

The Unconditional Vow

by Agnus Castus

Albus Dumbledore had a plan to protect Severus Snape after the fateful night on the Astronomy Tower. During his final year as Headmaster, Snape has a chance to come to terms with his past and find peace, before his life draws to its inevitable close.
Canon-compliant. TPP Featured Story May/June 2010.

One

Chapter 1 of 14

Albus Dumbledore had a plan to protect Severus Snape after the fateful night on the Astronomy Tower. During his final year as Headmaster, Snape has a chance to come to terms with his past and find peace, before his life draws to its inevitable close. Canon-compliant. TPP Featured Story May/June 2010.

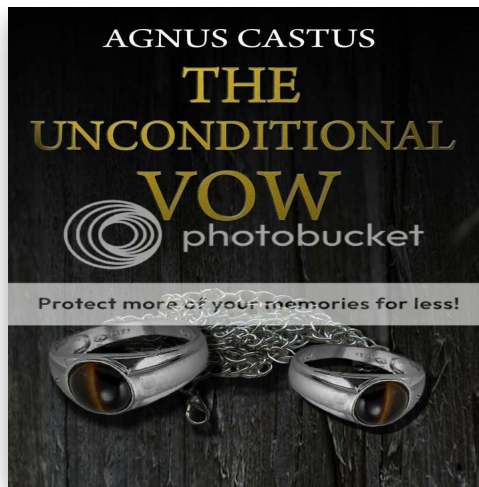


Author's note:

Thanks to J.K. Rowling for allowing fanfiction writers such as myself to play in her back garden.

My writing is all the better for knowing Spikesbitch, Redskytatnight and Hexgirl, who have made a wonderful beta-reading team.

I love to receive reviews from readers; please leave me your thoughts and feelings along the way.



(Cover by Hexgirl)

Grimmauld Place

"It's quiet now

And what it brings

Is everything..."

'Leaving New York', REM

A crack sounded in the cool night air as Snape Apparated outside number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

Although his hooded and cloaked figure was virtually indistinguishable in the dark street, he quickly concealed himself with a Disillusionment Charm before proceeding across the road towards the steps of the crumbling Georgian terrace.

He glanced upwards, trying to discern signs of life in the windows, but the house was bathed in darkness. The only light came from the stars shining directly overhead.

Cassiopeia twinkled brightly in the moonless sky, watching Snape as he hesitated at the front door of the Order of the Phoenix Headquarters.

In the hour that had passed since Dumbledore's death and Snape's subsequent escape from Hogwarts, pursued by Potter, Snape had barely had time to process the shocking events of the evening.

He had escorted Draco Malfoy back to Malfoy Manor to meet with the Dark Lord. After some careful manoeuvring, Snape had ensured Draco had not incurred the wrath of the Dark Lord for his failure to finish Dumbledore when he had been at Draco's mercy. Instead, Draco had been commended for his success, smuggling Death Eaters into the heart of Hogwarts right under the watchful gaze of the Headmaster.

However, Draco's hesitation at the Astronomy Tower had not gone unnoticed. Snape suspected that the Malfoy family's reputation was still very much in question, and the Dark Lord would continue to punish them accordingly.

Snape himself had been rewarded with praise for his actions, causing resentment amongst the other Death Eaters who could have killed Dumbledore in the moments before Snape arrived at the tower. Snape knew he was considered to be the Dark Lord's favourite, but this gave him no satisfaction whatsoever and left a bitter aftertaste in his mouth.

Now, standing outside number twelve, Grimmauld Place, he was acting on the orders of his other Master. The one he had just killed.

Coldly detached from his emotions, Snape entered the Black family home and cast the *Homenum Revelio* charm. There was no one home. Snape knew the house-elf was at Hogwarts, so he was completely alone in the house. He lifted the Disillusionment Charm.

Snape stood in the dark hallway for a moment, unsure of what to expect or where to begin.

"Lumos."

The candelabra in the hall flickered into life, casting an eerie glow on the dark and dusty walls.

As his eyes adapted to the light, Snape became aware of the injury sustained to his right shoulder. Buckbeak the Hippogriff had attacked him during his duel with Potter, thereby forcing his retreat. Snape ignored the twinge of pain; the shoulder would wait. There was work to be done.

Snape strode down the hall, past the troll's leg umbrella stand, which he remembered Tonks tripping over the last time he was there. He sneered slightly at the memory until he was struck by the realisation that this would be his final visit to Headquarters.

He knew it would be unsafe for him to return; Alastor Moody would no doubt arrive in a matter of hours to secure the place.

Now, in the eyes of the Order of the Phoenix, Snape was a traitor and a murderer. He knew, as far as the larger plan was concerned, that this perception was essential. It was imperative that Snape retained his influence with the Dark Lord in order for him to be in a position to fulfil his promise to Dumbledore and protect the students of Hogwarts.

Snape forced himself to care little for this gargantuan misconception, knowing he only truly cared for what one person thought. And she was already dead.

With grim determination, Snape opened the door to the kitchen. As this was usually the hub of all activity, it seemed a good place to start. He was met by a dusty table, surfaces completely cleared, pots and pans hanging in their racks. There was nothing out of place.

Snape climbed the stairs to the first floor, past the heads of generations of house-elves. Upon entering the drawing room he found the same thing; everything was neat and tidy and covered in a thick layer of dust. Cobwebs draped the shadowy ceiling and chandelier.

Frustrated and impatient, Snape held up his wand and muttered, "*Accio instructions.*" Nothing happened. Stowing away his wand, his brow furrowed as he contemplated the implications.

Dumbledore had assured him that he had seen to the arrangements after his death; Snape would be safe from the prying eyes of the Ministry of Magic and suitably well informed of the Order of the Phoenix's next moves.

He had not, however, explained the details. Dumbledore had merely told Snape to present himself at Grimmauld Place, where he would find further instruction.

Snape ascended the stairs to the second floor with growing anxiety. He was accustomed to being on his own; indeed he preferred it that way, especially in the years that followed Lily's death.

But here, now, in the aftermath of the death of a man he had come to view as his mentor, the thought of being completely alone and disassociated from the Order filled him with dread. How could he protect Lily's son now?

At the top of the stairs he peered through the open door of Regulus Black's old bedroom. The green and silver wall hangings of the house of Slytherin called out to him, soothing his distress and calming his fears.

Pushing the door aside, he entered the room of the former Death Eater and glanced around for a clue; some suggestion of where to begin his search.

Amongst the framed photographs on the mantelpiece, he saw a young Regulus Black, flanked either side by Horace Slughorn and Albus Dumbledore. The Headmaster's blue eyes shone brightly as he handed Regulus a trophy and shook his hand.

Snape felt his stomach lurch as he watched the small figure of Dumbledore performing his Headmaster duties in a looped playback, repeating over and over. The last time Snape had seen Dumbledore, he was pleading to him.

Anger surged unrestrained through his veins as he relived the final moments on the Astronomy Tower, seeing the light fading from those piercing blue eyes.

Snape threw the picture across the room and began to tear open drawers and rifle through their contents mercilessly. Clothing and possessions were scattered across the floor as Snape searched in vain, his rage burning like a firecracker bouncing around an empty room.

When the last drawer had been opened and no stone left unturned, Snape swept out of the room and stormed into Sirius's old bedroom.

His anger flared at the ostentatious Gryffindor decorations adorning the walls. The red and gold insignia mocked him as he was reminded of Lily's house and all that it entailed, along with his more recent understanding of the choice he could have exercised in his own Sorting.

Snarling at the Gryffindor banners, he realised such an overt display in a house of pureblood Slytherins was a powerful statement. Snape felt awe at the sheer audacity, and also a sense of shame.

Things might have worked out differently with Lily had he not been so eager to join Slytherin and pursue the Dark Arts. He regretted some of the choices he had made in the past, wishing he had known what the cost of those moments would be. Life could have been so very different.

Snape grabbed the red and gold hangings and attempted to tear them from the walls, his grief and loss ripping him in two. But the banners would not budge; a well executed Permanent Sticking Charm had seen to that.

He growled at the walls, unable to vent his frustration. A photograph of grinning Marauders taunted him as he tore aside furnishings and broke open drawers. He searched, searched for anything. Searched for something to anchor him in this storm.

Then suddenly, it was there in his hands an old parchment envelope addressed to Sirius Black, written in Lily's handwriting. His heart skipped a beat as his trembling fingers opened the letter and his eyes devoured the contents.

A photograph of an infant on a broomstick fell from inside the letter. Snape knelt down and retrieved it from the floor. With a rush of emotion he saw Lily's smiling, laughing face. She looked just how he had always tried to remember her.

Tears ran down his hooked nose onto his torn robes as he sobbed, overcome with guilt and shame, clutching to this one connection to Lily and his very reason for existing.

He knelt there on the floor for what could have been an eternity, awash with previously repressed emotions. Grief for Lily was now mixed with his new grief for Dumbledore, and it rendered him incapacitated, unable and unwilling to move.

His hands shook and his heart pounded as his damaged soul comprehended the magnitude of his burden. Snape had killed Dumbledore. He was also to blame for Lily's death. How would he find absolution now?

The answer came to him like a shower of ice cold water; he must compose himself and keep looking.

Slowly, he started to regain a measure of self control, the sobs subsided and tears ran in silent tracks down his face. Snape looked again at the letter and the photograph, assessed the first page as worthless and discarded it. He tucked the second page into his robes; he could imagine the letter had been written to him that way.

Snape ripped the photograph in two and tossed the half containing the Potter boy across the room. It landed out of sight, underneath a chest of drawers.

Placing the picture of Lily laughing carefully inside his robes, he grasped the bedpost in support and made to rise from the floor.

A sudden flash of light halted his progress as he instinctively turned, wand at the ready, shielding his eyes from the flash of amber flame roaring across the bedstead.

The fire disappeared as quickly as it had arrived.

In its place, sitting at the foot of the bed, was Dumbledore's phoenix, Fawkes.

The bird peered forlornly at Snape, as if in interminable pain. Fawkes looked old and weary, his feathers starting to fray. The phoenix's sorrowful eyes took in Snape's battered visage and bleary red eyes.

Snape was flooded with understanding; Dumbledore had sent Fawkes to him upon his death. This was the instruction he had been searching for, his link back to reality and life. Relief swam through him, and as the adrenaline diminished, he let out a reflexive sigh.

He rose from the floor, wincing in pain as he became aware of the extent of damage to his shoulder. Through his torn robes he could see a deep wound, and his shirt was soaked with blood. Clutching at his injured shoulder, he sat down on the bed next to the phoenix.

The bird considered him for a while as they sat side by side. Snape had never seen Fawkes so sad and subdued. The phoenix's beady eyes seemed to be appraising him warily.

When their eyes made contact, Snape blanched and crumpled. Holding his head in his hands, pulling his black hair away from his face, Snape began the process of rebuilding his internal defences, ready to face what was still to come on this dark and seemingly endless night.

The phoenix's red and gold plumage sparkled in the candlelight as it approached Snape slowly, a single glistening tear forming like a crystal bead in its eye. Leaning in

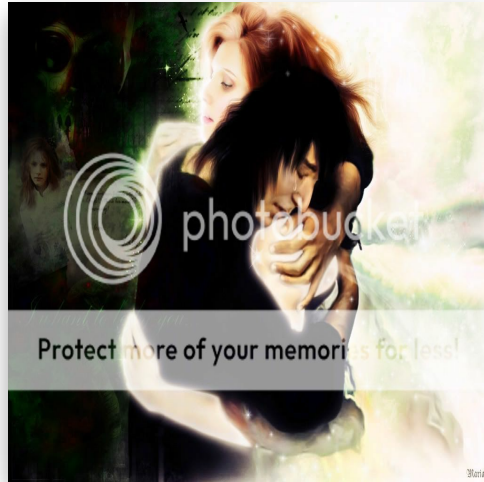
towards Snape, the phoenix's tear dropped onto the wounded shoulder. With a rush of warmth, the skin healed and the pain evaporated.

Despite himself, Snape felt a rush of gratitude towards Fawkes for this act of kindness, and he nodded his thanks to the bird, whose head dipped in acceptance. Something passed between them in that moment. A new understanding, a deeper contact forged by shared grief.

Snape and Fawkes sat in silence for a few more moments. Snape felt a familiar numbness wrap itself around him like a cloak as he gathered himself in preparation for the imminent departure from Grimmauld Place.

As he stood up, the phoenix opened its wings, and with a couple of elegant beats, Fawkes was airborne. Hovering above Snape, the phoenix extended its feet towards him, and Snape reached up to catch them.

In a flash of flame, the pair vanished.



<http://images2.fanpop.com/images/photos/6400000/Severus-and-Lily-severus-snape-6438314-1024-768.jpg>

Two

Chapter 2 of 14

Albus Dumbledore had a plan to protect Severus Snape after the fateful night on the Astronomy Tower. During his final year as Headmaster, Snape has a chance to come to terms with his past and find peace, before his life draws to its inevitable close. Canon-compliant. TPP Featured Story May/June 2010.

Squirrel's Leap

Cassiopeia twinkled brightly in the night sky above Squirrel's Leap cottage.

Out in the countryside the constellation was surrounded by the dusty outline of the Milky Way and thousands of other stars not visible in the light-polluted skies of London.

It was for this reason that Contessa Marchbanks lived alone in her tiny, isolated stone cottage rather than closer to her employment at the Ministry of Magic. In the dark depths of the countryside, the sky hung like a black velvet blanket sparkling with millions of glimmering stars and celestial objects.

The clear and moonless night had been perfect for her quest to map distant galaxies. Now, in the early hours of the morning, the sun crept towards the horizon, bringing dawn and heralding the end of her astronomy observations.

The fainter stars were slowly blotting out as Contessa packed up her telescope and levitated it back towards the cottage. Bats swooped around her head as she made her way carefully through the apple orchard by the light of her wand.

Opening the front door, she entered into the cosy living area. With a flick of her wand, she lit enough candles to allow her to safely stow away her telescope. After spending hours looking at the black night sky, the candlelight hurt her eyes.

Squinting, she returned her books to their proper place on the bookshelves. When all of the astronomy equipment was stored away, she extinguished all but one candle. Passing the Headmaster's portrait without looking, she padded softly through the darkness into the kitchen.

Feeling tired and ready for some rest, Contessa used magic to heat up a mug of milk. She stirred in some chocolate powder by hand and sighed. Another day at the Ministry beckoned as the twilight waned; she needed to get some sleep.

Taking a sip of hot chocolate, she turned to leave the kitchen and make her way upstairs. However, a crackling flash of flame lit up the living room, and she leapt backwards, dropping the mug and drawing her wand in one swift movement.

Silently Contessa approached the kitchen door, heart pounding in her chest and blood surging in her ears. She thought she heard a ruffling of feathers, or was it a cloak? Whoever or whatever it was had arrived without invitation.

She mentally planned a non-verbal spell before peering through the doorway. Nothing could have prepared her for what she saw.

Standing in her living room, silhouetted against the candlelight, was the unmistakable figure of her former Potions master.

Professor Snape stood looking slightly dishevelled, struggling to adapt to the darkness. As Contessa took in his torn robes and his blood-stained shirt she felt even more nervous. Why was he here?

She stepped into the room with her wand raised, pointed directly at his chest.

Snape caught sight of her movement and turned to face her, eyeing her wand intently. His hand twitched as he realised his own wand was out of reach. Contessa felt a rush of momentary advantage and moved closer, staying in the shadows, until she was face to face with the towering bat-like form.

She could smell the scent of burning wood on his robes as she stood, wondering if it would be prudent to cast the Body-Bind Curse. He was wandless, but Contessa knew he wasn't completely defenceless. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed movement behind him. With a jerk of her head, she beckoned Snape out of the way.

As he moved sideways, Snape revealed a beautiful red and gold and rather battered-looking phoenix. Comprehension flooded her mind as she gasped at the sight of Fawkes, perched precariously on the telescope.

Lowering her wand, Contessa looked back towards the Potions master in shock. "Professor Snape..." she croaked.

He stepped forward a little in the dim light of the room, searching the features of the woman who stood before him. Snape's eyes widened as he recognised her, and he appeared briefly discomposed.

Recovering from the recognition of his former student almost instantaneously, the fallow face hardened, and his black eyes glittered coldly in the candlelight.

"Miss Marchbanks," his low voice glided across the room, laced with disdain and condescension. Contessa shuddered at the sound of his speech, the distant memory of Potions lessons brought sharply and hideously back into focus.

Animosity swelled inside her as she looked at his pale face and dark eyes, framed by the usual curtains of greasy black hair. Snape's appearance had not altered at all in the fifteen years since she had left Hogwarts. He had aged, that much was clear from the lines around his eyes, which seemed puffy in the half-light.

"You were not expecting me?" His voice was derisive, cutting through her like a knife.

What had Dumbledore been thinking? Of all the people in the Order of the Phoenix, why did it have to be Professor Snape? Was Dumbledore out of his mind?

"I was expecting someone," she managed, "but I didn't know whom." Contessa wished she'd asked Dumbledore to be more specific when she accepted the mission. He had intimated that the task she had been given would not be easy, but had she known...

"A pleasant surprise for us both, then," Snape sneered.

She returned his sarcasm with a flash of loathing as she slumped into an armchair.

How in Merlin's name could she keep her promise to Dumbledore? Helping Snape would be difficult enough knowing their history, but giving him her unconditional acceptance... that would surely be impossible.

"Well, well, the Ravenclaw Revolutionary at a loss for words," he mocked as she wilted in submission. "Will wonders ever cease?"

Her insides churned at the sound of the old nickname; Snape remembered everything... how could he not?

Contessa looked up at him through narrowed eyes, but her retort died on her lips.

Behind Snape, the portrait of Albus Dumbledore was gently snoring.

Three

Chapter 3 of 14

Albus Dumbledore had a plan to protect Severus Snape after the fateful night on the Astronomy Tower. During his final year as Headmaster, Snape has a chance to come to terms with his past and find peace, before his life draws to its inevitable close. Canon-compliant. TPP Featured Story May/June 2010.

The Portrait

Snape studied the features of his former student as she sat down on the armchair, her eyes narrowing in reply. Her brown hair was longer now, her face older and, perhaps, wiser.

Wisdom seemed to give her an air of sadness somehow; the old fire was gone from her eyes. But her dislike of him still rippled like waves across the room.

As her mouth opened to speak, her eyes travelled away from him, focusing on a spot on the wall behind him. Snape turned around and found himself face to face with Albus Dumbledore.

Within moments, Contessa Marchbanks was at his side, agog at the portrait snoring softly in its frame.

"Another surprise?" Snape asked.

Marchbanks nodded shakily, staring at the framed portrait as if she had seen it for the very first time.

"I have had the portrait for almost a year, but it was a still-life picture, until now. This must mean..." Her voice faded as she assessed the repercussions.

"Dumbledore is dead," Snape finished for her, his voice soft and low.

They stood together for a few moments watching the slumbering Headmaster's chest rise and fall in its frame. Snape noticed tears forming in Marchbanks' eyes as she

absorbed the news.

Behind them, Snape heard the flutter of wings as Fawkes lost his balance on the telescope and glided safely to the floor. They turned around to see an agitated-looking phoenix glaring up at them in exasperation, clicking its beak irritably.

Marchbanks sighed as she crossed the room, removed a plant from its wooden stand and placed it on the window sill. Taking her cue, Snape drew his wand and Transfigured the plant stand into a makeshift perch for the phoenix, complete with a basin underneath for the ashes.

On seeing the Transfigured stand, Marchbanks assessed him suspiciously. Little did she know of the amount of time Snape had spent with Dumbledore and Fawkes in the Headmaster's Office at Hogwarts. Or the conversations to which the phoenix had borne witness.

Fawkes watched them weighing each other up for a moment before warbling an impatient message of thanks and flying onto the new perch. The bird scrutinised them from this new vantage point with a look of bemusement.

The phoenix's stare shook Snape and Marchbanks out of their wariness, and they turned to face Dumbledore's portrait.

The Headmaster was surreptitiously peeking at the two members of the Order of the Phoenix, as if curious to see what was unfolding. His momentary surprise was quickly concealed as he straightened in his frame; his blue eyes twinkled and a knowing smile played out under his long white beard.

"Ah, Severus," said Dumbledore cordially, "I see you've found your way to your safe house. Excellent."

Snape nodded jerkily as the confirmation sank in; a couple of days with the Marchbanks woman was not ideal but would suffice until alternative accommodation could be found.

"Professor Dumbledore, I..." Marchbanks stammered.

Dumbledore smiled kindly at the woman and said, "Tess, please do call me Albus. It is many years since I was your Professor."

She seemed to accept this with the ease of someone who had been told it many times before. However, Marchbanks seemed to be struggling on the verge of speech. Snape felt some pity for the revelation she was processing, as well as some amusement at watching the woman wrestle with her words.

"Albus," she began, "I'm so sorry. When did it happen?"

"Over an hour ago." He replied lightly, as if commenting upon the weather.

Marchbanks dropped her head. "He Who Must Not Be Named found his way into Hogwarts?"

Dumbledore hesitated and considered Snape before he replied. "No. But some of his Death Eaters did."

She raised her head inquiringly and Snape held his breath, his fingers twitching on his wand.

"Who then?" Marchbanks asked.

Snape shifted uneasily as Dumbledore considered his response. She was going to find out sooner or later. On balance, it would be better if the news came from him.

"I killed him," Snape said slowly.

Marchbanks rounded on him in a heartbeat, her wand pressed against his chest, her eyes alight with hatred and fear. "You!" she growled at him. "You! He trusted you!"

Snape took a step backwards but found himself up against a wall, his wand hand hanging uselessly at his side. Sparks were erupting from her wand with barely-controlled aggression. She had him cornered.

Fawkes screeched a warning at them, but neither listened.

Dumbledore spoke patiently to Marchbanks. "I trust him still."

She faltered at these words, and confusion spread across her distraught features. Snape took advantage of her indecision and raised his wand in defence.

Marchbanks, however, backed away. When she spoke her eyes did not leave his, but her voice addressed Dumbledore.

"Trust?" she asked sceptically. "What do you mean?"

"Severus was acting upon my command. I asked him to kill me."

She lowered her wand and turned to face Dumbledore, her face awash with conflicting emotions. "You asked him... but why?"

"I was already dying," Dumbledore said simply.

Marchbanks paused as the new information sank in. Snape stepped forwards and addressed Dumbledore, not wishing to go into more detail.

"I'm sure the accommodation in Miss Marchbanks' home will be satisfactory," Snape began. "However, I will begin the search for new quarters in the morning."

"No, Severus. That will not be necessary," Dumbledore said tolerantly.

"Where am I to stay?" Snape asked.

"You will stay here, at Squirrel's Leap with Tess. She has made extensive preparations for your stay. The cottage is protected by a Disillusionment Charm so that it appears empty and derelict. There is a first-rate Doorbell Charm and defences against intruder Apparition. You will be safe here," Dumbledore said in an uncompromising tone. "The Order and the Ministry will not search for you in the home of one of their own."

In synchrony, Snape and Marchbanks' jaws dropped as they regarded each other with contempt.

"Most amusing, Dumbledore." Snape smirked when he had recovered himself.

"I am perfectly serious, Severus," Dumbledore replied.

"Albus, no! I can't! Not him..." Marchbanks pleaded, her voice trailing off hopelessly.

"Remember the vow you took, Tess," Dumbledore reminded her, firmness edging his voice.

Marchbanks looked like she had swallowed Polyjuice Potion as her features contorted with distaste. She looked up at Dumbledore, appealing to him silently, but Dumbledore gazed steadfastly at her until her head dropped in defeat.

"Now, I suspect your hot chocolate is still awaiting your attention. Perhaps Severus would care for a cup?" Dumbledore inclined his head in unspoken command. Marchbanks nodded in subjugation and left the room.

Snape rounded on Dumbledore instantly. "You made her take an Unbreakable Vow?" he asked disbelievingly.

Dumbledore deliberated carefully before answering. "The vow she took will ensure your safety, so that you may return to Hogwarts and protect the students."

Snape was dumbfounded. How could Dumbledore do that to the woman?

Dumbledore seized the moment of silence and distracted Snape from his thoughts. "Thank you, Severus. What you did for me on the Astronomy Tower required a lot of courage. I am eternally grateful to you."

Snape's head twitched slightly. He'd done what had needed to be done. "You are most welcome," Snape replied, his voice heavy with irony.

The sound of a spoon clinking in a cup drifted in from the kitchen. Fawkes seemed to decide the show was over and tucked his head under his wing.

"Why her?" Snape asked Dumbledore after the moment's pause.

"Tess has certain abilities and skills, and connections at the Ministry and in the Order. She will act as an informant and spy, so that you may retain your influence with Voldemort," Dumbledore replied. "She will need to perform the Tongue-Tying Curse on you before you next meet with him, to protect the location of Headquarters."

Snape swallowed this with some resentment then asked, "How long am I to stay here?"

"Until the Ministry falls and you are a free man again," Dumbledore answered simply.

Snape heard nervous laughter and turned to see Marchbanks standing at the doorway, two mugs of hot chocolate in her hands.

"You cannot be serious," she said to Dumbledore.

The Headmaster nodded. The phoenix looked up from underneath its wing, waiting for an encore.

"But that could take all summer!" she exclaimed incredulously.

"Indeed," Snape agreed.

Marchbanks looked stunned, frozen in the doorway, her mouth gaping slightly. Dumbledore rolled his eyes with amusement.

"What do you expect us to do?" she asked, looking at Snape's tall, dark frame, dislike etched on every inch of her face.

"You will find a way to help each other," Dumbledore replied.

"How?" Snape asked.

"You are both intelligent enough; I'm sure you will figure it out for yourselves."

Dumbledore smiled at them both before standing and striding purposefully from the frame.

Four

Chapter 4 of 14

Albus Dumbledore had a plan to protect Severus Snape after the fateful night on the Astronomy Tower. During his final year as Headmaster, Snape has a chance to come to terms with his past and find peace, before his life draws to its inevitable close. Canon-compliant. TPP Featured Story May/June 2010.

The Vow

The following day Contessa came home from her day's work at the Ministry and Apparated into the garden of her cottage. It had been over a year since this particular courtesy had been required, and she knew that her peace and solitude was now broken.

The sound of her arrival sent a red squirrel running for cover into the apple orchard. Fawkes was swooping lazily through the air in the late afternoon sunshine, and he glided past her in welcome as she made her way towards the house.

The phoenix landed in her herb garden and started ripping leaves from the large and straggly rosemary bush. It was good fortune that the bird's main food stuff was available so close to the cottage, as Fawkes was looking rather decrepit in the late evening sunshine. He seemed to have lost some tail feathers and was bald in quite a few places.

Inside the boundary of the Disillusionment Charm, the cottage looked the same as always. Contessa breathed in the scent of lavender and smiled as she watched the sleepy bees bumbling around the flowerbeds, but her cheerfulness was short-lived when she noticed all the curtains in her cottage were drawn.

Contessa's stomach bubbled with acid at the thought of the man she knew to be waiting inside her home.

After performing the Tongue-Tying Curse, she had shown Professor Snape into the guest room, bade him a hasty goodnight, and hurried off to bed. A sleepless night had ensued, culminating in a rushed departure to work the following morning. She had left Snape a note inviting him to make himself at home and to help himself to food in the kitchen.

Now upon her return she knew she could no longer avoid a full conversation with the man Dumbledore had bound to her.

Shoulders hunched in resignation, she knocked and walked through the front door of the cottage and into the living area. The room was conspicuously gloomy with the curtains closed.

Sensing Snape was not in the immediate vicinity, she opened the curtains and surveyed the wreckage that was her living room. Books littered the floor, some open and strewn across the sofa. Candles were lit around the room.

Contessa smirked at the absurdity of it all. Why would anyone closet themselves up like this on a beautiful summer's day? She knew the answer: a man who was accustomed to living in the dungeons.

Throwing the parcel from Madam Malkin's onto the small dining table, she set about clearing up the mess and blowing out the candles. However, within moments, books were flying onto the shelves of their own accord without her intervention.

"Good evening, Miss Marchbanks." Snape's low voice took her by surprise, and she turned to see him standing at the doorway to the kitchen.

The wand in Snape's hand was directing books from the floor to the bookcase. He was wearing the shirt and trousers of the previous evening; the white shirt had been repaired and the bloodstains removed, but it still looked a bit scruffy with its sleeves rolled at the cuffs.

"Good evening, Professor Snape," she replied dryly.

Immediately she became aware that they had begun to play a game. By addressing each other formally, she had travelled back in time to her seventh-year NEWT Potions class with the new young Potions master.

Contessa was not going to be dominated by this man again, and certainly not in her own home. She met his gaze with a resilience that belied the uneasiness she felt inside. Silence hung in the air as they regarded each other, each searching for a crack to appear in the other's demeanour.

Snape spoke first. "It is inappropriate to use the title of Professor; I suspect I'm out of a job now," he said sleekly.

Contessa nodded. "What am I to call you?"

Snape watched her for a moment, and Contessa prepared herself for the expected sarcastic reply.

"Severus," he said smoothly.

Contessa's eyes widened as the barrier she had erected collapsed in front of her. An awkward silence stretched out again, and she shifted uncomfortably under his steely gaze.

Eventually she said, quietly but clearly, "My friends call me Tess."

Severus seemed to consider this for a moment, until his lip curled.

"Contessa it is then," Severus replied silkily. He turned back into the kitchen.

Despite not being the first to break, Contessa knew she had lost that particular power struggle.

With a sigh, she turned to Dumbledore's portrait, expecting to see him shaking his head in despair. However, the frame remained empty.

"He has been gone for most of the day," came Severus's voice from behind her.

"Yes, he's spent most of the day travelling between his portraits at the Ministry and Hogwarts," Contessa replied automatically, turning to see Severus carrying two plates of food towards the dinner table.

"Oh..." she began. Contessa became aware her mouth was bobbing like a goldfish. She closed her mouth and looked up into Severus's face; he was clearly enjoying watching her stunned expression.

"You did say to help myself to food," he said sardonically.

Her eyes flashed. "Yes, of course I did... I didn't expect you to..."

"It was just as easy to cook for two as for one." He cut her off with a hint of cool impatience.

"Of course," Contessa replied calmly. "Thank you, Severus."

She hurried to make space on the table and picked up the large brown paper parcel. "I got these for you from Madam Malkin's," she said. "A change of clothes."

Severus nodded his thanks as she moved the parcel out of the way, and he placed the food on the table.

"I hope you like black?" she added wryly.

His eyebrows arched in reply, and his head jerked slightly as he sat down. Severus held out a knife and fork for her. Contessa took them from him graciously and sat down at the table.

Contessa ate in silence wondering how he could have produced such a sumptuous meal from the known contents of her cupboard.

"This is delicious," she offered him.

"You sound surprised."

"I didn't mean..."

"There is very little difference between the making of potions and the preparation of food," he said dismissively.

She considered this before replying. "That may be so. However, your cooking is still excellent."

He regarded her for a moment before nodding stiffly and resuming his meal.

"Tell me about the vow you took," Severus said after a while.

Contessa swallowed her mouthful and sat, knife and fork in hand, contemplating her answer.

Severus looked up enquiringly.

"It was to provide a safe haven for a member of the Order of the Phoenix at their time of greatest need, ensuring they stayed alive and fulfilled their purpose. I vowed to trust in that person, despite their actions, and no matter how disloyal they might appear." She paused for a moment as she weighed up the appropriateness of telling him everything.

"And?" Severus asked.

She met his gaze unflinchingly.

"And accept the person completely without any conditions," she finished.

Severus paused to consider this before smirking.

"A tall order," he remarked. "Dumbledore has an interesting sense of humour."

Contessa laughed quietly. "Indeed he has." Her smile faded as recent events came into memory. "Or rather, he had."

They finished their meal without further conversation. Severus got up to clear the table.

"Oh, I almost forgot," said Contessa, getting up and finding the copy of the Daily Prophet in her robes.

She placed it at Severus's side of the table. A solemn picture of Dumbledore graced the front page.

"The funeral is in two days' time." Contessa noticed a shadow appear across Severus's eyes. He turned to leave.

"The Order is meeting the day after the funeral," she said. "We will start to plan what happens at Privet Drive when Harry Potter turns seventeen and the protective charms lift."

Suddenly, Severus dropped the plates back down on the table, and rolled his sleeve further up his left arm. Contessa recoiled at the sight of the Dark Mark burning black into his skin.

"The Dark Lord calls," Severus bit out through the pain.

With one swift flourish of his wand he was dressed in the long and oppressive robes of a Death Eater.

Contessa struggled to hide her revulsion at his appearance. However, he appeared not to notice, and his face was inscrutable as he affixed his mask.

With an abrupt jerk of his wand, he Disapparated from the room.

Five

Chapter 5 of 14

Albus Dumbledore had a plan to protect Severus Snape after the fateful night on the Astronomy Tower. During his final year as Headmaster, Snape has a chance to come to terms with his past and find peace, before his life draws to its inevitable close. Canon-compliant. TPP Featured Story May/June 2010.

Malfoy Manor

Severus knelt at the feet of the Dark Lord, awaiting his command.

They were alone in the garden, save for an albino peacock parading itself along a hedgerow. Severus focused on the neatly manicured lawn of Malfoy Manor and listened to the sound of late evening birdsong, allowing it to pervade his senses and block out his thoughts.

His disciplined mind shut down the hatred he felt towards his Master, and he ignored the creeping nausea spreading through his gut. He wore a face of calm servitude. The only way to survive.

"Arise, my faithful servant," the Dark Lord hissed softly. "You have done well."

Severus let out a breath as he stood slowly, hoping this meant he could forgo punishment for not providing the location of the Order of the Phoenix Headquarters.

"It's a pity about the Tongue-Tying Curse, but I doubt the Order will use the old Headquarters again. Knowing that you can still gain access will deter them, I suspect."

The Dark Lord's reasoning was sound, and Severus found himself breathing easier as a result.

"Who is your new contact?" the Dark Lord asked.

Severus knew this question was coming and what would follow. He brought forth an appropriate memory and opened his mind to the Dark Lord.

"The woman is known as Contessa Marchbanks, my Lord. A member of the Order of the Phoenix," said Severus smoothly. "I have placed her under the Imperius Curse."

The Dark Lord looked at Severus appraisingly, before focusing his stare on the Death Eater's cold black eyes.

Severus called forth his memory of Contessa, her wand raised in defence, confusion spreading across her face. Her question: *Trust?* What do you mean?" Then her expression softening as she stepped backwards, lowering her wand.

The Dark Lord seemed satisfied.

"Ah, yes," he said, impressed. "A direct descendant of Griselda Marchbanks?"

"That is correct, my Lord."

"That old witch was my Dark Arts examiner at Hogwarts," the Dark Lord said repressively.

"As she was mine," Severus replied.

"No doubt her great-granddaughter has inherited her prodigious skill?"

"Indeed, my Lord, she was an exceptional student," Severus said calmly.

"But of course, you would have taught her yourself at Hogwarts."

There was a pause in the conversation as the Dark Lord assessed the implications. He beckoned Severus to fall into step at his side.

Severus remembered his first year as Potions master at Hogwarts. He had spent most of the year in a haze of pain, grief and self-loathing. Memories were sparse.

His students had suffered his scathing outbursts and endured humiliating punishments. It was a pattern he had repeated throughout his career. Severus knew he had used it as a way to vent his anger, and he made no apology for it; some students had flourished under his tuition.

Marchbanks was one of them. He had inherited her from Horace Slughorn in her final NEWT year. She was bright and intelligent, but had been distracted by the Slug Club. Marchbanks had achieved a mediocre 'E' in her Potions OWL and had been allowed onto NEWT level on Slughorn's less discriminating criteria for entrance.

Severus mused that she had 'exceeded expectations' but that, in his opinion, those expectations had been set too low. She was capable of much more, as proven by her successes under his tutelage.

Of course, the girl did not understand or appreciate this, and Severus doubted she ever would.

Severus watched the sun sinking low on the horizon, casting its warm red glow on the surroundings. The peacock glided from the hedge onto the lawn and strutted with a supreme arrogance, befitting of its owners. Although, perhaps, less so now.

The last time Severus had seen Narcissa, she had looked pale and wan with dark circles around her eyes. She had thanked him for keeping his vow to protect her son. The Malfoy family would continue to pay heavily for Lucius's failure in the Department of Mysteries, that much was certain.

When the Dark Lord turned to face him, Severus recoiled slightly, admonishing himself for letting his mind wander in the presence of this dangerous and skilled Legilimens. It was most unusual for this to occur, and not at all like him. Severus would not allow himself to let it happen again; he would have to be more careful. Survival was crucial.

"I'm sure I'm right in recalling the Marchbanks woman was engaged to be married to another Order member," the Dark Lord began. "I do not remember his name."

"Nor do I, my Lord," said Severus, keeping the curiosity out of his voice.

"Yes, well, Dumbledore will have ensured his Order contained well-placed people who did not necessarily know of one another." The Dark Lord's forgiveness of Severus's lack of knowledge was unusual in its generosity.

"He certainly didn't keep all his eggs in one basket," Severus replied, knowing the frustrating truth behind his words.

"Indeed," the Dark Lord agreed.

They walked towards a large ornamental pond containing several elegant freshwater fish with fancy fins and long tails. Looking down into the surface of the water, Severus could see the red glow of the Dark Lord's eyes reflecting back at him.

"Ah, yes," the Dark Lord remembered out loud. "It was Dolohov."

"Dolohov, my Lord?" Snape enquired.

"Dolohov. He captured Marchbanks' fiancé in the spring of last year and tortured him for information on the Order. He resisted well. Dolohov killed him in a fit of frustration." The Dark Lord shook his head in displeasure. "A shame; he would have been a useful hostage. Much could have been learned, but still, no matter. We are in a much stronger position now." The Dark Lord inclined his head towards Severus.

The veiled compliment bounced off Severus's rigid composure. He would process this news later, when it was safe to do so.

"What news of the Order?" asked the Dark Lord.

Severus recalled the memory of Contessa placing the newspaper on the table, before meeting the Dark Lord's eyes.

"They will meet the day after Dumbledore's funeral to make plans for Potter when he comes of age," Severus replied.

"The protective enchantments will lift when he turns seventeen?" the Dark Lord asked.

"Yes, my Lord," Severus said smoothly. "He shall be leaving Privet Drive by the end of July."

"So, we must turn our minds to the task of capturing Potter before the Order finds new protection for him." The Dark Lord looked away into the distance. "There is much to do. Go now, Severus, you've provided useful information."

"Yes, my Lord." Severus nodded.

"Your lodgings are safe?" the Dark Lord asked as an afterthought. "It would not do to be captured by the Ministry at this stage."

"They are, my Lord," Severus replied. "It would be better if the details remained hidden from the others, however. My work will be more, ah, effective alone and uninterrupted."

"Of course, Severus, you make a good point. Enjoy the Marchbanks woman; she will make for stimulating company, I am sure."

"Thank you, my Lord," he said as he bowed to his Master.

Severus Disapparated in a graceful swirl of black mist, evaporating into the crimson sunset.

Thread of Hope

The following day, Contessa arrived home after a long day at the Ludicrous Patents Office. The Ministry of Magic had been a wonderfully cool underground escape from the heat of the summer. Contessa relished the glow of the late evening sun warming her skin as she made her way across the garden.

The rosemary bush was now a twiggy stump in the earth and, by the looks of it, Fawkes had started on her thyme plant. Contessa wondered how long the phoenix would be staying; she realised she was enjoying having the bird around.

The only sign that Severus had returned from his meeting with Voldemort were the drawn curtains in the window. She entered the living room to find the space neat and tidy. Fawkes was dozing with his head under his wing in the cool shade. He clucked softly, welcoming her home. Contessa noticed the phoenix had a couple more bald patches and was starting to resemble a half-plucked turkey.

At the top of the stairs, she knocked on the guest room door.

"Severus?" she asked gently. "Are you there?"

There was a moment's pause and the door opened slowly.

"I am," Severus said softly, squinting in the light of the hallway.

"Good," said Contessa. "I've brought dinner. Have you eaten?"

"Not yet," he answered quietly.

"Fifteen minutes?"

Severus seemed to deliberate before replying.

"Fifteen minutes it is." He nodded curtly and closed the door again.

On her way downstairs, Contessa noticed that Dumbledore's portrait was empty. She wondered if he preferred to make himself scarce at meal times, and she secretly wished he would spend more time at the cottage. It might make the awkward conversation with Severus a little easier to bear if Dumbledore was around.

A quarter of an hour later, Contessa and Severus sat down for dinner without speaking. Contessa found the silence unnerving. How were they to survive the next few weeks together like this? Dumbledore had intimated they were to help each other, but how?

She willed herself to open the conversation and asked, "How did your meeting go with He Who Must Not Be Named?"

Severus met her gaze before answering lazily, "Well enough."

Contessa nodded and realised there was nothing else forthcoming. "What did he want?"

Severus chewed his mouthful of food slowly and looked her in the eye. "A report on my activities."

Contessa returned his stare steadily. "An update?"

"Yes." Severus took another bite of food.

She waited and then asked, "What did you tell him?"

"That I've placed you under the Imperius Curse and you're now acting as an informant."

"The Imperius Curse? I hadn't noticed." She smiled ruefully.

Eyes like wells of black ink seemed to contemplate her, and Contessa wondered if the man in front of her had any trace of a sense of humour. Severus returned his focus to the meal in front of him.

"He Who Must Not Be Named believes me susceptible to the Imperius Curse?" she asked, attempting to hide the indignation in her voice.

Severus didn't look up. "The fact that you are a former student of mine would suggest that I have a certain advantage."

Contessa felt her eyebrows rising in provocation and she was tempted to disagree. "Really?" she asked with a trace of sarcasm.

"I cannot speak for the Dark Lord. However, I presume he believes I have an understanding of your strengths and weaknesses, and know how to manipulate you."

Contessa bit back a retort. "I see," she replied. "Thank you, Severus. I feel much more at ease about having you in my home."

Severus raised his head and made eye contact again. Contessa regretted her sarcasm instantly.

"You have my gratitude, Contessa." The calm sincerity in his voice was unmistakeable.

Contessa realised her eyes had widened, and she winced slightly. An apologetic smile played out on her lips.

"Actually, it makes a nice change to have some company," she answered truthfully.

Silence lingered again for a short while. Contessa watched the pale angular features of her once formidable opponent; she had never noticed the sadness in his face until now.

"My condolences about your fiancé," Severus said quietly.

Contessa felt a flurry of butterflies and a familiar dull ache in her abdomen.

"Thank you," she replied as her eyes dropped to the table. Putting her knife and fork down, she reached out for her wine glass. Taking a sip, she considered her response.

"Alex went missing fifteen months ago. He was on a mission for Dumbledore, seeking help amongst the goblins."

Severus's brow furrowed.

"He worked in the Goblin Liaison Office," she explained.

Severus nodded in understanding.

"I think he underestimated the danger he was in; he went alone and unarmed, so as not to prejudice the talks. Wandless, he couldn't defend himself. The evidence suggests he ran into a Death Eater. A few weeks after his disappearance we were forced to concede that we had lost him." She paused. "It's been so long now... I accept he must be dead." She looked down at the engagement ring on her finger and played with it absentmindedly.

Severus waited for a moment before responding. "You are right," he said gently. "He is dead."

His voice was compassionate, kinder than she had ever heard it. As she looked into his eyes she felt a fleeting connection between them. The contact was lost as she was engulfed in the reality contained in his words.

"You have news? Confirmation?"

"Yes," replied Severus.

"Tell me, please."

"He was murdered by Dolohov," Severus answered. "He proved resistant to the Cruciatus Curse. Dolohov killed him by accident rather than design; the Dark Lord was not pleased," he added, unthinking. "I'm sorry," he finished quietly.

Tears leaked down Contessa's face as she rose abruptly from the table.

"Thank you, Severus."

He nodded once.

"More wine, I think." She left the room.

Alone in the kitchen, the news swept through her like a whirlwind. Propping herself up against the work surface, she took some time to let the information register. Although Alex's death had been declared by the Ministry, a body had never been found. A memorial service had been held and the whole family had grieved, but Contessa must have still been holding on to a thread of hope. She still wore his ring.

Severus had confirmed the worst case scenario. Maybe now, at least, she could start to move on.

She took some time to regain her composure.

When calmness arrived she felt a wave of enormous gratitude towards the bearer of bad news. She doubted Severus would understand how much he had helped her.

Contessa picked up the bottle of wine and walked back into the living room. Severus had almost finished eating. She poured out two more glasses of wine before sitting down again.

Severus was quiet and subdued, but somehow the silence seemed less awkward.

"I'm not working tomorrow," she said after she swallowed her last mouthful. "The Ministry has given me the day off to attend Dumbledore's funeral."

Severus nodded once, his eyes were downcast and his lips pursed.

"It's being held at Hogwarts tomorrow afternoon," she continued.

Severus arose from the table suddenly, picking up his plate and reaching out for hers.

"Oh," said Contessa, "I'm so sorry...I wasn't thinking."

Severus left the room and she heard the clinking of crockery in the kitchen. He was clearing up, in order to avoid talking to her. How could she not have realised?

Contessa approached the kitchen door and spoke to his back. "Perhaps you could accompany me, under a Disillusionment Charm?" she offered uncertainly.

"Hogwarts will have security in place, it would be unwise to enter into the company of Ministry officials," he said, bringing an end to the discussion.

Contessa helped to clean up the kitchen at Severus's side. There must be a way for her to help him grieve. The funeral would be hard for him, undoubtedly, but nevertheless an opportunity for Severus to say goodbye. She searched her brain for a solution to the conundrum.

Lost in her thoughts, she jumped when Severus wished her goodnight and made his way back to his room. Contessa fiddled with her engagement ring as she watched him climb the stairs. A wave of inspiration hit her.

"Severus, wait!" she called, walking towards the bottom of the stairway.

Severus stopped midway up the stairs, looking down at her patiently.

"I have an idea," she offered.

"Go on."

"There is a pair of rings in my family, I think Uncle Hector has them."

"And?"

"They are linked by a Protean Charm. When placed on the finger, *Colligomens* can be cast," Contessa explained.

Severus showed the first signs of interest. "A complex bit of magic."

"Yes, but I've done it once before; I'm sure I can do it again."

Severus seemed impressed. "It could work, I suppose. Protean Charms are effective within the grounds of Hogwarts."

"I agree." Contessa felt a flush of excitement. "I shall speak to Hector tonight."

Severus inclined his head in acceptance and ascended the stairs, closing the door to the guest room quietly behind him.

Contessa hastened to the fireplace. With a sprinkle of Floo Powder and a flick of her wand, she placed her head into the warm green flames.

Above the fireplace, Dumbledore reappeared in his frame, smiling.

Tiger's Eye

On the day of the funeral, Severus arose in the late morning when boredom finally propelled him from the dark guest room. He picked up the torn photograph of Lily from beside his bed and tucked it safely inside the front pocket of his black shirt.

Severus wandered downstairs into the living room, squinting at the daylight streaming through the window. It was another beautiful summer's day. He half drew the curtains to accustom himself to the light.

The house was empty, save for the frail-looking phoenix perched in the corner of the room. Fawkes rasped a greeting at him, looking more old and forlorn than ever. As Severus studied the bird cooped up in the cottage with him, he felt a sense of hopelessness engulf him.

With no appetite for breakfast, Severus slumped on the sofa picking up the new edition of the *Daily Prophet*. Once again, a photograph of Albus Dumbledore graced the front page.

He leafed through the pages and read a small article confirming that the Ministry still wanted to question him over the 'mysterious' death of the Headmaster. The Potter

boy's evidence against him was no doubt being misrepresented by the *Daily Prophet*, which meant the Dark Lord's influence over the media was increasing.

Severus knew that Potter's hatred of him was likely to be monumental in proportion, and the rest of the Order would respond the same way to his apparent betrayal. Contessa was the only one who believed in him now. Or at least, she was trying to.

He turned to the middle pages and saw a picture of his colleague, Charity Burbage, next to the emblazoned headline 'Muggles Need Your Protection'. Severus shook his head. The woman was making herself a target in these dangerous times. She had obviously felt the need to take up the mantle left behind by Dumbledore, championing Muggle rights. Severus admired her tenacity but was concerned about her tactics. Professor Burbage would be no help to the Muggles if she got herself killed.

Dumbledore's soft cough brought Severus out of his reverie.

Standing up, Severus addressed the portrait with a good morning.

"Tess?" enquired Dumbledore.

"Not here," Severus replied.

"She is still at Hector's, I take it?"

Severus shrugged nonchalantly. "I haven't seen her."

"Avoiding her?" Dumbledore asked shrewdly.

Severus felt irritated by Dumbledore's sharp perception, but had to concede the truth in it. His eyes narrowed and his lips thinned as he stopped himself from responding.

Dumbledore smiled patiently. "She'll be back. Tess is a resourceful witch who can be relied upon. She won't let you down."

As usual, Dumbledore saw right through the façade, getting to the nub of the matter quickly. Severus felt some unease that he had become so transparent.

He replied to Dumbledore's assertion with a stiff nod and went into the kitchen to escape further conversation. Upon realising he was still not hungry, he made himself a mug of black coffee.

Severus felt strangely unsettled as he awaited Contessa's return. He was not accustomed to placing trust in someone; vulnerability was not to be encouraged, he had learned. To depend upon another person meant exposing himself to the risk of ridicule, loss and pain.

The crack of Apparition sounded outside and the Doorbell Charm rang in the tone of a wind chime: Contessa had arrived home.

The front door opened. "Severus?" she called out.

He stepped out of the kitchen, noticing how tense he suddenly felt.

"Good morning," he greeted her. The cold formality in his voice covered up the apprehension he was experiencing.

"I'm glad you're here." Contessa smiled hesitantly. "I've got them." She held out her hand, in which two silver rings glinted in the sunlight. "Hector kept me talking; I'm sorry I'm so late. He was asking a lot of questions."

She obviously felt the need to explain her long absence, and Severus did not want to appear as though he cared. He threw her a supercilious look.

Hiding a cringe, Contessa looked away. "I convinced him they were for a dear friend who was too sick to attend the funeral."

Severus moved forwards to get a better look at the items in her hand. The rings were set with an oval yellow and brown stone, with a lustrous golden sheen. The rings were quite small in size. Contessa held one out for him to examine.

"Tiger's Eye," she said. "The stone, I mean."

"Ah yes, I see," he replied. Severus studied the ring closely and noted several tiny Arithmantic inscriptions on the inside of the band.

"Try it on," said Contessa. "It's for your little finger."

Severus doubted it would fit, but he attempted anyway. Pushing the ring down his finger, he was thwarted at the finger joint.

"Oh!" said Contessa, clearly surprised. "Not to worry, that's easily remedied."

Without looking at him, she took hold of his right hand and raised her wand.

"*Engorgio!*" Contessa gently tapped the ring with the tip of her wand and the metal expanded instantly. She gently pressed the silver band further down his little finger, until it set with a perfect fit.

Severus became increasingly aware of her soft touch against his skin. The sensation was not unpleasant.

"There," she said, satisfied. Contessa held his hand upwards, examining the fit of the ring with a gentle caress of her fingers. "You have beautiful hands... I have never noticed before."

Meeting his gaze, she flushed slightly, and Severus felt her hand withdraw from his in a swift, embarrassed movement.

Severus was not accustomed to physical contact; his hard demeanour usually afforded him ample personal space. No doubt the icy cold exterior of the former Potions master had caused her sudden change of heart.

Realising that their endeavour would not be successful if she was a gibbering wreck, Severus held the ring up closer to his face and studied it further.

"It is a handsome cut," he remarked.

Contessa seemed to relax a little.

"So, how does this work?" he asked.

"After the Colligomens Charm is cast, our minds will be linked. You only need to clasp your hand, as if holding mine, and shut your eyes," she explained. "You shall see, in your mind's eye, what I am seeing."

"Ingenious."

Contessa slipped the other ring onto her little finger. "Let's give it a try," she said nervously. She held out her hand to him.

Unthinking, Severus placed his hand lightly in hers. Her fingers were trembling a little.

"The rings need to touch," she said, avoiding his eyes.

Severus grasped her hand more tightly and felt a cold tingle as the rings came into contact.

"Alright," said Contessa, more confident now, "we must look into each other's eyes whilst I cast the charm."

Severus complied. He met her gaze and was momentarily taken aback by the brilliance of the greyish-blue eyes looking back at him. Her pupils widened in response. Concentrate, he told himself.

"OK, ready?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied.

With one small movement her wand tapped their clasped hands.

"*Colligomens*," she whispered.

The rings grew warm in their grasp. Out of the corner of his eye, Severus caught sight of the silver bands shining on their fingers. He did not, however, look away from Contessa. Her steadfast blue gaze had anchored him in place.

Moments passed in silence.

"Did it work?" Severus asked as he pulled himself back, letting go of her hand abruptly.

"I think so," she answered. "We'll have to test it."

Contessa walked out of the room through the front door and disappeared out of sight. Severus let out a breath he hadn't realised he had been holding.

He gave himself a little time before cautiously reaching out to grip an imaginary hand, and was aware of a cool tingle on his little finger. He closed his eyes and was met by a flash of daylight. Mentally, he squinted, before realising that the vision was not his.

Severus watched two squirrels performing daring feats of acrobatics from the roof of the cottage onto a nearby oak tree. Impressive. He let out a small laugh.

He opened his eyes again and hurried out of the cottage, shielding his eyes from the midday sun. Contessa stood, smiling, watching a squirrel descend a tree trunk in pursuit of its mate.

"It worked!" Severus proclaimed, reverence in his voice.

Contessa turned to face him, a grin spreading across her face. He felt the corners of his mouth curl into the beginnings of a smile. The muscles felt like they hadn't been used in a long time.

"Excellent!" Contessa beamed back at him.

Severus was about to respond, but at that moment the Dark Mark burned into his arm. His spirits sank instantly.

Taking out his wand, he changed into the robes of a Death Eater and mentally prepared himself for what was to come.

Contessa's smiling face faltered before him, but this time he noticed that she didn't flinch. Instead, her expression was one of panic.

"No! Not now!" Her voice pleaded with him in desperation.

Severus placed the mask on his face and stored his emotions safely away in a locked box. There was no place for disappointment or sorrow at the feet of the Dark Lord.

Contessa reached out and grabbed his hand, holding him momentarily so that he couldn't Disapparate.

"I must go," he said sharply.

"But you'll miss..."

"I must leave now." Severus cut her off with snarling impatience. "If I stay, the Dark Lord will send his Death Eaters to find me."

Contessa seemed to process this briefly. "I understand," she said dejectedly, her own sadness and regret evident in her features.

Severus felt the pang of her feelings as they were reflected back at him. He attempted to shake them off.

"If you see Charity Burbage, tell her to watch her back," he instructed her sternly.

Contessa nodded and reluctantly let go of his hand. As she did so, the rings came into contact and Severus was flooded with emotions which were not his own. He felt a wave of fear and concern, which must have emanated from the woman before him.

Without knowing if such transference was supposed to happen, Severus Disapparated, leaving Contessa looking shaken and bewildered.

Close My Eyes

The Great Lake gleamed like a sapphire in the afternoon sunshine.

The atmosphere was subdued in the grounds of the castle as the guests filed solemnly into their seats. A chorus of beautiful birdsong surrounded the gathering, and the Hogwarts ghosts glimmered overhead.

Contessa was seated next to her great-grandmother and Augusta Longbottom. The two old women were talking quietly, commenting upon the superb weather and glorious scenery which seemed to honour the fallen Headmaster on his burial day.

Down the aisle, Contessa watched the students arriving in dress robes and sitting down sombrely. She had not felt Severus reach out for her hand and was starting to feel a growing sense of restlessness in his absence.

"Eh, Tess?" Griselda nudged her gently.

"Sorry, Gran. I was miles away."

"Over there." Augusta Longbottom pointed towards her grandson, Neville, being helped into his seat by a young witch with long blonde hair and large eyes.

"Oh, yes," said Contessa. "I see him. Was he badly injured?"

"Poppy says he'll make a full recovery within a few days," said Augusta, a large measure of pride in her voice. "He ran headfirst into the barrier cast by the Death Eaters... threw him up in the air, the force of it." She winced as she shook her head. "Brave boy, my Neville," she said as she watched her grandson approvingly.

"Just like his parents," commented Griselda.

Contessa felt glad that Augusta had finally seen some worth in her grandson, after years of being down on the boy. She sensed a shift in Augusta's perception at last.

Suddenly, Contessa felt a hand brush against hers, and the Tiger's Eye ring cooled instantly in her hand; Severus had made it in time for the funeral.

She smiled inwardly as she raised her eyes away from Augusta and Griselda and absorbed the scene around her, wanting Severus to see as much as possible.

Looking towards the marble table by the lake, she saw Cornelius Fudge and Rufus Scrimgeour being seated, whilst the Hogwarts staff arrived to take their seats on the front row.

A chorus of otherworldly music arose from deep inside the lake. Looking over and searching for the merpeople, Contessa's eyes found Harry Potter, sitting with his arm around a pretty young witch with striking red hair.

Contessa tore her eyes away from them, with a marked sense of irritation that was not hers, to see Hagrid walking carefully down the centre aisle with a bundle of purple velvet and gold stars held gently in his arms.

Silent tears were running down Hagrid's face as he placed Dumbledore's body on the marble table. Fumbling around for a colossal handkerchief, Hagrid blew his nose loudly before proceeding back up the aisle.

Griselda shook her head and Augusta tutted conspicuously. Contessa was overcome with an urge to chuckle at their reaction. Outpourings of grief were not welcomed in the wizarding world, or indeed by the Muggle community. It seemed paradoxical that people's behaviour was so distinctly incongruous to the occasion.

Looking towards the forest, she saw the centaurs standing in the shade at the edge of the trees, their bows hanging at their sides. The merpeople finished their song and broke through the surface of the water to listen to an old wizard dressed in black, tufts of white hair poking out of his black pointed hat.

The eulogy to Dumbledore was lengthy but held great beauty in parts, celebrating a life lived to the full. Dumbledore would no doubt have been mildly embarrassed by all this attention and somewhat amused by the supposed grief of certain Ministry officials.

Severus's hand shifted in hers but did not pull away as the man dressed in black robes resumed his seat.

Bright white flames erupted suddenly, encasing Dumbledore's body, and white smoke spiralled above the marble table. Contessa thought she could make out a magnificent phoenix flying gracefully into the cloudless sky.

Suddenly, Severus's hand was gone, and Contessa jumped a little in her seat as the fire vanished.

The gasps and screams of the crowd subsided as a white marble tomb was revealed. Severus's presence returned, encircling her hand. She felt a reassuring calmness.

A tribute of arrows fired from the centaurs' bows landed safely, far short of the funeral party. The centaurs retreated into the Forbidden Forest and the merpeople sank slowly into the water.

As the gathering began to break up, Contessa spotted Charity Burbage talking with Professor Sinistra as they left their seats. A sense of urgency washed over Contessa, compelling her to rise from her seat.

"Excuse me," she said to Griselda and Augusta, who nodded at her departure.

As Contessa approached Professor Burbage, she felt Severus's hand tighten, and then he was gone.

Contessa arrived home in the early evening to find Severus sitting under the shade of the oak tree, his nose buried in a book.

He didn't look up as she approached him.

Contessa cast a Summoning Charm. A bottle of elf-made wine and two glasses glided out of the open cottage door. With a flick of her wand, the wine poured itself into the glasses. Taking one for herself, she directed the other towards Severus. It hovered in the corner of his vision until he could no longer ignore it.

Snapping his book shut in an aggravated fashion, Severus scooped the glass into his hand and looked up at her intolerantly. Contessa was startled at the contrast with his manner from earlier in the day.

She met his gaze resolutely as she raised her glass.

"To Dumbledore."

Severus capitulated to the request with a sigh and rose to his feet with his glass in hand.

"Dumbledore," he said, his voice muted.

As they both took a sip, Contessa allowed the warmth of the wine to spread through her body, and she felt herself slowly relax.

Severus sat back down under the tree, put down his glass and picked up his book. Acting on impulse, Contessa gathered up her dress robes and joined him in the cool shade.

Severus threw her a sidelong glance of annoyance, designed to provoke her departure. She bristled slightly, but ignored his gesture and continued to sip her wine, settling back against the tree trunk. She didn't want to be alone after the funeral.

Severus placed his book back down on the ground in an exaggerated movement, resigned to the conversation that was about to follow.

"You spoke to Charity?" he asked acerbically.

"I did," Contessa replied calmly. "I'm not sure she really heard me, but I tried."

"You should have tried harder then," Severus said.

Contessa gasped in indignation. "We aren't in the classroom now," she said huffily.

Severus seemed to bite back a retort.

Eventually, after a long silence he replied in a veiled low voice, "Her life is in danger."

"I know," Contessa cut him off crossly. "I can work that one out for myself."

"You must make sure the Order of the Phoenix protects her."

Contessa looked back at Severus seriously and saw a flicker of regret across his face.

"What is it?" She asked him. "What did He Who Must Not Be Named want with you?"

Severus paused momentarily before saying, with a trace of apprehension, "The Dark Lord wanted to know where Professor Burbage lives."

Contessa's intake of breath was distinctly audible. When she recovered herself, she looked back at the man sat beside her, unable to hold back the next question.

"What did you tell him?"

Severus looked away towards the cottage with an air of acquiescence.

"I told him she lived in a Muggle town in Yorkshire, but I didn't know which one."

Contessa attempted to hide the revulsion she felt; Severus had disclosed information that could put Professor Burbage's life in danger. However, watching his grim features closely, she sensed his discomfort. Contessa started to understand the inevitable consequences of Severus's role as spy. With a pang of sorrow, she wondered how many other times he had been in such a position.

"He Who Must Not Be Named could've obtained that information from the Ministry of Magic with very little difficulty," she said reassuringly.

Severus nodded stiffly, took a large sip from his wine glass and resumed reading his book.

They sat in silence for a long while. Contessa felt content enough to sit, recalling the memories of the day and processing the emotions the funeral had roused in her. Butterflies fluttered past in the warm evening sunshine, and a curious blackbird approached them several times, lured in by their stillness.

"Did something happen during the funeral?" Contessa asked suddenly. "I felt your absence," she explained.

Severus looked up at her, annoyance back on his face. A memory registered in his eyes and he snapped his book shut, sweeping up off the ground in one swift movement.

Contessa looked up at him in confusion. Severus jerked his head towards the cottage impatiently, and she got up off the ground and followed him in through the front door.

The curtains were drawn once again. Severus gestured her over to the corner where the phoenix's makeshift perch stood.

Realising that she had not seen Fawkes at all since she had arrived home, Contessa approached slowly, her eyes adapting gradually to the gloom.

In the basin below the perch, there was a pile of ashes. Underneath the ashes, a baby phoenix poked out its head and squawked quietly.

"Ooh," said Contessa, a feeling of trepidation creeping through her.

Dumbledore spoke softly to her from his frame. "It wasn't before time. Hanging on for the funeral, I suspect."

Contessa was struck by a sense of wonder. "A baby phoenix!" she said in awe, lifting the baby bird's golden beak with her index finger. Fawkes looked back at her affectionately, rubbing his head on her knuckle. Contessa smiled, before laying Fawkes' head gently down in the nest of ashes.

Feeling struck by the enormity of the event, she looked at Dumbledore and said nervously, "I have no idea what to do..."

Dumbledore was about to reply when Severus cut in. "You don't know what to do?" he asked with pointed sarcasm. "I wonder what the Ravenclaw Revolutionary was actually doing in her Care of Magical Creatures lessons?"

Contessa turned on her heel to face Severus, a surge of old aggression and contempt building inside her. Her hands went instantly to her hips and she shot him a look of daggers across the room.

"Probably plotting a rebellion against the new Potions master," she said nastily.

Severus's eyebrows travelled further up his forehead as he opened his mouth to speak. Dumbledore, however, interrupted.

"Moths," said the Headmaster stoically.

Contessa turned to face the portrait.

"Moths?" Contessa asked, trying unsuccessfully to keep the animosity towards Severus out of her voice.

"Baby phoenixes eat moths," Severus gloated from behind her.

Contessa prickled with indignation but didn't turn around, effectively cutting him off from the conversation.

Dumbledore continued to speak, apparently unaware of the conflict in the room. "You must catch them before dusk falls. Fawkes will be self sufficient within a week."

Despite her hostility towards Severus, Contessa felt a bubbling surge of excitement and responsibility. She smiled at Dumbledore and turned towards Severus, who appeared surprised to see her looking happily at him.

Contessa knew he was on the back foot, and she approached him with mock playfulness. "Come Severus, let's see what we can rustle up for dinner!"

Taken aback by her change of composure, Severus looked towards Dumbledore's portrait with an expression of perplexity as Contessa skipped past him and left for the garden in a flurry.

A New Memory

Severus stood in the living room momentarily stunned as he watched Contessa bounce merrily into the garden. He was finding her mood changes rather unpredictable and infuriating.

Dumbledore's portrait coughed quietly at him from across the room. Severus met the Headmaster's gaze with exasperation. Dumbledore's eyes followed Contessa's path out of the house, and he inclined his head towards the front door for emphasis.

Severus was about to reply, but thought better of it. He knew Dumbledore was expecting him to find some way to repay Contessa for her help with the rings. There was no point in arguing.

With his shoulders hunched he slouched out of the cottage.

Across the garden, Severus could make out the figure of his hostess running around the apple orchard. In one hand she held an empty flask, the size of a jam jar. He watched her as she flicked her wand with increasing annoyance.

When he could no longer wait without intervening, Severus approached her with caution, not wishing to stray into her building temper.

"It's too early. The sun has not quite set," he told her with cool rationality.

Contessa flashed a look of irritation towards him before resuming her pointless task.

"Stop," he commanded her forcefully, grabbing out for the arm which held the glass jar and pulling her to face him.

For a fleeting moment the rings touched and a rush of anger and frustration engulfed him.

Contessa seemed to sober instantly.

Placing the jar on the ground, she straightened, looking down at the Tiger's Eye ring on her little finger. Severus noticed suddenly that her engagement ring was gone. A feeling of sadness took him by surprise and he shook it off habitually.

Contessa carefully removed the silver ring and pocketed it.

"We don't need these now," she said with a trace of hardness in her voice.

"No," Severus agreed, taking off his ring and holding it out towards her.

She looked at it briefly before turning away. "Keep it," she said stiffly. "It might come in useful."

Severus watched her tight features as he tucked the ring inside his robes and followed her to the wooden bench at the back of the garden.

Contessa sat, facing the sunset, her features heavy with the weight of the day's events. Severus stood next to the bench, facing the same pink and orange skyline, wondering how he was going to find a way to help this woman. And the sooner the better, if he wanted to be released from his obligation.

As he stood watching the sun sinking on the horizon, he could smell the heady scent of jasmine in the air. Bats started to poke their heads out of their nests in the roof of the cottage and swoop around the garden silently. Severus watched them darting gracefully and was reminded of Fawkes. The phoenix had renewed himself after his master's funeral.

Suddenly an idea came to him.

Unexpectedly, Severus was pulled out of his thoughts by a question.

"Will Death Eaters be frequent visitors?" Contessa asked him, fidgeting nervously on the bench.

"Why do you ask?" he replied, unsure of what had prompted her query.

"I was thinking about what you said earlier that the Dark Lord would send them to fetch you." Contessa shuddered. "What should I do if they arrive?"

Severus paused to consider his answer. He sat down next to her on the bench.

"Death Eaters are unlikely to come to the cottage," he said with conviction.

"How do you mean?"

He sighed. "The Dark Lord believes you to be under the Imperius Curse."

Contessa nodded at this, but without comprehension.

"I've asked him to keep my location secret so that we are not disturbed..."

"I don't understand," she said with a hint of impatience.

Severus turned away from her and faced the setting sun. "The Dark Lord believes I am enjoying more than just your company," he said quietly, ignoring the scoffing sound emitting from the woman beside him. "It is my reward for loyal service."

As soon as the words left his mouth, Severus felt his cheeks burning, and he was infinitely grateful for the ambient glow of the sunset hiding his discomfiture.

"Enjoying more than just my company?" she repeated incredulously. "Unbelievable." Contessa shook her head and rose from the bench, striding away until she was out of reach with her back towards him.

"Surely the Imperius Curse cannot perform such a remarkable feat!" she pondered. "Or can it?" she rounded upon him, but her expression suggested she wasn't entirely sure she wanted to hear the answer.

Severus watched her as the sun dipped below the horizon, her redoubtable profile bearing down on him with indignation. He knew that the answer he gave would be judged instantly, but he also felt compelled to give her a truthful reply. He took a deep breath.

"It can," he responded, his voice clipped in the twilight.

Contessa blanched and her eyes narrowed. Turning away from him, she picked up the glass jar and stalked towards the orchard.

Severus watched her for a short while as she gathered Fawkes' first meal. It was no surprise that Contessa thought him capable of such coercion, but her implied rejection of him gnawed at an old wound. Memories of a swirl of red hair disappearing behind the Fat Lady's portrait flashed before him.

Severus had long ago become accustomed to being alone; he felt certain it was his destiny. No one would accept him for what he truly was. Dumbledore was the only person who knew him well, but the Headmaster had been prone to judging him. Severus had a sense that he never lived up to the Headmaster's expectations, despite his well intended actions.

No, Severus had learned he fared better if he kept himself hidden. His talent and flair were of more importance; sharp intellect was a worthy value.

Deciding it would be better to leave Contessa alone, Severus gathered up the remnants of the wine and glasses and picked up his book. He returned to the cottage, moving twitchily through the descending darkness.

Fawkes was chirruping softly in the living room. Severus went over to the perch and stroked the baby phoenix gently. "Supper is on its way," he reassured him.

Sinking into the armchair, Severus reopened the book he had been reading. Contessa had a small but excellent library with which he could while away the long hours alone.

Darkness had fallen completely by the time she returned inside. The glass jar was full to the brim with Stunned moths. Contessa appeared calmer now; it seemed she had taken out her frustration on the poor creatures and had procured enough moths for a whole week. Severus admired her pragmatism.

Contessa walked past the armchair and fed the baby bird by hand, until it was full to bursting. Fawkes clucked happily back at Contessa and then settled down in his nest of ashes. Contessa watched the phoenix as it fell into a deep slumber.

Turning to face Severus, she looked at him uncertainly.

"You have another question?" Severus asked evenly.

Contessa shifted uneasily on the spot. "What happens if the Dark Lord himself pays a visit?"

Severus had not anticipated this question and his eyebrows crept slowly up his forehead. "That is unlikely."

"But not impossible?" she pressed.

Severus sighed inwardly. Contessa needed to feel prepared for all eventualities. It was a Ravenclaw trait.

"Act as though you have been Confunded," Severus suggested, "a vacant, glazed expression."

She snorted quietly. "I know the Dark Lord is an accomplished Legilimens," she began, some trepidation in her voice.

"You wish me to teach you Occlumency," Severus surmised.

"No," she replied, shaking her head. "I'm an adequate enough Occlumens. However, should the Dark Lord seek access to my memories... how do I know which ones to show him?"

Severus sensed immediately that she had a point; he might need such a memory himself. He searched his own recollections for an appropriate scene.

"Well, this evening we shared a glass of wine in the shade of the oak tree."

"Very romantic," she sneered. "The Dark Lord expects you to woo me?" Her voice was scathing.

"No," Severus conceded. He placed his book down and rose to his feet.

They looked each other up and down, sizing each other up. Dumbledore's portrait let out a soft chuckle.

Contessa's eyes flashed viciously and she turned to face the picture frame with her hands on her hips.

In one swift movement, Severus gripped Contessa's forearm and roughly pulled her back towards him. The force of the about-turn sent her body colliding into his. He held her tightly and noticed a wave of surprise and fear in her eyes.

"Let go of me!" she demanded, struggling against his pincer-like grip.

Severus held her firmly. "It will be better for you if you do not fight." His voice was hypnotically soft and low.

Contessa relaxed a little in his arms; she seemed to have realised his plan. Severus inclined his head closer and closer, until their noses almost touched. Her pupils dilated and she held her breath in suspense.

Severus's head turned slightly to the left and his black hair grazed her cheek. Into her ear, a voice of dark velvet whispered, "Close your eyes."

Contessa let out a little gasp, but Severus felt her compliance as her eyelashes brushed against his cheek.

Holding her still for a moment, his breath warm on her neck, Severus closed his eyes too.

Then, gently, Severus let go of Contessa and walked quietly away.

He watched her for a short time and took in her rigid, tense posture, her hands clenching furiously at her sides. She didn't open her eyes.

Severus saw her now as a woman; no longer a student, with a striking beauty in her unsettled features. The moment he realised his appreciation of her, he quickly reminded himself of Lily and customarily shook off the unwanted feelings.

He clapped his hands together once.

Contessa jumped and opened her eyes, surprised to see him so far away from her.

"That memory should suffice," Severus said coolly.

Contessa shivered as though waking up.

Severus picked up his book and made his way to the stairs, pausing briefly at the bottom. "Goodnight."

Contessa stood gazing at him, but did not return his parting gesture. She seemed unable to speak.

Severus ascended the stairs and closed the door of the guest room on her discomposed face.

Part of the Plan

Contessa and Severus spent the following week giving each other a wide berth. Work at the Ministry kept Contessa busy by day, and she attended regular Order meetings to keep abreast of developments. Along with Kingsley Shacklebolt and a few others, Contessa continued to act as the Order's eyes and ears at the Ministry, passing on intelligence which would help to decide the date and method of transportation for Harry Potter's move from Privet Drive.

She had been delighted to hear the news of the recent marriage of Remus Lupin to the Auror, Nymphadora Tonks. It was high time the pair got together and nice to have some good news in the weeks following Dumbledore's death. However, Severus greeted the news with disparagement, and Contessa had the distinct impression that Severus held some sort of grudge against the werewolf.

Usefully, Severus had been able to feed tidbits of information back to Voldemort which would not prejudice the Order's plans to protect Harry. In turn, Severus had proved a valuable resource for the Order, providing reports on Voldemort's attempts to infiltrate the Ministry.

Contessa noticed that Severus was spending more and more time away from Squirrel's Leap, and she suspected it was not all on the Dark Lord's bidding. When she questioned him he remained evasive. Contessa had wondered if Severus was simply avoiding her, but in the end decided she should respect his privacy, whatever his reasons might be.

They settled into an unspoken pattern, taking turns to feed the baby Fawkes, who was growing at a fast rate under their care and was now the size of a woodpigeon. Conversations centred on the care of the phoenix, and discussions about the books which Severus was devouring from her bookshelf. Contessa was learning to appreciate the sharp intellect of the man lodging in her home.

At the beginning of the second week, Severus had read the entire contents of her library and was growing restless and tetchy, cooped up in the cottage with nothing to do. Together they had set up a cauldron in the cottage's out-house, and he spent some time brewing potions and experimenting to pass the long hours alone. Contessa had procured some Polyjuice Potion to allow him to leave the confines of Squirrel's Leap, but he had shown little interest in doing so. It seemed he preferred to be alone, as long as he had something to occupy his mind.

On one evening the Order of the Phoenix met in the Headteacher's Office at Hogwarts. Professor McGonagall looked a decade older, the strain of the past two weeks apparent on her lined face. Snape was referred to once or twice; Alastor Moody had searched Severus's quarters at Hogwarts three times over, looking for clues to his location. He had found nothing. Contessa offered to dispose of Professor Snape's belongings, and it was agreed that this was now appropriate.

She had been surprised upon entering Severus's personal chambers to find them sparsely furnished and bleak in decoration. Moody had searched the quarters roughly with little regard for the contents, and the room appeared quite messy. Contessa packed as many belongings as possible into a trunk, upon which she had performed an Undetectable Extension Charm.

When Contessa arrived home that evening, she met Severus at the door and levitated the trunk across the threshold. She slumped, exhausted, onto the sofa and the trunk dropped with a resounding thud on the floor.

Severus raised his eyebrows enquiringly.

"Your belongings," she explained.

"From Hogwarts?"

"Yes," she replied. "I was expected to burn them, I think, but I thought you'd appreciate a few more books and a change of clothes."

Severus lifted the lid of the trunk to find his personal library stacked neatly inside, the rolls of parchment he had been working on the night the Death Eaters arrived in the castle, and his entire wardrobe of teaching robes, neatly pressed and folded, along with his grey nightshirt and a pair of boots.

"Thank you," he said quietly, lifting out a freshly laundered, high-collared, white shirt.

"I took the liberty of pressing your shirts for you," said Contessa, aware of the bemused expression on Severus's face. "I think Alastor was a little heavy-handed; your room was very untidy."

Severus regarded her in surprise for a moment. "No doubt," he replied, a curious smile curling his lips.

"I'm afraid there's not much choice, though. It's mostly all teaching robes." Contessa paused to consider that she had never actually seen him wearing anything else during her time at Hogwarts.

"These are sufficient for my needs," he replied, levitating the trunk and sending it towards the open door of the bedroom.

Contessa heard a fluttering of wings and felt the soft warmth of Fawkes land on her shoulder. She looked around at the bird and was met by a mouthful of warm feathers, as the young phoenix rubbed his head against her face. He looked back at her and gave a soft chirrup into her ear.

Severus sat down in the armchair, looking down at his hands.

"You have news?" Contessa asked.

"There will be a meeting at Malfoy Manor tomorrow evening. I shall be expected to provide the Dark Lord with information."

Contessa took a deep breath, as she paused to consider her response. "The Order has set the date for Harry's departure from Little Whinging." She hesitated as Severus watched her expectantly.

His eyebrows arched. "When is it?" Severus asked, his dark eyes glittering dangerously.

"I don't know if..." She faltered and looked away from Severus in embarrassment.

"It's alright, Tess," said Dumbledore, stepping into his portrait and regarding them both seriously. "Severus needs to know and it's best it comes from you."

Contessa swallowed. "The twenty-seventh of July at nightfall," she said reluctantly.

"Ahead of Potter's birthday?" Severus asked.

"Yes. The Order plans to set a false trail through the Ministry, however. They're convinced the Ministry has been infiltrated by He Who Must Not Be Named, and won't seek their help in moving Harry."

An uncomfortable silence stretched out across the room. Fawkes hopped down her arm and landed on the small coffee table, proceeding to tear strips from the *Daily Prophet*. Contessa sighed and arose from her seat, padding wearily into the kitchen to make a hot drink. Pausing at the sink, she reached out for a second mug for her guest and listened to Dumbledore's voice drifting through the open doorway.

"You will have to give Voldemort the correct date of Harry's departure from his aunt and uncle's," said Dumbledore. "Not to do so will raise suspicion, when Voldemort believes you to be so well informed. However you must plant the idea of decoys. That I think ought to ensure Harry's safety. Try Confunding Mundungus Fletcher. And Severus, if you are forced to take part in the chase, be sure to act your part convincingly...I am counting upon you to remain in Lord Voldemort's good books as long as possible, or Hogwarts will be left to the mercy of the Carrows."*

Contessa walked back into the living room and handed Severus a mug of steaming hot chocolate. He accepted it with a curt nod before turning again to face Dumbledore's portrait.

"Why Fletcher?" he asked.

Dumbledore considered him for a moment.

"Contessa could plant the idea," Severus suggested.

Dumbledore shook his head. "No, Contessa is best kept out of it as much as possible. We do not want the Order turning up at Squirrel's Leap, as will happen if she

becomes too involved in the planning. No, Mundungus is the one, easier to Confund and capable of thinking up such a piece of skulduggery."

Severus nodded his acceptance.

"Tess." Dumbledore turned to face her. "You will need to set up a meeting with Mundungus, and take Severus along with you."

"I shall find him and arrange it," she replied.

"Do you have any news on the contents of my Will?" Dumbledore asked Contessa.

"It's still impounded and I expect they'll keep it for the full thirty-one days before releasing it," she said, weariness creeping into her voice.

"Godric Gryffindor's sword?" asked Dumbledore.

"As you know, it's still at Hogwarts. From what I can gather, Scrimgeour has overridden Professor McGonagall's authority and decided it won't be released."

Dumbledore sighed. "Ah well, I was half expecting it. Tess, I think the time is coming for you to resign your post at the Ministry."

Severus's head turned sharply in surprise.

"I think so too," Contessa replied, ignoring Severus.

"But first, I have one more request," said Dumbledore.

"Of course."

"The Ludicrous Patents Office should have a copy of the patent for Gryffindor's sword. Find it and take a copy."

Contessa nodded. "That should be easy enough."

"Try as well to find out what you can from the Goblin Liaison Office who made the sword, and their descendants. Ask Griselda too; she might have some useful contacts."

"Goblins are notoriously secretive," Contessa commented. "It will be difficult."

"I know, but we must try," said Dumbledore.

Severus peered enquiringly at Contessa, but she felt too tired to give him a full explanation. He was going to find out soon enough, anyway.

"The Ministry is becoming more dangerous every day," Contessa said wearily. "I need to get out of the Ministry before it falls to the Dark Lord. I have another position to take up in the coming weeks which will be of more use to the Order in the long run."

Contessa saw some understanding in Severus's face and decided she had told him as much as necessary at this point in time.

She turned to leave. "I'm off to bed; there's a lot to do tomorrow."

Contessa shuffled upstairs, leaving Severus alone with the phoenix and the shredded copy of the *Daily Prophet*.

Author's Note:

Where I have quoted dialogue from the original Harry Potter books, I have marked it with an asterisk.

Six

Chapter 6 of 14

Albus Dumbledore had a plan to protect Severus Snape after the fateful night on the Astronomy Tower. During his final year as Headmaster, Snape has a chance to come to terms with his past and find peace, before his life draws to its inevitable close. Canon-compliant. TPP Featured Story May/June 2010.

Dangerous Game

An owl hooted in the distance as Severus walked briskly up the wide driveway towards Malfoy Manor.

He was accompanied by Yaxley, whose late arrival had been an unwanted surprise. Severus had intended to arrive last, to give the impression of importance and avoid any unnecessary conversation with fellow Death Eaters.

So far Severus had managed to avoid speaking too much with Yaxley. The biting chill of the night air pressed against his face as he controlled the anxiety rising in his stomach. It was imperative he gave a convincing performance tonight, and he didn't need Yaxley's distraction whilst he prepared himself.

They entered together through the grandiose front door into the opulent hallway. Pausing for a moment outside the drawing room, Severus methodically shut down his fear and disquiet. He had to be cool, calm and emotionless when he walked through the door to the meeting. Detachment was vital for success.

Severus reached out for the bronze door handle and stepped confidently into the room.

The drawing room's usual furniture had been replaced by a long ornate table, and its polished surface flickered in the half-light of the fire. Death Eaters were sitting around the length of the table with two seats vacant: one in the middle and one at the Dark Lord's right hand.

Everyone in the room turned to see the new arrivals. Severus could make out the silhouette of the Dark Lord against the firelight, beckoning them forward. Above the fireplace, Severus could see a large gilded mirror on the mantelpiece, and his eyes were drawn to the reflection of a body, suspended upside down above the table.

He noticed Draco Malfoy seated immediately below the figure, glancing up at it fearfully.

Before Severus had chance to identify the person hanging above Draco, the Dark Lord spoke.

"Yaxley. Snape. You are very nearly late."

Severus approached the head of the table, not daring to look upwards again.

"Severus, here," said the Dark Lord as he pointed to the empty seat at his right.

The significance of this was not lost on Severus, and he took his seat at the Dark Lord's right side, maintaining his smooth mask-like composure.

"Yaxley beside Dolohov," the Dark Lord hissed.

As Severus surveyed the scene, it seemed all eyes were upon him.

"So?" the Dark Lord asked him, without preamble.

"My Lord," Severus replied steadily, "the Order of the Phoenix intends to move Harry Potter from his current place of safety on Saturday next at nightfall." The confidence in his voice was genuine, despite the flutter of uneasiness he felt inside.

"Saturday... at nightfall." The Dark Lord's eyes locked onto Severus's.

Severus forced himself to remain calm, knowing the truth of his words would not betray him.

The Dark Lord considered him for a few seconds, and then his lipless mouth curled into a snake-like smile.

"Good. Very good. And this information comes"

"From the source we discussed," Severus interjected, determined to keep Contessa's identity hidden from the other Death Eaters. He allowed the memory of Contessa telling him the date to float to the front of his mind, should the Dark Lord deem it necessary to look.

"My Lord," Yaxley interrupted from the middle of the table, and all eyes in the room turned to face him.

"My Lord, I have heard differently." Yaxley hesitated. "Dawlish, the Auror, let slip that Potter will not be moved until the thirtieth, the night before the boy turns seventeen."

Severus silently thanked Contessa, and smiled at Yaxley knowingly. "My source told me that there are plans to lay a false trail; this must be it. No doubt a Confundus Charm has been placed upon Dawlish. It is not the first time, he is known to be susceptible."

"I assure you, my Lord, Dawlish seemed quite certain," said Yaxley, clearly manoeuvring to appear knowledgeable and useful.

Severus could not allow Yaxley to convince the Dark Lord; there was too much at stake.

"If he has been Confunded, naturally he is certain," Snape interposed. "I assure you, Yaxley, the Auror Office will play no further part in the protection of Harry Potter. The Order believes that we have infiltrated the Ministry."

"The Order's got one thing right, then, eh?" Selwyn said, with a wheezy giggle.

"My Lord," Yaxley continued, undeterred, "Dawlish believes an entire party of Aurors will be used to transfer the boy"

At that, the Dark Lord seemed to decide upon the credentials of the information and raised his hand at Yaxley. The Death Eater ceased his exposition and turned to watch Severus resentfully.

The Dark Lord locked eyes with Severus once again. "Where are they going to hide the boy next?"

Severus replied immediately. "At the home of one of the Order. The place, according to the source, has been given every protection that the Order and the Ministry could provide. I think that there is little chance of taking him once he is there, my Lord, unless, of course, the Ministry has fallen before next Saturday, which might give us the opportunity to discover and undo enough of the enchantments to break through the rest."

Severus's gambit seemed to have worked; the Dark Lord's attention was switched to Yaxley again, distracting him from the fact that Severus had not been able to supply the location of the safe house.

"Well, Yaxley. Will the Ministry have fallen by next Saturday?" the Dark Lord asked pointedly.

Severus felt a flurry of nerves as he listened to Yaxley inform the room that he had placed the Imperius Curse upon Pius Thicknesse. Thankfully, by the sounds of it, the Ministry would remain safe for the time being. The knot in Severus's stomach loosened.

A sudden wail of misery sounded from below the table, and the Dark Lord sent Wormtail to quieten the prisoner.

Severus caught Draco's eye for a second, and the boy gulped and lowered his head. Life was obviously getting more difficult for the Malfoy family. As the discussions continued, Draco seemed twitchy and unsettled as he glanced up at the inverted figure hanging above him.

Severus did not look up for fear of what he might see.

After the Dark Lord procured Lucius's wand, Nagini slithered under the table beneath Severus's feet. The sensation sent a cold chill up his spine, and he watched the great snake coil itself around the Dark Lord's shoulders.

Bellatrix rose to her feet to defend the Malfoy family's reputation, but the mention of her niece's marriage to Lupin sent her heavily-lidded face reeling. The fact that Severus had supplied this information to the Dark Lord gave him a sense of grim satisfaction. It amused him to hear Bellatrix jeered at by the table and taken down a notch or two. He'd never liked the woman. Severus sat quietly, relishing the ugly red flush on her face.

His enjoyment, however, was short-lived. After the Dark Lord commanded the room into silence, he manipulated Bellatrix into agreeing to kill her niece, Nymphadora Tonks. Severus was hit by a sobering wave of nausea as he became increasingly aware of the dangerous game he was playing.

The Dark Lord raised Lucius's wand, pointing it upwards at the slowly revolving body. Severus heard the groan of a female and sensed her struggling above the table. His insides turned to an icy numbness in anticipation.

"Do you recognise our guest, Severus?" the Dark Lord asked him.

Now that he had permission, Severus looked up at the figure dangling upside down. The woman rotated slowly to face him, and Severus felt a wave of horror engulf him as he recognised her terrified face.

"Severus! Help me!" Charity Burbage exclaimed the moment she saw him.

Severus met her eyes unflinchingly, willing himself not to alter his outward composure. He struggled to keep a lid on his emotions as his former colleague looked down at him imploringly.

As her body turned away from him, Severus felt safe enough to speak.

"Ah, yes," he said in a neutral voice, remaining impassive.

"And you, Draco?" asked the Dark Lord.

Severus was grateful for the moment's distraction whilst the Dark Lord explained the identity of the captive to the rest of the room. "Yes... Professor Burbage taught the children of witches and wizards all about Muggles... how they are not so different from us," he said contemptuously.

Charity revolved to face Severus once more, and one of the Death Eaters spat on the floor. She found Severus's eyes again.

"Severus... please... please..." she begged him.

Severus felt anger and guilt accost him as he heard Charity utter what had been Dumbledore's final words. Severus forced himself to stay calm and not show the myriad of emotions threatening to take over. He was in no position to help.

His eyes followed hers as she rotated away.

"Silence," said the Dark Lord. With a flick of his wand, Charity was gagged.

Severus watched the unfolding scene in abject horror, impotent to intervene, fervently wishing that the woman would receive a swift and painless end.

The Dark Lord reeled off his twisted version of Charity's last article in the *Daily Prophet* with pure contempt. The tone of his voice held the room in rapt attention.

Severus's wand hand twitched uselessly at his side as Charity Burbage turned to face him one more time. Tears streamed from her eyes and into her hair as she pleaded silently for his help.

Severus felt a lump the size of a bezoar in his throat. Outwardly he maintained his emotionless and impassive composure despite his instinct to look away from the fate which was about to unfurl before his eyes.

He hoped it would be quick, for Charity's sake, as well as his.

"*Avada Kedavra.*"

The green light from the Dark Lord's wand lit up the entire room. Severus felt his throat tighten and his stomach lurch.

Charity's body fell with a thud onto the polished surface of the table, her arms and legs askew.

Death Eaters around the table leapt out of the way. Draco fell out of his chair, hitting the floor hard.

Severus sat rigidly as the Dark Lord summoned Nagini to dinner.

Open Doors

"How can you see

Into my eyes

Like open doors

Leading you down

Into my core

Where I've become so numb"

'Bring Me To Life', Evanescence

Contessa awoke in the early hours of the morning to the sound of a wind chime, signalling Severus's arrival back from the Death Eaters' meeting.

She rolled out of bed groggily and dressed quickly before padding downstairs into the dark living room. There was no sign of her house guest.

Dumbledore was leaning at the edge of his portrait, his eyes focused on the window.

"Where is he?" Contessa asked drowsily, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.

"Outside," replied Dumbledore, straining to get a better view.

Contessa walked to the window and looked out into the darkness of the garden. It was a still, black night, and the sky was lit by a large waning gibbous moon.

She could make out Severus's robed figure pacing anxiously around the garden. Contessa watched him for a while, wondering if she should go out to him. Eventually, Severus sat down on the wooden bench, holding his head in his hands.

It was hard to make out in the darkness, but he appeared to be rocking slightly, back and forth, pulling at his hair.

Something inside Contessa spurred her into action. She quickly lit an oil lamp, threw on a travelling cloak, and opened the front door.

Leaving the cottage, she made her way cautiously by the flickering light of the lamp to the bench at the end of the garden.

When she reached Severus he was sitting immobile, still wearing his Death Eater robes. His mask lay in the grass by his feet. He was leaning forward with his hair pulled back from his face; the dark curtains held tightly in his fists. He did not acknowledge Contessa in any way.

She placed the oil lamp on the ground and sat down next to him silently.

Severus did not speak for a long time.

The chill of the night air surrounded them as they sat side by side, staring into the darkness. A barn owl screeched overhead and, somewhere in the distance, a nightingale

sang.

When Severus spoke, his voice was starkly cold and repressive. "Charity Burbage is dead."

The news hit Contessa in a sickening wave.

She sat, momentarily paralysed, as the information sank in and the repercussions played out in her mind.

Eventually, she asked, "What happened?"

Severus paused as if to prepare himself. "The Dark Lord murdered her as part of the evening's entertainment," he answered bitterly. "We were forced to watch... The snake..." His voice drifted away, unable to continue.

Contessa felt a swirl of nausea spread through her abdomen, silencing her thoughts and stopping her from responding. She knew she was experiencing a mere fraction of what Severus must be feeling.

Acting upon instinct, she reached out and placed her hand lightly upon Severus's shoulder.

His reaction was instantaneous. Severus shrugged her hand away and stood up abruptly. Purposefully, he walked away and resumed his pacing around the garden.

Contessa's hand dropped to the bench and felt the warmth of the wood upon which he had been sitting.

"It's not your fault, Severus," she called out to him gently.

Upon hearing her words, Severus stopped in his stride and gave her a sidelong glance. His face contorted with anger and he turned on his heel, stalking towards her with his Death Eater robes billowing out behind him.

Contessa felt frightened and intimidated as he bore down upon her, his arms either side of her, gripping the bench and preventing her escape.

His face was a matter of inches away from hers as he hissed, "It was my responsibility!"

Contessa sat back in the seat, lengthening the distance between them to get a better look at his face. His eyes seemed to cloud over and he ran out of steam.

With a forceful groan, he pushed himself upwards and turned away, moving out of her reach.

"It's always my responsibility," he murmured into the night.

Contessa allowed herself to breathe and took some time to understand the meaning in his words.

"You feel responsible for Charity's death," she said to his back.

Severus exhaled audibly.

Contessa paused, wondering if she should continue.

"And this feeling is not new," she said tentatively. "It's happened to you before."

Severus swept towards her, horror consuming his features. His expression changed as he calculated something in his mind, and a look of indignation appeared on his face.

"No!" he growled aggressively, causing Contessa to jump in her seat.

Severus strode away from her, towards the cottage, forcing the front door open and slamming it behind him. Contessa could hear the muffled sounds of shouting from inside the house.

She followed the path back to the cottage, able to discern some of Severus's angry ranting through the window. He was shouting at Dumbledore's portrait.

"You told her!" he screamed accusingly. "You gave me your word!"

Contessa opened the front door warily and stepped inside the room. Fawkes was flying around the room, screeching at the top of his voice. Dumbledore's portrait appeared thoroughly confused. Severus was striding around the confined space of the living room with his hands on his hips, rage burning on his face.

"Told me what?" she asked ingenuously, trying to make herself heard over the phoenix's racket.

Severus ceased his pacing and looked directly at her, his dark eyes boring into hers. Contessa met his gaze without flinching, feeling at a complete loss to explain his behaviour.

In studying her, Severus seemed to find some sort of answer, and began to regain a measure of self-control. Then Severus turned back to Dumbledore's portrait, looking for some kind of confirmation.

Contessa noticed something unspoken pass between the two men. Severus seemed to calm a little, and Dumbledore had a distinct look of vindication.

Contessa had no idea what had provoked Severus's outburst, but it seemed to have been based on some sort of misunderstanding.

Fawkes landed on the back of the sofa and looked Severus up and down. The phoenix seemed to decide it was now safe, and flew onto Contessa's shoulder, issuing a mellifluous trill into her ear.

Severus slumped onto the sofa.

Contessa waited for a moment, unsure if Severus needed space, but Dumbledore ushered her over to the armchair. She sat down quietly.

Fawkes flew onto Severus's lap and warbled softly. Severus seemed to salvage some of his composure as he looked down at the scarlet and gold bird singing soothingly to him.

Slowly, Severus looked up at Contessa, his features diffident, and addressed Dumbledore quietly.

"The meeting went well; the Dark Lord is satisfied that Potter will be moved on Saturday next."

Contessa was startled by the change in direction. It was almost as if the Severus she had seen moments before had been an illusion.

"Excellent work," said Dumbledore in a cheerful tone.

Contessa was finding it hard to go with the flow of this new conversation, and she looked at Dumbledore in surprise. He appeared not to notice.

"The next step is to Confund Mundungus Fletcher," Dumbledore reminded Severus in a matter-of-fact manner, and Dumbledore turned to look at Contessa enquiringly.

Contessa swallowed back her instinct to intervene; both men seemed to want to sweep the previous events under the carpet. She rolled her eyes at Dumbledore and then turned to Severus.

Her voice was reassuringly tender as she said, "I've set up a meeting for you tomorrow."

Severus nodded stiffly and placed his hand underneath the phoenix's plumage. Fawkes hopped gently onto his fingers.

Severus stood slowly and carried the bird to its perch in the corner. He left for the guest room without another word.

Fly in the Ointment

During the course of the following week, Severus began to feel the benefits of the relationship that Dumbledore had thrust upon him. Contessa engineered Severus's meeting with Mundungus Fletcher and accompanied him to the remote tavern, where he had met the smelly sneak-thief and cast the Confundus Charm.

Likewise, the information Severus provided from his Death Eater meetings was being utilised to good effect, with Contessa being able to warn the Order of the Phoenix that Pius Thicknesse was now under the Imperius Curse.

So far, Contessa had found a good balance between feeding intelligence to the Order and not becoming overly involved in the planning of Harry Potter's removal from Little Whinging. As such, Severus's accommodation at Squirrel's Leap had been a safe haven, providing him with a comforting refuge whilst the Ministry of Magic continued to search for his whereabouts.

The symbiotic relationship with Contessa also helped Severus feel useful to the Order without any of its members actually knowing of his involvement. Each small contribution towards keeping Lily's son safe was good for his conscience, assuaging some of the guilt he felt about Charity Burbage's death.

The only thing not going well was his attempt to help Contessa, to repay her for her assistance with Dumbledore's funeral. He was going to have to speak to Dolohov himself at this rate, but he had yet to think of a suitable pretext for the conversation.

As the twenty-seventh of July fast approached, Contessa spent more and more time away from Squirrel's Leap, working hard at the Ministry to gather enough intelligence before leaving the Ludicrous Patents Office. She was also attending regular Order meetings along with the other Ministry insiders.

Severus, on the other hand, was at the beck and call of the Dark Lord. He was feeding the Dark Lord a regular supply of information without revealing too much detail. The fact that Contessa was not personally involved in the plans to relocate Potter had been advantageous; it was easier for Severus to withhold information when he was simply not party to it.

However, that all changed the day before Potter was to be moved from Privet Drive.

Contessa arrived home late from the final Order meeting prior to the move. Severus heard the wind chime sound, but it took a long time for Contessa to come in through the front door.

He looked out through the window and saw Contessa pacing nervously around the garden, muttering to herself and stopping occasionally to stare into open space. Severus thought better of going out to her and waited calmly by the front door.

Eventually, the handle turned and Contessa walked through the doorway with an apprehensive smile curling her lips. When her eyes met his she seemed to change her mind, but then her smile grew more convincing.

"Severus, I'm so glad you're here," she said, an attempt at playfulness in her voice.

Severus shot her a quizzical look but she walked towards him, undeterred.

Contessa moved in closer and placed her hand suggestively on his chest. Severus felt its steady progress towards his collarbone. Wondering what had come over her, he started to speak, but Contessa held her thumb to his lips and rubbed past them gently. Her eyes beseeched him to stay silent.

"I have news," she said, as she teasingly removed her thumb and swept past him into the living room.

Severus watched her remove her cloak and sling it over the back of the armchair. He had no idea what she was trying to accomplish; nevertheless, he felt compelled to play along.

"The Order will move as planned tomorrow at nightfall. Harry Potter will be escorted by six members of the Order, including Moody and Tonks, by broomstick." Contessa seemed to falter before saying sadly, "I still don't know the location of the safe house, however."

She moved towards Severus and reached out for his arm, running her fingers down it until she found his hand and slipped it gently into hers.

"Let me make it up to you," she said coyly, gently pulling at his arm, urging him to follow.

Severus was completely bewildered as he followed her towards the stairway. His curiosity was piqued as he climbed the stairs.

"Contessa?" he asked uncertainly.

At this, Contessa seemed to come to her senses and she stopped suddenly on the stairs, causing him to bump into her. Severus took a couple of steps back and she let go of his hand, dropping to a sitting position halfway up the stairs.

Severus stood watching her holding her head in her hands and not daring to speak.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"I'm so sorry," she said hopelessly.

"Sorry for what?" he asked with growing impatience.

Contessa looked him in the eye before saying resignedly, "You're going to need that memory."

She arose from her sitting position and pushed past him on her way back down the stairs. Sinking into the armchair opposite Dumbledore's portrait, she looked tired and upset, and possibly a little guilty.

Severus walked back into the room feeling utterly perplexed. He stood next to the portrait waiting for Contessa to speak.

"Would you care to explain?" Severus said testily into the silence.

Contessa raised her head dolefully. "I'm afraid I got a bit over excited at the Order meeting," she began timidly. "Five people volunteered for the decoy Potters. I came up

with an idea... A brilliant idea." She flinched. "I suggested we needed another volunteer to make the total number seven, which would be much more magically significant..." Her voice trailed off.

Severus was impressed with her reasoning, but he could not see the fly in the ointment. He raised his eyebrows.

Contessa swallowed. "In the end, Mundungus was persuaded to be the sixth decoy. But then Remus suggested we needed another safe house." Contessa looked at Dumbledore's portrait imploringly, before meeting Severus's eyes. "Remus asked me to offer Squirrel's Leap to the Order for tomorrow night!"

Severus's stomach swooped as the implications of Contessa's slip up hit him surprisingly hard.

"What was your answer?" Severus asked urgently.

"Yes, of course. How could I refuse? From the Order's point of view, there is no reason why I should say no!" Contessa's head hung in defeat.

Severus ignored the sickening sensation rising in his abdomen and immediately started to plan his next move. He had not anticipated the need for another place to hide from the Ministry.

"Remus is coming here tomorrow morning to help me set up the necessary protective charms." She looked up at Severus again, searching his eyes in hope of clemency. "I am so sorry," she said quietly.

Severus felt a sweeping sensation of loss, suddenly realising how much he had become accustomed to the certainty of his safe lodgings. His preference for self-sufficiency meant he was not usually dependent upon another person's reliability or loyalty, but that didn't stop him from feeling a brief sting of injury at Contessa's hands.

He was about to respond when Dumbledore cut in.

"What's done is done, Tess, there's no use crying over spilt milk. We'll simply have to work around it," Dumbledore said calmly. "Severus will make himself scarce after sunrise, and not return until the protective charms are lifted. It's not the end of the world."

Contessa looked at the portrait and nodded in acceptance, but she did not appear to feel exonerated by this exchange.

"Severus, I..." she began.

He cut her off with a wave of his hand. "Your apologies are not necessary, Contessa."

"But I..."

"Save it," Severus said dangerously as he swept towards the stairs.

From behind he heard Contessa speak quietly but clearly.

"I'm sorry I let you down."

Severus paused briefly at the bottom of the stairs.

Her earnest apology had not been requested or needed. Yet, on a new-found level, he accepted her remorse as genuine. This unfamiliar intrusion soothed away the ache of the newly inflicted wound.

Severus felt an ephemeral sense of contact, an awareness that another person was there for him.

Turning back to Contessa, he searched her features for corroboration. With unexpected surprise, he found what he was looking for.

Severus lowered his head in acknowledgement and quietly ascended the stairs.

Shadow of Doubt

Severus had left Squirrel's Leap by the time Contessa arose on the Saturday morning. The cottage seemed strangely empty in his absence.

Fawkes, now the size of a small pheasant, was dozing on the Transfigured perch as Contessa entered the living room. She wandered over to the young phoenix and softly whispered good morning. The bird stirred and looked up sleepily at Contessa. Fawkes let out a muffled squeep as he stretched his wings, ruffled his feathers and shook himself awake.

"You'll have to make yourself scarce when Remus arrives," she said sadly, stroking the phoenix under its beak. Fawkes cooed appreciatively.

Dumbledore awoke in his portrait as the phoenix flew out of the window in search of breakfast.

Contessa stood awkwardly in front of the picture frame before looking at the Headmaster reluctantly. "And what am I going to do with you?" she said wryly.

"Ah, I shall make a swift exit when the Doorbell Charm rings," Dumbledore replied agreeably. "Do not worry."

Contessa sighed, dropping her head and swinging her arms out slightly at her sides. "I've made such a mess of things," she said despondently.

"It is retrievable, however," Dumbledore said kindly.

"Yes, but Severus might not trust me anymore," she said heavily, staring at the floor.

Dumbledore didn't answer immediately. Eventually Contessa looked up at him uncertainly. His gaze was sympathetic.

"You are doing well; better than I had hoped. I'm confident that Severus will return."

Contessa smiled ruefully. "I never thought I'd see the day when I would want to see him out of choice."

Dumbledore smiled in return. "As I said, you're doing well."

Contessa laughed mirthlessly. "It doesn't feel like it at the moment."

A mighty gong heralded the arrival of Remus Lupin, Apparating on the borders of the garden. Looking outside, Contessa saw a flash of scarlet and gold as Fawkes buried himself in the undergrowth of the herb garden.

Turning back to the living room, she noticed Dumbledore had already gone. Contessa Transfigured the phoenix perch back into a plant stand and Summoned the pot plant from the window sill.

With a brisk rap, Remus knocked on the front door. He was smiling broadly as he entered the cottage, and looked a little less shabby than usual. Married life was obviously

treating him well.

"Good morning, Tess," he said cheerfully. "You're looking well."

Contessa smiled in greeting and welcomed him with a warm hug. "So are you. Can I make you a drink?"

"No, no, I won't be staying long. Three more houses to do after this one. Dora might pop along if there's time. Thanks, anyway."

Contessa nodded.

"Looks like you've made a good start, though," Remus said gratefully.

Contessa looked at him enquiringly.

"Excellent Disillusionment Charm on the cottage very convincing. And I'm sure I heard a Doorbell Charm too." Remus smiled.

"Oh, that." Contessa shrugged it away. "I got started on the charms when I arrived home last night," she lied.

"Well, that'll make it quicker for us this morning. Let's start inside the cottage shall we?"

Contessa's stomach filled with a leaden weight. "Inside?"

"We need to be thorough; I'm not taking any chances." Remus grinned. "The Order decided that George Weasley and I will be using your safe house tonight."

Contessa gulped and tried to appear nonchalant. "No problem, it'll be my pleasure."

Remus smiled warmly. "Where shall we begin?"

"I'll do upstairs, if you like." Contessa's offer was more a command than a request.

"Certainly, I'll cover downstairs and I'll meet you outside when you've finished?"

Contessa nodded and let out an audible breath of relief as she climbed the stairs.

She opened the door to the guest room; it was the first time Contessa had been inside the room since Severus had arrived.

She was shocked to see the room in quite a state of disarray. The trunk retrieved from Hogwarts lay open, its contents strewn across the floor. Clothing was heaped in a pile in the corner of the room and Severus's books were stacked in a teetering tower beside his bed. It was a sight to behold.

Unthinking, Contessa raised her wand, about to perform a charm to tidy everything away, but she caught herself just in time. It occurred to her that Severus would know immediately of her interference. Clenching her hands at her sides, she forced herself to leave things as she found them.

Dumbledore had said she was doing well with the vow. Cleaning up Severus's mess was not the way to show him her unconditional acceptance.

Closing her eyes, she began the complicated incantations to protect the first floor of her home.

When Contessa joined Remus in the garden, he had already erected the defence against those bearing the Dark Mark. Severus could not return now, even if he wanted to.

As she approached Remus, the resounding snap of a second Apparition made her jump, and within moments she was wrapped in a bear hug with Nymphadora Tonks.

"Hiya Tess! How's hubby here treating you?" Dora smiled widely then kissed Remus on the lips.

"Ah, he's doing well enough." Contessa laughed conspiratorially.

Remus smiled at the two women, before resuming his spell-casting.

"When do you leave the Ministry?" Dora asked.

"It was my last day yesterday," Contessa replied, the sadness in her voice marking the end of an era.

"I'm going to miss you at work. The place won't be the same without you." Dora reached out for Contessa's hand, and accidentally stepped on her foot.

Contessa laughed heartily. "I'll miss you too. It'll be strange not having my co-conspirator around. I'll see you at Order meetings, though."

Dora smiled. The two women got to work and soon the protective charms were completed. Remus selected an old terracotta plant pot which was broken at the base, and turned it into a Portkey.

With a fond farewell, Contessa left Remus and Dora at the garden gate as they passed into the space where they could Disapparate.

"Thanks, Tess," Remus said gratefully, "I'll see you tonight."

Contessa smiled and waved. "Good luck!"

Dora beamed back as she took hold of Remus's hand, and the pair of them Disapparated with a reverberating crack.

The night was clear and still as Contessa waited at Squirrel's Leap. Remus and George were running behind schedule, and the longer they took, the more agitated and worried she became.

She was concerned about the welfare of the two delayed Order members, as well as the rest of the rescue party. And Severus.

He was out there tonight alongside the other Death Eaters, risking his life to protect Harry Potter and trying not to blow his cover.

Contessa felt sick with nerves as she waited alone inside the cottage.

Finally Remus flew through the enchanted barrier, with George flailing helplessly on the broomstick. He was covered in blood.

Contessa ran out of the house to help them, but was met by the tip of Remus's wand pressed into her chest. She backed away until she was forced against the stone wall of the cottage.

Remus's face looked slightly deranged as the moonlight reflected on his features.

Confusion tore through Contessa's mind as she stood restrained, her eyes flickering towards George lying groaning on the ground. He was losing a lot of blood from a

head wound.

"Remus, what has come over you let me help him!" she said urgently.

"Someone has betrayed us!" Remus hissed at her. "We flew straight into a trap!"

Contessa faltered for a moment, realising Remus had good reason to suspect her. After all, she was the one ultimately responsible for the leak. She quickly composed herself ready to face Remus's inquisition.

"Answer me this: what was the gemstone on Dora's engagement ring?" Remus barked at her.

"Remus, what are you talking about?"

"Answer me!" His eyes had a wolfish glint in them as he moved in closer, pushing his wand into her neck.

"You didn't buy Dora an engagement ring, Remus," Contessa answered steadily.

Remus's wand dropped to his side and he stepped back. "Sorry. I had to be sure you weren't an impostor."

Contessa sighed and pushed her way past him. "What happened to George?"

"Snape," Remus replied acrimoniously.

Contessa's insides turned to ice. "Snape?" she asked suspiciously.

"Yes, you know; the one who killed Dumbledore?" Remus answered bitterly. "His mask slipped before he could finish us off completely."

Contessa swallowed back the nausea creeping up her throat and she knelt down next to George. His injury was bleeding heavily, and he appeared to have lost his ear. There was no stemming the blood flow; the wound had been made with Dark Magic.

The caster of this particular spell had meant to cause serious damage. It could have killed George had he not been able to stay balanced on the broomstick.

Contessa felt a rush of anger and disbelief, and queasiness at the thought of Severus using the Dark Arts against the Order of the Phoenix. It seemed he was not the man she thought he was. She wondered fleetingly if his actions were something to do with his grudge against the werewolf.

Contessa realised she knew very little of Severus's motivations, but all the things she thought she knew came crashing down around her.

Suddenly, Remus was crouched down next to her, holding the broken terracotta pot. He placed it on the ground and picked up George, heaving his bloody mass over his shoulder.

Contessa picked up the plant pot and handed it to Remus. Within moments the Portkey flashed with a blue-white light and Remus and George vanished.

Through the Barricades

Severus lingered in the darkness outside Malfoy Manor, somewhat relieved that he had not been blamed for the failure of the mission to capture Potter.

He had left the Dark Lord's side before Ollivander's interrogation had begun, but could hear the wandmaker's screams from the driveway. Severus knew there was nothing he could do for the man.

Now he was away from the Dark Lord's presence, the events of the chase flooded his senses. Severus was consumed by the thought that he may have killed one of the Order of the Phoenix.

The Order had paid heavily that evening with the loss of Alastor Moody, and Severus hoped that he had not inadvertently added to the death count. The Order would need every one of its members in the coming weeks. Severus was no longer able to protect Potter; now the Order would have to keep the boy safe.

The last thing Severus had seen was Lupin speeding away with a wounded decoy flopping precariously on the broomstick. Severus didn't know whom he had wounded with his Sectumsempra Curse or what had become of them.

Nor did Severus know if Potter had escaped unscathed, but at least he knew that Lily's son was still alive.

The dismal inevitability of Severus's actions gnawed at him. He still felt guilty and responsible, regardless of his intentions. It was the depressingly familiar dichotomy of his status as double agent.

Now the price on his head could be even higher if another member of the Order of the Phoenix had been killed by his hand.

Severus Apparated outside Squirrel's Leap, his heart pumping with anticipation. His arrival set off a veritable firecracker of alarms, and he caught a glimpse of Contessa hurrying out of the cottage by wandlight. She approached him with caution, her wand aimed directly at his chest.

He felt his insides flip in confusion as he walked towards the gate. However, he found himself rebounded by an invisible wall, the force of which pushed him backwards. Severus remained standing, just.

As he approached the enchanted barrier slowly, Severus held up his hand, cautiously testing for the extent of the shield.

"Contessa!" he called urgently.

The aim of her wand did not stray from his torso. Standing a matter of feet away, her eyes assessed him suspiciously.

"Don't move," she growled.

Severus froze with his hand held out towards her; he realised instantly that something had changed. Severus's concern for the decoy grew in intensity, causing a sickening sensation in the pit of his stomach. He felt disorientated as he watched his ally looking at him with barely concealed hatred.

"What's going on?" he asked, trying to sound commanding, without truly feeling in control.

Contessa scoffed. "You don't know?"

Severus felt thoroughly perplexed as he wondered what had happened to cause Contessa to doubt him. Had she not vowed to trust him, no matter how disloyal he might appear?

He fought back his chagrin; his need for information was overwhelming.

"Did Lupin and his decoy make it back safely? Have you had confirmation?" Severus asked, desperation seeping into his voice.

Contessa's eyebrows rose in response, but she did not reply.

"Please tell me!" Severus felt his anger rising. "I accidentally wounded his decoy, trying to save Lupin from Macnair's Killing Curse. My mask slipped and I couldn't ensure their safe escape. I almost blew my cover."

Severus held both hands up now, pressing them into the barricades, forcefully. His arms shook as the enchantments repelled him, but he didn't care. He needed to know the answer.

"Tell me they're alright!" he shouted at her in frustration.

Contessa backed away with a look of uncertainty in her features. Severus removed his hands from the protective barrier in defeat and his head slumped.

"Remus and George are fine," she said in a clipped voice.

Severus looked up again, relief spreading through him. "What about Potter?" he asked breathlessly.

"Harry is safe and in one piece," Contessa said, scanning his features for his reaction.

Severus let out a perceptible sigh, and he met Contessa's gaze gratefully.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Contessa did not respond and continued to watch him closely. Abruptly, she seemed to decide something and lowered her wand, walking nearer to the boundary of the invisible wall.

"Alastor didn't make it," she said quietly.

"I know," Severus replied. "There was nothing I could do to protect him. Death Eaters have his body."

Contessa nodded sadly.

They stood looking at each other from either side of the enchanted barrier, and Severus had a sense of the ground feeling firmer beneath his feet. Contessa held up her hand, palm facing towards him. In turn, Severus reached out towards her until the only thing separating them was the protective barrier keeping him out of the cottage.

"I'm glad you came back," Contessa said, her voice faint but audible in the moonlight.

Severus found himself surprised at her notion that he might not return. It had not occurred to him to go anywhere else.

His thoughts were interrupted by a flash of scarlet and gold which flew past Contessa, through the barricades. Fawkes landed on Severus's shoulder and brushed his head softly against his cheek. The bird started to nibble affectionately on his earlobe.

Contessa gave a forlorn smile and turned away, walking back down the garden path into the cottage.

Severus stood alone with Fawkes, wondering if he should stay or leave. He wouldn't be able to cross through the gate until the defences expired, and he knew not when that would be. Severus was filled with an urge to be safely inside the cottage, so that he could lick his wounds in private. Out here, bathed in the cold and oppressive night air, he felt exposed and vulnerable.

Feeling unsure if he should stay, and not knowing where he should Disapparate to if he were to go, Severus's heart sank a little lower. As he turned to leave, Fawkes issued a reassuring whip in his ear.

The sound of footsteps on the pathway caused him to turn to face the cottage again, a flurry of hope rising in his chest.

Contessa was walking towards the gate by the light of her wand, with a bottle of Firewhisky in her other hand. Following behind her was her levitated telescope, which she guided carefully over the stone wall.

Contessa opened the garden gate and crossed through the barrier as though it wasn't there. With a flick of her wand she Summoned the garden bench towards them. Without a word, she poured two glasses of Firewhisky and offered one to Severus.

He accepted the drink appreciatively and downed the warming liquid in one mouthful. Contessa handed him the rest of the bottle and started to set up her telescope.

Severus sat down on the bench and Fawkes hopped onto the wooden seat, humming a low and calming song. Severus felt the soothing after-effects of the phoenix's song, and he relaxed a little as he watched Contessa working on her telescope in silence.

When the equipment was perfectly aligned, Contessa turned to face Severus and looked him in the eye for the first time since returning from inside the cottage.

Fawkes seemed to take this as his cue to leave, and he departed with a flutter of wings, heading back indoors.

"It seems a shame to waste such a beautiful night sky." Contessa's voice was tense and suggested unspoken regret.

Severus knew her gesture to be conciliatory, and he accepted her apology wordlessly.

For the next few hours they sat together under the starlight, using the telescope to while away the dark hours, without the need to speak.

Severus allowed himself space to experience his feelings of guilt, frustration and powerlessness in the presence of a woman who appeared to accept him despite his vulnerabilities.

Contessa did not offer him a single word of reassurance.

Severus did not need to hear any.

Eventually, in the early hours of the morning, the enchanted barrier faded away.

An Unexpected Guest

In the days following the death of Alastor Moody, Contessa spent time at Squirrel's Leap with Severus. She had signed her new contract of employment and was enjoying having some free time in between jobs.

Severus appeared to have finally settled in her home, although he still spent a large portion of his time alone, brewing potions in the out-house or reading in his room.

Contessa felt their relationship had a firmer basis, and the trust they shared seemed genuine; it was no longer reliant upon the recommendation of Albus Dumbledore.

Although the Dark Lord's plan to infiltrate the Ministry was gathering in pace, Severus had not been overly involved in the strategy. He was still a wanted man and therefore

of little use to the Dark Lord at present.

On the afternoon of the wedding of Bill Weasley and Fleur Delacour, Contessa dressed in her pale blue dress robes, and bade Severus and Fawkes farewell.

She arrived at the ceremony early, sitting behind Remus and Dora in the marquee. Dora was chatting excitedly and showing off her wedding ring. However, Remus looked miserable and subdued; Contessa couldn't work out what was troubling him.

After the wedding ceremony had taken place, Contessa spent the afternoon mingling with guests, feeling strangely detached from the surroundings. She thought about Severus from time to time and started to wish she had brought the Tiger's Eye ring with her.

She sat down at an empty table with a sigh and wondered if she might leave early and slip out unnoticed.

Almost on cue, Dora appeared at her side, holding two glasses of pink champagne. She giggled a little as she sat down next to Contessa, with newly blonde curls bouncing around her face.

Contessa accepted the proffered drink. Together they raised their glasses in a toast then settled back in their chairs to watch the throng on the dance floor.

"What's the matter with Remus today?" asked Contessa. "It can't be that time of the month." Her eyebrows rose mischievously.

Dora blinked then covered her composure with an amused smile. "Oh, it's nothing. He'll get over it."

Contessa realised she had hit a nerve, but Dora appeared not to want to talk about it. Contessa said nothing in response.

Dora gave a little hiccup and looked at Contessa guiltily.

"I must be careful; I'm not allowed too many of these," Dora said, looking down at the glass of champagne in her hand.

When her eyes met Contessa's, they were twinkling. Contessa searched Dora's features for confirmation.

"You're kidding me! Already?" she asked excitedly.

Dora's hand subconsciously massaged her stomach. "I found out yesterday," she said happily.

Contessa let out a small squeal of delight. "Seriously?"

"Seriously," Dora replied.

Contessa reached out for Dora's hand and squeezed it tight. "Congratulations!"

Dora beamed. "Thanks."

"I'm sure you'll make wonderful parents," Contessa said warmly.

Dora's face faltered for a moment, and she looked back towards the dance floor to see Remus talking gravely with Arthur Weasley. Her face held a trace of sadness for a moment, until she turned to face Contessa again, a smile returning to her face. "I hope so."

There was a slight pause in the conversation.

"I believe you've signed the contract of employment?" Dora asked, changing the subject.

Contessa smiled conspiratorially. "Yes, but it's not common knowledge just yet."

"Slughorn's going to be really pleased," Dora said knowingly.

Contessa let out a breath. "So they keep telling me," she said. "It'll be strange to go back after all this time..."

At that moment a large silvery lynx landed in the centre of the dance floor. Dora and Contessa sprang to their feet, wands at the ready.

Kingsley Shacklebolt's Patronus opened its large gleaming mouth and began to speak in his deep, booming voice.

"The Ministry has fallen. Scrimgeour is dead. They are coming."*

Dora ran towards Remus. Black cloaked and hooded figures Apparated into the screaming crowd.

Contessa, along with several other members of the Order of the Phoenix, cried, *'Protego!'* Their shields combined to protect the frightened witches and wizards who were running from the marquee and Disapparating to safety.

Within seconds the entire wedding party had escaped, except the Weasley family and various Order members. Death Eaters swarmed around them, and Contessa was thrown back by a Stunning Spell.

She hit the ground hard and knocked her head.

Contessa felt the sensation of blood dripping down her forehead before her vision clouded and everything went black.

When Contessa regained consciousness, she found herself lying on a cold stone floor. She could feel dried blood cracking on her temple as she opened her eyes. Tentatively, Contessa reached up and felt for the head wound and found it in the hairline above her left eye.

Looking around, she appeared to be in the living room of The Burrow. The room was empty but she could hear muffled conversation coming from the adjoining rooms and from the bedrooms upstairs.

Rising to a sitting position, she became aware of a multitude of aches and pains. Contessa looked down at herself and saw numerous cuts and grazes underneath her badly torn dress robes. It seemed she had been dragged unceremoniously from the marquee, across the ground, and dumped on the floor.

Contessa fumbled inside her tattered robes, futilely searching for her wand. She did not expect to find it.

One of the doors upstairs snapped open, and within moments she was sitting in the shadow of a tall, dark haired Death Eater with a pale, twisted face.

"Looking for this?" sneered Dolohov.

Contessa watched him produce her wand from inside his robes. She groaned slightly and her head dropped.

Dolohov's booted foot nudged her chin. He flicked her head back casually.

"Show a little respect, Marchbanks," he snarled, enjoying his power over her. "Get up on your feet."

Contessa obeyed shakily.

Behind Dolohov, Dora tripped through the open door with Selwyn at her back. She caught Contessa's eye and flashed a look confirming she was alright.

Contessa swallowed in anticipation.

Dolohov gripped Contessa's forearm and dragged her around in front of him, facing Selwyn. She felt Dolohov's wand pressed into her neck. Contessa dared not breathe.

"Selwyn, I'll take Marchbanks and search her home. I know where she lives," Dolohov said. The foreboding keenness in his voice sent a chill down Contessa's spine.

Selwyn nodded his assent. "I'll hold the fort here; the others should be finished soon. All the homes of the Order will be searched by sunset."

Dolohov ran his wand down the curve of Contessa's neck. "Let's see how much fun we can have together, shall we?"

With an ear-splitting crack, Contessa felt her body compress as she squeezed through space and time in a forced Side-Along Apparition.

A rush of air filled her lungs as she opened her eyes to see the artificially derelict Squirrel's Leap in front of her. She heard the wind chime drowned out by the boom of the gong, heralding the arrival of the unexpected guest.

As Dolohov hauled her roughly through the gate and down the path to her front door, Contessa fretfully hoped that Severus was still in the cottage.

Contessa was pushed into her living room and she glanced anxiously around; the phoenix perch was vacant, and the Headmaster's portrait was empty. There was no sign of Severus. Contessa felt a wave of panic hit her hard in the stomach.

Dolohov flung her into a seat next to the small dining table, and she found herself bound tightly to the back of the chair with a silvery serpentine rope.

The Death Eater licked his thin lips in anticipation. "Always good to have the pair." He grinned sadistically.

The air around Dolohov seemed to crackle maliciously as he surveyed his hostage.

A calloused hand nudged Contessa's head upwards, but she refused to meet his eyes. Despite the surge of adrenaline pumping through her body, Contessa was determined not to let him get the better of her.

Without warning, Dolohov hit her hard in the face with the back of his hand. The noise of the impact echoed around the room and Contessa saw stars forming in her vision.

She felt blood dripping once again from the re-opened wound on her temple. It ran down her face, and splashed on her torn blue robes. Fear gripped her as she realised that this was not going to be a clean interrogation.

Then she heard footsteps coming slowly down the stairs.

Contessa's heart leapt as she realised that Severus was still at home. She turned to see him walking nonchalantly across the room, wearing his Death Eater robes, without the mask.

Severus's boots clicked ominously on the floor as he approached. He regarded her as if she were merely an interesting diversion on an otherwise dull and ordinary day, showing no concern for her predicament or her injuries.

Severus walked past her constrained body with a smirk, and shook hands cordially with Dolohov.

Contessa's mouth turned instantly dry.

An Unexpected Lead

"Good afternoon," Severus said smoothly as he shook Dolohov's hand.

"Snape." Dolohov nodded uncertainly, his eyes flickering towards Contessa and back to Severus again. "What are you doing here?"

Severus paused to consider his response, and turned to get a better look at Contessa. She was tightly bound to the chair and bleeding from her temple, but she did not appear to be badly injured.

Her eyes caught his, fearfully. Severus hoped she would remain quiet whilst he dealt with the unforeseen situation.

"I'm here at the Dark Lord's behest," Severus answered him sleekly.

Severus's eyes followed the contours of Contessa's torn dress robes, taking in the cuts and bruises on her exposed skin. His outward appearance was of a man devouring the captive's appearance and savouring the moment.

Contessa noticed this attention and shifted uneasily in her restraints.

"I was not informed," Dolohov said suspiciously.

Severus turned to look at Dolohov, straightening himself up to give an air of superiority.

"Yes, well, this matter was on a need to know basis," Severus said silkily. "You didn't need to know."

Dolohov's eyebrows arched, and he looked like he was about to argue.

"I take it the Ministry has now fallen to the Dark Lord?" said Severus.

Dolohov nodded. "Just over an hour ago."

"Excellent news, although not before time." Severus smirked. "Why have you brought Marchbanks back here?"

"She is working for the Order of the Phoenix. I was about to begin her interrogation and search her home," said Dolohov testily.

"Indeed she is working for the Order," said Severus. "However, I believe I should be the one to interrogate her."

Dolohov took a step back and looked at Severus disapprovingly. "Why should I hand her over to you?" he asked dubiously.

Severus looked at Dolohov with unblinking eyes. "Because, this woman is my informant in the Order," he began lazily. "She has been feeding me news on their activities ever since I left Hogwarts. You could say she has been my, ah, summer project."

The words dripped from Severus's tongue lasciviously, as if he had enjoyed every minute of his time with Contessa.

Severus noticed Contessa's eyes expand and her pupils dilate but, mercifully, she stayed silent.

"Well, your source has not been very well-behaved this afternoon. It looked to me like she was on their side, not ours," Dolohov said doubtfully.

"Really?" Severus said. "Well, we shall soon see about that."

Severus raised his wand and pointed it directly at Contessa. She looked back at him in amazement.

"Legilimens!"

Severus had taken Contessa completely off guard and gained immediate access to her thoughts.

He saw flashes of Dumbledore's funeral, Contessa signing a piece of parchment under the watchful gaze of Professor McGonagall, and Tonks grinning as she rubbed her stomach, about to speak. Then Contessa, walking through the dappled shade of a woodland in the summer, arm in arm with a man he did not recognise. With a jolt, Severus realised it must have been her fiancé, Alex.

Quickly, Contessa seemed to regain some control and Severus felt her memories shift in another direction.

Suddenly, Severus saw a vision of himself, fifteen years younger, handing the young Marchbanks a roll of parchment with a large, spidery 'A' scrawled in the top right hand corner.

His younger self was smirking nastily as Contessa protested, "I spent the whole weekend on this. It's worth more than an Acceptable!"

Severus watched himself lean towards her, his nose only a few intimidating inches from hers.

"You'll need to do much more than that to exceed my expectations, Miss Marchbanks." The hiss in his voice carried across the classroom, for all the students to hear.

Contessa returned his gaze with a look of purest loathing.

The scene shifted and Severus found himself in her memory of Dumbledore's office. A fully grown Fawkes was sitting on his perch behind Dumbledore's desk, as Contessa confronted the Headmaster.

"But, Sir! Professor Snape is monstrously unfair!" she pleaded.

Severus watched Dumbledore sitting back in his chair, listening patiently to Contessa, who was going redder in the face with each passing second.

"He's partisan; he isn't giving everyone the chance they deserve!" Contessa blurted out, unable to contain her frustration and dislike.

Dumbledore looked back at Contessa mildly, and was about to reply, when Contessa forced Severus out of her mind with an empowered shove.

Contessa scowled at Severus from her seat in the living room of Squirrel's Leap with a look of defiance. Her expression reminded Severus of the frequent looks she had given him in the classroom at Hogwarts. Back then, he had admired her feistiness and tenacity, and he realised he still appreciated it now. It was good to know she hadn't lost the fire in her belly.

"Well?" said Dolohov impatiently.

Severus did not respond. Instead, he walked over to stand in front of Contessa, raising his left hand and running his fingers through her hair, careful to avoid the bleeding area of her hairline.

He leaned in towards her and breathed a dangerous whisper into her ear. "Behave yourself."

Severus straightened up and moved to stand at Contessa's side, gathering her long brown hair at the nape of her neck. With a sudden yank, he pulled down on the handful of hair, causing her head to jerk backwards.

Contessa gasped in pain as she met Severus's eyes with surprise and indignation. She was on the verge of speech when Severus shook his head almost imperceptibly. Contessa faltered.

Severus let go of her hair with a look of disdain, grasped her jaw in his hand, and callously flicked her head to one side.

He turned to Dolohov and, with a brusque hand movement, gestured him outside. Dolohov followed him reluctantly into the garden, and they closed the door to the cottage behind them.

"I shall take it from here. She appears to be hiding something; it could take a while to extract," Severus said coolly.

"I can help you," Dolohov offered, clearly not wanting to let the opportunity pass by. "I have a place you can use for interrogation, nice and isolated." Dolohov grinned evilly. "I took Marchbanks' fiancé there over a year ago."

With a rush of anticipation, Severus realised he had finally found an unexpected lead.

"That probably won't be necessary; I have certain ways of extracting information from her," said Severus.

"I could show you where it is," Dolohov suggested. "Bring her to me if she proves resistant."

After a moment's thought, Severus nodded his acceptance.

"That could be useful," Severus said, calculating his next move. "Take me there now. I shall contact you again if I need your assistance."

At last, Severus had a place to begin in his quest to help Contessa.

Dolohov grinned in anticipation and grasped hold of Severus's arm. A loud pop sounded as the pair Disapparated from the garden.

Elephant in the Room

Severus had been gone for several minutes, and Contessa was starting to panic.

Left alone in the cottage, bound to the chair, dozens of scenarios ran through her mind.

She was determined not to let Severus's actions in front of Dolohov shake her new-found trust in him, but the longer she was left to her own devices, the more concerned she became.

Since Severus had played his part so convincingly, she was starting to misinterpret his intentions. Contessa was deeply troubled by the way he had appeared to relish his dominance over her.

And, now that the Ministry of Magic had fallen, Severus was a free man. She wondered vaguely if he had decided to up sticks and leave straight away.

Chastising herself for doubting Severus, she looked around the room in the hope that Dumbledore had returned to his portrait. However, the canvas remained empty in its frame. Fawkes was also absent, no doubt staying away in case Dolohov or other Death Eaters returned to the cottage.

Contessa didn't know how Severus would react to the memories she had shown him. She knew that his casting of *Legilimens* had saved her from painful questioning, and she was already regretting goading him when he was trying to help her.

Outside, the pop of Apparition sounded and the wind chime rang. Severus had returned alone.

However, he didn't come back into the cottage immediately, and Contessa felt a dark sense of trepidation.

Suddenly the front door flung open and Severus marched in, still wearing his Death Eater robes. In his hands he carried two small bottles of potion, which he placed down carefully on the table at her side. He flung his hooded cloak onto the armchair, and rolled up the sleeves of his black shirt.

Contessa watched him suspiciously. Severus had not instantaneously released her from her bindings, and this caused her to experience an uncontrollable flare of anger and alarm.

"What in Merlin's name were you playing at?" she shot at him, with more venom than she intended.

Severus moved towards her, twitching with irritation. "Hold still and be quiet," he said impatiently.

He picked up the larger, amber-coloured glass bottle, and opened the seal of the container.

"Let me out of these restraints first," Contessa challenged him.

Severus's eyes glinted at her like the deep, dark sea under moonlight.

"Not until I'm convinced you won't do something foolish," he said coolly.

"Don't be ridiculous."

Severus did not respond.

The censure caused Contessa some consternation, but she realised her belligerent behaviour was not instilling any confidence in Severus. She slumped subserviently in her seat.

Severus stood before her and reached out his hand, softly nudging her head upwards until Contessa was looking directly into his eyes. He focused on her bloody temple and gently dropped essence of dittany onto the wound.

As the potion made contact with her head, the skin responded with a stinging tingle, and the pain ebbed slowly away.

Contessa felt her aggression fade as Severus continued to apply the dittany to her remaining cuts and bruises.

After a short time, Severus stood back to get a better look at her. His expression held a trace of tenderness and concern.

Contessa felt tears forming in her eyes and she quickly looked away.

Severus drew his wand and released the snake-like bindings with a non-verbal spell. The silvery ropes slithered loose, evaporating on contact with the floor.

Now that Contessa was free, she found herself unable to move. A sense of relief flooded through her, along with the horror of the interrogation she had narrowly escaped.

She looked up at Severus and found his dark, unblinking eyes.

"That was him, wasn't it?" she asked him. "The one who murdered Alex?"

Severus's head tilted fractionally, but his composure did not alter.

"Yes," he replied in a low voice.

Contessa tried to contain a sob, failing to control the mixture of grief and relief rising through her.

Severus winced slightly, but offered his hand out to her.

Contessa accepted it, and rose tentatively to her feet, reaching out for Severus's other arm to steady her.

She didn't dare to meet his eyes as she finally lost control and began to weep silently. Her hand clasped his tightly, in an attempt to brace herself from the onslaught of emotions.

Severus's body was rigid and tense, but he raised his other arm and placed his hand gently on her shoulder.

After a few moments of contact, Contessa sobered and began to regain her self-control. She pulled away from him, letting go of his hand and wiping the tears from her face. She dried her hands on her ruined dress robes, and sighed morosely.

"I can mend those for you," Severus offered, taking out his wand.

"No," Contessa replied. "I'd rather change."

Severus nodded silently. He picked up his Death Eater robes and removed a second wand, which he offered to her.

Contessa took her wand from him gratefully and hurried upstairs.

She showered and changed into fresh robes, not wishing to expose any more skin than was necessary. As she looked at her reflection in the mirror she saw no outward sign of injury, but she still felt vulnerable and exposed.

Dolohov knew where she lived.

When Contessa walked slowly down the stairs into the living room, Severus was sitting on the sofa, staring at the empty Headmaster's portrait.

Upon seeing Contessa, he made a space for her on the seat next to him and motioned her over. He held out the remaining bottle of potion.

"Drink it," he said calmly.

Contessa obeyed without thinking and swallowed the contents of the bottle in one gulp. The potion was syrupy and tasted faintly of lemons. She felt warmth and relaxation spread downwards from her throat and into her abdomen. The tension in her body seemed to drain away.

"Thank you," she whispered, as she leaned back into the cushions on the sofa.

They sat together in silence for a long while, and with each passing minute the inevitable conversation loomed like an elephant in the room.

Eventually, Severus acquiesced.

"I should leave now the Ministry has fallen." His voice was scratchy and he stared dead ahead into the fireplace.

Contessa turned around in an attempt to meet his eyes, but his steadfast gaze remained unbroken.

She waited for the space of a few anxious heartbeats.

"Stay," she said quietly.

Severus's brow furrowed as he looked around at her, silently questioning.

"Stay," Contessa said with more confidence. "Just for tonight, in case Dolohov returns."

Severus was about to offer her some reassuring words, but upon seeing her expression he appeared to change his mind.

He watched her with dark, unfathomable eyes.

"I shall leave tomorrow morning."

Contessa nodded, closing her eyes in relief.

Potions Assistant

By the time the morning arrived, the weather had broken and large thunderclouds loomed in the distance. Rain pelted on the windows of Squirrel's Leap as Severus and Contessa ate breakfast together.

A flash of lightning followed by a low rumble of thunder brought Contessa out of her reverie. She met Severus's eyes with a sad smile, and he felt a brief pang of sorrow in response.

He would soon leave for Spinner's End, and the thought was thoroughly depressing. Severus tried to spend the smallest amount of time possible at his childhood home; the place held so many unhappy memories for him.

Severus had lived in his dungeon quarters at Hogwarts for the last sixteen years and, such was his preference for them, he always spent Christmas and Easter holidays at the school.

It was only during the summer, when Hogwarts castle was closed, that he used his home at Spinner's End.

The month spent at Contessa's cottage in the rolling green hills of the countryside had taken him out of his comfort zone. However, he had appreciated the contact it had afforded him. Severus had been able to protect Harry through his connection with Dumbledore's portrait, and his acquaintance with Contessa had secured his link to the Order of the Phoenix.

Severus knew that Contessa had been very useful and valuable, and he also had to admit she'd been better company than he'd expected. She was respectful enough to leave him on his own when that was what he needed, but was always there in the background, a steady and consistent presence.

Whilst Severus understood the Unbreakable Vow had bought her trust and loyalty, he was still grateful for the kindness and respect she had shown him.

The stormy weather seemed to match Severus's mood as he contemplated leaving his sanctuary, realising only now what an oasis it had been.

"Are you packed up?" Contessa asked, after a loud clap of thunder bounced him out of his thoughts.

"I am," Severus replied, his voice formal in an attempt to hide his discomfort.

Contessa nodded, and started to clear away the breakfast table. Fawkes ruffled his feathers and shook himself, sending a couple of sparks across the room. He looked at Severus and warbled a doleful lament.

The last thing Severus needed was the phoenix adding to his darkening mood.

Dumbledore strode into his portrait and greeted the room with an incongruously cheerful good morning. Severus walked over to the portrait and gave Dumbledore a brisk nod in response. Within moments, Contessa was at his side, welcoming the former Headmaster.

"I take it you're ready to head off for Spinner's End?" asked Dumbledore.

"Yes, I'll be leaving shortly," Severus replied scratchily.

Fawkes chattered sadly in the corner, and Severus rolled his eyes.

"I think he wants to go with you," Contessa commented dryly.

Severus shot her a withering look, and she chuckled in return.

The phoenix contemplated the pair seriously and this served to subdue them at once.

Severus knew it was time to leave Squirrel's Leap now he was a free man, no longer on the run from the Ministry.

The Dark Lord would be choosing two new teachers for Muggle Studies and Defence Against the Dark Arts, and appointing a new Headteacher. Severus needed to take his place at the Dark Lord's side and ensure he was highly regarded, if he was to return to the school as one of its complement of staff.

"How am I to keep in touch with you?" Severus asked Dumbledore.

"This portrait is not going anywhere for the time being. Take Tess along with you today so she knows where to find you."

Severus nodded. "I shall visit Squirrel's Leap often enough to maintain the illusion that Contessa is still under the Imperius Curse, and therefore does not require a Death

Eater to tail her."

Dumbledore smiled in agreement. "That should work well; continue to use Tess as your contact in the Order. She will also be a useful lever in your next task."

"I shall confer with the Dark Lord immediately on recruitment for the posts at Hogwarts and put myself forward," Severus said brusquely, not completely sure how Contessa could help him to secure a position.

"I expect you to be the next Headmaster of Hogwarts, Severus," Dumbledore said pointedly.

"The Headmaster?" Severus asked in surprise.

"Yes, it's the ideal position. You will be able to do more to protect the students and help Harry when the need arises."

Severus was momentarily lost for words; he hadn't considered the Headmastership. He wasn't entirely sure how he felt about being Dumbledore's successor; it had been inappropriate to imagine Dumbledore being permanently replaced, let alone being succeeded by him.

After all, it had been he who had killed the Headmaster all those weeks ago.

He returned Dumbledore's gaze with an air of diffidence.

"How can Contessa help me win the Headmastership?" he asked.

Dumbledore turned to Contessa, with a look of mild astonishment. "You haven't told him yet?" he asked.

"Told me what?" Severus asked Contessa.

She hesitated, fidgeting uneasily on the spot. Contessa seemed unsure about how he was going to react. Severus braced himself for the worst.

"I'm coming with you to Hogwarts," she replied sheepishly.

Severus almost laughed out loud. His expression must have given him away, as Contessa looked at him quizzically.

The temptation was too much for Severus. "You can't possibly be joining the teaching staff," he said sarcastically. "Hogwarts would never cope."

Contessa shot him a look of indignation, but Severus caught a glimmer of underlying humour in her eyes. A small smile played out on Severus's lips.

"No, I'm not going to teach," she said, as if explaining to a small child. "I'm going to assist Horace Slughorn in his teaching of Potions."

Severus raised his eyebrows in response. "The Potions master has never needed an assistant."

Contessa opened her mouth to speak, but Dumbledore's portrait cut in.

"The Potions master has never been past retirement age, that is until Horace returned to Hogwarts," Dumbledore said evenly. "Last year was a struggle for him, and now he's Head of Slytherin too. I needed to make sure Horace was able to stay on for another year, to prevent the Dark Lord replacing him with a Death Eater."

Severus could see the validity of Dumbledore's reasoning. "What will the new role require?"

"Tess will be the new Potions Assistant. She will help Horace to prepare the potions he uses for his lessons, maintain the school stores of ingredients, and help to mark some of the homework. It will remove some of the more onerous responsibilities and allow Horace to concentrate on his Slytherin students and teaching."

Contessa continued to fidget as Dumbledore explained her new job.

Severus realised the precedent had already been set when Dumbledore had allowed Sybill Trelawney to teach Divination alongside Firenze. He supposed it was a practical enough tool to help Slughorn stay at Hogwarts.

Having Contessa around would prove useful, if he were to win the Headmastership. She could continue to inform him of the activities of other teachers, and possibly the students, by acting as a double agent.

There was also the fact that Contessa had spent a large amount of time in the dungeons, mostly in detention, and knew them like the back of her hand. Severus had instructed her to clean every nook and cranny of the potions storage cupboards, classroom and office, at some point in her final year. Contessa had broken the record for the Ravenclaw spending the most time in detention, and that was just during his first term as Potions master.

Severus knew she would make a perfectly adequate Potions Assistant; she had been an adept student and had been the only person in her year to achieve an Outstanding Potions NEWT. He also realised there was some further value in having her around, given she was the only living person who knew of his true loyalties.

"I'm sure I can convince the Dark Lord of the benefits to the plan," Severus said smoothly.

Contessa relaxed a little and seemed to stand straighter. Severus had the impression that his opinion of her suitability had carried great weight. He caught himself feeling flattered.

"Excellent," Dumbledore said emphatically. "I look forward to seeing you in the Headteacher's office at Hogwarts."

Severus nodded curtly. Contessa smiled in return, her features full of relief.

Half-Blood

A muffled pop sounded in the pouring rain as Contessa and Severus Apparated onto the cobbled street known as Spinner's End.

Contessa felt shocked that Severus had used Apparition to take her to his home; it was broad daylight, and they were clearly in a Muggle mill town.

Looking around the terraced street, Contessa realised that all the houses were empty with their windows broken or boarded up. Such was the air of neglect; it seemed the place had been deserted by its residents over a decade ago.

A large chimney loomed ominously behind the row of terraces as Contessa followed Severus up the street to the last house on the left.

Severus drew his wand and demonstrated how to unlock the enchantments to allow them to enter through the front door. Contessa noticed that Severus's home was the only house with its windows intact, although the glass was very grimy and couldn't be letting much light through.

She stepped inside the front door and found herself in a tiny sitting room, filled floor to ceiling with wall to wall leather-bound books. The daylight seemed to be absorbed by the library walls, giving the room a gloomy feel. The air was stale with the smell of old parchment.

Contessa realised there were no visible doors in the room, and a sense of claustrophobia welled up inside her.

Severus lit the candle-filled lamp hanging from the ceiling, and the flickering light warmed the room slightly.

Contessa dried her robes with a non-verbal spell. As she looked around her anxiety increased; she felt as though the padded walls were pressing in on her. Contessa walked towards the window and opened the curtains fully, wiping the window with her hand to get a better look outside.

"I didn't think places like this existed anymore."

"They don't," replied Severus, his voice clipped.

Contessa turned to face him and watched as he dried and removed his cloak. Severus opened two concealed doorways to allow the air to circulate. He nodded towards the window and Contessa attempted to open it. She had to resort to using magic to free the old, corroded window frame.

"How come it's still standing?" she asked.

"The town planners wanted to demolish the houses at this end of town to make way for an apartment block. I Confunded all the necessary personnel, and the council have conveniently forgotten about their derelict street."

Contessa was impressed with Severus's audacity but couldn't help but wonder why he would go to so much trouble for such a grubby hidey-hole.

"How long have you lived here?"

Severus looked at Contessa for a long moment, appearing to debate whether or not this was a conversation he was willing to entertain.

"All my life," he replied reticently. "I was born here."

Contessa felt a jolt of surprise. "This was your parents' home?"

Dark eyes bored into hers as he contemplated his answer. "Yes," he said in a low voice. "I... inherited it."

The meaning seemed clear, but Contessa couldn't stop herself from asking, "Your parents are dead?"

Severus paused, seeming reluctant to reveal more. Contessa admonished herself for being so inquisitive towards such a private man. Her first glimpse into Severus's childhood wasn't what she had expected.

"My mother is dead," Severus replied with an ounce of bitterness. "My father is... missing. He won't be coming back."

From his tone, Contessa knew that was the end of the conversation. She turned to look out at the dismal street, finding it hard to believe that pure-bloods would choose to live in a Muggle hell-hole.

When she turned back to face Severus, he had already left the room. Contessa remained at the window, watching the downpour of rain running like a river down the cobbled street.

She couldn't imagine the imposing Potions master hailing from such an austere working class background, nor could she understand why he would choose to return to it.

Severus walked back into the sitting room and placed two mugs of tea on the rickety table. Contessa felt him watching her closely as she sat down, wrapping her fingers around the warm cup.

"This is not what you expected," Severus said perceptively.

Contessa smiled uneasily. "I never thought a Slytherin pure-blood would live in Muggle suburbia."

Severus looked down and took a sip of his tea, then placed the mug on the table and walked over to the window. Looking out at the rain, he said quietly, "I'm not pure-blood."

"You're not?"

Severus met her gaze and shook his head slowly.

"I had always assumed, you being in Slytherin and a Death Eater," Contessa said awkwardly.

"The obvious isn't always the truth," Severus said smoothly. "My mother was a witch; my father was a Muggle."

She processed the revelation slowly. "So, you're a half-blood."

Severus nodded once with an air of edginess.

A nervous laugh escaped from Contessa before she could control it.

Severus assessed her suspiciously. "You find this funny?"

"Oh," she cleared her throat apologetically. "No. It's just that... I never would have guessed... You see, I'm a half-blood too."

Severus's lips curled into an anticipatory smile. "Nor would I have guessed."

Contessa felt some confusion as she watched Severus smirking back at her. "What do you mean?"

"Well, the Marchbanks line is one of the older pure-blood families. You always had that haughty air about you as a student," Severus said sardonically.

Contessa pricked at the suggestion. "Excuse me?"

"I always thought the Ravenclaw Revolutionary was the product of a privileged upbringing."

Contessa scoffed audibly. "I'll have you know, I was brought up in a Muggle market town. My mother was a Muggle and insisted I earn my keep, she made me work in her bakery every summer holiday..."

Severus laughed out loud as her rationalisation ran out of steam.

Contessa stopped any further elaboration, captivated by Severus's laughter. She had never heard the sound before, let alone seen the smile which now replaced it on his face.

She felt a grin creeping across her face as they shared a moment of revelation.

"Touché," Contessa said, with laughter.

Severus nodded in acknowledgement, and came to sit down in the armchair. They finished their tea in easy silence.

It seemed strange to Contessa that they were saying goodbye, after spending over a month together. She knew she was going to miss his company, and she wondered how Severus felt.

"So, how will this work now?" Contessa asked him.

"You'll need to let me know if Dumbledore wants to speak to me, or if you require me to tail you."

Contessa considered this for a moment. "I could send you my Patronus," she suggested.

Severus shook his head. "I prefer not to use Patronuses. They are too easily traced. Plus, as a Death Eater, I should not be producing a Patronus, let alone using one."

Contessa realised he had a point. They sat quietly contemplating the solution.

"What about the rings?" she asked, suddenly remembering.

Severus looked up at her with interest.

"Do you still have the other ring?" Contessa asked him.

"Yes." Severus removed the Tiger's Eye ring from inside his robes. He turned it over in his hand, staring into the golden brown stone. "I don't think I could wear it, though; it might be too obvious. I've never been one for jewellery."

As Contessa watched him playing with the silver ring, an idea struck her. She removed her necklace and Transfigured it into a longer silver chain. She offered it to Severus.

"Wear the ring on the chain, underneath your robes. If I need you, it will turn cool against your skin," Contessa suggested.

Severus took the chain from her outstretched hand and threaded the silver rope through the ring. He fastened the clasp at the back of his neck, and tucked the chain inside his collar.

"And what if I need you?" Severus asked.

"Put the ring on like last time. I'll make sure I'm always wearing mine."

Severus seemed satisfied.

They looked at each other for a long moment, each hoping the other would speak.

Eventually, Contessa stood, wrapped her cloak around her and made her way to the front door. Severus followed to open the door for her. The rain was still beating down on the pavement outside.

Their eyes met briefly once more.

"I'll see you soon, I hope," Contessa said.

Severus nodded.

Contessa dashed out into the rain and Disapparated.

Author's Note:

Where I have quoted dialogue from the original Harry Potter books, I have marked it with an asterisk.

Seven

Chapter 7 of 14

Albus Dumbledore had a plan to protect Severus Snape after the fateful night on the Astronomy Tower. During his final year as Headmaster, Snape has a chance to come to terms with his past and find peace, before his life draws to its inevitable close. Canon-compliant. TPP Featured Story May/June 2010.

A New Headmaster

Over the next few days the Dark Lord's coup at the Ministry of Magic resulted in many varied and drastic changes of policy.

Harry Potter's face was splashed across the front page of the *Daily Prophet*, wanted for questioning about the death of Albus Dumbledore.

Severus hoped that Potter had managed to find a safe haven somewhere, musing that the boy was again indebted to the Granger girl for her forward-planning skills, superior intellect and talent.

He still held the opinion that Potter was a mediocre wizard, but he could not deny the importance of the boy in relation to the prophecy. Severus merely hoped that Lily's son had gained sufficient knowledge from his private lessons with Dumbledore before the Headmaster's death.

Now, Severus had to trust in the former Headmaster's judgment and attempt to help Potter from afar.

Contessa had not made any progress in finding goblins willing to make a copy of Gryffindor's sword and was exploring wizard-made alternatives and, as it stood, there was no way for Severus to procure the original sword.

It was becoming increasingly important for Severus to win the Headmastership, in order to be in the best position to assist Potter, and deliver his promise to Dumbledore. When the Dark Lord summoned Severus to discuss the next steps at Hogwarts, Severus knew he had to give his best performance to secure the promotion.

Kneeling at the feet of the Dark Lord in the opulent drawing room of Malfoy Manor, Severus awaited his master's instruction with a degree of tension.

"Arise, faithful servant," the Dark Lord hissed softly.

Severus stood respectfully as the Dark Lord sat down in an armchair next to the fireplace.

The inclement weather had continued for a few days, and the lack of sunlight outside gave the room a cold and murky feel. The Dark Lord raised his wand and lit a fire in the hearth, beckoning Severus to sit in the armchair opposite.

The fragrant aroma of burning pinewood rose through the air as Severus sat quietly, waiting for the Dark Lord to speak.

"I shall be abroad for a while," the Dark Lord began. "I must try to discover the reason why my wand failed me again in the presence of Harry Potter."

"Yes, my Lord."

"The Ministry is under my control with my people in place. I must now turn my thoughts to Hogwarts."

Severus waited in silence, his heart beating steadily in his chest.

"I have established the Muggle-Born Registration Commission, and they will oversee the student list for September. All students of Hogwarts will require Blood Status to enter. We will weed out all the Muggle-born witches and wizards ahead of the start of term." The Dark Lord paused for thought.

Severus felt a hollow form in his stomach; he had known this was coming, but that didn't stop the wave of revulsion. Had the Dark Lord come to power earlier, Lily Evans would have been one of those expelled and hunted down.

Outwardly, Severus's composure was calm and mask-like. He nodded his head in agreement.

"So, Severus, tell me what you would do if you were to be placed in charge of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry?"

Severus contemplated the question carefully.

"I would be inclined to preserve the school's traditions and values, and retain the current teaching staff, my Lord. This would be in line with your strategy to control the Ministry of Magic, whilst maintaining an outward charade that nothing has in fact changed." Severus's voice was smooth and steady as he continued, "I believe the illusion of the smallest amount of change will allay public opinion, ensuring a seamless transition for the students of the school."

The Dark Lord considered his reply. "And you believe the teaching staff would accept you as Headmaster, knowing of your involvement in the death of Albus Dumbledore?"

"I do, my Lord."

"And how can you be assured of their loyalty? How can you be certain they will not undermine you and lead the Hogwarts students in a rebellion against you?"

"I believe the staff to be intelligent enough to know what is good for them, in the long run," Severus replied confidently. "I also have a useful tool to ensure their compliance to my regime."

The Dark Lord returned Severus's steadfast gaze with a hint of surprise. "Elaborate," he instructed.

Severus took a deep breath. "Contessa Marchbanks, my Lord."

The Dark Lord looked bemused. "How is she going to ensure their loyalty?"

"Marchbanks was due to join the Hogwarts staff in September, my Lord. Dumbledore recruited her to assist Horace Slughorn in his teaching of Potions."

The Dark Lord showed his first signs of interest. "And you are hoping she can remain your plaything when you return to Hogwarts?"

Severus paused; the Dark Lord had misinterpreted the subtle implication.

"That is part of it, my Lord. Marchbanks has certainly bestowed me a captivating summer so far." Severus inclined his head towards the Dark Lord in gratitude. "However, she will be of much more use to me at Hogwarts, where she will act as a spy amongst the teaching staff."

The Dark Lord raised his hairless eyebrows in recognition.

"Marchbanks will work alongside the teachers, who believe she is loyal to the Order of the Phoenix. She will secretly furnish me with information on illicit or disloyal activities." Severus felt his trump card had been well played, and he awaited the Dark Lord's response.

"I can see the potential, Severus. She could prove a valuable asset." The Dark Lord nodded his head with comprehension.

"Marchbanks will also have an interface with the students, who will see her as a friend rather than a superior. The intelligence she can provide will be of significant value," Severus said with conviction. "I believe it would place me in the strongest position to control the school and root out disloyalty."

The Dark Lord was silent for a while as he assessed the implications.

"And when would you propose to be named the new Headmaster?" The Dark Lord asked.

Severus felt the tide turning in his favour. "At the beginning of the school year, my Lord. There will be no time for those loyal to Dumbledore to react to the news. By then, attendance at the school will be compulsory."

The game seemed to have been won. The Dark Lord arose suddenly to his feet. Severus stood deferentially and awaited his decision.

The Dark Lord extended his white snake-like arm. Severus sank to his knees reverently and kissed the proffered hand. In the silence that followed he remained kneeling before the Dark Lord.

"Congratulations, Severus," the Dark Lord said softly. "You are the newly-appointed Headmaster of Hogwarts."

"Thank you, my Lord." Severus stood and bowed to his master. "It is my pleasure to be of service."

A thin smile played out on the Dark Lord's lips.

"May I begin recruiting for the vacant teaching posts in Muggle Studies and Defence Against the Dark Arts?" Severus asked respectfully.

"There is no need," the Dark Lord replied. "I shall appoint Amycus and Alecto Carrow to the Dark Arts and Muggle Studies respectively. Both subjects are in need of an overhaul, and I want my people involved."

Severus's heart sank in disappointment. The news was not, however, unexpected.

"As you wish, my Lord."

The Dark Lord glided out of the room, leaving Severus standing alone with his misgivings.

The First Glimpse

During the week following the appointment of the new Headmaster, Severus called at Squirrel's Leap every couple of days to confer with Dumbledore's portrait.

Contessa sensed that Severus was busy; his visits were brief and to the point, and she had not imposed unwanted conversation upon him.

At home late one evening, Contessa was sitting on her sofa, dressed in a vest-top and shorts, ready for bed. Curled up in a blanket, she was reading an old Potions book by candlelight. Her new job was due to start in a few weeks' time, and she was refreshing her memory ahead of her return to Hogwarts.

Fawkes soared in from outside and landed heavily on his perch. The phoenix was now fully grown, about the size of a swan, and he looked rather large and out of place in her tiny living room.

A crack of Apparition sounded, causing Contessa to jump in her seat. The wind chime tinkled. She looked at the clock, tutting at the lateness of the hour. As Contessa rose from her seat, Severus knocked and let himself in.

Wearing his customary black robes, Severus looked slightly surprised to see Contessa dressed in her nightclothes. Standing facing each other, their awkwardness grew in intensity.

Severus's hand twitched on the door handle as the chill of the night air rushed in. Contessa shivered and subconsciously wrapped her arms around herself. They both began speaking at the same moment.

"To what do I owe..." Contessa began.

"My apologies," Severus said curtly.

Nervous laughter followed as they looked away from each other. Severus closed the door.

"I'll go and change," Contessa offered, hurrying upstairs.

She returned moments later, wearing a set of rather crumpled robes, and saw Severus sitting in the armchair, leaning forward on his elbows with his hands clasped together.

The formality of his posture sent a ripple of trepidation through Contessa.

As she sat down on the sofa, Severus looked at her. His cold, dark eyes appeared pensive in the candlelight. Contessa leaned towards him anxiously, sensing his sombre mood. Now that he was here, he seemed reluctant to speak.

Severus eventually retrieved something from inside his robes. After turning it over in his hands a few times, he passed the item to Contessa. She felt cool metal in her hands and looked down to see a tarnished silver chain. It was a Saint Christopher pendant.

Her heart leapt to her throat as she read the inscription on the back. Contessa swallowed hard, attempting to control the tears forming in her eyes. She looked back at Severus in shock.

"Where did you find this?" she asked.

Severus looked down at his hands again and took a moment to answer. "Buried at the side of a Muggle railway track; a Niffler found it for me."

Contessa breathed in anxiously. "This was Alex's."

Severus nodded once.

"You found his body?"

Severus made eye contact again, his expression grim. "Yes."

Contessa felt as though she had been punched hard in the stomach. Tears streamed down her face and she wept quietly, almost forgetting Severus was there.

He fidgeted nervously, seeming to regret being present at such a personal moment. However, he did not leave.

Contessa heard a flap of wings, and the warm weight of Fawkes landed on her knee, warbling softly.

With the phoenix's song to soothe her, the familiar feeling of grief was joined by a new emotion – an ache of relief and gratitude. Finally, she knew what had been keeping Severus occupied during his stay at her home, and throughout the summer.

The phoenix lingered for a while as they sat in silence; Contessa's laboured breathing was the only sound. Contessa noticed Fawkes looking at Severus expectantly. Severus peered back at him with exasperation.

Fawkes issued a melodic whirr and hopped onto the coffee table. With a graceful beat of his wings, he rose into the air and flew out of the window into the garden.

Severus looked troubled and exposed. He fumbled in his pocket and offered out a handkerchief. Contessa accepted it gratefully and dried her eyes and nose.

Turning the hanky over in her hands, she said quietly, "Thank you, Severus."

His composure became rigid, as if unaccustomed to accepting gratitude.

"You didn't need to do this," Contessa said sadly.

Severus's expression changed to one of confusion. His eyes met hers uncertainly, as though asking a question.

"We were to help one another... Dumbledore expected me to help you." Whilst Severus's voice was perfunctory, his puzzlement was obvious.

Contessa stifled a laugh as she watched his emotions playing out on his face.

"But you've already helped me, Severus. You gave me confirmation of Alex's death. I didn't expect anything more."

Severus opened his mouth to speak and closed it again, mystified. Contessa could see the cogs turning in his head as he realised his debt had already been paid.

His lips pursed and his hands dropped to his sides in defeat. "I had no idea."

Contessa smiled forlornly and started to get up. "I need a drink."

Severus touched her hand lightly, signalling her to remain seated on the sofa. He walked into the kitchen, returning with a bottle of Firewhisky and two glasses, and sat down next to her, pouring out two large measures.

Contessa took a glass and downed the liquid in one gulp. Red hot flames hit the back of her throat, and she coughed a little. Placing the glass back down on the table, she looked at Severus again.

His eyebrows arched, but he held back further comment, pouring more Firewhisky into her empty glass. Picking up his own, he offered his in toast, and Contessa and Severus clinked their drinks together before taking another sip.

Severus relaxed back into the cushions, his face as inscrutable as ever. Contessa wondered fleetingly how long he would stay with her; she really didn't want to be on her own just at the moment. She leaned back into the sofa with a heavy sigh.

Contessa awoke several hours later with a stiff back and a tingling shoulder.

Her head banged in protest as she opened her eyes, and she felt a parched dryness in the back of her throat. Turning her head slightly, her cheek brushed against a black cotton shirt, and she became aware of another sensation: Severus's chest rising and falling underneath. She was covered in a blanket and leaning into his arm.

Comprehension dawned quickly, and she tried to move her head without disturbing him, but his eyes snapped open with a start. Severus looked down at her with surprise, momentarily discomposed. He quickly realised where he was and rubbed his forehead, wincing slightly.

Contessa sat up and stretched, feeling embarrassed that she had forced Severus to spend an uncomfortable night on the sofa. She saw the empty bottle of Firewhisky on the table and understood the cause of their respective hangovers. Contessa stood up slowly, and the room spun before her eyes. Severus started to get up but she held her hand out to stop him.

"Stay there," she croaked.

Moments later she was shuffling back into the living room with a small, cobalt blue potion bottle and a large jug of water.

Severus sighed in relief as she handed him the tiny bottle and he placed two drops of the potion onto his tongue. Closing his eyes and flicking his head back, some colour returned to his pallid face and the redness in his eyes disappeared.

"Thank you," he said, offering the bottle back to Contessa.

She poured him a large glass of water, and then medicated herself, sitting down sheepishly on the sofa.

"I'm sorry I put you through such an uncomfortable night," she said awkwardly.

Severus shook his head. "No apology necessary."

Contessa smiled a little, and continued to drink copious amounts of water. Gradually, sobriety and clarity pervaded her mind and body.

"I'll give the location of Alex's body to the police," she said steadily.

Severus looked at her quizzically. "The Muggle police?"

"Yes," said Contessa. "Alex was Muggle-born. His parents will want a proper funeral."

Severus's eyes widened in surprise and understanding. Contessa wondered fleetingly about Severus's views regarding Muggle-borns. Then a thought struck her: had Alex been alive today, he would have been on the run.

"I'll be going, then," Severus said, after finishing his second glass of water. He rose to his feet.

Contessa remained seated, but reached out to touch his hand. Severus gave her a sidelong glance, as if unsure what she expected from him.

"Thank you for all you've done, Severus," Contessa said gently.

He paused and looked down at the floor for a long moment. His hand brushed hers as he turned to leave, walking resolutely to the door.

Standing with his fingers grasping the door handle, he turned around to look at Contessa. Their eyes met briefly before he looked away.

In a low, quiet voice, Severus said, "I lost someone too."

She made eye contact with him again and saw sadness in Severus's dark eyes.

Contessa's heart leapt with realisation; he had given her the first glimpse into his soul. She nodded her head in respectful understanding.

Severus turned the door handle and swept out into the bright glare of the morning sunshine.

Asphodelus Albus

"I need your grace

To remind me

To find my own"

'Chasing Cars', Snow Patrol

Over the next two weeks the cause of Alex's death was not revealed by post-mortem. An inquest was opened and adjourned, allowing the family to bury his body.

Severus had been prepared to perform Memory and Confundus Charms on the Muggle police and coroner to expedite the burial of Contessa's fiancé, but in the end it had not proved necessary.

Contessa kept herself busy with funeral arrangements, and Severus called in to the cottage every couple of days or so on the premise of conferring with Dumbledore's portrait. The real reason for his visits was denied even to himself, but he continued to check that she was alright, subconsciously repaying the kindness she had shown him.

The day before the funeral, Severus was at Squirrel's Leap discussing strategy with the portrait. Term time was only a week away, and he and Contessa would soon be packing their trunks for Hogwarts.

"I know from my Hogwarts portrait that the teachers have been informed of your appointment as Headmaster," Dumbledore told Severus. "The Ministry have used the Tongue-Tying Curse to keep the news under wraps until the first of September."

"I can imagine Minerva's response," Severus said acerbically.

"Probably quite correctly," Dumbledore replied. "I tried to calm her down, but she was furious."

"I hope she doesn't booby-trap the Headteacher's office," said Severus.

"No; she was removed from the room, and the password has been changed. The office awaits your arrival in a few days."

Severus nodded in acknowledgment.

"There is the other matter, of Fawkes," Dumbledore said lightly.

The phoenix looked up from its perch and warbled a few low notes.

Severus and Contessa looked around at the bird with dawning realisation.

"Once you are both at Hogwarts, he will have to find a new home," Dumbledore said.

Contessa moaned quietly and went over to the phoenix, stroking its plumage gently. Fawkes rubbed his head dolefully against her hand.

Severus felt a flurry of sadness, which he quickly brought under control. There was no way they could take Fawkes with them to Hogwarts; that much was certain.

"Where will he go?" Contessa asked forlornly.

"Now he's fully grown he'll choose a new home. I expect he'll head off for Egypt, after spending all those years in the Highlands," Dumbledore said, watching Contessa stroke the bird.

Contessa turned to face the former Headmaster with a confused expression. "Egypt?"

Severus was unable to restrain himself, and laughed with incredulity.

Contessa shot him a piercing look in return.

"Phoenixes originate from Egypt, Contessa," he said, with as much patience as he could muster. "You really didn't pay attention in Care of Magical Creatures, did you?"

The hurt in her eyes stirred an unexpected feeling of regret in Severus. He hadn't intended to offend her, in view of her current fragility, but his sarcasm was as inexorable as ever. He bit down on the inside of his mouth in response.

"Apparently not," Contessa answered sullenly.

After a few moments of silence, Severus felt it was time to leave. He approached the perch and Contessa moved away to stand by the door. Severus stroked the phoenix gently on the side of the head; his feathers felt strangely hot to the touch. Fawkes crowed his goodbye.

Contessa smiled sadly and went outside. Dumbledore looked pointedly at Severus as he left the cottage.

On his way out Severus met Contessa on the garden path; she seemed to be waiting to speak to him in private. Severus prepared himself for an admonition.

"Severus," she said softly. "The funeral is tomorrow afternoon." The tone of her voice did not suggest a reprimand.

"I know," he said, feeling relieved.

Contessa made eye contact for the first time, and Severus felt the pull of her sadness somewhere in his chest.

"Come with me to the funeral," she said. "Please."

Severus was taken aback, and took a moment to respond. "I thought it was a Muggle funeral?"

"It is," she replied. "But, I... Could you come?"

Severus gave the matter some consideration. The feeling of relief was now replaced by discomfort, but nevertheless he felt compelled to assist her.

"It would have to be under a Disillusionment Charm," he answered pragmatically.

Contessa nodded her head in agreement. "You could be my official Death Eater tail there are bound to be others there. Remus and Dora are coming along with several other witches and wizards, all in Muggle clothing of course."

Phrased that way, Severus noted the request seemed reasonable. "I'll be at the cottage tomorrow afternoon. We can leave together."

"Thank you," she said gratefully, turning back towards the house.

The funeral took place in a Muggle town a few miles east of Contessa's home. It was a burial in the large grounds of a church.

Severus watched from afar, under the shade of an old sycamore tree, concealed by a Disillusionment Charm.

The funeral party was large, and he saw a number of familiar faces, each closely monitored by several Ministry officials. Severus wondered how many more Death Eaters were hidden, watching their charges for signs of sedition.

As Severus observed the group of people huddled around the grave, he was reminded of the last funeral he had attended, sixteen years ago. He had skulked in the shadows on that occasion too, not wanting it known that he was in love with Lily Potter.

Severus had spent most of his life hiding it ever since.

Indeed, he had become so proficient at concealment, he had sometimes thought his guilt, hurt and loss had disappeared. But they had not. The emotions resurfaced every time he looked at Harry Potter, and he was reminded of Lily's union with the man he despised.

So long had he hidden his feelings from the world, he doubted he would ever open up. Such was his deep sense of shame. Who could possibly understand or forgive him for his actions, when he couldn't even forgive himself?

Severus waited patiently as the funeral party dispersed. Eventually, Contessa stood by the graveside alone, save for the company of an older man and woman, whom Severus assumed to be Alex's parents.

He watched them comfort and hug Contessa as they prepared to depart. They seemed to be suggesting that she come with them, but Contessa remained alone beside the mound of earth. The couple left reluctantly.

Dark clouds were rolling in as Severus watched Contessa's stoic outline. He couldn't tear his eyes away from her.

With the first spots of rain, Severus looked around cautiously then lifted the Disillusionment Charm. He approached Contessa quietly and stood close by her side, his arm touching hers.

No words were spoken.

Contessa continued to stare down at the grave, transfixed. The raindrops became increasingly persistent, but she appeared not to notice.

Severus withdrew his wand, careful to obscure it from the view of passing Muggles.

With a flick of his wand he conjured a single white asphodel lily.

Bending over the mound of earth, he laid the flower gently down upon it.

When he looked back, Contessa seemed to be aware of his presence for the first time. Her eyes were red and brimming with tears.

Severus offered his arm to her.

The rain was falling heavily as Contessa curled her hand around his elbow. Together, they walked slowly away from the grave.

Solitaire

On the evening before Contessa was due to move to Hogwarts and take up her position of Potions Assistant, she decided to pay Severus a visit at Spinner's End.

She Apparated onto the cobbled street underneath the silvery moonlight and made her way to Severus's home at the top of the terrace.

When she knocked on his door there was no reply.

Contessa pondered outside for a moment, wondering if the conversation she needed to have with Severus could wait until they were at Hogwarts.

Upon reaching her decision, she reluctantly started to undo the enchantments around his house in the order which Severus had shown her on her first trip to Spinner's End. This was the first time she'd visited when Severus was not at home, and she felt some trepidation at crossing the threshold into his private sanctum.

Letting herself in to the tiny front room, she lit the candelabra in the ceiling and stood for a moment, contemplating her surroundings. Contessa was inquisitive enough to want to walk around the house and see what lay beyond the boundaries of the ground floor, but she also sensed the impropriety of such an exploration.

Peeking through the open door to the stairs, she mentally reprimanded herself and turned back into the front room. Contessa selected a Potions book from Severus's substantial selection and settled down on the threadbare sofa, prepared to wait as long as necessary for his return.

Hours later, Contessa placed the book on the small coffee table and got up to select another volume. She noticed a vast array of Dark Arts books and a number of titles which appeared foreign and rather specialist. Severus was obviously a man who liked innovation, and she found herself drawn in to his world of experimental magic.

Placing a new book down on the coffee table, Contessa padded into the kitchen and started to make a cup of tea.

She didn't hear the front door creaking open or the sound of footsteps towards the kitchen doorway. When Contessa walked back into the front room, she noticed the lights had gone out.

Reaching for her wand to cast a *Lumos* Charm, she found herself slammed against the wall of books. Her wand and her cup of tea dropped from her grasp as she felt a firm hand tightening its grip around her neck.

Gasping for air, she looked into the darkness, attempting to make out the features of the black cloaked figure bearing down upon her.

"Severus...?" Contessa wheezed, feeling light-headed and starting to see stars in her vision.

The vice around her throat instantly loosened, and the candelabra re-lit itself.

Severus stood before her, his wand pointing at the ceiling light. He looked tired and irritated.

Contessa's hand went to her neck, massaging her throat. She was confused by Severus's demeanour as he considered her with growing impatience.

With a small growl of annoyance, Severus raised his wand and pressed it lightly against Contessa's neck. He uttered a brief incantation, and the pain and bruising around her throat vanished.

Severus stepped away, and noticed the books on the table and the cup on the floor.

"I see you have made yourself at home," he said coldly.

Contessa cleared her throat. "Yes, I... err... thought it better to wait for you here..." Her voice trailed off as she noticed the pool of spilt tea on the faded carpet. She picked up her wand to clear up the mess.

"Allow me," Severus said sleekly, raising his wand.

He cleaned the carpet with a charm and left the room to prepare two fresh cups of tea.

Contessa sat down again on the sofa and waited. Flicking through the second book on the table, she found she was unable to read. Adrenaline still pumped through her veins, and she felt distinctly unwelcome in Severus's home. She placed the book back down on the table.

When he reappeared at the doorway, she locked eyes with him and asked boldly, "Do you always greet visitors with such hostility?"

Severus's eyebrows rose in response, and a smirk played out on his lips.

Eventually, he answered, "You are the first to have unrestricted access to my home... I'm not accustomed to unexpected company."

Contessa realised that, during the time Severus had spent away from Squirrel's Leap, he had been reacquainted with his usual solitude. Her arrival had broken into that private world.

She smiled sympathetically. "I know how that feels."

Severus turned back into the kitchen, returning moments later with two mugs of tea. He set them down on the table and sat down, looking pale and distant under the flickering candlelight. Severus looked at the two books she had selected from his library.

"An interesting selection; I take it you've been here a while."

"Oh, I hope you don't mind, you have a fascinating collection of books," Contessa replied in an apologetic tone. "To be honest, I didn't realise how late it was."

Severus leaned back into the armchair, appearing to assess the necessity of providing an explanation. "I was at the Ministry, being interviewed for the *Daily Prophet*. The article on the Headmastership is to be run in a few days, to coincide with the start of the academic year."

He looked back at her with weary eyes, impatient for her to reveal the reason for her presence in his home.

"I leave for Hogwarts tomorrow," Contessa began. "I wanted to speak to you beforehand."

Severus took a sip from his mug, and gestured for her to continue.

"First of all, my Gran has not had any luck finding goblins willing to make a replica of the sword of Gryffindor. She is now arranging for a wizard-made copy, which she thinks will take around a month to procure."

Severus nodded. "That will have to suffice."

"It's the best we can do, I'm afraid," Contessa replied.

Perturbed by Severus's lack of interest in the conversation, Contessa sat quietly for a while, feeling uncomfortable in his presence once again.

During the month spent living alone, Severus's need for companionship appeared to have vanished. He had retreated into himself. Contessa felt as though they had stepped back in time.

She looked up again and made eye contact. Severus looked back at her indifferently.

"How will it work between us when we get to Hogwarts?" Contessa asked faintly.

Severus gave her an appraising look, realising the need for her visit. He paused to consider his response.

"Once I'm in post I shall hold a staff meeting, after which I'll summon certain individuals to the Headmaster's office. I shall call on you last of all, so you may report your initial findings."

"How am I to gain access to you if I need to speak to you?"

Severus contemplated his answer, swirling the remnants of his tea around in the bottom of his mug.

"I can give you the password, but you will draw attention to yourself if you use the door to the Headmaster's office too frequently," he said thoughtfully. "I shall set up a secret Floo connection from your quarters to my office, to grant you access without being seen."

Contessa nodded her acceptance. "I shall make sure you are alone in your office before arriving."

Severus placed his empty mug down on the table. Contessa took the hint and finished her tea quickly.

"May I borrow these books? They might come in useful," she asked tentatively.

"Certainly," Severus replied. "You may help yourself whenever you like; you know how to let yourself in."

"Thank you."

Contessa stood up, placing the books under her arm. Severus got up to open the door for her.

"Fawkes left this afternoon," Contessa said, hesitating by the door.

Severus's expression softened. "I take it he won't be back?"

"Dumbledore says not."

"And what of the portrait?" Severus asked.

"I'm giving it to my Gran. We should be able to liaise with her through Dumbledore's other portrait at Hogwarts; she'll let you know when the sword is ready for collection."

"That seems sensible," Severus said.

Contessa watched his tired features for a moment. The next time they saw each other, their relationship would be very different. She felt anxious about how their connection would alter as a result.

"I'll see you at Hogwarts, then," Contessa said despondently.

"You will."

Contessa Apparated outside the castle grounds the following morning, and Hagrid met her at the gates to escort her into the school. He greeted her with a bone-crushing pat on the back and an ear-splitting smile.

"Great ter have yeh with us, Tess." Hagrid beamed as they walked across the grounds towards the castle. Contessa's levitated luggage followed them in close convoy.

Contessa smiled back warmly. She'd always liked Hagrid.

"It's good to be here," she replied.

"I s'pose yeh know who they put in charge, then?" Hagrid whispered under his breath.

Contessa nodded grimly in response. And so her new role began in earnest.

"Figured yeh wouldn't be too pleased," Hagrid said with sympathy. "Not really who yeh'd've hoped for, is he?"

Contessa shook her head. "Not exactly."

As they neared the front door to the school, Hagrid stopped walking and turned to face Contessa. His serious expression was evident through his long, wild beard and bushy eyebrows.

"I 'ope he don't give yeh a hard time, what with yeh past and all."

Contessa smiled inwardly. "I'll be fine, Hagrid. I can take care of myself."

"Aye, that yeh can," he replied with a grin.

Inside the castle entrance they were met by Minerva McGonagall. Dressed in resplendent tartan, she appeared to be putting on a brave face in front of the other teachers. She stepped forward with a tight smile.

"Welcome back to Hogwarts, Tess. Horace is going to be delighted to see you," Minerva said as she shook Contessa's hand.

"And I, him," Contessa replied. "It's been a long time, actually."

Hagrid said his goodbye and departed for the gamekeeper's cottage.

Contessa followed Minerva down the stairs to the dungeon, her trunk in tow. As they reached the bottom steps, Contessa had a sneaking suspicion about what was to follow.

"You've been allocated Snape's old quarters in the dungeon," Minerva said stiffly, turning to face Contessa at the bottom of the stairs.

"Oh, you're kidding me," Contessa replied dubiously.

"I'm afraid not, dear. The decision was not made by me," Minerva said in a clipped voice. But then her expression seemed to soften. "However, it's logical for you to reside in close proximity to the Potions classroom."

Contessa swallowed Minerva's reasoning stoically, trying not to show her disapproval. The thought of living in the dark enclosure of the dungeons made her queasy; she craved daylight and natural open spaces. Contessa had loved her time in the Ravenclaw Tower with its beautiful panoramic views of the Great Lake and Highlands.

Minerva opened the door to Severus's old quarters, and they entered together, levitating Contessa's trunk onto the cold stone floor of the living area.

The house-elves had been into the quarters since Contessa had packed away Severus's belongings. The place was clean and tidy, but felt spartan and unwelcoming. Contessa was struck by the marked contrast between her pretty countryside cottage and the oppression of the dungeon. She realised, for the first time, how out of place Severus must have felt when he first arrived at Squirrel's Leap.

"I'm sure you'll fix it up in no time at all," Minerva said, with an attempt at cheerfulness.

Contessa smiled in return. Looking around the quarters, she suddenly felt the urge to leave the décor mostly as she found it. There was something freeing about Severus's uncluttered and minimalist approach. It seemed that living in these surroundings might help her empathise with Severus and give her insight into his character. In some ways it was an extension of her unconditional vow.

"I'll be fine here, Minerva. Thank you."

The women closed the door on Contessa's new quarters and walked down the corridor towards the Potions classroom.

"Horace arrived yesterday," Minerva explained. "I broke the news of your appointment to him this morning."

"How did he take it?" Contessa asked nervously.

"You're about to find out," Minerva said with a hint of mischief, turning the door handle, and leading Contessa into the classroom.

Contessa's heart leapt as she saw Horace Slughorn, adorned in flamboyant purple robes, standing over a steaming cauldron. He stirred carefully and muttered to himself under his breath as he worked.

As Contessa approached she could smell the unmistakable aroma of jasmine. Inquisitively, she approached the cauldron to get a better look at its contents.

Horace looked up to see his former pupil, muttered a charm to pause the potion's development, and flung his arms around Contessa.

"Tess, my dear girl!" he chuckled affectionately. "How splendid it is to see you again!"

Contessa laughed her greeting into his ear as he continued to hug her enthusiastically.

"It's lovely to see you too, Horace."

The Professor pulled back and held her at arm's length, studying her closely. "My, my, you're looking very well indeed," Horace said with a grin. "Beautiful as ever."

Contessa blushed a little and laughed in return. "You old charmer."

"Less of the old, if you don't mind," he said genially. "I'm thrilled to have you here with me couldn't believe my luck when Minerva told me this morning."

Minerva smiled kindly. "You have Albus to thank for that."

"Indeed I do, and what a gentleman he was," Horace said with a trace of sadness. "You and I will make a formidable team, Tess."

"I hope so," Contessa replied. "I'm so glad to be here with you after all you've done for me over the years."

Horace shrugged it off. "You were always destined to go far, my girl. Now, let's see if I can't train you up to replace me when I take my second retirement."

Contessa found that thought very amusing. She walked over to the bubbling cauldron and caught a whiff of fresh coffee and baking bread.

"Is this Amortentia?" Contessa asked eagerly.

"Yes, for my sixth years," Slughorn replied.

"I'll leave you to it, shall I?" Minerva said as she made her way to the door.

Horace and Contessa looked back at Minerva and smiled, settling down for a day's potion-making and reminiscing.

Wet Behind the Ears

Severus arrived at Hogwarts just after dusk and was met at the main gate by Argus Filch. The caretaker bowed deferentially and wished him good evening.

Mrs Norris appeared at Severus's feet, and her yellow orb-like eyes stared at him, reflecting eerily in the lamplight. The cat had learned long ago to keep her distance, discovering that straying too close to the Potions master would earn unwarranted contact with the leather of his booted foot.

Severus followed Filch up the path to the castle by the flickering light of the lamp, with Mrs Norris padding silently behind.

When they entered through the main door, Severus was not at all surprised to find there was no welcoming party. Filch had either neglected to tell the staff of his expected arrival time, or the teachers had simply decided not to show up. Either way, it served Severus's purposes well enough.

At the entrance to the Headmaster's office, Filch muttered the password 'Magic is Might' at the stone gargoyle. The wall slid open to reveal the moving spiral stone staircase within.

Severus stepped onto the stairway and gestured Filch to follow. Mrs Norris looked at them hopefully but Severus gave the cat a stern glance, making it clear she was not to follow. Together the two men ascended to the door of the Dumbledore's old office.

One hand on the brass doorknob, Severus paused for a moment, slightly queasy with anticipation.

As Severus had not planned on becoming Headmaster of Hogwarts, he couldn't help but wonder if he really had what it took to run the school. Coupled with memories of what had transpired between himself and Dumbledore in this very room, he felt nervous and apprehensive.

Filch shifted on his feet a few steps below him, waking Severus from his reverie. Bringing his thoughts quickly under control, Severus locked his uneasiness away. He took a deep breath as he turned the doorknob.

Inside, Dumbledore's office looked the same as always. The previous Headmaster's belongings still occupied the room; his assortment of silver instruments whirred and buzzed in the corner, and Fawkes' perch stood proud at the side of the desk.

The only difference was the addition of Dumbledore's portrait. The former Headmaster smiled back at Severus from his frame behind the desk. The other portraits smiled, bowed or nodded their welcome quietly.

Filch stood by the door with his hands behind his back, looking like a shabby old butler.

"Mr Filch, have the house-elves remove Professor Dumbledore's possessions by the morning," Severus said tightly.

"As you wish, Headmaster," Filch rasped.

"I shall be changing the password forthwith, and holding a meeting tomorrow morning for the staff. Are all the teachers in residence?"

"Professors Carrow are due to arrive later this evening. Everyone else is here," the caretaker said in a business-like manner.

"Very good. Thank you, Mr Filch, your co-operation is appreciated," Severus said in dismissal, expecting the old man to turn and leave. "Is there anything else?" Severus asked with a hint of impatience.

"I am to show you to your new quarters, Headmaster."

"My new quarters?" Severus said, taken off guard.

"The Headmaster's personal quarters are adjacent to this office. I have to show you inside before you can take up residence," Filch said, bemused.

Severus's stomach swooped in realisation. "I think I would prefer my old quarters in the dungeon," he said discordantly.

Filch started to look uncomfortable. "My apologies, Headmaster, but your old quarters have been allocated to Madam Marchbanks."

"On whose authorisation?"

"The Ministry of Magic, sir. It was expected you'd use the traditional Headmaster's rooms..." Filch's voice drifted off into awkward silence.

Severus swallowed his initial indignation and chastised himself for showing reluctance. Whilst he might not feel he deserved the Headmastership, it was essential he gave off an air of confidence and self-belief.

"Very well," Severus said curtly.

Filch led him up the stairs to the landing of the minstrel's gallery and slid a book entitled *Knitting with Kneazle-fur* by Harriet Harcup halfway off the shelf.

The bookcase slid to one side, revealing a solid oak door. Filch beckoned Severus to enter.

Once inside the Headmaster's quarters, Severus was relieved to see the house-elves had prepared the rooms and removed Dumbledore's old belongings.

The quarters were large in size and grand in decoration. The ceiling was very high indeed, and shimmering tapestries adorned the stone walls. Two large windows at the opposite end of the room were fitted with elaborate stained glass, with cosy window seats snuggling beneath.

On the wall opposite the door there was an imposing fireplace, with a gigantic mirror resting on the mantel. Its frame was golden, bejewelled with an ornamental fretwork of blue and green dragonflies.

A large rug of scarlet and gold, the colours of Fawkes' plumage, covered the centre of the floor. Two outsized antique sofas faced each other in the middle of the room in front of the fireplace.

An exuberant chandelier hung from the centre of the ceiling, refracting prisms around the room.

It really couldn't have been further from Severus's old dungeon quarters. Severus had never before lived in such a grand open space, and he felt incongruous merely standing within it.

Filch shuffled uneasily at the door to the quarters. "I'll have your trunk brought up immediately, Professor."

Severus nodded his thanks.

"Would you care for food, Headmaster? I can instruct the house-elves to bring supper."

"That will not be necessary, Mr Filch," Severus said.

"Very good, sir." Filch bowed, closing the door as he departed.

Severus stood for a while, taking in his new surroundings.

He seriously doubted he would ever feel hungry again.

The staff meeting the following morning proved uneventful.

Despite the general atmosphere of disdain from the majority of the staff, most seemed appeased by Severus's intention to uphold the traditional values and structure of the school.

Unsurprisingly, Filch was the most committed of all the staff. He clearly relished a new era of discipline at Hogwarts. However, if the two new teachers were given free reign, Severus suspected the caretaker would get more than he bargained for.

The introduction of the Carrows caused an expected ripple of discontent amongst the teachers. However, nobody spoke out, and it appeared the staff did in fact know what was good for them.

Severus noticed Contessa standing behind Filius Flitwick, her old Head of House. Horace Slughorn was also at her side. She threw Severus a scowl every time he made eye contact.

Severus was secretly pleased that she was entering into her role with such gusto. It was true that their shared history of animosity gave Contessa a useful veil to hide behind. No one would believe she was Severus's spy, given her past hatred of him. Contessa was the perfect mole.

Severus selected several members of staff to speak to personally after the meeting.

He met these people in the Headmaster's office, which had now been emptied of Dumbledore's belongings. Severus did not replace them with any of his own possessions; he felt enough of an impostor already.

The last member of staff to arrive was Contessa. Severus stood up from behind his desk to greet her, offering her a seat across the table.

Contessa sat down, looking around the office. She made eye contact with several portraits, before smiling at Dumbledore's frame behind Severus.

"I'd forgotten how beautiful this office was," she said as she relaxed into her chair.

Severus bristled at her obvious comfort in a room where he felt so distinctly out of place. "Yes, well, you spent enough time in it when you were a student."

Contessa recoiled in her seat. "That's a little unfair, Severus."

Severus looked at her pointedly. "You should call me Professor or Headmaster."

Contessa blinked, clearly stunned and surprised. Her brow furrowed. "You're serious?"

"It would be problematic if you slipped up in the presence of students or teachers," Severus replied. The rationale seemed obvious to him.

Contessa's eyebrows rose, and she bit back a retort. "Yes, Headmaster," she said mulishly.

There was a moment's silence as Severus wondered why she would object to using his formal title. As far as he was concerned, it would keep things neat and orderly, with less room for error.

Then, from a portrait to Severus's left, a woman's voice piped up. "Tess won't let you down, Severus. She is a Marchbanks, after all," said Magda McDougall, Hogwarts Headmistress from 1365 to 1371. The witch was short in stature, with a square jaw-line, and long dark brown hair falling in ringlets around her face.

From the opposite side of the office, Phineas Nigellus Black made a scoffing sound. "Good grief woman, this is only the beginning; Severus's spy is wet behind the ears! She'll never cope with the demands; she lacks the necessary cunning of a Slytherin!"

Magda's chin rose in indignation. Severus held up his hand to silence the portraits and noticed Contessa covering a smirk with her hand. He shot her an incisive look, silently demanding an explanation.

Contessa stifled a chuckle. "Magda is a distant relative, a Marchbanks by birth. Obviously I never knew her, but..."

Severus shook his head in disbelief. "You are related to a former Headmistress?"

Contessa nodded with amusement.

Severus rolled his eyes sardonically. He didn't know why he was surprised.

After a short pause, Severus said, "I have set up a two-way Floo connection between this office and my old dungeon quarters. I take it you have settled in?" His voice held a trace of bitterness.

"You could say that," she replied, sitting back in her seat, looking uncomfortable.

Severus was baffled by her change of composure. "I'd been hoping to retain them for my use, but the Ministry had other ideas."

Contessa's eyes narrowed. "It wasn't you who allocated me those quarters?"

"No."

"Oh," Contessa said, taken aback.

Severus hesitated briefly. "I'm rather out of place in the Headmaster's quarters; I shouldn't be there."

Contessa returned his gaze, her expression softening. "You feel you don't deserve them."

Severus nodded uncomfortably. "But I must keep up appearances."

He opened the desk drawer and pulled out a roll of parchment.

"This is a list of potion ingredients to be segregated and moved into my personal stores," said Severus, handing the parchment to Contessa.

Contessa perused the scroll, looking increasingly perplexed.

"Why?" she asked. "I'll need at least one of these ingredients per week!"

"You must come to me for authorisation to use them."

Contessa looked at him incredulously. "Every time?"

"Every time," Severus replied.

"But that's absurd; I'll be constantly knocking on your door!"

"Indeed. You now have a reason for visiting the Headmaster's office on a regular basis," Severus explained. "It will also show the others that I do not trust you."

Contessa made a noise of comprehension.

"You may wish to lead people to believe that I'm making your life very difficult," he suggested.

"Just like the old days?" Contessa asked wryly.

"Yes," Severus said with a smirk.

Contessa sighed. "Alright."

"What do you have to report?"

Contessa looked at him begrudgingly. "Most of the teachers believe you killed Dumbledore to impress He Who Must Not Be Named and to take the Headmastership. However, they also realise they need to conform a little in order to keep their jobs. Their main reason for being here is to protect the students from you and the Carrows."

The irony in the latter sentence was not missed by Severus. "Will they play along?"

"For now. McGonagall is still fuming, but she's keeping a lid on it at the moment."

"Good," Severus said, relieved. He stood and walked to the door with Contessa.

Behind them, Magda McDougall gloated loudly, "See, I told you, Phineas! Ravenclaws always rise to the occasion!"

Phineas Nigellus Black sneered as Contessa left the room.

Sword of Gryffindor

Contessa's first two weeks in her new job passed by fairly uneventfully.

The teachers at Hogwarts were playing largely by the rules, with occasional mutterings whilst the Carrows were not around.

Although she hadn't spent much time with the students so far, she had bumped into Augusta Longbottom's grandson, who seemed pleased to see her again. Contessa had also nodded a hello to Ginny Weasley across the Great Hall a couple of times, but she didn't know Arthur's younger children particularly well.

Severus remained distant. She had only seen him briefly on a handful of occasions. As she had little to report, and he was busy establishing himself as Headmaster, Contessa had looked to others for company and friendship.

Horace Slughorn had been helpful in introducing her to the teachers she did not know already, and Aurora Sinistra had joined her atop the Astronomy Tower for stargazing on cloudless evenings.

Contessa had the distinct impression that Horace would not be reforming the Slug Club. She didn't understand exactly why but had ascertained it was something to do with a problem in the previous academic year.

The word in the corridors was that the Carrows had vastly altered the curriculum for Muggle Studies and Defence Against the Dark Arts. It seemed some students had already started to rebel. Contessa suspected the ringleaders would be members of Dumbledore's Army, and she fervently hoped that Neville would keep his nose clean.

At the beginning of the third week of term, Contessa was in the Potions office in the dungeons, marking homework for Slughorn's fourth years. It was early evening and beginning to get dark outside.

A brisk knock on the door caused Contessa to jump.

"Come in," she called loudly.

The office door opened to reveal Neville Longbottom, looking rather awkward and nervous. His eyes searched the room for other inhabitants. Upon seeing they were alone, he made eye contact again.

"Good evening, Neville. How nice to see you."

Neville gave a shaky smile but continued to stand at the doorway uncertainly.

"Please, do come in," Contessa said warmly.

A flash of red hair appeared at the door, and an arm extended to push Neville firmly into the room, closing the door behind him.

"How are you?" Contessa asked, pretending not to notice and offering him a seat.

"Fine, thanks," Neville said tightly. "Can't stop, though."

"What can I do for you?"

Neville shifted on the spot. "I'm in trouble, Madam Marchbanks. I got detention from the Carrows. I'm supposed to be at the Headmaster's office, but I, err... forgot the password."

"Oh, I see," Contessa said understandingly. Neville's memory had never been particularly good.

"Can you tell me what it is? Only, I'll be in worse trouble from Snape."

"Professor Snape, Neville."

"Yeah, right, sorry... Professor Snape," Neville said begrudgingly.

"The password is Hellebore."

"Right, thanks," Neville said hastily. He bolted for the door.

Contessa watched as Neville left the room and saw the same flash of red hair. Her curiosity was piqued.

Walking to the door and peering out into the corridor, she saw Ginny Weasley hurrying towards the stairs with Neville in pursuit. They ran up the steps out of the dungeon together.

Perplexed by what had transpired, Contessa wondered if Ginny also had reason to see the Headmaster. It was strange that both of them had forgotten the password.

As she watched them climb the stairs, she saw Alecto Carrow coming down the stairs, looking suspiciously at Neville and Ginny. The squat and stocky witch saw Contessa at her doorway, and shot her an almost identical wary look.

Contessa waited until Alecto had disappeared out of sight, before casting a Disillusionment Charm and heading up the stairs out of the dungeons.

Panting a little at the top of the stairs, she caught a glimpse of Ginny's red hair as the girl rounded the corner leading to the Headmaster's office.

Contessa ran to follow them, narrowly avoiding stepping on Mrs Norris, who spat at her as she passed. Cats were very good at picking up concealed witches and wizards, and the caretaker's pet was no exception.

Luckily the cat did not follow, and she soon closed the distance on her quarry. Shrouded invisibly, Contessa watched Ginny and Neville reach their destination, meeting Luna Lovegood outside Severus's office. The blonde girl appeared to be keeping watch.

Lurking in the shadows, Contessa crept silently towards them, hearing their discussion of the fact that Snape was still inside his office.

The three students decided to position themselves behind the suits of armour outside the entrance.

Within a few minutes, Severus appeared at the sliding stone door and walked briskly away, the door snapping shut behind him.

Contessa stifled a groan. The trio were poised to perform mutiny.

Feeling torn about whether or not to intervene, she watched as the three members of Dumbledore's Army extricated themselves from their hiding places and uttered the password to the Headmaster's office.

The stone gargoyle dipped its head in acceptance and the door slid open once more.

Contessa watched Neville, Ginny and Luna ascend the stairs with their wands at the ready.

Her decision made, Contessa ran back down the corridor, tearing past the occasional member of staff and student, trying to catch up with Severus.

Eventually, she found him on his way to the staff room, and tugged forcefully on his arm.

Severus jerked, pulled out his wand, and looked around cautiously. Contessa realised with a jolt that she was still under the Disillusionment Charm.

"Severus, it's me!" she whispered.

Severus's eyebrows rose in surprise, then he looked guardedly around the corridor.

"In here," he said quietly, nodding towards the door on the left.

Inside the classroom, Contessa lifted the Disillusionment Charm. She was surprised to see Severus glaring at her.

"You should call me Headmaster," Severus said waspishly.

"For goodness sake, Severus, there's no time for that nonsense!" Contessa exclaimed breathlessly. "It's Neville, Ginny and Luna! They've broken into your office..."

Severus looked at her sharply, opened the door and disappeared down the hallway, leaving her alone in the classroom.

Contessa returned to the Potions office, not knowing what else to do. She was concerned about the three students in the Headmaster's office and annoyed with Severus for chastising her. She was only trying to help him, but the urgency of the situation had caused his first name to slip from her tongue. Contessa couldn't see the point of semantics when it got in the way of doing her job.

A quarter of an hour later, the door to the office was forced open by Amycus Carrow.

He walked lazily into the room, followed by his sister Alecto, and the door closed quietly behind them. Amycus stood over Contessa's desk, and his lopsided leer sent a chill down Contessa's spine.

"Professors Carrow, how may I help you?" Contessa said, with as much politeness as she could muster.

"Yeh can start by answerin' some questions," Amycus said nastily.

Contessa's danger sense prickled on the back of her neck; the Carrows didn't know she was the Headmaster's spy.

"Go ahead, I have nothing to hide," Contessa said, instantly regretting the implication that she might entertain hiding something. She was going to have to get better at her double agent role, and quickly.

"Did yeh give Neville Longbottom the password to Snape's office?" Amycus drawled. His piggy eyes watched her closely.

Contessa's stomach swooped to the floor. "What is this about?"

"Ha! As if you don't know!" Alecto pushed in front of her brother, her voice a hiss of delight.

Contessa shook her head to convey her confusion.

Amycus leaned towards Contessa for emphasis. "Let me spell it out to yeh then, Madam Marchbanks." The inflection on the title of Madam was said with the utmost disdain. "Longbottom, Weasley and Lovegood have just bin caught breakin' in to the Headmaster's office, attemptin' to steal the sword of Gryffindor."

Contessa's breath caught in her throat. "You're kidding," she said, with a genuine hint of incredulity.

"Why would we make a joke about this?" Alecto sneered. "Answer the question. Did yeh give Longbottom the password?"

Contessa paused. Her answer would have to be truthful. "I did."

"See!" spat Alecto. "I told yeh she was in on it!"

"Now wait just a minute, I had nothing to do with the attempted robbery! Neville told me you had sent him to Professor Snape, and he had forgotten the password," Contessa said with impatience.

"A likely story," Alecto leered.

"It's the truth," Contessa said stoically.

"We'll see about that," Alecto said with relish, raising her wand at Contessa.

"Don't even think about hurting me; you have no authority over me," Contessa said calmly, rising to her feet. Inwardly she cringed, fearing what was about to come.

"Oh, I wasn't plannin' on using *Crucio* on you just yet," Alecto said dangerously. The stocky witch gestured towards Amycus.

In an instant, Amycus was at Contessa's back, gripping her arms forcefully behind her. Contessa's heart leapt to her throat. Panicking, she grasped her hand and closed her eyes, praying that Severus still wore the Tiger's Eye ring around his neck. The ring went cold on her little finger.

After a few moments, his sister spat, "Look at me, Marchbanks!"

Contessa opened her eyes, hoping against hope that Severus had felt the ring go cool and would know what to do.

Contessa's gaze met the bulging eyes of the Death Eater in front of her with as much resilience as she could summon. The squat witch raised her wand, pointing it directly at Contessa.

"*Legilimens!*"

Contessa felt the insidious presence of Alecto Carrow ripping through her memories.

The witch was obviously unskilled in Legilimency; her aim was untrained. Contessa pushed the memory of the conversation with Neville to the front of her mind, repeating the scene over and over until she was sure the Death Eater had seen it.

With the force of a whip, Alecto withdrew from her mind, leaving Contessa reeling. The inquisition of an inadequate Legilimens left her head pounding ferociously.

"Well?" asked Amycus impatiently.

"I saw her conversation with Longbottom. She seems to be tellin' the truth," Alecto said resentfully.

Amycus loosened his grip. As he did so, Contessa felt the ring on her little finger turn cool once more. Severus had found her.

"Wait, there's somethin' else that don't make sense," Alecto said slowly.

The grip on Contessa's arms tightened. She started to panic again, not knowing how quickly Severus would arrive in the dungeons.

"She's hidin' somethin', I'm sure of it," Alecto said with conviction.

"What do yeh mean?" Amycus asked his sister.

"There's somethin' suspicious about this woman. Why's she here? How come she's been allowed to take up her post with her history in the Order? It don't make sense."

Contessa felt a block of ice land heavily in her stomach. She only had a moment to decide what to do. Alecto raised her wand again.

"*Legilimens!*"

The Death Eater tore into Contessa's mind once again, with the presence of a bull in a china shop. Pain crackled through her head as the clumsy Legilimens rifled through her memories, searching for a clue.

Contessa forced herself to calm down and relive a memory: the one given to her months ago, in anticipation of the Dark Lord's inquisition. In order for Alecto to see the memory properly, Contessa would have to submit to the false memory completely, and experience it in slow motion, in the hope that the inept Death Eater would comprehend it...

Standing in the living room at Squirrel's Leap, Severus's pincer-like grip wrapped itself around her arm, forcing her to face him. Her body collided with his, but he did not release her.

"Let go of me!" she demanded, struggling in his arms.

"It will be better for you if you do not fight," Severus said softly, his voice almost a purr. Contessa felt herself shiver inside her own memory.

As her body relaxed into its fate, Contessa felt the air around them take on a prickle of electricity.

Severus inclined his head, very slowly, towards hers. Contessa could feel his warm breath on her lips as she looked into his deep, dark eyes. She noticed the tenderness held within, and a sense of longing, for the very first time. She held her breath, just as before, but this time with a flurry of butterflies in her stomach.

His nose almost touched hers as he turned, his long hair brushing against her cheek sensuously. Contessa felt a quiver descend her spine.

"Close your eyes," Severus said in a sultry voice.

Contessa responded, not because it was an instruction, but because she was succumbing to the seduction, seeing and feeling it in a totally different way.

Severus's breath was warm on her neck for a few moments, and then gone. With a shudder, Contessa realised the memory needed to end, and she reluctantly released herself from its thrall.

The Potions office came into view again as the Death Eater withdrew from her mind. Contessa's head felt as though it had been tightened in a vice, and throbbed sickeningly.

The short, dumpy figure of Alecto Carrow laughed salaciously.

"Well, I never would've guessed," she drawled.

"Guessed what?" said Amycus gruffly, still holding Contessa's arms tightly behind her.

At that moment, the door to the office flung open. Contessa looked past Alecto, to see Severus striding into the room purposefully. Locking eyes with Contessa, he quickly assessed the situation, and Contessa's insides swam with relief.

Alecto turned to face him with a grin on her face. "Snape, you old dog!"

Severus looked back at the woman with an air of intolerance. "I beg your pardon?"

Alecto laughed, but stopped when she saw the look on Severus's face. "Good on yeh, Snape, that's what I say," she said with a wheezy giggle. "Headmaster's privilege and all."

Contessa watched his expression change, and he looked back at Contessa for verification. She nodded slightly in return. Severus blinked.

"Release her, Amycus," Severus instructed.

Contessa felt him let go of her arms, and she walked away, as calmly as possible, towards the door.

"What's goin' on?" Amycus asked Alecto.

"Snape's got himself a concubine, Amycus," she said, looking Contessa up and down with enjoyment.

Contessa felt nausea in response to the woman's supposition, mixed with unfamiliar warmth towards Severus.

When Severus looked back at Contessa to see her reaction, she felt a desire that had not been there before. Blushing in bewilderment, she looked away from him, fervently wishing she could leave.

"Marchbanks is more than that, Alecto. She is also a spy," Severus said coldly.

As she heard Severus explain, Contessa felt a ripple of consternation. She hadn't felt like a concubine when she relived that memory. Contessa had felt something altogether different: unmistakable attraction.

Now, looking at the imposing bat-like profile of the Headmaster, Contessa was overcome with confusion and alarm. What in Merlin's name was happening to her?

Severus must have picked up on her discomfort. He turned to her and said succinctly, "Go to my office and await my return."

Contessa bowed to him, fighting back conflicting instincts. Leaving the office, she sprinted up the stairs, her heart pounding in her chest.

She did not go to the Headmaster's office. Instead Contessa continued to run up several flights of stairs until she reached the highest point in the castle. Queasy with exertion, she flung herself through the door to the Astronomy Tower.

Bracing herself against the chill, she stepped out into the night, hoping the fresh air would give her some clarity and perspective.

Contessa could still sense Severus's warm breath on her neck.

She was haunted by his bottomless eyes moving in close, his lips close enough to kiss.

The memory refused to be ignored.

Its persistence took Contessa completely by surprise.

She found herself wanting the memory to be extended. She yearned to see it end differently and to have the chance to be in that situation once more.

But, at the same time, Contessa knew she could not risk a romantic relationship with this man; there was too much at stake.

As she moved towards the edge of the ramparts, the cold wind whipped around her, freezing her hands and face.

Lost in memory, she contemplated the dark and murky depths of the drop beneath her.

The Astronomy Tower

When Severus returned to the Headmaster's office, he found it was empty. Gryffindor's sword lay across his desk where he had left it, and there was no sign of Contessa having returned as requested.

Severus looked around the room at the Headteachers' portraits, hoping one of them could offer an explanation, but they all peered back at him quizzically. He turned to Dumbledore's portrait and met his piercing blue eyes with a sense of disquiet.

"Contessa was supposed to meet me here," Severus muttered.

Phineas Nigellus Black offered his inference immediately. "I knew she couldn't be trusted."

"Oh, do be quiet, Phineas," Magda McDougall cut in.

Phineas scoffed audibly.

Severus held up his hand intolerantly, and the portraits fell silent.

"What happened?" Dumbledore asked.

"The Carrows found out she gave Neville the password to the office," Severus replied.

Phineas apparently couldn't contain his glee. "I told you so!"

Severus turned to face the former Slytherin Headmaster, feeling his patience wearing thin. "Contessa was tricked into supplying the password," he said; the tone of his voice did not invite further criticism. "The Carrows now know she is my spy. They also believe her to be my paramour."

"What?" spat Magda. "That's ridiculous!"

Severus prickled with indignation. The former Headmistress's implied opinion of his unsuitability reopened an old wound. If others believed it impossible for him to be Contessa's lover, they must view him as undesirable and reprehensible; a man unworthy of affection. It was not the first time such a judgment had been cast.

However, he and Contessa would now need to keep up appearances in front of the Carrows, regardless of the charade's plausibility. Inwardly, he hoped she would be an

adequate actress for the role.

Severus knew he could find enough qualities in the woman to play his part in the pretence. Contessa was a talented witch, intelligent, spirited and lively. In some ways she reminded him of somebody else.

But Contessa was not Lily. Severus would not allow himself to feel attracted to another woman; that would be a betrayal. It was important, now more than ever, to remain focused on the job at hand. He must do everything in his power to protect Potter and bring down the Dark Lord. He owed it to himself, and to Lily.

Shutting down his bitterness and resentment towards Magda and her judgment of him, Severus reminded himself of the vow Contessa had taken. Although her loyalty had been acquired by coercion, he at least knew he could trust her. She had taken an oath guaranteeing it.

Severus turned to face Magda McDougall with a look of tested patience. "As ridiculous as it may seem, the masquerade is necessary to protect Contessa from the Carrows."

Magda opened her mouth and promptly closed it again, appearing to have thought twice about her response. Her portrait sniffed slightly.

Severus continued, addressing all of the Headteacher portraits. "Alecto and Amycus have agreed to keep the knowledge of our relationship secret so that Contessa may continue to spy on the teaching staff."

That seemed to silence the remaining dissent, and Severus turned to face Dumbledore again. "Did she return here at all?"

"No," Dumbledore replied with concern.

Severus looked around the office fretfully, trying to work out where Contessa could have gone, and why.

Clenching his hands at his sides, he felt the unfamiliar presence of metal against his little finger. Severus looked at the Tiger's Eye ring on his hand. He had forgotten to take it off in his haste to respond to Contessa's cry for help.

Reaching out, Severus grasped his hand and closed his eyes. The ring turned cold on his finger, and his vision turned to one of darkness. He could feel the wind ripping around him, freezing his body.

Looking through Contessa's eyes, he could make out the shadowy depths of the long drop from the ramparts of the Astronomy Tower.

Severus's stomach swooped with fear. Opening his eyes, he walked briskly across the room and picked up his heavy travelling cloak. He flung the garment around his shoulders and ran out of the office and down the stairs.

As Severus climbed the spiral staircase to the top of the Astronomy Tower, he felt an increasing sense of foreboding.

Upon entering the chambers at the top of the tower, he realised this was the first time he had been back to this part of the castle since the fateful battle at the end of June. Back then, Severus had pushed his way past the fighting, and ascended the final flight of stairs to find Dumbledore on the other side of the door, pleading for his help.

After that night everything changed. Severus lost the one person he had trusted and the one person who believed in him.

Severus had since avoided returning to the Astronomy Tower. He needed no reminder of the events which had taken place there; he had relived the scene many times in his frequent nightmares.

Reaching the top of the stairway, Severus felt sick with anxiety and trepidation. He wished Contessa had not chosen here, of all places, to run to.

His hand rested on the door handle for a moment as he willed himself to open it, forcing him to confront the demons of the past. He was not accustomed to meeting these things head-on, preferring to block such unwanted memories.

Gritting his teeth and stamping down hard on his emotions, Severus flung the door open and stepped into the cold night air. As he passed through the doorway, his memory replayed the single flash of green light and Dumbledore's limp, rag-doll body being thrown over the edge of the tower.

Ground to the spot, Severus found he was unable to move, frozen in time.

As his vision refocused, he saw Contessa standing next to the ramparts at the opposite end. She looked back at him fearfully, her eyes drawn to the light at the doorway. Severus bolstered himself and closed the door, plunging them into the darkness of the wind-swept tower.

Severus and Contessa spent a long moment looking at each other from across the ramparts. She seemed to be shaken and unsure, shivering violently in the biting wind. Severus wondered what her reasons were for coming up here, so obviously unprepared for the conditions. Her eyes were wide, and she had the appearance of a startled deer.

Realising he was going to have to cross the tower, Severus bit down and clenched his jaw, then started to walk towards her trembling form.

Contessa began to back away. Severus increased his pace, feeling a wave of concern; she was moving dangerously close to the edge of the wall.

When Severus reached her, he removed his cloak and wrapped it forcefully around Contessa, simultaneously pulling her away from the ramparts and the long drop below.

"Come inside," he instructed her calmly.

Contessa shook her head, shivering as she grabbed the cloak and pulled it tightly around her body.

The length of the material drowned her petite frame, causing her to appear much younger and very afraid.

"What's the matter?" Severus asked.

Contessa looked at him briefly and then turned to face the night sky.

"What happened?" Severus persisted. "Did they hurt you?"

She shook her head quickly. "No," she said miserably.

Silence followed. Contessa's eyes traced the constellations partially visible in the cloudy skies.

Gathering herself up, Contessa turned to face him. "Alecto performed Legilimency on me," she said shakily. "I had to show her that memory you gave me at Squirrel's Leap... I had to relive all the detail, so she could grasp it."

Severus nodded, pleased that Contessa had been quick-witted and skilful enough for Alecto to fully comprehend the memory.

He waited for Contessa to continue, and her eyes searched his for a moment. She flinched and looked away. "The memory has spooked me a bit."

Severus felt a hard pit forming in his chest as he contemplated the implications. It seemed Contessa found him every bit as repugnant as Magda had suggested. He watched Contessa's face closely for confirmation, and saw embarrassment playing out on her features.

It was a stinging rebuff, and one he had experienced before. Severus tightened up his internal defences in response. They would have to play along together, no matter how they felt about it.

"The Carrows fell for the fallacious relationship, and believe we are lovers," Severus said, his voice was uncharacteristically hoarse.

Contessa's brow furrowed and tears formed fleetingly in her eyes. "Did I do the right thing, showing her that memory?"

"I believe so," Severus replied. "Now, at the very least, they should leave you alone."

Severus wondered if Contessa's angst had been about her decision to show the Carrows the false memory.

"What happened to the sword of Gryffindor?" Contessa asked.

"It is safe inside my office. However, we shall need that replica sooner than planned."

Contessa seemed to regain some of her composure. "I'm sure Gran can get the copy of the sword delivered earlier than scheduled."

"I shall ask Dumbledore to converse with Griselda to arrange it," Severus said. "I don't want to give Dumbledore's Army any further cause to break in to my office."

Severus watched her for a moment, noticing her lack of eye contact and uneasy demeanour. Evidently she felt uncomfortable with the new situation they found themselves in.

He held his arm out, silently inviting her to leave the tower for the warmth of the castle inside.

Hesitantly, Contessa stepped in front of him and set off towards the door, trying not to trip up over his long black cloak.

Just an Illusion

Contessa spent the following day in turmoil.

She found herself distracted by her conflicting feelings, and her concentration had been broken so many times that she had abandoned her first two attempts at making Deflating Draught for Horace Slughorn's Potions class. Contessa had drifted off several times, and forgotten to add the necessary ingredients or had not stirred the cauldron at the specified intervals.

The false memory from Squirrel's Leap continued to haunt her, and she frequently slipped into daydreams, fantasising that the seduction was real.

The events on the Astronomy Tower also replayed in her mind. Contessa had not intended for Severus to locate her whereabouts, but in her haste to escape from the dungeon, she had forgotten about the ring she wore. The icy night wind had frozen her hands, numbing all sensation, so she had not felt the ring turn cold on her finger.

And so, Severus had found her. He had come to her immediately, but his reticence at the doorway to the tower seemed to suggest he had not known what to do. Contessa knew he was unaccustomed to acts of kindness, but she could still feel his hands holding her firmly as he wrapped his cloak around her, pulling her away from the parapets.

She had hoped this gesture was one of affection, but when she looked into his cold, dark eyes, it was plain to see her feelings for him were not returned. Worse than that, Contessa thought she had read distaste in his features.

Contessa felt certain that the attraction was completely one-sided. As such, she had no idea what she was going to do or say when she next saw Severus.

She was due to hand in her weekly potions requisition, and Contessa found herself making excuses not to go to the Headmaster's office; the awkwardness of the situation was impossible. She feared being in the same room as Severus, but also experienced a strong desire to see him again. The two things simply did not fit together.

Later that afternoon, Contessa found a note pushed under the door to her quarters. She let herself in to the gloomy room and lit the candles with *lumos* Charm.

Contessa settled down on the dark green leather of the Chesterfield sofa, pausing as she looked around at Severus's former quarters. Since moving in, she had not changed them much, and the room had retained its cold and formal air.

The stone walls had a greenish hue, as though lichen grew on them, although there were no such organisms present in the rock. As a result, the walls seemed to glow when candlelight reflected upon them. Contessa found the luminescent effect strangely comforting.

A large fireplace dominated the room, conspicuous in size, with an iron grate which had been bewitched with a Replenishment Charm. Contessa realised that she never needed to add wood to the fire, and on one night when she had fallen asleep on the sofa, she had awoken in the middle of the night with the fire still burning, keeping her warm in her slumber.

The furniture in Severus's quarters was comfortable and functional but lacking in flair or design. There was an air of practicality about the quarters but it also had a feel of solace and security.

Contessa always felt she was completely alone in the rooms, undisturbed and peaceful. She was unsure why, as the quarters were nothing like her countryside cottage. It was a surprise to her that she had settled into the dungeon quarters with such ease.

Looking down at the parchment envelope in her hands, she flipped it over to see the Headmaster's stamp embossed in a red wax seal.

Simultaneously, her heart leapt to her throat, and her stomach dropped to the floor.

Madam Marchbanks,

I request your attendance at the Headmaster's

office at 9 o'clock this evening. Please prepare

your weekly potions requisition in advance.

Professor Snape

Contessa pushed herself to go to the Great Hall for dinner that evening but found that her appetite had vanished.

She spent most of her time avoiding eye contact with Severus and spent the meal deflecting comments from Poppy Pomfrey, who was concerned that Contessa looked

'peaky' and clearly wasn't eating enough.

By the time nine o'clock arrived, Contessa was sitting in her quarters again, seriously considering running for the hills.

Ten minutes passed in silence as she sat fidgeting fretfully with her wand. So far, she had produced a flock of canaries which fluttered around the room, singing loudly and performing acrobatics from the candle-lit chandelier. With a snap another canary popped into existence and hopped onto the arm of the sofa, scrutinizing the agitated witch warily.

Contessa wondered vaguely if she could get away with not responding to the invitation, but she doubted it. Severus was not the sort of man who tolerated disobedience.

Bracing herself, Contessa got up and prepared to leave, but at that moment the fire in the hearth turned green. With a crackle of flame and hiss of ash, Severus stepped out of her fireplace and into the quarters.

Contessa took a step back, and the canaries vanished with a pop.

Severus towered before her, his bat-like form bearing down on her, silencing her thoughts. His features were, as ever, inscrutable.

Contessa swallowed nervously and stood straighter in an attempt to redress the balance. Severus surveyed her with a familiar look of disdain.

"You are late," he said curtly.

Contessa felt a nauseating mixture of old contempt for her old Potions master and an inexplicable attraction to his form and presence. She reacted by taking another step back, swaying slightly.

"I'm sorry," she replied uncertainly. "I was... delayed."

Severus's eyebrows arched in response. "So, I see," he said, glancing around the empty room, and looking pointedly at the yellow canary feathers landing softly on the rug-covered floor.

Contessa cleared her throat, squirming at the absurdity of the situation. She was going to have to pull herself together, and fast.

Severus held his hand out to her, commanding her to join him next to the fireplace. Contessa placed her hand in his and he led her through the Floo connection and into the Headmaster's office.

The Headteachers' portraits all turned around to look at the unlikely pair as they arrived. Many of the portraits bore looks of mild amusement. Dumbledore, however, appeared solemn and concerned. He nodded towards Contessa as she took the seat opposite the Headmaster's desk.

Severus sat down on the other side and contemplated Contessa austerely. She wished the ground would open up and swallow her as a giddy mixture of power and attraction crashed over her like a wave. Befuddled, she remained speechless.

"We find ourselves in a delicate situation," Severus began formally, and Contessa noticed him twitch with discomfort.

A leaden weight landed hard in her stomach as Contessa interpreted his discomfort as aversion. It seemed clear he did not return her feelings. The realisation rendered her unable to speak.

"We now have an appearance to maintain in front of the Carrows," Severus continued.

Contessa's mouth turned dry in response, horrified at the possibilities which might now be expected of her.

Severus looked at her, clearly hoping she would speak and ease some of his misery, but Contessa had frozen, unable to offer him any relief from the difficult and embarrassing conversation ahead.

Her thoughts spiralled at the many varied ways they could keep up the pretence of a relationship for the sake of appearances. She wasn't sure she was capable of pretending, whilst all the while harbouring unrequited feelings for Severus.

He watched her closely with a strained expression, but Severus's unease was nothing compared to how Contessa was feeling.

Severus cleared his throat awkwardly. "I propose we meet twice a week for supper in my quarters," he said tensely. "You can give me your report on the teaching staff at this time." Severus paused and sat back in his seat, apparently wishing he was somewhere else. "The Carrows will be aware of this arrangement and have been sworn to secrecy about our... relationship."

Contessa relaxed somewhat, relieved she would not be required to be physically demonstrative in front of the Carrows. Their relationship would be just an illusion. "That seems acceptable," she croaked, her mouth still dry.

Severus exhaled, releasing some of his tension. The conversation had obviously pained him, although for wholly different reasons. Contessa wondered fleetingly if she would be expected to use the formal title of Headmaster whilst alone with Severus in his quarters. The thought made her shudder.

Contessa cleared her throat and straightened in her chair. "What news of the replica sword of Gryffindor?" she asked, changing the subject in an attempt to reclaim normality.

Dumbledore cut into the conversation, causing Contessa to jump slightly. She had almost forgotten that they were being overheard.

"Griselda informs me she will have the sword finished to an acceptable standard and delivered to Hogwarts tomorrow. The replica won't be perfect but should be sufficient," the former Headmaster said.

Severus then addressed Contessa. "I shall ask the Carrows to deliver the fake sword to Gringotts in the belief that it is the original sword. It will be done during daylight hours in front of witnesses. It would be helpful if you could ensure that Dumbledore's Army believes that the sword of Gryffindor no longer resides in the Headmaster's office. It should prevent further attempts at robbery."

"Certainly," Contessa replied. "I'll tell Neville when the sword has been removed from the school. Has he been told of his punishment?"

"He and the others will be assisting Hagrid in the Forbidden Forest for the next week. The punishment is one of Dumbledore's old favourites for the most severe incursions and should send out a strong message to the other students."

Contessa nodded, feeling relieved that she herself had never warranted such a detention in her time at Hogwarts. She had obviously not misbehaved as much as she had thought.

"Is that all for now?" she asked steadily, hoping she could leave the office and the confusing emotions it had roused in her.

"There is just the small matter of your potions requisition, and then you may leave," Severus said huskily.

"Oh, of course," Contessa said, scrabbling inside her robes for the small roll of parchment. She held it out to him, and he took it from her, quickly signing the list without

looking at it, and handing it back to her promptly.

"Thank you, Headmaster," she said, feeling self-conscious as she rolled the parchment up and tucked it away.

Severus stood up and escorted her back to the fireplace.

"Good night," he said decorously, as they glanced at each other in front of the crackling fire.

Contessa nodded and stepped through the Floo connection without another word.

Author's note: *Asphodelus albus* is the Latin name for the white asphodel lily.

Eight

Chapter 8 of 14

Albus Dumbledore had a plan to protect Severus Snape after the fateful night on the Astronomy Tower. During his final year as Headmaster, Snape has a chance to come to terms with his past and find peace, before his life draws to its inevitable close. Canon-compliant. TPP Featured Story May/June 2010.

Strange Glue

"When faced with my demons

I clothe them and feed them

And I smile, yes I smile

As they're taking me over"

'Strange Glue', Catatonia

The replica sword arrived at Hogwarts late the next night, under an autumnal cover of darkness.

Severus hid the original sword of Gryffindor in a compartment behind Dumbledore's portrait and handed the duplicate sword over to the Carrows. They made a public display of taking the sword away from Hogwarts, and Severus informed the teaching staff of its removal. With Contessa's whispers into the ears of the students, Severus felt convinced that another attempt at theft was unlikely.

Longbottom, Weasley and Lovegood commenced their detentions in the Forbidden Forest, and Severus hoped the message had been heard, loud and clear, by all the students of Hogwarts. He feared the consequences if he was unable to control the school. The Dark Lord expected him to deliver his promise, but Severus did not want the students of Hogwarts to suffer unduly.

Severus and Contessa met for supper on Tuesday and Friday evenings, and he noticed she had become increasingly temperamental. Contessa seemed uncomfortable and tense in his presence, rarely making eye contact. Severus didn't know what to make of it, but he presumed she was finding the transition to double-agent both taxing and confusing. He made a mental note to offer his guidance the next time he saw her on the Tuesday night.

Autumn was well underway, the October days bright and sunny, nights drawing in with the first signs of frost. Before the sun had properly risen on the Tuesday morning, Filch came bursting into the Headmaster's office, seething with rage.

The caretaker escorted Severus to the corridor outside the Great Hall.

Boldly emblazoned across the wall of the passageway was the message "Dumbledore's Army still recruiting". The graffiti was imprinted with several protective charms and hexes, which made its removal time-consuming and arduous.

Severus was furious with the audacity and ingenuity of the DA, and he and the other teachers were still struggling to remove the writing from the wall when a group of early-bird students arrived for breakfast. Severus sent them back to their Houses and ordered the house-elves to serve breakfast in the students' quarters in an attempt to control the number of people seeing the message daubed outside the Great Hall.

Later that day he held a staff meeting, informing the teachers their night-time rounds would become more frequent in order to prevent students sneaking out of their rooms at night. Severus also reinstated Umbridge's old decree forbidding gatherings of three or more people and banning unofficial student societies.

Severus regretted having to make this pronouncement. He had no respect for Dolores Umbridge or her methods, and he did not wish to follow in her footsteps. However, he felt it was the only way to curb the activities of the DA and dissuade those students who might be tempted to join the mutineers.

That evening Severus attended dinner in the Great Hall and found the atmosphere subdued. Many teachers point-blank ignored him and more students than normal scowled disdainfully as he walked by.

None of this bothered Severus. He had known from the outset he would not be a popular Headmaster. The only thing that troubled him was Contessa's reaction.

She had scowled fervently at him during the staff meeting and cut him dead when she passed him in the corridor, her face strained and flushed. Tonight, in the Great Hall, she steadfastly refused to meet his gaze. Severus could not understand her reaction, unless it was merely a façade to throw people off the scent.

Contessa arrived in the Headmaster's office by Floo Powder later that evening and, judging by the look on her face, it seemed the last place she wanted to be. Severus arose from behind his desk and met her at the fireplace. She returned his gaze warily.

"Good evening, Contessa," said Severus, his voice constricted and tight.

Contessa made eye contact, and her face contorted with suppressed emotions. "If I am to call you Headmaster, I prefer to be addressed as Madam Marchbanks," she said

frostily, "if you don't mind, sir."

Severus recoiled from her hostility and took a step backwards. He could not understand why she was still having difficulty using his proper title, unless she was being deliberately insubordinate. In the space of a heartbeat, he recovered his composure and surveyed the Potions Assistant with a sneer.

"Since I am Headmaster, I shall call you whatever I like."

Contessa's eyes narrowed into slits, and she looked away with exasperation, sighing heavily. "Do we have to do this tonight?"

Nonplussed, Severus paused for a moment. "What do you mean?"

Contessa's gaze held a silent plea, leaving Severus even more confused. He raised his eyebrows haughtily to cover his lack of comprehension.

"Is all this really necessary?" she asked irritably. "My coming here for supper but not being allowed to call you Severus... It seems absurd."

"It is necessary now more than ever," Severus replied, without fully grasping her point. "I need the information you can provide to help me maintain control of Hogwarts. I cannot allow Dumbledore's Army to resurface under my nose the Dark Lord will believe me incompetent and replace me."

Contessa rolled her eyes slightly and seemed to swallow something back. Her shoulders hunched in submission.

With a jolt, Severus construed her reaction as a refusal of his company. He felt a momentary pang of rejection. His companionship had been spurned before; it was a familiar feeling. However, Severus knew he could survive the consequences. He had become accustomed to living in this manner for his entire adult life; there was no difference in this situation.

Firmly squashing any need for closeness and amity, Severus focused on the task in hand. Their alliance was necessary for the protection of the school. Turning on his heel, Severus stalked towards the stairs and led Contessa onto the minstrel's gallery and into his quarters.

The dark rooms flickered into life as Severus raised his wand to light the candles and the fire. The level of illumination was lower now he had discovered the most efficient way of lighting the chambers, and the wavering gloom welcomed him as he entered the living room.

Severus had procured a small dining table which served its purpose for the suppers he shared with Contessa. It was an unadorned and simple piece of furniture with two wooden chairs placed either side of the table. The seats were similarly modest and functional.

Contessa had remarked how out of place the table looked, shoved up against the wall of the grandiose living room. Since Severus had chosen it for that very reason, he hadn't acted upon her suggestion of replacing it with something more comfy. Severus found its simplicity and practicality strangely comforting. He liked the familiarity.

He headed into his private chambers as Contessa took a seat at the table with obvious reluctance.

He didn't feel anything now that he was safely inside his walls. Coldly detached, Severus removed his cloak and frock-coat and returned to the living room wearing trousers, a white shirt, black waistcoat and neck-tie. He snapped his fingers as he crossed the room, and as he sat down opposite Contessa, his personal house-elf appeared with a pop at the side of the table.

Binky was slightly taller than the average house-elf, and his skin had a pinkish undertone which set him apart from the other elves. He wore a pair of black Hogwarts tea-cloths, tied in a customary toga. The silver embroidery of the Hogwarts crest glittered in the candlelight.

The Headmaster's house-elf had been in service for over a decade, and under Dumbledore's tutelage, Binky had learned an air of flamboyance. With the usual ostentation, a bottle of wine snapped into existence inside a silver bucket filled with iced water, and supper was served on a gleaming, covered silver dish.

Contessa, who was sitting with her arms folded, nodded her hello to the house-elf. Unusually, she made no attempt at conversation with Binky. Severus snapped his eyes away from her and glared at the house-elf instead.

"Good evening, Headmaster," Binky said, bowing to Severus with grace and finesse. "Madam Marchbanks." The elf turned to Contessa and repeated his gesture.

Severus tapped his fingertips on the table impatiently. He did not appreciate fuss or fanfare, and his ever-darkening mood was being aggravated by the pomposity of the house-elf.

"Get on with it, elf!" he snapped.

Binky jumped a little, but regained his composure quickly. He removed the cloche from the plate of food with a flourish and presented a spread of cheese, biscuits and fruits.

The selection was impressive, and Severus found his mouth watering despite himself. Whilst he felt confident he would eventually knock the flair for theatrics out of the house-elf, he could imagine getting used to the excellent quality of food.

"Dismissed," Severus addressed the house-elf curtly.

Binky bowed once more then vanished with a muffled pop.

Severus removed the bottle of wine from the ice-bucket and started to pour it into the crystal glasses, which had just appeared on the table before them.

"I don't want any wine, Professor," Contessa said discourteously.

Severus prickled with indignation but proceeded to serve her a full glass of wine regardless. She glared at him in response.

Sitting in silence, they ate supper without eye contact, and Severus found himself refilling his wine glass frequently. When Contessa finished eating, she sat with her arms folded like a sullen, sulking schoolgirl. He remembered that look from his first year as Potions master. It didn't bode well.

Growing more impatient with her lack of conversation, Severus pushed away his empty plate and sat back in his chair, swirling the remnants of his third glass of wine around the bottom of the glass.

"Are you going to speak at all, or do I have to question you?" he asked her sharply.

Contessa straightened in her seat, and her eyes flashed. "You know what, Headmaster, I think I'll ask the questions tonight," she replied insolently.

Severus bolstered himself, ready for a fight seeming to come out of nowhere.

"Why did you reinstate Umbridge's old decrees?" she asked loftily. "Do you seriously think you can prevent Dumbledore's Army from reforming?"

"I really don't see what that has to do with you, Contessa," he said evenly.

She shook her head with impatience. "You and I played that game once before, and it didn't exactly work in your favour." Her voice was laced with old hostility, and she seemed on the verge of erupting.

Severus could not understand why. He sat looking into the fire, temporarily stumped. What this had to do with their shared past was a mystery. How could anything from his time as Contessa's Potions master be pertinent to the matter in hand?

After a short time the memory came to him, but by then Contessa had stormed out of the room and was stamping down hard on the staircase to his office.

Severus's anger flared as he leapt to his feet and ran after her.

Blue Touchpaper

It seemed as though Contessa's body was on fire as she stalked down the stairs and hastened towards the fireplace. Severus's disregard for her had rendered her unable to speak, and she almost couldn't stop herself from punching the walls.

Just at this moment, Contessa couldn't bear to be around Severus for fear of what she might say. He didn't listen when she tried to explain her feelings about addressing him formally, and now she was livid about his rash implementation of the decrees. His decision had pressed buttons from their shared past, and it incensed her that Severus could not make the connection.

And, as if that wasn't enough, Contessa was battling with uncontrollable passion for a man who didn't return her romantic feelings. She was frustrated by his lack of response and furious with herself for being so spectacularly tripped up by her emotions.

Desperately searching for a flicker of feelings in the man, she had found none. Severus obviously wanted to keep their relationship completely professional, down to the very last detail, and Contessa was insulted by his assertion that she had to call him 'Headmaster' after all they had endured.

The Headteacher portraits watched Contessa crossing the office as she tried unsuccessfully to control the torrent of emotions writhing like snakes inside her. As more of the portraits awoke from their slumbers, their eyes tracked her progress towards the fireplace.

Contessa grabbed a large handful of Floo Powder and hurled it into the hearth. Ferocious green flames jumped up with a roar. Ducking her head underneath the mantelpiece, Contessa lifted up her robes and stepped onto the hearth.

She was about to utter the words which would transport her to her quarters when Severus's hand grabbed hold of her arm and wrenched her back into the Headmaster's office.

Contessa's lungs burned with ash as she stumbled on the floor, Severus's bruising grip holding her upright.

"There is no need to walk out on me, Madam Marchbanks," Severus said testily.

Contessa's hands rolled into fists, and her chest heaved sickeningly as anger rose in her throat. Biting down, she clenched her teeth to stop herself from responding. She needed to stay calm.

Severus didn't let go of her arm, and he led her across the office, flinging her unceremoniously against the desk. He stood before her, a dark and imposing figure silhouetted against the green firelight. He crossed his arms, effectively blocking her escape route to the Floo.

Contessa felt a new flare of rage as she realised Severus was playing cat-and-mouse with her. His arrogant display eroded her self-control, and she clenched her jaw to prevent herself lashing out. She needed to get out of the room before she succumbed to her anger.

Reaching out behind her, she grasped the desk to steady herself, and then ran towards the solid oak door, prepared to risk being seen leaving the Headmaster's office late at night.

In the blink of an eye, Severus raised his wand and locked the door with a non-verbal spell. Contessa ran into the door and tried desperately to turn the brass doorknob. She knew the attempt was futile.

She pounded the oak panels, venting some of her frustration, before turning to face Severus, her back against the bolted door.

A hundred different scenarios ran through her mind as she calculated her next move. Severus, however, was quicker. With a mocking smile, he flicked his wand, Summoning Contessa's wand from inside her robes. He caught her only chance at magical defence mid-air and tucked her wand inside his waistcoat. His eyes glinted dangerously.

"How dare you!" Contessa growled. Her heart raced and blood pumped furiously through her ears.

"I'm merely protecting us from your irrational behaviour," Severus said silkily. "You seem agitated. I don't fully understand why."

Every single portrait in the room was now awake and watching them with great interest. Contessa sobered a little and tried to calm her conflicting emotions. Running her fingertips over the wooden grain of the door, she did not reply.

Severus must have noticed her eyeing the portraits uncertainly, as his next words were more cordial. "Perhaps we can continue our... discussion... in my quarters?"

Contessa saw Magda McDougall cast an encouraging look towards her, and she was able to stand straighter as a result. She removed her hands from the oak panel at her back and walked calmly towards Severus.

"Anything I have to say can be witnessed by these portraits," she said as she strode past him towards the centre of the room, forcing him to turn around.

Meeting his gaze once more, she noticed his eyebrows arching. Severus moved towards her until they were both standing in front of the Headmaster's desk, eyeballing each other.

Severus spoke first.

"I believe you require my assistance in learning to manage your role as double-agent," he began.

Contessa scoffed. "This isn't about me and my failings, Headmaster," she said waspishly.

Severus's eyes narrowed into slits. He closed the distance between them until they stood only a couple of feet apart.

"I can't wait to hear this, Miss Marchbanks," he sneered.

Contessa knew he had lit the blue touchpaper. She felt her anger ignite once again as the past came flooding back to her.

"So, it's back to Miss Marchbanks now, is it, Professor?" she spat. "Back to the power games of the classroom... You didn't stop me last time!"

Contessa walked away from him and circled the office. Severus moved instinctively towards the fireplace, but Contessa didn't notice. She was only just getting started.

"Even though you bullied everyone in my Potions class, forcing some of them to give up the subject, you didn't win completely. I came to see Professor Dumbledore and asked him for permission to set up a Potions study group. He said I had to ask you to authorise the use of the Potions classroom for us to practise in..."

"I refused you," Severus said in a bored voice.

"Too right you did," she bit back, "deliberately unfair and partisan, like always."

Contessa rounded on him, but Severus merely smirked at her with amusement.

"It didn't do you any harm though, did it, Contessa?" he said mockingly.

Contessa's eyes turned to slits, and she threw him a look of pure malice. "Don't you dare try and tell me that you did it to bring out the best in me!" she snarled.

Severus laughed out loud at her defence. "You know nothing of my motivations. Not now, and not then," he said with contempt.

"I don't care about your motivations, Professor," she replied, in an attempt at restraint. "I care about the students."

Severus's dark eyes studied her intently as he waited to hear her new angle.

"It's the students who suffer when you make snap decisions without weighing up the consequences. If you bar unofficial student societies again, you are repeating the mistakes of the past!" she said with annoyance.

Severus glowered in front of her. Feeling slightly unnerved by his composure, she took a step backwards. He crossed his arms against his waistcoat and gritted his teeth. Contessa's stomach swooped in queasy anticipation.

When Severus spoke, his voice was tightly controlled. His fury, however, was still perceptible on his pale features. "You make the mistake of thinking this is about you, when it is, in fact, nothing to do with you."

Contessa swallowed hard, unable to believe they had reached this point. Despite the apparent danger, she couldn't stop herself from retorting.

"No, Severus. This is about us."

They stood facing each other for a long moment, and Contessa sensed they had reached an impasse. She noticed Severus's jaw set tightly as he clenched his hands into fists. She knew she had made him angry and part of her really didn't care; her need for vengeance had got the better of her.

Severus unfolded his arms and swept away from the fireplace, turning his back on her.

Contessa didn't need any further invitation. She walked briskly towards the fireplace, which still blazed with green flames due to the generous amount of Floo Powder she had tossed onto the hearth.

Stepping into the fire, she pronounced her destination and was whisked away in a hiss of ash.

Elm and Ebony

Severus heard the fizzing swoosh of the Floo Network as it transported Contessa out of his office.

With his jaw set firmly, he turned on the spot to face the fireplace. The emerald flames were changing to a natural amber colour, but continued to roar with intensity.

As Severus stared into the hearth, his anger unleashed, and his disciplined defences began to crumble. He had barely managed to restrain his fury in the moments before Contessa left the room. Now she was gone, rage reared its ugly, snarling face.

Severus swept across the room and came to a halt at the end of the ornate Headmaster's desk, and he wrenched it upwards, tipping it over onto the floor. The table came down on its side with a satisfying thump. Desk-top contents flew haphazardly across the room; parchments and quills scattered, and an inkwell seeped dark liquid onto the floor.

The destruction felt good to Severus, and he continued to vent his anger, ripping books down from the shelves lining the office. They landed with a thud on the floor as clouds of dust rose from the centuries-old volumes.

Severus stared fiercely at the pile of crumpled books on the floor as if they had somehow wronged him.

He jumped in surprise when he heard a muffled pop. Binky the house-elf appeared in the room, carrying a duster and a brush. The little elf looked startled as he surveyed the carnage in the room, and he looked at Severus uncertainly, bowing cautiously to his master.

Severus's nostrils flared as he addressed the house-elf. "What are you doing here, elf?"

Binky shifted uneasily on his feet. "Binky apologises, sir. Binky was Summoned by the rising dust... It is Binky's duty to keep the Headmaster's office clean."

The elf shrank under Severus's steely gaze.

"Not doing a very good job of it, are you, elf?" Severus lashed out.

Binky hung his head shamefully. "Sorry, Master."

Turning to face the upended desk, the little creature ran full-speed, head-on into it. He collided with the hard surface with a sickening crunch and fell onto his back, knocking himself momentarily unconscious. A lump the size of an egg appeared on his forehead.

Recovering with a stagger and rubbing his head, Binky got to his feet and retreated in preparation for another run.

Severus stepped in front of the up-turned desk, blocking the house-elf's path towards self-destruction.

"Enough," Severus growled. "Leave now."

Binky looked half relieved and half perplexed. "But the mess, sir. What about the mess?"

Severus clenched his fists intolerantly. "It can wait. Now get out of my sight!"

"Yes, Master."

With a crack, the house-elf disappeared.

Severus was left alone with his tipped-over desk and desecrated office, rage still bubbling away inside. As he looked around the room, he noticed the inkwell emptying its contents steadily onto the floor, staining the rug. With a rumble of anger in his throat, Severus picked up the offending pot of ink and lobbed it into the fire. The container shattered with a tinkle, causing the flames to turn bright magenta and spit out acrid black smoke.

Without warning, the fire went out with a sizzling gasp. Severus felt his anger wane as the room's illumination dropped and the crackles of the fire extinguished.

As the rush of adrenaline subsided, Severus slumped into a sitting position against the desk, leaning his back against the leather-covered surface. He sat with his legs hunched up, head resting on the desk-top and his eyes tightly closed.

When his heart rate slowed and his breathing became more regular, Severus opened his eyes. The fog cleared from his vision as he sobered, and he flinched with embarrassment when he observed the Headteacher portraits watching him warily from their frames.

With a low groan, Severus closed his eyes in humiliation. Contessa had forced him to act out the entire argument in front of generations of experienced Headteachers.

Despite his belief that his own line of reasoning was sound, he feared he had not handled the situation with as much skill and diplomacy as his predecessors might.

Severus kept his eyes shut as he banged the back of his head gently against the desk. It was quite clear that Contessa's behaviour was beyond reason. She was unable to control her emotions, and Severus usually saw this as a sign of weakness.

Contessa was not adept at disciplining her mind and compartmentalising her world. Whilst it had disadvantages and served no foreseeable purpose, Severus still admired her openness and honesty, even though he found her emotional outbursts irritating and unproductive.

However, her loose cannon temperament was a hindrance to their mission and clearly needed to be addressed. The task in hand was of the utmost importance and, as such, he knew had to find a way to resolve the situation and continue to work with her.

Severus was not accustomed to this aspect of managing adults. He much preferred students in that respect; disciplining them was child's play by comparison.

When Severus opened his eyes he noticed several portraits casting judgmental looks. Phineas Nigellus Black sniffed indignantly at him.

"I told you the Ravenclaw Revolutionary couldn't be trusted," Phineas said with a sneer.

During the months in which they had been reacquainted, Severus had almost forgotten Contessa's old nickname. He rose to his feet and dusted off his clothes, turning away from the portrait. "This isn't about trust, Phineas," he said wearily. "It's about something else."

From behind the desk, Severus looked up at Dumbledore's portrait. "How am I supposed to work with Contessa when she is so unreasonable?" he asked the former Headmaster. "This kind of unpredictable behaviour is the reason why I normally choose to work alone," he added.

Dumbledore returned his gaze with a look of patient understanding. "Tess simply needs to learn the limitations of her position. You forget the pair of you spent two months in a relationship of equality. Now she is working for you as a subordinate but also alongside you as a spy. It will take some time for her to adjust."

"I need her to adapt quickly, Dumbledore. I've been able to control my emotions since taking over the Headmastership. Why cannot she?"

"You are different people, Severus. She is open to her feelings and doesn't place value in containing them."

Dumbledore paused and glanced at Severus circumspectly.

Severus had seen that look before and groaned inwardly.

"There are a few things you don't know about Tess which cloud her opinion of you," Dumbledore said slowly.

"Oh, I don't believe this..." Severus replied.

From the other side of the office, Magda McDougall cleared her throat nervously. He noticed Phineas and the other Headteachers appraising Dumbledore expectantly. The hairs on the back of Severus's neck stood to attention.

"What is it?" Severus asked, not really wishing to know the answer. "What haven't you told me?"

Dumbledore sighed and crossed his hands in his lap. "I was hoping this would come out naturally, in time. However, I can see the need for transparency, given the current situation."

Severus rolled his eyes and sighed in resignation.

"You are aware Tess is the great-granddaughter of Griselda Marchbanks," Dumbledore began.

Severus nodded once.

"Griselda was a member of the Wizengamot, and she was present at your closed hearing. She heard me speak in your defence before all the charges were dropped."

Severus took a moment to interpret the information. "You're saying Contessa found out I was a Death Eater during my time as Potions master?"

"I'm afraid so," Dumbledore said with regret. "It was not ideal. Although your past affiliation was not common knowledge, there were of course several people who knew you once served Voldemort. During the Christmas holidays when your hearing took place, Tess overheard a conversation at home. Griselda was devastated that she'd found out."

"So, Contessa knew of my past; I assume she was sworn to secrecy?"

"She was, and she never once betrayed you, despite being sorely tempted on several occasions."

Severus took a deep breath in. "I did make it hard for her," he conceded, remembering the many altercations they had exchanged. Severus had tested her to the limit but hadn't realised the danger. "You placed a lot of trust in a seventeen-year-old girl, Dumbledore. You put me at risk."

"I placed as much trust in her as I did in you, Severus. Neither of you have let me down."

Severus bit back his sarcastic retort. Whilst he thought Dumbledore a fool to be so trusting, he could not deny the former Headmaster's trust in him was the only thing that had kept him alive.

And now, it seemed, Contessa had placed her trust in him too. It surprised Severus that the Ravenclaw Revolutionary had kept her promise to Dumbledore despite being so cruelly provoked by her Potions master.

"Her past resentment is more understandable now," Severus realised out loud.

"Oh, she wasn't exactly a saint," Dumbledore replied with a small smile. "Tess attempted many things to bring about your dismissal, culminating in a petition amongst the students to force me to sack you."

Severus laughed under his breath. "You're kidding."

"No," Dumbledore replied seriously. "Luckily the petition was unsuccessful. Too many students were... shall we say... reluctant to sign."

"Too scared of the Potions master?" Severus said with amusement.

"Indeed," Dumbledore answered wryly. "When she realised I had no intention of dismissing you, she backed down and put her energies into organising a Potions study group to help the students who were struggling. It was her method of retaliation against you."

"That's why she never gave me any credit as her teacher she considered herself self-taught."

"What can I say, Severus, you are both as stubborn as each other."

Severus sighed deeply. Whilst this explained much of Contessa's behaviour, it also made her Unbreakable Vow seem even more remarkable.

Out of the corner of his eye, Severus noticed the up-turned desk and the mountains of scattered books, quills and parchment. As he had sent away the house-elf, it was up to him to clear up the mess.

He reached inside his waistcoat to find his wand, intending to make quick work of covering up the evidence of his tantrum. His fingers brushed two pieces of wood and he withdrew his ebony wand and a smaller wand made of elm.

With a jolt, Severus realised he still had Contessa's wand.

The Wisdom of Hindsight

Contessa awoke the following morning riddled with anxiety. She regretted some of the things she had said to Severus in the heat of the moment and wished she had expressed her feelings in a more constructive way.

Although a month had passed since she had taken up her position at Hogwarts, Contessa still didn't know where she fitted in Severus's life. He was the only person who knew who she really was, and she found the mixed messages of their working relationship confusing. It was hard to know who to be when she was around him.

Their past as teacher and student had been tumultuous at the best of times, but over the summer Contessa had learned to tolerate the man and even like him. Initially, her trust in Severus had been a function of her belief in Dumbledore; she trusted Dumbledore's judgment. But now Contessa trusted Severus unreservedly of her own accord.

The cold light of day brought a dawning realisation: her reprehensible behaviour had repaid him poorly. Severus was relying on her to be steady and resolute. Last night, she had been neither.

Contessa was struggling with the boundaries of their relationship. She worked for Severus as Potions Assistant and was therefore his employee. But she also reported to him as a spy and that afforded a different status. Additionally, she was now spending time with Severus twice a week. The evenings they shared were in private, and Contessa could imagine settling into an easy dialogue with him, like the one they had established at Squirrel's Leap. Calling him Headmaster in this situation was so unnatural to Contessa; she didn't know how to relate to him when they were alone together.

Her recent attraction towards Severus was even more bewildering. The new feelings didn't seem to want to co-operate or be tucked away out of sight. Unwanted thoughts distracted her from the job at hand, and she was struggling to find her place in the bigger picture. Dumbledore held so many cards close to his chest.

Severus still had her elm and dragon-heartstring wand. It had been the last thing on her mind when she had made her hasty departure from his office, and Contessa was sure that, in the heat of the moment, Severus had forgotten he had confiscated it. The moment she arrived in her pitch-black quarters, she kicked herself and had to light all the candles by hand.

Contessa hoped that Severus would return her wand forthwith, but he had not. Her indignation prevented her from asking for the wand back, and her stubbornness meant she had spent the whole morning doing her work without the assistance of magic. The experience had been frustrating and felt like punishment.

When lunchtime arrived, Contessa followed the streams of bustling students to the Great Hall, where she lingered outside the doorway. Peeking around the backs of some tall seventh-year boys, she glimpsed Severus sitting at the Head Table at the far end of the hall. He looked as pale and imposing as ever, silently watching the students filing into seats at their House tables.

Feeling a surge of advantage, Contessa turned on her heel and hurried down to her dungeon quarters. Severus would be engaged for a least half an hour; time enough for her to speak to Dumbledore alone.

A handful of Floo Powder and a flash of green flame transported her into the Headmaster's office.

Dazzling daylight made the room look very different from the night before, and she became aware of dozens of eyes assessing her cautiously. Ignoring the Headteacher portraits, Contessa walked over to the desk, behind which hung the portrait of Albus Dumbledore. He greeted her with a knowing smile.

"Good afternoon, Tess," Dumbledore said cordially. "To what do we owe this visit?"

Contessa relaxed at the older man's benevolent manner. "I need some advice, Albus. I'm struggling."

Dumbledore nodded slowly, looking at her over the rim of his half-moon spectacles.

Contessa rested her hands on Severus's desk as she leaned forward and felt a thin piece of wood roll underneath her fingertips. Casting her eyes downwards, she gasped when she realised Severus had left her wand in his office.

Her heart leapt to her mouth as she picked up the wand and turned it over in her hands. Contessa was tempted to pocket her wand but realised Severus would know she had visited his office without permission.

With a sigh, she placed the stick of wood back down on the desktop and slumped into the chair across from the Headmaster's desk.

Holding her head in one hand, she muttered, "What am I going to do?"

Dumbledore's gaze was sympathetic. "What is it that's troubling you?"

"I'm lost, Albus. I thought I knew where I stood with Severus, but since we arrived at Hogwarts our relationship has changed. He's become distant and cold. The equality we had found at Squirrel's Leap has gone, and I'm confused. Sometimes I feel insulted."

"What do you find insulting?" Dumbledore asked.

"Severus's preference for the use of a formal title," Contessa replied. "I mean, I can understand the need for it in the company of others, but when we are alone together I can't see what the problem is. I spent all summer calling him Severus. Calling him Headmaster in private is belittling."

"So, you don't regard him as Headmaster when you are alone together."

"No, I don't. But he appears to treat me like an underling the whole time. It flies in the face of everything we had previously achieved and, frankly, makes it harder for me to keep my vow." Contessa paused as she contemplated her reaction. "I suppose I questioned his authority over the decrees to try and raise myself to his level." She sighed. "With the wisdom of hindsight, I can see I was disrespectful and my behaviour uncalled for. I'm just the Potions Assistant, at the end of the day."

Dumbledore listened calmly from his portrait. "In a way, you're feeling powerless."

"Perhaps," Contessa considered. "I don't feel I have any direction. I don't fully understand how my role at Hogwarts helps in the grand scheme of things."

"I never keep all my eggs in one basket, Tess. In time, you will come to realise what your presence here can accomplish. However, for the time being, you are a great deal of use to Severus as an informant. He will need your help to retain control of the school and prevent it slipping into the hands of another Death Eater. And the Headmastership places Severus in the best possible position to help Harry Potter. As soon as we know of the boy's location, we can bequeath the sword of Gryffindor to him. Then, when the time is right, Severus needs to pass on certain information to him. You are here to facilitate this, ensuring Severus is able to help Harry when the time comes."

Contessa nodded but couldn't help feeling glum. "I understand all of that. Somehow, it's not enough. Something is missing."

"Then you need to find a way to make your time here more fulfilling. I'm sure Hogwarts will provide you with many opportunities."

"Like what?"

Dumbledore smiled patiently. "You'll know when they arise; I cannot foretell them. Perhaps you should speak to Sybill Trelawney?" he said with a hint of mischief.

Contessa smirked in response. "I'll give that some consideration," she replied with sarcasm.

The conversation paused as Contessa considered her other predicament.

"There's something else, isn't there?" Dumbledore asked perceptively.

Contessa nodded, and a lump formed in her throat. She looked around at the other portraits uncertainly. "I need to talk something through in private," she replied, alluding to the other Headteachers listening to their conversation.

Dumbledore contemplated her seriously for a moment. "Certainly."

He gestured the request to the frames hanging on the walls of the office. Generations of Headteachers left their portraits with a cacophony of groans and indignant mutterings.

After a short space of time, Contessa and Dumbledore were alone.

"What is it?" he asked gently.

Contessa fumbled with the armrests of her chair. "I'm all over the place. I never thought it possible, but I've started to have romantic feelings towards Severus."

A brief silence followed. Contessa looked up at the portrait, beseeching Dumbledore to have a ready-made answer. He smiled back at her sadly.

"This is unforeseen," he said earnestly.

"I know." She sighed. "What should I do, Albus?"

"Does he return your feelings?"

"I seriously doubt it."

"Well, that makes it simpler."

Contessa looked at him, bewildered. "How do you mean?"

"I mean the path forward is clearer. If your feelings are not returned, the outcome is predestined. Rather than concealing and ignoring your feelings, you need to find a way to acknowledge your feelings to yourself. Work *with* them, instead of against them."

Contessa shot Dumbledore a suspicious look. "You make it sound as though I'm in denial."

"From what I saw of the fracas last night, I would tend to say you have been in denial."

Contessa swallowed this comment reluctantly, but as embarrassing as it might be, deep down she knew there was truth in it. "Merlin's beard, you are right," she said.

"Don't deny your feelings, Tess. You can't tell Severus how you feel, but if you try to suppress your feelings, they will prevent you from keeping your vow. Severus needs your unconditional acceptance now more than ever."

"I think there is a limit to what can be achieved with Severus. He's not ready." Suddenly, Contessa felt very tired and weary.

"Perhaps not, but you will be there for him when he is," Dumbledore replied.

Contessa accepted this dolefully. "I shall try to be patient."

With a nod which expressed much more than gratitude, Contessa left the Headmaster's office, her wand lying unclaimed on the desk.

Rhyme and Reason

Severus noticed Contessa's absence at lunch-time in the Great Hall and was left with the distinct impression she was avoiding him.

He wasn't overly troubled by the fact she wasn't speaking to him; Severus felt he had the moral and intellectual high ground.

However, he was perturbed by the thought of Contessa wandering the corridors of Hogwarts without her wand, unable to defend herself and impeded in her work. Awkward questions might be asked with regard to the location of her wand, and Severus did not wish to raise suspicions.

It was for this reason that he found himself descending the steps into the dungeon and knocking on the door of the Potions office later that afternoon.

Severus opened the door to find Contessa working alone in the office, marking a stack of parchments on the desk which had once belonged to him.

He glanced around the room and noted the office was neater and less cluttered than before. However, Severus observed the arrangement of the potions supplies remained the same. He found this deeply satisfying.

Contessa met his gaze steadily as he walked across the room. She placed her quill down on the desk and remained seated as Severus stood before her.

"Headmaster," she said calmly, "how may I help you?"

Severus nodded once in acknowledgement and looked again at the shelves of potions ingredients lining the walls of the office.

"I like what you've done with the place," he said, his voice betraying amusement.

Contessa followed his gaze around the room, and her eyes narrowed. Severus wondered if she would rise to the bait. He was not disappointed.

"I am sure you will recall, Headmaster, that I helped design the layout of your office during my seventh year," she said. "You requested I re-organise it on several occasions, before eventually settling on your original outline for the room. My memory of the plan's rationale serves me well."

Her voice was even and measured. Severus was pleased with her self-restraint.

"I notice you've increased the lighting in here," he said, looking pointedly at the new candelabras placed around the desk.

"I needed more light to work," Contessa said crisply.

Severus watched her for a moment. "The increase of light will have an adverse effect on the potions supplies."

"I'm aware of that. I took it into consideration, and the ingredients will not be harmed."

Severus was impressed by Contessa's controlled demeanour. Additionally, he approved of the changes she had made to his old office.

He reached inside his robes to retrieve her wand. Severus would have returned it to her regardless, but he felt more content about doing so now. He held out the wand, and Contessa rose from her desk and accepted it gratefully, her cheeks flushed pink.

"Thank you for returning this," she said quietly.

"My apologies for the delay in its return," he replied with formality.

Contessa's posture relaxed but she still appeared fidgety and nervous.

"Severus, I..." she began. "Sorry, Headmaster," she corrected herself with a wince.

"Go on," Severus said.

"I'm sorry for my impertinent behaviour last night. I didn't intend to question your authority." Contessa's voice was remorseful. "I forgot my place."

For the space of a few heartbeats, Severus stood stoical, gratified to hear an apology. At the same time he sensed the problem had still not been resolved, at least not for her.

"You're struggling to find your place now we are at Hogwarts," he reflected.

"I am, Professor," she said awkwardly. "I must admit I find it difficult to address you formally when we're alone together. You are still Severus to me." Contessa looked down at the desk, her fingers fiddling with her wand.

"I have good reason to maintain a façade, Contessa. There is a lot at stake."

"I know," she replied. "But I can't put our relationship in a box and label you Headmaster; I find it confusing and distracting. I don't know who to be when I'm around you am I a Potions Assistant, a spy, or simply Tess...?"

Severus processed her predicament carefully and weighed up the consequences in his mind. They needed to be able to work together closely in order to be successful, but his wish to be addressed formally had become a barrier to that goal. Contessa seemed unable to overcome it.

"I propose something different, in that case," Severus said.

Contessa looked up at him hopefully.

"In the presence of students, teachers and portraits, you should call me Headmaster," Severus suggested. "That effectively means almost everywhere in the castle, including my office."

Contessa eyed him suspiciously.

"However, when we are in my quarters, away from the earshot of others, please call me Severus."

A smile returned to Contessa's face. "I understand your logic, Headmaster. I accept."

"Good," Severus replied, lifting himself onto his toes and grasping his hands behind his back.

Contessa's relief was palpable as she sat down in her chair.

"Do we have anything further to discuss with regard to my enforcement of the decrees?" he asked.

"You want to revisit the argument?" Contessa replied, taken aback.

"Only in the interests of completeness I can't imagine your reasoning to be sounder than mine. Nevertheless, I should like to hear it."

Contessa appeared to collect her thoughts with a degree of trepidation.

"I'm aware I didn't express myself particularly well; however, my concerns are that the students will suffer from a learning point of view. Also, by making the membership of organisations such as Dumbledore's Army illicit, it will drive them underground and make the option more appealing. People will rebel and join the cause because it is exciting."

"It is only unofficial student societies that have been banned, so bona fide learning groups will be allowed to continue, albeit heavily supervised," Severus began to explain. "On the subject of the DA, it will mostly be Gryffindors flocking to the cause."

"That may be true," Contessa replied, "but remember, Dolores Umbridge struggled to stop the DA. Children should not be underestimated they are resourceful."

"Umbridge's old decree served to halt recruitment to the DA by scaring most of the students away. I believe this to be the best I can hope for. It will be impossible to stop the DA completely. I only hope to limit their activities and numbers. The decrees assist me in achieving this goal."

"So, you don't want to stop them?" Contessa asked, surprised.

"Oh, I would very much like to stop them, but I don't believe it entirely possible to do so," Severus replied pragmatically. "I shall have to consider how to penalise the culprits, and make an example of them. If I can dissuade students from supporting them, it might have an impact on their members. The punishment needs to be severe

enough to send out a strong message but stop short of violence and brutality."

"I see your conundrum," Contessa said earnestly.

"Indeed," Severus replied.

At that moment there was a brief knock at the door, and Horace Slughorn strolled into the office without looking up.

Contessa's eyebrows rose fractionally, and Severus shot her a stern look in response. He cleared his throat imperiously.

"Good afternoon, Horace," Severus said, in his customarily low voice.

Slughorn looked up, startled. "Oh, good afternoon, Headmaster."

Slughorn's beady eyes flicked between Contessa and Severus, speedily assessing the situation. He walked over to the side of Contessa's desk and dropped some rolls of parchment onto the work-space.

Severus's former Potions master addressed him carefully. "I hope I'm not interrupting."

"Not at all, Horace. Your assistant and I were just discussing the merits of restricting certain potion ingredients."

"Ah," replied Slughorn, casting Contessa a wary look.

"Your assistant is not particularly taken with the idea," Severus said waspishly.

Contessa's eyes widened as Slughorn rose to her defence. "She's doing a fine job, Headmaster. I'm very pleased with her."

Severus looked at him disdainfully. "I'm not convinced, as yet," he said in a cold voice.

Reaching inside his robes, Severus pulled out a small roll of parchment and handed it to Contessa.

"These ingredients are to be moved to my personal stores and added to your weekly requisition."

"But," Contessa spluttered, with believable consternation.

"Until you can demonstrate improved competence, I shall be keeping a close eye on you, Madam Marchbanks."

Severus felt satisfied when he saw Contessa's expression of indignation crossing her face.

She played her role well. Things were as they were meant to be.

Without another word, Severus turned on his heel and swept out of the dungeons.

The Missing Piece

"Good grief, Tess, what did you say to the Headmaster to warrant that?" Horace Slughorn rested forward on his arms as he stood at the side of Contessa's desk.

"Oh, nothing, Horace," she replied dolefully. "I doubt I'll ever be able to do anything right. The man tortures me for fun."

Horace pulled up a chair, sitting down at the side of her desk. "What happened between you two?"

"What? Just then?"

"No, I mean, in the past after I retired. You had one year left at Hogwarts, if memory serves correctly."

Contessa sighed, partly due to relief. "Snape was such a contrast to you, Horace. He was cruel and impatient, showed favouritism towards his own House, and impeded the students who did not perform to his exacting standards." She paused for a moment, remembering her struggles. "I rebelled against him."

Horace smiled ruefully. "You always were a feisty student, Tess; it was one of your admirable qualities."

"He didn't seem to think so," Contessa replied as the old feelings from the past resurfaced. "I found out he was a Death Eater during my seventh year. Dumbledore swore me to secrecy."

"Oh, my," Horace said, his eyes widening in horror. "Back then, none of us knew."

"I came so close to blurring it out, but Dumbledore convinced me to trust Snape. He said he was completely assured of the man's loyalty. I believed in Dumbledore and trusted his judgment, so I stayed quiet."

"If only we'd known," Horace said forlornly.

"Indeed." Contessa shook her head, faking remorse.

In the silence that followed, Contessa assessed the impact of her past discretion with new perspective. She realised how much would have been lost if she had broken her promise to Dumbledore.

"It's a wonder Snape allowed you to join the teaching staff this year," Horace pondered.

Contessa was ready for this one. "You'd think. But you shouldn't underestimate the man's vindictiveness. I know he takes great pleasure in making my life a misery." The falsities slipped from her tongue easily; up until recently they had still held some truth.

Horace sat quietly contemplating her dilemma then jumped slightly as he remembered something.

"Are you busy tonight?" he asked.

"No. Why?"

"I need you to supervise a detention for me," Horace asked, his demeanour hopeful. He was still testing the limits of his Potions Assistant's capacity, but Contessa was more than willing to oblige, due to Horace's commitments as Head of Slytherin.

"That's fine, I can finish the marking at the same time," she replied.

"Actually, it's a practical detention. A young third-year lad needs to make another batch of Shrinking Solution."

"That's OK. I've still got all the ingredients out from earlier today, so there'll be no need to obtain the Headmaster's permission for another Shrivelfig," Contessa responded with feigned irritation. "What's the student's name?"

"Robert Selwyn," Horace said darkly.

A memory sparked in the recesses of Contessa's mind. "Selwyn. I know that name."

"As well you might he's the son of a Death Eater," Horace said, unable to hide his distaste.

"A Slytherin?"

"No he's in Gryffindor."

Contessa was astounded. "A Death Eater's son was sorted into Gryffindor?" she asked disbelievingly. "Poor kid. He didn't have much luck, did he?"

Horace neglected to reply, standing and gesturing to the rolls of parchment which he had previously dropped onto the desk. "Sixth years' homework on Amortentia; should be interesting for you," he said with a little wink. "There's nothing like a bit of teenage angst to pass the time, eh?"

Contessa smiled in return but groaned inwardly. The last thing she needed was to be thinking about Love Potion at the moment; she was confused enough already.

"No problem, Horace. See you tomorrow morning."

"Thanks, Tess. Make sure Selwyn's potion cuts the mustard. I can't have him slacking all the time."

Contessa nodded as Horace waddled out of the room, no doubt looking forward to putting his feet up and tucking in to some crystallised pineapple.

At eight o'clock that evening, there was a knock at the door of the Potions office. A nervous-looking thirteen year old boy walked into the room.

Robert Selwyn was sandy-haired and pale-skinned with large chocolate-brown eyes. He looked sheepishly at Contessa as he stood in front of her desk.

"Hello, Madam Marchbanks." His voice was barely audible, and Contessa noticed he was shaking slightly.

"Good evening, Robert," Contessa said kindly. "I believe you'll be making Shrinking Solution tonight?"

"Yup," he said, looking furtively around the office for the cauldron he would be using.

"Oh, not in here," Contessa said. "We'll be using the Potions classroom tonight everything is waiting for you in there."

"OK," Robert said, and he turned to leave.

Contessa followed him out of the office and down the corridor, observing the boy's hunched shoulders and quiet footsteps. He seemed to be doing everything possible not to be noticed.

Once inside the classroom, Contessa showed Robert the caterpillars, daisies, leech juice and rat's spleen he would be using in his potion, and he set about skinning his Shrivelfig with impressive efficiency.

Contessa chalked up the instructions on the blackboard and settled down to mark the remaining Amortentia essays.

After about half an hour of working in silence, Contessa finished her marking. She got up and wandered over to the cauldron to have a peek at the contents. The liquid was bright, acid green perfect for this stage of its preparation.

"Very good, Robert. You're doing well," she said encouragingly.

The boy blushed and looked away. He set about slicing his caterpillars, ready for the next step.

"I'm just going back to the office to get some more books I'll be back in a minute," Contessa told him, feeling she could trust the boy on his own in the classroom without any problems.

Contessa went to her quarters and picked up the books she had borrowed from Severus's collection at Spinner's End. She had already perused the first Potions book and was looking forward to starting the second volume.

Returning to the classroom, all was quiet, and Robert was progressing well with the potion. Contessa wondered why he'd struggled so much during the lesson; he hadn't needed to ask her for any help.

Sitting back down at the teacher's podium, Contessa rested the book on the lectern and ran her fingers over its black leather cover. It was almost identical to the other Potions book she had borrowed, except she realised with a start that the book appeared to have no title.

Tentatively opening the pages, Contessa read down the table of contents. The book seemed to be a selection of research papers from prominent witches and wizards, most notably the former Hogwarts Headmistress, Dilys Derwent. Contessa's eyes scanned the titles of the articles and noticed a chapter titled 'Bottling Vim and Vigour' by Mungo Bonham, the founder of St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries.

Contessa had no idea that Severus had any interest in magical medicine. She leafed through the pages, relishing the smell of old parchment at her fingertips. Spinner's End had held the same aroma that of an archaic library stacked full of wisdom and knowledge. Excitement blossomed as Contessa dived into Mungo Bonham's article, almost forgetting about the student working opposite her, behind the bubbling cauldron.

Sometime later, Contessa jumped at the clink of a glass phial being placed down on the front desk. She looked up to see Robert Selwyn presenting his Shrinking Solution for inspection.

"Gosh, that was quick," Contessa said hurriedly, not realising how engrossed she had been in the book she was reading.

She held the vial up against the candlelight, catching its green hue and watery viscosity. It was near-perfect.

"Let's test it out, then," she said, producing a red apple from inside her robes.

Contessa placed the apple in Robert's outstretched hand and squeezed a few drops of the potion into the nook of the apple stalk. With a tiny pop, the apple vanished, and in its place, in the palm of the boy's hand, was a dark brown apple seed.

"Excellent!" Contessa exclaimed as she took the seed in her fingers and turned it over in her hands.

Robert beamed back at her with pride.

"How did you manage to produce such a good Shrinking Solution without any help from me, and yet completely fail to make a useable potion earlier today?" she asked with

a flicker of suspicion.

The boy shrugged. "Dunno, Madam Marchbanks."

"What stopped you during the Potions class?"

Robert hunched his shoulders again, fidgeting under her inquisition. "The others... They kept tripping me up, switching my ingredients behind my back, saying things to distract me."

Contessa's stomach flipped at the implication, and she saw a look of pained embarrassment flickering across the young boy's face.

"Who taunted you, Robert?"

"Dunno. Most of the class."

Contessa paused for a moment, not fully comprehending. "But why?"

"Cos of my dad," Robert answered sullenly.

"You're being bullied because of your father?"

The boy didn't reply. He looked at the floor, shuffling his feet on the cold stone surface.

"Was it the Gryffindors who messed with your potion?"

Robert looked up again. "Nah, they just thump me in the arm when I'm stirring the potion, or stick their feet out when I'm walking past them."

"Who then?"

"The Slytherins, Madam Marchbanks."

Contessa was nonplussed. "Why would the Slytherins pick on you? They'd be more likely to support you, wouldn't they? What with your dad being a Death Eater..."

"No. They hate me too. Because of my mum."

"Your mother? Why, what did she do?"

"She left Dad two years ago when You Know Who came back. She took me with her, but she's in hiding now. I was sent to Hogwarts because it's safer here. Dad disowned me; he doesn't want to know me. There's nowhere left for me to go."

Contessa stood in stunned silence. The young boy was essentially parentless, renounced by his own House of Gryffindor because his father was a Death Eater and hated by Slytherins because his father had disowned him. Contessa reflected that Potions classes would be his worst nightmare being in the same room as both Slytherins and Gryffindors.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Robert."

"Thanks," the boy said self-consciously.

Contessa's heart ached in response. "You've done brilliantly here tonight. You are obviously a gifted potion-maker."

Robert returned her gaze with a trace of a smile.

"Perhaps you'll do better in the next lesson," she said hopefully, wishing there was something more she could do for him.

"Yes, Miss," he said automatically.

Contessa's sadness returned. She knew how difficult it was going to be for the boy. "You can go now."

Robert left the room, and Contessa slumped into the teacher's chair. She felt torn, wanting to intervene, but not knowing how.

She wanted to help; she felt she had to do something.

With a flash of inspiration, Contessa realised she had stumbled upon the missing piece of the puzzle the thing Dumbledore had promised she would find.

Dreams and Fables

Over the next few weeks, things seemed to quieten down at Hogwarts.

Relieved there had been no further attempts to break into the Headmaster's office, Severus was now facing a lower level of mutiny and had caught the Weasley girl red-handed, daubing another message for Dumbledore's Army across the floor of the Entrance Hall. She had been awarded with a ban from Hogsmeade for her troubles.

Severus was fast running out of options for punishment, realising the old favourites and staples of the past were becoming increasingly ineffective. He hoped he could maintain control of the school without resorting to more drastic measures; it was hard enough to keep the Carrows' methods in line as it was.

Ever since the failed theft of Godric Gryffindor's sword, it seemed Contessa's ability to feed Severus information on Dumbledore's Army had greatly diminished. Longbottom was either too embarrassed about the incident to confide in her or didn't trust her anymore.

Meanwhile, Contessa seemed to have become wrapped up in another student. She had taken the child of a Death Eater under her wing and was providing the boy with Potions tutorials on an ad-hoc basis. Severus noticed Contessa spent a fair amount of time and energy lavishing the boy with praise and attention, and he bitterly wished she would apply herself equally to more pressing matters. He thought she should focus her efforts on the trouble-causing students of the DA not on some kid who ought to be able to stand up for himself. Severus didn't know how Contessa would be able to collect intelligence on the DA, given the current difficulties, but that didn't stop him from wanting more from her.

October marched on and Severus had been lucky enough to witness the Whomping Willow shedding its entire load of leaves one afternoon whilst out patrolling the castle grounds. As the nights closed in he felt more comfortable in the Headmaster's quarters. He often spent evenings alone, reading by firelight. Severus preferred to hide the room's boundaries with darkness; it helped them appear smaller and more like his old quarters in the dungeon.

Of course, when Contessa arrived for supper twice a week, he had to light more candles. She seemed uneasy with his choice of low-level illumination and had made several pointed remarks about the romantic lighting.

One Friday evening, Severus was awaiting Contessa's arrival and brooding as he watched the crackling flames of the fire. The book he had been reading laid forgotten on

his lap.

She was late.

Severus expected punctuality; in the past, people had always been reliable and kept their appointments. Admittedly, the majority of those individuals had been students and therefore knew what the consequences of their tardiness would be. Severus thought everyone should conform to his standards of prompt timekeeping, and he felt disrespected when they did not.

His agitation continued to intensify proportionally with the lateness of the hour.

Half an hour after the pre-arranged meeting had been due to commence, Contessa knocked hastily on the door and tripped unceremoniously into the room.

"Oh, Severus, I'm sorry I'm late," she said breathlessly. "I got caught up in something and didn't realise the time."

Severus stood up and walked to the door to greet her, taking in her dishevelled appearance and noting she'd probably run all the way to the Headmaster's office.

"It was something of importance, I assume."

"Yes," Contessa replied, her eyes sparkling happily. Her expression faltered, however, when she noticed the look on his face. "Well, no, now that you mention it. It was something important to *me*, that's all."

Severus shot her a pointed look.

Contessa walked into the room, removed her cloak and flung it over the back of the nearest sofa. She sat down, glancing sidelong into the fire which crackled lazily at the other end of the settee. Severus followed, sitting down on the opposite sofa.

"I've been teaching Robert Selwyn the Barrier Charm," she said, "to help him protect the contents of his cauldron from saboteurs."

Severus felt his eyebrows creeping up his forehead. "A pressing matter indeed," he said sarcastically.

"I..." Contessa paused, frowning a little as she returned his gaze. "It's a complicated spell for a third-year; it took longer to teach than I'd anticipated." Her eye contact faltered, and she started to fiddle nervously with her robes.

Severus noticed her differing priorities bothered him more than they necessarily should. However, he felt he had made his point, and he rose from his seat, clicking his fingers to Summon his house-elf.

Binky popped into existence, bearing a silver tray stacked high with biscuits and two large glasses of milk. Contessa chuckled as the elf placed the plate down on the coffee table between the two sofas and offered out the accompanying drinks.

"Milk and cookies, Severus?" she asked with amusement. "I never had you down for comfort food."

Severus bristled, sitting down once again on the sofa opposite. "Due to the lateness of the hour, this selection seemed more appropriate," he replied with a satirical tone.

Contessa's eyes narrowed and then, unexpectedly, she smiled broadly at him. "OK, I take the hint."

They sat comfortably in front of the fire, exchanging stories and updating each other about the goings-on at the school whilst demolishing the teetering pile of biscuits on the coffee table.

Severus felt his indignation ease as Contessa gave him her full attention. He realised he had started to enjoy her company, look forward to it even, noticing this was the first time in a great many years he didn't feel lonely at Hogwarts. As they were the only ones who knew of each other's true affiliation, suppers together were their only opportunity to speak freely and be themselves.

Severus was beginning to appreciate that Contessa seemed to accept him in a way in which Dumbledore never had, and the evenings they shared were becoming something of an oasis. Because of this, Severus coveted the time and was resentful when it was interrupted or delayed.

"I've eaten far too many of those peanut-butter cookies," Contessa said as she lay back onto the sofa, rubbing her stomach with a slight grimace.

Severus smirked and helped himself to another biscuit. "You seem more relaxed tonight. Perhaps the later hour is better for you."

"Yeah, maybe. But I don't think it would be better for my waistline," she replied, frowning again. "How is it that you can eat a plate of those and not put on any weight? You always have such a svelte profile I assumed it was because you never ate."

Severus finished his glass of milk then reclined on the sofa, putting his feet up in front of the fire. "I often forget to eat, especially when I'm on my own. I've been alone a lot over the years."

"Well, there'll be a nice feast to tuck in to at Halloween," Contessa said enthusiastically. "I'm looking forward to that."

Severus didn't respond. It hadn't occurred to him that he would be expected to retain the Halloween feast.

The last thing he felt like doing was celebrating on the thirty-first of October. If he had his way he would spend it alone in his quarters, licking his wounds and thinking about all he had lost. It didn't seem at all appropriate to have a party on the anniversary of the death of the woman he loved.

In addition, he loathed parties and social gatherings of any kind. He couldn't think of one good reason why the celebration should go ahead, and he certainly wasn't going to burden himself with the arrangement of the annual feast.

Contessa mirrored his movements and lifted her feet onto the sofa, leaning back into the cushions and closing her eyes. They were both tired at the end of the working week, and Severus was glad there was no need to talk.

He allowed his mind to wander as he listened to the crackles of the fire in the hearth. The sound of Lily's tinkling laughter resurfaced in his memory, her almond-shaped green eyes sparkling back at him as Severus chased her around the park in their hometown one summer holiday, long ago.

Severus had loved the summers away from Hogwarts. Even though he had to return to Spinner's End, he felt more than recompensed by having Lily all to himself, uninterrupted by Potter or any of the other Gryffindors.

She belonged to him on those long summer days, when they would walk and talk, play on the swings in the park, or sit by the riverbank discussing the magic they had learned and what they hoped to become when they grew up.

Those days were a pocketful of bliss which Severus could tap into whenever he needed them. They were the memories he used to create his Patronus and helped him survive the long weeks, months and years of his life without her.

A warm sensation wrapped itself like a blanket around him as he lay into the cushions of the sofa. With his eyes closed, Lily's presence felt tangible in the room, comforting and reassuring, encouraging him to carry on.

She was the rod he held himself up against, his anchor in a storm. His one reason for living.

Hours later, Severus awoke with a start. It took him a few moments to overcome the hazy disorientation of an unfinished dream. With a yawn, he stretched himself experimentally and realised he had been covered with a warm, fleecy blanket.

Looking around the dimly-lit room, he realised Contessa had departed without fanfare after he had fallen asleep by the fire.

Heaving himself up from the sofa, Severus ambled drowsily into the Headmaster's sleeping chambers, taking his dreams of Lily with him.

Past and Present

Since the air had been cleared, Contessa's relationship with Severus had found a firmer footing and, now that Robert Selwyn was benefiting from her tutorials, she finally felt settled in her role at Hogwarts. Contessa was helping the Death Eater's son to perfect his potion-making and regain some self-confidence and, even though the boy was still on the receiving end of taunts and abuse, she had noticed a change in his demeanour. It was a good start.

However, it was tiring for her to be on guard around the teaching staff and controlling her outward appearances to blend in with others. Contessa found it easy to be derogatory about the Headmaster her years of practice were coming in very useful, but she was pleasantly surprised by how much she enjoyed spending time with the man she once despised.

Tuesday and Friday evenings were the only time when Contessa could truly be herself. Severus seemed more at ease around her, and their evenings together had often been the highlight of the week.

Her feelings towards him were still the same, but now she'd looked them in the eye, they were no longer disabling or destructive. Contessa was certain Severus would never return her feelings, and she knew a relationship with him would be counterproductive. Too many important things were at stake to risk muddying the waters with romance, and she was slowly coming to terms with reality.

A week before Halloween, Contessa arrived at Severus's quarters on the Friday evening to find him stretched out along the length of the sofa. Facing the fire, his nose was buried in a leather-bound book. He was dressed in his usual black trousers and white shirt but had removed his necktie and unbuttoned his waistcoat.

Severus looked around at Contessa as she entered the living room, and he gestured for her to join him on the second antique sofa opposite him.

She kicked off her boots and sprawled back onto the cushions. The fire warmed her sock-clad feet as she lay watching the crackling flames.

After a short time, Severus finished what he was reading, and placed the book on the table at his side. Contessa turned around on the sofa, feeling too comfortable to bother sitting up straight. She dug her elbow into the cushion and propped her head on her up-turned hand, watching Severus's impressive figure from across the coffee table.

"Nothing much to report," she said idly. "All quiet at the moment. The students are looking forward to the Halloween feast."

Severus frowned a little and turned to an upright sitting position, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his lap. His long fingers played with the torn cover of his reading material. He appeared preoccupied.

The firelight sent flickering shadows over his hooked-nosed profile, and Contessa felt a swooping sensation as she found herself lost in his dark, brooding features. She couldn't understand why she'd never noticed how handsome her former Potions master was; his thin, lean frame cut a curiously powerful silhouette. Long black hair framed his pale features, hiding emotions from the casual observer. She was captivated by a sense of his loneliness and vulnerability, seen only by her, on very rare occasions.

Contessa opened her mouth to speak and then stopped, giving herself a mental shake. That wasn't what she was here for.

Severus snapped his fingers lazily, and Binky the house-elf appeared at his side, holding the usual silver plate with its shiny domed cover. The elf looked at Contessa pointedly and gave her a little wink. Her eyes widened in response, and she sat up quickly with instant alertness.

Grinning appreciatively, Contessa couldn't wait to see the efforts of the house-elves and wanted to catch Severus's reaction. She could tell he knew something was going on; Severus was watching her suspiciously from across the coffee table.

A pot of coffee and two cups appeared on the table before them. Binky lifted the cloche, revealing a seasonal parkin cake decorated with floating miniature pumpkins, about the size of apricots. The minuscule lanterns twinkled and diminutive bats darted between them, emitting tiny shrieks as they flew above the moist treacle and ginger cake.

Contessa giggled. "Oh, Binky, that's marvellous beautifully done! Please thank the kitchen for me; it's just what I wanted."

"As Madam wishes," the house-elf replied with a smile and a formal bow.

Binky popped out of existence, and Contessa turned towards Severus, hoping to see an expression of amusement or, at the very least, cynicism on his face.

Instead his features were rigid, as if frozen in place.

"Oh, you don't like it," Contessa said uncertainly.

Severus grimaced. "This was for me?" he asked quietly.

"Yes," she replied, unsure of how a simple cake adorned with symbols of the upcoming festivities could cause him such dismay. "Halloween is next Friday night, so I assumed we would be forgoing our usual supper in favour of the feast. I asked the kitchen to bake us a special cake instead."

Severus nodded in understanding, but his expression did not change. "I don't celebrate Halloween."

"You don't?" Contessa asked in amazement. "But it's the one night a year when Muggles entertain the notion of witchcraft and wizardry so we all stay indoors and have a party. It's tradition."

The bats above the cake had now lost interest in the floating lanterns and were soaring in between the steaming coffee pot and empty cups, knocking the china over with a clink. Contessa took out her wand, and with a quick flick the miniature bats vanished.

Severus remained silent with his head turned away, gazing into the fire. He wrung his hands tensely.

"Why don't you celebrate Halloween?" Contessa asked in a quieter, softer voice.

He sat poised for fight or flight, clearly wishing he was elsewhere.

Then, with one swift movement, Severus picked up the coffee pot and proceeded to serve their drinks. Contessa watched him as he added milk and sugar and offered her a cup. She took it from him wordlessly, nodding her thanks and sitting quietly as she waited for his reply.

Severus warmed his hands on his cup of coffee and peered down at the table with pensive, unfocused eyes. "Halloween holds a particular anniversary which is not cause

for celebration."

After a moment's pause, Contessa still didn't understand. "It was the day You Know Who was killed, or so we thought. But surely that's another reason to celebrate?"

Severus continued to stare at the table. "Other lives were lost that day."

"Yes, Harry Potter's parents," she said, seeing a different viewpoint. "Were you close to them?"

"No," Severus answered abruptly.

Contessa had a sense of being pushed away; she had stumbled on something, but she was unsure what. Why would Severus be so perturbed by the Potters' fate if he had not been personally close to the couple?

She searched her memory for a clue.

She knew Severus had switched allegiances by the time the Potters were killed; he was her Potions master when it happened. Contessa could still remember the day she had been at Hogwarts' Halloween feast when Dumbledore, McGonagall, Hagrid and Snape had been called away urgently. They returned later that evening and announced Voldemort's death to the school.

"What happened that night, Severus?"

There was a long pause. "I am responsible for the death of the Potters. I unwittingly gave information to the Dark Lord which led to their murder."

A lump formed in Contessa's throat and she attempted to swallow it away. "I'm sorry, Severus. I didn't know."

"No-one knew."

Contessa's memory of the event replayed in her mind. "I remember that night at the Halloween feast. You were so cruel and bitter towards the students afterwards. I thought you were sorry the Dark Lord was dead, and I hated you even more..." Her voice trailed off as she realised the depths of her past misconception.

"You thought me a Death Eater through and through."

Contessa's eyes widened with horror. "How did you...?"

"Dumbledore told me a few weeks ago," Severus said languidly.

Contessa rubbed her forehead. At least it was out in the open now. She looked at the cake sadly. "I couldn't have done better with the cake, could I?" she asked wryly.

She finally caught Severus's ebony gaze, and the tension eased slightly as she detected a glimmer of irony. Contessa raised her wand again, and the cake disappeared from the table.

"So, you won't be looking forward to the feast next week," she said softly.

Severus looked back at her, caught unawares. "I cancelled the feast, so it's of no consequence."

Contessa gaped, astonished. "Severus, you can't do that! There'll be uproar!" she blurted.

A trace of comprehension crossed his face, and the corners of his mouth curled in disgust. Contessa didn't want to press the matter, but the importance of the feast could not be overstated.

"The traditions need to be upheld, Severus, otherwise people will talk," Contessa explained. "No matter how you feel," she added gently.

Severus shrugged his shoulders in defeat. "I will not be part of the preparations for Halloween."

Contessa placed her coffee cup down on the table decisively. "Right, well, I volunteer to organise the feast for you."

"Whatever you want," Severus said dispassionately.

Feeling she had gained his acceptance, Contessa rubbed her hands on her knees in preparation for her next recommendation.

"I've had another idea as well," she began.

Severus looked back at her with arched eyebrows. She held his gaze steadily until his features softened.

"Regarding the bequeathal of Gryffindor's sword," she said tentatively. "With the thirty-first of October being the anniversary of his parents' death, Harry Potter might put in an appearance at Godric's Hollow."

Nine

Chapter 9 of 14

Albus Dumbledore had a plan to protect Severus Snape after the fateful night on the Astronomy Tower. During his final year as Headmaster, Snape has a chance to come to terms with his past and find peace, before his life draws to its inevitable close. Canon-compliant. TPP Featured Story May/June 2010.

□

<http://www.tvloop.com/harry-potter/show/photos/alan-rickman-severus-snape-135025>

"I've held your hand through all of these years

But you still have all of me"

'My Immortal', Evanescence

Severus spent the following week feeling partly amused and partly irritated by Contessa's obvious zeal for organising the Halloween feast. He knew she was hoping the evening would lift the spirits of staff and students and bring everyone together after the trials of the first half of the winter term.

It was for this reason that Severus allowed her to continue planning the feast; he appreciated the value of raising morale at Hogwarts. The best outcome for him would be fewer incidents of mutiny. And, so far, in the week leading up to the Friday night feast, the children were focused on the event and behaving themselves for fear of the event being cancelled.

Times were difficult now the Dark Lord's stronghold had increased in power; Muggle-borns were being hunted down, and the Carrows were teaching anti-Muggle propaganda at the school. Severus had to bite his tongue frequently and tell himself it was unavoidable.

He abhorred prejudice against Muggle-borns; after all, Lily was one, but he was also the Headmaster of a school that discriminated against them. It was yet another part of himself which he had to keep securely locked away.

Since Phineas Nigellus Black's portrait at Grimmauld Place had been stuffed into Hermione Granger's magically-proportioned bag, Severus had received scant news about Potter and his sidekicks. He knew the trio were still alive, but until such a time as their location could be revealed, Severus had to sit tight with the sword of Gryffindor.

Contessa had suggested that Potter may visit his parents' grave on Halloween, giving them a potential window of opportunity to hand the sword over to the boy. Severus decided the odds were slim, and indeed he hoped Potter would not be stupid enough to turn up at Godric's Hollow on the anniversary of his parents' death. However, Severus had acquiesced to the idea, in view of the fact that there were no other options available at present.

As the thirty-first of October approached, the anniversary of Lily's death loomed like a spectre before him. Contessa had tried to cajole Severus into visiting the Potters' grave with her, but he had persuaded her to go alone to cast the charm which would alert them should someone lay flowers by the headstone.

Severus had undertaken to wear the Tiger's Eye ring on his little finger instead of around his neck. This eliminated the cumbersome step of removing the ring from its chain, thus drawing unwanted attention. Now he would be able to communicate with Contessa discreetly and respond should the charm be activated.

Severus had been reluctant to perform additional charms on the rings, fearing their magic might be disrupted, but in the end he decided to Disillusion his ring to prevent people noticing that he and Contessa were wearing the same jewellery.

When Halloween arrived Severus spent the day pacing around the Headmaster's office, waiting impatiently for the summons from Godric's Hollow. He became increasingly restless, unable to concentrate and unwilling to find a task to keep him sufficiently occupied.

By late afternoon the tension was too much, and he found himself drawn inexplicably to the graveyard.

Severus pulled on his heavy travelling cloak and retrieved Gryffindor's sword from behind Dumbledore's portrait, casting the former Headmaster a brief nod to convey the sword's intended destination before he left the office.

The students were still in their final lesson of the day as Severus strode unseen out of the castle.

He Apparated to the kissing gate of All Saints Church at Godric's Hollow and concealed himself with a Disillusionment Charm, passing through the gate as though the wind had swept through it.

Severus made his way carefully across the graveyard. Although he had only been there once before for the funeral, the location of the grave was firmly imprinted in his memory. His feet crunched down on golden brown leaves as he passed numerous tombstones, and a steady breeze teased his hair away from his face as he walked.

Although it was not particularly cold, the breeze held a noticeable autumn chill. Its humidity suggested impending rain.

Severus wrapped himself snugly in his cloak as he passed the grave of Kendra and Ariana Dumbledore, and he briefly read the inscription on the headstone.

*Where your treasure is, there will be your heart also.**

The words tugged Severus somewhere deep in his chest.

His treasure lay only two rows away.

A lump formed in his throat as he approached from behind a white marble headstone. It seemed to shine with ethereal grace, inviting him closer.

Severus walked around the headstone and circled to face it. His eyes skipped past the engraving of James Potter's name with a nauseous surge of annoyance. Instead he focused on the second name, and his eyes devoured the inscription.

Lily Potter, born 30 January 1960

Died 31 October 1981

*The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.**

Severus's mouth turned dry as tightness formed in his chest and throat. He dropped to his knees, his eyes stinging with the first signs of tears, and he felt the cold, wet earth beneath him soaking into his cloak and trousers, cooling his skin.

Then the sensations in his body engulfed him; pain twisted like a knife in his stomach, and his ear drums pounded and prickled in synchrony with his heartbeat. Severus wrapped his arms around himself as tears rolled down his face, splashing his cloak and landing on the grass at his knees.

Shuddering and shaking with the agony of grief, he knelt crippled on the ground, losing all sense of space and time, cocooned in his cloak before the grave of his treasure.

Eventually the pain in his abdomen turned into a hollow ache, and he started to become aware of the breeze gently drying his face. He looked once again at the words on the headstone.

*The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.**

Severus's insides numbed in response. The only man capable of cheating death was the one who murdered Lily.

The Dark Lord took her life, and Severus was still angry that Lily had died, despite having taken steps to prevent it. But, as ever, Lily had been the consummate Gryffindor and had bravely stepped in front of the Dark Lord to protect her only child.

Lily's love for her son was so profound that Severus was consumed with sickening jealousy whenever he was reminded of it. And that had happened frequently in recent

years.

The irony of the way events had unfolded that fateful night was not lost on Severus. The Boy Who Lived survived only because Severus had tried to protect Lily. If the Dark Lord had gone to Godric's Hollow with the intention of murdering her, Lily would never have been able to cast the protective charm which had kept her son alive and ultimately defeated the Dark Lord.

Severus couldn't help but feel a glimmer of pride at her talent and ability. It was Lily who had defeated the Dark Lord, not Harry Potter.

Lily had destroyed death that day, but in doing so, she lost her own life. Her body lay cold in the ground beneath his feet, and there wasn't a day passed by when Severus didn't wish he could join her there.

He wasn't scared of death; Severus saw it as release from a painfully lonely life. Death would reunite him with Lily once more.

But he was not likely to have this wish granted any time soon; he intended to redeem himself and prove his love for Lily before that time arrived.

The hilt of Gryffindor's sword weighed heavily on his hip and reminded him of his purpose for living. Severus had a role to perform before he met his death, and he had every intention of completing his mission.

As his grief dissipated he stared at Lily Potter's name carved on the white marble and reminded himself of his responsibilities.

Severus had never told Lily that he loved her, nor had he disclosed it to anyone else. But he admitted it to himself and he knew, with steely certainty, that he would never love another. Lily was the love of his life and his deepest, most terrible regret. She had meant everything to him whilst she was alive and continued to be the focus of his world in death.

His wounds would never heal as long as he lived, but at least his anguish would be extinguished eventually.

Rubbing the salty tracks of tears from his face, Severus rose to his feet, noticing that darkness had almost descended in the time he had been kneeling at the graveside.

He didn't care that he'd been away from Hogwarts for too long; the time spent at Lily's grave had nourished him and renewed his sense of purpose.

Harry Potter might still attend during the remaining hours of All Hallows Eve, but Severus knew he could not spend the evening skulking in the churchyard; his presence would be required at the feast.

Severus faced his inevitable departure from Lily's graveside with miserable reluctance.

As he stood and prepared to leave, a warm presence encircled his hand, and for a fleeting moment he imagined it to be Lily placing her hand reassuringly in his.

However, an instant later the Tiger's Eye ring cooled against the skin of his little finger.

With a sickening jolt, he knew Lily was gone. Reality was calling him home.

Signs and Portents

Contessa felt Severus's cold hand in hers as she Apparated beside him.

Concerned about his absence, she had used her Tiger's Eye ring to locate him. The Halloween feast was due to start, and the entire school was assembled in the Great Hall, awaiting the arrival of the Headmaster and the commencement of the festivities.

The rings had shown her the headstone of the Potters' grave at Godric's Hollow, and Contessa had Disapparated from the main gate outside Hogwarts, using Severus's vision as a guide. She had not expected to arrive literally at his side with their fingers entwined, and she noticed the ring on her little finger burning with unusual heat against her skin.

Turning to face him, Contessa felt Severus's hand twitch in hers, and she realised he had concealed himself with a Disillusionment Charm. A moment later he materialised before her, tightly wrapped up in his long black cloak, regarding her with surprise and a trace of apprehension.

Mortified by her indecorous arrival at the graveyard, Contessa whispered, "Sorry."

Severus's face was typically pale, and his swollen red eyes regarded her defensively.

He released her hand, and the ring on Contessa's finger cooled quickly in response. Slightly unnerved, she made a mental note to avoid using the rings for a purpose for which they had not been intended.

Disturbing Severus in his private moment of grief had been the last thing that Contessa had wanted to do, and now, standing next to him by the headstone, she was overcome with sadness.

It seemed that, in addition to the mask he wore as a Death Eater, Severus also wore an incorporeal mask of his own making. It was so rare to see him without it that Contessa did not want to let the moment pass by unacknowledged.

The reason for her visit was in direct conflict with her instincts, and she felt dismally resigned to the inevitability of what needed to be done for the greater good. It was painful for her to contemplate breaking this singular moment of vulnerability with the realities of Severus's position and responsibilities.

Severus watched her with wide eyes, seemingly unable to speak. Contessa returned his gaze awkwardly, wishing she had a choice in what she had to say. But the mission had to come first.

"I waited as long as I could, Severus, but you are urgently needed at Hogwarts. The Halloween feast awaits your presence; we can't start without you."

Severus's head hung low, his long black hair hanging in curtains, hiding his emotions. Contessa's heart ached as she waited for his reply.

When he looked back at her, she saw clouds clearing from his vision as his world came back into focus. Severus closed his eyes briefly and nodded.

She reached out, taking his hand once again in hers, and the rings tingled as they connected. Contessa felt a wave of grief and remorse hit her unexpectedly, and she shivered, partially aware that the feelings didn't belong to her.

Closing her eyes, she concentrated on their intended destination, and then space and time compressed as Severus and Contessa Disapparated from the graveyard together.

A lungful of biting fresh Highland air made them gasp as they arrived outside the main gates of Hogwarts. The rings suddenly felt very heavy, dragging their clasped hands towards the ground. As they let go of each other, the two silver bands touched again, and Contessa was flooded with Severus's emotions once more. Judging by the look on his face, it seemed he was experiencing her anxiety in return. Severus set off towards the school at a brisk walking pace.

Contessa groaned quietly. Having just resolved not to expose the Tiger's Eye rings to any more unnecessary magic, she had subsequently used them for Side-Along

Apparition. The fading heaviness of the ring on her finger admonished her.

As she glanced back towards the castle, she noticed Severus had opened the gate and was striding swiftly across the grounds to the main entrance. Contessa passed through the gate, locked it behind her and ran to catch up with the Headmaster.

Severus cast a sidelong glance as she reached out for his arm.

"I'm sorry I had to disturb you," she offered tentatively, slightly out of breath.

He didn't reply.

They walked through the antechamber together, and Contessa cast her eyes over Severus in the candle-lit Entrance Hall. She frowned, noticing the muddy patches on his cloak and the stains on the knees of his trousers. Then she realised what they signified. Contessa shut her eyes, quelling her unease.

When she opened them again, Severus was watching her, calm and expressionless, his windswept hair hanging in black fronds against his face.

"You might want to clean your robes before you go in you're looking rather dishevelled," Contessa said as she removed her cloak, revealing a long black dress with lacy cobwebs adorning the neckline and the cuffs of her sleeves. She glanced down at herself apologetically. "We've all made a bit of an effort, you see."

Severus nodded curtly.

"I'll enter through the back room of the Great Hall, so that we aren't seen together. You need only cast *lumos* Charm, and the house-elves will take care of the rest." With that, Contessa hurried away, hoping Severus could compose himself quickly and that his late arrival would not appear untoward.

Contessa took her seat in the Great Hall amidst low-level muttering from the students sitting at their House tables. The resident ghosts of Hogwarts glided overhead as the staff sat quietly at the top table, the Headmaster's chair appearing ominously empty in the half-lit hall.

The enchanted ceiling provided the only illumination, bathing the room in the light of a full moon and thousands of glimmering stars. Contessa caught sight of a shooting star arching across the artificial sky, passing the Pegasus constellation, before slipping below the horizon. Surreptitiously, she crossed her fingers under the table.

"What's the holdup?" Filius Flitwick asked her from the seat on her left.

"I don't know," she whispered quietly.

With a bang, the double doors at the opposite end of the Great Hall flew open, and Severus strode in, imposing and bat-like as ever. His cloak billowed impressively behind him as he swept down the central aisle, past the House tables filled with expectant students.

Halfway to the podium at the front of the hall, Severus raised his wand nonchalantly, and with a dramatic swoosh of circling air, the hall filled with carved pumpkin lanterns hovering mid-air.

Tablecloths of sticky cobwebs spread across the tables as the smaller of the candle-lit lanterns landed softly down upon them, leaving the larger pumpkins floating silently overhead, flickering as they bobbed and turned under the night sky.

The pumpkins were then joined by real-life bats, diving and swarming through the air, dive-bombing within inches of the students' heads with unerring precision.

Plates and goblets appeared on the tables, then finally a troop of enchanted skeletons appeared at the edges of the hall, arriving from the kitchens carrying mountainous plates of food and jugs of pumpkin juice and Butterbeer.

Severus reached the lectern and turned to face the students. Nodding to the nearest of the skeletons, Severus wordlessly signalled the opening of the Halloween feast.

Contessa watched Severus covertly as he walked around to take his seat at the head of the top table. His face was impassive, and he did not make eye contact. Contessa was overwhelmed with pity, knowing how draining it would be for Severus to wear his mask for this one evening.

Once the skeletons had served the feast and everyone had eaten their fill, a party-like atmosphere sprang up, and Contessa was heartened to see people enjoying themselves. Severus was deep in conversation with Amycus Carrow when the next stage of Contessa's plans for the evening came to fruition.

At both ends of the House tables, two barrels of water appeared, each containing a dozen or so red and green apples.

Filius nudged her, and she turned to see a look of bemusement on the smaller wizard's face.

"What are the barrels for?" he asked her curiously.

"It's an old Muggle game," Contessa replied, "called bobbing for apples."

"Bobbing for apples?" Filius repeated uncertainly.

"Yes. The game is to catch an apple in your mouth without the use of your hands."

A few children who were familiar with the game had now approached the barrels and were sticking their fingers into the water experimentally.

"Come on, Filius," Contessa cajoled the Head of Ravenclaw. "Let's give it a go!"

The small wizard looked at her hesitantly for a moment then hopped off his chair to follow her to a barrel beside the Ravenclaw table.

Anthony Goldstein was leaning over the surface of bobbing apples, making his first attempt. He had so far managed to hold a red apple up against the edge of the barrel and was endeavouring to secure it with his teeth.

The apple rotated in the water, and the crevice that usually held the stalk opened up into a mouth-like shape. The apple firmly nipped Goldstein on the chin.

The Ravenclaw shot up from the surface of the water, rubbing his chin in surprise. His friend, Michael Corner, laughed heartily at him.

"What the bloody hell...?" Goldstein exclaimed.

"The apple is bewitched, mate," Corner replied. "It bit you back!"

Contessa and Filius joined them by the barrel. "I think this is a wizard version of bobbing for apples," she said slyly.

"Not much fun if the apples bite back." Goldstein looked doubtful as he offered his assessment.

"Oh, I don't think they all bite," Contessa said, poking a passing apple with her index finger. "You've just been unlucky."

Corner stepped forward, inclining his head into the barrel. "I'm going to try for a green one see if they don't bite."

He chased an apple around the edge of the barrel and sighed with frustration.

"I reckon you've got a better chance going for one in the middle," Filius pondered.

Goldstein looked at the tiny Charms Professor dubiously. "Perhaps you could show us, Sir," he said with a hint of mischief.

Contessa smiled encouragingly at the Professor and retrieved her wand, Summoning a stool to lift Filius up to the edge of the barrel. He raised his eyebrows at her, realising he had been skilfully manoeuvred into playing the game. With a sigh and a resigned shake of his head, he stepped up and leaned over the edge of the barrel, holding his beard against his robes and targeting a green apple alone in the middle of the water.

The apple promptly nipped him on the nose.

Surrounding Ravenclaws tried unsuccessfully to suppress their laughter.

"So much for the theory about the colour of the apples, then," Goldstein said, covering a smirk.

Contessa watched Filius make a second attempt, rubbing her thumb absently against the Tiger's Eye ring on her little finger. One of the bewitched apples attempted to bite the Professor on the cheek but became tangled up in his long beard and tugged him towards the side of the barrel.

A chortle formed in Contessa's throat, and she attempted to stifle it, closing her eyes and biting down on the inside of her mouth. As she did so, the metal of the ring cooled against her skin, and she glimpsed a vision of herself and Filius Flitwick from an angle behind them.

Realising she had inadvertently triggered the rings, Contessa immediately snapped her eyes open and unclasped her hand, turning to see Severus watching her from the top table.

She shot him an apologetic glance and turned back to see Filius stepping down from his stool, an apple in his mouth, triumphant with the cheers of his House.

Sybill Trelawney wandered over to congratulate the Head of Ravenclaw. "Well done, Filius. According to Muggle superstition, you will be the first to marry."

Filius's eyes bulged, and he almost choked on the apple. He waved her off and hurried back towards the teachers' table. Contessa chuckled at the Divination Professor, surprised to learn that Muggles had their own false notions based on the apple-dooking game.

"Are you going to have a go, my dear?" Sybill asked Contessa.

"Absolutely." Contessa smiled.

She approached the barrel of water and dipped her head confidently, knowing the secret of which apples were bewitched. With one swift, practised movement she captured a shiny green apple between her teeth and bowed to the applause of the two Ravenclaw boys. As Contessa stood up straight and took the apple from her mouth, she noticed Severus walking over to their barrel. Goldstein and Corner ceased clapping and walked away.

"Good evening, Headmaster," Contessa said formally.

"Madam Marchbanks." Severus nodded.

Sybill Trelawney nudged Contessa's arm and passed her a small silver knife.

"You should peel the apple, Tess. It's another Muggle tradition."

Contessa accepted the knife and began to carefully peel the apple.

Severus arched one eyebrow and then, to Contessa's astonishment, leaned over the barrel and deftly caught a red apple between his teeth.

"That was almost effortless, Headmaster. How did you know which apple to choose?" Contessa said, after she had recovered from the shock.

Severus's brow furrowed, and he tilted his head. "I chose an apple which still had its stalk," he said, as if the reason should have been obvious to her.

"But, how..."

Severus coolly ignored Contessa's question, choosing instead to remove a small potions knife from inside his robes. He proceeded to peel his red apple, dropping small slivers of the fruit's skin onto the Ravenclaw House table.

Contessa's knife reached the end of its task, and she looked down at the fruit, amazed to see she had peeled the apple in one long, curling slice. The green apple peel hung from her fingers in a spiral.

Sybill Trelawney smiled knowingly.

"What?" Contessa asked her.

"It's a good omen."

"What is?"

"Well, the Muggles believe the length of the apple peel determines life expectancy," Sybill said airily.

Contessa's mouth gaped as she looked at the Divination Professor. "You're kidding."

"No, I'm not. But it is only a Muggle prophecy; I don't set much store by them."

Contessa bit down on her tongue, trying hard not to laugh. She looked away, turning to see Severus's reaction, but he was staring at his pile of short apple peelings with an ironic smirk.

Sybill appeared not to notice and continued, "Now, you should throw the apple peel over your shoulder."

Severus's gaze met Contessa's briefly, and they shared a moment of amusement, before he scooped up his peel and lobbed it over his left shoulder.

Contessa mirrored his movement. "Now what?" she asked.

Sybill glided over, adjusting a flowing purple shawl which had fallen from her shoulder and peered seriously through her glasses at the apple peel on the floor. "The shavings should form the shape of the first letter of your true love."

Contessa gulped as she felt her heart leap to her throat. Suddenly, the game no longer seemed funny.

The three of them stared at the patterns of apple shavings on the floor.

Sybill pointed to a lop-sided crescent moon formation, in the top left hand corner of Severus's arrangement of peel.

"That looks like an 'L' to me," she said wistfully.

Severus did not look up. "Is that so?" he said. His voice was taut and constricted, and Contessa noticed him twitch as he covered a tiny crack in his composure.

Leaning forwards, Contessa scrutinised the suggested shape. Her insides burned.

Firenze trotted over to the small gathering and surveyed the floor inquisitively. "I'd say it's more like a 'C'," he pondered. The centaur's tail swooshed majestically as he turned and sauntered towards the Slytherin table.

A heady nausea wrapped itself around Contessa as she tore her eyes away from the stone floor.

"Yours looks like an 'S'," said Sybill thoughtfully, examining Contessa's peel.

Before Contessa could reply, Luna Lovegood appeared beside the barrel, raised her wand and said, *'Immobulus!'*

A red apple froze in place, allowing Luna to secure the apple quickly between her teeth. She took a bite of the fruit and paused, standing next to Sybill Trelawney and studying the pattern of peel at their feet.

"Indeed, it does look like an 'S'. But then there's only a few letters that a coiled strip of peel could make," Luna said contemplatively.

With that, the blonde witch turned on her heel and skipped enigmatically from the hall.

Masquerade

Blistering winds arrived in November, stripping trees of their remaining leaves. Morning frosts turned the landscape icy-white, withering perennial plants holding on to the last gasps of temperate weather.

Inside Hogwarts the atmosphere was quieter and, for once, the students were held in check. Severus felt the Halloween feast had been a useful exercise; it seemed to pacify some of the more disruptive students, allowing the professors to focus on teaching.

However, after a couple of weeks of relative calm, events outside the castle started to impact upon the school.

It was clear to anyone reading the *Daily Prophet* that the Dark Lord had gained control of the newspaper some months ago. In the intervening time *The Quibbler* had stepped up to the mark, essentially replacing the *Prophet* as the source of real news. The editor of the magazine continued to print ludicrous articles about Crumple-Horned Snorkacks and such like, in an attempt to conceal sedition against the Dark Lord's regime.

Luna Lovegood had become something of a minor celebrity amongst the students, who were heralding her father as a valiant crusader for the truth. Such was Miss Lovegood's burgeoning popularity that Contessa had to place a quiet word in the girl's ear, forewarning her to stay out of trouble.

Severus needed Miss Lovegood to be whiter-than-white for her to remain at the school; so far the editor's daughter had applied some of her Ravenclaw intelligence and kept a low profile.

Early one Tuesday morning, Alecko Carrow discovered Seamus Finnigan and Ernie Macmillan wandering the corridors of Hogwarts, affixing posters bearing the Headmaster's face on as many walls as possible with Permanent Sticking Charms. The posters showed Severus's pale, thin face, and his finger pointing sternly at the reader, aside the slogan, 'Snape wants YOU to read *The Quibbler*'.

Such was Severus's fury with the boys that he penalised the whole school for the offence. All Houses were confined to quarters until morning lessons began, forcing the students to miss their breakfast altogether. Severus hoped the strong message would make everybody think twice about supporting the activities of the DA.

Later that evening, Severus retired to his quarters and showered and changed into a fresh black shirt and trousers. He caught his reflection in the large dressing table mirror as he buttoned up his shirt. The Tiger's Eye ring around his neck glinted in the candlelight.

Severus had gone back to wearing the ring on its chain ever since the Halloween feast. He decided to lift the Disillusionment Charm in an attempt to minimise the undue influence of additional charms and also prevent him from losing the ring.

During the feast, when Contessa accidentally triggered a connection between the two rings, Severus suspected he had briefly sensed her thoughts. He had chosen not to tell Contessa, deciding it would be much better to have her believe his power of intellectual deduction led him to choose a stalked apple.

Contessa arrived in his quarters exactly on time at eight o'clock, wearing a knitted, black cardigan and a long flowing skirt adorned with a subtly shimmering pattern of bronze and gold autumn leaves. She too had started to make more of an effort for their shared evenings, and he was an appreciative beneficiary.

Severus sat down facing the doorway, and Contessa took her usual seat opposite him on the sofa across the coffee table. The fire blazed merrily as Severus served her a cup of aromatic coffee from the tray provided by the house-elf. Contessa slid the plate of biscuits over the table and selected a garibaldi.

"I might take a stash of these in a napkin tonight," Contessa said wryly, "just in case you decide to pull another stunt like the one this morning."

Severus watched her closely, expecting criticism.

"I was starving all morning, you know," she continued. "Horace was really annoyed with me; I'm hopeless if I haven't been fed."

Severus caught his breath. "The teaching staff didn't get any breakfast either?" he asked.

Contessa looked at him, surprised. "You didn't know?"

Severus shook his head, feeling a slight flush rising in his cheeks.

"I thought it was a bit harsh, even by your standards," Contessa said, a trace of a smile gracing her lips. "Maybe next time you'll ensure the staff are provided for and don't spend the entire morning snapping at students and handing out extra homework."

A smirk curled Severus's mouth, and he paused before replying. "For a moment there, I thought you were trying to dissuade me."

She chuckled and Severus relaxed, held rapt in her bluish, slate-like gaze.

"It certainly worked," Contessa said. "Some of the students are ready to turn in the culprits, next time something happens."

"So, the punishment was effective, then."

"It was," Contessa replied. "Though I'm not sure I want my behaviour to emulate a certain Potions master again."

Severus smiled as he watched Contessa fiddling with the laces on her ankle boots, eventually removing them and placing her slender feet on the cushioned sofa.

"Filch has been dusting off his collection of chains and shackles today," Contessa said darkly. "The man is incorrigible; he's getting all excited at the prospect of using his thumbscrews again."

"I might be tempted, next time there's a revolt," Severus replied.

Contessa frowned at him. "I hope you don't plan to use them on the staff as well."

"Only the ones who misbehave and talk back to the Headmaster," Severus replied, unable to hide a grin.

"I'll bear that in mind," Contessa replied, one eyebrow raised.

Severus felt a ripple of amusement at her feigned seriousness. He took a deep, anticipatory breath. "I'm glad to see you've finally learned your place."

Contessa turned with mock annoyance, reached for a teaspoon and threw it across the table, intending to hit him on the shoulder. Severus ducked out of the way. His eyes glittered as she grinned back at him, laughing.

The moment was broken by a loud gong chime; the Doorbell Charm on the Headmaster's office had been activated. Contessa looked completely bewildered by the sound.

Severus sobered instantly, and leapt to his feet.

"Who is it?" Contessa asked.

"One of the Carrows," Severus replied. "We don't have much time."

"The Carrows? Why would they..."

"They've started to drop in at all hours, so I've taken precautions. We have about twenty seconds to look convincing."

Contessa looked at Severus, frozen with horror.

He bent over and lifted her legs off the sofa, ushering her to one side so he could sit down next to her. Severus turned his back to the door. "You need to look more alluring," he said urgently.

"Excuse me?"

"Here," he said, extracting his wand and pointing it at her buttoned-up cardigan.

Contessa flinched as he Transfigured the garment into a black silk blouse. She looked down at her new clothing, stunned.

"Undo the first few buttons," Severus instructed, thinking it would be prudent to unbutton the blouse by magic, but not wanting to risk provoking her. "Quickly!" he pressed, stowing his wand away.

Looking into her frightened eyes, Severus heard the footsteps of one of the Carrows ascending the stairs to his quarters.

"My apologies," Severus said, hoping fervently that Contessa was ready for what was about to happen.

He slipped his right hand around her waist and pulled her closer. Ignoring her gasp, he slid his left hand into the V of her blouse, pushing the silk aside to expose her creamy-white collarbone and a black bra-strap. Severus inclined his head towards Contessa's neck and felt her body tense.

His lips met the soft warmth of her skin, and he inhaled the lingering aroma of her perfume.

Severus's heart thumped loudly as the uninvited guest burst through the door.

"Snake! Yeh've got to see this!" Amycus Carrow wheezed. "That ridiculous little man has done it again!" The wizard paused when he caught sight of the scene unfolding on the sofa.

Severus sighed, causing Contessa to shiver at the sensation of hot breath on her shoulder. He removed his lips from her collarbone and turned to cast Amycus a look of tested patience. Severus's right hand held Contessa firmly as she squirmed beside him.

"Oh," the Death Eater managed, rolling the copy of *The Quibbler* in his hands and gently tapping the paper cylinder with his fingertips. "Sorry to disturb yeh when yeh're..." The man halted, mouth gaping open at the sight of Severus and Contessa canoodling on the settee. "Busy," he finished.

"Perhaps next time you could knock," Severus said testily into the silence.

"Err. Yeah, I s'pose so."

When Severus turned back to face Contessa, she had pulled her blouse over her exposed shoulder and was starting to fumble with the buttons. He couldn't allow her to reassert herself in front of Amycus Carrow; she was meant to be at Severus's beck and call.

"Who told you to cover up?" Severus said in a low, sneering voice.

Contessa recoiled and looked back at him with wide, angry eyes.

Severus eyeballed her for a long moment, mentally crossing his fingers. She had to realise she must play along with the masquerade.

Eventually she capitulated to the request, dropping the silky blouse to reveal a length of collarbone. Her jaw was set firmly as she stared back at him with a hint of defiance.

Severus blinked, and let out his breath. "What do you want, Amycus?" he said, without turning around to face the Death Eater. Instead, Severus placed his fingertips on Contessa's jaw and ran them slowly past her ear and down her neck. She shuddered, but did not pull away.

"Yeh've got to see this copy of tomorrow's *Quibbler*, Snape," Amycus drawled. "This time Lovegood's gorn too far. He's run another article on Potter, claimin' he's still alive and urgin' folks to support the boy."

Severus's hand dropped from Contessa's shoulder and he turned around to reach out for the magazine in the Death Eater's hands.

"Give it to me," Severus instructed him.

He perused the feature briefly, realising the editor of *The Quibbler* had no understanding of the difficulties his daughter would face if he persisted in printing the truth.

"It's high time his kid was expelled from Hogwarts she's a rallying point for them mutineers. Every day she spends under this roof undermines yeh as Headmaster,"

Amycus said firmly.

"The girl has done nothing wrong and will not be punished for the misdemeanours of her father. She is better off here, where we can keep an eye on her," Severus answered evenly.

Contessa shifted against his arm, and he turned to see a look of discomfort on her face and a glint of rebellion in her eyes.

"You are an impatient little tease at times, Marchbanks," he whispered at a level audible enough for Amycus to hear.

Severus pulled her blouse back over her shoulder and removed his hand from her waist. None too gently, he pushed her upwards off the sofa, stopping short of tapping her behind.

"Go to my personal chambers and warm the bed for me," he told her smoothly. "I'll deal with you later."

Contessa shot him a contemptuous look. Severus maintained steely eye contact until she turned to leave.

"Yes, Headmaster," she said through gritted teeth.

One hand clenched in a fist at Contessa's side as she walked away and opened the door into his bedroom.

A Beautiful Lie

Contessa closed the door inside Severus's personal chambers and rested her back against the solid oak panel. Her knees were close to giving out, and she fought the urge to slide down and collapse into a quivering pool on the floor.

It was the second time she had felt Severus's breath lingering on her neck, but this time her skin had been softly kissed.

Her collarbone still tingled with the memory. She almost couldn't breathe.

Contessa tried to recover her composure as her clenched fists gently banged against the door. Years of ingrained resistance to Severus's authority mingled with the exquisite sensation of his lips brushing against her skin and the delicate caress of his fingers against her jaw and neckline.

She was annoyed with his ability to demean her and dazed by his power to make her literally weak at the knees. And there was also a feeling of awe.

Severus had been able to act out his role convincingly, undaunted by the sudden appearance of an adversary and unfazed by the part he had to play. Contessa envied his ability to detach himself from his emotions. She knew the unrequited feelings she harboured had hindered her ability to play along.

Amycus Carrow's muffled voice was discernible from the outside, and Contessa placed her ear carefully against the wooden door.

"She's still got spirit, that one," Amycus was saying. "Are yeh sure yeh're controllin' her completely with the Imperius Curse?"

Contessa heard the clinking of china and pictured the Death Eater taking a seat and helping himself to her cup of coffee.

"She is controlled at precisely the level I require," Severus replied.

There was a slight pause.

"She didn't seem that submissive just then," Amycus remarked.

Another pause.

Contessa imagined Severus raising his eyebrows, planning his next words with great care. She wished she'd pretended to be more compliant and hoped Severus had an answer which would easily explain her insubordination.

As usual, the falsities dropped from his lips with practised ease. "I don't want her to be too meek and subservient otherwise where's the challenge?"

Contessa shivered. The lie sounded so beautiful, wrapped in the velvet timbre of his voice. She closed her eyes as butterflies fluttered upwards towards her throat.

Amycus grunted. "Yeh always did get a kick from them power games."

Severus's reply was smooth, steering the conversation away from their deception. "I believe you wished to discuss Miss Lovegood?"

Contessa sighed and slowly breathed in the air of the bedroom. There was a noticeable medicinal smell, much like that of the dungeons, and its sharp, herbal aroma suffused the room.

She opened her eyes and cast a *Lumos* Charm. The candles sprang into life as Contessa walked cautiously into the chambers.

The bedroom was oak-panelled and held an air of understated grandeur. A large four-poster bed with emerald green velvet curtains dominated the room.

The space was fairly tidy, with the exception of Severus's cloak, frock coat and assortment of crumpled robes strewn across the bed, and the usual towers of books at his bedside. It seemed the house-elves were curbing some of the Headmaster's untidier tendencies.

Contessa looked around for somewhere to sit down and noticed a dressing table opposite the foot of the bed. There was no stool. The only place to sit was the bed, and she was loath to follow Severus's instructions to warm it for him he was already pushing his luck, as far as she was concerned.

Staring at the bed, she started to entertain the notion of slipping underneath the sheets. The stone-coloured pillowcases glowed in the candlelight, and she was drawn to run her fingers across the material. Crisp cotton slipped under her touch, and Contessa's hand teased the warm brown quilt where it met the paler sheets. She envisioned herself sliding underneath, surrendering to...

A pop sounded suddenly, yanking Contessa brutally out of her daydream. Binky the house-elf appeared at the opposite side of the bed, and without looking up he proceeded to collect Severus's discarded robes from the bed, presumably taking them to be laundered.

Contessa snatched her hand away from the bed linen and took a step backwards. The elf flinched and looked up at her, eyes wide with panic and surprise.

"Good evening, Madam Marchbanks," he squeaked. "Binky apologises for the intrusion." He looked around furtively. "The Headmaster's personal chambers are usually unoccupied at this time of the evening." Binky's face was full of remorse as he bowed apologetically. The house-elf then removed the belt from Severus's trousers and began lashing himself in punishment.

Contessa ran to the other side of the bed and extracted the leather belt from the elf's hand, holding Binky still in her grasp to prevent a further attempt at self-harm.

"There is no need for that," Contessa told Binky. "Besides, we have a delicate situation unfolding. One of the Carrows is with Severus in the living room."

Binky's eyes narrowed, and his ears twitched. "Binky understands, Madam." His eyes flickered once again to the leather belt in Contessa's hand, clearly fighting the urge to continue chastising himself. He licked his lips.

Contessa coiled the belt in her hand and opened the dresser drawer nearest to her, stowing the makeshift weapon out of sight.

Binky slumped in relief. His saucer-shaped eyes searched the room, taking in the rumpled edge of the sheet where Contessa had been standing.

"Binky can turn down the bed for Madam, if required."

Contessa eyed the bed, and her cheeks burned; she hoped her stare alone would return the sheets to their former pristine state.

"That won't be necessary, Binky," she said, trying to appear nonchalant.

Binky gathered up the remaining clothes, straightened the sheets and bade Contessa goodnight.

Standing alone once more in Severus's bedroom, the thought of the Headmaster expecting to find her waiting underneath the covers became a real predicament. Contessa wondered if he would choose to humiliate her with a mocking smirk or praise her for her pragmatism. It was, after all, unlikely that he would join her in the warm bed.

Wasn't it?

Of course it was. She shook herself again.

Contessa collapsed to a sitting position on the edge of the bed, her feet nudging one of the teetering piles of books by the bedside table.

With a sigh, she realised she had no appetite for reading and wondered how long Severus would be occupied. The patterned rug at the side of the bed held her attention for a while as she waited.

A quarter of an hour later, lost in a trance, Contessa jumped at the sound of the door snapping open. Severus strode into the room, his boots clicked sharply on the floor until he stopped a few feet away from her. His fingers entwined as he clasped his hands together, and despite wearing casual clothing, he appeared stern and imposing. Contessa leapt to her feet tremulously.

"Has he gone?" she asked.

"He has."

"Thank God," Contessa exhaled.

"And what exactly have you been doing for the last fifteen minutes?" he snapped, raising his chin slightly and looking down his hooked nose at her.

"I beg your pardon?" she replied indignantly.

"I specifically told you to warm the bed for me. Instead you saw fit to tidy the room and perch on the edge of a bed like a Bowtruckle camouflaged in its tree."

Contessa felt a hot and heady flush envelop her. "Who the hell do you think you're talking to?" Her hands moved to her hips.

Severus's eyebrows arched and he looked down at her imperiously. "I am talking to a shameless temptress of a Potions Assistant who cannot be trusted to maintain a charade."

The words *'how dare you'* never quite made it out of Contessa's mouth; they were superseded by the swift movement of her clenched fist. Her punch landed on Severus's cheek before he could mount a defence.

He looked back at her with mild surprise and caught her wrist to prevent further blows. Severus winced as he rubbed his face with his free hand, flexing his jaw experimentally.

"Temper, temper," he said patronisingly into the awkward silence. "You really need to learn to control your emotions. You almost gave the game away."

Contessa suppressed a low growl forming in her throat. "Pardon me for being distracted by your vampiric tendency of going for my neck..."

"Not then, Contessa. You just about held it together when Amycus entered the room. But if he'd decided to barge into the bedroom, he'd have found a sheepish-looking slip of a woman staring pensively at the floor. Hardly a vision of *Imperio'd* lust and temptation." Severus's low voice was scolding as he continued to hold her tightly by one arm.

"If you thought I'd actually warm the bed for you, then you're seriously deluded," Contessa retaliated. Her chest heaved with her ragged breath but, deep down, she knew the untruth of her words.

"For God's sake, woman," Severus replied, exasperated. "I didn't expect to find you draped across my bed in your underwear, but I did hope you would think to close the curtains around the bed and pretend to be ready and waiting for your Headmaster."

This time the growl escaped from Contessa's throat, and she snatched her arm away from him, stalking out of the bedroom and into the empty living room.

She hated him for it, but Severus's logic was sound. Contessa realised her romantic feelings for him were still clouding her judgement.

Reaching the back of the sofa upon which Severus usually sat, she stopped and hunched over. Her hands stroked the worn fabric as her mind processed the evening's events. She heard Severus's footsteps following her out of the bedroom, and sensed him standing quietly behind her. Eventually Severus reached out, and Contessa felt the reassuring warmth of his hand on her shoulder. She turned to face him.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't think."

Severus removed his hand and gestured for her to sit down on the sofa. As she did so, he took out his wand and cleared away the debris from the coffee table. Two mugs of hot chocolate appeared before them. Contessa couldn't help but smile when Severus tapped his wand against her cup and marshmallows suddenly bobbed on the surface of the steaming liquid.

She watched Severus sit down opposite her, on the sofa which usually belonged to her. Her heart-rate slowed, and her breathing returned to normal. She picked up the cup and prodded the marshmallows with a spoon. "Thanks."

Severus took a sip of his drink. "I know certain situations can be hard if you're not accustomed to play-acting." His features were softer now as he stared at the mug in his hands. "It's even more difficult since we've become friends." He didn't look up.

Contessa had a sense of Severus's personal struggle to verbalise the latter sentence, and one word resonated through her, removing any lingering animosity or uncertainty.

Friends.

Rendered speechless by a spiralling mixture of joy and sadness, Contessa wondered how long it had been since Severus had a friend. Certainly, in all the time she spent in his company, Contessa had never once heard him talk about having friends, in either a past or present tense.

Although she longed for more, she also realised that friendship alone was a compliment of some magnitude and not something which Severus gave readily.

She watched him shifting uncomfortably across the table and for the first time wondered how he felt about their masquerade. Contessa supposed it must be incredibly difficult for him when he felt no attraction towards her. She was shocked and slightly ashamed to realise she was not the only one who suffered.

Contessa cleared her throat. "Maybe, if it happens again, we should have a plan thought out in advance. If we hadn't had to cobble it together at the last second, you wouldn't have needed to cover up for me." Their eyes made contact again. "Your explanation of the strength of the Imperius Curse was inspired, by the way."

Severus seemed to relax a little, and his eyes widened slyly. "Yes, well, you've always been a bit of a challenge. Recently, once or twice, I thought I might *Imperio* you just to keep you quiet, but I decided you're much more interesting company when in possession of all your faculties. Whilst you are often rather irritating, you are also entertaining by equal measure."

"Funny. But you wouldn't stand a chance at *Imperio-ing* me." Contessa smiled. "Of course, I could have *Imperio'd* you if I'd chosen to."

"I doubt that very much; it has been over twenty years since anyone has successfully placed me under the Imperius Curse."

"Doubt all you want, Severus, but I could've done it. Luckily for you, I quite enjoy your quick-witted, acerbic nature. You wouldn't have been much fun, otherwise."

Severus regarded her suspiciously. "I am intrigued. I'd like to see you attempt the impossible and fail spectacularly. Perhaps you would like to place me under the Imperius Curse now?"

"Oh, I would very much like to, but I don't think I'll be able to do it at Hogwarts; the opportunities here are few and far between. However, there were numerous chances at Squirrel's Leap. I'm quite disappointed that I let them pass me by, now that you mention it."

"Excuses, excuses."

Contessa picked up her drink and took a sip, determined not to rise to Severus's bait. If she was going to have a chance at *Imperio-ing* the Headmaster, it would be easier if he didn't know the method.

She covered up her conniving with a smile and settled back into the sofa with the cup of hot chocolate resting against her new silk blouse.

The Unforgivable Curse

As the end of winter term approached, the portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black reported Ronald Weasley's departure from the golden trio. The news caused Severus some consternation. The Weasley boy would be unable to return to the wizarding world and, forced into hiding, he was placing Potter in greater danger. At least Miss Granger had sense enough to remain behind; the Boy Who Lived had a better chance of surviving the winter months camping in the freezing outdoors with her around.

The Quibbler continued to cause a nuisance at Hogwarts. Severus had been forced to ban the publication from the school, but he knew copies were still in circulation. He was resolutely ignoring the Carrows' suggestions and, because Miss Lovegood maintained her low profile, Severus had not needed to resort to remedial action which would place the girl in jeopardy.

During the last week of term, Contessa had informed him she would be spending the Christmas holidays at the Marchbanks' family home in the Brecon Beacons. As there were very few students remaining behind and all but one of those were Slytherins, the majority of teaching staff had decided to vacate the castle. Only the Carrows were staying, along with Severus, and Argus Filch.

Contessa had asked Severus to keep an eye on the sole remaining Gryffindor student, and he couldn't fathom why Contessa had made it her personal responsibility to look after Robert Selwyn. The boy would have the whole of Gryffindor Tower to himself over Christmas, and there was nothing Severus would've liked more than to spend time at Hogwarts all alone; the solitude greatly appealed to him. However, when he expressed this to Contessa, she seemed a little upset by his assertion. He could not comprehend why.

On the last night of term, the students and staff enjoyed the traditional Christmas feast, and the children went back to their Houses to pack their trunks ready for the Hogwarts Express, scheduled to depart the following morning at ten o'clock.

Contessa met Severus in his quarters, and they spent the diminishing hours of the evening with a bottle of port, talking about new advances in potion-making. Severus had watched his glass being refilled by his guest several times. He couldn't remember falling asleep.

He awoke quite late on the Saturday morning but felt strangely unconcerned. He was sure that the Carrows would oversee the students' journey to the train station without any difficulty.

Severus got out of bed and padded to the dressing table mirror, staring at his unshaven reflection. He ran his fingers through his hair in an attempt at taming it then rummaged in the wardrobe for a particular item of clothing. He found a dark green silky dressing gown embroidered with strikingly coloured dragons on the lapels.

Severus lifted the robe from its hanger and shrugged it over his shoulders. His feet found a pair of slippers on the floor.

He wandered into the living area of his quarters and clicked his fingers to Summon his house-elf. Binky appeared next to the fireplace, carrying a tray of two servings of scrambled eggs on toast and a pot of tea. For some reason which Severus couldn't ascertain, this didn't seem unusual.

Severus threw a handful of Floo Powder onto the fire and took the silver tray from the elf. When Binky popped out of existence, Severus took a careful step onto the hearth, green flames tickling at his bare legs, and pronounced his destination.

His old quarters in the dungeon.

The Headmaster's personal Floo Network transported Severus instantly, and he arrived gracefully without a drop of tea being spilt. Holding the breakfast tray in his hands, he stepped out of the fireplace and looked around the room. It looked much the same as always, but he noticed extra candelabras dotted around and a distinct floral aroma... Was it freesia, or jasmine? The smell was out of place in these quarters which, now that he thought about it, no longer belonged to him. So what was he doing here?

His hands began to shake slightly on the tray as consciousness pervaded his mind, and the false sense of calmness dissolved. He caught a flicker of movement in the corner of his eye and turned to see Contessa at the doorway to his old bedroom, grinning from ear to ear.

Severus felt his nostrils flare as realisation dawned with a sickening crunch. The contents of the tray started to slide around, and he looked down at the breakfast which Contessa had compelled him to deliver. A low growl escaped his lips.

He placed the rattling tray of food on the table as Contessa skipped into the living room and landed on the sofa, gleefully crossing her legs like a pixie.

He turned to leave.

"Good morning, Severus," Contessa said, barely able to contain a giggle. "How lovely of you to bring me breakfast!"

Severus's lip twitched, and a hot shudder ascended his spine.

"Mmmm," Contessa continued, talking to his back. "Scrambled eggs."

Severus could practically hear her mouth watering and, to his dismay, he noticed his salivary glands respond in kind. He closed his eyes and shook his head.

"How did you know they were my favourite?" she asked him with fake innocence.

Severus turned around to face her, his jaw set tight and hands clenched into fists.

"You *Imperio'd* me," Severus said in a low, croaking voice. Acid rose in his stomach, quelling his appetite.

Contessa watched him closely for a moment.

"I did," she said, her voice almost a whisper. The smile that formed on her face did not goad; in fact Severus thought he saw a glimmer of sadness in her eyes.

Unconsciously, Severus's posture relaxed. His fists unclenched, and his hands slipped against the silky material of his dressing robe. Except that it wasn't *this* robe; he'd never seen it before in his life. As he looked down at the shimmering embroidered dragons adorning his chest, his eyes narrowed. He felt cool air circulating around his ankles, and a moment later his stomach flipped, sending a rush of blood to his cheeks.

He spun on his heel and stepped towards the fireplace.

"Please don't leave," Contessa said despondently.

Looking back over his shoulder, through a haze of conflicting emotions, he saw Contessa perched on the edge of his old Chesterfield settee, fidgeting with her bare feet. Her brown hair fell in unkempt waves across her shoulders. The last vestiges of sleep clouded her eyes, and the pallor of her skin suggested dehydration and a possible hangover.

Severus turned slowly and noticed her cotton pyjamas were patterned with a black and orange cartoon-style duck. Her attire was almost as ridiculous as his. Could that be intentional?

Suddenly he found it harder to feel anger and humiliation. Severus's fingers rubbed his chin, taking in the prickly texture of his stubble. His tongue felt dry against the roof of his mouth.

Contessa's eyes met his, blue-grey and hopeful.

"You little minx," he said into the silence, with a hint of regret and perhaps amusement.

Her eyes widened and she smiled again. "Well, I had to prove my point. That'll teach you to throw down the gauntlet again."

"I didn't think you had it in you," he replied.

"Thanks a lot," Contessa said, eyebrows arched.

Severus paused. She had misinterpreted. "I didn't mean you were incapable of performing an Unforgivable Curse. I never doubted that for a second. I just didn't believe you capable of deceit and coercion."

"I learned from the best," Contessa replied wryly.

"So it seems."

Severus's heard a rumble emanate from his stomach, and his hand covered it surreptitiously.

"Sit down, Severus," Contessa said gently. "The eggs are going cold." She picked up the teapot and poured two cups of tea. "Besides, if you leave now, you won't find out how I managed it."

Severus knew instantly he was caught on a hook, about to be reeled in. He would exact his revenge another time, when she least expected it. Now was not the time to be a sore loser.

Reluctantly, he sat down at the other end of the sofa, feeling the cool leather of the sofa through the thin material of his robe. He picked up a cup of tea and took a sip. The warm liquid slid down his throat, calming and soothing in the way that only tea can.

"So," Severus began. "You got me drunk enough to fall asleep..."

"Yes. I had to wait an hour or so until you fell into the rapid-eye-movement cycle."

"When I was dreaming... Why?"

"Because that's when your mind is active, and you're more susceptible to the influence of the curse. It slips in as part of your dream."

Severus looked at her for a long moment, impressed. The theory made complete sense.

Contessa picked up her plate of scrambled eggs and started to tuck in. Severus found himself doing the same.

"How did I get into bed?" he asked in between mouthfuls.

"I left the suggestion to go to bed if you awoke during the night," Contessa explained.

"And to undress myself?"

"Yes."

Severus paused. "That's a relief."

Contessa laughed. "The Sobriety Potion I took last night reined me in a bit. It's a shame it didn't prevent the hangover, though."

Severus's head tilted as he appraised her. "So that's how you managed to out-drink me, and still have the ability to perform the curse." His forehead creased, and he settled the fork against the plate with a clink. "You are surprisingly devious, Contessa. Perhaps you could've been in Slytherin after all. Thinking up methods of *Imperio'ing* people in their sleep, who'd have thought you capable?"

Contessa's eyes narrowed as she reached out for her cup of tea. Her frown bemused Severus.

"I know you mean that as a compliment," she said, "but I can't take full credit."

"Pity. Why not?"

"Well, it wasn't my idea originally. When I was younger I had the trick played on me by my cousin for a dare, although to be honest, at the time I thought it was a fluke. Your goading motivated me to try it; I never imagined it would be so successful." Contessa smiled at the plate of food. "The eggs are excellent."

"I assume you gave Binky his instructions?"

"Indeed I did," Contessa replied. Her eyes twinkled as she looked at the pattern of dragons on Severus's dark green robe.

Severus suspected Contessa must have asked the house-elf to place the dressing gown in his wardrobe. He wondered if she was retaliating, following his Transfiguration of her clothing a few weeks ago.

Severus exhaled with a tight laugh. "Your foresight is noteworthy; however, I'm more intrigued by the ease with which you cursed me. I've never heard of that method, and now that I come to think of it, I wonder why it hasn't been tried before."

"Well, generally speaking, it's almost impossible to break into a wizarding home whilst the owners are asleep. Everyone protects themselves with various alarms and deterrents and would be awake before anything untoward could happen. It was only easy for me because I have access to you."

"Hmmm. I might have to reconsider that," Severus said contemplatively.

Contessa pursed her lips, but her eyes shone. "I wouldn't blame you. But I'm not planning a repeat performance." She dropped her empty plate onto the table and cradled her cup of tea in her lap. "I've been thinking though, about the Imperius Curse. There are so many people under its influence at the Ministry it would be useful to have a potion which could identify or release them."

Severus studied her intently. "Some sort of curse-breaker?"

"Yes."

"Veritaserum would be a good place to start," he pondered.

Contessa's nose wrinkled. "The problem is Truth Potion only reveals what people perceive to be the truth, so it wouldn't necessarily help." Her fingers traced the circumference of her teacup. "But Veritaserum *would* be a good place to start."

Severus felt a spike of interest. "What are you planning?"

"I've been thinking for a while that I might attempt to create a potion which reveals people as they truly are something which breaks through and releases them from the Imperius Curse."

Nodding his head, Severus replied, "It sounds like a worthy research topic."

Contessa's excitement became palpable, and her eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. "Perhaps I'll raid the library at Hogwarts before I leave this afternoon."

"There are a few books in the Restricted Section which would be useful," Severus advised. "But you should drop in at Spinner's End; I've got a couple of books on the history and application of the Imperius Curse. They are a little more, shall we say, informative than those in the library."

Contessa grinned broadly. "I'll do that, thanks." She took a final sip from her cup and placed it down on the table. "Do you want anything brought from home?"

"No. Why?"

"I just thought you'd get bored. You know, three weeks in the castle almost alone."

"I'm looking forward to it," Severus said.

"Oh."

Severus observed a change in her countenance. He didn't understand it.

"Well," Contessa said gloomily, "I'll stay away for the full three weeks, then." She stood up and wiped her hands absently on her pyjamas, avoiding eye contact. "Breakfast was nice."

Severus placed his tea cup on the table and stood up to leave. "Perhaps, next time, you'll provide it?"

At that, Contessa looked at him and smiled again. "Not if I can help it."

Severus spent the afternoon wandering the corridors of the deserted school checking everything was in order. It was times like these when he quite enjoyed being Headmaster. Roaming the hallowed halls of this magical place, all alone, was a source of great comfort.

He reflected how much easier it was to control the place when it was empty. But, like a shop with no customers, a school would not survive without its students.

The occasional Hogwarts ghost drifted by along the way, and several portraits stood to attention as he passed. The more frequently used hallways were decorated with festive holly sprigs and garlands, and Severus was reminded that he would have to plan the Christmas Day banquet and entertainment for those residing in the castle over the festive season.

Contessa had organised the Halloween feast with efficiency and flair. Suddenly Severus wished she hadn't gone home so soon she would've arranged the affair with enthusiasm, and been pleasant company for him during the tedious occasion.

The sound of footsteps broke into Severus's thoughts, and he turned to see Filch trotting towards him with his cat in pursuit.

"Headmaster!" the caretaker wheezed, gasping for air.

"Mr Filch," Severus replied in a clipped voice. "What can I do for you?"

Mrs Norris circled Filch's feet, her tail curling softly around the caretaker's leg as she watched the Headmaster with wide, amber orbs.

"We've just received news from the Hogwarts Express. Dementors stopped the train somewhere south of Fort William."

"What?" Severus exclaimed incredulously. "Why?"

"The train came to a halt in a remote, deserted station, and two Death Eaters boarded it. They took the Lovegood girl."

Severus's stomach lurched in protest. He had spent the last month protecting her, and now, as soon as she was beyond his reach, Miss Lovegood had been snatched.

More footsteps echoed up the corridor, and Severus watched the Carrows approaching with ugly grins suffusing their fat, squat faces.

"Who was responsible for the abduction?" Severus asked Amycus.

"Selwyn and Travers," the wizard answered with satisfaction.

The back of Severus's neck prickled. He wouldn't put it past the Carrows to have engineered the kidnapping.

"They didn't have my permission to board the Hogwarts Express," Severus said austerely. "Staging this high-profile abduction is counterproductive to our strategy at Hogwarts."

"But it sends out a strong message to the pupils, Snape," Alecto chipped in. "Them kids will behave themselves next term, for fear of the consequences."

Severus felt a ripple of disgust. "I suspect the contrary, Alecto. Selwyn and Travers have just made our jobs infinitely harder."

Turning swiftly, Severus stalked back to the Headmaster's office, brooding on the implications for the school. The repercussions were serious. He knew things would be different when Hogwarts reconvened in January.

As he uttered the password and stepped onto the moving spiral staircase, Severus felt Contessa's absence like a hollow pit in his stomach.

Author's Note:

Where I have quoted from the original Harry Potter books, I have marked it with an asterisk.

Ten

Chapter 10 of 14

Albus Dumbledore had a plan to protect Severus Snape after the fateful night on the Astronomy Tower. During his final year as Headmaster, Snape has a chance to come to terms with his past and find peace, before his life draws to its inevitable close. Canon-compliant. TPP Featured Story May/June 2010.

White Christmas

Christmas Day at the Marchbanks' family home was an elaborate affair. Despite Griselda Marchbanks being over a century old, she was still a thoughtful and attentive host, who knew how to throw a good party. The guest list was extensive; the branches of the Marchbanks family spread over many generations, and it was customary for relatives to put in an appearance at some point on the twenty-fifth of December.

The festivities were a black-tie event, and Contessa had spent the afternoon in a mulberry-coloured ball gown. Her feet were becoming steadily compressed by the high-heeled sandals which peeped out from underneath her dress.

By the time three o'clock arrived, she was standing barefoot and alone by the window of the library, fiddling absent-mindedly with her Tiger's Eye ring. The drizzly rain came down in waves against the glass as the daylight faded on what had been a dark and dismal Christmas Day.

She wondered if Hogwarts was covered in a blanket of snow and imagined the flickering lights of the castle lighting up the grounds, against the glorious winter sunset. Her mind wandered to Robert Selwyn, alone in Gryffindor Tower. She hoped Severus had kept his promise to look after the boy.

Almost a week had passed since she had left the school, and Contessa was surprised how quickly she had grown tired of the company of her relatives. There seemed little point in returning to Squirrel's Leap. Her house would be cold and undecorated, and there was nothing enticing about spending the remainder of the day alone. Yet it seemed the arms of her extended family were not fulfilling her needs today. She wished she were somewhere else.

After a lengthy internal debate, she slipped on her sandals and returned to the guest room where she retrieved her long, heavy travelling cloak.

Folding the dark woollen material over her arm, Contessa descended the staircase and located her great grandmother in the drawing room. Griselda accepted her apologies with a knowing smile, and Contessa slipped out of the back door, unnoticed by the merry throng.

Stepping outside, the cold air whipped around her bare arms as she threw the cloak around her shoulders. She Transfigured her sandals into a sturdy pair of walking boots which looked rather peculiar under the full skirt of her gown.

Contessa closed her eyes and concentrated on her intended destination. A moment later she inhaled the freezing air of the Scottish Highlands. Hogwarts was silhouetted against the setting sun, eerily similar to how she had pictured it in her mind's eye. Snow dusted the picturesque landscape with a fine layer of white, glowing against the pinkish-purple skyline. The white Christmas warmed Contessa from within as she made her way to the castle gates.

Within a couple of minutes Argus Filch arrived at the main gate, carrying an oil-lamp. The caretaker ushered her through the grounds and led her into the castle's entrance.

The relative warmth of the indoor air welcomed her, and Contessa quickly Transfigured her boots back into sandals. Her toes pinched and prickled in discomfort, and she shifted her feet until they settled. When she looked up again, Filch was several paces in front, on his way to the Great Hall. Contessa lifted up her gown and cloak and trotted after him, trying not to stumble on the flags of the stone floor.

The caretaker opened the double doors to the hall and stood aside for Contessa to enter.

The House tables remained in place, and at the top of the hall, on the dais where the teachers were usually seated, was a long table. It became immediately apparent to Contessa that she had arrived in the middle of Christmas dinner.

Severus was seated at one end of the table, hosting the meal for twelve other Hogwarts inhabitants. The Carrows flanked him on each side, and ten students of varying ages sat along the length of the table. Contessa noticed Robert Selwyn seated facing the door at the opposite end of the table. The boy was heartily tucking in to a plate stacked high with roast potatoes and turkey. In between mouthfuls, he acknowledged her with a warm smile.

Contessa remained still as Filch closed the doors, leaving her standing alone at the back of the hall, suddenly realising how inappropriate her impromptu appearance at Hogwarts might seem.

The low booming sound of the double doors shutting caused Severus to look in Contessa's direction. From a distance, she couldn't determine the subtleties of his facial expression, and her insides numbed with anticipation. He lifted his napkin from his lap and dabbed the corners of his mouth, before dropping the cloth on the table.

The Headmaster rose from his seat and walked down the steps and across the length of the Great Hall. Contessa responded by walking towards him, up the central aisle, to meet him halfway. A wave of light-headedness took her by surprise, and she realised she had forgotten to breathe.

Contessa forced her lungs into action as she approached Severus. His long, pale features were framed by curtains of black hair which swept away from his face as he marched towards her.

She was astounded to see him smiling broadly.

Contessa's eyes flicked to the table of guests behind him, and she felt a warm tightness in her chest as she comprehended their ignorance; with his back to the table and his hair screening his face, Severus's smile was meant only for her.

He looked completely different, in spite of his long cloak and formal teaching robes. His dark eyes glittered like opals, and his wide smile creased the corners of his eyes. Contessa followed the line of his hooked nose to his thin lips, encasing yellowing and fascinatingly crooked teeth. A flutter of nerves sent a sinking stone to the bottom of her stomach, and her cheeks flushed as awareness dawned. There was no way she could deny it she had returned to Hogwarts to see Severus, not Robert Selwyn.

Severus had never appeared so animated and welcoming as he came to a halt a few feet away from her, but Contessa was painfully aware of the number of eyes peering at her from the dais. Her resulting smile was low-key and belied her true feelings. It was probably just as well under the circumstances admitting her attraction was permanently off the menu. Notwithstanding, she hoped Severus would read the genuine greeting in her eyes.

Severus extended his arm towards her, and Contessa nodded briefly before stepping closer and curling her hand around his elbow. Their eyes met for one warm, friendly moment, and Contessa watched as Severus adjusted his facial expression to one of cold formality. He then turned on his heel and escorted her to the dinner table.

As they walked she noticed Severus was wearing his Tiger's Eye ring on his little finger. Contessa's eyebrows pinched together as she processed the revelation, and when Severus deposited her at the end of the table next to Robert Selwyn, she hesitated as she let go of his arm. For a split second, the pair of rings inadvertently touched with an instantaneous tingle on their respective fingers.

Severus snatched his hand away and removed his wand from his robes. As he turned to Summon Contessa a chair, she felt a tingling sensation creeping up her arm, across her shoulders, and finally disappearing down her spine. With a shiver, she wondered if Severus had experienced the same phenomenon.

She never found out. Severus gestured for her to take a seat at the end of the table and departed abruptly for the opposite end. Contessa removed her travelling cloak and folded it onto the back of her chair. As she sat down, a place-setting appeared before her.

The young Gryffindor welcomed Contessa with a smile as he munched his food. She nodded to the Slytherin boy across from him, who appeared to be the same age as Robert, and she wished them a Merry Christmas.

"This is a surprise, Miss," Robert said in a stilted voice which clearly didn't wish to communicate too much affection in front of other students. "Why'd you come back here for Christmas?"

Realising she didn't have a particularly good answer for the boy's question, she looked towards the impressive banquet.

"That'd be for the excellent food," she lied, inwardly regretting having already eaten one Christmas dinner. She wasn't sure the dress she was wearing could take the strain of another course of roast turkey.

Severus resumed his seat at the head of the table and watched her through the tunnel of students with a slight smirk.

Three thick slices of turkey breast appeared on her plate.

Contessa stifled a groan, wishing she had thought things through before turning up at Hogwarts unannounced. Looking at the white meat, she realised she was going to need cranberry sauce and lots of it, if she was going to survive this ordeal. Her eyes roved the table for the accompaniment, but before she found it she noticed a large plate of Brussels sprouts. Her insides flipped, and she suspected she might turn green if she ate any more.

She reached out for the gravy, and a moment later the Brussels sprout platter was hovering mid-air in front of her. Contessa searched the table for the person responsible, only to find Severus watching her with great interest. She had a fleeting suspicion that he had read her mind. Shaking the thought away, she noticed the Tiger's Eye ring was still tingling on her little finger. Was Severus experiencing the same?

Their eyes met, and he gave a small nod, before turning to continue his conversation with the Carrows. Contessa swallowed a hard lump in her throat.

Feeling self-conscious, she reluctantly accepted a small serving of sprouts, aware of the hairs on her arms standing on end in the cool air of the hall. The temperature was several degrees below that of the house from which she had recently departed, and her shoulders felt uncomfortably cold.

A glass goblet of mulled wine appeared on the table before her, and Contessa gratefully took a sip, appreciating the warming effect it had on her body and mind.

And it matches your dress, too, she heard herself think. *What? Why would I think that?*

She raised her head to see Severus studying her intently, his lips curled in amusement. Now Contessa truly was suspicious. What was he doing?

How did you...?

Severus set down his knife and fork on the edges of his plate, as if pausing for a breather, and he rested his chin on his hand. His little finger tapped his jaw-line gently. The silver ring caught Contessa's eye, glinting against the golden-brown stone. Her gaze shifted to Severus's eyes and back again to his ring. He responded with another smirk and picked up his knife and fork, resuming his meal as if nothing had happened.

After the onslaught of her second Christmas dinner, Contessa Floo'd to the Headmaster's office to find Severus perched on the edge of his desk. His cloak was folded on the back of his chair, and his arms were crossed casually, awaiting her arrival.

"What's going on?" she asked without preamble.

"And a Merry Christmas to you too," Severus replied sarcastically.

Contessa opened her mouth to speak before thinking twice and closing it again. It appeared Severus held the upper hand.

Just how things are meant to be, Contessa, she heard herself think. She shook her head with an irritated twitch. *Pardon? I call myself Tess... Who is that?*

She looked again at Severus, and his smirk turned into a grin. With an exaggerated movement, he removed the Tiger's Eye ring from his little finger and turned it over with his fingertips.

"It would appear our rings have learned a few new tricks," he said lazily.

Contessa approached him as he offered the ring out to her, placing it in the palm of her hand. "What have you done to them?"

"I've done nothing," Severus replied defensively. "Something changed when you used the rings at Godric's Hollow. Since then, when the connection is triggered whilst we are wearing the rings, I've been able to hear your thoughts."

Contessa gaped. "My thoughts? How?"

"I'm not certain. I only grasped the full significance of it today, when I heard your thoughts in my head, spoken in my voice as if they were my own. It happened once before. That's how I knew which apple to choose at Halloween; I briefly heard your thoughts. It seems the rings touching today made the effect permanent."

"No way," Contessa marvelled. She slipped her ring off her finger and placed them side by side in her palm. "I don't understand how that's possible." She walked over to Magda McDougall's portrait. "Has this happened before?"

The former Headmistress regarded her with a furrowed brow. Her brown ringlets tumbled across her shoulder as she leant forward and studied the rings in Contessa's outstretched hand. "It's unheard of, Tess, and it's not what they were designed for. They were merely meant to link the senses of sight and sound." Magda cast Severus a suspicious look. "What have you been doing to them?"

Severus balked slightly but recovered quickly. "The rings have linked our emotions right from the start," he said coolly. "I noticed it the first time we wore them."

"Then the Colligomens Charm must have been performed incorrectly," the portrait surmised.

"No," Contessa replied. "I'm fairly sure it wasn't."

"Well, you must have been messing around with them. Have you cast any other charms on the rings?"

"I cast a Disillusionment Charm on my ring at Halloween," Severus confessed.

"And I used it to guide my Apparition to Godric's Hollow," Contessa added sheepishly. She bit her lip before she spoke again. "The rings accidentally linked again when we Apparated back to Hogwarts."

Magda shook her head in despair. "It's little wonder their magical properties have been distorted. However, none of that explains the transference of emotions the first time they were used. What happened before you linked the rings?"

Severus's breath was audible as he remembered the sequence of events. He turned to face Contessa. "You cast an Engorgement Charm on my ring so it would fit my finger."

"Yes, I did. But, I had to..."

"No, you didn't," Magda admonished her. "Didn't Hector tell you to rub the inside of the band three times, to expand and contract the metal?"

"No," Contessa breathed.

"There you have it," Magda said with mingled triumph and regret. "Goodness knows what you've done to those rings with all that exposure to unnecessary magic. It's a small miracle they're still working."

Contessa handed Severus's ring back to him with a sigh. He removed the silver chain from underneath his collar and threaded it through the ring before closing the clasp around his neck. He tucked the jewellery out of sight as he watched Contessa place her ring back on her finger.

"We'll have to be more careful from now on," she said heavily.

Severus nodded.

They walked away from the portrait and towards the stairs to the minstrel's gallery.

"Hang on a minute," Contessa said as Severus placed his foot on the bottom stair. "Why were you wearing your ring today? You told me you don't normally wear jewellery and didn't want the ring to be noticed."

Severus, for once, appeared on the back-foot. His eyes narrowed to slits. "I wasn't expecting you to reappear at Hogwarts until the New Year. It therefore seemed safe to do so."

Contessa noticed he had evaded her question. Perhaps if Severus's ring were still on *his* finger, she might be able hear his thoughts. She wondered dimly if Severus's skill in Occlumency would prevent her from hearing his private thoughts, should he choose to block her. "That doesn't explain *why* you were wearing it," she said slyly.

"Nor have you explained your unexpected presence at Hogwarts today," he replied sleekly.

A sudden wave of relief crashed over Contessa; she was eternally grateful that Severus was no longer wearing his ring.

The Forest of Dean

Severus shared a drink of Firewhisky with Contessa before she made her excuses and left for the Marchbanks' family home for the remainder of the Christmas holidays.

With his boots and frock coat thrown across the living room floor, Severus spent the rest of the evening lying on the sofa in front of the fire, reading a book in an attempt to lull himself to sleep.

The Tiger's Eye ring tingled occasionally against his chest, and he wondered if Contessa were fiddling with her ring; he had often observed her fidgeting with the silver band when she was daydreaming. He imagined her looking bored during an evening of wearisome drunken ramblings and games of charades.

The erratic tingling of the ring was undoubtedly exacerbating his insomnia, but Severus found its presence reassuring, and he decided to keep it on the chain around his neck, regardless of the interruption to his solitude.

During the early hours of Boxing Day morning, the cold tickle of the ring against his skin awoke him from a light sleep, and with a low growl, Severus arose to retrieve his frock coat and boots from the floor. Dressing quickly, he descended the stairs to the Headmaster's office, intending to awaken Magda McDougall and question her further on the history of the rings.

However, when he arrived in the circular office, he was surprised to see a number of the portraits were wide awake and muttering to each other.

Severus turned to face Dumbledore's portrait.

"What's going on?" he asked gruffly.

"Harry and Hermione have been packing up their tent again. We're waiting for Phineas to return with news."

Severus was hit by an instant wave of alertness.

"Headmaster!" cried Phineas Nigellus Black as he rushed into his frame, slightly out of breath. "They are camping in the Forest of Dean! The Mudblood..."

A sickening surge of bile struck Severus's throat. As he turned to face the Slytherin Headmaster's portrait, a rush of blood to his head caused his ear drums to prickle at the sound of the hated slur. "Do not use that word!"

"...the Granger girl, then, mentioned the place as she opened her bag and I heard her!"

Lightness descended to Severus's stomach. The Forest of Dean would be a large area to search, but he was confident he could find Potter.

"Good. Very good!" Dumbledore said excitedly. "Now, Severus, the sword! Do not forget that it must be taken under the conditions of need and valour and he must not know that you give it! If Voldemort should read Harry's mind and see you acting for him..."

"I know," Severus cut him off. He had spent plenty of time preparing for this mission, and his heart quickened now the chance had arrived.

He reached inside the compartment behind Dumbledore's portrait and removed the gleaming sword of Gryffindor. Severus fastened a sword belt around his hips and sheathed the weapon inside the protective scabbard. Hurriedly, he moved behind the desk and collected his heavy travelling cloak.

"And you still aren't going to tell me why it's so important to give Potter the sword?" Severus asked Dumbledore. He knew this would be the last opportunity to extract an answer from the former Headmaster.

"No, I don't think so," Dumbledore replied contemplatively. "He will know what to do with it."

Severus accepted the reply with resignation; it was no more than he had expected. He turned and headed for the door.

"And Severus, be very careful, they may not take kindly to your appearance after George Weasley's mishap..."

With his fingers on the door handle, Severus looked back at Dumbledore once more.

"Don't worry, Dumbledore," he reassured him. "I have a plan..."

He left the office and Summoned his broomstick, and within a few minutes Severus had passed unseen out of the castle and Disappeared.

He arrived in the Forest of Dean in pitch blackness and knew it was not the ideal time to begin the search. Moonlight reflected from the snow-covered tops of trees as he flew above, surveying the area and planning the practicalities of finding Potter and Miss Granger.

Severus had charmed his cloak to protect against the biting cold wind of the mid-winter night, and whilst he didn't need a broomstick to enable him to fly, he felt it prudent to concentrate his efforts on locating Lily's son and not divert unnecessary energy elsewhere.

When night became day, Severus sought refuge in a small Muggle village where he procured some food. The Tiger's Eye ring around his neck started to tingle again, and it occurred to him that the Marchbanks family resided not too far away.

As appealing as the idea might be, he quickly dismissed the notion of turning up on Contessa's doorstep for a cooked breakfast. He was the enemy, as far as her family were concerned, and his sudden appearance at their home would seem outrageous. In fact he couldn't quite believe the absurd thought had even crossed his mind.

And so he spent the day circling the forest under a Disillusionment Charm, battling snowflakes away from his eyes as flurries of snow sprinkled the trees below him. As the sun set behind heavy clouds on the horizon, Severus finally found what he was looking for.

Despite an impressive array of protective enchantments, a light dusting of snow had found its way through the canopy of trees and had settled on the magical tent housing Potter and Miss Granger, making its extent visible to the naked eye.

Severus didn't want to risk Potter catching sight of him as he laid the sword within spitting distance of the campsite, and so he waited for darkness to descend. During his second sweep of the area, invisible under his Disillusionment Charm, Severus spotted a red-headed male wandering the forest alone. Upon further investigation, he identified the boy as none other than Ronald Weasley.

With a flash of inspiration, Severus knew the ideal opportunity had arisen. Not only could he pass the sword of Gryffindor onto Lily's son, but he could also reunite Potter with his sidekick. Killing two birds with one stone would ultimately do everyone a favour; it would minimise the risk of the Weasley boy being captured by a Death Eater and tortured for information on Potter's whereabouts.

In the fading twilight, Severus made his way back to the campsite and located a frozen pool within a short walking distance from the tent. After judiciously casting a Silencing Charm, Severus used magic to melt and refreeze the ice, placing the sword underneath the icy surface of the pond without making a sound. The only noise came from his cloak as it dragged across the frozen leaves as he made his way to a secluded spot behind two oak trees. A gap between the trunks provided an eye-level peep-hole, perfect for monitoring Potter's movements.

Sitting propped up against a sheltered tree trunk and wrapped in his warm, enchanted cloak, Severus waited for Weasley to find his way inside the visual range of the pool. He hadn't slept much in the last two days, and Severus started to doze, losing track of time, listening to the scurrying sounds of forest creatures rummaging through the frozen leaves on the ground.

He was awoken by the distant sound of a young man calling out Harry Potter's name. Severus dusted off lingering snowflakes from his cloak and mounted his broomstick. A swift search of the area revealed the presence of Ronald Weasley staggering around in the dark, tripping up over tree roots and clutching Dumbledore's old Deluminator.

The red-headed teenager called out, "Harry!" and "Hermione!" into the night air with an increasing degree of exasperation.

Severus returned to his viewpoint by the pool and stood quietly in the velvet blackness of the forest for what felt like an eternity, waiting for Weasley to wander close enough to the campsite.

When the time arrived, Severus closed his eyes and unlocked the part of his mind which housed his happiest memories. For one long, blissful moment, Severus recalled Lily, aged eleven, sitting under the dappled shade of a willow tree by the river near her home. She was lying, stretched out like a cat, with Severus sitting by her side, listening to her quiet voice singing an unfamiliar Muggle tune. Her green eyes sparkled like emeralds in the flickering light of the riverbank.

Severus raised his wand, and his Patronus sprang to life. The brightness of the silver doe burned into Severus's retinas, momentarily dazzling him as she stared wide-eyed at her creator. Her beautiful eyes were framed with long lashes, and her snout trembled as her cloven feet shifted on the frozen forest floor.

Recovering himself quickly, Severus directed his Patronus towards the campsite, hoping it would act as a shining beacon for the Weasley boy. He watched the deer glide effortlessly across the ground, picking its way slowly towards the tent, and he awaited the outcome with bated breath.

His Patronus came to a halt outside Potter's tent. With an exhalation of relief, Severus saw the boy emerging with his wand at the ready as he stepped outside the confines of the camp's enchantments.

Severus Summoned the doe Patronus back, in the direction of the pool, and he hoped that Potter would follow, curious and unafraid. Potter would know a Patronus could not be conjured by Dark Magic, and Severus hoped that the familiar corporeal form of the Patronus would reassure the boy.

Severus caught a glimpse of Lily's son as he approached the pool, and he looked dreadful; black rings underneath his eyes and overgrown, untidy hair. He was a mere shadow of his father, illuminated by the white glare of the doe. The boy came alone, having chosen not to awaken Miss Granger, and Severus fought the urge to roll his eyes. Potter was a typical Gryffindor swayed by fame and glory. Yet again he had failed to apply logic and neglected to ensure his safety by keeping his allies close at hand.

Potter was lucky that Severus had had the foresight to wait for Weasley's arrival in the vicinity; otherwise he would have had to save the blundering idiot from certain death once more.

The doe reached the frozen pool, and Severus commanded it to hold position, waiting for Potter to make a final approach. As the boy came within a hair's breadth of the shining corporeal Patronus, Severus cancelled the charm with a flick of his wand, plunging himself and Potter into total darkness.

Severus's eyes adapted quickly, having not spent too long looking directly at the Patronus, and a moment later the newly-ignited light from Potter's wand provided a focal point.

The boy stood motionless for a few long moments, listening to the sounds of the forest. Potter's wand-light lifted higher, searching the trees for the wizard who had conjured the Patronus, but Severus's vantage point behind the oak trees provided him with ample cover.

Finally, Potter noticed the frozen pool at his feet, and he circled it before dropping to his knees at the edge of the icy surface.

Severus stopped himself from exhaling audibly. It was about time.

The light flickered as the boy raised his wand again and searched the nearby area cautiously. Even though the extent of the illumination could not reach him, Severus didn't move a muscle and felt some relief that Potter was at least thinking things through before acting.

The boy's first attempt was to magically Summon the sword from the icy depths of the pool. Severus stifled a groan of derision. Potter's mediocrity came as no surprise to him, but he was irritated by the distinct lack of intelligence. Had the boy inherited nothing from his mother?

Potter stood up and headed off to walk around the pool and murmured, "Help."

Severus smirked. The boy was perhaps getting warmer, and Severus smiled at the unintentional pun.

Eventually Potter stopped, tilted his head backwards and sighed. His hot breath froze in spirals in the night air. He glanced around one more time, searching for onlookers and then began to peel off his many layers of clothing.

Severus grunted inwardly. One thing the boy had inherited was his father's tendency towards unnecessary and conspicuous heroics. Potter was a stranger to discretion; even when he thought nobody was looking, his behaviour cried out for attention. A tawny owl hooted somewhere in the distance, and Severus shook his head disdainfully. As if the boy needed encouraging.

Potter stood barefoot, wearing only his underwear, and he pointed his wand at the frozen surface of the water.

"*Diffindo.*"

The ice cracked with a thundering clap which reverberated through the trees. Although Severus cringed inwardly at the boy drawing unnecessary attention to himself, he also realised the sound would act as a signal flare for Weasley, whose presence was long overdue.

He watched disbelievingly as Potter placed his wand on the ground beside the pool. How could the boy be such a dunderhead?

Before Severus knew it, Potter had jumped feet first into the pool and immersed himself up to his shoulders. After a brief moment's pause, he disappeared under the chunks of ice floating on the surface of the water.

The boy was underwater for an unbearably long time, and Severus watched with a tight knot twisting in his gut, grateful for the small mercy of the wand-light which would act like a talisman for Weasley. If the witless wonder didn't make an appearance in the next few seconds, Severus was going to have to rescue Potter himself and risk exposing his cover.

Then, as if on cue, Ronald Weasley tripped forwards through the trees, a mere matter of feet away from Severus's hidey-hole, and he dived fully-clothed into the pool of water.

After a few seconds of frantic splashing and gasping, Weasley pulled Potter and the sword of Gryffindor simultaneously out of the forest pool.

Severus heaved a sigh of relief as he watched Potter clumsily pulling on his clothes, shaking with shock.

The deed was done.

Severus mounted his broomstick and flew silently away from the poolside scene.

He had reunited the golden trio and bequeathed the sword of Gryffindor to The Boy Who Lived.

Now all Potter had to do was save the world.

Once a Year

Spinner's End turned out to be a veritable treasure trove for Contessa, and she returned to Squirrel's Leap with over a dozen publications from Severus's personal library. She quickly realised why Severus had chosen to store so many of his books at home; it was unlikely Dumbledore would have allowed his Potions master to bring such literature into his school. Contessa noted wryly that the current Headmaster would probably have no such qualms.

Contessa spent the remaining two weeks of the Christmas holidays perusing various texts on the Imperius Curse and making a shortlist of potential potion ingredients and methods of preparation.

As the start of the school term approached, she packed her trunk a couple of days early and called to see her uncle at the bakery to collect a special order, which she fitted carefully into her luggage before heading off to Hogwarts.

Darkness had descended by the time she made her way carefully across the icy grounds of the castle, escorted by a silent Argus Filch. Mrs Norris hovered at Contessa's

feet, sniffed the levitated trunk and miaowed with a hint of frustration.

Trying not to trip up over the caretaker's pet, Contessa felt the fleeting tingle of the Tiger's Eye ring, which she was now wearing on a chain around her neck. After the events of Christmas Day, she had promptly made a decision to avoid temptation; as interesting as it might be to covertly drop in on Severus's thoughts and feelings, she knew it would be a wholly unacceptable breach of privacy. Moreover, she was concerned that Severus would do the same to her, and she couldn't afford the risk that he might discover what she truly felt for him.

The ring had been tingling but stopping short of turning cold intermittently for the last fortnight. Contessa surmised that Severus was fiddling with his own ring absentmindedly, causing her band to alter its state. She found the sensation, and the thought which accompanied it, very comforting.

Alone again and on her way down to her dungeon quarters, Contessa crossed Alecto Carrow on the stairs. The fat, squat witch stepped to one side to allow Contessa to pass.

The Death Eater's eyes narrowed and she grinned malevolently. "You're back early."

Contessa felt a hot iron burning somewhere deep in her abdomen. "I am," she replied. "Not that it's any business of yours."

"Couldn't stay away from your Slytherin master for a moment longer, eh?" Alecto rasped.

Contessa felt indignation rise to her throat, and her nostrils flared as she took a deep breath, resolving to play along with the game to avoid suspicion. "I would appreciate it, Professor Carrow, if the Headmaster and I are left undisturbed tonight. I have a surprise for Professor Snape."

Alecto's top lip disappeared into a thin line, and she raised her jaw, looking down her bulbous nose at Contessa. "No doubt," she said suggestively. "I'm sure that can be arranged. Snape's spent the week lurking in the dungeons; I imagine he'll be looking forward to his pet returning to the castle."

The podgy witch issued a self-satisfied smirk and trudged up the steps, leaving Contessa bristling and biting down on her tongue. She set off down the stairs for her quarters at a brisk march, boots clicking mercilessly on the stone floor of the corridor.

With a flurry of activity, Contessa unpacked and then Floo'd a request to Binky and the house-elves in the kitchen. Pausing at the mirror in her bedroom, she looked at her reflection and ran her fingers through her long, knotted brown hair. She wore a polo-neck jumper and jeans, and as she contemplated which clothes to change into, she realised her jaw was set tightly and her teeth were still grinding together after her exchange with Alecto Carrow.

Sighing, she willed herself to let go, knowing Severus didn't need to be on the receiving end of her untenable annoyance, particularly not on a day which came but once a year.

When Contessa slid the inconspicuous edition of *Knitting with Kneazle-fur* from the bookshelf outside the Headmaster's quarters and knocked on his door, Severus took a while to answer. Eventually the door creaked open, and suddenly Contessa was glad that she'd decided not to bother with a change of clothes.

Matted hair hung about Severus's face in an untidy, black mess. He wore black trousers, socks, and a rumpled white shirt with sleeves rolled at the cuffs. The shirt was unbuttoned midway down his chest, and his Tiger's Eye ring glinted against his pale skin.

Even in this crumpled, scruffy-looking state, Severus still managed to appear impressive. Contessa felt her heart pound against her ribs, and she was grateful, yet again, that he did not have access to her thoughts. The realisation left her momentarily dumbstruck, and they regarded each other as if neither were sure of the other's reason for being there.

Severus appeared to collect himself first. "You're back." His voice cracked with lack of use.

Contessa nodded uncertainly.

Severus cleared his throat and appraised his attire uncomfortably. "I should change," he said, starting to turn away.

"No," Contessa replied without delay. "There's no need. You're fine as you are."

As Severus opened the door to let her in, Contessa retrieved her wand and Summoned the square cardboard box she had brought from home. With one flick the box vanished to reveal a pannettone cake. The candles decorating the cake lit themselves as she cast a non-verbal spell.

Flickering light reflected on Severus's startled face as Contessa smiled and said, "Happy birthday, Severus."

Severus's countenance did not crack into a smile. Instead his brow furrowed causing two deep vertical lines to appear between his eyebrows. He looked at her with heavily-lidded eyes. "How did you know?"

"Oh, I have my means," Contessa replied breezily, hoping to turn the atmosphere into something cheerful. She looked past Severus and into his dimly lit quarters. "Are you going to invite me in?"

Severus appeared to pull himself out of a trance and stepped aside, allowing her passage through the doorway.

Contessa levitated the cake onto the coffee table and turned again, standing to face him. She wriggled awkwardly as she met his intent gaze. "I thought you'd be pleased," she ventured.

He shifted on his feet. "I am," he said in a neutral, expressionless tone.

"You don't seem to be," Contessa said quietly.

Severus looked at the birthday cake again, lost in thought. Eventually he said, "It's been a long time since..."

A heavy, compressing sensation struck Contessa in the chest as she finished Severus's sentence in her head. A long time since anyone had remembered his birthday. Her thumbs found the back pockets of her jeans and twisted against the rough fabric.

"Have you eaten?" she asked.

"Not yet."

Contessa moved towards the small dining table shoved up against the stone wall of the living room and gestured for Severus to take a seat.

He looked back at the birthday cake glowing brightly on the coffee table. "What about the candles?" Severus said with a peculiar expression on his face.

"They're bewitched; they'll last for an hour or so. Come, sit down."

Contessa summoned the Headmaster's house-elf with a click of her fingers, and Binky appeared at the side of the table with two servings of Lancashire hotpot and a bottle of red wine. Severus approached the table wide-eyed, running his fingers through his unkempt hair as he took his seat opposite her.

"I don't know what to say," he said, his voice somehow deep and hoarse in equal measure.

"Then say nothing. Eat," Contessa said as she prodded the top layer of sliced potatoes with her fork. The hotpot issued a whirl of steam.

Severus served the wine and held up his glass in toast. Contessa mirrored the gesture and clinked hers against his. This time Severus returned a small smile.

Conversation was stilted at first, as they became accustomed to each other's presence again. But by the time they had requisitioned extra portions of pickled red cabbage from the kitchens and poured their second glass of wine, it seemed as though no time had passed. Contessa was pleased to learn that the sword of Gryffindor had been successfully bequeathed, and she sensed a weight had been lifted from Severus's shoulders.

"I saw Alecto in the corridor before," Contessa said. "She told me you'd been spending a lot of time in the dungeons."

Severus nodded as he swirled his wine around his glass. "I've been busy preparing bases to give you a head-start on your Potions project. There's a large cauldronful of precursors for Truth Potion, as I thought that a good place to begin. I've also made a base for Memory Potion."

"Brilliant," Contessa said as her breath caught in her throat. "That's just what I'd been thinking, too."

Animated discussion followed as they shared their ideas for a potion which might repel the Imperius Curse. It seemed Severus had spent a great deal of time researching the topic, and some common themes emerged as their plans for experimentation began to crystallise.

After they finished the main course, Severus blew out his birthday candles and served a portion of cake for himself and Contessa. Later, she Floo'd to her quarters to retrieve her research, and together they spread the parchments across the coffee table, poring over the information and methodically constructing a plan for the project.

Several cups of coffee later, Contessa and Severus had assembled a list of potion ingredients which Severus would arrange to be purchased, plus around a dozen ideas for potions, and some suggestions for their respective antidotes. Contessa was pleasantly surprised how efficient their partnership had been; Severus seemed to relish the mental challenge and had submerged himself in their shared intellect and creativity.

When their efforts and insights began to wane, Contessa helped herself to another slice of cake and Severus followed suit.

"This is good cake," he said as he relaxed into the cushions of the antique sofa across the table from Contessa. "The house-elves must have a new recipe."

"Actually, no," Contessa replied after a mouthful. "I picked it up from my mum's bakery on my way back to Hogwarts."

"Then your mother is to be commended."

"Well, it was her recipe she was born in Italy, you see. But it's my uncle who runs the bakery now. Mum passed away ten years ago."

Severus straightened in his seat. "My apologies; I didn't know."

Contessa could sense the cogs turning in his head as he put his plate down on the table.

"You didn't inherit the bakery?" he asked, clearly curious.

"No, Mum left it to her brother. I was always destined for a magical career at the Ministry, so she passed the shop onto her Muggle relatives. Squirrel's Leap was my dad's, though. He left it to Mum in his will, and it was passed to me when she died."

"I didn't realise both of your parents were dead," Severus said quietly.

"Dad died during my fourth year at Hogwarts. He was in the original Order of the Phoenix."

"You have no brothers or sisters?"

"I have a brother. He's a high-flyer and works for Gringotts overseas. I haven't seen him for over a year." Contessa lifted the silver chain from underneath her jumper and ran the Tiger's Eye ring back and forth, along its length.

Severus smirked. "That tickles, you know."

The ring around Severus's neck caught Contessa's eye as it sparkled against his chest. "Oh, I wondered about that over Christmas," she remarked. "My ring tingles occasionally too; I thought it might be you."

His lips parted as if to speak, but then Severus's lips pursed. "I see you've taken to wearing your ring around your neck," he observed.

Contessa felt her cheeks flush slightly. "Yes, well, I didn't want you to drop into my mind at inopportune moments. Especially since I hear your thoughts in my own voice; it's very disconcerting."

"Occlumency should prevent that," he said matter-of-factly.

"I'm sure. However, I didn't think it wise to allow you access to my subconscious mind whilst I was asleep," she replied dryly.

Severus made a show of flinching and he frowned. "You do not trust me?"

Contessa laughed. She chose not to answer.

"I wouldn't blame you if you didn't," Severus said lightly. "My idle brain has concocted several Imperius scenarios. And I confess my disappointment at missing the opportunity to place suggestive thoughts in your head whilst you were dining with the unbearable toffs in your family."

"Excuse me," Contessa said haughtily. "There are no 'toffs' in my family!"

Severus laughed once. "But they do know how to bake a decent cake."

Contessa tutted loudly but smiled at his candour. Her eyes drifted across the coffee table, littered with her parchments and Severus's books. She gathered the documents together in a pile then returned to fiddling with the ring around her neck as she stifled a yawn.

"I'm sorry you've had to spend your birthday doing Potions research," she said, feeling a bit guilty.

"On the contrary," Severus replied, "I can think of fewer more enjoyable ways to spend an evening."

Contessa noticed Severus's eyes tracing her fingers as they rubbed against the silver band looped through her necklace. Severus placed the tip of his index finger inside the Tiger's Eye ring around his own neck.

I'm glad you're here.

Contessa felt certain the voice she heard in her head was not her own.

Tentatively, she offered, *So am I*.

Broken Eggshells

Rusty hinges creaked as the apothecary's front door opened, and a short, balding man stepped outside, pushing his gold-rimmed glasses up onto the bridge of his nose.

"Good morning, Professor Snape."

Severus shrugged away the snowflakes which had settled on his cloak whilst waiting for the shopkeepers of Hogsmeade to open for their brisk weekend trade. He wanted to be in and out with the minimum of fuss, so he could Apparate to Diagon Alley before the hordes of Saturday shoppers arrived.

He waited patiently as the proprietor cleared snow from the front steps of the potion supplies shop. "Good morning, Arbuthnot."

Severus's hasty departure from Hogwarts without breakfast was evinced by a gurgling rumble of his stomach as he entered the dark, airless establishment. The heady aroma of potion ingredients assailed his nostrils, welcoming him.

Arbuthnot shuffled across the floorboards and settled himself behind the till, peering through his owlish glasses at Severus.

"What can I do for you, Headmaster?"

Severus withdrew a roll of parchment from inside his robes and placed it on the high wooden shop counter. "This is to be delivered to Hogwarts today."

Arbuthnot unrolled the list of potion supplies and straightened it out on the counter, perusing the parchment with an occasional nod or mumble. Eventually, he looked up at Severus through the top of his glasses.

"I've got most of these in stock, but I'm out of salamander blood, and I haven't much powdered Graphorn horn. Only a couple of pinches, I'm afraid. And it's expensive."

"I'll take it all," Severus said without hesitation. "Charge it to the Hogwarts account."

"The salamander blood will be here next week. Do you want it when it arrives?"

"No. I'm going to Diagon Alley; I'll get it there."

With a curt nod, Severus swept out of the shop, and he Disapparated on the outskirts of Hogsmeade.

Within the hour, Severus had purchased the missing item from his list at Slug and Jigger's Apothecary on Diagon Alley. He had also procured another ingredient from an associate on Knockturn Alley with minimal application of duress. It was advantageous when black market traders turned out to be ex-pupils; not only were they more cooperative, they could also be persuaded to discount generously.

When he arrived back at Hogwarts, Severus found the parcel from Hogsmeade waiting for him, and he immediately set off for the dungeons, checking Filch had followed his instructions to clear out an old staff room.

In his heyday, Professor Slughorn had used a chamber in the dungeons to house small, informal get-togethers for his favourite students. Severus had never been invited to join the Slug Club, but Lily's presence had been requested at Slughorn's soirees on many occasions.

Following the Potions master's retirement, the room had fallen into disuse. Slughorn had used it again upon his return, but the Slug Club had not reformed after the summer holiday, and the old chamber lay empty once more.

Stripped bare of its contents, the pokey chamber now appeared much bigger. Severus stowed his parcel of supplies on the floor, out of harm's way, and he set about Transfiguring the furniture. An old sideboard became a new laboratory bench, complete with two small cauldrons, and he placed two brown leather armchairs and a footstool upon the hearth rug in front of the fire.

When all the necessary equipment was in position, the two large cauldronfuls of potion bases he'd made over Christmas were levitated into the new laboratory. After placing the wrapped box of ingredients on the new workbench, he left the room, locking the door behind him with the succession of protective enchantments he used on his own home at Spinner's End.

Pacing down the corridor, Severus's footsteps seemed to bounce on the stone flags, and his chest tightened as his breath caught in his throat. Severus found he had knocked on Contessa's door and was waiting outside his old quarters before he even realised he'd arrived. He swallowed a hard lump in his throat and rubbed his palms against his frock-coat.

Eventually, a tousled, sleepy-looking Contessa answered the door. Her hand moved the sleeve of her pyjamas further up her wrist, searching for a watch which wasn't there.

"Severus what are you...? What time is it?"

Severus noticed his mouth had turned dry and his tongue seemed to be glued in place. He cleared his throat before speaking. "Just after ten."

Contessa nodded groggily, pushing her hair from her eyes and squinting slightly.

"Can I come in?" he asked when the offer was not forthcoming.

"Oh, yes. Of course," Contessa said as she opened her door further and followed him into the living room.

Severus found himself biting his fingernails as he waited on the sofa. Contessa reappeared a few minutes later wearing jeans and a dark green sweater, pulling a brush through her long brown hair.

"Am I presentable?" she asked, as she tucked her fingers into her front pockets and twisted her waist slightly.

Severus's lip twitched. He consciously suppressed the urge to smile and rose to his feet, offering her his hand after he had thrown a handful of Floo Powder into the fire.

They stepped into the Floo Network together, and Severus guided their transportation to the new Potions laboratory. When they arrived Contessa let go of Severus's hand, gasping with surprise.

She looked around the space, clearly recognising it as Slughorn's old bolt-hole, and she walked across the room to run her fingers along the surface of the workbench. Her head turned, and she looked at Severus with wide eyes. A smile curled around her mouth, and her eyes sparkled.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked her.

"It's perfect," she replied reverently, looking around the room once again as she walked back towards him.

This time, he forgot to conceal his smile and Contessa beamed in return. Her shoulders rounded suddenly and her lips parted, and Severus was struck by the unerring

sense that she was about to reach out and hug him.

Instinctively his body tensed and he dipped his head to stare downwards at the floor, paying close attention to the threadbare rug at his feet, his fight-or-flight sense freezing him in place.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Contessa's shoulders drop and her posture straighten, and he felt safe to look up again. She met his gaze fleetingly before looking quickly away, knowing she had been shunned.

Crestfallen that he had pushed her away with his lifetime's habit of keeping people at arm's length, Severus felt a sharp spear of disappointment arch through his abdomen, eventually sinking into the floor beneath his feet.

Contessa's hands were stuffed into the front pockets of her jeans when she spoke again, and a wobble was evident in her voice. "I didn't expect you to go to all this trouble."

Severus shifted on his feet and clasped his hands behind his back. "It needed sorting out before the start of term; I don't expect to have much spare time when the students arrive back tomorrow. We need a discreet place to work from, so Horace won't become suspicious."

As he talked he was aware he was smoothing over the cracks, minimising what had just happened between them, and somewhere in the back of his mind, he wondered if she'd ever offer again.

Contessa wandered over to the leaded windows set high in the dungeon walls. She stood on tip-toes and peered out at the thready, white light of the winter morning. "Who knows about this place?"

"Only you and I. Filch is aware I've appropriated the room but doesn't know what I'm using it for. My house-elf has been instructed to answer our summons from here."

Contessa seemed to perk up. "We have room service?" she asked with a small giggle. "Excellent!"

"The door to the laboratory will remain locked, and we can access the room through the Floo. It's connected to your quarters and to the Headmaster's office and quarters, so we can come and go as we please." Severus paused for a moment. "I've also taken the liberty of establishing a connection between your quarters and my own. It seemed... prudent."

Contessa's head rolled backwards as if hit by a Stunning Spell, and Severus suddenly felt very warm underneath his snug-fitting high collar. He moved away from the fireplace, but this did nothing to quell the woodpecker drilling holes in his windpipe.

"You've thought of everything," Contessa said when she recovered herself. "It's like our own Room of Requirement."

The woodpecker in Severus's throat ceased its endeavour and vanished as he took a long breath out.

"Open the parcel," he said, gesturing to the box on the worktop.

Contessa frowned and laughed softly as she walked towards the workspace. "It isn't my birthday for months."

Severus approached the bench from the other side and pushed the box in her direction before sitting down on a stool. His arms rested on the table as he watched her pick at the strings of the parcel.

She sat down on an adjacent stool and tore the brown paper from the bundle, gingerly removing the contents and placing them on the bench. A carton of brightly patterned Fwooper eggshells caused a gleeful intake of breath, but it was the tiny silver tin of caviar-like eggs which surprised her most.

"Merlin's beard, Severus. Where did you get these?" Contessa lifted the circular tin to her nose and took a tentative sniff. "Aren't Runespoor eggs black market?"

"I've been to Knockturn Alley this morning."

"You really have been busy whilst I've been asleep," she said, sounding impressed as she surveyed the selection of potions supplies. Suddenly her temple creased, and her hand moved to rub her midriff. "Well, I can't get started on an empty stomach," she said lightly. "Will you join me for breakfast?"

Severus clicked his fingers, and Binky appeared within moments. They enjoyed two full English breakfasts and a large, steaming pot of tea as they discussed which combination of ingredients would form their initial trial-run.

A couple of hours later the laboratory was ready for the first batch of experimental potion; Severus had raided the school stores for the remaining basic ingredients, and Contessa had retrieved their combined research and found a spare radio which she made room for on the mantelpiece above the fire.

It was dark outside by the time their first attempt with Truth Potion base neared completion. Contessa fiddled with the radio, trying to find a signal for the nightly broadcast of *Potterwatch* whilst Severus stirred the potion, which had become increasingly thick and tar-like. Contessa gave up on the radio with a sigh and ambled over to the cauldron, taking a peek inside.

"Ah," she said, wrinkling her nose at the black glue setting in the bottom of the cauldron. "Not a particularly auspicious start to the proceedings."

"I seem to remember telling you we shouldn't add Flobberworm mucus at the same time as the Jobberknoll feathers," Severus responded dryly.

"You said no such thing!" Contessa replied with a hint of humour. She pulled out the ladle and watched the glutinous mess falling in sticky lumps back into the cauldron. "I don't think we'll bother testing it. Come and sit down it's time we had a break."

Severus Vanished the day's work with a flick of his wand and ordered two cups of coffee as Contessa resumed fiddling with the dial on the radio.

As Severus sat down, the radio burst into life, and the familiar voice of a past Quidditch commentator crackled as the reception began to clear.

"I recognise that voice," Severus said, sneering at the memory.

"I don't know who it is, but his codename is River."

Severus tutted loudly. "It's Lee Jordan. Ex-Gryffindor commentator, he was a biased little sod. *Not* a very original codename, either."

Contessa shushed Severus as she sat down opposite him, and he raised his eyebrows, knowing that the Order of the Phoenix's broadcast was unlikely to tell him anything he didn't already know.

Recent news of Dirk Cresswell going on the run seemed to upset Contessa, and she explained that the Head of the Goblin Liaison Office had been her fiancé's boss and had attempted to hide his Muggle-born status from the Dark Lord's regime.

After a Muggle-focused report delivered in the deep, booming tones of Kingsley Shacklebolt, Contessa leapt slightly in her seat as the 'Pals of Potter' contributor was introduced to the airwaves.

Severus recognised the werewolf's intonation immediately. Suddenly the cup of coffee in his lap seemed much less appealing.

"It's Remus!" Contessa whispered, her eyes shining.

"I know." Severus mouthed the words, attempting to hide his reaction.

It didn't seem to work; Contessa cast him a reproachful look. "What've you got against him?" she said, shaking her head.

Severus took a long time to word his reply, pretending to listen to the news of Luna Lovegood's extended kidnapping. Eventually Contessa nudged him with her foot, and he peered back at her, wondering what she would want to hear; if he didn't break this particular eggshell, the witch might indeed make a boat thereof.

"He and I didn't like each other much at school. I always suspected he was a werewolf, not that it ever got me anywhere... Everyone else thought he was positively angelic."

Contessa's reply caught Severus unawares.

"You were in the same year at Hogwarts?"

He watched her, measuring her unexpected response carefully. "Yes. You didn't know?"

"No," she said, looking away from him. "I mean, I was a first year when Remus was made Prefect. I didn't mix much with the older students, but I always remember Remus because lots of the Ravenclaw girls had a crush on him."

Severus's stomach clenched as he watched a reminiscent smile curve its way around Contessa's mouth.

"I hadn't realised you and I attended Hogwarts together for three years," she said contemplatively.

"You don't remember me?" Severus asked, trying to forestall the bitterness spreading in his gut.

"Not really. I mean, I'd heard of you, but I couldn't place you, even when you became Potions master," Contessa recollected. "Anyway, *do you remember me?*"

"No," he conceded, staring into his cup.

"You were very young to become Potions master, then."

Severus took another sip of his coffee. "Twenty-one."

"You looked older than twenty-one when you started teaching."

"Thanks," he replied sarcastically.

They listened to the remainder of the feature in silence. When the programme had finished, Severus placed his empty cup on the floor.

"I'm sure you're aware things will change when the students arrive back tomorrow. Miss Lovegood's abduction is likely to act as a catalyst for Dumbledore's Army." Severus suddenly realised he didn't want the day to end. He looked back at Contessa's face and saw compassion and understanding in her eyes.

"What are you going to do?" she asked gently.

Severus hung his head apprehensively.

"I really don't know."

Frozen in Time

As had been expected, the students of Hogwarts reacted angrily towards the abduction of Luna Lovegood.

During the first few weeks of term Dumbledore's Army stepped up its activities, causing chaos at every opportunity. And if they were able to get away with it, some of the professors turned a blind eye to their antics. With only the Carrows doling out severe punishments, the trouble-makers ran amok with sabotage and graffiti.

The Carrows had responded by establishing a Dark Arts Academy, but so far only the children of Death Eaters had become members, with the notable exception of Robert Selwyn.

Contessa continued to coach the third-year boy in potion-making and was juggling tutorials with an increasing number of detentions for Horace Slughorn. Whilst Robert was still being bullied his father was one of the Death Eaters involved in the kidnapping of Luna it seemed the Slytherins had started to lose interest, so life had become slightly easier for him.

Potions experimentation had fast become the pursuit to which Contessa and Severus most looked forward, and the new laboratory had thus far produced three potions which they had tested in the privacy of the Headmaster's quarters.

Contessa had fallen soundly asleep within moments of swallowing the first potion, and when the antidote proved ineffective, Severus had to carry her through the Floo Network to her quarters and put her to bed. She had been startled to find him sleeping on her sofa when she awoke the following morning.

As they had decided to take turns testing the potions, Severus had tried the second batch, only to find it completely ineffective when the Imperius Curse was cast; Contessa's spell found its way past the potion and Severus deflected it thereafter. Apart from a few abdominal cramps, which had been reversed with the antidote, Severus had not suffered any ill-effects.

The third trial yielded more spectacular results. Contessa had placed one too many Billywig stings into the potion and spent a large portion of the evening giggling uncontrollably whilst levitated in Severus's living room. It seemed to Contessa that Severus had taken an inexcusably long time to administer the antidote, allowing for the fact that she had been hard to reach, circling the crystal chandelier and banging her head against the ceiling. Eventually Severus had performed a miraculous feat of levitation, hovering before her without aid of a broomstick. It was almost as though the Headmaster could fly.

On Friday the thirtieth of January, Contessa arrived in Severus's quarters, flushed with success, after she had finished preparing the fourth potion ahead of schedule.

Severus was lying on the sofa with one arm curled around his head.

"What's up?" Contessa asked as she placed two flagons of potion on the coffee table and took a seat opposite him.

Severus stared into space, as if she wasn't there, until finally giving in to a sigh and slowly rising to a sitting position. Contessa watched his fine-looking hands as he ran his fingers through his scruffy hair. His lank, black locks disobeyed his command and quickly fell back into his eyes. He barely seemed to notice.

Contessa was aware that Severus hadn't bothered to change his clothes; he still wore his boots, black trousers and white high-collared shirt. A black necktie hung unfastened around his collar, and the creased, unbuttoned shirt revealed his Tiger's Eye ring dangling on its chain. Contessa wondered how long Severus had lain there, and she deduced he hadn't remembered she was coming for supper.

She didn't expect an answer to her initial greeting and waited patiently until his dark eyes met hers.

"Have I arrived at a bad time?" she asked.

The crooked, yellowing teeth of Severus's bottom jaw became visible for a moment. He cleared his throat. "Today is no different to any other day," he said gruffly, staring at the floor as he clasped his hands and rubbed his thumbs together.

It occurred to Contessa that, to Severus, today seemed very different to a normal day, but she didn't know why this would be the case. And she knew better than to push for an explanation.

"I've brought the new potion," she said instead.

"So I see."

"We could leave it for another night, though, if you prefer."

There was a short pause as Severus shifted in his seat and gazed pensively into the fire. Then, in one swift movement, he grabbed the flagon of experimental potion from the table and rose to his feet, striding purposefully to stand next to the fireplace.

He downed the contents of the bottle in one gulp and immediately took a sharp intake of breath. The empty flagon slipped from his grasp, and he simultaneously dropped to his knees. Hunched over on the rug by the hearth, Severus cradled his stomach, taking ragged, pained breaths.

Within moments Contessa was kneeling directly in front of him. It seemed as though her heart had stopped beating as she held out the potion's antidote.

Up close, she saw Severus's face had drained of colour, and he was shaking, as if shivering from the cold. With his gaze fixed upon the floor, Contessa couldn't raise his attention to the potion in her hands.

"Severus, take the antidote," she said, lifting the small green bottle into his line of vision.

Unexpectedly, Severus reached out and seized the flagon and proceeded to hurl it into the fire. Glass shattered against the chimney breast, and the potion evaporated instantly into the Floo.

Severus knelt, trembling, as Contessa attempted to collect her thoughts. Whatever the potion was doing to him, he was refusing intervention, and she suspected a bezoar stone would meet the same fate as the antidote.

And yet he was so obviously in distress. She knew she needed to try and calm him down.

"You're really shaking aren't you?" Contessa said gently, hoping the sound of her voice would draw his awareness into the room.

Severus continued to shake, but he nodded jerkily before resuming his stare at the floor.

His hand moved to clutch his chest, and his breathing became fast and shallow. Black curtains of hair fell around his face like blinkers, freezing him in time. Contessa sensed him panicking, overwhelmed by his senses.

Severus was trying, yet unable, to communicate with her. She remained calm and motionless on the rug in front of him.

"I'm here, Severus," she said, her voice soft and steady.

He didn't respond.

"Can you see me?" she asked.

Severus's head moved fractionally upwards. He nodded once.

"Clearly?" Contessa asked.

This time he raised his head further.

"Yes," he said. His voice sounded ragged and throaty.

Severus's eyes focused on the Tiger's Eye ring around Contessa's neck. He took a deep, shuddering breath, then his breathing calmed a little, and he continued to stare at Contessa's ring hanging on her necklace.

"Tell me what you can see," she pressed quietly.

"Your ring."

"What does it look like?"

"Silver. Golden brown stone. It... sparkles." His hand moved to the ring around his own neck. He inserted the tip of his index finger and moved the ring back and forth along the chain.

"How's your shaking, now that you can see me?"

"Better," Severus replied.

Contessa let out a breath, and her Tiger's Eye ring tingled in response to Severus's ministrations. Suddenly, she was overcome with a hunch.

"Do you want me to put my ring on?" she asked softly.

Her question hung in the air for a long moment, and Contessa wondered if Severus would answer.

Eventually, he raised his head. Dark eyes bored into hers as he yanked the ring from the chain around his neck. The silver necklace fell to the floor like a curling, coiled snake, and Severus lifted his other hand, ramming the ring onto his little finger.

He looked down at the floor again.

"I'm going to put the ring on my finger too, if that's OK?" she asked, feeling sure this was what he wanted.

He didn't respond.

Contessa mentally prepared herself as she unclasped her necklace, Occluding her thoughts and feelings so she could experience Severus's without confusion. She slipped the ring onto her finger and felt a ripple of Severus's fear and anxiety, then shuffled forward until she was close enough to place her hand on his knee.

Severus grasped Contessa's hand firmly and the Tiger's Eye rings touched, sending Contessa tumbling through space and time into a black, infinite void.

After a few long seconds of nauseating flashes of light and snatches of voices, Contessa felt her feet find solid ground.

She opened her eyes and found herself standing inside Severus's memory.

The scene was crystal clear, as if the past event was happening again now, in this very moment. She noticed her body had a visual form but, like in a Pensieve, nobody in the memory could see her. With the possible exception of Severus Snape.

The young Potions master met Contessa's eyes fleetingly before looking away, staring down the lengths of the House tables in the Great Hall at Hogwarts.

Contessa gasped as she turned around to see a plethora of pumpkins hovering mid-air. It was the Halloween feast, and at the opposite end of the hall she saw her younger self, aged seventeen, celebrating with the other seventh-year Ravenclaws.

A sharp scrape of wood dragged on the stone floor behind her. The young Professor Snape had risen abruptly from his seat, clutching his left forearm as though in pain. He made brief, urgent eye contact with Professor Dumbledore and left for the sanctuary of the chambers at the rear of the Great Hall.

Contessa followed him, and Dumbledore joined him moments later.

"What is it, Severus?" the Headmaster asked.

Wordlessly, Severus unbuttoned his shirt-sleeve and rolled back the cuff. The Dark Mark burned black into his arm, and the surrounding skin appeared red and swollen.

"There's no destination to the Dark Lord's call," Severus said, disconcerted. "I don't know why he summoned me or where he wishes to meet."

Dumbledore peered through his half-moon spectacles at Severus's Dark Mark, studying it closely. "I've never seen the mark so angry before. It troubles me. What do you think it means?"

"I don't know," Severus said impatiently. "Your orders, Dumbledore?"

The Headmaster contemplated his reply carefully. "Go to our friend Lucius Malfoy and find out what's happening. Report back to me when you have news."

Then the memory of Dumbledore dissolved as the room swirled around Contessa, and she lost sight of Severus for a moment. When the sands of time reformed, she found herself following Severus as he ran up the moving, spiral stone staircase to the Headmaster's office.

"Severus," Dumbledore greeted him grimly as he burst through the door.

"Headmaster," Severus replied brusquely as he strode across the circular office. "There's no word from the Dark Lord. He appears to have vanished. The Death Eaters are restless and fearful; no one knows what to do next."

"I suggest you take a seat," said Dumbledore as he summoned a chair.

Severus remained upright, ignoring the chair placed behind him. "Why?"

Dumbledore cringed briefly before looking away, addressing the Headteacher portraits instead of his Potions master.

"It appears Voldemort has fallen," he said, with his back towards Severus.

Contessa moved closer to Severus and touched his arm, reminding him she was still there.

"How?" Severus asked. "And when?"

"He fell when his own Killing Curse rebounded upon him, in the home of James and Lily Potter."

Severus's mouth gaped open in horror. "Is she alright?" he asked, his voice little more than a whisper.

Dumbledore turned to face him. "No, Severus. I'm sorry to say that she and James were murdered by Lord Voldemort."

Severus's knees gave out, and Contessa saw him slump backwards into the chair, ebony eyes beseeching Dumbledore to tell him it wasn't true. What little colour he had in his face drained away, and the long breath he had been holding escaped in an audible cry of anguish.

Contessa dropped to her knees at the side of the chair and twisted her hand around Severus's icy cold fingers. Glistening beads of tears formed in his eyes, blurring his vision as they fell onto his lap. His breath came in sharp, resonating bursts as gasps of agony fought their way out of his lungs. Hot, salty tears leaked onto Contessa's hands as she tried to console him, and she became aware that Severus could see her there, alongside him.

"I thought... you were going... to keep her... safe," he panted, gasping for air.

"She and James put their faith in the wrong person," Dumbledore said. "Rather like you, Severus."

Contessa felt the dagger twisting in Severus's gut. He flinched beside her. She tightened her hand resolutely around his.

"Weren't you hoping that Lord Voldemort would spare her?" Dumbledore continued.

Contessa noticed Severus's muscles tensing briefly. She nestled down on the floor and soothingly stroked the back of his hand, reassuring him of her presence.

"Her boy survives," Dumbledore said.

Severus's head jerked briefly.

"Her son lives. He has her eyes, precisely her eyes. You remember the shape and colour of Lily Evans's eyes, I am sure?"

Contessa's confusion was drowned out by the sensation of Severus's tension building like a coiled spring.

"DON'T!" he bellowed. "Gone... Dead..." His voice trailed off hopelessly.

As fog cleared from Contessa's vision, it became clear that the depth of Severus's loss was much more than guilt. Her breath caught in her throat, and her heart ached, halted and swollen inside her chest.

And still Dumbledore persisted.

"Is this remorse, Severus?"

But Severus didn't seem to hear. He was imploding.

"I wish... I wish I were dead..."

Contessa felt Severus's strength bleeding away, abandoning him to the depths of despair.

"And what use would that be to anyone?" Dumbledore said.

Contessa winced at the Headmaster's coldness.

"If you loved Lily Evans, if you truly loved her, then your way forward is clear."

Comprehension blossomed like a thorny rose in Contessa's chest, in synchrony with the glimmer of hope sparking from the darkest depths of Severus's heart.

Now she understood.

Severus's undertaking to protect Harry Potter had come to pass because of his love for the boy's mother. A love which seemed unrequited. Dumbledore had taken advantage of Severus's loss and turned his grief into something else—a reason for carrying on.

Whilst Contessa saw why Dumbledore had given him a *raison d'être*, she couldn't help but feel the constriction of Severus's pledge like a noose around her neck. She quailed, suffocated, wanting to cry out and make the whole thing stop. This decision, this moment, had halted Severus and prevented him from healing, trapping him in bitter desolation for the rest of his life.

She moved in front of Severus's chair, blocking his view of Dumbledore, and she took his head tenderly in her hands.

Through his shocked and disbelieving eyes he told her *enough*.

Contessa held Severus in her arms, cradling his head as she closed her eyes and ran her fingertips through his long black hair.

They stepped into the blackness of the void together.

When Contessa opened her eyes again she found herself kneeling in Severus's quarters in front of the fireplace. Her hand continued to stroke his hair as his head rested heavy against her shoulder. Feeling his silent tears dampening her neck, she wrapped her other arm around him, holding him close.

Contessa lost all sense of time as she listened to the sound of Severus's laboured breathing and felt the warmth of his chest rising and falling in her embrace.

In the fading firelight she began to comprehend the profundity of Severus's love for Lily Evans. He had loved her all his life, loved her still, and would never love another.

Now they were back in the reality of the present day, the significance of the day's date finally dawned upon her.

Lily Potter, born 30 January 1960

Died 31 October 1981

Cloak of Numbness

Severus's damaged soul tried to knit itself back together as he rested his head on Contessa's shoulder. The agonising memory of Lily's death began to fade as his conscious mind brought him back into the room, and slowly the pain of loss ebbed away into something more tolerable. Something more familiar.

The rush of adrenaline subsided to a creeping nausea, permeating his gut. He wanted to shroud himself in his customary cloak of numbness, make the torment of anguish disappear. But the potion had placed that cloak too far from reach. If only he hadn't panicked and thrown the antidote into the fire, he could rid himself of these feelings now, Occlude them away, as he did so many other things.

Contessa helped him onto his feet and guided him back to the cushioned sofa. They sat down facing each other, next to the fire. The room's illumination was low as the embers of the fire smouldered in the hearth, issuing lazy crackles as the fire began to die.

The hollow pit in Severus's stomach started to burn as he brushed the grainy tracks of tears from his face. Out of his peripheral vision, he could see Contessa sitting leaning forward, watching him closely. He wondered how long it would take for the potion's effects to wear off so he could resume his pitiful existence: a long and lonely search for redemption.

"You should *Imperio* me before the potion wanes," he told Contessa.

Contessa took a long moment to reply.

"No, I don't think so," she said quietly.

Severus lifted his head, perplexed. Contessa's compassionate gaze caused the burning, cavernous emptiness of his stomach to travel a circular route around his abdomen. Severus was aware that the words coming from his mouth were completely disconnected from the feelings snaking their way around his body.

"We should not waste the opportunity," he said, but he did not truly feel the cool rationality which his tone attempted to convey. Dimly, he wondered for whose sake he was being rational.

Contessa shook her head minutely but maintained eye contact. Her gaze met him in a place which seemed both alien and mysteriously comforting.

"I think a potion which forces someone to relive traumatic memories is best consigned to the dustbin," she replied. "I wouldn't want to use it, even if it did repel the curse. We don't need a bottled Dementor."

There was a note of sadness and regret in her voice which filled Severus with unexpected warmth. He knew that such a potion would probably have a market for torture and punishment, and he lamented its abandonment. But as they were researching neither of these uses, he remained silent.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," Contessa said softly.

Severus watched her eyes glistening on the edge of tears and fought back his own, wondering why she was almost crying. Then reality hit him. They were still wearing the rings. He realised now that Contessa had Occluded herself and was experiencing his thoughts and feelings by return.

He looked down at his Tiger's Eye ring, contemplating whether or not to remove it. Part of him wanted to reclaim his privacy but another part couldn't bear to be alone with the emotions threatening to engulf him.

It seemed Contessa was strong enough to stay alongside him, and with the ring firmly ensconced on his little finger, the moment became one of precious unreality.

In his mind's eye, Severus saw himself standing at the edge of a frozen pool, similar to the one in which he had placed Gryffindor's sword. He was drawn to look into its icy surface, even though he was scared to see what the reflection held. The thought of the cold water beneath the frosty mirror made his toes curl. He really didn't want to fall into the freezing water and become trapped, unable to escape.

His eyes searched Contessa's again, seeking contact and reassurance.

He heard her thought in his mind. *I'm a good swimmer.*

The back of Severus's throat felt hard and dry as he swallowed and looked away.

Silence lingered, the only sounds coming from the glowing embers in the fire shifting in the grate. As the radiant light dipped again, Severus felt secure in Contessa's presence.

Out loud, she said gently, "You lost the woman you loved."

"Yes," he murmured. Then, after a moment's deliberation, he added, *the only woman I ever loved.*

Contessa's posture changed slightly but she didn't look away. "And you love her still..."

"Now, more than ever," Severus vocalised his thoughts, without realising he had spoken.

"Your love grows stronger with each passing year," Contessa said softly.

Severus nodded.

The burning in his abdomen was spreading into his chest, searing persistently at his heart. "I'll never love anyone like I loved Lily." Her name on his tongue expelled one of the fiery serpents inside him.

"It seems no one can replace her in your heart."

"She's all I have."

They sat quietly whilst Severus explored the room in his heart occupied solely by Lily. Happy moments with his childhood friend mingled with memories of their deepening bond as they progressed through their years at Hogwarts together. She was the only person who he'd felt loved by, and the only one who had accepted him for whom and what he was. Severus squeezed every last drop of joy out of the warm, rapturous glow of the past, basking in his devotion to the one woman who meant everything in his world.

"Her friendship gave you something you'd never experienced before," Contessa reflected.

He knew she had seen, and he knew she had understood.

"I loved her, accepted her, completely, for all the things she was, even though she was Muggle-born. I thought she accepted me too..." Severus felt a vice closing around his ribcage as the reflection on the pool's surface began to change. "At least she did... until..."

His eyebrows pinched together as the clamp around his chest held its position an established place like a cast-iron girdle around his heart. He forced a deep, shuddering breath into his lungs.

"Her acceptance of you changed?" Contessa asked softly.

Severus's abdominal muscles cramped as Contessa prodded the pool's frozen surface. He had previously avoided agitating the icy mirror, but her gentle enquiry and willingness to accompany him seemed to make it easier to contemplate breaking through the surface. With the heel of his boot, he smashed down hard into the layer of ice.

He leaned forward to look into the dark waters beneath.

"She wanted me to be different, to give up the Dark Arts, to be more like *them*," he said bitterly, remembering the House of Gryffindor's oh-so-noble peers. "But I couldn't make a choice like that at the drop of a hat not quickly enough for her, anyway and then she... withdrew. My apology meant nothing to her, and she closed the door on me."

"You lost her."

"When I lost her, I lost everything."

"When she withdrew her friendship, you felt as though you'd lost everything."

"I did... I do."

"And you felt...?"

"Hollow. Empty. Alone." Severus knew these feelings well; they rose to the surface whenever his defences were brittle. And in recurrent nightmares. "I've felt that way for as long as I can remember." Then, unexpectedly, the sensation of a clenched fist formed deep inside his abdomen. "There's something else now, though," he said, surprised by the new emotion gradually uncoiling in his stomach.

"Can you describe it?"

"It's like a heavy, solid fist opening itself deep inside my guts." He stopped, not knowing how to articulate what was happening.

"Does it make a sound?"

He listened closely. "Yes," he said. The roar of emotion ascended his throat, where it halted, afraid. This was a different kind of anger to the one he lived with every day; it wasn't directed at himself, and its vibrations seemed to reverberate through his entire body.

"You're feeling angry," Contessa said, grounding him.

"I can't allow myself to feel angry with Lily," he said, and the feeling strangled him, like icy fingers closing around his windpipe.

"What does feeling angry mean to you?"

"It hurts and it stings," he answered, grimacing. "How can I feel that way about the best thing that ever happened to me?"

Contessa's blue-grey eyes were kind and caring. "You remember her with love, so it seems your anger is misplaced."

Severus tried to gulp down a choke, feeling as though his body was tearing itself in two, starting at his throat.

"Where does your anger go?" she asked him.

"It stays inside."

"What does it do?"

Warm, salty water trickled down his cheeks, and his chest felt open and vulnerable. "It tears me apart."

Adrift inside the gaping chasm of his heart, Severus almost lost himself in the frozen waters of the pool. Then he heard Contessa's voice, strong and resilient, like a life-raft amidst the chunks of ice floating on the water's surface.

"Your anger hurts you when it stays inside."

Severus realised the extent of the harm caused by the lump of ice lodged in his throat, ripping his soul apart as it cut through his body.

"What does your anger want?" Contessa asked.

The feeling, trapped in his throat, started to throb. *It wants release.*

"Can you let it out?" she asked gently.

Severus's breath froze in his chest, consumed by horror and panic. "It's too dangerous."

Contessa's soft and steady presence lifted him from the icy pit. "It feels dangerous to release your anger," she said.

"I'm afraid I'll hurt you," he whispered, searching her eyes, wanting to protect her, wanting to see if she could...

Contessa smiled a small, sad glimmer of encouragement. "I trust you."

Her words fortified him from deep within.

Hot snakes slithered down his right arm, hissing and spitting as they travelled inexorably to his hand. He needed something to throw, something to smash. He needed to make something disappear in a satisfying burst of energy and movement.

The lump in his throat felt like a balloon being pumped full of air, crushing into his windpipe. He knew if he didn't act soon, he would deprive his body of the oxygen he needed to live. His eyes found the empty, discarded potion bottle dropped on the living room rug.

"I'm here, Severus. Where does your anger want to go?"

Contessa's voice acted like a catapult, thrusting him forward.

Suddenly he was standing and had scooped up the amber-coloured flagon from the floor. He ran his fingers along the cool, ribbed edges of the glass, tightly gripping the tiny vessel in his hand. He flexed the muscles of his arm as the serpents passed through, sliding free from their prison.

With a gurgling rumble deep inside his throat, Severus swung his arm back, and with the force of snakes springing from his palm, he flung the potion bottle across the room.

Glass shattered, hitting the breast of the chimney and sending shards into the grate. Vapours from the remaining drops of potion spiralled upwards in a white snake-like wisp, and the serpents were sibilant in approval.

The last embers of the dying fire fizzled out, and the Replenishment Charm ignited. Newly chopped wood settled in the grate, spitting and crackling as it caught fire.

Severus noticed the strangled feeling in his throat had gone, and the burning in his arm had now faded to a warm, fluid heat. He stood for a while, watching the logs on the fire kindle, inhaling the aroma of burning pinewood.

Eventually he knelt down and reached for the poker by the side of the fireplace. As he stoked the fire and felt its warmth on his face and hands, Contessa joined him, mirroring his posture in front of the fire.

"Your anger found a way out," she said, her voice quietly comforting. "And you didn't hurt me."

Severus turned to look at her concerned, beautiful face, lit up by the flickering iridescence of the fire.

"How do you feel now?" she asked.

As his anger faded, his body felt more alive than ever before.

"The numbness has gone," he said simply.

With a pang of sorrow, he felt the effects of the potion beginning to wane. He wondered if he could now reach for his cloak, to numb the buried emotions he had uncovered in its absence.

He had feared these feelings, denied and suppressed them.

Severus felt Contessa's hand slip into his grasp as the pain of grief became visible beneath the melted, smashed surface of the pool. He knew they could look into its depths together, to know and name the darkness held within.

He left the numbing cloak behind at the water's edge.

Severus had travelled too far to turn back now.

Author's Note:

Where I have quoted dialogue from the original Harry Potter books, I have marked it with an asterisk.

Eleven

Chapter 11 of 14

Albus Dumbledore had a plan to protect Severus Snape after the fateful night on the Astronomy Tower. During his final year as Headmaster, Snape has a chance to come to terms with his past and find peace, before his life draws to its inevitable close. Canon-compliant. TPP Featured Story May/June 2010.

Blink of an Eye

Ten days passed, and the secret Potions laboratory remained empty.

Caught up in a flurry of activity assisting with the teaching of Potions, Contessa found plenty of excuses to suspend her research and was tempted to scrap her hunt for an Imperius curse-breaker after the events of the last trial.

She continued to see Severus twice a week in his quarters. They had not journeyed back and revisited his previously buried feelings for Lily Evans; instead Severus seemed content with Contessa simply being in the same room as him.

Initially, Contessa had been surprised to find she wasn't jealous after Severus's revelations of his love for Lily. But as it began to sink in, Contessa began to comprehend the intensity of his attachment to his first and only love. He had spent most of his life in love with one woman. So powerful were his feelings that they had become a defining part of him. His love for Lily was inextricably linked to who Severus believed himself to be; he didn't know who he was without her, and he lived only to prove his self-worth to her.

Long ago, it seemed, Severus had made a pact with himself: he would avoid the pain of losing someone by choosing never to love again. And so he held on to his memory of Lily, unable to let her go.

And with that, Contessa knew all she needed to know. It seemed there was no room in Severus's heart for another woman, and whilst he continued to hold on so tightly to Lily, their friendship would never progress to something more.

No longer Occluding her emotions and for days afterwards, Contessa's heart ached as though a stone had been thrust into its centre. The constant companion of tightness in her chest had, once or twice, in the privacy of her quarters, caused tears to flow as she mourned the loss of something she'd longed for, but never actually had.

The ache soon turned to anger, which eventually found its release on her broomstick one night, flying like a shrieking banshee around Hogwarts' grounds.

Shortly afterwards her heart dropped onto a new wave of sadness as she began to understand the futility of her attraction to a man whose heart belonged to another.

But Contessa knew she couldn't run away.

She knew Severus was still there, needing her.

And she needed him too.

Although friendship was all their relationship would ever be, Contessa realised that Severus valued her greatly, and she could accept him, knowing he couldn't love again.

As her conviction became clearer, her romantic feelings started to ripple away like the tide retreating across a beach.

But the tide was leaving the coastline renewed; in its place was a shore of firm friendship and unwavering loyalty. Strengthened by the pain of grief and anger, their bond had grown robust. Contessa was glad that her unconditional acceptance of Severus came naturally, now superfluous to her hastily-made vow.

Perhaps Albus Dumbledore had known her capabilities all along.

Elsewhere in Hogwarts, however, matters were getting out of hand. With the number of students facing discipline, many of Contessa's evenings were now filled with detentions from Horace Slughorn's Potions classes, as well as her tutorials with Robert Selwyn. She was soon going to reach the point where her evenings with Severus would be threatened; she would have no good explanation for her whereabouts if Horace asked for additional favours.

Late one evening she was helping Robert pack away his potion ingredients after a successful attempt at making one of the trickier formulas from Arsenius Jigger's textbook *Magical Draughts and Potions*. The young Gryffindor had advanced beyond the usual level for a third year, so Contessa had decided to up the ante to gauge the boy's potential. He had not disappointed.

"You know, Robert, I think we could progress to antidotes next time," Contessa was saying as she picked up the brass scales from the workbench in the Potions office. "Strictly speaking it's not something you'd start until your fourth year, but I think you'd enjoy it."

Robert smiled. "Yeah, that'd be good, Miss," he said, trying not to sound too interested.

"How's it going with the other Gryffindors these days?"

"Could be worse, I s'pose," he replied.

Contessa usually anticipated this question would elicit a mumbled reply, but this time Robert's tone was more assured.

"Has it got a bit better?" she asked, placing the brass scales in the cupboard.

"Yeah, a bit. You see, they think I'm in detention when I'm here at night. And, well, there's some kudos for being in detention, especially if you're a Gryffindor. Or a member of Dumbledore's Army."

Contessa felt her eyebrows creeping up her head. "And you've not told them otherwise?"

"Don't see the point, Miss."

Contessa laughed. "Fair enough."

"I had to tell Professor McGonagall about it last week though, 'cos someone told her I was always in detention. She called me in to see her 'cos she didn't know anything about me being in trouble, so I explained it was just tutorials."

"Oh, it's fine. I told her you were getting extra help ages ago. She must've been concerned that no one informed the Head of House of your so-called detentions."

As they were clearing the last of the debris away, Contessa almost dropped the mortar and pestle she was holding when the door flung open unexpectedly. Robert turned around, startled, and his posture straightened immediately upon seeing the Headmaster striding into the office.

Severus's eyes glinted malevolently in the candlelight as he came to a halt beside the workbench, his billowing cloak following in close convoy. He crossed his arms in front of his chest, lending him the appearance of an upside-down bat.

Severus's pale skin, dark eyes and iniquitous manner reminded Contessa of the rumour she'd heard during her seventh year that the new Potions master was a vampire.

She suppressed a smile as she counted the numerous black buttons on the sleeves of his frock coat, until the clunking sound of winchesters being hurriedly stowed away bounced Contessa back into the present moment. She frowned as she watched Robert stuffing the bottles onto the shelves, attempting to make as fast an escape as possible under the Headmaster's stern gaze.

"Good evening, Headmaster," Contessa said with a deliberate tone of impertinence.

Severus didn't look at her and simply nodded once in acknowledgement.

Contessa placed the mortar and pestle back down on the bench and waited silently. She felt a flicker of amusement at staging their game in the presence of an innocent. She turned to see Robert hot-footing his way out of the office without a backward glance.

Contessa saw the door swinging behind the sandy-haired boy and heard the faint echo of his footsteps as he ran down the corridor. She turned to face Severus, failing to notice her tutee had left the door slightly ajar.

"That was hardly necessary," she admonished Severus.

Severus's arms remained entwined, but his shoulders dropped as he relaxed. Contessa watched distractedly as his fingers slipped under his cloak and gripped his bicep.

Perhaps her attraction had not yet left the building.

"You are forgetting that most of the students hate me; I'm merely living up to their expectations."

"And it's a stereotype to which you easily conform," she observed.

"Of course," he said with a slight air of impatience. "Remember the school must believe we're still at loggerheads."

Contessa smirked. "Yeah, well, you're not so scary to me anymore."

Severus rolled his eyes. A moment later his arms dropped to his sides, and he leaned back against the workbench.

"What brings you to the dungeons?" Contessa asked. She rested her hand on the tabletop, and her fingers nudged the cold stone of the mortar bowl.

"Oleander root."

Contessa's bemusement soon turned into curiosity. "Pardon?"

"Oleander root," Severus repeated. "It should be the next ingredient we try with Memory Potion base."

Contessa was stunned at Severus's renewed interest in potion-making after the consequences of their last endeavour. She took a moment to catch up with him.

"Don't tempt me to Summon a bluebottle," Severus mocked.

Contessa snapped her jaw shut, and despite her mouth having turned dry, she swallowed reflexively. "You're ready to try again?"

"Of course," Severus replied. "And this time it's *your* turn to test the potion."

"That may be, but I've no intention of taking a potion containing oleander root; it's notoriously toxic."

"Plainly you haven't given the matter enough consideration," he said. His eyes glittering as he leaned in closer. "In combination with Murtlap, we should have a viable potion."

Contessa took some time to think his theory through, reluctant to agree to something she might later regret. Eventually, she conceded, "It's a good idea."

"You sound surprised, Contessa." Severus's forehead creased as he tilted his head to one side. "Perhaps the fact that I am the master and you are the assistant momentarily evaded you?"

The teasing in his voice caused Contessa to simper, and her bottom lip grazed against her teeth as her smile became more pronounced.

Severus's cheeks rounded as he chuckled.

Neither of them heard the faint creak of the office door, and seconds too late, Contessa noticed the pointed hat of Professor McGonagall entering the room. The older witch's eyes were wide with surprise, and assessing the situation, her expression became almost feline.

In the blink of an eye Contessa's smile died, and the alteration of her countenance caused Severus's bearing to change. His lips parted into a glower, and he crossed his arms before turning to face the Transfiguration professor.

Out of the corner of her vision, Contessa saw one of Severus's eyebrows arch as he appraised the intruder. Contessa cleared her throat quietly, trying to still the sensation of her quickening heart rising into her larynx.

"Good evening, Minerva," Contessa managed, hoping to convey a mixture of welcome and unease, befitting of the charade.

"Tess," Minerva replied crisply, before addressing Severus with a nod. "Headmaster," she said askance.

"What do you want, Minerva?" said Severus, in a voice laden with acid.

Contessa tried not to wince at his hostility.

"A word with Tess, if you don't mind," Minerva replied.

"Certainly," said Severus. He made no attempt to leave the room.

Minerva eyeballed the Headmaster for five long seconds before reluctantly kowtowing to his authority and turning to face Contessa.

"It's with regard to Selwyn," Minerva began awkwardly, giving Contessa a distinct impression that the professor was doing some quick-thinking. "He's made excellent progress, and I was hoping you could open up your... tutorials... to other students."

Contessa was momentarily stumped for words, placed piggy-in-the-middle between Headmaster and Professor. She opened her mouth to speak but found herself cut off by Severus.

"It seems somewhat... inappropriate... for the Transfiguration professor to encroach upon the remit of the Potions master, Minerva. Horace is perfectly capable of deciding who should receive Potions tutorials. Besides," he continued, turning to face Contessa with a sneer, "I'm here to curtail our little upstart of a Potions Assistant's extra-curricular activities. It's high time she learned her limits and focused on her job, which she already performs with woeful inadequacy."

Contessa's jaw dropped at Severus's insult, temporarily forgetting that the slight on her character was completely in keeping with their subterfuge.

"But..." Minerva spluttered.

"No ifs, no buts, Minerva. I'm the Headmaster and I'm in charge of the staff and students at Hogwarts."

Minerva looked as though she was about to disagree, but she quickly adopted a suitably chastised demeanour and cast Contessa an apologetic look.

Contessa let out a halted breath. She smiled at Minerva before affecting a grimace at the continued presence of the Headmaster. Minerva's brow puckered as she turned on her heel and closed the door behind her.

Seconds ticked away, and Contessa listened to her heartbeat thrumming in her ears.

Headmaster and Potions Assistant remained motionless, staring at the door.

After a while, Contessa's eardrums started to burn. "What did you do that for?" she asked incredulously.

Severus unfolded his arms slowly. His chin receded into his neck, and he tilted his head towards her, affronted.

Taking another breath, Contessa steadied herself against the workbench. "You've cost Robert Selwyn his tutorials," she explained, moderating her tone.

"I won't allow the teachers to dupe you into providing extra detentions."

"How do you know that was what she was asking for?"

"I've known Minerva for a long time. She came here to ask you to supervise additional detentions; the guise of tutorials was for my benefit alone."

"And so you made the decision for me?" Contessa asked, unable to hide her disgust.

"Perhaps you have indeed forgotten your place, Contessa."

His tone was perfunctory, and Contessa faltered, knowing she had overstepped the mark.

"Robert will be upset," she said in a conciliatory voice. "It seems a shame that he'll have to suffer."

Severus shook his head intolerantly. "You shouldn't waste your time pitying the boy he's perfectly capable of looking after himself. More to the point, you knew your evenings were unsustainable with the detentions you're providing. One less evening a week spent on tutorials will give you more free time, and we can get started on the next version of the potion."

Severus looked rather pleased with himself as he gave the latter part of his evaluation. Contessa knew he was offering a peace treaty, albeit with selfish motivations, in lieu of her diminished responsibilities. She couldn't help but smile at his disingenuous compromise because she knew it was his way of showing fondness.

Although she was disappointed for Robert, she knew the loss of his tutorials was unavoidable. At least she'd been able to help him.

Contessa turned to confront the problem which they had deliberately sidestepped.

"Do you think Minerva suspects anything?" she asked in a low voice.

Severus paused, appraising the closed door with a frown.

"I hope not."

Treasured in Darkness

"Letting go, it's so hard

The way it's hurting now

To get this love untied

So tough to stay with this thing

'Cos if I follow through

I face what I denied"

'Washing of the Water', Peter Gabriel

"Come on, Contessa, get on with it!"

Severus watched her slender fingers running up and down the potion flagon which rested on the coffee table in his living room.

"That's easy for *you* to say," Contessa replied. "You're not the one having to take it."

After a weekend spent preparing the oleander-root variant of experimental potion, the time had come to test it. Contessa was, understandably, nervous.

Severus tapped his fingertips on the table. His usual *modus operandi* would involve humiliating the other person into action, but ever since their experience with the last

trial of the potion, Severus felt less inclined to do so.

"I'm confident the antidote will work," he said instead.

Contessa sighed resignedly. "Alright then." She picked up the bottle and swallowed half of its contents before sitting back on the sofa. She rubbed her hands against her knees whilst she waited.

Severus watched her features change into a frown.

Contessa looked up at him, perplexed. "Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"I don't feel any different."

"That's good," Severus said. "Isn't it?"

Contessa shrugged her shoulders.

Severus retrieved his wand and pointed it directly at her. "Can you tap-dance?" he asked slyly.

"Wha..."

"*Imperio.*"

Severus scrutinised Contessa's face for the first signs of the curse hitting home. Her temple creased, and her lips narrowed as she concentrated.

"Nope," she said eventually. "The curse found its way in, and I was able to block it."

Severus grimaced and shook his head. "I was sure this would work. How do you feel?"

"Fine, really. Just a bit more anxious than before, but that could have something to do with your veiled threat," Contessa said, smiling.

Severus couldn't believe the potion had had no effect at all. A hiss of exasperation escaped his clenched teeth.

"We're missing something," he said. "We have to be."

Contessa wrinkled her nose at his scowl. "It didn't work on me."

But Severus wasn't about to admit defeat. He knew his potion recipe couldn't have a neutral effect.

"We should give up and move on," Contessa said, dejected.

"No," he replied firmly.

Severus snatched the half-empty flagon from the table, and to Contessa's complete surprise, he dropped the remaining potion into his mouth.

The liquid tasted bitter on his tongue, and as it slithered down his throat, it burned like chilli peppers. Somewhere deep in his abdomen, a vacuum began to build. It was as if something had sucked all the air out and left nothing but a wide, empty hole.

"Severus, what's the matter?"

Contessa's concerned voiced penetrated the vacuity, and Severus noticed her reaching inside her robes for the antidote.

"No," he instructed her. "No antidote. If the potion affects me differently we should study the outcome and learn from it. Cast the Imperius Curse now."

Contessa did as she was told, but when the curse penetrated Severus's mind he deflected it with ease. He huffed and shook his head, communicating the potion's failure.

The edges of the vacuum had now become palpable, eating away at Severus's insides as if trying to escape from his body. His heart seemed to be sinking slowly towards the void, and the resulting ache gnawed at his sternum.

He was aware that Contessa was still with him, and he was curious to know why the potion would affect him in a different way. His rational mind prepared itself for another sojourn into uncharted territory.

With Contessa's steady presence keeping him safe, Severus allowed himself to embrace the sensations in his body and the memories they evoked.

He found himself taken back to the windswept hilltop, one cold winter's night, long ago. It was the night he'd asked for Dumbledore's help to keep Lily safe from the Dark Lord. Shivering, he could hear Dumbledore's voice, scathing and filled with contempt.

Contessa's voice drifted into Severus's awareness.

"Can you hear me?"

This time it was easier for him to speak. "I can."

"What's happening?"

"It's another memory."

There was a long pause, then Contessa's voice, full of concern. "I still have the antidote."

"I'm alright."

"Where are you?"

"With Dumbledore."

The icy wind had been stilled by a flick of Dumbledore's wand, and Severus stood, disarmed and vulnerable, in the presence of the Headmaster.

"What's he saying?"

"He's... suggesting... if Lily means so much to me... I should ask the Dark Lord to spare her... in exchange for her son."

Contessa didn't reply straight away, and Severus felt a nauseous swirl of disorientation, mingled with his recollection of terror and desperation.

Then her voice, calm and clear, rang like a bell resonating warmly through the freezing void. "How do you feel when you hear him say that?"

Severus's stomach swooped, and the back of his neck prickled with hot electricity. "I'm frantic, as though sand is slipping through my fingers. I've done everything I can to protect Lily, but I must do more. I know Dumbledore can help, and it kills me to have to ask him, to expose myself. But I'm beyond caring about the risk and the shame Lily is all that matters. It's my fault she's in danger. It's because of me that the Dark Lord is hunting her down."

The vacuum pressed its icy extent further into Severus's chest, causing a new wave of anxiety.

"You're desperate to protect Lily, willing to risk everything to keep her safe."

"Yes. But when I tell Dumbledore I've already requested the Dark Lord's mercy for Lily, he says I... disgust him."

"How do you feel?"

Severus's stomach cramped. "Ashamed."

The word hung in the air like a spectre, and Severus fought the urge to shrink away. He opened his eyes and found Contessa's compassionate gaze, unflinching and resolute.

For one long, bizarre moment, Severus couldn't understand why this admission had not disgusted her, too. Surely he was a contemptible creature, unworthy of her acceptance? Had he not broken every taboo with the intensity of his love for Lily Evans? Was he not selfish, amoral and undeserving?

But there in front of his eyes was Contessa, unwavering, kind and accepting. Severus was stunned.

"You felt ashamed. You loved Lily and you wanted to protect her."

"She was all that mattered to me," he continued, heartened. "I asked for amnesty for Lily, but I knew the plan wasn't foolproof; there was a high probability the Dark Lord would kill her, regardless. I couldn't bear to lose her or be the one responsible for her death. If I hadn't heard Trelawney's prophecy, if I hadn't reported all I'd heard to the Dark Lord, Lily might still be alive today."

"You feel guilty. You jeopardised Lily's safety unwittingly you didn't know."

"I should have known, should've seen the consequences..."

"You blame yourself for her death."

"I *am* to blame." The vacuum in his gut seemed to come to a halt. His heart balanced precariously above the cavernous void, throbbing as it pressed into his ribcage. If he let the feeling escape, it seemed his heart would be lost forever, consumed by the black hole within. It was safer, then, to stay here in uneasy equilibrium, than risk succumbing to the dark depths of despair.

"You say you are to blame, even though she wasn't killed by your hand."

Severus swallowed reluctantly. "Not by my hand, no," he said through gritted teeth. "But if it were not for me, she'd still be alive."

"And if she were still alive...?"

"She'd be with that imbecile, Potter." Severus noticed his eyelids were very warm as he closed them. Warm and dry.

"She'd be with someone else."

Bitterness clawed at Severus's throat. "With her husband and her family, probably wouldn't even think about me forgotten my very existence."

"What do you want to say to her, Severus?"

Severus opened his eyes again. It hadn't occurred to him that there might be something he wanted to say. And now that there was a chance to say something anything countless feelings jostled for position. Somehow, inexplicably, words found their way out of his mouth.

"I'd say I'm sorry. Sorry for not being the man she wanted me to be." He paused as a red-hot serpent coiled itself around his spine, and his remorse faded slightly. "I could have been a better man if she'd given me a second chance. Instead I was forced out into the cold, and I've languished there for over twenty years, wishing I had died instead of her."

"You've lived your life trying to say you're sorry, and you've suppressed your anger after being abandoned by the woman you loved."

Severus's bottom lip pressed into his chin as the beginnings of a sob formed in his throat. His eyes watered, threatening tears, but he willed himself not to cry. Something he heard in Contessa's words provoked a sense of futility, and for the first time it seemed that living a life of atonement was folly.

But Severus wasn't quite ready to concede that. He lived for Lily; she defined him to his very core, and he couldn't imagine being himself without her. He resolved he would make it up to her by doing what needed to be done; Severus could no longer protect her son, but he could ensure Harry Potter received all the information entrusted to him by Dumbledore. If it was the last thing he did.

And, perhaps, when he did, he might be able to forgive himself.

Contessa's bluish-grey eyes met him across the divide, and Severus marvelled at her ability to walk alongside and accept him so completely, knowing some of his deepest flaws and his darkest, weakest emotions. It was as if she didn't need him to be anything more than everything he already was.

He supposed it was the unconditional vow she had taken that helped him feel safe and, in a new and strange way, loved.

Somehow it seemed unreal, this sense of being cared for and treasured in darkness. Suddenly Contessa was like a precious stone unearthed before his very eyes.

He might have to consider thanking Dumbledore for finding him this gift. Severus would not have known to look for her or believed such a person existed.

There was something different about Contessa, he realised. As with Lily, he shared a friendship with her, greater than any bond previously experienced. And yet somehow, when he was with Contessa, Severus knew he could be himself. Whatever he was, she was okay with. She knew he was a Death Eater, knew he loved the Dark Arts, knew he was bitter and twisted, preferred to be alone, loved another woman to the point of self destruction... All these things Contessa knew. And she was still there, steadfast, resolute and loyal.

It was something he had never encountered before, and now her acceptance had leaked through into his perception, he realised that Contessa treasured him in a way which Lily never had.

Here was a woman, sitting opposite him, her attention fixed solely upon him, offering him a connection he never thought possible.

All of a sudden, Severus's broken soul felt cherished and valued.

The vacuum in his abdomen filled with warmth and... another feeling... one he recognised but hadn't allowed himself to feel for such a very long time.

Severus couldn't bring himself to say the words in his head, but the warm and tender ache in his heart soothed his remaining doubts. It was as though he had a chance to start anew, to live his life differently. To free himself from the chains he had worn for so many years.

With a start, he realised they had been sitting in silence for almost half an hour. He shifted on the sofa, forcing blood to move through his immobile limbs.

Knowing he could not verbalise the revelation of his feelings for Contessa, Severus needed to switch the focus elsewhere. It was too soon to make any sort of admission to her, too uncomfortable, too dangerous. He racked his brain for the last words they had spoken.

Of course.

They had been about his remorse for his part in Lily's death.

That moment seemed an eternity ago.

"I've made a decision," Severus said.

"You have?"

"I know what I need to do to put things right."

Contessa leaned forward and reached out for his clasped hands. She placed warm hands on top of his and squeezed gently. He allowed this contact for a moment, before pulling away.

"Why do you think the potion affected me differently?" he asked. The tone of his voice signalled a wish to conclude the conversation.

"I'm not sure," Contessa replied, one hand resting now upon her knee, the other sweeping back the wavy brown hair falling across her shoulders. "These last two attempts were based on Memory Potion and seemed to unlock suppressed feelings. Perhaps I didn't have the same repressed emotions to release, so there's been no effect on me."

It was conceivable. Severus sat back in his seat, altering his posture to indicate his wish for her to leave.

Wordlessly, Contessa stood up and padded softly to the door. She placed her hand upon the doorknob.

"Tess," Severus called across the room.

Her name tingled slightly on his tongue, and he watched a small smile curl around her mouth.

"Thank you," he said sincerely.

She nodded once, wished him goodnight and left him on his own again, swimming in a warm pool, out from which he never wanted to climb.

Storm Clouds Gather

"Tess."

The sound of Horace Slughorn's voice made Contessa jump in her seat. So engrossed had she been in her thoughts, she hadn't heard the door to the Potions office open or the professor's footsteps as he crossed the room.

Red ink from her quill had dropped in blotches upon the parchment she was marking, and the nib had dried completely. She felt her cheeks burning as she hurriedly withdrew her wand and *Tergeo'd* the spilt ink from the first year's homework.

"Horace, good morning," she said, clearing a frog from her throat. "Sorry, I was miles away."

"My apologies for interrupting," he replied genially. "You seemed in a wonderful daydream."

Contessa smiled bashfully. She had been rather preoccupied with thoughts of Severus over the last few days, fascinated by how much he had loosened up in her presence and other subtler changes in his demeanour.

It seemed as though she'd swum into Severus's shore and was walking along the beach, feeling the warm sand beneath her toes for the first time. She felt privileged that she'd been shown things which no one else had seen.

However, Contessa still had a sense of the unspoken; there was much she didn't yet know. And she was also aware of other walls standing in her way, preventing her from moving further inland.

But she knew Severus trusted her and felt comfortable with her. It was true he'd made some dubious choices in his life and had done some terrible things, but as he revealed more of his true nature, Contessa found it easier to understand him and keep her unconditional vow.

And as her amorous feelings for Severus continued to disperse, she was relieved her confusion had finally passed.

"I need to talk to you about Potions detentions," Horace said earnestly, taking a seat on the stool beside her. He ran his palms over his bald head.

"I was wondering how much longer the status quo could continue," she replied.

"Not much longer," Horace said regretfully. "There aren't too many problems with my Slytherins most of them are keeping their heads down but the other Houses are in something of a quandary. Ever since the teachers started carrying out extra night-time rounds, they've struggled to provide enough detention time. Minerva's been hit worst, what with all those Gryffindors in the DA. It's bad enough that the Carrows are breathing down our necks, telling us our punishments are ineffective. I fear storm clouds are gathering all around us."

"What can I do to help?"

"Well," Horace said, licking his lips in anticipation, "I was going to suggest you hand the Potions marking back to me. It'll give you a bit of time to yourself during the day, and then in the evenings you can supervise detentions en masse for the less serious offenders. That way the professors can concentrate on teaching and holding detentions for the main culprits."

"So, I'd have a mixed bag of Houses and years each evening."

Horace grimaced slightly. "I know it's a lot to ask of you, Tess."

"No, it's OK. I'll have to talk to Filch about it; I can probably glean some ideas from him. What about the Headmaster?"

"I'll run it past him first," Horace said. "I don't want to get you into trouble again."

"Oh, don't worry about me; Snape's perfectly capable of finding his own excuses." Contessa's rehearsed reply reminded her of her commitment to see Severus twice a week. "I'll have to finish by eight o'clock a couple of nights a week, but I could make myself available at weekends."

"Thanks, Tess. It's always good to have a few options."

"When do I start?"

"If I can gain the Headmaster's approval, could you start tonight?" Horace's smile held a silent plea.

Contessa looked at him quizzically. "Has something happened today?"

"Something happens *every* day. But today the balance tipped. I don't know how much longer we can hold back the tide."

"Sorry I'm late," Contessa said as she stepped through the Floo Network into Severus's quarters one day later. It was Friday night, and she was half an hour behind schedule. "I had some problems controlling a bunch of fifth-year girls practically had to stop them clawing each other's eyes out in detention."

"Gryffindors or Slytherins?" Severus asked.

"Both," Contessa groaned. "The Slytherins are being provoked to the point of retaliation, and when they snap all hell lets loose. I don't think pooling detentions is going to work tension is high and tempers are frayed it's too much for one person to handle alone."

Contessa sat down and watched Severus rub his forehead irritably.

"I don't have any other options... or, at least, not one that I'm willing to give serious consideration. The Carrows have been very vocal in their suggestions, none of which I care to entertain."

"You'll have to make a decision soon; otherwise your leadership will appear weak. You don't want the Carrows to usurp you."

"I know." Severus sighed. "I wish Potter would get a move on. I fear all that sleeping outdoors has addled his puny brain."

"Have you had any news from them?"

"Nothing since the close scrape at Xenophilius Lovegood's home. Phineas says they're still camping, he's heard them talking about Beedle the Bard, of all things." Severus rolled his eyes.

Contessa understood why Severus maligned Harry Potter, but that didn't mean she felt the need to participate.

A squeaking pop heralded the arrival of Binky the house-elf.

Smiling exuberantly, he presented them with a large bowl of strawberries and a chilled bottle of champagne. From behind his back the elf withdrew a heart-shaped box of chocolates which he placed down upon the coffee table in front of Contessa.

Her eyes whipped up to meet Severus's. "What's all this?" she asked him worriedly.

Severus, uncharacteristically, appeared flustered. "I was just about to ask the same question..."

Binky shrank a little under the Headmaster's black stare. "Binky thought Master and Mistress would enjoy an early Valentine's celebration... seeing as their regular evenings won't overlap."

Contessa fought back a chuckle and watched a symphony of emotions flicker across Severus's countenance. He quickly settled on embarrassment.

"Good thinking, Binky," Contessa said kindly, trying to ease the tension. "After all, we do have a charade to maintain."

Binky appeared relieved. "Thank you, Miss."

The elf popped the cork on the bottle of champagne, bowed, and disappeared abruptly, leaving Severus gawking at the ridiculous spread of food and drink.

"I'd forgotten it's Saint Valentine's Day tomorrow," Contessa said conversationally, picking up the bottle and pouring bubbling champagne into two crystal flutes. She held one out for Severus and tapped her glass against his, listening appreciatively to the resonant tone of crystal.

Severus remained silent, seeming more occupied by the crackling fire in the hearth than the luxurious treats laid out before him. So excessive was his attention that Contessa didn't speak again. She wondered how Severus felt about Valentine's Day, given his unrequited love for Lily Evans. She supposed it was another notable date he would much sooner forget.

A loud gong bounced them both from their respective reveries. Contessa's heart lurched, realising the Doorbell Charm signalled the imminent arrival of the Carrows.

For one brief, frightened moment, Contessa noticed it was Severus who had frozen this time.

She stood up quickly and held out her hand. Startled, Severus took it, and Contessa dragged him to his feet. They didn't have much time, and he seemed shaken and unprepared. She had to push him towards the fireplace to spur him into action.

"Come on, Severus, we've planned for this," she urged him. He continued to look bewildered. "On the floor!" she commanded, panic starting to edge her voice.

Severus nodded jerkily and dropped to the floor, lying down on the hearth rug and starting to unbutton his shirt. Contessa picked up the champagne glasses and strawberries to place them on the floor next to Severus. Finally, kneeling down beside him, she Transfigured her jumper into a silk blouse.

She noticed the black fronds of Severus's hair splayed out on the floor and *Accio'd* a cushion from the sofa, tucking it gently under his head. Contessa could hear the sound of the Carrows' footsteps on the stairway.

"Are you ready?" she asked anxiously.

He nodded, jaw taut and gaze fixed on the ceiling.

Carefully, Contessa straddled his waist and selected a large strawberry from the bowl near Severus's head. His expression was completely unreadable, and it did nothing to quell her nerves.

A couple of months ago she might have relished this opportunity, but now their relationship had transcended, the situation felt entirely incongruous. And perhaps even

slightly disrespectful.

It pained her to notice Severus's mask-like face concealing his discomfort, and she could only imagine how difficult intimacy with another woman must be for him.

Contessa wilfully forced the last vestiges of romance and attraction aside, hoping to avoid experiencing a repeated sting of rejection. Her awkwardness was heightened by the thought of the Carrows bursting through the door at any moment, and Contessa closed her eyes briefly to calm her unease. What she was about to do would require copious amounts of self-control, and she mentally chanted a mantra to focus her thoughts.

She opened her eyes again and looked down at the pale skin of Severus's torso. His relatively hairless chest rose and fell in staccato bursts, and she noticed his lips pressed tightly together. Bemused, Contessa placed her hands on the warm skin of his chest, and he recoiled momentarily. Clearly, this was going to be harder for him than she'd thought.

Resolving to minimise his distress, Contessa leaned forwards, brushing past his chest and steadying herself with one hand on the floor. In her other hand she held the strawberry, suspended above Severus's mouth.

His breath was warm on her neck as her hair fell forwards, screening her from the doorway.

A brusque knock made them both jump.

Severus's ebony gaze met hers in wordless enquiry.

Contessa nodded immediately.

Across the room, Severus called, "Come in."

Turn of the Tide

The handle turned, and the door creaked open.

Severus saw the booted foot of Amycus Carrow stepping into the room and heard the gabbling tones of his sister, Alecto, as she pushed her way through the entrance.

A moment later Severus felt Contessa's warm fingers wrap around his jaw. She turned his head, forcing his gaze to meet hers again; her face, her lips, mere inches from his.

"Open your mouth," she whispered.

Severus noticed his heart racing, and he complied without thinking.

Contessa placed the succulent end of the strawberry between his teeth. Her warm breath stroked his cheek as she laughed gently. Severus's senses came alive as he took a bite of the red fruit, the juicy flesh melting sensuously on his tongue, contemporaneously sweet and tart. He closed his eyes as he chewed and swallowed, luxuriating in the sensations enveloping him.

Severus felt the soft warmth of Contessa's weight above him, the tickle of her cascading hair on his neck and shoulders, the nearness of her face and the flow of her breathing.

When he opened his eyes again, he was met by two oceans of cerulean blue, shining with reflected sunlight.

She blinked, and the connection severed.

Just as Severus began to regain his internal locus, Contessa dipped her head and brushed her lips against his neck. Sparks of tingling current erupted down his spine as she nibbled delicately on his collarbone. A minute arch in the crook of his back caused his chest to rise, pushing Contessa's moist lips onto his skin.

The sensation was like nothing he'd ever experienced before, so innocent in comparison to his previous encounters with women, yet somehow more electrifying and erotic. Somewhere, in the dampened-down recess of his thoughts, he wondered how that could be possible.

It was only when Amycus spoke that Severus realised he had stopped breathing.

"Evenin', Snape," the Death Eater grunted. "What's all this?" he asked, pointing at the champagne bottle and the box of chocolates on the coffee table.

"Ain't it a bit early for Valentine's Day?" Alecto chimed.

Severus forced his brain into action, trying to ignore the tickle of Contessa's hair as she worked her way slowly down his chest. He noticed her mouth was no longer making contact with flesh; she was hiding from the Carrows behind the shield of her hair.

Instinctively, his hand reached out for Contessa, and his fingers slid into her tresses, pulling the curtain away from her face. The loss of her safeguard caused her to look up, startled. Before he even knew what he was doing, Severus's thumb was stroking her bottom lip, which he noticed was trembling slightly under his caress. He felt a heady rush of power.

Contessa responded in one smooth movement, sliding her leg to one side and moving to lie down beside him. Her back was towards the Carrows as she refocused her attention to his torso, kissing his ribcage with her mouth, followed soon after by the warm flick of her tongue.

Severus was suddenly grateful she had dismounted before he disgraced himself.

"We've started a little early, that's all," Severus said, noticing his voice was husky and deep. "We intend to make a weekend of it."

He felt Contessa's hot breath against his stomach as she paused. The sensation was exquisite.

"Well," Alecto said gruffly, "What we've got to discuss won't wait 'til Monday, Snape."

"Surely, Alecto, school matters will keep until morning?" Severus replied, realising just how much he wanted the Carrows to leave.

With a jolt, he noticed Contessa lips had travelled further south than either of them had intended; they hadn't planned anything beyond this point in the charade. His elbow nudged the cool glass bowl on the floor beside him.

Severus plucked another strawberry and reached out for Contessa. His fingers felt the warmth of her scalp as he wrapped them around the back of her neck. As he pulled her towards him, the chain around her neck slipped, and the Tiger's Eye ring fell from underneath her blouse, landing on the exposed skin of his torso.

The silver band tingled as it dragged against Severus's chest, and suddenly Contessa's thoughts rang simultaneously through his mind.

I can do this. I can do this. I can do this.

Her fear of failure crashed through Severus's body, and he knew, indisputably, that he had voyaged unintentionally into Contessa's mind.

When the ring left his skin it was as though he had been hit in the face with a cold, hard slap. An icy shiver descended his spine, and he sobered instantly.

Then a vice of iron tightened around his chest: he had been a fool to think she might return his feelings.

The muscles of his jaw tightened as he offered the strawberry to Contessa. She stared, wide-eyed, for a moment, then opened her mouth timidly.

Severus smiled nastily when he whisked the fruit away at the last second, stuffing it smartly into his mouth.

This time he tasted nothing.

He pushed Contessa away, sat up quickly and hoisted himself to his feet. Severus half-buttoned up his shirt and offered his hand out to Contessa as if she were an afterthought. Appearing disconcerted, she grasped his hand and followed him to the sofa. As he fixed the last button, he felt Contessa's hands slide around his waist. He forced himself to shake off the sensation, reminding himself it was merely pretence.

He slouched to a sitting position and patted his lap, signalling for Contessa to join him. She reclined on the sofa, lying down on her back with her head resting in his lap. Severus didn't look at her.

"Pass me that bowl, will you, Amycus?" he said lazily.

Amycus huffed as he reached down to collect the strawberries and plonked the glass bowl on the coffee table in front of Severus.

The two Death Eaters sat themselves down on the opposing sofa. Alecto lifted the lid from the box of chocolates and helped herself to a truffle.

Severus leaned forwards and chose a small strawberry from the bowl. He dangled the red fruit above Contessa's nose for a few seconds, before he let her bite into it with her teeth.

"What's all this about then?" Severus asked Amycus, with tones of intolerance and boredom.

Amycus was poised to speak but was superseded by his sister.

"It's partly about that woman lying on your lap," Alecto said, speaking through a mouthful of melted chocolate.

As the uncouth mastication of the truffle continued, Severus fought the urge to ram another chocolate down her throat.

"Oh, really?" he said.

"The time's come for changes at Hogwarts," Amycus said abruptly. "Discipline ain't keepin' the kids in line anymore. The problem needs sortin' once and for all."

"I would agree discipline can sometimes lack cohesiveness," Severus replied, hoping to throw Amycus off track. "But individual teachers are responsible for punishments it's one of the many Hogwarts traditions we undertook to uphold."

"Snape," Alecto said, with a sneer of impatience. "The previous Headmaster was a Muggle-loving traitor. We've been here long enough to start makin' changes, it's time we ditched Dumbly's old ways and made up our own. If we don't get to grips with the kids, there won't be a school left to run."

Alecto turned her attention to Contessa, who froze in Severus's lap. "Your bit-on-the-side Potions Assistant is providin' a soft option for the troublemakers," Alecto continued. "That punishment's nowhere near enough for the likes of Longbottom and Weasley. Penalties should be harsher. We can't let them little shits take over Hogwarts."

"Marchbanks is perfectly capable of meting out appropriate punishment," Severus countered.

Alecto smirked. "Are you sayin' she'd use the Cruciatus Curse on that runt, Longbottom?"

Severus felt Contessa's shoulders tensing against his thigh. His heart skipped a beat when her lips parted, and she inhaled a slight gasp. Quickly, he reached for another strawberry and placed it neatly in her mouth.

"The Cruciatus Curse is not going to be used as a standard punishment by any of the professors," Severus said. "They will never agree."

"That's why you need to hand over control of discipline to us, Snape," Alecto manoeuvred. "We'll be firm and consistent. It's the only way you'll control the ringleaders of Dumbledore's Army."

Severus knew Alecto had backed him into a corner. "I'll think about it," he said after a short while.

"What's there to think about? Things are already out of hand."

"There might be another solution."

Alecto hissed snidely as she shook her head. "Happen I'll see what the Dark Lord thinks?"

Her words provoked a stab of pain, as if Severus had been shot in the abdomen. He knew where Alecto was leading, and he knew couldn't afford to follow. Severus couldn't hold back the turn of the tide; his indecisiveness would ensure his swift demise.

"The Dark Lord would not wish to be consulted on a matter this small," he said finally. "I shall announce to the school, presently, that Professors Carrow are to be placed in charge of discipline." The words choked in his throat with a swirl of acid.

"A wise move," Alecto mewed.

"Leave it to us, Snape. We'll have them kids sorted out in no time at all," Alecto affirmed.

Severus shuddered at the thought.

"We'll let yeh get on with yeh romantic evening, then," Amycus said, grunting as he stood up. The Death Eater offered out his hand to Severus, inviting a hand shake.

Severus pretended not to notice and turned his attention to Contessa, rigid and pale on his lap. He ran another strawberry against her cheek until it rested on her lips.

Out of the corner of his eye he watched the Carrows leave the room and the door closing behind them.

Contessa pushed away the strawberry and sprang immediately to a sitting position, resting with one leg wrapped underneath her. The change in posture flushed her face, long hair tumbled across her shoulders, and her bottom lip quivered.

Such body language could have been construed as attraction or ardour, but Severus knew it was neither. More likely it was pity. And that was the last thing he wanted from her.

"Severus," she said softly, "I'm so sorry I think I made the whole thing worse. If I hadn't agreed to Horace's request..."

"No apology necessary, Contessa," he said coldly.

Severus pulsed with satisfaction when he noticed her flinch at the renewed use of her birth name. The feeling was quickly replaced by a ripple of shame.

He needed her to leave before he betrayed his true feelings. Before he made a fool of himself. He wasn't about to be stung by unrequited love for a second time in his life.

"You should go," he said stiffly.

Contessa sat, quietly stunned.

When she reached out to touch his hand, he felt the warmth of her soft skin and he almost faltered.

"Go," he said more firmly.

Her hand snatched away, and he watched her uncoil her legs and rise up to stand. She lingered for a moment, and Severus could feel her eyes burning through his curtains of black hair, seeking contact.

He retrieved his wand and cast a charm past her, opening the door ready for her departure. He continued to stare dead-ahead until she turned to leave.

"I'll be back on Saturday night, then," she said sadly.

Severus twitched.

"We have an appearance to maintain," Contessa explained.

Severus didn't reply. He wished he were a million miles away from her.

He heard the latch snap shut as Contessa left his quarters.

A Fiercer Sea

Professor Binns floated into the front-row seat next to Contessa as she waited for the staff meeting to convene. The arrival of the ghostly History of Magic professor sent an icy shudder down her spine.

She looked around the crowded staffroom, noticing that most of the teachers had now assembled, awaiting the presence of the Headmaster.

It was the Saturday afternoon of Saint Valentine's Day, and the room was filled with hushed mutterings and general unrest. Despite the presence of the Carrows at the top end of the room ensuring effective crowd-control, Contessa was aware of the insistent tapping of Madam Hooch's boots on the marble floor and the low, growling sighs of Hagrid, who was sitting on the back row next to the centaur, Firenze.

Contessa had arrived in the nick of time, having spent the afternoon trying to track down Severus. Dumbledore's portrait had told her the Headmaster had gone for a walk in the castle grounds, but no matter where Contessa looked, Severus was nowhere to be found.

Increasingly concerned, she had tried to contact him using her Tiger's Eye ring, knowing the metal would turn cold against his skin. Severus had failed to respond.

Now she was sitting in the staffroom, crossing and uncrossing her legs, awaiting the Headmaster's arrival with as much trepidation as the rest of the staff.

The black iron latch of the door ground open and everyone turned around in their seats, only to see a flustered-looking Aurora Sinistra hurrying into the room. She spotted the only remaining chair next to Contessa and rushed forward, slightly out-of-breath.

Aurora was about a decade older than Contessa. The Astronomy professor settled down in her seat, adjusted her flowing, midnight-blue robes and smoothed an errant hair back into place. The professor always wore her black hair pinned tightly away from her face, and Contessa noticed it was starting to show the first signs of grey.

"Did I miss anything?" Aurora asked her anxiously.

"No," Contessa reassured. "No sign of *him* yet, either."

"What's it all about then?"

Contessa shrugged. "No one knows. We all received an owl this morning no indication what he wants us for, except that it's urgent."

"What could be so urgent that it warrants an interruption on Valentine's weekend?" Aurora asked with a hint of scorn. She looked towards the Carrows, standing like squat and ugly Grim Reapers. "I had plans today! I had to Apparate back here from Paris Friedrich was not at all pleased."

It was only as Aurora finished her sentence that Contessa noticed the room had hushed unexpectedly. Behind the Astronomy professor, the black, bat-like form of Severus Snape stood with his arms folded and one eyebrow arched.

He didn't need to say a word.

Immediately, the two women straightened in their seats and looked forward, silently castigated.

Severus strode to the top end of the staffroom and turned swiftly on his heel, affecting a stance which reminded Contessa of her once-hated Potions master surveying his students with disdain. His proximity caused her an unexpected ripple of unease, and she knew, undeniably, they now sailed on a fiercer sea.

"You will no doubt be aware," he began, without greeting or preamble, "that discipline at Hogwarts is failing, and the pupils' increasingly feral behaviour is preventing the delivery of an adequate education."

Contessa's heart chilled, filled with cubes of ice pressing into her chest. Surely he wasn't going to announce it here... during Valentine's weekend?

"After due consideration, I have decided to place the Professors Carrow in charge of discipline at Hogwarts."

The sound of china shattering on the floor caused everyone to turn around. Sybill Trelawney's teacup had slipped from her grasp and shards were ricocheting across the room. Tea-leaves scattered, staining the hem of Professor McGonagall's robes.

The shock of the Headmaster's announcement rendered the audience momentarily speechless. After a few moments of frantic glances, all eyes fixed upon Severus again. Contessa could have cut the atmosphere with a knife.

"You will, therefore, tell your students to attend the Carrows' office in the dungeons at eight o'clock prompt for all detentions. The Carrows will decide on the appropriate punishment for their misdemeanours."

Finally, someone in the room found their voice. Unsurprisingly, it was Minerva McGonagall.

"This is preposterous! Surely we, as professors of this school, should have a say in the way our pupils are disciplined!" Her voice increased in volume and pitch as she spoke.

"You've had your say for far too long, Minerva. The old methods are ineffective; behaviour has spiralled out of control," Severus said, his tone non-negotiable.

"I'm sure that, with renewed effort, the staff can work together to overcome the problems," Minerva said with forced calm. "There is no need for drastic action."

There was a loud murmur of assent across the staffroom, and Severus's gaze followed its progress through the audience. A hard lump lodged in Contessa's throat.

"It's too late," he stated. "There is no point locking the stable door after the horse has bolted. It's time for the Headmaster to take decisive action in the school's best interests."

Aurora shuffled in her seat, breathing into Contessa's ear, "In the best interests of You Know Who, more like."

For the first time since he had entered the room, Severus looked directly at Contessa. It was as if a lightning bolt had struck her. He glowered and looked sharply away.

"And what do the board of governors have to say about this decision?" Minerva asked.

"I met with them this morning," Severus replied. "I have their full support."

Aurora cast Contessa a suspicious look. It was clear they both knew *how* that agreement had been reached.

"No further questions?" Severus said abruptly. "Good. I shall announce the decision in the Great Hall at dinner. I expect you to demonstrate your co-operation and loyalty tonight."

For a few seconds, the teachers sat in stunned silence. Severus stared coldly at the staff, wordlessly communicating the end of the meeting.

Slowly, chairs started to scrape on the marble floor, and the teachers shuffled their way out of the staffroom.

Sitting on the front row, Aurora and Contessa waited as the others filed out, watching Professor Binns drifting airborne towards the door. Contessa decided her best chance was to wait until everyone had departed and speak to Severus alone.

Discernibly shivering, Aurora stood up. "What do you make of all that?" she asked Contessa.

"I don't..."

"Professor Sinistra," Severus's harsh voice cut through the air. "A word, please."

Aurora cringed. Contessa threw her a look of concern.

"I'll be fine," Aurora mouthed quietly.

Contessa nodded and then attempted to make eye contact with Severus, but he was still refusing to meet her gaze. Contessa's stomach knotted in a slow, nauseating pulse.

"Go!" Aurora hurried her.

Reluctantly, Contessa left the room and lingered in the hallway outside the staffroom. The two stone gargoyles above the entrance peered at her inquisitively as she waited for Severus.

After less than a minute, the doors opened and the Astronomy professor stepped into the corridor. Her firmly-set jaw eased into a smile when she saw Contessa.

"Tess, it's so kind of you to wait for me..."

"I..."

"... but I really can look after myself that overgrown bat doesn't scare me."

"Is he...?"

"Gone. Took the Floo out of the staffroom. Told me he expected my presence in the Great Hall for dinner. Miserable sod. I'll sneak out later..."

Contessa opened her mouth to speak and quickly closed it again.

"No need to say anything we'll make the best of the situation, Tess. The Carrows won't be getting their claws into any *of my* students." Aurora placed her arm around Contessa's shoulder and guided her away from the staffroom. "Besides, no need to look so glum; you'll have a few spare evenings now. We can spend some time together on the Astronomy Tower. I'll be glad of your company for my observations. Did you know next week there'll be a new moon next to Saturn in the constellation Pisces?"

Contessa forced a smile and followed Aurora dolefully, listening to her plans for their telescopes.

It seemed Severus was avoiding her.

And she had no idea why.

Twelve

Chapter 12 of 14

Albus Dumbledore had a plan to protect Severus Snape after the fateful night on the Astronomy Tower. During his final year as Headmaster, Snape has a chance to come to terms with his past and find peace, before his life draws to its



http://media.photobucket.com/image/playwitch%20severus%20snape/barbarella_1970/Exotik/HP/Marquise-SnapePortrait.jpg

Steel

"I've laced up both my boots

So try and twist the knife

I am steel

I don't feel

Anything at all"

'Steel', Charlotte Martin

The swoosh of the Floo roused Severus from his trance-like state; he'd lost track of how long he'd stared at the wooden grain of his coffee table.

Emerald flames erupted in the fireplace. Out of the corner of his vision, Contessa stepped from the hearth into his living room.

He was going to have to remedy that with immediate effect.

She stood silhouetted against the flames, still wearing the clothes she'd worn for dinner in the Great Hall. Severus had watched her cosseted up with Aurora Sinistra, animated in discussion throughout the entire evening meal. The rest of the teaching staff were sombre after Severus announced the appointment of the Carrows as heads of discipline, but Contessa seemed oblivious to the scene unfolding around her.

Severus had observed all this through his peripheral vision. He had not made eye contact with her, nor did he have any intention of doing so now.

The Potions Assistant remained standing by the fire, her eyes boring into the side of his head. Contessa's gaze left a burning sensation on the back of Severus's ear.

He was not going to look at her.

Severus picked up the book he had thrown to the floor half an hour previously and leafed through the pages, until he found his place. He settled back on the sofa and rested the book against his crossed legs, trying to read.

His attempt was as futile as it had been thirty minutes ago, but he didn't care. It was all he could do to avoid looking up at the woman standing in his quarters.

Agonising seconds passed, stretching to infinity. Severus seemed unable to swallow; his mouth and throat had dried to sand.

Then with a rustle of robes, Contessa crossed the room. Her boots thudded softly against the scarlet and gold rug. She sat down on the opposite sofa, perched on the edge of her seat.

Severus made no attempt to move, staring at the same paragraph he must have read ten times over. As he waited, tension built with bubbling nausea in his chest. He knew Contessa wouldn't be dissuaded so easily. She would see through his repressive façade, and he deeply regretted granting her such access.

It would not happen again.

He wanted her to leave now. Take the hint and go. But he knew she wouldn't. She would persistently search for his truth, digging and prying for an answer. Looking for one more fragment of his soul.

Part of him still wanted her to see him, to find him, to know him.

But he had to put a stop to it. Once and for all.

Severus's heart beat faster as the divergences tussled, trying to find a winner. Contessa's voice caught him off-guard.

"Severus." Her voice was so soft it was almost a whisper.

No, he told himself. Don't let her in again; it's too dangerous.

His tongue pressed against the back of his gritted teeth, and he snapped his book shut. The closure of the binding made a satisfying thump and caused Contessa to flinch. Severus's lungs swelled with authority, and his bones turned to steel.

"Contessa," he said curtly.

Severus enclosed himself behind heavy armour, and somewhere deep inside his core his fear gave a crooked smile. He found the confidence to raise his head and look her in the face. His eyes, calculating, narrowed to slits, and his nostrils prickled with alertness. He wanted to be able to savour her panic. It was only fair for her to feel as vulnerable as he.

And with a hot pulse of attestation, Severus found a glimmer of what he sought. Contessa's eyes were wide, lips parted ever so slightly in surprise. He watched her mouth

opening, and his eyes traced the bottom teeth of her trembling jaw line... Her lips invited him in, mesmerising him, offering him another chance...

No. Absolutely not.

She didn't want him.

And he would be damned if he was going to allow himself to need her. He had to get her out of the room as quickly as possible.

She watched him for a long moment, taking in his demeanour, changing her countenance into something more accepting of him. The alteration yanked a chord within him, as if a string had been plucked deep in his guts. But where there had once been hope and yearning now lay hostility and suspicion.

"No supper tonight?" she asked, clicking her fingers experimentally to summon his house-elf.

Severus maintained his hard composure, staring straight into the blue wells of her eyes. "I've instructed Binky to cancel all further suppers."

He felt a burning ache of satisfaction as Contessa's gaze dropped to the floor. Severus awaited the outcome of his provocation with bated breath and almost gleeful, child-like anticipation.

He was, however, disappointed.

"Something's changed between us, hasn't it?" she asked.

He fought to keep his mask of steel in place.

Where was her obstinate refusal to accept his authority? Where was her anger over his decision to make the announcement to Hogwarts on Valentine's weekend? Why was she not reprimanding him, criticizing him, telling him he was wrong? Why would she not react? Why wasn't she making it easy for him to walk away?

Severus gave a minimal reply to the question she posed.

"It has."

But he knew that wouldn't be enough. He was certain she'd press for more.

"What's changed?" Contessa asked.

Severus's heart felt like a cold stone in his chest, knocking against his ribs, threatening to shatter bones.

"Everything," he forced out.

He watched her expression: stunned, uncertain and then slightly exasperated.

Good. He could work with that.

"I don't understand," she said quietly.

"No?" he replied callously.

Contessa gaped, holding on to the edge of her composure. "I want to understand. Tell me what's happened."

Severus rose to his feet, redressing the power balance, trying to find a way to get her out of the room, out of his life, out of his heart.

He would force her to leave if he had to.

He paced around the back of the sofa, but Contessa remained seated, unprovoked.

"You say you want to understand, but I don't believe it," Severus said, his fingers clawing the back of the sofa. "It's all a lie."

Genuine confusion crossed Contessa's face; she was lost for words. Severus pressed on, feeling more certain of his theory than ever before.

"You and Dumbledore, you came up with this ploy. Merlin knows what either of you were trying to accomplish, but I see through the illusion. I know it's not real."

"Severus," Contessa managed, shaking her head, flummoxed. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"No?" he asked coldly. "Really? No idea at all? Well, let me enlighten you. I'm talking about your vow."

"My vow?" she said, unnerved.

"That's right," he replied, hoping he wouldn't have to fill in the gaps.

Contessa stared at him with a blank expression. Severus flexed the muscles in his hands in annoyance. She wasn't going to give anything away. He turned his back on her.

"Unconditional acceptance," he said sarcastically. "I mean, really, what does that mean?"

He turned to see a tide of perplexity and disbelief spread across Contessa's features. Severus realised he was going to have to spell it out for her.

"How can you truly accept me for all that I am? It's pretence, a fabrication. If you had to take a vow in order to be able to accept me, then your acceptance isn't real, is it? You've deceived and coerced me into thinking something is authentic when it is quite the opposite."

"Severus, no..."

"No, I can see it plainly now. You can't pull the wool over my eyes any longer."

"I haven't..."

"There isn't anything you can say to me which I won't view with suspicion, because it's all based on fallacy."

Contessa opened her mouth to speak then closed it again.

After a moment's pause, she said calmly, "I can't be forced to feel something, but I know what *to* feel is real."

"Whatever it is, it's something I don't want. I don't want your pity, and I certainly don't need your dutiful devotion. I don't need anything at all."

Severus thought he could see tears glistening in Contessa's eyes. She didn't seem to have an answer to that. He crossed his arms and waited, reviewing his standpoint in his mind.

Her promise of unconditional acceptance meant nothing to him if she didn't return his feelings. She wasn't in love with him. He didn't want unrequited feelings in his life again.

Better, then, to nip them in the bud this time. He would control and shut them away behind the safety of his armour.

"What do you want, Severus?" Her voice was equanimous.

He paused, his eyes raking over her body, taking in her open posture and calm demeanour.

Severus reminded himself that it wasn't genuine. It was all because of her Unbreakable Vow.

"I want you to leave."

Out in the Cold

Contessa rose to her feet unsteadily, Severus's request for her to leave still ringing in her ears. Queasiness wrapped around her abdomen, compressing her until she felt dizzy with vertigo. The worries and fears she'd carried around all day long were bursting out, growing dozens of heads, and each one bayed for her blood.

Dread clawed at her chest as she looked at Severus. He stood before her with crossed arms and unblinking eyes, as cold, guarded and untouchable as the Potions master she had known as a seventeen-year-old girl.

His rejection of her burned like a bullwhip stinging into her skin. His posture indicated contempt, clearly expecting she would obey his order to leave.

But Contessa was ground to the spot, partly paralysed, and partly unwilling to accept the loss and walk away. Her eyes beseeched him, only to be met by a snarling face as he extracted his wand. She heard the clunk of the latch and the creak of hinges as the front door to his quarters opened at his behest.

His expression inscrutable, Severus pocketed his wand. When Contessa didn't make for the exit he turned his back on her, striding towards his bedchamber. The door banged in its frame as he closed it behind him.

Dismay descended her body in a bilious trickle. She stood statue-like, hoping he would return to the room, wanting him to be ready to meet her, to open up to her, to trust her.

As the seconds slipped away it became apparent that Severus's door was not going to open, and he would not reappear.

Reluctantly she walked away, leaving the door open behind her as she descended the stairs to the Headmaster's office.

Tears began to roll in earnest down her cheeks, and she gripped the banister rail at the bottom of the stairs to steady herself.

For a long minute she looked up at Severus's open door, hoping he might still come back.

Her heart thumped like a bass drum when she heard his footsteps and saw the cuff of his sleeve as he grasped the door handle, only to watch the door being pushed closed. The bookshelves rolled back into place concealing the portal to the Headmaster's chambers.

Her final ray of hope flickered out. Contessa's heart sank so low she thought it might expel itself entirely.

She didn't understand Severus's behaviour what had motivated him to cast her out into the cold, or what had made him doubt her sincerity. Contessa could speculate and theorise, but ultimately she knew he was a complicated man and her assumptions were mere postulation.

As she rubbed her forehead with frustration and dried the tears from her cheeks, her body felt as though she had been flung from a high-speed train. She looked around the room to find her bearings.

Every single portrait in the Headmaster's office was either staring at her or in the hasty process of looking away. A flush of embarrassment burned her cheeks; she had forgotten she was on show.

Hurriedly, she ran her fingers through her hair, cleared her throat and walked across the office towards the fireplace, hopeful for a quick escape.

"Tess?"

Dumbledore's voice drifted gently toward her, stopping her in her tracks. She turned to face him, feeling an ache of uncertainty and shame. She knew she had failed.

"Tess, what happened?"

"He..." Her voice croaked in her throat, and she cleared it again. "He sent me away, told me to leave."

Dumbledore's eyebrows lifted high above his half-moon spectacles. "Why?" he asked.

Contessa paused as she considered how to answer the question. She settled on the truth. "I don't honestly know. He was ranting about my vow, saying I wasn't genuine, implying I'd deceived him."

She saw Dumbledore's lips purse as he absorbed the situation.

Magda McDougall broke the silence. "Ungrateful dunderhead," she muttered from the other side of the office.

Phineas Nigellus Black tutted disdainfully.

Dumbledore waved his hand to quieten the crowd. "What exactly did Severus say?"

"He said my unconditional acceptance was fabrication. He implied I wouldn't willingly accept him. I was only doing it because I had to, because of my vow."

Dumbledore's bright blue eyes bulged slightly, and he swallowed, clearly perturbed by what had transpired.

Tess walked over to stand directly in front of his portrait. "Albus, what should I do?"

"Do nothing," he answered calmly. "He'll come around."

"I'm really not sure..."

"Leave it for now, Tess. Give him some time."

Contessa frowned.

"It's for the best," the portrait said benignly.

"OK," she acceded.

Hesitantly, she returned forlorn to the Floo.

Hogwarts soon became a changed place under the Carrows' regime. The Death Eaters quickly sank their claws into the ringleaders of Dumbledore's Army, and Contessa had seen Neville Longbottom sporting a black eye the last time she had passed him in the corridor. All kinds of horror stories had reached her ears, and some of them chilled her to the bone.

Not that any of that news had found its way to the Headmaster, or at least not via his only spy in the castle.

For two weeks Contessa had arrived at the Headmaster's office by Floo (having found the connection to Severus's quarters terminated), and for two weeks he had not replied to her knocking on his door. When she tried the handle, she found it locked.

After periods of intense vacillation, Contessa had on each occasion left her Potions requisition on the Headmaster's desk.

The following morning she would find the signed parchment had been shoved silently underneath the door to her quarters. Once or twice she ran her fingers across the small, spidery 'Severus Snape' as if it might somehow reconnect them.

But no such connection seemed possible. Whenever she saw him in the Great Hall at mealtimes, or passed him fleetingly in the corridor, he treated her with cold indifference.

And so Contessa had spoken to Dumbledore's portrait again after her sixth attempt at meeting with Severus on their allocated evenings.

Dumbledore conceded that Severus was not 'coming around' as he'd hoped, and he would have to intervene. Now was not the time for the Headmaster to be cut off from the developments in the school; he had a mole whom he was refusing to utilise and this oversight might ultimately place everyone in jeopardy.

A note stuffed under Contessa's door the next morning, written in Severus's hand, requested her attendance in the Headmaster's office at nine o'clock that evening.

When she stepped out of the fireplace into the circular office and dusted off her formal robes, she caught a glimpse of Severus seated behind his desk, his quill scratching fervently at the parchment beneath.

He didn't look up, but said flatly, "Dumbledore requested a meeting with both of us." He rose to his feet and turned his back on her to face the portrait.

Dumbledore smiled at Contessa in greeting, and she shuffled across the office to stand next to Severus.

"Good evening, Albus," she said placidly. She turned briefly. "Severus."

He glared, then stepped in front of her before walking past and standing behind her, out of her range of vision. She bristled but held her composure. Even after three weeks she didn't have an explanation for his behaviour.

"Thank you both for attending," Dumbledore said cordially, apparently unaware of the tension in the room. It reminded Contessa of the many times he'd intervened during quarrels at Squirrel's Leap, and she was sad to notice how far her relationship with Severus had receded.

"Tess, it appears that the vow you made at my request now only serves to hinder you in your mission," Dumbledore began.

Behind her back, Severus scoffed.

"Therefore," Dumbledore continued, undaunted, "I have come to a decision."

Contessa could feel her ears pricking and her nerves standing on end with the realisation that something significant was about to happen.

"With immediate effect, I am releasing you from your vow," Dumbledore said magnanimously.

Contessa's breath caught in her throat, and her heart skipped a beat. She was aware of stony silence from the man standing at her back.

"Albus, I..." she protested.

"It's for the best," Dumbledore interrupted. "You should return to your quarters now. Severus and I have something to discuss."

Contessa turned to see Severus unfolding his arms in disbelief, his mouth agape. He met her eyes for a fraction of a second before glowering once again at the portrait of Albus Dumbledore.

Sensing it was time to make a swift retreat, Contessa advanced without delay to the fireplace and stepped headlong into the Floo.

Trick of the Light

Severus seethed disbelievingly as the fizzing crackle of the Floo transported Contessa out of his office. He took several steps towards Dumbledore's portrait.

"How can you lie to her, after all she's done for you?" he snarled at the old man.

"Severus, I've no idea what you're talking about."

Severus kicked the leg of his desk with his booted foot, but the pain in his toes didn't drown out the pounding in his head.

"You're perfectly well aware, Dumbledore. You can't release someone from an Unbreakable Vow! You must know this!"

"Indeed I do."

"Then how can you make her believe it's possible? You're putting her life in danger."

"Tess's life is not at risk."

"How can you..."

"I would never ask anyone to make an Unbreakable Vow, Severus. It goes against all my sensibilities."

"What? But..." Gradually, comprehension dawned like the sun breaking on the eastern horizon, causing Severus's brow to crease. He appraised Dumbledore sceptically.

"You told me she'd taken an Unbreakable Vow," he said slowly.

Dumbledore smiled patiently. "No, Severus, I don't believe I ever told you that... However, you might have interpreted my meaning in a way I did not intend."

Severus fought past his building rage, trying to remember Dumbledore's exact words during that first night at Squirrel's Leap. However, before he could retrieve the memory, a new understanding emerged.

"You deliberately misled me," he accused Dumbledore.

Dumbledore cocked his head contemplatively. "No. Not misled. Merely neglected to clarify, as I recall."

Enraged by Dumbledore's repeated manipulation, Severus felt a ferocious surge of adrenaline threatening to overwhelm him. But he was also alert to the way this changed everything. Him. Contessa. The Vow.

As the cloud of mirage swept away, revealed now as a trick of the light, Severus was dazed by the complexity and enormity of its repercussions.

It simply couldn't be true.

"No," he growled. "I don't believe you."

Severus turned his back on Dumbledore's portrait and strode across the office to the fireplace. He took a handful of Floo Powder and flung it into the fire. Without a backward glance he marched into the green flames.

In an almost continuous movement, he stepped out of the Floo and onto the hearth rug of Contessa's dungeon quarters.

She was seated facing the fire, astounded by the arrival of the man who had been avoiding her for weeks.

She stood up nervously, but Severus didn't give her the opportunity to speak.

"Tell me it's not true," he demanded.

Contessa's mouth fell open, and her eyebrows pinched together. *What* isn't true?"

"The vow you took," he said urgently. "Tell me..." He halted, cut short by a bout of nerves stealing the breath from his lungs.

"Tell you *what*, Severus?" she asked, baffled by his lack of eloquence.

When he failed to answer, Contessa continued, "It doesn't matter now, anyway. I've been released from my obligation."

"No! It *does* matter. You can't be released from an Unbreakable Vow that kind of Dark Magic cannot be rescinded!"

"Severus, what are you on about? I never took an Unbreakable Vow! How did you come to think that?"

He shook his head, confounded. "I..."

"You thought I was bound by magic?" Contessa interrupted. She dropped to the sofa, looking away in bewilderment. "How could...?" she began, but her question was superseded by an incredulous sounding, "*What?*"

Severus huffed, shamefaced. "Dumbledore prevaricated. I thought he'd said... He led me to believe your vow was unbreakable; that you had no choice about..."

"Severus, why on Earth would I agree to make an Unbreakable Vow? Especially when I didn't know to whom I would be beholden? It's not the sort of considered decision a Ravenclaw, such as myself, would make!"

The exasperation in her voice stopped Severus in his tracks. Why hadn't he realised that? Contessa wasn't a Gryffindor; she wouldn't expose herself to unnecessary risk-taking. How could he have been such a fool?

"I..." He faltered, his world tilting on its axis. The sideways motion left him nauseous. "So," he stammered, "your vow was non-magical."

"Yes. Well, more akin to a promise or undertaking. I mean, providing you with shelter was easy enough, but the unconditional element that's much more difficult to provide. It's a way of being, rather than a choice or decision. It can't be given unwillingly."

Severus's puzzlement gained in intensity. "You're saying you didn't *have* to accept me completely?"

"No," Contessa replied. "But I was encouraged to."

Severus found himself groping for the armchair next to the fire. He sat down, stunned by the revelation.

Each and every one of those moments when Contessa had been there for him, with her kind and steady understanding, her openness and her empathy; all had been authentic. She hadn't deceived him. She'd given him a gift more valuable than anything he could've hoped for, or even dreamed possible. She'd accepted him genuinely with every fault, idiosyncrasy and foible, for all his darkness and each tiny glimmer of light.

Severus suddenly understood the worth of the gift bestowed upon him, tangible like a crystal ball in his hands but also finite and fragile: a present which would be easy to break unintentionally.

He'd given that gift away the moment he'd asked her to leave, and now Dumbledore had released her from her obligation, he stood to lose it once more.

Asking her to give that gift again was fraught with peril. He didn't know if she'd give it willingly, and if she did, when she might take it away again. Crippled with doubt and self-reproach, Severus wrung his hands together. He couldn't bear to lose her a second time.

"Severus, I'm sorry." Contessa's words broke through Severus's forethought.

He looked at her concerned face; sadness echoed through her blue-grey eyes and sympathy furrowed her brow. His heart ached, bruised by shattered illusions, desperate to save itself from further harm.

"I had no idea you were labouring under a false impression," she said softly. "If I'd known..."

"No, Contessa. *I'm* sorry. I'm sorry I doubted you. I didn't realise the value of what I had, and now that it's gone..."

"It's not gone, Severus."

"Yes, it is. Dumbledore released you; you're free from your burden..."

"It was never a burden."

"No. You don't understand. I'm cutting you loose. I don't expect you to do anything more for me. You're free."

And with that he rose to his feet, wrapped his cloak securely around himself, and bade her goodnight.

He forced to numbness the knot that was tightening in his stomach as emerald flames carried him back to his office. Severus ascended the stairs to the minstrel's gallery without looking at Dumbledore's portrait and slid the brown leather spine of *Knitting with Kneazle-fur* from the bookshelf outside his door.

Within moments he was closeted within the low illumination of his quarters, safe inside the gloom, comforted by its dark edges.

Sheltered and secluded, Severus locked himself away in his illusionary dungeon of reassuring familiarity.

He was better off this way.

No one could find him.

No one could hurt him.

Sound of Silence

"Sometimes I think,

I think I understand

The fear in the boy

The fire in the man

Sometimes I watch

The wonder in your eyes

That, and you leaving

I have memorised"

'Roosterspur Bridge', Tori Amos

The new-found freedom bestowed upon Contessa dragged like an albatross around her neck. A hollow, aching pit in her stomach became a constant companion, and without detentions to supervise and evenings with Severus, she attempted to fill the void with other pursuits.

But even after copious amounts of reading, hours of potion-making, and evenings atop the Astronomy Tower with Aurora Sinistra, nothing seemed to diminish the yawning chasm of loss.

One week after she'd been released her from her vow, she found herself standing in the empty Headmaster's office, staring into the piercing blue eyes of Albus Dumbledore's portrait.

The old wizard smiled benevolently.

"Where is Severus?" asked Contessa.

"In his quarters, as he is every evening."

"How has he been?"

"Hard to say," Dumbledore replied evasively.

"Albus..." Contessa faltered as a prickling sensation of barbed wire tightened around her ribcage. She knew what it meant. "I miss him."

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose fractionally, but he smiled understandingly. "I don't know what more we can do, Tess."

Contessa wasn't so easily discouraged. "There must be some way for me to reach him."

"I'm all ears," Dumbledore said kindly, his hands opened outwards, welcoming.

"He told me he was cutting me loose, severing the obligation," she began, "but he never actually said he didn't wish to see me again."

The flicker of hope stirring in her abdomen was almost extinguished by the former Headmaster's pitying gaze.

"I'm sorry, Tess, I think he's deliberately cut himself off. I can't imagine him letting you in again."

"How can you know that?"

"Years of observation."

Contessa's head dropped, but the warmth in her chest refused to be dispelled. Her instinct told her Dumbledore was wrong. Perhaps, if she treaded softly, Severus might open up to her again. It had to be worth a try.

As she lifted her head, her intuition roared in approval. "I'm going up there," she said firmly.

Dumbledore shook his head slightly. "He won't let you in."

"I have to try, Albus."

The portrait shrugged its shoulders then gestured to the staircase. "Be my guest."

As she climbed the stairs to Severus's quarters, her stomach rippled with trepidation. Over the last month the gnawing loss of their friendship had never left her, and she was beginning to realise how much Severus meant to her. It seemed some feelings had never truly faded. They had lain hidden behind other concerns, dormant, but not completely diminished.

Contessa could hear the blood pounding in her ears as she slid the copy of *Knitting with Kneazle-fur* from the bookshelf and watched the casings separate, revealing the solid-oak door to Severus's personal chambers.

Contessa brushed the joints of her fingers against the raised grain of wood, hesitating. She remembered the hollow black wells of Severus's eyes and her sense of his anguish when he'd spoken of losing her. It had been the strongest indicator yet that his feelings had transformed beyond mere friendship. This might be her last chance.

Biting down on the wave of apprehension threatening to engulf her, Contessa took a deep breath and knocked twice on the door.

The sound of silence stretched out as her heart beat out the seconds: ten, fifteen, twenty. When nothing happened, she quelled her disquiet and grasped the cold door handle.

She pushed gently down, and for the first time in weeks, the iron latch yielded to her touch.

The door creaked open.

Steeling herself, Contessa's breath caught in the back of her throat as she crossed the threshold.

Across the room, sitting on an antique sofa in the middle of the flickering gloom, was Severus.

Dressed head-to-toe in black, a leather-bound book resting in his lap, he looked at her wide-eyed across the divide. He didn't turn to look away, nor did he arise to greet her. He was like a charmed snake, hypnotised by a seductive flute, caught between the urge to strike or slither away.

Contessa wondered if stepping further into the room would break the enchantment and cause him to recoil or attack. She wanted to remain forever locked in the eerie serenity of his gaze.

Severus seemed caught somewhere between joy and terror as Contessa reached out to close the door behind her. When she turned to face him once more, the memory might as well have been an illusion; he was supremely focused on the book in his lap, appearing calm, except for whitened knuckles gripping the binding.

Contessa moved quietly to sit down on the opposite sofa, ignoring the pulse throbbing in her throat and the deafening tick-tock of silent seconds drumming in her ears.

Time stretched out before her, threatening to sap her resolve. But she didn't waver. Deciding that honesty and genuineness were the order of the hour, she leaned forward and clasped her hands lightly on her lap. She knew her time would be limited should Severus choose to expel her from his quarters.

"I've missed you, Severus."

He twitched involuntarily, and his Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed.

"If you tell me to leave, I shall go," Contessa said softly.

She waited for a response. Nothing came.

"I want to update you on the Carrows," she began.

Severus's head tilted slightly.

Contessa pressed on, encouraged. "Today they instructed students to practise the Cruciatus Curse on those who've earned detention."

With one jerking movement, Severus made shocked eye contact. His expression soon turned to one of remorse.

"I know there is little you can do, but I thought you would want to know," said Contessa.

He nodded once, pensive, then resumed reading his book. Contessa sensed their moment of contact break.

Not wishing to overstay her welcome, she bade him goodnight and departed.

Twice a week, Contessa visited Severus in his quarters and updated him on the goings-on in the castle, each time staying a little longer.

She didn't ask him any direct questions, or indeed expect any kind of response, and as time passed by the tension seemed to ease, despite the lingering silence.

Aurora Sinistra seemed to have taken it upon herself to be responsible for Contessa's welfare, and one week before the school term ended, Contessa found herself cajoled into setting up her telescope on a crystal-clear evening.

Despite Contessa's protestations of a prior commitment, Aurora had eventually persuaded her to meet on the Astronomy Tower, under the proviso that Contessa could break for half an hour at eight o'clock.

The velvety blackness of the moonless sky and Aurora's continuous commentary on the moons of Jupiter absorbed Contessa, and she lost track of the hour.

She was in the process of realigning her telescope, mapping Jupiter's progress across the night sky and observing the planet's moons strung around its equator like a bejewelled necklace, when the door to the tower flung open.

The two witches almost toppled over with fright as the Headmaster charged through the doorway and strode across to the ramparts. Severus's arms were crossed against his chest, and his cloak flapped in the breeze as he stood before Contessa. His black hair was teased away from his face, and his hooked nose bore down on her with abundant condescension. But in his eyes she saw measures of fear and uncertainty.

She knew, instantaneously, the reason for his appearance at the top of Hogwarts' highest tower. She was late. Severus had come to find her.

Aurora stepped forward. "Headmaster, if this is about the fifth-year's Astronomy OWLs..."

"No, Aurora, it is not," Severus said. His voice purred with silken disdain, each word enunciated to inflect superiority.

Contessa shuddered despite herself. She had missed the sound of his voice, and her aural experience caused a choke to descend her windpipe, leaving warm fluidity in its wake.

Severus turned to face the Astronomy professor. "Kindly leave me alone with our Potions Assistant."

Aurora cast Contessa a significant look, probably concerned to leave her alone with the man who threw Dumbledore from the top of the same tower the previous summer.

Contessa nodded, encouraging Aurora to depart, and she watched her retreat and close the door behind her.

Severus's posture didn't alter. He was taut, his expression belligerent. But Contessa knew something else was going on behind his mask. Severus was there because she hadn't attended his quarters on time. This must mean that he wanted her there. This must mean he still cared.

His stern, imposing countenance seemed to demand an apology, but Contessa had nothing to say sorry for. She knew that his mask concealed a child-like, vulnerable person, reaching out for contact. Reaching out for her.

Nevertheless, for all intents-and-purposes, the Headmaster towered imposingly before her, and Contessa fought back the urge to apologise. She would not collude.

Instead, she said, "Severus, I'm glad you're here. It's a beautiful night." She turned to face the sky.

His brow furrowed, but his arms relaxed, coming to rest at his sides. Then he too looked towards the heavens.

Contessa ushered him towards her telescope. "Take a look," she offered gently.

One eyebrow rose on Severus's pale forehead as he crouched down towards the eyepiece. His fingers caressed the circumference of the lens as he cocked his head to one side, facing her.

His expression was characteristically inscrutable; however, his emotions were evident in his voice.

"I want you to remain at Hogwarts for Easter."

He looked into the eyepiece and adjusted the focus, playing down the magnitude of his statement.

A smile, unseen by Severus, crept across Contessa's face.

"OK," she replied quietly.

Contessa stared towards the distant planet twinkling brightly on the western horizon, and a balloon in her heart swelled with warm, tender air.

Magical Creatures

Severus stood by the main door of the Entrance Hall, watching the remainder of the students filing out of the castle.

The Hogwarts Express was due to depart in half an hour, and the entire teaching staff were on duty, escorting the bustling throng through the courtyard to the Thestral-drawn carriages.

Amycus and Alecto Carrow were in charge of the operation at Hogsmeade railway station, and Dementors circled the route overhead.

Security was tight following the events of the previous evening. Hagrid had narrowly escaped arrest after holding a 'Support Potter' party in the gamekeeper's cottage.

Severus knew that several of the party's attendees had not sufficiently covered their tracks and had been chained up by the Carrows. The mutineers spent a sleepless night in the dungeon, and in an attempt to keep trouble on the train to a minimum, they were sent home via Portkey at dawn.

However, it could have been worse if Severus hadn't been able to forewarn Contessa, she would never have reached Hagrid in time, and the oaf would've been locked up in Azkaban without a trial. Severus was glad that his renewed partnership with Contessa was again benefiting the Order of the Phoenix.

Across the hall, Severus caught a glimpse of Contessa standing with Minerva McGonagall, watching a group of fourth-year Hufflepuffs shuffling their way through the antechamber. The head-count completed, the witches walked past Severus and stepped out to see the students safely away.

He watched the back of Contessa's head, his eyes tracing the ornament which held her hair loosely at the nape of her neck. The crescent-moon shaped hairpin glittered in the morning sunshine as she chatted to the Transfiguration professor.

Severus felt his Tiger's Eye ring tingling on his chest, and he smiled to himself.

The prospect of having Contessa back in his life awakened his lungs like a walk in the fresh sea breeze, and the cobwebs of the past few weeks were gradually being blown away.

He had feared approaching her and asking her to stay, nigh on hoping for forgiveness for his recent behaviour. He felt he'd taken an enormous risk in admitting he needed her; Merlin knew, it had been hard enough to admit it to himself.

But, that night on the Astronomy Tower, he had overcome his lifetime's habit of keeping people at a distance. Contessa had welcomed him with grace, and ever since his doubts had begun to trickle away. Her acceptance of him helped him break free from his self-imposed prison, to claim a prize he'd never deemed himself worthy of winning.

Watching her now, from the elevation of the steps to the courtyard, he knew they would be spending the next three weeks alone with no interruptions. It was like a gift from the gods.

The tingling of the ring became more persistent, and Contessa looked at him furtively over her shoulder. Her bluish-grey eyes propelled Severus forwards, and he descended the steps, listening-in on the witches' conversation.

Minerva was saying, "A few of us are going for lunch in Hogsmeade before we Disapparate home. Will you be joining us?"

"I, err..." Contessa glanced away guiltily, and Severus knew immediately that she was struggling to provide Minerva with a convincing enough story.

"What is it, Tess?" Minerva asked.

"I'm not going home for school holidays this time."

"Why ever not, dear? Surely you don't want to be alone in a castle full of Death Eaters?"

"I..."

"Good morning, Minerva," Severus said briskly, smirking as he made the witches jump. They both turned to face him. "Tess," he said, inclining his head in her direction.

A flicker of shock crossed Contessa's face at the renewed use of her shortened name. Severus noticed her eyes widen at the public display, but he decided that, as he was Headmaster, he was at liberty to call her whatever he pleased, whenever he pleased. And it pleased him to call her Tess.

His eyes met Minerva's, who nodded curtly, and then Severus raised one supercilious eyebrow at Contessa. She was still stumbling on the verge of speech, with Minerva scrutinising her for her whereabouts over the holiday. Severus cleared his throat, securing the professor's attention.

"Tess will be spending Easter at Hogwarts, upon my request," Severus supplied.

It was fortunate that Minerva was looking at Severus, because Contessa's mouth gaped inelegantly.

"Why?" Minerva asked him sharply.

"It seems," Severus began, dripping words patronizingly from his tongue, "that our Potions Assistant wishes a promotion." He sneered at Contessa and enjoyed watching her horrified expression, before turning once again to Minerva. "This morning, she tendered her application for the Care of Magical Creatures professorship."

Severus caught Contessa's reaction through his peripheral vision, and had to clench his jaw to prevent laughter escaping.

Minerva's eyes were wide as saucers. Luckily, Contessa had recovered herself by the time Minerva turned her razor-sharp gaze in her direction.

"Is this true?" Minerva asked.

Contessa pressed her lips together and nodded.

The corners of Severus's mouth twisted into a sardonic smile.

"I'm giving her three weeks to prove herself worthy of the post. Consider it an extended job interview."

Contessa's forehead crinkled, and Minerva was momentarily speechless.

"In that case, Tess," she said, pulling herself together, "best of luck. If successful, you can prevent another Death Eater from teaching at Hogwarts."

And with that, the Transfiguration professor turned on her heel and descended the remaining steps. Minerva crossed the courtyard and met Septima Vector and Aurora Sinistra in the shade of the cloisters.

Severus faced Contessa and held out his arm, gesturing for her to turn and follow him back up the steps to the Entrance Hall. His arm lingered near the small of her back until they reached the main door.

"What did you say that for?" she asked through gritted teeth.

He looked towards her as he climbed the last step. "You needed my help, did you not?"

"Yes," Contessa replied, maddened, "but now I'll have to become a professor..."

The sound of Severus's laughter caused her to back-pedal instantly.

His voice was full of mirth when he spoke. "You can't seriously think I'm going to appoint you as Care of Magical Creatures Professor? With your demonstrable dearth of knowledge of phoenixes, for instance..."

"You..." Contessa's face screwed into a grimace.

"I sent an owl to Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank this morning, advising her of her reappointment as Hogwarts Professor. I'm sure the Ministry of Magic will persuade her, should she decline."

He opened the door for Contessa and waited as she disappeared inside.

"Besides," Severus said to her back, "I want you all to myself this Easter, not mucking-out Hippogriffs and catching Plimpies."

Contessa's quizzical face brightened considerably. "Thank God," she said, relieved. "I'm hopeless with magical creatures."

"I know," Severus said dryly.

He turned to close the door behind them and caught Minerva McGonagall watching intently from across the courtyard.

He returned Minerva's gaze with a dark stare, and his stomach crunched sickeningly as he wondered how much altered body language the Transfiguration professor had witnessed. Aurora Sinistra cast him a sidelong glance, ushering the suspicious witch through the cloisters.

Severus took his time to watch the professors leave and then closed the door on the outside world.

He shut his eyes and breathed in the quiet tranquillity of the empty school.

With only the Carrows and a handful of students remaining, Severus and Contessa were all but alone in the castle.

The Great Lake

"Severus?" Contessa called, after she'd let herself into the Headmaster's quarters.

Morning sunshine streamed through the stained glass windows, lighting up the grandiose, high-ceilinged room.

Severus's living space looked completely different in the daylight. Tapestries adorning the walls shimmered and sparkled, and the blue-green dragonflies surrounding the ornate mirror on the mantelpiece glistened, appearing to dance around the frame.

Contessa placed her satchel and broomstick on the coffee table and wandered over to a window seat, peaking through the leaded glass at the stunning scenery outside.

Within moments, Severus stepped through the bedroom door, dabbing his freshly-shaven face with a towel. He was fully dressed and wearing a dark shirt, which seemed an almost black shade of blue. He rubbed the towel through his hair, which was wet and clinging to his head in ribboned strips of ebony.

Contessa experienced a thrill arch through her abdomen as old feelings re-ignited, to the extent that she actually blushed.

He flung the towel over the back of the sofa and ran his fingers through his newly-washed hair, assessing her inquisitively.

Contessa moved back to the middle of the room, feeling awkward. "It's a beautiful day outside," she stuttered.

Severus eyed the broomstick on the table and raised his eyebrows.

"I thought... I wondered if... you'd like to go flying today?" Contessa asked, unexpectedly shy.

He stared at the satchel for a long moment, a smirk curling his lips.

"I packed a picnic," she explained. "Or, rather, Binky did."

Contessa could've sworn she heard Severus hold back a snort.

He strode to the window and knelt on the cushioned seat to look outside.

"It's a gorgeous spring day." Contessa heard her voice as if from afar.

"So you've said," Severus replied sardonically.

Contessa flushed a deeper shade of red. She shook herself to regain her composure.

Severus turned away and went back into his bedroom, emerging a minute later wearing a waistcoat which accentuated his narrow frame. He had obviously dried his hair with the assistance of magic, and it still appeared unkempt, albeit clean. He flicked his wand, and his boots laced themselves.

Impulsively Contessa looked down at her own attire a high polo-necked jumper and a pair of faded jeans. She sighed. At least her pullover was cashmere.

Severus folded a cloak over his arm and beckoned to the doorway.

"After you," he said. His voice was like silk sliding over stone.

Contessa shivered as she walked through the door.

"Don't you need your broomstick?" she asked belatedly, when she reached the bottom of the stairs.

Severus appeared briefly stumped. "I'll instruct Binky to meet me at the edge of the Great Lake with a school broom."

They left the Headmaster's office and made their way out of the castle, into the bright sunlight of the clear spring day.

"You don't fly very often, then?" Contessa asked conversationally as they walked towards the lake.

The expanse of water rippled in the gentle breeze, sparkling like millions of diamonds under the azure sky. Birds sang in the trees, strident and joyous in the fresh, chilly air.

Contessa shrugged her cloak more securely around her shoulders.

"No, not often," Severus replied with a glimmer of amusement.

Contessa assessed him shrewdly. "When was the last time you left the castle?"

Severus pondered his answer. "Is there a *need* to leave the castle?"

Contessa chuckled. She knew he was happiest when he was closeted up in the dungeon, erudite with Dark Arts and Potions.

They reached the pebbled shore of the Great Lake, where Binky was awaiting their arrival with a Nimbus 2000 for his master.

The house-elf presented Severus with the broomstick and promptly vanished.

Severus mounted the broom and rose a metre into the air, pausing as he looked down at Contessa.

She quickly realised she was gawking at him. Contessa swallowed a lump in her throat and tore her eyes away, resolving to concentrate on her own flight and not let the magnificent sight of the Headmaster distract her.

Nevertheless, palpitations strummed in her chest as feelings hidden below the surface revealed themselves with greater intensity.

With her satchel fixed firmly on her shoulder, and her cloak wrapped tightly, Contessa kicked off the ground and glided into the air.

"The Dementors know to leave us alone," Severus said when she reached his side. He glanced around the landscape. "Where do you want to go?"

"Follow me," she instructed, sweeping away into the blue, on a circular tour of the lake.

Severus kept pace beside her, the wind whipping his hair into his face and Contessa's own becoming a tangled mess.

After three quarters of an hour's flight, steering clear of passing ducks and geese, and drifting over the sapphire waters beneath, they identified a secluded landing spot, unreachable by foot, on the shore of the lake, directly opposite Hogsmeade.

Contessa's ears burned with the cold. As they hopped off their brooms, she laughed at the sight of their windswept hair.

With a quick charm, Contessa reversed the bird's nest on her head. She eyed Severus's tousled black hair and giggled.

"Remember when it was fashionable to have messed-up hair so you looked like you'd just stepped off a broom?" she said nostalgically.

"Yes," Severus said darkly. "All too well." He ran his fingers roughly through the mop on his head and winced, hair-sore.

"Allow me," Contessa offered.

To her complete surprise, Severus allowed her intervention, and his hair returned to its former state scruffy, but clean. It didn't look that much different to normal, now that Contessa thought about it, and she wilfully resisted the urge to run her fingers through...

"You brought food?" Severus asked.

She jumped. "I did."

"Good. I didn't eat breakfast."

Contessa lifted the satchel and opened the clasp, revealing its cavernous interior. With a non-verbal spell, a picnic blanket flew out and unrolled on the pebbly shore, soon followed by a veritable feast of cheese, wine, bread and fruit.

"Bloody hell, Tess. Who's going to eat all that?" Severus asked.

"We are, apparently," she replied, casting a Cushioning Charm on the blanket. "We might be here until midnight, however," she said with a grin.

Severus sat down and opened a bottle of wine. They had chosen a sheltered spot, and the sun beat down on them, warming their faces.

They ate brunch in silence and watched a pair of golden eagles soaring high above the lake. Every so often, an enormous tentacle of the Giant Squid poked through the water's surface.

The peace and quiet felt relaxing after the tumultuous final weeks of school term. With the stunning scenery of the Highlands surrounding them, the problems at Hogwarts seemed a lifetime ago.

"Wilhelmina accepted the Care of Magical Creatures position this morning," Severus said as he watched a flock of geese landing in the water with a dignified splash.

"Oh, I'm glad," Contessa said.

"There was never any doubt. The Dark Lord's people would've pressurised or *Imperio'd* her if she'd refused."

"I'm just pleased we won't have another Death Eater to contend with." Contessa turned to Severus and flashed him a smile. "I'm also glad I don't need to take a crash course in Magical Creatures over Easter."

"No chance of that," Severus said. His eyes glittered in the sunlight. "I've been considering our attempts to create an Imperius Curse-breaker, though."

Contessa watched him take off his cloak and fold it into a pillow. Severus unfastened the buttons on his waistcoat and leaned back on his elbows. The sight was very distracting.

Not seeming to expect a reply, Severus continued, "I'd like to try a combination of Truth Potion with Glumbumble treacle."

Contessa shifted a little and wrapped her arms around her bent knees. Her head rested on the apex, and she watched a strand of Severus's dark mane tickling his forehead in the breeze. Spellbound, she suddenly realised the earnestness of his words. It was the last thing she'd expected to hear.

"I thought, after all that happened, you'd given up on finding a potion to repel the Imperius Curse," she said.

Severus shrugged. "I still enjoy the mental challenge."

"But what about the testing?"

"We'll just have to resolve to use the antidotes properly this time."

Contessa bit her lip. Severus's eyes traced the path of her teeth, his obsidian orbs transfixed by her mouth. She thought, for one insane moment, that he was going to reach out and...

"That is, if you're still up to the challenge?" Severus's voice was slightly husky.

"Of course I am," Contessa replied shakily.

The clamorous cries of geese taking off from the water's surface caused them both to look away. The birds ascended to the sky in a perfect V-formation.

"I've always wanted to fly," Contessa said wistfully. "You know, unaided, like a bird. No broomstick to cling precariously to. Just me and the wind."

Severus remained silent as the flock of geese flew into the blue beyond. Contessa stared out at the lake as long minutes yawned by.

Then, with a crunch of pebble and shale underfoot, Severus was standing before her, offering out his hand.

Contessa cast him a puzzled look, but he continued to gesture for her to place her hand in his. She grasped his proffered hand warily and pulled herself up, searching his pale features for his intentions, his expression unreadable.

Severus nodded towards his feet. "Stand on my boots, one foot on each," he commanded.

He held out both arms, inviting her into his embrace. Contessa felt a wave of giddiness take over, and butterflies clambered up her throat as she stepped carefully onto his feet. Severus guided her arms upward until her hands rested against the back of his neck.

Contessa couldn't look up, knowing his nose and his mouth were so close to her own. Severus's warm breath caressed her scalp.

"Hold tight and close your eyes," Severus said quietly.

Now Contessa *did* look up, perplexed, and two opalescent pools of black took her breath away. She barely stopped herself from falling backwards into his arms.

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

"I do," she replied. After a moment's pause she added, "Always."

Severus smiled, satisfied. "Then close your eyes."

Contessa complied. She rested her head against his chest and felt his arms wrapping around her, holding her firmly in place.

His wand pressed into her back, then lightness filled her body and a swoosh of air whipped across her face.

When she opened her eyes again, she and Severus were airborne. The grassy Highlands were dozens of metres below as she hovered with Severus's warm, lean body holding her securely in place.

Gasping, she looked up into his face and saw the same broad smile she'd seen once before in the Great Hall last Christmas.

"Severus, you're amazing," she said, stunned. "You simply have to teach me how to do this!"

His smile faded a little. "The magic is a Dark Art. I'm not sure you'd wish to learn it."

Contessa's brow furrowed. "That doesn't matter."

Severus didn't seem convinced. "It matters to me," he said.

"Why?"

"You might become..." He couldn't finish the sentence.

"It's OK, Severus," she reassured him. "I believe the magic itself isn't dark. Magic simply *is*. We make it light or dark by our choices and our actions."

One of his long fingers brushed a stray hair from her face, whilst his other hand held her tight in his grasp. He studied her features intently.

"Please teach me," she asked again.

His eyes glinted. "Only if you agree to help me with a curse-breaker."

Contessa laughed. "Of course I will!"

Severus smiled again and pulled her head close against his chest.

For one gleaming, pristine moment, floating in the cool, spring air, Contessa dared to map out her future post-Voldemort. And for the first time in years, that future included hope.

And unconditional love.

Thirteen

Chapter 13 of 14

Albus Dumbledore had a plan to protect Severus Snape after the fateful night on the Astronomy Tower. During his final year as Headmaster, Snape has a chance to come to terms with his past and find peace, before his life draws to its inevitable close. Canon-compliant. TPP Featured Story May/June 2010.

Taste of Temptation

Several days and quite a few potions later, Severus and Contessa were to be found huddled up in the secret laboratory beside a steaming cauldronful of bright orange liquid.

Contessa was sitting with her arms folded on the workbench, watching the final stages of the potion's progress, whilst Severus carefully performed the last few clockwise and anticlockwise stirs.

Outside, the sky had darkened after a day of April showers, interspersed by brilliant sunshine and an occasional rainbow.

The first week of their holiday had been spent brewing and experimenting with potions and antidotes, but so far none of the concoctions had successfully repelled the Imperius Curse.

Severus remained unfazed. He knew the possibilities were limitless; some potion recipes had taken years to develop and perfect. It mattered not how long it took them to discover a curse-breaker; Severus was more interested in spending time with Contessa.

And she had been a delight.

Ever since the day at the Great Lake, Severus had found her happiness infectious and her company addictive. When once he had craved solitude, he now wanted nothing more than to be alone with her.

Contessa's presence seemed to satiate something he hadn't realised was missing. His outlook was transforming, and the fragile, vulnerable person who had feared exposure was learning to take off his cloak and be seen. The experience was nerve-racking, liberating and... strange. There was something untried and unproven about this new way of being; it didn't feel like him. But it *was* him. More of him than he'd ever been.

Severus had taken a risk in revealing his magical abilities to Contessa. With the exception of the Dark Lord, no one knew he could fly without a broomstick, and most members of the wizarding world considered the act abhorrent, as they would any use of a Dark Art.

But not Contessa. She celebrated his mastery of flight as one might applaud the casting of one's first corporeal Patronus.

Encouraged by her serenity and wisdom and her eagerness to learn, Severus had spent hours nurturing her capabilities.

First of all, he'd taught her to harness dark feelings of despair in order to cast the charm; her propensity of openness to emotion made her naturally adept. Next came the trickier skill to simultaneously feel hope at the same time as despair; a recalcitrant combination by definition. But Contessa harboured an innate aptitude and had made great strides towards achieving fully-controlled flight.

As he witnessed her ability to channel magic from a Dark source without it contaminating or consuming her, he became more accepting of his own darkness.

He now saw different choices available to him and fresh, invigorating experiences awaiting him. The world looked different, *tasted* different.

There was no vow, no agreement, and no expectation.

Their friendship their relationship simply *was*.

Severus now realised how much he craved; each snatched glance across the room caused a thumb-roll of palpitations, and each inadvertent caress of her hand produced electricity as never before.

But he knew his hopes and dreams would have to stay on hold until the Dark Lord fell.

He could not, would not, take her as a lover during such dangerous times.

Severus needed not the distraction.

Evidently, though, he needed *her*.

And with each passing day their mutual affection blossomed, augmented whenever their eyes met or their skin touched.

He felt certain now: she belonged to him.

"It's ready," Contessa said, halting his hand with the soft caress of her fingertips.

A new charge of current surged through his arm.

Her blue-grey eyes were serious as she met his gaze.

Severus removed a small bottle from inside his robes and scooped a ladle of potion which he poured deftly into the clear-glass flagon. Contessa padded across the room and placed the potion bottle on the mantelpiece whilst Severus extinguished the flames beneath the cauldron.

"I'm turning on the radio, Severus," Contessa said as she fiddled with the tuning dial and extracted her wand. *Potterwatch* hasn't been on for weeks, but I want to give it another try."

Severus nodded as he tidied away their ingredients. The radio crackled with static as he ambled over to the leather armchair by the fireplace. Languidly, he cast a charm to stoke the fire before sitting down and resting his feet on the footstool.

His mind wandered to what they might have for dinner, assuming he could prolong his time with Contessa by persuading her to join him.

Unexpectedly the radio gasped into life, only to play a love song which caused Contessa a frustrated sigh.

"Leave it for now," Severus said, tiredness creeping into his voice. "You've given the password and set the frequency. Be patient."

Contessa slumped heavily into the other armchair.

With a lazy flick of his wand, Severus Summoned the potion flagon from the mantelpiece, directing it to hover in front of Contessa.

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "You want me to test this now?"

"There's no time like the present."

With a grumbling murmur, she grasped the bottle and unstopped the cork. "Same drill as before?"

"Yes."

She swallowed the potion in one gulp.

"Mmmm... tastes a bit chocolately." She sat back in her seat, contemplative. "And... ooh... marmalade."

"How do you feel?"

Her brow furrowed. "Fine."

"Let's do it, then." Severus sounded slightly jaded as he extracted his wand. *Imperio*."

The spell caught Contessa with a visible shudder. Severus watched her expression relax, and with each passing second she seemed to become... vacant. Severus was suddenly keen and vigilant. Something was different this time; she wasn't repelling the curse on her own.

After a brief moment of hesitation, he sent the usual command. *Dance*.

Contessa stood up, leaned towards the mantelpiece and turned up the radio. The warbling tones of Seline Sedbergh filled the room, singing a melancholy tune which spoke of the reunion of hearts gone astray. Severus wanted to hex the disc jockey into next week, right then and there.

Before he could control his impulses, Contessa was standing before him, offering her hand.

What was she *doing*?

But even as his rational mind fought to catch up, his hand was already in hers and he was standing up.

She guided his hands to nestle in the small of her back and then ran her fingers up his chest until they rested either side of his shirt collar. She pressed her body against his, wrapping him in her embrace.

Her body began to sway, forcing his feet to move to a slow dance.

Severus didn't dare look at her. He couldn't bear the blank expression he expected to see on her face, reminding him that her actions were merely the result of the Imperius Curse.

Dread filled him from his throat to his stomach.

He knew Contessa would remember the entire event after the curse lifted, but even so, it was all he could do to stop himself from taking advantage and pressing his lips against hers.

She was so close, so warm, so beautiful; this might be his only chance to make her his.

He rested his chin against the side of her head and inhaled her scent: heady, seductive jasmine. Her soft hair brushed against his cheek as she moved closer still.

Severus's resolve crumbled as each stroke of her breath on his neck drew him in, enticing him to make use of the opportunity so willingly presenting itself.

But the taste of temptation was bittersweet. Whilst he might profit fleetingly from the deed, he would never know if Contessa had given herself freely, and he couldn't bring himself to exploit her in this way. He wouldn't violate her trust.

As the haunting chorus of the song repeated and faded, Severus held Contessa in his arms, not wanting the moment to end.

And then, as if on cue, the radio hissed with a swirl of static and *Potterwatch* blared out through the speakers.

It was the ultimate mood-breaker.

Severus let go of Contessa and swiftly commanded her to administer the antidote.

She swallowed the liquid obediently, and very quickly her expression became alert.

They stood facing each other by the fire as the Order of the Phoenix broadcast began, and Lee Jordan introduced his two regular contributors to the audience.

Contessa's colour began to rise.

She looked sheepishly at Severus.

"Oh my God... What happened?"

Severus cleared his throat. "It seems we've invented a potion which potentiates the Imperius Curse, rather than negating it. I take it you were unable to block the curse?"

Contessa rubbed her forehead. "I was completely unaware it had even been cast. It all seemed so... natural." She slumped into her armchair, embarrassed. "I'm so sorry."

"For what?"

"For forcing you to dance with me," she said, mortified.

Severus couldn't help but laugh. Contessa looked up at him, confused.

"I've just *Imperio'd* you, and *you* are apologising to *me*?" With an amused frown, Severus flopped into his seat.

Contessa stared at him. "Uh-hum." She laughed nervously.

"Perhaps," Severus said, "I should've given a more specific command."

Contessa shook her head immediately. "I'd kill you if you'd made me tap-dance."

Severus smiled. "Entirely understandable."

"Severus?"

"Hmmm?"

"That potion we made you realise how...?"

"Dangerous it is? Yes."

"In the wrong hands..."

"I know."

"It's not what we were hoping for, is it?"

Silence lingered as they listened half-heartedly to Kingsley Shacklebolt's deep, measured voice, followed by Remus Lupin announcing Hagrid's recent departure from Hogwarts.

Shortly afterwards, a new correspondent was introduced to the airwaves, and Contessa shifted in her chair. She peered at Severus awkwardly.

"We should Vanish the remainder of that potion and burn our notes," she said. "Don't you think?"

Severus considered his reply. Whilst Contessa's concerns were legitimate, Severus wasn't likely to forget the formulae in a hurry.

He nodded once. "I'll do it."

As he hauled himself to his feet, he listened to Contessa chuckling at the inane drivel coming from the new *Potterwatch* contributor, Rapier, whom Severus assumed to be one of the Weasley twins. The young man was suggesting that the 'Chief Death Eater' was in need of a holiday abroad.

Irritated by the flippancy of the monologue, Severus crumpled the parchment on the workbench into a ball and threw it onto the fire. He then went over to the cauldron containing the antidote and Vanished it.

"Point is, people, don't get lulled into a false sense of security, thinking he's out of the country," Weasley was saying.

It was the first sensible thing the broadcaster had said.

"Maybe he is, maybe he isn't," Weasley continued, "but the fact remains he can move faster than Severus Snape confronted with shampoo when he wants to, so don't count on him being a long way away if you're planning on taking any risks."

Severus glimpsed Contessa covering her mouth and averting her eyes, cheeks glowing crimson.

Impervious to insult, Severus made the most of the moment's distraction.

He retrieved a small flagon from inside his robes and surreptitiously filled it to the brim with the vivid orange potion.

Without a word, he tucked the bottle out of sight.

Severus Vanished the cauldron's contents before resuming his seat in front of the fire.

Heir of Slytherin

"Tess... Wake up!"

The sound of Severus's voice snaked into Contessa's consciousness. She felt an insistent nudging against her arm and a heavy weight sitting on the bed. She opened her eyes slowly to the flickering light of the candle on her bedside table. The illumination hurt her eyes, and she rolled over to escape.

Severus's firm grip on her arm stopped her. She wondered if she were dreaming.

"Tess," he hissed again.

This time Contessa recognised the urgency in his voice, and she fought past the bilious trickle of melatonin lulling her back to sleep. As the dark room came into focus, she saw Severus leaning over her, haematite eyes glinting in the candlelight.

"Is that you, Sev...?" she murmured.

"Wake up! The Dark Lord is here."

Adrenaline crashed through her body. She rose onto her elbows and sat up in bed. Severus muttered *lumos* Charm, and her bedchamber illuminated, dazzling her eyes.

Blinking away the searing pain of flooded retinas, Contessa squinted at Severus, taking in his concerned face. She ran her fingers through her hair and rubbed sleep from her eyes.

"Here? At Hogwarts?"

"I've just left him alone in the castle grounds. He'll be meeting me inside shortly."

Contessa gulped, her mouth dry. "What do you need me to do?"

Severus frowned and looked towards the curtained window. "Dawn is almost breaking. The Dark Lord will expect to find you in my bed." His bottom lip quivered.

Contessa noticed his unease mirrored her own, and she knew they had no time for fear. "Right, well, we better get this show on the road."

She threw back the bed sheets and climbed out of bed, leaving Severus sitting on its edge. He was looking at the floor, swallowing hard. "You'll need to be dressed accordingly..." He stopped when he noticed her full length, deep blue negligee.

From the look on his face, her appearance sufficed. She turned to retrieve her silk robe, exposing the long stretch of bare skin down her back, covered only by the nightdress's crossover straps. Severus's gaze lingered at the top of her pelvis. He blinked and stood up slowly.

They walked into her living room and tossed some Floo Powder into the fire. Emerald flames transported them forthwith to Severus's quarters.

They stood, befuddled, for a few long moments.

Eventually, Contessa ventured, "What do you want me to do?"

Severus opened his mouth and closed it again. Wide-eyed, he glanced away from her. "I don't know."

"Is he expecting you to wait up for him?"

"Yes."

"Then, if I was your Imperiused lover, I would stay up with you, would I not?"

Severus clenched and unclenched his hands. "Yes. You probably would."

"What's the matter, Severus?"

He looked at her nervously. "Are you sure you can do it?"

"What do you mean?"

"The Dark Lord could be here for some time. It would require a degree of acting, of which, I fear, neither of us is capable."

"You mean *I'm* not up to it?"

Severus bit his lip. "What if he interrogates you? Manipulates you? Uses you to provoke me? You wouldn't last two seconds."

"Don't worry about me," Contessa snapped, although she didn't feel the bravado her tone attempted to convey.

"But I *will* worry. I don't need the distraction."

Contessa shifted her feet in awkward silence.

"*Imperio* me, then," she said. "Do it now."

Severus shook his head. "I've already spent five long minutes at your bedside considering *Imperioing* you in your sleep." His eyes darted to meet hers. "But even if you're willing, you'll break past it eventually. The curse won't last very long on a mind as strong-willed as yours."

Contessa's frustration coiled through her body. She knew the truth of his words and the enormity of the situation; they were ill-prepared for this moment.

"If only we hadn't Vanished yesterday's potion..." she said regretfully.

Severus grimaced.

"What?" Contessa asked.

He seemed to take in a deep breath. Then, with movement so subtle that it might not otherwise be noticed, Severus dipped his hand into his frock-coat pocket and retrieved a small potion flagon filled to the brim with bright orange potion.

Contessa's heart skipped a beat as she recognised the contents of the bottle.

"You kept some?" she asked disbelievingly.

Severus winced. "I..." His attempt at explanation died on his lips. "I'm sorry..."

"No," Contessa countered abruptly. "Don't be sorry. It's just what we need to get us out of this mess."

Severus appeared visibly relieved. "I don't have the antidote; I don't know how long it will last."

Contessa shrugged. "It's better than nothing."

She took the bottle from his hands and swallowed the potion in one large gulp.

Sweet marmalade slid down her throat, warming her once more from the inside. All her worries and all her thoughts escaped out with a long breath.

Relaxed, she turned to Severus, floating into his bottomless dark eyes as he raised his wand and cast the Imperius Curse.

His voice, velvet and hypnotic, spoke its command in her mind.

You are mine.

Contessa closed her eyes and inhaled.

She was his.

Somehow she'd known this to be true for longer than these few seconds.

Severus didn't have to tell her to lie down on the sofa, to rest the side of her head on his lap and allow her hair to be stroked; all of that came naturally.

For half an hour, Contessa lay docile, her scalp tingling from Severus's ministrations, peaceful and contented.

When Lord Voldemort entered the room, she noticed her earlobe was aching against Severus's thigh.

"My Lord," she heard Severus saying as she moved to let him rise.

Contessa watched him kneel before the Dark Lord and kiss his hand.

"And this," Voldemort said in his high, cold voice, "must be Griselda's great-granddaughter."

Fearless, Contessa rose to standing, watched Severus step away, and sank to her knees to kiss the feet of the heir of Slytherin. His boots were wet and muddy.

"My Lord," she heard herself saying with calm serenity. "It is an honour to serve you."

Voldemort's white lips twisted into a serpentine smile. He offered his hand, which Contessa gratefully kissed, before dipping her head once again.

"What a fine choice you've made, Severus. I see now why you wished her to remain at Hogwarts."

With her eyes fixed on the scarlet and gold rug, Contessa sensed the Dark Lord raising his wand. She felt the solid presence of Severus standing behind her.

"Look at me, Marchbanks," Voldemort commanded.

Without hesitation, Contessa looked into his red slit-like eyes. The Dark Lord cocked his head, and his piercing gaze sent her falling into a black, echoing well.

She instinctively knew which memories to call forth, as if someone were guiding her.

Contessa recalled the night before, dancing to *The Magic We Made* by Selina Sedbergh, Severus's chin resting against the side of her head. Then, sitting by the Great Lake, resting her head on her knees as she watched Severus's hair being teased by the breeze. And then more? held tight in his arms as they floated above the lake...

The gong of the Doorbell Charm sounded, and the foray into her memories ceased.

"Interesting," Voldemort mused. He lowered his wand and ran his fingers contemplatively along its length. "She serves you willingly, Severus. Her emotions suggest something deeper..."

"My Lord?" There was a hint of hoarseness in Severus's voice.

Contessa remained at the Dark Lord's feet, silent and obedient.

"Her devotion lies beyond the realms of the Imperius Curse. She has the blinding loyalty of someone who loves..."

Voldemort was cut short by the sound of the door opening and the clattering arrival of the Carrows.

Contessa followed the Dark Lord's gaze and looked at Severus, whose countenance appeared troubled. Moving away from the Dark Lord, she curled her arm around Severus's elbow and rested her head against his arm.

Soon the new arrivals were seated on the antique sofas, with Contessa at Severus's side.

Voldemort continued to scrutinise Severus. "The Imperius Curse is a marvellous thing," he said idly.

Contessa watched the Dark Lord's pale fingers caressing his wand, knowing his comment was no throwaway remark. Severus's body seemed tense as he wrapped his hand around hers.

Voldemort pointed his wand at Contessa again. "*Imperio.*"

The sensation of sweet, warm nectar filled Contessa's mind.

She didn't intentionally move a muscle, but she found herself standing and removing her silk robe. Cool air grazed her exposed back and shoulders as she settled down on the sofa beside the Dark Lord and gently placed her hand against the side of his head.

Leaning in, she pressed her forehead against his glistening white skin, her lips almost touching the edge of his ear. She ran her hand down his neck and rested it in the V of his robes, and she felt his bony chest rise and fall under her touch.

She held herself there for a few seconds awaiting further command, before feeling compelled to look across the room at Severus and smile seductively.

Severus was thin-lipped but otherwise expressionless.

With a loud pop, Binky the house-elf appeared suddenly in the room with a selection of spirits and four glasses. The elf bowed and promptly vanished.

Voldemort shrugged Contessa to one side and leaned forward, helping himself to a large measure of brandy.

The nectar in Contessa's head trickled away, leaving her feeling shaken. But then a new wave encompassed her, inducing her to stand, walk away from the Dark Lord, and sit on the floor by Severus's feet.

She stroked his knee tenderly and looked up to see a flicker passing through his eyes: concern and, possibly, a question.

Severus's head jerked when the Carrows addressed him.

Contessa listened to the conversation for a while something about a new wand had appeased Voldemort, after Harry Potter had slipped through his fingers at Malfoy Manor. Someone called Wormtail paid the ultimate price for betrayal.

The words hypnotised Contessa into a drowsy haze. She rested her head against Severus's knee, dozing.

Eventually she awoke as the room was being vacated, and Severus scooped her up in his arms and carried her to his bed.

Inside the bedchamber, he turned down the sheets with magic and placed Contessa carefully on the mattress.

He covered up her cold arms with the heavy brown blanket then leaned against the wooden post at the foot of the bed.

Sleep now.

At his command, she closed her eyes and drifted away.

Contessa awakened once in the night and felt the weight of Severus's hand resting on her upper arm. She turned to find him asleep, fully clothed, on top of the quilt.

It did not seem odd that she should feel so at ease.

She smiled sleepily and slipped back into her dream.

When Contessa awoke later that morning, Severus was gone.

She reached out and touched the indentation in the blanket. It was cold.

Feeling increasingly nauseous, Contessa heaved herself out of bed, swaying with disorientation.

She staggered towards the door to the bathroom and pushed it open. She barely made it to the toilet before she threw up.

Flushing the toilet clumsily, she watched the vomit swirl away.

On her knees, she wrenched herself towards the washing basin and ran the cold water, swilling out her mouth and dousing her brow. She hoped the water would quell the vertiginous rush of memories: the feel of the Dark Lord's white, glistening skin at her fingertips and the recollection of her declaration of servitude at his feet.

Contessa stared at the plughole, fronds of long hair soaking up the water, dragging her down into the abyss.

Then there were firm hands around her shoulders, wrapping her in a warm cloak and pulling her away from the sink. She fell back into Severus's arms, wet and shivering.

He sat with her on the bathroom floor with his arm around her. His other hand stroked her long, brown hair and cradled her head against his shoulder.

The sounds of the running tap and the draining water broke the silence.

Contessa trembled in his arms. She knew Severus had done all he could to protect her, and eventually a sob clawed its way out of her chest.

He took her hand in his and held her close.

The Hardest Word

The only sound in the Headmaster's office came from the scratching of Severus's quill as he worked through a pile of correspondence from the Ministry of Magic.

After he'd run a bath for Contessa, he'd visited her quarters to retrieve some robes, which he'd laid out ready for her on his bed. Not wanting to rush her, Severus had left his quarters to give her space.

The stack of parchments now balanced precariously on the end of his desk provided a welcome distraction as he waited for her to reappear. He treasured her proximity; however, as time marched on, Severus became edgier as he awaited her arrival.

Something had been said last night, a word had been spoken, the truth of which he needed to know.

But, the longer Contessa took, the more intense his nervousness grew, and he no longer knew if he even had the courage to say the word out loud.

"Excuse me, Severus," said Dumbledore's voice from behind him.

Severus turned to face the portrait.

"I have a message from my portrait at Griselda Marchbanks' home," Dumbledore said.

Severus was on his feet immediately, studying the bright blue eyes of the former headmaster. The old man took a seat in the portrait's throne-like chair.

"A relative has arrived and wishes to come to Hogwarts to visit Tess," Dumbledore said, clearly unaccustomed to being a messenger.

"A visitor?" Severus asked. "Who, exactly?"

"Oh, she didn't say," said Dumbledore blithely.

Severus grunted under his breath. The last thing he wanted today was an unwelcome guest. He had plans. There was a conversation to be had, at the very least. He bolstered himself, ready to face Contessa when she finally graced him with her presence.

"Tell the visitor to arrive at the castle gates at five o'clock this afternoon. Filch will answer the call, and I'll instruct the Dementors to stay away." Severus withdrew his wand and sent the requests magically.

Dumbledore huffed as he heaved himself out of his chair and stepped out of his portrait to deliver the message.

Severus sat down again at his desk and picked up his quill. His stomach churned as he glanced at his timepiece. It was eleven o'clock in the morning. He had the best part of the day to spend with Contessa before handing her over, and he needed to make things right.

The Dark Lord's visit had been difficult for both of them. Contessa had been a puppet-on-a-string at the command of the man responsible for her fiancé's and father's deaths. Whilst she now wrestled with the aftermath of feelings, Severus, too, had almost fallen foul of his own emotions.

His skin crawled when he'd watched Contessa wrapping herself around the Dark Lord. Severus couldn't bear to see her sullied by the Dark Lord's manoeuvring, knowing that she had been used purely to elicit a response from him. He had managed to contain himself in front of the master Legilimens, but only just.

They had narrowly escaped exposure, and Severus had spent the rest of the night consumed by the terrorising nearness of threat. The hazard had always been there, of course. But the difference now sprang from his well of feelings, flowing untamed like never before. Severus was sickened by the thought that their relationship might put her at risk. If it hadn't been for him, the situation would never have come to pass; Contessa wouldn't have been traumatised, and he wouldn't be feeling so damned responsible for it all.

He couldn't bear to see Contessa's safety jeopardised; he wouldn't lose her like he lost Lily. Not at the hands of the Dark Lord.

Not ever, if he had anything to do with it.

And he knew one thing for certain: he'd do everything in his power to protect her and keep her out of harm's way, for as long as he lived.

He intended to make it up to her today. He had to.

The sound of footsteps on the stairs pulled Severus out of his reverie. The ink of his quill had dried whilst he'd stared vacantly across the room. He placed the white plume into the inkpot and watched Contessa descend the stairs from his quarters. She appeared brighter and less sickly than before, wearing the formal teaching robes he'd left

out for her. The smell of essential oils followed her like a scented cloud.

Contessa looked down at her attire. "I take it there's a reason I'm dressed like a professor today?" she asked, shaking her arms in their sleeves.

Severus stood up, put on his frock coat, and fastened its buttons diligently with well-practised fingers. As he shrugged on his cloak, Contessa looked slightly overwhelmed.

"We're spending the day in the castle grounds," he explained. "A mock interview, as far as the other residents of Hogwarts are concerned. We'll do the full tour; it'll do you good to get some fresh air."

Contessa's smile was sorrowful, and Severus's heart pressed softly against his sternum.

"That sounds lovely, Headmaster," she said, relieved.

Some of Severus's tension drained away. His shoulders relaxed.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Alright. The bath oil was nice and soothing, what was it?"

"Bergamot."

"I thought so." Contessa frowned. "I must've had delayed shock. Last night I was so serene and peaceful, under your curse and... latterly... his. It's as though my body took time to catch up."

Severus watched her closely, wondering what thoughts were foremost in her mind. Perhaps he could reach inside and seize them...

He reprimanded himself for considering such an infringement. He would have to do this the old-fashioned way. He took a deep breath.

"The Dark Lord said something last night, after he used Legilimency on you," Severus began tentatively. "Do you remember?"

Contessa blinked, her eyebrows pinching together in concentration. "No, not really..."

Her eyes searched his for a clue.

Petrified of saying the hardest word of all, Severus's heart began to clatter like a panicked bird trapped in a metal cage. He was within a hair's breadth of folding, but he had to know, one way or another.

"He said your devotion lay beyond the Imperius Curse," he began shakily, "that your emotions... suggested... you loved..."

Dumbledore reappeared vociferously in his portrait at the same time as the Doorbell Charm rang. Severus's heart stumbled, forestalled on the edge of a cliff, watching the gravel beneath his feet plunging to the watery depths below.

Before he knew what was happening, Contessa was standing in front of Dumbledore's portrait, receiving the news that the family guest had Disappeared ahead of schedule. Judging by the look on Contessa's face, she hadn't heard at all the last words Severus had uttered.

When the latch on the door turned, Severus knew the visitor was already upon them. Contessa turned excitedly to face the door as Severus fought the urge to hex the intruder to oblivion.

As the entrance opened, Severus crossed his arms against his chest, erecting his defensive wall.

A handsome, almost burly man strode confidently into the room with Argus Filch several paces behind, panting for breath.

"Nate!" Contessa exclaimed as the dark-haired man swept her up in his tanned, muscular arms and swung her around the room like a small child.

When her feet found the floor again, she wrapped her arms around the intruder, enveloping him in a bear hug.

Severus dismissed Filch with a wave of his hand. The caretaker looked contrite as he closed the door.

"What are you doing here?" Contessa asked the visitor, her voice full of wonder.

"Come to see my little sister, of course," the man replied, flashing a pearly-white smile. His hazel eyes sparkled. "I've made it home in time for your birthday."

Severus's nostrils flared. Her *birthday*? How had he not known it was her birthday? That only served to add insult to his injury.

He held back a growl.

"It's not for a few days yet, Nate. Not that I expect you to realise," she said, almost reprovingly.

Contessa was beaming at the man. *Beaming*.

It was, for all intents-and-purposes, as if Severus wasn't in the room.

And it was *his* bloody office.

He cleared his throat with a long, dragging rumble.

Brother and sister turned to look in his direction, Contessa radiating happiness, her hand curled around her brother's arm. She ushered the man towards Severus.

"Nate, let me introduce you to Sev..."

Severus shot a piercing look which halted Contessa's lapse. Her head dropped apologetically, and Severus eyed her, satisfied he had prevented the disclosure.

So engrossed was he in her features, Severus failed to notice her brother had walked towards him. A moment later he was being slapped hard on the back with a hand the size of a Quaffle.

"Severus Snape," said the curiously accented voice from behind him.

"Nate," Contessa said, stifling a giggle, "you're not in the Outback now!"

Severus turned to get a better look at the man he was about the same height as Severus, but more heavily-built, wearing torn jeans and a checked shirt. His smile was broad, revealing a set of perfectly straight teeth. Contessa's brother placed his hands casually inside the pockets of his jeans as he sauntered back to her side.

Severus's composure broke into a sneer. He recognised the man a student in the year below himself at Hogwarts he had been a Beater on the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

"Nathan Marchbanks." Severus glowered.

Nathan nudged Contessa's arm with his elbow and returned Severus another toothy smile. Severus was about ready to break his jaw.

"You can call me Nate," Nathan said sociably.

"And you can call me Professor Snape."

Contessa's hand slipped around Nathan's elbow, beseeching him to stay at her side.

Severus smirked.

"You two know each other?" she said uncertainly.

"Not really," Nathan answered. "You were in the year above me, weren't you? In Slytherin?"

Severus nodded once.

"Weren't you best friends with Lily Evans before she started going out with James Potter?"

Contessa's eyes bulged, and she tugged insistently on her brother's arm.

"You remember Lily, don't you, Tess?" Nathan continued, undeterred. "You were in the Slug Club together."

Contessa blanched gauchely.

Red hot fingernails clawed their way up Severus's back. *How* had he not made that connection? How many other things had he missed?

Severus was glad he was not holding his wand, as untold curses and hexes would have fired unrestrained. He grappled with the edges of his control.

"I seem to recall," Severus said, his voice as cold as ice, "you were instructed to arrive later this afternoon."

Nathan looked at Severus as if he hadn't a care in the world. Severus wondered how cheery he might be if subjected to the Cruciatus Curse, or if his perfect white teeth were being extracted one by one...

"Why, I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" Nathan asked.

Severus shot Contessa a pointed look, expecting her to explain her commitments to her brother before politely asking him to leave. However, from her countenance, it was clear she'd forgotten the afternoon he'd planned for them as soon as Nathan had walked into the room.

Severus's heart constricted as he watched her torn expression.

"Headmaster, I..."

"If you are serious about the Care of Magical Creatures Professorship, Madam Marchbanks, you will remain at Hogwarts until sundown."

Nathan scoffed, turning towards Contessa. "You're up for the Care of Magical Creatures job?" he asked, laughing. "You're kidding me! You can't tell a Crup from a Jack Russell, let alone converse with a Jarvey. Remember when I persuaded you to cancel the Silencing Charm on Uncle Hector's Fwooper? Mum was nearly driven to distraction by the bird's singing by the time Hector found out. He nearly had his Fwooper licence taken away. It was so funny!"

"It wasn't funny, Nate," she admonished. "You got me into loads of trouble with Uncle Hector. I couldn't tell him it was your idea because he Silenced me for the rest of the day."

Nathan grinned reminiscently, and eventually Contessa smiled too.

Severus felt his ire rising with each passing second.

After her encounter with the Dark Lord, Nathan was giving Contessa something she needed, and it was one thing with which Severus couldn't hope to compete; Contessa's brother offered a plentiful source of distraction. Nathan shared a vast history of memories, stories and experiences with the woman whom Severus loved.

They were only halfway through the Easter holiday, and Contessa was slipping away, becoming wrapped up in her brother's easy charm, comfortable in his assured and calming presence.

Severus's lip curled as jealousy spiked, causing bile to rise in his throat.

"Thanks, Nate," Contessa said. "You've probably just cost me the job. I was supposed to be touring the grounds with the Headmaster today as part of my interview."

Finally, the words Severus had hoped to hear. Too late, though.

"Are you going to offer Tess the job, Snape?" Nathan asked bluntly.

Severus took his time to answer. Contessa's bluish-grey eyes pleaded with him silently.

Damn.

Damn, damn, *damn*.

"No," Severus said shortly, uncrossing his arms and striding to the back of his desk. He swept his cloak to one side and sat down, taking his quill and reaching for a new parchment. As he dipped the feather into the inkwell, he looked up at them again. "Why are you still here?"

Contessa appeared crestfallen as Nathan grabbed her by the hand and dragged her to the door.

"Maybe you could take me on a grand tour of Hogwarts? I'd like to see how much it's changed." The twang of Nathan's accented voice grated on Severus's nerves like fingernails on a blackboard.

And then Severus was alone in his office, staring at the door closing behind Contessa.

The nib of his quill scratched through the parchment below and snapped, covering his fingers with green ink.

Severus balled his fist and thumped the desk. The vibration sent the stack of parchments scattering across the floor.

The Great Wall

Contessa's hand was being crushed as Nate led her out of the Entrance Hall and through the courtyard. The mild, humid breeze caressed her face as she stumbled behind her brother on the gravel pathway outside the castle.

"Nate, slow down!" she gasped.

He stopped and turned to face her.

"I can't believe you're cooped up here with that greasy git!"

"He's not greasy, Nate," Contessa said irritably. "Grow up!"

"*Grow up?* Are you kidding me? You hate that man you did nothing but complain about him in your seventh year."

"He's changed."

"Yeah, so I heard."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"He's You Know Who's right-hand-man, is he not?"

Contessa snatched her hand away. "I'm not having this conversation with you; I can't believe we're arguing already." She sighed and set off for the castle gates. Her brother's footsteps thudded behind her. "When did you get back?" she asked.

"This morning." Nate stuffed his hands in his pockets as he stepped into pace at her side.

"How long are you home for?"

"At least a month."

"Wow! Really?"

"Yeah. Reckon I need to hang around for a while. Listening to Gran today sent shivers down my spine. Things have really changed these last few months."

"I know," Contessa said regretfully.

Nate nudged her arm with his elbow. "But, hey look at you! Up for a professorship at Hogwarts! How did you manage to get a job here in the first place?"

"Dumbledore set up the position for me before he died."

"You kept that one quiet."

"Well, I've not seen you for over a year! And you've not written to me since Alex's funeral last summer."

"Yeah. Sorry about that. You know I would've come home if I'd known, but your owl didn't reach me in time. I'd been potholing for a while it made me hard to locate."

Contessa smiled. Her brother had always been the daredevil of the pair. She looked him up and down, taking in his healthy physique and his tanned skin. "It's good to see you."

Nate grinned. "I'm here to whisk you away, Tess get you out of this place. What are you doing closeting yourself up with Death Eaters? Surely it's not work for the Order?"

"It is," Contessa replied. "Sort of." She bit her lip.

"I can't believe that," Nate said, shaking his head.

Contessa wrinkled her nose. "I'm not asking you to."

"Come on, Tess. I'm your big brother. You can tell me anything!"

Contessa dipped her head, ignoring his comment. When they reached the gates, she passed through and waited for Nate to follow. "Let's go and get some lunch at Hogsmeade," she said.

Nate crossed his arms and didn't budge, staring at her with a crooked smile.

Contessa rolled her eyes and threw her hands up in the air. "Alright, then! There's someone at Hogwarts."

Nate crossed the boundary and waited whilst Contessa secured the gate. "I knew it!"

"How?" she said charily.

"I could just tell." Nate grinned as he set off down the lane. "Who is he? Someone at Hogsmeade? One of the shopkeepers?"

Contessa hid behind her hair in an attempt to cover her crimson cheeks.

"Come on, Tess. Tell me!"

"No," she said firmly. "It's nothing, really. We're not together or anything."

"Does he fancy you?"

Contessa glared at her brother. "I don't know. Sometimes, I think he does."

"You should ask him out."

"I can't do that."

"Course you can!"

"It's not that simple."

"I'll ask him for you."

"No. You won't."

"Tess, it's time you moved on, fall in love again, you know?"

She took a moment to reply. "I already am. In love, I mean. But it's complicated."

"God, he's not married, is he?"

"No."

"Tell me who he is, then."

"No. Anyway, stop harping on about it. You're not exactly the world authority on sustaining long-term relationships. Why are you really here? Running from a girl again, are you?"

Nate grimaced. "Might be."

"I *knew* it!"

Nate shook his head. "We can still read each other like a book."

"Let's not talk about our love lives then, shall we?"

"Agreed."

"Where are you staying?" Contessa asked.

"With Gran. But I thought it'd be nice to see Squirrel's Leap again, and I want to take you out for your birthday. Come away with me for a few days, Tess, before term starts?"

"I don't know if I can."

"Of course you can! Snape's told you you've not got the job. And you can spare a few days out of your complicated love life, can't you? Come home with me."

Contessa knew her excuse for remaining at Hogwarts had now been relinquished and her necessary evasiveness had backed her into a corner. She sighed resignedly. "He won't like it."

"Who won't? The man?" Nate said with amusement. "He'll get over it. It'll stop him taking you for granted. Let's go back to the castle and pack your trunk." He tugged on her arm to stop her from walking any further. "Gran would love to see you." His hazel eyes twinkled.

Contessa knew she wouldn't be able to refuse him.

"OK," she said with a sad sigh.

"I can't believe you've got to ask Snape's permission!" Nate exclaimed as they ascended the spiral staircase to the Headmaster's office.

"It's not permission, Nate. It's good manners."

"He's got you right where he wants you," Nate muttered.

Contessa tossed him another glare. "Behave yourself when you're in there, OK?"

Nate shrugged. "Sure."

After knocking and opening the door, Contessa found Severus still seated behind his desk, with several balls of screwed-up parchment dotted around the tabletop and floor. He watched her through heavily-lidded eyes.

"Headmaster," she began hesitantly.

Severus made a show of dropping his quill onto the desktop and threw her an intolerant look.

"My brother wants to take me back to see my family for a few days."

Severus sneered. "Are you seeking my permission, Marchbanks?"

Contessa was about to reply, but Nate interjected, "She doesn't need your permission, Snape. She's being what is it they call it? *polite*."

Severus's dark eyes gleamed.

Nate stepped forward. "Go and pack, Tess. I'll wait here with Snape. I'm sure we'll find a few things to talk about."

Contessa started to panic. "No, Nate. That's not necessary."

"I insist." Nate's voice was a fierce hiss.

The two men were eyeballing each other maliciously, and Contessa exhaled with exasperation. The last thing she wanted to do was leave them alone together in the same room. But she also knew she had to play along with the charade.

Contessa looked at Severus helplessly.

Severus raised his wand casually, and the fireplace roared as Floo Powder hit the flames. With a jerk of his head he indicated his wish for Contessa to make a speedy trip to pack her trunk.

Unnerved, Contessa practically ran to the hearth, emerging seconds later in her dungeon quarters. Hastily, she threw an assortment of clothes together and rammed the lid down on the wooden chest, almost losing a finger in the process.

With her heart racing like a runaway train, she lugged the trunk into the Floo and materialised again in the Headmaster's office. Her luggage clunked onto the stone floor.

Severus and Nate were locked in a silent standoff, staring at each other with utmost loathing. However, their wands were not drawn.

Contessa suddenly found it easier to breathe.

"Are you ready, Tess?" Nate said. His eyes didn't leave the Headmaster.

Severus was statue-like, standing with his hands clasped in front of him, disdain oozing from every pore.

"I am," Contessa said quietly.

Nate retrieved his wand and levitated her trunk. She followed him to the door and watched him take the first few steps down the spiral staircase with her luggage in tow. The stone stairway began to move.

From the landing, Contessa called down to him. "I just need a minute, Nate. I forgot something important. Meet me in the Entrance Hall; I'll be there soon."

Before her brother could argue, Contessa turned and closed the door as she stepped back into the office.

Severus had resumed his seat behind his desk.

He assessed her suspiciously. "That was the quickest trip ever witnessed. Did you squirrel-away a Time-Turner for leisure purposes?"

His sarcasm was bait; Contessa knew that. Severus was protecting himself with armour and maintaining a distance behind his Great Wall.

Contessa also knew better than to play the game. She walked around to the side of his chair and leaned against the back of the desk, traversing the barrier.

With his personal space invaded, Severus dropped the facade. He leaned back, closed his eyes and rested his head against the soft padding of the tall chair.

Contessa watched his teeth clench together and his lips part.

"I'm sorry I have to leave," she said quietly.

His hard expression faltered and a glimmer of sadness flickered across his pale features.

Contessa reached out and laid a hand on his arm, feeling the soft woollen fabric of his frock-coat and the rounded edges of buttons abrading her fingertips. His armour melted under her touch.

Severus opened his eyes and stared into space.

"When is it your birthday?" he asked huskily.

"In three days' time."

Severus nodded once. "Go," he said softly.

Contessa squeezed his arm tenderly and pulled away with a long stroke. Severus gazed at the floor.

At the doorway, she turned and said, "I'll keep in touch via Dumbledore's portrait."

Severus didn't reply.

She wrapped her hand around the door handle, and the iron latch creaked open.

Then, just as she was ready to depart, Severus's silken voice rippled across the room.

"Come back for the evening of your birthday, Tess."

His tone was more request than command.

"I will," said Tess.

Only Us

On the evening of her birthday, Tess arrived in the Headmaster's office wearing a silk dress in the shades of Ravenclaw House—dark blue and bronze.

Severus noticed the colour matched her eyes, which seemed bluer than usual, and the bronze edging of the dress's neckline and straps brought out highlights in her wavy brown hair.

Her hands brushed her hips nervously. "From your expression, I assume my appearance suffices?"

Severus cleared his throat. "Without a doubt."

"I received your owl," Tess said, smiling. She indicated to the garment thrown over her arm. "I've brought a coat instead of a cloak. I take it we're leaving the castle?"

"We are." Severus slid a tailored black jacket over his shoulders and fastened the buttons. He glanced at his watch. "We should go; we don't want to be late."

As they descended the spiral staircase, he caught Tess peeking at him with a curious look on her face. They didn't speak again until they left the castle and were approaching the boundary wall.

"Where are we going?" Tess asked.

"It's a surprise."

"A surprise?" Tess groaned. "I hate surprises."

Severus allowed himself a tight laugh. "I thought you might."

On the other side of the gate, Severus took hold of her hand and together they Apparated to a deserted country lane. The road was lined with the season's first bluebells, and the sun was setting against the stunning backdrop of the valley. A dark cloud loomed overhead, threatening rain. Tess wandered over to a nearby fence to look at the cattle in the field, grazing in the dwindling daylight hours. The sky was pinkish-yellow against the landscape's silhouette.

"Is that Pendle Hill?" Tess asked.

"You've been here before?"

"No, but I've read about the witch trials here. I've seen pictures but didn't realise this part of England was so pretty."

A drop of rain landed on the side of Severus's nose, and he looked up at the blackening clouds above them. Tess quickly buttoned up her coat whilst Severus selected a fallen tree-branch at the roadside, withdrew his wand, and Transfigured it into an umbrella.

The black broly was just about large enough for the two of them, but Severus would've happily given the protection from rain entirely to Tess. He was delighted, however, when she huddled under its shelter and slipped her arm around his elbow.

Severus tucked his wand away. "No more magic when we get to the top of the lane," he said dryly. "Not unless you want to be strapped to a ducking stool and drowned in a pond."

Tess laughed. "I'm sure you'd save me from such a fate, Severus. That being said, we may drown in the rain before we reach our destination."

Heavy raindrops drummed on the umbrella as they walked to the top of the hill. As they turned the corner, Severus spotted a restaurant with lights shining merrily in the downpour. They hurried across the road and looked through the windows. There were no customers inside. Perfect.

Tess shivered against him as a cold gust of air almost toppled the umbrella. She squeezed his arm and smiled. "You've brought me to an Italian restaurant?"

Severus searched her features; her blue-grey eyes shone with amusement, and her hair flew about in the wind.

"I thought you'd want to get out of the castle," Severus said. "Muggle territory and Italian cuisine seemed like a safe choice."

Tess laughed, the corners of her eyes creasing into a stunning smile. Lingering tensions drained away as Severus watched the beguiling woman on his arm.

"Happy birthday, Tess."

Unexpectedly, she flung her arms around him, hugging him tight. Severus could detect the faint aroma of strawberry in her hair, and he was disappointed when she released him from her hold.

A stream of water slid from the broly as it tilted to one side, and then Tess ducked out from underneath its cover and stepped into the restaurant's porch.

Severus closed the umbrella and passed through the door, following Tess inside. The air was warm and garlicky, and they took off their coats and hung them up to dry.

Within moments of their arrival they were greeted by the waiter and showed into the restaurant. There was a small table reserved for them beside a leaded window with a view across the purple horizon. Pendle Hill loomed ominously in the distance as storm clouds fast approached the setting sun, blotting out the remaining sunlight.

Severus had to stop himself from lighting the candle on the table with a *Lumos* Charm to afford them extra illumination. The waiter pulled out Tess's chair.

"This is a real treat," Tess said excitedly as she took her seat opposite Severus.

The waiter lit the candle with a gas-lighter and wandered off.

"I can't remember the last time I ate at a Muggle restaurant," Tess said in a low voice.

"Nor can I, but with the curfew, Death Eaters and Dementors at Hogsmeade, this seemed more conducive to an evening out," Severus said. "And we can't risk being seen publically together in the wizarding world."

"No," Tess agreed.

Severus was pleased by the note of sadness in her voice.

Menus arrived and they took a while to choose their meal. Occasionally Tess glanced around the restaurant and bar area, looking a little bemused.

"There's no-one else here," she whispered over the top over her menu. "I hope the food's alright."

"The food will be fine," Severus replied. "I suggested to the waiter that he should refuse further bookings tonight."

"Severus!"

"What?"

"You can't Confund a Muggle for my birthday!"

"He isn't Confunded," said Severus defensively, even though the thought had previously occurred to him. "I paid him."

Tess blushed. "So it's only us?"

"Yes," he murmured. "And the waiter."

The aforementioned man arrived at the table with a notebook and pen and proceeded to take their order.

Severus unfastened the top button of his shirt as the waiter laid out a napkin on Tess's lap and left them alone again.

"You suit that shade of green," she commented, watching Severus as he manoeuvred his dark waistcoat and straightened the cuffs of his sleeves which, in the candlelight, appeared more black than green. "You look..."

"Like a Muggle?" Severus supplied.

Tess giggled. "Not like any Muggle I've ever seen. But that's not a bad thing. You look... dark and mysterious."

Having heard the realness of the compliment she'd bestowed upon him, Severus studied her face. He couldn't remember the last time a woman had made a favourable remark or at least done so genuinely.

"You look beautiful," he offered.

"Thanks," Tess replied, slightly pink in the cheeks.

The waiter arrived with red wine, uncorked the bottle and poured it into two large glasses. All the while, Severus and Tess remained silent, snatching tentative glances across the table.

When the waiter departed, Severus was unsure what to say next. So far the evening had gone exactly as planned, but now his mind was blank and his heart was skipping like a schoolgirl playing Double Dutch.

"Have you been here before?" Tess asked.

"Pardon?"

"The restaurant."

"Oh. No. But I know the village. My mother's family are from these parts."

Tess leaned forward and rested her head on her upturned palm. "You haven't told me much about your parents."

"There's not much to tell."

"I'd still like to hear it."

Severus took a sip of his wine and settled back in his chair. He supposed this conversation was inevitable, in a way. He just hadn't banked on it happening tonight.

"My mother passed away the year I left Hogwarts. She didn't tell me she was ill, didn't tell me she was dying. She refused to seek help and just wasted away before my eyes."

"Where was your father?"

"He'd left the year before."

"What was he like?"

Severus ran his fingers through his hair, wondering how much he should say. He never talked about his family to anyone.

"I have his nose," Severus began awkwardly.

"I like your nose," Tess said.

"You wouldn't have liked *him*. He was a swine," Severus said bitterly.

Tess didn't respond, but her eyes searched his inquisitively.

Severus took a deep breath. "He smoked, drank, and my parents argued constantly. When I was doing my NEWTs I found out he was physically violent towards my mum and had been for years." Severus's innards twisted at the memory. "She'd been hiding the bruises and broken bones with potions and healing charms. When I witnessed an attack for myself... I sent him packing."

"What do you mean?"

"I *Imperio'd* him. Forced him to sign over the deeds of the house, pack his belongings all of them and then I slipped him a Memory Potion. I dropped him off in Cornwall and left him to fend for himself. I doubt he even knows I exist."

Tess was contemplative. "That's so sad."

Severus peered at her for a long moment, perplexed.

"You lost both of your parents within a year of each other."

"We weren't close. Hogwarts was my real home."

"Do you ever wonder what became of him?"

Severus considered his reply. "Occasionally. Mostly when I'm wishing him ill."

Their first course arrived. A wave of garlic assailed their nostrils. The waiter smiled and retreated to the bar.

"I noticed your brother hadn't changed much," Severus commented, changing the subject.

"Oh, I'm sorry about him. He was always over-protective; he drives me crazy."

"How long is he home for?"

"A month, so he says. But I can only take him in small doses. He's still a rogue, even at the age of thirty-seven. The boy got wanderlust when he finished his OWLs and the man never grew out of it."

"You and he are very different."

"Noticed that, did you?" Contessa chuckled. "I can't believe he spent three days trying to give me advice about romance. The whole notion is laughable."

"What advice did he give you?"

Caught off-guard, Tess's gaze flickered away. She ran her fingers up and down the stem of her wine glass. "You really don't want to know."

"I..."

Severus was cut off by the arrival of the waiter, who cleared away their plates and enquired after the quality of their starters. Tess stepped-in and handled the pleasantries, whilst Severus felt as though a water-filled balloon was bouncing around his abdomen.

He fidgeted with the napkin on his lap as the waiter disappeared and looked up to see Tess fiddling with the place-setting on the table. If he wasn't so nervous, he'd have laughed. They were both mature adults how could this kind of conversation be so difficult?

Severus began to gather the courage to speak again, and just as he was opening his mouth to continue the conversation, the waiter reappeared to refill their wine.

Tess smiled at Severus's expression.

"This is what happens when you are the only customers in a restaurant, Severus. You get the full attention of the staff."

Her hand dropped to the table, and she caressed the back of his hand.

Severus watched her fingers slipping between his, feeling the warmth of her hand pressing down upon his own. With his heart in his throat, Severus was unable to speak. Nor could he move; his legs were wobbly against his chair, and his arms felt like leaden weights, paralysed at his sides.

He wanted nothing more than to reach across the table, pull her towards him, and kiss her.

And he felt certain that, once this was accomplished, the rest of his life would somehow fall neatly into place.

He could be redefined by that one act alone; the slate would be wiped clean and his core rebuilt.

A completeness which he hadn't even known he'd craved was offering itself to him, right now, in this moment.

His mouth opened to speak, but Tess was not looking his way. She was staring at their entwined hands on the tabletop.

"I suspect Nate's advice is probably right," she said. "But now is not the right time."

Tess's fingers squeezed his hand gently as she let go.

Severus felt the breath in his lungs escape with a rush, leaving a frozen, empty space in his chest. Was she talking about him? Was she saying she had feelings for him? He couldn't be sure.

He was about to risk everything; wear his heart on his sleeve and tell her how he felt. If only he could find the words and air in his lungs.

Through his indecision came more of Tess's words, shaking and sobering him.

"Hogwarts is such a dangerous place now. With the Carrows torturing students, it's only a matter of time before the abductions and murders escalate. I we need to keep our focus."

There was the word: 'we', not simply 'I'. She was talking about him. *Shemust* be.

"Don't you agree, Severus?"

His voice croaked in his throat as his mouth caught up with his brain. "Of course."

Tess let out a breath.

Severus was still holding onto his. He wasn't quite sure what had just happened, but he knew his opportunity had passed. Severus wondered if he'd ever find courage to say the words out loud.

When the main course arrived, it was a welcome relief. Severus steered the conversation to more familiar territory, and they talked about their Potions research for a while. They eventually came to the conclusion that their previously unheralded discovery of an Imperius Curse potentiator might provide them with a long-awaited breakthrough. The antidote had been effective and could hold the key to discovering a curse-breaker.

And so they spent the remainder of the evening listening to the rain beating against the window pane, talking about Potions, Dark Arts, Dumbledore, the Pendle witch trials, anything and everything except about their true feelings.

As such, their pattern for the next few weeks was set. When they saw each other they didn't touch, merely talked; conversation was a cover which allowed them to spend time together, during which they spoke of everything unimportant.

Every evening when Severus and Tess said goodnight and parted for their separate quarters, they would look at each other longingly from across the room. Neither uttered a word, but sometimes their eyes betrayed them.

When summer term reconvened, the Carrows' punishment of students intensified. Neville Longbottom's grandmother, Augusta, closely escaped kidnapping, and then Neville himself vanished from the school. Shortly afterwards the members of Dumbledore's Army fled.

Then, one day in the Great Hall at dinner, Terry Boot shouted out the news of Harry Potter breaking into Gringotts and escaping on the back of a dragon.

That day, everything changed.

Author's Note:

If you're interested in learning more about the Pendle witches, visit:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pendle_witch_trials

Where I have quoted from the original Harry Potter books, I have marked it with an asterisk.

Fourteen

Chapter 14 of 14

Albus Dumbledore had a plan to protect Severus Snape after the fateful night on the Astronomy Tower. During his final year as Headmaster, Snape has a chance to come to terms with his past and find peace, before his life draws to its inevitable close. Canon-compliant. TPP Featured Story May/June 2010.

Author's Note:

Where I have quoted dialogue from the original Harry Potter books, I have marked it with an asterisk.

Make This Go On Forever

Running down the stairs to the dungeons, Tess noticed a sandy-haired boy lurking in the alcove of the Potions office door.

"Robert!" she whispered as she came to a halt beside him. "What are you doing out of Gryffindor House so late at night? It's past ten o'clock!"

The third-year boy stepped out of the shadows into the flickering light of the dungeon corridor. His brown eyes darted to the end of the passageway.

"Terry Boot is locked up in there, Miss." He nodded towards the Carrows' office. "There's no-one in the DA left to rescue him, so I'm going to bust him out when the Death Eaters have gone to bed."

Tess placed her hand on Robert Selwyn's shoulder. "I think I can help you with that," she said, unlocking the door to the Potions office. "Wait in here for a couple of minutes. I'm about to ask the Carrows to attend the Headmaster's office. When you've heard us leave, go and get Boot."

She hurried Robert inside the office and set off down the corridor, knocking briskly at the door to the Carrows' room.

Terry Boot was chained up against the wall with a bloody lip and a puffy black eye. The pair of Death Eaters regarded Tess with surprise.

"Your attendance is required immediately in the Headmaster's office," Tess said brusquely.

Alecto watched Tess from the comfort of her chair. "At this time of night?" she remarked.

"It's urgent," Tess pressed the witch.

Amycus stood up, his lumpy, pallid face leering at Tess. "Fancy a little ménage-a-trois with me and Snape, do yeh?"

"Don't be so dense, Amycus," Alecto interrupted. "Snape doesn't share his toys."

Tess bristled, wishing the Carrows hadn't been so indiscreet in front of the only remaining member of Dumbledore's Army. However, now her cover was blown, she could afford to be more direct.

"The Dark Lord wishes to speak with you both," Tess said.

She noticed Boot assessing her, wide-eyed.

Tess waited for the Carrows to exit the room then whispered to Boot, "Help is on the way."

She left the Ravenclaw boy alone in the office with the door ajar to prevent the protective enchantments from resealing.

Jogging after the Carrows, she followed them out of the dungeons, hoping Selwyn would attest to her true loyalties.

Hovering in the flames of the fireplace, the snake-like face of Lord Voldemort was waiting for them in the Headmaster's office. Severus stood with his arms folded as the Carrows knelt before the Dark Lord. Tess circled around the back of the room, standing at Severus's side, out of the line of sight.

"I am certain," Voldemort began, "that Harry Potter will attempt to re-enter Hogwarts castle very soon."

Tess noticed Severus tensing beside her.

"It is my belief he will seek access to Ravenclaw Tower when he arrives," the Dark Lord continued. "I shall leave for Hogwarts shortly, after I've attended to other matters. In the meantime, I expect you to apprehend Potter."

"My Lord," Alecto crooned, "I'll go to Ravenclaw Tower and wait for Potter in the common room. My brother can replace Flitwick on his night-time patrol of the school."

"Very well," Voldemort replied. "Severus is to remain in the Headmaster's office, where I may easily reach him. You will detain the boy and notify Severus. The Caterwauling Charm on Hogsmeade will alert me should Potter Apparate there."

Voldemort's face disappeared, and the Floo extinguished with a crackle. The Carrows bustled out of the room to take up their respective guard posts.

Alone now with Severus, Tess felt a pulse of panic in her chest. Stuck inside the Headmaster's office, there was no way Severus would be able to pass his vital information to Harry.

Tess wrung her hands together. "What are we going to do? We can't just sit here and wait. The Carrows won't hand Harry over to you if they catch him, and they're stupid enough to kill him, given half the chance."

Severus walked around to the back of his desk and placed his hands on the back of his chair.

"The Headmaster's office is the best place for us to wait, which is why I suggested it to the Dark Lord," Severus explained. He looked around at the dozens of portraits hanging on the walls, each former Headteacher poised and alert in their frame. "We have an army of spies who can patrol the castle for us."

Tess gasped as she comprehended the possibilities.

Severus addressed the room. "Headteachers of Hogwarts, the crucial time is upon us. I need each of you to vacate the office and roam the portraits in the corridors, paying particular attention to the Entrance Hall, secret passageways and Ravenclaw Tower. If you hear or see anything which suggests Potter has arrived in the castle, return immediately to this office."

A chorus of assent preceded their departure, and soon Tess and Severus were standing in a deserted room, staring at the empty canvases on the walls.

"Your office will be a nerve-centre," Tess realised.

He gestured for her to take a seat, and he retrieved his Tiger's Eye ring from underneath his collar.

Tess unclasped her own necklace and placed her ring alongside Severus's on the desktop.

"When we have Potter's location, I shall leave you here in the office," Severus explained. "We can communicate with each other using our rings, and you can keep me apprised of further developments from the Headteacher portraits."

"You've got it all worked out," Tess commented.

"I've had several months to prepare for this eventuality. I just hope the Carrows don't find Potter first. If he's using his Invisibility Cloak, it'll be much harder for the portraits to trace him."

Trepidation crept through Tess as they sat silently, awaiting news of Potter's arrival.

It was past eleven o'clock when Severus suddenly leapt from his seat, clutching his left forearm.

"Alecko has pressed her Dark Mark!" Severus growled. "They've got Potter!"

"No!" Tess's voice was a tiny yelp.

They looked frantically around the office, hoping for one of the former Headteachers to put in an appearance. Finally, Phineas Nigellus Black resurfaced, puffing in his frame.

"Amecus is banging on the door to Ravenclaw Tower, and Minerva just arrived too!" Phineas said.

Severus recoiled. "This is it, Tess."

He snatched his Tiger's Eye ring from the desk and pocketed it. Not looking at her, he strode towards the door and cast a charm at the fireplace.

Tess's heart thudded and seconds passed in slow motion as Severus reached the exit and placed his hand on the latch. He gazed back at her for a long moment, his face a maelstrom of conflicted emotion. Knowing how perilous the situation had become, Tess took a step towards him.

However, before she could reach him, Severus swept in her direction, his cloak billowing and dark eyes blazing. Tess found herself fixed to the spot by the ferociousness of his sable gaze.

And then Severus was upon her, glittering eyes mere inches from hers.

His strong hands slipped roughly into her hair, one hand holding her firmly beneath the ear, the other pressed against her temple, forcing her head to tilt to one side. His eyes focused on her mouth, and as he claimed her lips with his own, all the blood seemed to rush out of Tess's body.

The kiss was fierce and unyielding. His lips devoured her hungrily, and her muscles melted to flaccidity as she returned his kiss. She pushed her tongue into his mouth, encouraging and welcoming him in return.

Severus seemed then to realise she was more than amenable to his forcible ravishing of her mouth, and Tess felt his hands drop from her head. One of his hands slipped to the small of her back, his other arm wrapped around her shoulders, and the weight of his body shoved her backwards, up against a cold stone pillar.

His lips bumped against hers upon impact, and even though it didn't seem possible, the kiss gained in intensity as Tess's fingers slid into Severus's hair. She pushed the long black locks out of his face and pulled him closer, further into the deep, fluid, intoxicating warmth of swollen lips and tussling tongues.

The kiss might have gone on forever, it seemed, washing away doubts and insecurities, awakening and fulfilling her. Their fusion offered a sense of wholeness which she hadn't dreamed possible until this moment.

Tess perceived a similar change in Severus as their kiss slowed to a warm, luxuriant osculation. She stroked her fingertips against his hairline... the part of his neck not obscured by his high collar... the nape of his neck and the roots of his oily hair. Finally her hands came to rest either side of his head, her thumbs brushing against his temples.

As her touch slowed their lips parted, but Severus remained there, nose brushing against her cheek, hot breath warming her lips, eyes tightly closed.

And then he began to pull away, loosening his grip on her, eyes open but looking at the floor. Her hands fell from his head as he took a step backwards.

Knowing he was about to leave and risk everything to search for The Boy Who Lived, Tess's heart pressed, aching and swollen against her ribs.

"Severus, I..." Her voice broke.

Severus twitched, taking another step to extend the distance between them and making it harder for Tess to say the words pounding inside her.

"I..." she croaked.

His eyes, afraid now, found hers.

She tried again. "I love..."

He touched her lips, enforcing silence, and then his fingers pushed past her teeth and onto her tongue. Her resolve diminished as his lips captured hers one last time in a slow, tender kiss.

The soft brush of his lips was then replaced by fingertips upon her mouth once more.

Glittering black eyes met hers in a wondrous, dizzying gaze.

"Don't say it yet," his deep voice murmured.

Tess wanted to rebel, say it anyway, but when his fingers left her lips and caressed her neck, the words evaporated on her tongue. She leaned her head into the palm of his hand.

"If I make it back in one piece, you can tell me then," he said.

Severus stroked Tess's cheek gently with the back of his hand, then marched across the room and left the office without looking back.

Into the Fray

Standing on the landing at the top of the spiral stairway, Severus withdrew his wand and cast a complicated succession of spells upon the door to his office. The protective enchantments were a different combination to the ones he used at Spinner's End and had been carefully planned in advance.

Satisfied the entrance to the Headmaster's office was securely sealed, he then groped inside his frock-coat for his Tiger's Eye ring. The metal was tingling before he'd placed the silver band on his little finger.

Having already shut down his own emotions, Severus was overwhelmed by a tidal wave of Tess's feelings: fear, anguish and... unmistakably... love. The strength of her emotions caused him to stagger at the top of the stairs.

Occlude yourself, he sent.

As Tess complied, Severus stored the latter feeling safely inside his heart.

Better? She sent.

Yes.

Sorry.

Don't be.

Severus swished his wand and changed the password to the office to 'Dumbledore'. He felt Tess's smile.

You'll be safe now, he thought, knowing she'd hear him.

Severus ran down the stairs and passed the sliding stone wall, heading in the direction of Ravenclaw Tower.

Shortly afterwards, Minerva McGonagall emerged from the Ravenclaw common room, and the headteachers' portraits were able to send him a steady stream of coordinates via Tess. Eventually, two floors below the tower's entrance, Severus witnessed three cat-shaped Patronuses racing down the corridor.

He stepped into an alcove, and within a few seconds he saw Minerva running down the passageway, dressed in her tartan dressing gown.

Severus listened closely. There were definitely more than one set of footsteps, and they followed her invisibly down the corridor.

His heart leapt to his throat. *Potter.*

Severus stepped out into the dimly-lit hallway and followed the Transfiguration professor, eyes alert to the signs of a concealed wizard, but before he had taken even a dozen steps, he observed Minerva come to a halt and raise her wand.

He stealthily concealed himself behind one of Hogwarts' many suits of armour.

Be careful, Tess sent.

"Who's there?"* Minerva asked.

"It is I,"* Severus said, stepping out into the corridor. "Where are the Carrows?"* he asked, modulating his voice to sound soft and calm. He hoped to avoid a duel; Minerva seemed primed to fight at a moment's notice.

"Wherever you told them to be, I expect, Severus,"* Minerva replied crisply.

Severus moved closer and searched the shadows for a sign of Potter. All sets of footsteps had ceased when Minerva had turned to face him. The Boy Who Lived had to be here somewhere.

"I was under the impression that Alecto had apprehended an intruder,"* he said.

"Really?"* Minerva replied. "And what gave you that impression?"*

The witch's eyes flitted to Severus's left arm, drawing his attention to the fact he was unconsciously flexing his wrist. The skull and serpent branded into his skin would be there forever. If only he had known at the tender age of seventeen that taking the Dark Lord's Mark would alter his life-course so irrevocably.

"Oh, but naturally,"* Minerva said. "You Death Eaters have your own private means of communication, I forgot."*

Severus ignored her and continued to move furtively in her direction. "I did not know it was your night to patrol the corridors, Minerva."*

"You have some objection?"*

"I wonder what could have brought you out of your bed at this late hour?"* Severus deflected, now standing within a few feet of her.

"I thought I heard a disturbance."*

"Really? But all seems calm."* Severus assessed her, knowing he had moved as close as he dared. He knew she wouldn't co-operate and offer up Potter of her own accord, and his next question might be the last. Prepared to enter into the fray, he asked, "Have you seen Harry Potter, Minerva? Because if you have, I must insist..."*

At the first signs of movement, Severus cast a Shield Charm, which met her Stunning Spell and repelled it with such force that Minerva stumbled backwards.

Severus followed her line of sight as she seized a torch from a sconce on the wall. Flames descended, fashioned into a lasso by Minerva's wand. Severus reacted quickly, Transfiguring the fiery whip into a great, black snake, which Minerva promptly vanquished to smoke. Through the smouldering haze, Severus caught sight of a glint of metal, and just in time, he dived behind a serendipitously-placed suit of armour to dodge the swarm of daggers flying towards him. He sheltered behind the armoured suit as dozens of knives pierced its breast.

"Minerva!"* came the recognisable squeak of Filius Flitwick.

Severus could discern the sound of several sets of footsteps, heading in the direction of the duel. It could mean only one thing: the Heads of House had arrived. Severus knew this was the end of round one - he couldn't fight all four of them on his own - especially if Potter might be hurt in the crossfire.

Let me help you, Tess sent.

No. Stay there, he replied.

Severus could hear Horace Slughorn panting as he jogged towards them and knew he had to move quickly. Straightening up, he made to sprint to a nearby classroom.

"No! You'll do no more murder at Hogwarts!"* Filius squealed.

The Charms professor's spell hit the suit of armour and animated it into action. Metallic arms grappled Severus, but he managed to fight free from the onslaught and pushed the silver suit in the direction of his attackers.

Without looking back, Severus fled to the nearest classroom door, sprinting full-speed toward the window and jumping straight through it.

The glass shattered around him, and he fell into the night air to the sounds of Minerva's cry.

"Coward! COWARD!"*

Beyond the perimeter wall, Severus landed on the shore of the Great Lake.

The waxing crescent moon reflected on the black, watery mirror with eerie stillness. It was as though the battle inside the castle had never happened.

Enraged by failure, Severus kicked the trunk of a nearby pine tree in disgust. If only Minerva hadn't found Potter first, he could have told him all he needed to know, and the

boy would have been fully prepared for the Dark Lord's imminent arrival.

Now it would be so much more difficult for Severus to find Harry Potter.

He growled his annoyance into the night.

Belatedly, he realised he was no longer Occluding his emotions.

Don't worry, we'll find him, Tess reassured.

But how am I to gain access to him now?

I'll leave the office, find him and bring him to you.

No, you won't, Severus thought firmly.

Why not?

Potter doesn't know who you are, Tess.

No, but Ronald Weasley does. I can convince them to trust me.

Severus sensed her physical movement and then felt her ripple of shock.

Severus, I can't open your office door!

He cringed. *I know.*

Tess paused, incredulous. *What have you done?*

You're safe. That's all that matters.

Safe? How can I be safe if I can't get out? What if someone breaks in?

He sighed. *The moment someone penetrates the barrier, uses the password, or unblocks the Floo, the enchantments will break and you'll be able to escape.*

Tess's frustration felt like a fist tightening around Severus's stomach.

You've blocked the Floo Network too?

Yes.

Severus!

I needed to know you would be alright. I can't do this without you.

He felt something in Tess melt away when she heard the plea in his thoughts.

Please stay in the office, Tess, whatever happens... Promise me?

She sighed, retreated from the door, and slumped into a cushioned seat by the leaded windows. Tess was gazing out towards the lake, in the direction of where he was standing. She pressed her palm against the cold glass.

I promise, she sent, after painfully long deliberation.

"I know that you are preparing to fight."

The Dark Lord's cold voice rang clearly across the lake, echoing through the Highland landscape.

"Your efforts are futile. You cannot fight me. I do not want to kill you. I have great respect for the teachers of Hogwarts. I do not want to spill magical blood. Give me Harry Potter, and none shall be harmed. Give me Harry Potter and I shall leave the school untouched. Give me Harry Potter and you shall be rewarded. You have until midnight."

Severus sensed the Dark Lord's strategy, reaching into the hearts and minds of students and teachers alike, to persuade them to save themselves first. He glanced at his timepiece. It was half past eleven.

Tess, where is Potter now?

In the Great Hall, with everyone else.

Minutes later, she sent, *The Slytherins are vacating the castle via the Room of Requirement... And now the Ravenclaws... and the rest of the underage students. The defenders are dividing up, heading to the towers, preparing for battle. What should we do, Severus?*

We wait. And when the battle begins, I must fight for the Dark Lord.

Tess's heart plummeted.

I'll do what I can to protect Hogwarts, he promised.

"Severus!"

The male voice shouted to him from the edges of the Forbidden Forest. Severus lowered his wand and retreated to the cover of the trees.

In the dark shadows, behind a twisted tree trunk, a blond-haired Death Eater awaited his presence.

"Lucius," Severus said, approaching the man. Fear burned his throat.

His old friend staggered raggedly towards him, one eye puffy and the other half-closed. Lucius Malfoy's fall from grace had never been more apparent.

"Do you know where Draco is?" the broken man asked.

Severus sent the request for information through a single thought to Tess.

He's still in the castle, she replied. Sir Cadogan followed Harry into the Room of Requirement, talking to his friends about Horcruxes. Draco entered the room shortly afterwards.

Horcruxes? Severus mused for a moment.

"Draco remained behind," he told Lucius presently.

Lucius grimaced. "The Dark Lord sent me to fetch you, Severus. He wishes a service of you at the Shrieking Shack."

Severus felt a flurry of terror adding to his own.

Stay calm, Tess.

"Of course. I shall go there immediately."

The flashing colours of spells firing from the battleground briefly illuminated the torn features of his old friend, and Severus departed to meet with his master.

Eye of the Beast

Tess's thoughts pressed urgently into Severus's mind. *Harry is leaving for the Shrieking Shack! He's heading your way!*

Potter's coming straight to the Dark Lord?

Yes! Where are you?

Outside the shack. I can't delay any longer. Tess, please try not to interrupt me I need to concentrate. Stay in the Headmaster's office and keep safe.

I will.

The Dark Lord was waiting for Severus behind the light of an old oil lamp.

The creaky, dilapidated front room of the supposedly haunted house was lit up by the far-away lights of firing spells, flickering like fireworks against the night sky. The pounding against the castle walls sounded muffled from this distance, a distance which Potter was traversing at that very moment.

Severus knew Potter might not be far away. If he was foolish enough to use the secret passageway underneath the Whomping Willow, the boy would walk straight into the dragon's lair.

The Dark Lord was seated next to a table, his long fingers caressing his wand thoughtfully. At his side, suspended mid-air in a silvery protective sphere was his pet snake, Nagini. The giant serpent coiled inside its enchanted cage, issuing soft hisses into the shabby, claustrophobic room.

Severus's heart froze as Albus Dumbledore's words came back to him there would come a time when Lord Voldemort would seem to fear for the life of his snake. When he no longer sent the snake forth to do his bidding, but kept it safe beside him, under magical protection, then it was safe to tell Harry the truth.

That time had apparently arrived. The moment was here, and Potter might be about to walk into a trap, not even aware he was missing essential knowledge to defeat the Dark Lord.

Severus stepped into the room, knelted before his master, and then placed himself between the Dark Lord and the old crate which concealed the hidden passageway to Hogwarts.

"You wished to see me, my Lord?" Severus said with a bow.

"Indeed I do, Severus. You have been loyal and served me well." The Dark Lord's voice was contemplative.

"Allow me to serve you again; I can return to the battle and add my weight to the attack, my Lord, their resistance is crumbling..."

"...And it is doing so without your help," the Dark Lord interrupted. "Skilled wizard though you are, Severus, I do not think you will make much difference now. We are almost there... almost."

"Let me find the boy. Let me bring you Potter. I know I can find him, my Lord. Please..."

Severus took a pre-emptive step towards the door, but the Dark Lord stood up, forcing him to stop.

"I have a problem, Severus." The Dark Lord's voice was unusually soft.

"My Lord?"

The wand in the Dark Lord's hand rose into the air with delicate precision.

"Why doesn't it work for me, Severus?"

Severus felt a frozen stone plunge through his stomach. The Dark Lord obviously had something he wished to discuss, and Severus wasn't going to be able to absent himself quickly.

"My my Lord?" he replied, puzzled. "I do not understand. You you have performed extraordinary magic with that wand..."

"No," The Dark Lord declared. "I have performed my usual magic. I am extraordinary, but this wand... no. It has not revealed the wonders it promised. I feel no difference between this wand and the one I procured from Ollivander all those years ago. No difference..."

The calmness in the Dark Lord's voice turned Severus's spine to ice. Something was going to be required of him was it knowledge or something else? Severus stared at Nagini twisting and curling as she floated in her sparkling cell. He knew the snake was important, but he knew not why.

The Dark Lord began to pace around the room. "I have thought long and hard, Severus... do you know why I have called you back from the battle?"

"No, my Lord, but I beg you will let me return. Let me find Potter..."

"You sound like Lucius. Neither of you understands Potter as I do. He does not need finding. Potter will come to me. I know his weakness, you see, his one great flaw. He will hate watching the others struck down around him, knowing that it is for him that it happens. He will want to stop it at any cost. He will come."

Severus knew his master was correct and knew there was even a chance that Potter could already be within a few feet of them both. "But my Lord, he might be killed accidentally by one other than yourself..."

"My instructions to my Death Eaters have been perfectly clear. Capture Potter. Kill his friends the more, the better but do not kill him. But it is of you that I wished to speak, Severus, not Harry Potter. You have been very valuable to me. Very valuable."

"My Lord knows I seek only to serve him. But let me go and find the boy, my Lord. Let me bring him to you. I know I can..."

"I have told you no!" The Dark Lord turned and his cloak swished against the dusty floorboards. "My concern at the moment, Severus, is what will happen when I finally meet the boy!"

"My Lord, surely there can be no question surely...?"

"...But there *is* a question, Severus. There is."

Red eyes fixed themselves upon Severus, and the Dark Lord's wand slid through his pale fingers.

"Why did both the wands I have used fail when directed at Harry Potter?"

"I cannot answer that, my Lord," Severus replied shakily. However, he might have access to the answer...

Tess? I need your help.

"Can't you?" The Dark Lord's question was a sibilant whisper. "My wand of yew did everything of which I asked it, Severus, except to kill Harry Potter. Twice it failed. Ollivander told me under torture of the twin cores, told me to take another's wand. I did so, but Lucius's wand shattered upon meeting Potter's."

"I have no explanation, my Lord."

Tess, wandlore! There will be a reference book in the office! Find it!

Severus's eyes were drawn once again to the snake, swimming mid-air in its enchanted cage.

"I sought a third wand, Severus. The Elder Wand, the Wand of Destiny, the Deathstick. I took it from its previous master. I took it from the grave of Albus Dumbledore."

It was as though Severus's heart had stopped beating. Dumbledore's wand had in fact been the fabled Deathstick, and it was now in the clutches of the greatest Dark wizard the world had ever known.

He looked into the slit-like eyes of the Dark Lord, Occluding his emotions and adopting an unperturbed mask. Severus knew what this meant: he had been the one who had killed Dumbledore. If the Dark Lord thought Severus himself was now the master of the Elder Wand...

"My Lord let me go to the boy..."

"All this long night, when I am on the brink of victory, I have sat here wondering, wondering, why the Elder Wand refuses to be what it ought to be, refuses to perform as legend says it must perform for its rightful owner... and I think I have the answer."

Tess, am I the master of the Elder Wand?

Frantic flicking of old parchment pages was quickly followed by, *If you defeated Dumbledore that night on the Astronomy Tower, then yes.*

But his death was already arranged between us. Would the wand know that? And what about Draco? He Disarmed Dumbledore first!

Disarming could be the same as defeating, I'm not sure.

"Perhaps you already know it?" the Dark Lord continued. "You are a clever man, after all, Severus. You have been a good and faithful servant, and I regret what must happen."

Severus wondered what the Dark Lord was postulating; did he believe he needed to defeat Severus in order to win the wand's loyalty? The Deathstick was reputed to be won through murder, though, not simply defeat. Was that true?

Or was this just a test, some sort of cruel experiment to check Severus's own loyalty? Was he expected to divulge knowledge? He secured his wand in his hand, ready to defend himself.

"My Lord..."

"The Elder Wand cannot serve me properly, Severus, because I am not its true master. The Elder Wand belongs to the wizard who killed its last owner. You killed Albus Dumbledore. While you live, Severus, the Elder Wand cannot truly be mine."

Severus's hand jerked as he raised his wand. "My Lord!"

But, from the look on the Dark Lord's face, Severus knew his plea would be ignored. Whilst the Dark Lord believed he needed to die by his hand, Severus was certain his death alone would not accomplish the Dark Lord's mastery of the Elder Wand. He could, of course, earn himself a reprieve by offering the information that it was Draco Malfoy who had Disarmed the wand's master, but then the power of the Deathstick could be easily transferred to the most dangerous man alive, and Harry Potter would have no chance of defeating him.

"It cannot be any other way," said the Dark Lord, prowling like a cat circling his prey. "I must master the wand, Severus. Master the wand, and I master Potter at last."

Severus knew he was trapped, and that he was not the one destined to kill the Dark Lord. There could only be one winner.

There was, of course, still the chance that the Dark Lord was testing him. He sensed Tess now, furiously thumping the door as she tried unsuccessfully to undo his protective spells.

Perhaps this was the way it had to be...

Dumbledore's wand cut through the air.

And nothing happened.

Severus let out a fraction of the breath he'd been holding.

He hadn't cast a Shield Charm in the hope that he was being tested. Had he passed the Dark Lord's inquisition?

But then the starry pen which enclosed Nagini began to roll in his direction. Tess screamed in his mind, and as the cage encased his head and shoulders, Severus yelled his own surprise. The scaly skin of the serpent brushed up against his cheek, and he tried desperately to push the cage away. The eye of the beast glinted at him malevolently.

Severus started to feel faint, as if all his blood had drained from his head. It was as though time had suspended, and his body turned to marble.

He heard the Dark Lord hissing in Parseltongue and sensed the snake's fangs sinking into his neck. At first there was a sting of venom, but soon there was very little pain; it was as if his body accepted its fate and had stopped fighting. He was aware of his scream as the breath he'd held in his lungs rushed out. And then he was falling to his knees...

He didn't feel the impact. The sound of the hissing snake sounded strangely remote. However, he could hear Tess's hysterical cry in his mind. He tried to reassure her.

"I regret it," The Dark Lord said, but there was no remorse in his voice.

The caged enclosure floated away, and Severus was free to fall to the ground. His knees buckled, and he landed sideways. He heard the clunk of the Tiger's Eye ring when his hand thudded on the floor.

Footsteps resonated on the wooden floorboards as the Dark Lord exited the room, and the illumination dipped as Nagini followed her master.

Warm liquid flowed against his cheek. Severus realised he was haemorrhaging, and he pressed his free hand against his neck to stem the blood flow. But he had seen others die this way and knew the attempt was futile.

As his strength waned he could no longer Occlude himself, and he rushed full-force into the sanctuary of Tess's mind.

Tess, he thought. I need to tell you what Dumbledore entrusted to me, and then you must find Harry. I won't make it.

No! I'll come to you! There's still time to save you!

No. There isn't. It's too dangerous. Stay there.

But...

Don't argue! This is more important. I need to do this, not just for Harry, but for me.

Severus felt Tess waver.

Take my memories, Tess. Give them to Harry. I want him to know everything. I want him to understand. He deserves to know the whole truth. I need him to know everything... Why I did what I did.

He selected his memories assiduously, telling his story, the entire story his love for Lily, his one big mistake, his attempts to redeem himself, and finally the information which Dumbledore had assigned to him, more critical now than ever before.

Tess had barely begun to see his memories when the crate in the corner of the room levitated silently to one side, and Harry Potter revealed himself from underneath his Invisibility Cloak. He was followed closely by Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley, climbing into the room from the secret passage.

Harry bent down and looked at Severus, entranced. Severus reached out and grasped Harry's robes, pulling him closer.

When he tried to speak, blood gurgled in his throat, choking him. Severus heaved another breath, the air struggling to push past the gushing flow.

"Take... it... Take... it," he rasped.

The silvery-blue whispers of the past, which he'd collected for Tess, leaked slowly into the stale air of the room, a précis of his hopes, fears and quest for redemption.

Out of the corner of his vision, he saw Miss Granger conjure a flask and collect the precious memories. All of them.

The Half-Blood Prince's tale was told, and he knew that The Chosen One would know who Severus truly was and who he had always been.

Severus was complete.

Lily's green eyes peered at Severus. They were all he could see now the peripheries had darkened. He felt his fingers starting to lose their grip and slip against Harry's robes.

"Look... at... me."

Lily's eyes locked onto his.

And then suddenly Severus realised he no longer needed Lily's forgiveness.

Because now, in this moment, Severus had forgiven himself.

He could feel Tess's presence encircling and cradling him as he drifted away from this mortal coil. She held him and comforted him in ephemeral arms.

Severus held his last breath in his lungs, knowing his end had come.

The Tiger's Eye ring on his little finger tingled furiously.

I love you, Tess.

And then all was black.

The first thing of which Severus became aware was the soft stroke of a warm breeze and the rushing sound of flowing water.

The gentle wind tickled his body which, he now realised, was naked. As soon as his discomfort registered, he could feel the soft brush of cotton and wool against his skin.

He lay for a while, wondering if he should open his eyes.

He felt calm, untroubled and free of pain.

Eventually his curiosity got the better of him. He needed to know where he was and, indeed, if he were still alive.

Opening his eyes answered neither of these questions.

He was lying upon grass, surrounded by a swirling white mist.

Shapes began to form above him. First, the outline of tree branches, then leaves, and the sun breaking through the canopy, casting shadows in the dappled shade.

Slowly he sat up. The leaves glowed luminous green in the sunlight, and the branches of the ancient willow creaked, their extent almost brushing against the bank of the river. Beyond, the gentle flow of water lapped against the riverbank.

Now he knew where he was.

It was the same riverbank he had shared with Lily during their childhood; some of the happiest memories of his life.

Severus pulled his knees towards him and wrapped his arms around his legs. He realised now he was wearing the clothes he'd worn for Tess's birthday the same dark green shirt and black waistcoat. He studied the cufflinks and remembered fidgeting with the cuffs and straightening his attire nervously as he'd battled to tell her how he felt about her.

But he'd done it now.

With his last breath.

Even though they'd spent nearly a year together, it seemed their time had been cut tragically short.

Severus tried to recall the taste of her on his lips, and then, as if by request, he evoked the flavour of Marasca cherries, intense, rich and refined, like a classic Amarone wine.

It seemed whatever he imagined in this place would materialise, all his wishes and requirements, like some universal Mirror of Erised.

So, if he had access to anything he desired, living or dead, what would he choose?

He was in the special place he'd shared with Lily, and yet he didn't want her here with him.

He wanted Tess.

Wanted her to find him, to hold him, to love him.

The leafy branches at his back made a rustling sound, which could not have been caused by the wind.

If he looked around, Severus wondered who he might see.

Despair and Hope

Inside the Headmaster's office, leant against the oak door, Tess stood with her hands over her eyes, forcing herself to keep her eyelids tightly shut. A brilliant white light blinded her from within.

Afraid to open her eyes and lose contact with Severus forever, she squinted into the brightness, perceiving shapes forming and moving in the mist. She watched gleaming white fragments interweaving into a coherent whole, and she sensed Severus's peaceful serenity as the patterns shifted and bound together. It was as though his soul were melding and transforming inside her mind.

His moment of unity was precious, momentous and agonisingly brief.

When the light extinguished it was as if someone had cancelled a *Lumos* Charm in the dead of night. The emptiness was stark and pitch-black.

Tess heard the crackle of the Floo as it roared back to life. She opened her eyes and realised the protective barrier had gone; the spells which Severus had cast had been cancelled.

Either there was an intruder on their way into the office, or...

Tess simply couldn't face the other explanation for the undoing of Severus's spell-casting; there must still be a chance to save him.

She immediately Floo'd to the hospital wing. The ward was a hive of activity whilst the Battle of Hogwarts raged within and without.

Not stopping to intervene or offer help, Tess Summoned a phial of snake-venom antidote, a bottle of Blood-Replenishing Potion and some essence of dittany from the Medicinal Potions cabinet. She dashed out of the hectic room and ran down the corridor towards the Entrance Hall.

Lord Voldemort's voice rang like a bell through the corridors.

"You have fought valiantly. Lord Voldemort knows how to value bravery. Yet you have sustained heavy losses. If you continue to resist me, you will all die, one by one. I do not wish this to happen. Every drop of magical blood spilled is a loss and a waste. Lord Voldemort is merciful. I command my forces to retreat, immediately."

At these words, the duelling armies stopped fighting and the Death Eaters began to retreat. Whilst the defenders of Hogwarts listened warily to the Dark Lord's conditions, Tess fought her way through the commotion, unnoticed. She had to reach Severus. She had to believe there was still enough time.

"You have one hour. Dispose of your dead with dignity. Treat your injured. I speak now to Harry Potter, directly to you. You have permitted your friends to die for you rather than face me yourself. I shall wait for one hour in the Forbidden Forest. If, at the end of that hour, you have not come to me, have not given yourself up, then battle recommences. This time, I shall enter the fray myself, Harry Potter, and I shall find you, and I shall punish every last man, woman and child who has tried to conceal you from me. One hour."

Tess hurried past dazed and confused students, and sidestepped Pomona Sprout, who shouted, "Tess!" at her back.

But she didn't stop running.

Ahead, Minerva McGonagall heard Tess's name and turned to lock eyes with her. Tess attempted to push past, but was caught by a firm grip on her forearm.

"Where have you been?" Minerva asked, her gaze calculating. "We've looked everywhere for you."

"There's no time to explain," Tess panted, "I have to find him whilst there's still time!"

Minerva's grasp tightened like a vice. "I won't permit you to hand over Harry Potter to Voldemort, Tess."

Tess's eyes widened with astonishment. "Not Harry!" she snapped. "I need to get to Severus!"

Minerva's hand slipped in shock, and Tess immediately tore herself away, running as fast as she could, half expecting to be hexed from behind.

Instead, a silver cat Patronus overtook her and sped towards the Entrance Hall.

Tess followed its feline form as she cut through blown-apart balustrades, dodged shattered pieces of marble, and slipped on the Slytherin emeralds scattered across the floor. The Patronus, however, raced effortlessly across the battle-strewn arena and reached the door in plenty of time to deliver its message to Aurora Sinistra. The Astronomy professor raised her wand and quickly moved to meet Tess, blocking her exit.

"Let me through!" Tess pleaded, tears falling down her cheeks in desperation.

Valuable seconds trickled inexorably away as Aurora pointed her wand at Tess's chest.

"Severus is dying. I have to save him... I have to..." Tess faltered hopelessly.

Aurora studied Tess's features closely, seeming to decide something.

"Do you love him, Tess?"

Tess felt her mouth gaping open and her eyes pinching together as more tears streamed out. "Yes," she conceded hoarsely.

Aurora nodded swiftly. "Then go to him."

The professor stepped aside, and Tess's heart skipped a beat. It took a moment for her feet to respond to the command. "Thank you," she whispered.

She sprinted out into the night, through the dark, littered grounds, and past the retreating troops. At the perimeter wall the Dementors scattered, under old orders to let her pass.

Despair burned through her like a branding iron, and simultaneously a beam of hope encircled her heart.

As she darted to avoid obstacles and debris on the ground, Tess realised she had lifted into the air. Her despair and hope had propelled her skywards, flying like a tornado in the direction of Hogsmeade.

Towards the Shrieking Shack.

Towards Severus.

Tess blasted through front door of the Shrieking Shack and raced inside to search for the room she had viewed through Severus's eyes.

She saw the pool of blood first, and then his body, supine on the floor.

Skidding forward on her knees, she heaved his bloody mass onto her lap and rested his head, still warm, on her thighs. Severus's eyes stared fixed and unblinking into the distance, his body completely immobile.

Tess refused to give up hope and rifled through her robes to retrieve the bottles of potion. She parted his blue lips and tipped the liquids down his throat then sprinkled the essence of dittany onto the neck wound.

And waited.

She cradled his head, softly whispering a plea.

Seconds turned to minutes, and Severus did not stir.

Tess stroked his matted black hair away from his face, checked his jugular for signs of a pulse and listened closely for the sounds of breathing.

But there was nothing.

Nothing, except for the tears flowing down her face, and the sob clawing its way up her throat. Realisation dragged its talons inside her windpipe, freezing the air in her lungs.

She was too late.

Severus was dead.

Through the tightness in her chest, a shocked cry forced itself out, then Tess turned weak and her shoulders slumped. She drew in gulps of air with disbelieving moans.

The creaking sounds of the shack ripped through her eardrums and tore her body and mind asunder. It was as though her heart had turned to stone, and nothing, including herself, felt real.

She knew not how long she stayed there, holding his head on her lap, her tears falling on his bloody robes. It could have been minutes, it could have been hours. It could have been an eternity.

No amount of staring at his ashen features could convince her that she should move.

Eventually she swallowed, noticing the dryness in her throat and the hollow space in her stomach. Numbness enfolded her like a shroud, rendering her insensibly removed from events.

Tess tenderly closed Severus's eyelids, so he might appear peacefully asleep, and then noticed the Tiger's Eye ring glinting on his little finger. She closed her eyes and clasped her hand, trying to make contact with him through the rings. But the band on her finger no longer tingled; the connection between them had severed.

Tess lay his head gently down and pulled herself along the floor to remove the ring from his finger. Blood had congealed around the oval, golden-brown stone, and as she watched, the clots seemed to be absorbed into the silver metal. She blinked once to force her eyes to refocus, and the ring was clean again; all traces of his blood had disappeared.

Not knowing what to make of it, and feeling increasingly sick, Tess stood up and pocketed the ring. She draped her cloak over Severus's remains, resolving to return to the Shrieking Shack after the battle.

Completely unaware of her blood-stained robes, she left the derelict building, intending to do everything possible to bring down the man who had killed the one she loved.

Love and Loss

Outside the Shrieking Shack, Tess realised she could not Disapparate; Hogsmeade and its surrounding areas had been charmed to prevent escape.

She staggered through the gate and, guided by the distant lights of Hogwarts, attempted to fly. However, all she managed to do was trip and stumble in the dark woods. Her hope drained away; the combination of emotions required for the spell was beyond her reach now.

Hogsmeade village was deserted; not a single shopkeeper or homeowner remained. Tess looked down the hill towards the school and saw the distant flicker of wand-light as the population descended through the trees in the direction of Hogwarts. With no one to help her, no broomstick to fly, and no means of transportation, Tess had no choice but to trek down the steep path alone.

The cold stone which had replaced her heart drummed nauseously, and her chest began to burn. The night air penetrated her clothing, making her shiver.

The pre-dawn sky was tinted indigo, and stars were blotting out one by one as the sun made its steady journey towards the horizon. Through the clouds scattered overhead, Tess could make out the morning star, Venus, shining like a talisman, leading her onward.

Sometime later, ahead in the distance, the sounds of battle raged once more when the crowd from Hogsmeade penetrated the perimeter wall. Spells flickered, red, green and blue, lighting up the grounds like a swarm of fireflies. Dark shapes in the castle grounds suggested the Dark Lord's giants had added their strength to the fight, and Tess caught a horrific glimpse of an Acromantula scuttling out from the Forbidden Forest.

Despondency engulfed her as she realised she might be too late. Her desire to take out a Death Eater or two diminished, and the strength in her muscles began to fail. It was all so very hopeless.

Exhausted and overwrought, Tess eventually passed through the castle gates and climbed up the gravel path. By the time she had reached Hogwarts, the grounds were deserted; the battle had been taken inside and, when she stepped cautiously through the cloisters of the courtyard, a hush had fallen.

As she ascended the steps to the Entrance Hall, the sun rose on the horizon, casting a stream of pink light from the East, flooding through the stained-glass windows of the Great Hall.

An almighty cheer broke the silence, and screams and roars of hundreds of people rent the air. The exultant jubilation stopped Tess in her tracks. A knot, which she hadn't noticed until now, loosened itself in her stomach, and she knew, unequivocally, that Voldemort was dead.

Soon after, a Death Eater limped out of the Great Hall unnoticed by the joyous masses. Tess waited for him in the shadows of the antechamber and saw the man was Robert Selwyn's father. Perhaps she had arrived in time to do *some* good.

Before the Dark wizard knew who or what had hit him, Tess's Stunning Spell rammed him against the wall. His head cracked on sandstone, and he slumped onto the floor with a groan.

Tess dragged her tired and sore feet towards the unconscious man, surveying him with contempt. She kicked him hard in the stomach.

"That's for Robert," she whispered.

Tess felt a hand on her shoulder. She jumped and turned to see Aurora Sinistra appraising her with concern.

"Did you find Severus?"

Tess nodded.

The expression of hope on Aurora's face caused fresh tears to leak down Tess's own.

"I was too late." Tess almost choked on the words. Her vision blurred, and the lump in her throat swelled like a balloon.

The next thing she knew, Aurora's arms were around her.

Tess crumpled as she fell into her embrace, sobbing and wailing as the pain of grief overwhelmed her.

"Come on, Tess, we need to get you out of these clothes," Aurora was saying.

Tess seemed to be void of any feeling as she looked down at her heavily-bloodstained robes. Numbness had taken over in the hours since Severus's death. She was in the Great Hall, surrounded by a mixture of the bereaved and the survivors, who were celebrating and commiserating.

She was aware she hadn't spoken since being found in the Entrance Hall, even though Aurora hadn't left her side. Tess's reactions were slow, and she looked at Aurora, bemused.

"You're frightening some of the younger students," Aurora explained.

Tess looked down at her garments, soaked in Severus's crimson life-force. Blood had dried on her hands, and now that she thought about it, she could feel the same sensation cracking around her face. She lifted her head to see the gazes of several students flicker away.

She felt nothing, only emptiness. If she were to put her feet on the floor, she felt certain that a chasm would open up and swallow the remnants of her soul, and part of her wanted to sink down into it to escape from the pain.

"Madam Marchbanks," came a woman's tentative voice from behind her.

Tess turned to see a sandy-haired, middle-aged woman with her arm around Robert Selwyn. The woman offered Tess her free hand.

Tess shook it automatically.

"I believe you apprehended my husband?" she asked. "Robert's father?" she added.

Tess cleared her throat, uncertain she could even speak. Up until now, she'd had no words.

"Yes," Tess managed.

The woman smiled. "I'm Anna Selwyn. Thank you for all you've done for Robert."

Tess nodded once and moved to stand on her feet for the first time in hours. She staggered when her knees gave out. Instantaneously, Aurora was at her side, supporting her, and together they left the Great Hall for the sanctuary of the dungeons. Anna and Robert looked on in concern.

"How long have you known?" Tess asked as Aurora helped her into her quarters.

"That you loved Severus?" Aurora clarified. "Since the night he came looking for you on the Astronomy Tower."

"How? I didn't even know it myself back then..." There were so many things she hadn't known until it was too late. "How did you know where to look?" Tess asked.

"Minerva asked me to keep an eye on you. She had... concerns... about your affiliations. Once she even suspected you were under the Imperius Curse."

Tess exhaled mirthlessly at the irony.

"But I noticed something in Severus's eyes that night, and from the look on your face when he arrived on the Tower, it was plain to see. I knew then that you weren't a danger to the Order, and I hoped that love might save Severus from a dark and miserable fate. I've watched his suffering for years. Little did I know he had once loved Lily Potter."

"I can't believe you didn't turn me in."

"Well, I suppose I'm an old romantic at heart, Tess. That, and I trusted Dumbledore. I had to believe he had good reason for bringing you to Hogwarts." Aurora paused. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

Aurora kissed Tess on the forehead. "Get changed and get some sleep. I'll bring you some breakfast in a few hours' time."

Tess nodded, and Aurora left.

But Tess didn't move, or bother to take off her clothes. She stood, contemplating Aurora's reason for trusting her. Aurora had trusted Dumbledore's judgment.

Had Dumbledore known Tess would fall in love with Severus?

Surely not. That would make no sense at all.

In fact, Dumbledore probably chose Tess because she had loathed Severus so, and would have thought the distraction of love to be an unlikely complication.

Tess's curiosity piqued and she glanced at the Floo, thinking she might visit the Headmaster's portrait after she'd had some sleep.

That was *it*.

The Headmaster's portrait!

How had she not realised it sooner?

She threw Floo Powder into the fireplace and stepped upon it, knowing she would see Severus again, if only as a picture hanging on a wall.

Still wearing her blood-stained robes, Tess arrived in the Headmaster's office and scanned the walls for the new portrait.

Slowly the Headteachers awoke from their early-morning slumbers and watched Tess sympathetically. There was no sign of Minerva McGonagall having taken up residence and no portrait of Severus to greet her.

"Where is he?" Tess's voice sounded harsh in her ears. "Where's Severus?"

Dumbledore strode wearily into his frame, having apparently been elsewhere. Tess met the wizard's piercing blue eyes with a cold stare.

"Why is he not here?" she demanded.

Dumbledore, beneath his long white beard and half-moon spectacles, appeared somewhat embarrassed. "I'm afraid, Tess, that Severus's removal from the Headmastership was tantamount to abandonment, and, ah, tradition states that ignoble departures do not earn one a portrait in this office. It was the same for Dolores Umbridge."

"But that's outrageous! Severus did everything possible to protect the students of Hogwarts and bring down the Dark Lord. He lay down his life for them!" Tess hissed with exasperation.

Dumbledore nodded understandingly and lifted his upturned palms in apology.

Tess's anger soon waned. Her last hope had dissolved. She would never see Severus again. She had truly lost him.

Forcefully, she wiped tears from her cheeks and dried her hands on her robes. It was only then that she noticed the disappearance of the bloodstain around the pocket in which she had stowed Severus's Tiger's Eye ring.

Tess studied the circular pattern of clean material around the pocket and turned the ring over on her fingertips. The silver band gleamed, pristine.

She shuffled over to Magda McDougall's portrait. The former Headmistress leaned forward to look at the ring in the palm of Tess's hand.

"This ring has an affinity for blood. How is that possible?" Tess asked.

Magda pushed cascading brown ringlets away from her face and scratched her head. "Who knows what that ring has become whilst Severus has worn it. You've exposed it to so much magic, and the bond between you became so close, I doubt even the Ministry could categorise it."

Tess stared at the silver ring she had taken from Severus's body. Proportioned for his little finger, it was wider than the band she still wore. "It's all I have of him now," she murmured.

Without thinking, she placed the ring on her middle finger. The only one which would fit, and the metal cooled instantly against her skin.

The last thing Tess remembered was a flash of brilliant white light and the sensation of her knees giving way as she fell to the floor.

Weeping Willow

Sitting in the dappled shade of his tree, Severus turned to see the figure of a woman opening the curtain of willow branches and stepping onto his riverbank.

She wore a silk dress of bronze and blue, and her brunette tresses tumbled over her shoulders in waves, swept by the breeze. The lime-green luminosity of the leaves seemed to dance in patterns across her features.

At first, Tess approached hesitantly, watching Severus as he arose to greet her. Then suddenly she sped towards him, flinging her arms out and almost knocking him over with the force of her embrace.

She held him tightly, seeming afraid he might evaporate if she were to let go.

Severus gathered her hair gently away from her face and cupped her chin tenderly. When their lips converged her kiss was ragged and possessive, attempting to devour and contain him, as if he might otherwise slip away. He responded patiently, kissing her reassuringly, holding her head loosely in his hands.

And then Severus tasted salt.

His fingers grazed her cheeks and discovered they were soaking wet. He pulled away from her lips and wiped the tears from her face with his thumbs.

"I didn't imagine you would cry when I kissed you," he murmured.

Tess pressed her head into his chest and held him close.

"I don't want to believe this is real," she whispered. "It can't be real..."

Severus stroked her hair. "Why not?"

"I saw you," she said, her voice muffled against his shirt. "I felt you die." Tess clung to him fearfully.

"I'm fairly sure I *did* die."

Tess looked up at him, not sure what to believe. "They recovered your body a couple of hours ago. You're currently laying on the dais in the Great Hall, next to Remus and Dora. This must be a dream. I must be asleep."

Severus saw the seriousness of her expression, her confusion, and her loss of hope.

"And I thought this was somehow *my* dream..." he said. "Or some kind of afterlife. Everything I wish for appears here." He lifted her chin with his fingertips, so he could look into her beautiful blue-grey eyes. "Including you."

He moved closer, and her eyes flickered shut as her lips welcomed him in a slow, tranquil kiss. *This* was what he had imagined: Tess in his arms, belonging to him, melting against him as their bodies merged, never to be parted again.

And now Severus knew a true moment of serenity. Of loving and being loved.

If only it could last forever.

He sensed a change in her when her fingers pressed into his cheek, and she softly pushed his lips away. He saw questions flicking through her eyes: all too quickly, her Ravenclaw inquisitiveness took over, her rational mind struggling to comprehend their apparent shared existence, unable to go with the flow of the moment.

Tess studied his features as if he were some great mystery waiting to be understood.

Severus knew he had been an enigma in life; he had deliberately remained so to protect himself over the years. But he now realised he *wanted* Tess to understand him.

He cared little about the puzzle of his being there with her, impossibly, implausibly, in the happiest place he had ever known.

What he needed now was for Tess to *know* him, inside and out, the best of him and the worst of him. All of it.

All of him.

But, for now, it appeared Tess needed to know the answer to 'How?'

Severus glanced at the grassy verge, and a picnic blanket appeared forthwith, together with two plump cushions. He took her hand and guided her to sit down beside him.

Tess couldn't relax. She fidgeted incessantly, wringing her hands, looking furtively around, trying to work out the conundrum. She turned and rested against the side of her hip, and her eyes devoured him. "Where are we?"

Severus looked around once more at the branches of the weeping willow enclosing them. "On the riverbank near my home, the place I felt most happy."

Tess swallowed the answer with consternation. She adjusted the straps of her dress as they threatened to slip from her shoulders.

"We appear to be wearing the clothes we wore on your birthday," Severus continued. "I assume my choice was based on the moment I was happiest with you."

Tess smiled self-consciously. "They would've been my choice too."

Severus felt a spike of fear. "Oh my God, Tess. You're not dead too? Did you die in the battle?"

"No. I'm not dead. At least, I don't think I am. After Harry killed Voldemort, I returned to the Headmaster's office, hoping to see your portrait, and then... I put your Tiger's Eye ring on my finger." Tess looked down at her hand and there it was his ring on her middle finger. "That's the last thing I remember."

Severus took her hand and kissed it. His fingers nudged the golden brown stone. The silver band sparkled in the broken rays of sunlight.

"So it must be something to do with the ring. Tell me what happened to it," he said.

"I... took it from your little finger, and it was covered in your blood. But then the spots of blood disappeared, as if it had been absorbed into the metal. Later on, the ring soaked up the bloodstains from my robes."

Severus pondered the repercussions. Somehow his essence could have become trapped in the ring. He remembered Harry Potter had been discussing Horcruxes when he'd returned to the castle, so that must have been how the Dark Lord had survived death all those years before.

But what new magic was this, which sealed Severus's soul into a ring? His soul did not tear at the time of his death; if anything, he felt it heal.

He shared his musings with the woman at his side.

Her nose scrunched as she considered the question of Horcruxes and souls. "Would Horcruxes absorb blood?" she asked.

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"How much time do you think we have?" Tess asked.

"I think time works differently here," Severus said. "You said my body had been moved two hours ago, yet I had barely been here two minutes when you arrived. I have the sense that we have plenty of time, although I can't tell you *how* I know that."

Tess stifled a yawn. She looked tired and weary. Severus brushed a stray strand of hair out of her face.

"When did you last sleep?" he asked.

She thought about it for a moment. "About twenty-two hours ago."

Tess yawned properly now. Her tiredness was contagious.

Severus laid back on the cushions and gestured for her to rest her head against his shoulder. "We can solve the mystery of the Tiger's Eye ring when you've had some sleep," he said softly. "Lie down with me, Tess. I'll be here when you wake."

Tess sat watching him, no doubt torn between her need for sleep and her need for answers. He smiled at her, happy that she was there with him. She was all he really wanted, after all.

Her smile spread to a mischievous grin.

"There are several things I'd like to do before I get some shut-eye, Severus," she said. Her eyes narrowed as her gaze swept his body.

Severus did a guileless double-take.

Tess laughed and slipped one leg over his hips, straddling him. Playfully, she began to undo the buttons on his waistcoat.

Then she was unbuttoning his shirt and running her warm hands up his chest, and it seemed as though Severus had forgotten to breathe. His lips, slightly parted, had nothing to say. His eyes could only watch.

If this were heaven, he wanted to stay for all eternity.

She leaned over him, locks of her hair tickling his face and chest.

"Besides," Tess said, her voice a whisper in his ear, "I want to see what kind of underwear you imagined I'd be wearing."

Severus felt little-used muscles contracting as a smile crept across his face.

His fingers found the zipper on the back of her dress, and Amara's lips enveloped him in a teasing kiss.

Sleeping in Light

The first thing Tess became aware of was the slightly medicinal smell of the air.

She could see the orangey-pink glare of bright sunshine through her eyelids, but it took some time to find the energy to open her eyes.

When she did so, daylight streamed onto her retinas, making her squint. She lifted an arm, which felt like a block of stone at her side, and her skin brushed against crisp cotton sheets. She raised her hand to shield her eyes from the unrelenting brightness.

A figure stepped forward from a chair at her bedside, and when her vision came into focus, she saw her brother, Nate, leaning over her. His concerned face lightened as she continued to stir.

"Welcome back, Tess," he said, squeezing her other arm, which lay motionless upon the bed in Hogwarts' hospital wing.

Tess attempted to speak, but her voice was a squeaking croak.

"How do you feel?" Nate asked.

Tess swallowed and ran a mental checklist through her body. There were no aches, no pains and no stiffness. Just a very dry throat.

"Thirsty," she whispered.

Madam Pomfrey appeared at her bedside with a glass of water, and Nate helped to adjust Tess's pillows as she sat up. Small sips of deliciously cool water slid down Tess's throat, and with each mouthful she seemed to regain mental acuity.

"What happened? How long have I been here?"

"Aurora Sinistra found you unconscious in the Headmaster's office yesterday morning. You were lying on the floor, covered in blood." Nate reclaimed his seat next to the bed. "Madam Pomfrey checked for everything, but could find nothing wrong. You've been here, fast asleep, for twenty-four hours."

The breath in Tess's lungs seemed to ache. "So it was a dream," she said shakily. "He wasn't real." As she said the words out loud, she felt her heart sink into her hollow stomach.

Poppy stepped forwards. "The Headteacher portraits told me you'd put this ring on your finger before you collapsed."

In the matron's upturned palm was Severus's Tiger's Eye ring. It sparkled in the sunlight.

Tess's heart leapt back into her chest and began to thrum.

"We didn't dare take the ring from you," Poppy continued, "not knowing what magic held you in your slumber. I felt certain you were safe, because... well, you were smiling in your dreams." Poppy touched Tess's forehead to check her temperature. "Nate arrived yesterday and has watched over you whilst I triaged and cared for the injured. This morning, we decided the time had come to remove the ring from your finger." Poppy's fingertips checked Tess's pulse for a few seconds, then she took a step away from the bed. "You seem fine now. I'm going to tell Minerva you're awake."

And then the nurse left the bedside.

An uneasy silence lingered between brother and sister. Tess realised the removal of the ring had pulled her away from the riverbank. She watched Poppy slip Severus's ring inside her apron as she left the ward.

"Aurora told me everything, Tess," Nate began. "That you were in love with Snape..." The words seemed to cause him some distaste, but his next sentence was filled with regret. "I'm so sorry you lost him."

Tess blinked a flurry of tears from her eyes. "I haven't given up hope," she mumbled.

"Harry Potter relayed Snape's story after the battle, how he'd loved Lily Evans, and worked as a triple agent to protect Harry and bring down Voldemort. But nobody knew about you, Tess. Well, no one except Aurora."

Tess nodded sadly.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Nate's tone was soft, without reproach.

"I couldn't. I was sworn to secrecy," Tess replied. "Anyway you weren't really around for me to tell. I think Gran might've figured it out, though."

"I still don't fully understand it, Tess. Snape just didn't seem your type I mean, you hated him when he was your Potions master."

"Yes, I did. But that was sixteen years ago. A lot has changed/ve changed. And so did he. We grew closer; I was the only one who knew of his true affiliation. At first, it was just a physical attraction, but I came to realise some weeks ago that I loved him."

Nate's hazel eyes were wide, betraying his surprise. Nevertheless, he reached for his sister's hand and squeezed it.

The doors to the hospital wing opened; Poppy had returned with Minerva McGonagall. They walked past the rows of injured in curtained beds, until they stood beside Nate in Tess's cubicle.

Minerva held out Severus's Tiger's Eye ring in her hand, then placed it upon the bedside table and clasped her hands awkwardly.

"I owe you an apology, Tess."

Tess shook her head, but Minerva continued.

"No, I do. I doubted your allegiance, thought you were colluding with Death Eaters. I should've trusted you as a fellow member of the Order. I'm sorry."

"It's OK," Tess reassured her. "You weren't to know. You did what you thought best. I wouldn't have expected anything less of you."

"But I impeded you when you were trying to save Severus..."

"He was already dead," Tess interrupted. "It was already too late. I just couldn't accept it. I was desperate hoping there was still a chance to save him."

Minerva's head hung low, and she dropped her hands to her sides, brushing them against her tartan robes. "I feel terrible about the whole thing. I didn't trust him, and I stopped trusting Dumbledore's judgment too. If I hadn't duelled with Severus in the corridor, he might still be alive today."

Tess offered her hand, and Minerva reached out and gently grasped it.

"The only person responsible for Severus's death is Voldemort," Tess assured her.

"You are kind, Tess. I'm so sorry for your loss."

With that, Minerva and Poppy left the bedside, leaving Tess alone with her brother.

"Help me out of bed, Nate. I need to speak to Dumbledore's portrait."

"Are you sure you're up to it?"

"Yes. It's important. There's something I need to know."

Tess was forced to eat breakfast before Poppy would allow her to leave the hospital wing. After some tea and toast, Tess dressed in fresh robes and followed her brother to the Headteacher's office.

Despite Nate being overly-protective, Tess managed the walk up the stairs unaided and found her strength gradually returning. By the time she stood before Albus Dumbledore she felt strong and calm.

"Did you know?" she asked the blue-eyed, bearded wizard sitting in his portrait.

Dumbledore peered at her through half-moon spectacles. "That you and Severus would fall in love?" he elucidated.

Tess nodded, her chin set.

"No," Dumbledore replied simply. "I knew you would be good for him, help him work through some of his grief, and ensure he remained at Hogwarts to protect the students. I hoped you'd become friends. I admit I never thought Severus capable of getting over Lily."

"You used Severus's grief for Lily as a way of guaranteeing his loyalty," Tess said without accusation.

"I did," Dumbledore confessed.

Tess retrieved Severus's ring from her pocket and held it out for all the Headteacher portraits to see.

"I've spent the last twenty-four hours with Severus," she began. The audience of witches and wizards took a collective intake of breath. "Somehow his essence has become trapped in this ring. We don't know how, or why. I need to know what this ring has become. Is it some kind of Horcrux?"

Dumbledore looked troubled. "Tell me what happened at the time of his death."

"Lots of things. After he was bitten by the snake, Severus collected his memories and gave them to Harry. Then I felt him forgive himself... I saw bright, white shapes moving... coalescing... He told me he loved me then everything went black."

Dumbledore sat back in his seat and hummed thoughtfully under his breath.

Tess continued, "Nothing happened to my ring, but when I recovered his, the ring had soaked up his blood. I returned to this office, placed the ring on my finger, fainted, and woke up inside his happiest memory. No time had passed for Severus since the moment of his death."

The piercing blue eyes of the portrait studied Tess, and she felt her brother's hand on her shoulder, reminding her of his presence.

"Horcruxes are formed when the soul is torn in two," Dumbledore explained. "The magic, naturally, is Dark; it requires a murderous act to tear the soul. What happened at the time of Severus's death sounds anything *but* Dark... Perhaps, in the moment of death, you witnessed Severus's fragmented soul being restored."

Tess remembered the shapes she had seen shifting and reforming, becoming a coherent whole. Maybe that had been a manifestation of Severus's soul?

"The healing of his soul at the precise time of his death, coupled with your connection to him through the rings, may have caused magic unheard of to have erupted spontaneously. Your love for each other and your shared connection through the rings must have melded his soul to the vessel on his finger. Perhaps, then, it has become some kind of anti-Horcrux, a version of the Light. Severus's soul may indeed live on, intact."

Tess started to feel faint as the ramifications stormed her mind.

Nate squeezed her shoulder and spoke softly into her ear. "Maybe you did save him, after all."

"No," she replied. "He saved himself. He was the one who forgave himself, and he was the one who allowed himself to feel love. Severus held the power all along. It took

him until the moment of his death to realise it."

Tess stroked the silver band in the palm of her hand. "If his soul resides in this ring, there might be a way to bring him back."

There was a moment of silence as the listening portraits pondered the possibilities.

Dumbledore spoke first. "It could be feasible. After all, Voldemort regained his corporeal form in the graveyard of Little Hangleton, at his father's burial site."

"I could research how Voldemort's soul was reunited with his body that night," Tess contemplated.

"You could, Tess. But, before you begin, perhaps you should ask Severus to express his wishes? Does he want you to bring him to life, or would he prefer his soul be released into the ether?"

Tess bit at the dry skin of her bottom lip, a snake of doubt and worry curling in her abdomen. "You're right. I can't make the decision for him."

She hesitated as she placed the tip of her finger inside Severus's Tiger's Eye ring.

Nate stepped forwards, forcing her to look at him. "Tess, at least wait until you're back in the safety of the hospital wing."

"No, Nate. I have to do it now. I might not find courage to ask him otherwise. This needs to be Severus's choice." She looked steadily into her brother's eyes. "Catch me if I fall?"

With mingled acceptance and resignation, Nate nodded.

Tess slipped the ring onto her middle finger.

The last thing she felt was her brother's arms capturing her before she hit the ground.

And then Tess found herself stepping through the cascading branches of the weeping willow. Her presence caused the leaves to rustle peacefully.

Severus laid half-dressed upon the blanket, sleeping in light, just as she had left him.

The End