

[fic post!](#)

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Well, here it is, at last.

glances smugly at [bookshop](#), then flounces away

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At Her Grace's Behest, Part Two of Two

by Branwyn

(part one [here](#).)

Mina/Charlotte ahead. In a...Mina kind of way.

Part Two

I logged on to my account immediately when I got home from work the next day. Normally I take an hour or so to change clothes and bathe away the smell of fried foods, but since I had failed to specify to Charlotte through Arc the exact time of evening I would be at home to receive her call, I thought it best to make myself available as early as possible. Of course, Arc could, if she chose to take it upon herself, tell Charlotte what time I customarily came online of an evening, and heaven knows what else about me in the process—but considering how we had left things, I assumed that it was as much as I could dare to hope for that Arc would pass along the message exactly as I had given it to her.

The thought which immediately followed at the heels of that one was rather sobering: if Arc were so inclined—say, in a bad mood, and irritated with me—there was really no limit to what she could tell Charlotte, or for that matter anyone who came nosing into my affairs. If Arc decided to become Charlotte's "source," as quite a few people had done while Charlotte was compiling the LadyWriter story, there would be no need for the jumped up little Nancy Drew wannabe to get clever with my IP addresses. Arc knew all about my sockpuppets, and had even manned them a from time to time to boost their plausibility.

I decided that, before I did anything, I should take a moment to reconnect with Arc and clear the air between us. I couldn't apologize, precisely—I do have my standards—but I felt it might be

prudent to make some little overture toward her. I did value her friendship, after all, at least as much as I valued her discretion. Or nearly so. I logged into my Instant Messenger account, and scrolled the list of names for Archivist12, considering how I would phrase my first message as I did so.

But Arc, I quickly realized, was not online.

I felt a chill then, let me tell you. There are certain hours of the day, you see, when Arc is never not online. She has an archive to maintain, after all, and we had long ago coordinated our schedules to ensure the maximum overlap between our respective time zones. It was possible, of course, that she was simply on one of her unannounced gadabouts—she is so unpredictable that way—but frankly, the timing of the thing worried me. Just to be on the safe side, I opened a window and typed Arc’s username into and tried sending a message, in case she had decided to go invisible—but it was returned to me with a resonant, damning **Archivist12 is not available**.

I sat and stared at the screen for a few seconds, a multitude of scenarios running through my head. It was like watching an episode of a soap opera, or possibly a romantic comedy with Julia Roberts. *Arc doesn’t like you anymore*, whispered a paranoid voice in my head. *She’s seen that Charlotte Lennox is the new rising star of fandom, and she’s forsaken you to join forces with her*.

I don’t mind telling that I quailed a bit. But I am pleased to say that after the application of a mere one-and-a-half Cadbury fruit and nut chocolate bars, I rallied admirably. The way I saw it, there were two possible explanations for Arc’s absence: either Arc was still sulking over last night’s exchange, or she had, in fact, decided to sell me out to—to this *upstart*. In the first scenario, I had nothing to worry about—Arc would come around eventually, as she always did. But if the events of the second scenario had actually occurred—well, there was only one thing for it.

I would have to win Arc back. And I would start by putting Her Grace well and truly in her place.

I logged into my *Sanguinity* account with shaking hands, but firm resolution of mind. I was keenly aware that it would not do to underestimate this Charlotte Lennox. If Sockpuppetgate had proven anything, other from the fact that some people simply have too much time on their hands, it was that the self-styled Duchess of Richmond was too clever by half. However, I myself am no slouch in matters mental, and I fancy that I can be quite cunning at times, although it must be confessed that my best plans usually evolved after close consultation with Arc. But I always say that a BNF who cannot stand on her own two feet is hardly deserving of the title. I write my stories myself, to paraphrase a song by Stevie Nicks. *And that makes me stronger*.

I arrived at the Malfois Estate and began putting things in order. As Arc so ungenerously observed, I do not, strictly speaking, have a housekeeper yet, although I was confident that as time passed and more of my readers signed up for *Sanguinity* accounts I would be flooded with applications, nay, *pleas*, for employment. But it was early days yet, and the Malfois Estate was still a work in progress. The grounds were mostly established, so it looked all right from the road, so to speak, but only a few of the inner chambers were fit to be seen. I intended to host

Charlotte in the main receiving room, which was completed to my satisfaction, but I felt that it might do just as well to devote some attention to the closest adjoining chambers, in case the Duchess asked to be taken on a tour. I mean to say, I could hardly tell her that the time I should have been devoting to the upkeep of the manor was actually spent working for a wage, what?

I had just selected lilies from a list of available flowers to place in the vase in the front hall when I was informed that **The Duchess of Richmond presents herself to Lady Mina, with her compliments**. Competing thrills of excitement, relief, and dread coursed through me as I opened the door, but I am pleased to say that my expression betrayed nothing but a calm dignity. And neither did my avatar's.

"Your Grace," I greeted her. It galled me just a bit, but I could never have it said that Mina de Malfois does not observe the courtesies. Some enterprising fanpoodle might suggest that I do not know them.

"Hello, Mina," she said, thereby demonstrating her own imperfect grasp of fannish hierarchies. "Thank you for inviting me. I do enjoy your writing."

Which took me aback just a bit, I must admit. I felt an unexpected glow of pride: Charlotte Lennox, notorious *fan provocateur*, was a fan of *my* writing? I enjoyed the glow for a few seconds, then checked myself. After all, "Charlotte Lennox" *was* a pseudonym—behind the mask, she might be just another nobody, one of the anonymous blur of gushing fangirls who routinely sent me feedback. I smiled and thanked her—graciously, of course—and invited her inside.

"What a lovely manor," she said.

"Thank you," I said. "Unfortunately, my housekeeper—"

And then I stopped, as a magnificent plan, inspired in its daring, unfurled in my mind like the sail of a mighty ship billowing across a brilliantly blue sky.

"My housekeeper," I continued with hardly a pause, the words seeming to rush of their own volition from my startled brain to my tongue, "is in the hospital."

Charlotte's eyes widened, gratifyingly. "Oh dear," she said. "The hospital? I do hope it's nothing serious."

"I am afraid it may be some time before she is with us again," I said. "She is recovering from a particularly nasty bout of tuberculosis."

There followed a moment of absolute silence, in which you could almost hear the wind rustling in the branches of the trees outside. Of course, there weren't any trees on the grounds of the Malfois Estate yet, but it was only a matter of time before I built up enough points to plant them.

“Tuberculosis?” said Charlotte at last. “That’s. Very. Um, may I take a moment to clarify whether we’re talking about an *in-game* case of tuberculosis, or—”

“Oh no.” I shook my head sadly. “No, I’m afraid it was quite real. *Is*, quite real. Poor Sarabellam. She’s been working for me ever since I first entered fandom you know, and I’m afraid it’s my fault that she’s sick. You see, I was ill myself for *such* a long time, and Sarabellam was my nurse. I owe my health to her, but she worried over me for so long that she became quite inattentive to her own well-being, and picked up the first bug that came along.”

“Which was...tuberculosis,” said Charlotte, as though she was still trying to wrap her mind around it.

I nodded. “Her recovery has been steady, but very slow. She will have to spend some time in a sanitarium when she leaves the hospital, but of course I am seeing to all her medical expenses.”

“That is very generous of you,” said Charlotte.

“Oh I don’t mind,” I hastened to assure her, “but I do miss her company. She used to be in fandom, you know—maybe you’ve heard of her? She was on the SophistiFic list for awhile as ameliana.”

“Ah,” said Charlotte. “Yes. I do remember her, actually. I had...wondered why she disappeared so suddenly.”

And that, gentle readers, was that. I could see by the introspective gleam in Charlotte’s eye that she was fitting the pieces together in her head. Suddenly, I found it in my heart to pity her: no doubt she had gone to extraordinary lengths to assemble her case against me. It must have been very difficult for her to see all her hard work eroded in an instant. But it was all for the best; it would have pained me to debunk her arguments in a more public arena. Say what you will about Charlotte Lennox, fandom owed her a debt for exposing LadyWriter, and I for one would have been loathe to puncture such a well deserved reputation.

No, really, I would.

I entertained the Duchess for another hour or so, ordering tea (which I had prepared ahead of time, so as not to draw attention to the fact that I had to make it myself) and sharing light conversation. Naturally, our chit chat turned in the direction of fandom, and mindful of the compliment she had paid to my writing, I said,

“Do you write fic yourself, Duchess? Or are your literary endeavors strictly, er, historical in nature?”

She smiled over her teacup. It is amazing what you can do with an avatar these days.

“No,” she said, sounding thoughtful. “I’m not much of a fiction writer, really. I’ve always

considered myself...well. More of an archivist.”

She gazed at me steadily for a moment. I stared back at her—she seemed to be trying to tell me something with her eyes.

And then the realization struck me like a jab to the ribs. “Of course!” I exclaimed. “You’re an archivist! Why, that must be how you know Arc!” I beamed. “Some sort of archivist social club or mailing list, what?”

She blinked. Then sighed. Then smiled.

“Yes,” she said. “Something like that.”

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Epilogue

Once the Duchess and I had said our adios, I logged back into Instant Messenger, and there, much to my relief, I found Arc waiting for me.

“Well, Arc!” I said. “That Charlotte Lennox creature is certainly a piece of work.”

“I was under the impression you got on tolerably well,” she said promptly. I was a little startled by *how* promptly, actually. It was as though she had been waiting for me. Which thought, considering my doubts of a mere two hours before, filled me with a strange, warm glow.

I remembered then what I had intended to say to her when I first came online that evening. Part of me thought that it would be best to simply forget it, since there was clearly no need to make certain of Arc’s loyalty; but on the other hand, surely her loyalty was all the more reason to be generous? She is a good friend, after all, and clearly as sound an ally as ever BNF could wish for.

“Arc,” I said, “I’ve been thinking for awhile now that—well, you’re a jolly good sort, and there’s a whole suite of rooms in the Malfoy Estate that I never use—or at least there will be as soon as I’ve built up a few more game points—and it can be dashed lonely, rattling around the old pile all by myself.” *And doing all my own housekeeping*, I didn’t add. “So, I mean to say, how would you like to hang up your hat with me?”

I pressed “send” and waited. I must say that I waited rather a worryingly long time. Arc, for some reason, seemed to have difficulty phrasing a reply—the text at the bottom of the chat window kept switching from *Archivist12 is typing*, to *Archivist12 has entered text*, which is a sure-fire sign of a hesitant conversationalist.

“That’s very generous of you,” she said eventually. “I’m really very honored. But I’ve already signed up to take berth on the *Honey’d Briar*, and the captain wants me to stay with the ship.”

“Oh,” I said. “Well, think nothing of it. Just an idea, you know.”

“I really do appreciate it,” she added.

She seemed strangely eager to convey her gratitude. She must have thanked me three more times before we both signed off for the evening. Which, I mean to say, I would have expected nothing less from the average admirer of my fic. But when it comes to Arc, one grows accustomed to a certain reserve, a dignity that elevates her above the level of the average yapping fanpoodle. She’s a friend, rather than a fan, and tends to be stinting with her admiration, for reasons of her own. I can only suppose that she was bowled over by my generosity, which isn’t very flattering if you think it over too closely.

Just before signing off, Arc sent me one final message. “I think that Charlotte found your chat enlightening,” she said. “Take a look at her latest post.”

I did so with alacrity, to find the following message.

Charlotte Lennox, it read, wishes to convey her thanks to those who have expressed admiration for her work, and begs to inform you all that, having lain the facts of LadyWriter’s story before the public, she will be taking an early retirement. She does not intend to pursue inquiries regarding any other incident or person in fandom. She advises her readers to conduct investigations of their own, where and when they feel that such effort is warranted.

And then, in smaller print, several lines before the main body of the message, she had written: *Charlotte Lennox wishes to tender her particular regards to Mina de Malfois for her assistance in clearing up one or two little matters which had puzzled her exceedingly, and begs that Mina will rest easy in the knowledge that the author holds her probity in the highest regard.*

Well, I’m sure I don’t have to tell you what a load off my mind that was. But when I checked my email a moment later, I discovered another message from Charlotte, addressed to me privately, that I found rather more obscure.

It read:

*Dear Mina: I wanted to tell you again how much I enjoyed our chat this evening. I found that after we parted ways, my thoughts turned back to your poor housekeeper, Sarabellam, and her unfortunate illness. She must be a very brave, not to say slightly bewildered, young woman to find herself suffering from such a severe, and, above all, **rare** disease as tuberculosis. Of course, she is very fortunate to have you looking after her medical bills; but as I am sure you are not unaware, there are those with equally serious medical problems who are not so lucky in their benefactors. On that note, I wonder if I might enlist your assistance in a small charity drive I intend to hold next week. I have enlisted the services of an icon maker, but I could also use the skills of a well known fic writer. I wasn’t thinking of anything overwhelming—perhaps a drabble, for every twenty dollar donation? Do let me hear back from you soon.*

*I remain, your obedient servant,
Charlotte Lennox*

I know you must be thinking, as I did at first, that it was a bit presumptuous of her to ask so much of me after such a short acquaintance. But on reflection, I decided not to take offense. After all, the more time Her Grace devoted to raising funds for cancer victims, the less time she would have to reconsider her decision to take an early retirement. Also, as I have had cause to observe before, raising funds for charity never hurt the all-too-fragile reputation of your common or garden variety BNF.

And I have to admit that there was *something* about the wording of Charlotte's email that made me uneasy. Not that I could perceive any overt threat in it—but she did have a knack for blending courtesy and insinuation in such a way that one found oneself desiring to please her, just to make certain that any imagined displeasure remained entirely imaginary. It was a trait, I observed grumpily, that she shared with—

I paused.

I blinked.

I felt cold chills race up my spine and down my arms.

I read the email over again.

I reflected on all the events of the evening.

I logged off from my account, climbed into my bed, and pulled the covers over my head.

When I awoke the next morning, I took the few minutes I would otherwise have spent over my corn flakes to post a note in my LiveJournal, stating that I would be participating in Charlotte Lennox' fund-raising drive for charity the following week. I took a shower, left for work, and by the time I returned home that evening I had done an admirable job of shaking off the dreadful suspicion that had haunted my dreams.

I didn't delete the post, however. A proper BNF knows a sign when she sees one.

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