

Interregnum

by StormySkize

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One Shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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Disclaimer: Damn I'm still not JKR. I make no money when I play in the universe she created; I'm just here for the party.

Author's Note: This story was written for the Potter Place's Anything Goes Challenge. Prompt 25. It's between Voldemort's disappearance and his return; write a romance between any two canon characters during this period of peace.

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As always, hugs and kisses go to my very special beta.

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Severus Snape slipped quietly into the staff room and headed for his usual seat in the far corner. He stopped short when he realized that the chair was already occupied.

"You're in my chair," he snarled at the woman whose head was bent over a large book that was open on her lap.

The woman looked up, startled.

"I wasn't aware that there was assigned seating," she said as she regained her composure.

"I *always* sit in that chair."

"Since this is my first staff meeting, I didn't know that," the woman said.

She got to her feet gracefully, her hands sliding under the cumbersome book to support it as she stood.

"Severus, I see you've met our new Arithmancy professor."

Albus Dumbledore had moved silently to stand beside Snape.

"Septima, this is Severus Snape, Hogwarts' Potions master and head of Slytherin House.

"Severus, Septima Vector."

"Professor Snape," Septima said. She moved away from the chair she had just vacated.

"I apologise for usurping your seat," she said with a small smile.

Snape nodded and dropped into the chair. He shifted a bit, settling himself into the well-worn contours of the old chair; his long legs sprawled out in front of him. He could feel the residual body heat left behind by the young witch. Living and working in the dungeons meant he was perpetually cold, and he relished the warmth.

"Ah, yes," Dumbledore said with a wide smile, "the dungeons are rather chilly; Severus likes the seat nearest the hearth. There's no reason why you can't both take advantage of the fire, however."

Dumbledore waved his wand and another squishy, comfortable-looking armchair materialised next to Snape's.

"Thank you, Headmaster," Septima said. She sat, rather less awkwardly than Snape had.

"My pleasure," Dumbledore said. "Have some tea."

Another swish of his wand and a tea service settled itself on the small pie crust table next to her chair.

"Ah, there's Minerva. Please excuse me."

"Is he always so accommodating?" Septima asked as she poured herself a cup of the fragrant brew.

"He's a meddlesome, interfering old fool," Snape muttered.

If she was shocked by Snape's cavalier attitude toward the Headmaster, she hid it well.

"He seems rather harmless to me," she said. "Tea?"

Snape gave a soft snort, but before he could comment further, Dumbledore called the staff meeting to order.

Two hours later, the fire was burning low in the grate, giving off very little heat, and even the squishy old armchair seemed uncomfortable. The tea, which the Headmaster had served in an ever-filling pot, had made its way through Septima's system. A trip to the loo had now become the be-all and end-all of her existence, and she found it nearly impossible to concentrate on what the man was saying.

She squirmed and shifted the large book she still held on her lap, hoping to ease the pressure on her bladder. She stuffed the many parchments the Headmaster had handed out between the pages of the book.

Dumbledore closed the meeting by officially welcoming the new Arithmancy professor to Hogwarts.

Septima stood to acknowledge the introduction. There was a small scattering of applause, and then, mercifully, the meeting was over.

She looked around frantically.

"Through that door and to the left," Snape said as he stood and pointed.

"Hold this," Septima said as she thrust the unwieldy book into Snape's hands.

He barely had time to catch it as she dashed out of the room.

"You should never drink the tea; I think he puts a diuretic in it," Snape said to her a few minutes later when she returned to the staff room to retrieve her book.

"It would have been nice of you to warn me *before* I drank it," she said.

And then she smiled.

Her smile lit up the drab, dark staff room.

As soon as he realised that his lips were beginning to curve into an answering smile, Snape twisted the smile into a sneer.

"You'll soon discover if you haven't already I'm not nice."

He handed her the book, turned, and strode out of the staff room, his robes swirling behind him as he went.

What a strange man, Septima thought to herself as she watched the retreating figure dressed all in black. He'd seemed angry and surly when he'd first entered the staff room and found her sitting in 'his' seat. He'd been almost solicitous when he'd pointed her toward the loo, and he'd even joked with her about the Headmaster doctoring the tea. (At least she hoped he'd been joking.) But then he'd been angry again when he left.

She shrugged. Perhaps they wouldn't see very much of each other his quarters, his classroom, and the Slytherin common room were all in the dungeons, while her own quarters and classroom were near Ravenclaw Tower. It was a very large castle.

Severus Snape paced restlessly in front of his fireplace as he reviewed the incident in the staff room. He wasn't sure why he'd reacted so angrily to the new Arithmancy professor, and he castigated himself for losing his temper. He prided himself on his control. The last time he'd truly lost control, he'd regretted it within moments.

He idly rubbed his left forearm. The Dark Mark was barely visible now, and it hadn't burned in nearly six years. Not since the night Voldemort had been vanquished by a mere babe in arms the night Lily died.

He harboured no illusions, however, that the Dark Lord was dead. He and Dumbledore both believed that Tom Riddle was merely in hiding, regaining both his physical strength and his magical power, and awaiting the day when he could once again challenge the only wizard who'd ever beaten him Harry Potter.

By the time Lily's son entered Hogwarts in four years, Voldemort would be ready to begin his campaign in earnest.

In just four years, the chain of events he himself had set into motion on the day he'd sat his OWLS would recommence.

It wouldn't be many years after that before he finally made restitution.

He almost looked forward to it. If there was any kind of mercy beyond the veil, perhaps he'd finally be able to convince Lily to forgive him.

In the meantime, he couldn't allow himself to be distracted by anything not even a winsome witch with shiny, honey-gold hair, deep violet eyes, and a dimple that winked in

and out when she smiled.

Snape pulled himself up short as he realised the direction his thoughts had taken.

Merlin in a mini-skirt! He was *attracted* to her!

He wasn't sure *why* he was surprised to discover this. He was a man, after all. The sex drive was deeply rooted in human beings, and he didn't delude himself into thinking he had the discipline to live as a celibate. He had his share of female companionship. That's what weekends and holidays were for. It was easy to find women willing to spend an hour or two with him. They were Muggle women of course – lonely, homely, desperate women who were willing to overlook his thin, stringy hair, large nose, and surly disposition. He picked them up in bars and clubs, and oft-times he didn't even bother to learn a name. They were utilised briefly and then discarded as dispassionately as the soiled condoms he peeled off his spent cock.

He'd never had the slightest inclination to develop a relationship with any of them.

But when the new Arithmancy teacher had smiled at him, he'd been drawn to her.

That in itself was unusual. He made it a point to never become involved with anyone he worked with – not that there were any candidates within the isolated confines of Hogwarts anyway. Minerva, Pomona, and Charity were far too old. Aurora and Rolanda were far too committed to each other, and Sybill was ... well, Sybill was Sybill, and she was just far too *out there* for him to even consider her in such a context.

But when he'd seen Septima, there'd been something else – something beyond her physical appearance. Perhaps it had been the sight of her with her head bent over a book. He'd always appreciated a female with a brain. It was one of the things that had attracted him to Lily Evans in the first place. (Even now, he refused to think of her as Lily *Potter*.)

"No," he said aloud.

Physical drives were one thing. Intellectual compatibility was another. The two in combination were a threat to the carefully constructed and rigorously maintained barriers he had placed around his emotions.

The threat must be neutralised before it could breach those barriers and do any damage.

He'd already laid the groundwork. When she'd smiled at him so enticingly, he'd managed to snarl at her. She'd been startled by his sudden invective. Perhaps even a bit hurt. It wouldn't take much more to get her truly pissed off and when that happened, maybe she'd stop smiling at him!

When she entered the Great Hall for dinner, Septima Vector discovered that as the newest member of the staff she had been given the seat furthest from the centre of the high table – right next to the second newest member of the staff – the enigmatic wizard in black, Severus Snape.

"Good evening, Professor Snape," she said in a polite tone as she took her seat.

She received a grunt in reply.

When the food appeared, she took a portion of the roast beef and mashed potatoes.

"Please pass the salt," she said after she'd tasted the potatoes.

When she was ignored, she repeated her request a bit more loudly.

"Excuse me, but would you please pass the salt?"

Snape picked up the salt shaker and slammed it down next to her plate.

"Here's the salt. And the pepper." The pepper mill was slammed down next to the salt shaker. "I suggest that if you need anything else, you ask one of the house-elves. I'm not your bloody servant!"

Snape stood up, threw his napkin down, and stormed out of the room.

Septima flushed with embarrassment.

The witch who'd been sitting on Snape's other side slid over and took the seat that Snape had so dramatically vacated.

"Charming, isn't he?" Rolanda Hooch said. She gave a throaty chuckle and pulled her plate over, pushing Snape's aside.

"All I did was ask him to pass the salt."

"He's rather prickly until you get to know him. Well, actually, he's rather prickly most of the time, and I'm not sure that anyone really knows him."

She took a bite of food from her plate and chewed enthusiastically.

"Do you think the Headmaster would give me another seat if I asked him?"

Rolanda shook her head and swallowed.

"Oh, no." She waved her fork emphatically. "You're stuck sitting next to Severus for the duration of the term, at least. And if you looked over the schedules Albus handed out at the meeting, you'll have noticed that you're also paired up with him to supervise Hogsmeade weekends, to oversee detentions, and to do nightly rounds."

"I confess, I haven't looked at the schedules yet. Why would the Headmaster do that when it's so obvious that the man despises me?"

Rolanda chuckled again.

"He despises everyone, so you needn't feel singled out on that score. As to why, well, it's a tradition handed down from the Founders, and Albus is very big on tradition."

"How will we ever work together if we can't even get through a meal?" Septima asked.

"I'd say that's up to you."

Septima looked startled, but before she could say anything, Rolanda patted her lips with her napkin and stood up.

"I've got to go check the equipment in the Quidditch shed. With the students arriving tomorrow, the house teams will want to start practising right away."

"Welcome to Hogwarts!"

With another laugh and a small wave, Rolanda left the Great Hall.

Septima sighed and tried to finish her meal. Her appetite had deserted her, however, and all she did was push her food around her plate.

When she saw the Headmaster get to his feet, she made a sudden decision.

She stood up and hurried after the older wizard, catching up to him just as he reached the exit.

"Headmaster!"

"Yes, Professor Vector?"

"Might I have a word with you?"

"Of course, of course."

A few minutes later, Septima was seated across from the Headmaster in his office.

"Sherbet lemon?" Dumbledore offered with a twinkle and a smile.

"Uh ... no, no thank you, sir."

Dumbledore withdrew the sweet and popped into his own mouth.

"Well, then, what can I do for you?" he asked as he shifted the sweet to rest between his cheek and gum.

Septima took a deep breath and then began to speak.

"... and so, I doubt we'd be able to work together effectively," Septima finished.

Dumbledore sat quietly and listened. When she finished speaking, he took his glasses off and began polishing them on the sleeve of his robes. He settled them back on the bridge of his nose and peered down at her.

"You signed a contract, a contract which gives the Headmaster that would *bestow* the authority to assign your duties, and even your seat at the High Table, as I see fit."

"But ..."

Dumbledore held up a hand to stop her.

"You and Severus *will* work together, Professor Vector.

"It's up to you, however, to determine whether you'll work together in harmony or dissension."

"Madam Hooch said nearly the same thing, but I don't understand. It certainly isn't my choice to work with someone who demonstrates nothing but scorn and contempt for me."

Dumbledore smiled.

"Severus Snape will treat you with scorn and contempt for only as long as you will allow him to do so. You are a teacher at this school. You deserve respect from me, from the students, and from your fellow teachers.

"Severus does not suffer fools, and he has no patience for those who allow themselves to become victims."

"Not even his own victims?"

"Especially his own victims."

Septima's eyes narrowed, and then she smiled. "I think I understand now, Headmaster."

"I knew you would; I'm not in the habit of hiring fools."

"Good evening, sir." She turned and walked out of the room.

Dumbledore steepled his fingers under his chin and leaned back in his chair.

"Well, well, Fawkes, I think things are about to get very interesting 'round the castle."

Fawkes, on his perch with his beak tucked under one colourful wing, made no reply.

The next evening, Severus Snape stood just inside the staff entrance and looked out over the Great Hall, which was now filled with loud, unruly, rambunctious children.

He frowned. The noise had already reached an uncomfortable level, and the first-years hadn't even been brought in yet. He wasn't pleased to note that his own Slytherins were contributing to the din as the boys exchanged rude comments, and the girls squealed greetings to friends they hadn't seen over the summer hols.

It seemed a lecture on decorum was in order. Slytherins weren't well thought of in general, and there was no advantage in giving others an excuse to further malign them over something as trivial as table manners.

He glanced toward the High Table and saw that Professor Vector had already taken her seat. She was also looking out over the room. Her expression, however, couldn't have been more different from his.

She had a sparkle in her eyes, and she seemed to be suppressing her excitement as she looked toward the back of the Great Hall where Minerva was now lining up the first-years. Her posture gave the impression that she couldn't wait to jump up and begin working. She was clearly enjoying the moment.

Snape wondered if his face had ever held an expression of such wonder and anticipation. Probably not, he decided. His drunken, abusive father had made his early childhood a misery; Sirius Black and James Potter had made his school years a misery; and he'd managed to cock up the rest of his life all on his own, giving misery a whole new meaning. He rubbed his forearm absently.

Dumbledore came through the doorway, but paused to speak to Snape before going to his seat.

"And so, Severus, another school year begins."

"You have a firm grasp of the obvious, Headmaster," Snape drawled.

"What do you think of the new Arithmancy teacher?" Dumbledore asked, ignoring Snape's sarcasm.

Snape shrugged. "I'm sure she'll be a competent teacher. I doubt you'd have engaged her if you were unsure about her abilities."

"She was educated at the Hellenic Centre, and afterwards, she apprenticed under Vernados at the Heidelberg Institute for Advanced Mathematics. Her qualifications are unparalleled."

So, the girl really did have a brain. Snape was impressed in spite of himself, but he maintained a disinterested expression.

"I was asking your opinion of her personally," Dumbledore continued.

Snape arched a brow at the older wizard.

"I have no personal opinion of her, Albus. I've barely met the woman."

"You'll be working closely with her this year."

"That's your doing, not mine."

"Instead of regarding it as a punishment, perhaps you should think of it as an opportunity," Dumbledore said in a mild tone. "You and she are both intelligent and erudite, and I'm sure you'll find you have other interests in common, as well. You might come to enjoy her company."

As if he didn't have enough complications in his life. Besides, while he might come to enjoy her company, if he allowed himself to, he highly doubted she would enjoy his.

"Minerva's charges are getting restless," Snape said, ignoring Dumbledore's comment. "She's waiting for you to take your seat so the Sorting Ceremony can begin."

"Quite right," Dumbledore replied as he straightened his hat and smoothed down his robes.

He smiled and stepped into the Great Hall, waving jauntily to the seated students as he made his way to his place at the centre of the High Table.

As soon as he sat down, Minerva began marching the first-years down the aisle between the House tables and toward the front of the Hall where a three-legged stool sat with the tattered Sorting Hat draped upon it.

Once everyone's attention was focused on the Sorting Hat, which had begun its yearly song, Snape slipped into his seat.

He watched each child as he or she sat on the stool and donned the hat. He kept a mental tally of which house each was sorted into.

As the last child was sorted, he breathed a sigh of relief. Somehow, the Sorting Hat always managed to keep the student population relatively equal. Slytherin house had gained nine new students five boys and four girls. Gryffindor had also gained nine new students again five boys and four girls. Ravenclaw had gained twelve, six of each, and Hufflepuff had gained ten six girls and four boys.

Had the last student, one Amberly Zambini, not been sorted into Slytherin, his house would have had a distinct disadvantage this year, at least in terms of numbers.

As it was, the numerical advantage went to Ravenclaw, but he could live with that. As long as Slytherin kept pace with Gryffindor, he'd be satisfied.

The attention of everyone in the Great Hall shifted from the Sorting Hat to the Headmaster as he stood and began his welcoming speech.

The students cheered when the Headmaster finished his speech and clapped his hands together lightly. It was difficult to tell whether they were celebrating the end of the speech or the sudden appearance of platters filled with food and icy-cold pitchers of pumpkin juice.

The noise level in the Great Hall rose again, making conversation at the High Table nearly impossible. While this sort of rowdiness wasn't usually permitted, the staff tended to relax the rules a bit at the Welcoming Feast.

When the last empty dish of pudding had vanished, Dumbledore rose to his feet once more, and the room slowly quieted.

"It's been a long day for most of you," Dumbledore said in his most grandfatherly tone. "Dinner tonight was a bit later than usual and curfew is almost upon us. With classes beginning on the morrow, it's time we all retired."

"The prefects will show you to your common rooms where your Heads of House will greet you."

"I bid you all a good night."

There was the scraping of chairs against the stone floor and the shuffling of feet as the students stood and began to move out of the Great Hall.

The staff remained seated until the last of the students had left.

Snape was the first to get to his feet and turn toward the exit.

Septima watched as Snape stood and began moving away from the High Table.

He hadn't spoken a word to her during the entire meal. As a matter of fact, he'd barely glanced at her.

She hadn't particularly minded because she'd been caught up in the excitement of the Sorting and the Welcoming Feast.

Now, however, she needed to speak to him because they were scheduled for rounds together tonight, and she had no idea of the procedure.

"Professor Snape."

For a brief second, Snape considered ignoring her. She'd spoken softly; he could pretend he hadn't heard her, and how would she dispute it?

As quickly as he'd considered that option, however, he rejected it. He was sure that Rolanda, at least, and perhaps even Pomona had heard her call his name. Besides, it would be much more satisfying to intimidate and humiliate her; maybe he could even make her cry.

He turned, his robes billowing out behind him, and glared at the young witch.

"Must you nag me, woman?"

Instead of cowering as he'd expected, she drew herself up and narrowed her eyes. She sent him a glare every bit as withering as the one he'd cast upon her.

"I'm hardly nagging you, Professor, as I merely called your name. Furthermore, *my* name is Septima. I give you leave to address me as such. If, however, you can't bring yourself to use my given name, you may call me Professor Vector, or even Madam Vector."

"I'll call you whatever I damn well please," Snape replied with a sneer.

He turned his back on her.

Their exchange had attracted the attention of the others. Filius was wringing his hands, looking embarrassed, Pomona and Charity were whispering, and Aurora and Rolanda were goggling openly as Septima reached out and grasped Snape's arm, turning him back to face her.

"No, Professor Snape, you will *not* call me whatever you please! I've done nothing to warrant your contempt, but that doesn't matter. I'm a teacher here, and I will not be treated in such an abysmal manner by you or by anyone even if that means I have to file a formal complaint against you."

Snape's eyes moved to where her hand grasped his arm. He wouldn't have thought she'd have the temerity to even respond to his cutting remarks, never mind to actually *touch* him.

He watched as she flushed and dropped her hand, but she tilted her chin up defiantly and didn't move away from him.

She was right, of course. She'd done nothing to him save to smile at him and remind him of what he'd lost.

And if she filed a complaint against him, Dumbledore would have no choice but to censure him.

Not that a reprimand on his record would change anything. The Board of Governors might be able to find someone else to teach Potions, but in just a few years, Dumbledore would need him for far more than his teaching skills.

Still, he'd be well advised to choose his battles carefully.

"What do you want, then, *Professor Vector*?"

It wasn't difficult to hear the sarcasm behind his use of her title, but Septima was prepared to accept the small concession he'd made.

"As I'm sure you're aware, we've been scheduled for rounds together this evening ... "

"Of course I'm *aware* I received the same memorandum you did."

"Yes, well, the memorandum did not outline the procedure for rounds."

"The procedure hasn't changed in a millennium," Snape replied scornfully.

"That may well be, but as I've only been in the castle two days, that's hardly informative."

"You might try reading *Hogwarts: A History*."

"And you might try being less of an arse!" she snapped out.

"She's got you there, Severus," Rolanda called out.

"Mind your own bloody business," Snape hissed at Rolanda.

It was at this point that Dumbledore decided that things had gone far enough. With a casual flick of his wand, he immobilised the bickering pair.

His gaze then swept along the High Table meaningfully.

"I'm sure you all have duties to attend to?"

He spoke softly, but there was steel in his tone.

Like a group of chastised students, the other teachers filed out of the room, murmuring among themselves.

When the door to the staff entrance closed firmly behind Pomona Sprout, Dumbledore turned back to Snape and Septima.

"I'm pragmatic enough to realise that in an isolated environment such as this, it's difficult to avoid some friction between people. I generally try to stay out of the petty disputes that occasionally crop up. When those disputes threaten to interfere with the smooth running of this school, however, I have no choice but to intervene.

"I'm going to release you now, and when I do, I'll expect you to speak civilly to each other."

The moment the spell was lifted, Snape and Septima began speaking, interrupting each other as they both began berating Dumbledore.

"How dare you!" Snape roared.

"Do you make a habit of attacking your employees?" Septima asked in an acid tone.

"You go too far, Albus ..."

"Perhaps I should review my contract ..."

"As Head of Slytherin house ..."

"I've *never* had to concern myself ..."

Snape and Septima had begun their tirade facing each other, but were now shoulder-to-shoulder facing Dumbledore, who had a bemused look on his face.

"What are you grinning at, old man?" Snape finally snarled.

"And here you both had reservations about being able to work together," Dumbledore said affably.

"What?" Septima scowled at Dumbledore.

"Cooperation is a lovely thing, isn't it?"

"Severus, I'm sure that after your house meeting, which is scheduled to begin in five minutes, by the way, you'll be more than happy to meet with Septima to 'show her the ropes' as it were.

"And, Septima, I know that you'll pay rapt attention to what Severus has to say. No one knows the castle better than he does. He's especially adept at finding any recalcitrant Gryffindors who are out after curfew."

Before either Snape or Septima could gather their wits to reply, Dumbledore was gone.

Septima stared at Dumbledore's retreating back, and then she turned to Snape.

"I'm not sure, but I think we've both just been out-manoeuvred."

"I'm sure," Snape replied.

It took her a moment to process his reply, but then she smiled and put out her hand.

"Truce?"

"I wasn't aware that we were at war," he said.

As he looked down into the open, smiling face of Septima Vector, Snape acknowledged to himself that he had, indeed, been at war, and that he'd lost badly.

"A new beginning, then," she persisted.

Snape took Septima's slender hand in his and surrendered.

An hour later, his house meeting over, Snape was guiding Septima along the route they would walk on their rounds four nights a week until the end of the term.

"Some nights I begin at the Astronomy Tower and work my way down, other times I reverse my route. Occasionally, I'll double back and return to an area I've already checked. It's important not to be predictable. The little buggers will soon learn to outsmart you unless you vary your routine."

"You make it sound like a contest," Septima said.

"Oh, it is, make no mistake about it."

Septima shook her head, but made no comment.

On this, the first night of the new school year, the Astronomy Tower was deserted.

They passed a number of paintings that lined the corridor that led to Ravenclaw Tower.

"All's quiet, Professor Snape," a portly gentleman called out from one of the bucolic scenes. He sat astride a tired-looking horse whose head drooped dispiritedly.

Snape just nodded.

"Oh, the poor thing," Septima whispered after they'd passed.

"Indeed. I've often had the urge to use a bit of turpentine and whittle a stone or two off the squire."

When they reached the base of Ravenclaw Tower, Snape paused and pointed overhead.

"That trapdoor leads to the Ravenclaw common room."

"Yes, I know," Septima said wistfully.

"Dumbledore mentioned that you trained at the Hellenic Centre. How would you know the location of the Ravenclaw common room?" Snape asked.

"My parents emigrated to Greece after my first year here. I wanted to remain at Hogwarts, but they insisted I join them there."

"I don't remember you."

"Why would you? I was a couple of years behind you, and I was sorted into Ravenclaw. I would hardly have been memorable."

"If you ask Filius Flitwick, I'm sure he'd grant you access."

"Yes, I'm sure he would, but I'm no longer a student. I have my own quarters in another part of the tower. Besides, I doubt the reality of a noisy, messy common room would live up to my memory of it."

"You're right, of course. I avoid the Slytherin common room unless I have no choice."

Septima smiled again.

"Where do we go from here?" she asked as they left Ravenclaw tower behind them.

"To the prefects' bathroom."

"Where is that? I'm afraid I was gone from Hogwarts long before I had any hope of ever becoming a prefect."

"It's down two levels on the fifth floor," Snape replied.

Halfway down the second flight of stairs, Snape paused.

"Mind the vanishing step," he said as he stepped nimbly over it.

Septima nodded and jumped over it as well.

"We'll make a quick sweep, but as student access is limited, that area is usually quiet."

He opened the heavy wooden door and stepped through. Septima followed him into the opulently appointed room.

The room was empty of students, but the painted mermaid sitting on a wave-tossed rock was smiling and waving, her rosy-coloured nipples peeking out tantalizingly between her long, curly locks of golden hair. She was singing softly, her voice a mesmerising hum.

"Just ignore her," Snape said loudly enough to be heard over the mermaid's song. "She's a vixen and will flirt with anyone, male or female."

The mermaid pouted prettily and Septima laughed.

They left the prefects' bathroom and went down another flight of stairs.

"You'll need to walk through the library at least twice on each circuit," Snape said. "Be sure to check the restricted section as well."

"Shouldn't we be encouraging students to use the library rather than chasing them out of it?"

Snape snorted softly.

"Most of them couldn't find the library if you drew them a map. If they're here, especially after curfew, they're up to no good. Order them out and deduct house points."

He opened the door to the library and stalked down the centre aisle toward the door that led to the restricted section.

Septima followed him, noting that he made a point to look down between each row of towering shelves, his wand tip lighted to assist him as he peered into the darkened corners.

When he opened the door that led to the restricted section, he moved more quietly.

"Some of the books in here are sensitive to noise and light," he explained in the softest tone Septima had ever heard him use.

She just nodded and followed him around the cramped, gloomy room.

She was relieved when they stepped back out into the main section of the library.

As they made their way toward the exit, Snape again looked down each section of shelving.

When they were outside the library, he moved toward the stairs again, but the staircase was gone.

"Is there another way down?" Septima asked.

"The stairs will return in a minute or so," Snape replied.

"How can you be sure of that? We could be waiting here for hours."

Snape closed his eyes and shook his head as though pondering why the gods had seen fit to saddle him with the mentally deficient.

"I thought we were going to have a new beginning, but apparently you can't get over being a pompous pillock." She spoke softly, but there was no mistaking her tone.

"What did you say? How dare you?"

"How dare I? How dare *you!*"

She had her hands on her hips and was glaring.

"Tell me, Snape. On the day you became a teacher, did you absorb all this information by osmosis?"

"What kind of a ridiculous question is that?" Snape asked with a scowl. "Of course, I didn't."

"I thought not. You had to learn all the nuances and intricacies of this castle the secret of the stairs, where the vanishing step is, and probably a whole lot more that I've yet to realise.

"Well, I've got to learn those nuances, as well. And the quicker I learn them, the less you'll have to deal with me."

"There's an incentive," Snape muttered.

"There's an incentive for both of us, then," she said. "I won't have to deal with you, either!"

Septima crossed her arms over her chest and turned away from him.

Snape was secretly amused by Septima's indignation. Most people were intimidated by his scowl and his sneer and his snark, but this young witch had stood up to him and demanded his respect.

He touched her shoulder lightly, and she turned to face him once again.

"My apologies," he said. "My disposition is ...*tart*... at the best of times. And the first day of term is hardly that."

She nodded, albeit a bit stiffly.

"Now, what was your question about the stairs?"

Although she might have liked to prolong her righteous snit, her curiosity was too strong.

"How do you know the staircase will return soon?" she asked. "I thought they moved randomly."

"They do move randomly. Apparently the Founders thought that the students should learn how to deal with adversity and with the unexpected. It's not in the best interests of the school for the teachers to be stranded, however.

"Hogwarts recognises the magical signatures of the teachers and responds to them."

He'd barely finished speaking when the missing staircase swung back into position with the loud clang of stone against stone.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Snape turned down another corridor. He stopped before the floor-to-ceiling painting of a gaunt-looking man standing in front of the entrance to a cavern cut into the side of a large hill.

"May we enter, Gavin?"

"No one's in there," replied the painted man in a deep, gravelly voice.

"We need to check it anyway," Snape replied. "This is Professor Vector. She's on staff this term and may be allowed entry."

"As you wish."

The man stepped to the far side of the painting.

When he moved, a tunnel could be seen stretching out from the back of the cavern.

Snape lighted his wand tip once again and stepped into the portrait.

Septima hesitated only a moment before she followed him.

As they moved along the tunnel, she shivered slightly and lighted her own wand.

"Where does this lead?" Septima asked.

"To the ready room in the Quidditch pitch. That's a favourite haunt for amorous students. They think that because the pitch is so far from the castle that the teachers won't bother to check it out.

"Of course, the students don't know about this tunnel; it reduces the distance from the castle to the pitch by at least half."

"And you come through here every night?" Septima asked. "Even with the shortened distance, it's still a long walk."

"Actually, I don't. None of us do. Gavin keeps an eye on things and lets us know if anyone is making use of the area for nefarious purposes.

"You need to be familiar with the tunnel, however, so we'll go all the way to the pitch and then come back through."

As Gavin had told them, the ready room at the Quidditch pitch was dark and deserted. Twenty minutes after they entered the tunnel, they were stepping back out into the corridor where they'd entered.

"Thank you, Gavin," Septima murmured.

"My pleasure, Professor," Gavin replied as he stepped back into place in front of the cavern's entrance, effectively hiding the tunnel.

Half an hour later, Snape and Septima had finished walking through their assigned checkpoints for the first time.

"We need to walk through once more before we can retire for the evening," Snape said.

"It's nearly eleven o'clock," Septima replied. "It'll be one before we finish a second round. Do you often find students out this late?"

"Probably not on the first night of term," Snape answered. "And you'll seldom find first-, second-, or third-years out after curfew, although it does happen once in a while. The worst offenders are the seventh-years. Most of them are of age or will be by the time the school year ends. They seem to think that as 'adults', the school rules shouldn't apply to them.

"You'll need to deal harshly with them."

"I'd rather not have an adversarial relationship with my students."

"Oh, you'd rather be their *friend*." Snape's voice dripped sarcasm.

"What's wrong with that?"

"They'll walk all over you."

"I'll deal with them in my own way."

"Believe me; by mid-term, you'll realise that deducting fifty or even a hundred house points, along with dirty, unpleasant detentions, is the only thing they understand."

"I guess we'll find out whose method works best, won't we?" she asked with a small smile.

"Indeed, we will."

They set out and headed back toward the Astronomy tower.

As Snape had predicted, there were no students about. Their second circuit took less time than their first had because they didn't make the long walk through the tunnel to the Quidditch pitch when Gavin assured them that the ready room was empty.

It was fifteen minutes before one when they arrived back in the staff room. There was a fresh pot of tea waiting for them.

Snape poured a cup and with a tired-sounding sigh, he settled down into his usual chair beside the fire.

"Help yourself," he said to Septima with a casual wave of his hand toward the teapot.

"No, thank you. I'm going to bed. I'm sure tomorrow will be hectic."

"It will," Snape agreed. "The first full day of classes always is."

"Then why are you drinking tea? Won't it keep you awake?"

"It's my own blend. It actually helps to promote a more restful sleep."

"Well, in that case ..."

She poured herself a cup and took the same seat she'd had the previous afternoon during the staff meeting.

They sat in silence, drinking their tea and enjoying the warmth of the fire.

"Might I ask another question?" Septima said a few minutes later.

"Could I stop you?" Snape drawled.

Septima smiled.

"Probably not," she conceded.

"Then by all means ... ask."

"Earlier, you mentioned deducting fifty or a hundred house points. That seems rather excessive. How do you determine the number of points to be deducted or awarded?"

"There aren't any specific rules," Snape replied. "There are, however, some general guidelines that most teachers follow.

"For a minor infraction, such as talking in class, a point per year would be deducted from first- through third-years. Students in the higher years would have more deducted because it is presumed that by that point in their academic careers they should know better.

"Although teachers are supposed to be impartial in the awarding and deducting of points, there is always some covert favouritism given to students of one's own house.

"The awarding of points is similarly structured, although most other teachers tend to award twice as many points as they deduct."

"But you don't, do you?" Septima asked.

"I seldom award points at all," he said with a wicked grin. "Ask anyone."

Septima laughed and got to her feet.

"Good night, Professor Snape. Thank you for your ... insights."

"Good night, Professor Vector."

As September faded into October, Snape tried to convince himself that he resented the time he had to spend with the new Arithmancy professor and her incessant questions.

He told himself that his time would be better spent working on his potions, or re-reading his extensive collection of books on the Dark Arts in preparation for the Dark Lord's inevitable return.

He told himself any number of things; but as their rounds ended each night and they settled into their familiar, comfortable chairs in the staff room to drink the tea the house-elves left them, he didn't believe any of them.

In fact, when Dumbledore approached him and suggested that Septima now had enough experience to conduct rounds on her own, Snape was reluctant to agree.

"I'm not sure she's ready," he said, although he knew she was.

"You would have two extra evenings free each week if you split up and did rounds separately," Dumbledore reminded him.

"I'm aware of that. I'm merely concerned that the students would take advantage of her ... inexperience."

"The only way to find out is to put her to the test. The two of you are scheduled for rounds tonight; I'll talk to her and tell her that she'll be on her own."

"As you wish, Headmaster," Snape replied in a carefully neutral tone. "But perhaps it would ease her transition if she knew that she could come to me should a problem arise. I could keep myself available at least for the first few nights she's on her own."

"Well, if you don't have any other more pressing demands ..."

Dumbledore's tone was as neutral as Snape's had been, but as the older wizard left the dungeons in search of Septima, Snape couldn't help but feel that he'd once again been manipulated by a master.

When Septima finished her rounds that night, she made her way to the staff room as usual. She was hoping that the house-elves had left a pot of tea as they always did when she and Severus conducted rounds together.

She knew she could have ordered the tea delivered to her rooms, but she'd come to enjoy the few minutes of 'decompression' as Severus termed it when the two of them sat drinking tea and chatting. And although she'd be alone, she was looking forward to the quiet ritual of sipping tea in front of the fire.

She was surprised, therefore, when she opened the door to the staff room and saw Severus slouched in his customary chair.

"Severus what are you doing here?"

Snape got to his feet and moved toward the sideboard where the tea pot sat bubbling.

"I work here, or have you forgotten?"

"Tea?"

"Of course I haven't forgotten. I just mean why are in the staff room so late. I wasn't expecting anyone to be here."

"And yes, I'd love a cup of tea. I wasn't sure it would be available. I know the house-elves bring it for you, but I hadn't asked for it."

"Just about everyone drinks it after rounds," Snape said as he poured the steaming brew into two cups. "I think Pomona might be the only one who doesn't. She prefers her own blend."

He handed her one of the cups and returned to his seat.

"As to why I'm here on my night off well, didn't the Headmaster tell you that I would keep myself available in case you needed help?"

He took a careful sip from his cup.

"Yes, he did, but rounds are over now. Don't tell me you've been sitting here all evening."

She settled herself in her own chair and lifted her cup to her lips.

"No, I've only been here a few minutes, actually," Snape replied.

"You should have taken the opportunity to get to bed early, you look tired."

Snape shrugged. "I seldom sleep more than four or five hours."

"No wonder you're such a grouch," Septima muttered into her teacup.

Snape pretended he hadn't heard her remark.

"How did rounds go?" he asked.

"The evening was mostly uneventful."

"Mostly?"

"Well, I did catch a couple of sixth-years snogging behind a wall hanging near Ravenclaw tower."

"How many points did you deduct?"

"Twenty-five each."

"Only twenty-five? You were far too lenient."

"It was still a few minutes before curfew. I did warn them, however, that if they weren't back in their common room on time, I would deduct more points."

Snape gave a soft snort. "That was an idle threat, wasn't it? They were right outside their common room."

"Actually, the dungeons are quite some distance from Ravenclaw tower."

"The dungeons? They were *Slytherins*?"

"Still think I was too lenient?"

"You should have contacted me." Snape got to his feet and began to pace in an agitated manner.

"Why? I handled it in the same manner you would have," Septima said in a reasonable tone. She took another sip of her tea.

"I'm head of Slytherin. I have a right to be kept informed ..."

"The required memo will be in your box tomorrow morning again the same way you keep the other heads of house apprised of the house points you deduct from their charges."

Snape glared at her. "Still ..."

Septima banged her teacup down, got to her feet, and glared back at him.

"Still, nothing, Severus! If the students had been Hufflepuffs or Gryffindors, would you have expected me to call Pomona or Minerva to take care of the problem? Would you have?"

Snape shot her one more caustic look, but then he sighed and shook his head.

"No, I wouldn't have called them; and you were right not to call me."

"Thank you."

She picked up her teacup and made a face when she realised the tea had gone cold.

"I'll order a fresh pot," Snape said.

"It's late ..."

"It's Friday no classes tomorrow."

"All right, then," she agreed.

As they sat, drinking their tea, Snape spoke.

"So, did my Slytherins get back to their common room on time?"

"I don't know, honestly. I didn't follow them, I just continued with my rounds."

"I'll ask the Bloody Baron," Snape said. "He'll know."

"It doesn't matter," Septima said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"Of course it matters," Snape countered. "If they didn't make it back on time, you'll have to deduct the additional points as you said you would."

"You're actually encouraging me to deduct points from your house?"

"The students soon learn to ignore idle threats," Snape explained. "As much as it will pain me to lose the points, it would be worse to see you being taken advantage of by the students."

Septima reached out and covered Snape's hand lightly with her own.

"Why, Severus, I didn't know you cared."

Snape tensed slightly. He knew he should shake her hand off. He thought he'd done just that, but when he looked down, he found his fingers curled around hers.

"Are all the little monsters safely tucked away for the night?" Septima spoke from the comfortable depths of her arm chair, which she had transfigured slightly so that she could lie in a semi-reclining position. Her head rested on the back of the chair and she had one arm draped across her eyes.

"All present and accounted for," Snape replied. "The house hourglasses are all down a marked amount, however."

"Every bloody one of them should be as empty as a miser's heart," she snapped out.

Snape chuckled softly.

"I warned you."

"I thought you were exaggerating. Who would have thought that a visit to Hogsmeade would transform a usually well-behaved group of students into a teeming, riotous mob?"

"They've been cooped up here for weeks," Snape said.

"You're not defending them, are you?" Septima sat up and glared at Snape.

"Me? Defend a bunch of fractious, recalcitrant miscreants? Never. I'm merely repeating the official mantra from the Headmaster."

"I didn't notice *him* in Hogsmeade helping to rein them in," she replied sourly.

"As much as he would enjoy participating in the frivolity that is Hogsmeade weekend, his duties are far, far too pressing to allow him to indulge."

It was Septima's turn to chuckle.

"Ah, well, tomorrow is Sunday, we're off, and the whole lot of them will be somebody else's headache."

"Would you like to go into London for lunch?" The words were out of his mouth before his brain even knew he was thinking them. Having spoken them, though, Snape discovered that he had no desire to retract the request.

Septima looked up and smiled.

"I'd like that very much."

After lunch, they went to the Victoria and Albert. After spending several hours wandering through the exhibits, they walked along the Serpentine.

Neither of them was in a particular hurry to go back to Hogwarts, so they found a quiet little bistro and had supper.

It was when they left the bistro that Snape noticed the marquee for the cinema. Without speaking, he raised his brow questioningly at her, and she nodded.

As they sat in the dark, watching the flickering images on the screen, Snape felt more peaceful than he had in a long time. Without really thinking about it, he reached over and captured Septima's hand, squeezing it lightly.

It was very late when they got back to the castle long past curfew, and even long past the time when they might run into other staff members out on their rounds.

"I had such a wonderful day, I hate to see it end," Septima said as they stood outside the door to her quarters.

"I feel the same way," Snape replied.

"Come in, then. We'll have a nightcap. I think I've got a bottle of brandy here somewhere."

Snape knew he should leave. He had a mission, and even though that mission wouldn't really begin for a few more years, he knew he mustn't do anything to jeopardise it.

"We both have classes in the morning," Snape replied.

"I know, but just a quick drink won't make much difference. I'm a night owl anyway. Not that I could be anything else, what with having to do late rounds twice a week."

"True. All right one quick brandy."

Snape ignored the warning voice in his head and surrendered to the beautiful young witch before him not that he'd put up much of a struggle anyway.

When they finished their second brandy, Snape stood up.

"I really should go."

Septima got to her feet and moved to stand in front of him. She reached her hand up and rested it lightly on his chest.

"Stay."

Snape took her hand in his and raised it to his lips. He kissed it softly.

"I *want* to stay. Please believe that."

"Stay," she repeated.

Snape sighed, dropped her hand, and turned away.

"There are ... circumstances ... that prevent me from doing what *I want*."

"Look at me, Severus," Septima demanded, and Snape turned back to face her.

"You ... you're not married, are you?"

Snape shook his head and gave her a small, sad smile. "No, I'm afraid it's not something as mundane as an unwanted wife."

"I don't understand."

"I know you don't. And I can't explain. I'm sorry."

"Does it have anything to do with ... with He Who Must Not Be Named?"

Snape's expression remained neutral as he answered her.

"Why would you think that? He's ... gone."

"Is he? There are those who think not. And you were once accused of being one of his followers. Didn't Dumbledore testify on your behalf before the Wizengamot?"

"And here I thought those proceedings were *secret*." Snape's tone was bitter.

"Isn't there an old saying about two people being able to keep a secret if one of them is dead? In a body as large as the Wizengamot, secrets are impossible to keep."

"So, I'm the subject of rumour and innuendo?"

"I've heard some things. I don't believe most of it."

"The worst of what you've heard is probably not as bad as the truth."

"Tell me the truth, then."

Snape shook his head again. "I can't. All I can say is that the time is coming when I'll have to pay for every mistake I've made."

He was halfway to the door when she spoke again.

"Stay."

He turned back to her.

"I can offer you no future, Septima!"

"Then give me tonight."

And then she was in his arms and the future seemed far, far away.

"Will you promise me one thing, Severus?"

She was curled in his arms, her head resting on his chest.

"If I can."

"When the time comes, when you have to do whatever it is you have to do, will you tell me? Please don't just turn me away and try to protect me from the truth."

He stroked her hair back from her forehead.

"We have a little time yet," he murmured.

"But you'll tell me?"

"Yes, I'll tell you."

Snape's brow was deeply furrowed as thought about the events that had transpired that evening. He'd failed Lily again. He'd failed to keep her son safe. The Dark Lord, using Quirrell as his tool, had very nearly succeeded in killing Harry Potter.

"He's back, isn't he?" Septima asked as she stepped up behind Snape. She put her arms around his waist and rested her cheek against his back.

"He's never really been gone," Snape replied. "He's been hiding, replenishing his magic, and trying to find a way to regain a corporeal form."

"He hasn't managed that."

"It's just a matter of time until he does, though, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"How much time?" she asked.

Snape shrugged. "There's no way of knowing for sure, but Dumbledore and I think two or three years."

"You should leave here," he added.

"Leave Hogwarts?"

"Leave Hogwarts, leave Europe. You could go to America. The Dark Lord thinks America is beneath his contempt. You'd be safe there."

"I'm staying ... with you."

Snape pulled out of her arms and turned to face her. He grasped her shoulders and shook her slightly.

"Don't be a fool! There's nothing here for you ... nothing!"

"You're here."

"And your being here, with me, puts you in more danger than you can conceive of."

"I'm staying," she repeated.

"You're a damn fool, then," he said.

But he pulled her into his arms and lost himself in her embrace.

"Fudge and the others don't believe it. I showed them my Mark, and they still deny it. Potter saw it happen, but they don't believe him, either. Their blindness could mean the end of the wizarding world as we know it."

Snape paced up and down in front of his hearth, his robes swirling out behind him.

"What will you do?" Septima asked.

"Dumbledore is calling the Order of the Phoenix together again."

"And you're going back to *him*. Now is the time when you start paying for your mistakes, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"And our relationship is over." Her voice was steady, but inside she was shaking.

"Yes," he repeated.

"Do we have tonight?"

Snape shook his head and raised his left arm. "The Mark acts as a conduit between the Dark Lord and his followers. While he was ... gone ... the channel was closed. Now it's open again. I have to be constantly on guard, and keep my Occlumency shields up at all times. It's not easy to do if I'm ... distracted."

"Is that what I've been for the last few years a distraction?" She tried to keep her tone light.

"A most beautiful and pleasant distraction," Snape replied.

"When this is all over ..."

"Please don't, Septima," Snape said. "This is difficult enough. I can't bear the thought of you living with the false hope that I will somehow survive to see the end of this. I told you once before that I could promise you no future."

"I won't ask for your promise, then," she said. "I'll only give you mine. When this is over, I'll be here."

Snape hissed through clenched teeth as the long-unfelt, but never-forgotten pain of his master's summons surged through the Dark Mark and into his heart.

"I must speak to Dumbledore before I go."

"Hurry, then."

"Septima, I never said it, but I ..."

His voice trailed off, but he lifted his hand and stroked her cheek lightly.

She turned her head and kissed his palm softly.

"I know ... I love you, too."

"Are you sure, Severus? Why not put the memories in a Pensieve instead."

"No. They could be found and would put her in danger. I won't have another woman's death on my conscience.

"You must replace all my personal memories of her with more ... unpleasant ... ones."

"This is a Permanent Memory Charm. You'll never be able to get them back."

"Hurry, old man, and do it!" Snape whispered harshly as another bolt of fiery pain rushed up his arm. "He's getting impatient."

Dumbledore sighed heavily and raised his wand.

"Severus! Severus!"

Snape, who'd been speaking quietly to Dumbledore in the Great Hall, turned in annoyance when he heard his named being called, rather more loudly than was decorous, by the Arithmancy professor. Would the woman never stop harassing him?

"What is it now, Professor Vector?" he asked. "Has another one of my Slytherins done something to annoy you? Talking too loudly? Walking too quickly? Breathing?"

"I assure you, not all Slytherins are plotting to murder you whilst you sleep!"

Septima pulled herself up short when she heard Snape's harsh words. He was scowling, and looking at her with a combination of loathing and annoyance that she hadn't seen since their first meeting.

"I ... I ..."

"As articulate and intelligent as always, I see," Snape said with a sneer.

Septima turned to the Headmaster.

His cool, blue eyes bored into hers, and then he shook his head slightly.

"I'm afraid Severus didn't get much sleep last night, Septima," Dumbledore said. "It's left him a bit ... testy."

And with that small head shake, Septima understood.

She squared her shoulders and lifted her head. In spite of her inner turmoil and pain, she spoke in a voice that barely shook.

"You needn't make excuses for him, Headmaster. He's *always* testy!"

Snape gave a soft snort.

"I'm sure you didn't accost me to discuss my insomnia, Professor Vector. Might I hope that you've finally decided to accept the teaching position at the Salem Conservatory, and that I can look forward to your absence next term?"

She looked into his eyes with an intensity that Snape didn't understand, but which left him feeling ... empty.

"I'm sorry to have to dash your hopes, Professor Snape," she said, "but I've decided that my place is here.

"I'll always be right here."

End Interval