cosily at *Home.*

At 7:48 p.m., however, as Emily appeared outside the village of Ottery St. Catchpole, close to the Weasleys' front door Molly's hand made a crisp click over to *Mortal Peril.*

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The Weasleys' house was a picturesque old pile with several red-brick chimneys a lopsided, funny, harum-scarum sort of house, very like an illustration from the bright picture books Emily had loved as a child. A little painted sign near the door bore a quaint moniker: *THE BURROW.*

There were several fat brown chickens scratching about just outside the house's front door, but Emily sent the flock away with a pass of her hand and an inaudible word, then made her way toward the front door. As promised, Mrs. Weasley had left the door unlocked, to preserve the illusion that she was not expecting an intruder of any kind.

As Emily silently crossed the threshold, dagger in hand, any number of homey, poignant details caught guiltily at her heart the crayon drawings of many children tacked on the walls, the mantelpiece heaped with well-thumbed cookbooks, bright rag rugs, and clean, hand-crocheted white doilies on worn armchairs. Everything looked shabby and much-used, but the Burrow had such an unmistakable air of being someone's *home* that it took all the resolve she had to violate this sanctuary.

As they had planned, Mrs. Weasley was alone, kneeling in front of the fireplace in an old, soot-stained chintz house dress, nervously humming a tuneless little song to herself as her brush swept the hearth.

Molly! Emily's Glamoured voice hissed inaudibly, deep in the recesses of Mrs. Weasley's ear. *Behind you at three o'clock, remember what we practiced*

As she advanced toward the hearth, Emily trod heavily on the violet patch in the rag rug before the hearth, and as promised, the floorboard creaked and groaned deafeningly. Mrs. Weasley's song halted, and she turned around, calling, "Arthur? Who's there?" Seeing no one, her body tensed with fear, and then her hand went to the iron fireplace poker in the wrought-iron stand beside the hearth.

Pyewacket the cat had been drowsing in her usual spot on the sofa and, as practiced, came over to investigate the odd sound lingered to investigate the smell of an unfamiliar, invisible person then hissed, and struck out with all five forepaw claws extended, catching Emily a sharp blow just above the top of her boot. She yelped *Owwwww!*, then bent down to swat at the animal and made herself visible in the process. Pyewacket wheeled around and fled from her with a loud caterwaul.

Molly stared at the black-veiled, armoured figure who had just appeared in the middle of her cosy living room, with a long, wicked-looking silver dagger in hand and that poor lady could scarcely have looked more frightened than if Lord Voldemort himself had materialised before her.

"Who are you?" she screamed *"Leave me alone!"*

And then she swung the poker.

It connected with the upper part of Emily's left thigh with a solid meaty thud, followed by a sizzling sound

There was no need to pretend that hurt at all. A scream reverberated through the Burrow

"Go away! Leave me alone!" Mrs. Weasley cried, then gritted her teeth, and resolutely swung again

Emily turned, gasping with pain, and ran for the door as fast as she could at least, as fast as she could on such an injury. The poker fell from Mrs. Weasley's boneless fingers and clattered on the floor, and she fell heavily to her knees, trembling, tears starting in her eyes.

Thus Molly Weasley became perhaps the only fortyish housewife in the United Kingdom to ever defeat a Fianna knight in an armed confrontation, but somehow she seemed disinclined to gloat over her victory.

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The façade of Malfeasant swam queasily in Emily's sight as she Apparated as close to the manor as she could. The distance from her Apparition point and the French doors of the conference room seemed endless; every footfall was a torment and a penance. There was blood dripping down her leg, pooling around the top of her boot, and her thigh now felt like someone had left a red hot coal on her skin, and it had penetrated through the meat straight to the bone.

Lucius turned toward the French doors with a smug, triumphant smile as Emily threw them open but then his look turned to a deep scowl as she staggered across the threshold, gasping. She limped across the room to fall against the conference table, oblivious to the fat droplets of blue blood falling onto the vast Oriental rug with every step.

"Are you all right?" Emmitt Parkinson's voice called sharply.

"What's going on? Is the Weasley bitch dead, or what?" Menzentius Black demanded.

Emily raised her head and tore off the black veil "No, I... the fecking cow had an iron weapon, she... " She broke off with a long hiss of pain, her teeth gritting.

"What?" Lucius cried, scandalised. "You didn't complete the mission? Don't tell me you left the woman alive "

"What was I *supposed* to do?" she shouted back at him. She glanced down at her left leg, which was still oozing blood onto the rug "After she coshed me with an iron poker, I could barely even *move* was I supposed to just stand there and let her finish me off?"

Then someone who had been sitting in the great armchair at the head of the table slowly stood up and the whole room fell silent.

So, Voldemort said, gliding toward her, *you mean to tell me that you came back to us... without that woman's red scalp as your prize? How disappointing... you seemed so confident when you left us earlier.*

"She was cleaning the hearth when I got there damned *cat* sensed me, it's hard to get past dogs and cats even with Obscurantis," Emily protested desperately. "And then she grabbed the poker and... you told me she was a fat, dim-witted housewife, you didn't tell me the fucking sow would defend her home like a goddamned cornered tigress "

A fascinating tale, but now I think I'd like to judge for myself what happened, Voldemort said icily. His wand pointed at her

Emily forced her real motivations down down *down*, disassociating herself from the events of the last few weeks, forgetting the Order of the Phoenix ever existed, forgetting she knew Albus Dumbledore, or Severus Snape, or Alastor Moody and Nymphadora Tonks forced herself to concentrate on her pain, anguish unimaginable, torment that made perfect concentration impossible. She tensed her left leg until her entire body screamed in protest at the stress on her burned flesh, making the pain worse on purpose to mask her true thoughts

Sweet Lady of the Worlds, make him see, make him feel

Legilimens, the Dark Lord said.

She closed her eyes and felt the recent past playing on her eyelids like a Muggle film he had forced his way into her short-term memory now, and she tried not to cry out at the hated sense of violent mental intrusion. He was a cold presence among her recent experiences, reliving her entrance into the Weasley house, the groaning floorboard, the cat smelling her and then scratching her, the gasp that dispelled her Obscurantis effect, the instant's hesitation, the frightened Mrs. Weasley attacking in an aggressive panic

Emily seized on the memory of the poker connecting, amplifying the burning pain for the benefit of the interloper in her mind, then ferociously turning up the venom on the *shockrageshameagony* she felt afterward *stupid fat bitch like to kill her for this*

And then he was gone from her mind, apparently having seen and felt enough.

Ah, but that stupid, fat bitch still managed to defeat you, didn't she? he cold, hissing voice said. *So even a mighty knight of the Fianna can be made to flee before even the least threat of iron? Am I to understand that a mere household implement can fell the greatest warriors in this world or any other?*

"You don't *understand!*" Emily cried. "It's not the same as it is for you humans iron is "

Silence, he warned, and she quieted, shrinking away from him.

Now he was coming toward her, his voice like fire hissing *I told you there would be penalties if you failed.*

"No, *please!* Wait, just listen, I can explain, it was it was "

His black robes swirled behind him as he came on, raising his wand again and Emily could feel blood pounding in her temples and throat. She knew she wasn't the one destined to finish off this wizard, but if he tried to use an *Avada Kedavra* curse on her, she was going to see how this would-be immortal reacted to a twelve-inch mithreal blade hurled into his throat, and hope that bought her enough time to escape through the open doors behind her.

His lipless mouth parted, forming the first syllable of an incantation but not the vowel A, instead, a hard consonant C.

So it was to be the Cruciatus Curse.

There was nothing she could do but tough this one out, it seemed she steeled herself, tried to mentally prepare for it she had taken the worst iron burn of her life today, how much worse could it be than that

Oh shit, she thought, trembling *ohshitohshitohshit*

The Dark Lord pointed his wand at her

Crucio.

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Iron burns were nothing compared to this. She would rather have been burned over every inch of her skin than endure *this*

Wracking, mind-whitening agony; not waves of it, but a single instant of pain without end, as though every sensory torment the world could offer hit her every nerve cell at once. The doomed Fae of centuries ago, feeling the meat cook off their bones in immolating fires, feeling their skin sizzling and their bones crushed in the iron maidens forged by humans, might have felt like this

The crystal prisms in the chandeliers above her vibrated with her shrieking, thrashing, pleading

holymothersaveme

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The pain stopped.

Her body relaxed from its contorted rictus, and she hit the floor hard, breathing raggedly. Her body felt completely bathed in sweat, and her throat burned raw with screaming.

Later on, Emily would only be able to recall very little of what happened after she confronted Molly, of how she got to Malfeasant, and what went on there. But one instant would always stand out in her mind with perfect lucidity how Lucius turned with the others and followed Voldemort out after that very angry and disappointed personage stormed out of the room, and left her bleeding and grovelling on the conference room floor and never looked back.

After some time, she got up, and staggered out of the open French doors and outside.

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Emily found her way back to number twelve, Grimmauld Place entirely by rote. By the time the door appeared in front of her, she had accepted the idea of walking on a leg that felt as though it was on fire as her usual lot in life, and couldn't imagine how it had ever felt otherwise. Her hands felt nerveless and very far away; it took several tries before she could make them turn the doorknob.

A second after the door opened, a young woman's voice called out: "Who's there? Emily, is that you?" A second later, a very worried-looking Nymphadora Tonks hurried into the foyer from the kitchen. She stopped dead when she saw Emily, her face paling under her bright pink hair, brown eyes widening in alarm. "*Em?* Are you all right, mate?" she asked.

"I'm fine," Emily said dully.

"You're *really* not looking very well," Tonks said, gingerly coming toward her, both hands extended. Bill Weasley, Remus Lupin, and Alastor Moody appeared behind Tonks a second later, and both of them reacted exactly the same way Tonks had when they saw Emily, stopping dead and surveying her with wide, apprehensive eyes.

"*I'm fine*," she snarled irritably there were just too damn many loud, garrulous voices in this room, why wouldn't they all leave her in *peace*! She wanted to go somewhere and lie down it seemed as though everything that had ever been wrong in the world would be all right if she could only get to somewhere safe and quiet where she could sleep but she never made it past the foyer. A second later she noticed she wasn't standing upright anymore, but had someone's black broadcloth shoulder under her cheek. There was a rustle of a cloak beside her Moody had gone down on one knee and was examining her burn injury. He gasped and pressed his hand hard against his lips.

"Professor? When you got back and made your report, what happened?" Snape's voice in her ear, a low, very gentle tone. "Did he use the Cruciatus Curse?"

She meant to say, *Yes, he did, sir, and I couldn't believe how painful it was* but all that came out were rasping sobs. She buried her face in his shoulder as though to hide herself under his skin; it was all she could do to force herself to continue breathing.

"No, you are *not* fine," Snape whispered. She felt him cradling her head against his shoulder with one hand while the other raised her right arm and looped it around his neck. Then his arm was under her knees and he lifted her up off the floor, careful not to apply any pressure to the burn. The relief of not having to walk or remain upright, of allowing herself to just go limp against him with her arms around his neck, was unbelievable.

"Oi!" Fred and George Weasley came running into the foyer "Mum's back and she's all right. She's won the " Then, like Bill Weasley, Lupin, Moody and Tonks, they took one look at Emily and immediately stopped, turning pale and silent.

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley appears to be uninjured, that's been established," Snape said curtly, starting forward with his colleague in his arms. "However, her opponent did not come out unscathed. So if you would all *get the bloody hell out of the way*... ?"

When Professor Snape used that tone of voice, everyone in that room instinctively scattered.

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In a moment he was down the corridor and into a small and very neglected-smelling back bedroom, and laid Emily on the bed.

"Hold still," he said and lifted the skirt of her chain hauberk up and off of her thigh, then took a large scissors out of his bag and cut the leg of her breeches open to her hip. Emily got her first look at the damage she had taken from Molly Weasley's two blows with the poker and had to turn aside and jam her closed fist into her mouth to avoid being violently ill. The first blow, high on her thigh, was a mass of running blue blister, outlined by black charring, but the second, just below it, was even worse a long patch of crisply blackened skin peeling bloodily away from exposed muscle.

There was an abrupt knock on the door, and then it flew open, admitting a puffing, white-faced, very concerned Mrs. Weasley, closely followed by her son Bill. "Emily? Emily dear, please, I've been sick with worry. How bad was it "

She stopped dead, staring and the sight of the ghastly burn, the blood, and the pain on the other woman's face was too much for poor, tender-hearted Molly Weasley. She turned, threw herself into Bill's arms, and began crying horribly.

Emily seized Snape's hand in a desperate grasp. "*Please* get her out of here," she pleaded, aside to him.

Snape glanced down at her with a barely perceptible nod, then turned toward Bill, who was trying to calm Molly "I didn't *mean* to hurt her, we had to do it, she told me to do it, I had to! Why did this happen! I didn't *want* to hurt anyone, *I've never hurt anyone in my life* "

"*William* your mother is hysterical. Kindly take her out of here and calm her down. I recommend a double brandy. And do it *now*, please," Snape said, in his usual calm, effortlessly authoritative voice. It had the desired effect of Bill gently but inexorably removing the distraught Molly from the room, closing the door behind them.

"*Thank you,*" Emily whispered. Snape glanced at her, and said nothing but soaked a clean piece of surgical gauze in Numbing Potion and delicately dropped it over her burned flesh. The blinding, searing pain instantly diminished into a low throbbing ache and she sobbed with relief.

Snape took a gleaming pair of scissors from his bag "Look away," he said firmly, and then she felt his hand on her thigh, the pressure of metal on her skin, and a quick, decisive *snip* as he removed the charred flap of skin hanging from her flesh. He then hastily dampened another piece of surgical gauze with something else she caught the sweet, acrid scent of Healing Potion and very gently dropped it over her wound as well.

"We have to stop meeting like this, Professor," she said softly. The Healing Potion began to take effect, itching like a fury, even through the cooling effect of the anaesthetic.

"Absolutely," he muttered, rummaging through his bag for something else. "I'd like to try something, madam, if you would permit me... your friend Catherine Orson and I have been corresponding lately, regarding potential treatments for iron burns. She also put me in touch with a wizard Healer named Collier, in Paris, who has ties to the Faery community and who is also studying Faery physiology."

"Healer Collier in Paris? You mean Laurent Collier?" she asked, raising herself on her right elbow with an effort.

"I said, *don't move*, damn it."

"Sorry," she replied.

"Yes, that is his name. He attended your alma mater of Beauxbatons, I believe."

"Oh, I know Laurent, he was a " she winced as the itching built to a furious crescendo of irritation, "he was a Tithesman the year I finished school. Alain Collier, who you met, is his half-brother."

Snape grimaced. "At any rate, the three of us have been working on a variant on Healing Potion, specifically created to heal iron burns. It is an experimental formulation, and we haven't been able to test it in a real clinical setting, but both Catherine and Laurent have apparently had some success with testing it on Faery patients. If you would permit me to use some now, I think we can perhaps cut your recovery time significantly."

Emily stared at him, amazed. "You're working on when did why did "

"Please, Professor, there will be time to tell you about it later. Right now my greatest concern is that another member of the Order has taken a serious injury and I'm being forced to treat her in less than sterile environs. I'd like to do everything I can to minimise your discomfort and speed your recovery time before any sort of infection has a chance to set in so please, with your permission?" he urged.

"Yes... all right, go ahead."

Snape turned back to his satchel and took out a large phial of greenish-blue solution and a roll of surgical gauze. He then wet the gauze with the greenish solution and, uncovering her wound, dropped the third piece of potion-soaked gauze over it. Emily winced again as the third potion took effect it itched a bit less than the regular Healing Potion, though its effect was still not what you could call a comfortable sensation. The pain, however, noticeably lessened almost at once. She fell back against the dusty-smelling pillow with a long sigh.

She heard him again rummaging in his satchel. "Professor? I know you can't take morphine, but do you have any adverse reactions to belladonna that I should know about?"

"No, belladonna's fine. You'll need to give me about four times the usual dosage though my tolerance for it is a lot more than a human's would be."

"I see. Approximately how much do you weigh?"

"About a hundred thirty-five or forty pounds... "

A moment later he was helping her up into a reclining position and clasping her hand around a small cup. "Drink this it's tincture of belladonna, Antibiotic Potion, and the new Healing Potion. The first will numb the pain and help you sleep, and the others will hopefully speed your recovery."

"Thank you." She drank the medicine down, and he eased her back down onto the pillow.

There came the sound of more rummaging, and then his hand curved gently around her cheek as he peered down into her face. "Now hold still, try to keep your eyes open I'm going to put few drops of regular Healing Potion in them. You have some broken blood vessels in your eyes and nose... it's a common side effect of the Cruciatus Curse. Stay very still... "

The pad of his thumb peeled her eyelid back with incredible delicacy, and then liquid dropped into her left eye. He repeated the process with her right eye, then wiped a piece of wet surgical gauze over both her eyelids and nostrils and her upper lip. For the first time, Emily realised that she must have had a film of blood rimming her eyes and leaking from her nose when she returned that evening. He then peeled off both of her gloves and peered at her fingernails, many of which looked bruised.

The sedative he had given her was now beginning to take effect the pain was still a dull red haze, but she didn't mind it so much. Professor Snape's back was to her as he replaced an eyedropper, bottles, and jars in the open satchel beside him. After a moment, he turned and looked down at her face again, examining her eyes. "You're looking much better," he said softly.

"Would you just... talk to me about something?" she entreated, clinging to his hand. *Please don't go.*

He remained bent over her, didn't pull his hand away. "What would you like to talk about?"

"I don't know... what Potion do you most like to make?"

He took a seat beside her on the bed, very gently clasping her hand between both of his. "Let's see... I find Healing Potion can be very satisfying to make," he said. "I have to pick some of the ingredients under a full moon, which can be rather pleasant in good weather... when I'm preparing the fixative, I have to extract an oil from wild mint that's been anointed with human tears... and it's always exciting when I can find a good big chunk of narwhal ambergris or a human trichobezoar, because those will make the mixture even more potent... "

He went on like that for some time. From many other people, this sort of discourse would have been dull, but Snape's interest in the topic was obvious it illuminated every syllable he uttered with a subtle glamour and excitement. It really was extremely interesting and it had the desired effect of taking her mind off of her own pain.

"I'm sorry to bother you... I'm just... "

"No need to apologise," he said in a voice that completely excused her from any wrongdoing this time. "Just try to rest."

"Where do you get human tears?" she asked. "Do apothecaries carry those?"

"Yes, but they're rather prohibitively expensive. Anyone's tears will work, so most of the time it's easiest just to use my own."

She glanced up at him, her hand tightening around his. "You just let yourself dwell on sad things?"

Snape brushed her hair back from her eyes with an awkward, infinitely careful gesture. "Yes."

Perhaps a minute later, she was asleep, still holding his hand.

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as well, and with comforting their mother the woman who, he reminded them, had devoted her entire life to their care.

To their credit, Fred and George nodded agreement and took their leave of him without insolence, and diligently followed his instructions to the letter for the entirety of Professor Swain's short stay at number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

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"Severus? Where are you going?" Dumbledore called after him, some strain sounding in his voice.

"I'm going to go make arrangements to have the Professor looked after by someone both competent and trustworthy," Snape snapped, and left the room.

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escaped my notice that every time you've gotten serious about a man, he's always been tall, dark, brooding, and unbelievably clever, just like "

"Oh, don't you *dare* "

"Just like your *father!*" Catherine finished, crossing back to her friend with an evil little grin. "You like your men just like the one who married Dear Old *Mum*."

"Ooooh! Catherine Grace Orson, you are SO full of shite! I am in awe of your full-of-shiteness!" Emily took the toothbrush and paste and slammed into the bathroom, hobbling a little on her burned leg.

"It's *true*!" Catherine retorted through the bathroom door. "I've known you since you were a little eleven-year-old punk whining because Mummy and Da made her go to school in the big bad Second World, and you are the biggest Daddy's girl I ever saw, Swain! Face it!"

"I am *not* listening to you!" Emily cried.

"Come *on* so I wasn't supposed to notice how you spent most of my Tithe year drooling at Laurent? Sure, you may have amused yourself for a couple of months with Whatsisname, you know, that blond snobby wizard bloke, but you regarded him about like a puppy does its favourite chew toy, and everybody knew it but him. You were completely *done* with him the day after Beltane."

From within the bathroom, there came a disgruntled grunt of *Mmmmrhfff,* then the sound of water running, and furious tooth brushing.

"But then Whatsisname Blond Wizard Bloke thought everyone wanted him I never saw anyone so convinced he was God's gift to women. But I could tell you and he wouldn't last he wasn't clever enough for you, and I knew that Muggles-are-lower-than-dirt *'tude* of his would get on your nerves sooner than later. He worked in your father's library all day, had unlimited access to all those ancient High Arcadian lexicons, and he still couldn't figure out a True Name. Not only that, but he'd get all defensive if anyone asked him how the work was going. But you fancied Laurent like anything he'd be following Samiel around the infirmary and you'd be watching him with your little heart all aflutter."

"Laurent was ten years older than me," Emily protested, around what sounded like a mouthful of toothpaste.

"Which is probably what held him back, you know. He really liked you, but he just wasn't the sort who goes around chasing teenage girls at twenty-seven," Catherine said, quite sensibly. "But you had a huge crush on him back then, just admit it. He was your ideal, the dark, broody, nonconformist intellectual."

"But then he had to go fall in love with *Eithne*," pouted Emily's voice from inside the bathroom.

"And Eithne married Corvus yes, I know, I was there, remember?" Catherine reminded her. "And Laurent is still married too, I believe."

"Did I ever tell you I sent Laurent a letter when I was at Cambridge, just to say hello and casually mentioning I was still single, I'd just had my twenty-second birthday, and that I was about to take my degree in Classics? It took me a week to actually get up the nerve to post the bloody thing and then he sent me back a very nice reply with a fecking *wedding invitation* in it," Emily said sourly.

"Oh, I didn't know that. That's... that's terrible. Oh, honey, I am so sorry." On the other side of the bathroom door, Catherine's head fell into her hands with silent laughter. "You have to admit it was a nice wedding, though."

Another disgruntled little *Mmmmrhfff* sounded from behind the bathroom door, accompanied by the sound of toothpaste being spat into the sink.

"But your colleague, unless I'm very much mistaken, is an available bachelor," Catherine reminded her.

"So what, he still doesn't like *me*," Emily said tartly, punctuated with even more vociferous spitting. "Well, not like you're thinking, at least."

"Oh, Em, you are so oblivious," Catherine muttered to herself. She shook her head with another private little laugh.

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To her credit, though, Emily was only barely conscious when Professor Snape brought her into the clinic, late Friday night.

Please, Doctor, I'm sure you're busy, but you are the only person in this world I would trust with her, he had said.

Part Third: The Hart Subvertant, Chapter 31, Part 1

Chapter 49 of 55

After Voldemort's return, Professor Swain has agreed to Sirius Black's suggestion that she use her influence with Lucius Malfoy to gather intelligence on the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters. As her horror of the Dark Lord grows, her old enemy Severus Snape proves to be the only one who understands the fear and doubt that plague a double agent…

Chapter 31, Part 1:

If there was one thing Emily found intensely irksome, it was waiting to get better after she had been sick or injured. It had now been four days after her confrontation with Molly Weasley, and after four days of treatment with compresses soaked in the new iron burn Healing Potion, she felt so much better that she had started pestering Catherine to release her from hospital.

"Not yet, not yet," Catherine said on Friday night, when she brought up a tray of supper and an armful of books and magazines for her increasingly restless patient. "You're healing fast, but we're still experimenting with the new potion, Em, so I'd rather err of the side of caution."

"Tomorrow, then?"

"Maybe I'll tell you after I've checked your bandages tomorrow morning." Catherine sat down by Emily's bedside with a cup of tea as her patient started on supper: a large

green salad with roast chicken and vegetables, and a pot of herb tea. "So, Em... do you want to tell me how you met up with that iron poker, and then got magically cursed afterward?" she asked, very tactfully indeed.

Emily looked sharply up at her friend. "Who told you about the curse?"

"Severus did. He wrote me the day before he brought you in, telling me that some unnamed Faery mutual acquaintance of ours was going to need treatment for burn injuries, and some nasty-sounding magical curse here's his letter." Catherine reached into her large pocketbook, sitting on a chair in the clinic foyer, and put a letter in Emily's hand she immediately recognised her colleague's stark handwriting.

As she read though his letter, she found herself strangely touched by what he had written. Although his disapproval of her actions came across loud and clear so did his concern over her potential injury. He gave very specific details of the potential side effects of the Cruciatus Curse and listed various ways of treating someone who had suffered it. There was a brief inventory of potions he had enclosed with the communication both varieties of Healing Potion, Calming Draught, tincture of belladonna so apparently he had taken it upon himself to supplement Catherine's clinic's pharmacy as well.

"Does this have anything to do with that enormous new barely-healed slash on your left shoulder, by any chance?" Catherine asked quietly. "I noticed it while I was getting you into your hospital gown on Monday night."

Emily blushed, looking down at her supper. "I can't... really tell you about that, Cat. All the information is highly sensitive."

"I get it, I get it. Although I heard something through the grapevine about how some wizard thug had stabbed a Fianna knight in the back in Diagon Alley, and how everyone was really upset about it. At the time I hoped it hadn't been you, because you didn't come to see me about it," Catherine said, blowing on her tea. "But it was you, wasn't it."

"Yes, it was," Emily admitted. "I would have come to you afterward, but I wasn't sure if you'd be here or at home, and I was bleeding so much I just let them take me to St. Mungo's and refused anything but willow bark infusion. You know, that's "

"The Wizarding equivalent of aspirin, yes, I know. Any reason why you couldn't have come to me afterwards, though? At the very least I could have prescribed you something non-narcotic for the pain."

"Catherine... I'm sorry," Emily said in a conciliatory tone. "There was just a lot going on at work at the time, and I didn't want to trouble you."

"Emily you're a dimensional plane away from home, and I'm one of the few people you actually know here. Not only that, but we've been friends for almost twenty-five years, and I'm a practicing physician. When you become the victim of what sounds like a violent hate crime, *trouble me*, all right?" Catherine declared, with a look of severest reproach.

"Look, there was more to it than that. The bloke who did it wasn't just some anti-Fae bigot, it was actually... oh hell, I shouldn't even be telling you any of this, but here goes." Emily pushed her plate away. "The stabbing was a contract hit put out on me by a fellow working for some Dark Wizards who thought I knew more about them than I actually did. As to what these blokes are like... oh, let's just say they're about the worst criminals the Wizarding world has, and leave it at that."

"Voldemort and the Death Eaters," Catherine said levelly. "Yes, I've heard of them. I think everyone who's acquainted with a European witch or wizard has heard of them. And from what I've heard, You-Know-Who somehow pulled a Dark Lord Sauron and brought himself back from the dead."

Emily stared at her. "How did you know?"

"Laurent's youngest brother is still at Beauxbatons, and one of his best mates was a Triwizard Tournament exchange student. The kid who told Rowan Collier heard it straight from Albus Dumbledore himself at a dinner at Hogwarts. As soon as Laurent heard, he wrote all his friends in the U.K. and warned them. He especially stressed it to me, because he thought I might want a heads-up if there was a sudden spike in magical injuries. He also thought I might be at higher risk to become a target because I work in a hospital. So I figured that if Laurent was telling me all this, and you weren't, when you bloody well *live* at Hogwarts then it had to be because you were involved in the resistance effort somehow and were keeping your involvement quiet." She put down her tea mug, not letting up with the reproachful glare for an instant. "Am I right?"

"Cat... "

"I am, aren't I," Catherine said flatly. "I know you, Em you couldn't walk away from a fight if you tried, especially since these Death Eater scumbags tried to have your father killed back in the eighties. They were the reason your father left England and isn't coming back."

Emily averted her eyes. "My word you're so well-informed today you're positively frightening me."

Catherine shrugged. "I've spent a lot of time in Gwydion's library reading medical texts over the years, and seeing as how a lot of the time your dad is the only other Briton at Court, he and I have gotten to talking. A lot. I asked him once if he ever got back to England much, and he said that Arcadia was his home now. Then it came out that he'd been targeted by some Muggle-hating Dark Wizards after he wouldn't join up with them, and didn't ever want to go back, and he didn't want you or your mother anywhere near the Wizarding world either. He also said once that he was pretty disappointed that he couldn't convince his other children to move to Arcadia as well, but I got the distinct feeling there's been some really bad blood there, and didn't pry."

"Yes, there has been," Emily said quietly. "He doesn't like to talk about them. They haven't spoken to each other in years."

"So Emily, come on," Catherine chided her. "I knew you'd want to go after these guys once I heard what had happened. I know how much you love your father you'd go medieval on anyone who'd ever tried to hurt him. And these Death Eaters certainly seem to be doing their best to bring this fight to your doorstep, what with killing one of your students like that."

Emily sighed. "All right, yes, it's true. I joined Dumbledore's resistance effort, and I got burnt and then cursed because of something I was doing for them. You are, as always, one hundred percent right."

"Dumbledore's resistance effort? So the Hogwarts headmaster is running the show?"

"Yes. They call themselves the Order of the Phoenix."

Catherine nodded thoughtfully. "Is Severus a part of the group as well?"

"Yes, he is. If there's a chain of command in the Order, he's probably ranked about third in it, right after a Magical Law Enforcement veteran named Alastor Moody."

Cat shook her head admiringly. "Bloody hell, and somehow he finds the time to work on a cure for iron burns while trying to free his world from oppression." She turned another reproachful look at Emily "*Why* do you not like him again?"

"Cat honestly!" Emily protested, now blushing furiously. "Do I have to explain every stupid workplace conflict I get into to you? My word, you're starting to sound like my mother."

"Good your mother's a damned clever lady." Catherine reached for her mug of tea again. "So, this Order of the Phoenix. Do they have any doctors in the ranks?"

Emily turned her most dire look of prohibition on her friend. "*No.* I don't want you involved."

Catherine didn't give an inch. "Why not?"

"Because you're a *Muggle*, Cat. The Death Eaters would kill you as soon as look at you."

"So would all those bloody Orcs, but somehow I'm still here. Emily, listen to me Severus told me that he administered first aid to you when you came back from whatever it was that you did on Monday, and he's a pretty decent amateur triage medic for an *organic chemist*," Catherine pointed out. "I, on the other hand, have extensive experience as both a combat medic and an emergency room physician, and I'm not exactly crap at magic either. Don't tell me the group can't use someone like me."

"I've *been* listening to you and I'm not letting you become their next target. Back when we were at war together, I never expected you to pick up a sword and charge onto the battlefield that's *my* job "

"Exactly and it's my job to patch you up after you get *hurt* doing your job. And, if you'll remember, I usually do a pretty decent job of it." She quirked an eyebrow at her patient. "How's your head, by the way?"

Emily reached for her fork and salad plate again, sulking. "It's fine, thank you."

"Any headaches? Blurry vision?"

Emily sulked all the worse. "Leave me alone. You're interrupting my supper."

"Patched you up *real* nice that time, didn't I," Cat goaded, smugly crossing her arms over her chest. "Right after saving your arse, no less."

"I'm recuperating, you know," Emily said huffily. "Some doctor you are, baiting people while they're recuperating. Real therapeutic, darling."

"Not even a *scar*," Cat continued inexorably. "Though I was rather astonished to discover that something had actually been found that was harder than that head of yours, truly."

"All right, all right, *all right*." Emily threw down her napkin, conceding defeat. "I'll introduce you to Dumbledore, and if anyone gets hurt, we'll perhaps entertain the option of bringing you in but that's *all* I'll let you do, and I mean that, Cat. Despite the constant insubordinate *cheekiness* which I *only* let you get away with because you're my friend I was your commanding officer once, so don't make me pull rank on you."

"Yes, my Lady," Catherine said, smiling.

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After Emily finished supper, Catherine changed her bandages for the final time that night, again marvelling over the rate at which she was healing. The burns were now just large bluish splotches of extremely sensitive new skin, and Catherine predicted that at this rate, she would be fully healed by tomorrow evening. "Okay, sweetie, I have to go, my shift starts in ten minutes. I'll be back to check on you before I go home, though."

"All right, I'll see you then." Cat was sitting on the edge of her bed, and Emily impulsively wrapped her arms around her friend. "You still love me?" she asked in a small voice, letting her head fall onto Catherine's shoulder.

"Of course, silly." Cat gathered her in for a long, comforting hug, then kissed the top of her head. "You just *worry* me, trying to save the world all the time. And you never want to let me help you, either. I know I can't really be in the Fianna and get honours like you and the others, but I do my best."

"Hey, if I had my way, you'd be Lady Orson, Senior Medical Officer, and be covered with medals," Emily said. "But there's only so much a person can do to change the rules when she's only tenth in line for the throne."

"Really, you're that far down?"

"Tenth or eleventh, I forget. It's somebody else's job to remember all that stuff, thank goodness."

"I know you hate all that courtly stuffiness," Cat laughed. "Well, milady, here I have to leave you. People to save, wounds to stitch, you know the drill."

"I know." Emily let go of Cat with reluctance; after the week she had had, it felt wonderful to get a kind, sisterly hug from a good friend. "Bye. Save lots of lives, and all that."

"Good night. Try and get some sleep."

Not long after Catherine had gone, there came the *flitter-rustle-scritch* of a post owl at the clinic window, and Emily got up to answer it. A little brown barn owl she recognised as one of the Hogwarts school owls alighted on the windowsill, carrying a small white box addressed to:

Miss Professor Emmalee Swane

Hidden Clinic Window

6 Floor

Sant Georges Hospitel

Summers Town

Lundon

Emily thanked the bird with head-scratch and a bit of chicken from her dinner plate, and it bobbed its head in thanks before it flew off.

Inside the box was a little bouquet of fragrant wildflowers that could be found all around Hogwarts in summer: yellow iris, primroses, haresbell, dog violets, and heath orchids, loosely bound with narrow pastel satin ribbons, and three letters. The first was a simple little card, written in large, childish hand:

Get Wel Soon

I am missing you

~Yr Friend

Cecile

Simple words and dodgy spelling aside, the elf's note and exquisite bouquet made her throat tighten with gratitude. She set the little bouquet on her hospital bed tray, where its fragrance could reach her nose, then opened her second letter, which was written in a flowing hand and deep purple ink, on white parchment monogrammed with the initials A.P.W.B.D. Albus Dumbledore's personal stationery, no doubt. His letter read:

Dear Emily,

Cecile and I went for a walk and gathered some posies for you today. Your young friend certainly has a talent for flower arranging I hope you enjoy her gift.

I hope your stay in hospital has been as pleasant as it can be, given the circumstances. Professor Snape assures me that Dr. Orson is a highly qualified physician with a wide knowledge of Faery medicine, as well as a long-time friend of yours, and I could not be more pleased to know that you are in such capable hands. Severus paid a second visit to the clinic late Tuesday evening, apparently while you were sleeping, and from what he has told me, your recovery has been nothing short of miraculous. Although your colleague has given me only the barest details of his research on the new iron burn potion, as per his usual modest habits, it would not surprise me in the slightest if he was the driving force behind this project. As before with his work on Wolfsbane Potion, this cure is, quite simply, the kind of challenge he would find irresistible.

Regarding Molly Weasley, Arthur has temporarily moved her and their two youngest children, Ron and Ginny, into Grimmauld Place until he deems it safe to bring them home, so alas, it may be some time before Molly sees her own home again. I am pleased to report that she is much recovered from the shock of the events of last Monday, and is keeping herself busy trying to get our headquarters ship-shape and keep everyone well fed. Molly, Arthur, Officer Tonks, and, oh, just about everyone have been continually asking for updates on your condition, and were glad to hear that you were well on the mend. Once it's safe for Mrs. Weasley to go home, you have a standing invitation for dinner at the Burrow.

In closing, while I am well aware that the Order of the Phoenix cannot accord you the same honours as a Royal Order of the Nine Kingdoms, I cannot begin to describe how much your efforts have been appreciated, my friend. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you.

Yours truly,

Albus

The third letter was a simple thing written on lined notepaper:

Dear Swain,

Hurry up and get well, mate, because you still have a date on with me for next time. And you bet your sweet arse you won't be paying for drinks.

Hope to see you soon!

Cheers,

Tonks

"I'll be there, Tonks," she muttered, with a small, happy smile.

Then, Emily's eyes fell on another letter lying on the bed tray. Catherine had not asked for Professor Snape's letter back, and now Emily lay in her hospital bed reading it and then re-reading it, unable to suppress a furtive thrill that he had written such a letter in the first place. In the day leading up to the confrontation, not even the Headmaster or Emily herself had had the practical foresight to line up expert medical care for her after the incident with Molly, but Snape had. It occurred to her then that acid tongue or no, her prickly colleague was a very good man indeed to have about in a crisis.

*Why did he do all this?*she wondered. *Why would he do this for us?*

She had no doubt that Snape would nonetheless have diligently done everything he could to aid any member of the Order of the Phoenix who needed help... but to take that diligence to the point of anticipating a need for a Healing Potion variant designed to cure iron burns, and then taking it upon himself to create such a remedy was so far above and beyond anything she would have expected of him that she could still scarcely believe it. She recalled Lucius's remarks about the Wolfsbane Potion Snape had created in order to render werewolves harmless during their transformations he had made it sound as though Wolfsbane had been Dumbledore's idea, and he had then foisted all the practical work for it off onto Professor Snape. But Snape himself and then Dumbledore made it sound as though the professor had been thinking about the need for such a remedy for some time, and that he had taken it upon himself to experiment with Wolfsbane well before Remus Lupin had ever come to work at Hogwarts. Snape hadn't made it sound as though the work was an unwelcome imposition upon him at all, but a project undertaken because he saw there was need for such, and he had the knowledge and expertise to create one. Some people might do crosswords or collect model trains, but apparently Severus Snape liked to work on cures for supernatural ailments in his spare time.

For a creature made of thorns and prickles, he certainly was generous with his abilities being neither a lycanthrope nor a Faerie himself, both Wolfsbane and this new iron burn Healing Potion seemed to be purely utilitarian undertakings on his part, intended to impart the greatest good to the greatest number of people. Everyone knew how much Snape personally disliked Remus Lupin (and how indifferent he was on the topic of another Defence Against the Dark Arts instructor, for that matter) and yet he had obviously put in a tremendous amount of work to help both of them, and others like them. Not only that, but he seemed to expect absolutely nothing in return, other than perhaps the satisfaction in seeing suffering alleviated, and in his own achievement. By all appearances, he had seemed content to work on the Healing Potion variant with Catherine and Laurent and never even mention it to her.

*By the Lady... I've done him yet another disservice,*she thought. *I've underestimated him.*

Emily resolved then that before she left this place, she was going to find some way to repay her colleague in kind for all he had done for her, and for Liria, and now, for the Faery people in general. She knew that she had let him down unforgivably as a lover, and had probably been less than thrilling to have as a colleague. But now she was determined that when she left here, the very least she could do was leave him with the impression that she had been a competent comrade-in-arms, and perhaps even made a half-decent friend.

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The days since he'd admitted his colleague to hospital had been long and empty for Professor Snape.

He again had Hogwarts almost entirely to himself. Dumbledore was spending quite a bit of time visiting with Black and the Weasleys at Grimmauld Place, and with Professor Swain and Hagrid gone, the only other inhabitants at Hogwarts that week were Argus Filch, Mrs. Norris, and the ghosts. Dumbledore had invited Snape to go along with him on his visits to the Order's headquarters, but Snape had brusquely declined, loath to spend any more time in Sirius Black's home that he absolutely had to, and having no desire to accept Black's hospitality.

Black's odious presence aside, the dust, filth, and general neglect of Black's home not only annoyed him, but served as a constant reminder that he hadn't been able to make as much headway in the endless repairs to Snape Hall as he would have liked that year. He kept trying to put enough Galleons aside to finally put a whole new roof on the place, but every rainy season brought more small leaks and minor repairs that needed to be performed just to prevent further deterioration, and after the way this year had gone, he finally just shelved the project until next year or the year after that. He would rather have liked to get a chance to spend a few quiet days at Snape Hall, just to be alone with a pile of frivolous reading and perhaps pay a visit to his old friends in the Chess Society on the weekend, but he didn't think he had time to leave just yet, not with the situation being what it was at present.

Snape had all that week been reviewing the memories of previous Death Eater meetings recovered from Cecile's mind, and while he wasn't yet finished reviewing all the information, what he had seen thus far had confirmed what Professor Swain had reported Lucius had become entirely convinced that Snape was a traitor and had been

doing his best to convince everyone else of the same for some time. The Dark Lord himself had been suspicious of Snape's interaction with Professor Quirrell while Voldemort had possessed Quirrell's body, but after Snape had not immediately appeared along with the others at the meeting in the graveyard, it was Lucius who had become convinced that his failure to appear was inalienable proof that he was a threat that must be eliminated, and had arranged the pub explosion in a private, closed-door meeting, attended only by Lucius, Walden Macnair, and the two largely invisible house-elves who tended the fire and refilled their plates and brandy glasses.

Not only that, but from the way Lucius dealt cuffs and kicks to all of his elves and addressed them all as *"You, elf!"*, it was more obvious than ever that Lucius had never really bothered to note that they were different from one another. Snape was well aware of Lucius's callousness toward his servants he could recall any number of times when his cousin had declared house-elves all looked alike to him and he now strongly suspected that Lucius may not have even realised that Cecile, the elf he had given to his mistress, had witnessed so much. It was beginning to look like Professor Swain's idea of persuading Lucius to give Cecile to her had been a real stroke of genius on her part, and he hadn't even gotten a chance to examine everything that had gone on in the weeks following the private meeting in which Lucius and Macnair had planned his demise at the Fusilier. *Good work, my Lady,* he thought as he exited the Pensieve after his most recent foray through the elf's memories on that Saturday afternoon.

After making another report on all he had seen to Dumbledore, Snape then returned to his apartments and wrote five very carefully worded letters to his great-aunt Druella Black, to Emmitt Parkinson, Theodore Nott, and to the Messrs. Crabbe and Goyle, respectively. If it was true that Druella, Parkinson, Nott, Crabbe, and Goyle were all still unpersuaded by Lucius's blandishments, he would need to cultivate every ally he could to defend himself against his cousin's charges. He went up to the Owlery and dispatched his letters, and was now sitting in his study trying to calmly research flesh-transfiguration potions, but in truth anxiously awaiting replies from all of them. Additionally, he had been sending daily post owls to Catherine Orson for updates on their patient's condition ever since she had been admitted to hospital. Professor Swain was, after all, the most serious iron burn case they had yet treated with what was still an experimental potion, and he thought it was only a professional courtesy to monitor her progress and make certain she was all right.

At perhaps half-past seven p.m. he was roused from his reading by a post owl at his window. He collected the letter, recognising Dr. Orson's now-familiar handwriting:

Dear Severus,

More good news. Our patient's amazing rate of progress continues apace, and she's well and truly on the mend it's just Saturday and the burn's nearly gone, can you believe it? There's no reason for me to keep her in hospital any longer, so I released her this afternoon. If she was simply a regular burn patient and not someone we're observing as a test subject, I just would have given her some antibiotics and released her yesterday.

She's back in good spirits, as well, I'm glad to report, but then Emily's always been the sort who hated being confined to bed and who wants to get back into the game the second her life's no longer in danger. Case in point: After going through the entire last conflict with barely a scratch on her, she ended up taking a skull fracture just after the 3022 Peace was signed. I'll never forget it there she was, lying on a stretcher going in and out of consciousness, and she kept insisting that it didn't hurt that much and if someone just got her a stiff shot of something, she'd walk it off. Oh well, that's Em for you.

But just think of it, my friend our first third-degree burn patient treated with the new Healing Potion, and we got her almost entirely healed up from third-degree burns over three percent of her body in five days, with almost no scarring. I know you envisioned something that would heal on contact, but quite frankly, I'm damned pleased just with something that works this fast. You and Laurent are both absolutely amazing, and it's an honour and privilege to get to work with both of you. When you lads get some time, my boyfriend Roderick and I would love to take you both out for dinner or something to celebrate, what do you say?

Cheers,

Catherine

Snape set down her letter with a long sigh of relief, his forehead inclining onto his hand.

He had known Professor Swain was going to get hurt on this idiotic mission she had undertaken, but the time between her departure from Hogwarts and her arrival at Grimmauld Place had been excruciating. He had paced the kitchen floor, watching every clock in sight and answering anyone who spoke to him in the most curt and abrasive monosyllables couldn't they *see* he was in no mood for frivolous conversation? He remembered feeling acute pity for Arthur Weasley, who sat pale and nervous at the kitchen table, obsessively refilling his tea cup and staring down at his hands, with Tonks and Dumbledore sitting silent beside him. Yes, Arthur he understood, but everyone else's presence had only annoyed him to no end he'd even snapped a vicious *No* at Albus when the Headmaster offered him a cup of tea. At that moment he hadn't even been able to look at Albus Albus who was usually his closest friend and ally without wanting to shout at him and shower abuse on him for ever agreeing to this ridiculous undertaking in the first place, and not having the brains to just send the woman home while there was still time. *If he kills her, it will all be your fault, you old fool, and I will hold you personally responsible for whatever happens.* His jaw had begun to hurt with the pressure of what he couldn't say as he watched the clock, and paced.

Then the door creaked open, and Mrs. Weasley arrived, only to be mobbed by her husband, eldest son, and the twins Merlin's beard, couldn't they see that Molly had just suffered a terrible shock and the last thing she needed was to be accosted by a lot of howling savages? For heaven's sake, sit her quietly down and put a hot cloth on her forehead, get her some Calming Draught and a brandy, and stop *pawing* her, he wanted to tell them.

Another half-hour went by.

Then the door opened again, and whatever he had expected, he hadn't been prepared for what Professor Swain looked like when she returned. She had wavered across the threshold of Grimmauld Place, stumbling, barely aware of where she was, and with literal tears of blood trickling from her eyes and nose in the manner of those who have suffered prolonged exposure to *Crucio*. Not surprisingly, she started to collapse before she got three steps into the foyer, and everyone else had been too transfixed with watching her bleed to recognise that she needed *help*, for pity's sake. He could have killed those idiotic Weasley twins, making idiotic war whoops in celebration of their mother's safe return while his colleague the formidable ice maiden who wasn't afraid of anything shrank into him and cried.

No, she may have been surrounded by ineffectual idiots, but he'd be damned if he'd let her suffer that indignity for one instant more. They may both have been outsiders in Sirius Black's house, in the Order, at Hogwarts, in this world, bloody well *anywhere*, but he wasn't going to abandon her to this. She'd clung to him so tightly while he carried her out of there if he'd been in the same condition she was at that moment, he'd probably have been lashing out at everyone who came near him in a pain-maddened rage, not lying quiet on someone's shoulder. While he treated her, he'd been angry about the entire situation: that Dumbledore had foolishly and short-sightedly accepted her help, that Black hadn't bothered to so much as clean up a sickroom in anticipation of her arrival, that Mrs. Weasley was troubling her with self-indulgent hysterics when the woman didn't have a mark on her, that the Weasley twins were such goddamn hooligans but Professor Swain hadn't spoken one word of complaint, even though she was lying there with the worst burn he'd ever seen on anyone. The fact that she had returned at all was impressive she must have been able to hide her real motives from Voldemort's mind magics even while injured, and Snape knew from agonising prior experience that the Dark Lord's Cruciatus curses were something to be dreaded.

Then she'd asked, *Would you just... talk to me about something?*catching him completely by surprise, and he hadn't been able to refuse her, since all she had seemed to want was to keep listening to the sound of his voice. Well, if it comforted her to hear him lecturing about potion-making for some incomprehensible reason, he'd be damned if he was going to refuse her at this point Merlin knew he could hold forth on this topic for as long as she wanted. And then she'd gotten concerned when he told her about having to collect his own tears to create Healing Potion oh honestly, it wasn't even that difficult; two minutes of recalling his mother's coffin being lowered into the ground was enough to get all the tear water he'd ever need. But how she'd been able to feel compassion for him while in her condition, he'd never know.

Yes... perhaps he'd judged her too harshly. Perhaps

But then he looked sharply up at his transom window again, for another creature was scratching at the glass. He opened the window and peered out, and a large bird, what looked like a North Sea kestrel, alighted on his windowsill. Snape untied a large, heavy parchment envelope from the animal's leg, then fed it a handful of dried minnows

from a jar on the shelf. A moment later, the bird shook out its feathers and winged silently out of sight.

The return address was that of his home at Snape Hall, posted to his work address at Hogwarts. Opening the envelope, he found a second letter inside, with a note on white stationery with his own family crest:

Dear Master Severus,

This arrived for you this morning. We is been forwarding yr letters to you like you has instructed us.

Best regards to you. Please come visit, yr work allowing.

Yr obedient servants,

Philomela, Towrie, and Danceny

SNAPE HALL

The enclosed letter was on the Malfoy family's watermarked stationery and bore their family seal in green wax. He instantly recognised Lucius's ostentatiously ornate handwriting the son of a bitch never put pen to paper without acting as though he was signing the bloody *Magna Carta* or some such.

Old man ~

Where have you been, Coz? The family misses you terribly, and all the old crowd are wondering what's happened to you.

Dreadfully sorry I couldn't make our last meeting I was delayed at the office for perhaps a quarter hour, and when I arrived, the bloody establishment had burned down, how do you like that. I do hope that idiot Muggle who owned the place was suitably fined or imprisoned for his negligence in allowing the gas lines to get so old and decrepit. It's really providential you weren't hurt, truly.

At any rate, it's about damned time you and I sat down and really had a good talk, cousin. We need to clear the air between us you know it, and I know it. I must warn you though, He still seems to harbour doubts about your future with the organisation that guilt by association with some of your co-workers is proving to be a tricksy thing, despite my efforts in your favour.

So, I'd like to meet you somewhere rather out of the way, so we can speak freely without fear of being seen or overheard. The family owns a little ironworks on the outskirts of Endustree Alley I'm positive you've met me there before. How about this tonight at nine or so, perhaps meet me at the back entrance to the place. The meeting facilities are rather Spartan, but we do just need a bit of privacy in which to talk, after all.

Don't worry, cousin, I'm always happy to help, you know that. It's the least I can do for you, given all that you've done for me in the past.

Regards,

L.

Snape checked the clock on his desk

7:47 p.m.

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"However, if no one can be found to accompany me as backup in case it is another murder attempt, the potential risks of going outweigh the advantages. But nonetheless, I'm not looking forward to the idea of open war being declared between me and the entire lot of them, because my chances of surviving such open hostilities for any period of time... are not optimistic." Snape's tone was fatalistic, but his only indication of nervousness was the slow, silent drumming of his fingers against the windowsill.

Dumbledore got up and crossed to his colleague, laying a supportive hand on his arm. "Don't worry, my friend. Someone has been found who can accompany you to this meeting and guarantee your safety." The headmaster glanced toward the office door "Ah, there you are, Professor. So glad to see you're up and about again."

"Thank you very much, sir. It's good to be out of hospital," came a lilting voice from over Snape's shoulder. He turned toward her.

The silver chain mail was now painted soot-black, flowing with her every movement like armoured skin. A side lock of her pale hair was braided with crow feathers; a single rune like a broken cross which she would later tell him was the *muin*, symbolic of the Morrigan was drawn high on her cheekbone in blue woad. She was barefoot and all in faded black, bearing no visible mark of Third Kingdom loyalty for this stealth mission. For one very long moment, as she came toward him, with the sword on her back, and the dagger on her hip, and the pitiless resolve on her face, Snape knew what the doomed satyr Robinett had faced across a forest clearing, and feared it. A chill crept down his back *A goose walking over my grave,* his Scottish grandmother Octavia Prince would have said.

But Severus Snape had betrayed Lord Voldemort at the height of his power, and he had seen many far more terrifying sights than Fianna Commander Emily Swain-Tumnus at full battle readiness.

"Good evening, Professor," he said, with a cool, gracious nod of greeting. "How are you feeling?"

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"I'm fine," Professor Swain said. "Between an excellent doctor and this really clever apothecary bloke I know, I healed up in record time Catherine pronounced me fully recovered this morning. And yourself?" She paused, slanting an appreciative smile at him, and silently spoke the words *Thank you.*

Snape acknowledged it with another nod of his dark head, and a ghost of a smile. "I'm well enough," he replied, black eyes gleaming with satisfaction. He paused, allowing himself just an instant's vicarious delight at seeing her healthy again, looking as vital and insolent and... *totally* insufferable as she had always been, with that little lift to her chin, and all that impatient, athletic confidence restored. After seeing her collapse in the foyer of Grimmauld Place earlier that week, it just did his heart good to see her back to normal.

"Good evening, my dear." Dumbledore came forward to warmly clasp her hands, also seeming pleased to see her looking so hale and hearty, then turned back to Snape. "When you Flooed Malfoy's letter to me and were on your way down, I took the liberty of Flooing Professor Swain and asking her to join us."

"Albus told me another member of the Order might need a bit of backup for a dangerous mission, and I was happy to volunteer," Emily added.

Snape was silent, watching her. He knew what she must be feeling, having already seen this eager aggression in her once before or rather, having already felt it in the memory of battle she had shown him at Grimmauld Place. It didn't seem to matter to her how often he said, *You have no place in this conflict, you are risking all in helping us*; nor that she had been released from hospital only hours earlier here she was again reporting for duty, armoured and prepared for battle. He thought about protesting her involvement yet again... but after a moment's consideration, he said nothing. He now knew the woman too well to imagine that voicing his objections would change a damned thing, and while she was still the biggest fool he had ever seen to keep coming back for more, just another victim of her own vain idealism he needed her tonight, and there was no denying it.

"Thank you, madam. Your efforts are... much appreciated," Snape said quietly. "Though are you absolutely *sure* you're up to this?"

"Oh yes." She turned toward him with a raffish little smile, flexing her sword hand in front of her. "I'm quite looking forward to it."

"Now listen, both of you," Dumbledore said, very seriously indeed. "I don't plan on losing either one of you tonight. If either of you detects any live magic on the area take no chances and leave at once. If Malfoy or his agents do meet you, Severus, do not go off with them to any other location stay exactly where you are in the open, where Emily can follow you. If at any time you feel threatened, abort the mission and Apparate back here immediately."

"Yes, sir," Emily said, with what Snape knew to be a formal Arcadian salute, closed fist crossed over her breast, and a deep, respectful nod and then she turned back to Snape with a bright, diabolical smile. "All right then, sir let's go hunt some Death Eaters, shall we?" He thought she looked as though she couldn't wait to get started, bless her dear, gleefully violent little heart.

"Alas, in all likelihood, we'll probably just meet up with their hired thugs the actual Death Eaters prefer not to dirty their hands," he told her.

"No matter," she scoffed, shrugging. "Just let me at 'em."

Snape chuckled. "Then after you, madam," he said, and gestured her through the door with his most polite bow.

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Emily had returned to Hogwarts at perhaps half-past six p.m. that night to discover her quarters absolutely sparkling clean, every surface dusted and everything polished, laundered, and mended, with vases of wildflowers on every surface clear indicators of Cecile's doting presence at every turn. Her armour and all the clothes and gear she had worn on the night of the attack at the Burrow were all neatly folded on top of a dresser, immaculately cleaned and repaired. Emily was left absolutely aghast at how the elf had managed to get such dreadful bloodstains and char marks out. *House-elves, gotta love them*, she murmured to herself as she examined her boots, tunic, and breeches.

Catherine had told her to get some exercise in the time following her recovery; that the increased circulation would be good for the new, regenerated skin and muscle in her left thigh. "Keep yourself moving, sweetie, don't let that leg stiffen up. Get in some stretches every day, maybe go for a run. Let me know if any of your friends in the Order need patching up, and keep your arse away from iron pokers, you hear me?"

"Yes, Catherine, my love, I hear you."

Upon her return, she had gone straight to the fencing practice studio and worked up a good sweat with some training long forms, glad to be out of hospital, and even gladder to no longer be injured. Now that her injury was healed, now that the Cruciatus curse was a memory, and between Professor Snape's concern and several days of Catherine's nursing, her terror and despair had abated. In its place was now a sense of furious indignation, and an angry, mad-doggish kind of energy that made her practice thrusts and feints even more savagely than usual *Snaky-eyed fucker thinks he can Crucio me, does he?* She moved through the room as though slaying a whole platoon of Orcs, cursing up a storm as she did so. What she wanted, more than anything, was someone she could fight, something she could *hit*, some vile evil she could irrevocably drive out of the world, just to prove that she would not allow herself to be permanently crushed under some tyrant's boot heel. Some soldiers she knew were intimidated and demoralised by serious injury, but this time, it had only made Commander Swain-Tumnus angry.

Then the Headmaster's voice came from the studio hearth "Emily? Are you up there?"

"Yes, sir, what is it?"

"I do apologise that I haven't been to see you since your return, but Severus and I are facing a rather serious dilemma at the moment. I know that you've only just returned from hospital, but could I perhaps trouble you for a favour this evening? Please believe that I wouldn't ask this of you if we had any other alternative."

"Of course, sir, what's going on?" she asked, approaching the hearth.

As Dumbledore began to explain the circumstances, Emily quickly realised the perfect opportunity to show her appreciation for all Professor Snape had done for her after the Burrow attack had just fallen into her lap.

"Give me twenty minutes to prepare, and I'll be right down."

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Now as they left the Headmaster's office, Snape took his leave of her with a serious nod. "I'll need to run down to my apartments and retrieve a few things, madam, but it shouldn't take long. Can you wait for me at the gate just outside the campus?"

"Of course, sir."

"I'll meet you in a moment, and then we'll Apparate from there."

Perhaps five minutes later, Snape met his colleague at the gate. He had put on a light black topcoat, and was pulling on a pair of thin black leather gloves as he hurried down the path.

"Did you get everything you needed, sir?" Emily called to him as he approached.

He drew a sheathed dagger from an inside pocket of his coat. "Yes I wanted to bring along a certain *letter opener* someone gave me once."

Emily laughed grimly. "Excellent idea. And there's something else you can probably use tonight, if you'll allow me " She held up a familiar silver medallion on a long silver chain, then looped the Amulet of Protection around his neck. "That'll make you a significant percentage harder to hit."

"Thank you," he said, dropping the amulet under his collar. "Now, shall we?"

She paused. "Sir, before we go, can I ask you something?"

He glanced at her in mild surprise. "Yes, what is it?"

"Why did you do it? Why did you decide to create the new Healing Potion?" she asked.

He shrugged. "There was a need," he said, and to him, that was the end of it.

All she could do was stare at him, amazed. "Thank you," she said finally. "Thank you so much. I hope someday you'll know how much this will mean to us. I can't even imagine how much I'd still be suffering if you hadn't done this."

He averted his eyes to somewhere far over her shoulder, an acid tinge of self-consciousness suffusing his scent. "You're welcome," he said quietly.

"It also provides me with the perfect alibi as to where I was tonight," she said, with a devious little smirk. "It'll never occur to any of them that I could have accompanied you to this meeting, because as far as they know, I'm still laid up with a horrible burn wound and can't even stand up, much less stand guard over someone."

"It would probably never occur to any of them that you would offer to go with me even if you hadn't been injured Lucius thought you would have been glad to hear I'd been blown up in a pub bombing, last I heard," he replied, with a grim little chuckle.

Emily blushed, averting her eyes to over his shoulder. "Well, you know. Midsummer or no Midsummer, I'm not *quite* that much of a vindictive bitch, I suppose," she said wryly.

Snape paused for about one second, it looked as though he might rather like to pursue this topic of conversation but then he glanced down at his watch. "It's now quarter to nine," he said. "We should be on our way."

"All right then, where are we going?"

"We're allegedly meeting Lucius at the back entrance of an ironworks he owns at the far end of Endustree Alley. Are you familiar with the place?"

"No under normal circumstances, there's no way you could get me anywhere near an ironworks," she replied, shuddering.

"I understand. Don't worry like the Headmaster said, we'll not be going inside under any circumstances. Now, as time is rather of the essence, if you'll excuse me, madam "

He moved to her side and put an arm around her waist. An instant later they had both disappeared, with a *crack* of Apparition.

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They reappeared just beneath a quaint wooden signpost on a London street corner, so that the cool grass under her bare feet suddenly gave way to cold, damp cobblestones. One hand pointed east toward *Endustree Alley* and *Knockturn Alley*, another pointed south to *Diagon Alley*, and a third pointed west to *League Alley* and *Litur Alley.* Once they had arrived, Snape wasted no time in relinquishing his hold on his colleague, and taking a polite step away. "Come along, it's this way."

"Of course. Now you'll want to look away from me." Snape turned his back to her, and she first Obscured herself with an utterance of her True Name, then went from her soft bare feet to her hoofed form in another instant. *Right behind you,* she told her companion, projecting her Glamoured voice into the chamber of his ear.

Snape made his way down the east alleyway, into Endustree Alley, past the Ollivander wand woodworks, the now-defunct and boarded up Cleansweep Broomstick factory, and a large cauldron manufacturing plant. This late in the evening on a Saturday, all of the factories were closed for the weekend, and the area was for the most part deserted. Unlike the attractive shopping streets of Diagon Alley and Sartor Alley, this area was clearly intended to be a place where one went to work, not to enjoy oneself, and it looked like it. The sparsely lit walkways led past chain-link fences surrounding blacktop yards devoid of landscaping, and heavy pieces of machinery were blackly silhouetted against the sky. Now and then the cobblestones were strewn with greasy wrappings from chip shops, dead leaves, and discarded newspapers. Emily followed close behind him, scanning their surroundings for any sign of danger, both with her usual sight, and the third form of Obscurantis, which would have alerted her to any attackers approaching from beneath Invisibility Cloaks.

He paused at the entrance to a covered brick alleyway leading behind a row of sprawling industrial complexes. Several small wooden signs mounted at eye level pointed into the portal: *First Butterbeer Bottling Co. Ogden's Old Firewhiskey Distillery. Tugwood Laboratories. Black Binderers and Printing Press. Vulcan Ironworks.* Snape paused before entering, leaning against the brick wall and seemingly taking a moment to compose himself.

"Professor Swain? Are you still with me?" he called softly. As Emily came closer to him, she could see the faint sheen of sweat at his hairline and smell the fear and nervousness boiling in his scent. But those were the only indicators that he was at all disquieted by the situation; otherwise, he was outwardly his usual imperturbable self.

I'm right behind you, but don't look for me or you'll make me visible again, came her Glamoured answer. She placed her open hand lightly on his back, letting him know by its reassuring pressure that she was there.

"Thank you," he whispered, and his breathing quieted. "I don't think there will be more than two or three of them, if Lucius holds to his usual precedent."

I'm not worried, she replied soundlessly. *I've faced far worse odds before and come out all right.*

"Yes, I remember," he murmured. "However, if Lucius does appear, try not to vent your anger on him just *yet*, no matter what he says. I know we're both rather annoyed with him, but if we riddle him with curses and hexes, the other Death Eaters might interpret that as an aggressive action and retaliate."

Inconvenient, that, she replied, with a silent little chuckle.

Snape smirked. "Truly. Now, are we ready?" He straightened up, smoothing his lapels.

Lead on.

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The ironworks was located at the very end of the tunnel. The walkway terminated in a large walled courtyard of brick and upright wooden beams. Bolted to one of the beams was a painted sign: *Vulcan Iron Manufacturing, Since 1781,* with a picture of a man in a leather apron pounding at a bit of red-hot metal with a hammer.

The back entrance of the factory consisted of a wood and concrete loading dock where lorries could be loaded, and a double set of back doors leading out onto a long row of concrete stairs. Lucius was nowhere to be seen, but there were three men casually sprawled on the back steps, chatting in low voices, laughing now and then. The first was a young, wiry fellow with close-cropped blond hair, wearing a soot-stained white jersey and a blacksmith's leather apron, with tattoos on both arms. The second was a stringy, middle-aged fellow, with brushy ginger hair and thin lips, wearing a woollen pullover with holes at the elbows and a shabby brown wool cap. The third was portly and red-faced, with the stump of a cigar between his thick fingers, and wearing a long grey overcoat. Emily didn't recognise any of them, and from the look on his face as he approached them, neither did Snape.

The three of them looked like bored employees perhaps lingering after a late shift at the factory to have a smoke and a pull of whiskey, and talk over sports scores and what birds they fancied. Snape's frown deepened when he saw them, and the fear in his scent intensified. *I'm right beside you,* Emily's voice whispered in his ear, by means of reassurance.

"Evenin', sir," the fellow in the grey overcoat said as Snape approached them. "Can we be helping you with anything?"

"Yes, I am to meet with Mr. Malfoy this evening at nine," he replied crisply.

"You wouldn't be Mr. Severus Snape, by any freak of luck, would you?" the man asked, getting to his feet.

"I am. If one of you gentleman could please tell him that I've arrived?"

"Right away, guv," the man in the shabby cap said, snickering. He stood up as well, and Emily noticed his right hand going into his back pocket. She moved silently forward, positioning herself perhaps two paces in front of Snape, and pace to his right, adjusting her unsheathed dagger in her hand.

"Yeah... Mr. Malfoy, he sends his regards," the fellow in the grey overcoat said, his hand going into his pocket as well. Something in the man's hand caught the light a long line of metal.

Then they started toward him.

Part Third: The Hart Subvertant, Chapter 31, Part 2

Chapter 50 of 55

After Voldemort's return, Professor Swain has agreed to Sirius Black's suggestion that she use her influence with Lucius Malfoy to gather intelligence on the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters. As her horror of the Dark Lord grows, her old enemy Severus Snape proves to be the only one who understands the fear and doubt that plague a double agent…

Chapter 31, Part 2:

But an instant later, the three advancing assassins each found themselves facing an opponent who simply manifested out of nothingness in front of them, three identical figures clad in black armour, with long whisking ears and huge, pitiless dark eyes, a gleaming dagger in hand. Cries of *Wot the bloomin' fuck is that?* and *Bloody hell!* rang out.

A wand came up, pointed at her. *Stupefy!* the man in the leather apron snarled

The Stunner flew from his wand and crackled through her. The Glamour dissolved, leaving her attacker falling over his own feet, gaping.

The man closest to Professor Snape, the fellow in the woollen pullover and shabby cap, shook his head, confused, then bared his teeth and swung a drawn knife at her and his attack just *stopped*, cold. A second later red-black arterial blood was spraying from his throat, and then he had crumpled to the ground.

"Go! Get out of here!" Emily screamed behind her at Snape.

"You first," he rasped back.

She chanced a look in Snape's direction, to see his hand go into his coat and come out with the mithreal dagger.

Unfortunately by that point the second assassin, the man in the grey coat, had already drawn a knife and swung it into his Glamoured adversary discovering she was merely an illusion. An instant later, he turned back toward their original target, his dagger arm reaching back and coming forward almost too fast to follow Emily's heart stopped as she saw the blade thrown in a straight, expert line in Snape's direction -

and then embed itself, hard, in a vertical wooden beam just behind him. He had dodged it.

Seeing the knife attack miss its intended victim, his assailant started to reach into his coat again, presumably for either his wand or another dagger, but he never got a chance to finish his action. Emily let the gory dagger in her hand fly toward him, aiming for the soft, vulnerable expanse of liver and crucial viscera just beneath his ribcage. At such close range, perhaps four or five paces, her aim was deadly, and he fell lifeless to the ground with an agonised groan.

Now, in mere seconds, the odds were down from three against one to one against two, and the only man left, the wiry bloke in the leather apron, became desperate. He charged toward Snape, his wand at the ready and her colleague's icy black eyes fixed on him without fear as he adjusted the dagger in his hand. But before the man could reach him, Snape's black-gloved hand made a pass in front of his face, and a blinding flash of brilliant white light lit up the air in front of him, as though he had thrown a switch on an invisible floodlight. The Glamoured light stopped his assailant in his tracks, cursing and rubbing at his watering eyes, but the distraction only gave him pause for an instant before he aimed his wand at the Professor again

But Snape was gone; vanished, without a sound.

The man in the leather apron cried out in astonishment, gawking in every direction *"Cor, you sod, where are you!"* Emily took advantage of his distraction to Obscure herself as well, silently speaking a word. She invoked the third form of Obscurantis with another utterance of her True Name, scanning for Professor Snape, who had withdrawn several paces back down the alleyway. The leather-aproned hired killer was now standing between them and the portal back to Endustree Alley, and they would have to make their way past him at close quarters in order to escape.

But now the man was panicking he had gone into what he thought was an easy fight, where their single target would be outnumbered and taken down with minimal effort, and instead he had been confronted with magic he didn't know and a frightening, well-armed creature he had never seen before. Both his allies were now dead, and he was alone against two enemies he couldn't see. "Where did you go, you bastard!" he shouted, shaking, his eyes rolling wildly. A moment later, the wind stirred some dry leaves on the cobblestones to his right, and his wand snapped forward again *"Reducto!"* reducing the leaf pile to ash. Soon every rustle and breath of sound in that alleyway incited him to further paranoia, and he began hurling off Reductor Curses at random, blowing leaves and discarded newspapers and bits of rubbish to dust. One of those newspapers had been disturbingly close to Emily's feet, and she had to dodge sideways to avoid being hit herself. Her heart was pounding; with their enemy laying down this blanket fire of disintegrating curses, it was only a matter of chance and luck as to whether one of them took a serious hit, or they got out alive.

Professor Snape had apparently come to the same realisation as Emily had, and started toward the assailant but in his haste, he trod on a dry branch on the cobblestones. The man in the leather apron, hearing the snap of the branch, wheeled in Snape's direction and let fly with another Reductor Curse, which to Emily's horror brushed past him close enough to ignite the left sleeve of his coat. He quickly beat the flame out with his dagger hand, but he made himself visible in the process, his Obscurantis effect dispelled.

Their attacker turned toward him with a shout "*There* you are, yeh sod! You're a dead man, you and your freaky friend " His wand snapped forward *"Reducto!"*

But Snape's hand had snapped forward as well *"Impedimenta!"* he shouted, then spoke an inaudible word and the golden light of the Reductor curse changed direction in midair, blowing a large crater in the brick wall to their right.

Snape's eyes followed the bolt of golden light with a look of pure horror on his face, glancing frantically around for something, and his opponent took advantage of his distraction to try a different tactic *"Incendio!"* he cried, sending a gout of flame toward the Professor

But Snape instantly countered with an Extinguishing Spell *"Exstinguere!"* reducing out the flames to a wisp of steam.

Instinctively, Emily put herself in the safest place for an onlooker to such a confrontation right behind the person successfully deflecting all the attacks thrown in their direction, where she wouldn't get in his way, and where wild curses deflected by one or the other would not catch her in the crossfire. But as she did so, she wondered why Snape was merely deflecting all the attacks thrown at him, and not making any aggressive actions himself. Why did he not counterattack? The man was still coming toward him, wand at the ready, throwing all manner of aggressive spells at him; why did he not use a Reductor Curse, or a Stunning Spell, or hurl the dagger in his hand, or something

Then she remembered

in my experience Avada Kedavra... cannot be aimed with perfect accuracy... there would have been one safe opportunity to use it today during the hunt... you were between me and the boar

I was afraid of accidentally killing you instead of it

and she was still Obscured. In the heat of the battle, he didn't have time to invoke the third form of Obscurantis and find her.

"Here!" she cried and saw Snape's ear turn toward where she was standing, one or two paces behind him, letting him know that he was free to engage his attacker unhindered.

Her alert came none too soon their attacker's wand snapped forward again, this time over Snape's shoulder, in Emily's direction "*Die*, freaky bitch!" he shouted, and then his lips formed the first syllable of another word "*AV* "

But again Snape reacted instantly, the moment the man had screamed his imprecation at Emily; reacted instantly and with a shorter incantation "*REDUCTO!*" and an inaudible word

" *VADA KEDA* "

Then the bolt of golden energy caught the man full in the chest, and he dropped to the cobblestones as a smoking, partially vaporised corpse.

Both wizard and Faerie paused a long moment, on guard, assessing the situation, and then realised the fight was over.

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"That was far too close," Emily murmured.

"Absolutely," Snape replied.

They turned to each other, and something relieved and triumphant passed between them; the same understanding that compatriots in battle have felt since human and Faerie had first attained awareness *the enemy is vanquished, and we, my friend, are alive.*

"Are you all right? Are you bleeding?" she asked, coming to his side and bending over his arm.

"No, I'm fine my coat took the worst of it. I'm not hurt, just a bit singed." He held up his left arm, revealing a long char mark burnt into the black woollen sleeve of his frock coat. "It was headed right for me by rights, I should have taken far worse damage than I did." His hand reached under his collar, then held up a silver medallion on a chain. "A very useful bit of magic, this." He glanced toward her, black eyes narrowing in what could only be described as keen appreciation.

"Well, you know... everyone makes them at home," Emily said quietly, feeling heat climbing her cheeks.

"Would you show me how?" he asked, turning the amulet over in his fingers.

"I will. Later," she replied. Much as she wanted to stay here and get her breath and bask in his gratitude and admiration years of combat training and experience demanded that she make sure everything was secure. "But first, we'd better check out the building and the perimeter, just to see if there were any more thugs or potential witnesses about. If anyone saw what went on tonight, we're going to need to be busy with the *Obliviate* spells."

She was turning away from him and heading toward the factory back steps when her eyes met those of a black-cloaked man with long grey hair who had just come out of the building's back doors. His face was totally unfamiliar to her, but the deep scowl of anger on his face looked murderous. His wand was already at the ready, pointed straight at her, his lips peeling back from his teeth in an incantation

"*Avada* "

Emily stared at the cloaked newcomer, calculating desperately he had the drop on her, had taken her completely by surprise, and thus had the advantage. She had armed herself with a dagger and a sword that night; and then she had first killed one assailant with the dagger, then thrown it away in killing the second, and hadn't had time to retrieve it. Now it was a matter of whether she could draw her sword and somehow either hurl it at her attacker or cross the space between the two of them and get up the steps before he got out the last three syllables of the incantation

She had gotten her hand to her sword grip and was gathering herself to spring

Later on, Emily would realise that she never should have worried.

She never had to complete the action, because her attacker never got the fourth syllable out. In another second a dagger hilt was protruding from his throat, and a long gush of red blood welled forth, the remainder of the incantation drowned into incomprehensible gurgle and then a dark figure suddenly appeared just beside her, wand at the ready in case his first attack with the thrown dagger had been insufficient.

But there was no need. Emily's would-be murderer crumpled forward, gagging and choking, and grasping at his throat then tumbled headfirst down the steps. He came to rest on the cobblestone alley floor and was still, more of his blood pooling beneath him unheeded.

As she let her hand fall from her sword hilt to her side, it occurred to her that she had done very well indeed to ask her colleague to attend her lecture on physical ways of countering Unforgiveable Curses. Always such an apt pupil.

Emily finally exhaled.

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Snape stepped forward, held out his hand to her. "Are you all right?" he asked.

She grasped his hand and straightened up. "Fine, I think." She wavered on her hooves a bit just narrowly evading two Killing Curses in rapid succession being a somewhat disconcerting event for anyone and Snape caught her opposite elbow and steadied her. "Thank you."

No answer but a curt, courteous nod. They both stood, just breathing hard for a moment.

"I read in your inquest report that the judge said he dearly hoped never to startle you in a dark alley," Snape said finally. "How sensible of him."

"You do pretty fecking *all right* in dark alleys yourself, sir," Emily replied. "I always said you were talented."

He took one instant to give her an absolutely diabolical grin in reply not a smile, but a jubilant baring of his teeth that would have done any successful predator proud. But then his moment of triumph passed, and he was all business again.

Emily went to the corpse of the fellow in the grey coat and retrieved her dagger, while Snape warily approached the man lying at the foot of the steps, then grasped the man's shoulder and turned the body over.

"Oh, bloody hell, Corin Jugson," he said, examining the corpse's face. He pushed up the man's left sleeve, exposing the unmistakable image of the Dark Mark seared into his left forearm.

"Did you know him?" Emily asked, leaning over his shoulder.

Snape dropped the corpse's arm, then tugged the dagger he had thrown free of the man's throat, coolly wiping the mithreal blade clean with a fold of the man's cloak. "I'd dealt with him once or twice. I was better acquainted with his cousin, who is another corrupt administrator in Magical Law Enforcement. They're the reason why Shacklebolt and Tonks run into so much red tape in taking illegal items seized by Arthur Weasley's department into evidence. He'd also been known to use Cruciatus Curses on petty criminals who weren't prompt enough with their bribe money." He sheathed the mithreal dagger and tucked it under his coat, then threw the fold of the late Corin Jugson's cloak over his head, covering both his staring-eyed face and bleeding throat. "Believe me, his loss does not leave the world the poorer."

"We should see if there's anyone else inside," Emily said, nodding brusquely at the back doors. "Turn away from me I'll Obscure myself and take point. Then you'll want to Obscure yourself as well, and follow me."

Once Obscured, they both took a moment to locate the other using the third form of Obscurantis, and then Snape motioned Emily forward, following a pace behind her as she silently made her way up the back factory steps. She paused at the threshold, giving the wrought-iron door handle a wide berth, and nudging the door open with one hoofed foot.

The two of them passed quickly through the building administrative offices, a kitchen and lavatory, and a large metal-smelting forge and metalworking facilities. Other than the four men they had met with tonight, the place appeared to be entirely deserted.

"Professor Swain?" Snape called to Emily as they passed through the metalworking facility, and reappeared solidly beside her. "There's no sign of anyone. If there was anyone else here tonight, he's had time to Apparate away and perhaps summon reinforcements, so let's get out of here. This place is also absolutely full of forged iron, so it can't be safe for you."

When they emerged from the back doors, Emily cast an appraising eye over the four men lying strewn about in the alleyway. "So, what should we do with the bodies?" she asked, bending over Corin Jugson's unmoving corpse.

"We can't let them be found," Snape replied, shaking his head. "Your work is too distinctively precise Lucius would know you were here after a cursory examination. The forensic evidence has to be destroyed." He led her a few paces aside with a tactful hand on her elbow "You'll want to stand clear."

Snape then pointed his wand at Jugson "*Papyrus.*" In another moment, he had Tranfigured each of the bodies on the ground into human-shaped bundles of wadded-up paper, which he then lit on fire with *Incendio* spells. The paper ignited and began to go up with a faint whoosh of indrawn air, swirling Snape's black coat and Emily's black cloak around them.

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He had to hand it to Albus.

If this was what the woman was capable of, then she truly was just about the finest Defence Against the Dark Arts professor he could have obtained in this world or any

other, and it was a crying shame that she wouldn't be staying on for another year.

She was standing perhaps five feet off his right hand, and had not yet changed back to her more humanlike physical form too caught up in watching what had been their assailants turn to charred ash to notice, perhaps. He was silent, indulging his curiosity with a long look at curved haunch and slender leg, one delicate hoofed foot bent sideways in an alert, alarming angle. The cervoid ears were just visible through her windblown hair, whisking toward the sound of the paper crisping.

What struck him the most about her other form at that moment was how absolutely *natural* it looked. It suited her, somehow he hadn't noticed until that moment just how fey and deerlike her expressions and mannerisms were in her more human form. It was so obvious now, in the way her whole attitude and expression seemed to strain toward whatever interested her, the way she seemed to listen to and sense her surroundings so actively and acutely; her sense of animal vitality, untroubled by the existential dilemmas of humankind. Always the impression of subtle thought and motion, even when she was completely still.

But then her attention flicked back in his direction, and she saw him looking at her. She twitched a fold of her black cloak closer around herself, hiding her legs from view. Snape turned back to watch the fire consuming the newspapers, and knew without glancing back at her that she would be Obscured and gone when he did.

"There's no need to be so self-conscious about your other form," he muttered to the empty air. "I'd already seen it before tonight, you know, and I've never found it terrifying."

No answer. He had no idea if she had heard him.

"I'll finish up here, and meet you back at the castle," he called out to her.

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Snape quickly finished clearing up the scene of the attack, first letting the Transfigured remains of their attackers burn to ash, and then reducing the ash to vapour with Reductor Curses. He also cast a *Reparo* spell on the blasted wall, and locked the factory's back doors to preserve the illusion of security for anyone showing up for work on Monday. He then Apparated back to the gate just outside of Hogwarts.

As he returned through the castle's great front doors, he found Professor Swain waiting near the steps in the front foyer. She was still in armour, but had put the weaponry away somewhere, and had resumed her more humanlike form, her feet shod in black boots. Upon his return, she immediately came forward to meet him.

As he went to greet her, euphoric aggression singing in his veins, all he wanted was to embrace her, crush her in his arms, exultant and victorious, but he didn't dare. Instead, he coolly held out his hand, and they congratulated each other in the manner of warriors after a victory.

"Professor."

"Professor."

Her hand clasped in his, still warm and a bit damp from her recent exertions and in that chaste touch he could almost feel the exertions of her heart, the blood rushing beneath her skin. A memory recurred to him with painful vividness; a moment from a callbox

clutching her, sheathed aching in her body, fourteen years of hunger exhaling from every cell. Her fair head fell back, revealing the most biteable drift of neck flesh he could imagine, and for a long moment his lips found her pulse fluttering wildly, that vitality just under his kisses, her scent sweetly concentrated here then her arms and thighs tensed around him with the long indrawn breath of suspense that let him know her orgasm was perhaps a second away

Now he could just as vividly imagine her lying under him as he drove his lust and triumph into her, more of those soprano gasps of pleasure in his ear, her arms locked around his shoulders as he again brought her to orgasm in what felt like a few heartbeats after he was inside her. Her profile and the line of her cheek again struck him as beautiful had always been beautiful to him and he wanted to outline that beauty with his fingertips, wanted to take her chin in his hand and turn her face to his, and whisper down into those uncanny eyes, *I know what we both need, at this moment, here and now. May I offer you a companion with whom to sleep tonight, if there is any chance that the moment when you desired such has not forever passed?*

But he was not the sort of man to say such words out loud, and even if he had been, he could not have imagined that such advances were welcome. He resolved, however, that if he ever again unexpectedly found himself in the arms of a woman such as this one, never to take his eyes off her for even an instant.

"Good night," he said. "And thank you."

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"Anytime," she said, smiling faintly. "Thank you."

Emily knew that she was lingering too close to him, hovering really. His personal scent was a miasma of adrenaline rage, spent muscle acids, testosterone he smelled like pure intensity. There had been times in her past, with a very different yet similar black-haired, black-eyed man, when she couldn't wait to launch herself onto him after a victory, when the only way to calm their aggressions after battle was with the most raw and animal kind of sex. Now, faced with someone equally worthy and enticing... she had to concentrate hard on forcing herself not to reach for him, although he of course remained cool as a winter night as he very respectfully and politely took his leave of her, then turned toward the Slytherin dungeons.

"Sir... wait, please," she called to him. "Would you perhaps confirm or deny something I've been wondering about tonight?"

"If I can, madam," he said, wearily turning back to her. No doubt their work of this evening had been exhausting.

"On the day of the hunt, back in November it seems as though you would have let Lucius die, rather than risk harming me with a Killing Curse," she said.

"Of course I would have." He acknowledged that as if it was, again, the most obvious truth in the world. "And it wouldn't have been one of those decisions that kept me awake at night wondering if I had done the right thing, either."

Then he nodded to her again, and made his way toward his own quarters.

It occurred to her, as she watched him move out of sight, that she was in love with an extremely uncommon man.

At that moment, she would have run after him, stopped him, tried to sway him with protestations of her affection and sincerity, the most heartfelt apologies she could muster for any slight he still cherished, just said any damn thing he needed to hear and meant every word of it if only he would have tea with her again.

But it never occurred to her that he would have accepted such an invitation, now, at this late date, after all that had never been between them.

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Later that evening, Severus returned to his apartments to enjoy some privacy and rest, but oddly, he now found them so silent as to be unnerving. It seemed years since he had been in these rooms; nothing seemed to be where he had left it. The only constant was Swain's *Encyclopaedia*, lying open on his desk, to an entry headed:

*"**FAUN.** Pl. Fauns. A member of one of the shapeshifting race of deer changelings native to Arcadia... "*

There was a woodcut illustration of a nude male faun; with antlers, sinewy muscles, and handsome endowment all richly detailed; and on the next page, a corresponding woodcut of a nude female faun, slimmer, narrower in the shoulders and more graceful than her male counterpart, but no less physically formidable.

*"**Historical Notes:** The faun tribe most likely takes its modern name from **Faunes I**, one of the first kings of this race, who is believed to have ruled the territory that later became the Third Kingdom from approximately 30 B.F.A. to 83 F.A., or 1033 B.C. to 950 B.C. which would place his ascension to the throne as approximately a century prior to the founding of the Roman Empire. (See also **Third Kingdom, History of; Pan, Bona Dea, Lupercalia**) The Ardensea portals of his time are believed to have opened not into what is currently Great Britain, but the European continent near what is now the border between Italy and Greece; it is thought that a substantial amount of peaceful integration and intermarriage went on between humans and Fae fauns and satyrs at that time. King Faunes I is reported to have been a worldly and cosmopolitan traveller, who kept counsel with many of the Second-World European sovereigns of the time. The Muggle leaders of this time by all accounts regarded King Faunes I as a benevolent demigod, Latinising his Arcadian name to **Faunus.***

*A figure resembling King Faunes I became incorporated into the Greek and later Roman religions of the era. He was venerated as an agricultural and woodland deity, the protector of farmers, crops, and livestock, and the patron of winemakers. The Greeks and Thracians created a springtime fertility festival called the **Lupercalia** in King Faunes I's honour; this festival was later assimilated by the Romans along with much of the Greek religion. The Greek god of wine, agriculture, and poetry, Dionysius, was often described by the Muggle poets and playwrights of this time and region as possessing an entourage of satyrs, fauns, and wood nymphs, and the Greek nature deity Pan was often pictured in a faun- or satyr-like form, with cloven hooves, the legs and lower torso of a goat or deer, horns or antlers, and a goat's beard.*

Fauns, on average, tend to be taller and of a more attenuated build than their close cousins, the satyr tribe. Like most changelings, however, they enjoy many of the same physical advantages proportionally higher muscle density, especially in their hoofed forms, and senses of smell, hearing, and low-light vision comparable to their deer counterparts. Fair, russet, or light brown hair is most common; large, well-separated brown eyes are universal to this race. Male fauns have short cervoid antlers in their hoofed forms, but female fauns do not, also like their deer counterparts.

Like their satyr cousins, the faun race is often thought of as highly sensual, and possessed of an acute appreciation of Nature in all its forms. Given the prevalence of winemaking in the Third Kingdom economy, it is not surprising that the faun race is also closely identified with wine and carousing; and given the extreme physical grace fauns are capable of, it is also not surprising that they are closely associated with dance and revelry... "

Now, when Snape recalled that a knight and noblewoman of this race had looked at him for an hour or so, then gone to the ridiculous lengths that she had to pursue him, so enthusiastically accepted him as a lover... based on what he now knew of her people, and of the woman herself, her actions no longer seemed as offensive as he once felt them to be.

He was now almost flattered.

As he readied himself for bed, it occurred to him that he should be more upset about the events of this evening, that he should be terrified by this confirmation that Lucius actively sought his life. In days past, he would have been sleepless and jittering with terror all night. But instead, he felt luxuriously exhausted, as though after a long day's work.

When he went into that confrontation with her, he had known with bone-deep certainty that he would come out alive. It hadn't been easy, not by a long shot the victory had been hard fought. Both of their lives had been in danger that night.

But he had been with her, and her presence had allowed him not to worry. Somehow, his fear was gone, at least for that night.

Then sleep engulfed him, the heavy, numbing, natural slumber that had eluded him since the night of the Third Task, and finally, he let himself rest.

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Emily had a long, exhausted lie-in the next morning, awakening to Cecile traipsing in with another of her tempting breakfast trays and humming a blithe little song. During her breakfast, a messenger owl appeared at her sitting room window and Emily recognised the Malfoys' black eagle owl, bearing a long white box tied with velvet ribbon. She paused a long, wary moment before accepting the package, but inside the box, she found nothing more dangerous than dozens of brilliantly red, fragrant, long-stemmed roses, and a letter in Lucius's distinctive handwriting:

Darling,

Please, get well soon, my love. You can't imagine how worried I've been.

I would have come to see you the very next day if you had chosen to recuperate in St. Mungo's, but as you haven't been admitted to hospital there, I'll assume that you've sought out a physician among your own people probably a wise choice, as you don't want anyone administering morphine to you by mistake. Please let me know if you need anything, anything at all. If you want a licensed nurse at your bedside, or painkillers, or a burn specialist, I could have them for you in a moment.

I have to admit, dearest, I'm shocked over the way things turned out what an unexpected turn of events that was. The best laid plans do seem to go awry now and then, and I'm so sorry you had to take the brunt of it. I know you wanted to make an excellent first impression, and I share your disappointment that things went so badly.

At any rate, do be sure to let me know what I can do to aid your recovery. Also, my love, be sure to let me know when you've recovered enough to see me again, and when we're reunited, don't feel the need to apologise or heap blame upon yourself. You already know that no matter what happens, I find it hard to withhold forgiveness. Of course everyone would have preferred if things had gone the way we planned them, but as they say, better luck next time.

Don't worry, my dearest, all is not lost. I expect that this is merely a temporary setback, and we'll still welcome you back into the fold as soon as you're able to return. (And you know what kind of welcome I'll give you, as soon as you're able as always, I can't wait to see you again.)

Emily put Lucius's letter aside, scowling with distaste. She then took quill and parchment and composed a note:

Dear Catherine,

Good morning! After all that St. George's has done for me, I'd like to do something for St. George's. Please give these to whichever patients you think would most enjoy them.

Thanks again for taking such great care of me when I was hurt, and please let me know when you next have an evening off, because I'm taking you and Roddy out for dinner. Also, please let me know the address of the charitable donations office at St. George's when I see you next I think an anonymous donor may have to thank them for hosting a certain guest unawares.

Love you, and hope to see you soon!

~ Emily

Then she showered and dressed, took the box of roses up to the Hogwarts Owlery and dispatched it off to St. George's, then took Lucius's letter up to Dumbledore's office.

She found the Headmaster sitting in one of the armchairs near his hearth, paging through a book *The Rise and Fall of Grindelwald, 1933 1945* and then he greeted her with a pleasant smile. "Ah, good morning, Emily, I was going to ask you to come see me today. Please, have a seat. May I offer you a cup of tea?"

"Yes, thank you," she said, and took a seat in the chair opposite his.

"Just a moment " Dumbledore picked up a china tray sitting on an end table, containing a teapot of what smelled like the dregs of Earl Grey tea, and two empty cups. "Has Professor Snape already told you what happened last night?" she asked.

"Yes, Severus came to see me first thing this morning," Dumbledore replied. He set the tray down on his desk, cleaning all the china to sparkling whiteness with a single pass of his hand. "He was grateful for your help last night."

"He was very welcome," Emily said. "And he needn't lay all the credit at my feet he's pretty bloody capable himself."

"Yes, he certainly is. Filius thinks Severus might have been a duelling champion, if he had ever cared to enter the competitions." Dumbledore busied himself adding what smelled like citrus-spice loose tea to the pot, then replacing the lid. He then tapped the pot with his wand "*Aqua fervens*" and plumes of steam began to rise from its spout. Dumbledore brought the tray back to the sitting area and poured out two cups, handing one to Emily.

"Now, I would very much like to hear your impressions of what went on last night," the Headmaster said, settling into his chair and blowing on his tea.

Emily then gave him a long, detailed account of what had gone on outside Vulcan Ironworks: how Professor Snape had immediately been set upon by three assailants upon their arrival, how Emily had then killed two of them in defence of both herself and Snape, and how Snape had killed their final attacker and a Death Eater accomplice in order to pre-empt Killing Curses aimed at her. After she had given the Headmaster a thorough briefing, she handed him the letter she had received that morning.

"Lucius still expects me to carry on as a Voldemort supporter even after what happened," she said, with an ironic grimace. "And he knows I was never admitted to St. Mungo's, so it's obvious that he's still keeping close tabs on me. I know from experience that Lucius has a very effective network of informants at the hospital. When I was admitted there after the attack in Diagon Alley, he knew about it within hours."

"I see," the Headmaster said gravely, handing the letter back to her. "I've called a confidential meeting this evening at Grimmauld Place, and if you wouldn't mind, Emily, I would like for you to attend. I believe Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and the Order's Aurors should all be made aware of what happened yesterday. If you could meet us at eight tonight at our headquarters, bringing all the correspondence you have in your possession relating to both the attack on Mrs. Weasley and the Endustree Alley incident, I would be most grateful."

"I'll be there, sir," she replied.

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Later that evening, Emily Disapparated on the sidewalk just outside number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and made her way up to the front foyer only to be all but mugged on the threshold by the very anxious Mrs. Molly Weasley.

"Emily, dear! Oh goodness, they told me you had just gotten out of hospital I've been so worried. Please, how are you?" Mrs. Weasley asked, all in a rush.

"Hello, Mrs. Weasley. Yes, I got out of hospital yesterday. How are you?"

"I'm fine, dear, some attacks of the nerves as you can imagine, but I've never put anyone in hospital before, so it's been rather a shock. Are you *sure* you're all right?"

"My doctor pronounced me fully recovered Saturday afternoon. I'll be just fine, thank you for asking."

"Are you sure?" the other woman asked, her voice cracking. "It was terrible, dear no one's *skin* should look like that, it's not right at all, I had no idea iron was that harmful to Faeries, I couldn't have done it if I'd known how bad it would be. That burn looked like it hurt *awfully* I mean, I've seen well-done beefsteaks that looked like that, I cook them up for my husband's supper with a little brown gravy and sprouts... Oh, I'm sorry, I am babbling a bit, aren't I, it's just that I've been so upset ever since "

"It's all right, Molly, really. See, look." Emily propped her left foot on the very ugly umbrella stand made from a troll's leg that stood in the hall, and lifted her calf-length skirt to discreetly bare the bit of thigh where the burn had been all that was left of the wounds were two oval splotches of slightly bluish new skin.

Mrs. Weasley's eyes nervously scanned the site of the injury for a moment, then pressed her hands to her ample bosom, sighing deeply with relief. "Oh, good, you *are* nice and healed up, aren't you that's wonderful, dear. It doesn't hurt anymore, does it? I'd heard this week that iron burns can be stubborn even with Healing Potion how did they get it to clear up so fast?"

The front door creaked open at that moment, and Professor Snape came in, his hair blowing slightly in the breeze. He stopped short at the sight of his colleague standing there with her skirt hiked alarmingly above her knees, one fine black brow arching toward the ceiling.

Emily immediately smoothed her skirt back down. "I thought Mrs. Weasley should see how well I had recovered from the burn," she said, blushing.

"Of course," he replied.

"To give credit where it's due, Mrs. Weasley, the reason I healed up so quickly is because Professor Snape and some colleagues in the medical field decided to create a new Healing Potion formulation specifically to treat iron burns," Emily said, with a hesitant smile in his direction. "It's worked famously well in my case."

"Really!" Mrs. Weasley turned to Snape with a decidedly less hesitant smile. "How *clever* of you, Professor."

Snape glanced rather self-consciously from Emily to Mrs. Weasley, then nodded to them both and made his way past them down toward the kitchen, muttering *Well, no one else was doing a blessed thing about it* as he went.

After he had gone, Mrs. Weasley turned toward Emily with a matter-of-fact little shrug. "Well, you know, dear, he *is* Professor Snape," she said, and to her, that explained everything.

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Emily and Mrs. Weasley followed Snape down into the kitchen, where Dumbledore, Alastor Moody, and Arthur Weasley were clustered around the table. Kingsley Shacklebolt was putting the kettle on for tea. Nymphadora Tonks was perched on the kitchen countertop talking to Shacklebolt, but she sprang to her feet when she saw Emily come into the kitchen "Swain! How're you feeling, mate?"

"Fine, thanks," she replied. "My doctor pronounced me fully recovered as of last Saturday."

"Glad you see you're up and about again you gave us all a scare the other night, lassie." Alastor Moody got up and clomped up to Emily's side and offered her his hand, and this time she felt no reserve about taking it.

Mrs. Weasley and Shacklebolt meanwhile busied themselves providing everyone with tea, and then the group assembled at the kitchen table.

Professor Snape and Emily both made reports on the previous night's incident in Endustree Alley, answering questions when the Aurors asked for more details. Emily also

described exactly how Lucius had gone about asking her to murder Mrs. Weasley in order to be initiated as a Death Eater, and her conversation with Voldemort before she set out. She also described everything she could remember about what had happened after she returned to Malfeasant with the news that she hadn't completed her assignment, but had to admit that her memories of her return were rather patchy.

"Yes, *Crucio* has a way of inducing selective amnesia in those who suffer it," Snape muttered, and the others nodded grimly. Mrs. Weasley looked especially haggard and distressed as these tales were related, holding tight to her husband's hand.

Dumbledore then asked both professors to bring out their correspondence from Malfoy regarding these incidents for the Aurors, to be reviewed as potential evidence against Malfoy, and asked them to compare the letters they had received regarding the same incidents. "I do apologise if this is at all embarrassing for either of you," the Headmaster said, as Emily hesitated before giving up her sometimes sentimental letters from Lucius.

Emily was outraged when she saw the letters Lucius had written to Snape "*'Yes, it's a Muggle place I do apologise in advance for the stench of unwashed non-magical humanity' 'When I arrived, the bloody establishment had burned down, how do you like that. I do hope that idiot Muggle who owned the place was suitably fined or imprisoned for his negligence in allowing the gas lines to get so old and decrepit'* oh, that son of a bitch! Could he possibly be more transparent?" She threw Lucius's letter down on the table with a torrent of extremely profane-sounding Old Arcadian, sending most of the assembled company's eyebrows quirking toward the ceiling. Dumbledore discreetly hid a laugh under his hand.

Dumbledore, the Aurors, and especially Snape were equally disgusted when they saw Malfoy's letters to Emily it seemed to her that Snape put each communication aside after reading as though he thought they would dirty his hands. Tonks was likewise unimpressed "Isn't he full of himself. Hey, Swain '*don't feel the need to apologise or heap blame upon yourself*' for not killing Molly now, we all know how shite happens," she said sarcastically.

"Yes, I'll do my best not to wallow in my sense of failure," Emily replied, also sarcastically. She stood and held her tea mug aloft "Ladies and gentlemen a toast to the continuing health and well-being of Mrs. Molly Weasley."

"Bloody right," Mr. Weasley exclaimed, getting to his feet as well. There came a round of *Hear hear* from the assembled company, and everyone drank to that sentiment. Mrs. Weasley smiled and blushed.

"Which brings us to the next burning question of the day how long do you all think Molly should hide out here at headquarters?" Mr. Weasley asked, turning to Moody and Dumbledore. "Do we have any way of knowing as to whether they'll be after her again?"

"Yes, I've been considering that as well," Dumbledore said thoughtfully. "At this time, we don't seem to have any way of knowing."

Snape held up his hand for the group's attention. "I think another week or two of hiding out here will be enough they won't be out looking for her. I honestly think Mrs. Weasley is quite safe for the time being, as she's probably no longer a priority to them."

Dumbledore, both Weasleys, and Emily glanced sharply in his direction, each coming out with some variation on *Why not?* in unison.

Snape regarded them all coolly. "Truthfully... I believe that Professor Swain was never really meant to succeed at the task they assigned her," he replied. "I'd lay even money that they expected to benefit from her failure just as much as they would have from her success."

"What do you mean?" Emily asked.

"Think about this, Professor when they gave you that assignment, they had to know they could only benefit by both your success or your failure," he told her. "Their primary objective was to intimidate Arthur Weasley and I think they've handily managed that, even now." The Weasleys exchanged a long look, clasping each other's hands tightly.

"And not only that, madam, but you had the advantage in negotiations, and you knew it," Snape continued. "As such, their secondary objective was to negate your edge there. If you had succeeded in this task, you would have been guilty of murder, and they would have used that against you whenever it suited them. But you failed, so the Dark Lord took the opportunity to grind you under his heel with a Cruciatus Curse, which was probably just as effective in bringing you back into line. I've no doubt that this task was as much a means of intimidating you as it was the Weasleys."

Emily scowled, considering what he had just said and twisted logic or not, it made sense. Far too much sense. "As always, you seem to be able to think about five chess moves ahead of me," she said tartly. "I wouldn't have thought of that."

"I simply have the advantage of about sixteen years' experience on you in this matter," Snape said dismissively. He turned toward Mr. Weasley "My advice to you, sir, is to refuse to be intimidated. Carry on at work as though nothing had happened, and be glad that your wife is safe." Weasley put an arm around Molly's shoulders and nodded, his face set in a look of grim determination.

"Nonetheless, I'd rather err on the side of caution. Molly should remain here at least until the end of the summer," Moody declared. The other Aurors nodded agreement.

Molly sighed in resignation, her head inclining onto her husband's shoulder.

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Some time later, the confidential meeting broke up, and Mrs. Weasley began clearing up the kitchen as the rest of the group began to disperse toward home.

Emily caught up to Snape in the foyer. "So, they're trying to keep me in a weak and subordinate position, and you've seen my last letter from Lucius," she said, folding her arms in front of her. "What do you think I should do next?"

He considered for a moment. "If I were you, I would put off my next meeting with Lucius for as long as possible. You have the perfect excuse none of them know about the iron burn potion, so as far as they're all aware, you're still lying in hospital getting your wound painfully debrided every day. I would milk that excuse for all it's worth, because the second you return, it's all going to start over again."

"I see," she said, nodding.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, madam. I shall be leaving Hogwarts for some time as of this evening, and I still have preparations to make, so now I'll have to bid you good-bye."

He gave her his usual curt, courteous nod of farewell, and started toward the door.

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"Bid me good-bye?" she repeated in dismay. "Where are you going?"

He stopped, then took her aside in the foyer for a private confidence. "From what you've told me, what I've gathered from Cecile's memories, and after that attack in London, I'm now convinced that the Death Eaters are sharply divided as to whether or not I should be allowed to return," he told her. "We both know that Lucius wants me out of the way, but there are others who don't, and I've gotten in contact with some of them. For the next day or two, I'm going to meet with the faction that wants me to return as a Death Eater and my other contacts may have enough pull to outweigh Lucius's influence and talk me back into the Dark Lord's good graces, if I can convince them on a few points. But that's all I'll say about it. As I've said before, madam, it's better if no one else knows the details."

He again nodded to her and started to take his leave, but Emily stopped him with a hand on his elbow. "Is that really safe?" she asked, concerned. "Are you going by

yourself? What if this is all another trap?"

"I truly don't think it is," he assured her quietly. "The people I'm meeting have much to lose by my death, and a great deal to gain by my return. I've done some of them quite a few favours in the past, and I'm counting on their desire to keep me alive to do them more favours in the future. Good evening, madam."

He opened the front door and proceeded onto the porch, but she persisted, following him outside. "When will you be back?" There was no mistaking the upset in her voice at this news.

Snape stopped dead, turning back to face her on the porch landing. The wind caught his hair and blew it over his pale face; haggard black eyes watching her through dishevelled black locks. "What's it to you?" he asked, his voice a hoarse whisper.

Emily looked at him silently. *Don't leave. I couldn't endure it if anything happened to you.*

Then she stared down at the dirty porch floor. "I've worked with you all year is it so impossible that I might be concerned about one of my colleagues?" she protested softly.

"Then I'll have to come back, if only so you don't have to mourn for one of your... colleagues," he said dryly. "I should be away for a day, perhaps two."

"I see. Well... best of luck to you, then," she said, resolutely holding out her hand even as the tightness in her throat threatened to make it impossible to speak.

"Thank you." He kept his eyes downcast as he shook her hand.

It took all the strength she had to let go of his hand, and say nothing while he left, down the front steps of Grimmauld Place.

At the foot of the steps, he turned back and saw her watching him go. He paused long enough to give her the smallest, most ironic bow of farewell, and then, with a *crack* of Apparition, he was gone.

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Her panic-stricken dash away afterward now seemed both cowardly and intensely cruel even to Emily herself. Yes, why not just mug some unsuspecting bloke with everything that's missing in his life, give him a few hours of sympathy, understanding, companionship, lust, and a few minutes of damnably hot sex and then leave him there. He was right, she should have tried to get in contact with him again, surely there was *something* she could have suggested that would enable them to get together again without revealing everything to him. Why hadn't she said something like, "The truth is, darling, I'd dearly love to see you again, but I'm about to go off and start a new job, and the new job is in a very isolated area where I won't have any way to contact you. Could you possibly meet me back here in King's Cross in a week's time and then we could, er, get tea again? Perhaps have another pleasant evening trading war stories about teaching? Then maybe check into some nice little hotel and spend the night lustily taking each other in every way physically possible?"

No, she had to get scared and vanish. Oh yeah, *that* was tactful. Why hadn't she just stolen his wallet and tied his bootlaces together on her way out, just to make the poor man's evening *really* complete.

Oh flaming Christian hell, she thought, I've killed any number of murderous Orcs twice my size on a battlefield, and somehow I got scared of a reserved Englishman who just wanted to get to know me better, and now someone might use a Killing Curse on him before I get a chance to make all of this up to him.

Damn it, she had best stop thinking thoughts like that, because they made her feel like crying.

It was a very long, very guilty night.

Please, holy Mother, just let him come back safe, and I'll never criticise his classroom discipline ever again. I'll tell him how sharp he looks in dress robes, if the opportunity ever arises. I'll even stop losing my temper with him over things that aren't his fault. Please, just let him come back.

Just let him come back.

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The next weekly meeting of the Order of the Phoenix was set to happen that Tuesday at 6 p.m. the same day Snape was supposed to return from his meeting with the Death Eater contingent still friendly to him but when Emily arrived at Grimmauld Place that Tuesday for the meeting, the distance between the sidewalk just outside and the kitchen where all the others were assembling seemed as wide and daunting as the Sahara Desert.

She stood in front of the house, unable to go inside because if she went in, she might hear that Professor Snape had mysteriously gone missing, or been killed. He might be in the kitchen already, sitting at the table... or she might hear news of his awful fate at the hands of the Death Eaters. If they caught him, they would make a horrible example of him, of course... somehow her feet wouldn't move, wouldn't take her up to where someone might tell her that something dire had happened to him; cherishing her ignorance of his fate to the bitter end.

"Hey, Swain! Hi!" Someone Disapparated next to her on the pavement just outside the Blacks' house. Nymphadora Tonks, hair now violet and slicked back, dressed in a long black witch's robe over a Weird Sisters concert t-shirt, black jeans, and Doc Martens, and clumsily juggling several bags from Sainsbury's. "Grab one of these, would you?"

"Oh... sure." Emily took a bag threatening to tip canned goods onto the sidewalk, then another full of what smelled like bread, cheese, tuna salad, and cinnamon rolls.

"Thanks, mate." Tonks adjusted her other bags in her arms. "I'm the provisions monkey today Molly's scared to go out since what happened, so we're all just giving her a chance to calm down." She breezily nodded toward the front door "After you, then."

"Thanks." Emily took a deep breath and made her way onto the porch, then followed Tonks through the front door. Tonks was still cheerily talking about what she and Remus Lupin and the Weasley family were doing to help Mrs. Weasley settle down, but Emily barely heard a word of it. There were more cheerful voices coming up from the kitchen surely the group would sound hushed and strained if word had arrived that one of the members had died? Was this a good sign?

"Just set the bags on the counter when we get down there then, and Molly and the twins will put them away," Tonks continued, sounding very much as though nothing was wrong.

"Right," Emily replied, distracted then forced herself to go into the kitchen, her stomach a knot of acid.

Professor Snape was sitting in his accustomed seat in the far left side of the table. He appeared entirely unhurt and uninjured, dressed in his usual black, and was having a quiet, intense discussion with Dumbledore and Alastor Moody over mugs of tea. He even looked rather animated and relaxed, as though he was well satisfied with his labours of the last couple of days. Apparently whatever had taken him away had gone well.

He never looked up as Emily and Tonks entered the room, but the relief that flooded through her at the sight of him was nearly unbearable. Emily's knees felt watery as she crossed the kitchen and set down the two Sainsbury's bags.

"Hey, Professor, you're back! How'd it go?" Tonks called to Snape. She put her groceries down on a low cupboard, and shook his hand and suddenly Emily's stomach twisted as she saw him casually greet the young Auror.

"It went better than I expected, Officer. I'll debrief you and the other Aurors on what I learned later."

Then he glanced in Emily's direction for a second, acknowledging her entrance with his usual silent inclination of his dark head as she found a dilapidated kitchen chair and took a seat. He then turned toward Moody as the retired Auror stood up, called the meeting to order, and began to make a report on what were believed to be the Death Eaters' latest acts of public vandalism.

If she turned one long last look an infinitesimal plea for more attention at the side of Snape's face before the meeting started, he did not seem to notice it.

But perhaps someone else did.

"No, this can't continue, this will never do," Albus Dumbledore muttered inaudibly into his teacup, glancing from one to the other. "It does truly seem as though some impetus is needed."

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After Moody, then Tonks, then Shacklebolt, and finally the Headmaster had made their final reports, the meeting began to break up. Professor Snape made his single terse good-bye to Dumbledore and silently made his exit. Whether the Professor had work to do, or didn't want to linger in Sirius Black's house any longer than necessary, or wanted to avoid someone else entirely was anyone's guess. Emily watched him go, feeling rather deflated and dejected.

A moment later, someone in a bright purple robe appeared at her side "Emily. Before you turn in tonight, could I have a word?" Dumbledore asked, smiling pleasantly at her.

She looked up in surprise. "Of course, sir. What about?"

"Oh, just something I've wondered about for some time. Could you meet me up in my office at nine o'clock, for a nightcap and a chat?"

"Er... " Emily turned back toward him, distracted. "Yes, of course I could, sir."

Dumbledore grinned at her. "Excellent. I shall see you then." And then he was gone, in a swirl of purple velvet.

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Emily imagined Professor Snape and Minerva McGonagall facing each other over a chessboard like rival generals an amusing image, to be sure. Despite herself, she chuckled a little, just picturing it. Dumbledore smiled.

"He's also always up for a discussion of the highlights of Slytherin House's last Quidditch season, and how all those prats in Gryffindor would benefit from a good old-fashioned spanking," the Headmaster continued. "And this year, he's become quite fascinated by Faery magic in general, and anything to do with you, in particular."

"Sir... " She got up from her chair and was suddenly very interested in the books on the mantelpiece, averting her face in the hope of not being seen blushing furiously. "I find it hard to believe that he has anything to say about me at all. Really, Albus, I'm not a little girl who's going to believe that the biggest bully in school only pulls my pigtails because he fancies me."

"Severus was never a bully when he was in school, actually," Dumbledore said, with a thoughtful sip of brandy. "He was much more the sort who spent hours in the library next to a tremendous pile of books. As I recall, he had one or two extremely close friends, to whom he was unfailingly loyal. But unfortunately he was very much the sort of earnest pedant who often becomes a target for the bullies of his generation, alas."

Emily was still unable to face him, unable to accept what he was saying. "If he was ever to mention my name, it's probably just to criticise me. He looks down on everything from my tradition of magic to my teaching style to the way I dress, for pity's sake."

"Yes, Severus is quite capable of criticising his colleagues when he thinks their behaviour is lacking, but he has never said one disparaging word about you in my hearing, Emily. That alone puts you on different footing than any of his other colleagues. And " A note of gentle reproach crept into the tactful, humorous tone of his voice "I daresay that as far as any pigtail-pulling goes, my dear, you manage to tug his pigtails as often as he does yours."

She only blushed all the paler, and began pacing on the hearth rug, her hands working before her in agitation. "Sir... truthfully, you've not really heard most of what's gone on between him and me, not really. I've given him the sort of training most of my squires back at home would kill for, I've kept him out of a burning building, I've risked my own safety to bring him information, I've gotten myself beaten to a pulp for the Order, and just lately I've saved his hide from a lot of Death Eater flunkies and you know what he does afterward? Like to *guess*?"

"I can't imagine. Do tell me," Dumbledore said pleasantly.

The pacing came to a dead halt in front of him. "At the worst, he Stuns me and makes me come tell you what a bad girl I've been, and at best, he bids me a very perfunctory good evening, and *leaves*. Honestly, sir what does one need to *do* to impress that bloke?"

To her great surprise, at the end of this dramatic rant, the sublimely dignified Headmaster just burst out laughing till the tears came to his eyes. "Oh, Emily you're priceless, my dear, absolutely priceless." He brought a starched lavender handkerchief out of one of his voluminous sleeves and dabbed at his eyes behind the half-moon spectacles. "But you seem to have missed the fact that you impressed him simply by existing. Can't you see that?"

All the bravado went out of her stance; she stared at the rug in front of Dumbledore's boots, crestfallen. "No, I don't see that. Not at all. I've no idea why you believe you see that."

"Well, I've known him since he was ten years old, so I suppose I do have the advantage on you as far as experience," Dumbledore said, with a reassuring smile. "He's never been a sentimental man romantic words don't come naturally to him. But can you not see the effect you have on him?"

"I have no effect on him at all, Albus. He enjoys the company of Draco Malfoy's pet dog more than he does mine," she said, sounding hurt.

"But, Emily... excepting myself, he talks to you more than he does to anyone else," he told her gently.

She stared at him, amazed. "Does he?" she asked, her voice almost too faint to be heard.

"Ah, my dear, you don't know how you must appear to him." Noting her empty brandy glass, he took up the decanter on the table beside him, got up, and refilled it. "You grew up in Gwydion's Court you know any number of women considered to be your equal in beauty. You've always had the bravest mother, and the most brilliant father parents who might make anyone feel a bit overshadowed. Am I right?"

Emily sighed. "I've never thought my mention in the history books would ever surpass what's already written about my mother, no," she admitted. "Nor have I ever imagined I'll write as many history books as my father." She picked up her glass and took another healthy swallow. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He took his seat again, refreshing his own glass as well. "But here, when you walk into a room, you instantly command attention. You may think of yourself as just Emily not a Queen, not a First Knight, not the King's Historian but Severus sees a beautiful and talented woman any man would find desirable. And he won't declare his intentions if he thinks he will be rejected, if he thinks he will make a fool of himself. Despite my ongoing efforts to assure him of his great talent and personal worth, Severus believes that his dignity is all that he has, and he won't risk it lightly."

Emily took the seat opposite him again, holding her glass tightly, as though afraid of letting it smash again. "Well, if he's so terrified of being rejected that he never risks anything in his relationships with other people, he's going to end by always being alone," she pointed out. "Sure, he'll be safe from embarrassment, but he'll never have friends, or a lover, or a wife, or anyone who loves him, any companionship at all that's no way to live."

"Exactly," Dumbledore replied, nodding. "I don't think Severus allows himself to dwell on what is missing in his life, most of the time which is why your presence unnerves him so much. I think you remind him of what he would have liked to have, and it upsets him. He's terribly reticent about his past, so I don't know if he's ever been in love before, but some of what he's said makes me think he was once, and it ended badly. But certainly a young man who spent his formative years in such company as Severus did may not have had the opportunity to meet a woman capable of caring for him the way he deserves."

"Yes, I can imagine that dating might not have been his top priority, in his first youth," she said. It seemed as though Professor Snape had never told Albus about this Bella person, and she wasn't about to supply the woman's name or any specifics on the matter. Emily thought about something Snape had said to her on the turrets all those weeks ago *Dumbledore assisted me in striking a plea bargain agreement with the previous Minister of Magic. I was twenty years old at the time.* Again it struck her as to how very *young* he had been during the first Voldemort conflict and certainly Death Eater meetings were no place to meet a faithful, loving woman.

"And you... my dear, you have to realise that you are an enigma writ large, for someone like him," the Headmaster said, winking at her. "He doesn't have the intuition into your behaviour and motivations that a countryman of yours would have. I hate to say it, but like you said so long ago, the Fae can be awfully *mysterious* at times, to mere humans."

Emily blushed all the worse, recalling that yes, Professor Snape was indeed a human, not another Faerie, with all the lack of familiarity with her own culture that entailed. He was starting to use her people's magic with such facility that the distinction between them had blurred somewhat for her, in the same manner that she sometimes forgot her own father was a human wizard because he spoke and wrote both dialects of Old Arcadian more fluently than she did. "Even so, the Professor certainly has a talent for our magic. Has he mentioned to you that he's turned out to be another natural adept, like my father?"

"Yes, he told me the morning after you told him it came as a complete surprise to him. He scarcely knew what to make of it, but nonetheless, I think he was very pleased," her companion said, smiling broadly. "So, my dear... you're already well aware that he's no ordinary man. I can also assure you that while it's true he can be argumentative, he would never have devoted so much time to arguing with you if you weren't a worthy opponent. The only people Severus truly respects are those who can capably defend their opinions when questioned, and you're very like him that way. I've known since you were a tiny girl sitting on your father's knee that the man you married would need to have the intelligence, and the energy, to stand up to you."

She chuckled faintly it was indeed true that as a child, she had been what Gwydion, Dahlia, and her father called *precocious*, her mother called *stubborn*, and the Robinett family had called *a spoiled, willful little minx* "Perhaps I've heard myself described that way... once or twice, but in a friend, in a real companion, one wants an equal, not a sycophant, or a tyrant that has to be flattered and placated," she pointed out.

"I couldn't agree more." Dumbledore set his brandy glass down and faced her very simply and seriously. "Now, please, Emily, you have to promise me you'll never tell him I told you this, because I know he won't appreciate it but you see, for all his well-deserved confidence in his intellectual abilities, Severus has never thought of himself as attractive to women. As such he will never know how you feel about him if you don't tell him. He will never even *imagine* that you cared for him if you don't tell him."

Emily averted her eyes, again blushing horribly. "That's the thing, sir... I have no idea how to tell him so in a way that will actually make him want to listen to it," she said. "Nothing I say ever has any effect on him at best, he just doesn't want to hear it, and at worst, he gets furious with me."

"Yes, he does come off that way, doesn't he." Dumbledore laughed softly, shaking his head. "If you'll allow me to give you some advice, my friend... perhaps more persistence on your part could be in order. Perhaps you could stop running off the first time he scowls. Don't let the first sarcastic remark he makes throw you. Let him know that you're seeking him out because you enjoy his company, rather than just letting circumstances throw you together. But remember if you pursue him, he will not immediately believe that you are sincere, and you must convince him that your intentions are honourable. All of his life, he's been much more accustomed to cruelty and betrayal than to affection and loyalty, and it's made him a terrible pessimist when it comes to the motivations of others. And I don't mean to scold, but you haven't exactly given him cause to have complete confidence in you, you know."

"I know I haven't," she said, her voice thickening. "Do you think he'll ever forgive me for... being involved with Lucius?" She held out her empty brandy glass. "Is there any more of that?"

"He already has forgiven you or at the very least, he refuses to judge you too harshly for it," Dumbledore said quietly, taking the glass from her. "I knew from the way he defended you to Sirius, and tried so hard to talk me out of accepting your help, the night the Fusilier was destroyed." He thoughtfully refilled her glass, and put it back into her hand. "Severus knows exactly what it is to come under Malfoy's influence without his cousin's persuasions, I sincerely believe that your colleague may never have been a Death Eater himself. Severus may be the one person you know who could best sympathise with you, as far as relying on Lucius Malfoy's promises to one's own detriment. If anything, he realises that he could have put an end to that involvement at any time by telling you the whole truth about Malfoy, and regrets that he didn't."

"But Albus... " She downed the calvados in one swallow, and set the glass aside. Then she paused, opened her mouth to speak once or twice, but seemed unable to find words to fit what she wanted to say. Finally she got up, and went to lean against the windowsill.

"Yes, what is it?" There was a rustle of velvet robes beside her, and Dumbledore joined her at the window. The moonlit lake below them glimmered gently on the horizon.

When she spoke again, her voice was only a soft, halting whisper. "Back when I got married, you see... I knew Jayson thought he was in love with me. He'd been following me around since we were children, and he'd always been so jealous of all my other friends. You remember how he always hated Bill Blake because Bill was my favourite companion."

"Yes, I remember. Luckily William Blake isn't easily intimidated."

"Yes, that's Bill for you," Emily said, lowering her chin onto her hand. "But I *knew* Jayson would be jealous because I loved someone else. I knew he would hate Dorien because I married him... *but I didn't think Jayson was capable of murder.* I had no idea he would get so angry, he hadn't done anything to indicate that he would be able to... that he would ever... "

"Emily did you honestly expect yourself to be able to predict Robinett's criminal behaviour?" Dumbledore asked her, thunderstruck. "You can't honestly expect yourself to somehow be able to do what the greatest criminologists and behavioural psychologists in this world cannot do. Are you an oracle, who can infallibly predict treachery and murderous intent?"

"Well no, of course not, no one can do that," she said softly.

"Jayson Robinett acted the way he did because he was a spoiled, lawless, jealous, and selfish wretch *not because of anything you did*," Dumbledore averred stoutly. "Some women might enjoy playing the *leanan*, tormenting such a willing victim for their own amusement, but Gwydion himself has told me that you only ever tried to be a friend to him since you were a child, and by all reports, you had always made your refusal clear. It has never been any fault of yours that he persisted beyond an honest *No*."

"But, Albus... you see, in this case, I *do* know Lucius to be jealous, evil, and a murderer. He already hates Severus on just the suspicion that he might have left Voldemort's service. What would Lucius do if it came out that I left him because I preferred Severus to him? What if that's all it takes to finally make him seek his life in earnest? *What if I only get him killed?*" Her head inclined miserably into her hand. "I don't think I could live with myself, knowing that not one but *two* good men had died because they had the misfortune to take up with me."

"I don't know how you can say that, when he would be dead twice over without you," Dumbledore pointed out. "Both Severus and Molly would have been murdered, Arthur would have lost his wife, and the Weasley children left motherless, if you had not come here this year. You worry that you would endanger his life but as far as I can see, you're the one person who has most capably preserved him from harm this year."

"Just doing my job," she murmured.

Dumbledore smiled, fondly pressing Emily's hand. "There are those women who never meet a man worthy of their love, and you've been lucky enough to meet two of them. I know that it was your fondest hope to simply be celebrating your sixth wedding anniversary at home about this time, but alas, we must live the life that we have, not the life that we would like to have had. Did you and Dorien ever discuss what you would do if one of you was killed in battle?" he asked, very gently indeed.

"Well yes, of course, we were both soldiers... you know what's funny I told him not long after we were married that if I ever fell in battle, he was to find someone else to love and get married again with my blessing. I didn't just tell him it was all right with me I urged him to do it. You know how intense he was... I couldn't stand the idea of him isolating himself from everyone and pining for me, because he *would*, you know, he was like that."

"Yes, I remember."

"Little did I know. At the time I thought it would be more likely that I would die suddenly than he would you know the mortality rate for ground troops is higher than it is for archers... didn't know *anything*, did I... " A tear slipped down her cheek, and Dumbledore handed her his lavender handkerchief.

"Thank you." She turned aside and dabbed at her face. "Albus... while Dorien was alive, sometimes I think that we were so glad to be together that we made the gods jealous we tempted fate. Maybe mortal creatures just weren't meant to feel like that. Maybe that kind of love is reserved for the gods, only."

"*Emily.* Surely you can't believe that," Dumbledore chided her gently. "Don't tell me you've given up entirely on happiness. I don't believe for an instant that the Lady of the Worlds would envy the joy of two of her faithful knights in loving each other and likewise, I don't think you should let anything get in your way now. I sincerely believe that you could make Severus happier than he has ever been in his life, and that he would welcome the chance to do the same for you. Please don't tell me you're going to leave here without talking to him. Really *talking* to him."

Emily took a deep breath, composing herself. "Why... why do you think he wants to hear... why do you think he *really* wants to talk to me?"

Dumbledore just laughed, shaking his white head. "Because of the way he can't ignore you, even when he would like to. Because no matter what happens, his first thought is always devoted to how he can best protect you and keep you from harm, even though he knows very well that you can take care of yourself. And because he's never met a woman who could match him point for point, barb for barb, in a debate well, except for Minerva, but she's almost old enough to be his grandmother."

The idea of the Heads of Slytherin and Gryffindor cosily paired up together made Emily laugh for a second, but it was definitely true that of all the teachers at Hogwarts, Snape's eternal adversary Minerva McGonagall was the one Snape seemed to respect most, other than Dumbledore. "I... I do see your point, sir," she said quietly.

Her companion smiled. "Not only that, but on the day you and Mrs. Weasley were due to have your confrontation, I watched him pace the floor and stare at the clock and generally work himself into a frenzy of worry waiting for you to come back. And when you did return... everyone else was momentarily paralysed with shock, but when you started to stumble, he was at your side in an instant, both to comfort you and slay all comers I had never seen him so fiercely protective of anyone before. In my opinion, the way he treated you that day will always be one of his finest moments, when he again reinforced my opinion of all his best qualities."

"Yes, I was just thinking the other day that Professor Snape is a good man indeed to have about in a crisis," Emily murmured to herself.

"Oh yes, my dear, he is. The *best*," Dumbledore averred, patting her hand again. "I would trust Severus with my life."

Emily paused a long moment, gazing at the lake, her long uncertainty warring with the reassurances Dumbledore had given her that evening. Then she made a silent resolution and she turned back to her companion.

"So... what you're saying, Albus, is that my colleague, Severus Snape, the spy, the apostate Death Eater, the teacher of whom every student at Hogwarts is absolutely terrified is terribly shy when it comes to women, and if I want him, I need to just knock myself out pursuing him, because otherwise he won't even know I'm interested?"

Dumbledore looked up at her, his face alight he really looked perhaps a heartbeat away from jumping up and down and clapping his hands like a little boy. "*YES,*" he cried. "Yes, that's it exactly."

"Well... " Emily faced Dumbledore almost bashfully. "Does he have a favourite restaurant?" she asked.

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After his cathartic late-night talk with Emily, Dumbledore had his usual cup of bedtime cocoa, then slept untroubled all night. The next morning, he got up, hummed his usual song while performing his usual morning ablutions, combed his long white hair and beard, dressed in his usual purple robes, had a pleasant breakfast in his sitting room, and then swept purposefully down to the Slytherin dungeons.

He knocked once on the door of Professor Snape's office, heard a curt *Enter* from within. Dumbledore went inside, finding Snape standing at the blackboard at the front of the room in shirtsleeves. He was scratching down some highly complex chemical diagrams, his black brows furrowed in concentration.

"Severus! Up early, as usual, I see."

"Good morning, sir," Snape said, glancing morosely over his shoulder as the Headmaster came in. "So, what brings you all the way down here? Have you heard anything new about the Death Eater situation?"

"No, nothing new at the moment I simply wanted to ask you a question. I've been terribly curious about something since last year, and I was wondering if you could perhaps clear it up for me."

"Yes, what is it?" Snape asked impatiently, his eyes still on his work.

"Why doesn't Emily know how you feel about her?"

Snape froze, his hand arresting in the middle of writing a formula on the blackboard.

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After a long, immobile moment, Snape lowered the chalk and turned in profile toward Dumbledore.

"Albus... you know that I respect you more than anyone else alive," he said slowly. "But at this moment, you are so far out of line that I don't see how you're ever going to get back in again, unless perhaps you immediately turn around, walk out of here, and never speak to me about this matter again."

"It's not escaped my attention that you can't look at anything else when she's near you, my friend." Dumbledore settled himself on one of the tall stools next to Snape's worktable, as though getting cosy for a long chat. "On the day I introduced the two of you, there hadn't been that much electricity in the teacher's lounge since Filius demonstrated the St. Elmo's Fire Charm. You've had her undivided attention ever since "

"*I most certainly have not!*" Snape snapped, hurling his chalk aside and turning on him in a fury. "She's ignored me from the *very* first she makes an*art* out of ignoring me. And I cannot even begin to describe how eloquently that woman has expressed her contempt for me at every opportunity."

"At *every* opportunity?" the Headmaster asked mildly.

Snape's gaze was drawn to a silver object in Dumbledore's hand, that he was idly spinning on the end of a chain Professor Swain's Amulet of Protection, which had been sitting on Snape's worktable for the last few days. He had neglected to give it back to her following the London attack, and she had not asked for it.

Snape paused, perhaps even reddened slightly then turned back toward the blackboard. "That, sir, came about because she is a knight, and has her own oaths to uphold. It had nothing to do with me personally she said so herself."

"Did she come out and tell you it wasn't personal, or did she make a conditional statement to that effect? To the Fae, there are worlds of difference between the two. Did she tell you not to *assume* that it was personal? Or that she's saved people's lives on other occasions, or that's what a Fianna knight *does*... ?" Dumbledore asked gently. "She's a proud woman, Severus did you give her the chance to admit why she rescued you that night without sacrificing her dignity?"

Snape remained silent, his face averted, his spine stiffly straight.

"Do you really think she wouldn't see her oaths as extending to someone she *was* fond of, personally? And did you never hope that it meant something more than just a knight's duty toward others?" Dumbledore asked.

When Snape finally answered, his voice was only a toneless whisper. "Good lord, Albus, were you really so bored with the events of this year that you actually *wanted* to listen to me sawing on about some absurd unrequited fancy for a woman? Did you not *quite* have enough to do already?"

"I... do not think that you should worry overmuch about your regard going unrequited, my friend," Dumbledore said quietly.

Snape laughed bitterly. "Sir, this is not to cast aspersions on your... *legendary* understanding of the human character, but I can't recall ever seeing overmuch in that woman's behaviour to indicate that she holds me in any higher regard than the lowliest creeping flobberworm."

"When you examine your own behaviour, can you honestly say that you've given her any cause to believe that you prefer *her* to the lowliest creeping flobberworm? I hate to say this, Severus... but you can be just a bit intimidating, you know, by spells," Dumbledore said. Peripherally, Snape could see the Headmaster smiling at him with fond reproach.

"To students in my classes, perhaps and they still have no problem disrespecting me," Snape growled. "I've overheard them saying, 'Do you think I've got nothing better to do in Potions class than listen to Snape?' Don't ask me if I'm for or against re-instituting thorough beatings to misbehaving students you won't like the answer."

"Professor Swain isn't a student in one of your classes. In matters of her nation's security, she offers counsel to a king. Can you expect someone like that to kneel, and kiss your hand?" Dumbledore asked, with great gentleness.

"I can't imagine her doing that with *anyone*," Snape muttered.

"And there are any number of reasons why she might feel her affections for you are unwelcome. You can't have missed the way some people stare, and whisper, and sometimes make unkind remarks at the sight of her. The Fae protect their secrets well, you know they became experts at blending in, hiding their true nature, rather than brave the trials of integration into Wizarding society. Only occasionally will you find one of the Fae willing to show her true face on the street amongst us, let alone one willing to teach her people's magic to us."

"Yes, I'm well aware that there are anti-Fae bigots out there I'm related to some of them," Snape growled. "I know that prejudice exists in our world. But why on Earth would she think that of me? When have I *ever* do you have any idea how much work I've put in to trying to help them, this year? It's a pattern I try to help ease the sufferings of lycanthropes, and the only one of them I know still holds me in contempt. I try to ameliorate the Fae's suffering from iron burns, and *that woman* barely even notices. There's no gratitude anywhere."

"Severus she *does* appreciate what you and your colleagues have done for her people, very much, and while you may not believe it, so does Remus."

Snape only gave a curt, disbelieving laugh, and turned back to his diagramming.

"As for her assumptions about your attitudes, remember you are the son of a pure-blooded family, and you associated with people like Druella Black and the Malfoys. You do so in order to gather information from them, certainly, but Emily didn't realise that at first. Some wizards can be quite openly hostile to her people... including, sadly, some members of her own family. Once Buckminster Swain made it known that he intended to remain in the Faerielands permanently, his first wife's children made it quite clear to Emily that she was to consider herself a Swain in name only."

"Yes, I heard," Snape said, scowling. "Some vicious gossip of a woman mentioned it at one of the Malfoys' parties. But it's rather *unfair of her* to tar me with the same brush as the Druella Blacks and Felina Rosiers of the world, isn't it she should of course fancy herself an expert on my social attitudes because she's spent so much bloody time *talking* to me about them, after all."

Dumbledore chuckled. "It is not in the nature of the Fair Folk to be too forthright and open, my friend, especially in the face of hostility. That is why they have never bothered to integrate into our society, but instead hide within it. Emily prefers to remain a cipher, unknown by all, than be rejected for being who she truly is. She believes that there is more safety in keeping her feelings private. Can you not sympathise with her in that?"

"You're trying to draw some parallel between that tendency in her and the same one in me, aren't you," Snape said with a bitter little laugh. "And I'm supposed to find that very telling and romantic, aren't I."

"I think that is very telling and romantic," Dumbledore said.

"You would, Albus," Snape said, shaking his head. "The woman is utterly impossible, always has been, always will be."

"Yes, I know. Totally irrepressible and indomitable, just like all her people she's the sort who would prank the hangman on the way to the gallows. That's the way they have always been, throughout history so you have to realise, my friend, that she has it within her to elude you, and she'll do it, if you let her."

"It's in her nature to elude me no matter *what* I do," Snape snapped. "I think she positively *enjoys* it."

"Yet, she stood in front of a hundred people and plainly stated that Arcadians tend to be secretive due to their magical heritage. That had to be unnerving for her. Can you expect someone, anyone, to spontaneously throw off every influence of the culture in which she was raised a moment after she makes your acquaintance?"

"Well, no, of course not," the younger man growled. "But why does she have to be so damn *difficult*, all the time? Why does she look at me like I've slapped her every time I ask her a question?"

Dumbledore looked at his friend with compassion no father looking upon a son could have conveyed more empathy. "Severus, remember that her magic is dependent on keeping a secret a wariness about allowing herself to be known is ingrained into her very character. *Of course* she isn't going to respond well to direct questions. When one openly demands information of a Faerie, it feels abrupt, brutal, offensive and they respond with evasion. And they are extremely good at evasion."

"Yes, I've noticed," Snape said sourly.

"If one wants an answer from one of the Fae, one must first acknowledge her prerogative for keeping her secrets. Ask her if she is willing to divulge what you want to know. Ask her if she would be amenable to telling you, or if circumstances allow her to tell you. Better yet, make a leading statement and see if she expounds on the topic introduced of her own volition. Or, confide in her yourself first to them, that is a great offering of trust. You can't demand anything of them, Severus, they won't allow it but they respect every bit of yourself that you offer to them. If you divulge anything personal to her, she will value that most highly, and value the trust you have shown even more highly. That is why no one will ever listen to your confidences, and keep your secrets, with more care or consideration than one of the Fair Folk."

"Except to mine," Snape said quietly. "I doubt that she'd listen or care about anything I had to say if her life depended on it. Because no one ever listens to me even when it's in their best interest to do so. That does seem to be the trend 'round here, you know."

"And a regrettable condition that is, too, my friend," Dumbledore said. "For my own part, I don't know where I'd be without your counsel."

"You're the only one who ever values my opinion on anything, Albus. It's been that way for almost fourteen years, and I don't see that ever changing."

"Well... I do see that changing in this situation, but only if you undertake to change it. But I have to remind you Emily doesn't have much time left with us. At midnight on September twenty-third, she will have fulfilled the assignment Gwydion gave her, and thus her promise to me. If she chooses to leave here and at this point, she probably will that will be the last you will ever see of her."

"But Albus... " Again, Snape half-turned toward Dumbledore, perhaps looking a touch wounded, just for an instant. "She... the night I showed her the Mark, told her that I had been a Death Eater... you didn't see the way she reacted. She was horrified. She was *revolted* by me."

"Are you sure that it wasn't the Mark itself that she found so revolting?" his companion countered. "And if she was as horrified by you as you say, then why did she agree to accompany you to the meeting in Endustree Alley?"

"Again, that probably falls under the criteria of that's just what a knight does," Snape said grimly. "She'll always look down on me for what I was, won't she any respectable woman would. The Death Eaters tried to kill her father how could she possibly care for someone who used to be one of them?" He then stood back and surveyed the elaborate chemical diagrams on the blackboard and then noticed that he had made any number of absent-minded mistakes in the last fifteen minutes. He threw the chalk

aside, and rendered the board clean again with a pass of his hand, an inaudible word, and a harassed scowl.

"By the same token, how could she not feel respect and admiration for the man who decided to cure iron burns in his spare time?" Dumbledore pointed out, raising his own sinister white eyebrow. "She might have looked down on you before, but you have proven your worth to her hundredfold since then. Think of this three of the people she has loved the most are an aged and decidedly eccentric king, a discredited politician, and a soldier with a long disciplinary record, my friend. Her father has made catastrophic miscalculations in judgment, but she remains one of his most ardent apologists, and always has been. A squire under her command once defied her direct instructions, in order to save the life of a friend and she married him anyway. I think you'll find your colleague to be far less judgmental than you imagine her to be and while she may not love wisely at times, no one could deny that she loves *well*."

Snape stood in front of the empty blackboard, motionless.

"What makes you so certain that I shouldn't worry about... matters going unrequited?" he asked, very softly.

"Call it a hundred and fifty-four years of intuition, my friend," Dumbledore said. "I saw the way she reacted to you when you were introduced, and the way she talked to you all year. She wouldn't have bothered with you for an instant if she thought you to be merely a crank, or a fool. When I told her about Malfoy's last invitation to you, she volunteered to escort you before I could even ask her, did you know that? And you didn't see the way she drove herself half-mad with worry when your duties took you away from us the last time. You also didn't see the blessed relief on her face when she saw you back again, and well.

"Plus, I asked the two of you to schedule self-defence sessions I didn't say you had to meet three times a week for the rest of the school year. I would have been satisfied with once a week it was the two of you that decided to spend so much time together. And I can't imagine that you would have done that if you didn't take at least some pleasure in each other's company."

"Perhaps but she still preferred Malfoy to me," Snape said bitterly. "The man may smile and smile, and still be a villain, but he's handsome and charming, so women just ignore the fact that he's the most despicable bastard alive. They always have."

"Yes, I know, my friend. It took her far too long to realise the truth about him. But she's long since realised that another man may frown and frown, and disagree with her, and still be a hero," Dumbledore said, his clear blue eyes fixed on Snape's face. "So perhaps you might consider that a woman may misunderstand you, and refuse to take your advice, and make the wrong decisions over and over again and still be true and loyal, and worthy of your affections. And I think she would very much welcome the chance to prove herself to you as a matter of fact, I think she's already been trying for some time now."

Snape slanted a penetrating look at Dumbledore. "Albus? Exactly why are you telling me all this?"

Dumbledore smiled. "I do have to admit my motives here aren't entirely altruistic I dearly hope to persuade Professor Swain to take the Defence Against the Dark Arts position for next year, as a free at-will employee this time."

"And you think she'll be more inclined to stay around if she isn't eager to get the bloody hell away from me as fast as she can," Snape said sourly.

"Well, yes, as it stands, she doesn't have much motivation to stay here, truthfully. But I also think you've punished yourself for the errors of your youth long enough, Severus. Despite everything, you care for her, and she for you and I believe with all my heart that the both of you deserve to be happy, finally."

"Please, Albus, if I had a Sickle for every time you told me I deserved to be happy, I'd be retired by now," Snape muttered. "It's verging on tiresome."

Many another person would have taken offence, but Dumbledore just laughed until his eyes teared, and he had to dab at them with his handkerchief. "Well then if you won't let me talk you into pursuing an extremely clever and attractive woman who cares very much for you, then do me a favour and brew me up another batch of Calming Draught, because watching the two of you go on the way you do is getting exhausting, and I'm an old man with only so much energy. So please, Severus, if you won't do it for yourself, try and come to some kind of understanding with her before listening to the two of you kills *me*."

"Well... " Snape stared contemplatively at the empty blackboard. "If it gets me out of brewing Calming Draught, I suppose I could... have a talk with her. If you're *certain* I won't be making a fool of myself in the attempt," he hedged, treating Dumbledore to the full effect of his sinister eyebrow.

"Don't worry," his companion replied. "You won't."

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In answer to Emily's question about Professor Snape's favourite sort of restaurant, Dumbledore had just said, *If Severus was your guest at dinner, I think he would be too busy convincing himself he had not drunk an infusion of hallucinogenic peyote by mistake to really notice the menu overmuch, but he does appreciate a good beefsteak.* Amusing as that had been, it didn't shed much light on potential spots for a quiet possibly even romantic dinner. So the morning after their chat, she got up, showered and dressed in a light summer frock, and then went for a stroll down the Hogsmeade high street, thoughtfully considering venues for an elegant but not ostentatious sort of first date.

The Three Broomsticks was a very pleasant and well-kept neighbourhood pub, with a rather impressive and varied wine list, granted, but somehow she didn't want to take him out to some little neighbourhood place for a pub supper and a pint. The first date and cease fire of two people who had spent so much time imagining themselves to be mortal enemies really should have a bit of thought put into it.

There was a little place up ahead Madam Puddifoot's Tea Shop. Emily had been there once or twice for Sunday high tea with Irma, and found it amusingly kitschy, if a bit over-full of sighing, hand-holding students. It was one thing to take Irma there for tea, but for lunch with Professor Snape, it seemed kind of precious, what with the frilly curtains and gilt cherubs. No, something else was definitely in order. What was that place up ahead a pub called the Hog's Head. One glance in the window made her dismiss that possibility the place looked more like the kind of establishment where one interviewed hired goons than a likely spot for a date.

Would he mind going into London, then? Emily knew several gourmet restaurants in Diagon Alley but then it occurred to her that her visits to all of them had been in private little dining rooms with Lucius, and she didn't want to give Professor Snape the impression that he was being wined and dined in secret like some kind of illicit paramour. Perhaps something a touch less ostentatious than a six-course meal with six different vintages of wine to go with it did he like Indian food, maybe? Greek? French?

She ended up in Scrivenshaft's, a little combination stationery store and bookshop, paging through a nightlife guide to Wizarding London. There were a few upscale steak and seafood sort of places that seemed rather nice... oh, a Tuscan cuisine restaurant had just opened. But if all else failed you couldn't really go wrong with French food for a romantic date, could you...

But then Emily's pleasant reverie was shattered by a woman's sweet, hostile voice from behind her. "Why, Mrs. Tumnus, I hadn't thought to see you here. I'd heard you'd had yourself an accident, and were in hospital."

Emily spun around, and found herself looking into the baleful brown eyes of one Mrs. Felina Rosier.

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"Er, yes, I just got out recently," she said, very stiffly indeed, and too surprised to be able to prevaricate with her usual facility. "My doctor recommended a lot of bed rest I probably shouldn't even be up, but I simply had to have something new to read."

"Of course, I'd heard about how badly you were hurt everyone was talking about it," Mrs. Rosier said, with a killing little sniff, one that clearly said that if Molly Weasley's murder had been entrusted to her, she would have made ever so much better of a job of it. "Oh well, no matter, I suppose. And I've been taking the opportunity to familiarise myself a bit with your people's magic," she continued, holding up a familiar book ***Identity and Illusion: A Wizard's Overview of Faery Magic***, by Buckminster

Swain.

"One of Father's best known works," Emily said.

"Yes, I'd just been reading the entry about *Glamours*, it's absolutely fascinating. Lucius tells me you're very experienced with that art," Mrs. Rosier said conversationally. "Is it true that you can make anyone see and feel anything you want them to?" Her eyes raked over Emily's body from her black slippers, up to her waist and given the heat of the day, of course she had put on a little black spidersilk frock with a hem a few inches above her bare knees. There was no need to bandage the burn any longer, so all that she wore under that translucent little skirt was an equally translucent petticoat and knickers and given the sheerness of her dress, a bulky bandage would have been readily apparent.

So now, seeing as how she knew nothing about Professor Snape's iron burn potion, Felina Rosier had every reason to think Emily had faked her injury after the attack on Mrs. Weasley.

"No, that's not quite how it works," Emily interjected quickly. "As with so many other sorts of magic, there are limits to what you can do with Glamour. It's not like Transfiguration, where you create something new from something else Glamour is entirely illusory. For example, if one created a Glamoured illusion that one was, say, bleeding on a carpet, there wouldn't be *actual blood left behind* after the Glamour was dispelled, you see."

"Oh, I see," Mrs. Rosier replied. "And by my estimation, it's only been about a week or so since you were hurt. What a wonder Faery medicine is! I'd heard something to the effect that iron burns were something to be dreaded, and here you are looking so well why, it's nothing short of *miraculous*."

"It's actually been nine days since the accident," Emily corrected her. "And there have been some advances as far as curing iron burns lately, thank the Mother."

"Yes of course, thank the Mother," Mrs. Rosier sneered sweetly. "Well then, if you'll excuse me, I must be going. I'm behind on my correspondence, and wanted to see about catching up on it today."

"Of course."

Emily watched Mrs. Rosier go with grim resignation now there was no way that she would be able to keep her recovered condition a secret. When she got back to Hogwarts, she sat huddled in one of the large armchairs in her sitting room, wondering how many hours she had before Lucius demanded her attention again.

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Sure enough, by ten p.m. that evening, there came the now-dreaded *rustle-flitter-scritch* of the Malfoys' black eagle owl at her window.

Darling ~

I've just received a letter today, from a friend telling me all about your miraculous recovery oh, my love, that's splendid news! I thought you'd be in hospital for weeks, even months, but now I hear you're actually healed up enough to go for a bit of a walk, and looking blooming. You really were clever to seek out a healer amongst your own people as I've always said, Faery medicine is nothing short of amazing. I'm thrilled, dearest, really.

Now, even with all the great Arcadian apothecaries and physicians this world has to offer looking after you, surely you can find just a moment of time to see me? It can be entirely platonic, of course, as I don't imagine you're at one hundred percent just yet, and I certainly wouldn't want to make any demands on you while you were recuperating. But I've always so enjoyed our cosy evenings together, when we just held each other and talked. When that assailant injured you back in June, you can probably remember how much I wanted to be of help to you, and I'd very much like to do the same now. Please, my love, indulge me.

It just so happens that I'll be in meetings in London all this week, so I should be in the Hulot club suite tomorrow night after half-past five. Why don't you drop by then for a bit of supper with an old friend I'd love to have you. And I understand that travel might be a bit fatiguing for you, so you're welcome to get all the bed rest you'd like here, preferably next to me.

I can't wait to see you, dearest. Please don't be late.

Well. It looked as though her promised real talk with Professor Snape was going to have to be delayed, due to the overriding promise she had made to the head of the Order of the Phoenix, pledging her services as an informant.

I love you, but I gave my word that I would aid your cause.

When the affair with Lucius began, there had been no bond or commitment between her and Professor Snape; she had been sure that he wanted nothing more to do with her. Disappointing as that was, it meant that she had been free to see who she wanted, when she wanted. While it was definitely true that she hadn't made the best choice of men with whom to become romantically involved (*a married man who is the de facto head of the Death Eaters, no less*) but it had been her mistake to make. She'd owned up to it, and was now doing her best to regain her self-respect by advancing the Order of the Phoenix's cause. Yes, she had been wrong and she knew it, but her indiscretion had put her in an excellent position as far as becoming an informant, and as such, she thought she had been making the best of a bad situation.

Now that she was certain how she felt about Professor Snape could no longer deny that she loved Severus the idea of keeping a romantic tryst with another man just felt corrupt, immoral, and *wrong*. If she went to Lucius now, something precious and honest would be irreparably damaged and diminished, in a way that felt sickeningly like infidelity.

Forgive me, love. I promised.

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Time has a way of slipping by in an eyeblink when we most want it to tarry, and as such, it seemed that the sun went down and came up with unnatural speed. Today, she was to go down to London again. He would be waiting for her.

Every time Emily looked at her mantelpiece clock that morning, she would spend a second or two trying to stop its hands with a concerted effort of will and much furrowing of her eyebrow muscles, because of course it logically followed that if a clock stopped, time would stop as well, and she wouldn't have to leave the castle. All she ended up doing was making the pendulum of that clock swing wildly up and down, its hands spinning madly. But abuse one timepiece as she may, then she would glance at her watch, at the little boudoir clock on her bedside table, and both of them would be treacherously inching forward, marking off the time until she had to leave.

Then it was four p.m., and Emily listlessly began packing an overnight bag. She spent time making a careful list of everything that she had wanted to pack, then lost it. She would pack things, and then forget that she had packed them, and would waste time looking for them.

All this, to pack for a short weekend with Lucius. It used to be, that she would throw two dresses, some fetching lace underthings, and a toothbrush into a bag and be gone; now, she seemed to be sabotaging herself, dawdling for as long as she could.

Then it was five p.m., and she made her way out of the castle by the back way, and down toward the village.

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In Hogsmeade, she briefly stopped in at the Three Broomsticks for a cup of tea. She had perhaps a quarter hour before she had to go, and she was enjoying the warmth and familiarity of the pub before she had to embark for London, and face the moment when she would have to see Lucius, kiss him, feel his hands touching her.

"Hello, Professor. What can I get for you?" Madam Rosmerta asked.

"Just some jasmine tea. In a takeaway cup, please," she said, putting a Sickle on the bar. She had collected her change and her cup and was turning away from the counter when she heard Madam Rosmerta address someone else behind her with "Hello, Professor, what can I get for you?" as well. Odd, that.

"I'll have one of what she's having, please," said Severus Snape's voice. Emily froze.

By the holy Mother, he was right behind her at the bar and she was on her way to meet Lucius. And of course it would be rude as all bloody hell to just nod curtly to him and leave... she was going to have to at least say hello to him, it was only polite.

"Good afternoon, sir," she said, half-turning in his direction with an uncharacteristically timid smile.

"Madam." He gave her his usual polite nod of greeting, glancing down at the overnight bag in her hand and Emily suddenly wanted to fling that offending item of luggage up in the air and completely decimate it with a Reductor Curse.

"You're going visiting this weekend?" he asked, for all the world like one colleague just making idle chatter with another.

"Yes, unfortunately." *By all that's holy, don't look at me. Not now.*

"Have a lovely time," he murmured. Madam Rosmerta put a steaming cup in front of him on the bar, and he took it from her with a brusque *Thank you.*

Emily offered him a quick, meaningless nod of farewell, and made her escape as fast as was polite.

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Jasmine tea. Before he met her, he'd barely been aware that jasmine tea even existed. Now every time he was in Hogsmeade, he found himself drinking the stuff. And *liking* it.

He paused on a bench outside the Three Broomsticks, holding his takeaway cup between both hands, lost in thought.

Snape would have described himself as a hardened cynic, a realist, a man of the world, and he had no illusions that a single impulsive sexual escapade somehow created any more than a fleeting bond between the two participants. He knew that he had no reason to have any claim on her affections, or to expect fidelity on her part; he even knew now that he bloody well could have pursued her after she turned up at Hogwarts, and hadn't, for reasons that somehow did not seem as compelling to him now as they had been at the time.

Bloody hell nothing related to that woman seemed as simple as it had at the time.

He had been doing a great deal of hard thinking since his talk with Albus the morning before... and now, when he considered what he had said to her on the night of the Hallowe'en Ball, it seemed as though he hadn't so much been upbraiding the woman before him for leaving him behind that first night so much as he was berating every woman who had ever made him feel abandoned chastising his mother for dying and leaving him alone, taking Bellatrix to task for encouraging him to love her, when she never had any intention of loving him in return. He had vented his own frustrations on Professor Swain that night just as surely as she had, when she lit into him in the school library.

She was just such a paradox to him, always had been... on the day of the hunt, she had killed a wild boar by herself without showing fear but when the other hunters had reacted with horror to the sight of her other form, she had shrunk into herself with terror. An overt threat, she could handle, but when others found her monstrous, and alien, she was crushed. Then later... she had been so certain she could scare him away with her memories of battle, and the merciless cruelty she could find within herself in extremity. But he had been far from frightened or shocked when he felt that anger and violence in her, it had been like coming home. *No, you've not succeeded in making me fear you,* he thought. Well, perhaps that wasn't quite true he was deathly afraid she might destroy all his hopes with another killing smile, and one of those careless little laughs. Methought I was enamoured of an ass!

But today when he saw that bag in her hand, she could barely speak to him or meet his eyes, and fled out of his sight as fast as was seemly. He had always despised the arrangement between her and Lucius while she had never breathed a word to anyone about what was going on between the two of them physically, he knew what she must be doing in order to keep Lucius's attention, and thus get access to his confidences, and it infuriated him. Why in the bloody hell should *Lucius* be able to send for her and make her come to him, like paid entertainment, like some beck-and-call pet on a leash? He already had a wife at home, and Emily didn't even care for the man why should he be allowed to assume proprietorship of her like some sort of jealous husband? It was her life, her body, and her heart, and he could easily imagine what a burden it must be for her to pretend love for a man she hated. No, that needed to *stop*, damn it, no matter how she felt about him, no matter what she had promised to Dumbledore.

You didn't see the way she drove herself half-mad with worry when your duties took you away from us the last time. You didn't see the blessed relief on her face when she saw you back again, and well, Albus had said. A scene from a Pensieve the two of them lying in bed together, her hand curving around his cheek, her lips close to his ear... *No, you didn't do anything wrong at all. You were lovely. Just... witty and clever and damned fine company. And then later... you were incredible. Afterward, I remember thinking how much I wanted to take you back to my London place and keep you there for about a month, without all those blasted millions-of-buttons clothes on.* Her eyes burning into him as he walked away from her the night they took on the assassins together... why had she not called out to him, asked him to stay. If she'd only said something that night, *anything*, there was no force in this world or any other that could have induced him to leave her side ever again.

The fact was he simply couldn't deny what he felt for her any longer, and he needed to know how she felt about him. He had to know if Albus was right; needed to hear her answer. Yes, and happiness, or no, and resignation. Please, he thought, if she refuses, don't let her say "We'll always be friends," because then I think I'll go back to my office and have a nice glass of cyanide.

Do I dare? Do I dare? What if I'm not in the strata she wants as far as a lover?

There was still time to turn around, and go back up to the castle.

He put his hand in his pocket and touched his letter to her, as if to reassure himself that it was still there, and he had truly seen and heard all that went on at Midsummer. If there was the chance that she still felt so much for him, then he would wonder till it drove him mad about what could have been if he let her go now.

I betrayed the Dark Lord, he reminded himself, as he finished his jasmine tea and threw the cup into a nearby waste bin. *Compared to that, this is a small thing. I am more than capable of giving a woman a letter.*

He reminded himself of this many times as he followed the path his colleague had taken, into Hogsmeade Station.

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By the holy Mother, *why* did she keep ordering jasmine tea, when all it did was remind her of the night she met him. Yes, this was definitely her last cup of the stuff. It just had too many memories attached to it now.

Emily had taken her tea to one of the long, low benches in Hogsmeade station, just to have a quiet seat alone with a beautiful view. The trains only ran once or twice a day in Hogsmeade in the summertime, as everyone in this village usually travelled by Floo or broomstick or Apparition, and as such, the station was deserted today.

And of course, he could Apparate, so he would have no reason to come down here.

She'd promised Dumbledore that she wouldn't leave the Wizarding world without talking to Professor Snape... *really* talking to him but she had also promised him her aid against Voldemort and the Death Eaters. So... after September 23rd, when her obligation to Dumbledore was over, she would finally be free to have that promised *real* talk with him... and free to make her escape the second after he scornfully laughed a refusal to her, if that was what he was going to do. If he didn't, there would be time for them after that, but if he did, she wanted to be free to disappear off to where no one would lay eyes on her shame and humiliation for the next week.

Maybe the next month.

Or perhaps the following year.

So, how to initiate this *real* talk. She would go seek him out, as per Albus's advice, in his office perhaps. She would ask if he had a spare moment to speak to her. She would then sit him down, and say

What?

"Professor Snape, despite the fact that I had an affair with your worst enemy for most of this year, I am in fact desperately in love with you, you and none other, even though I've never gotten up the courage to actually tell you so until now. Despite everything that's happened, our one awkward date and quick anonymous shag in a callbox is now and has always been more precious to me than all of his wooing and gifts and protestations of love, and now...

"Oh please, I beg of you, just give me a second chance, please...

"*Please...* "

Oh yes, *that* would work. He was always *so* impressed by pathetic begging, absolutely; if she said something like that to him she'd probably have as much chance of persuading him to return her affections as Neville Longbottom did of persuading him to give an even thousand points to Gryffindor. Gads, if she came to him whining like that, he'd probably be totally justified if he was to drown her in a cauldron and call it euthanasia.

She finished the last of her tea, and threw the cup into the nearest waste bin. Well, then, her last excuse to remain here was finished. Emily picked up her bag and was getting ready to Apparate away

"Professor Swain?"

and she stopped so fast she might have been in danger of splinching herself, and spun around.

The black, etched silhouette of a man in the late afternoon sun. A gust of wind caught his black coat and set it swirling, the same wind that rustled her skirts as she set her bag down, and went to meet him.

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"Professor."

"Professor."

She gave him a wan smile of greeting, and he returned it with another polite nod.

"Should you really be out?" she asked. "What if someone sees you?"

"I don't care. I'll go outside if I bloody well please to." He nodded toward the bag on the ground "You've gotten another summons from Lucius? How did he find out you've recovered?"

"I ran into Mrs. Rosier in the village yesterday, and she could probably tell I wasn't exactly at death's door." She averted her eyes apologetically. "You know how it is the Order's work is never done."

"Indeed. Though you look as though these trips are becoming... rather more of a strain than before," he observed.

"Well, they're not exactly what you could call a good time." *Please stop looking at me. I could endure this so much more easily if you'd only stop looking at me.*

"Professor?" her companion asked. "Are you all right?"

"Fine, thank you." But a tear slipped down her cheek, and she wiped it away with a little swipe of her hand. Not in front of him. Never in front of him.

"Are you sure?" he asked, his eyes burning into the side of her face. "Because you look absolutely miserable. No offence."

"Well, it's a pretty miserable situation to be in," she shot back. "I'm sure you hated it, when it was you who had to go among them."

"I did," he replied flatly. "Every time."

"Fine, if you want to hear the unvarnished truth? *I hate this*," she whispered, turning away from him. "I hate that *thing* he's something that should not be, but yet he is, and he knows more about me and has more power over me all the time, and just being near him makes me feel corrupted and unclean. I pity Draco and Beatrice so much that I want to kidnap them and take them off somewhere where they can be free of their awful families."

"Perhaps we should," he replied grimly.

"And I can't even stand to look at Lucius now. All of them keep trying to find ways to get their hooks into me, and maybe one of these days they will. You talked me out of it last time, but what if... *what if*... "

Then her chest felt so tight she couldn't draw breath, and her face felt like it was on fire. Snape had taken her elbow, and was helping her sit down onto the platform bench. "*Breathe*, Professor you're hyperventilating."

"I have to go, I'm going to be late. He doesn't like it when I'm late."

"I don't give a toss what *he* wants. Now sit down, and get your breath."

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Quarter of an hour later, Emily was still sitting on the train station bench beside her colleague, and half-past five had come and gone.

"You know... you were right," she said finally. "I am *not* cut out for this kind of intelligence work, and I never will be. It's like being trapped in a maze that just keeps getting smaller and more complicated every second, and I've lost all hope that I'll ever solve it, I'm just trying not to be crushed. It's like I've been walking along a tightrope for so long that just letting myself fall is looking pretty damned good... I know I'm going to anyway, eventually, so the last act of will I'll ever make seems to be to decide when exactly it will happen."

"The night I had to meet Lucius at the Fusilier, I felt the same way myself," he said quietly.

"But that's still not all of it," she said despondently. "I could have *anything*, including revenge on everyone who's ever hurt me. I could have everything done for me, and all I have to do is take an oath to do whatever the Dark Lord tells me to do. If I just do that, then all of this uncertainty will be over. There are times when that seems so simple, and so *right*."

She turned toward him, expecting nothing but condemnation, unable to think of a word to say in her own defence. "Again... you probably think I'm pretty horrible, don't you and you're probably right." Her head inclined miserably into her hands with a rasp of bitter laughter.

"No, I don't think you're horrible," he said. "You're still trying to say *No*. When I was nineteen and they offered the same to me, I couldn't say *Yes* fast enough. I thought myself lucky to have been asked at all."

It was impossible that she had let her head fall onto his shoulder, with a dark little laugh that turned into a sob. She waited to be repudiated, but to her astonishment... he didn't seem to mind. And then he was bending over her with his arm around her shoulders, murmuring words of understanding and comfort. *Yes, I know. Of course you're tired you don't always have to protect everyone all by yourself. There, you're all right. You'll be all right.*

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So the warrior broke at last. And instead of feeling jubilant, instead of the usual smug, despairing thrill of *I was right*, all he felt was the purest, keenest empathy imaginable.

She was walking the same tightrope on which he had found himself sixteen years earlier, and no one had comforted him then, or even cared to notice him straying from the path of normal, respectable, and decent at the time. By the time he had gone to Dumbledore, it was too late he had pledged his fealty, taken the oath, and *meant it*. The Mark was already a part of him, branded onto his flesh a tragic flaw written on his very skin.

It was too late for him, and might soon be too late for her, but it cost him nothing to put his arm around her, and murmur what he thought were pathetic, hollow noises of *there, there* at her.

But somehow, that was exactly what she seemed to need.

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Then Emily's self-consciousness returned, and she pulled away from him. "By the Mother, this is embarrassing. You probably hate it when women cry."

He put a clean white handkerchief in her hand. "I hate it when people cry to demand my pity, like some schoolgirl who can't give the right answer in class. I can understand someone crying because she has to live with a situation she finds unendurable."

"Thanks. I don't know why I keep having these stupid crying jags, it seems like I'm just weeping and wailing at every damn thing lately."

There came a rattle of metal off to one side, and Emily glanced up to see a couple of men in coveralls collecting the plastic bags from the garbage cans far down on the platform, substituting fresh liners. She glanced up in dismay, not wishing to be seen by strangers while in such a vulnerable mood and peripherally, she saw her colleague's gaze following hers. A second later, she saw Snape's lips move soundlessly, and the maintenance wizards passed by without so much as glancing at them. "Thank you," she whispered.

"For when you don't want anyone looking at you," he murmured. "Terribly restful, that."

This, from him. She laughed softly in the middle of wiping her eyes with his handkerchief. "Your handkerchiefs aren't black."

"Don't think I haven't asked for black ones. I don't think they make them."

"I'm sure you could Transfigure them up black if you liked."

"Rather a lot of trouble to go through, just for a humble snotrag, don't you think?" he asked, shrugging. As always, his sarcasm was the bleeding edge of perfect she laughed so hard that she had to dab away more tears with that snotrag a moment later.

"Well, all right. Feeling lots better now, so... I guess I'd best be on my way, then. Thanks, you've been most kind. Perhaps if we get any more of us double-agent types working for Dumbledore, we'll have to form a support group or something," she said with a bitter laugh.

"Perhaps we might," he said.

Emily nodded her farewell to him, more warmly than she ever had. She got up from the bench and was picking up her bag when a question hit her like a welcome lash

"*Do you really want to leave?*

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She stopped, set down her bag; then very slowly and deliberately turned back to him.

"No, I don't."

They regarded each other for a long, blistering moment.

"Do you want me to stay?" she asked.

"*Yes*," he replied, in a hoarse whisper, his eyes burning in his pale face. "Just stay. Don't go to London tonight."

"Because you're asking me to."

"Yes, because I don't want you to go," he said, with quiet ferocity, taking a step toward her. "And you don't want to go, and you shouldn't have to."

"But I'm committed to this I promised Dumbledore."

"So what. I promised my dentist that I'd floss more often, but that doesn't mean that I have to do it all day, every day, now, does it?"

Again with the flawless sarcasm and again she laughed so hard that tears came to her eyes.

"Emily... I need to know something," he said hoarsely. "It *was* personal, wasn't it. The night the pub exploded."

"Oh, by the Mother of course it was." She averted her eyes, cheeks flaming. "It could never have been anything else. I wasn't going to let them kill you I can't stand the idea of the world not having you in it. I'd rather hear you barking about those stupid Dungbombed cauldrons than hear anyone else swear he adored me." She turned back to him with a little, bitter laugh. "There, I've said it. Go ahead and ridicule my absurd sentimentality and ridiculous notions of bravery all you want."

"Why would I *ridicule* that?" He sounded thunderstruck at the idea. "Miserable as it may seem to some, I'm not going to readily part with my life when someone offers me the alternative of keeping it bloody hell, you have my express permission to drag me out of the way of exploding storefronts as often as is necessary."

"Well thanks. I'm so glad that's cleared with you then."

"And as for absurd sentimentality, somehow I can't see you indulging in that overmuch." He moved close to her side, laid his hand on her shoulder and she trembled under just that touch. Dear Mother, he had to be able to feel it.

"Damn it, Severus... you make infinitely clear all the ways in which I'm not to trifle with you, but you never leave me any way to approach you. And I'm only going to humble myself so far and no further. But if I thought you wanted my attention, you'd have all of it."

Then to her utter, jaw-dropping, pulse-stilling surprise, he said: "I don't recall ever telling you that I didn't want your attention."

"*What?*" She laughed aloud at the sheer *nerve* of the man when had he ever told her he didn't want her attention? He did that constantly, all day, every day. At the Malfeasant weekend, he had said it... or had he? Wait... he had said... but then, she had thought he was right to be indignant, after what he told her that night. But then there was the time at the Yule Ball... but actually she did the leaving that night. No, there was that time in her classroom, the day after Midsummer... but it seemed like she had done the leaving that day too. And then there was... there was... she searched her memory, looking for the defining moment in which Severus Snape had told her to get bent, get stuffed, not to even imagine that he wanted her any more. She knew he had, at some point, she was convinced that he had.

But

But. He hadn't. He had told her he was furious about something on two or three occasions, and very eloquently detailed his reasons as to why but he had never once told her that he didn't want anything further to do with her. And given that she had quite memorably blown up at him on more than one occasion, and at least twice with no real reason for doing so at all, this now seemed quite admirable of him.

Dear Lady of the Worlds, she needed to *pay attention*.

Peripherally, she could see him curiously watching all of this intense thought, and cathartic realisation, going on on her face. "At least you already recognise that ignoring the obvious is your biggest fault," he said. "That's a start."

"Well... " She put her hand up to her shoulder, clasped it over his. "It's not very polite to make a date with someone and then not follow up on it the next day," she said. She slanted an accusing eyebrow up at him. "You stood me up, Professor Snape."

He turned away from her, perhaps hung his head just a fraction. "I know," he whispered. "That was... unfortunate."

"What a rakish, *caddish* thing to do if you changed your mind the next morning, you could have just said so "

"I hadn't changed my mind the next morning I couldn't *remember what happened* the next morning. That was why I asked you what happened, and you wouldn't tell me. So... " He turned away from her, his jaw tensing. "Oh, bloody hell. Here, just read it."

He took a rather crumpled-looking parchment envelope out of his pocket and handed it to her. Emily opened his letter, composed on the evening the Fusilier was destroyed, and finally read it.

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"Probably just supper in my quarters, and doing a bit of reading is all."

"That sounds lovely," she said, "if you would like company."

"I would like company," he replied. "Shall we say, seven, then?"

"I shall I show up at seven," she said. "Which, coming from you, really means 6:53."

"6:53 it is," he said, with the ironic little grin she adored.

The only thing to do in response to that was to launch herself into his arms, sink a hand into all that black hair, and kiss him and he kissed her back with all the tantalising arrogance only he was capable of. He tasted like jasmine tea.

The Hogsmeade train platform was entirely deserted, save for two tall, thin figures in black, who held each other very close for a long, long time, all else in the world forgotten.

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Well then. What to wear for a quiet supper with Severus Snape.

He had politely excused himself in the Great Hall, saying he had preparations to make, and pressing her hand before retreating. Emily had the distinct feeling that he would have kissed her good-bye had it been a more private area. Then she went back to her rooms and judiciously composed a letter to Lucius:

Darling,

Yes, I know you don't like to be kept waiting. Really, I do! Unfortunately, though, something's come up that means we'll not be able to see each other for some time. There are, er, physical reasons to be taken into consideration, if you know what I mean.

I know I'm being coy, but it's always embarrassing to discuss oestrus with a man, and the emotional ups and downs of it can make me a bit hard to take. I don't imagine you want to hear a dreary litany of gynaecological woes and moodiness, so why don't we just spare you all of that.

I know you're going to be disappointed, but you did make me promise to stay away from you during oestrus no matter what, and really, this would not be a good time to present Draco with a little brother or sister. Plus, you know how hard it's been for me to keep my hands off you in the best of times !

Thanks for understanding, dear. I hope everything's not too excruciating for you at present.

There, all of that was entirely true and correct. Every concrete statement she had made in the letter was true, and given who he was married to, he was no doubt used to women being coy about bodily functions. She hadn't come out and said she was in oestrus, and she did find it embarrassing to discuss that state with most men.

And there *were* indeed physical reasons to be taken into consideration as to why she couldn't see Malfoy at this time the foremost among them of course being that she didn't think she could live one day more without having another madly impassioned shag with Severus.

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The only reason Snape hadn't taken Professor Swain no, *Emily* directly back to his quarters was because his apartments were a bloody mess.

Snape could function all right in a certain amount of clutter it was *his* mess, after all, and he knew where everything was. He was a bachelor who had lived alone since his late teens the idea of keeping his quarters presentable enough to be viewed by other people was now almost entirely alien to him. Thank Merlin that Hogwarts had such a large staff of house-elves about after he Flooed down to the kitchen asking a gang of them to come up and assist with tidying his rooms, the place was swept and dusted and furniture-polished, with fresh linens on the bed and tidily arranged books, in less than an hour. He told the one of them who seemed to be in charge, a slightly dotty fellow named Dobby, that he would be hosting dinner for two in his rooms that evening, and would be sending down a menu shortly.

Then, he sat down at his desk, picked up a quill, and tried to devise such a menu. What did one feed a Fae dinner guest?

He knew that his guest was native to a country where caffeine and refined flour and sugar didn't exist, so those were all right off the menu from the start. Additionally, he was well versed on what was addictive, toxic, or otherwise harmful to her. He even knew quite intimately what sort of euphoric hallucinogens her people partook of recreationally.

But what did she *like to eat*?

Snape himself was partial to the English standard of roast beef with peas, potatoes, and Yorkshire pudding. But it occurred to him that roast beef was rich in iron, and thus might be rather indigestible for one of the Fae, so that was right out. He had also heard Druella Black complaining to her daughter that the vegetables were like bullets at the Malfeasant Hallowe'en supper, and Narcissa had replied that Lucius had insisted on cooking them in the Arcadian manner that night, in a tone that indicated what she thought of any culture that didn't appreciate fork-tender vegetables. It hadn't occurred to Snape to mind the vegetables, but then, he had more teeth than Druella Black.

He jotted down:

Some sort of smallish roast bird?

Steamed vegetables of some variety?

Coffee and dessert?

Oh no, bloody hell, she was a Faerie, one didn't serve them after-dinner coffee, what was he *thinking*?

Finally he took out a fresh sheet of paper and scrawled down:

Dobby:

Please send supper for two down to my apartments at 6:50. Kindly include nothing a Faerie would find toxic or noxious in any way, with lightly steamed vegetables. Feel free to indulge any gourmet notions you may have, within reason.

~ S. Snape

and Flooed that letter down to the kitchen. There, they were house-elves, they were good at this sort of thing, and they had managed not to poison her all year, so heaven knew they should be able to figure that out.

Now, to the slightly more onerous task of making himself look presentable to a date.

Oh, by the Merlin's hoary testicles... he had a *date*.

He had what might even be described as a particularly *hot* date.

Yes, he thought as he made his way into the shower, the little minx definitely had a talent for disturbing his universe.

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After Emily climbed up to the Owlery and dispatched her note to Lucius, she headed back to her own apartments to dress and find some way to occupy herself until 6:51 or so. Now she was twirling around holding frocks up to check their seductive potential like a randy teenage girl.

Fuck it. Who was she trying to kid her primary criteria for an ensemble for tonight was that it be something easily removable. If he didn't reiterate his entreaty to sleep with him, she was just going to ask him to sleep with her, and she wanted something that hindered the access of his hands to her skin as little as possible while not looking tastelessly provocative or desperate. Something demure yet easy access. Finally she decided on a soft camisole and long skirt of finely pleated spidersilk, no stockings, flat kidskin slippers that were easily kicked off, no jewellery, just a touch of violet oil behind her ears.

Oh, should she bring something? He was hosting dinner in his quarters... perhaps she should bring a bit of dessert? Or an *aperitif*? Or wine?

She went to her closet she had exactly one bottle of the Chateau Latour 1986 burgundy she had bought as Christmas gifts for the staff left. Seeing as how she had smelled it on Snape's breath shortly after Christmas, she knew he liked it, or had at least drunk it.

Half an hour to go.

Knickers, or no knickers?

Yes, she should probably wear them, just to keep up the pretence of demureness, and to at least *pretend* not to be acquainted with his savage knickers-ripping sort of tendencies. But again, fuck it, who was she trying to kid she would have sacrificed every pair of knickers she had and defended Rivendale all by her lonesome if only it would get her another three minutes of impassioned lovemaking up against a callbox wall with Professor Snape.

No *Severus.*

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Severus felt somewhat more settled after a shave, toothbrushing, and hot shower there being very few worries known to man that could not be at least partially assuaged by immersing oneself in a great deal of hot water. Now for the onerous task of getting a comb through his hair. Snape men didn't go bald or grey, but detangling this mop was a laborious task indeed, combs had been known to snap in half while being forced through his hair only his mother's hands had ever been deft enough to comb it out without yanking.

When he finally had his hair coaxed into some modicum of smooth and neat, he leaned forward into the mirror, and something else caught his eye. Oh bloody hell, when had he let his *teeth* get so coffee stained? He rummaged around in his medicine cabinet for the bottle of Tooth-Whitening Potion that he had stopped using years ago, largely because the stuff burned like a bloody branding iron, and he hadn't cared about impressing anyone with his appearance for years. He poured a capful and swished it around *Owwww* for one minute, then spit. There, that was better. He didn't want blindingly white Gilderoy Lockhart teeth, but one didn't want to look as though one had been making a meal of charcoal and clay, either.

There was a rattling sound behind him, as two golden place settings, cutlery, and some small covered platters appeared on the table under the window. He crossed to the table and lifted some of the domed lids a couple of nicely done breasts of duck in what smelled deliciously like orange cognac sauce, mixed steamed vegetables, herbed new potatoes, a chilled plate of sliced pears arranged around a wedge of English Stilton. China teacups, a chilled bowl of lemon slices, and a steaming pot of orange allspice tea. The sight and smell of food suddenly made him notice very definitely that he was starving, having subsisted on nothing but black coffee all day.

He glanced at the clock. 6:51.

His apartments didn't exactly look like the latest home decor spread from an interior decorator's magazine, but they were clean and tolerably organised. The table was spread with a repast that he believed would be reasonably palatable, and not in any way toxic, to his guest. This would do well enough.

Oh bloody hell, who was he kidding. Dinner was irrelevant, just a convention to prove to themselves that they weren't savage animals bent on copulation. He briefly wished that it was acceptable custom among civilised people to wordlessly take one's date straight to bed upon arrival, have lots of ragingly good sex, and then have dinner afterward.

6:52.

I flatly refuse to go to pieces over a pretty woman like some callow first-year, he had sworn to himself in a long-ago journal entry.

So much for that resolution.

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Emily stood for perhaps half a minute in front of his door, trying to get up the gumption to knock. All of a sudden it felt unbelievably awkward and foolish to be standing in front of a man's door with a bottle in her hand. Was there any graceful way to show up *carrying a bottle*, for pity's sake? What if he served whitefish or prawns or something and red wine was totally inappropriate?

Dinner. What in the flaming Christian hell was she *thinking* in asking for dinner first? She didn't think she could eat in front of him. The Mother knew she already felt so self-conscious that she was hardly able to swallow right now, at this moment how in the hell was she going to make polite conversation over a meal ?!

Oh shite, her watch said she had twenty more seconds till 6:54, and it would make a good impression, especially for an Arcadian, and one who wanted to sleep with the incredibly punctual Severus Snape at that, to be *on time.*

Just knock, she told herself. He said he would like company. He wants me here. Just *knock.*

She was raising her hand to do just that when the doorknob turned and the door opened.

"Oh, hello," she said, with a bright, nervous smile. "I was just about to knock."

"Good evening," he replied courteously. "Er, won't you come in?"

"Thank you," she said.

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As before, Emily felt incredibly self-conscious before him, but he seemed as cool and suave as black silk.

He looked good, very good, actually. His hair still smelled damp and bore the marks of a comb, and his face still had the slight flush of recent shaving. Wearing plain black trousers, a well-pressed white dress shirt, and a simple but rich black waistcoat. He had greeted her very cordially, but seemed to be addressing it more in the direction of the floor. By the time she came within two feet of him she could detect the faint, pleasant odour of castile and witch hazel soap and old-fashioned Bay Rhum shaving lotion, which didn't quite hide an acid tang of self-consciousness accompanying the pleasant scent of freshly washed man, overlaid with a cloud of agitation, all warring with an intoxicating amount of testosterone-laden lust.

But then she already knew that this was a complicated man. Hello to you too, darling.

To flaming Christian hell with self-consciousness she was ecstatic to see him and wanted him to know it. "Hello," she said, then set the wine bottle on the table closest to the door, put her arms around his neck for a brief, but tenderly affectionate, kiss. "It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you too," he muttered, again more in the direction of the floor, but seemed to be quite enjoying the kissing.

"Dinner smells wonderful," she said. It occurred to her that such a good host deserved to be kissed again, and did just that. Again, this met with no objection, and as always, the slightest touch of this bloke's lips on hers was like to make her light-headed.

"I, er, told the house-elves to indulge any gourmet notions they might have they always seem rather bored when it's only a handful of us staying at the castle... seem to like having something to do," he murmured, with just the smallest trace of an uncharacteristic stammer, but then perhaps Severus Snape wasn't altogether used to dates that began with long, tremblingly randy spates of kissing.

"Of course. Good of you to think of them," she said, brushing her lips over his cheek, delicately caressing the corner of his mouth with hers. Gods, the hard set of his mouth wouldn't ever let you know how soft his lips were.

"Someone mentioned to me that you weren't fond of boiled vegetables, so I recommended steaming instead... " His hand caressed the small of her back, as if enjoying the feel of her waist under silk.

"Yes, my one pet peeve about English cuisine is the custom of cooking vegetables until they're khaki... " How really bloody considerate of him. She had absolutely no idea that he had noticed the first thing about what she liked for dinner. This definitely called for more kissing.

Now conversation, dinner, anything beyond that embrace was forgotten; she was kissing him the way she had wanted to for most of a year, just holding him tight and sinking her lips into his, his tongue caressing hers in that way that made her pulse race, and made her feel as though all conventions of sexual restraint were idiotic and a man like this must be had, and immediately, and if a callbox ledge was the one place available for such, then so be it but then he turned his lips away from hers with what seemed like a tremendous exertion of will.

"The elves went through the trouble of cooking supper... we really should it eat it, I suppose," he whispered, breathing hard.

"Right," she said breathlessly, nodding.

He put one last soft kiss on her lips before picking up the wine bottle she had set down "Ah, Chateau Latour 1986. Happy Christmas."

"I'm sorry, did you not like it?"

He went into a cupboard, came out with a corkscrew and a couple of glasses. "It was gone by about nine p.m. that Boxing Day, so I would call it reasonably palatable." When paired with a faint grin, it was amazing how funny he could make the sinister eyebrow look later, in her more maudlin moments, she would sometimes think she could have lived and died in the sight of that grin.

Then he very politely pulled out a chair for her, and took the seat on her left.

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Severus was not at all used to being thoroughly kissed less than a minute after his dinner companion arrived, but had rather decided he didn't much mind it. For a minute there, he was almost convinced that they would after all end up going straight to bed and having dinner afterward, and had rather been warming to the idea. Professor Swain seemed as though she wouldn't have minded either in the slightest, with typical Arcadian total spontaneity, but then his self-consciousness returned, and he escorted her to the table. One should at least pretend to be acquainted with decent manners when one had a dinner guest.

He was much more used to dinner parties with women like Narcissa Malfoy and Felina Rosier, who ate tiny portions and didn't seem to allow themselves to enjoy even the rarest, choicest delicacies; he honestly thought that Narcissa Malfoy would rather redecorate than eat. But Professor Swain Emily carved into the simple but hearty repast with a delightful sort of sensualist's gusto. It was really charming to see a woman very much enjoy a meal.

"Oh, I wanted to ask you something," she said. "Your piece on human bezoars in last year's autumn issue of *Alchymia et Potio Diurnalis* talked all about their uses in anti-caustic antidotes are you planning to write anything on their preparation for countering neurotoxic poisons? As I recall, you touched on that briefly in your introduction... "

So she *had* read his bezoar paper, after all.

"Ah, yes, I'm now working on an outline for a piece on the uses of bezoars in the preparation of anti-venins... " And again, what an exquisite listener. That gaze could make anyone feel like the cleverest bloke alive, like nothing but pure concentrated wit and brilliance ever fell from his lips.

It was looking to be the most pleasant meal he had enjoyed in a very long time, and he was glad that she had wanted dinner first.

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By the time they had finished discussing the new articles he was outlining, and the one in progress that he was writing, they had gone through the duck and side dishes and all of the wine and tea. The topic of how potions were taught in Arcadia and the Apothecaries' Guild apprentice system was introduced while they were leisurely nibbling on plates of fruit and cheese. After that, he remembered an excellent bottle of fifteen-year-old Oban he had stashed away for a special occasion, and poured them both an after-dinner glass. Somehow, she struck him as the sort who wasn't afraid of hard liquor.

"So tell me why did you decide to examine Midsummer's night in a Pensieve?" she asked, inhaling the aroma from her glass. "This is excellent, by the way."

"Thank you. I was just horribly curious I could only remember flashes of that evening, but what I can remember was so surreal. It was such that I couldn't be certain if it really happened, or if I dreamed it. People dancing with purple fire, men with antlers, women with wings, stars swirling in the sky. It was all just a huge jumble."

"Do you remember getting on the Knight Bus?"

"No. First... I was with you and there was music playing and other people around. Then there was no music and we were alone, and... well."

"So now that you've, er, refreshed your memory... what were you talking to Malabar Puck about?" she asked, fixing him with a look. "It was the strangest thing I left you alone for a bit while I said some good-byes, and when I came back, you and my friend Ciaran Puck's grandfather were just chatting away like you'd known each other forever. When I said hello, the two of you clammed right up."

He fixed her with a look of his own. "You have of course already figured out that we were talking about you, oh incredibly coy one. He gave me some very good advice, and that's all I'll say about it."

She laughed. "Fair enough. And what was going on with that nixie who looked like she was getting ready to give you her phone number?"

"Nixie ah. Red hair and black wings?"

"That'd be the one."

"She really did have wings," he said, with a wondering shake of his head. "The first time round I thought I'd hallucinated that."

"Yes, she did. Her whole race has them." She glanced downward, with just the smallest, most delicate of scowls. "So is your poor coat still traumatised from being so molested by her?"

"I *don't* see what you're making such a fuss about," he said, in a tone of mild reproach. "I talked to her for about five minutes, and all I really said was some inarticulate *oohing* and *aahing* over the fact that she had the wings, because that's rather new to me."

"Cuter than buttons, that one," Emily said, slanting a look at him. "And she *really* liked you."

"Well, yes, she was stunning," he agreed readily. "But don't be trying to convince me she was doing anything other than perhaps briefly amusing herself, because I don't believe it for a second."

"She *did*," Emily insisted. "Tell me, did she use the old chestnut line of "Ever make it with a girl who can fly?" I'm warning you, they say that to *everybody*. It's their version of, "Hey, baby, what's your sign?" I'm not joking."

"She said nothing of the sort, and even if she had given me her telephone number, I'd have been at sea as to what to do with it you bloody well *know* how I am with Muggle telephones," he replied, with an irritable little shrug which made her laugh so hard that he actually smirked after a moment, and seemed much appeased. "So can they really fly, with those wings? Gain altitude, travel at a good clip of speed, like birds?"

"More like moths, actually, they don't soar precisely, they sort of flitter and glide."

"Really." He leaned back in his chair, picturing that. "I'd rather like to see that sometime."

Emily looked a bit put out by all this interest in nixies. "Once you've spent a bit of time around them, though, the flying gets sort of mundane. Flying for a nixie isn't all that much different than running for anyone else it's not like it takes them a whole lot of effort or talent to learn it," she said, with a dismissive shake of her head. "You get your nixie fancier sort of bloke now and then, who idealises them for some reason, but I think I'd be more impressed by someone who was tremendously talented at something they'd actually had to work at." She bent over her glass with a shrug.

"Of course," he replied. "Like a twice-decorated combat veteran, perhaps?"

"Well, I did manage to take out a wild boar by all by myself with nothing but a sword and a couple of knives," Emily shot back. "How much did that thing end up weighing?"

"Four hundred seventy-five pounds was what I was told," he said, with a very bland sip of whiskey.

"Let's see my Lady Acherontia do *that*, why don't we. But no, that's not at all impressive, because I can't *fly*," she said moodily.

Severus was regarding her with more than a bit of amusement. "Er, are you quite finished?" he asked. "I wouldn't dream of interrupting."

She considered that for a moment. "Yes, I suppose."

"Those showy nixie girls perhaps get all the attention at home, or some such?" he asked delicately.

"Sometimes," Emily admitted grudgingly. "Well, that and six of them nearly burned my father's library once, so I can't say I'm entirely rational regarding them at times. It's the Seventh Kingdom that produces most of your lunatic fringe dwellers who think books and writing are blasphemous and perpetrate terrorist actions against libraries and scholars and portals and Second-Worlders. They can also be very haughty and turn up their noses at "*the Earthbound*" a lot, if you know what I mean."

"I understand. Tell me, how did you know her name?"

"Oh, I don't, not really, but I can make a guess at her surname and clan affiliations from her wing markings. To some extent, the coloration of a nixie's wings are like caste marks. The girl in the Mushroom Circle had black wings with silver and white Death's Head patterns, and generally only very high-ranking nixie nobility and royalty come from that bloodline. She was probably some kind of noble. Queen Mab is one of the Acherontias, put it that way."

"Ah, I see," he said, nodding. "Though you have to admit that she behaved herself a great deal better than that... that *Alain person*." He growled the last two words in the tone he usually reserved for the words *Harry Potter*.

"Oh, you didn't like him?" Emily asked, the picture of innocence.

"He's appalling, that bloke. Rather inconsiderate of him to bait a fellow who's taken a euphoric hallucinogen by mistake," he said, scowling direly.

Emily grinned. "Yes, he's horribly sarcastic, always has been, but he's also fantastically clever and amusing and a wonderful friend, so everyone loves him anyway."

"Oh, fantastically clever and everyone loves him," Severus said, bending over his glass with a touch of a sneer. "Bully for him."

Emily hid a smirk in her own glass. "And I forget, did I introduce you to Mackenzie Collier?"

"Who?"

"Alain's wife," she said, with a demure sip of whiskey. "Very cute woman, long curly hair and glasses. She's also an artist, only she's more into multimedia, whereas he's an oil on canvas sort of fellow."

"Oh... I think I remember him dancing with her a bit. He's married?"

"Very happily. Has been for the last five years."

"Ah," he said, with another sip of whiskey. Somehow his annoyance with Alain Collier seemed much mollified.

"If you couldn't remember so much of what happened that evening, I can only imagine how you must have felt when you woke up the next morning," Emily said, leaning her chin on her hand with a sympathetic grin. "You must have thought I'd played a terrible prank on you. I'm sorry it upset you so much."

"Well... " He glanced down at his glass, looking abashed for perhaps an instant. "It was very disconcerting. I woke up in my bed, still with my clothes on, with a terrific headache. And then I found a bite mark on my chest while I was shaving. And then I asked you about it and you wouldn't tell me what happened, but seemed very offended with me about something."

"I was... I just wish you could have remembered it. I got up that morning feeling wonderful I really thought you'd be happy to see me the next day."

Then, to her complete surprise, he said, "Emily... why didn't you tell me what happened when I came to see you in your classroom?"

"You were angry at me," she protested mildly. "I didn't think you'd want to hear it."

"Then for pity's sake, why didn't you keep at me, then?"

"Because... don't get upset, but you're kind of impossible to talk to when you're in that mood," she said quietly.

"Oh bloody hell." Severus flung back in his chair in annoyance. "Why didn't you just... *throw something* at me then?"

"I did I threw my quill at you," she said, pantomiming the gesture. "Didn't faze you in the slightest."

"Well, a quill doesn't weigh anything they're not going to work," he pointed out. "If you want to get someone's attention and make him listen, you need to throw something heavier next time. Throw the ink bottle, perhaps."

"All right, *next time* I will." Severus in this relaxed, blackly humorous mood was simply too delightful. She leaned forward, laid her hand on his knee under the table, and gave it a little squeeze which made the low scent of male arousal around him spike upward again.

"Ah I see you're already well versed in the notion of distractionary tactics," he murmured, laying his hand over hers under the table but then she was possessed with a fit of self-consciousness, and drew it back.

"Sorry about that... I can't claim to be entirely familiar with the usual sorts of courtship etiquette in this world, or of what you're used to, but I've heard something about waiting until the third date to actually do anything, er, physical with someone," she said. "I'm... used to what you might think of as a more permissive society, you see. So if I don't know all the usual conventions you like to observe when you're involved with someone, do feel free to tell me, that would be all right." With that, she folded her hands demurely on the table.

"This is our third date," he replied. "Our first was back in September, and the second was at Midsummer."

"Oh." She hadn't thought of that at all, but now that he mentioned it, it made perfect sense. "Right. Of course it is."

"And as far as the sorts of courtship etiquette I'm used to, it tended to be rather a mixed bag." He tossed back the last bit of whiskey with a wry chuckle. "The ideal, of course, was pure Victorian, or so most of them would have you believe. The reality was much more licentious, and made complete hypocrites of everyone, but you've probably already noticed that."

"Well, I can only imagine how it must have felt to you, after coming from all that, to just be spontaneously kissed in a public callbox by someone you'd only known a few hours," she murmured ruefully. "In the past, I've always known the bloke I'm interested in for some time, sometimes years, before anything happens I'm sorry to have been so wildly forward "

"Please, *don't* apologise," he said, with a soft chuckle. "It's not like either of us did anything we didn't want to do."

"I swear that's not my usual way of doing things. I'm really not known for just groping blokes in callboxes, that was the first time for *that* sort of thing. It just... sort of *happened*."

He slanted an oblique look down at her demurely folded hands, smirking. "To be completely blunt your forwardness wasn't what bothered me about that night. What I found most upsetting was the fact that it didn't look as though any more of the same would ever be forthcoming."

"What?" She couldn't help but laugh oh, this man was just *impossible*. "Are you joking? After I met you at school, I didn't dare even suggest such a thing. Started off by maligning my poor first attempts at scholarly articles on sport fencing in schools, no less "

"Yes, Albus put copies of some of your writings in the teacher's lounge the week before you arrived, but I didn't really make the connection until you arrived that morning, I suppose "

"It's all right if you hated them. They were both kind of culturally naïve, I admit it."

"They were... well-intentioned," he said mildly, "well-researched "

"Come off it, you didn't like them. And I think you would rather have had a mountain troll turn up that morning to teach Defence Against the Dark Arts, truly."

"Emily." He shook his head irritably, then pushed his chair back, and stood up, then extended a hand to her and helped her out of her chair as well. "From the way this year has gone, we could trade recriminations all night." His arms encircled her waist and drew her gently against him; warmth of his skin through his clothes, strong, tantalising whiff of male lust "Forget it. It's over."

"All right," she murmured, her arms slipping around his neck. "Shall we make a pact then? No recriminations, we'll just focus on what's happening now. At least... for awhile."

"Agreed," he said.

He was silent for some time, just looking at her, his red-black eyes glinting. His fingers traced the outline of her cheek, and then the pad of his thumb stroked lightly over her lower lip a featherlight touch that nonetheless made her heart accelerate and vaginal muscles contract. "Emily ?"

"Yes?"

"You're going to need to remember to breathe," he said softly.

"Right," she replied, exhaling hard.

A long, tremulous moment passed, in which they held each other silently, her head falling onto his shoulder. Emily's mind raced for something brilliantly eloquent to say, and came up with nothing. Words were dangerous; there were so many things she might say to break this truce and understanding, as she had done so often before. But her companion didn't seem content to let this moment pass in silence "A thousand Galleons for your thoughts," he said softly, his hand coming up to gently stroke her hair. Again, that lightest of touches was electric.

"I wanted to say... no matter what's happened this year, I can't pretend what's happened between us wasn't important, because it is," she said, her arms tightening around him. "I can't stand seeing you looking so bruised and angry if that goes on for another second I think I'll throw myself off the highest turret in this castle. I don't ever want to hurt you again, or make you feel abandoned again, because you don't deserve that and you never have. I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow and I don't care but I can't even try to ignore you anymore."

He took her chin in his hand and lifted her face to his again. The sinister brow was slightly quirked, the corner of his mouth turned up in what could only be described as a fondly ironic little grin, one that let her know she was being just a bit overdramatic, but he well understood her meaning, and as such, would humour her anyway. "All very

noble sentiments," he observed dryly. "But if that's why you came here tonight, I'm afraid my answer has to be *No*."

"No? *What*?!" she wailed very nearly whined in dismay.

He paused, seemingly just to luxuriate in her disappointment. "No. I don't want you here because you think you have to make amends, or because you want to make *me* happy. Leave the bloody self-sacrifice outside I'm sure you're sick of it by now, and so am I."

His forehead inclined to rest against hers; his hand curving gently around the back of her neck. Even in the lamplit dimness of his room, his eyes seemed bright and now she couldn't have turned away from that gaze if her life depended on it, all she felt for him in her wide-open eyes. And to her utter, utter delight, that ironic grin spread irresistibly over his entire face as he looked at her, and he smiled back.

"But don't think I'm throwing you out, either," he was quick to add. "However, the only reason I want you to stay here tonight is because you haven't been able to stop obsessing about the night we met any more than I have, and now you'd like to give that another go, because it was just a smashing good time."

Well. That seemed like a truly excellent reason to do anything.

She let her head sink onto his shoulder again, and finally said what she had wanted to say to him all year

"*Please do that again*."

Part Third: The Hart Subvertant, Chapter 33

Chapter 52 of 55

After Voldemort's return, Professor Swain has agreed to Sirius Black's suggestion that she use her influence with Lucius Malfoy to gather intelligence on the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters. As her horror of the Dark Lord grows, her old enemy Severus Snape proves to be the only one who understands the fear and doubt that plague a double agent…

Chapter 33:

They almost didn't make it into bed.

The civilised meal and conversation were finished, the rules of respectful courtship had been properly observed, and the lustful invitation had been extended and then it seemed that she either drew him into an impassioned kiss, or he kissed her, or both. Emily scarcely noticed the transition from the supper table to his bedroom; one moment they were standing up and clinging to each other, and the next he had unceremoniously scooped her up without ever ending that kiss and brought her to bed, and then they were lying down and wrapped around each other and that kiss was still going on with every bit of intensity either of them had. Nothing had changed since the first night she met him when he touched her, her stomach still quivered and her knees again turned to jelly, the lust igniting as elementally as a burning match dropped in gasoline.

In another second, he had her camisole blouse open and half off, baring her shoulder and most of a breast, then she had his waistcoat and shirt unbuttoned and was pushing them off his shoulders, her lips buried in his neck, his back tensing hungrily under her hands. Same Tesla-coil sense of electric *wanting* in him, same sense of craving her like water, and she was again in one of the least prohibitive moods she had ever felt and this time he had very cleverly worn something with a sensible number of *buttons*, so she could get him properly undressed. But he recoiled slightly as his clothes began to come off, his eyes going to the inside of his left forearm. He then made an offhanded backwards gesture *"Nox"* and silently spoke a word, and all the lamps went out, plunging his apartments into total darkness.

With the light went all inhibitions. It took perhaps another few seconds for them to hurriedly divest each other of any (superfluous, irritating) clothing there came the sound of one of his cufflinks rolling to *ping* off a piece of furniture, but neither of them ever noticed. Then he was lowering her to the mattress or she was pulling him down to cover her, or both. His skin felt as hot as a low-grade fever and faintly slick with sweat, and she could feel his breath coming in shallow gasps as he devoured her neck, every touch leaving heat and shivering pleasure etched on her skin.

The suspense was now unbearable, her nails were curling against his shoulders and her heart hammering painfully as he stretched his full lithe weight over her. His skin still smelled deliciously like wood resin and smoke, but as he finally held her, naked and frantic, in the darkness and in his own bed, the scent of his lust was an enticing haze of male desire. Her hand traced the curve of his thigh, then gently closed around another handsome erection, provoking a delicious shiver and groan from him. Then she was moving to fit herself as closely around him as she could, urging him on, doing everything she could to let him know that she wanted this, wanted him, this instant, now *nowpleasenow*

He needed no more encouragement than that. In another second he had either forced himself inside her, or she recklessly pulled him into position, or both. Again it seemed he took her with the primacy of an alpha male covering his mate, slipping into that deep, welcoming inner warmth so snugly and naturally, as though instinctively remembering exactly what he had done the first time to leave her clutching at his back and yowling at a callbox wall. She couldn't have been more glad of his body pressing her into the mattress, because otherwise she thought she might have vibrated right up to sprawl on the ceiling.

For some immeasurable amount of time she could only strain helplessly up to him, lips crushed to his, her skin awash in heat, every muscle lost in an agony of clutching him closer. Again, there was no attempt at establishing any kind of rhythm, no sense of performing for the pleasure of a demanding master, just a woman's most elemental reaction to the man she urgently desires, and who she knows wants her just as desperately. After what seemed like no time at all she felt borne up into that moment of suspense just as orgasm becomes inevitable, and then felt herself seizing on him, melting against the confines of bone and musculature. The climax went through her like some inverse Cruciatus Curse, unbearable obliterating pleasure instead of pain, her head thumping against the pillow, her face frozen in ecstatic profile in the crook of his arm.

He gasped triumphantly when he felt her start to come, his dark head sinking onto her shoulder. With his lover's ecstatic cries in his ears, whatever control he had left seemed to shatter completely. Nearly a year's smouldering discontent had gone by since he had last made love to her, and he was in a form that night to make her sorry she'd ever left, striving toward something indescribably luscious and long withheld *yes love please darling harder yes* and then his breath tore and caught in his throat as the orgasm racked through him, heat draining from his body into hers.

They clutched each other for a long, long time afterward, naked and entwined, and it was, again, absolutely glorious.

She couldn't have imagined anything sweeter than that moment her impossible adversary lying in her arms, and *loving* it, shivering like a raw nerve of bliss. He was so

spent and affected that he was literally shaking; she gathered him into a tight embrace, comforting him after this titanic wave of unaccustomed pleasure crashed over his unsuspecting nerves. His dark head lay heavily on her shoulder, his cheek tenderly pressed to hers and she remembered that he had been trembling like this just after the first time they had ever made love, as well.

Yes, everything, and nothing, had changed since that first night. Now he held her for a long time afterward, lying over and inside her as if soaking in her limp satisfaction, with that lover's embrace that is unbreakable from outside, but still manages to be gentle to the one it enfolds. Now she not only felt completely content to stay in his arms, but held him just as ardently. Tonight, after the first rush of mutual lust had been satisfied, she felt no panic, no sick feeling of worry as to how he would react once the Glamour came off, because tonight there had been no Glamour. It was her real face across the supper table and on his pillow that night, point-eared, wide-pupilled, arch-browed, fine-boned now sheened with exertion and from his response, that didn't seem to bother him one bit. Far from it as he lay in her arms, he caressed her face as though describing the most beautiful thing in this world, or any other.

And tonight, just before he made love to her, she had silently whispered not one word, but three, into his neck.

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That delectable satiety was short-lived Severus had been a long time without a lover, if he had ever truly had one. After they had quietly and contentedly lain nestled together for some time, Emily felt him engaging her attentions again, his lips on her ear, her cheek, the side of her neck; felt the beginning of another extremely fine erection against her thigh. She responded eagerly, pulling him back over her but he had other ideas, lifting her off the mattress and deftly poising her above him. She took a long, tantalising time to slide down onto his full length, enjoying his tense anticipation and the purely mammalian pleasure of his hard size filling her and then there was nothing but the taste of his breath, the feel of his chest under her breasts, the silken scrape of clitoris against male pelvic bone, and his hands on her breasts, back, and hips.

She took a fistful of thick black hair and pulled his throat taut, tenderly sinking her teeth into his neck in that way she knew he liked and was rewarded with a long, shivering groan. Now she was trying to hold herself back from the frenzy of that first time, savouring his responses; exploring how and where he liked to be kissed, experimenting with how this rhythm or that stroke made him breathe shallowly or gasp aloud. It went on until she couldn't draw it out any longer, couldn't tease him or herself one second more, and the second orgasm shuddered through her until she collapsed, panting, onto his chest. His hands convulsed on her hips, and she felt heat spasming up within her, accompanied by more of those devastated baritone groans.

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From then on, Emily lost track of how long or how often they had each other that night. There needed to be nothing else in the world at that moment but a dark room, a bed, and her onetime enemy who had again become her impossibly exciting new lover. He seemed possessed of a desperate, feverish energy that provoked an equally fierce answering response in her. Time slipped by as if in a thrilling hallucination now and then she would notice that they had turned to face a different wall, or that she had draped him on his back and was covering him now, whilst he had had her bent over the headboard and had been taking her from behind not long ago, or that now her lips were on his mouth or his ear or his neck or his damp forehead. This was the most loved and desired she had felt in a very long time, since (*admit it*) since her wedding night, and she never wanted it to end.

Her fingers were interlaced with his, unless they were threaded through his hair, or clutching at his back in supplication. She could smell her own scent all over his skin, his sweat all over hers, and the maddening pheromone tang of semen spilled on the sheets, on her thighs. All was urgent, dark, and almost silent but for their ragged breathing; neither of them needed much by way of sentimental words spoken. They had talked long enough, been lost in mazes of words and subtext now it was time for a more primal and immediate form of communication, a consummation for which they had both long and devoutly wished. Speech was only soft, broken syllables whispered in one's lover's ear; praise, encouragement, urging

Oh, Severus... oh please... yes, love...

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Some hours after 6:53 p.m. that night, or perhaps the next morning Professor Severus Marcus Antonius Snape was savouring the very new sensation of lying in his bed with his new lover sleeping in his arms, after having been tenderly and enthusiastically shagged into such complete exhaustion that he could hardly move.

Perhaps ten minutes earlier, Emily had collapsed at his side, tucked her head into the nook of his shoulder in the cosiest manner imaginable, and twined her arms around him. He had bent to kiss her, only to discover that she had fallen asleep there, her tousled head pillowed on his shoulder soft, rhythmic exhalations of breath, the warm heaviness of her relaxation against his side.

He lay back on the pillow, holding her, and sighed.

Bloody hell, what a great night this had been. The best date of his life, bar none. There had been ten months between their first and second dates, and about six weeks between their second and third, but truly, this had been worth waiting for.

Please do that again, she had entreated him, as though concealing this burden of desire was now too heavy of a task to be borne. Well, how could he have resisted an invitation like that. He replayed the moment in his mind, just savouring the sound of the words...

Please... do that... again.

Yes, love, he'd be happy to do that again, and again, and again. You poor, deprived creature, you only had to ask *properly.* Then the way she kissed him like a randy schoolgirl to the *nth* power, in a way that made his cock forget that he was thirty-five and had made love only once since 1981, that made him feel like a virgin of eighteen again. Her breath tasted like smooth old whiskey, which he actually liked even better than Chateau Latour burgundy.

Then she had all but torn his clothes off oh, that had been exquisite he had no idea where his most expensive pair of cufflinks had gotten to, probably on the floor somewhere, and he didn't even *care.* Her excitement had been impossibly contagious; she'd been absolutely panting to have him inside her... any man alive would have found his inner satyr faced with such provocation, and he was no different. Gods, he'd had to look at her all year, seen all that superb physicality sweating and out of breath, remembering every instant that *I am not and never will be the bloke who's sleeping with her.*And tonight she'd been begging him *now, please, now* to make love to her, and that had been enough to make him about as hard as he'd ever been in his life.

That first time had been the callbox all over again, the callbox to the exponential power, only now he'd had most of a year to lust for her and brood over that lust alone, and resent her for leaving him alone with this discontent. But tonight when he felt her writhing beneath him as she came, heard those estrogen-drenched cries again *yes, my darling, go on, enjoy yourself, yes* bloody hell, he was surprised he'd managed to contain himself long enough to have another round of mad rutting before he came like to make a fellow faint. Gods, that quim and those lips of hers ought to be a controlled substance.

And that was just the first time.

The second had been incredible as well. Of course the pureblooded romantic model demanded that a man of his breeding could only make love in the missionary position and sire lots of blond pureblooded children thereby, but damn it he *liked* having his woman on top, he just had a taste for it that wouldn't go away. Plus, he had just that evening made the discovery that the muscularity of a fencer's thighs allowed her to perform many other physical feats beyond an impossibly quick advance, retreat, and lunge.

The third time had also been delectable, when he'd coaxed her up onto her knees against the headboard and covered her from behind, which allowed him to devour her neck and shoulders while caressing her breasts... and she'd taken his hand and led his fingertips down into the damp folds between her thighs, showed him exactly the

way to coax her into yet another writhing orgasm there was simply not one breath of shame or self-consciousness about her, as though she'd just never been taught sex was anything other than a joy and a pleasure.

And the fourth time they'd wrestled each other about like one of their sparring sessions on the practice mat first she had pinned him on his back, then after enjoying that for awhile, he'd used one of the grappling moves she'd taught him that year, thrown her onto her back, and held her down, his fingers interlacing with hers, and let himself fulfill every idle fantasy he'd had that year about overpowering her and making her give in to him, and after about five minutes of that she'd been yowling with orgasm again... oh yes, they were going to have to do that again. Often. Frequently.

Could there have been anything more enjoyable than draping that impossibly supple boneless wonder of a body all over his bed and making her come in as many different ways as humanly possible, starting in a mad frenzy of rut and then getting slower, more sensual, and more tenderly explicit every time they took each other again. He'd wanted her like that all year, just hot and receptive and up for anything... and it hadn't been Bel someone else's sort of brazen, insolent, taboo-flaunting sexual confidence either; that happy-cat-being-stroked quality he had noticed about her on the night they met really seemed to be her natural state.

If he'd had one iota of tension left in his body, he'd have gotten hard again at the recollection, but now, for a moment pleasant exhaustion, contentment, peace. There needed to be no world outside the circle made by the two of them, nothing more important than the profundity of being alone with his one chosen other. Yes, she was still here, sleeping beside him, and this *was* his life, and it *had* happened, to him. And it was entirely possible that it would happen again tomorrow, if the two of them didn't come to hate each other in the interval in between but somehow, he couldn't see that happening. Merlin's teeth, she could actually take criticism of her academic articles reasonably well, how rare was that.

He felt the smallest twinge of disappointment that she was already asleep, because there were things he would have liked to tell her that night. He would have liked for her to know that she was his first lover in fourteen years. He also wanted to tell her how important it was to him that she had been the first woman to ever approach him of her own volition, simply because he intrigued her, without any ulterior motives in mind. That this was the first time, in all of his life, that he had ever had a lover sleeping beside him but he wasn't about to wake her up to tell her how delicious it was to have her there with him.

Instead, he extended a hand toward the bedside lamp, whispering *Lumos*, followed by an inaudible word, and let the light come up just a bit, so that he could see her more clearly. She was lying on her side in what seemed to him a state of enviable relaxation, a slight film of perspiration sheening her neck and pale hairline, hair a mess from thrashing on the pillows. Her expression seemed very peaceful, and the smallest, most satisfied smile was lingering on her face even as she slept.

Yes, he would have liked to talk to her that night, but she was tired, and there was tomorrow.

So he doused the lamp and stretched out beside her, encircling her waist with his arm. She stirred slightly, settling back against him with a soft sound of contentment, her slack fingers slipping down onto his wrist. It was only a small, unconscious gesture, but he nonetheless felt it all down the length of his spine.

He had no trouble sleeping that night.

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Severus awoke at a few minutes to six the next morning, as per his long-conditioned habit during the school year. He thought about getting up, showering, and Flooing a note down to the kitchens asking for a bit of breakfast to be sent up. But then he glanced toward the pillow next to his, and decided to allow himself the luxury of perhaps a quarter hour's further drowsing and contemplation of his companion, who was still sleeping next to him.

Emily was sprawled on her back next to him, one arm flung up onto the pillow. Her face was lightly flushed, a fine sheen of perspiration on her forehead, and her dandelion-floss hair was very well mussed from the previous night's exertions.

He paused, looking at her, just enjoying that small, poignant pleasure known to so many men since time immemorial; that instant of waking up with the woman he most cares for lying contentedly asleep beside him. In moments like that, a lover can see rosy-fingered Dawn herself in the tousle-haired person snuffling into the pillow beside him, and Severus was not immune to these sorts of imaginings. And when he moved closer to her, draped an arm around her hips and nestled his own mussed head on the pillow with her, she settled herself against him with another long sigh, without ever waking up.

Such was the narcotic effect of such morning embraces that Severus did something he had done very rarely in all of his thirty-five years after lightly kissing her forehead, he went back to sleep.

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Emily awoke at perhaps a few minutes past eight to the delightful sensation of her new lover lying beside her.

He was still asleep, one arm around her waist, so close that she could feel the heat from his skin. So dignified, even while sleeping, his limbs composed gracefully, and his face relaxed into the most serene expression she had ever seen from him. She recalled that Albus had said something about how he suffered from fairly severe insomnia, and smiled happily, glad that her presence didn't seem to have disturbed his rest.

Yes, it looked as though she had to add a few new words to her impression of Professor Snape... of Severus. Lusty, sensuous, passionate, and now, incredibly she wouldn't have believed it of him for a second unless she had been the person who fell asleep in his arms the night before *highly touchable.* Not only had he been an affectionate lover the night before, he had actually wanted to spend quite a bit of time holding her after lovemaking. Under the right circumstances, with the right person he genuinely seemed to like being caressed and held. Forget about all her impressions of him as a cold fish after the night they met the man was about as physically cold as Vesuvius. She gave a catlike stretch, allowing herself an instant's incredibly smug, knowing smile.

But no, there was simply no way one could describe someone like him as cuddly or snuggly, those were words reserved for teddy bears and kittens. She wouldn't call him huggable, more like *savagely tactile. Fiercely embraceable.* There, that was better. She was simply going to have to expand her vocabulary for describing male characteristics and behaviour. With him, it would be an absolute necessity.

She rolled over onto her left side, careful not to disturb him, and glanced curiously around the bedroom where she had awakened. During the previous night, she had been far too distracted to notice any details about his quarters, but now, she thought his bedroom looked a great deal like her own, up in Ravenclaw Tower the same sort of heavy, carved furnishings of dark wood, vast bookshelves along the walls, a great four-poster bed with velvet draperies, fireplaces in every room except his apartments were done in dark green velvet instead of blue, and were situated several storeys farther down. The only natural light in the room came from narrow transom windows set high up near the ceiling, at ground level. In winter it must have been gloomy, but now, in high summer, his rooms were pleasantly cool and dim. Severus's ideas of decor were much like hers as well masses of books covering every surface except he had well over a decade's head start on her at filling his bookshelves. Indeed, his shelves were overflowing to such an extent that he had started stacking tomes neatly against the walls. And where she had Arcadian armaments of every kind and description and state of repair in her rooms, he had jars of every description, holding a diverse assortment of substances. Some of them looked ordinary dead roaches, butterfly wings but some gave off their own light, or flittered incessantly inside their jars, or gave off ooky plashes and bubblings.

But now Severus had awakened as well his chest sealed against her back from behind her, his hand outlining the pliant curve of her waist and hip, and then a fervent kiss to the back of her neck sent shivers all though her. Emily rolled over in bed and pulled him into her arms it would be a long time before she got her fill of just holding him. Now that they were both fully rested, it was right back into the randy teenage kissing, morning breath be damned. After a moment, she let her hand trail down his stomach until she encountered a much more alert part of his body and heard a soft intake of breath.

"My word, love, you're insatiable," he murmured.

"Sorry, I'll stop... "

"Please don't."

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Severus woke up from his unaccustomed lie-in at perhaps half-past eight a.m., shaking his head groggily well that was odd, he must have gone back to sleep. Emily was awake, resting her head on her arm, close beside him with her back to him, seemingly just looking at his rooms. He glanced down at her left shoulder yes, it did seem to have healed nicely, though perhaps the long white scar left behind would disappear all the faster if he applied a few compresses of the new Healing Potion to it, he'd have to mention that to her later today. And yes, come to think of it, her sword arm's side *was* more muscularly defined than the other.

Then she stretched luxuriously, and nothing could have been more enticing to him than her unselfconscious nudity, the sight of that back flexing, those breasts lifting. Merlin's teeth, he had thought she looked good freshly shagged in a steamy callbox, with her dress half-unbuttoned and her hair mussed, breathing hard and her eyes a little unfocused, as though surprised by how much she'd enjoyed herself. While he had watched the two of them in the Pensieve, he'd thought she was quite seductive on the Knight Bus with her silk skirts rucked up and her black-gartered thigh wrapped around his hip. But damn it all to hell if she wasn't a vision of enticing carnality waking up naked in his bed on the morning after their first night together. *Come here, you. Allow me to show you why you want to sleep with me again tonight.*

He wrapped himself around her from behind, and lowered his lips to the back of her neck, and what felt like a moment later, her mouth was open under his and he was lying over her again, that shameless hand caressing him gods, she knew *exactly* what he liked and then the aching morning erection that woke him up so often sank into her with a welcoming groan. Was there any pleasure in this world to compare with this, her long sigh when he began to make love to her again, that body enfolding him, her neck bared under his lips... this was all almost too much like one of his hopeless sexual fantasies about her during the school year to be real. But from the way she was responding, her husky breath in his ear, her hands caressing his back and shoulders, grinding up into his thrusts... she seemed to be enjoying this as much as he was.

There seemed to him no better way to start one's morning after a long night of desperately intense lovemaking than with another lusty, sleepy go at it just after waking up; and there is perhaps no greater charge to a man's ego than the feel of his lover's unabashed orgasm beneath him. As before in the callbox and the previous night, the sensation of her climax was enough to send him into his own a moment later, and he collapsed over her, panting. It was a long time before either of them moved or spoke.

At last he disengaged from her, to sprawl against the pillows beside her. But after a moment, possessed by an instant's self-consciousness, he lowered his lips to her ear, and whispered "That was... all right, for you, wasn't it? And last night... ?"

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Emily chuckled softly, surprised there could be any question. "My dear. From the first night I met you onward, you have always and invariably made me come like a howling animal every time we've had each other. So yes, it was 'All right' for me," she said, with a long sigh. "I just hope it's as good for *you*."

He averted his eyes almost shyly, his head falling onto her shoulder.

"Severus? What is it?"

"Just... er, trying to formulate a *reply* to a remark like that," he said.

She felt his cheek growing hot against her shoulder, his scent suffusing with acid self-consciousness "My word is the Head of Slytherin House actually blushing?"

"Well, it's not every day that a bloke wakes up to someone saying things like *that* to him."

Emily laughed again, her arms tightening around him. He fit into her embrace so perfectly, not a breath of awkwardness, as though her arms had been designed to go round him, and her shoulder had been modelled with the intent of giving him a comfortable place to rest his head. *Oh, you're adorable,* she thought. *Will you ever know how much I love you.*

But she resolved to say nothing about such feelings just yet; it was still so early on, and she didn't want to make him feel pressured, or hurried to catch up to her level of commitment. Three dates and one night together did not a relationship make, so she decided to be patient.

"Well, at the rate you're going, my dear, you may just have to get accustomed to waking up to such things said to you," she pointed out, with another long sigh. "Bloody hell, I should have launched an all-out campaign to win you over the second I arrived at Hogwarts."

He propped himself up on one elbow and slanted a look of reproach at her. "Yes, you should have."

As always, his fine sarcastic wit was honed to a razor's edge, softened only slightly by post-coital satisfaction and Emily laughed till her eyes teared. "All right, all right, my dear. I suppose I deserve that."

"Bloody right you do," he grumbled, which only made her laugh harder. "But really can you stay for a bit?" he continued, his voice barely audible, his lips moving against her cheek.

"Oh, yes." She closed her eyes and sighed, just basking in his nearness, his wonderful, relaxed, affectionate mood, the warmth of his skin on hers. "I'm not going anywhere."

From that morning onward, there was no question they would be spending the next night together as well, and probably many more after that. The pairbond simply existed now, vital and undeniable, as though the two separate halves had melded together into an indissoluble whole. It had either grown up overnight, or had been there from the first night they met, waiting for them to acknowledge it.

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"I was going to make tea," he murmured, bending toward her ear. "Would you like a cup?"

"Please. I need to do a little rehydrating after last night."

"Absolutely." Severus turned toward his wardrobe and held out his hand, and said "Accio dressing gown" followed by an inaudible word. The wardrobe door opened to allow a charcoal-grey flannel robe to fly out into his hand. A moment later, he got up, knotting the robe's belt around his waist, and took out a teakettle and two mugs from one of the cupboards in his sitting room. "Let's see... is mint tarragon all right?"

"Sounds lovely, thank you."

A moment later, he brought two steaming mugs back to bed, reclining comfortably beside her. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course, what is it?" she asked, taking one of the cups from him.

"Should we be at all worried about what anyone else thinks of our, er, associating with each other?" he asked, giving her a very serious look over the top of his mug.

"Don't worry, I think we can assume Albus approves," she said, blowing on her tea.

"Actually, I meant Malfoy," he said, after a long pause.

"Oh. *Him.*" She grimaced. "Last night, I sent him a letter implying that I'm expecting my oestrus to start any day, and can't see him for something like the next few years."

"Years?" he asked, one eyebrow quirking.

"All right, I was kind of unspecific on the exact amount of time. It really lasts about a week to ten days, but he'll believe anything I tell him, he's hardly a Fae gynecologist."

"When did you really last have it?" he asked.

"Late December. The week of the Yule Ball and the Ministry Ball, unfortunately. I'm sorry if I was sort of awful then," she said ruefully.

"*Oh*," he said, nodding. "Perhaps makes you blow a bit hot and cold, then, does it?"

"Well... the hormones are such that... but acting on it means that... oh, you know."

"So... for lack of a better description, you were in heat, but didn't want to end up pregnant," he muttered. "That explains a lot."

"You see, when I was around you then, I would get but I wasn't sure that you would... but even if you did, I couldn't do anything about it without and as a result, my mood was... iffy." She averted her eyes with a very self-conscious sip of tea.

"I'll remember that," he interjected gently. "And you do know that things like Contraceptus potions and Muggle barrier contraceptives exist, right? Perhaps there are ways of making the next one a bit less of a painful exercise in self-denial." He stroked insinuating fingertips down her arm.

Emily imagined being in oestrus... and being able to take Severus to bed during oestrus, without worrying about any unwanted consequences resulting from it. The thought of that was such to make her wish that she really was in heat at the moment.

"So your next fertile period won't happen until this December?" he asked.

"They don't come at regular twelve-month intervals for me it's usually thirteen or fourteen months in between. Some years when I have to train or fight a lot and get very thin, I don't have them at all. So I'd say next February or March."

"And you weren't seeing, ahem, anyone in December?"

"No." She looked away from him in embarrassment.

"How long do we have until we have to worry about him, then?" he asked, subtle fingertips stroking her shoulder.

"I'd say two weeks at most."

Severus put his empty tea mug aside and stood up, then picked up a towel from the clean stack on the dresser top, and put it in her lap.

"All right then. Get showered and dressed. Then we'll get some breakfast and get packed, and be on our way."

Emily looked at him, mystified, raking a hand through her pillow-tousled hair. "Get packed? Be on our way?"

"Yes, let's get out of here for a bit," he said decisively. "There's somewhere I'd like to go with you. Let's not waste any time."

"Where do you want to go?"

"Have you ever been to Orkney? Far up north, beyond Scotland?"

"No. What's in Orkney?"

"The weather is sort of variable this time of year anything from hot sunshine to rain showers. You'll need to pack for everything. You'll want to bring an armful of books and an umbrella. And be sure to bring some heavy boots so we can go down to the beach and watch the Selkies."

"What's in Orkney? Tell me."

He turned around and leaned on the dresser, grinned obliquely at her through an untidy mass of black hair. "Snape Hall, of course."

"Snape Hall. Sounds frightfully ancestral."

"It is."

She slanted an eyebrow at him. "Should I worry about running into any ancestors while we're there?"

"Only their portraits on the walls. Other than that, I'm afraid I'm the last one of the Snapes."

"Sorry," she said gently.

"Oh, I'm not. There were some decent sorts of them centuries ago, but with the exception of my father's parents, the last few centuries only seem to have produced a lot of land-grubbing robber barons, whose ill-gotten gains were all then lost by about four generations of rotten business management and bad investments. When I die I'll leave the whole sorry lot of it to some Orcadian Wizarding History society and let them make a museum out of it or something."

"That really doesn't bother you?"

He sprawled beside her on the bed. "Not a bit. Come on do you see me frantically racing around looking for some blonde pureblooded virgin to bear my heir so I can carry on the family name? It's such a gorgeous family name, after all. Who wouldn't want to be called Something Pretentiously Latinate With Two Middle Names *Snape*, if given the chance... " He rolled his eyes at the ceiling with dire eloquence.

Emily laughed until her shoulders shook, collapsing beside him on the bed. Oh, she *loved* this man. "Well, now that I think of it, you do seem rather indifferent to the usual mania for breeding an heir and a spare."

"As do you, thank Merlin. Now let's hurry I want to be out of here by lunchtime." He paused, then looked at her again. "If that time is all right with you."

"We could leave earlier if you like," she offered. "I'll grab a quick breakfast while I'm packing."

"All right then. While you're in the shower I'll send an owl to the house-elves and let them know to have the place ready for us."

"The Orcadian and the Arcadian. That is just too bloody precious. How come you haven't got a Northern Scottish burr?"

He slanted an oblique smile at her. "I used to have one. Now into the shower with you. There are some new toothbrushes in the medicine cabinet."

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"All right then. I'll just take a minute."

She put her empty tea mug aside, got up, gave him a final leisurely kiss, tossed the towel over her shoulder, and disappeared into the bathroom. All quite casually, and without bothering to put on a stitch of clothing.

Severus leaned back against the pillows with a long sigh. Yes... that was a sight he could get used to, all right. The sound of the water started up in the bathroom.

After a moment, he got out of his dressing gown, and pulled on some plain black trousers and a pullover, socks and boots, then raked a brush through his untidy hair. Once he was reasonably presentable, he made his way out of the Slytherin dungeons, and toward the Headmaster's office.

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Argus Filch had returned from his holiday in Brighton only the previous night, but as per his usual habit, he was up with the dawn, patrolling the castle corridors with his constant companion, Mrs. Norris. He had spent most of the morning checking over the house-elves' cleaning projects completed since he had been away, and had found that the elves had carried out their work with characteristic extreme diligence.

On his way up from the sub-basements to the highest staircases, Filch ran into Professor Snape coming up from the Slytherin dungeons, apparently making his way toward Dumbledore's office. Snape didn't look any different than usual, but somehow Filch thought there was something odd about him this morning. Something about the way he moved.

This could not be said to be Snape's usual stalking sort of gait in truth, this was really more of a stroll. Almost, verging upon but not quite, a strut. Now and then, it could even be said to approach a swagger. He paused before a window, looking out at the view, it seemed, just because the view was beautiful, and it pleased him to look at it.

This was, truth be told, just about the single best mood Filch could remember ever having seen from Professor Snape. He had seen something approaching this the day after a Leaving Feast sometime in the eighties not long after Snape had been promoted to Head of House, in which Slytherin had taken both the Quidditch Cup and the House Cup by a spectacular margin of points, but somehow this was... different.

After a moment, Professor Snape seemed to get his fill of gazing at the summertime fields around Hogwarts, and resumed his walk down the hall. He nodded rather pleasantly to Filch as he passed him. "Good morning, Argus."

"Morning," Filch replied.

When Snape had moved out of earshot, Mrs. Norris cocked her head at Filch, and chirruped an interrogative *Mrrrowwwr?*

"No bloody idea what's gotten into him either," Filch told her.

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Albus Dumbledore looked up from pouring birdseed into a tray on Fawkes's perch when Snape knocked on his office door. "Come in. Ah, good morning, Severus."

"Good morning, sir. I'd, er... I'd like to take a week or two and visit the Orkney house, if you think the idea of leaving Hogwarts isn't too dangerous. And if you don't have any pressing duties for me at the moment."

"No, I think Snape Hall is still as secure as ever, if the wards and Unplottability Spells are still in place. I think we can cover for you." Dumbledore gazed affectionately at Fawkes' brilliant crested head as the Phoenix pecked at his breakfast.

"Good," Snape said. "And... do you also think you could find someone to cover for " he cleared his throat self-consciously "Professor Swain as well?"

Dumbledore looked up, chipper as a squirrel. "Why? Is she going somewhere?"

Snape cleared his throat again. "I thought she might... have a fancy to observe the summer Selkie migration their songs can be quite pleasant."

Dumbledore looked at him for a moment, blinking. Then a faint, delighted smile lit his blue eyes. "Yes... no doubt she will find that very diverting. I hope both of you have a lovely time."

"Thank you, sir." Snape gratefully made for the door.

"Severus?"

"Yes?" He turned back around.

"I'm glad to see the two of you ironing out your differences," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling.

Thought Snape: *Yes, aren't you surprised, you ruddy great meddling white-bearded Cupid.*

Said Snape: "Thank you very much, sir," and left the Headmaster's office.

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Well. What to bring for a stay of undefined length at Snape Hall in Orkney, north of Scotland.

Emily brought out her Holding Trunk and had it open on her bed as she nibbled on some toast, fruit, and tea, and got out clothes and shoes from the closet, directing them into the trunk with gestures of her hand. Stout boots for walking on the beach, shirts and trousers, a raincoat, a parka, some cloaks, some sexy black lingerie, a few sundresses, a cashmere cardigan, skirts and camisoles, an umbrella, all the books on her shelves that she hadn't yet read or was planning on re-reading sometime in the near future, toiletries, a couple of satin dressing gowns. She probably wouldn't need any real weaponry, but it might be fun to do some sport fencing while they were there, so she added fencing equipment as well.

Was she ready? Well, perhaps she could bring some sparkly jewels ? Not the diamond collar or emerald serpent bracelet, those were far too ostentatious. Her black pearls, definitely. The diamond earrings, yes, those were pretty but not too over-the-top. She lingered over the black diamond heart... it was so elegant and simple, and would go so nicely with all her little black dresses... but in the end, she decided no, it was just a little too much. She definitely needed to bring some violet oil and makeup, and that scandalous little silk chemise. And maybe a pretty satin waist corset. Why not a few more bits of sexy black lingerie.

As she was going through her closet, two or three of her dresses slipped off their hangers and fell to the floor in puddles of spidersilk. Emily picked them up with a little breath of impatience her Arcadian silk dresses were sometimes difficult to keep hung up, due to the slipperiness and weightlessness of the fabric, so this was a fairly commonplace occurrence. Much of the reason why the pooka weavers liked to bead their creations was that it weighed the material down enough to hang properly.

As she went to hang the last dress a mermaid-green silk with narrow straps and a subtle pattern of silver beading like the shimmering scales of a fish back up, she remembered when she had gotten this particular frock. She had been a rough-and-tumble little girl, who practically lived on the back of her pony, always muddying her clothes and tearing them in the branches of trees. Knowing this, her parents had dressed her very simply, usually in a boy's shirt, riding breeches, and paddock boots for when she wasn't tearing around on her bare hooves. But then she had gone off to school in France, and spent a great deal of time in Paris. By her late teens, she had finally become enamoured with pretty clothes and shoes. Her mother had given her this little green frock as a surprise gift the summer she was eighteen, on the occasion

of their trip to the Second World for Lucius Malfoy's wedding. She remembered opening the box and finding this beautiful green dress inside, one that had the unmistakable air of a "creation" of Court fashion the kind of dress Elaine often wore, but had never given to her before. With this gift, it was as if her mother had finally said to her *You, my daughter, are a lovely woman now.*

Then Emily suddenly remembered something Severus had asked her during that memorable night at the Mushroom Circle *Why do you never wear green anymore? Didn't you wear green at Lucius's wedding? and she had replied, It's been about sixteen years, I don't remember.* Now, with that very dress in her hands, she realised that indeed, she had.

But how did he know that? Had he been there? She didn't recall noticing a tall, thin young man with striking pale and dark colouring at that event, didn't think she had been introduced to him. Why would he remember, correctly, the colour of the dress she had worn?

It was just odd.

Impulsively, she packed the green dress in her trunk. In all likelihood there would be no reason to wear it, but who knew what they would be doing up in Orkney. Perhaps they would go out for a formal dinner or some such, and it would be nice to wear a gown that she already knew he liked.

But once she had finishing packing and dressed to go out, she heard the familiar *scritch-flitter-rustle* of a messenger owl at her window, some small brown post office hireling from the looks of him. The letter was written in Lucius's ornate handwriting, and she opened it with some trepidation, wondering if her excuses had been believed:

Darling

Oh no, how terribly inconvenient! Yes, I do recall the promise you made me to stay away and not let me lure you into bed during your oestrus, but please forgive me if I'm finding that promise terribly inconvenient about now as well.

Yes, you're right, I think a short separation is necessary at this time, because Merlin knows I can resist everything but temptation. If I was to have you about me now, I know damned well that I wouldn't be able to keep my hands off you, and we would start our brood too early. So yes, you'd best keep yourself locked away at Hogwarts with the portcullis drawn and your doors bolted against all interlopers, because the very thought of you coming into heat is enough to drive me to desperation.

However... if you find the temptation too much to resist, you have my full permission to disregard that promise to stay away. You know I'd absolve you of any breach of faith if you want to come to me anyway, and very secure and secret arrangements can be made for whatever consequences arise from it. You know I'd do anything for you, my love... you have only to extend your hand and ask.

"Not bloody likely," Emily snapped. She wadded up that letter and threw it away, but not without some sense of relief. The ruse had worked, and she had bought herself some time.

With that, she picked up her bag, and went to meet Severus.

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After clearing their holiday plans with Dumbledore, Severus had gone up to the Owlery and dispatched a note to the house-elves at Snape Hall, letting them know to expect him and a guest for a visit later that day. Then, he headed back to his apartments to shower, pack, and get a bit of breakfast. The elves had collected the supper dishes from the previous night, and someone had made the bed and gathered up his clothes from the previous evening and put them in a neat pile on a chair, and put his best cufflinks neatly away in the wooden tray on his dresser, next to his watch. Emily had finished her shower and left, but there was a little note propped up on his desk:

Meet you in the foyer at 11 a.m., which is of course really 10:53 Snape Standard Time.

Thanks for dinner. You're a lovely host.

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You're very welcome, my dear, he murmured to himself. That lovely host then made his way into the shower with an even more decided swagger in his step.

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After Dumbledore gave Fawkes his breakfast, he lingered about his office performing various administrative duties, and answered some correspondence. Then he remembered some instructions he had wanted to give to Argus Filch, regarding repairs to one of the greenhouses to be made that summer. He got up and headed down to Filch's office.

But as he went down the twisting maze of staircases from his office to Filch's, he turned a corner and came upon a sight that made him stop short and his eyes widen Professor Snape was standing in a small windowed alcove off one of the staircases adjacent to the great main foyer, dressed in smart black travelling clothes, his damp hair sleekly combed, with a much-used but well-polished black case beside him. He was leaning an elbow on the windowsill and gazing out, apparently without a care in the world. A second later, Professor Swain joined him in the alcove, also smartly dressed in black, and carrying a small trunk. She put her bag aside, then put her arms around Snape's neck with an absolutely enormous smile, and kissed him and he put his arms around her and quite lustily kissed her back. On their way out of town then, just pausing in the shadowy alcove for a moment's embrace before they left.

It is rare to look upon a perfect unit of any sort but this... this was Rodin's *The Kiss.* Or, perhaps some little-known canvas by a less pastoral Pre-Raphaelite, *Hades and Persephone*, the goddess of the spring successfully wooed and won by the brooding lord of the underworld. There was a certain look on Severus's face as his new lover came happily into his arms to greet him perhaps that look sent a pang of recognition through Dumbledore's heart, of something intoxicating and never forgotten. Severus's dark head inclined to Emily's fair one, and he murmured something in her ear that made her look up, eyes shining, and kiss him again.

Suddenly Dumbledore's instructions to Filch could wait, and he silently turned and started back up to his office, lest the two of them realise their tender moment had been observed. As he made his way through the stone corridors of the castle, he smiled to himself, secure in the knowledge that he had done a very good thing indeed.

"Sometimes I outdo even myself," Dumbledore murmured as he blithely strolled back up to his office.

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At 10:53 on the dot, Severus was waiting for (*my lovely travelling companion, Miss Swain*) just off the great main foyer and perhaps a minute later, she had breezed up with what he thought was a glowingly well-satisfied smile on her face, and kissed him thoroughly before he even got a chance to say *Good morning.*

"Hello, good to see you too," he murmured dryly, once she let him have his lips back for a second. "I see *someone's* in rather a good mood today... " She just laughed, and kissed him again. Had there been anyone else around, this effusive greeting would have made him self-conscious, but since they were alone, and after what had happened that morning and the previous night well, he could indulge her.

She was looking very well, as usual; clean, loose hair and clear eyes and fresh, translucent skin, and just happened to be wearing one of her little black frocks that he especially liked, the short diaphanous one with all the little silver buttons down the front. "Smart as this frock is, it might be a bit light for the Orcadian coast. You might want to put on a cloak."

"All right, one second then " She opened her trunk, leaned down into it so that her entire head and shoulders disappeared into its depths, from whence he heard a muffled "*Accio black embroidered cloak*." A second later, she straightened up with a cloak in her hand, a thing of supple velvet with a subtle pattern of silver embroidery on the inside of the hood, of a style that somehow seemed vaguely familiar to him. "How's this? Do I need something heavier?"

"No, this looks fine." She threw the cloak over her shoulders, and he absently tidied her hood as she fastened the silver clasp in front.

"This looks fine?" Emily glanced questioningly at him for a second. "I thought you didn't like for me to wear so much black."

Severus's mouth quirked ah, this might be a good time to get in a compliment on her appearance; in his experience, women quite enjoyed those. "Actually, if you want to know the bitter truth, I think you're one of the few women I've ever met who really knows how to dress."

"Oh, stop it," she said, with a downcast smile, but her tone invited him to continue at length and in detail if he so desired.

"When we were both at that dreadful tea at Malfeasant in November, I recall thinking how painted and stiff and overdone most of the others looked by comparison to you." Oh, why not lay it on with a trowel, since she seemed to actually be enjoying his pathetic attempts at flattery.

"Then why the crack about 'Try the black frock,' then?" she asked, slanting another poignant look up at him what a little flirt.

"Please, do I have to spell *everything* out? Because I wanted to go to bed with you, but had to settle for being an arse at breakfast," he said, leaning forward and murmuring into her ear, blushing slightly at his own daring.

She laughed hugely at that. "So the real truth comes out. That makes a great deal of sense."

"I *always* make a great deal of sense," he assured her, taking up his bag. "Now, are we ready?"

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Severus joined her at the fence's edge, his arms winding around her waist, and she leaned cosily back against him. "Honestly, how do you like it?" he asked quietly. "There are those who think it's very gloomy and isolated up here. The seas can get quite loud... you can hear them for miles during storms, and such."

"That's all right. My bedroom window at home looks out on the biggest river you can imagine, and I always loved the sound of it lulling me to sleep."

It occurred to Emily at that moment that this rocky beach, with its view of the crashing seas and majestic stone pinnacles and wild sea breezes blowing their hair crazily around their faces, was the most romantic setting imaginable in which to give a man a very long, slow, tender, and adoring kiss, and then she turned to her companion, took him in her arms, and did just that.

"Don't worry about *those who think it's gloomy and isolated here*," she told him. "*I* think it's absolutely beautiful."

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Emily laughed softly as the two elves made their exit. "She's always *thrilled* whenever someone asks her if she wants to see a kitchen. Half our students don't get that excited about their Christmas holidays."

"Well, you know how house-elves are," Severus said, bringing her hand up to his lips and putting a brief, feeling kiss on her palm. "As for you, Miss Professor, perhaps you'd like to go have a look at the bedrooms upstairs?"

"The bedrooms?" she whispered. "*Yes.* Thank you."

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Emily was delighted with Snape Hall from her first glimpse of it, and now it seemed that the castle only became more beautiful the more she saw of it. Severus took her hand and led her up a magnificent staircase of carved marble, carpeted with a worn but beautiful Oriental rug that had to be a hundred feet long, down a wide gallery corridor ornamented with more fabulous stone carving, the occasional taper in tarnished silver wall sconces flickering to life as they passed. The corridor led to another vast hall, this one windowless and with a magnificent, peeling fresco of knights armed with lances after what looked like a highly aggressive black Hungarian Horntail dragon "Oh, an ancestor rode with a King Pellinore once, after a dragon that had been terrorising the countryside. It was supposed to have been quite an exciting adventure," Severus said, glancing up matter-of-factly as they passed through the hall.

"I can imagine."

Severus led her through more galleries and corridors, then up a long winding staircase ornamented with more magnificent gothic carving, to a wide landing with four large doors. "I usually stay in the apartments in the westernmost tower at the end of the hall. It's practically on the edge of the cliff, so it's got quite a nice view."

He threw open a heavy wooden door, into a large suite of rooms that looked like the chambers of a medieval king, all huge wooden beams and massive, heavily carved furniture of dark Scotch oak. The sound of the ocean was audible here; and grew even louder when he went to the window and threw it open. Emily joined him there, and immediately felt another cool blast of sea air. She leaned out and looked down at a view that had to be at least three hundred feet straight down, down the side of the tower, down the cliffs, down to the rushing white water below. To the west, nothing but ocean, but to the north, there were more oak woods, what looked like a walled garden with some kind of white flowering trees, and the tip of what had to be another wing of the castle, the earliest one he had mentioned; an ancient leviathan of a structure built back when the world was lit only by fire and lightning.

Wow, she murmured.

She glanced sidelong at her host it was now so obvious that he had been raised here. The castle was austere and remote and brooding in exactly the same way he was, with its medieval forest and stark stone monoliths out in the water, and the unquiet seas all around.

"This is your bedroom?" she asked, surveying the massive carved four-poster bed against the west wall, big enough to hold the lord and lady of the manor and a whole pack of fawning wolfhounds.

"Yes. There are three master bedroom suites on this floor, but this one is mine," Severus said, leaning back against the windowsill, his eyes following her as she took in the room.

"Well then." Emily flopped down on the bed and made herself comfortable. "This looks lovely."

"If you would prefer a room to yourself, feel free to choose either of the others," he said politely. "I've asked the elves to ready them both for guests."

She propped herself up on her elbows and smiled at him. "Could I sleep with you for awhile? Would you mind?"

He regarded her with his most pleasant smirk. "Not in the least."

At that moment, an unfamiliar sound began to make itself heard over the crash of the waves outside a high, warbling melody of some sort, as though a trained opera singer strolling along the beach below had spontaneously begun a pastoral aria in some mysterious foreign language, warbling long, drawn-out high notes that were growing in volume

"What on Earth is *that?*" Emily asked, sitting up and turning toward the open window in astonishment more voices were joining the singing, until it swelled in a magnificent, ethereal mosaic of far-off voices. "Does the London Opera practice on the beach now and then?"

Severus chuckled to himself, turning back toward the window. "No, it's just the Selkies they're rather like the Wizarding version of seals. A whole colony of them summer on the beaches around here every year, and for some reason they spend part of their time singing. I've always rather liked it."

"I can see why. It's glorious."

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Honestly, Severus was starting to wonder if there was anything about this isolated old pile that she *didn't* think was absolutely tremendous. She had started by marvelling at the view of the beach, staring about her with a wonder to match that of her absurd house-elf; but he had known every stone of this beach since he was a boy, and had never brought a lover here before. He had been looking at her.

Then he brought her up to Snape Hall, and she continued to act like the silliest creature he'd ever seen, *oohing* and *aahing* over the masonry like she'd never seen carved stone before. His eyes lingered on her face, waiting for the arch little sniff, the back-handed compliment, the look of bemused disdain as she lingered on the dust and cobwebs that inevitably proliferated in a castle the size of four or five Muggle churches and which only had a staff of three elves to clean it but nothing of the sort happened. No, she was spouting architecture terms and talking about Muggle cathedrals, her hands clasped before her, looking like an excited little girl who had wandered into some aching romance... and the maddest, most ridiculous thing about the whole ridiculous performance was that it seemed absolutely *sincere.* He examined her words for some Faeryish dialectical of hidden meaning, but she seemed to be talking in a lot of short, declarative sentences since they had arrived *I think it's absolutely beautiful, this is magnificent, it's glorious* not a lot of conditional modifiers there.

Well. It looked like she really did like the place as much as she said. And now she liked his bed, too *Could I sleep with you for awhile? Would you mind?* What an utterly ridiculous question. Next thing she would be asking, *Darling? Perhaps you'd like to continue breathing in and out, would that be all right? Or, might I suggest that you drink some water next time you become thirsty?* Sweet Merlin's beard YES, silly woman, of course he wanted her to sleep with him. He hadn't felt like this since he was about eighteen years old and the sound of his lover's voice overheard in a distant room was enough to make him tremble.

Then she gave him that melting look, and held out her hand an unmistakable gesture of *Please, darling, come to me.* And with the woman he had wanted for so very long lying on his bed in such an attitude of seductive invitation, looking at him like that she didn't have to ask him twice.

He joined her on the bed, sank into her arms and buried his lips in hers, still amazed that she wanted this, wanted him, seemed to think of this trip home with him as a delightful holiday, and now seemed to be in love with everything about his dilapidated pile of a home from the instant she saw it. He thought about what he should do now to impress upon her what an excellent host he was; perhaps he should ask her if she would like to have tea, should Floo her ladies' maid to unpack her trunk, should ask to hang up her cloak. How uncouth was it to bring a woman home, make a brief introduction to the house-elves, take her upstairs and then to bed immediately upon arrival but now, with her kissing him like this, he couldn't imagine wanting to do anything else. And from the way her arms went round his neck when he joined her in bed, and the rate at which her breath was labouring, she didn't seem to mind.

He knew he was far too eager for this, wanted her too much and thought he was hiding it badly; but having been so long deprived of this sort of intimacy, he could now scarcely get enough of it. But here, in his ancestral home, with the hard-won lover he had brought up into this splendid, intimate isolation, some of the authority of the lord of the manor returned to him, something of the lustiness of the wizard earls of Orkney from whom he was descended. Unlike Davie o' Kirkwaa, the last of the venerable Snape family seemed totally unwilling to be parted from the Faery woman he had brought home.

"I remember that look," he said, willing his hand not to quaver as his fingertips traced the line of her cheek. "I decided a long time ago I was going to call it your 'Puck surveys a sleeping Athenian youth' expression."

"Did you now," she sighed, loosening his tie and then began unbuttoning his shirt.

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By the Mother, this was like something out of one of the fearsomely randy dreams that had plagued her all through oestrus Severus entwined around her in a tower bedroom in some remote, dreamingly lovely castle... oh, this wasn't reality, it was one of Morgaine's or Eithne's epic romances. Her lover had come to bed and kissed her, and then looked up long enough to close the door and the thick velvet window draperies with a lazy gesture of his hand and an inaudible word, and what felt like an instant later he was lowering her onto linen sheets worn to velvet softness under her bare skin.

Once he was in possession of her, he wanted to take a long time, to have her at his leisure, and all she wanted now was to let him. No sound, other than the sea and ethereal voices singing their enigmatic songs all around the castle, the rustle of sheets, kisses and gasping and laboured breath, both baritone and soprano. She was far away from anything and everyone she knew, all worries fallen away. It never occurred to her to feel anything other than completely unselfconscious about lying under him and thoroughly enjoying him, just rocking in that primordial dreamsea of long-denied lust being consummated.

She had discovered another kind of kiss in his repertoire; along with those spontaneous, randy, teenage sort of kisses, the brief, arrogant, tantalising ones... when he was making love to her, he was capable of long, slow, impossibly narcotic kisses that left her dizzy, unsure of how she was ever going to get her lips off his again. His cock was working her slowly, relentlessly, but his tongue was almost unendurably soft.

It went on, and on, and on nothing to worry about, no agendas to hide, no fear, no guilt about desiring a man she loathed nothing but slow, unhurried pleasure, adoration for a man she trusted... who she loved. The warm weight of his body lying over her was frighteningly new yet familiar, as was the sweetness of his kisses and caresses, the *oh please yes harder more* feel of him moving deep inside her. He was larger than any man she had been with previously, but she couldn't have imagined being more ready there was no pain, only a sensation of being gorged, deliciously filled. She raised her thighs slightly, to receive him more fully.

If she lived for an entire Age, she would never quite fathom the acuity of her response to this man, the sheer intensity of arousal and release; it all occurred so naturally with him. Her deep inner muscles sealed down on him, tighter and tighter, her clit heated and stiffened as he ground against it until she had wrapped herself around him with strength she didn't know she had, and every stroke seemed to be pushing her closer and closer to falling, but she couldn't have stopped. A moment later, her head fell back on the pillow with a raw cry that she herself never heard, blindly surging against him.

Afterward, when she was lying shivering and breathless beside him in bed, he lowered his lips to her ear with a dark little laugh. "By the way, welcome to Snape Hall. I suppose I should have asked you if you wanted tea or asked to hang up your cloak about an hour ago, so please do forgive my inexcusable boorishness."

She just laughed, her arms tightening around him how odd was that, to have a marvellous round of lovemaking with someone that made laughter well up out of you afterward. "Quite all right, darling."

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Their first night together was like opening Pandora's box once the lid was opened, it could not be closed; once they started, they couldn't stop. For the first few days at Snape Hall, they barely got out of bed.

Those delightful, unutterably sensuous first days with one's new lover occupied all of their attention, as both were entirely given over to that time in which all the mysteries of life can be found in the way someone else shivers under your kisses, your caresses. Those moments, in which you discover the exquisite sensitivity of the flesh of her inner thigh, or that nibbling his neck makes his whole body react, seem as profound as the discovery of new worlds. Both members of this particular couple were no strangers to the pursuit of knowledge, and now they both turned their formidable gifts to discovering ways to conjure ecstasy in the other. He loves being touched like this, being kissed there sends her into raptures, he really enjoys being lightly bitten when in a certain primal sort of mood, this is the rhythm and stroke that invariably brings her to breathless climax. He adored kissing and being kissed, could do it for hours; and he had never made love in a certain way before, but is very much intrigued by it... would she like to... ? Of course, darling, come here.

The feel of her in his arms, the scent of his agonised lust all over her skin, the soft, anguished gasps in his ear as they made love, time passing unheeded, awareness of days into the next only by the changing patterns of faint sunlight on the bedroom walls. Occasionally, one of them would run a shower, and they would scrub each other off and make love against the edge of the claw-foot bathtub, the water raining down on them. Emily noticed that his left forearm looked entirely unblemished apparently he had used an unobtrusive bit of Obscurantis there, and she noted that without comment.

Three times a day covered trays of very old and much-used silver would appear on the table by the window, laden with hearty, robust meals, as the house-elves seemingly tried to outdo themselves with feeding the couple within but food was just something he consumed so he could keep his strength up for more sex. He was still wholly intoxicated with the indescribable luxury of just having her with him, so willingly and happily. She couldn't have imagined anything more exquisite than seeing him lying in her arms, looking at her with that faint, shy smile instead of bristling every time his eyes met hers.

As had happened in the callbox, and in every other time they made love since, the unabashed way she responded to him was indescribably erotic. When he had kissed her for the first time, she had responded so enthusiastically that his own long-ignored impulses had kicked in with a vengeance and that just kept happening now. For some unfathomable reason she ignited helplessly at the slightest encouragement from him, watery knees and shivering in the pit of her stomach until their mutual provocation and response built into an impossible feedback loop, her arousal feeding his, and his responses amplifying hers, until it crested in that single instant of shattering bliss. Even after their lusts were temporarily sated, there was the pure mammalian pleasure of being held, just lying in his arms, the primacy of her skin on his he wanted to soak up that closeness and intimacy with every pore.

By the Lady of all the Worlds, how had she *ever* managed to keep her hands off him for this long...

And not only was she his every sexual fantasy of that year made flesh, but she was just such fun to talk to, pert little minx that she was...

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"So tell me... we've been going through so many athletic ups and downs in bed lately I've forgotten to ask which is your favourite one of them," Severus said by way of conversational opening sallies one morning, after long hot showers and breakfast in bed.

After perhaps three minutes of watching Severus scowl and yank at his hair after bathing, Emily had taken the comb from him and deftly untangled his hair in the back his hair was blacker than raven's wings, and he had enough of it for two people. Breakfast was simple, just fresh berries with clotted cream, lemon tea, wheat toast with butter and jam; but somehow, sharing it with him amidst those tangled sheets while wrapped in one of her grandfather's old bespoke satin dressing gowns, it was the best breakfast Emily had ever tasted.

"What's my favourite... I have to admit, I never get tired of what's called female superior position," she replied, batting her eyelashes at him, and smearing strawberry preserves on a slice of toast.

"Ah. Why does that not surprise me in the slightest." She had to hand it to him, when paired with a seductive little smile, that old sinister eyebrow was downright sexy.

"And how about you, what's your favourite position, then?" she asked.

He thought about it for a second, then shrugged. "One in which I'm participating."

"Ah. You just like everything, then." She noticed his teacup was almost empty, and refilled it for him.

"Thank you. And yes, I have yet to take you in a way I didn't find *eminently* satisfactory. If the novelty of any of this ever wears off, I'll tell you."

"How lucky those students were that you were the one to give the Sex Ed lecture last year. Now having had a personal demonstration of your expertise on the subject, I am really most impressed."

Severus laughed softly. "I wasn't at all happy about having to be the one to give it, so I might have been a bit more caustic than usual that afternoon. Yes, I know, you've heard how appalling it was, you told me."

"Well... to be honest, when I heard that bit about the doorbell analogy, my first reaction wasn't exactly that it was... *appalling*."

"Oh? What did you think of it, then?"

"Come off it, dear 'It's lots of fun, and I'm not going to demonstrate it,' followed by the analogy about the doorbell? Did you specifically *choose* words calculated to make every female student wiggle in her chair imagining what this tall dark velvety-voiced man could do to her personal *doorbell*?"

"I most certainly did nothing of the sort," he said, with mild indignation.

"All right, Mr. Youngest and Best-Looking Male Professor on Staff "

"Given that my only competitors for such a prize are Flitwick, Hagrid, and Albus, that's really not too great an honour "

"Know what you are? You're a ruddy great tease, Professor Snape. It's not only teenage boys who are subject to sudden flashes of randiness, you know."

"I'm a 'ruddy great tease', am I? So you thought the doorbell analogy sounded... interesting, then?" he asked, leaning on one elbow with an infuriating smile.

"I never claimed to be any more immune to such blatant provocation than a wiggling teenage girl, thanks," she said, turning away from him in an elaborate huff.

"The truth, young lady," he intoned warningly, draping himself over her from behind.

"Fine hearing that made me quite sorry that I wasn't ever going to get a demonstration."

Then on your back, wench, came the tender growl in her ear. He leaned down and imprinted a long kiss on the space of downy bellyflesh just under her breasts.

"Oh please, sir, Mr. Professor, sir... " and she sank back onto the pillows.

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Oh yes, this was *good.*

He kissed his way down her quivering belly, drawing it out for a few heartbeats, savouring her eagerness... parted her legs and put an openmouthed kiss on the inside of her thigh. There, aroused and pink and ready, the female sex, waiting for him. The trembling thighs and long-coveted quim of his impossible ice maiden, now his to spread like strawberry jam on hot toast. He delicately threaded his fingers through the damp pink folds. Not velvet, no, more hallucinatorily brilliant than that. As full of sinuous rills and petals as the interior of an oyster.

Oh gods, yes. He dreamed of this as often as he had dreamed of feeling his cock slide deep into a woman's body. Lazily, he licked at the pinkness, tongued the softness of the interior lips, lapped at the mouth of the vaginal opening. He felt aflame with covetousness, sliding the tip of his tongue inside her and delicately flickering it just inside the opening. His lover moaned lustily, throwing her fair head back on the pillow.

It was *lots* of fun. Really. He had no elderly hard-of-hearing relatives with doorbells, but he had a powerful imagination.

Yes, the clitoris. *Clitoris*... .he enjoyed the classical-Greek sinuousness of the very word on his tongue. Could there be anything more delicious and intimate than having his lover's pleasure centres so up close, so accessible... he parted the inner lips with his fingers, found the tumescent little peak rising beneath them, and slowly outlined it with his tongue, which drew an aching soprano cry out of her. Lifting the little fleshy hood, he lightly flickered his tongue against it, discovering its shape, its contours, its rounded head and tiny cleft shaft. The reactions this provoked from her were delicious; she was gasping and yowling and writhing like a trapped cat, impossibly hot and wet *Not feeling so icy now, my love, are we* but he was a patient man, and knew how to take his time.

Still softly drawing on her with his tongue, he slid two fingers deep inside her, gently delving... he wanted to make her come, come *hard*, and he wanted to taste it and feel it when she did.

He didn't have long to wait. Her silken interior muscles clamped down on his fingers with surprising strength and he moaned softly, urging the orgasm out of her with the urgent pressure of his tongue. Her nails were curling against the sheet, her hips nearly jerking off the bed. Her vaginal muscles squeezed down rhythmically on his hand again, and again, *againagainagain*... until she subsided, jerking away from him, unable to take so much sensation, her body shuddering convulsively.

Orgasmic aftershocks he loved it. He loved her for wanting him like this, for responding to him like this.

"Gods, you're fantastic," she purred afterward, lying sweating and boneless beside him. "I can't even *move*."

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"And you call me a tease, Miss Knocking on My Door At Half-Past Midnight in That Appalling Wisp of a Frock to then ask for a potion," he said, sometime later.

"Whatever do you mean?" she asked, when she was capable of rational speech again.

"Well when you decided to show up at my quarters the evening we went to the hospital, for about one second there, I was thinking that perhaps you were there for something *other* than to get a potion made to help an ailing countrywoman of yours. Yes, I know she desperately needed it and there was no one else you could turn to, and in retrospect I'm quite pleased to have done it. Though at the time I was very bloody annoyed with you for not adhering to the scenario in my head."

"And how would I have done that?" She sat up, listening, unembarrassed as a chipmunk.

"You see, my dear, in order to properly fulfill it, you should have knocked on my door at half-midnight in that appalling wisp of a frock, then pressed yourself very enticingly against me, and said, 'Oh, Severus, I've been such a fool, you are absolutely the only one for me. Now you really must show me the error of my ways through a wide range of acts of desperate passion.'"

"Should I write that speech down for next time the opportunity arises?"

"Now she wises up," he muttered darkly, but kissed her anyway.

"I can put that dress on and go knock on the door, if you want to act that scenario out," she said, nuzzling his ear.

"Perhaps later. Right now, I'd prefer if you stayed right here."

Emily chuckled. *I'll show you an act of desperate passion... lie back...*

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He felt her breath, then a line of soft kisses tracing their way downward and then...

oh yes...

Forget limitless power over all one surveyed, there was nothing, *nothing* that felt better than the caress of a woman's mouth on one's cock. He threw his head back onto the pillow with a heartfelt moan, the sheets bunching between his fingers.

He could still scarcely believe that there were women out there who did this sort of thing to men not because they wanted something from them, but because they *liked* it... what *wonderful* creatures such women were... how *lucky* he was to have one of them in bed with him. The velvet warmth and liquid pressure of tongue, the exquisite rhythm and friction of lips was like no other sensation on Earth... he realised he had forgotten to breathe for awhile, and gasped.

Miracle of miracles, she didn't seem in any hurry to *stop*, either... there came the softest little moan of enjoyment from somewhere in the darkness, a sound that raised every hair on the back of his neck, that found its way into everything within him that craved sensuality and could not get enough of it. And she was prolonging this, drawing it out until his breath was laboured and his entire body felt wracked with suspense...

My dear... er... He put his hand down and lightly nudged her shoulder, a half-hearted warning that if she kept up with those kind of... *oh please yes*... .ministrations, she would swiftly bring this act to a rather explosive conclusion, and he wasn't sure whether that was her intention... but she didn't stop. No, she only quickened her pace... and then

that shameless, gloating little moan again

he whiteknuckled the sheet between his fingers

and then

somehow he turned *yesyesmoreharderpleasemyloveYES* into one word

Afterward, some time went by before he could remember who and where he was.

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"Do you have any *idea* how good you are in bed?" Emily gathered him into her arms with a long, rapturous sigh. "I mean, has anyone ever given you the slightest indication of how extremely, superlatively, hyperbolically gifted you are in matters carnal? You ought to write how-to books on the subject. Really, love, the less talented could benefit from your expertise. No, really I am *quite* serious."

"It seemed rather like I didn't do much of anything that time but lie back and *receive*, my dear."

She sighed rapturously again. "But you did it so *well*."

That marked the first time she ever made Severus collapse on her shoulder laughing.

Part Third: The Hart Subvertant, Chapter 34

Chapter 53 of 55

After Voldemort’s return, Professor Swain has agreed to Sirius Black’s suggestion that she use her influence with Lucius Malfoy to gather intelligence on the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters. As her horror of the Dark Lord grows, her old enemy Severus Snape proves to be the only one who understands the fear and doubt that plague a double agent…

Chapter 34:

A man could get used to being kissed, nuzzled, and nibbled within five minutes of waking up in the morning. Given that Severus had now had the pleasant experience of waking up beside his lover for the last four mornings which was, of course, four more times than he ever had previously the experience was definitely beginning to grow on him.

On the morning of their third day at Snape Hall, Severus awoke with his chest to Emily's back, one arm loosely draped around her waist which was becoming his accustomed way of sleeping. He nestled closer to her and kissed her shoulder.

"Mmmm... good morning, beautiful." She rolled over and kissed him tenderly.

He slanted a quizzical look at her. "'Good morning, beautiful'? It's far too early in the morning for sarcasm." He sat up, raked his hands through his hair, and rubbed the corners of his eyes.

Emily gave him a very *oh please* sort of look. "I had something like four or five orgasms with you yesterday so now you have to understand that to me, you are the most gorgeous man alive. Now, do please kindly get used to it and stop questioning my judgment." She was then distracted by nuzzling the back of his neck.

"I've heard myself described as a *greasy git with an abnormally large nose* a great deal more frequently than I've been called *beautiful*, my dear," he explained, leaning back into her caresses. Yes, Severus could see himself quite getting into this nuzzling habit of hers. He was now becoming more accustomed to the novel idea that he could simply assume that he was wanted and desired; that if he was in bed or on the sofa beside this lovely woman, she would want to touch him, want to be in his arms. It helped that she was about as sentimental or self-conscious about her fond attentions as a wolf with her mate.

"There's nothing abnormal about your nose. It's the reason you have such a gorgeous voice, you know it you went to the plastic surgeon's and did something to it, your voice wouldn't be as resonant and sonorous as it is. Think of it as the Stradivarius of noses." She leaned forward put a kiss on the side of that distinctive feature. "And besides, have any of those people spouting such vile epithets ever slept with you?"

Severus gave a horrific shudder in spite of the profusion of nuzzling being showered upon him. "Bloody *hell* no."

"Then screw them, what do they know," she said, airily refuting and discrediting every barb and insult from the Marauders of the world and their ilk with a lazy wave of her hand. "I clearly have more expert knowledge of the beauties of your person than they do, and thus my opinion trumps theirs. And if they try to say any different, they can all pucker up and kiss my happy pointy-eared arse." She gave his neck a final nuzzle, then stretched luxuriously. "Do you want first shower?"

He turned around and kissed her, at length. "All right."

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Severus brushed the sheet aside and reached for his dressing gown, which was lying on a chair beside the bed. Emily's eyes were drawn to his naked back and arms yes, he hadn't been anything to sneeze at before, but several months of intensive combat training had certainly agreed with him physically. His back was elegantly cut and defined, his arms corded with wiry muscle, the sort of whipcord-lean athlete conditioned for sustained endurance rather than power. He would always be thin, not much to him but what there was, was perfect. He just looked *good.* Positively edible. She traced a caressing hand over his shoulder with a sigh.

He glanced back at her as he pulled on his robe. "What, what is it?"

"Mmmmm, that back and those arms. You look fantastic, darling. You make me wish I could paint."

He looked back at her, startled. Apparently this novel idea that someone thought he looked fantastic was just as unsettling to poor Professor Snape as the discovery that the stranger taking tea with him appreciated his sense of humour. Then, he lowered his eyes and blushed like a drunken house-elf.

"Er, thank you," he muttered. "It... it's never hurt to look at you either." As he kissed her once more and headed off into the bathroom for a shower, Emily resolved to pay him more compliments the way he reacted to them was frankly adorable.

As the water started up in the bathroom, she took the pillow he had lain upon for much of the last three days and buried her nose in it, taking a deep breath of the scent of him. Oh, bloody hell, why even try to pretend, every damn thing he'd done of late was endearing. Since they had been at Snape Hall, it had become hard to shake her arms from around his neck.

He came off as so harsh and autocratic with students, so shrewd and jaded in his dealings with the Order of the Phoenix but put him in bed with a woman who adored him, who was disinclined to disparage him in any way, and the experience just seemed so unexpected and so *new* to him. He could still be surprised by kindness or affectionate gestures from her, and he was so taken aback by compliments something in his manner put her in mind of a feral creature finally grown tame enough to allow itself to be petted. This was the side of him with which she had initially become enamoured who he was when out from under every obligation and antagonist and now she wished she could keep every worry and stress out of his life, just so she could enjoy it forever.

As a lover... Emily stretched luxuriously in bed with a long sigh. By the Mother, how had she *ever* managed to stay away from him during the school year. If she'd known then what she knew now, she would have staged a raid on the Slytherin dungeons and carried him off the first night she'd arrived at Hogwarts. He wasn't some smug, practiced Lothario like some men she had known before, but no one could have hoped to rival his raw lust, his kind of purity and intensity. She couldn't have imagined thinking of anyone else while the focus of the blistering wealth of his attention.

While she knew that he'd had at least one lover before, there was nonetheless something so virginal about him, somehow, as though he was now venturing out into territory where he had never been before. He may have had the depth and subtlety of a thirty-five-year-old man, but every now and then, he would regard her with something of pure, adolescent wonder in his eyes. When she thought of him as an orphaned teenage boy, cast aside by this *Bella* wench and completely alone in the world she couldn't have imagined anything more heartbreaking.

Well, at least the chances of that happening again were pretty damned slight if *she* had anything to say about it, thanks.

But now he was out of the bathroom, towelling his wet hair and wrapped in his grey dressing gown, smelling of shaving lotion, toothpaste, and soap. He paused before the mirrored dresser top and took up a comb, then began dragging it through his hair. He always yanked at it so fiercely, scowling as though each tangle was there just to spite him Emily couldn't watch this performance for more than a minute before she had to get up, take the comb from him, and tidy it for him, lest he tear his own hair out by the roots. He was doing it again this morning, so she got up and approached him from behind "Oh, give me that, silly thing. You'll be bald by forty with the way you're going." Her hands were deft, and a moment later, she had his hair neatly combed and put a little kiss on his cheek. "There you go."

"Thank you." He pulled her into a soft, flannel-dressing-gown embrace, keen black eyes studying their reflection in the mirror, perhaps admiring the sight of himself looking so well-coiffed. Or perhaps he was enjoying the sight of his skyclad lover in his arms the look on his face was very much one of *This one is mine and I'm not sharing.* "I'm feeling ambitious this morning let's actually leave the bedroom and go have breakfast downstairs."

"Whatever you like, dear," she said, and kissed him.

He chuckled, shaking his head. "I can't believe I just heard you say that."

She laughed, and kissed him again. "Well, yes, don't get too used to it. But breakfast downstairs sounds lovely."

"All right. I'll tell the elves to get the dining room ready for us."

She nodded, and then disappeared into the steamy bathroom.

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While Emily showered, Severus got dressed and went down into the kitchens to supervise the elves as they got the smaller dining room ready to receive the master of the house and his guest. He was pleasantly surprised to discover that his initial misgivings about allowing Cecile to accompany them had proved unfounded, and the elf was already making herself helpful in the kitchens, and had already begun instructing Philomela and the other elves as to the various dietary and environmental requirements of her Mistress "With a Faerie about you can never NEVER be putting iron on the table or anywhere near her, that is burning to them, but china and silver, that is all right. And no sugar in the cream for porridge, she is not liking that, it gives her hands the fidgets."

Now Cecile and Philomela were in the kitchen preparing breakfast while Danceny gave the long oak table a quick polishing, then put the long benches that usually flanked the table against the walls and brought out two wooden armchairs, and Towrie whisked all through the place with a pushbroom. Cecile traipsed in and out with candelabra, china plates, silverware place settings, teacups and two steaming pots, and a loosely arranged bowl of Scottish primroses and fragrant white roses. When she finished setting the table, Cecile turned to Severus with a little curtsy. "Breakfast is nearly ready, Mr. Professor, sir," she said. "Be you needing anything else?"

"No, this is fine. Thank you."

The Selkies had started up on the beach again while the elves worked, filling the air with muffled, crystalline warbling and the rain had started up again as well. It had misted slightly in the early morning, but now the sky was pale grey, and fat droplets were splattering the dining room windows with monotonous regularity. And as always with Snape Hall, with heavy rains came the inevitable drips in the roof.

A new leak had begun in the dining room ceiling just above the easternmost window Severus pointed his hand at it, and intoned "*Constructivus Reparo*," then silently spoke a word. The leak stopped, but he knew from long experience that it would only be a matter of time before the old roofing wore through again, or a new leak started in place of this one. He paced through the dining room, taking a long, appraising look at the roof, and aiming *Reparo* spells at worrisome cracks in the plaster. While Emily didn't seem the sort to hold him in disdain because his manor's roof was leaky, he didn't want to be bothered with that sort of thing while he had company, especially not when he was currently entertaining his lover.

He paused as that thought occurred to him, then turned to pensively gaze out one of the windows, replaying those words to himself *Miss Emily Swain, who is my lover.*

Bloody hell, he had a lover, and they now seemed to have interacted enough together and spent enough nights sleeping beside one another to fairly begin to call this association a relationship.

He had a relationship. With his (witty, clever, *amazingly* randy) new lover.

It seemed that his universe was not only being disturbed, it was actually still expanding.

Well then. What now to do with this totally unexpected new development, now that there was the possibility that he might not be facing life as a perpetual bachelor, the way he had always assumed. Severus had spent an entire school year feeling slighted that Emily's romantic attentions to him had ended after that first night, but now that those romantic attentions were his again... Well, he just hadn't ever counted on that. He had been so certain that she had dismissed him that he never had any plan for what he would do if it turned out that she hadn't. He had only wanted her attention again, to be taken seriously, to have his wishes respectfully considered, and to continue the sexual relationship begun that first night. And now, he had everything he had ever wanted of her, given joyously and ungrudgingly. Not only that, but... he'd had lovers, he wasn't completely inexperienced, but this was something completely unlike any relationship he had ever had before. The sensation of lying over and inside a woman who was perfectly ecstatic to have him there, who had no ulterior motives in bed other than to have a lot of ragingly good sex, was a wholly new sensation. And somehow he didn't think that sort of response could be feigned, especially by someone who had grudgingly admitted she just wasn't cut out to be a spy.

There just didn't seem to be anything of Bel other women's sort of deviousness in her. It had only been three days now, so there wasn't too much precedent to go by, but he realised now that in all the time he had known her, he had never once gotten even a whiff of the old anticipatory dread, no sense that she was biding her time until he was dependent enough to swallow the latest indignity or betrayal she had dreamed up without complaint. No, she seemed to have three moods: crackling antagonism, total uninvolvement, or (*yesmyloveyou'rewonderfulpleaseyes*) this. She was just the most affectionate and spontaneously hedonistic lover imaginable; no past encounter with a woman had ever felt this unforced, this unselfconscious. With her, there was no time for worry he was simply too caught up in enjoying himself.

He could no more have kept himself from being made happy during these last few days with her than a plant could have resisted warming in sunlight. The only thing he was worried about now, truthfully, was how long this could last.

Then the arched doors opened behind him to admit someone into the dining room, someone fair-haired, smiling, and happy to see him. Wearing one of her diaphanous little black spidersilk gowns with a cashmere schoolgirl cardigan over it, which she no doubt thought made the outfit look less provocative. She put her arms around him and kissed his cheek, then turned toward the raining windows as well.

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glance down at his porridge bowl with a smirk.

"I'm glad you like it," he said quietly. "I've never had a lot of good memories of this house, until now. It's so far out of the way that I spent a lot of time bored and alone when I was younger the winters are really quite depressing. And my father could be rather moody at times."

His father was one of the most profoundly horrible men I've ever met. Believe me, when compared to Snape Senior, my dear little Cousin Severus seems a perfect lamb, Lucius had said.

Emily smiled sidelong at him. "Well. Let's give you some good memories of this house while we're here, then. In which I will do my best to keep you from being bored and alone."

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After breakfast, Severus led Emily through an east-facing door into the cavernous stone kitchens, with walls of untreated stone and a brick fireplace that took up an entire wall, the sort of place where medieval servants would have huddled for warmth and companionship through the long dark of an Orkney night. Cecile was standing in front of a huge stone basin washing the breakfast dishes with Philomela, but she excused herself when she saw Emily and bounced up to her with a big grin "Mistress! Be you liking your breakfast? Philomela is showing me new things to cook all the time there will be fish pie for lunch and lamb cassoulet for supper."

"Yes, breakfast was lovely. How are you enjoying your stay?"

"Oh, it is very nice, I has a room all to myself, it is the biggest room I is ever having, with windows! The days here is *very* long, so first I helps Philomela clean, and then in the evening I is walking and walking the grounds there is so many BIG trees by this castle, and there is a little white-roses garden with walls, too, and I is sometimes watching the great big HUGE fishes sometimes jumping right up out of the sea! And there is birds, and seals, and sometimes the seals is *singing*!"

Severus approached the two of them with an oil lantern in hand, then handed a second one to Emily. "The huge fishes actually aren't fishes at all they're called whales, and they breathe air, like we do. When they leap out of the water, that's called *breaching*. The singing seals are called *Selkies*, and they spend the summer here as part of a long migration that they complete every year. In winter, they'll go farther south, where it's warm." He turned toward Emily and took her hand. "Well, then, are we ready?"

Cecile listened to this lesson with big eyes, clearly pleased that the stern Mr. Professor had taken the time to explain it to her. "Thank you, Mr. Professor sir." The elf excused herself with a polite curtsy and went back to the dishes, while Emily followed her host out into the castle.

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He first led her through the small dining room where they had breakfasted "Let's see this smaller dining room is where the family probably ate every day, but when they were entertaining, it was probably turned into a preparation room. Pages would be running back and forth with food and such. This was the main dining hall, here," Emily's host said, leading her through the massive mead hall she had discovered earlier.

As they passed through the hall, Severus glanced at the rain pelting down on the great northern windows with a rather pained look, his eyes raking over the ceiling with concern then indicated the grand dining table with a little grimace. "The table supposedly seats fifty, though we've never thrown a party for that many people that I can recall."

"Perhaps you will someday," Emily said, smiling.

Severus chuckled grimly. "Not bloody likely. And through here, we have the ballroom." He led her through another set of double doors into a large and airy L-shaped chamber with a floor of dusty green marble, with dingy but elegantly crafted stained-glass windows to the north and west. A line of chandeliers made up of cobwebbed and age-darkened crystal prisms hung from the slightly domed and heavily carved stone ceiling. "We think this used to be an armoury, where visiting pages would sleep and have their meals while looking after their lords' arms and horse tack, but in about the eighteenth century, the stained glass and marble flooring and chandeliers were put in, and it became the ballroom. Although we might as well turn it into an armoury again for all the entertaining I do I think the last great ball we had in here was for my grandparents' wedding, in about 1908."

The sound of dripping came from their right, and Severus stalked up to one of the ornate windows, scowling. A second later, he sealed a leak in a windowpane with a pass of his hand and a muttered incantation, then returned, still scowling. "Everything leaks in heavy rains," he muttered and from the look on his face, and the acid tinge of embarrassment suddenly apparent in his scent, it was obvious that those leaks were the source of a great deal of frustration to him.

"Well then " He led her out another elegant pair of doors in the southernmost wall of the ballroom, out into the great main entrance hall. "And here of course is the foyer, which Milady claims resembles a certain Muggle cathedral "

"It *does*! I'll take you there and you can see for yourself then you'll have to eat your words, you'll see."

"A likely story," he scoffed indulgently, leading her along the wide gallery to another set of great doors. "This leads to the oldest wing in the castle you'll want to be careful here. Stay on the stone galleries and don't go out onto any of the wooden flooring, because some of it is rotten and could crumble at any time, and I don't want you to get unceremoniously dumped into the cellar."

With that, he threw open one of the doors, and offering her his arm, led her onto another wide gallery overlooking what was left of an Orcadian wizard earl's thousand-year-old fortress.

The air here was alive with scents: fresh air, rainwater, rotten wood, ancient stone. "This part of the castle was originally a hunting lodge, but as they spent more time here, they added more floors to it. The livestock lived in the bottom floor, and the human inhabitants lived above them," Severus said, leading her up a second stone staircase at the end of the gallery.

Everything Emily knew about architecture had come from one class taken at Cambridge, and now, as they made their way through the bones of a castle that was still being completed in William the Conqueror's time, she was racking her memory for everything she could recall about castle building. Here and there fitful sunlight shone through holes in the roof, and Emily leaned over the stone gallery railing, craning upward to see falling raindrops silhouetted in grey light. Much of the flooring had fallen through here, leaving giant exposed wooden beams and crossbeams visible. The stone walls were often elaborately carved with round-centred crosses, and the patterns incised the crosses' surfaces were elaborate scrolls of leaves and vines, and occasionally that of a chalice. The patterns seemed oddly familiar.

Emily had wandered a few paces away from Severus as she took in this ornamentation, the lantern held at eye level in front of her. A moment later, she turned a corner, and gasped, taking several steps backward for around that corner she had come upon a transparent woman with long braids, in what looked like early Renaissance garb, sitting at a transparent spinning wheel in a shadowy corner, her foot silently working a treadle as she spun a long skein of silvery thread. The ghost neither paused in her work nor looked up.

A moment later, Emily felt Severus's comforting presence behind her, his arm around her waist. "Don't worry, it's just the spinning woman, one of the ghosts," he murmured. "They are four or five of them inhabiting the castle, but they're all harmless. Most of them stay in this wing."

"What are the others like?" She leaned back into his warm solidity, calming herself there were no ghosts in the Faerielands, so despite her residency at Hogwarts, it still gave her a turn to come upon an unfamiliar ghost in gloomy surroundings. Unperturbed, unseeing, the ghost continued her work.

"Let's see there's a ghost in the main library who can't be seen, only felt... sometimes he'll get books out, or turn pages in the dictionaries on stands, or tidy up. You never see him, but now and then you'll feel a chill, and smell his pipe tobacco, and see the books have been moved or the lamps trimmed. And on nights when the Northern Lights are visible, there's a young man in medieval knight's garb who appears on the highest turret walk, just looking up at the sky."

"Really have you ever spoken to any of them?" she asked, with a delicious shudder.

"No, none of them answer when spoken to. They used to frighten me when I was a boy you couldn't have made me come into this wing at night, or when it was raining like this but now I doubt if they're even aware of us." He seemed to enjoy playing protector as his shivering companion huddled against him, and drew her closer into his arms. "I asked the Bloody Baron about ghosts like them when I was in school he calls them *repeaters*, people who died suddenly and who don't realise they're dead, and just continue to do what they did in life. Professor Binns is a particularly erudite and well-spoken version of this sort of ghost, I believe."

"And they're all in this wing?" Emily asked, resolving to stay out of the oldest wing at night.

"Except for the library ghost and the one upstairs in the eastern part of the central wing there's a nursery with a haunted cradle. Sometimes you can see the outline of an elderly woman in medieval garb putting a phantom infant to bed, and hear her singing to it in what I think is Old English as she rocks it to sleep. Those two really aren't very frightening. My mother used to like them quite a bit she thought the singing was rather pleasant."

Emily glanced up at him it was the first time she had ever heard him mention his mother in conversation. Other than the time he had confided the circumstances of his mother's death to her up on the turret walk at Hogwarts, she had never before heard him mention his mother at all. "Well, what with the Plague going on around that time, I can imagine there were a few castle inhabitants who might have died suddenly," she said.

"Actually, we're so isolated up here that I think the Plague passed the Isle of Wyre over entirely," her companion replied thoughtfully. "That went on before Apparition was created, I believe, and the waters and winds are so treacherous that most Orcadians never did much travelling. I believe we had some outbreaks of plague on the bigger islands in the mainland, but I haven't read enough Muggle history to be sure."

Severus glanced down at her, his arm tightening around her waist. "Come on, I'll show you the east wings, they're a little less gloomy."

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for very important guests, who we actually ended up entertaining only two or three times. Not long after I inherited the place I ended up taking over the best stateroom in the castle only to then be *appalled* by the amount of firewood I ended up going through in the winter."

Emily nodded, chuckling a little. Coming from such a temperate climate herself, where the chill of the coldest winter nights could be negated by closing the windows and adding more blankets to her bed, she had never had to worry about staying warm until she experienced her first Scottish winter. But this far north, she realised, life would be miserable unless one had firewood and a good roof overhead. And the inverse of the twenty-hour summer days they had lately been having would be endless nights, where one would need candles and lamp oil all day long. "I'd imagine your trips home for the Christmas holidays could be a bit dreary, without any sunlight."

He sighed. "Half the time I just end up staying at Hogwarts over the Christmas holidays, although I don't know which is worse, twenty-four hours of pitch-black dark outside or Albus's attempts at Christmas *cheer*."

Emily gave a little, commiserating laugh, wrapping her arms around his waist and snuggling her head on his shoulder. Severus raised her hand to his lips and kissed it lightly.

"Come on, there's only the northeastern wing left."

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The northeasternmost and final chamber to the castle was a single large hall three storeys high, ornamented with several stained glass windows. This part of the castle looked to have been built at a later date than the rest of the structure perhaps the fourteenth or fifteenth century, she thought. There were many more Anglo-Saxon crosses cut into the stone carvings on the walls, often ornamented with more carved vines and leaves.

"It's a chapel," Emily said, coming forward for a closer view of the cross a very Celtic and faintly pagan cross, now that she looked closer. As she wandered further into the room, she noticed an elaborate stone cross centred on the far wall, and then off to one side, a small alcove with stone shelves for candles, surrounding a smaller stained glass depiction of a sweet-faced, dark-haired woman in a blue mantle, with a nimbus of golden light around her head the Christian Virgin Mary. She approached this image, bowed to Her, and then bent her head over her clasped hands.

"Emily?" Severus approached her from behind.

Sssh, she murmured, and went back to her devotions. After a minute or two, she turned to her companion and smiled.

"Sorry to disturb you," he said, looking a bit uncomfortable. "I've read about your religion, but I don't claim to be an expert. I'm curious when did you start praying to Christian religious figures?"

"You didn't disturb me, it's all right. My religion allows me to pray to any goddess or gods because they're all a part of Her," Emily said, studying the image before her. "The Virgin Mary is the Christian personification of pure, selfless mother love I can easily imagine Her as a part of my Goddess."

"Well, I've no doubt that the family didn't use this chapel much after it was built it was probably put in to keep up appearances for those who might have persecuted us once for having a lot of witches and wizards in the family," her host said, with an ironic shrug. "I'll not pretend that the Snapes have ever produced any saints or any sort of clergy. We've never tended to be very observant, sorry."

She looked at him curiously. "Why are you *sorry?*" she asked.

"Well, I do realise I'm talking to someone who believes she does magic by the will of her Goddess, who fights under the banner of a Goddess, and who adheres to a military code of honour and rules of engagement all formed by religious convictions," her companion observed wryly. "The closest analogues we have in this world to the Order of the Morrigan were perhaps the Knights Templar, or the Order of Hospitalers."

"Yes, I know. But why do you have to *apologise* to me because I'm religious and you aren't? It doesn't make me better than you," she said, shrugging.

"Well, there are those who would say a holy warrior had rather more claim to virtue than a former Death Eater," Severus said darkly.

"And there are those who would say that a bloke who spends all his time trying to overthrow Voldemort and cure iron burns has more claim to virtue than someone who had an affair with a married bloke, too," she pointed out, a little testily.

Peripherally, she could feel his eyes on the side of her face. He started to speak, but then seemed to think better of what he had been about to say, and fell silent. Finally he insisted: "But it wasn't really adultery for you. You're not married and he is if anyone disregarded an oath, it was him."

"Yes, that's the sophist's argument, but I can't really buy it. I went to his wedding, I witnessed their vows and believed them to be sacred, and accepted their hospitality that day. That creates a promise from me to respect their commitment and I didn't. Of course he was doing everything in his power to persuade me to disregard that commitment, but that still doesn't excuse me." She turned toward him with a bitter little laugh "I have to admit, my dear, perhaps I've been so snappish with you ever since I joined the Order because I've felt rather inferior to you for some time."

Severus was silent for a very long moment, perhaps too surprised by the painful honesty of her answer to speak. "Don't I don't want you to feel inferior to me," he said quietly, and that was the end of that. "Is there anything you can do to be reconciled? I know some faiths have a sacrament where one can confess one's faults and be forgiven... "

Emily shook her head. "No, it doesn't work like that for us. We don't have clergy proper if I want to confess myself to a friend or authority figure and ask advice, I can do that of course, but no one can offer me sacramental forgiveness if I repent and do penance or what have you. I'll have to work that out for myself, and hope that in time, She'll forgive me."

"What are you going to do?" he asked quietly.

"No offence, dear, but that's between Her and me," she said, standing on tiptoe to kiss his cheek.

"Fair enough," Severus replied, then glanced at his watch. "We should probably head back for lunch. Cecile will be despondent if we miss her fish pie."

"What do you want to do after lunch? There's still the option of hide and seek," Emily pointed out, smirking.

"I've got an idea," Severus murmured. "Do you play chess?"

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Lunch was just as good as breakfast. Cecile and Philomela had been preparing the pie all morning the lightest of whole-wheat phyllo dough wrapped around an incredibly delicate blend of local shell- and fin-fish, served with fresh greens. Afterward, Severus ignited a blaze in the drawing room with a few *Incendio* spells, and then he and Emily took up positions on the opposing sides of the chessboard before the hearth. Cecile whisked in and made sure both combatants were well supplied with hot tea.

"So... shall we put a little wager on the outcome?" Emily asked her opponent, rolling her queen between her fingers.

"What do you have in mind?" he asked in his silkiest voice.

"Winner gets to be on top?"

"My dear, if I bed you without going through the full repertoire of positions, I feel deprived." He said it in that tone that she affectionately called *insufferably cocky*, and he would have called *gently smug*; a tone of infinite expertise on the subject of bedding the lady he was addressing. He had, after all, been her lover for all of four days.

"Oh, Severus. You're such a beast. I adore you."

"Bloody right you do," he said with mock severity, openly playing the queen's gambit decline, moving his white queen's pawn forward two spaces.

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He had her in checkmate in ten moves.

They played again. This time checkmate only took eight moves.

"Hmm, it appears that compared to you, I'm not very good at chess," Emily said, with a rather sulky swig from her teacup.

"You seem rather a beginner," Severus observed tactfully.

"I know how all the pieces move," she said, shrugging. "Is there more to it than that?"

He just looked at her for a long moment, studiously keeping his expression neutral, then started returning her black pieces back to their opening positions.

"All right, you think that's the silliest question you've ever heard, I get it."

Severus shrugged. "I didn't say a damn thing."

"You didn't have to," she retorted, pouting. "You might have told me you were some sort of learned grand master who was going to wipe the floor with me."

"Just like you could have told me you were some kind of Master-At-Arms before your first bout with me?" he asked, returning his white pieces back to their proper opening stances.

"I gave you two hours' worth of *training* before I wiped the floor with you," she pointed out.

"All right then, I shall return the favour. This is called the queen's gambit declined." He moved his white queen's pawn two spaces forward. "It's probably the most popular chess opening. The reason for that is, it allows you to start from a very strong and easily defensible position. Now, tell me what you would do to counter it."

He leaned his chin on his hand as he waited for her reply, a lock of black hair falling almost into his eyes.

The fire crackled in the grate, and the rain plashed mightily against the windows all that afternoon and despite a valiant effort and close attention to everything Severus told her about chess, he still had an uncanny ability to pin her king in impossible predicaments all across the chessboard no matter how she tried to hide. He was especially good at launching long-range attacks from far across the board his queen or bishops were always coming from about six spaces away to put her in check, or else a knight would be popping up in the most disconcerting place imaginable.

"You've been playing for a long time, haven't you," Emily observed, sometime after her fifth or sixth crushing, head-scratching defeat.

"Yes, since I was about eight. We have a chess club in town led up by a nationally ranked grandmaster, and I'd been taking lessons from him for years."

"And I *never* would have noticed," she replied with sarcastic brightness.

"Well, you're the one who suggested we play for sexual favours, so my competitive instincts might be rather more cutthroat than usual," Severus pointed out. He bent over the board with a deliciously evil little smirk, then moved his right castle three spaces, effectively pinning Emily's king's only escape route from the queen who had him in check. "And at the rate you're going, it looks as though I'll be on top for *quite* some time. Checkmate."

Emily surveyed the board in dismay. "Bloody hell," she said, flinging back in her chair. "I've been had by a ruddy great *chess shark*."

"You haven't been had as well as you'll be *had* later, my dear." He leaned across the table, took her hand, and brought it to his lips. "At luck would have it, we have a few hours before supper, so would you like to make good on your wager now, or later?"

Her gaze met his across the table with a diabolical little grin. "*Now* works for me... but only if you promise to be utterly demanding and insufferable about it."

His eyes gleamed. "That can be arranged. How about this why don't you go upstairs, put on that appalling little black frock you wore the night you showed up at my quarters to ask for a bit of emergency potion-making, and we'll let matters go from there... ?"

She sighed. "Yes... that can be arranged."

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Not long afterward, Severus knocked lightly on their bedroom door, and heard a seductive warble of *Come in, darling...* He smirked to himself as he slid into the room.

All the heavy velvet drapes were drawn, leaving the room suggestively dim; the only light came from a single shaded candle. His lover was waiting for him, draped over his bed and lazily brushing her dandelion-floss hair with a silver-backed brush. Sweet Merlin, he'd forgotten how appalling that lacy little spidersilk frock really was, and that afternoon she had left off the evening cloak but had recalled his idle remark about developing a fetish for black suspendered stockings. Yes, those legs really needed to join that quim and those lips on the controlled substances list.

She looked up with a mischievous smile when she saw him, and set the brush aside on the night table. Oh, how could he have *ever* thought that twinkly, insinuating little smile was insolent or offensive. Bloody hell, he had never seen a facial expression with so full of shameless allure or erotic possibility in his life.

"So, my victorious drawing room warrior. It appears that I've been had, and now I am to be had for *quite some time*." She beckoned him closer to her with a lazy gesture of her slender hand.

"And does that meet with your approval, my dear?"

She sighed. "I can hardly wait."

Severus Snape never thought he would see the day when he had a lascivious Faerie lying on his bed, wearing what amounted to some black silk and lace erotica of the highest order. It was a scenario straight out of one of his most fantastical teenage erotic reveries, in which the good Faerie arrived to offer the clever hero his heart's desire once he had out-foxed or out-riddled her. Or perhaps this was really the scenario in which the evil Faerie appeared to tempt the hero from his quest but he didn't see any reason whatsoever why he should resist. If one had to pass up such temptation as this, the quest couldn't have been that important anyway.

Then he had just crossed the bedroom floor and seized her, taking another of those long, selfish, callbox-ish kisses of her, and felt her arms twine around his neck as she returned it with equal ardour. Why not, she had expressly stipulated that he was to be demanding and insufferable about this, and one couldn't disappoint a lady. *Yes, you absurd, impossible, maddeningly fuckable female I can think of something I wouldn't mind having.*

A moment later they had just fallen on each other, and she was dragging his shirt and waistcoat off his bare shoulders. He had slipped a hand under her diaphanous skirt and felt quivering thighflesh above her stocking top, cursing every instant he had wasted when he could have been shamelessly molesting her all through the school year, and also discovered that while she had remembered his fondness for gartered stockings, she had left off any sort of knickers. Probably for the best, that at this point he'd have just torn them off her again, and a lady probably wouldn't appreciate the wholesale destruction of all her lingerie.

Then she had his trousers open and that shameless little hand was closing around his cock damn, how could she *always* touch him in exactly the way he found most arousing and then, oh fuck all the foreplay, you want this as much as I do and we both know it. Come here, you, I want you *now.*

He laid her on the bed and in the space of another heartbeat was sheathed inside the impossible luxury of her flesh, both still half-dressed, and just let himself take her selfishly, which in this instance meant that he was going to keep her there for a very long time. Their first days together had been blindingly intense, but now he was beginning to take the most pleasure in prolonging lovemaking, not rushing toward immediate gratification, but taking a long, languorous time to build toward it. Or at least he was starting to appreciate delayed gratification Emily didn't seem to be able to subdue her reaction to him much at this moment. She had been meltingly ready for him a minute after he put the first kiss on her shoulder, responding to him without reserve or calculation. All of her mystery, her mythology, her secrets, eagerly straining against him in bed *yes, you're mine, you want me*

And then she had thrown her head back on the pillow with a long gasp, her body arching harder onto him as she came, and he urged her into climax but held himself back, not wishing for this to be over just yet. He was starting to adore watching her face as she came, seeing that ecstasy playing out in her expressions, and it was also exquisite agony to feel his own aching lust so deep inside her during her orgasm, and then to start again, bringing the tension in her to crisis for a second time sweet Merlin, it was almost too good to be real.

There was just something so utterly *natural* about this. All of the women he had slept with previously seemed to take it as a given that sex was something taboo and shameful, a vice to be indulged in secret, and considered themselves quite the scandalous *femme fatales* indeed for pursuing him and enjoying him in various guest bedrooms. Severus had soon tired of being the means of some girl's rebellion against her parents, when all he really wanted was pleasure and affection. Now, with his lover clamouring under him like some wild-eyed little nymph writhing beneath her satyr beloved, her hands clutching the small of his back so as to fit herself even closer to him as her second orgasm neared and his own wild excitement mounted suddenly all that vice and corruption seemed very far away.

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There are few experiences more rewarding than to have all one's lustful and depraved appetites sated, only to then go downstairs to a hearty supper of lamb cassoulet and lots of red wine. Evening found the elves drawing heavy velvet drapes against the gloomy late-night sunshine in preparation for sleep, and Severus and Emily comfortably ensconced on one of the shabby, overstuffed sofas in the east wing's sitting room before another comfortable blaze, each with a book and a glass of smooth old Scotch whiskey within easy reach. The rains continued for hours, and the weather grew cooler and the winds sharper as the far north summer sun dropped lower on the horizon.

For several quiet, comfortable hours, there was nothing but companionable silence, and occasionally the sound of pages turning. Emily couldn't have imagined anything cosier or more relaxing it was so pleasant to have someone with whom she could just *be quiet*, who didn't require a constant audience reinforcing his over-inflated opinion of himself. She glanced at her companion, admiring his black, etched silhouette in the firelight. He had his book one of his ubiquitous crumbling leather-bound tomes open on the arm of the sofa, and was bending over it with such a thoughtful expression that it was impossible for her to resist the temptation to kiss his cheek.

"What was that for?" he asked, glancing in her direction.

"Oh, nothing. I just felt like kissing you." She went back to her reading.

"Nothing wrong with that." He smiled faintly, and turned another page.

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At perhaps midnight, Emily put her book aside and lay down on the sofa, pillowing her head on Severus's knee.

"Do you want to go up to bed?" he asked, stroking her tousled hair.

"No, this is fine. Stay up and read as long as you like." Within moments, she was asleep. Severus indulged himself with a long moment of gazing at her peaceful profile before he fell to reading again.

Within a quarter hour, though, he felt his own eyelids start to droop. Something about listening to her quiet, regular breathing was immensely relaxing, and the woman did make sleeping look absolutely luscious, like the goddess Nepenthe on her shadowed bower. He put his book aside and gently nudged his companion.

"Come on, young lady," he murmured, as he helped her up off the sofa. "Time for bed."

He steered her out of the east wing and up the tower steps, and led her into what he was coming to think of as their room. She undressed drowsily and got under the bedclothes, and when he joined her there, she settled cosily down into her now-accustomed place in the nook of his shoulder.

"Emily?"

"Yes, love?"

"I hate to ask, but won't he start to miss you soon?"

She shook her head, one arm wrapping around him. "Don't worry. If Albus needs us I'm sure he'll just send us an owl posthaste."

"I wasn't talking about Albus," he said, after a long pause but she had already closed her eyes and her breathing was deep and regular, asleep.

It was amazing, he thought, holding her close against his side when Malfoy was out of her sight, he really was out of her mind. She hadn't brought him up even once since he had persuaded her to put down her bag and refuse to go to him five days earlier. Even when they had discussed the circumstances of her relationship with him in the chapel earlier that day, she had talked in terms of abstracts, of concepts and ethics, rather than discussing a single person.

You never really cared for him, he thought.

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The next morning she greeted him with "Good morning, beautiful," yet again.

"Oh come off it, not *this* again."

"Come off it yourself, darling if I had one delivered by owl post, could you let yourself accept a compliment?" Severus just averted his eyes again the Head of Slytherin House still didn't seem quite used to waking up to such things being said to him.

Emily wrapped her arms around him and nestled her cheek against his. "Oh thou doubting Thomas, what further proof can I offer you? All right, how about this. Do you remember that... interval the other day when I spent some time with my head about at the level of your beltline?"

He closed his eyes and shivered for a single long moment. "Yes... that was rather memorable."

"Did you at any point doubt my ardour or enthusiasm for the proceedings?"

"Not in the slightest."

"Then *good morning, oh my superlatively beautiful, enchanting, brilliant, and fuckable one*," she whispered into his ear, caressing every syllable with her tongue.

He laughed softly, and kissed her. "By the time we get back to Hogwarts, the Great Hall won't be big enough to contain the size of my head. You've been warned."

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Emily got into the shower first that morning, and when Severus came out of the bathroom, towelling his wet hair, he found her dressed in canvas fencing knickers and a cotton jersey, lacing up a pair of trainers.

"All right, you got to trounce me all day yesterday at chess. Now I want to do something where I can trounce you." She took a leather fencing glove from behind her back and threw it at his feet.

"Ah, you'd like to go a few touches, then? Did you bring equipment?"

"Yes, for both of us. Is there a big empty room with a wooden floor somewhere?"

"Yes, there's a room in the east wing that fits that description nicely."

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Cecile brought out another hearty breakfast that morning, cheddar scones and thick-cut bacon and pots of piping hot tea, accompanied by more excited reports of her explorations of the woods around the castle. The elf kept refilling the scone basket and bacon platter at such an enthusiastic rate that Severus said later that with Cecile around, they would have to make a daily habit of these fencing sessions if he wanted to keep fitting into his robes.

An hour later, they were both in a long, narrow, almost entirely bare chamber in the east wing, doing preliminary stretches and drills in preparation for an afternoon's competitive fencing session. Emily had taken up a position close to one of the corners of the room, using one of the north windowsills as a *barre* as she ran through any number of increasingly difficult stretches. When she was finished, she paused, and ran a thoughtful, curious hand along the north-facing windowsill, then touched the wall to her right, which was also covered with dark, old-fashioned wallpaper.

Severus was watching her curiously as she went about this investigation. "What is it?"

"Hmmm... just noticed something. It seemed to me when you were showing me around yesterday that this room and the two next to it to the east were probably one big room with a fireplace at either end at one point, I'm thinking," she told him, running her hand further along the wall. "See, the north and west walls are all stone and wood, and this east wall is all prefab and plaster. So, someone decided to break a bigger space into this room and the two bedrooms next to it at some point, probably within the last century, right?"

"Yes, that would have been my great-grandfather. He put about seven new bedrooms into this wing turned it into a sort of dormitory in anticipation of the huge brood of children he never had, because his wife died when their first child was just a baby. This space here was to have been the family schoolroom, I believe. Why, what are you thinking?"

"Oh, nothing, don't worry about it." It probably wasn't the height of politeness to tell one's host about how she would allocate the space in his home if it belonged to her, so she was prepared to abandon her idea unspoken.

Severus glanced from her to the wall. "No, tell me."

Emily picked up her fencing mask and tucked it under her arm. "Well, all right, it's just an idle thought. If this was my house, I'd knock out all the prefab walls and take down the wallpaper, and then just have one big room with wood-panelled walls and two fireplaces at either end of it, and make it into a giant study or saloon or map room like it probably was originally. Or maybe I'd just take all the furniture out, put in some athletic flooring and armament racks, and make a nice indoor fencing studio out of it, so I could keep up on my training even when it was too cold and wet to go outside."

"That's a wonderful idea, in theory," Severus said, with a little, ironic, twist of one corner of his mouth. "However, unless you've got a construction crew in your pocket, it'll have to wait until I've replaced the roof, alas. With an old house of this size there's always *some* improvement that could be made to it... " His only response was an offhanded shrug, but his scent took a turn toward the acid clearly, Snape Hall's condition was a source of much aggravation for him, and had been for a very long time.

"Of course, dear," she replied, then slipped on her fencing mask and assumed *en garde* position, motioning for him to join her. "Ready?"

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They spent most of that morning and afternoon in a series of bouts that were a combination of coaching sessions and combat. "Nice work, darling, I can tell you've been practicing dodges. Have I ever told you how good your form is? If you were a squire in one of my bladework classes at home, I'd be dragging you up in front of the class for demonstrations."

"I still have yet to score a single point from you, oh thou ruddy great flatterer." He feinted to her right shoulder, then disengaged and lunged forward in a low-line attack, retreating with an annoyed scowl as she anticipated the attack and solidly parried.

"You will, one day. Just keep trying."

"Just how much of this new complimentary attitude about my performance on the fencing strip is due to my *performance* elsewhere?" he asked wryly. An instant later, he noticed her point coming at his left shoulder and dropped it out of the way with a practiced dexterity that filled his coach's heart with pride.

"Good! And no, you didn't start impressing me as a fencer just because we started sleeping together."

"Oh, *really*." Clearly, her opponent wasn't buying a word of it.

"No, I always thought you were talented. The only thing that's different now, is that I feel like I can actually tell you about it." She grinned at him through the fencing mask "If you really want to make this interesting, we could always wager for sexual favours."

"Not on your life I only gamble when the odds are in my favour, thanks."

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After several hours spent wearing themselves out with fencing, they went upstairs to their bedroom and shared a very long hot shower, scrubbing away several hours'

worth of sweat and exertion and enjoying the lubricious qualities of each other's overheated flesh, well slicked with soapsuds. As always, competition of any kind brought out the dominant alpha wolf in him, and the desire to remind her that he now considered her to be *his*, no matter how often she trounced him in combat or was sharked by him at chess. After so many months of a cold, touch-me-not attitude from him, Emily thought there was nothing more thrilling than to feel him confidently laying claim to whatever he wanted of her, the more demanding, the better. Before long he had her spread against the wall and was taking her from behind, very slowly and deliberately, one hand stroking between her thighs and one curving around her breasts. He was devouring her shoulder, the back of her neck, and then she craned her lips back to him, and he devoured them too as the steam wreathed around them.

They took a languorous time about towelling each other off in bed afterwards, and then Emily again took Severus's comb away from him and detangled his hair, whereupon he took the comb back and did the same for her. Then he put a hand inside his robe and kneaded his right shoulder for a moment before turning to her with a pained expression "Emily... er, my shoulder has been hurting again. If you have five minutes, would you mind... "

She only laughed. Then she laid him on his stomach. "Of course I can. Lie down," she said soothingly, drawing the dressing gown off his shoulders and tucking the bedclothes up to his waist.

"I do beg your pardon for the blinding glare off my pallid skin, but I never claimed to be the outdoorsy sort who spends all his time on the Quidditch pitch," Severus muttered, as he settled down on the pillow, resting his dark head on his crossed arms. "I'm afraid I'll never be much of an athlete."

"*Not much of an athlete* my arse, just because you aren't built like some huge rugby player or a Quidditch Beater doesn't mean you can't be a fine athlete it's just a matter of finding a sport that suits you," Emily chided, reclining next to him and beginning to gently knead his shoulders. "I've always said that you were a genius for the spatial aspect of sword combat, my dear, and you've got the perfect build for a fencer or dagger fighter as well, so I'll have no more of this *not much of an athlete* shite, thanks."

"'*Perfect build for a fencer*' what do you mean?" he asked, craning back to look at her.

"Tall, thin, with long arms and legs that gives you the advantage of a long reach and a small target area," Emily said, shrugging. "Honestly, love, if you ever get the chance to see the Fianna working out, you'll note that except for the pookas and trolls, Faery soldiers are *all* built like you. The Orcs are the ones built like rugby linemen, and even *they* think twice before attacking us, so I'll hear no more aspersions cast on your athletic ability, silly thing. If the Sirius Blacks of the world ever give you a hard time again, just throw down a glove and challenge him to a nice bout of fencing, because what with all the training you did with me, you could probably take him apart in about five minutes."

Severus relaxed, picturing himself in a bout with the clumsy, inexperienced Sirius Black the big gorilla would probably fall for a few feints to the chest in a second, then it would be a simple matter of a tight disengage and thrust, or a swift, brutal beat to his opponent's foil and a hard lunge. He imagined landing a good satisfying hit to Black's sternum and knocking the wind out of him... he smirked a little into the pillow, just imagining it.

Emily glanced down at him and chuckled. "I see you like that idea."

"Yes, I do. Rather a lot, now that I think of it."

His lover just laughed merrily, and put a soft kiss between his shoulder blades. She continued what she was doing to his shoulders and back, which felt incredible. As before in the fencing studio at Hogwarts, she just sank her fingers gently into his sore muscles and kneaded him like bread dough, until he felt ancient knots of tension breaking up and uncoiling. After about an hour, her hands showed no signs of tiring, and he would have sworn that his shoulders were sitting about two inches lower than usual.

He had meant to thank her, but he was asleep.

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"Well someone was feeling ambitious tonight," he murmured, putting another little kiss on her shoulder.

"Oh no, this is easy. At home if you want smoked trout and roast duck, most of the time you'd have to go out and catch, gut, filet, and smoke the fish, and then shoot, pluck, and dress the duck," she told him. "So you see, to just order an exact number of pounds of pre-butchered meat up from the market feels positively decadent."

"I see." She was mincing the garlic with such slow and deliberate care that Severus impatiently took the knife out of her hand and took over. "Here, let me do that. At the rate you're going we'll be here all night."

Emily stepped aside with a giggle. "Yes, *sir.* I see that while one can take Professor Snape out of his Potions classroom, one can't take the Potions Master out of Professor Snape."

"Bloody right you can't. Pour me a Scotch, you."

She turned away from him with another merry giggle, and a second later a cut-crystal glass of smooth old whiskey appeared in front of him. Then he heard a champagne cork pop, and his companion poured herself a glass of Veuve Cliquot.

Severus finished mincing the garlic into a very fine and precise purée in minutes, then started on the parsley and the dill. "Roast duck and garlic potatoes am I sensing a theme from our third date this evening?"

"Oh yes duck and potatoes is my favourite supper and I could eat it every night. It was terribly suave of you to ask the elves to serve that for our dinner the other night, darling," she warbled, sipping wine and beginning to slice the bread.

Terribly suave of him oh yes, all he had done was ask the house-elves to send up a supper that a Faerie wouldn't find toxic in any way. Apparently one of the elves knew what her favourite supper was, probably Cecile but why disabuse her of the charming notion that it was a deliberate kindness on his part. "Just trying to be a good host, my dear," he replied limpidly.

Dinner preparations continued apace Emily put the asparagus on the stove to steam, then drained the potatoes and mashed them up with liberal amounts of chopped parsley and garlic, butter, hot milk, black pepper and salt. She then removed the roast duckling from the oven and put it on a platter, then scraped off the rich drippings from the roasting pan with splashes of cognac and Grand Marnier, finally pouring the whole savoury lot into a saucepan. The resulting gravy was then thickened with dollops of marmalade and sprinkles of wheat flour.

"Anything I can do?" Severus asked.

"Let's see... you can put a cover on the duck so it'll stay hot, toast the baguette, and start putting things on the table," his companion replied cheerily. "Oh, and go ahead and light the candles."

Not long afterward, they were both comfortably ensconced at the dinner table, with a glass in hand and a steaming hot supper before them. The rain was still pouring down outside, but somehow anything outside the oasis of light and warmth around the supper table seemed completely irrelevant.

Peripherally, Severus could see his companion watching him curiously, and he realised that he must have been taking a long moment to contemplate the scene in front of him before taking his seat. "Darling? What is it?"

"Oh... I've just never had anyone cook supper for me who wasn't my mother, or a house-elf," he muttered.

Emily grinned at him. "Get used to new experiences," she said, clinking her glass against his. "Cheers."

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She glanced again at the drip puddling in the bucket and suddenly her face lit up, and she turned back to him smiling hugely. "I've just had an idea."

"Then I suppose we must needs hear it then," he replied. The words would have been blisteringly sarcastic when addressed to anyone else, but somehow for her he found himself making an effort to soften them.

"You've got this big lovely thousand-year-old ancestral castle and can't fix all the leaks because there's not enough money. I've got this annoying pile of money I hardly ever use sitting in a vault, and they won't let me in my family's ancestral home because their father went to stay with the Faeries and never came back. So why don't we take some of my pile of money and put a new roof on Snape Hall?"

He stared at her for a very long moment, then muttered, "No."

Emily shrugged. "Why not?"

"Listen to you go on "*Why not*." The very idea is impossible."

"It's not impossible. Severus *listen*. I've got the inheritance from my grandmother, because my mother's never going to live anywhere other than Arcadia and has no Earthly use for it, and I've got what my father gave me. And, most of the bloody time, I live in a place where I can't spend either pounds or Galleons, and have to pay a solicitor to oversee all of it for me in my absence. So why can't I do something with it if I like? What good does it do anyone for it to just sit there in a vault doing nothing?"

"It's not doing nothing at Gringotts, my dear last I heard, their compound interest rates were quite good."

"Compound interest. Yes. More money sitting in a vault that I have no use for, because we use the barter system for everything at home."

"I am not having this conversation with you," he growled warningly.

"Dammit, yes, you are don't look at me like you're about to take an even hundred points from Gryffindor. You've been having this conversation with me for the last ten minutes, and I'm not finished with it yet."

"And what am I supposed to give you in exchange for that kind of money?"

"Well, last I checked, you still haven't deposited the cheque I gave you for the potions consulting in May "

Severus turned toward the windows, pained. "Emily, I was never going to ask you for anything in return for that. Let's just call it *pro bono* work performed out of ordinary decency and put it to rest. Though the figure on that cheque was flattering, I must admit."

"Then why did you keep on for all those weeks about how you were going to bill me?"

"Is it so hard to believe that I was rather enjoying the way you treated me when you were feeling grateful?"

"No, it isn't," she said, laying her hand over his. "How about this in return, you can let me stay here with you sometimes."

"I'd do that anyway," he replied, shrugging. "Look, if you're really determined to pursue this, I promise I'll talk to you about it in five years, no sooner. And I don't promise to do anything more than talk about it then."

"Oh yes five years of more water damage to the roof and the walls and the flooring every time it rains. And this being Scotland, it *will* rain."

"Thank you ever so much for reminding me," he said, with just a second's severe warning look.

Emily glanced down at her glass, abashed, but was not yet finished making her case. "Truthfully, though, how do you know I'll even be around in five years?" she asked quietly. "What if we never get a chance to have that talk about it?"

He pulled his hand out from under hers in a fury. "Fine all the more reason for us to not talk about this," he snapped, the old anger flooding back. "Since you think you'll have *met someone else* by then, it seems "

"Actually, I was thinking more in terms of what if some great big fecking Orc *kills me* before then, but I thought it would be too depressing to ask, *How do you know I'll still be alive in five years*, over dinner," she flashed back, eyes blazing. "But you seem to think it's more likely that I'll up and flit off with someone else. Thanks, I really appreciate that. So much for trying to be fecking *tactful* you know, it wasn't all that long ago that I was known to a whole lot of people as someone's very faithful and devoted wife." She pushed back from the table with a clatter of silverware against china, then started for the door.

Severus shoved his own chair back, snarling: "Dammit, would you wait a second before you "

"No, you're right. Forget it. It's stupid for people like us to make plans for the future. Fuck it. You could die tomorrow and so could I."

"Where the hell are you going?" he demanded.

"Bugger off, you," she snapped back, and left the room, slamming the heavy door behind her with a resounding *THUD*.

A second later, he stood up and pursued her out into the great main hall

To find that the hall was entirely deserted.

"Well *that's* mature!" he shouted. "Always with you, it's Obscure yourself and leave, isn't it if you wanted some time by yourself, you can always try *saying so*, you know!"

Silence.

After a moment, he turned on his heel and stalked back to the dining room table, and resumed his seat. He then sloshed a good big shot of whiskey into his glass, and pulled one of Emily's architecture books toward him, rather huffily settling in for a good long read.

If she wanted to talk, she could bloody well come to him and apologise.

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Soon the hour had dragged to eleven-fifteen by the great clock above the hearth, and no one had said a word. Severus had been poring over architecture books for an hour and could barely remember any of what he had just read.

He looked up from the book, and snapped: "You know I really hate it when you do this. No, scratch that I absolutely *despise* when you do this, and I would like it noted that I have never, not once, since I learned how to use the same sort of magic, done it to you," to the air in general.

No answer.

At midnight, he pushed the book aside and shouted "If I've never told you this before, allow me to emphasise that I think it's profoundly alienating to disappear when you're in the middle of a conversation with someone. Your habit of vanishing at tactless moments is *not* your most attractive quality and never has been."

No response.

He glared up at the still-dripping ceiling with a look of such concentrated fury that the less brave of the water droplets may have decided to remain outside rather than face the Professor when he was in a temper like this. "*Women*," he growled.

At one a.m., Severus got up, and called out: "All right, I'm tired and I'm going to bed. You can join me if you want to," to the otherwise empty room. "If you haven't already packed up and left," he muttered as he climbed the stairs to the western tower.

But once he reached the bedroom, he found the pillow already occupied by a tousled red-gold head, a bare shoulder, and an arm banded with violet, red, and black tattoos. Fast asleep, with a sulky little frown still creasing her features. She also looked as though she'd been crying.

Damn.

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He undressed and slid into bed beside her, keeping his back to her. A moment later, she silently wrapped herself around him from behind.

"I bloody *hate it* when you ignore me," he growled, but allowed himself to be enfolded.

"I bloody hate it when you snap at me. And I wasn't at all wild about that assumption about how I'm going to leave at first opportunity, either."

"It bears repeating that you won't," he said bitterly. "I could stand hearing that a few times before I got tired of it."

"Severus as I reckon time, we've been together for five days. How can you already be faulting me for not being committed enough?"

"Because of the impression made by how evasive you've been the two terms previous."

"During which I thought you despised me." She threaded her fingers through his. "And I've been with you every hour since you told me how you really felt. Do you still feel like I don't pay enough attention to you?"

"Well " He flung back against the pillow with a long sigh. "No. Not since the day at Hogsmeade Station. But I'll never have your undivided attention, will I? You're an Order informant, which means you have to carry on at least some semblance of a relationship with Malfoy. By the third week of September, when your assignment ends, you've already told me you'll leave for home as fast as you can. Counting the days, as I recall."

"That was the original plan before, yes. But when the assignment is over, all it means is that I'm free to do what I like after that. I can go back to Cambridge, or I can stay here, or do something else entirely."

"So I'm the wrench in the works then," he snapped, pulling away from her with an accusing look.

"More like you're an unexpected but very bloody welcome new development. And can't leave for home right away unless the Orc situation is such that Gwydion needs me back immediately, truth be told."

He rolled over in bed and stared at her. "Why? What's going on?"

"I got a message from home just before the Third Task."

"I remember. Mind telling me what it said?" he asked, with a touch of the old sinister eyebrow.

"Grainné Robinett died. Jayson's mother. Just didn't wake up one morning."

"And that means what?" he asked, his brow knitting.

"After Jayson died... her health started to fail. She wasn't a young woman, but she was healthy enough until... and then she just started fading. Jayson had two older brothers Steifan and Richert. And, now... "

"They blame you for both their mother's and brother's deaths, and given what savoury characters we all know the Robinett lads to be the King fears for your safety if you come back too soon."

"Exactly. So I can't go home again. At least not right away. Gwydion told me to stay in the Second World until he summons me back."

"So, what are you going to do?" he asked bluntly, in a voice that was bracing for disappointment.

"Do something interesting, hopefully while continuing to see you if you're still interested," she replied. "I was thinking of maybe asking for my old lecturing job at Cambridge back, and getting another tiny flat there. Then you could come down and stay with me on weekends. I'd like to get to strut my intellectual stuff in front of you occasionally, just to show off. And I'd had this rather nice image of us cooking dinner and getting horribly in each other's way in my tiny kitchen, and then just having wild passionate sex in every room in the place. I know it's silly, but I was having a marvellous time imagining it."

Silence.

"Severus?"

"That... sounds all right," he said, very softly. "But can you keep a secret?"

She laughed. "I'm a Faerie, dear."

"Right silly question. Dumbledore is going to try to hire you for next year, if you haven't gone back to Arcadia by September." He rolled over in a soft rustle of faded linen sheets. "You'll stay at Hogwarts if he asks, won't you?"

"Well... it is fun to get to teach fencing, and magic," she said. "And it probably does the students good to see a few part-humans on the staff."

"Does that mean you'll stay, then?"

"Yes," she said, brushing her lips over his cheek.

"But it won't be because of Dumbledore, will it?"

"No."

"It'll be because you want to be with me, don't you?" he whispered hoarsely.

Her fingers entwined with his on the pillow.

"Silly wizard of course I want to be with you," she whispered. "I'm really looking forward to the day when you can take that a bit for granted."

Part Third: The Hart Subvertant, Chapter 35

Chapter 54 of 55

After Voldemort's return, Professor Swain has agreed to Sirius Black's suggestion that she use her influence with Lucius Malfoy to gather intelligence on the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters. As her horror of the Dark Lord grows, her old enemy Severus Snape proves to be the only one who understands the fear and doubt that plague a double agent…

Chapter 35:

Severus awoke alone the next morning, but found a note on the night table beside his pillow:

S

It's finally stopped raining. I woke up very early & couldn't get back to sleep, so I went for a walk on the beach.

I'll meet you at breakfast around nine-ish.

E

Severus glanced at the bedside clock 7:37 a.m. But rather than wait to meet her, he quickly showered, then dressed in black trousers, a grey lambswool pullover, and stout walking shoes, and made his way down to the beach.

He found Emily sitting on a mussel-encrusted boulder, in black jeans and her black leather pea coat, her arms loosely gathered around her knees.

"Good morning." He took a seat next to her.

"Hello." She glanced sideways at him almost shyly.

"Something wrong?"

"Severus... I didn't mean to upset you last night," she said softly. "But I still owe you a tremendous favour, and the roof was leaking and it had been annoying you all day, and... well, offering to fix it seemed like a good idea at the time."

"I've told you already I don't like to have other people beholden to me," he replied. "You don't owe me anything."

"But I *do*," she insisted. "Downplay it as you will, your assistance probably saved Liria's life Catherine told me she probably wouldn't have lasted much longer if her addiction had gone untreated. Heroin withdrawal is even more traumatic for Faeries than it is for humans you *saw* how sick she was. Not only that, but you did it because I asked you to, despite the fact that you felt wronged by me. And I'm sorry, *we Fae honour our obligations.* Read the books, love that's just how we are."

He glanced stoically out toward the crashing whitecaps before them. "Be that as it may, the offer to put a whole new roof on the castle is a favour of a much higher magnitude than anything I did for Liria. The figure on that cheque was probably overestimated to begin with."

Emily paled and turned away from him. "I guess I'm still not quite current on what's expected when it comes to money. Troublesome stuff, really. When I'm here in the Second World I'm never sure whether it's something I should never talk about, or all I should talk about. I'm always a little behind everyone else on what things should cost, and such... " She shrugged.

"Yes, I noticed. For example, some of us might consider giving each of our colleagues a ten-Galleon bottle of wine at Christmas to be a trifle extravagant."

She blushed all the worse, then got up from the boulder and bent over a tiny sea urchin making its way through a rock pool a few paces away. "Well... we don't *have* money at home. I didn't even know what currency was until my father brought me here to the Second World for the first time when I was seven years old. Then it just seemed so static and dull of a system to me, to have this bit of paper or metal that allowed you to obtain things, and not to have to work for them, not to have to gather or grow something to exchange for them, and not to get to haggle for goods yourself. To me, having a vault full of gold isn't at all *satisfying.* It's just metal sitting in the dark."

"The goblins at Gringotts could no doubt tell you all the ways in which your gold is doing a great deal more than just sitting in the dark," Severus observed dryly. His mouth tightened as he watched her bending over the pool, the wind off the water blowing her wavy red-gold hair around her pale face the idea that any one person could be both so clever and experienced and so damned *naïve* at the same time filled him with a strange kind of reproachful protectiveness.

"Yes, you're right. But no matter how much gold I have in the bank, I can't eat it or drink it, and I can't live on it or grow things on it, can I," she retorted. "You should have seen Swaincroft, my father's ancestral home in the Cotswolds it was so beautiful, this giant Tudor mansion covered with wisteria, with all kinds of orchards and gardens and little brooks. Now, if I set foot on the grounds, they'd probably have me arrested for trespassing." She turned away from the pool, picked up a rock, and threw it viciously out into the waves.

"Yes... I'd heard some evil-minded gossip of a woman say that there had been some unpleasantness between you and your father's first wife's children," Severus muttered.

Emily laughed bitterly. "I don't doubt you heard more than that, if you know the same Felina Rosier I do."

He scowled. "All right, I heard that some acrimonious dealings went on when your father parcelled out all his assets and relocated permanently to Arcadia. Apparently your half-siblings were quite hateful over the whole thing."

"Yes, that's it in a nutshell. If I may be so vulgar as to transgress the pureblooded aversion to ever talking about legal proceedings or money, what happened was this Father gave a fourth interest in Swaincroft and all of his real other estate to each of my brothers and sisters, and then he gave an equivalent fifth share to me in shares, liquid capital, and interest-bearing accounts, along with the Second-World publishing rights to his books. He thought it was only right to give them the house they'd grown

up in, and that they would be interested in tangible assets, whereas I'd prefer liquid cash since I was always running thither and yon on various assignments for Gwydion. And of course, as had to happen, I really would have liked a house and a bit of land to call my own, and all they wanted was my big pile of money. Funny how this sort of shite always happens like that, isn't it." She picked up another rock and hurled it after the first.

"So what did they do?" he asked.

Emily turned back to him with a harsh little laugh. "They did what any civilised person would do they sued me. First they tried to pressure me into signing some papers I hadn't read, but I wouldn't do it. It was the four of them, two sisters-in-law, and seven children all putting the thumbscrews to me, and this went on when I was twenty, mind," she said, scowling ferociously at the memory. "When the high-pressure tactics didn't work, they questioned Father's dispersal of his assets on some grounds that still barely makes any sense to me. Now I took my degree in Classics, I can read Shakespeare in the original folios' text and understand it, but I couldn't grasp what those legal documents were getting at no matter how hard I tried."

"Probably because they didn't make any sense at all," Severus observed.

"Probably," she agreed grimly. "So that first attempt got thrown out of court. Then, they tried to claim I was a bastard daughter who wasn't entitled to a fifth share of Father's assets and his royalties I had to go to Gwydion's royal scribes and get them to draw up these documents saying that my parents were in fact married according to Arcadia's laws, and they had a daughter after that marriage. It was ridiculous hundreds of people including an entire royal family attended my parents' wedding and my naming ceremony, and what, they aren't married and I don't exist unless it's written on a special bit of paper? I just don't get that how can a *person* be illegitimate?"

Her voice had risen angrily, and she took a moment to calm herself before continuing. "And they of course filed the lawsuit in a manner that gave me a deadline to produce these documents, otherwise I would lose everything in a default settlement. Of course they cleverly timed that deadline around days when the Third Kingdom portals wouldn't be open, trying to make the trip impossible I can't bring documents back from Arcadia if I can't get to Arcadia, naturally. I had to go to France and take a portal into the First Kingdom, and then jump on a broomstick and fly like hell for two days, and then go to the Sixth Kingdom to get back. When I actually turned up to the hearing with these papers in hand, they were so surprised it made me sick they weren't even *pretending* any of it happened by accident. So anyway, I gave them their documents and a written statement from my father and that written statement included some scorching language, believe you me."

"I can imagine," Severus said, nodding grimly.

"So their complaint was overturned and I kept everything, but it wrecked the family they all completely disowned me. My father said that if they wouldn't accept my mother and I as his legitimate wife and child, then they didn't need to have anything to do with him, either. When I came home and told him I had to get these documents because they were suing me oh by the Mother in heaven, I'd never seen him so angry. Father's the kindest man alive he *never* gets angry. He's never been angry with me, and the Mother knows I was the most headstrong and aggravating child that ever was. And of course, all of this was going on over something I didn't really *want.*" Another rock went flying after the other two.

"So, the point of all this is, what upset me last night was just that... I'd love to have a castle like you do, with beautiful green lands and oak trees on a cliff overlooking rock pinnacles on the North Sea, with waves crashing and Selkies singing on the beach below. To me, that's what's worth possessing. I'll be honest, I'm insanely jealous of you for having it. When I look at Hogwarts or Greenbarrow Castle, yes, they're beautiful and I love living in them, but they'll never be *mine*, will they."

Severus watched her in silence. It had never occurred to him to feel wealthy or privileged because he owned the manor on the cliff above; having been told from boyhood that the house was a crumbling eyesore and inherently inferior to the homes of his family and peers, he had come to regard it with more shame than pride. To hear now that Lady Emily Beauregard Swain-Tumnus, noblewoman and heiress to one-fifth of the Swain family's fortune, envied *him* because he owned Snape Hall was a chill jolt of lucidity to match the salt breezes now blasting him in the face from off the water. He tried to think of some kind of diplomatic reply, but failed.

"And you know what's funny, is ever since we got here, you keep *apologising* for the place, acting like it embarrasses you, though I can't imagine why," Emily said, glancing over her shoulder at him. "So the roof leaks, so fecking what, that can be fixed, silly thing. Don't you realise how fantastic that place is? I mean *I* want an enormous library with thousands of books and room for another few thousand books and one *couch* in the middle of it," she grumbled, hurling another rock.

"There used to be a lot more furniture and books in that library some good antiques and rare editions, too. But my father sold them," he muttered, with an eloquent scowl. "The library ghost used to throw papers and candlesticks around whenever they took anything out of there he practically turned into a poltergeist. My father used to swear he'd have him exorcised."

"Smart ghost," Emily declared. "If that was my library, I'd have a tantrum too if someone sold my books."

At that point, it was just too much Professor Swain was now on the verge of having a tantrum herself because she wasn't the possessor of his bare library full of dusty old books the thought was too absurd to be borne. His head inclined into his hands with a fit of ironic laughter.

"Stop laughing at me! *I would!*" she insisted, glaring at him.

"I'm not laughing at you," he assured her, quieting himself. "I'm just laughing... at all of it."

"Severus... damn it all to hell, don't you *know* what you have here? In those libraries, you've got first editions by Brontë, Shaw, Stevenson, and my father, among others any number of rare books, and you don't even take pride in them! Up in your Mum's library, you've got all that gorgeous old Art Nouveau silver that used to belong to her, and it probably hasn't been polished in *decades.* How can you *not* admire all that?" Emily kicked peevishly at the gravel in front of her. "I was thinking this morning about how you said it's not opulent like Malfeasant the other day, but please, darling, *fuck Malfeasant*, it's an over-decorated blip on the historical map compared to this place they probably didn't dig the first root cellar of it until the Renaissance. I don't claim to be an expert on Scottish history, but if the foundation of Snape Hall was dug around the same time Canute the Great was born Severus, it's got to be one of the oldest castles in Scotland."

"I do know it's probably the oldest Wizarding castle still in habitable condition in Orkney," he said, averting his eyes. "About three kilometres east there's a Norwegian castle that belonged to a Muggle warlord named Kolbein Hruga, and there are palaces in Kirkwall, but they're all in ruins."

Emily stared at him in disbelief. "My dear now, keep in mind that everything I know about castles and architecture came from that long-ago class I took at Cambridge, but to my untrained eye this castle isn't a mishmash of gothic-Norman-Romanesque-Tudor-gothic revival like Hogwarts the oldest wing is almost pure Anglo-Saxon, and only a few examples of that remain anywhere in the British Isles because of all the Viking raids in the ninth and tenth centuries. The Muggles don't think that any secular examples of that architectural style exist above ground *anywhere*, and here you have a whole fortress of it... don't you realise how historically significant that is?"

Severus got up from his mussel-encrusted seat and joined her at the water's edge. "Yes, the Muggle Vikings never raided Snape Hall because they didn't know it was here, it's Unplottable. The wizard Viking lords didn't raid us because we were related to half of them by marriage or whatever Orkney's always been as Norse as it was Scottish. Viking raiders probably stopped by here to say hello and catch up on their gossip before they sailed down to terrorise the coastline further south."

"Your western, central and eastern wings look like pure early gothic, every stone and recessed arch of them, and not the over-ornamented gingerbread-house later style of gothic, either. If work on the first building began in the late tenth century, then it's a smaller contemporary of *Glamis Castle*, where the Douglases lived," Emily pointed out.

"Yes, I read about the Douglases in History of Magic class," Severus said quietly. "I do recall they were one of the few English noble families who turned out a lot of wizards and witches, and Shakespeare based *Macbeth* on their medieval ancestors."

"Exactly. And in my opinion, Snape Hall is far more beautiful than most of the castles of that era, and built on more elegant sort of lines. Most of the time castles just got slapped up without any sense for the overall balance of things, it would be like, we need some space here, let's put up a tower or a new wing. But whomever designed

Snape Hall had a real genius for proportion and symmetry, and the masonry work is first-rate, all of it."

"Well... we're isolated up here. Oftentimes there's nothing to do but study or pray or work, or perfect your craft at something. If a mason knows he's going to get to work on the one church and one castle that his village possesses, all of his life, I can imagine that might lead to... a certain pride in the work, especially if he's getting decent wages," Severus said quietly.

"Come on, love, the care they put into it is obvious. Centuries have gone by, and it's still beautiful, especially the interiors it wouldn't have held up this long if it wasn't superlatively well-built in the first place. That great main entrance hall is just a work of art, truly "

"For a room full of cobwebs I can't afford to light properly," he grunted, also picking up a rock and flinging it out to sea with an impatient gesture.

Emily turned on him in a fine fettle of annoyance, her finger jabbing into his shoulder. "You know what *fuck all that.* If Michelangelo's *David* was put in a dark room and cobwebs were allowed to gather on it, guess what? It would *still* be a Michelangelo, my love the second someone got it out and dusted it off and lighted it properly, its artistic worth would be undiminished. I know my opinion probably isn't educated enough to mean much, but I still think that entire castle is a dusty, cobwebbed, leaky Michelangelo, my dear."

For a long moment, they just glared at each other but then Emily gave him a challenging look, and turned back toward the steps leading up to the top of the hill. "You want to see the entrance hall lit properly? Come on."

Severus scowled deeply, but hurried after her. "Mind telling me what you're talking about?"

"Just come on."

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Emily decisively threw open the front doors and stalked into the centre of the main hall when they arrived back up at the castle.

"You're right, this hall doesn't make full use of the available natural light, with all these high ceilings and south-facing windows. It was built by someone with a huge budget for wax candles and brazier coals, who didn't mind showing off his wealth," she said, craning her head back to gaze up at the ceiling.

"Yes, that sounds about right," Severus said grimly.

"Well then allow me to demonstrate one of the first *caltrops* a Faery child learns." She raised her arms above her head like an orchestra conductor signalling for *Fortissimo*

"LIOHT!" she shouted, her voice reverberating faintly off the stone walls -

And a brilliant greenish-silver light climbed the walls... starting at the floor, outlining every detail of the intricate stone carvings with pockets of luminescence... until the entire hall glowed softly, like some otherworldly cathedral.

"*Well... then,*" Severus murmured, wandering forward to join her in the middle of the hall. "What do you call that?"

"In English, it's just called *Faery Light*," she said, shrugging. "It's the equivalent of a *Lumos* spell, really, only it's not confined to your wand, so you can play with it a bit "

She gestured in his direction, and Severus saw his hands lit up with a glowing nimbus that blazed silver for a moment, then was gone. "Light, but no heat," he murmured.

"Exactly, so you don't end up with smoke residue on the ceiling, and there's no chance of fire. If you want to light an actual fire for warmth or to cook with, you'll need firewood and a different incantation, just like in wizard magic. But this charm is still very useful and a lot of fun for example, if you want to get fancy, you can even draw and make pictures with it " She waved her hands delicately over her head, and a cascade of greenish-white snowflakes fell from the hall ceiling, disappearing as they fell toward the floor.

"But to get the best view come here." She sat down in the middle of the floor, then lay down on her back, pillowing the back of her head on her hands.

"Oh come, don't be ridiculous "

"Don't worry, love, no one will see you, just look at it."

"All right, if you're going to insist on this absurd thing... " He lay down beside her, and for a long time just lay there gazing up at the ceiling. After a moment, she rolled over on her side toward him and put her head on his shoulder, one arm around his chest.

"See?" she murmured, nodding toward the softly glimmering, timelessly beautiful ceiling. "It's gorgeous."

And it was.

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Severus had so long thought of Snape Hall as a liability, an old pile, a constant annoyance with a leaky roof and mildewed wallpaper and shabby furnishings, inherently inferior to the homes of his relatives and friends that its historical value and great beauty had long been lost on him. Now... some of her admiration and enthusiasm for the castle were beginning to rub off on him, allowing a previously unknown pride to be kindled in a part of him that had long felt worthless.

But then his scepticism reasserted itself "Well, it's still awfully bare, hardly full of antiques and ancestral portraits like Malfeasant "

"Trifles," Emily scoffed, completely dismissing all of Narcissa Malfoy's decorating efforts with a single wave of her hand. "You've been listening to the Malfoys pontificate about how great their place is for too long. If you want some paintings on the walls, it would be easy enough to get you some. If there aren't a million ancestral portraits lying around, then landscapes would be nice."

He chuckled softly, caressing her slim forearm where it lay across his chest. "You don't have to do that, it's all right."

"Well, my point is, pictures can be obtained. Architecture like this is a lot more impressive."

"Especially when it's lit up like the Hogwarts Great Hall at Christmas," he observed dryly.

"Oh, why not light it up like Christmas this effect doesn't cost a damned thing, or leave soot on the walls. If I use another incantation to make it stay like this, it'll last for a whole day. As for the cobwebs "

She sat up and aimed a hand at one of the thick skeins of dusty cobweb on a veined stone arch "*Waskan líon damháin alla* " The web vaporised.

Severus sat up behind her, his brows quirked at the ceiling. "*Where* did you learn that?"

"It's the world's easiest magic, really the twisty incantation just means *Clean Spiderweb* in Old Arcadian. My best friend Bill's mother was a Greenbarrow Castle housekeeper, so you can bet she knew a lot of spells to get cobwebs out of high corners," Emily explained, scanning the glowing ceiling for more cobwebs. "She and a

crowd of her friends could get the King's huge audience hall sparkling in fifteen minutes, it was really fun to watch them zapping the dust and smudges away. Plus we've got all these unpaved roads and dirt paths around the castle, and you have a crowd of folks living there who run around on their bare hooves half the time, so we track mud in like nobody's business. Nonetheless the cleaning staff keeps the place positively beautiful you should see it."

"Really?" Severus said, keenly studying her animated face as she continued decimating cobwebs. "So... you're the king's great-niece, and the First Knight's daughter, and your *best friend* was the son of a castle charwoman? And your parents let you learn some of her housecleaning magic?" he asked, surprised. He couldn't imagine what the Malfoys, or his own father for that matter, would have said if he had done something similar as a child it would simply have been unthinkable. His father wouldn't even let him associate with respectably middle-class village children, much less the children of domestic labourers. He could only have imagined the hiding he would have gotten if he'd ever asked one of the house-elves if he could help with their work.

"What sort of a pampered princess would I be if I couldn't clean my own bedroom, eh?" Emily scowled deeply and half-turned away from him. "And Gwydion isn't the sort to emphasise class distinctions every hour of every day in his castle he's not like that. His head steward and any number of his knights are commoners, he's... he's just not like that. Bill and I started playing together when we were both about one year old, and by the time someone pointed out that he was considered to be rather lower down than I was in the castle pecking order, I liked him too much to stop talking to him. He was more fun than anyone else I knew I wasn't going to start... *hating him* like some people did because my Mummy was a noble knight and his Mummy cleaned the castle for a living. Housekeeping is honest and necessary work I'd like to see what the castle would look like if we didn't have a cleaning staff," she said, rather more defensively than necessary, Severus thought. He intuited that this was a sore point with her, and that she had defended her friend Bill to many people, over many years.

"Besides, I didn't give Mrs. Blake much choice in the matter," she continued, defiantly blasting another blowing cobweb off the wall. "I was the pushiest child alive if I saw someone doing something interesting, I pestered them endlessly until they explained it to me. If you ever sit across from my Mum at supper long enough, she'll tell you all about how I tried to get her perfumer friend, Mrs. Peaseblossom, to take me on as an apprentice when I was about eight. It hadn't quite occurred to me at that age that all Mum's fencing and archery lessons meant she was grooming me to be something other than a middle-class merchant."

Severus chuckled, putting an arm around her shoulders. "Emily Swain, the perfumer... I can't even imagine it."

"It could have been worse," she said, grinning mischievously as more cobwebs disappeared. "My friend Victoria is the worst clotheshorse you ever saw, and when she was little she wanted to apprentice with Mrs. Peshka, one of the pookas who make spidersilk. Now Vi wasn't taking into account that the spider pookas make silk by secreting it from their own bodies, you see, and Vi is a sidhe, so her chances of becoming a silk weaver were... kind of unlikely. Mrs. Peshka is incredibly nice, so she was sort of at a loss as to how to explain this "If you ever grow a set of spinnerets, sweetheart, we'll talk about it... " For *years*, Vi and I had no idea what she was on about."

She continued blowing cobwebs away for another minute, but Severus finally took her hands and stopped her. "Thank you for the effort, but just leave it for the elves. I didn't ask you up here so you could clean house for me."

"It only takes a second," she protested. "And something as wonderful as this deserves to be cared for." Her eyes alighted on his face a second later, and lingered.

"I know," he said, feeling his face heat under her gaze. "But this place is my responsibility, not yours."

"All right. Sorry. But... perhaps you could apply to some historical society for a grant. There's got to be some group of wizard academics out there with a budget who would have an interest in preserving it, darling. Or maybe you could apply to the government to have it declared a historical monument, like Hogwarts is, and then maybe they'll give you something toward its maintenance I'm not sure how either of those processes work offhand, but I could check into it for you, if you don't have time."

"You're not going to give me any peace over this until I let you do something to help, are you," he muttered. "First you wanted to help the Malfoy elves with their ironed hands, then it was Liria, then the Order of the Phoenix, then Cecile, then Molly and now it's my old castle. You're just not happy unless you have some cause to champion, are you."

"Severus... that's just how I *am*," she told him. "I owe you a major boon for what you did for Liria, and here's something you could use my help with. If you don't let me do something for you I'll be in your debt *forever*, and just saying you don't want me to be beholden to you isn't enough. Wouldn't it drive you mad to know that you had unfinished business with someone that he *wouldn't ever let you finish?* Wouldn't you hate knowing that you owed someone everything, and he wouldn't ever let you get square with him?"

Severus gave a long resigned sigh, his head inclining into one hand; for perhaps he knew all too well what it was to owe a binding debt of gratitude that could never be discharged. "All right would you *finally* be satisfied if I deposited the cheque you gave me and put it toward repairing the roof?"

She nodded vigorously. "Yes. Very much so *please* promise me you'll do that."

"I *suppose* I could, if it means you'll finally be able to sleep at night, and *I'll* finally have some peace from your guilty conscience," he growled, but his practicality was finally winning a rare victory over his pride.

"Yes, it would. And then for your next birthday or Christmas or whatever, I'll have another part done and then "

"No, I said we'd talk about that in five years, and I mean it," he insisted, putting an immovable end to that line of reasoning with a touch of the old sinister eyebrow. "Now, you have to promise to not have been killed by some ruddy great Orc in five years."

She smiled gratefully. "I'll do my best, love, I promise you that at least."

There was nothing to do after that sort of resolution besides pull her into his arms and kiss her, at length.

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Afterward, Severus nudged Emily and asked, "So... this first *caltrop* every Faery child learns, and the world's easiest spell for getting cobwebs out of distant corners are those classified by the Arcadian monarchs, or can you actually teach them to someone else without penalty of court martial?"

"I could," she said. "I couldn't formally instruct my students in their use, but there's nothing preventing me from informally teaching them to my lover, if I wanted to " She slanted a wary look up at him "and if he wanted to learn them?"

He fixed her with a look of his own. "I don't know where you're getting the idea that I have some aversion to learning Arcadian magic, my dear did the rate at which I started devouring your father's books mean nothing to you?"

"You certainly seemed averse to it at the beginning of the school year '*neat little tricks*,' and all that "

He felt his skin heat, and glanced away from her. "And *neat tricks* they've turned out to be, especially when one is fighting a lot of hired thugs in an alleyway."

She kept looking at him, large brown eyes fixed on his face, lower lip perhaps quivering for just an instant.

Severus grimaced. "Ah, I see I've made this a sore point for you, and there's no way I'm getting out of this without making some kind of abject apology, is there?"

Emily silently shook her head *No.*

"All right... I suppose it might have been a bit tactless to lay into you with other faculty around, especially when you had just moved into a new community and a new school. And it probably wasn't fair to hold you responsible for a lot of classroom pranks when your curriculum was dictated by your government and not you yourself."

She just kept looking at him, and he flushed all the worse.

"And I suppose it wasn't fair to blame the antics of those Weasley hooligans on you, either. I do know bloody well that no one can control them, not even Minerva. I didn't mean to denigrate your people's magic... I was just angry because my cauldrons were getting Dungbombed and you weren't talking to me." He averted his eyes self-consciously, feeling himself blushing horribly. "So yes, I shouldn't have lost my temper with you and insulted your people's magic. It was boorish of me."

An instant later, she threw her arms around him and kissed him effusively. "But you've gotten awfully interested in it since, haven't you?"

"Well, yes, of course, did the rate at which I was studying it tell you *nothing*? I had *plenty* of other work to do, but I spent every spare second absorbing " These heroic protestations only resulted in more kissing, which did much to assuage his discomfort over having to apologise. A bloke could perhaps own up to his imperfections more easily if he knew that such confessions would be accepted with a brilliant smile and lusty bouts of kissing.

A tiny piping voice suddenly sounded to their right "Mistress? I thought I is hearing you out here, breakfast is ready in the dining room " Cecile then got an eyeful of her Mistress engaged in said lusty bout of kissing with Mr. Professor, yodelled *Ooooh! Sorry!* then turned and scurried back in the direction she had come. Severus was painfully embarrassed, but Emily only fell on his shoulder laughing again.

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Today's breakfast consisted of bacon and cheese omelettes with a sizzling pan of mushrooms sautéed in herbed butter. Both Severus and Emily had scarcely dug in when she said "You know what would go really well with this?"

She got up and vanished into the kitchen, then came back a second later with a bottle of beer. "Mmm cheddar and bacon omelette, mushrooms, and a cold beer. Just like home."

Severus chuckled, his eyes widening. "You've got to be joking."

"Don't laugh until you try it. Here, have a bite... " She fed him a fork of omelette and mushrooms, then a swallow of beer. "Pretty good, eh?"

He chuckled again. "Positively decadent. So that's what you have for breakfast at home?"

"Well, not always. For breakfast at Gwydion's table, you'll get lots of exotic gourmet sorts of things and champagne. In Rivendale, you'll get fresh bakery sorts of things with fruit and hard cider. At your average country pub, you get bacon and eggs and small beer."

"Small beer?"

"Low alcohol content beer. We didn't always know about water purification, so someone noticed that if you drank mostly beer, you wouldn't get as many stomach ailments as people who drank still well water. And the early Fae liked to drink, so they got very good at winemaking and beermaking and such. By the time we discovered that you could boil water and make it safe, or purify it magically, we had gotten to where we liked drinking liquor so much that we just kept right on having it with every meal."

"And now it's been going on for so long that you're all born with a huge tolerance for it."

Emily laughed. "Exactly. If you're ever with me at Court, don't worry about trying to drink all the booze that you'll get offered."

"Yes, I quite remember what Catherine said about the best food and the worst hangover of her life. If I ever travel in the Faerielands, I'll have to ask her to prescribe me some of that hangover cure to bring with me." He kept his eyes on her face, as though waiting to hear more about this notion of visiting the Third Kingdom with her in the future, but Emily had gotten absorbed in her breakfast again. "Did you want to do some more fencing today, perhaps?" he asked, pouring himself more tea.

"We can do that, sure. Right after we get back from the village, where'll you'll have deposited my cheque into the new Snape Hall improvement fund account and made appointments to get estimates from all the local roofers," Emily said, with a sweet, twinkly, utterly stubborn little grin.

"There already is a Snape Hall home repair account," he murmured down into his teacup.

"Of course there is." She grinned all the worse. "Have I ever told you how *sinfully* attractive that practical streak of yours is?"

Severus rolled his eyes. "Now you're just shamelessly flattering me."

"I prefer to think of it as positive reinforcement."

"All right, you've gotten your way and made your point, but I'll *not* stand for any gloating, understand?" He turned the full effect of the sinister eyebrow on her in a manner that brooked no disagreement.

"Yes, Mr. Professor, sir." She brought his hand to her lips and kissed it.

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To her credit, Emily made good on her *no gloating* promise to the letter. She could sense that the house's state of repair was a very sensitive and personal issue for Severus, and it would be easy to wound his pride again on the matter. So when they went upstairs to get ready to go out, she kept her attention carefully averted and avoided any mention of the cheque her lover had just tucked into his pocket. On the walk down to Nornsay, she kept up a round of bright conversation about what sorts of shops and restaurants were in the village, never once touching on the reason they were making the trip.

Nornsay turned out to be a charming, sleepy, picturesque little village of snug white clapboard and brick buildings set around a winding inlet of the bluest sea imaginable. A few fishing ships were tied up to the dock, unloading their catch; and a group of children were kicking a football about on a wide village green. The high street was made up of any number of cosy shops, cafés, offices, and the occasional pub.

Emily spotted the small Gringotts branch down at the end of the street, then tactfully excused herself, telling Severus she wanted to pop into the bookshop across the street for some local history books, and asking him to meet up with her at the little café next door when he was finished with his errands. He readily agreed to this plan, with what Emily thought was a touch of relief.

When Severus met up with her perhaps an hour and a half later, Emily was sitting at a cosy table with a mug and tiny pot of peppermint tea beside her, poring over several new selections from the bookshop's Local Interest section. She looked up with a bright smile when he approached the table. "There you are, love. Listen to this:

"The men spoke for the most part in a slow deliberate voice, but some of the women could rattle on at a great rate in the soft sing-song lilt of the islands, which has remained unchanged for a thousand years... It is a soft and musical inflection, slightly melancholy, but companionable, the voice of people who are accustomed to hours of talking in the long winter evenings and do not feel they have to hurry; a splendid voice for telling stories in." "

"Ah, yes, that's Edwin Muir," he said, taking the seat beside her.

"It reminded me of you when I read it," she said smiling, and handed him a teashop menu.

Severus began poring over the hot beverage selections. "So I spoke to three different contractors, and they're going to come look at the central wing's roof at different times this week, then submit bids," he said, keeping his eyes on the menu.

"Excellent," Emily said with a satisfied smile.

"Do I need to show you the deposit slip?" he asked archly.

"You most certainly do not."

"Tell me why I did that again?" he muttered.

"Because you earned it," she said, fixing him with a very deliberate look across the table. "Because you put in so much time studying Potions that your expertise is valuable, and anybody who's been dragged out of his own bed at an instant's notice *should* charge time and a half for his trouble."

"You keep acting as though it was a simple matter of a Potions consulting job," he muttered darkly.

"It *was* a simple matter of a Potions consulting job. Think of it this way, love imagine there was a sudden epidemic, a new strain of Mad Thestral's Disease or some such, and you got a late-night Floo call from a former student at St. Mungo's begging you to come help them get more medicine ready, saying you could bill them for whatever you thought were reasonable fees after the crisis was averted. So you do the work, you send them an invoice, and thirty days later, they pay you. Would you have any problem whatsoever with depositing that cheque?"

He thought about it for a moment. "No, I wouldn't. I'd probably find someone in hospital accounts to vent my spleen upon if they took a day longer than thirty days to get it to me."

"So why do I deserve any more consideration than they do? Really, my dear " She lowered her voice and leaned toward his ear "What happened in that callbox was a damned good shag, not a pledge to do my bidding for the rest of your natural life, *gratis.* Honestly, talk about situations to make a bloke feel taken advantage of," she said, with a dire shake of her head.

"I'd say there were quite a few extenuating circumstances at work on the night we went to the hospital," he countered.

Emily shrugged. "Like *what*?"

"You know very well what I mean."

"No, sorry " she leaned toward his ear again "an appalling little black frock *doesn't* count as an extenuating circumstance. I hired you as a legitimate independent contractor in that situation, and for me, that's where it ends. To be brutally honest, I think you would have been entirely justified in blowing the whole damn cheque on taking some sweet young thing to Tahiti for a week, myself, but no, you're putting a snug roof over my head for when I stay here with you. Your wholly admirable prudence is matched only by your extreme generosity, my love."

He gave her a look that somehow managed to be withering and flirtatious at the same time, then shook his head. "I'm going to take every one of those remarks out of your hide later, you irreverent minx of a woman."

She sighed. "Mmmm, I can hardly wait."

Just then, the waitress who had earlier taken Emily's order for tea, a tall, lightly freckled woman with long dark braids twisted behind her head, appeared at their table. "If it isn't Master Snape o' the Hall, hallo! Didn't know you were in town, then. Just dilderin' about the village for a spell?"

"Yes, running errands and such," Severus said. He studied the woman's face for a moment "Let me guess, you're one of the Erlendssons."

"Aye, I'm Martha, Will's eldest. I'd met you a few times down at the Narwhal, a-playin' at chess with me Da."

"Ah, that's right. How is your father? I'd heard he competed in Cyprus last year, how did that go?"

"He placed in the top fifteen, and they had *six* Russian grandmasters, too!"

Severus and Martha Erlendsson chatted about the Cyprus competition for a few minutes, and while Emily wasn't sure what they were talking about, it sounded as though placing in the top fifteen in such a contest was a noble effort indeed. Then Martha took their orders for another pot of mint tea and a cup of black coffee.

Their waitress collected their menus with a grin. "I'll tell me father you're in town, he'll be wantin' a game at the pub come Saturday. Will you be about, then?"

"Possibly, we could try to make it, just so Will isn't deprived of the chance to give me a thorough thrashing the way he always does," he replied wryly, making the woman laugh merrily.

The fresh tea and coffee appeared shortly afterward, and Emily had her usual reaction to the proximity of fresh coffee and what she considered to be its oily, acrid smell. Severus noted her distaste with curiosity. "What? What is it?"

"Nothing, I've just never been wild about the way that stuff smells."

Severus's forehead creased. "Oh, come, how bad can it smell from three feet away?"

Emily grinned at him. "Darling, keep in mind that I can smell the starch from your shirt and the shaving lotion you used yesterday. Fresh brewed coffee from three feet away is like to incinerate my nose hairs right off."

He looked at her in disbelief. "I've no idea why you object so much to a simple beverage "

"I don't *object* to it, I simply don't like the way it*smells* is all."

"This, from a woman who thinks nothing of having a beer first thing in the morning. Have you ever even *tasted* coffee before?"

"No, but I don't need to taste pond scum to know that it's probably rather vile as well. You wouldn't want to be around me if I tried some, believe me."

"Why?" He looked at her sceptically. "What would happen?"

Emily gave him a sinister-eyebrowed look of her own. "All right, fine, I'll show you why I can't drink coffee." She waved Martha back over to their table. "Could I have a single cup of espresso? Thank you."

Their waitress returned shortly with a tiny white china cup and saucer. Emily picked it up and blew on it for a moment, then downed the entire cup in a single swallow, holding her nose and making a face as though she had just taken some vile medicine indeed, then chased it with a large gulp of mint tea.

"Now, was it really that bad?" Severus asked.

She grinned at him. "You'll see."

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From then on, there was absolutely no stopping her all day.

They walked from one end of Nornsay to the other, and she was a non-stop font of questions and gay chatter about everything, as energetic as a hummingbird. Then they took the path back up to Snape Hall, and Severus had to hurry to keep up with the pace she set. She was as distractible as a child on the way back, wandering from the path to look at anything that caught her eye for even a second, with a new, hectic brightness to her manner.

The elves were finishing up with their lunch preparations when they returned. Cecile happily told her Mistress that she had found a thicket of wild raspberries during her treks in the woods, and the elves had spent part of the morning in berry-picking. Cecile had then devised a lunch menu around the fruit: roast chicken with a salad of field greens and raspberries with vinaigrette, and a hot berry cobbler. When Cecile told the story of her find, Severus would have been hard pressed to say whether elf or Faerie twittered more excitedly.

After the meal, Emily mentioned Severus's earlier suggestion that they do a bit of fencing that day. "You know what, though, let's do a bit of work in the Arcadian style instead of the European linear style, because what with all that varied terrain outside it would be a good learning experience for you. After all you can't expect to always meet up with someone who's coming at you head on and most of the ground is dry now," she chirped, all in one breath, then took the steps up to the bedroom to change as though gravity had loosed some of its hold on her.

"You weren't joking about not being able to drink coffee, were you," Severus muttered as he followed.

Nonetheless, once they both got dressed for combat practice and into canvas jackets, fencing masks and gloves, and met each other in a grassy forest clearing that afternoon, he couldn't complain. It was like a day left over from the idyllic far past, with the restless seas below them and the golden sunlight slanting through the trees, when the young heir to the Snape family's tribal earldom had met with the medieval knights loyal to his clan for training with the sword and the bow. Both the Norwegian Viking lords and Scottish wizard earls from whom he had descended had held their lands through force of arms, and their sons would have been expected to do the same. He doubted, however, that any of those heirs had ever been trained by a knight such as this one.

"All right, squire." She tossed a wooden practice sword to him, and he caught it deftly. They saluted each other, and assumed *en garde* position.

Emily gave him a wild, mad-doggish sort of grin through the mask, slanting a challenging look down her blade.

"Defend yourself."

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She came on immediately with an attack at his left shoulder Severus felt a breathless instant of fear and suspense in the pit of his stomach before he reacted, but then his well-drilled response to such provocation kicked in, and he parried her solidly, using the momentum of his blade against hers to force her back a step. This successful defence to her first attack sent a charge of visceral confidence through him, adrenaline racing through his veins as all his mammalian fight instincts came to the fore. He retreated to the right, for he knew his opponent was right-handed and thus felt more comfortable with attacking toward the left.

This combat on the uneven terrain of the grassy field felt much different than any of his previous experiences on a polished wooden floor, but he was adjusting quickly to it, to the springy leverage of the grass beneath his feet and the give of the dirt beneath the grass. This compensation came none too soon, for she aimed another attack at his right, a slash that would have bisected his collarbone had she connected with an *Orcleofian* in her hand but he brought the practice blade up and countered in a manner that brought a spontaneous exclamation of *"Good!"* from his instructor.

He still wasn't able to get past her defences and land a solid hit on her, try as he might; his opponent had decades' worth of experience on him and he knew it. But he also outweighed her by about forty or fifty pounds and had about six inches of height and reach on her, and as such, was starting to be able to move her around a bit using his greater mass, and had noticed that it took her longer to recover for the next action if he could force her off balance. He had been learning to use this advantage during their hand-to-hand grappling sessions, and had actually been looking forward to their next session after Midsummer so as to continue working on that style of combat. Maybe later he could persuade her to take that sort of training up again, to make up for the session that wasn't.

They spent much of that afternoon in such practice, and Severus noticed to his considerable satisfaction that even if he couldn't land an attack on her yet, she was landing fewer and fewer attacks on him, and working harder for the ones that she did get. This made her resort to new tactics in order to maintain her advantage he wasn't accustomed to low-line attacks just yet, so she started a campaign of feints to his upper torso followed by wickedly fast jabs to the knees that forced him into some frenetic footwork to dodge. Perhaps five minutes later she tried this tactic again, and he made the mistake of trying to chase her blade with his and parry rather than dodge which meant that she landed a solid knock to the side of his knee before he could force her blade away.

"If that was a real combat situation I'd have just taken your leg half off at the knee," she threw out, circling him.

"This is what you're like at home, isn't it," he said, taking up position opposite her again. "You don't lavish encouragement and back massages on your squires in the Fianna, do you."

She shrugged. "There's the public school teaching style and the military teaching style, darling," she replied. "The kids at Hogwarts will never have to go up against three-hundred-pound Orcs what they need to know is how to defend themselves against Dark Wizard sneak attacks. Can you even *imagine* what would happen if I stood in front of my class and knowledgeably discoursed on the best way to hack someone up with a sword?"

"I think most of the Slytherins and half the Gryffindors would hungrily lap that kind of knowledge up, but yes, the parents might be a little uncomfortable with it."

"Would *you* be uncomfortable with it?"

He fixed her with a look through the fencing mask. "When I said *most of the Slytherins* would lap that up, I was including myself among their number."

She gave a depraved little laugh, assuming *en garde* stance again. Yes, Severus was starting to know his opponent well, and was quite aware that she had become a soldier not just to defend her country, but as an outlet for the aggressions seething beneath her professorial propriety. Whether it was the unaccustomed stimulant in her blood, the fact that she had finally paid him back in kind for the great boon he had done her, or the splendid isolation of Snape Hall, she was in fine mettle of savage competitiveness that day.

"Someone's feeling *forceful* today," he said, after barely evading another feint-disengage-attack combination.

Emily laughed. "Sorry."

"Don't stop. I rather like it."

"This is nothing," she scoffed. "You should try taking me on in my other form."

"*Fine*," he snapped back, without a trace of fear. "Kick the trainers off and have at it."

"Oh yes, *right*," she replied, as though that was the most preposterous notion ever conceived.

"No, do it." He dropped his *en garde* stance and leaned the sword against the ground. "I'd rather like to see that."

"My dear, it's been well established to me that what's normal for my people is *not* normal for yours," she retorted. "There are a lot of people here who aren't at all comfortable with me unless I'm passing for human. Hell, even my eyes and ears are barely acceptable to some."

"There's no one here but us."

"Oh, please, I saw the way you reacted to me at the hunt," she shot back, an edge in her voice.

"There you go equating me with the Felina Rosiers and Druella Blacks of the world again. I'd quite appreciate it if you stopped that, because it's damned irritating. You're a teacher, Emily, such sweeping and unfounded assumptions are beneath you," he reproved her.

She paused, then yanked off the mask to face him directly. "Come off it, you looked shocked beyond belief when you saw me, I remember it quite clearly."

Severus pulled off his own mask as well. "Was I surprised to discover that I was personally acquainted with a shapeshifter the like of which I'd never seen before? Bloody hell *yes* I was, I'll not deny that."

"Do you know what would have happened that day if I hadn't been able to dodge like I did?" she demanded hotly. "I would have *died*, Severus, there was no way I could have gotten clear of the boar's rake attack unless I switched forms at that instant, I would have ended up with my entrails hanging out like that poor horse "

"You don't have to defend that decision to me it's always been obvious why you used the tactics you did. And if you'll remember, I tried to help you up after you had killed it. While you were still in your hoofed form, mind."

She paled deeply, staring at the ground for a long moment before she finally glanced back at him. "I'm sorry," she said. "I guess I don't really remember a lot of what happened afterward with perfect accuracy. I was *very* upset at the time."

"I noticed." He waited, his gaze holding hers.

She took a deep breath, then took off her shoes and socks and put them aside, facing him across the clearing on her bare feet and in another instant, he was facing an otherworldly new opponent, a creature with enormous brown eyes, dainty cloven hooves, and whisking cervoid ears. "All right, but don't say I didn't warn you. Ready?"

"Yes."

And then they had at each other.

He came on with a swift lunge to her right hip and in an eyeblink, she simply sprang past him and wasn't there. His attack connected only with air.

Nimble little minx, aren't you, he muttered.

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Perhaps half an hour later, Severus fell exhausted onto the grass and put his mask aside, then downed most of a bottle of water. "I'm afraid I'll have to admit defeat this time, my dear. And yes, you did warn me."

Emily took off her own mask and crouched beside him, gathering her hooves beneath her with her arms around her haunches. "Well, you did put yourself at a bit of a disadvantage."

"So I see."

"Don't feel too bad about it, really. I have a vertical leap of about six feet in this form. It certainly helps with avoiding attacks and getting that apple high up in the tree."

"Vertical leap of six feet? Straight up?" he asked, mopping his brow with a towel.

"Straight up. Measured it and everything when you've got a bunch of soldiers with free time on their hands, they do a bunch of stuff like measure how high they can jump and how fast they can run and who can beat who in swordfighting."

"I can imagine we did much the same thing in flying class when I was a boy." He closed the space between them, peering intently into her face, then hesitantly stroked her hair back behind the deerlike ear, and traced its outline with his fingertips.

"No need to be so reverent about it, darling, it's still *me*, I just look different," she pointed out.

"Of course," he whispered, stroking her ear with more familiarity.

A moment later she pulled off her gauntlets and got out of the fencing jacket, then got out of the cotton jersey, fencing knickers, and sports bra she was wearing under it, her eyes averted, arms clasped modestly over her breasts. It was a picture he remembered from Swain's *Encyclopaedia*, the woodcut of the slender nude female faun, only breathing and alive, in full sunlight and close enough to touch.

Then her eyes met his; a wary gaze through windblown fair hair. "Well?"

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Well indeed.

Her eyes and the pose made her seem much more a wild thing of the forest than a noble lady; almost a child, carnal and lawless. How magical her kind must have seemed to human beings of centuries past, who thought that a good harvest must be due to the goodwill of a panoply of fertility gods. And how eerie and demonic she would have seemed to those who personified their religion's force of ultimate evil with horns, cloven hooves, and a tail.

"What does the transformation feel like?" he asked. "Does it hurt?"

"No, not at all. I barely notice it."

"Do you... if you change forms spontaneously, do you have to adjust to the different anatomy?"

She shrugged. "No, my mind just seems to know how to compensate for the physiological changes automatically. I don't have to adjust to it any more than you would have to re-learn how to stand up if you'd been sitting for awhile."

"*Interesting.*" He pulled her into his arms, one hand caressing the curve of her delicate haunch it felt like stroking a gazelle. "You're not terrifying," he said softly. "Really rather graceful, in my opinion. If one is at all familiar with Greek sculpture, this form is very classical. Although I'll admit I'll need some time to get used to it."

"Severus, stop it, don't worry, you're hardly alone in that," she said, her arms twining around his neck. "My husband was a sluagh from the Sixth Kingdom, and he had never met any shapechangers or pookas until his platoon was deployed to the Third Kingdom. Any time a person meets a whole new race of people, it takes time to get accustomed to how different they are."

"Well, speaking of getting accustomed to the ways one's lover is different... I don't know any delicate way to put this, but I do have a preference for your other form in, er, intimate situations. It's simply that "

Her head fell onto his shoulder with a merry laugh. "Of course you do. You're not a male faun, so you're not biologically hardwired to find this form sexually attractive it's just too different from your own physiology. Having hooves and a tail isn't like having a different skin tone, to you that would be akin to bestiality. And yes, my husband felt the same way and it didn't offend me. But... " In another second she had morphed from the elfin hoofed form to soft, bare skin, oval knees, pale, high-arched feet "how about this body?"

"Not that your saucy white tail isn't charming in its own way, but I do enjoy this form the most." He raised her face to his and kissed her softly. "Now, I'm afraid the sight of all this pretty naked female flesh has chased all thoughts of fencing practice from my mind, so what do you say to another *interlude* in bed before supper?"

"Only if you promise to take all my irreverent remarks out of my hide, just like you said earlier," she murmured, kissing him back.

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was for each individual volume to be taken down, dusted, and the leather covers wiped with a cloth lightly dampened with lanolin and castor oil. It occurred to her that perhaps she could get some supplies from the village and teach Cecile and the other elves how to properly maintain the books but then her eye was drawn to the clock on the mantelpiece, which read 1:47 a.m. All right, maybe she could talk to the elves later.

She took up a single volume Keats's *Complete Poems*, a gorgeous old illuminated edition with swirling pastel drawings after the style of Alphonse Mucha: Isabella with her pot of basil, the Grecian urn, Lamia in all her serpentine glory. The endpapers still looked beautiful and the leather cover was in very good shape after she wiped the dust away, but the binding was nearly worn out; clumps of pages fell out into her hand when she opened it. So, she took the book over to the table by the sofa, and set about with a few *Biblio Reparo* spells.

After a few minutes' work, she muttered, "Damn it, the glue is all gone, can't do much more without getting some adhesive." She considered for a moment this late at night, nothing in the village would be open. Perhaps she could go back down to the kitchen and rummage about again

Then something touched her hand, she looked up to find a bottle of spirit gum sitting on the table beside her, where it had most definitely *not* been a moment earlier, and she was still entirely alone in the library. Emily nearly jumped out of her skin, staring wildly around her.

After a moment, she calmed herself, remembering that Severus had told her that an invisible ghostly presence inhabited this library. This ghost was notably protective of his space Severus had said that he had become hostile when any of the books or furniture had been sold. As such, it did logically follow that perhaps he would be favourably inclined toward someone who came into the library, dusted the books, and began restoration work on one of them.

She gingerly picked up the glue bottle, murmuring "Thank you," to the air around her, and began work again. After some careful gluing and half an hour of painstaking *Biblio Reparo* spells, she thought the book was rather nicely restored. The pages flipped easily when opened, and due to the deckle edges of the pages, a person would really have to look to find where they had been reinserted.

"Not bad, if I do say so myself," she said, then addressed the air again "Is there perhaps any castor oil about for the leather covers?"

When she glanced back down, there was another leather-bound book sitting on the table, and a bottle reading *Old Anodyne's 100% Pure Castor Bean Oil.* Emily smiled, looking around with wide eyes. There was still no one there, but from somewhere nearby, she detected the companionable scent of pipe tobacco.

"Well, Mr. Prince I'll assume you're a Prince you're a very helpful fellow," she said to the empty room. "I'm Emily Swain, by the way. I'm here visiting your descendant Severus Snape, the current owner of the castle. It's really a shame Severus doesn't have more time to maintain your library, because you've got some wonderful books here. I'm having a bout of insomnia tonight, so I thought I'd poke around a bit, and as it turns out, you've got some books that could use a going-over. Why don't you just keep bringing them to me, and I'll see what I can do. While I'm at it, do you think you could do something about the dust and cobwebs? I know you were probably pretty depressed when some of them were sold, but that's no reason to just stop looking after them, don't you think?"

When she glanced down again, her stack of books on the table had grown by two volumes, both of which had been nicely dusted.

"Thank you very much," she said.

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Severus woke early, as per his usual habit, and was surprised to find himself alone. He got up, dressed, and went looking for Emily.

When he couldn't find her in the bathroom, dining room, or any of the sitting rooms, he started to get a bit worried, but then it occurred to him to check the libraries. He found Emily in the large main library, sitting on the sofa. She had pulled the side table in front of her, and now it was absolutely covered with books, cleaning rags, and little bottles.

"Hello, love," she called when she saw him. "I couldn't sleep so I came down here but then I noticed some of the books were losing pages," she said, all in one breath, raising her glassy eyes to him. "So I fixed a few of the books that were falling apart. The ghost kept bringing them to me, he was really helpful. Nice fellow."

She indicated a stack of books on the table, about thirteen or fourteen of them in all. Severus glanced at the stack of volumes beside her, then picked up the one on top, his mother's treasured old illustrated edition of Keats's complete works and for the first time in years, none of the pages fell out when he opened it. She had put it back together so well that he couldn't find the mends in the binding.

"Emily... you did a fine job of this," he said, glancing up at her in surprise. "Where did you learn it?"

"My father's a library curator, darling," she said, shrugging. "The King is a huge book collector and oftentimes he would acquire these incredibly old books of poetry and ballads or magical grimoires or whatever, and my father would have to restore them. When I got big enough, I started helping him. Second-World bound books are actually really easy by comparison to Arcadian books because the modern binderies manufacture them all the same standardised way and... " Then her head was nearly split in half by an enormous yawn.

"And you've been up the whole night doing this?" he asked, one eyebrow arching toward the ceiling. He came closer to her, and noticed that while her eyelids were heavy and her face very pale, her hands were shaking slightly, and she was talking a mile a minute. "Shouldn't you perhaps *go to bed*?"

"There's no way I'd be able to sleep, dear. I'm still far too wired from that coffee I drank yesterday."

"But that was *yesterday*."

She shrugged helplessly, hands jittering. "And three glasses of Seventh Kingdom absinthe would just give *me* a nice giddy high for a few hours, whereas you were convinced that the inconsiderate walls of the Knight Bus were breathing too loudly... ?"

"Ah. I see." Then he helped her up off the sofa, and put his arm around her waist, and started out of the room.

"Where are we going? I still have more books to work on!" she protested, with a touch of uncharacteristic irrational peevishness, no doubt the result of a night of sleep deprivation.

"You can get to those later. Right now, we're going to have a bit of breakfast, and then you're going upstairs and taking a nice dose of Dreamless Sleep Potion."

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Emily went out like a light after she took the sleeping potion, and Severus covered her with the bedclothes and drew the bedroom curtains. Then he went downstairs to meet with the first of the roofing contractors he had contacted.

When the man arrived, the two of them got on broomsticks and flew over the roof of the castle, and the man gave Severus his opinion of what work needed to be done, a timeframe of how long it would take, and a cost estimate, which was, not surprisingly, for a very large amount of Galleons. In order to restore the roof of the Anglo-Saxon wing of the castle where the roof had rotted and fallen in, the contractor thought the structure would need some strengthening so as to be able to take the weight of new construction, which would require large-scale *Reparo* spells to the rafters and beams from a crew of trained construction wizards. "This would be a major renovation job, and that's for certain, Mr. Snape. This place is so old, you see, I'd need to hire some specially trained sort of engineers and construction wizards, the sort who work on historical cathedrals and castles like Hogwarts, and that kind of skilled labour doesn't come cheap."

"I understand," Severus said. He noted down the figure quoted, and thanked the man for his time.

The second contractor came by an hour or two later, and had much the same opinions of the scale of renovation required as the first fellow had, and quoted a very similar price to undertake it. The third contractor, who turned up not long afterward, had much the same opinion as well.

However, even though it would be years before Severus could save enough to undertake a full-scale renovation of the castle's roof, what with Emily's consulting fee, he now had almost enough to have the central wing's roof replaced. Once the coming school year started, the work could commence by the following spring. Well he had done a strange Faerie a good turn, and as a result, he was going to get rid of his leaky roof over a year ahead of schedule. This made his steps feel a great deal lighter as he mounted the stairs back to their bedroom.

When he arrived, Emily was out of bed, and the room was deserted, so he again went in search of her. Downstairs in the dining room, Philomela told him that Emily had already been down for an early lunch, and had gone outside onto the northern castle grounds afterward, taking Cecile with her. Severus then had a quick lunch himself, got back on his broomstick, and went looking for the two of them.

From the air, he spotted a familiar red-gold head and pair of big, droopy ears within the walls of his mother's old rose garden. Emily looked up and waved when she saw him Severus, we're down here!

When he touched down in the centre of the garden, he saw that Emily had put on Muggle jeans, a light woollen pullover, and an old pair of rubbers, and had garden shears in her hands. The flagstones of the garden path had been swept clean, and she had raked the dead leaves and effluvia out from under the rose trees and bushes in one entire quadrant of the garden down to the rich, bare black earth, and piled them into a bin she had found or Transfigured up from somewhere. She and Cecile were now clipping off the dead canes and branches of diseased leaves on several of the plants, and had been piling the clipped blooms on the nearest stone bench.

"Do you see that?" Emily asked Cecile, holding up a rose branch. "That's called *blackspot*, it's a rose disease. When you see leaves with these black spots, I want you to pluck them off if there's only a few of them, but just cut the branch off entirely if it's really covered with it."

"The roses, they is sick, then?" Cecile asked.

"Yes, they're sick and need our help to get better."

"You didn't sleep very long, did you," Severus said, propping his broomstick against a bench.

"Sorry, all that caffeine is probably going to get me up bright and early for some time now," Emily replied, shrugging.

"I'm sorry I even brought up the topic of coffee," he said, with a dire shake of his head. "What have you two gotten up to, then?"

"Cecile kept going for all those walks around the castle, and she told me at lunch today that she had found the prettiest little garden down here, all these white rose trees and rosebushes. It's the perfect spot for roses up here, all sheltered from the sea breezes by the house and that big stand of oaks all round," she said, nodding out toward the woods. "But it's all overgrown, and some of the plants have a horrible case of blackspot, and there were enough aphids to choke whales. So I told the aphids to get lost and picked up a rake and shears. I've just got a lot of energy to work off due to my least favourite beverage, and I thought it would look so pretty with a bit of care, and I like roses, so there you go."

She bent over the drift of flowers on the bench and selected a single full-blown blossom, then brought it over for him to see. A slender, graceful form amidst a bank of blooming plants; a woman's slender hand offering him a white rose. Suddenly Severus's throat had closed completely.

"Darling? Are you all right?" Emily was watching his face intently. "Was this, er, someone's garden?"

"It was my mother's garden," he whispered. "She planted the roses herself. We used to sit out here, when the sun was up... "

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to... I'm sorry. I guess I'm turning into a bit of a Little Miss Fix-It, aren't I, it was just that... " She turned away from him, embarrassed. "I'll leave it to your elves, then "

"No, no. Thank you, it looks like you've been working hard at this." He swallowed hard. "I just haven't been down to this part of the garden in rather a long time, is all, I haven't told the elves to maintain it, really... "

"I don't blame you roses are really high-maintenance, they're more of a hobby than just a plant. You've got to have a bit of a passion for them, I suppose," she said with a touch of false gaiety, putting the shears aside on a bench. It seemed to him that she was making excuses to cover her embarrassment, and wanted to be gone from here before she offended him any further than she thought she already had.

His hand closed around hers, brought the white rose to his face, and inhaled deeply. "Did you have a rose garden at home, that you had a bit of a passion for?" he asked.

Emily paled, eyes downcast. "Well no, not like this. Just some plants in pots I liked a few varieties that smelled nice. But I gave them away when I left to come here. Just one of my momentary crazes, really... "

She started to turn away, but he drew her back and kissed her cheek, until she relaxed against him and he felt her worry and self-consciousness fading away. Then he tucked her white rose behind one of her ears, and smoothed her windblown hair.

"Would you like some help?" he asked.

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The raking and pruning-back continued apace, and with three people at work, that neglected, overgrown little garden was starting to look quite well-manicured and shipshape. Cecile was too small to reach the rose trees, so Emily had her pulling weeds and pruning the smaller bushes.

At first the elf was loath to cut off too many dead canes and diseased branches, especially on when it left a plant looking much more bare than before, but Emily assured her that pruning roses was good for them and encouraged them to grow. "Even if you cut it nearly bare, it'll grow back in a few months roses are tough, they can bounce back healthy after all sorts of things." Cecile nodded, and fell back to work.

"So you told the aphids to get lost, eh? How did you manage that?" Severus asked.

"In English, it's called *Fauna Ken*, the art of commanding animals. The general rule of thumb is that the less intelligent the creature you're trying to influence is, the more surely you can order it to do your bidding. Let's see " She glanced around for a moment and spied a sparrow in the trees above them, then silently spoke a word and the little bird glided off the branch to alight fearlessly on her open hand.

"How did you do that?" he asked, pausing in his work to watch.

"Put the idea in his mind that he would be unharmed and get a nice head-scratch out of it if he came over and said hello," Emily said, lightly scratching the sparrow's head and neck with a delicate fingertip. "And now that I have his attention, I can use a bit of *Deceivre* and have a chat with him how are you today, Mister Flitterhop?" she asked the bird, again silently speaking a word.

The sparrow twittered for a moment, and Emily nodded. "He says he's having a good day, because he's been finding a lot of food, and the weather's been nice. These are all very important matters to a sparrow, you see." Again she addressed the bird with a silent invocation of her True Name "Well, I'm pleased to have made your

acquaintance, sir. Please convey our good wishes to your mate."

The sparrow took his leave of her with a jaunty bob of his speckled brown head, spread his wings, and darted away and Emily turned back to Severus. "See? That's all there is to it."

"Interesting," he murmured, his eyes following the sparrow as he alighted back in the tree. "How did it work with the aphids?"

"All right, consider the common aphid," she said, falling to work with her rake again. "It's a slow-moving, soft-bodied insect that feeds on plants like roses and violets. What do you think motivates it?"

"Let's see... food, of course, and safety, and the wish to reproduce, I suppose," he said, shrugging.

"Right, it's not a very complex creature, so that's probably all it's capable of thinking about. So you've got this aphid contentedly living and laying eggs on a rosebush. What do you think would motivate it to take its eggs and leave a situation like that?"

"Hmmm... " He paused, considering. "Fear of being eaten and all its young wiped out, I suppose. One would have to somehow convince it that it and its eggs were in danger of imminent death, that it was being threatened by some predator."

"Exactly," she said, smiling at him. "What I did was convince them that if they didn't leave this garden forever, a plague of mantises and ladybugs would devour them and all of their eggs, but if they left this garden alone, there was a feast of wildflowers for them far away in the woods where they would be safe. And wouldn't you know it, they started picking up their eggs and trooping away into the grass. See, there some of them go now," she said, nodding toward a cluster of slow-moving green and brown insects, each carrying tiny white eggs as they made their way across the flagstone and out of the garden. "Then I used a *Weard* spell to create a barrier around this garden, so that any parasite thinking to feed on the roses would be possessed with the fear of predators, and leave."

"*Weard* spells I think I might have read about those in your father's *Encyclopaedia*. Magical wards, right?"

"Right," she said, nodding. "It'll fade eventually, so I'll need to refresh it every so often, but until then, you've seen the last of any parasites on these roses."

"So you've put an invisible insect-repelling barrier around the garden, then?"

"Just against parasites. The bees and such can come in and pollinate like before."

"So... do *Fauna Ken* and *Deceivre* fall under the heading of that which you can teach your lover?"

She turned to him, smiling, holding a fragrant white rose to her lips. "They surely do," she said.

Eileen Snape's white rose garden had years before served as a classroom, in which she had taught her child to read and write three languages, to work out mathematics and how to study the natural sciences, and to comprehend centuries of diverse literature. That afternoon, the garden became a classroom again, as more of the Faery magical canon was thrown open to its newest acolyte, Eileen's son.

&&&

Siúil go sochair agus siúil go ciúin,

Siúil go doras agus éalaigh liom,

Is go dté tú mo mhúirnín slán... "

Severus paused in his work, listening closely. The words were unintelligible... but there was something so *imploring* about the first words, repeated three times, like someone begging someone else for something, or to do something, such a tender, reverent inflection to the word *rúin*... the only word he knew of that was pronounced like that was, of course, "love"... what did one implore one's love to do...

"Severus?" The song was over.

He shook his head impatiently. "Sing it again, I didn't quite get it. What language is that?"

"It's an Irish Gaelic traditional ballad." She cleared her throat and began again... Severus closed his eyes and silently invoked his True name...

and this time he picked out a word.

Come...

A woman asking her lover to come to her? Yes, somehow that sounded right and then it was like someone in a distant room had finally gotten close enough to make out what she was singing

"Come, come, come, O love,

Quickly come to me, softly move;

Come to the door, and away we'll flee,

And safe for aye may my darling be!"

"And safe for aye may my darling be," he whispered, opening his eyes and turning to her.

Emily put aside her pruning shears with a delighted laugh and threw her arms around his neck. "You're brilliant, my love," she said, kissing him soundly. "Absolutely brilliant. And it'll just get easier the more you use it."

Cecile had been heaping white roses into a pair of willow baskets as this lesson went on, and now she cut her eyes away with a little squeak when her Mistress had embraced Mr. Professor for yet another effusive bout of kissing. After a moment, she murmured, "Er, Mistress Emily? It is getting on supper time, and I am wanting to make up some of these roses into decorations for the, er, the *special thingy* tonight. May I be taking them up to the kitchen?"

"Yes, that's a wonderful idea, Cecile, go right ahead. I can't wait to see what you come up with your bouquets are always so pretty."

Cecile grinned happily. "Thank you!" Then she took the two absolutely enormous baskets in each hand, and vanished with a puff of grey smoke.

Severus turned a quizzical look toward Emily. "What's that about a *special thingy* tonight?"

"Well, seeing as how I completely missed the feast of Lughnasadh this year due to extenuating circumstances, I thought I'd throw a belated one," she said, smiling at him.

"We're throwing a feast tonight, are we?"

"We are." She only grinned all the worse. "All you have to do is put on your summer dress robes, and meet me in the grand ballroom at seven p.m. tonight."

"Really. And how many guests are we expecting, may I ask?"

"Just two."

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Emily took herself off to another stateroom to wash off the sweat and mud of her afternoon's gardening and prepare for whatever she had planned for that evening, so Severus showered, shaved, and dressed in their bedroom alone. At exactly a few minutes after seven p.m. (he decided to forgo his usual extremely punctual habits in deference to his hostess) he made his way down to meet her.

The ballroom looked absolutely magnificent Severus finally realised exactly what mysterious project she had had the elves working on in the evenings previous. The formerly dusty and cobwebbed crystal chandeliers had all been taken down and cleaned to a prismatic shine, and the whole room was lit to an ethereal glow with *Lioht* spells and new wax tapers in freshly polished silver candelabra. The marble floor had been polished to a buttery shine, and the stained glass windows were outlined in silvery-green light. As he entered, someone put a victrola's needle to a record; he recognised Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*.

Every available surface held a bowl or vase or ewer of prettily arranged white roses clearly Cecile had gone all out with the decorations. The supper table was set with an abundance of dishes: roast pheasant on a bed of wild rice, a small roast of what he thought might be liver of some kind, field greens and all manner of summer vegetables, fresh-baked wheat rolls, honey cake, a raspberry and blackcurrant tart, and several bottles of wine chilling in a silver basin.

And finally the smiling girl he remembered from the Malfoys' wedding, the fair-haired one in the little silvery-green dress, was waiting there for him and she smiled rapturously when she saw him arrive. Then she wafted up, put her arms around his neck, and kissed him as though he was the one person she loved most in all this world. "There you are, love," she said. "Happy Lughnasadh."

He kissed her back, his arms finding their now-accustomed cosy place around her waist. "Now tell me, what exactly is Lughnasadh?"

"It's one of the four great feasts of the Arcadian calendar the others are *Imbolc, Beltane*, and *Samhain*. It has other names too, *Lammas, Lammastide*, and *Latha Lunasdal*. We have some minor feasts too, like *Midsummer, Yule*, and *Ostara* as well. Lughnasadh is a harvest festival, the first one of the year; there are three of them in total. It's now that we bid farewell to summer, and it's thought that the Mother will change her aspect from the Maiden, to the Mother, and then when winter starts, she'll become the Wisewoman, or Crone."

"That's right, I recall reading something about that. The Morrigan is a Crone aspect, isn't she?"

"One of the main ones, yes."

"And exactly how would you be celebrating it at home?"

"We'd have a big feast, with lots of things made with fresh butter and milk and honey, and mead, and the brewers usually bring out a special seasonal beer around this time. A lot of the time people go berry-picking, and it's thought that the more berries you find, the better the harvest will be. And then there are traditional dances that are

usually performed at this time of year at sunset. Then we'd all eat and drink and dance ourselves into exhaustion, and everybody would take the next day off to sleep."

He chuckled, then nodded toward the table. "That's quite a supper."

"Thanks, I showed Philomela a collection of traditional recipes from home, and she spent all day shopping and cooking," Emily said gaily, bringing him to the table and pulling out his chair for him. She then took a bottle from the ice bucket and filled his wineglass with a pale, amber-coloured wine. "It's customary to drink mead at this holiday, and wouldn't you know it, the wine shop in town actually had some. Have you ever tried it before?"

"No, never." The mead, a wine made from fermented honey, was like nothing he had ever tasted before, tangy, mildly sweet, and faintly spicy. It paired wonderfully with the food, especially the pheasant and dark brown bread. Emily busied herself with slicing the liver after the first melting, delectable bite, she told him it was lightly seared *foie gras*, her King's favourite dish. "This is all wonderful, my dear."

She blushed. "Well, most of the credit goes to the elves, I just gave them the menu, recipes, and a shopping list."

"No matter who's responsible, I'm certainly not complaining. You're spoiling me this holiday the only time I ever eat this well is during the first and last feasts of the year at school, at Christmas, and the occasional wedding."

Emily turned toward him, her eyes keen with curiosity. "Speaking of weddings you said something to me when we were at the Mushroom Circle that really stood out in my mind. I don't know if you remember it, but you asked me: 'Why don't you wear green anymore didn't you wear green to Lucius's wedding?' I didn't really think anything of it until I was packing to come here, and came across the exact frock I had worn," she said, smoothing her skirts. "How did you know? I don't recall anyone introducing us."

"No, no one ever did you were too busy dancing with everyone, and I was too busy wishing I was somewhere else. I suppose I remember it because... you and your family were the only cheerful part of the whole wedding," he said quietly.

"You're absolutely right, love, was that not just the most lugubrious affair you ever saw? I never saw a bunch of wedding guests look so grim we have wakes at home that are more cheerful than that. And then the highlight of the whole thing was when my parents made me get into this big crowd of women so Narcissa could chuck a floral arrangement at us, and it nearly bounced off my forehead."

Severus smothered a laugh in his hand. "Oh, yes, how well I remember that. You caught the bouquet, and then you threw it back up in the air and stepped away from it like it was contagious."

"It was coming right at my head I only caught it in self-defence," she pointed out. "First I thought, 'What's this for again? Oh wait, it means I'll be the next to get married,' and my next thought was 'Bugger that, somebody else take it!' Then this ungraceful cow of a girl practically incurred a rugby foul trying to get the damn thing from me. Honestly, she was welcome to it, no need to stave my ribs in, really."

Severus recalled the tableau Emily and Bellatrix had made at the wedding: Bella's discomfiture, and Emily's cheerful, rude smile as she left the dance floor. The thought was enough to make his smothered laugh turn into a real one.

His companion watched him across the table with shining eyes. "I love it when you laugh," she said.

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After supper, Emily got up from the table, crossed to the victrola, and put on another record waltz music began playing softly. "So tell me, do you remember asking me to teach you the waltz at the Mushroom Circle?"

He got up and joined her. "Vaguely. Though from what I saw in the Pensieve, we did make a rather good show of it."

She laughed merrily at the memory. "Absolutely we did. Would you like to give that another go, then?" she asked, holding out her hand. "It is traditional to do some dancing after the feast on this holiday."

"Well... perhaps that would be all right." He took her hand and drew her out onto the open ballroom floor. "Let's do this properly, shall we?" He made her a courtly bow, fixed her with another velvet-black gaze, and asked, "My Lady, may I have this dance?"

And as before, whenever he looked at her like that, everything between Emily's heart and knees turned to water. "Of... of course, sir."

Then his arm was around her waist, and hers around his shoulder, and she gave him a very quick refresher course as to the box step waltz, which, conveniently, he seemed to recall rather well. Before long, they were off in a fluid, stately waltz, and the rest of the world seemed to melt away to the edges of her memory. As she remembered from Midsummer, he was a pleasure to dance with, courteous, graceful, and light on his feet, and this time, he genuinely seemed to be enjoying this without the dubious benefit of a great deal of Seventh Kingdom absinthe, which did nothing to dispel the liquid trembling from somewhere in the vicinity of her heart and knees.

He leaned toward her ear "And as I recall from the Pensieve, you said that next time, it would be my turn to lead?"

Her head fell onto his shoulder with an indulgent laugh. "Of course it is. Really, my love, you're doing fine. Better than fine. Whomever told you you couldn't dance definitely needs to be spanked."

"Oh no, no one ever told me I couldn't dance it was that the more people pestered me to do it, the less I wanted to. After I'd gone to enough of those dreadful Wiltshire cotillions, the very idea of it was excruciating."

"Well then." She drew him closer into her arms as that dance continued, holding him in a manner that would have scandalised many a Wiltshire society hostess into an attack of the vapours had it been observed in her ballroom. "Perhaps we'll have to find a way to make the idea less excruciating for you in the future."

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Later that evening, after much wine, waltzing, and banter, the candles had burned far down and dancing had largely become an absent-minded sway to accompany a series of lengthy and extremely intense kisses. Not long afterward, both decided by some familiar mutual telepathy that what had been started on the dance floor would be best finished in bed, so they made their way upstairs. It was a slow, leisurely progress, their arms around each others' waists, and stealing kisses at every staircase landing.

Severus wasted no time in hanging up his robes, undressing, and getting into bed. He leaned contentedly against the pillows to watch his companion getting out of her clothes, his chin propped on one hand, and with a decidedly humid look in his black eyes.

She sat on the edge of the bed to remove her dancing shoes and stockings, then reached down and lifted the green dress over her head. Underneath it, she was wearing a filmy silk chemise and little boned corset bodice, both in a pale pink perhaps three shades off from the colour of her skin. Pale V of downy neck, spine, and shoulder blades just above the back ribbon ties of the corset, soft sinewy arms. Just a slightly dishevelled woman in her lingerie, but she was sitting on the edge of his bed, preparing to make love with him and then sleep next to him; so now her every curve and line, every gesture, seemed timelessly and eternally female, a tableau of sensuality from a painter's canvas. She raked her hands through her soft, mussed hair, then glanced back over her shoulder at him.

"What is it?" she asked, smiling faintly.

"Just looking at you," he whispered.

She paled, her eyes downcast almost modestly, a lock of hair falling over her cheek. "You're always looking at me now."

"I looked at you not infrequently before now as well."

"Yes... I have to admit I've spent a bit of time looking at you when I thought you wouldn't notice," she murmured, unlacing the front of her bodice. "Like at the New Year's Eve Ball. You looked positively scrumptious that night, really."

He smiled faintly, then took her hand and drew her into his arms. "So did you. And then afterward I went to bed thinking about how I would have liked to watch you slip out of that silver dress and get into bed with me."

"I'll not lie to you, I'd had more than one shameful little fantasy about bedding you even when we were arguing about library policies," she murmured, punctuating each word with languorous little kisses.

"It all seems so stupid now on the day you arrived at school, I wish I'd just Flooed you a map to my quarters, reading 'Let's retire at ten tonight. Dress code is something black and appalling, please... ' You would have taken me up on such an invitation, wouldn't you... "

"In a heartbeat, love. My word, it's no wonder we spent so much time in such a foul mood with each other. Nothing could have been worse than having this phenomenal shag with someone, and then having to see that person every fecking day without the possibility of ever getting to have another phenomenal shag with them. Just think of it all that drama, all due to an appalling lack of sex."

"Yes, it was just unforgivable of us. Let's make a pact never to let that happen again, shall we?"

"Absolutely."

His hands were buried in her hair, tilting that neck back to be devoured; and from the way her hand was caressing him under the bedclothes, it appeared highly unlikely that anyone in that bed would be suffering from an appalling lack of sex at any time in the near future.

Then she had slipped out of the chemise and joined him under the covers, easing him down onto his back as her full lithe weight stretched over him, and... oh, could anything have felt better than this, to be so hard and eager and then feel himself taken deep and snug into the warmth of his lover's body. His hands sensually caressed down her back, curving over the sleek arse and thigh muscles clenching as she breathlessly worked herself on him... yes, love, just fuck me like that, oh sweet Merlin yes... No breath of shame in how much they both wanted this, nothing to hold back.

*Is this what you wanted?*he whispered, his lips brushing over her damp neck.

Yes, darling, yes, my love...

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Perhaps they had dispensed with celebrating on the proper day of Lughnasadh, and dispensed with the usual madcap folk dances in favour of the sort of stately ballroom dancing with which Severus felt more comfortable, but the customs of eating, drinking, and making love until all celebrants were exhausted were well and thoroughly observed that evening. For just the final touch of perfection to their night, the Selkies started their crystalline arias up again just as the two of them were drifting off to sleep, cosily nestled in each others' arms. It sounded as though a huge group of them had gathered on the beach just below the western tower.

Severus closed his eyes and concentrated on the music, feeling the familiar goosebumps coming out on his arms at the sound of their voices, unable to imagine a more beautiful soundtrack to lull him to sleep on a night like this. But then an instant later, he threw his head back with a gasp, his eyes dilating

Stay...

for suddenly the Selkies' voices had resolved into words

Stay with... me...

Come to me...

Swim to me...

Sleek one, strong and lovely one, come to me...

"You can hear them now, can't you," Emily whispered, her arms tightened around him.

"*Yes*," he said. "The words... this must be mating season."

"So they're singing love songs," she said. "Trying to attract a mate."

Come...

to...

me...

Stay...

with...

me...

Emily drifted off to sleep soon afterward, her head nestled in its usual place on his shoulder, but Severus's mind and heart were racing. He had been here once before in his life, in this state of narcotic bliss brought on by his first experience of kissing, of lovemaking, of holding and being held, of gazing into his beloved's eyes as they lay on the same pillow; when all he wanted was one particular woman, a room with a bed, and perhaps food and water now and then.

Now, as he re-discovered this state of being, he found that it had lost none of its charm or significance.

And now... the woman he desired felt exactly the same about him, purely and openly.

He watched her sleeping beside him, that lovely profile pillowed on his shoulder. For some measureless amount of time, he just held her and listened, his scalp prickling and goosebumps shivering on his arms, as the Selkies sang their immortal longing and need.

I love you, he whispered, his lips barely moving against her forehead.

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Severus watched his lover sleeping beside him for a long time that night.

He almost couldn't stand the idea that anyone else's eyes would ever rest on this face, this body, ever again; just the fact of her existence seemed like something too precious to share with the rest of the world. The walking symbol of his vulnerability and need, with a mind, will, and agenda of her own. He now knew what motivated men like Emmitt Parkinson to chase away anything in one's woman's life that might interfere with her devotion to him, and knew that he had it within him to become the most jealous man alive like Emmitt, or pathologically possessive like Lucius.

But he was also quite certain that Emily would never allow that sort of thing. He knew of two men who had tried to subvert her will to their own, and completely control her she had killed one, and was doing her best to get the other sent to prison for life. He was sure she would leave him in a moment if he tried it, and that was enough to make him keep such tendencies at bay.

He also couldn't have said why this was going so well, either. It wasn't as though he considered himself such an expert on how to sustain a relationship indeed, with the father he had, all the precedent would have pointed to him treating her dreadfully, and making her leave him as fast as possible. But impossibly, arguments over roofing and money aside... she seemed happy. Very happy. Falling asleep beside him every night with her head on his shoulder happy.

Severus was perhaps not taking into account the fact that he had always been able to learn at a frightening pace, or the fact that he once had a spectacular example of how not to treat a woman, and many occasions to vow to himself that he would never become his father. Perhaps now, this was serving him quite well. It also helped that she was so encouraging, always ready with the brilliant smiles and caresses and *If you please, dear, What do you think, love, Thank you, darling.*Under such positive reinforcement, courtesy was very easy.

Plus, there was the fact that they simply could not get enough of each other in bed, which certainly didn't hurt anything, either. And not long ago they had had their first real argument since starting this erstwhile relationship, and afterward had kissed and made up and she had fallen asleep in his arms again, just like she had the night before, seemingly without any hard feelings.

Yes, he was not in the slightest used to having someone like this around him, but like most people who receive an unexpected windfall of some kind or another, he was adjusting quickly to his changed circumstances. It hadn't yet been a week since their first night together, but already he was coming to expect her to be with him, to require her presence for his continuing happiness; even coming to expect some degree of happiness derived from her company to be his regular lot in life.

He couldn't have said that he trusted this relationship absolutely, not yet, even though she had quite literally prevented his death on two separate occasions. It wasn't that he didn't trust Emily herself in many ways, he had never trusted anyone more. In a crisis situation, there was no one who he would preferred to have at his side, or watching his back. It wasn't anything that she had done to unsettle him their argument had been somewhat understandable, given the circumstances, and it didn't seem to have done any lasting harm.

But... there was still the matter of Lucius. Wonderful as this time alone with Emily was, Severus could still feel his cousin's subtle menace always looming in the background, a constant reminder that he hadn't always been the only man in his lover's life. He knew he had it within himself to become as jealous and obsessed with Emily as he had been with Bella... perhaps on some level, he couldn't believe in this new relationship because he was waiting for that Bella-ish moment when he felt secure enough, trusting enough, to be stabbed in the back once again.

To give proper credit though, that just didn't seem to be happening with Emily. He now felt a touch anxious if he woke up and found no mussed fair head on the pillow next to his, even if she had just awakened earlier and gone into the bathroom for a shower, or gone into the sitting room with a book.

It was just... he didn't quite trust what he felt for her. It felt too good, and he wanted it to continue far too much.

As that brief night continued, the Selkies raised their voices in their eternal, lyrical quest for love and companionship; and Severus lay with his lover beside him in bed, and pondered how best to sustain the love he had.

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Severus had a pleasant lie-in the next morning, and found a note on the night table when he awoke -

Good morning, my love -

The Selkies are practically rehearsing "Carmen" down here! Come on down to the beach!

He quickly showered and dressed, then made his way down to the seaside. The Selkies had gathered in a little hidden cove just beyond the cliffs, and they were in fine voice that morning, singing their impassioned love songs like a choir of angels.

But now there was another figure ahead of him on the beach, blowing fair hair and a black cloak, a lonely soprano adding itself to the Selkies' chorus like a folk tune woven through a symphony

Full fathom five thy Father lies,

Of his bones are Corrall made:

Those are pearles that were his eies,

Nothing of him that doth fade,

But doth suffer a Sea-change

Into something rich, and strange

Sea-Nymphs hourly ring his knell.

Harke now I heare them, ding-dong, bell...

And then the horizon somehow whitened in his sight, her image before him becoming dreamy and surreal... and he could see them, the two of them, in years, decades, well over a century later, himself older than Albus, grey, wizened, retired from teaching, perhaps the writer of innumerable tomes on magic, the creator of any number of beneficial and much-needed potions, and her with him... having had his vindication and seen his cause through to the end, the old wizard gives up his responsibilities to live his twilight years peacefully alone with her, for the only way to keep such an airy sprite is if she chooses to stay with you...

No lightning flashed above, no celestial choirs sang, but he felt a mysterious bone-deep certainty that this one, and no other, was to be his.

He wondered how long it was traditional to court a woman in the Faerielands. Perhaps they had a set custom for such somewhere, and a ritual by which one asked for a woman's hand he resolved to consult Swain's *Encyclopaedia* on the subject when they got back up to the house.

But these pleasant musings were cut short by the cry of an owl. He looked up to see a large brown barn owl that he recognised as a long-time veteran of the Hogwarts Owlery circling above him, buffeted unsteadily by the strong sea breezes. He accepted the bird's message, recognising the purple seal and monogram of Albus's personal stationery:

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Dear Severus,

Hello, my friend! I do hope that you and Emily are enjoying a delightful holiday up there in Orkney, and she is finding the observance of the Selkie migration as diverting as you hoped she would. She's always been an avid naturalist, so I don't doubt that she's finding all the rockpools and sea creatures up there quite fascinating. I quite remember how when she was a little girl, she was always catching tadpoles and looking for wildflowers and racing about on her pony. The pony was, I believe, named Pony.

Someday when we can all sit down and have a quiet drink together I'll have to tell you all about how she used to scoff at my tall tales about the Second World when she was six she didn't believe me at all when I told her that Muggles could fly in aeroplanes in the sky. "Albus Dumbledore, you are a very wise wizard and your beard is very white, but you are trying to trick me!" the little Miss Swain would say. Then I'll have to tell her all about how you used to try to walk and read at the same time when you were in school, and very cleverly managed to misjudge the locations of doors and walls only occasionally.

During your absence, I've taken over reviewing Cecile's memories in the Pensieve and I see now that your description of them as "somewhat unpleasant" was yet another example of your tactful and endearing tendency to stoically downplay the atrocities you've witnessed for my benefit. It will be a monumental day indeed when our friend Tom Riddle, the fine Mr. Malfoy, and their various cronies can be held accountable in a court of law for the cruelties they have inflicted on the sensitive and nurturing little creatures we call house-elves, but I fear that a great deal of social change must come about before that day of reckoning. I applaud your generosity in allowing Cecile to accompany you and Emily on holiday, and hope that Miss Cecile is enjoying her vacation as well.

I have now examined all the material available to us and come to the end of Cecile's recollections, and wish to let you know the results of my observations. (And I believe I have finally worked enough Reparo spells on my office wall to get rid of all the char marks I inflicted after witnessing that meeting between Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Macnair, wherein the fate of a certain dear friend and colleague of mine, who I am damned bloody pleased is still with us, was discussed. Yes, you don't need to remind me that I'm a firm believer in the policy of catching more flies with honey and have sermonised to you for years about the virtues of keeping one's temper in check, but I'm sure that you can understand that sometimes a fellow needs to fire off a few hexes in private to relieve his feelings. I trust that you will tactfully refrain from noticing the scorched ends of my whiskers upon your return.)

At any rate, I'm afraid I have bad news for you.

Firstly, I know you've reviewed most of the same memories that I have, so no doubt you are already aware that you need to be extremely wary of Lucius Malfoy at this time. His suspicions of you are obvious, and fuelled not a little by jealousy. As I sensed what lay beneath the constant conflict between you and Emily, so has he, and he isn't the sort to tolerate the presence of a rival. My advice to the two of you is to be very cautious, and secret, and wait until we have Malfoy safely behind bars before the two of you appear in public together or otherwise let your relationship be known. While I am certain that both of you wouldn't be the least ashamed if the entire world knew about your intentions toward each other, to do so would be to greatly escalate the conflict with Malfoy. Please, my friends, be careful.

Secondly, the last few meetings Cecile recalled were worrisome indeed. Severus... they're talking about ways to gain access into the Department of Mysteries, and Riddle and Malfoy seem especially interested in the Hall of Prophecy. And Malfoy has enough Ministry contacts that he will in all likelihood figure out a way to gain entrance before long. I am greatly afraid that Sybil's prophecy could be in danger.

Lastly I'm afraid I have some even worse news as well. Harry Potter and his cousin Dudley Dursley were attacked by Dementors while still at his aunt and uncle's home on Privet Drive in Little Whinging. Mundungus was on duty at the time, and swears to me he was only gone for five minutes, but apparently that's all it took. Harry's Muggle cousin was very nearly Kissed by one of them, but Harry fortunately managed to drive them off by means of a Patronus. Unfortunately, however, he is being called up for a disciplinary action, and a Wizengamot member named the Honourable Theophilius Solon seems to be agitating for his expulsion from Hogwarts.

I hate to ask you to cut your holiday short, my friend, because I know that you and Emily more than deserve some peaceful time together but I would appreciate your counsel in this matter. Could you please return to Hogwarts by, oh, Sunday morning?

Yours truly,

Albus

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Damn, Severus muttered.

Emily loped gaily up to him a second later, her hair blowing in the breeze, not a care in the world. "Darling? What is it? Who wrote you?"

He wordlessly handed her Dumbledore's letter, watching as she first chuckled and then her blonde brows tensed with concern, then horror. When she finished, she looked up at him, silently questioning and he nodded grimly to her.

"We have to go back," he said.

Author's Notes:

The song Emily sings in the garden during Severus's Deceivre lesson is the Irish Gaelic traditional ballad "Siúil a Rúin."

The song Emily sings during the final scene on the beach is "Ariel's Song" from Shakespeare's "The Tempest." ~ GS

Part Third: The Hart Subvertant, Chapter 36

Chapter 55 of 55

After Voldemort's return, Professor Swain has agreed to Sirius Black's suggestion that she use her influence with Lucius Malfoy to gather intelligence on the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters. As her horror of the Dark Lord grows, her

old enemy Severus Snape proves to be the only one who understands the fear and doubt that plague a double agent…

Chapter 36:

The mood was sombre that morning as Severus and Emily made their way back up to the castle from the beach. Breakfast was an almost silent affair, despite the elves' usual marvellous cooking, and afterward they went out to finish work on the garden, tensely discussing the Dementor attack on Harry Potter.

"Do you think Lucius or You-Know-Who was responsible?" Emily asked, giving voice to both their suspicions.

"Lucius – no, he doesn't have that much influence with them, and doesn't work directly with the Department of Law Enforcement. He'd have to get someone in the executive office to do it for him, either through persuasion, or blackmail, or more likely through *Imperio*... I won't rule him out, but he's not the likeliest party. As for the Dark Lord, there were supposed to be protections in place for Potter so long as he resides under the same roof as his own blood kin. I've never been privy to any of the specifics regarding that – Albus and I thought it was better for me not to know, in the off-chance that I was ever exposed by the Death Eaters, and... interrogated."

She nodded. "I understand."

"For now, I'll assume that the Dark Lord found some way to get Dementors around the Potter boy's magical protections, until a more likely suspect appears. Potter is in Albus's hands as far as the expulsion, although I don't doubt that Arthur Weasley will be doing everything he can to protect the boy as well. To be perfectly honest, and please don't breathe a word of this to Minerva or Albus, but I've wondered here and there if it might have been better for that boy to have remained outside of Wizard society in general and be raised as a Muggle, rather than attend Hogwarts. It's bad enough having him in class without having to spend every second worrying if some enemy is trying to do away with him yet *again*."

Emily watched his grim profile with concern. "Yes, I know, love. You don't have to tell me how you feel about Harry Potter." Severus's personality conflicts with Harry Potter and his friends in Gryffindor House were the stuff of Hogwarts legend, even to a foreign visiting professor far on the outskirts of campus politics.

"He's just his arrogant bad seed of a father over again, is the problem," Severus muttered darkly. "Not only that, but he's already even more famous than worthy people like Albus due to the incident in 1981, and the worst part is, he's already completely spoiled by the fame. He works at nothing, he has no interests other than Quidditch, he has all the intellectual curiosity and ambition of your average garden slug, and he disrupts my classes every day with that endless, all-important rivalry of his with Malfoy. It doesn't even occur to either of them that the other people in the class might be there for something other than to witness the disagreements between a couple of spoiled and undisciplined schoolboys. Before Potter arrived at Hogwarts, I never thought I'd see the day when my Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff classes seemed positively restful by comparison to the classes with my own House."

She remained quiet and sympathetic; although her own impressions of Harry Potter had been much more favourable than she knew Severus's to be, she let him get his grievances off his chest without opposition. "Well, hopefully this coming school year will be less of an ordeal for you than the last one," she said. "At least now you'll only have to deal with Mr. Potter and the Death Eaters, instead of Mr. Potter, the Death Eaters, and that pox of a Faery magic professor you can't stand."

That provoked a sardonic, one-cornered smirk from him. "So you really have decided to stay, then? Just can't deny your calling as the faculty advisor of SPEW?"

"Oh yes, I'm staying – I'll let Albus know the first time we get a spare minute back at school. There's a wonderful faculty at Hogwarts, it's such an honour to work with all of them." Her look let him know which member of the faculty she most admired.

Severus put his pruning shears aside, then drew her close into his arms, letting his cheek rest against the side of her forehead. "It's Saturday, isn't it," he said, after a long, silent, tender moment, then took his watch out of his pocket, and clicked it open. "Yes, they won't be more than starting to gather about now. How would you like to go into town for a bit? I have a few friends there I'd like you to meet."

"I'd love to," she replied.

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The Narwhal Publick House, located at the intersection of Arbour Alley and Oceanic Alley was Nornsay Village's most popular pub. The carved sign outside featured a sleek grey whale with a long twisted horn against a blue background. Indoors, clean glassware hung above a polished wooden bar, and all manner of local folk sat about on barstools and high-backed booths.

A small group of people were already gathered around three tables at the pub's front, upon each of which was a wooden chess set of alternating dark and light wood. One of them, an elderly, round-cheeked fellow with curly grey eyebrows, broke into a broad smile when he saw Severus and Emily come into the pub. "Ha! As I live and breathe, it's the peedie beuy! Beuy, I'm fair blide to see yeh!" He rose from his seat to meet them, casting an approving eye over Emily's arm linked with Severus's. "And I see you've brought a friend."

"Hello, Pete." Severus greeted him with a handshake.

A freckled, redheaded fellow holding court behind the centre chessboard stood up to shake Severus's hand as well. "Ah, yeah, Martha had told me ye were takin' tea with a lady friend in the village the other day," he said, nodding toward a young woman at an adjacent table, who Emily recognised as the teashop waitress from their previous trip into town. "I was hopin' we'd merit an introduction."

Severus gave a silent chuckle, and actually grinned back. "I suppose there was no way that word wouldn't get out in this village that I'd been seen taking tea with a lady, was there?"

"Nae on yer *life*, me beuy," interjected a slight, very elderly woman with long white braids, and the assembled company laughed merrily.

Severus went to the white-haired woman's side and gently took her hand in his. "Hello, Margaret, it's good to see you."

Margaret smiled, her clear blue eyes not quite focusing on his face before her – and Emily noticed the white cane propped against her knee. "It's good to hear yer voice. Get yersel' a pint and come have a game, and don't be long about the introductions."

"Yes, I suppose introductions are in order, aren't they." Severus drew Emily forward to meet everyone. "Pete, Will, Margaret, Martha, this is my good friend Emily Swain, who also teaches at Hogwarts. Emily, this is Peter Atkine, William Erlendsson, and Margaret Omshad, three of the founding members of the Nornsay Village Chess Society, and you remember Martha Erlendsson, Will's oldest daughter. I also expect we'll get a few more members turning up this afternoon as well. So, what are we all drinking? Pints of stout all 'round? Emily?"

"I'd love one, thank you. I haven't had a good dark beer in forever."

Will Erlendsson got up and followed Severus to the bar, and Pete Atkine came forward to shake Emily's hand. "And she's one of the Fair Folk come back to Orkney, nae less. So you taught at Hogwarts, then? What subject?"

"It was an elective session of Defence Against the Dark Arts, with a heavy emphasis on Faery magic."

Margaret Omshad's face lit up with interest upon hearing this exchange. "One of the Fair Folk, is she? Oh, come sit beside me, me dear. Me sight's gone now, so if ye don't mind, I see folk with me hands these days," she said, holding out a transparently slender, age-spotted hand before her. Emily took a seat on the bench beside Margaret, then took her hand and lifted it to her cheek.

"Aye, one of the Folk indeed." Margaret murmured, tracing the outline of Emily's ear with her fingertips, then the high arch of her eyebrow and curve of her cheekbone, and then breaking into a bright smile. "My great-great-grandmother was a sidhe, one of the ones who stayed... they said she sang as sweet as a honeybird, and danced like an angel. Are you a sidhe yourself, me dear?" she asked, patting Emily's hand.

"No, I'm a faun. My father is a Wizard from the Lake District, but my mother is a faun from the Third Kingdom."

"So it was, so it was. There were a lot of Fae settling in Wizard Orkney back in the day, it seemed. The tales say some of the Folk would settle on little skerries where there was fresh water, and use their combined magics to hide the whole island from sight, so that no humans could find their villages, and maybe raid them, use iron against them," Margaret said, nodding. "But there were others who weren't so standoffish. They would trade with humans, and sometimes they'd marry with us. They say you always knew a house with a Faery bride, because the husband would put on a new bronze door handle."

Will and Severus returned a moment later with a round of pints for the group, and Severus took the seat opposite Margaret at the chessboard, handing pints across the table. "Ah, then we're well fortified," Margaret said, with a long pull from her glass, then turned back to Severus. "Ready, then, me beuy?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," he muttered, sipping from his own pint, and moving his queen's pawn forward two spaces. "Pawn to D4."

"Ah, you're still a fan of the queen's gambit declined, I see," Margaret said, moving her black queen's pawn forward two spaces.

"Why meddle with a good idea," Severus murmured, moving out another pawn and calling out its position to Margaret. His eyebrows went up as he saw her response. "The Chigorin Defence – well, that's a departure for you."

"Something I've been working on with Will," Margaret replied, grinning. She nodded in Emily's direction. "The beuy here started playing with us when he was just eight years old, you should have seen him. Not an instant's whining or fidgeting out of him, I never saw such a lad. So serious, such an old soul."

"He was our youngest player for a decade," Will Erlendsson said, opening a game with Pete Atkine at the table to Emily's right. "I'd loan him a book – big thick ones, too, like the *Encyclopaedia of Chess Openings*– and he'd have absorbed it in days."

"He read everything. Every week he'd be carrying around some new book half of us had never heard of – I never saw such a bookworm. His mum would be doing her shopping, and there would be her boy coming along behind her, walking along with his nose buried in a book, walking into things," Pete Atkine chortled, tamping down and then lighting a long clay pipe.

"She was such a pretty woman, Mrs. Snape," Martha Erlendsson murmured in Severus's direction. "She had the most beautiful eyes and hands you could imagine. And she was so nice to talk to when I'd see her at the library."

"Oh, yes, the beuy's mother was just a dear creature, she was," Margaret said, again nodding toward Emily. "She served on the library committee for years, used to read books to the children every weekend. I would take my grandchildren down, but I'd really have gone just to listen for myself. She did different voices for every character – really held those children spellbound, and their parents too."

A faint smile appeared on Severus's face as he contemplated his next move. "Yes, Mother loved her Sundays at the library," he said quietly.

His game with Margaret went on for some time, and Emily soon became lost in the highly complex interplay of the game. Severus and the other chess players seemed to know a tremendous amount of arcane terminology that they threw around with ease, and they all seemed to know everything about each others' characteristic styles of play, and each others' families as well. Emily had to struggle to make sense of the lingo they used, but she was thoroughly enjoying the cosy gossip, especially when it turned to the topic of Severus's youth. She was not at all surprised to hear that as a boy, he had been known in the village for his quiet precocity and cleverness.

He finally pinned Margaret down to a knight, a bishop, and a castle in endgame, whereas he had retained his queen, a bishop, and both castles. Margaret managed to elude him for some time until he pinned her king down with the castles, then mated with his black-square bishop. "And so I am defeated," Margaret said, smiling and shaking her head. "Good game, me beuy, well fought."

Severus got up and shook his opponent's hand across the table. "Well, you opened with a new defence. I'm sure if you used Tarrasch like usual, we would have been here

for another hour."

Margaret then turned toward Emily. "Fancy a game, my love?"

"Oh, I don't know," she replied, abashed. "I'm a rank beginner, and everyone here really seems to know what they're doing."

"Nonsense, if you never play, you'll never learn," Margaret said, waving her into the opposite chair Severus had just vacated. "Severus, sit beside her and let's have a bit of coaching, then."

Emily sat down with a bright, apprehensive smile, but much of her nervousness abated when Severus drew up a seat close beside her, and leaned over her with his arm loosely draped over the back of her chair. "Should I play the queen's gambit declined?" she asked, turning toward him.

"If you like," he replied, nodding, and Emily moved her queen's pawn out two spaces, and Severus called the move's coordinates to Margaret.

Emily leaned back in her seat, taking another sip from her pint. "So, were there a lot of Fae settlements in this area in the past?" she asked Margaret.

"Aye, Orkney used to be home to lots of the

Folk, or so the stories go," Margaret said, countering this time with what Severus told Emily was the Slav Defence. "The Howans of Hurtisgarth was a Faery place, supposed to have been lousy with Fae, they say. Until one day, the village looked up and most of them were gone. Just vanished overnight, they say. But that was during the Black Death, and villages in the mainland were just turning up empty, but for the corpses. Never found any bodies in the Faery woods, though – they were just *gone*. Even the ones who'd married humans, sometimes they left their families, or they'd be gone with their spouses and children with them. No one knows what happened." She turned toward Emily – "Do you know any history from that time, then, me love?"

"I've heard that the Black Plague caused a lot of trouble for the Fae at that time," she replied quietly. "I couldn't speak for them as to why some decided to leave and some didn't, but the Continent and the British mainland could be dangerous back then, if you were an Arcadian."

"Aye, I see," Margaret said, nodding. " 'Twas a time of great distrust and hysteria, as no one knew where the sickness was coming from. Jewish folks and gypsies often became scapegoats during that time, as well – anyone who was different was suspect. But my great-granddame told me stories about how when the sickness was worst in the Mainland here in Orkney, when all the doctors had got scared and run away, some of the Faeries started appearing from their hidden villages, and they'd go among the sick and nurse them – they didn't get the Plague, so they were the only folk who could safely lend a hand, and they had medicines no one else did. Folks said it was like a host of angels had been sent from heaven."

As that game progressed, Margaret continued telling her all about the local Faery folklore for some time – all the while annexing Emily's pawns, a bishop, and then a castle at a disturbing rate, while Emily herself had only a couple of pawns and a knight to show for her efforts. But as Emily watched Margaret's finely wrinkled face across the chessboard, somehow she didn't mind that this gentle, wise, completely blind witch was absolutely hammering her at chess. She would have let herself lose many, many games to this opponent, if only to keep listening to her stories.

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a wildly toxic substance just as a part of everyday life."

"I couldn't agree more – I still remember burning my hand so badly after just picking up a cup that I couldn't even hold a pen for days."

"You know, of course, that the whole business with the wrought-iron teacup *wasn't* an accident, my dear," he pointed out. "It's always been Lucius's habit to collect hair and blood from as many of his guests as he can, so as to have power over them in case he needs it for any reason. Those bloody napkins are still probably hidden away at Malfeasant, in case he ever wants to find you, or affect you by means of sympathetic magic."

Emily froze as any number of memories recurred to her – the bloody napkins at the dinner, the bloodstained sheet after Lucius had bitten her, the blood she had left on the carpet after staggering in following the attack on Molly, and that tiny, intensely worrisome moment of blood magic he had worked on her during their last tryst together. "I... I didn't know that," she said quietly. "Do you think he knows I'm here with you now?"

"I doubt it," Severus said, shaking his head. "Both Hogwarts and Snape Hall are entirely warded against that sort of magic, so Lucius would have had to know to work a *Locatus* spell on you while you were in the village, and if he had, the first thing he would have done would be to send you a letter at Hogwarts, to see how fast you responded. If Lucius had written you, Albus would have forwarded it to you here in an eyeblink, so if we haven't heard anything, I don't think there's anything to worry about. We do know that he doesn't seem to have interfered magically with Cecile in any way, so no matter how he feels about me, it does appear that Lucius still trusts you to some extent." From the absolutely furious scowl he then directed down at the floor, it looked as though Malfoys' stubborn regard for her was an irritant on the level of one Sirius Black and Harry Potter.

"Well, whatever that bastard Malfoy thinks of me, I think *I'll* throw a party on the day he's sentenced to life in prison," Emily insisted, for while she may not have been able to deny what he had said, she could at least point to her own less than reciprocal regard for Malfoy by means of reassurance.

"Believe me, I'll be the first to arrive to that little *soirée*, but at the rate he's going, it's more likely that Lucius will end up Minister of Magic in the next few years," her companion declared, with a wry twist of his mouth. "Nothing he does seems to ever make any dent in his popularity, no matter who he threatens or injures – he just spends some money, kisses a few hands, gives some empty reassurances, and he's back in everyone's good graces. He threatened half the Hogwarts governors into temporarily removing Dumbledore from the Headmaster's position in 1993, and do you know what happened afterward? Nothing. All of the governors and their wives still turned up to that New Year's Eve ball Narcissa organised at the Ministry. They're just a lot of lumpen idiots with their heads in the sand, to a one. Why I spend an ounce of effort trying to protect these people and their imbecilic offspring, I have no idea."

"But our students aren't all like their parents," Emily pointed out softly. "Nearly all of them are loyal to Dumbledore, and remember how popular Cedric was. I do honestly believe that if we ask our students for their support, they would give it."

"Forgive me, but I'm not as optimistic about them as you are. I know I've been criticised for calling them lack-witted dunderheads and such in class, but that's hardly the worst I could accuse our students of, believe me. Every time those little bastards look at me as though I'm annoying them for trying to teach them how to counteract poison in class, I just want to slap them senseless. Do I need to wheel in the purple suffocated corpse of some poor bastard who drank cyanide with his tea because he ran afoul of the Death Eaters somehow? *Then* will they believe me when I say antidotes are important?"

His voice had hoarsened, and he turned away from her and coughed. "Look at everything you were teaching them during the school year – all of it was incredibly useful and would have direct applications in an actual Dark Wizard attack, but I had to sign I don't know how many drop slips for your class for students who withdrew because the martial arts curriculum was *too exhausting*. When they were laughing during your physical pre-emption demonstration that day it took every bit of willpower I had not to stake them out somewhere for the fecking acromantulas in the forest."

She was silent, just listening, and letting him vent as much as he needed.

"I probably shouldn't have taken this time away from the Order, because now I'm finding it damned hard to go back to it. I've an awful feeling now that this won't end well for either of us. It was different when the only person I had to worry about was myself, because if I died, it would all simply be over." He fell silent, but he didn't need to tell her what he was loath to leave behind now.

"Darling, I made it through three years of war at home, and that was without you there to advise me, you know. To be honest, now that I know what kind of strategist you are, I almost wish you had been."

Severus turned a grave look at her. "Emily – you aren't really aware of the rate at which the bodies of innocent people pile up around the Dark Lord. Iron burns and *Crucios* notwithstanding, you've still managed to stay clear of the worst of it so far. During his first rise, the ranks of the Order would be slowly *thinning* from one meeting to the next. Cedric Diggory's death was not some terrible fluke of circumstances. There's worse to come."

"I know that," she whispered.

"You couldn't have known what kind of position you would be putting yourself into when you became an Order informant, and I still think Albus should have detailed more of the group's history to you before accepting your help. For example, he didn't mention that one of the consequences of trying to play both sides of the fence is that no one completely trusts or supports you on *either side* of the fence. Sirius Black undermines my efforts on behalf of the Order more than some of the Death Eaters ever have."

"I don't doubt it," Emily replied, nodding grimly. "Black's not endeared himself to me one bit. I'd have no scruples about Stunning him and stuffing him in the nearest broom cupboard if he endangered you in any way."

"You'd best do it when no Gryffindors were around, or you'll risk becoming their latest red herring villain. To our current crop of Gryffindors, you see, a *villain* is anyone who isn't pathetically impressed by the empty straw men they think are *heroes*," he pointed out, scowling like a thundercloud.

"Yes, the students don't realise how complex loyalties can be," she said, sighing. "I still wish Mr. and Mrs. Parkinson and Draco Malfoy had been born almost anywhere else in the world, because without Lucius and You-Know-Who's influence, their lives might have been so different." Her eyes lingered on Severus's grim profile, wishing with all her heart that circumstances in his life had been different as well.

"Not a day goes by when I don't wish for the same for Evan Rosier." The pain in his voice when he spoke his friend's name made tears of sympathy start in Emily's eyes. "I'm sorry, but Death Eater or no, Evan was not evil, he wasn't even approaching evil – just because one accepts an ugly magical brand on one's arm and puts on a mask and makes all the appropriate noises at the Dark Lord's latest bloody pep rally does not automatically remove all moral compass from a man's mind and spirit. Mundungus Bloody *Fletcher* commits more crimes on a weekly basis than Evan ever did in his life – all he wanted was to keep his family's fortune and make his wife admire him, and he was worried about me. I'll never forget the way he acted when he went to his first meeting, a few months after I'd been inducted – he was so nervous and scared, and hiding it so badly. 'Lina wants me to look into this fellow's group, and someone's got to make sure that cousin of yours doesn't end up taking the mickey out of you all the time,' he said... "

His voice hoarsened again and broke, and then his head inclined into his hands. For one long moment, Emily sat beside him frozen with shock, hardly able to imagine the depth of sorrow that would cause such a dedicated stoic as Severus Snape to grieve like this. Then she drew him tight into her arms, cradling his head on her shoulder. "No, we're going to see this through to the end, and when it's over, you're going to be happy again, love."

"I don't know, I never have been, I'm... it's just too damned *late*... ." he said, his voice barely audible.

"No, it *isn't*," she whispered. "When this is all over, you'll be safe with those who love you."

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Some time later, Emily finally coaxed him upstairs and into bed. Severus slept unusually late the next morning, probably due to the quantity of whiskey he drank the previous evening, and Emily again awoke very early due to the dose of caffeine she had taken. She hunted up some willow bark potion and Muggle aspirin for him, which she left on the night table next to the carafe of water, silently wishing she had a bit of Catherine's hangover powder for him.

Then she showered and dressed, taking her things into the bathroom in the next stateroom over so as not to disturb his sleep, and then hunted up both her Wizard camera and Muggle camera, and rolls of film from her trunk. She slung both cameras around her neck, went out onto the tower walk with her old school broomstick, and lifted off over the castle. From that vantage point, she then spent an hour taking photographs of Snape Hall, exterior views from every direction, and concentrating on the Anglo-Saxon wing. She also photographed some of the interiors as well: the great main foyer, the mead hall, the frescoes, and also the inside of the Anglo-Saxon wing, concentrating on the details of the stonework and carving. Although Emily was only faintly aware of the process by which a homeowner would apply for maintenance grants or estate tax relief for a historic castle, she imagined that a substantial amount of documentation would probably be required, and wanted to be prepared if Snape Hall turned out to be qualified for such benefits.

When she was finished taking pictures, she did a long, slow fly-over of the castle and all its grounds – the cliffs and the rocky beach below, the barnacle-encrusted rock pinnacles – getting buffeted about by the wild sea breezes, her cloak, skirts, and hair blowing in all directions. Dammit, it was all just so magnificent in its austerity and isolation; and just so heartbreakingly beautiful and neglected. Perhaps she might have annoyed Severus with her desire to step in and just take care of everything that was wrong with the castle for him: the leaky roof, the tarnish, the crumbling library. Her first instinct, upon seeing his worries about the house, had been to try to solve the castle's every problem for him, just so she could see some of his perpetual cares taken off his shoulders. She had made herself back off after convincing him to finally accept her consulting fee and put it toward the repairs, realising that she was going to have to learn to respect his pride and independence in much the same way he had learned to respect hers. He had stopped pushing her for more personal information and gotten comfortable with the idea of allowing her to open up to him at her own pace, so likewise she would have to rein in her desire to set everything right for him like some "fairy godmother" out of a Muggle tale, and respect his need to do it for himself.

But something about this beautiful, lonely place caught in her heart like a fishhook. She couldn't help but imagine how splendid it would all be with a snug new roof, with the books all restored and many new volumes in the library, with the worn upholstery replaced and the great halls all spotless and brightly lit, with gardens lovingly tended, and perhaps a few more merry house elves stirring bubbling pots on the stove, arranging roses from the garden, and squealing *Wheee!* on the upper staircases... what a home it would be.

For a moment she imagined their life together... both of them teaching at Hogwarts during the school year, then celebrating the Arcadians' winter solstice and the wizards' Christmas together at Snape Hall, his traditional celebrations overlapping into hers... she would find him exactly what he most wanted for a Christmas gift, small or large, whatever it might be, and then help the elves cook up a splendid feast in the kitchen... there would be great blazes in the hearths and snow falling outside. At night they would join the ghost watching the Northern Lights blazing in the skies above, and then make love and hold each other all night under the eiderdowns. During the summer holidays she would take him to visit her family in Arcadia, introduce him to Gwydion and Dahlia as one of the driving forces behind the cure for iron burns, listen to him talking about fencing and Arcadian politics with her mother and the Blakes, talking about Faery magic and history with her father, who would be so impressed with his daughter's new love, who was a human natural adept like himself. Then she would show him everything she loved about her native land, its cities, its countryside, its forests, wine and cuisine, music, festivals, and theatre, the diverse peoples that made Arcadia what it was... she couldn't have imagined anything she would like more.

It simply felt as though the castle needed someone to love it and care for it just as much as Severus had needed a companion to love him, and she now felt as though she could fulfil everything that had previously been missing in his life just as surely as he was beginning to fulfil what had been missing in hers. At that moment, it just seemed damned bloody inconvenient that a violent dictator had ever arisen to threaten her lover's world, and drag the two of them away from each other.

But now she spotted a dark figure out on the flagstone terrace outside the smaller dining room, waving to her, and pointed the broomstick down toward him.

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"Good morning, dear – how are you feeling?" she asked, dismounting from her broomstick.

"A touch of a hangover, but otherwise, I'm all right." He indicated the cameras around her neck – "Went up for a bit of aerial photography, then?"

"Yes, I wanted some shots of the castle, and I think I got some rather nice ones, too. I'll have to order up a second set for you when I have them developed." She followed him into the dining room, put the cameras aside on a table, then propped the broomstick against the wall, and finally put her arms around his neck. "You had me worried last night," she said, kissing his cheek.

He sighed. "I suppose I was in rather an unusually low mood."

"Well, in light of everything that's been going on, my dear, I'd say you're allowed. I think I'd be even more worried about you if you didn't get a bit drunk and angry once in a while, just to blow off steam. Do you feel any better?"

Severus shrugged, raking a hand through his windblown hair. "I don't think I'll truly feel better until all this is over and I'm either dead or retired, but a decent night's sleep and a good breakfast will do for now."

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After breakfast, Emily took Cecile aside and told her that they would be returning to Hogwarts by noon that day, and let her know to get packed and be ready. "Can I be packing your bag for you, Mistress?" the elf asked, with a curtsy.

"No, don't worry, I'll do it myself. Just be ready to go by about ten minutes to noon."

Then she followed Severus upstairs, and together they almost silently packed up their things for their return. When they were both finished, Emily put on her black embroidered cloak, and set her trunk by the door. "Ready to go, love?"

Severus set his bag next to hers by the door, but then crossed back to her and unfastened her cloak's silver clasp, letting it fall onto the chair beside the bed. Then he glanced past her and extended a hand at the heavy velvet draperies, closing them with a gesture and an inaudible word.

"One more hour?" he asked, outlining her cheek with delicate fingertips.

She sighed. "Yes. *Please.*"

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Not long afterward, the chair beside the bed was covered with the black travelling clothes of two people, and the scene was that of some days previous – everything beyond the walls of that room forgotten.

Severus had wondered earlier if perhaps he shouldn't have taken this week away from the Order, perhaps shouldn't have let himself flirt with the idea of what it might be to just be a teacher enjoying his summer holidays and starting a new relationship with a woman – and now he was letting himself cling to that blissful illusion up until the very last instant.

As before, during his first night with her, he had never felt so laid bare, so naked. Now, lying deep in her arms, he was forcing himself to take this slowly, draw it out for as long as he could, even as his skin prickled with excitement and his breath came in shallow rasps. She was cradling his dark head in her arms, both utterly lost in long

feeling kisses that seemed to take hours as their bodies rocked together. *Gods, how can you want me so much, no one could pretend this, what the hell could you possibly find so exciting about me...* but then he realised he didn't care in the slightest, just so long as she felt this way tomorrow, and the next day.

In moments like these, it could be so difficult to force himself to hold his emotions in reserve and not be that stupid teenage boy who threw his entire heart and mind at the first woman who went to bed with him, who had based all of his self-worth on whether she loved him or not. But here, in the darkened isolation of their bed, in this rapture of prolonged intimacy, her affection for him achingly apparent in every kiss, every touch... he wanted to race ahead into *You're mine, I need you, promise me you'll never leave me,* but he remained silent, and let his physical responses say what he was feeling. He could now admit to himself that he had thought of her as his own ever since the first time they kissed, but now, under all this encouragement, he knew he was becoming a bit obsessed... but somehow she seemed to be getting obsessively devoted to him in exactly the same manner. Neither of them had ever seemed able to exercise much caution or restraint where the other was concerned; from the first, they could pass from a single kiss to superheated lust in moments, and now, neither of them wanted to stop.

Everything in him wanted to just violently assert his claim to her and force her to recognise it, wanted to hold her down on the bed, gasping *Tell me you want me, tell me you love me. Promise you'll always go to bed with me, me and no one else, ever* – somehow at this moment, as the arousal built between them, he could easily imagine her answering in kind, pledging everything he wanted and more. But he made himself hold back from demanding such reassurances so soon – they had time, time for him to make her want to make such promises to him of her own accord, without prompting.

But now he could sense that he had again brought her beyond any hope of holding back; her breath caught sharply in her throat and her hands clamped down on the small of his back to hold him inside her, her hips starting to jerk beneath his in an involuntary rhythm, pressing up to him with the instinctual greed of a woman nearing orgasm. A second later, she had thrown her head back onto the pillow with a sharp little cry, and he was urging her on into climax with every bit of energy he had. When her spasms began to subside, he abandoned restraint and just let himself have her, pounding her into the mattress for his own pleasure, finding that impossible peak of arousal and rushing past it with a groan. Then all the breath and tension in his body was gone, and he collapsed over her, exhausted and enfolding.

"Why do we have to go back," she lamented, burying her face in his neck. "I don't ever want to leave."

"Neither do I," he whispered, his arms tightening around her.

"Oh, love," she gasped. "I just want to stay here with you."

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